



JULIE & ROSE

SONG

for the

UNDEAD

Song for the Undead

DECALOGUE

Chapter 1

I guess a lot of people say that through every tough thing, you find more of yourself. I have no idea if that was true or not for me then, but it definitely is now. Lost isn't the word I'd use for me then. I'd say very disillusioned. I had dreams, big ones, because without dreams, why is life worth living? I had them, but I didn't know how to get to them. I had ideas, and I tried, but I didn't really do any of it the right way, didn't work hard enough for it. I always thought it was meant to happen, so as long as I tried just a little, it would happen, ya know? Wrong. I'm always wrong, even now. I'm not good at telling things, or writing. I'm not the most useful person, and the one thing I was good at still couldn't bring me any success in life. But that was my own damn fault. Failure is second nature to me anyway.

Life, to me... I thought, well, you can only live once. The biggest excuse I had to party my life away. I still live by that motto now, but in a different way. A better way. It's that thought that killed my dreams then, but keeps me fighting to survive now. Life is funny that way...

Tuesday, April 3, 2012

10 days before Infernal Friday

"Life sucks," Nick muttered as he drove along the highway. It had been a long drive, one he'd never wanted to make in the first place.

For him, a simple road trip was an admission of failure. He knew he'd never hear the end of this. Years ago, he had thought by the age of twenty-five, he'd be far more than what he was now at twenty-eight years old. So the U-Haul truck sped its way down the mostly unoccupied roads. Few people drove at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday morning down the interstate.

The rain began to fall, which just added on to his sour mood. He wasn't a lover of rain; that was why he had loved California so much. It was a place of consistently sunny days, beaches, beautiful women, and a place where he thought he could get his life going.

Wrong.

His mind wandered because there wasn't much else he could do. His only companion was the cheerful golden retriever, Spunky, who was laying next to him

in the passenger seat. He'd bought the pup as soon as he had moved to California, having always been a dog lover but forbidden by his parents to take the dogs when he moved out. He'd talk to her, but she was sleeping, probably because she was bored herself.

California was behind him now, and so, it seemed, was his heart. Not because of any girlfriend. Nick Carter didn't put much validity into attachments like those. How could he? He'd seen his parents' own marriage dissolve before his very eyes. Then he'd had to see them both remarry other people. His mother had even gotten a divorce for a second and, later, a third time. Love wasn't something he really took in. If it happened, marriage could actually destroy it. Back on the west coast, he'd had flings with girls, and nothing more. They knew it when they got with him, too. He never told them anything less than the truth. He had a goal to aim for, and that was more important. Well, that and partying it up, so that he could live life to the fullest.

Not that it ever got him anywhere. That was what frustrated him the most. He had been pounding the pavements of Hollywood for eight years now, and all it had ever given him were bit parts and little attention. The idea of never making it, when, constantly, people told him how talented he was, grated his skin the worst. Back home, he had done talent competitions all his life, minor kid shows that aired on the local networks of Tampa. But as soon as he'd gone for it at the age of twenty, nothing had come. The big break he'd been searching for never found him.

He had tried community college after high school, more for his mother, who was never satisfied with him. Never a university because he'd be the first to say book smarts were beyond him, and his high school records weren't impressive. Still, he'd had hopes that maybe he would find his niche in college.

Wrong.

After two years, he had known it'd never work out for him. In the end, Nick had decided to use all the money he'd been saving from working at the nearby deli and move to where the opportunity was.

Not that it ever knocked or anything.

He released a sigh as he watched the roads. It was too quiet in the truck, Nick realized. Why hadn't he even bothered to turn on a radio after leaving the hotel earlier that morning? He finally did flip the switch and turned the dial, scanning for a decent station. He settled on one that played both current rock and older, as the song "Headstrong" by Trapt filtered through the speakers. He banged his head to the music as he drove. Nick had always been a rocker at heart. If he'd ever felt he had musical talent, he would have gone that route rather than acting.

The song soon ended, and the voices of radio DJs were heard. "...On the world

front, the troops in North Korea are at a standstill, while London is held by enemy forces. Kim Jong-il is giving no sign of trying to talk for the treaty both Canada and France desire. McCain says negotiation is not an option and never was..."

The radio quickly went off. Nick didn't even want to think about the wartime in which he lived. A third world war. It was something that had been coming for far too long, yet no one wanted to admit it. Really, it could be said that September 11, 2001 was the catalyst for it all. Few said it, but many thought it. Still, all that ever came during the Bush Jr. terms was an invasion into Iraq for personal vendettas that finally ceased in 2009. Then came President McCain, who had snuck a victory past Barack Obama by a tiny margin of votes.

That was when it happened. Invasions made by North Korea, China, and an alliance with other Middle Eastern countries into Europe. China invaded Japan in hopes for total control. All of it occurred during McCain's term, which he was close to finishing out now; the next presidential election was in November. Yet America had tried neutrality for once, having been fed up from Iraq, Desert Storm, and even the long-past Vietnam days. Nick had been there to see what had finally shot America into the worst war yet...

July 4th, 2010

The day had been festive. Fireworks could be heard blasting in the distance, with songs of patriotism soon following. Sure, there was a war, but it was outside of America; for once, they weren't getting involved.

Nick was spending his Fourth of July working the night shift at The Spaghetti Factory, in hopes of overtime. Acting in small commercials wasn't making rent, so he needed the extra padding to his side job's paycheck till he did make it. He was bored and flirting with a girl waiting for a blind date. He smirked at her; the restaurant wasn't really busy that night anyway, and the other servers could handle it.

"One day, I'm gonna make it," he told her, after explaining why he was stuck doing such a job.

She just laughed. "Big dreamer."

"Without dreams, life is nothing but darkness. Dreams are like the fireworks they're setting off outside right now. I'm just surprised someone as pretty as you is waiting."

She raised a brow, glanced him over, and snickered. "That's the best you can do? I think I'll go find the friend who set this up." She stood and, without a second glance, headed out the door. Nick just shook his head. She just didn't see

how great he was; she was blind. She'd learn.

His thoughts were paused when he heard a loud roar from something that sounded like it was racing above his head. Before he could process that, it was followed by a series of screams coming from outside. Uncaring about his job, he ran out the door to see what was going on.

It was the sign that horrified him first, he later realized. The Hollywood sign, the symbol of glitz and glamour to many, was up in flames, as well as most of downtown Hollywood, from what Nick could see. Buildings were blazing and crumbling quickly. People ran from the chaos, and ash began to fall like a twisted rain. Remembering the sound he had heard before, he glanced up to see only slight glimmers of what had to be fighter jets.

It was the screams of horror, the sight of Hollywood destroyed, he would never forget.

That was when the war began. That was when his dreams began to fall apart.

Spunky's excited barking was what startled him out of his reverie. He laughed and petted the dog with a chuckle. "Excited to have traveled the entire country, huh girl. I don't know if you're gonna like it in Florida." He sighed once more. "After I grew up, I never did."

The golden retriever just licked his hand and barked cheerfully in response to the master she loved. He had never connected deeply with anyone. Never made that close friendship. Sure, he'd had some friends growing up in Tampa, but in Hollywood, or Los Angeles, people made connections, not friends. He had tried to do the same. All it had done was leave him alone, never get him anywhere.

He was close, had entered the city limits of Tampa, Florida, finally. It had taken him a week to make this cross-country trip, but he'd had no choice. He was out of money almost, unemployed, and with no glimmers of hope of the big break he'd wanted so badly. The only choice he'd had left was to pack up and move back home with his dad. His mother was a no-go from the beginning. All she did was remind him of how much of a failure he was and always had been. The sad thing was that Nick couldn't deny any of it. All he could do was start over, and even if he wasn't old yet, he felt too old to have to do so. He knew his four siblings, three sisters and a brother, would mock him for his failure. Not they were close anyway.

None of it was something to look forward to.

He made a turn into a quieter neighborhood of middle-class homes. It felt almost like a death sentence, coming back there. Another turn was made, and in minutes, he pulled up to park in the driveway of a modest, yet cozy-looking

suburban home. For a moment, he sat there before finally turning off the engine. Spunky barked and tilted her head up at him.

“Home sweet home, my ass,” Nick told her, a bitter tone not well-disguised within his voice.

He then got out of the car and walked up the steps to his childhood home, each step heavier than the last.

Chapter 2

When you interview for a nursing position, one of the questions you are guaranteed to be asked is, “Why did you choose nursing?” The standard answer is, “I want to help people.”

Of course, you have the few odd ones who become nurses for other reasons: maybe they have a fetish for people in hospital beds (sadly, I met at least one of those in my years working at Tampa General), or maybe they just watched a lot of “ER” growing up and went into the field expecting all the doctors they would work with to look like Noah Wyle or George Clooney (even more sadly, this couldn’t be further from the truth). But most of those fresh-faced, young nurses just want to help people.

I’m sure I gave the same answer in my first interview, and it was as true then as it is now. I’ve always been one of those maternal sorts, destined to be a caretaker. I did choose nursing because I wanted to help people, because I wanted to make a difference in the world. Maybe that’s why God chose me. To help those who are left. To make a difference. To save the world...

Wednesday, April 4, 2012

9 days before Infernal Friday

Josefina Lopez was known simply as “Jo” to all her colleagues, for any name more than three syllables long was too much of a mouthful to be shouting down the crowded halls of the Emergency Room, and too complicated for patients who were seriously ill or injured to remember.

Most of the latter didn’t call her by name anyway; she was only someone there to serve them, to be a liaison between them and their doctors, until they were either released or admitted to another floor. But she liked when they did use her first name; it made her feel as if she’d made a connection with them in the short time they would be in her ER, and that was important to her. She was sure it made it less scary, less stressful, for the patients and their families, to have a nurse they

could trust, and she strived to be that nurse to every patient who fell under her care.

Of course, some were easier than others, and tonight, it was down to the difficult ones. It was going on midnight, barely halfway through her twelve-hour night shift, and things were slowing down in the ER at Tampa General Hospital. Most of the night's accident victims and heart attack patients had been treated and shipped upstairs; they were just waiting on X-rays and lab results for a man who'd fallen asleep at the wheel and driven his car into a ditch. Other than him, it was mostly the drunks. Not the same crowd of intoxicated college students and twenty-somethings who were brought in on Fridays and Saturdays, thankfully, but these were the serious alcoholics, the ones who got wasted enough on a Wednesday night to warrant a trip to the ER for a banana bag. Needless to say, most of them were less than pleasant to deal with. When *they* called her by name, it was usually part of a slurred rant because they wanted to bust out and drink some more, and things around the hospital weren't happening fast enough to satisfy their addiction.

She could hear one of them shouting down the hall now, as she made her way to the nurses station to use the phone. She had told Gabby she'd be calling around midnight to check in.

Normally when she was scheduled for a night shift, her daughter Gabrielle spent the night with her grandparents, but tonight, Gabby had begged to sleep over at her best friend's house. Although it was a Wednesday, the girls were out of school for the week on spring break, so Jo hadn't had a problem with her staying up late. It wasn't *that* she worried about.

At almost thirteen years old, Gabby was trustworthy enough, as much as any girl that age could be. In the past year, she'd even started babysitting for some of the younger kids in the neighborhood where they lived. Jo only allowed her to sit when she was at home, close enough to run to Gabby's aid in a few minutes, should she have trouble, and only for a few hours at a time. Still, it was enough to make Gabby feel grown-up and important, and she got some extra spending money out of it, more than the meager allowance Jo could afford to give her for her chores at home.

No, it wasn't Gabby she didn't trust; it was everyone else. She didn't see how she'd ever feel comfortable leaving her daughter home alone at night, not after what had happened last June. The memory, never far from her thoughts, crept in, raising goosebumps on her skin.

That night had been an unusually cool one, for a Florida summer, and Jo and her husband Luis had been all too eager to turn off their air conditioning, open up the house, and save some money on their electric bill. Ever since the war, energy prices had been even more outrageous than when Bush was in office, and it was getting ridiculously expensive to keep their Florida home cool.

They had gone to bed that night with the windows open and slept deeply under the cool breeze that blew through the window screens. It had been Gabby, normally a deep sleeper herself, who must have heard the noise in the kitchen first, though she said later she didn't remember what woke her up. In any case, Jo and Luis were awoken a minute later by her scream.

The scene that had awaited Jo when she ran into the kitchen was like one from a horror movie, and it replayed in her mind as such. She had found her daughter held tight by a man dressed in dark clothing, his thick arm around her skinny frame, the glinting blade of a knife pressed to her throat.

"Nobody move," he warned them in an abrupt voice when he saw the adult man and woman advancing on him. Jo could hear the quaver in his voice and knew he was nervous. At the time, it made her think he could be reasoned with. Looking back, it should have scared her more. People who are acting out of panic, out of fear, are unpredictable.

When Luis went for him, the man cut Gabby, then sank the knife into his front. Jo, acting on the rush of adrenaline that was coursing through her own body, ran toward him blindly, thinking of nothing but getting him away from her family. She remembered the flash of metal as the desperate intruder jabbed the knife into her belly, and she remembered her astonishment that there was no pain, not while her racing mind was preoccupied with saving her husband and child.

The would-be robber had fled in fear without stealing a thing, leaving Jo slumped in the puddle of blood that was rapidly expanding beneath her family.

Luis was already taking his last breaths when she got to him; the knife had entered his chest and punctured his lung, and he stopped breathing before he bled to death. He was dead by the time she finished calling 911; not even her skills as a trauma nurse had been enough to resuscitate him. When the ambulance arrived, the EMTs found her propped against the kitchen cupboard, her dead husband lying at her feet, her daughter cradled in her arms. Her hands pressed a blood-soaked towel not to the stab wound in her own belly, but to her little girl's neck, trying desperately to save her from bleeding out through her jugular.

Ten months later, Gabby was coping as well as could be expected. She wore a choker necklace to hide the scar on her neck and went fishing with her best friend Makayla's father instead of her own and tried to act as though everything were okay. But on the nights she was home, Jo sometimes still heard the muffled sound of her crying through the walls as she tried, and failed, to fall asleep.

She wished Gabby would come to her, so that they could put their arms around each other and cry together, but Gabby never did. She had the fiercely independent streak of her father, and so Jo was left to cry alone, in a bed that was

too large without Luis's warm body nestled next to her. Working the third shift gave her a reprieve from the nightly struggle to fall asleep when it was dark and she was lonely.

Under the bright, fluorescent lights of the ER, Jo sighed, feeling suddenly drained, and picked up the phone at the desk to call her daughter.

Chapter 3

Do you ever wonder why stuff is the way it is? I don't mean, like, why is the sky blue, or why is the grass green? Those are the kinds of questions little kids ask, and I'm not a little kid. The sky is blue because of how the gases in the atmosphere scatter light, and the grass is green because of chlorophyll – I learned that in science.

I'm talking about why things happen the way they do. Like, why did my dad have to die? The guy who killed him didn't even know him, so why did he choose our house to break into? It wasn't even that nice of a house. Why our house, and not the house next door? Why my daddy, and not somebody else's?

It's not like I wish it had been someone else's dad. I'm not that mean. I just wonder why it had to happen at all. Why did he have to die? Why did anyone have to die? Why did everyone die? And why am I still alive?

Thursday, April 5, 2012

8 days before Infernal Friday

"You're dead!" came a gloating shout, as the gun-wielding character on screen collapsed to his knees, to be devoured by Ganados. "Too bad, the zombies got you. Now come on, let's go watch *High School Musical 3*. I'm tired of playing video games."

The TV clicked off, and Gabrielle Lopez found herself being yanked to her feet by her best friend, Makayla Dean. She dropped the Playstation controller in her hand and followed Makayla from her brother's room, which they had infiltrated to play on his game console, back to her own, in which glossy posters of Zac Efron and Robert Pattinson smiled down from glaringly pink walls.

Gabby, almost more at home in this room than her own, plopped down into a turquoise beanbag chair while Makayla stopped in front of her TV to put in the DVD. They had only watched the third *High School Musical* about a hundred times together in the three years it had been out. They knew every line and every lyric by heart. "Sorry, I was just getting so bored watching you play *Resident Evil*

again,” Makayla said, as she turned off the lights and stretched out on the floor next to Gabby. “I’m having a Zac attack!”

Gabby smiled; Makayla was always in need of a Zac Efron fix, even with his face covering her walls, her pillowcases, her folders and notebooks at school, everything. She played along with the addiction, but really, she had forgotten what it was like to care so much about something. She could still recite the script to *High School Musical* from memory; it was programmed into her brain. But so, it seemed, was everything else she did these days.

She let her mind wander as the movie began; there was no need to pay attention to follow the story she knew so well. She could giggle on command at all the parts she’d once found funny, jump in with Gabriella’s lines when Makayla sang Troy’s, and still be a million miles away in her head. Going through the motions again; that’s what she was doing. She had been doing it for months now. She thought she might be an actress when she grew up, like Vanessa Hudgens, because that was all she ever did anyway. Act.

Staring at Makayla’s TV screen without really watching it, Gabby chewed on her bottom lip. She wished things could go back to the way they were last year, when she and Makayla were in sixth grade. She had never had to act around her best friend then. She had told Makayla everything, all her deepest secrets, which she realized now were nothing all that deep anyway. Certainly not like the thoughts she’d been coping with for the last ten months, anyway.

Everything had changed the night the robber broke into her house and murdered her father. She had changed. She didn’t feel like the silly little girl she’d been when she had gone to bed that night, a twelve-year-old who felt perfectly safe in her house with her mom and dad sleeping in the next room over, unconcerned with the war going on outside her country’s borders, just eager to have the best summer of her life with her best friend forever.

Makayla was still her BFF and always would be, but nothing else would ever be the same for Gabby. She no longer felt safe at home, despite the locks and deadbolts and security system her mother had installed. She didn’t sleep well either. Without fail, she awoke at least once every night, sometimes more often than that, from nightmares that made her dread falling back to sleep. She cried sometimes, burying her face in her pillow to muffle the sound so that she wouldn’t make her mom sad too, but in the light of the morning, she always managed to pull herself together and go about her act, pretending things were still normal and that she was okay.

The ringtone of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts, and the movie as well. Makayla went to pause it while Gabby hurried to dig her phone out of her bag, but Gabby waved her off, saying, “You can keep it playing; it’s just my mom.” She flipped the phone open and put it to her ear. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetheart,” came her mother’s voice. “I’m just calling to check in. Everything going okay?”

“Yep, fine.”

“Having fun? What are you and Mak doing?”

“Watching HSM 3.”

Gabby’s mom chuckled. “Again?”

“Yep,” said Gabby. She wasn’t exactly sure why her replies to her mother had been reduced to one or two words, but most of their conversations went just like this these days. Their relationship, along with everything else, had changed in the last year. Most people expected Gabby and her mother to be closer than ever, now that it was just the two of them, but in reality, it was just the opposite. Rather than cling to the only parent she had left, Gabby had distanced herself.

It wasn’t something she’d done on purpose; it had just sort of happened. She had always been more of a Daddy’s girl, but when he was alive, Gabby and her mom had never butted heads like they did now. Her mother was always trying to talk, asking questions. Gabby hated her prying. She knew, deep down, that her mom loved her and was concerned about her, but she had become so overprotective that Gabby couldn’t stand her sometimes. Even when her mother wasn’t working twelve-hour shifts at the hospital, they spent most of their time apart; Gabby preferred to be alone in the sanctuary of her bedroom.

“Alright...” The voice on the phone trailed off, and Gabby felt a pang of guilt. She knew her mom wished she would say more, wished she would open up to her, but for whatever reason, Gabby could not. She didn’t totally understand it herself, but she could not bring herself to add anything else. “Well, I guess I’ll let you go then. Don’t stay up too late, alright? I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Kay.”

“Night, Gabs. I love you,” her mother offered, and the guilty feeling poked at Gabby’s insides some more.

“Love you too,” she replied quickly, and ended the call.

Makayla looked up as Gabby slipped her phone back into her bag and returned to her spot. “Just calling to check up on you?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Gabby sighed, rolling her eyes. “You know my mom. She’s so annoying.”

Makayla shrugged, offering a sympathetic smile. “Moms are just like that,” she said, before returning her attention to the movie.

Gabby did the same – or pretended to, at least. She pretended to be thinking only of the complicated lives of her favorite characters, and not her own. She liked spending the night at Makayla’s house because when she was with Makayla, it was easy to do that. She could talk about the boys at school, none of whom she actually liked, and watch their favorite movies, and sneak into Makayla’s brother’s room to play video games, and not have to think about her dad. She didn’t have to walk by her parents’ bedroom and feel sorry for her mother, who must be so lonely, or look at the spot on the kitchen floor where she had watched him die in a puddle of blood. She didn’t have to answer her mom’s questions or listen to her threats to send Gabby to talk to a counselor. Makayla never ever brought up what had happened last summer, and that was how Gabby preferred it. At Makayla’s house, she could be the old Gabby, even if she was only acting, and pretend it had never happened at all.

Chapter 4

Failure is not something I’m used to. I don’t mean that in an arrogant way, like I’m just good at everything. Anyone who has ever seen me play sports knows that’s not true. The truth is, I know myself pretty well; I’m an intrapersonal type – “self smart,” we would call it in my classroom. I know I’m not good at a great many things, but in knowing my own limits, my weaknesses, I also know my own strengths. I’ve always set realistic goals for myself, and I’ve always accomplished those goals.

Except for one.

As a teacher, I knew I had the power to make an impact on young lives, and it was an amazing feeling. I just never dreamed I would be in the position I am now, where my personal success or failure will impact the entire world. It terrifies me. My life is worth more than it ever was before, and I have a duty to fulfill, an obligation to the human race.

I can’t fail again.

Friday, April 6, 2012

7 days before Infernal Friday

“Okay, boys and girls, we’re on page four now, the article called ‘America Overseas.’” Gretchen Elliott folded her copy of the weekly *Time for Kids* magazine, creasing along the edge, so that she was only looking at page four. She watched some of her students mimic her actions at their desks and waited until they were all on the right page. “Now, this is a pretty short title, isn’t it? It

doesn't give us a lot of information. But what else do you see on this page that could help you predict what the article is about? What inferences can we make?"

The children looked down at their articles, their eyes scanning the page. Some knew exactly what to look for, while others had learned merely to stare at their magazine, to look busy, when really they had not a clue what they were supposed to be doing. These, she noticed, suppressing a smile, would furtively look up every few seconds, their eyes shifting over to their neighbors to see what the other kids were looking at.

It didn't take long for the first hand to shoot up into the air, followed by a few others. Gretchen offered the early birds an appreciative smile, but waited another minute while she gave the rest of the class a chance to look and think. Then she called on a girl whom she knew had taken the task seriously. "Faith?"

"I think it's about the war," was Faith's matter-of-fact answer.

"And why do you think so?" Gretchen prompted.

"Well... there's a picture of a soldier."

"Yes, there is. How many of you made the same prediction as Faith based on that picture?" Most of the class raised their hands. "Does anyone have anything else to add? Let's see if we can be more specific. What about the war?"

Most of the hands went down. She gave them another few moments to scan the page again before calling on a boy named Chance. "Maybe it's about the soldiers and their families and stuff?" was Chance's answer. It was not the one she had been looking for, since the article was about the parts of the world in which the U.S. troops were fighting.

"What makes you think that?" she asked neutrally.

"Cause there's a little boy with the soldier in the picture; maybe it's his kid," Chance explained.

The soldier was black, the little boy Korean, but no matter, Gretchen decided. Families were so mixed, so untraditional these days, his assumption that they were father and son wasn't completely out of left field. "It could be," she said. "Where could we look to find out who the people in the picture are?"

"Um... that sentence below the picture?"

"Absolutely! Do you remember what we call that, the words below a picture?"

Chance screwed up his face in thought; he couldn't remember, but many of the other students did, since they reviewed it every Friday in their weekly *Time for Kids*. "The caption," Maddie supplied.

"Bingo," said Gretchen. "Who can read this caption for us? Kenzie?" She called on a girl who was on the verge of spacing out, bringing her back to the lesson. Kenzie startled, but quickly found her place and began to read.

"Private Aaron Mar... Marshall, pictured above, bends down to greet Lee Yong... Sung?" She stumbled over the foreign name, blinking at the page for a moment, then shook her head and continued on, "... a South Korean boy. Marshall is one of many American soldiers who are sta... stat... stationed in..."

"Seoul," Gretchen supplied, knowing her third-graders would never get the correct pronunciation of that one.

"Seoul, the capital of South Korea, where Yong Sung lives. South Korea is an alley-"

"Ally," Gretchen corrected.

"-ally of the United States. An ally is a country that helps another country."

"Thank you, Kenzie. So Chance, was your prediction correct? Is the boy in the picture the soldier's son?"

Put on the spot, Chance looked unsure. "Um... no?"

"How do you know? What did we learn from the caption Kenzie read?"

His eyes dropped back to his magazine. "He's just some kid who lives in South Korea."

"Right. Good example of how our inferences can change as we get more information. Thanks, Chance. Now, before we start to read the article, does anyone else have a guess about what it will be about? We're pretty sure it's about the war, but what else?"

It was nearing the end of the day on a Friday afternoon – Good Friday, actually, and the last day before a week-long spring break. Almost a third of the class was absent from school for "religious reasons" (reasons which, Gretchen was sure, included an early start to the beach for many families), and the two thirds who were physically present were starting to check out mentally. Gretchen didn't blame them, and when no one wanted to answer, she didn't push. She called on a volunteer to start reading the article and walked around the room to observe the students as they followed along.

She had been teaching for eight years now, though it was only her first at this school. Still, the last nine months had been enough to cement her opinion that third grade was absolutely the best grade to teach. The kids came to her with distinct personalities and a delightful sense of humor and were old enough to work independently on increasingly complex skills. Yet they were still so young that they looked up to her with respect and adulation, even when she made mistakes, and they did, as Cosby would phrase it, “say the darndest things.” She had been blessed with a great group of kids this year, and even now, when she could scarcely wait for her week off, she adored her class.

Gretchen had wanted to teach for as long as she could remember, going back to the days when she had played school with her younger sister; she had always been the teacher, her sister, the student. Real school was something that had come easy to her, as someone who could be described as “book smart,” and because she was also shy, she had always found it easier to interact with children than adults. Therefore, it seemed only natural that Gretchen follow in her mother’s footsteps to become an elementary school teacher, which she had. She’d done it the quick and easy way, taken the direct path: high school to college, college to classroom. She’d gone away to school, to a four-year university known for producing excellent teachers, and graduated with her bachelor’s degree in exactly four years. To her relief and excitement, she’d landed her dream job three weeks before graduation, teaching fourth grade in the same district where she had student taught.

“Want me to stop here, Mrs. Elliott, or should I keep going?” The voice of one of her third-graders, who had likely been a newborn during Gretchen’s first year of teaching, snapped her back to the present, and she realized his monotonous reading had lulled her into a daydream. It had been happening all too often lately, whenever she was not standing at the front of the room, directly instructing the students. Gretchen Elliott needed a break like she’d never needed it before. Her emotions, the recent events of her personal life, were starting to interfere. She could keep it together when she was in front of her class, too busy to stop and think about what had been troubling her, but in moments like these, she found her mind wandering, the thoughts that kept her awake at night creeping in.

“Go ahead and call on a new reader, Jeidyn,” she said, glancing down at her magazine to check where he had left off.

At twenty-two, Gretchen Millworth had found herself right where she’d wanted to be in life: graduated, teaching school, living on her own. By twenty-five, she was searching for more. Her career, up to that point, had played out exactly as she had hoped, but her personal life was at a standstill. For three years, she had used her job as an excuse, a crutch to fall back on when people asked her about her nonexistent love life, the reason she hadn’t been dating. She was too busy, she would claim; she didn’t have time for a boyfriend. And anyway, she was happy being single.

It had been partially true, but of course, not totally. The truth was, even though she'd been happy with her life, she wasn't completely satisfied. She was halfway through her twenties, with no immediate prospects of finding "the one," and that had made her nervous. She had always wanted a family, even more than she had wanted to be a teacher, but with no man in her life, she had started to worry that her most important goal in life would never be fulfilled.

And then she had met Shawn Elliott. He was her age and from a similar background, having grown up in a Midwestern, middle-class family, the same as she. While she had been immersed in her career for three years, he had been finishing up medical school, with aspirations to be a military doctor. The U.S. Army had paid for his education, in exchange for two years of service, minimum, upon his graduation. Having watched her classmates from high school enlist and be deployed to Afghanistan following September 11, 2001, having consoled her college friends whose boyfriends served in Iraq during the War Against Terror, Gretchen had sworn never to fall in love with a soldier. The life of a military wife was not one she wanted for herself. But she'd soon learned that the reason it was called "falling" in love was that it happened suddenly, accidentally. She'd had no control over it.

She had fallen in love, and now here she was, Mrs. Shawn Elliott, teaching not in the Midwest, but in Atlanta, Georgia, after two years of tutoring military brats on bases across the nation and one as a first grade teacher in Maryland, where Shawn had taken a job as a researcher for the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases after finishing his tour of duty. A year later, he'd been offered a better position at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. They'd married over the summer and moved to Georgia, where Gretchen had been lucky enough to land her current teaching position due to a last-minute opening in the district.

Gretchen loved the job, loved her school and her class, but was all too relieved to say goodbye to both when 3:30 came and she was allowed to leave. Unlike most of the teachers, who left empty-handed, insistent on enjoying a duty-free week away from school both in body and in mind, she took with her a tote crammed full with papers to grade, hoping the work would help take her mind off what had been bothering her at home. As much as she was looking forward to the time off, she feared it would be too much time to think and worry and feel sorry for herself.

At home in the modest, two-bedroom bungalow she and Shawn had purchased together, Gretchen sighed with relief as she changed out of her teaching clothes and into a pair of pajamas. She lived in pajamas around the house, especially now that she was pouring herself into her old clothes to go to work everyday. She refused to dress in maternity wear anymore, even though it was far more comfortable than the clothes which were now a size or two too small. If the kids had noticed this change, they hadn't said anything, though she dreaded finding a

way to tell them. She wished the school year were over now, but it was only the beginning of April. They still had another two months to go.

She had been twice that far along when she had told her third-graders what her friends and family had already known for a month: she was expecting a baby. Her first trimester was over, and she'd gained enough weight to be showing beyond the point of hiding it anymore. Not that she had wanted to. She'd been bursting with excitement since finding out; it was her first pregnancy and the culmination of her dream to one day have a family of her own. A nurturer by nature, Gretchen was the type of woman who had been born to be a mother.

She'd been a little nervous about the pregnancy, of course, but hadn't anticipated any real problems. None of the women in her family had ever had trouble conceiving or carrying babies; they all had more than one healthy child. When Gretchen had realized she was pregnant at the start of the new year, after seven months of marriage in which she and Shawn had not really been trying to conceive, the two of them had joked that she must be blessed with the same fertility.

Now, looking sadly at the pooch of her belly in the dresser mirror, Gretchen wondered if she had jinxed herself.

The spotting had started two weeks ago, followed by heavier bleeding. Sick with panic, Gretchen had gone to her doctor, only to have her worst fear confirmed: she'd had a miscarriage. No one knew what had caused it to happen, and Gretchen couldn't think of anything she had done wrong, yet of course she felt to blame.

Thankfully, Shawn didn't blame her; he had been wonderful. Of course he was devastated; he had been looking forward to the birth of their first child as much as she had. But he kept assuring her that there would be more chances, more babies. She just wasn't sure when she would feel up to trying again.

Gretchen filled the two hours between school letting out and the end of Shawn's shift by preparing an indulgent dinner for the two of them to share. The only time she liked to cook was when she was bored or wanting to take her mind off something, though being a wife had brought out her domestic side. She timed it just about right, so that dinner was almost ready when Shawn walked in the door.

"Happy spring break," he greeted her with a kiss. The loving gesture brought a genuine smile out of her, and she hugged her husband tightly, hoping this week would be a chance to heal for them both. She knew he'd been hurting too and, like her, working through the pain of losing their unborn child. He planned to use some of his vacation days next week, while she was off, so that they could be together. Grieve together, she thought. They could share the grief the way they'd shared so much else.

The phrase “opposites attract” didn’t apply to Shawn and Gretchen. They were soulmates, in that it truly seemed as if they shared the same soul; they were alike in so many ways. Both were shy, reserved; they took a long time to get to know people. At their wedding reception, Shawn’s best man had joked that he couldn’t imagine what their first date had been like, with only scraping forks and chirping crickets to form conversation. It was a good thing they had gone to a movie.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” their friends liked to tease them, but underneath their quiet exteriors, Gretchen and Shawn shared the same wicked sense of humor and a love of rock music. He was intelligent and bookish, like her, with a fair complexion, a thin, studious face, and wire-rimmed glasses. Everyone had always joked that if the two of them had children, they could already predict what they would be like: blue-eyed, brown-haired, left-handed, and incredibly near-sighted. Both Shawn and Gretchen were.

With sadness, Gretchen wondered about the child she had lost. Would it have turned out like they said? She watched her husband push his glasses up the bridge of his nose and wearily rub at his eyes and felt her sorrow shift to him. He had been working long hours lately at the CDC; the government feared the use of biochemical weapons by the enemy countries in the war, and Shawn was part of a team assigned to investigate, experiment, and develop antidotes. Gretchen was glad he’d been granted a few days off; he needed the vacation as much as she did.

“Go change your clothes,” she told him, loosening his tie and undoing the top button of his shirt. “Dinner will be ready by the time you’re done.”

He smiled, a tired but grateful smile. “What did I do to deserve a wife like you?”

His rhetoric, intended to be romantic, made her smile back, but once he had left the room, the smile faded from her lips. *A wife like me*, she thought. What kind of wife would she be if she could not give him the one thing the two of them had always wanted? The answer came in the form of a word she had always hated, a word she had always feared.

A failure.

Chapter 5

I’ve always been a father figure. I think I was destined to play that role, since I was promoted to Captain over a decade ago. It hits home now that I’m thirty-six and still have no children of my own.

Being in the Air Force, I’ve learned a few things about family. The family you were born with and the family you choose on your own usually get lost in the

jumble of defending a country. This is especially true during a war. Once you put on that uniform, it doesn't matter who you called your family before. You become America's son.

Or, in my case, you become the Air Force dad. The other thing I learned was that the family that is forced upon you is the one you come to see as your own. Generals and colonels become your father figures. The fresh-faced recruits are like your children. And when they're promoted, you feel a sense of fatherly pride in their accomplishments. People you fight with and suffer with are the people you form real bonds with. And even though they aren't your flesh or blood, they're more like family than anyone.

I think that's truer now than it ever was before.

Saturday, April 7, 2012

6 days before Infernal Friday

He took in a breath as he exited his tent in the crisp morning air. He had been staying in the army camp for the past two days, in order to discuss the current invasion plans with the higher-ranking officers. At present, the aircraft carriers were out to sea with the naval force. Of course, the highest-ranking naval officers were here as well.

He stretched his arms and took in another breath. Even though a war was going on, it hardly seemed that way in this camp. A brief smile crossed his face.

He looked up to the sky and saw a few streaming clouds. That was unusual. Air travel was heavily restricted...

There was an explosion. He turned quickly to see a tank roaring with flames.

He took in a gasp and ran toward the nearest trench, hoping to get out of the way of the fire.

He heard the rattling of machine gun fire as he huddled under the outcropping above the trench. He was only mildly safer here than he was in the early morning daylight. He huddled with his arms wrapped around his body.

Please let this be a dream. Please let me be asleep in the tent still. He prayed to himself over and over again.

It was then that he heard more explosions, followed quickly by the screams emanating from the camp.

The quickest to their feet were swift to join him under the outcropping.

Please let this be a dream. I'll ask nothing else ever again.

Could anyone hear his prayers?

“Let him through!” the voices shouted.

In moments, his commanding officer was before him, bleeding profusely.

“Sir!” he exclaimed.

The blood poured down his commander’s face.

He turned his head, shutting his eyes from the sight. “WHY?!?!”

Kevin woke with a startle. He placed his hand to his heart as his breathing quickened. Just a dream... At least, just a dream this time...

Lord, help me.

He rose from bed slowly, throwing a towel over his shoulders.

“If I’m sweating already, I may as well exercise,” he laughed as he mentioned this piece of information to himself. He gingerly placed his hand on his wounded arm. He was thankful each day that he had only sustained a small injury, in comparison to a death as gruesome as his commander’s.

That was the most dreadful thing about dying in war: everyone who lived suffered more, in the end. Those who died never had to see the gruesome face of war ever again. And yet, dying was never really a reprieve either. Everyone always witnessed everyone else dying. That was the horror of war.

Kevin stood on his treadmill as he adjusted the settings on the machine. He began jogging slowly, eyeing his injured arm every few moments.

March 15, 2012

“It’s a good thing we’re here to refuel your planes, isn’t it?”

Kevin gave him a slight nod. “It’s a necessity.”

“Do you ever worry about getting shot down?”

“It’s a fact of life. If it happens, it can’t be helped.”

The technician laughed. “You’re a stronger man than I am.”

Kevin gave him a warm smile and put his hand on his shoulder. "You could be just as strong someday. You just have to keep moving forward."

"That's pretty kind advice for someone in the army."

Kevin shook his head. "Not everyone is a harsh drill sergeant." A small laugh escaped his lips. He turned his head slightly. "Did you hear something?"

"Probably just the wind."

"It probably is."

The ship rattled intensely.

Kevin ran to the side of the ship. The water was full of ripples. He turned to face the sky. The aircrafts were overhead... and they were on the attack.

"Are the aircrafts ready, yet? We need to get off this ship."

"It'll be a few more hours, at least..."

"Unfortunately, they can't wait that long..."

"Why?"

There was another crash.

Kevin turned just in time to witness the second blast. One of the airplanes burst into flames.

Without hesitation, Kevin knocked the technician to the ground.

"Ow," the technician cringed as he hit the ground. "What was that for?"

Kevin cringed as he held his arm.

"You're... you're bleeding!"

Kevin cringed for a moment. "I'm fine. Just... keep moving forward."

The young man's eyes grew wide as he knelt with the air force captain, as the shrapnel from the planes kept flying toward them.

Kevin touched his arm lightly as he slowed the machine to a stop.

He stepped off the treadmill, wrapping the towel around his shoulders. He let out a sigh as the phone rang. He pulled it from his bedside table.

“Hello?”

“Is that any way to treat your cousin?” the line responded.

Kevin shook his head. He hadn’t realized he sounded annoyed.

“Sorry, Brian. How are you this morning?”

“Good, just busy getting ready for Sunday.”

“It is almost Easter, isn’t it?”

“This makes me a terrible pastor; my own *cousin* can’t remember when Easter is.”

“Sorry, I’ve just been getting ready to go back overseas.”

“That’s right. When do you get shipped out again?”

“Two weeks.”

“Two weeks? Now, why couldn’t you come up for Easter?”

“I wish I could, Brian...”

“I’ll be singing.”

Kevin let out a laugh. “You always sing.”

“I think it brings the community together.”

Kevin laughed again. “I’ll make you a promise.”

“A promise, huh?”

“I’ll be on leave around Christmas, so I’ll come for your Christmas Eve sermon.”

“Why don’t you just come up and see us for the entire holiday?”

“I’d love to.”

Brian laughed. “It’s a promise, then. Just, be careful when you go.”

“Sure, Brian, I’ll try.”

“Don’t try. Promise.”

“Talk to you soon. I know you’ll give a great sermon on Sunday.”

“Thank you.”

Kevin lowered the phone and put his head in his hands. Relatives...

He gave a small smile. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can. And the wisdom to know the difference.”

He ran the towel over his head and headed toward the shower.

Chapter 6

It used to sadden me to watch the news. I’d see such awful stories about people whose actions I couldn’t begin to rationalize. Mothers, who murdered their own babies. Quiet teenagers, who suddenly snapped and brought guns into their schools. A soldier, who threw a puppy over a cliff. Where was God in these people’s lives? I wondered. How could anyone kill innocent children, babies who depended on them, pets who trusted unconditionally?

I have a better understanding now. I know what it’s like to kill, and I know how it feels to be the innocent one, betrayed by someone I once called Father. My faith had rendered me blind; though I watched the news, I didn’t see the world for what it was becoming. Now, my eyes are wide open. I know there is no one out there I can trust, no one who will watch over me and the people I love. No one can. They’re all dead.

In what’s left of this world, I am on my own.

Sunday, April 8, 2012

5 days before Infernal Friday

On Easter Sunday, the Reverend Brian Littrell stood at the pulpit before his congregation and proclaimed, “Christ is risen!”

“He is risen indeed!” came the response from the sea of churchgoers who had flooded the sanctuary of Calvary Hill Baptist Church.

When Brian had first come to this church ten years ago, its services brought only enough people trickling in to fill the first few rows of pews. This morning, every pew was filled. Pride was a sin, so Brian didn't like to attribute the flourish in attendance to his own doing, but on this day, the most joyous of days for Christians around the world, he couldn't help but smile out into the faces of his congregation and give a silent prayer of thanks for all that he had been able to accomplish here.

A decade ago, the church had been lead by a man named Charles Danner. Reverend Chuck, as he'd preferred to be called, had been preaching at Calvary Hill since its charter in 1963. The oldest church members, those who had lived in Marietta, Georgia for some forty years, described him, in his youth, as a vibrant preacher, charismatic and dedicated to his faith. The Reverend Chuck Brian had known was an old man with a kind heart, a wheezy voice, and unbearably dry sermons. No one dared speak an ill word against their pastor, who had raised their church from the ground up and continued to preach there into his seventies, yet privately, many felt it was time he stepped down and allowed new blood to take over.

Brian had been the "new blood" they craved, though no one had realized it at the time. He had been hired by the church as its new youth pastor, and when he'd arrived, fresh out of Bible college at the age of twenty-three, people had joked that he must have misunderstood the job description: the youth pastor wasn't supposed to be one of the youth himself.

There were skeptics, sure, but within six months, they had been silenced. The new Reverend Littrell's youth proved to be an asset to the church, rather than a hindrance. He had brought with him both energy and vision, and he'd quickly made an impact on his new church, revitalizing the Sunday school program, directing the youth choir, and organizing a new youth group. Under Brian's leadership, the children of the church actually *wanted* to go to Sunday school; they *wanted* to sing in the choir. The youth group was no longer a corny thing, but something cool, something the teens looked forward to each week. No one could deny that the new youth pastor had made a positive change in a church that was otherwise in steep decline.

When Reverend Chuck suffered a stroke and passed away, Brian had been the obvious choice to fill his shoes. In the five years since he had become the minister at Calvary Hill, the church had seen a steady rise in attendance, to the point when, on holidays such as this, its sanctuary was almost too small to hold everyone who came to worship there. Brian infused his sermons with a blend of passion, personality, and humor that was appealing to people, especially those who were more casual about worshipping, and in this way, he reached a wider audience than Reverend Chuck had been able to.

Now, finished with his welcome message, Brian stepped back from his pulpit to allow that morning's liturgist up to do a reading from the book of John, the verses

telling of Christ's resurrection. In Brian's mind, there was no more powerful story in the Bible, except perhaps Creation itself. The miracle of rising from death had always been especially meaningful to him.

A hymn followed, and then the choir director announced, "And now for this morning's special music, here is our very own pastor, Reverend Brian Littrell, with a new song he wrote called 'We Lift You Up.'"

The praise band struck up a jazzy tune as Brian took the microphone from her and pulled it off its stand. For a moment, as he listened to the band behind him and looked out into the rows of people in front of him, he felt almost like a rock star. The thought was laughable, but it was the closest he would ever come to a music career. The regulars of the congregation smiled back at him with adoration, while the visitors gazed on in intrigue. They had likely never witnessed such a spectacle: a pastor performing his own special music? But at Calvary Hill, it was nothing new, just as it was old hat for Brian, who had started singing at church in his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky as a child and never stopped.

*"When I think of all the things that God has done for me,
And how my faith has always conquered adversity,
I stand amazed to think that God really knows who I am,
And to think that within me, there is a master plan..."*

To those who knew him best, it was a miracle that Brian was even alive to stand before a crowd and sing. At five years old, he had contracted a serious blood infection, which was made worse by a heart defect he'd been born with, though no one had realized it until then. His temperature had spiked high enough to cause brain damage, and his heart had stopped for thirty seconds. The doctors had prepared his parents for the worst, advising them to start making funeral plans, but to everyone's amazement, Brian had bounced back from the brink of death and survived, leaving the hospital two months later as virtually the same happy-go-lucky kid he'd been when he had gone in.

*"And at night when I pray to the Lord that I know,
I thank Him for his precious blood He gave to save my soul..."*

Having grown up in a devout Baptist family with that experience never far from his thoughts, it seemed only natural that Brian choose the path of religion. He'd been called to ministry as a teenager and gone north to Cincinnati Bible College on a music scholarship. He had always possessed a natural talent for music, and had it not been for the call, he might have pursued a singing career. Instead, he wrote music on the side, and whenever he came up with a contemporary Christian song he was proud of, he performed it for his church.

*"And that's why
We lift You up,*

*Higher than the heavens;
We lift You up (because Your love is)
Deeper than the deepest sea;
We lift You up,
Higher than the mountains;
We lift You up;
He died for you and me..."*

The church choir joined in behind him on the chorus, and looking out into the congregation, Brian was rewarded by the sight of people rising from their pews to sway along with them.

*"Let me share with you just how I know He's blessed my life
He opened up His precious hands and gave me a wife..."*

His eyes panned across the front row and locked onto a trio of blondes sitting in their usual spot, in the very center. His wife Leighanne beamed up at him, her blue eyes shining in admiration. She looked especially lovely on this morning in her Easter clothes. A true Southern belle, she even wore white gloves.

Brian had met Leighanne Wallace over spring break, his junior year of college. That year, he took a mission trip to Mexico, where Leighanne and her friends were vacationing. Her beauty first caught his eye, but it was her sweet personality that had captured his heart. Over the next year, they had maintained a long-distance courtship, and upon his graduation, Brian had moved south to Leighanne's native Georgia to pursue a more serious relationship. Two years later, they were married.

On either side of Leighanne sat the products of that unity: their seven-year-old twin daughters, Brooke Lynn and Bonnie Leigh. Named for both their parents' initials, the two girls were a perfect blend of Brian and Leighanne, with their mother's beauty and their father's charisma. Brian thanked the Lord daily for the two miracles He had created when He'd touched Leighanne deep down in her soul and given him daughters. He knew no greater love on Earth than the one he had for his children, his family.

*"And at night when I pray to the Lord that I know,
I thank Him for his precious blood He gave to save my soul..."*

On that Easter Sunday, in the midst of his parishioners, Brian Littrell lifted up his hands and praised the Lord for His gifts of love and family, of resurrection, and of salvation.

Chapter 7

People tell me I'm rough around the edges, and I like being that way. Leave the sensitivity for other girls. I'm true to myself, who I am, and with no apologies about it.

Drive, goals, determination, achievement. Those are the four words I've lived by my entire life. I learned at a young age the world doesn't always give you what you want, or even what you need. So I knew early on that what I wanted, or felt I needed, I'd have to work my ass off for. And I did. I watched myself begin to rise to the top. When I was almost there, the world went to hell. I mean literally. When that happened, I was on the brink of the best (and most realistic) career goals I'd had for myself, and suddenly, that didn't matter anymore.

I had no room and no time for the more personal goals. I knew what I wanted required sacrifice, and I easily gave it without question. My family, my friends, even coworkers always tried to give me sage-like advice, and I brushed it off. My biggest regret is hearing their words when it was too late. I learned only after that life is nothing without the personal connections, touches, that make it special.

And the ironic thing about it all? I have too much time for my personal life now, and my former achievements now mean jack shit.

Monday, April 9, 2012

4 days before Infernal Friday

The fitters were fluttering around her feet as she stood on a pedestal. They were trying to make sure the hem of the dress was just right as she just scowled down at all the frilly attention. She rolled her eyes and glanced at her giddy friend who had caused all this trouble. "Remind me to tell my brother he's so dead, Kelly."

The other woman just giggled with excitement as her strawberry-colored hair bounced with a shake of her head. "Riley, relax. Chase and I both adore you for being the Maid of Honor at our wedding."

"You better. You know how I feel about dresses."

"Yes, heaven forbid you don one for the sake of your younger brother."

"Just shows how much I love the dweeb. This can't take too long, though; I have a report I need to do tonight. This war has really been heating up my career." And it was true. She had graduated in 2009 and had been doing what she could to make sure she was getting the hot stories for the tiny station she worked for. None of it had gotten her noticed until the war happened. She had come upon the right story at the perfect time. Suddenly, she'd gone from getting pointless

fluff pieces with no camera time to actual news. Since then, she'd been making sure she rose higher to success.

“Gotcha. Your job. Is that all you think about, though, Riley? It is all you talk about. And when was the last time you actually took a day off? You're working nonstop.”

She shrugged as she pushed a stray blonde lock away from her eyes, readjusting her ponytail. She knew what everyone said. Hell, they told her all the time. She needed to focus less on her career and more on her personal life. Maybe they were even right, but she was so close to getting what she wanted. So much so that she could taste it. Now wasn't the time to slow down just for the sake of something as frivolous as dating.

Perhaps how she had been raised had something to do with it. She was the middle child of five and the only girl of the bunch. Her mother had died soon after her youngest brother was born, when Riley Blake had only been six years old. Chase, the one getting married, was the second youngest. The line-up was Nathan as the oldest, then Randy, herself, Chase, and, lastly, Tommy. Being raised with four boys would have been enough to make her a tomboy, but her father had lost their mother to childbirth and struggled to raise them as a single parent, never remarrying. She'd thought before she might be more soft, more sensitive, if she had had her mother growing up. But she hadn't and, in the end, had learned anything she cherished could be taken away, and that if she wanted something, she'd have to fight for it.

So she had, and it had gotten her far.

“Riley, hellooooo, you alive?”

She laughed, shifting uncomfortably. “Yeah, still breathing.” Riley hated dresses, skirts, with a passion. She wore makeup, but outside of stage makeup for work, very lightly. That and the whole setting made her feel uneasy. It was just weird seeing Chase get married. That same awkward, scrawny, towheaded boy she'd beat at wrestling was now twenty-two years old and a man by all rights, now making the biggest commitment of his life.

This wasn't the first time she was seeing one of her brothers marry. Actually, it was the third. Now she and Tommy were the only single ones left. She wasn't exactly sure how to take that yet. Her friends had all gotten married as well. Many were saying that “at her age,” she should start thinking about settling down with someone.

And that was the problem. She didn't feel ready. She loved independence, mostly. And they talked as if twenty-five was old. Riley felt that was far from true. Yet there were times when her heart betrayed her. When she'd feel a random pang of loneliness and wish she could find that one guy. Like right then.

She was getting a bit tired of being the bridesmaid, never the bride. Of course, she'd never admit that.

In the end, all she would do was work even more, until the pangs went and faded away. It never fixed anything, but it helped her ignore it quite well.

It was odd for a journalist to say, but for Riley, sometimes ignorance was bliss. Even false ignorance.

“This is Channel Three News, with your news, your way. There have been marked threats for the US to back down, that we only have a week to settle. We have been trying to reach McCain’s advisors for a comment on how they plan to deal with such a threat. All that’s been received is this statement: ‘This country will not be terrorized into a position we don’t want. We will do what we need to, to keep our people safe.’ We’ll update you further as more information comes in. And now we have Riley Blake with the war on the local front. Riley?”

“This is Riley Blake, for Channel Three News, reporting live from MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa Bay, where a prototype jet, rumored to revolutionize air combat, has just been through a series of tests.”

The camera followed her as she walked along the base, taking in the men training around her. She casually approached one of the officers, who knew she would be arriving. “I have Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson here with me. Colonel Richardson, just what will these planes be used for, specifically, and how will they change the war?”

“Well, Miss Blake...”

The military man before her was attractive, and no doubt when her friends saw her report, they'd ask if she had tried to flirt or ask for his number. He had dark, raven-shaded hair, pretty green eyes, and a Southern tone that was almost soothing. But it didn't do anything for her. And even if it had, she didn't have the time for a personal life.

The interview went on, as most of hers did. She put on her happy face and did her thing for the camera, asking the set of questions and getting the answers she knew would make the story as good as she hoped it would be. The entire setting was second nature for her, really. This was what she was meant to be doing; she knew it.

It seemed so wrong that a war which had torn the world apart had helped her life. But it had. As a firm believer in karma, Riley knew what went around came right back around. She only prayed her own profit from the blood-soaked war wouldn't come back to bite her later.

Chapter 8

Darkness can creep up upon you, take over you before you even have a chance to scream. I don't mean actual darkness. I mean the depths of your own soul that even you are afraid to peer into. That side of you that you never want to admit is there, though it finds ways to remind you and lurks on the outskirts of the life you fool people into thinking you're happy living.

Happiness itself is a sham, but I digress.

People in general live false, shallow, and even pointless lives. They do what society tells them they're supposed to, and then they come home feeling satisfied for doing absolutely nothing within the grand scheme of things. I'm guilty of that myself; everyone is. I used to express my own views upon the world through painting, poetry, whatever artistic flavor I was feeling at the moment. Usually painting. Many thought me different, odd, dark, and of course, I was. I reflected a truth back to them they did not want to see. I didn't want to see it either, and to avoid it, I did whatever I could. That was my downfall.

Only now, it's my salvation.

Within the hands of death, I was given life.

Tuesday, April 10, 2012

3 days before Infernal Friday

When AJ McLean checked into the Adult Men's Residential and Recovery Program over in Orlando, he wasn't sure about the whole idea. He pretty much summed it up as a huge waste of his time and his mother's money. He didn't care if he had a problem or not. He wasn't hurting anyone except for himself, and to him, it was more of a release than harm.

It was the tears of his mother that had convinced him perhaps he did have a bigger problem. Taking his coke-infused anger out upon her had given him his severe wave of a reality check. Hitting his mother, the one who had always stood by him after his father had abandoned them when he was only a child. Hurting his mother, who never stopped believing in him, despite his inability to experience the joy she did in the little things of life. Harming her, when he clearly saw that she was too good for him, that he wasn't worthy of being her son. It was that event which had snapped him into rehab. Not self-realization, not religion, nothing more than seeing her heart break.

So now he was in a sterile and empty room, with a bed that felt like cardboard and fellow inmates who made him feel almost normal. Which, for that to be said in any situation involving him, was bothersome. He wasn't sure how to take his new separation from the outside world yet. It was the absence of cocaine that was beginning to drive him mad.

Already, he had spent a better part of the day with his head in the toilet, regurgitating every molecule he'd eaten and some he was sure he hadn't eaten. He had heard withdrawal was tough, but this was ridiculous. He hadn't had the urge to eat much anyway, even before the vomiting. Now that that had finally passed, he rested upon the stiff board of a bed and turned on the TV the room had. He had to watch something, do something. Otherwise, his mind would immediately travel back to thoughts of the pleasures of the drug that brought him here.

"I'm Riley Blake, for Channel Three News, here with Florida's War Watch down at the..."

He smirked at the news that came on and shook his head. The war itself was a perfect example of all that was wrong with the world. It was a world of selfishness, one where few people cared and where everyone pretended they did. A world of illusions and no depth behind them. Even when he was younger, back in the days when he wanted to be a singer and performed his own original songs and everything, he had seen the world that way. And that was why he'd never gotten anywhere with music. Depressing songs about all-consuming darkness and the salvation of death never went well with the majority of the world's population.

His gifts were all artistically centered and abreast a view that saw the world in a truthful way. For the longest time after his failure in music, he had done nothing but write poetry and had been mildly well-accepted. AJ had even had one solitary book published, which few people bought. He'd gotten bored soon after. Then he'd gone to his current love of painting. When he painted, he felt his energy escape into the brush and be shown through impressionistic strokes. The painting thing hadn't taken off, but he didn't hate the starving artist world yet.

It was hard to mind much when he was cracked out of his mind almost every night of the week.

Drugs alleviated the pain his perspectives gave him. He had tried to change growing up, but struggled with everything, with the effort behind living. If not for his mother and grandmother, he would have gone a long time ago. The therapists told him he had all the signs of clinical depression. Ironically, it meant he'd be taking another pill every week. When he'd told the doctor that his coke addiction should count as self-medication, AJ was pretty sure he had seen the neutral face of the therapist crack slightly with annoyance. AJ had laughed in his face before leaving the office and going back to his room.

Counter-productive though it was, seeing the workers at the clinic try to get a handle on his natural personality amused him to no end. He couldn't help how his mind worked, and battling his addiction, wasn't he being taught that drugs would never help him deal with the world? And now, because of a mental affliction he'd supposedly been born with that had gone undiagnosed, he'd be taking drugs anyway.

Life was not without its own twisted sense of humor, it seemed.

Chapter 9

Money can't buy you everything.

When you become rich, everyone always chides you with that remark: "money can't buy you everything." In my experience, that was farther from the truth than anyone is willing to let on. Money can buy a person many luxuries, friends, even social standing. Money is one of the most useful commodities.

But money is the root of all evil.

People will also tell you this when you are wealthy. As for my personal opinion, I'd rather be rich and evil, than poor and pious.

And then the day came when money no longer mattered. If your world is structured around your income and the purchase of goods, what is there to life when none of those things are available to you anymore? It makes life seem almost empty.

But they were still lying. It's not that money can't buy you everything.

It's more that money can't buy you anything.

Wednesday, April 11, 2012

2 days before Infernal Friday

Howard Dorough adjusted his tie meticulously as he stared into the mirror in the dean's office. His knot was off-center. He continued to fiddle with it as he turned back to the dean slightly.

Dean Keon placed his office phone back into its receiver. "Sorry about the wait, Mr. Dorough."

Howard shook his head slightly as he stared back into the mirror, adjusting his tie a third and final time. It seems pretentious to say so, but at least for today, Howard Dorough had every right to adjust his tie seven hundred times if he wanted to.

“Now,” the dean smiled, “would you like a tour of the building?”

Howard gave him a stiff nod.

Howard was the multi-million dollar creator and CEO of Dorough International. His more or less humble beginnings had started in hotel property management at the beginning of the new millennium. A decade later, he had reached the top tier of the business. It was truly one of those rags-to-riches, success stories – without the rags, of course. His father had, after all, been a sort of second-in-command to the Hilton empire. It was only natural the hotels would be his original love.

There were some days when he missed his nearly-humble beginnings with his business. He used to be able to visit each of his properties daily. But now that he owned well over one hundred, it was practically impossible – especially when several of them were outside of the state of Florida; never mind that he only had a few properties within Orlando itself these days.

A small smirk crossed his face.

And there were those days when his wealth, power, and prestige brought a smile to his face – most days were like this.

Today was one of the latter.

He was currently visiting the University of Central Florida’s campus. With his funding, a new building had been erected and was finally ready to open on the university campus, just in time for the summer session. Being a prominent businessman, it was only fitting that he would donate to the business program of the university in his home town.

That is one of the drawbacks and bonuses to being rich. People expect you to be a philanthropist. But when you are a philanthropist, people remember your name.

And nothing says “I’m important” more than a building with your name etched into it.

Howard smiled at the thought of his name being preserved long after his death and through many millennia. People would remember Howard Dorough – he would make sure of that.

He adjusted his tie a fourth time as he followed Dean Keon out of his office.

In a matter of minutes, they had descended an elevator and walked out of the building into the Florida sun. Howard adjusted his collar. Since he spent most of his time indoors these days, he had forgotten how unbearable the Florida weather was in a suit, even in mid-April.

A university cart was parked outside the Business Administrative building for them.

Howard raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a bit of a walk to it from here. It’s past the far end of the second Business Administrative building.”

Satisfied with the answer, Howard stepped into the cart. He sat beside the dean in the passenger seating area.

The driver started the cart and proceeded to head toward the newest addition to the Business Administrative plaza.

The dean described how they’d come to pick the location of the newest building and the history of the two previous buildings. Apparently, his building was on the lot which had previously contained the University Theatre. It had been rebuilt at a new location a few years prior, so it only made sense to fill the location with a new building for one of the nearby degree complexes: business or science, particularly computer science. Business, however, had happened to claim the lot first. Thanks, in large part, to Mr. Dorough’s kind contribution.

Although lengthy, there was no one who could withstand the power of the dean’s flattery. Howard gave him a large smile as he accepted the praise graciously.

After all, he was more than used to listening to lavish praise.

The cart stopped abruptly, and Howard put his hand to his chest before brushing off the sudden stop. He took in a few low breaths before getting out of the cart and brushing off his slacks.

Howard stood in front of the building in front of him. It matched the other two Business Administration buildings in appearance. It had the same facade constructed completely of windows. It had the same circular, modern architecture style. But this one was different.

This one was called the “Howard D. Dorough Business Administration” building.

He smiled and stared up at his name. Everyone always said it was impossible to be remembered, unless you did something amazing, like a work of art or great literature. But he had certainly proved them wrong.

Anyone will be remembered if they have enough money to get their name out there. And not just out there, but on something indestructible.

Money is the key to securing remembrance. That was obviously certain. People with money make things happen.

The dean placed his hand on Howard's shoulder. Howard brushed it aside lightly by pulling his shoulder away.

The dean straightened his tie and cleared his throat. "Would you like to go inside?"

"Yes, I would like to see just how this building turned out."

He held open the door for Howard.

Howard slid into the opening and entered the building.

The dean followed closely behind him.

The foyer was wide and held classic leather couches and various potted plants in strategic corners.

The building guide directly center noted where offices were and on which floors.

"Do the students use this building?" Howard studied the sheet intensely.

"It's intended to be a graduate level building, but I believe that there will be a least a few undergraduate courses in its classrooms."

"Has there not been space for the graduate students in the other two buildings?"

"Sometimes, but not always. We've had business classes in overflow classrooms, like the mathematics building."

"What an odd place to put business students."

"I agree, but it is nice to know that we've been forced to do it because there has been high enrollment and retention in the business program."

"The universities are doing a fine job of producing tomorrow's business leaders. That was why I was happy to donate funds toward this building's construction."

"I would actually love it if you could see the large lecture hall we have created in this building."

"To keep students away from mathematics?"

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Dean Keon laughed as he led Howard toward the elevator.

The two descended toward the lowest floor of the building. The elevators opened, and they stood in a long hallway. The outer side was constructed completely of windows – even the doors were made of windows. The inner side contained the doors to the large lecture hall.

The dean opened one and ushered Howard in. The lecture hall was completed with red padded chairs and sleek black walls.

“Is this for undergraduate courses?”

“I can’t imagine many graduate courses needing large lecture halls.”

Howard nodded.

“This room seats three hundred students. So it is a great asset to the Business Administrative complex.”

“Indeed.” Howard nodded in agreement with the dean.

They exited back into the half-glass hallway. Dean Keon pulled open one of the doors and led Howard out to the side of the complex.

He motioned toward the large staircase to his left. “And, if we go back up these stairs, we’d return to the main lobby of the building.”

Howard crinkled his nose at the thought of climbing up that many stairs, when a sound caught his ear. “What’s that noise?”

Dean Keon turned toward the Student Union. It seemed as though he already had his suspicions about what was producing the sound. “I apologize, Mr. Dorough. Some of the student population does not support America’s involvement in this recent war. Protestors are inevitable... You know how idealistic the younger generation is.”

Howard cleared his throat as he stared toward the Student Union. “Idealistic” was far from the word he would choose. Rather than idealistic... he would probably opt for “directionless.”

“Make peace, not war!”

“Bring our soldiers home!”

“Let’s learn! Not fight!”

Chapter 10

Inside everyone, there's a sort of sameness and lack of sameness. People are like cookies in a way. One batch could have been cut with the same cookie cutter, but when they come out of the oven, one might be more burnt or disfigured or broken. I always thought I was one of the broken ones.

Back then, I felt like college royalty. I was a legacy, who had everything down to the tightly-woven safety bond and inherited pin. I would nestle myself in that bond and complain about the Fiji that stood me up or the term paper worth half my grade. And my bond would be there to catch me and hold me. But things like that don't last forever... It just fell apart. And because I was a drama queen then, I just didn't know how to piece it back together. And that broken feeling spread to the surface. And I had nowhere to go when that net was broken.

Being broken is a frightening thing. And no one is really ever glamorously lonely.

Thursday, April 12, 2012

1 day before Infernal Friday

“Make peace, not war!”

“Bring our soldiers home!”

“Let's learn! Not fight!”

Protestors littered the lawn outside the Student Union. They wore their signs with seemingly clever slogans. Though, the same group was out there day after day without additional numbers or support.

“Can you honestly believe them, Kayleigh?”

Kayleigh looked back at the protestors and then towards her friend. “I don't like the war either, Sam. Matt's in the Navy already, and Chris is going to be eighteen soon... I don't want any dead brothers...”

“But they act like it's the Vietnam War they're protesting. *They* attacked *us*. We need to defend ourselves.”

Kayleigh fiddled with the strap of her Prada bag. “We always get dragged into world wars...”

“Would you protest it, Kay?”

“Me? Gawd no, Sammy.” Kayleigh shook her head forcefully. “Especially not when I need to wear my letters.”

“You *need* to wear your letters?”

“How would anyone know who I was without them?” Kayleigh laughed a little.

Kayleigh Shane Jackson, the firstborn daughter of Pi Kappa Phi and Delta Delta Delta University of Alabama alumnae, was the epitome of a Southern lady. She always wore pearls with her sorority jerseys and high heels with her jeans. She never had a hair out of place and always carried the latest hot accessory.

“Said as a true Southern Tri Delta would,” Samantha laughed.

“We need more of them at UCF,” Kayleigh giggled with her.

“You can’t expect Southern from Floridians.”

“That’s because Florida has a mindset all its own.”

Kayleigh giggled again as she loosened her grip on her Prada bag before she went to fiddle with her Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses, secretly swearing one of the screws was loose. Kayleigh sighed quietly; Prada... Dolce & Gabbana... She owned all of this, and yet, it seemed meaningless next to the war. What did it matter if you had designer bags, clothing, or accessories, when people like your brothers, family members, friends, or boyfriends were being shipped off to fight in a war? She let out a sigh.

That’s what she hated the most about the war... It turned her mood so sour. She sighed again and turned back to the protestors. Maybe they did have the right idea? Maybe it was okay to protest it... Because it kept the people you loved safe. Of course, there were plenty of people overseas fighting to protect this country, but in reality... what did the country matter? People you would never meet... people you would never know... what did they matter?

What did it really matter if, halfway across the country, a mother was shipping her only son off to basic training? Or that, halfway around the world, an air force pilot was dropping bombs on some foreign city? It mattered to them, but what did it matter to her?

She lowered her head. It was a pretty selfish way to look at it. But when it came down to it, it didn’t matter. You saw it on the news: some guy from Nebraska got killed in the war. And you felt bad for him and his family when you saw it, but when the segment ended, it wasn’t in your life anymore, and you moved on.

Wars or not, what really mattered were the people you knew, the people who were close to you.

“Kay? Kayleigh?”

Kayleigh snapped her attention back to her friend. “Sorry, I was just...”

“I promise you that there are no Pi Kapps protesting in that crowd.”

“We don’t even have the Pi Kappa Phis here, Sammy.”

“If we did, you wouldn’t constantly be obsessing over whether it’s better to date a Kappa Sig, a FIJI, a Sig Pi, or a Sig Nu.” She shook her head.

Kayleigh lowered her head. “Sorry... I have to be loyal to my daddy.”

“Are you really still thinking about transferring?”

“I think Louisiana State would be fun.”

“There’s no Brad at Louisiana State.”

“Actually, he said they have a chapter there.”

Samantha laughed and shook her head. “You’re too invested in having an entourage.”

“I’d let him down gently when I met a Pi Kappa Phi Prince.”

“I don’t think your daddy would approve.”

“My daddy always approves of inter-Greek relations.”

“In what way?” Samantha started cracking up. Her face was even bright red.

Kayleigh turned back to the protestors one more time. And maybe at that university, people wouldn’t protest in public...

“Kayleigh Shane!”

The two girls looked up in response to the southern drawl and smiled at the sight of the young, blonde man wearing a Kappa Sigma sweatshirt.

“And Samantha Anne,” he drawled again with a smile.

Kayleigh's face lit up again as she skipped over and linked arms with him. "Bradley Lee!" Her voice carried a slight teasing tone.

Brad ran his hand through his hair as he smiled once more. "I thought I might run into you here, Kayleigh Shane."

"I was hoping you might, Bradley Lee." Kayleigh herself slipped into an Alabama drawl; she always did around the infamous Kappa Sigma from Mississippi.

He was a better fit than Jake, the loud-mouthed FIJI from New York, anyway, and a gentlemanly second to a brother of Pi Kappa Phi – who didn't have a chapter on their campus anymore. And, he was already planning to meet her parents when the semester was over; her daddy would just have to forgive him for joining Kappa Sigma.

"Do you need an escort?" Brad fiddled with Kayleigh's hair slightly.

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Just kiss her; you know you want to. Anyway, I'm off to class, Kay. Don't get into too much trouble."

"Do you need me to walk you?" Brad smiled.

Samantha couldn't help but laugh at his outdated gesture of kindness. "Aren't you going to the library, Kay?"

"Yes."

Samantha put her hand to her head. "Don't tell me you'd actually planned to meet her at the Student Center and it wasn't just some random happenstance." She laughed.

"Every Thursday after class." Brad smiled. "You're just usually gone by then."

Samantha shook her head again with a smile. "You two are so predictable... and that means I'm late, huh?"

"Sorry, darlin'." Kayleigh's lips formed into a small frown.

"Can't stay and chat then. Peace, babies!" Samantha jogged off from the Student Union.

Brad chuckled. "You've walked her to class for half the semester, and she never asked why?"

Kayleigh tightened her grip on Brad's arm. "I love Sammy, even if she's too Florida."

“We’ll make her an honorary Southerner.”

Kayleigh laughed and then turned back to the protestors.

Brad followed her gaze before pulling her into a tight hug. “You’re worried about Matt, aren’t you?”

Kayleigh nodded. “Brad... what do you think about the war?”

“Honestly... I feel indifferent to it now. But if they start up a draft, who knows?”

“I don’t want you to get drafted...” Kayleigh looked down, feeling a little embarrassed about her response.

Brad kissed the top of her head. “Let’s not worry about that now. Let’s just worry about today.”

Kayleigh smiled. Brad was right. There wasn’t any reason to worry about the war now – they only had to worry about when the police would finally come for their protestors. And even that didn’t really concern them. But today, today there were no police, there was no draft, there was hardly a war at all, according to the University of Central Florida campus. All that mattered to Kayleigh today was that she was the luckiest girl in the world while she had her doting parents, caring siblings, and the love of gorgeous, Southern Kappa Sigma. Today was today, and tomorrow would always be tomorrow.

PART I: INFERNAL FRIDAY

Chapter 11

People always think they're better than others. I ain't ever been like that, ya know? We're all the same. Even if I haven't done much with my life, I shouldn't be judged by some kid who doesn't know me. People like to feel better, and they put others down so they can feel good. It sucks, and what sucks even more is when I'm dumb enough, drunk enough to get drawn into that bull like I did that night. Even though people say alcohol brings out the worst in people, doesn't it bring out the truth in people too? I think so. I don't like the truth that came out of me. I bet few people ever did, and that's why they said “worst” rather than “truth.”

Nowadays, there ain't much room for lies or distorting the truth. You can't do that stuff when your life depends on it. But this was before that. This was when people all had that “I'm better than you” attitude against others for no real, good reason. Sometimes people suck!

I can't say that much now, but I'm just glad to have my life to live. Life is too short to waste on things like that. I know that now. I didn't then, but I would, soon enough. If there's anything good about the world now, it's that the lies, the superiority, the petty things, are long gone. It sucks it took such a crazy extreme to get there, that we couldn't get there before that.

Like that night at the bar...

Friday, April 13, 2012

12:00 a.m.

Nick walked into the bar that night with a mission. After the ordeal he'd been forced into, as a result of his homecoming, all he wanted was to forget. Forget how unwelcome he was, even at his father's and stepmother's home, how unwelcome he was to the rest of his family. Forget how his father and stepmother had gone on and had a baby two years before, while he had been in California, without even bothering to tell him about his new baby brother, Kamden. He had to forget it. All of it. Forget that his life was going nowhere. Forget that he had no true goals anymore. that his dreams had been lost. And really, what was life with absolutely nothing to aim for, to reach for?

Frustrating. Incredibly frustrating.

So since he had nothing better to do after a long day of job hunting in a failing economy (back in 2009, the country had dove into the largest depression since the 1930s, and now Nick was amongst the ever-rising ranks of the unemployed), he wanted to end the day on a more relaxed note. But he didn't want to think of the reasons he wanted that. That was the entire point.

He had been barhopping for about the last two hours that Thursday night. Now he was hitting the bar close to home, since it was nearing midnight, and he still had to job hunt on Friday. He needed money, and fast. An apartment would be salvation, for he couldn't live at home much longer. He didn't want reminders of failure, nor of his family's blatant dismissal of him.

He knew he had a slight alcoholic buzz going. But he wasn't drunk yet. That was what he wanted. Nick wanted to be blissfully drunk, to truly let go. He never really got hangovers anyway, so it wasn't like it would affect him much tomorrow.

He walked through the doors of the small tavern. It was very obviously a college bar. Nick himself lived close to the university, so it made sense. With a glance around, he began to regret his choice of taverns. Immediately, half the people within the room stopped to look at him. He knew why. He was pathetic: a washed-up, no talent townie, getting drunk 'cause he didn't want to go home, where he lived with his father. He stumbled his way over to the bar. He didn't

pay much attention to anyone, didn't care to. All they were, in his eyes, were reminders of what he couldn't be: a man with a real future.

He just had one goal, and that goal was to make it to a stool and order the strongest drink he could afford. He began his mission. Careful steps. Well, he thought they were careful. The music was blaring some of the current Top 40 hits that got played twenty times an hour on the radio. His vision didn't clear up as much as he'd like, but he didn't care.

He continued walking, until a large force blocked his path. He just rolled his eyes at the obstacle, which happened to be some college kid. He wore a shirt with some Greek symbols on it. A frat boy – that was even worse. Nick was about to just keep going, no words and no apologies. Until two hands shoved him roughly against a pool table near the wall.

"Watch it, loser!"

It took a lot to make Nick really snap on a normal day. But that moment, those words, caused it to happen within mere seconds. Perhaps it was the fact that he was stuck in Florida again; perhaps it was the alcohol, or that some college kid had the nerve to judge him. He wasn't sure. It could've been a combination of all three, even. It really didn't matter because there was no true thought behind the action of his fist slamming into the college boy's face, hearing the nose make a satisfying crack upon impact.

"Fuck you!" Nick yelled, after watching the younger man stumble back. "You don't know me!"

The kid charged at Nick, tackling him onto the pool table. Punches flew between the two as it quickly turned into a bar brawl. They rolled off the table and onto the floor. The two were throwing fists every which way, rolling along the ground, as the battle between them continued. It became evident that Nick was taking more of the beating. People tried to break them apart, but were thrown off by both in the process.

Soon, sirens could be heard. Someone had called the police, but neither cared. Nick didn't even care that he was losing. He cared that he was trying to prove that he *was* something. He *wasn't* a loser, no matter how many dumb kids wanted to judge him.

The kid grabbed the stool Nick originally had been aiming for when he'd first entered the bar. Nick stared up from the ground, where he was lying; his vision spun around him in a haze, as he saw the stool come slamming towards him. There was severe pain within his skull, beyond anything he'd known up to that point. But it only lasted for a moment.

Because then came the bliss of darkness, as consciousness faded away from him.

Chapter 12

When you work in a hospital, you get to see the true nature of human beings, raw and uncut. It's often not a pretty sight. I'm not even talking about the gore. By now, I'm basically immune to blood, vomit, and other unpleasant excrements. No, I'm talking about human behavior. The horrible things people do to other people. I can't tell you how many shot-up gangbangers and bloodied rape victims I cared for in the ER. I never got used to that part.

Other animals kill for food or disputes over territory or mates. But humans seem to be the only species to harm their own kind, not accidentally, or out of necessity, or because they feel threatened, but just for the sheer sport of it. Perhaps that is why only humans were affected. Perhaps it was an act of God, an act of punishment for all the sins His "children" have committed since Noah's time.

Or perhaps it really was just another act of mass murder by another group of godless people.

Friday, April 13, 2012

1:00 a.m.

"We've got two rigs pulling up with a couple of college kids involved in a bar brawl."

"ETA?" asked Jo, wondering if she had time to use the bathroom before the ambulances arrived. The coffee she guzzled to get her through night shifts always went right through her.

Mike, the unit coordinator, smirked. "Now."

Jo sighed. Her bladder would have to wait. She joined the team of emergency physicians and nurses assembling by the doors that led out to the ambulance bay. She could see the two ambulances already pulling up, one after the other. The EMTs wheeled in two men on stretchers. One was strapped down and motionless; the other wasn't strapped down and needed to be. "He started it!" shouted the second guy, whose t-shirt was screen-printed with the Greek letters of some fraternity. "He threw the first punch! I was just defending myself!"

Jo looked from him back to the other guy, who was unconscious, and knew he'd gone past the point of self-defense. She also knew which one she wanted to work on. She grabbed the rail of the first stretcher and helped wheel the unconscious

man into one of the trauma rooms, as the EMTs brought the doctor up to speed.

“Nick Carter, twenty-eight years old, found unconscious on scene, probable head trauma. Witnesses said he was hit over the head with a bar stool. GCS 12, BP 90/50, heart rate 120, resps shallow.”

In the trauma room, Jo started a new chart and jotted down the information from the paramedics, while the rest of her team slid the patient over onto the gurney and began to cut off his clothes. She watched the doctor, a resident named Tavarez, lift the blood-soaked gauze from the side of the man’s head to check the laceration underneath. It was still bleeding freely, as head wounds had a tendency to do. The man’s blonde hair was plastered to his scalp, tinged pink with the blood. His right eye was practically swollen shut, the skin around it bruised and bloodied.

Dr. Tavarez drew in an audible breath. “This looks pretty ugly,” she commented. “Grace, call radiology for a CT. He may have an orbital fracture, and I want to rule out a skull fracture. Jo, would you get him on a monitor and then start the IV?”

Jo nodded, setting to work. She clipped a pulse oximeter the end of his index finger and stuck leads to his chest to monitor his vital signs. When the wires were hooked up, she turned on the monitor and checked its numbers against the earlier figures she’d noted on his chart. He was a little shocky, she thought, but otherwise normal, given his head injury and loss of consciousness.

As she was starting the IV line in his arm, the patient came to. She held down his arm, to keep him from thrashing, and leaned over the gurney so he could see her face. “Hi there. My name is Jo,” she spoke to him calmly. “Can you tell me your name?”

The man’s blue eyes looked blank, dazed. They moved sluggishly from side to side as he looked around the room. “Nick... Carter,” he mumbled. “Where’m I?” He looked more confused than combative, which was a relief.

She took his hand and held it. “You’re in the emergency room at Tampa General, Nick. Do you remember what happened?”

He moved his head from side to side, wincing at the pain it caused him.

“Apparently, you were involved in a fight at a bar near campus,” Jo told him, watching his face closely for signs of recollection. “You took a blow to the head. You’ve got a pretty bad gash there. Do you remember now?”

“Not really. Explains why my head hurts like a mother though,” he muttered, chuckling humorlessly. “Sorry,” he added, catching her eye.

She smiled patiently. “Is there anyone you’d like me to call?”

“Nah... How long do I gotta stay here?”

Jo looked to Dr. Tavarez, who took over. “Hi, Nick, I’m Dr. Tavarez. We’re going to need to run a couple of tests and probably keep you at least a few hours for observation. You lost consciousness, which means you almost certainly have a concussion, and you may have cracked your skull too. So relax and take it easy; you’re going to be here awhile yet.”

The doctor distracted Nick while Jo finished putting in the IV, halfway between the large collage of tattoos decorating his shoulder and the charming skull and crossbones on the inside of his wrist, emblazoned with the mantra, “Old habits die hard.” *Habits like getting into fistfights in college pubs?* she wondered, suppressing a smirk.

“Jo, when you’re finished with that, would you order a CBC, BAL, and type and cross his blood? His pressure’s still a little low; he’s lost a lot of blood from this head lac.”

“Sure.” Jo drew some blood and sent the sample to the lab for testing. Noting the time on the lab order, she realized it was well past midnight, making it officially Friday the thirteenth. She chuckled to herself, wondering what kind of stories she’d have to tell Gabby in the morning. Friday the thirteenth was right up there with Halloween, New Year’s Eve, St. Patrick’s Day, Cinco De Mayo, The Fourth of July, and any month’s full moon, in terms of how crazy it got in the ER, especially during the night shift. Her husband Luis had always looked forward to hearing about the “interesting” cases she saw on these nights. Jo could still picture his mischievous smile, his eyes sparkling wickedly as he asked her how her shift had been. Now that he was gone, she was glad her thirteen-year-old daughter was old enough to hear her stories – well, most of them.

Her shift half over, Jo ducked into the ladies’ room for a much-needed break. As she stood at the sink, washing her hands, she observed her tired reflection in the mirror and thought of Gabby, who had the same long nose as her, the same brown eyes. Her daughter was spending the night with Makayla again tonight. Jo wondered if the girls were still up at this hour. Knowing them, probably so, but it seemed too late to call and check. With a sigh, she rubbed at the dark circles under her eyes, part mascara and part fatigue, ran her hands under the tap once more, and reached for the paper towels.

With no major traumas in the last couple of hours, the lab was virtually dead, and it didn’t take long for them to complete Nick’s bloodwork. When Jo returned to her patient with the results, Dr. Tavarez was suturing his head. “His crit is low,” Jo told the doctor, showing her the lab results. “BAL is .11.”

“He’s also dehydrated and complaining of dizziness,” Dr. Tavarez added, studying the numbers, “but at least he doesn’t have a skull fracture. We just got him back from CT. Hairline fracture of the right orbit, but that’s all. Lucky guy.” Raising her voice, she added, “Mr. Carter, I’m sure the alcohol isn’t helping anything, but you’ve lost a decent amount of blood from this head wound. A blood transfusion and a good night’s sleep should have you back on your feet by morning... with a headache and a hangover, I’m sure. Oh, and a massive shiner around that eye of yours. It’s already turning lovely shades of black and blue.”

Beneath the sterile drape that covered his head, Jo heard Nick groan.

“Jo here can give you some more information before you consent.” Looking up from her work, Dr. Tavarez met Jo’s eyes. “Get the consent form, then push one unit, type-specific. That should do the trick.”

Jo smiled at the resident, fifteen years her junior, and nodded. “Right away, Dr. Tavarez.” To Nick, she said, “Don’t worry, hon. A macho guy like you... the blacker, the bluer, the better, right? It’ll give you some bragging rights.” This time, she heard him chuckle, as she left to get his paperwork.

In the hall, the EMTs were barreling by with a fresh patient on their stretcher. This woman was not just strapped down, but restrained, and screaming bloody murder, though there wasn’t a speck of actual blood anywhere on her that Jo could see. Cracked out of her mind on some combination of drugs, no doubt. Jumping out of their way, Jo shook her head.

Friday the thirteenth, indeed. The crazies were starting to arrive.

Chapter 13

You know what question I asked the others on one of those first few days? And no, not “What’s your favorite color?” or “What’s your favorite animal?” It bugs me when people think that just because I’m “only thirteen,” I’m still a little kid who shouldn’t think about anything deeper than rainbows and fluffy animals.

Anyway... The question I asked them was: “What did you do the night before Infernal Friday?”

I was curious. That night, we lived out the last few hours of life as we knew it. I wanted to know what people had done with those hours, besides sleep. Most of their answers were kind of lame, which made me sad. If they had known the world was going to hell the next day, they probably would have done something different.

When they turned the question back to me, I felt good about what I'd done. I'd spent the night the way an almost-thirteen-year-old girl should spend it, hanging out with her friends. But if I'd known it was going to be the last time I ever saw them alive, would I have done something different? Yeah, I guess I would have. I would have made it last.

Even so, I'll never forget that night. Or the day after...

Friday, April 13, 2012

8:00 a.m.

A bleary-eyed Gabby heaved her haphazardly-rolled sleeping bag and duffel into the hatchback of her mother's Ford Escape. "Bye, Gabs!" Makayla yelled from the front stoop, where she was standing, barefoot, in her pajamas. "See ya tomorrow!"

"See ya!" Gabby called back, waving briefly before she disappeared around to the passenger side. She heard the screen door bang shut as Makayla went back inside.

"Tired?" Jo asked as she climbed into the SUV beside her.

Gabby nodded, and a yawn came to punctuate her wordless reply.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah," said Gabby. Feeling she should return the question – and to keep her mom from probing further – she added, "How was your shift?"

"Oh, fairly typical." Her mother gave a low chuckle. Gabby smiled, a little uncomfortably, and was relieved when Jo didn't elaborate.

She had once looked forward to hearing her mom's stories from the Emergency Room, even begged her for the really freaky, gory ones. But not anymore. These days, she preferred not to think too much about what her mother did for a living. When she went to work at the hospital, Jo spent her twelve-hour shifts caring for people just like she and Gabby had been that night, scared and hurt and bleeding. Gabby didn't know how she could stand it. She had no idea what she wanted to be when she grew up, but she knew it wouldn't be a nurse. No way, José.

"Did I buy you those PJs?" Jo asked suddenly, her hand ready to shift into reverse, but her eyes focused elsewhere. Confused, Gabby followed them down to the magenta, leopard-print, cotton pajama shorts she had on.

"Oh... no. They're Mak's."

“Oh! I was going to say...” Jo trailed off, apparently deciding not to say whatever she had intended to. Probably that she thought purple leopard spots looked tacky, or trashy, or something to that effect. “So, why are you wearing Makayla’s PJs?”

Gabby pictured her own pajama pants, wadded into a wet ball and sealed inside a Ziploc bag at the bottom of her duffel bag. She chose her words carefully. “Oh... mine got wet, so she let me borrow some. I spilled soda,” she added quickly, before her mother could ask any more questions.

“Oh dear. I hope you cleaned up,” Jo remarked, finally shifting. Gabby buckled her seat belt and didn’t reply, as the car backed slowly down the driveway.

She looked out the window, watching the houses of Makayla’s neighborhood flash by as Jo drove. They got smaller the closer they got to home. Finally, they were pulling into the driveway of the only house Gabby had ever known. She’d just turned two when her parents had bought it in 2001, just months before the terrorist attacks on September 11 had thrown the economy into a recession that had only gotten worse in the decade since. She didn’t remember the apartment they’d lived in before; the major milestones in her memory, from riding her first bike in a wobbly circle around the driveway (her dad had taken off her training wheels, then gotten her off to a running start), to starting her first period in the same bathroom in which she’d been potty-trained (her mom had dealt with those), had taken place in this house.

The asphalt driveway was cracked and in need of patching now. Gabby stepped carefully over pot holes as she lugged her sleepover gear into the house. That, too, needed repairs. When he’d been alive, her father had overseen the home improvement projects. Now the maintenance of their house fell squarely on her mother’s shoulders. And Jo was tired.

Gabby could see it in her mother’s posture as she shuffled into the house, shoulders slumped. She could see it in the lines in her face, the dullness in her eyes as she looked around the kitchen, her gaze lingering on the bills piled on the table, the dirty dishes piled in the sink. Gabby could hear it in the way she sighed, but said nothing. Jo didn’t have the energy to complain. Gabby knew her mother was as tired, probably more tired, than she was, having worked all night at the hospital, but it was more than that. She knew that, too.

Jo disappeared into the master bedroom to change out of her scrubs, and Gabby dropped off her stuff in her own room.

“I’m gonna lie down, babe!” she heard her mother call after a few minutes. “It would be nice if you could pick up some for your party tomorrow!”

“Kay!” Gabby called back. She closed the door to her room and started unpacking her bag. Normally, she wasn’t so prompt about putting things away,

but she was hosting her own sleepover for Makayla and her other friends the following night, and she wanted her room to look neat. Maybe she'd be better at keeping it that way as a teenager than she had been as a child. Tomorrow was her thirteenth birthday.

She put away her iPod and her toiletries, tossed her dirty clothes in her laundry hamper, and fished the Ziploc bag with her pajama shorts out of the bottom of her duffel bag. She opened it up carefully, wrinkling her nose as she caught a whiff of the fishy smell of the Gulf. The shorts were still damp, but had dried some, and were now crusted with salt. She decided she'd do her own laundry today, so that she could wash them before her mother got to them. Jo would wonder what she had been doing playing in the ocean in her pajamas, and Gabby didn't want to be grilled.

She dumped the clothes into the washing machine and added a capful of detergent. Her mother would kill her if she knew she and Makayla had snuck out of the house in the middle of the night... and she'd be beyond dead if Jo found out they'd gone down to the marina with a couple of boys. Smirking to herself, Gabby closed the washer lid and cranked the dial to the normal cycle. She heard the rush of water as the machine began to fill.

Last night, it had been tapping. Tapping on Makayla's window, just after midnight. Whether Makayla had planned it or not, she wouldn't say, but when she had pulled up the blinds, there had been two grinning faces pressed against the glass. Makayla hadn't seem too shocked, but Gabby's heart had leapt into her throat until she'd recognized them as Brock and Colton, two boys from her seventh-grade class. Colton was okay; he was on the student council (she'd voted for him) and had earned the nickname "President" in fourth grade, when he'd had the habit of standing up to answer questions and adjusting his hoodie before he spoke, the way men in business suits straighten their jackets. He was polite to everyone and had a good sense of humor. Brock, on the other hand, was a big kid with a big mouth, loud and obnoxious and immature, despite the fact that, physically, he was the tallest boy in their grade. Maybe it was the physical aspect which gave him some appeal, in Makayla's eyes.

She had opened the window to the two of them, and Brock, who lived somewhere down the same street, had held up a portable DVD player. "Wanna watch *Friday the 13th* with us?" he'd asked, as casually as if he knocked on Makayla's window to invite her to a movie every night.

Makayla had looked at Gabby, and Gabby had stared back pointedly, trying to convey with her eyes that she didn't want to at all, without actually saying it in front of the boys. But Makayla had either missed the message or ignored it, and Gabby had soon found herself standing awkwardly outside in the dewy grass, in nothing but her pajamas, with a couple of boys she'd never even talked to outside of school before.

The boys had come over on bikes with the portable DVD player, a six-pack of Mountain Dew, and the plan to ride to the marina, where Brock's family had a boat. They'd sneak aboard and watch the movie there. Again, Gabby had been reluctant, but Makayla must have thought Brock was making a grand romantic gesture by suggesting it, and so, Gabby had been carted to the marina on the handlebars of Colton's ten-speed.

Her butt was still sore from riding that way, she realized, patting it gingerly as she moved from the tiny laundry room into the kitchen. There she fixed herself a bowl of cereal, carefully avoiding the invisible spot where her father had been killed as she put the milk back into the fridge.

She carried her cereal into the living room and set it down on the coffee table as she settled onto the couch and turned on the TV. Last night, she had sat on the deck of Brock's boat with her back pressed up against one of the seats, gathered with the others around the tiny screen of the DVD player. It hadn't been very comfortable, and she hadn't wanted to watch the movie anyway. She didn't do well with slasher flicks these days. After the second bloody murder, she'd had enough and had snuck away from the group with the excuse of having to use the bathroom. She'd ended up picking her way down to the beach, where she'd found a dry spot in the sand to sit.

It was Colton, not Makayla, who had finally come to check on her and found her there, hugging her knees to her chest in the cool night breeze. "You okay?" he'd asked earnestly. His voice had not yet broken, and it rose to a high pitch with concern that seemed genuine.

She had smiled and nodded. "I just don't like scary movies very much," she'd admitted, once he'd plopped down beside her.

Colton had surprised her by smiling, a nervous chuckle escaping his lips. "I don't really either," he'd confessed. "This was Brock's idea. 'Cause it's a Friday the thirteenth and all."

"So, does he like Makayla or something?"

Colton laughed nervously again. "I don't think I'm supposed to say..."

Gabby raised her eyebrows. "That sounds like a yes."

Even in the moonlight, she could see Colton blush. He blushed easily in class, his fair, freckled skin turning redder than his hair, and though it was dark, she saw the same effect there on the beach. It made her smile.

"Don't worry; I won't tell," she added. And she hadn't told, not that night or in the morning, although that wasn't a guarantee she never would. She thought

Makayla had a right to know if a boy had a crush on her. Wasn't she, herself, at least a little curious to know what Colton thought of her now? After last night...

"Wanna take a walk?" he had asked after awhile, standing up and brushing the sand from his backside. He'd offered her his hand to help her up, and as she'd reached up to take it, she had marveled over the contrast of his pale, white arm, glowing almost blue in the moonlight, next to her own, darker skin.

They'd wandered a ways down the bay, the tide lapping at their bare feet, until the lights of the marina faded, and it had grown darker. It was then that Gabby had tripped and sat down hard in the water, soaking her pajama bottoms. She'd been mortified at first, but Colton stuttering and stumbling to help her had made her laugh, and he had joined in, and before she'd known it, he'd pulled her to her feet, she'd staggered into him, and, then, somehow, his lips were pressed up against hers, clumsily kissing her.

The kiss had been wet, and he'd tasted like Mountain Dew and nacho cheese Doritos, but now, as she absently spooned cereal into her mouth, Gabby savored the memory of it, though with fascination more than any real fondness.

It had been her first kiss.

She hadn't seen it coming, and apparently, Colton hadn't put any real thought into it either. The moments afterward were just as awkward as the ones that had led up to it, with him blushing and stammering and nervously giggling again. She'd been so astonished, she hadn't known what to say or how else to feel. Even now, she was not sure. Did she like Colton? She hadn't before, not like *that*, at least. He was just a boy from school, a nice boy, but not one she'd ever given much thought. She didn't *like-like* any of the boys at school, anyway. But did he like her? She could admit it to herself now: she *was* curious.

Gabby smiled over her cereal as she perched on the couch, like a mother hen carefully guarding her own, private secret. She hadn't even told Makayla that Colton had kissed her, but maybe she would, tomorrow night, at her party. She would think about it. She *did* think about it, as the TV droned on in the background.

When she snapped out of her sleepy reverie, her cereal bowl empty, Gabby realized she'd never even flipped channels. The TV was still tuned to NBC from when her mother had watched the nightly news before work yesterday. The *Today* show was on now. Uninterested, Gabby picked up the remote to change it, but not before catching the end of Ann Curry's recap of the morning's top stories.

"... And in breaking news, we are getting reports of unauthorized, foreign jets seen flying in the Washington, D.C. area around six o'clock, Eastern Standard Time, this morning. The jets were captured on video by a civilian recording on his cell phone, and we have that video for you now." There was a pause, as the

feed cut to a shaky, pixilated clip of a small group of planes flying seemingly low to the ground. Watching, the remote still in her hand, Gabby recognized the Washington Monument in the background.

“As you see on your screen, the jets circled the Washington Mall several times before flying over the White House, the Capitol, and the Pentagon. Officials at the Pentagon and nearby Bolling Air Force Base are on a heightened security alert, and the Department of Homeland Security has raised the National Threat Advisory from yellow to orange, while they are investigating the aircraft sightings. We at NBC will update you on this story when we can confirm more details. Reporting live from the news desk this morning, this is Ann Curry.”

The news held her attention for another minute, before, shrugging it off, Gabby set down her cereal bowl and changed the channel.

Chapter 14

Before Infernal Friday, Shawn’s job never scared me. I mean, I never really worried about him when he went to work. Sure, I knew he worked around dangerous strains of bacteria and viruses at the CDC, but I also knew how seriously safety was taken there. Shawn was careful; he took precautions. They all did. We always joked that I probably got more exposure to germs in my job, being coughed and sneezed on by eight-year-olds, than he did studying them under microscopes.

So when I hugged him goodbye that day, I wasn’t afraid. Truth be told, I was a little pissed at him for leaving me. It was supposed to be our spring break, our last few, rejuvenating days off together. Why did he have to answer his phone when he knew it was his boss calling? And why couldn’t he have just told the guy that he wasn’t flying anywhere on his vacation time?

Do I really need to ask? No. I didn’t then either. I understood. My husband was a good guy. He was always up for helping people, doing favors, lending a hand. He didn’t know how to say no. I’m the same way. But I was still mad. I didn’t hug him as tightly as I could have. I didn’t say “I love you” back with as much feeling as I had in my heart. I didn’t say a prayer for God to watch over him while he was away. I guess I didn’t think to, until it was too late.

But I should have. I should have done all of those things.

I should have been afraid.

Friday, April 13, 2012

3:00 p.m.

The day showed no signs of strife. No “trouble in the air,” as the cliché goes. The sky over Atlanta was blue and sunny, and the trees outside Gretchen’s open window were green and still. She could hear birds chirping in them above the background drone of the TV. Spring was in full swing, with daily temperatures in the low seventies, her absolute favorite kind of weather. On a day like today, it seemed like nothing could go too wrong.

But it had.

It had started out well. Gretchen had awoken naked in bed next to Shawn, having fallen to sleep in his arms. They’d rolled apart in the night, but upon waking, she had snuggled closer to him again, chilled by the crisp, morning breeze drifting into their bedroom. They’d slept with the windows cracked last night, the crickets’ song accompanying their lovemaking. Pulling the blankets up tighter around her shoulders, Gretchen had sighed with contentment as she’d nestled in.

The week off from work had been just what she’d needed – she and Shawn, both. They had spent it together, relaxing, working in the yard, helping each other to heal. Of course, it wasn’t like healing from a paper cut or a burn from the stove – wear a band-aid for a few days, rip it off, and voila, good as new! The loss of the baby was a wound which would never fully heal, only scar and fade a little over time. But she and Shawn had made love for the first time since, and that had to be a sign that, as a couple, they were on the mend.

And then the phone had rung.

It had been Shawn’s cell phone, and Gretchen, who’d heard it first, had tried to ignore it. But Shawn, who was a light sleeper, had jerked awake and reached clumsily out to the nightstand on his side of the bed to grab it.

“Who is it?” Gretchen had asked, as he’d held the phone up in front of his nearsighted eyes, squinting blearily at it.

Shawn had groaned. “It’s my boss.”

“Don’t answer it...”

“I’ve got to.”

She’d sighed as he’d flipped the phone open and lowered it to the pillow next to his ear.

“Dr. Elliott speaking.”

Gretchen had rolled away from him, tucking the covers under her chin. She'd listened quietly to his side of the conversation, and when it had ended, she'd spoken with her back to him. "You're not leaving, are you?"

"I've got to."

There it was again: that compulsion to answer the call – this time, the call of duty. The army had drilled it into him, and as they say, once a soldier, always a soldier.

She'd turned back over to face him then. "Where? And why?"

Shawn had sat up in bed, dragging a hand through his disheveled brown hair, and looked at her apologetically. "You know I can't say too much. I don't know much, anyway. But I guess they discovered some new kind of virus up in Maryland. People have been coming down with it in droves; the DC/Baltimore area hospitals are already filled to over capacity, just since this morning. They say it strikes fast and spreads even faster. So far, it's got the medical community stumped, but they're working on it at USAMRIID, and they want my help."

And so he had gone to Frederick, Maryland, to the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, where he'd worked up until just last year.

Guess they must still miss him there, Gretchen thought with a wry smile.

The childlike, selfish side of her had wanted to protest, to whine and plead, if she had to, to keep her husband at home. She had been looking forward to three more days with him before they both went back to work, and in her still-fragile state of mind, the disappointment of a vacation cut short had seemed almost unbearable.

But of course, it wasn't. She could deal with it, and *was* dealing, as a matter of fact. She'd taken advantage of the quiet time alone at home to catch up on some reading, play her piano, watch one of the romantic tearjerker movies she loved – things she didn't often do when Shawn was around. Around mid-afternoon, the guilt of such laziness had caught up to her, and she'd pulled out her school tote of papers she had neglected to grade. Now she sat in front of the TV, which she'd flipped to CNN for the background noise, with her purple pen in hand, a stack of spelling tests on a clipboard in her lap. When she finished with these, she would think about what to fix herself for dinner that night. Maybe she'd go to the grocery store. And after dinner, she could take a walk, then soak in a long, hot, bubble bath.

The evening took shape in her mind as a schedule of events, one right after the other, just like her daily lesson plans. The basic goal was the same: keep her students engaged; keep herself busy.

She'd been effectively tuning out the TV, her attention focused on trying to decipher Chance's handwriting, when she caught the word "virus." Her head snapped up, her pen slipping from her hand, as she paused to watch the news report.

"Welcome back to the CNN Newsroom. This is Rick Sanchez, reporting from CNN World Headquarters in Atlanta, and joining me from Baltimore, live via satellite, is Dr. Gabor D. Kelen, chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine at John Hopkins Hospital, and director of the John Hopkins Office of Critical Event Preparedness and Response. Dr. Kelen, thanks for taking the time to talk to us today; I know your staff is swamped with this bug. What can you tell us about the situation?"

On the right side of the split screen, a balding man with gray hair and beard pressed his lips together grimly. It wasn't a smile. *"Rick, in just the last nine hours, all of the hospitals in the John Hopkins Health System have filled to capacity with patients showing symptoms of this virus, which, I regret to say, is still, as of now, unidentified."*

Gretchen frowned, remembering what Shawn had said this morning, after getting off the phone. *"People have been coming down with it in droves; the DC/Baltimore area hospitals are already filled to over capacity, just since this morning. They say it strikes fast and spreads even faster. So far, it's got the medical community stumped."*

She studied the doctor on the TV. He looked sallow and tired. His skin was pale, though there were spots of color high in his cheeks. His eyes were sunken and red-rimmed. There were odd splotches, almost like hives, on his forehead. He looked like a man who had aged a lifetime in a matter of hours.

"What exactly do you mean by that, Dr. Kelen?" the news anchor probed. *"Is this illness just difficult to diagnose, or are we looking at a brand new virus?"*

"I can't say at this time. I can assure you, though, that the finest doctors Hopkins has to offer are on the case, working around the clock to treat these people. We're staying in close contact with USAMRIID over in Frederick, where they're studying samples of the virus, trying to classify it."

Gretchen thought of Shawn, bent over a microscope in a Hazmat suit. At the Special Pathogens branch of the CDC, he worked in a Biosafety Level 4 laboratory, studying the Marburg and Lassa viruses, developing potential vaccines.

"What should the public know about the virus at this time? Are there specific symptoms to watch out for? How does it spread?"

Dr. Kelen drew a hand down his haggard face, looking beat down by the barrage of questions. *“Unfortunately, it appears to be airborne, meaning it’s transmitted the same way as the flu, through coughing, sneezing, body fluids, or contaminated surfaces. The early symptoms also resemble those of the flu: aches and pains, fever, chills, nausea and vomiting.”*

“What advice can you give viewers who are showing these symptoms?”

“Until we know more, it might be best to simply stay put and try home remedies. As I said, hospitals in the affected area are already over capacity, and unfortunately, all doctors can do at this point is relieve symptoms, not treat the virus itself. And as always, it’s important to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, and wash your hands often, to avoid spreading the illness further.”

It was the same thing she constantly told her third-graders, realized Gretchen with a thin smile. She could hear herself calling out, “Cover your cough!” whenever one of them started hacking all over his desk.

On her television screen, Rick Sanchez was nodding in agreement. *“Of course, of course. Great advice to keep in mind. Thanks again, Dr. Kelen, for your time. We wish you the best in keeping this bug contained.”* The satellite feed disappeared, as the anchor’s face filled the screen once more. *“If you’re just joining us, this is Rick Sanchez in the CNN Newsroom, and we just finished talking to Dr. Kelen at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where they are investigating a virus that has spread across the Northeastern region of the country. We go now to our New York studios, where Erica Hill is standing by with Dr. Michael Yin, Associate Program Director for the Division of Infectious Diseases at Columbia University Medical Center, for an update on the situation in the New York area. Erica?”*

Gretchen jumped as her phone began to ring, drowning out the new reporter’s introduction. Letting out her breath in a shaky rattle, she reached for it and smiled in relief when she saw the name flashing on her caller ID. She quickly flipped open the phone.

“Hey!” she answered, a little shrilly.

“Hi, Gretch,” Shawn’s voice replied, blessedly familiar.

“How’s it going up there?” she asked. “I’ve got the news on... they’re reporting on that virus. Sounds pretty serious...”

“It is.” His voice was grim. “Everyone’s sick. The hospitals are overflowing. There haven’t been any deaths reported yet, but some people are close to it. It’s bad, Gretch.”

His words jarred her. *Everyone's sick.* "You're... *you're* okay, aren't you?"

"I'm fine. I've been in a mask and gloves ever since I got here. I'm being careful. But even the base has been hit with it. People are collapsing in convulsions... foaming at the mouth... It's horrific."

Gretchen took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to steady herself as she pictured what Shawn was describing. "What is it?" she asked uneasily.

"We don't know. The virus is like nothing I've ever seen. And it replicates even faster than Lassa virus. We don't even know what it is, let alone how to stop it from spreading. It's moving too fast to contain it."

"Oh my God," she murmured. Her skin prickled with goosebumps as the first shiver of fear jolted through her.

"Listen... I'm not calling to scare you, but I want to warn you." He lowered his voice. "What I'm about to tell you is a matter of national security. It's classified information. You can't repeat it to anyone, understood?"

"Of course," she agreed faintly. She had lived on military bases; thanks to Shawn's career, she knew about classified information.

"The army thinks this is an act of bioterrorism. Around o-six-hundred, there was a small fleet of unauthorized jets spotted flying around the DC area. They made a couple of passes through restricted airspace, then disappeared before the FAA could ground them. Video surveillance revealed a couple of things, though. First, they were private aircrafts, possibly foreign. Second, they were equipped with spraying nozzles." Shawn spoke slowly, deliberately. "It's... possible... that they sprayed aerosol containing the virus over Washington, D.C."

Gretchen gasped. "God..."

"The virus has spread in roughly a circular pattern, with DC as its central hub. Virginia and Maryland have been crippled with it. It's spread to New York, Pittsburgh, Raleigh... And if we can't contain it soon, it'll keep spreading. It'll reach Atlanta. You understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes..." Gretchen breathed, the phone shaking in her trembling hand. "Wh... what should I do?"

"For now, I want you to stay put, alright? Shut up the house completely, and stay inside it. Don't go out; don't answer the door to anyone. I'd tell you to go to the airport right now and buy a plane ticket to Europe, but if this is terrorism, I don't want you on a plane either. I think the best thing to do for now is to stay indoors and ride it out. It spreads like the flu, so as long as you isolate yourself from any infected people, you should be alright."

“What about our families? Our friends?”

“Call them if you want. Tell them to stay inside. But Gretch... you can't tell them anything else, alright? The army would have my head if word of this got out before they choose what details to make public. So not a word about terrorism, got it?”

“Okay,” she agreed. “When do you think you'll be able to come home?”

“As soon as possible,” he vowed. “I can't leave now... we're hoping for a breakthrough here. But if we don't find it, and things get worse, I'll come for you. I promise. Until you hear otherwise, just stay where you are.”

“I will.” A lump rose in her throat. She swallowed it with difficulty. “Shawn, be careful, okay?”

She could hear the crooked smile in his voice when he replied, “Always am.” It tore at her heart. She wished she had held onto him a little longer when she'd hugged him goodbye that morning. Had she even told him she loved him?

She would now. “I love you,” she whispered, hoping it was enough to convey her emotion through the phone.

“I gotta go, sweetheart. I love you too.”

And then he was gone, the connection cut off. Gretchen closed her phone and set it down. She stared down at it for a few seconds, feeling numb and slow as she tried to process everything her husband had told her. She stood, absently, and the spelling tests slid off her lap and scattered across the living room floor in a flutter of looseleaf. She didn't bother to pick them up.

She walked to the closest window and pulled it down, latching it tightly. After that, she went around the house, repeating the process, securing every window in every room. She locked the front door and the back one, too. She closed the air vents in the walls and baseboards. She did this all quite calmly, and then she returned to the couch and hunkered down there.

It wasn't chilly in the house, but she started to tremble. She pulled the throw off the back of the couch and wrapped it around her. It smelled like Shawn, from when his head had rested against it as he'd watched the Braves game the night before. Her nostrils flared, taking in the comforting scent, and it was then that the tears started.

Chapter 15

I used to think I was a good father.

I did everything I could to protect and provide for my family. I worked odd jobs to supplement my measly pastor's salary, so that the girls could be raised at home by their mother. I took out the best home and health insurance policies we could afford, so that none of us would have to worry about money, should disaster strike. I tried to prevent such disasters. I made sure we had safe cars and strong locks, batteries in the smoke detectors and baby gates on the stairs.

I checked the backs of closets and underneath beds for monsters. I caught little girls who were afraid to jump into the water. I held onto the seats of wobbly bicycles without training wheels, reassuring their riders I wouldn't let them fall. I knew, even then, that I wouldn't be able to protect them from everything. Sooner or later, I would have to let go, and they would probably fall. They might even skin a knee or an elbow. But if they did, I would be there to kiss away their tears and put a band-aid on their scrapes.

My family believed I could fix anything, and I believed I could too. I had God on my side; my faith in Him was strong. I knew my God would never punish me with a problem too big for me to solve. But I underestimated the power of evil. The monster that can't be seen, even with the lights on. The monster that strikes swiftly and silently. The monster that takes no prisoners and leaves no survivors.

I couldn't protect them from that.

Friday, April 13, 2012
4:00 p.m.

“Out of state license plate! No pinchbacks!”

“Owww! Daddy, Brooke pinched me!”

“It's an out of state license plate! Right in front of us, look! Isn't it an out of state license plate, Daddy?”

Brian glanced up into the rearview mirror and saw his daughter on her knees in the center of the backseat, pointing straight ahead. “Brooke Lynn, you get back in that seatbelt right now, you hear me?”

“Okay, but Daddy, look in front of us! Isn't it?”

Brian watched until he saw her blonde head bob out of sight and heard the click of the belt; then his eyes shifted to the car in front of them in the McDonald's drive-thru line. "Yep, it is, baby. Can you read what state it is?"

"Not now that I'm buckled up again!" Brooke complained.

Brian heard another click and was about to scold her for unbuckling again, when Bonnie's face poked between the two front seats instead. She squinted ahead at the light blue plates. "So... Soo... ow!"

"That's right," Brian encouraged, before realizing the "ow!" had come only because Brooke had unbuckled again and shoved Bonnie aside.

"Let me try!" she shouted, her head appearing where Bonnie's had been. "S... South? South Cuh-... Cay-ro... Carolina! South Carolina, Daddy?"

"That's right, baby. Good reading," Brian praised her. Brooke's first grade teacher had said she was already reading above her grade level, thanks to all the time Brian and Leighanne had spent reading stories to her and listening to Bonnie and her read to them. Bonnie was somewhat behind, but Brian was convinced she would catch up eventually. They were identical twins; their abilities couldn't be that much different, could they?

If academic ability was anything like personality, he knew they very well could be. Despite looking alike, each just as angelically blonde and blue-eyed as the other, Brooke and Bonnie's temperaments were inherently different. Brooke was loud, outgoing, and bossy, while Bonnie tended to be reserved and submissive. Until Brooke started pushing her around too much, Brian thought with a smirk, turning around to look at her, sulking in her seat. Then she could whine and holler louder than her twin.

"I could've gotten it," Bonnie huffed, in full pout.

"I know, baby. South Carolina's a big one."

"Not too big for me, Daddy!" Brooke spouted triumphantly.

Brian pressed his lips together, not replying. He was relieved when the South Carolinians finally pulled forward, allowing him to inch the car up to the window. To a seven-year-old, a Happy Meal could fix any problem, including hurt feelings and an overbearing twin sister.

"Thanks," he said to the drive-thru worker who handed him the two small sacks and a couple of kid-size drinks. He passed the drinks back to the girls and kept the sacks in the front... they could wait till they got to the church to dig into their french fries.

“Have a nice day,” muttered the drive-thru guy, sniffing. Taking in his appearance in a second glance, Brian noticed the paleness of his skin, the hollows in his cheeks, and the circles under his bloodshot eyes, and wondered if he was a drug user. He’d heard about people dealing drugs through drive-thru windows before. The thought made him think twice about giving the girls their Happy Meals.

As he pulled away, Brian regretted his unchristian thoughts. Maybe the poor kid was just sick. And anyway, he’d never hear the end of it if he deprived Brooke and Bonnie of their much-anticipated McNuggets now. McDonald’s was a rare treat in the Littrell family, one the girls had been looking forward to since they’d gotten off the bus after school that afternoon. Leighanne didn’t usually let them eat fast food, but since she was setting up for the weekend church bazaar that night, she’d made an exception.

Once Brian had parked in the circular drive outside Calvary Hill Baptist Church, the twins skipped ahead of him into the fellowship hall, carrying their Happy Meals. The normally sparse, open room was now taken up by rows of long, rectangular tables. Most were still empty, but a few of the vendors had already shown up to start setting up their booths for the bazaar that started tomorrow morning.

The girls found Leighanne quickly, and Brian saw that she had staked out a prime spot for herself, on the end of one of the center rows. It would be hard for the browsers to miss her table of handbags. “Lookin’ good, sweetheart,” he greeted her, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

“Thanks, hon,” she replied, standing back to admire her handiwork. She’d quit work to raise the twins, and in the seven years since, designing and making handbags had become her hobby. She was a regular at the fabric store. She rented a small booth at a little antiques and crafts shop downtown, and she’d even started selling some of her creations on Ebay. She had quite the collection going, realized Brian, his eyes panning across the rows of colorful purses. And each one an original.

“Can we eat now?” Brooke interrupted them, rustling her McDonald’s sack.

“Go for it,” said Brian. He looked around. “There’s a couple of chairs over there.” He pointed. “Go drag them over here so you’ll have a place to sit.” He watched the girls scramble off for the pair of folding chairs, and turned back to his wife. “What do you need me to do?”

“Well...” She considered this for a moment. “I’m about set up here, and those high school boys from the youth group got the tables up in record time. There are some other vendors with trucks out front, bringing in their merchandise. Why don’t you see if you can contribute a little manpower?”

“Alright.” Brian strolled back to the front of the church, where he saw some middle-aged ladies unloading trailers and vans. “Can I lend a hand, ladies?” he offered.

He’d been shuttling back and forth with armloads of “stuff” – boxes of hand-dipped candles, bags of homemade candies, piles of embroidered sweatshirts, cases of hand-crafted jewelry – for half an hour when Brooke came shuffling up. “Daddy, I don’t feel good,” she whined.

“Did you tell Mommy?” was his automatic response.

“Bonnie’s with Mommy. She doesn’t feel good either.”

That struck Brian as strange. It was common for the twins to get sick one right after the other, but not at the exact same time. He suspected this might be a conspiracy to go home early; they were likely bored, now that they’d finished their dinner. But he had to humor Brooke before he could call her on this.

“Really? What hurts, baby?”

“My tummy... and my head... and all over.” Brooke sniffled, on the verge of tears.

“Ah...” Brian had to hide his smirk as he reached out to feel her forehead, prepared to tell her she felt perfectly normal and that, surely, she and Bonnie would live until Mommy and Daddy were done at the church. So he was surprised when he felt the heat radiating from his daughter’s forehead before his hand even touched it. Disturbed, he pressed his palm quickly to her head; her skin felt like the inside of an oven. “Baby, you’re burning up!” he exclaimed, kneeling down to her level and gazing into her eyes with concerned. For the first time, he noticed the flush in her cheeks, the paleness everywhere else. “Did you feel sick at school today?”

“No... just since now,” Brooke replied miserably.

“Okay... come on...” Brian scooped her up and carried her on his hip back into the church, where he found Leighanne sitting with Bonnie on her lap. She had made the same discovery as Brian; a look of mutual understanding passed between them as he approached. “Think we oughta get these girls home?” he asked her.

She nodded. “Home and into bed,” she said, tweaking the tip of Bonnie’s nose. “We might need to find a sitter for tomorrow, unless you want to stay home with them.”

“And miss the bazaar?” asked Brian, hope blossoming in his chest. He felt obligated to oversee the thing, since it was sponsored annually by his church, but the prospect of having a valid excuse to skip it this year was a thrilling one. “I’d

hate to do that, but if they're contagious, we also don't want to subject a babysitter to getting sick, do we? I may have to take one for the team."

He was a horrible actor; he knew Leighanne didn't buy it for one minute, but she played along. "Oh, I guess you're right... Maybe you will have to stay home just this once. I know what a disappointment that will be for you." She winked, her blue eyes twinkling, and he offered a sheepish smile.

They piled the twins into the car and drove home. Leighanne tucked the girls into bed, while Brian filled two cups with ginger ale and brought them upstairs. Leighanne had already fetched the thermometer from the bathroom and was taking temperatures.

"102.3," she frowned, shooting Brian a look of concern as she rested her hand on Bonnie's head. "Maybe we should have taken them straight to the doctor instead."

"It's Friday evening, babe. Not even those doc-in-a-box places are gonna be open now. Let's just get through the night and see how they feel in the morning," Brian said, reassuringly. He wasn't overly worried. He knew kids... they ran fevers at the drop of a hat, especially when it was late in the day. It was probably just a stomach bug. They'd spend Saturday lying in bed, and by Sunday, they'd be up and on the move again.

Leighanne agreed. She pulled "Curious George Goes to the Hospital" off the bookshelves – the girls' favorite when they were sick and feeling sorry for themselves – but when she sat down to read it, Brooke howled, "No, Daddy, you read it!!" Leighanne looked slightly wounded, but managed a smile as she handed the book over to Brian, who was preferred by the twins because he did funny voices and sound effects when he read.

So Brian read the story, and the girls settled down. Halfway through, Brooke sat up and vomited up her Happy Meal, and Leighanne cleaned up. Brian finished reading the story to a whimpering Brooke and a whining Bonnie, and they finally settled down again, drifting off into a feverish sleep. Meanwhile, Leighanne started a load of laundry downstairs.

By the time all of this was done, it was getting dark, and Brian and Leighanne had missed both the five o'clock and the six o'clock news. They didn't know it yet, but they would miss the eleven o'clock news, too.

By then, it would be too late.

Chapter 16

If you want to be remembered, you have to get your name out there. Everyone that people remember made history. They put their name in books, on buildings, anywhere they could find to scrawl their signature.

I thought that if I had my own building, I could be remembered in the same way.

A picture says a million words... but a sentence only says a few. No one wants to read anything that has a million words... but they will always remember a few.

At least I knew I could remember a few. A few words aren't very many to remember at all.

Maybe they were more than I thought. And yet, maybe they weren't.

There was one thing I had inscribed with my signature that I wish I hadn't. Knowing that my name was on that makes me regret having a name at all.

Sometimes, it's best not to be remembered.

Friday, April 13, 2012

5:00 p.m.

Howard sat in the lobby of the main business administration building. He examined his wallet lightly as he held his phone to his ear. "And the papers are in order?"

"They've been taken over this afternoon," the voice on the other end responded.

"I won't have to go over there?"

"No."

"And when will they come back to me?"

"It will be sometime within the week, at the latest... Though, I know that you're anxious to get them back sooner than that."

Howard began tapping his foot with a slight nervousness. "Of course I want them back. They are extremely important."

"I'm doing my best, sir."

“Thank you, Mr. Jones.” Howard looked up from his call to see Dean Keon exiting the elevator. “I look forward to hearing from you about their progress.”

“Of course, sir.”

Howard closed his phone as he stood to meet the dean.

“Mr. Dorough, I’m glad to see you again. Shall we head over to the building?”

Howard smoothed his tie. “Of course.”

The two men exited the building to find another cart waiting for them directly outside the entrance.

“Mr. Dorough, I have been meaning to ask you... Do you have any ominous feelings about today’s dedication?”

“Why would I?” Howard huffed. “It’s as good a day as any other for a building dedication.”

“I just meant that it’s Friday the thirteenth.”

“Friday the thirteenth is an old wives’ tale, perpetuated by moviemakers and craven children,” Howard retorted. “I do not believe a man of your caliber would be the type to engage in it as well.”

“It never hurts to be at least a little wary during the war...” The dean gave a half-hearted laugh. “I’m sure you heard the news about the planes this morning and the diseases up north.”

“An old wives’ tale,” Howard huffed again.

The cart reached the building with ease. He exited it with ease and looked up at the inscription on the building one more time. *Howard D. Dorough Business Administration*. Yes, it was to be perfectly preserved in writing. A smile lit up his face.

Meanwhile, the dean surveyed the scene around the building. More students than he had expected were standing outside the building, waiting for its unveiling. The dean smiled until he saw a familiar student standing amongst the crowd.

Howard gave an uncomfortable glance as he watched the dean walk toward a student with a smile. He couldn’t imagine any unaccomplished person who actually deserved just such a smile.

Howard inconspicuously walked toward the dean, to listen in on the conversation. He noticed that the male student the dean seemed to walk towards was being comforted by a female of about the same age. Some indecipherable writing covered both their shirts.

Howard leaned closer toward the group.

“Mr. Montgomery,” the Dean smiled.

“Good evening, sir.” The young man gave him a weak smile.

The dean examined his own suit before giving a slight frown toward the young man’s attire.

“Sorry, sir. I headed here straight from class and hadn’t thought to put a suit on.”

The frown remained on the dean’s face. “But that particular shirt?”

The young man lowered his head. “Sorry again, sir.”

Howard examined the shirt. The inscription across the chest read, *Muéstrenos sus tetas*. Howard cleared his throat and mimicked the dean’s obvious distaste with a frown.

The dean turned around. “Ah, Mr. Dorough, I would love you to meet the student assistant in my office, Brad Montgomery.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir.” He put his hand to his head as he said it.

“Do you always walk around like that?” Howard raised an eyebrow.

“Just a little hot, sir.”

“Try wearing a full suit while you say that.” Howard gave a stifled laugh.

“Brad... do you want me to take you home?” the young woman asked with concern.

“No... let’s just go over there.” He shook his head with a warm smile, his voice drawling with a little southern Mississippian inflection.

The pair walked away slowly.

Howard studied the back of the young man’s shirt. “Kappa Sigma at Sands Key, Fall Formal 2011.”

“It’s clever, despite its vulgarity.” The dean shook his head.

“And you let your office assistant dress that way?”

The dean let out a low laugh. “You know what they say... Let them have their fun now, so they can be cut and dried business men in their later years.”

Howard cleared his throat again. “Or they could learn early that the world isn’t all fun and games. It’s mostly work.” Howard shook his head and headed back toward the building.

The dedication went off without a hitch. Howard gave a riveting speech about the importance of setting high standards for one’s self and achieving one’s goals in the lucrative world of business. It truly was a moving speech—the press even attended, in order to document that moment.

Howard gladly posed for photographs because publicity made business. And business created earnings.

The building was opened for tours afterward. The entire proceedings had an almost theatre-like feel to them. Howard smiled as he watched people enter and exit the building. His legacy was already making him famous.

However, a short frown did appear on Howard’s lips as the dean’s student assistant exited the building with the female who had accompanied him earlier. His arm was slumped over her shoulder as though he were too weak to walk by himself.

“Brad... let’s get you home...”

He paused her for a moment and motioned toward Howard. He stepped toward them slightly.

“It is a great building, sir. Thank you for the donation.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Howard chuckled, almost out of character. “You know, you don’t seem to be doing too well.”

“I just need to eat something...” he trailed off.

“How far is home for you?” Howard raised an eyebrow.

“Just over in Greek Park,” his female companion answered.

Howard nodded as he watched the two students start the trek back toward their houses. His thoughts turned to his own son, Bartholomew, as he continued staring after the two university students. They had planned on going south this

weekend, but business was business... even the few times Howard wished it wasn't. Now was one of those times.

He let out a small sigh, and it was at that moment that he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to face Dean Keon.

"Mr. Dorough, it's almost time for the dinner to start. I've just been called into a meeting, so I can't go there with you, but the Assistant Dean, Dr. Ganesh, will head over there with you." He motioned toward the African American man behind him.

Howard gave him a nod and went with the assistant dean. He turned back toward Dean Keon with a slight frown on his face.

Being called into a meeting at six-thirty on a Friday evening was highly unusual, if not slightly alarming. The dean had already made his plans for the evening, and they had all revolved around Howard's building dedication.

Any meeting that would draw the dean away from that had to be of the utmost importance.

Howard's brown crinkled as he pursed his lips slightly.

His concern, however, was soon abated by the dinner. He thoroughly enjoyed the company of Dr. Ganesh and the two directors of the school of business, Mr. Jacques and Ms. Roberts.

The food was satisfying, if not exquisite. The drinks were delectable. The rest of the attendees were talkative and distinguished.

It was a good crowd.

The only downside was that a few people were noticeably ill, but Howard assumed it was from too much liquor.

As the evening wore on, Howard noticed more and more people were beginning to confine themselves to their chairs, and the people who tried to leave were turned from the door.

As a wave of concern swept over Howard's face, Dean Keon entered the room.

He was as composed as he could be, despite the feeling of panic that emanated from him. He made his way toward the head table and pulled the microphone toward him.

“Your attention, ladies and gentlemen.” He cleared his throat, a sure sign of his ever-increasing panic. “I understand that many of you are attempting to leave this event; however, we have been forced to quarantine the school.”

A few gasps rose from the crowd, followed by a low murmur.

“Our campus health center is completely full with students complaining of flu-like symptoms... and a few others...”

Howard’s thoughts flashed back to the young man in the unseemly shirt. He felt ill just at the thought of having come into contact with someone who was already carrying the disease.

“We do not want this to spread to the rest of the Orlando area.” The dean’s voice was shaking. “So we must ask that you do not leave this event.”

Another murmur rose from the crowd.

“I repeat, no one is to leave this event.”

Howard sank into a chair. He put his hands to his head, swearing that this was not how he’d intended to be remembered at all. Everything was supposed to have gone off smoothly, but not like this.

And his son...

He pulled out his phone hastily and scrolled through his contacts.

“Hello?” a woman’s low voice answered.

“Bree...”

“Howie, where are you? Barty is getting impatient!”

“Tell Bartholomew that I’m sorry. There’s a disease going around the university, so they’ve had it quarantined.”

“At the university?”

“Yes.”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you’d stayed with your original plans.”

“Business is business.” He would never relent that to her.

“Business is always business with you!”

“Did you receive the papers?”

“Why should it matter if I did?”

“Did you receive the papers?”

“Of course I received them!”

“Will they be signed when I come pick them up?”

“I’ll see if I can fit in it my schedule...”

“Bree...”

“Fine, fine.” She paused momentarily. “Howie... about that disease...”

“I’ll see you when I get there.” Howard slid his phone down with a snap.

Those papers were his greatest worry.

What Howard did not worry about, of course, was that his building dedication, the events surrounding it, and even his important documents ought to be the least of his worries.

Chapter 17

Everyone always told me: “Kayleigh, you’re so dedicated.” “Kayleigh, you’re so helpful.” “I can always count on you, Kayleigh.”

But they were wrong.

I would be there in a flash for a shopping buddy. I had any color of eye shadow anyone possibly needed. I knew several men in any of the fraternities, and I always knew when the best parties were going down.

I would be there with every datebook committee, even if it wasn’t mine. I sat in the chapter room for hours to make sure everything ran smoothly. I welcomed our newest members with open arms.

I was a shoulder to cry on. An ear for listening... A hug when it was needed. I could say any comforting word and mean it. And I was always there to laugh with.

“I can always count on you, Kayleigh.”

That's what they always told me... But there was that one time they couldn't count on me... and my grief has never let me forget that.

Friday, April 13, 2012
8:30 p.m.

Kayleigh pulled the door open to the Tri Delta house. It was surprisingly quiet for 8:30 on a Friday night.

“Is something wrong, Pearl?”

“Oh... no... sorry, Daddy. I was just thinking it was weird how quiet the house is...” She held her phone out in the entryway for a few seconds before putting it back to her ear. “See? It’s silent.”

“No screaming collegiates?” He laughed. “You’re right; that is cause for concern.”

“Daddy...” she whined. “Be serious.”

“I’m sorry, Pearl. Now what were you saying?”

“When school’s over, I’m bringing Brad down to see you all. He wanted to know when a good time was.”

“The Kappa Sig from Mississippi?”

“Yes, Daddy. He’s very nice; you’ll love him!”

“But he’s a Kappa Sig.”

“Well, yes, but you can’t blame me, or him, for the Pi Kapps getting kicked off campus before we came to school. I had nothing to do with it, and neither did he.”

“They just didn’t stop themselves from getting caught,” her father chuckled.

“Daddy!”

“I thought you’d be happy to hear, my Little Bro is coming to visit about the time you’re out for the semester. He’s bringing his family with him, and his son’s a Gamma Iota in Louisiana.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate it, but we were discussing Bradley Lee, the Kappa Sigma from Mississippi.”

“Were we now? Because I believe my precious Pearl was just about to tell me how much she wanted to meet a Gamma Iota.”

“Daddy...”

“Well, even if you don’t want to meet him, they are coming out.”

“It’ll happen when it happens...” She peered into the dining room and was surprised to find it empty, without a book in sight. “Anyway, we can talk about Brad tomorrow. Can I talk to Mama?”

“She’s been down with a headache all day.”

Kayleigh frowned a little. “It’s not pregnancy complications, is it?”

“I think she’s just tired.”

Kayleigh shook her frown off quickly. “How about Chris?”

“He’s out being a star soccer player as usual.” Her father chuckled.

“He would be doing that, wouldn’t he?” Her phone gave a small beep. “Can I call you back later, Daddy? I have another call coming in.”

“Of course, Pearl. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“No promises.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes, tomorrow.”

She looked at her incoming call. “Hey, Bradley Lee.”

There was coughing in the background.

Kayleigh cringed as she heard vomiting. “Brad?”

There was another cough. “Sorry, Kayleigh. I was trying to call for a couple minutes without you answering.”

“Sorry, I was talking to my Daddy.”

“How’s the family?”

“My mom just has a headache... but they’re fine. You sound worse than when I left you.”

“Unlike in most cases, the fresh air didn’t do me any good.” He forced a laugh.

“Are you laying down?”

“Yeah...” He paused. “It seems like a couple of the other brothers have the flu too.”

“Well, we do live in Greek mansions... It happens.”

“Not as bad as the dorms.” He forced a laugh again.

“Maybe worse...”

He started laughing again, followed shortly by vomiting.

Kayleigh cringed a second time. “Brad...”

“Kayleigh...” The voice was faint from within the door next to her.

Kayleigh stared at the door with two handmade dolphin nametags. One read *Kayleigh Shane*, and the one underneath it read *Samantha Anne*.

“Kayleigh?”

“Yeah, I’m here...” She hesitated as she pushed open the door lightly.

The shock came when she opened it on her roommate vomiting into a trashcan.

Kayleigh turned away and cringed. She’d dealt with vomiting people countless times before. But there was just something different about vomiting because you were drunk and vomiting because you were sick. When someone was only drunk, it seems like there was less agony involved.

“Kayleigh?”

Kayleigh tottered between running out of the room and talking on the phone with Brad in library or running to the bedside of Sammy and smoothing back her platinum hair.

“Brad, do you think you can take care of yourself?”

His response was a small chuckle. “You tucked me in so tight, I think I’ll be here for days.”

“And if you run out of water, a brother can get it for you?”

“Not everyone is sick... just a few of the other guys.”

“Okay. I’m going to call you back in a half hour, then.”

“Exactly a half hour?”

“Exactly a half hour.”

“I’ll be by my phone.”

“I tucked you in so tight, where else are you going to go?” Kayleigh laughed.

“I love you...” Brad mumbled.

Out of surprise, Kayleigh dropped her phone. She hurriedly picked it up off the floor. “Brad?!?” There was no answer. She stared at the phone for a moment before shaking her head. “It hung up when it hit the floor...”

“What did Brad say?” Samantha asked weakly.

Kayleigh threw her phone and purse on her desk and sprinted over to Samantha. She sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed back her hair from her face. The ends of her long hair were dripping with vomit. “Don’t worry about it...” Kayleigh quieted her.

“Gossip always makes me feel better.” Samantha gave her a weak smile.

Kayleigh stood up lightly. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to get a washcloth to clean your face.”

“In the bathroom...” Samantha started.

“I know, in your drawer.”

Kayleigh left the room and hurried to the bathroom. Upon entering it, she found two sisters in an open stall. One was throwing up; the other was holding back her hair with a sickened look on her face.

“Jamie, is Alison okay?”

“She’s just a little sick... I tried to take her to the health center, but they say they’re booked...”

“Sammy has it, too.”

A worried look crossed Jamie's face.

"And some of the Kappa Sigs do..."

"Does Brad?"

Kayleigh nodded.

"Have you heard anything about Matt?"

"In TKE?"

Jamie nodded with concern.

"I haven't, but I can call him... Or you could call him..."

"He only met me once..."

"It's a nice gesture."

"Kayleigh!"

Kayleigh grabbed the vermilion washcloth out of Sammy's drawer. She smiled to herself. She had called it purple once, and Sammy had replied, "*No, it's vermilion.*"

Alison looked up at Kayleigh. "Call Zack for me..." Her head started to droop as her eyes closed.

Kayleigh put an arm on her shoulder. "Alison, stay awake for me while we get you to bed, okay? Let's call Zack..." She turned to Jamie quickly. "Can you help me carry her?"

Jamie gave her a small nod, and the two girls picked up their sister lightly.

"Where are we going?" Alison asked.

"Try to walk, Alison. We're just taking you to your room."

Alison's steps were slow and labored.

"Is Zack at home today?" Kayleigh continued.

"I saw him in Econ..."

"Okay, we'll call him when we get you settled."

The two girls got Alison safely into bed. She started to close her eyes slightly.

“Stay with me for a little while, okay, Alison?”

“Call Zack...”

“Yes, we’re going to call Zack...” Kayleigh turned to Jamie again. “Can you go check on the sophomores?”

“Yeah!” Jamie nodded.

Kayleigh pulled out her phone.

“Hey, Kayleigh.”

“Zack, are you at home?”

“Yeah, I’m just getting back from dinner. Orlando is a ghost town...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the waiter said they’ve quarantined the university, and no one was around, except for Josh, Christian, and me... well, and a few other people...”

“And the medical center is full...” Kayleigh whispered.

“Damn. What’s up otherwise?”

“Alison wants you to come over.”

“Why didn’t she just call me herself?” He started laughing. “It says something when your own girlfriend has your mutual friends call you.”

Kayleigh turned to Alison again.

“Zack...” Alison mumbled.

“Shit! Alison’s...?” There was running in the background. “I was just walking up to Sig Chi. I’ll be right over!”

“Zack, where are you going?” a muffled voice replied in the background.

“Tri Delta!”

“Do you need help?” a second muffled voice asked.

“Yeah, sure!”

“Zack...” Kayleigh started.

“You’re not going to yell at me about boy hours, are you?”

“No, it’s only just before nine.” Kayleigh swallowed. “I was going to say thank you.”

“No problem! Be right there!”

“I’ll have someone let you in the back door.”

“Thanks!”

Kayleigh ended her call and stroked Alison’s hair. “Zack’s coming soon with Josh and Christian...”

“Okay...” she whispered quietly.

“Can you stay awake for him?”

“Yeah...”

“Will you be okay if I go back to Sammy?”

Alison gave a weak nod.

“Okay, you better. I’ll be back later.”

“Okay...”

Kayleigh shut the door lightly.

“How is she?” The girl was pulling her auburn hair into a bun.

“Zack’s coming for her, Megan, so...”

“How long ago?”

“He just started running from Sig Chi...”

Megan crossed her arms. “So if he ran through Sig Ep’s parking lot...”

“He should be here now.” Kayleigh nodded.

“I’ll go get him then.” Megan headed for the stairs.

Kayleigh walked back to her room lightly and opened the door. “Sammy...”

“I’m here...”

Kayleigh laughed as she saw *Pretty in Pink* flash across their television set.

“Don’t judge me...” Samantha whined. “I watch it every time I’m sick.”

Kayleigh sat on the bed. “I know, I know...” She ran the washcloth through the ends of Samantha’s hair. “Sorry that Ricky is abroad right now...”

“The only thing I hate about Ricky being abroad is that I can’t go to Sig Ep’s formal.” Samantha laughed weakly. “Tell me what Brad said.”

Kayleigh swallowed as she kept running the washcloth through Samantha’s hair. “He said... ‘I love you.’”

Samantha used all her energy to sit up. “And instead of saying it back, you dropped your phone?!” She flopped back on the bed.

Kayleigh folded up the washcloth and put the clean side against Samantha’s forehead. “Sorry, Sammy...”

“Well, are you going to call him back?”

“Well, I’m calling him around nine-ish, but what do I need to say?”

“Tell him that you love him!”

“Do I love him?”

“Just because he’s not a Pi Kapp...” Samantha shook her head weakly. “Kay, you’re absolutely smitten with him... so much so that you’re willing to tell your Daddy that you want *him* to meet *and* approve of a Kappa Sig.”

“I guess. I’ll call him... and I’ll say it back... unless he thinks I didn’t hear him...”

“He knows you heard...” Samantha waved her hand in front of Kayleigh’s face. “Shh, shh, shh. This is my favorite part.”

“What is?”

“Andie’s meeting Blane at TRAX.”

“Isn’t that a little far into the movie.”

“I paused it right before you came in to throw up...”

“Even though you’ve seen this movie like ninety times?”

“Even though I’ve seen it like ninety times... Now, shh!”

The two girls laughed, albeit one more weakly than the other. Sometimes it was okay to watch movies you’d seen ninety times and laugh together. Because when college was over, when could you laugh together, curled up in bed, again?

Chapter 18

Life sucks, and then you die.

I don't give a damn what anyone says. That's a fact of life. Period. It's blunt, and it's harsh. People hate hearing it. People hate a lot of what I have to say. But it's honest. It's reality. Reality ain't ever been made of sunshine and roses, no matter what shit people try to spread around, whether it be through religion or another way.

In therapy, I'm told to try and concentrate upon the positives. What positives? The fact that I'm an addict and need the help? The fact that I hurt my own mother, the woman who was my rock? Or let's not forget the fact that I'm clinically depressed and am supposed to be medicated. Yeah, positives. I was told to do an assignment on the positives that day. I blew it off, and it ended up not mattering in the fucked scheme of things.

But I think I'll try it now. Positives...

I'm alive.

I'm not alone.

I have been sober since Reaper's Sabbath, so far... (and, all things considered, that's a damn miracle.)

I'm alive.

I'm alive.

I'm alive.

Guess there are some positives these days.

Friday, April 13, 2012
9:00 p.m.

AJ glanced out the window as he completed his painting, simply contemplating the day's events. It had been, overall, uneventful, in the grand scheme of the world, he figured, or even in his own life. Nothing life-altering for him that day. Simply therapy, where he'd revealed more than he had wanted to.

God, he had craved a drink worse than ever right then...

"Alexander."

AJ tilted his shades down so the therapist could get a really good look at the cold, hard, steely gaze he was directing at him. No one called him Alexander these days. Even his mother had always called him Alex. Though now, she barely spoke to him at all. His fault, of course. He never blamed anyone else for what was his fault, and yes, that included the hell he considered rehab to be. He never figured rehab therapy sessions would be about twenty times worse, though.

"AJ."

"Alright, AJ..." His therapist was a meek-looking man, mousy eyes peeking through a set of thick lenses belonging to glasses with a thick, red frame. He sniffled a lot, and couldn't quite keep his slacks and dress shirt neat, like they should be. AJ figured the man probably had a lot of issues of his own. It seemed to be why most people went into any career involving psychology. "We'll leave the positives as a special assignment for you; you can have it ready for our next private session."

Private sessions. Then group sessions. Then group dinners. All he wanted was time to himself. Of course, that was a luxury denied to him these days. The therapist, Dr. Michola, eyed him with precisioned caution. And all he wanted was to be out, honest to God, that was all, and it was all he could think about as well. Even the jail cell the rehab center considered to be a proper room had been upgraded to an improvement.

"Come on, Alex, talk to me." And now the bastard was doing that because AJ just didn't want to answer the man's questions. What was the point? No one could fix him. He was depressed; he knew that. He would have to take a new drug and fight his addictions to others.

He was fucked up. That said it all, in his eyes. What was the point of having a therapist tell him again?

"You told me when we first met that no one understood. Well, how will anyone understand you, if you won't tell me how you see things? Why don't you try to make me understand?"

Dr. Michola was met with silence once again. AJ was left with his thoughts as the words hung within the air before him. He knew he wouldn't be allowed to leave, or he'd end up with a "special" session, unless he started talking. He knew this man would never actually get it, but he guessed he should at least throw the starving dog a bone.

"Distanced..."

The head of the other man snapped up almost immediately. It reminded him of an old jack-in-the-box he'd had when he was five; it popped up, and the head broke off. A hint of a smirk appeared at the image of Dr. Michola's head flying off. Wishful thinking; he wanted to happen. The smirk grew as he watched him hurriedly scribble some notes down. An actual response had almost put the man into shock. It amazed AJ, sometimes, how malleable people could be.

Finally, the therapist met AJ's shaded gaze once more. "How so?"

AJ gave a slight shrug. He just had to fill the time until he was able to escape. "I always had people who cared about me. Family, friends, all that shit."

"Go on..."

"But when they included me, when I knew I was involved in what they were doing, or fuck, their lives... I still felt separated."

"Yet you know you were part of it."

He knew the man wouldn't grasp what he was trying to say. "Yeah, well, damn... it was like watching a movie. I could see it happening, feel like I was in the story. In the end, though, I was still outside of it. No matter how involved in the story I was. Just like a movie, and I was just watching it."

He was supposed to have gone to group therapy earlier that evening. He'd decided to blow it off, said he wasn't feeling well. Which wasn't too far from the truth. AJ wasn't sick or anything; he just had a dark feeling nestled within the pit of his stomach. Something wasn't right. Not that it ever was, but this was different. Worse. Darker. It was the sort of feeling a child would get just before a thunderstorm started – something they felt was bad was coming, and no one could stop it.

AJ decided to leave his room and walk along the halls, into the lounge-styled room of the residence, where many of the other addicts at the facility were

gathered around the television. *"A new strain of virus has consumed the nation at an alarming rate. The CDC has been investigating the source of this unknown illness. Its early symptoms resemble a virulent version of the flu..."*

He turned away from the TV and looked back at the others, whom he'd just now noticed were sitting in a semicircle, their hands linked together. One of them glanced up at AJ, as others coughed violently. "We're going to pray for the poor souls infected. You can join us."

"I think it's a sign..."

"Half the country has it."

"Lord... hear our prayer..."

AJ walked away without an answer to any of them. He was fed up with all of it. And the others... A prayer circle? They thought that was the answer?

He sat down on his bed, resting his head in his hands. There were no sounds to comfort him, no one there to tell him that his inner feelings were wrong this time.

Did they really think God would save them?

He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually believed in God. God was like Santa Claus, someone in whom only little kids or, in the case of religion, those who'd had privileged lives could ever truly believe. The common link between kids and the faithful? They hadn't had reality splash a cold dose of cruelty in their faces yet. It seemed so obvious to him that there was no God, that religion had been created as a way of controlling others, but then again, many things seemed obvious to AJ and not to others.

And people thought there was something wrong with *him*?

He stood and walked slowly towards the corner of the room, where the easel waited before him. A glance to the right showed a worn, wooden box that sat upon his nightstand and was open to reveal brushes and a variety of paints. His gaze shifted back to his painting once more. His pictures were always darker than most people liked, and they were typically cynical in their imagery, but this one depicted an image even AJ found a bit disturbing. An image he couldn't stomach if he looked at it too long.

Little did he know just how accurate that image would soon become.

Chapter 19

Infernal Friday.

That term is so natural now. It's actually funny to me. Because I remember how the term was first coined for that cursed day. It was a fluke, really. I was trying to be dramatic with the current trouble that was rapidly consuming the United States. I wanted to make it as big as possible, because it was the juiciest story I'd been given to date. And yes, that was what was on my mind. Not the victims, not the families, just the story I was going to tell about it. The day the infection swept across the country, I didn't give one thought to anyone suffering because of that damn super-virus. I didn't care at the moment.

What was really bad was that the reason I got the story is because the best reporters had all fallen ill as a result of the virus. I knew that, and all I could think about was the fact that this story may be the one to get me noticed. Nice, huh?

I was a selfish bitch, and deep down, I think I always knew that. Hell, I think I still am. Always, my thoughts were focused on myself and on my career. Nothing more, really. With the exception of occasional thoughts of my family, and even those were rarer than I'd ever like to admit. But it's true.

By all rights, I should be dead. With all the circumstances, the odds, I know I should be dead in the ground. Or... the alternative. But not alive.

Yet, I'm still here.

Maybe that's why I'm still alive. Because I'm meant to suffer for my lack of compassion, my selfish and cold ways, my shallow life. Perhaps my surviving this whole thing was karma's way of kicking me straight in the ass, right down to hell. I wouldn't be shocked.

Because all those who died? Man, do they have it easy.

Friday, April 13, 2012
10:00 p.m.

"Seriously? Really! Josh, that's... well, not great 'cause they're sick, but that is fantastic you're giving me this chance." Riley paused to listen to her station's producer as she drove down the roads of Tampa. "I'm on it. I'm not too far from Tampa General anyway. Get some rest; you sound awful. Tell Mare I hope she feels better!" She clicked off the Bluetooth clipped to her ear and flipped her Jeep in a sharp U-turn with a smile. She had just landed the best story she'd ever gotten.

"I can't believe my luck," she mused to herself. "Everyone else is either on location or sick themselves. What is going on, anyway?" The news, for part of the day, had been reporting that there had been some strange jets up along the east coast, specifically around Washington, D.C. Then came news of a strange new illness sweeping the northeastern part of the country. Today was actually supposed to have been her day off, but mostly, as she'd done some errands, she'd kept the news station on her radio so she could keep up with what was going on.

That was until about 4:00 p.m. Suddenly, there was no news being told. No one was able to get in contact with anyone up north. Even stations like CNN that were set up in cities like New York and even Washington D.C. went off the air, with only the Atlanta headquarters left to deliver any news. And they kept repeating how they couldn't contact their sister stations. You could turn on any cable station news show, radio station, anything stationed further north than Georgia or the Carolinas, and you'd get either dead air or a blank screen. It was a media blackout unlike anything Riley had ever seen. One that would probably scare her if she wasn't so focused on the fact this could really make her career.

Many were falling ill, and fast. No one had seen anything like it. Definitely headline or top story worthy, and it was hers. Riley was a bit concerned that she would catch it like her colleagues had, but that was overridden by the fact that she wouldn't get another shot like this. Not anytime soon, anyway, perhaps not ever. At that very thought, her foot pressed down harder on the gas pedal, and she felt herself accelerate.

After driving a bit, Riley also turned her Bluetooth right back on, as she dialed a familiar number. She had to call. "Dad? Oh..." Her face fell as she got the answering machine. "Dad, it's Ri. Look, do me a favor. Stay HOME. Don't leave the house. Tell the boys that, too, for me. I don't know what's going on. But some bug... it's bad, I'm hearing. I don't want you guys getting it, okay? So... please, when you hear this, stay home. I love you... bye." She sighed in defeat. Well, she'd tried. And she would again later, just to be sure.

The young blonde tried turning on the radio, just for some music to fill the air, and was surprised to find nothing but static on the local stations. She thumped her radio once as she stopped at a red light. "Jeez, what gives?" Riley muttered, with thoughts that it was just her radio that had problems. Whatever had caused the blackout up north couldn't be happening down there in Florida, could it? *No, no way*, she tried to convince herself. *Whatever happened up there is different.*

"Oh, forget it." And she plugged in her iPod, switching it on to Hinder. She beat her head to the music as she continued down the road. The streets were oddly still, especially for a Friday night. Usually, all the college students were out and about, since the college didn't sit too far from the hospital. Riley's sharp, blue eyes glanced around warily at the empty streets. She felt like she was living in a ghost town.

Research tonight, and the story would air tomorrow. It sounded perfect to her as she finally pulled into the parking lot of Tampa General Hospital. After she grabbed her recorder and camera, she climbed out of her car. Swift, confident strides carried her through the large doors of the facility.

Riley wasn't prepared for what she saw.

What she saw was death, or at least the doorway to it. The hospital was in chaos, no one able to truly help the ailing the way they should be helped. People were lying on the floor, having sporadic convulsions. Many were covered with festering, deep violet lesions that oozed a darker fluid. What truly disturbed her was the sight of one patient foaming at the mouth, like he had rabies. Something animals were supposed to have, not people. She saw a doctor collapse before her eyes and nurses rush to help the man as they coughed heavily themselves.

And what did she do?

Riley simply just turned on her camera.

Chapter 20

In my line of duty, I'm supposed to show a sense of stability, of control. People were looking to me for answers, and I was supposed to have them. But I didn't. I couldn't. None of us did. Everyone knew that, but they wanted the pretense of it. They wanted the security that came with answers, even if it was a false security. So I gave it to them. I gave it to my men; I gave it to my family.

All lies fed to them, of course. But what else could I do? I couldn't help them; hell, I'm not a doctor. I couldn't save them. I couldn't even find a way to really comfort any of the ailing. So I told them they'd be okay; I acted as if I knew what was happening. I gave them that security blanket they so desperately needed.

And all I wanted at the time was the ability to give myself the same thing.

Friday, April 13, 2012

11:00 p.m.

“Luuuuuke... I am your father...”

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson turned to look at his comrade, Lieutenant Sam Licata. He could tell the man was grinning behind his black gas mask. He shook his head; there wasn't much to smile about.

Sam chuckled tensely. “Aw, c’mon, sir, embrace your inner Darth Vader. It’s the only fun in wearing one of these things.”

Kevin took a deep breath, in and out, inhaling the filtered air that came through his own mask. “I wouldn’t call this fun, Licata,” he muttered. Even so, he couldn’t help but hear the “Imperial March” playing in his head as he and Sam trooped into the infirmary.

Every sickbed on the entire base was full, or so it seemed, and had been for hours now. To Kevin’s knowledge, no one had died yet... but no one had shown the slightest sign of getting better, either. Worse still, the situation had deteriorated to the point that military men now writhed on blankets spread across the floor, their wives and children packed into the hall on extra cots and camp beds. Everywhere Kevin looked, there were sick people.

It hadn’t happened all of a sudden, but it had intensified quickly. The Air Force had paid close attention to the reports of unauthorized jets in the restricted airspace over Washington, D.C. that morning, and when news of the mysterious illness spreading up North had reached the base, it had been locked down. That hadn’t stopped the virus – they were calling it a virus, anyway; not that anyone really knew what it was – from creeping in. The infirmary had started filling up around eight o’clock that evening.

When the influx began, the base doctors had broadcast the order for everyone not showing symptoms to don their gas masks as a precaution. *Bioterrorism*, the whispers went around. Kevin, Sam, and the other men in their dormitory had quickly complied, but not everyone on the base had. In fact, even some who had put on masks had fallen ill shortly afterwards. Even some of the medical staff, themselves.

The situation at MacDill was certainly grim. With the base on lockdown, no one could enter, and no one could leave. The sick were to be treated on the base, which wasn’t equipped for emergency medical services, and when the doctors and nurses collapsed, there would be no one to relieve them. There was not enough staff as it was to adequately treat almost the entire base, and so those officers who were well had been called in to help.

Looking over at Sam, Kevin could tell by his body language that he was just as shaken by the sight of so many ill. “What are we supposed to do, Colonel?” the younger man asked weakly. “How can we help all these people?”

“Just help make them comfortable. That’s about all we can do for now,” replied Kevin in a low voice. To set an example, he approached the nearest casualty, a young woman, and knelt down so she could see his eyes behind his mask. “Ma’am? I know you’re not feeling well. What can I do to help?”

“Burning... my whole body feels like it’s on fire,” the woman murmured, her words slurring together. She was trembling with chills, but when Kevin placed his hand gingerly on her forehead, he could feel the fever burning through his glove. He noticed that her skin had erupted in ulcers, maybe fever blisters, that surely stung.

“How about a cold compress? That might help your fever,” he suggested, nodding to Sam. The other man nodded back and took off to find something they could use for compresses. “Make a few of them!” Kevin called after him, looking down the long hall of patients in the exact same state. He spoke words of comfort to those around him while he waited for Sam to return.

After five minutes, when Sam still wasn’t back, Kevin set off in the direction he’d gone, wondering what had held him up. “Edwards, you seen Licata around?” he asked, recognizing a captain who was staying in the same quarters.

“Saw him heading that way,” replied the captain, jerking his thumb to the left. Kevin followed its trajectory.

He didn’t have to do much looking. All of a sudden, Sam came wheeling around a curtain, nearly ripping it from its track in the process. “Colonel Richardson!” he blurted, breathless. “I need some help in here!”

Kevin sprinted after him, around to the other side of the curtain, where a man in a bed was in the midst of a seizure of some sort. His whole body shook with convulsions, rattling the bed beneath him. All of his muscles were clenched tight, from his locked jaw to his balled up fists. His face was twisted, as if in pain.

“Should we force his mouth open?” Sam asked. “Try to grab his tongue? Is it true what they say about swallowing your tongue?”

Kevin shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, caught off-guard. “I don’t know. Let’s just... let’s try to hold him down, so he doesn’t hurt himself.”

They went to either side of the man’s bed and grabbed his twitching limbs, pressing him against the mattress as he jerked beneath their hands.

“Ahh!” Sam cried suddenly, taking one hand off the man and holding it up in disgust. “Those boils on his skin... they pop!” Kevin could see the sheen of yellow pus on his glove.

“Good thing we’re wearing gloves, eh?” he replied. “Looks like it’s stopping.”

The spasms had died down; the man’s body seemed to relax. Sam let go of him at once and backed away. Kevin released him more tentatively, but it seemed the fit had passed. The man’s jaw slackened. He was breathing raggedly. Then, all of a sudden, his head lurched back, his throat bubbled up, and he was vomiting, a

small eruption of thin, orange-ish fluid that dribbled up his nose and down his chin.

“Turn him!” Kevin ordered, springing forward. “He’ll choke!” As he and Sam hoisted the man over onto his side, he threw up again, this time spewing the orange vomit all over Sam’s fatigues. Sam backpedaled as another wave of vomit splattered the floor, and Kevin heard him begin to retch himself. “Sam, no! Don’t-”

But it was too late. The lieutenant was already vomiting inside his gas mask. Before Kevin could stop him, he reached behind his head and tore the mask off. There was a sickly popping sound as the seal was released. Sam doubled over, heaving. Kevin sighed and dutifully pat his back until he had finished. When Sam rose up again, his face was streaked with vomit, his eyes watering in misery and fear. “I’m sorry,” he gasped hoarsely. “I had to get it off.”

“C’mon,” said Kevin, grabbing him by the arm. “You need to shower, right now. Wash all that crap off you. Wash *everything* off, you got it?”

He hustled Sam back to the dormitory where he’d been staying while recuperating on the base. Neither man spoke during the walk, but Kevin knew Sam had to be thinking the same thing he was: he’d exposed himself. If the illness was airborne, like they all thought it had to be, he was now at risk for coming down with it.

“Use lots of soap, man,” he ordered Sam as he pushed him towards the showers. “I’ll wait around for you.”

He went to his own room, with thoughts of checking in with his family while he waited. He’d called his mother in Kentucky earlier in the day, well before the base went on lockdown. She had heard about the jets and the sickness on the news, but was feeling perfectly fine, she’d assured him, telling him not to worry. But Kevin couldn’t help but worry; it was his nature. His mother had been living alone ever since he’d lost his father a decade ago, and she was getting on in years. His two older brothers lived nearby, and so did her brother, his uncle and Brian’s father. They kept tabs on her, but still, he worried.

It didn’t help ease his fears when he dialed her number and got no answer, but then he looked at the time, and he groaned. It was half-past eleven; she had probably gone to bed hours ago and was sleeping too soundly to hear the phone. She didn’t keep one by her bed. He wished she’d pick up, just to put his mind to rest, but told himself he would wait and try again in the morning. If she didn’t pick up then, he could start worrying.

After some consideration, he decided to try Brian. Unlike his mother, his cousin had a cell phone and did keep it at his bedside. He could call Brian without waking his twin daughters, who were surely in bed at this hour. He dialed and let

the phone ring, and just when he worried he'd be transferred to voicemail, Brian's voice rasped, "Kevin?"

"Bri?" Immediately, Kevin's brow furrowed with concern. "Are you sick, man? You sound terrible."

"Nah, I'm alright; I don't have it. It's the girls. Leighanne's got it, too."

"Oh no..." Kevin's hand went to his head; he rubbed at his temple. "How are they doing? Are you at a hospital?"

"No, no, we're at home. I tried calling the hospital a couple of hours ago. They told me not to bring them in, said they were already full up, and there was nothing they could do."

"It's the same situation here," Kevin sighed. "Seems like three-quarters of the base is sick. We're on lockdown; no one can be taken to the hospital. But it sounds like our hospitals are in dire straits, too. This is insane."

"I know. I'm worried, Kev. Really worried. The twins... their fevers are so high."

"Give them lots of fluids. Use cold compresses," Kevin advised, as if he actually knew what he was talking about. He couldn't not try to give advice, though; it was the least he could do to help.

"I have been. They're sleeping now."

"Hopefully that will help. Give their bodies a chance to rest and recover."

"I hope," Brian sighed. "I'm praying this is the worst it will get. I tried to tune in to the news, but the TV stations are down. Websites are crashing. I can't get any information."

"I don't know much more than you do, cuz," said Kevin, apologetically. "Just hang in there. Keep praying. I'm praying, too." It was the only thing he could say that he knew would comfort his minister cousin. They had both been raised in religious families, but Brian's faith was stronger than that of anyone else he knew. If anyone could stay strong through this crisis, he knew Brian could.

"Thanks, Kev. Stay healthy down there, alright? You are, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, man. We busted out the gas masks. They think this thing is airborne. You, uh... you might wanna wear a mask of your own, if you're taking care of the girls."

"I'll be fine," Brian reassured him. "We'll get through. I trust in God's mercy."

“Sure... sure, man.” Glad that Brian could not see him through the phone, Kevin shook his head. Their God wasn’t showing much mercy right then; that was for sure. He thought of Sam and wondered if the lieutenant was going to come down with the same thing the man who had vomited on him had. “Listen, Bri, I gotta go. Gotta check on a friend here,” he said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright, thanks for calling. Keep the prayers coming.”

“I will. Bye.”

Kevin stared down at his phone for a few seconds after he’d hung up, thinking of his cousin’s family. His beautiful wife, two angelic little girls. He prayed that whatever this illness was, it was something like the flu, something that made you miserable, but ran its course in a few days. He couldn’t fathom the alternative.

He put his phone back on its charger and tested his gas mask to make sure it was still sealed. Then he left his room and wandered up the hall. His timing was impeccable; Sam was just leaving the bathroom, toweling off his hair, while a larger towel was wrapped around his waist. His skin was bright red from being scrubbed practically raw in scalding water.

“How ya doin’, Licata?” Kevin asked, looking him up and down. With a jolt, he noticed that Sam’s whole body was trembling.

“Alright... it’s just freezing in here.” Sam shuddered. “Gonna grab some clothes.”

“You sure? It looks like you boiled yourself in there,” said Kevin. He reached out and laid a gloved hand on Sam’s upper arm; sure enough, his skin was warm to the touch. He could practically see steam rising from it. “You feel warm, but you’ve got chills. That’s not just from the water, is it?”

Sam nodded, then shook his head. “I don’t know, sir,” he said miserably, and Kevin was startled to see tears filling the man’s eyes. “I’ve got a headache, sir, and I don’t feel right. Sort of weak... shivery... like I’ve got a fever. Do you think I’ve got it? Already?”

Kevin released a shaky breath through his gas mask and shook his head. “I don’t know, Sam. Why don’t you go get dressed, and I’ll walk you back to the medical building.”

Sam nodded and hurried off to his own room, still shivering. As Kevin watched him go, a heavy feeling of dread filled his chest, making his heart sink like an anchor.

PART II: REAPER'S SABBATH

Chapter 21

My family was my life.

Leighanne, Brooke and Bonnie... I loved them more than life itself. I mean that, with all the heart I have left. Even though I believed life was a gift, I would have given up my own to save them. Christ died for my sins; I would have died for my family.

But I didn't. I'm still alive. Technically speaking. Not that it matters. The line between life and death is fuzzy now. My heart's still beating, somehow. That's more than I can say for "them." But what truly separates the living from the dead, and even those in between, is the soul. And even if my broken heart still beats, my soul seems shattered beyond repair.

How can I call myself alive?

I didn't die, and even if I had, it wouldn't have saved them.

My family is dead.

My family was my life.

My life is over.

**Saturday, April 14, 2012
2:00 a.m.**

Brian awoke with a start, his head jerking up from the mattress. He looked around, confused by his surroundings, and remembered he was in the twins' room. Exhaustion must have interfered with his night's vigil. He'd fallen asleep there, slumped across the foot of Bonnie's bed, his cheek pressed against the Disney princess comforter.

Upon realizing this, he was instantly alert, and he crept to the head of the bed to check on his daughter. Even in the dim, blue glow of the Cinderella lamp burning on the nightstand next to her, he could see the flush of fever in her cheeks, and when he put his hand to her forehead, he could feel the heat radiating from it, as it had all night. He smoothed her sweat-soaked hair, tenderly, and though she gave a faint moan at his touch, she did not awaken.

A ripple of fear coursed through him, as he took in other details of her appearance: the sores dotting her face like leopard spots, the dried beads of foam

at the corners of her cracked lips from her earlier seizures. Maybe she was beyond waking.

Despair twisted his heart until he was in agony. How had this gotten so bad, so fast? It had started out like a simple stomach flu, with the twins' complaints of not feeling well and Brooke throwing up her dinner. But it had escalated quickly, until both girls were vomiting and burning with fever. Brian had called the emergency room at the hospital. He would never forget the receptionist's words:

“Sir, we’re already packed with patients with the same complaints. I don’t know what’s going on, and to be quite honest, it doesn’t look like the doctors do either. They don’t know what it is or how to treat it; all they can do is make people comfortable. Not very comfortable, at this point, since we’re out of beds. You’re better off keeping your family at home and doing what you can for them there. Give them plenty of fluids, and use cold compresses to bring down their fevers. That’s all I can tell you at this stage. Good luck.”

He'd hung up the phone with a cold, hollow feeling in his gut, but he'd followed the woman's instructions, treating the girls as if they just had a bad case of the flu, though he knew it was something more than that. But when Bonnie had started convulsing, sometime before midnight, he'd panicked and dialed 911. Nobody had answered. Nobody had come.

Brian had known then that he was on his own.

Bonnie hadn't woken up since the seizures, and neither had Brooke. Brian sat with them in their darkened room, watching them sleep, maintaining his vigil. He left only to check on Leighanne. It was easy, though, to nod off himself, with no one to talk to and nothing to do but sit and watch and wait. The fog of sleep rolled in again, and oddly enough, it was sudden silence, not sound, that lifted him out of it.

His chin snapped up, his breath catching in his chest. Though nothing appeared to have changed, the room seemed too still, too silent. The silence was heavy and noticeable, the way it seems after the air conditioner shuts off, and the white noise you didn't even notice while it was humming away in the background suddenly stops.

What had stopped this time?

He leaned forward and realized he no longer heard the rasping sounds of air rattling in Bonnie's lungs. Beneath her polka-dot pajamas, her skinny frame was still. Fighting panic, he tried to keep control of himself, to think rationally. Maybe she had just drifted into a deeper phase of her sleep cycle. He pressed his palm to her chest and closed his eyes in concentration.

He felt nothing.

The panic got stronger. He tore open the front of her pajama top, sending smooth, round buttons flying like BBs, and lowered his ear to her still-warm skin.

He heard nothing.

The panic took over. “No, Bonnie... no, baby,” he howled, as he scrambled into desperate action. He had taken a CPR class with Leighanne the year before, shortly before having open-heart surgery. She had wanted to be prepared, in case something should happen after she brought him home. Neither of them had ever had to use their training. But Brian used it now, hoping he was not too late.

He cupped his hands over his daughter’s chest and began to pump it up and down, stopping only to listen for the precious sounds of her heart. He tried a few breaths, forcing his own air into her lungs, and watched her chest inflate, then expel the stale air and lie flat and still. Refusing to give up, he went back to the chest compressions, pushing more forcefully, trying to jolt her heart into beating on its own.

He tried to block out the sight of his seven-year-old daughter’s flaccid body twitching, as his hands thrust her down into the mattress, again and again, refusing to give up. It took the muffled sound of a crack and the feel of ribs splintering beneath his palm for Brian to stop, horrified. He fell back, gasping, and dissolved into sobs, as the strength went out of him.

Gathering her broken body in his arms, Brian hugged Bonnie to his chest, wishing his own thudding heart could pulse life into hers, knowing it could not. She was beyond saving. Her small frame drooped like a rag doll, limp in his arms. Her lungs were empty. Her heart was still. Her soul was in Heaven.

Her twin was in bed on the other side of the room.

Remembering Brooke, Brian’s breath hitched in his chest again, as panic and fear muted his grief once more. He gently lay Bonnie down against her pillows and ran to Brooke, determined to save at least one of them. But when he reached her bed, he found that he was already too late. Her body was as lifeless as Bonnie’s, her chest just as silent. Her skin was still warm from the fever, but when he lifted one of her eyelids, the wispy blonde lashes tickling his fingertip, he found the blue eye cold and staring, not a sparkle of life left in it. He smoothed the lid down again, and a tear fell from his own eye to wet her cheek. He lowered his trembling lips to kiss it away, tasting the salt of his tears and the remnants of her sweat.

This time, he didn’t try any heroics. He couldn’t bear to damage her body more.

Brooke was gone.

Bonnie was gone.

And then his thoughts turned to Leighanne.

He left his twin daughters lying in their beds, deep in eternal sleep, and rushed into the room he shared with his wife. In their bed, her body lay, just as silent, just as still, but he clung to the last ounces of his faith as he climbed onto the bed beside her. "Leigh," he croaked, his throat congested with grief. "Leighanne?" What would he say if she awoke? he wondered. How would he tell her their daughters were...

The word was in the back of his mind, but he refused to bring it to the surface. He couldn't yet think it, though he pictured their bodies, identical in death. There it was: that word he'd been trying to avoid. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force both the word and the image out of his mind. But when he opened them again, there was Leighanne, lifeless in the bed.

"No... no..." He shook his head, refusing to believe that she, too, could be gone. He held his fingers beneath her nose, over her lips, feeling for the faint, warm puff of her breath. He peeled back the covers and watched for her chest to rise. Nothing. Again, nothing.

"Leigh... please... Lord, please..." Begging, crying, he hovered over her. Tears streamed from his eyes and trickled into her blonde hair as he bowed his head and kissed her forehead. "Please..." His lips moved against her skin, touching the rough patches of sores that had erupted there. He could still feel the heat from her body, and the warmth on his lips sparked renewed hope.

With one last rush of frantic determination, he scrambled up. He straddled her hips, tugged her camisole down off her shoulders, and thrust his hands between her breasts. The skin there was clammy, and his own sweating palms slipped around as he pressed down on her chest, forcing her heart to constrict, to pump blood and warmth and life to the rest of her body. He couldn't let the warmth leave her. He couldn't sit back and let his wife die, too.

He pumped and pumped, pausing only to feel for the rhythm of her heart beating on its own, and when he felt nothing, he pumped some more. His breath came in heavy pants, as his arms began to tire; the mattress squeaked on its springs with his effort. The cadence of desperation began to slow.

Finally, his arms gave out, and he collapsed in exhaustion, slumping over her body, resting his head on her bosom. Her chest was as silent as the room around him. Her soft skin, kept warm only by his touch, cooled quickly beneath his cheek. Leighanne was beyond saving, not by man, medicine, or miracle. As the truth of this realization finally sank in, Brian began to weep, helpless, hopeless in his grief.

After some time, he finally found the strength to roll away from her, in essence, letting go. Lying on his side of the bed, he clasped his hands together and whispered a few words of prayer. He prayed for the souls of his wife and daughters. He prayed for the strength to get up, the strength to go on without them. Even his faint voice sounded unnaturally loud in the eerie quiet, and he wondered how he would ever be able to live in this silent house alone.

Wiping his eyes, he sat up slowly, feeling shaky and weak. His heart fluttered in his chest, and he fought the fleeting urge to vomit. Were these the symptoms of the virus that had killed his family, finally staking its claim on him, too? Or was it just grief making him feel this way? He realized he didn't care either way.

He clung to the banister as he staggered downstairs. In the kitchen, he leaned against the counter, the phone in his hand. He squinted at the magnet stuck next to the memo board, the one with the emergency numbers: fire, police, poison control. The numbers blurred before his eyes. His fingers were trembling so badly that he had to dial twice. Finally, the phone rang. And rang. And rang.

No one ever picked up.

Chapter 22

Why be a nurse, if not to nurture? Why be a caretaker, if not to care? Why work in a hospital, if not to heal? Why study medicine, if not to save?

I am a nurse. I am a caretaker. I worked in a hospital. I studied medicine.

I tried to nurture. I did care. But those people, those poor people, I could not heal.

The souls who succumbed on Reaper's Sabbath, I could not save.

Saturday, April 14, 2012
7:00 a.m.

In Tampa, it was the phone that woke Jo. She snapped into consciousness and fumbled for the cell phone on her bedside table. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she squinted down at the name flashing at her on the screen and frowned. Work? Did she have the day wrong? It was supposed to be her day off. She had specifically requested April fourteenth off. Why, oh why, did the hospital have to call her on this, of all mornings?

She got rid of a hearty groan before she flipped open her phone, instantly brightening her voice to its “pleasant bedside manner” tone in time to answer, “Hello?”

The voice on the other end wasn’t at all pleasant. It was panicked. “Jo? It’s Mike. Can you come in?”

Jo sighed. It wasn’t like the ER unit coordinator to be so abrupt, so she tried to turn him down gently. “Mike, I’m off today. Sounds like you’re slammed, but it’s Gabby’s birthday. She’s having a party later. Can you call someone else?”

“I’ve tried; there’s no one else. We need you here; we need all the help we can get. It’s bad, Jo... really bad. Everything’s falling apart; people are dropping like flies. I think... I think I’ve got it, too.”

Jo drew in a sharp breath as she sat up in bed. “What?? Got what? What’s going on?”

Mike’s voice was incredulous. “Didn’t you see the news yesterday? I mean, before it went off the air? It’s this virus... it started up in the Northeast yesterday, but it’s spread... This has got to be the same thing.”

An icy finger traced the length of Jo’s spine, leaving shivers in its wake. Quickly, she thought back to yesterday. She’d gotten off work at seven in the morning. She’d picked up Gabby from Makayla’s house, then gone to bed. She’d slept until afternoon. She had tried to turn on the NBC Nightly News while she cooked dinner, but she’d gotten only the rainbow color bars that signaled the station was off the air. The CBS Evening News was also having trouble; all she’d seen on that channel was the CBS logo, frozen on the screen. And ABC had been simply static. She’d flipped through the channels in confusion, noticing that some of the cable channels still worked, but many were simply dead air.

Passing through the kitchen, Gabby had commented that it was weird and, with her head half in the fridge, babbled something about planes flying over Washington, D.C. that morning. Distracted by her cooking, Jo hadn’t even caught it all, let alone connect it to what was happening with the TV. *Must be a problem with the television signal*, she’d thought, and wondered if she should call the cable company. She had shrugged off the notion, figuring her neighbors would have taken care of that by now. All she could do was wait. It didn’t bother her. She wasn’t a big television viewer, anyway, and Gabby could certainly live without TV for a night.

They’d put on a movie, instead, while they ate, letting the comedy on screen take the place of dinner conversation between them, or lack thereof. Even the stupidest of movies was better than awkward silence. When it was over, she and Gabby had each retreated to their separate rooms to read. Jo had nodded off, as

she always did when she read in bed, and now it was morning. She had no idea what Mike was talking about, but she sensed she had missed something major.

She let out her breath in another sigh. “So you need me to come in,” she said, accepting her plight. Hopefully she could put in a few hours, until they got some back-up, then head home for Gabby’s birthday sleepover.

“Desperately.” Mike’s voice was pleading.

“Alright. Give me half an hour or so. I’ll be in.”

“Sure. Thanks, Jo, you’re a lifesaver. Oh, and hey – wear a mask. If you don’t have one at home, stop at Walgreens on the way and get one, alright? This thing is serious... I don’t want you gettin’ sick.”

“O-okay... I will,” Jo replied, feeling that shivery sensation sliding down her spine again. Every ounce of instinct protested as she pushed back the covers and forced her legs out of bed.

She ignored the bad feeling, dressing quickly and quietly in a pair of dark purple scrubs, in honor of Gabby’s birthday. Purple was her favorite color. She slipped on a pair of Crocs and tiptoed up the hall, into the kitchen. She was in the middle of scrawling a note for her daughter when she heard a small voice ask, “Where are you going?”

Jo looked up, her pen poised over the notepad. Gabby was standing on the threshold in her pajamas, dark hair in tangles, eyes sleepy, yet suspicious. “I thought you weren’t going to work today.” Her dark eyes flashed, wounded and accusatory. Her mouth puckered at the corners, scowling. “Or did you forget it’s my birthday?”

“Of course I didn’t forget,” Jo assured her, laughing. “Mike called; the hospital’s jam-packed and short-staffed, and they need my help. Just for the morning, until they can bring some temps in. I’ll be home in a few hours, I promise. Plenty of time to get ready for the slumber party. You go back to bed and don’t worry.”

Gabby heaved a huge sigh. “I should have known you’d get called in, even on your day off. Even on my *birthday*.” She rolled her eyes and turned on her heel, flouncing dramatically back to her bedroom.

Jo shook her head after her daughter, now an official teenager. So this was what she had to look forward to for the next seven years. With a sigh of her own, she found her keys and her purse and slipped out of the house. The last words she shouted to Gabby before she closed and locked the door were, “I’ll be back later!”

Even through her surgical mask, Jo could detect the change in the air as she left the clear, bright Florida morning and entered the emergency room. The air inside the building was stagnant with the stench of vomit and death. Looking around in dismay, she could see why.

The halls were lined with patients on gurneys, overflow from the already-full rooms. Some were writhing in misery; others appeared lifelessly still. The curtained areas were packed with still more sick people, as were the waiting rooms. Jo tried to block out their frightened cries as she hurried past them.

An old woman with wide, half-crazed eyes reached out to her with a gnarled, sore-spotted hand, ranting, “And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them! Now I am going to destroy them along with the earth! I am going to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life! Everything that is on the earth shall die!’”

“Not if I can help it!” Jo shouted over her shoulder as she jogged by, heading for the nurses station. For as jam-packed as the emergency ward was, she would have expected the central hub of the ER to be bustling with activity. She was surprised when she found the nurses station all but deserted. She set her purse down on the hexagonal counter and stepped around to the inside.

A weak groan drew her eyes to the floor. There, slumped against the counter, was the very man whom she’d spoken to on the phone less than an hour ago. Instantly, she dropped to her knees beside him. “Mike?” She gently shook his shoulder. The large man lifted his drooping head; his blonde curls were plastered to his scalp with sweat, and there were flecks of dried vomit caked in his stubble of beard.

He looked at her blearily, blinking a few times, as if trying to focus his vision. “Jo,” he croaked.

“Oh, Mike...” She shook her head, looking at him in pity. “I had no idea it was this bad. On the phone, you-”

“It’s worse than I thought. It comes on quick... kills even quicker. You shouldn’t have come,” he murmured, closing his eyes. “I know I called... but you shouldn’t have come here.”

“You need my help,” Jo asserted, struggling to keep her voice calm while her heart slammed against her ribs. “I can help. Let’s start by getting you into a bed. Can you stand?”

She reached out to help him, but Mike shook his head. “There are no beds.”

“Sure there are; we’ll find something. I’ll get some help. Where is everyone else?”

Again, he shook his head in defeat. “There is no one else. Not that I’ve seen. They’re all gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, gone? They left??” She stared at him incredulously, unable to believe that her coworkers could have bailed and left the ER like this.

“No... dead. Or close to it.” He began to cough then, racking coughs that shook his heavy body. “Fraid I’m not far behind them,” he whispered, as he looked up at her miserably, his blue eyes full of tears.

“Don’t say that,” Jo ordered briskly, giving him a little shake as his chin started to droop to his chest again. “Stay with me, Mike; I’m not going to let you die. Wait here while I find some help... I’ll be right back. Just hold on.”

As Jo stood up, a little voice in the back of her head told her not to leave him, but the logical side of her argued with it. Surely, there had to be someone left who knew what was going on, who could help. There had to be a doctor on call. This was the hospital; this was the Emergency Room. Even when it was understaffed due to illness or bad weather or whatever it may be, there were doctors on call.

She headed for the staff lounge first, expecting to find at least someone at the coffee pot, loading up on caffeine to get through the morning. But at first glance, the lounge, like the nurses station, appeared empty. The coffee pot was half full, but one whiff told her it was stale. It had likely been sitting there half the night. She turned, and that was when she noticed the lone figure slumped over the length of the couch, one arm dangling to the floor.

Jo approached cautiously and knelt down on the floor beside the couch. As she did, the smell of vomit overpowered the faint aroma of the coffee. She pushed aside a wastebasket, which had been dragged up alongside the sofa. Congealed vomit ran down its sides. The woman on the couch was lying on her belly, her dark hair in her face. It, too, was crusted with vomit. Gingerly, Jo brushed it out of the woman’s eyes. When she recognized her face, she drew in a low breath and released it shakily. “Dr. Tavarez?” she asked, rubbing the shoulder of the resident with whom she’d worked the occasional night shift. “Ana?”

There was no response from the young doctor, not the slightest movement. Fearing the worst, Jo reached for her wrist. Picking up her arm, she saw that it was covered in open sores, the same kind she’d seen on the old woman in the hall. Mike, she recalled, had had some on his face. They looked like chickenpox, only larger, deeper. She wished she was wearing gloves, but there was little time. Touching only where necessary, she pressed her middle fingers against the radial artery in the doctor’s wrist to feel for a pulse. She felt nothing.

Noticing Dr. Tavarez's own stethoscope lying on the floor next to her, Jo picked it up and slipped it into her ears. She slid its round end down the front of the doctor's scrub top and listened, but there were no breath sounds and no heartbeat. At first, she kept moving the scope around, thinking surely she was missing something, surely she wasn't listening in the right place. But soon, disbelief gave way to dejection, and she let the stethoscope fall.

Dr. Tavarez were dead. How many others would she find in the same state?

Trying to keep her mind focused on the task at hand, and not let it wander, Jo washed her hands at the sink, scrubbing until they were pink and raw. She covered them with latex gloves. Slinging her own stethoscope around her neck, she left the lounge. In the hall, she paused and looked around. With gurneys lining the halls and no other staff in sight, the ER suddenly seemed overwhelming. How was she going to get to everyone, all on her own?

She decided she would start by checking on Mike. Then she would make rounds, seeing every patient, starting with the ones in the rooms, then the ones in the hall, and finally, those in the waiting room. She would do what she could to treat them and make them comfortable, and while she worked, she would look for the rest of the staff. It seemed as good a plan as any, and so Jo jogged back to the nurses station.

Her composure quickly lapsed back into panic when she rounded the counter and found Mike in the throes of a grand mal seizure. His eyes were rolled back in his head, exposing only the whites, and flecks of foam bubbled at the corners of his gasping mouth, as his body convulsed violently on the floor. One arm kept knocking against a cabinet as it jerked, putting an audible rhythm to his spasms. *Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.*

Jo had witnessed plenty of seizures in the ER, but that didn't stop them from being scary. Especially when it someone she knew twitching like that. But she couldn't let her emotions get the best of her. She knew what to do. She could stop it. *Dilantin*, she thought. That was the drug of choice for treating a seizure. As an R.N., she wasn't allowed to prescribe it herself, but in this case, she didn't care about the rules. There wasn't a doctor in sight, and if she didn't medicate Mike and stop the seizure, he could hurt himself, even suffer brain damage.

Without a second thought, she went racing to the drug lock-up and tore open the cabinet where the Dilantin was kept. She knew this room like the back of her hand, had helped organize it, even. In trauma situations, she was usually the one sent scurrying to get whatever medication the doctor ordered, and so she knew just where the Dilantin would be. Or should be. But the shelves were hopelessly empty.

Breathing fast, she rummaged through the other shelves, other cabinets, checking labels on bottles and boxes before she shoved them aside. But there were no anti-

seizure drugs to be found in the ER. And then Jo realized... They must have used their entire stock on the influx of patients with the virus.

Sighing in defeat, she left the drug lock-up and returned to check on Mike. Thankfully, his seizure had stopped. He lay motionless on the floor, unconscious, but still breathing. There was not much else she could do for him until she had a hospital bed with medical equipment for him. With that thought in mind, she set about her original plan, to scope out the rest of the ER.

The patient in the first room she checked was a man, about her age, and he was dead. The patient in the second room, a woman, was also dead. Her attention was drawn to the third room by the unmistakable noise of a heart monitor sounding an alarm, and she rushed in to find a young man, no older than twenty-five, unresponsive in his bed. His dusky skin was blemished with the same sores that plagued the other patients and Dr. Tavarez. Oxygen was still flowing through the mask that covered his mouth and nose, but the waves on his EKG did not rise and fall with any sort of regularity. The line on the monitor was chaotic, like a child's scribble, a cardiac rhythm she recognized as ventricular fibrillation. The man's heart wasn't beating, only fluttering. It was not pumping any blood, and she knew that if she did not do something to restore it to its normal rhythm, it would stop altogether, and the man would die.

She looked around for a crash cart. If she could shock his heart, she might be able to save him. There was no defibrillator in the room, so she rushed out into the hall, searching wildly. She spotted one of the red carts that carried a defibrillator parked next to a teenage girl on a gurney. The girl was dead and topless, her shirt torn right off her chest so that she could be shocked back to life. Whoever had done it had been unsuccessful.

Swallowing with difficulty, Jo grabbed the crash cart and dragged it into the room with the young man. She got the defibrillator ready, charging the paddles and slapping pads onto the man's chest and side to take the shock. When she defibrillated him, his whole body jerked up from the bed with the surge of electricity, but the rhythm on the heart monitor didn't change. She shocked him a second time, and then a third, when the monitor suddenly flatlined.

"No..." Jo moaned, throwing the paddles aside. She began chest compressions, trying in vain to keep blood flowing through the man's virus-ravaged body. She could feel the fever on his skin, and the pustules popping beneath her palms as she pumped his bare chest. She knew she was over her head, with no one around to assist her, no one to monitor his oxygen or inject his IV with drugs that might stimulate his heart. After some time, she knew it was over. The man was dead. She was not going to bring him back.

She took a shaky breath as she stripped off her gloves and wiped the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her wrist. Her eyes shifted to the clock, as they always did when a death was called, but as a nurse, it wasn't her right to

pronounce a death. Only a doctor could do that. Even so, she found the man's chart by the foot of his bed and noted the time on it. 8:34.

Shoulders slumped in defeat, she made her way into the next room, and the next. There was nothing in either to encourage her. In one of the trauma rooms, she found one of the attending physicians and two of her fellow nurses, people she had known and worked with for years, slumped lifelessly on the floor around the gurney that held their patient.

Every last one of them was dead.

The situation in the hallway wasn't much better. Most of the patients who had been brought in too late to get a real bed had passed away in the hall. Even the raving old woman who had shouted Bible verses at Jo as she'd come in was now silent and still on her gurney, her sore-covered arm hanging limply through the metal rail. There wasn't even a clean sheet nearby with which to cover her.

She returned to the nurses station to check on Mike. She wouldn't have thought there was much more that could shock her on that morning, but she got a terribly familiar jolt when she knelt down to check his breathing and pulse and found both vital signs absent. In the time it had taken her to circle the ER and fail to save the only other living person she'd encountered, he, too, had slipped away, another countless victim to the virus that had taken over the hospital.

Letting his wrist droop to his chest, she felt the prickle of tears behind her eyes, as her former panic descended into despair. She sank all the way to the floor, letting the coolness of the tile seep through the seat of her scrubs. She was already shivering, but it had little to do with the cold. There was nothing else she could do, and as a nurse, there was nothing she hated more than feeling helpless.

Uninvited, thoughts of Luis entered her mind, the memory of sitting on the cold, tiled floor of her kitchen while her husband died in her arms. Even though she'd witnessed the same thing happen to far too many patients in the ER trauma room, even with a team of doctors and nurses working on them, she had always blamed herself for not being able to save him, or least keep him alive until the ambulance got there.

And now she wondered, was there no saving anyone this virus struck? Were they all doomed to die of it, every last person exposed? How long would it take for the symptoms to claim her, too?

Swiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she took a deep breath and forced herself to get up. She left the nurses station, where Mike lay, dead, but still warm, and wandered back down the hall. She came across the dead girl she'd found the crash cart near, still lying half-naked on the gurney, her small breasts pointing towards the open air. She looked only a few years older than Gabby, and Jo's heart twisted with agony as she looked at her. The girl was far past feeling,

but Jo felt for her, remembering how self-conscious teenage girls were about their bodies. Dead or not, it wasn't right to leave this girl exposed in the hallway.

There was no one else around to see her, no one living, at least, but still, it made Jo uncomfortable to leave her there, and so she wheeled the gurney towards the elevator. If she could not save her, the least she could do was take her down the morgue, where she could find something with which to cover her.

The elevator came unusually quickly, for there was no one else trying to ride it, and indeed, when it opened, it was empty. There was no elevator music playing, only eerie silence, as Jo pushed the gurney in. She pressed the button for the ground level and stared at the closed doors for the short ride down. She could not look at the dead girl next to her.

When the doors slid open again, she pushed the gurney into the hall. It was chilly down on this level; they kept the air conditioning cranked up high for the sake of the bodies. The air only got cooler as Jo entered the morgue. Her mouth fell open as she looked around in dismay. Every autopsy table, every drawer that was open, held a body. They were nearly identical in death: ashen skin, pocked with festering, purple-red lesions. All victims of the virus.

Several of the corpses had already been dissected for autopsy; their chest cavities were open wide, flaps of skin drawn back. But where was the medical examiner? Jo looked around and noticed a closed door on one side of the room. She hadn't spent much time down here, but guessed it led to an office. She strode across the room, taking care to avoid looking at any of the corpses, and knocked twice on the door. No answer. She knocked once more and waited a few seconds before tentatively turning the knob.

Opening the door, she found herself looking in on the medical examiner's office. It was typical of any doctor's office – well-stocked bookshelves, filing cabinets, a large desk with a computer, and a leather office chair... in which a man was slumped, facedown over his keyboard, as if he'd simply collapsed in the middle of typing a memo.

Jo rushed to him, knowing, from previous experience, that she was already too late. Indeed, the coroner was without a pulse, the heat already leaving his body. She sighed behind her mask, feeling even more desperate than before. But before she turned away, she noticed the cursor flashing on his computer monitor, where he had, indeed, been typing a memo of some sort. His findings on the effects of the virus, it seemed. Jo paused to read it, her eyes skimming over the text. Disturbing phrases popped out at her. *“... virus of unknown origin... effects primarily nervous and digestive systems, leading to cardiac and respiratory failure secondary to brain deterioration... causes high fever, skin lesions, vomiting, headache, seizures, leading to death...”*

On a sticky note placed on the desktop to the side of his keyboard, where his cold hand now rested, he'd jotted a few extra notes. These were the most jarring of all.

strain: unidentified

cause: unknown

incubation period: short! <10 hrs

transmission: airborne

mortality rate: ~100%

Trembling all over, Jo stumbled back, afraid, for a moment, that she would faint. She didn't faint, though. She regained her composure enough to scramble out of office. Leaving the girl she'd brought down with the other bodies, she ran for the elevator, and when its doors did not open instantly, she took the stairs. She welcomed the noise of her pounding feet echoing in the stairwell as she jogged up, and she didn't stop after one flight. She continued up a second flight, and then a third, bypassing both the ER and the surgical floor. Finally, panting, she stopped on the third story landing and hunched over, hands on her knees, to catch her breath. Then she pushed through the heavy door.

She was in the Neuro wing now, where patients with head trauma were admitted. As she entered the quiet corridor, Jo thought for sure she would find staff here who could help. No one with the virus should have been brought to this floor. But as she started down the hall, she quickly discovered she was wrong.

At first, she thought the lumps of hospital blue and sterile white were piles of discarded scrubs, tossed aside like soiled bed linen. But as she came closer, she recognized hair and shoes and realized they were people, doctors and nurses and custodians, slumped on the floor where they had collapsed and died. After checking for pulses on the first two she came to, she knew she did not need to check the others.

Fighting tears, she continued down the hall, checking patient rooms, on the off-chance she might find someone alive. But the sights and sounds were the same in every room: a patient or two, lifeless in bed, with EKG alarms wailing out the solitary tone that signaled cardiac arrest. Every heart monitor that was on showed a flatline, the numbers representing heart rate, blood pressure, breaths, and oxygen saturation reading zero.

There were no signs of life on this floor.

That was, until she reached the very last room. Thumping sounds attracted Jo's attention outside the room, and she ran to the doorway. But any last ounce of hope she'd held onto drained away when she looked in and discovered the source of the sounds: they were the product of the rhythmic convulsions of a blonde man in the midst of a seizure. She got close enough to his shaking bed to realize that she recognized him: he was the same man she had treated for a concussion and scalp laceration during her last night shift in the ER. Surely, he'd never

expected to enter the hospital with a bump on the head and succumb there to a virus that offered virtually no chance of survival.

Watching him convulse, his spittle foaming up in the corners of his mouth, she remembered Mike, and she couldn't stand it any longer. She turned and ran, ran almost blindly, until she slammed against the door through which she had come. She yanked it open and practically threw herself back into the stairwell, but once there, she stopped, clutching at her chest for breath. She could feel herself starting to hyperventilate. Shrinking back into the wall, she slid to the floor, bending her legs at the knees. There, she clutched her knees to her chest, hugging herself in a ball. And she rocked.

The motion evened out her hysterical breaths, and she released the emotion that had been building in her chest since she'd first set foot in the ER. The dam which had been holding back her tears broke, and out they poured, as she began to sob.

Eventually, the tears gave way to sniffles, and finally, nothing but her regular breathing to break the stifling silence of the stairwell. She sat there, on the landing, for much longer than needed, but what else was there to do? Where else was there to go? She dreaded the thought of checking another floor, and finding more bodies of people like her, hospital staff she recognized, but she could not go home. She feared the virus was on her now, in her, no matter the precautions she'd taken to protect herself. If she carried it home, she'd risk exposing others... most importantly, Gabby.

She would stay at the hospital, and if she fell ill, like the others, then she would die there, too.

Chapter 23

"I love you..."

Every time I thought of those words, my heart stopped. I had to sit on the ground to collect myself, and then I had to hold myself together.

I would never hear them again.

I would never feel my heart convulsing as I returned them. My heart was now a dead weight.

I would never laugh over a movie I'd seen hundreds of times ever again. Laughter sounded like a funerary bell.

Even the sound of my own name is hollow now. And I thought that I would never hear it again.

My weak, shaking hands would never hold anything again. Never rest lightly on his neck... Never clasp her hands in expectation... Never touch my father's cheek or my mother's stomach... Never hold my little sister on the day she was born...

My weak, shaking hands could only hold together my own weak, shaking body... and they weren't even very good at that...

Remembering that... remembering the "I love you" of the people I love snapped me into pieces...

And that was when I remembered that I was all alone... trying to heal my wounds with my own feeble strength... and failing.

Saturday, April 14, 2012
10:30 a.m.

Kayleigh's eyes flickered open lightly. A pale, eerie blue light flooded the room. She raised her head lightly to stare at the television, only to see the DVD screensaver. She shook her head with a laugh and nestled back into the bed.

She jumped up suddenly. Brushing her hands through her hair, her fingers caught on dried chunks. She took in a quick gasp, and that was when she noticed the utter stillness of the room. Her gasp and her heartbeat were the only things she heard.

She shook her head quickly and placed her hand on it to stop the onslaught of disorientation she was feeling.

"Saturday morning..." her voiced quivered. "Sammy would probably still be at Ricky's from last night... She'd come home later in one of his big sweatshirts with her hair all bunched up and her eyes rimmed with black... and I would laugh and say, 'Sammy... You look like a raccoon...'" A tiny, forced laugh escaped her lips. Kayleigh cringed at the strange sound before taking a deep breath.

"And Sammy would smile and say, 'Ricky always did have a soft spot for raccoons. And anyway, someday you'll come home and see me after letting Brad see you like this.' And I would blush and cringe a little at the thought... just like almost every Saturday morning..."

Tears began to stream down Kayleigh's face. "I should call Brad... I'll bet he's hurting..." She put her hand to her chest. The stillness of the room was betraying her confidence. "I'll see if Sammy wants Starbucks before I head over. I bet she's

on the mend from her twenty-four hour bug, and she'll want banana bread.”
Kayleigh began to smile to herself.

She pulled herself from the bed lightly and noted her clothing. Jeans... and the recruitment shirt she'd worn yesterday... Kayleigh frowned briefly before her eyes locked on the purple bedding. Her heart stopped once more.

Sammy's bed...

Kayleigh put her hand to her face while she tried to remember and tried to forget yesterday's events. Her head was spinning as she came to the realization that she had fallen asleep in Samantha's bed... because Samantha wasn't there?

Kayleigh shook her head. “No, because Sammy needed me here...” She ran her hand through the chunks in her hair once more before forcing herself to turn around.

She had spent the night curled up with Samantha. The bed was covered in the same chunks as Kayleigh's hair. There were also a few spots of residue similar to dried hair mousse nearest to Samantha's mouth.

Kayleigh clapped her hand to her face and began running through the signs of alcohol poisoning on default.

Pale skin. The skin was more than pale; it was almost listless... not to mention being covered in purple sores the color of the bed spread...

Passing out. She didn't seem to be awake... She could simply be asleep...

Vomiting. Kayleigh attempted to run her fingers through the chunks in her hair again.

Seizures. Kayleigh stared at the residue on Samantha's pillow and shook the memory from her mind.

Irregular breathing. Tears began to stream down Kayleigh's face once more. It was more than irregular... It was almost non-existent...

Kayleigh dried her tears, but they kept streaming down her face. “Detox... I've got to get Sammy to Detox...” Kayleigh stood and caught her hand on the edge of the bed before she fell to the ground. She supported herself as she tottered toward her desk, where her phone lay. She pulled it up and stared absently at the screen. “Sixteen missed calls...” Her voice was so low it barely interrupted the silence in the room.

She started to examine her missed calls, but stopped short when her phone began ringing. She picked it up hurriedly. “Brad!”

“Kayleigh...”

His voice was weak, but it really was his voice. A burst of relief washed over Kayleigh. Her tears kept streaming down her cheeks. It was a bittersweet mixture of fear, grief, worry, relief, and hope.

“You sound upset...”

One of Kayleigh’s breaths lodged in her throat. “Sammy needs to go to Detox...” she choked out quickly.

“Kayleigh...” He stopped momentarily.

“Brad?”

“You’re trying to distract yourself with a plausible lie. Samantha is sick... remember?”

“Brad...” Kayleigh stopped short. “Are you crying?”

“My Little Bro...” Brad started. It was hard not to notice that he was choking back tears, making his irregular breathing even more strained.

“Brad...”

“He tried to call the paramedics for both of us. No one answered. He stayed with me all night... even when he caught it too... and this morning...”

Kayleigh started sobbing. “Derek... not Derek too...” She hiccupped. “Sammy...”

“Get out of that house, Kayleigh. Call the paramedics, pray they answer, and then get out...”

“Where?”

“Come to me...”

“But if I catch it too... What if I already have it, Brad?”

“We’ll wait for the paramedics together...”

“Brad...”

“I don’t want to be alone...”

Kayleigh’s voice broke at that last request. “Okay... I’m coming...”

Kayleigh ran down the hall of the silent mansion. The only sound was her erratic breathing and the sounds of her keypad as she searched her recent call list. She focused her attention toward the stairs as she passed a few sisters slumped in the hallway. Their skin resembled Samantha's all too well. Right down to the purple sores and the lifeless skin tinted with chunks of vomit and spittle.

She shook the image out of her head and pushed herself down the stairs and out the door. As she was running down Greek Park Drive, she stared idly at the cars stopped in the middle of the road. Zack had been right yesterday; Orlando really was a ghost town.

Her phone finally connected. "You've reached the Jackson family – better known as Andrew, Kim, Kayleigh, and Chris. Leave a message with your name, number, and the family member you want to speak to. We'll get back to you soon." There was a short beep.

"Daddy! I'm sure you're asleep, but I wanted to let you know that I'm okay. There's the thing going around Orlando that I'm sure you've heard about, but don't worry about me, okay? I'll call you later... Tell Mama and Chris 'hi' for me. I love you all so much."

Kayleigh pulled her phone from her ear as she reached the Kappa Sigma house. The door was oddly ajar. She took in a breath as she pushed the door open and headed toward the stairs at the front. "Brad!"

She kept walking up the stairs. The mansion was also oddly quiet. "Brad!" She reached the top of the second flight of stairs and saw a brother leaning against the railing. His face covered with the same purple sores.

Kayleigh let out a small shriek and ran up to the third floor. "Brad!"

"Kayleigh..."

It was weak, but the voice was there. His voice was really there!

Tears were streaming down her face as she turned to the open door.

A small gasp escaped her lips as she saw Derek's body crumpled in the corner. Dried blood matted his hair. A small smear of blood was spread on the wall.

"Come here..." Brad's voice was notably weaker than it had been on the phone.

Kayleigh tiptoed toward the bed. All of her strength was fading quickly. She collapsed on the floor.

Brad ran his fingers over her head. "Kayleigh..."

“Your hand is wet...”

“I slammed it into the bed frame while I was sleeping... before I called you...”

Kayleigh took his wrist into her hand and ran a fallen cold compress over it. “It’s okay... I’ll take care of you now. I’m here... so let’s stay together until this passes.”

Brad gave her a small nod. “I’m so sorry...”

“You can’t help being sick. It isn’t your fault.” The blood was beginning to clot with the pressure from Kayleigh’s hands.

He closed his eyes lightly. “Kayleigh... I love you... always.”

A small smile spread across Kayleigh’s lips. “I...”

His hand started rattling within her grasp. Kayleigh looked up to see Brad’s torso thumping against his bed.

“Brad!”

Spittle began forming from within his mouth. A gagging sound emerged from his throat.

“Brad! Should I do CPR? CPR? I’ll call the paramedics!”

Kayleigh put her hands to his chest to start compressions, but his convulsing body knocked her into the table beside the bed. When she regained the strength to stand, the convulsing had stopped. Aside from her breathing, the room was silent, just like every other room.

“Brad?”

She reached her hand lightly to his neck. It was warm, but completely still.

“Brad...”

His weak voice was the only sound she could comprehend as it ran through her head. “*Kayleigh... I love you... always.*”

“BRAD!!!” His name turned into an incomprehensible scream. It shook the quiet of the looming mansion.

Her house... her sisters... Greek Park... Derek... Megan... Zack... Alison... Josh... Christian... Jamie... Matt...

Sammy... Sammy...

"I love you... always."

Brad...

Brad...

Adrenaline ran through Kayleigh's veins as her grief consumed her. Her body assumed the natural flight versus flight response. In the wake of a dangerous illness, one should run.

No matter who they were running from.

Kayleigh's body forced her to run. She ran away from Kappa Sigma, away from Tri Delta, away from Greek Park. She ran toward the university without stopping until her body succumbed under her. She fell to the ground as a car jerked to a stop behind her.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Why can't I die?

A door slammed shut. "Are you alive?"

She didn't respond.

Two feet stopped near her face. "You're... not covered in the sores..."

She remained silent again.

"And you are breathing..." The voice softened. "And bleeding..."

Kayleigh wearily pulled herself to her knees.

"I remember you... The girl with the office assistant."

"I love you... always."

Rather than face the pain again, Kayleigh's face became hard and cold.

"You're... not covered with sores either... Can you help me?"

"Help you?"

"He was convulsing... covered in those purple sores and bleeding. His voice was so small... and his fever was so high; his cheeks were flushed even when they were sallow..."

“I can’t help you...”

She managed to struggle to her feet. “You’re the only living person, and you can’t help me?! I’ll walk to the hospital, then! I’ll get the paramedics to answer my calls!”

He grabbed her shoulders. “There’s no point in me helping him! He’s dead! Everyone in this University is dead! Do you understand? There’s no use in being spoiled or irrational now!”

“Mr. Dorough, sir, you’re hurting me.” Her voice barely whimpered as she pulled herself away.

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and turned back to his car.

“Where?”

“There’s someone I have to see. You’re welcome to join me.”

Kayleigh hesitated and looked toward the campus.

“I’m the only living person you’ll find in the entire university.”

Kayleigh gave a slight nod and dragged her feet to the car door. She opened it slowly and slid in.

The drive seemed to fly by, despite Mr. Dorough weaving in and out of traffic.

“Where are we going, anyway?”

“My house...”

“Oh... Why? Do you need a change of clothes?”

“Not as much as you do.”

Kayleigh pursed her lips.

Mr. Dorough cringed at the expression. “I think you can appreciate this...”

Kayleigh turned to face him, her interest slightly piqued.

“Yesterday, I was supposed to spend some time with my son, Bartholomew...”

“He didn’t come to your dedication?”

“His mother and I are separating.”

“I’m sorry...”

“There’s no need to be.”

“So you’re going to your son now?”

“I’ll get you to a hospital after I grab him.”

“Oh...”

That was the last the two spoke. Kayleigh decided to ignore the drive, preferring to stare out the window. Mr. Dorrough didn’t seem like he wanted to talk more anyway.

Derek... Megan... Zack... Alison... Josh... Christian... Jamie... Matt...

Sammy... Sammy...

“I love you... always.”

Brad...

She closed her eyes as a few tears spilled on to her cheeks.

Brad...

When she opened her eyes, the car was parked in front of another mansion. She turned toward the house, wondering how long Mr. Dorrough had been gone.

It was at that moment that a man exited the house. He tore a small stack of papers as he walked back toward the car. The scraps from the papers scattered to the winds.

Mr. Dorrough gripped the handle of the car. His hand shook violently. His face was notably pale. He opened the door and sat in his seat for a few minutes.

“Mr. Dorrough?”

“It isn’t just the university...” His voice was quiet and muffled.

“What?”

“If there was a virus threatening your country, where would you go to get away from it?”

“Some other country...”

“But the airports are probably closed...” Mr. Dorough revved the engine, and the car lurched forward as it started to run according to the speedometer’s gage.

When they had reached the highway, Kayleigh finally caught her breath. “Mr. Dorough, where are we going?”

“As far away from Orlando as possible! But first, we have to stop at Cape Canaveral!”

Chapter 24

Control.

That was something I loved to have. It was something I possessed once, before everything went down. When it all happened, I lost any semblance of control, and I almost couldn’t handle it. Seeing others lose control... I’m used to that. Things not going my way... I can handle that too, as long as I’m able to control what happens next. But that day, I lost everything. My life, my soon-to-have-been ex-wife, my son... Barty... my son...

Losing control.

It never would have happened before. Never. And even though it happens all the time now, it still hasn’t gotten any easier.

**Saturday, April 14, 2012
2:00 p.m.**

Cape Canaveral was normally only an hour’s drive from Orlando, but they’d been on the road for an hour and a half. Just trying to get out of Orlando had caused most of the delay. It wasn’t that everyone else was trying to the same... It was that everyone else had already tried to get out, and had died in the process.

Cars clogged the streets, some parked neatly in the middle of lanes, others stalled on the shoulders or in the medians, and still more crumpled against guardrails, trees, telephone poles, or other cars they’d collided into when their drivers had become incapacitated. In trying to navigate through this mess, they’d seen the bodies, many of them slumped over steering wheels, others simply lying on the ground. And in the quiet houses and darkened buildings they’d driven past, there were surely more. Many more.

At last, they'd made it to the interstate, where the congestion had gradually thinned the further they got from the city. Now the open road stretched before Howard, not entirely clear, but with enough lanes to allow him to weave in and out of the stopped vehicles in his way. He stared straight ahead, eyes on the road, both hands on the steering wheel, completely focused on his task. He gripped the wheel so tightly, his knuckles were white, and the veins bulged out from the backs of his hands. He did not allow his mind to wander.

Every now and then, he snuck a glance at his companion. Beside him in the passenger seat, the girl, Kayleigh, stared out her window with as much determination as he watched the road. She stared without really seeing, he suspected. In her reflection in the side mirror, her red-rimmed eyes appeared glazed, unfocused.

Howard was glad he was the one driving. Not that he would have even considered letting a woman – a college girl, at that – drive his custom, amethyst pearl Lexus, but he embraced the concentration needed to plot a course through the obstacles that stood between them and the coast. The cruise control was off, and so was the GPS; he drove the old-fashioned way, flooring the gas and relying on road signs to tell him how much further they had to go and what exits to take.

They had no exact destination and no definite plans. The drive so far had been quiet, silence permeated only by the occasional snuffle from Kayleigh's side of the car. The sound of Howard's hard swallowing seem extra loud in his own ears, but he allowed no other noise to escape him. He had expected the sorority girl to be chattier, even in the hysterical state in which he'd found her, and had been relieved when she had calmed down and lapsed into silence. He was not one for small talk, except when business required it, and he certainly didn't want to talk about what he had seen in Orlando.

As the road signs indicated they were getting closer to Cape Canaveral, the unmoving traffic became more dense, and Howard was forced to slow down and concentrate even harder to navigate through it. He passed a convertible with its top down, a young couple slumped with their heads together in death, and steered around a stalled semi truck bearing the logo for Florida's Natural Orange Juice. He stayed on the causeway for as long as possible, until it merged into Astronaut Boulevard and became congested with the cars of those who had died in the midst of their desperation to flee. Then he searched for side streets clear enough to drive on. Any would do; as long as they kept heading east, they would eventually reach the coast.

"So... what's the plan?" Kayleigh asked, her voice cracking, as Howard passed a Circle K gas station and made a careful left onto a road called Harrison Avenue. Like in nearly every other American town, the side streets were named after the presidents. In this case, William Henry Harrison, whom Howard remembered only as the president who had died of a virus a mere month after his inauguration. It seemed a bad omen, but he didn't say this out loud.

Instead, he slowed to a stop in the middle of the road. Even though he knew it was unnecessary, he couldn't help but check the rearview mirror anxiously, in case there were any cars behind him. But of course, there weren't. None moving, anyway. He glanced briefly at Kayleigh and then into the mirror again. Speaking for the first time in the last hour, he admitted, "I don't know." When Kayleigh didn't reply, he elaborated, "I thought... I hoped that, maybe, it would be different here. You know, Cape Canaveral... it's on the coast, it's away from the mainland, and there's the air force base and the space center... I thought here, if anywhere, there would be some order. But..." He looked around helplessly, the last of his hope slipping away.

Kayleigh answered his thoughts. "It looks the same as Orlando did, huh?"

Howard nodded, his throat closing up again.

"So what are we going to do?"

Normally, Howard enjoyed being looked to for answers. He was a CEO, a natural-born leader. He liked to be in charge, to have control. He hated not having the answers.

"We'll look around," he decided after a pause, making up his answer on the spot. "See if we can find any other survivors. Gather some supplies. And then... we'll look for a boat."

"A boat?"

"Well, it's more practical than a plane, isn't it? Unless you have a pilot's license you haven't mentioned?"

A faint, humorless chuckle. "No."

"Okay, then. Neither do I, so flying's out, unless we happen to find a pilot still alive. Anyone can operate a boat, though, so we'll start there." Howard's mind worked ahead, imagining their next steps. "Travel by water will be easier than trying to drive, anyway. We'll probably have more luck heading down the coast. If the whole Florida coastline seems affected, we'll head to the Bahamas. It might not have spread to the islands."

Kayleigh nodded. "Good a plan as any, I guess," she said dully, shrugging, and sank lower in her seat. The dove gray leather made a noise that sounded like breaking wind as she repositioned herself, and before Howard could stop the thought from entering his mind, it did: *Barty would have laughed at that.*

He muffled the strangled cry that threatened to escape his throat by revving the engine, throwing the car back into drive. He pulled into an empty driveway and

backed out again, turning in the opposite direction. “There was a gas station back there,” he forced himself to explain, feeling Kayleigh’s questioning eyes upon him. It was difficult to keep his voice steady. “We should stock up before we go much further. We may not find another one before we reach the coast.”

“Oh,” said Kayleigh.

It seemed he was going to be the one making all the decisions, but that was fine with him. As long he could keep thinking ahead, he could prevent himself from thinking back. Back to Orlando. Back to the house he’d built for Bree and Bartholomew. He never wanted to go back there again, in person or in his mind.

The drive back to the station was short, the car silent once again. Kayleigh resumed her stare out the window, and, despite his best efforts to control them, Howard’s thoughts drifted back to his son. The son he had found lifeless within his mother’s arms, both covered in the horrific purple lesions, a mockery of his favorite color and the trademark on the plague that seemed to have consumed Florida. It was a relief when he finally parked the car in one of the gas stalls, and the two stepped out.

Kayleigh watched him questionably as he slid his charge card, more to get the pump working than out of concern for payment, and then pumped his own car with gas. “Why are you doing that if we’re taking a boat?”

“Just in case there are no boats. I don’t know what’s going on; I just want to be prepared,” he answered shortly. As he finished, the lights on the screen displaying the price and gallons being pumped flickered sporadically. He placed the pump on the holder with a shrug. “Weird.”

The two headed inside the station, the lights illuminating the store flickering as well in the same manner. A quick glance at the counter answered their silent questions as to any other life around other than themselves. A man was slumped over the cash register, lifeless. Howard reached for one of the “Green method” cloth bags and started filling it up with any food he could grab.

“Try to get stuff that won’t perish easily; we don’t know how long we’ll be on there. Dry foods, lots of water, jerky, stuff like that.”

She nodded and headed for the coolers, as the lights finally shut down completely around them, encasing them in an eerie darkness, despite the sunlight shining through the windows. Kayleigh shrieked in surprise. “Why is the power out?”

He didn’t want to answer. “No one left to keep it on, if the roads are any indication... How far has this gone?” He was panicking, not where his companion could see it, but he was all the same. She watched him carefully, gauging his reactions. Control – he needed to keep control of himself. He forced

his breathing to slow, to make himself relax. He could swear he felt his alarmingly high blood pressure finally take a dive back to normality.

Kayleigh nodded, wiping her eyes discreetly. He caught her gaze sneak down to her phone as she slipped it out of her pocket. Probably still trying to contact her family. He didn't quite blame her; he wondered if she was an out of state student. That would make it worse, he felt, the not knowing. The hopes and guessing that came from a lack of knowledge and fear for your loved ones. He looked down in his bag, before sweeping half the rack filled with various types of jerky inside. They'd need it later. He did the same for crackers, and even grabbed a second bag to fill with cans of those travel fruit cups.

He had no idea what was to come, but he had a hunch they'd both be thankful for this stuff later. Kayleigh came back to him after a few minutes, holding two bags filled with nothing but various water bottles. He nodded and led the way out of the convenience store.

"Wait!" she cried, making him turn sharply back towards her.

"What?"

"We should pay..."

"Kayleigh, he's dead; it won't do any good."

"Still, it doesn't feel right."

He rolled his eyes, not so much frustrated with her as with the hopelessness of the situation. It had hit him then. Money was worthless. Everything he worked for was worthless. Everything he had was gone. The realization slammed against his mind and shook him terribly. Howard set a bag down and reached for his wallet. He slapped a hundred dollar bill upon the counter, tucking it under a drink cup near the dead clerk's hand.

"There. Now let's go."

Howard stowed their supplies neatly in the trunk, and they piled back into the car. They turned once more down Harrison Avenue and continued east, hoping they would run into a port with a boat once they reached the seaboard. "If my sense of direction is correct, I believe both the Air Force base and Kennedy Space Center are to the north," Howard thought aloud as he drove. "I think we should follow the coast north first and check out both. If they're as deserted as the rest of Cape Canaveral, then we'll set a course southeast, toward the Bahamas."

Kayleigh didn't object. She was still staring out the window, and Howard wasn't entirely sure she'd comprehended a word he had said. No matter. He was talking more for himself, anyway.

Harrison Avenue stretched only a few blocks across the narrow width of the cape, but it took Howard another half an hour just to reach its end, due to the cars parked on both sides of the street and abandoned in the middle. Worse yet, there was not a port at the shore, only a stretch of beach.

Howard sighed in dismay. “See any boats?”

Kayleigh looked left, then right. “Nope. But I do see water. Where there’s an ocean, there’s gotta be a boat. We just have to find one.”

Howard looked doubtfully into his rearview mirror, begrudging the thought of turning around and trying another side street. But when he reached for the gearshift to put the car in reverse, Kayleigh’s hand clamped down on his.

“Forget driving; let’s just go on foot.”

“On foot?” Howard repeated skeptically.

“Sure, on the beach. We shouldn’t have to go far.” Kayleigh was already opening her car door as she spoke. She climbed out, slamming the door shut behind her, and Howard had no choice but to follow suit. “Should we take the supplies now, or come back for them?”

Howard sighed as he remembered the bags they’d stuffed full of food and water. “I suppose we should just take them with us. If we do find a boat, we’ll want to leave as quickly as possible. Coming back to the car would only delay us.”

Kayleigh nodded. “Okay. Pop the trunk.”

Howard did so, and they split the load. Kayleigh took most of the food, leaving Howard to carry the water. As they set off for the sand, Howard took one, lingering look over his shoulder at his purple Lexus. He felt deeply uncomfortable about leaving it behind, just parked in the street that way, but he supposed Kayleigh was right. It would be quicker to just walk until they found a boat. Surely, there would be a dock with one nearby.

Before stepping onto the beach, Kayleigh stopped, set down her load, and removed her shoes. “What are you doing?” Howard asked, watching her slip her feet out of a pair of platform sandals, which, he noticed for the first time, were probably the most ridiculous choice of footwear he could imagine on a girl he’d found running down a street.

“Like I’m gonna walk through sand in these? No, thank you! Besides, it’s more fun to walk barefoot through the sand and feel it squish in your toes, don’t you think?” She offered him a girlish smile.

Howard shuddered inwardly. He hated the feel of anything squishing between his toes, except perhaps the foam of a nice, hot bubble bath, or the three-hundred thread count linen of his favorite bedsheets. He left his dress shoes on as he waded after her through the sand.

They walked north along the shoreline for about ten minutes, lugging their burdens, before they spotted a dock jutting out into the water, with a small yacht anchored next to it. Kayleigh immediately picked up her pace, hurrying toward the boat with a new spring in her step. Howard dragged along behind, wincing at the gritty feeling beneath his socks from the sand that had filled his shoes.

When he finally reached the dock, Kayleigh was already on the boat. "It's perfect!" she shouted down from the deck. "Come on board!"

Feeling uncertain as to whether he would prefer this new, animated Kayleigh over the silent, sullen girl he'd driven there, Howard hauled his bags across the dock and stepped cautiously onto the yacht.

"Do you know how to drive this thing?" Kayleigh asked, as he set down the supplies and went to inspect the controls.

"It can't be too difficult," replied Howard with confidence. "We just need to find the key to start the engine..."

After half an hour of searching the yacht and knocking on the doors of the houses on the beach behind it, they gave up on finding the key. "We can find another boat instead," insisted Howard, and he and Kayleigh continued north on foot.

On the next decent boat they came to, another small cabin cruiser, they found the key tucked under the driver's seat. Praising his good fortune, Howard stuck it in the ignition and turned. The boat's engine grinded and turned over once, before finally revving to life. The deck began to vibrate beneath their feet. Kayleigh gave a cheer.

Howard reached for the throttle and suddenly swore under his breath. Kayleigh's smile disappeared. "What's wrong?"

"Look at the fuel gauge," Howard replied flatly.

Kayleigh looked. "It's almost on empty? Ugh! Are you telling me we need to go and get gas for it?"

"Gas or diesel... it won't matter, because we're not getting either with the power out."

"What do you mean?" Kayleigh cocked her head in confusion.

Howard felt impatient. “The gas pumps are powered by electricity,” he explained brusquely. “No power equals no pumping action, which means we can’t refuel.”

“Which means we’re up shit creek without a paddle,” Kayleigh added miserably. There was no humor in her voice, only despair. Howard could practically see the light of hope flicker and die in her eyes, which suddenly filled with tears.

In an instant, the Kayleigh who had briefly seemed to have forgotten the horrors of that morning was gone, replaced by a girl who went from weepy to hysterical. “This was stupid; this whole plan was stupid!” she cried. “We shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be here! I should be back on campus, with my sisters... with Brad. They need me! They’re sick!”

“They’re dead,” Howard said without emotion. “They’re all dead.”

“No they’re not! Don’t say that!” Kayleigh cried, pushing at his shoulders. “Don’t you ever say such a thing!” She was irrational now, and he knew better than to fight her. Yet he didn’t know what to say to comfort her, either. Howard was not a man on whom tears had much effect, nor was he one who knew how to console a crying woman. Bree had been more of a screamer than a crier.

“Control yourself,” he told Kayleigh, not sharply, but firmly. “Hysterics aren’t going to help the situation.”

Control... always, he fought for control. But the situation was far out of his control, and Kayleigh wouldn’t stop crying. Feeling helpless, and bewildered by the feeling, Howard shrank back and watched her sob.

Chapter 25

Reaper’s Sabbath... what a stupid name. Three guesses as to who was emo enough to come up with that one. I kept saying it didn’t make sense. First of all, I thought the Sabbath was Sunday. But they told me that, traditionally, the Sabbath was the seventh day. So Saturday. Okay then – I get that.

But Reaper’s Sabbath? That’s retarded. The Sabbath is a day of rest, right? Well, sure, everyone did “rest” on that day, if you’re going to use “rest” as a P.C. term for DIE. But the Grim Reaper? He sure didn’t rest. He had himself a heyday! At least for the morning. Maybe he rested in the afternoon, after everyone was dead. Like a siesta. Maybe we should have called it Reaper’s Siesta instead. Haha...

I’m not really laughing. I just can’t force myself to really write about what happened on that day. Everyone I know dying? Nope, not going there.

You know, if I survive long enough to grow up, I'm gonna be one majorly screwed up adult. Probably even more screwy than the one who coined the name Reaper's Sabbath.

Saturday, April 14, 2012

3:00 p.m.

Gabby stood on her knees in the center of the couch, one hand clutching the back of it for support, the other pulling the filmy drapes aside so she could see out the bay window. She had been in that position, watching the street outside her house, for close to half an hour now. In that time, she'd seen birds and bugs fly by, even a small, green anole crawling down the palm tree in the front yard, but no other movement. No people. No cars. No sign of her mother's white Escape.

Across the street, the neighbors' house was quiet and closed up, curtains drawn, blinds shut. Odd, considering the electricity had been out for hours now in Tampa. Gabby had opened the blinds in the kitchen to allow the natural light from the sun to stream in. The bay window offered plenty of afternoon sunlight to brighten the living room. She would have guessed her neighbors had gone out, to the movies or the mall, or, if those were also without power, maybe the beach. But both of their cars were there, parked side by side in the driveway. Yet she'd seen no sign of life from the house all day.

It wasn't just weird anymore. It was downright scary.

She hadn't been too concerned when she'd re-awoken mid-morning and found her alarm clock dark and numberless. On the coast of Florida, the power was often knocked out due to storms or the heat. Granted, it was sunny and seventy-something, but maybe a transformer had blown, or a line had fallen, or... something.

Her ideas of what that "something" could be had grown steadily more sinister as the day had progressed, dimly and quietly.

At first, she had wondered why no one had bothered to call and wish her a happy birthday. Sure, her friends were supposed to be coming over for her party that night, but she'd still been hoping for at least a text from Makayla. Or Colton... Wishful thinking, maybe. He probably didn't even know it was her birthday. A kiss didn't mean they were suddenly boyfriend and girlfriend.

But phone service was out, too. She'd discovered that tidbit when she had tried to call her mother around noon. Her phone still had power left, though it wouldn't for long with her charger dead, but she hadn't been able to get a signal or a connection. The land lines were down, as well. What had happened to take out the power and the phones on a clear, sunny day like this one?

She thought about the news report she'd seen yesterday, about the strange planes, about the threat of terrorism. She thought of the apparent emergency that had called her mother into work on her birthday. Had something happened? What was going on?

Gabby was afraid to leave her house, but staying cooped up there, watching out the window for her mother to come home and worrying when she didn't, was going to make her crazy. Already, her heart was racing with barely-controlled panic, and she felt clammy, almost shaky, the way she felt before she had to give a speech in English class, only worse. The more she thought about it, the worse it got. Her mind was getting carried away, and the rest of her couldn't stand it. She had to give herself something to do, something to keep her mind from thinking anymore.

Maybe she could ride her bike to the gas station at the edge of her neighborhood. She could ask the attendant there what was going on, and there was a pay phone she could try calling the hospital on, if it worked. And if it didn't, well, at least she might kill enough time for her mom to be home by the time she got back.

Her mind made up, she scrambled off the couch and ran to her bedroom. She put on shoes and stuffed the pockets of her shorts – in one went her house key and wallet, which contained about ten bucks of babysitting money; in the other, her cell phone, just in case she picked up a signal away from home. Then she locked up the house and went out into the garage to get her bike. The ten-speed, painted a glossy, electric blue with hot pink accents, had been the highlight of her tenth birthday. She wondered if there would be any big gifts for her this year. She hadn't asked for anything special.

She walked her bike out the back door and rode it over the grass to get to the sidewalk out front. Usually, she had to dodge joggers and little kids in strollers when she rode on the sidewalk, but today, the pavement was empty. The faint clicking of her bike chains as she pedaled seemed unusually noticeable, and Gabby realized it was because the rest of the world seemed unusually quiet. Bird chirped, insects buzzed, and trees rustled in the breeze, but there were no other human sounds. No lawnmowers roaring across the yards. No skateboards rumbling over the pavement. No children laughing as they played.

Gabby slowed to a stop and stuck out her toes to ground herself. She looked around, struck with the ominous realization that there was no one in sight. No one outside on this beautiful, spring afternoon. Absolutely no one, anywhere.

A part of her wanted to turn around and go back to hiding out in her house. She was frightened. But she convinced herself to keep going. She had to find out what was going on. Knowing couldn't be worse than not knowing, could it?

She began to pedal again, hard this time. She rose up off the seat and pedaled standing up to gain some momentum. Her bike whizzed down the sidewalk, bounced over a curb, and crossed the street without stopping for Gabby to look both ways. What was the point? The only cars on the streets were parked and unoccupied. No one was out driving, either.

She reached the gas station without encountering a single moving vehicle, let alone a moving person. There was only one car parked at the station, in a faraway parking space that told her it was probably the attendant. Well, at least *someone* was inside. She pulled her bicycle up to the door and leaned it against the building, not bothering to release the kickstand or lock it up. There was no one around to steal it, and besides, she hadn't thought to bring her bike lock.

A bell jingled overhead as Gabby pulled open the glass door and stepped inside. The station was dim, with only the natural sunlight streaming through the front wall of windows to brighten it. The large, fluorescent lights hanging overhead were dark. The air was warm and stale without the air conditioning blasting. It seemed the power outage had affected the entire neighborhood, at the very least.

Gabby looked around. There seemed to be no one in the station. Nobody browsing the snack aisles, or raiding the large drink coolers in the back. Even the counter was unmanned, with no attendant standing behind it. But there was a car parked outside. Surely, someone *had* to be here. Someone had to have opened up the station that morning, hadn't they? They would have locked up if they were leaving, wouldn't they?

Desperate for reassurance, desperate for human contact, desperate for answers, Gabby tiptoed to the counter. The small screens on all three cash registers were dark. Holding her breath, she pressed her body against the edge of the counter and rose up on her toes to peer over it. At the sight of a pair of legs lying on the floor, she gasped and jerked back, stumbling a few feet away from the counter.

She released her breath slowly, shuddering, and stood still for a moment, frozen, as she contemplated what to do. She didn't want to look again, afraid at what she might find, at what she might see, but she knew she wouldn't just walk away without looking. Without checking. What if the legs on the floor belonged to someone who was still alive and in need of her help? She pictured a man, stabbed, like her father had been, lying in a puddle of his own blood. Maybe the gas station had been held up. An armed robbery, like the one that had ruined her family. She never wanted to see a sight like that again, but if he was still alive... if she could help save him...

Her feet felt like blocks of cement, but she forced them to move forward. Her pulse raced in her throat, and she could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears as she crept nervously toward the counter again. Like the child she had been before she'd lost her father, Gabby knelt down alongside it and peeked timidly around, prepared to squeeze her eyes shut if the scene was gory.

There was no blood on the floor, and for that, she was grateful. It wasn't a man, either. It was a woman, not too old, probably early thirties, and she was lying on her back, still, very still. Beneath her red vest bearing the gas station's logo, the woman's chest was not rising. Gabby swallowed hard. She pulled her phone out of her pocket, flipped it open, and held it up hopefully.

Zero bars. Still no signal.

Gabby crammed the phone back into her pocket and inched closer to the motionless woman. She noticed the purplish sores all up and down the woman's pale arms. And then she caught sight of her face. Her face, its complexion gray, its features distorted by the sores, with chunks of congealed vomit on the chin and dried flecks of foamy spittle in the corners of the mouth.

It was enough to make Gabby gag, then retch, and it was all she could do not to toss her cookies then and there, behind the counter. Choking, crying out, she bolted in panic for the door. The bell jingled behind her as she scrambled onto her bike and raced away.

There was no one around to hear her crying as she pedaled across town, but Gabby desperately wished there was. She had to find someone, someone who knew what was going on and could help her, even if they could not help the woman. The woman was dead. If she hadn't known it before, Gabby had been sure of this when she'd seen her face. It was a face she wanted to erase from her mind, but she couldn't. It kept popping up again as she rode, without any idea where she was going.

Her absent-minded pedaling carried her to a different neighborhood, one almost as familiar to her as her own. She hardly realized it until she found herself dragging her toes on the sidewalk in front of her best friend's house. In the last year, the Deans had become like her second family, so Makayla's house seemed like a logical sanctuary.

Gabby wedged the kickstand out on her bike and left it standing in the driveway as she hurried up to the front stoop. She rang the bell, and when no one answered, she tried the doorknob, knowing Makayla's parents wouldn't mind if she let herself in. It turned, and so she opened the front door. The house was unusually quiet, but even in its stillness, there was a comfort there. It smelled like Makayla's house, where she'd slept over so many nights, a homey blend of scented candles and laundry detergent and the sawdusty smell of hamster bedding.

"Mak?" called Gabby, looking around. The living room was empty, the television off. The kitchen was also deserted, and the digital clocks on the microwave and oven were blank. No electricity here either. But were there people? In the

kitchen, Gabby opened the back door, which connected to the garage, and peeked out. Both cars were there. So their owners had to be there too.

Not finding anyone downstairs, Gabby wandered upstairs. She felt a little weird creeping around Makayla's house by herself, but she wanted to be caught by someone, even Makayla's brother. She would try Makayla's room first, though.

The door was partway closed, and the smell of the hamster cage grew stronger as she pushed it open. There was another smell, too, a smell that brought the face of the dead gas station attendant flashing back into her mind. Shuddering, Gabby went into the room. She saw a lump in Makayla's bed and wondered what her friend was doing sleeping in the middle of the afternoon, with her covers thrown over her head. Maybe her mom had made her take a nap before the slumber party.

"Makayla," she whispered, tiptoeing closer. "Mak, you awake?"

She poked the lump through the covers. The lump did not stir.

She prodded it again. Still no reaction.

Finally, she tore the covers off Makayla, announcing, "Rise and shine, Makay-" Gabby choked on her friend's name. She made a retching noise, like coughing and gagging at the same time, and then she began to scream. She screamed, and screamed, and screamed, as she looked down upon her best friend, lying dead in her bed and covered in purple sores, like the spots of her magenta, leopard-print pajamas.

This time, Gabby could not hold it back. She doubled over and vomited, right there on Makayla's pink carpet. She did not think of cleaning it up, did not see the need, for in the back of her mind, she knew Makayla's mom would not mind, *could not* mind, in fact, because she was dead in another room. They all were. Makayla's whole family, dead in this house. It was the only explanation for the house being so quiet, with both cars there.

Everyone, everywhere, was dead.

Gabby couldn't take any more. She was no longer curious. She could not bear to look in on the rest of the Dean family dead. Holding her breath, she yanked Makayla's covers back up and over her head, hiding her body once more, and then she turned and fled. She ran down the stairs, the first of her sobs bursting from her throat, and out into the sun. She straddled her bike once more, kicked up the kickstand, and started pedaling, though she hadn't the faintest clue as to where she might go next.

She looked dazedly up and down the street and thought of Brock, who lived somewhere nearby, and of Colton, who had kissed her on the beach two nights

ago. Brock and Colton, who were probably both dead in their own houses, whichever ones they were. Gabby did not want to find them.

The only place she could think to go, besides home, was the hospital, where her mother worked. It was her last hope; she had to find her mother. The hospital was several miles across town, further than Gabby had ever ridden or was allowed to ride, but she started to pedal feverishly, intent on getting there. She flew over curbs and straight through intersections without even looking for cars, throwing caution to the wind, because she knew there would be none. And she was right.

She was right, until she was startled by the sudden sound of screeching brakes, so startled that she toppled right off her bike and spilled onto the street, a mere few feet in front of the white Ford Escape that was skidding to a stop. She looked up in shock, and the driver's side door was already opening, and her mother's voice was screaming, "Gabrielle!!"

"Mom!" Gabby cried, scrambling up, not bothering to brush the gravel from her skinned knees. "Mama!!"

She ran for her mother, who was running towards her. Their bodies collided in a fierce hug, and Gabby collapsed into the relief of her mother's arms. She sobbed into Jo's shoulder, as Jo squeezed her in a tight embrace, stroking her back and whispering, "Oh Gabby... Gabby, thank God."

"Everyone's dead, Mama," Gabby finally found the voice to choke out. "Even... even Makayla."

"I know, sweetie... I know. I'm so sorry," her mother whispered, her own voice shaking. "I'm so thankful you're okay. I went home, and you weren't there... I panicked. I must have just missed you."

"I couldn't get a hold of you," Gabby sobbed. "I tried to call, but the phones are all dead."

"It's all right. I'm here now. We're together; that's what matters. We'll go somewhere safe, somewhere where there are still people who are well."

"Where? There's no one..." whispered Gabby, thinking again of the empty gas station, with the woman lying so still behind the counter.

Jo squeezed her shoulders. "I have a thought," she replied, guiding Gabby back to the SUV. "I may be wrong, but it's worth a try."

"Where?" Gabby sniffled, as they lifted her bike into the hatchback.

“MacDill... the Air Force base. If there’s anyone left alive in this city who knows what’s going on, they’ll be there.”

Chapter 26

Death.

That’s what everything comes down to doesn’t it? I know I’m not the type to dwell on it. I’m always the one who focuses upon the task at hand. I’m the one who focuses on what is to come, the one who fights to make sure we’re all prepared for everything. Basically, that’s who I was. That’s who I am. The military tends to breed that sort of thinking, make it become second nature in you.

So that’s who I am.

Here’s the problem with that: Nothing prepares you for death. Nothing. I don’t care how many lives you’ve taken in the line of duty, as I have. You could be a doctor or a nurse. I don’t care if you’re a mass murderer. No matter how many times you’ve seen death staring you in the face, nothing can prepare for that in the slightest way. And I don’t mean your own death; I mean the death of others. Whether it’s family, or friends, comrades, coworkers, whatever. Nothing can prepare you for that.

So when death fell upon everyone around me like a rancid waterfall, I wasn’t prepared.

None of us were.

None of us could be.

Saturday, April 14, 2012
4:15 p.m.

There were few of them left, and only a day had gone by. Kevin sighed as he ignored the rumbling of his stomach, looking up into the clear, blue sky. Everything was so quiet amongst those who remained. It unnerved him in ways he couldn’t really explain. There was a lot he couldn’t explain, and no one asked for answers anymore. He was the highest-ranking soldier left still breathing, and he had no clue how to handle that idea.

So many had died, and so few remained. It was something he kept thinking, but never spoke. Sam had died hours before, one of the latest to go. None of them

dared pull off the gas masks, though the problem of eating and such had occurred.

In the end, you couldn't put off death. It would come in some form. It was going to be to this plague or starvation. They had a drinking system attached, but even that couldn't last forever. Neither sounded all that pleasant. His thoughts went to Sam, and for a moment, he considered his now dead friend lucky. He didn't have to wait, to wonder; his end had already come. He didn't have to choose between a lack of food and an airborne disease being the cause of his demise. It had been chosen for him.

Freedom was overrated at times.

Kevin wanted to call Brian, to see if he was okay. Yet he decided not to; there was too much to do, too much to deal with when it came to both himself and his cousin. Brian had his family to care for; Kevin had to somehow keep order within the dwindling ranks of his base. He just wished he actually had a stronger faith, like his cousin. He wished he wasn't questioning God right then, wondering why He would will this upon them. Kevin wished he didn't doubt God's existence right then.

He'd tried his mother throughout the day when he could, and other members of the family all down in Kentucky. No answers. No one had returned the calls, and Kevin knew the worst had probably hit them, too. He wanted to be hopeful; he wanted to be a dreamer and see the best outcome he could. He couldn't. Kevin Richardson was a realist, a planner, a man who could face challenges head-on, and he had been ever since his father had died so many years before. It was what had landed him in his current position. It was what kept the tears from falling, even then, knowing his mother was likely dead. Knowing that half the country or more had joined her, seeing how it had ravaged his base, the entire east coast.

“Sir?”

He turned to see a young private, who went by the name of Justin Flakeland; he was around twenty-two years old and fairly new to the base. He heard the fear within the younger man's voice, saw it within the soldier's sharp, blue eyes, almost hidden behind the gas mask. “We... we put the bodies in piles, like you... like you ordered, Colonel.”

It had been up to him to decide how to dispose of the bodies. He'd wanted to show more respect to all who had fallen to what obviously and plainly had to be bioterrorism now. There were too many coincidences: the mysterious planes, the plague's city of origin, the rapidness with which it consumed lives. Somehow, the enemy had released a super-virus to destroy their biggest threat within the war.

For a moment, he envied those overseas and cursed the injury that had kept him there in the States. But only for a moment.

He had wanted to honor all the dead victims, so undeserving of their fate. But there were too many, and time was short. Kevin had to think of those who remained: the handful of men, who had managed to survive so far, thanks to the lockdown of the base and vigilance of the gas masks they all wore. To think of them, he knew that keeping the bodies till they could manage a proper burial was a biohazard he couldn't risk. Aside from the corpses still holding the virus, there were bacteria, bugs, the smell, and so many other complications to kill off the remaining residents of the MacDill Air Force Base. So, as early in the morning as 7:00 am, he had sent out the order of what to do with the earthly remains left behind.

There were so many bodies, so many to clean out. They could just leave; they could just leave everything to rot behind. Yet duty held him here; loyalty and pride forced him to stay and do what he had to do. It was what made him who he was, and he knew his father would be proud of him if he knew.

“Did you follow the procedure I laid out?” was all he said, though, amidst all these wandering thoughts he had.

Justin nodded, paling a bit at the thought. “Ready to go at your orders.”

Kevin followed him over to the first pile. It was a sickening image to behold. Bodies piled high, tossed carelessly atop one another. It had variety in race, women, children, faithful soldiers who served to the end, all similar in their glazed stares and the violet lesions that marked them. Now they were like rag dolls, tossed aside as if they were nothing more than forgotten toys, pushed along for something better. The smell that hit him was intense, even through the masks, but it wasn't of rotting bodies, not yet.

Within Kevin's hand was a small pack of matches, and the other five men who still lived surrounded the pile on all sides. A simple movement caught the match ablaze, and it was tossed into the pile. The gasoline-drenched corpses instantly came to life with the consuming fire. The heat was intense, and there they stood, around the first of several piles, all ready with fire extinguishers of every kind they had, ready to control the flames.

It was almost beautiful, in a haunting way.

And that thought was the thought that finally broke him. That was the thought that caused a single tear, unseen by all but himself, to slowly roll its way along Kevin's cheek, untouched and unnoticed by others, beneath his gas mask. It shouldn't be this way. Death wasn't supposed to be so consuming. This was an age where they prevented mass deaths from diseases like this.

The flames jumped and licked and bayed at their control so far. Part of him wanted it to get beyond them, to just take over the base. He'd have the excuse he wanted so desperately to leave. To search out Brian, the only remaining member of his family who may still be alive. Certainly, he was the last to talk to him sounding healthy. But even those chances were slim, because Brian had likely caught it from his wife and children, and died soon after.

He nodded to the others and walked away from the bonfire, unable to observe any longer. Walking away, his thoughts were scattered. His mind wanted to focus on everything, settle on nothing, and not think of the fact that death would soon be there to greet the rest of them.

"Mooooom, you're, like, pulling my arm off!" he heard someone cry, someone young, probably a teenager, given the whine. Kevin raised a thick brow in question. *What the hell?* Maybe he was hearing things.

"Everyone's probably dead here too," he heard the same voice say, soaked with cynical sarcasm. Definitely a teenager. The entire thought forced him to stop dead in his tracks at realizing someone else was alive. Kevin gathered his thoughts and turned to follow the source.

Someone else was alive.

That meant there was hope.

At the nearest entrance to the base, he was met by an older Hispanic woman. She was proud-looking, yet also had the look of someone who had dealt with many trials in her life and expected more to come. Beside her was a young girl, he guessed to be about twelve or thirteen. The two were obviously mother and daughter, and the younger one had fear in her eyes, trying to hide behind typical teenage defiance.

"Oh... thank God; I thought..." The mother shook her head, nodding sadly at the gas mask Kevin still wore. "My name's Jo. Everyone... everyone's..."

"Everyone kicked the bucket, so we came here to see if you knew what was going on."

"Gabby!"

"It's true!" She rolled her eyes and turned her back to Jo. Still, Kevin saw her wipe away the tears quickly, in hopes of being unseen, and saw the attitude for what it was: nothing more than a mask to protect her mother and help herself deal.

"My name's Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson. The... man left in charge. If you want, we can go to one of the bunkers; we have a generator, and you can get

comfortable. Our base... we..." He motioned to the bonfire of bodies, still burning strong. "It hit us, too... and so maybe, you can tell me what's going on outside the base."

Jo smiled with relief. "Alright."

It had been a couple hours, and Gabby, the teenager he had heard, was staring out at the latest makeshift, mass cremating pile. They were in a smaller room, and before them was the set-up for radio broadcasting, used in emergencies. It was a room seldom touched, because with television and satellite technology, who really needed to make an old-fashioned emergency broadcast these days?

After talking to Gabby's mother, Jo, and giving her some fresh clothing, Kevin had decided they couldn't be the only ones still alive. It seemed the two had been around the victims, yet managed not to catch it themselves. Kevin was amazed that Jo, given her exposure and job, was even alive. If she was alive, that meant others could be. That sole thought was what saved his sanity that night.

So they were going to reach out to anyone alive left to hear.

That was all they could do.

Kevin prayed it would be enough to save anyone still out within the chaos.

Chapter 27

I don't know what to say here.

I don't know how to describe that moment at the Cape. Don't get the wrong idea, I was with Howie (as I started calling him – I wasn't fond of Howard). But, I don't know. Once I regained my senses, and once I came back to reality, where everyone I loved was dead, I just took everything in.

I mean everything.

The truth, the quiet, the peace, all of it sunk in, and it took me a bit to really, I don't know, process it all. There was this weird peaceful feeling that came with all the death. Peace that came with the pain, the never-ending heartache of losing everyone around me. I still haven't stopped mourning them. But there was a sweet peace that came that day, and while it stayed, I loved it.

I haven't bothered trying to understand any of it. Why it happened, how it happened... I leave that for the others. I just try to focus on the fact that I'm alive.

I'm alive, and that's a miracle.

Right now, I guess that's enough.

Saturday, April 14, 2012

5:00 p.m.

“Kayleigh... Kayleigh... KAYLEIGH!” Howard shook her fiercely, hoping for an answer. For the past hour, she'd done nothing but cry hysterically. Then, suddenly, she had stopped and had been quiet since. She peered up at him and saw he was fearing that she had finally snapped completely. Admittedly, that would have been nice; it would have been easier. She could tell he was never one for comforting; he was never one to rely on others, but she could also see that the idea of being alone in a world where everyone else was dead frightened the hell out of him.

Kayleigh could see he needed her just as much as she needed him.

“YES! What! What, Howie!”

He blinked, staring at her. “What did you just call me?”

“Howie. It's better than Howard. Howard is too stuffy; how do you put up with that?”

He rolled his eyes, but was visibly relieved she was acting more normally and actually talking. Kayleigh gave a weak smile; she must have worried him more than she'd thought. “It is my name. Are you alright now?”

“Howie sounds better,” she replied, completely avoiding his question.

“Howard.”

“Still calling you Howie...”

He waved her off impatiently. “Forget it. But really, are you alright?”

She processed the question. Would she be okay ever again? Somehow, Kayleigh doubted it. Still, she nodded dutifully, noting that Howie, as she would now think of him and call him, needed her to say yes. He could handle a major crisis, but couldn't take emotional outbursts. How odd. “I need... I need a change of clothes.”

She looked down at what she was wearing. Skimpy pajamas, covered in dried vomit that, she sadly remembered, came from trying to take care of Sammy, of Bradley...

Her hair was covered still in chunks of half-digested food, for the same reason, and he nodded in agreement. "We can go back and check that yacht; it would have a bathroom for you to wash up in. Possibly clothes, too."

Kayleigh nodded and climbed out of the boat. "We can leave the supplies here. There's..."

She didn't continue her sentence aloud, but her mind completed it for her. *There's no one left alive to steal them.* She felt herself shudder instinctively. It didn't feel natural, to have a world without people. There was a peace about it, though, that she actually appreciated a bit. It was soothing, but unnatural. Yet there they were. The quiet, the calm beyond any they'd ever experienced before it hit, was all the confirmation they needed. Neither of them said anything for a moment, the thought still settling within their heads. Then Kayleigh stood, slowly climbing out of the boat, leaving her shoes inside. She glanced back at Howard. "You coming?"

"Yes, I'm coming," he replied after a minute, climbed out, and followed her along the beach.

The two walked in silence, much to Kayleigh's dismay. She could have used some simple chatter to distract her. She needed something simple to make her forget that her mother and father hadn't answered any calls. Neither had her grandparents. Something to make her forget the cruel fate she'd had, of waking up and finding all of her sorority sisters dead, pale, covered in vomit and lesions, not to mention the fraternity boys she'd come to love as brothers damned to the same end as well. Kayleigh craved for something to make her forget the horror of having her Bradley Lee die in her arms, just earlier that morning. Had it only been hours? Felt like years. His last words still echoed in her mind.

"Kayleigh... I love you... always."

"What should we do now?" she asked, begging inwardly for anything to break the silence as they walked along the beach. The waves could be heard crashing against the shore, with seagulls soaring overhead, but she needed human noise, talking, something. She couldn't take hearing Brad's words in her head anymore. Not now. Kayleigh would break down again, and she knew it. "After I get fixed up, I mean..."

Howard sighed. She guessed then that he, himself, wasn't sure anymore. They were an odd pair, to be sure, and neither was experienced in handling any sort of crisis that came even slightly close to their current situation. Howie was a rich

businessman, not the outdoorsy type, and she was a pampered, southern, sorority girl. Now they were forced to find a way to live on in a world without the comforts they'd both enjoyed. They couldn't find a boat with fuel, the power was down, and she didn't have a clue about what to do.

"I'm not sure yet. I want to just... drive. Find a place that hasn't been hit by this yet..."

"You think it's spread farther than Florida?" The two walked side by side, and Kayleigh forced herself to just enjoy the feel of warm sand beneath her feet.

"I don't know, but it took over the school; we saw it as we drove here. You can't get a hold of anyone in your family. The radio had nothing but static earlier... I think it has."

"So... there may not be a place to... go to?" She watched him, as the hope struggled to live inside her, and she waited anxiously for him to reply.

And so he lied. She knew he did, yet she took comfort in it anyway. "There will be. We lived; there's got to be some place that was missed. I don't know where it is, but it's got to be there."

"You think we'll be okay?"

"Yes, Kayleigh, I think we might be."

She smiled at Howie, slightly touched at how he tried to protect her within that bold, yet simple lie. Finally, they approached the yacht and slowly climbed aboard. The door was open, and she morbidly wondered if they'd find yet another body to add to the growing list of corpses they'd encountered.

She glanced back at Howie. He nodded at her calmly. "I'll stay on the deck." Peering in, Kayleigh went inside and found... well, she wasn't sure what to call it, per say, but she'd describe it as the "house" part of the yacht, anyway. She peered in and found a bedroom. She thought she saw something in the bed, but didn't wish to check. Heading further along, her eyes looked within another room, and with no sign of life, or of former life, she walked on in.

It was designed for a girl, and that was all she needed to know. Rummaging through the suitcase still sitting carelessly upon the bed, Kayleigh wondered if they had been trying to run from the disease. She wondered if they had tried to do what she and Howie had wanted to do, but died before they could.

Wrinkling her nose a bit at the style of the clothes, she shed hers and tried them on to see if they'd fit well enough to deal with for now. They were a bit too punk-styled for her, with the chains and rips all through not only the pants, but the shirt. Kayleigh figured they must have belonged to the rebellious teenager.

“She had no taste.” Her words felt odd in the air, stale and unwelcome. She stared at the clothes again. Yuck. Still, they fit, and that would do.

Back in the hall, she felt her spirits dip again. It was just so hard to stay upbeat with it all. Everything had its upsides. There was that calmness, the ability to actually hear nature, and she liked it, despite what had caused it. She wasn't alone; she did have Howie, who, in an odd way, was already trying to look out for her.

She was alive. She was alive, and to be blunt, she knew she may be only one of two who could say that. How was she still alive? Kayleigh had been surrounded by that illness, just like everyone else she knew. It was the same with Howie. By all rights, by all nature and science, she guessed the two of them should have caught it and died as well.

Yet they hadn't.

So there was the ultimate upside: they were alive, and the very fact they were seemed like a miracle.

Kayleigh gave a slight sigh as she continued her exploring. Tears sprang to her eyes when she remembered that she was alive, but that everyone she loved was not. But they wouldn't want her to break down completely. They wouldn't. She needed to control herself somehow, to make herself deal with it. She needed a lot of things. Before now, she had always relied on the current boyfriend to help her be strong. Always, she had been dependent on others, and now that was a luxury denied to her.

I need Sammy, I need Brad, I need Daddy, I need...

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by one simple action. She turned her head, and, in doing so, her eyes caught sight of the doorway to the bathroom. She smiled a bit to herself. A bathroom meant she'd be able to have a hot shower.

At that moment, the idea sounded like heaven.

Turned out a long shower was what she needed to set herself right. Her hair still wet, she tied it back in a ponytail with one of the hair ties she's discovered. She felt refreshed and able to actually try and do something now. Staring at herself in the mirror, she giggled at her appearance. Her pants were ripped all along the legs, featuring spikes and chains along them as well. Her shirt was a band shirt for a death metal band she'd always hated. A lone rip tore across her bosom, revealing some cleavage for no one to see. All she needed was some white makeup, black lipstick, and some eyeliner, and she'd be able to complete the look.

She started making her way back to the deck, where she could hear Howie calling out for her. He was excited and holding something small in his hands. She ran over to him, expecting more bad news, which wasn't surprising when one considered the day she'd had. It was a day that felt like decades had gone by, rather than hours.

"About time you came up; I've been waiting."

"Why? What is it?"

Howie turned the knob of what she finally realized was a radio, and the two leaned in to listen.

"Hello, this is Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson from MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. In this state of emergency, I need any survivors of the illness caused by bioterrorism to come to the base. I repeat, I urge any survivors to come to MacDill Air Force Base as soon as possible. We have everything needed to help you. If there are any survivors, come to MacDill Air Force Base."

She squealed, hugging Howie and, in turn, causing him to drop the radio overboard.

"KAYLEIGH!"

"It doesn't matter! We know where to go! We're not alone! Howie, we're not the only ones left alive! We'll be okay!" Kayleigh hugged him tighter. He chuckled, before shrugging out of her death-gripped hug.

"Alright, let's go back and get our supplies, just in case. Then we'll get in the car and go to the base."

"I'm so excited. We'll be okay!"

He gave her a gentle look. "Hopefully. Just, don't get too excited till we get there, okay?"

Nodding in reply, Kayleigh hurriedly climbed off the yacht. She ran along the beach, her feet splashing in the water as the waves came to meet them. They were going to be okay. For the first time all day, she felt like they were going to be okay.

Chapter 28

What do you do when the world goes to Hell in a hand basket? The world was already there, sure. But this was the end of the world. It was the end of everything. Some of the others will tell you it was “The Beginning” or some crock of shit like that. I know the truth, though. It was the end of all humanity as we knew it.

I was proven right on this by Sunday, but again, no one wants to admit that. Even when you're the last people on earth, you still want to remain blind if the truth is too painful to see. Even if the truth might save you, you'll choose the lies that damn you, if it means you can hold on to false hope a little bit longer.

Reaper's Sabbath – I named it that, because that's what it was. It was a final rest at the command of the Reaper. Death consumed everything. Death consumed all. Death forced everyone to rest in honor of the Reaper.

So what does someone do when they're alive at the end of the world?

Whatever the hell they want, cause nothing matters anymore. Why would it, when everyone is dead? Everyone you knew. Everyone you loved. Everyone you hated. Everyone who tried to help your fucked-up self. What does anything matter, if you're forever alone till the day you finally get to that eternal rest yourself?

Nothing mattered to me that day.

Nothing.

Saturday, April 14, 2012

5:45 p.m.

*“O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt.
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst (self-slaughter!) O God, God,
How (weary,) stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!”*

AJ was lying in bed, absorbed in his book as he read it aloud to himself. Ever since he'd read his first play in middle school, he'd been addicted to Shakespeare. Often, he could be found reading one of the many plays aloud to himself. At the moment, he was reading his worn-down copy of his favorite work of Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Perhaps once he was out of this place, he'd try acting, once he got sick of being the literal version of the starving artist.

“I'll make love to you... like you want me to...” He smiled at the song playing faintly in his ears. Despite what everyone thought, he really enjoyed Boys II Men.

Although he'd never tried that sort of music himself, found himself expressing his soul in the darker forms of music, he always considered the group one of his favorite bands. There was something soothing and soulful about their music that he really couldn't get enough of. He'd had his iPod play their songs on repeat all day. So he adjusted the volume and continued his reading.

For the past hour or so, he'd been just reading, and waiting for the time when he would be asked to "join the group" and do some so-called "socializing." The power was down everywhere else, had been since around eleven o'clock that morning. When it had gone down at the rehabilitation center, the caretakers had said they would handle it. But that was as they'd basically been hacking up a lung.

Personal sessions had been cancelled that day, due to the therapist, unsurprisingly, being too sick to meet with anyone. So, AJ got to have the day to himself, alone in his room, the way he liked it. Private time was rare, so he decided to enjoy it while he could. He spent the day painting, writing, reading, even playing a bit of music on his old, beat-up guitar that he still owned out of sentimental value. Even with all the weirdness that seemed to be going on, he still expected the group time with anyone still well enough to watch TV in the recreation room, since you didn't get one in your personal room.

And there was TV, because sure enough, the generators had kicked on, twenty minutes after the caretakers had reassured everyone. AJ had just decided to stay in his room. He was positive he would end up sick soon enough. When he was younger, he'd been the type to catch any bug that passed by him. He'd gotten sick easily, and although he'd become more resilient as an adult, it still didn't take a lot for him to get sick with something, compared to most individuals.

He marked his place, even though he almost knew the play by heart and, therefore, really didn't have to. He always read it as if it was his first time. Setting the book down, he sat up and stretched. Grabbing his sunglasses, he slipped them on and chanced a glance at the clock upon the nightstand next to his bed. He raised a brow at the time. Usually, they came by to bug him by no later than 4:30 in the afternoon.

He turned off his radio, first time he'd done so all day. He stood, and he listened.

For the first time in his life, AJ heard silence. Complete, true, and unwavering silence. He couldn't hear the other guys muttering as they walked down the hallway, or noise from the rec room television. He couldn't hear the counselors popping into rooms and checking on other residents, while spouting off some cheerful quote AJ felt was a crock.

Grabbing his paint kit, for no real reason other than just feeling like he needed it, AJ walked out of the room and was shocked to find the hallways empty. There was always someone. He made his way to the wall phone further down. Time to

call his mother and tell her he was blowing this joint. Something didn't feel right, and AJ always felt he should trust his instincts. His hand picked up the phone, and he found it to be dead.

“What a time not to have my damn cell phone.” Taken when he moved in, as so he couldn't attempt to get alcohol smuggled in. They had to use the land line, for that could be monitored. And, of course, that was dead. His gaze went to the recreation room just a few feet away, and he saw that everyone was dead right along with the phone. The counselors, the residents, the janitor, everyone.

AJ dropped the phone in shock. All of them looked the same: pale, spotted with purple sores, dried vomit covering their faces and the carpeted floor. Common sense told him they'd all died of the same disease. They had died maybe hours before, AJ guessed, but that was long enough. Was this the same thing that had been playing all over the news? Stepping forward, he reached for the remote and took it from a dead man's hand.

The TV played nothing but static.

AJ was a lot of things. He was an addict, he was suffering from depression, he was blunt, he was harsh... but he wasn't stupid. There was news of a disease spreading and everyone dying up north. Suddenly, the news was down, the power was down, and everyone around him was dead. Whatever had hit up there had crashed down in Florida and killed them all. For all AJ knew, he could be the last man left alive.

“Fuck this; I'm getting the hell out of here.”

He ran. He ran out of the residency and onto the road. The place looked like the nuclear holocaust had happened or something. Cars crashed into each other all over the road, in the field, into trees. Everything was a silent chaos. As silent outside as it had been inside. He clutched his art set to his chest as a substitute security blanket.

I need a drink, he thought. I really, really need a drink. And a hit. I need a hit. But first, a drink.

AJ continued running down the road, as a breeze blew into his face, spreading the stench of death to him faster than it would have gotten to him otherwise. His feet carried him as he picked up his pace, trying to run from the horrors even his mentally disturbed mind couldn't have fathomed till now. Suddenly, the urge for cocaine that he'd been fighting the past ten days came rushing back to him. The taste of alcohol burned in his mind as he begged for it then. He wanted it.

He passed so many bodies along the road. Bodies on the ground, bodies in cars, on benches, on the counters in stores, leaning against open doors. Bodies that stared up at something that he couldn't see. Corpses were everywhere, littering

the areas around him carelessly. AJ actually envied them. He'd tried to end it so many times, had come close once. He'd always failed, yet everyone else in the world seemed to die without even trying. Something about that didn't seem fair.

Finally, after running for so long, with thoughts only of satisfying the addiction he'd been fighting pointlessly, he came upon an old-styled tavern, welcoming him with open arms.

He knew he shouldn't. He knew his mother would be upset if she knew. But his mother was dead. Of that, AJ was certain. If she wasn't, she would have come for him once the chaos started. No matter how old he was or how much he'd hurt her, she would have still come to save her only son. She hadn't come, hadn't called the residency, and that said it all. The only thing that would have stopped her was death. Somewhere inside, he felt she was gone.

He walked inside the tavern. So what did it matter anymore? Who cared if he was an addict? Everyone was dead, so the way he saw it, all bets were off.

He groaned hours later. His head pounded as he lifted it up from the bar counter. AJ rubbed his eyes and put on the sunglasses he had set on the counter earlier. He had the migraine of a lifetime. Various open bottles of alcohol were sitting before him, many empty, others only half-empty. The barkeep was on the floor on the other side, dead like everyone else. He glanced at the time, before remembering the power was out everywhere.

"Guess my tolerance went down since I went dry..." he murmured to himself, too unnerved with the neverending quiet. His head pounded in response, and he regretted vocalizing his thoughts. Maybe the quiet did have a benefit at the moment. Rubbing his eyes again, he finally looked around enough to actually reabsorb his surroundings.

How long had he been passed out? The last thing AJ remembered was going in and mixing himself every drink imaginable, not giving a damn if the alcohol was warm or not. He'd fix himself a drink, down it, mix himself another one, down it, and had kept repeating the process till he'd fallen into oblivion.

It was dark out. The tavern was almost pitch black, and the only light was the one the moon provided to him. AJ sighed. He didn't know what to do next. He wanted a hit, but where the hell was he going to track down cocaine?

"I picked a hell of a time to try dropping this shit," he muttered, as he stumbled his way out of the bar. He wasn't sure what his plan was. Maybe he'd walk along the road till he found a car he felt like hotwiring. After his head stopped pounding, anyway. He kept walking down the road and processed his actions. He knew he shouldn't have done it; it wasted all that effort in getting sober, and,

dead or not, his mother would be upset with him. She was the reason he had tried to stay dry in the first place.

He vowed silently not to do it again. AJ knew, in the grand scheme, nothing mattered anymore, if it ever had. He'd always thought nothing mattered and felt this chaos proved him right. Still, he'd keep to his promise, in honor of his mom, the one woman who had believed in him and never stopped.

His thoughts paused when he saw brights glaring at him further up the road. Brights. That meant a moving car, and that meant someone other than him was alive. He could care less who it was; he just needed someone who was actually still alive by some chance like himself.

"HEY!" he screamed, trying to wave the car down and get into view. "HEY!"

Once he got a good look beyond the blinding headlights, he saw it was a well-kept purple Lexus being driven, and there were two people inside, a well-dressed businessman and a young, punk-styled woman. The car slowed and pulled up beside him.

"Hey, man..." AJ lifted up his shades again. It pained his eyes and increased his headache, but he did it anyway. "I thought no one was alive..."

"I'm Kayleigh, and this is Howie-"

"Howard," the well-dressed man said. AJ found him to be a bit too stuffy.

"Howie. And we're on our way to the Air Force base in Tampa. There are survivors there." She grinned happily, full of hope AJ knew would slowly kill her once she found it to be false.

"Mind if I bum a ride with you?"

His eyes were filled with contempt for AJ, but Howie nodded. "Get in."

Chapter 29

I remember reading the Little House on the Prairie books when I was a kid. I had the whole box set of the paperbacks, which sit now on the shelves of my classroom library, dog-eared and falling apart and collecting dust, I'm sure. There are no children left to read them. It's a shame... when we left school for spring break, my Amanda was almost done with "These Happy Golden Years." She'll never be able to finish...

Anyway... I remember reading those books and trying to imagine what it must be like to live in isolation on the prairie, a whole day's travel from any town, hundreds of miles from the only place I'd known as home, with only my family for company. No electricity, no running water, few toys, and lots of work. It sounded impossibly hard, and when I really thought about that, it made me appreciate the comparatively easy life I lived.

I was a tomboy as a kid, but never the outdoorsy type as an adult. I was content indoors, with my books and my movies and my computer. I loved the show Survivor, but not even for a million dollars would I have wanted to rough it for thirty-nine days, away from everything and everyone I knew.

I never asked for this, but here I am, playing the ultimate game of Survivor. The days have started to blur together, but according to our calculations, it's Day 40. If I were on Survivor, I'd be a millionaire by now. Ha. I wish this would turn out to be some crazy, epic reality show... one big joke on us all, that everyone I know was in on. Sounds like something FOX would have greenlighted, doesn't it? I wish...

So much for a million dollars. Money is meaningless now. Most things are. All that matters is our survival, me and these people who have become like my family. Here we are, living in isolation, hundreds of miles from home, with only each other for company. Our lives are more precious than ever. Nothing about them is easy anymore.

Saturday, April 14, 2012
9:00 p.m.

It was dark and quiet inside the Elliott house. Gretchen, the lone occupant, lay curled on the couch in her shorts and camisole. It had gotten stuffy in the house with all the windows shut and no air conditioning, since the power had been out all day. Near her on the coffee table lay a flashlight, her cell phone, a carton of melted ice cream, and a glass of lukewarm wine.

When she'd realized the power wasn't coming back on, Gretchen had decided she might as well indulge in what would go bad before it did. She'd eaten as much of the ice cream as she could before it turned to soup, for once not worrying about her weight or the havoc it might wreak on her digestive system. She'd opened the wine while it was still chilled, though she had never been much of a wine drinker. Shawn had brought the bottle home for Valentine's Day, but they'd ended up drinking wine coolers instead.

Now the bottle of wine was half gone, and Gretchen was half drunk, which suited her just fine. The effects of the alcohol made it easier to relax, to sleep, to empty her mind of worry and let it go blank and numb. She'd been drifting in and out

for a couple of hours now, pulling herself out of a groggy haze just long enough to check her phone.

The battery would last two more days, at least, so for now, the phone still beamed her the time. But service had been down all day. She kept checking for bars in different locations around the house, but it was no use. The phone was as good as dead. She and Shawn didn't have a land line, but she supposed those were down, too, along with the power.

Everything was dead. And from the sound of it, *everyone* was dead, too.

Shawn had left her a message in the night. A much deeper sleeper than he was, she'd slept right through it and awoken in the morning to find it on her voicemail.

"Gretch, it's me. I hope you get this message; I'm not sure how much longer we'll have phone service. The power's already out in Baltimore; we're running off back-up generators here at the base." Her husband's voice dropped to a hush, and he spoke rapidly, as if he were afraid of being overheard. *"The situation's gotten worse. People are dying, and we're no closer to finding an antidote. I'm worried we're already too late. Whatever this thing is, it seems to be a hundred percent lethal."*

A pause; he seemed to realize he'd said too much and backtracked. *"Listen... I'm not telling you this to scare you; I don't want you to worry about me. I'm keeping myself safe, and I want you to stay safe too. Stay inside, like I told you, and wait for me. If we don't make a breakthrough in the next twenty-four hours, I'm coming home to get you."*

Another pause, perhaps to make sure she'd understood. Then he added, *"At some point, self-preservation becomes the priority. Remember that. I love you. See you soon."*

The message cut off there. Gretchen had listened to it a dozen times since; she knew it by heart. *"If we don't make a breakthrough in the next twenty-four, I'm coming home to get you."* She checked the time again. Just after nine p.m. Eighteen hours since he'd left the voicemail. At what time would he give up and decide to leave? And with the east coast crippled by illness, how long would it take him to make it home?

If he gave it the full twenty-four hours, he wouldn't leave until early morning. But if he'd been up all day, maybe he'd get some sleep first. And if he couldn't fly, if the airports were down, he'd have to travel by car. Any way she sliced it, she couldn't expect him until tomorrow, likely late.

All day, as she'd sat and watched the hours tick by, Gretchen had tried to rationalize with herself this way, telling herself there was no reason to worry yet. She'd give Shawn another day, maybe two, before she'd worry about him. Not

that she would need to. He'd be home, like he'd promised, or if he did make a breakthrough, he'd find a way to send word to her, knowing her tendency to overthink things. Exactly like she was doing then. But trying to rationalize her fear away wasn't very effective. She still worried.

The worst part, she realized, was the lack of contact. She'd tried to call Shawn back immediately after listening to his voicemail, but by then, her cell signal was already gone. Service had been down all day, as she guessed it was up north, too. She couldn't call Shawn in Maryland any more than she could call her family in Indiana. She couldn't even call her friends from school, who were her only real friends in Atlanta. The isolation, the lonely feeling of being cut-off from everyone she loved, was terrifying.

In the modern age of technology, she'd never been more than a phone call away from her family and friends. Now, without a working phone, without the internet, without electricity of any kind, she understood what it must have been like to have lived before all those things were invented. She imagined she was a pioneer bride, alone on the prairie, cooped up in her soddie while her husband was away, fearful of wild animal attacks and Indian raids and all the calamities that could possibly keep her man from coming back home to her.

This reverie carried her away from the dark, empty house for a few moments, but then she was back, lonely and anxious as ever. Still, it gave her a thought. "Maybe I'll try reading again," she said aloud. There was no one around to hear her talking to herself, and the sound of her voice – the sound of anything, really, besides her own uneasy breathing – was oddly comforting.

She had tried reading throughout the day, but all she had to choose from were the books on her shelves, books she had already read, and none of them had held her attention. Now she went to the bookshelves again, searched for a moment, and then pulled down a tattered paperback, one of the oldest on the shelves. It was her mother's favorite book, an old pioneer romance called "A Lantern in Her Hand," and she'd borrowed it once in her young adulthood and never remembered to return it, taking it with her as she moved around the country with Shawn. It panged her heart to flip through the yellowed pages and think of her mother, but she carried it back to her spot on the couch and settled down with her flashlight to read.

It took her three tries to get through the first page. Try as she might, she could not focus. Her mind kept wandering. She couldn't shut off her own thoughts long enough to put herself into the story. Sighing, she closed the book, not bothering to mark her place. She was only on the page two.

She got up from the couch and paced around the living room a few times before making her way to the front door. She did not open it, but instead leaned close, peeking out the small pane of glass in its center. She could see outside, into the street. The streetlights were dark, as were all the houses. No porch lights were

on, no lamps lit. She didn't even notice the faint glow of a flashlight or flickering of a candle in any of the windows of the houses across the street.

The only source of light to illuminate the dark night was the moon. It was full, and its glow beamed blue-white light down onto the street, casting shadows of the trees and lampposts. Among these, she could see the lumpy shape of something lying on the sidewalk. The something was a someone, her neighbor. She didn't know his name, only his face, which she'd smiled at when she'd seen him jog by from time to time. He'd been lying there, dead, since she'd gotten up that morning and first looked out. She knew he was not alone. There were no others on the street, not that she could see, but she was sure there were behind closed doors, filling the beds of the dark houses across the street and on either side. With nothing else to do, she'd been looking out all day, like the guy in that movie *Rear Window*, and she'd seen no signs of human life. Not one.

Maybe her other neighbors were just doing the same thing she was: hiding. But with no curtains moving, no lights flickering, no doors cracked open for impatient dogs to go out, she suspected there was a more sinister reason for the stillness in her neighborhood. It didn't ease her fears any.

Reluctantly, she backed away from the door and returned to her book, clicking the flashlight back on. She forced herself to concentrate this time, saying every word aloud in her head, trying to picture the descriptions and actions in the words, those and nothing more. She sipped at her wine between pages, and eventually, she began to relax again and let the story draw her in.

Gradually, her eyelids grew heavy, and her head nodded forward, towards her book. Yawning, she set the book aside and turned off her flashlight. It was nearly pitch black in the house, with only the faint glow of her cell phone and the moonlight through the windows to see by. Of all the things that scared her, though, the dark was not one. She padded to her bedroom, relying on memory and feel to avoid running into things, and crawled into bed.

As she lay curled beneath the top sheet, hugging a pillow, she savored the fuzzy feeling in her head from all the wine and how it seemed to absorb all her thoughts before they could go on too long. Unable to stay on any one train of thought for more than a few seconds, she quickly drifted off and was asleep within minutes. Dark, silent, and still, her house joined the others on the block.

Chapter 30

I'm sure everyone knew this saying...

"You never know what you have, until it's gone."

Everyone knew that one, or some variation of it.

But did anyone, before Infernal Friday, or even before Reaper's Sabbath, truly understand what it meant? Did anyone really see how true that saying actually is?

Somehow, I strongly doubt it.

I'm not saying people didn't know grief, loss, and the pain that comes with losing something or someone. Of course everyone did. I'm not saying they didn't. What I'm saying is... oh hell, sometimes I'm not sure what I'm saying. I talk big, act so sure of myself, but I'm not. I just try not to let anyone see that.

People knew loss... but what about the fear? The fear that comes when you personally see civilization as you knew it crumbling down around you? The panic, at realizing you might be the only person left alive, at knowing you may truly be alone for the rest of your days.

Lastly, the agonizing regret. Regret, at all the sacrifices you made. Friends, relationships, family, everything you pushed aside, now gone for good... for something that was suddenly worthless.

So I know people before didn't know the meaning behind that saying. It's a good thing; they were blessed not to. Believe me.

But I do know. We all do, those of us left, know now.

I just wish I didn't.

Saturday, April 14, 2012

10:15 p.m.

“Hello? Hello? Dad, come on, it's Riley; answer the phone!” She slammed her phone shut and sped down the quiet, abandoned highways. She didn't want to take a good look outside her window. She didn't want to see what she knew she would at that point. It was a dark night, despite the full moon shining above her. All the lights were gone, and she had to drive with her brights on, just to make sure she wasn't going to crash into anything.

It was colder than normal for an April evening, but Riley knew that wasn't why she'd started shivering. Still, as she pulled up to a stop sign, she tugged down the sleeves of her hooded sweatshirt. Her eyes drifted towards the rearview mirror, even though she knew she shouldn't let them.

“It’s not worth looking at. Don’t torture yourself...” she scolded herself sternly, but her eyes wandered to the windows again rebelliously. Riley couldn’t stop staring.

Cars were haphazardly scattered along the roads. All throughout her drive, she’d been forced to drive around them. Inside, if she looked hard enough, she could see the bodies of people who had succumbed to the disease that had rapidly spread around. There were too many bodies for the morgues to keep up with, even if people weren’t too sick to run them.

Part of her wondered why they had attempted driving to begin with. But as soon as that question entered her head, the answer followed. They were trying to outrun the virus, trying to get to a hospital that wasn’t falling apart. With the media blackouts, how would most of them have known that it was like that up north, too? And if it had hit them so soon after it spread through the northeastern US, surely it would have hit the rest of the country soon enough. But they had still tried, and Riley was there to see their final resting places upon the road.

She hadn’t been awake for long. After a long night getting footage at the hospital, she had gone back to her apartment to crash as the sun rose and slept till about eight in the evening. She hadn’t meant to, as the report was supposed to air earlier in the day. However, when she’d tried to call the station, she’d received no answers. She had tried calling her boss, her coworkers, and nothing.

Her father had called while she was at the hospital last night, at least. And she’d held on to that shred of hope that he was still okay. *“Riley Anne Blake, you worry too much. You should know by now your old man can handle himself. You sound just like your mother used to...”* But she kept asking herself, had he been hiding it from her so she wouldn’t worry? Or had he really been all right when he’d called her?

After an hour of attempting calls to work, her friends, and her family, she’d decided to head out, after grabbing a bag of chips. Much to her annoyance, she’d found the power to be out as well, which meant no cooking. She’d kept trying to reach her father’s cell phone, a gift from her to bring him up into the twenty-first century. He hadn’t answered, so she was making the drive out to the house, feeling there was no room for brushing off concern at this point.

“Keep yourself together, Ri. It...it’s not as bad as it seems...” she repeated to herself again and again, in a hushed tone. She could feel the panic rising. What if it had hit her family? As busy as she kept herself, as isolated as her life was, due to her own career goals, she still relied on her family to keep her grounded. She still managed to call every weekend to check on her brothers, on her father, on her nieces and nephews. Even though she rarely saw them because she was always working, she always kept them on the fringes of her life, if nothing else.

She flipped open her phone again, having forgotten her Bluetooth at home. She called the number once again, desperate for some type of answer.

“Dad? It’s me again. Look, I’m just really worried. I know I probably do sound like Mom, but just... call me back. I love you...bye.” It hurt to think of her mother, even so many years after her death. She was told she looked just like her, that she had her determination, and that she worried like she had. Riley didn’t know if it was true or her father’s wishful thinking, but she didn’t like being told that all the same. She loved her mother, but being told those things just reminded her that she was gone.

“I should visit her...” she murmured, suddenly feeling the need to visit her mother’s grave, something she hadn’t done in years. Riley just had the urge for the slight comfort visiting and talking to the tombstone gave her.

She weaved through the messy roads, and the sight grew more gruesome, the further she drove. Bodies were lying out upon the sides of the roads, people whom she guessed had tried walking once the roads started getting jammed. The roads were getting worse; she was starting to have to drive along the sides and ignore the occasional bump, trying to also ignore what she knew it was.

Before long, she pulled up to the familiar place she had once called home. She parked and climbed out, trying fiercely to get her heart to stop beating so wildly in her chest. Taking in a deep breath, she started walking towards the house. Her gaze caught sight of a familiar car. Tommy’s car. Her baby brother’s car. She ran over to it, thinking maybe he’d pulled up moments before she had.

Maybe he knew if everyone was okay. She knocked on the window, peered inside, and her voice caught in her throat before she could utter even one single word.

He was slumped over the steering wheel, his blonde hair matted to his forehead, his blue eyes open and unblinking, staring at something beyond her now. His skin was covered in purple lesions, and she knew she didn’t have to open the door to see the truth. Her brother was dead.

She stood there, frozen by the realization. If Tommy had died out here, that meant he had been either coming or going. If he had been going...

Riley bolted for the front door, not caring if she got sick. If she was going to, she knew that night filming at the hospital was what was going to doom her anyway. She burst through the door, not bothering to knock. Her dad could yell at her, and she’d be thrilled.

“Dad?! Hello?! Chase... Randy... Nate... anyone hear me?!”

She saw the silhouettes, illuminated by the moonlight coming through the bay window. Bodies that didn’t move. Bodies that she knew belonged to members of

her family. She could check, she could find out who, which members. Yet to Riley, it didn't matter. She knew one of them was her father, that the others were some of her brothers, and that the rest of her family was dead as well, even if not here. They were dead. Everyone was dead.

That was when the tears finally began to fall.

An hour passed, and it found her driving down the road again, aimlessly. She didn't understand it. Any of it. She liked finding the truth; she liked knowing things. If she didn't, she wouldn't be a journalist. Yet nothing would come to her, nothing to help her understand it all. Although her family was technically religious, technically Catholic, Riley had never found herself truly a devout follower, growing up. But then, seeing all this, she found herself questioning God, wondering what she did to earn such salvation.

Or was it really damnation?

Riley pulled out her small camera, uncaring if she crashed her car then. She'd do anything to distract herself, anything to stop the questions pounding her brain. Besides, she had just lost her entire family in one swift stroke. Would it matter anymore if she died, too? With one hand, she aimed it at herself, while the other navigated the car down the road.

"I'm... I'm filming this just in case I'm not alone. For someone to find. This is in case in the end I don't make it, though right now, it looks like I will. I won't assume anything right now."

She sniffed, willing the tears to stop. They had been coming since she found the bodies. Bodies... not her family, just empty shells. It seemed easier to think of them like that. But she had to stop crying. She had to film this, just in case, so someone who came upon this mess, clueless, would know what had happened.

"I... I don't know how it happened. I don't know why. I just know some virus swept the eastern half of the country, maybe the rest of it, too. It's killed everyone. I haven't found anyone alive yet. Everyone's dead. My family, my friends, my coworkers... everyone."

She pulled off to the side of the road. Riley deep down knew she still didn't want to die. No matter what depressed thoughts were plaguing her right then. Riley's trademark determination flared in fury at even considering giving up and dying. How could she even give credence to such a thought? However, she knew if she kept driving like she was, she'd crash. She sighed, keeping the camera on her. She could see the college and the hospital not too far in the distance. Maybe tomorrow, she'd see if anyone was alive there. She pointed the camera outside the Jeep's window, filming all the bodies scattered upon the ground.

“People were trying to outrun the illness. No one knew what was happening. People panicked... It spread so quickly, killed so quickly. No one could figure out what it was, why it spread here. No one knew how to cure it; hell, did anyone have time to even try?”

She aimed the camera back at herself, feeling oddly like she was doing a bad imitation of that movie, *The Blair Witch Project*. “What I don’t get... what I don’t understand is, why didn’t I get it? I walked through the hospital, surrounded by the virus. Why didn’t I get it? Why didn’t I die?”

She turned the camera off, lying down across her front seat. Suddenly, Riley felt exhausted, drained emotionally. She didn’t bother with the idea of driving back to her apartment. Why should she? She bet everyone was dead there, too. She felt the urge to drive as far as she could tomorrow, escape this hell and find out if it had happened everywhere. Tonight, though, she would sleep.

Staring out the window, she could feel the tears come again. Everyone was gone, and she had no answers as to why.

“Mom... why didn’t I die, too?”

PART III: DAY OF UNHOLY RESURRECTION

Chapter 31

Darkness came over the whole land... Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “... My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33-34)

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. ... It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. (Luke 23:46, 54)

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb... but when they went in, they did not find the body. ... The men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (Luke 24:1-7)

Sunday, April 15, 2012
12:00 a.m.

Brian could not be sure what woke him up at midnight, but later, he would guess it was a creak from upstairs. Just the house settling, he might have thought. But he didn't remember thinking that.

What he did remember was sitting up, looking around in confusion, and wondering what he was doing on the living room couch. Usually, when he dozed off there, it was during a game, or maybe one of the twins' cartoon movies. But the TV was off. The room was dark and empty. It was the middle of the night. Some husbands were banished to a night on the couch when their wives were upset with them. But he and Leighanne didn't have that kind of a marriage. They rarely fought, and when they did, they never went to bed angry. It was sort of a pact they'd made as newlyweds, and they'd managed to keep it for eight years now, he and Leighanne...

Leighanne.

All of a sudden, Brian froze. His breath caught in his throat. His heart seemed to stop, mid-beat.

Leighanne.

Brooke. Bonnie.

The last twenty-four hours crashed through the wall his groggy mind seemed to have built, and he remembered everything. First Bonnie had died, and then Brooke, and then Leighanne. His girls... his beautiful girls, all dead in their beds upstairs. A strangled noise escaped his throat, as he buried his face in his hands. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes and felt moisture well against them. He bit down on his bottom lip, struggling to hold himself together. It was a battle he'd fought – and lost – all day.

He couldn't believe an entire day had passed. In some ways, it had been the longest day of his life, and unquestionably the worst. In others, it seemed to have passed in a blur, hazy and dreamlike, as if it were some epic nightmare from which he might soon wake up. But though he'd drifted off into restless fits of sleep and awoken several times, the reality had always come back into sharp, unforgiving focus.

His family... his entire family... dead.

They'd been dead for some twenty hours, and normally, by now, he'd have called his family, and Leighanne's, and started making funeral plans. He'd performed enough funeral services, counseled enough grieving families, to know how that worked.

But although time had passed, the world seemed to have stopped, and it wasn't just Brian's grief that made it feel that way. The power was out, and the phones

were down, and even before that, no one had answered his calls anyway. Not the paramedics, or the coroner, or the police. Not his parents or Leighanne's, not his brother or Leighanne's sisters. No one had answered, and so no one had come to take care of the bodies, or of Brian. He'd been utterly alone in the house with his dead wife and daughters for almost a full day, and there was no one around to notice or to care.

Something truly horrific had happened, and its effects seemed to extend far beyond the walls of the Littrell house. How far, Brian did not know, but he was beginning to fear the worst. The rest of his family, spread along the east coast from Kentucky to Florida... were they gone, too? Was he the only one left?

It was midnight, but Brian was suddenly wide awake with worry, wondering what to do. He couldn't lie around in this house for much longer. Something had to be done. If there was no one to take care of his family, then he would. He would have to. He couldn't just leave them lying there in their beds to rot. They deserved much more than that, a proper burial and funeral, at the very least.

He struggled to his feet, grabbed his flashlight, and paced a circle around the living room before making his way toward the stairs. He heard a creak as he started up, not from the stairs, but from somewhere overhead. *Just the house settling*, he thought. He remembered thinking it that time.

He passed the closed door to the twins' room and stopped outside his own. He took a deep breath before turning the knob. When he entered the room, he shut off his flashlight, not wanting to look just yet, but the fragmented moonbeams streaming through the window blinds provided enough light for him to see the shape of his wife, lying on her back, as he'd left her, in the center of their bed. He flicked the flashlight on again as he went to the night table on his side of the bed and opened the drawer to retrieve his Bible. Then he sank down into the armchair in the corner of the room, the Bible in his lap, and aimed his light at its worn, leather cover.

Brian owned several Bibles, one from his Confirmation into the church as a teenager, another from his graduation from Bible college, one a gift from his congregation, which he used during his sermons, but of all of them, this was his favorite. It was the one he kept at his bedside and read from before turning in at night. Its pages were dog-eared, its spine creased from being cracked open so many times. It had belonged to his mother, hers since her own childhood, and she had read to him from it when he was a child, and prayed over it in his hospital room, when he was five years old and seemingly on his deathbed. She had passed it on to him a few years after that, and though still very much a child, Brian had listened in earnest as she'd explained its significance to him. *"Take care of it,"* she'd told him, *"but use it. It'll give you strength."* And he had, and so had it.

Now he opened it slowly and turned not to the twenty-third Psalm, the most classic of funeral readings, but to First Corinthians. He would do two separate services, he decided then, one for his wife and one for his daughters. For his daughters, he would read from Ecclesiastes, the passage that begins, "*For everything there is a season...*" But for his wife, for Leighanne, no passage fit better than First Corinthians, chapter thirteen, verses four through eight.

Though he turned to this passage, faintly highlighted by his mother in her young adulthood, Brian did not need his flashlight to read the words. He did need to read the words at all. He knew them by heart, had recited them at countless wedding ceremonies and heard them spoken at his own. He turned his light now onto Leighanne, and when the ring of golden light encircled her face, brightening the gray pallor of death, washing out the lesions of disease, she looked somehow beautiful again.

The light wavered in his unsteady hand, and his voice shook as he cleared his throat and began, "Love is patient... Love is kind... Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude." He paused, swallowing hard, and then he continued thickly, "It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." As he found strength in the familiar words, so did his voice, and it was clear and steady as he finished with conviction. "It bears all things... believes all things... hopes all things... endures all things. Love... never ends."

He drew in a breath and held it for a few seconds before releasing it slowly. Then he stood, closing the Bible in his hand, and crossed the room to the bed. He set the flashlight down on the mattress, still on, and the circle of light it projected onto the wall behind the bed brightened the room enough for him to see. He leaned down and kissed his wife's dry, cracked lips. "I love you," he whispered, and he sank to his knees beside the bed, clasping his hands together, squeezing his eyes shut. Poised in prayer, he began to recite the twenty-third Psalm by heart.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."

The mattress creaked, but Brian assumed it was just his elbows, bearing down, and continued, "For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me..."

The bed moved again, and this time, Brian opened his eyes and looked up.

Leighanne was looking back at him.

He gasped and rocked back on his heels, blinking in shock. Surely, his tired eyes were just playing tricks on him. He looked again. No... he wasn't just seeing

things. Her eyes were open. Only they didn't look like her eyes. Even in the dim light, he could see that they were vacant and cloudy, no longer blue. He looked away with a shudder and released the breath that had caught in his throat.

Just a spasm of some sort. Nothing to get upset over. He swallowed hard and forced himself to look back, extending his thumb and forefinger to close her eyes again. He wanted to remember them the way they had been in life: vivid blue, like the sky on a clear day, sparkling along with her smile. A lump of sadness clogged his throat once more, as he realized he would never see her smile again.

He reached out to touch her face...

In a violent thrash of covers, he saw her arm fly up off the bed. Her hand, stiff and hooked like claws, latched onto his wrist in a grip that was shockingly strong. He cried out in disbelief and horror as his dead wife raised her head from the pillows, an animalistic growl expelling from her chest. Instinctively, he tried to pull away, as her vice-like grip wrenched his arm towards her mouth, which was wide open, her teeth bared. He struggled and finally yanked away from her grasp, falling backwards with the force of the pull.

He got quickly to his hands and knees, then scrambled to his feet. He wasn't able to think clearly, as adrenaline took over his body, but somewhere in the back of his mind, the voice of reason seemed to say, *This is a nightmare. This has to be a nightmare. Wake up! Why won't you wake up?*

He hesitated just long enough to see Leighanne stumble out of bed, lurching toward him with her arms outstretched, fingers splayed, and then he ducked into the bathroom, slamming the door shut in her face. His clammy fingers fumbled with the lock, slipping off the brass several times before finally securing it, effectively barricading himself in.

Gasping for breath, more out of shock than exertion, he staggered back and sat down hard on the toilet seat. He doubled over, putting his head between his knees, and tried to collect his thoughts. *This can't be real*, he thought, but even as the words formed in his mind, he could hear fists beating senselessly on the door, long fingernails scratching at the wood.

With his head down, his ragged breathing sounded extra loud, and even his heartbeat was amplified in his ears, drumming out the erratic cadence of raw terror. The bathroom was pitch black, but for the faint glimmer of moonlight through the beveled glass of the lone window. He'd left his flashlight behind in the bedroom, yet somehow, incredibly, his Bible was still clutched in his left hand. He squeezed it, feeling the girth of its pages between his fingers.

Then he stood, on shaky legs, shoved the Bible into the waistband of his pants, and faced the locked door. He could still hear what had been his wife pawing at

the other side like an animal, trying to claw her way in. He wasn't sure what to call her now, but that... creature... out there was not Leighanne.

What exactly she was, he would wonder later. At the moment, the more immediate question in his mind was, *What do I do now?*

The door rattled on its hinges as her hands thumped against it. If she kept at it, he feared she'd force the lock, or maybe even beat the door down. And if she managed to get in, what then?

He looked around wildly. There was the window... should he try to escape out of it? He was on the second floor and terrified of heights. How would he get down? He'd worry about that later, he decided. He could already hear the wood of the door starting to splinter, and if he didn't make an escape route for himself, he'd have to face whatever was behind it.

With the burst of strength only adrenaline can provide, he wrenched the towel bar out of the wall. Screws clattered to the floor. He held the bar in his hand like a sledge hammer. It wasn't nearly as heavy, but it was high-quality brass. It would be enough to break the window glass if he used the right force. He choked up on his grip and brought the bar back, over his head. With a guttural cry, he swung it with all his might, down and through the window.

The cloudy glass exploded outward, showering the roof below. As it did, the bathroom door banged inward. Brian turned in shock to find that she'd succeeded in breaking it apart. Her slack face showed no expression, triumph or otherwise, and she did not hesitate before staggering into the room, tripping over part of the door. Brian saw a splintered piece of wood tear into her bare leg and winced, but when he looked again, the gaping slash across her skin was bloodless.

He gulped, tightening his grip on the towel bar once more. There was no time to squeeze out the window. He reacted instinctively, and when she came at him, he swung. The bar caught her under the chin, throwing her head back with a sickening clang as it ricocheted off her jaw. She stumbled backward, but didn't fall, her head rebounding quickly. He swung again, this time connecting with the side of her face. The force was enough to send her head spinning as far as it would go, but not enough to take her down. Again, she lunged at him, and this time, he used the bar like a stake, thrusting it forward with a jabbing motion, instead of a swing.

He'd meant to hit her chest, but at the last minute, she crouched, like a cat preparing to spring, and his aim proved high. The end of the bar soared into her face, plunging straight through one of her eye sockets. The force of his motion sank it so far through her head, he felt the resistance as it bumped against the back of her skull.

He let out a choked cry of horror and revulsion and immediately let go. Without his leverage holding her upright, she toppled backwards and fell with a tremendous crash as her dead weight hit the wood-strewn floor, the towel bar still protruding from her right eye. She twitched once and then went completely still.

Retching, Brian fell to his knees in front of the toilet and tore up the seat. Doubling over, he vomited into the bowl, again and again. Finally, only dry heaves racked his body, and eventually, those died away, leaving him weak and trembling. Somehow, he found the will to climb back to his feet, if only so that he could get out of the room and away from the desecrated remains of what had once been his wife.

He found he was afraid to go back into the bedroom, back through the house, and so he climbed out the window instead. He barely felt the shards of broken glass cut into the soles of his bare feet as he hit the roof of the back porch, nor did he feel the usual fear of heights squeeze his heart. He felt numb, utterly numb, and the adrenaline coursing through his system made him both reckless and brave. He padded across the rooftop, knelt at the gutter, and lowered himself over the edge, climbing swiftly down the trellis he had built for Leighanne along one side of the porch. It cracked and started to splinter beneath his weight, but it managed to hold him until he could safely jump down.

He skidded on the dew-soaked grass that cushioned his landing, his feet nearly sliding out from under him. He got his balance and paused to look around, beginning to collect himself. The night was cool and silent, but for the rustle of wind in the trees and the low hum of crickets. He crept around the side of the house, pausing every few steps to listen, his senses heightened to their full capacity. In the front yard, he looked up and down his street, but saw nothing. Deep down, he knew there was no one left to help him. His neighbors' houses had been dark and quiet all day.

His only option was to get away, as far as he could go. He wasn't going to stay here. He couldn't. But that would mean going back into the house for his car keys...

It ashamed him to be afraid, afraid of setting foot in his own house, afraid of...

Of what?

Deep down, he knew, but he couldn't bring himself to articulate what that last fear was. He felt sure he'd killed what had once been Leighanne, if "killed" was the proper word for it, but another worry nagged at the back of his mind.

He would just have to face it. He couldn't stand out here on the front lawn, waiting and wondering, worrying about what else might come for him. He sprung into action, ducking back into the house through the front door, which

he'd thankfully left unlocked, because... well, who had he needed to lock it from? As far as he could tell, the rest of his neighborhood had met the same fate as his family.

The same fate...? With a shudder, he wondered how true that would prove to be.

He hurried about in the house, keeping to the downstairs, collecting his keys, wallet, and an extra flashlight. He tucked his phone into his pocket, too, just in case, and put on shoes. He was wearing only a pair of pajama pants and a gray tanktop, now blood-spattered, but he was not about to go back up to the bedroom to change. He grabbed a windbreaker from the front hall closet and threw that on over the sleeveless shirt.

He was standing in the kitchen, just about to go out into the garage, where both cars were parked, and put up the door manually, when he heard a familiar creak from upstairs. This wasn't just the house settling. He knew this sound all too well, was used to hearing it every morning as he helped Leighanne with breakfast.

It was the sound of footsteps on the landing.

Brian froze, torn between running on to the garage and never looking back, or going to look. A part of him didn't want to see, didn't want to know, but he had to. He had to know.

Instinctively, he looked about for something with which to arm himself. His gaze fell to rest on the wooden knife rack, which held Leighanne's expensive set of cooking knives erect, handles up, in increasing size from the smallest paring knife to the large meat cleaver. With a sick feeling in his gut, he reached for the meat cleaver.

He held it behind his back as he tiptoed across the kitchen floor. In view of the stairs, he stopped. Feeling faint, he stared.

There, on the staircase, stood his two little girls in their brightly-colored pajamas, their blonde hair tangled from sleep. At least they looked like his little girls... at first. But as they slouched down the steps towards him, moving in a strange, stiff-legged way, he could see that they weren't his daughters at all. Their dead, gray skin and eyes gave them a ghostly appearance, though he was quite sure they were solid, as the woman upstairs had been. They didn't smile, didn't speak; their faces were utterly blank and expressionless.

But they sensed his presence.

He knew it in the way their shuffling feet picked up their pace, as they shambled awkwardly down the remaining stairs, their arms flailing into each other as they reached out for him. Brian took a few tentative steps back, trying to brace himself for what he was about to do. For what he knew he *must* do.

“Lord, forgive me,” he whispered, and he closed his eyes briefly.

After that, he shut his thoughts off. What happened next was pure reaction. When he opened his eyes, they were lurching towards him, dragging their toes on the hardwood floor. The creature which had been Brooke pushed ahead of Bonnie, and when she was within an arm’s length of him, Brian whipped the meat cleaver out from behind his back and slashed the air. The sharp, silver blade cut through more than just air, and Brian felt the spray of blood as something heavy hit the floor. The seven-year-old body of his daughter, the body he had helped to create, collapsed.

Its twin staggered over it, unfeeling, unnoticed, its cloudy, bulging eyes fixated on Brian. For the second time, he raised the cleaver. For the second time, he shut his eyes and swung. His aim was true, and he cringed as he felt the blade meet its target. It sunk in deep before the resistance became too much, and the handle slipped from his hand. His eyes flew open just in time to see Bonnie’s body fall, Leighanne’s giant meat cleaver embedded in her small skull.

He spun away before she hit the floor, and when he heard the sick thump she made against the hardwood, the kind of thump that had always brought him running in a panic to see which twin was hurt, he dropped to his hands and knees and began to retch again, though there was nothing left to bring up.

It took him several tries to get up, for the strength had left his arms and legs, which were shaking too uncontrollably to support him. Finally, he managed to climb to his feet, though he hung on to the wall for support as he dragged himself back into the kitchen. Later, he would not remember gathering up the few possessions he had collected, or cranking up the garage door, or even backing the car out of the drive, but somehow, he did all of these things. Autopilot. He was acting on autopilot.

When the shock wore off, when he eventually came back into his right mind, Brian found himself behind the wheel of his car, weaving slowly down the freeway. How long he’d been driving, he didn’t know. How he’d gotten out of Marietta, he didn’t recall. The highway was scattered with cars, some parked on the shoulder, others stalled or crashed in the middle of lanes. Now that he was aware again, he welcomed the obstacles, welcomed the need to concentrate on the road. He could not bring himself to think of what he’d seen and done at home.

He put down the windows, letting the night wind whip through the car and lift up his hair. He hoped it would waft the stench of death and blood from his clothes. He flicked on the interior light and saw that he was covered with it.

Then he saw the Bible, his mother’s Bible, resting on the seat next to him. He didn’t remember that he’d still had it wedged in his pants when he’d left, that it

had been pressed up against his back the entire time, but at some point, maybe when he'd first gotten into the car, he had pulled it out and set it there. He looked at it now, and for the first time in his life, he felt not comfort or strength, but revulsion.

"Where were You?" he croaked, his voice hoarse and bitter. "Where were You when I asked You to bring Your children home and watch over their souls? It's all I asked, and where were You? You weren't there. You weren't there. You don't exist..."

He picked up the Bible, felt its weight in his hand, and thought about how much meaning he had once found in it. He had set out to live his life by this book. And for what?

Nothing.

It was meaningless. Everything in it, everything he'd ever believed in, was a lie. His life, as he'd known it, had been nothing but a lie.

"You're dead," he whispered, holding the Bible up to the window, letting the wind rustle its tattered pages. "If You ever did exist, You're dead now. Just like everyone else. Dead to me... dead to the world. You're dead!"

He held the sacred book, the heirloom from his mother, once his most valued possession, up to his chest. Then, with one, sharp flick of the wrist, he flung it out the window. He watched as it bounced into the gravel on the shoulder and then out of sight, shrouded by the darkness. Then he floored the accelerator and sped on down the freeway, never looking back.

Chapter 32

*"It's close to midnight, and something evil's lurking in the dark.
Under the moonlight, you see a sight that almost stops your heart.
You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it.
You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes.
You're paralyzed..."*

*"Darkness falls across the land. The midnight hour is close at hand.
Creatures crawl in search of blood to terrorize y'all's neighborhood..."*

*"And though you fight to stay alive, your body starts to shiver,
For no mere mortal can resist the evil of the thriller..."*

For anyone reading this who doesn't know where those quotes come from, you're completely uneducated in music. Maybe you came after 4/15, though, so I'll educate you. Those are part of the lyrics of one of the most genius songs in pop music history. (Before 4/15 ended it and made us start over, anyway. I don't use the other name; Brian is the one who uses it the most. It's too long – 4/15 is easier.)

But back to the song... The song is "Thriller," sung by the most infamous Michael Jackson. He had a lot of hits, but damn nothing ever topped "Thriller," though I gotta say "Billie Jean" came close. That's a whole 'nother can of worms though.

So why am I discussing "Thriller"? Good question. It's because on the night of 4/15, I woke up to a horribly bad imitation of the 80s music video that changed music indefinitely. There were armies of the undead, but there was no dancing, there was no music, and the 80s version of Michael Jackson was nowhere to be found.

The worst thing was, unlike watching it on the internet (or on TV when it got aired around Halloween)... I couldn't shut it off. It was horrific; it was real, yet...

I still heard the song playing in my head the entire time.

Funny what shock can do to a person, isn't it?

Sunday, April 15, 2012

3:33 a.m.

There wasn't anything that could have woken him up, he later realized, when thinking back on that day. There was no one to disturb his peaceful rest, no touches to jolt him out of sleep, no poking or prodding. He wondered, later, what could have woken him up and never found a truly rational explanation. But awoken he did. His blue eyes shot open and absorbed the stark, white lighting in his room.

Nick looked to the TV, but it wasn't working. There was no noise, except for the standard beeping of the monitors next to him. He groaned as he slowly rose in his hospital bed and took a good look around for the first time in two days. He didn't remember much of the past weekend. The last crystal clear memory he had was of getting into a stupid bar fight when he was getting drunk. After that, it was a mixture of fuzzy images and memories of sleeping on and off in the hospital for two days straight.

He glanced at the other bed in his room and saw that his "roommate" was sleeping, so he tried to stay quiet. Nick was curious why he couldn't hear

anything except the monitors, but wasn't terribly bothered by it. Staring at the cords hooked to him, Nick ripped out his IV, not needing it anymore, but wincing at the slight pain it caused. Following along came the other wires, pasted along his chest to monitor him. Hopefully, it would get someone's attention and bring them down there quicker. He stretched again and got off his bed, wanting to do anything but lie down. It was the cool air hitting his behind which reminded him that all he was wearing was a hospital gown. With a swift tug that carried the curtain around his bed for privacy, he decided to hunt down his real clothes.

Spotting them in a bag beside his bed, he happily grabbed them and changed. Maybe he could find a way to finally check out of there. He wasn't sure how bad his injury was, but he felt fine now. Surely, they'd be okay with him leaving. After changing, he tossed the hospital gown aside on his bed and decided to take a peek into the hall. If he could get a nurse's attention, she could send whoever was supposed to be watching him over and hasten his escape.

Nick had never liked hospitals. Hospitals and Nick had never meshed well. He'd always gotten nervous in them and had just bad feelings about them altogether. It was a completely illogical fear that gripped his chest anytime he was forced to be in a hospital, but it had always been there and never faded, as he'd hoped it would after he grew up. His logic always went to the fact that this was supposed to be a place of healing, but more people died than lived on in hospitals. He wanted to get out soon, before something else happened to him.

Scowling at the ridiculous notion, he chuckled at himself. His mother always said things like that, always pessimistic, always critical. After years of striving to cut out all the bad parts she had ingrained in him, he got annoyed when some notions of hers flared up in him. He never wanted to be anything like her. He wanted to be himself; he wanted to be Nick – happy, optimistic, comfortable-with-himself Nick. It'd been harder since he had returned to Florida, though.

Nick ran a hand through his hair and debated going to find a bathroom to try and fix it. No, he decided; that could wait for later. He stepped out into the hall and was shocked to find it completely empty. That was, until he looked again and saw that he was wrong. It wasn't empty. It was just didn't have anyone *alive* in it. There were plenty of people, looking like bundles upon the floor, until you looked closer and saw that, instead, they were bodies.

“What the *fuck*?” he exclaimed, the first words he'd uttered aloud since he'd woken up. Nick ran down the hall, checking rooms as he did. Everywhere he went, he found the same thing: bodies, corpses, all covered with some type of purple sores and vomit, their eyes open and unblinking.

Again and again and again, he kept up his pace, checking every room he found. There *had* to be someone alive in there. He couldn't be alone. This was a hospital, for God's sake. His long-running fears about hospitals were supposed to be wrong and irrational. They weren't supposed to actually happen.

“HELLO? Can anyone hear me!?” he bellowed. His voice echoed within the halls. He waited, but no response. He kept walking. Nick had no idea where he was in Tampa General and decided the first thing was to figure that much out, so he could get the hell out. Then, maybe, he could find out just what exactly was going on. A light above him was flickering sporadically, and that was the final touch in completing the creepy, horror film stereotype in his head.

“Hello? Is there anyone here who can hear me?” Nick called out yet again.

He kept hope alive in his idea that, perhaps, he might actually find someone who wasn't dead, but his search continued to prove fruitless. All these patients, the doctors, the nurses, all of them, had been dead at least a day. How had this happened? Had this all gone down while he'd rested, obviously, in his bed? Could all this really have happened within a day? He tried to will his mind to remember something, anything, to help him try to figure it out.

“Alright, Mr. Carter, how are we feeling today? Apparently, that little bar brawl of yours did more damage than we thought...”

He sighed. No images; just a fragment. Nick wished he could focus enough to try and picture the doctor who'd said that to him, but nothing came. That had been on the first day. Wait, what day was it? He pulled out his cell phone, which had a four-day lifespan before it died, if it had been fully charged.

Damn, glad I charged it on Thursday, he mused. The phone read *April 15, 4:00 a.m.* He blinked. It was Sunday morning? He had been hoping he'd been wrong about being in there, sleeping mostly, for two straight days. Apparently not.

“Okay Nick, think. You get smacked with a damn bar stool, and you end up here on... um...” He thought for a moment. “Friday morning. Okay, and the bastard did some damage, 'cause you stayed here for two days, sleeping and shit. Maybe one day...” He looked around again, reminded that all the doctors, nurses, everyone responsible for saving lives, had failed in the most epic of ways. “... and then, the second, everyone ran... or died...” He started walking again. “Need to find a way out of here...”

Soon came the sight he had been looking for. Simple, welcoming, and inviting elevator doors greeted him like an old friend. He only hoped the thing worked. Running over, he slammed his fist against the elevator button for 'down.' He wasn't sure where he was, but he obviously wasn't on the first floor.

“This Hospital of Horrors is giving me the fucking creeps,” he muttered, as the doors opened. His eyes went up to the light above the elevator, and finally, he learned where he was: the third floor. Nick wasn't sure if stepping onto the elevator was the brightest of ideas, considering, so far, the place was empty. He could get trapped inside with no one to hear him. At the same time, he wasn't

thrilled about the idea of hunting down the stairs, so he stepped inside and hit the button for the main lobby.

There was no elevator music, no noise even then, with the exception of the whirring of the elevator as it descended. It pinged once it reached level two and then stopped. Raising a brow, he stared, as the door opened a floor too early. He stepped out. His senses were on high alert. Obviously, something didn't feel right, but that wasn't what had his attention. No, this was something different.

What came next, his reactions, he could only attribute later to pure instinct.

A sore-covered, pale, gray hand lunged for his throat, and only seconds before he dived down and rolled out of reach. Standing again, he breathed heavily for a moment and got a look at his attacker before it groaned and reached for him again.

"What. The. FUCK?!" he yelled. It looked like a doctor. Well, like it had *once* been a doctor. The eyes were cloudy, unfocused, unblinking. The mouth was slack and emitted no noise. It began to make its way towards Nick, not actually walking; it was more like a dragging shuffle, lacking any type of true coordination.

Then, once he realized what he was actually facing, he began to panic. He turned and ran blindly down the hall, not caring even slightly about where he was going, at that point. A glance back showed the *creature* following him at a slow and haunting pace. It moaned loudly as it began its chase, the noise echoing throughout the halls. Once a comfortable distance away, Nick paused and bent over to catch his breath.

"Don't panic. Don't panic. Get it together, Nick. Just... just because... you're in a hospital, where everyone's dead, and now... now..." He shook his head. No, it couldn't be real. Had to be a dream. What else could it be? Nick pinched his arm sharply. "OW! Damn it. Okay, it's real... I just... I just saw a zombie."

The moan came once again, and it wasn't far off. He glanced around hurriedly. "Need to kill it. Need to get the hell out of here. Weapon, weapon, who's got a weapon?" He pushed crash carts aside, shoved everything out of his way, and slammed his fist against the wall, letting out a long string of curses. Then he looked above his head and gave another silent *Thank you, Lord* when he spotted it. A red, glass case was fixed upon the wall. The glass read, *Use in Case of Emergencies*. He grabbed a small device from the crash cart he had shoved aside before and hurled it at the case. The glass shattered. Carefully reaching in, Nick pulled out a long and deadly sharp axe, ready to wield it when necessary.

"I'm either fucking crazy, this is somehow a dream, or I'm in some horror flick come to life." He was talking to comfort himself, trying to settle his nerves with the sound of his own voice. However, nothing could calm him now.

The moment came only seconds later, when the previously-encountered, undead doctor came back again to greet him. Nick gulped. He wasn't ready for this. This didn't seem real. By all rights, it shouldn't be real. It was like he'd woken up in an alternate dimension or something. Some part of his mind wished he had, and then he'd have a chance of escaping this hell. He was frozen in fear, unable to move the way he knew he should.

The zombie grabbed for his neck, but, thanks to Nick's quick motion, was only able to get his shirt. The mouth opened, a putrid smell escaping, along with yet another groan. Nick took the precious seconds he had and swung the axe as roughly as he could at the creature's neck. The head flew off into the air, landing atop another body, and the grip it had on Nick released, as the headless corpse fell.

Nick released ragged breaths, and despite the cool air, beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. He wiped his brow, staring down at his handiwork and then at the axe still held in a death grip in his hand. The blade was spotted with brown blood, and when his gaze shifted downwards, he noticed it was on his shirt, as well.

"I need to get out of here." He ran, looking for any signs of stairs. He certainly wasn't going near the elevator again, after what had just happened. Once he saw the sign pointing the way to the stairs, he almost wanted to cheer, as he headed that direction.

He was only a few feet away when he heard the noise that made his own blood run cold. "Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." A long moan, followed by a harmonic chorus of the same sound, that seemed to be stemming from the depths of Hell. He had not one iota how many had just made that sound, and he couldn't care less, as the noise came around the corner, drifting in his direction.

"Cause this is Thriller! Thriller night... and no one's gonna save you from the beast about to strike... Thriller! Thriller night...you're fighting for your life inside a killer... thriller..." he sang shakily, a pure nervous reaction when his eyes took in the dozen zombies headed his way. Nick's mind raced for a plan. There was no way he'd be able to take them all alone. He needed something to delay them even more. He needed a window of time to get away and out of sight.

Nick's thoughts went back to everything he'd learned about zombies in horror movies. He had no idea how much of it was true, but it seemed best, for the moment, to act like all of it was and learn what wasn't later. One of the things he knew was that if he could get out of sight, they would forget about him, and he could manage to escape. He needed a plan, and his eyes skipped around endlessly, in search of anything that could help him.

He brightened when he saw the fire extinguisher hanging upon the wall. “Thank you, fire safety.” It would be the second time he’d been saved by emergency fire setups. Gripping the extinguisher fiercely, he waited for them to get a bit closer, so the impact would be stronger. He stared at the beings headed his way, all doing the exact same, awkward, dragging shuffle, all of them staring with milky eyes and slackened jaws. The smell that hit him was intense, and he was forced to repress his urge to vomit. They were patients, they were doctors, and they were nurses...

It hit him then, just as he pulled the handle on the extinguisher, grunting as it thrust him backwards. The zombies were shot back in brute force. The spray made some of them tumble back onto the others. They all fell down like nothing more than dominos. They toppled like bowling pins. He tossed the empty extinguisher aside, but the realization slammed into him.

They had all been victims of whatever had killed them. All had had those purple sores he’d seen on every corpse he’d encountered. Leaving that chilling thought for later, he bolted down the stairs, battle axe in hand and ready to go. He needed to get out of there. He could figure everything out later. First, he had to live.

He reached the ground floor and was able to see the lobby from where he was standing, by the ER rooms. There were more bodies there than anywhere else, he noticed, except maybe the morgue. A place he definitely did *not* want to go.

He picked up his pace, running to the lobby. He couldn’t stick around any longer; it was obvious Nick would be dead mighty quickly if the bodies down there began to rise. Outnumbered and doomed would be the ultimate understatement if that happened. He skidded to a stop, just beyond the help desk. A creature rose to greet him. Before it could even moan, Nick swung around his axe, slamming it directly into the top of its skull. Congealed, brown, gooey blood sprayed into the air from the force of the blade, and the body slumped to the ground.

He reached down to grab the axe, pulling it forcefully out of the now shattered skull. Nick heard another groan about to greet him. Leaving no time to think, he ran for the doors. Bursting through them, he took one last look back, before running fearfully out into the night.

Chapter 33

There’s not a lot that scares me, or so I thought. I’m not afraid of many of the usual, silly things – spiders, storms, heights, enclosed spaces, the dark... My biggest fears, aside from public speaking, are – or were – sickness and death. Ironic, considering I married a man who worked around deadly diseases.

Almost as ironic as someone who hates speaking in front a room of people becoming a teacher, I guess. But I digress...

I considered myself pretty brave and pretty rational. I was afraid of the things that made sense to fear, the things that could, or were likely to, actually kill me. I was afraid of death itself.

Now, it's the undead I fear.

In some ways, death – real, old-fashioned death, without reanimation – seems a luxury. Eternal rest... wouldn't that be nice? Don't get me wrong: I don't want to die. I can't die. My life is too important now. If I die – if any one of us dies – one more shred of hope for humanity will die with us. We are all that's left. We must live, in order to keep humanity alive. At least I have a reason, now, to fear death.

I used to think I'd die of cancer or a car accident, something typical like that. Maybe old age, if I were lucky. Hopefully nothing too horrific or freakish. I worried plenty about the typical things; I didn't dwell too much on all the OTHER ways there are to die. But now? I have a new fear...

Phagophobia: the fear of being eaten.

Sunday, April 15, 2012

4:00 a.m.

Like the others before her, Gretchen awoke suddenly, but could not figure out why.

A noise? Lying still in her bed to listen, she could only hear the sound of her own breathing. The night was incredibly quiet. Even the crickets had gone silent.

A dream, then? She tried to remember it, but the images floating around in her head were too fuzzy to make any sense of.

She didn't know what had woken her up, only that it was still night – judging by the light, too early for her to be up – and yet, she was suddenly wide awake. Her first thought went, naturally, to Shawn, and so she reached for the cell phone on her nightstand. After checking the time – four a.m... too early, indeed, to be awake – she tried, again, to call him. But there were still no bars on her phone, no signal, and the call did not go through. Sighing, Gretchen snapped the phone shut.

She sat up in bed, pushing back the top sheet. It felt stuffy in the room, with the windows shut tight and the air conditioning off, and she was warm from sleeping. She felt sweaty, even, which made her wonder again if she'd had a bad dream in

the midst of her restless sleep. In any case, she didn't feel like lying down again. She wished she could turn on the TV or, at the very least, go outside and cool off on the front porch for a few minutes. She was sure it was beautiful night, what with the full moon and the mild spring air. But she didn't dare: Shawn had told her to keep the house shut up against the virus and stay inside.

Sighing, she flopped back against her pillows and kicked her legs straight out in front of her. She'd never fall back to sleep stretched out on her back like this, but she didn't think she'd be able to sleep anymore, anyway. She stared up at the dark ceiling and wondered what Shawn was doing then. Was he sleeping, or still up, having worked through the night? Had his team made the breakthrough he'd been hoping for, or was he already on his way home to her?

That thought gave her hope and made her feel a little better. She stretched her arm out and patted the other side of the mattress, imagining Shawn's body nestled there, close to hers. She wished he was there now. Gretchen wasn't normally a clingy wife; she was used to Shawn's being away, fulfilling his obligations to the CDC and, before that, the army. As much as she loved him, she usually enjoyed the time alone. But now she wanted nothing more than to have him safe at home.

After two days of being cooped up in the house on her own, unable to reach her family and friends, she felt edgy, anxious, and desperately lonely. She wished there was someone – anyone, anything – there to provide some comfort or, at the very least, companionship. Even a pet would have been nice. She imagined a cat curled up at the foot of bed, a soft, warm body that would purr as she pet it in the middle of the night. She'd had cats growing up and would have liked to have one now, but Shawn was allergic. They'd planned to get a dog, maybe in a few years, after the baby was born and old enough to be taught how to treat one. But there was no baby, not anymore, and no dog either. Just Gretchen, emotional Gretchen.

She got up from the bed before the tears could start, figuring maybe it would help to walk around. Her eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness that she could make out the shapes of the furniture, and she managed to get out of the room without tripping on anything. In the living room, she found her Bic candle lighter and lit a few candles. Shadows danced among the flickering flames.

Moving to the large front window, she drew back the drapes, letting the faint blue glow of the moon mix with the golden candlelight. Then she leaned into the windowsill and brought her face up close to the glass, peering out into the moonlit night.

The houses across the street were as dark and lifeless as ever, windows shut, shades drawn. Then again, she supposed they always looked like that at this time of night. Her eyes panned lower, to the street. She remembered the man, the nameless neighbor, slumped on the sidewalk. She expected to see him lying there

still, but when she looked, he wasn't there. She blinked in surprise and squinted, looking closer. It was dark, but the white concrete of the sidewalk was visible enough. She should still be able to make out the shadowy form stretched across it. But there was no mistake: the patch of sidewalk in front of her house was undeniably bare. The man was gone.

Mystified, Gretchen's mind began to whirl, as she contemplated what could have happened to him. Maybe he hadn't been dead, after all – just unconscious. If that was the case, he might have just woken up and walked home. Or maybe someone had moved him. That would have been the proper thing to do: leave the man with a shred of dignity and not just let him lie there to rot. She wanted to believe she would have done so herself, if she hadn't been afraid to leave the house, but then she imagined how he might feel to touch – heavy and limp... and stiff – and how he might smell, after lying out in the sun for at least a full day, and she honestly wasn't sure. Ashamed, she turned away from the window.

But there were still unanswered questions. If someone had moved him, that meant there was someone else alive, someone out and about. But *who*? She hadn't seen a living soul since Friday. Who was there to come along and drag a dead man out of the street in the middle of the night?

She contemplated this as she wandered into the kitchen, with the idea of getting something to drink. Her throat was dry from sleeping, most likely with her mouth open. Ice water sounded heavenly... until she realized the ice cubes in the freezer would be melted by now. Maybe something hot to sip on, then. Who said you couldn't fix hot chocolate in the spring? The microwave would be useless, of course, but she could always make it the old-fashioned way, by boiling water on the gas stove. She padded back into the living room for her lighter and ignited the flame under one of the stove burners. On top, she added a small pot of water. She settled for tap water to wet her throat while she waited for it to heat, and once she'd filled her glass, she stood at the sink, drinking it in long, slow swallows.

Her glass in one hand, she reached with the other up to the kitchen window and flipped open the mini-blinds. As soon as she did, she screamed and jumped back, her heart leaping into her throat, her glass falling from her hand. She vaguely heard the breaking of glass as it hit the floor and felt the splash of water against her ankles, but she didn't look down as she reeled backwards in fright.

There was a face in the window.

Looming out of the shadows, it was the most horrific face she'd ever seen: bloated and discolored, its features distorted, the mouth agape, murky eyes wide and staring. It was the face of death, the face of her worst nightmares, and yet it was alive. The mouth moved soundlessly. The eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets when they saw her. Hands appeared suddenly, pressing against the window pane.

“What do you want?” she shouted, and when there was no reaction from the face outside, no sign that he’d heard her at all, she lunged forward, jerked the blinds shut, and sank to the floor. She sat down in a puddle of spilled water from the remnants of her glass, her back pressed against the cupboards, and shook. Her mind raced. Who was he? What was he doing? Why had he come?

The latter two questions seemed answered when she heard a tapping – no, a *slapping* sound on the window, the sound of palms beating against the glass. This was no neighborly knock; whoever he was, the would-be intruder wanted in. The window was locked, but how long would the glass hold against the barrage of his hands? Gretchen was not willing to sit there and find out.

With a burst of adrenaline, she scrambled up and scuttled out of the kitchen, half on her hands and knees, trying to stay low and out of sight. In the living room, she released a breath, then looked up and gasped. There were more bodies pressed up against the front window, their awful faces leering in at her. The glass squeaked as their hands swiped down it and groaned with the force of their weight.

Caught in a circle of candlelight, Gretchen froze in terror for a second, wondering what to do. Then, quickly making up her mind, she ran a lap around the living room, dousing the candle flames and plunging the room into darkness. From inside the dark room, she had a better view out into the moonlit night, and the beings outside would have a harder time seeing in. Counting on this hope and praying the latches on her doors and windows were sturdy, she retreated to her bedroom.

She closed the bedroom door and locked it, throwing the room into total darkness. The only weak source of light came from the window, but she didn’t dare open the blinds to let more of the moonlight in. She was afraid of what else might try to get in, too.

Relying on her other senses, she crept about the room, straining her ears to listen for signs that they had broken in, groping around for the possessions she sought. She didn’t want to leave the house, but if they got in, she would have to escape, and quickly. She had no idea where she would go or what she would need, but she felt around the back of her closet until she found an old backpack, and she started throwing things in: a change of clothes, tennis shoes, her cell phone. The rest of what she would want to take – the flashlight, her purse with her wallet and keys – was in the front of the house, and unless she planned to escape through the window, the doors were there, too.

She’d have to chance it, but not without some reassurance. Heart pounding, she crawled to Shawn’s dresser and eased open the bottom drawer. She felt around for the shoebox she knew he kept in the back corner, under a pile of grungy college sweatshirts and old army fatigues. She pulled it out carefully and set it in

her lap. Daring, for the first time, to use her only source of light, she took out her phone and flipped it open. She tipped the lid off the shoebox and held her phone up over it, using its bright screen as a flashlight. Reflecting the glow of the weak, blue-white light, the metal of the gun inside seemed to gleam. It was beautifully frightening, and it sent a shudder through Gretchen as she reached in and gingerly picked it up. It was the first time she'd ever held a gun, a real gun.

She hadn't wanted a gun in the house at all, and it was something she and Shawn had argued about when she'd gotten pregnant. But this was not just any handgun, Shawn insisted; it was an antique, the very pistol his grandfather had carried on his person in World War II and, later, the Korean War. It had been handed down the family to his father, who'd taken part in Desert Storm, and then on to him. It was not only an antique, he protested; it was an heirloom. It was not there to be used, but to be cherished.

And suddenly, for the first time, Gretchen did cherish it. She couldn't fathom actually using it, but as she took it from its box and wrapped her fingers around the grip, she imagined she might soon be glad she had the pistol with her.

She kept the gun in her hand as she rose, slowly, and slung the backpack over her shoulder. Creeping to the bedroom door, she cracked it open soundlessly and peeked out. The hallway was dark. She could still hear the muffled pounding of hands and bodies against the windows, along with a low, guttural sort of moaning, but there was no indication that they'd broken in. Yet.

Who are they? she wondered again, but she dared not stop to think. Everything about them felt threatening, and instinct told her she didn't want to wait around to find out. She wanted to get away, as soon as possible. If she could make it to her car, she could floor the gas and leave them all behind.

But what if they followed her?

They wouldn't, she argued with herself. These people were sick. They weren't acting normal; they weren't acting human. If they had cars, if they were up to driving, they'd be doing it, not beating against her windows. They were out of their minds.

It's the virus, she thought, and remembered Shawn's warning to stay inside.

As she hesitated at the threshold of the kitchen, a sudden crash made her jump. Horrorstruck, she looked to see the living room window shatter inward. That was enough to make up her mind. She barely caught a glimpse of the first shadowy figure clawing its way over the windowsill before she bolted, snatching her purse and keys from their hook by the back door on her way through it.

There were more of them outside the back door. Gretchen screamed as a woman lumbered toward her, reaching out with fingers hooked like talons. She dodged

out of the way of the woman's grasp, only to nearly collide with a man in a dirty, gray tracksuit. Her eyes widened with dawning horror as she recognized the man from the street, the neighbor with whom she'd exchanged smiles, but never a formal introduction.

"You're alive?" she gasped, but she didn't wait for an answer, backpedaling in fright. This man looked like he wanted to grab her, to hurt her, as much as any of them. It was all in his body language, though; his face was expressionless, the mouth slack, the eyes blank and cloudy, completely...

Dead.

His face was the mask of death, his eyes nothing more than two, cold marbles rolling around their sockets. His limbs moved with the stiffness of rigor mortis, and her nostrils could already detect the faint stench of earthy decay rising from his body.

Yet, he *was* moving. They were all moving toward her, arms outstretched, seeming frenzied and hungry despite their blank, dead faces.

Dead.

Undead?

Gretchen began to shake violently and feared her quivering knees wouldn't support her if she tried to run. But just as they began to close in on her, cornering her against the house, she acted on one last burst of adrenaline and blind courage. Shrieking, she ran, using the butt of her gun like a club, hitting and pushing through their stiff, grabbing arms, shoving them aside. She heard a crack as she barreled through the woman's thin arm and nearly gagged when she realized she'd broken her bone. Insanely, she thought of Red Rover, a game she'd played as a child. The kids at her school were no longer allowed to play it at recess, not since a boy had fractured a little girl's arm, trying to get through the line.

Red Rover, Red Rover... childish voices chanted in her mind as she ran, her eyes fixed on her car, imagining herself yanking open the door, leaping in, and shutting it immediately. *Send Gretchen right over...*

Her body slammed against the car, and she reached quickly for the door handle. A quick tug revealed what she should have already known – it was locked. She never left her car sitting out under the carport unlocked. The keys were in her hand, and she fumbled with them, trying to fit the right key into the lock with trembling fingers in near darkness. She could sense the undead encroaching on her, could hear the scrape of their clumsy feet on the driveway and the low, grunting groans from deep in their throats. When the door came unlocked with a faint pop, she knew, without looking, that they were right behind her.

She clutched at the door handle again, and this time, the door flew open, slamming into a couple of the... well, whatever they were, and knocking them over. She jumped in and wrenched the door shut again, nearly catching the fingers of the man in the tracksuit. He banged his hands against her window as she jammed the key into the ignition and started the car.

The headlights came on automatically, illuminating the alley between her house and the next. She thought it might deter the undead, but instead, it seemed to act like a beacon, luring them towards her. She didn't wait to find out how quickly they could climb onto her hood or how strong her windshield might be. She threw the car into reverse and floored the accelerator, whipping backwards out of her driveway faster than she ever had, with no thought to what might be behind her. She felt a massive thump beneath her tires as she mowed down one of them, and then another bump as she hit the curb. She didn't care. As long as she didn't blow out the tires of her little, blue Cobalt, she was good.

She spun out onto the street, braked just enough to shift into drive, and gunned the engine again, speeding past clusters of the undead on both sides of the road now. *My God, they're everywhere*, she thought with despair. All the people who had contracted the virus... all the people who had died... had they all become these creatures? These... zombies?

Zombies – what am I thinking? Behind the wheel, she shook her head, laughing humorlessly. Was she going crazy? This had to be a dream. A nightmare. Maybe she'd never really woken up at all.

Come on, wake up! Snap out of it! she pleaded with herself, but as she navigated through the familiar streets and sights of Atlanta, she realized her surroundings were much too vivid to be part of a dream. This was real. Somehow, it had to be real.

It all seemed too much, and she started to cry then, shaking violently as she pictured the face leering in at her, the monsters climbing through her living room window, the man in the track suit reaching for her, the woman's arm snapping with a crack. For a moment, with her vision blurring and her hands trembling, it was difficult to keep her car on the road, and she nearly hit the curb again. Thankfully, she managed to get control again, both of her car and of herself, remembering that she couldn't afford to blow out a tire. Her little Cobalt was her only protection against the masses of undead roaming the streets of Atlanta. If she crashed the car, she was screwed.

That realization was enough to calm her down, make her think rationally. *I have to get out of the city*, she decided, assuming that, away from the city, there would be less people... less zombies... less to worry about, and more room, more time, to think. She would drive first and figure out the rest later.

With that decided, she headed for the nearest interstate. She'd thought, foolishly, that it would be relatively easy getting out of Atlanta in the middle of the night, when everyone else seemed to be dead or a zombie. She hadn't counted on the fact that before they died, those people, those zombies, had owned cars, and some of them had had the same idea about getting out of Atlanta. The roads were strewn with vehicles, and they weren't just parallel parked neatly along the curb. Some of them were stopped dead in the middle.

She gaped through the window of the first one of these she encountered, as she eased her Cobalt carefully around it, and saw a dark figure slumped lifelessly over the steering wheel. A shudder ran through her. In the next car, the driver was moving around, smacking her hands against the window, as if she were trying to get out. One look at her bloated face told Gretchen she was not among the living, but the living dead, trapped in her own car, where she'd apparently died and come back.

After that, Gretchen stopped looking.

She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, watching out for cars and zombies in the road. There were lots of both in the heart of the city, and she was both glad she had a small car, because it made it possible to squeeze through obstacles, and worried, because it wouldn't take too many zombies to total it. Thankfully, once she reached the freeway, there were far less zombies, and after she'd crawled up the on ramp and driven a few, tedious miles, the number of stalled cars thinned too, and she was able to speed up.

Once it seemed the immediate danger was behind her, her emotions caught up to her again. She didn't shake this time; she seemed to be past the point of shock. But she did cry. She cried, thinking of the home she'd left behind, the first house she'd ever owned. She couldn't go back there, but where would she go? She couldn't imagine stopping anytime soon and wondered how she'd ever feel safe enough to stop driving. She cried, thinking of Shawn, surely on his way home to meet her. How would he find her, now that she'd left without so much as a note? A note... she should have left a note. But there'd been no time, and what would she have said? She hadn't a clue where she was headed, so a note wouldn't have been very helpful. She had her phone, in the backpack alongside Shawn's gun, but it was useless without service. And so she cried.

For awhile, she drove in silence, her senses on high alert, eyes focused, ears piqued for sounds of danger. But soon, the silence became too much. Gretchen hated driving in silence; she always had music playing when she was behind the wheel. Longing for something to drown out her thoughts, she turned on the radio. Nothing but static. She pressed the auto-tune button, but as it ran through the stations, static blasted out at her from every one. With a sigh, she switched to her mp3 player, which she'd thankfully left plugged in to her car stereo. Without need for a signal, this worked fine, and within seconds, her music was blaring.

After a few songs, Gretchen started to feel again that it had all been a dream. Surely, it couldn't have been real – dead people reanimating and breaking into her house as zombies, chasing her out of Atlanta? She was just on a road trip, heading South, not a care in the world. Truth be told, she loved driving at night, alone in the car, with the music turned up high. It was her chance to sing along as loudly as she wanted to, and no one could see her or hear her. She was in her own world.

This was normalcy, and it was comforting. She still had no idea where she was going, but now, she didn't care. She just didn't think about it. The sun would be coming up soon, and with her music playing, she could drive all day if she needed to. She started to feel better, the further she got from Atlanta, the further she went without seeing a zombie. There were still abandoned cars here and there, but not nearly as many as before, and most were pulled off to the shoulder, so that she could drive as fast as she wanted without the fear of wrecking her car.

Then she saw a sight up ahead that made her slow down.

It was a car, a sedan, not just parked in the median, but crashed there, its front end smashed into the guardrail. She wouldn't have thought much of it, except that its taillights and one headlight were still on. None of the other cars she'd seen had any lights on. And in the eerie, red glow of the taillights, she could see shadowy figures circling around the car. She swallowed hard, realizing by the way they moved that they were among the undead. This made her want to slam down the accelerator again and leave them in her dust before they could turn their attention on her. But the fact that they seemed so fixated on the other car and had *not* yet turned to approach her gave her another realization.

There was someone trapped in the car. Someone living.

That had to be it; there was no other explanation she could think of for a cluster of zombies to be swarming around a single car with its lights still on. If it was abandoned, they would abandon it, too, and come after the car that was moving: hers. But it wasn't abandoned.

She turned down her music as she crept up to the scene, her foot poised over the gas pedal, ready to floor it again if she needed to. As the light from her headlights spilled over them, some of the zombies turned to face her, and she nearly did floor it. But thankfully, she paused and looked first, and with her headlights illuminating the other car, she could see that there was a man inside. Frightened as she was by the thought of another encounter with the undead, she couldn't just drive away and leave him there. His car wasn't much bigger than hers was. Eventually, they would break in, and... and what? Kill him? *Eat* him? Everything she knew about zombies came from the movies; she didn't have a clue what real ones would do to a living person. She was pretty positive she didn't want to find out.

Slamming her palm against her steering wheel, she honked her horn. Once, twice, then a long, sustained third time. She thought this would scare the zombies, but it didn't. It did, however, attract the attention of the man in the car. She couldn't make out his face in the shadowy interior, but she could see the shape of his arms waving, the universal signal for HELP!

Her mind quickly formulated a plan. She pulled ahead, then made a U-turn, so that she was now facing his solitary headlight. Then, with the utmost concentration, she revved forward, trying to get as close to his car as she could, as fast as she could, without hitting it. She plowed into several zombies, throwing them out of her path, cringing as their bodies crunched against her fender. Then she slammed on her brakes, stopping her car parallel to his. She reached over to the passenger door to unlock it, only to realize she'd pulled up too close to get the door open. There was no time to correct this; the zombies were regrouping, staggering towards their cars.

"The window!" she yelled to the man in the other one, signaling by flapping her hand downward, as she lowered her own passenger window. Thank God for automatic.

The man understood and did the same on his driver's side. Without hesitating, he stuck his head and torso through his window and then through hers, climbing awkwardly into the Cobalt. It was a good thing he was a small guy, thought Gretchen, as he struggled into her passenger seat.

"Okay, drive!" the man shouted, as soon as his legs were free of his car, and Gretchen didn't hesitate. She whipped the car around in another U-turn, righting her direction on the freeway, and then she plunged her foot down onto the pedal. They raced away, leaving the pack of zombies lumbering in confusion behind them.

Chapter 34

I'm probably what people would describe as the most cynical out of the ones left. I know this. Before it happened, I talked about the world going to hell. I always said people would cause their own destruction. I had figured it was only a matter of time. Even knowing this, finding everyone dead was a hell of a shock.

It was even more shocking when I stumbled upon survivors, and they actually helped. Outside of family, people didn't help me. Society feared anything outside the norm, and I was used to that. So having people help me shocked me, even when I knew at least one of them couldn't stand me from the first sight of me. It was still amazing. It'd been awhile, that's all. Outside of rehab, and they

were paid to do that; it wasn't because "they cared." I think I sound bitter. Maybe I am.

It was an adjustment. Wasn't everything?

But even I never before imagined seeing what I did that night. How could I? How could anyone?

Yet, in the end, I feel like I was freed that day. We were all freed from everything that people never knew had held them down for so long. We were freed, all of us still alive, at least.

Whether we wanted it...

... or not.

Sunday, April 15, 2012
5:00 a.m.

The night had been as silent as the day, when the three had settled into an empty hotel the previous evening. It had been a relief to get out of the car when they had. AJ had the feeling that all he did was agitate Howie, and to be honest, he didn't find himself quite fond of the man either. He was too absorbed in himself, too convinced he was right, and had this air of superiority that drove AJ crazy.

Kayleigh... He felt he couldn't get a solid read on her just yet. At some moments, she'd get sick of the silence as they drove and would attempt to fill it with idle chatter. At others, she'd sit in her seat silently with tears running down her cheeks. AJ only guessed that she kept fighting to deny what was happening and continued to fail. Still, her sporadic mood changes made it difficult for him to see what kind of person she was, and he couldn't read her yet.

The drive with those two had been long and tedious. The time it took them to get anywhere was tripled, due to the fact that many people had tried to escape and died in the process. The result was a mess of blocked streets with cars scattered everywhere. Many times, it forced them to make detours that didn't always work, so they'd have to drive around until they found another way. AJ had even offered to take over driving for Howie, seeing the man get tired. That hadn't exactly gone well.

"I can't believe this. I figured once we got out of Kissimmee, it'd clear up a bit."

"You kidding, Howard? Some people probably got sick trying to get the hell out."

They heard Kayleigh sniffle, but say nothing, as she stared out the window. Howie just sighed, his grip on the steering wheel tightening that much more, as the car rolled over yet another body carelessly strewn across the pavement. Kayleigh gulped as they all felt the jolt, Howie's jaw tightened, and even AJ felt an uncontrollable twitch just from knowing what that was.

"Look, you're getting tired, bro; let me take over for a bit, and you can rest."

Howie stared at AJ incredulously. He saw the amazement written clearly in Howie's eyes at his being so bold as to suggest driving a car Howie clearly considered too good for him. He increased his speed as he navigated his fancy Lexus around the other cars and bodies blocking his way. "Are you kidding me, DJ? I don't need you driving my car."

"It's AJ."

"Like it matters now. The world is dead. You could say you're Bill Gates now."

AJ smirked, lighting up a cigarette in the backseat as he rolled down the window. Enjoying the Puerto Rican's look of pure annoyance, he blew the smoke out the window. "I could have said that before, as long as I didn't mind people thinking I was insane. Heh, the world was dead long before now; it just wasn't as obvious. Now some sick bastard probably decided to take it to a more literal level."

"Are you serious, AJ?" The tone was dripping with superiority, an air of confidence that he knew that AJ was just bitter and deluded, when truly, AJ felt it was the other way around. "You really believe that load?"

"I know it's true. That's why I can handle a world where status means nothing. But you, you seem the type to love making yourself feel like you're better than others. Can YOU handle a world without that?"

"Can you two stop fighting?" a tearstained Kayleigh asked them, finally interrupting the conversation before it went too far. "Don't we have enough problems without creating more?"

The drive was silent after that.

So eventually, after hours of fighting the clogged-up roadways, Howie had gotten frustrated and pulled over at the first decent hotel he spotted. They'd found no one inside, not even employees, which, once AJ thought about it, wasn't shocking. Who would try coming to work when they were dying? And people would flee a hotel as soon as possible, if they found themselves succumbing to a plague. Obviously, a lot of people had thought that way, judging by the state of

the streets. However, they had to use their cell phones as flashlights, due to the power outage, which only confirmed that, so far, nothing had changed.

Despite everything that had happened, they'd managed to sleep. At last, AJ's mind was at ease, no conscious thoughts invading it at the moment. His body had forced him to get the rest he so desperately needed. It was a blissful escape from all the unbelievable horrors of the day. There were no dreams, at least, none that he could recall later. There was no stirring. There was just rest – quiet, peaceful, and seemingly eternal.

It was only mere hours he rested, before his body betrayed him and forced him to rise again. He grabbed Howard's phone from the nightstand beside the couch he'd been delegated to and checked the time. Five hours he'd slept, more impressive than he thought it would be, given all the circumstances. Stretching from the far-too-small couch he'd been stuck sleeping on, he stood and cracked his back lazily. A quick glance around the room showed Howie and Kayleigh asleep on the one bed in the room.

Howard would've slept so much easier on that couch; he's small enough for it, AJ mused in mild annoyance. Slowly, he made his way out onto the balcony, craving a cigarette. His hand grabbed the pack he'd gotten during one of their earlier rest stops and lit one up. Taking a long drag, he rested against the balcony lazily, watching his surroundings. The sun wasn't due to rise for probably another two hours, and the moon shone brightly above as he blew a wave of smoke out into the air. The night was still present and dark, the stars teasing him with their simple beauty.

He used to do this often, go out and watch the night, the birds soaring through the air, crickets chirping softly, cars rushing by on the dark streets. It was one of the few things that used to bring him back to reality as a child, make him feel part of the world, rather than outside it. There was just something soothing about watching people drive by from the apartment balcony he and his mother had lived in, to see how people lived with no pressures to interact himself. That night, there was nothing to watch, and the silence was deafening. He could hear no birds, no crickets, nothing.

It was that which made him put out his cigarette and really take it in. Only people had died of the disease. As far as he'd noticed, it hadn't touched animals at all. All throughout their drive, they'd noticed abandoned cats and dogs wandering the streets. Although the world was now devoid of the noises humanity made daily, it was still filled with the soft sounds of animals.

Now, there was nothing. That only happened...

When something was coming.

“What’s the matter?” a soft, tired voice came from just behind him, making him jerk with surprise. He turned to see the young college girl, so out of place in her slept-in, stolen clothing.

“It’s too quiet,” he replied, turning back to the scene below. “Thought you were asleep...”

“Howie woke me up.”

“Heh.”

“Why’s the quiet bugging you now? It has been all day.”

“This is different...”

She came up next to him, resting against the railing. Their room was on the second floor, as it had been the first one they had found a key for down in the lobby. The breeze picked up a bit and blew her hair around as she sighed once more. “How?”

“Because it-” His words stopped dead cold once they heard a noise below. Their gazes shifted downwards to take in what they had only seen before in horror movies. Everything seemed a replica of scenes in almost every basic horror movie he’d ever bothered with. (Not that the list was long, seeing as he’d always get frustrated with the Hollywood happy endings, but that was beside the point.) The moon was full, the area lit only by its glow, giving what was already disturbing an even more haunting appearance.

Of course, what made it such a horror scene were the signs of life – or more precisely, imitations of life – shuffling their way along the streets below. He heard the high-pitched screams coming from the now-panicking girl beside him. AJ, however, was once again outside of the situation, and he blocked her out as he stared in shock at the sight below.

People – what used to be people – were roaming the streets below them. AJ could see almost every detail as he craned his neck over to see better. They were clearly dead; the skin was gray and pale, marked with the trademark lesions he’d grown tired of seeing. Many of them were ones Howard had run over earlier, with tire marks along their heads and chests.

Kayleigh continued to scream, and one of the... could he really think it?

One of the *undead* paused and began to moan. AJ could only guess what that meant, but didn’t wish to find out. He turned to Kayleigh, grabbing her quickly and covering her mouth with his hand. He stared down below, waiting, staying there quietly, and feeling like he was watching himself in a movie theater at that

very moment. Her eyes stared at AJ in shock as she struggled angrily against him.

“Shh...”

The creatures continued their awkward, limping-styled shuffle, and AJ looked at the girl he still held in his arms. “Are you going to stay quiet?” He took her silent nod as an agreement, and the moment he let her go, she burst inside without another word. AJ watched the scene below once more and felt completely separated from the entire matter. He knew he probably should be having a panic attack. He should be acting the same as Kayleigh, who could be heard inside, babbling to herself in terror and losing all self-control – albeit far quieter, much to his relief.

But he wasn't. He was in shock, of course. Seeing people rise from the dead was something he'd never imagined possible. Even with his cynical mind, a mind others would have called twisted before the virus hit, he had never pictured anything like this actually happening.

How *could* this happen? He wasn't sure.

How had this *not* happened to himself, to Kayleigh, to Howie, or to those survivors they spoke of on the radio at the MacDill Air Force Base? He wasn't sure.

What *was* happening to the world? He wasn't sure.

His mind was racing, still trying to grasp that he was, in fact, watching zombies roam the streets of Plant City, Florida and not dreaming. He wasn't in Kissimmee at the rehab center; he was in some random hotel in random Plant City and was watching the undead walk. His mother and grandparents were dead, he knew, and probably among the armies of the undead as well now.

If he hadn't thought society was dead before, even after seeing the mass deaths, he knew it now.

He felt grief; he felt sick; he felt disturbed...

He also felt *free*.

Before his thoughts could continue any further, they were interrupted by hearing Howie try to calm down Kayleigh in the background. Soon, he had company once again, when they both burst out onto the porch to meet him. Kayleigh was crying again, and Howie looked odd. AJ tilted his head to see tissue stuffed up one of Howie's nostrils and spots of blood along his cheek. What happened – had Kayleigh hit him?

“What the hell did you do to her, MJ?”

“AJ,” he corrected for what felt like the millionth time, through gritted teeth.
“And I didn’t do anything. Stay quiet and look down.”

Howie did what he was told, and AJ watched him slowly take in the horrific sights upon the streets. The only answer he got was Howie’s eyes rolling to the back of his head only moments later, his body falling directly against AJ as he collapsed. AJ stumbled back, holding the unconscious man in his arms, and dragged him back into the hotel. With one look to Kayleigh, he made his decision of what to do next.

“Get everything together. I’m gonna wake him up, and we’re getting the hell out of here.”

Chapter 35

I can’t really talk about 4/15, not aloud anyway. It’s become a normal part of life now, disturbing as that is. But that day, I still find it hard to discuss. Everyone else can a bit, except Brian, but he has obvious reasons. Then there’s AJ, who, in the rare moments he actually DOES decide to talk about himself, speaks of that day with no problems at all.

But I have issues talking about that Day of Unholy Resurrection. No real reason, I think, anyway. I didn’t have to kill my family; I’d already found them dead and bailed. I didn’t have to see a zombie version of, well, anyone I knew, actually. But it was a day I’ll never forget, that’s for sure. None of us have the luxury of forgetting that day. How could anyone rid their memories of that day of chaos and of madness, a day beyond belief and of evil?

With all my issues talking about that day, it makes me glad we’re not reading each other’s journals. We’re all writing them, but it’s more to make sure our story is told. Just in case. Death is pretty much a very solid possibility every day now. But again, I’m glad we’re not sharing them with each other. Even though it was my idea to write them. There’s some things I don’t want the others reading.

Like me talking about that day.

It was the day the dead rose.

It was the day hell was unleashed.

It was a day I’ll never forget, for many reasons.

It was also the day I met Nick Carter.

Sunday, April 15, 2012

6:00 a.m.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

It was the noise coming from the window that forced her to wake up. With a look to the window, she saw it was nothing more than an annoying pigeon tapping its beak against the glass at her. Annoyed, she started her engine to scare it off. Riley shut off the vehicle yet again and let herself fully wake up. A large yawn escaped, as she sighed and realized she had, in fact, slept in her car. If she'd slept in her Jeep, that meant what had happened earlier...

Her brothers.

Her father.

Her sisters-in-law, her nieces and nephews...

All of them were dead.

The tears threatened to fall again, as they had only hours before, but she held them back. She was awake, and even though she wasn't running on very much sleep, Riley instantly made the decision that it was time to start trying to find a place that hadn't been hit by the virus yet. If such a place existed.

She wasn't sure; she had many of the facts and knew the chances were slim. Still had no idea what had caused it, but she'd witnessed firsthand how deadly it was, heard how quickly it had spread up north, and seen for herself how it happened down south. Surely, it had spread. Yet the hope for a safe haven still burned, because stranger things could happen. It wasn't like there was anything holding her here in Florida, now that everyone she'd known and cared about was dead. Riley pushed a dark gold lock of hair out of her eyes and sighed to herself. She wondered if they even knew how much she did care about them.

"Riley, come on, Dad wants to see you. He says how you never come by. We're all supposed to have a get-together there tomorrow. Around noon. You're off then."

“Nate, you come on. I use my days off to do my groundwork for my stories. I’m finally getting somewhere. That’s important to me.”

“More important than your family, huh?”

“Damn it, I never said that.”

“You don’t have to, Ri. You don’t have to.”

How many times had she cancelled outings with her family for work? How many times had she told them that work was important and that they didn’t understand? How many times had she wasted everything, only to learn now that it was worthless to do so?

“Riley! You and I totally need to hang out. My fiancé has this friend, and he’s perfect for you, I swear.”

“Jules, I want to go, really...”

“It’s just, ‘I have to work, and it’s important, and blah blah blah.’ Whatever, girl. You always blow me off, and I get sick of it. There’s more to life than a career, you know.”

“And that’s why I’m more successful than you.”

“Yet I’m happier. Sucks, doesn’t it? Call me when you decide you care about your friends again.”

She’d lost friends over work, dismissing it because they “*didn’t understand,*” and that it would “*all pay off, and then I can relax,*” and so many excuses she’d built up to justify putting her career before everyone else. Now, she’d never be able to tell them. Never be able to say she was sorry, that she did love them, and that she’d always cared. She’d never cared more about her career than family and friends, at least... not intentionally. Riley had just wanted to leave her mark on the world.

Now it didn’t matter. She may have been the only one left alive, for all she knew. Her thoughts went back to her family. Her family – she knew they deserved more than being left to rot. But she also knew they’d want her to get away, before she fell victim next. Riley reached for her keys again. She needed to just go, get away.

Another noise stopped her from starting up her car again. A series of guttural grunts could be heard in the distance. Scraping and thuds coming from nearby could be heard, as well. After a night of silence, Riley decided she’d see what was going on, unnoticed. Turning off all signs of light in her car, she ducked down

and peered out her window. Her hands reached for her steadfast camera, turned it on, and started filming.

It took only minutes for her to lower her camera. Not turn it off, of course, but lower it so she could get a better look, as she peeked carefully through her car window. All the bodies that had been in cars, along the roads... all of them were standing, bashing through windows and doors, anything to get out. They did not sense her nearby, and she kept all sounds to herself. Her eyes widened as she took it in. It was something straight from one of her old favorite movie series, *Resident Evil*. Armies of the undead were roaming the streets, hundreds just by her eye count. There were still many bodies lying still on the roads, and she wondered why they didn't rise as well.

She lifted her camera up again, keeping low to stay out of view. "Day Two of the chaos, only hours after I last filmed... Well, you can see for yourself," Riley whispered, just loud enough for the camera to record. "They rose, not too long ago. I've only been asleep..." She checked her phone for the time. "... about five hours. I can't believe this... How could this happen?"

She watched as they roamed the street. The moaning was loud and almost unbearable, as Riley fought to ignore it. There were so many of them. So many creatures were out there, all who had once been dead, now with no conscious thought, just shuffling slowly along the roads, in search of something. Riley figured herself safe, seeing that there was a decent distance between them, and the fact that none of them seemed to notice her.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"Stupid bird..."

THUMP.

THUMP.

"What the hell?"

THUMP.

THUMP.

Her head turned to see that the undead on the *other* side of the road, the ones she hadn't taken even one glance at, had taken notice of her. Her car was surrounded, and they were angrily banging upon it, in hopes of getting in. She

stared at them, horrified at seeing them up close. The camera fell from her hands and landed on the seat beside her. Her sharp, blue eyes almost bugged out of their sockets, as the zombies grew in number, all of them banging on the Jeep, fighting to get inside and get to her.

She screamed. Her hands fumbled for her keys as she continued screaming, incredibly thankful that the doors and windows were all shut and locked. Riley fought to get the keys back in the ignition. Her screams didn't stop as she became surrounded by zombies, trapped in her car with what looked to be nowhere to go if she couldn't get going soon.

"Damn it, come on!" Finally, she was able to get enough coordination to jam the keys into the ignition and start the car. Frantically, she glanced backwards, seeing a small crack form along the shatterproof back window. Shoving the car into reverse, she floored it, hearing her tires squeal and feeling the bumps that came along with it.

Thrusting the gear shift into drive, she peeled off, slamming her car into the zombies. Riley screamed again as one was hit head on. The animated corpse flew atop her hood, moaning as it tried to beat its way through the glass. Swerving the Jeep, she frantically tried to throw the zombie from her car. It had once been a pregnant teenager, the protruding belly smashing up against the glass under a t-shirt that said *Future Soccer Star*, with an arrow pointing at the stomach. The face was ragged, bearing tire marks, probably run over by Riley when she had pulled to the side to park and sleep, hours before. Its fist continued to beat down until Riley finally screeched the car to a stop, forcing the zombie to fly backwards and land against a light post. She swung the car around and started driving again, desperately trying to get away from anything that had once been dead.

It seemed the more she drove, the more of these creatures she attracted her way.

The biggest horde came when she grew close to the hospital. Her car picked up speed. They were thicker than she'd seen them earlier, and she gritted her teeth, fighting to remain strong and run them down. What other choice did she have? She wasn't even sure where she was going yet.

There was one that was waving its arms at her erratically, and she forced the speed of her Jeep to grow even higher. She wasn't going to make the same mistake as before and let a zombie get stuck on her hood. This one, she was running down. The thumping noises began again, as the moans got louder. The blonde zombie that had been waving its arms at her still didn't move as she got closer.

But instead of opening its mouth to release the trademark groan that all the other creatures had, it did something else. "HEY! HEY!"

She kept going.

“I’m NOT a fucking zombie, DAMN IT!”

At the last second, it hit her. She’d finally stumbled on someone who was actually alive. Though, that wouldn’t be true for long, as she was moments away from hitting him. Her foot slammed on the brake, and her grip on the steering wheel tightened so much, her knuckles were ghost white, as the car spun before finally coming to a stop, only inches away from him. She hit the button that unlocked the door, leaned over, opened it, and stared at him.

“Get in!”

He ran to the car, climbed in, and slammed the door shut. Though it felt pointless, Riley locked the doors once again and sped away. The zombies followed at a creepily slow pace behind them. She took a good look at her new companion. He looked tired, as she was sure she did. He had a childlike face, tousled blonde hair, and eyes that matched the color of the ocean, her favorite place in the world. In his hands, she then noticed, was an axe, gripped tightly like the ultimate security blanket. He breathed heavily beside her. She drove in silence, until she found an empty alleyway, where there seemed to be no bodies. Whether that meant the ones who had been there had already risen, or that she’d actually found a small spot where no one had died, she wasn’t sure. They had long outrun the zombies, which, she’d learned, did not ever seem to pick up their pace. Because of that, she felt comfortable parking and shutting off her car.

It was then that he, at last, spoke. “Thanks...” He glanced at her and gave her a charming smile Riley was sure had worked for him many times in the past. “Name’s Nick, Nick Carter.”

“Riley Blake.”

He shook her hand while the other still held the axe. His hand was gentle and warm, and it comforted her to feel that right then, knowing everyone else was dead – or undead.

“Nice to meet ya. Just... thanks for pulling over. If you hadn’t...”

“No problem. Sorry about...”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I prolly would’ve thought you were a zombie, too, if it were me...”

“So they are zombies.” Even though that had been the term she’d been using in her mind, on camera, it hadn’t seemed real.

He shrugged, setting the axe down on the floorboard, finally, and turning fully towards her. “What else could they be? Glad to see *you*. Man, I thought everyone had fled or died...”

Riley shook her head, tilting her head at him. “Fled? No one had time to run from this...”

Nick sighed. “I wouldn’t know. Got in an-” He paused, his tongue unconsciously running over his lips, as he thought it over for a moment. “-accident. I’ve been snoozing in the hospital that past couple days and woke up just in time for this hell.”

She stared at him in a mix of shock and pity. He didn’t know? He’d had to wake up to this, without any clue... She would have to be the one to tell him that there was an almost sure chance that everyone he knew and loved was dead. She wasn’t sure if he was the luckiest man alive, or the most cursed.

“There... there was this disease, spread all up north Friday morning. By the end of the day, it’d come here. Everyone who caught the virus died. Everyone. No exceptions. I woke up Saturday evening to find nothing but bodies everywhere.” She coughed, trying to cover the break in her voice when she was reminded that she’d never see her family again, and then continued. “I never caught it; sounds like you didn’t either, or we’d be dead too. I woke up-” She decided then not to mention it had been in her car because she had been so distraught. “-and saw this. That’s all I know.”

Nick stared at her, as she watched him take it in. It was hard enough for her, who’d seen it all happen within the span of three days. She couldn’t even try to imagine how she would be dealing if she had woken up to this, without a clue as to what had happened, only that leagues of the undead wanted to eat her brains.

After about ten minutes that felt more to Riley like an hour, he spoke again. “You said everyone’s dead, pretty much?”

“I thought so, anyway. You’re the first person I’ve found alive. Power’s down everywhere. Before they rose, there were bodies all along the streets...”

He nodded, and his hand touched her shoulder gently. “Riley, I know you’ve known me about an hour at best. But I need to ask you a huge favor. You can say no, and I’ll get out and find a car to hotwire and try it myself. I just don’t want to attempt this alone, though. It’s hell, selfish, but I just really need this.”

“What is it?”

“I need you to take me to my place-”

“You’re insane, Nick.”

“I know, but I just... I need to check; I need to know.”

“You want me... to take you... to a place where there are almost guaranteed to be zombies waiting for us.”

“Basically, yes.”

“You’re insane, Nick.”

“You said that already.”

“I felt it needed repeating.”

“Please, Riley... I just- I need to know. Wouldn’t you, if you were me, and had just learned the world had gone to hell?”

Taking a deep breath, she thought about it. Logically, she knew it was stupid. They needed to just drive until they got to an open area and then figure out what steps to take next. They needed to leave. But at the same time, she felt for Nick. She felt his pain, and she knew why he had to see it for himself. She glanced back at him and made her decision. Riley started up the car.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Chapter 36

I’m not sure which was more frightening... “Reaper’s Sabbath,” as some of us have come to call it, on which I nearly lost Gabby and, for a time, was sure I was going to lose my own life and leave her orphaned... or the day after. The Day of Unholy Resurrection. The day on which the dead rose, and both my daughter and I found ourselves running for our lives.

The first day was scary, but sickness and death are natural. They are a part of life. I was shocked by how quickly the pandemic spread and how effectively it killed, but there are other diseases with the same potential for disaster.

The second day was truly horrific. Rising from death, in the physical sense, is completely unnatural... illogical... unexplainable. The walking dead... what satanic power is responsible for such an abomination? I shudder to think.

The world is a different place now. Our lives have completely changed. Our knowledge has changed. It seems nothing is out of the realm of possibility now,

and that is frightening. The unknown is frightening. What does the future hold? What will become of us?

If there's one comfort I have here, it is that I'm surrounded by decent people. People who look out for each other, who strive to keep us safe. If they've taught me anything, it's this: There are three things in this world that are still the same. The first is the inherent goodness of man. The second is man's will to survive. And the third is a mother's instinct... her instinct to protect her child.

That's natural. And that will never change.

Sunday, April 15, 2012

7:00 a.m.

The sun was just rising over Tampa when Jo awoke to the sounds of shouting and stampeding feet.

At first, she was alarmed and jumped out of bed, fearing burglars. Then she looked around the stark room and remembered she wasn't home, but at the air force base. She relaxed for just a moment, but the shouting continued, and as the pounding footsteps raced past her door, she remembered all that had happened the day before and became alarmed again. Trouble on a military base had to be worse than trouble at home, especially considering recent events.

Jo hesitated in the middle of the room she'd been given in the "TLF," as the military men called it. Temporary lodging facility, it stood for, and it was essentially a dormitory. She debated over whether or not to open her door and stick her head out into the hall to find out what was going on. On one hand, she was curious, anxious to know. On the other, if the shouting men weren't the same ones who had put her up here last night, she wasn't sure she wanted to attract attention to herself and Gabby, who was still asleep in the bed on the other side of the room.

Colonel Richardson had offered them separate rooms, but Gabby had insisted on sleeping with Jo. That had surprised her, considering her daughter was usually so disconnected, but she supposed it shouldn't have. She'd felt the same way, anxious to keep Gabby in her sight after their separation the day before. It was this instinct to protect her daughter that made her decision for her. She'd stay put, safe in her room and out of sight, until the sounds of panic stopped. If there was real trouble, she felt sure Colonel Richardson wouldn't forget them in here. In his relief at seeing two people who were alive and well even without gas masks, he'd bent over backwards to be hospitable to them yesterday.

Suddenly, she recognized his voice joining the others and remembered he'd said he was staying in a room just down the hall. "I'll be right there if you need anything in the night," he'd told them kindly, a true gentleman. His presence

reassured her, and she moved towards the door. She was just about to reach for the knob when someone on the other side of the door knocked. It was an urgent knock, and it startled her, causing her to jump back.

“Jo? It’s Colonel Richardson; are you awake? Jo?”

He knocked again, but Jo was already rushing for the doorknob. She opened the door to a gruesome scene in the hallway: Colonel Richardson was standing in front of her door, and behind him were two other men she’d met last night, an officer by the name of Edwards and a young private called Flakeland. They were both splattered with blood and together were cradling the limp body of a third soldier, dressed in torn and bloody military fatigues.

“Richardson said you’re a nurse?” The captain, Edwards, pelted the question at her and didn’t wait for an answer. “This woman was attacked; she needs medical attention. I don’t know if there’s anything you can do for her, but... dear God, you’re all we’ve got.”

Jo stepped back at once. “Bring her in,” she said, and the two soldiers rushed by her with the third. Richardson followed, giving her a brief nod of greeting. She couldn’t see much of his face through his gas mask, but his eyes looked grim.

Edwards and Flakeland lay the wounded soldier on Jo’s bed. As they set her down and backed out of the way, the woman’s head lolled to the side, and Jo gasped. The woman had suffered a massive head wound; the left side of her skull had been cracked wide open, her bloody scalp hanging in sheets. She still wore her gas mask, the kind she strapped on at the back of her head, but flesh had been torn from any part of her face not covered, and it was badly mutilated, a gaping hole where her left ear had been.

Carefully, with shaking hands, Jo unstrapped the gas mask and removed it. She regretted it instantly. It made it somehow worse, seeing the pretty young girl underneath, who looked like she’d been shoved into a meat grinder and yanked back out again.

“Was she shot?” Richardson demanded to know, and although his voice was sharp, commanding, Jo could detect the quiver of fear and revulsion in it. It was the same voice she’d heard attending physicians use in the ER when a particularly grisly trauma came in.

Jo started to shake her head even before one of the other soldiers answered. She’d worked on a number of GSWs to the head, but this looked like no gunshot she’d ever seen.

“No, sir,” gulped Flakeland. He didn’t even try to control the trembling in his own voice. “She was bitten.”

“Bitten??” Richardson repeated. “What do you mean, bitten? Bitten by what?”

Wondering the same thing, Jo looked up to see Flakeland and Edwards exchange glances through their gas masks.

“*Bitten by what??*” Richardson repeated, his voice rising. “What in God’s name-”

Edwards cleared his throat. “It was a... a person, sir.”

“No!” interjected Flakeland quickly, almost before the colonel or Jo could react. “Not a person... not anymore. It was a zombie that attacked her!”

There was a split second of silence, in which this information was digested. Then Richardson roared, “Alright! Enough of this bullshit. Flakeland, why don’t you take Jo’s daughter out of here – she shouldn’t see this. Jo, is there-”

“No, wait!” Jo cried, as the private moved towards the bed where Gabby lay sleeping. “Leave her be. My daughter... she’s a deep sleeper. If we all just lower our voices and calm down, we may not even wake her.” She took a deep breath. They all did. The room seemed to calm a fraction.

Jo felt relieved, until she turned her eyes back onto her patient. “What’s her name?” she asked quietly.

“Butler,” Flakeland said, his voice still shaking. He sounded near tears. “Private Amy Butler.”

Jo nodded. Her own throat was threatening to close up, but she swallowed hard to clear it. “I’m afraid Private Butler is dead,” she said. “This head wound is a fatal one. There’s... there’s gray matter all over her skull and in her hair. Brain tissue,” she added, when she caught the flicker of confusion in Flakeland’s eyes. She held his gaze long enough to see comprehension dawn, and then his eyes welled up, and he bowed his head.

There was a grave silence in the room, as Jo dutifully pressed two fingers to the carotid artery in the young woman’s neck – the side that had not been ravaged to a pulp. As she’d suspected, there was no pulse. Anything resembling a pulse would have been fleeting. No one could survive a head injury like that.

When she looked up, all three soldiers were watching her, waiting for the official confirmation. She shook her head slowly. “I’m sorry. She’s gone.”

“Damn it,” cursed Edwards in a low voice, turning away.

Richardson turned to Flakeland and grabbed him by both shoulders. “What did you mean by what you said earlier?”

“I... I meant what I said,” Flakeland gasped. “It... it was a horde of zombies, sir. Dead people – well, formerly dead, I guess – walking around, attacking. Soldiers and civilians... all victims of the plague, I guess.”

“You’re telling me that the people who died on this base – military men and their families – have come back to life as zombies. Am I understanding you, Flakeland?” asked Richardson, and Jo could hear the frustrated sarcasm in his voice.

Quivering, Flakeland nodded, and to Jo’s surprise, so did Edwards. “He’s telling the truth, Colonel Richardson,” the latter admitted, in a grim voice. “I recognized some of them. Men and women whose bodies we hauled out to the fire pits last night, to burn in the morning. I know it sounds crazy, sir, callin’ ‘em zombies, but... I witnessed it myself. I was guarding the front gate when I heard screaming and gunfire. I hopped in my Humvee and came upon the two privates, tryin’ to fight ‘em off. Looked like a goddamn mob scene. I... I hit one of ‘em, accidentally, when I saw ‘em jump Butler. It was a woman, and she went right down, but when I stopped the Hummer and jumped out, she got right up again and started comin’ towards me, draggin’ a busted leg behind her. I knew somethin’ wasn’t right.”

“I shot some,” Flakeland inserted, his eyes wide. “So did Butler! They just kept getting right back up! She couldn’t fight them off; there were too many of them! You have to shoot them in the head, or they just keep coming back. One of them bit me right here on the shoulder when I was trying to get them off Amy.”

For the first time, Jo noticed that the shoulder of his uniform was torn and that the shiny blood coating it – unlike the blood that covered the rest of them both from carrying Butler – was his own.

“Let me look at that,” she said. She moved Butler’s legs, heavy with dead weight in their combat boots, over to the wall and pressed Flakeland down onto the spot she’d cleared on the mattress. “Take off your jacket.”

The private stripped down to the plain white t-shirt he wore underneath his uniform and pushed up the blood-soaked sleeve. The wound was deep; a whole chunk of flesh had been torn from his shoulder, and she could clearly see teeth marks. Jo had treated a variety of animal bites before, usually from dogs, occasionally something wilder – once in a blue moon, even a shark – but these looked human, and she told Colonel Richardson so.

“I’m telling you, there’s zombies out there,” Flakeland insisted. “I wouldn’t make this up, sir, and neither would Edwards. Zombies killed Butler.”

Edwards nodded once in agreement, and Richardson shook his head. “I’m not doubting you, Flakeland,” he murmured. “I just... I can’t...”

Edwards put a hand on Richardson's shoulder. "We understand, sir. You have to see it to believe it."

"I need something to clean this bite out with," Jo spoke up. "Disinfectant of some sort. And some gauze."

Richardson put a hand to his mask in frustration. "This is just a lodging facility; there's no first aid supplies here. There's a Red Cross building down the street from here..."

"If any of us goes out there, we're all going," Edwards injected firmly. "It's not safe."

"Mom? What's not safe?"

Four heads turned to the bed across the room. All the talking had finally awakened Sleeping Beauty herself, Gabby, who was half-sitting up in bed, tangled in her sheet and blanket, her disheveled hair in her eyes and the t-shirt Colonel Richardson had loaned her to sleep in hanging off her shoulder. She blinked blearily in confusion at them.

"What's going on?"

"Go back to sleep," was Jo's first reaction, but that only served to put Gabby on alert. She sat up fully and looked past the officers. Her frown deepened, and then her eyes widened.

"What happened?? Is that girl-"

"Cover her," Jo hissed, and Flakeland quickly pulled the sheet from her bed up over Private Butler's face. To Gabby, Jo said, "We're not sure what's going on, sweetheart. That's what we're trying to figure out. Something..." She refused to use the word "zombie." "... attacked her."

"*What* did? What attacked her??"

They all exchanged glances. No one wanted to repeat what they'd just convinced Jo and Richardson to believe.

"We're not sure," Edwards finally answered for the group. His voice was flat, and Jo could tell by the way Gabby's eyes narrowed suspiciously that she didn't buy it. She was too perceptive for her own good sometimes.

"I'll settle for antibacterial soap and water for now," said Jo, eager to stop Gabby's line of questioning. "And anything you can bring me to cover this up."

“I’ll go,” said Edwards, and he hurried from the room, returning a few minutes later with a small basin of warm water, a bottle of liquid soap, a washcloth, and a couple of towels. Jo set to work at once gently cleaning and dressing the wound with the towels.

“Just hold that to your shoulder, and that should stop the bleeding,” she assured Flakeland, who was looking pretty green around the gills beneath his gas mask. His skin felt hot and clammy. She worried shock was starting to set in. “Maybe we should have you lie down,” she suggested, looking around the room. “Gabrielle, would you mind giving up your bed for this young man? We’ll get you some fresh sheets later.”

“Or a fresh room,” added Colonel Richardson. Jo flashed him a grateful smile and a nod. Somehow, she knew Gabby wouldn’t be keen on spending another night in a room where a girl had died, on a bed where this bleeding man had lain.

Gabby reluctantly got out of bed, tugging self-consciously on her t-shirt, though it already hung to her knees. She stood back out of the way while Jo walked Private Flakeland to her bed and eased him down on it. “There you go... now lie down and rest; your body’s been through quite a shock,” she spoke softly to him in a nurturing voice. He couldn’t have been much older than twenty, more scared than hurt. She concentrated on caring for him while the two senior officers spoke in low, conspiratorial voices about what to do next. “What’s your first name, Private Flakeland?” she asked him.

“J... Justin,” he croaked, and no sooner had his name left his lips than his eyes suddenly rolled back into his head, and his whole body began to twitch violently.

“Justin?” Jo repeated his name loudly, attracting the attention of everyone else in the room.

“What’s happening??” Richardson demanded in alarm. “Is he having a seizure?”

“It looks like it,” confirmed Jo, a heavy feeling of trepidation settling into her chest. She recalled all the people she’d seen go into convulsions yesterday, leading into cardiac arrest.

“Is it the virus?” Richardson asked, his thoughts on the same wavelength as hers. “Could it have spread through the bite?”

“I’m wondering the same thing,” Jo admitted, watching helplessly as the young soldier twitched and flailed.

“Can’t you stop it?”

Jo shook her head. “The only way to stop a seizure is with an anti-seizure drug, which I’m sure you don’t have here either. Otherwise, they just have to run their course. It should be over soon.”

And so they waited, until at last, the spasms slowed, and Justin’s body fell heavy and limp upon the mattress. By then, Gabby was crying, her face turned into the corner so she wouldn’t have to watch. Everyone else was silent, nervously waiting to see if he would regain consciousness. Jo took his wrist to check for a pulse, and though she’d feared it was inevitable, she was shocked to find that his heart had already stopped.

“No pulse,” she murmured. She leaned over Flakeland, rubbing her knuckles against his breastbone to try and stimulate some kind of response. “Justin? Justin!” She took his mask off to check for breathing. She tried a few chest compressions, but nothing brought back his vital signs. “He’s gone,” she admitted at last, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Just like that??” Edwards said in disbelief, shaking his head. “All from the bite, you think?”

“That has to be it. He wasn’t showing any other signs of the virus, was he?” She looked Justin’s body over. His pallor was gray now, but not pocked with the same lesions she had noticed on the victims at the hospital. He hadn’t had the virus before today; she was sure of it.

Edwards and Richardson both agreed that he hadn’t, confirming her theory and, as far as Jo was concerned, Flakeland’s entire story. The two dead soldiers, one bitten, one utterly mutilated, were all the confirmation she needed to believe there was a threat worse than the virus itself lurking outside.

She looked to the two officers. “Do you have a plan for dealing with... what’s out there?” she asked cryptically. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gabby turn to look at her. She was staying out of the way, but she was listening.

Edwards looked as grim as ever. “I think we should stay put for now. There were more of them out there than there are of us. We took out a few to get them away from Private Butler, but we were still outnumbered. And if our theory proves right, there’ll be more...”

His eyes took on a faraway look, and Jo could understand why. She had watched him and the others dispose of the bodies in mass cremation piles on the outskirts of the base yesterday. They’d burned many of the remains, but there had been more lined up for their turn today. If Edwards was right, if Flakeland had been right, the dead would no longer be lying amongst the smoldering ashes.

“More *what?*” asked Gabby, and before anyone could find a way to deter her questions again, she stamped her bare foot against the industrial tiled floor and

insisted, “I *know* you know, and I deserve to know too! I’m thirteen years old; I’m not a little kid anymore! Tell me what’s going on!”

Jo looked apologetically at Edwards and Richardson, embarrassed by her daughter’s disrespectful outburst in front of the two officers, before rounding on Gabby to scold her. But before she could say anything, Colonel Richardson shrugged at Edwards and said, “I think she has a point. Everyone here deserves to be briefed on the situation. It’s all of our lives at stake. Do you agree, Jo?” He turned a meaningful look upon Jo, who hesitated, flustered, and finally nodded her consent.

In the seconds before Richardson relayed what Edwards and Flakeland had told him, Jo watched her daughter with sadness. She was barely thirteen, and yet, she was right: in many ways, she was no longer a child. In the last day, she had seen death, witnessed the breakdown of society as they’d known it. How far into society that breakdown reached, no one yet knew. But it was clear the world had changed, and Gabby with it. What she was about to hear would change her further, just as it had changed all of them.

Colonel Richardson cleared his throat before turning his attention to Gabby. Despite the barrier of his gas mask, Jo admired the way he looked right at her when he talked to her, like she was his equal. “Captain Edwards and Private Flakeland were attacked by a group of people outside. They killed Private Butler, and we believe the bite they inflicted on Justin Flakeland is what killed him, too.” Richardson kept his voice controlled and even, and the way he spoke in his low, easy drawl was calming, despite the frightening things he was saying. “We think they had the virus that’s been killing almost everyone... and we think they’d already died from it.”

Gabby frowned, her brow knitting in disbelief. “But then... you mean-?”

Richardson perched on the foot of the bed which held Flakeland’s body, looked her full on in the face, and nodded. “I mean that they seem to be dead people, come back to life... or something resembling life. They’re not the same as they were, that’s for sure... not if they did this.” He made a vague, sweeping gesture that encompassed both Flakeland and Butler.

“Like... zombies?” The word came out as a whisper.

Richardson nodded. “I guess so.”

“For real?? This isn’t, like, ‘Scare Tactics’ or something, is it?” She looked around, craning her neck, as if searching for hidden cameras. Jo didn’t have a clue what “Scare Tactics” was, but marveled over her daughter’s cynicism.

Richardson shook his head and answered with the same quiet sensibility that made Jo innately respect and trust him. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Gabby's reaction surprised her. Jo wasn't sure what she was expecting – screaming terror? A flood of frightened tears? But all Gabby said was, "Wow... this is just like 'Resident Evil.'"

Jo only knew vaguely that this was a video game, but Richardson seemed to know more. He nodded, and though his mouth was concealed by his mask, she could tell by the way his eyes crinkled at the corners that he had actually cracked a smile.

"I guess so."

"Well, what are we gonna do?" Gabby asked, looking around the room. No one had an answer for her. Edwards's plan of waiting seemed as good as any for now, but they all knew they would need another one eventually.

And then something happened that would change the plan immediately.

Amy Butler sat up.

As the sheet fell off her body, Gabby was the first to shriek and jump back, even though she was clear across the room. Edwards, who was closest, uttered a half-repressed shout that sounded like "Gah!" and scrambled away, his eyes wide with disbelief. Jo watched in horror as the young woman dragged her legs stiffly off of the mattress, until her combat boots hit the floor with a heavy thump. Then she wrenched her upper body around to align with the lower half. Her eyes opened, and they were clouded over with a white film. The mottled, gray tissue of what was left of her brain oozed from the open fracture in her skull, and Jo knew she had not mispronounced this woman's death.

What she was looking at now was the living dead.

She retracted, instinctively, back as far as she could go, which was Gabby's bed on the opposite side of the room, the bed now occupied by Justin Flakeland's dead body. That was when she felt the mattress behind her move and knew, before she heard Gabby's second scream, before she turned to see for herself, that Justin Flakeland was not so dead anymore.

"Get out!" Richardson's voice suddenly boomed. "Go! Run!" He grabbed Gabby first by the arm and practically yanked her into the hall, then turned back for the others.

Jo launched herself towards the door and looked over her shoulder at the same time, stumbling into Edwards. Flakeland had risen as well and was dragging himself off the bed. Butler was already lurching towards them, moving stiff-legged, her feet pointed inward, the reinforced toes of her boots scraping the tile.

Edwards caught Jo and hurried her into the hall. Richardson slammed the door shut behind them, then said, "I don't have a key to lock it. We've gotta get out of here – go!"

It was Edwards who led the way now. Jo reached for Gabby's hand and followed at his heels, aware of Richardson bringing up the rear. She could hear thumps and scratching noises from inside the door even as their footsteps reverberated through the hall. They rounded the corner, ducked into the stairwell, and spiraled downwards. Edwards's heavy boots pounded loudly against the concrete steps, but Richardson, having been roused from his sleep, was in slippers, and Jo and Gabby were both barefoot, their feet slapping the cement.

When they reached the ground level, Edwards stopped them shy of the door that led outside and drew his gun. It was a big gun, but it didn't give Jo much reassurance, not when she pictured the brains foaming out the side of Butler's head. Private Butler, she was sure, had been armed as well.

"I'll lead," Edwards said, speaking in a hushed voice. "Stay behind me, but keep close. Lieutenant Colonel, sir, you cover us from behind."

"You got it, Captain," replied Richardson.

Edwards pushed open the heavy door emblazoned with an Emergency Exit sign. An alarm went off, but the four ignored it as they crept outside. The light of the early morning sun was a welcomed relief. Jo didn't think she would have the courage to venture out in darkness.

"Let's go to the chapel," murmured Edwards, pointing his gun towards a building across a long parking lot. "We should be able to barricade ourselves in there."

"Sounds like a plan," Richardson agreed.

Jo squeezed Gabby's hand and pulled her daughter closer to her side.

They had only made it a few paces across the parking lot when they heard a terrible, strangled sort of moan that ran chills through Jo and made her hair stand on end. She turned towards the sound and gasped, as a figure lurched from the shadows, moving with the same, stiff gait as Butler. Edwards cocked his gun and aimed, but before he could fire, more of them appeared behind the first.

Jo heard a click behind her and looked back to see Richardson also with his gun raised, though pointed the other way. She followed the line of his gun barrel and felt her heart sink at the sight of yet more zombies coming towards them from the opposite direction. They were completely outnumbered, and if they didn't move fast, they were about to be surrounded as well.

Edwards seemed to recognize this. He fired, and as the first zombie fell, he turned and shouted, "Richardson, take them and run! I got this!" He aimed again and fired a second time.

The loud blasts of the gunfire made Jo jump and Gabby clap her hands over her ears, but when the colonel yelled, "C'mon!" and beckoned them to follow him, they followed, running as fast as they could.

The blacktop surface of the parking lot was scattered with tiny pebbles and soot that cut into the bottom of Jo's bare feet, but she ignored this, running like she hadn't run in many years. Gabby, with the natural endurance of a child, broke ahead of her, but kept looking back, screaming, "C'mon, Mom! Run!"

"Keep going!" Jo shouted, urging her forward. "I'm right behind you!"

She heard gun blasts from behind her, as Edwards took out more of their would-be attackers. In front of them, Richardson slowed down to aim at a couple of zombies who had appeared ahead. He fired once, and the first zombie fell straight backwards, a bullet wound to the forehead. He aimed again, fired, and the second zombie twisted to a heap on the ground with a shot to the neck. More emerged from the shadows, but they were almost to the church. Jo could see a back entrance just a few more yards ahead.

Richardson reached it first and opened it, then stood guard as he beckoned furiously to Gabby and Jo, ready to take out any creature that tried to block their path. Gabby reached him first, and he shoved her on into the building. Winded and panting, Jo stumbled through the door after her and immediately doubled over to catch her breath.

"Let's go, Edwards!" she heard Richardson shout, but she didn't look back. She didn't want to see any more. She started to lead Gabby further into the safety of the building, but Richardson said, "Wait!" When she paused and looked back, he added, "Wait for me to clear the building... just in case there's more in here."

Jo hadn't considered that, but now, she shuddered at the prospect and pulled Gabby back into a protective hug at her side. They waited until they heard the pounding of Edwards's boots on the pavement, and at last, he burst through the door. Richardson shut it immediately behind him and bolted it.

"We need to compass the building," he told Edwards.

"I'll do it," Edwards volunteered quickly. There was an odd look in his eyes, but with the gas mask hiding most of his face, Jo couldn't identify it. "Take them into one of the Sunday school rooms; those should be small, easy to defend."

Richardson nodded and motioned for Jo and Gabby to follow him again. They did, down a hallway and into a small classroom with a few tables spread with

Bible coloring books and crayons. “Have at it,” said the colonel with a wink at Gabby, but she didn’t smile. She sank into a perch on one of the small, child-size chairs and hugged her knobby knees – still very much a child’s knees – to her chest. Jo sat down on the edge of the table, her own knees weak and quivery, as much from fear as from running.

And they waited.

They waited in tense silence, listening, until, at last, Edwards reappeared. “All clear,” he announced, but he didn’t look relieved. His eyes still held a grim shadow, and when he said, “Richardson? Could I have a private word?” Jo got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Richardson started to move into the hall, but Gabby brazenly called out, “Hey! Whatever it is, you can say it in front of us. We have a right to know, just like before. Right, Mom?”

Jo couldn’t find it in her to agree out loud; she felt that, once again, Gabby was verging on disrespect. But in her heart, she did agree. She didn’t want to be sheltered to the point of being kept in darkness, in ignorance.

Edwards hesitated, sizing Gabby up. His eyes darkened even more, and then he said, “Alright, kid. You wanna know? Here, have a look.” And he turned around.

Gabby gasped aloud and nearly toppled backwards in her little chair. Jo didn’t react audibly, but felt her heart sink.

There was a chunk of flesh missing from the captain’s lower back.

He’d been bitten.

“I can feel it coming over me,” he said, and his voice was shaking now, as was his whole body. “The pain... the fever... I can feel myself starting to sweat and shake. Any minute now, I could collapse in convulsions just like that Flakeland kid and wake up wanting to rip your heads off with my teeth.”

He cocked his gun then, and it was Jo who screamed first and lunged in front of Gabby, her first instinct to protect her. But Edwards let out a derisive laugh and instead pointed the gun at his own head.

“Don’t!” shrieked Gabby in horror, and Jo pulled her to her side, shielding Gabby’s eyes against her body. Gabby struggled, her muffled voice screaming, “Don’t let him!” but Jo held her tight, refusing to let her see.

“Charlie, wait,” said Richardson, holding up a hand.

“You do it then! Put me out of my fucking misery before I end up like them! Please!” Edwards pleaded. His eyes were huge now, with savagery and fear. The hand holding his gun was shaking so badly, Jo wasn’t sure he’d have the strength to pull the trigger even if he’d wanted to right then.

“Not here,” spoke Richardson in that low, strangely calming voice. “Not in front of them.”

“Then let’s go.”

Edwards turned, and Richardson followed him into the hall. Gabby broke out of Jo’s hold and watched them go through wide, tear-filled eyes, shaking her head in denial. “No... oh my god... Mama, don’t let him... don’t let him.”

Jo said nothing, just put her arm around Gabby and held her. She wanted to cover her ears now, instead of her eyes, but it wouldn’t have done any good.

When it happened, the single shot shook the building. It rattled Jo’s insides and made her feel like vomiting.

With a guttural sob, Gabby collapsed against her shoulder.

AN: Dedicated to TantalisinTeaser. Thanks so much for all your detailed reviews, Amy! Sorry to make you dead in your cameo... wasn't a lot of choice in a world where most everyone is dead! LOL Have fun eating people's BRAAAAAINSSS! =D

Chapter 37

I've always been something of a loner. I guess that sounds weird, coming from someone who was married, who was surrounded by people at work every day, and who was liked by most of them. But it's true. I had friends, of course. I got along well with my colleagues. And I loved my husband. But at heart, I was always the shy girl, the private one, who kept to herself and enjoyed just being alone.

At school, I taught my students about teamwork and cooperation and encouraged them to work in groups. I think I'm a team player when I need to be, but the truth is, I always hated working in groups, relying on other people. I was the kind of person who would rather just do things by myself, for myself. I believed in myself. I was raised to be independent, and I was. I am.

But there are just some times when it doesn't make sense to be alone, and ever since the day the undead rose, I've been glad I wasn't. I'm glad that I'm not. I don't think anyone could endure this life on their own. We need each other to survive. If we don't work together, we won't make it. Teamwork and cooperation are essential.

The best decision I made that day was stopping to rescue a stranger. I could just as easily have kept on driving, at less risk to myself, but I know now that, aside from being selfish, even cruel, that would have been a huge mistake. If I hadn't picked him up, I don't think I'd be alive right now. I owe my life to him, but I don't consider it a debt: I'm glad to owe him my life.

I'm glad he's in my life.

I'm glad I'm not alone.

Sunday, April 15, 2012

8:00 a.m.

Never in her life had Gretchen picked up a hitchhiker, and if she'd seen the man currently riding in her passenger seat standing by the side of the road, rather than trapped in a car surrounded by zombies, she almost certainly would have sped on by, perhaps even mistaken him for one of *them*. It would have been an easy mistake to make, judging by the state he was in.

It was only once the sun had come up that she'd gotten a clear view of the man she'd rescued. His navy blue windbreaker and plaid pajama bottoms were spattered with blood, and there was some on his face too. His eyes seemed sunken in dark circles, and the rest of his face was pale white. In the last few hours, this man had been through hell. She didn't know details and wasn't sure she wanted to. The blood spoke for itself.

His name was Brian Littrell, and he'd come from Marietta. That was all she knew about him and all she needed to, for now. It was not enough to make her trust him, but she had no choice but to do so, and no reason not to. In the two hours they'd been driving down I-75, they'd seen no other living people, only scattered clusters of the undead on the outskirts of towns. Though he'd been mostly quiet since she'd picked him up, Gretchen was grateful to have someone with her, particularly a man.

She didn't like to think of herself as the weak, damsel-in-distress type of woman, but she had to admit, Brian's presence reassured her. He wasn't a big man – in fact, she was willing to bet she had a couple of pounds on him, herself – but there was a certain strength that seemed to radiate from him. Maybe it was the blood and sweat that stained his clothes and skin, but those were evidence enough: this

man could fight. He *had* fought, and she had no doubt that he would protect her, if it became necessary.

If. There were as many “ifs” as there were “whys” and “what nows.” She didn’t have a clue where they were going or what they were going to do. She just kept driving, hoping for a sign, a plan, anything to set their course. They couldn’t just drive forever, but she was afraid to stop, remembering the zombies’ tendency to swarm around parked cars with live people inside.

Up ahead was an overpass, on which two large, green road signs were mounted. The interstate split, one way veering east, the other continuing south. She cleared her throat and said, “Looks like the road forks. Which way should we go... Savannah or Valdosta?”

Brian had been so quiet until now, she didn’t expect him to have a preference. Anticipating a shrug or a grunt in response, she prepared to stay left and head east, toward Savannah. It was the bigger city of the two and located on the coast, which seemed like it would give them more options and more chances to find other survivors than continuing south, through rural Georgia.

But Brian cleared his throat and said, “If you don’t mind, I think we should keep heading south.” When she glanced over at him, he added, “I’ve got a cousin in the Air Force. He’s down in Tampa, at the MacDill base. He called me... Friday, I guess it was. Said the sickness had hit the base, but he was alright. Said they were wearing gas masks. He wasn’t sick. He sounded fine.”

“So you think there may be survivors there?”

Now he did shrug. “No way of knowing for sure, but it’s worth a shot, don’t you think?”

“Sure. It’s as good a plan as any,” said Gretchen, and she stayed in the right-hand lane. “You said your cousin called you... I don’t suppose you have a phone with a signal left now, do you?”

Brian shook his head slowly. “No signal since Saturday morning,” he mumbled. “And before then, no one answered anyway...” Still, he pulled his cell phone out of the pocket of his windbreaker and checked. “Nothing,” he sighed a second later and stowed it away.

Gretchen sighed too, the spark of hope quickly dying. “Figures. I’ve been trying to get a hold of my husband. He used to be in the military himself, but now he works for the CDC in Atlanta. He got called up to USAMRIID at Fort Detrick in Maryland when this virus first hit. The last I heard from him was early yesterday morning... He said he might come back, if they didn’t get any closer to finding a treatment. I was supposed to wait for him at home. But then I woke up this morning, and there were...”

She trailed off. It still felt insane to say the word “zombies” aloud, as if she were in the middle of some B movie shown late at night on the Sci-fi Channel. Brian knew what she meant, though, and nodded, making it okay to leave off there. She thought he might open up a little about his own experience, but he did not. It felt strange to be the one doing most of the talking; usually, Gretchen was known as the “quiet one.” But Brian, she sensed, was not just shy.

He was haunted.

Anxious to change the subject and spare him from whatever he must be going through inside his mind, she asked, “So... what do you do? For a living, I mean.”

“Oh...” Brian paused, as if taken aback by the question. “I teach music,” he answered finally.

“Really?” she replied with interest. “I’m a teacher, too. Third grade. What grades do you teach?”

“Uh, junior high. Seventh- and eighth-graders.”

“Oh wow... good for you. It takes a special kind to teach junior high; I could never do it. I’m happy with the fifth-grade-and-under crowd.” Gretchen smiled. “It must be great to teach music. Are you choral or band or both?”

“Choral.”

“So you sing?” She looked over at him with interest. She felt relieved to know that, beneath the blood and shadows, he had to be a regular person, a good person, to do something as innocent as teach music to middle-schoolers. “I like to sing, but not in front of anyone. I’m not very good, and I’m way too self-conscious about it,” she babbled on, with a nervous laugh, eager to fill the silence now that they’d started to talk. “I do love music though...”

Brian’s only reply was a dull, “Me too.”

Sensing he wasn’t up for a conversation, Gretchen stopped talking after that. She turned up the volume on her car stereo a little and handed him her mp3 player. “Feel free to browse,” she offered.

“Whatever you’ve got is fine,” mumbled Brian and returned the player to her cup holder.

Gretchen nodded. With music to fill the silence between them, she drove on.

It was outside of Macon, Georgia that they hit their first major roadblock – literally. Gretchen took her foot off the accelerator and slowed down as she

pulled up to the scene of a traffic jam that clogged all four lanes of freeway, including the exit ramp, where she could see cars stalled bumper to bumper all the way down.

“What now? Should I turn around?” she asked uncertainly.

“We’d be backtracking. You’ve got a small car; I bet we can squeeze through... try the grass, between the highway and the off-ramp,” suggested Brian, pointing.

“Okay...” Gretchen eased forward, guiding her car carefully off the road and over the patch of grass that separated the lanes. It quickly became apparent that this was a mistake, though, when she found herself blocked by a truck that had tried to exit late and was stalled between the freeway and the ramp. There was no way she could get around it; her Cobalt was walled in on both sides by other cars. The only way out was in reverse.

“Then again, maybe not,” said Brian. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” Gretchen shifted gears and raised her eyes automatically to the rearview mirror as she started to back up. Suddenly, she screamed and slammed on the brake again.

“What??” Brian twisted around in his seat to look. Gretchen heard him draw in a sharp breath as he caught sight of what had made her scream.

Zombies. A small flock of them had converged behind the car. She could see them lumbering around in her rearview mirror, hear the taps of their hands thumping against the trunk. Horrified, she met Brian’s eyes. “What are we gonna do?”

“Put the car back into park. Maybe... maybe if we just stay put, hold still and keep quiet, they’ll go away.”

Gretchen remembered how the zombies had surrounded her car in the driveway of her house, how she’d feared they would break the windows with their relentless beating. “I think you’re thinking of T-rexes,” she said shakily. “Somehow, I don’t think these guys work the same way. I had to run some down to get out of my driveway this morning.”

Brian shrugged. “So... let’s do that.”

“Okay...”

Shuddering, Gretchen released the brake and floored the gas. The car rocketed backwards, and she let out a little gasp as it struck several zombies with a sickening thump. She and Brian were thrown against their seatbelts as the car

bumped over the fallen bodies. And then, suddenly, the Cobalt lurched to an abrupt stop.

“What happened?” Brian demanded, turning around to look again. “Keep going – you’re doing fine!”

Gretchen pressed the pedal as far as it would go and heard the motor rev loudly, but the car barely moved. “I’m trying!” she cried. “I think we’re stuck! We’re stuck on their bodies!” She pictured the car wedged on a heap of half-crushed bodies, its tires spinning futilely, and felt sick.

“Can you go forward?”

She switched gears and tried, but only succeeded in revving the engine more. “Oh God... oh God, what do we do?” she panicked. The remaining zombies had surrounded the car now. Their gray, festering faces and hands pressed against the windows as they tried to find a way in. Just as before, she feared it wouldn’t take them long; with enough strength, they could break the glass.

Brian looked around. His jaw was set, his eyes narrow and determined. He looked more alive than he had the entire time he’d been riding in the car with her, and she could tell his mind was hard at work. “We’ve gotta bail,” he decided after a few seconds.

“Bail? How are we supposed to get out of the car? They’re everywhere! The minute we open the door, they’ll be on us!” Gretchen protested.

“You’re right; we can’t get out through the doors. We’ll go out through the top.” He looked up. “The moon roof.”

Gretchen followed his gaze upward to her moon roof, which had been a selling point when she’d bought the Cobalt four years ago. She’d never so much as stuck her head out of it, let alone tried to climb through it. But she thought through the idea. “And what then? The car’s not that tall; they’ll still be able to reach our legs. And we can’t jump down with them surrounding the car... I dunno about you, but I’d never make it over their heads; they’d be all over me in an instant...”

“No, you’re right; we’d need to get away first, put some distance between them and us. We’ll stay on the roofs.” He gestured at the long string of cars ahead, and Gretchen suddenly understood where his plan was headed. She pictured them vaulting from car to car.

“I don’t know...”

“I don’t think we have a choice. The other option is to stay in the car and wait for them to break in. We’ve got to try and run for it. Once we get over a few cars, they’ll have a hard time trying to get through this mess. We’ll get to the first car

that's in a clear position to get out of the jam, and we'll take that one," said Brian. Suddenly, he seemed rational and assured. She had no choice but to trust him.

"Okay," she agreed with a shudder.

While the zombies pounded on the exterior of the car, she and Brian unbuckled their seatbelts and stowed their few belongings in her backpack. "You got any weapons in the car?" Brian asked. "A tire iron, anything like that?"

Gretchen shook her head slowly. "Sorry, I don't have a clue how to change a tire. All I've got is an umbrella and an ice scraper, in the backseat."

Brian grimaced. "Not sure the umbrella's gonna do much good, but we should take the scraper... just in case."

The thought of killing a zombie with an ice scraper was laughable, but Gretchen reached back and found it on the floor of the backseat. It did make her feel a little better, to be holding something hard in her hand. And then she remembered the gun.

"Wait! I do have a weapon! Shawn's gun... in my bag." She carefully drew the gun from her pack and showed it to Brian. "It's an antique... I've never used it, hardly even held it before... but it's something, right?"

"Better than an ice scraper!" Brian agreed, one corner of his mouth twitching in a faint glimmer of a smile. "You wanna take it, or you want me to?"

"You can," Gretchen said and gladly handed it over. "Have you ever fired a gun before?"

A humorless chuckle escaped his lips. "No. But I guess there's a first time for everything." He rose from his seat and slipped the gun into the front pocket of his jacket, while she struggled to put on her backpack in the confines of the car. "Open your moon roof," he directed her. "I'll go through first, and then I'll pull you up, okay? You ready?"

She took a deep breath and released it shakily. "I guess it's now or never." She reached up to the button that controlled the moon roof and pushed it, holding it in while the glass began to move, slowly sliding open.

Brian climbed up onto the passenger seat and put his head through. He was able to boost himself up and onto the roof of the car using mostly his arms, a feat Gretchen didn't think she would have been able to accomplish on her own. When he was through, he crouched on the edge and reached his hand down. "Okay, come on."

Gretchen shook as she followed his lead, standing up on her seat and taking his hand. He helped pull her up as she climbed through the opening. She was okay until she found herself crouched on a narrow strip of metal on the roof of the car, looking down at a cluster of zombies who were looking stupidly back up at her, arms outstretched, moaning hungrily. Then panic and vertigo set in, and she began to wobble.

“Come on, Gretchen,” said Brian, grabbing her upper arm and squeezing tightly. “Stand up... careful, but quick.” He rose from his crouch, pulling her with him. Holding onto him for stability, she felt more confident, until she felt a cold, stiff hand latch onto her ankle.

She screamed, as the hand pulled, dragging her foot clear out from under her. She went down hard, falling into Brian and nearly knocking him off the top of the car. Luckily, he was agile and sunk back to a crouch, helping to cushion her fall. Her right side hit the rim of the moon roof, and she cried out as shockwaves of pain rippled through her ribcage. But her attention was quickly drawn away from the pain by the sensation of being pulled by the ankle. She could feel her body sliding off the roof and screamed again in desperation. “It’s got me! Brian!! Don’t let it pull me off!”

“I’ve gotcha!” he promised, holding onto her arms. “Kick! Kick it away, and I’ll pull you back up!”

She kicked blindly and managed to connect with some part of the zombie’s body. It was enough to break its hold on her, and in the split second before another zombie latched on, Brian pulled, and she scrambled back onto the roof.

“Let’s go!” shouted Brian, and, grabbing her hand, he jumped down onto the hood of her car. She followed him as he leaped from there onto the trunk of the nearest car in the congested highway lane, then climbed up and over the roof.

They continued on this way, scrambling over one vehicle and onto the next. It wasn’t as fast as running, but it put them out of the reach of the undead. Zombies, Gretchen realized, chancing a look over her shoulder, appeared to lack the coordination needed to climb onto a car, and they were quickly barricaded behind the same traffic jam that had stranded Gretchen and Brian in their midst in the first place.

The congested lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic lasted longer than Gretchen had anticipated, but from her new vantage point, she didn’t regret leaving the Cobalt behind. It never would have made it through this mess. Their only alternative would have been to backtrack to the nearest exit and find an alternate route back onto the interstate.

Now they looked ahead for a new vehicle that was in a position to be driven away. Toward the front of the line, there was a moving truck jack-knifed across two

lanes, blocking everything behind it. Ahead of it was a pick-up that appeared to have careened off the side of the road, uprooting a speed limit sign in its path. Its front was smashed into the guardrail on the narrow shoulder of the road. The only option appeared to be a white SUV that was stalled in the left-hand lane, with nothing blocking its path. Gretchen guessed the driver had stopped it there to die, probably causing the pick-up truck to swerve out of its way, the moving truck to jack-knife, and the other cars to pile up behind them.

“The SUV,” she told Brian, pointing it out.

He agreed, and they made their way to it. The landscape seemed clear of zombies now, and they were almost onto an overpass, making the likelihood of any zombies wandering onto the road from the sides very slim. It seemed they were almost out of danger, as long as they could take the SUV and drive away before the zombies found a way through the traffic jam.

But when they approached the white SUV, Gretchen gasped and jumped back. “There’s one of them inside!”

A lone zombie woman struggled behind the wheel, writhing convulsively in the driver’s seat, with apparently no mental capacity to work out how to escape her own vehicle.

“It’s just one,” said Brian slowly, almost calmly. “We can let it out and then kill it.” He drew Shawn’s gun from his coat pocket. “Go around to the front... you open the door and stay behind it, out of the way. When it comes out, I’ll shoot it in the head, and we’ll jump in. Sound easy enough?”

Gretchen swallowed hard. “I guess?” She didn’t want to go anywhere near the SUV, but it seemed their best option, and as long she stayed out of reach, as long as Brian could aim, the plan would work.

The zombie’s thrashing movements intensified as she crept up to the door. Her hand shook as she reached for the handle.

“That’s it,” Brian coached her. “I’m right behind you... I’m ready for her when you are...” He was already pointing the gun, ready for his shot.

“Okay... here goes.” Shuddering, Gretchen pulled the handle and leaped back, yanking the car door with her. She stayed behind it, using it like a shield, as the zombie spilled out.

Brian waited until the zombie straightened up. Then he aimed at her head and pulled the trigger.

The gun emitted a hollow click. It did not fire.

Brian jumped back in surprise, turning the gun over in his hand. “Is this thing loaded?!” he roared, raising panicked eyes to meet Gretchen’s.

Too late, she realized her mistake. “Oh my God... I don’t know! I don’t know; it was dark, and I just grabbed it; I wasn’t thinking!” she cried, horrified at this deadly oversight.

“You don’t have any ammo??”

“No... I don’t think so, no!”

With a strangled cry, Brian threw the gun at the zombie. It ricocheted off her head, but of course did no damage. The zombie barely reacted, other than its head tilting backwards with the force. It staggered toward Brian, arms reaching, mouth open wide.

“Quick – I need a weapon!” he shouted as he scrambled backwards.

Gretchen looked around and suddenly spotted the speed-limit sign that had been knocked over by the pick-up truck. It was lying on its side, its post uprooted from the ground. “The sign!” she cried and ran towards it, picking it up. It was heavier than she’d imagined, but she managed to drag it over to Brian, who was dodging the zombie’s clumsy swipes.

Brian lifted the signpost with surprising strength, given his wiry frame. With a shout that sounded almost like a battle cry, he charged the zombie and, using the signpost like a jousting lance, he rammed it through her torso, impaling the zombie in a spray of guts that showered both him and Gretchen. When the creature fell, he jammed the post down further, effectively pinning it to the ground.

Gretchen watched in horror as the zombie continued to writhe and moan around the post through its middle. There was no blood loss and no sign that the zombie would stop struggling and die.

“You have to kill the brain,” said Brian in a low, detached voice, “to kill one of them.” With this almost off-handed remark, he walked quite casually to the open driver’s side door and climbed in. “Keys are here,” he told Gretchen. “Get in.”

Trembling all over, Gretchen went around to the passenger side and climbed up into the SUV. She was relieved Brian was driving now; she was shaking so badly, she didn’t think she’d have been able to. She slumped down in her seat, exhausted, panting, her head spinning. As Brian turned the key in the ignition, she looked down at herself and felt her stomach roll.

“It’s all over me!” she cried out in horror, seeing the bits of zombie insides that had spattered not only her pajamas, but her bare arms and legs as well. “Oh

God...” Her gag reflex kicked in, and she began to retch, not actually bringing anything up, but unable to stop gagging.

“I know... I know,” Brian murmured. “I just wanna get away from here... then we can stop and find somewhere to clean up, alright?”

“Oh please... thank you,” Gretchen gasped. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so nauseated – morning sickness paled in comparison.

“Hang on,” Brian reassured her. He sped away from the traffic jam, leaving it a mere glimmer in the rearview mirror.

“Look... there’s hotels over there,” said Gretchen a few minutes later, pointing out the window as they drove past the outskirts of Macon. “Maybe we-”

“Sorry; I don’t think we should stop at a hotel,” Brian replied. “If there were people staying there when they died, that means there’ll be zombies there now. No, I think we’re better off getting away from the populated areas and finding a house, somewhere in the country. There’ll be less zombies where there were less people around to die.”

As much as she hated sitting in the car covered in zombie guts, Gretchen couldn’t argue with his logic. She closed her eyes while he drove and tried to imagine she were somewhere else. Only when she felt the car turn did she open her eyes. Brian had taken an exit and was navigating down the off-ramp.

“This looks better,” he commented, once they found themselves on a two-lane road. “This route looks like it heads into the country, maybe a small, rural town. We’ll find somewhere to stop this way.”

“Whatever you think,” Gretchen murmured, too woozy to disagree. In addition to the shock and queasiness she felt, her side hurt where she’d fallen on the roof of the car, and she wondered vaguely if she had cracked a rib.

At last, the car slowed, and she gazed out the windshield at a small farmhouse with wooden gray shingles.

“There’s no garage and no cars parked out front,” Brian observed. “That means there was probably no one home... which hopefully means none of *them* around.”

“Good,” sighed Gretchen, closing her eyes again in relief. “I can’t wait to jump in a shower and wash all this off me...”

“I know the feeling.”

As they climbed out of the SUV, Gretchen eyed him, noting the old bloodstains on his clothes and skin again. “Point taken. Maybe you should go first,” she said, as they trudged up to the front door.

“Maybe there’ll be two showers,” he replied. “If not... ladies first.”

She managed to smile. “A true Southern gentleman. Thank you.”

The front door was locked, but Brian used a rock to smash the window next to it and let them in. They explored the house together, armed with fireplace tools they’d found in the front room, but Brian’s logic had proven correct, and the house was blessedly empty. As it turned out, there were two bathrooms, but only the upstairs one had a shower; the downstairs, only an old, clawfoot tub.

“Dunno about you, but I’m not too keen on floating in the filth I’m trying to wash off me,” said Brian upstairs. “You take a shower first, and I’ll wait.”

“Okay... I’ll try to be quick. Thank you,” she repeated with gratitude.

It was hard to be quick, though, once she was under the hot water. She washed at once, scrubbing away every trace of zombie remains from her skin, but even once it looked clean, she felt the compulsion to keep scrubbing, keep scouring. It was only the darkness – they’d found a few candles to light the bathroom, but without windows, it was still quite dim – and the knowledge that Brian was waiting to get clean as well that made her finally rinse and turn off the tap.

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a clean towel she’d found in the linen closet. Wet hair dripping on her shoulders, she exited the bathroom and motioned Brian in. “All yours.”

“Thanks,” he replied with a grim smile, as they traded places.

When the bathroom door shut, she finished toweling off and changed quickly into the spare clothes she’d thrown into her backpack. It was a huge relief to be clean, she thought, as she perched on the bed in the master bedroom and finger-combed her hair. She felt much better already, the nausea and faintness a distant memory, one she was determined to keep at bay by not thinking about what she and Brian had just been through. But her ribs continued to bother her, a nagging reminder of the ordeal. Her side panged as she got up from the bed and walked over to the dresser mirror. She pulled up her shirt to inspect it and saw the beginnings of bruises already starting to form. There were no odd lumps, though, nothing that seemed out of place, and so she contented herself with the thought that she was only banged up, not broken. She would live.

She was back on the bed, massaging her tender ribs, when the bathroom door clicked open again, and Brian came out. Seeing him cleaned-up for the first time, she couldn’t help but do a double take. She hadn’t realized before how attractive

he was, with high cheekbones, a chiseled jaw covered in two-day stubble, and shockingly blue eyes. His wavy hair was plastered to his scalp, and he was still quite wet, a towel around his waist, his upper half bare. She saw that he was quite skinny, but toned, with muscular arms and a well-defined torso. Running down the middle of his chest, she noticed, was a long scar, faintly red and raised.

Catching her looking, he said, "Open heart surgery, last May."

"Oh." She felt herself blush, embarrassed to have been caught staring. "I'm sorry..."

He waved her off. "Don't be. It was to repair a defect I was born with, a hole in my heart. A couple of holes, as it turned out," he explained. "But I'm fine now... I'm not gonna keel over and die on you, I promise." He offered a thin smile. "It was the scariest thing I'd ever been through... until today."

He stopped there, and again, she wondered about what he'd been through before she'd encountered him that morning. But he didn't elaborate, and she didn't press. Instead, she lay down on the bed. Her ribs twinged with the movement, but once she was settled, it felt good to be lying flat.

"I'm exhausted," she murmured. "I wish we could just stay here a few hours and take a nap."

Brian shrugged. "We don't have to leave right away. Dunno about you, but I've been one the move since about midnight. It would be good to rest... maybe scrounge up some breakfast?"

Gretchen made a face. "I don't think I could eat, after what we just saw. Not sure I can really sleep either, but right now, I'd rather lie here than get back in the car," she admitted.

"I'm not hungry either," said Brian. "But you go ahead and rest. We deserve a break."

Gretchen closed her eyes, but of course, sleep did not come right away. Instead, she saw the freeway, lined with cars and zombies. She opened her eyes again. "I'm sorry about the gun," she blurted suddenly. "I'm sure you think I'm the stupidest person in the world, not thinking to bring ammo or see if there was any inside. I should have known Shawn wouldn't keep it loaded, but I don't know the first thing about guns, and I wasn't thinking..."

Brian actually chuckled. "It's alright; it doesn't matter now. And I don't think you're stupid. You saved my life, remember?"

Gretchen smiled in relief. "Well, you saved mine too," she pointed out. "I think we're even."

Chapter 38

Loyalty. That, pretty much, is rare to find. Before the Osiris virus came, I mean. That's why people loved dogs so much. Loyalty defines dogs. They just know that they are supposed to love you and protect you. That's all they need to know, and that's what they do for you, every time. So when I knew the world had ended, I had to go back to my place.

There were three reasons I decided it was worth going to my place, despite the risk.

Reason # 1 – To see if there was anyone left in my family alive. Sure, Riley made it sound pretty damn bleak, but I had to know. I blame the optimist in me.

Reason #2 – To pick up a couple things. Selfish again, but there was something there I felt I needed to take with me. Something I considered part of me.

Reason #3 – Loyalty. That's the whole point of this entry. Loyalty was something people always had issues finding in each other, but no problems finding in Man's Best Friend.

I'm glad I met Riley first. I don't think anyone else, of those of us left, would've put up with my shit enough to drive me back to my house. Everyone else would have said hell no and floor it in the opposite direction. I think I knew, when I asked her, that she'd say yes. Not sure why; I guess I was thinking the best of her, and I was right. I'm lucky it was her. Especially after what I did end up putting us through that night. I was lucky; WE were lucky; we still are lucky.

People call me a dreamer, the way I see things. AJ's always questioning it, but hey, I try to find the good in everything, even though I was never able to find it in myself. That night, I think I started to find the good. In the situation, and in me.

Of course, I also found a reason to sing Michael Jackson more often, and that's always good, too. So, you know, there are silver linings in everything.

**Sunday, April 15, 2012
9:20 a.m.**

“Turn the radio up; maybe we'll hear something.”

“Not the radio; it’s my iPod playing through it. Radio’s nothing but static, remember? Everything’s down; I’d been listening for hours.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

After a long drive through clogged roads and then trying to avoid the plagues of the undead, Riley finally seemed to be making some headway in getting to Nick’s house. Hours had been wasted trying to find alternate routes, fighting zombies, and then trying to once again escape zombies. Riley yawned tiredly with a look of pure frustration. Finally, she pulled behind a nearby building and parked. Nick figured she just needed a well-deserved break, after all that had happened. He watched her, as she rested her head against her arms upon the steering wheel, and said nothing. She stared out, watching as the dead meandered off to darker spots; he noticed they seemed to not be fans of the light. She didn’t say anything to Nick, just sat there, lost in thought.

“You alright?”

“Y-yeah, just, it’s sinking in.” She didn’t look at him; spoke softly, her voice shaking slightly.

“You don’t look okay.” He knew he sounded stupid, but he wanted to comfort her, and his arm went around her gently. It stayed there for a few moments, seemingly unnoticed by Riley as she looked to be gathering her thoughts. Finally, though, she shrugged it off lightly.

“I’m fine; I just needed a moment. That’s all. Looks like they’re backing off a bit.” She gave a bright smile. It was one that didn’t quite reach her eyes, Nick noticed, but he nodded with a grin of his own.

“Maybe we can finally get there.”

She nodded, playing with her sweatshirt, pulling down the hood that had been up the entire time. “As long as we can get through the roads. They’re a mess cause of... well, you know.”

“Yeah...” It was odd how neither could manage to actually say the word that had haunted their thoughts so much. In fact, during the drive, neither of them had talked much at all. They’d been too focused on making sure they were never boxed in, never surrounded, and found ways to go.

But now that they’d been in the car awhile, Nick was able to settle a bit, let everything truly sink in his head. He took a long look at his new companion. Perhaps, his only companion, if the massive leagues of the undead were any indication. She was what he would describe as cute, not gorgeous or stunningly beautiful, but cute. Cute with shoulder-length, blonde hair that was currently

ruffled and mussed, and blue eyes that looked tired and shaken. Her face was oval, with a nose just slightly too large for her face, and a sideways grin, rather than full-on smiles. She looked like she had some muscle and meat on her bones.

“Wait, are *you* okay?” she finally asked, catching his stare.

“Sorry, just thinking.”

“How can you not? This whole thing...” She slammed her fist against the steering wheel angrily. “Fuck!” Wiping her eyes, she took several deep breaths before looking at him again. “I...”

“It’s alright, Riley.”

“So, what were you before... this?” she asked suddenly, clearly eager to change the subject away from herself. Her hands tapped the steering wheel nervously. He could tell she wasn’t comfortable with the situation in the slightest, but who could blame her?

He wasn’t fond of the question. All it served to do was remind him how he was nothing but a failure and that the only thing which erased that was the true end of the world, when zombies roamed the earth. In his head, it sounded as pathetic as it felt. His hand ran through his own disheveled hair resignedly. It had been a long morning and was getting longer.

“... I... I wanted to be an actor,” Nick finally responded, after deciding the truth was probably best. What did it matter anymore?

“Wanted?”

He nodded faintly. “Yeah, I never got anywhere with it. I just moved back here from LA before all this started.”

“Oh...” Her eyes swung away, and Riley looked completely ill-at-ease and unsure of what to say. “I guess we have something in common then,” she added on after a long pause. A weak smile followed.

“How?”

Riley twirled a lock of hair around her finger idly as she turned more towards him. Her other arm leaned against the steering wheel. Her line of vision focused on him directly now. “I loved being on the camera, too. Hell, I loved the camera period.” Reaching down to the floorboards of her Jeep, she pulled out a small hand camera. “I...” She stopped there, as if unable to say even another word more, and set the camera atop her dashboard.

“So what did you do?” Nick turned the question back on her, after watching her stay quiet and pensive with her uncompleted thought for several minutes.

“A career around the camera...” A sigh followed, regretful and solemn. “I was a TV journalist.” She met Nick’s gaze again. “There was just something addicting to telling a story. To being in front of the camera to tell others that story... I sound weird, don’t I?”

“No, actually, you make sense. I get it.”

Riley nodded, starting up the car. “I think we can keep going now. I know you want to get back; I’m sorry I stopped...”

“You needed a break; fuck, I did too.”

She pulled out from behind the building and pushed her foot on the gas. The car sped off, and they raced down the roads, averting cars when necessary. The car thudded every time she ran down another one of those creatures roaming outside. Nick’s grip tightened on his axe with every thud; he hadn’t let go of it once since his great escape from the hospital. He saw it as his one way of staying alive, and it would have to be pried from his cold dead hands before he’d ever let go. Nick frowned at the choice of words his mind came up with. Would he actually stay dead if he died? Or would he become like... *them*?

He shook his head, holding the axe close to his side. *This shit is crazy enough without you getting morbid, dumbass*, he scolded himself silently as Riley continued to drive.

“Sick?” he thought he heard her say, making him turn sharply towards her.

“What?”

“I said, did you want to change the music?” She gave another weak lopsided grin. “I can’t take the silence...”

“Oh... sure...” His hands reached for the iPod, and he scanned through the song titles. Some of her music tastes weren’t to be desired, but others, others were spot on. Within moments, “*Bodies*” by Drowning Pool was blaring through the speakers.

She raised a brow at him questioningly. “Ironic.”

“I... think I’m in shock still.” He wasn’t lying about that. None of it felt real. No matter how he had been forced to encounter *them* in the hospital. No matter how he’d been chased down the street and had been saved by her from *them*. No matter how many of *them* he’d felt her run over and seen the dents on her hood

from *them*. Still didn't feel real, even though reality was sinking in, and he knew it was.

With a brisk nod, she focused on the road, but not quite in time. Another zombie slammed against her Jeep, but unlike the many they'd encountered, this one stayed on the hood. Its fists slammed angrily against the glass. He could see the rolls of fat along its arms and body, and the mouth opened to moan just above a saggy triple chin. The dirty t-shirt it wore rolled up to reveal an abnormally large stomach, covered with the violet spots Nick had come to despise in the last few hours. It moaned against the windshield, and Riley screamed as she tried swerving the car every which way, in an attempt to throw off the overweight, dead man.

"Fuck! Get it off! Do something!"

"You think I'm not trying? His fat ass won't move!" she shouted at him, and Nick could see the panic written plainly across her face. Fat lips were rubbing the window, continuing to make their one noise, as its fists angrily hammered against the glass, which was quickly weakening under its weight. Riley slammed the brake, but it only forced the zombie to slide several inches down the hood, and it continued its attempt to reach its next meal with no trouble at all.

"What now?!" she cried out, accelerating once more. Nick was sure that was only because she had no idea of what else she could do.

"I don't know! Keep trying to shake it!" His eyes went to the axe held away from him, but he ditched that thought immediately. He'd have to break the glass. Breaking the glass meant the creature could get in. The windshield shook as the glass splintered, and spider web cracks spread all along the window.

"It's gonna get in!" The moment Nick heard Riley say that, the windshield shattered. Glass flew at them from all directions as Riley dropped down, and Nick covered his face with his arms. Arms reached in for Riley and gripped her neck tightly as the zombie moaned loudly in triumph. She was pulled forward against her seat belt, forcing her to lose control of the car, as it continued to speed down the street. Her strangled shrieks echoed as she was pulled closer to its mouth. Without a second thought, Nick slammed his axe down on the zombie's arm, severing it completely.

"Riley! THE CAR!" he bellowed, as she fell backwards in the driver's seat. She looked up in time to see the inevitable. With a loud cry of fright, she quickly dove down with Nick as they crashed head-on into a pile-up of cars in the middle of the narrow road.

Nick grunted as he was propelled tightly against his seatbelt, still refusing to let go of the axe that had saved him and Riley both now. His head struck the shattered windshield, and he was covered in glass and shallow cuts. He felt a

wetness slowly trailing down his face, and after touching it, saw blood on his hands to confirm a new gash along his forehead. Smoke hovered around the crunched-up hood, creating an eerie haze for them to peer through. His eyes went to Riley, who groaned tiredly as she rose again. One of her arms hung awkwardly as she unbuckled her belt. Her face had various miniscule slices from the shards striking them, but overall, she was better off than Nick thought she might be.

“You alright?”

She nodded. “Mostly. I think I dislocated my shoulder in the impact...” Her head motioned towards her right arm.

They heard the moan yet again. “Are you fucking kidding me?!” Nick ranted. “We need to go!”

“Right.” Slowly, she climbed out of the car as he did, hindered by her arm. The overweight undead man had been thrown finally during the impact, but he wasn’t far. Already, he was trying to shuffle between the mangled cars, back over to them. Nick glanced back at Riley, axe in one hand, and his other reached for her left hand.

“We’re not too far from my house! Let’s go!”

“You think we’ll be safe?!” he heard her ask as he dragged her along behind him. Nick’s head throbbed with the beginnings of a migraine. Great, now wasn’t the time for a headache. The back of his head, site of his bar fight injury, was beginning to pulsate with pain as well. Just what he needed.

“Can’t be any worse than here!”

“Well, no shit, Sherlock!” Despite the situation, he couldn’t help but smirk a bit at her.

The two ran along the roads, without any glances behind them. He felt Riley’s hand clutching his own quite intensely, so he knew she was still alright behind him. That was all he needed to know, because looks back could only tell him that the zombie in need of a StairMaster was still chasing him, or that more had joined it. After about twenty minutes of running, he slowed a bit and finally risked a peek behind him. Much to his elated relief, he couldn’t see any of them, and it hit him that the undead didn’t pick up speed, even in pursuit of their prey. They didn’t seem capable of it, and lacked coordination period.

Riley watched him for a moment before actually letting his hand go. “I thought you were going to pull my other arm out its socket, with the way you were dragging me.”

“Sorry; I didn’t want us getting separated.”

“Neither did I. Do you even have feeling left in your hand?” she teased.

“Nah, it’s undead like the rest of the world.” The two snickered a bit and felt a release in the tension that had consumed them throughout the early hours of the morning. Nick felt his body relax just ever so slightly, but it was an upgrade. Even she looked more at ease for the first time since she’d almost run him down hours before.

“Hey... Nick... can you help me out and...” She shifted her eyes down her still-dislocated arm. “...pop it back in? If more come, I’ll be completely screwed like this.” This was the reason he finally set down the axe that had become his lifeline.

“Yeah, sure.” He helped her slide off the black sweatshirt she wore, revealing beneath a snug, white tanktop and toned arms that hinted she could play sports in her spare time. He moved behind her now, unsure of what to say as his hands slid along her arms ever so gently.

“I hope I don’t fuck this up.”

“I trust you, and you better not, cause it’s not like we have another option.” A smirk followed her reply, as her body tightened, and he could see Riley bracing herself. “Okay, go ahead.”

He nodded, holding her arm, and rotated it slightly. Taking a deep breath, he turned her arm before forcefully attempting to shove the shoulder back into place. A loud cry of pain escaped her. She screamed in pure agony, jerking instinctively. Nick backed off immediately, arms in the air. He watched her try to control herself and fail miserably.

“Sorry! I’m sorry. Shit, I can’t do this!”

“I’m good, Nick. It’s alright,” she said, tears of pain shining in her eyes. “Not like we can go to a doctor anymore. Just... get it back in.”

With a brisk nod, he held her with one hand, while the other took her arm and began moving it again. This time it was in a gentler manner; he was terrified of hurting her like that again. She turned her face towards his, with only inches between them. “Just do it, Nick.”

“Okay, I got this.” This time, more slowly, he rotated her arm, before trying to force it back into place once more. She yelled out in agony yet again, but this time, he didn’t let go. With a last uncontrollable howl of pain escaping Riley, she took in a long deep breath, and he continued until he, at last, heard a resounding pop and felt her shoulder snap back in. She moved her arm ever so slowly and

nodded. She gave a sigh of relief before bending down and handing the axe he had set down back to him.

“Better.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I can move it now. It’s sore, but... better. Damn, that hurt like a bitch.” She tried to sound nonchalant – he could hear her try – but her voice shook a bit. Her hand tried to inconspicuously wipe away the tears in her eyes, but he saw. Yet, Nick chose not to say anything; he wasn’t sure just what he *could* say anyway.

At last, he took a long look at their surroundings, now that their situation had taken a small leap for the better again. Cars were crashed every which way, Riley’s included. He had always liked the neighborhood, peaceful and pretty in a calming matter. He sighed. How many times had he walked through this neighborhood? And now it was so devoid of true life. He paused at his own thought. This was Nick’s neighborhood. It had taken them awhile, but he’d finally made it home.

“Come on, we gotta go!”

She blinked, staring at him as she rubbed her shoulder. “Okay, where?”

“We’re right down the street from my house!” He tossed Riley her sweatshirt quickly.

She gave him a determined look, one that matched the new surge of energy Nick was feeling, which had come with the realization that he was almost home. Nick had no idea what he’d find, but he didn’t care. He just had to see for himself and was happy Riley seemed to understand that. She tied the sweatshirt around her waist and nodded at him. “Lead the way.”

“Right.”

The two walked along the abandoned streets, both ready for anything else they might encounter. Oddly, Nick started walking behind Riley, in a protective stance, rather than leading, like he knew he should have been. He almost tripped when she halted in front of him suddenly. She turned to Nick, a serious expression upon her face.

“We need to find me a weapon... just in case.”

“Good point.” They looked around. With all sorts of items littered along the ground, it wasn’t hard to find a makeshift weapon for Riley to wield. The first thing they came upon was a discarded crowbar that made Nick wonder if, before

people died, they hadn't tried to take advantage of the chaos by robbing the dying. The entire thought made him sick. He handed it back to her as they continued along the sidewalk, Nick leading now, his trusty axe in hand.

"We may not find anything," he heard her say softly.

"I know."

"It may not be pretty."

"I know."

"Okay, I just wanted to prepare you."

"I know. I just... it's like I said earlier: I have to see it."

"Just so you don't keep wondering. No, I know."

"Yeah... it feels like a dream. I didn't get to see this happen."

"I'm starting to think you were lucky that way."

"I think I'm lucky now."

"I'm still debating that one."

"Why? We're alive, anyway. We ain't alone..."

"That's true, but-"

"-Wait." He cut her off as they turned another corner in the small neighborhood. He pointed to a small, one-story house, just yards away, with a well-kept lawn and a small boat attached to a truck parked out in front. "That's my house."

The two headed in, both gripping their only weapons tightly in preparation for what might happen. Nick knew he might have been a bit optimistic, but he'd survived when he'd been surrounded by it in a hospital – maybe his father had survived, too? Not to mention his baby brother. Immunity could have been genetic, for all he knew. He hadn't thought to ask Riley if anyone in her family had survived, if she'd been able to find out. Nick suddenly felt like an asshole for not asking that, considering what she was doing so he could find out what had happened to his family.

Nick stepped in to find the house almost virtually how he'd left it. That was, until he reached his living room and saw the broken glass door, shards covering the floor. He saw the smears of blood along what remained of the sliding door, and he knew then that his family was either dead or eaten. He swallowed hard, saying

nothing to Riley as she stood silently beside him. She simply put a comforting hand on his shoulder, and in her expression, he could see that she had dealt with the same pain before. Her family was gone, too; the look in her eyes answered his unspoken question.

“You warned me it wouldn’t be pretty,” he croaked out. His voice was rough and scratchy. Nick almost didn’t recognize it as his own.

“Nick...”

“No, I had to see it, and I am.” He continued his walk further into the house. He whistled sharply, hoping to call Spunky out like he always had.

His heart sank when he heard nothing. *No, not her...* After losing everything and everyone else, he couldn’t lose his last link to his own sanity. That dog had meant everything to him, ever since he’d moved to California too many years before. He’d always seen her more as a friend, rather than a pet. He whistled again, silently praying his dog was alive.

A moan reached his ears first, a moan that was closer than it should have been. It was a moan that he couldn’t find the source for, yet it sounded frighteningly close. A small blur lunged for him, forcing him to fall backwards against the nearby couch in surprise, with brute strength beyond what should have been there. He looked down at the thing now crawling along his chest, reaching aching for his throat, and he screamed in horror.

Matted, light blonde hair.

Eyes the color of the ocean.

A round baby face that, if given the chance to mature, may have charmed many, as Nick had been able to do. As all of the Carter children had typically been able to do.

Violet sores, covering pale, grey skin.

All belonged to a person Nick hadn’t expected to succumb to the terrible fate met by so many others. It was his own, two-year-old half-brother, Kanden Carter. Nick screamed again, tossing the undead toddler off of him. It immediately lunged for Riley. Riley, yelling in shock, swung her crowbar like a baseball bat and sent the two-year-old zombie flying against the wall on the other side of the room. Nick got up, staring in shock at the sight he had just witnessed. He couldn’t move, couldn’t process any of it. This had been that final shock that he just couldn’t take.

“Nick... we need to bail! Nick!”

They were interrupted yet again, this time by a series of loud, familiar barks that were coming their way. A large, furry, golden blur leaped up against Nick, licking him excitedly. He snapped back to reality then, hugging his dog tightly. Had Spunky seen all this happen? She had probably been hiding ever since the virus hit the house. *Thank you*, he thought silently, thankful that his loyal companion had been found alive and unharmed, when no one else he loved was.

“We gotta go!” Riley’s voice forced him back to the present and reminded him that he couldn’t do anything. It reminded him that he now had someone else to protect.

The zombie version of Kanden rose again, and Spunky growled menacingly at it, challenging it to try and get past her to her master as she bared her teeth. Nick watched in stupefied shock and horror. Could animals sense the difference? Spunky had loved Kanden since they’d come back.

“Nick!”

He nodded, running behind Riley out of the house. Spunky followed them faithfully, looking thrilled to have finally found her master again. They ran down the street, hearing the moans of zombies, undoubtedly attracted by all the noise they had been making. The two – now three – raced down the streets, looking for any safe place to hide.

“She yours?” Riley asked as they ran, jerking her head back at Spunky.

“Yeah! Just glad I found her.”

“We need a plan!”

They upped their speed, running on nothing but pure adrenaline as they fled their pursuers. They continued sprinting away, too afraid of attracting more if they let themselves slow down. The three escaped the neighborhood, running down a set of random streets with no real destination in mind. Finally, after running for twenty minutes with no words, no plans, just the drive to put as much distance between them and the hordes of creatures as they could, they let themselves slow down, and then finally stop.

“We... need... a place... to rest...” Riley pointed out, between short breaths.

Nick looked around, breathing heavily. He spotted the local SuperTarget his stepmother liked to shop at and pointed immediately. “Over there! We can pull down the gates and rest there for a bit!”

With Spunky nipping at their heels, they began running, once more, for the first resting place they had come upon since the dead had risen. The store only took them minutes to reach, and there seemed to be no zombies in sight. Still, they

both had their weapons at the ready, having learned their lesson within the past several hours.

“Looks empty.”

“No one would shop while they were dying, right?”

“Let’s hope so.”

Nick glanced back at Riley, to make sure she was safe, before opening the door and heading inside.

Chapter 39

I already said I liked control.

I also like when people know their place. That sounds stuck up, but it’s true. If you’re not the leader, don’t try to boss me around. If I run things better, don’t try to overstep me. Don’t assume you know me; don’t pretend you know why I do things. There are a lot of things people don’t know about me. There’s a lot of things the others assumed about me.

There are always reasons for my choices; there should always be reasons behind everything you do. That’s why, even though I had passed out, even though AJ had said we were leaving, we didn’t leave immediately. I had reasons for it. I had a plan, an idea. You should never run off of chaos; you should run on organized decisions.

Reading this, I can see why Kayleigh teases me about being anal. But what I’m saying is still true. It all goes back to that control, and I like that because it gives organization; it gives reasoning to the world. With the way the world is today, we could use all the organization we can get. Not people like AJ trying to just go with it and making it all worse by overstepping me.

People need to know their place.

Sunday, April 15, 2012

10:05 a.m.

“We need to go!”

“You have a way out of here?!”

“I’m okay... I’m okay... I’m okay...”

Howie felt like pulling his hair out in a mixture of fear, fury, and frustration. They’d found the undead roaming outside hours before. Well, the other two had. Howie, from reasons he didn’t wish to think about, had passed out. When he’d come to only a short while later, he’d found Kayleigh in the middle of a panic attack and AJ throwing their stuff together, getting ready to go. For the past five hours, they’d been arguing about how to handle this, while Kayleigh was in her own little world on the hotel bed.

“Can’t believe this shit. Zombies are all over the damn place, and what do we do? We wait for you to take a damn bath.”

“Well, who knows how long the water will be on? Besides, they didn’t find us.”

“YET! You rich, snobby dumbass! They’re gonna get in here soon; there’s only so many rooms to burst into. And now we have more to try to get by than we did before!”

“I’m okay... I’m okay... I’m okay...” The two continued to ignore their other companion.

“I thought they’d go away once day broke.”

AJ slapped a hand to his forehead irritably and rolled his eyes. Howie ignored the look that followed that clearly showed the other man thought Howard was an idiot, something he knew to be the furthest from the truth. “That’s fucking *VAMPIRES*, you moron!”

“Oh, I’m sorry – next time the world ends, I’ll make sure to keep better track of horror movie trivia!”

“Well, if you’d listened to me, we’d have our asses out of here by now!”

“STOP IT!” they heard Kayleigh finally shout, before resuming her former position. Her knees were held close to her chest, and she rocked slowly back and forth on the bed. Howie liked Kayleigh; she wasn’t too bad, it seemed. Though sometimes she got annoying, usually her pep was refreshing in a way he’d never admit. The biggest problem with her was that, in times of stress, she completely fell apart. And it seemed to always happen at the worst times possible, like right then, when the noises were becoming too close for comfort and they’d decided it was time to leave.

Howie stretched, rather than fidget. He needed something simple to focus on at the moment so he wouldn’t lose control. It was always about maintaining some form of control so he could be able to cope with whatever was happening to him or even around him. Surely, the same could apply to this, even if it was the

complete end to everything he'd once known. If he had control, he could figure out how to handle this, rather than have someone like BJ-AJ-CJ-DJ-whatever-his-name-was take over.

"Look, we need to get out of here." Moans could be heard off in the not-too-far distance.

"Fuck, they're in the damn hotel. Maybe they caught our scent or some shit."

The two went to the window and peeked down below. Too many of the undead still roamed the streets to give any thought to trying to use a sheet rope to climb out the hotel. One whiff of them while hanging on a sheet would get the creatures' attention too quickly. They'd be eaten before they could even touch the ground. The two glanced back at each other while Howie's mind raced for some semblance of a plan to form in his head.

"We're going to need weapons. If this shit is anything like the movies, we gotta go for the brain or the head. Play it safe that way," AJ said quietly.

"Oh yeah, cause we've got so many lying around here, BJ," Howie spat back impatiently.

"You know my fucking name is AJ, so stop that shit. We'll have to improvise."

"I don't see any damn weapons in here," Howie replied, fed up with the entire situation. How were they supposed to fight their way out if they had absolutely nothing to fight their way out with?

"You're not fucking helping. Get creative, unless you have a better idea!"

Howie headed into the bathroom in hopes maybe he could find something. Mini shampoos, conditioners, a hairdryer... nothing actually useful. He sighed; he hated everything at that point. Before all this had happened, he'd have never stayed in a dive like this, anyhow. He eyed the towel rack; AJ had said to get creative. Would this do any good?

It's probably cheap... But would it get the job done? Break a neck or do enough head damage? Gathering his strength, he tugged at it, groaning till it was eventually forced from the wall. He stumbled back in surprise, ready to wield his weapon. How he'd use it, Howard again wasn't entirely sure, but it was better than nothing.

Now to bring Kayleigh back to reality...

But before he could, another noise brought Howard himself back into the present.

CRACK!

It was followed by moans, booming sets of thundering sounds, and screams coming from the only alive girl in the hotel room. Howard rushed out to see several zombies slowly stumbling over the now-destroyed door, which had been their last defense. AJ was already trying to fight one off as it reached for his skull. Standing there in shock, Howie simply watched it happen, unable to move, and unable to process anything. A complete lack of control.

AJ was wrestling, struggling with the first creature able to finally stumble through the mess of a doorway. The other two were still unable to get through, as they kept running into each other, showing a complete lack of coordination. The creature kept coming with inhuman force, slamming AJ against the wall as it let out a fearsome groan. AJ growled and shoved it off, pushing himself off the wall in the process. Without a weapon, anyone would be able to tell AJ was trying to improvise as best as he could.

“You ain’t eating my shit, you bastard!”

Howie continued to watch. It was almost like the ultimate reality show. No money or shiny, dazzling prizes; the winner either got to live or eat brains, which was simple enough. AJ’s shades were, in the end, tossed off in the struggle and crushed by the creature’s foot. AJ’s eyes narrowed intensely, and he threw the zombie off of him. The zombie flew to the other side of the room, as Kayleigh dodged out of the way, still shrieking shrilly. It landed next to the television, its leg now broken and hindering its ability to rise again for the prey. AJ lunged, thrusting the TV on the creature’s head. It continued to moan unmercifully.

“This is for breaking my fucking shades!” He kicked the TV still covering the zombie’s head again and again, till they heard a resounding snap beneath it, causing the moans to stop. The zombie was finally still.

Yet, as AJ paused to catch his breath, and Howie came back to reality yet again, he knew they weren’t safe yet. With an almost Amazon-styled yell, Howard ran at the other zombie that had finally entered the room, slamming his towel rack through its eye. Immediately, it slumped to the ground, lifeless as it should be.

A third one followed. This time AJ was ready, grabbing the lamp from the nightstand. He tossed off the shade hurriedly, and in the fashion Howie had done so, slammed it directly at its eye. The light bulb shattered against the creature’s face, and the metal rod following the bulb met its mark, stopping any more attempts to reach AJ.

Howie looked at AJ and nodded. “Okay, so we do need to get out of here.”

Kayleigh was still panicking, screaming for the empty world to hear. She wasn’t rocking anymore; she was just standing nearby the bathroom door, staring at the

wreckage and corpses in utter shock and disbelief at all that was around her. AJ sighed as he picked up his now-shattered sunglasses, while Howie went to her.

“Kayleigh, calm down, they’re dead!” A pause. “Again.”

She wouldn’t calm down. Shaking Howard away, she wrapped her arms around herself. Howie shook her, trying to get her to focus. AJ shoved Howie aside after tossing the useless shades to the floor. “Let me.”

“Oh, and what are you going to do?”

A hand slapped Kayleigh forcefully across the face. The shock of it made her stare up at the two men, and AJ smirked. “Just that. Now we gotta get the hell out of here.”

He nodded in agreement. “Just follow me then.”

The three made their way out the door, and when the moans began once again, they ran in the opposite direction. They raced around the back end of the hotel, down the stairway, and into the courtyard. There was a gate surrounding them now and a simple, yet inviting pool to meet them. Howard glanced back to see more of the undead following them, having picked up their scent, as AJ had said they would.

It irritated him that the tattooed man had been right, *again*.

They should have left when they had first risen.

The sun shone down on them happily, showing no signs of the horrors that had been released upon them, upon the world. The sky was crystal clear, and it was the type of day even Howard would have enjoyed, *before*. But there was no time for useless thoughts such as this. The three continued running to the end of the courtyard, Howard leading the way.

“How the hell are we going to get anywhere, oh fearless leader?”

“What?!” Howie yelled, chancing a quick look at AJ, who was becoming more and more aggravating by the second.

“Well, we’re fucked without weapons *and* a car. And the car’s back fucking there, you moron!”

Realization slammed into him like the icy storms of winter attacking the countryside. His blood ran cold at what that meant. He skidded to a stop as all of this processed in his business-built mind. The three turned to see the several more of the living dead making their way towards them in their paced, slow, yet haunting shuffle.

It was actually Kayleigh who reacted first when they finally got close. Rather than kill the zombie with anything around her, she shoved it headfirst into the swimming pool. It seemed to Howie to be a bit silly, till he noticed the zombie simply wandering the bottom – not drowning, not swimming, and not even attempting to get out. It just wandered, as it did on dry land.

AJ grabbed a patio umbrella and used it to spear a second zombie through the eye, a technique they were coming to find quite handy. Howard grabbed a lawn chair when another came close and bashed it in the head. When its decaying body came back for another attempt, its foul breath filtering into Howie's nose, he slammed it against its head again and again, till its head was forced against the gate, and he felt something snap. He had not a clue if it was the skull or the neck, nor did he care, as the body collapsed.

“We gotta head to the car!” AJ shouted above the moans and the chaos, shoving another zombie into the pool after he saw Kayleigh do it a second time.

Deciding to run for it, the three bolted back in the direction from which they had come, using their patio umbrellas or, in Howie's case, his trusty lawn chair, to slay the undead they came across or, at the very least, shove them out of the way long enough to escape. A sight for sore eyes reached them when Howard's purple Lexus came into their eye line. It seemed a vision of heaven right then, with all it meant to them. It was a means of escape, a haven, a way to stop fighting. Food was still stockpiled in the trunk. At that moment, the car looked to be everything they could ever want or need, and Howie could kick himself for ever deciding to leave it the night before.

Pulling his keychain out of his pockets, while holding the chair awkwardly in his attempt to keep running, he aimed the small remote at the car. The doors unlocked, and Kayleigh lunged into the backseat of the car, tears streaming down her face. With a toss of the lawn chair, Howie threw himself inside and struggled to jam his key into the ignition, as AJ entered the car and firmly shut the door behind him. They had little time, because the zombies they had before outrun had now caught up to their prey in their pursuit. Howie seemed completely unable to coordinate himself into the simple task of sticking the right key in the ignition. He kept fumbling, shaking, and the keys kept slipping within his unstable hands.

“THE WINDOWS!” Kayleigh screeched. A rotten stink met them again, along with a long hand covered with violet lesions, reaching in through the window and grabbing Kayleigh's hair. Howie fumbled with his keys, desperately trying to start the car.

“Damn it!” he shouted furiously, when the keys slipped from his trembling fingers and fell to the floor. Beginning to panic himself, he felt around for the keys in terror of what might come if they stayed around much longer.

“Get it off! GET IT OFF!” Kayleigh screamed, trying to bat the hand and force it to release her russet hair. AJ rapidly looked around for the buttons in the car. Howie heard him cheer in triumph, signaling his success in finding them. He grabbed the keys and looked up in time to see AJ slam his hand down on the buttons. All of the windows rolled up, and the hand that had been tugging Kayleigh’s head out the window was separated. To their relief, the dead hand was gone, along with a huge chunk of her hair.

No one said anything. He started the car and floored the gas pedal. The cars squealed loudly in protest as they sped away from the hotel, and they were again on their way to their next destination. A glance in the mirror showed Kayleigh with her hand to a plain-to-see bald spot, mourning her loss, as her tears continued to fall. A mix of pity and sadness stirred in Howie, feeling sorry for the poor girl unable to handle any of the madness they had been tossed in only that day.

It was AJ who broke the silence. “I told you we should’ve left when we saw them.”

“Shut up.”

“This is why you need to listen to others...”

“Shut up.”

“But you’re a prime example of society, how it shut out everyone, made people selfish and shallow. That’s why you thrived so damn much.”

“AJ! SHUT UP!”

Chapter 40

I wasn’t trying to be a hero. I didn’t set out to become a martyr. On the Day of Unholy Resurrection, my goal was simply to prepare the survivors who were immune the best I could while I was still able.

I had accepted my fate. In my military training, I was taught that casualties are a part of war. They can and should be limited, but they are nearly impossible to prevent altogether. Some casualties are inevitable. My own demise seemed just as certain. Unless I opted to check out early, as Edwards had, I would go one of two ways: the unpleasant, yet relatively quick death met by all victims of the plague, or the torturously slow, yet final process of starvation. The way I saw it, I had three choices: take off the gas mask... take

off the gas mask and blow my own brains out... or leave the gas mask on and just let my body waste away.

I tried not to dwell on these choices and the less than desirable results offered by each. Instead, I focused on ensuring that, whichever choice I made, it would not doom the other survivors I had brought together on the base. In the beginning, they were dependent on me. I knew they had to become self-sufficient, if they were to survive after my death.

I only know a couple of Latin phrases by heart. One of them is “carpe diem” - “seize the day.” The other is “unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno,” or “one for all, all for one.” I’d love to pretend it was only for the greater good that I kept my mask on as long as I did, kept myself alive while those around me perished, so that I could be an asset and prepare that small group of survivors to rage a war against the undead. That was part of it, sure, but self-preservation was also a factor. I didn’t want to die. But once I’d accepted it as probable, almost certain, a third reason entered the picture:

When death came calling, I hoped the others would be merciful, and put a bullet in my brain before I became victim to something even worse: undeath.

Sunday, April 15, 2012
2:00 p.m.

It was stuffy inside the Sunday school room. Power at the base had been down for over a day, ever since the last of the electricians had died, and it was now running off a system of emergency back-up generators. The system was programmed to conserve electricity by supplying enough power for only the bare essentials. Lights, it seemed, were considered essential. Air conditioning, apparently, was not.

Kevin could feel the slimy sweat sliding down his face, beneath his gas mask. He longed to take the mask off, to feel the room air on his face, but he didn’t dare. He was past the point of hunger now; he hadn’t ingested anything more than water since Friday evening, but what he’d witnessed that morning had been enough to take away his appetite. The thought of food made his hollow stomach turn, as he pictured, instead, the festering gray faces of the undead, their lips slick with blood that was not their own. Over and over again, he saw the face of Private Butler, her brains protruding from her open skull. He saw the dead body of Justin Flakeland rising from the bed. And he saw Captain Charlie Edwards falling to the floor, the top of his skull blown away by the bullet Kevin had fired into his forehead at point blank range.

He had seen combat. He had seen men die, men he had known, men he’d considered friends. Even so, nothing had prepared Kevin for the horrors he had seen that morning. This was a new kind of war.

It was for that reason he had not yet risked removing his gas mask. He remembered what had happened to Sam, after a moment's panic, the briefest lapse in judgment, had caused him to pull off his mask. Sam was long dead, dead of the virus that had killed most of the base. For all Kevin knew, he was now *undead*, one of the zombie soldiers roaming around outside the chapel. If his body had not been one of the many incinerated in the fires the day before, he likely was.

Kevin did not want to end up like Sam. But, more importantly, he did not want to leave them alone.

He glanced up and across the room. Jo and Gabby sat huddled together on a pair of the small chairs. Jo was perspiring heavily, but despite the heat, she had her arm around Gabby, who leaned up against her, her head on her mother's shoulder. The girl hadn't spoken in hours. Gone was the outspoken, opinionated teenager Kevin had taken her for at first, replaced with a fearful, quivering little girl who refused to let her mother leave her side. She had sobbed for almost an hour after Edwards had died, then lapsed into shocked silence. Around noon, Jo had asked her if she was hungry. Gabby had shaken her head no. Kevin had taken that as a good sign; the girl was traumatized, no doubt, but at least she was still in her right mind, still able to communicate.

"What are we going to do about food?" Jo had asked Kevin, hesitantly. It wasn't a crisis situation yet, but she was clearly thinking ahead, realizing that if they remained barricaded in the chapel long enough, it would turn into one. He admired that quality in her. As an ER nurse, she had proven herself to be level-headed in the midst of catastrophe, and he had confidence that, should something happen to him, she would do everything possible to protect her daughter.

But he didn't want it to come to that. The fact was, he was the only one left who knew the base, knew the ample resources it provided and how to access them. Jo and Gabby depended on him, and he needed to stay alive for them. This was why, so far, he had stayed in the chapel with them. Whenever he mentioned venturing out for supplies, even just for planning purposes, Gabby got upset, shaking her head and starting to whimper incomprehensibly, almost like a baby whose parents have strayed out of its line of sight. For her sake, he always held up his hands and said, reassuringly, "Alright... it's alright... I'm not goin' anywhere. We'll stay here all together."

In the back of his mind, however, he knew they couldn't stay, not forever. Eventually, they would have to go out for supplies. But as long as he was trapped in an inside room of the chapel, with no way to know for sure what it looked like outside and a little girl who flipped out every time Kevin tried to check, there was way to make plans. As the hours ticked by with agonizing slowness, Kevin found himself growing more and more frustrated.

The stifling heat didn't help, but every time he got the urge to yank off his mask, he reminded himself why he couldn't. If he started getting sick, like Sam had, it would send Gabby over the edge, and Jo would be on her own to care for her daughter and fend for herself on an unfamiliar military base, surrounded by the living dead.

So he kept the suffocating gas mask on and prayed for some sort of salvation.

Salvation came in a purple Lexus.

The first sign of it was Gabby suddenly sitting upright and saying, quite clearly, "Do you hear that?"

Kevin and Jo were both so astounded to hear her say something out of the blue that, at first, they didn't react. Then Jo said, "Hear what, honey?"

Finally comprehending, Kevin listened. He didn't hear anything.

Gabby cried, "Listen!" Her head cocked, brown eyes narrowed in concentration, she added, "It sounds like a motor... like a car!"

Kevin strained his ears, and finally, they picked up what hers, aided by a child's keen and undamaged sense of hearing, had much earlier. It did sound like the engine of an approaching car – a low rumble, faint at first, but growing louder and closer.

Jo heard it too now. Her eyes, the same as Gabby's, lit up, and she exclaimed, "I think you're right! Someone's coming!"

Kevin stood up at once. "I have to go meet them. They'll never know we're in here unless I do," he added quickly, at Gabby's first sign of protest.

The girl bit down on her bottom lip, sucking it between her teeth. "But... what if it's not... you know... a regular person. What if it's... one of... them??"

Kevin smiled, though it was half obscured by his gas mask. "Did you see those things when you were running earlier? You think they have enough coordination to drive a car?"

To his relief, Gabby actually cracked a sort of smile, too. "I guess not," she admitted.

"Okay then. So it has to be another person, a normal person like us. Someone who's probably just as scared as we are. Imagine how relieved that person will be to see us, eh? You see why I've gotta go out there and meet that car?"

Gabby nodded.

“Alright. Listen, I’m gonna take my gun,” he explained deliberately, reaching for it across the table, “and I’m gonna be real careful when I go out there. Charlie – Captain Edwards – left his Hummer parked somewhere around here, from when he first met the zombies, when Justin and Amy were attacked. I’m gonna take that, and I’m gonna drive up towards the entrance gate, the same one you came through. I’ll meet the other car along the way, and I’ll bring them right back here. Alright? Sound like a plan?”

With some reluctance, Gabby nodded again.

Kevin nodded too. “I’ll be right back,” he vowed, and then he left without another word, not looking back. Before he left the chapel, he went into the sanctuary. He strode up the aisle to the altar, where he had lain Edwards’s body, beneath the cross. It had seemed the most reverent place to put him in the moment, almost as if he were ready for his own funeral. Now, he quickly patted down the captain’s pockets, searching for the keys to the Hummer. He found nothing.

Not panicking, he assumed – as he’d suspected when he had first remembered the Hummer – that Edwards had left the keys in the ignition when he’d jumped out to help Flakeland drag Butler into the lodging facility. But if he was wrong, he would find himself outside, possibly surrounded by hordes of the undead, without transportation.

It was a chance he was willing to take. To not risk it would mean risking missing the other car, who might mistake the base for deserted and turn back. He couldn’t let that happen.

Steeling himself, he armed his weapon and let himself out the door through which they had come. This was just another ground battle, he told himself as he set off across the parking lot, heading back towards the TLF. As an Air Force pilot, he did most of his fighting in the air, but he had been trained in hand to hand combat, and this was no different. In fact, he thought, it was easier, because unlike enemy soldiers, these zombies did not seem capable of actual thought, only instinct. The instinct to hunt. To kill. To feed.

But Kevin could hunt, too. Kevin could kill. A bullet through the brain; that was all it took. A good eye and a steady hand would be defense enough.

He kept repeating these positive thoughts in his head as he darted along, eyes moving all around for the first sign of movement. At first, there was nothing, and then, halfway there, the remaining zombies began to emerge from around trees and parked cars, having sensed his presence. Kevin didn’t hesitate. He fired off one shot after another, taking out zombies in all different directions. If he missed their heads and hit shoulders or torsos, the zombies staggered with the force of

the bullet, but kept coming. Only shots to the head killed them; that really was the key.

This isn't so bad, he thought, now spotting the Hummer ahead. *With another person or two to help, we can take 'em out, rid the base of 'em.* He fired off another shot, felling a zombie in front of him and clearing the path to the Hummer. It was a straight shot now. He broke into a sprint and didn't stop running until his hands touched the door handle. *Please be keys*, he begged, as he yanked open the door and boosted himself up and into the vehicle, immediately shutting the door and locking it behind him. Then he checked the ignition, and his heart sank.

No keys.

“Okay, now just wait,” he muttered to himself, looking around. “They could still be here somewhere. Maybe Charlie took ‘em out... and then set ‘em down... here!” He had looked down towards the center console and suddenly spotted a glimmer of silver. The keys were sitting in the cup holder, where they'd been tossed haphazardly in the rush to aid the injured private.

Triumphantly, Kevin found the right key and plunged it into the ignition. A turn of the wrist brought the Hummer's engine roaring powerfully to life. Kevin threw it into drive and gunned it forward, flattening several zombies in his path as he weaved out of the parking lot and turned onto the boulevard. Hoping he would not miss the other car, he made a high-speed right turn onto Florida Keys Avenue, which connected to the main drag, Bayshore Boulevard. Up the road, he sped, the western arm of Tampa Bay shimmering in the sun to his right. And then, suddenly, there was something else glistening in the road up ahead.

The metallic gleam of a car.

He began to honk, as the car grew nearer. There didn't seem to be many zombies roaming along this stretch of road, so he threw caution to the wind and even rolled down his window to stick his arm out and wave. When he got close, he slowed down, and so did the car. It was a fancy car, Kevin realized, a Lexus, with a glossy purple paint job.

Out of the Lexus climbed not just one, but three people. Two men got out first, from the front, and then a younger woman emerged from the backseat. “Watch out!” Kevin called, sticking his head out the window. “There's some of *them* on the base too.”

The girl recoiled immediately, drawing closer to the driver as she looked all around, but to everyone's relief, the area seemed – for now – free of zombies. One of the men, the front seat passenger, strode ahead of the others, stopping a few feet from the driver's side of the Hummer.

“I thought this was supposed to be some kind of safe haven for survivors,” he said suspiciously, without any kind of greeting or introduction. “Those two-” He jerked his thumb carelessly over his shoulder. “-said they heard some radio message, telling all survivors to come here, to MacDill. And now we’re here, and there’s nothing... no one... ‘cept you. And you’re telling me there’s fucking zombies here too? Some safe haven.” He let out a derisive snort.

Before Kevin could reply, the girl sprang forward. “Oh come on, AJ, he’s the first living person we’ve seen since we picked you up!” she cried pleadingly. “That’s something, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” the second man answered for the first, and he marched up to Kevin’s door, his hand outstretched. “Howard Dorough, of Orlando,” he introduced himself, pumping Kevin’s hand through the window.

“Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson,” Kevin responded, somewhat amused at the other man’s formality in a time like this.

The girl gasped, her eyes lighting up in recognition. “You’re the one we heard on the radio!”

“That’s right. I’m glad the message got through. To be honest, I wasn’t sure anyone was still alive to hear it.”

“We’ve been all the way to Cape Canaveral and back and haven’t seen anyone else,” said the girl, her eyes wide and serious. “Except AJ here.”

“There are two other survivors here from outside the base, a woman and her daughter. But we haven’t seen anyone else either. A lot of the base got sick before we could contain it, and I’m afraid most of the rest were attacked by... well, whatever you wanna call those things.”

“Zombies,” supplied the man called AJ. “The undead. Living dead. Walking dead. Fucking ghouls.”

“Yeah,” Kevin nodded. “Them.”

“Speaking of which...”

A moan, in the distance. They all heard it, four heads turning in the same direction. The girl shivered visibly.

“We better head to safety,” Kevin said apprehensively. “You wanna take your car or ride with me?”

“Ride with-” The girl started to say, but Howard interrupted, “I’ll follow in my own car, thanks.”

Kevin looked kindly at the girl. “You can hop in with me, if you want.”

“Okay.” She scrambled up into the passenger seat. AJ hesitated, then shrugged and followed Howard back to the Lexus. The two men climbed in, and Kevin made a U-turn, leading them back down Bayshore Boulevard and to the chapel. There were, of course, more zombies there, new ones joining the ranks of those Kevin had failed to shoot down.

“You guys got guns?” Kevin asked, gesturing to his own.

The girl, Kayleigh, shook her head.

Wondering how they’d managed to stay alive this long without guns, Kevin said, “Okay. You’ll just have to stick close to me then. I’ll cover you. At least we’re close this time.” He had parked right in front of the entrance to the chapel. “Ready?”

“No,” whimpered Kayleigh, but the zombies were already closing in; there was no time to hesitate.

“Let’s go,” Kevin said, and he opened his door. He jumped down and immediately went around to Kayleigh’s side to help her out. He heard car doors slam as Howard and AJ raced to join them. “Go ahead, run!” he urged them, turning to start taking out the zombies within range. As the shots fired, he heard their footsteps pounding against the pavement as they rushed for the door.

Within a few seconds, they were all safely inside. As he barricaded the door, Kevin shouted, “It’s just us, Jo! We’ve got company!”

He led Howard, AJ, and Kayleigh to the Sunday school room, where Jo and Gabby sat waiting. “Oh, thank the Lord!” exclaimed Jo, rising to her feet, when she saw that there was not just one, but three more survivors in their midst. She went to Kayleigh at once and hugged her. Introductions were made, and even Gabby joined in as they all pulled up chairs and started talking rapidly.

It was so good to hear from other survivors, people who had been on the other side, had seen the outside world. Unfortunately, it seemed the rest of central Florida was as desolate and in as much disarray as the base.

“... and it took us almost four hours to get here, between all the cars blocking the streets and trying to avoid the zombies!” finished Kayleigh, who had narrated most of their harrowing tale, quite dramatically. “Four hours, for a drive that should have taken, like, one, at most!”

Kevin nodded. “Well, I’m glad you’re here,” he said, once he was finally able to get a word in. “This gives me hope, that at least five people who were exposed to the virus have survived. You all must be immune.”

They all looked at each other, then at him, and he could see the question forming on all of their minds. It was the same question he had, too. What would happen when he finally took off his gas mask? Would enough of the virus remain in the air to make him sick? Or would he turn out to be the same as them, apparently resilient?

“I’m not gonna last in this mask much longer,” he spoke seriously, looking at them each in turn. “I’ve kept it on this long for the sake of those who were left alive. But now that there are more of you, I know that whatever happens, you can survive without me.”

“No!” cried Gabby, shaking her head, her eyes wide as saucers. “What do you mean, without you?”

Kevin looked directly at her. “You know what I mean, honey. I want to make sure the rest of you know how to get around the base, how to get what you need, so that if I get sick when the mask comes off, you’ll be able to survive here. I think I should take one of you in the Humvee with me now, on a sort of tour of the basics. Howard? Whaddya say?”

He would have chosen Jo, but knew Gabby wouldn’t allow it, and there was no way he was taking the kid back out among the zombies. Of the three newcomers, Howard, dressed in a rumpled pair of suit pants, dress shirt, and silk tie, looked the most intelligent, and that was what Kevin needed then. A logical leader-type, someone who could take charge and delegate in his absence.

Howard nodded his agreement, and before Gabby or Kayleigh could protest much, they set off. Kevin wanted to get it over with in a hurry, wanted to be free to take the mask off so that he could know his fate, once and for all.

“How good a shot are you?” he asked Howard, as they stood just inside the back door to the chapel, preparing to make the run to the Hummer.

Howard blinked in bewilderment. “Me? Well, I... actually, I... well, to be honest, I... I’ve never actually fired a gun before.” He said this last part very rapidly and in a low voice, as if he were ashamed to admit this apparent inadequacy.

Kevin wasn’t surprised. “No problem. You drive; I’ll ride shotgun. Uh... literally.”

“Oh... well, alright then...”

“Follow me.” Kevin led the way out, his loaded rifle proceeding him. He guarded Howard while the shorter man boosted himself into the driver’s seat of the Hummer, then jogged around to the passenger side. Kevin immediately lowered his window halfway, allowing himself enough room to poke the barrel of his gun out and take aim. He blew the head off one of the remaining zombies before they’d even left the parking lot.

“Which way should I turn?” asked Howard.

“Left. The aircraft hangars, weapons, and vehicle dispatch are all located that way, on the western perimeter of the base. We’ll stop and stock up on basic supplies and weapons while we’re there,” said Kevin. “And I’ll show you the communications building, where I did my radio broadcast. I’d like to try that again. If you guys heard it, maybe there are others left alive who might hear it too.”

He navigated as Howard headed towards the five large, white hangars in the distance, occasionally stopping in mid-sentence to fire a shot out the window. As they got further from the chapel, he realized that the rest of the zombies were not congregated in one area, leading him to believe there were not fellow groups of survivors holed up in the other buildings they passed.

The zombies roamed freely all around the base, often alone, sometimes in small clusters of twos and threes, though they never interacted with one another. They seemed oblivious of each other’s presence; oblivious, in fact, of just about everything but their quest for prey. In that respect, they were like animals – predators, programmed to hunt, driven solely by instinct and hunger. Unlike other predators, such as lions and wolves, they did not appear to use any sort of strategy. They simply chased, lumbering determinedly after their prey until one of three things happened: one, a large enough mob formed to overwhelm the prey; two, the prey got away; or three, their brains were destroyed. They seemed to have lost their self-preservation mechanism, for they didn’t even react when Kevin pointed his gun out the window and aimed. Most were still shambling forward when his bullets sent their brains spattering out the backs of their skulls.

Howard kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, watching the road, wincing noticeably every time the large vehicle thumped over one of them in the street. He looked out of place in his expensive business attire, behind the wheel of the camouflaged Humvee, and even more ridiculous toting around the semiautomatic Kevin outfitted him with later.

There was a skeet range located on the southern end of the base, good for target practice, but Kevin decided to give Howard some more authentic experience, on living (or, rather, *unliving*), moving targets. Near the skeet range was the communications building, and it was there that they headed last, the Hummer loaded down with goods and ammo, Kevin driving this time, while Howard practiced his aim from the shotgun seat. Kevin hadn’t expected him to be very

good, and he wasn't, his inexperienced marksmanship made worse by the fact that every time Kevin slowed down a little to allow him more time to aim, Howard panicked at the sight of the living dead gaining on them and screeched, "What are you doing?! Drive!"

It was only due to the Hummer's power and protection that they made it to the communications building in one piece. Inside, Kevin showed Howard the radio set-up he'd used the day before and explained how to operate it. "If I get sick after I take this mask off, it'll be up to you to show the others," he told Howard. "It's important that you keep broadcasting. If there are five survivors just in this area, there must be more in other parts of the state, let alone the country. If you join forces and work together, you'll have a much easier time taking out the zombies and trying to rebuild."

Howie frowned. "You keep saying 'you,'" he noted, "like you already know you're not going to be a part of it."

Kevin shrugged. He had come to accept his fate as inevitable. "It'll be a miracle if I am. I guess there's a chance... I mean, you all survived, and no one's sure why. But I'm not counting on it. I just want to prepare you as much as I can while I'm able to. This place offers as many resources as you could ask for; you just need to know where they are and how to use them. Teach the others as soon as you can, just in case... you know... something happens to you, too."

Howard didn't respond. His dark complexion had paled, as if all the blood had drained from his face.

Kevin swallowed hard. "I'm gonna do it now, okay? Before we broadcast and before we go back. I don't wanna upset the little girl any more by making her beg me not to; I want it done and over with. If it happens as quick as it did to my friend Sam, I should know by then if I'm feeling any symptoms or not. Besides... I hate talkin' on the radio through this damn mask."

Howard just stood there, stiffly. He did not try to stop him.

Slowly, Kevin unstrapped the mask from behind his head. *Moment of truth*, he thought. He hesitated... and then he pulled the mask off. As the seal broke and the first breath of air reached his mouth and nose, he inhaled deeply, savoring it. The room air was slightly stale, warm and heavy from the lack of air conditioning, but after sucking air through a filter for two days, the ease with which it filled his lungs was satisfying. He tried not to think about the infectious particles entering his system with it. The damage was already done, and there was no going back now.

He couldn't wait to step outside and take a breath of fresh air again, but first, there was the broadcast to attend to.

With the sense that he was recording his final testimony, Kevin cleared his throat, raised the microphone to his lips, and said, “This is Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson, of the United States Air Force, stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. I am urging any survivors of the catastrophic events that have claimed our country to make their way here, to Tampa. I wish I could tell you that the base is free of the living dead. It isn’t. But we do have the means to get rid of them. Weapons. Supplies. All the resources we need to survive on. There are other survivors here at MacDill. I repeat: There are survivors here...”

PART IV: THE GATHERING

Chapter 41

Those first few days after, I saw them every time I closed my eyes. I dreamed of them every time I fell asleep. I woke up screaming every time I dreamed.

In some ways, it’s gotten better since then. Some days, if I keep myself busy, I can go a few hours without seeing them, without thinking about them. Some nights, I don’t have nightmares. Some nights, I don’t dream at all. Those are the best nights, the nights I find it easiest to rest.

But in some ways, it’s gotten worse. Because when I do think of them, when I do see them in my memory or in my dreams, I see them how they became, so much more vividly than I can picture how they were before. As time goes by, it gets harder and harder to see them clearly, to get every little detail – the laugh lines around Leighanne’s eyes; the freckles across Bonnie’s nose; the devilish smile on Brooke’s face - just right in my mind’s eye. Sometimes, I’m afraid a day will come when I won’t remember what they look like anymore.

But I tell myself that will never happen. I have a picture of each of them – an old photo of Leighanne from around the age when I met her, and the twins’ first grade school pictures – that I kept in my wallet, and whenever I worry I’m forgetting, I take them out and look at them, practically study them, like I’m trying to relearn every last detail. Those small, single photos could never capture the spirit of the real people they represent, but they don’t need to. Their spirits, the essence of each of them, live in on my memory. The day may come when I don’t remember the exact shade of Leighanne’s roots, or which twin had a cowlick at the back of the part in her hair, but I will never forget the love my wife and I shared, or the two daughters we brought into the world together.

The world is a different place, and so much has changed since that infernal Friday, it’s almost hard to recall what our lives were like before. But I can’t forget. I don’t want to forget.

Monday, April 16, 2012
9:00 a.m.

Their voices came to him in the midst of his sleep.

“Daddy?”

“Daddy...”

Brian opened his eyes, blinking blearily as they swam into focus: blonde and tiny, standing barely four feet tall beside his bed. He sat up quickly, the tangle of covers falling down from his bare chest. “Brooke,” he croaked, his voice hoarse from sleep. “Bonnie.”

He looked upon his beautiful twin daughters, smiling at him, innocent and angelic, and tears of relief filled his eyes, as he realized he had been dreaming. Their deaths, their transformation into bloodthirsty monsters... all a nightmare.

“Girls... my girls...” He swung his legs over the side of the mattress and opened his arms wide, eager to hold his daughters tightly. They clambered onto his lap, wrestling each other for space as their blonde heads nestled against his shoulders. He wrapped his arms around them both, savoring their soft, warm weight on his knees. The dream had seemed so real, he’d thought he would never hold them on his lap like this again.

He hugged Bonnie to his chest. He ran his hand through Brooke’s silky hair, gently untangling the gnarls made in her sleep. When his fingers got stuck in a particularly knotted clump, he gave a little tug. Brooke’s head tipped back... and when he looked down to make sure he hadn’t hurt her, Brian saw that her face had turned a deathly shade of grayish green. He gave a little gasp of fright, and her head toppled back further, clean off her neck and over his arm, bouncing once off the mattress and landing on the floor with a sickening thunk, where it rolled once and came to a stop.

Brian screamed and let go of his daughter’s decapitated body, watching in horror as the bloody stump of a neck slid out of sight, the body dropping into a heap at his feet. No sooner had he turned to Bonnie than he felt an immense pressure and ripping, tearing pain in his chest. He looked down and saw Bonnie’s fist *inside* his chest cavity. “No!” he choked, but he could not draw breath back in. He could feel Bonnie’s small fingers literally squeezing his heart, her fingernails digging in, and then, all of a sudden, her arm yanked back, and he retched as his heart was wrenched out of his body.

He looked down in shock at the gaping hole in the center of his chest, then slowly up at his daughter, still sitting on his lap. She was holding his heart up to her mouth; it filled her hand like a large apple, fleshy and blood-soaked, still

vigorously beating. She lowered it slightly, revealing a sinister grin, and he saw that her lips were dripping with his blood; it beaded at the corners of her mouth and trickled down her chin. Then she bowed her head, tipping it slightly at an angle, opened her mouth wide, and sank her teeth into the organ.

“No!” he cried again, as she ripped another chunk out of his heart and rose up, stringy bits of vein and sinew dangling from her teeth.

Then, from behind, he heard a woman’s voice whisper his name (“Brian...”), and he felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder, and he stiffened, for he knew this was Leighanne, and in a second, he would feel her taloned nails dig into his skin, and he would turn, and there she would be, not his beautiful wife, but a monster, dead-eyed and hungry for his flesh...

“No!” he moaned once more, and the grip on his shoulder relaxed, and he could feel the hand moving over his arm. But this hand was not heavy and menacing; it was delicate and very soft, almost comforting...

Brian rolled over in bed, and when he opened his eyes, he saw not Leighanne, but a different woman, a stranger: brown hair, fair skin, and a look of deep concern etched upon her face. It took him a moment to realize the face was not a new one and put a name to it.

“Gretchen,” he mumbled, and as he sat up, his conscious brain sorted his muddled thoughts into clarity, and he became aware of his surroundings once more. This was not his own bed, not his house. He was in a stranger’s home, somewhere just across the Georgia/Florida border, where he and Gretchen had stopped to stay the night. They’d been fearful to travel at night, he recalled, because of the zombies. Those were real, but what he’d just experienced was not.

Only a nightmare, he realized, looking down at his bare chest, which was unblemished but for the scar running down its center. He placed his hand there, his fingers slipping over his clammy, sweat-soaked skin, and felt the reassuring pulse of his heart racing beneath it, and he let out his breath in a long sigh, then inhaled shakily. He felt his heart rate begin to slow as his body started to relax from its dream-induced state of stress.

He looked up at Gretchen, who was gazing back at him, her mouth pursed with pity. “I’m sorry if I startled you,” she said timidly. “You must have been having a nightmare. You were... twitching... and sort of gasping in your sleep. I was afraid you...” She trailed off, shrugging apologetically.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, still taking measured breaths. “It was...” He, too, trailed off, shaking his head. There was no way he was going to relive what he’d just experienced in his sleep. “I’m glad you woke me,” he finished dully.

“No problem. It’s already nine in the morning.”

“What??” Shocked, he turned towards the window nearest his bed. The light filtering through the curtains was still dim and gray.

“It’s raining. The sky’s all dark and overcast.”

Pausing to listen, he could hear the rain now, spattering lightly against the windowpanes. “Oh.”

“Do you... d’you wanna stay here awhile and wait it out, or should we get going?” she asked hesitantly. She seemed to be tiptoeing around him, as if she were afraid of upsetting him. He must have been a sight to see in the throes of his nightmare, he thought, a dull flush creeping up his cheeks.

“Nah, it sounds like a light rain... I think we can drive through it,” he decided, adding, “I mean, if you’re okay with that. If we leave now, we should be able to get to the base before nightfall.”

Gretchen nodded quickly. “That sounds like a good plan.”

They should have been in Tampa by now, thought Brian, as he got up and moved around the room, dressing and gathering up his belongings. With the roads clear, the drive should only have taken seven or eight hours. But the freeways were cluttered with the abandoned vehicles of those who had died in their attempts to escape the plague, and they couldn’t drive as fast or as freely as they normally would. Thus, each mile traveled took significantly longer. They had meandered south for a few more hours the previous afternoon, after leaving the farmhouse, where they had stopped to rest and freshen up and gather supplies. They’d finally reached the Florida state line just before sunset and had agreed to find another place to stop and stay the night. The last thing either of them had wanted was to get stalled in the midst of another horde of zombies in the dark.

They had stopped in another rural area to find a house because lower concentrations of people before the plague struck meant lower concentrations of zombies afterwards. And indeed, after locking up the house and laying low, they had not been bothered all night. Brian’s sleep had been restless, permeated with nightmares and flashbacks, but Gretchen, at least, appeared to have slept reasonably well.

She and Brian repacked the white SUV they had been driving since yesterday with their supplies, a mixture of the few personal possessions they’d brought with them and supplies they had scrounged from the homes they’d stayed in. Another perk of choosing country homes was that the owners tended to be well-stocked with food, both fresh and canned, tools, and weapons. They were now armed with a pair of hunting rifles and plenty of ammo, along with other necessities, and as Brian climbed into the driver’s seat that morning, he felt confident that they

would have no trouble making their way down the Florida peninsula to Tampa Bay. If they did run into trouble, this time, they would be prepared.

And so they set off, iPod playing softly, wipers swishing across the rain-spattered windshield, headlights beaming through the gloomy morning mist. Brian's nightmares were shoved firmly into the depths of his mind, while on the surface, he focused solely on his driving. Their spirits were as high as could be expected, given the circumstances. They had a plan now, at least, and they were hopeful that they would find other survivors – perhaps even, miraculously, cousin Kevin among them – at MacDill Air Force Base. Brian refused to lose sight of that plan, for it was the only thing keeping him going, the only hope he had left to live for.

“I wish I had thought to leave a note or something,” sighed Gretchen, as they wove through the stalled traffic on the freeway. “If Shawn's made it home by now, he won't have a clue where I've gone...”

She had mentioned this several times before over the past day. Brian knew she was worried about her husband and worried that, if he really had left the army base in Maryland at which he'd been working, he would come home to an empty house and not know what had become of her. He was surprised she hadn't yet asked to turn back, but she seemed to have enough sense to know better. There was no way he was going to head back to Atlanta, not until he found out what was waiting in Tampa. Likewise, though he sympathized with Gretchen's situation, he'd had enough sense not to tell her what he really thought – that there was no way her husband would ever make it home alive. He was probably dead – or undead – like everyone else... like Brian's own spouse... and children...

He swallowed hard, forcing thoughts of his family to the back of his mind again. To Gretchen, he replied, “You couldn't have left a note; from the sound of things, there wasn't much time. You had to get out of the house. And anyway, what would you have said? You didn't know where you were headed till we decided on MacDill.”

She nodded. “I guess you're right... I just don't know how I'll be able to reach him, with the phones down...” She trailed off sadly, and out of the corner of his eye, he watched her fumble with her backpack and take out her cell phone. She turned it on – she'd kept it off to conserve the battery that was left – and played with it for a minute, checking for signal bars, even trying to make a call, but of course, there was still no service. She put the phone back without a word, and Brian kept on driving and didn't mention it.

They made good time crossing the Florida panhandle, for along their route down I-75, there only seemed to be small towns, few and far between, which meant there were fewer abandoned vehicles to get around. It was only once they reached the intersection with I-10, which ran east towards Jacksonville to west towards Tallahassee, that the freeway became crowded again.

As he navigated through this mess, Brian was aware that they would need to stop and get gas for the SUV soon – that or abandon it for a vehicle with a full tank. But the cloverleaf at this interchange was crawling with rain-soaked zombies, who had forced their way out of their cars that still clogged the exit ramps, and there was no way he was going to leave the freeway – or the SUV, for that matter.

The empty light came on a mile or so past the interchange, and the SUV emitted a friendly warning ding. Gretchen looked over in alarm. “What was that?”

“We’re almost outta gas.”

“What?? Well, we better find somewhere to stop!”

“We will. We can try the next exit.” Brian wasn’t too worried; he knew that most gas tanks had a decent-sized reserve. They were never really empty when the fuel gauge said they were.

But the next exit ramp, a few miles down the interstate, was completely barricaded by stopped cars. “Let’s keep goin’,” Brian said, swerving back into the left lane. “There’s gotta be another exit up the road a ways.”

Gretchen looked uncertainly at the exit sign as they drove past it. “Are you sure? The last thing we need is to run out of gas...”

“We won’t,” Brian insisted, and still, he felt confident. “I reckon we could go another twenty miles on empty. There’s bound to be a clear exit in that span.”

And he kept on driving.

They had traveled only ten miles or so – which took nearly half an hour, during which time they saw no exits, clear or otherwise – before the engine began to sputter. Gripping the wheel tightly, Brian heard Gretchen’s sharp intake of breath beside him. She didn’t say “I told you so,” only looked at him with wide, frightened eyes, as he grimaced and took his foot off the accelerator, allowing the SUV to coast.

“There!” he said suddenly, pointing to a green sign up ahead. “There’s an exit up there! There’ll be a gas station. We can make it down the ramp if we coast.”

He fed the engine the last of its gas, giving them enough acceleration to reach the exit sign. *Ellisville*, it read, with an arrow directing them to the off ramp. The engine died as he swerved onto the ramp, but the SUV hurtled down it with no trouble in neutral. Afraid to brake, he blew past the stop sign at the foot of the ramp and took the turn practically on two wheels. Next to him, Gretchen had reached up to grasp the clothes hanger bar above her door and was clutching it tightly, white-faced.

“Almost there,” Brian chanted, spotting the sign for a gas station up ahead on the two-lane road. Unfortunately, the road was flat, and the momentum of his acceleration slowed, until at last, the SUV slid to a stop. Brian released his breath in a low sigh. “Well,” he said, gazing out the windshield. “We’re close, anyway. The station’s right up there. We just need to walk and fill a gas can; that’ll give us enough juice to get the car up to the pumps.”

Gretchen bit her lip. “What if there are zombies?”

They both looked out the windows, all around. It was hard to see out, through the misty drizzle, but they didn’t see any of the undead, nor hear their distant moans of hunger. “I think we can make it,” said Brian. “Listen, if you want, I’ll go, and you can stay here in the car. If you lay low with the doors locked...”

Gretchen shook her head furiously. “No way, I’m not staying in here by myself. If we’re going anywhere, we’re going together.”

Brian nodded. “Alright,” he agreed. “Then we’re goin’, right? Because sittin’ here ain’t gonna do us any good.”

“I guess you’re right,” Gretchen sighed. “We might as well go now, before any of *them* show up. But let’s take the guns, just in case.”

“Definitely.” Cautiously, Brian climbed out of the SUV. He stood by the driver’s side door for a moment, looking and listening, and when he was satisfied that nothing was going to jump out at him, he went around back and opened up the hatchback to retrieve the weapons. When Gretchen came around to join him from the other side, he saw that she was carrying her backpack.

“I threw everything back in it,” she explained, “just in case.”

He nodded. “Good planning.” He handed her one of the loaded rifles, taking the other for himself, and closed the trunk on the rest of their supplies. Then they started up the road at a fast walk, which quickly turned into a jog. The rain rapidly drenched them, but getting wet was the least of their concerns. As she trotted ahead of him, her bag bouncing on her back, Gretchen repeatedly looked right and left, like a scared animal. Brian didn’t blame her. He did the same.

He felt a feeling of immense relief when they reached the gas station and found the building unlocked. They ducked in quickly, found a gas can, and hurried back outside to the nearest pump. It was only once Brian reached up to select options on the pump that he realized the electronic screen was dark and blank. “Oh no,” he groaned.

“What? What’s wrong with it?”

“No power. Modern gas pumps run off electricity, same as everything else. The pumps are shut off; they won’t work.”

“How are we gonna get gas??” Gretchen’s voice rose shrilly as panic set in.

“I dunno,” Brian sighed, looking around. “Lemme think...” He racked his brain, eyeing the covered manholes around the perimeter of the station, which he knew lead to the gas tanks underground. If they could pry off one of the covers, maybe they’d be able to rig up a hose and siphon gas manually straight from...

“Brian!” Gretchen gasped suddenly, and he felt her grab his arm. She turned him around, and, following her line of sight, he saw her cause for alarm.

Zombies had appeared on the outskirts of the property, emerging from the trees, rising out of flooded drainage ditches. Moaning at the scent of living flesh on the wet breeze, they converged upon the gas station.

Brian looked around wildly for a means of escape, his mind racing, heart pounding, adrenaline pumping. There were two cars parked at the station; if just one of them had keys inside, they could drive off before the zombies reached them. “Check that car for keys!” he ordered Gretchen, pointing to a Cadillac pulled up to one of the far pumps. While she darted off, he hurried over to the pick-up truck parked in a space in front of the building. But both doors were locked, and peering through the windows, he didn’t see keys inside. When he looked up and over at Gretchen, she was already running back towards him, shaking her head in defeat.

“No keys,” she confirmed. “Nothing here either?”

He shook his head, feeling panic starting to rise up his throat, as the zombies staggered closer.

“Let’s go inside,” said Gretchen. “We can lock the door and hide out in a back room or something until they go away.”

Brian saw no other option. He gave a single nod of agreement, and together, they ran back inside, as the zombies shambled across the forecourt towards them, their clumsy feet splashing through puddles of rain. Brian slammed the glass door shut and fumbled with the lock, while Gretchen looked around in dismay. “The whole front of this building is nothing but windows,” she observed. “Do you think they’ll crash their way through?”

Brian rapped his knuckles on the glass. “It’s probably safety glass. They’d want it to be strong, in case of a car crashing through... or an armed robbery or something...”

“Wait...” Gretchen’s eyes suddenly widened. “I have an idea! Open that door again.”

“What? But...” He looked outside. The zombies had reached the pumps.

“Just do it!” Gretchen raised her rifle. Brian quickly unlocked the door and thrust it open, but she wasn’t pointing the gun at him. She aimed through the open door instead. He realized what she was about to do a split second before she did, and as soon as she pulled the trigger, he fell upon her, throwing her to the floor and covering her body with his own as a colossal boom rocked the station.

He felt the wave of heat sweep over him and heard the roar of flames. Looking up and over his shoulder, he saw a massive fireball rising up from the pump Gretchen had shot. Burning debris from the explosion littered the pavement, and several zombies tottered around in flames, their dead flesh melting away from their bodies in sheets.

To his surprise, the front windows of the station had not shattered with the blast; indeed, the glass was as strong as – perhaps stronger than – he had hoped. The fire seemed contained to the pump embankments for now – perhaps the falling rain was helping to keep it under control – but he imagined more explosions, as the other pumps went up, and couldn’t imagine they’d be safe in front of a wall of glass. “Come on,” he muttered to Gretchen, pulling her up from the floor as he climbed to his feet. They staggered off to the back of the building, where there was a door marked *Employees Only*. They pushed their way through, and Gretchen screamed.

There was a lone zombie wandering stupidly around the back room. At the sight of them – and the sound of Gretchen’s scream – it halted in its tracks and looked right at them, letting out a rather excited moan. Immediately, it started lurching towards them. This time, Brian raised his gun, and with a single shot to the forehead, sent the zombie crashing to the floor.

“Can we get rid of it?” pleaded Gretchen, eyeing the fallen zombie warily.

Obediently, Brian grabbed its legs and dragged it out of the back room, across the tiled floor of the building, and kicked it through the door, which he’d forgotten to re-secure in his haste to take shelter from the explosions. Rolling the dead zombie out onto the wet pavement, he closed the door and latched it, then ran back to Gretchen. He found her trying to drag a set of supply shelves across the floor – “to block the door,” she grunted, struggling. Brian hurried to help her, and together, they moved the shelves against the closed door to the back room, barricading themselves in.

Once that was done, he looked around. The room was small and windowless, with a table and a couple of chairs, a coffee maker and a few snacks strewn about.

They wouldn't last long using it as their bunker, but for now, until the flames died down and the remaining zombies with them, it would have to suffice.

He and Gretchen hunkered down in the pair of chairs to wait it out.

Chapter 42

It was raining.

The first day after the dead had risen, it was raining. It was a complete downpour, accompanied by rain and thunder that I used to love watching next to my window. There's something so wild about thunderstorms, rainstorms. They make you feel that, if you go out and just enjoy the rain, it's natural – a cleansing, I guess.

I'm not one to be religious. I'm not one to search for signs. But, honestly, it felt so fitting to have such a fierce storm after... that day. The rain was pounding down harder than ever, with the winds trying to threaten our current hiding place.

It reminded me of someone trying to scrub a stain out of a carpet. No matter how hard, how much effort, how many cleaning chemicals, some stains never truly vanish. It felt like whatever the hell is up there was trying to wash away the terrors of the virus, and that's a stain that will never fade.

I guess when you really think about it, it could be that higher being was washing away the traces of the world that existed before the dead rose. Depends on how you look at things. I'm not sure where I stand on that yet. There are so many things about this that I know. There's even more about this that I don't know. There's a lot I don't know period.

I do know that day was the first of many adjusting to my new life.

I do know that it was raining.

Monday, April 16, 2012

12:30 p.m.

Two people lay almost completely intertwined on the floor of the store; both were caught within the blissful ignorance slumber provided for them. A large golden retriever lay closely next to the young man. The blonde canine happened to be the only one awake and peeked her head up every now and then in a silent watch till her master awoke again. Peaceful looks were set upon two sleeping faces, as

the young man's arm went over the girl's body. He shifted a bit before becoming still once more. The arm, however, jolted Riley out of her dreams and thrust her back into reality.

She awoke with a start from that motion that morning – well, afternoon, once she checked her watch. She jerked around, confused at her surroundings, confused at seeing someone asleep next to her. The scene around her startled her: a dimly lit store, illumined only from what peeked through from outside. The daylight barely reached where she sat, giving the area a more dusky setting. Her hand reached for the flashlights she and Nick had found yesterday. Even from where she was at the back end of the store, she could spy overcast clouds outside. From above came the pitter-pattering of rain tapping steadily on the roof, followed by the booming of thunder and flashes of lighting that lit up the store better than anything else.

Rubbing her eyes, she focused, as everything came rushing back to her. Her mind flashed back to images from the night prior: the armies of the undead coming to meet her, finding Nick, escaping there. Stretching a bit, she spied Nick, lying closely next to her. It'd been he who had accidentally woken her up, she realized. He looked so peaceful right then, a smile creeping gently across his face. It was almost cute; he looked so innocent, young, and free, momentarily, from the horrors of the walking dead.

They hadn't been able to sleep immediately yesterday. First, they'd had to pull down the gates in front of the store and kill any random zombies within the building. It'd been hours before they both felt they had cleared out the Target of any danger. While what they'd faced hadn't come close to all they'd seen roaming outside before, it had been enough to remind them that there was no safe place for them anymore, only safer. Once they had finished, they had agreed they needed some sleep. So she had followed Nick to the sporting department, covered the floor around them with sleeping bags, and finally lay down to rest. As they'd fallen asleep, Nick had told her more about himself, and even though it felt wrong, she'd shared very little of her own previous life.

One of them, however, was supposed to have stayed up and kept watch, and then they would switch off. Riley couldn't remember who was supposed to have stayed up last, but she cursed their stupidity. If anything had gotten in, they would have been sitting ducks. But it did confirm that they'd cleared the store for the moment, because any zombie would have smelled them out while they'd been sleeping. Grabbing her crowbar, she stood, deciding to see if she couldn't get a change of clothes before Nick woke up. It would be less awkward, she knew, and why wake him when he was sleeping so soundly?

I'll hear if anything's roaming the store. Won't happen if they didn't eat us while sleeping. Even if I do, I'll run right back to him to make sure he's safe. It'll be fine. Plus, Spunky's there with him... I'll hear her if something happens, right?

As if she had heard Riley's thoughts, Spunky stood, trotting around to Riley and plopping down in front of her. It hadn't taken long for the dog to take to her. Not to mention, Spunky had an innate ability to sense the presence of anything undead before she or Nick could. Watching Riley, she gave a tilt of her head; clearly, she wanted some affection. Obliging, Riley patted her with a smile. She reminded Riley of younger days with her brothers and the loyal German Shepard they'd once owned together. She bit her lip, as the memory tore open the emotional wounds of just a day before, of the knowledge that her brothers had been left back in the home she'd grown up in, left to rot. But no, they wouldn't even get that privilege; they were likely roaming the world with the other members of the living dead, rather than resting in the peace they deserved.

With a quick glimpse at Spunky, once she left her dismal daydreams, Riley pulled herself back into the present, where she needed to be. "Keep an eye on Nick for me," she told Spunky, careful to stay quiet, so as not to wake Nick up. Taking the dog's soft whine as a yes, she watched as the retriever calmly walked back over to him and curled up beside him as she had before.

"Smart dog..." she mused and then crept cautiously to the women's clothing section. Riley wasn't exactly concerned about how she looked. It was more the idea of ditching the clothes that had witnessed so many horrors. They had been covered in a mix of her blood, as well as the congealed fluid of the undead. They had been torn, ripped, and probably smelled horribly if she took a whiff. Personally, she didn't wish to know.

As she thumbed through the clothing racks, she kept herself blocked by them, in case any of the zombies could see her through the windows from outside. It was doubtful, given the help from the gates, as well as the distance mixed in with the storm outside, but she knew to be careful. Another flash of lighting zipped outside, causing her to turn and just watch the front of the store with interest. Always, she'd been fascinated by storms. When she was younger, she used to worry her father constantly by trying to play out in the rain. It was a habit that never completely died, for when she was older, she'd often go on drives in the rain, finding them peaceful in a way that made sense to no one but herself. As she inched closer towards the front doors, crowbar still in her hand, she watched the downpour wistfully, and the urge to go out in it rose once more. She couldn't, no matter how tempting it was; it'd be her death, and she knew it.

Riley turned away, frustrated by the limitations forced upon her. Nothing was hers anymore, yet somehow, everything was, in an annoying contradiction that only served to frustrate her more. She sighed a bit; her shoulder still throbbed some, not that she'd tell Nick that at all. Skimming through the racks, she searched for a shirt to fit her. When she saw one she'd make do with, she stripped off her tank top, having left her hoodie back with Nick and Spunky. It revealed a slim body that had been used to playing sports, and often. Riley was about to put the new shirt on, when the smallest noise caught her attention.

It was miniscule, nothing more than a footstep, she figured. In times before, it would have meant nothing. Only now, it meant everything. She ducked down immediately, crouching low and inching her way towards the source of the sound. Still in just a bra and pants, she gripped the crowbar tighter than ever and lunged for the source, once close enough. She didn't take a good look at what she was attacking, but she knew what it had to be, as she tackled it to the ground.

“Whoa! Riley! Wait!”

Her hand flew in midair, ready to slam the crowbar down upon the undead. It was only seconds before forcing it down, that she realized it was Nick she saw below her. It was on his chest she sat, not a ghoul's. It was him she had almost killed, not some member of the living dead. The metal rod fell from her hands in shock and clanged angrily against the floor. Slowly, her eyes crept downwards, till her gaze met his, as she felt her cheeks grow warm.

“Sorry,” she apologized almost inaudibly, still in shock that she'd almost accidentally killed her one companion left in this hellish world. Spunky had heard the commotion and had run up, barking excitedly until she discovered who her master's attacker was. She then sat, titling her head as if she, too, was asking how Riley could make such a mistake. Riley of course, was asking herself the same thing. She should have known better.

Nick simply smirked at her, teasingly; his eyes were twinkling, playful now. For a moment, everything felt as normal as the situation could allow. “That's the second time you thought I was a zombie. Do I really look that bad?”

Laughing, she shifted her hair out from in front of her eyes. “Nah, see, yeah... I knew it was you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I was just testing your reflexes.”

“Right.”

“I was!”

“You just wanted to jump my bones. It's alright.”

“Sorry, Nick, not my type.” And it wasn't a full lie. In the world before, as she was already starting to think of it, that was true. Nick would be the guy she'd glance over, think was cute, but not worthy, and then walk away. It was a bitchy way to think, but Riley knew that was just how she'd been. How she was. But she had come to feel comfortable with him in their short time together, and that was a relief.

There was a silence between them, then, as they simply took in the sight of the other. It soon grew awkward, as she noticed Nick's eyes travel down, reminding her that she'd lunged for the "zombie" in nothing but a bra and jeans. She felt her cheeks flush and was annoyed at her face betraying her the way she knew it had. Riley didn't like people being able to read her. She climbed off of Nick and reached her hand down towards him. Gripping it, he let her help him up, and she painfully tried to fill the odd quiet.

"I'm going to, well... finish... changing, and... you have Spunky, too, so, I'll just take the crowbar and go change."

He nodded, looking at a loss for what to say, much like herself. She turned back towards him, concerned that she'd hurt him. "I didn't make you hit your head, did I?" She didn't know much about his head injury, just that it had been bad and the reason he'd been in the hospital to begin with.

"No, but the bandages are dirty as hell; I need to take 'em off."

His hand felt the back of his head, beneath his tousled blond hair, where the bandages still were. Nick winced a bit at his own touch, as she watched him. She stepped around him, glimpsing the injury for herself as he carefully peeled the bandages off. It revealed quite the head wound; blood had dried in his hair from the wound reopening, probably when she'd crashed her car. It looked like someone had tried to kill him, rather than some accident, like he'd described earlier.

"Jeez, Nick, what happened? What kind of accident just were you in?"

Nick sighed and shook his head, looking very disgusted with whatever answers flitted through his head at her question. "I thought you were gonna go change."

His sharpness surprised her. Nick seemed to be able to take things and still keep his head up; at least, that was how she had read him in their short time together. Riley, so used to being the one on the offense, rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'm going. I was just worried. Okay? But forget it."

Riley felt herself walking away, irritated, back to the clothing she'd been thumbing through earlier. Not one glance was spared back at Nick. To be honest, she knew she was probably too angry just because Nick was irritated about her question. Still, she was just so frustrated. She had no one left in the world, but this man she'd met only a day and a half before. So in the end, she was so scared of ending up alone again. That fact alone made her want to rage at the world. She'd liked priding herself on being so independent before, even if it had cost her everything she'd never appreciated until the zombies took it all away. Her independence was all she had left.

Her hands reached for the t-shirt she'd dropped earlier, pulling it on snugly, as she stood there amongst the racks, watching the rain again. Steady footsteps headed her way, as she continued to watch the rain, ignoring the presence that came up beside her. It had too much coordination to be a member of the undead.

"Sorry I snapped at you."

"Sorry I cared."

"Oh, come off it, Riley. It caught me off guard, aight? We just met, damn; don't expect me to just want to share everything. It's not like you have. All I know about you is that you're a damn journalist. And the way you like to keep poking in my life keeps reminding me."

Riley remained silent as she watched Nick from the corner of her eye. "I love the rain."

It was almost amusing, seeing the puzzled expression arise on his boyish good looks. He raised a brow at her, as she kept her eyes turned at the windows, at the storms she so adored.

"I love the rain; I love the wild way it feels. It's just... so freeing. It's nature unleashing its rage on the world, and I love every minute of it. I always would go out driving in it, out to this hill overlooking the beaches. I'd get out, sit in the downpour, and watch the lightening come down."

"I wonder if it's trying to clean the world," he said softly.

"No, if there's a God, He's trying to wash humanity away."

The two were silent once more, until Nick spotted an overturned cart amongst the clothing section. His hand grasped hers gently, and Riley gave him a look as he pulled her over to it. They sat next to each other, both remaining silent. Together, they watched, as the rain continued to fall.

Chapter 43

The first day at the base, I hadn't known that it'd be my new home.

It rained all day. All it did was make everything worse. The world was crying, like it knew what had happened. I was crying; I'd been constantly crying, it felt like. I'd had my own personal rain since Reaper's Sabbath, no matter how sunny the day.

Everyone expects me to just be able to move on, live past it. After all, I was alive. I guess that I was able to, the first day after, on Sunday, before the dead rose.

Once that happened, what would make me happy to be alive? The fact that the world didn't want us anymore? Or maybe that everyone I knew and loved was now roaming the streets craving for my flesh? I wanted my simple life back, when I was able to be shallow and carefree, when my only worry was whether or not Daddy would accept Bradley Lee.

It's so hard, now. Everything has gotten so hard; nothing is easy anymore. Not even simple things. Nothing, ever since the Osiris Virus claimed our lives, as brutally as it did the ones it killed. You know why we call it that? I gave it the name. It's after the Egyptian God of the Dead, you know. He was killed and arose from the grave, just like everyone now.

I want everything to be simple again. I can't handle this world. I can't be tough like everyone else. I don't even want to try.

If people don't like that, I don't care.

I don't care about anything anymore.

Monday, April 16, 2012
5:00 p.m.

They had been in the church all day. No one wished to go outside, and no one could really blame anyone else. They'd all been living in the hell that had once been their world for a full day, almost, and none of them wished to adjust. Kayleigh spent the day more observing than actually attempting to interact with people. Why bother? For all she knew, everyone would begin to die before her eyes, just like everyone else she had cared about before.

Oddly enough, the clothes she'd been forced to wear on Saturday, the clothes she'd resisted before because they weren't her thing at all, suddenly felt homey. She didn't want to change out of them; she felt like they showed the state of her. Her knees were close to her as she remained sitting against the wall. She wanted to feel enclosed, her own personal bubble that shut out the world and everything it had become. She wanted to live in the fantasies of the world before.

Before. What a connotation that word had taken on. It wore the heartache that embraced Kayleigh like a silk shawl, proudly displayed it. *Before* - it meant so many things. *Before* was when she was happy. *Before* was when her world seemed to sing and tune out any hint of darkness. Now that darkness had become the world, happiness was to be forgotten.

Would she ever be happy again?

She seriously doubted it. All day they'd been in the church, Kevin checking himself constantly throughout the day for symptoms of the virus. So far, there were no such signs. It gave the others hope, because the virus had struck so quickly before. It wasn't doing so now, giving them the belief that it had either left the air, or that Kevin was to be amongst the rare immune. Kayleigh didn't want to believe either one. It meant she could get attached to the strong protector. Attachments were dangerous and, thus far, the only one she had allowed had been a small one to Howie.

Her phone couldn't make any calls – no service, of course. Yet still, she flipped it open often, checking for a miracle that could never come. Every time she glanced at the screen, there were no missed calls. No signs of life from her family, who she knew were probably dead, after what Kevin had told them.

She wondered if her unborn sibling could reanimate in the womb. If it could, would it try to eat out of her mother's stomach? They were sickening thoughts, ones that had been haunting her throughout the hours.

“Kayleigh?”

Jo snapped her out of her reverie. She had a motherly concern for the college girl, but Kayleigh simply frowned, ignoring her. She didn't want a replacement for the people she'd lost. Jo's daughter sat over at the other end of the church, giving Kevin the same looks. At least, it seemed, someone understood. She sighed. Why did it have to be a church they hid in, anyway? The entire thing was ironic. If God had let this happen, God could care less if zombies ate them. That simple. Her hand smoothed her hair back, trying to hide the bald patch that had almost caused her death. It hurt, throbbed when she touched it. It also made her feel less, less than what she was. It was a vain notion, but she could care less about that.

To be blunt, she wasn't sure exactly sure what she *did* care about anymore.

“Kayleigh? Are you hungry? We're fixing dinner with the supplies you brought.”

Great, jerky and canned fruit, most likely. Because that was just so appetizing. Why bother when they'd be eaten soon enough, anyway? What, this way they'd be better tasting, plumper for the leagues of ghouls just waiting to break into the barricaded church? Kayleigh looked away, her frown morphing into a scowl, as she focused on her cell phone, deciding to play a game on it before the battery died. It was simple, it was mindless, and it suited her.

The noises around her could fade into the back. She didn't have to watch as pews were forcefully separated from the floor by the men, as Jo tried to prepare a meal. She didn't have to hear talk of plans of action or clicking noises that she didn't

know the exact source of. Instead, she stuck to the Sunday school room, away from the moans from outside. She could simply play Pac-Man on her phone.

“Kayleigh, did you hear me?”

Turning away, she focused on the floor, willing the world away. She'd have been better off dead, even if she'd once loved being alive. She was far from suicidal, but the events had caused her to become extremely realistic about how everything would be for her now. And, realistically, it would've been better to have just died with everyone else, to be completely oblivious to the hell Earth had become, and be one of the mindless dead instead. Knowing... It was knowing, it was fighting, it was living, that was the cruelty of life now.

“Kayleigh!” Finally, she glanced up at the middle-aged Hispanic woman, whose dark eyes had become daggers aiming straight her way. Direct hit.

“What!” she cried out, irritated at being brought back to harsh reality. Reality was colder than she wished to be. Reality froze her to the bone, and she shivered simply from the thought of such.

“You need to eat. Talk to us.”

“No, I don't.”

Howard, who had been debating something with Kevin, had decided to stroll over. His steps were short and speedy. Impatience sat upon his furrowed brow; his dark eyes glinted with an edge he hadn't turned her way before now. “C'mon, don't be childish, Kayleigh; you need to eat.”

“Why bother?”

“Then why don't we just throw you out the door and let those *things* eat you now? It'd be easier on us.”

“You wouldn't do that.”

Before her very eyes, the tough snobbish business man softened at her reply. “You're right, I wouldn't. But come on, you need to eat, at least for me.”

“Fine.”

Rolling her eyes, she stood and followed him back to the others. AJ was eating and actually seemed at ease, which shocked her because how could anyone be at ease in a situation like this? But they all ate, and it, of course, was as she'd figured. Bits of various jerky and canned fruit that she and Howie had swiped from that convenience store, something that was only days before, but felt like

eons. Because it was *Before*. There was chatter going on, she knew. But it felt like a simple buzzing to the ears that one could block out with ease.

“...I’ll make sure we all start practicing target practice. The head isn’t the easiest place to aim.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes, even Gabby should know, in case something happens.”

“I don’t think-”

“If the worst happens, I want her prepared, Jo. That’s all.”

“I think we should worry more about supplies first. We don’t have enough for long.”

“Dude, supplies can’t do shit if we try and get 'em while those fucking ghouls are after us and we can’t shoot for shit. My ass is with Kevin.”

“Kayleigh?”

“Kayleigh?”

They were saying her name, but she was feeling distant, completely unattached. It was like Kayleigh belonged to the name of a college girl, one in love and with everything to live for. That wasn’t her. That was some other girl. A girl she’d once known, but had long since lost contact with. So why were they calling for a Kayleigh?

“Kayleigh! Snap out of it.” Tatted hands with black-painted fingernails snapped rapidly before her eyes, causing her to blink and swat them away irritably. Back to the world, she came, and a crashing sensation filled her as she was once again reminded of that which she wanted to forget.

“Alright, AJ! Jeez.”

“Are you okay?” the teenager asked. Kayleigh hadn’t exactly taken a lot of notice of her. She knew her name was Gabby and that she was Jo’s daughter, but overall, the two had ignored each other. Gabby seemed as sullen as her and, rather than appreciate it, Kayleigh resented her for it because Gabby already seemed to be getting the free pass Kayleigh would have died to have at the moment. No one forced *Gabby* to come back to the here and now. No, instead they wanted to pick on *her*. What had she done to deserve this?

“Yeah, fine. I don’t care about the guns, by the way. Do whatever you want. I don’t care. I’m not going to learn anyway.”

Kevin's brows furrowed as he shifted his jade eyes her way. If looks could kill, she was sure she'd be dead, with all the stares she'd been getting throughout the day. "You have to learn. We need to work together. Our lives depend on it."

"Then I'll do something else. I'm not going to use a gun. I'm not going to try and face one of those... those... those *things*. Not just to make the rest of you happy."

She stared at him, watching the reaction that followed. His jaw clenched, and, while it was obvious he wanted to say something, it was surprising when he instead said nothing and sat back, mulling it over. Jo was talking to Gabby quietly, wanting to ignore the tension. AJ rolled his eyes, muttering the entire time. Howie simply smirked. At her limits with the entire discussion, Kayleigh refocused back on AJ.

"What was that, AJ?"

"I said, you're being fucking selfish."

"I don't care."

"What do you mean, you don't care? Our lives could be lost 'cause you don't give a damn."

"I don't think so. You can fight; I'll do other stuff. We'll be fine."

"You're being a selfish bitch."

"I don't care."

She shook her head, walking back to her corner of the room, away from the others. She huddled back up, pulled out her cell phone to play her game yet again. A glance back over showed them all discussing something. Probably her. She didn't care. This world was harsh and hard, and she could care less about what they wanted. She wasn't going to do it. What would they do? Let her die? Hardly... None of them were that heartless, and they all knew it. They could say whatever they wanted.

"I don't care."

Chapter 44

I used to like getting scared.

When I was little, I loved watching scary movies. Black-and-white monster movies, 70s slasher flicks, movies about ghosts and aliens and killer dolls – I watched them all. It was fun to get scared in the safety of my house or Makayla’s, knowing the movies were just pretend and nothing like that could ever hurt me.

After my dad died, I stopped watching slasher movies. I stopped watching anything that was too realistic. But I still watched the stuff about ghosts and aliens and killer dolls. I still watched the old black-and-white movies about Dracula and Frankenstein and Wolfman. I took out my anger on the monsters in video games, blowing out the brains of the zombies in Resident Evil. That was the fun kind of scary. None of those things could hurt me or my family.

I miss my old life, before I knew zombies were real, before I knew I’d never feel safe again.

I don’t want to be scared anymore.

Tuesday, April 17, 2012
9:00 a.m.

Yesterday’s rain had cleared, and the morning was bright and sunny, hardly a cloud in the sky. “It’s gonna be a hot one,” Kevin had predicted, from inside the already-stuffy chapel. “We’ll go out early for target practice.”

He had taken AJ with him first. They’d left in the Hummer at the crack of dawn and still weren’t back. Huddled inside the chapel, Gabby was starting to get worried. What if something had happened to them? Kevin was their leader, and AJ looked tough, easily the second-strongest. How could the rest survive without them?

She looked around at the others. They were a pretty pathetic bunch.

Her mother had gotten all domestic, of course, trying to spruce up the chapel and make it fit for living in. They’d made their beds in the pews of the sanctuary, which had also become their living area, after they’d gotten tired of holing up in the tiny Sunday school room. That had become their dining room, since it had a table and chairs and was close to the chapel’s small kitchen, which Jo had used it to prepare meals. They weren’t good meals, but Gabby had to hand it to her for trying.

That was more than the other two had done. Howie talked the talk, but Gabby hadn’t seen him lift a finger to help around the church yet. He seemed to think he’d done enough by risking his life to bring back supplies with Kevin. He mostly sat around in his ridiculous business suit, feeling sorry for himself and finding

things to complain about, while the others bustled around him, Jo and Gabby organizing and inventorying, Kevin and AJ guarding and fortifying the chapel.

And then there was Kayleigh.

Kayleigh had been almost hysterically talkative when she'd first arrived, but since the adrenaline had left her system, she had all but shut down completely, isolating herself from the rest of the group, refusing to speak, refusing to eat. Gabby rolled her eyes in Kayleigh's direction. The older girl had wedged herself into the corner of the very last pew, sitting sideways, her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms wrapped around them, as if she were literally holding herself together. Her head was bowed, so she couldn't see the looks of annoyance Gabby was casting her. Gabby didn't think she was praying, though. Feeling sorry for herself, most likely. As if she were special. As if she'd had it any harder than the rest of them.

Gabby thought that, for a girl who was old enough to be considered an adult, Kayleigh was being awfully selfish. She hadn't bothered to ask anyone else about what they had been through since the plague had struck. She didn't know – or care, it seemed – that Gabby had seen her best friend dead, or that Gabby's mother had tried and failed to save everyone in the hospital before she had finally left, or that Kevin had watched all of his Air Force comrades die and turn to zombies. Howie and AJ had lost friends and loved ones, too, no doubt, but you didn't see them curling up to die themselves. No one else had the nerve to act that way when there was so much to be done. Even Gabby had snapped out of the stupor she'd been in on Sunday and was ready to help.

It was too bad, really. Kayleigh was the only one even close to Gabby's age; they could have been friends. But Gabby didn't want to be friends with such a Debbie Downer. She missed Makayla more than ever. Makayla had always been able to lift her mood, even this past year, after her father's murder. Sometimes Gabby had taken her for granted, but now, more than ever, she realized what a valuable friend Makayla had been. The realization made her throat tighten and her eyes burn, but she refused to let herself cry. She was not going to break down now. She was not going to be like Kayleigh.

The morning sunlight streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling stained glass window behind the altar. Gabby watched dust particles floating in the beams of colored light, gazed at the patterns they made on the opposite wall of the sanctuary. She would have wanted to get married in a church like this, with wooden pews and stained glass windows. Once, she and Makayla had gone through a bridal magazine and planned their fantasy weddings, picking out gowns and flowers and cakes. Gabby had pictured herself grown up and beautiful, walking down a long aisle with her father, ready for him to give her away to the cutest boy from school, who was no longer boyish and cute, but also grown up and handsome. Before she got to the altar, her father would lift her veil back off her face and kiss her, and she would hand her bouquet to Makayla, her

maid of honor, who would fluff out her long, white train as she climbed the steps to meet her groom.

The long-ago, little-girl fantasy still played vividly in Gabby's mind, but she knew now that it was just that: a fantasy. Never meant to be a reality. Her father was gone, and so was her best friend. There would be no one to give her away on her wedding day, no one to fluff her dress, and if this was all that was left, no one for her to marry when she was grown up. What was the point of growing up, anyway? Maybe that was the way Kayleigh saw things. For a moment, Gabby could understand.

Then she heard the low rumble of an approaching engine outside, and her gloomy mood lifted. They were back!

She jumped off her pew and flew to the door just outside the sanctuary, arriving just as three short knocks sounded on the other side. "It's us!" came the deep, rasping voice of AJ.

Gabby threw her weight into one of the marble pedestals they used to block the door, inching it out of the way. She unlocked the door and opened it just a crack to peek out. Seeing AJ, Kevin, and no one else – undead or alive – she stepped back out of the way for the two men to come in.

"Thanks, kid," said AJ gruffly, while Kevin immediately bolted the door shut again and dragged the pedestal back in front of it. It was the only door they hadn't boarded up, so that they'd be able to get in and out. The pedestal wouldn't do much to prevent zombies from getting in if they managed to force the lock, but if the door was kicked in, it would fall, and the heavy crash would be loud enough to alert them. That was the rationale, at least.

Gabby led the two men back into the sanctuary, where the others were scattered. Jo and Howie looked up as they came in. Kayleigh kept her head down, either completely oblivious or intentionally ignoring them.

"Well," said Kevin, looking around at them all, "target practice went well. This guy's a damn good shot, for an amateur," he added, jerking his thumb towards AJ, who smirked, pleased with himself and trying to hide it. "We took down quite a few on the way to the skeet range and back, and we stopped by the communications building to do another broadcast."

"And how are you feeling, Colonel Richardson?" asked Jo, looking at him in mild concern. They had all been on edge since he'd come back on Sunday with his mask off, but so far, the horrifying symptoms of the plague that had killed everyone else had not yet claimed the colonel.

"Kevin, please," he insisted with a warm smile, "unless you'd rather I call you Mrs. Lopez."

“Of course not... Kevin,” Gabby’s mother replied, nodding. “But don’t change the subject. You’re feeling okay? No fever, aches, nausea, skin rash?”

Kevin shook his head, still smiling. “Nothing.”

Jo let out her breath in an audible sigh. “Thank Heaven,” she said, and Gabby felt relieved, too. She didn’t want to think about Kevin covered in sores, like the woman behind the gas station counter. Like Makayla. She closed her eyes and shook the image from her brain. When she opened them, she focused again on the colored sunbeams filtering through the stained glass. She tried not to think of Makayla.

“I want to take another group out now, before it gets too hot,” said Kevin, looking around the sanctuary. “Who wants to go next? Howard?” Howie nodded listlessly and got up. He didn’t look particularly enthusiastic. “Kayleigh?” Naturally, there was no response. Kevin tried again. “Kayleigh? KAYLEIGH!”

When he barked her name, Kayleigh’s head finally jerked up. “What?” She blinked dazedly, but Gabby thought she was faking.

“Target practice. You, me, and Howie. Let’s go.”

Right away, Kayleigh started shaking her head. “No... no,” she repeated. “I told you, I’m not shooting a gun. I’m not going anywhere near those things.”

“You don’t have to go near them; that’s why we’re going in groups. I’ll cover you,” said Kevin. He had been patient with her the last two days, but it seemed to Gabby that his patience was wearing thin. “But you do need to learn how to shoot a gun, in case you do end up near them someday with no one around to protect you. You have to be able to protect yourself.”

But Kayleigh kept shaking her head, refusing to listen to reason. “No... not now. Not today.”

Kevin sighed, pressing his lips into a thin line. “Fine,” he said grimly.

“I’ll come!” Gabby volunteered, jumping on her chance. “I wanna learn how to shoot!” In her head, she saw Makayla again, but this time, her best friend was alive, sitting next to her on the floor as they played *Resident Evil*. The game had taken on more reality than Gabby had ever imagined. But if zombies were real, then she wanted to be like her character in the game – a gun-toting zombie assassin – not a helpless victim, like Kayleigh.

It was Kevin who had planted this idea in her head yesterday, when he had suggested that even she should learn to shoot. But now she caught him eyeing her mother, silently asking her permission.

Jo looked worried. "I don't know..." she began, already shaking her head. "She only just turned thirteen..."

"Kids my age ran off to join the army during the Civil War," Gabby piped up immediately, her heart starting to pound faster. "We're at war now, Mom, and there's no one left but us to fight. I have to learn!"

Her mother let out a long sigh, her brow knitted with worry. But finally, she nodded, just as Gabby knew she would. After all, Gabby was right. They all had to do their part. They all had to learn. If they didn't, who would?

"We'll get her back safely," promised Kevin, his large hand clamping down on Gabby's shoulder. "Let's go, kiddo."

Gabby bounced on the balls of her feet as they trooped back to the door. Adrenaline was coursing through her now, and she felt eager, almost excited. She flashed a grin over her shoulder at Howie, but he didn't return it. He looked pale, like he was dreading leaving the safety of the chapel again. At least he was man enough to do it, though, thought Gabby. Kevin, too, looked grim-faced and stoic, as he hauled the pedestal out of the way once more and unlatched the door.

"I'll go out first," he told the others in a low voice. "Then, Howie, you run Gabby to the Hummer and get in. You can drive again. Put her in the back. I'll cover you and ride shotgun."

Howie nodded. When Kevin inched through the door, his gun at the ready, Howie grabbed Gabby roughly by the wrist and yanked her out into the open. He took off running before she was ready, and at first, she stumbled, but managed to regain her footing and quickly matched his pace. She didn't slow down until she reached the Hummer, thrusting out her arms to catch herself against the back door. She quickly climbed in, while Howie ran around to the driver's side.

As he opened his door, a shot rang out, and Gabby looked out her window in alarm to see a thin wisp of smoke curling out of the barrel of Kevin's gun. She followed its trail to a fallen zombie, and her breath caught in her throat as she saw more behind it, closing in on Kevin. He fired another shot and sent another dropping to the ground, giving him enough time to get to the Hummer. Howie already had the engine running when Kevin scrambled in, and before his door was shut again, they were already driving away.

"Whew," sighed Kevin, yanking his door shut.

"Good shooting," Gabby congratulated him, trying to keep her voice light, but inside, she was shaken. Cooped up inside the chapel for two days, she'd almost forgotten how truly terrifying the zombies were. Her eagerness to fight them

quickly drained away, as fear took hold of her. But she kept it in check. She was not going to wig out now, not after she'd pled her case for coming.

While Kevin drove, she looked out her window and tried to focus on her surroundings, not on what might be lurking within them. She'd never been on a military base before, but she could see now why her mother had thought to come here. It was like a small, gated city – and small was an understatement. Just like in her neighborhood, there were winding side streets with neat, little houses on both sides, but there were also large, modern-looking buildings and complexes. Under the clear, blue sky and the bright, Florida sun, everything gleamed, crisp and clean.

The base was well-designed, visually appealing, but it was also haunting, in a way. It reminded Gabby of the block of model homes that had gone up near Makayla's neighborhood. She'd toured one of them with Makayla and her mother once, just for fun, and come away with the same feeling. The house had been lovely, decorated in neutral colors, smelling of fresh paint and new carpet and upholstery, with shiny appliances and spotless surfaces, a beautifully-landscaped and well-manicured lawn, and a glistening teal pool. Everything in and outside the house was untouched and perfect.

Too perfect.

It was obvious to Gabby that no one had ever *lived* in that house. No mother had ever cooked in that kitchen. No father had ever mowed that lawn. No children had ever plastered posters on those walls or splashed in that pool. No pets had ever lain on that furniture. Though fully-furnished, the house had seemed empty, sterile.

The base, to Gabby, now looked the same way. Everything was in its place – cars parked in driveways and parking spaces, flowers growing in beds, flags flapping in the breeze – but there were no signs of life, no *people*. Only the undead, who occasionally stumbled out from behind buildings and trees, staggering aimlessly through lawns and across roads. Gabby got a startle each time, her heart leaping into her throat, until she remembered that she was safe in the Hummer for now, safe with Kevin and Howie. Even so, she felt increasingly uneasy as they drove through the deserted base. Even under the radiance of the spring sun, it was downright creepy. Fog and a full moon would have been more fitting.

“Here we are,” said Kevin after a few minutes, coming to a stop. Gabby looked out onto a wide, open field. It wasn't just a field, though. There were two, small, brick buildings, almost like short chimneys, spread apart, and between them were markings on the ground, arranged in a large circle.

“What is this place?” she asked Kevin.

“It’s a skeet range,” replied Kevin. “People come here to blow off steam, shoot a few clay disks. It’s good target practice – more for bird hunting than the war, but even so, it helps your tracking and precision. For our needs, it’ll be better than shooting at stationary targets. When you’re trying to take down zombies, they aren’t gonna be stationary. They’ll be moving – not too quickly, but still moving – and you’ll have a small target to aim for: the head. A shot to the head seems to be the only way to kill a zombie – you have to take out the brain, you see.”

Gabby knew that from *Resident Evil*, of course, but even so, a shudder ran through her. Her game was becoming a reality. The monsters of her imagination were now a part of her real life.

They climbed cautiously out of the car, already looking around for signs of the undead. Gabby felt like a scared rabbit, taking tentative hops into the open field to graze, wary eyes darting all around, ears cocked for the slightest rustle of grass or leaves. And it was a good comparison: she *was* being hunted. The food chain diagrams in her science book at school were wrong; humans weren’t at the top. Zombies were now the ultimate consumers. The ultimate predators. And Gabby was nothing but prey.

No, not nothing, thought Gabby, as a sudden, fierce determination took her in its grip. *The rabbit, who can only run away, is nothing but prey. I’m not a rabbit. I’m not just gonna run. I’m gonna fight back!*

She turned to Kevin. “I wanna learn how.”

He smiled. “Then let’s get started.”

Gabby had never shot a real gun before, but she quickly discovered she was something of a natural at it. After just half an hour of practice, she had gotten the hang of skeet shooting and was able to at least take a chip off the flying clay disks with almost every shot.

“And if you can hit something that small while it’s flying through the air,” said Kevin, grinning with pride, “you can definitely connect with the head of a zombie while it’s lumbering towards you.”

Howie did not appear to have the same beginner’s luck. He took too much time aiming his shotgun, and his shots were always too late, whizzing past the point where the clay disk had just been. He apparently didn’t have as much experience with video games, thought Gabby. He didn’t get how to follow the trajectory, how to anticipate where the target would be by the time the bullet reached it. Zombies, of course, would not be quite this predictable, but you still had to try to guess their next move.

She was contemplating whether or not to speak up and offer this piece of advice to Howie when she heard a guttural moan. It curdled her blood; her whole body froze up. She saw Kevin stiffen and turn to look and forced herself to do the same. Following his gaze in the direction of the moan, she watched with horror as a small pack of zombies emerged from the trees on the outskirts of the field. As soon as the undead caught sight of the three of them, as soon as the scent of their live flesh carried over to them on the wind, the zombies began to stagger towards them.

Kevin raised his gun first, aimed, and fired. His first shot was low; a zombie in the front of the pack took a bullet to the chest, but continued forward, undeterred. His second shot rang true, and the same zombie collapsed. One behind it, wearing military fatigues, tripped over the first's fallen body and crumbled to a heap itself. As it dragged itself back to its feet, Kevin aimed low and fired again. The second zombie immediately fell back to the ground, a gaping wound in its skull.

There were still more coming. As she started to come to her senses, Gabby raised the shotgun in her shaking hands. Knowing what she had to do, the very reason she had come out here to practice, she brought the shotgun up level to her cheek, resting the butt of it against her shoulder, the way Kevin had shown her. She took aim, pointing the gun barrel at the zombie coming closest to her. Resisting the impulse to close her eyes, she took a shaky breath and squeezed the trigger.

The force of the blast pushed her backwards, but she kept her eyes on the zombie, watching hopefully for the zombie to stagger and fall. Nothing happened. She had missed.

Next to her, Kevin's gun went off again, causing her to jump. Another zombie fell, but there were still two more. Determined to get one of them, Gabby raised the gun again, steadied it, and fired. This time, her bullet made contact, ripping off a chunk of flesh from the zombie's cheek.

"Good shot, Gabby!" yelled Kevin. "One more oughta do it!"

He fired again, taking down the other zombie. Only the one Gabby's bullet had grazed was still lumbering around, and she could tell he meant for her to kill it. She positioned her gun one more time, aimed, and pulled the trigger once more. The bullet was too quick for her to see, but all of a sudden, the zombie's legs were folding under it; it was collapsing to the ground.

She released her breath with a little gasp, staring in disbelief. Smoke spiraled from the barrel of her gun, and she could smell the sharp, metallic burn of the gunpowder. Through the haze, she saw that the field was empty again. All five of the undead lay motionless in the grass, mere yards from each other.

“You did it!” crowed Kevin, snapping her out of her shock. “Thatta girl!” Taking the gun out of her hand and tossing it down, he pulled her into a quick, one-armed hug, drawing her tight against his side. “You okay?” he asked, ruffling her shoulder a little, as he held her there.

Gabby nodded, still in disbelief. She looked over at Howie, who was standing apart from them, his own gun frozen in his hand. He had not even bothered to lift it. His tan complexion was pale with shock. Seeing his fear seemed to take some of hers away. “That... that wasn’t so scary,” she managed to say, though her voice came out shaky and small. “We got ‘em all before they got too close to us, at least.”

Kevin squeezed her close again. “You did great, kiddo,” he agreed. Following her gaze to Howie, he added, “What do you think? Another few rounds, and then we’ll call it a day?”

Gabby couldn’t help but giggle at the stunned look on Howie’s face.

Chapter 45

One morning, I woke up thinking everything that had happened was just a dream.

Of course, I don’t get dreams like that often these days. Reality does hit at some point or another. Because I was an actor – wanted to be, I mean - I was never big on reality. Avoidance was freaking awesome that way. That’s how I got into it, anyway. I wanted to escape the crap at home, so I’d pretend to be someone from TV or movies, like Star Wars, the best movie ever. I wanted to pretend to be anything that wasn’t me. That never changed.

When you make avoidance your life, it’s hella hard to let that way of coping go. But now, avoidance gets you killed. Reality like this overrides old habits dying hard. “Do or die” takes on new meaning these days.

It’s like this now, to quote the mighty Yoda (Star Wars. Well, I guess I’m the new world’s pop culture expert!)... “Do or do not. There is no try.”

And you know what I’ve noticed? You tend to live up to that when you’ve got no damn choice. And you cling to whatever life raft you have. Or whatever person you have, and you keep him or her as close to you as you can. You open up to them in ways you don’t with any of the others you come in contact with.

Everyone here, it seems they’re closest to the person they ran into first. I think it’s because that was the person they had to depend on for everything, the

person they instinctively clung to, if that makes any sense. It's true for almost everyone.

Except AJ, but AJ's just weird anyway.

It's true for me.

P.S. (Wait, do you P.S. in journal entries? Note to self: Ask someone.) Song quote of the entry! I think I'll put in one for every entry from now on, so I can try to keep the songs from history alive. At least till I can't remember anymore songs. Maybe after that, it can be movie quotes or something. Genius like that can't be forgotten.

*“You stumbled in and bumped your head
If not for me then you'd be dead
I picked you up and put you back
On solid ground*

*If I go crazy then will you still
Call me Superman
If I'm alive and well
Will you be there a-holding my hand
I'll keep you by my side
With my superhuman might
Kryptonite”*

- Three Doors Down, “Kryptonite”

**Tuesday, April 17, 2012
1:20 p.m.**

“The storm's cleared up today,” he heard her say, as he fed Spunky some dog food they'd gone looking for in the pet supplies section. At least the fact that they'd hidden in a Target had come in handy – no having to hunt for anything they needed. Nick's eyes skipped over to Riley, who was watching the doors intently, while keeping carefully obscured by the racks. It was so strange to him, hiding in the Target. The place was so empty and quiet, nothing like it should be. Random carts were left overturned, some empty, others with various items inside. His eyes went back to her; she'd been tense throughout the past couple days. Beyond the zombie stress, he knew. That was what frustrated him already; she was always on guard with him, even when she thought she wasn't. It was easily infuriating when their lives literally depended on each other.

“That's good. Maybe now they won't smell us.”

“No, I think the opposite happened.”

“What do you mean?” She had his full attention now.

“Rain tends to wash away everything, so smells become more enhanced, in a way. All the odors death brought are gone, beyond the rotting corpses roaming around, obviously. All smells of humanity are out the window.” She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, her eyes not fully meeting his.

A sigh released from his chest, as he nodded. “You’re saying they can probably smell us better now.”

“Pretty much.”

“That would explain it then.”

“Explain what?” she asked, as he reached down to scratch Spunky’s head, his gaze still fixed on Riley. You’d think she was asking the weather, from the casualty of her tone, yet in her eyes, the fear was clearly written in bold print. Her hands seemed like they had minds of their own, because in the smallest of ways, they couldn’t stay still. They’d tap or scratch, or, as in the current moment, clench and unclench.

“The moans are louder, like there’s more. You haven’t noticed?”

“I try to block out the moans. They screw with my head too much. It’s harder to try and forget that...”

He let her leave her thought unsaid. Nick knew what she was saying. He felt the same way himself. The moans did something to you. It was why, after Sunday night, he’d gone and found one of those white noise makers, stuck in batteries, and played it just to drown out the moans. Anything was better than those. And he used to be a man who hated noise of any kind as he tried to rest. How quickly things had changed.

“... I know, but I think there’s more out there wandering around, getting random whiffs of us, than there used to be.”

“Now there’s something I just wanted to hear. Why, thank you, Nick; that just made the sun shine *that* much brighter!” Sarcasm dripped heavily from her voice, like the statement had been marinating in it all day, waiting for that moment.

“So how did you get that scar on your stomach?” he decided to ask, having wondered that since she’d mistaken him for a zombie the day before, but forgotten to ask. For some reason, the question took the opportunity to come right back to him. Not to mention, it forced the discussion to make an about face.

“...Why do you want to know?”

He shrugged, as he started walking amongst the racks, back to their makeshift camp. Riley followed behind with Spunky between them, trotting happily. She rolled her eyes at his silent, yet telling response and remained quiet. He glanced back with a slight smirk, glad he'd been able to change the subject in such a smooth manner. They'd return to it, he was sure. Nick felt they both knew that they couldn't remain in their current spot much longer, but, for the moment, he wanted denial. Just for the moment.

“I'll tell you how I hurt my head; how about that?”

She paused. Her hands started to twist again, unbeknownst to her. Birds attached to wrists. Nick almost chuckled aloud at the image in his head that followed the thought. Nick's gaze kept on her, however, while he waited for her response. His mind ran through other tactics if this one didn't work; his tongue ran across his lips in a thoughtful manner. After a few minutes, she lifted her blue-eyed stare to meet his dead on.

“Fine.”

They strolled over to their spot and sat somewhat comfortably upon the many sleeping bags. Spunky curled up against Nick, resting her golden head upon his lap, keeping her eyes open for signs of danger. It made Nick smile at the reminder that his faithful companion was still with him, that she had managed to survive, despite being in the house with his toddling, undead half-brother. He shook his head, as if the physical action could actually take the thought away. While lost in his thoughts, he noticed Riley ripping open a bag of Doritos and opening a Pepsi from their food pile, saying nothing, as she herself was lost within her mind.

“Okay... so...”

“Look, I got it about a year ago.”

Nick smirked at her, waiting for her to continue. They had to pass the time somehow, and, to be honest, trying to get her to talk about anything personal was like pulling teeth. So he wasn't going to let up just yet. He grabbed a Twinkie and ripped it open, wondering idly if they really did last forever. Seemed like they'd find out now, wouldn't they? He stuffed the Twinkie into his mouth, grinning at her, his mouth filled with the golden pastry. She laughed, and he smiled more sincerely, after swallowing, of course. He had to admit, there was one beauty to the end of the world: it gave him a chance to start over. She didn't know him as the loser he used to be. No one did – if there was anyone else left – and it felt good. It was just tragic that the price was so high.

“...And?” he nudged, when she didn’t continue, not wanting to ponder this sort of subject any longer.

“...Maybe a little less. I was driving along the highway, not paying attention ’cause I was watching the rain and talking to my boss on my phone. It was about this new assignment about the war, and I really wanted it, even though I knew who it was probably going to go to. I was so focused on the rain and the call... well, I didn’t see this car coming. If I had, it wouldn’t have happened. I could’ve avoided it.”

“You veered off your side?”

Riley shook her head, brushing her hair out of her face. “Not me. This stupid drunk sorority girl had and was heading for me straight on. I didn’t notice till I glanced up seconds before. Thank God I at least did that. Probably why I’m still here. I veered away immediately, but not enough. I wasn’t wearing my seatbelt cause I’d been on the phone when I got in my car. I cared only about my career, screw everything else. Just how I am. I went through the windshield, and it tore up my stomach like hell. I’m lucky my ass wasn’t paralyzed.”

“What about the college girl?”

“She had her belt on, and she came out better than me. In fact, she sobered up damn quick and, once she was able to get out, came to help me. That’s how I know she was in a sorority; it was on her sweatshirt.”

“I don’t get why you didn’t wanna tell the story. It’s not that bad.”

“It is when I finish. You know what my thought was when I thought I was gonna die? It was, *I can’t die. I haven’t really made it as a reporter yet, not the way I want to. So I can’t die.* It wasn’t of my family or friends. No, it was my damn career. And now... after... everything... it messes me up, Nick. I was given a reality check before everyone became fucking zombies. Did I listen? No, and now it’s too damn late.”

“You’re human. That’s all it means.”

She rolled her eyes at him, blowing a puff of air at a stubborn lock of hair that didn’t wish to leave her face. “I know how I was, and look what I got for it. I was happy when the damn war started; it helped my career. I tossed away everything that mattered for something that doesn’t mean shit anymore. That’s something I won’t forget anytime soon. I’m a selfish bitch, but I’m not stupid. Forget it, though.”

“Riley-” he tried. He knew it was hard, living with regrets, with no chance of redemption because everyone in the world who loved was gone. There was so much Nick knew he could have done to try and bring his broken family back

together, and now it could never be. Thoughts like that, they haunted a person. He'd wasted his life, and now he'd been given a chance to start over without a stigma. Hadn't they all? Within the darkest of clouds, could there really be a silver lining? Or was he just being selfish, too?

"Your turn to talk."

"See, you think yours is bad. Heh. I got mine from a bar fight."

"A bar fight? You? Seriously?"

He felt his teeth grind against each other. "Yes, me. Seriously."

"Sorry, you just don't look the type. At all. Especially since you said you were trying to be an actor."

"I am the type. It was some frat boy, and he pissed me off. I was drunk beyond reason, so I started hitting him. He got the best of me, and last thing I saw was a stool coming at me. Shithead got me upside my own head, and I ended up in the hospital with a concussion. You were right when you said it looked like someone was trying to kill me; he was drunk as hell, too, dude. My last two days in the 'normal' world were spent unconscious. I wonder if my own family even gave a shit about where I was those two days." He gave her a somewhat bitter smile. "I'm no better. We're all human."

She digested this and stood, finishing off her soda and tossing the bottle aside the now half-empty bag of chips. He watched Riley for a response and, not surprisingly, she didn't give him one. Rather, she changed the subject. "Speaking of being human, I had a thought. Maybe we should try and find a radio."

"No power."

Riley rolled her eyes at him. "No shit; it's called batteries. The whole country may not be like this. We can see if there's, like, an emergency broadcast or something. Hell, we're alive; we can't be the only lucky bastards out there."

Nick nodded. He got to his feet, and Spunky whined at her pillow moving without her approval, before getting up as well. "You have a good point."

"I know I do."

"Modest, huh?"

"Always."

The two walked down towards the electronics department, neither saying much. It seemed like both felt they'd said too much before. Nick beamed down at

Spunky, trotting faithfully between them with no worries at all. How nice that had to be.

First radio they found on display, Nick pulled off the shelf and checked the back. “D batteries.”

“How many?” Riley called out, as she jogged over to them.

“Six!”

Two packages of batteries were tossed his way within moments. Setting the radio down quickly, he ran to catch them, stumbling in the process. He fell to the floor with a thud, sliding a bit across the linoleum floor, yet the batteries landed in his hand, the way he’d wanted them to. She ran back over and chuckled. “Sorry, I should’ve just brought ‘em over.”

He looked up at her sheepishly, trying not to wince. That hurt more than he’d like to admit. “Might’ve helped.”

Riley held out a hand. He gripped it and let her help him up. “Let’s pop those suckers in and see what we get.”

As they did so, Nick looked back at her. “Wait, we know Florida is probably a dud. How we gonna know if anyone’s alive if we can’t hear it on Florida radio?”

“National Emergency Broadcast System. In times of a nationwide crisis, they can do a country-wide broadcast from any major base. So we should be able to pick it up if anyone is doing that. That’s the only chance we have.”

“God bless our paranoid government.”

“Exactly.”

Turning the knobs, Nick slowly scanned through the stations. “Nothing... more nothing. Static, there’s a change. Back to nothing...”

“Try AM.”

“Nothing times a million...”

“This-this is...”

“Go back! I heard something!”

“Nothing...”

“Nick! Back!”

Nick jerked the dial backwards, and through the static, a human voice suddenly crackled out of the speakers.

“This is Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Richardson, of the United States Air Force, stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. I am urging any survivors of the catastrophic events that have claimed our country to make their way here, to Tampa. I wish I could tell you that the base is free of the living dead...”

“But I bet you can’t,” Nick heard himself say, knowing that kind of luck was impossible.

“It isn’t.”

“Thought so.”

“Shhh!”

“But we do have the means to get rid of them. Weapons. Supplies. All the resources we need to survive on. There are other survivors here at MacDill. I repeat: There are survivors here...”

“Well that settles that,” Nick said, turning off the radio. “You were right.”

“But is it really any better than our current situation?” Riley questioned, leaning against one of the shelves, wringing her hands as she kept her eyes on him.

“Supplies.”

“We have those.”

“Weapons.”

“We make do.”

“Theirs are better. Military base, more people. Besides, remember earlier, like you said? They can smell us better. Better to leave now than when they eventually break in here. You know it’s gonna happen.”

Riley stayed quiet as he stepped closer to her, placing his hand on her shoulder. A simple gesture. “I know. I just don’t want to go out there,” she explained, her gaze shifting down. Spunky barked loudly, as if in agreement with Riley. He reached out, tilting her chin upwards towards him.

“Better we go on our terms, than on theirs.”

“Are you ready?”

They were in the clothing department yet again. The two had divided to pack up supplies in the backpacks they'd grabbed back in sporting goods. Food, water, each a set of clothes, basic light essentials, just in case they didn't get to the base as soon as they'd like. They may not get lucky twice and get stranded in supply heaven the way they had in the Target. He glanced at Riley. Her hair was now tied back, her hoodie on, paired with tight jeans, and she had a determined look on her face. Her crowbar was gripped tightly in her hands, her knuckles almost white. He was likely holding his battle axe just as firmly.

“Of course.”

“First car we find.”

Spunky barked excitedly.

“Yep.”

“Don't fight unless necessary, Riley.”

“No shit.”

“Let's go.”

They headed for the door. From their demeanor, one would think they were just done shopping for the day. Up went the large gate, and they peered through the doors, watching the ghouls roam the street in search of any prey. Prey they smelled, but couldn't find. The two looked at each other, nodded, and burst through the door. They raced out into the parking lot, looking around helplessly at all the cars. Nick screamed with joy as he saw what he needed just lying on the pavement: a keychain, and hanging from it, a small keyless entry remote for a car. “YES!”

Riley was slamming her crowbar through a zombie's skull. Spunky knocked over another, growling furiously. “What?”

“Keys!” Nick yelled victoriously as he held them up, running over towards her.

“Sweet! Push the remote then!”

“I am!” he obliged, then blinked when he realized their latest problem. “Shit.”

“Now what?!” she said, as she turned to him. “Nick! Behind you!”

Jumping forward as a zombie lunged, Nick swung his axe around, almost slicing the head clean off its neck. However, just a thin layer of tissue and muscle held, leaving the head hanging from the neck like a door hinge. The body stood for a moment before crumpling to the ground.

“We have a problem.”

“Really now? I thought all these fucking zombies were just good exercise for us. Of course we have a problem!”

Sometimes he quite liked Riley, and other times, she drove him crazy with her neverending sarcasm. “I mean another problem!”

“What then? And can we make this quick before more reach us? They’re slow, but they DO move.”

“Can you tell what car this goes to?” he asked, shoving the keys in her face. That was when it dawned on her; he saw it in her eyes as the realization hit.

“...No.”

“Yeah, see, we have a problem.”

“Well, let’s start testing cars.”

They ran towards the first car they spotted. It was a nice blue truck, a Ford, even. Nice, sturdy... it wouldn’t do too badly against any undead they spotted on the road. Nick pushed the unlock button, and they lunged for the doors, but neither would budge.

“Damn,” he cursed, as they went to the next one. Luckily for them, the parking lot wasn’t completely packed. Nick knew they’d be screwed if it was. As the undead army formed around them, a circle growing ever smaller as they closed in, Nick and Riley went from car to car, trying their luck, failing with each and every try.

“Fuck it!” Nick yelled. “Let’s just hotwire a car.”

Riley turned, as they came to the next car. “Do *you* know how to hotwire a car, genius? ’Cause I sure as hell don’t.”

At that, Nick looked a bit sheepish, as he felt his anger simmer down a bit.

“...No.”

“Okay then.” She tried the handle of the next one. Nick didn’t think it’d be this car anyway. It was a bright pink Volkswagen Beetle convertible. The white top

was down, and the car was covered in yellow flower decals. It felt like the most ridiculous car he set eyes upon in a long time.

So, in the end, of course it was the car the remote key belonged to. Riley cheered as the door opened in her hands. The two tossed their bags into the backseat, where Spunky hopped as well, while Nick jogged around to the passenger side. He tossed her the key he still held in his hand. "I can't believe this."

"Beggars can't be choosers."

"It's a fucking Barbie car!"

"You wanna just walk to that damn base, then?"

"No, I'm good."

Riley nodded as she started the car. "Good. Get the damn top up while I get us out of here." She floored it, and the car lunged forward on its way out of the parking lot.

They were surrounded, and soon she'd have no choice but to hit the zombies straight on – an option Nick really didn't want her to use without at least having the top on. Of all the cars, this was likely the worst protection possible. *Stupid piece of shit Barbie car!* his mind screamed, as he kept trying the switch for the automatic top that refused to go up.

They were inches away, her foot flooring the gas, as they raced towards too many zombies to count. Riley shot a glance towards Nick. "The TOP, Nick... any day now."

"I can't get it to fucking go up!"

"Do it manually then, before we have corpses falling in the car!" she screamed, as he reached over his seat, tugging on the top with all his might. Spunky was running from window to window, barking and growling wildly from both the craziness and the dead beings wanting to consume them.

"Nick!"

"Go UP, you piece-of-shit car!"

He was thrown forward on the first impact. As he was still holding the top, it was tugged forward with him. Nick landed in his seat, breathing a sigh of relief, until his ears registered Riley's screams. He looked up, and stuck in the top was a skinny blonde zombie. She'd have been pretty if alive, he knew. Her body looked like it was once well-kept, her pale violet, spotted breasts popped through a torn,

skimpy shirt. Unable to reach them, the zombie moaned and swiped at them, staring at them with glassy blue eyes.

“Damn, if she was alive, I would’ve done her.”

Smack! He felt Riley’s hand slap him upside the currently uninjured part of his head. “Are you fucking kidding me?! Get her out!”

Coming to his senses, he reached for his axe and slammed it atop her small, golden head. Spots of brown blood spurted out at him before the zombie fell still. Nick reached up and shoved the dead girl out of the roof, pulling it shut completely as his head almost hit it from the bump the body caused when Riley ran it over. He gave Riley an impish grin. “What?”

“*If she was alive, I would’ve done her?*” Unbelievable. She had no brains, Nick.”

“Only cause I slammed an axe into them.”

“Yeah, and it’s not like a lot came out.”

“She was still hot,” he joked.

“And dead; don’t forget dead,” Riley reminded him, keeping her eyes firmly on the road. Still, he saw the smile creep up along her face, despite herself. Nick chuckled as he glanced back at his golden retriever, who’d settled down comfortably in the backseat now that the chaos had dissipated a bit. Reaching into the back, he rifled through his bag and pulled out a clear, thin, plastic case. He took out a CD, something Riley hadn’t used in ages, and popped it into the CD player, a rarity to find in cars those days. He watched as recognition lit up beneath her dark blue eyes.

*“It’s close to midnight, and something evil’s lurking in the dark
Under the moonlight, you see a sight that almost stops your heart
You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it
You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes
You’re paralyzed
‘Cause this is thriller...”*

“Are you kidding me?”

Nick simply grinned at her, running a hand through his mussed blonde tresses casually. Her look of disbelief was priceless, even in the given situation. She couldn’t keep looking at him in surprise, as she had to watch the roads to avoid overturned cars, traffic jams, and such. He shrugged, as he turned up the volume. “I spotted it as we gathered up supplies. Come on, you gotta have a sense of humor when everything goes to shit.”

“You. Are. Something. Else.”

“And how can you not grab *Thriller*? It’s a classic!”

“Yes... but...”

“But nothing! We’re living the music video! When I saw it, I knew it was *essential* to have the music.”

Now she was laughing, her eyes sparkling amusedly at him, as they sped down the road. “Like I said, Nick, you are something else.”

“That’s what I’m told.”

“But trust me, I’m glad you are.”

“Thanks, Riley.”

“No problem. But Nick?”

“What?”

“Next time you find keys... make sure it’s not to a damn convertible, will you?”

He laughed along with her. Nick knew they were both in lighter spirits as they got further away from the Target. Neither could help themselves. The two kept beaming at each other in ways Nick felt they hadn’t felt free to do before. He knew now that they weren’t alone. It was the first sign of hope they’d found, among all the signs of the hell their world had become almost three days before. He felt like celebrating, and damn if he wasn’t going to show it.

*“Cause this is thriller, thriller night
Girl, I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try
Thriller, thriller night
So let me hold you tight and share a killer, thriller!”*

“Nick, do you really need to sing along?”

“Well... yeah...”

For now, that was all Nick needed, as the small pink Beetle made its way closer to what would soon become their new home.

Chapter 46

It always took me a little longer than the average person to get close to someone. I was the quiet one in a group of friends, reserved and shy, a far better listener than I was a talker. I was the girl people came to with their problems, not the girl who dumped her own problems on everyone else. I didn't like talking about myself. To my friends, I was the nice girl, the friend you could count on, the shoulder you could cry on, the problem-solver. With the exception of Shawn and a few others, I felt like I understood them better than they understood me.

In many ways, my role here is the same. I calm, and I comfort. I listen, and I help. But you can't experience something like we have with a group of people and not get close to them. You have to open up to each other. You have to understand each other. You have to trust each other and depend on each other. And so I have, and I do.

I've shared more of myself with these people than I did most of my old friends from my old life, and in just a matter of weeks, I've grown closer to them than anyone but my own family. In this new life, they are my family.

You see, when humanity dies, you cling to what remnants are left. You don't hold back; you hold on tight, and you never let them go.

Wednesday, April 18, 2012
7:00 a.m.

Gretchen breathed a sigh of relief when she opened her eyes to see a crack of faint light filtering beneath the door to the back room. Another dark night over – at last, it was dawn.

She sat up, feeling groggy and stiff, her bones cracking as she picked herself up from the pile of thin blankets she'd spread across the tiled floor. The blankets were identical, purple, with "Union County Tigers" spelled out in gold lettering – merchandise for the local high school's athletics program, no doubt. They were the only blankets she and Brian had been able to find in the gas station, tucked away in a corner behind a sparse rack of t-shirts. They'd taken all that was left and used it to pad the floor, but Gretchen was still feeling it, after spending the night there. Bruised ribs were only a part of it; her body was simply not the same, at thirty, as it had been at thirteen, when she'd had no problem curling up in her sleeping bag on the thinnest of carpets and dropping right off to sleep. She had slept poorly last night, waking every hour upon the hour, it seemed, though she had no way of knowing the time for sure.

Of course, the zombies were as much to blame as the uncomfortable sleeping conditions. It was hard to sleep soundly, knowing that they prowled restlessly outside the station, fearing that they would find a way in while she slept. If Brian

had not been there, she doubted she'd have been able to relax enough to fall asleep at all.

She and Brian had been sleeping in shifts, trading off between lying on the makeshift bed of blankets and sitting up at the small table and chairs, the only furniture in the back room. He had chivalrously offered her the bed on the first night, volunteering to take the night shift of guard duty and sleep during the day. Gretchen was grateful. Though she'd never feared the dark before, she wasn't sure her sanity could take sitting up alone all night in pitch blackness, as Brian did, listening to the muffled scraped and moans of the undead outside.

She looked up and found him slouched in the hard-backed chair, his elbow on the table, propping his chin in his hand. As her eyes adjusted to the receding darkness, she saw that his were bloodshot and glazed; he seemed to stare right through the barricaded door without seeing. Gretchen cleared her throat quietly and whispered, "Morning."

Even though she'd tried not to startle him, Brian jumped in his seat. He recovered quickly, though, and looked down at her. "Mornin'," he rasped back, managing a lopsided smile that didn't reach his bleary eyes. Neither of them bothered to preface it with a "good." There had not been any "good" mornings since Friday.

She struggled to figure out how many days it had been since then. There was Saturday, the day she'd spent alone in the house with the power out, waiting for word from Shawn. That was the last time she'd heard his voice, she thought, and the realization made her heart skip a beat. *Don't think that way*, she scolded herself. *Of course you haven't heard from him since then; the phone service is down. How would he reach you? But he's fine, he's got to be fine, and eventually...*

But she couldn't finish the thought. How *would* Shawn find her, eventually? She still hadn't figured that out and had been contemplating telling Brian that when they got out of this place, she was turning around and going back to Georgia, back to her home. It was the only place she could think to meet Shawn, or at least leave a message for him. But she would have to find a way out of the gas station first.

How many days had it been? She returned to her former train of thought. After Saturday came Sunday, and that was the morning she'd awoken when it was still dark and found the zombies outside her house, the morning she'd picked up Brian. They had been traveling together ever since then... but how long?

They'd spent Sunday night in the farmhouse, and on Monday, they had started driving again and run out of gas and ended up here, at the gas station. Blowing up the pumps had killed off most of the zombies who had forced them in there, but even once the blaze had died down and it should have been safe to come out,

it wasn't. More of them had appeared, attracted by the sound and the light of the flames, no doubt. The fire had acted as a beacon for them, something neither she, nor Brian, had anticipated.

Clearly, the movies were wrong: the living dead had no fear of fire. They feared nothing, for they had no feelings, no thoughts or emotions. They were not like animals, acting on instinct, for even animals showed fear. Animals had feelings and needs, just as human beings did. But there was nothing human, animal, or *alive* about the undead. They were more like robots, terminators, cold and unfeeling, programmed only to destroy and deadest on fulfilling their duty.

Unlike the Terminator, they had no technology and no problem-solving abilities. If she and Brian were being pursued by the Terminator, they'd have been dead the first day, but instead, they'd survived through Monday... Tuesday...

That meant today had to be Wednesday. They'd been trapped in the gas station two full days and nights, securely barricaded in – so far – but unable to come out. The whole place was surrounded by the living dead, and Gretchen knew if they dared venture outside, they would be attacked and killed in mere seconds. Even with guns, there were simply too many of them to take on. She wasn't willing to risk it.

The station wasn't exactly comfortable, but for the time being, it would do. It was secure enough, especially there in the back room, and it had enough supplies to live on for at least a few weeks – not that they planned on being there that long. There was bottled water and other drinks, plenty of snacks, batteries for their flashlights, and a working bathroom. When they'd first emerged from the back room to check on the fire and found the grounds teeming with new zombies, they had rounded up enough supplies to last a couple of days and holed up in the back room again, barricading themselves in once more. They'd been there ever since, sneaking out only to make trips to the tiny bathroom and check on the zombie situation outside.

Wondering if there'd been any change in that situation overnight, Gretchen asked Brian, "Anything new?"

He shook his head. "It's been quiet, 'cept for the moanin'. Did ya sleep?"

She shrugged. "Off and on."

"What you wouldn't give for a bed, eh?" A faint smile passed over his lips.

She returned the smile. "Oh yeah."

They'd made small talk like this over the past couple of days, in the few hours they were both awake at the same time. Gretchen found Brian easy enough to talk to when they were planning or just chitchatting like this. He seemed mild-

mannered and sweet, and she imagined that, under different circumstances, he would have been quite charming. But there were shadows behind his light blue eyes, a darkness, a sadness that she suspected had not been there a week ago. Whatever he had been through before she'd come across him on the roadside that morning, whatever he had experienced when the undead rose, it still haunted him in a way that surpassed her own nightmarish memories. Whenever their conversations turned to more personal matters, he shied away, shut down, and silence ensued.

Gretchen was running out of things to talk about. She had never been particularly skilled in the art of making conversation; she depended on others to keep the chatter going. She wasn't one to talk endlessly about herself, either, yet in this case, she felt she had shared much more of her own life with Brian than he had in return. She still didn't know much more about him personally than the few details she'd learned during the car ride that first day, and that troubled her. She was depending on a man she barely knew.

"So, mattress or waterbed?"

Brian blinked, caught off-guard. "Huh?"

"You know... what kind of bed do you sleep in?" probed Gretchen, smiling. "Are you a mattress guy or a waterbed guy?"

"Oh... waterbed, I guess. I mean, I used to be. Bought my first waterbed for fifty bucks at a garage sale once." He grinned. "But I've just got a regular bed at home, now. Not just regular, I guess – it's *huge*. My wife..." But he trailed off, and his grin faded. "Well... it's a king-size," he finished lamely.

"Sounds nice," said Gretchen. She wanted to ask him about his wife, but was afraid to pry. She knew how it felt to be asked about things you weren't ready to talk about. She knew how it felt to just want to shut down – and shut out everyone else, too. She also knew it felt better when you finally opened up and let them in, hard as it was to do. "Ours is just a regular mattress, too. It's a queen. I've got this down mattress topper, though, and that makes it really soft and squishy... You just sink down into it, like a cloud. I'd kill for that thing right about now..." she moaned wistfully, getting up to stretch out her stiff body. Maybe Brian wasn't ready to let her in yet.

His grin returned. "I bet you would. And if it was a zombie you killed, you'd be killin' two birds with one stone."

"Two zombies, you mean." Gretchen grinned, and Brian chuckled appreciatively. "So... headboard or no?"

"No. You?"

“Headboard. One pillow or two?”

“Two.”

“Same. Comforter or bedspread?”

“What’s the difference?”

Gretchen laughed. “A bedspread is longer, but thinner. A comforter is thicker and warmer, but doesn’t hang as long on the sides.”

“Comforter, then. Definitely.”

“Me too. Except when you have a cover hog for a spouse. Or, in the case of my husband, one who gets hot and throws his heavy legs and big feet on *top* of the comforter so that you can’t even pull it out from under him in order to hog,” huffed Gretchen, though she was filled with longing for Shawn and his big feet and warm body. Where was he right now? Was he safe? Alive? He had to be... wherever he was. She couldn’t think otherwise.

“My wife was the cover hog in our family,” Brian replied. Again, a ghost of a smile appeared and then vanished. The past tense confirmed what she’d already suspected about his wife.

“Yeah... I guess I was, too.” Gretchen offered her own fleeting smile. Again, she considered asking... and this time, decided to go for it. “What happened to her?” she asked quietly. “Did she...?” She didn’t know the most sensitive way to word the second question, so she left it unfinished.

Brian pressed his lips together into a thin line. His nostrils flared as he sucked in a deep breath. He glanced once toward the ceiling and then down at the floor. For a few seconds, Gretchen thought he wasn’t going to answer, but then he said, “Yes – same as everyone else, I guess. She got sick. She passed. She... reanimated.”

He closed his eyes completely on the last word, as Gretchen drew in a sharp breath. She wasn’t sure why that last part shocked her – hadn’t they all reanimated? But “they” were all strangers to her. Even her neighbor, lying in the street – she hadn’t even known his name. She had not had to see any of her loved ones die and come back, for she had been all alone. Up until now, she had pitied herself over this, wishing for Shawn, but now she wondered if she hadn’t been lucky her husband had left before it all happened.

She looked now at Brian, whose eyes were squeezed shut, his lips pursed so tightly, they were lined in white. “I’m... so sorry...” she whispered, knowing it was lame and cliché, not knowing what else to say to him.

“She chased me into our bathroom,” Brian went on. She could see the emotion in his face, but his voice was flat, utterly void of it. Yet it trembled slightly, and she knew he was fighting hard just to get the words out. He didn’t have to, but it seemed that now he’d started to talk, he wanted to keep going, or rather, *needed* to keep going. “I put the towel bar through her skull. I killed her. My own wife...” A tear slipped out from beneath his eyelid, and he took a shuddering breath that sniffled in his nose and rattled down his windpipe.

Gretchen listened in increasing horror to the story, but tried to mask her revulsion, wanting to give him comfort and understanding. “She was already dead,” she whispered, all the while knowing her logic wouldn’t ease his pain. Emotions were just more powerful than logic. “You did what you had to. You did what was best for her. You freed her.”

He exhaled through his nose, shaking his head slowly. “That’s what I told myself I was doing, when I... when I killed my own daughters.”

Again, Gretchen tried to hide her shock, but couldn’t conceal it completely this time. He had never mentioned having children, and now she knew why. “Oh, Brian...” she whispered, her hand poised near her lips, her heart breaking for him. “I... I can’t imagine...”

He opened his eyes, and the moisture in them made them glisten, vividly blue, both tragic and beautiful. “They were just seven years old,” he said, and his voice quivered worse than ever. The deadened quality had left it, and it was brimming with emotion now. “Twins. Identical. Blue eyes... blonde hair, like my wife. They were so beautiful... like little angels, people always said.” He sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Wanna see them?”

“You have pictures?” Gretchen asked hopefully. She was hopeful for his sake, not hers. To her, they would be just pictures. To him, they would be precious memories, irreplaceable and invaluable.

He rose from his chair and dug into the back pocket of the jeans he’d taken from the farmhouse. They were baggy on him, at least a size too big for his narrow waist, but he’d secured them with a leather belt. From them, he withdrew a leather wallet. He opened it, and she saw the flood of emotion wash over his face as he flipped through its contents. Finally, he held the wallet out to her. “This is Leighanne – my wife,” he said quietly, and Gretchen’s eyes widened at the beauty of the young, blonde woman in the portrait. She could tell from the hairstyle and type of clothing that it was a dated picture, but even so, Leighanne had been striking.

“She’s beautiful,” Gretchen whispered.

Brian nodded, his adam’s apple bobbing in his throat as he swallowed. He reached out and flipped the picture. Behind it were two more photos, side by

side. Gretchen's breath caught in her throat. Twin girls grinned up at her, each with wispy, blonde hair, big blue eyes, a light smattering of freckles across their identical noses, and missing front teeth. They were cute girls, just a couple years younger than her students. The realization that they were both dead – as well as probably most, if not all, of her students – made Gretchen feel sick to her stomach.

“What are their names?” she asked. She couldn't bring herself to speak in the past tense.

“Brooke Lynn and Bonnie Leigh.” He pointed them out to her as he spoke the name of each. “We used our first initials – B for Brian, L for Leighanne – for their names. We all went together. We matched. I thought I had the perfect little family, all I could ever want...” He trailed off, and the tears spilled over the puffy red rims of his eyes. A sob escaped his throat, and Gretchen could barely make out the words as he choked, “... and now it's all gone.”

Gretchen didn't know what else to say, didn't think there were words that could express what she felt, so she got up from the floor and went to him, pulling him into a hug. She felt his body – smaller and bonier than she'd imagined it would feel – tense at first, then go limp in her arms, as he relaxed into the hug, his arms encircling her back. Gretchen wasn't much of a hugger, normally, and had never before initiated a hug with a stranger, but it felt comforting to be able to hold him and be held, herself. His tears wet her bare shoulder, and when at last they pulled away and he saw the moisture there, he snorted and shook his head. “Sorry,” he apologized, managing a sheepish smile as he wiped his eyes.

Her smile back was sympathetic. “Don't apologize. I'm... I'm glad you told me. I'm not one to talk about the hard stuff either, but sometimes it helps to get it out.”

He took another shuddering breath. “I thought I'd burn in Hell for doing what I did...”

Gretchen shook her head adamantly. “But you had to-”

“It doesn't matter,” Brian interrupted her. “Now I know there is no Hell, not in the sense of some other realm of fire and brimstone. *This* is Hell. Hell is here. We're already living in it.” Gretchen opened her mouth to protest, but he went on gravely, “If the dead are walking on Earth, there must be no Hell, and if my wife and daughters were among them, there must be no Heaven either. I didn't free them. I just ended their existence.”

Gretchen listened in dismay to this bleak view of their situation and couldn't accept it. “But what about their souls? You can't tell me those creatures out there have souls. Your wife and children... their souls had already gone on, the natural

way. What you saw after that was only their bodies, not *them*. Their souls, the real them...”

“Are where? Certainly not in Heaven. Certainly not with God and Jesus. The Lord I believed in put His children through hardships, to make them stronger, but He would never allow such an abomination to happen on the Earth He created,” spewed Brian. The look on his face was that of a man betrayed. “I don’t believe in that God anymore,” he went on bitterly. “There is no God. There is no afterlife. The only life after death is the kind moaning at us from outside.”

Goosebumps rose on Gretchen’s flesh. Despite the stifling heat, she felt cold from the inside out. She had never been devoutly religious, though she believed in a God, but to hear this gentle, Southern man renounce his faith with such venom hurt her heart in a way she didn’t fully understand. It was not just depressing; it was downright unsettling. And there was nothing she could say to change his mind. His points were valid. They left her questioning, wondering, herself...

“I lost a baby,” she said suddenly, so candidly it surprised even herself. She once had agonized over having to tell people about her tragedy, but now the words flowed from her with relative ease. “About a month ago. I had a miscarriage. It was my first pregnancy.”

The anger left Brian’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

She acknowledged the gesture with a nod. “I was devastated. I felt sad, disappointed. I felt guilty. I wondered about the baby. I still do. Was it a boy or a girl? What would it have been like? I wondered about the baby’s soul – what happens to babies who die before they’re even born? I hadn’t felt it move yet, but I was through my first trimester, and I’d heard its heartbeat. It was *alive* inside me...”

She would never forget hearing the miraculous, rapid *whoosh-whoosh* of her baby’s heartbeat on the Doppler monitor in her doctor’s office. She could hear it even now, in her head, but with it, forever tarnishing it, was the memory of the obstetrician’s face a few weeks later, as she looked at the ultrasound, grainy and completely still. Gretchen had known even before she’d been told, simply by the stillness... and the silence.

Blinking back the tears that threatened, Gretchen looked at Brian and said, “I know it’s not the same... but I can empathize with losing a child.”

He nodded grimly, squeezing her shoulder again. “It doesn’t matter the circumstances,” he replied. “It’s never easier or any less painful one way or the other. But life goes on... if you can call this living. I guess we’ve got to, too.”

She sighed and listened to the muffled scrapes and thumps of the monsters outside, still relentlessly trying to claw their way in. “So what are we going to do?”

They left the back room together, cautiously pulling the shelves out of the way and creeping out into the open store. A row of zombies blocked the wall of windows, their bloated gray faces pressed against the glass. Over their shoulders, still more were on the horizon, their slouched and stiffened forms silhouetted against the sunrise.

“There’s just too many of them,” murmured Gretchen despairingly. “We’d never make it out alive. And even if we did, where would we run?”

They both looked out into the parking lot. The Cadillac which had been pulled up to one of the pumps was blackened, its windows blown out in the explosions. The pick-up truck parked closest to the building looked to be in better shape, but they knew that it was locked, with no keys inside.

They’d both wondered about the zombie they’d killed in the back room, surely the owner or at least an employee of the gas station. Surely he had a car around here – if not the pick-up truck, then possibly around back. If the keys weren’t in the vehicle, perhaps they were on him. But the dead zombie was outside, blocked from view by the live ones who were crowded in front of the locked door. They would never get to him in enough time to rummage for keys. And what if there were none? Or if there were, what if they didn’t go to the truck after all? It seemed too big a chance to take.

There was another option, a tan Suburban parked further down the road, in the opposite direction from where their own SUV had stalled. They could just barely see it out the windows. It looked to be in drivable condition, no flat tires that they could make out, likely just another vehicle left by a dying person who had tried – and failed – to outrun the plague. But they had no way of knowing if it had gas, keys, or even if it was unlocked. If it didn’t... if it wasn’t... there would be no escape for them. The distance was too great; the zombie hordes would close in on them before they could make it back to the safety of the gas station.

In the station, they had supplies and relative security. The situation was serious, but not desperate.

As a look of grim uncertainty passed between them, Brian and Gretchen came to a silent consensus.

They would wait.

Chapter 47

I don't think I'm that great with people.

That's probably odd for a reporter to say, seeing as the job was to get people comfortable enough to tell you everything they didn't want to, so you could get the story. But I don't think I am. I have issues.

Nick, it's so funny; he's freaking great with people. He can get along with everybody he meets, I think. I mean, literally, he does, pretty much. When we arrived at the base that day, he was able to mingle and mesh, no problem, within minutes. I, on the other hand... well, I just have issues. I tend to just make sure I'm fine with just me. I purposely act cold so I don't make connections. It's a conscious decision, every time. That way, I know it's because I chose it, and not because something's wrong with me. I just always was so worried something was wrong with me, caring so much what everyone else thought, that I prevented it from happening. To avoid the hurt and embarrassment, I did it myself, cause then I had an excuse.

Does that make sense?

I'm not so sure it does. I can't explain it any better. And now, you really can't try to isolate yourself.

Actually, no, I take that back. You totally can – just ask Kayleigh. Ugh, I swear to God, that girl... never mind. That's a whole 'nother topic.

So yeah, you can, but it's extremely selfish, extremely stupid, and it puts lives at risk. I'm just saying. So when the world changed, I think I did too. Not instantly; people aren't like that, I don't think. But it did start to happen. I saw myself trying to open up, to let people in, and let those connections happen. Felt kind of good to do it, too. The others here, at my current new home – I'm at the point where I consider them family. I'm at the point where I treat them better than I ever did my "real" family, before Infernal Friday. Took time, but it happened. It started with Nick, of course.

Seems like everything started with Nick.

Not sure if that's a good thing or not just yet.

**Wednesday, April 18, 2012
7:30 a.m.**

"I can't believe we're not there yet."

“Don’t rub it in.”

Riley yawned as she continued along the roads. It was hard going, as, obviously, there were no street lights anymore, the roads were still plenty jammed, and so she was forced to have the Beetle’s brights on. The entire mess was frustrating, as the base wasn’t far; however, getting there was becoming a bigger challenge than she and Nick had originally thought. She glanced down at the gas gauge. They’d started off with a full tank, a lucky break for them.

Another thud slammed against their car, as she hit yet another zombie. She was hitting more and more, the longer she drove. Already, the hood was getting dented in, and small cracks were appearing along the windshield. The car wasn’t going to last much longer. Riley glanced around at their surroundings. An increasing number of the undead continued to head their way, attracted by the spotlights displayed by the car. She muttered curses under her breath as she made a sharp turn to avoid them.

Keeping her eyes on the road, she continued to drive, till finally they hit a spot where it was completely blocked. It was just another accident from when death had hit, and one car after another had hit the mess to cause a massive wreck, a pile-up of cars and twisted metal. They could see some still trapped inside, in undeath, banging angrily against the windows and moaning loudly. Riley slammed the brakes angrily, jerking them both against their seatbelts as the small car halted immediately. “Fuck.”

“We ain’t gonna make it there tonight. We’re just getting more of those bitches on us. With the lights on, we’re not exactly going to be stealth. We’re attracting more than this stupid Barbie car can handle.”

“What do we do then? Like you said, this car isn’t exactly secure.”

“We’ll go into one of the houses, crash there for a few hours, and then we can try later.”

Sighing, she nodded. “As long as it’s a two-story, so we can hear them coming.”

Riley stretched quietly from the king-sized bed, contemplating the night before. They had given up the idea of traveling at night around eight o’clock, according to the car clock, then found this place for momentary shelter. They’d barricaded the bedroom door upstairs, in hopes that the zombies wouldn’t be able to make it up and past it. The two had agreed that sharing a room would be safest and simply shared a bed because when Nick offered to take the floor, Riley told him chivalry had died with the rest of humanity. He slept next to her still, more soundly than she had, and she wondered what it was he dreamed.

She wondered a lot of things. Like if those who'd become the undead had gone to heaven, or if their souls were trapped within the rotting corpses. Riley had never questioned her choice to leave the Catholic religion she'd been raised in after she turned eighteen. She'd had more questions than faith for the religion, and found herself disagreeing with many of the beliefs. She'd become agnostic, much to her devout father's disappointment. However, she'd held on to the rosary he'd given her as a child. Her mother's rosary, passed to his only daughter, who looked so much like her. Riley could never let that go. She still had it; actually, it was always on her, kept in her pocket, a touchstone of sorts for her. It gave her comfort when nothing else could. She yawned just a bit as she thought of the poor undead, who likely *were* trapped souls, and suddenly, a wave of pity came for them. She still had the privilege of a final death and an eternal life, something they did not know and perhaps never would.

Riley reached down for one of their bags, next to where the golden retriever was resting. Spunky lifted her head lazily for a moment before going back to sleep once more. She pulled out the bag and rummaged for the map Nick had thought to grab on their way out. Bless him. She scanned it, looking outside for the street names and an idea of just exactly how far from the base they were. Maybe then she'd be able to think of different routes to get there, and quickly. Setting the map back down on her side of the bed, she eyed the bathroom just feet away. How she craved a shower right then. She wondered if the water worked.

Rising slowly and carefully, so as to let Nick sleep, she walked into the bathroom and was grateful for the small window near the ceiling, letting the light in. Reaching the sink, she turned the handle and pouted when no water came out. That meant the water was down, and no shower for her. "Damn," she muttered.

She turned, cursing irritably to herself, only to run right into her companion, towering over her by some inches. "Dude, don't do that!" Riley yelled, jumping back with surprise.

"Good morning to you, too."

"I wouldn't call any morning after the dead rose 'good'."

He shrugged, yawning. His golden hair was up in tufts going every direction, and he scratched the back of his neck while yawning yet again. It was almost cute, in a teddy bear sort of way. "I'd call any morning I'm still *alive* a good one these days."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

“No, but you gave me this look. What’s the deal?”

She rolled her eyes, but tried to move past him. This time, he stepped sideways to purposely impede her path. Gazing up at him, she crossed her arms over her chest. “Come on.”

“No, seriously, what was that look for? It meant something.”

“It’s just.. I don’t get you, Nick.” He watched her carefully before stepping aside and following her back to the bed. She faced him as he stretched his arms out lazily. “Like, you’re so freaking optimistic, despite everything; you’re able to crack jokes and sing ‘Thriller,’ of all things...”

“... ‘Thriller’ is always meant to be sung...”

“Not that point. *Anyways*, you’re just able to take all this shit in stride and act like it’s nothing most of the time, so I don’t get you, how you’re able to do that; that’s all. Why? How can you do it? I just don’t get it, and I keep wondering. Now, if you don’t mind, I need to see if I can’t figure out a route I haven’t tried yet to get us to the base without hitting zombie traffic.”

He stared her straight in the eye, blue meeting blue, without speaking for several moments. His hand reached for hers, and he took it in a gentle, yet strictly friendly manner. “I’ll tell you something I haven’t admitted to anyone, okay?”

Riley nodded, unsure of just how to respond. Even in their short time together, she already knew it was a rare moment to catch Nick being this serious, unless his life was in peril. “Sure.”

“I don’t feel half as happy as I act, alright? With me, it’s like this. I have to crack jokes, or I end up cracking myself. I fall apart. So I act stupid. I’ll sing; I’ll do anything to just not focus on all the shit that’s making me do it to begin with. I mean, I like to joke around anyway, but I do it more when everything goes to hell. Or... ya know, *becomes* hell. It gets me in a better place, and you too, even.”

She smiled, pulling her hand away in the softest of gestures. “That makes sense. Sorry, I didn’t mean to grill you; it’s just...”

“Habit. Gotcha.” Nick glanced down at the map. “Hey,” he said, pointing at a small street marked on the grid. “We haven’t tried that way yet. Why not go that way?”

Riley paused in amazement. “I didn’t even think of that. It’s such a small side road, that-”

“People wouldn’t use it to outrun the plague. Makes sense, right? Hell, you didn’t think of it.”

“Sometimes, you amaze the heck out of me, Nick.” And she meant it. “You really do.”

“So what are we waiting for? Let’s pack up and get the hell outta here.”

“Agreed.”

The drive was considerably shorter than the previous night’s attempt, and finally, they were getting close. As they pulled up to the base at last, Riley was smacking herself mentally for not thinking of the route Nick had pointed out before. She had taken that exact route to do that interview about two weeks prior. Nick looked at her questioningly as he reached back to pet a whining Spunky, and she simply gave a small smile before turning her attention back to the road. They’d encountered more than enough members of the walking dead that morning; the windshield had cracked into a spider web pattern that made her again grateful for the creator of shatter-proof glass.

“So, where do we go? This place is like a mini city...” Nick commented, as they drove down Bayshore Boulevard. The base was almost picturesque, if one was able to ignore the corpses roaming around.

“I’m not sure. That broadcast didn’t exactly say, did it? Well, shit, screw it.” She slammed her hand down on the horn. Both were expecting something different from what they got. Rather than a legitimate honk, the car issued a small “beep beep” noise expected from a toddler’s toy steering wheel. The two stared at each other, before Nick burst into laughter, causing Riley to join in. Nick had a laugh that was completely infectious; once he started, he couldn’t stop, and neither could she.

“I told... you... this was a... fucking... Barbie car!” he gasped between giggles, because at this point he was, in fact, giggling.

“Must have been... ‘cause of the damage... to the hood...”

They drove on a bit further, running another zombie down, and even then, they couldn’t see any signs of life. They’d heard the message, but Riley frowned, as doubts filtered in. Maybe it had just been a recording, which no one was left alive to stop. Or perhaps they had moved on.

Much to their relief, they didn’t have to test their car horn a second time. A large Hummer had pulled up in front of them, the window rolling down for a moment, and someone was waving at them to get their attention. The arm was heavily tattooed. Its owner, the driver, cut the engine, glanced around, opened the door, and jumped out of the car. He was armed with several types of guns and was far

from what either of them had expected to greet them. His hair was receding, and they could see the remains of mussed eyeliner around his eyes. His fingernails were painted black, and he wore ripped jeans with a torn and bloodstained shirt. He stared at the car with a roll of his eyes, as Nick and Riley stepped out of it.

“I gotta ask, who the *hell* drives around in a frou-frou toy car that looks like every annoying socialite of the former shallow world threw up on it and decorated it with shower decals when the world is overrun by fucking ghouls? And how the hell did you ever *survive* in that thing?”

Nick grinned broadly, glancing around with his axe in hand. “Very carefully. Only a real man can handle zombies in that car.”

Riley turned on Nick, raising a brow. “What’s being a man got to do with it?”

“Um... we need to get our stuff.” Nick ran back to the car, while she chuckled to herself.

“Thought so.” She turned back to the other man. “Riley Blake.” She held out her hand, while he seemed to struggle with the decision of accepting the hand or not, before finally taking it.

“AJ.”

“I’m Nick!” Nick called out, as he grabbed both their bags and held the door open for Spunky to jump out. Spunky barked happily, running up to the Hummer. AJ stared at them, looking unsure of just how to handle the three new arrivals, yet no one could say anything more, as they were soon greeted by the harmony of moans they already knew so well.

They all scrambled into the Hummer. Nick sat up front, while Riley climbed into the back with Spunky. Nick tossed the bags back to her, as AJ started up the vehicle again, running down every zombie he could as he drove through the base.

“You guys got guns?”

“Not exactly. I got my axe, and Riley’s got a crowbar.”

“I’ll toss you both one when we get to the church; that’s where we’re holed up. Heh, where’d the dog come from?”

Riley patted the canine’s head, which lifted back up, as if Spunky knew she was being discussed. “She’s Nick’s. She’s good about the undead, though. She senses ‘em, acts like an alarm. And she’s good about tripping them up.”

“Heh.”

“So, what happened to you? How’d you get here?” Riley asked, curious, since he obviously wasn’t military.

AJ cast a look in her direction. “Same thing that happened to everyone else.”

He didn’t say much else until they arrived at the church. The drive was quick and riddled with bumps, caused by everything he drove over without hesitation. AJ cut the engine and looked back at the two blondes. Despite the rough appearance and distant act, his eyes were a stark contrast. They were soulful and brown, reminding Riley oddly of a doe’s.

“You know how to shoot?” AJ asked as he handed them each a handgun, out of the several kept on him and atop the dashboard of the vehicle.

“Not well.”

“Nope, I hated hunting,” Nick said, while Riley handed him one of their bags. Spunky started barking yet again, but these were angry-sounding, short, and sharp. They were about to have some unwanted company if they didn’t hurry.

“Keep your asses close to me, then. Don’t shoot unless you have to. Run for the door.”

They burst out of the car, running for the church doors, while AJ shot beyond them. Zombies fell, one after another, before AJ turned to catch up to the two of them. He banged on the door repeatedly, yelling, “It’s AJ; open it up!”

A young Hispanic girl opened the door, and they hurried in as she shut it behind them. She looked no older than twelve to Riley, yet the look in her eyes belonged to someone three times her age. It hurt to know this poor girl had had to witness all this.

“I *told* you that I heard people out there. Ooooooh!” she squealed when she spotted Spunky. She ran over to the golden dog and was greeted by happy licks and yips.

Nick beamed as others came over to them. “That’s Spunky.”

Riley noticed the others now: an older Hispanic woman who had to be the girl’s mother, simply from the way they interacted. Beside her was a tan man, approaching them with a sort of snobbery that was surprising, given the current situation. A young girl, around college age, was huddled in the far corner of the room and made no effort to move. Then, of course, Lieutenant Richardson, the same man she’d interviewed the last time she was at the base.

As Nick went to greet everyone, Riley chose to hang behind by the door. Nick became the center of the conversation, and she stayed a bit outside of it. That

suiting her just fine. She wasn't sure exactly how to introduce herself just yet, wasn't sure what to say beyond her name. Yet the people around her seemed all right, and it confirmed for her what Nick had said before. They *weren't* alone.

"And that's Riley... Ryyyyyye, come here! After that trip in that damn pink Barbie car..."

Riley walked over, feeling a bit out of sorts with herself. Nick grabbed her arm and pulled her over, giving her a bit of a sideways hug, as everyone introduced themselves and started talking in general. There was an air of relief amongst them all that there were more people out there.

"See! We found more people; we're alive. I'm not *that* crazy for being an optimist."

"I'm not saying you were right, Nick."

"But I was!"

She smiled to herself. It was good to be around other people, to have a group, of sorts, fighting to survive with her. They'd all be working together, she knew, to figure out how this had happened and how to live now. It was good to just not be alone, but in that moment, she had a realization that she hadn't expected. It was a thought that entered her head simply, naturally.

I'm glad that I met Nick first.

Chapter 48

I used to believe I was destined to do something meaningful with my life, to make a difference in the world. It's the reason I became a minister. I thought that through doing God's good work, I was repaying the life debt I owed him.

I don't have many clear memories of the near-death experience I had when I was five. Most of them are my mother's. She was the one who had to listen to my doctor tell her and my father to start making funeral arrangements for me, because the virus that had invaded my bloodstream and attacked my heart was surely fatal. She was the one who had to stand by and watch as that same doctor performed CPR on me, after my heart stopped beating. I was in and out during that time, barely conscious, delirious with a fever high enough to fry my brain. My mother was the one at my side when I woke up and recognized her, despite the doctor's fears that even if I pulled through, I would be brain dead.

You might call that doctor a pessimist, but she was only being realistic. My mother, though, was an optimist, a believer. She never left my side, and she never stopped praying. And God came through. He reached down and touched me, and He saved my life. It was a miracle. At least, that's what I'd always been told. That's what I'd always believed.

I never thought twice about making ministry my life's work. I owed my life to God, so I would devote my life to God. It was as simple as that. And when I found success as a minister and happiness in my personal life, I naively believed that God and I were square. He had blessed me. I was in His favor.

I was wrong. I was wrong about everything. I believed in fate, in destiny, in the notion that everything happens for a reason. Now I know there's no such thing. I don't know why I was spared as a child, nor why I survive now, but it wasn't the hand of God. It was a fluke, a lucky coincidence. One in a million odds, and I happened to be the one. "Lucky" me, eh?

You know that saying, "Shit happens"? I used to hate that phrase. I've never used it, myself, but you know what? It's true. Shit happens, and it's all just as random and meaningless as it seems. Nothing's in God's hands; it's all down to us and chance.

We make our own destiny.

Thursday, April 19, 2012
5:00 p.m.

Brian was restless.

He and Gretchen had been bunkered in the gas station since Monday morning: three days, six hours, give or take. They should have been at the Air Force base in Tampa by now, and the more time passed, the more Brian worried that there would be nothing left but zombies by the time they got there.

As he stood in the doorway, waiting for Gretchen to return from the bathroom, he looked out the glass façade of the station. Zombies still prowled the forecourt, shuffling among the blackened remnants of the gas pumps in search of the prey they could sense, but not reach. The sun was starting to sink in the sky. Only a couple hours of daylight remained, and then it would be dusk, and darkness would fall across the land. Brian dreaded another long, sleepless night of sitting up on guard duty, listening to the hungry moans of the undead, while Gretchen tossed and turned on the hard floor.

This was always the hardest part of the day for him. It was five o'clock, supper time, and if the world were still right, he'd have been at home with his family. Leighanne would have been in the kitchen, putting the final touches on a

homecooked meal. Brooke and Bonnie, home from school, would have been setting the table. Brian would have poured the milk, then said the grace as they all sat down for dinner together.

But instead, he was here, in this godforsaken gas station, staring out at the gormless ghouls who sought to make *him* their evening meal, because the world *wasn't* right. It had all gone very, very wrong.

“They’re never gonna go away, are they?”

Brian jumped. Gretchen was back; he hadn’t even heard her footsteps approach. He stepped back to let her pass, then closed the door to the back room behind her. “Nope,” he said flatly, turning to face her. “I don’t reckon they will.”

She sat down cross-legged on the floor to paw through the small pile of food they’d taken from the shelves. Opening a new box of Slim Jims, she pulled out two of the beef sticks and tossed one to Brian. He caught it one-handed and absently tore open the yellow packaging. He didn’t feel hungry, but it gave him something to do.

Gretchen spun her Slim Jim around her fingers like a miniature baton. “What are we gonna do about them?” she asked. It was the question Brian had fallen asleep that morning contemplating and woken up in the afternoon without an answer to.

“I dunno,” he replied, “but we’re gonna have to figure out something. We can’t stay here forever. Frankly, I don’t even wanna stay here another night.”

“Me neither,” Gretchen agreed, which gave him some hope. If she was as eager to leave as he was, even if it meant risking their lives, then maybe they could find a way out. He considered this, as he watched Gretchen reach for a Corona from among the selection of drinks they’d pulled from the coolers. There was bottled water and Gatorade, sodas and tea, but she always went for the booze with her dinner. It relaxed her, she said; it was the only way she was able to sleep. “Want one?” she asked, gesturing to the remainder of the six-pack.

Brian shrugged. “Sure,” he said dully, extending his hand. He twisted off the cap of the bottle she passed him and took a sip, grimacing at the bitter taste of the warm beer. He’d never been much of a beer-drinker, but like Gretchen, he welcomed the calming, numbing effect the alcohol had on him.

“It’s sure better cold – with limes,” put in Gretchen, “but I guess it’ll do.” She took a long swig of hers, wiping her chin with the back of her hand when she finished. “You know, the first time I had one of these was when I was in the U.K., in college. It was the Fourth of July, and we wanted to do something to celebrate, but all we ended up doing was buying a case of Corona and a bottle of Malibu rum and ordering Chinese food. We sat around in the tiny little kitchen of the flat

we were staying in and got drunk while we played cards and listened to The Beatles. It was pretty sad, actually. No fireworks, no backyard barbeques... it was like the world was just wrong that night.”

“Like it is now,” agreed Brian. His smile was grim, but knowing.

Gretchen nodded. “I was homesick then, but at least I knew I’d be home again soon. Now...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

He knew she was thinking of her family and her husband. He wondered about his own family, his parents and brother, up north in Kentucky. Was there any chance the plague had not yet struck them? Then he thought of Kevin in Florida. He was banking on Kevin’s – or someone’s, at least – survival at MacDill. Was the base just a pipe dream?

“I’m anxious to get to the base,” he admitted. “See if it’s any different down there.”

“Let’s pray to God it is,” said Gretchen. “Otherwise, where else will we go? What will we do?”

Brian couldn’t answer her.

They fell into silence, Gretchen fumbling with the wrapper of her Slim Jim. Brian watched her unwrap it and bite off the end, chewing speculatively. After some time, she swallowed and wrinkled her nose. Without a word, she got up and wandered over to their stock of supplies, returning with a lighter. She sat down again with her Slim Jim and clicked the lighter until it sparked a flame; then she held it to the end of her Slim Jim, until it began to crackle and blacken. When she looked up and found Brian watching her in bewilderment, she giggled. “Didn’t you ever see a clip of Wendy Williams doing this on her talk show?”

“Who?”

Gretchen shook her head. “Never mind.” She capped the lighter and took another bite of her now burnt Slim Jim. Swallowing, she made a face. “I’m not a fan.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about right now,” Brian admitted, chuckling.

“It’s okay. It’s not important. I was just thinking... last week, I wouldn’t have thought anything of wasting an hour watching some stupid talk show. And now... I’d give anything to spend that hour with Shawn. We took so much for granted...”

Brian thought painfully of those family dinners, such a routine part of his life – his old life, a life he’d never have again. “I know.”

Gretchen sighed. “Sorry if I’m depressing you. I just realized how much everything’s going to change. I mean, what if it’s not any different on the base or anywhere else? What if it’s not just the east coast that’s affected, but the west coast too? What if it’s the whole country? The whole continent? The whole world? What if this is...”

“The end of days?” murmured Brian. He thought suddenly of the book of Isaiah, of passages he’d read from his mother’s Bible, foretelling of the Lord’s impending judgment:

Terror, and the pit, and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth! ... The earth is utterly broken, the earth is torn asunder, the earth is violently shaken... Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise... The earth will give birth to those long dead. Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past. For the Lord comes out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no longer cover its slain.

“Why us, then?” he wondered aloud. “Why are we the ones left alive?”

Gretchen shook her head. “I wish I knew...”

Brian didn’t know what to say back. He couldn’t really blame God, because he’d forsaken His existence. And he couldn’t blame Satan either, because how could Satan exist in a realm where God did not? The truth was, he was beginning to think it was all random and meaningless. His own survival was nothing but a fluke – and if the number of zombies outside were any indication, he would be joining their ranks soon enough. He and Gretchen were greatly outnumbered. They could only run and hide for so long.

In that moment, their situation seemed both hopeless and pointless. He didn’t want to die, but what was there left to live for?

Kevin, he told himself fiercely. If his cousin had survived in Florida, he had to get to him. And if not, at least he had to see for himself. He had to know. He was sure Gretchen felt the same about her husband. If there were others alive, perhaps the situation was not as bad as it seemed.

Hope flared and faded inside him, like the flame that ignited and died every time Gretchen clicked the lighter in her hand, which she’d started to play with. “Sorry,” she said, when he looked up at her, mistaking the frown on his face as one of annoyance towards her. She put the lighter down, trading it for her beer bottle, from which she took a swallow.

Brian's eyes drifted from the lighter to the bottle, and all of a sudden, something clicked. It was not the lighter, but an idea that sparked, and at once, his eyes lit up. "No, no," he said quickly. "I just thought of something!"

She looked up curiously at him. "What?"

"You know what a Molotov cocktail is?"

"Eh, I'm not really a connoisseur of mixed drinks. Sounds like it'd include vodka, though. Why, wanna make me one?" She smiled, swishing the beer that was left in her bottle.

Brian laughed. "No, it's not a drink. Well, not the kind I'm talking about, anyway. It's a weapon, a type of bomb. You put a rag in a bottle filled with a flammable liquid, and you light it on fire. The rag becomes a fuse, and when you throw the bottle, it becomes a fireball."

Gretchen's eyes widened. "Sounds dangerous."

"Dangerous, yes. But also more destructive and easier to aim than a gun. We could probably take out enough of them using those to get to that tan SUV parked on the road."

"What if there's no key? Or no fuel?"

"Let's just hope there is."

A grim look passed between them. Brian could tell Gretchen was uncertain about taking such a risk, but like him, she was also unwilling to stay another night in this room. The time had come to take action, take a chance, and hope it paid off.

"The way I see it, we've got nothing to lose," he told Gretchen, as they ventured out into the station to gather the materials they needed. "If we can't escape now, we never will. And I dunno about you, but I'd rather die running tonight than starve in that back room a few weeks from now, when our supplies run out."

Gretchen nodded, pocketing a couple of extra lighters. "I'm with you."

In the back room, they put together their rudimentary bombs. They started with bottles of hard liquor, the strongest proof the station offered. Brian had also found bottles of windshield cleaner in the stock room, the labels of which contained a warning that they were flammable, so they filled a couple of glass bottles with that, as well. Into each bottle, they stuffed a cleaning rag, leaving one corner hanging out to act as the fuse.

"Should I be frightened that you know how to do this?" Gretchen asked as they finished, surveying their handiwork in awe.

Brian chuckled. “Unexpected, for a man of –” He stopped abruptly, on the verge of saying “God,” and quickly recovered with, “– music, huh? Trust me, I’ve never tried actually making one of these before. Pretty sure they’re illegal, for one thing.”

“Guess that doesn’t matter now,” said Gretchen. “Let’s go burn some zombies.”

They carried their weapons out into the main part of the station, stopping short of the door. Upon seeing them, the zombies began to press in on the other side of the glass with fresh determination. Brian could see Gretchen’s confidence dissolve as she watched them warily. “The hardest part will be getting out of the building,” he said, noticing how tightly the zombies were packed in around the door. “We won’t be able to use the bombs till we’re out in the open. We don’t want to risk catching the building on fire until we know we have an escape route.”

Gretchen nodded in agreement, but she looked doubtful. “How exactly are we going to get out?”

“We can use the guns while we’re in such close proximity,” replied Brian, looking to the hunting rifles they’d taken from the farmhouse. “Shoot enough of them to get ourselves out, and use the bombs on the rest.”

When this was agreed on, they loaded themselves up with supplies. Gretchen strapped on the backpack with all the worldly possessions she’d carried with her, plus some extra supplies from the gas station. Brian stuffed the bottles into the pockets of his jeans, grateful that they were the baggy, cargo variety. He tucked one lighter in the waistband and handed Gretchen the other. They each armed themselves with a loaded rifle.

It was nearly dark by now, but Brian could see the gleaming silhouette of the tan Suburban on the road, their best shot at an escape. They would make a beeline to it, if only they could clear a path.

Shoulder to shoulder, they positioned themselves in front of the door, their guns raised. Brian reached out and unlocked the door. Next to him, he heard Gretchen suck in a deep breath, as she prepared to open the door. “Do it quickly,” he told her. “You’ll be able to knock down the ones standing right on the other side if you throw it open with enough force.”

Gretchen nodded. “Ready?” she said breathlessly. “One... two... three!” On three, she hurled her weight against the door, thrusting it open.

Out of the corner of his eye, Brian saw the zombies who had been standing behind it topple backwards, in a domino effect, just as he had predicted. But those who had been better positioned swarmed forward, trying to push their way in. Brian fired the first shot at point blank range, the barrel of his rifle pressed

against the forehead of the first ghoul. Its head was literally blown half off, and Brian pressed his lips tightly together as he was spattered with bits of brains, clotted blood, and rotting flesh. Barely hesitating, he aimed at his next target and fired again.

An echo shot came from Gretchen, and together, they inched their way forward, taking out as many zombies as they could with their rifles. When they were far enough from the building to become encircled by zombies, they pressed against each other, back to back, and Brian said, "Time for the cocktails."

Shouldering his rifle, he pulled one of the glass bottles out of his jeans and hastily snatched his lighter. His fingers shook as he clicked the lighter, but thankfully, he was able to ignite a flame. He didn't hesitate, holding the lighter to the rag until the cloth caught fire. Then he hurled the bottle into the face of the nearest zombie. Behind him, he heard glass shatter, as Gretchen did the same.

On either side of the circle, zombies were stumbling around in flames. Brian raised his rifle and used it like a bludgeon to knock down the zombies who still blocked their path to the SUV. Then he grabbed Gretchen's hand and yanked her through the break in the circle. The desperate moans of the undead rang out behind them as they ran, and glancing back over his shoulder, Brian saw that they were still lurching forward, arms outstretched and on fire. They were walking torches now, igniting everything around them.

"Run!" Gretchen screamed, and now she was the one pulling him along. She reached the Suburban first and dove for the nearest door, tugging on the handle. "No!" she shrieked, tugging harder, and Brian's heart stalled in dismay. It was locked.

"Try the driver's side!" he shouted, and they ran around to the far side of the SUV. This time, he grabbed hold of the door handle first and pulled. To his utter relief and amazement, it opened in his hand. "Get in!" he cried, pushing Gretchen up and into the vehicle first. She scrambled over the driver's seat and middle console and fell into the passenger seat. Brian climbed in behind her and slammed the door, immediately locking it again.

Looking out Gretchen's window, he could see the flaming horde of zombies approaching, slowly but steadily. If they got too close, he was afraid they'd ignite the SUV. They had to get away, now. His eyes darted down to the ignition, fearing that after all the obstacles they'd fought their way through, there would be no keys now. But there they were, dangling from the ignition, right where their dying or undead owner had left them before abandoning the vehicle.

He let out his breath in a whoosh and turned the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered to life, and he threw the gear shift into drive and slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The Suburban shot forward, spitting gravel from its tires. Brian pulled it back onto the road, and when he checked the rearview

mirror, the zombies were lagging far behind. He drove until they were indiscernible from a bonfire on the horizon, and then he looked over at Gretchen.

She was still breathing fast, shuddering, covered in zombie flesh and guts. Brian wasn't sure why, but he actually laughed. "Déjà vu, huh?" he remarked, looking down at his own brain-spattered clothing. "We'll find a place to stop soon and clean up. We'll probably have to switch cars again too; this one only has a quarter tank."

"The sooner, the better," said Gretchen shakily.

"You got it," Brian agreed, smiling. "I won't make that mistake again."

Now that they were on the road again, he felt worlds better than he had at the gas station. Soon they'd be on their way to Tampa again. Soon they would know if there was anyone left alive down there... or if they were on their own.

Chapter 49

People cause problems. A person doesn't. People do. That's the truth: when one person joins another person, that's when problems arise.

I ain't saying I ain't happy to be in a group. I am. I wonder if I tell them that enough. But I am. They try to make sure to reach out to me, and it feels strange as hell, but good too, in a way. I'm glad I have them, though I really don't think I tell them enough. Heh, well, they should just know without me having to say it.

I think I've gotten more talkative ever since I started journaling. Damn.

As I was saying, when you have a group, problems come right along with it. Look at how the world was before the dead rose – perfect example. People thought coming together solved any problem, and throughout history, all it showed was that it created more.

Did they listen to history?

No.

We could, but we'd die trying to fight off too many fucking ghouls, so we have to stick together. So we have the problems. People try to lead when their ass knows nothing about true leadership. People try to loaf and let others do their work. Heh, if the others read this, they'd know exactly who I mean. Others try to keep the peace, and others get pissed off at the ones causing the problems to

begin with. Dynamics and all that interaction bullshit. Before, you could afford to have those problems. It's people being people. Now, everyone needs to get the hell over themselves when this shit happens. Otherwise, we may as well walk out the door, ring a bell, and yell "CHOW TIME!" to those damn ghouls and save us all some time and energy.

Like I said, a person doesn't cause problems, but people do.

Friday, April 20, 2012

12:30 p.m.

AJ was beginning to get far too stir-crazy in the chapel. He was looking for any excuse to get out now, taking on sniper duty more often than anyone else, going out when Gabby or someone thought they heard a car, gathering supplies. Every excuse meant an escape from the suffocation of people and people trying to understand him. In a sense, he appreciated the interest, but felt stifled by it. It had been bad enough at rehab, and even then, he'd known how to get the therapists to back off and give up. Those methods wouldn't work now, and even though he was free of the past that had gagged him, he felt he'd gone from one extreme to another. From being seen as a blemish on society to being seen as an asset. He hadn't made the adjustment just yet.

It was making him anxious, making him crave a hit worse than anything else since he'd gone sober. He wanted to go with Kevin to the range again this morning, take on some ghouls, the first purpose he's had in an existence that seemed so pathetic to him now. Instead, that early morning, he'd taken one of their newest arrivals, Nick, for some training, along with Howie, whom Kevin felt needed *more* practice, much to AJ's amusement. He got a nice stab of satisfaction every time the snotty businessman was shown that he wasn't superior to everyone else in this "new" world.

AJ looked around, beginning to pace around the sanctuary of the chapel, taking in what everyone else was doing. At the moment, Gabby was napping, having not slept well the night before. He knew this because she'd woken him up during her nightmare, before she'd quieted down and gone back to sleep. A simple reminder that she was the child of the bunch, rather than Kayleigh.

Speaking of Kayleigh, she had actually eaten that morning, a shock to them all, except AJ, who figured she didn't want to actually starve herself; rather, she wanted the sympathy and attention that went with it. Sad, really, both the action and the reason. The action wouldn't work, making her even more depressed, and the reason just showed how weak a person the girl really was. Pathetic.

Jo was in the little kitchenette by the Sunday school room, preparing lunch with what food Riley and Nick had brought with them in their bags. Kevin had mentioned them going supply hunting for real food soon, after they had everyone

familiar with the guns, anyway. Riley was near Kayleigh, jotting something down on some paper. When she noticed she'd caught his eye, she met his gaze and waited expectantly.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a bit bored, so I'm just thinking, jotting down random thoughts on paper. It's used for like writers for inspiration, but I forgot the term. Oh! Stream of consciousness."

He wanted to lean over and just see what thoughts were running through her head, simply out of curiosity, but was relieved when Kevin, Howie, and Nick came in. AJ grinned just a little, hoping maybe he could get out of the church and finally do something interesting. Being around people and "bonding" just wasn't his idea of a good fun time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the look of relief on Riley's face as well. But unlike his gaze, which focused on the door, hers focused on the blonde. Interesting. Maybe he should just start people watching when he got too bored. God, he wanted a hit. Anything to just fade away from the mind-numbing reality for a change. But he couldn't, and not just because all the dealers wanted flesh rather than drugs now. He had to do his part like everyone else.

"Okay, Riley, you're up. Kayleigh, we need you to stop being stubborn and come with us. Kayleigh... KAYLEIGH!"

"What?! God."

"We need you to come with us; if you're going to survive, you need to learn to kill them from a distance."

AJ saw as the girl rolled her eyes for the millionth time. All week, it'd been the same thing. She'd refuse, Kevin would get frustrated – actually, they'd all get frustrated – and in the end, Kayleigh would get her way. She'd sulk in the corner, eat very little, and stare at her phone, put her head down, or feel her bald spot. He caught the look of Nick, who was standing behind Kevin, choosing not to say anything. Then there was Howie, who walked up to Kayleigh and sat next to her, while giving Kevin an evil eye.

"Leave her alone."

"Howie, she needs to learn. We don't know what'll happen."

"I'll have people around, you don't need me, and I'm not touching a gun."

Throughout all this, AJ, along with Riley and Nick, were watching this with a detached interest. All for different reasons, he guessed. While Howie and Kevin were emotionally involved, they weren't. He couldn't say why the two blondes

were so interested, but for AJ, he was simply bored. He didn't bother caring or even giving a thought to becoming involved, himself, because he knew nothing could change. If the girl wanted to stay helpless and weak and, as a byproduct of that, cause her own demise when the time came, so be it. He really wasn't bothered by it either way.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" The voice was irritated, disbelieving, and undoubtedly female. All heads turned to Riley, who was fuming, causing AJ to smirk to himself.

That's right, she and Nick haven't seen this debate yet, he mused.

"No, and I don't care."

"Obviously."

"Leave her alone. You haven't been here long, and-"

"Shut it, Howie; I'm talking to Kayleigh, not you."

"I'll have you know-"

"Does it look like I care? Shut. The. Fuck. Up. Okay? She's technically an adult; she doesn't need ya to hold her hand and coddle the hell out of her." Put in his place, the businessman stepped back. He appeared to have decided that this wasn't his fight and he shouldn't get involved. So he sat down next to Kayleigh, offering her a small smile.

Everyone stared at her now, as Kevin stepped forward. He, like everybody else, saw where this was heading real quick. "Riley..."

"Rye, calm down," Nick cut in, interrupting Kevin as he stepped closer to her. She turned, and AJ saw her soften at his words, before her eyes became icy once more, as they refocused upon the college girl.

"No, this *clearly* needs to be said."

Finally, Kayleigh stood, before anything more could be said, fuming now, herself, at Riley's justified anger. Just from watching the brunette, AJ could tell that she thought the fury of Riley was uncalled for. *Deluded, even after the dead rise. How pathetic.*

"You don't know me, and you need to just back off." Her voice was monotone, steady and unwavering.

AJ raised a brow. Sadly, this had replaced the void television, Shakespeare, and radio had once left in the shallow entertainment of his life. But at least he knew it

was shallow and vapid, unlike the rest of humanity, before they'd become ghouls, who'd lived in their perpetual state of limitless deniability. He'd seen the coats they'd all donned and known them for what they'd been, which, to him, made all the difference. At least, that was how he was currently justifying his enjoyment of the ever rising scene. He only wished he had some popcorn, as he watched Riley hoist her shoulders, as if preparing for battle, which, in essence, it seemed she was.

“Let me tell you something, *little girl*. I don't *need* to know you. Fuck, I don't even *want* to know you. I already know more than enough to tell me that much.”

“Oh yeah? So why don't you keep on talking with that big mouth of yours, and-”

“Oh, hell no, I'm not finished. Let me tell you, Miss Kayleigh, all about your damn self, as you were about to suggest. Number one: You're an adult, who's acting like a child. Period. Gabby acts more adult at thirteen than you do at college age. Number two: You're *not* special! We've all lost people; we've all been through hell on Earth. Not just you! Lastly, number three: Get over yourself. I can handle you mooching off of us for stuff like cleaning and food. What I *cannot* even think of dealing with is you risking our lives by being lazy about protecting yourself and, therefore, *all* of us. You get it now?”

“This isn't about you! Take your own advice and get over *yourself*! If *I* don't want to, then...”

“... It still affects us. Period. All of us, you idiot! What if one of us gets taken down because we're too busy trying to keep your useless self safe because you can't do it? You expect us to die making sure you live 'cause you can't bother? Forget it. Screw that.”

“Well, I'm not touching a gun, and you can't force me!”

“Riley, calm down,” the heavy, Southern voice belonging to the colonel pleaded. AJ suppressed a laugh. Fat chance of that. Not to mention, AJ wanted her to keep it up – and not just for the amusement anymore. The girl had a point: this needed to be said; in fact, it was a bit overdue. Yet again, it wasn't shocking that Kevin actually stepped between them now, but what was shocking was Riley shoving herself past him, her face actually red after hearing Kayleigh's last response. The entire scene had caused Jo to peek out of the Sunday school room to see what was causing all the commotion.

“You know what? I'm different from everyone else here. You know *why* I am?”

Kayleigh crossed her arms over her chest defiantly and stared at the former reporter, brown eyes clashing with blue, neither girl willing to back down.

“Because you're a psycho?”

“Nope, because I’m a bitch who knows she is a bitch and has no problem being one. So much so that I have absolutely *no* problem shoving you out that door with nothing but a gun and making you fend for yourself. So much that I’ll make damn sure that no one goes out there to help you, either. I won’t even care that you’ll be doomed and die within the hour. You know why? Because I’m a bitch who’ll know it was your own damn fault for refusing to learn how to fight and survive. I am not risking my life, or anyone else’s lives, to coddle you. You’re learning, or I will toss you out of this damn church right here, right now. And I dare everyone else to stop me.”

The room was silent. No one knew what to say as they stared at the two girls. Nick was looking at Riley as if he’d never seen her before. Kevin was carefully observing the situation, waiting to make sure it wasn’t going to come to physical blows, as it had looked like it would only minutes before. Jo must have decided she was best off staying in the kitchen, as if she were oblivious to the whole thing, as AJ saw her duck back into the Sunday school room as if nothing had happened. Howie stood, looking like he wanted to say something, but was debating to himself if it was worth it or not. AJ glanced at his tattooed hands for a moment, before breaking the silence himself.

“So me, Riley, Kayleigh, and you, Kevin? We can make sure they shoot out their anger.”

Kevin gave him an appreciative look and nodded. “How about I try guard duty for the church while you help them practice? See if I can’t take any more out that are roaming around.”

“Me?” AJ asked, surprised. Typically, it was Kevin who prepared everyone.

“Yeah, I trust you. You’re the best shooter here so far; you know the basics to show them. I think you can handle it.”

And while Howie looked furious from his corner, AJ felt a smile form. It wasn’t the most important task to do; in fact, Kevin’s was more imperative. The quicker they cleared out the base, the better. However, it felt good to be relied on, to be considered trustworthy. To have someone see something worthy in him, after feeling, for so long, that no one would. He’d never believed the psychologists who tried to tell him in countless therapy sessions that he was worth anything. Yet, now there was the little group of survivors. He was the one being relied on for help, sent to check for people, sent to protect. They trusted him and showed it, especially Kevin. It got to him, in ways words never had.

Words were meaningless; they’d been tossed around carelessly in the world before.

Actions, however... They spoke volumes.

Chapter 50

We've formed a new kind of family here on the base. Most of us aren't related, by blood or marriage or anything else. We don't have much in common, other than the fact that we've, so far, managed to survive. Before the Osiris Virus struck, some of us were rich, some of us were poor, and most of us were somewhere in between. We had our own lives, our own families, but they're all gone now. All we have is each other, and that makes us family. Necessity is stronger than blood, stronger than marriage, stronger than common threads. Necessity is the true tie that binds. We stick together because we need each other; it's as simple as that.

Of this new family, I am still the father figure, still the leader. These people are like my sons and daughters, my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to protect them and keep them unified. It's not an easy job. They may have come together like a family, but they fight like a family, too. I can't say I blame them. There are a lot of different personalities here, and it's not hard to see why some of them clash. Sometimes I raise my voice, too.

They drive me crazy, just like a family, but at the end of the day, I love them, just like a family. They are my family now. It's a different kind of family, not one I would have chosen, but really, who gets to choose their family anyway? Most people are born into a family. The ten of us were brought together by destiny – or whatever it was that spared our lives and helped us find each other. Maybe I'll never know what exactly it was, but I do know one thing: I would die to keep this new family of mine alive.

Friday, April 20, 2012

2:00 p.m.

Kevin had a headache.

Standing outside the church, his gun in hand, he viewed guard duty as a reprieve from the tension stagnating inside the chapel. He was used to living in close quarters with other people, but only military people, people with strong character and discipline. He was not used to being holed up with people who were snotty, whiney, immature, or unrestrained... and he wasn't thinking of Gabby.

The thirteen-year-old girl, surprisingly enough, had proven herself to be more of an asset than a hindrance. She had helped her mother make the church fit for living, and she had demonstrated a willingness, even an aptitude, for weapons training. Kevin wasn't comfortable with the idea of arming her for actual combat with the undead, but he had no doubt that she would rise to the challenge, if it

ever came to that. She was young, too young for the horrors she had witnessed, but whether because of this, or in spite of it, she seemed mature beyond her years.

If only they could all be that way, he thought grimly. Of the first set of newcomers, only AJ had really contributed to life on the base – another pleasant surprise to Kevin, given his rough exterior. Kevin knew himself to be judgmental; he expected things to be a certain way and was automatically wary of anything that went against the norm, and AJ, with his too many tattoos and too-cool attitude, was one who certainly did. AJ was an artist, an addict, practically an anarchist – uncouth, undisciplined, and unpredictable. He was the last person Kevin would, under normal circumstances, entrust a gun and expect to conform to military training. But while everything around them was deteriorating, AJ seemed to be thriving in this new, zombie-infested world. He had quickly risen through the unofficial ranks to become Kevin's right-hand man, his best soldier, the major to his lieutenant colonel. Though they were opposites in many ways, Kevin admired AJ's courage and candor and thought he could understand, at times such as this, why he was so willing to take on extra sniper duty, just to escape the chapel for awhile. In that respect, they were not so different after all.

His eyes searched the landscape around him, alert for signs of movement on the horizon – either zombies, following the scent of his flesh on the breeze, or AJ and the two younger women, returning from target practice. They had been gone an hour now, and he hoped being forced out into the open, with the threat of the undead heightened, would be enough to scare Kayleigh into learning how to defend herself. She was a skinny girl, not strong, but in shape; she would have no problem wielding a weapon, if she would only try. Kevin had trained plenty of young women her size in the Air Force; the only difference between them and her was their strength of mind, a quality Kayleigh lacked. She seemed determined to stay weak, the constant damsel in distress. In that respect, she was as stubborn as Howie, and almost as infuriating.

Howie seemed eager enough to defend himself, but he was too arrogant to learn the proper way to do so. He was a man who liked to be in control, in charge, and he didn't take direction well. Accustomed to men who followed orders from higher officers without question, Kevin was not used to being challenged. Just as Kayleigh was determined to stay helpless, Howie seemed determined to prove he could learn without being taught. On their trips to the shooting range, he ignored Kevin's advice and, as a result, continued to waste precious seconds lining up his shot, trying to get his aim perfect, which led to him firing too late and missing his target completely. To make matters worse, he panicked at the first moan of a zombie, and Kevin feared that even if he did learn to aim and shoot quickly, he would still freeze up when confronted with a lurching, undead target.

The latest pair of arrivals showed more promise. Nick had shot well on his first trip out. He had never fired a real gun before that morning, he'd told Kevin, but he was a skilled video gamer, and it showed in his hand-eye coordination. When

he took the time to line up his shot, his aim was excellent. Unlike Howie, though, he spent little time actually aiming. He was quick to pull the trigger, but his shooting was chaotic, inconsistent. With some practice, though, Kevin was confident Nick would become a capable defender. He, at least, was willing to learn.

He hoped Riley would be the same way, though he worried, too, about her stubbornness. She was tough to read, even harder to predict. When she and Nick had arrived, she'd been quiet, withdrawn. Her explosion at Kayleigh earlier had come without warning, and even now, it left Kevin unsettled. Riley was a firecracker with a short fuse who had gone off in a small space, surrounded by people who were already on edge. He knew what dissension in the ranks could do to a regiment's morale, and he worried that if tempers flared and arguments like the one this morning continued, their precariously united group would fracture. He hoped, as AJ had, that both women would work out their emotions on the skeet range.

In the meantime, he massaged his temple with his free hand and tried to enjoy the temporary solitude. It was a beautiful day; the sky was blue, the sun was shining, and a coastal breeze was blowing, bringing with it the fishy, salty scent of the Gulf. If only it were enough to mask the stench of decay that had thickened throughout the base, as bodies, both dead and undead, began to rot in the heat and humidity, without which Kevin might have been able to pretend it was just another typical day.

If he'd counted the days correctly, it was a Friday afternoon. Normally, he'd be looking forward to the weekend – a break from the physical therapy that had kept him here on the base to recuperate from his injury, a chance to get off the base and go out, see the sites western Florida had to offer, or just relax. Now, weekends were meaningless. Time itself was meaningless. It didn't matter if it was Friday or Monday, day or night; they had to be on alert at all hours, ready to defend themselves against the constant threat of the living dead.

Again, Kevin's eyes panned the horizon. A distant rumble drew his attention in the direction of the front gate, which was out of his range of sight. He strained his ears, listening. Unless it was just the shuffling feet of a massive horde of zombies, that sounded like something that was running – a motor. He hated to get his hopes up, but it had happened twice before, first with Howie's purple Lexus and then Nick's pink Barbie car. Could it be that another carload of living people had found their way to the base?

Forgetting his headache, Kevin jammed his hand into his pocket, fumbling around for the keys to the Humvee. He came up empty and remembered that AJ had driven Riley and Kayleigh down to the skeet range in it. Looking around, his eyes darted between the only two vehicles in the front lot – the purple Lexus and the pink Beetle.

Sighing, he turned to open the one unfortified entrance to the church. "It's just me!" he called in at once, announcing himself. "Hey, Howie! Can I borrow your car?"

Howie hesitated; at first, there was no response. Then Kevin heard a reluctant, "Uh... well-

He rolled his eyes. "Nick?" he shouted, cutting Howie off. "Key to the Barbie car, please?"

Nick was there at once, keys dangling from the keyless entry in his hand, a questioning expression on his face. "What's up?"

"I think I heard another car. I wanna go meet it. Thanks," Kevin added, grabbing the keys from Nick. "Watch the chapel, will ya?"

"Sure thing," replied Nick.

Kevin smiled; at least one of them was agreeable. "Be back," he said, darting out of the church. He aimed the keyless entry at the flowery, pink Beetle and heard a honk and a click as the locks disarmed. His legs protested as he squeezed himself into the driver's seat, jamming his knees beneath the dash. Turning the key in the ignition, he heard the engine sputter to life and the sound of Michael Jackson's voice through the speakers, singing, "*Thriller... thriller night... so let me hold you tight and share a killer thriller, ow!*"

Kevin shook his head, stifling a chuckle. "Really?" he muttered aloud and then shrugged. "Guess it fits."

He turned the volume down and pulled out of the parking lot. The pink sunflower drooping over the bud vase in the dashboard swayed as the convertible putted up Bayshore Boulevard. Just a short ways up the road, Kevin spotted the metallic glimmer of the hood of the other vehicle, approaching slowly. He honked the horn in excitement and frowned in bewilderment at the feeble "meep!" that sounded from the Beetle. Changing his mind, he slowed to a stop and put the car into park, letting the engine idle as the other vehicle grew near.

It was a pick-up truck, he saw, though with the sun reflecting off the windshield, he couldn't make out the faces of the people inside. The truck rolled to a stop in its own lane, and the driver's side door opened. A man jumped down from the big truck, temporarily obscured by the open door, but when he straightened up and stepped out from behind the door, Kevin's jaw dropped open.

"Brian?!" He scrambled out of the Beetle, practically spilling out onto the road as his long legs tangled together, shouting his cousin's name all the while. "Brian!"

A familiar figure was running towards him, until the two men collided in a crushing hug. “I can’t believe it’s really you,” Kevin murmured, tightening his arms around his cousin’s bony frame.

“Me neither,” replied Brian, squeezing him back fiercely. “I came here on a chance; I didn’t know where else to go... but I didn’t think you would really...” He trailed off, but Kevin knew how the sentence ended.

“Most of the base is dead,” he replied. “There are a few other survivors who’ve made it here. How about Leighanne and the girls?” He looked over Brian’s shoulder to see the passenger side door opening, but the woman who climbed out of the truck was not Brian’s wife. Kevin glanced down as Brian’s gaze flickered up to meet his, and his heart sunk as he noticed the sheen of tears in his cousin’s blue eyes. Brian’s adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed, but he didn’t speak. He just shook his head.

“Oh Bri...” he whispered, and pulled Brian back into another hug, patting his back awkwardly. “I’m sorry.” He pictured Brian’s twin girls, his own nieces, and his heart broke for his cousin.

Brian pulled out of the hug and straightened again, clearing his throat. When the truck door slammed shut, he glanced over his shoulder to see the woman approaching timidly and beckoned her over. “Kev, this is Gretchen,” he introduced his companion, as she came up alongside him. To her, he said, “Meet my cousin, Kevin.”

Gretchen’s blue eyes widened in a mixture of disbelief and delight. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “It’s so nice to meet you! To meet anyone, really... but especially you. We... we didn’t know if we’d find anyone alive down here, let alone you. We haven’t seen a living soul since we left Atlanta.”

“There are a few others here,” Kevin repeated to her. “You guys’ll make it ten.”

“Are there... you know... any of *them* here, too?” Gretchen asked, looking around apprehensively.

Kevin knew to what she was referring. “Unfortunately, yes,” he replied. “We’ve been going out practically every day, taking out as many as we can, but the base is huge; we won’t get them all for awhile. That said, we should head to the chapel – that’s where we’re staying, for now. It’s as secure as anywhere.” When they nodded, he added, “Just follow me in your truck.”

“Nice ride, Kev,” Brian remarked sarcastically, as Kevin turned to head back to the pink Beetle. He didn’t have to look back to know that his cousin was smirking. He responded by waving his middle finger over his shoulder.

Crap, he realized, as he opened the door to the Barbie car. *I just flipped off a minister*. “Sorry Lord,” he muttered out loud, as he climbed in, glancing up at the canvas top. “And thanks... thanks for sparing my cousin, and for sending him here.”

He threw the car back into drive and pulled a U-turn, and when he glanced up into the rearview mirror, the truck was behind him. Brian and Gretchen tailed him, as he led the way back to the chapel.

When they reached the parking lot in front, Kevin saw the Humvee parked there. That meant AJ, Riley, and Kayleigh were back. He parked the Beetle two spaces down, leaving a spot for Brian’s truck. He grabbed his gun from the passenger seat before climbing out, looking around for any zombies that may have followed the others back. Brian and Gretchen climbed down from the truck, also wary.

“Looks clear, for now!” called a voice, and they all turned to see Nick standing just outside the church door, armed with a gun. “A few of ‘em followed AJ and the girls back, but we took ‘em out.” Looking around, Kevin could see fresh – or recently dead, anyway – corpses littering the grass. “So hey, more people!” Nick exclaimed, grinning at the new arrivals.

“My cousin, Brian,” said Kevin, slinging an arm around Brian’s shoulders. “And this here is Gretchen. Gretchen, Brian, meet Nick. He just got here yesterday.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Gretchen at the same time Nick said, “Welcome.” Brian merely nodded his greeting.

“We’ve got some supplies,” Brian spoke up, motioning to the truck bed. “Should we unload them now, or...?”

“Yeah, might as well do it now, while there’s no zombies around.” Kevin hurried to lower the tailgate. With Nick’s help, they were able to unload everything – bags of food, clothes, guns, blankets, and other survival supplies – and carry it into the chapel in one trip.

“We’ve got more newbies!” Nick announced, as Kevin secured the door shut behind them.

Gabby came scurrying out of the sanctuary to see the new arrivals, Jo and Riley behind her. A flurry of chatter rose in the entryway, as introductions were made, the women hugging, Brian shaking hands. Gabby led them into the sanctuary to meet the others. Kevin noticed Kayleigh and AJ slouched in opposite corners, leading him to wonder how their training session had gone. They both glanced up at the group’s noisy entrance, but neither of them got up. Howie came right down from the altar, his hand outstretched pompously, to greet the newcomers. Kevin led another round of introductions.

Gabby offered to take Brian and Gretchen on a quick tour of the chapel, while Jo set to work organizing the new supplies, adding them to the inventory of what they already had. While this was going on, Kevin slipped off to AJ's corner and sank down beside him. "How'd everything go?" he asked in a low voice, with a pointed look toward Kayleigh.

AJ snorted. "About like you'd expect. I guess I should be congratulated on the fact that neither of them shot each other. And Kayleigh *did* have a gun in her hand."

Kevin smirked. "Did you get her to actually pull the trigger?"

"Once or twice. She's a terrible shot, but I don't think she was really trying. She wants to suck at it. She wants us to think she's so bad at it, we'll never put her on sniper duty."

Kevin nodded. "Sounds about right. How about Riley?"

"She's good. Real good, for a chick. Once she quit bitching at Kayleigh, she was fine."

"Good. Thanks for taking them."

"No problem, man." There was a long pause, and then AJ added, "Thanks... thanks for trusting me to."

Kevin was surprised at the hesitancy in his voice. He smiled and clapped AJ's shoulder. "Sure. If anyone could've gotten Kayleigh to shoot a gun, I knew you could."

AJ snorted again. "So," he changed the subject, "that guy Brian, he's your cousin?"

"Yeah, from Georgia. He came here on the off chance that I might still be alive, or at least that the base would be a safe zone."

"That's pretty lucky."

"I know. What are the chances, right?" Kevin's voice dropped to a whisper, as he added, "His family didn't make it, though. I don't know the details... don't know if he's ready to talk, or if I even wanna know... but he had a wife and kids... two little girls..."

"So the chick with him – she's not his wife?"

"No."

“That sucks, dude.”

Kevin nodded, and another awkward silence fell. When Gabby returned from the tour with Brian and Gretchen in tow, he stood up and motioned for AJ to follow. “Come on, man, come join the group.” Even Kayleigh slunk over from her secluded corner to sit on the outskirts of the cluster, as they all settled down into a section of pews together.

“So you two came all the way from Georgia?” asked Riley, surveying the newest additions to their group. “No wonder it took you so long to get here; it took me and Nick forever just to get across town!”

“Yeah, we only traveled by day...” Gretchen explained. “We stayed a couple of nights in abandoned houses, and we got held up for three days at a gas station. We kept having to switch vehicles for fuel; the gas pumps won’t work with the power down.”

“We’ve got good generators here,” supplied Kevin, “so it won’t be a problem, at least not for awhile.”

“Good weapons too, I bet,” added Gretchen. “We just have a couple of hunting rifles we took from a farmhouse... although your cousin showed me how to make a Molotov cocktail. That’s how we finally escaped the gas station; we were surrounded! Pretty impressive, for a music teacher.” She grinned at Brian, who didn’t quite meet her eyes as he flashed a quick smile back. He cast a furtive glance at Kevin, who stared back at him in confusion. Why had he lied to Gretchen about his occupation?

“You’re a music teacher?” Nick spoke up. “Rock on, man. We need another music lover up in here. Riley gets annoyed by my singing.” He stuck his tongue out at Riley, who rolled her eyes in response, grinning the whole time.

Brian chuckled, but the sound seemed forced. “Yeah? You work in music, too?”

“No... not really. I don’t really... work,” Nick replied awkwardly. “I mean, I’m sorta... between jobs. Or I was, at least, before all this shit went down. Guess it doesn’t matter now, does it? Money’s worthless.”

“Fine with me,” AJ chimed in. “Doesn’t matter now what class anyone is – or was, I should say. We’re all equals now – no one’s better than anyone else just because they’ve got more money.” Kevin noticed that his gloating smile seemed directed mostly at Howie, who looked disgruntled.

“So what did everyone else do, before last Friday?”

“Infernal Friday, I’ve been calling it in my head,” interjected Riley. “The day the world went to Hell. I was gonna use it in my news report – you know, play up the

drama. As if the situation needed to be any more dramatic.” She rolled her eyes at herself, her cheeks flushing.

“Infernal Friday... I like that,” said Gretchen, offering a grim smile. “So you’re a reporter?”

“I was.” Riley put on her news anchor voice. “This is Riley Blake, for Channel Three News...”

AJ smirked. “I’ve seen you on TV.”

“Me too,” added Kevin, as a sudden realization dawned. He hadn’t recognized Riley without her makeup and hair done, but now he remembered her as the reporter who had toured the base just a couple of weeks earlier for a report on the new jet prototypes being tested at MacDill. “You interviewed me.”

Riley smiled. “That’s right. Small world, huh?”

“I’d say so.”

“So what do you do, Gretchen?”

“I’m a teacher. Third grade,” added Gretchen, and there was a sadness in her voice. Kevin thought of all the military children who had died on the base, and of Brian’s daughters.

Then Howie said, “That’s the grade my son was in. He was nine.”

Everyone looked at him. To Kevin, it looked as if they were all as surprised as he was. Only Kayleigh did not react. No one else, it seemed, had known that Howie was a father. He had never mentioned having a child. They noticed his use of past tense, though, and for a few seconds, no one spoke, for no one knew what to say.

It was Brian who broke the silence. “My twin girls were seven. First grade.”

Howie met his gaze with sympathy. “What were their names?” he asked quietly.

“Bonnie and Brooke.” Brian’s voice was shaky. “How about your son?”

“Bartholomew. We called him Bart, or Barty, for short. I was supposed to have him for the weekend, but...” Howie trailed off, shaking his head. Then he cleared his throat. “In any case,” he went on briskly, changing the subject, “I’m the CEO of a major corporation, Dorough International, which owns and manages over a hundred hotels worldwide.”

“Hm... too bad. It looks like this zombie crisis is really gonna put a damper on travel and tourism,” remarked AJ in mock seriousness. “You might have to lower your room rates... or at least bump up the amenities. Personally, I always thought the continental breakfast could be a lot better, don’t you?”

“Would you like to tell the others what it is *you* do?” snapped Howie. “Or should I say, *don’t* do?”

“Sure.” AJ’s tone was as cool as Howie’s was hot. “I don’t drink anymore. I don’t do drugs anymore. Before Howard here was hospitable enough to offer me a ride in his Lexus, I was an unemployed, starving artist in rehab. So there you have it: I’m a loser. Make you feel better about your own life?”

Howard scowled. AJ smirked. Nick spoke up, “Actually... yeah – it does me. Good to know I’m not the only loser in the bunch. Like I said, I was unemployed. I wanted to be an actor, but all I ended up doing was waiting tables in Hollywood for eight years, before I gave up and moved back here to live with my parents. Look up ‘loser’ in the dictionary, and you’ll see my picture.” He smiled good-naturedly, but Kevin could see the sting in his eyes.

“At least you followed your dreams,” put in Jo, smiling at Nick. “It’s just so hard to make ends meet in this economy, especially in a field as fickle as entertainment. There’s no shame in working as a waiter.”

“Thanks.” Nick looked pleased. “So what do you do, Jo?”

“I’m an ER nurse. You don’t remember, do you?”

“Huh?” Nick blinked, taken by surprise. “Me?”

Jo smiled patiently. “Speaking of it being a small world... I treated your head wound last week, Mr. Carter.”

Everyone looked at Nick, who appeared bewildered. “You did? I don’t remember...”

“Short-term memory loss is a common side effect of a head injury like yours. You were in and out of consciousness for several days; I’m not surprised you don’t remember,” Jo explained.

“Sorry,” said Nick. “I remember getting into it with some douchebag frat boy-” Kayleigh suddenly looked up. “-and then I blacked out, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up in a deserted hospital.”

“Very *28 Days Later*,” AJ put in.

Gabby shuddered. “Ooh, that movie was scary! Do you think that’s what caused this? Like, something like the pure rage virus in that movie?”

“I haven’t seen the movie... and I’m not sure you should have seen it either,” said Jo, frowning at her daughter, “but it was definitely some sort of virus, spread through the air...”

“The Osiris Virus.” Kayleigh spoke out of the blue. All of them turned to look at her. Blushing, she elaborated, “After Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld. He was brought back from the dead.”

“It’s a cool name,” said AJ, with a nod in Kayleigh’s direction.

Kayleigh actually smiled, still looking a little embarrassed. “I... I’m a history major at UCF; I’ve studied ancient Egypt,” she explained. “I just thought it would be a good name for... you know... the virus.”

“It does have a ring,” Gretchen agreed, with an awkward chuckle. “There’s probably some official sciencey name for it, but that works for me.”

“Well,” Jo spoke again, “whatever it’s called, this virus – the Osiris Virus – was definitely airborne. All of the patients at the hospital died of it, even the ones who were admitted for other reasons. All of them, except... you.” She looked directly at Nick, still frowning. “I... I’m ashamed to say I left you for dead, Nick. I wonder why you didn’t get it. Or why I didn’t.”

“Why any of us didn’t,” Kevin spoke up. “It was the same way at the base. You know,” he added, to Jo. “Everyone without a gas mask died within a day, except for me. Why didn’t I get sick when I took my mask off?”

“I dunno why I didn’t get it either,” said AJ. “Everyone else at the rehab center had already kicked the bucket when I decided to bounce.”

“It was the same way at the college,” added Howie, and Kayleigh nodded solemnly.

“Maybe it’s something in our genes,” Gabby suggested, her brown eyes lighting up with this apparent revelation. “You know, like, our DNA! Think about it – my mom and me are both fine, and so are Kevin and Brian, and they’re related!”

Howie raised his eyebrows, looking impressed with the thirteen-year-old. “She could be on to something. Maybe we all have an inherited resistance, an immunity.”

“If it’s inherited, how do you explain our whole families dying?” asked Riley. “My dad, my brothers... all dead. How could I be the only one in my family with some kind of genetic resistance?”

Howie's paused, pressing his lips into a thin line. "Not everything gets passed on," he answered finally.

They were quiet for a moment, all of them deep in thought. Then Gretchen said, "Shawn would have answers. My husband. He works for the CDC in Atlanta. He was sent up to Maryland to study the virus after the first outbreak. I haven't heard from him since Saturday, though... the cell phones are out of service. Hey!" Her eyes widened suddenly, as she looked at Kevin. "You don't have a way to contact Fort Detrick, do you? He might still be there, at USAMRIID."

"Sorry," said Kevin. "The only means of communication we've got here is radio. I've been broadcasting over an AM frequency – that's how most of the others knew to come here – but I don't think the signal is strong enough to reach all the way up to Maryland."

"Oh." Gretchen sighed. "Oh well... He's probably already left there, anyway. We should keep broadcasting. Maybe when he gets far enough south, he'll hear the message and come here."

If he's still alive, thought Kevin grimly, but of course, he didn't say it. He caught a look from Brian that told him his cousin had been thinking the same thing. "We'll keep broadcasting," he assured her. "If there are ten of us, there may be more. And in the meantime, we'll need to secure the base, and get rid of all the zombies. It'll be easier, now that we have more numbers."

"It will be nice to get out of this church," said Jo, and Riley nodded in agreement, with a sour look towards Kayleigh. "For today, though, we should rest. You two have had a long trip," Jo added, to Brian and Gretchen. "We're so glad to have you here."

"Thank God," Kevin agreed, slinging his arm around Brian's shoulders. He felt Brian stiffen and gave his cousin a searching look.

Gretchen smiled and replied, "We're so glad to finally be here, too." But Brian just nodded once and said nothing, avoiding Kevin's questioning eyes.

PART V: IN SANCTUM

Chapter 51

It's a relief to be with a group of people again. All those days, when it was just Brian and me, I couldn't help but wonder if that was it. If we were it. The last man and woman alive, like in that old Vincent Price movie, "The Last Man on

Earth.” (I think there’s one called “The Last Woman on Earth,” too. Not sure if they’re related.) It sounded silly even then, but a week without seeing any other live human beings will make you wonder.

We still don’t know for sure if there are any others outside our little group, but at least we have each other. We each have our roles here. Kevin is the leader and sort of a father figure, or a big brother, to everyone. He’s not much older than most of us, but he has this commanding presence that makes you look up to him, respect him, trust him. I guess it’s because he was in the Air Force. He knows what he’s doing. He knows this place.

Jo is like the mother, then. Not just because she’s the oldest woman, but because she’s a natural caretaker. She tries to keep us organized, keep us calm. She’s a comfort to have around, especially for Gabby, but all of us appreciate her.

Howie would like to be second in command, but really, I think that’s AJ. He’s the tough guy; he and Kevin work well together, even though they have totally different personalities. Maybe that’s why Howie and Kevin are always at each other’s throats – they’re too alike, too used to being in charge. AJ doesn’t want to boss anyone else around; he just wants to do his own thing, and Kevin lets him.

Nick pretty much goes wherever he’s needed and does what he’s asked. He and Riley are newer to the group, like Brian and me, so I guess we’re all still learning our place. The three of them are learning how to shoot and how to fight the zombies. I’ve been helping Jo, making sure we have food and water, cleaning up around the church. It’s not exciting work, but somebody’s got to do it.

Gabby will usually help us, especially if I’m the one who asks her – she gripes occasionally if her mom does, but then, she is a thirteen-year-old girl. I was the same way at that age. Kayleigh is worse. I know most of the others are annoyed with her. I try to be understanding; she’s just dealing with everything in her own way, like the rest of us, and not doing so well with it. She’s depressed. But it’s hard to accept someone just lying around while the rest of us do everything we can to keep the group safe. We’re all mourning the ones we lost, but if we don’t protect ourselves, we’ll end up just like them. I’m not sure Kayleigh would even mind.

I would, though. I get down sometimes, too, but I know I have to keep going, keep fighting. I have to survive for Shawn. I know he’s out there, looking for me... I just have to be alive when he finds me.

Monday, April 23, 2012

Week One

“Goodnight, everybody.”

“Goodnight, Kevin!”

“Goodnight, Gabby.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Gabby.”

“Goodnight, Riley!”

“Goodnight, Nick.”

“Goodnight, Spunky!”

“Woof!”

“Goodnight, Kayleigh.”

“Goodnight, Howie.”

“Goodnight, Brian!”

“Goodnight, Gretchen.”

“Goodnight, AJ!”

“Goodnight, John Boy!”

A round of laughter.

“Who’s John Boy??”

“Never mind, Gabby, you’re too young.”

“I don’t know who John Boy is either.”

“*The Waltons*, Kayleigh; he’s from *The Waltons*.”

“How come *she* gets to ask a question without being snapped at, but I don’t? That’s unfair!”

“You got an answer, didn’t you?”

“Enough, guys. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“Yes, Dad!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Goodnight, Kevin.”

“Goodnight, everybody.”

As silence fell upon the sanctuary, Gretchen lay awake on her pew, listening. She’d done a lot of listening over the last three days, much more than talking. It was a nice change, a perk of being around ten people instead of just Brian. With Brian, she’d talked more than usual just to pass the time, fill the silence. Now she was content to let the others make the conversation – and the decisions.

There were a lot of strong personalities in the group, she’d noticed. Brian’s cousin Kevin was the natural leader, as the oldest man, the military officer, and the one most familiar with the base. But she could tell that Howie, who had run his own company, was also someone who was used to being in charge and liked to micromanage. He and Kevin constantly butted heads, as they argued over decisions. Riley was another Type A personality, and though she’d been cordial ever since they’d arrived, Gretchen could sense she was not a woman to be crossed. And then there was AJ, who was not afraid to speak of his mind – or, it seemed, of anything else. It was he who had been volunteering to take on nighttime guard duty, in order to let Kevin oversee the day-to-day operations around the base.

With so many contenders vying for control, there was no need for the leadership of a teacher. Gretchen could manage a classroom, but she didn’t know the first thing about fortifying buildings or checking generators or making battle plans. In this setting, she was better off keeping her mouth shut and going along with the decisions of those who knew what they were doing. She didn’t yet know where she fit in this group, but she would find her niche, eventually.

Painfully, she rolled over so that she was facing the back of the pew, turned away from the others. It was hard to sleep in the sanctuary, almost as bad as it had been in the gas station. Her bruised ribs ached when she was lying down, and just the slightest movement in the wrong way was enough to cause stabbing pains so sharp, they took her breath away. The pews were padded, which made them preferable to the floor, but they were also narrow. The bigger of the guys chose to just crash in sleeping bags on the floor.

She could hear one of them tossing and turning now, the waterproof material of his sleeping bag rubbing together. Probably Nick – he was the most restless, constantly moving some part of his body. He reminded her of boys she’d had in

her class, the kind who took medicine for ADHD. Just like those kids, Nick was a clown, always making jokes or singing. But also, like them, he was sort of loveable, in his own way. He had a cute personality, and his goofy sense of humor did a lot to lighten the mood around the church. With the others so serious and brooding all the time, Nick – and his dog – were good for morale.

Just not good for my insomnia, thought Gretchen, rolling her eyes as she listened to him thumping around while he adjusted his position up on the altar. The sounds were another hard part of sleeping in the sanctuary. Gretchen normally liked the noises of night – the high-pitched symphony of crickets chirping, the low rumbling of motors as cars drove by, the gentle flutter of leaves as a calm summer breeze blew in through the open window, or the mournful howl of the wind whipping around outside on a blustery evening.

But here, those noises were absent. There were no crickets – or locusts or birds or any animals, for that matter. They all seemed to have disappeared when the dead rose, instinctively fleeing from something even they knew was unnatural, a threat. There were, of course, no cars, and no breeze, because they kept all the windows firmly shut and locked against the undead, despite the smothering heat. Inside the sanctuary, there were only human sounds – blankets rustling, bodies shifting; the snores of those sleeping lightly, mixed with the murmurs of those deep in dreams, and the whimpers and screams of those lost in nightmares.

Gabby, in particular, had had a rough time with the latter since Gretchen had been there. She put on a good front during the day, but Gretchen could tell the youngest among them was having a tougher time than she let on. At least she had her mother nearby, though Kevin seemed to have taken her under his wing as well.

In any case, Gretchen found it hard to get to sleep with the little sounds of nine other people taking the place of the usual white noise that soothed her. Even worse was the occasional, distant moan of the undead that still prowled the base, which caused the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end, her body crawling with goosebumps. Every time this happened, many of those who were still awake to hear it would sit upright, looking around, before settling back down, and then the tossing and turning would begin again. It was a wonder any of them slept, but eventually, they always did, awaking in the morning not quite refreshed, but still alive, at least.

On that night, it was raining, just the kind of summer thunderstorm Gretchen loved. The light spatter of raindrops on the sloped rooftop and down the stained glass window was a lonely sound, but in a way, it comforted her. She pressed her cheek up against the smooth, stained wood pew back, savoring its relative coolness, and drifted to sleep.

A guttural shout awoke her.

“WAKE UP! C’MON, WAKE UP NOW!”

Gretchen struggled to sit up, her ribs twinging. Spunky was barking, her sharp yelps interrupted only by low growls. Gretchen had never heard the sweet golden retriever sound so menacing. She blinked, looking around for the dog, her vision taking in only blurred shapes in the dim light. She reached for her glasses. The sanctuary was still shadowy, lit by only a single, flickering altar candle, but squinting through the darkness, she could make out a hunched figure running up the aisle.

She recognized AJ by voice, rather than shape. *“Fucking wake up!”* he hissed. *“There’s-”*

The stained glass window exploded.

Gasping, Gretchen rolled off her pew and fell to her knees, shielding herself behind the pew in front of her, as shards of colored glass flew like shrapnel, raining down upon the altar. The colossal crash was enough to wake the others; she heard shouts and screams at the front of the sanctuary. But when she raised her head over the back of the pew, it wasn’t just the other survivors she saw stirring.

More figures were shuffling in through the shattered panes of the floor-to-ceiling window. Gretchen saw their contorted bodies silhouetted in the candlelight, heard their ravenous moans, and knew this was it. Their sanctuary had been invaded. They were done for.

“LET’S GO!” bellowed AJ. Gretchen’s pew was near the back, and he reached her first. Grabbing her arm, he jerked her up roughly and shoved her into the aisle. “RUN, GO!”

Gretchen ran. She heard footsteps behind her and put on a fresh burst of speed, afraid to look back, unsure if her pursuer was man or monster. She slammed into the sanctuary doors, forcing them open, and darted into the foyer. There she hesitated, torn between the open door to the outside and the large multipurpose room across the hall.

“In there!” shouted a deep voice behind her, and Gretchen turned to see Kevin pointing to the multipurpose room. He was already armed with his gun. She jumped reflexively as she heard a round of gunfire from inside the sanctuary, drowning out the moans and the screams. Before she could react, Kevin had already run back in, and the sound of his rifle joined that of its brother.

Gretchen raced across the hall and pulled open one of the double doors to the multipurpose room. Before she could get inside, a small figure ducked under her arm and scurried in first, towing a larger figure behind her – Gabby and her mother, Jo. Gretchen wanted to follow them in and lock the door behind her, but

instead, she stood at the threshold, holding it open for more survivors. She was prepared to slam it shut at the first glimpse of a zombie.

Howie came running out next, Kayleigh on his heels. “Where are the others?” Gretchen asked them frantically, as Howie doubled over, panting, and Kayleigh collapsed like a gelatinous blob on the floor, sobbing. “Are they coming?”

“They’re shooting,” Howie offered pointlessly, as another round of fire rang out from the sanctuary.

Gretchen took a headcount in the darkness. They were missing five – half the group. Kevin... Brian... AJ... Nick... Riley. Were they all fighting zombies, she wondered, or had some of them been hurt?

“We should round up some materials to barricade the door,” said Howie, flipping on the lights. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling buzzed as they gradually brightened, powered by the generators. He pointed across the room, and as her eyes adjusted, Gretchen saw a set of round tables that had been pushed up against one wall, half of them turned upside down on top of the others. Neat stacks of chairs lined the adjacent wall.

“We can’t close it yet, not while our friends are still out there,” Jo protested. Gretchen and Gabby nodded their agreement. Kayleigh just sobbed.

“I just meant we should get ready, drag some of those tables over,” Howie explained.

“Good idea,” said Gretchen. “Someone needs to keep watch at the door.”

“I will,” Howie volunteered at once.

As she retreated from the door to let him take her place, Gretchen couldn’t help but roll her eyes. He had to be the strongest in the room, physically, yet he was happy to let the three women and a little girl do all the moving and lifting while he stood in the doorway and watched. That bothered her, but then, maybe he thought he was being noble by putting himself in closest proximity to the zombies. If they did break through the sanctuary, they’d get him first. A wry smile crossed her lips as she followed Jo and Gabby across the room to start pulling down tables.

“Hey Kayleigh, could you come help, please?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light, as she struggled to tip one of the tables without dropping it on her feet. They were bulky, hard to maneuver.

Reluctantly, Kayleigh dragged herself off the floor. She helped Gretchen wrangle down the overturned table, while Jo and Gabby slid another one over to Howie. “Once we close the door, we’ll stack these on top of each other, just like they were

over there, and we'll pile chairs on top of the upside down table, to add some weight," Howie said. "Even if they manage to break down the door, they'll still have quite a barrier to get over – they're not too coordinated, are they? And the clatter it'll make will be enough to alert us."

Gretchen nodded. "Sounds good." Some of her annoyance with him subsided; what he lacked in manpower, he made up for in logic, and she valued logical thinking.

She paused at the door to listen. Across the hall, the gunshots were becoming fewer and further between. That meant one of two possibilities: either they were running out of zombies to shoot, or running out of shooters to take down the zombies. She caught Howie's eye, and the look that passed between them told her he was wondering the same thing she was.

"I'm going to check on them," she blurted. The last thing she wanted to do was go back into that sanctuary, but she thought of Brian and the others, armed but outnumbered, and knew she could not just stand by and hope they made it out. There were more firearms in the foyer, for those on guard duty, and she snatched up one of the rifles, the kind of gun Kevin had trained her and Brian to shoot the day after they'd arrived. Checking quickly to make sure it was loaded and the safety turned off, she held it out in front of her as she crept towards the sanctuary.

The doors had fallen closed behind those who had escaped. Through the narrow glass panels inlaid in each of the doors, she could see movement, but it was too dark inside the sanctuary to tell what was going on. The solitary altar candle had been extinguished; the only glimmer of light came from the sliver of moon outside. It took all of Gretchen's courage to reach out, take hold of one of the door handles, and pull it open.

Catching the door with her foot, she pointed the gun straight ahead and squinted into the darkness...

"Don't shoot!"

The shock of hearing a voice right in front of her almost caused Gretchen to pull the trigger out of reflex. "Nick?! Jesus... you about gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry... it's okay now. I think we got them all." She heard Spunky whine and could just make out the retriever's shape circling Nick's legs.

"Found it!" Gretchen recognized Brian's voice, and a second later, a circle of light shone off to one side of the room. Brian's face appeared like an apparition, floating in the golden ring of light made by the flashlight he held below his chin.

“Quit goofing off and give us some light,” snapped Kevin. “Let’s make sure before we let our guard down.”

Brian quickly obliged, shining the flashlight in a slow circle around the sanctuary. As Gretchen’s eyes adjusted, they made out the forms of Kevin, AJ, and Riley, standing in various spots around the sanctuary, their weapons still in hand. In the faint light, they were able to find the other flashlights, and soon five more halos of light joined Brian’s. Kevin found the wall switch for the overhead lights, and as they came up slowly, the six of them circled the sanctuary, flashlights in one hand, guns in the other, checking and double-checking corners and rows for any undead stragglers. Spunky walked in front of Nick with her nose to the floor, sniffing everything. She growled, still unsettled, but did not bark.

When, at last, they determined that the sanctuary was clear, Kevin said, “We need to move all of our stuff into the multipurpose room, quickly. Just because we’ve taken out the first wave doesn’t mean there won’t be more. The noise may have attracted them. It’s not safe.”

Gretchen followed his eyes to what had once been the spectacular stained glass window behind the altar. Now it was merely a gap in the wall that ran from floor to ceiling, only a few jagged panes of glass still dangling from the top of the window frame. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to repair, and she wondered vaguely why no one had recognized this as a potential problem before.

“I’ll go get the others,” she said. “It’ll go faster if we all help.”

She walked back across the hall to the multipurpose room. “It’s just me,” she announced. “It looks like everyone is okay – and they killed all the zombies... for now. There may be more, though, so we’re going to move everything from the sanctuary into here. It’s not safe to stay there anymore, with the window broken.”

Jo joined her at once to help with the transfer of supplies, and Gabby followed. Warily, Howie and Kayleigh joined them at last. It didn’t take long for the ten of them to gather up all of their blankets and sleeping bags, clothing, flashlights and candles, and weapons and carry them into the multipurpose room.

“Now we just need to block off the sanctuary,” said Kevin. “We can’t risk them getting in again while we sleep. Jo, would you show a couple of guys where we left the extra lumber we used to board up the windows and doors? If it’s not enough, we’ll have to rip out some of the pews and use that wood.”

“Sure.” AJ and Brian went with Jo and returned a few minutes later with armloads of wooden boards. Meanwhile, Kevin had found the supply of nails, along with a couple of hammers. He and Brian set to work nailing boards across the sanctuary’s closed doors. They worked quickly, hardly speaking. AJ carried

his gun back to the entryway of the church and sat just inside the doorway, out of the rain.

Inside the multipurpose room, Gretchen and Jo sat down to reorganize their pile of supplies, while Riley, Kayleigh, and Howie spread out their bedding on the floor. Gretchen suddenly heard Riley ask, “Nick, what’s wrong?” She turned to look in Nick’s direction. He was sitting apart from the others, holding his arm. Spunky lay next to him, her head in his lap.

Gretchen was immediately concerned, too, as it wasn’t like Nick to be so quiet and removed from the action. “Are you okay?” she asked, joining Riley at his side. “What happened to your arm?”

“Oh, it’s... it’s nothing. Just a little cut.”

Hearing the word “cut,” Jo came over immediately and knelt down on his other side. “Let me see,” she pried gently, and with some reluctance, he lifted his hand.

Jo kept a composed face, but Gretchen gasped aloud at the “little cut” that appeared when Nick pulled back his bloody hand. The “little cut” was actually a deep gash in his forearm, and without his hand to cover it, it bled freely. Jo nudged Riley and her aside and moved in front of Nick, looking him full-on in the face. “Nick... were you bitten?” she asked, her voice hushed and grave. It was the kind of voice used just outside the room of someone who was deathly ill, and it sent chills down Gretchen’s spine. She exchanged a glance with Riley, who looked paler than usual under the fluorescent lighting. From Jo’s reaction, they could both infer what happened to those who were bitten by the undead.

“No,” answered Nick, and Gretchen felt herself sag with relief. “It’s just from the glass, I think. I was sleeping on the altar; I got friggin’ showered with it.”

“Are you sure?”

Nick’s expression twisted with annoyance. “Of course I’m sure; I’d know if a fucking zombie bit my arm!”

“Alright...” Jo held up her hands in defense. “I’m just making sure.”

“It’s all good.” But it wasn’t all good, not for Nick, at least. Further examination revealed other cuts, tears and dark circles on his t-shirt, where the wounds had bled through. His arms were the worst, for apparently he had awoken in the midst of the crash and raised his arms to shield his face, but there were even bits of glass in his hair.

“Take off your shirt,” advised Jo. “And Gretchen, I’m going to need some tweezers and something to disinfect them with, if you can find it.”

Gretchen rummaged through the hodgepodge of gear that had been moved from the other room and dumped into a heap, but she couldn't find anything resembling medical supplies. She went into the foyer to ask Kevin. "Do you know if there's a first aid kit or anything around here?"

"Try the kitchen."

Carrying a flashlight, Gretchen searched the kitchen and eventually found an old first aid kit in one of the cabinets. She carried the whole box back to the multipurpose room and sat down next to Jo to pick through it. "Not much here," she observed, frowning. "There's a few antiseptic wipes, but no rubbing alcohol or anything. And no tweezers."

"I should have a pair of tweezers in my purse." Jo raised her voice and called, "Gabrielle? Bring my purse over here, please!" To Gretchen, she added, "Save the antiseptic wipes; I can use a lighter to sterilize them."

"You're so prepared," smiled Gretchen, as Gabby came over with her purse and one of the candle lighters. "Comes with the territory of being a nurse, huh? Like how I almost always have Kleenex and Band-aids with me, for little snotty noses and picked scabs."

Jo returned her smile as she opened up her large handbag. "That, and just being a mom. You learn to have things on hand when you have your own little scabby, snotty-nosed angels running around."

Gretchen forced herself to chuckle, but she felt a twinge deep down inside her, in a place that was hollow and empty. Inconspicuously, she put her hand on her stomach.

Jo found the tweezers, and Gretchen held the lighter while she sterilized their tips in the hot flame. Riley held Nick's hand as Jo set to work picking out the shards of glass, one by one. Gretchen had to turn away, though she cringed every time she heard one of the tiny glass pieces plinking into the bowl they had set out. Even Howie looked pale, as he watched from a distance.

Kayleigh was already curled in the fetal position on her blanket in a corner of the room, her back to everyone else. After awhile, Gretchen thought she had managed to drift back to sleep, but she had not. When at last Jo had cleaned and dressed Nick's cuts, and the cousins had finished boarding up the sanctuary doors, Kayleigh surprised everyone by sitting up and asking in a small voice, "Do you mind if we all sleep together tonight?"

They all looked at her. "We *are* together," said Riley none-too-kindly, casting an obvious look around the big, open room.

“No, I meant... never mind.” Kayleigh closed her mouth, drew her knees up to her chest, and folded her arms around them. She buried her face in them like a small child, humiliated.

Nick shot Riley a look and then rolled his eyes in Kayleigh’s direction. But his tone was patient and polite when he asked, “No, go on, Kayleigh. You meant, like, sleep close together, instead of spread out like we had been?”

Kayleigh nodded without lifting her head. She was such a drama queen, like some of the nine-year-old girls Gretchen had taught. It was hard to feel sorry for her when she started acting like that, but nonetheless, most of the others liked the idea. They all felt a little shaken, after waking up to an ambush by the undead. Even Howie, at odds with so many, dragged his blanket over to the rest of the group.

AJ remained outside, insisting that he was still up for overnight guard duty alone, but the rest of them lay down in a sort of square, five going lengthwise, the other four stretched out sideways in two rows at their heads, with Spunky curled at Nick’s feet. Gretchen felt like a gingerbread cookie on a sheet. The closeness made the human sounds she usually hated that much louder, but on that night, they brought her comfort.

She fell asleep to Nick’s snores and did not awake to Gabby’s screams. The rest of the night was quiet.

Chapter 52

Prepare them for anything and everything. Be sure to think of every eventuality, and get them ready. Make the choices you believe in, no matter how hard they are. That’s the job of a leader who’s supposed to ready his troops. It’s a hard responsibility, one not to take lightly. You are often hated for it. People get angry and disagree, but in the end, it’s like being a parent. The same principles apply.

You do what’s best for everyone; you deal with any negativity that comes your way. Your “children” may hate you, but in the end, it’s worth it if they’re safe. In my case, it’s for the best if we’re all able to stay alive. I choose certain people to defend, others to hold down the homestead, so to speak, and set the roles. It’s not a job I enjoy, but it’s basic survival tactics that I believe will keep us alive.

I do what I have to.

And you know, there’s a spirit rising within us now. A defiant one that wants to stay alive. We all know the odds are slim, and yet the human spirit is screaming

for us to fight the inevitable. At first, we were all scared and unsure of what was to come. Now, we know what our lives may be and how short they can be.

But at least we'll go down fighting.

Tuesday, April 24, 2012

Week One

He could see the darkened sky, flashes of lightning striking far in the distance, followed by rumbles of thunder booming ominously. It was raining hard, as he stood in the doorway of the church. The pitter-pattering upon the church roof simply reminded him that nothing was ever for sure these days, not even a simple plan. Another one of the spring showers was hampering what he'd planned to have been a simple run of the base, to make sure others knew the layout. Howie, of course, knew, but he no longer trusted Howie's leadership skills, like he had in the beginning. AJ knew, of course, but Kevin wanted to make sure he'd thought of everything.

Just in case. Those were the three words that had morphed into almost a prayer within the last nine days.

He'd already made one mistake, one that had almost gotten them all killed. He had thought the creatures wouldn't stumble upon them somehow. Yet a simple damn window, which was, in truth, a gigantic flaw in their shelter, had almost cost them their lives. And while there was no intelligence within the rotting minds of zombies, there was a sense of instinct, primal and primitive. That instinct would lead them to food, every time. Just like any other creature of the wild – this was what they were, in a sense, no matter how unnatural they were as well.

The rain blew in through the shattered, stained-glass window, now nothing more than a gigantic, gaping hole above the altar. Everyone was in the back rooms, except himself. Kevin stood in the doorway, debating whether or not he should still take Nick, Brian, Riley, and even Nick's dog, Spunky, out on a familiarity run of the base in this weather. AJ was to stay behind and guard the church, as he already knew the setup of the base. He'd learned in better conditions than the small group that Kevin was still debating even taking out. It would be unpleasant, and the last thing any of them needed was the thought of getting sick. But on the flip side of the coin, it would also be good to go out in these conditions because, as last night had proved, they would not always be the ones setting the battle conditions.

“It's raining.”

He felt himself smirk at his younger cousin as he stepped up beside Kevin. “No shit, Sherlock.” He paused, remembering how Brian used to feel about language. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Shit happens.”

Kevin raised a brow at him, confused as ever at the way Brian had been acting the past couple days. It made no sense to him; it was like the person he’d known had been twisted and warped into someone else entirely. It made him concerned. It made him wonder if Brian would be suicidal, if not for his religious beliefs. Beliefs he seemed to be keeping hidden for the moment.

The thoughts were too unsettling.

“What?” Brian finally asked, when he noticed the way it got the older man lost in thought.

Kevin turned to him, staring into the steely blue eyes that were haunted by death. “You’re asking *me* ‘what?’ I should be asking you that.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anyways, so go ahead and ask.”

“Brian-” Although Kevin had always had several inches of height on his younger cousin, suddenly the cold stare coming from Brian made him feel like he was six inches tall rather than six feet. It was a look that didn’t seem right, coming from the once always at peace man. Brian brushed past him, turning back only for a moment’s pause.

“Leave it alone, Kevin, and don’t say anything. I’m going to go get the weapons.”

“Weapons?”

“Yeah, we’re going out and around today, aren’t we?”

Question answered. “Yeah, we are.”

“It’s raining, Kevin.”

“Duh, Nick. You’re so observant...” Two bodies stepped up beside him. He knew simply from the voices who they belonged to. He turned to see the Riley and Nick behind him, staring outside with the same looks of interest.

“Hey, not everyone is like you and loves playing in the rain.”

“We’re still going out in it,” he informed them, and they went silent, watching the lightning blaze angrily across the sky.

All were was strapped with weapons and ammunition, ready to go. Of the three, the storm was making two of them hesitate. Kevin and Nick, to be specific. Riley looked happy, content even, at the idea of hunting in the rain. Brian looked like he wouldn't care even if it was raining fire from the heavens, as he came back with weapons of his own. His determination to go out and kill the creatures was clearly set into his expression, his stance, his presence. Spunky's excited barks brought them all back to attention.

"I know the weather isn't pleasant, but we're not always going to be able to pick our battles, and we need to make sure as many people as possible know the layout of the base."

"Plan on dying anytime soon, Kevin?" Brian said, as he adjusted his weapon over his shoulder.

"You never know these days. So here's how we'll do it. We're going to take Brian's truck; Nick and Riley, I want you sitting out in the bed. You'll be sniping and luring out any that may be around. We need to get this place cleared out as soon as we can. I want you to be as accustomed to the layout as possible; we can clear out some marks and get you more comfortable with the place."

Riley grinned, as she watched the rain fall earnestly. "Sounds good to me."

"Wait, hold up."

Nick pouted, as he hurried back to grab one of the few jackets amongst them. Kevin had no idea who had brought it, but wished they'd brought more. It was just yet another thing to be added to the list of *"Things I Should Have Thought Of,"* at the top of which, highlighted in red, was the now-shattered, stained-glass church window. He nodded when Nick returned, tossing their only poncho to Riley, who gave him a look.

"And what are you gonna wear?"

"I'm fine."

"Look, Nick, I-"

"No, really, just humor me and put it on." Her eyes narrowed, but she put it on accordingly. Nick, he noticed, only had a t-shirt. She didn't make any more sarcastic remarks, which Kevin had learned was a specialty of hers. She simply gave Nick a soft smile that surprised Kevin.

"Alright, let's go."

Soon, the three, as predicted, were soaked with the pouring rain. Riley and Nick hopped into the back of the truck, guns at the ready. They were soon

accompanied by Nick's most faithful companion, as the retriever settled beside her master. The two sat with their backs against each other, shooting glances between them, while Kevin and Brian got into the cab.

"We're gonna get drenched."

"Relax, Nick, no worries; you're not going to melt. According to Kayleigh, I'm the witch, so it should be me who won't survive getting wet."

"Well then, see, you need the poncho."

"Woof! Woof!"

Kevin chuckled to himself, as he watched the two laughing in his rearview mirror. It seemed at least some were going to be able to find something within the ruins of the earth that had become Hell. Brian refused to look at him directly. He shut the door to the truck roughly, and Kevin started the engine.

"I know why you did this."

"So we can lure out zombies." He shifted the truck into gear and began to drive. "And so I can show you where everything is."

Brian rolled his eyes, as he put down his window and began to load one of his handguns. "Are you kidding me? I know you better than that."

"Fine, we'll just not talk, then."

An uneasy silence settled between the two while Kevin drove. He continued to drive, as shots rang out in the air. His eyes shifted upwards to glimpse a horde of zombies that had gotten a whiff of the two blondes in back. Two by two, they fell, giving Kevin a small smile of confidence in the two he had chosen to bring with them. He looked at Brian, waiting for him to elaborate, the way he knew he wanted to. Finally, the former minister took a deep breath, readying himself to respond.

"You want to know why I didn't tell Gretchen the truth. That's why you decided to do this. Hunt zombies and weasel the truth out of me. Two birds, one stone. Look, we grew up together, only a couple houses from each other. Don't think I don't know how you work."

"So just talk to me, man. Make things easier."

"Nothing's going to make things easier. Nothing. But fine, you want to know why I lied? Here, I'll lay it out for you."

Kevin kept the vehicle at a steady speed, slowed to make sure the zombies would be within range of Nick and Riley, who, with the occasional glance back at the bed of the truck, he assured were still doing alright. “Enlighten me.”

“Because there is no God, as far as I’m concerned. So I’m not a pastor, a man of God, or whatever. I’m not. Not anymore. So I told her the truth, from *my* point of view. And if there *is* a God, then he’s no savior of mine to take everything away and leave me trapped in this hell on earth. Think about it, Kevin: if there’s a Hell, what the hell is this that we’re dealing with now?”

This blatant confession almost shocked the older man enough to finally stop the truck. He stared at Brian, while keeping track of where they were going. He hardly recognized the man before him. They’d always been family, but they’d also been friends, despite their different paths in life. This was a version of Brian unlike anything he’d ever seen. If there had been one thing that was consistent about Brian, it had always been his resilient and steady beliefs in God.

For the first time in ages, Kevin Richardson was left completely speechless.

“That’s what I thought. Now that we’ve got that out of the way, you can show us the vitals around the base now, like you planned to do.”

“Fine.”

“Wait, you know what? Pull over. I want to switch with Riley or Nick.” Waiting till after Kevin stopped the truck, Brian hopped out quickly. He ran around to the bed, and Kevin could see him chatting with Riley and Nick.

The young woman shook her head, as she reloaded her gun. Nick, however, looked almost ecstatic. He saw Spunky trot over to the other side of the back, barking menacingly at any undead she sensed. Within mere moments, Nick leaped out, as Brian climbed in. Nick headed to the passenger door, quickly scrambling in. After giving a smile, Nick shook his head a bit to dry out his shaggy, golden hair. The action reminded Kevin of Spunky and made him notice that the loyal canine reflected Nick’s personality quite accurately.

“Hey, glad to finally be out of that rain. Man, I don’t get why she loves getting drenched so much.” He grinned, as Kevin started up the car once more, before the trailing horde of zombies caught up. Nick looked content, despite his constant glances to the back to, assumedly, check on Riley. He shivered a bit, rolled up the window, and glanced at Kevin.

“So where are we heading?”

“We need some more clothing. We don’t have enough for everyone, at least not without being able to wash it. We’re going to hit up the military clothing store.

Then, on the way back, I'm going to make sure you guys take note of the important spots."

"Alright. Hey, are you okay?" Nick asked. His tone was sincere, and the look on his boyish face was one of concern, as he wrapped his arms around himself, shivering.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just..."

"Family drama."

"Maybe, and maybe I should've waited on this. You're freezing."

Nick shook his head, waving the thought off. "I'm fine. There was only one poncho, and so..."

"It was good of you to do."

Nick simply shrugged. Kevin made a turn, one that would take them longer to get to the destination he had in mind, but one that was needed.

"See the houses we're passing? That's part of the goal. If we can clear this place enough..."

"We can break up into smaller groups, and the groups each share a house?"

"Yes. I can see if I can fix the generators so that they only wire to those three houses in the neighborhood. I don't want anyone living alone, just in case. But the church isn't going to last forever."

Nick nodded. "No, it's not. Last night..." He ran his hand along his arm, crisscrossed by so many cuts that would turn into scars and forever remind him of the night before. "It freaked me out, man.

"You're not alone in that, Nick," Kevin said, reaching over to place a hand on his shoulder. He felt bad, responsible for everyone who'd come to the base. He wondered if everyone felt they had to be strong because of the bravado he, himself, was putting up. Kevin was just as terrified of the horrors as the rest of them, but lacked the luxury of showing it. Someone had to lead; someone had to hold up a strengthened front. It wasn't easy, but it was something Kevin had long ago learned how to do. So he did.

"I know, but I don't want to freak out any of the girls by saying it. So don't say anything for me. It's just, I don't know, I felt like nothing could touch us in there."

“I know. I think we all did.” He opened his mouth to say more, but shut it once more, as they finally pulled to a stop once again. Two major buildings would be seen within their view. One was considerably bigger than the other, although quite plain in its appearance. The one beside it looked more like a warehouse, and that was where Kevin was pointing after the two men got out of the truck. Behind them, Brian and Riley fired a few more shots, and the remaining, straggling zombies were taken down. The rain continued to fall, as Riley jumped down to the ground and threw the hood of her poncho back.

“Now this is the way to spend a day, Kevin.” She did a slight spin. She seemed to be relishing the weather. Brian soon followed, as Nick went to let Spunky out as well. She barked happily, and Kevin knew that the dog would be their first warning sign. He wasn’t sure how, but she seemed able to sense the zombies sooner than they could.

“So this is the military clothing store. It’s not much, but the mall...” He pointed to the other building. “... has too many opportunities for the undead to be in there, for what we need. We need to grab some clothes for everyone...”

Nick chuckled. “Cause, otherwise, we’ll be starting to get ripe soon. Right?”

Brian stood there, avoiding Kevin’s gaze. Kevin sighed. He felt like he didn’t know him at all anymore. In truth, he didn’t even know where to start in helping Brian. He only knew his cousin was scarred beyond anyone by whatever he’d seen since April 15, 2012, but he didn’t even know what exactly that was yet. Only that it was what had caused the most devout man he’d known to lose faith. He shivered despite himself, unnoticed by the others. In a time when he clung to his beliefs in a higher being, Brian had tossed them aside.

The fact scared him.

He forced himself to tune back in to the conversation being held by the other three. Well, more so Riley and Nick, while Brian kept an eye out for any visitors. “Well, we are in nature’s shower right now, Nick – strip down, run around, and you won’t smell ripe anymore.”

“You saying I smell?”

“No, you did. But since you did, yeah, you totally do.”

“You love my smell.”

“Who says I love your smell, Nick? You’re starting to get delusional. Not even the rain can knock some sense into you.”

“You love it. Love it-love it-love it!”

“As soon as I find some soap, I’ll do us all a favor and superglue it to your hand,” she teased, as she slapped her hand into his playfully.

“What, you want me to wash you, Riley? I ain’t that kind of freak now...” He was clearly teasing, yet still caused her to blush amidst her laughter and pull away.

“Keep dreaming, Hollywood,” she retorted with a cheeky grin.

Even Kevin chuckled at the banter. “Come on, let’s go inside and get some clothes together. I don’t think we should run into anything. In the last day, no one was worried about the stores. They were in the hospital wing, or... resting at home...”

“Reanimating in their beds,” Brian muttered with sour disgust, leading the way inside. Kevin glanced up at the overcast sky above, gave a silent prayer for his lost cousin, and walked in just behind him.

Chapter 53

I’m horrible in a crisis. Heh, I’m sure the others have said that by now in their journals. I’m sure they’ve complained all about me. Useless Kayleigh... I hear them muttering it a lot, when they think I can’t hear. Even I after I learned how to shoot cause of that damn psycho, Riley. That still wasn’t enough. Oh, no. They keep wanting me to be like this super zombie fighter, or lifter, or cooker.

I’m not!

I never chose to survive into this hellhole. I’m doing my best. They need to leave me alone. At least Howie understands. He defends me a lot when the others get upset with what I tell them, or my saying no.

I don’t know how to be what they’re asking of me. Before this, I expected to go to college, marry my dream boy, be loved and pampered, and have a few kids. That’s what I wanted out of life. It was simple, it was lovely, and it’s what I dreamed of above all.

It’s not my fault my dream got shattered, and I got thrown into this nightmare.

They say they all lost people. That’s true, but they’re not me. We all deal with loss differently, don’t we? I’m not going to be what they want me to be, and they need to learn to deal with it.

At least I’m not alone in being attacked. Howie is, too. Howie is on my side.

Better than being alone, I suppose.

Not that it helps me deal any better. It's still hard.

I still struggle.

Wednesday, May 2, 2012

Week Two

Kayleigh sat there, away from the others. She felt like such an outsider anymore. A wall had come between them. It was Howie and her versus everyone else. There had been a silent division amongst the group since the last time a fight had broken out. While everyone was making an effort to keep another from happening, the tension was clearly there and clearly felt. She could see everyone creating mini-cliques within their small “family,” as Gretchen said they should think of themselves. Family? No. She’d had her sorority sisters as family, and her real family, and lost them both. She had no family anymore.

It was a feeling she’d never experienced before, and to be quite honest, she didn’t like it one bit. She felt isolated, misunderstood, hated even. It didn’t matter whether it was true or not, though she believed it was. What mattered was how it affected her. It wasn’t helping her adjust; all it made her do was yearn for the world before. The world she had thrived on even with the war, the world that had shone upon her and promised her that life would always go her way. In the end, such a place didn’t exist anymore. It was almost like she’d lost yet another person she cared about – that was how it felt. An old friend she didn’t know existed, or something.

She glanced up when one of the several conversations caught her attention. She saw Howie and Kevin debating back and forth, not too far from where Riley, Nick, and Gabby were playing with Spunky together. And they got on her for not doing anything useful... well, playing with a dog wasn’t exactly useful, in her opinion. It was all the same, wasn’t it?

“Maybe if you listened to me, Kevin...”

“You never listen to anyone; what would you know about listening? I’ve listened, taken your suggestions into consideration, but I don’t agree that what you think we should do is best for the group, and you need to accept that.”

“I don’t see why you need to be-”

“Someone has to lead, and because of my military training, I know the most about survival in tough conditions.”

Howie was attempting to talk to Kevin, yet again, about his ideas for fortifying the church against the zombies and keeping it their stronghold. Kevin, it seemed, had other ideas; however, he hadn't disclosed them all to the group just yet. That annoyed Kayleigh just a bit because, in all honesty, they should know exactly what he thought the group should be doing. Also, she agreed with Howie: in the end, why should they leave the church when they could keep making it stronger?

"Kevin, look, why don't you just-

"Shut it, Howie – god, you'd get us all killed in about ten seconds flat, and that'd be on a good day for you. Let Kevin be – he, at least, can keep us alive, and he, ya know, actually *knows* what he's doing."

Kayleigh rolled her eyes as she glanced back at her least favorite person among them. "Did anyone ask you, Riley? No, didn't think so."

"No one asked the balding Barbie either, yet here we are."

She felt herself freeze the moment she heard the response. Her hand unconsciously touched the spot on her head where the zombie had yanked out the now lost chunk of hair. It was starting to grow back, slowly, but the patch still felt desperately exposed to her groping fingers. "Ugh! You're such a bitch! Just like you said. You know, I bet your family's glad they're undead; I know I would be if the other option was being related to you."

At that, the other woman almost lunged. Nick, having grabbed her arm, was actually what stopped her. "Enough. C'mon, Rye, you're better than that, picking fights and alla-that." She sat down once more, looking furious. He looked over in Kayleigh's direction; the look wasn't the friendly one he usually gave.

Like she cared what Nick thought?

Shockingly enough, Riley did, in fact, let it go and went back to playing with Gabby and Spunky. Jo watched with a small smile at her daughter, as she talked with Gretchen some feet away. Gretchen seemed okay, so far. Best out of *them*, not that that said much. Brian was next to her, but he really wasn't saying much. What words he did say, at the moment, seemed to be towards AJ.

"So you think he's still alive?" Jo was asking Gretchen, as they tried to tidy up the multipurpose room of the church a bit.

"I do. He was studying the virus under like a Hazmat suit, he said, so maybe he was protected. Maybe they were finding a way to fight it. I just hope he won't worry, 'cause when I left, I couldn't leave a note and didn't know where I was going. But he'll find me..."

Her gaze shifted back to Howie and Kevin, who were still going back and forth. So much so, they hadn't even noticed the other confrontation. Kevin sighed as he ran a hand through his hair. He looked tired. *See, if he let Howie help, he wouldn't be so tired*, Kayleigh mused.

"Alright, we need to start doing something. The sooner we get the base clear, the sooner we can make homes for ourselves. That's part of the problem; we're starting to get a form of cabin fever in here," Kevin spoke up, addressing the whole group now. "Nick, Kayleigh, and Brian, I want you guys to take the Hummer and do a base run, clearing out any spots you can. Jo, you and I will see if we can't try out guard duty of the church. AJ, I want you on sniper duty on the roof of the church, like we talked about."

AJ smirked as he stood and stretched. "Up on the rooftop, sniper-AJ Claus, I'm just never gonna pause... I've got my gun all ready to go, aim at those zombies and watch the heads blow..."

Brian raised a brow at him. "Random."

A simple shrug was the only reply.

Howie stared at Kevin, when it became obvious he wasn't getting an assignment yet again. "What about me? I *should* be-"

"He can go instead of me."

"I didn't ask you, Howie; I asked Kayleigh."

"What about Riley? Or Gretchen?"

Kevin rolled his eyes, while she smirked. That was what happened when you didn't explain the reasoning behind your decisions, and Kayleigh felt no real guilt for pestering or even trying to get out of her assigned duty. The others were giving her various versions of the same look of irritation, with the exception of Howie, who had the look, but was directing it at their leader. She tapped her foot, waiting for an answer.

"Riley is staying because I need someone who I know can handle fighting well without a gun if they get past me and Jo, staying in the church as a final backup to ensure survival. She's better hand to hand than with a gun. Nick was telling me how they escaped, and Riley can handle it with Nick's axe. Gretchen is preparing dinner and needs more than one field session before I want her out there. Howie needs more work." This earned a dirty look from the former businessman. "And Gabby..." he added on, seeing the teenager about to pipe up about how she wasn't going to laze around. That was what she always said, trying to make a point about Kayleigh, which annoyed her to no end. The brat was no more useful than the others claimed she was. "...she's too young. You're going

with Nick and Brian and doing your part. Besides...” Here he paused with what Kayleigh could clearly see was a patronizing smile. “You could use the field practice, especially after you’ve had several runs on the skeet range.”

Gabby looked like she was about to argue this point, but actually decided not to, focusing back on the golden retriever, who seemed to sense her annoyance and lick her face appreciatively. Brian nodded at Kevin. “Makes sense. I’ll go grab the weapons.” He walked to the pile they kept by the altar, where AJ was already going through them to pick his zombie-slaying weapon of choice.

Nick looked at Riley with a smirk. “Don’t mistake anyone for a zombie this time, if they make it in. Remember, zombies are the dead people.”

“Try not to sing ‘Thriller’ as you hunt them down. You’re turning the song into overkill. Try singing ‘Another One Bites The Dust’ instead – keeps the hunting songs fresh.”

“You know, ‘Down with the Sickness’ is a good one for it, too!” AJ called out.

“You could just sing ‘Achy Breaky Heart’ and maybe throw them off their game,” joked Brian, as he came back with the weaponry.

Nick shook his head playfully, giving a look of sympathy towards Brian. “Now man, that’d be more of a punishment to me.”

Sighing, Kayleigh went and took one of the smallest handguns they had from Brian. He gave her a tentative smile that she decided to ignore, as she sulked about her current assignment. She had *just* learned how to shoot, so wasn’t that enough? It wasn’t like she was any good or anything. In fact, her shooting lesson had completely tanked, and she knew it. They all knew it; it was one of the many complaints about her.

Not that she cared.

Honestly.

“Will you at least shoot something?” Nick asked as he slammed his foot on the gas pedal, jerking them all forward and causing him to hit his head against the roof of the Hummer. Grumbling, he rubbed it irritably.

“I’m *trying!*”

“Ow! Hey Nick, warn us next time,” Brian muttered, as he was thrust against his own seatbelt. “Let’s just get out and scope the area, see if any are lurking.”

“Sorry.” He climbed out, his gun ready to go as he glanced about cautiously. Brian followed suit, while Kayleigh stayed in the car. There was no way she was willing to go out and actually look for those *things*. It was bad enough when they found them by accident. That was why she didn’t want to do this. This was a mistake. She wasn’t going to try, and she’d lie about it if someone pestered her. The drive had felt long and arduous, and the entire time, while Nick drove and Brian fired off consistent shots at any ghoul that was spotted, Kayleigh had simply watched.

“Get out of the car.”

“No, it’s bad enough I have to handle a gun. I’m here with you, but I am *not* going out hunting for those things.”

“Damn it, Kayleigh, I...”

“Let me talk to her.”

“Alright.” Nick walked a few feet away, scoping the area for any sign of the undead. She heard a blast and turned her head in time to see another member of the walking dead slump to the ground. He looked like he was taking all his frustrations out on the undead. Something AJ kept telling her to do, because she knew everyone else thought *she* was the problem.

Brian opened the door calmly and leaned in. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

“Look, I know this isn’t easy, but we do need you to help us do this. Don’t you want an area that’s zombie free? It ain’t pleasant, but it’s better than having them burst in on us at any moment.”

“I didn’t even want to come.”

“I know, but here’s a benefit: once we get the base clear, we’ll probably be able to live outside of the church, get some space from each other,” he pointed out, giving her a knowing look. “You’re not the only one here who wants that. Trust me.”

She paused, taking it in. Brian had a point: at least if she helped, as much as the thought grated her, they’d eventually be able to move out of the church. She’d be able to get away from Kevin, from AJ, from Riley. Then she could do as she pleased and not be under scrutiny all the time, which was forever driving her up the wall. The thought had its appeal, she supposed. Then again, she was sick of the others trying to force her into all this when, again, all she wanted was to be left alone.

“Alright, I guess.” Holding her gun with a death grip, she stepped out of the car and followed him back to Nick.

“No one hates you. Just so you know,” he told her, as she and Brian approached him.

“I never said-”

“I’m good at reading people, and none of us do. We just need you; that’s why we get mad. Even Rye.”

At the last part, she had to bite her tongue. Anyone could see he and Riley were close friends already, and she wasn’t up for a battle over what she really thought of the other woman.

Moans could be heard in the not too far distance. She shivered instinctively. Brian smiled at her; it was a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, however. In the short time he’d been with the group, she had noticed most of his smiles didn’t. Not that she could blame him, really. They saw the first ghouls approaching them just beyond the gates, as they strolled towards the tennis courts. Kayleigh looked down to see her hands shaking. She tried to keep them steady as her eyes found the targets.

I can’t do this. I can’t do this.

Why not? You’ve killed zombies before.

I can’t do this. I...

Kayleigh Shane Jackson, are you really going to be as weak as everyone says you are?

BANG!

Startled, she glanced down at her gun as a zombie fell, a direct hit to the skull. So she had done it. Yet she wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Happy? Not so much. Sad? Not that either. It was a muddled feeling. She wasn’t sure what to make of it, really, as Nick gave her a friendly smile once more.

The moans had ceased, and corpses littered the area some feet away. She looked at Nick. He stared at her for several moments, as if he was thinking of saying something. Yet, it seemed like he wasn’t really thinking at all...

Then the friendly blue eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he collapsed towards the pavement. A haunting scream roared from his throat as he fell. Brian dove to catch him, barely doing so before his head slammed against the

ground. Kayleigh went to help, but Brian shook his head. “Keep an eye out for any other zombies!” he commanded, as he gently lowered Nick to the ground.

“Nick? Brian what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but-”

Before Brian could finish, Nick’s body went into violent convulsions. Kayleigh watched in horror, as his body twitched and contracted in ways it shouldn’t, in ways that were so familiar to her, ways that brought back horrifying memories of what had happened at the college, the events that had brought her here. He continued to twitch and contract, and Brian glanced up at her, looking as disturbed as she knew she had to look. He tossed her the keys that had fallen out of Nick’s pocket. Nick’s body rose and fell, as it rigidly jerked on the ground. She caught a glimpse of his face and shuddered: his eyelids were half open, showing the whites of his eyes, and his mouth not quite closed.

“Go get Jo!”

“But I- I can’t, I... oh my God, what if he caught the virus? What if we get it? I can’t...”

“KAYLEIGH!”

“I... just... I...”

“We don’t have time for this! Just go get Jo! I’ll stay here with Nick and fend any visitors off.”

Kayleigh ran for the Hummer without another word. Despite herself, tears had sprung in her eyes. She wasn’t close to Nick, but she just couldn’t handle this. She couldn’t handle seeing anyone else die. She couldn’t handle the idea of the virus striking yet again, when she thought things could maybe get better. It didn’t matter who the virus was after now: it couldn’t have anyone else. Too many had died.

She hopped in the vehicle and slammed the door, stuffing the key into the ignition. She gave a small wave to Brian, who was leaning over a now still and unconscious Nick. The scene was disturbing and haunting as it replayed in her head. The minutes felt like a lifetime.

Her foot slammed down on the gas pedal, and she raced for the church.

Chapter 54

So, I guess I should try to write about that day.

It's not that I can't talk about it. I can, actually. Better than I can the day the dead rose. Far better. I have no problems talking about it. At least, as far as anyone can tell. I just – it's like my pen runs out of words every time I start this entry. It still scares me, you see. It's still such a fear I have. I know what I want to write, or to say; I just can't find the way to actually put it out there.

I think I'm not making any sense again.

That day scared the hell out of me. It was like a lesson, though. It definitely showed me something, taught me something. It kind of made me see things. See myself, see... others. It opened my eyes. Everything is different now. Not just in the undead ruling the world sense, either. The way I am; the way people are, in general. As crazy as some of them drive me, the people I'm with now, the others, they're my family. Kevin's like this protective father figure, even though he's not that much older, while Jo's become a mother to us all. I love them all, really. We're family.

Except Nick.

... Except Nick.

And see, I just... Nick is, well...

Forget it.

Wednesday, May 2, 2012

Week Two

She stared at her journal, almost expecting it to talk to her, as she tapped it impatiently.

Riley hated the fact that she'd been left behind. She understood why she was and knew that Kevin felt she was capable of going out, unlike Howie. It was just the fact that she was forced to wait in the church. It felt like she was babysitting, even though she knew she wasn't. It irritated her a bit and had made her grab for the notebook she'd been jotting in since she'd found it in the Sunday school room. Only instead of just writing random thoughts, she found herself writing about everything that had led up to her current situation. She wanted to do a retrospective journal of sorts.

She was sitting against the wall in the kitchen, wanting to be away from the others in the multipurpose room, her notebook propped up against her legs as

she chewed on her pen cap thoughtfully. Hair fell into her face, and she blew it aside impatiently, trying to think of how to write the tale she wanted to tell.

“And the ironic thing about it all? I have too much time for my personal life now, and my former achievements now mean jack shit.”

She stared at what she'd written so far. What to say next? In a sense, it had all started with the interview she'd done with Kevin, hadn't it? The story started there for her, all leading up to Infernal Friday. She supposed that was why she'd started where she had. Writing a journal also meant there'd be something left behind if the worst happened. Something people could come upon, to show that there had been survivors, that there had been life.

Just in case.

It wasn't easy, constantly thinking of the worst, but in a sense, it came naturally to Riley. The worst in life was what had made her career before her world was destroyed. It was what she'd thrived on, a calamities provided the best stories to cover and really were career-makers. Yet now, thinking of the worst really did nothing more than to psych a person out. And when one was facing the worst enemy possible, one that never rested and never quit, she didn't need help in that by considering every bad scenario.

“What are you doing?” Gretchen asked, as she took inventory of the food in the kitchen. They were running low on the last of the supplies they'd brought with them as they arrived. They had already acquired more clothing, but they'd have to go on a food run, and soon.

Howie gave them a quick look as he walked by, before going back to whatever he was doing. Riley wasn't sure what that was and, honestly, didn't care much. The man was still a bit of a snob after two weeks, to put it mildly, and it irritated her now and then.

She glanced up at the other woman, giving her an easy smile. She didn't know Gretchen that well yet, but she felt comfortable with her. They were close in age, and she was far more mature than Kayleigh, so it was nice to have another young woman to relate to. Riley hadn't had a lot of girlfriends growing up – far too much distrust amongst teen girls, in her opinion. Then, later, when she'd been old enough to have girlfriends who were past that, she had let her career consume her before everything else. If nothing else, she now had the chance to create bonds with people.

Maybe she could make up for all the mistakes she'd made in the past, mistakes that still stung.

She motioned towards the notebook in her hand. “I'm making, like, a log of everything. Journaling everything that's lead up to this, and us together now.

Just, ya know, in case. If we leave, and other survivors come, they'll know there are others. Or, in case something happens..."

"You want to know we left a sign that we were here. I understand. That's not a bad idea."

"I was thinking of suggesting we all do it. It would kinda help us deal, too, you know?"

"Like therapy."

She shrugged. "As a kid, it used to be how I'd get it out. Writing, telling stories..." Riley felt herself grin. "... that or beating up my younger brothers and playing sports."

Gretchen laughed, sinking down into a chair beside her. "No brothers here, just a little sister, and I always sucked at sports. But I had a diary. Not that I ever kept up with it that well. It was basically for the crush of the month."

Riley chuckled. "Crush of the month, huh?"

"Well, you know, junior high. Whatever boy I suddenly thought was just oh-so-hot."

"See now, I had the 'one of the guys' problem. Just friends, all of..." She found herself trailing off when the loud squeal of tires across the pavement caught her attention. The two women shared a glance before quickly heading outside, where Kevin and Jo were standing guard.

Riley could feel it: something was wrong.

"Jo! It's Nick!" Kayleigh cried, as she ran over, completely frazzled.

She felt herself suddenly go on autopilot as she ran over to them. "Wait, Nick? What the hell happened? Kayleigh, where's Nick?" Feeling several pairs of eyes set upon her, she fell silent shortly after.

"He, he collapsed... and he was twitching, and just... oh my God, what if he got the virus? What if we can get it, too?"

For a moment, it felt like Riley's heart had stopped.

"Where's Brian?"

"He stayed with Nick... We didn't know what to do..."

Kevin looked between them, appearing to think for a moment. Riley glanced around at them all, feeling the wave of panic rise in a way she hadn't expected. "Alright, Kayleigh, I need you to lead Jo to where Brian is. Riley can drive and help keep a watch out. Gretchen can help me guard the church till you get back."

As the others headed to the car, Riley paused by Kevin. "Thanks. I..."

"I know you need to go with them. It's alright."

With a nod, she raced to the Hummer, catching the keys from Kayleigh, who, much to Riley's relief, said she was too nervous to drive. Driving gave Riley something to focus on right then. She started the engine, glancing back at Kayleigh in the backseat. "Which way?"

"Left, then right... and, and then... it's just, we were..."

"Spit it out, Kayleigh!"

"We were out... out by the tennis courts."

With a nod, she thrust her foot against the gas pedal. The short ride felt like an eternity, despite the crazy driving she knew she was doing. She felt the walking dead she ran over as she drove, bumps on the road interfering with getting to her destination. She thought of the time she'd known Nick – three weeks, tops. Yet he was the closest person she had to her now, and she couldn't handle even the idea of something happening to him.

"Riley! There they are! Stop!" Jo yelled, shaking her fiercely out of her thoughts.

Her foot slammed the brakes, and she hardly noticed the jerk forward, as she cut the engine and jumped out of the Hummer. There was no thought; she was running on pure adrenaline, running to where Brian sat. She was just dimly aware of Jo and Kayleigh following behind her. She spotted Nick lying unconscious on the ground. Brian looked up, as he fired off a shot to an incoming undead. The shot missed the skull, but caused it to stumble as it hit it in the neck. He took advantage of its hesitation and fired again, killing it this time.

"What happened?" Riley asked, kneeling beside them. "Nick?" She nudged him gently.

His eyelids fluttered as the Hispanic woman kneeled beside her. Brian stood. He nudged Kayleigh, and the two kept their guns at the ready, in case of any sign of danger. Kayleigh shivered a bit at the sight of Nick once more, while Riley leaned over him, her eyes filled with concern. Jo glanced back at Brian. "Tell me what happened."

“We were taking some marks out. He looked at Kayleigh for a few minutes. The next thing we knew, he was on the ground convulsing.”

“How long was he like that?”

“Probably a few minutes, I think. He’s been out since.”

Jo nodded; there was a knowing look in her eyes when Riley turned to look at her. She knew the older woman had a good idea of what had happened. Before she could ask, however, his eyes opened, and Riley hugged him tightly before letting go. “Nick! You’re awake.”

“Um, yeah... what happened?” He sat up slowly, rubbing his temples.

“Nick, do you know where you are?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m at MacDill Air Force base. But how’d I get out here? How come we ain’t at the church?”

“Do you know what day it is?”

“Yeah, it’s Wednesday, Jo. May second, right?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Are we playing twenty questions?” he asked with a tired smile. “The last thing? Riley and Kayleigh fighting again... I had to pull down Rye bread so she didn’t get all toasted.”

“Rye bread?” Riley heard herself asking, fighting back a laugh despite herself. Only Nick could be this random and this odd, after going through what he just had. It was official: that boy was truly one of a kind.

“Yeah, that’s your name now. It’s been decided... it’s official.” He yawned. His face looked worn. Perhaps it was Riley’s mind playing games with her, but he suddenly seemed to look older. “So... can’t anyone tell me what’s going on?”

“When we get back, okay? Jo will explain everything there.” Riley helped Jo assist Nick up off the ground. He was shaky on his feet, unsure of his footing, and she didn’t like the look of confusion written so clearly in his eyes.

“Let’s go then,” Riley commanded, as she let Nick lean upon her and followed Jo and Kayleigh back to the Hummer. He gave her a weak smile, and she gave him one in return. They walked slowly. Brian trailed behind them at a distance, still looking behind them to make sure they weren’t ambushed. They shared several glances before either of them broke the quiet between them.

“Do me a favor, Nick.”

“What’s that?”

“Never scare the shit out of me like that again.”

“He had a Tonic-clonic seizure. I suspect it’s because of his old injury.”

“But it’s likely a one time thing, right?” Riley heard herself asking, wishing that to be true. She wasn’t sure if she could handle seeing Nick like that again. Or, even worse, seeing Nick actually going through it next time, if a next time happened.

“No, he’s had one before. It may be a pattern. In fact, that’s why I abandoned him at the hospital, when the virus hit,” admitted Jo. “I found him having a seizure in his room, and I mistook it for the virus, as seizures were one of the symptoms. I believe Nick’s, however, are a result of his head injury the night before the virus hit.”

Brian nodded in understanding. They were all gathered in the back hall of the church, away from the Sunday school room where Nick was supposed to be attempting to rest upon a couple of the sleeping bags. “Hey, he did hit his head against the roof of the Hummer before we got out of the car.”

Jo nodded. “Sometimes that can set off a seizure to someone who has a history of them or had a recent head injury.”

“Wait, he’s hit his head before... a couple times actually. And nothing happened like this then,” Riley interjected as her eyes skipped back to Nick, who she could spy through the open door frame.

“There’s no set way to cause a seizure. Every time he bumps his head, it doesn’t mean he’ll be having one moments later.”

“He’s a liability now, you know,” Howie pointed out, almost looking smug, as he brushed off his arm.

“I’m sure he’ll still be more useful than you,” AJ replied with a smirk. Riley shot him a grin; she was really beginning to like AJ, even if he was a bit strange.

“We’ll have to be careful, though...” Kevin said, as she stood and walked away. Riley headed into the room where Nick was lying down. She didn’t feel like being a part of the discussion anymore. It was stuff she knew already, and she felt bad that Nick was now isolated from the others. Jo had explained what had happened to him first, away from everyone else, so that way, he could rest, while

everyone else talked. She knew he wasn't because of the way his eyes kept making their way over to the door.

She doubted Jo had told him it was likely to happen again, and she understood why. All it could do was bring him down, make him worry about being a bother, like what Howie'd had the nerve to insinuate. All this gathering away from him likely wasn't helping, either. It wasn't his fault this had happened, and she figured he may need some cheering up. Or at least a companion. If not, well, then, she'd tried anyway. She was never any good at this sort of thing, but after everything that Infernal Friday had caused, her whole mission now was to change. It was to be a better person, to be a better friend to her new surrogate family.

But Nick wasn't exactly what she'd consider a brother.

What was he, then?

She wasn't exactly sure.

He smiled as she sat beside him, getting comfortable on the edge of the sleeping bag. "So I scared you, huh?"

"Yeah, so don't do it again."

He chuckled. "Why, what are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna royally kick your ass all the way back to Hollywood."

He propped himself up a bit, stifling a yawn before answering. "You would not."

Riley gave him a questioning look, trying not to smirk as she stared him down. "Oh? And enlighten me as to why I wouldn't, oh wise and musical Nick."

"Because you love this ass."

She scoffed at him, laughing softly. "One too many knocks to the head, Nick."

"Nah, I'm right. I have a completely lovable ass. So much that kicking it would just make you cry because you damaged such an enjoyable and lovable ass."

"You definitely need some rest."

He smiled at her. It was a full one, winning and charming, as all his smiles seemed to be. He watched her for a few moments, looking as if he was debating something with himself. Nick stuck his tongue out at her as he lay back down again. His arm yanked hers, pulling her down next to him. "Keep me company till I doze off, then?"

“Sure.”

Chapter 55

I'm not supposed to be a failure anymore.

And that's the thing, I wasn't. I got the hang of handling a gun pretty quick. Kevin typically asked me in those first couple weeks to help clear out the place. It became a pattern, me, Rye Bread, AJ, Brian... we were the ones typically asked to guard or do sniper duty. The others got asked too, but one of us always came along. I was starting to get used to that, that feeling of success. It's good, ya know? Even in a zombie-infested world, where the main goal is killing... (Or is it re-killing? Guess it's re-killing)... and staying alive.

After a life of failure, it felt good. That's all I'm saying.

And then of course, something effs that up.

It's typical and makes it hard to be the optimistic, cheery Nick I want to be. I like him; I was happy being him since the dead rose. Everyone else liked him too, my new family. They looked to him when they needed a break from our hell of a reality. That Nick doesn't fail. That Nick isn't a problem the way I am now. They won't say it (well, actually, Howie does), but I know. It's in the way they act. They way they talk when they think I can't hear. The way Kevin never asks me to help clear out the base anymore.

It's like I'm suddenly back to the old Nick, the angry, bitter, failure Nick.

I don't want to be him anymore.

Cheery Nick has everything. He's got hope, he has dreams again. He has faith that somehow we'll still be okay. He has a surrogate family who relies on him, who depends on him.

Cheery Nick... has Riley.

While I... I have nothing.

Oh, almost forgot the song quote of the entry, here it is:

“I'm not in love cause I'm a mess...”

Like refugees

*We're lost like refugees
Like refugees
We're lost like refugees
The brutality of reality
Is the freedom that keeps me from*

*Dreaming, I was only dreaming
Of another place and time
Where my family's from*

*Singing, I can hear them singing
When the rain had washed away all these scattered dreams”*

- Green Day, “Before the Lobotomy”

Monday, May 7, 2012

Week Three

Nick was pacing, back and forth, in the Sunday school room. He was getting really sick of seeing nothing but the rooms of the church, rather quickly, within the last week.

After the seizure he'd had, he felt like everyone was treating him differently, acting differently, and making him feel like he was nothing more than a piece of china that had to be protected. They were beginning to get sick of each other, honestly. There was too much time together, in one room, with no space of their own. Except Nick – they felt he needed more rest than anybody. AJ, who'd been wanting an escape, had volunteered to share the room with him, just in case any undead surprised them again. So not only was he not being asked to help hunt zombies anymore, he was being watched by the best shooter in the group, after Kevin.

His frustration had been bubbling just under the surface the past few days, and he was constantly fighting to keep himself in check. Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair. He was getting bored again. Even Riley, he felt, was beginning to avoid him. While she had always liked wiping out zombies, she'd never volunteered, the way AJ always did. The past week, she'd tried to go out on a run every chance she had. This was what she was doing at the moment. She was on sniper duty on the roof, to give AJ a break, so he could get some sleep for the night shift of guard duty.

Finally, Nick headed down the hall, debating going into the kitchen or the multipurpose room. Not that it mattered. It wouldn't make him feel better either way, no matter which room he chose.

“Hey, Nick, whatcha up to?” It was Gabby who asked this, Spunky in tow behind her. Next to Nick, he figured Gabby was his faithful dog’s favorite person. It made him smile, because when he’d hear her cry out from nightmares during the night, he was sure she needed that. Spunky seemed to make her laugh and smile and actually be her age for a few moments. Most of the time, these days, she struck him as such an old soul, trapped in a preteen’s body. He guessed it had to be everything she’d seen. That had aged them all.

“Nothing. That’s the problem.”

“I totally understand. I’m getting bored, too.”

Nick nodded absentmindedly, as he started walking down the hall again. Normally, he’d be singing or cracking jokes or doing something to break the boredom between going out on runs. He’d come up with some random game or idea to get them all talking and passing the time. That would be the Nick before the seizure, the one who wasn’t fragile china.

He shook his head at himself. What was he doing?

The door burst open, and in came Riley, chatting with Brian as she did. Shotguns were slung over their shoulders as they walked. “I can see why AJ likes it up there. You get some time to think to yourself as you take ‘em out. Too bad we can’t have Nick doing it with me, ‘cause...” She trailed off, as he came into her vision.

Nick was almost seething, hearing confirmation of his own worries from the one person he never wanted to hear it from. “Cause of what, y’all are afraid I’ll just collapse and start going crazy? ‘Cause that’s me, crazy Nick, nothing but a liability, good for nothing. Too bad he’s useless now, right?”

Two sets of emotions collided when he caught her instant reaction, the surprised sting before it was covered up by the angry expression on her face. One was of immature satisfaction, stemming from the frustration that still burned there, and the other was regret at attacking her. Both were battling to be stronger at the moment. Out of the corner of his eye, as he stared at the ground, he caught sight of her hands. They were twisting again nervously as she bit her lip, considering her response before speaking.

“Nick, that’s not what I was going to say.” The voice was calm, collected, or at least attempting to be.

“Hey, this isn’t like you...” Brian started.

“Yeah, let’s not upset Nick. He may have another seizure from it and be a danger to us all. Right? Isn’t that right?”

Riley stepped forward, placing her hand on his gently. “Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what? Be honest? It’s good someone here tries it.”

“Now you’re just acting stupid, Nick.”

He pulled it away; they were attracting attention, he knew. Good. Too bad Kevin and Howie were out on a zombie sweep. Howie, of all people. That’s how he knew he’d sunk to a new low. Kevin was picking Howie instead of him now. “Yeah, that’s me, stupid, crazy Nick. Come on, I see how y’all are treating me now. I’m being coddled. And you...” Their eyes met; the hurt written in hers hit him hard. “You’re just as bad. You’re trying to avoid me now, after what happened.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m doing more sweeps and sniping because-”

“I don’t feel like hearing it, alright? I already know. You don’t gotta say how useless I am. I just wanted you guys to know that I know what you’re doing. I can’t stop you, but don’t expect me to be grateful that you’re babying the hell out of me.”

Nick stalked off, furious with himself for that stupid outburst he immediately regretted, irritated at the entire situation. He’d said what he felt, but at the same time, wished he hadn’t. The last thing he needed was more reason for everyone to act so cautious around him. Nick sighed; he didn’t feel like dealing with it anymore. He retreated to one of the empty offices. On the way, he brushed past Kayleigh, who was yet again sulking on the floor.

“Hey!” she cried, as he almost stepped on her, not giving her another look. He kept on his path. A simple glimpse back told him Jo and Gabby were still watching him in shock at his behavior.

“Nick! Stop!” He heard Riley’s footsteps hurrying after him. He slammed the door behind him, ignoring her.

The office was simple, a desk, some books on the shelf, and, for now, a convenient hideaway. Locking the door, he slid down it, feeling the cool wood upon his back. Kicking the nearby chair as hard as he could, he growled with annoyance.

Once again, he was good for nothing but messing things up.

After about two hours of exploring the contents of the office and flipping through various books on the shelves, Nick was done isolating himself inside there. No matter how irritated he was. He stepped out, looking down the hall both ways before continuing. He wasn’t up for being asked how he was. That question got a

bit old after being asked five times a day, no matter how many times he said he felt fine. He was lost in thought –or mental rants, to be more specific – and not paying attention to what was around him.

“Still stewing huh?” He jumped at AJ’s voice. There the other man stood, leaning against the wall casually as he took a drag off a cigarette. Nick smirked; that would infuriate the others, seeing him smoke inside like that.

“You gonna treat me all special, too, now? And I thought you were sleeping for sniper duty tonight?”

“Couldn’t sleep after your hullabaloo in the hall. And hell no, I ain’t gonna baby you. Everyone’s overreacting. I keep telling Kevin that.”

Nick blinked, staring at AJ. “Wait, what?”

“I told you. Everyone’s overreacting when it comes to you. You’re fine now. We ain’t gonna know when or if you’ll have another seizure; no use going all protective about it. Hell, we can’t afford it.” He smirked then. “Having Howie go instead of you ain’t smart. He panics too much. I’d rather have you with me with the off-chance of you collapsing, than him with me freaking out and running away every time. It is what it is.”

“Thanks, man.”

AJ took a long drag before dropping the butt of his cigarette on the ground, snuffing it out idly with the toe of his shoe. He stretched a bit, the sound of his bones popping as he did. “For what? The truth? Nothing to be thanked for; it just means you can handle yourself. Something he and Kayleigh both need to learn. He made me laugh when he said you’d be a liability. That was ballsy, he of all people trying to say that. He had no room to talk. Not to mention, he’s the type that used to make me sick before. He feels he’s better than everyone here. Your seizure just gave him another reason to gloat. You should’ve seen him with me the last time, fucking hell. Don’t let it get to you.”

“Yeah, well, it ain’t easy when Kevin won’t let me do anything, Jo keeps checking on me, and R-” He stopped then, not knowing what to say. Nick knew why he was so angry, but he wasn’t sure how to say it point blank.

“Your girl keeps volunteering for extra shifts.”

Nick raised a brow. “My girl?”

“Nick, the only ones who haven’t noticed the way you two act around each other are blind. That’d be Kayleigh and Howie, who want to live in the past and avoid reality. You dig her, and she probably digs you. You know why she’s been volunteering this past week, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “Cause she’s too freaked out to be around me. And there’s nothing going on between us man. Nothing.”

“For now, but whatever you say. And it’s ‘cause she doesn’t want anyone complaining about picking up your slack ‘cause Kevin won’t let you help. So she’s covering you.”

“Oh, well... wait, how do you know that?”

“I asked her, and, holy hell, she answered. Amazing what communication can do.”

“Right... how the-”

“It’s aight, I notice shit no one else does. I’m gonna try and sleep again. No screaming fits till nighttime, aight?”

“Agreed.”

AJ patted him on the shoulder, as he headed back to the room they shared. Nick sighed, thinking what AJ said over. AJ did have a knack for seeing and getting right to the truth of things. Maybe he had overreacted. His current feeling of house arrest had been keeping him on edge. So maybe he had taken it out on the first person he’d come across. Yeah, he was definitely channeling his old self. How long would it take him to shove that side back into the past where it belonged, with his family, his mother, and all the baggage that followed?

Rolling his eyes at himself, he walked along the halls, hoping to come upon Riley or even Brian, since he owed him an apology, as well. He hated apologizing; he was never any good at it. Normally he’d crack a joke and skim past it as much as he could.

Somehow, he knew the others weren’t going to let him pull that.

“Hey, Gretchen, I need a favor,” he heard as he walked up the hall, causing him to pause just before passing the kitchen. Nick knew who the voice belonged to. He peered in, taking into view both Riley and Gretchen alone in the room.

“What’s up?”

“I was talking to Kevin earlier today, about the idea of taking one of the offices. He was okay about it, understood about some of us feeling too cramped, but he wants at least two per room, just for precautions. I mean, this is going to sound mean, but...”

Gretchen chuckled, turning from the mini fridge, as she placed a jug of fruit punch back into the fridge. "Kayleigh's driving you crazy, huh?"

"... A bit. And I'm working on not fighting and being snarky. But damn, she makes it difficult. I swear that girl... Anyways, I was going to ask AJ if maybe he'd swap out with me..."

"Oh? Room with Nick? How come?"

Riley shifted, looking past Gretchen rather than right at her. She twirled the straw in the cup she was holding, her hands suddenly needed something to do. "Well, I feel... comfortable with him. I mean, we did have to stay together till we made it here, talking and getting to know each other you know? And we've become really..." A pause. "...really good friends."

"That makes sense. I feel most comfortable with Brian, as he was the one I traveled with. I suppose it's the same."

"Yeah, but I changed my mind. Awkward and all. And I don't think Nick'd want me rooming with him anyway right now."

"Because of-"

"Yeah, that's why." She half-grinned at Gretchen and set her cup down. "Anyways, after that, you came to mind next. You wanna be my roomie?"

Rather than walk in and interrupt the conversation, Nick started walking again, peeking in the room one last time as he did. That was his own fault, he knew. And so he used it as the excuse he needed to find Brian and apologize first, instead.

He headed into the multipurpose room, where Kevin was talking with the others about what to do next. Nick sighed - whatever it was, it likely wouldn't include him. Kayleigh was sitting in one of the corners, as always. Howie was standing with Brian and Kevin, his chest puffed out pompously as they conversed.

He felt himself rolling his eyes, but smiling when Spunky ran over to him, licking his hand energetically, sensing he needed it. He knelt down, patting her head, hugging the dog close. She always did know when Nick needed the closest a dog could give to a hug.

"So given recent events..." Kevin announced, while Riley and Gretchen walked into the room. "We should try and get medical supplies. I'm amazed we didn't think of it before..."

"Kevin, of all people, I should've been on top of it first. It's alright; we haven't needed it until now," Jo interjected, sending the military men a warm smile.

“Why don’t I go?” Nick heard himself saying. “I’m part of the reason; Jo said there is the off-chance of finding medicine for my...” He couldn’t finish the sentence. He had no idea if it was going to be a condition he’d forever have to deal with, and he refused to admit it was a problem. “But I should help, earn my meds.” Nick forced a smile, knowing the answer before Kevin even spoke.

“That’s a good idea, Kev. Nick’ll be fine,” AJ agreed, as he stepped in, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “The fact that we’re keeping him in here isn’t the best anyway.”

Brian turned towards AJ. “But what if he’s not? I know he could be, but I was there when it happened. I don’t want a death on our hands because Nick wanted to help too much.”

Riley raised a brow. “But there could be death with or without a condition. It’s not like a long life is guaranteed now. He’s been fine this past week. He’s good. We shouldn’t be sending people who can’t...” She shot a quick glance at Howie before she stopped and shook her head. “I mean, we shouldn’t stop him from doing sweeps with us over that. He’s one of our better shooters.”

“This is exactly what I was telling you, Kevin,” the former addict reminded him.

Nick suddenly felt like the world’s biggest asshole when it hit him he had probably yelled at Riley for defending him. Too bad he’d cut her off before he could find out either way. His mind was about to run through possible ways to apologize like no tomorrow, but Kevin’s voice interjected amongst the debate. He looked torn between both sides, and for once within the past week, Nick felt hopeful.

“I have to think about all eventualities, AJ, Riley, Nick. I agree with Brian, Jo, and Howie on this one. We can’t risk several lives by letting you help, Nick. That’s all it is. That’s my final say on it for now.”

Nick rolled his eyes, watching everyone go silent. The leader had spoken. “Fuck it. Treat me like a kid then.” Nick walked out, back to the only place he could escape to, his and AJ’s room. Once again, he was nothing more than a problem.

The church had never felt so suffocating.

Chapter 56

It’s tough being the oldest person on the planet.

I'm kidding, of course, but then, am I really? As far as I know, I AM the oldest one on the planet. At 45. That's depressing.

The others treat me like the oldest person on the planet too, like I'm their mother. I suppose I don't mind, but as much as I love my daughter, I was never really the stay-at-home mom type, and here, that's exactly what I've become. I clean the chapel. I "cook" the meals – if you can call it that. I'm in charge of the household chores, while the others – the younger, stronger, braver ones – guard the church and go out around the base and shoot zombies. I'm not sure why I'm complaining – do I really want to go zombie-hunting? No.

I suppose I just miss feeling useful. I miss being needed for the skills I have that not everyone does. Don't get me wrong – emptying bedpans and holding hands aren't rocket science, but taking blood pressures, starting IVs... those are jobs not everyone knows how to do. Of course, I'm glad we haven't needed those kinds of skills around here; I'm glad that Nick's seizure was just a seizure and not the virus, and I'm glad we haven't had any injuries worse than minor cuts. At the end of the day, I suppose what I'm saying is that I miss my old life. And isn't that the same thing everyone's writing about in these journals?

Of course they are. They all miss their old lives. They all miss their families. They all miss their mothers. And if I can even partially fill that void for them, I should be glad to do so. But that still won't fill the void in my life...

Tuesday, May 8, 2012

Week Three

Of the ten survivors bunkered in the MacDill Air Force base chapel, Jo had been out the least. For the last three weeks, she had spent almost all of her time at the church, cleaning, organizing, fortifying, and guarding the place. She'd gone out for one tour of the base – more of a zombie reconnaissance mission than anything – and one shooting lesson, and that was it.

She knew that her place was inside the chapel, that she could be of most use there, sort of a caretaker for the men and young women and girls, but she was running out of things to do. The others viewed her as the "old lady" among them, she knew, though she was five years shy of fifty. Still, forty-five made her almost a decade older than Kevin, and even she had to admit that she looked old compared to the other women, none of whom were past thirty. It didn't help that she'd put on weight in the past year, after Luis had died, and what had once been a few coarse, stray grays seemed to be growing exponentially these days, contrasting sharply and obviously with her natural, jet black hair. She didn't *feel* old, though, and she was glad for the opportunity to prove it to the others.

Finally, a mission for her: They needed more medical supplies, and everyone had agreed that Jo should be the one to get them. Along with basic first aid supplies,

such as gauze and bandages and antiseptic, she would be able to search for medicine for Nick. Though he hadn't had another seizure in the week since the last one, Jo worried he wasn't out of the woods yet. The seizure wasn't an isolated incident; it wasn't his first, and she doubted it would be his last. Nick didn't want to be a liability, but as long as there was the chance of him collapsing into convulsions at any given time, she could understand why Kevin was hesitant to send him out into battle with the undead.

Their leader had chosen his cousin, Brian, to accompany Jo instead. They studied a map of the base together, as they planned their route. "The base medical center is here," said Brian, pointing to a spot southeast of the chapel, off Bayshore Boulevard, "near the basketball and tennis courts."

"Tennis courts?" Gabby popped up, looking over Jo's shoulder. "I wanna go play tennis."

"Out of the question," Jo dismissed immediately, "as long as those creatures are roaming around."

"But I bet the tennis courts are fenced in. They won't be able to get in," Gabby countered. "Someone else can go with me; we'll take guns, just in case. Want to, Nick? We could bring Spunky, too!"

Nick looked up, arching an eyebrow. "I'd rather play basketball..." he said slowly, a smile spreading across his face.

Gabby shrugged. "Okay. I'll play anything, just to get out of this place for a change. I'm sick of being here!"

"My thoughts exactly, kid." Nick stood up, stretching his arms over his head, arching his back. Jo watched him, imagining him alone with her daughter, imagining him collapsing in the sweltering heat, imagining Gabby being left to defend herself and take care of him on her own...

She shook her head. "You're not going anywhere. Not yet. Not until the base is safe."

"But Mom!" Gabby whined. "Come on! You let me go with Kevin to practice shooting. Why can't I go this time?"

Jo didn't answer at first, and when Nick caught her eye, she looked away. She knew he knew what she was thinking, and she was embarrassed, but that didn't change her thoughts. Her fears. "I just don't like the idea of you out in the open like that. If they can break through a stained-glass window, I'm sure they can get past a chain-length fence," she replied finally.

“Fine then, can we go to the library? It’s right... there,” she said, jabbing her finger into a spot on the map. “It’s not far from here, see? And we’ll be inside, at least.”

“No one’s gone to clear out the library yet,” spoke up Brian. “It could be crawling with zombies on the inside, and think of all the opportunities they’d have to sneak up on you there.”

Jo shuddered at the thought and quickly shook her head. “Brian’s right, Gabby. The answer is no.”

“Well, can’t we at least go clear it out then? I bet Kevin will go with us. Or Riley. We can clear it out and then get some books to bring back and read!” Her brown eyes danced with enthusiasm over this latest idea. Jo hated to say no, but she shook her head again. Gabby’s face quickly crumpled and contorted with anger. “But there’s nothing to do around here! I’m bored! And you won’t let me do anything! God!”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” Jo said tiredly, as Gabby stormed off.

Brian looked away.

Jo sighed. “At least she’s acting like her old self again.”

For the second time in a year, she had watched Gabby go through the stages of grief. It was the same as it had been after the robbery. At first, Gabby had been unusually clingy, more like a scared little girl than the independent teenager she was becoming. Then she’d gone quiet, barely speaking, barely eating, an empty shell of her former self. After the depression had come some semblance of acceptance, during which Gabby had been pleasant and helpful, working around the chapel, wanting to learn to shoot and fight the living dead. But now she was spiraling back towards anger, as boredom and cabin fever set in. This moody, short-tempered teenager was the one Jo had been dealing with for most of the last year.

She couldn’t blame her, though; it was happening to all of them. Tempers flared, and tension rose, as they spent most of their time cramped in such close living quarters, going out only to fight the neverending battle against the zombies. Their goal was to eventually clear the base, so that they could live there in safety and peace, but the effort seemed futile. There were just so many of them, so many bodies of men and women and children that had died on the base and reanimated. It seemed they would never be able to kill them all.

Still, they had to try. While Brian sorted through the guns, arming himself with a rifle and a handgun, choosing a more manageable pistol for her, Jo slipped a rosary around her neck. It wasn’t her own rosary, the one she’d inherited from her grandmother, the one she’d intended to pass on to her own grandchild

someday, the way Gabby had received her mother's for her first Communion. That rosary was still tucked away in her night table drawer, along with her Bible. When she'd picked up Gabby and driven her here, she hadn't considered the possibility that they would never go home again. If she had, she would have taken the time to go back and gather those precious heirlooms, their family photos, Luis's wedding band – all the sentimental things that really mattered to her.

But she hadn't, and so this rosary, along with the military garb she wore, was borrowed. She'd found it in the chapel, in one of the offices, and assumed the owner had passed, perhaps was one of the zombies still roaming around outside. She wore the rosary as a talisman against them, a symbol of the Lord's protection. The weight of the wooden beads around her neck made Jo feel safer, braver.

She slung a bag over her shoulder, to carry the medical supplies, before she and Brian left the church. The day was clear and sunny, which would make zombie visibility good, and for that, Jo was grateful. Though she felt uneasy, being outside the relative safety of the chapel, the fresh air and sun was a welcomed relief after spending most of her time inside the dim, stuffy rooms of the church.

Brian didn't stop to relish in it. He moved like a cat towards the Hummer, slightly crouched, his eyes constantly flicking right and left, his gun drawn to his chest. Jo followed, staying right on his heels, looking around behind her. Her heart raced inside her chest; she was dreading the shock of spotting a zombie, and she knew it would come at any moment.

They were halfway to the Hummer when she heard the moan that made her heart leap into her throat, though she'd tried to prepare herself for it. She turned to see two zombies staggering toward them. One was a man in a dirt-streaked uniform, the other a woman in a stained t-shirt and pajama pants. Their glazed eyes bulged from their mottled, gray faces; their arms stretched stiffly in front of them, reaching towards their prey.

Jo jumped backwards, flinching involuntarily as a shot rang out. The blank expression on the man's face didn't change as Brian's bullet grazed his cheek, tearing off a chunk of flesh. Jo could see part of the zygomatic bone protruding from the blackened wound, but there was no gush of blood. The zombie continued toward them, oblivious, and even when Brian fired a second shot that took him down, the female zombie lurched forward, unaware, uncaring that she was about to meet the same end.

This time Jo raised her own gun and fired first, but her shot missed. Before she could panic, she saw the barrel of Brian's gun rise out of the corner of her eye. He took aim, fired, and the second zombie collapsed.

Jo released her breath, her whole body shaking. "Thank heavens one of us is a good shot," she managed to say, chuckling nervously.

Brian barely smiled. “You’ll learn,” he said. “I haven’t had much practice. It’s just a matter of hand-eye coordination. C’mon.” He jogged off towards the Hummer, and she followed.

The interior of the Hummer was stifling, but when Brian got behind the wheel and started the engine, the air conditioning came on at full blast. It was hot air at first, but once they were driving down Bayshore Boulevard, it came out cool. Jo slid down lower in her seat, adjusting the vents so they were aimed towards her face, and closed her eyes, relishing the rush of cold air against her hot, sticky skin. Leaving the security of the chapel behind was worth it just for this temporary reprieve from the stagnant heat.

Her eyes flew open as she felt the Hummer swerve sharply, the momentum throwing her into the door. “Sorry,” Brian said, as Jo sat up straighter, struggling to right herself in her seat. “I can’t quite bring myself to run them down.” Jo looked into her side mirror and saw a cluster of zombies meandering down the middle of the street behind them.

“It would be easier than shooting them,” she murmured.

“You’re right,” he allowed. “I guess... I guess it’s like the difference between hunting animals for food and hunting them for sport. So far I’ve only killed out of necessity, out of self-defense. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Jo nodded, studying his profile, for he stared straight ahead as he spoke. Brian was difficult to read. He appeared hardened, with a strength much greater than his slight build attested to, but she had the sense that, deep down, he was a gentle soul. This seemed to confirm it. He was doing what he had to do to survive, but he hated himself for it. She could understand that, much more than she could relate to someone like AJ, who seemed to delight in killing the undead. Abominations though they now were, they had once been living human beings, and she could not forget it.

She followed his gaze out the windshield, drawn to the sight of Tampa Bay, its waters sparkling blue beneath the cloudless sky. Normally, on a day like this, the bay would be dotted with boats, but its surface was hopelessly empty. Then Brian turned right, away from the bay, and she looked up to see the base medical center sprawling ahead of her. The parking lot was crawling with zombies, and she realized this was probably their epicenter. Most of them would have died here.

Brian’s jaw clenched as he navigated the hospital’s drive carefully, bypassing the parking lot completely and pulling right up to the entrance. The doors were mere feet away, but the zombies were already honing in on the Hummer, and Jo feared there would be more trapped inside the building. She suddenly wished Brian would just floor it and get them away from there, but she knew he wouldn’t. He

couldn't. They had to do this, for the sake of the group. She steeled herself, trying to summon up a courage she wasn't sure she possessed.

"This is crazy," Brian muttered. "What was Kevin thinking? We should have brought more people."

"Do you want to go back?" Jo asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Brian shrugged. "We're here. We might as well go for it."

His recklessness scared her, but she nodded. "Alright..."

"We need to move, before they surround us. Stay close to me; we'll cover each other. On three, okay?" He unbuckled his seatbelt, and she followed suit, reaching for the door handle. "One... two... three!" At once, they threw open their doors and jumped out. Brian slammed his door and ran around the front of the Hummer to join her. Together, they raced to the entrance of the medical center. The double doors were shattered, the sidewalk in front showered with broken glass. Jo tried to avoid stepping in it, as Brian pulled her inside.

It was dim inside the building. Only the emergency lights running along the walls were lit, providing faint halos of light among the shadows. It wasn't hard to see, but it wouldn't be hard for zombies to lurk, unseen, in dark corners, either. Jo looked around warily, keeping close to Brian's side.

The infirmary was in disarray. The admissions desk was heaped with piles of paperwork, which had spilled onto the floor. Further down one of the halls, Jo could see overturned gurneys and IV stands. Everywhere she looked, the tile was littered with latex gloves and surgical gowns and masks. The whole place looked the way a trauma room did after the medical staff left it and before the housekeeping staff arrived to clean it up. But the mess wasn't nearly as eerie as the emptiness. Jo felt a strong sense of déjà vu, remembering the last few hours she'd spent in the emergency room at Tampa General, after the last of the patients and staff had succumbed to the virus. This hospital looked different, but felt just the same.

The silence was broken by a hungry moan and the sound of shuffling feet, and Jo turned to see the first zombies shambling through the shattered entrance. Her first instinct was to run, but even as she started to back up, she saw the barrel of Brian's rifle rise up beside her. She jumped at the first blast, but was relieved to see one zombie fall. It took only a few more shots to take down the second and then the third. But there were more behind them. They swarmed around the doors, bumping into each other in their efforts to squeeze through the doorway. The first ones that managed to do this tripped stupidly over the three bodies lying just inside the threshold and ended up writhing on the floor themselves.

Taking advantage of this obstacle, Brian didn't hesitate. He stepped forward, aimed his rifle towards the ground, and put a bullet into each of their brains before they could get up again. Realizing the brilliance of his plan, Jo pulled out her own gun to help. She flinched each time she pulled the trigger, but was relieved whenever one of her bullets added to the rapidly-expanding heap of bodies that was now partially barricading the doors. And still, the zombies kept coming, oblivious to what was happening. They tried to climb up and over the dead, but Brian and Jo took each one down, adding to the pile. At last, the doorway was blocked.

"I don't think they've got the sense to start dragging bodies out of the way," said Brian, sounding satisfied. "This should buy us some time."

But no sooner had he said it than they heard another moan echoing down one of the corridors. "There's more inside," whispered Jo, her fears confirmed. "All the noise probably attracted them."

Brian looked around. "We need another barrier, until we can take down the rest of them."

"This way," said Jo, leading him further into the hospital. Her eyes lit up when she spotted what she'd been looking for. "There – the nurses station."

It was a circular hub of counters, perfect for standing behind to shoot. It would not enough to protect them indefinitely, but unless the zombies suddenly gained the coordination to climb over counters, the barrier would slow them up long enough to be killed. "Good thinking," said Brian, and they ducked behind it, just as more zombies began to emerge from the shadows of the interior hallways.

Jo and Brian positioned themselves on opposite sides of the nurses station, their backs to each other, and started firing. Jo missed more of her shots than she made, but it didn't matter: after a ten-minute siege, the floor around them was littered with bodies, congealed blood and decomposing brains oozing from their head wounds.

Jo sagged against the counter, clutching at her rosary. Her fingers trembled as the smooth beads slipped through them; she was shaking from head to foot. Even her lungs seemed to be quivering, as she panted in and out in rapid, shallow breaths.

"You alright?" Brian asked quietly, looking back at her in mild concern.

Jo nodded, rubbing her beads. *Slow, deep breaths*, she told herself, the same advice she had given patients. Her heart was racing in her chest. She felt like she always did after a particularly intense trauma, when the patient had been either stabilized or pronounced, and she was finally coming down from her adrenaline high. Looking around at all the corpses, she didn't know whether to congratulate

herself or cry. "Is this a sin?" she murmured, squeezing the rosary, "what we've done here? *Thou shalt not kill...* Do you think this counts?"

"What does it matter?" muttered Brian in reply, avoiding her eyes. "We did what we had to do. Sinners or not, we're damned either way."

The bitter coldness in his voice sent a chill down her spine. She looked sadly at the body of a woman, dressed in a pair of scrubs, lying facedown on the tile. "Do you think they have any idea what they've become? Are their souls in Heaven, watching their bodies roam the Earth?"

Brian took a moment to answer, but when he did, he shook his head. "I don't think so."

He didn't elaborate, and she didn't ask what he did think. Her heart had slowed, her breathing had relaxed, but now that the rush of adrenaline had left her, she felt depressed. "Let's go," she said quietly. "Let's get what we need and leave this place."

The stench of decay was stronger on the other side of the counter. Brian wrinkled his nose, but Jo, used to worse, stepped quite calmly over the corpses. "We need to find the supply room," she said. "And the pharmacy." Now it was her turn to lead.

Though she'd never worked in this hospital, her surroundings felt familiar, and it didn't take her long to find what she was looking for. In a long, narrow room lined with shelves, she packed her bag with extra gauze pads, sterile dressings and bandages, bottles of antiseptic, bags of saline, latex gloves, a couple of suturing kits, and a set of surgical tools.

"You think we'll need all that?" asked Brian, eyeing the scalpels and syringes.

"I hope not," replied Jo, "but if we do, at least we'll be prepared."

They found their way to the pharmacy next, picking off a few undead stragglers along the way. Jo inched along the shelves, shining a flashlight across rows of pill bottles, checking labels, and filling the remaining space in her bag with painkillers, antibiotics, and a few bottles of Dilantin. "For Nick," she said, hearing the pills rattle around inside as she handed one of the bottles to Brian. "It's an anti-seizure drug. Hopefully it will help."

"Hopefully," he echoed, adding it to their stash.

"That should do us for awhile. Now we just need to find a way out of here." She remembered the heap of bodies barricading the front doors and imagined the mob of zombies waiting on the other side of it, blocking the path to the Hummer. "How are we going to get back to the car?"

Brian's expression was grim. "Good question. Let's see how many are out there."

At the front of the hospital, they found a waiting area off the main lobby which had windows. Some of the chairs were overturned, the window blinds dangling lopsidedly, and Jo couldn't help but wonder whether the would-be patients had destroyed the place before or after they turned to zombies. Brian went to one of the windows and peeked out. Jo followed, peering over his shoulder. Just as she had feared, there was still a sizable herd of zombies clustered around the main entrance, trying to claw their way through the pile of their fallen comrades. On the other side of them was the Hummer.

"What now?" whispered Jo, a heavy sense of dread dropping into the pit of her stomach.

"Maybe we can create a diversion," Brian whispered back, as if the zombies would hear their plans if he spoke any louder. "They seem pretty distractible. If I run, I bet they'll all go after me. Then you could run to the Hummer."

"What about you? Where will you run?"

Brian took his time answering, scoping out the view from all the windows first. Finally, he pointed out the last window and replied, "There. See where those ambulances are parked? With any luck, one of them will be unlocked. If I'm really lucky, it'll have keys. But if not, I'll circle back to the Hummer, and you can pick me up. They're not that fast – I can outrun them."

"Are you sure?" Jo hated the idea of him putting himself in danger for her.

"Have you seen how slow they are?" Brian's face split into a grin, a genuine grin this time. He had a great smile, the kind that lit up his whole face. "Sure, I'm sure."

"Okay..." Reluctantly, Jo agreed.

Brian opened the last window, the one closest to the ambulances. He punched out the screen, kicked one leg over the window sill before easing the rest of his body over, and dropped easily to the landscaping below. "Close the window," he whispered behind him, as he straightened up. "They'll be coming. Wait till they're gone, and then make a run for the Hummer."

Jo nodded. "I'll come get you," she promised, and then she closed the window. Through the glass, she saw Brian take off, waving his hands over his head. As she moved back to the first window, she could hear his muffled shouting, as he tried to get the zombies' attention. She peeked through the blinds in the first window and watched as the whole mob shambled off after him, moving away from the Hummer and towards the ambulances.

She waited until they were a safe distance away, and then she opened the window in front of her. She had already decided she didn't feel like crawling over a pile of dead zombies to get back outside. She removed the window screen, as Brian had done, and hoisted herself over the window sill, not quite as skillfully as Brian had. As soon as her feet touched the ground, though, she was running, making a beeline for the Hummer, her back of supplies bouncing on her shoulder.

She scrambled up and into the big vehicle, nearly slamming the door on her foot in her haste to shut herself in. But there was no need to hurry; Brian's plan had worked perfectly. The zombies were still following him across the parking lot, oblivious to her escape. But not for long. She crammed the key into the ignition and revved the Hummer to life.

She expected Brian to turn and run back towards her so she could pick him up, but as she pulled out of the drive and into the parking lot, she saw that he was still heading for the ambulances. She watched as he disappeared around one, and then, to her surprise, he appeared inside the cab. She could see him fumbling around, searching for keys, as the zombies closed in on him.

What are you doing? she thought, driving closer, wondering how he was going to get out of the ambulance and into the Hummer if both were surrounded by zombies. *Forget it; let's go!*

Then, suddenly, the ambulance sprang to life. The lights started going, and then the sirens, and from inside the cab, she saw Brian give a whoop and pump his fist into the air. He backed the ambulance out of its parking space, running over a couple of zombies who had followed him around behind it, and pulled it up alongside the Hummer. "Follow me!" he shouted through his open window, and she nodded and gave a thumbs up to show she understood.

He cut the lights and siren once he pulled out of the parking lot, and she followed in the Hummer, leaving the zombies in their dust as they raced back towards the chapel.

"This is amazing!" exclaimed Kevin later, emerging from the back of the ambulance.

Jo couldn't help but smile at this rare burst of excitement; she'd learned quickly that Kevin was a man who kept his emotions in check. But she couldn't contain her enthusiasm either. "I know! It has a backboard, a defibrillator, oxygen tanks, monitors... anything we could possibly need in a medical emergency, God forbid. I hope we'll never need any of it, but if nothing else, it will be good for carrying supplies."

“And taking down zombies,” added Brian, looking pleased with himself for once. He’d had a boyish grin on his face ever since returning from their little adventure with his new toy.

Nick had been jealous at first, but perked up once Jo showed him the bottles of Dilantin. “If I take this stuff, can I have the keys to the ambulance? Please, Dad, pleeeeeease?” he joked with Kevin, with a grin to match Brian’s.

“Maybe if we run the siren and lights, we can get all the zombies to follow it and lead them straight through the front gate, like the Pied Piper,” Gabby suggested, and Nick immediately latched onto the idea.

“Yeah! I can do that! That’s awesome! Too bad we can’t make it play ‘Thriller’ instead...”

“You and your ‘Thriller’...” Riley rolled her eyes, grinning in Nick’s direction. “You can make it play ‘Thriller,’ doofus; just stick it in the CD player and roll down the windows.”

“Ooh, yeah! You’re a genius, Rye; what would I do without you?”

“Come on, y’all; let’s get back inside,” said Kevin. His rare smile had vanished, and he was looking around uneasily. “Nick’s voice alone is loud enough to lead them right to us.”

“But that’s perfect – I’ll do it right now! Give me the keys, bro!” Nick held out his hand to Brian, but Kevin grabbed his shoulder and steered him back toward the chapel doors.

“Not right now. Take some of that stuff Jo brought you and see how it works. Then we’ll see.” As Nick followed the others back into the church, sulking, Kevin turned to Jo. “Thanks,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder as he walked her inside. “All the stuff you and Brian brought back will be great to have, just in case. We’re lucky we’ve got you with us.”

Jo smiled. Brian was the hero of the day, taking out as many zombies as he had, creating the diversion, and bringing back the ambulance. But she was proud of herself for the part she’d played in their mission. She had been an asset, not a liability. For the first time since she and Gabby had arrived on the base, Jo felt as if she’d proven herself.

Chapter 57

Darwin was right. Even our contemporary, human society functioned on the principle of “survival of the fittest.” Granted, it meant something different to the modern man than it did to the wild animals: mental strength got you further than physical prowess. Brains over brawn, education instead of instinct, charisma rather than quickness – those were the traits that kept you alive, got you ahead, made you a success. There was competition over colleges, jobs, women – natural selection at its finest.

I had it all. I was king of my jungle. Graduate of an Ivy League college, CEO of a successful company, husband to a beautiful woman... well, that last part hadn't worked out so well. But my trophy wife, before she was my soon-to-be ex-wife, had given me a son, so I could add “father to an incredible son” to the list as well. By anyone's standards, I'd done well for myself.

In another time, I might have been an outcast – the scrawny Puerto Rican and Irish kid who couldn't play sports or fight or hunt or build things with his hands. But what didn't kill me made me stronger, at least in the way that mattered. While others kids were climbing trees and throwing footballs, I was studying; I was thinking; I was dreaming. Some kids get athletic scholarships; I got an academic one. And while my peers were up to their ears in debt from college loans, I was already starting to rake in the millions, as my company expanded. Despite my one limitation, I believed I was better than them. Better than everyone.

It's the ones on top who have the farthest to fall.

On Infernal Friday, I fell just like everyone else. The ones to get back on their feet the quickest were not the smartest or the richest, but the strongest, the ones with true survival skills. You see, we're back to basics now. Back to classic Darwinism. Survival of the fittest, where fitness means strength, speed, endurance, and good aim. The strong will survive. The weak will become zombies.

I'm not sure why I survived the initial outbreak, but I can't imagine I'm long for this new world. It's not just because I'm not cut out to be a zombie-hunter. It's because the whole point of natural selection is to pass on the genetic traits that will equip a species for success. And despite my own personal success, no one's going to want to repopulate the planet with my genes.

Friday, May 11, 2012

Week Three

Howie lay on his back on a thin blanket, stripped down to his thin, white, cotton undershirt and boxer shorts. Even so, he was sweating like a pig inside the stuffy chapel. He had never felt so unclean, so uncivilized.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself sitting in his office, in the high-backed executive chair made of smooth, buttery leather, behind a colossal desk of gleaming mahogany, dressed in a neatly-pressed pair of slacks, a crisp button-down, and his finest silk tie. The blinds would be closed, blocking out the heat of the afternoon sun in favor of the cool air blasting steadily from the air conditioning vents in the ceiling. In the dim light, the computer monitor glowed, black type standing out on white, as he smiled over the company's latest figures.

Gone. All gone.

The scene changed. He was nude, nothing against his bare skin but the silky softness of the twelve-hundred thread count Egyptian sheets he lay between. Lying next to him, sound asleep, the top sheet draped over her breasts, was his ex-wife, Bree. She looked as beautiful as ever, her blonde hair spilling over the pillow as she slept. He watched her for a few moments, yawned contentedly, and stretched out his legs to the tips of his toes beneath the sheets, still not reaching the end of the king-size mattress. She stirred as his weight shifted, but her blue eyes remained closed, her lashes thick against her cheeks. Smiling, he let his own eyelids grow heavy and drift downward...

His eyes flashed open, and he was back in the church, feeling sticky and smothered. He longed for the cool, crisp luxury of his office. He longed for the lavish comfort of his bed. He longed for his old life. For Barty, and even Bree.

Gone. All gone.

In his memory, another image flickered, that of Bree naked in bed again (she'd always preferred to sleep in the nude), but this time, her body was blemished with purple sores, her eyes were fixed half-open, and she was no longer beautiful. He squeezed his eyes shut again, not to keep looking this time, but to extinguish the image, force it out of his head, before he could remember any further. He didn't want to remember, couldn't bear to see them again, not like that...

"You okay, Howie?"

He opened his eyes again to look around, startled, and there was Kayleigh, watching him. "I'm fine," he mumbled and looked away, but he could still feel her gaze on him and knew she had not.

He'd gotten the sense that a lot of Kayleigh's staring into space was really people-watching. She was more insightful than people gave her credit for, what with the persona of the mute, unstable, air-for-brains weakling she'd built around herself. Slowly, she was coming out of that shell. He attributed the change to Nick's seizure. It had been Kayleigh who'd come for help, Kayleigh who'd "saved the day" with her actions, small as they were. She was pleased with herself, he could tell, even if she didn't make a big deal of it. She had been talking more, even smiling, ever since that day.

Yet still, she struggled. Of them all, she and he seemed to have had the hardest time adjusting to life in the post-plague, zombie-infested world. Some individuals in their group were well-equipped to survive in it – Kevin, of course, and, surprisingly, AJ, who almost seemed to be enjoying himself. Others, like Jo and Riley, Nick and Brian, had adapted quickly. Even Gretchen, the schoolteacher, and Gabby, the little girl, were faring as well as could be expected. But Kayleigh and Howie both had struggled to adjust. Perhaps it was because life had changed the most for them – she, the spoiled sorority sister, and he, the wealthy CEO – both educated, yet neither possessing the sort of smarts that mattered in this new world. Maybe that was why they had bonded.

Kayleigh had opened up to Howie first, telling him about the people she had loved and lost – her father, her family, her boyfriend Bradley Lee. He sensed she expected him to pour his heart out to her in return, but he couldn't bring himself to talk about Bree and Barty. Mostly Barty.

He closed his eyes yet again and tried to picture his son the way he'd last seen him alive: dark hair, glowing mahogany skin, brown eyes that crinkled at the corners whenever he flashed his big, gap-toothed smile. Howie couldn't help but smile now, sadly, just picturing it. It had been clear, the day Barty was born, that his son had inherited his dark, Puerto Rican looks, rather than Bree's fair, European features. Despite his pride in having a son who looked like him, he'd feared those weren't the only genes he'd passed on. Yet Bartholomew Dorough had grown into a strong, healthy boy, athletic and outgoing like Bree. Looks, it seemed, were the only realm in which he resembled his father.

It was cruel irony that Howard had been the one to survive.

For a man who had been worth millions a few weeks ago, he was now worthless. Utterly worthless.

"Yo, Howie! Get off your lazy ass; we got a job to do!"

Howie scowled, as AJ's crude, raspy voice grated his ears. He raised himself on one elbow, as AJ came barreling into the multipurpose room. "What is it?" he asked stiffly.

"Supply run. Kevin's orders," the other man added quickly, before Howie could protest. "We're running low on food, and Kevin thinks we might as well finish off anything perishable before it goes bad."

Howie wrinkled his nose. "Don't you think it's gone bad already?"

AJ shrugged. "It's only been a month. Stuff that's packaged and doesn't need refrigerating will still be good. Cereal, crackers, that kind of thing. Kevin says we should eat that before we get into the canned stuff."

Then why doesn't Kevin get it himself? Howie thought peevishly, but he knew better than to say this aloud. His expression must have given him away, though, because AJ added, "He and Brian are heading out to shoot zombies and try the radio again, and Nick and Riley are on guard duty. He asked me to pick someone to help me get supplies, and I picked you, so suck it up, be a man, and let's go."

Howie bristled, but climbed slowly to his feet, pulling on a pair of pants over his boxers. He had learned from Kayleigh that refusing did no good, and his powers of persuasion had proven pointless here. Kevin was in charge, and AJ was his right-hand man. Their command had been established easily the first week, and though he resented it, Howie knew better than to stage a *coup*. He was used to being the boss, but it was obvious even to him that Kevin was the man best equipped to lead in this situation. Howie had been a competitive force in the hotel industry, but he knew nothing of waging war with the undead. He didn't want to know. But Kevin and his squad insisted everyone pull their weight, and so, reluctantly, Howie followed AJ to the door.

"Good luck," Kayleigh called half-heartedly after them. AJ ignored her, but Howie acknowledged the goodbye with a grimace over his shoulder.

"What vehicle are we taking?" he asked AJ, as the other man handed him a rifle and prepared to unbolt the front door.

"Kevin took the Hummer, and Jo thinks we should save the ambulance for emergencies, so we'll take the truck. You can drive if you want. I'll ride shotgun, and we can throw shit in the back."

Howie frowned, picturing the dented pick-up Brian and Gretchen had arrived in. "I'd rather drive my own car," he said at once, thinking of the tinted windows, the cool leather interior with the air conditioning blasting. It would feel so good to escape into the luxury of his old life once more, if only for a short while. "It has eighteen cubic feet of trunk space, which should suffice for the amount of supplies we could reasonably be expected to obtain in one trip."

AJ shot him a look, opened his mouth to retort, seemed to change his mind, closed it again, opened it once more, and finally replied, "Whatever, dude. Whatever floats your boat."

Satisfied to have gotten his way, Howie ignored the condescension in his tone and shouldered his gun, trying to prepare himself for the threat of zombies, as AJ finally opened the door. He winced against the shock of the light and heat that spilled in from outside, wrinkling his nose. The air he'd been craving wasn't fresh at all, but ripe with the stench of decay from the bodies lying or lurching about. It was almost worse than the stale, stagnant air inside the chapel. The breeze felt nice, but smelled terrible. Howie wanted to hold his nose, but didn't dare take a

hand off his rifle. He breathed through his mouth as they crept towards his Lexus.

AJ broke into a run, and Howie followed, panting behind him. He used the automatic starter on his keychain so that the engine was running by the time he slid behind the wheel. The leather seats practically scalded the backs of his legs even through his trousers, but within minutes, icy air was blasting through the air conditioning vents.

Even AJ had to sigh and rest his head against the back of his seat for a moment, fanning the cool air towards his face. “God, that feels good,” he groaned.

Howie smiled in self-satisfaction. Despite the rotten stench outside, the Lexus maintained its smell of new leather, though as they drove away from the chapel, Howie’s nostrils detected the odor of sweat coming off of AJ – and probably himself, as well. Someone had picked up deodorant on one of their supply runs, but it could only do so much when they were constantly sweating.

AJ didn’t seem to notice; if he did, he didn’t mention it. Now that they were on the road, he was focused, his gun armed and ready in his lap, his eyes darting back and forth like an edgy animal’s. He lowered the passenger side window, shooting at every zombie they passed. Howie flinched at every shot and struggled to keep his hands from jerking the wheel.

“Take a left here,” said AJ, when they reached the intersection of Florida Keys Avenue. “The catering office is a couple of blocks up the street, part of the base’s club complex. We’ll try there today.”

Howie nodded, having no choice but to follow his directions. After three weeks of following Kevin around, AJ had come to know the layout of the base considerably well, certainly better than he had. He let AJ navigate, and sure enough, in just a couple of minutes, they were parked beneath the overhang of an expansive building with a white-columned façade and a sign labeling it The Bayshore Club. It looked like a swanky place, and for an instant, Howie’s spirits lifted.

Then he felt a familiar, warm, wetness in his nose, and his heart sank. He looked down to see a spot of glistening red on the steering wheel in front of him and watched as another drop fell to join it.

“Ready?” AJ growled, reaching for his door handle. “Let’s do this.”

“Wait,” said Howie. He reached up and touched the moisture at the base of his nostrils, then pulled his hand back to look. His fingertips were streaked scarlet. He tasted metal as the blood dribbled down over his top lip. “My nose is bleeding.”

“What?” AJ turned to look at him, frowning. “Damn, it is. Well, stuff some kleenex up it or something, and let’s go. We can’t hang out here; I’d bet money those motherfuckers can smell blood.”

Howie could smell blood, too. He was starting to feel light-headed. “It’s not that simple...” He pinched the bridge of his nose, leaning his head back, but he could still feel the blood trickling down his mouth, his chin, the heel of his hand. He was going to get blood all over the pristine interior of his Lexus, but for once, that wasn’t his biggest concern. He should have known better than to blast the air conditioning like that... all that dry, cold air after so much heat and humidity... “Can you open my glove compartment?” he asked AJ thickly. “There should be tissues inside.”

Impatiently, AJ flung open the glove box, handed him a huge wad of tissues, and slammed it shut again. Howie started to feel annoyed. If AJ didn’t want to be held up by him, he should have known better than to make him come along. This wasn’t the first nosebleed he’d had in AJ’s presence, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last, unless...

His head snapped upright when he heard the moan. He stared out the windshield at the small flock of zombies staggering up the sidewalk towards them and felt his panic skyrocket.

“Damn, too late,” AJ cursed. “What do you think – fight, bail, or run for it?”

“I’m not in a position to do any of the above at the moment!” cried Howie, holding the tissues to his nose.

“Fine, then I’ll fight.” Before Howie could stop him, AJ jumped out of the car and started shooting.

Howie had to hand it to him – he was a pretty good shot. But by the time he’d taken down most of the undead, there were more – lots more. They were like termites crawling out of the woodwork – the emerged from around both sides of the building, even through its front doors, and still more came from across and down the street. Either AJ was right and the blood had attracted them, or maybe it was the noise, but suddenly, there were zombies closing in on them from all angles.

AJ jumped back into the car and locked the doors. “Okay, so fighting didn’t work, and I think we’ve lost the chance to make a run for it. The supplies will have to wait. Let’s bail.”

Howie nodded, reaching out to start the car again. The engine sprang to life, and he put his foot on the gas to rev it, but not even the roar could scare the walking dead that surrounded them. He shifted into drive, and with one hand holding his nose and the other gripping the wheel, he eased the car forward.

“Floor it!” shouted AJ. “Run them down!”

“I don’t wanna wreck the car!” Howie protested.

“Well, they’re gonna wreck it for you if you don’t get us outta here!”

He was right: even as Howie tried to navigate through them, one-handed, the zombies swarmed around the car, their faces pressed to the windows, their hands beating determinedly against the glass and aluminum exterior. The Lexus bumped and bounced over the fallen bodies of the undead, but the ones left standing did not get out of the way. Howie accelerated, but some of them clung to the car, hanging on to door handles, bumpers, whatever they could grab.

He looked into the rearview mirror, his nose still leaking blood into the handful of tissues, and saw two riding on the trunk, trying to climb up onto the roof. When he lowered his eyes to the windshield, he gasped and jerked his foot off the gas pedal – a third zombie clung to the hood, inching forward on its belly. Howie slammed down on the brake, but he was too late – the zombie had grabbed hold of one of his windshield wipers and managed to hang on. He flicked the wipers on, but as the zombie was dragged sideways, it struck the windshield with its free hand.

“Fuck, man!” shouted AJ, and Howie gaped in dismay at the spiderweb pattern of cracks that had appeared in the glass.

“It’s shatterproof glass,” Howie said, “so it should be-” The word “okay” died on his lips, as the zombie rammed its skull into the already-cracked windshield, and a circle of glass imploded. Howie cried out and let go of the wheel, both hands flying up to cover his face. He slammed his brakes again and opened his eyes just in time to see the zombie fly off the hood. He watched it bounce and roll on the ground, where it lay motionless.

“Would that be considered zombie suicide?” asked AJ, looking at the lifeless heap. “That thing totally just smashed its own head.”

Howie stared at him. He had a small piece of glass embedded in his forehead and another cut on his cheek. He hadn’t seemed to have noticed either yet. Howie reached up to feel his own face and felt a jolt in his stomach when his fingers came away bloody once more.

“Dude,” AJ chuckled, finally noticing this, “now you’re really bleeding.”

“It’s not funny,” said Howie, feeling his face again. He couldn’t tell where exactly the blood was coming from; his whole face stung, wet and sticky with it. He could feel it running slowly down his hands, his wrists, his arms. “We’ve got to get back. I... I need Jo...”

“Well, floor it, then, before we end up with zombie hitchhikers!”

The thumps and thuds of zombie bodies came from all directions now. There were some on the trunk, some crawling up the hood, and still more had made it onto the roof. Howie felt sick imagining the damage to his Lexus, but he felt even sicker picturing the damage to his face, the blood pouring from his nose and each of the cuts caused by the flying shards of glass.

“Can you drive?” he choked. “I... I can’t... I shouldn’t...”

“What?! *Now* you want me to drive your precious car?” AJ was incredulous. “Well, fuck, then move outta the way.”

In a tangle of limbs, they managed to switch positions. AJ collapsed into the driver’s seat, grunting, but didn’t waste any time getting comfortable. He floored the accelerator, and the car lurched forward, throwing the zombies off the hood and sending the others flying over the roof and right into their path. The car practically went airborne as it bounced over the pile of bodies.

Howie groaned, pressing the blood-soaked tissues to his face. He felt like a human colander, the blood draining out of him through multiple holes in his skin. He knew he needed medical attention, but now was not the time to explain why to AJ. His only relief was that they were not far from the chapel.

AJ veered back onto Florida Keys Avenue, and as he sped back towards the church, the horde of zombies chasing after them fell behind. By the time Howie staggered out of the car, he felt too light-headed to even notice the many cracks, dents, and scratches in the amethyst pearl exterior of his car.

“Dude, are you okay?” asked AJ, coming up alongside him. “You look about ready to faint.” The teasing smile left his lips as a look of genuine concern came over his face. Without waiting for a reply from Howie, he threw Howie’s arm around his shoulders, supporting his weight as the two men dragged themselves across the chapel’s lawn.

“What happened?!” cried a female voice, and Riley came running towards them. “God, Howie, you’re bleeding pretty bad...”

She hurried them to the door, where Nick stood, waiting to usher them in. Howie leaned against AJ, who hauled him into the multipurpose room, where the others sat, including, thankfully, Jo.

The nurse came over right away, a look of alarm on her face. “Did you get bitten?” she asked, in a grave hush.

Howie shook his head quickly.

“Most of it’s from the windshield breaking,” AJ explained, “though he did have a nosebleed before that.”

“Gabby, get the first aid supplies,” Jo asked her daughter, and the girl came trotting over at once with the box she and Brian had brought back from the base hospital. Jo set to work mopping up the blood with gauze. “These cuts must be deeper than they look,” she commented, after a few minutes. “They won’t stop bleeding. Some of them might need stitches. Hold this in place while I get out the suturing equipment.” She guided Howie’s hand to one of the gauze pads she’d applied to his forehead. “Put pressure on it, now.”

Howie nodded. He knew the drill. He also knew it wouldn’t do much good.

He cleared his throat. “It’ll take awhile for it to stop,” he told Jo quietly. “I’m a hemophiliac.”

Despite his low voice, all eyes in the room turned to him. Everything else in the room seemed to stop, as everyone paused to listen and stare.

Jo’s eyes widened, her expression serious. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Howie shifted uncomfortably. “I... I guess I didn’t want to be considered a liability. You know... the weak link.” He couldn’t help it: he looked at Kayleigh, who blushed when he met her eyes and quickly dropped her gaze.

“Dude... you were the weak link before we knew you had hemophilia,” said AJ with a snort, but when Howie looked at him, he was smiling. “At least now you have an excuse.”

Howie managed a smile in return. “Thanks for getting me back in one piece,” he offered.

“Not sure you can say the same for your car,” AJ replied, “but at least it still runs.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Howie, and to his surprise, it didn’t. Perhaps it was because he was still worried about bleeding, but the damaged Lexus seemed trivial now.

The concern must have showed on his face, because Jo patted his shoulder and said, “You’re going to be fine. Most of these cuts really are superficial, and I’m excellent at suturing – you’ll barely have scars.”

“Thank you,” Howie replied quietly.

Jo peered at him closely. “You weren’t injured anywhere else, were you? No impact from the seat belt or steering wheel?”

Howie shook his head. He knew she was wondering about the risk of internal bleeding – dangerous for anyone, deadly for a hemophiliac.

“Good,” she said with a nod of relief. “Just take it easy, then, and keep an eye out for signs of a bleed.”

“I know.”

All his life, he had been dealing with the symptoms and stigma of hemophilia. As an adult, he’d done so quietly – few people in his life, with the exception of his family and closest friends, even knew of his illness. He had a medical alert bracelet that he barely wore; it was at his home in Orlando, tucked away in the top drawer of his bedside table, never to be seen again. He viewed it as a sign of weakness, a magnet for sympathy and even fear. As the leader of his company, the last thing he wanted was to be patronized or pitied. He took care of himself as best he could and dealt with the issues sprung from his hemophilia privately. It had been a long time since he’d had a bad bleed, but then, he’d lived a cautious and controlled life up until now.

That life was over now. Gone. All gone.

If he was going to adapt to this new life, he realized, he was going to have to start opening up to and accepting help from the rest of the group. Otherwise, he’d never survive.

Chapter 58

So, I was wrong about Howie.

I admit it. He’s got layers. Everyone, everything in the world has layers. If you decide to watch and observe long enough, sometimes you can peel them off to see what’s inside. I didn’t bother trying that with Howie. Can you really blame me for screwing that one up, though? You gotta admit the man was an ass snob when it came to me, because of my looks, because I ain’t a damn norm. Then I judged him the same way. It ain’t right, but understandable, I guess.

You can’t make judgments anymore, but it’s human nature. In a way, it goes back to instincts. Animals size each other up before one decides whether or not to make that other animal its bitch. Yet now, you can’t do it. Like it or not, we need every live (key word being “live,” obviously) human being left on the

planet. Doesn't matter how big a cunt bag or ass hat some people are. In the end, you need them for survival.

Sucks, don't it?

So when you know that, you search for others. You gotta figure, the odds of there only being ten survivors on the whole damn planet is pretty frickin' slim. But on the other end, the odds of people surviving in a world completely overrun by zombies when your ass is alone? That's even slimmer.

You can't let yourself be realistic in this case. I know I always bitched about how people deluded themselves in the world before, and you know what? They did, so much it did way more fucking harm than good.

But in this case, even if you feel it's pointless, you gotta try.

In a world this fucked up, you can't give up hope.

It's weird, me saying that.

Still, I say it how it is, and right now, that's what it is.

Tuesday, May 15, 2012

Week Four

AJ sighed, thinking of everything that had happened in the last month. It had been exactly one month since the day the dead rose, and so much had changed in so little time. The world, himself, even the two he'd met first, Kayleigh and Howie. He felt guilty now about judging Howie, having since learned why he acted the way he did. Yet part of him still argued that the man was a royally snobby pain in the arse and that he didn't need to feel guilty. Still, despite himself, he did.

AJ cursed his emotions mentally, remaining stoic by the doors of the multipurpose room. His hand reached for his paint brush, happy he'd dug his art set out of Howie's now wreck of a Lexus. It felt like revisiting an old friend. He hadn't painted since the Osiris virus hit the world. It wasn't that he loved doing it any less; it was just the simple fact that he hadn't had the time to think about it.

In the world before, artistic expression, whether it was poetry, music, or painting, was always simply his own personal form of therapy. When it got to be too much, that was how he got it out.

At least, after the incident.

And now, in a post-apocalyptic, zombie-infested world, where he could no longer go out, anyway, unless it was to hunt, it seemed to be the best solution once more. He'd been painting for the last hour upon the double doors of the multipurpose room. He wondered if he'd be smited for painting on the doors of a church building.

But then again, if God existed, how much worse could things get anyway?

He shrugged his thoughts away and continued with his work. He'd only pause now and again to check out his surroundings, along with his companions. *Companions - is that really what they are?* he wondered silently. After being isolated, aloof, and alone for so long, it felt odd in his mind. A discarded puzzle piece that didn't quit fit, yet was shoved into place anyway.

He paused once again, taking a good look around the room now. Everyone was off in their little groups. Gabby was once again arguing with her mother. It had become routine, actually.

"Mom, I'm sick and tired of you keeping me inside! How long do you expect me to hang out in here and do nothing without going out of my mind?!"

It made him sympathize with her, though he understood Jo's reasons.

Nick was massaging Riley's shoulders, as she sat contentedly in front of him, rubbing Spunky's ears. She'd pulled a muscle earlier, climbing down the roof from a sniper trip. A zombie had gone unseen, and it'd pulled her by her arm roughly down to the ground. Nick had been about to climb down when it happened. He'd been the one to save her, with a direct shot to the creature's head, before it had a chance to bite Riley. It was one of those reality checks, reminding them, startlingly, how nothing in their lives was safe anymore.

The two blondes were sitting next to Brian and Gretchen. The girls were having one chat, while Nick and Brian shared another. It was an easy-going conversation, AJ knew, because it was one of the rare moments when Brian seemed to look relaxed. Kevin's cousin was the one in the group with the biggest walls built around him, understandably because he was the one with the rawest wounds that hadn't even begun to heal.

Howie and Kayleigh weren't back in the church yet. Unbelievably, the two had actually volunteered to go and attempt to get the food once more, after the last failed attempt. It was a move that had shocked them all, yet made it clear that there was, in fact, more to the outcasts of their small group than any of them had first thought.

They'd all been sketchy with the idea at first: the two weakest links, out together? But AJ had to admit, Kayleigh's shooting skills had been improving, finally. He'd been right: when she'd finally decided to try, she had become a decent

marksman. Not one he'd recommend for sniping, but as help for zombie hunts, she'd be alright. Not to mention, now that the two were actually volunteering, who wanted to discourage that?

Kevin was taking a nap. The leader had fallen asleep while trying to read one of the books they'd found in the offices of the chapel. No one had the heart to wake him yet; he was definitely burning both ends, trying so hard to protect them all. AJ knew he'd been doing the same, but at least he suffered from insomnia, so he had an excuse for the lack of sleep he'd been getting.

He glanced at his painting once more. It wasn't much, done in impressionist style, as he preferred that the most. It always reminded him of how one's surroundings appeared when looking out the window of a speeding car. In the painting, he always created the image while wondering what it would look like if someone stopped the car, so to speak, and cleared up the fuzzy images he'd created.

It wasn't a self portrait, but simply the blurred image of a figure, standing atop a hill to look at the chaos below, did look familiar. The world was in flames in his image, the fire consuming everything around. AJ thought he saw a face within the fire, a slackened one, unstarving and unknowing. He shuddered at his own creation. Sometimes he disturbed himself with his images. He wondered what the others thought of him painting a mural on the doors. It wasn't like he had asked them or anything; he'd just done it. As was his way.

The doors burst open, causing AJ to jump out of the way just in time. Instinctively, he let the paint brushes fall to the floor as he grabbed for the gun strapped to his leg. He aimed, prepared to fire at the first moan. He released a sigh of relief when he realized the tired-looking man in front of him was simply Howie.

"Jesus, AJ! Make sure something's dead before you try to re-kill it!" Howie cried out in surprise, almost dropping the bags of food he carried. Kayleigh was behind him, picking up the food she'd dropped accidentally. Between them, they carried various cereals, crackers, peanut butter, sodas, bottled water, and anything else that was pre-packaged, such as chips and cookies. Now, AJ knew there was no God, no Heaven, and no Hell, besides the one on Earth. However, seeing that food brought him damn close to Heaven right then. He noticed they carried no alcohol, and at once, his throat burned for the liquid that had once dominated his life. He yearned to drink himself into oblivion, the way he had just a month before, when the world had died.

"AJ?" Howie's voice called, snapping him out of his craving-induced reverie.

He shook his head. "Sorry, man. Is there more?"

Kayleigh nodded. “Out in the truck.” Howie had learned his lesson and refrained from using the battered Lexus again. It seemed their last trip had changed Howie in several ways, rather than just one. “We brought some books we found in the store, too.”

At that, Gabby’s face brightened, and she ran past her mother and AJ and out to the truck. Jo stood to chase her, and AJ shook his head. “I got her.” He chased her out of the church, to where the cars were parked.

“Kid, are you crazy?” he asked calmly, as he watched the teenager grabbing bags from the bed of the truck. His eyes wandered, searching for anything dead, as he inhaled the rotting stench that permanently saturated the air. One got used to it after awhile, as unbelievable he would’ve thought that in the beginning. AJ glanced once more at Gabby. So far, so good.

“Not you, too. God, you sound like Mom.”

AJ rolled his eyes, as he reached in to grab a couple bags himself. “She worries for a reason, kid. You rebel, and it’ll get you killed now. Of course she’s gonna be on your ass about it.”

She huffed, dropping the bags over the side and leaping out to pick them up once more. “But I’m so sick of doing nothing! I’m bored. I... I just need to get out!”

He felt himself nodding, as he followed her back inside, eyes peeled for any sign of undead catching their scent. He really did feel bad for the kid. Gabby had been through a lot, even before the dead had risen. It seemed pretty normal for her to have anger issues beyond that of the normal teenager.

He smirked at his own thoughts. Being at that clinic, talking to therapists all the time, must have rubbed off on him. He glanced inside the bags and pulled out a pair of sunglasses, similar to the ones he’d lost back at the hotel. They weren’t a necessity; no one besides him really wanted shades when most of their time was spent inside a church. So why were they in there?

Howard.

Touched by such a simple token, AJ felt himself smile.

“Turn here.”

“So we’re going outside the base, Kevin? But I thought the base wasn’t clear yet?” Gabby questioned from the front of the Hummer. After much coaxing and reassurances, AJ and Kevin convinced Jo to let Gabby go with them on a reconnaissance trip to search for survivors outside of the base. AJ had proposed

the idea to Kevin once he arose from his catnap, and the two agreed that the young teenager could use the break from the base and her mother, as any teen would.

AJ was in the back, a gun aimed at the side window, rolled down just enough to get the shot through. This would have been a better job for the truck, they both felt, with AJ out in the open as bait and a sniper. However, the massive and enclosed Hummer seemed like the best way to reassure Jo that Gabby would be kept safe and sound.

Kevin smiled at her, as AJ glanced over. "I know, but we're trying to see if we can't find more survivors. Not everyone would think of turning on a battery-operated radio, the way Nick and Riley did."

Gabby nodded, aiming her small handgun out the crack of her window, similar to the way AJ did. As sad it was, the kid had to stay protected somehow. She fired off a shot, and a corpse on the side of the road staggered back. The shot was just off, hitting the nose rather than the brain.

"Try again. This time, try to stay steady."

Another shot, and the zombie slumped to the ground this time and remained still. They heard moans everywhere, a larger chorus of undead singers than they had become used to inside the base. AJ shivered, despite himself. How much of the world had really reanimated? It was a question they could never answer, and personally, AJ never wanted to.

As they got further from the base, Kevin handed a bullhorn to AJ. AJ raised a brow at the man he was coming to regard as an older brother. Kevin always had faith in AJ, trusted him explicitly above everyone else. In return, Kevin was the only one who was allowed to see AJ with his guard down, something he hadn't shown to anyone else quite yet.

So questioning him... well, it didn't come easily.

"We're gonna attract a lot of corpses with this."

"We don't have a choice. How else can we let survivors know we're out here? I'm gonna need you to keep a steady round going at anything that gets too close." The former military man smiled at Gabby, who looked more content than she had in a couple weeks. "You too."

"Got ya."

The Hummer pulled to a stop at the side of the road. AJ got out and actually climbed onto the roof of the car. Gabby moved to do the same, but Kevin held

her arm. “Don’t. Your mother would kill us. Not to mention, if something happens to AJ, I’ll need you in here.”

Turning on the bullhorn with the driver’s side window pulled down, AJ could hear Kevin muttering a prayer that this wasn’t a mistake. Silently, the recovering addict hoped for the same thing as well.

“God, if your ass is up there, now’s a great time to listen, after putting us through all the shit you have been.”

Kevin’s deep, Southern-twanged voice blared from the bullhorn. “If there are any survivors, we’re here to help. We’re stationed at MacDill Air Force Base, clearing it of all undead. My name’s Lieutenant Richardson, and...”

AJ tuned him out as Kevin drove slowly, so as not to throw him off the top of the Hummer. Kevin kept calling out to survivors, handling the steering wheel with one hand, while keeping the bullhorn on with the other. He shot off a couple of rounds at a pack of zombies, feeling more and more depressed with the fact that no one alive was coming out. There were no signs of life. Outside of the moaning, walking corpses that had become so normal in their lives, the areas they drove through were completely desolate.

‘Maybe we are doomed. Are we really the only ones left in town? Why?’ He shook his head, as if to try and toss the thoughts out of his mind.

Once his mind snapped back to attention, he got distracted, once again, when they passed by a bar. He had to bite his tongue to keep from asking Kevin to pull over. The burning taste he missed right then taunted him, made his mind beg for the oblivion he yearned for, which only alcohol could truly bring.

The Hummer suddenly pulled to a stop that forced AJ to grab at the sides to keep himself steady on the roof. Back to reality, it brought him, making him focus once more.

“You alright up there? I haven’t heard you fire in a few...” Kevin asked, as he leaned out of the window to look up at him. His normally sharp and piercing, jade eyes were now soft with concern.

“I’m alright, Kev. No sign of anyone, huh?”

“Doesn’t mean much. They could’ve left the area or are hiding out in a place we haven’t thought of yet.”

“Yeah. What are the odds we’re the only ones left? Can’t be.”

A sigh. “I hope not. You sure you’re okay, AJ? You don’t look too good.”

“I’m fine, Kevin. I don’t have a choice anymore these days, do I?”

“Of course you do. You don’t gotta try and hide it by zombie-killing all the time.”

“I don’t, from you. I just... I feel like we’re it, and we can’t be. Even if we are, I gotta believe we’re not. That make sense?”

“Have faith, man.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Sun’s going down. We should start getting back.”

AJ slid off the roof, down to the hood of the Hummer and then to the ground. He hadn’t noticed until then, but they had pulled onto an overpass, overlooking the roads below. Before getting into the vehicle, he walked over to the barricade and gazed downwards. A sea of rotting bodies swelled within plain sight, moaning in unison, stumbling towards something AJ couldn’t see. The horde of zombies was almost endless, countless creatures shambling along.

“Have faith...” he muttered, looking up at the red-tinged sky, as the sun set slowly. “Another thing I don’t have a choice about anymore.”

With that, he headed back to the car, lost within the thoughts he fought desperately to control.

Chapter 59

So this virus kills almost everyone on the planet, who then come back from the dead and walk the earth as zombies, hungry for human flesh, while a ragtag group of survivors band together in a military base and fight to stay alive.

It’d make a great story, if only I were just reading it, instead of living it.

Sometimes I wonder, what’s the point of even writing it down? Who’s gonna be alive to read it? But I guess Riley’s right – we should keep writing, if not to keep our story straight, then to at least keep our sanity.

It’s hard not to go crazy here. It’s so hot, and the only escape is to go zombie-hunting in one of the air-conditioned cars... which, of course, my mom won’t let me do. I can’t stand it anymore!!! I want out!!!

We finally got some books in this place, so I’ve been reading to try to take my mind off things. It hasn’t worked so well. I used to love to read, but that was in

my old life, when I could curl up in my air-conditioned house and hear birds chirping instead of zombies howling. And guess what? My old life is dead. The old me is dead, too. I'm a different person now... reborn, just like the zombies.

My English literature teacher said that in a good story, the main character changes from the beginning to the end. This really would make a good story, then, cause I've definitely changed.

Friday, May 18, 2012

Week Four

Sticky. That was how Gabby felt: sticky all over. Her back stuck to the wall through her damp tank top. The backs of her legs stuck to the floor tiles. The wisps of black hair that had fallen out of her ponytail stuck to the back of her neck. Even her fingers stuck to the pages of her book.

She had started sneaking off to the church bathroom to read, not only because it was private and quiet, but because it the coolest spot in the chapel, with its tiled floors and walls and water readily available to splash on her face and the back of her neck. Still, by mid-afternoon, the hottest part of the day, it felt just as sticky as the rest of the place. There was no escaping the heat and humidity.

Sighing in frustration, she set the book facedown on the floor next to her, still open to mark her place. It was one of the books Kayleigh and Howie had brought back from their supply run a few days ago, a trashy paperback romance, the kind her mother might spend a few dollars on at the supermarket and then sell for a quarter at the next garage sale. It had a shirtless man with long, blonde hair on the cover, riding on a white horse with a woman whose boobs were foaming out the top of her long, old-fashioned dress. Gabby had snatched it out of the pile, not only because she knew her mother wouldn't want her to read it, but because she needed to read something frivolous and silly, something that would give her some relief from the suffocating church.

It hadn't worked.

The book was silly, alright, using words like "orbs" and "tresses" to describe the characters' eyes and hair, "bosoms" and "loins" to describe other parts of their bodies, but it hadn't offered her the escape she'd longed for. She couldn't lose herself in the story and pretend she was a fair and busty English maiden, torn between the wealthy baron her father had chosen for her to marry and the poor blacksmith's apprentice she secretly loved. The smothering heat of the chapel and the distant moans of the undead reminded her that she was just a sticky, sweaty, skinny teenager, possibly the last living girl in the world. Her story was a lot more interesting than the one in the book, if only she were reading it, instead of living it.

That's a good one. I should write it in my diary, Gabby thought. She reached for the notebook sitting at her other side, which she carried around with her inside the chapel so that no one could snoop in it. She had jumped on Riley's suggestion that they all keep a journal, starting her post-apocalyptic diary at once. She'd kept a diary at home, and this one, it turned out, wasn't so different. In it, she recorded, as she assumed the others did, the events that had taken place since the Osiris Virus had spread and her thoughts on their new life. But she also wrote about other things, things from her old life, things she missed: spending time with her father, sleepovers with Makayla, going to school, kissing Colton... They were things she didn't like to talk about, things she certainly didn't want anyone to read about, especially her mother.

Now she picked up the pen she kept tucked in the spiral of her notebook, flipped open to the next blank page, added the date (writing daily was the only way she could keep track of what day it was), and started writing about what a good story her new life would make. It was the kind of book that would be made into a movie, and they'd get an actress who was really twenty-two to play her, the thirteen-year-old heroine. Maybe Vanessa Hudgens... except that Vanessa Hudgens was probably a zombie, like the rest of the world. Zac Efron, too. Maybe Zombie Makayla would finally get to meet Zombie Zac, and they'd fall in love and have zombie babies together. Zombie Vanessa wouldn't mind because, well, she was a zombie. Gabby laughed to herself as she jotted this down, too. Then the words she'd written began to blur, as her eyes filled with tears.

Dead. Zombies or not, they were all dead. Makayla. Vanessa Hudgens. Zac Efron. Colton. Her father. Everyone she'd known, except for her mother, was dead. Her old life was dead. In a way, the old Gabby was dead, too. She was a new person, reborn just as the zombies had been.

That was good. Crying, she wrote that down, too.

A tear spilled from her eye and splattered wetly on the page in front of her, smearing the ink. She pushed the diary aside and stood up, peeling her legs off the floor. She walked to the counter and leaned over the sink, frowning at herself in the big mirror. Her reflection was a pitiful sight. Her naturally brown skin looked pasty and yellow under the buzzing, fluorescent lighting, and there were dark, puffy circles under her red, watery eyes. She could see tear tracks through the layer of grime on her face. Her hair was plastered to her sweaty scalp, looking oily in its lank ponytail.

They had soap and water on hand, so that they could sponge bathe, but as there were no tubs or showers in the chapel, Gabby hadn't felt properly clean since the night she'd spent in the temporary lodging facility on base, the night before she'd awoken to the commotion of the first zombie attack. She longed for a cold shower. She'd even take a swimming pool – and she knew there was one on base. Two, in fact.

She'd seen one of them on the map Kevin had given them: a pool, just a few blocks west of the chapel. Easily within walking distance. The other pool was even closer, at the base club. It was essentially right down the street.

She knew the club was where AJ and Howie had gotten into trouble a week ago, but a lot had changed since then. Kevin and AJ had been taking groups out every day to lure out and kill the remaining zombies on the base. AJ had come back, just yesterday, complaining loudly that he was running out of zombies to shoot and would need to go outside the base more often to get his fix. Gabby had no desire to leave the base again, not after she'd seen what the world outside was like, but she was desperate to leave the chapel. If the base was almost free of zombies, then surely, there was no harm in it. She knew where the guns were, and she knew how to shoot. She'd even killed a few more zombies on her last trip out. As long as she was armed, she would be fine.

These were the arguments she would make if anyone caught her trying to sneak out of the chapel. But she didn't plan on getting caught. Kevin, Brian, Gretchen, AJ, Riley, Nick, and Spunky were all out hunting the remaining zombies, and her mother had lain down in one of the offices, after staying up for the overnight watch. That left only Howie and Kayleigh, who were on guard duty outside the chapel. Kayleigh would be on the roof – she had taken a liking to AJ's sniper position, not because she enjoyed shooting zombies, as he did, but because it put her well out of their reach and gave her a prime spot to sunbathe. All Gabby had to do was stay close to the building until she was around the sanctuary side, and then she could run under the cover of trees, and Kayleigh would never notice her. Howie would be harder to get past. He was standing outside the only door that wasn't boarded up, and she knew there was no way she could sneak through it. She would have to be cleverer than that.

She left the bathroom and returned to the multipurpose room, which still served as their main living quarters. She stashed her diary and her book underneath her blanket and put on her shoes. Then she opened the front door and poked her head out. "Howie?" she called. He was standing just a few feet away, gun in hand. "My mom wants to talk to you for a minute."

Okay, so it wasn't exactly clever, but it would do. Howie and her mom had gotten closer ever since he had told them all about his hemophilia. As a nurse, she understood his condition better than anyone else and would know what to do for him if he got hurt again.

"Where is she?" Howie asked, stepping just inside the doorway.

"In one of the offices. Here, I'll keep watch for a few minutes while you go find her," said Gabby, taking the gun from his hand.

Howie looked hesitant, but he shrugged and nodded before striding off to find her mother. Knowing she had only a minute to make her getaway, Gabby bolted

the instant she was outside the chapel. She ran around the side of the church, staying close to the building to avoid Kayleigh's line of sight, and across the parking lot that stretched behind it. It was the same parking lot she and her mother had raced across with Kevin to get to the chapel on the Day of Unholy Resurrection. If she'd known then that she would be trapped in that same chapel for a month, she might not have been in such a hurry to get there.

It was too hot to run for long, but Gabby had a plan. In this lot, parked close to the lodging facilities on the other side, was her mother's SUV. In the back of the SUV was her bicycle. If she could just get to her bike, she wouldn't need to worry about outrunning the zombies. Her bike would go much faster than them, without nearly as much effort from her. It seemed so obvious to her now, she wondered why she hadn't thought of it before. She could go anywhere on her bike, as long as she stayed alert and didn't let the zombies surround her.

She spotted her mother's white Escape ahead and sprinted towards it, already panting in the thick, humid air. She didn't stop until she slammed against the hatchback and then, trying to catch her breath, she pulled at the handle. Her heart sunk. All of a sudden, her brilliant plan didn't seem so brilliant anymore.

The SUV was locked.

"Keys!" Gabby hissed. She smacked the hatchback window again and kicked a back tire, furious with her oversight. "Why didn't I bring the keys?"

She thought quickly. The keys to the Escape were probably in her mother's purse. And her mother's purse was... where? She frowned, drawing a blank. As she wondered why she couldn't picture her mom's purse in the chapel, it occurred to her: the purse wasn't in the chapel. The few possessions they'd brought with them to the base were still in the room where they'd spent that first night and fled from first thing in the morning. Her mother's purse, along with the key to the car, was in the lodging facility in front of her.

Gabby gazed uncertainly up at the three-story dormitory, remembering how she and her mother had raced down the stairwell to escape the newly-reanimated zombies in hot pursuit of them. She wondered if anyone had been in the building since. If not, how many zombies were still trapped inside? Was it worth the risk just for her bike?

She heard a distant moan that made her blood run cold, despite the heat. No, she decided, it wasn't worth it. The pool was only a couple of blocks away. She could make it easily without her bike.

She didn't see any zombies, so she headed towards the road at a fast walk. She crossed Tampa Point Boulevard and started up a side street marked Durnstone Avenue. She could see tennis courts up ahead on the right and knew she was going in the right direction. The club and the pool had to be nearby. She slowed

down her pace as she walked by a grove of trees on the left, savoring the small bit of shade they provided. It didn't occur to her that they also provided an excellent hiding place for the undead.

She had just stepped out into the sunlight again when she heard a rustle and a moan behind her. She turned, her heart leaping into her throat, just in time to see a lone zombie emerge from the trees which had concealed it. It was smaller than the ones she was used to seeing, and she realized as it staggered closer, its bony arms stretched out stiffly in front of it, that it was a child. A girl, younger than her. Behind a curtain of stringy hair, the little girl's face was starting to rot, the skin peeling away from her cheeks and forehead in dead sheets, and the smell was rank.

Gabby aimed her gun, but hesitated, her finger poised over the trigger. The zombie child was wearing soiled pink pajamas with the Disney princesses on the front. Gabby took a step back, then another. She was about to turn and run without firing her gun when the zombie girl let out a blood-curdling moan. That did it for Gabby. Remembering what she was really dealing with, she adjusted her aim and closed her eyes as she pulled the trigger. The wet sounds of brain tissue splattering into the trees and the soft thud of a small body hitting the ground told her she'd hit her target.

She didn't open her eyes again until she had turned around, only to see that she was not out of danger yet. The noise had brought other zombies out of their hiding places. They were shambling toward her from all directions, their moans rising in a discordant cacophony that made Gabby's blood run cold. Where had they all come from? She thought most of the base had been cleared out.

Trying not to panic, she raised her gun again, but she didn't know where to aim. There were too many of them, and in a matter of seconds, they had surrounded her and were closing in. They never broke from their slow, shuffling pace, but that didn't make them any less menacing. Gabby fired into the ring, turned, and fired again without taking the time to aim. A couple of zombies fell, but the others stepped right on top of them, filling the empty spaces.

There was no way to take them all out herself, and no way to escape. Out of other options, Gabby did the only other thing she could: climb. Flipping the safety on her gun, she tucked it down the front of her shirt and launched herself at the nearest tree. She grabbed the highest branch she could reach and scrambled up the trunk. Rough bark and twigs scraped her exposed skin as she squeezed between the leafy branches, climbing higher, until she found a thick branch to perch on that was high over the zombies' heads.

Breathing hard, her heart racing, she peeked down through the leaves at the zombies below. They were looking up at her, their stiff arms reaching toward her, moaning hungrily. She pulled the gun out of her top and poked its barrel through

the leaves. She undid the safety and fired a few shots. The zombies' heads were easy targets from her vantage point, and they collapsed one by one.

She pulled the trigger to take down a particularly big zombie, still dressed in his military fatigues, but her gun just made a hollow, clicking noise. Nothing came out. Panicked, she squeezed the trigger again and again, but it was no use - she was out of bullets.

Gabby looked down, surveying her situation. Despite the dead zombies on the ground, her tree was still surrounded by the undead, reaching and moaning. She had lost her only weapon, and she could see no way to get past them. So she opened her mouth and screamed.

“HEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!” she shrieked, in the loudest, shrillest voice she could make. “HELP ME!!! HEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!!!”

The chapel wasn't far away, she reassured herself between screams. If Kayleigh was still on the roof, she would hear her, right? She had to!

But it was Kevin who came. Kevin, Brian, and Gretchen in the Hummer. Gretchen was driving; she mowed right over several zombies as she parked the massive Hummer under the tree. Kevin and Brian fired shots through the open windows, quickly killing the rest of them.

“It's alright, Gabby!” Kevin called up, stepping out of the Hummer and looking up through the branches. “You can come down now.”

Shaking, Gabby maneuvered back down the tree, dropping onto the Hummer's roof below. “Thanks!” she gasped, as she jumped down from the hood.

Kevin opened the door for her to climb into the back seat. To her surprise, he got in after her. “May I ask why you were out climbing trees alone?” His deep voice was deadly calm, but she could sense the reprimand in it. It reminded her of her father's.

Gabby wiped the sweat off her forehead and leaned forward, sticking her whole face in front of the air conditioning vent in the back seat. She closed her eyes in relief, savoring the blast of cold air. “I couldn't stay in that church another minute,” she admitted, eyes still closed. “I just had to get out. I was gonna go to the pool. I'm sorry,” she added quickly. “It was a dumb thing to do.”

“Yep,” Kevin agreed.

“I'll never do it again,” she went on in a rush.

“I'd hope not.”

“I promise!”

“Good.”

Straightening up, Gabby looked over at him, perplexed. She had expected a lecture, not a series of one-word responses. He was their leader, their military man; he knew something about discipline. “Are... are you gonna tell my mom?” she asked him tentatively.

He didn’t answer her at first, but then a wry smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t think I’ll need to.”

She looked up. They had already reached the church. Her mother was pacing outside with Howie, and the moment she spotted Gabby in the back seat, she charged the Hummer and wrenched open the door. “You get back in that church this minute!” she shrieked, grabbing Gabby by the arm and yanking her out of the back seat. “Let’s go! Now!”

As soon as she’d wrangled Gabby back into the sweltering chapel and closed the door, she rounded on her, her dark eyes flashing. Gabby noticed they were red-rimmed and puffy. “Do you know what a scare you gave me, taking off like that?!” she cried. “When Howie came and said you’d disappeared, my heart almost stopped!”

Gabby hung her head. Her mother tended to get dramatic when she was upset, but still, she felt guilty for worrying her so much. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I sure hope you’re sorry! After all we’ve been through, you go and gamble your life on... on, what, a-”

“Trip to the pool?” Kevin supplied, letting himself in to the chapel. He still had that same wry smile.

“What?! The pool?? That was it – you wanted to go to the *pool*?!” Jo stared at Gabby as if she’d grown a second head.

Before she could think a way to justify her stupidity, Kevin stepped in again. “You can’t blame her for wanting some relief from this heat. It makes everyone a little crazy.” He rested one of his large hands on Gabby’s bare shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Let’s just be glad we got her back in one piece.”

“Yes – thank God for that!”

“Thank you,” Gabby mumbled again.

“Don’t mention it. Looked like you were doing pretty good on your own there, kid.”

Gabby smiled up at him. "I would have been okay, if I'd just had some more bullets. I ran out."

"That happens when you don't plan ahead," he said, but he returned her smile. "Next time, you should just ask."

Gabby cast a resentful look at her mother. "If I asked, the answer would be no."

"Maybe for now. It's still dangerous out there; we haven't killed them all. Your mom's right to be overprotective. She just cares about you and wants to keep you alive. We all do."

"I know," said Gabby, as Jo nodded emphatically. "I just hate being cooped up here. I wish I could come out hunting with you more."

"Gabby, I just don't think that's a good idea," started Jo, shaking her head, but Kevin smiled.

"Maybe not, but you did give me a good idea. A way to lure out the rest of them so we can clean this place out, once and for all."

Gabby felt her eyebrows lift. "Really? How?"

Kevin chuckled. "Bait. Did you see how they were all standing around that tree, looking up at you. Maybe we can use that to our advantage..."

"Not using Gabby!" gasped Jo.

Kevin shook his head. "No..." he said thoughtfully. "Not Gabby. We'll need a volunteer..."

"Me," said AJ, as if on cue, raising his hand as he strode into the chapel. "I'll be the bait. Bring it on, bitches."

"Language?" Jo cut in automatically, with a meaningful look towards Gabby.

Gabby snorted. "Mom, I know the word 'bitches.'"

Her mother turned to her, eyes flashing dangerously again. "Don't push your luck, young lady. You're in enough trouble as it is." But then she smiled, the fire in her eyes softening to a twinkle, and opened her arms.

Smiling guiltily back, Gabby drifted forward and allowed herself to be pulled into her mother's sticky embrace.

Chapter 60

I knew my place in the old world. I knew who I was and where I was going. I had a home and a family, and I'd dedicated my life to my calling. Everything was the way it should be. And then I lost it all, lost everything – and lost myself at the same time.

I don't know who I am anymore. I don't like the person I've become. I am a hypocrite who has gone against everything I once believed and preached to others. I've lied to the people I'm close to, my only companions in this undead world. I've looted and stolen supplies from the base. I've killed those which were once human beings. And I've forsaken the god to whom I was once faithful.

I feel guilty, not only for doing these things which are so unlike me, but even for doing the things which used to be normal for me – goofing off, joking around, laughing, even smiling. Even the smallest pleasures here make me feel more guilty than happy. How can I laugh in a world overrun with zombies, a world in which my family is dead? How can I smile as I pull the trigger to blow out another undead brain? How can any joy exist in a world gone mad?

Somehow, it does. Somehow, life goes on. Somehow, it has for us.

Life has evolved. The world is new and different and strange. Nothing is the way it should be.

I am lost.

Sunday, May 20, 2012

Week Five

It was a faint scratching noise that woke Brian. One moment, he was sound asleep, and the next, wide awake. He had just scrambled into a sitting position, his heart beating fast, when he heard a raspy chuckle.

“Chill, dude, it's just me.”

Brian looked over and saw AJ kneeling close to the wall he'd made his bed against, a small knife in his hand. He relaxed, though his heart took longer to calm down. Forcing a weak smile, he joked, “You know, before the world was overrun with zombies, I wouldn't have been so relieved to wake up to a guy with tattoos and a knife sitting by my bed.”

AJ grinned back. “Well, before the world was overrun with zombies, they didn’t let me have sharp objects, so... guess things have changed for both of us.” He waved the knife around carelessly, its silver blade gleaming in the weak rays of morning sunlight that filtered through the boarded windows.

Brian watched as he turned back to the wall and finished carving another notch on the crude calendar he had been keeping there ever since Brian and Gretchen had arrived. *A month ago*, Brian realized with a jolt, as he calculated the date. It had been the twentieth of April when he and Gretchen had finally made it to the base, the last of the survivors to arrive, and it was now the twentieth of May. That the ten of them had survived a whole month living in the chapel together seemed incredible.

“I can’t believe we’ve been here a month,” he said aloud.

“We should celebrate,” chimed in a voice over his shoulder. He turned and saw Gretchen standing in the doorway, still in the oversized t-shirt she wore for pajamas. “I mean, a month has passed, and we’re all still alive. In this situation, that’s a pretty big accomplishment. Plus, we’ve about got the base cleared out, right?” she added.

“Fuck yeah,” AJ replied with another shit-eating grin. “One more day in the cage should do it.”

Brian and Gretchen exchanged amused smirks. AJ had found a new favorite pastime around the base. Instead of zombie-sniping from the roof of the church, he now preferred zombie-baiting from a cage hung in a tree. For the last two days, ever since Kevin had suggested it, he had sat behind the bars of a dog kennel they’d brought back from the base’s veterinary clinic and rigged to the strongest branch of a tall tree with a pulley system, gleefully taunting the zombies who prowled beneath him.

The plan had proven to be an effective one: AJ used his rough, booming voice to call the undead, who came from all corners of the base, like housecats to the sound of a can opener, to circle around under the cage, reaching and moaning desperately. From their vantage points in the surrounding trees, Kevin, Brian, Nick, and Riley waited until a significant crowd of zombies had arrived to start sniping, their bullets picking the zombies off one by one. After each massacre, they let AJ down for a break and hauled the corpses off to a large burn pile. As the bodies burned, they raised AJ into the tree again to repeat the whole process.

It was highly successful. Brian estimated they had killed more zombies in the last two days than they had in all of their hunting expeditions around the base combined. The undead seemed oblivious of each other, yet tended to shamble along in hordes, and though their thought process was nonexistent, their senses were still intact. They were drawn to noises that signaled potential prey, yet

failed to shy away from the sound of gunfire or the sight of their own kind falling at their feet. This made them incredibly easy to take down in large numbers.

“Well, in that case,” said Gretchen, “we should definitely celebrate. How about a nice, big, group dinner tonight? I’m sure Jo will help me get things together.”

Brian nodded. “That sounds good.”

“Hell, we can just roast hot dogs and marshmallows over the cremation pit,” AJ added, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

Gretchen made a nauseated-looking face, and Brian just shook his head. AJ’s warped sense of humor was often too dark and crude for his taste, but he had grown accustomed to it. What he hadn’t gotten used to was AJ’s carefree enthusiasm over killing the undead, the way he shot down zombies without hesitation and without remorse. Yes, Brian went out on hunting trips and sniped from the trees, as well, but every time he pulled the trigger of his gun, he felt a little tug of his stomach, too. Every time he shot a woman, he remembered jamming the towel bar through Leighanne’s head. Every time he killed a child, he thought of Brooke and Bonnie. He did it out of necessity, but he would never get used to it, and he would certainly never relish in it the way AJ did. To Brian, it was only a means of self-preservation.

He and the others got up, dressed, and ate a bowl of dry cereal each. “We’ll go for more supplies and have better food for dinner,” Gretchen promised, as AJ led the team of snipers outside to prepare for another round of zombie-baiting.

“Just watch your back,” Brian warned her on his way out. “There may still be zombies trapped inside some of the buildings.”

“I know.” Gretchen smiled. “Good luck.”

Brian followed the others to the ambulance he’d brought back from the medical complex, which they were now using to transport the cage around the base. “Shotgun!” Nick called, racing AJ to the passenger seat, as Riley slid behind the wheel.

“Fine, but we’re leaving the back doors open,” growled AJ, forced to climb into the back of the ambulance with Brian and Kevin. “I wanna shoot ‘em as they chase us.”

“I know just the thing to bring ‘em crawling out of the woodwork!” Nick called back from the cab. Through the window that separated them, Brian could see him fumbling with the dashboard controls. As Riley turned on the ignition and pulled the ambulance away from the chapel, the siren – and, presumably, the lights – began to wail. It was joined by a creak... a set of footsteps... a clap of

thunder... an eerie howl... a drumbeat... a swelling synthesizer... a familiar bassline...

Brian started to laugh. "I shoulda known..."

Nick rolled down all the windows and cranked the music up on full blast. *"It's close to midnight, and something evil's lurking in the dark... Under the moonlight, you see a sight that almost stops your heart..."*

AJ joined in, his raspy voice surprisingly smooth. *"You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it... You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes... You're paralyzed..."*

"Cause this is Thriller!" they all sang at the top of their lungs. *"Thriller night... and no one's gonna save you from the beast about to strike. You know it's Thriller..."* The remaining zombies were starting to emerge from nearby buildings. *"Thriller night... You're fighting for your life inside a killer, thriller toniiiiight..."*

Lights flaring, sirens airing, music blaring, the ambulance rolled down the street, and the undead dragged themselves behind it. Sitting in the open doorway, his legs swinging jauntily, AJ raised his gun and aimed at the front of the pack.

"You hear the door slam..."

BANG!

"...and realize that there's nowhere left to run..." he sang without missing a beat, as the lead zombie dropped, the others stumbling over it.

Brian followed suit. *"You feel the cold hand and wonder if you'll ever see the sun..."* He squeezed the trigger of his rifle, and another zombie fell.

"You close your eyes..." Nick's voice rang out enthusiastically from the front seat, as he poked the barrel of his gun through the open window. *"...and hope that this is just imagination."* His shot took down an incoming ghoul on the sidewalk. *"Girl, but all the while..."*

"You hear the creature creeping up behind..." crooned Kevin, and he turned and tapped the glass partition to get Riley's attention. *"You're outta time..."*

"Cause this is Thriller!" they chorused, and Brian, Kevin, and AJ were suddenly thrown sideways as Riley whipped the ambulance around in a U-turn. *"Thriller night..."* ("Ow!") *"There ain't no second chance against the thing with forty eyes, girl. Thriller..."*

"Whoo-hoo!" Nick howled out his window.

“Thriller night...” The engine revved as Riley slammed the accelerator to the floor, and the ambulance rocketed towards the flock of zombies. *“You’re fighting for your life inside a-”* Brian winced at the impact of a zombie’s body hitting the front fender. *“-killer-”* Another undead body bounced off the ambulance. *“-thriller-”* A third zombie was thrown up onto the windshield. *“-toniiiiight...”* With a sickening creak, the zombie slid down the windshield and off the hood. Brian cringed again as he felt the crunch of its body beneath the front tire.

“Night creatures calling, the dead start to walk in their masquerade...” The ambulance plowed into the walking dead, rolling over their flailing bodies. *“There’s no escaping the jaws of the alien this time...”* Brian stared down in disgust at the flattened zombies that emerged from beneath the ambulance, their bodies crushed, bones mangled, yet in some cases, teeth still gnashing. *“This is the end of your life...”* He pointed his gun and put one out of its misery.

“They’re out to get you... There’s demons closing in from every side...” Even as Riley turned around again and drove past the carnage, more zombies appeared, swarming after them like children chasing an ice cream truck. *“They will possess you... unless you change that number on your dial...”*

“Now is the time...” Nick sang, slinging an arm around Riley’s shoulders while he fired casually out his window with one hand. *“For you and I to cuddle close together...”*

“No,” Riley said, peeling his arm off of her, “this is not the time.”

“All through the night...” Nick went on, grinning at her, *“I’ll save you from the terror on the screen. I’ll make you see...”*

“That this is Thriller...” A volley of gunfire took out zombies in all directions. *“Thriller night... Girl, I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try. Thriller...”*

“Whoo-hoo!” AJ crowed, as his shot took out yet another zombie.

“Thriller night... So let me hold you tight and share a killer, thriller...”

“Ow!” they squealed in unison, as the last zombie dropped.

Nick turned the music down. “Okay, if we were in a zombie musical, that would have to be our closing number.”

“Nah... it’d be the one before the intermission,” AJ argued, as Riley pulled the ambulance to a stop on the side of the road. “Cause we ain’t done here yet. Cage me!” He jumped out of the back of the ambulance, dragging the dog kennel out behind him.

“Yeah,” said Nick, hopping out of the cab, “but what other zombie song is more epic than ‘Thriller’? You gotta save the best for last, dawg.”

AJ considered this for a moment, as Brian helped Kevin get the kennel ready to hoist into a nearby tree. “I dunno... I think you win there, dude. But combine an equally epic, un-zombie-related song with zombie fighting, and you’d still have a pretty sweet finale.” He ducked into the open kennel and sat down, gripping the bars with his fists. “I’ve been caged!”

Brian and the other three grabbed the ropes on the other end of the pulley and heaved, raising AJ high into the air. “What equally epic, un-zombie-related song did you have in mind?” Nick asked, as they secured the ropes to hold AJ in place.

AJ grinned and waved them off to take their places in the surrounding trees with a cryptic, “You’ll see.”

It was good to have some entertainment in the post-apocalyptic world, thought Brian, as he scaled the trunk of a tall maple, straddling one of its thicker branches. Sometimes he felt guilty for laughing or even smiling in this world, a world in which the dead walked, a world in which beautiful women and little girls died and came back to life and died again at the hands of their father. But just as he’d told the countless congregation members he’d counseled before funerals, acceptance was a part of the grief process. At some point, life went on and returned to normal. This life was far from normal, but even so, it was impossible not to laugh at Nick and AJ’s antics.

“Y’all ready?” AJ shouted from the cage. “Bring it on, bitches! Come and get me, you undead motherfuckers!”

They had cleared the area of zombies in the ambulance, but before long, his shouting brought new ones shuffling up to investigate. Just as they had every time before, the living dead clumped together beneath the cage, reaching and moaning, stepping over each other in their mindless attempts to get to their prey.

From his perch, Brian heard AJ’s singing rise above the moans. *“Zombies are walkin’ under me, reachin’ way down low... Ain’t no sound but the sound of their feet, machine gun’s ready to go... Are you ready? Hey! Are you ready for this? Are you hanging on the edge of your seat? Out of the trees, the bullets rip... to the sound of the beat.”*

“EPIC!” Brian heard Nick yell from somewhere across the circle of zombies.

Then the hailstorm of gunfire began, as bullets rained down on the undead. *“Bum bum bum... another one bites the dust!”* sang AJ, as the zombies started to fall. *“Bum bum bum... another ones bites the dust! And another one gone, and another one gone... another one bites the dust!”* He cocked his own rifle, poking

its barrel through the bars of the cage. *“Hey! I’m gonna get you too! Another one bites the dust!”* he belted, as he blew another zombie away.

When the dust had settled on the heap of corpses, they let AJ down. His dark eyes were bright and almost crazed, his smile twisted and maniacal. “What’d you think of my song for the undead, eh?” he asked, quite pleased with himself, as Nick opened the door to his cage.

“Like I said, dude... epic,” Nick replied, slapping him a high five.

Brian watched their interaction with a sad smile, wishing he could be so carefree, wishing he could dismiss the creatures he killed as mindless, soulless monsters. To an extent, of course, he could. It was the only way he could sleep at night, though that was often a struggle, too. But not completely. Because although they were monsters now, he could never forget that they had once been people – husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. They’d once had souls.

He respected that and remembered it, even when the others seemed to forget.

They ate at the club that night. Gretchen and Jo had worked on dinner all afternoon, gathering ingredients and cooking with the electricity supplied by the generators. They had provided quite a feast, spread across a large, round table in the middle of the club’s dining room. It was the first time the ten of them had sat down to a formal meal all together, with no one taking guard duty, hunting zombies, or sleeping off the night shift.

As Brian looked around the table – Gretchen beside him, Riley next to her, then Nick and AJ, Kayleigh and Howie, Jo and Gabby, and Kevin on his other side – it occurred to him again how lucky they were to be alive five weeks after the dead had risen. In another age, he might have used the word “blessed,” but not anymore. There were no blessings, no miracles, only luck. They’d gotten lucky, in surviving the initial zombie outbreak, in finding each other, and in coming together in this fortress. That luck, aided by survival skills and sheer determination, had kept them alive.

Still, he wasn’t surprised when someone suggested they say grace before their meal. It was Jo who proposed it. “I think Kevin should say the grace – if you don’t mind, of course,” she added, looking directly at Kevin. “You’re our leader. You’re the reason we’re all gathered here.”

Kevin shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Brian saw his cousin’s eyes flicker towards him. He quickly looked away. He was relieved when he heard Kevin say, “Sure. Let’s bow our heads.”

Around the circle, they joined hands and lowered their chins to their chests. Brian slipped his hands into Kevin's and Gretchen's, but he kept his eyes open, staring down at his lap. Beside him, Kevin cleared his throat. "Heavenly Father... we thank You for providing us this meal – and Jo and Gretchen, who prepared it for us. We thank You for shining Your light through the darkness of the past few weeks, in order to guide us through it..."

Brian glanced up. Nearly everyone else had their heads down, their eyes closed in prayer, but across the circle, AJ was staring back at him.

"...We thank You for our survival, and we pray for the souls of those who succumbed to the virus. We ask Your forgiveness for the violence we've been forced to commit against the undead, and we also ask that You watch over the loved ones we have lost..."

Their eyes met, and as Kevin finished his solemn prayer, an understanding passed between them.

"...In Your name, we pray. Amen."

"Amen," the others murmured.

"Let's eat," said AJ. Brian shot him a smirk across the table. Out of everyone there, he'd never expected to feel camaraderie with the tattooed atheist who had broken out of drug rehab to join them. On the exterior, they seemed as different as could be. Yet, the saying was true: opposites attract. For the third time that day, Brian was grateful for AJ's presence.

He picked up the nearest dish to pass, and the others followed suit, filling their plates. Spunky trotted laps around the table, eagerly awaiting table scraps. The somber mood set by the prayer lifted as they started to eat, conversation flowing easily in between bites.

"We all still need to stay alert and be cautious. There may still be a few stragglers hanging out in some of the buildings," Kevin said, "but after today, I think we've gotten most of them. We'll need to finish disposing of the bodies tomorrow."

"Ew." Kayleigh made a disgusted face. "Can we please not talk about burning dead bodies while we're eating?"

"Where do you think that meat you're eating came from, Kayleigh?" asked AJ. He snickered when Kayleigh dropped her fork with a look of horror. "That's not chicken..."

"Oh, stop," Jo chided, trying not to smile. "It is too chicken. It came from the restaurant's freezer. The generators kept it frozen."

But Kayleigh ate around the rest of her chicken breast.

“It’s real good,” Brian told Gretchen pointedly. In truth, the chicken was tough and dry from being frozen so long, but he knew she and Jo had worked hard to pull off a homecooked meal.

“Really? Thank you,” Gretchen replied, beaming at his compliment.

“So what now?” Riley asked. “The base is clear, we have plenty of supplies... What’s our plan from here?” Brian could tell she was the type of person who always needed an assignment, a goal to work towards. The way she talked, she’d been a workaholic in her former life as a journalist; downtime probably wasn’t something she was used to.

He wasn’t surprised when Kevin had an answer for her. Kevin, the man with the plan. He was like Riley in that respect, always looking ahead, aiming for some target. “I think our next step needs to be broadening our search for other survivors,” he said slowly, toying with the fork in his hand. “I know we’ve broadcasted on the radio, and we’ve been outside the base perimeter looking, but we need to do more of that. We need to extend our parameters and make sure we’ve checked everywhere. Now that the base is secure, we’ll be able to devote more time and manpower to the search.”

The others nodded in agreement. Though their group of ten had grown close in the month they’d been together, none of them liked to think they were the only ones left alive. They all held on to the hope that, somewhere, there were others like them. Kevin seemed confident that such survivors existed, but others were more skeptical.

“You know I’m down for going outside the base, but do you really think we’re gonna find anyone else, Kevin?” AJ spoke up. “I mean, I know I’m the cynic here, but seriously – it’s been a month, and we’ve heard from nobody since Brian and Gretchen showed up. And did anyone see any signs of life on their way here?”

They exchanged grim looks across the table. Finally, Jo said, “We may not have seen any signs, but we have to believe in what we can’t see. That’s what faith is all about. We have to have faith that God wouldn’t leave us alone in this undead world.”

“What about Noah, Mom?” Gabby countered. “God left him and his family alone. They built their ark, and He flooded the world and killed everyone else, except for them, right?”

Jo paused, thoughtfully rubbing the wooden beads of the rosary she wore around her neck and looking as if she didn’t know quite what to say to that. In his preaching days, Brian would have explained that God was both testing and rewarding Noah’s faith. Noah, because he was righteous and followed the Lord’s

instructions, survived the flood with his family, who went on to repopulate the earth. Now he knew it was just a fable, designed to promote the sort of blind faith Jo was talking about. Be good Christian, and the Lord will save you in the end.

“It’s just a story, Gabby,” he said dully. “That’s all the Bible is, a bunch of stories people wrote a long time ago to tell you what to believe and how to live your life.”

“Brian...” Kevin started with a warning tone, but Brian ignored him.

“There may have been a man named Noah,” he continued in a monotone, not caring who he was offending, “but there was no ark and no flood that wiped out the rest of the world. It didn’t happen.”

Gabby recoiled, her dark eyes narrowing as she frowned. “How do you know?” she challenged him. “It’s ancient history. What if a hundred thousand years from now, people read our diaries and say the world was never taken over by zombies either, that our writing is ‘just a story’?”

Brian offered a patient smile, but before he could reply, Kayleigh jumped in. “They’ve looked for the ark, Gabby, in the mountains in Turkey. They’ve never found it or any proof that it existed. I’m a Christian too, but Brian’s right – you can’t take everything in the Bible literally.”

Everyone looked at Kayleigh, surprised, as always, to hear something insightful come out of her mouth.

Before Gabby could retort again, Jo said, “Kayleigh’s right, Gabby. It goes along with what I was saying, though. Just because you can’t prove something doesn’t mean you shouldn’t believe in it. Whether it really happened or not, the message you should believe is that the Lord shows mercy to those who are faithful.”

“Why believe in something that’s not true?” said Brian abruptly, and the heads of those who had been looking at Kayleigh whipped around to stare at him instead.

“Brian, please,” Kevin pleaded again.

“No, really,” Brian said, pushing back his chair. He stood up, his heart pumping fast and his face heating up, as he looked down at the table of nine. “The Lord shows mercy to those who are faithful? You really think that? All those zombies we killed today... you think none of them had faith when they were still human? God didn’t show them much mercy, did he?” His eyes came to rest on Jo, and though he knew he should stop talking, he let the words continue to spill out of his mouth, releasing the feelings that had been brewing inside of him for over a month. “What about your husband? He wasn’t a good Christian? God didn’t save him.”

Jo’s face had gone white. Beside her, Gabby’s eyes were filling with tears.

There was a loud crash, as Kevin's chair toppled backwards. He had jumped up, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Shut up, Brian. Shut up now," his deep voice demanded.

But Brian could not stop the rush of emotion that was carrying his words. "My wife and daughters were good Christians, the same as I was! You knew them, Kev; you knew they were!" he cried. "If there was a merciful God, he would have saved them, or he would have killed us all! The Lord I believed in wouldn't have let me live and then turned my family into crazed, flesh-eating zombies that I had to kill with my bare hands!"

"Brian!"

The room blurred before him, distorted by the angry tears that stung his eyes. "I was a father!" he sobbed. "No Father would make His children do that!" He looked down at Jo again and bitterly shook his head. "How can you still believe in a merciful God? How can you still have faith in something that doesn't exist?!"

Jo just stared at him, clutching her rosary, tears streaming silently down her cheeks. She looked deflated.

The devastation in her eyes was enough to break Brian. Heart thundering in his ears, he turned and bolted for the door. He flung it open and stormed through it, escaping into the night air.

He took off down the sidewalk, walking without any sense of direction. It was dark and quiet outside. A breeze ruffled the leaves of the nearby palm trees, and the effect was calming. He began to slow down, his pounding footsteps softening to tired shuffles. There was a lone car parked in a parking lot up ahead, and he drifted toward it. The driver's side door was unlocked, so he slid in, slumped over the wheel, and buried his face in his arms.

With loud, racking sobs that shook his entire body, he started to weep. He wept for Leighanne and the twins, whose memory tortured him so. He wept for Jo and Gabby, whom his words had hurt so deeply. He wept for himself, though he knew he wasn't worthy of self-pity.

Crumpled over the steering wheel, he didn't notice the figure that crept out of the shadows, and he jumped when he heard a tap on the window. His head jerked up, his heart leaping into his throat. It slid back down in relief when he saw that it was just Gretchen.

Wordlessly, he reached across to the passenger side door and opened it for her. She slipped inside and shut it softly. "Hey," she whispered.

His voice was a hoarse croak. "Hey."

She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. “I told them I was gonna go and see if you were okay... but I know you’re not. Of course you’re not.”

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have lost control like that. I should never have said all those things.”

“It’s how you feel, though, isn’t it?” Her tone was understanding. “It’d been building up for a long time.”

Straightening up, he turned to her and nodded miserably. “Still... I’m better than that. Or at least I thought I was.”

She offered a sympathetic smile. “Everyone says things they regret.”

“I know. But I don’t, usually. I don’t know what came over me.”

“No one’s perfect. Grief affects people in different ways.”

Brian sniffled and shook his head. “It’s not just grief,” he said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “I feel... lost. Like I don’t know who I am anymore. I know I lost a part of myself when I lost my family, but there’s more to it than that. I can’t explain...”

“You can try,” Gretchen encouraged. “I mean, I’m here to listen, if you want to.”

He looked away, staring out the windshield in silence. For a long pause, neither of them spoke. Then, without looking at her, he confessed, “I lied when I told you I was a music teacher. I’m not.” He could feel his heart thudding against his ribs again, but this time, it was from anticipation and apprehension, rather than anger. He had spewed forth so much verbal diarrhea that night, he had to come clean. He had to explain himself, to make her understand *why*. “When all of this happened, I was a Baptist minister.”

He heard her soft intake of breath and could tell he’d surprised her. “Really? Wow... I had no idea...”

“I didn’t want anyone to know. I disassociated myself from the church, from God, from all of it. I don’t believe it anymore.” He raked a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends of his disheveled curls. “All my ministry, I found myself trying explain how a god that’s supposedly so loving and merciful and all-powerful lets calamities happen to good people. Bad things have happened in my life, too, but I thought I was blessed. The Lord had always given me the strength to overcome. I was a good person, a faithful servant, and he never gave me more than I could handle. But this is too much... too much for anyone. No god would let this happen to the world he created.”

She nodded. "I understand how you feel."

But he could tell she didn't agree with his new beliefs. "You think I'm a bad person?" he asked. "For saying all those things... for forsaking my religion... for going against everything I've ever believed and preached?"

"No, of course not," she said, so firmly that he was forced to look back at her. Her eyes locked with his. "You're a good person, Brian. I've known it since the day I met you. I think... I think this all just affected you so much more because... well, you had the rug swept under you. Like you said, you lived a good life, had a perfect little family, and then it was all just taken away from you. And not in a way that would be easy for anyone to deal with. But especially someone who had always defended God, in a way, and justified His will. To have to figure out how He could let something like this happen... well, I don't know how I'd explain it either. It still makes no sense to me." She paused. "I think the difference between us is, you were so close to God before, you've taken it like a personal insult. Me, I've always believed... but I've never been all that religious. Maybe that's why I don't blame God."

"I don't blame him," Brian said bitterly, clenching his jaw. "I blame whoever started this... the terrorists, or whoever they are. They're to blame. Not God. Because the way I see it, there is no God."

She touched his arm, rubbing it lightly. "I won't argue with you. Thanks for coming clean with me. That had to have made you feel a little better, right?"

Reluctantly, he nodded. And it was true. His heartbeat was slowing again, and his chest felt a little lighter, as if a weight had been lifted. "Thanks for listening," he whispered. "And for understanding."

She smiled. "Anytime."

They walked together back to the club, where the others had finished dinner and were cleaning up. They all stopped and looked at Brian as he walked in.

"I'm sorry," he said at once, fixing his eyes on Jo and Gabby, in turn. "I lost my temper. What I said was completely uncalled for, and I'm sorry." When no one spoke, he added, "I used to be religious. When I lost my family, I sort of lost my religion too. I didn't mean to take it out on any of you, and I'm sorry for offending or upsetting you."

He'd rehearsed what he was going to say the whole way back and decided to keep his explanation brief and vague. It had been hard enough telling Gretchen the whole story. He didn't want to go through it again with the rest of the group, not

that night. His meltdown had left him emotionally drained and mentally exhausted.

“You’re forgiven,” Jo said, but her voice was clipped, her body language stiff. He could tell she hadn’t recovered from the way he’d talked about her dead husband. Gabby, too, was still shooting him daggers. He ignored it, knowing she would need time to heal. He’d struck a raw nerve in both of them to prove his point, and he hated himself for it.

He was relieved when they finally finished cleaning up the club and headed back to the chapel. It was as hot and stuffy as ever inside, but at least he could seclude himself from the others, curl up on his makeshift bed and feign sleep until the real thing claimed him.

And that was what he did, lying awake until the sounds of the night faded away, one by one, leaving him with only his thoughts to fill the silence.

PART VI: NO REST FOR THE WICKED

Chapter 61

This was one of the hardest days of my life (up until that point) - not the hardest, but one of. I fell apart. I just fucking just shattered. Last damn straw for me, and I broke, because it was my fault. And she was there for me, once again. When everything fell apart around me, there she was, helping me try to keep myself together. I don't know why. I don't get why. When I manage to look in a mirror, I still see that loser who never made it. The guy who failed at everything he tried. Family. Acting. School. Relationships. I look, and I just see the failure.

What does she see?

It all goes back to loyalty, ya know? It can save you. It can kill you.

Of course I was finally allowed to really go on a zombie run. Not just the guard duty or sniping where Kevin allowed it (because Riley was hella stubborn with him about me being able to handle it, saying she'd keep an eye on me). This time, I mean a good ol' zombie hunt. Like the ones I always went on before my head fucked up. It was my first time since the stupid seizure that I'm on these damn meds for. So what happened?

Once again, I failed. And this time, it really cost me.

Yet, there she was, by my side.

I don't think that was the day I fell in love with her.

I think that was just the day I realized I had.

Song quote of the entry... which, I will say, wasn't a classic song or a song I'd have listened to in the world pre-zombies. It's country. Brian played it for me the other day, and it made me think of that day. So, I'm quoting it because it fits.

Okay, for real now... Song Quote of the Entry:

*“And I wonder if I ever cross your mind?
For me it happens all the time.
It's a quarter after one, I'm a little drunk and I need you now.
Said I wouldn't call but I lost all control and I need you now.
And I don't know how I can do without.
I just need you now.*

*Oh whoa
Yes I'd rather hurt than feel nothing at all.
It's a quarter after one, I'm all alone and I need you now.
And I said I wouldn't call but I'm a little drunk
and I need you now.
Well I don't know how I can do without.
I just need you now
I just need you now.
Oh baby I need you now.”*

- Lady Antebellum, “Need You Now”

Monday, June 11, 2012

Week Eight

“We're walking ducks...” AJ retorted, as he walked down the abandoned road, Kevin and Nick traipsing beside him with Spunky.

“I thought it was sitting ducks?”

“Well, we ain't sitting, are we?”

“I'm telling you guys, I saw something in those houses. I'm sure of it.”

Kevin nodded. “Keep an eye out. It won't be long before they catch our scent.”

“You really think we're not the only ones left, Nick?”

“AJ, I know you think we’re it. But I don’t believe that. How can we be the only ones lucky enough to survive? We’ll find them.”

“We shouldn’t lose hope; maybe they were just trying to stay safe. We need to check, to make sure. The more people we have, the better chance we have at surviving.”

Nick nodded, as he followed the two best shooters of their group. The base had finally been cleared of zombies, after two months of tirelessly hunting them down. The methods had gotten creative, including the idea of leading the zombies out with the ambulance blaring *Thriller*, much to Nick’s own delight. Now the former sniping job had changed to keeping the entrance properly guarded, so that none could get back inside the base. It seemed, for now, the group finally had a clear zone of their own. Precautions were still taken, yet everyone seemed to breathe just a bit easier than before.

Because of this, they were finally able to execute what Kevin had been planning for some time. The large group, which had long since begun to feel like family, started to split up, so that they could move into some of the homes on the base. Nick, Riley, Gretchen and Brian chose a house that was sandwiched between one occupied by Howie, AJ, and Kayleigh, and another one where Jo, Kevin and Gabby lived. Riley and Gretchen had become quite close and insisted the four of them share a place. Kevin had developed a fatherly bond with Gabby and felt she and her mother needed him for extra protection. And oddly, Howie and AJ now had a camaraderie that no one had expected, and Kayleigh trusted them more than anyone else.

Still, the one thought weighing upon them all was the lack of additional survivors. As much as he wanted to truly believe what he’d told AJ and Kevin, Nick wondered if there were any, at least in Tampa, maybe even Florida. No one had seen any signs of life anywhere on their trip to the base, and wouldn’t that have been when they’d see the most? People trying to escape or find help? Or the various trips AJ or Kevin had taken, sweeping the area further and further away from the place they now called home... None had been successful, even with Kevin risking their own safety by calling for survivors through his bullhorn.

All of it left Nick to question what he wanted to so desperately to believe.

Still, he found himself feeling the need to be hopeful. To be that dreamer who always tried to see the best in things. He could be wrong, and he knew it would be far from the first time. So he would do his damndest to keep his doubts to himself, to convince the others that they weren’t alone, and that they’d find more people someday soon. AJ was the realist of the group; Nick, on the other hand, fought to be the optimist.

Spunky growled more and more frequently, as they got further from the Hummer and closer to the elementary school in which Nick thought he'd seen signs of life. It was a familiar sight, West Shore Elementary, the school he and his sister BJ had gone to for a short time. The building was two stories, red brick and surrounded by trees. Across the street was a row of little houses from the neighborhood Nick once lived in. His family had moved across town around the time Aaron and Angel were born. Nick had just turned eight, and BJ was only six and in kindergarten. That had been before the fights, the tension, and the divorce. The homes were modest, older, and gave Nick another stabbing pain that he forced himself to ignore.

It doesn't matter. All memories, in the past. Dead with them.

AJ and Kevin moved around the parking lot, peering into the few cars found there. Nick, however, inched closer to the school building. A flash of movement caught his eye, and he opened the front door.

"Be careful, Nick!" Kevin scolded, hearing the groan the door gave.

"Don't go in by yourself, man."

"It's alright. This time I *know* I saw something, someone..." Suddenly, Spunky barked loudly, running ahead between Nick's legs.

"Spunky!" Nick yelled, chasing after her. His feet pounded against the pavement, in sync with his heart, as he ignored the yells from both AJ and Kevin behind him. He ran down the darkened hallways of his first school, light peering through the windows and casting an eerie glow throughout the building. Unable to see the retriever, he followed the sound of her growls.

"Nick!" AJ called. Nick could hear his heavy panting as he ran after him, his footsteps reverberating through the dark, empty halls. Kevin stayed in the doorway, presumably keeping watch, so no unexpected company would get in.

Nick recklessly pursued Spunky, with no thoughts about the noise he made. The golden retriever he loved so much bounded ahead, in pursuit of something beyond Nick's senses. Finally, he was forced to pause, to catch his breath, as his lungs burned for air. He panted heavily, bent over and still out of shape from the partying life he'd led before the world was taken over by the undead. He could still hear AJ, trying to catch up.

That was when he heard the sound that sent chills dancing along his spine: the moans the undead produced when they discovered a member of the living. His body protested, as did AJ when he finally rounded the corner, only to see Nick sprint ahead once more. His face was damp and sweaty from the heat and humidity multiplied inside the musty building, turning red as he exerted himself

beyond his own expectations. The moans grew louder, as Nick went further into the school, bursting through the double doors and into the cafeteria.

There, amidst the tables, was a horde of animated corpses. The stench slammed into Nick immediately, now that he was so close to so many. He felt the bile begin to rise in the back of his mouth and swallowed it back down with a gulp. Spunky was only feet ahead of him, barking and growling at the incoming creatures. The groans rattled in their rotting throats when the scent of Nick hit them.

He readied his gun, firing shots at those approaching him. This had been what he'd seen. Simply more zombies within a building. Nothing of the living. He'd screwed up again. Down, the zombies fell, one after another, but there were simply too many for him to tackle on his own. Spunky seemed to sense this, as she lunged at them, trying to trip them up in an attempt to protect her master.

"Spunky, NO!" Nick screamed, about to run in himself. He was grabbed by the collar by AJ.

"Come on!"

He winced at the sound of his faithful dog's yips, as the zombies overtook her. They began to feast upon her, biting eagerly into her flesh. They resembled an ant hill, feasting on a piece of fruit in the summer sun. The smell of blood hit the air. Spunky's whines shredded Nick's heart to pieces. He couldn't even see her anymore, within the horde, as she was being devoured alive.

AJ tugged at him again, as he tried to save her once more. His arms wrapped around Nick's chest, keeping him from going irrationally into the nightmare playing out in front of them.

"NO! I have to save her!"

"Come on! You can't do anything for her. They're gonna be back on us any minute, and there's too many of these fuckers to take on!"

"AJ, let me fucking go!"

"No! Not without breaking my goddamn arms, I ain't!"

The sounds of his companion were suddenly silenced mid-bark, and AJ forcibly dragged him away.

The image haunted his mind. His last friend of the world before, eaten before his very eyes. All because of him. She had wanted to protect him. He was the one who had wanted to go in there. Once again, he had failed.

But this time, it had cost him more than ever.

The night was peaceful.

They were in their new homes that night, and no roaming undead could be spotted from the back porch, where Nick sat on the porch swing, the rifle laying across his lap. Even though he knew the zombies couldn't clear the high fences that surrounded the perimeter, he felt the need to be cautious.

Without the fluorescent lights of the world impeding, the stars in the sky could be seen clearer than Nick had ever seen them before in his life. He swung back and forth, ever so gently, simply staring up at the stars. He hadn't cried at all that day. Not when he'd seen his loving dog being eaten alive. Not after. He hadn't even cried when he had learned about the death of his family the day the dead rose, or when his toddler undead brother had attacked him. Instead, he had simply buried his feelings away, with all the other pain he wished not to show. He did now as he'd done before. Whenever someone asked if he was okay, he simply nodded in response, cracking a joke to ease the tension.

It didn't ease the pain. Nothing did. But it hid it well enough, so it sufficed.

"Nick?" His head turned to see Riley waiting in the doorway. She was finally in something other than the army garb they'd all been wearing when they stayed in the church... SpongeBob boxers and a t-shirt, actually, with her hair pulled back in a loose bun, a few tendrils falling into her face. It made Nick wonder if she had raided one of the former occupants' closets. They had split up the rooms earlier. Nick, not caring, took the downstairs room, Brian the bedroom upstairs, and Gretchen and Riley had decided to share the master bedroom.

"Hey," he finally said after a long pause. Nick didn't want to be alone, not then, but he didn't want to be bothered either. He was just in a place of numbness and pain, flitting back and forth between the two like an indecisive kid at a candy store.

"Mind if I..." She gestured at the swing bench.

"It's cool."

Riley settled next to him, giving a gentle smile as she looked up at the sky. "Wow, the sky's so clear. Guess that's what happens when humanity dies. The lights go out, and you can see the stars again."

Nick just nodded, his hands fingering his gun.

“You okay?” She scoffed at herself. “Dumb question. Sorry. Look, I’ll just... leave you alone.” She seemed jumpy, unlike her normal behavior, making Nick place his hand on hers.

“No, stay. Really. I’m not okay, but it ain’t a dumb question.”

“You hide it well, you know. You could let it out. It wouldn’t kill you. It’d probably help.”

Nick sighed, letting his head rest naturally upon her shoulder. There were no thoughts; it was simply instinctive. “It was my fault. I led her in there. I couldn’t kill them all off, so she went to protect me. It’s my fault.”

The two swung together, a cool breeze blew around them, ruffling their hair. “It’s not your fault. You went in ‘cause you thought there were people; that’s what Kevin said. That’s you caring about people. Spunky loved you, enough to sacrifice herself to keep you safe. It’s sad, and it’s tragic. But it’s not your fault, Nick.”

“I bring bad luck to everything I fucking touch, and I always come out okay. How is that right?”

“Are you gonna try and blame yourself for the zombie nightmare? That it’s your fault your family died? That’s bull, and you know it. You were unconscious in a freaking hospital. If it wasn’t for you, I’d probably be dead right now. Or... ya know, undead. Blame yourself for shit that’s actually because of you... but don’t take on all the bullshit as yours to blame.”

He remained silent, his eyes glistened in the moonlight. The two continued to swing, neither of them saying anything, exchanging simple glances and nothing more for some time. The crickets had returned; they could hear them chirping into the night, over a chorus of distant moans from zombies he knew to be outside the base. Finally, Nick broke the silence.

“Thanks, Riley.”

“It’s what I’m here for.”

What he did next had no rhyme or reason to it. All it took was a simple look into her eyes. He saw her there, smiling softly at him. He leaned in, his lips meeting hers beneath the moonlight. The kiss continued for a few moments, before the two pulled away. Riley stared at him.

“Sorry, I-”

“No, you have no idea how long I’ve been wanting to do that.” She pulled him closer to her, and they kissed once more. It was bittersweet bliss. He wasn’t sure

he was supposed to feel happy then, but couldn't help it, as the feeling rose within.

"I should've done that earlier, but I was afraid you'd slap me for it."

The two laughed contentedly. He was surprised at how good that felt, how it soothed the pain of loss still beating inside his heart. He lay back, forcing Riley to do the same beside him. She settled within Nick's arms afterwards, smiling up at him. They found comfort within the shared embrace, falling asleep easily, and feeling the safest either had felt in a long time.

Chapter 62

Life.

Death.

I used to crave death once. I'd challenge it and beckon it to come at me so I could make it my bitch before I let it take me to abyss I thought I wanted so badly. I would do anything to escape the world and life I despised once. And then the world ended. Then I met the others.

Funny how a fucking apocalypse can change your outlook on everything.

I have a sense of friends, a sense of family. Stuff I didn't have before, with the exception of my mom, really. She's the one person I still miss. It's also amazing how shit like that, shit I never considered important, is what changed my view on all that. Maybe I didn't consider it so damn vital cause in my eyes I never had it till now. Drugs solving things, my ass. Fuck you, undead therapists! All I needed was people to give me a chance. It's done a lot more than those pills.

Of course, as soon as I stop wanting death, that's when it comes my way. When I finally begin to appreciate the life I've been given, and no longer want to throw it away... that's when death finally receives all my old challenges. That's when it beckons me, hearing my call far too late.

So fucking typical.

Friday, July 6, 2012

Week Eleven

"You're worried about your boy, aren't you?" AJ asked Riley, as Kevin drove the ambulance outside the base. They'd thought perhaps the cage idea would work

just as well outside the base and help keep the base itself clear of any nearby zombies wanting to roam inside. AJ and Riley were camped out in the back, taking pot shots at the corpses that followed. While AJ's hit the mark, hers were missing more than usual. It almost amused him; a lot amused him these days, though.

"I am not."

The main hunting group had split up, for a change. Nick and Brian had driven off to one side of town and had been given the additional help of Howie, since theirs was supposed to be "light" hunting. AJ, Riley, and Kevin went to the other side, intending to hunt more and stay out longer. Nick's and Brian's excursion was yet another search for people. As they'd had no luck with the previous searches, they thought perhaps spreading themselves out might garner them more luck after over a month of nothing. Still, from the looks of it, the separation was making Riley more anxious than normal. AJ hummed to himself as he shot random zombies from the back of the vehicle, the doors open so he could take down the marks. They were also supposed to try and seek out ghouls to kill, to clear out as much as possible, making their trip a hunting search and rescue, so to speak.

"You are too; hey, I'm glad someone's getting some."

"AJ! Oh my god, you're impossible. We're nothing close to that yet."

"Key word being *yet*, honey bunch."

"It's not like we'll tell you if we get there."

He shrugged, lining up his shot carefully. "Won't need you to; guys know that shit. The signs are clearer than the purple spots of the Osiris Virus. Hey, pop the CD in the player for me, Kev."

Riley rolled her eyes as she leaned out the back to fire a few times herself. "You're getting as bad as him, you know."

"He must be doing something right." AJ grinned as he took down another member of the undead. "HA! Gotta do better than moan and shuffle, you cocksuckers!"

"At least you're not singing *Thriller* all the time," Kevin remarked, as they pulled into a seemingly empty park. Riley helped Kevin unload the kennel, while AJ climbed on top of the ambulance to get a better shot on any zombies that got too close before they set up.

The young woman smiled to herself. "It's weird, but that's becoming my favorite song. But do *not* tell him that; I'll never hear the end of it."

“Step right up and get your brain blasted! That’s right, fresh living meat here, ready to blast your ass into oblivion. Best me and get the prize! Braaaaaaaains!” AJ yelled, waving his gun around in hopes of attracting some undead while waiting. While he succeeded, it wasn’t a big enough of a horde to satisfy him, as he took them down quickly, making them fall like rotting ducks in a row. He grinned satisfactorily, adjusting his shades.

Once they had the rope swung over the branch, AJ jumped down and walked over with a broad grin on his face. He knew that he enjoyed this too much, but at the same time, he couldn’t help it. This made him feel useful, gave him something to focus on and the ability to fight the depression before it could sink in. It connected him to a positive reality, as twisted as he knew that would sound if he ever said it aloud. He always knew he’d find his niche in the world, but what he hadn’t guessed was that it would take an apocalypse to make that happen.

Was I really that fucked up?

“Cage me, baby! Lock me up! AJ’s been a naughty motherfucker!”

Riley laughed as she and Kevin secured him inside. Once the kennel was securely latched, AJ gripped the bars like he was in jail. He actually did know what that was like; he’d done a few stints for petty theft during some of his poorer eras. However, jail was never this much fun. The other two forcibly pulled him up and above the zombies’ reach. AJ snickered to himself, as they went to climb their own tree posts, not too far away. He adjusted his sunglasses, reloaded his gun, and gazed down below. “Yooo-hoo...here, zombies, zombies, zombies...”

“You’re insane!” he heard Riley yell.

“Come on, fuckers! It’s chow time! Hey Kevin, next time we do this, I need a bell. Or a triangle.”

Slowly they came, as if they truly were following AJ’s summons. He grinned as he saw them below. Aiming carefully, he fired off the rounds, yawning a bit. He needed a new thrill. As the world ended, adrenaline had become his new addiction, helping him replace the drugs and at least ignore his urges for the bliss of alcohol. AJ did wish they’d stumble onto other people, despite his obvious cynicism that it wouldn’t happen. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to find others; he did, badly. It was just that the part of him that always had to stay with the cruelty reality provided wouldn’t let him believe it without solid proof.

They had yet to find any.

AJ let his voice carry to the zombies hopelessly reaching for him from below. There was no real conscious thought to their actions. They were mindlessly groping for him, their prey, kept just out of reach in order to keep them there. Around them was a pile of fallen bodies, evidence of how much work had been

done in such a seemingly short time. His eyes skipped around, spotting Kevin sitting comfortably against the bark of another tree. One would think Kevin was watching a sports game or something, given his ease in that position.

While he reloaded his gun, a song came to him. It wasn't even remotely fitting to the situation. He calmly wiped his brow, adjusting his beloved sunglasses, and glanced down below, to the reanimated audience that was waiting there for him, eagerly hoping for his arrival. His smooth voice was bold and strong as it carried over the chorus of moans. *"If I can see it... then I can do it... if I just believe it... there's nothing to it..."*

A series of shots rang out, striking the incoming dead down. AJ focused on the inner circle just below him. He could have done this all day if someone managed to feed him through the case somehow. *"I believe I can fly..."*

A new sound came to his ears, loud, sharp and close, but he couldn't recognize the source. *"I believe I can touch the sky..."*

BANG-CRACK!

The kennel jerked, causing AJ to turn almost wildly, even though he couldn't see anything through the other side. Even if he could, he couldn't turn well enough to do so.

Have those rotting pieces of shit found a way to reach me? He shook the thought away. That was impossible. A squirrel could have rattled it. Or a bird, for all he knew. He shifted, ready to take aim again. The kennel jerked a second time, forcibly, thrusting him forward and slamming his head into the bars.

"What in the flying squirrel's left nut?!"

CRACK!

Suddenly, the kennel wasn't jerking anymore. This time, it was falling. AJ suddenly felt the ridiculous urge to pray to the God he didn't believe in. He could hear Riley's screams, as he plummeted to the ground. What took only moments felt like years, as his life flashed before his eyes. It didn't take long; his life had been a series of experiments and outsider experiences. The fall wasn't going to be what killed him; that he knew.

It would be the zombies.

He was going to be that piece of candy he'd drop on anthills as a kid. They'd swarm him, reach for him, and devour him alive. The same exact way they had done to Spunky, only two and a half weeks before. He would know hell as they slowly ate him. He could fight, and fight he would, to bring as many as he could

down with him. Still, the end would be the same. AJ only wondered if he'd be eaten fully or turned into one of *them*.

The kennel crashed onto the ground, ceasing his train of thought. He was thrown against the back of the kennel, and by pure luck, the door didn't burst open. His head slammed the top, and he grunted in pain, as he rolled along the ground like a discarded toy.

"AJ!" he could hear Kevin bellow, as he attempted to regain his senses.

He was surrounded, and he was trapped, in a mess of still corpses and still-reaching decomposing arms trying to get their latest meal out of its lunchbox. He breathed slowly, taking in his current situation, as he did a quick self-assessment. He was bruised; he was shaken. He had not been bitten, they could not get in just yet, and no bones were broken. Positives. This was the first time in his life that the cool detachment his clinical depression gave him actually had a use. AJ could analyze everything, in a way he wouldn't have been able to, had he not been so distant from his own emotions.

Zoning out on the yells coming from his two companions, AJ reached for his gun. He only had one option, really. He'd have to fight his way out. Shoot the closest ones and then hope he could blow his way out without any scratches or bites. It would require a miracle.

But already, he'd survived, against every odd around. Who said it couldn't happen twice? The cynical voice that always rested within his mind said so, but this time, he ignored it. Listening to it would cost him his life, he knew. He loaded his weapon, hearing the click above all the moans. It felt final. Like it would be the last time he'd do this, or second to last, only to a suicide shot to the skull. Silly thoughts, ones he couldn't afford to entertain, but they floated through his mind all the same. He reached his hand through the bars to quickly unlatch himself and pushed on the door. It wouldn't open. He growled furiously.

"Fucker must've gotten warped when I fell."

"AJ!" he could hear Kevin's country-tinged voice cry. "We're trying to get to you! Are you alright?" AJ knew the real questions behind that. Was he *alive*? Was he *infected* by the bite they all so feared?

"I'm fine! I'm just stuck in this goddamn cage!"

Shots resounded around him, and the thumps of bodies hitting the ground soon followed. AJ didn't know where Riley and Kevin were. He didn't know what their plan was. He knew they would try to help, that they would do everything they could to save him. Would that be enough? He gritted his teeth. It didn't matter. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't rely on them getting to him before

the ghouls did. Bracing himself, he slammed up against the cage door, forcing it open.

He rolled out onto the grassy floor. His nose was hit with the stench of decomposition, closer than ever, as he stared into the glassy, fogged eyes of an unmoving zombie. The bullet that marked its head could be clearly seen. Jerking, he jumped to his feet and shoved his way through the bodies, shooting what he could. Without aim, the shots were off-course and random. He ceased fire, afraid of a random bullet striking his two companions. AJ shoved against the horde, trying to have as little physical contact as possible.

He was forcing his way through. The gun had become a weapon in a new form, a way to bash biting heads aside before they could sink their teeth in. The sound of gunfire grew closer, and finally, AJ felt the first spark of hope that he could possibly get out alive.

It was that moment of distraction that the animated corpses needed.

A pair of teeth dove into the inked flesh of his arm, ripping into his wrist. AJ roared in pain, tore his arm away, and fired off a round to its skull, as quick as lightning. The sharp reflexes were unable to save him. His mind registered that fact as he finally escaped the mob, pushing past Riley and Kevin, who were trying to force their way through it. A mess of scattered bodies lay behind them, an undead game of fifty-two pick up.

“AJ!”

He ignored them.

“AJ!”

AJ said nothing as he retreated into the vehicle with a slam of the door. What did it matter? He knew his future. His only choice. Life had nothing else to offer. Life itself was just a joke once more. Not that any of it counted. Nope. All that was left was the hope that he'd be able to muster enough courage to do what he must. He was a dead man walking.

His last decision would be to prevent that from becoming more than just a metaphor.

AJ stuffed his hands in his pockets as he walked inside the church. Kevin knew he'd been bitten, as did Riley, and Jo, from having to treat the wound earlier. But Kevin had felt the need to inform everyone else before he did the deed.

He felt so self-conscious about the bite. He glanced at it once more as he pulled his hand from his pocket. It was a perfect half moon, red and raw. Already, bruises appeared around it, along with a slight tinge AJ assumed had to be from infection. He sighed. There was no denying it. He'd gotten the kiss of death that day, or bite of death, to be more accurate.

He thought of a line of poetry then, suddenly missing the books of poems he'd left behind at the Center. *Two roads diverged in a wood...* Both lead to death for him now.

Everyone was waiting for him in the chapel when he walked in. He glanced around; it felt weird now, being in there, after living in an actual house for a month. Kayleigh and Howie weren't the best roommates at times, but they weren't as bad as he had expected either – more so Howie than Kayleigh. Brian was watching him cautiously from the pew closest to the door, Gretchen at his side. Beside them were Nick and Riley; those two were standing, Nick's arms around Riley, as she kept her eyes away from him. Further down was Howie, giving Kayleigh a look as she cried into a handkerchief, unable to remain composed. Gabby sat there, saying nothing, staring at the floor, as Jo wrung her hands nervously beside her. At the end, by the altar, where shattered glass still littered the floor from the attack that seemed suddenly like years ago, stood Kevin. His jade eyes were clouded, swirling with a mixture of emotions AJ knew was his fault.

They were silent as he walked down the aisle. He took another long look at his wrist and a deep breath to regain his own composure. AJ knew he had to steady himself. He didn't fear death. He used to be suicidal and beckon for it. He only feared becoming one of *them*. That was why suicide, that act that had once been considered so wrong, was now his only way out. It truly was the best option now. It felt so ironic.

"We're meeting 'cause I fucked up."

"AJ-" Kevin started.

"No, dude, really. I got my ass bit." He held up his wrist now, to let everyone see. "So this is... Well, Kevin wanted me to do this, before I go and splatter my brains up against the wall. It fucking sucks, but I ain't becoming one of those mind-craving shitheads."

"You can't kill yourself!" Brian suddenly cried, rising up from his pew. "How do you know you'll turn?"

Jo turned, giving Brian a look. Although things had settled down, there were still tense moments between them. It looked like Jo had forgiven, but had not quite forgotten. Or vice versa; AJ wasn't exactly sure. But ever since Brian's outburst

that had shocked them all two months before, the two rarely agreed on anything. Almost out of spite, it seemed to AJ.

“I saw what happened to those who got bitten. The infection hit them faster than anything else. They changed quick...” She paused, obviously bothered, but then said what AJ knew she would say. “You’ll need to do it soon. It’s for the good of... of us all...”

Nick stared at Jo. “But have you seen anyone who was immune to the Osiris Virus actually get bitten? How do we know a bite will even affect us?”

Gretchen nodded, watching AJ with cautious eyes. “I can’t see why a bite would infect us, when the virus itself couldn’t.”

“We survived, for God knows why, but how do we even know we’re immune to it completely? It could’ve just been a strong resistance that can’t fight a direct infection. I saw what this did to people in the hospitals...” Riley replied, pulling gently away from Nick. “...I hate saying this, but if he doesn’t do it, he could end up killing us all.”

Nick stared at her, shocked at her reply, before turning to Kevin. AJ simply watched him, the optimist who always had to believe in the best. When he couldn’t, that was when he got lost. “Kevin, you’re not going to let AJ do it... are you?”

Their leader looked downward with a gentle nod. “I have to think about our best chance for survival. I saw what happens to those who have been bitten, too.”

“But you don’t know it’ll happen to AJ, too!” Kayleigh screamed, her face red and blotchy from her tears. AJ suddenly felt guilty for making her so upset. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt responsible for her lately.

The business man stared at her. “But he could kill us all.”

“But he may not!” Brian piped up again. “This is ridiculous. It’s bad enough we have to kill all those *things* that were once human beings. At least they’re already dead. I am not about to approve of AJ killing himself for what *may* happen!”

“Exactly! What he said.”

“And if he does turn? He could start killing people easily as we slept, Nick.”

“I don’t wanna see AJ kill himself!” Gabby cried. “I’ve seen too many die already!”

“Gabby, we don’t want him to do it... but he has no choice.”

“Yes, he does!”

“Brian!”

“Well, he’s right. He does. We could wait and see...”

“Fine idea. Good to know we’ll find out who’s right as Zombie AJ tries to eat our brains for breakfast and liver for lunch. Maybe he can even have spleen for supper.”

“The sarcasm ain’t necessary, Rye!”

“Well, you want to pretend it’ll all be okay, when it likely won’t be...” Her tone was softer now, as she turned toward Nick, lost within the squabbles that had broken out between the group.

AJ stood there, almost forgotten. “Yo!” The fighting continued. He placed his forefinger and thumb in his mouth, giving a piercing whistle. Everyone silenced as they stared at him. “Fuck, let’s vote on this shit then,” he said, with a roll of his eyes.

Kevin nodded. “All for having AJ handle this himself.”

Five hands rose. Riley, Howie, Kevin, AJ, and Jo all voted for him to do the deed himself. AJ wanted to groan. He already knew how this vote was going to go.

“All for waiting it out to see what happens.”

He glanced around, nodding at his own suspicions. Brian, Nick, Kayleigh, Gretchen, and Gabby voted against him. “And now what? It’s a tie.”

Brian stared him down, their eyes meeting silently in almost an understanding. “We can strap you down, make sure that even if you did turn, you couldn’t get to us. If you did, one of us could... do it.”

His cousin pondered this, rubbing his chin. “We can use the ambulance, and lock you in, too. In case you break free.”

“I guess that could work...”

“Then we can wait and see what happens.”

“Better than killing him straight off...”

They all walked outside, heading to where the ambulance waited. Once there, Kevin opened the back doors, stepping aside so that AJ could get in. He lay down

on the stretcher, as Nick helped Kevin strap him down. He smirked at them, knowing the others were within earshot outside the vehicle.

“Well, on the bright side, I was always into bondage. Anyone wanna find me an undead hooker for when I turn?”

Nick chuckled, tightening his bonds. “Don’t worry. I don’t think you’ll turn, man.”

“Why not?”

A simple shrug. “Just a hunch.”

Once he was fastened down, they both climbed out. Even though he couldn’t lift his head up far to see them, AJ could feel their stares upon him. The silence was almost enough to drive him crazy. It was tense-filled and awkward.

Kevin nodded. “We’ll check on you in the morning.”

The doors shut, and AJ was left within the darkness.

Chapter 63

If I had to pick one word that defined my entire life, I actually could. I bet people would think that’s weird, to be able to sum up your whole life with one word. I don’t think anyone else in the group could, to be honest. But me? Yes, I can do it. Maybe that just says something about me. Probably not in a good way. But anyways, if someone asked me to, I’d be able to within a heartbeat. You know what it would be?

It would be “Why?”

I’ve asked this so many times in my life. Far too many, actually.

Here’s a few that came up pretty often:

Why did my mom have to die? Why can’t I find someone when my brothers can? Why don’t people understand me? Why did this happen? Why is this story important? Why are the people supposed to care? Why can’t I let people in? Why do people not realize how important my career is to me?

Or, here are a few more recent ones:

Why did the world have to end this way? Why did so many have to die? Why did they have to reanimate as zombies? Why did someone have to do this? Why can't we find anyone? Why does Nick care the way he does about me? Why couldn't I have let people in before this happened? Why didn't I appreciate what I had?

Why?

Why?

Why?

I hate not having the answers. I hate knowing that I may never get any. That just goes against my every fiber. I just, I like to know things. I like to have a plan, a goal. It's not knowing that's scary. Combine that with the undead, and it turns into fear central. With a lot of questions when I try to sleep at night, it's why I don't sleep well anymore.

*Here's the big question, one I know we've all been asking since *Infernal Friday* set us all on this highway to hell. (Good thing Nick doesn't read this; he'd start singing after seeing that last sentence.) But it's a question that's been plaguing me, the person who always has to have a plan, have an answer, since the beginning.*

Why did we survive?

Why?

Saturday, July 7, 2012

Week Eleven

The morning didn't start well. The night had been one of restless sleep. Riley turned over in her bed, seeing Gretchen sleep no more soundly than she had on the other side of the room. The room wasn't too different from how they'd found it originally. All they had done was remove the pictures of the now undead residents and have Brian and Nick remove the king-sized bed so that they could replace it with two full-sized ones and shift the furniture accordingly, so that everything would fit nicely in the large and airy room.

Riley sighed, staring up at the ceiling. The past couple nights, she hadn't slept in there, anyway. Instead, she'd been sleeping with Nick in the most literal sense: fully clothed in pajamas and his arms around her. It made her feel safe and soothed her, despite the distant moans that they could still hear faintly from outside the base. On a night when she feared for the life of a man she now considered family, she'd needed it desperately.

But of course, that night, it didn't happen. They'd argued instead about AJ, whose fate awaited them that very morning. Out of fear and frustration with each other, they'd left the ambulance, going back and forth all the way to the house. It had ended in doors slamming, rather than apologies.

In all actuality, she really hoped Nick was right. She prayed that AJ had somehow survived the night alive and well, rather than dead and reanimated. Still, Riley didn't regret what she had said. She hadn't wanted to say it, but her analytical mind had immediately shot to that conclusion the same way Kevin's had. She rolled over in her bed again, closing her eyes and willing the sleep to come. If AJ turned, he could then contaminate them all, leaving them to the same fate as the rest of their world. And logically, it seemed that was going to happen. Even AJ himself knew it.

She wished she could be as optimistic as Nick. A small smile came. He was always looking to the brighter side of things. It was an ability she lacked. Not that she was pessimistic... She could be optimistic, if the evidence supported it, so to speak. That was partly why she'd been so drawn to him, his innate skill at always seeing the lighter side of everything. He could be the hope she lacked in her own reality. The smile faded. At least he could be when they weren't arguing.

"Can't sleep either, huh?" Gretchen asked, as she sat up, stretching.

Riley did the same, finally giving up. "Of course not. How could I?"

Her friend gave her a sympathetic smile as she put on her glasses. "I know. Brian and I could hear you and Nick arguing downstairs from up here. And..." She trailed off, leaving unsaid what was on both their minds. AJ.

"Exactly." Riley clutched the pillow close to her chest. "I could've used the comfort last night, too. Us fighting just made it all worse. I didn't want to say it, you know that, right?"

"I know. No one wants it..."

"I just didn't see another choice." Her eyes shifted downwards to the pale blue, plush carpeting. "I don't think Nick realizes just how much I want to be wrong for once."

The faintest beginning of a smirk could be seen on the former teacher's face. "How often are you wrong?"

"Honestly? This is gonna sound cocky... not often. But I'd like there to be a first time for everything."

Nick was waiting in the living room when she came down the stairs. He looked like he'd slept about as well as she had. He was dressed simply, in a random shirt and jeans, and had his trusty axe in hand. There were lines from the pillow still on his face, his hair wild and all over the place. His eyes were bloodshot, and she could see the bags under them. Still, she smiled. Even though she was sure he was mad at her still, she smiled. These days, it was hard for her to look at Nick and not smile. There was just that quality about him.

"Look... I'm-"

"Sorry..."

"-sorry..." She blinked. "Why are you?"

He shrugged. "I was just as bad as you were. We were both just worried like hell about AJ."

"I didn't-" she started, determined to make sure he knew she didn't want to say what she had. Only that she'd felt she had to. He simply shook his head, his finger softly meeting her lips and silencing her with that one gesture. Nick pulled her close, and she rested her head against him, simply breathing him in. For a moment, the world faded away, simple as that. There were only the two of them. No zombies. No worries. No apocalyptic world. There were just Riley and Nick, and that feeling of peace that shut everything else out when he held her.

"You guys ready?" Brian asked, as he came down the stairs, with Gretchen in tow. His voice shattered her reverie and brought them both back to reality. He didn't look any more rested than the rest of them. His face was worn and tired. Riley pulled away from Nick, nodding to herself, as she reached for the gun sitting on the coffee table, tucking it away.

"Yeah, let's go."

As they walked outside of their home, they could see the sun just beginning to rise in the distance. There was no noise of birds or any creatures, except for the reanimated ones not that far away from the perimeter of the base. Riley shivered at the thought, despite the humidity already thickening the air. They weren't alone either. She spotted Kevin, not too far ahead, walking to where the ambulance awaited them. Riley thought maybe she could see the others out by the ambulance, but she wasn't sure.

Each step felt heavier than the last, as they trekked the short distance. Nick's hand reached for hers, and she appreciated the small bit of comfort it gave. Having any, in those times, was a rarity and felt like a gift she didn't deserve. When they got close, they could see some of the others already there. Howie and Kayleigh were sitting on the sidewalk, chatting. Howie's arm was around Kayleigh's shoulders stiffly, in an awkward attempt to comfort the girl. Gabby

was leaning against the vehicle, which was oddly silent. Jo simply kept her eyes on her daughter, with the look any bear would have for her cubs.

They all watched as Kevin prepared to open the doors. Nick stepped forward with his axe in hand. Kevin nodded at Brian and Riley, who both loaded their guns accordingly. “When I open the doors, Nick, you hop in. If he’s... then give a direct blow to the head. No hesitating. If he gets past you, Riley, Brian, we’ll try to take him down.”

Kevin unlocked the back doors and threw them open. Everyone peered in, and there was no sound. No movement. The air felt stale inside, as Riley leaned in a bit. She wasn’t sure whether to gauge that as a good sign or a bad one, at that point. Nine pairs of eyes met. It appeared she wasn’t the only one to think that way.

Gabby was the first to vocalize the thought everyone shared. “So... is AJ alive or undead?”

Nick climbed in, and it felt like her heart leaped as he did. Riley found herself feeling the urge to pray, truly pray, for the first time since she’d been a child. As soon as that thought appeared, she could hear Jo murmuring one beside her, a rosary barely visible within her clasped hands.

“AJ...”

Riley climbed up onto the vehicle, to get a better look. While one hand held her position, standing on the bumper, the other had the gun locked and ready to go. She saw Nick creep in further, softly calling his name.

“AJ...”

Nick leaned in, staring at the motionless form Riley’s eyes could make out in the faint light of breaking dawn. Nothing could be heard, beyond some heavy breathing coming from an understandably nervous Kayleigh. He leaned in more. She could see the grip on his axe tighten, as he went to examine AJ. They all waited with bated breath for a sign. The wait felt like it took hours, rather than mere minutes. Riley saw Jo pull Gabby close out of the corner of her eye, before she refocused back on Nick.

“AJ?”

Nick’s arm raised the axe, ready to slam it down if needed. When Nick’s face was only inches away from AJ’s, the latter moaned loudly. Nick jerked with shock, and Riley did as well, almost falling off the back of the ambulance. “Shit!” he cried, as he jumped back.

Riley climbed in, unable to take it any longer. She thought Kevin said something, but couldn't be sure, as she blocked him out. She ran forward to where Nick was. She was ready to shoot AJ, knowing from the moan that he had indeed gone over to the realm of the undead.

His eyes shot open. "Brrraaaaaaiiiiiinnnnnsssss!" he yelled, causing the two to jump once more. Riley's own heart felt ready to explode from the surprise alone. A smirk appeared on AJ's face, as he looked at Nick. "Aww, come on, I requested brains!"

Nick shook his head, tucking his weapon away. "Fucking hell, dude!"

Their companion just guffawed, as tears poured down his face from laughter. "I couldn't help it! You... you should've seen your face!"

Riley smacked him upside the head, before moving to release his bonds. "You're an ass," she said sharply, but the hints of a smirk were there as well. "I almost shot you, and Nick almost decapitated you."

AJ rubbed his wrists as Nick helped him off the gurney. "That would've sucked."

They climbed off the back of the vehicle. Kayleigh was the first to hug AJ once he climbed down. Nick laughed, and Riley guessed it was for the same reason she smirked: Kayleigh looked so thrilled, and AJ looked so stiff, so awkward, and so unsure of how to take it. It served him right, after the stunt he'd pulled.

Jo went to AJ next, to inspect his bite, and Kevin joined them, talking fast, likely trying to piece things together. Riley wasn't sure because, for once, she was tuning their conversation out, rather than listening for answers. She glanced around, until her eyes rested on Brian. He looked happy about the survival of the strangest, but most reliable member of their group.

Riley sighed. "I was wrong. I'm sorry about... not listening." She met Brian's gaze evenly. "You were right; it's one thing to kill zombies, but to kill someone else before they... you know. It's cold-blooded." Her hands twisted anxiously. "I'm... cold-blooded. But I'm trying not to be."

"It's okay. I'm glad I was right, is all."

"Yeah, me too."

Chapter 64

I never had children, and at this point, I probably never will. Still, like I've said before, I feel like a father here. I am our leader, the head of the family, and it's my job to take care of the others. It's not easy. But then, fatherhood isn't, is it?

I lost my own father about a month before I turned twenty, but before the cancer took him, we were close. I always wanted to be the same kind of father as him, the kind who took his kids camping and was never too busy to toss around a football in the backyard. I'll probably always regret not settling down with someone and starting a family while I had the chance. But then, maybe it's better that I didn't.

I look at Brian and Howie, and I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a child. To stand by, helpless, and watch as the sickness consumed them. It certainly wasn't easy watching my dad waste away, but even though he and I were both much too young, it wasn't unnatural – parents are supposed to die before their children, not the other way around.

It's bad enough trying to protect everyone here – and even worse, failing at it. I can't begin to describe what I went through after AJ got bitten. From the day he'd arrived on the base with Howie and Kayleigh, he had been my right-hand man, my best soldier. He had risked his life, sacrificed himself to be the bait for our battle plan, and it seemed he was about to be our first casualty. I'm a military man; I'm used to losing men, sometimes close friends, but I wasn't ready to lose AJ. I don't want to lose any of them.

These nine people are the only family I've got left, and it's my duty to protect them. The stakes have never been higher; the fate of the world might depend on our survival. This is one mission at which I absolutely must not fail.

Sunday, July 8, 2012

Week Twelve

When Kevin got up the next morning, Gabby was already waiting for him at the kitchen table. “Morning!” she chirped, unusually brightly.

“Good morning,” Kevin echoed warily, eyeing her with suspicion. He liked Gabby, but her moods were pretty unpredictable. One minute she was happy and talkative like she seemed now, and the next, either sullen and pouting or angry and screaming, usually at her mother. Having grown up with only brothers and not spending much time around kids as an adult, he hadn't yet learned that this was just typical teenage girl behavior.

“So, what are we gonna do today?” Gabby asked, her eyes large and shining.

If he had, he would have recognized from the start that her bizarre cheerfulness was just because she wanted something. “Do?” repeated Kevin, and for once, he

honestly wasn't sure. Usually he had a plan, an objective for the day, but the scare with AJ had thrown everyone off. All plans had been put on hold until they found out what was going to happen to AJ, and even now, Kevin wanted to wait and make sure he was really alright.

"Yeah... you're not gonna go out zombie-hunting today, are you? It's Sunday," added Gabby, like she really cared if it was a day of rest or not.

"After what happened last time? No. Not today," said Kevin, joining her at the table. *Probably tomorrow*, he added in his head, but that would depend on how AJ and the others were feeling. He knew they had all been shaken by the trauma of almost losing AJ to the undead.

"Oh, good! Maybe we can do something fun, then!"

Kevin raised his eyebrows. "What did you have in mind?"

With a hopeful grin, Gabby pushed something across the table toward him. It was the base map she'd confiscated back at the chapel, he realized. Even though she'd been out on fewer trips than the rest of them, the kid probably had it memorized by now, for as often as she studied it. "I think we should check out the mall!"

She reached out and tapped a spot on the map, and he looked at where she was pointing. BX Mall, it said. "That's the base exchange mall. It's not exactly a mall like you're thinking."

Her expression was confused and crestfallen. "What kind of mall is it?"

"Well, it has stores and a food court and stuff, but most of them are military-related."

"I don't care," Gabby said quickly. "It sounds better than hanging out here. I wanna go out!"

"Be glad we're not still living in the chapel."

"I am! But I thought things would change once we got rid of all the zombies on the base. It's not all that different, though; you guys still get to go out on hunting trips, while I'm stuck here with my mom." She rolled her eyes.

"It's for your protection, Gabby. It's not safe anywhere, even on the base. We think we got them all, but you never know – it's a big area, and there's lots of buildings they could be hiding in. And if you think we're having fun when we go outside the base, you're sorely mistaken," Kevin said grimly.

"AJ has fun."

“Yeah, well, look what happened to AJ. This is not something to take lightly.” Kevin sighed, then looked around to avoid her mutinous glare. “Where is your mother, anyway?”

Gabby let out a long-suffering sigh. “Upstairs, changing the sheets. She always changes the sheets on Sundays.” When Kevin raised his eyebrows again, she added, “Yeah, I know, tell me about it. You’ve only been living with her for a month; try thirteen years!”

Kevin offered her what he hoped was an understanding smile, but then he said quietly, “You should be glad to have her around, you know. We’re the only ones who had anyone from our families survive. I’m sure the others would give anything to have their moms here.”

A stricken look crossed Gabby’s face. “I am!” she insisted quickly. “I didn’t mean it like that; I love my mom! She just... bugs me sometimes...” She trailed off lamely, hanging her head.

“I know,” Kevin said, reaching out to pat her arm. “Just a friendly reminder to show her some respect.”

Gabby scowled, but nodded. When she lifted her head, she was smiling again. “So... about the mall...?”

Kevin racked his brain, but he couldn’t come up with a logical reason why not, so finally, he said, “Alright... I’ll take you to see the mall, if your mom says it’s okay. Maybe some of the others will want to go, too.”

Gabby gasped, “Thank you!” and jumped up from her seat, scampering up the stairs to ask her mother’s permission. “She said it’s okay!” she announced a few minutes later, bounding back down.

Kevin looked up at her skeptically. “Really?” He had not forgotten the time Gabby had snuck out of the chapel to go adventuring on her own; he knew she could be manipulative.

“Really,” sighed Jo, appearing on the staircase. She followed Gabby down, carrying a basket of laundry. “She has a point – as long as you’re with her, I know she’ll be protected.”

Kevin tried to suppress his smile. “Well... alright then,” he said, standing up. “Give me an hour to get ready and eat some breakfast. Why don’t you run next door and see if anyone else is up and wants to go?”

“Okay!”

“Be careful!” Jo shouted after her, as Gabby darted out the door.

But Kevin wasn't too worried about her there. Since they'd taken residence of three of the homes on base, they hadn't encountered any zombies in the area. She would be safe, as long as she only went as far as AJ, Howie, and Kayleigh's house, two doors down.

Kevin headed back upstairs, where he took a long shower, shaved, and got dressed. Even he, a soldier used to roughing it, appreciated the simple comforts of home, after two months of living in the chapel. They didn't have all the amenities of the pre-undead world; they tried to conserve as much electricity as they could, since the base was still running on generators with only a limited supply of fuel. When the fuel ran out, they'd have to either find more or go without power.

Gabby was nowhere to be found when he returned to the kitchen, so he fixed himself a bowl of cereal and ate breakfast alone. When he was finished, he put his empty bowl in the sink and asked Jo, “Where did Gabby go?”

“She's outside, with the crew,” called Jo, poking her head out of the laundry room.

Kevin went out and found “the crew” gathered on the front porch of the house that Brian, Nick, Riley, and Gretchen shared. Gabby, Kayleigh, and Gretchen squeezed onto the swing, while the others perched on the porch rail or sat around on the steps. “Are y'all going to the mall?” he asked, looking around at the big group in amusement. Everyone was there, except for Jo.

“We are,” said Kayleigh, referring to herself, Howie, and AJ. “I can never pass on a trip to the mall. Apparently, neither can AJ.” She beamed at her roommate, who slid his dark sunglasses down the bridge of his nose and raised his eyebrows at her.

Kevin looked at Brian. “What about y'all?”

“Nick and Riley wanted to go to the beach,” he replied. “I think Gretchen and I are gonna go with them and check it out.”

“Alright... be careful...”

“We will, cuz.” Brian flashed him the same impish grin he'd had all his life.

“See if Jo wants to go; she's in the house doing laundry. Unless...” He looked at Gabby. “Did you invite your mom to go to the mall with us?”

Gabby wrinkled her nose, a look of pure horror on her face. “No!” she said, aghast. “I don't wanna go shopping with *her!*”

Kevin frowned, giving her a warning look that said, *Remember what we talked about this morning?*

Gabby got the message; the lines on her face smoothed out, and she flashed him a sheepish grin. "Sorry."

Kevin nodded, winking at her. "Well, let's head out then," he said, clapping his hands, eager to get going now that their plans were made. He'd always hated just sitting around. "Which vehicle do you want?" he asked Brian.

"We'll take the pick-up. You guys can have the Hummer."

So Kevin, Gabby, Kayleigh, AJ, and Howie piled into the Humvee and headed for the base exchange mall, a large building near the front gates. "It looks like a mall," said Gabby, looking up at the building with approval, as they climbed out of the vehicle.

"I haven't been shopping in forever!" Kayleigh added happily. It was nice to see her smile; she was a pretty girl and had probably been one of those bubbly types in her former life, but these days, she usually just seemed depressed. Maybe a shopping trip was just what she needed to perk her up.

When they walked into the mall, they all stopped just inside the entrance, stopped and stared. The interior was dark, hazy natural light filtering through the skylights in the ceiling, showing the dust particles that floated through the air, casting shadows across the tiled floor. It was also completely deserted, of course, and although they were used to abandoned buildings by now, this one was so large and so crowded, usually, that it still seemed creepy. AJ's raspy voice echoed through the empty expanse when he said, "It's like a fuckin' ghost town, ain't it?"

Gabby, Kayleigh, and Howie nodded silently, solemnly. Kevin just stared, remembering random trips here to get Baskin Robbins with some of the guys he'd gotten to know during his recovery on the base. Guys like Sam Licata, who had succumbed to the virus, and Charlie Edwards, who had been infected by a zombie bite. Guys who were now dead.

A lump swelled in his throat as he looked over at AJ, who had come so close to meeting the same fate as Charlie. He was glad they had voted not to kill him that night, but it disturbed him how close the vote had been. And he had been on the wrong side. He had voted to shoot AJ, the way he'd shot Charlie, and now he wondered, had killing Charlie been a mistake, too? Charlie had asked for it, begged him to do it, but what if he had also been immune, the way AJ was, the way they all seemed to be?

The thought made him sick, and he was glad he would never know for sure. He wasn't sure he could live with the truth.

“So why *do* you think AJ’s not a zombie?” Gabby asked reflectively, once it was just Kevin and her. After taking a lap around the mall together, they had split into two groups to check out the stores. Kayleigh had patronizingly offered to take Gabby with her, but Gabby had no interest in shopping with the older sorority girl and said she wanted to stick with Kevin instead. Feelings hurt, Kayleigh had stalked off in a huff with Howie and a reluctant AJ following in her wake, and Kevin was left alone to shop with a thirteen-year-old girl.

He looked down at her. “That’s a real good question.”

“Well, we’re all wondering, right? So what do you think?”

He took his time answering, thinking through his words before he said them. Slowly, he replied, “I think it’s clear that we all have some kind of immunity to the virus that caused this... None of us got sick in the first place, even though we were exposed... and if we’re like AJ, not even the bites can affect us the way they did... others...”

“Like that girl. The dead soldier,” said Gabby knowingly, and Kevin pictured Private Butler, her brains foaming out of her shattered skull, even as she rose from the dead and staggered towards them.

“Right,” was all he said back.

“So why do you think we’re all immune?”

He’d wondered the same thing all day and night, but had come up with no solid theories. Every possibility he’d played around with had flaws, reasons why it could not be so. “I dunno,” he replied. “What do *you* think?”

“I still think it’s genetic,” she answered promptly, precocious as ever. “You and Brian... my mom and me... that can’t be a random coincidence, can it?”

“It does seem far-fetched,” Kevin admitted. “But it doesn’t explain why the rest of everyone’s relatives got the virus and died. If we had inherited some kind of immunity, don’t you think more of our family members would have, too?”

He could practically hear the gears whizzing in Gabby’s brain as she contemplated that. Finally, she replied, “Maybe it’s just really, really rare.”

“That could be,” he conceded, impressed by her logic, even though he’d considered and dismissed the very same notion the previous day. It worked for Jo and Gabby, mother and daughter, who looked so alike. But how could he and Brian, first cousins, yet total opposites, have inherited the same genetic anomaly

when no one else in their family, not their parents or their brothers or, in Brian's case, children, had? Granted, Kevin didn't know for certain that the rest of his family was dead, but he had come to accept it – after all, it had been nearly three months since the Day of Unholy Resurrection. If they were still alive, they would have come looking for him by now.

He knew most of the others, those who had not seen their dead family members firsthand, had come to realize the same sad fact. They were all dealing with it in different ways. Some, like AJ and Nick, seemed determined to make the most of their new life and enjoy the simple pleasures it had to offer, rather than dwell on what they missed about their old lives. Others, like Brian and Kayleigh, were still haunted by their grief. The rest of them were somewhere in between, and Gretchen was just in denial, still expecting her husband to turn up any day. She had started asking Kevin about traveling north, to Maryland, where her husband had been working when the Osiris Virus spread. His firm answer was “no.” Their group was so small already, he couldn't bear the risk of losing any of their numbers, and after what had happened to AJ just outside the walls of the base, there was no way he was going to let Gretchen try to make it all the way to Maryland. It wasn't really up to him, he knew; she was free to go if she insisted, but somehow, he knew she wouldn't. She was afraid, afraid of the journey and afraid of what she might find – or not find – at its end. That fear kept her put, for now.

He watched Gabby wander ahead of him, absently tugging at the choker she always wore around her neck, as she rifled through racks of military clothing. The teenager had adjusted to their new world better than he would have guessed – better, indeed, than some of the others. She was tough, and according to Jo, her hardened exterior had been around even before the dead rose. He knew about her father, about how she'd gotten the scar she tried to hide with her necklace. It was a tragedy, for sure, but it had made her stronger; in a way, it had prepared her for what was to come. She was better equipped than most to handle the world falling down around her because, for her, it already had when her father had been taken from her.

“Finding anything?” he asked kindly, catching up to her.

Gabby made a face. “Everything's blue, green, khaki, or camo. I'm sick of camo.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I warned you this wasn't gonna be your kind of mall.”

“Tell me about it. There's not even a Claire's or a Hot Topic.”

“I'm sure Kayleigh's complaining about the same thing.”

Gabby rolled her eyes. “Kayleigh would probably complain even if there *was* a Claire's and Hot Topic. I'm sure she only shops at places like Abercrombie & Fitch and Banana Republic.”

Kevin chuckled. “Not a fan, huh?”

“She reminds me of my best friend, Makayla. Except she’s not, and I don’t want her to be. Nobody can replace Mak.”

“I don’t think she wants to take your best friend’s place. But maybe she needs a new best friend of her own. She hasn’t had an easy time of it here... not that any of us have, but... you know what I’m saying, don’t you?” Kevin looked closely at Gabby, who was frowning.

“Yeah. I know. I just don’t want her treating me like her kid sister, like her Mini-Me. I’m nothing like her.”

“I know,” echoed Kevin, thinking, *No, you’re not. You’re so much stronger.* But he didn’t say that, not wanting it to get back to Kayleigh. Kayleigh had come so far since the first few days; he didn’t want to do anything to set her back.

They left the military clothing store and made their way to the food court. “Do you think anything will still be good?” asked Gabby, looking longingly from Anthony’s Pizza to Baskin Robbins.

“Without electricity? Doubt it.” He nodded towards the ice cream parlor. “I bet all they’ve got now is thirty-one flavors of curdled ice cream soup.”

He meant it as a joke, but Gabby looked too dejected to smile. “Ew...” she said pitifully, her mouth turning down into a sad pout.

“We can still check it out, if you want. Who knows, maybe they’ve got a deep freeze that stayed cold enough.” He started walking towards the Baskin Robbins, and Gabby reluctantly followed.

“Ice cream sounds sooo good right now,” she whined. It wasn’t quite as hot inside the large mall as it was outside, but the air was still stagnant and stuffy. Kevin had to agree that an ice cream cone would be amazing. But it was just as he’d predicted; they gazed through the clear partition into the freezer cases next to the counter to find tub after tub of muddy-looking, liquid ice cream, floating in water from all the ice build-up that had defrosted. “What’s back there?” asked Gabby, pointing to a closed door behind the counter. “Maybe that’s the deep freeze.”

“It’s probably just a break room,” said Kevin, but Gabby had already run around the counter to see for herself. “Be careful,” he warned instinctively, as she reached to open the door.

Though he’d said it off-handedly, he’d been right to warn her: no sooner had she flung open the door than Gabby let out a high-pitched scream and jumped back.

“What?” asked Kevin in alarm, darting around the corner to see. His heart leapt into his throat as a female zombie, dressed in a pink uniform, staggered through the doorway. “Go!” he shouted to Gabby, pushing her behind him. He drew his gun, aimed, fired. The ice cream scooper zombie toppled backwards, the back of her head hitting the floor with a sickening thunk.

“Kevin?” he heard Gabby call from out in the food court.

“I’m alright!” he shouted back. “I got her! Just gonna make sure there’s no more.” Shaken, he stepped over the dead zombie and peeked into the tiny room she’d emerged from, but it was empty.

“Kevin?!” Gabby called again, her voice sounding more shrill this time.

“Coming!”

“Kevin, hurry!!” She was panicking now, and when he made it out of the ice cream parlor and back into the open space of the food court, he saw why. A second zombie, attracted by the noise, was shuffling out of Manchu Wok, bumping clumsily between tables and chairs as it lurched toward Gabby, who stood defenseless and seemingly paralyzed by fear.

“Damn,” Kevin cursed under his breath, rushing to take out the second zombie. He got in front of Gabby again, took aim, and sent a bullet right through one of the zombie’s cloudy, slanted eyes, which exploded in a spurt of fluid as the zombie collapsed, bouncing off one of the seats on its way to the floor. He waited just long enough to make sure it wouldn’t get up again, then grabbed Gabby’s hand and said, “Let’s go.”

As he returned his gun to his holster, he realized he was the only one who had come armed, more out of habit than the need for protection. Despite his constant warnings for everyone to be cautious, he, like the others, had thought the base was clear. If AJ, Howie, and Kayleigh ran into more of the undead on their end of the mall, they were going to be fashionably screwed.

Chapter 65

When something happens and destroys everything, you think you’ll never get over it. I mean, sure, you’ll never be the same; you’re totally changed by something like that. You feel like you’ll never be able to breathe again. You think that the pain will never stop.

Time's a funny thing. It makes it fade. You fight it; you hold on as tight as you can to that pain. Why? So you don't lose what you loved so much. Because even though it's not even, like, close to being there anymore, the pain is there, so you know it was real. You feel like, if the pain fades, what you loved is really gone for good.

But in time, it does. You can fight it and scream and yell, but the pain still fades. When I think of school, of my sorority sisters, it's with a smile. When I think about Bradley, it's with love, and the knowledge that he loved me even as he died. I smile when I think of Mom and Daddy, so happy when they told me I had a new baby sister coming. The tears follow; they always do. But the ache, the overwhelming pain, doesn't.

Things get lost in history. The full story is never told, simply gone through time. That's why I majored in history; I like the idea of looking for what's left behind. Only now, I'm what's left behind. And now the pain's leaving me, too. Time has that effect, the ability to wash things away. I guess it's a good thing. Because if this hadn't happened, I don't know if I'd be here now. I'm different, like everything else.

See, I want to live now.

That makes all the difference, don't you think?

Sunday, July 8, 2012

Week Twelve

Kayleigh smiled as they wandered through the military mall. It was nothing like the malls she was used to. None of the stores she loved the most had a place here. The area was abandoned, empty, and big. It would be creepy, if not for the fact that this was the closest thing to her old life that she'd had since Infernal Friday.

Their footsteps echoed as they walked. She glanced towards AJ, who watched her carefully. AJ had taken on a more protective stance over her, not in the sense that she couldn't protect herself, but one that was more *brotherly*, so to speak. It was odd, since the one time she had tried to show affection toward him, when she realized he wasn't dead or... otherwise, he'd stiffened up, without a clue of how to handle it.

"So why do you think you didn't turn?"

"Hell if I know. But I'd bet my ass on the line that this means none of us will change if we're bit. Or... well, fuck, maybe it takes more than one bite for us, since we're already immune to, like, the basic shit of this thing."

“So, in other words, you may have just gotten really lucky.”

AJ nodded. “I ain’t about to test that theory, though.”

“Perhaps we’re just immune. The bubonic plague didn’t kill everyone, because some people were just incapable of catching the virus to begin with.” He stared at Kayleigh, in response to her astute remark, and she shrugged.

And then there was Howie, who was traipsing behind her and the former addict. Howie had been her closest friend in the group since the beginning: haunted by everything around them, the two still clinging tightly to their lives from before. Since Howie’s hemophilia had been revealed, he’d become more relaxed. He still kept the wall around him; still, the wall had been lowered or made easier to climb over, she felt.

She wished the others could try giving her another chance. Kayleigh knew they still saw her as the girl she’d been when she had arrived. One who wanted to shut them out; one who refused to help. She’d offered to take Gabby shopping with her, in hopes for some girl bonding. It was something she’d been lacking ever since *it* happened. But Gabby had, of course, shunned the offer, and gone with Kevin instead. It stung a bit, because Kayleigh had known why. Maybe, given time, she’d be able to show them she wanted to be an active member of their group now. She wanted the family feeling she knew they could provide. Nothing close to a replacement to her past, of course; nothing could ever do that. But she felt lonely, especially if AJ or Howie weren’t with her. They were the only two she knew did see her differently.

“Kaaaaaayleigh...” AJ’s raspy voice called right beside her ear, causing her to jump. He snickered a bit, as she shot him a pout.

“Hey, don’t get mad at me; you should know better. Zombies don’t say names. They just want brains.”

“You’re a poet, and you didn’t even know it,” Howie remarked dryly, but a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. Slowly, but surely, that businessman armor he wore was beginning to crack.

“You look happy,” AJ remarked, as they walked along the halls.

Kayleigh shrugged, tucking a dark strand of hair behind her ear. She felt the split ends and wished suddenly that one of them was a former hair stylist. It was a trivial need, but it would have been nice. Even though the spot that had been bare, thanks to a member of the undead, had grown back, it was uneven and bugged her more than the split ends themselves. “I guess. I dunno, this is nothing like the malls I loved to crawl, but it’s weird – still feels like home.”

Howie eyed her. “Something can feel like home to you?”

“Not completely, but it’s still a mall. It’s... I don’t know... familiar, I suppose.”

They walked silently. Kayleigh’s attention focused in on the stores, of course. They passed a GameStop and, oddly, she walked in. She would have ignored the shop if the world had been the place it once was. Now? Now it was a sign of normality, that one thing she’d never possess again. She checked out the games. The Wii 2.0 had just come out a few months before April thirteenth. She remembered a lot of the fraternity boys had been hyped up about it. Kayleigh didn’t really get the hype; she’d never been into video games, not even as a kid. She picked up a case, glancing at it without true interest. *Final Fantasy XXI*, the case read, and she flipped it over.

“You a gamer?” AJ asked, breaking gently into her reverie. He sounded surprised, and to be fair, she couldn’t blame him. She didn’t seem the type, from what he knew of her, and he was right – she wasn’t.

“No... but maybe I will be now,” she remarked softly. It’d be a good distraction, if nothing else. Something to help fill the hours was becoming a necessity, since she wasn’t one of the main zombie hunters (not that she ever wanted to be), and they were out of the church. Currently, she was using the time to redecorate the home she shared with Howie and AJ, and watching seasons of *The OC* on DVD when she needed breaks from that. As much as she loved the angst of the brooding Ryan Atwood, the wit of geeky Seth Cohen, and the ease at which she could always relate to Summer, it wasn’t enough to fill the void. Maybe nothing would be. She’d try everything before deciding that, though.

“I’ll bring this with us,” Howie replied, grabbing a game console. “It’ll give us something else to focus on, at least.”

The three strolled out, AJ in the lead. Kayleigh glanced around once more, trying to spot the next store she wanted to check out. Her eyes lit up when they rested upon the sign above the entrance to a furniture store. Howie stared at her, a brow raised. “Don’t think you’re getting us to carry a couch back to the house.”

“Nooooo... but we can redecorate! We can get, like, pictures to hang, lamps, that sort of thing. Oh my God, then maybe later, we can totally see if we can’t get some paint, try to really add some personality to this drab place...”

AJ laughed, shoving her forward with a smirk. “Okay, okay, we get it. You don’t want the place to look like it still belongs to the people currently known as the undead.”

She bit her lip as they entered the store. “It just feels a bit creepy living there, knowing it belonged to the people in the pictures, and knowing they’re all... well, you know.”

The two men simply nodded as she glanced around. There were various pieces: lamps, tables, bed frames, wardrobes, the basics of any good store of that type. Kayleigh walked around in a bit of a daze, touching the railing of a crib as she let her eyes close. She could almost hear her mother singing as they set up the new nursery during her winter break. She sniffed, trying to remember the exact scent of her father's aftershave, for he would come up behind her mother, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She'd come down the halls, peeking in on them with a smile.

"Kayleigh?" They would turn and watch her with loving eyes.

"Kayleigh?"

"Kayleigh, you're gonna have us come back here with the truck so we can bring some of this stuff back, I bet. Am I right?" Howie's eyes skipped back towards her.

"Huh?" she asked, sounding a bit dazed and confused, as the daydream drifted away.

He shook his head. "Never mind."

Kayleigh just nodded, looking around when she realized they were now missing a member of their trio. She weaved and bobbed amongst the furniture. "AJ?"

She could hear Howard falling in step behind her. Suddenly, she stopped. Howie, right on her heels, almost stumbled into her at her abrupt halt. Kayleigh wasn't sure herself why she had stopped. Maybe it was simply instinct. And while she wasn't the most adept at listening to it, compared to the others, she had learned to try and operate by it. It was something they'd all come to learn. Howie said nothing, and she felt he sensed the same thing. Odd, yet soft noises resounded in the distance. They were footsteps, and they were uneven. Uneven footsteps were never a good sign anymore.

"We need to get AJ and go find Kevin."

She moved slowly again, trying to find AJ, but without making too much noise. "I know... are you armed?" She wasn't and was definitely regretting it right then. Even though her distaste for guns had lessened, and even though she had grown accustomed to using them to kill zombies any time she needed to, she still hated carrying them if she didn't have to. Despite Kevin's warnings to always be prepared, she'd made sure to always "forget" her gun once it became evident that the base was clear.

Or at least evident that they *believed* the base was clear.

A moan echoed through the empty store, coming from behind. The two turned, as several zombies meandered clumsily in their direction. Some looked to be civilian, wandered in from reanimating in the neighborhood, most likely. Others were in uniform. As time went on, the decomposition had furthered, though still not at the pace a plain corpse that hadn't reanimated would have rotten. Maggots were beginning to attack the flesh now; she could see several crawling through a large hole in the frontrunner's cheek. The eyes had become completely milky white now; she couldn't even see what color the irises had once been. The skin was now a pale yellow and beginning to peel from the rotting flesh along the cranium. The hair hung from the head and appeared to be loosening, as if it were a wig, when really, it was just the skin that was starting to slacken.

"... I'm not armed."

Kayleigh began to back away slowly, as they advanced. Her voice shook as she spoke. It had been awhile since she'd been this scared. She felt vulnerable again, helpless because of her stupid choice to remain unarmed. "Neither am I."

"Well, it's a good thing *I* know how to get creative, then, isn't it?" AJ announced from behind them. He grabbed a lamp as he ran up to them, passed them, and almost dived into the zombies.

"Batter up!" He swung the heavy, metal lamp at the one closest to them, connecting squarely with the jaw. The creature flew through the air and crashed through a glass table not too far away. He turned and eyed Howie and Kayleigh, who watched him in a shocked stupor.

"Don't just stand there; help me clear out the fuckers before more show up!"

There were still several advancing, including the one AJ had knocked through the table, as the brain hadn't been destroyed. It had been undeniably slowed down and injured, though, if she wanted to look at the silver lining of their advancing grey clouds. Howard spotted a frame; inside were antique swords that Kayleigh hoped weren't just for decoration. The zombies came closer, and AJ tried to bash another's head in before the other one came back. While Howie struggled to get the swords, Kayleigh looked around desperately for a weapon.

A lamp? I'm not strong enough to kill it with one.

A vase? It's not strong enough to kill it. Even if I did hit it hard enough, it'd shatter.

A chair? It's a zombie, not a vampire; I'm not going to get anywhere with that. It won't trip it up or bash in the brains.

Then it hit her. Her pearl necklace. The pearls her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday. She could remember the moment perfectly. But right then

wasn't the time to reminisce, as Howie still was struggling to tear apart the frame and the cover that he'd learned clearly *wasn't* glass as he had assumed. AJ was swinging around the lamp, but he wasn't as reckless as he'd once been. The bite scare had gotten to him, the same way it had everyone else, even if he wouldn't admit it. Testing fate was okay to do once, but twice was just crazy, and his behavior supported that theory.

I'm sorry, Daddy. Kayleigh pulled the necklace off roughly, hearing the cord snap. She ran forward, as AJ hit another ghoul upside the head and lost grip of the lamp. She could hear it sliding across the floor, the metal clanging with a tone of finality. Howie was now jumping on the case, doing his damndest to find a weak spot so he could pull out the weapons she knew they desperately needed. AJ backed away, as a couple more zombies came in. The number was almost an even dozen, at this point.

She threw the pearls along the ground, watching them scatter beneath the creatures' feet, and pulled Howie along, as he finally kicked the display case aside in disgust. "Let's go!"

The three ran out of the store, pushing past the zombies, who were now falling on top of each other, thanks to the pearls tripping them up every step of the way. She could hear the loud moans behind them, as they continued to flee. Even though she knew zombies had no emotions and no true cognition at all, they sounded as if they were moans of frustration at their prey getting away. As the trio raced through the mall, the noise they made roused more members of the undead from their dormancy inside the building.

"Let's get the hell out of here, and maybe we'll run into Kevin when he comes out! I ain't being a breakfast burrito for these fuckers again!" AJ announced, as he made a swift turn towards the double doors of the main entrance of the building. Kayleigh simply followed; she trusted AJ's judgment and knew, if nothing else, that alone could keep her safe.

They burst through the doors, none of them looking forward. Their lines of vision were focused on what was pursuing them, rather than what was ahead of them. It was for this reason that Kayleigh was surprised when she felt herself slam into a body in front of her. She screamed as she fell over and knew now that this *thing* would have a chance to eat her, as its comrades had Nick's poor dog. She screamed and flailed, ready to beat whatever she landed on off. It reached for her hands, and she batted them away angrily. She wasn't going to go down without a fight. No, this time, she was ready to fight back, ready to show that she wasn't going to just lie down and die. She looked down to see the rotting face of...

... Kevin, who stared at her in bewilderment. No zombie. No decomposing remnants of a face. It was just Kevin, their leader, the man they all had come to rely on. That was who she was trying to fight off, for no good reason. Not a zombie. Gabby was still standing, smirking. AJ was laughing, as was Howard,

but in a more dignified manner. Her cheeks grew warm, and she climbed off Kevin quickly, holding out a hand to help him up as well.

“Well...” he said, as he brushed himself off calmly. “You ran into some trouble, too, I take it.”

AJ nodded. “Yep. I feel like an idiot for not remembering my guns.”

“We all thought the base was clear!” Gabby piped up.

Kevin sighed. “Well, let’s go load up, so we can come back and try to clear this place out. Hopefully, the others aren’t having any trouble.”

Kayleigh silently agreed. In spite of all the arguments and the frustrations, she really did care a lot about everyone in the group. She prayed that they were having the carefree day they deserved and that Nick, Riley, Gretchen, and Brian didn’t run into the same familiar visitors that they had. She stared at the doors now; no zombies were coming out. For the moment, anyway, they’d lost them. Finally, she let herself breathe easy once more. She wondered if she’d ever be able to truly let herself feel completely safe again.

Deep down, she knew the answer. *Probably not.*

Even in the blistering July heat and thick humidity, she found herself shivering.

Chapter 66

I’ll never feel safe again. I realize that now.

Prior to this year, I’d never suffered a major tragedy in my life. I’d never been in a life or death situation. Being a military wife, I’d known plenty of others who had, but never myself. Then I lost the baby, and for the first time, I knew the full meaning of grief. And then the zombies rose, and I knew fear.

Now I know what it’s like to try to overcome that fear, to try to go on with life and pretend that all is normal, and to fail. The truth is, although life has gone on for a select few of us, nothing will be normal again, not even when we try to make it so. I wouldn’t say it was easy for us to be lulled into a false sense of security, but somehow, it happened. We’d been living outside the church for a month, and we truly believed that the base was clear, that it was secure. As long as we stayed within its walls, the undead couldn’t get us.

We were wrong.

Inside the base, we tried to find things to do to keep ourselves sane, to keep our lives as normal as possible. We discovered ways to have fun and forget our grief and our fear, if only for awhile.

We were naïve.

Even on the base, zombies were still a threat. And now I know that, for as long as the dead walk the earth, they'll continue to hunt us.

We are vulnerable.

Sunday, July 8, 2012

Week Twelve

Gretchen wasn't really an outdoorsy person, nor was she the type of woman who felt comfortable flaunting her figure in a bathing suit, but even she was looking forward to a day at the beach.

She enjoyed the ride in the back of the pick-up truck, feeling the wind whip through her hair and the sun beat down on her bare back and arms. In one of the houses on base, she'd found a swimsuit that fit her, and she wore it under a pair of shorts for the ride to the beach. She knew she didn't look nearly as good as Riley, who sat across from her in a cute bandeau bikini that showed off her athletic body, but in this new, undead world, she didn't really care.

Brian and Nick were in the cab, and once they'd pulled the pick-up into an empty parking lot, they turned off the engine and eagerly jumped out. They came around back to lower the tailgate and grab the supplies they'd brought – a cooler with drinks and a little picnic lunch, some towels, and a beach umbrella they'd borrowed from one of the houses – while Gretchen and Riley climbed down from the truck bed. Gretchen looked around; they were at the very tip of the peninsula on which the base was located, and she'd never been that far. To her left was a small marina, packed with boats, and to her right, a wide strip of beach, sprinkled with palm trees and a few little pavilions. Out in front of her, stretching all the way to the horizon, was water. Technically, it was just Tampa Bay, but it might as well have been the open ocean, for as far as she could see.

“This looks awesome,” said Nick, a big grin on his face.

Riley nodded. “I can't believe we've been here this whole time and never come down here.”

“I know! Man, I don't think I've ever gone this long without going out on the ocean.”

“I can’t wait to get in the water,” Gretchen chimed in. The sun was starting to become uncomfortable; she could feel it baking her skin. The water looked invitingly cool and refreshing.

“Well, let’s go then!” Like a little kid, Nick shouted, “Last one in’s a rotten egg!” and took off running. Brian chased him. Riley looked at Gretchen and grinned; then she ran after them. Gretchen laughed and followed them at her own, leisurely pace, carrying the supplies they’d forgotten.

Ahead of her, she watched Nick wrangle off his t-shirt as he was running and drop it in the sand. Brian was right behind him, as they charged straight into the water with a huge splash. Riley kicked off her flip-flops and went in after them. Gretchen set down the supplies, took off her shorts and shoes, and dug out the sunscreen she’d made sure to find and bring along. She didn’t know about the other three, but without it, she’d soon look like a lobster. She applied a liberal amount, rubbing it into her arms, legs, chest, and as much as she could reach of her back.

“Need help?” She looked up, and Brian was standing there, dripping. Behind him, she saw the trail of his footsteps leading up from the water, where Nick and Riley were splashing each other. Like Nick, he’d taken off his shirt, and she realized that, despite living with him for almost three months, it was only the second time she’d seen him without a shirt. Her eyes dropped to the scar that ran down the center of his chest, and she wondered if he, like she, was just the slightest bit self-conscious.

She smiled at him. “Sure.” Handing him the bottle of sunscreen, she turned around and held her hair so that he could get the back of her neck and shoulders. Despite the heat, a shiver ran through her as she felt his hands on her skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake as they rubbed in the cool cream. It felt good, yet it was strange to have another man touch like this, even in a platonic way. Usually, Shawn would be the one doing this for her, and in that moment, she missed him terribly. A sudden wave of guilt washed over her, as she imagined him fighting zombies, trying to get home, while she was down here relaxing on the beach, as if she were on vacation.

Brian must have felt her stiffen. “Sorry – little cold, huh?” he laughed, misreading her tension. “I’ll warm it up this time.” He squirted out some more sunscreen and rubbed it between his hands before he brought them up to her shoulders.

“Thanks,” she said, trying to get her mind off her husband. “I guess it’s stupid to worry about skin cancer when there are zombies to deal with, but I don’t really want to peel for two weeks after I get burned.”

“Nah, this was a good idea,” replied Brian, his hands light on the nape of her neck. “I should put some on, too.”

When she felt his hands come off her, she turned around. He squirted another blob of sunscreen into his palm and started to rub it over his own skin. She couldn't help but watch as his hands ran up and down his own arms; for such a little guy, he had really nice arms. They were muscular, without being too bulked out – she didn't care for bulky guys. He had a couple of tattoos on his left arm; she had noticed them before. The one on his shoulder was of a cross on a rock, with a banner beneath that said "Rock of Ages." Even if she hadn't known he had once been a minister, it was obvious religion had been important to him. Below that, encircling his upper arm, was a band of words. She'd asked him once what they said, and his eyes teared up as he explained they were lyrics to a song he'd written for his wife and sung at their wedding. Gretchen had found herself wondering about his wife; she must have been something special. She hoped Leighanne had appreciated him when she was alive, had realized how lucky she was to be married to a man like Brian, had loved him as much as he obviously loved her.

She watched the way his hand slowed down over the tattoos, rubbing them carefully, as if the sunscreen might smear the ink. His fingers moved lovingly over the words he had penned, words now permanently etched upon his skin as an everlasting symbol of love for his wife. It made her wish she had something to represent Shawn that way. When they finally found each other, maybe they could get matching tattoos. AJ might know how to do them; he'd certainly spent enough time in tattoo parlors to learn.

The bottle of sunscreen made a loud, squelchy farting noise as Brian squeezed out more, and they both laughed. Gretchen kept laughing as Brian moved to his chest, putting a dab of sunscreen over each nipple, then drawing a U-shape with it over his stomach to make a smiley face. It was such a juvenile thing to do, but it was still funny. She giggled, and he grinned, rubbing it in until the face disappeared. That was Brian; serious one minute, a clown the next. She got the impression that he had always been the type of guy who used humor as a defense mechanism.

"Thanks," he said when he was finished, closing the bottle and handing it back to her.

"Sure," she replied, shoving the bottle back into her beach bag. She pulled out the towels and spread them across the sand, while Brian set up the beach umbrella, angling it to create a patch of shade.

A high-pitched shriek rang out across the water, causing Gretchen's heart to leap in her throat as she spun around. Brian had already started running toward the ocean, but suddenly stopped in his tracks, sending sand flying up from his feet, as he saw the same thing Gretchen did: Riley was sitting on Nick's shoulders now, her head thrown back with laughter, as he held on to her legs.

Brian glanced back over his shoulder and met Gretchen's gaze, and they both shook their heads, laughing, as Gretchen's racing heart gradually slowed down. Even on a gorgeous day like this, she was going to be constantly on edge, always watching for signs of danger. Riley and Nick, the happy couple, seemed to be having fun, but she knew she was not going to be able to relax enough to truly let her hair down.

Even so, when Brian said, "Well? Shall we join them?" she nodded and followed his footsteps from the dry sand to the wet sand and on into the water. The waves, warm as bathwater, lapped over the tops of her feet and swirled around her ankles, rising up to her knees and then her thighs as she waded out further. The water was above her waist when she and Brian finally reached Nick and Riley, who was still high above the waterline on Nick's shoulders.

"C'mon, let's play chicken!" shouted Nick, his shining face still sporting the same goofy grin. He was definitely back in his element. "Get on up there, Gretchen," he said, swatting one of Brian's shoulders.

Gretchen looked doubtfully at Brian, not sure he could even support her. Nick was broad-shouldered and tall, and Riley was trim and tiny, but she probably weighed the same as Brian. He seemed more confident, though, and grinned sportingly at her. "C'mon, get on," he said, lowering himself into the water. He went under, squatting on the ocean bottom long enough for her to maneuver her legs over his shoulders, and then he rose up again, his arms wrapped around her legs to hold her on. As she was lifted out of the water, Gretchen teetered unsteadily for a few seconds before finding her balance in her perch on Brian's shoulders. He felt bony enough to break beneath her, but as she'd thought before, he was stronger than he looked and stood quite steadily in the water.

"Ready?" said Nick, turning so that he and Riley were facing Brian and Gretchen and moving in closer, so that the two women were within arms' reach of each other. "Three... two... one... fight!"

Before Gretchen could even brace herself, Riley had pushed her backwards. She could feel herself sliding off Brian's shoulders and dug her knees in, trying to hold on with her legs, but to no avail – off she went, toppling backwards into the water. She surfaced, spitting salt water, and wiped off her face. Nick and Riley were laughing, but Brian asked, "You okay?"

"Fine," said Gretchen, breathless. "That was... quick."

"Rematch!" said Riley. "C'mon, you can do better than that."

Reluctantly, Gretchen climbed back on Brian's shoulders, and they played again. She was ready this time and lasted a lot longer before Riley finally knocked her off. She wasn't surprised to find out that Riley was competitive, even more so

than Nick, who was egging her on. Brian was almost as bad, though, and kept insisting they go again.

“Why don’t you get on my shoulders this time?” Gretchen finally suggested, laughing. She was only kidding, but to everyone’s amusement, they actually did try it. She was not as strong as Brian, though, and couldn’t support his weight on top of her nearly as well as he’d managed hers. They switched partners and had her hold Riley when Brian sat on Nick’s shoulders, which worked out better, and Brian and Riley put up a good fight before he finally knocked Riley into the water for the first time.

“Sorry, Rye,” he apologized immediately when she surfaced, looking almost appalled at himself for beating a woman, but Riley was laughing.

“Suuure, you are,” she said sarcastically. “It’s okay; I let you win – I wanted to get wet. It’s way too hot to be out of the water that long!”

“Ohh, I see how it is,” Brian replied, equally sarcastic, and they all laughed.

Done with chicken fights, they simply swam. The ocean water was warm, but kept them cool compared to the sweltering heat on land. They stayed low, dunking beneath the surface occasionally to keep their heads and shoulders wet. Without realizing it, they had drifted further out into the bay. Gretchen was no longer standing in waist-deep water, but water that came up to her neck. She treaded water, her toes barely skimming the ocean bottom. The beach was in sight, so this didn’t concern her.

Until Nick suddenly screamed.

“What the FUCK!” He whirled around in a spray of water, his arms flailing with panic as he tried to keep afloat.

“What?” Brian demanded, his voice sharp with alarm. Gretchen was already propelling herself backwards, towards the beach.

“Something fucking bit me!” Nick shouted, his voice shrill. His blue eyes were wide, practically bulging out of his head.

“Are you sure?” asked Riley, her own eyes widening with horror.

“I... I dunno... felt like it! Something definitely grazed my leg,” Nick insisted, though as they all looked frantically around, they could see nothing beneath the water, no dark shadows.

“Let’s go in,” Gretchen said nervously, beckoning the others to follow her. “We should take a look at it.”

Nick didn't need to be told twice. He started paddling after her, and Brian stayed close to him, but Riley hung back. All of a sudden, they heard her started to laugh. It started out as a snicker, then exploded into a full-blown belly laugh. They all stopped, their feet finding the bottom as they turned back to look at her.

"I'm sorry!" Riley sputtered through hysterical laughter, slapping the water. "I shouldn't have... I just didn't think you'd be so gullible!"

Nick's jaw dropped, and his face took on the look of a wounded puppy. "That was you?!" he cried in dismay.

Riley laughed harder. "It was just a little pinch!"

"Fuck you!" At first, Nick looked legitimately angry, and Gretchen couldn't blame him, but then he let out a shaky laugh, drawing a wet hand weakly over his face. "Damn, I shoulda known... I thought a fuckin' shark bit me."

"Shark?!" said Brian and Gretchen at the same time, and she knew he had been thinking the exact same thing she had. "You thought 'shark' and not 'zombie'?"

Nick snorted. "What would a zombie be doing way out here? You think they got the coordination to swim? Fuck no, man... Didn't I ever tell you I'm afraid of sharks?"

Brian laughed. "No! You? The ocean lover? You're afraid of sharks?"

"Yes," admitted Nick grudgingly, now sounding embarrassed. "I always have been, ever since I was a little kid. Probably cause I spent so much time in the ocean. I mean, you hear about shark attacks in Florida sometimes... doesn't happen often, but it does happen. And okay, so yeah, I probably just watched too much *Jaws* as a kid, too..."

"*Da-dun... da-dun...*" Predictably, Riley sunk low in the water and started humming the *Jaws* theme, as she glided smoothly toward Nick. "*Da-dun-da-dun-da-dun-da-dun...*"

"Stop!" Nick sounded like a little kid again, as he twisted out of her reach, splashing her in the face. "Seriously, Rye, don't; it freaks me out!"

Riley's giggle sounded more like a gurgle through the faceful of water, but once she'd wiped her eyes, she smiled apologetically and said, "Alright, alright, I'll stop. I didn't know it was like a phobia for you."

"Well, it is," said Nick. He wasn't really mad at her, but Gretchen could tell he was serious. It was a little funny that a happy-go-lucky guy like Nick was so deathly afraid of sharks, but Riley's practical joke wasn't. They were all paranoid

about being attacked by zombies, and even out here in the ocean, they hadn't left that fear back at the beach.

They had just decided to head in for their picnic – in fact, Gretchen and Riley had already started swimming for shore to get it set up – when it happened. There was a sudden shout, quickly silenced, and then Nick screamed. Again. Gretchen quickly looked back, but Riley said, “Don't. He's just trying to scare us. Payback, you know?”

Gretchen couldn't see Brian.

“He just went under!” Nick shouted, twisting left and right in the water, looking all around. “Something dragged him under!”

Gretchen's stomach lurched, but Riley insisted, “They're fucking with us. He's just holding his breath underwater. Wait, he'll pop up laughing in a few seconds.”

Riley didn't even turn around, but Gretchen waited and watched. No Brian.

Nick suddenly went under, and she gasped, afraid he had been pulled under too, until he popped back up, sucked in a breath, and went down again. He was searching, she realized. Searching for Brian. Gretchen had already started swimming toward him when he surfaced again, screaming, “Help me! Help me look!”

She fought the waves, spitting out salt water each time one of them crashed into her face, frantically trying to make it to Nick, who seemed to be drifting further and further away. “BRIAN!” she shouted, looking all around for signs of a disturbance underwater. With the waves, it was hard to tell. The water was too deep here; she couldn't see through it at all.

“BRIAN!” she heard Nick yell helplessly.

And then, as if he'd heard their calls, Brian suddenly crashed through the surface between them, his arms windmilling wildly, as if he were trying to fight off an invisible force. He flailed and thrashed in the water, trying to keep himself afloat, but too panicked to do a good job of it. His head kept going under, before he fought to get it up again.

Gretchen and Nick swam toward him as fast as they could, coming in from opposite directions. Gretchen reached him first and slipped her arms under his, holding him up as she tried to swim backwards, kicking furiously to keep them both afloat. But he was heavier than she'd expected, and she didn't have the strength to swim with him.

When Nick appeared, it was easier. He grabbed one of Brian's arms, and she grabbed the other, and together, they towed him through the water, making a beeline for the beach.

"What happened?" asked Riley, her face stricken, as they grew near.

Brian shook his head, too out of breath to answer. No one spoke until they were safely on the beach. Brian collapsed in the sand, his thin chest heaving, and coughed out mouthfuls of seawater. Not sure what else to do for him, Gretchen sank down beside him and clapped his back, like she would to burp a baby, waiting for him to catch his breath again.

Finally, Brian rasped, "We're not safe here. They're in the water, too."

"It was a zombie?" gasped Gretchen, her heart hammering in her chest. "Are you sure?"

Brian nodded grimly. "I'm sure. It must've been walking on the bottom. It grabbed my ankle from underneath me and pulled me down."

"Did it bite you?" Riley asked, and Gretchen saw her eyes shoot down to Brian's bare ankle. It looked unscathed. There was no sign of blood on his body or on the sand beneath him.

He shook his head. "I don't think it wanted just my leg."

"Braaaaainsss..." moaned Nick under his breath. Gretchen and Riley both looked at him, shocked that he would make a joke at a time like this.

But Brian grinned weakly. "Maybe so. It dragged me all the way down. But I fought it off before it could sink its teeth in."

"It's still out there..." said Nick, now staring out at the bay. They all followed his line of sight, watching... waiting...

And then a dark shape rose out of the waves. It was a head, they realized, as a pair of shoulders followed, and then a torso. Gretchen drew in a breath and held it, frozen in fear, as the zombie staggered slowly, but surely into the shallows. Nick and Brian were both right; it looked much too clumsy to swim, which meant, with no need for oxygen, it had simply been walking around on the ocean bottom, waiting for prey to drift within its reach. And surely, it wasn't the only one. The water was probably teeming with the undead. Tampa Bay had become the Undead Sea.

"Let's go," she said shakily, as the zombie grew closer. The water was below its waist now, and it was near enough that she could now see how bloated it was from the water, its pruny skin sagging off its decomposing flesh. Its cloudy eyes bulged

from its puffy, gray face, and water trickled from its open mouth as it let out a moan that raised goosebumps on her skin. “Let’s just go.”

“No,” said Nick, and when she glanced at him, she saw that his jaw was set. “Not before we kill this thing.”

“With what?” asked Riley, looking around. “None of us brought a damn gun.”

“Then we’ll have to improvise.” Nick looked around, too, and his eyes came to rest on the beach umbrella. He hurried over it and yanked it out of the sand. The bottom was pointed, like a stake. Gretchen felt sick, imagining how he was going to use it. “Grab the cooler, Rye,” Nick added, and Riley hurried to get the small cooler, still heavy with their lunch. “Gretch, you take Brian and head for the truck.”

Gretchen felt guilty for being relieved, but she didn’t protest being let off the hook. She helped Brian to his feet, as Nick and Riley crept closer to the waterline, weapons in hand, waiting for the zombie to make it out of the water. Her eyes fixed determinedly on the truck, she heard, rather than saw, the confrontation that followed – the hungry moan of the zombie, the guttural shout from Riley, the thud of the heavy, plastic cooler colliding with bony skull, the moist splatter of something hard plunging through something soft.

When Gretchen finally chanced a glance back, Nick and Riley were trudging towards them, carrying the cooler and her beach bag, and the zombie lay still on the sand, the colorful beach umbrella protruding from one of its eye sockets.

“We can come back tonight and have a little bonfire on the beach,” said Nick, so deadpan that she couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not. “But for now, let’s get the hell out of here.”

Gretchen couldn’t agree more. They climbed back into the truck and peeled away. She sat in the back with Riley, hugging her knees to her chest. Despite the sun beating down on her, she couldn’t stop shivering.

Chapter 67

Careless.

That’s what ended up happening, to put it into one solitary word that really covers everything. We were careless. It’s just how we became. I suppose it’s easy to see just why we did. We all wanted the same thing, I think. All of us needed to feel like we were safe. After everything we’d been through, all the changes, the horrors, the nightmares that never let us ever truly have peace...

I suppose we needed to feel like we had a sense of control once more.

Like the world before the dead rose.

So, we let ourselves feel comfortable. We let ourselves become completely complacent. It was idiotic, moronic. We relaxed when all the signs and evidence were completely against it. It simply wasn't logical. We knew the undead were far from gone. Even with the scattered encounters, the neverending moans in the distance, we somehow managed to get cocky.

I'm not an exception from this. I got this way, myself. I thought we could be safe; I thought we could handle it. I believed we, once again, had regained the control I desperately missed in my day-to-day life. Everyone saw the base as a safe zone. We felt confident. We even started feeling invincible.

We never should've forgotten the paralyzing fear we felt on The Day of Unholy Resurrection. No one should ever become accustomed to the horrors we now deal with daily. We should never, EVER feel safe.

Carelessness... before, it was just a simple mistake.

Now?

Now it can get you killed.

Friday, August 3, 2012

Week Fifteen

Howie stretched idly on the couch. They were in the living room of the home Nick and Brian shared with Gretchen and Riley. The latter two were in the kitchen, chattering away while they cleaned. Nick sat across from him, his face scrunched in deep concentration as his thumbs pounded the buttons on the old PSP they'd found during their recent mall raid.

"We should do something," the blonde remarked, without even once letting his eyes leave the screen. His foot endlessly tapped the floor. This sort of thing used to bug Howie, yet Nick had grown on him, with his endless energy and ability to make everything seem better than what it really was.

"Like what?" asked Kayleigh, who was stretched out on the Persian rug beside the couch. Her hand turned the page of an old magazine casually. Her current mission to redecorate their own shared home hadn't let up just yet. The magazine was for inspiration, now that she could just take what she pleased to make their home "less like a shrine to the current undead," as she put it.

Gabby wandered in, munching on a few Oreos they'd grabbed from the store earlier that day. Howie wondered what they'd eat next, when the last of the packaged food was gone or too stale to eat. He suspected Kevin had a large store of freeze-dried food stashed away for that eventuality, but it made him miss things such as steakhouses – or steak, period, really.

“The base has some cool stuff,” he heard Gabby reply, as she flopped onto the couch next to him.

He felt himself smile a bit; the thirteen-year-old had become a walking map of the place, as much as she'd studied it the past three-and-a-half months they'd been there. He decided to speak up. “Isn't there a bowling alley here somewhere?”

“Are you sure you'll be okay?”

Howie suppressed a smirk, as Nick suddenly decided to show off his protective side. The girls had declined the idea of the bowling alley and instead had liked Kayleigh's suggestion of finally checking out the library, in hopes they could find some new books to pass some of their endless idle time. So the girls would go, while the boys went bowling. They all knew they could handle themselves, but it looked like some still couldn't help but worry. Riley smirked a bit herself as she leaned in to gently kiss Nick, her arms wrapping around his neck as she gave him a teasing look.

“We'll be fine. Any ghouls come... we shoot them, right? Or do we let them eat us? I mean, we should invite them for a snack; it's only polite...” Laughing at the look that crossed Nick's face, she grinned. “Come on, we go on raids together how often? I think we delicate women can handle it without you big strong men. It's just the library.”

“Yeah, and a couple weeks ago, it was ‘just the mall’ or ‘just the beach’...” Howie interjected, feeling the need to back Nick up. The girls probably could handle it, but it didn't mean they shouldn't still be careful. “Just be cautious.”

A frown crossed Brian's face, as his eyes met Gretchen's. “Maybe AJ should go with you guys...”

“Okay, y'all need to totally learn to chill.”

Riley shot a grin towards the others. “I never thought I'd say this, but you guys need to listen to Kayleigh.”

Kevin placed a hand on Nick's shoulder, stopping him from saying anything more. “They'll be alright.”

The girls made their way out. “I call the front seat!” Howie heard Gabby cry, as she ran toward their vehicle.

“Jo, you wanna drive?”

As Howie shut the door, he took in the others, each looking more pensive than normal. They were waiting for AJ to come downstairs; he’d said he needed to grab something before they left. Howie wondered why they seemed to worry more about the girls now.

Probably because one of us was always with them.

It was old-fashioned, and possibly – no, *definitely*, chauvinistic. Still, it felt a bit wrong leaving the girls to their own devices at the library while they went to go bowling. Logically, he knew the girls could handle themselves just fine. They’d all become battle-tested, and out of the females, he’d say Kayleigh was second in terms of skill only to Riley, with all her sniping missions. In fact, all but Jo seemed to have a better shot than he, himself, did. Despite all that, Howie had a gut feeling that something was going to go wrong. Nothing about this felt right to him.

Still, he said nothing.

“About time, AJ...” he heard Brian say, as he turned to see the former addict finally coming down the stairs.

“Sorry, just making sure I was loaded up. I left my stuff at my place; I’ll give you some ammo when we get back, Nick.”

Nick nodded, as the five of them made their way out of the house, walking slowly to the truck. They’d made the girls take the Hummer: another sign none of them were fully comfortable with this, even when they should have been. They’d swept the base clean again; they knew it. They were in control once more. They wouldn’t have anything like the church incident that felt like eons ago, never again. They’d find an occasional zombie now and then, but that would be it. That was the presumption, anyway, and he knew they desperately needed to believe in it.

Or else they’d all go insane.

“Shotgun!” Nick yelled, running for the cab.

Kevin climbed into the driver seat, and Nick blared the radio as soon as he started the engine. Howie was thankful the music was Nirvana, rather than Michael Jackson. Not that he didn’t like him; he was just on overkill from being around Nick. He tried his best not to look so disgruntled at not being able to sit in the

cab as he hoisted himself up into the bed of the truck behind AJ and Brian. As the truck bounced along the road, causing the wind to whip his dark, gelled curls around his face, he kept to himself, simply wanting to think in peace.

I wish I could go to a stylist and have my hair done.

The thought was incredibly superficial.

But it was honest. He wanted to cut it short once more, as he used to. He hadn't had his hair this long since college. Having his unruly curls, a throwback to his Puerto Rican heritage, touching his shoulders unnerved him in an odd way. Something as insignificant as a hair salon never seemed like a luxury before. These days, it felt like everything was. Maybe he'd ask Kayleigh to try cutting it for him later; if anyone was likely to do it nicely, he figured it'd be her. His mind continued to wander over everything that had happened in the last few months, as was his way. His birthday was in a little over two weeks, and he felt incredibly old, even though he was only turning thirty-six.

If he was honest with himself, he felt absolutely ancient. A result of all they'd been through.

"Howie? How-Howie? Yo... yo, D!"

His brow quirked as he glanced over at AJ, who tilted his shades down so that their eyes met. "D?"

Brian chuckled, speaking up before AJ could. "Well, you know, Howie Dorough... Howie D..."

AJ grinned. "Personally, I'm liking the idea of calling you D."

"Is it your goal in life to drive me crazy?" Once, he would have sounded angry. Right then, he was just completely and utterly amused.

"Not my joy – just a hobby, between all the beheading and decapitation of rotting corpses."

"Beheading and decapitation are the same thing."

The truck pulled to a slow stop. Brian hopped out of the back. "We're here."

"Sweeeeeet!" Nick bounced out of the truck and bounded towards the bowling alley. Then he slowed to a stop, staring at the building. For an instant, a split second in time Howie was sure no one else caught, Nick's faced darkened with storm clouds of concern, which quickly vanished into thin air. Howie wondered if he was thinking about the girls. Surely, he was.

Kevin smiled as he walked ahead of them. It was nice to see him relax, even if only momentarily. They headed inside, while their leader went to get the power running. Once he did, Howie couldn't help but smile. It was only a bowling alley, basic and wide, but oddly, it felt like the world they'd left behind. He couldn't really explain it.

Nick ran forward. "I gotta try something. I've always wanted to do this."

"Oh yeah?" AJ asked, slamming his foot into the cigarette vending machine. Several packs fell down to the bottom, and he picked them up casually.

"Hell yeah..." Nick strolled over to the nearest lane and then backed away slowly, seemingly readying himself. He took a running start and launched himself upon the slippery, smooth floor, sliding speedily along on his stomach. He hooted wildly, cracking himself up before his head crashed into the pins.

"STRIKE!" Nick's laughter echoed throughout the room, bringing life to the area.

Howie turned, chuckling to himself as he made his way over to the snack bar. A bottle of water sounded nice, and, logically, there should be some around there somewhere. If not, he'd maybe ask AJ to kill another vending machine. He could still hear Nick laughing, about to try it again, as AJ and Brian cheered him on.

He leaned over the clear counter, hoping to see something nearby. It'd save him some trouble, anyway. As he searched, a squalid smell slammed his senses. A quick look around revealed its source, as he caught sight of all the rotted food inside the half-open mini-fridge by the door. He gagged and held his breath, trying to overcome the reflex long enough to find his water.

Then... "What the fuck?!"

"Nick!"

Howie did an immediate one-eighty, just in time to see Nick getting pulled fiercely into the hole at the end of the lane he'd been slipping and sliding on before. His legs flailed where the pins should have been, as he fought it off, screaming for a gun. Before Howie could react and rush to Nick's much-needed aid, an iron grip dug into his shoulder.

His eyes skipped down to see the dead, cold, almost-skeletal hand, only a split second before it pulled him back, causing him to slam hard against the counter. Howie winced as the pain shot along his back, making it hard for him to move. He tried to get up as the ghoul did it again, in its earnest attempt to seize its prey. Both hands held him tightly now, and he felt himself panicking in a wild search for a weapon within reach.

There was nothing of use there.

Howie's gaze soon met the fogged over, distant blue eyes of his attacker. The eyes were forever unblinking, unmoving beneath the patches of scraggly brown hair. The skin was peeling away in sheets, revealing the stark white of the skull. The creature moaned deafeningly, a cry of victory over Howie, despite logic's claim that zombies had no emotions. It moaned again, as it made a more forceful attempt for its meal.

His body flew back onto the countertop, which creaked and cracked and finally gave way under his weight. Shards exploded into the air, surrounding him in what felt like slow motion, as he fell onto the shattered remains of the counter. Howie could feel the glass stabbing into him like a thousand knives. Pain was instantaneous and all-consuming. It blocked out anything else. Pain was his everything.

Vaguely, he could hear the others yelling. He couldn't quite see them, only the ceiling, along with blurred shapes. His vision had become fuzzy, the images fading as the blood spilled from his body.

"HOWIE!" A gunshot blast followed. "Howie, hold on!"

Blissful oblivion took him, and he knew nothing more.

Chapter 68

When my dad died, I thought I'd never be able to laugh or even smile ever again. The first time I did, it felt fake. Okay, it probably was fake. The first time I did for real, it felt wrong. I felt guilty, like I shouldn't be having fun when my dad wasn't around to enjoy things anymore. I knew he was probably having fun up in Heaven, or at least I hoped he was, but that didn't stop me from feeling bad about it.

After enough people told me it was okay to laugh, that my dad was watching over me and would want me to go on with my life and be happy, I started to believe it, and I learned how to smile for real without it hurting. But I was never as happy as I used to be.

I guess it's the same now, for all of us. We feel like we shouldn't let loose and have fun when the world around us is dead, but sometimes we do anyway. I think we'd go crazy if we didn't. It's better now than it was when we were all living in the chapel. We even have video games now! Makayla would like that. I don't think we'd play as much Resident Evil, though. We're living Resident Evil now.

Kevin always reminds us that we can never let our guard down completely, and he's right. 'Cause even when it seems like things are getting better, something bad always happens...

Daddy, if you are watching over us, we need you now!

Friday, August 3, 2012

Week Fifteen

After her father's death, the public library had become something of a sanctuary for Gabby. On hot summer days, she liked to escape the bright sun and retreat into the cool, dark corners of the library, curl up in a chair, and lose herself in a story. She liked the silence and solitude of the library, the musty smell of the books which made her forget who she was and let her pretend to be someone else. She preferred fantasy tales to the scary stories and sappy tearjerkers her friends liked to read. The real world was scary and sad enough; when Gabby read a book, she wanted to visit another world and stay as long as she could.

As much as Kayleigh annoyed her, she owed her for being the one to finally convince the others to check out the base library. For as little else as they had in common, the two girls apparently shared a love of books. That surprised Gabby; she'd always thought of sorority girls as dumb bimbos who only went to college to drink and party. But Kayleigh actually knew a lot.

Still, Gabby had been grateful to get away from her and the others once they were safely inside the library. She roamed the shelves, looking for a book her English teacher had recommended to her before the Osiris Virus was unleashed. *"It's called 'Redwall,' and it's by Brian Jacques. If you like the Harry Potter and Percy Jackson books, I'm sure you'll like this one. And if you do, there are plenty more in the same series."* Gabby had always been skeptical of people telling her what she would and wouldn't like, but since Mrs. Tremain was probably now either dead or a zombie, she felt she owed it to her to give the recommendation a try.

She found the book, a nice, thick hardback, and settled down in a patch of sunlight on the carpet to read. She was quickly charmed by the idyllic, flowery descriptions of Mossflower country, where Matthias the mouse was helping with the preparations for a big feast at Redwall Abbey, while Cluny the rat and his army grew closer, intent on invading and pillaging the abbey. The suspense of the impending attack kept her turning the pages, her eyes skipping over lines of heavy dialect in her hurry to read on, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard Riley shout, "OH MY GOD, you guys, you have GOT to see this!"

Gabby lowered her book for just a few seconds, listening to the distant replies from her mother and Gretchen. Then she determinedly went on reading.

“GABBY!” Riley called. “C’MERE! You’ll love this!”

Gabby rolled her eyes, but she knew her mom would start freaking out if she didn’t answer, thinking she’d been attacked, so she grudgingly set her book facedown to mark her place, picked herself up from the floor, and followed the sound of Riley’s voice. “COMING!” she hollered back in annoyance.

She found Riley standing in front of a big old TV on a cart, like the TVs they wheeled in to show movies on at school. This one was so ancient, it was hooked to a VCR, instead of a DVD player. Riley was holding the remote and laughing hysterically, while a grainy picture flickered on the TV screen. Gretchen, Kayleigh, and Jo were gathered around her, looking bemused. “I was poking around in their media archives,” Riley gasped, breathless from laughter, “and I found this!” She handed Gabby the box to a VHS tape. It was titled *Reach for a Book!* and the cover featured a woman with a cheesy smile and a bob haircut, surrounded by a group of equally cheesy-looking kids in tacky, eighties-style clothes.

Gabby snorted. “Looks like the kind of videos my guidance counselor makes us watch at school.” *Made*, she corrected herself inwardly, the sarcastic smile slipping from her face. Everything about her old life had to be referred to in the past tense now. Everyone she’d known, with the sole exception of her mother, was dead or a zombie.

“Oh yeah, it’s hokey alright,” said Riley, “but it gets better. Look closely at the kids. Recognize anyone?”

Glad for the distraction, Gabby squinted at the goofy, grinning faces of each of the children. The widest, toothiest smile belonged to a blonde boy in a red and white sweatshirt. There *was* something oddly familiar about him, and she looked at him for several seconds before her jaw dropped. “OH MY GOD!” she mimicked Riley. “Is that-??”

“Nick?!” gasped Kayleigh, snatching the box from over her shoulder. She brought it right up to her nose, studying the cover for a second, before she burst out laughing. Gretchen and Jo swooped in from the sides to get a look at it, too. Soon, they were all cracking up.

“Okay, okay, watch!” wheezed Riley, aiming the remote at the VCR to un-pause the video. Gabby came closer, smirking as she recognized a young Nick among a group of kids sitting around a library table.

“*So, how about it? Are we gonna have the party or not?*” asked the Nick onscreen. He looked close to her age, but his voice hadn’t started to change yet; it was oddly high-pitched. He said his lines the same way kids at her school sounded in their school plays, and even though he was pretty hot, she could suddenly understand why he hadn’t had much success as an actor in L.A.

“Wait till we show him this,” she giggled, while the cheesy kids talked about planning a surprise birthday party for their cheesy friend with the cheesy librarian. She must have been laughing through the transition, or maybe there wasn’t one, because all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the cheesy librarian burst into a cheesy song.

“It’s a *musical*?!” shrieked Gretchen, laughing so hard that tears started to stream out of the corners of her eyes.

“It’s your *L-I-B-R-A-R-Y... It’s the place to be!*” sang the cheesy librarian, over the chorus of their uproarious laughter. “It’s your *L-I-B-R-A-R-Y... It’s your library!*”

“C’mon, Gretchen, you don’t randomly break out in song in your classroom?” Riley asked sarcastically.

Didn’t, thought Gabby automatically, feeling another pang of sadness.

“Oh, sure, all the time,” giggled Gretchen, playing along. “My students sing along and rock out just like those kids, too.”

Sang, Gabby corrected. *Rocked*. She couldn’t keep herself from thinking it. All of Gretchen’s students, kids younger than her, were probably dead or zombies, too.

“Nick’s really into it,” Kayleigh snickered, as cheesy Nick swayed back and forth to the beat of the song.

“At least he’ll never forget how to spell ‘library,’” joked Jo, as the word was spelled out yet again in the song.

“*Let’s reach – up – high!*” chanted the cheesy librarian, and the five of them nearly collapsed in fits of giggles as they mocked the hand motions that goofy little Nick and the other cheesy children onscreen were doing. “*Sing L-I-B-R-A-R-Y...*”

Watching the older women, including her mother, be silly and dance around in front of the TV made Gabby smile. It reminded her of the kind of thing she and Makayla would do – and had done, many a time, during viewings of *High School Musical*. That was back before Gabby stopped caring and started pretending to care, before her father’s murder and long before Infernal Friday.

Her world had been one of innocent fun then, but now she saw that they could still have fun in a world that was changed, a world that was not so innocent, a world that had fallen apart. There were still bits and pieces of their old lives that they could get back, moments just like this – goofing off, laughing with friends,

making fun of a cheesy old video. The undead world was a scary place, but they didn't have to be scared all the time. They didn't have to be sad all the time, either. They could still smile and laugh and have fun. *She* could do all of those things.

Grinning, Gabby mocked the dancing along with the rest of the girls, and they were all still laughing hysterically when AJ came running into the library.

"AJ! Watch this! Oh my god, you *have* to see this!" crowed Kayleigh, bouncing up and down as she pointed at the TV.

But Gabby took one look at AJ's ashen face and knew the fun was over. Something was very wrong.

"What happened?" she asked in a whisper. Behind her, Riley paused the video, and the library fell deathly silent.

"We got attacked-" AJ panted, out of breath from running, "-in the bowling alley. Howie's hurt. We need you, Jo. It's... it's bad."

That was all he said, but it was enough. Gabby watched her mother take off jogging for the front door, and she and the others quickly followed.

"Where is he?" Jo demanded, as she climbed behind the wheel of the Hummer. AJ ran around to the passenger side and jumped in beside her.

"They put him in the truck and took him to the medical center," said AJ. "There was... a lot of blood..."

Jo nodded, cranking the ignition. "Everyone buckled?" she asked, glancing into her rearview mirror. Gabby, Kayleigh, Riley, and Gretchen had squeezed themselves into the back seat. Gabby was sitting on Kayleigh's lap in the center seat. She grabbed the seatbelt, extended it to its full length, and clipped it around them.

"Now we are. Drive, Mom!"

Without a second's pause, Jo slammed her foot to the pedal and peeled out of the library's parking lot. The Hummer veered through the base's winding roads, making it to the medical complex in record time. Even Gabby was impressed with her mother's driving. They pulled up to the front doors, and Jo threw the car into park, as they all scrambled out.

"Watch out for the undead," she warned Gabby warily, as they hurried through the doors.

"It should be okay now," said AJ. "We cleared this place out."

“Didn’t you think that about the bowling alley, too?”

“Point taken. Hey, GUYS, we’re here!” he bellowed.

“In here!” The answering call came from one of the rooms on the right side of the hall. AJ and Jo took off running again, and without thinking, Gabby followed.

She was unprepared for what she saw when she skidded through the door.

Nick, Brian, and Kevin were standing around Howie, who lay facedown on a table, his shirt ripped open, his back dotted with gauze pads. Gabby knew that the pads were supposed to be white, but these were bright red, soaked with blood. There was more blood on the floor under the table, puddles of it, then smaller drips that made a trail all the way to the door, from when they had carried him in. Gabby looked down in shock and saw that she was standing in a smear of blood; the floor was slippery with it.

“Can you do something?” she heard Kevin ask, his voice unusually grave, even for him. She glanced up and saw the way he was looking at her mother. His face was as white as AJ’s. “He’s bleeding out.”

Gabby followed his eyes to her mother, who actually looked pale herself. But of course her mom could do something; she was a nurse! She took care of people who were hurt worse than Howie all the time.

But then, Howie was a hemophiliac. Gabby had read about hemophilia in her science book at school; she knew it was a genetic disorder and that it messed with the blood’s ability to clot. Even if his cuts weren’t deep, Howie would keep bleeding and bleeding, until there was no blood left.

Tears stung her eyes, as she watched her mother put her hand over her mouth and start to shake her head.

Chapter 69

I know we’ve all asked why. Why did this happen? Why did we survive? Why the ten of us? Why are we here?

It’s been hard to accept that we may never know the answers. Not in this lifetime, at least.

But one thing became clear tonight: We are all here for a reason.

I know the others have questioned their faith, but more than ever, I believe someone – Someone – brought us together. Someone made us resilient against the plague that destroyed so many. Someone led us to this base, which has become our fortress. Someone gave us Kevin, our protector. Someone provided the supplies I'd need to put my skills to use in a crisis.

Someone is watching over us.

Friday, August 3, 2012

Week Fifteen

"Howie's hurt. We need you, Jo. It's... it's bad."

From the moment she'd heard the words pass through AJ's lips, Jo had been in trauma nurse mode. She'd run faster than she'd known her body to move, driven on autopilot to the medical center, and now stood before a man on a gurney who desperately needed her help. She was in her element.

But as she came closer and saw the extent of the wounds on Howie's exposed back, deep gashes the men had tried in vain to stop up with gauze, she suddenly froze. There was a reason hospitals had a policy against letting medical staff work on family members; it was simply too difficult, too stressful, to think clearly when you were trying to save the life of someone you loved. Though not a blood relative, Howie was as good as her younger brother, in the new family they'd formed on the base. For a moment, she was paralyzed with panic – panic at the realization that she was expected to save him, panic at the knowledge that she might not be able to.

"Can you do something?" Kevin asked in a low voice. "He's bleeding out."

He was right. Jo could see the blood seeping through the soaked gauze pads, spilling down Howie's sides, and splattering wetly to the floor, where there was already a significant puddle. She estimated at least two liters, which was almost half his body's blood volume. As the gravity of the situation hit her, she covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head in disbelief. Ever since she'd found out about Howie's condition, she had known this could happen, but things had been going so well, and Howie had always been so cautious, it still came as a shock.

"Please," Kayleigh begged, sounding near tears. "Do something."

Jo wasn't sure how much she'd be able to do. Howie was very still, already unconscious from the blood loss. One arm hung limply off the side of the gurney. Afraid of what she'd find, Jo nonetheless rushed forward and picked it up. The limb was dead weight in her hands, as she held it up and pressed two fingers to the radial artery in his wrist to feel for a pulse. It was very weak, but after a few

seconds, she felt it, the faint fluttering beneath her fingertips that signaled life. His heart was still beating, barely, but if he kept on losing blood, eventually, the heart would have nothing left to pump.

The key was blood. If she could just get more blood into him, feed his heart enough to keep it beating, then she could work on trying to stop the bleeding. “He needs blood,” she said abruptly. “Does anyone know his blood type?”

She looked around at the others. They all exchanged uncertain looks.

“Can’t you just give him Type O?” asked Gretchen. “The universal donor?”

Jo answered the question with one of her own. “Are any of you O negative?”

Regretfully, they shook their heads.

“I’m sure there’s a blood bank here,” Kevin spoke up confidently, but Jo shook her head.

“He needs whole blood. Whole blood expires after thirty-five days. Any stored here will be useless now.” She sighed; if only someone had thought to ask Howie before he’d blacked out. As a hemophiliac, of course he would know his own blood type. It struck her as odd that, despite his condition, he didn’t wear a medical ID bracelet. Then she caught sight of the watch on his other wrist and wondered if it might serve the same purpose. “Take off his watch,” she ordered Brian, who was standing on that side of the gurney.

Brian unclasped the watch and handed it to Jo, who turned it over. Sure enough, the back was engraved.

Howard Dorough
Hemophilia
Blood type B+

“B positive...” she murmured. It wasn’t a common blood type, but in a stroke of luck, she was B positive herself. So was Gabby, as a matter of fact. At the very least, they could both donate blood.

She was just wondering how she was going to start an IV on herself when Brian said, “I’m B positive, too. Can you give him some of my blood?”

Before she could answer, Kevin added, “I’m also B positive.”

“Hey, so am I!” In shock, Jo looked over at Riley, who looked equally astonished. But it didn’t stop there.

“Me too,” said Gretchen, her eyes widening.

“Me three,” added Kayleigh, sounding equally shocked.

AJ snickered. “Well, what are the odds? So am I.”

Stunned, they all looked around for the only person who had not spoken. Nick’s face turned red, and he stammered, “I, uh... I don’t know what type I am. Sorry...”

Jo stared through him, trying to think back to when she’d treated him in the emergency room, the day before Infernal Friday. He had received a transfusion to make up for the blood he’d lost from his head wound, and she knew he’d been typed for that. She wished she could remember what she’d written on his chart. She was willing to bet he, too, was B positive. How could he not be? It was too much of a coincidence, and yet suddenly, it was starting to make sense.

“We’re all the same blood type,” breathed Kayleigh. “Could that be why...?”

But there was no time to debate it now. Howie was still hemorrhaging, dying before their eyes. If they were to save him, they had to act quickly.

In a frenzy, Jo started tearing apart the room, searching for the equipment she’d need to set up a blood transfusion. “Apply pressure to his back,” she ordered Kevin, tossing him more of the large-size gauze pads. While he leaned over Howie, pressing the dressings to his back to soak up the blood, Jo found an IV starter kit and ripped the package open, spreading its contents across a stainless steel tray.

She picked up Howie’s arm again and turned it over. His normally olive skin was gray and bloodless, clammy and cool to the touch. She tied a tourniquet around his upper arm, then swiped the crook of his elbow with an alcohol pad to disinfect it. From the selection of catheter sizes in the kit, she selected the largest, the fourteen-gauge, which would allow the most blood to be transfused in the shortest amount of time. She plunged the needle into the vein and watched for a blood flash. Then she advanced the catheter, pulled out the needle, took off the tourniquet, and hooked up the IV tubing. She started a bag of saline, figuring the least she could do was increase his fluid volume while she obtained the blood.

“Find another gurney,” she said to no one in particular, as she got out another IV kit and started setting it up.

AJ left and came back, rolling a second gurney up alongside Howie’s.

“Who’s first?” Jo asked, patting the gurney.

“I will,” AJ volunteered at once, hopping up and offering her his arm. It was so heavily tattooed, Jo couldn’t imagine he had an aversion to needles, but still, he looked away when she inserted the needle.

“Squeeze this every few seconds,” she said, handing him an enema bulb. “It’ll increase the blood flow.”

AJ squeezed, and she watched the dark, red blood flow through the tubing that ran from his arm to a collection container. While the container filled with blood, she found a suture kit and set it up to start closing Howie’s wounds.

“Jo, this is soaked through,” Kevin spoke up, pulling up the fresh gauze she had given him, now sopping wet with Howie’s blood.

She got him another one. “Keep applying pressure, as much as you can. If you get tired, have someone else take over.”

“I’m okay,” Kevin said determinedly, covering Howie’s wounds with the new dressing.

“What happened to him, anyway?” Riley asked. “Are those... bites?”

“Cuts,” answered Brian. “He fell onto a glass counter. We got to him before he could get bit, though.”

“That’s lucky,” said Kayleigh, without thinking. Everyone just stared at her. “Er... maybe not so much,” she whispered, looking away.

Jo alternated between suturing and checking on AJ. When he’d given a pint of blood, she set it up to transfuse into Howie’s IV line, then started the next donation. Brian offered to go next, and once she’d set him up, Jo returned to Howie. His vitals worried her; his heart rate too high, his blood pressure dangerously low. His heart was racing to circulate the little blood that was left throughout his body. His breathing was rapid and shallow, his body’s last-ditch effort to get enough oxygen to its cells and tissues. He was still losing blood as fast as she could give it to him.

As she hung Brian’s blood on the IV stand and hooked up Riley’s IV, Jo wondered if it was all in vain. But as long as Howie’s heart was beating, she had to keep going, too. She had to keep trying. She’d never forgive herself if she gave up on him too soon. So she took her place beside the gurney once more and continued her work, using tweezers to dig fragments of blood-stained glass out of Howie’s back, then stitching the deep gashes shut. Through her head ran a nursery rhyme she used to recite to Gabby: *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.*

What if I can't do it? she wondered again. *What if I can't put him together again?*

When Brian's blood finished running in, she swapped it for Riley's and got Kevin ready to donate, while Nick volunteered to put pressure on the remaining open wounds. One by one, they all gave blood, even Gabby, who was too young and too light by Red Cross standards, and Kayleigh, who was terrified of needles, but consented to help Howie. Of them, only Jo did not donate because of the logistics of setting up her own IV while tending to Howie, and Nick, because there was no way to confirm his blood type. Still, eight units were donated, and eight units were transfused. By the time Kayleigh's blood was running through Howie's IV, Jo had finished suturing the last of his cuts. She had done all she could. It was a waiting game at that point.

"His vitals are improving," she told the others. His respiratory and heart rate were down, his blood pressure higher than before. Both good signs.

"Is he going to make it?" Kevin wanted to know, voicing the question everyone was wondering, yet no one else seemed willing to ask.

"I hope so," said Jo. "The fact that he's still alive is encouraging." But there were still so many things that could go wrong. A transfusion reaction... infection... internal hemorrhage... She had only treated the external injuries, the ones she could see. She didn't have the skills to operate, should he have internal bleeding, too.

"Is there anything else we can do?"

Jo's answer to that was simple. "Pray."

They sat with their chairs in a circle, around the perimeter of the darkened hospital room. In the center lay Howie, still unconscious. They'd moved him to a bed, hoping he'd be able to rest comfortably until his body recovered from the massive blood loss.

While he slept, they had formed a prayer circle around him, praying for his survival. Jo knew not everyone in their group believed in God, but AJ and even Brian, after his tirade, had joined hands with them and bowed their heads. Perhaps they didn't believe in the power of prayer, as she did, but the gesture showed their love for their friend. Howie hadn't always been the easiest person to get along with on the base, but he was one of them now. He was family. And none of them could bear the thought of losing him. They had lost too many friends, too many family members, already.

Night was falling now, but none of them wanted to leave Howie alone. To conserve electricity, they'd left the lights off; the room was lit only by the monitor Jo had hooked Howie up to, which ran off the medical center's emergency generator. It kept track of his vital signs, freeing her from the task of checking them every fifteen minutes. His heart rate was back to normal now, his blood pressure still low. All in all, he seemed stable. Without the donated blood, though, he surely would have bled to death.

She looked around the circle at the others, all of them with the same blood type. What were the odds? It couldn't have been a coincidence. Not even God or fate would have brought ten people, all with B positive blood, together as the sole survivors of the zombie apocalypse. There had to be something more to it than that. Something scientific.

"Is that it, then?" she wondered aloud. "Is that all there is to it? Our blood type made us immune to the virus?"

It seemed too simple, but what other explanation was there?

"Maybe..." said Gretchen uncertainly.

"It'd be a damn freaky coincidence otherwise," added AJ.

It was Brian who said, "It can't be that." They all looked at him. "It can't be that, for the same reason our immunity wasn't somehow inherited, either. Blood type is genetic, too. My twin girls had the same type as me. B positive. If that's all that gave us immunity, they wouldn't have caught the virus."

He spoke in the same deadened tone he always used on the rare occasions he brought up his family, and despite their earlier differences, Jo's heart went out to him. She knew what it was like to lose a spouse, but she could not imagine losing her child, too. Why had Gabby survived the pandemic, when his daughters had not?

"Maybe it's a rare antibody in our blood," Jo suggested. She knew that, even within the same blood type, there were differences caused by antibodies. It was the reason matching organs for transplantation was such a complicated process. Two people of the same blood type might not be a good match, and even a good match required powerful immunosuppressant drugs to keep the immune system from attacking the donor organ. Yet antibodies also defended the body against truly harmful antigens, including viruses. Could it be that they were the lucky few with an antibody that protected them from the Osiris Virus?

They discussed the possibility for awhile, but of course, they could reach no definitive conclusions. They might never know the key to their survival, at least not in their time on this earth. Jo hoped the answers lay beyond, that when she

went home to Heaven, she would know everything. But until then, they could only wonder.

“When do you think he’ll wake up?” asked Nick, after they’d gotten quiet again, leaning forward to look at Howie.

Jo shook her head. “Hard to say. He was in hypovolemic shock from the blood loss. His body just needs time to recover.”

Nick nodded. He didn’t look satisfied, but he accepted the answer and sat back in his seat. As he leaned against the back of his chair, Jo saw him wince, a flicker of pain shooting across his face.

“Nick? Are you alright?” she asked in concern.

“Yeah?” Nick looked surprised. “Why?”

“You looked like you were in pain there for a moment.”

“Oh...” He glanced away. “It’s nothin’. I just got mistaken for a bowling pin back at the alley.” He tried to grin, but it came off looking more like a grimace.

“Stand up,” ordered Jo, getting up herself. She flipped on a light on her way over to Nick. “Turn around.”

Nick obeyed, childlike in his overgrown body, still programmed to listen to a motherly voice. With gentle hands, Jo lifted the back of his t-shirt. In the sudden, bright light, the pattern of bruises across his back stood out: a horizontal contusion, where he’d been banged against the edge of something hard, and a series of vaguely circular bruises that dotted his shoulders and neck. *Fingerprints*, she realized, disturbed by the familiar formation of bruises. It was the kind of pattern she saw on victims of abuse and strangulation, people who had been grabbed and choked by a pair of human hands. Zombie hands, in this case.

“You weren’t bitten, were you?” she asked quietly, as she inspected his skin for tears and teeth marks. But there were none, only bruises.

Nick shook his head. “I didn’t fit so well through that hole where the pins go.”

“It’s your big ol’ head,” joked Brian, grinning. “Like trying to fit a square peg through a round hole... or vice versa, I guess.”

The others chuckled, and Jo let Nick sit back down, satisfied that he’d live. Their attention returned to Howie.

Their vigil at his bedside lasted into the night, and just when Jo was about to suggest that Kevin take Gabby home, their patience was rewarded, when Howie's eyes fluttered open at last.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"Get him a glass of water, someone," Jo said, as she hurried to his side. "Welcome back to us, Howard." She smiled down at him. "You're going to be okay," she assured him, softly stroking his arm. "You lost a lot of blood, and I took enough glass out of your back to make a mosaic, but you're on the mend now."

Gretchen brought a glass of water, and she helped him lift his head enough to take a few sips. His eyelids drooped, and she knew he was still weak. He would need time and rest to recover. Eventually, he would want to know how they'd managed to control his bleeding, and she would have quite the story to tell. But for now, she told him only, "Lie back and relax. You're safe here."

She spoke the words convincingly, but she knew, as Howie knew, that they weren't an absolute truth. In the undead world, safety was relative. They may have been immune to the virus that had turned their friends and neighbors to zombies, but they were still under constant threat. They would never, ever be truly safe. Not there. Not anywhere.

Still, as Howie settled back against his pillows and drifted off to sleep once more, Jo's gaze shifted from him to Nick, and she offered up a silent prayer of thanks.

Thank you, Lord, my rock and my shield. Thank You for Your protection.

Chapter 70

*O LORD, God of my salvation,
I have cried out day and night before You.
Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry.*

*For my soul is full of troubles,
And my life draws near to the grave.
I am counted with those who go down to the pit;
I am like a man who has no strength,
Adrift among the dead,
Like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom You remember no more,
And who are cut off from Your hand.*

*You have laid me in the lowest pit,
In darkness, in the depths.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
And You have afflicted me with all Your waves.
You have put away my acquaintances far from me;
You have made me an abomination to them;
I am shut up, and I cannot get out...*

*LORD, why do You cast off my soul?
Why do You hide Your face from me?
I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth;
I suffer Your terrors;
I am distraught.
Your fierce wrath has gone over me;
Your terrors have cut me off.
They came around me all day long like water;
They engulfed me altogether.
Loved one and friend You have put far from me,
And my acquaintances into darkness.*

(Psalm 88: 1-8, 14-18)

Wednesday, August 22, 2012

Week Eighteen

Another milestone had come and gone. Four months, they'd been at MacDill now. But on that night, they gathered at the club to celebrate a different sort of milestone.

"Happy birthday, Howie!" The salutation rang out around the table, as they all looked to their guest of honor.

Howie nodded his thanks, grinning almost embarrassedly. He was normally so stiff and stuffy that it came as a surprise when he lifted his glass and said, "Thank you, everyone. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have made it to thirty-six." Of course, he'd already thanked them, many times over, for saving his life with their blood, but the way his brown eyes sparkled with moisture behind his glass made the rare touch of sentiment even more poignant.

"Thirty-six!" crowed AJ. "God damn, you're an old man, D!"

The smile slipped from Howie's face, and Kayleigh scoffed, "Jeez, way to ruin a moment, AJ."

“Now c’mon, y’all...” Even when it was mellow, Kevin’s deep voice was commanding enough to cause them all to stop, look, and listen. “Let’s do this right,” he said, and raised his glass. “To Howie, on his birthday. We couldn’t imagine life here without you.”

“To Howie,” they all echoed, holding up their glasses in a toast to Howie’s survival.

Brian had seen the way tragedy brought people together, and it seemed that ever since Howie’s near-death experience, they had forgotten their differences and banded together, closer than ever. They were a single unit now, united against the undead, dedicated to protecting each other and their new home. Their bickering was more just friendly banter now. Everyone was pulling their weight, and everyone had earned his or her place in the group. Together, they felt stronger than they ever had before.

Jo had cooked Howie’s birthday dinner, improvising with the ingredients she could still get to prepare a traditional Cuban meal. The dishes weren’t all authentic, seeing as how fresh food was hard to come by, but she served rice and beans and tamales made with canned pork. To Brian, a home-cooked meal was a home-cooked meal, and he thought the food was tasty, considering.

Everyone was complimentary to the cook. “Ya did good, J-Lo,” said Nick, patting his stomach once he’d finished his meal.

“Oh, it’s J-Lo now?” laughed Jo, her eyes twinkling.

Gabby looked horrified. “Uh, *no*, Mom, it’s not! Do *not* call her J-Lo ever again,” she ordered Nick. Unbeknownst to her, Brian twisted his features into a snotty face and snapped his fingers in a circle, mocking her attitude. “What?” Gabby asked, looking around, when Nick started cracking up.

“Nothing!” chirped Brian in a high-pitched voice, folding his hands angelically beneath his chin.

Gabby crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. “Were you making fun of me?”

He dropped his voice to its normal tone. “Now Gabby, look at this face.” He flashed her a cheeky grin. “Would I ever make fun of you?”

“Yes!” she insisted, glaring at him. But he knew she wasn’t really mad. Gabby could be moody, but she was playing along, just as he was. He missed going back and forth with his own daughters this way, and it made him wonder what they would have been like at Gabby’s age. He would never know. She reminded Brian of them sometimes, especially Brooke, who’d had the same kind of spitfire

personality. Bonnie, the more reserved of the two, might have grown up to be more like Kayleigh or Gretchen.

He caught Gretchen's eye across the table, and she winked at him. Even though she hadn't had children of her own, she understood them well, and he liked that about her. It was something they had in common, and as time had gone on, they'd spent hours sharing stories of his twins and her students, all gone now, but not forgotten. Never forgotten.

After the dinner plates had been cleared away, Gabby shut off the lights, and Jo came in, carrying a large birthday cake that was covered in flickering candles. "*Happy birthday to you...*" she started.

"*Happy birthday to you...*" Brian joined in, singing the harmony.

"*Happy birthday, dear Howie...*" they all sang. "*Happy birthday to you.*"

Jo set the cake down in front of Howie. The candles danced in the darkness, lighting up his face with their warm glow. "Make a wish!" cried Kayleigh, and Howie smiled. Then he sucked in a deep breath and blew out all thirty-six candles in one, sweeping gust of air.

They all clapped, bringing back memories of the seven special birthdays Brian had celebrated with his twins. There should have been so many more. But today was Howie's day, and he tried to put himself in the moment, rather than dwell on the past.

Jo removed the candles and cut the cake, and Gabby started passing pieces of it around the table. It was a chocolate cake with vanilla icing, and the first bite was like heaven to Brian. It had been a long time since he'd tasted cake.

"This is wonderful, Jo," said Howie appreciatively. "Thank you."

The others nodded in agreement, echoing the sentiments. The room got quiet as they ate their dessert, savoring each sweet bite. But when there were only crumbs left on the plates, Kevin spoke up. "Whose turn is it for guard duty tonight?"

"Mine," said Brian at once. They took turns keeping watch at the main gates each night, for no one wanted another repeat of the ambush in the chapel. No one really looked forward to guard duty; the nights were long and boring, but they always went in pairs, which made it easier. Except for Gabby, everyone was expected to take their turn, and since there were nine of them, the rotation always changed, so they were paired with a different person each time. Brian looked around to see who would be joining him that night.

"I think it's my turn, too," said Howie.

“Aww, on your birthday? You shouldn’t have to stay up all night on your birthday,” said Kayleigh, her lip jutting out sympathetically. “Unless you’re out drinking, of course!” She grinned. “I think Howie should get a bottle of tequila to take to guard duty tonight!”

“Absolutely not,” Kevin replied sharply, with a disapproving frown. He didn’t get that Kayleigh was joking... at least Brian thought she was.

Kayleigh blew air through her lips. “Party pooper,” she pouted. “Fine, then I’ll trade with Howie tonight. You can take my shift on Friday,” she added, smiling at Howie.

“Thanks, Kay,” said Howie, looking surprised, but pleased.

Kayleigh beamed. “Consider it a birthday present.” She stood up and pushed in her chair, oblivious to the fact that everyone was staring at her in astonishment.

Kayleigh had come a long way since they’d arrived on the base, but still, they didn’t often see her volunteering to do others’ duties. But she had always been close to Howie, probably for the same reason Brian felt close to Gretchen, and Nick to Riley. They’d all bonded with the first living person they encountered after the dead rose, the same way a newly-hatched duckling imprints on the first moving object it sees. *Nothing like a horde of zombies to bring people together*, Brian thought wryly.

“You coming, Brian?”

“Yeah.” He stood up, too, and touched Howie’s shoulder on his way over to join Kayleigh. “Happy birthday, Howie.”

“Thanks, Brian. You two stay safe,” Howie replied, his large brown eyes flitting between him and Kayleigh with concern. No one exactly felt comfortable sending two of their own out to the main entrance every night, where they would be separated from the undead by only a gate, but they would feel less comfortable with no guards at all.

“We will,” said Kayleigh, and she and Brian walked out. They climbed into the pick-up truck, and Brian drove, following Bayshore Boulevard along the shoreline to the first of the three main gates. They would pass the time by rotating among the three of them, following the tall, chain-link fence that ran along the perimeter of the base to the center gate on MacDill Avenue, then to the gate at the Visitor’s Center on the west side of the base.

They started at the Bayshore Boulevard gate, which was Brian’s favorite because it was near the beach, and he could hear the waves lapping gently against the sand and feel a cool breeze coming in off the water. He found it soothing. It was

too nice of a night to sit inside the stuffy guard's kiosk in the median of the road, so he and Kayleigh sat outside, right on the curb.

As darkness fell, he thought of his childhood, of playing outside on the streets of Lexington on warm summer nights such as this, until the streetlights came on, and his mother hollered for his brother Harold and him to come home. He turned to Kayleigh and asked, "You ever play chicken as a kid?"

"Chicken? Like in the pool?"

"No, like in the road."

"No?"

Brian chuckled. "It's a pretty dumb game, really. You lie in the middle of the road, late at night, and wait for a car to come. Then you see how long you can stay there before you turn chicken and get outta the road."

In the moonlight, he could see the glint of Kayleigh's eyes widening. "That's a horrible game! You could get killed doing that!"

Brian grinned. "I know. Like I said... pretty dumb, right? My mama woulda skinned me alive if she had a clue." She had always been overprotective of him, especially, because of his heart condition. Looking back, that was probably why he had enjoyed playing such games, living a little. He shuddered to think of his own girls doing that as teenagers, then realized it didn't matter. They would never have the chance to repeat any of his adolescent mistakes. He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat and forced himself to keep talking. "It was kinda fun, though, for some reason. The thrill of it, I guess. Lyin' there on the pavement, listenin' for the sound of tires or the first flash of headlights, your heart goin' a mile a minute. It made you feel alive."

"I bet AJ played that game, too," Kayleigh said dryly.

"Probably," he agreed, laughing.

After a moment, Kayleigh said, "It's like in *The Notebook*."

"Huh?"

"*The Notebook*. You know, the movie? Ryan Gosling? Rachel McAdams?"

"Oh, yeah." Leighanne had made him take her to see that one. It wasn't too bad of a movie, actually, for a chick flick, though he wouldn't admit to Kayleigh now.

"It was kinda romantic when they did it. Still dumb... but romantic." She was quiet for a moment, apparently thinking. Then she added, "Bradley and I never

tried that.” He knew that Bradley had been her boyfriend; she had spoken of him often in the early days. Not so much anymore. “I was always a good girl. I know you probably can’t imagine that, me being in a sorority, but I was. I studied hard; I only went out on the weekends. I had a 4.0 at UCF.”

Her expression was wistful, and he could relate. He thought he and Leighanne had made the most of their time together, but still, there were so many things they would never get the chance to do. To Kayleigh, he said, “You can try it now. You just gotta watch out for zombies, ‘stead of cars.”

She giggled, and he was surprised when she actually got up from the curb and scampered out into the middle of the road, then proceeded to stretch out flat on her back across the white line. He was impressed. Leighanne had been a lot like her, prissy and put-together, a genuine Southern belle. She was a lot of fun, but she never would have lain in the street with him. He was proud of Kayleigh for taking a chance.

He followed her into the road and lay down next to her, the opposite direction, so that his feet were near her head, his head at her feet. “Isn’t this nice?” he asked, jokingly.

“It is, actually,” came Kayleigh’s soft reply.

He gazed up at the stars overhead and remembered why he’d always thought so, too. There seemed to be a lot more stars in the sky now, he realized, than he’d ever seen before Infernal Friday, when the lights down on earth overpowered them. Now, with his and Kayleigh’s flashlights turned off, there was nothing to compete with the stars but the quarter moon.

For a long time, they were silent, just listening to the sounds of their own breathing and the peaceful noises of night – the constant chirp of crickets, the mournful cry of gulls, the soft rustle of breeze through the palms, the distant slosh of water meeting the land. Then one seagull’s voice rose above the rest, letting out a long squawk that sounded like a scream. Brian heard the beating of many wings as a flock of gulls took off, all at once. He saw their white shapes disappear into the black sky as they flew overhead and away, and he wondered what had made them suddenly take flight. Had something spooked them?

It was then that he realized the crickets had stopped singing.

He sat up, and a sudden gust of wind rose goosebumps on his skin. But it wasn’t from the temperature, for the air was still steamy. It was from the familiar stench that invaded his nostrils, carried on the breeze, carried off the coast. Like an animal, he lifted his nose and sniffed. This was a mistake; he gagged and started coughing.

“Ugh,” Kayleigh sighed, without moving. “There must be some of *them* nearby. They’re starting to smell worse and worse. How long till they just rot away completely, you think?”

“Not soon enough,” Brian choked. The base had been smelling better lately, since they’d, for the most part, rid it of the undead. But on the borders, where zombies tended to skulk on the other side of the fence, the stench of decay still lingered. The hungry moans could still be heard.

Brian heard them now, riding the wind.

Getting louder.

Closer.

Hungrier.

Brian’s blood ran cold, and without a word, he climbed to his feet. “What is it?” he heard Kayleigh whisper, but he didn’t answer. He stood still, squinting through the darkness, afraid to turn on his flashlight. He didn’t need it. As he stared toward the bay, its black waters sparkling with starlight, his eyes could just make out the dark shadows that rose out of it, splashing as they staggered onto the sand.

For an instant, he froze, as he tried to process what he was seeing. Zombies. Coming out of the water. Coming up the beach. Coming for them. There was no fence on this side of the base; it ended at the waterline, where Tampa Bay became a natural barrier.

But not for the undead.

As they emerged through the palm trees, he finally reacted. “Kayleigh!” he hissed. “Get up!”

She was still lying on the pavement, finally at ease in her new home. The base’s many defenses had lulled her into a false sense of security, as it had all of them.

They had both left their guns on the curb.

Kayleigh sat up quickly, twisting around. When she saw the zombies over her shoulder, she screamed and scrambled to her feet. Brian grabbed her hand and pulled her up, dragging her toward their weapons. He picked up his loaded gun, turned off the safety, and fired at the lumbering figures, their faces hidden in the shadows. Kayleigh fumbled with hers, her hands shaking badly. Brian had fired off another shot before she managed to take aim.

They both missed.

“C’mon!” yelled Brian, running for the guard’s kiosk. It was a small building, but at least it would offer them some protection. They could shoot through the windows, out of reach of the undead. He threw open the door and darted behind it, prepared to slam it shut and lock it the moment Kayleigh made it inside.

But Kayleigh never made it.

He thought she had been right on his heels, but at the moment when she should have crossed the threshold, he heard her scream. He stuck his head out around the door just in time to see her fall underneath the weight of the zombie that had grabbed her. Her gun discharged as it hit the ground, a shot firing randomly, ricocheting off the roof of the guard’s station. Over the sound of the blast, Kayleigh went on screaming, struggling frantically beneath the zombie.

Heart thumping erratically, Brian raised his gun and tried to steady his hands enough to aim for the zombie without hitting Kayleigh. He was afraid to shoot, but if he didn’t act fast...

He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

The gun fired, and Kayleigh kept on screaming. When his eyes snapped open again, they were both still flailing, one on top of the other. It appeared his bullet had hit the zombie in the leg, but that made little difference. It dragged its leg lamely along behind it as it crawled over Kayleigh, dead hands reaching, teeth gnashing. She shrieked again as its fists clenched around two hanks of her hair, and he heard a horrible tearing sound as it ripped the hair from her scalp in its effort to pull itself forward.

“GET IT OFF ME, GET IT OFF ME!!!” Kayleigh screamed, as Brian lunged forward, jamming the barrel of his gun into the side of the zombie’s head. He pulled the trigger and winced as its head exploded, sending a shower of skull fragments and rotting brain tissue spattering everywhere.

His relief was short-lived.

It was still raining blood and bone when a second zombie lunged out of the darkness and sprung upon Kayleigh like an animal, its wide, snapping jaws aiming right for her head. Brian had just raised his gun again when he heard the sickening crunch of its teeth breaking through bone. He staggered back in shock as a third zombie fell upon her, and together, they cracked Kayleigh’s skull like a walnut.

He pulled the trigger of his gun, but he was too late; more zombies were closing in. Out of other options, he ran for the guard’s station and barricaded himself in, cracking open the window just wide enough for the barrel of his gun. He fired, one shot after another, at the horde of zombies hunched over Kayleigh’s fallen

form. She was no longer screaming, but he could see her legs twitching weakly and knew she was still alive; if he could just take them down and get to her in time...

His resolve steadied his hand, and one by one, he managed to put a bullet into each of their brains, until there was only a single zombie left moving. Brian rushed back outside to get a closer shot, but as he approached, he was met with a grisly sight. At the sound of his pounding footsteps, the zombie raised its head, and he could see that its lips and chin were slick with blood. Bits of brain clung to the patchy remnants of its beard and mustache. It swallowed and moaned, then lowered its head to the hole in the side of Kayleigh's skull once more, slurping up its contents.

Brian raised his gun, aimed, and closed his eyes once more as he pulled the trigger. He heard, rather than saw, the zombie's body hit the pavement with a dull thump. Then he dropped his weapon, doubled over, and vomited.

When he had expelled the contents of his stomach – birthday cake, rice and beans, and Jo's tamales – onto the street, he straightened up, wiped his mouth, and went to Kayleigh. He picked up his flashlight on the way. He didn't want to look, but he knew he had to, in case there was any chance of saving her.

She was still twitching when he got to her. He sank to his knees at her side and whispered her name as he leaned over her. "Kayleigh..." He shined the flashlight over her face, or what was left of it. The eye that was still there was half open and unfocused, rolling vaguely in its socket. The pupil was dilated wide, even in the bright light. Blood oozed from the hole where the other eye should have been. Her hair was wet with it. His stomach turned again as he recognized the wormy remains of her brain protruding through the shattered side of her skull.

How she was even still alive, though barely so, was beyond him, but somehow, her heart was still beating. Her body was still convulsing. He knew she must be in the throes of death, that there was nothing he could do to save her physically, so he did the only thing he could think of. He took her hand, squeezed it in his, and prayed for her soul.

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven," he murmured, "hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." A lump closed his throat as he thought of the inexplicable evil that had done this to Kayleigh. He swallowed hard before he finished, "for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."

Kayleigh was breathing raggedly now, her chest heaving as her body shook, the air rattling in and out in short, uneven gasps. Her fist had clenched tightly around his hand, and though she wasn't lucid, he knew she was in unspeakable

pain. In his desperation to comfort her, a passage from the Book of Revelation came to him, and he whispered, “God is with you, Kayleigh. And He shall wipe away all the tears from your eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying; neither shall there be any pain, for the former things are passed away...”

And gradually, Kayleigh’s grip on his hand loosened. Her breathing slowed, and her chest relaxed and did not rise again. Her body twitched one last time and then came to rest, limp and still. Her remaining eye stared at the sky, fixed and glassy. Brian reached out and drew his thumb over her eyelid to close it. Then he bowed his head over her body and began to weep.

He wept not only for Kayleigh, but for Leighanne, and for Brooke and Bonnie. He wept for his own shaken faith. He wept until he heard the distant moans that signaled more zombies on the way, and only then did he wipe his eyes and pick himself up from the ground. He left his gun where it lay and instead lifted Kayleigh’s lifeless body in his arms and carried her to the truck. He hoisted her into the truck bed and lay her out flat. Then he climbed into the cab and turned the ignition.

For a moment, he sat there with the engine idling, dreading the drive back to the others, dreading the moment when they found out Kayleigh was dead. Ever since they had discovered the connection between their common blood type and their immunity from the Osiris Virus, they had begun to feel almost as if they were invincible.

But they weren’t invincible. No one was invincible.

Not even the Son of the Lord had been invincible.

The savaged body in the back of the truck would serve as a devastating reminder to the others that the undead were still a threat, and that they were all, very much, still vulnerable.

As midnight approached, they gathered in the chapel once more. It was eerie to be back there, eerie to see Kayleigh lying so flat and still across the altar, her hands folded neatly over her chest, a towel draped over her face to hide her massive head wound. The flickering candlelight did nothing to help the atmosphere. Brian felt jumpy, imagining zombies lurking in every shadow.

No one spoke much. He heard mostly sniffles. Jo was distraught, weeping into a handkerchief someone – Howie? – had offered her. Gabby sat at her side, her mother’s hand in her lap, her face dry and stoic. She stared straight ahead, not crying, barely blinking. Her expression seemed wooden. It intrigued Brian to watch the totally opposite ways in which they dealt with grief, the reversal of roles

between mother and daughter. Gabby was the composed one, silently comforting her mother, rather than the other way around.

Beside them on the pew, Howie and AJ formed a similar pair. Howie, who had been closer to Kayleigh than anyone else, didn't bother to hide his tears, while AJ's face was impassive behind his dark sunglasses. Brian suspected his eyes were red underneath.

Gretchen sat at his side, tears pouring silently down her cheeks. On her other side were Nick and Riley, their hands tightly entwined. And then there was Kevin, his face a hardened mask of grief and guilt. "We should never have made her go," Brian had heard him say, before they'd left for the chapel. "She didn't know what she was doing. From now on, AJ and I will take turns doing guard duty."

"What about me?" Riley had spoken up, sounding almost offended. "I can shoot!"

"So can I," Nick had added, still eager to be considered useful. "We'll still take our turns."

"Stop," said Howie flatly. "Stop arguing about it; this isn't the time. We don't have to decide now. We should be thinking about Kayleigh."

And they'd thought about Kayleigh. For hours, they'd thought of nothing but her. But decisions had to be made.

Kevin's voice cut through the heavy silence. "We need to decide what to do with her."

Brian could always count on his cousin to take the lead.

"She deserves a proper funeral," Howie jumped in quickly, almost defensively, as though he thought they were just going to dig a big hole in the ground, dump her body in, and be done with it.

"Of course," Kevin agreed. "And she'll have one." Then he turned and looked at Brian, his eyes boring into his cousin's.

Brian swallowed hard, steeling himself. Then he nodded. "I used to be a minister," he spoke up, his voice hoarse and ragged. "I can officiate."

Heads snapped in his direction. Gretchen was the only one who did not look at him in surprise. She just smiled, and silently patted his hand.

Kevin nodded. "Good." His lips twitched in a brief smile, meant only for Brian's eyes. "And afterwards?"

“I don’t think we should bury her,” said Howie. “I don’t want those *things* digging her up...” He shuddered.

“They’re probably not interested in dead bodies.” Nick shrugged. “Otherwise, wouldn’t they have started eating each other by now?”

“We’ll cremate her then,” said AJ, with a tone of finality. “We can build her a big, wooden funeral pyre, like they did in ancient Roman times.”

Brian saw Jo shudder, but no one protested. It seemed no one else wanted to think about it.

Kevin gave a nod of approval. “The men will build the pyre tomorrow,” he decided. “The women can get the chapel ready for the funeral. We’ll have it tomorrow evening.” When, again, no one spoke, he added, “We should think about heading back. It’s late, and we have a long day ahead of us.”

But no one moved to get up. Finally, Howie said, “I’m not leaving her here alone. What if they come back?”

“I told you, man, they’re probably not interested in dead-” Nick stopped abruptly when he saw the look on Howie’s face.

“Maybe one or two of us should stay,” Kevin agreed.

“We will,” AJ volunteered at once. “D and I.” Beside him, Howie nodded.

“Okay. You two have your weapons?” They each held up a gun. “Good. Be careful. We’re not as safe here as we thought.”

Brian knew it killed Kevin to admit that. After the incident on the beach, they should have known something like this could happen, but they had completely overlooked the fact that one side of the base was protected only by water, and that zombies could apparently cross bodies of water with no problem. It was only a matter of time before they made it across Tampa Bay.

The base had been compromised, and Brian knew Kevin wouldn’t rest until they had done something about it. But they had to lay Kayleigh to rest first. “At least she’s safe now,” Brian said to Gretchen, on the drive back to their house. “At least she’s no longer afraid, or in danger, or in pain.”

Gretchen nodded. “She’s home now,” she added. “She’s back with her family.”

Brian smiled sadly. For an instant, he was almost envious, imagining Kayleigh being welcomed home by Jesus, her family and her Bradley Lee waiting to greet her with open arms inside the gates of Heaven. One day, he would see his own loved ones there. His two little girls would run to meet him, their arms

outstretched, ready to throw around his neck as he scooped them up. Leighanne would be there, too, more beautiful in Heaven than she was even on Earth, a true angel, instead of a monster.

He swallowed hard. “You really believe there’s a Heaven?” he asked Gretchen.

She didn’t hesitate. “I do.”

After a moment, Brian nodded. “So do I.”

He had to believe. Faith was the light at the end of the tunnel, the only thing that could guide him through this dark, dark night.

As Gretchen drove, Brian thought about what he might say at Kayleigh’s funeral the next day, what readings he might do. He would stay up late, preparing, before he set out to help build the pyre in the morning. He had thought ahead and grabbed something on his way out of the chapel to help guide his thoughts.

In his lap, he held a Bible.

PART VII: THE DIVERGENCE

Chapter 71

I always thought I’d have a big family. I come from a big, loud Cuban family, myself, and when I married Luis, we both assumed we would have the same. But my first pregnancy was hard; there were complications, and after Gabrielle was born, I lost the ability to have any more children. At the time, I was just grateful to have my baby, safe and sound, but there came a time, when Gabby was two or three years old, when I desperately wished I could give her a little brother or sister. Luis loved Gabby with all his heart, but I knew he would also have loved a son, a boy to carry on the Lopez name. Instead, we had just our precious daughter, who was destined to be an only child. We were a small family of three, but we were tight-knit and happy, until the night that tore our family apart.

The others here lost their families to the Osiris Virus, but I actually feel I’ve gained one. Kevin, Howie, Brian, and AJ are like brothers to me; Gretchen, my younger sister. Nick could be the son I never had, and Riley is like another daughter, an older sister for Gabby. I felt the same way about Kayleigh, God rest her soul.

That’s the only downside to bonding like a family; while it feels so good to love and be loved, it hurts so much to lose a loved one. Kayleigh may have rubbed

some the wrong way at first, but we all loved her, and now, we all miss her. We all wish we could have saved her. I know Brian blames himself for not getting to her in time, though from the sound of it, there was nothing he could have done without getting himself killed, too. Howie's been a wreck; he was closest to Kayleigh, and it was his turn at guard duty she was taking. If it hadn't been his birthday, he would have been out there instead when the zombies attacked. He wouldn't have stood a chance. And Kevin... as our leader, he's shouldered a lot of the responsibility, too, for letting Kayleigh go. It's not rational, but I can understand the feeling. It's natural to want to protect your family – and to feel as if you've failed when you can't.

These people are all my brothers and sisters, my sons and daughters, and my greatest fear is losing another one of them. But in the undead world, where fear is an everyday feeling, loss is inevitable.

Saturday, September 22, 2012

Week Twenty-Two

The mood around base had been dismal in the month since Kayleigh had died. Life seemed more like it had been when they'd first arrived at MacDill, than how it had been on Howie's birthday – Kayleigh's death day. It was as if they had regressed.

They didn't move back into the chapel or any such nonsense, but they did spend less time on fun and more time on defense once again. Their safety on the base had been compromised, and the only answer was to try and secure it again, the best they could. Kevin's solution was to build a fence that ran the length of the beach – essentially, a sea wall, though its purpose was to keep the zombies at bay, rather than the waves. They had started on it the day after Kayleigh's funeral and worked tirelessly on it every day since. They used tools and lumber from the wood shop located at the arts and crafts center on base, and when that wood ran out, they started chopping it from the forest that covered the southwest corner of the peninsula.

Everyone helped. The strongest men – Kevin, Nick, and AJ – oversaw the logging work, while Brian, Howie, Riley, and Gretchen assembled the fence. Even Gabby proved useful by holding boards while they hammered and bringing more nails, while Jo spent her days in the swampy, mosquito-infested woods, helping drag logs into the bed of the truck and making sure no one got crushed underneath a falling tree.

The work was hard and hot, but it gave them purpose, kept them occupied, and took their minds off of Kayleigh. A month after her death, they still weren't done, but they paused to acknowledge the anniversary. They went to the chapel, their usual meeting place, and lit candles for Kayleigh. Brian, who had officiated the funeral service, led them in a prayer. Jo had felt closer to him ever since he had

opened his heart to God again. Their differences were forgotten. In fact, everyone had been getting along better, as they worked together to fortify the base and each other's spirits.

It came as a surprise to Jo when, on that one-month anniversary, Kevin said, "We can't stay here."

Everyone looked at him, equally shocked. "Why not?" Howie demanded. "We have everything we need here. Once the wall is finished, we'll be perfectly safe again – safer than anywhere else, at least."

Kevin gave a nod. "Yes... but for how long? Eventually, we'll run out of food. We'll run out of fuel for the generators. We'll run out of supplies. That's if the zombies don't pick us off one by one. What happened to Kayleigh – and to you, Howie, and to AJ before that – could happen again, to any of us. We think we're protected, but we're not. Not really. They'll find another way in, another hole in our defense, another flaw we've overlooked. We'll never truly be safe."

"Gee, thanks for that optimistic outlook," said Riley sarcastically, rolling her eyes. Beside her, Nick chuckled.

Kevin shrugged, unapologetic. "It's the truth. We've done a good job at surviving so far, but we can't sustain ourselves here forever. Our best chance for long-term survival is to increase our numbers. We need to find more survivors."

"Why?" AJ spoke up right away. "We've got a good thing going here, a good group of people. We don't need anyone else fucking that up. And anyway, if we have more mouths to feed, we're just gonna run out of food and everything else that much sooner. Besides, we've already looked for other survivors, remember? We didn't find jack shit. Everyone's a fucking zombie."

"We looked here," Kevin replied, leveling his gaze with AJ's. "I'm talking about a broader search. I think we need to get out of Florida and see what else is out there. We have no idea what the situation in the rest of the country is like."

"The entire East Coast was affected," Gretchen said. "New York, D.C.... it just spread down the coast."

Kevin's answer was simple. "Then we go west."

"Easier said than done, cous," said Brian. "It took Gretch and I a whole week just to drive down from Georgia. The major roads are blocked with traffic, and without power, the gas pumps are down, so refueling will be an issue. Not to mention the hordes of zombies roaming around."

"I agree, driving is impractical," replied Kevin. "We'll fly instead."

“Uhh, what?” Nick laughed nervously.

“I’m a pilot, remember. We’re on an Air Force base. There’s plenty of planes here – and plenty of fuel. We can cover a lot more distance, a lot more quickly, and we won’t have to worry about zombie attacks in the air.”

Nick snickered. “Unless it turns into *Zombies on a Plane*.”

AJ immediately chimed in with his best Samuel L. Jackson impression: “That’s it! I have had it with these muthafuckin’ zombies on this muthafuckin’ plane!”

The two of them cracked each other up, and Gabby joined in. Jo’s disapproving frown quickly quieted her.

“We can go all the way to the West Coast,” Kevin continued, ignoring the jokes.

“And what if it’s the same situation out there?” AJ asked, serious once more.

Jo saw Kevin’s jaw tighten, his lips pressing into a thin line. “Then we’ll have to come up with a new plan. But we have to check it out. We need to know what we’re dealing with, how widespread this plague is.”

Jo wasn’t sure she wanted to know, but she could appreciate Kevin’s logic. It would be good to find more survivors, if there were other groups like theirs out there. It was just a big “If.”

“So who goes?” Howie asked, looking around. “Do we all go?”

“I think some of us should stay behind,” Jo spoke up quickly, “to protect the base and finish the wall.” She didn’t like the idea of taking Gabby into the unknown, back out into a world overrun with the undead.

Kevin met her gaze and nodded. “I agree. We don’t need everyone to go. Just a few of us – a small expedition. We’ll fly out, spend a few days scouting the area, then come back to report our findings.”

It sounded practical and reasonably safe. They just had to decide who would stay and who could go.

“Jo, Gabby, Howie, and Gretchen will stay behind,” Kevin decided immediately. He didn’t say it in so many words, but Jo knew and accepted that he was naming the weakest among them. She and Gretchen didn’t know how to fight zombies nearly as well as the rest of them, and Howie was a liability. And, of course, there was no way she would allow Gabby to go. “AJ, I think you should stay too, to help guard the base.”

“And what if I’d rather go?” asked AJ defiantly. Jo had never seen him disagree with Kevin, despite how different they were.

Kevin’s reply was calm, but firm. “I need you here.”

Perhaps it was the subtle flattery, the idea of being needed, that worked. In any case, AJ stopped arguing and agreed with a sullen nod. “Fine.”

“Does that mean the rest of us are going?” Nick asked.

Kevin’s sharp, green eyes turned on him. “Do you not want to?”

Nick didn’t look particularly enthusiastic, but he shrugged and replied, “I’ll go if you need me to.”

AJ snorted. “Don’t sound so excited, dude. Kev, I’ll trade with Carter if he’s gonna puss out.”

Nick’s face reddened. “I’m not pussing out! I just have kind of a... fear of flying...” he admitted, mumbling the last few words.

This time, AJ snickered outright. “I think you’ll have more to be afraid of than the fuckin’ plane on this trip, kid.”

“I know,” Nick said, smiling sheepishly.

“So are you in or out?” Kevin demanded.

Nick’s adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed hard. Jo could practically see him steeling himself. “I’ll go.”

“Good.”

“If Nick goes, so do I,” Riley jumped in immediately after. When Kevin eyed her uncertainly, she added scornfully, “I think I’ve proven that women can fight zombies, too, you know. This isn’t the nineteenth century. You did work with female soldiers in the military, didn’t you?”

Jo expected Kevin to look affronted that she was basically accusing him of being a chauvinist, but all he said was, “Of course, but they were well-trained.”

“If you’re looking for well-trained soldiers to go on this mission, it looks like you’ll be going alone,” she retorted coldly. “I may not have the brawn, but I’m just as good a shot as Nick – and I’m not afraid of flying. No offense,” she added, patting Nick’s arm.

“Fine,” Kevin said with a nod. “You’re in. Brian, what about you? Stay or go?”

“Do I have a choice?” Brian asked mildly.

Kevin looked annoyed. “Of course you have a choice. No one’s being forced into anything.”

Under his breath, Jo heard AJ mumble, “Yeah, right...” If Kevin caught it, he didn’t react.

“Then I’d rather stay and help with the wall,” replied Brian. Jo didn’t miss the way he looked at Gretchen when he said it.

“Alright. So Nick, Riley, and I will go. The rest of y’all will stay behind to guard the base and keep working on the wall.”

It was decided. Jo asked the only question that remained: “When will you go?”

Kevin’s answer came promptly. “As soon as possible.”

Monday, September 24, 2012

Week Twenty-Three

While Jo, Gabby, Brian, Gretchen, Howie, and AJ spent Sunday working on the wall, Kevin, Nick, and Riley spent it preparing for their trip. Nick and Riley gathered supplies, while Kevin fueled up a small plane, made the necessary calculations of how far it could travel on a tank of fuel, and plotted their course.

They wasted no time. By the next day, they were ready to leave. It felt too soon to Jo, who was not ready to see her new family split up, but she went with the others to the air field to see them off.

Kevin had already pulled the plane out of one of the five, large hangars; it sat ready on the runway. They all helped him load the cargo hold with the rations and supplies they were bringing along, and then they milled around on the tarmac, knowing it was time for the trio to go, knowing they would soon have to say goodbye, but not knowing how to. No one seemed to want to be the first to start the farewells.

Finally, Kevin said, “Well... I guess we should get going. I wanna leave us plenty of daylight to get there. We’ll need to stop at Buckley to refuel in order to make it all the way to California.” That was the plan, to head straight to the opposite coast and try their luck there. It was too long a journey for the small plane to make on one tank of fuel, though, so Kevin intended for them to stop at another Air Force base in Colorado.

Brian stepped forward and shook his cousin's hand, pulling him into a tight hug. "Be safe, cous," he said, patting Kevin on the back.

When Brian released him, Kevin offered a tight smile. "You know I will. You were always the reckless one when we were kids, not me."

Brian chuckled, nodding. "Yeah, who'd have guessed I'd grow up to be a preacher, and you'd be the pilot?"

"Who'd have guessed the world would be overrun with zombies?" was Kevin's reply. Jo had come to understand his dry sense of humor well enough to know that it was meant to be a joke, but no one laughed.

When Brian went to hug Nick next, Jo approached Kevin. Before she could say a thing, he smiled at her and said, "You hold down the fort while I'm gone, Jo. I know AJ'll think he's running the show, but everyone will look to you as the true leader."

"I hope not," joked Jo, laughing lightly, but she knew there was some truth to it. Just as Kevin was the natural father figure in their group, she was easily the mother. Without him around, she would have to be the glue that held the group together. "You'd better come back soon, safe and sound. It won't feel right here without you."

Kevin nodded. "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing. We'll be back."

"I know," she said.

But as she watched her daughter run to him next and throw her arms around him, as she saw Kevin ruffle Gabby's hair, as she heard him remind her to listen to her mother, Jo was struck by an awful feeling of dread. She had the sense that something was going to go wrong.

She said nothing, but as she watched the three of them climb into the plane, Kevin waving before he closed the cabin door behind him, Jo somehow knew it would be the last time she ever saw him.

Chapter 72

Nothing about this feels right.

I know there's no "logic" to that, so Howie and Kevin would both look at me like I'm crazy. But it's the truth. How can splitting up be a good thing? Watch ANY

old horror movie (if you can get a generator and a working DVD player, of course) and you know as soon as the group splits up, they're doomed.

It's just horror logic.

Don't laugh at it. It's what saved me that night in the hospital, where I relived 28 Days Later. Zombie rules in horror movies. They did apply. They did save my life. Well, except for the biting thing, which is weird. I still don't get why the bite thing didn't happen. I mean, the whole logic of it is that it's a more direct infection, and so we can't fight it or something. But AJ got bit, and nothing happened. So no go on the no-getting-bit rule. Score one for the good guys?

Humans: 1

Zombies: 500,000,000,000,000,000

Sidetracking. Sorry.

This happened because of Kayleigh, who we still miss, more than you would ever guess. Just the other day, I caught Howie looking through the journal she kept, like the journals we all keep these days. We only found it about a week ago, tucked away. It's hit him, Brian, and Kevin the hardest. Brian feels like it's his fault, even though it's not. Howie was the closest to her, and it's like he lost his best friend. Maybe more, since we've already lost so many people this year. We've lost a whole world. How much more can we take?

Kevin blames himself for not keeping the base secure. So now he's got this idea to really try and find out what happened to the rest of America. Three of us go, six of us stay behind. It's not supposed to be a long trip. Just a couple days, tops, to try and fly around in this little plane and look for survivors. At least I'll have Riley with me; that helps.

I have such a bad damn feeling about this. Maybe I'm just paranoid. I gotta try and make the best of it. If we find more people, it'll all be worth it, right?

Maybe I'm nervous 'cause I hate planes. Little levitating fucking deathtraps. Okay, calm down, Nick, no need for a damn panic attack. Breathe. In. Out. In. Out.

I need to stop thinking.

Song Quote of the Entry time. Now let me just say, I'm appalled at myself for not mentioning The Beatles yet. They were truly one of the greatest and most revolutionary bands of all time. A must-mention.

Now, I give you my song quote:

*“Hey Jude, don't make it bad
Take a sad song and make it better
Remember to let her into your heart
Then you can start to make it better*

*Hey Jude, don't be afraid
You were made to go out and get her
The minute you let her under your skin
Then you begin to make it better*

*And anytime you feel the pain, hey Jude, refrain
Don't carry the world upon your shoulders...”*

- The Beatles, “Hey Jude”

Monday, September 24, 2012

Week Twenty-Three

He was flying.

Actually, that was inaccurate. He was getting ready to fly. Nick was in a small, private plane, enough room for perhaps two people at most. It reminded him of the toy remote-control planes he used to crash into the walls as a kid. Glancing around, he made sure he was strapped in and started up the engine. He was out in the desert, far from his Florida home, but they'd left to find survivors. So far, none had been found, but he tried his best not to think of it. He turned the plane as he began to pick up speed, heading down the lane.

His eyes skipped around nervously from within the cockpit, while he accelerated. As he pulled the throttle, he could feel the too-tiny-for-comfort plane lifting into the air. Why had he let Kevin talk him into this? This mission would have been better for AJ – not Brian, though, as he had a fear of heights bigger than his own. Still, the ease at which this went down was enough for him to be thankful, and a sigh of relief followed. He could feel his whole body relaxing as his plane rose.

He was okay.

Nick adjusted his cap, sitting sideways on his head. He felt himself smirk at his own foolishness. What had he been so worried about?

He was about to contact Riley when he felt it.

The plane gave an uncontrollable lurch that made him forget everything else, as his stomach decided to make a gigantic leap into his throat. His right wing was throwing him off. His heartbeat went on overdrive as he looked around, feeling helpless as he tried to stabilize. He looked over again. What had happened?

It wasn't long before he found it. There, tearing into the wing, tearing it apart, was Kayleigh. She grinned at him. Her face began to immediately decay at a rapid pace. An eye was suddenly missing; her skin was coated in congealed blood. It was matted in her hair; the other half of her head was exposed, showing the partially-eaten grey matter that lay within a nest of feasting roaches.

The plane began its sudden nosedive. The right wing had burst into abrupt flames, as he lost any chance of control of the aircraft. There was nothing he could do; he was trapped, helpless to do anything but die.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" he screamed.

"NO!" Riley shrieked into his ear through his headset. "No..."

The small plane slammed into the ground, exploded into a shower of debris and flames. An orange fireball was consuming everything, was more dazzling than the sun...

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Nick, Nick, wake up!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Nick!"

"Wha-huh? Rye-Riley?" He was jolted awake by a hand shaking him gently, bringing him out of the terrors of sleep and into the horrors of reality.

For a moment, he was disoriented in a way he hadn't been in some time. Not since April fifteenth, if he wanted to narrow it down. It hit him again: they were traveling for the first time since the dead rose. A survivor search mission. Riley hovered above him, a look of pure concern written on her face. Nick shifted, his eyes opening slowly, as he tried to adjust himself again in the small seat of the plane. He was far from happy about the idea of flying across the country, the way they were.

Already, it was causing him nightmares.

Just as he'd always had a fear of sharks, he'd always harbored a fear of planes, or heights, in general. It had been partly why he'd moved back from California on the road rather than on a plane. There was no source to this fear, unlike the sharks. He always remembered having it, even when he was just that scrawny, nerdy kid who was always pretending. While his younger siblings climbed trees,

he'd been the one sitting on the ground below them, thinking they were crazy. He had tried flying on planes before, and, always, the immense waves of irrational, heart-stopping fear followed. When it came to heights, Nick just found it best to avoid them. Avoiding them meant avoiding a panic attack, typically, or a nightmare like the one he'd just had.

Planes weren't the only thing haunting him, though. Thoughts of Kayleigh were, as well. Thoughts of her haunted them all. She had been the motive behind this whole mission.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Sorry Rye," he muttered, glancing out the window. *Bad idea, moron*, he reminded himself irritably. He wondered how long he'd been asleep. *Not long enough*.

She sat down beside him again, taking his hand in hers. "I didn't want to wake you, but you started thrashing and screaming. It really freaked me out."

"Bad dream." Her brow furrowed. He felt himself attempt a grin, not wanting to worry her in the slightest. "Planes just freak me out. I mean, there's a reason why we don't fly; flying's just not good. I hate it."

Riley laid her head on his shoulder, a golden curtain of hair covering part of her face. It was a simple action, yet it comforted him. It was always the simple things that made him happy. It was what he loved about her, that she somehow seemed to sense that about him. He rested his head upon hers, enjoying the feeling. "It'll be okay. Kevin's a trained pilot. And we're not going to fly around the world or anything. Just to see if we see any signs of life, then to Colorado to refuel, then to California. If California's a mess, then it's a good guess America's gone down the way Florida did."

"That's a hell a scary thought."

"Tell me about it."

Nick sighed, shifting once more in his seat. He had never been able to sit still; it was much like his ability to focus, completely erratic. "If America's gone... you think maybe..."

He felt her head shake against him. "I don't know. I don't even want to think about it." Riley shuddered a bit, a look of pure, undiluted fear flashing across her eyes. "The idea of this... this curse going global? That's enough to want to say 'forget it' and give it up right now."

Nick turned his head towards her, meeting her gaze. "You think so? I'd say that's more reason to try and fight, to survive, I guess."

A smile tugged at her corners of her mouth. “You’re such an optimist.”

“Guys, we’re going to be descending in about twenty minutes; make sure you’re strapped in,” they heard Kevin announce, before they could continue any further. It was just as well. As much as Nick wanted to believe in their ability to survive in an entire planet overrun by zombies, it was hard to. They could hardly make it in a state where they were the minority species these days.

As they began their descent, however, Nick only let himself think of the positives. Doing that had helped him keep his sanity so far, and given all that had happened in mere months, he needed all he could get.

Still, he would never admit it, not even to himself, but there was just an inexplicable feeling that wouldn’t leave him alone.

One that said something was terribly, terribly, wrong.

“LAND!” Nick leaped down the steps out of the plane. Immediately after, he threw himself upon the ground, kissing it thankfully. He was beyond words in his feelings of no longer being in the air. He kept kissing the ground again and again. Footsteps could be heard coming down the steps only feet away.

“You realize you are so washing your mouth out before I kiss that again,” Riley teased, helping him up. Kevin chuckled, as they glanced around the seemingly-abandoned area. They had landed at Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora, Colorado. It was a perfect halfway point to regroup and refuel before trying to scan the rest of the western side of the country.

“You love me and my dirty mouth.”

Riley didn’t respond, but he caught her trying not to smile as she adjusted the backpack she wore. Kevin tapped Nick on the shoulder. “I need you to help me refuel the plane. Riley, keep watch out for anything. It looks calm, but we don’t know for how long. If there’s undead here, they’ll have been attracted by the noise we made landing.”

Nick raised a brow. “This place looks dead.”

“Or undead.”

A smirk appeared. “Such an optimist…” he teased.

“Okay, there’s the refueling truck. Hopefully the keys are in the ignition or nearby; I’m not fond of the idea of trying to hotwire it.” Kevin yawned, stretching

a bit. “You get it started, and I’ll get the hose connected to the plane. It shouldn’t take us longer than thirty minutes, and I feel like I’m overestimating.” He took a long look at the truck.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure it’s the right kind of fuels. There are two main kinds, and if I use the wrong one, it would blow up the plane.” A pause. “Okay, we’re all right.”

Nick headed for the fuel truck, glancing around for any sign of the keys. The door was unlocked, and there the keys sat in the ignition. Nick had a feeling many had died on the base, or were already undead. The place was just too empty, too lacking of life, for anything else to be true.

The thought gave him chills. He turned the key, starting the ignition. Once the truck was running, he hopped back out, heading over to Kevin, who was fueling the plane as one would a car. It surprised Nick that it seemed so simple. He’d have guessed the military would make it more complicated. Riley stood not far from them, her eyes focused as she scanned the area, her rifle loaded and ready to go.

Maybe they evacuated in time after what happened to the east coast. Who knows? The idea of it was encouraging, but it also felt empty, an easily popped balloon of hope within their sky of broken dreams.

“Did you hear that?” Kevin’s voice called softly, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Hear what?”

“No... wait, I think I do. Shit!”

Then Nick knew what they were talking about. A chorus of moans, harmonically haunting, could be heard in the distance. The sound was echoing from all around them, all encompassing. The moans had a depth to them, one he hadn’t had to experience in a long time, not since the base had been swarming with the undead. Much like this base had to be, if there were no survivors here. Maybe there had been, but if there were, they weren’t there now. The sound of the plane would have attracted them.

Instead, all it did was announce dinner time to an immense amount of beings craving fresh human flesh. The three looked at each other. Kevin was still fueling the plane, and they had nowhere to go. Nick pulled his handguns from where they were strapped to his belt, next to his handy axe, as Riley tossed him some ammo from her backpack.

“Looks like the virus kept spreading.”

“Good God, how many people are zombies now?”

Nick set his jaw. “No need to think about that now.” He grinned. “Time to nut up or shut up.”

“You would quote a movie at a time like this,” Riley joked, glancing at him and then back at the zombies, which seemed to be coming at them from all sides. The approach was slow, staggered, and typical, but until Kevin was finished, they had no choice but to make a stand.

“Go get to a better spot!” Kevin yelled. “Both of you.”

“You’re nuts! Someone needs to cover you!”

“We’re both staying.”

“Like hell you are, Rye! Get to a better vantage point; snipe some of them down.”

“Both of you, go! That’s an order!”

“Sorry, Kev, but neither of us are military! If you can get that baby filled up, we’ll be okay to run on and fly the fuck out of here.” Nick’s eyes met Riley’s steadily. “Rye, go! You can keep a bunch of them from getting to us if you set up a spot!”

Her jaw set, and he could see the fire in her eyes as she opened her mouth to argue again. Yet the moans grew louder, and the ghouls began to come within range. Shaking her head, she ran to the nearest car, some yards away, a Hummer. He breathed slightly easier, knowing she was safer, just being higher off the ground. He could see her settling up top, her ammo handy and her rifle steady. He heard the constant sound of bodies hitting the tarmac, as his girlfriend shot them down from the top, one after another.

Nick aimed. “We’re so majorly screwed.”

The moans drowned out any reply Kevin might have had. Nick kept the shots going, and he could hear Riley’s gun going off as well. Kevin was shooting what he could with his free hand. The shots weren’t steady, and Kevin dropped the hose, shaking his head as fuel spilled along the ground. Nick didn’t get a chance to ask why, as the massive horde was keeping him too busy.

Shots kept coming, again and again. The sea of undead was endless; when some fell, more just stepped over them, ever-reaching for their prey. As they came within reach, Nick’s axe, the one he’d diligently kept sharp, came into play. Heads rolled along the ground; brown gelatinous blood sprayed into the air. Pure luck kept him from getting bitten, and although he knew he couldn’t be infected, he could still be eaten. The creatures were stumbling over the fallen bodies in their unremitting determination to reach the humans. Nick stared into the

deadened gazes of a hundred milk-white eyes, the mouths slackened, bodies stiff and reaching.

Nick knew, as he continued the fight, struggling against them, that they were going to die here.

“We need to find another way out of here!” Kevin yelled, as he threw one over his shoulder. Once down, he shot it directly. Another was behind him, about to leap and sink its teeth into Kevin’s unprotected throat.

“Watch out!” Nick screamed. He fired at the corpse, as Kevin ducked. The shot was wild, as another made a grab at him. It missed the target, striking the plane instead.

A spark hit the ground, some feet away from the plane, landing in the trail of fluid left by the gas pump hitting the tarmac. And Nick knew what was going to come, only moments before it did. The ground burst into flames, and for a split second, his eyes stared into Kevin’s, each reflecting the same look of dread at what was about to happen.

The two pushed through the mob of zombies, no thought of killing, only of keeping themselves from being eaten and getting as far as possible from the plane. Nick couldn’t see Kevin anymore, as he kept fighting his way through. Time seemed to slow down for him as he did. He saw Riley, atop the Hummer, her line of sight stretching in the opposite direction, focused on her targets. She didn’t know.

“RILEY!”

He somehow found the strength to pick up his speed, reaching the vehicle with only seconds to spare. As he leaped on top of the hood, he grabbed Riley, flinging her over with him to the other side of the Hummer, as everything behind him burst into a massive downpour of debris. They hit the pavement as another explosion shook the ground; the car that had been protecting them flew over their head from the force of the blast. Nick kept himself over Riley’s body, close to the ground, shielding her from everything. He could feel the hot air blowing fiercely from all around; still, he kept his head down, buried into her shoulder. He could still feel her holding him tightly, afraid to let go.

The air was littered with fire and bits of metal and bone. Large flames danced where the plane and fuel truck had once been. They grew steadily higher, black smoke filling the air. Charred body parts were flung into the sky. Nick lifted his head up, seeing Riley panting below him, but safe and sound. He glanced around and saw that everything in the area was in flames. But that was far from the worst of it. The worst was the bodies still making their way in his direction.

The blast hadn't killed everything. With the creatures just enough out of range, as he and Riley had been, they had only caught aflame. Fiery bodies were still making their way towards them, still hungering for the taste of their flesh. Nick was only thankful that they had some time; those closest to them had been torn apart by the explosions. The smell that consumed the air was overpowering, a mix of char and rot. He swallowed back the urge to vomit.

He looked back down to see Riley grinning tenderly back at him. "Nick Carter... you're my hero."

Despite their situation, he felt the almost uncontrollable urge to laugh. Only one thought kept him from doing so. Instead, he simply replied, "All in a day's work, ma'am," in what he considered to be one of his worst attempts at a cowboy country accent.

"Where's..." She left the question unanswered.

"KEVIN!" he screamed, as he stood and helped her up.

"Kevin!" They ran forward, looking for any sign of their companion.

A body was coming in closer, limping steadily. Nick grabbed Riley's rifle, ready to fire. "Wait, don't shoot!" she cried. "I think that's... Kevin."

The two ran forward, to where Kevin was slowly walking. His body was covered with human remains and blood that could be none other than his own. His clothes were singed and torn, but they had no time to search for the wounds. They had to make it out alive before they could aid their friend and leader.

"I'm all right; we need to get out of here," he croaked. This was followed by a series of coughs.

Nick grabbed his arm, wrapping it over his own shoulder so he could support him. He pointed at the Hummer some yards away. He glanced at Riley. "Try and get that thing going. Before the flamers get here." He snickered at his own joke, while Kevin groaned. He couldn't tell if it was out of pain or because of his joke. He suspected it was the latter.

She ran ahead, making her way to the vehicle. *Thank you for sparing us*, Nick thought, giving his silent prayer to the God who had once again decided to save them. *Thanks, Kayleigh, for watching over us*. Somehow, he had a hunch Kayleigh was helping them, even now.

He had never really believed much in a higher power. Given the life he'd lived, the family he had been born in, Nick had always lacked the faith needed to do so. How could there be a God who did nothing about the problems that plagued and

pained humanity? It had never made sense. Yet now, in this new world, one that would never stop testing them, he finally understood.

Someone was protecting them. He could feel it.

The Hummer sped down the tangled mess of roads, crawling with ghouls. Nick was simply thankful the military vehicle could handle the difficulties pretty seamlessly, as Riley navigated. There was no real set destination in mind; their only thought was of getting as far from the base as possible. The fire had consumed most of the base by now, he was sure. The flames had only grown, as they ran down zombies in their high speed desertion.

He sat in the back, Kevin half-lying beside him. His shirt was open, as Nick tried to clean his wounds with the few materials they had. They had been lucky Riley had brought her backpack for the ammo. There had been a miniature first aid kit she'd packed as well. They needed more, but he was at least able to try his best at cleaning the wounds.

Bits of metal had pierced the former military man all along his chest; some had gotten in deep. Those had just been the little bits, but he wasn't able to dig them out properly. For what felt like the millionth time, Nick missed Jo immensely.

"We need to find a place to camp out for now. To regroup," Kevin said, refocusing them as always.

"Already on it." She veered to the side, slamming the two men against each other. The elder grunted in pain. "Sorry."

Nick readjusted himself, as he looked over Kevin once again. "This is the best I can do for now, man."

"It's fine. I'll be fine."

Nick nodded, not feeling so sure, but wanting so badly to believe him, that he forced himself to. Of all people, Kevin knew what he was doing. If he couldn't trust his judgment, what then? He glanced out the window as he readjusted in his seat. There were so many questions now. Was the whole world like this? It looked like the country certainly was. He shivered. How were they going to get back home to Florida? The mission was a bust, and trying to drive to California now felt ludicrous. The only option Nick could really see was trying to go home.

But could they go home again?

The car swerved again, but this time, he kept his grip. The Hummer slowed as it made its way across the green. Nick leaned forward into the front seat, surprised. “Rye, this is a golf course.”

“Yep.” She pointed to the clubhouse. “That’s gonna be our camp for now. We can see them coming in from on the green; there’s plenty of golf clubs as backup weapons and a way to fortify the area. Better than a residential area, which will probably be loaded with zombies.

Kevin nodded in appreciation. “Well thought. Not the best, but it’ll do.”

“Given the circumstances, I can’t think of much better.”

They may have used the word “camp,” but Nick knew this would likely be their new home for some time. At least, until they could figure everything out. His only prayer was that he would be able to one day see the faces of the people he called family once again. That when they’d said goodbye, it wouldn’t be forever.

Despite his prayers, he knew.

He just knew he would never see them, or the MacDill base, ever again.

Chapter 73

I felt so sorry for Brian, Howie, Jo, and Kayleigh, the ones who had lost their wives, their husbands, their boyfriends. I didn’t consider myself one of them. I was no widow; Shawn was still alive, still looking for me, and one day, he would find me here. It was that thought that kept me going.

July 30th was our first wedding anniversary. I had myself a good cry, thinking of how, if the world were normal, Shawn and I would have gone out to a nice dinner, then come back to the house for some year-old, freezer-burned wedding cake while we watched our wedding video and drank champagne. Instead, the day passed with no cake, no champagne, no video, and no Shawn. But I wasn’t alone. That night, I sat out on the front porch and stared up at the moon. It was a clear night, and the moon was big and beautiful, almost full. I comforted myself with the idea that, somewhere, Shawn might be gazing up at the same moon and thinking of me. It was very Fievel from An American Tail, minus the singing, but cheesy as it sounds, it made me feel better. It made me feel like Shawn was with me, somehow.

It’s been almost two months since then – more than five months since I last saw my husband. I’m not sure how much longer I can go on like this. It sounds sick, but I look at Brian, Howie, and Jo now, and in a way, I envy them. Their

spouses are dead, but at least they know they're dead. They've grieved and accepted it, whereas I feel like I'm stuck in some kind of limbo. I miss Shawn. I worry for Shawn. But I can't grieve for Shawn when I haven't accepted that I'll never see him again, and I can't accept that when there's still a chance he's alive. At this point, I just want to know. It's killing me not to know.

I just wish someone would give me a sign.

Tuesday, September 25, 2012

Week Twenty-Three

The moon was almost full again. It shone brightly in the sky, sparkling off the water of Tampa Bay and casting shadows on the ground below. Gretchen was grateful for the extra light, but the shadows did make it seem even eerier out by the gates.

Guard duty was more nerve-racking than ever, after what had happened to Kayleigh. She hated when her turn came around, but she hated the idea of going to sleep with no one keeping watch over the base even more, so she continued to take her turn without complaint. At least Brian was with her tonight.

He was on edge that night, too. She knew he felt at least partly to blame for Kayleigh's death, even though there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. "You could have died, too," she'd told him, shuddering at the thought. Brian was one of her closest friends here; she didn't think she could take it if something bad happened to him. It had been horrible enough losing Kayleigh – and almost losing Howie before that. And now Kevin, Nick, and Riley were gone, and she had to worry about them, too. The house seemed empty without Nick and Riley; in a way, she was glad it was her turn at guard duty, because there was no way she could have slept there alone that night. At least she was with Brian. He made her feel safe – as safe as she possibly could feel, under the circumstances.

They sat side by side on the curb outside the tiny guard's kiosk, their guns in their lap. As a breeze from off the bay rustled the nearby palms, Gretchen shivered a little, goosebumps rising on her skin from the sudden chill. Even as they entered fall, the daily temperatures were still in the upper eighties and nineties, but the temperatures at night had started to drop.

"Chilly?" Brian asked, looking over at her.

"A little. Guess I should have brought a sweatshirt." She laughed. After months of suffering without air conditioning, it seemed ridiculous to complain about being cold. She was glad summer was over.

Brian put his arm around her and rubbed her upper arm vigorously to warm her up. It helped a little. "Thanks," she said, smiling in his direction.

“Wanna go inside?” he asked, tipping his head toward the guard’s kiosk. They usually avoided sitting inside it; it was cramped and stuffy, and unless they left the lights off, it was hard to see outside in the dark.

Gretchen shrugged. “Okay.”

He let go of her and stood up, then extended his arm down to her to help her up, too. She thought it was cute the way he did things like that, not just for her, but all the ladies on the base. He was just chivalrous that way, a true Southern gentleman. She accepted his hand and let him pull her to her feet. She started to follow him into the kiosk, when a glimmer of movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Turning her head, she gasped, instinctively clutching Brian’s arm.

“Something’s coming,” she whispered, pointing through the gate, to the main road that extended north into the city. A lone figure was wandering down the road toward them. In the silvery light, it was a mere shadow, a dark silhouette, but it was human in shape. She had said “something” and not “someone” only because it had been so long since they’d encountered a “someone,” she assumed it had to be one of the undead – no longer a person, but a thing.

Brian moved in front of her, raising his rifle. The creature was still too far away, out of shooting range, but it was getting nearer with every step. Gretchen held her breath, watching it. Brian kept his eyes trained on it, as well, adjusting his aim as it slowly came into range. He inched closer to the gate, slipping the gun barrel between its metal bars, as his target approached it on the other side.

As the moonlight fell upon it, Gretchen suddenly cried, “Wait! Don’t shoot!”

Brian turned to look at her in surprise, but she ran past him and grabbed the bars of the gate. She yanked on them, trying to open it, but it was operated electronically and was too heavy to move manually. “Open the gate! Open the gate!” she begged Brian.

He didn’t question her, but went obediently into the guard’s kiosk to work the controls. Within a few seconds, the gate was sliding slowly but steadily open. Gretchen waited just until a gap wide enough to slide through appeared; then she slipped through it and took off running toward the figure, screaming, “Shawn! Shawn!”

She had recognized his lanky shape, his old military fatigues, and the glint of his glasses in the moonlight. Now she ran to him, her arms open wide. He came steadily toward her, calm and collected as always, and she thought in exasperation, *The least you could do is meet me halfway!* But she didn’t care; she would run a marathon just to fall into his arms at the finish line.

“Oh, Shawn!” she sobbed, and she hurled herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face in his shoulder. “You found us! I always knew you’d find us!”

She felt his arms come around her, heavy and hard, and their weight comforted her; it had been so long since she’d had someone to hold her. His fingers scrabbled up her back and into her hair; it had grown long since the spring. He had lost weight; he felt bonier than ever, as if he might break if she squeezed him too hard. He stunk, as if he hadn’t showered in days, maybe even weeks. Clearly, he’d been on the road for a long time. He had been through hell. She could smell the pungent stench of the undead on his clothes. “You need a shower,” she laughed, reaching up to stroke his face.

A chunk of flesh from his cheek fell off in her hand.

She gasped, as the sickening realization hit her, and tried to pull away, but his hands were wound in her hair and held her tight. She felt them clawing at her scalp, and as she looked up into the milky, dead eyes sunken into the hollows of his decaying face, the bony fingers clenched around two hanks of her hair and tugged her head toward his gaping mouth. She caught a whiff of his rotting breath as she sucked in a lungful of air and released it in a high-pitched scream. “BRIAAAN!!!”

“GRETCHEN!” She heard his voice and the pounding of his footsteps, but there was no way he could make it to her in time, no way he could get a good shot at Shawn’s brain.

As she felt the jaws brush her forehead, she screamed and screamed.

“Gretchen! Gretch! GRETCHEN! Wake up!”

Gretchen sat up, her covers falling off her. Her hair was in tangles from writhing on her pillow, and her skin was slick with cold sweat. She was breathing hard, her heart racing. The bedroom was dark, but she could just make out his silhouette perched on the edge of the bed.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, and she felt the warm weight of his hand on her leg through the covers. “You were just havin’ a nightmare.”

“I dreamed you were dead,” she whispered back, and she started to cry then. “Oh Shawn...” She reached out and drew him into her arms, holding tight to him as she had in her dream, clinging to his bare chest.

She felt his arms come around her and pat her on the back, but then she heard his voice saying, “It’s Brian, Gretchen... wake up... it’s just Brian...”

The light came on, and she woke up then, really woke up, and found herself in Brian's arms – or, rather, him in hers. She released him at once and recoiled, still disoriented but quickly becoming aware that she had done something embarrassing in her sleep. He offered her a crooked smile, looking awkward, and she realized he was wearing only a pair of boxers. Looking down at herself, she remembered that she had on just a thin t-shirt, and she quickly pulled the sheet up around herself, feeling self-conscious.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, shaking her head. "I'm a real deep sleeper... I had a bad dream..."

"I know." He smiled sympathetically. "You were screaming. You shouted my name, but then you called me... well... your husband's name."

"I'm sorry," she apologized again, feeling her whole body flush with embarrassment. She lowered the covers again, desperate for air. "I dreamed he came here, to the base, only... only he was... one of *them*."

"That sounds awful," said Brian, and she realized he knew just how awful it was because he'd been through something similar, but for real.

"I'm sorry," she said a third time, at a loss for anything else to say. "Thanks for waking me up."

"No problem," he replied, getting up from her bed. "You don't have to apologize either. It happens. You gonna be alright?"

She nodded, anxious for him to leave, but after he was gone, she left the light on. She was afraid to go back to sleep, afraid to see what she'd seen in her nightmare again. She scooted back against her headboard and brought her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, and there she sat, until the darkness faded to dawn, thinking of Shawn.

I can't keep doing this, she thought, her head pounding as she fought off sleep. I can't keep torturing myself, wondering. I need to know. I need to find him.

It was that thought, that resolve, that finally lulled her back to sleep.

Later that morning, Gretchen called for a meeting. When the remaining six of them gathered around her kitchen table, she announced, "I want to go back to Atlanta."

The protests came quickly, as she'd known they would. "No, don't go!" Gabby cried.

“It’s too dangerous,” Howie added.

“Especially with the others gone. Wait until they get back and let us know what the rest of the country looks like; maybe then you can go.” That was Jo.

“Kevin already told you no.” That was Brian. Gretchen couldn’t help but glare at him, feeling betrayed that he would side with his cousin over her. It was true that she had brought up the idea of going back north to look for Shawn before, and it was also true that the plan had been shot down by Kevin. That was exactly why she was bringing it up again now.

“Kevin’s not her dad. Besides, Kevin’s not even here. If Gretchen wants to go, she’s free to go.” That was AJ, and Gretchen looked over at him with surprise and gratitude.

“Thank you, AJ,” she said. To the others, she explained, “I have to find my husband. I know it’s a long shot, but I have to try. I can’t go on like this. I won’t rest until I at least look.” She paused, seeing the way they exchanged glances, and then she added, “I know you think it’s stupid and dangerous and naïve of me; I don’t expect you to understand. But I do expect you to let me go.”

“I understand,” Howie said quietly. When she looked over at him, he continued, “I only had to drive a few miles, but I would have gone to the ends of the earth to find my son.”

Gretchen felt her throat tighten. It was easy to forget Howie had once been a father. He rarely spoke of his son, but the way he did now, she could tell he did understand how she felt and why she had to go. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Brian looked from Howie to Gretchen, frowning. Finally, he said, “Well, you can’t go alone.”

She raised her eyebrows, her heart doing a little staccato step.

“I’ll go with you.”

She could tell he wasn’t thrilled about the prospect, and she couldn’t blame him. She and Brian had both been through hell in Georgia, but while Atlanta still held hope for her, it held only horrors for Brian. Where she might still find her family, he had lost his forever. She couldn’t make him face his demons just for her sake. “You don’t have to,” she said quickly.

He shook his head. “I’m not gonna let you go by yourself. We came down together; we can go back up together.”

She bit her lip, wanting to smile, but fighting back the impulse. “Are you sure?”

Looking a lot like his cousin, he gave a single, stoic nod. “We’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Why not today?” she blurted, before she could stop herself.

“Because. We need to get some supplies together and make a plan, look at a map, figure out the best route to take. By the time we do all that, it’ll be well into the afternoon, and we want to give ourselves as much daylight as possible to travel in.”

Of course, all this was perfectly logical, so she forced herself to nod. “Okay. So we’ll spend today getting ready, and we’ll leave tomorrow. First thing in the morning.”

Brian smiled tightly. “First thing in the morning,” he agreed.

The moon was nearly full again that night. Maybe it was the extra light streaming into her bedroom, or maybe (probably) it was just anxiety over the dangerous journey she was about to embark on, but Gretchen slept badly. She tossed and turned for hours before gradually falling into an uneasy sleep. But when Brian woke her at dawn, she jumped out of bed, wide awake and ready to go.

She had slept maybe two hours, at most, but adrenaline was coursing through her, more potent than caffeine, and she worried if they didn’t leave then, she’d lose her nerve. She brewed a pot of coffee for the road, while Brian added the last of their bags to the back of the same pick-up truck they’d arrived in, which was already loaded with guns, gas cans, and boxes of food and ammo.

Jo and Gabby were still asleep when they left, but AJ and Howie, who had been up all night on guard duty, opened the front gate for them and wished them well.

“Take care of yourselves,” said Howie, giving them each a rare hug.

“You two just better make it back before the other group does, or Kevin’ll skin me alive for letting you go,” growled AJ, before surprising Gretchen by pulling her into a rough hug, too. He clapped Brian on the back. “Don’t become zombie meat.”

“We’ll try not to,” Brian chuckled weakly, as he climbed behind the wheel. Gretchen went around to the passenger side and clambered on up into the cab. She had always loved a road trip, but this one felt like anything but.

As Brian eased the truck on through the gate, her stomach twisted into knots. She heard the gate rattle closed again behind them and shuddered, as she realized she was outside the protection of the base for the first time since they

had arrived. Now she wondered if they were making a deadly mistake by leaving again.

She turned in her seat and watched out the back window, as AJ and Howie waved from behind the gate. As much as she prayed she would find Shawn alive at their home in Atlanta, she also prayed they would make it back alive to their new home, at the base in Tampa.

Chapter 74

I wonder if the others are okay.

I think about them a lot. Really, there's not a lot of options of stuff to do. It's like the early days of the church, only worse. We got hella spoiled by the luxuries of the base. I didn't realize that till we moved into this freaking golf course. Riley was right about the zombie count being lower, though; we're lucky. We're alive. So I think about the others, what they're doing. I bet the fence will be done soon. Knowing AJ, he'll paint it. I hope Howie's alright; he seemed to be getting better before we left. I wonder if Gabby's okay, now that Kevin's gone. He seemed to be like a surrogate father to the kid. Is Brian okay? After Riley, I'd probably say I was closest to him. I miss him a lot; we did plenty of goofy shit that helped keep his mind off his family.

Do they think we're dead?

They probably do. I would. We've been gone for almost two weeks now, far beyond the three days we promised. We have no way of contacting them, no way of telling them how wrong everything's gone.

I hate this.

I hate being stuck here.

I hate feeling so damned helpless. So fucking idle.

That's how we feel, all three of us. Especially Kevin. I've never seen him like this. He seems so damn lost, like he doesn't have a real plan now. He's second guessing, because of what happened here, and before that, Kayleigh... It's not his fault; sometimes things happen. But it's killing him, I think. Also, I think his injuries are hurting more than he's willing to admit to me or Rye. I don't know for sure; he won't let me check. He says he's fine, and he's handling it. Something's off.

All we have now is each other.

If that changes, I don't know if we can survive.

*Song Quote of the Entry... Nirvana, one of my favorite bands of all time.
It's...man, it's so hard to explain if you weren't here in the world before. But they
were fucking epic.*

*"I thought you died alone
A long long time ago*

*Oh no, not me
We never lost control
You're face to face
With The Man Who Sold The World*

*I laughed and shook his hand
And made my way back home
I searched for form and land
For years and years I roamed
I gazed a gazely stare
We walked a million years
I must have died alone
A long long time ago..."*

- Nirvana, "The Man Who Sold The World"

Wednesday, October 3, 2012

Week Twenty-Four

The sun was only beginning to give out the smallest rays of light to pierce the otherwise velvet black sky, as Nick glanced out the windows by the double door entrance. He was sitting up against one of the walls, his guns resting at his side. Riley lay against him; her head was in his lap as she was lost within a peaceful slumber. A small smile was etched on her face, a look of peacefulness he'd never seen on her awake. His hand ran through her hair ever so gently, his eyes gazing at her tenderly while he let her sleep.

Nick had promised to wake her up, so he could let her take her turn for zombie watch, but he didn't have the heart to disturb her. She bottled so much inside, never let him see her fear. She was so determined to prove to Kevin that she was strong, able to handle this mission, despite all the problems that had come their way thus far. He felt the least he could do was let her rest for as long as possible. He was sure she'd chew him out for it later, but he didn't care much; it was worth it.

His eyes scanned the area, seeing no potential threats at the moment. They landed on Kevin, who was sleeping on the other side of the main lounge. He'd made sure Kevin had the couch, as he was still hurting, no matter how hard he tried to convince them otherwise. He'd been so distracted lately, as well, a fact that deeply unsettled the two blondes. Still, neither of them said much to him about it. What could they say? They seemed to have reached an impasse, and neither of them was sure of how to get out of it.

A moan reached his ears. Without thinking, Nick grabbed the shotgun, spotted the zombie, and fired a shot that soared through the one open window. The shot hit directly in the skull, and the body crumpled almost silently to the ground, where a pile of them now lay from a week-and-a-half's worth of sniping. Nick smiled at his shooting. It always felt good when he was able to get one down with the first shot.

He felt Riley stir, and he stayed almost perfectly still, knowing the noise from the blast might have disturbed her. She was an incredibly sound sleeper, sounder than Nick could ever be these days. He often got jealous of that. She shifted against him, turning a bit and mumbling. He sighed.

"I love you..."

Nick blinked, staring down. *Did I hear what I think I did?*

"What did you say?" he asked, forgetting, for an instant, that she was, in fact, still asleep.

She simply snuggled against him more, giving her own sigh of contentment. Maybe he'd heard her wrong. But what if he hadn't? Was he even ready to hear those words? Nick shook his head, stroking her hair again. He had no idea. Nick didn't think about being with her; he just *was*. It felt right. They just fit, somehow, and there was no logic, no reason to it.

At least she was asleep; she wouldn't know what she'd said. Only Nick would. So he wouldn't have to worry about it, not really. Riley wasn't the type to really outright say anything personal. She could be blunt as hell when she wanted to be, but when it came to being truly emotionally vulnerable, that was something she couldn't handle very well. Right then, he was thankful for that little fact. As long as he was able to act like it never happened, at least.

He glanced outside again.

Killing zombies is way less complicated.

SMACK!

A hand slammed into the back of his head – playfully, of course, but it still smarted a bit. Nick rubbed the back of his head, wincing as if the smack had inflicted more pain than it actually had. He held back the laughter that wanted to surface. He'd never tell Riley, but she got cute when she was angry.

“I can't believe you stayed up all night instead of waking me up for my shift!” Riley cried, giving him an irritated look.

Nick smiled, looking sheepish. “I didn't wanna wake you. You looked so...” He struggled for a word. “... so happy. It's okay; I handled it.”

Her expression softened. “Oh. Well, then, thanks. I just, don't want you always covering my slack. I told Kevin I could handle coming, and I can, you know?”

Their gazes shifted over to Kevin, where he still lay resting upon the couch. They had no way to tell, but the sun was high in the sky, so Nick guessed it to be maybe around noon. It wasn't like Kevin to sleep in so late. Their eyes met, and he knew they were both thinking the same thing. He was just the one who vocalized it first.

“We should wake him. You think he's alright?”

“Honestly? I think something's up, beyond the fact that we're trapped in the middle of the country with no plans of how to get home.”

He had been like this for the past few days: lethargic, pensive, and isolated. They'd both tried to piece the new shell that Kevin had built around himself, but he refused to let them in. Nick set his jaw as he walked over. That ended now; they didn't have room for that sort of behavior anymore. Too many things rested upon it. They had to get back to Florida, and they had to figure out just how they were going to do it. Brian and Gretchen had said they'd almost been killed just going down there from Atlanta. Their odds were going to be far slimmer traveling from Colorado.

Still, they had to try.

“I think you're right. Fuck, how did everything go so bad, so fast?”

She shrugged. “We didn't think about the rest of the country; we assumed it would be okay. We didn't think that maybe the rest of America was just as bad. Why else would we assume we could refuel?” Riley shot him an ironic smile. “We were optimistic.”

Nick smiled back, making his way towards Kevin. The truth was, they had been thinking it hadn't spread. Maybe not consciously, but their actions had said otherwise. He shook Kevin a bit, ever so gently, in hopes of rousing him. Kevin

shifted, but didn't wake. Nick frowned when he shook him again. Kevin moaned, in a weak echo of a zombie, but still didn't rise.

"Rye? C'mere."

"What's up?" She stood beside him, watching Kevin. The man's brow was glistening with beaded diamonds of sweat; his black hair was pasted to skull. He mumbled something, tossing a bit on the couch before lying still once more, looking far paler than normal. Her brow furrowed. "He's not looking too good."

"It can't be the Osiris Virus; we'd have caught it by now."

"Just because we can't get that, doesn't mean other shit can't touch us," she remarked darkly. Her hand touched Kevin's forehead. "He's warm, really warm."

"Shit." Nick paced, trying to think of how Kevin could have caught a virus, when it occurred to him: the injuries from back at the base. The fact that Kevin wouldn't let him check him out after that night. Even if Nick had, it wasn't like he could just run out and get medical supplies. It was far more complicated than that now. They had been living off of the dry supplies they had been able to find at the clubhouse so far. Venturing out to get food, or anything, was a dangerous task.

"What are you doing?"

Nick ripped open Kevin's shirt and nodded, confirming his suspicions. "It's from back at Buckley. He wouldn't tell us he was still hurting." There, angry red lines spider-webbed along his chest. Just above his navel was a raw, angry wound with a thick grey-white fluid seeping from it.

"Mom? Mom, it's okay; we're going to be okay... I'll take care of you now..." Kevin murmured.

"I think he's delirious."

"I really wish Jo was with us right now. That's gotta be a pretty bad infection."

Nick ran for their pitiful first aid kit, while Riley went to grab a towel from the kitchenette. They came back at the same time, and Riley set to cleaning the wound. Nick handed her Neosporin and bandaging; all the sanitized wipes had been used the day at the base. Neither said anything, but they shared the same thought; one look at each other said enough. Both were worried; neither had a clue of what to do. He saw the faces she made while draining the pus, but didn't laugh, for once.

"I hope I'm doing this right. I'm no nurse. Whenever my brothers got hurt... well, I screamed till Dad came."

“We need Jo.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“So what do we do now?” he asked, as she bandaged up the wound so it wouldn’t get infected further.

“What can we do? We wait and pray like hell that will work.”

If I didn’t fucking hate hospitals before... I sure as hell do now.

Thursday, October 4, 2012

Week Twenty-Four

“I have to go to the hospital.”

“No, hell no. No way. No. I’ll shoot you before I let you walk out of here.”

Nick was staring down Riley, as they stood hovering over Kevin. His condition hadn’t improved; in fact, Nick was worried it had actually worsened. Kevin still slept in a feverous delirium. And although he didn’t like it, Nick knew this was beyond the meager supplies they had at their disposal. He was going to have to risk a trip to the local hospital and see what he could find.

He’d known this the night before, that this would be an eventuality if nothing changed. He’d spent the night flipping through the map at the back of the phone book to try and find the nearest hospital. He’d thought over and over again about how he could get in and out the quickest, what way to get in. Despite all that, he didn’t feel even the slightest bit prepared.

It was a suicide mission, and he knew it.

The simple truth was, Kevin didn’t have a prayer if he didn’t try. Riley knew it, too, and that was why she stood in his way, her rifle in hand, threatening to shoot him before letting him go kill himself instead. He’d never seen her like this; her face was pale, her blue eyes pleading, begging him not to go. The gun itself shook with nerves in her hands. The expression on her face was one of anxiety, her lips set in a firm line. It felt like she was saying those three terrifying words all over again, just as unconsciously as before.

“He needs more than what we’ve got here.” He watched as she took that in and could see she knew he was right.

“You can’t go alone.”

“You can’t come with me! What if those things get in here? Kev would be an all-you-can-eat buffet to those fuckers!”

“It’s a death trap if you go alone. Hell, it may even be a death trap if I go with you, but you won’t make it alone.”

“We can’t leave him here to die.”

“Then no, no way, you’re not going.”

“He’s gonna die if I don’t get something! You were even saying so last night, weren’t you? He needs some antibiotics.” Nick was trying to sound calm, rational, and logical – three things that he never quite accomplished properly. Still, someone had to stand strong; someone had to keep from breaking down.

“And you’re going to fucking die trying to go get them! It’s a goddamn hospital, you barely made it out alive from one before, and that was before all the goddamn corpses even managed to rise! If there’s a mass zombie party, the hospital is where it’d be. We’ll figure something out, but you are *NOT* going to a hospital.”

“What if there’s no other option? You’re just going to let Kevin die?!”

“Of course not! But what if you don’t make it back!?” she countered. He could see her fighting back the stream of tears that threatened to fall. There was so much left unsaid in that statement.

He approached her cautiously, wrapping his arms around her, pushing the gun aside. “I’m going to make it back.”

“No... no, you won’t.”

He buried his face in her hair, breathing her in. “Yes, I will. I swear. I’m going to come back just fine.”

Riley shoved him away, her expression stony and cold. “You’re a dead man walking. You already decided. Just go.”

“Rye, come on.”

“No, you’re practically dead; just go make it official already.”

“Just have a little faith. I’ll be okay.”

“Like Howie when he almost died? Or how about Kayleigh when she *did*? Just fucking go already!”

“Rye-”

“Get out!” she yelled, looking like she wanted to do nothing more than curl up with a teddy bear and cry. The gun fell to the floor; the safety must have been on, as it didn’t go off. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if to make up for the embrace Nick wanted to give. But he couldn’t try to find another way. He couldn’t just waste time when he knew this was the only answer. So instead, he gave one last look at the girl who held his heart, grabbed his weapons, and walked out the door.

Nick sat in the Hummer for awhile outside the hospital, unsure of his next move. When he’d thought this over, it had seemed simpler than it actually was, once he arrived. He drove carefully around the building, hunting for the pharmaceutical entrance. He figured that would be his safest route, less bodies there, hopefully, and then he wouldn’t be forced to make some roundabout journey in search of medication.

That was the other hole in his operation. What medicine should he get? He knew antibiotics would be his best bet, but that was as far as his knowledge went. They’d always relied on Jo for any medical incidents, big and small alike. Sitting there in the Hummer, he realized they probably should have had her teach them what she could, just in case.

He cut the engine, hearing the moans from outside the vehicle. It was harder to tell now how many were close than it had been back in Tampa. On the base, once they’d cleared it out, they had learned how to determine how far off a ghoul was from the decibel and distance of the moans. Now, there were so many, it was just a neverending chorus.

Nick grabbed his axe and doubled-checked to make sure he had his handguns and ammo tucked away. He swallowed back any fear bubbling up from within his stomach and opened the door. The smell, once again, slammed his senses, and he wondered if those zombies would ever just finally decompose completely and fall apart, thus doing them all a favor. The zombies wandering amongst the cars detected him immediately. His feet slammed against the pavement as he raced indoors.

He kicked through the small door, coming up to the desk of the pharmacy. Hearing the zombies behind him, he looked around before grabbing a nearby mop and jamming it through the door handle to keep the door shut for now. He just prayed the shatterproof glass of the door would stay true to its name.

Nick glanced around, reacting just in time to a uniformed, undead nurse lunging at him. They fell to the ground, her jaws snapping at him eagerly for her next

meal as the axe slipped from his grasp. The hands wrapped around his neck, and he struggled for air, as he fought to get free. His hand struggled to reach his weapon, as spots began to appear before his eyes. Nick struggled with every ounce of strength he had, his other hand keeping her just out of biting reach. Finally, he was able to grab the axe and slam it clumsily into her skull as hard as he could. He felt the skull shatter beneath the force, and the reanimated corpse slumped on top of him. Nick gasped for air, enjoying the feeling once he was able to breathe normally again. He shoved the body off of him, getting up slowly.

“I’m never going into a hospital again after this,” he muttered, putting the axe back into the strap along his belt. “Only for Kevin would I do something this damn crazy.”

Another zombie rose from behind the counter, and this time, his guns came out swiftly. The first shot slammed into the zombie’s shoulder, causing it to stumble, and Nick cursed his own bad aim. The next shot connected with the skull, and he watched it fall quickly to the floor. He heard another set of moans, sounding like they were coming from the other side of the door at the end of the room, leading to the rest of the hospital.

I really don’t want to know how many heard me just now, he thought to himself with trepidation. He put his hands on the counter, hopping over it with ease, due to his height. He walked into the back room, where another zombie was there to greet him. He stumbled back, almost tripping. A shot fired off wildly, as a result, bouncing off the metal lamp hanging from the ceiling and firing through the top of the zombie’s skull. Nick, once again, was thankful for his incredible luck. He ran into the stock room, leaping over the newly-fallen body, and started sifting through the medical prescriptions.

“Okay... antibiotics, antibiotics. Fucking doctor handwriting; how the hell do they expect anyone to read this shit?” He fumbled his way through the little bags of medication, reading the labels and tossing them aside as the moans grew louder.

“Fuck, fuckety fuck fuck!” Nick yelled, forgetting himself as shoved a bunch onto the ground. “I don’t got time for this...” Finally, he saw the labels he’d been looking for. “Penicillin... okay. Amoxicillin...” His eyes skimmed the label. “Okay, that too...” He saw several bags, but the one word he read was “antibiotic.”

Not caring about much else, he grabbed as many of them as he could, stuffing them into a larger bag he found stashed under the shelves. He thrust himself back over the counter, pulling the mop free from the door handle. Before the ghouls could shove their way in, he forced his way out, axe once again in hand. Many fell to the ground, and using that window of opportunity, he ran through the small gap, using the blade of his weapon to decapitate only those that got truly in his way.

He ran for the Hummer. He didn't think about it till later, but he felt more in shape than he used to be. Once past the horde, he felt his speed pick up without as much effort as it used to take before the dead had risen. Nick raced quickly into his ride, tossing the bag of medications into the passenger seat, started the engine, and floored it.

"Cause this is Thriller! Thriller night..." he sang happily, a song of victory. The moment deserved one, because Nick recognized the fact that he had been incredibly lucky, once again.

"Honey, I'm home!" he called, as he came through the doors of the golf course clubhouse. The ride had been uneventful, compared to the hospital trip. All the drive had taken was some careful maneuvering around the wreckage of cars, and keeping his lunch, as he ran down zombies again and again. It wasn't hitting them that unnerved him; it was feeling the bumps as he drove over them that did it.

Riley kept her back to him. She was standing by Kevin's bedside – or couch-side, if Nick decided he wanted to be accurate. He could see her shoulders jerk just a bit, so it wasn't like she hadn't heard him. Nick strolled towards her, shaking the bag. "I've got goodies."

She didn't respond.

He sighed. "We can try the penicillin first, see if that works." He knelt down beside Kevin, who groaned tiredly in his sleep. Nick grabbed the cup of water Riley had been using to try and keep him hydrated, after taking out two tablets. Opening Kevin's mouth, he laid them on his tongue, following it up with some water. Once he was sure Kevin swallowed them, he stood back up, turning back to Riley, who was watching sullenly. She turned away before Nick could get a good look at her face, not letting their eyes meet.

"If they don't work, I brought some others."

"Good." It was one word, short and harsh.

"You're not even going to talk to me?" he said, feeling hurt. He hadn't had a choice; why couldn't she understand that?

"I can't..."

"Can't what? Can't talk to me? Why?"

"No, that's not it, Nick! God!" Her voice shook.

He grabbed her shoulder, forcing her to turn back towards him. That was when he saw. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face splotchy from tears shed while he'd been away for the past couple of hours. It hurt his heart, seeing her so broken like that, knowing he was the one who had caused it. "Hey, I'm here; I'm okay. Kevin'll be okay." His hands rested on her shoulders, one coming up to stroke her cheek affectionately.

"I can't take this. I can't... I can't lose Kevin. We're so far from the others; we'll probably never see them again. Kevin might die from this infection, zombies are roaming the world, and he might die from an infection, Nick!" Her eyes watered again, and Nick wondered when was the last time she had let herself break down like this. "And... losing him would be bad enough. But when you left... I thought..."

He pulled her close, and he held her tight. Her body shook, as he wrapped his arms around her, her face buried into his chest. He understood the fear she had; he had felt that very same feeling that day at Buckley, when he'd seen her just before the blasts. For an instant, he had thought she was going to die, and the fear of losing her had been all-consuming and more powerful than anything he'd felt before. There were no more words spoken between them.

There didn't need to be.

Chapter 75

Faith.

It gives us meaning and purpose. It strengthens and comforts us.

It also blinds us.

Faith means believing in what you can't see. But sometimes you believe in something so badly, you don't see the truth that's right in front of you. Sometimes you don't want to see. The truth can be a hard thing to face. The truth hurts.

Faith helps us heal.

*"Hear my cry, O GOD; attend unto my prayer;
From the end of the Earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I;
For Thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy."*

(Psalm 61: 1-3)

Thursday, October 4, 2012

Week Twenty-Four

The Georgia countryside, with its rolling, red hills and thickets of towering cedars and oaks, was a mere reflection in the rearview mirror, and as the pick-up truck rounded a curve in the road, the Atlanta skyline loomed ahead through the dusty windshield.

“Country rooooooads... take me hooooome... to the plaaaaace... I beloongoong...” Brian crooned along to the John Denver tune blasting out of the truck’s speakers. The song was more than appropriate for their journey; still, he couldn’t help but make a few slight modifications to the lyrics. *“Lanta, Georgia... mountain mama... take me home... country roads...”*

“Nick’s rubbing off on you.” Brian looked over at Gretchen, sitting shotgun beside him. She was grinning.

“Nah, if I was like Nick, we’d still be playin’ ‘Thriller,’” he replied. “This stuff is more my speed.”

When Gretchen’s iPod had finally run out of juice, they’d perused the music collection left behind in the glove box by the truck’s former owner. He must have been a good ol’ boy; it was mostly all country and folk music. Gretchen wasn’t a fan, but Brian had enjoyed listening to John Denver, Willie Nelson, James Taylor, and Johnny Cash – artists his Kentucky-born father had listened to, the kind of music he’d grown up with. The words and melodies were familiar, and he’d sung along, his Southern-tinged tenor well-suited to the style of the songs.

It was almost possible to pretend he was going home, even though they wouldn’t make it as far north as Marietta, let alone his native Kentucky. That was okay, though. He never wanted to see Marietta again. There were too many memories there. Even the familiar landscape outside Atlanta was marred by reminders that he could never go home again – abandoned vehicles clogging the freeway, downed road signs and power lines that no one had bothered to repair, animal carcasses that had been savaged by hungry zombies rather than speeding cars. The stench of death was in the air from all the rotting bodies still roaming around; they could smell it even with the windows rolled up.

Brian wouldn’t have thought it possible, but the trip back up to Atlanta seemed to have taken even longer than coming down had. The lanes leading to the city seemed even more jam-packed than the ones coming out of it, a fact which Brian found odd, until Gretchen pointed out, “I bet people were trying to get to the CDC.” The Center for Disease Control... naturally, the sick would have flocked there, once it became clear the virus was an epidemic. Of course, by that point, it

was too late for the poor people desperately seeking treatment; they had died on the way there.

But the traffic jams weren't the only things blocking the roads. They'd also had fallen tree limbs, telephone poles, and power lines to contend with, souvenirs of the powerful storms of hurricane season that had not been removed, for who was left to clean up the damage? Parts of the interstate were impassable, and whenever Brian and Gretchen weren't able to move the barricades themselves, they'd been forced to backtrack. It had taken days for them to meander through Florida and into Georgia, using good old-fashioned road maps to find alternate routes and back roads when the main ones led to dead ends. They stopped often to stock up on supplies and fuel, loading the truck bed with cans of gasoline and refueling when it was safe. Neither of them wanted to get stranded again, like they had before. They were wiser this time, more cautious, and as a result, the trip had been long, but uneventful.

Driving into the city, they passed a faded billboard advertising a concert that was to have taken place at Philips Arena at the end of April. *Over five months ago*, Brian thought, feeling dejected as he realized the concert had never happened; the tickets had never been used, and the people who had bought them were probably all dead or undead now, past the point of caring. As he looked again at the date on the towering sign, it occurred to him that he didn't know the current date. The days had blended together, and somehow, over the course of their trip, he'd lost track. "What day is it?" he asked Gretchen suddenly.

Even she had to consult the road map, on which she'd marked the passing days with tallies. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her counting on her fingers, just like the children she had once taught. After a minute, she said, "It must be Thursday. October fourth."

"Kevin's birthday was yesterday," Brian realized, feeling guilty for forgetting it. He thought of his cousin, out west with Nick and Riley. "I wonder what they did to celebrate it." He glanced over at Gretchen again. "You think they're okay?"

"I hope so. I'm sure they are... Kevin knows what he's doing, and Nick and Riley are both tough. They'll be fine," she said with a confidence Brian didn't feel. Gretchen had seemed overly optimistic this whole trip, convinced she was going to find either her husband or at least some word from him waiting for her at home. Brian wasn't so sure.

It was a slow crawl through the city. The undead residents of Atlanta roamed the streets, which were congested with cars. Gretchen set aside her map and tried to navigate by memory, but it wasn't as easy as knowing which streets to turn on. They had to scope out the streets first, make sure they were passable and not overrun with zombies. Brian was reminded of one of those traffic jam puzzles. One move at a time, they forged a long, zigzagging path to Gretchen's neighborhood, in an older section of the city. The streets were clear there; most

of the cars were lined up neatly at the curb or parked in driveways and under carports. The houses were old and small and spaced close together, and weeds had erupted from the cracked sidewalks and tiny, overgrown lawns, but aside from the zombies shuffling aimlessly about, Brian found the neighborhood rather charming.

Gretchen looked out the window as he drove, her face pressed close to the glass, feeding him directions about where to turn as she searched desperately for signs of life – specifically, signs of Shawn. But as soon as they turned onto the street she said was hers, Brian could tell something was wrong. The houses on one side of the street looked especially ramshackle; siding was peeling off, bricks walls had bowed, roofs were caving in. They looked distinctly burned and blackened around the edges – unmistakable signs of smoke damage. “There’s been a fire here,” Brian said, easing his foot off the gas pedal. He looked out in awe as the truck crept forward.

“Keep going,” Gretchen urged. Her voice sounded quivery. “Our house is a few more down.”

Brian had a bad feeling, but he gave the truck some more gas, and they rolled on. The damage to the homes got worse and worse, until they reached a crumbling bungalow whose roof had been blasted half off. The glass in the windows was completely shattered; the front door was off its hinges. Gretchen drew in a shuddering breath, and with a sinking sensation, Brian realized it had to be hers.

“Oh god... oh my god,” Gretchen whimpered, her breath coming in quick little gasps. “What happened??”

“Lightning, I’d guess,” was Brian’s initial reaction, but then he added, “Looks more like an explosion, though. Maybe the gas line?”

“Oh god,” Gretchen said again, shaking her head in disbelief, as Brian pulled up to the curb.

Letting the truck idle, he turned to her. “Don’t expect Shawn to be here. The house is uninhabitable; it doesn’t look safe. But maybe he’s been back and left you a message. You wanna check it out?”

She nodded quickly, as he’d known she would. He shut off the engine and reached for the two rifles stowed behind the seats. He handed Gretchen one and held onto the other as they got out of the truck. “Take it easy, now,” he warned her. “Don’t forget to look and listen before you go runnin’ in there. For one thing, it’s not structurally sound; I don’t want something collapsing on you and you gettin’ hurt. And some of them could be hidin’ anywhere.”

Gretchen nodded again. She crept ahead of him, leading the way up the crumbled sidewalk to the house, her gun held out in front of her. He followed her

up the uneven front steps to the concrete patio, which had a big crack running through its middle. Whatever had happened here, it had been forceful enough to rock the house right off its foundation.

Gretchen rushed ahead to the broken front door, and Brian saw her check behind it, poke around underneath it, fumble with the knob, and trace her finger around the perimeter of the narrow window, which had held a single pane of glass, now shattered at their feet. He knew she was searching for a note. She found nothing, though, so she went on inside.

Brian was nervous about going into the house, worried about the floor beams buckling or the roof falling in on them. But it didn't seem too hazardous on the inside. The living room furniture was singed, but still in place, as far as he could tell. There was still a tattered book lying on the couch, a partially melted flashlight and an overturned bottle of wine on the coffee table. Gretchen made a slow circle around the room, looking at everything. Brian hung back, keeping watch at the doorway.

When she didn't find what she was looking for in the living room, Gretchen moved on into the kitchen, which looked like a war zone. The cupboards had been blasted open; the wooden table and chairs had been reduced to mere kindling. The floor tiles were blackened and broken, and there was only a hole where the ceiling had been. There would be nothing from Shawn in this room.

"I'm gonna check the bedrooms," Gretchen said shakily.

"I'll stay here and keep a lookout. Be careful," Brian replied. He waited, watching her walk down the hallway and disappear into the back of the house.

She was gone a long time. For awhile, he could hear her fumbling around, and then, an eerie silence filled the ruins of the house. Brian wasn't worried about zombies; he knew he would hear their hungry moans if any had gotten in. Still, the longer he stood there, the more apprehensive he felt. "Gretchen?" he finally called softly, following the path she had taken down the short hall.

He found her in the master bedroom, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the dresser, her face buried in a navy blue hoodie. She must have heard his footsteps, because she looked up when he stopped in the doorway. Her face was red and tearstained.

"Anything?" Brian asked hesitantly, though he already knew the answer. She wouldn't be crying if she'd found a message from Shawn.

Gretchen shook her head.

"Well, maybe... maybe he just hasn't made it back here yet. Or maybe he did, but thought you were gone for good, with the house in the shape it is. Maybe he's still

out there, looking for you,” he suggested. He knew he shouldn’t be encouraging false hope, but he wanted to say something, anything, to console her.

“Do you think so?” Gretchen asked, her voice rising hopefully.

He didn’t answer.

Her face crumpled. “I never should have left ...”

“You didn’t have much of a choice, did you?”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of the sweatshirt. “I didn’t have to go so far away... I could have come back sooner...” Her voice was filled with regret.

Brian shifted his weight awkwardly, wondering if she blamed him for taking her all the way to Tampa. He didn’t regret it; his choice to try the Air Force base had been the right one. That much he was sure of.

“Don’t do that,” he chided Gretchen. “Don’t go back and cycle through all the ‘what ifs.’ You could have done a lot of things differently, but you might not be alive today if you had. You’re alive, Gretchen. Remember that. You survived, against all odds. Don’t you think Shawn, wherever he is, would be happy about that? Don’t you think that’s what he would have wanted?”

He cringed inwardly as he heard himself slip into past tense, but if Gretchen noticed, she didn’t react. She just nodded, staring down at the sweatshirt in her lap. “This was his,” she murmured, holding it up for him to see. He recognized the big yellow M on the front as the University of Michigan’s emblem.

“Go Wolverines,” he said dully. “Did he go to college there?”

She nodded. “Undergrad and med school. That’s when I met him, when he was finishing med school and I was teaching near Ann Arbor. We were so boring our first year of dating; all we did was study – well, he studied, while I graded papers. The only times we went on actual dates were on the weekend, if he wasn’t on call at the hospital. No going out on school nights.” She smiled tearfully. “I miss those days.”

Brian could relate. He thought back longingly to the early years of marriage with Leighanne, before the twins, when life was simple and carefree. They would have celebrated their eight-year anniversary just over a month ago. Instead, he was a widower, at the age of thirty-three. “Me too,” he told Gretchen. “I miss Leighanne and the girls more than anything. But I know they’re in a better place now, a much better place than we are.”

“I wonder where Shawn could be,” Gretchen sighed, missing his point – or perhaps just choosing to ignore it. “I’m going to leave him a message, in case he does come back here. And I want to pack up some things to take back with us. I’m going to take this...” She raised the sweatshirt to her face and inhaled deeply, closing her puffy eyes. “It *smells* like him.”

To Brian, everything in the house smelled like smoke and soot. “Do you need some help?” he offered.

“No.” Gretchen stood up slowly and looked around. “I’d rather do it myself. If you’d like, you can go out back to our tool shed and look for a can of paint. I want to paint a big message, something that he won’t miss.”

“That’s a good idea,” Brian agreed, thinking not just of Shawn, but of any other survivors. “Maybe we can take it with us and paint other messages on our way back, anywhere we stop along the way. That way, if there are any other survivors we missed, they’ll know where to go.”

Gretchen nodded vaguely, clearly preoccupied with thoughts of how to contact her husband. Brian had a feeling it would require a *séance* – not that he believed in such things. No, he doubted Gretchen would ever communicate with her husband again in this life, but she would see him on the other side – just as he would see his own wife and children. And Kayleigh. He had faith, once more, that he would see them all again in a place where the undead were not zombies, but resurrected souls at peace.

Leaving Gretchen to pack up her things, with a warning to keep her ears open and her gun handy, Brian snuck back outside and around the house, to the tiny backyard, where a neat little shed stood. The door were not locked, so he opened them wide and let himself in. He kept his gun in one hand while he looked around for paint. The shed was well organized, and it didn’t take him long to spot a few cans sitting on a shelf above the lawnmower, below some plant fertilizer and insecticides. He grabbed the closest one in reach and found a screwdriver to pry the lid open with. The small can was still full of paint, a creamy shade of butter yellow – good enough, he figured, as long as they painted on a dark surface. He found a wide-brimmed paintbrush nearby and slipped it into the pocket of his jeans.

The shed itself had light gray siding and a dark gray shingled roof – the perfect canvas on which to test out the paint. Brian dragged a small ladder out of the shed and set it up next to the exterior. He perched the paint can on top and climbed up carefully, holding his gun in one hand and trying not to look down. Thankfully, the shed wasn’t very tall; he’d always had a fear of heights. He reached for the paintbrush in his pocket and dipped it into the yellow paint, using long, sweeping strokes to spell out a message across one side of the slanted roof.

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Just as he put down the paint and leaned back to admire his handiwork, Brian heard an ominous moan. He looked down in time to scramble further up the ladder and out of the way as a lone zombie swiped at his ankles. Clinging frantically to his rifle, he pulled himself up onto the roof and straddled its peak.

His heart was pounding with adrenaline and fear, and his palms were sweating, but he managed to get a good grip on his gun and take off the safety. Aiming was more difficult; his hands shook, and he couldn't seem to keep the barrel steady. He fired one shot and missed. The zombie scabbled wildly at the ladder, looking almost agile enough to climb it in its soiled, gray jogging suit, even though it was decomposing badly. Thankfully, it seemed to lack the coordination, not to mention problem-solving skills, to actually do so. Brian took a deep breath to calm his racing heart, steeled himself, and shot again. This time, the zombie collapsed in a heap on the grass, mottled brains showing where the top of its skull had been blown off.

Brian's relief was short-lived. The sound of gunfire had surely alerted the other neighborhood zombies to their presence, and soon, the whole mob would come stamping into the backyard. It was time to get Gretchen and go. He shimmed back down the ladder, bringing the gun, paint, and brush with him, and jogged up to the house. He took one last look over his shoulder at the shed and was glad to see that his letters were only slightly smeared; the message was still visible. He hoped someone still capable of reading would see it, even if Shawn never did.

"Gretch!" he shouted, as he entered the house. "We gotta go! I just shot one of your zombie neighbors."

Gretchen emerged from the back of the house, dragging a big suitcase on wheels behind her.

"Got everything you need?" he asked.

She shrugged listlessly. "How do you decide what to take with you when you know you'll never be back? I packed our photo albums, some clothes, a few of Shawn's things."

Brian nodded. "Sounds like you put in just the right stuff." He wondered what he would pack, if they ventured on to Marietta. It didn't matter – he didn't want to go. Having his own family's albums, mementos of Leighanne and the girls and the good times, would have meant a lot to him, but they weren't worth the trauma of entering that house again, where he'd left the three of them to rot on the floor. He shuddered, forcing the memory out of his head. "C'mon, let's get goin'."

"Wait... I need to leave a message for Shawn..."

“I already did.” Brian explained quickly about the roof of the shed, showing her the can of paint he’d used.

Her eyes filled with a fresh batch of tears as she looked at the label. “Lemon Chiffon... this is the paint we picked out for the baby’s room.”

“Oh...” Brian’s heart sunk. “I’m sorry...”

“No...” Gretchen sniffed, wiping her eyes. “That’s okay. I’m glad it went to some good use. You know, I think I’m still going to write a quick note, just in case he doesn’t look in the backyard...”

Brian forced himself to wait while she found some paper and a pen and scrawled a quick note. She left it on the coffee table, using the wine bottle as a paperweight. She plucked the book off the couch and added it to her box of stuff, saying vaguely, “This was my mom’s favorite.” Then she wandered outside. Brian followed, worrying about the state of denial she seemed to have slipped back into. He blasted a few more zombies out of the way, while Gretchen loaded her box into the back of the truck, almost frighteningly calm.

She was even quieter than usual as he drove them back through the city, the John Denver CD still playing softly on its third or fourth repeat. It wasn’t until they were on the freeway, outside the city limits, that the breakdown Brian had known was coming actually came. “Leaving on a Jet Plane” had come over the speakers, and all of a sudden, Gretchen started to sob.

“He’s never coming back, is she?” she choked, crying so hard she could barely get the words out.

Brian slowed the truck to a stop, right in the middle of the lane, and shifted into park. He took his hand off the gearshift and placed it on Gretchen’s, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. “No... I don’t think so,” he told her honestly. “But I know you’ll see him again when you get to Heaven. His soul will be there, waiting for you.”

She shook her head, too overcome to speak. The tears poured from her eyes, and this time, she made no attempt to wipe them away. She cried messily, her shoulders shaking, her lips quivering, her face breaking out in red splotches, like hives. And still, the music played on, the folksy voice singing, *“So kiss me and smile for me... Tell me that you’ll wait for me... Hold me like you’ll never let me go... ‘Cause I’m leavin’ on a jet plane... Don’t know when I’ll be back again... Oh, babe, I hate to go...”*

It alarmed Brian to see her so distraught. Not sure what else to do, he unfastened his seat belt and leaned across the front seat to take her in his arms. He held her close and let her cry against him, running his hand down the side of her head,

smoothing her hair, as her tears soaked his t-shirt. And though she never saw them, his eyes brimmed briefly with tears of his own, as together, they took a time out to grieve for the loves they had lost.

Chapter 76

When you grow up a hemophiliac, the world around you seems like a dangerous place. Potential accidents and injuries lurk everywhere, waiting to strike. A bad cut or a blow to the gut can lead to a bleed, which, for me, meant landing in the hospital to be pumped full of clotting factor. As a kid, I hated being in the hospital, so I learned to play it safe. I didn't play sports. I didn't rough-house with my brother and sisters. I didn't use sharp tools. I didn't take risks. Instead, I took it easy.

It's funny... The world we live in now is more dangerous than ever, yet I find myself taking risks every day, doing things I never would have imagined myself doing before. We're surrounded by death, but in a weird way, I've never felt so alive. The daily dangers we face and the risks we take are necessary, in order to better our situation. Just like in business, sometimes the risks pay off. Sometimes they don't.

And sometimes they backfire, leaving us in a far more dangerous situation than we were before...

Friday, October 5, 2012

Week Twenty-Four

Howard Dorough had lived in Florida all his life, but there had been times when he'd dreamed of moving to one of the big cities up north – New York, perhaps, or Boston, maybe even Chicago. All of his family was in Florida, though, and they'd meant more to him than he'd let them know when they were alive. They – especially Barty – had kept him rooted there, in the Sunshine State.

Not a bad place for a real estate tycoon to make his fortune. The hotel business had been booming in Florida, land of sand and sun, theme parks and palm trees. Tourism once made up the largest sector of the state's economy. Not anymore, though. The only visitors they got now were the unwanted kind. The undead kind. The Sunshine State had become Zombieland.

Once again, Howie wished he could go north, somewhere with a real autumn, where the weather grew cool and the leaves changed colors in the fall. Instead, he was still perspiring like a pig under a canopy of green that provided only minimal relief from the unrelenting Florida heat. He had removed his sweat-soaked shirt,

and the sun beat down on his bare back, streaming through the filter of leaves to bake his skin to a crisp while he worked. He was tan naturally, courtesy of his Puerto Rican mother, but he had never been so brown – or so strong.

Howie had always been trim, but also short and scrawny. At only five feet, six inches, his slight build had earned him the nickname “Runt” from his four older siblings. The kids at school had been crueler, calling him names like “Chihuahua” and “Munchkin.” (It didn’t help that he’d once played a member of the Lollipop Guild in a community theatre production of *The Wizard of Oz*.) He had never been able to play sports because of his hemophilia, so he’d never built up much muscle or endurance. Instead, he had surrounded himself with books and, later, computers, developing his brain, rather than his body.

Over the last few months, though, and in the last six weeks, especially, his body had changed. He had bulked out, built up muscle from all the hours of chopping and sawing, lifting and hauling, hammering and pounding, as he helped the others build the wooden wall along the coastline of the base. He had never been stronger or in such good physical shape. *If Bree could see me now*, he thought, smiling to himself, as he tossed a log into the bed of the truck.

Without Kevin, Nick, and Riley, and with Brian and Gretchen still gone, Howie made up one quarter of the manpower that remained on the base. He and AJ had taken over the logging duties, bringing fresh lumber for Jo and Gabby to continue assembling the fence. It had been a good bonding experience for both pairs – mother and daughter, and whatever he and AJ could be called. Two men with nothing in common, brought together by a virus that had killed virtually everyone else they knew, forced to work together to ensure their survival. Friends?

There had been a time when Howard had felt he’d never, in a million years, think of the tattooed drunk as a friend. He was a loose cannon, unhinged, unpredictable, almost uncivilized, compared to Howard’s straight-laced, practical, businesslike demeanor. They were complete opposites, but oddly enough, Howie had come to feel a sense of kinship with AJ. It was a yin and yang sort of relationship; in a way, their differences complimented each other, made it easier to get along. They didn’t butt heads for power, as Howie had with Kevin; in fact, there wasn’t a leader on the base anymore. Or, perhaps, they had all become leaders, in their own right.

Of the four, AJ and Gabby were the creative ones; they came up with the ideas. Jo and Howie were the rational ones; they made the plans, divided the work, and organized everything. Even with such small numbers, the four of them had such a balance that they’d managed to keep things running smoothly around the base, holding down the fort until the others returned.

“If Brian and Gretch are gone much longer, we’ll have this fence finished by the time they get back!” Howie called to AJ, who was high up in one of the tallest trees. He always climbed up high to start, sawing off the top branches first and

then working his way down. They had given up on cutting down whole trees; with so few of them, it was just too tough and too dangerous, so they had settled for smaller logs instead. AJ was like a monkey in the trees; he liked to climb and cut, and being up high gave him the perfect vantage point to watch for the undead, while Howie worked down below, sawing the branches down to useable logs, piling them neatly in the back of the truck to bring back to the ladies.

“Those slackers!” AJ shouted back, jokingly. Neither of them asked the questions that were really on their minds: What was taking Brian and Gretchen so long?? And what about the others? When would they be back?

Howie often found himself searching the sky while he was working outside, putting his hand up over his eyes to shield them from the sun as they panned the horizon, hoping to spot a plane. He’d caught AJ doing the same thing. Both of them kept their ears pricked, listening not only for the moans of zombies, but the distant rumble of an engine that would signal their friends’ return. With each passing day in which this did not happen, the worry that something disastrous had befallen the others grew, gnawing away at Howie’s gut.

He was surprised by how much he’d come to care for the other eight survivors in their group. Though he had the social skills necessary to succeed in business, Howie had never been much of a people person. He got along with most people reasonably well and had made a respectable CEO, known for being level-headed and fair. But he was also seen as uptight, and his serious disposition and inclination towards privacy had isolated him from others, kept him from making many close bonds with other people. In his old life, he’d had many acquaintances, colleagues and business contacts, but few true friends. He had been closest to his family.

His ex-wife, Bree, was one of the few who had been able to pull him out of his shell. But then, he’d always had a way with women. Even though his sense of humor left something to be desired, he knew how to play “Sweet D,” as his college girlfriend had dubbed him, and charm the ladies. He had money and style, along with his wink and winning smile, and once women found out he wasn’t gay, they enjoyed being wined and dined by Howard Dorough. That was how he had managed to score a knockout like Bree. She had been a trophy wife, it was true, but she was also the mother of his child, and he had cared about her, even after their separation. And, of course, he had loved his son, in a way he had never loved another person before and would never love again.

No, his relationships with the others here couldn’t compare to that level of love, but still, Howie cared for them more deeply than he’d ever expected to when he, AJ, and Kayleigh had first arrived on the base. It brought him some comfort, to have companionship in this crazy new world, but in a way, it caused more worry and created more fear. He wasn’t just concerned with his own well-being anymore, but that of eight other people, as well. They had already lost Kayleigh, who had been his closest friend on the base, and the pain of her death still

plagued him. He couldn't stand the thought of losing someone else, let alone five of them. He hoped at least one of the groups would make it back soon and put his restless mind at ease.

"Heads up! Incoming!" bellowed AJ from up in the tree. Snapping back to attention, Howie looked up in time to jump back out of the way, as a severed branch crashed down through the leaves and landed at his feet. He dragged it into the clearing where the truck was parked and knelt down beside it, picking up the handsaw to whittle it down to a leafless log.

In between strokes of the saw, he could hear AJ rustling around in the tree. Howie glanced up once and saw that AJ had moved down to a lower perch. He was straddling a tree limb, his legs swinging freely on each side as he happily sawed away at the end of the branch. In his dirty wifebeater and torn camo pants, his rifle holstered to a sling across his chest, he looked more like a guerilla fighter than a lumberjack. *Make that gorilla fighter*, thought Howie, smiling at his pun as he watched AJ's legs swing. He looked comfortable enough in the tree, but the smile slid off of Howie's face as he thought, *This is dangerous. We really should look for a ladder*. Neither of them knew what they were doing; AJ was certainly no logger. But he had taken charge of the operation after Kevin and the others had left, and Howie knew better than to try to tell AJ what to do.

His eyes returned to the fallen branch in front of him, as he went back to his own task. The two of them worked quietly for awhile, the racket of their saws keeping them from talking to each other. It was tough work, and Howie paused often, to rest and to listen for zombies. It was during one of these pauses that he heard an ominous sound... not a moan, but a creak.

He looked up again. AJ was still sawing away, oblivious, but Howie didn't miss the way the bow he was straddling sagged beneath his weight with every stroke of the saw. The branch looked thick enough, but it wasn't going to support his weight with the added pressure he was putting on it. "AJ!" he called, but AJ either didn't hear him or chose to ignore him. He was hunched over in concentration, his left hand gripping the tree branch for balance, while his right arm pumped back and forth, sawing hard and fast for a few more seconds.

"AJ!" Howie shouted again, more frantically this time, knowing what was going to happen mere seconds before it did. There was just enough time for him to realize it, but not nearly enough to prevent it. The limb creaked again, bending lower, and just as AJ lifted his saw and straightened up, looking down in surprise, the wood started to splinter.

"Shit!" Howie heard AJ yell and saw him start to scramble, bringing one leg up onto the branch to boost himself up. But it was too late: a second later, the bow broke clean away from the trunk, and down came AJ, saw and all, hitting the ground at the base of the tree with a sickening thump.

“Oh my god!” Howie rushed forward to where AJ lay in a crumpled heap, sprawled out on his back. The tree limb was on top of him, pinning his left leg underneath it. Even with the branch in the way, Howie could tell it was bent at an unnatural angle. “AJ?” he asked frantically, afraid to touch him or try to move anything, for fear of hurting him worse.

AJ groaned. “Fuck, that hurt,” he rasped, his voice sounding strained.

It was a relief to hear him talking, even cursing. Hovering over him, Howie smiled hopefully and asked, “Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere... my leg, mostly. I can't... move it,” replied AJ, struggling with the effort. Howie was glad to see him moving the rest of his body, though it probably wasn't a good idea. “Get this thing off me...”

“Okay. Okay, I'm going to. Just lie still,” said Howie, bending down to grip the branch. *Easy does it. You can do this*, he coached himself. He knew he was level-headed, good at handling high-stress situations. The sight of blood didn't bother him; if it ever had, he'd gotten over it a long time ago. It helped when it wasn't his own.

That was a good thing, because when he dragged the tree limb off of AJ, there was plenty of blood. It flowed from a gaping wound in the side of his shin, just below the knee, where a jagged piece of leg bone protruded. Seeing the white bone, tinged red with blood, poking through the torn skin, Howie couldn't help but cringe. He had to look away, but even then, he still saw it in his mind's eye. It was a sight his memory would never let him forget.

AJ noticed his reaction. “What is it?” he asked, coughing, as he struggled to sit up.

Howie turned back around. “No, don't look,” he started to say, but it was too late. AJ had already lifted his head far enough to see. Maybe he was already slipping into shock, or perhaps it was just the rush of adrenaline that had delayed his response to pain, but it wasn't until he actually saw his own leg that he started to scream.

“Oh god... oh god!” he panted, hyperventilating in between heart-wrenching, guttural cries of agony. It lasted only a few seconds, until a fresh spurt of blood from the hole in his leg caused his face to drain of all the color that remained. AJ's eyes rolled up into his head, and he toppled backwards in a dead faint.

At first, Howie wasn't sure whether to be more concerned or relieved that he was passed out cold. At least the horrible screaming had stopped. But then the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, as AJ's screams were answered by an even more horrible sound: the ravenous moan of a zombie. It was enough to make his blood run cold; he felt a chill, despite the heat. All the noise had alerted the

lingering undead to their presence, and soon, very soon, he knew, the walking corpses would come staggering through the trees to claim the fresh human flesh they craved.

He was not about to leave AJ lying around to become zombie meat. Forgoing the most basic rules of first aid, he bent down and pulled AJ into a sitting position, sliding his arms under AJ's and around his body. AJ's head lolled, unconscious. His body was heavy and limp, dead weight. It was a relief he wasn't any bigger than he was; otherwise, Howie never would have been able to lift him. But the surge of adrenaline coursing through him, the pure desperation to get himself and AJ away from there, must have bolstered the muscle he'd built up over the summer. Somehow, he found the strength he needed to hoist AJ over his shoulder in a fireman's hold.

As he did, he heard another sickening crunch. *Broken leg*, he thought, wincing. He couldn't see it, but he pictured AJ's leg dangling like a rag doll's. It needed to be stabilized; he was going to make it worse, picking AJ up this way. But what other choice did he have? It was too late now. Struggling beneath AJ's weight, he waddled towards the truck. Thankfully, the tailgate was still down, the bed not yet full with logs. He eased AJ down onto it, climbing up to drag him in further. AJ moaned, his eyelids fluttering, and Howie squirmed as he imagined the pain his friend was in, pain that had probably doubled in his efforts to get him to safety.

"Hang on, AJ," he whispered. "I'm getting you out of here. I'll take you to Jo. She'll know what to do."

He patted AJ's shoulder awkwardly, then jumped out of the back of the truck and raised the tailgate. Leaving both saws and AJ's gun on the ground, he rushed around to the driver's side and climbed into the cab, just as the first zombie emerged from the trees. Howie didn't hesitate. The key was already in the ignition, and as soon as he turned on the engine, he threw it into drive and slammed his foot down onto the accelerator. He swerved to plow into the zombie and felt a sickening, yet satisfying bump as the tires rolled over the fallen corpse. "Sorry!" he called over his shoulder, thinking not of the zombie, but of AJ, being jostled around in the back.

He drove more carefully after that, but still quickly, speeding back up the coastline of the peninsula, until he spotted Jo and Gabby working on the wall. Rolling down his window, he slowed the truck and stuck his head out. "AJ's hurt!" he shouted. "He fell from a tree! His leg's broken!"

Jo came running, Gabby on her heels. "Take us to the medical center," she said, and without hesitation, she boosted herself up and over the tailgate to get to AJ.

Gabby climbed into the passenger seat and looked at Howie with wide eyes. "What happened?"

“The branch broke,” he murmured, shaking his head, as he removed his foot from the brake and drove on. “He should never have been up that high... We should have used a ladder...”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gabby shrug. “I climbed trees all the time as a kid. I fell out of one once and broke my wrist. It wasn’t that bad. I got a cast that went all the way up to my elbow – lime green – and all the kids in my class got to sign it. It was pretty cool at first, except it got real itchy, and that was annoying. And when I got it cut off, my arm was all, like, white and shriveled – you know, like when you stay in the bathtub too long? And it *stunk!* Eww, it was so gross!” She laughed, then added, “But it went back to normal. It’s fine now.” In his peripheral, Howie saw her rotate her wrist freely. He continued to stare straight ahead, wishing he could tune out her incessant chatter. “He’ll be okay,” Gabby said assuredly. “My mom can fix him up.”

Howie wished he had the same confidence. He wanted to tell Gabby, “I bet your wrist didn’t break clear through the skin, did it?” But he said nothing. He had never broken a bone himself, but he knew it would take more than a lime green cast to make AJ’s leg good as new. If the world were normal, AJ would surely need surgery. But Jo was just a nurse. Her medical skills were impressive, no doubt; he would never forget that she had saved his life. Still, he knew there were limits to her expertise.

He pulled up in front of the medical center, stopping just short of the front doors. “Go in and find one of those gurneys on wheels,” he told Gabby. She nodded and scrambled out of the truck, running into the building. Howie got out, too, and went around to the back, where Jo had already climbed down and was lowering the tailgate. “How bad is it?” he asked her in a low voice.

Her face looked pale. “Bad,” she whispered back.

Gabby brought the gurney, and together, they carefully eased AJ out of the truck bed and onto it, wheeling him into the building. It was a mess inside, supplies and equipment thrown haphazardly everywhere, some of it used and soiled with bodily fluids. The air stunk like death. But at least they had cleared the place of zombies. There were no undead around to bother them as they took AJ into one of the rooms to do what they could for him.

Howie had to hand it to Jo – she knew what she was doing. At first, she barked out order after order, sending Gabby and him to search for supplies, asking them to hold things for her as she worked on AJ. Howie watched, impressed, as she started a pair of IVs, one in each of his arms, to give him painkillers and antibiotics. “Infection is the biggest problem we have to watch out for now,” she explained quietly, as she tended to AJ’s open wound. He was unconscious, thanks to the combination of shock and sedatives. “With an open fracture like

this, the infection can get into the bone, and if that happens..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

Howie could guess what she was leaving him to infer. AJ would face losing his leg... or death. He prayed it wouldn't come to that. "That's what the antibiotics are for, right?" he asked hopefully. "To keep that from happening?"

Jo nodded, but she said, "It's still a risk. We'll have to be diligent about keeping the wound clean."

He fell silent as he watched her carefully wash out the hole in AJ's leg, removing fragments of bone with a pair of tweezers and cutting away the ragged edges of his torn skin. She realigned the broken bones as best she could before dressing the wound and stabilizing it with a splint. It took a long time, but Howie was still surprised when she stopped her work. "You're not going to put a cast on it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "We won't be able to watch for infection if he's in a cast. The splint will have to do for now, to keep it stable."

"He needs surgery, doesn't he?" Howie expressed his earlier thought.

"Yes," Jo admitted, looking grim. "But it's too risky. I'm no orthopedic surgeon; I don't know the first thing about pinning broken bones back together, and I doubt they have the supplies here for that kind of operation. I'd probably end up doing more damage than good if I tried." Her shoulders sagged in defeat. "I think our best option is to keep his leg clean and immobilized, until it heals on its own. He's lucky in one way: it looks like a clean break. The bones will fuse back together eventually, as long as they're kept aligned. How much use he'll get out of that leg, though, I can't say." She sighed. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Wait and see... Howie was tired of waiting. Waiting for AJ's leg to heal. Waiting for the others to return. Waiting for some sign that the world as a whole was not a lost cause.

The longer he waited, the less hopeful he felt.

Chapter 77

I fucking hate this.

You remember a few months before, back when Nick's seizures were the problem of the moment? I thought he was being a pussy when he was ranting about feeling useless cause of that. I felt that there was no place to bitch, since it

was a damn fluke we were even alive to begin with. I remember telling him he needed to suck it up and just deal with it until the others realized they were overreacting.

Now, I'm a fucking gimp due to my fucked up leg... and I'm wishing the blonde shithead was back so I can tell him I get it. I get why he was so damn jaded. Why I'm so fucking jaded right now.

My leg is hurting like a bitch. The pain meds don't do shit but fuck with my head, so I'm not taking them. So I deal with the pain, constantly.

I can't do anything. I can't help. I can't keep everyone safe. That's what I did. And now I can't. I'm a worse liability than Howie. I went from knowing my place, back to being a fucking waste. Out on the edge of our little "society" all over again.

Do you know how that feels?

You know what that does to me?

I fucking hate this.

I fucking hate myself.

Monday, October 8, 2012

Week Twenty-Five

AJ sat there, staring up at the ceiling of the place he now thought of as home. All he could hear was the steady ticking from the wall clock nearby – one that Kayleigh had picked out for the place before she had died. It seemed to slow down the day, cause it to drag on even more so than it already had been.

He could turn on the TV to put in a DVD, but he felt like he'd watched every movie he could get his hands on. Besides, it was a waste of the precious electricity the generators provided, as Jo was quick to remind him. Howie was more understanding; he had spent a lot of time lying around in hospital beds as a kid and knew how boring it could be.

AJ could read a book, but that sort of thing didn't give him contentment anymore, the way it once had. He wanted to paint, had tried to that morning, but he needed to be standing to do so properly. His already throbbing leg begged for mercy anytime he tried to put any weight on it.

And so he sat there, listening.

Tick – *I can't believe how bad I fucked up.*

Tock – I'm a useless pain in the ass right now.

Tick – I hate this shit.

Tock – I should be out killing zombies, not sitting here on my ass.

Only three days had passed since he'd been hurt, and he was already going stir crazy.

AJ sighed, shoving the wheelchair he sat in away from the wall. Howie had gone and dug out a wheelchair from the medical building for him, since his leg wasn't stable enough for crutches. AJ had asked Jo if she thought he'd be alright after a couple weeks. She would nod, say yes, but her eyes never met his own once he had his shades off. That alone told him that she didn't believe her own words. Gabby was probably the least awkward about it. She came in often, bringing a new board game every time. In fact, she'd been by earlier that day; he'd been the one to drive her off. He felt bad about it, truth be told, but at the same time, he needed to just be away from everyone.

It felt like a bitter irony that after a lifetime of hating isolation, after so many years of despising how people misunderstood him, he was now craving solitude. AJ had always been a social person, despite his own issues. He loved having people around him and always had. It was his outlook and his old inability to feel as if he connected to others that had kept him from having what he wanted. Everything had changed once the dead rose. Suddenly, his old issues had no longer mattered. He had been given a clean slate, a fresh start.

It was that freedom to really do as he wished and not have anything drag him down that had caused AJ to finally thrive in the new world. Since the Day of Unholy Resurrection, he'd always been somewhat amused that it had taken basically the apocalypse to make that happen for him. And now he felt like he'd been thrown down right back where he had started. Back at the bottom of the totem pole, back to being on the fringes of a society, even if it was a tiny one, seen as useless, though he knew Howie and Jo would never say it.

Suddenly, his mind flashed back to his talk with Nick. It felt like a lifetime ago, before he'd left with Kevin and Riley. Back when he'd had the seizure and learned he might have them sporadically for the rest of his life. Everyone had been pussyfooting around Nick then, too.

He was smoking in the hallway of the church building, away from the others. AJ knew the moment Kayleigh or Jo spotted him, they'd tear him a new hole in his rear end, but he didn't really care. He had been craving a cigarette all day, and damn if they'd stop him. He heard a door slam and peered around the corner to see the youngest man in their group, Nick, exit it angrily. Nick

glanced around before deciding the coast was clear enough for him to leave without being bothered.

“I can’t fucking believe this. I’m not useless; I can still help. It ain’t a big deal... and I thought better of her...” he could hear Nick muttering as he walked his way and turned the corner. AJ leaned back casually and took a drag off his cigarette, acting as if he hadn’t just been watching him.

“Still stewing, huh?” he asked. Nick jumped at AJ’s voice. He smirked once he saw the cigarette. It would infuriate the others, him smoking inside like that, but Nick seemed more amused by it. Still, the smirk couldn’t hide the bitter expression written so clearly in his eyes. It dripped from his voice like acid as well.

“You gonna treat me all special now, too?”

Now, AJ understood exactly why Nick had been so angry and so bitter. It had become incredibly clear and evident to him. The two had a few things in common. Both had been held back by their own failures, by the way others viewed them. This new world, despite all the tragedy and pain that had come with it, had broken those chains around the two men. Yet little things would come back and remind them that they couldn’t fully escape what they had once been.

AJ wheeled himself into the kitchen, barely getting through the doorway. Howie had been thoughtful to get this for him, but at the same time, the house hadn’t been designed for anyone disabled. His mobility was just as limited, but in a new way. He wondered where the others were. He wondered if they were even alive.

Would I be dead now if I’d gone with them like I wanted to?

The darker side of him, the one that had never truly left him, said that, yes, he would. It said that the three of them must be dead and gone, or they would be back by now. In the few times the subject came up (which wasn’t often), he could see the others thought so too. None of them said it. They all talked as if they would be back any day now. It was like they believed that if they said Nick, Riley, and Kevin were dead out loud, it would become true.

AJ wheeled himself to the fridge. He felt like he had signed his own death certificate anyway. How was he going to survive if he needed to be looked after like this? Gabby was good, for a kid, but she couldn’t protect him. Howie trying to do so would likely cause his own death, not only from the undead, but his hemophilia as well. All it would take was one bad accident to kill Howie, and AJ didn’t want to be the cause. When he’d learned that his friend had carried him the entire way back to the truck in a run, he’d been shocked, impressed, and

angry. Such heroics could have gotten Howie killed, and it was pure luck that caused it not to happen.

Ignoring the fridge, AJ instead opened the door to the cabinet under the sink. He knew Howie didn't think he knew about this, but he'd seen him a couple times at night when he was up, thanks to his insomnia. One of the habits AJ still hadn't lost was people-watching. It still fascinated him, simple human behavior. In fact, some of it could have belonged to the original owners, as well. One thing they hadn't done was sweep the house of alcohol when they moved in. Simple enough reasons for that – AJ had already been sober for awhile, so it hadn't crossed anyone's minds.

He leaned down, reaching further into the depths of the cabinet. When he straightened up again, breathing hard, he held in his hands a rather large bottle of Grey Goose Vodka, along with two bottles of Jack Daniels. He knew the vodka to belong to his roommate. He peered into the cabinet again. There were more bottles of alcohol further back, if one looked hard enough. AJ made a note to keep that in mind for later. He set the bottles on top of the counter and wheeled himself forward, in search of a glass. His eyes skipped around the kitchen area, only to realize they were all out of reach while he remained in the chair. His leg pulsed with lightning bolts of pain at the mere thought of attempting to stand.

“Damn it!” AJ swore, knowing he was, for the moment, alone in the house. His uninjured leg thrust forward, kicking the counter. The chair flung backwards, flying back up against the fridge. The force of the collision caused one of the bottles of Jack Daniels to fall right into his awaiting arms.

I shouldn't be doing this, he told himself silently. His mind was suddenly attempting to think rationally. But why not? It's not like being sober does me any damn good. And who the fuck cares? Addiction doesn't exist anymore.

The bottle had landed in his hands with no harm done at all. He stared at it longingly. It had been so long since he'd last had a drink. It had been almost six months since he'd gone on a bender, after finding the entire world around him nothing but a mass of fallen corpses. The craving had never stopped. Each day, his throat burned for the intoxicating liquid. It was just that he'd found something else to distract himself from it. But now, now he no longer had that.

They don't need you. You're an outsider. You're an idiot to think you were anything but that. They won't want you now that they can't use you anymore. You thought they were family? Ha! What you have in your hands... that's the only family you have in this world.

The once-former addict eagerly opened the bottle, like a toddler trying to unwrap a Christmas present. He almost dropped it, trying to do it so quickly. Once open, he took a long swig from the bottle. AJ relished the taste, as the burning fluid slid down his throat. He felt like a man dying of dehydration finally being given

water, after an eternity of suffering. AJ couldn't believe he'd denied himself this for so long. What had he been thinking? What was the point? Especially now, when there was no rehab or such a stigma for loving alcohol as much as he did. The cocaine had been easy for him to ditch. It was this, the simplicity and bliss that alcohol gave him, that he had missed so much.

He took another long drink, straight from the bottle. A smile formed on his face. If those in his life had walked in right then, they would see that smile wasn't what it seemed. It was an odd one, looking half bitter and half satisfied on an otherwise unhappy face.

It didn't take long for AJ to lose the control he still thought he possessed. With every sip, he became more frantic for more. He wanted the oblivion he knew he could get if he continued.

AJ wanted to forget everything. He didn't want to be reminded of the pathetic waste he was. He didn't want to be reminded of why the shallow society of yesterday had disregarded him. He didn't need to think about how those he cared about were likely rotting on some random roads to the west, after becoming a zombie buffet. Maybe one of the zombies that had eaten them was his own mother. The fact that this was highly unlikely didn't occur to him. So he continued to drink alone, rambling about things aloud for no one to hear.

Soon, his wish came true.

Howie returned only an hour later. He found AJ on the floor, out cold beside his chair and cuddling an empty vodka bottle close to his heart.

Chapter 78

Life sucks, and then you die.

I used to think people like AJ were just being emo, saying things like that, but now I know it's true. That's my new phsylosophy on life, or however you spell that word. I'm too lazy to look it up. I don't care anymore. What's the point? Caring only makes you hurt. I don't want to hurt anymore.

I just want to be numb.

Tuesday, October 9, 2012

Week Twenty-Five

It was another bright, fall day in sunny Florida, but to Gabby, it felt like the entire base was stuck under a dark shadow. The gloom seeped from AJ, who sat scowling in his wheelchair under a nearby tree, watching the others work on the wall through his dark sunglasses. Even though Gabby couldn't see his eyes, she could tell he was shooting murderous looks at her mother and Howie, who had forced him out there.

After the incident the day before, the other adults had decided AJ could no longer be left alone. With him out of commission and the others still gone, they needed all hands on deck to help finish the fence. They could spare no one to sit inside the house and supervise AJ, so they had wheeled him outside, where they could keep an eye on him.

Gabby, who knew how overprotective her mother could be, felt for AJ, but she didn't blame them, either. It had scared her to hear Howie shouting for her mother again, calling for her to come quick and help AJ. When she'd followed the two of them back to the house and caught a glimpse of him slumped on the kitchen floor, her heart had leapt into her throat, and her mind had flashed back to seeing her father lying on the kitchen floor like that, in a pool of blood instead of vomit. At first, she'd thought for sure that AJ was dead, but it turned out he was only passed out drunk. Her mom had forced her out of the room while she and Howie took care of AJ, refusing to let Gabby see him until he was sobering up in bed.

Standing outside the door, she'd listened to the lecture he got from the two of them after coming to. She hadn't heard her mother yell like that in a long time and was glad that, for once, it wasn't directed at her. "Do you know how far this could set back your recovery?" Jo screeched at AJ. "You should be taking care of your body! Instead, you fill it with alcohol, to the point of unconsciousness, fall out of your chair, and land on the dirty kitchen floor, where God knows what sort of bacteria could have entered the *open fracture* in your leg. Are you suicidal or just plain stupid? Do you not realize how serious this is?? I didn't want to scare you before, but I'll put the fear of God in you now: If your leg gets infected, you could end up losing it. It's very easy for a dangerous infection to get into the broken bone, and once that happens, the only way of saving your life will be to amputate your leg."

As Gabby's insides twisted queasily at the thought, she'd heard AJ shout back, "Fuck no! You think I'd let you cut off my fucking leg? How am I supposed to outrun the zombies with one leg? Fuck that; I'd rather die! I'd be dead anyway, with only one leg."

"So you understand how serious this is, then," her mother had replied icily.

AJ had muttered that he understood, and that night, Howie had made him watch while he poured the rest of the liquor down the kitchen sink. AJ's mood hadn't

improved much since then. He was sulky and silent, only speaking when someone asked him something directly. They let him brood.

Gabby could understand how he was feeling. She wiped the sweat off the back of her neck with a towel, then brought her fingers around to the front, sliding them up underneath the stretchy choker necklace she always wore. As she massaged her throat, feeling the raised scar under her fingertips, she thought back to the dark days after her father's death, when she had wanted to shut out the world, too. She thought about telling AJ that things would get better, but that wasn't really true. The world was no better than it had been in those days; in fact, it was a lot worse. The pain hadn't gone away, either. It had just gone numb. She didn't blame AJ for wanting to dull his pain with booze.

Dropping her towel, she walked over to him and offered a tentative smile. "Want some iced tea?" she asked.

AJ didn't return her smile. "Only if it's a Long Island," he replied, deadpan. Gabby wasn't exactly sure what a Long Island was, but she knew it included alcohol.

"Sorry," she said. "Just regular old sun tea. You sure you don't want some?"

"No thanks, kid. I'm fine," he muttered. He didn't seem fine.

Gabby shrugged and walked away. "I'm going up to the house to get a drink!" she bellowed at her mom, who was tying a couple of log posts together while Howie held them straight.

"Bring me back one! Lots of ice!" her mother called back. Then she added, "Be careful!"

"I will!" Gabby sing-songed, unconcerned. The base was pretty much safe now, as safe as anywhere could be these days. Zombies popped up on the outskirts now and then, usually coming out of the water, but the area where the houses and other buildings were was clear. Still, out of habit, she picked up one of the guns that were lying on the ground nearby and, after checking to make sure the safety was on, slid its barrel through the belt loop of her shorts for the walk up to the house.

If Makayla could see me now, she thought with some amusement, imagining her best friend's reaction if she knew Gabby's mother let her carry around guns. She remembered how the two of them used to play *Resident Evil* on Makayla's brother's Playstation and wondered what Makayla would think about her becoming a real life zombie-hunter. It might have been cool, if only Makayla and Colton and her other friends were alive to see it.

She made the trek up to the small house she and her mother had started to call home and let herself in. A pitcher of sun tea was chilling in the fridge; she took it out and poured it into three tall glasses of ice. Standing at the counter, she gulped down one of the glasses herself, sighing with satisfaction as the cool tea slid smoothly down her dry throat. She finished her drink, then set the glass down by the sink and picked up the two full ones, carrying one in each hand. She walked slowly back towards the coastline, being careful not to spill. They had all brought water canteens down to the worksite that morning, but the water was like bathwater by now, warm from sitting out in the sun. The iced tea would taste wonderful to her mother and Howie. AJ would be sorry he'd turned her down.

These were the innocent thoughts flitting through her head as she wandered back to the unfinished wall, the glasses of tea sweating in her hands, the gun slapping against her thigh. As she walked across Bayshore Boulevard, which ran parallel to the water, she could see AJ slumped in his chair, his chin drooping to his chest, and her mother and Howie still bent over the wall, adding another wooden post. She could also see what they did not: a trio of twisted bodies, lurching out of the bay behind them.

“Mom!” she screamed, and the glasses of iced tea fell from her hands and shattered on the pavement as she broke into a run. “Howie! Look out! Behind you!”

They both looked up, hearing her but not understanding at first. By the time they turned around, it was too late. The zombies were practically on them. Jo swung wildly with the hammer in her hand, connecting with one zombie's skull, while Howie ran for his gun. AJ's head snapped up, and he started screaming, “Get me a gun! Get me a fucking gun!”

Howie charged toward him, gun in hand. He dropped the gun into AJ's lap, but even as AJ picked it up and took aim, Howie was already behind the wheelchair, dragging it backward by the handles.

“No!” AJ protested. “Let me fight! Go help Jo!”

“Help my mom!” Gabby screamed, as she made it to them. Down by the water, her mother had managed to take down the first zombie with her hammer, but she was still surrounded by the others. Gabby raised her gun and aimed carefully at the one furthest from her mom. She took her time lining up the shot, and when she fired, it was dead on. The zombie dropped, a bullet in its brain.

“Good shot, kid,” she heard AJ say, but she could not reply. Her mouth fell open in horror as she watched the third zombie fall upon her mother, knocking her to the ground.

Gabby could see Jo struggling under the zombie's weight as it scabbled over her. She managed to grab it by the shoulders and thrust it upwards, trying to throw it

off her, but its waterlogged body was too heavy. Her arms trembled with the effort of holding it up, out of biting range. Howie took off running towards her, but Gabby knew he'd never get there in time. Desperate, she raised her gun again, seeing if she could line up a clear shot. It was going to be close, but if Jo could just keep the zombie up and off her for a few more seconds...

Then she heard her mother scream. It was a scream she'd only heard from her once, the night her father had died – raw and guttural and terrible. For Gabby, that was all it took to force her into action. She held her breath, locked her elbow to steady her shooting arm, and thought, *Daddy, please*, as she squeezed the trigger.

Her shot was low, but at first, she thought it was good enough. It passed through the back of the zombie's neck, missing the brain, but severing the spinal cord. She could tell by the way its hands stopped clawing and its legs went still, yet its jaws went on snapping. The zombie was still a threat as long as it could bite, but at least now her mother would be able to push it off her and get away.

So why wasn't Jo moving?

"Mom?" she called, her voice shrill and panicky. *Get up... get up!* she begged silently, as she watched Howie reach her mother and pull the paralyzed zombie off her. He jammed the barrel of his gun into the center of its forehead and pulled the trigger, exploding its brains all over the ground. Finally, the snapping jaws went slack. But still, Gabby's mother didn't get up.

Gabby raced toward her crumpled form, her heart pounding, her breath coming in shallow gasps. "Mom? Mom?!" She skidded to a stop, dropping to her knees at Jo's side, and stared down in horror. Her mother's hands were pressed over her heaving chest, unable to hide the red stain spreading steadily across her shirt underneath them.

At first, she assumed the zombie must have been bitten her, and she thought, *She'll be okay. AJ got bit, and he was okay.* But then she watched as Howie gently slid Jo's hands out of the way to assess the damage, and she saw the wound, saw where all the blood was coming from: a little, round hole in the center of her mom's t-shirt. And she understood. It was not a bite, but a bullet hole.

She had shot her mother.

Even as she stood there, shaking her head in denial, a part of her could piece together what had happened. The bullet must have gone straight through the zombie's scrawny neck and hit her mother in the chest. She hadn't thought of that when she'd taken the shot. She'd only been trying to help, to save her mom's life...

But there would be no saving Jo now, not with bright red blood spurting out of her with every last beat of her faltering heart. Instinctively, Gabby already knew it, knew it because she had watched her father bleed out almost the same way. Still, she threw herself over her mother's body, as if to stopper up the blood with her weight, and clung to her, crying, "Hang on, Mama... hang on..."

Hang on for what? There was no one here who could help her. The only one in their midst with any real medical training was Jo herself, and she knew she was dying. She was still semi-conscious, though she was fading fast, and Gabby heard her voice rasp in her ear, "Be strong, Gabrielle. Be strong, and survive."

To Howie, she pleaded, "Take care of her."

"I will."

"And take care of yourself. And AJ."

"I will, Jo."

Gabby couldn't stand to hear her say her goodbyes. "No, Mama," she begged, burying her face in her mother's neck. She pressed her body firmly against her mother's, holding onto her as if she could somehow tether her to life. Just as Jo had once held her in her arms, trying to stop the flow of blood from the stab wound in her neck, Gabby held onto Jo until she felt her chest stop heaving and her body relax beneath her, as the life rushed out of it.

Even then, Howie had to practically pry her away. She stiffened, resisting, at first, as he tried to pull her into his arms. Then she went limp and collapsed against his chest, sobbing, while he smoothed her hair and silently tried to soothe her.

"Jesus," a low voice rasped, and Gabby looked up from Howie's shoulder to see that AJ had wheeled himself up. He stared down at Jo for a long time, his sunglasses pushed back on the top of his balding head, his features twisted with grief. Then he looked back at the two of them. "Holy shit, Howie... are you hurt?"

Howie glanced down at himself. He was covered in blood. So was Gabby. But it didn't belong to either of them. "It's Jo's," he muttered. "I'm fine."

Selfishly, Gabby thought, *You shouldn't be. It should've been your blood, not my mom's. I need her. We all need her...* She knew it was a horrible thought, but she couldn't keep it from coming. She wished it had been Howie, the hemophiliac, who was attacked. *But it wasn't the attack that killed her, she realized. It was the bullet. It was me. My fault.*

She started to sob wildly again, screaming, "I killed her!"

Howie pulled her to him again, muffling her cries, saying, “Shh... it’s not your fault. You were trying to save her. If you hadn’t taken the shot, the zombie would have gotten her first.”

But Gabby could not be comforted. She cried until she was out of tears, until she was so exhausted that she finally collapsed. Howie carried her back to the house, where she slept fitfully, her sleep disturbed by nightmares. Waking brought her no relief, for when she opened her eyes, she remembered that her real life was the worst nightmare of them all.

For the first time in her life, the thirteen-year-old fully understood AJ’s desire to drink himself to death.

Chapter 79

I’m not strong.

I used to think I was, like I’d convinced myself that the act I had going was true. I think I wrote in an earlier entry about how I always try to talk big, act so tough, when I’m really not. I don’t know why I can’t take letting anyone in. I’ve really gotten better since that fateful day in April. I really have. Still, there’s that part of me that just feels the need to protect myself by keeping up that wall. This idea part of me refuses to let go of, that I just can’t let anyone see me break down. Nick’s the only one who has, and that terrifies me, despite the fact that it’s brought us closer.

I think I love him, like honest to God love.

Too bad he’ll probably never know that. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to tell him, because of that damn side of me that has to be strong. I’m no shrink, so I don’t have a clue of why I get like this. It’s chased so many away in my past.

If I ever see AJ again, I’ll ask him. He’s seen enough psychologists in his life – maybe some of it rubbed off. But I don’t think I’ll ever be given the chance. Things aren’t good. I’m terrified Kevin’s about to die. He reminds me of Nathan, the oldest of my brothers. Overly responsible, always thinking ahead, always trying to be the dad, always testing me. I can’t handle losing anyone else. Wasn’t the death of Kayleigh enough? I can’t handle losing Kevin; I really can’t. I may act like a smartass, but I still love everyone in our little group of ~~ten~~ nine.

I don’t think we’ll make it back to Florida. I don’t think we’ll survive to see 2013. I don’t think we’ll be lucky much longer on our food raids. I don’t think we’ll be

able to stay at the golf course much longer; more and more are beginning to sniff us out.

I don't think it's fair that we'll probably have to die now, after fighting so hard. To think I argued with Kevin to be able to go on this trip. I could've been back at the base, comfortable and far safer. It's mindboggling.

You wanna know what's even crazier?

If I had the chance to redo that moment, knowing what was to come... I'd still choose to go.

Wednesday, October 10, 2012

Week Twenty-Five

Riley stood by the window, not too far from where Kevin lay resting on the couch. She'd been up all night, having decided she'd keep the vigil for once. Nick kept insisting she should rest and let him do it. It didn't seem fair to make him always be the one to protect their small little camp, to watch over Kevin without being able to truly help him. Tonight, she'd finally pushed him to get some real sleep. He looked so haggard and worn now. Bags had built up beneath his normally sparkling, blue eyes. Now they looked dull, like murky swamp water. Everything that had happened had finally begun to bring her cockeyed optimist down.

Her eyes shifted over to Nick. Where he lay sleeping, there was no smile. It saddened her to see him so down, even in slumber. It wasn't normal, and it wasn't something she was used to. She wondered then if maybe he was dreaming of Kevin, or Kayleigh, or his family. There was so much to grieve for these days, and from the looks of it, more to come. It frightened her more than she ever wanted to admit. She sat down slowly, with her back resting against the couch. Riley stifled a yawn, staring out into the night.

We never should've left, she thought, for what felt like the millionth time. She wondered what everyone was doing right then. She wondered if they assumed the three of them to be dead. Being the pessimist she was, Riley knew she would have, if she'd remained back at the base. She suddenly missed Gretchen right then. She needed a woman to talk to, someone to really just share with and get everything about Nick off her chest. She sighed. At least Gretchen had Brian, who was probably keeping her spirits up. Brian was always good at that. Riley missed Jo, who'd become like a surrogate mother, a figure she hadn't had since she was a child. Jo would have known what to do.

If Jo were here, Kevin wouldn't be dying.

Tears sprang to her eyes; still, she refused to let them fall. She couldn't. If she let herself cave and cry now, she knew she wouldn't stop. Riley stood, stretching a

bit as she did. Shivering, she reached for Nick's hoodie, which he'd grabbed on a supply run. Putting it on, she took a deep breath, going to grab some water. Since the water was off now, with no people to keep it running, they'd been forced to grab cases of bottled water during one of the runs. There wasn't much left. Riley had been using it mainly to keep Kevin hydrated. Pouring some into a cup, she came back over to Kevin's side. On the table before him lay a damp rag. Gently, she set the cup down and took the rag, running it across his forehead. It felt so fruitless; nothing seemed to help.

"Kevin... you need to wake up. Please..." she whispered, despite knowing he wouldn't hear her. Wherever he was, he seemed beyond hearing her now.

He shifted in his sleep, if you could call it that, and she gently opened his mouth. Her hands trembled as she set the pills inside, following them with a trickle of water. Kevin had been like this for a full week now, if her count was right. If something didn't change soon, she feared for the worst. At least the mumbling had stopped. That had unnerved her the most, the rambles caused by his feverous delirium.

"Rye?"

She turned sharply, startled from her reverie. Nick was sitting up slowly, his golden hair going every which way. If not for the paleness of his face and how drawn his skin was, it would almost be cute. The corners of her lips twitched slightly. "Morning, Sleepy."

"Is it morning?" he asked as he stretched out, cracking his back.

"Barely... I can see the sun beginning to rise."

"You should get some sleep."

Riley shook her head, turning back to Kevin, dabbing at his forehead. "I'm okay."

"You always say that."

She shrugged, not looking at him. "Maybe I say it 'cause I am."

"Damn it, Riley-"

She turned, her eyes blazing. "What, Nick? What? You think I can get any sleep right now? You think I can even try? Kevin's about ready to kick the ever-fucking-loving bucket, and I'm not going to go sleep and..." Riley stopped, swallowing back the rest of her words.

A arm came around her shoulder. Two tears fell from her eyes, beyond her control. "I know."

“I can’t take this. I, I try to. I try and...”

“You don’t always gotta have control, you know. Aren’t you the one who tried telling Howie that?” She glanced over; Nick was giving her that smile. That smile that never failed to bring out one of her own, despite the situation at hand.

“I know.”

“So go sleep. I know you’re tired, even if you’ll never tell me.”

She hugged him, feeling safe for only moments within his warm embrace. Riley nodded, giving in. She *was* tired, emotionally, if not physically. Her lips touched his forehead sweetly as she stood, heading over to the makeshift bed on the floor that Nick had just left. Pulling the blanket over her, she smiled to herself as she watched Nick sing quietly to their sick leader.

His soothing melody lulled her into a much-needed rest.

A loud crash caused her to stir. A smell immediately slammed her senses, and she rose with alarm. Her hands reached wildly for her shotgun, as she ran forward. Her eyes skipped around the room. The windows had been shattered, and neither Kevin, nor Nick, could be seen.

“NICK!” she screamed above the moans. Zombies were coming in through the broken windows now, through the doors, through every way they could. They writhed and moaned with no other purpose than to reach her, their newfound prey. Riley fired off a few shots, both of them wild and missing their targets. Plaster fell from the ceiling. She looked around again, her heart beating wildly.

“NICK!” That was when she spotted it, a swarm of them bent over.

Bent over in the feeding position.

She fired off the gun again and again. There was no thought to it. There was no method. She continued shooting, reloading automatically. All she cared about then was getting through. Finally, one zombie fell to break the circle. There, lying still with his eyes half open, was Kevin. Blood ran everywhere, coating the couch as if it were simply spilled paint. Parts of his leg were missing, the flesh raw and gleaming in the breaking daylight. The leg ended halfway down, splintered bone peeking through the broken end. She screamed in fright, before turning and puking everything that remained in her stomach. Bits of regurgitated SpaghettiOs littered the floor now.

The zombies turned on her, just as she began to catch her breath once more. A fresh catch, she knew she was now that much more appealing to them. She ran outside, towards the pond out on the green of the course. Riley had no idea where Nick was, but he wasn't inside. That much she knew. He'd have heard her screams if he was, or she'd have spotted him if he was already dead.

She ran, paying no attention to where she was going. She didn't glance back once to see how far she'd gotten ahead. Riley ran blindly into the gradually fading night, the sun only beginning to break through. Her surroundings seemed to be still within a veil of darkness. Tears ran down her face freely now, for Kevin, who hadn't even had a chance to fight back. It had been like Nick said, a free for all buffet. Riley forced back the bile the thought caused and ignored the burning in her lungs as she kept up her pace.

Suddenly, her foot struck against something. She lost her balance and tumbled down onto the dewy grass. For a moment, she lay there, the breath knocked out of her. As she pulled herself up, she looked over to see what had tripped her. It had to have been big, to have gotten her to fall so hard.

She screamed yet again, a mix of terror and anguish. The sight she saw was one she'd never forget for the rest of her days. There lay Nick. *Her* Nick. His blue eyes that she so loved were no longer full of life; they stayed open, glassy and unseeing, to the sky above. His throat had been mercilessly ripped out, teeth marks remaining on his neck. His body was mangled, what was left of it. His arms had been devoured, the bones of which only had bits of tattered flesh sticking to them. His torso, which had become toned since the Day of Unholy Resurrection, was nothing but a bloody mess of ribs.

"Nick... Nick..." she sobbed as she hugged his destroyed body. "You can't be dead... you can't be... Nick... you... no... no... no..."

She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. All she knew was the overwhelming pain that consumed her then, far more than the ghouls had consumed him. Riley buried her face into what remained of his shoulder. She knew the rest of the horde would sniff her out soon, but found she no longer cared.

A gargled moan came from beside her ear. Riley's head raised only to see Nick's had as well.

A bony hand grabbed her hair as she screamed.

"Riley? Riley?!"

"NO! Nick... no... God... no..."

She thrashed away, feeling the grip of her undead lover. Despite no longer having the will, she still fought for her meager life. Still, she couldn't get away from his grip.

“Riley!” Hands shook her now, no longer grabbing. “Rye!”

Her eyes shot open. Nick was staring at her, looking worried. She buried her head in his chest, crying yet again. Riley hadn't cried this much since she was a kid. It felt so foreign. In the end, she couldn't help herself. His hand rubbed her back in an attempt to calm her down.

“I dreamed... Kevin... dead... and then, I found you... and... and...” She couldn't even utter the words. It felt like saying them would make them real.

“Shhh... it's okay. It was just a dream. You've been asleep for almost twelve hours... I told you you were tired.”

“I... I know... but...”

“It's okay. It's alright.”

They remained like that for a short while, Nick patiently soothing her as she slowly calmed down. The nightmare had shaken her to the core. She nodded, pulling away and wiping her eyes discreetly. “I feel stupid.”

“Don't. We all have nightmares, Rye.”

“I know.” She still felt childish, but said nothing more about it. Instead, she straightened up. “I should check on Kevin...”

“It's okay; it can wait.”

“But...”

“Everything okay over there?” a raspy voice called, almost inaudible.

The two blondes looked over, both wearing identical expressions of shock. There, weakly attempting to sit up, was Kevin. He looked worn down, still sick, and unable to fight off even an undead toddler. But he was awake, and he was still alive.

Despite all the evidence that said otherwise, suddenly, Riley felt like everything was going to be alright.

Chapter 80

Was the trip back to Atlanta worth it? For me, it was. It was worth it to see the house one last time, even though it was ruined. It was worth it to recover some of the things I'd left behind. It was worth it to feel some sense of closure, even if I'll never know for sure what happened to Shawn. It hurts not to know, but it would have killed me not to look. At least now I know I've done all that I can to find him.

I've accepted that it's unlikely I'll ever see him again in this lifetime, but it's a comfort to have our pictures with me, to be able to see his face the way I remember it whenever I want. One of my favorites is from our engagement photos. It rained the day we had scheduled our session, but we went ahead with it, hoping it would clear so we could do some of the shots outdoors, like we'd planned. It never did, but we went outside anyway and took pictures. I thought it would be sort of romantic, like the kiss in the rain from The Notebook. Instead, it was just cold and wet and uncomfortable. My hair got drenched and frizzed right out, and his glasses fogged up so bad he could barely see. We both got soaked to the bone and came out looking like two drowned rats in the photos. Two drowned rats in love, though. We laughed so hard that day, joking about how he could have used a tiny pair of windshield wipers for his glasses, and how I was going to be nipping out in our engagement announcement in the newspaper. Obviously, we chose a different photo – one of the dry shots – but my favorite will always be the one of us laughing in the rain. And when things get bad, I'll always be able to look at it and smile through my tears.

It's a good thing, because there sure have been a lot of tears around here lately.

Thursday, October 11, 2012

Week Twenty-Five

“This truck could use some new wipers,” Gretchen commented, struggling to see out the windshield as she drove through the rain. The skies had been clear for most of her journey with Brian back to Tampa Bay, but that morning had dawned overcast and rainy.

“I'll put some on when we get back to the base,” Brian replied. “Unless you think we need to stop and find some now.”

“No... it's fine. We can make it,” said Gretchen. Now that they were on the road again, she was eager to keep going.

It would have been the perfect day to stay in bed, if that bed had been the one she shared with Shawn at their house in Atlanta. But her house and her bed were far behind them now, and deep down, she knew she would never see them – or

Shawn – again. Instead, she and Brian had slept in a stranger’s home, somewhere outside Gainesville, Florida.

Only a hundred more miles to Tampa, according to a green road sign she could just make out through the rain-soaked window. Even though it had been tempting to curl up under the covers and sleep until eternity, Gretchen found that she was glad. She couldn’t wait to get back to Tampa. There was nothing for her in Atlanta anymore, nothing but memories. At MacDill, there was hope. There were people. She had friends, a family, however unconventional. She found that she had missed them while she and Brian were away.

“Do you think Riley, Nick, and Kevin will be back?” she asked Brian.

“I hope so.” He didn’t elaborate, though she could infer what he was thinking. It had been almost three weeks since the other group had boarded a plane and flown west in search of survivors. If they weren’t back yet, it could only mean they had run into trouble – with the plane, with the undead, or any number of other possibilities.

“Kevin’s gonna be pissed at us for leaving,” she added, but that didn’t bother her. Once they were all back together in one piece, the relief would be so great that no hard feelings could last long.

Brian chuckled. “If he’s back at the base, I bet he’s a basket case right now, worryin’ about us.”

She smiled and nodded. “Jo’s probably right there with him.” She knew Jo, the mother of the group, hadn’t wanted them to go, either. But as a widow who had lost her own husband, she had also understood Gretchen’s need to search for hers. And when they got back, she would surely have some words of comfort to offer her.

Gretchen thought she was coping fairly well, as well as could be expected. She was still grieving, of course, but in the days since they’d left Atlanta, she had also gained a sense of peace. While it was true that she might never know what exactly had happened to Shawn, she was reasonably sure that his soul, at least, had gone on to a far better place than this one, and she took comfort in that belief.

It helped that Brian was on her side now, a fellow believer once more. He’d held a little memorial service for Shawn during one of their overnight stops. He had read some passages from the Bible, she had shared stories and favorite memories of Shawn, and together, they’d looked at pictures from the photo albums she’d recovered from the house. It wasn’t the send-off Shawn deserved, but it did bring Gretchen some closure.

Her mood lifted as the rain stopped, and the sun peeked out from behind the storm clouds. She could see its golden rays filtering through the misty gray atmosphere, and she smiled. “When I was a little girl,” she spoke aloud, pointing out the window at the visible sunbeams, “I used to think those beams of light were the souls of people who had just died, being taken up to Heaven.”

Brian smiled, too. “That’s a beautiful thought. I’d like to think it’s true.”

She liked to think so, too, but who on Earth was left with a soul to take? As far as she knew, it was just the nine of them, for the undead certainly had no souls left in them. The realization left her feeling troubled again.

Then Brian said, “Hey, look... over there.” He pointed in the other direction, and she slowed down, craning her neck to look over her shoulder. She saw it then, a faint glimmer of color against the dark gray clouds: a rainbow.

Letting the truck coast to a stop in the middle of the highway, Gretchen shifted it into park, looked around carefully to make sure there were no zombies in sight, then climbed out. Brian followed her. They stood in the road, flanked by abandoned vehicles, and stared up at the sky. Out in the sunlight, the rainbow appeared even brighter and more vivid, stretching across the backdrop of gray sky from one side of the horizon to the other. “Whoa... that’s a full rainbow,” Gretchen murmured.

Above it, they could just make out a second rainbow, much fainter, like an echo of the first. Brian was the one to point it out. “It’s a *double* rainbow... all the way across the sky,” he observed, tracing the arc of it with his finger.

“Wow...” Gretchen shook her head, in awe of this rare miracle of nature. “It’s so beautiful. What does it mean?” Looking up at the double rainbow, she had a strange, fluttery feeling deep inside her, like it was a sign. She smiled up at the soft spectrum of colors and thought, *This is Shawn telling me that he’s all right... that I can go on, and everything will be all right.*

When she told Brian this, he smiled back and squeezed her hand. “God’s miracles are all around us,” he said. “Sometimes we just have to look for them more closely. This is a nice reminder that there’s still beauty in this world.”

But not long after he’d said it, the slouching silhouettes of zombies also appeared on the horizon, shuffling toward them under the double rainbow, and they were forced to get back in the truck and keep driving.

The pair of rainbows soon faded, but Gretchen was not too disappointed. The full-on double rainbow had left her feeling fulfilled. She floored the pedal and watched the needle on the speedometer steadily creep higher. With a hundred more miles of rain-soaked highway stretching out in front of her, she just wanted

to get home. That was how she would think of the former Air Force base from then on – as home.

And indeed, when she finally found herself driving down Bayshore Boulevard, guiding the truck through MacDill's front gates, Gretchen felt an overwhelming sense of relief and satisfaction. Home, at last. She navigated the winding streets and brought the truck to a stop in the driveway of the little house she and Brian shared with Nick and Riley. After parking, she jumped out and ran into the house, eager to see if their two roommates were home yet. Brian followed, calling, "Nick? Rye?"

But there was no one home. The house was dark and silent, the air stagnant. Gretchen fought off her feeling of disappointment, saying, "I bet the others are down at the beach, still working on the wall."

They went back outside and walked around the house, heading for the bay. Their pace quickened, the closer they got to the water. Up ahead, Gretchen could see the wall, but no sign of anyone, living or undead. She kept her ears perked for voices or the sound of hammering as they followed the wall along the waterline to its end, but still, there was no one. Yet their tools were still there - a hammer, nails, rope, and a saw lay among the chopped logs that had not yet been assembled to continue the wall. "Maybe they're taking a break," Brian said, looking around.

Gretchen nodded, refusing to admit anything could be wrong, though she was starting to get that sense. She couldn't put her finger on what it was, but there was an eerie feeling in the air. The base seemed too quiet, even quieter than usual. The absence of moaning was a relief, but the lack of human noise bothered her. "Where do you think they went?" she asked, but Brian just shrugged. They both knew there were too many places to check on the large base.

They trudged off in the direction they had come, heading back to the housing area. The walk seemed to take a lot longer than it had before. But when they finally reached the house, someone was waiting for them by the truck.

"Howie!" Gretchen broke into a jog, arms outstretched for a hug. It had taken her some time to warm up to Howie, but she was so glad to see him, so glad to see someone alive on the empty base. When she got close, though, she lowered her arms and slowed to a walk, frowning as she studied his face.

Howie looked all right, physically, but he appeared to have aged several years in the sixteen days they'd been gone. Or had he always had those lines around his eyes? That touch of gray in his stubble? He hadn't shaved in several days, which was unlike him. He also hadn't showered, which was *very* unlike him. His black hair was greasy and disheveled. Underneath his tan, his face seemed pale, almost ashen. Was he sick? Or had something horrible happened?

“What’s wrong?” she asked, afraid to hear his answer.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said, but he didn’t smile. His voice was low and grim. “AJ’s been hurt, badly. And Jo’s dead.”

Gretchen gasped out loud, swaying with the shock of his last words. “No...” she whimpered, her eyes already filling with tears.

Brian had reached them just in time to hear Howie’s grim news. He put his arm around Gretchen and hugged her close to his side. “How did it happen?” he asked Howie.

There must have been a horrible attack, Gretchen thought, and she immediately felt guilty, guilty because she and Brian hadn’t been there to help. With so few of them left to fight and defend the base, they’d suffered heavy losses. This was the conclusion her mind immediately jumped to, so she was unprepared for Howie’s answer.

“She was attacked by one of them while we were working on the wall, two days ago. Gabby shot the zombie to save her, but her bullet went right through it and hit Jo in the chest.”

Gretchen gasped again. “Oh no... oh God... Gabby... Poor Gabby! H-how’s she doing?”

It was a stupid question. Howie just shrugged. “You can imagine. She’s inside with AJ.” He gestured to the house next door, the one he shared with AJ. “I should get back... I don’t like leaving either one of them alone.”

“We’ll come with you,” Brian said.

As they followed him next door, Howie filled them in on what had happened with AJ – the fall from the tree, the fall off the wagon. “We’ll have to watch his leg carefully for signs of infection,” he said. “Jo said if it gets into his broken bone, it could kill him. She said we’d have to amputate his leg. Of course, AJ was having none of that. With Jo gone, though, I don’t know what we’d do.”

“Just pray it doesn’t happen,” Brian murmured. Gretchen could be sure that he would, but she wasn’t so sure it would do any good. Prayers hadn’t seemed to help them much yet. She had been so relieved to make it back to the base safely, but her faith had been shaken again by the tragedy that awaited them there.

“Any news on the other group?” she asked pointlessly, already knowing there had been none.

Howie shook his head. “How about on your end? Any sign of Shawn?”

She, too, shook her head sadly. “Our house was half-destroyed. Some kind of explosion. We left a message for him, in case he ever does make it back to check, but... but I don’t think that will happen. I think that he’s... that’s he gone,” she admitted with difficulty, her voice trembling on the last words.

“I’m sorry,” Howie offered, holding out his arm. She let him put it around her, so that she was sandwiched between the two of them, hugged on both sides. They walked like that, three across, all the way to the front door. Howie held it open for Brian and Gretchen, ushering them inside.

His house was just as dark and silent as theirs had been. Gretchen felt like she should tiptoe as he led them back to the three, small bedrooms. One of the doors was closed – *Gabby*, Howie mouthed, pointing – but the other two were open. He brought them into one of the rooms, where AJ was laid up in bed, his broken leg heavily bandaged and splinted, elevated by a couple of pillows.

“Hey. You’re back,” he greeted them matter-of-factly, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards in the faintest flicker of a smile. “You missed all the excitement,” he added, gesturing at his leg.

Gretchen shook her head, her eyes filling with a fresh batch of tears. “I’m so sorry, AJ,” she said. “I’m sorry all this happened. I’m sorry we weren’t here.”

“Hey, don’t apologize.” He shrugged. “Accidents happen. There’s nothing you could’ve done.” But he said this all very flatly, and Gretchen knew it wasn’t true. Maybe they wouldn’t have been able to prevent his fall, but they could have saved Jo. A tear slipped down her cheek, dripping onto the foot of his bed. “Any luck with the hubby?” he asked, and she shook her head, more tears falling. “That sucks... sorry.”

She sniffed and nodded, not knowing what else to say. The three of them just stood there around AJ’s bed for a few, awkward minutes, barely speaking. Then Gretchen asked, “Can we see Gabby?” She looked at Brian, and he nodded. Between the two of them, maybe they’d be able to offer the girl some comfort.

Howie took them across the hall and rapped his knuckles lightly against the closed door. “Gabby?” he called. “Brian and Gretchen are back. Can they come in?”

There was no answer.

Howie shrugged at Gretchen and Brian, looking helpless. “She hasn’t spoken since Tuesday,” he whispered. “She barely comes out of this room.”

Gretchen could tell he didn’t have a clue what to do about Gabby. “I’ll see what I can do,” she offered, reaching for the doorknob. “Gabby?” She tried the knob and was surprised when it turned easily in her hand. Having once been a teenage

girl herself, she had expected it to be locked. She opened the door slowly and peeked in.

Gabby was curled up in a little ball on the bed, facing the wall. She didn't react when Gretchen walked in.

"Sweetheart..." Gretchen started softly, in the voice she'd used to console crying third-graders in her class at school. Gabby may have been older, but she was still a child, an orphan now, in need of some tender loving care. Though Gretchen knew she could never take the place of her mother, she could provide that much. "I'm so sorry..." she said, sinking down onto the edge of the bed and reaching out to stroke Gabby's back. The teenager stiffened at her touch, but didn't twist away. Neither did she roll over to face Gretchen. She stayed rigid, hugging her knobby knees to her chest.

"I can't imagine how much you're hurting right now," Gretchen offered, to fill the silence. "I know it's not the same, but I'm sad, too. Your mom was an incredible woman. She did so much for us here. We all miss her already."

Gabby still didn't respond, so she stopped talking, figuring Howie would have tried this already. What else was there to say? There were no words that could ease the pain of such an unspeakable tragedy. She continued to rub Gabby's back in slow, soft circles, until she heard the girl sniff.

"It's okay," she murmured, feeling the tension and tightness in the teenager's muscles, the effort of holding it all in. "Let it out..."

A sob escaped Gabby's throat, and finally, she let her guard down, rolling over to face Gretchen. Her eyes were swollen from crying, her cheeks blotchy and tearstained. Even so, fresh tears clung to her lashes and dripped from her nose and chin. Her lips quivered, though she said nothing. She didn't need to, and neither did Gretchen. Wordlessly, the older woman opened her arms and let the girl crawl into them. She wrapped Gabby up in a warm hug and held her, feeling the grief rack through the teenager's small body as she shook and sobbed against Gretchen's shoulder.

She could sense Brian's presence in the doorway, and after a minute, she glanced back and saw him there, watching. He offered her a sympathetic smile and a nod of approval, then turned and walked away, leaving her to comfort Gabby, as he had comforted her.

Grief... it had descended on the base once again like a storm cloud. In the days to come, tears would fall like rain, and anger would rage like thunder. They would ride it out together, waiting and praying for Kevin, Nick, and Riley's return, wondering if the storm would end in a rainbow or a flood.

PART VIII: FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS

Chapter 81

They say you shouldn't dwell on your mistakes. Well, "they" said that before "they" all died and turned into the unrelenting undead. But that used to be how I operated. I focused on the goal ahead and not on the mistakes along the way. You can't do that and expect to stay sane. You take the bumps along the road you travel as they come.

Someone needs to keep a level head.

Someone has to lead.

Someone needs to appear like they have all the answers, even now.

I made the biggest mistake by having them come out here with me. Now we're out in the middle of the country, surrounded by zombies no matter where we go. I wish we had never left Florida. And I keep thinking about how different things would've been if we had just concentrated on strengthening the defense of the base. Instead, I left, feeling a sense of duty to find more survivors and discover the fate of the country I loved. It almost got me killed. And for what? America doesn't exist anymore. And now I have a more important mission than trying to save the remnants of my country.

I have to get myself and my new family back home.

Before my mistake kills us all.

Saturday, October 13, 2012

Week Twenty-Five

Kevin was sitting on the couch, trying to plot out their next move. He'd insisted on letting one of the two blondes sleep on it for once; he was sure they'd gotten sick of the floor while he'd been sick. But both of them had refused, saying he needed to be on the couch while he regained his strength. After two weeks of battling a nasty infection, Kevin was finally on the road to recovery, but he wasn't at full strength yet, and they all knew it.

He knew they were trying to let him rest. But he also knew they were weary and fatigued. Nick had decided to take the night watch, but while Riley slept at his side, he had soon dozed off, as well. So Kevin had grabbed his gun and taken the watch on his own, having not wanted to disturb them. He spent the time planning, carefully trying to analyze their current situation.

The golf course was a good temporary refuge, but they couldn't remain here much longer. The night before, several of the walking dead had breached one of the back doors, doors that were now blocked off by a large table they'd found. None of them had bothered to clean up the broken glass. It felt like déjà vu to Kevin, who was thrown back to the beginning days at the base, when the undead had broken through the stained glass windows of the church.

He looked back down at the map Nick had pilfered during his supply run yesterday. Kevin had wanted to go with him as back-up, but had been turned down. He'd been told it was so they wouldn't be leaving Riley alone, but he knew the main reason was because they wanted to be sure he was better. Kevin understood this and knew they were right, but it didn't help any. He didn't like letting others do all the work. Nick seemed to have stepped into his shoes with more ease than he would have expected, however. That fact alone was a comfort to Kevin. It was satisfying, seeing the young man become more confident in himself.

A yawn caught his attention, and he glanced over. It wasn't Nick who had awoken, but Riley. She shifted carefully as she stood, so as not to wake up her boyfriend. She smiled at Kevin as she walked over and sat next to him, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Morning."

"Morning." Calling it morning was a bit of a stretch, as the sun had yet to peek over the horizon, but the battery-operated wall clock told Kevin it was four a.m. Riley leaned closer to sneak a peek at the map and shot him a questioning look. She traced the route Kevin had outlined on it. Their eyes met again.

"We can't stay here much longer, you know," he said, in reply to the unspoken question.

She nodded in agreement, though her brows furrowed as she examined the map once again. He was taken aback by the lack of commentary that he'd come to expect from the former journalist. After a few moments of silence between them, during which they could hear nothing but the haunting, neverending chorus of the undead in the distance, he continued.

"It's going to take time. The roads, zombies, weather – it's all going to slow us down. We'll have to pack up all we can, find us a new vehicle..."

Riley glanced up at him then. "Why? The Hummer works fine."

"I want as few stops as possible. This trip is going to be risky enough without adding to it. The weather's going to get bad soon. It'll be November before we

know it, and we have a lot of ground to cover. So we're going to have to hurry this road trip along."

"Road trip?" Nick asked, mid-yawn, as he stretched on the couch. Two heads whipped around in his direction. Neither had seen him wake up. "We're going back home?"

Kevin simply nodded. He was fatigued and still felt a bit weak, but he didn't want to tell them. If he did, it would just delay them, and at that point, even a few days' delay was a risk.

"It just feels like such a waste," Riley muttered, folding the map up and handing it back to him. Her hands looked in need of something to keep them busy afterward.

Kevin sighed as he looked away from her. He had known this was coming and guessed maybe she'd just been too tired to say something earlier. He was used to her challenging him and had come to expect it since getting to know her. He didn't mind it. It was simply the type of person she was, very similar to his own self. That goal-driven mindset, that determination to achieve. At times, though, he found it tiring, like he did right then.

"You're right." He stared out the window at the stars. He never got sick of the clear view they had of the sky now. It reminded him of his childhood days back in Kentucky, staring up at the sky from his backyard. He'd missed it when his military assignments had taken him to bigger cities, like Tampa. "It is a waste. I wish we'd never come out here."

"So you think that the rest of America's like this?" Nick reached for a brush and proceeded to try and comb his hair down.

"It's clear it spread through the country. I don't know if there are other survivor camps like ours back home out there or not. Part of me still wants to try and find them if they're out there. But we can't try to find out." He turned to Riley. "You expect us to drive to California?"

Riley stepped back with her hands up in surrender. "I don't. It's just frustrating that we went through all this, and we're not even coming back with any real answers."

"Frustrating would be an understatement. I just hope the others aren't paying for my mistake in judgment right now. That they're still there when we get back home."

"You don't think they'll still be there?"

"Of course they will be."

Kevin brought his hand up to massage his temple, as a slight throbbing signaled to him what kind of day this was going to be. "I don't think any of them would try to leave us, but they probably think we're dead. I would, if I was there. They have no way of finding out otherwise, and we don't have a way to tell them. The wall may not have worked; they may have had to move on. Or maybe they..." He left the rest unsaid, but both Nick and Riley caught the dark undertones of his message.

"They're okay," their perpetually-cockeyed optimist, Nick, said with a smile and confidence Kevin couldn't quite comprehend. "I just know it."

Several hours later, the sun was high in the sky, though the wind chilled them. The Hummer was parked in front of the first Wal-Mart they had come upon. Packed in the back were the few possessions they had, ready to go into the first vehicle Kevin found acceptable. Of course, they had to also stock up on the basics, so that they wouldn't have so many stops.

Right then, the three of them stood in the store's open doorway. It felt odd, being in a Wal-Mart without seeing the oddities of the people within the store. Wal-Mart had once been the Mecca of hicks and white trash, and now it was like everything else: a Mecca of zombies. Nick had his gun ready to go, grinning at Kevin as he got ready to purposely attract attention. This way, there would be less surprise encounters with the ghouls. Riley was loading her gun beside him.

"Hey Kevin, we're running low on ammo."

Yet another problem to deal with. He'd have to check the sporting goods section and hope for the best. Surviving would instantly become about ten times harder without guns.

Nick fired a shot off into the ceiling, just to make noise. Kevin gave him a hard look, since they had just been told ammo was becoming scarce.

The smell of the rotting food hit his senses, and he fought the instant urge to vomit. It was going to be like this, no matter where they got supplies. It was easy to forget the rest of the world didn't have electricity anymore, when the base still had that priceless luxury.

Nick either didn't notice it, however, or simply ignored it as he sang, "*Off with your head! Da-dan-dance-dance till you're dead!*"

A staggering zombie slowly made its way towards them. The decomposition of the undead was increasing, though not at even close to what Kevin would consider a fast enough rate. This one looked bloated, and he wondered if it had

rained during his two weeks of “rest.” The zombie had clearly been one of the trashy Wal-Mart type customers, a woman of at least three hundred pounds, wearing a leopard-spotted spandex exercising outfit. Rolls of rotting flesh tufted out between the top and the bottom, maggots thriving happily upon them. Kevin reacted instinctively at the first moan it emitted. A shot was fired and went through the eye dead center. It fell to the ground with a sickening thud.

Riley had grabbed a shopping cart. She thrust it at the next zombie to appear. Nick managed to do a Michael Jackson-esque spin as he fired off a shot at it. That and the cart forced the zombie back against a display of soda bottles. The bullet had slammed through its nose and out the other side of its skull. Soda sprayed everywhere upon impact. Bits of clotted blood, decaying flesh, and bone mixed with the geyser of Code Red Mountain Dew showering the surrounding area.

“Off with your head! Da-dan-dance-dance till you’re dead! It’s close to miiiiidnight, and something evil’s lurking in the daaaark...”

The three of them began to walk forward after Riley took another cart and started pushing it. Immediately, Kevin directed them down the canned food aisle. He looked at Nick curiously. “Okay, I’ll bite – what are you singing?”

Nick stared at him incredulously. “Haven’t you ever seen *Glee*?”

“No.”

“Okay, I need to find the seasons on DVD up in here.”

Riley laughed. “I love your priorities.”

“Glee must live on! I mean, it’d be like if Kevin said he never saw any of the Harry Potter movies.”

“I haven’t.”

Nick shook his head in severe disappointment. “You’ve been denied so much.”

They headed for the drinks so they could pick up some cases of bottled water. They needed several, as they now had to use it for everything. Kevin sighed; he missed the luxuries they had left behind in Florida.

They turned a corner. Another zombie was standing there, waiting contentedly. This one had no pants, just soiled yellow underwear that revealed a minuscule bulge in the privates area. Its shirt was torn flannel, and a scraggly mullet hung loosely from its skull, as the scalp peeled away. Beetles skittered about its face. Kevin got ready to aim, but Nick shook his head.

“Save the ammo, ‘cause we’re low, right?” He pulled out his axe and grinned at Riley. “Ten points if I can get a hard enough swing for the head to land on the top shelf.”

She laughed. “Twenty if you can get it in the meat department.” She pointed at the counter, several feet away.

Kevin shook his head at the two of them, trying not to chuckle as he tossed some more items into the cart. It was funny how morbid their humor was, but that was just the way they had all learned to cope. It was easier to forget that every zombie they killed had once been a living, breathing, human being, which had, at one point, had a soul. It didn’t bother them as much if they tried to turn it into a game.

Nick ran at the zombie, which let loose an almost deafening moan. He swung hard at the corpse as it slowly slouched toward him. The axe sliced through its neck, causing the head to spin up into the air. As it started to fall, Nick swung the blade yet again at the still-gnashing skull. It was a direct hit, and the head flew across the aisles like an undead kickball. It sailed over the butcher’s counter, and Kevin could hear it hit the ground with a soft thump.

“YES!” Nick fist pumped. “I’m the man!”

Riley giggled as she came up and swatted him upside the head playfully. “The crazy-ass one.”

“Come on, kids.”

They continued picking their way through the store. Once they had stocked up on the dry and canned foods Kevin hoped they could make last for a few states, they decided to go get some new clothes. Kevin took a sniff of his shirt and sighed. It wasn’t the freshest. They’d had to resort to sponge baths again, and their clothes had suffered as a result. He also wanted to grab some jackets, in case they got stranded or stalled due to bad weather. He didn’t know if the other two were thinking of how difficult their journey was going to be, but he was. He knew he’d have to be the one who did most of the thinking.

Riley immediately ran for the clothes, tugging them off the hangers and tossing them into the cart. “Thank God; mine were getting so stiff, they could have stood up on their own. Nasty.”

Kevin and Nick were about to go into the men’s section when they suddenly heard her yelling. “Guys! Come here!”

Thinking the worst, they ran over. But instead, they found her laughing. Her face was turning pink as she continued, trying to pause for air to say why she called for them. Finally, she sighed and led the two men through the lingerie.

Nick smirked and, when Riley wasn't looking, tossed a silky, skimpy, pink number into the cart. Kevin rolled his eyes.

There, in the aisle, once Riley stopped, had to be the strangest image he had ever seen. On one of the motorized scooters Wal-Mart offered was a zombie that had to be at least a good four hundred pounds. Its large, protruding stomach was stuck beneath the handles, keeping the scooter from being able to move. It waved its arms feebly and moaned.

Nick chortled. "That thing is in desperate need of a Stairmaster."

Taking Nick's axe, Kevin slammed the blade forcefully into the skull, thus ending the obese corpse's struggle. Blood sprayed on Nick, and he made a face, taking back the weapon. "Glad we're getting clothes."

Kevin nodded. "You two load us up on clothes. I'm going to check sporting goods to see if I can't find a gun."

Both were about to open their mouths to protest, but Kevin shook his head. Without a word, that shut them up. Kevin fought back a smirk. It was good to know he was still able to silence those he guided with just the right look. The two blondes disappeared into the clothing department once more, but he could still hear Riley once she discovered Nick's newest addition to the cart.

"Nick! I am *not* wearing this."

"Aww, come on!"

As they meandered along the narrow, winding roads of Colorado, Kevin examined the maps again. Nick was driving, as Kevin didn't trust him quite enough to be the navigator. It was too easy to get lost anymore. There was no music playing just yet, though he knew it was only a matter of time; he had caught Nick stuffing CDs he'd found in a bargain bin into the cart. Kevin feared the day there wasn't a way to play Nick's favorite songs. He was sure the man would go into a seizure from that alone.

"Shit!" he heard Riley say, out of nowhere, as she organized their supplies into packs in the backseat.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to check to see if they didn't have something about Nick's medication."

Kevin turned in his seat. "Why?"

“We didn’t bring much with us, and what extra we had was on the plane.”

He saw Nick’s reflection biting his lip in the rearview mirror. He sighed. They had no idea what the medicine was right then, and finding a book to tell them would be difficult. Not to mention, trying to raid a hospital would be suicide. When he had learned of what Nick had done to help him get better, Kevin had immediately reamed him out for such a risky decision. The three had agreed it had been a combination of skill and pure, undiluted luck that had seen Nick through it all right.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kevin finally answered.

“Wait, what?”

“We can’t worry about what we can’t change.” He rubbed his temple again. “We have enough to deal with right now.”

The other two fell silent again, leaving Kevin to his thoughts. He figured he had just shocked them with his answer, but what else could he have said? This wasn’t like before. They couldn’t let Nick be out of commission. All they could do was hope for the best. At least, if he remembered right, the seizures weren’t a common occurrence.

The Hummer slowed to a stop, and Kevin glanced up with surprise. “What is it?”

“Dude, I just found our ride.”

Kevin looked out the window and instantly frowned.

“No.”

“Come on! It’s fucking perfect!”

“I’m not getting in that.”

There, along the shoulder of the highway, sat two luxurious tour buses. On the side, they said: **NSYNC + New Kids On The Block! NSYNKOTB 2012.** Nick laughed as he read it. Kevin shook his head. Riley snorted.

“Two forgotten boybands trying to reunite for nostalgia. No wonder the world ended. This was a sign.”

“You think they’re still inside?”

“Where do you think they’re gonna go? No windows are broken... doors are shut. I guess they didn’t have ‘The Right Stuff’ to get out of there,” Riley cracked, chuckling at her own cheesy pun.

“Grab the supplies,” Kevin ordered. “We’re going to have to toss them on, then clear it out.” The other two rushed to grab the duffel bags they’d packed with Wal-Mart supplies in the back of the Hummer. Kevin kept a look out, in case they were sniffed out by any roaming ghouls. Once they’d piled their many supply bags by the door of the bus, Riley and Nick nodded at him.

Kevin loaded his gun, and Nick approached the door. He pulled on it gently and was instantly met with the rotting face of Joey McIntyre. He was thrust back by the zombie and struggled to shake it off for a moment before he shoved it back up against the bus. It moaned angrily.

“Heh, he sounds better as a zombie than he did as a singer!”

Kevin shot it in the throat, and it gargled in an attempt to moan, before another shot was fired directly into its skull. It slumped to the ground, and Nick smirked. They carried the bags on, two by two, setting them down in a pile by the driver’s seat. They headed into the bus with their weapons at the ready. The next to run at them was a middle-aged zombie with a head full of braids and beads. It would have been even more pathetic, had the person been still alive.

“Chris Kirkpatrick?” Riley said with surprise. “Ew, you have that hair again...” The zombie rushed at them, and while Riley hesitated with the shot, Nick slammed his axe through the braids and into the skull. Hair flew up around them, and the creature fell.

Nick gazed back at Riley. “Again. How do you know he had that hair before?”

“I grew up in the ‘nineties, okay?”

“You were a fan of ‘NStink weren’t you?!”

“They had catchy music, okay? It was the whole boyband thing... I was a teeny; I didn’t know better!”

“I am so ashamed right now.”

“I can’t believe I’m letting us commandeer a mega-boyband’s tour bus.”

“Just think about how much more comfortable we’ll be. This thing is kick-ass,” Nick replied, with a look around. The bus was huge and appeared to have housed both groups, rather than just one, the way Kevin had assumed. The second bus must have been for the crew. There were plenty of bunks, a kitchenette, and he could see the living room area at the end.

A shuffling sound came from that direction. This zombie opened its mouth, yet didn't moan even once, though it looked as if it were attempting to. Kevin started laughing. "Wow, he was the one who never sang, and now he can't even moan."

Nick laughed. The moment of distraction gave the zombie formerly known as Jonathan Knight the opportunity it needed to grab Nick by the shoulders. Riley shrieked, but there wasn't enough room to move around them. A shot couldn't be fired because the likelihood of hitting Nick himself was just too high. Kevin could see him begin to struggle for air, as the rotting hands tightened around his throat. One of Nick's hands was trying to loosen the grip enough to get air; the other was fumbling for his axe.

While Kevin tried to get to Nick, Riley was left to battle it out with JC Chasez, who must have rolled out of one of the beds. She was slammed back into Kevin, who was forced into Nick. Nick's hand reached around wildly in the bunks on the side of him for anything useful. It settled on a drumstick. Nick slammed it into Jon's eye as hard as he could. The stick snapped in half from the force alone, and the boybander fell to the ground.

Riley was still battling the other, struggling more, as she lacked the brawn that Kevin and Nick possessed. Kevin could see Nick's face go pale. "Rye!"

She ducked from its grip, reaching for a nearby guitar. She brought it down on JC's head, causing him to fall to the ground for a moment. Riley stepped out of the way to find a better weapon. Before she could, Nick fired a shot off instantly, so that it didn't even have a chance to rise again. Kevin sighed.

This may not be worth it, he mused. The space is too tight to try and fight in here.

Kevin peeked into the bathroom as they went further in. The undead Donnie Wahlberg rushed at him with only his soiled underwear on. He shook his head and shot him right between the eyes, before the three continued on. Kevin thought he heard something; he turned back to look at the door, but there was nothing there. Not that he would mind if some just left the bus.

They didn't see any sign of the driver of the bus, which amused Kevin. *I wouldn't have wanted to die with these guys either.*

A loud crash brought his mind back to the matter at hand. He kicked himself mentally. He knew better than anyone not to let his mind wander when they had to be on the watch. Kevin found himself being distracted easier than he had been before the infection. He hurried forward to the kitchenette in time to see Nick battling off Joey Fatone. Riley was trying to get in a good shot, but was evidently afraid to fire, in fear of hitting Nick.

"Where did he come from?"

“The fridge, which... I have no idea how he got there... or fit in there... I mean, he was always the Fat One...”

Riley was searching the drawers for a hand weapon, when she spotted the axe swinging from where it always hung at Nick’s waist. She reached for it, but he moved at the last second, and she ended up with a handful of his butt instead. Nick laughed.

“Rye, not the best time!”

“Try to stay still for a second!” Kevin called after them, trying to see if he couldn’t line up the shot himself. But just as Riley had found, it was impossible without Nick possibly getting in the way. It didn’t matter anyway, since Riley finally managed to not only grab the axe, but reach over Nick’s head to slam it into Joey’s. The blade must have just breached the skull, as it slumped up against Nick.

“Um... why don’t we just stay friends there, buddy?” Nick joked, shoving the large corpse off him. It fell to the ground against the fridge, causing spoiled food to topple on top of it. “Just how he wanted to die, I’m sure.”

“You okay, Nick?” Riley asked, trying to sound calm.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine... You know, if I was in a gay-ass boyband, I would’ve been the hot one.”

Kevin chuckled and, maneuvering past the two of them, managed to get further ahead. He looked at the awards on display in the bus and shook his head. It was their tour bus, yet both boybands had felt the need to show off their accomplishments to each other. *Pathetic.*

He picked up an award off the shelf, an MTV VMAs Moonman. A smirk appeared, as he remembered the days when MTV was actually relevant when it came to music. That had ended long before the dead rose. He went to examine what award it was and who had won it, when a guttural moan reached his ears.

He went to turn, but was slammed up against the wall instead. Bleached blonde hair, unseeing green eyes, and pasty skin loosening from the skull immediately filled his vision. Another groan emerged, as he was hit with the putrid breath of the undead Lance Bass. Its jaws were snapping at him angrily, as Kevin tried to shove it off long enough to get a good hit in. He remembered the Moonman he held and swung it up behind the rotting popstar’s head. It smashed into it with brute force, causing the body to fall. Kevin looked back towards Nick and Riley, who had rushed over at the noise.

“See if you can’t get this thing started, Riley. Nick, come with me to make sure no one else is left in here.”

“We need to get the bodies out of here.”

“You’re right, but I think if we stay here too long, we’ll get more visitors.”

The two made their way to the back of the bus and finally entered the small, but luxurious living room area. There was a large couch, a beautiful flatscreen TV and DVD player, and a coffee table. Nick cheered the moment he spotted the DVD player. There was also another reanimated carcass lying in wait for them. It rose, and the two looked into the mutilated face of Justin Timberlake.

Both moved to take him out, but the bus suddenly lurched forward, climbing back onto the road. It jerked all three bodies, forcing Nick and Kevin to grab something to stay steady. The zombie formerly known as Justin just fell towards them.

“He sure ain’t bringing sexy back.”

The bus jerked sporadically again, causing Kevin to fall this time, despite his efforts. Nick tripped back into the wall, but managed to stay standing. Justin moaned in a high-pitched manner, sounding whiny compared to most of the zombies they had encountered.

“What the hell?”

Kevin stood back up, just in time to see Nick punch the zombie dead in the face. It stumbled back to whine again. Nick gave Kevin a sheepish smile. “Sorry, I’ve always wanted to hit this asshole. He annoyed the hell out of me in life.”

“Just kill him so we can figure out why...” The bus stopped suddenly, thrusting them around yet again. “... Riley can’t manage to drive.”

Nick nodded, bringing the gun directly into Justin’s face as he started towards him again. “Hey, hey... Justin... say bye, bye, bye!” The shot went off, and the now-destroyed face of Justin Timberlake fell forward, landing on the ground.

“Was that really necessary to say?”

“Hell yeah! In the movies, they always have that punny dramatic line before they kill pricks like him. Or, ya know, re-kill.”

They rushed back to the front of the bus, not caring that they were traipsing over bodies as they did. The bus started forward again, before stopping yet another time. Nick tripped over the fallen body of JC and tumbled into Kevin’s back. Kevin grabbed one of the bunks for balance, and the two righted themselves

again. Once at the front, the two discovered the reason for Riley's sporadic driving: On the windshield was the disfigured body of Jordan Knight. No matter how she tried to throw him off, the size of the bus made it hard to maneuver fast enough to toss him.

Kevin nodded at Riley, and she let him get behind the wheel. He started messing with the switches and smirked once he found the one that controlled the windshield wipers. They hooked onto the body, dragging it back and forth across the windshield, brownish-red blood streaking the glass. The zombie slammed its hand against the window as it moaned in protest. Finally, it fell off.

"HA! Not 'Hangin' Tough' now, are ya?" Nick quipped, laughing at his pun.

Kevin switched seats with Riley, and she started driving the large bus once again. She glanced over at the two men as it slowly began to pick up speed. "You know, we might have to take side roads if we keep this thing. The highways may be too clogged up to try and squeeze through."

Kevin nodded. "Right."

Nick glanced out into the large side mirror, where he could see a zombie attempting to chase them in full pursuit. His eyes widened slightly in recognition. Kevin looked over at him.

"What is it?"

"Nothing – we just forgot one."

Riley glanced into the rearview mirror with a smirk. "Eh, it's okay; no one remembered that one even when he was alive."

Their laughter was what carried them as they finally started the journey back home.

Chapter 82

The hardest thing in this world is to live in it.

I forget where the fuck I heard that from, but it's probably the truest statement ever made.

Dying, that's easy. I never thought I'd say that shit, but it's true. Dying is letting go. Dying is giving up, instead of fighting whatever the fuck the world wants to toss your way. It took me a long time to learn that shit, but I did learn

it. I mean, I could give up, let the world win. But where the hell's the fun in that? I have my dark days, the days where throwing in the towel looks tempting as shit. It's why I fell off the wagon.

It may be why Jo died.

The thought kills me, but there are others suffering more than me. It's about time I get my head back out of my ass and see that.

Friday, October 26, 2012

Week Twenty-Seven

In his old life, AJ had spent Friday nights the same way he spent most other nights: drinking in the bar, or maybe just at home in the dark, until he got so shitfaced he couldn't think straight or simply blacked out.

It had been a long time since he'd partaken in that nightly ritual, but even so, it still felt strange to be sitting around a dining room table with four other people, completely sober, eating dinner like a normal person. Of course, it seemed strange because nothing else in the world was normal, but even before the zombie apocalypse, family dinners were not something to which AJ was accustomed. He'd been raised in a small, unconventional family, by his single mother and grandparents, and although they were tight, they hadn't exactly been traditional. But he could tell that the others – Howie, Brian, Gretchen, and Gabby – had all grown up in the sort of homes where sit-down family dinners like this happened every night, and as the world died around them, they were fighting to keep that tradition alive.

Gretchen, in particular, had insisted on eating dinner together every night since she and Brian had gotten back, mostly for poor Gabby's sake. The sullen teenager hardly ate and barely said a word, but Gretchen made her come to the table each night, anyway. AJ would have just left her to mope; she certainly had a reason to. But who was he to say anything? He probably would have made a crappy dad.

Gretchen, Brian, and Howie did most of the talking at these family dinners. AJ found he didn't have much to say. He pulled his wheelchair up to the table, bad leg stretched out underneath it, and listened to the conversation, occasionally putting in a comment or two, but mostly just observing everyone else. He caught things this way, things the others didn't even notice. Like how hard Gretchen was trying to hold it together, to fill the gaping hole Jo had left behind as the matriarch, the happy homemaker. And how much Gabby resented her for it. He didn't miss the spiteful looks the teen shot her when she wasn't looking, the rolled eyes, the jutted chin. Neither did he miss the way Brian looked at Gretchen lately – a much different kind of look, a tender sort of gaze that lit up his whole face whenever he watched Gretchen at work.

He was doing it right then, staring across the table at Gretchen with a little smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, as she babbled something about planting a garden. “I don’t know if there’s enough time now,” she was saying, “but it’s something we should definitely plan for. We have to be able to grow our own food, for when the canned stuff runs out. Do any of you know much about gardening?”

AJ snorted out loud as he looked over at Howie, picturing him the way he’d first met him, in an expensive suit and silk tie. Even now, he couldn’t picture the former businessman in anything resembling gardening attire, though he snickered to himself at the thought of the little Latino wearing a big straw hat and overalls, spreading manure in the hot sun.

“Is something funny, AJ?”

At that, AJ just laughed harder. It was so obvious that Gretchen had been a teacher in her former life. All she had to do was use that voice and give him that look, with her eyebrows raised, and he could see her in the classroom, in a polka-dotted dress, scolding some poor kid whose dog ate his homework. If she was going to use the teacher voice on him, he was going to play the smartass student. “Not at all,” he replied smoothly. “It’s a good idea, Gretch. I dunno how much good I’ll be gettin’ down and dirty on this leg, but I do know how to work a hoe.” He flashed her a devilish smirk, waiting for her to get the pun.

She got it, alright, and gave him the other teacher look, the disapproving one with the knitted brow, her eyes darting in Gabby’s direction. He glanced over at the kid; she was staring down at the table, oblivious. He doubted she’d even been listening.

“I’ve got a bit of a green thumb,” Brian put in, quick to ease the tension. “I can help you with the garden.”

Gretchen smiled at him in gratitude, her forehead smoothing out. “Really? Great! I can grow a mean bean plant in a styrofoam cup, but I’ve never tried a whole garden.”

“Leighanne and I had a garden,” Brian said, and AJ noticed that he smiled as he spoke of his wife, instead of looking sad. It was a sign of time gone by, wounds that had started to heal. He hoped Gabby would reach the same place of acceptance someday, just as he hoped to heal himself. “We grew tomatoes and beans and different greens – lettuce and spinach and that sort of stuff. Good salad fixin’s.” Brian grinned wider, looking and sounding every bit the good ol’ country boy he was, and the way Gretchen beamed back at him was almost sickening... though in a sickeningly sweet way.

I’m going soft here, thought AJ, wrinkling his nose at them. I need to get my ass outta this chair and shoot some zombies soon.

It was getting harder and harder to be wheelchair-bound. At first, his leg had hurt so bad that he hadn't really minded sitting or lying around all day, but now that he was on the mend, it had become much more frustrating. The wound on his shin where the bones had broken through the skin had finally healed over, though he would always have an ugly scar there, and the threat of infection seemed to have passed. Now their worry was that the broken bones beneath the skin wouldn't fuse together the right way. His leg was kept stiffly splinted, unable to bend, let alone bear weight. Though he wasn't in agony anymore, it still throbbed constantly, and he worried he would never be able to walk right again. Still, he longed to be back on his feet.

He felt so worthless in the wheelchair, unable to do much of anything except stand – or rather, sit – guard while the others worked on the wall. He wasn't even very good at that. If he hadn't nodded off that day, he might have spotted the zombies sooner, and Jo would still be alive. He felt guilty about that, though not nearly as guilty as he knew Gabby felt.

“Can I be excused?” the teen mumbled, standing up abruptly in the midst of this conversation about gardening.

Gretchen looked over at her plate. She had really just pushed the food around on it, but she'd done a good job of making it look like she'd eaten some. “Okay,” Gretchen said, nodding. AJ was proud of her for not saying, “You mean, *may* I be excused?”

Gabby shoved in her chair and slouched off without another word. After a few seconds, they heard her bedroom door close. No click of the lock followed – Howie had taken it off, the day after Jo's death. That had been AJ's bright idea; he remembered his own dark depression, following his beloved grandmother's death, and knew how dramatic teenage girls could be. It didn't seem wise to let Gabby mourn alone behind a locked door.

After she was gone, the others went on making plans for a garden – where they would put it, what they would plant, which kind of crops would grow best in which season, and so on. AJ quickly grew bored of the conversation and decided to spice it up a little. “You know, I bet we could grow some good weed in this garden.” This comment earned him three dirty looks, which only inspired him to keep going. “The Florida climate's just about perfect for a cannabis crop,” he added, smirking. “Not that I'm an expert – smoked it, never grown it – but maybe Nick can give us some advice when he gets back. He seems like the kind of kid that would know a thing or two about pot.”

As soon as Nick's name was mentioned, the looks changed. AJ watched their faces fall and didn't miss the wary glances they gave each other. He knew what they were thinking: that he was delusional for believing Nick – and Kevin and Riley – would come back. He remembered thinking the same thing about

Gretchen whenever she talked about finding her husband. It had been over a month since the other group had left. With each passing day, the odds of their survival grew slimmer, and the hope for their return dwindled further.

Deep down, AJ knew something must have happened to them – the plane had crashed; the zombies had swarmed them – but on the surface, he maintained a certain level of denial, refusing to acknowledge this grim reality. He hadn't been praying for their return, like he knew the others had, because he didn't believe in prayer, but he was somewhat surprised at how hard he'd been hoping, at how much he'd come to care. Kevin was a warrior, strong and resourceful. Nick was a goofball, but a good fighter and a hell of a lot of fun. Riley was a badass bitch, in the best sense of the word. It was hard to accept that any of them could have fallen to the undead, and it hurt worse than his leg to think he would never see them again. He tried not to think about it.

But he'd opened a can of worms that night, because Gretchen said, "God, I hope they do come back. Do you think there's still a chance?"

"There's always a chance," Brian said firmly, even though his eyes told a different story. "Miracles happen."

Howie didn't say anything. His silence told AJ that he, too, believed they were goners.

AJ wished he hadn't brought it up.

"I'm gonna go check on Gabs," he announced suddenly, pushing his wheelchair back from the table. It had been awhile since she'd left, and he hadn't heard a sound from her room. That was better than the sobbing they'd had to listen to for days after Jo died, but the sometimes the silence unnerved him, too. Maybe it was just due to the depressing turn the conversation had taken, but he felt a sick sort of churning sensation in the pit of his stomach that had nothing to do with what Gretchen had served them for dinner. He was anxious to get away from the others for a few minutes and make sure Gabby was okay.

"Okay. We'll start clearing the table," said Brian, volunteering himself and Howie for clean-up duty. "Thanks for making dinner, Gretch; it was great."

Suck-up, thought AJ, smirking, as he wheeled himself into the hallway. Dinner had sucked, as most of their meals did these days. They no longer had fresh food, and even the frozen stuff was now freezer-burnt and disgusting. Everything they ate came from a can or a box – dried, processed shit that could be mixed with water and heated up. He had to admit, Gretchen's idea for the garden was a good one, though he wasn't going to kiss her ass like Brian did.

He rolled away from the sounds of plates being scraped and rinsed and stacked, stopping outside Gabby's closed door. There was silence on the other side. He paused for a second to listen, then reached out and knocked.

"Go away," was Gabby's muffled response.

"Make me," AJ retorted, turning the knob and pushing the door open anyway. He'd only meant to tease her, but the sight that awaited him was anything but funny.

Gabby sat on the edge of her bed, her back to the door. Her right hand was raised to the side of her head. In it, she held a gun.

He froze, and so did she. He saw her shoulders stiffen and her spine go rigid, but she didn't move, didn't lower the pistol. Its barrel pressed into her temple. Her finger hovered near the trigger.

AJ's mind raced, though he sat still in his chair. His instinct was to rush at her and make a mad grab for the gun, but he knew he'd never get there in time. If he spooked her, she might react and pull the trigger by accident. He would have to take it slow, give her time to think things through, and buy himself some time, as well.

"You're doing it all wrong," he said, as casually as he could. Gabby didn't react, but he thought he saw her head twitch just a little to the side. She was listening. "If you shoot yourself in the side of the head, you're only gonna blow half your brains out. You can live with half a brain, you know. People did it all the time in the olden days, when they used to perform lobotomies. It's not much of a life, I'm sure, but still, alive is alive. If you really want to kill yourself, you have to take out the brain stem. That's the part of your brain that controls all the vital stuff – heartbeat, breathing, and so on. If you want my advice, go through the mouth – direct path to the base of your skull."

AJ had seen enough shrinks to know how reverse psychology worked. Gabby was a smart kid, but she was still just a kid. He could psych her out, he thought, by egging her on. Stall her, he hoped, by rambling long enough to make her realize this wasn't really what she wanted.

"I doubt you'll even taste the gunpowder," he went on. "As soon as you pull that trigger, the bullet will rip through the back of your throat and explode out the back of your head so fast, you won't even know what hit you. Just make sure you hold the gun straight. It might help to aim down a little, instead of up, so you don't miss. God, that would hurt like hell if you did. So keep that hand steady."

As soon as he said it, he could see her hand start to shake. She lowered her trigger finger, gripping the barrel with her whole fist. Her knuckles were white from clenching it so tightly. He could tell he was getting to her. What else could

he say that would get her to put down the gun?

“I’m just glad your mom won’t have to see the aftermath of this – well, unless you believe what Brian does, that she’s up in Heaven watching you right now. Your mom was pretty religious, too, wasn’t she? Well, anyhow... at least she won’t have to scrape her daughter’s brains off the wall, or sweep up the skull fragments from the floor. I guess that’ll be Gretchen’s job. But you don’t care about that, do you? Gretchen’s annoying, isn’t she, trying to act like your mom? This is a good way to get back at her. Just think of how bad she’ll feel when she sees what you’ve done.”

He paused, watching Gabby closely. Her whole body was shaking now, and her arm seemed to have sagged with the weight of holding up the gun. He had almost broken her.

“Hey, did you write a note or anything in your journal?” he asked. “If you didn’t, it might be a good idea to take a few minutes and jot something down. It’d be a nice gesture, anyway, for the people here who care about you. They’ll want to try and understand what was going through your head, you know, before the bullet did.”

That did it. A strangled little sob, quickly stifled, slipped from the back of Gabby’s throat, and she dropped the gun onto the mattress as she whipped her head around to face AJ. Her eyes were full of tears, but they flashed angrily as she cried, “How could they understand?! No one understands!”

“No one understands?” AJ repeated scornfully. “Who in the hell do you think *doesn’t* understand? *Everyone* here understands, kid! We’ve *all* lost our families.”

“Well, you didn’t shoot your own mom!”

“No, but Brian killed his wife and kids. Nick had to beat down his baby brother.”

“They were zombies!”

“So? You think that made it any less traumatizing? Think again, Gabby. We’ve all been through hell here.”

Gabby hung her head, her whole body seeming to deflate as the fight went out of her. She slumped over sideways onto the bed, sobbing openly now.

Finally, AJ dared to move closer. He wheeled his chair slowly around the foot of the bed to the other side and, when she wasn’t looking, swept the gun out of her reach. “I know it sucks, kid,” he offered, reaching out to touch her shoulder. “I know it hurts like hell. It’s gonna hurt, for a long time, but eventually, the pain will get better, even if it never completely goes away. Life will get better.”

“How do you know?” she mumbled, her face buried in the bedspread.

“Cause I’ve been there,” he said simply. In his mind’s eye, he could see himself in the bathtub, his arms floating at his sides, palms up. He watched as the blood poured from the deep gashes in his wrists, dyeing the bathwater pink. It reminded him of washing his paintbrushes, watching red paint swirl down the drain. His life was headed the same way – down the drain. He could feel it leaving him, drop by crimson drop, and he marveled over the sense of calm he felt as it did. He slid lower into the water, until it was up to his neck, and tipped his head back. The faint, shivery feeling vanished, as the warm water wrapped around him like a blanket. He was so tired, but soon he would be able to sleep. He closed his eyes. His ears were underwater now, and he could hear his heart thumping crazily, pumping more of his blood into the tub with every beat. Soon, there would be nothing left, and it would stop, and he would just slip away...

Except that he hadn’t slipped away for good. His mother had come over to check on him, using the spare key he’d given her to get in, and pulled his naked, lifeless body out of the tub. He’d woken up in the hospital, where he’d been pumped full of blood and placed on a suicide hold until he could convince everyone he wasn’t going to try to off himself again the minute they discharged him. Remembering those dark days, he looked down at Gabby and added, “I tried to kill myself last year, for reasons that seem ridiculous compared to what you’re going through now.”

Gabby lifted her tearstained face from the bedspread to look up at him in surprise. “Really?” she asked, sniffing. “Why?”

He shook his head. “Drugs. Depression. Dumb shit. Doesn’t matter, really. I got drunk and slit my wrists. They had to replace half my blood volume to resuscitate me.” She stared in morbid curiosity as he showed her the long, thin scars on his forearms, cleverly camouflaged by his collage of tattoos. “At the time, I wished they’d just let me die. And you know something? It wasn’t until the rest of the world died that I was glad I didn’t. It took the fucking zombie apocalypse to make me appreciate being alive. But I do now. I’ve never felt more alive. For the first time in my life, I feel like I have a purpose in this fucked-up world. And so do you, Gabby.”

She turned her head away from him again. “No I don’t. You guys don’t need me here.”

“Yeah we do. Now more than ever. The other group’s gone. Your mom’s dead. I’m a fuckin’ gimp. Without you, it’s just Brian, Howie, and Gretchen. You think the three of them can keep this place going by themselves?” He snorted derisively. “Gretchen can plant her little garden, but have you *seen* her try to shoot a gun? And Howie... ha! You’re a way better shot than Howie! As for

Brian... well, it's a bad sign when the only capable fighter we've got is a preacher. Next to him, you're the best shot on base. Trust me, kid, we need you."

Gabby sniffled again and said nothing.

"I know it's not gonna be easy," AJ added, "but we need you to be strong. I'm sure your mom would want that, too. She wouldn't want you to give up. She'd want you to keep surviving."

To his surprise, Gabby looked up and nodded. "That was the last thing she said to me," she told him, her eyes refilling with fresh tears. "She said, 'Be strong, and survive.'"

Thank you, Jo, thought AJ. To Gabby, he said, "Then what are you doing in here with a gun to your head? Listen to your mom, Gabby. Even if you don't listen to me or Gretchen or anyone else, listen to her. She was a smart lady. She always knew best. Keep her strength and spirit alive inside you, until you can pass it on to someone else."

She nodded again. "Okay..." she agreed, in a small voice.

He picked up the gun and placed it in his lap, backing away from the bed.

Watching him, Gabby asked, "Are you going to tell them?"

AJ shrugged. "Do you want me to?"

She shook her head quickly.

"Then I won't. But you keep this door open. And no more guns for awhile, okay?" She nodded. "And if you feel this bad again, come and talk to me. Trust me, kid; I've felt like putting a bullet in my brain plenty of times, especially since busting my leg. We can get through it together, alright?"

Gabby nodded one more time. "Thanks," she whispered. That was all she said, but it was all that was needed right then. AJ knew she wouldn't try it again. He had a feeling she wouldn't have done it in the first place, but he would never tell her that.

"Sure, kid," he replied shortly and wheeled himself out of the room, leaving her to think about the things he'd said. She was going to be one screwed up kid, but kids were resilient, and Gabby was strong, maybe stronger than she realized. She would go on surviving, and someday, she would be okay again. AJ had never been known for his optimism, but he felt reasonably sure about that much.

Chapter 83

It's weird as fuck seeing the world go back to basics. If the zombies weren't here, I'd say this was exactly what the planet needed, though. I wonder if we'll make it back home okay. I wonder if any of the animals have been able to survive all the zombies. I hope they have; I've always been sort of an environmentalist. I love animals. I still miss Spunky.

(Insert big dramatic sigh here)

I miss everyone. AJ and the way he'd see shit no one else did, and the epic way we'd kill zombies together. I miss Brian's random sense of humor, Gretchen's home cooking. I miss Jo's motherly ways – something my own mother never had – and I miss Gabby and the innocence she brought with her. I even miss Howie – once he let his guard down, he turned out to be a cool fucking dude.

I wanna go home and see them again.

This whole road trip thing is kinda cool, though. It's weird seeing no other moving cars, but there's plenty of walking dead. I don't see many animals; I think they just know when to hide. I'd like to think so. But we're always on the road now. Trying to go home again. New age pioneers! I feel like we're reliving the history books.

Only, ya know, with a car.

And zombies.

Song Quote of the Entry – JOURNEY!

*“Wheel in the sky keeps on turnin'
I don't know where I'll be tomorrow
Wheel in the sky keeps on turnin'”*

*I've been trying to make it home
Got to make it before too long
I can't take this very much longer
I'm stranded in the sleet and rain
Don't think I'm ever gonna make it home again
The mornin' sun is risin'
It's kissing the day...”*

- Journey, “Wheel In The Sky”

Wednesday, October 31, 2012

Week Twenty Eight

“Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo roam... where the deer and the antelopes plaaaaay...”

“Give it a rest.”

“Where seldom is heaaaard a discouraging word... and the skies are not cloudy all daaaaay...”

“Nick...”

“HOOOOOOOOOOME! Home on the range! Where the deeeeeer and the antelopes plaaaaaay! Where seldom is heard... a discouraging word...”

“Enough, Nick!” he could hear Kevin yell from up front. It was his turn to drive; they were going in eight-hour shifts. Already, they’d had to start siphoning gas from nearby cars along the road. With the lack of any true human life, gas wasn’t hard to find. It was keeping the zombies at bay while they got it that was the problem.

Nick huffed and grinned from where he sat at the end of the kitchenette. “Come on! We’re traveling the country! It’s the time to be going all country, y’all! We’re, like, in the Middle East now.”

Riley chuckled as she started fixing herself something to eat. “You mean we’re in the Midwest.”

“Yeah, that.” He looked up at her. “Oooh, whatcha got cookin’, good lookin’?”

“You are such a dork.”

“But I’m *your* dork.” He reached out and pulled her into his lap. Chef Boyardee Ravioli was tossed onto the floor as she dropped the opened can. The red sauce quickly began to run everywhere, with aide from the movement of the vehicle. She swatted him upside the head.

“You’re messy,” he teased.

“It was your fault, brat.”

“You love me,” he joked. She looked at him oddly, before recovering within seconds.

“You’re cleaning that up.”

He smiled, keeping his arms wrapped around her. There were plenty of things wrong with their current situation. Bleak was a mild description of their chances. Deep down, Nick knew that. But on the outside, and consciously, he chose to focus on the positive. It was the way he'd used to escape any other trial of his life before, and it was an old skill that he kept around now. Optimism was how he kept his sanity.

There was also plenty to be happy about. Their new mode of transportation was, in his opinion, far better than the airplane. He loved the tour bus and the luxuries that came with it. They were alive, which meant they could fight. Kevin was doing fine, and his reflexes were now as quick as ever.

He put his head against Riley's, his nose in her hair. He smiled. Things could be worse, after all.

"What are you doing?" she asked, pulling up just slightly, so that she could glance back at him.

"Smelling your hair."

Her brow quirked. "And can I ask why? It probably stinks." The corners of her mouth curved downward as she wrinkled her nose. "I miss having real showers."

"It doesn't stink, and I like your smell."

"Weirdo."

"So where are we, anyway?" Nick asked innocently.

"Somewhere in the Middle East, remember? Hell, maybe we're in Iraq."

"Ha-ha, but no, seriously."

Riley stood, walking over to the sink. She sidestepped the mess carefully, subtly reminding him he'd better be the one to clean it up. She leaned over and peered out the window to try and get a better glimpse of the road outside. Nick smirked as he got a clear view of her behind. His eyes focused on their newfound target as he enjoyed the new scenery. Her jeans lowered a bit on her hips, showing skin in the gap between the pants and snug sweater she wore. The weather was cooling off quickly, making him miss the warm temperatures of home.

"So?"

"Um... I think we're in Nebraska." It was a little farther north than their route called for, but they were having to take some detours because some roads were simply too clogged up to navigate.

Nick pondered that for a moment, before rising to run to the front of the bus. It had just hit him what day this was, and the irony of it didn't get past him in the slightest. He could hear Riley laugh as she looked for a towel. He made a mental note to make it up to her later, since she had decided to clean. Otherwise, he was sure she was going to get him back for it later. It was the nature of their relationship, and he enjoyed every minute of it. He loved the way she teased him, tested him; it made everything fun and light in a world of darkness.

"Kevin! Kevy-Kev!"

"What did you just call me?" Kevin glanced over, his thick brows bunching together so much, they appeared to be one large caterpillar, living happily above his sharp, green eyes. Nick snickered at the thought.

"Dude, we should stop somewhere tonight, try to all rest. And, well, ya know, bond or something."

"You don't think this road trip is bonding?"

"It is, but we should bond more." He looked out the front window. "Holy shit, that's Chimney Rock!"

They were just driving by a large rock formation, otherwise surrounded by nothing but flat, grassy fields. The sun was beginning to set, casting the sky in a mix of orange, blue, and pinkish hues. It reminded him of those boring scenic calendars a lot of places used to give away for free. The mountain rose, like any other, up to a pyramid point, but then continued straight up, giving the distinct appearance of a house chimney. Riley walked up beside him and glanced down at the map. He could see her checking to see if he was right. Her eyes shifted back over to Nick with some surprise.

"How'd you know that?" Kevin asked.

"Dude, didn't you ever play *Oregon Trail*?" He snickered. "You always go past Chimney Rock. Hey, we can try and go hunting! We can go shoot buffalo or something."

"You would know a landmark from a computer game. And hunting? Nick, the only thing that would end up being hunted around here is us."

"Aww..." Nick snickered again. "It's a shame Howie isn't with us. I bet he'd be the one who'd get dysentery."

Once the chuckles died down, everyone grew quiet at the thoughts of those they had left behind. What if they came back to an empty base? What if everyone had left, or worse, what if everyone was dead? They would all blame themselves for having left in the first place, because they couldn't see it happening if they hadn't

tried to fly across the country. None of them voiced their dark thoughts. Nick wouldn't even admit to having them to the other two. Someone had to keep the chipper outlook in their little group, and he knew the job was his.

Finally, it was Riley who broke the silence. "What is dysentery, anyway? I never tried to look it up."

"Intestinal infection, causes really bad and bloody diarrhea."

The two blondes stared at Kevin. Nick shook his head. "How is it you know *everything*?"

The former military man ignored him, focusing on the road.

"Anywaaaaay..." Nick continued, leaning forward so that his head was almost on Kevin's shoulder. "Let's stop for the night. It's Halloween! We can have our own little camp-out, tell scary stories..."

His girlfriend laughed. "Our lives aren't enough horror for you?"

"Pleaaaaaaase?" he pleaded, after sticking his tongue out at her.

Kevin sighed, as the three of them gazed out the windshield. Nick watched his eyes shift downwards and followed his line of vision. The needle of the gas gauge was flirting dangerously with the empty end. A sign advertising an RV park flashed by them as he drove. Their gazes went back and forth between the gauge and the road. Their eyes met.

"We can stop for the night. That's it."

Nick beamed. "Yes!"

"It's only because I don't want anyone siphoning gas after dark; it's asking for trouble."

"I know."

Riley glanced up at him as Kevin pulled off at the next exit to drive to the RV Park.

Nick looked around, throwing open the door and jumping off once they parked the vehicle. He immediately shivered, feeling the brisk cold of October out there on the flat Nebraskan plains. Chimney Rock could still be seen in the distance, and for a moment, Nick was able to picture himself here back then. The roads would be dirt and as open as could be, the world an unknown adventure, the fight for survival not too different from the one they were currently battling. Nothing was guaranteed back then, just as it was now for them. He wondered if any of his

ancestors had been pioneers. He wasn't sure himself, knowing little to nothing about his family history. Not that it mattered anymore. He was just curious.

A loud moan snapped him back to the present. A slumping zombie, wearing ripped flannel, jeans, and cowboy boots, was approaching him. It was only feet away - too close for comfort. It was harder to see them coming as the night settled upon them. He whipped out a handgun Kevin had picked up during a scavenging hunt. Nick smirked, having the sudden thought to try something. The gun spun in his hands, western-style, before he fired it. The shot was wild because of his antics, hitting the creature in the shoulder. It stumbled back from the blow, but moaned again in response as it came his way. Nick shot again.

The gun clicked hollowly. It needed a reload. Horrified, he struggled to reload it as quickly as possible as he backed up, trying to stay out of the zombie's reach. It moaned again, reminding Nick he needed to put it down before he was killed, or at least before it attracted more. Footsteps could be heard coming down the steps off the bus. His hands shook uncharacteristically as he tried to load the bullets into the chamber.

The sound of a gun firing followed.

Nick turned to see Kevin standing just behind him, blowing the tip of the muzzle of his gun. He suddenly felt like he was looking at John Wayne or something. He half-expected to see a cowboy hat materialize on top of his head, just so Kevin could tilt it down like they did in the movies. "Hey, Nick?"

"Yeah?"

"Do me a favor."

"Sure."

"Leave the cowboy tricks to me."

Chapter 84

As part of my clerical work, I remember counseling widows and widowers who were concerned about remarrying, or even dating again. It's an inevitable part of the grief process, to feel guilt over "replacing" your spouse with a new relationship. But the ones who got over that hurdle were the ones who ended up the happiest, at least in my experience.

I know I tried to put myself in their shoes and wondered what I would do in their situation, but in all honesty, I don't remember ever talking to Leighanne

about it. Stupid as it sounds, coming from a guy who's officiated funeral services for people of all ages, I guess I just never expected to find myself in that situation, at least not for a long, long time. Leighanne and I were the kind of couple that was going to grow old together; I was just sure of that. Even if she went first, I assumed I wouldn't be far behind her.

But here I am, a widower at the age of thirty-three. Who knows how much longer I'll be able to survive in this world, but I do know one thing: I'm not ready to throw in the towel just yet. Even if I was, I never would; it wouldn't be fair to the others. As far as we know, we may be the only ones, the only eight survivors of the zombie apocalypse – assuming Kevin, Nick, and Riley are still alive out there somewhere. If they aren't, then there's just five of us left. We have to do all we can to guarantee our survival.

I know Leighanne would want me to go on with my life, to make the most of this precious gift I've been given and the time I have left. I just feel so torn over the thought of moving on without her...

Friday, November 2, 2012

Week Twenty-Eight

It was after midnight and raining hard in Florida. From his vantage point on the back porch, Brian looked out into the storm and wondered if it would ever stop.

He thought the rainy season was supposed to be over, even if the hurricane season wasn't, but it had been damp and dreary for days. Work on the wall had been delayed, and instead, he and the others been cooped up inside their houses, restless and bored. It was actually a relief to be sitting outside, under the roof of the porch, keeping watch. The rain had a way of making the air smell fresh again, as if it had washed away the stink of the undead. It was only once it stopped that they would smell the stench of rotting flesh coming off the bloated bodies that roamed outside their walls. In the long run, the rain made it worse – wet corpses stunk even more than dry ones did.

Maybe it won't stop this time, thought Brian. Maybe the rain would fall for forty days and forty nights, as it had in Noah's time, when the Lord had flooded the earth to rid it of the wickedness of humankind. Maybe, this time, God intended it to wash away all that was unclean and undead, to rid the world of its walking corpses. Unless, of course, the plague of zombies had been sent as a warning, a punishment, like the ten plagues of Egypt. Brian swallowed hard; the mere thought left a bad taste in his mouth.

This must have been what Noah felt like on the ark, waiting for the flood waters to recede, putting his faith in the Lord who had chosen him that everything would turn out all right in the end. Brian wished he had Noah's faith, but his had been shaken. He felt anxious, alternating between the belief that Kevin, Nick, and

Riley were still alive, and the knowledge that they were probably never coming back. The tug of emotions made him feel trapped. How long was he supposed to wait there, praying for their return, before he gave up hope?

I wish you'd give me a sign, Father, he spoke silently, directing his thoughts toward Heaven. He clasped his hands and bowed his head, pleading for guidance. *I don't know what to do or how to feel. If they're gone, I just want to know for sure, so I don't have to keep on wondering.*

Then a light appeared over his head. He felt its warmth as he was cast into its golden aura, and he gazed up in surprise.

It was only the porch light.

The screen door opened, and Gretchen stepped out onto the porch. "Still awake out here?" she asked softly.

"Still awake," he responded, smiling at her. He scooted over to one side of the porch swing and patted the spot next to him. She came over and sat down. "Still raining," he added, opening up the blanket he'd wrapped himself in and throwing one side over her shoulders.

She snuggled up closer to him, drawing the blanket tighter around herself. "I don't mind it, though," she replied. "I've always loved rain."

"What is it with you women and rain?" he asked, smiling over at her again. He remembered Riley saying the same thing. He wondered if it was raining where they were. He could just imagine her playing outside in the rain, twirling around with Nick while Kevin yelled at the two of them to get back inside before the zombies smelled them. Then the vision changed, and instead, he saw her lying in a puddle, lifeless and cold, her face half buried in mud. He felt a sick, sinking feeling, and the smile faded from his lips.

Gretchen laughed, unaware of his mental torment. "I dunno. There's just something sort of peaceful and romantic about a nice, light rain like this. It makes me want to curl up in bed with a good book... or a good man."

Caught off-guard by this last comment, Brian looked over at her in surprise. A little smile was playing on her lips. Was she just thinking of her husband, he wondered, or hinting at something different? He was tempted to find out, to lean over and kiss those lips and see how she responded, but when she turned her face toward him, he lost his nerve.

"And you're volunteering to sit out here in the cold instead," he said, chuckling to cover up the momentary awkwardness. "You don't have to, you know."

He saw the smile slip from her face, but in an instant, it was back, tighter-looking this time. “I told you, I don’t mind. I like being a night owl.”

With so few of them left on the base, they had given up on guarding the main gate. Instead, they’d started sleeping in shifts again, leaving someone to sit outside at all hours of the night, just in case. Since Jo’s death, they had been more cautious than ever about protecting each other. They kept watch in three-hour blocks, giving everyone a chance to get some sleep. Brian took the first watch, from nine o’clock at night until midnight. Gretchen relieved him, staying up until three. Then AJ, who insisted he was used to sleeping during the day anyway, rolled his wheelchair out onto the porch of the house he shared with Howie and now Gabby to keep a look out until six a.m., at which point Howie, the early bird, got up to stand guard while the others slept in. It was a solid arrangement that made them all feel safer and sleep more soundly. Still, Brian always hated to leave Gretchen in the middle of the night. He had a hard time falling asleep, knowing she was sitting outside alone.

Over the past six months, he had come to care deeply for Gretchen, maybe more than he wanted to admit. He felt closer to her than anyone else on the base, closer than he’d expected to feel, so soon after losing Leighanne. The pain was no longer raw, but it was still there, beneath the surface, and it felt like a betrayal to even consider feeling more than friendship towards Gretchen. But she reminded him of Leighanne, in a way.

On the surface, they were completely different. Leighanne had been blonde and beautiful, with a warm, bubbly personality to match her cheerleader physique. Gretchen was pretty, but plain, with a quiet, more reserved disposition that seemed to fit her mousy brown hair and soft features. She resembled his late wife in other ways, though, through her sweet and caring nature. Leighanne had been the perfect Southern housewife and mother, putting her family first above all else. Gretchen was the same way. She was a nurturer, a natural fit for the matriarch role Jo had left behind. Brian was sure she had been a wonderful wife to Shawn and would make an excellent mother someday, if she ever got the chance. He admired these qualities about her, the same way he had loved them in Leighanne.

Lately, he’d found himself fantasizing about a future with Gretchen, but he was afraid to make a move on a woman who was just beginning to regard herself as a widow, and he mentally scolded himself for even considering it. He couldn’t imagine Gretchen was anywhere near ready for another relationship. He wasn’t sure he was, either. It was just that he had a lot of time to think on the base, about what had been, and what could be. He got lonely, too... especially at night.

“You should get some sleep. Don’t worry about me.” Gretchen was still smiling at him, but he caught the hint. He wasn’t ready to go inside yet, but he knew she was right. He got up slowly, his bones cracking as he stretched out his arms and legs, stiff from sitting still so long. His body wasn’t as young as he liked to think; it needed a good night’s sleep.

“Wake me up if you need anything,” he told Gretchen.

“I will. Goodnight, Brian.”

“Night, Gretch,” Brian replied and reluctantly went inside. He wandered upstairs to his bedroom, across the hall from the one Gretchen shared with Riley, where he undressed and crawled into bed.

Lying in the dark, he spoke to God for longer than usual, praying for guidance with the issues weighing on his mind – issues of faith and doubt, of life and death, of loss and love. Gretchen’s shift was half over before the rain outside finally lulled Brian to sleep.

By the time he woke up, the rain had stopped. The sun was shining. The house was quiet, though Brian could hear the steady sound of hammering coming from outside. He frowned and checked the time on the clock by his bed. It was just after nine. Had they started working on the wall already?

Brian got out of bed and poked his head into the hall. Gretchen’s door was closed, which meant she was still asleep. He threw on some clothes and tiptoed past her room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. There, he started a pot of coffee and helped himself to a stale breakfast bar from their stash of food. Gnawing absently on it, he left the coffee to brew and wandered outside.

The ground was damp from all the rain; it squished under his shoes as he tramped across the grass to the house next door. Howie and Gabby were out on their back porch, bent over some sort of project. Howie was hammering some boards, while Gabby sat on the steps nearby, hunched over something in her lap. “Good morning!” Brian called as he approached, not wanting to startle them. “What are y’all workin’ on?”

Gabby glanced up just briefly, then returned her attention to the greenery in her lap – palm fronds, Brian realized. She was braiding them. “It’s Day of the Dead,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’m making an altar, and Howie’s making a cross. You know, to honor my mom.”

“Oh.” Brian didn’t know much about Day of the Dead, except that it was a Mexican holiday to honor the deceased, similar to the Catholic All Souls’ Day. As a Baptist, Brian had never celebrated either, but it was refreshing to see the two of them so interested in something. “That’s a real nice idea.”

He watched Howie pound nails into a pair of two-by-fours, fashioning them into a simple cross, and marveled over how far he had come since they’d first met.

The old Howard never would have rolled up his shirtsleeves and dug into a hands-on project like this, especially one that required manual labor.

And Gabby... She had been so distant and withdrawn lately that it was a relief to find her doing something creative. Like everyone, Brian been concerned about her, but in the last week, she had started to come around. Gretchen had invited her to move into their house, but Gabby had refused, insisting she would rather stay with AJ. She had never seemed particularly close to him before, at least not when Brian and Gretchen had left for Atlanta, but all of a sudden, she hung around him constantly. Brian supposed it was a good thing for AJ to have some company while his leg healed, but he worried a little about the effect the former addict would have on the grieving young girl. AJ was harmless, but he still cursed like a sailor and had an awfully warped view of the world. Poor Gabby was already jaded enough, without his influence. But at least she was talking to someone. She sure didn't say much to Gretchen or him these days.

"Can I do anything to help?" he asked, wanting to show his support.

"You can make a second cross," Howie suggested. "I thought Kayleigh should have one, too."

"That's a great idea," Brian agreed, the wheels in his head starting to spin. "You know, if it's okay with y'all, I'd like to make a few more, for my wife and daughters. Maybe we could make them for all our loved ones and start a little memorial garden." He and Gretchen had been talking about planting a vegetable garden, but why not a flower garden, too? He could picture it already: a small cemetery, with colorful flowers growing among the rows of crosses honoring their families and friends.

Howie nodded, a smile spreading across his face. "I like that. I'll make one for my son. Maybe my ex-wife, too."

"I'm sure Gretchen will want one for Shawn. And..." He trailed off without saying it, but in his head, he finished, *if Kevin, Nick, and Riley don't come back, we can make crosses for them, too.*

"And my dad," Gabby added, jumping in where he'd left off.

"Of course," Brian said. "I'll get started."

He squatted down next to Howie, retrieving a second hammer from the large toolbox Howie had brought out and setting the box of nails between them. Then he pulled two more boards toward him and assembled a cross identical to the one Howie had made. For almost an hour, they pounded away, until they had laid twelve crosses out on the lawn. By then, Gabby had formed her braided palms into an arch. "For the top of the altar," she said, nodding at it in grim-faced

satisfaction. “It’s supposed to have flowers on it, though. Marigolds. We got any of those around here?”

Brian thought over the landscaping he’d seen around the base. Most of it had wilted away in the hot summer; with the undead as their main priority, they hadn’t been able to keep up with its maintenance. “I don’t think so,” he told Gabby regretfully.

“I can show you how to make them out of tissue paper,” said a new voice. Brian turned, smiling, to see Gretchen striding across the lawn. “What’s all this?” she asked, smiling back as she looked over their handiwork. When Gabby explained, she nodded knowingly. “I’ve done Day of the Dead with my students before. I’m a pro at paper marigolds. Let’s walk up to the Arts and Crafts Center and see if they have orange and yellow tissue. And yarn; we’ll need yarn. Whaddya say?”

Brian had seen Gabby reject Gretchen’s attempts at being motherly – or teacherly – before and braced himself for her reaction, but he was surprised when Gabby just nodded and replied, “Okay.” She set her arch aside and stood up, brushing off the seat of her pants.

Gretchen turned to Brian and smiled. “We’ll be back,” she said simply, and off she and Gabby went. Brian was impressed with how well she had handled that and found himself thinking again of what a good mother she would make.

With the girls gone, he and Howie decided to carve the names into the crosses, rather than paint them. “They’ll last longer that way,” Brian claimed. They would also take a lot longer, but that was okay. The hard work would make them more meaningful, worthier of their namesakes. He found a pair of knives suitable for the job, and he and Howie set to work carving. When AJ got up, he joined them, using his artistic touch to add little flourishes and flowery designs around the crudely carved names.

Gretchen and Gabby were gone a long time. Just when Brian was starting to worry that more zombies had found their way onto the base, they turned up, their arms laden with bags. “How many arts and crafts projects are you planning on doing?” joked Brian, eyeing the bulging bags.

“We’re going to be baking, too,” Gabby announced, showing him the contents of one of the bags. It contained baking ingredients – sugar, butter, evaporated milk, egg substitute, and things like that. “We’re making *pan de muerto* – bread of the dead.”

“Attempting to, anyway,” Gretchen added with a shrug. “I have no idea how it will turn out, with no fresh ingredients, but we’ll try and see.”

They went into the house to start baking the bread. Once they were inside, Howie said, “It’s nice to see Gabby in a good mood for once.”

AJ nodded. “She was in a pretty dark place last week,” he said, cryptically. “I’m glad she’s coming out of it.”

Brian agreed.

They continued carving while the girls worked in the kitchen. Once the bread was baking, Gretchen and Gabby joined them on the porch again, where Gretchen gave everyone a lesson on making tissue paper flowers. Before long, they had turned pieces of sunny-colored tissue into big, blooming marigolds, which they tied to Gabby’s palm arch with yarn. “It looks good,” Gabby said proudly, smiling for the first time in days.

She brought the arch into the house, and they watched her set it up on a small table, which she decorated with candles and some of her mother’s things. “This is the only picture I have of her here,” she murmured, clipping her mother’s hospital photo ID to the bottom of the arch, so that it hung in the center of the makeshift altar. Brian saw the tears in her dark eyes, so like Jo’s, and swallowed the lump that had risen in his throat.

“I know your mom would appreciate this,” he told Gabby.

She nodded. “We made an altar like this last year, for my dad,” she explained. “He was Mexican-American. It was tradition on his side of the family.”

“It’s a nice tradition,” Gretchen said.

And it was. Even though there was no good picture of Jo, even though the marigolds weren’t real, and even though the bread of the dead turned out to be a dense and doughy mess, it was a valiant effort, and it seemed to cheer Gabby up immensely.

That evening, with just an hour or so of daylight left, they carried the crosses to a large, grassy area near the chapel, which they had decided would be the perfect place to put their memorial garden, not only because of the spiritual connotation of the chapel, but because it was where they had spent so much time together in those first few weeks on the base. They dug holes in the ground to anchor the crosses in three neat rows of four. Jo’s cross was placed next to one for Luis, and included beside them were crosses for Gabby’s best friend, Makayla, and a boy named Colton whom she must have cared about. Kayleigh’s was put in a place of honor next to the cross that said, simply, *Spunky*. Next to it were two crosses Howie had carved with the names *Bartholomew Dorough* and *Breanna Collins-Dorough*. Gretchen planted Shawn’s cross at the end of the last row, where the wooden monuments for Brian’s family stood three across – *Brooke Lynn*, *Bonnie Leigh*, and *Leighanne Reena Littrell*.

After all the crosses were in place, they stood together, heads bowed in silent prayer for the loved ones they were remembering. Brian glanced up once and saw his wife's name next to Gretchen's husband's. He looked from Shawn's name to the grieving widow he had left behind. Gretchen was staring down at the grass, but he could see the teardrops clinging to her lashes. One of them had slid down her cheek and hung from her chin. He watched it fall to the ground and knew he had been right to hold back the night before. They both needed more time, time to grieve and time to heal. But one day, he thought, his eyes shifting back to the pair of crosses, they might be ready to move forward, together.

Having never met him, Brian couldn't speak for Shawn Elliott, but he knew in his heart that Leighanne would want that for him. She would want him to move on, to be happy in this otherwise hellish new world. Brian wasn't sure he could ever be truly happy without his family, but if there was anyone left on earth who could help fill the hole in his heart, he had a feeling it was the woman standing beside him.

Without a word, he reached out and offered her his hand. Gretchen took it, gave it a gentle squeeze, and together, they grieved, side by side and hand in hand.

Chapter 85

I hate when people use clichés. I always thought they were too cheesy. But I guess clichés are clichés for a reason.

So here it is...

The world may have become hell, but I don't think I've ever been happier.

Tuesday, November 6, 2012

Week Twenty-Nine

Riley tossed the last duffel bag down beside the door before glancing around the great, old, plantation-style house they'd decided to hide out in for the night. They had just arrived in St. Louis, Missouri, after being on the road for almost three weeks. She wondered if they were ever going to make it home.

She swung her shaggy, golden hair forward and pulled it free from its ponytail, causing the wet strands to cascade down past her shoulders. It was the weather that had caused them to finally give in and find some shelter for the night. It was getting harder and harder to drive in it, especially in their oversized tour bus. And they were in need of supplies yet again, which they would have to seek out before night finally fell. The wind howled with ferocity, slamming ice and rain

down upon the roof. The noise was deafening, but it drowned out the moans of the undead.

She shivered, soaked to the skin, as she closed the door behind her. She looked around for Nick, who was supposed to be trying to light the place up a bit. She could see candles and old-fashioned lanterns he must have found stashed away somewhere. Kevin had decided he would be the best one to run and scavenge for food while they set up.

“Nick?” she called, slowly making her way further into the house, with her rifle loaded and ready. The two of them had already cleared out the house, but she knew better than to ever be complacent. Anytime they had been before, it had only led to bad things for them. Her ears perked up to listen for any noise. She could hear nothing, except for the pounding of the storm outside.

“Niiiiick?”

A tap on her shoulder caused her to jump with shock. Her hands jerked instinctively, sending a shot firing up toward the ceiling. It rang out as it struck the chandelier. Glass shattered on impact, before the great, decorative piece shook and then fell. It crashed loudly and fantastically down to the floor, pieces scattering everywhere. Riley whirled around, breathing heavily, with her gun aimed at the face in her vision. She quickly lowered the gun and put the safety on. Nick stood before her, holding out a blanket, while trying his best to suppress his laughter and failing miserably. His normally fluffed-up hair was still wet and plastered down to his head.

“Jesus, you scared the shit out of me.”

He grinned. “At least you killed the mean chandelier.” He motioned to the mess on the other side of the room.

“I thought you were a zombie.”

“You always think I’m a zombie.” As she set the gun down, he walked behind her, wrapping the blanket gently over her shoulders. His lips met the bare skin of her neck with a feathery touch. She shivered again; this time, it had nothing to do with the cold. “Zombies are the dead ones...” He turned her back towards him. “...remember?”

Riley smiled a little, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, yeah... smartass.”

“How long do you think Kevin’ll take?”

She walked away to peer out the windows, before pulling each set of curtains closed. “Could be awhile. This weather’s a mess.”

“Yay! That’s good.” He ran over to her, picking her up and twirling her around. She laughed as he dropped her gently back down onto her feet, next to the small pile of bags. She opened one immediately, so that she could rummage for some dry clothes.

“You act like we’re never together.”

“Not alone...”

“No... not alone,” she murmured, continuing her rummaging through the bag, which held, as she quickly realized, all of their blankets. Riley tossed it aside and started looking through the next bag. Nick kneeled down next to her.

“I think these are my clothes,” he told her, pulling out a shirt and some jeans to toss towards her. “Here, wear these. I already changed.”

“I can find mine somewhere...”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. We need to get you dry. Last thing I need is to see you getting sick.”

She smiled at him as she took the clothes. Riley often tried to figure out what made them fit together so well. She always thought that they shouldn’t. They didn’t seem each other’s type, and if they had met in the world before, it seemed reasonable to believe they would never have worked as a couple. Yet, even though logic defied it, Riley thought maybe they would have. Stuff like this wasn’t supposed to be logical, or have reason to it. It just happened. She’d had several relationships in her life, before her career ambitions had chased everyone else away. None had felt like this, and sometimes, it scared her. Because nothing was guaranteed anymore. Anything, *anyone* she cherished, she could stand to lose. She’d been reminded of that once already, when Nick had his seizure at the base.

Right then, however, it brought a contentment that almost felt out of place. It was that feeling that caused her to say what came next. Nothing in particular spurred it. It was just a glance over at him. The way he smiled, the light that danced happily in his eyes.

“I love you.”

He stared at her for a moment, as the words sunk in. The two of them had been skipping around those three words a lot lately, she suspected. She knew she, herself, had been. He pulled her into his arms, the clothes dropping to the floor. His lips pressed against hers, and instinctively, her arms wrapped around him. It was a kiss of passion, deepening between them before she pulled away and their eyes met.

The half smile he gave her was soft and gentle. “I love you, too.”

This time, it was Riley who initiated the next kiss, her tongue exploring his mouth as his did the same inside hers. The kisses between them continued, becoming more frantic, as his hands snaked up under her still-drenched clothing. They found her hips, and he guided her backwards, until the two fell back onto the couch. He braced himself up as he continued kissing her, the passion growing each time.

Finally, he was able to snap her bra free, and her arms went up as he lifted that up, along with her blouse, and tossed it aside. Her hands grabbed his shirt and tugged it off of him. She looked at his well-defined chest, a result of all the zombie-killing he'd done since she had met him. The beer belly pooch he'd once had was just a memory. Her hands ran gently down his torso, before they fell to the zipper of his jeans. Nick was already sliding hers down her hips.

A part of her knew they should slow down. Her logical side would have asked him if he had any protection – pregnancy was a bigger risk now than it used to be. Her logical side had no voice right then, however. Passion was what ruled them. Both were too wrapped up in the moment to think of anyone or anything else but each other. The two were in their own world now. One where only each other existed. One where there was nothing but pure bliss.

The hellish world around them was forgotten.

She lay curled up in his arms, her body fitting perfectly beside his on the couch. She couldn't stop beaming. The two of them had dozed off afterwards, just content in each other's embrace. She could still hear the storm raving crazily outside.

Riley's gaze shifted back to Nick. He was still sleeping, but she could see the smile on his face. Her hand trailed along his arm, tracing the mural tattoo on his shoulder. Her eyes followed the lines of his body, the imperfections and the beauty. The various tattoos, like the word “KAOS” written down his spine, and the sun on his shoulder blade. She sighed contentedly, as she cuddled up against him again. In that moment, as she lay just reflecting on what had happened, everything before and everything now, she realized something.

Riley was happy. Blissfully, stupidly, unbelievably happy.

Of course, such peace couldn't last forever. The sound of a window shattering startled her, causing her to fall off the couch, bringing the blanket along for the ride. Nick immediately rose and looked around, confused. Moans could be heard from within the house, and Riley frantically searched for their guns. Nick jumped to his feet and was able to find his axe first. The timing was impeccable, as a

zombie came at him seconds later. Nick fought to keep it at bay, still stark nude as he tried to fight it off.

Riley found his handguns within the pile of discarded clothes and turned to see several more coming in through the broken window. Swallowing back her concern for Nick, she rushed forward, trying to take out the others. Two fell after several shots to the face, one of which went through the skull and into the head of the zombie behind it. She heard the sound of a skull cracking and knew Nick had been able to kill the one he'd been battling. They needed to block the window before more came in.

That moment of pause, the turn of her head, was the opening the zombies needed. There were too many, too close. One got a grip on her shoulder, and as she struggled, she felt another help the other. The two corpses forced her down to the ground. She stared into the blank, milky white eyes of the undead on top of her, as she tried to fight them off. She was able to kick one of them off of her. The other had too good of a grip on her. A gunshot and a thud followed. She couldn't see if the one that went down was the one she had kicked off, however. Her hair was yanked painfully forward, and she found herself getting closer to the gnashing jaws.

"Rye!" Nick screamed.

For a split second, Riley felt herself giving up. She knew what was about to happen. She knew she couldn't stop it this time. She closed her eyes. *Thank you, God, for giving me Nick before I die.*

Suddenly, the corpse fell flat against her body. There was no movement, and she opened her eyes. As she struggled to sit up under the dead weight, it was thrown off of her, and she could see the blade of the axe still stuck into the back of its skull. Nick stood above her with the broken handle in his hands. He smiled grimly as he tossed it aside and reached down to help her up, as gently as possible. The look of relief in his eyes was unsettling.

"I was killing off the others, and when I saw them start to pull you down..."

Trying to slow her breathing and calm herself, Riley forced a smile. "I'm alright; no worries."

He pulled her close, hugging her tightly. His face fit into the crook of her neck. "Don't you ever scare the shit out of me like that again."

She laughed, pulling away just enough to look up at him. "I didn't mean to."

"I thought you were going to die."

"So did I, to tell you the truth."

The door opened, and instinctively, both dove for their weapons. They aimed their guns, only to lower them quickly. Kevin stood there, staring at the two still-naked blondes. Riley felt herself flush deep red, and she went and hid behind Nick. Her head peeked out from around him.

“Do I even *want* to ask what happened?”

“No...” Riley said, laughing, as she bent down to pick up the blanket and wrapped it around herself and Nick. Kevin looked grateful that the two were no longer exposed. “Probably not.”

Her eyes met Nick’s, and at that moment, Riley knew she’d never love another person more.

Chapter 86

Everything’s getting harder.

Traveling ain’t easy anymore; we’re having to get more creative with the ways we get around. Fighting these things ain’t getting any easier either. There’s just as much danger, but we can’t always win. The odds are just too high in their favor, ya know? There’s been too many close calls...

It’s enough to drive a person crazy.

But I keep telling myself we’re gonna make it. I have to believe it. Someone needs to have hope around here, and I guess it’s gotta be me.

It’s gotta be me, ha, sounds like a song. I think. I can’t remember.

I shouldn’t use a song quote this entry, I need a movie one. I should stick in more of those, ‘cause, ya know, movies can’t be forgotten either. I’m an actor... well, I was... or I tried to be. Anyways. I’m not that person anymore, but still, the old me is still part of the new me. Or something. I need a movie quote.

I gotta keep the classics alive, right?

Except I can’t think of a good movie quote. Damn.

Oh well... song of the entry it is!

I don’t think I’ve used a Beach Boys song yet, have I? Rye loves them. (Which is funny as hell since just about everything else she likes is rock.)

*“Let me go home
Why don't they let me go home
This is the worst trip I've ever been on*

*So hoist up the John B's sail
See how the mainsail sets
Call for the Captain ashore
Let me go home, let me go home
I wanna go home, yeah yeah
Well I feel so broke up
I wanna go home...”*

“Sloop John B” – Beach Boys

Friday, November 9, 2012

Week Twenty-Nine

Nick could feel the wind blowing by him fiercely, challenging him, and taunting him. He turned the wheel accordingly, enjoying the control he now had. There wasn't much he had control of these days. It felt good to be doing something he used to once love, to know he had some hold on something.

The storm had finally ended the day before. Once it had, they'd found their tour bus trashed by animals and the storm. It had been Nick who'd come up with the idea of trying to sail down the river, in hopes of hurrying their journey along and avoiding the roads. It was night then; he could see the stars twinkling above them gently in the sky.

Originally, Nick had wanted to steal one of the old-fashioned riverboats they'd seen along the shores, but Kevin had pointed out that they needed far more people to actually operate it properly. In the end, Nick ended up stealing a large speedboat that must have belonged to some fisherman, given how much gear had been left behind inside it.

A glance back showed Riley sleeping contentedly across the rear seat behind him. Kevin had finally dozed off in the seat beside him only a few hours before. For the moment, Nick was the only human awake in the area, left to his own solitude. He could hear Riley shifting, stirring with the noise of the engine and movement of the boat. He sighed and slowed the boat down, before cutting the engine completely. For the time being, Nick was content to float down the Mississippi River and let his two companions sleep.

“Hey, why'd you stop?” Kevin asked, rubbing his eyes tiredly as he looked around.

Nick shrugged. “I was trying to let you sleep, man.”

“It’s not easy to sleep these days.”

“Rye manages to alright.”

“I mean after...”

Nick nodded. “Right.”

Kevin’s near-death experience still unnerved them all. They had become more cautious, more wary, with the exception of Riley and Nick’s little escapade back in St. Louis. Nick thought back that with a wide smile, forgetting for a moment that Kevin was, in fact, awake beside him. He couldn’t see what Riley saw in him. Any time he looked in the mirror, he saw the same old failure. He had to remind himself daily that that Nick was dead, that life had moved on, and that he had changed, along with the world around him.

He caught Kevin smiling out of the corner of his eye. The smile was a melancholy one, wistful and accompanied by a distant look in his eyes. The trip had aged Kevin in ways he didn’t like to think about. There were more lines around the corners of his eyes, his face more weathered by the hard times that they had been through since that fateful April day. Nick turned, not looking directly at him. Instead, his eyes focused on the waters illuminated eerily by the moonlight from above.

“What?”

“Nothing...”

“Come on, man, talk. We can’t do much else right now.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair. His hands rested beneath his head as he gazed up at the stars, rather than Nick. It was eerie how no animal noises could be heard near them. As a nature lover, Nick definitely missed them immensely. They could hear the moans of the undead, but nothing more. Kevin sighed, as Nick looked down at the moon’s reflection along the water.

“The two of you just remind you of me and Kristin.”

Nick raised a brow, sitting forward to look at Kevin more directly. The boat floated serenely down the river, giving the illusion of a peace that no longer existed. Kevin kept his eyes toward the sky, lines creasing his forehead as his line of vision went beyond the here and now and into the past beyond their reach.

“I didn’t know you were married...”

Kevin gave the simplest jerk of the head. “We weren’t. I always wondered if we should have. If there was a ‘one,’ I think she might’ve been it. But she didn’t like how many times I’d been sent out on-duty, how much we had to move around...” He sighed. “I don’t know... we broke up and got back together so many times. I loved her. She’d bait me, tease me... so when I see you two, lately, I’ve been thinking of us.”

Nick nodded. “You think you’d both be here if you had married her?”

“I’m not sure. I wonder that myself. But then I think maybe it would’ve been worth dying, to have that. To have started my own family, instead of choosing my life in the military. Maybe it wouldn’t have. I’m not one for lot of ‘what ifs,’ but that’s the one that’s followed me.”

“If it helps, I’m glad you’re here. I don’t think any of us would be alive today if you weren’t.”

“You give me too much credit.”

Nick shook his head, running a hand tiredly through his hair, as he attempted to stifle back a yawn. “No, sometimes, I feel like you’re not told that enough. Hell, if we had to have gotten stranded in the middle of the country, where the odds are that we’ll die before making it back home, I’m glad you’re the one who led us into this mess. Anyone else, and we’d probably have been nothing but bones picked clean by now.” He grinned. “The zombies missed out on a grand human buffet because of you. No braaaaaaaaiiiiiiiins for them.” He mimicked some slurping noises. “Nick – it’s what’s for dinner! Dun-dun-dun.”

“Nice image.”

“I try, but seriously, man, I mean it.”

Kevin smiled up at him gratefully. “Thanks.”

“So, since we’re on a boat, you think I’d be the Skipper if this was *Gilligan’s Island*?”

The older man sat up, a bit bewildered by the sudden subject change. It almost made Nick laugh. So many people in his life had claimed to be used to his forever-short attention span, but he’d always managed to surprise them sometimes.

“What?”

“*Gilligan’s Island*! You know...” His expression brightened as he happily launched into the theme song. “*Just sit right back, and you’ll hear a tale... a tale of a fateful trip... that started from this tropic port, aboard this tiny ship...*”

“I think you’re sleep-deprived.”

“The mate was a mighty sailing man, the skipper brave and sure. Five passengers set sail that day for a three-hour tour, a three hour tour...”

“You’d be Gilligan; I think I’d end up as the Skipper. The Skipper knew what he was doing.”

“Hey!”

“What made you think of that, anyway? We’re not shipwrecked; we’re not even sleep-deprived.” Kevin glanced around, searching for something, but not wanting to disturb the still-sleeping Riley.

“What are you looking for?”

“Our makeshift anchor. It’s too risky to try and tie up the boat ashore; we’d be best off at a standstill in the middle of the river. You clearly need some rest.”

Nick dug down between his legs, where a large weight sat on the floor. Around it was tied a thick, heavy rope. He grabbed the end of the rope, securely fastening it around one of the metal loops on the side of the boat, typically used for tying it down at a port. He expertly tied it, having done it so many times in the past when he’d go sailing just for fun. Carefree days that seemed like eons ago, another life.

“I can stay up and keep watch.”

Nick yawned as quietly as he could, discretely wiping his eyes. “You don’t have to; I think we’ll be okay. We’re in the middle of the river, at the deepest part.” He dropped the weight into the water, hearing the immediate *sploosh* sound that followed. Water hit his face in angry beads that looked like tears. The boat jerked to a stop, swaying gently as the river rushed around them. “You need your rest, too; I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Maybe you’re right; we should be left alone here.”

Nick lay back, staring up at the stars once more. They were so inviting, little gems of light that felt comforting in a world that was no longer safe for them. They seemed to speak to him. He felt as if they were saying that, soon, everything would be alright.

“Goodnight, Nick.”

“Goodnight, Kevin.”

As his eyelids grew heavier and fluttered to a close, he prayed he was right.

It was the splashing of water and Riley's frantic cry that woke him up, only hours later. His eyes shot open just in time to witness Kevin being pulled into the water by a zombie that somehow had managed to climb up the rope attached to their anchor. His mind raced, groggy and jump-started all at once.

"Wha...?" was all he was able to actually vocalize.

"I don't know how, but it got up... Kevin was trying to fight it off, and..." Riley was frantically trying to grab some sort of weapon. Nick immediately saw what she planned to do. He grabbed her wrist, stopping her. Their last close call flashed through his mind. How she'd been moments away from being eaten. The same, familiar fear crawled into his heart, making the decision for them both. He wasn't about to let her risk herself again. He stripped off his shirt, and before Riley could say anything, he dived into the river to help their forever-fearless river.

Once underwater, the shock of the cold was what hit him first. He forced himself to try and acclimate to the low temperature. His eyes darted around, searching for the sign of a struggle. What they saw was an endless stream of zombies, roaming the bottom of the river. Bloated, their clothes having rotted off, they roamed without any true purpose, their moans unheard. Nick refocused and soon spotted Kevin trying to fight his attacker off. The zombie still had a hand on the rope, keeping it closer to the surface than the rest below.

He swam forward, suddenly thankful for all those scuba diving escapades over the years, which helped him hold his breath underwater. Kevin was clearly struggling, fighting to be free of its grip, looking desperate for air. Nick propelled himself toward the zombie, full speed ahead, and forced it off of Kevin. The arm holding the rope was torn from the body, bits of flesh flying around and clouding the water, along with Nick's vision.

A gargled moan escaped the zombie's mouth, as its one arm reached for his throat. The grip caught Nick by surprise, forcing out the breath he was holding in the water. His lungs began to scream for air, as he struggled to fight it off. Kevin swam up behind it, pulling at the head, whose jaws were snapping at him. He tugged back hard, and the neck, weakened by the water that had puffed up the body, tore away. The grip fell slack, and both men shoved themselves up to the surface for air. Nick gasped, enjoying the feeling as the oxygen returned to his burning lungs.

"Thanks," Kevin said, as he caught his breath as well. He threw the still-moaning head, and it skipped along the water before sinking in the distance.

“No problem.” They swam back to the boat, where Riley was waiting. Her expression was anxious as she helped them both back into the boat. She hugged Kevin, before turning to Nick. He wrapped his arms around her, while Kevin pulled up the weight they had been using as an anchor.

“I thought you were both dead.”

He smirked. “Come on now, if I’m gonna die, it’s not going to be in the water. I just wonder how one got up.”

Riley shrugged, still not letting go of him. “Maybe the fact you’re weightless in the water makes it easier to climb. No need for coordination.”

“It was too close of a call. We need to start moving.”

Nick turned to go back up and drive the boat, but Kevin surprised him by sitting at the wheel. He shook his head at him, motioning for him to relax. A sentiment passed between them without a word spoken. His shirt was tossed back at him offhandedly, and he put it on, trying to dry off in the cold.

The boat started making its way, once again, down the Mississippi. Despite everything that had just occurred, Nick felt safe. They would persevere, and they would survive. Covering them both with a blanket, he lay back on the seats with Riley in his arms. Her head was on his chest, her gaze meeting his own.

That was how Nick fell asleep once again, a peaceful smile upon his face.

Chapter 87

Everything you have, everything that actually means something to you... you can lose. Fate, God, whatever thing up there that’s running things, it can take it all away. That’s why I always liked keeping my distance. No chance of rejection, no chance of losing anything if I did manage to gain something. It was a lesson I learned when I was just a little girl, and I learned it well.

At least till the world changed. Then it wasn’t easy to try to be distant. You couldn’t have that luxury anymore. And I loved it. I was happy. Of course, my guard went down. I stopped worrying about what the world was going to throw at us. Even after we got stranded in the middle of the country, I had Kevin as a surrogate big brother, I had Nick by my side... What was there to worry about?

I was such an idiot for thinking that way.

Thinking that way is like you're begging for something to go wrong. The world, fate, God, whatever, complied with that, of course. As it always will. Nothing is ever easy, and I need to never forget that.

'Cause I already know...

If I lost Nick now, life wouldn't be worth living anymore.

Monday, November 12, 2012

Week Thirty

“Shame I forgot my mask; you think it'd be Mardi Gras?” Nick asked, as Kevin drove their latest form of transportation, a sturdy pick-up truck, down the roads of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Kevin rolled his eyes as Riley laughed, imagining the putrid corpses all decked out in Mardi Gras masks and beads, slumping along the streets as music played. The image was dark humor, but it seemed like that's all there was these days. The truck pattered its way along the road; the three of them had taken it once they had come ashore from the Mississippi River. They had passed the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, a place that caused Nick's eyes to light up as a child's. He'd pleaded to stop there, until Riley had been forced to remind him that all the fish there were likely dead by now, with no people to care for them.

“I think Mardi Gras was back in February.”

Nick sulked, and Riley simply smiled at him, enjoying his antics as she aimed her gun out the window at some roaming zombies. It always felt so eerie, seeing them stumble along in packs with no real direction. Often, their heads turned at the noise the truck made, but Kevin kept the speed high enough so that none could truly follow them. She squeezed the trigger and fired off a shot. An odd noise followed, but the truck was moving too fast for her to see why.

She shrugged. *Maybe I missed.*

“Thinking hard, Rye?” Nick asked, breaking into her thoughts.

“Yeah, maybe you should try...” she teased.

Nick pouted, causing her to chuckle. Part of her was thankful their trip had failed. If it hadn't, they wouldn't have needed this cross-country road trip. What it had done was intertwined them far more than they likely would have been otherwise. Setting the gun aside, she sighed contentedly as she leaned up against Nick in the backseat. His hand gently rubbed down along her arm, an action that soothed her.

A melody came to mind, though she couldn't remember who sang it, or how she knew the song, since it was a little more bubblegum for her old tastes in music. A wry grin formed. Nick was rubbing off on her. As she began to sing it to herself softly, it just confirmed her musings.

"It's a masqu-er-aaade... a love pa-raaade... so won't you stay-uh... and dance with me, all through the niiiight and da-aaay... my masqu-er-ade... I need ya, baby, so stay with me toniiiiiiight..."

Kevin cracked up as he navigated the roads. "What was *that* you just sang?"

"I don't know, popped in my head... seemed fitting, since we're in Mardi Gras land and all."

Nick tickled her side with a smile, as she squirmed. "And you said you don't like pop."

"I doooooon't."

"Well, you know that's a boyband song; I forget who, though."

"I forgot my boyfriend is the pop culture guru," she teased.

"He's slipping." Kevin called back. "Normally, he'd be telling us how we should know all about it... who sang it, who wrote it..."

"Hey, hey!" Nick protested, sitting up and accidentally jostling Riley to the other side. Rubbing her shoulder, she straightened up as well. She made a face at him, but it went unnoticed. Nick crossed his arms indignantly. "I don't *always* do that."

"You lectured me on *Glee* for a week straight."

"That's different."

"You're about to get him started..."

"Oh, it's different, huh?"

"*Glee* was in a league of its own, man. I mean, that show was the first in a long time that was actually decent. And had good music covers! It was the best of both worlds, and..."

"See what you did?"

"Shit, my fault."

Riley laughed as she glanced out the window and effectively tuned out Nick's discussion of the show and the many ways in which he thought it was memorable. The scenery moved by in a bit of a blur. No animals or life to be seen, beyond that of the undead. A sigh followed, as she pushed some loose strands of hair from her eyes.

She wondered if anyone was alive back home. If they believed that the three of them were still alive. If they'd stayed at the base, or if they had moved on. She missed all of them: Jo's motherly ways, and Gretchen as her female confidant, Gabby's youthful spirit, and AJ's own cynical sense of humor. She thought wistfully of Howie's determination and Brian's steadfast belief that things could somehow get better. She'd gotten used to their little threesome, with as long as they'd been on the road, but it was nothing compared to the family that had formed on the base they called home. Everything was about looking forward to home - that was their hope and destination. Yet, her own cynical side wondered if there would even be anything to go home to? Zombies had broken past the barrier before, causing Kayleigh's death. Would it happen again? Would they come back to nothing but the remains of those they loved, picked clean along the ground?

Or even worse, would the others have moved on because of the weaknesses in their defense? Leaving the three of them to come back to an empty base, with nothing but questions that would forever remain unanswered?

"Rye?"

She blinked. Her eyes moved back to the window, and she realized they had slowed down. She shifted her line of vision back to Nick, whose own blue eyes were settled on her with concern. She smiled gently.

"Sorry, I spaced a bit."

"Seemed pretty deep in thought..."

She shook her head. She didn't want to bring him down with her own dark thoughts. "Just tired... Why are we slowing down?"

Kevin's eyes glanced back at her in the rearview mirror. She always had the feeling Kevin could see right through any of them to what they were really thinking. She loved him like a big brother, but it always unsettled her. "We need to gas back up and get supplies."

"Oh."

She stared out the window again. New Orleans was one of those cities she'd always wanted to visit at some point. It was so iconic, right up there with New York City or Las Vegas. They were driving along the roads of the French Quarter.

She couldn't get enough of the majestic architecture of the city. Three-story tall buildings with grand archways and designs, beautifully built in the early days of America, still standing as a tribute to the past world, before the undead had come. She sighed again as they passed by a red streetcar, crashed alongside the road. A ruin of twisted metal, fists of the undead beating could be seen beating on its windows relentlessly in a weak attempt to escape their prison.

Finally, the truck slowed to a stop, and Riley turned to see Nick loading a pistol, shooting her an easy smile. Her stomach churned, and she looked over at Kevin, feeling oddly uneasy. She couldn't place it, but the feeling was there all the same. Grabbing her own weapons, she made sure her handguns were loaded before passing Nick the shotgun. He took her hand in his, squeezing it encouragingly. It did little to ease her nerves, but she managed a smile.

"We'll have to split up to make this quick," Kevin suggested, and the two blondes nodded in agreement. They had learned the hard way not to dawdle. "I'm going to see if I can't find a place that has weapons. Anything. We're starting to run thin again. You two get as many bottles of water and canned food as you can carry to the truck. If I'm not here, load up on clothes until nightfall. If I'm not here by dark... I need you to go on without me."

Riley blinked. The sun was slowly setting in the sky. If she'd been forced to guess the time, she'd have placed it at somewhere around four or five o'clock. It didn't leave them much time.

Nick spoke before she could. "Dude, we can't do that!"

"No, if I'm not here, it means I'm not alive to come back. I mean it: go on without me if I'm not back by dark."

She could see the struggle Nick was battling within himself. His hand had tensed up immediately in hers. Riley swallowed hard to fight all the emotions building up. It hurt to hear the words, but decisions had to be made. That was their only choice in their fight for survival. The words felt like they were coming from another, even as she heard herself say them.

"Alright, we will."

An incredulous look was shot her way by the man beside her, but she said nothing more. She climbed out of the truck, tugging him along behind her. She could hear the truck doors open and shut, one after another. She fought not to look back; it felt like a jinx to do so. Still, her head turned to see the back of Kevin's head walking away. Her heart fluttered, yet she nodded at Nick, and the two began walking in the other direction.

Their walk around felt relatively peaceful. Moans could be heard, but they were distant, and she was thankful. Finally, the two spotted a grocery store. Nick grinned at her easily, putting on his handkerchief. From past food raids, they had learned this was completely necessary to be able to stand their surroundings. He snickered as she, too, tied her bandana around her head to cover her mouth.

He held up his pistol. “Is it me, or do we look like we’re in a bad western movie?”

She felt herself smirk, even though Nick couldn’t see it. “How many bad western movies did you try out for?”

“More than you’d think,” he laughed, causing her to smile, as he held open the door. “Ladies first.”

“Yay, I get to be eaten before you.”

“So cynical.”

The smell hit her first, a putrid, horribly intense stench that wasn’t stifled as much as she’d like by the clothes tied around their faces. Her eyes watered in reply. They had encountered this at every store they’d entered, looking for food. It had been easy, on the base, to forget that, around the country, there was no electricity. There were no people. Everything had been left to decay; fresh food was nothing but a memory in the wake of endless cans that helped them survive.

“This smells worse than donkey ass...”

“I’m not even going to ask how you’d know that.”

The two each adjusted the empty duffel bags on their shoulders on the way towards the proper aisle. Their ears were keen for any signs of life, undead or otherwise. Riley turned at the sound of something hard hitting the floor. A glance around showed nothing, however. She sighed.

I’m getting really paranoid, she mused. Still, the feeling that had been following her all day refused to leave.

“You know what I miss?” Nick asked, as he started tossing random cans into his bag. Soups, beans, chili, fruits – everything one would think of. Peas, corn – it didn’t matter anymore. Pickiness had gone away, once they had become the main entrée for the dead. Her bag grew heavy, too, as she loaded it up with everything she could think of.

We’ll have to come back by again for water. The more food they had with them, the better.

“Hmm?”

“Steaks. I love steaks. I miss ‘em. I even tried to go vegan once...”

She stifled a giggle, as they started making their way back out of the store. It was easier said than done. Many shelves had been knocked over; cans were everywhere. It made the store a maze, easy to get confused in if you lost track of how you’d gotten to that aisle to begin with.

“You went vegan? Somehow, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Yeah, I tried. See, I read this book my acting coach gave me, when he wanted me to lose weight...”

“Awww.”

“And I liked the idea, but I kept caving because I missed steaks. And now we can’t have any unless we find a live cow that hasn’t starved, been eaten, or mutated or something.”

“Mutated.”

“Hey,” he said with a casual shrug, his eyes twinkling, as they stepped out, once again, beneath the slowly setting sun. “You never know anymore.”

It was easy for her to imagine things were normal for a second. That they were simply two lovers walking down the road together, hand and hand. Each had their duffel slung over the other shoulder, comfortable with the silence that settled between them. Nick’s hand broke free of hers and pulled down his bandana, revealing the lovable grin beneath. The only thing that broke the peace of the moment was the chorus of moans, sounding closer than they had before. It caused their pace to quicken, neither wanting to be found if they could. Soon they would be sniffed out, and they had a bit of a walk to go.

“Hey Rye?” Nick paused, causing her to do the same and turn towards him.

“Yeah?”

He stared at her, not saying anything. His eyes looked scarily blank, glazed in a way she normally attributed to the walking dead. He stood there, unseeing. Her pulse quickened. His eyes, the pretty eyes she so loved to stare into, suddenly rolled to the back of his head. His voice roared, as he collapsed suddenly to the ground. His head slammed against the pavement.

Riley stood there, frozen in shock.

“NICK!” she shrieked. Reality clicked into place as she rushed towards him, her bag thrown off to the side and forgotten immediately. She kneeled down, at a

loss of what to do, as his body was thrown into violent convulsions. It had been so *long* since something like this had happened. The possibility had been discarded and forgotten.

At that moment, she had never missed Jo more.

His body continued to contract, his eyelids half-open, the whites of his eyes sending a shudder of fear through her body. Riley felt helpless, without even the slightest hint of what to do, as the moans grew louder. They were going to be found soon. Whether it was the noise Nick had made, or her own yells of fear that had summoned them, it didn't matter. Something had attracted the zombies' attention, and she knew from the volume of their moans that she had to get them moving, somehow, before they were found.

It killed her and relieved her at the same time to take her eyes off Nick, to check for zombies. Spotting none, she took a moment to give God a silent prayer, before watching the person she loved beyond her reach. He twitched and jerked rigidly, his mouth open just slightly, before the convulsions slowed and finally stopped.

The time that had gone by felt like eons. Riley had no idea if she was supposed to try to wake him or not. The last time this had happened felt like a lifetime ago, and even then, she had had Jo check him out before they woke him. This time, there was no choice. She shook him gently, hoping that he didn't have further damage from hitting his head in the fall.

"I should've caught you..." she murmured. "Nick, please... *please*... get up for me..."

His chest rose and fell steadily, but he didn't wake up. Riley felt like screaming in frustration, but knew she couldn't attract any more attention to them. Getting the bag free from Nick's arm, she tossed it aside. Tenderly, she brushed aside the hair on his forehead, before grabbing him from his armpits. It took all her strength to try and drag him, as gently as possible, further up the road.

The sun was setting, the sky becoming a darker gradient of red, purple, pink, and orange. It was also an alarm clock, reminding her they had to reach the truck by dark. Would Kevin look for them? He'd told them to go on without them if he didn't show. Would he do the same?

Am I doing all this, only to end up dead anyway? No, Riley, you can't think like that.

Her arms grew tired as she tried to drag Nick along. Panting, she lay him back on the pavement. Realistically, she knew this wasn't going to work. They were both going to die. She'd live, but only if she left Nick behind. Her jaw set at the mere realization.

I'll die before leaving you behind.

An empty storefront across the street caught her attention. No broken glass – it seemed to be in better shape than many places these days. She needed a place to camp out until Nick woke up. She needed a plan of some sort. As she went to pick up Nick again, a corpse came into view, startling her into dropping him. This time, he fell against her feet, rather than the ground. Her hands flew to her guns, and she cursed the moment she realized she only had one with her. The others had been in her bag, so that everything was easier to carry.

Every shot had to count. Steadying herself as the zombie started shuffling her way, she fired. An odd sound followed, as the bullet went through its nose, sending bits of bone, rotting flesh, and congealed blood spraying everywhere. A moment passed before it fell to the ground.

Tucking the gun away, she picked Nick back up again. She dragged him as quickly as she could across the road. Zombies were closing in around them. She backed through the door forcefully, setting Nick down on the floor and blocking the door with her own body.

Thankfully, the door was wooden, without glass. She could only pray the windows held.

Then she heard a moan from the other end of the office. Riley hadn't looked to see what kind of place she'd entered, but it looked like an insurance company of some sort. The zombie emerging from the back of building was wearing a ragged suit and tie. She fired a shot, hitting its neck and causing the zombie to stumble. She fired again, cursing her aim. This time, the shot hit its mark, and the undead man fell.

Riley checked her ammo. Not many left.

A shuffle of movement caused her to whirl around with her firearm at the ready. A glance downwards relaxed her immediately. She kneeled down swiftly, immediately at his side. Nick glanced up at her dazedly, his eyes unfocused.

“Rye?”

She hugged him tightly.

“Whoa...” He chuckled at the sudden embrace, looking surprised at the fierceness. She refused to let go, enjoying the moment. She didn't dare look into his face, unsure if she'd be able to handle seeing the confusion she knew would be there. “What happened?”

Her head burrowed into his shoulder. “You’re okay... I was so freaked. You... you had a seizure. And I was... I was so...”

“Shhh...”

“I didn’t think we’d be able to....” She couldn’t finish the thought, yet knew he understood. Riley breathed him in, the scent she knew so well, enjoying the way her head fit against the crook of his neck, as his hand stroked her back in soothing circles.

“I’m so glad you’re alright...”

“It’s okay; I’m alright... I’m here now...” His hand tangled itself in her hair, his lips close to her ear, as he whispered, “I’m here now.”

Chapter 88

“Life goes on... if you can call this living. I guess we’ve got to, too.”

Brian’s the one who told me that, on one of those first days after the dead rose, when we were stuck in that gas station. We had a lot of time to talk, and that’s how we really got to know each other. He opened up to me about his family. I told him about my miscarriage. We shared in our grief, and I think that’s why we got so close, so quickly. I like everyone on the base, but I’m still closest to Brian, especially now. He understands what I’m feeling better than anyone.

It’s hard being here, knowing that the people I love are never coming home. I try to go on with my life, but it doesn’t even seem like “my life” anymore. Everything has changed. I never thought I’d say this, but I wish I had AJ’s outlook on life. He looks at this as a sort of rebirth, an opportunity to rebuild a better world, a world with a place for him in it. I still look at it as an apocalypse, the end of the world, but I guess even that word has more than one meaning. Some people just think of an apocalypse as a revelation. It’s fitting, in a way. I’ve had a revelation of my own recently. Brian’s right: life goes on, and we’ve got to, too.

At least now I have another reason to live.

Thursday, November 15, 2012
Week Thirty

As soon as she woke up that mid-November morning, Gretchen could tell it was going to be a good day. The weather outside her window was beautiful. The

temperature was mild, hovering somewhere around seventy. The sun was shining; a warm breeze was blowing. The sky was blue, and the clouds were white. And after months of silence, the birds were finally singing again.

At first, she thought nothing of hearing birds twittering outside her window, but then, suddenly, she was struck by the strangeness of it. Ever since the dead had risen, the animals had been mysteriously absent. It was as if the unnaturalness of the walking dead had thrown the animal kingdom into an upheaval, upsetting the delicate balance of nature and forcing the animals to flee. Just as Spunky had, they must have sensed danger in the air and known, instinctively, to stay away.

Gretchen couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a bird or a rabbit or squirrel or one of those little green lizards Florida used to be famous for. There were hardly even any insects around, though that hadn't stopped the mosquitoes from buzzing around the swampy parts of the peninsula. Otherwise, the sounds of nature had been silenced. She wasn't used to hearing birds chirping, frogs croaking, or locusts humming during the day anymore, and at night, there were no crickets to sing her to sleep. Instead, the dissonant moans of distant zombies kept her awake.

But on that morning, she woke and heard birds, right outside her window, and she knew that hope was still alive. It filled her up, warming her from the inside, radiating out of her like the rays of the sun. She dressed quickly and rushed downstairs, heading straight outside. Brian was already up, sitting on the back porch, rocking slowly on the porch swing with his usual cup of coffee in hand. "Mornin'," he said in his soft, Southern drawl, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled up at her.

"Morning," she echoed, beaming back. She felt breathless, almost giddy with delight. "Do you hear the birds?"

He pointed, up into a nearby tree, where she saw a pair of robins perched on a high branch. "Where do you reckon they came from?"

She stared up at them in wonder. In the Midwest, where she'd grown up, a robin sighting was one of the first signs of spring. It was strange to think it was almost winter, but it made sense. "North," she replied. "They flew south for the winter."

"And they stopped here." Brian nodded. "Guess they realized it was a safe place."

Safe... Gretchen hadn't felt truly safe since spring, but she supposed he was right. The base was safer than anywhere else around. Maybe the birds had been able to sense that, too. They'd landed here, where the scent of the undead wasn't as strong. She hoped they would stay. They made her feel like maybe, seven months after turning upside down, the world was going to right itself again.

For the first time in a long time, she felt energetic and inspired. It was the perfect day to start a new outdoor project, so while Howie and Gabby took AJ down to work on the wall, Gretchen and Brian decided to get a move on the memorial garden they intended to plant around the wooden crosses they'd put up.

They had already begun working on a vegetable garden, which had proven tougher than Gretchen had anticipated. Though the weather was perfect for growing, the soil was sandy and poor, and they'd started a compost pile from which to fertilize it. Brian had suggested starting with short season winter crops, like radishes, onions, spinach, lettuce, and broccoli. "We'll be able to make good salads, at least," Gretchen had laughed, as they looked for seeds in the base's supply stores and maintenance sheds.

That day, they returned in search of flower bulbs to plant for the following spring. They came back with lilies, dahlias, and amaryllis, which they hoped would bring life and beauty back to the base, blooming around the memorials for those they'd lost to the undead. But the garden plot was in no shape to be planted yet, so they spent the rest of the afternoon digging, weeding, and tilling the soil.

It was hard work, and before long, Gretchen's back and arms were aching from bending, pulling, and shoveling. Sweat poured down her dirt-streaked face, and her clothes stuck to her skin. Even her hair felt grimy and hot. She longed for a shower, followed by an afternoon nap, and was grateful when Brian finally said, "Let's take a break."

Relieved, she followed him to the pick-up truck, and they drove back to the house. "I'm gonna hop in the shower," Gretchen said, as they went inside. "I feel gross."

He looked her over, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Aww, at least it's just dirt – 'stead of zombie guts."

She laughed, but later, in the shower, she marveled over the fact that she could laugh at such a thing now. It certainly hadn't been funny at the time, their first narrow escape from a horde of the undead, during which she had been splattered with blood and intestinal bits from the zombie Brian had impaled with a road sign. She couldn't forget the horror of having to sit covered in it in the car while they drove around, looking for a safe place to get cleaned up and rest. A shower had never felt so good.

Watching little trails of dirt circle down the drain, she shuddered, remembering the rusty red tinge of the water in that shower. That had been the very day she'd met Brian, she realized, the day of the unholy resurrection of the dead. Sometimes, it seemed like only yesterday, yet it felt like a lifetime ago. In a way, it had been. Gretchen's life had changed so much in seven months that her old life felt remote, like some distant part of the past. It was as if she were a

reincarnation of her old self, rather than the same Gretchen who had once taught school and dreamed of starting a family. She imagined Brian felt the same way.

She stood under the shower, just thinking, far longer than she had intended, then came to her senses and shut the faucet off quickly, feeling wasteful. They were lucky to still have running water and electricity on the base, when nowhere else did, and she knew better than to take these luxuries for granted. If the systems went down before Kevin's group came back – or if Kevin and the others never did come back, a possibility that was becoming more and more probable each day – she wouldn't have a clue how to get them working again. She doubted Brian, Howie, or AJ would, either. They had adapted as best they could, but none of them had any real survival skills. That was Kevin's forte.

Suddenly depressed by the thought of losing their leader, Gretchen trudged out of the bathroom and looked around the master bedroom she shared with Riley. The day they had moved into this house, they had agreed to split the largest room. They'd swapped the queen-size bed for the two twin beds in Brian's smaller room, giving everyone more space. But Riley's neatly-made bed had been empty for many weeks. She missed her roommate, the closest friend she'd made on the base, after Brian. Was there any chance she could still be alive?

It's just like with Shawn, she thought sadly. We'll go on hoping they're still alive and on their way home for a few more weeks, maybe even months, until eventually we just give up and accept that they're never coming back. She knew in her head that this was the path their grief would take, from denial to acceptance, but in her heart, she wasn't ready to give up hope yet. Not with the robins still singing outside her windows.

But it wasn't just the robins who were singing. Suddenly, she realized she could hear a human voice singing, too. She paused to listen to the muffled sounds drifting up through the floor vent – running water and, rising over the roar of the shower, Brian's soulful tenor. Smiling, she wrapped a filmy robe around herself and crept out of the bedroom and down the stairs, amused and eager to listen. Though Brian had a great voice, she hadn't realized he was a shower singer – but apparently, the robins had inspired him. Standing outside the bathroom door, she giggled silently into her hand when she heard him singing, *“He rocks in the tree top all day long, hoppin' and a-boppin' and a-singin' his song... All the little birds on Jaybird Street love to hear the robin go tweet, tweet, tweet... Rockin' robin – tweet, tweet, tweet! Rockin' robin – tweet, tweedle-lee-dee! Go rockin' robin, 'cause we're really gonna rock tonight...”*

The shower shut off abruptly, which caught Gretchen off-guard. She backed away from the door and scrambled up the stairs, not wanting to be seen eavesdropping, especially in her skimpy robe. But on the top step, her big toe caught, her ankle rolled, and she tripped and fell forward, landing with a large thud on the stairs. It was enough to bring Brian running out of the bathroom, before she could even pick herself up. She had just barely managed to readjust her robe when he

appeared at the foot of the stairs, wearing nothing but a towel and a look of concern. “You okay?” he called up to her.

“Yeah,” she replied quickly, feeling her face heat up. She mustered as much dignity as she could and tried to stand up, but her ankle throbbed. “No,” she amended, grimacing. “Maybe not.”

“Not you, too,” he joked as he climbed the stairs, securing his towel with one hand. “We’ve already got one gimp around here. What’d you do?”

“Tripped. Turned my ankle.” She stretched it out in front of her and inspected it from different angles. It looked okay. It wasn’t swelling or turning colors. It would probably be fine in a few minutes. She hoped so, anyway. He was right; they couldn’t afford another injury around the base.

Brian knelt two steps down. “May I?” he asked, and when she nodded, he gently took her foot in his hands. His touch was light as he felt her ankle, but when he moved his thumbs under her arch to support her foot, she squirmed away. “Sorry,” he apologized quickly, “Did I hurt you?”

“No... just ticklish.”

He grinned. “My girls were the same way. Whenever they got a boo-boo, I had to kiss it and make it better.”

She smiled back, her heart melting – and breaking – as she imagined the kind of daddy he must have been to his twin daughters. “I bet you were good at that,” she said.

“You better believe it,” he shot back. His grin was as cheesy as ever, but there was a certain sadness behind it. He tried to hide it by lowering his face to her foot, planting the softest of kisses right over her ankle bone.

She was surprised at the shot of pleasure that rushed through her, as his lips brushed her bare skin. That tickled, too, but in a good way. It felt nice. Maybe there was something to the rumored healing power of his kisses. She wished she could return the favor and kiss away his pain.

“Does that feel better?” Brian asked, and she smiled.

“Much.”

“Let me help you up.” He stood up and reached for her, pulling her to her feet. She swayed unsteadily at first and nearly collided into his chest, throwing her arms around his neck for support until she regained her balance. “Whoa... you okay?” he asked, chuckling, and she realized they were face to face.

“Yeah,” she gasped, breathless. But she wasn’t ready to let go of him yet. His bare shoulders were still wet from the shower, but his skin was warm and smooth. She could feel the muscle rippling underneath it. He smelled like soap. She inhaled, looking into his face, appreciating its finer details – the strength of his jawline and the angular shape of his high cheekbones, the wispy curls of hair around his ears and over his forehead, the gorgeous blue of his eyes, which seemed to twinkle as they gazed back at her. Like a moth drawn to light, she couldn’t look away, and she felt herself leaning in closer, tilting her chin, until her lips connected with his.

The first kiss was light and hesitant, but it was enough to send shockwaves through her body, which suddenly remembered how good it felt to be kissed and craved more. His body seemed to respond the same way, for his arms tightened around her waist, pulling her closer, until their hips bumped together. He returned the kiss hungrily, and the second one was so deep, it made her dizzy with delight and lack of oxygen.

He pressed her back into the banister, and they stumbled on the stairs, clinging to each other as their lips locked together. Finally, he lifted her up, her robe hitching higher as his hands slipped on its satiny material, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, as he carried her the few short steps into his bedroom. He lowered her gently onto the bed, and as she lay back, he leaned over her, kissing her lips, her cheeks, and down her neck.

When he reached the part of her that was covered by the robe, he paused and looked up. “Don’t stop,” she begged, giving him the permission he sought to continue. Without a word, he nodded, parting the front of her robe so his lips could continue their trek down her body. She shivered with pleasure as they found the space between her breasts and lingered there awhile. When they started to go lower, she grew self-conscious and raked her fingers through his wavy hair, gently guiding his head back up toward hers. Their lips met again, and she let out a moan of anticipation as she felt the warm weight of his body climb on top of her.

She ran her hands down his bare back until they found the bony edges of his hips. From them, she tore off the towel. As it dropped away from his body, she looked down and saw that he wanted this just as much as she did. Smiling, she threw back her head and arched her back, raising her hips as he lowered himself onto her. Then she closed her eyes and rocked her body along to the rhythm he set, enjoying every last measure of it. She hadn’t experienced such pleasure in seven months, and in the heat of the moment, she had no regrets.

It was only once Brian had rolled off of her and snuggled up beside her that the magnitude of what they’d just done struck Gretchen. It was a gorgeous fall day outside, yet there she was, lying in bed with another man, just seven months after losing her husband. She was suddenly guilt-ridden, not because what they’d done seemed so wrong, but because it felt so right.

Turning her head toward Brian, she asked, “So, does this make us sinners?”

Brian pressed his lips together, seeming to consider the question for a long time before he answered. “We’re guilty of fornication, but not of adultery, if that’s what you’re thinking,” he finally said, rolling over to face her. “We’ve both lost our spouses. But life goes on. You showed me that, Gretchen. You gave me a reason to keep surviving, when everything I loved in the world was gone. And now, I wanna do the same thing for you. I wanna be your reason.”

Touched by his tenderness, she whispered, “You are.” And it was true. For months, she had lived in hope of one day seeing Shawn again; it was that hope and love for her husband which had kept her alive. But she could not deny that, even before she had accepted that Shawn was not coming back, she’d felt an attraction to Brian. He had been there for her since Day One, and when she was with him, she felt protected. He would never leave her, the way Shawn had. It was Brian, not Shawn, who gave her the strength and faith she needed to survive.

Her eyes swam with tears, and as they started to spill over, Brian leaned in and kissed both of her cheeks, wiping the tears away in the process. “I know how you’re feeling,” he murmured, “‘cause I’m feeling the same way. But I think God understands. Life is a gift, and He’d want us to make the most of it. And I’m sure Shawn and Leighanne would want the same, don’t you think?”

She smiled; of course, he had known that she cared not about what God thought, but what Shawn would think. Nodding, she replied, “I do.”

He smiled back and took her in his arms, holding her close against his chest. “Then let’s keep living,” he whispered, and kissed her again. Outside the open window, the robins chirped their approval.

Chapter 89

I hate feeling like such a fucking liability. I almost got my girl killed ‘cause of one of my damn seizures. She should’ve abandoned me, but she didn’t. Kevin eventually found us at the office she had dragged me to. Dragged me, you hear that? Because I had a fucking seizure and almost got us both killed.

I would’ve deserved it.

We’re getting closer to home. I can’t wait to see everyone. Kevin says if we keep along the coastline and don’t run into anything major, it could be really soon. I’m excited. I’ve missed Florida all to hell. I’ve missed everyone we left behind

more. I mean... we're family. In some ways, more than my so-called "real" family ever was before.

I know it ain't right to speak ill of the dead and all that... but it's the truth.

Anyways, you know how the world before the undead feels like a lifetime ago? Now, it's weird, but life at the base feels that way too. I know it's only been about two months, but it feels like longer. I guess it's just cause we're damn lucky to be alive right now. Too many close calls, for all three of us.

But... at least it brought us closer together, right? Silver linings in everything – remember that.

Song Quote of the Entry – this has NOTHING to do with what I'm talking about. But I've had it stuck in my head for like the last week. Pretty sure I'm about to drive Rye crazy 'cause I keep singing it. See, we found a Greatest Hits album at one of our recent supply runs...

*"I was working part time in a five-and-dime
My boss was Mr. McGee
He told me several times that he didn't like my kind
'Cause I was a bit too leisurely*

*Seems that I was busy doing something close to nothing
But different than the day before
That's when I saw her, ooh, I saw her
She walked in through the outdoor, outdoor*

*She wore a raspberry beret
The kind you find in a second hand store
Raspberry beret
And if it was warm she wouldn't wear much more
Raspberry beret
I think I love her..."*

- Prince, "Raspberry Beret"

Saturday, November 17, 2012

Week Thirty

"She wore a raspberry beret... damn it, Nick, now you have me singing it!"

Nick snickered from the passenger seat of their new truck. Stealing it had been easier than trying to siphon gas, which was becoming more and more problematic as they traveled the road. The weather had taken a nasty turn; they'd caught the tail end of hurricane season down south, and while they hadn't

actually had the misfortune of facing a full-fledged hurricane, they had been dealing with endless downpours of rain.

Riley was taking her turn to drive now, with Kevin in the back. They didn't let Nick drive anymore. As much as that stung, he didn't protest. It would just cause arguments he didn't want to have right then. He stroked his chin, feeling the facial hair that had grown there. It was more than that, though: he knew they were right.

The rain continued in a downpour that was frustrating all of them. It was slowing them down, when all they wanted, at this point, was to get home. Even Riley, who always talked about how much she loved the rain, was muttering curses as she swerved around abandoned cars along the narrow back roads they took. Nick glanced down at the map he was supposed to be using to navigate, a task that was getting harder as landmarks were becoming impossible to see.

"Maybe we should stop," she said, glancing first at him, then back at Kevin.

"You think?" Nick asked, sounding almost hopeful.

"No, the weather's just going to get worse before it gets better. We just need to be careful is all."

"Yeah, because we're *never* careful..."

"You know what I meant."

"Oooh, *When Doves Cry*, I love this song!" He reached forward and turned up the volume.

"I almost miss the Michael Jackson songs," Kevin said with a smirk.

"Dude, I haven't seen another CD of his. Why did the apocalypse have to happen after everyone pretty much ditched them for iPods?"

Riley snickered, keeping her eyes focused on the road. "We'll have to tell the zombies that they should've come sooner, then. Just for you."

"Please do."

She shook her head, but he saw the grin she was trying to hide.

Nick did his best to watch for landmarks, but all he could see were water, trees, and swollen zombies roaming in the distance. It was like one of the lame movies he'd once auditioned for. They were wearing torn jeans and flannel, bellies bloated and poking through the fabric to reveal their maggoty flesh. One even had a banjo dragging from where it stepped through it.

Hillbilly Zombies – that would've made an epic TV show, he mused.

A slam of the brakes and a sudden jerk forward snapped Nick back to reality. He grunted in response, just glad he hadn't hit his head on anything this time. Nick knew he didn't need any more damage up there. His eyes met Riley's, before he turned to look back at Kevin.

“Why'd we stop?”

“Take a look. The whole damn road's flooded out.”

“At least the rain's letting up.” The pattering had become less intense, something none of them had really noticed until that very moment.

“Any other way to go?”

“Mostly highways, and they'll probably be a bigger mess than the side roads.”

Nick climbed out of the vehicle, his gun in hand. He glanced around, just looking for anything that might be easily missed on a map. The water splashed around him as he walked forward. The rain continued to pitter-patter in a light sprinkle; it was so muggy that it actually felt nice, like a warm shower. There were a few overturned vehicles around, wrecks of twisted metal, and others with open doors that had been long ago abandoned. No signs of life – or, thankfully, the undead – could be heard, even as he looked out in the distance at the many Cypress trees surrounding them.

He started to turn around, feeling disappointed, until he saw the sign.

Honey Island Swamp Boat Tours - Straight Ahead.

Nick glanced at his two companions and simply smiled.

“You guys feel like sailing again?”

They were sitting in one of the air boats they'd found at the dock of the tour station. The silence around them was unnatural and set Nick on edge. He'd grown so used to the incessant moaning that the lack of it was disturbing.

Kevin was driving this time, another sign of the problem that none of them wanted to mention aloud. Before, it would have been Nick at the wheel, having had the most boating experience. Once again, he didn't comment on it and just pretended to take it in stride without a word.

The waters of the Pearl River were brown, murky, and calm. Every once in awhile, he would see a sign of life. It was the most they'd seen in months. A snake, big enough to wrap around his body and suffocate him if it wanted, could be seen slithering sneakily along in the water. He watched, fascinated by the wildlife he had imagined would be gone.

“Nick?”

He turned back towards Riley, who had stepped up beside him. His arm wrapped around her, and he pointed down at the snake as it continued on its way. The light was fading; even with the clouds scattering slightly, not much sunlight broke through into the swamplands. The vast amount of trees provided a natural covering and felt like shelter.

“Look...”

“So some things have survived. Like us. They haven't killed everything.”

Their boat made a turn, following a bend in the river. As if on cue, they passed an alligator, overturned on its back and clearly dead. A festival of bugs could be seen feasting on the rotten flesh of its underbelly. The jaw was partly open, and caught within it was the body of a zombie, the skull broken from the powerful teeth of the deceased animal. A rush of pity passed through Nick.

“I wonder what killed it.”

“Who knows?” He paused for a moment. “Maybe it was the zombie – looks like it was trying to eat it. I've been wondering if anything could, ya know? Ain't like we've had a chance to test that.”

She nodded, as she pulled away to lean closer to the edge for a better look. “So when it tried to kill it, it signed its own death warrant.” A sigh followed.

An owl hooted from above, casting its own note on the feeling in the air. Nick glanced around again as the rain began to pick up once more. He sighed. Unlike his girlfriend, he didn't like the rain at all. It just made their journey more difficult. He walked over to where he had left the brochure he'd taken from the tour building. It sat on top of the many duffel bags they had carried with them. Who knew when they'd be able to run for supplies again? He scanned through it with a bored feeling. He'd always gotten bored easily. It took a lot of effort for him to stay focused; his attention tended to wander, naturally and without warning.

“Hey guys, did you know there's supposed to be a swamp monster here? And... dude! The thing looks like Bigfoot! That's fucking awesome!”

“Nick, don’t you think we have enough problems without you wishing for other horror monsters to be real?” Kevin said dryly.

“Aww, come on, you can’t say it wouldn’t be neat to see it if it existed.”

“The undead have probably eaten it by now.”

“Killjoy.”

“No, just realistic.”

A scream shattered their conversation, as Nick turned to see Riley. Riley, who’d been leaning over to look at something, was getting grabbed at forcefully by a rotting arm that had risen out of the river. She struggled to stay on the boat, unable to grab her gun without risking being dragged into the murky water. The zombie, like others that they encountered in the swamp, was bloated up immensely. Its decayed skin flapped away as it moaned to reveal black, putrefying flesh. A maggot slithered out of a gap between its snagged teeth.

“I’m coming, Rye!” Nick’s shout was drowned out by moans, as more zombies rose out of the river, attracted by her scream. He heard gunshots coming from Kevin’s end of the boat, as well.

Despite how many times they had found themselves in danger, Nick’s heart felt like it stopped whenever it was Riley whose life was at risk. He reached for his gun and ran forward, trying to hit the ghoul without hitting her. The tug-of-war continued over her arm. As she teetered dangerously over the edge, he fired the shot.

To his surprise, the zombie exploded upon impact. Blood sprayed through the air like a liquid firework and splattered the both of them immediately. Rotted meat, bugs, and bone flew everywhere. Gasping, Riley fell back on the floor of the boat, covered in the remains of the zombie, but otherwise unscathed.

Nick brushed what he could of the remains off himself, swallowing back his own bile. Riley was unable to do the same. She ran back towards the edge of the boat, just in time to expel the contents of her stomach in a rainbow fountain of digested food. He stayed with her, rubbing her back in circles until she was done. She pulled away from the railing immediately and settled into his arms. They were both still covered with decomposed innards, but he didn’t care.

“What the fuck?” Nick asked suddenly, seeing movement over her shoulder. He pulled away in time to watch Kevin shoot the zombie that had risen. The reaction was the same as before: it burst like a water balloon. What was left of the undead man rained down around them. This time, the three of them ducked in response.

Now, Nick welcomed the rain that poured from the sky.

Chapter 90

I had a lot to be thankful for in my old life, but when did I ever stop to count my blessings? Not nearly often enough. I was always on the go, always working or traveling; I didn't have time to stop for anything, not even my family. It's no wonder Bree left me and took Barty with her. I guess I wasn't much of a husband or a father. Sure, I provided for them – a magnificent roof over their heads, private school tuition for Barty, designer clothes and fine jewelry for Bree, and all the luxuries my money could buy – but I see now that it wasn't enough, that I didn't give them what they really needed: my time, my attention, and my love.

Now I have all the time in the world and no one to spend it with. I've come to care about AJ, Brian, Gretchen, and Gabby, but it's not the same as having a family of my own. I know I should be grateful to have good people in my life, even to be alive at all, but sometimes I can't help but wonder, what for?

What is there to give thanks for, really? Our survival? The roofs over our heads? The food in our bellies? Sure, in my day-to-day existence, I appreciate these things, but how long can we really go on living this way? What's the point? Everyone else is dead – Kevin, Nick, and Riley included, from the looks of it – and eventually, we'll be dead, too. A hemophiliac, a gimp, a minister, a schoolteacher, and a little girl, surviving the zombie apocalypse together? Yeah, right. It's only a matter of time before we meet the same fate as everyone else.

And when that time comes... in a way, I'll be thankful.

Thursday, November 22, 2012

Week Thirty-One

On the fourth Thursday of November, Howie found himself missing his family more than ever. Not just Barty, not even Bree, but his mother and father, his older brother and three sisters, and the nieces and nephews he hadn't seen nearly enough of before the plague had claimed them all. He was filled with regret as he remembered all of the times he'd put his career ahead of his family, even his own son – all the late nights he'd spent working, the business trips he'd taken away from home, the holidays and school functions and Little League games he'd missed for the sake of furthering his company.

And for what? It was all gone now; he'd lost everything, the company and his family, too. Of the two, there was no question of which he missed most. His

career in real estate was meaningless now. His money was worthless. Only the people in his life still had value, and of most of them, he had only memories.

But memories were not enough. On that day, he longed for his family even more than he craved his mother's pumpkin pie or the fat, roasted turkey carved by his father. It was not just a day to feast, but a day to be with loved ones and give thanks for all the good things in life. But on the first Thanksgiving in the new world of the undead, Howie felt no love or gratitude. He felt only bitterness and sorrow.

He could tell he wasn't alone in feeling that way. AJ and Gabby seemed equally miserable. Though the memorial garden had helped Gabby get through her grief, the approaching holiday had sent her spiraling back down into the depths of despair. She missed her mother and father, and there was nothing any of them could say or do that would change that. Meanwhile, AJ was still mourning the loss of his mobility, as he dealt with his injury. His leg was healing, but not fast enough for his liking. He was a free spirit who had lost his freedom, rather like an exotic bird locked away in a cage. He was moody and restless, but no less reckless – Howie had to watch him constantly to make sure he didn't push himself too hard and set his recovery back any further.

Only Brian and Gretchen seemed happy and hopeful lately. Brian, in particular, was a changed man. He was no longer quiet and solemn, but outgoing and downright cheerful. His eyes had lost the haunted look that had clouded them since his arrival on the base; they twinkled with laughter now, as he tried to give the others reasons to smile, entertaining them all with songs and impressions. It turned out he was quite the comedian, but no one appreciated his sense of humor like Gretchen. She laughed at all his jokes, even the lame ones, and beamed him bright smiles that lit up her whole face. Neither of them seemed to be affected by the holiday gloom that had descended upon the others.

No one knew for sure what had caused this change, but Howie and AJ had a pretty good idea, which they discussed when Gabby wasn't around. "I think the Reverend got himself laid," AJ said in an undertone one night, smirking at Howie, who snickered. "Wish he'd share some of that with the rest of us, but I bet he's all monogamous. Too bad there's not more ladies left in the world... who are over the age of thirteen, I mean," he added, with a glance towards Gabby's closed bedroom door. "I ain't no pedophile."

Howie couldn't help but wish for the same thing, whenever he watched Brian and Gretchen together. They were certainly acting like a couple, holding hands and touching each other when they thought no one was looking, spending lots of time locked up in their house together, when they weren't working on the wall or their garden. It was a little sickening, but Howie tried not to resent them too much. At least they had found something to keep surviving for: each other. If only he could be so lucky.

But as winter approached, he wondered, *What's the point?* How much longer could they expect to survive, with just five of them left in the world? The base offered security and supplies for now, but eventually, their stock would run out, or the undead, desperate for human flesh, would gather and break down their defenses. One way or the other, they would die, too, and sometimes, he felt that sooner would be better than later.

In honor of Thanksgiving, though, he kept his dark thoughts to himself and joined the others around a dinner table set for five to share the feast Gretchen had prepared. Howie had to hand it to her: she'd certainly put her best effort into making the meal special. The table was set with fine dishes and glassware, decorated with candles and a homemade centerpiece, and piled with food. Before they started passing dishes, though, Brian insisted on saying a blessing, so they joined hands and bowed their heads.

"Heavenly Father," Brian began, "we thank You for this day, for this feast and fellowship we're about to enjoy. We thank You for bringing the five of us together, for allowing us to survive, and we ask that You please watch over our loved ones who are no longer here with us. We also ask that, if our missing friends are still alive, You help guide them home to us. In Your name, we pray. Amen."

"Amen," Howie murmured and heard Gretchen do the same. He cleared his throat and took a swig of water to wash away the lump that had risen at the mention of Kevin, Nick, and Riley. Then he looked at the spread on the table and said, "This looks wonderful, Gretchen."

"Amen!" Brian said again, and Gretchen beamed, looking pleased with herself.

Of course, there was no turkey on their Thanksgiving table, but she had roasted a couple of seagulls that Brian had shot and plucked clean for her, and she served those, along with fish, in place of a turkey. It was not the same, as Gabby was quick to point out, but it was still fresh meat, and the rest of them tried to pretend the gulls were just tiny turkeys. "You know, the Pilgrims didn't have turkey at their Thanksgiving, either," Gretchen said, serving Gabby a piece of fish when she flat-out refused to try the gull meat. "They ate seafood, too, and duck and venison – deer – because that's what was available to them."

Gabby rolled her eyes, but Brian smiled at Gretchen. Howie and AJ exchanged a knowing look across the table.

Maybe the main dish wasn't same, but Gretchen had managed to fix all the other staples of a modern Thanksgiving, improvising with the ingredients she could find on the base. She cooked Stove Top stuffing and turkey gravy from a packet, whipped up mashed potatoes out of a box, and served cranberry sauce out of a can. But her green bean casserole, made from canned green beans and Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, was as good as any Howie had tasted, and

so were her homemade rolls and candied yams, topped with melted marshmallows and lots of brown sugar.

Howie had second helpings of everything but the seagull, stuffing himself well past the point of being full. “Now, I hope you saved some room for pumpkin pie,” Gretchen said, smiling, as they started to get up from the table.

“I did,” Gabby piped up instantly, looking somewhat happier than she had before the meal.

“I can always make more room for pie,” AJ added, belching loudly and grinning. “See? Good stuff, Gretch.”

“Very good,” Howie agreed. They all felt better with full bellies, but once the table had been cleared, they stood around the kitchen, looking at each other, unsure of what to do next. Howie had never attended such a small Thanksgiving dinner; he came from a big family, and for him, Thanksgiving usually meant a large gathering at his parents’ house in Orlando. It felt strange with just the five of them.

“You guys go sit down, let your food digest,” said Gretchen after a few seconds of silence. “I’m gonna wash some of these dishes.”

“I’ll dry,” Brian volunteered right away, joining her at the sink. Howie and AJ smirked at each other again, before retreating into the living room with Gabby.

Howie sat down in an armchair, Gabby flopped onto the couch, and AJ stayed put in his wheelchair, his broken leg elevated on one of the footrests. They looked each other. Finally, Gabby said, “So... what would you guys be doing with your families right now if this was a normal Thanksgiving?”

“Watching football!” Brian called from the kitchen, without missing a beat. They all laughed.

“Same thing I’m doing now – dishes!” Gretchen sighed, and they chuckled some more.

“Drinking,” said AJ, totally deadpan. No one laughed at that; Howie and Gabby looked away, avoiding eye contact.

“What about you, Howie?” Gabby asked, breaking the awkward silence for the second time. “What would you be doing?”

Howie tried to think. He honestly wasn’t sure. He thought his family usually turned on the traditional Thanksgiving football games, but he couldn’t remember ever having watched one closely before. He’d never been much of a sports guy. Neither was he one to help clean up the kitchen; that was the women’s job. He

liked to have a drink or two with dinner, but his family wasn't the type that spent holidays getting drunk together. So how had he spent his last Thanksgiving with them?

"I don't know," he was finally forced to admit. He dragged his hand through his hair, feeling his brow furrow. "Nothing special, I guess. Talking like this, maybe." *Or working on my iPad, while the rest of them talked,* he thought, being honest with himself. The realization sent a stab of regret shooting through his heart. He had taken so much for granted, missed out on so many moments he would never get back. "What about you?" he volleyed the question back to Gabby, mostly to keep his mind from digging too deeply into that thought.

"Usually we played a game after dinner. Like, a board game or cards or something like charades or Pictionary. We could play a game now, if you want." For a brief moment, her whole face lit up, childlike in its enthusiasm.

AJ ruined it by snorting at her. "Yeah, 'cause I'd rock at charades like this." He gestured at his bum leg. "I am pretty good at Pictionary, though," he added, with an evil grin that told Howie his kind of Pictionary probably wasn't appropriate for a thirteen-year-old to play.

"Well, maybe we could play cards or something," he said, without any of Gabby's enthusiasm. He wasn't a big fan of games.

"Poker," growled AJ. "Texas Hold 'Em."

"I'll play!"

"You know how to play poker, kid?"

"No, but you can teach me!" Gabby's face was still glowing. Even Howie, who wasn't a big fan of children, either, except for his own, found himself smiling in relief at the sudden lift in her spirits.

"Well, alright... you find some cards, and we'll play," AJ agreed.

Gabby shot off to ask Gretchen where she might be able to find a deck of cards in the house, and Howie looked at AJ with a shrug. "Who knew all it took was offering to teach her poker to get her to smile?"

AJ tried hard not to smile, looking pleased with himself nonetheless.

Gabby came tearing back into the room a few minutes later, but she wasn't carrying a pack of cards. "Did you guys hear that?" she demanded, her eyes wide.

Howie felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. He looked over at AJ, who stiffened in his wheelchair. Neither of them had heard anything. “Hear what? Zombies??”

“No... honking! I heard a car honking; listen!”

They fell silent, but all Howie could hear was the clinking of dishes and Gretchen and Brian’s conversation in the kitchen. “Hey, lovebirds, shut up for a sec!” AJ bellowed, and the two of them appeared in the doorway, looking alarmed. Brian held a dishtowel; Gretchen’s hands were wet and soapy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just listen. Gabby thought she heard something.”

“I *did* hear something! It was honking; I’m sure it was!” Gabby insisted.

No one moved. They all stood frozen... necks craned... heads cocked... ears perked... straining to listen.

And then they heard it: a long, low, toneless note, as if someone was leaning on the steering wheel. It was definitely a car horn. Whose car, they couldn’t say, but they all looked at each other hopefully, hesitating just a split second before they sprang into action.

“Do you think it could be them?!” Gretchen gasped, hurriedly wiping her hands on a couch cushion.

“It’s gotta be; who else could it be?”

“Unless it’s just a zombie, stuck in its car.”

“No way... There are no zombies stuck in cars anymore, not around here. We got rid of them all. It’s gotta be them!”

“Well, c’mon, let’s go!” Gabby was already at the front door, looking back at them with impatience. They all grabbed their guns, a habit that had become as routine as pocketing one’s wallet and keys before leaving the house, and followed her out, AJ bringing up the rear in his wheelchair. Brian headed automatically to the driver’s side of their pick-up truck, while Gabby scrambled up into the bed. Gretchen got halfway to the truck before she stopped and turned.

“AJ, maybe you should stay here...”

“Hell no, I wanna see if it’s them. Just throw me in the back.”

“I’ll ride with him,” Howie volunteered quickly, and they helped AJ out of the wheelchair and into the truck bed, where he could lean against one side, his bad leg stretched out in front of him. Howie climbed in after him, and Gretchen slammed the tailgate shut and got into the cab with Brian, who had already started the engine. They took off, going much faster than the posted speed limit on the base. Howie clutched his rifle anxiously in his hands. AJ winced painfully every time the truck hit a bump. Gabby rose up on her knees, leaning over the side of the truck to get a better look ahead, until Howie said, “Gabby, sit down.”

“Yeah, your mom wouldn’t have wanted you to end up roadkill,” muttered AJ, holding onto his leg.

Gabby shot him a resentful look, but plopped back down onto her bottom with a huff.

As they sped up Bayshore Boulevard, heading for the front gate, Brian suddenly laid on the horn. Howie’s heart leapt into his throat; he twisted around to peer through the cab windows, trying to see what Brian had.

“It’s them!” he heard Gretchen cry. She pointed straight ahead, bouncing in the passenger seat.

“Really, it’s them?!” Gabby was up on her knees again, trying to see. This time, Howie didn’t bother to stop her.

“All of them?” AJ asked, unable to see a thing.

Howie squinted ahead, his face pressed so close to the rear window that his forehead smacked into the glass when Brian slammed on the brakes. “Ow,” he muttered, rubbing his head. By the time he had turned around, Gabby had already vaulted herself over the side of the truck and was running toward the gate. Gretchen was right behind her. Brian left the truck idling in park and climbed out, too. Howie shrugged at AJ, said “Sorry,” and jumped out after them, his gun still in hand.

His eyes followed the path Gabby had taken, and he saw, on the other side of the gate, another truck. Squeezed into its cab, sitting three across, were Nick, Riley, and Kevin. They waved through the windshield, all of them grinning, none of them seeing what Howie, from his distance, could see: the undead, attracted by the horn, shambling in from all sides to surround them.

Gabby, who had been dancing around in front of the gate, shouting, “Open it, open it!” suddenly shrieked and backpedaled, as the zombies approached. Brian, who was already halfway to the guard’s kiosk, hesitated, raising his gun.

Kevin, in the driver’s seat, rolled down his window and shouted, “Brian, open the gate and close it again right behind us! Gabby, get in the control center with

Brian and stay there! Gretchen, Howie, be prepared to shoot any of them who get through!”

Howie couldn't help but smile. Kevin had been back five minutes and was already back in charge. It was a relief; he had never been so happy to take one of his orders. He and Gretchen positioned themselves like sentries on either side of the gate, already firing at the closest zombies as it slowly slid open. Kevin gunned the truck's engine the first change he got, barely clearing the gate as he sped through it. The tires squealed as he slammed on the brakes again; Nick and Riley were already jumping out, guns at the ready, to join Howie and Gretchen in defending the entrance.

The zombies should have fallen like toy soldiers as they were hit with the volley of gunfire, but they didn't. To Howie's shock, they exploded instead, sending rotting bits spraying everywhere. He staggered back, horrified, but Nick said casually, “Oh yeah – they do that now,” and kept on firing. When there was nothing but a pile of body parts outside the closed gate, Nick lowered his gun and said, “Sorry for not warning you about the ‘splodey zombies. We just found out about them ourselves about a week ago.”

“We think it must be from the build-up of gases inside their bodies – you know, from the decomposition,” Riley added, in a matter-of-fact way that told Howie they had discussed this prior. He glanced over at Gretchen, who looked just as disgusted as he felt. With the base mostly secure, it had been awhile since either of them had killed a zombie.

“We should burn the remains,” said Kevin, surveying the sight grimly, “but I guess that can wait till tomorrow.”

“Of course it can wait,” Nick replied impatiently, grinning at the others, as if to say, *See what I've had to deal with this whole time?* “We're finally home – time to celebrate!”

Riley and Gretchen were already squealing like a couple of schoolgirls in each other's arms, so glad to see each other again. Gabby ran at Kevin and threw her arms around his waist, burying her face in his chest as she hugged him tightly. Brian was right behind her, grinning as he waited for his turn to hug his cousin. Nick strode over to Howie, his arm outstretched. He took Howie's hand and pulled him into a one-armed embrace. “Good to see ya again, Howard,” he said, grinning, as he released him again.

Howie grinned back at the big, goofy blonde. “You too, Nicky. I can't believe you're back. We thought...”

“You'd given up on us, huh?” Nick laughed, easygoing as ever. “Yeah, we figured. We're just glad you guys are still here. We worried you might've had to move on without us.”

“What happened? What took you so long to make it back?” Howie asked, realizing they had arrived in a truck and not a plane, as the original plan had called for. Obviously, they’d been forced to abandon both the plane and the plan.

Nick didn’t answer; Brian had just come over and pulled him into a brotherly hug. Howie went to greet Kevin, and everyone was talking at once, until AJ shouted, “Hey! Am I invisible over here or what?”

Kevin frowned as he spotted AJ for the first time, stretched out in the back of the truck. “What happened to him?” he asked Howie in a low voice.

“Broken leg. And Jo...” Howie saw Kevin’s eyes flash toward Gabby, who was walking back toward the pair of trucks with Gretchen and Riley. He shook his head. “... she’s dead.”

Kevin didn’t gasp, but sucked in a rattling breath, his brow knitting together. “When? How?”

“Bout a month ago. Same way Kayleigh went,” he answered, almost choking on Kayleigh’s name. He swallowed hard.

“What about the wall?”

“Still working on it. It hasn’t been easy, since AJ’s injury... you know, with only four of us...”

“First priority, now that we’re back, is to finish it,” said Kevin, his jaw set.

Howie nodded. Ahead of them, he heard Nick say, “Hey Gretchen, what’s for dinner? I’m freaking starving. We haven’t had a decent meal in-”

Gabby’s gasp interrupted him. “Don’t you know?” she cried incredulously. “It’s Thanksgiving!!”

“Really? Today?” Nick looked blankly at Riley, who shrugged.

“Uh, yeah!” said Gabby. “C’mon, Gretchen made mashed potatoes and stuffing and green bean casserole and rolls, and we had to eat seagulls, instead of turkey, but there’s pumpkin pie for dessert!”

That was all Nick, Riley, and Kevin needed to hear. They piled back into their truck, as Howie and the others went back to theirs, and together, the two trucks drove off to the block of houses they’d turned into their home.

Back in Brian and Gretchen’s kitchen, Gretchen took out three more plates, while Brian brought in more chairs, and the eight of them squeezed around the table

together, talking all at once. Nick, Riley, and Kevin seemed exhausted, but exhilarated, while Howie and the others pelted them with questions, eager to hear all about their adventure. “Let them eat first,” said Gretchen, putting plates of reheated Thanksgiving leftovers in front of them, and the conversation died down as the three hungry travelers dug in.

While they ate, Howie and AJ filled them in on everything that happened on the base, and Gretchen and Brian told them about their trip to Atlanta. Then it was Kevin, Nick, and Riley’s turn to talk. Howie and the others listened in stunned silence, as they recounted everything that had happened to them since leaving the base – their disastrous landing to refuel the plane in Colorado, the explosion that had injured Kevin, the infection that had nearly killed him, their long journey home by road and by river, encounters with zombie boybands, zombie cowboys, and Cajun zombies, Nick’s seizure in New Orleans, Riley’s close call in the swamp... By the sound of it, it was a miracle any of them were alive, let alone all three of them.

Howie was not at all surprised when Brian suggested another prayer. Once again, they joined hands, eight in the circle now, as Brian said, “Father, we thank You again for this miracle You have given us. You have answered our prayers by bringing the rest of our family home, safe and sound, and on this day of Thanksgiving, we couldn’t be more thankful for Your watchful eye and guiding hand. In Your name, we give thanks. Amen.”

“Amen,” the word echoed around the table, as they all looked up, smiling at each other.

For a few moments, they just sat there, enjoying the togetherness. Howie felt full in a way that had nothing to do with food, though his belly was plenty grateful for Gretchen’s cooking.

It was Nick who broke the contented silence. “Hey, Gretch?” he said suddenly, looking around the kitchen. “Did someone say something about pumpkin pie?”

They all laughed, and with a smile, Gretchen got up to dish out their dessert.

PART IX: REVELATION

Chapter 91

It’s almost Christmas. I can’t believe we’ve been here this long. I can’t imagine celebrating Christmas here, either, but I guess we’ll have to do something to make it special.

Last Christmas was special. It was our first Christmas as newlyweds, and we'd just gotten the best present any couple could hope for: we'd found out we were expecting a baby! We went home to Indiana for Christmas and shared the news with our families by giving them each a wrapped box containing an ultrasound photo, which showed our baby as nothing but a little black blob floating in a sea of white. But he – or she; we'll never know – was so much more to us than that.

We thought we'd spend this Christmas at home together with our new little bundle of joy. Instead, I'm going to be spending it on a military base in Florida, surrounded by zombies, with people I've only known for nine months. They're my family now, and I love them all, especially Brian. But I can't pretend it's the same. I miss my real family. I miss Shawn. I miss the baby. I miss snow and Christmas lights and helping little hands cut snowflakes out of paper and watching A Charlie Brown Christmas on TV and seeing Santa at the mall and dropping change into the Salvation Army bell-ringers' red pots.

It won't be the same this year. But then, nothing's the same. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Monday, December 24, 2012

Week Thirty-Six

"I'm... dreaming... of a white... Christmas..."

"Doesn't look like there's much chance of that happening, does it?" laughed Gretchen, looking out the window at the palm trees swaying against a backdrop of blue sky.

"...just like the ones I used to know..."

Behind the wheel, Riley laughed, too. "Well, you know what they say about Hell freezing over... Still, I think the only way we'll get a white Christmas here is if we burn enough zombies to cover the ground in ash. I guess that would be more like a gray Christmas, technically..."

"Sick, Rye." Gretchen shook her head. "I guess I shouldn't complain – I mean, imagine if we had to deal with the cold on top of everything else – but I would love to see some snow."

"Snow? What's snow?" Riley looked over at her and grinned. "I forget you're from up north. I haven't seen snow in years. We only have fake snow in Florida."

"I love snow. I missed it last year, too, when we were living in Georgia." *Our first Christmas together*, thought Gretchen, remembering how much fun she and Shawn had had as newlyweds, decorating the house in Atlanta for Christmas. *Our only Christmas together.*

A wave of overwhelming sadness washed over her, and the voice of Bing Crosby crooning Christmas songs through the truck's speakers did nothing to ebb it. She'd gotten excited when she'd found his CD in a box of Christmas decorations back at their house on the base, but now she regretted the choice to play it while she and Riley went to pick up groceries for their Christmas dinner. It just made her nostalgic and homesick for the life she'd left behind and the family she would never see again.

She tried to hold it together in front of Riley, tried to push thoughts of Shawn out of her head and focus on the task at hand. *Christmas dinner*, she reminded herself, looking down at the grocery list she'd made out. Just as with their Thanksgiving feast, she would have to improvise with some of the ingredients, but she felt reasonably confident she'd be able to come up with something that would please the rest of the group. She was determined to make Christmas on the base special for them, Gabby in particular. She knew they all had to be feeling the same way she was, missing their loved ones more than ever during the holiday season. It seemed impossible that they could truly have a merry Christmas there, though the mood on the base had certainly been lifted by the return of Riley, Nick, and Kevin.

Gretchen's own mood had been all over the place lately. Some days, she couldn't stop smiling, and others, she couldn't stop crying. Being with Brian made her happy, but remembering the life she'd had with Shawn made her sad, and the frequency with which these emotions fluctuated made her feel both guilty and confused. The emotional turmoil had even started to affect her physically; she had trouble sleeping at night and would lie awake long after Brian had fallen asleep next to her, until she finally drifted off, only to wake in the morning feeling exhausted and slightly nauseous, like she'd been worrying herself sick even in her dreams. *It's just the holidays getting me down*, she thought. *I'll feel better after the new year*. But even then, it depressed her to think of starting another year in this place, under constant threat of the undead who skulked outside its walls. It was like being trapped inside a nightmare from which she could never wake up.

"I'll be home for Christmas... You can count on me..."

Riley had fallen silent as she drove, and Gretchen's attention was drawn back to the music. The track on the CD had changed, and she thought, *Oh God... not this song*. As a soldier's girl, she had always appreciated the sentiment of the song, the significance it had at the time it was released, when World War II kept many soldiers far from home for the holidays. But now it came as one more devastating blow to her already-broken heart, yet another reminder that Shawn would never be coming back to her.

"Christmas Eve will find me... where the lovelight gleams. I'll be home for Christmas... if only in my dreams."

If only... she thought wistfully. But they were fighting a much different war now, a war which had claimed the lives of Shawn and the rest of their families, loved ones who would never be home for Christmas again. The thought brought tears to her eyes, and as she sat there feeling sorry for herself and for Brian, Gabby, and the rest of them, Gretchen started to cry. She couldn't help it. One minute, she was fine, and the next, tears were sliding down her face. She tried to hide them, taking an inconspicuous swipe at her eyes, but a sniffle gave her away. She quickly turned her head toward the window, but not before Riley looked over at her in concern.

"Gretch? Are you okay?"

Gretchen started to nod, then gave up and shook her head.

"Aww, Gretch..." She felt the truck slow down, as Riley eased it to a stop right in the middle of the road. Before she knew it, her friend's arms were around her, and she was sobbing onto Riley's shoulder. "I know... I know..." Riley kept whispering, even though Gretchen was crying too hard to explain. Then again, she probably didn't have to. Of course Riley knew. Their stories were all the same.

"I'm s-sorry," Gretchen said shakily, once she'd gotten control of herself. She hiccupped, took a shuddering breath, hiccupped again. She felt like a little girl, working herself into such hysterics. What was wrong with her?

"Don't apologize," replied Riley, sounding sympathetic. "We've all been there. Christmas getting you down?"

Gretchen nodded, but she began to suspect that wasn't the only thing bothering her. Her stomach felt queasy. Had she made herself sick from crying so hard? Riley was still talking, offering words of consolation, but Gretchen wasn't listening anymore. She was holding her stomach, trying to settle it, but all of a sudden, she knew it was too late.

"Where are you going?!" Riley called, as Gretchen jumped out of the truck and ran to the side of the road, where she doubled over and vomited. Riley was by her side in an instant, rubbing her back and holding her hair while she finished emptying the contents of her stomach. "What was that?" Riley asked, frowning at her in concern once she straightened. "Are you sick, or just upset?"

Gretchen wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and shook her head. "I don't know. I've just been feeling weird lately. Maybe I am getting sick."

Riley narrowed her eyes, then put her hands on her hips. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

Gretchen's eyes widened; she hadn't even considered that possibility. She tried to laugh it off, shaking her head and saying, "No... I don't *think* so." But she had to admit, it was possible.

That was Riley's next question: "*Could* you be?"

Gretchen blushed and nodded, avoiding Riley's eyes as she tried to remember when her last period had been. Was she late? It was hard to know. Though their timekeeping had evolved since the early days of carving tally marks into the chapel wall, the days still passed in a monotonous blur, each one more or less the same as the one before it. Nothing stood out in her memory.

"You should take a test." Riley grabbed her wrist and tugged her toward the truck. "C'mon. I'm sure we can find one somewhere around here."

As they drove to the exchange mall at the front of the base, Gretchen cycled between excitement and fear over the possibility of another pregnancy. There had been a time, merely months ago, when she'd wanted to be a mother more than anything. But now? Here? She wasn't sure she wanted to bring a child into the undead world.

Of course, she was getting ahead of herself. She wasn't even sure she was carrying a child. But the more she thought about it, the more likely Riley's diagnosis seemed. And she thought about it the whole shopping trip, as they rummaged through the stores to gather the supplies for their dinner, picking up a pregnancy test in the drugstore.

"Can we do it here?" Gretchen pleaded, before they left the mall. "I have to know."

They found a ladies' room and walked in. Gretchen, who was in the lead, stopped suddenly a few steps inside the door, causing Riley to stumble into the back of her. "Sorry!" Riley sputtered. "What-?"

"Shh!" Gretchen hissed, freezing Riley in her tracks. They both paused to listen to the rattling sounds coming from the last stall in the restroom.

Heart pounding, Gretchen slowly bent down and saw a pair of shuffling feet under the stall door. She looked back at Riley, whose eyes were wide. Gretchen understood her panic: neither of them were armed. They hadn't encountered a zombie inside the base in weeks, but clearly, they hadn't yet killed them all.

Riley beckoned to her and started to back out of the bathroom. Gretchen followed on tiptoe. But the zombie had already heard them or smelled them out; the stall door rattled with fervor. Then, with horror, Gretchen saw a rotting arm reach underneath the door. A head followed, long, stringy hair trailing along the floor, as the zombie crawled clumsily out from under the stall.

Gretchen's instinct was to run, but Riley's fight or flight response chose a different option. She pushed Gretchen aside and picked up the metal wastebasket, which was still overflowing with paper towels. They scattered to the floor as she raised the can over her head and brought it crashing down onto the undead woman's skull before she could straighten up. The zombie collapsed, splayed across the tiled floor, where Riley continued to beat her with the trashcan until she stopped moving completely.

"God damn those boys," she sighed, panting, as she tossed the trashcan aside and wiped the perspiration from her forehead. "Were they too chicken to check out the girls' bathroom, or what?"

Gretchen laughed nervously, releasing some of her tension. "I guess so."

"I tell you, some jobs are just better left to a woman. So – how 'bout that pregnancy test?"

Gretchen laughed at the absurdity of their situation. "Like I'll be able to pee on a stick now!"

"Oh, come on, just do it. I'll stand guard."

Sighing, Gretchen went into one of the other stalls – after checking to make sure it was completely clear, of course – while Riley waited outside it. The stench of the rotting zombie turned her stomach, threatening to make her vomit again. She held her breath as she fumbled with the package and got herself positioned. A few minutes passed before she could relax enough to get the job done, but finally, she handed the stick underneath the stall to Riley and pulled up her pants.

"I need to get out of here," she said breathlessly, as soon as she barged out of the stall.

Riley nodded in agreement, and they took the test outside the bathroom to wait for the results. "So what are we looking for here?" she asked, looking over Gretchen's shoulder. "One line? Two?"

"Two," whispered Gretchen, staring down at the empty window of the test strip in her hand. As she waited for something to appear, she was struck by a sense of déjà vu, followed by a wave of sadness. A year ago, she'd taken a test like this at home with Shawn at her side, and they'd celebrated the results together. It felt wrong to be doing this in the middle of an abandoned mall. She squeezed her eyes shut, wishing she could click her heels and go home.

Then she heard Riley's sudden intake of breath behind her. "Gretch..."

Gretchen's eyes flew open, and as she looked down, her heart skipped a beat.

The mood around the base that night was as bipolar as Gretchen had been feeling for weeks. On one end of the spectrum, there was Gabby, who sat sullenly in the corner after dinner, hugging her knees to her chest and barely speaking. On the other end were Nick and AJ, who were overcompensating for the lack of Christmas cheer by singing their own, improvised versions of carols.

“Zombies moan... are you listening?” Nick sang loudly, his voice drowning out the distant moans. *“In the lane, blood is glistening. A horrible sight... We’re ready to fight... Livin’ in a zombie wonderland!”*

AJ laughed and interrupted, *“No, no, how ‘bout this? Dashing through the base... with a shotgun in my hand... picking up the pace... here in Zombieland! Hordes of zombies moan... giving me a fright. What fun it is to shoot the undead in the head tonight!”*

Nick laughed too and joined in, *“Ohh, shotgun shells, zombies smell, blow their brains away! Oh, what fun it is to kill a zombie every day!”*

Then AJ struck up another new tune. *“Death to the world! The end has come. Let zombies roam the Earth!”*

“Aw, c’mon, AJ, that’s just depressing,” Howie cut him off, shaking his head.

Gretchen glanced at Brian and saw him frowning, too, though he didn’t say anything to ruin AJ’s fun. He’d been quiet all evening, and she figured he must be thinking about his family. She had kept quiet, too, not wanting to say anything that would give her away, not knowing how to tell him she was expecting his child. How would he react to the news? Would he be glad to become a father again or upset at the thought of having a baby under these circumstances?

Gretchen didn’t even know how *she* felt about it yet. A part of her was excited, but she also felt fearful and guilty. She worried about Brian’s reaction. She worried about being pregnant again, this time with no medical care. She worried about losing another baby. She worried about having the baby and trying to raise a child in the midst of the zombie apocalypse. She wondered what to do. Only one thing was certain: she had to tell Brian.

When he got up and wandered outside, she followed him. “Are you okay?” she asked softly.

He nodded. “It’s just hard, celebrating Christmas here, without my family.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

They fell silent for a few seconds. Then Gretchen asked, “Can we talk?”

“Of course,” he said, looking over at her. His eyes glinted in the moonlight.

She reached for his hand. “Let’s go back to our place. Just for a few minutes, so we can be alone.”

“Alright.” They left the porch of the house where Kevin, Gabby, Howie, and AJ were living and walked next door to the house they shared with Riley and Nick. “What’s up?” Brian asked, putting an arm around her as they settled down on the porch swing together.

Gretchen leaned against him, glad she didn’t have to look at him. “I have something to tell you.”

“Something good or something bad?”

“I don’t know yet. It depends on how you take it.”

“Alright...” She could hear the confusion in his voice. “So what is it?”

Gretchen sucked in a deep breath. “I’m pregnant.”

She felt Brian stiffen. His jacket rustled as he turned to look at her. She forced herself to look back at him. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but he didn’t look angry, just surprised. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. I took a test today with Riley. It was positive.”

“Wow...” he whispered. She wondered how he meant it and decided he was just stunned, like she’d been. After a few seconds, he said, “So... we’re gonna have a baby...”

If Shawn had said that a year ago, she might have laughed and said something snarky, like, “*That is the result of being pregnant, yes.*” But all she could say this time was, “Are you upset?”

“Upset?” he asked, sounding just as surprised by her question as he had by her news. “No, of course not. I’m just... wow! I sure wasn’t expecting anything like this.”

“Me neither,” she said, sighing.

“Are *you* upset?”

She hesitated, then shook her head. “No... just scared. What are we going to do, Brian?”

“What are we going to do?” He smiled at her and hugged her closer to his side. “Sounds like we’re going to have a baby.”

“You know what I mean.”

He nodded, still smiling. “I know. But there’s no point in worrying about it now. It’s in God’s hands. We should consider this a blessing... a miracle, even, given everything we’ve been through. If it’s meant to be, He’ll make sure it all works out.”

And if not? she wondered, but didn’t ask. She didn’t want to question Brian’s renewed faith. As long as he wasn’t upset, she couldn’t be either. Relief was already setting in, and as she smiled back at him, a sense of peace enveloped her like a warm blanket. Wrapped in his arms, she felt loved and protected.

Brian was right. There was no sense in worrying now. If her math was correct, they had eight more months to figure things out. Maybe the world would be a better place by then. Maybe not. But even if nothing changed, at least they were relatively safe there on the base. At least they had each other.

We’ll make a family of our own, she thought, snuggling against him.

On a gloomy Christmas in Zombieland, they’d been given a gift, and Gretchen knew that the gifts least expected are often the gifts cherished most.

Chapter 92

*“To you, O Lord, I call;
my rock, do not refuse to hear me,
for if you are silent to me,
I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.
Hear the voice of my supplication,
as I cry to you for help,
as I lift up my hands
toward your most holy sanctuary.”
(Psalm 28: 1-2)*

*“It was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me*

*you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.”
(Psalm 22: 9-11)*

As I read from the Book of Psalms, I'm reminded of both the greatness and the goodness of my God. My faith in Him has been restored; I've been reassured that He is still watching over us, giving us protection from the ungodly creatures that roam His earth, for God is good, and they are the result of evil.

Now I look to my Father for guidance in this time of uncertainty. He has blessed us with the miracle of new life in this world of the undead, and I'm grateful, but I am also afraid, both for Gretchen and for our unborn child. So much is at stake, and we have so much to fear. I can't bear the thought of losing another child, and to lose Gretchen, who has been a source of comfort to me since the day the dead rose, would be equally devastating.

Until I found my way back to the Lord, Gretchen was my rock, and now she is so much more – not only my lover, but the mother of my child. No one can replace Leighanne in my heart, but Gretchen gives me hope that love can still exist in this world. This new baby will not bring back Brooke and Bonnie, but he or she will be loved and, I pray, protected from the threat that exists outside these walls.

This isn't the ideal place to have a child, but then, neither was the stable in Bethlehem where Mary gave birth to baby Jesus. If she can do it, so can Gretchen. I know in my heart that God will be with her, but I still worry about everything that could go wrong. I need to give my fears over to my Father, put my trust in Him, and rest assured that He will watch over us.

It isn't always easy, though, to submit to God's will. I still wish there was something I could do to secure our future and prepare us for what's to come in the next nine months. The void Jo's passing left behind seems wider than ever; I know I would feel better if she were still here on Earth to lend her guidance and expertise. But she's not, and so I pray to my God to give us a sign or send us some help. I'm not sure we can do this on our own.

Lord, help us... guide us... be with us. In this new year, we'll need Your mercy more than ever.

*“I sought the Lord, and He answered me
and delivered me from all of my fears.”
(Psalm 34: 4)*

*“Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.”
(Psalm 37: 3-4)*

Tuesday, January 1, 2013
Week Thirty-Seven

“Ten... nine...”

Eight-and-a-half months after the world died, Brian looked around the circle of eight at the seven other survivors.

“Six... five...”

For the last few minutes, their eyes had been glued to the face of Howie’s watch, which sat on the coffee table in the center of their circle.

“Three... two... one... HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Nick was the only one who shouted it. The others let it slip somberly through their lips. Even Gabby looked solemn, although that was nothing new these days. The last of her childlike exuberance had faded away with her mother’s passing. Though still just thirteen, she seemed as much of an adult as the rest of them, world-weary and wise beyond her years.

Would this world have done the same thing to Brooke and Bonnie? Brian sometimes wondered. Perhaps thankfully, he would never find out. All he knew for sure was that his daughters were in a better place. At least they would never have to see the horrors Gabby had witnessed or feel the fear and desperation they all felt on a daily basis.

The new year was supposed to signify a fresh start, a sense of hope. But it was hard to feel hopeful when they were still, as far as they knew, the only eight people left on the planet, struggling to survive on a base that was surrounded by the living dead, who still skulked outside their fortified fences. How long could they last like this? Eventually, their stock of supplies would run out. Even if their garden succeeded, food would be scarce. And they still hadn’t found a solution for the impending shortage of fuel to feed the generators. Without electricity, they’d be living in the Dark Ages again. It was only a matter of time before the lights went out. Then the only light left in Brian’s life would be the love he shared with Gretchen... *if* they were lucky.

The news that Gretchen was carrying his child had come as a surprise, but the glimmer of hope and happiness he’d felt when he’d found out had been

extinguished by fear. Contrary to the things he'd said to reassure Gretchen, Brian couldn't help but worry, both for their baby and for her own health. He knew women had been delivering babies on their own since Eve's time, but he also knew how many things could go wrong, complications no one on the base would know how to handle. Losing Jo and Kayleigh had been hard on all of them, but Brian feared that losing Gretchen or another child would destroy him. It was that fear that fought with his restored, but fragile faith, threatening to unhinge him.

"Aren't we supposed to start singing now?" asked Nick, who still managed to look on the bright side, even in the midst of darkness.

Riley laughed, and the sound lifted Brian's spirits. "Go for it," she said. "You know you want to."

So Nick launched into, "*Should auld acquaintance be forgot...*"

"...and never brought to mind?" Gretchen promptly joined in, surprising them all. Her high, sweet voice made Brian smile.

"*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,*" he sang along, "*and auld lang syne?*"

Gradually, they all joined in, until there were eight voice chorusing, "*For auld lang syne, my dear, for auld lang syne... We'll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne.*" Brian could hear AJ's raspy tenor and Gabby's shrill soprano echoing about a beat behind the others, unsure of the lyrics, and that made him smile, too. If there was anything left in this world to give him hope, it was these seven people sitting before him. Together, they were still strong, and if their camaraderie could survive, so could they.

"How about a toast?" suggested Howie, standing up. He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of champagne. Brian raised his eyebrows in surprise; Kevin had told him they'd purged the house of alcohol after AJ nearly drank himself to death one day, while he and Gretchen were in Atlanta. He didn't miss his cousin's look of disapproval, but Kevin said nothing when Howie came around to fill their glasses. Brian was glad when he skipped AJ, and AJ didn't protest.

Everyone else held out their glasses to Howie, except Gretchen, who said, "None for me, thanks," when he stopped in front of her.

Uh oh, Brian thought, when the others looked at her in surprise. They hadn't told anyone else their news, and Riley had been sworn to secrecy until they figured out the best way to do it. This wasn't the way they'd imagined it, but since when had anything turned out like they'd planned?

AJ smirked at Gretchen. "It's okay, you can drink in front of me. I'm a grown-up; I can handle it." But before Gretchen could respond, his expression changed.

The smirk dropped off his face, as he raised his eyebrows. “Unless... you’re not pregnant or something, are you?”

Though she was far from showing, Gretchen couldn’t hide it. She didn’t have a poker face; her eyes widened, and her cheeks reddened, as a sheepish smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

The others stared at her, their mouths dropping open. “Seriously?” asked Kevin, looking from Gretchen to Brian for confirmation. Everyone else’s eyes followed his.

When Brian ducked his head in a subtle nod, AJ crowed, “Holy shit! You got knocked up by a preacher?! The world really has gone to Hell!”

At that, Brian felt his own face grow warm, but the weird thing was that he wasn’t really ashamed. Maybe the timing of it was wrong, but the rest felt... right. If it was in God’s plan, how could it be a mistake?

He felt reassured by the others’ reactions. “You’re gonna have a *baby*??” Gabby blurted, sitting up straight in her chair and gaping incredulously at Gretchen. She actually looked excited by the idea. Kevin didn’t seem as thrilled to have one more thing to stress over, but he congratulated both of them, and so did Howie, grinning as he wrung Brian’s hand.

Nick apparently noticed Riley’s lack of a reaction, because he suddenly thrust his finger toward her. “You knew! How long have you known?”

Riley smirked. “Since Christmas.”

His mouth gaped. “A *week*? We live in the same house! We share a freaking bed, and you kept this quiet for a whole *week*?! ”

She laughed. “It was Gretchen and Brian’s news to share, not mine.”

“Thanks, Rye.” Gretchen smiled and added, “Sorry, Nick.”

“Damn!” Nick just shook his head in disbelief, causing everyone to laugh at his expense. It lightened the mood in the house, which had been fairly gloomy all night, despite the occasion.

They’d tried to make New Year’s Eve special, as they had Christmas and Thanksgiving, but Brian had spent it the same way he’d spent all the other holidays they’d celebrated on the base: missing his family and wishing life could go back to the way it used to be. He’d rung in 2012 at home with his wife and children, watching the ball drop in Times Square from the comfort of their living room. Brooke and Bonnie had been allowed to stay up until midnight, hours past their usual bedtime, and they’d toasted with glasses of sparkling grape juice. This

year, there was nothing on TV and no one in Times Square but the walking dead. If 2012 was the year of the apocalypse, what other horrors would 2013 have in store for them?

It was a question that was on all of their minds, but maybe, thought Brian, this would not be another year of horror, but a year of healing. The new year would be a chance for rebirth and renewal... starting with the birth of his child, the first new life born into this world of death.

Maybe Gretchen's pregnancy was not a mistake, but a miracle.

These were the thoughts he comforted himself with, as he drifted off to sleep at her side in the early hours of the new year.

Brian woke to the sound of Gretchen getting sick. He staggered groggily out of bed and across the hall to the bathroom. The door was partway open, and peeking in, he could see Gretchen on her knees, her head bowed over the toilet. He pushed open the door and walked in, whispering her name so he wouldn't startle her.

"I'm okay," Gretchen said shakily, without looking up. Her fingers gripped the sides of the toilet seat, like she couldn't decide whether to let go or not. "It's just morning sickness again. It'll pass."

Brian frowned, hating to see anyone in such a state. He didn't remember Leighanne ever being so sick; even with twins, she had sailed through her pregnancy. "Was it like this last time?" he wondered out loud.

She nodded. "Only in the first trimester. Once I got to my second trimester, I was fine. Second trimester was wonderful. Until..." She trailed off, shaking her head. Brian knelt behind her and put his hand on her back, rubbing it in slow, soothing circles until she decided she was done and climbed to her feet.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked, as he walked her back into the bedroom they now shared.

She shook her head. "I don't think I could keep it down."

"Then just go back to bed and rest, until you feel better."

He helped her back into bed and climbed in beside her, but while Gretchen pulled the covers over her head and sunk back into sleep, Brian lay awake. He stared up at the ceiling, troubled by her discomfort. He knew morning sickness was a common pregnancy symptom, but he wished there was someone on the base who could reassure him that Gretchen would be fine. Someone like Jo. He missed her

now more than ever. There was no one left who knew anything about medicine or childbirth. Of them all, he and Howie had the most experience in that area, and that was a scary thought. What would they do if something went really wrong? Brian knew he had to trust in the Lord to take care of Gretchen and the baby, but he wished he could put his faith in someone a little closer to home.

After awhile, he got up again and wandered downstairs, leaving Gretchen to sleep. Nick was awake, sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of hot chocolate in his hand and his hair sticking out in all directions. “Good morning,” Brian said, smiling at the crazy hair. Nick was in need of a trim.

“Morning,” Nick grunted, grinning bleary-eyed back at Brian. “How goes it?”

“It’s goin’. Riley still asleep?”

“Yep. Gretchen too?”

“Yeah. She already got up once and got sick. She’s back in bed.”

“Aw, sorry, that sucks.”

“I know.” Brian sighed and sank into a seat across the table, raking a hand through his disheveled curls. “I dunno how I’m gonna handle eight more months of this. I’m a nervous wreck already.”

“Heh, just wait till you have to deliver your own kid.” Nick started to snicker, but stopped when he saw that Brian wasn’t smiling.

What he’d said was no joke. There was nothing funny about it; it was the frightening reality of the situation they were facing, and it scared Brian to death. “I can’t stand the thought of staying here, waiting for something bad to happen and hoping that it doesn’t,” he said, shaking his head. “We need to find help. We need to find other survivors, someone who knows something about this sort of thing.”

“Uh, we tried that, remember? It didn’t work out so well for us.”

Brian sighed. “I know. But we have to try again. We have to keep trying.”

Nick shrugged. “Talk to your cousin, man. I don’t think he’s gonna be too stoked about the idea of leaving the base again, though, considering it almost killed him last time.”

Nick was right.

“It’s not worth the risk,” Kevin said, shaking his head, when Brian repeated his suggestion of resuming the search for more survivors.

“Not worth the risk?” Brian repeated. For a few seconds, he stared at his cousin in disbelief. Then he looked around at the other three men who had gathered in Kevin’s sun-soaked kitchen, wondering why none of them were stepping up to say anything in his defense. He knew Howie wouldn’t, but what about Nick? And AJ – hadn’t he practically begged Kevin to let him come along on their last expedition?

When none of them spoke, Brian added, “We’re risking a human life by staying here! Two lives, in fact – Gretchen’s and the baby’s! How can you say they’re not worth the risk?”

Kevin frowned, a shadow darkening his face as his eyes narrowed. “You know that wasn’t what I meant. All I’m saying is, the last time we tried splitting up to look for more survivors, it was a catastrophe. We lost Jo... I almost died... AJ got injured... Nick and Riley had too many close calls to count. It’s too dangerous to try again. We’re better off sticking together and staying here, for our own survival.”

“But that’s exactly what I’m talking about – our survival. I’m just looking further into the future than you are.”

“Nine months into the future, you mean.”

Brian ignored the sarcastic comment. “How long do you think we can actually survive here? Eventually, our resources will run out, or the zombies will break down our defenses, and we’ll be screwed.”

Kevin gave him a wry smile. “That’s a pretty pessimistic outlook, coming from someone who’s spent the last few months building walls and planting gardens to prevent those things from happening.”

Brian glared back. “Yeah, well, that’s a pretty cowardly course of action, coming from someone who used to fly military jets into war zones to fight for freedom. Are we really going to give up the fight and just hole ourselves up in here and wait for them to pick us off, one by one? We’re already down two.”

“And we won’t lose any more, as long as we stay here to protect each other.” Kevin’s voice sounded deathly calm, but his jaw was tightly clenched, and Brian could tell his last comment had touched a nerve in his cousin.

“We could lose Gretchen. Or the baby. Or both.”

Kevin nodded. “That’s a chance we have to take, but our chances are better if we stay here. We can take care of Gretchen. Women have been having babies outside hospitals since the dawn of mankind. If every baby needed a doctor to deliver it, our species would have died out a long time ago.”

Brian shook his head. "I don't wanna take chances. Not when it comes to my child."

"Well, Brian, it's not like you have a choice."

"I *do* have a choice. I could choose to go search for other survivors."

Kevin raised an eyebrow. "You could, but you're not going to. You wouldn't leave Gretchen behind, and you wouldn't put a pregnant woman in that kind of danger."

Brian didn't have an answer to that. He knew Kevin was right; he would never go off on his own, and he wouldn't bring Gretchen along unless everyone came. Kevin was right about that, too: there was strength in numbers, and they were most vulnerable when they were separated. He should have known it would be a hard sell. Kevin clearly felt responsible for their disastrous last attempt at finding other life in the undead world, and he wasn't willing to risk it again. *He's just willing to risk Gretchen's life*, Brian thought, feeling frustrated.

He decided to give it one more shot. "But if we all went together..."

"I'm not subjecting Gabby to that," Kevin interrupted. "She's been through more than enough already. She needs some stability."

"We have a good thing going here," Howie added, speaking for the first time in minutes. "We're safer here than anywhere else. Why sacrifice that when we've never seen a sign that there are other survivors out there?"

"It can't be just us," Brian said, shaking his head. "It just can't be."

"We traveled across the entire country, Bri," Nick put in quietly. "Howie's right; there weren't any signs of life. And I'll be honest; I'm not in any hurry to go back on the road. That was some scary shit."

"I'd go," said AJ, "but I'm not gonna be any more useful than Gretchen and Gabby on this leg." He patted his bad leg, which he kept in a brace. Three months after breaking it, he still wasn't able to walk without pain and relied on crutches to get around. Brian had to concede that, in the event of a zombie attack, AJ would be in trouble. Even if he could shamble along faster than the zombies, they would catch up to him quickly as he tired and fell behind.

Brian sighed, recognizing a lost cause. "All right, so I guess we stay and pray, huh?"

"That's all we can do," said Kevin.

“No, that’s not all. We can try the radio again,” Howie suggested. “We haven’t done a broadcast in a long time.”

AJ scoffed. “That’s because no one responded to them, D.”

“I did,” said Howie seriously, looking over at AJ. “Kayleigh and I... we heard Kevin on the radio. That’s how we knew to come here, remember?”

Kevin smiled grimly at Howie. “That’s true. It’s worth another try. You never know – right, cous?”

Brian didn’t feel very hopeful right then, but he forced himself to nod. “Miracles do happen,” he agreed. *And we could use a miracle right about now*, he added in his head.

Perhaps God heard his silent prayer and, feeling merciful, finally decided to answer. Maybe it was just a coincidence. In any case, though Brian didn’t yet know it, the miracle he hoped for would come a mere two weeks into the new year.

Chapter 93

Life is fragile, unpredictable. It can be taken away in an instant. It can change in a heartbeat, for better or for worse.

Growing up with hemophilia, I learned that hard reality at an early age. One minute, I’d be playing, and the next, I’d be bleeding and on my way to the emergency room. During one of my hospital stays, I met another kid with hemophilia. My doctor introduced us; he thought it’d be good for me to meet another kid my age who was like me. And it was, at first. Gary understood me in a way the kids at my school didn’t. I could be myself around him, not Hemophilia Howie, but just plain Howard. We bonded in the hospital and kept in touch even after we were both discharged. This was way before the days of email and texting, but we talked to each other on the phone and even wrote letters, like we were pen pals or something. Gary lived across town, but sometimes his mom would come pick me up and take us both to the arcade. I wasn’t a big fan of video games, but Gary loved them, and while the other kids our age hung out at the skating rink, the arcade was a safe place we could go to have fun. Other times, I’d just invite him over to my house, and we’d listen to my Michael Jackson cassettes and try to teach ourselves how to do the Moonwalk.

Then one Saturday, I called Gary’s house, and no one answered. This was before anyone had an answering machine, so I just kept trying all day, but no

one ever picked up. The next weekend, same thing. Finally, I called, and Gary's mom answered and asked to talk to my mom. I could tell from listening to her side of the conversation that something was wrong. When she hung up the phone, my mom turned to me with tears in her eyes and shakily started telling me what Gary's mom had told her. Gary had gone into the hospital, not with a bleed, just with a fever and a cough that wouldn't go away. Everyone had thought it was just the flu, but it turned out to be a lot worse than that. Gary had pneumonia... and not just regular old walking pneumonia, but the kind of pneumonia that people with weakened immune systems get. Like people with AIDS. I hadn't known it until then, but Gary was HIV positive. He'd contracted the virus from a tainted transfusion, before they knew enough to screen donor blood for it. He went into the hospital with a cough and never came out.

After that, I stopped hanging out with kids with hemophilia, kids who were sick. And as much as it hurt, I couldn't blame other kids for not wanting to hang out with me. I knew it could just as easily be me next. I wouldn't die from AIDS like Gary, but a bad bleed, a fall, an accident... any number of things could kill me. Funny, zombies were never on my list.

The world was a dangerous place, and my life seemed especially delicate. But I didn't die. I'm still alive. I've outlived all those kids who used to pick on me or avoid me altogether; I've outlived everyone I knew in my old life. And even though the world seems more dangerous than ever, I know now that I'm stronger than I thought.

Life may be fragile, but as a species, humans are hardy. Death happens, but life goes on.

Even when the odds are stacked against us, we will continue to survive.

Sunday, January 13, 2013

Week Thirty-Nine

The miracle came in an armored truck, one unsuspecting Sunday afternoon.

Howie and Brian were on their way back from the communication dome, where they'd been trying, once again, to send messages over the radio. Howie didn't really think there was any point in trying the radio now, when it was clear from their many failed attempts that there was simply no one left alive to listen. But he couldn't forget that it was the radio that had summoned Kayleigh and him to MacDill; without it, they'd both have been goners by now. Nor could he blame Brian for wanting to try anything to help his unborn child. Howard Dorough might not have won any prizes for Father of the Year, despite the claim of the cheap "#1 Dad" mug from which he'd drunk coffee when working late in the office, but he knew that fatherly instinct well. Perhaps it was because he hadn't

been able to protect his own child from the apocalypse that he felt bound to help Brian protect his.

So when Brian looked over at him and asked, “You think there’s any hope of finding other survivors this way?” Howie didn’t shake his head.

Instead, he blinked incredulously back at Brian and replied, “Don’t tell me the preacher’s giving up on hope. Of course there’s hope. Miracles happen, don’t they?”

Brian nodded, his expression faraway. Howie didn’t know if he was back to believing or still doubting. He hoped it was the former; he liked the company of the Brian who believed much better than the sullen, angry Brian he’d first met, the one who had renounced his faith. He didn’t want that Brian to return, yet feared he would, if anything happened to Gretchen or the baby.

Whether it was pure coincidence or the divine result of God’s impeccable sense of timing, Howie didn’t know, but in any case, the miracle came mere minutes after he had mentioned miracles. He was just about to make the turn off of Bayshore onto Bridges, when Brian said, “Hang on! Do you hear that?”

Howie braked to a stop, mid-turn, and listened. He heard it, too: a horn honking, somewhere in the distance.

He looked over at Brian in disbelief. Brian’s blue eyes were wide, mirroring Howie’s expression. Without a word, Howie took his foot off the brake, jammed it down on the accelerator, and swerved their pick-up truck back onto Bayshore Boulevard. They headed north toward the main entrance to the base; the honking had to have come from that direction.

“Do you think-?” Brian started to ask, then trailed off.

Howie understood, but didn’t answer. Neither of them wanted to get their hopes up. But as they sped along in silence, they sure hoped that they would find the vehicle that had honked, and that it was a living person and not a zombie that had pressed the horn.

As they approached the gate, it appeared to them like a mirage in a desert: a small, armored truck, idling just on the other side. Howie could hardly believe his eyes, but he could even see the driver, sitting behind the wheel. And the driver could see him; he put down his window and waved wildly, sticking his head out to shout something.

Howie looked over at Brian, wanting to ask, “Are you seeing this??” but he didn’t need to. Brian saw it, too; he was already opening his door, ready to jump out. But they weren’t the only ones.

As soon as Brian flung the door open wide, Howie was hit with the familiar stench of decaying corpses, carried in on the breeze. It assaulted his senses, stronger than it had been in months, and Howie knew what it meant; he smelled them before he saw them...

Zombies.

A small horde of the undead, drawn by the sound of the honking, emerged from behind the armored truck, swarming hungrily around its sides. "Shit," swore the pastor in the passenger seat, and before Howie could react, Brian had already sprang out of the pick-up and was sprinting toward the gate, waving his arms over his head and screaming, "WATCH OUT!"

But it was too late. Before the driver of the truck had time to look in his side mirror and react, a large zombie – probably male, from the size, though it was hard to tell anymore – had grabbed his head, its skeletal hands closing around fistfuls of his hair, which it used to pull the driver further out the truck window.

Howie could make out another person in the passenger seat, trying to pull him back in. He saw the glint of a gun barrel as the passenger raised a firearm, but there was no room to get a clear shot from that angle. If the zombie was to be taken down, it would have to happen from the outside. But Brian, who was already approaching the gate, was unarmed. So Howie flung open the glove compartment and snatched the small, loaded handgun that was stored inside. He knew he'd never make it in time, but he also knew he at least had to try and help.

He jumped out of the truck and raced toward the gate, where Brian watched, helpless, as the man was attacked. His truck was completely surrounded now, the area outside the gate swarming with zombies, zombies that would get back inside the base if Brian dared to open the gate. Howie would have to take his shot through the gate. But he'd never been good at distance shooting, especially with a handgun. He raised the weapon anyway, trying to steady his arm as he took aim and fired.

The first shot missed, wide right, though it did take out a zombie behind the one that was still clawing at the struggling driver. In the time it took him to line up a second shot, Howie watched in dismay as the zombie's frenzied, flapping jaws finally latched onto living flesh, as it sank its exposed teeth into the man's neck. "No!" shouted Howie, and he squeezed the trigger.

The second shot was low; it missed the zombie's brain, but hit its shoulder with enough force to knock it sideways. It tore off a chunk of the driver's flesh as it fell, and blood began to spurt from the man's jugular. The passenger pulled him back into the vehicle and put up the window, but the man just slumped against it, already fading fast. Howie knew if they didn't act quickly, he was going to bleed to death, and his companion would be trapped, as the smell of his blood drew more and more of the undead.

The companion seemed to know it, too. Howie watched a struggle ensue inside the vehicle, as the passenger pulled the driver out of the way, climbed over him into the driver's seat, and opened the window a crack again, just enough to be heard shouting, "Open the damn gate!" Howie was surprised to hear a woman's voice – throaty, English-accented, but unquestionably female. The bright sunlight bouncing off the windshield made it hard to see inside, but with her features hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses and her hair tucked up under a bandanna wrapped around her head, he'd mistaken the passenger for a man. "For God's sake, open the gate, please!" she screamed, her voice shooting up an octave with panic.

Howie looked at Brian, who was squinting through the gate, eyes narrowed, jaw set, sizing up the situation. A second later, Brian looked back at him. "Gimme your gun," he demanded, holding out his hand. "You open the gate and take cover in there." He gestured to the guard's station. "I'll defend the gate. Close it again as soon as they're through."

They were taking a chance, risking the undead coming back across their borders for a pair of strangers, but Howie knew it was the only chance the injured man had. And if these were the survivors they'd been seeking, people who could help them in return, it would be worth the risk. So he didn't hesitate. He tossed Brian his gun and darted into the small building that housed the security controls. He found the button that opened the gate and punched it, praying it would still work. Electricity was unreliable when it came from back-up generators that were running low on fuel, and it had been a long time since anyone had attempted to open any of the gates. If they tried to open it by hand, the zombies would be all over them before they got it closed again.

But to Howie's relief, the gate rumbled slowly open, and the woman guided the truck swiftly through it, leaving little room for any zombies to squeeze past. But there was no way to reverse the gate until it was all the way open, and once the truck had cleared it, the undead began to flood through the wide open entrance. Brian started shooting, as Howie smacked the button to close the gate, but it seemed to be taking forever. He felt like a coward, huddled inside the guard's station, safely out of the way, while Brian defended the base alone, but what else was he supposed to do? Foolishly, they'd only brought one gun between them.

This is where Kayleigh died, Howie realized, as a sick feeling of trepidation caused his stomach to lurch.

Then, all of a sudden, Brian wasn't alone. The armored truck lurched to an abrupt stop, and the woman who had taken over driving leaped out of the cab, gun in hand. She shot a spray of bullets into the sea of zombies, taking down several in one fell swoop. At the same time, the back doors of the truck burst open, and out leapt two more people. One was an older, Asian man, armed with a long, sharp-looking spear. The other was a younger, red-haired man who carried

a strange, wooden sort of paddle; Howie couldn't be sure, but he thought it might be a cricket bat. The two men entered the fray, stabbing and beating back the zombies that the bullets missed. Their defense was more efficient than it looked: within minutes, they were surrounded by dead bodies, no longer moving.

"Wow!" Howie exclaimed, finally venturing out of his safe haven. "That was incredible! Where did you guys come from?"

"No time to explain," the woman blew him off brusquely. "If we don't do something now, Giorgio's going to bleed out. Do you have medical supplies? Sutures? Bandages? IVs?"

Howie and Brian looked at each other. Brian's eyes were wide and hopeful. "Yes," he said quickly. "Let's put him in the back of our truck, and we'll take him to the medical center."

The woman, evidently the leader, looked at her other two companions. "Get the first aid kit from the truck." Then she turned back to Brian and Howie. "You two – help me move him."

They followed her obediently to the cab of the truck. The driver was slumped across the seat, unconscious. His clothes were saturated with blood, and the upholstery beneath him was sticky with it, too. Howie could feel its warm wetness as he helped drag the man out and carry him to the back of the pick-up, where the other two were waiting with the first aid kit, the tailgate already lowered for them. They pulled the man into the truck bed and lay him flat, while Brian ran around to the driver's side and slid behind the wheel. As Howie climbed into the passenger seat beside him, he had a bad feeling about the man's fate. He'd lost a lot of blood already, and as a hemophiliac, Howie was all too familiar with the symptoms of hypovolemic shock. The woman, whoever she was, was right: if they didn't get him some help soon, he was going to die.

And if he wasn't immune to the Osiris Virus, as AJ was, he was going to come back... as one of the undead.

"I miss Jo," Howie muttered out of the corner of his mouth, as he and Brian stood out of the way, watching the three strangers work to save their injured companion.

The woman seemed to have some idea of what she was doing, but the way she barked out orders was completely different from Jo's calm and quiet leadership. The redhead bumbled and fumbled around in response to her commands, putting pressure on the dressings she'd applied to the unconscious man's neck wound. Clearly, he was clueless, but the older man appeared to have some medical knowledge as well. He had rummaged through the cabinets in the room where

they'd brought the man and found what Howie recognized as an IV kit. He'd had enough transfusions to know.

"He needs blood badly," the woman announced. She looked up at the Asian man. "Can you do a direct transfusion?"

The man gave a single, solemn nod.

"Shaun!" the woman snapped, and the redhead jumped. "Find another gurney. We'll start with you." As Shaun scrambled into the hall, she turned her attention to Howie and Brian, acknowledging them for the first time since they'd arrived at the medical center. "Are there any other survivors here?" she asked.

They nodded. "Eight of us," Brian answered.

A brief smile flickered over her otherwise grim face. "Brilliant. One of you needs to go get them, all of them, and bring them back here."

"I will," Howie quickly volunteered, anxious to get away from that room. The sight of blood didn't bother him, but its metallic smell was starting to make him feel sick.

Brian didn't look thrilled to be staying, but he nodded and dutifully took Shaun's place at the man's bedside, applying pressure to his blood-soaked bandages.

Howie started to leave and was forced to jump out of the way, as Shaun barreled back into the room, practically riding the gurney he was bringing in. Curiosity caused Howie to pause and watch, frowning, as the woman positioned the gurney right next to the one on which the man lay and motioned for Shaun to lie down on it. As the other man came forward with a length of IV tubing, Howie realized they were going to attempt to transfuse blood straight from Shaun into the dying man. This seemed like a terrible idea to Howie, who was familiar with the risks associated with blood transfusions, having faced them himself ever since he was a child, before the AIDS crisis, before donor blood was screened for HIV. He knew all about blood-borne pathogens and transfusion reactions that could result from receiving the wrong type of blood. But he also knew that critical situations call for desperate measures, so he said nothing as he backed out of the room and ran for the pick-up truck.

As he sped back to the house he shared with AJ, Kevin, and Gabby, Howie didn't know which was racing faster, the truck or his pounding heart. There was so much to tell the others, he wondered where to start. He supposed the most important thing was to bring them back to the medical center, though he wasn't sure why all of them were needed. They'd have to squeeze into the Hummer, and he could fill them in on the rest as they drove.

The tires squealed as he swerved onto their street, honking the whole way up it. By the time he'd pulled into the driveway, Kevin had already come running out of the house, Gabby hot on his heels. "What happened?" Kevin demanded, as soon as Howie opened his door to get out. "Where's Brian?"

"Oh God!" Gretchen had emerged from the house next door, just in time to hear Kevin's question. She clapped her hand across her mouth, like she was about to throw up. Her face was ashen, like she was about to pass out.

"Brian's fine!" Howie said quickly. "But something's happened. Something big – something good *and* bad, I guess you could say. We need to go to the medical center – all of us. I'll fill you in on the way."

By then, Nick and Riley had come out behind Gretchen, and even AJ crutched his way out onto the front porch. They pelted Howie with questions, but he ignored them all, insisting they get into the vehicle before he answered anything. They piled into the Hummer, Gabby squeezed between Howie and Kevin in the front seat, AJ sprawled across Nick's, Riley's, and Gretchen's laps in the back. It wasn't a comfortable ride, but no one seemed to care. They were all eager to hear Howie's news. He talked a mile a minute while Kevin drove just as fast, telling them about the arrival of the armored truck and the four survivors it had delivered to their base.

But when they reached the medical center, there was no time for introductions. "He's losing blood faster than we can give it to him!" was the woman's way of greeting Howie upon his return, and her dark eyes flashed as they panned across the rest of the group. "We've taken about as much as we can out of Shaun. Who's next?"

The others exchanged bewildered glances. "What's his blood type?" Kevin asked, on behalf of them all.

"B positive," answered the Asian man in a soft, heavily-accented voice. "Same as all of yours, I presume?"

They nodded, stunned into silence. So it did have something to do with blood type, thought Howie, as to the reason they had all survived the virus. But what? How?

"How did you know-?" Gretchen started to ask, but trailed off when the man shook his head.

"Time is short, and the story is long," he whispered apologetically.

"In other words, Giorgio's dying, and we need blood *now*," interjected the dark-eyed woman, turning to glare at them again.

“You can have mine,” AJ volunteered, limping forward. Looking back at the others, he shrugged and added, “Least I can do.”

Howie understood. AJ had been feeling helpless lately, hobbled by his injured leg. This would be a way of making him feel useful again.

“We’ll all donate,” Kevin offered, as AJ traded places with Shaun on the gurney. “Except Howie; he’s a hemophiliac. And Gretchen shouldn’t; she’s pregnant.”

Howie felt his face get hot as the woman looked between Gretchen and him, frowning briefly before she nodded. “We should have enough. Can any of you suture? We’ve got to close the wound.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “We lost our nurse a few months back. None of us have any medical training.”

“What about you?” Howie asked her. “Aren’t you in the medical profession?”

“I was a pharmacist.” The woman shook her head. “This man needs a surgeon.”

Kevin cleared his throat again. “Howie here says he was bitten. Forgive me, ma’am, for sounding insensitive, but are you sure it’s worth the effort? What if he turns?”

“He won’t turn,” she answered matter-of-factly. “He’s immune, same as all of us.”

“But how do you know for sure?”

Her eyes flashed as they met his. “Trust me. We know.”

“I got bit, and I didn’t turn,” AJ spoke up from the gurney. “I say we do everything we can to help this guy and hope for the best.”

With a grim smile, the woman nodded her agreement.

But their efforts were in vain. Despite the blood transfusions, despite their best attempt at stitching and dressing the man’s massive neck wound, it soon became clear that the bite had done damage beyond repair. As the donor blood joined what was left of the man’s blood in a puddle on the floor, his heart gave out, and after several unsuccessful attempts to revive him, the woman was forced to give up. Howie could tell that she was the type of person who hated to admit defeat. She punched a tray of supplies out of the way and bowed her head over the gurney, heaving a massive sigh. He wasn’t sure if she was praying for the dead or simply collecting herself, but when she straightened up again, her eyes were dry.

“I’m sorry,” Brian was the first to offer, placing a comforting hand upon her shoulder, “Ms.-?”

“Selena,” she said shortly. “Just Selena.”

“Selena,” he repeated her name. “I’m Brian.”

A round of introductions followed. The older companion of Selena, Shaun, and the dead man, Giorgio, introduced himself as Dr. Kwak In-Su. “Doctor, huh?” AJ challenged. “If you’re really a doctor, why couldn’t you sew up this guy’s neck?” He flung his hand toward the body on the blood-soaked gurney.

The Asian man bowed his head regretfully. “I’m sorry, but I am not the kind of doctor to treats such traumas. In my country, I was a biochemist. I worked in a laboratory.”

“And what country is that?”

He seemed to hesitate a few seconds before answering. “North Korea,” he said finally, looking down. “I come from North Korea.”

His body language made Howie frown. When he looked at the others, he could see that they were equally suspicious.

Kevin took over the interrogation. “And what is it y’all know about the zombie virus that we don’t? How do you know for a fact that we’re immune?”

“And how did you know we were all the same blood type?” Nick added.

Howie didn’t miss the dark look that passed between Kwak In-Su and Selena. But it was their companion, Shaun, who spoke up. “We’ve got loads to tell you, but this isn’t exactly the place for it, is it?” For the first time, Howie noticed that he, like Selena, spoke with an English accent. “Is there somewhere a tad less bloody we can go for a chat... and perhaps a pint as well?” He smiled hopefully at them, catching Howie’s eye. Howie winked.

Nick laughed, easing the tension in the room. “I’m gonna like this guy; I can tell already,” he announced. “Let’s take ‘em to the lodge.”

“What about Giorgio?” asked Brian, looking solemnly down at the deceased, whom they’d covered with a sheet.

“We’ll give him a proper funeral,” Kevin promised, looking at the newcomers, “but first, I think we need to have a conversation. Can we agree on that?”

Selena gave a short, single nod. “Yes. Show us the way. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Chapter 94

Answers.

Did anyone ever think we'd actually get any?

I'm pretty sure I gave up on that months ago. Rye kept trying to figure it out. Why we survived. Why we're here. Brian believed there was a purpose, once he found his faith again, anyway. Me, well, I tried not to think about it. I was here, I was alive. It was enough, ya know? I always think more about those fucking seizures that make life hell. But now, we've found other survivors. We've finally got answers in our hands. The whole thing is just crazy.

Here's one thing I've realized since the dead rose: I can't waste my life anymore, because it's a damn miracle I'm here to begin with. I've made the most of every moment I have. It sucks that it took an apocalypse to make me appreciate things, but it is what it is. I've had my close calls, but I'm still alive, still here. For a guy who never had a break in the world before, it's like karma's making it up to me.

It was only just today I realized it...

I'm the luckiest son of a bitch in the world.

Song Quote Of The Entry – I gotta say, that's one of the things I miss the most anymore, being able to turn on a radio and jam to whatever music is playing.

Anyway, this song is by a band called "Live." They weren't appreciated much here in the US, but man, I fucking loved their music. This song in particular was one of their best!

*I will go on like a soldier
Through the storms of love
And I take you back
Take you away from here, my friend
And charge you up again*

*We just come down from the mountain
Where the breezes were blowin'
And everything was growin'
Like some tree in the bush*

*Still, I gotta live my life here
With some pretty scary brethren
But now I'm a rebel on a mission, baby
To live and die by my smile
- Live, "Like a Soldier"*

Sunday, January 13, 2013
Week Thirty-Nine

It had been about an hour since the group had sat down in the lodge with their two new visitors. A lot of idle chatter had gone on, but not about anything that mattered. There was some drinking, but the tension hadn't eased much, despite Nick's efforts. How could it? Everyone was anxious to get some answers. They had been waiting for so long, but at the same time, it seemed like there was hesitation to actually ask the questions now that they could. They all sat around two tables pushed together, eleven pairs of eyes nervously skipping around. Nick glanced over at Riley, who looked lost in thought. His hand took hers, squeezing it gently in the awkward silence that had settled over them all. Nick looked at Kevin, who seemed to be mulling over the way to shift the conversation to what they wanted to know.

"Selena, right?" Riley started, her tone becoming more brisk, professional. Nick's mind flashed to an image of the workaholic reporter she'd once been in the life before the dead rose. "You guys seem to know so much. How is that? Why are we all the same blood type? Why are we immune to the zombie virus that wiped out everyone else? How did you find us? You're clearly British – well, you and Shaun, anyway – and... Dr. Kwak In-Su, how are you connected to all this?"

Kevin cleared his throat. "We just have a lot of questions. We haven't found more survivors since last April."

"I understand," answered the soft-spoken Asian. "It is not a story of which I'm proud... but it is a story I know must be told."

"You said you came from North Korea?" Brian interjected, his arm around Gretchen as he pulled her closer.

He nodded solemnly. Shame was written clearly in his small, dark eyes.

"It's okay, Ducky," Nick said with a comforting smile. "We just really wanna know."

"Ducky?" The scientist's brow furrowed with a look of confusion.

"Yeah, ya know... Kwak? Quack? Like a duck?"

Laughter followed. “Ducky... I think I might like that. It is a comfort to see more people alive in the world, despite everything that has occurred.”

“Same shit can be said for us. Fuck, we almost lost half our group as a goddamn zombie buffet because they tried to find others by traveling across the fucking country.”

Selena shook her head, a small smile forming, despite herself. “You won’t find anyone here in the States, I don’t think. You’re it.”

“But how do you know? Like I was saying before, you know way more than the rest of us.”

“Let me tell you my story, Miss...”

“Blake. Riley Blake.”

“Miss Blake. I’m sure it will answer all your questions.”

The scientist leaned back, and Nick’s hand reached for Riley’s, squeezing it before it could even begin to flutter about nervously. The two shared a comforting smile before refocusing on the man before them. A man with answers.

Howie took another swig of his beer, as if attempting to steady himself with the alcohol for what they were going to hear. He caught AJ eyeing the bottle enviously for only a moment before he began to pick at his nails idly, obviously in need of something to distract him a little.

“I was considered one of the top scientists in North Korea. I knew it; I perhaps even reveled in my superior intellect. One of my proudest days was when I was handpicked by Kim Jong-Il himself to work on what was only described as a *Special Project*.”

He paused. The room was silent, as everyone listened with rapt attention. Nick tried to hold it in, but when he belched, it seemed to echo around, announcing his presence. Everyone started laughing, momentarily breaking the calm.

“Sorry,” he apologized with a sheepish grin. “Keep on talking, Ducky.”

“There were ten of us, each the best in our little corners of Korea. Our leader wanted us to create something, something deadly enough to not only wipe out America, but to make the rest of the world watch and live in fear of my country’s wrath. Part of me knew this was wrong. But that part was quite, quite small. I loved the intellectual challenge, so sadly, I was unable to care at the time how wrong it was. At least not until...”

“Until what?” Gabby piped up.

“Until the day it was created. With the help of one of my colleagues, Dr. Shin Young Ji, we created the...” At this point, the doctor trailed off again, unable to finish.

Kevin’s mouth dropped open. “You created the Osiris Virus.”

A dry, almost bitter-sounding chuckle followed. “Is that what you’ve come to call it?”

“A lost friend of ours coined that term.”

“I suppose it rather fits.”

“You’re... you’re the monster who did this?”

Nick felt Riley begin to rise, a temper flashing through her stormy blue eyes that he hadn’t seen in a long time. His hand clenched hers tightly, and she stayed in her seat. There had to be more to this.

“Let him tell his story,” Selena shot back with a glare, her British accent sounding short and clipped.

“It is okay. I deserve to be judged for what I have done. I did not know at the time just how deadly of a super-virus we had spawned, only that death came, torturous, swift, and inevitable. That, once infected, there was no cure.”

“No cure?” Gretchen asked, sounding hopeful, despite knowing the answer. They all knew, but they had to hear it, once and for all.

“No. We studied it in animals, and it killed them well. But there were signs it would react differently in humans, so we began to run tests in a prison, on what you would call ‘death row.’ We injected the prisoners with the virus. At first, it seemed to have the same results. But then...”

“Then, they started rising,” Brian finished for him, his eyes taking on a familiar, haunted look.

A sigh followed. “Yes. It was a miracle we kept the virus contained and the undead quiet. I suspect it is because we injected the patients directly into the bloodstream, so that there was no chance for it to go airborne. The incubation period was far shorter with injection, though, from our studies, we knew it could go airborne.”

“You saw all this, and yet you still kept at it?” Riley demanded incredulously.

“You Americans, you have had it so good. You do not understand existing under a true dictator. I was horrified when I saw the bodies reanimate. Our leader was pleased with the results. One of us actually protested, and he was beheaded by the guards. Dr. Shin and myself were the only other ones frightened of this plague we had wrought. But our true feelings had to be kept silent, for, dead, we could do nothing.”

Looking around the room, Nick could easily see that the truth they had once so desperately sought was now taking its toll. As it was, he had to keep Riley’s hand in his own in an attempt to keep her calm. Brian’s eyes were downcast, his arm tightly wrapped around Gretchen, who was murmuring in his ear. Howie’s eyes were distant, clearly lost in thought, where none could touch him. AJ was distractedly rubbing his legs, though his line of vision was focused on one of the newcomers, Selena, who was ignoring him and whispering to her friend Shaun. Shaun himself was glancing around a bit, looking unsure. Kevin stood, keeping his eyes on Gabby, who was keeping silent, though Nick knew she was paying more attention than the others suspected. He thought of Jo then and hoped she was keeping a watch over her daughter, over them all.

Kevin cleared his throat, catching everyone’s attention as he filled the awkward pause. “I think we need a break.”

“Thank you,” the doctor replied, as he slowly stood and made his way outside for some air. He was soon followed by Selena and, oddly enough, Howie and AJ.

Shaun looked at Nick with a nervous smile. “Go easy on him till you hear the rest of the story. He hasn’t had it easy.”

Nick nodded, idly playing with his girlfriend’s hair. “None of us have, but at least we’re here. We’re alive.”

“Are there more of you guys?” Gabby asked, sounding hopeful for the first time in a long while.

“A few back home. We came to find others and got lucky enough to catch your broadcast.”

“I’m sorry about your loss,” Brian said softly. “I was once a minister. Once we’re done talking, I can hold a service for him, for you.”

A nod. “Thank you.”

“Have you found others? Or are your group and our group all that’s left? I’ve had so many questions, but we gave up on finding more survivors.”

“We know where others may be, but you’re the first we’ve actually found. I’m just happy to see other people.”

“Same here,” Brian replied, with an unconscious glance down towards Gretchen’s stomach.

Before anyone could say anything more, the others came back inside, lead by Kevin. A sudden silence came with their entrance, the slight ease in tension vanished instantly, and the air thickened amongst them.

“I think we’re all ready to continue,” Kevin stated, while Selena and AJ took their seats. Dr. Kwak In-Su chose to stand, looking to be readying himself for the rest of his undeniably tragic tale that had inevitably doomed them all.

“So you wanted to stop... but you couldn’t,” Howie prompted, finally sitting down.

“Not without being killed, no. Now that we had the virus, we were looking to create a vaccine, something to inoculate us so that we, my country, could stay immune, in case the worst scenario came to fruition. That is, if the virus did spread globally – which, at the time, we thought was highly improbable.”

“And you did...” Nick said slowly. “That’s why we’re here, why we survived.”

“Yes, Dr. Shin and I were able to crack the key that granted us immunity to what you call the Osiris Virus. I made sure the work the other scientists did hit roadblocks; I sabotaged their efforts. We gave false results to their research, gave credibility to a preventative measure that would not work. This was so that...” Another sigh followed. “So that those who rejoiced in this horror would risk suffering its fate as well.”

“So why us?”

Kwak’s eyes turned back to Riley, forever thirsting for the truth. It was written so clearly in her eyes. She was a reporter at heart, even now, even after the world had moved on.

“We had to be careful, so careful. There was so much risk. One night, after much planning, we fled the country with our papers, after giving ourselves the vaccine we had created. We could not travel with any; we could not bring vials or anything with us. We were fugitives in our own homeland. We hid in London for some time.” His eyes darkened. “We started sorting through our notes, if only to keep us from being too idle, to keep us in our love of science. And that... that was when we spotted it.”

AJ smirked. “You realized how fucked we were once this shit went airborne, didn’t you? You didn’t know that before, but then you saw that once that psycho bitch launched it at us, the whole world was fucked.”

“Yes. We did not know what to do at first. We could not go back, only to be killed, and we knew that doing nothing was not an option. The window of time we had was unclear. It seemed fruitless, as we had no way of telling the world without being captured and blamed and, thus, unable to help. Finally, the best solution we discovered was a weak one. The best we could do was spread the immunity as far as possible... and pray.”

A fuzzy brow quirked. “How so?”

This time, it was Howie who answered, having had far too much experience in this area. It was ironic, he knew, that something he hated so much about his life was what had kept him alive. He didn’t want to think about it. “They donated blood. Those who received it also got their immunity. It’s like what happens when patients who get transfusions end up with HIV.”

“Correct. There was no recovery from this plague. You either were killed and reanimated, or you never became sick at all. Each of you I know must have had a transfusion within the year before the Osiris Virus struck, yes?”

Each of them nodded.

Much to Nick’s own surprise, it was Gabby who spoke up first. “The man who killed my dad, he tried to kill me.” She sniffed as she lowered the choker she always wore to reveal the scar. Tears shone in her eyes, but didn’t fall. “He almost killed me, too. My-my mom, she kept me alive till the ambulance came...”

AJ sighed. “I was... I was suicidal.” He kept his gaze on the floor. “I slit my wrists, and they had to pump a shitload of blood in me to keep me alive.”

Nick sat there, stunned, trying to wrack his brain on where he’d gotten the vaccine. How was he here?

“I had major surgery after one of my last stints overseas. That’s why I was here when the virus hit; I’d just got cleared to return.”

He hadn’t had anything major happen to him, like an accident or a surgery, or a condition like Howie’s hemophilia. Around him, the others continued.

“I haven’t told anyone but Brian this, but...” A pause followed. “I was pregnant once before, and I miscarried. I lost a lot of blood...”

Gretchen was saying more, but it was hard for Nick to focus then, still troubled about how he’d acquired his own immunity. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his girlfriend touch her stomach, where he knew the scars still remained. He thought of that stormy day, their first day together, in the Target, where she told him about the car accident. It was so long ago, like another life, on the day after he awoke in that horror of a hospital...

The hospital.

Nick gasped, as the realization slammed into him. So close. For him, it had been so very close.

A hand took his own, gently, lovingly. “What is it?”

“My bar fight, Rye, my head injury. Remember how I woke up in the hospital? It’s cause that bar fight happened after midnight, the morning of Infernal Friday. Like, hours before that shit hit. If it hadn’t happened, if that college prick hadn’t slammed a bar stool into my head, I’d be munching and moaning right now.” Nick shivered. “I’ve been cursing the shit out of that day, cause of my goddamn seizures, and it’s what saved my life.”

Her arms wrapped around him, and Nick was grateful for the comfort that that simple gesture brought. “Jesus fucking Christ, Nick, I’ve never seen a luckier son of a bitch. I’m about ready to chop off your leg and use it as my lucky rabbit’s foot.”

Laughter filled the room.

Brian’s gaze met his. “I know the feeling. I knew open-heart surgery would help me live longer. But somehow, this wasn’t the way I pictured it.”

“There should be little pockets of survivors everywhere they donated. We decided to start looking; you’re the first we’ve found. It’s still too easy for people to die because of those ghouls,” Selena told them bitterly.

“We split up; I stayed in the north, while he went south of the Equator. I know not if he is even still alive. I was only back in Europe for a short time before I saw them strike your country.”

No words were spoken, as each of the survivors mused on the finality of it, the fact that they had finally been given the answers they’d been seeking. And yet, it changed nothing now. It only brought down the fact that this had been the fault of cruel human nature, not God.

Brian stood, reaching for his wallet. Inside, he stared at the memories of the family and life that had been stolen from him. He swallowed hard, and Nick knew he could very easily become the broken man he’d met when he first arrived. He tucked his wallet back away, his resolve strengthening.

“Why don’t we go prepare to give your friend a proper service?”

That night had the four of them sitting on the porch out in the backyard. It was a warmer winter night, the breeze gentle and refreshing. It was a night for thought, a night for reflection. Brian and Gretchen were curled up in the swing chair together. Both looked to need close contact and the relief it gave them from cruel reality. Riley stood behind Nick with a brush and scissors on the small little table beside her. He had to admit, his hair was pretty wild and shaggy now. So, he'd conceded to letting her give him a trim. That, and he knew she could use something to focus her attention on. He gave it to her without question.

"So what do you guys think?" he asked, trying to sit still, something that had always been hard for him.

"I think... that doctor's the reason the world's gone to shit, and he'll burn in Hell for it."

"Harsh, Riley," Gretchen said with a yawn. "I think he's tried to redeem what he's done. I mean, he's the reason we're still alive."

"And why everyone we loved is now dead... or undead. What about you, Brian?"

Brian stared up at the stars as he spoke. "I don't know. I'm... I'm just relieved that my child will be born immune." His voice spoke in the familiar, haunted tone it once had, though his eyes still shone with hope, as his hands rubbed Gretchen's stomach.

Before Nick's eyes, bits of golden hair fell to the ground. "And finally, we've found more people. Well, they found us, anyway."

"Except they want us to go with them. And while I know I don't have your fear of flying..." She kissed his cheek. "...I don't like the idea of traveling the world again. Too many close calls last time."

"There's always close calls now." Gretchen's hands rested on top of Brian's as she lay her head back against his chest, her brown hair cascading down in loose waves.

"But we're alive," Nick reminded them, "and that's something."

No one replied. Only the soft sounds of snipping could be heard above the moans of the undead still wandering around the base, a reminder to them that tomorrow was not a guarantee. But Nick knew that having today was a miracle in and of itself.

He didn't intend to waste it.

Chapter 95

It's not ever easy, being the leader.

Before... I loved the responsibility, the honor. But there's always that fear as well. When everyone looks up to you, failure can't be an option. You question every choice you make, but can never speak a word of doubt. You must remain confident in their eyes, to show that their faith in you is well-placed.

Still, I wonder. It's only human nature, I suppose. Humanity is in short supply these days.

Am I making the right choices?

I've already cost us once. We traveled the country, and all it did was weaken us, get Jo killed. I miss her. It was nice, having her to help me keep the group together. We balanced in the way we led them, for she was as much at the head of the group as I was. Just in a different way. Now, there's only me, and no room for any more mistakes.

Should we go with the newcomers?

Should we stay?

I just don't know.

Monday, January 28, 2013

Week Forty-One

A sweet aroma greeted Kevin's senses as he made his way downstairs and into the kitchen. There stood Riley, looking frustrated with a variety of baking ingredients before her. Shawn was sitting at the table, eating breakfast with Gabby. Kevin had been the one to let the newcomers stay with him and Gabby over the past week. They needed rest before flying back to Europe, and the question of going with them still hung in the air. So, of course, they stayed with him. What else could he do?

Gabby was talking animatedly with Shaun. About what, Kevin wasn't paying much attention. He was more focused on the fact she was chatting away. Anything that got the teen to be more interactive could only be a good thing. His return to the base seemed to have cheered her up a bit at first, but since then, she'd regressed to being sullen and withdrawn again. It was only recently that he'd started seeing signs of the girl he'd known before he'd left, before she'd lost her mother. Kevin knew he'd never be able to replace Jo, but he tried his hardest to be a parent to her. If only to sooth the guilt and regret he felt over not being

there to prevent her mother's demise, he did it. But it was more than that. He had a strong fondness for Gabby, the daughter he knew he'd likely never be able to have.

"Morning, Kevy!" Gabby chirped when she saw him there.

"Kevy?" he sighed. "I'm going to murder Nick."

She laughed as Riley turned towards him. "No killing on his birthday. Though there *has* to be way to make a cake for him with canned milk and egg substitute and not have it falling flat on me. Ugh, I knew I should've asked Gretch."

"Why are you baking it here?" Shaun asked between bites.

"My attempt at surprising him. Brian's with him at moment, keeping him busy, I hope. He doesn't know I'm over here."

Kevin smiled as he walked over and started writing down an old recipe of his mother's. He slid it over to her, enjoying the simplicity of worrying over a birthday instead of worrying if they would live to see another day. "Try this. My mom would make this anytime she was low on supplies but didn't have the time to run to the store."

"You're a lifesaver."

Selena made her way downstairs and took in her surroundings critically. "What's with the meeting?"

"It's Nick's birthday. Riley's borrowing the kitchen."

"I'm amazed you bother with frivolities like birthdays."

"Of course we do. Just because zombies rule the world, it doesn't mean we can't still take joy in the little things."

"Hmm."

"So I take it we'll have the dinner at the pub?" Kevin asked, redirecting the conversation before the two strong-willed women got too heated.

"Yeah. I figure it'd be nice to make it special. He's freaking out a little about almost being thirty."

Shaun laughed. "Hell, I'd love to make it to forty. These days, it's an accomplishment."

The youngest in the room made a face. "Forty's ancient."

“Hey now, I’m only a couple years away from forty myself.”

Just then, they heard the distant sound of the front door, followed by an unmistakable voice shouting, “I smell food!” It was as if he’d been summoned.

“Shit! Brian’s gonna get it for losing track of him.”

Kevin almost laughed at the look of panic that struck Riley’s face at that precise moment. She gazed at him pleadingly as she gathered what she needed for the recipe he’d given her.

“I’ll keep him busy and take him on a sweep; we need to do one today, anyway.”

“Thanks. I owe ya.” She grinned at Gabby. “Wanna help me bake? I need all the help I can get, I think.”

“Sure.”

“Heeeeeeey, anyone hear me?”

“Nick!” Kevin called out, as he cut him off in the living room. “I was just about to go next door to get you.”

“You were? See, I was looking for Rye and...”

“Yeah, you and I need to do a sweep of the base. Make sure nothing’s slipping through after smelling our new guests.”

Nick pouted as he followed him outside. “Can’t Brian do it? He’s not doing much; we just played basketball for a bit. It *is* my birthday...”

He almost laughed. One of Nick’s more endearing, yet at times annoying qualities was his childlike exuberance. Kevin feigned surprise. “Is it? Happy birthday, little man, but I know Brian *should* be busy right about now, so I need you.”

“Alright... but really, have you seen Riley? I haven’t seen her all day. Gretch said she was helping Selena with something earlier.”

“Hmm, well if she is, I haven’t seen her.”

The two made their way out into the garage to load up on weaponry. It seemed like they wouldn’t need much, but too many close calls prevented Kevin from acting on what may have been an illogical instinct. Once loaded up, they walked outside and climbed into the Hummer so often used for their rides around the

base. As Kevin started up the car and began to back out, he caught Nick in the corner of his eye staring out the window, lost in thought.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

He chuckled. “They ain’t worth that much.”

“Try me anyway.”

“It’s just the idea of us leaving... if we do, ya know?”

“Do you want to?” Kevin asked. He knew he could use more feedback on the idea. While everyone would surely vote, he also knew they wouldn’t go if he said it was a bad choice. But that was the rub: he wasn’t sure if it was or not. He simply did not have the answer this time.

Nick sighed, aiming casually out the window at a lone zombie shuffling about. Kevin wondered for an instant what gender it was. As time went on, the decay made it harder and harder to tell. They were becoming worse for the wear by the day. The bullet slammed directly into its face, causing the body to burst in a splash of flying body parts they’d now become accustomed to. “I do, and I don’t.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, see, I know how badly Brian needs this, for Gretch. They need this shot. Hell, maybe one day, more of us might, too. But we don’t know if we’ll find what we need there, if it’ll be any better. It’s a huge fucking leap of faith. And... well, this is home.”

Kevin nodded. “That’s how I feel about it, too.”

The vehicle slowed as they passed the front gate. Something about it captured Kevin’s attention, making him want to take a better look. His thick brows furrowed at the scene. As always, there was a horde of zombies struggling to enter and forever failing in their endeavor. They never left, though, attracted by the all-too-human scent left by the people Kevin and Nick now considered family, kept at bay only by the gates.

Nick immediately noticed Kevin’s slight reverie. “What is it?”

“There’s a lot more than normal... They must have been attracted by the blood.”

“It’ll be alright, though, right?”

Will it? He wasn’t a hundred percent certain. He took in the multitude of the undead yet again. The gate had been built to withstand almost anything thrown at it. But did that include zombie bombardment? It took constant, daily,

unyielding abuse. Would it be alright with the new added pressure? The gate shook a bit, but still seemed sturdy. Kevin rubbed his temple tiredly. He was overreacting. Maybe he was simply over-thinking things.

“Yeah, we should be fine.”

“Shhh... shhh...”

The room was dark. All were silent, listening carefully, their ears peeled for any sound beyond the distant moans, which did seem a little loud, likely because of the hush amongst them. The door opened, and two silhouettes could be seen, illuminated by the moonlight filtering in through the windows.

“Happy birthday!” they all screamed, as the lights came on. Nick jerked a bit with surprise, a gun in hand.

Riley smirked. “Now, remember, zombies are the dead ones.”

“Says the one who almost shot me twice, thinking I was one.” He looked around, seeing the cake, dinner, and festive decorations hung around the club. He smiled. “You organized all this?”

She shrugged.

“Thanks, guys. I thought you all forgot.”

Kevin laughed. “Like you would let us.”

“Yeah, you’ve only been driving us crazy singing ‘*Happy Birthday to Me*’ all week.”

“How’s it feel being ancient?” teased AJ.

Nick rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out in response. “Says the one who’s balding and needs a cane.”

Howie laughed. “Yeah, if anyone’s in the running for Old Man, it’s you.”

The others joined in the laughter, as they all gathered around the table. Gretchen was serving up plates, looking so domestic it was easy to forget they lived in a post-apocalyptic world these days.

As everyone started eating and chatting away, Kevin thought he heard something. He tuned everyone out, using the instincts honed by years in the military to try and single out what he thought he had heard. There was nothing but the moans,

which seemed loud, but that was just because there were more zombies around the base now. When nothing more followed, he brushed it off and tuned back into the conversations around him.

“Rye, I can’t take this,” Nick said softly, almost in awe. In the side of his vision, Kevin could see Nick staring down at a rosary held gently in his hands.

“Yes, you can.”

“But it was your mother’s. You always say it’s your last link to her.”

“I know. See, my mom gave it to my father. And now, I’m giving it to you...”

Kevin felt wrong, eavesdropping accidentally on such a personal conversation. As he continued eating, he tried to focus on what the others were saying. Kevin’s gaze went over to AJ, who was taking off his sunglasses to look Selena directly in the eyes.

“No, really, I get what you’re saying. People are overrated, or at least, they were...”

And then there was Shaun, chatting contentedly with Brian and Gretchen. “You should meet my girlfriend, Liz. She’d die if you lot came back with us. Her biggest complaint is that there’s not enough couples back home.” He made a face. “Or enough women for her to chat with. There’s only one, besides her and Selena...”

“Dr. Kwak In-Su...” Howie started. “I’d be interested in knowing more about your studies before you left Korea, if you’re willing to talk about it...”

AJ, hearing Howie, laughed. “I love that name. It sounds like something you’d call a fucked-up doctor. A Quack and Sue... for everything he’s got!”

“Sometimes you scare me, AJ...”

It was Gabby who noticed Kevin’s own lack of interaction with the others. “What’s wrong?”

That was it. He felt it. It was in the air. Something was wrong. Something was coming. But he couldn’t place his finger on what it was. For all intents and purposes, the night was calm. There seemed to be no danger within their base. So why was he so on edge? Why was he keeping distant, in an attempt to stay alert?

“You alright, Kev?” Brian asked, hearing Gabby and frowning once he saw his cousin’s expression.

“Hey, no bumming out on my birthday!” Nick announced.

That was until the windows shattered.

Suddenly, zombies were slumping and crawling their ways through the windows. Doors that hadn't been locked or even shut all the way were flung open, as more corpses made their way in. The innocent birthday party now became a free-for-all buffet for any reanimated corpse in the area. All because of mistakes they had made. Careless mistakes. Always, whenever they got comfortable, they became careless – and Kevin knew he had let them.

Nick immediately started firing off at the undead. Bodies burst upon impact, splattering them all. No one cared right then. What scared Kevin was how few of them were armed. Even he, always the careful one, hadn't thought to grab his gun. Only Nick, AJ, and Selena were firing consistently.

“Gretch!” Brian screamed, when one got her by the hair. Shrieking, Gretchen grabbed for the champagne bottle on the table. She swung it around and slammed it down on the zombie's head. It only moaned louder once it shattered. Using the shattered remains, she shoved a large shard of glass as hard as she could at the creature's eye. Finally, the grip on her released. She stepped away, panting, and collapsed into Brian's arms.

Gabby ran for Kevin. A ghoul grabbed for her leg. Kevin grabbed the chair he'd been sitting on and smashed it down on the head. He continued beating it, again and again, until it finally stopped moving.

Howie, Selena, Shaun, and Dr. Kwak hurried outside, once the opportunity presented itself.

“Go!”

Brian, AJ, and Gretchen ran for the door. AJ was more or less hobbling, firing shots with every step he took. Kevin was simply thankful they'd brought more than one car, due to the supplies for the little party. They had been lucky. How many times would they be in the future? They couldn't afford more mistakes.

Mistakes cost them lives.

“Head for the church!” he bellowed, once the numbers of the undead finally dwindled a little. It wasn't much, but a noticeable enough difference for them to work with. There were less shots being fired. Kevin only hoped that was because there were fewer zombies, rather than dwindling ammo.

Nick and Riley raced ahead, piling into the truck she'd had him take. “I'm gonna try to get some them to follow me!” Nick called back to Kevin.

Right then, he was thankful someone was thinking of a plan. It was so unlike him to be taken by such surprise like this. He raced for the Hummer. Gabby's hand was in his, held in a death grip. Once in, Brian started the engine. He and Gretchen were in the front, while Kevin and Gabby squeezed into the back with AJ.

"The church." It seemed ironic, but it was still the best fortification on base. They'd never cleared it out of the clothes and sleeping bags, a fact which offered him some relief.

Thriller was blasting from the truck as they passed it. Riley had climbed out into the bed, firing back as Nick drove. He'd been right; they were able to clear a path by diverting some of the masses, but a second look out the window revealed a horrific sight. The undead, putrefying, rotten corpses were roaming everywhere. It was déjà-vu, a flashback to the first days of their new world.

But how?

They took an indirect route to the chapel, unable to make it a straight shot while there were so many zombies in their path to run over, and on their way, they passed the front gate. It had been pushed down completely. As it was, more and more zombies were coming through, shuffling over the fallen bodies.

As they pulled up to the church, Brian killed the ignition, giving Kevin a questioning glance. Gretchen said nothing, just rubbed her stomach, gazing out the window every few seconds. Kevin nodded at AJ, who stopped shooting out the window and rolled it up. It was nice, being able to give direction without a word. They had to wait for the others; their best chance at getting inside safely would be as a group.

"Kev..."

"I know. Looks like this answers our question. We're leaving for Europe as soon as we can."

No one said anything more; they waited in silence. The thoughts of earlier that day haunted Kevin.

"It'll be alright, though, right?"

"Yeah, we should be fine."

How wrong he had been.

Chapter 96

*“I’m leaving on a jet plane.
Don’t know when I’ll be back again...”*

I think I’m around Nick too much. He’s rubbed off on me.

But we are leaving. This time, it’ll probably be for good. It’s not safe here anymore. Probably never will be safe here again. Our sanctuary isn’t such a sanctum now. Yet... will it really be safe anywhere? Somehow, I doubt it. Call it negative thinking if you want. I just see it as realistic. I leave the optimism to Nick.

What if I’m not ready to move on?

It’s not like I have a leg to stand on to argue against this. We’re barricaded in the back of the church again. God, it feels like it did when this all began. Just with three different people, one more than the first time around. But it’s not the same; it never will be. The beginning is what made us the family we are now. You can’t replicate that. Things feel just as bad as they did then, though. Still, I don’t want to go.

This is home.

And there’s a reason why “you can never go home again” was a saying.

*“Hold me like you’d never let me go,
Cause I’m leaving on a jet plane.
Don’t know when I’ll be back again.
Oh, babe, I hate to go,
But I’m leaving on a jet plane...”*

Friday, February 1, 2013

Week Forty-One

“You’re staring out the window again?”

Riley turned from where her gaze had been focused. Out in the distance, she knew Kevin was readying up a plane for their departure. Nick, Selena, and Shaun had gone with him to keep the zombies at bay while he did so. As soon as they returned, they’d all go to the runway, where Kevin would be waiting, to board the plane and leave the only true home they’d known since the Day of Unholy Resurrection had been set upon them.

“Yeah... I didn’t mean to space out on you, Bri.”

Brian smiled, wrapping an arm around her and leading her back to the bundle of sleeping bags where Gretchen and Howie were sitting. Gabby was sleeping, something that seemed odd so late in the day, but Kevin said it was probably her way of coping. Dr. Kwak and AJ were up on the roof, back to AJ's old favorite pastime.

"They'll be fine, you know."

"I know that. It's not that..."

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing important."

The lie felt sour on her tongue. But what could she say? She knew Brian needed this more than anyone. He had been the one desperately trying to seek out more people, anyone who could help with Gretchen's pregnancy. She had even agreed with him. It was just so bittersweet, knowing they would be leaving the base for the unknown. The plague had hit the world, not just their own country. That meant nowhere was safe, that the same dangers would be there to greet them overseas. There was no guarantee that this new safe haven was actually safe.

She sighed, sitting down next to her friends, listening to them talk. She knew she was acting distant. Riley wasn't trying to; she just didn't want to talk right then. If she did, she'd say what she knew they didn't want to hear. Couldn't they find a way to fortify the base again? Maybe. Would it be logical? No. But she didn't want logic or facts thrown at her for once. She just wanted to know they hated the idea of leaving as much as she did. Vividly, she remembered their last expedition away from the base. Who was to say this would be any different?

And even if it was, nothing would be the same. Her mind raced back, back to the beginning. Even before the base. Back to when it was simply her and Nick, unsure if they'd survive, having no idea if there were others left, trapped inside a Target they'd run into, watching the rain fall.

"I love the rain."

It was almost amusing, seeing the puzzled expression arise on his boyish good looks. He raised a brow at her, as she kept her eyes turned at the windows, at the storms she so adored.

"I love the rain; I love the wild way it feels. It's just... so freeing. It's nature unleashing its rage on the world, and I love every minute of it. I always would go out driving in it, out to this hill overlooking the beaches. I'd get out, sit in the downpour, and watch the lightning come down."

“I wonder if it’s trying to clean the world,” he said softly.

“No, if there’s a God, He’s trying to wash humanity away.”

It was in that moment that she’d felt a connection. It was in that moment that she’d felt safe, despite the undead roaming about, thirsting for their blood. Safety had always been a spotty feeling since April fifteenth, but that was the first time she’d felt that way after that day. It was at the base where that feeling had been the most consistent. She remembered what it had been like to first arrive here, to see other people. Riley laughed, thinking of how she and Kayleigh used to argue so much in the beginning. She’d been a different person then. She wondered if Kayleigh had known she’d actually come to like her before she died. Death had come back to greet them twice more since their arrival at the base. Riley sighed; she wished she’d been able to truly say goodbye to Jo. Then again, if that chance had been given, Jo may not even have died in the first place.

“I wonder if we’d be leaving then...” she murmured.

“What do you mean?” Gretchen asked, gazing at her with concern.

Riley’s eyes remained focused on the mural AJ had once painted on the doors, so long ago now. Why had they let him do that? The picture was simply beyond depressing. Despite herself, a grin formed on her face. AJ was definitely one of a kind. “If Jo was still alive... would we have sent out a signal? Would Selena, Shaun, and that scientist still have shown up? Would we still be leaving?”

“We might be,” Howie answered, idly eating some chips, “but I don’t think so.”

“We can’t change anything.”

“I know that. My brain just doesn’t shut off.”

Just then, the doors opened. Nick peeked his head in with a grin. “We’re ready when you guys are.”

Everyone gathered what little things they had. Brian was gently waking Gabby. As they filtered out, Riley hung back, giving another glance around. She had to take it all in. Memories would be all she had. They wouldn’t all be happy, but she wanted to hang on to them anyway, as tightly as possible.

“Rye, c’mon! AJ’s got the car running.”

“I’m coming.”

“You okay?” Nick asked, as he took her hand and led her outside.

“Yep, no need to worry about me.” She flashed him a smile, ruffling his spiked-up hair. He looked so much better now that she’d been able to cut it. Riley gave one last glance to the church as she got into the crowded Hummer, and they made their way to the runway, where the plane would be waiting.

Goodbye, Kayleigh.

Goodbye, Jo.

Goodbye, home.

“Nick, breathe.”

Nick sighed, as he tried his best to not look out the window. The insanity of his fear of flying, compared to what they dealt with daily, almost made Riley want to giggle. He shut his eyes again, and she simply grabbed his hand. Now that they had been airborne for hours and would hopefully be landing soon, she felt better than she had before. Home wasn’t just simply the base, was it? No, it had to be more.

She hoped, almost prayed, that it was the people as well.

“We’re descending soon,” Kevin announced.

“Thank fucking God,” Nick muttered.

“Jesus, Nick, you know we’ll survive; your lucky ass is on the plane. Hey, that reminds me, I still need to chop off your leg and replace my lucky rabbit’s foot,” AJ teased, snickering.

“Why, you wanna replace your bum one?” Howie chimed in. “Maybe we should start calling you Hop-a-long Cassidy.”

“Hop-A-Long-what?”

“Just a really old TV show they used to watch in the Stone Age,” Nick answered, still sounding a bit shaky. He refused to open his eyes. The plane took a sudden dip, and his face immediately went green. Riley grabbed for the sick bag and handed it to him. As he started vomiting, she shifted her gaze over to Gabby, who was staring out the window and looking excited, as patches of green landscape started to appear through the heavy clouds.

“Maybe someone my age will be there,” she explained when she saw Riley’s look.

“You never know.” *I hope so. You need that.*

Selena was up by Kevin, giving him directions on where to go. AJ was staring towards the front of the plane, but wasn't saying much, which was typical of him. Brian turned in his seat to look at the oldest in their group, the Korean scientist. Riley's ears perked up at the question he posed.

"How are we going to get to your place once we land?"

"That is why we had Kevin travel at such a specific time. Those we left behind... we set a time for them to check the airport nearby every day. If Kevin lands at the right moment, they will see us come and help us get back."

"And what happens if we don't?" AJ asked, with a tilt of his shades.

As if Kevin had heard them, they felt the plane bump and shift as it hit solid ground, still rolling forward. Riley leaned over Nick and stared out the little window. Through the gray mist, an endless sea of zombies could be seen roaming the tarmac. The moans were deafening. She sighed. *Well, guess it's not that different from home, after all.* Despite knowing otherwise, she had still hoped.

"Okay, where..." Nick paused, looking on the verge of vomiting yet again. He took a deep breath and, after a moment, seemed more settled. The plane had come to a complete stop, which had to have helped. "...are these friends of yours?"

"Be patient," Shaun replied. "They know to be here."

Riley raised a brow at him. "Sorry, I'm not one for blind faith."

"We can't afford to be," Howie agreed.

Selena was walking down the aisle, with Kevin in tow. Everyone seemed restless, looking out their windows again and again. The only noise they heard beyond the moans came from Gretchen, who was now expelling her own stomach contents into an airsick bag. Brian sat beside her, rubbing her back in small circles. Riley didn't envy her then; from what she knew, morning sickness was an evil thing.

"They'll be here."

In response, they suddenly heard the fire of gunshots. Two large vehicles – one a truck, the other a van – emerged out of the fog. Guns were sticking out through the windows, as they swerved to a stop in front of the plane. Zombies fell left and right.

Selena smirked at them all. "Trust us now?"

"Let's go."

Everyone pulled out their weapons. Even with transportation so close, this wasn't going to be an easy thing. Kevin opened the side doors, activating the emergency slides for them to roll out on.

Nick grinned. "Sweet! I've always wanted to go down these in planes." He jumped down onto the inflatable slide, firing around at the nearby undead as he slid. "Wooooooooo-hooooooooo!"

Gabby couldn't help but laugh. She glanced up at Kevin. "Can I go next?"

"Let Riley go, then you, and I'll be right behind, alright?"

Riley caught the look their leader shot her. It would be Nick's and her job to make sure Gabby got to a car safely. She couldn't blame Kevin for being so protective of her. She was still so young in years, even if the world as it was now had aged her far beyond her time. She nodded and slid down to the tarmac, where Nick was shooting wildly, trying to wait for her.

Gunfire could be heard from the cars as well, as the occupants tried to clear out a path for them to run. Once she landed, Riley regained her bearings and jumped to help Nick keep the incoming undead at bay. He smiled at her. "Fun, ain't it?"

Once Gabby was down, Riley wrapped her arm around the girl and ran with her and Nick to the van. They opened the doors quickly and slid in without question. In the front, there were two people. One was a young woman with short, wavy, blond hair that just barely reached the nape of her neck. The other was a large man who had obviously worked out excessively in the life before. The top of his head was shaved, and although he looked tough, his green eyes, peering at them in the rearview mirror, looked friendly. Not that it mattered; they had no choice but to trust now.

"Is Shaun okay?" the woman demanded.

Nick nodded. "Yeah, he's fine. Oh! You must be Liz."

"He's talked a lot about you," Riley added.

The woman smiled. "Yes, I'm Liz, and the big softie next to me is Ashton."

"I'm Nick, this is Riley, and the youngin's Gabby."

"So, you must be the people lucky enough to survive in the States."

"Yep."

A few minutes later, AJ, Brian, and Gretchen slid into the backseat. Riley could see AJ leaning a bit on Brian for support as they climbed in. She knew his leg would never be the same. He would always have that noticeable limp slowing him down.

“Kev and the others are in the truck. Let’s blow this fucking zombie wannabe orgy.”

Nick laughed. “That’s AJ, and this is Brian and Gretchen.”

“Well, guys...” Ashton said with a smile. “Welcome to London.”

The conversation on the drive was stilted and awkward at first, yet they quickly forged a connection, a bond. There were just too few humans left in the world not to. As the others talked, Riley found herself retreating inwards, the way she had in the beginning, when she’d first arrived at the base with Nick. While she was less hesitant about letting people in, she still found it hard to really open up immediately. Her gaze was focused on the countryside. It was so simplistic and, yet, so beautiful, as long as she ignored the roaming ghouls out in the hills.

After almost two hours of driving, Riley had just about dozed off. Between the stress and emotional upheaval of leaving Florida and the hours they’d been flying, she was simply exhausted. She had curled up as much as she could, using Nick’s chest as a pillow. He kept stroking her hair, an action that soothed her.

“Hey, we’re here.”

Immediately, she sat up. Up ahead, a castle loomed before them. It looked straight out of any fairy tale she’d ever read as a child. More importantly, it looked impenetrable, from its stone towers down to the drawbridge they were driving over to get across the moat. There was an aura of strength about this impressive building, and Riley had to admit, using it as a base seemed downright brilliant.

“This is Bodiam Castle... but we simply call it home.”

And now, so will we, she thought with a smile. *Maybe now, we’ll actually be safe at last.*

Chapter 97

When we first got to Bodiam Castle, I felt like I was Harry Potter, coming to Hogwarts for the first time. This castle’s not nearly as cool as Hogwarts though, and it’s not even close to being as nice as MacDill. There’s no electricity

here; we've gone medieval. If we want light, we have to light a candle or an oil lamp. If we want hot water, we have to heat the water over the fire first. Thank god this place has a lot of fireplaces, cause it's freaking freezing in here! It was so hard to keep track of time in Florida, I almost forgot it was winter... and that winter is COLD in other parts of the world!

I never feel warm here, but at least I feel safe. The zombies can't get inside the castle, and the cold slows them down even more. They don't smell quite as bad here as they did in hot, humid Florida either, but maybe I've just gotten used to the stench. It's pretty sick to think you could just get used to the smell of rotting bodies, but it's been with us so long, I almost forgot what fresh air smells like. But as long as I live, I'll never forget the smell of death. Some things just stick with you.

This castle will never feel like home, but I'm still glad we came. It's nice to be someplace new, where there are more people and not so many memories. It's not the same, but I think I needed the change. Not everyone's so happy about the change, but at least we're safer now. Stronger, too, now that we know we're not alone. I try to remind myself of that every day, to make myself feel better.

I am not alone.

I am not alone.

Sunday, February 3, 2013

Week Forty-Two

Gabby wasn't the type of girl who dreamed of being a princess, but if she had been, she would have been disappointed by Bodiam Castle. On the outside, it was every bit a classic fairy tale castle, complete with turrets and a moat, but on the inside, it was drafty and dilapidated, hardly a palace fit for a princess.

The castle had been in ruins when Selena and Shaun's small group had sought shelter there, a mere shell of its former fourteenth century glory. They had fortified its stone walls and maintained its grounds, which contained both a garden and a well, making it a suitable fortress against the walking dead. There, they'd been able to stay safe and self-sufficient, with enough space and supplies to provide for the eight American newcomers. The castle didn't offer the same luxuries Gabby and the others had enjoyed on the base, but it did offer security and hope for the future. Inside its walls, a simplistic society continued to survive.

Gabby understood that survival was all that mattered these days – not wants, just basic needs. The castle wasn't exactly comfortable, but she had everything she needed there... everything, except her mother and father. Like Harry at Hogwarts, she'd arrived at Bodiam Castle an orphan. But she wasn't the only one. In the undead world, everyone was an orphan. The English survivors were

no different from the base group – ten strangers who had found themselves alone after the plague, then found each other. Their numbers had once been higher, but like the base group, they had lost people, too.

They were devastated to learn of the death of Giorgio, who had been a commercial airline pilot in his native Italy. “He told us he was flying back from the States on the day the virus spread,” Selena had explained. “He left New York with a plane full of people, and by the time he landed in Milan, most of them were dead.” Giorgio had survived, due to the same immunity they’d all been lucky enough to receive, but not even that had been enough to save him from the insatiable hunger of the undead.

“He sacrifice himself to save the world,” lamented Lucio, a middle-aged Italian man, who had apparently escaped to England with Giorgio. The loss of his fellow countryman seemed to have hit him the hardest.

“At least it wasn’t in vain,” said Abby, an older, motherly type, who seemed to be a leader among the English group. The gentle way in which she spoke to Lucio, patting his arm consolingly, reminded Gabby of her own mother, and in that moment, she missed her more than ever. She took the red-haired boy who sat on Abby’s other side to be her son, and as she watched them together that first night, Gabby seethed with jealousy, hating him for having a mother when she had no one.

Besides Selena, Shaun, Dr. Kwak, and the pair who had picked them up at the airport, Liz and Ashton, there were two others who lived in the castle. One was a young man named Martin, who came from Norway. The first thing Gabby had noticed about him was that he was missing half of his right arm. She was curious to know how he’d lost it, but he didn’t seem to speak English very well, and even if he had, it wouldn’t be polite for her to ask. Even in the undead world, her mother would expect her to use good manners, so Gabby kept her mouth shut and tried to stop herself from staring at the empty sleeve he had pinned to his shoulder.

The other man was equally mysterious. He was an older gentleman by the name of Alistair, and he, too, looked worse for wear, with a face that was twisted and scarred beneath his bushy beard and a noticeable limp when he walked. AJ and Alistair quickly bonded over their bad legs, and Gabby overheard them swapping stories over breakfast on Sunday morning, two days after they arrived at the castle. “Old war wound, leftover from me stint in the army,” Alistair explained, in an accent so thick, Gabby had a hard time understanding him. “Got injured in combat some forty years ago... hasn’t been the same since.”

“Aw, hell, man, now I feel like a total wimp,” groaned AJ, shaking his head. “I jacked up my leg falling out of a tree.”

“And who came out worse, you or the tree?”

AJ grinned. “We turned the tree into lumber.”

Alistair chuckled wheezily, slapping his good leg. “Now there’s a good lad! ‘Least ye got yer revenge in the end, eh?”

In another corner of the castle’s large kitchen, Riley and Nick were laughing with Liz and Shaun as if they were old friends. Gabby supposed it made sense; Shaun was a lot like Nick, ten years older, but no more mature. No wonder they got along so well.

Gabby sat on a hard, wooden bench between Kevin and Gretchen, across the table from Brian, Abby, and her son Callum, with whom Gabby carefully avoided eye contact. She kept quiet, listening rather than joining in to the conversation they were having. Abby was like an older version of Gretchen, sweet and soft-spoken. Callum just seemed shy. He had fair, freckly skin that turned pink whenever someone asked him a question.

Meanwhile, Gabby shifted uncomfortably on the bench, picking at her breakfast of lumpy oatmeal. She wasn’t hungry, especially for this; her stomach had been aching on and off ever since she’d gotten up that morning, as if her insides were all twisted up. Besides that, she felt like she had to go to the bathroom – maybe that would help. “I’ll be right back. Bathroom,” she added, in response to Kevin’s questioning gaze as she got up, climbing over the back of the bench.

Going to the bathroom wasn’t as bad as she’d expected it to be, after seeing the inside of the castle. Before the world had fallen apart, this had been a tourist attraction, so there was a modern ladies room with real toilets and sinks and even a baby changing station. Unfortunately, there was no running water, so they kept buckets of well water on hand with which to wash and flush the toilet.

Gabby reluctantly lowered her pants and perched gingerly on the edge of the cold toilet seat. As she went about her business, she happened to look down and quickly realized the reason for her discomfort, when she noticed the spot of pink in the middle of her white underwear. “Oh, no,” she groaned out loud, burying her face in her hands. What crappy timing her body had.

It wasn’t her first period ever; thankfully, that had happened when she was still twelve, when the world was still normal, when her mother was still alive to show her what to do. But it was her first since they’d arrived in England, and in that instant, Gabby realized a major oversight on her part: she’d forgotten to pack any supplies to take care of it. *Great*, she thought, annoyed with herself. Now she would have to go ask one of the other women, which would be embarrassing. Unless, maybe, someone had already left a stash in the bathroom.

She looked around hopefully. It was a public restroom, so there were no cabinets under the sink in which to store such things, but she was in luck: on the wall was

an old-fashioned dispenser, like the kind that had hung in the girls bathroom at her school. In the younger grades, it had been common practice to dare each other to put a quarter in that dispenser and see what came out. But this time, Gabby didn't have a quarter, and even if she did, this machine probably didn't take quarters; it would take British coins, and she didn't have any of those, either. Up until then, there had been no need for money in the undead world.

She sighed, resigning herself to the notion of asking one of the adults for help. She decided she'd go to Gretchen; Gretchen wouldn't make her feel too embarrassed. Gretchen had been a teacher, so she would understand. But then another thought occurred to her: Gretchen might not have what she needed either. She didn't think pregnant women got periods.

That left Riley, because she wasn't comfortable enough to ask one of the English women, and she definitely wasn't going to go to Kevin or any of the other guys. But that was okay; Riley was cool. Riley would help her without making a big deal out of it.

Gabby got up, fixed her clothes, and flushed the toilet using the bucket of water, the way she'd been shown. Then she slipped out of the bathroom, snuck around the corner, and nearly smacked right into someone else. "Oh!" she cried out, startled, as she jumped back. Looking up, she found herself face to face with the old man, Alistair. "Sorry," she apologized quickly, feeling her face heat up.

"No need to apologize, dearie; I'm still standing," said Alistair, his weathered face splitting into a grin that looked more like a grimace. "I suppose we're accustomed to walking on different sides of the corridor now, aren't we? Just like our roads. You Yanks stay on the right, but here in Britain, left is right!" He let out a loud guffaw.

Gabby giggled weakly, forcing a polite smile. "Sorry," she said again. "I'll try to remember."

"No need. Just watch where yer goin' now, and no one'll get hurt."

She nodded. "Okay."

She started to walk away, but his gruff voice stopped her. "Ye settlin' in alright, are ye?"

Gabby stopped and turned back, nodding. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, if there's anything I can do for ye, just say the word. Right?"

"Right," Gabby agreed, forcing another smile. "Thanks." She started to hurry away again, then, on sudden inspiration, turned around once more. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to have any quarters on you, would you? Or... whatever's close

to a quarter in British money.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she felt embarrassed and wished she hadn’t asked.

Alistair’s mouth twisted into another crooked smile, exposing his snagged, yellow teeth. Gabby knew it was rude to stare, but she couldn’t seem to look away from those nasty teeth as he talked. “Let’s see now... a quarter... that’s twenty-five cents, right? Only here in England, we use *pence*. *Pence* – say it now.”

“Pence,” Gabby repeated, feeling like her face was on fire. “Right.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t got any pence. Haven’t carried any coins on me since the dead started walking. What do you need five and twenty pence for?”

Gabby wished she could sink through the floor and disappear. “Oh, nothing... never mind.” But the way Alistair stared at her, as if he could see right through her, made her feel obligated to explain. “Just... for the dispenser in the bathroom,” she mumbled quickly, refusing to meet his probing eyes.

There was a pause, in which a confused Alistair was probably trying to figure out what she was talking about, and then he said, “Oh! In need of a sanitary napkin, are ye now?”

“Never mind,” Gabby said again, anxious to get away. “I’ll just ask Riley.”

“Ah, wait a tick now. Let ol’ Alistair take a look.” And to Gabby’s horror, the old man took her by the arm and led her back into the bathroom, where he proceeded to give the sanitary napkin dispenser a few sharp whacks, until it deposited a small, folded maxi pad right into his gnarled hand. “Here ye are,” he said, placing it in hers.

“Thanks,” whispered Gabby, mortified.

“My pleasure. Didn’t know I had magic in these old bones, did ye now?” Alistair wiggled his fingers and waggled his brows.

Gabby didn’t know what to say to that, but she managed a weak smile, hoping he’d take the hint and leave her alone.

But Alistair leaned against the doorway, stroking his grizzled mane of facial hair as he studied her. “I had a niece, ‘bout yer age,” he said. “Name of Hannah. Me younger brother’s girl. Sweet girl. They had a small flat in London.”

Gabby didn’t bother to ask what had happened to them. She already knew. It was the same thing that had happened to all of their families and friends. “I wish I could have met them,” she said quietly, and although she was just trying to be polite, it wasn’t a lie. It would have been nice to have another girl her age around

here. The thought of what could have been made her miss Makayla more than ever.

“Aye, I wish ye could’ve, too,” said Alistair. “Well, I won’t keep ye. Ye need yer privacy.” He winked at her and walked away, finally leaving her alone in the bathroom.

Gabby quickly closed the door and pressed her back against it, sighing with relief. She wanted to pretend that whole conversation had never happened, but at least she had a pad now. She slipped back into one of the stalls and took care of business, then hurried back to the kitchen before anyone could wonder what was taking her so long. She didn’t want Alistair filling them all in.

After breakfast, she slipped away again, announcing, “I’m going to go explore.” It was a nice surprise when no one tried to stop her. They had never been comfortable with her going off by herself on the base, even after they’d cleared it of zombies. But the castle was a contained space, smaller and safer by comparison, and she supposed that was why no one seemed to have a problem with her roaming it on her own.

To Gabby, the labyrinth of stone passages and narrow, spiral staircases leading up to the many towers made the castle an exciting place to explore, and she set off at once, carrying a small oil lantern for light. She felt like Harry Potter again, prowling the halls of Hogwarts in his invisibility cloak. She wished she was invisible. She also wished she had brought the set of Harry Potter books she’d borrowed from the base library, especially when she found a little nook at the top of one of the spiral staircases that would have made a perfect place to read. Sunlight streamed in through the narrow window in the turret, landing on a patch of stone floor. Gabby sat down on the sunny spot. It was warm, like the fireplace hearth in the kitchen.

She would have been content to sit there for hours, a book in her hands, but Kevin had been insistent that she pack light, bringing only the bare necessities, which, to him, did not include fantasy novels. The only books they’d brought along were nonfiction texts and how-to manuals on boring topics like electricity, plumbing, gardening, and survival skills. Gabby knew this was more practical, but sometimes, she didn’t want to be practical. Sometimes, she just wanted to be a little girl again and daydream about silly, frivolous things.

She was doing just that when a pounding pair of footsteps jarred her out of her fantasy. Startled, she scrambled to her feet, just as a ginger head rounded the curve of the spiral staircase. “Oh!” It was the boy, Callum. He gasped and jumped back, apparently just as started as she was. “Sorry,” he said shakily, letting out his breath. “Didn’t know you were up here.”

“It’s okay. Sorry if I scared you.”

“That’s alright. What were you doing up here?” His tone wasn’t accusing, merely curious.

Gabby shrugged. “Nothing. Just sitting here, wishing I had a book. It’s a good spot for reading.”

“It’s my favorite spot, too,” Callum agreed. “What sort of books do you like to read?”

“I like fantasy,” Gabby offered. “Anything that lets me escape, you know?” She was surprised to find herself opening up to him like that, but Callum didn’t seem to think it was weird at all. He just nodded.

“I like fantasy too. Have you read the *Lord of the Rings*? Those are my all-time favorites.”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“You should; they’re quite epic. What are your favorites?”

“I like Harry Potter... and I was reading the Redwall books back on the base. Being here makes me miss those.”

“Those are good, too,” Callum agreed. “I have my Tolkien books here, if you want to borrow them sometime.”

Gabby’s heart lifted. “Do you? I’d love to... I didn’t get to bring any books with me.”

“I couldn’t leave home without them. After my parents died, they were the only thing that brought me any comfort.”

Gabby was confused. “Your parents? But... isn’t Abby...?”

“Oh, Abby’s not my mum,” said Callum matter-of-factly. “She found me, sometime after the zombies rose. She’d lost her own son, so she sort of took me under her wing, and we traveled here together.”

“Oh.” Gabby couldn’t hate Callum anymore, not when she suddenly felt so connected to him. He was just like her. She thought of Kevin, who had become like a surrogate father to her, especially since her mother’s death. She supposed she was lucky to have him, the way Callum had Abby. At least they weren’t alone. “I’m sorry about your parents,” she offered.

“Thanks.” A sad smile flickered across his freckled face. “Sorry about yours as well.”

“How did you know my parents were gone too?”

“Well, none of the people you came with could be your parents. They don’t look like you, and none of them seem old enough. So I just assumed...” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

She shrugged, too. “It’s okay. My dad died before all this stuff started. My mom was immune, like us, but then zombies attacked our base last October, and... she was killed.” *I killed her*, she thought, but of course, she didn’t say it. It was an accident... she understood that now, even if she still blamed herself.

“Sorry,” Callum said for the third time. Gabby nodded, as an awkward silence descended upon them. She lowered her head, hiding her face behind her long hair, but through the black curtains of hair, she couldn’t help but sneak a peek at Callum. He was staring out the window, squinting in the sunlight, which gave him a look of intense concentration, even though he was probably just spacing out. The rays of sun seemed to set fire to his hair, making it gleam like the copper of a shiny, new penny. With that red hair and those freckles, he looked a little like Colton, who had kissed her on the beach in another lifetime. Watching him, Gabby felt wistful.

She cleared her throat, wanting to lift the heavy silence. “So...” she said lightly, smiling a little as he looked back at her. “Where do you keep those books of yours?”

Chapter 98

Change.

Change can be good. Change can be shitty. We ain’t got options about it, so we gotta roll with it anyway, right? I kinda hang on the outskirts here, like I did on the base in the beginning. I mean, it’s easier to observe shit than to actually get involved. People are still people, no matter how fucked up the world is.

But I’ve changed.

I care what people think. I want to be involved. People-watching is fun as fuck, but not being able to really click, ya know, the way I’ve gotten to at the base... that’s a bitch. But hey, this place is safer, probably. I don’t know. We ain’t had any attacks yet. Not sure how those ghouls could get through solid fucking stone. Then again, I still ain’t sure how that damn virus caused all this to begin with. I know Quack-And-Sue explained it, but hell, don’t mean I understand it all.

Acceptance is part of change too. You can fight like hell, but eventually change makes you its bitch, and you bow down and accept it. Like my leg. I fucking hate this limp. Maybe it'll go away. But it kills me that, for now, I ain't gonna be as fast or as good a fighter as I used to be. But at least I'm alive. I'm alive to be cursing the shit out of change.

So I may be ranting and not liking things much here now.

But fuck, at least I'm alive to bitch about it.

February 13, 2013

Week Forty-Three

AJ sat at the top of the gatehouse tower at the front of the castle. The view as the sun rose was a spectacular one. One that made him wish he'd packed his many painting supplies left behind in his house on the base. Kevin had lectured them all on packing light, and though everyone had listened, AJ also knew everyone resented him a little for it. He enjoyed the calm, though – beyond the roaming undead, of course. Most of the others were in bed. Then there was him, forever battling insomnia. He liked being able to snipe once again. He had to admit, it was easier to do so up here than it had been on the roof of the church back home.

He didn't want to go and make friends with all the newcomers. That was how he thought of the people outside of the ones he'd come to love in Florida. Sure, technically *they* were the newcomers who'd invaded the Europeans' base of operations, but it was simply how he thought. They were outside of the circle AJ had come to create. It was so hard for AJ to let people in. He'd spent so many years building these walls around him, so that rejection couldn't come just because he saw things differently. Then the world had ended. He'd come to have a new family, people who were able to see past his walls of detachment. Now he found himself often trying to stay isolated. The dynamic with the *other* group was different. It wasn't as secure, as tight. The bond wasn't like the one he and the others shared at the base. The people who'd been living at the castle weren't as united. Something was just off, and AJ didn't like it.

Not to mention, having so many new people around him was too unsettling.

He looked down at the water as he got ready to aim. He kind of liked the old fashioned Winchester rifle he'd found amongst their weapons supplies. It was odd, watching the English zombies wander along the bridge, moaning at the well-protected castle. It proved there was nothing there but simplistic, animalistic instinct. A drive for sustenance the creatures didn't need. He also liked that the smell wasn't *as* bad here. The decomposition was at a similar rate, however.

AJ fired. Within moments, a loud *SPAT!* sound followed. The fact that the bodies exploded was still the same as well. He snickered. It reminded him of

throwing darts at water balloons at a carnival. This was better, though, because with this, rotting body parts flew everywhere. He tilted his head. Maybe it was more like a rotting human firecracker than a popping balloon.

He snickered at the image.

“Someone seems to be enjoying himself.”

He turned to see Selena approaching. He wasn't sure what it was about her that caught his eye the way she did. Maybe it was her confidence. Or the *no compromises* attitude that exuded from her everywhere she went. It wasn't outright bitchy, the way he thought Riley came off as at times. It was more an inability to take any bullshit tossed her way. It was a trait he embodied himself, and on Selena, it just made her more attractive than she already was. He wondered idly what she'd been like before the world had gone to hell, if she'd been as toned, or as uncompromising. Had the world made her like this now? Somehow, he doubted it; she seemed like the type who handled anything thrown at her without even batting an eyelash.

“It's like that old video game, *Duck Hunt*, only with exploding zombies and no annoying fucking dog laughing at you if you missed.” He smirked. “I always wanted to shoot the damn dog.”

Selena chuckled as she tightened the bandana she wore over her hair.

“Sometimes I picture them as some of the people who used to give me hell. It's a little macabre, but it made it fun.”

“Being macabre can be fun.”

“Not to most of the people here. I always got told it's too morbid.”

“You cared what they thought?”

She smirked. “No, but hearing it all the time gets old. So why are you playing sniper?”

“I get bored easily.”

He set the gun aside and just looked down at the zombies roaming along the ground. Aimlessly, pointlessly, persistently, they moaned, in search of the prey they could smell but not catch, as the living continued to elude them. AJ glanced at Selena again, admiring her captivating, angular face, the smooth, mocha skin, and the dark eyes that sparkled impishly with light. AJ almost wanted to hit himself.

Fuck, what am I doing?

“What *are* you doing?”

Shit, did I say that out loud? He cleared his throat. “Watching them roam is amusing too. Like, it’s sort of how people used to be before the world went zombie-fest on us. They’d wander aimlessly from job to home, or whatever responsibilities society forced on them. No real purpose, no one truly happy. The biggest difference now is that they have a major case of the munchies and smell a shitload worse.”

“That’s a bit twisted.”

“Twisted, but true.”

She smiled at him. “I never said it wasn’t. Few people could see the world for what it really was.” She laughed. “I used to want to change it. Before I ended up becoming a pharmacist, I wanted to be a doctor, to save people.”

AJ cocked a brow. “Not something I would’ve guessed from you. What happened?”

“I learned how the world really is.” Selena turned, patting his shoulder.

“Not many do, you know.”

“Too many did it for the money. I got bitter and decided it wasn’t worth it. Now...” She laughed. “Now I’m reading all these medical books, trying to be the doctor I could’ve been then.”

“Ain’t life a bitch?”

“No, karma’s a sadistic bitch; it’s what I get for giving up.”

“So what was your life like... before all this?”

“Not much different.”

“Oh?”

He slid to the ground, sitting with his back up against the cool stone. It was almost freezing outside, but he shrugged it off. It was kind of nice, not having to deal with the humidity of Florida, to not be sweating daily. Sitting there, he stared up at Selena, enjoying the way she tried to make sense of him and his ways.

“Like you said earlier, people tended to be zombie-like. I didn’t really have people to lose either.” A shrug. “My mum died when I was younger, never knew

my dad..." She paused for a moment and then grinned. "The world didn't smell so rank, though."

"Sounds like my life, more or less."

Finally, she sat next to him, leaning back as she closed her eyes, enjoying the cool breeze that began to pick up around them. It tossed her short hair a bit. The two sat in silence for a few moments. Oddly enough, it didn't feel awkward to him. Both seemed to enjoy it, without forcing themselves to fill it with awkward chatter. It was different; AJ had never hit that level of comfort so quickly with anyone he'd known in his old life.

"What's the less?" Selena finally asked.

"Being a drug addict, an alcoholic, forced to go to this fucked-up rehab center. It's where I was when everyone up and croaked without warning. It's funny shit, though, the rehab center was a joke, but the world going to hell seemed to help more than anything to get me straight." He glanced over at Selena. "I only relapsed once."

"Is that how you hurt your leg?"

"No, actually it was because I fucked up my leg. Too much idle time, being stuck in some damn wheelchair and unable to do shit. And honestly, I think it's why Gabby's mom died."

"How do you take the blame for that?"

"I was hungover, pissed off, and not paying attention when she and Howie were working on something. I didn't see those ghouls till Gabby did, and they were too close. I wasn't able to do shit either, with this damn leg."

"So that's why you keep an extra eye on her?"

"What?"

"You may not have been here long, AJ, but I people-watch the same way you do. The only one more protective of her than you is Kevin. He's like her surrogate father. You've become like her big brother. It's not your fault, though, that her mum died. Shit happens. Especially now."

"Doesn't mean I ain't partly to blame. The least I can do is make sure the brat don't get hurt," he replied, startled she was able to see right through him so easily.

"It's like with the way you've been acting. Anyone with eyes can see how your group is like a family. I can't say the same for us. We're a band of survivors; it's

different. And you, with you, it's like you don't even want to try to know us. The others try; you keep away. Like we're the zombie plague in wait or some shit."

He blinked. "Wait a minute..."

She stood, brushing herself off with a smirk. "What, annoyed that I'm right?"

"Heh, you wish."

"Have it your way. You continue having fun sniping away. And by the way... AJ?"

"Hmm?"

"Just because you avoid people doesn't mean we can't see what you're doing." And with that, she started walking away.

He stared after her, Selena's words leaving their mark on him in ways he was far from used to.

Chapter 99

*Set me as a seal upon thine heart,
As a seal upon thine arm;
For love is strong as death,
Jealousy is cruel as the grave.
The coals thereof are coals of fire,
Which hast a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can floods drown it:
If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,
It would be utterly condemned.*

(Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

Love is still alive in this world of death. My heart is glad.

Thursday, February 14, 2013
Week Forty-Three

It was Valentine's Day, but if there was love in the air, it was smothered by the stench of rotting flesh.

Standing at the top of the northwest tower, Brian wrinkled his nose. The large moat surrounding Bodiam Castle kept the zombies a safe distance away, but on a blustery day like this one, the breeze wafted their odor right over the top of its turrets. There was no such thing as stepping out for a little fresh air anymore, not in the world of the undead. Even the picturesque English countryside was marred by the sight of zombies roaming the land. Their moans were carried on the wind, making them seem much closer than they appeared.

The sound was unsettling, but Brian reassured himself that they were relatively safe at Bodiam Castle. Even if there were zombies in the moat – and he was willing to bet there were – the uncoordinated undead could never scale the castle's thick, stone walls. It had originally been built to withstand an attack from an invading army, and six centuries later, it was being used, once again, for the purpose of defense: defense against an army of the undead.

Brian was tired of fighting. He was a lover, not a fighter – or so the saying goes – and on that day, of all days, he just wanted to focus on love.

There was still love left in this world. He saw it when he looked at Nick and Riley, holding hands when they thought no one was watching. He heard it when he was greeted each day by Kevin saying, “Mornin’, cous.” He smelled it when he found Liz cooking dinner for Shaun and the others; he tasted it when he filled his stomach with the simple meals, lovingly prepared. And he felt it when he curled up with Gretchen under the covers of their bed, cuddled close together for warmth, his hand resting on her belly, which harbored the greatest love of his life. Their unborn child, a new life created out of love, was proof that both love and life still existed.

But it was hard to focus on love without feeling sadness. Brian's heart was full of love, but heavy with grief. On days like this, the memories weighed on him, and the pain dragged him down. For how could he think of love without thinking of Leighanne and of Brooke and Bonnie?

On their last Valentine's Day together, Brian had taken the twins to school, their bookbags stuffed with Valentine cards addressed to their classmates, their lunchboxes packed with heart-shaped peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hidden love notes from Mom, their arms laden with handcrafted Valentine boxes and homemade cookies for their classroom parties. Leighanne had been a room mother and went to school to help out with the parties. When she brought the girls home that afternoon, Brooke and Bonnie told Brian every last detail of their day, which included showing him every Valentine they'd received and sharing something about the kid who'd given it to them. He could still hear Brooke babbling, “*And this one's got Spongebob on it, and it says, 'Soak it up and be mine!' and it's from Kyle M. He got in trouble yesterday for running in the hall,*” and Bonnie adding, “*Yeah, he gets in trouble all the time...*” After show and tell was over, they all fancied themselves up and went out to dinner together, Brian

and his three lovely Littrell ladies. And when they were home again and the twins tucked into bed, he and Leighanne had enjoyed a private celebration in their own bedroom. If they'd known they would only have two more months together, they would have made it last all night.

It was hard to believe it had just been a year since that night. To Brian, it felt like it had been a whole lifetime, and in a way, it had. That was his old life, and this was his new life. The old Brian had died along with Leighanne, Brooke, and Bonnie. The new Brian was born the moment he met Gretchen. She had saved him, not just from the zombies, but from himself. In that respect, he owed his new life to her. It was as different from his old life as Gretchen was from Leighanne, but he was glad to be alive and in love again.

Still, it was impossible not to feel some guilt, especially on days like this. His family hadn't even been gone a year, and he was already starting a new one. He knew in his head that Leighanne wouldn't judge him, that she would want him to be happy, and that Brooke and Bonnie would only be sorry they couldn't be there to play with their new brother or sister in person. But in his heart, he still felt like he'd been unfaithful in some way.

He'd been praying every night for guidance, and there on the tower, he folded his hands over one of the crenellations and bowed his head once more. *"Father, I pray You light my way and show me the right path,"* he silently pleaded. *"I know that I've sinned, and my faith has wavered, but that faith has been restored. I vow to follow You, Father, wherever you lead me. I just feel a little lost lately, and I'm not sure if I'm going in the right direction. I guess what I'm hoping for is a sign... some small sign to let me know I'm heading the right way."*

Brian knew that God wasn't a genie; He answered prayers, but He didn't grant wishes on command. So he nearly jumped out of his skin when, as if on cue, he heard a deep voice proclaim, "Brian, my son."

His heart leapt out of his chest, as his eyes shot upwards, half-expecting to see a face in the clouds over his head, like Simba's father in *The Lion King*. But the sky looked just as flat and gray as it had all day, so Brian spun around. He shouldn't have been surprised to find someone standing in the doorway – an earthly being with a sinful smirk on his fully-human face. Brian's heart, which had been pounding in his throat, slowly sunk. He felt his face heating up and imagined his cheeks were even redder than the prankster's hair.

"Heh, gotcha," chortled Shaun. "Sorry, mate – couldn't resist."

Brian returned his gleeful grin with a weak smile. "You're not exactly what I was praying for."

“Ah, but *you* are exactly what I’ve been looking for,” countered Shaun, still grinning like a fool. “I’m hoping you’ll do me a massive favor.”

Brian pounced upon the opportunity to toy with him. “And why should I do you a massive favor, after what you just did to me?”

Shaun didn’t miss a beat. “Because you’re a good Christian man and, therefore, a forgiving man.”

Brian grinned and held up his hands. “You got me there. What do you need?”

“I’m in need of a minister to marry Liz and me.”

Brian felt his eyebrows lift in surprise. “Yeah? You and Liz are ready to take the plunge?”

Shaun rubbed his hands together and sucked in an anxious breath. “Hope so. She’s been ready – for about nine years now, mind you. Thought she’d have given up on the idea by now. But, as it’s Valentine’s Day and I’ve nothing else to give her, why not my hand in marriage, eh?”

Brian grinned. “You know that’s not a real good reason to marry someone.”

“Zombie apocalypse, mate. Who needs reason?”

Brian laughed, and so did Shaun.

“I’m only joking, you know – I love Liz, I do. Always have. Just never been great with commitment. But at this point, I think we’re pretty well committed to one another no matter what, so might as well make it official, right? It’d be nice to have a happy occasion to celebrate ‘round here.”

Brian nodded. “That I agree with.”

“So you’ll do it then?” Shaun raised a hopeful brow.

Brian smiled. “Like you said... might as well make it official.”

Shaun’s face split into a wide grin. “Splendid! What time?”

“You mean today?”

Shaun shrugged. “Why not? Today’s Valentine’s Day – perfect day for a wedding.”

Brian couldn’t argue with that. In the undead world, there was no use taking time to plan and no point in waiting. Life was short, and the future was scarce.

They had to live each day as if there would be no tomorrow. “How about sundown?” he suggested. “That’ll give me some time to prepare.”

“Brilliant. It’ll give me a chance to propose!”

Shaun flashed a cheeky grin over his shoulder and took off down the stairs, leaving Brian to shake his head. Shaun reminded him of an older version of Nick, with a little splash of AJ for added color. But as he watched the top of his ginger head disappear, Brian realized that Shaun’s proposal might, indeed, be the sign he had been searching for.

“Every young girl dreams of having a fairytale wedding in a castle. Every young boy dreams of defending a damsel in distress in a castle that’s under siege by an army of the undead – in his video games, at least. But not every young boy and girl grow up to see their dreams come true. Shaun and Liz did. They’re living the dream – which, in this case, may be more of a nightmare.”

Brian paused, as a round of chuckles echoed through the chapel ruins.

“They stayed together through the zombie apocalypse, and like I’ve always said, if your relationship can survive zombies, it can survive anything. That’s why we’re here today, to celebrate the union of husband and wife. Or, to keep this modern, Zombie Slayer and... Shaun.”

Raucous laughter this time. “I thought this was a wedding, mate, not a roast,” Shaun whispered out the side of his mouth, winking at Brian.

Brian shrugged and grinned. “Guess that’s what you get when you give a guy less than a day’s notice,” he shot back, not bothering to lower his voice.

In reality, Brian was in his element and enjoying every minute of this makeshift wedding ceremony. He had always enjoyed performing marriages; they were one of the highlights of his former career. There was no greater joy than taking two people who were happy and in love and joining them as one in God’s eyes. Brian respected the sanctity of marriage, but he always tried to keep his sermons light-hearted; it was one of the reasons the congregation back in Atlanta had flourished under his ministry. He believed faith and fun should go hand in hand, just as Shaun and Liz stood before him on the crumbling altar of what had once been the castle’s chapel.

Behind them, everyone else had gathered to witness the special occasion. Even AJ had showed up, though he stood awkwardly apart from the others, arms crossed over his chest. In the opposite corner of the room, Selena struck a similar pose. Nick and Riley stood side by side, their arms locked around each other’s waists as they listened to the sermon. Kevin, Howie, Gabby, and Gretchen

formed a small group of their own, separate from the original castle-dwellers. Brian couldn't help but catch Gretchen's eye as he proceeded with the vows.

"Will you, Shaun, have Liz to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort and keep her, and, forsaking all others, remain true to her as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," whispered Shaun, suddenly solemn. As if in response, a lone zombie moaned, somewhere in the distance.

A shiver ran down Brian's spine, but he forced himself to smile and continue. "And will you, Liz, have Shaun to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort and keep him, and, forsaking all others, remain true to him as long as you both shall live?"

Tears sparkled in Liz's blue eyes. "I will!"

Brian sensed she'd been waiting a long time to say those words. He wondered what it would be like to hear them again from his own lips, to promise himself to a woman he'd only known a matter of months. A little rush of anticipation swept through him.

When it came time for the ring exchange, he asked, "May I have the rings, please?" and the boy, Callum, stepped forward, digging a pair of rings out of his pocket. They were nothing but simple, sterling silver bands, looted from a display of handcrafted Celtic jewelry in the castle's souvenir shop, but the bond of love they represented was more beautiful and priceless than any piece of jewelry. Shaun and Liz slipped the rings onto each other's fingers in turn, repeating the promise, "With this ring, I thee wed... in sickness and in health, in poverty or in wealth, till death do us part."

Death... the threat of it hung over the castle like the heavy clouds of midwinter, but as the groom kissed his bride, their love seemed powerful enough to keep it at bay. This was a happy day, one of the few they'd shared since the dead had risen. It gave Brian fresh hope that life would go on, that one day their nightmare would be over. He found himself gazing again at Gretchen, who was glowing, her hands folded over the beginnings of a baby bump, and he prayed that love and faith in the Lord would protect them all.

Chapter 100

Society.

For some reason, since the dead rose, we've been operating as if such a thing still existed. The assumption simply was that the rules, expectations, everything

was still there in some form. Now, we should have known better. That should've been destroyed by the simple fact that corpses were roaming the world like it was nothing. Why wasn't it?

Maybe it was habit.

I don't know. Believe it or not, I don't always have the answers. Everyone expects me to, and I wish I did, but... I just don't. So what happens when the rules of before are broken? What do you do? What can you do? The rules are gone. As are the punishments. It's a different world now.

We adapt and face the new challenges the universe throws at us.

No matter how grim things may be.

I can't share my doubts with the others. Even in this new home, with more people, I'm still the leader. People still look to me. Someone has to do it. I never asked for this role, but I take it on anyway. So I keep these thoughts in my journal. Remind me to someday thank Riley for the suggestion. That girl may drive me crazy at times, but this was one of her best ideas. I think it's kept us all sane over the past ten months. It feels longer. The world from before seems like a lifetime ago. In a sense, it was.

One final thought to ponder...

What if the worst thing out there isn't the undead... but ourselves?

Friday, February 22, 2013

Week Forty-Four

It seemed like another day in the castle. It still felt surreal, living overseas the way they were now, nothing but the moors in their view, when Kevin decided he needed a break. He needed space away from the others. A break from the leader role that plagued him. He wondered how this group had been run before they'd arrived. It seems that although they had survived, they had been unorganized. So of course, once Kevin had seen that, he'd gotten them into action. He'd taken full inventory of their supplies, checked what weapons they had and how much ammo, and started getting them to use weapons other than guns, to keep those aside for runs and possibly hunting game when spring came. He'd also started thinking about the idea of a new garden after the spring thaw. He was looking ahead at the long term, something not many others did but he knew was a necessary task.

“You look like you're thinking too damn much again.”

Kevin chuckled as he turned to see AJ walking up behind him. He walked with an obvious limp, which kept his pace a slower one than before. It had lessened some since the initial injury; he only hoped it would be more subtle as time went on. He never mentioned it, since he knew how sensitive the other man was about it. AJ would never admit it, but Kevin knew he defined himself by how useful he was to the group, to keeping them safe. It was why, when he later found AJ had relapsed after breaking his leg, he hadn't been too surprised.

“Just trying to make sure we're prepared.”

The two started walking down the steps towards the bathrooms. Initially, Kevin was going to try and find Gabby, since they needed to go on a clothing run. He thought perhaps she'd like to go and get out of the castle for a bit. It was always dangerous, but since Brian, Nick, and Riley were going, he knew the teen would be well-protected.

“When do you ever take a break?”

“You can't take breaks anymore, someone needs to stay vigilant.”

AJ snickered. “You remind me of Mad-Eye Moody in *Harry Potter* man – CONSTANT VIGALANCE!”

“What scares me is that you've read those books; they're meant for kids.”

“Hey, those books are fucking awesome.”

“You never stop surprising me.”

“That's because, like the books, I'm fucking awesome.”

He couldn't help but start laughing again. “Look, Aje, we'll be heading out on a run later; I need you to...”

“Stay behind, I know.”

“...Keep watch and snipe anything that's roaming around the doors, actually. I need you to keep this place safe, to keep us safe when we return.” He paused, his hand resting on the former addict's shoulder. “I need you to be my eyes, man. I wouldn't trust that with anyone else.”

He saw a smile start to form on AJ's face. “Thanks, man. It's just-”

But what it was, Kevin didn't get a chance to hear. A scream resounded throughout the castle's walls and chilled Kevin right down to the bone. He knew that voice instinctively. The two shared a glance for a split second before sprinting down the hall, AJ forcing his leg to cooperate as best as he could. The

screams continued. Kevin's mind was racing. How could the undead get in here? The place was impenetrable; it was the only thing that let any of them feel safe.

How is this possible?

They burst into the bathroom, and Kevin was frozen with shock at the sight before him. Gabby was still screaming. The scene before them was different from any scenario the two could have imagined. A figure was hovering above her, moaning loudly. However, it was *not* a member of the undead. Instead, it was a human, alive and kicking. The old man, Alistair, was struggling with the young girl, as she fought to keep him from ripping off her clothes.

“Now, now there, girl, you’ll enjoy what I have to give ye...”

In that moment, Kevin saw red.

He reached forward, grabbing the older man and slamming him up against the wall. In his peripheral vision, he could see AJ going to Gabby, helping her up and trying to gather what was left of her torn clothing. There were already bruises forming along her arms and face. His rage only built at that fact. His emotions drove out any rationality he could have possessed at that moment. He shoved Alistair into the wall a second time and held him there, ignoring the way he winced as his head was thrust back against the stone.

“Hey there, lad...”

His grip tightening around Alistair's throat, Kevin leaned in, his voice barely audible. “What gives you the idea, the thought, that you could touch her? *How sick are you?* Do you know what that girl has been through!?”

“It’s a new world now; the rules of old are...”

Kevin pulled him back from the wall, only to slam him into it forcefully once more. He could hear the noise as the other man's skull smashed into it again, harder this time, and he felt a tinge of satisfaction, as the rage continued to surge through him. “It’s a new world, and you don’t deserve to be alive in it. You just tried to *rape a thirteen-year-old girl!*”

Alistair tried to talk again, but Kevin's grip began to cut off his air. He knew he could do it, kill him right then. He knew that to leave this man alive would be a mistake. He could hear someone yelling in the background, but he was too enraged to make out the words. All he saw was this sad excuse for a human, alive by chance, damaging Gabby even more than she already was. It had been pure luck that they had been close enough to hear her screams in time. Had he been blinded back in Florida because he'd had the good luck of finding companions who were good, honest people? His trust in what humanity was left had been brutally betrayed.

A few minutes longer, and... His grip tightened even more at the thought. The rapist's face began to redden with the lack of air.

"KEVIN!" AJ screamed.

He ignored him, focusing in on the task at hand. "I should kill you."

"KEVIN, NO!!!"

AJ lunged at the two men, forcing himself forward and prying Kevin's hand from around Alistair's neck. He shoved Kevin back so that he couldn't go back at him again. The old man passed out, slumping to the floor. AJ stared steadily at the former colonel, who simply looked at him coolly in response.

"Kevin, you were killing him."

"He deserved it."

Gabby just stared at them from where she stood, tears streaming silently down her face.

"Yeah, but fortunately for that bastard, we're better than that."

Kevin sighed, staring down at the unconscious body, and then nodded. "Grab Nick; we need to get him locked up. Ask Liz or Shaun if there's a dungeon we can use. We can figure out what to do with him there."

AJ nodded, pausing at the doorway.

"I'm not going to kill him. I... wasn't thinking."

"I know," he replied and rushed off to do as Kevin said.

Kevin turned towards Gabby. She rushed to him, and he cradled her in his arms. She sobbed hysterically as the two slowly slumped to the floor, exhausted. His head rested on top of hers as she continued to cry, her body shaking. Kevin rocked her, clueless of how to comfort the teen.

"Did he...?"

She shook her head, still unable to say anything.

"I'm here for you, okay? I won't let anything happen to you," he promised, looking up at the ceiling, wishing for a sign.

Jo, I need you. How do I protect your daughter? How do I keep her safe?

I'm sorry I failed you.

A few hours later had them all together, staring at the man locked in old shackles Kevin knew would hold. It was almost barbaric, but he knew the man deserved no better. Gabby was glued to his side; she had been since the incident. She hadn't spoken a word either. He could see Callum out of the corner of his eye, staring at Gabby worriedly. It made him smile that she finally had someone her own age around. He hoped Callum's presence would help comfort her in the days to come. She would need that, more than anything. Gabby had had more to deal with than he could even imagine. It was a miracle she hadn't become catatonic or something, he figured. How could she trust again? He caught sight of Callum again. Or even love? He wanted that for her, something to light up her dark, bleak world. He worried for her deeply, his surrogate daughter in a world of orphans.

"So what do we do with him?" AJ asked bluntly, since no one else seemed to want to.

"That's the question. I almost..."

"Dude, I get it. Hell, I want a piece of the bastard myself," Nick replied, but Riley put her hand on his shoulder, a silent gesture to keep him from acting.

"I always thought Alistair was a bit daft, but..."

"He deserves a good flogging," Shaun said, looking sheepish as his wife gave him a look for interrupting her.

"Kevin has already done that," Dr. Kwak In-Su reminded them with a distinct tone of disapproval.

"What do we do? We don't have laws anymore," Gretchen added, reminding them all of the biggest flaw in the current situation. "We don't have prisons; we have to handle everything ourselves."

"We kill him," Selena said simply.

"We *don't* kill the living," Brian declared firmly. "What's the matter with you? Suggestions to beat him, saying we should kill him? I get it; Kevin was upset when he found him doing... what he did. But to really plan it out and do it? Are you insane? That makes us *no* better than those corpses roaming around, trying to eat us."

“Oh sod off with your morals,” Selena retorted. “This is about reality. We can’t be letting this bastard free to wander. What are we going to do? Just force him out the door for the undead to eat? That’s the same as killing him. We should just shoot the wanker and get it done.”

“Brian’s right,” Riley chimed in, staring down Selena. “We can’t kill him in cold blood like that. That makes us lower than the sleaze himself. I say... we keep him chained up down here. For now. We don’t kill him. We hold him till we figure out something else to do.”

Ashton stood in the corner silently as the debate continued – something Kevin didn’t like. He’d rather everyone gave their opinion on the issue. But he also knew that was too much to ask. No matter what everyone thought, the decision was going to come down to him and him alone. It was easier for people like Selena to suggest killing. Why? Because she knew she wouldn’t have to be the one to do it. In the end, it would be Kevin who held Alistair’s life in his hands. He hated the feeling. It made him feel slimy, dirty.

It was that feeling that made his decision.

“Brian and Riley are right: we can’t kill him. For now, we’ll hold him here, feed him, and keep him alive till we have a solution.” He turned, his steely stare fixated on the old man, who had wisely refused to utter a word this entire time. “Don’t think you’ve gotten away with it, or that our respect for human life is a weakness. That would be a mistake.”

The words seemed to echo throughout the dungeon and haunted them all.

PART X: SEASONS TURN

Chapter 101

Sleep doesn’t come easy in the land of the dead. The zombies don’t sleep, so neither do we. We still take turns doing guard duty, keeping watch from the top of one of the towers at night, while the others get some shut-eye. With so many of us in the rotation now, my turn only comes around once every two weeks or so, but even on the off nights, I only sleep a few winks. It’s cold in the castle and lonely late at night. The wind howls through the makeshift shutters we use to board up the windows, and it’s not just the chill that makes me shiver, but the stench and sounds of zombies that are carried in with it.

It helps having someone to share my bed, but not even Gretchen can keep my nightmares at bay. Even in sleep, I’m haunted by dreams of my dead wife and daughters. When I wake up, I don’t know whether to be relieved or

disappointed. I'm always grateful to find Gretchen there beside me, still warm and breathing, but equally devastated to realize Leighanne and Brooke and Bonnie are still dead. Even awake, I'll never be able to escape the nightmare, not when I live it every day. The best I can do is find ways to distract myself. Gretchen is a good distraction.

I lie awake so often at night with something to read or something to write. In the silence, my mind is free to think of the ways that God has ~~curse~~ blessed me.

Saturday, March 9, 2013

Week Forty-Six

The stub of a candle burned, casting its flickering light into an otherwise dark corner. Shadows danced on the stone walls of the castle, as Brian, missing the ease of electric lamps, squinted down at the notebook in his lap. Pen poised over the paper, he read the last words he had written.

I lie awake so often at night with something to read or something to write. In the silence, my mind is free to think of the ways that God has cursed me.

It had been another restless night, his sleep disturbed by another terrifying dream. Brian had woken with a start, his heart racing, and slipped out of the bed he shared with Gretchen. She slept on soundly as he stole away, not wanting to wake her. He took with him only the single candle, a pen, and the journal Riley had suggested he keep.

The suggestion had been a good one; putting his thoughts down on paper was the only way he could get them out of his head. Writing was relaxing, therapeutic. In the many months since he'd started it, the once blank book had become filled with entries that spanned everything from stories to sermons. Onto its pages, he'd copied verses from the Bible and created verses of songs, but most of his writings were free verse – his own rambling thoughts, his own troubling memories.

He still struggled with his faith sometimes, especially on nights like these, when he'd find himself alone in the dark, the only one awake. He would lie there and listen to the soft sounds of slumber that surrounded him: a symphony of slow, steady breaths... the occasional rustle of covers as another restless sleeper turned over. But rather than allowing himself to be soothed, Brian fixated on the more sinister sounds coming from outside the castle walls. Every thump made his heart leap into his throat; every moan made his blood run cold. In these moments, he reached out to his god like a security blanket. But he never got a reply. It was a lonely feeling.

But he wasn't truly alone. He remembered it just as a dull thud from somewhere overhead made him jump.

Nick.

Nick was in the north tower, keeping watch that night. They all worried whenever it was Nick's turn for guard duty, not because they didn't trust him to do the job, but because of his seizures. The ominous thud sent Brian scurrying for the stairs to make sure he was all right. The candle shook precariously in his hand, its flame creating a dizzying strobe effect as he circled up the spiral staircase to the top of the tower.

There, he found Nick climbing to his feet. His gun was lying on the ground, its barrel glinting in the candlelight. Brian looked from one to the other, putting the pieces together. "Nick?"

Nick spun around, startled, but seemed to relax when he recognized Brian, a sheepish smile spreading across his face. "Oh, hey Brian. You scared me, bro."

Brian smiled back tentatively. "Are you okay? I heard a thud."

"Oh yeah, I'm good. Don't tell Kevin, but I may have nodded off for a sec. Dropped my gun."

"Nodded off?" Brian raised his eyebrows. "You sure that's all it was?"

The sharp look Nick gave him was all the proof Brian needed. Post-seizure Nick just had a vacant stare. "I didn't have a seizure, if that's what you're thinking." If he had, he would have seemed more confused than annoyed.

Brian nodded, clapping a hand down on Nick's shoulder. "I know. Just had to come check on you, bro," he replied, returning the term of endearment Nick had used earlier. They really were like brothers now, for the small group of survivors had become a sort of family, connected by a bond that was stronger than blood – though, as it turned out, they had that in common, too. And like brothers, they sought to protect one another from threats both outside and within the walls of their fortress.

The muffled pleas floating up from the dungeon were proof of the danger that lurked around every corner, even inside the castle. Alistair, imprisoned in its bowels, served as a sad reminder that the dead weren't the only ones to be feared. The living could be just as dangerous. But Nick was all right. A little misguided at times, maybe, but a good guy nonetheless.

"Sorry if I woke you."

Brian shook his head. "Nah, I was already awake."

"Can't sleep?"

“Can’t stay asleep.”

Nick looked sympathetic. “Another nightmare?”

Brian nodded.

“Sucks, man. I have ‘em sometimes too.” A look of understanding passed between the two men. Although Nick rarely spoke of it, Brian remembered that he, too, had lost family members.

“I’m sure we all do,” said Brian.

Nick smirked. “Hell, the world we live in is one big waking nightmare.”

Brian let out a humorless chuckle, nodding in agreement. When Nick turned and wandered back to the window, he followed. They stood side by side, sentry-like, staring out into the night. The moon was a mere sliver in the sky, doing little to illuminate the dark ground below, but the stars around it shone like diamonds.

“I’m thinking of asking Gretchen to marry me,” Brian blurted out of the blue.

Nick turned to look at him, grinning like a jack-o-lantern in the candlelight. “Yeah? Way to go, man – congrats!”

Brian could feel himself blushing. “You don’t think it’s too soon?”

Nick snorted. “What, you think society won’t approve or something? Lemme tell you something, bro – society’s dead, and time is meaningless. It can never be too soon.”

“I guess that’s true...”

“So when you gonna pop the question?”

Brian considered the question. “I don’t know. I guess I’m waiting for the right moment.” He had proposed to his first wife on a Christmas Eve picnic in her parents’ backyard. It was simple and romantic, exactly his style. He would have to think about how to do something special for Gretchen here, in this hellhole. But he didn’t want to dwell on it too long, for Nick was right. Society was dead. Time was meaningless. And it could never be too soon.

He felt calmer when he told Nick goodnight, descended the stairs, and slipped back into bed beside Gretchen. His side of the bed was cold, but he snuggled closer to her and was warm in no time. For awhile longer, he lay awake, imagining how he might make an honest woman out of her. Then he reached for

his journal on the floor beside the bed. His pen was tucked inside, marking his place. In the dying candlelight, he read the last words he had written.

In the silence, my mind is free to think of the ways that God has cursed me.

Glancing over at Gretchen, he crossed out the word *cursed* and replaced it with a better one.

Blessed.

Then he snuffed out the candle, turned over in bed, and allowed himself to drift back to sleep.

Thick clouds rolled in while Brian slept, and the morning dawned gray and chilly. It would have been the perfect day to spend in bed with Gretchen, but such laziness wasn't an option. The group was short on supplies, and Brian woke to find Kevin organizing an expedition into the nearby village.

They made these supply runs every few days, bringing back only as much as they could carry without slowing themselves down. Speed was their greatest advantage over the undead, whose shambling pace had slowed considerably with the winter freeze. The zombies still outnumbered them, but as long as they could outrun the undead, the small group of survivors felt confident in their ability to slip in and out of town unscathed. Selena usually led such missions, though Kevin had quickly risen through the ranks to become her second in command. He had trained the foreigners to use the military-grade weapons he had brought from the base and taught the whole group tactical formations to use in confined spaces.

“Oh, there you are, Brian,” he remarked, as Brian walked into the kitchen, where Abby was ladling bowls of porridge out of a big pot on the stone hearth. A fire crackled cheerfully in the fireplace, making the starkly furnished kitchen feel cozier than any other room in the castle. Abby handed him a bowl of breakfast, and Brian pulled a milk crate up to the makeshift table, crudely fashioned out of wooden planks. Kevin sat at the head of the table with a scrap of paper and a pen. “We’re going into town today,” he was saying. “I want you to be my wingman.”

Brian gave a single nod – not that Kevin needed his consent. The former Air Force pilot didn't ask for favors; he issued commands. Brian knew better than to refuse. Ever since AJ's leg had taken him out of commission, Brian had become his cousin's right hand man. “Add candles to your list,” he said. “That stub I had last night isn't gonna get me through another one.”

“Got ‘em. Matches, too,” replied Kevin, tapping his pen against the paper. “Anything else?”

Brian shrugged. “Just the usual.”

Food was always their first priority. It was impossible to grow anything in the frozen ground, so they survived on what little they could scrounge up that wasn’t spoiled – mostly canned goods and boxed meals, looted from the pantries and cupboards of houses in the village.

The original castle-dwellers had come up with a system for organizing their trips into town. When they’d finished going through a house or building, stripping it of all useful supplies, they spray-painted an X across the door so they wouldn’t mistakenly go there again. It would have been an easy mistake to make, for the houses in the small parish all looked more or less the same, a row of quaint, red-brick cottages with gabled roofs, located along a single, winding lane.

Using this system, the survivors made their way up the street, bypassing the houses whose doors had been marked. They moved silently, in the T-formation Kevin had taught them, with Kevin in the lead, flanked on either side by Brian and Ashton, while Selena brought up the rear, walking backwards to cover them from behind. The advantage of being in such a sparsely-populated area was that there weren’t many zombies roaming around, certainly not compared to the situation in Florida. However, it was common to have to clear a house of its undead inhabitants before it could be scavenged.

As they neared the end of the lane, the houses became fewer and farther between. Brian wondered what they would do when they ran out of buildings to loot. He supposed they would have to become completely self-sufficient and produce their own supplies. Food wouldn’t be a problem once spring came; they could re-plant the garden and grow their own vegetables, enough to last through the winter if they preserved them. There would be more animals around, if the undead hadn’t driven them away, and they could hunt for game. But Brian worried about how they would manage to make all the other things they needed, things like candles and matches, soap and medicine. Somehow, people in the distant past had done it, and he supposed they would have to learn as well – sooner, rather than later.

They passed a two-story brick house with a bright blue door. A charming little sign mounted next to the door named the house as *Ash Cottage*, but the red X slashed across the cheery blue told Brian the cottage held nothing of value to them. They moved on.

An ominous creak caught Brian’s attention, and he froze in his tracks. Kevin and Ashton stopped as well, but Selena bumped into him from behind. Startled, Brian let out a shout.

“Shh!” Kevin hissed. He crept up alongside the tall, wooden fence surrounding Ash Cottage’s side yard, and the others followed in a single line, pressing their bodies close to the wooden planks. Brian feared the noise had come from inside the fence and imagined a zombie mirroring their movements on the other side, ready to crash through the gate and attack them at any moment. But as they reached the corner and peered around it, he saw the source of the sound.

There was a small playground next door, and a pair of swings were swaying in the wind, their chains creaking. Brian let out the breath he’d been holding, willing his heart to stop its pounding. But his sense of relief didn’t last long. It was replaced with a shivery feeling that had little to do with the cold. There was something eerie about the playground. Its equipment, painted in bright, primary colors, seemed out of place under the steel gray sky. The wrought-iron fence that surrounded it had an air of menace. *Keep out*, it seemed to say. *Children only*. But there were no children left to play inside. Perhaps that was what unnerved him. There was something sad and almost sinister about an abandoned playground.

But it wasn’t abandoned. Something moved behind a row of rubbish bins, and Brian’s breath caught in his throat again. He raised his gun as he sidestepped carefully around the trash bins, his courage bolstered by the presence of Kevin, Ashton, and Selena close behind him. But when he saw what was skulking on the other side of the wrought-iron fence, the breath rushed out of him, and his shoulders slumped, his arms falling limply to his sides.

It was a little girl, dressed in a lacy nightgown that had once been white. She had long, blonde hair that reminded him of Brooke and Bonnie, but her once-blue eyes were bloodshot and clouded by a pus-like film. In life, she had probably looked like an angel. In death, she was demonic. Her hands scrabbled between the fence posts, hooked fingers slashing like claws. A primal, animalistic growl rumbled from the back of her throat as she snapped her jaws, baring her teeth. Brian saw that she was missing the two top ones.

“S’alright, it can’t get us from behind the fence,” he heard Selena say nonchalantly over his shoulder. “Let’s keep moving.”

He sensed her turning away, heard her footsteps crunching over the dead grass as she walked back to the road, and felt Kevin’s heavy hand on his shoulder, trying to steer him in that direction, too. But Brian couldn’t simply walk away. “Wait,” he said. “Shouldn’t we... take care of her?”

He glanced back at the others. Selena was standing on the edge of the road, rolling her eyes at him. Halfway between them, Ashton hesitated, looking back at Brian with impatience. Only Kevin, still at Brian’s side, seemed to understand his internal struggle. Slowly, he raised his gun.

“No!” Selena said suddenly, stopping him before he could take aim. “We don’t shoot when it’s just one, remember? It’s a waste of bullets, and it’ll only attract more. Let’s just go.”

“We should put her out of her misery,” said Kevin evenly. “It’s the humane thing to do.”

“Humane?” Selena let out a derisive laugh. “That thing isn’t human. Not anymore.”

“But she was,” said Kevin. “What if she was your daughter?” Through his tears, Brian saw his cousin’s eyes just barely flicker towards him. Discretely, he tried to blink them away.

“Fine, then I’ll do it,” Ashton interjected, brushing past both of them. He strode up to the fence, holding his rifle over his head by its barrel. Brian looked on in horror as he reached over the fence and brought the butt of the gun crashing down on the little girl’s head. It took several blows, but finally, the child collapsed, blackened blood and brain matter spilling out of her split skull.

Brian couldn’t help it; he turned and vomited his porridge into the grass beside the trash bin. For what seemed like an eternity, he crouched there, too shaky to stand, with the memory of embedding the meat cleaver in Bonnie’s skull replaying in his mind. Over and over again, he saw her small body collapse, the handle of the cleaver clattering against the floor as she fell into a heap next to the decapitated head of her twin, its dead eyes open and staring. Then Kevin sank down beside him, put an arm around him, and hauled him to his feet.

“C’mon, cous,” Kevin whispered in his ear. “We’ve gotta keep going. C’mon.”

He dragged Brian down the lane, Selena and Ashton covering them both. At a bend in the road sat an old-fashioned, red phone booth. A zombie was stuck inside, smacking the sides clumsily in its efforts to get out. Brian wondered how it had come to be inside it in the first place. Perhaps it had tried to barricade itself in the booth while it was still alive and had been bitten. He found himself feeling sorry for this zombie, too, but not like the little girl.

They kept walking.

Around the bend was a large, brick house, half-hidden behind the overgrown hedge that surrounded it. It was a struggle just to find the front door, but when they did, they saw that it was unmarked. Ashton threw a rock through the front window, then boosted Selena through it. A moment later, she had unlocked and opened the front door for the others. “Place seems empty,” she said, as the three men tramped in.

“Just because it seems empty doesn’t mean it is,” Kevin warned. “Don’t let your guard down.”

They kept their guns within an arm’s reach as they searched the house, starting with the kitchen. They raided the cupboards, filling their backpacks with as many cans of food as they could carry. Then they made their way down the hall, looking in linen closets and medicine cabinets for additional supplies. Brian added soap, batteries, and a package of tea lights to his stash. “Those don’t burn very long,” said Kevin, when he saw Brian stuff the tea lights into his pack. Brian could tell he thought they were a waste of space.

“We can melt some together to make bigger candles,” he replied with a shrug, though he had other plans for the tiny white candles.

While Selena and Ashton continued to poke around downstairs, the cousins wandered upstairs. At the top of the stairs was a small room that was set up as an office. There was a large desk with a computer under the window, bookshelves along one wall, and propped in the corner, an acoustic guitar. Brian’s eyes lit up when he saw it, his heart lifting. A guitar... It was a luxury item, certainly, and not a necessity, but it had been so long since he’d played one...

Impulsively, he picked up the guitar. It felt like an old friend as it fell into position in his arms, comfortable and familiar. He slid his fingers over the strings and gave them a strum. A single chord echoed through the silent house.

Kevin turned and gave him a stern look. Downstairs, he heard Selena squawk, “Are you fucking mad?! Keep it down; you’ll attract them!”

“Oh, like you shouting through the house won’t!” Brian called back, rolling his eyes at Kevin. Kevin cracked a smile, seeming torn over whom to side with.

But it turned out that Selena was right.

Brian’s blood ran cold when he heard the scuff of dragging feet. He froze, looking at Kevin. His own eyes were wide with fear, but his cousin’s were narrow and determined. As they stood still, listening to the slow approach of the uneven footsteps, Kevin whispered, “Gimme the guitar.”

Brian imagined him grabbing the guitar by its neck, raising it over his head and bringing it down upon the zombie’s, bashing its brains in and splintering the guitar in the process. He shook his head, slinging the guitar onto the safety of his back. “No... find something else.”

Kevin started to protest, then seemed to realize there wasn’t time. He spun around, snatching a heavy-looking lamp from off the desk. He ripped its cord out of the wall and raised it over his head just as the undead master of the house staggered into the office, arms outstretched. The guitar let out a hollow twang as

Brian backed into the wall. Kevin sprang forward, swinging the lamp like a club. It connected with the side of the zombie's head, knocking it sideways. He continued to bludgeon the zombie until it lay still in the doorway, its skull clearly caved in. "Let's go," he growled, jumping nimbly over the corpse. Brian followed, the guitar swinging on his back.

There was a trail of dried blood in the hallway. The sight of it turned Brian's stomach. It seemed to unsettle Kevin, too. "Let's make this quick and get back downstairs, alright?" he said, eyeing the blood.

They split up to search the two bedrooms. Kevin ducked into the smaller of the two, while Brian found himself in the master. He perched on the edge of the bed and looked around. While he had no problem stealing food, knowing that it would just spoil otherwise, it felt wrong to go through other people's personal possessions. They didn't really need new clothes or anything else that could be found in a bedroom. But just as he was about to get up, something shiny caught his eye. A pair of rings lay upon a saucer on the nightstand next to the bed. He scooted over and picked them up. One was a solid, white gold band. The other was a matching ring, set with a single diamond. It wasn't overly large or ornate, but its simplicity was what made it beautiful.

A lump rose in his throat as he remembered picking out wedding bands with Leighanne. He had taken his off when he and Gretchen had started getting serious, but he still wore it on a chain around his neck. He kept it tucked beneath his shirt, so that it rested against his skin, right over his heart. Gretchen had done the same with hers, which he knew must have been difficult for her. The only time he could remember Leighanne taking off her rings was during her pregnancy, when her fingers were so swollen, they didn't fit. It occurred to him that if he was going to propose to Gretchen, he should have a ring for her to put back on her finger.

With that thought in mind, he stood and stuffed the rings into his pocket.

He tried not to think of the woman they'd once belonged to, but try as he might to prevent it, the vision came of a sick woman on her deathbed, removing the rings from her swollen, sore-infested finger as the plague ravaged her body. Perhaps her husband, the man Kevin had killed in the office, had died in bed beside her.

Suddenly repulsed, Brian backed away from the bed and bumped into the wardrobe. As the heavy piece of furniture slammed against the wall, he heard a softer thump, followed by a scratching sound. The door that he'd thought led to a closet stood ajar, and as it slowly swung inward, he realized it opened into a bathroom. In the gray light, he could see that the tiled floor was smeared with dried blood. And then he saw the pair of bloody feet trip over the threshold. Unable to look away, his eyes followed the skeletal gray ankles up to the bare, mottled legs. What was left of the rotten flesh was covered in festering sores and streaked with blackish blood. The woman's nightgown was soiled with it, too. It

hung to her knees, hugging the middle of her swollen body in a way that reminded him oddly of Gretchen. When she staggered through the bathroom doorway and he saw her in profile, he understood why.

She had been pregnant.

In the second it took him to realize this, the woman shambled into the bedroom, snarling as she reached for him. “Lord forgive me,” Brian muttered as he raised his gun. Remembering Selena’s warning, he didn’t shoot, but instead used it to strike her with all the strength he possessed. The zombie collapsed, and Brian exhaled a sigh of relief, slumping back against the wardrobe. He closed his eyes, wishing he had just stayed in bed with Gretchen. He wanted to be anywhere but in that room with the woman he had just put down. But when he opened his eyes again, there he still was, and there she was, too. And she was starting to move again.

Startled, he raised his gun again, ready to shoot her in the head and put her out of her misery for good. But as he took aim, he realized the woman wasn’t really moving after all. It was something else that was moving, something that was tucked between her legs, hanging out the back of her nightgown like a tail. It was gray and bloody, and when he realized what it was, he gagged violently. He didn’t want to look, but something – morbid curiosity, perhaps – made him take a tentative step forward. He peered into the bathroom, and there he saw it, writhing in a puddle of congealed blood on the floor.

Its skin was gray and mottled, like its mother’s. Its black, soulless eyes bulged from their sockets, seeming too large for its head. Its flailing limbs, by comparison, looked like twigs. It seemed so helpless, lying there on the floor, unable to hold up its head or turn its body, and yet, its toothless mouth opened and closed, rooting desperately for the blood and flesh it craved.

Brian didn’t want to do it, but he knew he had no choice. He stepped over the rotting umbilical cord by which the zombie mother had been dragging her undead fetus around for months. He squatted on the floor, careful to avoid the blood. Then he raised his gun one last time and brought it swiftly down, smashing the infant’s fragile skull.

There was nothing left in his stomach to vomit, but that didn’t stop him from retching over the toilet bowl, the bile burning the back of his throat, until Kevin came to collect him.

“Brian... my God,” said Kevin, looking down at the scene before him in horror.

Brian looked up miserably from the toilet. Wordlessly, Kevin handed him a towel off the rack, which he used to wipe the mixture of tears, sweat, and vomit from his face. Then Kevin extended his hand and pulled him to his feet. “Let’s get out of here,” he said in an undertone, towing Brian by the wrist. They stepped

around the baby and over the mother on their way out of the room. They went straight downstairs to rejoin the others and never looked back.

“You found a guitar?” said Ashton, looking impressed. “Bloody ace!”

Brian had almost forgotten about the guitar strapped to his back. “Yeah,” he heard his own hollow voice agree, as if someone else were answering for him. He didn’t believe himself capable of speech.

“You know how to play?”

Brian struggled to bring himself back from the brink of Hell. *It’s over*, he thought. *Don’t think about it. Think of something pleasant. Think of Gretchen.* Finally, he found the strength needed to form words. “Yeah... a little. I used to write music... for church.”

“Will you teach me sometime?”

“Sure... sometime.”

Selena rolled her eyes. “Lovely. Now we’ll be able to gather ‘round the fire and sing ‘Kumbaya’ whilst the zombies moan along in harmony.”

Despite what he had seen, the comment struck Brian as funny, and he managed a hoarse chuckle. “Thanks, Selena.”

“For what?” she demanded, flashing him a sharp look.

Brian smiled grimly and shook his head. “Never mind.”

The first thing Brian did when he was safely back inside the castle walls was hug Gretchen. As he wrapped her up in his arms and held her close, he savored the warmth of her skin, the softness of her body, and the firm little bulge of her belly. His baby was inside there – his living, growing, human baby. He felt his body beginning to relax against hers, his mind banishing the horrors he had seen to some far back corner, where they couldn’t be easily accessed. He knew they would return in his nightmares, as such horrors always did, but for now, he tried to put the past behind him and focus on the present... and the future, his future with Gretchen and their baby.

“Are you okay?” Gretchen asked, looking him over, once he’d released her from the hug. She seemed to sense that the supply run hadn’t been an easy one.

He nodded. “I will be. But if you don’t mind, I need a few hours to myself. Will you meet me later, at sunset?”

Her eyes searched his, but she didn't question his request to be alone. "Sure. Where?"

He thought for a minute. "The chapel," he decided. And after he'd helped sort through the supplies they'd brought back, it was there that he went, the pack of tea lights tucked under his arm, the guitar slung over his back, his journal in his hand.

He sat down on the stone altar and wrote in the journal for nearly an hour, not about what he had witnessed that morning, but about what he felt for Gretchen. It helped to cleanse his soul and to wash away the blood on his hands. He would write for awhile, then pick up the guitar, plucking out notes and chords to accompany his voice as he sang softly to himself. It had been so long since he'd sung, even longer since he'd played. He had almost forgotten the effect music had on his spirit.

As the gray sky slowly faded to black, he set out the tea lights and lit them, bathing the chapel in soft, golden light. Then he sat back down to wait for Gretchen.

She soon appeared in the doorway, her smiling face aglow in the candlelight. "What's all this?"

He smiled back. "Something special for someone even more special. C'mere." He patted an empty spot on the altar, and she came to sit beside him. "I found this guitar in town today," he said, pulling it into his lap. "I've just been in here playing and writing. It's been so long since I've done that. It felt good. I'm a little rusty, but you wanna hear what I came up with?"

Gretchen's face was shining. "Sure."

"Alright." Brian cleared his throat and slid his fingers into place. He plucked at the guitar strings, picking out the tune he'd been humming to himself all afternoon. His playing was tentative at first; it had been so long since he'd had an audience for his music. But as he repeated the progression, he found himself gaining confidence, settling into the song. Then he took a deep breath and began to sing the words he'd put down on paper.

"I lie awake, so often at night... with something to read... or something to write. In the silence, my mind is free... to think of the ways... that God has blessed me. It's easy to see how He's been so kind. Any proof I might need is right here by my side..."

Still strumming along, he turned to face Gretchen and found tears sparkling in her eyes. The emotional response bolstered his courage, and he continued, "You

are the grace of my life, so tender... so undeserved. Won't you please be my wife? It's so hard to put what I feel into words..."

He trailed off, chuckling nervously at the way her eyes had widened. The last few notes hung in the air, uninterrupted, until Gretchen said, "Um... was that a proposal I just heard?"

Brian grinned and set the guitar aside. Taking her hand, he replied, "Yes, ma'am, it was. It's high time I made an honest woman out of you, wouldn't you say? For what it's worth in this weird world we live in... I wanna marry you."

Gretchen smiled and squeezed his hand, pressing her other hand to her belly. "Then I say yes."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply. In the midst of the kiss, he remembered the ring. "Oh, hold on!" he cried, breaking away. "I forgot one thing. Told ya I was a little rusty at this!" As she looked on, laughing, he dug in his pocket and pulled out the diamond engagement ring he'd brought back from the village. "Now it's official," he said, as he slipped it onto her finger. It was a little loose, but it would do. With any luck, she wouldn't even need to remove it as her fingers swelled later on in her pregnancy.

"Where did you get this?" Gretchen wondered. "It's beautiful."

Brian flashed a big smile that he hoped would hide the horror in his eyes. He wagged his finger, then put it to his lips. Some things were better left unsaid.

Chapter 102

I hate this.

I need to be able to accept and move on, but I can't. I need to be able to see and deal with things that are never going to change, and be okay with what I see any time I look at a mirror. See my flaws, all the things wrong with me, and face them head on. I mean, that weakness ain't going to go anywhere. So I'm supposed to be okay with it, smile, and find the good in me despite that.

Finding the good, it sounds so simple.

You know I've always been able to do that for everyone but me?

There's good in my life now. There's this spark, this reason I wake up in the morning with a smile instead of being how Brian used to be. I'm thankful as hell that I have it too. But I want to protect that, to keep the good in my life safe

from harm. I'm not supposed to be weak at all. I can't afford to be. If I am, I can lose it. I've already come close enough times. Once was because of this thing that's wrong with me. How I can be a protector if I can't fix it? How can I keep the one thing that makes my life special safe?

The idea I may not be able to all the time – it's just a really shitty pill to swallow.

Song quote of the entry...

*"I remember tears streaming down your face
When I said, "I'll never let you go"
When all those shadows almost killed your light
I remember you said, "Don't leave me here alone"
But all that's dead and gone and passed tonight*

*Just close your eyes
The sun is going down
You'll be alright
No one can hurt you now
Come morning light
You and I'll be safe and sound*

*Don't you dare look out your window darling
Everything's on fire
The war outside our door keeps raging on
Hold on to this lullaby
Even when the music's gone
Gone..."*

– I have no idea who sings this. I just heard Brian singing it the other day on this guitar he picked up from a supply run. I liked the sound of it, so I wrote it down.

Monday, March 18, 2013

Week Forty-Eight

"Nick, are you okay?"

A sweet face was staring down at him. It was a face he'd grown used to staring into. A face that housed blue eyes that shone brightly when she was happy or sparked with flames when she was annoyed, a nose that was a bit too big for her face, and a mouth that tended to smirk more than smile – but when she did smile, it was crooked and endearing. She was smiling then in an attempt to comfort him, but he could see the worry, concern, written clearly across her furrowed brow. Strands of blonde hair fell into her face from the ponytail in

which she had the rest pulled back. There was a streak of dirt smeared across her cheek.

To him, there was no better sight.

No, I'm not okay. I keep putting you through this.

“Yeah,” he muttered, slowly sitting up once the room stopped spinning. He hated this. One moment he would be talking or doing something, anything, and it seemed like the next moment, he’d be on the floor recovering. It was the first seizure he’d had since their move overseas, but he felt that familiar bitterness all the same.

“You sure? You took a hard fall; I wasn’t able to catch you quick enough, and-”

Nick hated himself for the guilt Riley felt. She shouldn’t have had to feel that way. It was *his* fault. His weakness. How could she try and take responsibility for something like that? His hand reached up and stroked her cheek; maybe he could seek answers from Selena. Jo had been so unsure before, when she had talked to him about his episodes, and maybe something had changed. Selena knew a lot and was studying more about medicine as time went on. Perhaps it wasn’t as bleak as he imagined. If nothing else, she would know what medication he needed, as he hadn’t had any since they came there.

“Don’t you *ever* blame yourself.”

Riley helped him up silently, seeming a little taken aback by his tone. For a moment, he was unsteady on his feet. She immediately rushed to keep him up. The action, while gentle, immediately irritated him. He didn’t want to be dependent on Riley taking care of him. He wanted to take care of *her*. He wanted to protect *her*. He was the man in the relationship; he needed to be the strong one. The idea of her being that was incredibly frustrating.

“I got it, Rye,” he said, pulling away as he walked over to the wall to look down at the moat below. They had been enjoying some time alone before he had collapsed. Nick was thankful no one else witnessed it. “I don’t need you as a crutch,” he muttered as an afterthought.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” Nick turned and started to walk away. The last thing he wanted to do was get into it right then. His temper was flaring, and it wouldn’t lead to anywhere good.

“No, I won’t forget it,” she retorted as she grabbed him by the shoulder and made him face her. “What do you mean, *I don’t need you as a crutch*? Huh? I can’t take care of you when you need me? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, Rye, that’s exactly what I’m saying! I don’t need you to baby me or coddle me. I can take care of myself. I’m the one supposed to be caring for you, not the other way around!”

“Nice, let’s live back in the 1950s, when women were supposed to be all meek and docile. You want me to be that, Nick, so you can be the big, strong man?”

“That’s not what I said!”

“The hell it isn’t!”

“Why don’t you actually listen instead of just assuming you know what I mean?”

“Funny, you’re telling me I’m the one assuming. Maybe you should stop acting like an ass and actually explain to me what I did that was so wrong!”

“Like you’d listen.”

“I’m trying, but you won’t tell me.”

“I didn’t know I had to explain everything to you.”

“I’m trying to understand.”

“Just forget it! Jesus, Riley, this isn’t some damn news story. I’m not some assignment you need to get done. So stop pushing!”

Riley stared at him, swallowing hard to keep her emotions in check. But he saw through that; he always did. “Talk to me when you decide to act your age.”

He watched her walk away; each step was another stab to the heart. Nick knew how fiercely independent his girlfriend was. It was her strength that he loved about her. He admired her ability to see the worst and face it head on. She was never able to see the light in things, like he did, so they balanced. The one thing she saw the good in, that he didn’t, was him. How could he explain that although she was strong, all he wanted was to make sure nothing happened to her? That because he felt he was so lucky, he had a duty to safeguard her any way he could? Nick knew she wanted to do the same for him. It was because he felt she already did so much that he hated that she had to. She shouldn’t have to, he knew. He’d seen her at her most vulnerable, knew she wasn’t invincible as she thought she was. But he couldn’t explain that to her.

He couldn’t tell her that because of how his seizures left her unprotected, he didn’t deserve her.

Nick couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I can't help you."

"What do you mean, you can't help me?" He wanted to scream, yell, and shake the cynical woman before him. Selena just stared at him, her dark brown eyes unforgiving and unyielding with the truth.

"I mean what I said. What this Jo had told you before was the bloody truth. I know hearing this must have you gutted. But from what you've told me and what I've looked up since, it's permanent. I'll get you the pills you need, Nick, but once they expire, you won't be able to do anything but cope. Don't get mad at me; just accept it."

"So just like that. I can collapse at any time, and there ain't shit I can do about it."

"Yes."

Nick kicked the wall angrily. He wanted to go kill zombies, rage, do something destructive. But right then, there was nothing he could do. "FUCK!" he screamed without caring who heard him. Selena just stared at him.

"Don't act like a prat. It's not your fault, and you're not some Nancy boy because of it."

The words weren't even remotely comforting, and he wasn't upset when he noticed she had left. She reminded him of AJ in a lot of ways. But at least AJ seemed to actually care about other people. He didn't think he could say the same for Selena. True, she had looked into it for him when he'd approached her hours ago. But her words had been harsh, cold. Nick knew his condition had essentially saved him when the Osiris Virus spread around the world. But that fact wasn't comforting when he knew it could just as easily get him killed now. That it could get Riley or one of the others killed.

Nick sighed and slumped down to the ground, his back up against the cool, hard stone. Not many came up to the northeast tower unless they were sniping. Maybe there was a decent chance of him being left alone for a bit. He thought of Spunky for the first time in months and wished she was still around. He could use the loyal companionship she brought right then. He didn't know where he could find another dog, but the thought of getting another was a nice one.

"You okay, Nick?"

It was a question that had been asked that morning by someone different. It was a question he was rather sick of. He stared up at Howie, who wasn't one for

trying to take care of others, but he could see the concern there. He patted the ground next to him. Nick figured he must be looking really bad if Howie, of all people, had decided to comfort him. Howie sat down, while Nick stared up at the stars just beginning to appear, as dusk descended upon them.

“I heard you yelling before.”

Nick resolutely kept his line of vision aimed upwards. “Did you hear...”

“What Selena told you? Yes. I was looking for her for AJ, but when I heard you two, I hung back. Then I decided you might need someone to talk to.”

“Why would I need to talk, Howie? It won’t change anything.”

Howie reached over and patted his shoulder, getting Nick’s eyes to meet his. “Because I understand.”

“You do.”

“I do.”

“Tell me how then.”

“You really don’t see how I do? My hemophilia always limited me because I was scared to live. I didn’t want to die, and I always knew how easy it was. I kept people out you know. I let my brains intimidate people, built myself up to compensate for how my body failed me. When April fifteenth hit, I was scared. I knew I couldn’t do that anymore. I know that any day, something could happen, and I’d die easily. I almost did, remember?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what, Nick? Those seizures of yours can get you killed someday. You know that. I know that. If it’s at the wrong time, one of those things can eat you while you’re convulsing away. You hate yourself for it.”

“Because if that happens, I can’t...” He shook his head.

“Can’t keep Riley safe. Is that what you were going to say?”

“Maybe.”

“You can. You do everything you can to. And you have to let her do the same for you. If you do, then you can keep her safe because she’ll be there if something happens. Then you won’t die, and you can keep protecting her.” Howie chuckled, almost sounding bitter. “I’m jealous, Nick. You should’ve seen me and my wife before we divorced. It was a marriage of convenience, something to build me up

more. The only good thing that came out of it was Barty..." He trailed off there wistfully and then shook his head before continuing. "But I understand, more than you think I do, about having a body that betrays you. You just can't let that make you push people away. It took me a long time to learn that."

"I just... I hate this."

"I know, but you can't change it. The best you can do is learn to do the best with what you're given. You've been given a lot, you know." Howie stood once again, brushed off his clothes, and gave Nick a wink. "Think about it."

He sat there for awhile, staring up at the stars and ignoring the moans he could hear being carried to him by the wind that blew by and tousled his hair. Nick wished the world could look as peaceful as the night sky. Maybe then this wouldn't bother him as much. He sighed. Howie was probably right. No, he *was* right. Nick just didn't want to admit it to anyone.

Wrapped in his thoughts, he didn't hear footsteps approaching him. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he glanced down to see Riley on the floor next to him. She didn't say anything. She just gazed at him expectantly, waiting for him. Unconsciously, he laid his head on her shoulder. She let him; her hand reached up and began to stroke his hair softly.

"I'm sorry about before," he finally said after a few minutes.

"Why were you acting that way?"

"I just hate when I get like that. It means I can't... do the things I need to do for you."

"Like what?"

"...Keep you safe. Remember when I had my seizure on the road back to Florida? You could've been killed. From what you said, both of us almost were. And it was my fault. If something ever happened to you..." He stared up at her, dead on, his eyes glistening in the moonlight. "I'd never forgive myself, Rye. And it could, because of my fucked-up head."

She hugged him tightly. "God you're such an ass," Riley told him between laughs. "You don't get to just protect me. I'm not some damsel that needs rescuing. We keep each other safe, as a team. I hate that you have seizures, but my job is to help you through them. I wouldn't change you for anything. If you didn't have them, that old head injury that caused this... you wouldn't even *be here*, Nick. So if that's the price, I'm okay with it."

"I'm sorry I'm this way and-"

“Shut up. Just shut up.” She kissed him gently, the taste of her lips sweet upon his own.

The two stayed like that, wrapped within each other’s embrace and enjoying the comfort only the other could bring. Nick sighed happily. Howie was right.

Nick knew he *had* been given a lot, and he was thankful.

Chapter 103

You are the best thing that’s happened to me in this crazy new world we live in. You have been both my rock and my security blanket, my shelter and my shoulder to cry on. Every time I’ve needed you, you’ve been there for me... including that day, one year ago, when I was speeding down the interstate, all alone, and you were there in the middle of the road. You were there, and I haven’t felt alone since. So I promise to do the same for you: to be your rock and your security blanket, your shelter and your shoulder to cry on. I promise to be there for you, for all the days of our lives.

Monday, April 15, 2013

Week Fifty-Two

As a teacher and a military wife in her previous life, Gretchen had always been practical. She and Shawn had stuck to a strict budget, putting every penny they could spare into savings for the future. She had stayed on him about turning off faucets and lights in an effort to conserve water and electricity around their small house in Atlanta. She had saved shoeboxes, two-liter soda bottles, and the cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper towels to use for projects at school. And although none of that mattered anymore, now that her money was worthless, the house destroyed, and her students dead, practicality had never been a more important trait to possess. In the undead world, it was everything.

That was why, one year after the apocalypse, Gretchen was so surprised to find herself trying on wedding gowns. For a brief second, standing on a pedestal in front of a wall of mirrors, she could almost pretend that nothing had changed, that she was just another blushing bride, about to be married for the second time. But even if she could forget, there were reminders all around her.

The small bridal boutique had not been looted like most of the other shops on the street, but even so, its front window was shattered, the white gown on the window display mannequin stained with blood. This made for such an ominous sight that Gretchen, her hair standing on end, had almost insisted they turn away. But Abby, whose idea it had been to come in the first place, convinced the group

to go in. “We’ve come all this way,” said the older woman, surprisingly persuasive in her sweet, maternal way. “It would be a waste of petrol to go back with nothing. Come on, let’s find you a wedding dress.” She had taken Gretchen by the hand and practically dragged her in. It was better on the inside. Abandoned. Untouched. But the musty smell of death and the thick layer of dust that clung to all the dresses still gave Gretchen an uneasy feeling.

“Look at you!” Abby’s gasp made Gretchen jump. She nearly toppled off the pedestal, until Riley’s arm shot out to steady her. “You’re absolutely gorgeous!”

Gretchen forced herself to smile at her reflection in the mirror. She felt far from gorgeous. Her hair looked greasy, pulled into a messy knot on the back of her head. Her face was bare; she couldn’t remember the last time she’d worn makeup. The white dress she’d tried on made her appear bottom-heavy; it was too big on top, yet tight across her growing belly. But she couldn’t deny that it was beautiful. “The gown’s gorgeous,” she amended Abby’s statement matter-of-factly. “But it doesn’t fit.”

“Then we’ll just have to find something that does!” chirped Abby, bustling back to the racks. She seemed to be on a personal mission to make Gretchen the most beautiful bride the zombie apocalypse had ever seen, ever since she’d overheard her complaining at breakfast about her lack of suitable clothing to wear.

“Looks like I’m going to be walking down the aisle in my pajamas,” Gretchen had sighed, gesturing at the baggy plaid pajama bottoms she wore under the old University of Michigan sweatshirt that had belonged to Shawn. “Nothing else fits.”

“Nonsense!” snapped Abby, brandishing the wooden spoon she’d been using to stir the pot of porridge. “It’s high time we find you some proper maternity clothes. And why not a wedding dress, too, while we’re at it?”

Naturally, the unofficial leader of the group, Selena, dubbed the idea of wedding dress shopping “barking mad,” but Abby found an unexpected ally in Howie, who agreed that Gretchen deserved to have something nice to wear on her wedding day. “I’ll even come with you,” he offered. “Believe it or not, footing the bill for a wife as fashionable as Bree taught me a thing or two about picking out clothes. Also, I have excellent taste.”

Riley, who was to be Gretchen’s maid of honor, agreed to accompany them, and Nick, always up for an adventure, jumped at the chance to go as well.

“Well, that’s lovely,” snapped Selena, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she rounded on Abby. “So you’ll be taking a pregnant woman, a hemophiliac, and an epileptic on this little expedition of yours, will you?”

Gretchen put on a patient smile, the same one she'd always reserved for the parents who blamed their children's problems at school on her. Howie hardly batted an eye, but she could see that Nick's feelings were hurt. "We'll be fine," she spoke up quickly, shooting him a smile of reassurance.

"And what if something happens?" Selena persisted.

"Nothing's going to happen," said Riley, equally stubborn.

"You can't know that. What if Howard falls and skins his fucking knee, or Loverboy collapses in a fit of convulsions? Then what will you do?" challenged Selena.

Gretchen could see Nick's face getting redder and redder, while Howie stared at the ground, his shoulders slumped. She wished she could say something more in their defense, but she could not deny the validity of Selena's points. Was a wedding dress worth the risk they would be taking? Of course it wasn't. And yet, Abby had conjured up one of Gretchen's old, girlhood fantasies, that of the fairy-tale wedding, and in that moment, she felt like doing something fun and frivolous. It had been so long since any of them had, she could even understand why the others were so quick to volunteer to go along.

"I'm sure Martin will come with us," said Abby, never losing her pleasant tone of voice. "If anything should happen, he'll know what to do."

"Oh yes, an amputee – quite the obvious choice. Should've thought of it myself!" Selena mocked her scathingly.

Gretchen frowned at Selena, but she was also wondering why Martin, of all people, would be Abby's choice to accompany them. The young Norwegian spoke only broken English, and his missing arm made it impossible for him to shoot a gun. He was never invited to go on supply runs because he could only carry half as much as the others.

Abby turned her back to Selena at that point, addressing only Gretchen, Riley, Nick, and Howie. "Did you know that Martin was a medical student? Yes, he was training to be a doctor when the dead rose. Needless to say, he never finished, but I still expect he knows more about medicine than anyone else here." Though she kept her voice light and cheery, these last few words were surely meant to snub Selena, who prided herself on her pharmaceutical knowledge.

Sure enough, Selena turned on her heel, muttering something under her breath about them all being "a bunch of nutters" as she stalked off in a huff.

Martin agreed to go with them, and so did Kevin, at Brian's insistence, after his own request to go was swiftly rebuked. "The groom can't see the bride in her dress before the wedding!" squawked Abby. "It's bad luck!"

And so it was that the seven of them had set out towards one of the small towns tucked into the countryside that surrounded the castle. Abby drove the van, claiming to know of a bridal shop mere miles from the castle. Gretchen rode shotgun, but kept turning around to talk to Martin, who sat in the back. She'd never had a proper conversation with him before, as he was quiet and kept to himself, but after learning of his medical training, she found herself suddenly curious to know more about him. Martin, she realized, might be the key to her baby's survival. With every week that passed in her pregnancy, she'd found herself worrying less about miscarriage and more about actually delivering this baby without the aid of modern medicine. More than ever, she missed Jo, whose presence would have eased her mind. Martin now gave her fresh hope that, when the time came, someone would know how to help her.

"So Martin," she said, smiling back at him, "I didn't know you were a med student."

"*Ja*," answered Martin in his thick, Scandinavian accent.

"What was that like?" she wondered, just trying to make conversation.

"Were you working in a hospital when the plague hit?" Nick added, before Martin could answer. Gretchen thought she understood his interest, having witnessed a similar conversation that had taken place between him and Jo on the day she and Brian had arrived at the base.

Martin shook his head. "I was... on holiday. How do you say... spring break?"

"That's right." Gretchen smiled. "I was on spring break from school, too."

When Martin smiled back, she realized it was the first time she had seen him do so. "Teacher, *ja*?" he asked, pointing at her.

She nodded. "That's right," she said again.

Martin cleared his throat. "Mine friends and I went skiing... in the mountains. We had a... a small... how you say?"

"A cabin?" Gretchen guessed.

"*Ja*, a cabin. Communication was... not good. We were... isolated. When people got sick, we knew nothing. Then... the dead came."

Gretchen shivered, imagining him and a small group of college students huddled in a remote cabin, cut off from the rest of the world, oblivious to the zombies skulking outside in the snow. "What happened?" she asked in a whisper.

Martin described the events in a deadened, emotionless voice. “They attacked. Killed mine friends. The bites spread infection... brought them back from death. So when I was bit, I knew... I knew I was dead if I could not stop it.”

Gretchen’s eyes widened. “You were bitten?”

He held up the stump of his right arm. “On the wrist. We learned at Uni about amputation, so... I took the saw, and I cut it off.”

Gretchen swayed a little in the front seat, feeling sick. “You cut off your own arm,” she murmured, more to herself than to Martin.

“How did you stop the bleeding?” asked Nick in morbid fascination.

“Lit a match. Used the flame to... how you say?”

“Cauterize,” said Kevin in a low voice. His face was a grim mask, hiding any reaction to the story.

“*Ja.*”

They fell into a stunned silence after that, leaving Gretchen to wonder the rest of the way into town if she would ever have the strength of mind to do such a thing to save her own life. She hoped she would never have to find out. But if anything went wrong with her pregnancy... if drastic measures had to be taken during delivery... She shivered again, stopping that thought in its tracks, and rubbed her belly, praying that the baby inside would make a safe and smooth transition into this world.

Now, while Kevin and Martin – armed only with a large knife – stood guard at the door of the bridal shop, Gretchen stared at her changing body in the mirror of the dressing room, as she waited for Abby to bring back another gown. There weren’t any full-length mirrors in the castle, and she was mesmerized by the sight of herself and her smooth, swollen belly, streaked with faint stretch marks. It was especially jarring when she turned to the side and saw her own profile. Until she’d started trying on dresses, she hadn’t realized how big she had gotten.

By her best estimate, she was five months along – more pregnant than she had ever been before. This was both a relief and a concern, because she was over halfway through her pregnancy, and there was no turning back now. In another four months, she would be bringing a baby into the undead world. That thought was almost as scary as the dreaded word *miscarriage*.

“Here, dear, try this!” trilled Abby, opening the dressing room door a crack to hand her another gown on a hanger. “This one has an empire waist, so it won’t be so tight ‘round the middle.”

“Thanks,” said Gretchen, taking the dress. She struggled into it, disappearing in a cascade of satin as she tried to slip it on over her head. Abby and Riley had both offered to come in and help her, but Gretchen found herself surprisingly self-conscious. She would have to get over that soon, she knew. She doubted giving birth during the apocalypse would allow her much modesty. Still, she managed to squeeze herself into the dress and then let Abby in to lace up the corseted back.

“Oh, this is lovely... just lovely!” Abby clucked as she tightened the laces. “Turn around; let me look at you!”

Gretchen spun slowly, and when Abby got a good look at her from the front, her whole face lit up.

“Beautiful,” she declared. “Come and look at yourself properly.” She took Gretchen’s hand and pulled her out of the dressing room.

Everyone oohed and ahed over her as she stepped onto the pedestal in front of the mirrored wall, and even when she saw her reflection from every angle, Gretchen had to admit that Abby had made the right choice. The dress did fit her beautifully, the sweetheart neckline accentuating her pregnancy-enhanced bust, while the white satin draped modestly over her bump. It was simple, yet elegant, appropriate for the occasion.

Gretchen smiled at Abby’s beaming face in the mirror. “I think this’ll do just fine. Thank you,” she said.

“It’ll be more than fine, and you’re more than welcome.” Abby slipped an arm around her waist and gave her a little squeeze. “Now then, Miss Riley, what will you be wearing?”

Riley made a face. “Oh, I don’t-”

“Well, the maid of honor must have *something* special to wear to compliment such a beautiful bride!” Abby insisted, making Gretchen blush. Riley looked equally embarrassed.

“Alright, alright... why don’t you pick me something out, too?”

This proved to be a mistake. A few minutes later, Riley was perched on the pedestal next to Gretchen’s in a cloud of powder blue. “That color’s just gorgeous with your blonde hair!” Abby gushed. “And it goes perfectly with Gretchen’s eyes.” But Gretchen didn’t think the pastel blue bridesmaid gown suited Riley at all, and she could tell by the look on Riley’s face that she wasn’t alone in thinking so.

“Hm... I don’t know,” she said, coming to Riley’s rescue. “I think maybe something darker would be better. What about more of a royal blue? And a little more fitted? I mean, Riley’s got the body for it – might as well show it off.”

“Hear, hear!” Nick chimed in. Gretchen caught his eye in the mirror and winked.

If Abby’s feelings were hurt, she didn’t let it show. “Well, back to the drawing board, I suppose. You girls go get changed and then help me have another look around, eh? And in the meantime, Howie, why don’t you take Nick over to the men’s side of the shop and pick out a pair of nice suits for him and Brian to wear?”

Gretchen thought it wise of Abby to put Howie in charge of this task, seeing as how he had the best taste. Privately, Riley agreed. “Yeah, if it were left up to Nick, I have a feeling he and your husband-to-be would show up to the wedding in blue and orange leisure suits,” she commented, her voice carrying over the wall that separated their dressing rooms.

Gretchen snorted with laughter. “At least they’d match your dress.”

“Oh, god!” burst Riley, making Gretchen giggle some more. “Yeah, thanks for covering my ass back there. I didn’t *think* you wanted me looking like Alice in Zombieland at your wedding, but who am I to question anyone’s taste?”

“It was pretty bad,” she admitted quietly, afraid Abby would come back and hear them laughing. “We’ll find you something more modern.”

“Thanks. I have enough ugly bridesmaid dresses back home. They may be the only thing from home I don’t miss.”

“Aww...” Gretchen thought of her old wedding dress, even more beautiful than the one she wore now. She had taken such care to preserve it in pristine condition. She wondered if it had survived the fire.

“Hey, will you help me get out of this god-awful thing?” Riley voice, almost wistful for a second, changed quickly back to its offhanded tone. “The zipper’s stuck.”

“Sure, if you unlace me,” replied Gretchen, relieved to have a reason to wipe her eyes and pull herself together before she got too weepy. She met Riley outside the dressing room, where they took turns helping each other with the gowns. “So... *how* many ugly bridesmaid dresses did you say you had?” asked Gretchen, to keep the conversation going. She wanted to laugh with Riley, not cry for Shawn. She knew it would be better to focus on the here and now, on Brian and their imminent marriage, than to dwell on the past, on her last wedding and late husband.

But in doing so, she was inadvertently reminding Riley of her *own* past. “Too many to count,” Riley scoffed, jerking at the laces on Gretchen’s gown. “I was starting to feel like Katherine Heigl in that one movie.”

“27 Dresses?”

“Yeah. The most recent one was the worst. It was this big, poofy princess dress – pink with ruffles.” She sounded as disgusted as if she were describing one of the rotting corpses roaming around outside. “My sister-in-law Kelly was such a diva. Well, I guess she wasn’t really my sister-in-law – she and my brother never made it down the aisle,” she said, her voice softening. “But they would have gotten married, if the world hadn’t gone to hell. They’d be celebrating their first anniversary in another week or so, actually...”

She swept her long, blonde hair over her shoulders, under the guise of giving Gretchen better access to the zipper on the back of her dress, but Gretchen knew better. Riley, never wanting to show weakness, was hiding her face. But with the back of her neck exposed, she looked especially vulnerable, and when Gretchen touched her to unzip the dress, she could feel Riley’s shoulders trembling. She wrapped her arm around them, pulling Riley into a hug. “I’m so sorry...” What else was there to say? She knew how Riley felt. They’d all lost family and friends, planned for events that had never taken place.

Riley sniffed and swiped at her eyes. “Thanks. Yeah, so anyway... at least there are no embarrassing photos of me in that dress for Nick to see.” She forced a wry smile, blinking back her tears. “We better hurry up so we can help Abby find something tolerable and get the hell out of here. No offense, but I hate this bridesmaid shit. *Not* that I’m not honored to stand beside you; you know how happy I am for you and Brian. You’d think it would be different after the zombie apocalypse, though. But oh no, here I am... always the bridesmaid, never the bride.”

She smiled again to show she was kidding, but Gretchen knew some truth lay underneath it. Smiling back, she patted Riley’s shoulder again and said, “Don’t worry. Your turn will come.”

Riley snorted. “I’m not sure I believed that when people told me before. But now? Now my chances of finding someone are next to nothing.”

“But you already found someone,” Gretchen pointed out.

“Yeah...” Riley turned toward her dressing room. “Now I just have to worry about keeping him.”

...*Alive.*

Gretchen filled in the unsaid word in her head, and a lump rose in her throat. She was all too familiar with the fear of losing the one she loved, but she supposed it was even scarier for Riley, knowing Nick could lapse into one of his seizures at any time. "Let's get dressed and go check on the guys," she said, to reassure Riley.

Riley nodded, but just as she reached for the dressing room door, they heard a horrific, high-pitched scream.

They looked at each other. Riley's eyes were wide, and Gretchen's heart felt lodged in her throat. "Abby," she choked. Riley was already running, the blue dress poofing out around her knees as her bare feet slapped the floor. Gretchen hitched up the skirt of her gown with one hand and held the bodice in place with the other as she hurried after her.

In the center of the store, they met up with Howie and Nick, who had come running from the other side. "Thank god," said Nick when he saw Riley.

Howie still looked worried. "Was that Abby? Where is she?"

"I think the bridesmaid dresses are back here, c'mon!" Riley veered left, leading them to a smaller room off the main floor that was filled with colorful dresses. "Abby?" she called.

"Back here!" they heard Abby's tremulous reply. "Hurry!"

They raced down a long row of dresses to the opposite end of the room and rounded the corner, nearly colliding with Abby, whom they found cowering, unarmed, behind a dress rack in the next row. "It came out of the stock room!" she gasped, pointing. Gretchen followed the path of her finger and saw a lone zombie wobbling toward them on one high heel. The other heel was hanging halfway off the undead woman's foot, which she was dragging behind her on a broken ankle. This, coupled with the constricting cut of her bloodstained pencil skirt, slowed her down.

"Watch out." Nick pushed past the rest of them, stepping in front of Riley as he raised his trusty ax, but Martin beat him to it. The Norwegian appeared out of nowhere, releasing an animalistic battle cry as he barreled down the aisle from the other side of the room. The zombie turned toward the sound as he came up behind her, his knife raised. Gretchen couldn't help but gasp as he brought it down swiftly, the blade plunging through the remnants of a French twist on the back of her head.

"Whoa, go Martin!" cried Nick as the zombie collapsed at his feet.

He stretched out his hand to slap Martin a high-five, but before he could, Abby shrieked, "Martin, look out!"

No one had noticed the second ghoul skulking among the yards of taffeta and tulle, not until it was too late. Gretchen clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her scream as she saw the zombie stagger right through one of the racks and seize Martin by the stump of his missing arm. Nick took a wild swing with his axe, but only succeeded in embedding it in the zombie's neck. It was Riley who sprang into action next, jamming the end of a hanger through the creature's eye socket, but not before its jaws had clamped down on Martin's shoulder. When they pried the dead zombie off him, they could see blood starting to seep through his jacket.

"My god... Martin," whimpered Abby, as Martin shook off his jacket to see what damage had been done. It was as bad as they'd feared: his t-shirt was torn, the bite marks visible beneath it. Fresh blood pooled amid the torn flesh.

Nick yanked his axe out of the zombie's half-severed head and stumbled backwards, looking stunned. "Shit... I'm sorry, man," he mumbled, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry."

"Let me see." Howie stepped forward to inspect Martin's wound. "It's not that bad," he said hopefully. "We can bandage this."

"Here-" Riley ripped a strip of fabric off one of the dresses and handed it to Howie. "Maybe this'll help."

"Yeah, that's good. We're gonna need more than that, though."

Riley seemed to relish in shredding the bridesmaid gown, turning it into a tattered pile of bandages.

"That should do it," said Howie. "Take off your shirt, Martin, so I can secure this better." They all watched as Howie folded several of the strips into a thick pad and applied it to the bite. He lay another length of fabric over it and wrapped it around Martin's torso, tying it tightly to keep it over the wound. "Thirty-six years as a bleeder will teach you the best way to tie a bandage," he said with a grim smile, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "That should be good enough to get you back, anyway."

"But... what of the virus?" Martin asked miserably. All the color had drained from his already-pale face, and he was visibly shaky.

"Well, we're all immune, right?" said Nick with a shrug. "I mean, AJ got bit and didn't get it."

"Did he really?" asked Abby, her anxious expression clearing. "Well now, that's a relief to hear. We'll just need to clean this thoroughly when we get back to prevent infection, and you should heal up good as new, Martin."

Martin looked at her, and behind the guarded look in his eyes, Gretchen could see a flicker of hope. “You think so?”

She tried to match Abby’s encouraging tone. “Of course,” she chimed in. “You survived one bite already, didn’t you? You’re going to be just fine.” But a quick glance at Riley told her not everyone shared the same optimism.

As they walked back out to the main room, they heard Kevin call, “Martin? Everything okay back there?” They trouped up to the front of the store, where Kevin stood guard. “What the hell happened?” he asked, taking in their pale faces and grim expressions.

“There were a couple of *them* hiding in the back,” Howie explained. “Abby was almost attacked, and one of them bit Martin.”

Kevin’s green eyes flashed. “You were bitten?” he asked Martin, speaking slowly and deliberately.

Martin nodded. “*Ja*. Mine shoulder.”

“We bandaged it,” Howie added quickly. “It didn’t look too bad. No worse than AJ’s.”

A significant look passed between the two of them. Kevin nodded. “We should get back. Did y’all find what you were looking for?” He raised his eyebrows at Gretchen, who realized she was still wearing the wedding dress.

“Um, yeah. I should go change, though...”

“I’ll help you bag it up,” Abby volunteered, putting an arm around her.

“I’ll go with you,” said Riley, and the three women walked back to the dressing rooms, where Riley and Gretchen took off their dresses. “Sorry, Abby, my dress got kind of bloody,” said Riley, tossing the brain-spattered blue dress over the top of the door. She didn’t sound too sorry.

“That’s alright.” Abby let out a weak laugh. “I suppose I was being silly, suggesting we come here. I feel just terrible about what happened to Martin.”

Guilt gnawed at Gretchen’s stomach for the same reason. If their little escapade to loot a wedding dress had gotten him killed... “Let’s just go,” she said, pulling her clothes on in a hurry. Abby finished smoothing the garment bag over her gown and tucked it over her arm as the three of them went to rejoin the others.

Nick was waiting for them outside the dressing rooms, with a sheepish expression on his face and a sapphire blue dress in his arms. He held it up for Riley to see. “I saw this and thought it would look good on you. It’s like what Gretchen was

describing, isn't it?"

Gretchen looked at the sleek, satin gown and then at Riley, who was staring at Nick with a bemused expression on her face. Then, seeming to snap out of it, she snatched the dress out of Nick's hands. "You guys are just so determined to see me in a dress, aren't you?" she replied, rolling her eyes.

Nick grinned. "You wanna try it on?"

Riley checked the size on the tag. "It should be fine. You did good, Nick. Now let's get the hell out of here."

No one objected. As they hurried to the van that was parked out front, Kevin said, "I'll ride in the back with Martin." But once Martin had climbed in, he turned to the others and muttered, "Don't worry. If he turns, I'll take him out."

Martin did not turn during the tense ride back to the castle, but once they'd arrived, he announced that he was going to lie down. "Watch him," Gretchen heard Kevin whisper to Selena, whom he'd ordered to stand guard outside of Martin's room. "If he turns... you know what to do."

"I don't know why we don't just lock him up!" Selena hissed. "That's what you did to AJ, isn't it?"

Unfortunately, she didn't have the same tact as Kevin, and this time, Gretchen wasn't the only one who heard.

"Please..." They all looked up to see Martin standing in the doorway, his eyes filled with tears. "Please..." he begged. "Is not safe, I agree. Lock me up. Please."

The others exchanged glances. Abby shook her head, tears starting in her eyes, too. She reached for Callum's hand. On the boy's other side sat Gabby, anxiously biting her lip. But no one said anything.

Then AJ spoke up. "He's right, you know. It's the safest way to be sure. It ain't no picnic, trust me, but it's better than opening the door for someone else to get bit. If he's immune, we'll know in a day or so, and no harm done. And if he's not..." He trailed off, rubbing the half-moon scar on his wrist. "We'll all be safer this way."

Kevin cleared his throat, looking warily at Martin. "Are you okay with this, Martin? Is this what you want?"

“*Ja.*” Nodding miserably, Martin echoed AJ’s words. “Is safer for everyone this way.”

“Well, alright. It’s settled then. We’ll put you in the dungeon for the night. You can keep Alistair company.”

Martin nodded again in silent agreement. Abby burst into a fresh batch of tears, but Martin remained stoic. They took turns telling him goodbye, promising they’d see him bright and early the next morning. “It’s just for one night,” Kevin reassured him, putting a hand on his good shoulder as he led him away. “And when you wake up tomorrow, we’ll be able to put this all behind us.”

When they were gone, Gretchen turned to Brian, who was sitting beside her. “We should wait to get married,” she whispered, stroking the back of his hand.

She could tell by the look on Brian’s that this was not what he’d wanted to hear, but she was still surprised when he asked, “Why?”

“Why?” She blinked incredulously at him. “We can’t have a wedding tonight, knowing he’s down there wondering if he’s about to become one of them!”

“That’s exactly why we should get married tonight. It’ll make for a good distraction, take everybody’s minds off what’s going on,” said Brian rationally. “Besides, we picked this date for a reason. Why else did we wait all this time, when we could have married each other six weeks ago?”

Gretchen smiled sadly, remembering their reason for waiting. In a way, it was already their anniversary. One year. One year since the dead rose. One year since the day they’d met. Brian had been particularly adamant about turning that anniversary into a reason to celebrate, rather than mourn. And Gretchen wanted to give him that: a chance to make new memories, good ones, to take the place of the bad ones that still haunted him. But still, she was unsure. She still felt guilty about what had happened at the dress shop.

“Please, baby,” Brian begged, placing his hand on top of hers. “I don’t want to wait anymore. Especially after what happened today. When you guys got back, and I found out what happened, I thought, ‘My God... that could have been Gretchen.’ Life’s too short to wait. I don’t want to go another day without making you my wife.”

“Oh c’mon, Gretch,” Nick butted in. Gretchen looked up, embarrassed; she didn’t realize he’d been eavesdropping. Nick gave her one of his big, goofy grins. “Even if he does just want to get in your pants tonight, the guy’s got a point. What’s the use of waiting, when we could all use the distraction? Besides, I wanna see how Rye looks in that dress I picked out.”

“Oh, Nick.” Riley rolled her eyes, shooting Gretchen an apologetic grin, but that was all Gretchen needed to hear.

“Well, alright,” she said. “If no one has any objections... we’ll get married tonight.”

“Y’all better speak now, or forever hold your peace,” added Brian, looking around the room. When no one spoke, he grinned and gave Gretchen a kiss on the cheek. “It’s settled, then. See ya at the altar.”

Gretchen would never forget the flurry of activity that had proceeded her first wedding, the feeling of butterflies fluttering in her stomach as her mother and bridesmaids flitted all around her, buttoning her into her dress, touching up her makeup, re-pinning pieces of hair that had fallen out of place. She had wanted everything to be perfect, and they had helped her to make it so. Her nerves had been at their peak when she’d stepped into the sanctuary on her father’s arm, but when Gretchen had looked down the aisle and seen Shawn’s face, it was as if all her stress had simply melted away.

When she closed her eyes, she could still see Shawn’s face, smiling at her, his eyes shining behind his glasses. When she opened them, her own eyes were shiny and wet with tears. They spilled over as she glanced down at her dress, staining the white satin bodice. What would Shawn think if he could see her now, already five months pregnant with someone else’s child and about to marry another man, when he had only been gone a year? She hoped he would understand, that he would even be happy for her, but even so, it was guilt, rather than nerves, that gnawed away at her this time. She had taken off the necklace that held her wedding rings, and she felt naked without it.

Riley had gone to find her another necklace to wear, and when she returned and saw Gretchen’s face, she said, “Aww, what’s wrong?”

Gretchen sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Oh, nothing. Just being sentimental, thinking about Shawn.”

Riley gave her a sympathetic smile and a hug. “Don’t you go getting cold feet,” she said, shaking Gretchen’s shoulders as she started to release her. “You know he would have wanted this for you. He would have wanted you to survive and start a new life, and you have. You are. So don’t second guess yourself.”

Gretchen forced herself to smile back. “I know. I guess I just needed to hear someone else say it. So thanks.”

“Sure. Hey, look what I brought back.” Riley held up a teardrop-shaped sapphire pendant on a silver chain. “Found it in the gift shop. I figured it fits the ‘something borrowed and something blue’ part.”

“It’s beautiful. Thanks, Rye. Put it on me?” She turned around so Riley could fasten the clasp at the nape of her neck.

“There you go. Let’s see.”

Gretchen spun back around to face Riley, the best substitute she had for a floor-length mirror. “How do I look?”

“You look gorgeous.”

“So do you, girl!”

Riley rolled her eyes, but Gretchen was being sincere. The dress Nick had picked out for Riley matched the sapphire pendant and fit her like a glove, the sleek satin hugging her body in all the right places. He was in for a treat when he saw her walk down the aisle ahead of Gretchen.

“I peeked in the chapel on my way back, and it looks like they’re ready. Should we get in there?”

Gretchen took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Yeah. I think I’m ready now.”

Riley grinned and offered Gretchen her hand. “Let’s do it.”

Hand in hand, they left the tiny chamber in which Gretchen had gotten ready and walked toward the chapel, where the others would be waiting. It had gone quiet in the castle, Gretchen noticed, and the sound of their footsteps scuffing on the stone floor seemed extra loud. For hours after Kevin had escorted Martin to the dungeon, they’d been subjected to the sound of Alistair’s angry shouting. “Are ye MAD?! First ye lock me in here and leave me to rot, and now yer goin’ to chain up a zombie beside me? This is torture! TORTURE, I tell ye!” Alistair had gone on ranting and raving for close to an hour, but his screams had eventually died down. They hadn’t heard a peep from the makeshift prison since. The silence unnerved Gretchen. She would be glad when morning came, so they could let Martin out of there.

As they approached the chapel, soft strains of music filled the silence. “They’re ready for us,” Riley whispered. “Are you?”

Gretchen nodded. “Go ahead.” She watched as Riley rounded the corner to enter the chapel. After waiting several beats, long enough to give Riley time to get down the short aisle, Gretchen followed her.

As soon as she set foot inside the chapel, the music changed. AJ stood in a corner of the chapel, softly strumming the *Bridal Chorus* on the acoustic guitar Brian had brought back from a supply run. Gretchen beamed at him as she glided past, and he winked. Then her attention turned to her husband-to-be, standing at the altar with his hands folded nervously in front of him. He was wearing the black tuxedo Nick and Howie had picked out for him at the bridal store, and Gretchen thought he had never looked more handsome. Nick didn't look bad, himself, standing on Brian's left in a matching suit. But it was Kevin who truly looked distinguished, standing in the center of the altar in his full Air Force uniform. Brian had asked his cousin to conduct the ceremony. He wasn't an officiant, according to the old laws, but under their current circumstances, he would have to do.

Brian reached out and took Gretchen's hand when she reached the altar, and they turned briefly to face the rest of the group, standing in rows behind them. Abby was in the front, beaming up at them, with Callum and Gabby at her side. Across the aisle with In-Su, Howie gave them a wink and a grin. Shaun and Liz were holding hands in the second row, while Ashton and Lucio stood shoulder to shoulder. Even Selena had shown up, though she stood alone in the back. The only one missing from the ceremony was Martin. Gretchen tried to push him into the back of her mind as she turned and took Brian's other hand.

Facing each other, they said their vows. Brian read his off a piece of paper he'd pulled out of his pocket. "Gretchen," he began, his voice husky with emotion, "I met you, one year ago, on the worst day of my life. It was the day I lost my whole world." Remembering how broken Brian had looked when she'd rescued him on the roadside that day, Gretchen's eyes welled with tears. "I'd lost my family, my faith," he continued, his voice cracking. "I'd lost everything, everything that made me the person I was. I even lost myself. But I also gained something special that day – April fifteenth, two thousand twelve, the first day of the rest of my life."

Gretchen smiled through her tears as Brian squeezed her hands. "It hasn't been the easiest life," he admitted, "but you've made it worth living, Gretchen. You saved me in more ways than one that day, and you've been my saving grace every day since. I promise to love and protect you for the rest of my life."

His blue eyes were bright with unshed tears, though hers had already started to trickle down her cheeks. Struggling to keep her composure long enough to get through her own vows, Gretchen swallowed hard. She reached into the bodice of her dress to dig out the folded scrap of paper she had tucked there, earning a few laughs from the group. Smiling, she unfolded the piece of paper, cleared her throat, and began to read the words she had penned there.

"Brian," she started, her voice shaking, "you are the best thing that's happened to me in this crazy new world we live in. You have been both my rock and my

security blanket, my shelter and my shoulder to cry on. Every time I've needed you, you've been there for me... including that day, one year ago, when I was speeding down the interstate, all alone, and you were there in the middle of the road." Brian smiled, the tears still sparkling in his eyes. "You were there," Gretchen repeated, "and I haven't felt alone since. So I promise to do the same for you: to be your rock and your security blanket, your shelter and your shoulder to cry on. I promise to be there for you, for all the days of our lives."

Kevin led them through the exchanging of rings, a pair of silver bands Brian had looted on one of their supply runs. A lump rose in Gretchen's throat as she watched Brian slide the simple band onto her finger, next to the engagement ring he had given her. It felt good to have a wedding ring around her finger again, but she couldn't help but think of the band that was there before it, the one now tucked away with the rest of her belongings. She was someone's wife once again, but she was also someone's widow, and she could never forget that. She could never forget Shawn. But then, she knew Brian felt the same way about Leighanne. Neither of them could be forgotten or replaced. They would live on through memories – tucked away, like the rings, for safekeeping.

"By the power vested in me by... Brian," proclaimed Kevin, to a few chuckles, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. Go on and kiss your bride, cous."

Grinning, Brian pulled Gretchen into his arms and planted a kiss upon her lips. With her eyes closed, she couldn't see the latecomer stagger into the chapel. It was Selena's scream that broke the kiss.

"HE'S ONE OF THEM!"

Gretchen looked up as everyone turned around, in time to see Martin – or what used to be Martin – making his way up the aisle. His once-blue eyes were clouded over, his complexion the color of ashes. As he lurched toward them, his arms outstretched, Gretchen saw that his good hand was gone, his wrist a bloody stump. The sight of bone poking out of the mangled flesh made her gag. She clapped a hand over her mouth, heaving.

Selena sighed and pulled a dagger out of her belt loop. "Sorry, mate," she said, and she plunged the blade through Martin's skull.

For several long minutes, they all just stood and stared at the spot where Martin lay, his unseeing eyes fixed upon the ceiling. Then, needing to understand fully what had happened, they tramped after Kevin as he left the chapel and returned to the dungeon where he had chained Martin. There they found the empty manacle, Martin's severed hand lying near it on the floor. On the other side of the small room, Alistair's gutted corpse lay in a sticky pool of blood.

"He must have turned, then ripped off his own hand trying to get to Alistair," said Kevin sadly, shaking his head. "We should have had someone stand guard."

“Eh... it’s not like Alistair’s a big loss,” grunted AJ, shrugging.

Privately, Gretchen agreed, but it didn’t make her feel any better. She was wracked with guilt over what had happened to Martin. But the sick feeling in her stomach was not just one of guilt, grief, or even disgust. It was worry. Now that Martin was gone, they’d lost the closest thing they had to a medical doctor. The hope she’d felt that morning had died along with him.

She looked at Brian, who was still holding onto her, his arm around her waist. As the newlyweds locked eyes, the silent question passed between them: *What are we going to do now?*

Chapter 104

We should have learned our lesson from what happened at the bridal boutique. We should never have risked our lives for a luxury item. We should never have split up inside that store. We should never have assumed we’d all make it out again in one piece.

I felt good about going to that store with Gretchen, like I was finally giving back in a way, doing something nice for someone as sweet as her. But that good feeling went away the moment Martin – what used to be Martin, anyway – lumbered into the chapel and ruined her wedding. Was a wedding dress worth losing a member of our group? No. No way.

I know Gretchen still feels guilty about what happened to Martin, but it wasn’t her fault. The whole group is to blame. We were careless. We got sloppy. We should have listened to Selena when she said it was a stupid idea. We should have learned. I should have learned.

We lost another member of our group today. And this time, it’s all my fault...

Friday, June 14, 2013

Week Sixty

The deaths of Martin and Alistair had rattled the group. Just when they were starting to feel relatively safe inside the castle, the losses served as a stark reminder that they were still vulnerable.

The European contingent was especially shaken. They had always assumed that they, like Dr. Kwak In-Su and the American survivors, were all immune to the Osiris Virus, but Martin’s demise had cast doubts over this theory. “Martin was

an exception, though,” Selena tried to assure them in her matter-of-fact way. “He was in a remote, isolated area when the plague hit. He was never exposed to the airborne virus. His friends got it through bites, and the only reason he survived is because he amputated his own arm and stopped the spread. Had he been in a populated area, like the rest of us, he would have succumbed to the illness, same as everyone else did. We have nothing to worry about. Nothing more than the usual, anyway.”

But they did worry. In fact, besides Selena and AJ, who was justifiably confident in his own ability to survive a bite, the only one unaffected by the fear that had consumed the rest of the group was Howie. As a hemophiliac who risked grievous injury just by existing, he was used to feeling vulnerable. This was nothing new. He’d learned to overcome his fear.

He could not say the same for Brian and Gretchen, who did more worrying than anyone these days. Gretchen, approximately eight months pregnant now, worried for the life of her unborn child. Brian, who had already lost one wife and two children, worried for them both. Howie could empathize with this fear. He remembered the anxiety he’d felt when Bree was in labor with Bartholomew, and that had been in a hospital with trained medical professionals and modern technology. Now that Martin was gone, Gretchen had only Selena. If something went wrong during the delivery, there would be no saving her. And Howie, who also knew what it was like to lose a wife and child, could only imagine what would become of Brian then. He had been a broken man before, but this would shatter him.

They needed help – help from Heaven above, Howie thought – but for now, they would settle for supplies. “We need start getting a delivery room ready,” stated Selena that morning, as the group gathered for breakfast. “From what we’ve guessed, Gretchen’s about eight months along, but that’s only an estimate, and she could always go early. Right now we have only basic medical supplies. We need more specialized instruments, monitoring equipment, IVs...”

“Pain meds?” Gretchen put in hopefully.

Selena shot her a grim smile.

“Not to mention formula, nappies, blankets, and clothing for the baby,” added Abby.

“Right,” Selena agreed. “So what I’m saying is, some of us need to go on a massive supply run to the nearest hospital or clinic or whatever’s closest.”

“I’d say Conquest Hospital’s our best bet,” Abby suggested. “It’s perhaps ten or fifteen kilometers south of here, near the coast.”

Selena nodded slowly, a faraway look on her face. "We'll take the truck; we can stow the supplies in the back. I have the best idea what to look for, so I'll be going, of course. Who'll be joining me?"

"I'll go."

Howie was surprised to hear AJ's raspy voice volunteer, though he supposed he shouldn't have been. Back on the base, AJ had always been up for an adventure, but his injury had changed everything. His bad leg had healed as much as it ever would, but he still walked with a limp and would probably never run again.

Selena was quick to shake her head. "No. Sorry, but you'll only slow us down."

"Or I'll save our asses," AJ countered. "I'm a damn good shot, and you know it."

"Yeah, but we're not shooting them anymore. Not out there, not unless we're surrounded. Otherwise, it's all hand-to-hand combat, so we don't attract them with the noise. And you'll be crap at close combat on that leg."

AJ arched his eyebrows. "Yeah? Try me. I'm stronger than you think. And in case you haven't noticed, the zombies are getting weaker."

It was true. They'd thought it was just the cold slowing the undead down during the winter, but the ghouls had gotten even slower since spring. The warm weather seemed to have accelerated their already advanced stages of decomposition, to the point that it was almost impossible to tell male zombies apart from females anymore, unless their clothing was still intact. Most of them had been reduced to walking skeletons, more bone than flesh. Their snapping jaws still made them a threat, but certainly, they were more manageable now.

Selena scrutinized AJ carefully for a few seconds and finally nodded. "Fine. Just don't go getting yourself killed."

"Scout's honor," he said sarcastically, holding up three fingers. The gesture seemed lost on Selena, who just rolled her eyes.

"Right, now that that's settled... who else is coming along to help me cover the cripple?" She smiled at AJ, who made a face back at her. The two of them had been spending an awful lot of time together these last few months, Howie had observed. Insulting each other seemed to be their favorite form of flirting.

"I will," said Brian, but Selena shot him down too.

"No. You have a wife and baby on the way; you'd better stay here. Ashton will come with us, won't you, Ash?"

“Course,” agreed Ashton, whose physical strength was always an asset on supply runs. Howie couldn’t help but envy Ashton. No one would ever think to ask him, Howie, to accompany them on a run. And after what had happened in the bowling alley back on the base, Howie couldn’t blame them. He knew he was a liability. Still, he wasn’t used to feeling so helpless. His intelligence and strong business sense had served him well in the old world, but here, such traits were no longer in demand. Brains meant more to the zombies than the living, who only seemed to care about brawn. Howie just wanted to feel useful again.

Half-listening to the others debate over who would go and who should stay to defend the castle, Howie thought about how the others had risked their lives to save his, time and time again. Brian had gone into the medical center, the most zombie-infested place on the base, to bring back supplies. AJ had driven Howie back to the chapel the day his car windshield had imploded in an attack, embedding glass in his face. Gretchen, along with the others, had given blood when he was dying of hypovolemic shock. He owed it to them to be the brave one for once, to sacrifice his own safety to keep them out of danger.

“I want to go,” he spoke up suddenly, infusing his voice with a confidence he didn’t feel.

Heads turned as everyone in the kitchen stared at him incredulously. Howie was not at all surprised when Selena, again, said, “No.”

“I’m serious,” he insisted. “You need me. Maybe I’m not the strongest or the best shot, but I’ll know what kind of things to look for in that hospital.”

Selena gave him a haughty, skeptical look. “Is that so? Because you know so much about childbirth?”

“I’m not claiming to be an expert, but what I *do* know didn’t come from a book. It came from experience. Tell me, have any of *you* had a baby before?” he asked, looking from Selena to Ashton to AJ. “Have you even been inside a delivery room? Well, I have. I was there when my son was born. I was there when they did an episiotomy on my wife to get him out.” Gretchen blanched at that, and even Selena’s face seemed a shade paler. “I’m willing to bet I’ve spent more time in hospitals than any of you,” added Howie, glancing around the room at all of them. “I know a thing or two about the kind of equipment and supplies we’ll need. I know I can be useful, if you’ll just give me the chance to prove it.”

Selena looked to AJ, who nodded. “Fine,” she snapped. “But if either of you get hurt or fall behind, don’t think we’ll be going back to save your sorry asses. Our objective is to bring back supplies for Gretchen. Understood?”

Howie met her steely gaze and gave a single nod of agreement. “Understood.”

Conquest Hospital was a sprawling building, only several stories high, but spread out wide, with a maze of roads, roundabouts, and parking lots they had to navigate in order to reach the entrance. Thankfully, there were a number of well-marked signs around the campus to point them in the right direction, though trying to read these while a horde of the undead closed in on their truck wasn't the easiest feat. "There's so many of them," said Howie, starting to regret his decision to come. He hadn't seen this many zombies in one place since the early days on the base.

"Yeah, well, this is where they all died and turned. Makes sense, doesn't it?" said Selena, slowing down in front of another roundabout. "Which way?"

"Emergency Maternity," Howie noted on a sign that was just visible through the overgrown shrubbery. "Turn right."

Selena cranked the steering wheel to the right, ignoring the arrow directing her to go left around the roundabout. Howie would have done the same; all of the road signs in England seemed backwards to him, anyway. It still felt strange to be sitting, as the front seat passenger, on what would have been the driver's side in America. He kept stretching his foot out to tap an imaginary brake, as Selena drove like a maniac down the wrong side of the road, running over zombies without even the slightest hesitation. It must have been a bumpy ride for AJ and Ashton, who were sitting in the back. Howie kept checking over his shoulder to make sure neither of them had bounced out of the truck bed yet, but they were both still there, weapons raised, ready to pick off any zombies who got too close.

The truck trundled down a steep, winding drive that led them around the right side of the building, where they saw the emergency entrance. There was only a small cluster of zombies meandering around outside it, but another glance out the rear window revealed a whole herd staggering down the drive in pursuit of them. Getting into the building was definitely going to be easier than getting out again.

AJ rapped his knuckles against the rear window. "Let's get moving!" he shouted.

"Bloody hell," Selena swore, throwing the truck into park and shoving open her door. "You coming or not?" she called to Howie, as she jumped down.

Howie heaved a sigh and tried to steel himself before climbing out of his side. As soon as his feet touched the ground, AJ and Ashton appeared in front of him. "We'll have to barricade the doors before our followers find a way in after us," Ashton was saying.

"First we gotta get past these guys," said AJ, limping towards the zombies outside the entrance with his Winchester pointed in front of him. He'd fixed a bayonet to the end of the rifle, and he seemed to relish in stabbing it through zombie eye

sockets. Meanwhile, Ashton was armed with a medieval mace he'd found in the castle, perfect for bashing in zombie skulls. Selena had holstered her gun in favor of her machete, while Howie wielded a sword – light, yet sharp, capable of slicing through rotting flesh and bare bones. He just hoped he wouldn't cut himself in the process. He held back as the others took the offensive, clearing a path through the pile of corpses they left in their wake.

Selena, dodging the slow, lumbering zombies, reached the doors first and yanked one side open. "Get in, get in!" she shouted, beckoning furiously to the others. Ashton went in after her, holding his mace in front of him. AJ followed, limping painfully, while Howie brought up the rear.

"You alright, AJ?" he asked as he hurried inside, pulling the door closed behind him.

"I'm fine," said AJ gruffly. "Let's you and me get these doors secured while they start clearing the place."

Howie looked past AJ and saw Selena and Ashton already killing zombies. The place was crawling with them. He swallowed his rising panic. "What if we have to get out quickly?"

"We won't have to if we can clear this ward and secure it. Now c'mon, help me." AJ was standing with his back pressed against the doors. Howie could hear the skeletal hands scraping on the other side. "Go get that IV pole," AJ directed, pointing. "Maybe we can shove it through the door handles."

Howie ran for the pole, keeping one eye on the carnage happening down the hallway. He wheeled it back to the doors. "It's not going to fit," he told AJ. "The top's too wide."

"Looks like it unscrews," AJ observed, pointing to a black knob on the side of the pole, which allowed its height to be adjusted. Howie feverishly twisted the knob until it was loose enough to spin freely in his hand; then he pulled the top of the stand clear out of the hollow bottom pole. "There you go. Now put it through."

Howie lifted the pole and turned it sideways, slipping it through the double door handles until the wheeled bottom caught. "I don't know how well it'll hold," he told AJ worriedly. "Most of it's hollow; the metal could bend."

"They're not that strong. They're walking skeletons, remember? They'll probably break their own bones before they break that pole. But just to be safe, let's overturn one of those gurneys in front of the doors. Those suckers are heavy."

Howie brought over one of the gurneys he was pointing to, and together, they tipped it in front of the doors.

“There we go,” said AJ, brushing his hands. “That should hold ‘em for awhile. C’mon, let’s go help Selena and Ashton.”

That was what Howie had been afraid of, but he had no choice but to follow AJ further into the maternity ward, where Ashton and Selena were bludgeoning and decapitating zombies left and right. “You two! Secure those doors!” shouted Selena, gesturing to a pair of double doors at the end of the hallway. While she and Ashton kept undead occupied, Howie and AJ snuck past them and used more IV stands to reinforce both the double doors and a single door leading into the stairwell.

With the ward sealed off and the hallway clear, they were finally free to explore. “There’s the delivery room,” said Howie, pointing to a pair of doors beneath a sign marked *Delivery Suite*. “Most of the equipment we need will be in there.”

Selena nodded. “Right. You and Ashton go there. Gather as much as you can carry. AJ and I will see if we can’t find the pharmacy. I believe you know a bit about pharmaceuticals too, now, don’t you?” she teased AJ, who merely smirked. “It’s about... half past noon, by my watch. What time have you got, Howie?”

Howie checked his medical alert watch. “Same.”

“We’ll meet back here in one hour.” Selena glanced back at the entrance. “Hopefully the horde outside will have wandered off by then. Don’t be late, or you may be left behind. Got it?”

“Got it,” everyone agreed, though Howie squirmed at the thought of being left behind. He didn’t doubt that Selena meant what she’d said.

He wasn’t comfortable splitting up, either, but he felt reasonably safe with Ashton, especially after witnessing the way Ashton slammed his mace through the window on one of the delivery room doors, shattering the glass and gaining them access through the otherwise locked doors. “You know what you’re looking for?” Ashton asked Howie, as they entered the delivery suite.

“I’ve got some idea,” said Howie, wandering around. The delivery rooms in this hospital looked different than the one in his memory, the room in which Bree had given birth to their son. Along with the standard beds and chairs, they were furnished with pieces of equipment that seemed better suited to a gym than a hospital room: large exercise balls, foam floor mats, and lengths of knotted fabric, hanging rope-like from the ceilings. But when he started poking through the contents of cupboards, drawers, and carts, he found the sort of equipment he’d had in mind. While Ashton stood guard, he filled the empty backpacks they’d brought with everything from basic monitoring equipment – a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, and thermometer – to scary-looking, stainless steel surgical instruments he stole from one of the carts. “We need to find the

nursery,” he told Ashton. “That’s where we’ll find the baby supplies – diapers, formula, all that stuff.”

“Lead the way, mate,” said Ashton. It was nice to get a break from bossy Selena. Ashton stayed quietly in the background, keeping watch, while Howie searched for the nursery. He found it in the adjacent set of rooms, across from the stairwell. There was another security door blocking their access, but all it took was Ashton throwing his mace through the plate glass window for them to break in. “It’d be easier to just go through the window,” Ashton suggested. “Need a leg up?”

Eying the shards of glass sticking out of the window frame, Howie shook his head. “You first. I’d rather go through the door.”

Ashton shrugged. “Alright.” He boosted himself up and through the window, dropping neatly to the floor on the other side. Within seconds, he’d opened the nursery door to let Howie in.

At first glance, the nursery looked abandoned, but they quickly realized this wasn’t the case, when they heard the gurgling cries of a newborn. Howie’s head whipped to the side, his eyes focusing on a bassinet in the back of the room, where something was moving under a blue blanket. “Oh my God!” he cried. “Someone left their baby here?!” Without thinking, acting purely on paternal instinct, he rushed to the bassinet and whipped off the blanket before Ashton could stop him. What he saw underneath it made his heart skip a beat. “Oh, no...”

The infant was unclothed, except for its sodden diaper. Its skin was mottled and gray, the flesh beneath it so wasted that Howie could see bone in places where it had rotted away. Yet its eyes were open, cloudy and unfocused, and so was its mouth, the blackened, toothless gums flapping endlessly as it cried to be fed. Its tiny, skeletal hands were balled into fists that flailed randomly, lacking the coordination to even reach for Howie.

“Dear God...” Ashton had come up behind Howie, and he heard the horror in the other man’s voice. “What should we do with it?”

With a sinking feeling, Howie realized the only proper thing to do. “We have to take care of it.” But then he thought of his own son, lying still and lifeless in his bed, and he shook his head. “I don’t think I can do it. Will you?”

Ashton looked down at the mace in his hand. “Not with this. Doesn’t seem right to bash a baby’s brains in, even if it is one of them. Give me your sword.”

Howie handed it over, then turned around. He couldn’t bear to watch, but he heard the sound of the sword swishing cleanly through the infant’s soft skull, heard the cries suddenly cease, and that was bad enough.

Ashton came up alongside him, wiping off the blade with the blue blanket. He tossed the blanket aside and handed Howie the sword. "Let's hurry up and get the hell out of here."

Howie couldn't agree more.

They tore through the nursery's supply cabinets, stuffing their packs with diapers, wipes, bottles, powdered formula, blankets, hats, sleepers, anything they could find that would fit. "The sad thing is, this stuff will only last us a little while," Howie told Ashton. "Babies grow so fast, and they go through diapers and formula even quicker." He could still remember his shock at how much his credit card bills went up after Barty's birth, though, of course, Bree had bought him more than just the bare necessities.

"It's okay. We still have another month to stock up before the little tyke even gets here, right?"

"I hope so," said Howie.

They headed back to the entrance, where they'd agreed to meet Selena and AJ. A quick glance at his watch told Howie they still had twenty minutes to spare, but a look out the front doors told him they wouldn't be leaving any time soon. The horde of zombies that had followed their truck to the maternity wing had amassed outside. The truck was surrounded, and only the IV pole wedged through the door handles had stopped them from breaking in.

To Howie, it looked hopeless. "What are we going to do?"

Ashton chewed thoughtfully on his bottom lip. "We'll have to try another exit. If they're all fixated on these doors, maybe we can sneak out another way."

"But how will we get back to the truck?"

"Maybe we won't. Maybe we'll find another vehicle."

A sudden thought struck Howie. "Hey! Back at our base, Brian stole an ambulance from the medical center. He said it was just sitting there, keys still in the ignition. It could be the same way here!"

"That's not a bad idea. I saw some ambulances parked outside the main entrance as we were driving by. Worth a try, anyway, wouldn't you say?"

Howie didn't want to be the one to try, but he did want to get out of the hospital, so he sucked up his courage and nodded. "Let's give it a shot."

"Brilliant." Ashton started walking back the way they'd come.

“Wait, now?” Caught off-guard, Howie hurried after him. “But – what about AJ and Selena?”

Ashton shrugged. “You said we’ve got twenty minutes till they’re supposed to be back, right? Well, why wait? If we get hold of an ambulance now, we can use it to lure the zombies away from that exit, so Selena and AJ can get to the truck. Then we’ll have both. It’d be nice to have a back-up, in case the ambulance runs out of petrol or breaks down or something.”

Howie had to admit, it made sense. *Always have a Plan B.* The businessman in him appreciated this forethought. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“So let’s go.” Ashton led them to the stairwell they’d blocked off earlier, where there was a hospital directory and map. “We’re on Level 1,” said Ashton, pointing to a spot on the map. “We need to get to Level 3. That’s where the main entrance and the emergency department are, so that’s where the ambulances are as well.”

Howie nodded. “Sounds good.”

They both strapped on their bulging backpacks, readied their weapons, cleared the door leading into the stairwell, and started up the stairs. Ashton led the way, walking ahead of Howie. Their footsteps on the bare cement steps echoed through the stairwell, but Howie supposed this was a good thing: if there were any zombies on the stairs, their footsteps and moans would echo as well.

They made it up the first flight of stairs without incident, but as soon as Ashton set foot on the second floor landing, the stairwell door flew open with a bang that made Howie jump. He looked up in horror to see a stream of the walking dead squeezing through the doorway. “Keep going! We can outrun them!” Ashton shouted, starting up the next flight, but Howie’s first instinct had been to turn back. A few steps below the landing, he froze, realizing he and Ashton had been separated by the zombies. In the split second it took for Ashton to look back over his shoulder and realize the same thing, one of the zombies reached out and latched on to his backpack.

Howie could only watch helplessly as Ashton stumbled backwards, the force of the zombie’s pull on his heavy bag throwing him off balance. He missed a step and fell hard onto the landing, the mace slipping from his hand. The precious weapon rolled right underneath the railing and went crashing down to the bottom of the staircase. Howie raised his sword, but his feet were still frozen to the stairs, unwilling to take him into the fray. He hesitated, as Ashton thrashed around under the weight of the zombies had that fallen upon him, struggling to wriggle his arms out of the straps of his backpack and hold the zombies back at the same time. “A little help here, Howie?” he shouted, his voice several octaves higher than usual.

Howie forced himself to take one step, then another. When he was within reach, he swung his sword wildly, slicing through the neck of the nearest zombie. He had to jump to dodge the severed skull as it rolled down the stairs. Looking up hopefully, he saw that Ashton had managed to free his arms, but it was too late. As he raised the heavy backpack over his head, one of the zombies went for the jugular, its jaws clamping down on the side of Ashton's neck. He let out a blood-curdling scream and dropped the backpack, which bounced down the stairs into Howie's arms.

For just a moment, as Ashton turned his head to watch his only weapon fall away, and as Howie caught it and looked up, stunned, the two of them locked eyes, and time seemed to stand still. Howie couldn't remember any rational thoughts that passed through his brain in that moment, only his fight or flight instinct screaming, "*Run! RUN!*" in his head. But he would never forget the desperate look in Ashton's eyes or the way his mouth moved soundlessly, silently pleading for help as blood bubbled from his lips.

"I'm sorry," Howie whispered, as he turned and ran. Not even the echo of his pounding footsteps as he bolted back down the stairs could drown out the sound of Ashton's last scream, gurgling out of his throat as the undead tore into his flesh.

Howie would never forget that, either.

When AJ and Selena came back, they found Howie sitting alone on a bench in the hallway, holding the mace, his sword on the bench beside him and the pair of backpacks at his feet. He twisted the mace in his hands, its rough wooden handle scraping against his palms. The smallest splinter could make him bleed, but he wasn't thinking about that just then.

He looked up when he heard their footsteps approaching and found AJ and Selena staring back at him. "Where's Ashton?" Selena was the first to ask.

Howie shook his head, tears prickling in the corners of his eyes. "He didn't make it."

AJ blinked in disbelief, his mouth dropping open. Selena simply bowed her head.

Feeling he owed them some kind of explanation, Howie added, "We were trying to find another way out. We got back early and saw how many of them were out there, so we thought we'd go out the main entrance, try to steal one of the ambulances, and use it to distract them so you guys could get to the truck. But we got attacked in the stairwell. He was ahead of me, and we got separated. They surrounded him. There... there was nothing I could do."

Liar! screamed his conscience. *You could have done something. You could have tried to save him. You didn't. You just turned tail and ran, like the coward you are. Like the coward you've always been.*

Selena shrugged. "It's every man for himself. He knew the risk he was taking when he agreed to come with us." There was a forced sort of casualness to her tone, but Howie could tell by the way she turned away as she talked that she was more shaken by the loss of Ashton than she wanted to show them. Perhaps she had remembered that it was she who'd asked Ashton to come along.

It was AJ who changed the subject, redirecting their attention to a more pressing problem. "So... how *are* we gonna get out of here?"

They all looked toward the double doors, which were shaking with the force of the zombies beating relentlessly against them. The barricades they'd created were working for now, but there was no way they would all get past the growing horde in one piece.

"Your plan wasn't such a bad idea," said Selena, looking at Howie. "If one of us could get out through another door and create some kind of diversion, lead them away from this exit, the other two could escape."

AJ and Howie exchanged glances. "Who's going to create the diversion?"

Selena sighed. "I suppose I will. I'm certainly not entrusting that job to a hemophiliac or a bloke with a bum leg."

Howie smiled, feeling a rising sense of relief, but AJ scowled. "You sure?" he asked Selena, clearly not as happy with her arrangement.

"Trust me, I'm the fastest. I'll be fine," she assured him. "I'll try and get one of the ambulances, but if I can't, I'm just going to run for it. As soon as you see them leave, you better be in that truck, coming to find me."

They both nodded. "You can count on it," said AJ. He reached out and pulled her into a rough, one-armed hug, but Selena was having none of that. She twisted away from him, shaking his hand from her shoulders.

"Cut it out. Don't start that now," she scolded him. "I said I'll be fine, and I meant it. You can squeeze me all you want when we're both safe and sound back in the castle."

AJ raised his eyebrows. "You can count on it," he said again, grinning.

Selena rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide the smirky little smile on her lips. Howie knew then that there was definitely something going on between them.

But there was no time to wonder about that. As soon as Selena had gone, AJ sat down beside Howie and said, “So... what really happened with Ashton?”

Howie felt a flash of heat rising into his cheeks. “What do you mean?” he asked, hoping his guilty face didn’t betray him.

AJ gave him a look. “C’mon, man, I know you better than that. Something else happened. You’re sitting there with his backpack, holding his weapon. If he was surrounded by zombies, how’d you get his stuff?”

“He dropped it.” It wasn’t a lie, but as AJ’s dark eyes probed into his own, the rest of the truth came pouring out of Howie. “They knocked him to the ground; they were all over him. I should have tried to help him, but I froze. I got scared, and as soon as I could make my feet move again, I ran for it. I ran, while they ripped him to pieces.” He covered his face with his hands, the heels digging into his eye sockets, his fingers clawing at his hair. Behind the mask of his hands, his face burned with shame, the tears stinging like acid in his eyes.

Then he felt the warm weight of AJ’s hand on his shoulder. “C’mon, D... Don’t beat yourself up about it. You did what you had to do to survive. Either of us might have done the same thing.”

“No you wouldn’t have,” Howie mumbled into his hands. “You and Selena would have saved his life.”

AJ snorted. “You heard what Selena said. ‘Every man for himself.’ ‘If you get hurt or fall behind, don’t think I’m saving your sorry asses.’ For all we know, she could be hightailing it the hell out of here in an ambulance right now, while *we* serve as the distractions.”

Howie dropped his hands, looking at AJ in horror. “She wouldn’t really do that... would she?”

AJ shrugged. “She might, if I weren’t here.” Then he grinned. “She’s into me, man.”

Howie rolled his eyes. He was tired of everyone hooking up but him. Nick and Riley... Brian and Gretchen... Shaun and Liz... and now AJ and Selena. Even little Gabby had gotten awfully friendly with the other kid in the castle, Callum. They made him feel like even more of an outsider. He didn’t doubt that Selena would have left him, had it not been for AJ and the fact that they had most of the medical supplies sitting at their feet.

“Speak of the devil...” AJ said suddenly. “Look.”

He was pointing toward the doors. Howie looked out the narrow windows and saw the sea of skeletal hands and faces starting to recede. “Something’s drawing them away.”

“That’s our signal. C’mon, let’s get our shit together and get ready to move.”

They gathered the supplies and their weapons and snuck up to the doors. It took several more minutes for the last of the zombies to stagger away, but finally, their path to the truck looked clear. AJ gave the command: “Let’s bounce.” They removed the barricades blocking the doors and burst out of them. “You drive,” AJ called to Howie, as they tossed their bags into the back of the truck. “I’ll shoot.”

Howie nodded and ran around to the far side of the truck. He climbed into the driver’s seat, while AJ rode shotgun. After pulling a hasty U-turn, Howie followed the zombie horde up the drive, searching frantically for whatever they seemed to be following. He was expecting to see – or hear – an ambulance, its lights flashing, sirens wailing, anything to attract attention to itself and draw it away from the doors. But he noticed nothing, until AJ suddenly said, “There!”

Howie looked in the direction AJ was pointing and saw Selena on foot. She’d made it across the roundabout in front of the main entrance and was running up the road, past the parking lots, away from the hospital. The growing horde was hot on her heels, zombies streaming toward her from all directions.

“Pedal to the metal, Howie!” shouted AJ. “Hurry!”

Howie gunned the engine, and the truck lurched forward. Bodies bounced off the front fender, flying right and left, as the truck parted the undead sea. He took the roundabout on two wheels and raced toward Selena. She was almost surrounded now, and he could see her struggling. Even if she’d had the stamina to run forever, she had nowhere to go.

He crashed through the perimeter of zombies closing in on her and slammed on the brakes, stopping just long enough for her to scramble over the tailgate and into the back of the truck. Then he accelerated again, leaving the undead in a cloud of exhaust.

AJ had twisted around in his seat, opening the rear window to talk to Selena. “What happened with the ambulance?”

Selena shook her head, too winded to speak at first. “No good,” she panted. “None had keys inside.”

“Damn. Well, at least you got out of there in one piece. Our plan worked anyway. Good one, Howie.” AJ grinned in Howie’s direction, but it didn’t help. He knew AJ was only trying to make him feel better.

But nothing could make him feel better, not even Gretchen hugging him with gratitude when they got back to the castle, or Brian calling him a godsend. Because Howie knew the truth: he wasn't a hero. He hadn't done anything brave. Rather than sacrificing his own safety to save the others, he had sacrificed the strongest member of their group to save himself. And while they gathered to mourn the loss of Ashton and hear Selena's side of the story, Howie sat on the outskirts of the circle and said nothing. He knew the truth, but he kept it to himself.

He wasn't a hero. He was just as much of a coward as he'd always been.

Chapter 105

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not, for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2: 6-14)

Glory to God, indeed! Please watch over my family, Father, for we need Your helping hand to guide us. I have faith that our baby will be brought safely into this world. If Mary could do it, so can my wife – right? I'll never know what You have planned for us, but I pray that, whatever happens, You'll be with us.

Friday, August 9, 2013

Week Sixty-Eight

It must have been after midnight, but Brian lay awake, like he had so many other nights, listening to Gretchen's soft snoring. He had never noticed that Gretchen snored before she was pregnant, but he didn't mind it; it helped drown out the

distant moans of the undead. It was comforting, too. The steady snores served as a reminder that she was still alive, still breathing. Lately, it was the only thing that could soothe him to sleep. Even then, his sleep was hardly restful. He was plagued with nightmares, haunted by memories of waking up to find his family dead. Now whenever he woke, he would find himself drenched in sweat and filled with dread, fearing the same had happened to his new wife and the baby inside her belly. The sound of Gretchen's snoring was a welcomed relief.

He turned toward her, glad that she, at least, was getting some rest. Gretchen had an even harder time sleeping than he did these days. Just looking at her, it wasn't difficult to see why. A sliver of moonlight streamed through the open window, illuminating the silhouette of her sloping belly. She had gotten so big that it was impossible for her to find a comfortable position. Although he couldn't sleep, he didn't dare get up for fear of disturbing her. He knew if her woke her up, she'd never get back to sleep, and she needed the rest. By their calculations, she was due to deliver any day.

Brian remembered the excitement he and Leighanne had felt in the days leading up to the twins' birth, as they put the finishing touches on the nursery, talked about names, took childbirth classes, and toured the maternity ward where their babies would be born. They'd been nervous, of course, about the prospect of becoming parents, but their eagerness to begin the journey far outweighed any fear they'd had about the road ahead.

It was different this time. There was no nursery to decorate, only a makeshift crib made from a pair of deconstructed milk crates. There were no classes to help them prepare, no hospital to help bring their baby safely into the world. Without Jo or Martin, there was only Selena, whose pharmaceutical training hadn't prepared her to deliver babies, and Kwak In-Su, who was more mad scientist than medical doctor. They had both been researching childbirth techniques, but Brian knew that if there were any complications, he could lose both Gretchen and the baby. He had purposely avoided discussing names this time, not wanting to get too attached to a child whose chances of survival in this world were slim.

"Women have been giving birth on their own since the dawn of mankind. We'll be fine," Gretchen would say, but despite her reassurances, Brian knew she was as scared as he was. For her, it would be a brand new experience. He, at least, had some firsthand experience to fall back on, but since Leighanne had given birth by Cesarean section, he hadn't seen her all the way through labor and delivery. In Gretchen's case, a C-section would be the last resort, a chance of sparing the baby's life if its mother's could not be saved. He knew she couldn't survive being cut open under these conditions.

And so, Brian lay awake, praying that when the time came, all would go well.

Eventually, his eyelids grew heavy, and he rolled over, relaxing into a light sleep.

Suddenly, the mattress moved. Brian rolled over and opened his eyes.

Leighanne was looking back at him.

He gasped and sat up, blinking in shock. Surely, his tired eyes were just playing tricks on him. He looked again. No... he wasn't just seeing things. Leighanne was lying there beside him. Her eyes were open. Only they didn't look like her eyes. Even in the dim light, he could see that they were vacant and cloudy, no longer blue. He looked away with a shudder and released the breath that had caught in his throat.

Just a spasm of some sort. Nothing to get upset over. He swallowed hard and forced himself to look back, extending his thumb and forefinger to close her eyes again. He wanted to remember them the way they had been in life: vivid blue, like the sky on a clear day, sparkling along with her smile. A lump of sadness clogged his throat once more, as he realized he would never see her smile again.

He reached out to touch her face...

In a violent thrash of covers, he saw her arm fly up off the bed. Her hand, stiff and hooked like claws, latched onto his wrist in a grip that was shockingly strong. He cried out in disbelief and horror as his dead wife raised her head from the pillows, an animalistic growl expelling from her chest. Instinctively, he tried to pull away, as her vice-like grip wrenched his arm towards her mouth, which was wide open, her teeth bared. He struggled and finally yanked away from her grasp, falling backwards off the bed with the force of the pull.

He got quickly to his hands and knees, then scrambled to his feet. He wasn't able to think clearly, as adrenaline took over his body, but somewhere in the back of his mind, the voice of reason seemed to say, *This is a nightmare. This has to be a nightmare. Wake up! Why won't you wake up?*

"Wake up... Brian, wake up!"

Brian's eyes flew open. He was bewildered to find himself lying on the stone floor beside the mattress he shared with Gretchen. She was leaning over him, her hand on his shoulder.

"S-sorry," he stammered, as he came to his senses, realizing he had tried to shake her off in the throes of his nightmare. "You okay?"

"Are you?" she countered, her eyes wide with concern.

"Yeah... just another-"

"Nightmare?" she supplied sympathetically, and he nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "Did I wake you?"

"Not at all. I was trying to wake you." Though the look of fear hadn't left her eyes, she suddenly smiled. "I think it's time."

"Time?" Brian repeated, his heart leaping back into his throat.

"I'm pretty sure I'm in labor. I was having some cramps before bed, nothing major, but they've gotten a lot stronger, strong enough to wake me up."

"Contractions?"

She bit down on her bottom lip and nodded. "I think so. I tried to time them for awhile before I woke you up. They're coming every ten minutes or so."

"Sounds like contractions," he agreed, though he couldn't relate to what she must have been feeling. "Should we get Selena?"

"No need. I'm up," said a weary voice. Brian looked over and saw Selena sitting up on her pallet in the corner. "How could you possibly expect me to sleep through your bloody screaming?"

He looked at Gretchen in horror. "Was I that bad?"

She bit her lip again, suppressing a smile. "You may have freaked out just a little."

Brian sighed. "Sorry, everyone."

Those whom he'd woken grunted their forgiveness. "Is Gretchen really in labor?" a small voice called out in excitement.

"Early labor, Gabby," Gretchen called back. "It'll be awhile yet. Go back to sleep."

Brian shook his head. This was one of the many disadvantages to sleeping in close quarters. There were no secrets, no privacy; everyone heard everything. He'd put up with it during the winter, when most of the group had huddled in one chamber for warmth. But in the height of summer, there was really no need to be so close together. He knew it made some of them feel safer to stay in the same room, but when the baby arrived, he and Gretchen would spread out, find their own space to sleep in and spare the others the sound of the baby's cries. Hopefully by the time the temperature dropped again, the baby would start sleeping through the night. Assuming it survived that long.

With a shudder, Brian tried to shake off such thoughts. Now was not the time for negativity. He had to stay positive and be strong for Gretchen. She needed him now, more than ever.

“Push!” Selena barked, as Gretchen cried out with the pain of another contraction. She’d been pushing for over an hour already, and her strength was sapped. Brian could feel it in the pressure she put on his hand. When she’d first started to push, Gretchen had squeezed it so hard, he feared he might lose his fingers. Between contractions, she’d offered a sheepish smile and apologized for cutting off his circulation. Now her grip was so weak, his fingers kept slipping out of her sweaty hand. The contractions were coming so close together now, she had no time to rest in between, and without the strength left to smile, she could only cry.

“Stop that!” snapped Selena, as tears mixed with the sweat dripping down Gretchen’s face. “Don’t waste your energy crying. *Push*, damn it!”

Gretchen gritted her teeth, grunting with exertion. Brian wiped her forehead with a wet cloth, wishing he could do more. His wife’s labor had lasted all day, finally progressing to the point where Selena thought she should start pushing around sundown. As dusk fell, the temperature outside dropped, but it was still stifling hot inside the darkening castle, where Selena had been forced to light candles to see what she was doing inside the makeshift birthing chamber. The heat from their flames only added to Gretchen’s discomfort.

“Come on, love, keep pushing!” coached Abby, who was down at the end of the bed, gripping one of Gretchen’s feet. Riley was on the other side, holding down the other one, while Brian stayed at the head of the bed, holding her hand. He tried to soothe her as the women shouted directions, their voices growing more and more shrill. He could sense that even Selena, who was usually so self-assured, was feeling the stress of the situation. Gretchen was giving it all she had left, her back arching above the mattress with the effort of pushing, but still, the baby seemed to be stuck inside the birth canal.

When the contraction ended, Gretchen flopped back down onto the mattress, breathing raggedly. Brian moved to the foot of the bed, where Selena and In-Su were working in tandem. “Is something wrong?” he asked them in a hushed voice, not wanting to worry Gretchen. “Why is it taking so long?”

“Babies take time,” said In-Su in his soft, Korean accent. “Be patient. It will come when it is ready.”

Brian looked at Selena, who seemed less certain. He could see the apprehension in her eyes. “I don’t know how much more of this she can take,” he whispered, glancing at Gretchen. “She’s exhausted.”

“I wish there was something more I could give her, but I can’t this close to delivery,” said Selena. “It’s not safe for the baby.”

He sighed, feeling frustrated and helpless. He was glad he’d never had to see Leighanne in this kind of pain when she gave birth to the twins, but now he wished, for Gretchen’s sake, that he had – maybe it would have better prepared him, equipped him with some idea of how to help her. When the next contraction hit, all he could do was return to her side and take her hand again, hoping it would be for the last time.

“Push!” Selena screamed, as Gretchen squeezed her eyes shut and bore down. “That’s it. I think I see the head!”

“Really?” gasped Gretchen, her eyes popping open.

“Yes... yes, I can feel its hair!” Selena laughed, looking relieved. “Keep pushing; you’re almost there!”

“You hear that?” Brian asked, rubbing the back of her hand. “Almost there.”

“You’re doing great, Gretchen, keep going!” Riley chimed in.

The added encouragement seemed to give Gretchen one last burst of energy. With a groan that rivaled that of the ghouls outside, she gripped Brian’s hand and the side of the bed and pushed with all her might.

“The head’s out!” Selena cried, and Brian couldn’t help it; he had to look. Sneaking a peek beneath the blanket they’d draped over Gretchen’s knees, he saw a sleek head of hair, a scrunched-up face, and a small nose, and his breath caught in his throat.

For a few seconds, he could scarcely breathe, let alone speak, but finally, he whispered, “Incredible.” There were no other words to describe what he was seeing, what he was feeling, the miracle that was occurring in their midst. “I wish you could see this, Gretch.”

He looked back at his wife just in time to see her eyes roll back into her head. “Gretchen?” he shouted, as her chin slumped to her chest. Her grip on his hand had slackened, and he watched with dismay as her hand slipped out of his and fell limply at her side. “Something’s wrong!” he alerted Selena. “What happened to her?”

Selena shoved him aside and took Gretchen’s wrist to check her pulse. “She’s just blacked out, probably from the pain. Her pulse is pounding.” She roughly rubbed the back of Gretchen’s hand. “Wake up, Gretchen. Come on now.” When that didn’t work, she slapped Gretchen’s cheek. “I said, wake up!”

“What are you doing?!” Brian protested, pushing Selena away from his wife. “Don’t hit her!”

“Fine, then you wake her! Splash some water on her face; do whatever it takes to bring her ‘round. We need her conscious to deliver the rest of this baby – otherwise, it’ll suffocate. Unless you want your baby to die, you’d better wake her the fuck up!”

Frantically, Brian plunged the washcloth he’d been using to mop Gretchen’s brow back into the basin of water. Without bothering to wring it out, he wiped it over Gretchen’s face, wetting her cheeks and forehead. “C’mon, honey,” he whispered. “Wake up now.”

Gretchen’s eyelids fluttered open, and she looked up at him in confusion. “Is it over?” she asked groggily.

“Almost.” He smoothed her sweat-soaked hair back from her forehead. “One more big push should do it. You ready?”

She nodded, crying out in agony as the next contraction hit. “Push!” chanted her chorus of supporters, and as she pushed, Brian saw his baby’s body slide out into Selena’s hands.

“It’s a girl,” Selena said grimly as she flipped the baby over, scooping it into her arms.

“Did you hear that? Another girl...” murmured Brian. Tears blurred his vision as he watched Selena suction the baby’s mouth and nose with a small bulb syringe. He remembering being in the operating room with Leighanne and seeing each of his twin daughters for the first time. The third time wasn’t any less momentous. Under the extreme circumstances they’d faced, it was maybe even more so. Overcome with emotion, he let the tears – tears of joy, tears of heartache – trickle down his face.

Then Gretchen said, “I don’t hear her. Why can’t I hear her crying?”

The others exchanged worried glances, as Selena looked up. Through his tears, Brian could see the shaken expression upon her face. “She’s not breathing.”

Panic set in. “Give her here,” demanded Brian, wrenching his infant daughter out of Selena’s arms. Her body felt feather-light and limp, almost lifeless. He lay her flat across the foot of the bed, barely taking in the bluish tone of her floppy arms and legs as he lowered his face to hers and breathed into her tiny mouth and nose. He could taste blood as he pulled back to watch her narrow chest rise. It was as if he had entered one of his nightmares. “Not again,” he whispered, remembering the way he had breathed for Bonnie, pumping her chest until her

ribs cracked under the pressure of his hands. “Please...” He couldn’t lose another daughter, not like this. “Please...”

The night he’d lost his family, there had been no one to hear his desperate pleas. But this time, his prayers were answered. With a faint cough, the baby expelled the fluid left in her lungs and took her first breath of air. Crying with relief, Brian watched her tiny chest expand, listening to the air rattle in and out of her lungs as she threw back her head and started wailing. It was the most blessed sound Brian had ever heard.

“Can you hear her now?” he asked, glancing back at Gretchen.

She looked exhausted, but she was smiling. “I hear her.”

It was close to midnight, and something evil was lurking in the dark. Under the moonlight, a horde of zombies had amassed on the bridge outside the main entrance to the castle, eagerly awaiting their turn to meet the newborn baby. Brian could smell their stench through the windows and hear them moaning outside the stone walls.

“They had to have heard all that screaming,” Selena said afterwards, when AJ came to tell her they had visitors. “Or smelled the blood. Here, why don’t you throw them a bit of placenta?”

“Stop,” said Brian, as AJ jumped back, revolted. Selena just rolled her eyes, balling up the bloody sheet on which Gretchen had given birth.

“Dude, that is sick! Good thing I never knocked up a chick – as far as I know, anyway.” AJ chuckled.

“Like any self-respecting woman would want to have your baby,” Selena sniffed.

“She wouldn’t have much of a choice these days, sweetheart,” AJ shot back.

The two of them bickered back and forth for awhile, their favorite form of flirting. Brian tried his best to tune them out. Everyone was exhausted. He had been awake for almost twenty-four hours, too wired to sleep.

While the others drifted off to bed, leaving AJ and Kevin to keep an eye on the undead, Brian sat up with Gretchen, watching her sleep. He was glad she, at least, was finally getting some rest. As he rocked his baby daughter slowly back and forth, he could feel his body starting to relax. His arms felt heavy, and his eyelids drooped, but he fought against the fatigue, wanting to be there when Gretchen woke up.

She had been out for several hours before she finally stirred. “Hey there,” said Brian softly, as she struggled to open her eyes. “How ya feelin’?”

Gretchen groaned. “Like I just had my insides ripped out.”

“And here she is,” replied Brian with a grin, holding up the baby for her to see.

Gretchen smiled tiredly. “She’s beautiful. Is she all right?”

“She’s perfect,” Brian assured her. “You wanna hold her?”

Gretchen nodded, and he helped her prop herself up in bed. She moved gingerly, grimacing with pain. “What happened to me?” she wondered.

“It was pretty scary for awhile there,” he admitted. “You blacked out during the delivery – do you remember? And you lost a lot of blood delivering the placenta. Your blood pressure dropped, and you passed out again. We weren’t sure what was gonna happen, but Selena stopped the bleeding eventually.”

“It was the same way after my miscarriage,” she said quietly. “I lost so much blood, I had to have a transfusion.”

“Thank God you did, or you wouldn’t be here today.” They smiled, grateful for the connection they shared, the bond of blood that had given them both immunity to the virus. Brian prayed they had passed the same antibodies along to their daughter. “Here,” he said, handing her to Gretchen. “Time for our baby girl to meet her mama.”

Gretchen beamed down at the little bundle in her arms. The stress her body had been under had stained dark circles under her eyes, but her happiness gave her a warm glow that lit up her whole face. She looked haggard, but beautiful. “What are we going to call her?” she wanted to know.

Finally, the time had come to talk about names. It was an astonishingly short discussion. “I think we should call her Evette,” Brian suggested. “Like a little Eve... the first woman born in the new world.”

Gretchen smiled as she was struck by the Biblical significance. “Evette,” she repeated, testing the name on her tongue. “I like it.”

“Evette it is, then.” Brian bent down and kissed the baby on her forehead. Her skin was silky smooth, her hair feathery soft. Gretchen’s lips were dry and cracked by comparison, but he kissed them, too. “I’m proud of you,” he told her. “I can’t imagine how painful that must have been, but you pushed through it.”

“Literally,” added Gretchen.

He grinned. “Literally. You’re amazing.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Literally,” echoed Brian, and she laughed. He stood up, stretching his arms above his head. “Listen, why don’t you enjoy some time with Evette? I’ve had her to myself all night. I’m gonna get some air. I won’t be long.”

“Okay,” Gretchen agreed. As he walked away, Brian could hear her cooing, “Hi, Evette... It’s Mommy...”

Smiling to himself, he made his way to the top of the North tower, where Kevin and AJ were keeping watch. “Hey cous, congratulations,” said Kevin, slinging an arm around Brian’s shoulders. “How’s the little one?”

“Evette is doing great. Gretchen’s got her now.”

“Evette? Cool name,” said AJ, after Brian had explained its significance. “So how come you’re up here instead of chilling with your wife and kid?”

“I just needed some fresh air. I’ve been cooped up inside the castle all day long.”

“Ah. Well, enjoy.” AJ swept his hand toward the open window. “The air’s not exactly ‘fresh,’ though.”

Far from it, the air was ripe with the smell of rotting flesh. Brian wrinkled his nose. “I know.” He sighed. “Do you think Evette will ever know what fresh air really smells like?”

“Someday, she will,” said Kevin. “Someday, all these dead bodies will have rotted away. I mean, look how badly they’re decaying now. Then we’ll have fresh air and fertile soil. And we won’t have to worry about zombies anymore. We’ll be able to start over, rebuild society.”

Brian looked out the window, past the pack of zombies, toward the rolling meadows and hills that lay beyond. “You really think they’ll all be gone someday?” It seemed like wishful thinking, but then, he’d already witnessed one of his wishes coming true that day.

“I do,” Kevin reaffirmed. “Someday soon.”

And what then? Brian wondered. Would they continue to live in the castle, which had been their safe haven for the last few months? Or would they spread out? Move on? Where would they go?

What would life be like for Evette, growing up in this post-apocalyptic world? It was a question Brian had tried to avoid dwelling on during Gretchen’s pregnancy,

knowing that his child might not make it to adulthood. He wasn't even sure she'd make it out of the womb. But now that he'd welcomed his daughter into the world, he had to wonder, what did the future have in store for his new family?

Fear of the unknown had kept him awake at night, as he lay in bed imagining all the worst-case scenarios, dreading the likelihood of losing the woman he loved and their child all over again. After Evette arrived safely, he'd felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. And now, his cousin's words had given him something new to think about. Although he was still exhausted, Brian felt much better. Far from fearful, he felt... hopeful.

It was a welcomed relief to crawl back into bed beside Gretchen, safe in the knowledge that his wife and daughter were both alive and well. If not for the infant crying from her makeshift crib in the night, he would have slept soundly.

Chapter 106

Moving on.

We need to leave and get out of here. It was a nice break, but it's time to go home. Honestly, our group has probably brought nothing but more death and shit than these poor suckers had before we showed up. They're nice, and I'm-well, Selena's a badass chick. But the rest of them aren't family. Except maybe her. She's the one I'm not so keen on leaving behind.

This just ain't home. May take us forever to fix the base or clear it out. Get the power back on and use what's left of it. But we'll be happier doing that shit than having it safe and easy here. It's good knowing there's other people out there. Even beyond Europe. One day we'll probably have to go find them. Hell, for Gabby's sake or maybe for Brian's kid. But this ain't home, and it never was. I think the others know that.

Home is that place where everything is supposed to make sense. A place where everything feels right and you're surrounded by people you'd give up your life for. Sometime after the dead fucking rose, I found one for the first time in years. It was comforting, and I want it back. Dead swarming the place like ants or not, we'll find a way. And hell, I ain't in the mood to deal with all the snow and shit being here's gonna force on us. Fuck that.

Sometimes you gotta leave everything behind to realize what home is.

Monday, September 30, 2013

Week Seventy-Six

It was on a supply raid with Kevin and Nick that the thought occurred to him. Despite the events of his last raid, he found he couldn't stay in the castle for too long. Too much time to think. And that was simply a bad idea all around. Then again, sometimes he liked getting Selena alone in the castle, but given everyone there, that was a lot easier said than done. Something was always happening, whether it was the baby's cries attracting the undead around the outside of the castle, or Gabby wandering the halls when she couldn't sleep. He'd hear her nightmares sometimes, and Kevin get up soon after to help calm his surrogate daughter. Nightmares were still something all too common in a world dominated by the still-walking dead.

AJ took a deep breath as he followed Nick, with the determination to focus on better things. It was a skill he had never really possessed, but he could at least try.

The blonde was going over to some zombies that they'd taken out earlier. The bodies had become completely unrecognizable, more skin and bone than flesh. But it was clear he was looking for something in particular. A brow rose as he got closer to him, while Kevin was doing what they actually came for, which was gathering up more baby supplies, like diapers and formula. Gretchen was breast-feeding, but they all felt better at the idea of having backup supplies, just in case. Nick was kneeled down with a rotted hand in his grip as he smiled softly.

"Dude, what the fuck are you doing? Do you and Riley have some zombie fetish none of us know about?" AJ teased him with a smirk.

Nick laughed, grinning at him. "I'm trying to pick out a ring, you sicko. It's not like I can just go to the nearest Tiffany's and have it wrapped up in a box for me."

That caused Kevin to turn his head, a smile slowly growing on the older man's face. "You're looking for a ring for Riley?"

Nick ducked his head as he examined the dead hand he still held. "Yeah. I think I've had too many close calls, and, ya know, I love her, so... I wanna do it."

Nick said it so casually, but as AJ observed him, his gun in hand, he could see this was something he'd been mulling over for a long time. He smirked. Probably since Gretchen and Brian's wedding, if he had to bet on it. "Love in the apocalypse, where cutting a ring off a corpse is suddenly romantic." He snickered at Nick. "You're a goddamn Hallmark card, kid."

"Shut up," Nick said with a laugh.

"I'm sure she'll love hearing how you shopped for it."

"What about you and Selena?"

That caused the former addict to turn, raising a brow at the eldest of them as he bagged up more supplies they'd need. "What about her?"

"If we decide to go back to Florida for the winter..." Hmm, so it hadn't just been AJ thinking about the idea. That was a rarity. He knew his ideas tended to typically be outside the rest of everyone else's. "Are you going to ask her to come with us?"

A fair enough question.

"You really think she'd want to leave this place with us?" he asked instead, uncharacteristically avoiding the question.

Nick fought to get the lovely ring off the putrefied finger. "Why not? Hell, she talks to you the most, man. I think you're the only one she actually likes."

"When *are* we gonna go?"

Kevin packed away some extra supplies and nodded, shouldering the duffel bag after zipping it up. "We're going to be leaving in no more than three weeks if we decide to do it. Better to go now, before we get hit with an early snowfall. If we're lucky, we'll have missed the hurricanes."

It was still weird sometimes how easily weather could screw up everything, without the technology of the world before to shelter them and keep them alive. And AJ had this feeling, dark as it was, that even if they returned to Europe someday (which felt likely, given Gabby's closeness to Callum), they wouldn't see some of their new allies ever again. That was why, yes, he wanted to ask Selena to come back with them. He'd grown used to her sharp wit and sometimes cold ways of seeing the world. She made him laugh, and, hell, she made him feel normal. When he woke up in the morning, he found himself happy to see her lying beside him, as she had been in recent weeks. AJ wanted to go back to Florida and wouldn't be sorry to see this castle go, but he'd be sorry to see *her* go.

"You think anyone else will want to come back with us?" he heard Nick say as he tuned back into their conversation, pretending he was rummaging through some drawers rather than letting his mind wander. He found some toys and tucked them into his sack. The kid needed toys, too, not just food and clothes.

"I haven't asked yet, but for them, this is home. I don't think they will," Kevin replied. "I think we've gotten everything we can from here."

AJ nodded, smiling some as Nick tucked the ring he'd found in his pocket and followed their leader towards the door. "Do you have a plan on how you're popping the question?"

The blonde grinned. “I think I’m gonna wing it. I don’t think there’s a big way to ask anymore. Any idea how you’re asking Selena to stay?”

He simply shrugged. Honestly, he didn’t have the slightest clue. “Let’s go case the next house.”

“After that, I think we can call it a day, and…” Kevin trailed off as a soft sound could be heard from the upstairs. It caused all three men to pause simply because it wasn’t the ever constant moaning of the undead that had long ago become the soundtrack of their lives. It was quieter, gentler and helpless.

“I’m gonna go check it out,” Nick announced, continuing before either of them could get a word in edgewise. “Don’t worry. I ain’t about to drop or get eaten.” He grinned. “Whatever it is sounds alive.”

And nonthreatening – that’s why Kevin’s letting you go up alone, AJ mused, though he knew he didn’t have much room to talk, given his bad leg. But with Brian out of the picture due to his cousin insisting he stay back for his baby, there weren’t a load of options for runs. There was Shaun, he supposed, but he wasn’t the most reliable. Selena was getting some rest, as she’d pulled the graveyard guard shift, and Riley had chosen to stay behind. She didn’t say why, but AJ had caught her furtive glance to Nick that explained it all. There was always Lucio, but he was helping Callum do something or other. Kevin hadn’t even tried to ask the other group, actually. In a way, he wondered if the Europeans cursed the day the Americans had arrived at their base. Their small group had seemed to go down, one by one. Martin, Alistair, Giorgio, Ashton – almost half their people. It was a tragic reminder how lucky they had been to have only lost Jo and Kayleigh, despite all their close calls.

The old him would have thought his group was a curse to others, he realized.

Once he was done watching Nick go upstairs, he turned back towards the former military man. “We should have a meeting, be sure we’re all on the same page on going back.” He smirked. “Just us though, the family. Then if the Euros want to join in, they can.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Kevin said, running a hand through his dark hair, though for a moment AJ thought he spotted a few strands of grey. “I’m not sure how Bri and Gretch will feel cause of Eve, but I think this is the right move.” There was something very telling in his expression, a knowing one.

AJ agreed with him fully, but he had a hunch their reasons differed as to why. “Same here, and we’ll come back someday anyway cause of the kids and shit.”

Kevin smiled, his jade eyes shifting upwards at the ceiling, as if looking for any signs of Nick collapsing or a struggle. The silence was calming. “Not for you, though. Just the kids.”

AJ rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Heh, nope.”

Mainly because he couldn’t imagine Selena saying no – or so he hoped.

Nick came back down only a few minutes later, a shit-eating grin having lit up his face. “I found the intruder. The most dangerous thing ever.” His hands came from around his back, and within them was a small kitten. It was white all over, though covered in grime, except for a small black bit of fur around its eye that resembled a pirate’s patch. The two men couldn’t help but laugh. It was nice seeing their fears not realized for a change.

“If that’s it, let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, put it down unless it’s gonna be part of dinner,” AJ teased.

“Hell no! He’s coming with us.” Nick opened up an outer pocket in the duffel bag slung over his shoulder and tucked the little animal inside. Its furry head popped out with a tiny mew and watched them with big blue eyes. “I think something happen to his mom.”

Kevin seemed to debate him, but AJ knew it’d be a losing battle, remembering Spunky. It seemed like his friend realized it as well because, instead, he simply shook his head and headed outside, fighting back a smile. “C’mon.”

“Maybe I’ll call it The Governor...”

AJ snorted, immediately catching the reference. “What if it’s a girl, dumbass?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Why the Governor?”

An overdramatic sigh followed. “Never mind, Kevy, never mind.”

After the meeting, the sun was starting to set, and AJ was wandering the castle. He’d thought about sniping for bit, but decided against it for once. The discussion had gone pretty much as expected. Barring the obvious concerns about the baby being ready for travel and keeping her safe, everyone else felt the same yearning to return to MacDill. That was home. Not to mention, Kevin’s theories made a lot of sense. *Zombies here were different; they decayed differently.* And if he was right on what that could mean, there was plenty of reason to hope.

AJ had a destination in mind as he kept walking. As time went by, his limp had lessened, but he knew it would never fully leave. And the thought hadn't been one to drive him back to the bottle. He knew why that was, but he'd never say it aloud. Not yet. Right now, he enjoyed his stroll, feeling a need to take his time. To enjoy the view while he could. He'd always appreciated the castle's worn down beauty, an artist's dream really. And he didn't feel so jaded anymore. If he still drank, the thought would've been pretty sobering.

As he passed the great chambers, he could spy Selena on the other side, not too far from where Nick and Riley, who thought they were alone. Nick was showing her the kitten. Riley's face lit up at the sight of something small and adorable managing to survive in this world. She held it close and grinned. "Nick, she's so cute!"

"I couldn't leave it behind. Consider it our first kid – wait she's a girl? Damn, I only had a boy's name."

She laughed. "Call her Lucky in honor of you."

Nick stuck his tongue out at her while the kitten mewed happily. "She seems to like it. Check out the collar; I convinced Kevin to raid one more place so I can find a few things."

"It's nice and..." Her voice grew soft when her eyes spotted the engagement ring Nick had gotten from their raid earlier. AJ couldn't help but smirk a little. He had to give the kid points for originality, even in the zombie apocalypse. "Nick, is this...?"

Taking the kitten and getting the ring from her collar, he took her hand in hers. "Yeah, it is. I know I should've asked sooner. This world doesn't give you many chances, and you know I can't promise you how long but... will you? Marry me?"

"Of course I will!"

Just as Riley pulled Nick into her arms for a kiss, a tap on his shoulder caused AJ to jerk with surprise. Selena smirked, crossing her arms over her chest. He hadn't even noticed her head over. "It's not polite to eavesdrop."

He smirked, walking away with her to give the lovers a private moment. "I was on my way to find you, actually."

"Should I feel honored?"

"Fuck yeah, I chose you over killing ghouls."

She grinned, blowing a wild lock of hair out of her face. "I need to cut this again, makes it too easy for things to grab."

Once the two reached the tower, AJ leaned against the window opening, gazing out onto the fields, watching the dead roam. “We’re heading back to Florida, you know.”

“After it got overrun?”

“We’re crazy assholes, I know. But Kevin’s got a theory, and we think it’s right. If not, hell, we’ll find another place.”

Her big brown eyes softened as she moved beside him, glancing at him before shifting away. “That sounds oddly optimistic, especially for you.”

“I know. I ain’t used to it yet,” he replied with a chuckle. Silence fell between them. He couldn’t find the words. Why was he chickening out? Was he really afraid Selena was going to say no? AJ knew he could stay if he wanted to. But... he didn’t want that either.

“Really AJ, are you going to piss around like a wanker, or ask me to join you?” she asked pointedly.

He blinked, grinning as he tilted down his shades. “You really want to come, even though we’re crazy and suicidal to try?”

Selena rolled her eyes and leaned over, giving him a feathery kiss. “Of course, you twit.”

It was nice, feeling hopeful for his future. Something that in the world before, he never thought he would be.

Chapter 107

I hate saying goodbye. I guess I’m lucky I even get to this time. It’s not like I got to say goodbye to my mom or my dad or Makayla or Kayleigh or Spunky or anyone else I know who’s died. It always seems to happen so fast, there isn’t time. But time can make things harder too. I can’t stop thinking about it, that moment when I’m going to have to say goodbye. It’s going to suck. Still, at least I have some choice in it this time. I’ve always been the one left behind, but this time I’m the one who’s leaving.

Does that make it any easier?

I guess I’ll find out.

Monday, October 7, 2013

Week Seventy-Seven

There was a definite chill in the air. Sitting in her favorite spot at the top of the spiral staircase, Gabby shivered as the wind rushed in through the open window, whipping around her long hair and raising goosebumps on her skin. She knew she should close the wooden shutters over the window and go down to the kitchen, where a warm fire and food awaited, but she wasn't ready just yet. If all went well, it would be her last night in England, and although she couldn't wait to get back to sunny Florida, where she'd never have to spend another winter in a freezing cold castle, a part of her was sad to leave.

It wasn't so much the castle she'd miss. It was the people, all the new friends they'd be leaving behind: Shaun... Liz... Lucio... In-Su... Abby... and, of course, Callum. She would miss him the most.

Not since Makayla died had Gabby had a friend close to her own age. Even Kayleigh, the second youngest in their original group on the base, had been eight years older, and she was dead now, too. Callum could never replace Makayla, but still, he and Gabby had gotten close in the eight months since she'd come to the castle. She wasn't looking forward to leaving him.

In fact, she was dreading it so much that she'd secluded herself here so as to avoid the awkward goodbyes. She knew she could only delay the inevitable so long – in a matter of hours, it would be morning, and they would be on their way – but for now, she was content just to sit still in her special place and pretend that time had stopped, too.

But of course, Callum knew just where to find her, for her favorite spot was his special place as well, one he'd been kind enough to share with her. She wasn't at all surprised to hear a small set of footsteps and see his familiar, ginger head coming up the stairs. "Hey," she said, turning toward him, forcing a smile onto her face.

Callum smiled back crookedly. "Hi. I thought you might be up here."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Where else would I be?"

He smiled again and came over to sit beside her. "What're you doing?"

"Nothing. Just... thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

Gabby's first inclination was to shrug him off again, to shut down, like she had in front of almost everyone else who was left in her life after her mother's death.

She didn't like talking about her feelings, and she hated when people tried to press her to do so, so it came as a surprise to even her when she found herself opening up to Callum. "About everything. And everyone. I'm gonna miss you guys so much," she admitted, giving him a quick sidelong glance before she turned to look out the window again. "I'm just sick of losing people."

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere," said Callum lightly, trying to sound cheerful.

She looked at him sadly. "I wish you were. I wish you were coming with us."

He sighed. "Sometimes I wish I was too."

"Really?" she said, raising her eyebrows, as hope sprung up inside her.

"Sure, why wouldn't I?" he replied, sounding surprised that she would assume otherwise. "I've never been to Florida, but I hear it's quite lovely. Sunny skies... sandy beaches... Disney World..."

She snorted. "You know how many people go to Disney each day? It's probably overrun with zombies... wearing Mickey Mouse ears..."

He chortled. "And zombie Mickey himself, I'd expect."

"Don't forget zombie Minnie," Gabby added, giggling too.

"And zombie Cinderella..."

"Plus Prince Charming – not so charming anymore, I bet."

"How about zombie Snow White?"

"Back from the dead – again."

"Sleeping Beauty?"

"It sure wasn't true love's kiss that woke her up this time."

They went back and forth like this for awhile, rattling off as many Disney characters as they could come up with, until Callum was cracking up too much to speak.

"What?" laughed Gabby along with him, as she watched him with amusement. He was cute when he laughed, the way his nose crinkled...

"Just... you," said Callum, shaking his head. He heaved a sigh, catching his breath. "You're hilarious, you know. Who knew you could still make me laugh, after everything I've – everything *we've* seen?"

A warm sensation worked its way through Gabby's body, making her squirm. She shrugged off the compliment, feeling self-conscious and oddly flattered at the same time. "Well, when you've spent almost the entire apocalypse with guys like Nick and AJ, you learn to laugh at really inappropriate things, I guess."

Callum chuckled again. "That's Shaun as well. I wish I shared that same warped sense of humor."

"Aww, you're funny, too!" Gabby insisted. "And if you spent more time with AJ, I swear, you'd be just as warped as the rest of us real soon."

He smiled wistfully. "I wish I could."

"You should," she said, and then, on sudden impulse, she reached out and grabbed his arm. "Seriously, Callum, you should! Come with us!"

He hesitated, and for a few seconds, he looked like he was actually considering it. But then he sighed and shook his head. "I want to. But I can't."

"Why not? Selena's coming!"

"Yeah, but Selena... Selena's sort of always done her own thing. She's not accountable to anyone. I, on the other hand... I've got Abby to consider."

Gabby marveled at the mature way he spoke. He was actually about a year younger than her, but sometimes he seemed so much older. Maybe it was the accent. "She could come, too! Why don't we ask her?"

Callum cocked his head to the side, and then he shrugged. "Sure, we could," he said slowly. "I doubt she'll want to come, though. Her son's body is here – not *here* here, like in the castle, but here in England. I can't imagine she'll be too keen on leaving him. But it's worth a try, I suppose. Maybe we can convince her."

Gabby could understand why Abby wouldn't want to leave. It was one of the many reasons why she couldn't wait to get back to Florida. Her mother was buried on the base, her father only a few miles from it. Even if she couldn't see them, couldn't touch them, it was still sort of comforting to know they were there, a few feet under the soil, where she could talk to them. She knew that was stupid – it wasn't like they could hear her, and if they could, it was because their souls were listening from Heaven, not their rotting corpses underground. Still, she was looking forward to seeing the crudely carved cross that marked her mother's grave in the memory garden they'd started at the base. Maybe, if Kevin was right about the zombies decomposing, she could even go visit her father's grave again when they got back.

“C’mon!” she exclaimed, all keyed up over the idea that Callum might actually come with her. She sprang to her feet and pulled him up with her. Down the spiral staircase they raced, leaving Gabby dizzy with excitement. Both breathless, they burst into the kitchen, where Abby was cooking dinner.

“What is it?” she asked with alarm, when she caught sight of their flushed faces. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Gabby replied quickly. “We were just talking about how great it would be if... if you and Callum came with us!”

“Came with you?” Abby laughed. “What, to America?”

“Yeah! Our base there, it’s really awesome! It’s got a bowling alley and an arts and crafts center and a whole library full of books; you’d love it!”

“I’m sure I would.” Abby smiled. “It sounds lovely, dear, but it’s such a long ways away. We’ve made a home for ourselves here. I don’t know that I’m ready to leave it.”

Gabby and Callum exchanged glances.

I told you so, his seemed to say.

I know, hers sadly replied.

Abby must have seen the look of disappointment on Gabby’s face. “Of course, I’m only speaking for myself,” she added quickly. “Callum can do as he wishes... although I do hope he chooses to stay.”

Gabby saw the way she looked at Callum. It was the same look she’d seen her mother give her a million times, whenever she’d said things like, “You’re growing up too fast.” Following Abby’s gaze to Callum, Gabby watched the way his adam’s apple bobbed in his throat, as he swallowed hard. She knew then that he would not be going with her.

“I’m sorry,” he said after dinner, as they sat at the top of the tower once more. “I just can’t leave her. It would break her heart. She thinks of me as another son... and... and she’s like a mother to me.”

Gabby nodded. “I know,” she said quietly. “I get it.”

“You could stay here,” he offered, but the tone of his voice told her he already knew she would say no.

She shook her head. “I can’t, for the same reason you can’t go. I want to be with my mom, too. And Kevin... he’s kind of like what Abby is to you, like another dad

or something.” It was the first time she’d said it out loud, but it was true, wasn’t it? Kevin had been there since almost the very beginning, taking care of her, making sure she was safe. Being separated from him when he left the base to look for survivors had been hard, especially after her mother died. She couldn’t imagine letting him leave without her again, nor could she imagine him letting her stay. Of course, he wasn’t her real dad; she could do what she wanted. But she didn’t want to hurt him, and she didn’t want to be left behind again.

Callum smiled tightly. “I figured. So I guess it’s goodbye for now. Hopefully not forever.”

A lump rose in Gabby’s throat. She hated saying goodbye, though it wasn’t often in this world that she even got the chance anymore. “I hope not. Maybe we’ll come back someday,” she said, though she knew it was unlikely she would ever see Callum again.

“Or maybe I can convince my group to come to you,” he replied. His freckled face looked ghostly in the moonlight that came through the window. Reaching across one of the moonbeams, he grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. Silently, she squeezed it back.

For a moment, she thought he might kiss her, and then she thought, *Maybe I’ll kiss him*. She took a tentative step toward him, pulling him toward her. They met in the middle of the moonbeam. As the pale blue light shone down upon them, bathing them both in its beauty, they drifted closer to each other. Gabby closed her eyes as their lips connected in a brief kiss.

Not since Colton had she kissed anyone, and afterwards, Gabby wondered if she ever would get the opportunity again. It was then and there that she made a promise, one she intended to keep.

“I’ll come back for you, Callum,” she whispered, as she slowly pulled away. “Someday.”

Chapter 108

I don’t know if I have words yet for this. I’m just happy.

Unbelievably, stupidly, incredibly happy.

I remember the day we met so well. It’s weird to think how far we’ve come since then. How much has changed. I used to be such a different person, and you (along with the end of the world) helped me change into someone better. Sometimes, Nick, I don’t think I deserve you. I feel like I don’t deserve to be this

happy. But I'm grateful for everything. I'm thankful for this second chance at life. I'm so thankful for you. In the end I'm thankful for everything, especially our newfound family. I couldn't live without any of them. I think if my family's looking down they're happy for me. Happy for all of us still here.

Everything's changed so much, us the most I think.

It's a whole new world now. A world I never thought would look welcoming ever again.

And I can't wait for everything that's to come.

Wednesday, October 16, 2013

Week Seventy-Eight

The plane was probably somewhere over the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. She wasn't quite sure. Riley was holed up in the tiny excuse for a bathroom in the back. The goodbyes to the remains of the European group of survivors had been hard. In the past months, she'd found some great friends. But that was the difference between them and the people she'd known for the past year-and-a-half. They were *friends*, while those with whom she'd lived since the world changed had become family. And who knew, perhaps one day they would see each other again. She hoped so if only for Gabby's sake. There weren't many people her age left in the world. One day they'd have to travel to South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia to see if there was anyone left alive there as well. But that would wait for awhile. For when Evette was older, for one.

It'd been a long flight so far. Nick's fear of flying hadn't lessened any and, with the way she'd been feeling, hadn't made that any easier. Finally, she'd told him she wasn't feeling great and ran back to this death trap of a restroom. Within moments, she had hurled that morning's breakfast Liz had lovingly made for the group before they'd left. That was when she'd decided it was time to finally see if perhaps her suspicions were right.

She'd been avoiding runs outside the castle the last couple of weeks before they left because she had been unable to handle the smells up close. It was bad enough when she got by what were AJ's favorite sniping positions along the wall. Sometimes she'd say she was watching the baby so Brian and Gretchen could get some rest – which was true. Other times she'd find a task to be doing around the time Kevin would gather people up. She didn't think anyone had really caught on just yet.

Well, one might have.

Cracking the door open, she looked around and found Gretchen thankfully not too far from her as she watched AJ hold the baby. Oddly enough, he'd become a

downright softy around the child who cooed up at him happily. It looked so natural, though, and Riley knew AJ would make a great father someday if he let himself. Maybe he would now that he had Selena.

“She loves you.”

AJ smirked and ignored Selena’s snort from beside him. “Of course she does.” He tickled under her chin. “I’m a fucking lady killer.”

“Hey, Gretch, can I borrow you?”

A brow rose, and AJ turned to Nick, a few rows up. “Hey, Carter, looks like your girl’s gonna get the preacher’s wife to join the Mile High club with her.”

Nick looked up from where he was, a little pale but a lot less green, a sight that had Riley sighing inwardly with relief. He wiggled his brows at them with a grin. “Rye, I didn’t know you were freaky like that. Let me join in!”

“Why would you want to join them?” Gabby asked. They could tell she knew they were talking about sex but probably didn’t know much about the more *interesting* kinds just yet at her age.

“Never mind, Gabby; you’re too young,” Howie mumbled, half asleep. “AJ’s crazy. You know that.”

“I’m not crazy; I just know what I like.”

“Howie’s right.” Gretchen rolled her eyes, but she was trying hard to keep herself from smiling. “You guys are perverts.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Brian chimed in, laughing. “Why would you get to go in instead of me, Nick?”

“Duh, you’re a preacher. Preachers don’t get threesomes.”

AJ snickered. “That’s gotta be in the fucking Bible somewhere.”

“See! So it’ll be me. Ha!”

“Fuck this. I’ll join in – that way you two don’t have to fight about it.”

That earned him a smack to the back of the head from the Brit. “The bloody hell you are.”

Riley shook her head at them. “None of you are coming in.”

Nick pouted at her. “Awww, that’s not fair.”

“Hey, don’t start pouting at me.” She was smiling. “Besides, nothing’s happening except in your fantasies.”

Her fiancé grinned that charmingly goofy grin of his. “And what great fantasies they are.”

“And on that note, we’re taking our leave.” Riley reached out and pulled Gretchen gently in and managed to shut the door behind her. Shifting around, there was enough space between them so that the tiny stall didn’t feel so suffocating. She shook her head, bemused at the conversation still taking place outside the stall. “I swear, if I didn’t love them...”

“You’d want to kill them,” her friend replied with a smile. “So why was this worth the scene outside?”

She handed the object she’d been hiding in her pocket over to Gretchen. “Because I can’t look.” She bit her lip as she watched her. “I’ve been suspicious for awhile, and I... it’s the first chance I’ve had to find out. It wasn’t easy finding that without anyone noticing, let me tell you.”

“Especially with you ducking out of runs.” Gretchen hadn’t looked at the stick yet. “I was wondering myself.” She chuckled lightly. “Not that I haven’t enjoyed all the babysitting time. I’m actually able to get some real sleep and alone time, thanks to you and AJ.”

“Sometimes I think AJ’s gonna kidnap Evie for his own,” Riley teased.

“Now you might have one yourself.”

“I know. Gah, I can’t look, so can you? I don’t even know what I want,” she admitted. “I never thought I’d get married some day. Now I’m engaged, and there might be a baby. And I’m scared because, during your labor, when you passed out, you scared the living shit out of me. For a moment, I’d thought you’d... and I know I could.” She looked sheepish in that moment. “I know it sounds stupid.”

Gretchen looked at the pregnancy test in her hand and smiled, taking Riley’s hands to show her. “No, it doesn’t. You have every right to be scared about this. Just answer this question for me, then: Do you love Nick? Really love him?”

She nodded. “Of course I do. You know that.”

The pair looked back down at the results. “Then you’ll be fine.”

The plane touched down a few hours later, and Riley had napped for most of it, her head on Nick's shoulder and feeling as safe and secure as she possibly could. She wanted to talk to him desperately, but she also knew that they needed to be alone to do so. Of course, everyone would know soon enough. She just wanted to talk with Nick about it first. Despite her own worries about what was to come, she wasn't worried at all about Nick's reaction. Nick was the type of guy who was loyal to the end. Just like Spunky had been. Or Lucky, who was currently camped out on top of Nick's backpack in the seat beside them. She mewed contentedly before curling back up for another nap.

The landing was a bumpy one, which took her by surprise, waking her up when her head bounced against Nick's shoulder. Minutes later, he was grabbing for a bag and hurling whatever stomach contents he had left inside him. Riley yawned and rubbed his back in small circles, fighting back her own nausea for the moment. She glanced around to see the others with varying expressions of confusion as well.

Evette had been startled by the jerky movements and was screaming as loud as her little lungs would let her.

"Shit, we can't go anywhere with the baby going off like that," Selena said plainly. "It's like a damn dinner bell."

"What was that?" Gabby asked, getting out of her seat when the plane came to a complete stop.

"The base was overrun when we left, remember?" Howie pointed out before hurrying behind her to grab her arm. "Wait! Don't get out till Kevin gives us the okay."

Brian had picked up Evette out of her car seat and was soothing the wailing baby as best as he could. "Shhhh, it's okay." He started humming softly to her. Gretchen was digging through the diaper bag for her pacifier.

The plane they were in had been one they'd managed to get running from the airport back overseas. The one they'd flown in originally had become overrun by the walking skeletons still managing to roam around. While they could have probably gotten it airborne, Kevin had decided it would be best for the baby if they found a new plane. It had been a bit of a struggle, but they'd succeeded. Only this one had also had the stained remains of the undead on its body, most the windows unpleasant to try and look through.

"Fuck this." AJ stood up and started hobbling down the aisle. "I'll go see what's up."

In that moment, Kevin came out from the cockpit. His grin went from ear to ear, his eyes alight with joy. "Guys, come look outside."

Nick, in his everlasting hatred of airplanes, grabbed his bag, tucked his gun into his belt loop, and followed AJ out and down the steps of the plane. “Gladly.”

“Nick, hold on!” Riley dug around for her own weapon, rummaging hurriedly in her bag.

“Rye! Come on out! It’s okay! Guys! It’s okay!”

“Come on, you fucking slow pokes!” AJ’s gruff voice called after. It was a mad rush to get off the plane at that point. Everyone wanted to get out and see what had them so excited. To see Kevin’s theory be right.

Riley stepped up beside Nick and looked around in awe. His hand tangled itself up in hers. It was an incredible sight. There were no moans, the song of the undead they had long ago become used to. Instead, they could hear birds chirping in the air. The smells of the dead were still there, but they were lighter, somehow, perhaps because the bodies were no longer moving. Instead, there were corpses scattered everywhere throughout the base. Several had been squashed beneath the wheels of the plane, like human speed bumps. The base was calm and peaceful in a way Riley had never seen it since coming there in what felt like a lifetime ago.

“It’s beautiful,” she said softly. The others were around her, marveling as they were, but she wasn’t taking any notice of the others. She was remembering then how this all started. That very first night when she’d met the man who would change the rest of her life. Someone she never would have expected to do so. But in a world where the dead came back, she had learned life wasn’t supposed to be predictable. Riley felt she might like it better that way. She smiled at him. “Nick, I have something to tell you.”

“Yeah?” He couldn’t stop looking around. Lucky was on his shoulder, looking completely at home there.

“I’m pregnant.”

Nick grinned and turned her back towards him. As great as the world looked without any zombies to haunt them, the sight before her was even better. He kissed her cheek softly. “I know.”

Chapter 109

In this life, nothing is guaranteed.

There's a lot of things I know I'll probably never know. There's a lot of things I know I'll probably never have. I'll never find out if Kristin was "the one" because the zombie apocalypse killed any chance of finding out, literally. I don't think I'll ever find another love like that. There's not many left alive in this world. Life isn't neat; not everyone gets their "Happily Ever After." Because of that, I'll never have any children of my own. But you know, that's okay. I have those around me I would protect with my life. Riley and Gretchen are the sisters I never had. Brian, AJ, Nick, and Howie are the younger brothers I never had, having been the youngest myself.

Gabby is the daughter I will never have. I know I can never replace her real parents. I don't want to. I simply want to be that stability she hasn't had since her father died. I want her to know that she'll never have to feel alone again. Now that the Undead are finally gone for good, I can give her, everyone, a future to strive for.

I think that's all enough to make my life worthwhile.

It may not be that fairy tale ending, but I'm okay with that.

Friday, October 25, 2013

Week Seventy-Nine

The past week had been mostly work on trying to pile up the bodies so they could burn them up. Hopefully, in time, the base would be clear once more, for the last time. Sure, there was still more work to be done. They had the generators up and running again, but they were going to be down to their last fuel tank within about a month or so. The military was prepared for the worst, but nothing lasts forever. Kevin was almost positive that every worst-case scenario still called for society having been rebuilt, at least to a point, within two years. Supplies would begin to dry up.

With the zombies gone, there was the option of trying to raid another base, but even that was just another quick fix. So while the others were working more on festive decorations for the wedding next week along the beach, Kevin was further up the shore. He'd been reading all morning. He had raided the library earlier for ways to implement the plans he was laying out for their future. It would take a long time. Years, maybe. But in the long run, it would be what helped keep them going as far as they could. That was his role in the base, and he relished in it. Having a purpose suited him well.

He yawned and rolled his shoulders. Last night, he had been up late looking at various blueprints.

AJ was constructing what looked to be an arch with Howie and Nick, laughing and joking around about Nick's insistence on what the wedding date had to be.

Kevin chuckled to himself. It was a little odd, but he'd long ago become accustomed to Nick's idiosyncrasies. In fact, he was almost positive that everyone in their small group enjoyed, them deep down. He set the book aside, in need of a break, and moved to help them. Poor Riley didn't need the arch falling on them as she tried to say her vows.

"It's a good thing the girls aren't here, or they'd be worried about y'all hurting yourselves," he joked as he walked up to them.

Nick grinned at him. "They're out trying to look at dresses, since it's safe now."

AJ smirked as he hammered some boards together that Howie was holding for him. He paused to examine their work so far. Right now it was a work in progress but Kevin had a feeling that, with AJ's artistic ability, it was going to look pretty good in the end. He still remembered that mural in the church AJ had painted back in the early days. AJ tilted his head before continuing, "The world's a living graveyard with all the bodies everywhere, but unless they run into a gator or something, they're alright."

Kevin immediately frowned. "Don't joke about that. They brought Gabby with 'em."

Howie laughed, moving his hand just in time to avoid it being hit by AJ's hammer. "Come on, the odds of that are nothing."

"I'm sure when everything hit the fan a lot of animals at the zoo found their ways out."

"If they didn't die or become zombie chow."

Nick was working on braiding various-colored wildflowers with wire and vines to put along the arch once it was done. It was looking pretty well-put-together so far. "Can we not talk about something that depressing, dude? Those poor animals."

"Fair enough." Kevin smiled at the others, his tone a teasing one. "Need any help? I'd help Brian plan a bachelor party but there's no one left to strip. Unless AJ let us borrow Selena."

A derisive snort followed. "She'd kick your ass if she heard you suggest that. But nah, we're good right now."

"Where is she, anyway?" Howie asked, knowing Brian was busy with Evette. Kevin had seen him down there with her earlier before she started fussing, in need of a nap.

“In the hospital, taking inventory of what’s left and getting books that might help with shit. She said she’ll come by to go over them with you.”

A few honks caught Kevin’s attention, and the men all turned to see the car drive by before turning around back towards the houses. With a wave to the others, he started the walk back up to meet with the girls. He wanted to see how their shopping trip had gone and if it had lifted Gabby’s spirits at all. She seemed happy to be back, but, at the same time, he saw the differences in her since they’d left Bodiam Castle. Despite all that had gone on there, Alistair in particular, she had been happier there in several ways. It was easy to see why. For the first time since the apocalypse, she’d had a companion her own age.

This had been one of the reasons he’d been torn on leaving to begin with. When they’d left England, the undead had still been hanging on, but he had suspected that back in Florida, where the weather was hotter and much more humid, they would have decomposed faster – and he had been right. That knowledge helped with the guilt of tearing Gabby away again, but it didn’t get rid of it completely. Kevin had talked with Abby after the group had decided it was time to come home. She’d wanted to stay, and while she wouldn’t say it, he knew she wanted Callum to stay with her. Gabby herself had asked Callum, and he couldn’t leave Abby behind. It was something Kevin understood. Abby had become Callum’s surrogate parent the way Kevin had for Gabby.

But here, Gabby was more apt to be alone, more likely to fall into her quiet depressions.

On his way towards their homes, he was surprised to see Gabby out by the memorial garden the group had made while Kevin, Riley, and Nick had been traveling the country in search for more people. He had expected her to be with the girls, trying on the dresses again. It seemed like the thing for a teen girl to do. Instead, she was kneeling by the crosses made for her parents, talking quietly to them. He waited until she was finished and had stood once again, understanding her need for privacy. Slowly, he approached her, stepping up beside her with a hand resting gently on her shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

She gazed up at him with her big, brown eyes. He hoped one day there wouldn’t be such a haunted look always settled within them. “I’m okay. I was telling my mom and dad about Callum, Riley marrying Nick, the new baby, everything. I hadn’t had a chance yet. But I know they – Mom, especially – would want to know. I know she’s not really *here*, but I like talking to her here. I like to think they can hear me here. You think so?”

Kevin smiled tenderly down at her. “Jo would be happy for us. That I know. And I know they’re looking down on us and watching out for you. The same way I do.”

She started brushing the dirt off her clothes. “You know, I’ve got this really pretty dress Gretchen picked out for me. Riley wanted us to get what we liked cause she said something about ugly bridesmaid dresses needing to die like the zombies. I’ll show you later.”

He laughed and nodded. “I bet you look beautiful in it.”

She blushed, just slightly. “She got sad, though, cause, ya know, her dad isn’t here to walk her down the aisle.”

“I think we’re all gonna have moments where we miss our families like that.”

“Hey... Kevin?”

“What is it?”

Her foot twisted nervously in the dirt, scattering a few pebbles away. “You think I’ll ever get married?”

Kevin wondered the same thing. He knew why she was asking, same reason he’d been thinking about it. Between the Littrells and, soon, the future Carters, it was hard not to think of settling down with that special someone. Even in a world like this. It was still easy, so easy, to dream. For a moment, the image of Kristin laughing at Disney World with him flashed before his eyes. Back before he’d joined the military. Long before their relationship experienced the off-and-on pattern that had become so typical. Would he still be alive if he’d left the military and tried to be the man she needed? It was a question he’d asked himself back in Louisiana on that little speedboat. It was a question he knew he’d ask himself often throughout his lifetime, but never know the answer to. He wanted for Gabby what he didn’t get the chance to have.

“I think you will.” He grinned at her with an all-knowing expression that hid his own doubts. “There’s Callum back in Europe and a bunch of survivors around the world, like Dr. Kwak In-Su had told us about. Maybe you’ll meet your future husband there. You never know.”

She smiled back, but, in that smile, Kevin could tell she had the same doubts as he did. “If I do... ever get married someday, would you walk me down the aisle? I think my mom would want that. I do.”

Taking her hand, he led her not towards the house, but back to the beach. He would never marry in this life. Kevin would not be as lucky as the others. But still, without a wife or even a girlfriend, he had managed one thing. He had managed to find himself a daughter. In that respect, he couldn’t have been luckier if he’d tried.

“It would be an honor to do that for you someday, Gabby.”

Chapter 110

Halloween.

Who'd have thought I'd one day be celebrating monsters being gone today? I think I always knew if I ever got married, it'd be on this day. Can't believe I talked Riley into it, to be honest. When I started the journey back to Florida, I felt like my life was over. That there was no point in trying because I was so good at failing. I was stupid and made mistakes that ended up saving my life. I've always been an optimist, but hell, I never believed in fate.

Now I do.

I was meant to get in that fight. I was meant to be an epileptic, hard as it is. Because I was meant to be here today. Riley was meant to find me outside the hospital. We were meant to be together. And I can't wait to be a dad and do everything I wish my parents would've done for me. Now, I've got my base family. We have a freaking crazy future, but I know it's all gonna be okay. How can it not be? My first entry in this thing was about my journey back to Florida. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I was looking for something. Now I'm at the end, and I've found everything I was missing.

I sort of stole borrowed Brian's guitar today. I've never been much of a songwriter, but it's been helping me write and get my thoughts in order.

So instead of song quote, this comes straight from me.

*“You've got me wide open, wide open,
Now I'm yours
You found me heartbroken, heartbroken,
On the floor
Became my salvation, salvation
Through the war
You got me wide open, wide open
Now I'm sure*

*In a world like this where some back down,
I, I know we're gonna make it.
In a world like this when love comes 'round,
I, I know we're gonna take it.
In a world like this where people fall apart,
In a time like this where nothing comes from the heart...*

*In a world like this,
I've got you."*

Thursday, October 31, 2013
Week Eighty

Nick was nervous.

Last night, they'd set up two tents along the beach. It was cooler now that they were going into November, but no one wanted to prepare down there without some shelter. It was Nick who'd wanted the wedding to be along the peninsula, by the ocean he loved. It felt like a lifetime ago when he, Brian, Riley, and Gretchen had come down here only to learn that zombies had taken the ocean for their own as well. They'd cleared the area of bodies when they'd rounded up the others, and only occasionally in the past couple days had one washed ashore.

He'd spied a pair further up along the coast earlier, but there was no time to clean them up now. He felt sorry for them. Maybe now their souls were at rest, however. Part of him had wondered, deep down, if their souls had really moved on, or if they had been trapped within their rotting, reanimated shells. Taking a deep breath, he looked down at his hand, which bore an engagement band he had found once they'd returned to the base. It was funny how many things could change in less than two years. Nick knew he had managed to lose everything and yet, in another way, *gain* everything as the world changed around him. The overgrown kid struggling to be an actor back in Los Angeles never would have considered settling down with someone. He hadn't thought himself good enough for that sort of thing. Or even a believer in marriage, really. Seeing his parents had been enough to put that fear into him. Then he'd met Riley.

Funny how one person could change your life.

"Nick?" He turned around in the folding chair he was sitting in. There stood Brian, ready to go with a Bible and a smile. There was still some time, of course. Kevin was the official best man, since Brian was the one officiating the ceremony, but he'd like to think they both were. He wasn't much for tradition, anyway. The suit he wore fit him well, making him look almost out of place, a debonair man in a world that was starting over after it had crashed and burned. "You okay?"

Nick nodded. "Just thinking."

"I don't blame you." Brian smiled. "This sort of thing makes you think." His expression became wistful, but in a happier light, rather than a saddened one. "Even with my wedding to Leighanne, I was pretty nervous."

“I don’t even have a reason to be nervous,” Nick said with a chuckle. “I don’t have to worry about a job. And it’s going to take all of us to keep us going. Sometimes, I think I wonder what she saw in me.”

“Same thing we all do,” he replied, placing a hand on his shoulder. “None of us are the people we were before Infernal Friday, remember that. You’re a good guy, and you’ll do anything for people you care about.” Brian grinned. “And besides, what would we do without our human jukebox?”

Nick stuck his tongue out at him in response. “I’m keeping music alive!” After a moment, he smiled up at Brian. “But thanks, really.”

“Come on, let’s get you married.”

“I can’t wait.”

It felt surreal.

There was a gentle breeze blowing, giving the weather just the cool touch it needed to keep the heat from being too much. Birds could be heard above them. He was standing by the now-finished archway. It had been painted white and then covered with the blue, yellow, and purple wildflowers he’d found along the base and vines AJ had cut from just outside the gates. Brian was standing on a podium they’d found and put on the mini-platform Howie had helped put together with Kevin. Kevin stood at his side, looking suave in his Air Force uniform, holding the rings and giving Nick a reassuring smile. The clothes for the men had all been picked out by Howie, because the women had all agreed he was the only one with a real sense of style. Nick had wanted them all in costumes, but was where Riley had drawn the line, though the idea had given her a good laugh. Which had been what Nick wanted. It had kept her from thinking about the families that should have been there.

It was almost perfect.

Another body had washed ashore, which had caused Gretchen to make an odd expression, mixed with disgust and pity for whoever the person had been when it was alive, as she walked down their “aisle.” She looked lovely in a pale blue satin dress, which had a sweetheart neckline and flared out below the waist, the hem ending just above her knees. In her arms was Evette, their official flower girl, though she was too young to throw petals. She was fast asleep in a lacy dress she had managed to not spit up on yet that day. Behind Gretchen came Gabby, looking just as fresh and pretty in a similar dress, which was just a bit longer on her. The three women had helped her do her hair up special, with a single white flower pinned in just above the intricate bow.

AJ, like he'd done for Brian and Gretchen's wedding, started strumming the tune for the *Bridal Chorus* from where he sat beside Selena. Howie sat on his other side, looking happy that his friends were all finding the happiness they deserved. Nick and Riley had both wanted them to be part of their bridal party, because why not? But both Howie and AJ had joked that they needed an audience. Riley suspected it might have been because AJ worried Selena felt a little out of place still. Time would one day make that a non-issue.

Then came the rest of his life.

Her hair was curled in ringlets, and her face was bright with joy. She wore a simple dress, somewhat casual, yet perfectly fitting for her personality. It was a strapless dress covered in lace with a heart-shaped top and a sky blue satin band that wrapped around her waist and was tied in a bow in front before the dress widened out to the bottom just about at her knees. Riley blushed as Nick smiled widely at her. His smile only grew as she looked even more embarrassed while walking towards him. When she reached him, he took both her hands in his and smiled reassuringly. The pair turned towards Brian, but Nick didn't miss the tears that began to form in her eyes.

Brian grinned at the two. "Alright, so we're here today not only because these two managed to survive the apocalypse till the dead fell apart, but because, despite all the death, despair, and destruction, they found each other. They found a light of hope within a sea of darkness. In each other, they found a reason to keep fighting, no matter what life decided to throw at them. It hasn't been easy, but here we are to celebrate everything they've fought for."

Nick gazed at Riley tenderly. "Rye, the day I met you was the day you saved my life. I wouldn't have survived that night if you hadn't almost run me over." Everyone chuckled, and he paused, licking his lips before continuing. "You've stood by me since that day, and I don't think I would've made it this far without you. It hasn't been easy, and it won't always be easy. But I know I can face this world and everything that's to come. I know we're going to make it. Because I've got you. I love you, and I promise, no matter what, I'll find a way to protect you for the rest of our lives."

With a lump in his throat, he watched as a few solitary tears streaked down Riley's face. "I never thought I'd be here," she replied. "Before the world changed I wasn't a happy person. I couldn't see what was really important in life. I may have saved you that night, but you saved me, too. You wouldn't let me push you away. It's not just the world that changed me. *You* changed me, as well, Nick, and it was for the better. Everything we've done, everything we've dealt with, it's been worth it because I have you. I wouldn't have a life worth living if you weren't here to live it with me. I love you more than life itself, and I'll be there for you in every way, as long as we both live."

Brian nodded at Kevin, who handed Nick the rings, a pair of bands he'd found when he'd been raiding the military mall for options. They were done in tribal band designs, resembling the tattoo he had along his arm. Somehow, they'd felt right. He met Riley's gaze again, and she was smiling through the tears that were now almost impossible to stop. His vision had gone slightly blurry as well.

"And by the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. Okay, Nick, go ahead. I know you've been dying to kiss her this whole time."

Nick immediately pulled Riley into his arms and kissed her, ignoring the catcalls coming from AJ.

That was one thing he didn't need to be told twice.

DECENNIUM

Chapter 111

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that
which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to
embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.
(Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8)*

If this were one of Nick's entries, he'd tell you that these are lyrics from a song by The Byrds called "Turn! Turn! Turn!" But The Byrds were only borrowing words from the Bible. Still, the music lover in me couldn't help but hum as I wrote them down. Nick would appreciate that.

I can't believe it's been almost a decade since that day, when I chose this verse to recite by my daughters' deathbeds. I regret that I never got the chance to give them a proper goodbye. Still, the words ring true. There is a time and a purpose for everything. I know that now. We've faced some hard times here, but life is finally starting to get easier. The bad times are falling farther behind us, and the good times are only beginning. We've been through a war and lived to tell the tale. Now, God willing, we can finally enjoy our time of peace.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022
Ten years after Infernal Friday

As the anniversary dawned, the former Reverend Brian Littrell stood at the fence before his field and said to himself, “God is good.”

The only response came from a nearby flock of birds, who chirped their gratitude as they swooped down to grab their breakfast. He smiled as a robin landed on the fencepost, remembering what his wife had once told him: seeing a robin was a sign of spring.

Though they didn’t have much in the way of seasons in Florida, it did feel like spring. The sky was blue, and all the leaves were green. The sun was as warm as a baked potato, but the air was still cool. A gentle breeze fluttered over the field, creating a wavelike ripple effect that made it look more like a sea of greens.

The fat robin fluttered to the ground on the other side of the fence. It stuck its face right into the rich soil at the edge of the field and rooted around until it emerged with the end of an earthworm clamped firmly in its beak. Brian watched the ensuing struggle, as the worm wriggled wildly, trying to get away. But in the end, the bird won, taking flight again with the worm still in its mouth. *The circle of life goes on*, thought Brian, as the bird disappeared between the branches of a towering oak tree. He wondered if it was going to use the worm to feed its young. *To every thing there is a season... a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.* With a smile on his face and the familiar verse running through his head, he stepped into the field.

The sun was still low in the sky when Brian set out to harvest his latest crops. The dew-soaked leaves brushed his bare ankles as he bent down to pick cucumbers and pull carrots out of the ground. His basket was heaping with vegetables before the sun had even risen above the bay.

As he moved on to check the spinach plants, Brian became aware of a pair of footsteps behind him. The sound of that shuffling, uneven gait was familiar...

He spun around, unsurprised to see AJ limping toward him. “Look!” the other man exclaimed, holding up his bucket. “Blueberries!”

Brian looked inside, admiring the bounty of freshly-picked berries. “Wow... I bet there’s enough for Gretch to make us some blueberry cobbler for dessert tonight. You did good, bro!”

“Thanks.” AJ smiled, but even after all these years, he still seemed reluctant to accept a compliment. “So how’s the spinach looking?” he asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Some of it’s starting to wilt,” said Brian, rubbing a spinach leaf between his thumb and forefinger, “but I think we’ll still be able to get enough for a good salad with dinner. We should pick the last of the strawberries to go with it.”

AJ nodded. “Sounds good. I was thinking I might try to make some dye out of the rotten ones that we don’t wanna eat. The blueberries, too, eventually. We could use it for clothes or ink or paint or whatever. Wouldn’t Evie look pretty in a new blue dress?”

Brian smiled at the mention of his daughter. “You bet. And Asha would look beautiful in a red one.”

AJ’s dark brown eyes brightened. “Yeah, and all the little ones would love to finger paint.”

Brian nodded, chuckling to himself. Who would have thought that the tattooed former addict would turn out to be such a softie?

“What’s so funny?” AJ asked.

“Nothin’. Just thinking... Ten years ago, would you have ever expected to be here, talking about making finger paint and pretty dresses for our little girls?” Brian grinned. “I think you’re goin’ soft on me, McLean.”

“Never,” scoffed AJ. “Did I mention they’ll be finger-painting abstract, post-apocalyptic murals, and that Asha’s red dress will have a big black skull on the front?”

“Oh, no, you failed to mention that,” Brian played along, although he was pretty sure AJ was kidding. Then again, he never did know what to expect from AJ. Sometimes, the zombie-sniper-turned-archery-enthusiast still surprised him. “You goin’ hunting after this?” he asked, noticing the arrows sticking out of AJ’s back pocket.

“Yeah, thought I’d try to bag us something good for the big dinner tonight. I don’t know about you, but I’m getting sick of chicken.”

Brian shrugged. “At least we have fresh poultry. And fresh produce,” he added, looking down at their harvest. They could never eat so many cucumbers, but Gretchen would be able to pickle some for the winter. With all the women getting pregnant, Lord knew they needed pickles.

“Yeah, beats that canned shit we used to survive on,” AJ agreed.

They strolled along what had once been a runway, looking at the crops they’d planted on the patches of flat land that stretched between the strips of pavement. Potatoes were planted in neat rows on one side, sweet corn on the other. They

would never go hungry again, so long as they continued to take advantage of the long growing season. The little garden Brian had planted with Gretchen so long ago had grown into a full-fledged farm, complete with a chicken coop and dairy cows to give them eggs and milk, from which they could make butter, cheese, and everything in between. Finally, they were self-sufficient, no longer dependent on the dwindling supplies left behind by a civilization that was long dead. Brian had taken the lead in learning everything he could about farming, but everyone helped. The men took turns helping him harvest the fields, while the women and children tended to the animals. Everyone contributed something.

“What’s that over there?” AJ suddenly stopped and pointed. Brian’s eyes followed his finger’s trajectory into the cornfield, where a familiar shape was silhouetted against the early morning sky. Rather than standing up straight, the humanistic form had a distinct slouch. Its broad shoulders slumped, and its head lolled to the side. Brian could see why AJ sounded worried.

“Why don’t you go check it out?” he replied, trying to hide his smile.

AJ gave him an uncertain look, but shrugged and set off into the field, cutting a path through the corn. Brian followed a few feet behind. When they got to the middle of the field, he heard AJ let out a loud guffaw. “Oh my god, that’s fucking great! Who came up with that?”

Brian grinned. “I’ll give you three guesses, but you’ll only need one.”

“It had to be Nick’s idea, right?”

“Of course it was Nick. Riley made the clothes for it, but he stuffed the thing and painted the face. We just put it up yesterday.”

They both looked up in admiration at Nick’s handiwork. The scarecrow wore a red suit with black trim, two diagonal black stripes forming a V shape down the front of the jacket. Its hair was made from curly wisps of blackened corn silk sticking out of the top of its burlap head. The face was painted green, with big, bulging eyes. Nick had even used some black around the eyes and under the cheeks to give it a gaunt, hollowed-out look.

“A zombie scarecrow just wasn’t enough, huh?” said AJ, laughing. “It *had* to be Michael Jackson.”

“He thought it would really ‘thrill’ the birds,” Brian joked.

AJ snorted. “If it only had some braaaaaainsss...”

They both laughed as they walked back to the path, where they’d left their produce. Then, with the sun on their shoulders, they picked up their baskets and headed back toward the houses, where the rest of the base was just waking up.

Chapter 112

In one of my early entries from that first year after the world fell apart, I wrote about Little House on the Prairie. I loved those books. Now I'm living them.

It was a good idea Riley had to keep these journals. By writing this all down, maybe I'll become the next Laura Ingalls Wilder. Gretchen Millworth Elliott Littrell, post-apocalyptic pioneer. Our stories are not so different. In a lot of ways, they're surprisingly similar. She was part of a large family, and so am I. Her family built a home and a life for themselves on the prairie, like we have here on the base. While they worried about Indians, we feared the undead. As a young woman, she taught in a one-room schoolhouse, similar to the work I'm doing here.

In the beginning, I'm sure some of us thought writing in our journals was a waste of time. It was a way to pass the time and keep ourselves from going too crazy, but besides that, what was the point? As far as we knew, there would be no one around to read our words once we were gone. We were all that was left of humanity.

We know now that isn't true. We didn't just write this for ourselves, but for our future. It's important that we share our story with our children so that they can pass it on as a part of their history, too. Someday, when a larger society has been reestablished, we'll want people to read our story and remember our struggle. We'll want them to learn from the mistakes made in the past so they don't repeat them in the future. This is our prayer, that tomorrow will help us leave the past behind. It's my job to teach our children everything they need to know in order to keep humanity alive, long after we're gone.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

By eight o'clock that morning, all the children had gathered at the small school on the base, where Gretchen taught them five days a week. "Good morning, boys and girls," she greeted them, although there was only one boy in her tiny class. Little Joshua Carter, Nick and Riley's son, grinned up at her from his desk, smack dab in the middle of the four girls. With his blonde hair and blue eyes, he was going to be a ladies man someday, the spitting image of his father.

"Good morning, Gretchen," the kids chorused back. She did not insist that they call her Mrs. Littrell. It was too formal for their little group, which felt more like a family than any of her previous classes had. Gretchen enjoyed being back in her

element, doing something that had always felt natural to her, but it was different here, more like home-schooling than full-time teaching. She had to differentiate each day's lessons to fit the different abilities of her five students, who ranged in age from four to eight.

Evette, of course, was the oldest. At almost nine years old, she was already an avid reader. She loved to explore the base's library and was often found with her nose in a book and her mind a million miles away. She reminded Gretchen of Gabby in that way. She had even started keeping her own diary, after seeing all the adults writing in their journals for as long as she could remember. *If I'm like Laura*, thought Gretchen, looking fondly at her first-born, *then she's my Rose*.

Just eleven months Eve's junior, Josh would be eight in July. He had inherited his dad's sense of humor and his mom's spitfire personality, so it came as no surprise that he was something of a class clown. Josh was a sweet kid, though, eager to learn, even though he had a hard time sitting still.

Next came Kayleigh, Gretchen and Brian's other daughter. Her full name was Kayleigh Josephine, but they usually just called her Kayleigh Jo or K.J. for short. She was six years old and spirited, to say the least. While Eve took mostly after her mother, Kayleigh was a tomboy, Daddy's girl through and through. She preferred playing outside to sitting in school and would much rather toss a ball around with Brian than look at a picture book with Gretchen. The only thing she seemed to have in common with her two namesakes was the fact that she was smart. By the time she was four, she not only knew all her letters, but could spell words like "pig" and "horse" – more thanks to playing basketball with Brian than anything Gretchen had done to help her.

Leslie Anne was Nick and Riley's second child, named for his sister and her mother. She was almost three years younger – but only slightly calmer – than her brother. Although she'd just turned five, Leslie was already developing the same love of stories as her mother and seemed to be as creative as her father. She loved to play pretend and tell wild tales about her "adventures" to everyone.

Finally, there was four-year-old Asha, the baby of the base (but not for long). Everyone agreed she was absolutely beautiful, a perfect blend of both of her parents, with AJ's big brown eyes and Selena's cocoa-colored skin. In spite of her parents' rough exteriors, Asha was sweet as could be. Of course, having her had softened Selena and AJ a lot. They were better parents than many Gretchen had known before the apocalypse. They didn't put up with any bullshit.

"Today is Wednesday, April thirteenth," said Gretchen, pointing to the date she'd written on the board. "It's a special day. Who can remind us why?"

"Gabby's birthday!" blurted Leslie, her big blue eyes shining with excitement.

Gretchen smiled. “Almost. Gabby’s birthday is *tomorrow*. I thought we could make some cards for her later. But what else is special about *today*?”

“It’s the anniversary,” Eve spoke up. She didn’t raise her hand either; with only five students, Gretchen didn’t bother with such formalities.

“The anniversary of what?”

Eve’s expression was solemn. “Of when the world died,” she said.

The way she worded it gave Gretchen goosebumps, but of course, she was right. They had been talking about it at home all week, trying to help the children understand why it was a big deal for the grown-ups. Ten years. It had been ten years since the world, as they’d known it, had come to an end. Their children would never get to experience that world. Except for Eve, who was born in England, they had lived their entire lives on the former MacDill Air Force Base. They didn’t know anything different. It was up to the adults to tell them what life used to be like, to preserve what they could of their old culture.

As a teacher, Gretchen had taken on most of the responsibility for the children’s education. They spent most of their mornings in school working on reading and writing, along with basic math. Gretchen knew that language and literacy were essential to pass on and could not afford to be lost. Writing was the best way to record their history for future generations to read. She tried to tuck as much history as she could into her reading lessons, and she’d had the older kids start keeping their own journals as soon as they were able to write, so that they, too, could contribute to the archives.

Science lessons were practical ones, usually spent outdoors. They learned about animals by taking care of the cows and chickens and, of course, the pets Nick was never without. They studied plants the same way, by watching flowers grow in the garden and helping Brian farm the fields from which most of their food came. There were simple machines all around them that made their lives easier. They experimented with energy using the solar panels Kevin had installed to power the base. Selena drew on her pharmaceutical knowledge to show them some basic chemistry, while AJ taught them about color by having them help him make dyes and play with paints. Even Howie’s expertise as a hotel tycoon came in handy, as he oversaw the engineering of elaborate buildings with wooden blocks.

And, of course, there was music. Nick made sure the kids knew every song he considered a classic, while Brian gave guitar lessons to anyone who wanted to learn. Without internet or television to entertain them, they would often get together and sing. So much could be learned through song. Gretchen was still waiting for Nick to go with them on a field trip to the L-I-B-R-A-R-Y, where he could sing the song about its many functions, but whenever she suggested it, he would blush and say he was busy. *Maybe someday*, she thought, suppressing a smile.

But that day, there were more important topics to discuss. “That’s right,” she told her daughter. “Ten years ago, our world changed overnight.”

She cleared her throat, glancing down at the five innocent little faces looking up at her. She’d had a hard time figuring out what to say that would be appropriate for a four-year-old and even an eight-year-old to hear. How could she explain what had happened without scaring them?

“We lived in a country called the United States of America. There was a war going on with other countries that were against ours. One country, called North Korea, really didn’t like us. Their leader, a man named Kim Jong-Il, sent some planes over to our country, carrying a kind of poison that was meant to make people sick. Ten years ago, on Infernal Friday, the planes sprayed the poison into the air, and people breathed it in without even knowing it. They got very sick and started dying. By the end of the next day, which we know as Reaper’s Sabbath, almost everyone had died. It was very sad.”

She paused, remembering how she’d sat alone in her house, waiting for word from Shawn, having no idea that she would never see her husband again.

“And then what happened?” asked Josh, egging her on. Of course, he already knew what came next. The older ones had heard the story many times before. To them, it was just that: a story. Even Evette was much too young to have any real memories of the undead. In her mind, they might have been make believe, like the monsters under her bed.

But Gretchen remembered what they had really been like. She remembered the way they shambled toward her, slowly, but ceaselessly. She remembered the blood-curdling sound of their moans. And she remembered the stench of decay, which would never quite leave her nose.

She closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath before continuing. “Then the dead people started waking up. Only they weren’t people anymore. They were monsters.”

“Zombies,” Josh supplied matter-of-factly, looking around at the girls. Kayleigh giggled, but Eve, Leslie, and even little Asha remained stoic, staring up at Gretchen in rapt silence as they waited for her to go on.

“Those of us who were left had no choice but to run. Our homes weren’t safe anymore. I left my house in the middle of the night, got in my car, and drove.”

“And that’s when you met Daddy,” Eve supplied, her eyes shining. She always loved that part of the story.

Gretchen smiled and nodded. “That’s right. I met your dad on the road and rescued him from the zombies, and we rode the rest of the way together down here to MacDill, where his cousin was stationed.”

“Kevin,” said Kayleigh, and again, Gretchen nodded.

“Uh-huh. Everyone ended up here because it was the safest place to be. Kevin kept sending messages over the radio, encouraging any other survivors to come to the base, but Brian and I were the last ones to arrive. After that, it was just the ten of us. Brian... Kevin... Nick... Riley...” Josh and Leslie turned to look at each other, as Gretchen ticked their names off one by one. “AJ...” Asha’s face lit up with a grin. “Howie... Gabby... her mother, Jo... Kayleigh...” Gretchen smiled sadly at her younger daughter, whose eyes lit up in recognition. “...and me. For a long time, we thought we were the only ones left in the world. We even sent a search party – Kevin, Nick, and Riley – to look for more survivors, but they didn’t find anyone else.”

She swallowed hard, remembering the many weeks they’d spent waiting for their friends to return. What a miracle it was that all three of them had made it back, despite the obstacles that stood in their way.

“We were alone for almost a year,” she went on, “until the other group showed up. They came from across the ocean, from another country called England. We went to live with them for awhile because the base wasn’t safe, and they had a castle. But it was cold there and not nearly as nice. We missed our home. So when the zombies started to fall apart, we flew back to Florida. Selena came with us, but the others stayed in England.”

“Will we ever see them again?” asked Eve.

“I hope so,” Gretchen replied, “but I don’t know. We’ve been away for a long time. You were just a baby when we left.” She smiled at her daughter. “Who knows what’s happened to them since.” It was something they had all wondered about. There had been talk of trying to return to England someday. Gabby was especially eager to go, but Gretchen would just as well stay on the base. In the last ten years, they’d made a life for themselves there. Why risk it? Especially now.

Her hand dropped instinctively to her stomach, as she was suddenly struck by a sense of *déjà vu*. She fiddled a little with the fabric of her shirt, then forced her hand away.

“So,” she said, brushing her hair behind one ear, “tonight, when the whole group gets together, that’s what we’ll be remembering: the day our story started, and all the days we’ve survived since then. Does anyone have a question?”

She spent the next half hour answering their questions as best she could, without getting into all the gory details. Afterwards, the older kids made birthday cards and wrote in their journals while she worked with the younger ones on forming their letters. The morning passed quickly, and when it was time for lunch, Gretchen walked the children home, dropping them off at their doorsteps until she was down to just her two daughters.

Brian was already back from working in the fields when they walked in. “There’s my three lovely ladies,” he said, kissing them each in turn. Sometimes Gretchen wondered if he had said the same thing to his first wife and family. It was odd how his post-apocalyptic life paralleled his former one. Once again, he was a father to two daughters. Gretchen knew that Eve and Kayleigh could never take the place of Brooke and Bonnie, just as she would never replace Leighanne in his heart, but even so, she was glad she had been able to provide him with two more children... and, if all went as planned, hopefully a third. He would never say so, but she knew Brian wanted a boy.

“Girls, go wash up for lunch,” she told their daughters, and when they had gone, she turned to Brian and wrapped her arms around him. “I was thinking,” she whispered, “that maybe we should tell everyone tonight, while we’re all together anyway.”

Brian smiled down at her. “You don’t think we’d be stealing Riley and Nick’s thunder?”

Gretchen shrugged. She hadn’t considered that. “I don’t know. Maybe we should wait.”

“I’m just kidding. I don’t think they’d mind, but I’ll leave it up to you. Whatever you decide is fine with me. If it slips out, great, and if not... well, then it’ll stay our little secret for awhile longer.” He reached down and rested his hand over her stomach, which was just starting to show. She would have to see Riley about letting out her pants soon – at which point their little secret would be a secret no more. Riley would tell Nick, and once Nick knew, the whole base would know. But until then, maybe it was better to keep it between her and Brian.

She loved the way he would look at her and wink when he thought no one was watching, the knowing smiles they shared behind the backs of their family and friends, like they were the sole guardians of a priceless treasure. And, in a way, they were.

“Can you believe it’s been ten years we’ve been together?” she asked, resting her head on his shoulder.

He stroked her hair. “We, as in all of us, or you and me?”

“Both, I guess.” They would celebrate their own anniversary two days later: ten years since the day they’d met, nine since they’d married. Eight more years than she had spent married to Shawn. “God, I’m so glad we found each other that night,” she said.

Brian chuckled. “I’m just glad you saw me and stopped your car! A few more minutes, and I’d a been a goner.”

She smiled. “It was the best decision I ever made. You’ve been such a blessing to me, Bri.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the grace of my life, Gretch,” he whispered back, as he bent and kissed the top of her head. She snuggled into his chest and closed her eyes, picturing him playing the guitar and singing those words to her on the night he’d proposed. She much preferred that memory to the one of him sitting silently in the passenger seat of her car, all covered in blood.

They had come such a long way since then, in every sense of the word. She hoped they would never have to go back.

Chapter 113

I don't care what everyone else thinks – I can't wait to go back to England!

I get why some people don't want to. Gretchen and Brian, Nick and Riley, and even AJ and Selena all have little kids now, and they don't want to take them away from a place they know is safe. Plus, it's the only home their kids have ever known.

Florida's my home too, and it's not like I want to leave it forever, but lately I've been feeling like there's no future for me here. I'm not a kid anymore, but I'm also nowhere close to where the other adults are in life. They're all in their thirties and forties, while I'm about to turn twenty-three. There's literally no one my age left on this side of the ocean. I'll admit it: I'm lonely. I just can't help but think that if I never go back, I'll never have what Gretchen and Riley and Selena all have: a family. I know we're all like one big happy family here on the base, blah blah blah, but I want a real family of my own someday. A husband. Children. I want to know what it's like to be someone's wife, someone's mother. I think my mom would want that for me, too. But I'll never have that here. There's no one left for me. Nick and AJ and Brian are already taken – not that I would be interested anyway. They're more like my big brothers than anything else. Then there's Howie, who's like an uncle to me – that would be way too weird. And Kevin's like my second dad, so not even going there!

But that's why I have to get out of here and go somewhere else. Callum could still be there, but even if he's not, there has to be someone out there for me. I just have to find him.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

The day was already getting warm when Gabby walked down to the aircraft hangars. Behind them, she could see Brian pattering around in the field he had so meticulously planted. Otherwise, the base was quiet. The kids were still in school, she assumed, and Nick was probably out on his boat, where he spent most nice days like this one. He claimed to be fishing, but Gabby knew he just liked to spend time on the water. She didn't blame him. Sometimes – more often these days, it seemed – she needed to get away, too.

It was probably still cold in England, but spring would be coming soon. She imagined spring and summer in England would be lovely, without the undead stinking up the place. She wondered if their old friends were still living in the castle, or if they'd spread out to the cottages in the nearby village. That was if they were still even living in England – or living at all. She knew it was possible – likely, even – that they weren't. But she also knew she would never stop wondering until she went and found out for herself.

That was where Kevin came in.

“Morning, Gabs!” he called, waving to her as she walked into Hanger 5. He was standing on a stepstool near the wing of one of the smaller planes, wiping down its exterior with a cloth.

“Good morning.” She gestured to the plane. “Is that the one we're taking up today?”

“Yup. Now that you've got the basics down, I figured it'd be good for you to get some experience with different aircrafts, just in case you can't fly out in the same plane you flew in on. If you remember, when Nick and Riley and I went on our little expedition to California back in the day, our plane exploded shortly after we'd landed. If we'd had to rely on another plane to get us home, it would have helped to know how to fly it.”

Gabby nodded, trying to seem self-assured, even though her stomach was twisting in knots of nervousness. Sometimes she wondered if she was a fool for wanting to fly into the great unknown. She had it good here, relatively speaking. The base was safe and had enough resources for them to be self-sufficient. The same could not be said of the rest of the world. What was she getting herself into?

But like any twenty-two-year-old – *twenty-three tomorrow*, thought Gabby with a little thrill – she was itching to go out into the world, finally ready to fly the coop, figuratively *and* literally.

She had come to Kevin with her proposition shortly after the new year, when the future was on everyone's mind. "I want you to teach me how to fly," she'd told him. "I know it sounds crazy, but I'd like to go back to England someday – by myself, if no one else is on board – and I don't know if Nick's boat is big enough to get me there."

"Don't let Nick hear you say that. No man wants to be told his gear isn't big enough, if you get my drift," Kevin had joked, winking at her. Gabby wrinkled her nose, but she had laughed along with him. It was nice to finally be at an age where he felt comfortable talking to her that way, like another adult, an equal. For too long, she had been treated like a child, even though, in her own mind, she had grown up the year the dead rose. Sometimes, she was sure Kevin still saw her as the little girl she had been when she'd first come to the base with her mother, but slowly, he'd begun to accept that she was an adult now.

Even so, Gabby could tell he wasn't comfortable with the idea of her flying overseas on her own. He was still like a father to her and considered her to be sort of his surrogate daughter. Naturally, he was worried that if something went wrong, he would never see her again. "Which is exactly why I want you to teach me, so I'll know what to do if something happens," Gabby had said, when he'd expressed these fears. It had taken some time and energy, but eventually, her persistence had paid off. Gabby's powers of persuasion proved stronger than Kevin's reservations, and she'd convinced him to give her flying lessons.

They'd been at it since February, and after two months, Gabby was getting to be a pretty good pilot. She hadn't yet been up in a plane by herself, but although Kevin still went along for the ride, Gabby did most of the flying these days.

"You ready, kiddo?" said Kevin, swatting her playfully with his rag.

She realized she had been spacing out and smiled sheepishly. "Yep. Let's go."

They climbed into the cockpit, Gabby sliding behind the controls while Kevin settled into the co-pilot's seat. She started the engine, as he had shown her many times before in other aircrafts, and felt the vibration under her feet as it roared to life. Slowly, she guided the small plane out of the hangar and onto the runway, centering it over the faded line that still ran down the middle. The takeoff was always her favorite part of a flight. She made sure the wing flaps were up, then shifted the throttle to full power. As she released the brake, the plane began to roll down the runway, bouncing on its wheels as it picked up speed.

"Get ready to pull up," Kevin warned in a low voice, almost under his breath.

“I know.” Gritting her teeth in determination, Gabby pulled the control column toward her, easing the nose of the plane upward. She let out the breath she’d been holding as she felt the plane lift off the ground, the runway disappearing underneath it. There was always that moment of uncertainty, when she worried she wasn’t going to get off the ground in time. Once she was safely in the air, she could breathe more easily.

“Let’s fly west today, over the water, eh?” suggested Kevin, pointing to the right out his window.

“Okay,” agreed Gabby, her heart accelerating with anticipation. She hadn’t flown over water before, other than Tampa Bay. Usually they headed eastward, staying over land in case they needed to make an emergency landing. But, of course, she would need to feel comfortable flying over water to make it across the Atlantic Ocean. The Gulf of Mexico would work for now. She took it as a sign of Kevin’s trust in her that he had been the first one to suggest it.

Following his directions, she turned westward and flew the plane over the peninsula on which the former cities of St. Petersburg and Clearwater lay in ruins. It made for an eerie sight, looking down on the neatly laid out streets, still lined with cars, but none moving. Not a sign of life anywhere. Not for ten years now.

Soon, the land was behind them, and nothing but water lay ahead. It was a little bit scary, not being able to see where she was going, with no frame of reference on the ground below, but at the same time, it was exhilarating. “How long does it take to cross the Gulf?” she asked Kevin.

“A couple of hours. Maybe we’ll fly all the way across to Texas sometime so you can experience a longer flight over water, but for today we’ll turn back soon so we don’t waste fuel.”

Gabby nodded. For now, she was fine with doing whatever Kevin told her to do; after all, he was the expert, and she was still learning. But she knew there would come a day when she would have to make all the decisions on her own. “When do you think I’ll be ready to go over the Atlantic?” she wondered aloud.

“Don’t you mean ‘we’?”

She looked over at him in surprise. The sight of his raised eyebrows made her heart lift, too. “Really? You would go with me?”

“Well, sure, Gabby. If you’ll have me, I mean. I can’t tell you what to do anymore – not that I ever could.” He gave her a sidelong look, and she grinned. “But you’re an adult now, and if you’ve got your heart set on going, I can’t keep you here. All I can do is offer to go along and give you as much help as I can.”

“Yeah... yeah, that’d be great!” she enthused, her fears fading away. With Kevin sitting by her side, the thought of leaving didn’t seem quite so scary.

He grinned back at her. “And here I thought you’d never ask.”

Shaking her head, she shrugged and said, “I just didn’t think you’d wanna go. The base was like your home even before the rest of us were here. And your family’s here – Brian, I mean...”

“You’re my family, Gabby.” He reached out and patted her knee. “Brian’s got a family of his own, and if anything happened to me, I know he’d be okay. Same with Nick and AJ and the girls. But if something were to happen to you...” He paused and shook his head, temporarily speechless. If she had looked at him then, she would have seen the tears sparkling in his eyes. “...I would never forgive myself.”

Gabby was not one to get emotional. Not anymore. She thought that all the trauma she’d experienced as a child had numbed her to such feelings. But, hearing the emotion in Kevin’s voice as he said the same sort of thing her own father and mother would tell her when they were still alive, she felt a lump rise in her throat.

“I appreciate you looking out for me all these years, Kev, but you don’t need to worry about me anymore. We’ve made it this far, haven’t we? We’re gonna be just fine.”

She looked out the window, where the sun shone directly in front of her like a beacon of hope. It would serve as her frame of reference when she was ready to leave Europe again. All she would need to do was follow the sun, as it beckoned her back home.

Chapter 114

It’s been ten years since society crashed, burned, and whatever it is up there decided to play its practical joke by fucking up the world. Ten years ago, if you’d asked me if I believed in God, I would’ve laughed in your face. What proof was there in some dude sitting up there watching us like we were his goddamn ant farm? My life had been pretty twisted by that point, and I didn’t believe in anything. Let alone some god. I sure as hell wasn’t afraid to say so either. I didn’t care who it offended ‘cause I wanted to open their eyes.

Ask me that question now, well, the answer isn’t yes.

It’s a maybe.

*I don't pretend to have all the answers. I don't know why I'm here. But it is wild how we not only came together, we managed to survive a shitload of flesh-eating corpses, and we even started to rebuild. It's something. It's a life. Hell, I even found someone. I'm a father. If that doesn't tell me there might be something up there, what does? When Asha was born, I promised I would never leave her. I promised I would always be there to protect her and give her everything my father couldn't stick around long enough to give me. So far, I don't think I'm doing a bad job. Maybe fatherhood is the first thing I **know** I'm actually good at. I judge myself by her happiness. She's happy. I'm happy. Selena's happy.*

I'm... a lot of things. I'm an artist. An addict. Reckless. Asshole. Survivor. Hunter. Out of everything I am, though, I think fatherhood is probably my biggest accomplishment. When I look into my baby's face, I know I've done something worthwhile in my lifetime. I ain't worthless.

Shit, Brian's right. I really have gone soft.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

The sky was blue, the grass was green, and AJ's heart felt full. Almost as full as a baked potato, really. He'd dropped off Asha at the little school house Gretchen had for the kids before making his way out into the wilderness. Even after ten years, it was still laughable that in Tampa Bay, what had once been a national park was now dangerous. But that was how things went when there were no people besides themselves. Without humanity, nature was able to take her land back. And take it back she had. It was incredible to realize just what simple maintenance did to fight it back. Now the roads were cracked with plants fighting their way through.

He walked the path he knew well now to where he was going. Brian had managed to find a couple of wild horses once, but he knew better than to try and take them hunting. They had been tamed well enough with some time and effort, but it always felt less risky to go on foot. His limp was still there after so many years, though it had lessened over time. Now it was more manageable, and he'd adapted to move quickly enough when he was out on the hunt. Despite everything that had changed since that first day a decade ago, he still yearned to make sure he was useful. AJ had learned he wasn't worthless, for sure. But he loved that feeling of accomplishment, even now.

Every once in awhile, he found himself still missing the immediate high cocaine could give or the pure oblivion enough alcohol granted. It was a battle he fought daily, but his struggle was made easier by the simple fact that the drug was no longer in existence the way he knew it. As for alcohol, sometimes he'd spot it

when, on the rare occasion, he'd enter a store. It could last for plenty of years, so he was sure there was some great wine out there somewhere, just waiting to be taken. But when he looked down at his little girl, with her curly black hair and big brown eyes, suddenly he found even the moment's thought fading away. He needed to be strong; he *wanted* to be strong for her. His baby girl deserved that.

It was weird, to think of himself as a father, even now. Perhaps because he'd never known his own. His mother had tried to be both for him, for so many years. AJ liked to think she'd be proud of the way he'd turned his life around. Maybe not the fact that it had taken the end of the world for it to *really* happen, but it *had* happened, at least. He loved Selena more than life itself, and it warmed his heart when he saw her and Asha together. She'd often tease him about the many drawings of them she'd find in his old sketch pad, but he couldn't help it. They, everyone in their little base family, had become the source of hope in what had once been a bleak, dark, life.

Over the past ten years, he had learned to become a new man for the third time. He remembered the past versions of himself. First, there was the addict, the man who had fallen so far through his depression he couldn't see anything for what it was. Instead, all he could do was find everything worthless, while giving up seemed to be the best option. The second was the man reborn through the end of the world. A world that had chosen him for whatever reason, to help rebuild. He was a man who had, for the first time, found a purpose. But even then, he somewhat sought to chase after the death that constantly eluded him through his risky maneuvers and choices. The third came after Jo's demise, a man who realized he'd done nothing but waste everything he'd been given for his own weaknesses. This was the man Selena fell for, the man who had the courage to take that step and ask her to come back to the States with him.

Still, he loved *some* risk. Hunting satisfied that for him.

Birds chirped and fluttered around him as he got deeper into the park. He swatted away mosquitoes and sought to ignore the buzzing cicadas. It was more humid here than back on the base, another sign spring was here and summer would be soon to follow. It was a big day for them, a real milestone in terms of their survival. AJ chuckled to himself as he walked, his eyes peeled for signs of any movement from significant prey. He wondered what the others would think if he suddenly decided to try his hand at some more apocalyptic murals. He wouldn't, mainly because of the kids, but it would almost be worth it just to see their faces.

It was this musing that caused his attention to be slightly scattered, if only for a moment. He was walking along a stream and didn't see the alligator creeping steadily along, another hunter in search of that day's meal. A twig along the ground snapped, and AJ jerked, stumbling back in an attempt to catch himself. His crossbow almost fell from his hands, but he hurriedly regained his grip on it,

costing him that sense of fleeting balance. He slammed onto the ground while stabbing pain shot up and down his bad leg, the source being his ankle.

“Mother fucking Christ on a cracker!” AJ swore as he scooted back, the gator growling in excitement at the prospect of fresh meat. Memories of himself in the same position with zombies flashed before his eyes.

The gator snapped at his legs as he rolled quickly to dodge it. This wasn't going to do it for long. “Damn if I'm gonna get killed by an oversized purse,” he grunted.

As he pulled the trigger, an arrow flew from the bow, piercing the animal through its eye. It fell to its side with a few final gasps. AJ smirked as pushed himself up into a sitting position, groaning softly. “Better shot than I meant to.” He tried to stand and immediately learned why that was a bad idea, as his ankle gave way at any attempt of pressure. “Fuck!” He glared at the dead alligator. “I'm gonna see if Riley can turn you into some damn boots, fucking asshole.”

Years ago, he used to keep his old cane strapped to his back alongside his arrows. After awhile, it became unnecessary, though he still kept it in the house, just in case. Now he was wishing he was the extra cautious type. Or someone who didn't prefer solitude as much as he did. Sure, Nick got annoying at times, but he'd known the blonde would be down at the docks the way he always was, using fishing as an excuse to be by the oceans he loved so damn much. Then AJ remembered the last time he'd taken Nick along with him on a hunt. The kid scared everything off because he couldn't stay still or quiet long enough. Laughed at the memory, AJ glanced around for a fallen branch or something to brace himself up on.

The roar of a small aircraft caught his ears before he did, however. With a grin, AJ reached for his crossbow. After tying on the bandana he wore to an arrow, he fired it into the air above the trees in hopes of catching their attention. When the plane circled back around and began to lower in altitude towards the nearest clearing, the former addict smiled smugly to himself. The only people flying around would be Kevin and Gabby. They knew how to find him if he was in trouble. Or, in his case, just unable to walk for the moment.

I may not believe in fate, he mused. But lady luck fucking loves me.

Chapter 115

Who would have guessed that I – a hemophiliac with no wilderness survival skills whatsoever – would be one of the sole survivors of the zombie apocalypse? Certainly not me. If I had crunched the numbers back in the beginning, I would have said the probability of someone like me surviving long-term would be slim

to none. The odds were stacked against me, yet here I am, still alive. Somehow, I survived.

It hasn't been easy. There have been close calls, too many to count, but the fact that most of our original group has made it ten years speaks to our strength, in every sense of the word. We are strong – physically, mentally, emotionally, and collectively. As a group, we've never been stronger.

Slowly, we've started to rebuild and reestablish society. Our goal now is not just to survive, but to plan for the future, so that mankind can continue to survive long after we are gone. For too long, we were living in the moment, fighting for our lives every second, but finally, we can move forward. Even as we look back on the last ten years, we are also looking ahead at the decades to come.

I know there's no guarantee we'll all be around to see what the future brings. The world is still a dangerous place, especially for someone like me. But life is a gift, and I don't want to waste one day of the time I have left.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

Howie sat in the supply room of the base infirmary. He examined his fingernails curiously as he wound a strip of fabric around his finger. They were overgrown and grimy-looking, with gray gunk embedded beneath the once-white crescents projecting past his fingertips.

There was a time - over ten years ago now, he realized - when he had kept his nails clean and impeccably trimmed. Once a week, he'd paid for a professional manicure and hand massage at the finest Vietnamese nail salon in Orlando. His hands had been almost baby-soft and so very smooth. Now they were rough with calluses that had built up over a decade of doing the kind of manual labor he had once detested. No amount of soap seemed to be able to remove the dirt from underneath his nails now, yet he rarely clipped them, knowing even a hangnail could cause him to bleed or contract an infection. He couldn't be too careful, now that all of their antibiotics and clotting drugs were long past their expiration dates. Selena had been experimenting with making her own herbal remedies out of plants and fungi, but Howie wasn't about to become her lab rat.

“Here's another one,” said Selena, tossing him a fresh wad of fabric from the t-shirt she was shredding to make bandages. Howie finished rolling his first, tucking the end neatly into the wrapped bandage before adding it to the stock on the shelf in front of him, then started on his second.

For a while after the dead had stopped walking, the survivors had enjoyed a surplus of medical supplies, but as the decade wore on and more babies were

born, their stock had started to diminish. It helped to have homemade bandages on hand now that there were five little kids bumping around the base. Skinned knees and scraped elbows occurred almost daily, but on that day, it was one of the overgrown kids who needed patching up.

“AJ!” Howie heard Selena gasp, and he looked up to see her husband being half-carried, half-dragged into the infirmary by Kevin and Gabby. “What in the bloody hell’s happened to you?”

Howie followed her into the next room, where AJ, grimacing in pain, hobbled to the examining table and hoisted himself on. “Got ambushed by a gator on my hunt.”

Selena, who was usually so hard to rattle, gasped again. “Did it get you? Did it bite you?”

“No.” AJ smirked. “*I got it,*” he replied grimly, pulling back on an imaginary bowstring. “Arrow through the eye. But... I jacked up my bum leg again in the process.” He gritted his teeth as Selena gingerly rolled up his left pant leg, revealing an ankle that had swollen to double its normal size.

Howie blanched at the sight of it, imagining how much it must hurt. “Hey, at least you still have it,” he joked, earning a weak chuckle out of AJ. They both remembered how close he had come to losing that leg after his fall from the tree. He would always walk with a limp, but at least his broken leg had healed without becoming infected. Between that and the zombie bite that had also failed to infect him, Howie was starting to believe AJ was invincible. The trouble was, AJ seemed to believe it, too.

“You’ve got to start being more careful,” Selena scolded, as she prodded his inflamed ankle. “You’re a father now; you can’t keep going out and almost getting yourself killed. Imagine if I had to explain to our daughter how her dad’s been eaten by a bloody alligator!”

She was being serious, but Howie couldn’t help it; he started to laugh and was quickly joined by Kevin, Gabby, and even AJ himself.

“Relax, babe. The only one getting eaten is that alligator. By us. Tonight.” AJ grinned triumphantly. “Kev here hauled his carcass into the plane before he and Gabs flew me back - you can thank them for finding me, by the way. I figured Gretchen could fry him up for our feast tonight.”

“Ugh, gross,” said Gabby, wrinkling her nose.

Selena sighed in exasperation. “Wiggle your toes for me?” AJ complied, wincing again as she gently rotated his foot from side to side. “Well, looks like you got

lucky again - it seems to be sprained, but not broken. I'd better wrap it." She looked over her shoulder at Howie. "Guess we'll be needing those bandages."

Howie shook his head. "I swear, you've got more lives than a cat, AJ," he said, as he went back into the supply room to fetch some freshly-rolled strips of fabric.

AJ laughed, as Selena set about immobilizing his ankle. "It ain't just me, bro. I think we all do."

Howie had to agree.

Chapter 116

It used to be that I was nothing. As I said once when I first met AJ, if you looked up "Loser" in the dictionary you'd probably find my picture next to it. I wasn't going to be remembered. I knew I was never going to be famous. Everything I had tried ended in failed attempts. I'd cover it up with good humor and optimism and hope no one would notice. Then, the world changed. None of that mattered. It's funny how these journals Rye had us start now have volumes. There's a stack of them up in the attic, kept for safekeeping. Ten years is a long time. The fact we've kept going for ten years since Infernal Friday is insane to me. Everything we've been through has been worth it. I probably sound like Brian here but honestly, I've been beyond blessed with everything I've been given since that day.

Now I've come to learn it wasn't that I was nothing. It was that it just wasn't meant to happen. I was meant to come back and survive. I don't question it at all. When I look down into the faces of my children, or see Riley smiling at me, I know this was my purpose all along. If these journals survive the future generations, the world as it'll be then, they'll know our names. They'll know my story. But that doesn't matter. I don't need to be remembered. That sort of thing doesn't matter to me anymore.

All that matters in the end is right now. Living and surviving as best as we can.

Here's a song I was teaching to the kids the other day. Cause music HAS to survive! It really doesn't have anything to do with what I was talking about but I have to keep writing down songs I remember so they don't get lost. It's not as good as "Thriller" either but hey, it's still a freaking classic.

*"I like the feelin' you're givin' me
Just hold me baby and I'm in ecstasy!
Oh I'll be workin' from nine to five*

*To buy you things to keep you by my side!
I never felt so in love before
Just promise baby you'll love me forevermore
I swear I'm keeping you satisfied,
Cause you're the one for me.*

*The way you make me feel...
You really turn me on
You knock me off of my feet now, baby (hee!)
My lonely days are gone..."*
- Michael Jackson, "The Way You Make Me Feel"

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

"Daddy!" his blonde-haired, blue-eyed, seven-year-old son cried with delight as he came running down the dock. It was part of an almost daily ritual. Nick would often be out here between his chores, fishing and enjoying the third love of his life after his wife and kids: the ocean. He didn't often catch any actual fish, but that never mattered much to him. Each day after Gretchen's school let out and she dropped Josh off at home with Leslie, if Nick wasn't there, he'd make a beeline for the docks. Homework and chores would come later. Riley had learned early on that if she tried to make him focus after a day of learning, she'd be unsuccessful, no matter how hard she tried.

Josh had his father's boundless energy as he leapt into Nick's open arms with such force, he almost fell back into the water. "Hey, little man! Careful, or we'll end up swimming with the fishies instead of catching them. Mom know you're here?"

"Yep! She says you gotta catch fish today or we're having nothing but ally-gator." In so many ways, Josh was his Mini-Me. Nick shifted, and Josh moved to sit on the dock beside him.

"Alright, good." *Or Rye will kill me.* On rare occasions, their son managed to slip out unnoticed, each time practically giving her a heart attack. Nick laughed but, at the same time, understood her fears. The undead might be gone, but that didn't mean the memories and paranoia had faded completely. The scars would never go away, but Nick felt that was a good thing. Maybe the lessons learned from the end of the old world would finally carry on in the future generations. Ever the optimist, he felt they would.

"We made cards for Gabby's birthday today!" Joshua announced, as Nick handed him a smaller fishing pole.

“I bet it looks awesome.” He gazed up at the clear blue sky with a smile. Without the pollution humanity had caused, the skies had changed. Nick often found himself simply enjoying the beauty of nature in the world around him.

“Uh-huh!” He baited his fishing line like his dad had taught him with ease and cast it out into the water. “Then we talked about the anniversary.”

In a lot of ways, it was mind-blowing to know they had come so far in all this time. Josh was a living reminder that there was and still is a future worth fighting for, a future worth living for. All the children of the base were. Having a son had been Nick’s biggest scare and one of his greatest joys. At first, he’d been terrified of losing Riley in childbirth when her labor came. Memories of the way Gretchen had passed out birthing Evette had driven this fear home. But all had gone well, and when he’d held his firstborn in his arms, the love and happiness had been impossible to describe in words. The same had been true for Leslie. They were perfect in every way, and he couldn’t be prouder.

Soon, I’ll get to have that feeling again. I can’t wait.

“It’s a really important day. You know, two days from now it’ll have been ten years since I met your mother.”

Josh laughed as seagulls could be heard in the distance, flying above the beach. “Mommy always says she found you running away.”

“She did.” He grinned. “She thought I was a zombie and almost ran me over.” Nick set his pole aside and started tickling his little boy mercilessly. “If she had, you wouldn’t be here!”

“Daddy! Daaaaaddy, stoooooop!” Josh cried between giggles.

After a few moments he ceased and ruffled his son’s hair. “Your mommy saved my life.”

Many times. And in more ways than one. The seizures had never completely gone away. Jo had been right so many years before. Drugs ran out on the base, and pills they found elsewhere quickly went over. So, like he had back at the castle, he’d simply learned to live with them. The task had become easier to accept once the zombies had fallen apart. Never once, however, did he let the epilepsy stop him from living the life he wanted. He knew that if he ever fell, Riley would always be there to help him up. Her help wasn’t a weakness, the way he once had seen it. It was a sign of the strength of their relationship and something he wouldn’t trade for the world. The seizures, in a sense, had been a gift, as they’d given him what he’d needed to not only survive the Osiris Virus, but to meet the rest of his life. To this day, Nick didn’t quite understand what she’d seen in him back then, but he didn’t question it like he had so often in the first two years.

“Momma used to be strong?”

Josh’s words caused Nick to laugh as he stood; he’d come back for the fishing gear later, the way he always did. “She still is strong, kiddo. Don’t forget it.” He held out his hand to his son. “C’mon, we should head back. She worries about you.” Nick grinned. “For some reason, she thinks you and I are always out to find trouble.”

“She says I get it from *yooou*.”

“Well...” He snickered. “She’s right, but don’t tell her.”

Josh’s little hand rested in Nick’s, and the two started on the familiar trek back home.

As they walked, Nick found himself thinking of what he’d once thought his life would be. Marriage had been completely out of the question; he hadn’t believed in it thanks to his broken family. He thought he’d live his life in Los Angeles and never come back to Florida again. One day, he’d dreamed of being discovered and made famous for his movies and possibly TV shows. All his dreams had been so shallow and meaningless. He’d never achieved a single one of them. Because of that, he had seen himself as nothing more than a failure. But everything happened for a reason. He’d failed because something bigger had been waiting for him: the chance to be with Riley, raising his children in a world so unlike the one he’d grown up in.

The life he lived today was so much simpler, but he couldn’t imagine anything better.

Chapter 117

This morning, I went upstairs into the attic. Nick had already gone to go take care of the animals, and the kids were with Gretch. I went up there with a purpose. It took me a few attempts, but eventually I sat down and started reading the very first of the journals. They’d been my idea, but I had no clue back then how important they’d become. At the time, I figured they’d be good for helping us cope and waste time. Reading them reminded me of who I used to be, back before the world changed, and who I became once it did.

I’m not that girl anymore. I barely remember her. The first one threw away everything that mattered. She put up a strong front and hated the idea of letting anyone in. The second, well, she tried to let others in. Those she did became her new family. However, she was still so hot-headed and stubborn. She still fought to keep that strong front coming. She hated weakness.

Now, I'm a wife.

Now, I'm a mother.

In a lot of ways, change doesn't begin to describe the last ten years. But it's not a bad thing. I feel like this is who I was this entire time. I simply didn't know it. Or maybe I refused to see it. Nick helped me realize what true strength really is. I had it so wrong once. And our children remind me every day of why life is still so precious.

To think, this is the life I once wanted to throw away.

I'm so thankful I got that second chance at it.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

As Lucky sunbathed by the nearby window, Riley adjusted the hem on one of the legs of the pants lying in her lap. Once the undead had fallen, she, like AJ and Kevin alike, had needed a new purpose to focus on. Her forever workaholic personality demanded it. It had taken some time, but time she had and eventually was able to research the ways clothes had been made before technology came around. Leather-making, cloths, furs, anything helpful. There was a loom AJ and Kevin had managed to rig up on the other side of the living room, where a TV had once stood. A lot of badly-made clothes followed, but eventually, she had learned how to knit, sew, and crochet.

From journalist to zombie-killer, from zombie-slayer to clothes-maker... the differences were more than slight. But, oddly enough, everything felt so natural. While pregnant with Josh, she'd had a lot of time on her hands once she entered her third trimester and Nick kept fussing for her to take things easy. So she'd read, and she'd learned the skills that would give her a new purpose there on the base. Once their son was born, she'd lost the urge to go find adrenaline rushes, the way AJ still did. The first time she held him, all her priorities shifted into their rightful places. She never questioned it.

"Mama?" Leslie called, pausing from practicing her letters in a workbook Gretchen had given her. She was sitting happily on the bear-skin rug, a present from AJ from his first hunting days post-zombies. No one was sure how he'd managed to find a bear in southern Florida, but they assumed it had been a zoo survivor.

Riley glanced over as she finished with the hem. Josh was outgrowing his clothes again, too quickly for her liking. "What is it, Cupcake?"

Leslie grinned. While she looked a lot like her mother, her smile was all Carter. “We talked ‘bout why today is special. Did you fight zombies?”

“Yup, I did it all the time.”

“Daddy too?”

She couldn’t hide the smirk if she tried. “Your father used to sing as he battled zombies.”

“*Thriller!*”

Riley laughed and rolled her eyes. As Nick had always wanted, that song would never die off. At least, not until they were long gone. Their children had learned the song almost as soon as they could talk. He’d insisted upon it. And deep down, she couldn’t deny him, though she wouldn’t admit it. The rest of the kids on base soon learned it as well, mainly because of the Carter kids. “Always *Thriller.*”

“*Cause this is Thriller! Thriller night!*”

In that moment, she felt a sharp kick against her stomach and winced, rubbing her hand over it. Maybe the Michael Jackson love was imbedded in the DNA at this point. In many ways, *Thriller* was their song. Their escape from Target and journey to the base had been soundtracked by it, for one. No, it wasn’t exactly romantic, but she’d fallen for Nick’s goofy charm and optimism, not because he was some smooth Casanova. *Thriller* suited them.

“*And no one’s gonna see ya cause the beast’s about to strike!*” Nick sang as he burst through the door. “Honeys, I’m home!”

Leslie shrieked playfully. “Don’t get me, beasty!”

Nick smirked and began to chase her at a slow pace, while Josh shut the front door and made a beeline to the kitchen for a drink. “I want little Leslie. BRAINS FOR BREAKFAST!”

She screamed and ducked behind Riley, who’d just stood up to greet Nick. Leslie held on to her legs as Riley crossed her arms and tried to look firm, unable to quite pull it off. “Careful, you two,” she chastised, as Nick leaned around her. At thirty-four weeks, Riley was close. The baby could come at any time. Still, as big as she felt, rushing things wasn’t something she wanted. “Last thing I need to do is trip and fall into labor.”

“Absolutely not.” He stood up straight and pecked her lips softly before peering down at their daughter. “We both gotta be careful around Mommy, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Mom!” Josh yelled coming out of the kitchen and setting his empty cup on the counter. “I’m gonna go play hide-and-go-seek with the girls!”

“Wait a minute!” Using Nick for balance, Riley reached over carefully and picked up the clothes she’d finished. “Try these on first.”

His face immediately morphed into a pout. “Awww, Moooooommm!”

Nick swung Leslie up into his arms. “Hey, if you don’t, then you can stay inside and do your homework instead, Little Man.”

“Fine,” Josh grumbled, coming over to snatch the clothes begrudgingly before heading upstairs.

“You know he gets that from you,” Riley teased.

“Maybe.” With his free hand, Nick rubbed her stomach. Leslie nestled up against him contentedly. “How’s Number Three coming?”

“Stop calling him or her that,” she said, as she tried not to laugh. Her gaze shifted upwards. “The baby keeps kicking like it’s fine. Joshie keeps telling me how it’s gotta be a boy.”

Nick kissed the top of Leslie’s head and snickered. “Well, the poor guy is really outnumbered.”

“Hey, not my fault,” she joked. “Blame everyone else for only having girls.”

Not long after, Josh came running back down the stairs, skidding to a stop in front of his parents. Nick was just setting Leslie down. “You did as your mother asked?”

“Yeah. They fit, they fit. Can I go now?”

Riley nodded. “Go ahead, but take your sister with you.” With the celebration later, burning off some of her kids’ energy couldn’t hurt. They’d be hyper enough as it was. “Be back when it starts to get dark!”

“Okay!” He grabbed Leslie’s hand and practically dragged her out the door. “Bye!”

She shook her head with a laugh as she moved back towards the couch. She tried to sit by herself while keeping her balance, but Nick was quickly there to support her. Riley groaned as she eased down onto the cushions. “Thanks. I think I gained twice the pounds with this kid as I did with the first two. Soon we’re gonna need a crane to lift me up and down.”

“Nah.” Nick grinned. “You’re still pretty.” He sat beside his wife, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “You know, your son doesn’t believe you used to be tough. I had to tell him that you still are and that he shouldn’t forget it.”

“You softened me up a lot you know, Mr. Hollywood,” Riley reminded him, her eyes gazing at him warmly. “But I’m glad you did.”

So much had changed over ten years time. The world she’d grown up in had become a pure Hell. She’d lost everything she didn’t learn to appreciate until it was too late. By all rights, Riley knew she should have died multiple times in the first two years after Infernal Friday. But she hadn’t. She’d survived; she’d grown; she’d changed. With Nick. With the small group of strangers she now considered family. People she couldn’t live without now. They’d had nothing in common but one thing: the fact that fate had given them all a new chance in a world that had died, and was later reborn.

And Riley would never be more thankful.

Chapter 118

Today is a speshle day. Something relly bad happened 10 years ago. It was befor I was born. Evry buddy started geting sick and then they died and turned into zombies except for my mom and dad and the other peple here. They servived and that is why we are selubrating tonite. It is speshle but sad and also a little happy.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022
Ten years after Infernal Friday

“Ten... eleven...”

Her heart pounded hard against her ribcage as she raced around the side of the building.

“Twelve... thirteen...”

She flattened herself against the brick wall, panting, and looked around frantically for a place to hide.

“Fourteen... fifteen...”

Across the yard, a clump of colorful flowers caught her eye. She hesitated, her heart still hammering in her chest.

“Sixteen... seventeen...”

Almost out of time, she made a split second decision and took off through the tall grass, sprinting toward the overgrown garden.

“Eighteen... nineteen...”

With a little gasp, she ducked under a pair of wooden planks and dove onto her stomach, flattening herself into the field of flowers, where she hoped she would disappear.

“TWENTY! Ready or not, here I come!”

As Joshua’s voice rang out, Evette held her breath. She held herself perfectly still, not daring to move a muscle. Yet she could feel her heart fluttering away. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears and his feet rustling through the grass. She hoped he couldn’t hear her heartbeat or the rush of breath that escaped her screaming lungs. She sucked in some fresh air and held it for a few seconds before letting it out slowly, trying to calm her racing heart. She felt a shivery thrill of excitement mixed with fear as she lay waiting for him to find her.

A shrill scream and the sound of running feet told her one of the other girls had been found. She lifted her head a few inches to see Josh chasing his sister, Leslie, around the chapel. Eve ducked down again, but not before she’d been spotted.

“Psst!” a voice behind her hissed, and she turned her head to see her own little sister, Kayleigh, crouching at the base of a tree just beyond the garden. “I see you, Evie!” KJ sang out in a voice just above a whisper, a wicked grin on her face.

“Shush! He’ll hear you!” Eve hissed back. They both paused to listen for the sound of footsteps, but Josh seemed to be back on the other side of the building. “He’s gonna see you, too; that tree’s not big enough to hide behind.”

“I know! I was gonna climb up into it, but I can’t... reach!” Having risen to her full height - all three feet and four inches - KJ took a flying leap at the lowest branch, but her fingertips barely brushed it. The six-year-old looked pleadingly at her sister. “Gimme a boost, pleeeeeease?”

“No! Then he’ll see us both! And besides, climbing trees can be dangerous. Ask AJ.”

“But Evie!” Kayleigh stamped her foot.

Then, all of a sudden, Josh's voice rang out over the chapel roof. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Both girls froze, staring at each other with wide eyes. KJ started to shrink back behind the tree, then seemed to think better of it and trotted over to where Eve was instead.

"Hey!" Eve hissed. "This is my hiding spot! Go find your own!"

"I don't know where!" KJ whined.

Realizing it would be best just to shut her sister up before she got them both caught, Eve replied, "Well, get down then!" and pushed Kayleigh's face into the flowers.

They lay like that, side by side on their stomachs, for what seemed like forever, listening to the distant sounds of Josh chasing the other two girls - his roaring laughter, Leslie's giddy shrieks, and Asha's screams of "Stop it! Stop scaring me!"

After awhile, KJ whispered, "D'ya think he gave up?"

Eve considered this. Josh, give up on a game of hide and seek? Never. "He's probably just trying to trick us," she whispered back, "waiting for us to come out so he can catch us."

KJ nodded, giving her sister a knowing grin that said, *We'll never let a dumb boy fool us!* But after a few more minutes had passed, she let out an impatient sigh. "This is *boring*," she complained, flipping over onto her back.

"I know." Eve, too, turned over. Folding her arms behind her head to prop it up, she could see the crude letters carved into the wooden cross above her.

"What's that one say?" Kayleigh wondered, noticing her looking.

Eve took a second to sound out the single word. "*Spunky*. That was Josh's daddy's dog," she added matter-of-factly, remembering Nick telling her and the other kids about his canine companion one time.

"Oh." Kayleigh looked curious. "Did dogs turn into zombies too?"

Eve frowned. "I don't know... I think Spunky just got eaten," she said sadly.

"Oh."

"But hey, I bet you know what the next one says," Eve added quickly, hoping to distract her sister from the dead dog.

Kayleigh's eyes moved to the next cross and lit up as she recognized the arrangement of letters. "It's my name!"

"Yup. Only it's not for you; it's for the other Kayleigh."

"She got eaten, too, didn't she?" KJ said solemnly.

Eve nodded. She had walked through the memorial garden many times with her parents, asking about the people who were commemorated on the crosses there. She always listened intently to their answers, and she remembered their stories. She knew that on the other side of Spunky's cross was one for Howie's little boy, who had died before he came to the base, and that behind them, in the last row, were the twin crosses that belonged to her daddy's other daughters, her half-sisters. Sometimes she wondered what it would have been like to have big sisters, instead of always being the oldest one, the one who took all the blame.

"Olly olly oxen free!" Leslie's voice rang out at last, signaling that it was safe to come out of hiding. She or Asha must have gotten caught.

"Come on," Eve said, standing up. She brushed herself off before reaching down to grab KJ's hand and haul her up, too. Giving her sister a sidelong glance, she said slyly, "Bet I can beat you back to base." Then she took off running between the rows of crosses.

"Hey, no fair, you had a head start!" Kayleigh whined as she chased after her.

"GIRLS!" The sound of their cousin Kevin's barking voice made them both jump. They stopped in their tracks, exchanging guilty glances before they both turned to face him. Kevin was standing by the tree where Kayleigh had been hiding, his arms crossed, glaring at them. "Haven't I heard your mother telling you not to play here? This is a place of respect, not a playground. You know better," he added, his eyes narrowing at Eve, the oldest.

She hung her head. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Sorry," Kayleigh echoed in a tiny voice, her chin quivering as she tried not to cry.

"Aww, Kev, cut 'em some slack," said Gabby, coming up alongside Kevin. "Why can't they play here? I bet our people would've wanted it that way." She gave a wide sweeping gesture across the garden. "I know my mom would have."

Kevin raised his eyebrows at her.

"Seriously," Gabby added, smiling at the girls. "I know she was always trying to stop me from doing stupid stuff, but I think she'd be happy to know that this is

finally a safe place... a place where kids can run around and play without worrying about being... bitten.”

Kevin shrugged. “You have a point. But still...” He eyed Eve and KJ. “You’d better ask your parents before running around in here. I know you’re too young to understand,” he added, his voice softening, “but it holds a lot of sad memories for us old people.”

“Hey!” exclaimed Gabby, playfully smacking his arm. “Are you calling *me* old? I’m not old, am I, guys?”

Eve and KJ exchanged glances again. “Well...” said Eve, a sly smile sliding across her lips. “You *are* turning twenty-three tomorrow...”

“That’s practically ancient,” Kevin agreed, winking at Gabby. “Well, all right. I’m headed over to the club. Apparently one of our solar panels stopped working. I wanna make sure we have plenty of power for our feast tonight. Hope you girls like gator!” He grinned at the Littrell girls, who wrinkled their noses.

“What?! Eww!”

Gabby laughed. “Careful climbing on that roof, old man. If *I’m* ancient, then you’re, like... Jurassic.”

“*You’d* best be careful, girlie, or you’re gonna get yourself roped into helping,” Kevin retorted as the two of them walked away, leaving Eve and Kayleigh to go find the other kids so they could start another game of hide and seek.

Chapter 119

I know that I can’t believe just what the past has brought us, to the people we want to be. I know that we have had some times, that we won’t forget the struggle ‘cause we had so far to go. I know we’ve changed, but change can be so good.

Time.

Look where we are, and what we’ve been through.

It’s astonishing to see, to think about. The base is hardly recognizable anymore. We’ve changed it so much to make it a real place to live in, and we’ve thrived. We can sustain ourselves. But like the base, the people here barely resemble their old selves. They’ve grown so much. And when I look at them, I feel nothing

but pride. Everyone has come so far. I'll miss them when I leave with Gabby. But I know they'll be alright.

Come what may.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

In many ways, Kevin was living a life he always thought he would. Unlike the others, he hadn't changed much over the years. There was no grand journey for his character that would help him grow and evolve. He'd always had a strong sense of self and the ability to lead. A life in the military had only strengthened those qualities, and so he had been the most prepared for the Day of Unholy Resurrection. As ready as any one person could possibly be for what had once been thought impossible, at least. He saw it as another battle, but not for freedom, rather, the future of humanity. And as hard as the war had been, and as many losses that they had suffered, he'd won. No, *they* had won.

Kevin smiled to himself as he adjusted the solar panel on the roof and began tightening it down again. In the first month, their mismatched little group was such a contrast to who they were today. Having never been given a chance to father a child, he knew that same proud feeling others fathers had. He had it any time he looked at the others, especially today. It was easy to forget that AJ had been a suicidal addict who once painted apocalyptic murals onto church walls while antagonizing Howie. Howie, who hadn't been called Howard in years and worked hard every day to keep this place going, no longer looked down on anyone for the life they'd left behind, or tried to hide his weaknesses under a veil of snobbery.

AJ and Howie, of course, made him think of Kayleigh. She'd been lost so early on. But even she had begun to change before that fateful day. She'd come slowly out of her shell and started to become strong. He wondered if she had watched over them all these years, if she knew how far they'd come in just a decade's time. Her death had united them all. It had also caused them to search for others, a mistake he would always carry with him. That mistake had inadvertently cost them Jo. If he was the father of the base, she'd always been the mother. He knew she would be so proud of the woman Gabby had grown up to be, in the face of what losing her mother had done to her.

Kevin wiped his brow and sighed softly. Gabby. If he had done anything right in the last ten years, she would be at the top of his list. The little girl who'd come to the base had every reason in the world to grow into a screwed-up person, far beyond recognition. Yet that wasn't what had happened. She might have become somewhat emotionally distant, but that was minor in comparison to the damage the trauma of her childhood could have done. She was also strong, capable, and compassionate. She was the big sister to the children of the base. Kevin knew

they'd miss her terribly when they flew overseas. The choice to go with her had been a hard one, but it was one he wouldn't regret.

Life was too precious to let it drown in past regrets.

Like that fateful flight with Nick and Riley across the country. It wasn't often he let himself think about it anymore. Who would've thought the same woman who had that short fuse and rough exterior would soften up so much over the years? Her workaholic nature had not faded so much as matured with her mothering duties, and the kids had cooled her once-hot temper. And Nick... Kevin smiled to himself. Nick had been a child in a grown man's body, which was good in some ways and bad in others. He'd been self-doubting and immature, unsure of who he was. Now he was still light-hearted and playful, but self-assured and mature. He'd been a kid then. These days, he was a man. A proud and caring father to his children.

His thoughts drifted to the only blood family he had left in the world, Brian. Brian, who had come as nothing but a shell of who he once had been. He'd lost his wife, his children, and, as a result, his faith. That loss of faith had shaken his very foundation. Depression had consumed his cousin, and Kevin worried he'd never come back again completely. Yet, in the end, he had. Leighanne and the twins would never be forgotten or replaced. Instead, Gretchen had helped him heal the holes they'd left behind. She, over time, had to overcome her denial about her own husband's demise. She had to find her own reasons to move forward in life. Just as she'd helped Brian, Brian had guided her back to happiness. The two gave each other reasons to hope and dream once again.

Kevin grunted as he finished tightening down the solar panel, his biceps flexing under the hot sun. Everything about today made him feel so nostalgic. Or maybe it was the fact that he'd finally confirmed to himself and Gabby that he *was* leaving with her. The others didn't know yet. He planned to tell them towards the end of the celebration dinner. He only hoped there was something left for his surrogate daughter to find. She deserved at least that. She'd lost so much. All he wanted was for her to *gain* something.

Maybe if there isn't, we can look for the other groups of survivors, finally, he mused, glancing up. The sky was ablaze with hues of pinks and reds as dusk began to creep upon the base.

It was his fault that they'd never sought out anyone else. Kevin had felt it was more prudent to work on their home so it could last in the long term. After everything they'd been through, a time of peace seemed to be the best medicine to heal. No one had ever come to the base again, not since the UK group had heard their desperate broadcast so many years before. He sometimes wondered if anyone had managed to survive long enough to see the zombies finally fall apart in their respective countries. Had any managed to keep living after starting

civilization over, as they had? There was no way to tell. But perhaps they were overdue to find out.

Slowly, he climbed back down the ladder from the roof, smirking to himself as he heard his bones pop in places. Age was beginning to finally creep up on him, it seemed. Long ago, he'd taught Brian and AJ how their solar-powered system worked, just to be safe. He would go over it again as a refresher course soon. Not that he thought anything would go wrong here. He had complete faith in everyone. They were strong, and they were survivors. Just because the undead were gone, it didn't mean that sort of thing went away. No. It stayed with you. Buried deep until you needed that sort of strength again one day.

"Kids! It's getting dark! We need you to go in and clean up for the celebration dinner!" Brian called out, addressing all of the children at once, rather than just his own.

Josh tagged Eve one last time with a mischievous grin before running back towards his house, his little sister Leslie trying to catch up behind him. Eve laughed and rolled her eyes as she looked around for Kayleigh. Once she spotted her sister, she grabbed her hand, and the two ran together to where their father was waiting. The only one left was little Asha McLean. Asha was dragging along her teddy bear as she began to run home, only to miss some pebbles and slip, tumbling backwards to the ground. Kevin rushed over to her as she began to snifle. The grass was soft, and so she wasn't hurt, thankfully.

"Asha!"

She gazed up at him with her big brown eyes, soulful as her father's beneath her dark curls. "Hi, Kevvy."

"You okay there?" He'd never say it, but he had a soft spot for Asha, the sweetheart of all the kids - ironically, the complete opposite of her parents. "I don't see any boo-boos."

The little girl held up her bear, its head now hanging by a few threads. "But-but Mister Bear!"

Kevin took it with gentle hands and looked it over. "You know, Riley is a master surgeon when it comes to teddy bears. How about I bring this to her, and by tomorrow, he'll be good as new."

Her eyes shone as she smiled softly. "Really?"

He kissed the top of her head and helped her up. "Really. No go home before your mom and dad worry. I'll make sure Riley takes care of Mister Bear for you."

Asha hugged his legs tightly. "Love you, Kevvy!"

Watching her run off before heading towards the Carter house, Kevin chuckled. He was always going to be the father of the base, despite being the one with no children of his own. Though he supposed that was slowly morphing into grandfather of the base. Either way, that was okay. Like a father, he knew when he could leave his kids because they had the world in their capable hands. No one knew for sure what the future would bring. He only knew what thing.

Whatever it was, they would keep living.

Chapter 120

*This one's for the mothers who have lost a child.
This one's for the gypsies who left their hearts behind.
This is for the strangers sleeping in my heart.
They take what they want, and leave while it's still dark.*

No one is glamorously lonely all by themselves.

*This is a song for The Undead.
This is the music for one last cry.
This is a prayer that tomorrow will help me leave the past behind.
It's a song for The Undead.*

*This one's for the bridesmaid, never the bride.
This one's for dreamers who've locked their faith inside.
And this is for the widows who think there's only one.
For the dying fathers who never told their sons.*

No one is glamorously lonely. Follow your heart.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Ten years after Infernal Friday

“Hey, who’s up for gator!” AJ asked cheerfully, once again using a wheelchair, at Selena’s insistence, to give his ankle a break for the night. He smirked at the platter at the center of the table.

The group of thirteen was seated around the table at the club, still their go-to place for special occasions. Flowers had been hung around the room, as well as spare cloth turned into ribbons to decorate and celebrate. Gretchen had just sat down, with Brian at her side and her two daughters at the other. They’d had to

push two tables together now so it could accommodate everyone. Beside the Littrells sat the Carters. Josh and Leslie next to Kayleigh Jo and Evette, then Riley and Nick at her right. Of course, at one head of the table was Kevin, in his rightful place. At his right hand was AJ, then Selena and, of course, little Asha. Gabby sat the other head of the table, in the place that had once been her mother's, with Howie beside her.

Two white candles were lit, one at each end. They served as a small memorial for two of the original ten who had been lost, but not forgotten. Never once would they be forgotten. Their names would live on little KJ Littrell, and their memories would stay on in those they left behind. Gabby smiled. She was sure her mother would be happy with how things had turned out for them. She had survived, as Jo had pleaded for her to do with her dying breath.

Asha wrinkled her nose. "Ewwww."

Selena chuckled, rolling her eyes at her husband. "You're gonna make it so the kids don't eat any, and I don't fancy the idea of leftover alligator for a week."

"Is it like the ally-gator from *Peter Pan*?" Josh grinned from across the table. Riley always read stories to the kids before bedtime, and that particular one had always been her son's favorite. "Did it tick-tock too?"

Plates got passed around so everyone could get served. Nick shook his head. "The one in *Peter Pan* tick-tocked cause it ate a clock."

Riley was fixing her children's places as she glanced over. "And your father forgot to point out that it's a crocodile in *Peter Pan*, not an alligator. They're similar, though."

"Before we start eating..." Brian spoke up once the platters had been set down and everyone was served. "Let's give thanks."

Hands joined all around the table, big and small. Their heads bowed. Brian hesitated for a moment so that his eyes met AJ's. He remembered a similar moment, only then their kindred feelings had been because of a shared lack of faith. AJ smiled knowingly, thinking of that same day. Something had brought them all together, and he was thankful for it. So much could have gone wrong. Their two heads lowered so the former reverend could start the prayer.

"Heavenly Father," Brian began, "we thank You for this day, for this feast and blessings on this special anniversary. We thank You for watching over us for these past ten years, giving us the strength and spirit to survive and allowing us to do so. You have answered all our prayers in so many ways. We ask that You may continue to watch over us and that You will guide Riley and Nick's new baby safely into the world when it arrives. On this anniversary of when the world was

changed, we are never more thankful of Your watchful eye and guiding hand. In Your name, we give our thanks. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone chorused, as they looked up.

“Aaaaaaymen!” Asha chimed, followed by laughter.

“Okay, everyone, let’s eat,” Kevin said, looking around. “And for those sketchy about the gator, Gretchen cooked one of the seagulls Nick shot down the other day.” He smirked. “Since we know his fishing is really playtime in the water.”

“Hey!” Nick pouted as laughter rang around the table yet again. “I try to catch fish. They just don’t always bite.”

“Could be that your singing chases the fish away,” Howie joked between bites. “Guess they’re not Michael Jackson fans.”

Gretchen smirked. “He could sing about the *L-I-B-R-A-R-Y* instead...”

Nick blushed and ducked his head, focusing intently on his food as he ate. “You’re not gonna defend my honor, Rye?”

“I love you, but not in this case ‘cause...” She grinned. “I’d like to see it happen too.”

“Dad! Josh is making faces!”

“Josh, not at the dinner table.”

“Tattletale.”

Kayleigh snickered. “Ooh, you got in trouble.”

Brian smiled down at his younger daughter. “Kayleigh, eat your dinner.”

Evette ate her dinner quietly, lost in thought for a few moments. The chatter died down some as everyone enjoyed the meal. “Mom, do you think other people will ever find us? Like Selena’s friends did?”

Everyone at the table turned their gazes towards the oldest of the children. Kevin was somewhat thankful she’d brought it up. It would be a nice way to ease into his own personal announcement. Gabby smiled at him. She needed him more than the others did now. And she was the one he couldn’t bear to lose. Maybe they’d be able to answer Eve’s question for certain once they left.

“I’m not sure, sweetheart.”

“I’m going to find out,” Kevin said, causing the attention to shift to him. “I have an announcement to make. In two weeks, Gabby will be leaving for England so she can see what happened to the other group. See if anyone is still alive. But when she does, I’m going with her. We might try and check out other countries if we don’t find anyone in London. Dr. Kwak In-Su had said the immunity was spread around the world, and I still have the list of countries. It’s time we see if we can’t bring what’s left of humanity together.”

“You’re LEAVING?” Josh blurted.

“We won’t be gone forever,” Gabby gently reassured them. “I promise we’ll be back, and we could have more people with us.”

Nick looked between the two of them. “Just the two of you?”

Brian frowned. “Are you sure about this? We have a good thing here; we’re doing so well...”

“You guys are,” Gabby explained. “I want more. I *know* there has to be more waiting out there for me. I have to find out. I was going to go alone; I can still go alone,” she told them firmly, eyeing Kevin.

He nodded. “I’d never ask any of you to leave. Everyone here is settled, and we can’t drag the children on a journey across the ocean. Riley’s still pregnant, and even if she wasn’t, I’d never ask to bring a newborn on a plane. Not when we’re safe and sound here.” Kevin sighed softly. “This is the right decision. You’ll be fine here. I wouldn’t go if I didn’t think that.”

“Makes sense to me. Go get yourself laid, kid,” AJ teased with a smirk before looking at Selena. “You know, if you want to go with him, see the others...”

She shook her head. “I won’t leave Asha behind, and I bloody hell won’t have her come with. My life’s with you, even when you manage to cripple yourself and scare me half to death.”

Riley nodded at Gabby and Kevin. “I understand. And you know, I’d almost wanna go if I wasn’t still incubating,” she joked. “But seriously, just be careful. Both of you. The zombies might be gone, but that doesn’t mean be stupid.”

Gabby smirked at Riley. “I won’t be stupid, scout’s honor.”

Leslie looked at Kevin with sad blue eyes. “You’ll come back?”

“I promise.”

“I say we have a toast,” Gretchen proposed as she held up a glass. Kevin had uncorked an old bottle of wine, but she, Riley, AJ, and the kids were drinking

water. “To ten years as a family. We might not be conventional, but we’ve made it together. And to ten years more... with all of us and those Gabby and Kevin find scattered around the world.”

“To ten years more!” Brian followed.

“Ten years more!” echoed around the room, and glasses clinked.

In a world reborn, one could only look forward toward the future. The scars left upon all of them from Reaper’s Sabbath and the Day of Unholy Resurrection would never fade away. In a sense, no one wanted them to. If the pain was forgotten, history might someday repeat itself, far beyond their lifetime. Instead, they made sure their story would live on, a song of the painful lessons learned. Life was a precious gift that none of them ever intended to waste again. As the Bible once foretold, there was a time for everything. Ten years prior, it had been the time for countless people to die. It had been a time for those left to fight. And it had been a time for the dead to rise.

Now was their time of peace.

And with each new tomorrow, they would find ways to leave that past behind.

*Tomorrow the sun will shine and dry the tears in your eyes.
Suddenly love comes alive.
For one last cry,
Just one last cry...*

The End