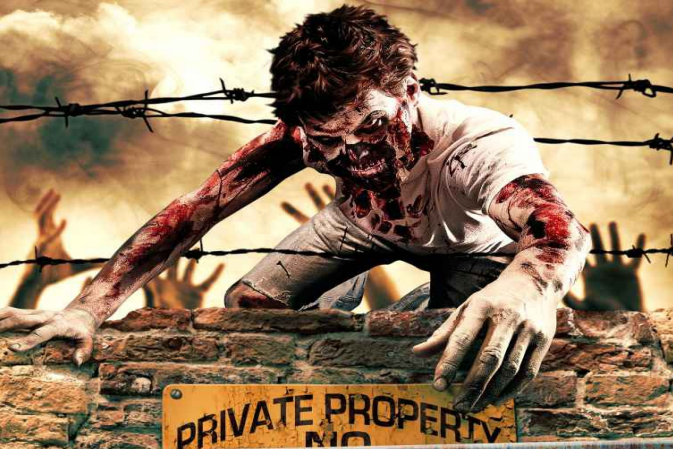




ZOMBIE RAGE

A WALKING PLAGUE NOVEL

J.R. RAIN
AND
ELIZABETH BASQUE

ZOMBIE RAGE

The Walking Plague Trilogy

Book #2

by

J.R. RAIN

and

Elizabeth Basque

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ZOMBIE RAGE

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Dedication

The authors dedicate this book to the
zombie survivors.

Zombie Rage

Chapter One

*“Contamination. Chaos.
Cannibalism.”*

If I had to describe in just three words what my life had become, those would be the ones. But it wasn't me who just spoke them. It was Carla the Cop, my almost-girlfriend.

“It's turning into a plague,” she added.

Just a few days ago, my life had

been normal.

I had been fairly happy just working as a park ranger, parenting my fourteen-year-old daughter, and enjoying the relative simplicity of my routine existence.

Then all hell had broken loose. Literally.

“The infected. The crazed. The *abominable*,” said my brother’s friend, Mike, his words reaching me as if from a great distance. Also, I realized he was talking about me, too.

It was true. *Because I was one of them.*

The wretched course of my infection was the most horrifying thing I’d ever experienced. God, I was so sick that I

was starting to not care if I kept my sanity—or even my life. Yes, if not for my daughter—who was the center of my universe—I would have had much darker thoughts than the ones that currently *plagued* me.

A plague. Yes. That's what this was turning into. One thing the infection did for me was jolt me out of my own small and perhaps selfish existence to consider the big picture.

“It's a global threat to humanity,” Carla continued.

I nodded, but felt unable to vocalize actual words. *And that very much scared me.*

My brother and his friend—both lieutenant commanders in the United

States Navy—had unwittingly brought the infection to my house. They were two of just a handful of people who had come in contact with mysterious meteors that had crashed from the heavens. They'd become so sick and irrational that I'd had to imprison them in my cellar—for their own safety, as well as mine and my daughter's.

I still didn't know if their forced captivity was right or wrong, but I'd justified my own actions as drastic steps that I had taken to protect my brother from those who were looking for him, and to stop the infection from spreading.

“Apparently, we will all get our turns to play judge, jury and executioner,” Mike said. He looked at

me for a moment, as if he wondered if what he was saying was registering with me.

I nodded. Above all, I had to protect my daughter, Anna. She was my life, and my reason for living. She was what I was fighting for, even now, in my sickness.

I tried to say my daughter's name and it came out as, "Ah-ah." I tried again, and gave up. I was so sick. So very sick.

Anna wiped my brow. She was acting so brave. But I saw the tears shimmering in her eyes.

Mike continued, "Accounts of these same symptoms appearing in people exposed to the meteors were followed

by actual cannibalism—this was reported at international locations where these meteors landed. People who came in contact with the rocks developed symptoms. Like mine and now, *his*.” Mike gave me a sharp look.

“It’s like a freaking monster movie exploded in Los Angeles,” Jared said.

“You mean the *world*,” said Anna.

Sadly, I knew it was just a matter of time before I, too, became a monster.

“I may be a bit of a science geek,” Anna continued, “but has anyone noticed that no women have been reported to be infected?”

Her comment caused a lot of eyebrows to be raised. Not mine, of course, as I was doing all I could to

remain sane. Carla was the first to respond, “Wow,” said Carla. “Nice catch. What are your thoughts about this, Anna?”

“Well, what if—because of the differences in our physiology or emotional makeup from men—women might be immune to the infection?”

“Interesting speculation,” Mike said. “We have discreetly found out that people all over the world are becoming infected, but you’re right, every victim, that we know of, has been male. At least the ones that we know of who are eating other humans and infecting others, and who are, we assume, multiplying this unprecedented catastrophe.”

I was now having some trouble

following the conversation. During this period of my sickness, I had no idea to what extent I would lose my ability to discern right from wrong. Truth was, no one knew what to expect from this outbreak. Perhaps the military knew more, perhaps the Agents in Black. Perhaps no one would ever completely comprehend the far-reaching consequences of what had happened...or was about to happen.

Sweet Jesus.

“You’re being very quiet, Jack. How are you doing?” I heard Carla say, an edge of concern in her voice.

I still knew that I was Jack, only I didn’t want her to know just how sick I felt. So I didn’t reply.

As I agonized over what had happened and worried about what was to come, I sat with them at the kitchen table in the Los Feliz house where I sometimes lived, a place that was usually full of warmth and memories of good times for Anna and me.

“Jack?” I heard my name again as if from far away, like an echo, and recognized where I was. But I felt feverish, drugged.

I tried to focus on my hazy surroundings, to not let familiar recede from my recognition. We were in a beautiful, old Spanish-style house, set back from the street and overlooking Los Angeles. The faint creamy-pink color stucco home had been lovingly crafted

with arched wooden doors and Mexican-tiled halls throughout and a terracotta tile roof where doves nested under the eaves and cooed in the mornings. The house wasn't mine, not in my name, and that was a good thing. Otherwise, I would most certainly have been found by now, and perhaps wiped off the face of the earth by the Agents in Black.

“Earth to Jack,” Mike said. “Come in, please.”

“Snap out of it, Jack!” Carla said.

I sat with my elbows on the table, my head buried in my hands, and tried to concentrate on the conversation unfolding around me. My daughter, Anna, sat next to me, along with her

boyfriend, Jared, my good friend Carla the cop across from me, and finally, Mike to my right.

Mike had been infected along with my brother Joe and I had ended up drowning him. Yes, drowning him. Mike, of course, had survived that drowning and for the first time since he was infected, he seemed normal, hopefully cured. He now showed no symptoms of the illness. So the general consensus was that I would have to be drowned, too, if I wanted to save my sanity. And my life.

Jesus, what an option. A horrible, shitty option.

I moaned and held up my hand for them to see.

“Look at that! It’s getting worse,” Anna said and got a package of frozen peas from the freezer and laid it on my hand. “Maybe this will help.”

The pain in my hand was excruciating, but I didn’t really care. I contemplated the bluish veins creeping up from my hand to my arm, probably toward my heart. I didn’t care. My head ached, my body ached, and I was hungry. I was very, very angry. Mostly, I strove for emotional control.

“We’re losing him,” Jared said from seemingly afar.

“No, he’ll be okay,” Anna replied, equally far away.

As far as I knew, my brother Joe, who had been infected along with Mike,

was still out there somewhere, getting sicker, but gaining the enormous physical strength the infection presented after a period of severe illness, all while slowly going insane. Before Mike was “cured,” he had actually been obsessed with feeding on human flesh.

All of these thoughts went through my feverish mind in a haze. I tried to keep focused, to keep caring. I cared, but I didn’t care, too.

So weird.

I wanted so desperately to keep my daughter safe. And I cared for Carla, too. Who else? Jared, and even Mike, although just hours ago, he’d wanted to kill Anna. And, of course, I cared for my little brother, Joey.

I didn't know what to do and I was so sick that I almost didn't give a damn. *Almost*. But I had to give a damn. God, I wanted to live, but at the same time, I was losing...interest.

Jesus.

“Dad, I'm counting on you to keep it together,” Anna said. “We all are.”

I tried to hang onto that more than anything else.

“Jack, are you hungry?” Carla asked.

I nodded. The growing fatigue, I knew, could only be cured by feeding. Feeding on...human flesh. To be more specific, gray matter. *Brains*.

Lord help me.

“Want an ice cream sandwich?”

Anna asked me. “We have lots.”

I shook my head, gathered my thoughts. Or tried to. Mostly, my thoughts were on the gray stuff. I looked absently down at my hand. It had been cut a couple of days ago by a punch I’d delivered to my own brother. I was guessing this infection, or disease, was spread through blood contact. I didn’t even want to risk touching anyone.

Mike was absolutely convinced he was cured. That meant...what? I couldn’t remember.

“Hey, bro, come back to us,” Mike said. His voice came from so far away.

“You got better,” I heard Anna say to Mike. “Does he have to get better the same way?”

“I’m fresh out of alternate ideas,” Mike replied and Anna gave a little cry. She could have been weeping from atop one of the distant hills behind us, she sounded so far away.

The voices continued, all sounding distant, hollow, empty. At least, to my ears.

“Let’s weigh our options,” said Carla, “and be very cautious with our actions.”

“I can’t bear this,” my daughter said. Jared, her boyfriend, held her hand tightly.

I could barely pay attention to the conversation. My head ached so viciously that I couldn’t think of much else but the *thump-thump* of it all.

I'm fucked, I thought.

I was also thirsty as hell but could no longer drink any form of liquid. I vaguely realized that I should be seriously dehydrated by now. Most of all, my hand hurt like someone was driving a railroad spike through it, although the cold pack had alleviated some of the pain.

I looked at Carla and reason left my mind. I wanted her. Not sexually. I wanted to *taste* her. Taste her *skin*, her *blood*...her *brain*...I shook my head again. I decisively glanced the other way, out the window and into the night, but only saw my reflection in the kitchen window. My own face looked desperate, haunted, and a shadow of my former

self. I might have even had drool at the corners of my mouth.

“Dad, are you even *listening* to us?” Anna’s voice brought me back.

I forced my mind back into the conversation and turned my face her way.

“Daddy?”

Daddy, she called me Daddy, I thought to myself. Like when she was little.

“What?” I asked blankly, forcing myself to cough up a one-word answer. Except it came out like a growl. *I’m a monster.*

“Mike says we should contact Uncle Joe,” she said. Her eyes fell on mine with growing concern.

“Okay,” I said simply. Was that the right word? My mind was wandering again, leaving logic behind. All I could think of was the smell of humans, and the hunger that raged within me.

Anna was sitting next to me. I could smell my daughter’s scent, and in a perverse way, I wanted it. *Can’t be right*, I told myself. *She’s your daughter, for Christ’s sake*. But my hand, my good hand, reached out and pawed her. She shrank back, startled.

Jared jumped up and pulled her back. Carla took no chances. She switched into cop mode, jumped up and twisted my arm behind my back. I cried out in pain. It was my infected arm! But she didn’t release me.

“What are you doing?” she barked, not backing down, not one bit.

I tried to apologize but my throat and lips couldn't form the words. I could still think but I was unable to articulate. It was maddening and more frightening than the pain in my arm. I had lost the ability to communicate with words, a basic human function.

Once again, I desperately tried to gather my thoughts. I loved my daughter with all my heart, more than anything or anyone in the world. How could I have wanted to hurt her?

God, I am going insane.

Carla squinted at me, clear intent in her eyes that I had crossed some line. She knew, damn her. *She knew.*

In the next instant, I felt rage for Carla, who had been nothing but good to me through all of this. I lunged at her. I didn't care about the pain in my twisted arm. I wanted her to leave me alone, and at the same time, I wanted to taste her flesh. I turned and lunged at her, my mouth wide open.

Carla immediately cold-cocked me with her handgun.

Chapter Two

I slowly came back into consciousness.

My eyes were still closed, but I

could feel that I was lying on hard, cold cement that did cool the back of my head a little. I turned on my side. I didn't care where I was. I just wanted my face to feel the same cool relief. It felt good, the only part of my body or mind that was soothed.

The smell of the cellar and the darkness came to me slowly. My right hand hurt like hell, and I realized my left hand was chained to one of the beams.

I was hazy but I managed to sit up and look around. Where was I? *You're locked in the cellar. Why?* I tried to concentrate but my mind wasn't cooperating. *Think, Jack.*

The last thing I remembered was sitting with everyone at the table,

listening to them all trying to figure something out. A cure. Because I was sick. I wasn't sick, I was just hungry. I tugged at my cuffed hand. Carla must have done it.

God, my head was on fire. *What was going on?* My hand hurt, too. I tried to rub it, but my other hand was chained, too. So I settled with rubbing the inflamed hand on my jeans.

Struggling now to concentrate, I recalled something about Mike. He had been cured, apparently. How? By drowning? Sweet Jesus. Anna had come up with this idea. I remembered looking at her with an insane lust for feeding. I remembered Carla restraining me. *Damn Carla.*

No, I tried to reason, Carla was good. *Wasn't she?* She'd saved me from hurting Anna, who was the center of my existence. I was in the wrong. But my rage at being confined overtook me and I pitched forward to get free. I felt a sharp pain in my shackled hand, but I didn't care. I didn't care at all. I was *hungry*.

I was mostly gone, but I fought for reason. Mike had been cured, it seemed, by drowning. Suddenly, I knew what they were going to do. They were going to drown me, too. And I would die. Or at least I would be different than I was now, and I wasn't sure I wanted that.

Part of me, a tiny part, was still fighting for life but mostly, I just wanted to get the hell out of there and

have...satisfaction. Food. Flesh. Warm brain. *God, what the hell was wrong with me?*

Suddenly, I heard voices up above and I looked toward the cellar stairs. I cocked my head toward the voices, and my mind went away...far away.



Chapter Three

Carla sat with Mike in the living room. Both were silent for the moment, each lost in their own thoughts, each puzzling out the situation.

“Mike, I’m a good career cop,” Carla said. “But this is personal, too, so

I'm glad you're here to help figure out this mess."

Mike nodded, let out a lot of air. "We're going to have to do the same thing to Jack that he did to me."

"I'm..." She looked away, tried again: "I'm almost sure...but not a hundred percent."

Mike knew that for the first time since he'd been infected, he felt human again. Yes, he'd fed while he was out. Up in Griffith Park. He'd gotten a hold of a couple of transients, but he couldn't remember if he'd killed them or had just bitten them. That part was hazy. He felt horrible about it. And worried. He had spread this disease. *Or killed*. How many more people were infected by

now? He had no way of knowing. The details were just too hazy.

But Carla was right. Was it the gunshot wound that had cured him or the drowning? Just hours earlier, he'd experienced both. Thankfully, the zoo vet, at Jack's request, had removed the bullet in his side.

"I don't think the bullet would have killed me," Mike said. "I mean, I was *strong*, Carla. Extremely strong. And tough. And vicious."

Carla shrugged, "Easy, tiger. You would have probably been killed if you'd been shot in the head."

"Either way, I remember being conscious but not conscious," he told her. "And the water filling my lungs and

then just kind of fading away.” He paused, remembering it all again for the dozenth time in the last few hours. So unreal. So bizarre. He shook his head at the memory and continued speaking, “I then remember choking, gagging. My mind was awake again, somehow, in a cognizant way instead of an instinctive one. I don’t know what happened but it took all my strength to turn onto my side and get the water out of my lungs.”

Working as a cop in the Hollywood area, Carla had seen and heard a lot of crazy things, but she’d never heard anything like this. Mike’s gaze on her never wavered during this description; she knew he was telling the truth. It was a hideous truth. *Is this what it’s going to*

come to in order to bring Jack back?
she wondered. *Will he have to really be
drowned to save his life?*

“It’s ugly, I know.” Mike seemed to read her mind. “But I’m also thinking about Joe. I was personally on the verge of...” he sought the right words, “...on the verge of not caring. At all. Jack is a few days behind us with this...whatever it is. He may still have a little time. And he’s safe, for now. Not happy, but safe.”

“What about Joe, his brother?”

“Joe’s running out of time.”

“So what are you thinking, Mike?”

“I’m thinking Anna’s idea of contacting Joe is the best we’ve come up with,” Mike answered. “Only, I’d bet that by now he’s probably beyond

reason.”

“I guess you know better than anyone else about Joe,” she said.

“Right. Joe and I had a connection, an understanding, if you will, about our *condition*. I could try this drowning cure on Joe, if it’s not too late. But I think I will need to first fool him into thinking I’m, well, still infected.”

She didn’t like it. Who would?

“You could be killed, or, if things get out of hand, you could kill Jack’s brother.”

Mike picked up his glass of water and gulped down half of it. Water had never tasted so sweet to him. He relished another mouthful and swallowed. He looked at her. “I’m close to Joe. We’re buddies. Seen and done

everything together. But tell me if you don't think it's the most logical choice here. We don't have much else. If there's a chance to save Joe, then we need to do it."

Carla thought of Jack in the cellar, probably trying to tear his hand through the damn cuffs. She thought of Anna upstairs, going crazy with worry. Mike did have a point. Jack hadn't progressed to the point Mike had—and where Joe probably was at now. It was a great risk, but, yeah, they were out of other options.

"Okay," she locked eyes with Mike. "Call Joe and talk him into meeting with you."

That is, of course, she thought, if Jack's brother was even coherent.

Chapter Four

Joe Carter parked down the street from the cottage where David Stetson and the Agent in Black were staying. Joe had gotten the call from the Agent—Cole, as he now called himself—and had decided to accept the invitation to come to them instead of turning himself in to the naval base at Seal Beach.

It sounded like a good plan, Joe thought. The three of them had been changed. Joe and Stetson were feeling great now, and they just had to get Cole (who was no longer an Agent of the

CREW, everyone was sure) through the rough stage before Cole could feel better. Then the three of them would return to the base and, with their strength and heightened senses, take over the damn place.

Joe left the stolen car on a side street and ambled down the road to the cottage. Stetson had promised food, and Joe was hungry. He'd never been so hungry in his life and he relished the scent of the people inside the small beach homes as he passed them. *Not yet*, he told himself firmly. He wanted to feed, but Stetson had promised him a good meal and Joe had agreed not to do anything foolish before he got to the cottage. *Not yet. Soon, though*, he

grinned.

Scientist David Stetson let Joe Carter into the small beachfront cottage. Joe saw the filet mignons scattered on the kitchen counter and wolfed down three of them before he did anything else. It wasn't quite what he was craving, but it was good enough for now.

Stetson smiled as he watched Joe tear into the raw meat. Joe felt good knowing he wasn't alone in this. Somewhere in his mind, he knew that normal people didn't devour raw meat, but he was beyond those people now. He was strong, and he was smart.

Stetson waited for Joe to finish. Joe licked his lips to get most of the juicy leftovers, then Stetson led Joe into the

living room where Agent Cole lay.

Cole was now bound hand and foot with strong cords and duct tape. His mouth was taped. He wouldn't want to eat or drink anything through this phase of the "transformation" as Stetson now called it. It would only be about twenty-four hours more, and then Cole would be like himself and Joe.

Joe took a seat across from Agent Cole. Joe smiled, nodded. "This son of a bitch is one of us now," he commented heartily.

"Yes," Stetson answered, noticing Joe's energy and the red streaks in his eyes. "It's only a matter of time now."

Cole stopped struggling for a moment and cocked his head toward the

two men seated across from him. Suddenly, a low, guttural sound came from his taped mouth and he tried to break free from his bonds. He *wanted* them.

Joe just grinned at him. “I wonder which is worse, being handcuffed in a cellar or being tied up like him?”

“Is that what happened to you?” asked Stetson.

“Yeah. My brother did it. Until I got better. Then I escaped.” He explained how he and Mike had been locked up while they were going through what Agent Cole was currently experiencing. He also explained how, when he and Mendoza were given a chance to clean up, he’d swiped a bobby pin from the

bathroom and later used it to unlock the handcuffs and escape.

“Where’s your friend now?
Mendoza?”

Joe shrugged. “Don’t know. I was going to turn myself in. Anyhow, I’m glad you called. So, are you going to tell me your plan?”

Stetson jerked his head toward Agent Cole. “We wait until he’s better, then he’ll bring us back.”

Joe blinked. “Back? Back to the base?”

“Yes.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No. Listen to me.” Stetson leaned forward. Excitement shone in his eyes. “Our Agent in Black here is, or was, one

of the most powerful men on the planet. When he gets better, he'll want to take command again. I think he can pull it off. And then..."

Suddenly, Joe's cell phone rang.

"Speak of the devil," Joe said. "It's Mike Mendoza."

"Answer it."

Joe did.

Chapter Five

When Mike hung up from his call with Joe, he caught Carla up to date on Dr. David Stetson's "plan." Carla immediately said, "We can't let this

happen.”

“No,” Mike said. “We can’t.”

“They really want to take over the Seal Beach Base?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Jesus.”

Mike was certain that Joe believed he, Mike, was still transformed into a monster. Mike had said all the right words, pretending agreement and excitement with the idea of taking over the base in Seal Beach.

“I’m fairly certain I can handle Joe,” said Mike. “Try out the cure on him.”

“Maybe,” replied Carla. “If you plan carefully. Remember, he will be a lot stronger than you.”

“Yes, Joe still trusts me. I have to

use that trust to my advantage.”

Except Joe wasn't alone, as Carla well knew. “But taking on *two* of these monsters, Mike?”

The lieutenant commander shrugged. “What can I say? I have to do this.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Carla tried to be brave, but Mike shook his head.

“You know you have to stay here. Anna's upstairs, going crazy with worry over her dad. And then there's Jack.”

Carla knew he spoke the truth. God knows, it might be only a matter of time before someone comes: the police, the military, the Agents in Black. Or, even worse, more of the *infected*. She wasn't much by herself, but she could sure as

hell shoot a gun and keep Anna and the others safe.

For now.

Mike suddenly stood; the resolve in his eyes was obvious, “I have to go now. You take care.”

“You’ll call? I have to know what’s going on.”

“It only takes an hour to get there, but I have to think about how to do this...this thing. I’ll call you within a few hours, or when I can.”

Mike knew Carla was Jack’s girl, but he gave her a big hug, anyway. He didn’t know who needed it more: him or her.

Chapter Six

I heard the front door close and looked up, listening for other movements. I was barely conscious of anything at all and I was far past caring. I was sicker than I had ever been in my life—except I didn't even give a damn about how miserable I felt.

Someone was in the kitchen. I could smell her. I licked my dry lips. At once, a tremendous rage filled me and an unstoppable urge to feed encompassed me. I plunged for the cellar stairs, only to be yanked back. I fell to the floor with a thump.

What the hell? I looked stupidly at

the handcuffs, as if I had forgotten about them. In fact, I *had* forgotten them.

Jesus.

I heard a sound in the kitchen. It was her. I could smell her. Enraged, I jumped up and lurched for the cellar stairs, only to be yanked back and I fell to the floor. *What the fuck?* I looked stupidly at the handcuffs. I had a strange sense of déjà vu, but couldn't quite remember why.

Maybe I could bite this off, I thought.

Then I heard noises coming from above, and the instinct to eat flesh overcame me, followed by uncontrollable anger.

I pitched toward the stairs, only to be yanked back.

I looked at my handcuffs in surprise.
I was a prisoner?

Chapter Seven

“I feel so hopeless!”

Anna paced back and forth in her bedroom, tears streaming down her face. Occasionally, she blew her nose. She plopped down on her bed next to Jared. He tried to put an arm around her but before he could, she was up and pacing again.

“Anna...” Jared started, but she interrupted him.

“I swear to God, Jared, if you tell

me to calm down one more time, I'm going to clock you!"

"I wasn't going to." Jared was hurt. Or maybe just frustrated. All he knew was that for the first time since they'd met, he couldn't calm her. He always could before this, but he was at a loss for what to do now.

"That's my father down there, a potentially flesh-eating maniac!" Anna burst into tears all over again. "How could I be calm?"

"I do know—"

"I don't think you really do," she said angrily, cutting him off. "If it were your dad...just try to put yourself in my shoes for once. My dad is a freakin' cannibal, or he would be, if he got

loose!”

Jared knew Anna was much closer to Jack than he was with his own father. His own father didn't really care that Jared had hardly been home for the last week. His own father, in fact, hadn't even checked to see if Jared was truly staying with friends or not.

He shook away these thoughts. It didn't matter. What mattered right now was *Anna*. Jared's job was to keep Anna calm, and stop her from doing anything rash. Above all, he was to keep her away from the cellar. Away from her father. He chided himself that he'd only accomplished two out of three goals, but he wasn't going to give up now.

Chapter Eight

Carla needed something to occupy herself, get her mind off of all of this. After Mike left, she went to the kitchen to make something for the three of them to eat. She could hear Jack downstairs. Raging. Struggling to escape.

She couldn't help wondering how much damage he was causing to himself. She was concerned that he'd really injure himself. She also worried about him somehow getting free.

That would be very, very bad.

They'd barricaded the door from the outside, but Carla didn't think that would

stop Jack if he chewed through his own hand or something. Carla shuddered at the thought. *Lord help us all.*

More than anything, his imprisonment in the basement would only buy her time. Time to get Anna out and all of them safely away.

Everything is going to be fine.

This was becoming Carla's mantra, and she repeated it every time she heard Jack grunt or pull at his cuffs. Still, a piece of her heart broke off every time she imagined that he was never again going to be the Jack she had known.

She finished making the tuna sandwiches as quickly as she could, doing her best not to flinch each time she heard Jack grunt through the basement

door, and quickly went up to Anna's room. She tapped on the door and pushed it open.

"You guys know this door is supposed to be left open, right?"

"Sorry," Anna said in a teenage sarcastic manner that meant she wasn't really sorry. "Thanks for the food."

"You're welcome." Carla casually sat down in a chair and waited until Anna ate her sandwich, and Jared ate the two that she'd made for him—growing boy and all that.

Carla considered. Anna deserved the truth, but her life had also been turned upside down. The girl was barely containing herself. Did she need to know that Mike would have to face two of

these monsters? That he might very well die trying to save her uncle? No, she decided. Anna didn't need to know everything, but Anna was smart, and she would want an answer.

“Mike's going to the base for your Uncle Joe. He's walking into a dangerous situation,” she explained to the fourteen year old. “We decided that it would be best if you weren't there. And besides, how could we leave your dad all alone?”

“Good point,” Anna said. “I don't want to leave my dad for a second.”

“I could have gone with Mike,” Carla continued, “I could have but you have to realize that you haven't been...well, you haven't done exactly as

your father wanted you to in the last few days. And, as much as you might not like it, I'm in charge for the moment."

"Fine."

Typical teenager.

Carla regarded Anna with a tenderness she'd never felt before.

"Honey, I care about your father. You know that, right?"

"I know." She rolled her eyes. Anna wanted to hear about her father's romantic life about as much as she wanted to hear about zombies.

Carla dismissed the eye roll. "So if I care about your father you know I care about you. And Jared, of course."

Jared was getting used to staying out of this family's domestic and dramatic

affairs. He'd been listening, watching Anna, but he'd held his tongue so far.

“Thank you,” was all he said. It seemed to him that nobody understood he was under pressure as well. It was all about Anna, Anna's dad, Anna's uncle, Carla and even Mike. He understood only one thing: he loved Anna with all his heart and he wasn't going to leave her. No matter what.

Carla continued, “Mike and I discussed this at length.” She held a hand up when Anna started to protest. “I know, I know. You love your dad. You love your uncle. This is a lot, hon, I understand. But if we're going to help your dad, Mike has to cure your uncle.”

“How is he going to do it? Will

Uncle Joe suffer? Will it work?"

Jared automatically handed her another tissue as the tears welled up again.

"Mike's one of the good guys now," Carla replied. "He's on your uncle's side, and more importantly, he's on your dad's side. After all, your dad saved his life."

Anna sobbed quietly and nodded.

"Anna, if we can get your uncle and your dad better, then maybe we can help others, too."

"But if you think that...that drowning is the cure, then why didn't you just do it to..." She couldn't finish but Carla knew Anna was referring to her father.

"Listen to me, Anna, listen to

reason.” It was the closest Carla had come to an order with the teen. “Joe has been infected longer than your dad. We have no idea how this condition will play out. But we’re sure, pretty sure, that this is what helped Mike. Joe may not have much time. And if it helps him, it’s better to help him first because your father is only in the first...stage.” Stage of what, Carla still wasn’t sure. But she knew her logic was sound.

“So, it’s not time to...do it yet?”

It being, of course, drowning her father. Carla shook her head and Anna’s face creased in understanding.

It was then that Jared finally took Anna’s hand. Anna held on tight. Carla’s reaction was a mixture of joy and

concern. Yes, they were both so young, but Carla could tell by their connection that this was no puppy love.

Chapter Nine

Mike had time to think during the drive down to Sunset Beach. He knew it would be smarter to take on Joe alone, and recalled again about how powerful he himself had been in that blood-thirsty state.

“A man’s got to know his limitations,” he said to himself, thinking of Clint Eastwood. In spite of the circumstances he smiled a little at the

quote. It would have been good to have Bad Ass Clint with him now. Or good ol' Bruce Willis.

As it was, he was alone and he was going to drown his best friend to save his friend's life. He hoped. He was mostly sure that was the cure.

In order to do this, he needed to get Joe alone. Mike remembered his previous heightened senses, especially that of smell—something which Joe and Stetson would surely pick up on. Most likely, they would catch Mike's scent as human again. That would be disastrous. So this shit that was coming down had to be quick and dirty.

Mike pulled onto the highway shoulder and got out of the car. Just to

his right, there was a small, private beach, but it was winter, so this particular beach wasn't too populated during the night. He felt it was safe enough.

He entered the restroom. He checked the toilets; there were only two in the men's room. The place was empty. He walked out onto the sandy beach. There were a few campfire rings made of large rocks. Mike prayed for luck. The first one was cleaned out. So was the second. He ventured a little further, and found that the third fire ring still had some firewood. One large piece of wood in particular. He hefted the weight of it. It would do.

Mike thanked whatever gods were

helping him and carried the large, heavy log into the restroom. He put the trash can into the larger handicapped stall and buried the wooden log underneath some used paper towels.

Mike washed his hands to get rid of the gritty charcoal from the half-burned log. He returned to his car. Other vehicles sped by at an alarming rate.

Everyone speeds in California, he thought to himself. He kept to the right side of the car and let the air out of the back right tire.

Then Mike Mendoza called his best Navy buddy, Joe Carter.

“I got a flat tire and the spare is bad.”

“So, how far away are you?” Joe

asked as he frowned into the phone.

“About eight miles,” Mike answered from the side of the highway. “I’d run the distance myself, it would be a piece of cake. But I’m not clothed for running. And the beaches are private around here, I’m pretty sure. Can you pick me up?”

Mike knew that was a lie, of course, as there were no private beaches in California. Hopefully Joe wouldn’t pick up on that.

If it’s not one thing, it’s another, Joe thought to himself. Joe had been ecstatic that Mike was coming down and was on board with their plan. Now they were going to have to be careful to not attract any attention whatsoever.

Sunset Beach was a kind of ritzy,

but also a sleepy, kick-back community and all they needed for their kind of party was one houseful of people—human flesh. Yes. *Yes.*

Joe was almost past self-control. He'd waited for Mike to come celebrate and now this. Mike needed Joe's help.

"Joe?" Mike's voice came through the cell phone. A wash of brief anger rushed through Joe's veins. There was a small amount of control left, though. If he had to pick up Mike, then so be it.

"I'm here," Joe said grimly.

Stetson was listening to Joe's half of the conversation with growing anxiety. Stetson was intelligent. He thought he smelled something fishy, and not from just the ocean nearby. He shook his head

at Joe, but Joe ignored him.

Perhaps it was fate that caused Joe to ignore the doctor/scientist in his mind. Instead of letting logic dictate his actions, emotion ruled him at the moment...and Mike was his friend. In either case, Joe got directions to where Mike said he was stranded and hung up.

“You’re sure about this?” Stetson asked.

“Of course, I’m sure,” Joe answered defensively. “But I really don’t want to drive the car I stole. Can’t take any chances.”

“There’s a car in the garage,” Stetson reasoned. “I think the keys are hanging by the door. It’s safe. Use it.”

Chapter Ten

Mike Mendoza waited by the bathroom door until he saw a car pull up behind his. He remained hidden in the shadows as he watched Joe get out and look around.

“*Joe?*” Mike made a retching sound.

“Mike, where are you?”

“I’m in the bathroom,” Mike said and coughed for good measure. “I’m sick, Joe. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Are you feeling okay?”

“You’re sick?” Joe frowned. Joe relished his strength now and almost

couldn't remember what it was like to feel ill. But maybe this was some phase of...whatever it was. "Maybe you shouldn't come with me, then." Joe felt a little guilty, but he and Stetson had plans that night for some decent flesh. The craving was overpowering.

"No, don't leave me here, please," Mike begged, gagging a little more. He had to lure Joe into the bathroom. This was his only chance. "I bet it was some...bad meat, you know? I've been really careful, but maybe that deer wasn't a good choice."

Joe Carter was torn. He was so hungry. He'd just driven a car that smelled of human flesh and he had to *eat*.

But Army buddies are for life, Joe reminded himself. And if he could just get Mike back to the cottage, well, if Mike didn't want to join them in their first nightly hunt, he could stay and babysit that son of a bitch Cole, the Agent in Black.

"You're in the bathroom by your car?" Joe asked.

Mike hid his relief. It was going to work. Had to. "Can you come in here? I think I need a little help to the car."

"All right," Joe agreed. "But you're gonna have to get better, man."

"I will, I know I will. I'm hungry, and I can smell..."

"Stop," Joe said. "I am, too, bro. I can barely stand it. On my way."

Joe could hear Mike groaning as he neared the restroom. *Shit*. He hadn't planned on this. All he could think of was getting Mike into the car and getting this over with, and then....

Joe's overpowering cravings left him completely unprepared when he entered the bathroom and Mike jumped out. The log came crashing down toward Joe's head.

Chapter Eleven

“What the fuck—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Mike slammed the hard wood into his

face, and then his gut. Joe was surprised and dazed only for a second, but that was all the time Mike needed. He whipped out the handcuffs Carla had given him and slapped them onto Joe's wrists.

“Hey! Are you *insane*?!”

Mike had wanted to get Joe's hands behind his back but Joe's instant fury and strength scared him. Joe's eyes gleamed red—a deadly red—as he brought his hands up, ready to bring them down on Mike, who was now up against the wall.

Mike ducked at the last minute and Joe's hands hit the tiles, shattering them. Mike picked up the log, rolled behind Joe and locked the door. He meant to

butt Joe in the back of the head but Joe turned too quickly and took the blow on the side of his face. One of Joe's teeth flew across the public bathroom.

Joe still couldn't believe he'd been tricked like this just as Mike kicked him hard, sending Joe sprawling into the bathroom stall.

Jesus, Mike thought as he brought the log down again, this would have killed anyone else. But Joe uttered a low growl so Mike hit him again, this time drawing serious blood from the back of Joe's head.

Mike didn't let himself even think as he brought Joe's hands up above the toilet handle and shoved Joe's head into the bowl. The lid came crashing down.

Mike instantly sat on it and began flushing.

Again, the element of surprise helped more than anything else. Joe hadn't been expecting this. He used all his strength to get his face out of the water, but Mike managed to hold him down.

Christ, he's drowning me! Joe panicked. He could only hold his breath so long. A wave of fear filled him. He struggled...but he was losing strength fast. Joe couldn't think of anything else as the first dose of water filled his lungs.

And still Mike kept flushing. He was sweating, scared. *What the fucking hell am I doing? I'm killing my best friend.* He fought for reason as well as

strength. *No. I'm saving him. This will cure him. It has to, because if it doesn't I'm totally fucked. We all are.*

So, he kept flushing.

The sensation of drowning swept all logic from Joe's mind. Nothing mattered but *getting air*. He forgot all about feeding, about his strength, even that this was Mike Mendoza doing this.

His lungs flooded with every desperate effort to inhale, and whatever thoughts he did have faded—his heart slowly stopped beating and Joe Carter finally stopped struggling.

Chapter Twelve

It wasn't until Joe Carter's body convulsed a final time, and his twitching arms and legs finally went limp that Mike stopped flushing. Now, Mike was dripping with sweat. It wasn't easy to drown someone he knew, not even a zombie, or whatever the hell Joe had become...or was about to become.

Now, the only sound in the bathroom was the magnified echo of his own panting.

Mike's own body was shaking as he climbed off the toilet seat that held Joe's body. *Jesus fucking Christ*. Mike backed away and stared at Joe's lifeless body. He wiped sweat from his face with his sleeve. He realized he was

bleeding from the stitches he'd received.

Least of your worries. Get a hold of yourself, Mendoza.

Carefully, he removed Joe's hands from the top of the toilet and pulled his head out of the bowl. Joe lay still, in a heap on the dirty, smelly floor. *Maybe I drowned him too much*, he thought to himself and let out a hysterical laugh. It was too much for him. Yes, he'd been trained to kill, but never had he dreamed that he would do something like this.

Joe's eyes were still open, which was creepy. Mike turned him on his side. Nothing.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit. Now what am I going to do?

He was furious with himself, with

Joe for not breathing, with the whole goddamned situation. He wiped his face again and kicked his friend in the back.

The restroom door jiggled. Someone was trying to get in.

“Use the women’s,” he called out, hoping he sounded a lot more calm than he felt.

“Is everything okay in there?” a concerned voice called. “We heard some commotion.”

“My friend here is just a little sick.” The understatement of the year. “I’m sure he’ll be fine. Just give us a moment, okay?”

Whoever it was apparently didn’t buy it. “How come I don’t hear anyone but you?”

It was then that Joe started coughing. Mike was so relieved he actually let out a laugh—this time, a normal one. Joe was spurting and coughing and making such a ruckus that Mike raised his voice. “Hear that? That’s my friend. He’s going to be okay. All right?”

“Well, all right,” the voice answered back. “Maybe we’ll check on you in a few. Just in case you need some help.”

“Fine,” Mike answered. He wasn’t paying attention anymore. He clapped Joe on the back as Joe coughed and then vomited.

“Easy, bro,” Mike soothed as he grabbed some paper towels. “You’re going to be okay now.” God, he hoped

he was right.

Joe finished puking...not a pretty sight. He was still hand-cuffed. He was scared, he'd pissed his pants, and he was angry. He glanced from his chained hands to the toilet and then up to Mike. "Just what the fuck was all that about?"

Joe was ready to fight again. His anger turned to confusion as Mike laughed once more.

"What's so funny? You're fucking crazy, dude. You tried to kill me and you're laughing?" Joe looked uneasily around the bathroom. Shattered tiles. He'd done that. Because he was strong...wasn't he?

"I didn't kill you. I cured you, Lieutenant Carter."

“How the hell does flushing my face in a toilet cure me?” Joe asked. But a realization was coming to him. He felt different.

“That’s the cure,” Mike explained. “Look at me. Let me see your eyes.” Joe never withheld his eyes from anyone’s gaze and he didn’t do so now. He looked Mike straight in the eye. And when he did, he realized Mike’s eyes didn’t have those red streaks in them.

Neither did Joe’s, Mike realized. What a relief.

It was a lot to take in. Joe did feel different. He felt normal. He hadn’t anticipated it, and welcomed it like a fresh spring shower, which is exactly what he wished he had. Maybe he would

take a dip in the ocean to get the piss, filth and toilet water off him. “But...how did you...?”

“Anna figured it out.”

“Anna? My niece?” and then a horrible thought occurred to him. “Is she all right?”

Mike sighed. This would be hard. “She’s fine. But Joe, your brother is infected now. And when I was cured, I was pretty far gone. Almost...terminal.” It was the most accurate description he could come up with.

Mike explained everything, from Jack’s slow-moving infection from the cut he’d gotten days before to his handcuffing in the basement. Mike confessed that he himself had been crazy

for flesh, but still coherent enough to want revenge on Jack for locking him up. He even told Joe how he craved Anna most of all. To eat her flesh.

“I don’t think I would have lasted much longer,” he said. “I was really losing it. Then your brother did it. Injured me enough to pass out in the pond. That was a miracle,” He affirmed. “I’m amazed that he was still clear-headed enough to protect himself and his family.”

“So, he drowned you?” Joe was still trying to put together the puzzle.

“No, he shot me.” Mike took another look at the side of his shirt, to where his stitches had opened during his struggle with Joe. It was soaked with blood. He

wincing and ignored it for now. “I ended up face down in the koi pond. That’s how I drowned. It was an accidental cure.”

“Wow.” Joe was absorbing that he himself was no longer a monster. And taking in everything else he’d just heard.

“Now we have to get your doctor friend and the Big Boss,” Mike was saying.

Joe shook his head. “No way. Why didn’t you do the same to Jack? He needs help. Where is he, anyway?”

“He’s at home. He’s in that no-brain stage. We figured we’d try it on you since you were further along, and if it worked, he would be next. But I figured while we were down here, we could

take care of the doctor and the Man in Black. If you're up to it."

Joe tried to stand. "Take these off, for God's sake." As Mike complied, Joe stood and stretched. "So, I was a guinea pig? Thanks a lot."

Mike was serious now. "You were farther along than your brother is now. This is all still new, and we didn't know how much time we'd have. And, we had to make the decision for Anna's sake."

Joe felt foolish, selfish. It all made sense. Especially about Anna. *Anna, poor angel*, Joe's heart welled up with the love he felt for his only niece. She'd be absolutely devastated if anything happened to her dad.

"No," Joe said, shaking his head.

“We go to my brother first. Then we’ll deal with those other crazy bastards.”

“But we’re already down here,” Mike protested again. Joe was in a hurry but he took the time to use the sink. He washed the vomit out of his mouth and took a good, long drink. God, even this bathroom tap water tasted like heaven. As he used some more paper towels to dry his hair—and still seriously considered taking a dunk in the nearby ocean—another knock came at the door.

“Everyone okay in there?” It was the same guy. Since Joe didn’t remember, Mike explained: “You were sick. That’s the story. Now you’re better.”

Mike opened the door. A couple of guys stood outside, cautiously peering

in. They were dressed in shorts and flip-flops, the expensive kind, and each had a forty of beer in hand. Locals just kickin' it, obviously. Nice guys who didn't want any trouble on their secluded beach front.

Joe stepped forward, showing himself. He was still a little shaky; he *was* just recovering, but from what, they didn't have to know. They wouldn't have guessed in their wildest dreams. Or maybe one day, they would. But it didn't matter right now.

"I'm okay," Joe reassured them with a little smile. "I was just really sick. I'm sorry."

"Dude, it's totally cool," one of them said. "Everyone's had a little too

much to drink once in a while, right?"

You have no idea, Joe thought, but all he said was, "Right. I'm feeling a little better."

"It's all good," the other man reiterated. "You know, we're cool with this, but some people might not like you being down here. Everyone knows each other. You don't want the cops, man, if you know what I mean."

"You're right," Mike said. Another gross understatement. "We're just leaving."

Satisfied that all was right in their little world, the men turned to go. "Take it easy," one of them said.

"You, too," Joe answered. He thought of Stetson and added, "And be

careful.”

Chapter Thirteen

David Stetson, the scientist, stood in the dark.

He'd carefully pulled aside the cutesy curtains his former girlfriend had made to see if Joe was anywhere in sight. Mostly, though, he *smelled* the scent of human flesh. Everywhere. Holy sweet hell it smelled wonderful.

He knew it was a mistake for Joe to drive to his friend. He had known it in his gut. It had been an hour and a half; they should have been back within thirty

minutes.

He and Joe had planned to go hunting tonight, finally. Stetson was strong and very intelligent, but the craving for human flesh was overtaking his thoughts now. As if to confirm this, his stomach growled.

Where were they? Anger was overtaking Stetson's emotions as well. *If they've gone without me*, he threatened to no one in particular, but his thought process stopped there. What would he do? *I'll go by myself.*

Stetson's mind was talking to itself now. There were two trains of thought. *What if they're in trouble?* He didn't know what to do with that one. *They've deserted you*, he now realized. *You're*

on your own, and oh yes, you have to eat.

He glanced back at Cole, who was sitting still in the dark, although his eyes were glowing softly red. All was quiet, except for the voices in Stetson's head.

Go, he told himself. You have to.

He sniffed the air and picked up on a small child playing outside a couple of doors down. Too small.

Stay, he argued now. Carter will be back, and there is strength in numbers.

Stetson turned to the last filet mignon on the table, grabbed it and bit into it. However, the meat had turned brown and didn't taste fresh. Stetson grunted and threw it across the room. Cole stirred from the sound, and

wrestled for freedom.

“To hell with them,” Stetson said out loud now, although he didn’t realize it. “To hell with them all. I’m going to get my dues.”

No, not yet. Soon, soon.

Yes, he’d wait, just a little while more. Joe promised he’d return. Except David Stetson didn’t know how long he could last. He looked down at Cole. Cole couldn’t be left alone. Could he?

Did Stetson even care?

Not really.

Still, he commanded himself to think clearly. He would wait twenty more minutes. Could he last that long? Maybe, maybe not.

We’ll see, he thought...and thought

again of the small child playing three houses down.

Chapter Fourteen

Mike Mendoza drove exactly sixty-five miles per hour up the 605 freeway, and even though Joe was anxious as hell to get to his brother, and equally importantly to Anna, he understood the need for caution. All they needed now was to get pulled over for speeding. According to the police, the two former lieutenant commanders were still AWOL, and there was an APB out on them. They were designated as Armed

and Dangerous.

Not good.

But Joe smiled, rolled down the window and did that curvy thing with his hand, weaving it in and out to the oncoming wind. “Did I even thank you?” Joe asked, as he inhaled the fresh air deeply.

“No, but you’re welcome,” Mike answered.

Mike was happy, too. Of course, he understood that this wasn’t over. Not by a long shot. But if they could cure Jack, then there would be three of them. Three people who knew more than what 99.99 percent of the rest of the world knew. He was happy, for now. So glad that he’d saved his Army buddy, Joe. He believed

Army buddies were for life.

They'd decided to keep the phone calls to an absolute minimum. Mike had promised to call Carla within a few hours. They would return within those guidelines, and although he felt bad that she was probably going crazy wondering what was happening, this was the time to be careful. Extremely careful.

So, it wasn't surprising that Carla questioned them when they finally arrived at the Los Feliz home and knocked on the door.

Carla peered through the peephole, no doubt with her gun drawn.

"It's okay, Carla," Mike said. "I'm back. With Joe."

"Why didn't you call me?" She tried

not to sound like a needy woman. The detective in her had to know without a shadow of a doubt that they were safe. And *sane*.

Mike explained quickly, and then Joe appeared in front of the door with a huge smile. In Carla's experience, those who were infected didn't smile. Perhaps they grimaced viciously, but not with the joy Joe displayed now.

“Ta-da! It's me! I'm back! Cured!”

Finally, convinced—and laughing lightly—Carla opened the door, with her gun still in hand, of course.

Anna, who had a reputation for not following orders, was, of course, listening at the top of the stairs. Jared stayed next to her, knowing he could do

nothing to deter his beautiful but stubborn girlfriend.

And when Carla finally opened the front door, Anna flew down the stairs and into her uncle's arms, almost knocking him over. She looked into his eyes. Yes, normal. Thank God! Anna started crying again, this time with tears of joy.

“Uncle Joe! Is it really you? And you're okay?”

“I'm back. Your Uncle Joe is here and we're going to fix everything.” Joe wasn't certain this was exactly true, but for Anna's teenage-limited world, the promise would do. For now.

“I knew you'd make it,” she said through her tears. When she was done

hugging her uncle, she turned to Mike Mendoza. “Thank you,” her words were sincere. “I don’t know how to thank you enough. For bringing him back and making him...okay again.”

Mike was still new to this family and didn’t quite know what to say. “I did what I had to do.”

Anna took her uncle’s hand. “Oh, Uncle Joe. Was it horrible?”

Joe Carter understood that Anna hadn’t witnessed a real drowning. *Yet*. Mike had been shot and unconscious when his lungs filled with water. It had been much, much different for Joe. And he remembered all of it. The fighting, the panic, the absolute necessity for air in his lungs instead of the forced water that

slowly but inevitably filled them. Then the insane realization that he wasn't going to get any oxygen. Finally, the...fading away.

Joe embraced his niece again, gently this time. "It was necessary, angel. Mike saved my life."

"My dad will have to go through the same thing?"

Carla stepped in. "Honey, we'll do everything we can to make it simple and quick. And then your dad will be...fine," she ended, more uncertainly than she'd intended.

Anna nodded. Jared came forward and took her hand. It was Anna he cared about most, although her father was growing on him big time. But he also

knew that saving her father's life was crucial to all of their survival. Before Jack had been infected, he was the glue that held them all together.

“Sooo...” Anna said as courageously as she could, “how are we going to do it?”

* * *

A little while later all were seated back at the kitchen table.

Carla wasn't used to “family meetings” and she tried to reason how this group constituted a family anyhow. Only three were blood relatives, but all played a part in this strange set of circumstances that now encompassed

each of their lives. The set of events over the last week or so bound them together. Bonded them more closely than any of them would have ever imagined.

Jared was inseparable from Anna. Carla knew his parents either weren't aware of his whereabouts or didn't care. Mike was the Army buddy who had gotten into this mess with Joe, who was Jack's brother.

I've seen whackier families, thought Carla, but couldn't muster even a small grin.

"Carla?" Joe interrupted her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I was saying that Mike and I were feeling stronger when we were—

transformed,” he repeated. Joe took in the dark circles under Carla’s eyes and her worried face. From what he could tell, she was just about at the end of her rope. Joe loved Anna deeply but he knew that, even under normal circumstances, the girl could be a handful. He also comprehended the gravity of the situation for his brother. Joe gestured to the cellar door as he continued, “How’s he doing?”

Carla took a huge gulp of her coffee. “He’s stopped obsessing,” she said, “but truthfully, I haven’t had the heart to go down there for the last hour or so.”

“You haven’t?” Anna cried out. Before anyone could stop her, she rose from her chair and bolted across the

kitchen to the cellar door.

“Anna, wait!” Jared, Carla and Joe chimed together. But she opened the door and descended the stairs quickly.

They all cautiously followed her, some quicker than others. Jared knew that if Anna thought for an instant that her father was getting “better” she would be in his arms in a flash. He forced his way down the stairs faster than the others.

But Anna had stopped halfway down the stairs, peering into the darkness. “Daddy?”

A groan from below. Then a hoarse voice: “Anna? Is that you?”

“It’s me, Daddy.”

Before she could do or say any more, Carla was in front of her. “Back

up, Jack,” Carla ordered. Jack did back up and Carla pulled the chain for the single light in the room. She positioned herself to one side of the cellar, out of Jack’s reach, but also able to see the other four on the stairs.

Anna pulled her hand loose from Jared and started down.

“Stop right there,” Carla commanded the teenager.

Joe reached his niece and took her hand. “No, honey, not yet.”

But Anna would have none of it. “But he’s fine, Uncle Joe! Listen to him!”

Jack Carter was indeed coherent. He was feeling better, they all could see that. Except for the eyes. His retinas

were streaked with a deep, glowing red.

“You’re better, right?” Anna asked him hopefully.

“I feel better. I feel stronger. Don’t worry, angel, I’m okay now.” Jack smiled, but he was very aware that Carla wasn’t smiling. He was very aware that he was being tested. “I’m really thirsty,” he added. He was thirsty, too, but mostly he was hungry.

So very *hungry*.

Someone was lingering at the top of the stairs. A man. Jack could sense him, smell him.

“Who else is here?” he asked warily.

“It’s Mi—” started Anna, but her uncle put a finger to her lips, shushing

her.

“But Uncle Joe,” Anna whispered. She didn’t think her dad could hear them, although she knew his senses were heightened. “Why can’t we tell him about—”

“Not now, Anna. Trust me.”

“But——”

“No buts. Listen, we’ve seen he’s okay. But you’re going to have to trust me on this. Let’s go back upstairs.”

Jack knew something was going down. There was something they weren’t telling him. He also knew he’d better play nice if he was going to get the hell out of the cellar.

Carla was in control now, it seemed.

What a bitch, thought Jack. *What did I ever see in her?* He fought down rage. *No, Carla is good. She's the best thing that's happened to me in a long time.*

“Go on, Anna,” Jack smiled at his daughter again. “I understand. Hell, I had to do the same with your uncle, right? I had to leave him, too. It’ll be okay.”

Joe marched her up the stairs.

“I love you, Dad!” She gave Jack one last glance and then she was in the kitchen with Joe and...another man...Who was that, anyway?

“I love you too, angel.”

Jared remained halfway down the stairs. He was relieved that someone else could handle Anna. He was glad he

hadn't said anything, glad that no one had told Jack what he would have to face.

Jared was tired too—they all were. Except for Jack, apparently. Jared attempted a poker face while wondering who was going to do it. How they would do it. He'd never seen anyone drown, except in the movies. He had a feeling it wasn't going to be pretty.

“Look, Jack,” said Carla, “we’ll get you some water, okay?”

“Thank you,” Jack answered as calmly as he could. “Carla, you look tired. Thank you for taking care of Anna.”

Carla almost broke down. It was all she could do not to cry right now,

because she had been thinking pretty much the same thoughts as Jared. “Of course,” was all she could say. She couldn’t take it anymore.

She turned her back on him and left.

Chapter Fifteen

My fake smile faded as soon as Jared followed Carla up and closed the door.

I didn’t know what the fuck they were planning, but I had a bad feeling about all of it. They wanted to stop me. Cure me. Except I didn;t want to be

cured. I wanted to be free. And to feed, goddammit.

Joe was different, too. My own flesh and blood. He was no brother to me anymore. He'd somehow become normal again, which was interesting. I had heard Joe calmly keep Anna silent. They were hiding something from me. No, someone. Either way, I was sure of one thing: *they were gearing up to "save" me.*

The last thing I remembered was pawing my daughter, with the intent of eating her alive. I did feel bad about that. Maybe I should feel worse than bad, but I didn't. Just bad. Nothing more, nothing less. Yes, Anna was off limits as food. Of course. Probably my brother, too.

Maybe.

And how did Joe become normal again? Had he done it willingly? I tried to remember the conversation when I'd almost attacked Anna. I'd been sick and not thinking clearly. They'd been talking about a possible cure. For who? What had happened to make them think there was one?

Suddenly, it came to me.

I'd been sick—

But still holding onto protecting Anna when Mike had attacked me—

And I'd killed Mike—

Shit. There was a way to transform back. Joe had done it. *I'm going to have to be very, very careful.* Now that I felt strong, I couldn't imagine life any other

way. And if they'd done it to Joe, they would do it to me.

Just a few minutes ago, I'd recognized the scent of the man I couldn't quite see. Although I felt strong, I realized I was seriously outnumbered by Joe, Carla, and—my lips curled into a snarl—and *Mike*.

Chapter Sixteen

Jared followed Carla into the kitchen to find that Joe, Mike and Anna were sitting on the grass out back, away from the house. The two joined the rest of the group.

“We were waiting for you,” Joe said. “My brother can hear quite well right now. Even out here, perhaps. Either way, we’ll speak quietly.”

They were all thinking the same thing—drowning Jack—but no one knew how to begin.

Jared wished for better times. He wished he could cheer Anna up—and he really wished he could kiss her. He looked down and wished he could pluck a blade of grass and hold it between his thumbs and whistle through it to impress her, but that wouldn’t be appropriate. So, he pulled his knees up and put his arms around them and waited for them to figure out the best way to kill Anna’s father. He almost smiled at the craziness

of it all. *Almost.*

“So,” Carla finally began. “Any ideas?”

“First of all, we can’t let him out of there,” Joe declared. Everyone nodded agreement except Anna. “Anna, you know we can’t. Look what Mike did. Hell, I was on my way to infect or kill a couple of others when Mike cured me.”

“Cured,” Anna repeated bitterly. “Tell me how it felt, Uncle Joey. How was it, drowning? I’m sorry, but I don’t know if I can do it.”

“You won’t have to, honey. Maybe you should just let the grownups decide. I know this is hard on you. Why don’t you and Jared go to the park or the zoo for a few hours?”

“Let the *grownups* decide?” Anna shot back loudly. “This is my dad’s *life* we’re talking about here!”

The adults were silent.

“He’s *my* dad!” she said again, eyes blazing with fury and leftover tears. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been in on this since day one. I helped you,” she pointed at her uncle, “and you.” Now, she pointed a finger at Mike. “I may be fourteen, but I’ve held up pretty well, I’ve thought straight, done research for you, done everything I could. And now you want me to go to the fucking zoo while you kill my father? No!”

She felt a little satisfaction in silencing them all. She had never before used the F-word among so-called

grownups. “I’ve got news for you,” she added. “I’m not going anywhere. I can take it.”

“Calm down,” Joe pleaded. Anna nodded. She took Jared’s hand. No one but Jared knew how hard she held on.

“Okay, this is getting us nowhere,” Carla said impatiently. She needed some shut-eye. Then she needed to get back to work. Now that Joe was here—and *normal*—maybe he could take over. When *it* was done.

A big *it*.

A very, very big *it*.

She took a deep breath. “Anna, I know you’re upset. But just shut up for one minute out of your life and let us talk.” She didn’t wait to see Anna’s jaw

drop or Jared hold back a smile. “Joe, Mike. He’s coherent. He’s thinking again. He’s powerful. How *with it* is he?”

“He’s extremely *with it* right now,” Mike told her. “He will try to be as truthful as he can without letting on that he probably still wants to...” he couldn’t say it in front of Anna. “If he’s like we were, he *wants* to be good, but he’s not quite sure he can.”

“Right,” Joe echoed. “When you and Jack asked me if I was okay, I didn’t tell the whole truth. And Mike and I felt a sort of bond. We could almost read each other’s minds.”

“Because you were both infected?” asked Carla.

“Maybe,” said Joe.

“Probably,” added Mike.

Carla said, “And then you two planned together how to escape.”

“Right. I told Mike I was a pretty good lock-picker. We talked about it, planned it, and waited for you and Jack to leave. All premeditated. And it worked.”

“And,” Mike said, “if Joe and I could feel that bond, I’m pretty sure that Jack senses the change in Joe.”

“That Joe is normal?” said Carla.

“That’s right,” said Mike. “He knows who is ‘human’ and who isn’t. Which is why I stayed hidden.”

“A good idea,” said Joe. “But I’d be willing to bet he still knows you’re

here.”

Mike nodded. “And probably not too happy about it.”

“You did try to kill Anna.”

“I was also out of my mind.”

“Try explaining that to him now,” said Joe.

They all knew, of course, there was no reasoning with Jack. There was only curing him, if possible.

Joe looked at Carla, then Anna.

“You two can’t trust what he says. Believe me. I know you care about him but he’s just not right in the head.”

Carla shook her head. It was so much. Was it just a couple of nights ago that she was falling in love with him? She still was. She had to remind herself

who the real Jack Carter was. Kind, handsome, and a sense of humor. She'd never met a single father who cared for his child the way Jack did. It was one of the traits that attracted her to him. But for now, she had to stay focused. "We were talking about the cure when he went berserk."

"I had just mentioned the idea about water," Anna put in.

Carla nodded, recalling her input. She looked at Joe and Mike. "Do you two think he remembers that conversation?"

Mike thought a moment. "I'm not sure, really. He was pretty far gone, but for myself, I do remember some things about that stage."

“I do, too, but there’s no way to tell for sure. If we ask him, he might lie,” Joe reasoned.

“We have to decide two things,” Carla said. “One, do we tell him? And two, how are we going to do this?”

* * *

In the end, and with great protest from Anna, which Carla and then her uncle overruled, they decided *not* to inform Jack of their plan.

Knowledge is power, after all. Jack was in a state of hyper-awareness and considered himself invincible. Both Joe’s and Mike’s experiences were that they had no intention of going back to

“normal.” When Jack realized what was about to happen to him, he would become violent, if not deadly. The instinct for self-preservation was undeniable, in humans and zombies.

They had no way of knowing that Jack did remember, and that he was already planning a counter-attack whenever they came for him.

Carla, exhausted as she was, realized she was the only legal person of the three adults to go out in public. They had decided to buy two large buckets for water, the kind that held about twenty gallons of water. If Jack fought his way out of one, they would have a backup ready. While she was at the hardware store, she decided to pick up three pairs

of the thickest gloves they had. She had no idea if the guys could be re-infected, but she had seen enough of this crap to not take any chances. She certainly didn't want to go through this infection herself.

Driving back to the Los Feliz home, she turned on the radio. Not the police radio. She thought a little music would help but when she heard "Sympathy for the Devil," she snapped it off.

Can't catch a break, she thought.

She thought grimly that the Stones couldn't have possibly had this scenario in mind, but it was ironic nonetheless.

Just hang on, girl, she told herself as she pulled into the driveway. *Just a little longer and this will all be over.*

She couldn't have been more wrong about anything in her entire life.

Chapter Seventeen

I was Jack Carter, park ranger, lover of wildlife, great father and friend to my community, but I sat chained in my own cellar and tried to think of a plan. I had time, but just a couple of hours, at the most.

I looked around. They'd learned to clear everything out of the way. No more bobby pins...not so much as a piece of string within reach.

They're coming, I thought. Soon.

Joe had come down eventually to give me some water. No food. I realized they didn't need to think that far in advance. They would "cure" me, and I was far from happy with the method. Sure, I would fight them. Even handcuffed to the strongest beam supporting the house, I would lure them in with smiles and cooperative conversation, but I would fight for my new life. I felt powerful and I *liked* it.

I was so *hungry*. Steak would have been okay, but I was now lusting for more. I craved human flesh. *More specifically, brains*. I couldn't deny it any longer. It didn't even seem odd. I could barely wait for freedom. *Human flesh, brains, that's it*. Nothing else

would do for me now. I would stay away from my family when I escaped, I promised myself—and escape, I would—but my desire to feed now encompassed me.

What about Anna? I was sad about Anna. But dammit, she's got her boyfriend now, I reminded myself. She doesn't need me. And that hussy, Carla, will take care of Anna. If I don't take care of Carla first...No! I tried to hold on to reason. *This isn't right.* A part of my mind tried to hang on to sanity. *You have to take care of your daughter,* I told myself. *That's what you're living for. And Carla's nice...but she's with them. My brother and that son-of-a-bitch traitor, Mike Mendoza.*

I searched the premises again. The light was off, but that didn't matter. I had the eyes of a hawk now, an eagle. A cougar was more like it. I thought back to when Anna and I had saved that cougar. Was that about a week ago? Ten days? I didn't remember. Part of me longed for that special father-daughter connection again. She loved wildlife as much as I did. As much as I *had*, before. Before what?

Get a hold, I told myself. You're not going over fond memories; you're finding a way out. There's got to be something to help me get the fuck out of here...I don't want to drown...and I don't want to give up who I am now. So powerful...so very powerful.

I moved around with my hand chained to the beam, feeling with my feet along the cold cement for anything. A coin. A screwdriver would have been nice, but no luck. Not even piece of broken glass.

I searched slowly, thoroughly. Finishing the 360-degree circle, I finally pulled myself up and leaned against the house's main beam to which I was chained. For what I'd just done, stretching and moving around on the ground as far as I could reach, carefully, over the last fifteen minutes, I should have been sweating profusely. But I wasn't. I just drew my one free hand through my hair. Something caught one of my fingers, and I moved this hand past

it...then back to it. *Something metal.*

I carefully maneuvered myself around to see the object.

Bingo! I smiled. I risked a laugh. *Well, what do you know,* I thought to myself.

An old, rusty nail protruded slightly from the beam. Not so much that you could really see it from a distance. And who had come close enough to that beam? It was the *surrounding area* they were concerned with.

The nail looked long; it had a large head. Such a small thing, I realized, such a sharp nail could make all the difference in the world. I could easily conceal it when they came. And come for me they would, I knew it in my core.

But now, I had a weapon.

I wrapped my teeth around the nail in the beam, and pulled. Hard.

And soon I held my freedom in the palm of my hand.

Chapter Eighteen

“Promise me again,” Joe Carter said to his niece.

“I promise, okay? I won’t leave my room until you come get me.” Anna blew her nose again. She was horrified, frightened, out of her mind with fear.

Joe hugged her. “It’s going to be okay, honey. That’s my promise to you.”

He held her a moment. Then he crossed to the door. There was nothing else to say.

Downstairs, the three of them were ready. As ready as they could be. None of them spoke. Again, there was nothing left to say. The feeling was unanimous: just do it, get it done.

Carla went first. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life. This was insane. Was she crazy? She didn't know for sure, but she made herself do it anyway. Tried not to think in human terms as she descended the old staircase.

“Back away, Jack,” her hands were shaky. She couldn't help the tears. “Back up.”

“What's going on?” Jack asked

innocently enough.

Mike and Joe carried the first large bucket of water down and set it out of Jack's reach.

“What the hell's happening?” Just for a moment, Jack feigned ignorance. But the two men wouldn't meet his gaze. His own damn brother. A murderous asshole.

As they hurried up the stairs again, Jack tried to work on Carla. “Carla, no. Please. You can't be serious.”

Carla didn't speak either. *Fuck*. This was going to be harder than he thought. Joe and Mike confirmed this by bringing down the second container of water. That's when Jack lost it.

“I won't let you,” he said, backing

as far away as he could, his hands curled into fists.

“Yes, you will,” Joe said. “And it will be all right. Mike went through it, so did I. And so can you.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you, all of you,” Jack growled. “Carla, I *trusted* you. And you’re going to let them kill me? You fucking *bitch!*” he spat the words at her.

Carla let out a sob. “Shut up, Jack.” She reached behind her and pulled out another pair of handcuffs. Handed them to Mike. “Just do it.”

“No!” Jack pleaded. “Think of what you’re doing. Joe, think. This is crazy! Where’s Anna? You can’t do this to her!”

He watched as Joe and Mike checked out the other beam. Joe pulled a piece of heavy chain from somewhere and tethered it to the beam. Now Jack backed the other way, coming dangerously close to Carla.

“I’m not going down without a fight. You don’t know how strong I am!”

Jack curled his hands tight.

Chapter Nineteen

But they *did* know.

Both men fully understood what they were dealing with.

Who, Joe corrected himself. *He’s*

still my brother.

“Take off your shoes.” Mike was the least emotionally involved, so he was calling the shots.

“No,” said Jack.

The three formed a triangle around him now. “Do it,” Mike commanded. “Don’t make this any harder than you have to.”

Somewhere in Jack’s mind, a little sanity remained, but that part was now in fight-or-flight mode. What was left of his humanity panicked. He pulled mightily on his one cuffed hand. “You can’t do this. Please,” he begged them.

“Jack.” Joe held back tears.

“You’ve got to know that I love you. I know you’re scared. And angry. But try

to think.”

“Stop it,” Carla ordered. “We agreed. No unnecessary talking. Jack, take off your fucking shoes.” Her hands were still shaking, but she pointed her gun at his shoulder.

“Fuck it,” Mike said. “Plan B then.”

They had planned as much as they could. Plan A was created in the hopes that Jack would cooperate, although they didn’t have much hope that he would. No sane person would, and Jack was far from sane. Plan B had been worked out beforehand as well, to keep Jack in the dark for as long as they could. Less emotion, less violence, if they could help it.

Joe and Mike donned the heavy

gloves. The three moved in on him, Carla being the most careful. She couldn't use her gun with the heavier gloves on, she later realized. She had only her leather gloves for protection.

Joe and Mike acted at once. Joe moved behind Jack, locked his heavy arms around his neck and held on. God, Jack was strong. He growled and lifted Joe off the ground. He started to try to grab his brother from behind but Mike got a hold of Jack's free arm.

Jack was now pulling Mike toward him, even with all of Joe's efforts to restrain his brother. Jack yanked Mike toward him and then he whipped his hand up, flipped the nail outward. He aimed for the eye and shoved with every

ounce of his strength.

Fortunately, Joe saw it at the last second and heaved Jack over. The nail drove into Mike's cheek—and stayed in.

Mike fell back, surprised as hell, howling.

Joe jumped on Jack, but he was no match for his brother. He was holding on, now with his legs wrapped around his brother's waist, but he was losing control.

With a howl of pain and surprise, Mike yanked the nail out of his cheek. He was angry now. It hurt, but Mike was trained military and knew his mission. His anger made him stronger and he used that to get a good grip on Jack's free hand, slap the cuff on it and yank it to the

chain tied to the other beam. They had him.

Jack was still standing, now with his arms stretched wide, as if he were being crucified. But he thrashed and snarled as Joe moved around to face his brother.

To Mike, he said, “Are you all right?”

Mike’s gash was narrow but it had gone straight through. Blood ran down his cheek and he spat more out.

“Can’t think about it,” he panted. “Move in, move out. Right?”

“Right,” Joe answered. They knew the sooner they did it, the sooner this would all be over.

They each took hold of one of Jack’s

wrists and pulled him down to a kneeling position. Even now, he could be dangerous. They moved quickly. First, they moved one of the water buckets a little closer. Carla came as close as she dared. She pointed the gun straight at his face while Joe and Mike moved the other bucket into place.

“I’m not fucking around, Jack.” Carla’s tone was cold now. “Don’t move or I’ll shoot you.”

He growled at her but he wasn’t certain she wouldn’t shoot. He trusted no one now. All he could think of was saving his own life.

They’d agreed that Mike would do it. They’d figured out the logistics, and now Joe moved behind his brother and,

as he lifted Jack's legs, Mike dunked Jack's head into the cold water.

It only took a few minutes but it seemed like forever. Carla couldn't watch. She was a good, strong cop, but she ran to the corner and vomited while Mike held down the man she cared so much about.

Jack finally stopped struggling. Just like Joe had, Mike watched as Jack's arms and legs now convulsed. Then he was still. As Mike gently lifted Jack's head out of the bucket, Joe set his legs down.

It was done.

Joe just stood there, looking at his brother's lifeless body. He couldn't hold back any longer, and let the tears come.

Carla was just about as useless. She finally holstered her gun.

Mike knew what to do. It wasn't any easier the second time drowning someone. He unchained one of Jack's hands, turned him on his side, and hit him hard in the back.

Nothing.

Fuck.

Jack just laid there, eyes wide open, mouth open, completely still. Mike hit him again, harder.

Joe picked up on Mike's growing anxiety. He bent down next to him. "It's not working?"

"I don't know," Mike said.

"What should we do?" Now Joe was starting to panic. Carla just backed

away, her hand over her mouth, horrified.

“Jack! Come on, man! Wake the fuck up!” urged Mike.

“Let’s take the other cuff off.”

“No,” Mike argued. “We all agreed he’s not getting loose unless we’re sure he’s cured.”

“Fuck that. He’s my brother, goddammit. Carla, give me the cuff keys.”

Carla looked up at Joe, her eyes round and full of fear. She looked from Mike to Joe...then shook her head.

Joe was about to get up and get the keys, one way or another, when Mike locked his fingers together for maximum force—and whacked Jack in the back as

hard as he could.

Finally, Jack started coughing.

Chapter Twenty

Anna was wild with fear and worry.

He had managed to get her away from the door, but she fought him, and he knew her, too. If he didn't hold his ground, she'd be down in the cellar to possibly mess everything up. Or worse, get hurt.

So, he did all he could to keep her in the room without hurting her. Jared didn't know what was happening any

more than she did, but he had to keep her away from whatever was going on down there.

They ended up laying on her bed side by side, Jared with his arms around her and Anna sobbing quietly. He wondered how many more tears she could possibly shed. He handed her a water bottle from the nearby nightstand. Maybe that would help replenish her tears. She took it and drank the whole damn thing.

It wasn't until the knock came at the door, that he let her go. She leaped up and ran and had the door open before Jared could even roll over.

Uncle Joe stood there, sweating, shaking, but smiling. He embraced her,

still smiling. That said it all. As Anna wept happy tears, Jared wondered if he would cry like this, too, if his own parents were involved in this crazy mess. He was, after all, becoming more concerned about them. They worked at the zoo, too. But where were they now? Why hadn't they called him?

“He’s all right,” Joe said, stroking Anna’s hair. “He’s all right.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

“Can I see him? Please!”

“Yes, come and see your dad,” Joe said, and she rushed down the stairs after him.

Jared found Anna sitting cross-legged across from her father, embracing

him. Jared thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever witnessed. Father and daughter reunited. For them, no one else existed. Anna was so happy; she kept wiping her father's tears away. Jack caressed Anna's hair like he'd done a million times before, whenever she'd had a skinned knee or a bad dream.

“I'm so sorry, angel, that you had to go through this,” Jack told his daughter. He couldn't believe how beautiful she was. He couldn't believe he'd ever not loved her as any parent loves a child. And he was astounded that she'd come through all of this...this terror, as well as she had.

“Don't be sorry, Daddy,” Anna said.

“You’re the one who had to...” She couldn’t finish.

He hugged her again. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” he soothed. “It’s over. I’m okay. You should thank your Uncle Joe. And Mike. And Carla.” He looked up to Jared, who was standing by himself. “And, I’m thinking, Jared, maybe most of all.”

Jack looked up at Jared. “Come here, son.”

Jared sat down next to Anna, across from Jack. “I know how hard this was on Anna.” Jack’s words were warm, sincere. “You’ve been her backbone from day one.” Jack thought about hugging Jared, but reconsidered. He held out his hand, man to man. “Thank you for

caring for my daughter when I could not.”

Jared took his hand, relieved that everything turned out all right, that this whole mess was solved, that Jack was okay, and that Anna was happy. “You’re welcome, Jack.”

Mike spat out another flush of blood. Mike was satisfied about “mission accomplished,” but he had this damn hole in his cheek to deal with.

“Did I do that?” Jack asked.

“Yeah. You did.”

“I’m so sorry, Mike. I didn’t know
—”

“Never mind,” Mike said. “Now, can we get the hell out of this cellar?”

At last, all was well in the Carter household.

Everyone was healthy, safe and sane. Mostly, they were all exhausted. Carla had dressed Mike's wounded cheek as best she could. Mike could have used a couple of stitches, but he would have none of it. He settled for some Neosporin and a butterfly bandage.

"You're gonna have a scar, and I'm sorry about that," Jack said.

"Hell, it will be something to tell the grandkids." Mike spoke lightly, but wondered grimly whether he would live long enough to *have* grandchildren.

They all slept in the Los Feliz house

that night. Jared on the floor of Anna's room—he gave his word to Jack, no funny business—Carla and Jack slept together. They were so tired they fell asleep instantly. Joe and Mike crashed in their respective guest rooms. But before they did, they hashed out a plan to stop the Agent in Black and Stetson.

If the household in Los Feliz had known what was happening outside of their tight-knit world, they might not have slept so soundly. They had no idea that the homeless people Mike had infected had extremely low immune systems. It wasn't their fault. But this sad fact would speed up their process of transformation, tenfold. No one would figure that out until much, much later.

So they slept soundly, for the last time in a long time. And it was a good thing, too. Because if they hadn't slept, they might not have had the strength to deal with what was coming...

Chapter Twenty-one

During the whole Jack ordeal, and even before that, Dr. David Stetson had plans of his own.

He'd come to think of himself as the Master Planner, in fact. He'd devised the idea to bring Cole, the head Agent in Black, back to the base. He'd decided to use Joe Carter to discover what was

really going on in the world—a world that hadn't allowed the media to publicize exactly what was, indeed, going on. They were good plans.

Stetson and Joe had decided earlier to search out any wandering souls together, to watch each others' backs as they fed—and thus fulfill their insatiable appetites. Feeding, Dr. Stetson assumed, would also aid their thinking, and thus their planning.

Yes, feeding.

Feeding.

Flesh.

The Agent in Black was still in what Stetson called the *mindless state*, but he would soon come out of it. Stetson needed the Agent on his side for his

plans.

But the best-laid plans, Stetson knew, often went awry. He'd had a bad feeling about Mike wanting to join them, but Joe would hear none of it. Army buddies were for life and all of that.

Well, Stetson hadn't trusted Mike from the get-go.

Something was up. Stetson just hadn't been able to put his finger on it.

Not yet, anyway.

So far, Stetson had controlled his urge to feed, but he couldn't hold out for much longer. And his thoughts were becoming a little fuzzy. What was he going to do with Agent Cole again? It took him a moment to remember. Yes, back to the base.

So hungry.

Starving.

What was he waiting for? For Joe Carter to return. But why? Why should he, Stetson, wait when he was so goddamn hungry...and where the hell was Carter anyway?

He snarled. He tried to stop himself. But his mouth had started to open and close, open and close, as if he were chewing on something. What was he waiting for? He slammed down his fist on the coffee table, breaking a leg, and causing it to lean down.

Maybe if I eat, I'll be able to think better, Stetson reasoned. *Yes. I have to eat.*

His jaws opened and snapped shut.

What was he waiting for?

He couldn't remember.

The last semi-coherent thought he had was to eat from a handful of people. Just a bite here and there. That way, the disease would spread faster and he could make new friends.

Stetson had no way of knowing that he didn't have that much time left for sanity. So, he went out the sliding glass door and into the night to find food.

Living food.

* * *

The next morning, Agent Cole felt much better.

He could think clearly. He was now

strong enough to wrestle his way out of his bonds. He was hungry, but he wanted to wait for Stetson to return before he made any move.

Cole had no way of knowing that Joe and Mike were coming for him with a plan to cure him. Joe and Mike had decided to be ready for anything, and packed heat accordingly. So, Cole was seated on the couch, flipping through the TV channels when they let themselves in, guns drawn.

Among other things, Cole was a trained killer, but Lieutenants Carter and Mendoza were aware of this. They had the element of surprise on their side. They moved quickly and aimed at Cole's head.

“On your knees,” Mendoza ordered.

Cole complied. “Do you mind telling me what the hell you’re doing?”

As before, Joe and Mike had agreed to speak as little as possible.

“Yeah,” Joe answered. “We do mind. Where’s Stetson?”

“I don’t know,” Cole answered truthfully enough. “I was better this morning, but he wasn’t here. I had to free myself. I’ve been waiting for him, or for you, to come back.”

“Lie down now,” Mike told him.

“Look,” Cole said as he did as he was told. He could fight, but so could these two. And both had guns trained on him. “What are you doing? We had a plan.”

Joe kept his gun on Cole as Mike scouted out the small cottage. He soon returned. “Stetson’s gone.”

“I told you he was gone,” Cole snapped.

Mike looked at Joe, silently questioning. Joe shrugged and nodded. Cole was starting to get a bad feeling about this. He barely had time to register that neither man had any red in their eyes whatsoever when Joe Carter ordered him to put his head down.

Immediately, Cole felt Carter's heavy boot on his neck. At the same time, Mendoza yanked one of Cole's hands into a hand-cuff, then the other. As soon as he was cuffed from behind, a blindfold was tied around his eyes.

Cole knew he was in trouble now. He didn't know what would happen next. His fear showed. Now, he knew how it felt to be on the other side, all the people he'd interrogated through his

many years as head of the CREW. Even his new strength couldn't get him out of those cuffs—and now, he couldn't see, either.

“Get up, slowly,” Mendoza ordered.

Cole felt the cold barrel of a gun at the back of his head. He rose carefully.

“What...look, when we get back to the base, I'll promote the both of you. We can work together...just let me go...”

“Shut up.” That was Joe Carter, from behind.

Mendoza pushed him from the other side. “Move.”

They shoved him through the hallway and into the bathroom. Cole had no idea what was coming, so it was fairly easy for former Lieutenant

Commanders Joe Carter and Mike Mendoza to shove his face into the toilet and start flushing.

Chapter Twenty-two

I had to work early—the morning shift—while Joe and Mike drove down to Seal Beach. Carla had a later shift, so I left her sleeping and wrote a note to have Anna call me. I didn't like leaving like this, but I absolutely had to get to work. I didn't want to attract attention with my prolonged absence, and I needed contact with others. Information.

When I got to the zoo, Brice was

waiting for me. “Jack! Where on Earth have you been?”

“I’m so sorry, Brice,” I said. “We had a real family emergency. I’m sorry I didn’t call.” It was the truth.

We strolled up the northern road where the zebras, elephants and other African animals made their homes. “It’s all right, I guess,” Brice said, “You never take time off. But I was worried about you. I called, you didn’t answer. Want to talk about it?”

“I’d rather talk about anything else,” I answered. Understatement of the year. “Maybe some other time.”

“You got it.”

“So, anything interesting happen while I was out?” I asked.

“You really have been out of touch.” Brice frowned at me. “Haven’t you been watching the news at all?”

“I really haven’t had time,” I answered. “Why, what’s up?”

Brice’s voice took on a serious tone that I seldom heard. “Slaughters,” he said. “As of this morning, twelve.”

“What do you mean, *slaughters*?”

“I mean someone, or maybe a group, has broken into the zoo the last couple of days and slaughtered our animals.”

I stopped in my tracks. Jesus and Mother Mary. Brice kept his pace so I hurried after him. “What? How?”

“Whoever they were, they were sneaky. Most of them. Police caught one, and he was described as completely

deranged. Unable to speak, extremely violent. They shot him—had to—several times, I hear.”

I had to hold onto a hand rail. *It's spreading. They're feeding on animals and then they'll get humans.* Mike.

He'd admitted to biting someone up in Griffith Park. Suddenly, I remembered a TV commercial that said, “And they'll tell two friends, and they'll tell two friends...” I suddenly understood the magnitude of how this disease could spread.

“I didn't mean to spring it on you like that, bud,” Brice was saying. “I know how you love the animals. We all do. Everyone is just sick about it.”

“What...which ones?” I asked, still

holding on to the rail. Anna. She would be heartbroken.

“Well, at first, the farm animals, it seemed. The petting zoo was hit the hardest, a few nights ago. Goats, lambs, a couple of llamas. But then last night, things escalated past the barnyard animals. A zebra was—ripped apart. And then a couple of koalas. All of them had their brains torn out...gone. Don’t know how the bastards got in. News says there’s some sort of infection spreading, and everybody should stay in at night and lock their doors. Call the police if they see anything suspicious at all. Because...”

I was already wondering what Carla would learn when she got to work.

“Because what?”

“Because, a few people have been attacked, too.”

* * *

I was still trying to process all of what Brice had told me. I was just about finished with my rounds at the zoo. I'd seen some tracks the police hadn't found, and called them in to Brice. Then Carla called me.

“Hey,” I said from my truck, exhausted. I was gulping down my second cup of coffee, preparing for my rounds at the observatory.

“Jack!” Carla's voice was urgent.

“If you're calling to tell me about

the animal attacks, I already know.”

“Okay, what do you know?” she asked. I could tell she was in a hurry.

I explained everything Brice had told me.

“So, you know what the media has officially let out,” she said. “Jack, there’s more. Much more.”

I sighed. Of course there was much more. “Tell me,” I said simply.

“Jack...besides the zoo animals, there have been at least two dozen murders. All of the victims had their skulls bashed in and their brains consumed. Or missing.”

“Jesus.”

“And two of our officers were outnumbered and attacked. *Bitten*. They

said they fired several times, but the perpetrators didn't stop until they were shot in the head."

I rubbed my temples with one hand, and felt for my gun with the other. I locked the truck's cab doors. It got worse.

"They've been treated at the local hospital and released."

I paused. "Carla, you know what this means."

"I know. But I can't say anything, Jack. I can't say anything that would compromise you and your brother. Anna. Even Jared."

"Honey?" I didn't realize I'd used the term until it was already out in the open. "How can you *not* say anything at

this point? Your force has to know what's going on. And how can it be that they don't have information on the meteors and the infected?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps the Chief knows and he's keeping it under wraps to avoid mass panic. It's L.A. Can you imagine the pandemonium if this became public?"

That made sense. A couple of dozen reported crimes could mean that many more had gone unreported. As of yet. How was this spreading so quickly? This infection could blow up in a matter of days. Hell, it was mushrooming right now.

I thought for a moment. "How about if I put in an anonymous tip?"

“Good idea,” Carla sounded relieved. “But from a pay phone. And you have to keep the call to under a minute. Can you go somewhere like Sunset Boulevard? That’s a hard area to trace.”

I thought of my daughter. And her boyfriend. Alone at my house. I didn’t like it, for more reasons than one. “I’ll get Anna and Jared first.”

“I don’t think your home is safe yet,” Carla said, referring to the fact that I had been questioned by the goon squad here at the park, that maybe someone was following me.

She was right, of course. Griffith Park Observatory might not be the most popular attraction L.A., but there were

plenty of cars in the parking lot now. Any one of them could be the agents.

So, how to get to Anna and Jared without being seen, without leading the bastards to a home they knew nothing about, a home that was in my ex-wife's family's name? I had an idea.

“Carla, can you do me a favor?”

Chapter Twenty-three

“Oh, those poor animals!” Anna cried into the phone. She and Jared had strict orders to stay at home; they had been studying when I called. Or so they said.

“I know, angel, I know.” I tried to calm her. “I want you to come here. I don’t want you two alone.” I knew Carla had gone to work around one in the afternoon, and I’d wanted the two kids to get as much sleep as possible. It was now late afternoon and it looked like I would have to work a double.

“You want us to come *there*?” Anna was shocked.

“Not really,” I answered, “but I’d rather have you close to me.” I looked at my watch. It was getting late. Dark. And the fog was rolling in. “Carla’s on her break right now. She can’t come to the house, because, you know...” I didn’t need to explain the obvious. We were both worried that we hadn’t heard from

her Uncle Joe all day. *One thing at a time*, I told myself. To Anna, I said, “She’s going to meet you and Jared at the Greek. She will take you up to the observatory, that’s safer than the zoo. I’ll meet you there. I have to do something.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll meet you on the Hill.”

“Okay, but...”

“No buts, Anna. You do exactly as I say, okay?”

“*Ookkaayyy*,” she was irritated. Probably scared.

I hesitated. “Put Jared on the line,” I said.

She called him, and a moment later

a squeaky, hesitant voice came on the line. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Jared. I don’t want to scare you or Anna any more than I have to.”

“All right,” he said bravely.

“But there’s real trouble. We don’t have time to mess around here. You and Anna need to leave now.”

“Of course.”

“And, do you know how to use a gun, son?”

“Uh, yeah, I do.”

“All right,” I said. “I want you two to take the streets. Not the trails. To the Greek Theatre. You understand? No trails. Stay where people can see you.”

“Okay.”

“If, for any reason you come across

someone like...like I was, or feel in danger, you have to use the gun, okay?"

"Are you kidding me?"

I could hear Anna asking in the background what was going on.

"Keep this between us, Jared. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Just shoot and run. You have the gun?"

"Not with me."

"Anna has it?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Get it from her. It makes me nervous her having the gun."

"Yes, sir."

"And Jared?"

"Yes?"

“When you shoot, aim for the head.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Jared ended the call in a haze.

Had he heard right? *Aim for the head*. By now, after everything they had been through, he trusted Jack almost like a father. Hell, more than his own father. But Jared wished like crazy that he'd just wake up from this horrible nightmare.

Of course, Anna was impatient.

“What did he say? Jared, you have to tell me!”

Jared looked at the phone a little stupidly, and handed it back to her. “He told me to protect you at all costs,” he told her, which was a version of the truth. And he would, too. “Look, we have to go. Now. Carla is waiting, and it’s getting dark.”

Anna glanced out the window. “It’s fogging up,” she said.

“I’ll be with you.” Jared took her hand. He kissed her gently. She returned his kiss with passion. She made him dizzy when she kissed him like that and he wanted to...*No*. He had to keep his head clear. Jared couldn’t help but press a few more kisses on her soft lips, then stopped. This was wonderful, but it wouldn’t protect her. Or him.

“Give me the gun,” he said, pulling back.

“Why?”

“Because your father wants me to have it.”

“But why? Jared, I’m the better aim. We both know that. Why?”

Jared sighed. “Anna, sometimes you just have to do what you’re supposed to do. And not ask questions. I didn’t ask your father why and I don’t know. But I trust him. Don’t you?”

Anna nodded, her eyes round with worry.

“So, if your dad wants me to have the gun, I’m taking it. And we’re going to meet Carla at the Greek. *Now*. Before it gets dark. Don’t argue with me, babe.”

He liked calling her *babe*. It made him feel like they were in a real relationship. A grown-up relationship. Jared added, “I’m following your dad’s orders and you want your dad to be happy with me, right?”

The passionate moment had passed. She pulled the gun out of the back waistband of her jeans and handed it to him.

“Does he have any extra bullets?” Jared asked her. She was about to ask why, he could tell. “Just to be on the safe side. We don’t know when we’ll be back.”

“All right,” Anna couldn’t stop thinking about the animal killings. Those poor, beautiful animals that depended on

the zoo staff to take care of them. She fought down her anxiety. She wanted to be good. She knew her father wanted her safe. And Jared, too.

Anna stepped into her father's room and brought back the box of ammo he kept in his dresser. Jared made sure the gun was loaded and ready to go. He put up a brave front for her. He hadn't told her that he couldn't get in touch with his own parents. That would be just one more thing for her to worry about. There was nothing to be done about it anyway, he supposed.

"Better get a jacket," he said. "The fog's going to be heavy tonight."

Anna, feeling a touch of rebellion, grabbed a sweatshirt instead.

They started walking up the tree-lined streets toward the Greek Theatre. It would have been a nice walk. Except for the fog. Except for the fear of what Anna was now calling *zombies*.

“They don’t act like zombies,” Jared kept up the conversation. Even though they were talking about some crazy shit, it felt good just to talk. But the fog was rolling in quickly now, and their voices echoed in the mist. They found themselves speaking softly.

“I know, weird symptoms,” Anna agreed. “But then they want to kill. Mike almost killed my father.”

The way leading up to the Greek Theatre was unusually quiet. Normally, people were out walking their dogs or

going for a run. On this evening, Anna and Jared were alone.

“True,” Jared said, “but then he got cured.”

“Yeah. Not enough information, I guess. Maybe we can go online again if we can get into the observatory.”

“Right,” said Jared, taking her hand. He was getting a little nervous. All of the houses were locked up tight, a minimum of lights on.

Suddenly, Anna stopped. “Shh,” she whispered, glancing behind them.

They stood silently. Somewhere back there in the dense fog, they heard a sound. Distant but definitely there. Like something dragging along the street.

“Shit,” Jared said. “Come on,

Anna.”

They started running, still holding hands in the fog and descending dark. *Just a few blocks to go*, Jared told himself. They could now only see about ten feet in any direction.

They were moving as silently as they could, not only to remain unheard but to listen.

Jared stopped abruptly, yanking Anna back. Up ahead, and close. The same dragging sound...

They froze. Behind them, now in front of them.

“The trail,” Anna whispered.

Jared remembered her father’s instructions...except the trail seemed their only option now. “What if we get

lost? Carla's waiting." *I hope to God she is*, he added to himself.

Anna was about to answer when it materialized before them, seemingly out of the fog itself, moving slowly straight for them. Human but not human, gnashing its teeth, eyes blood red.

Anna screamed. Jared let go of her hand, took off the safety, and drew up the pistol.

He aimed for the head and squeezed the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-five

The head exploded.

Blood and brain spattered as the zombie fell to the ground, twitching, then lying still. Jared couldn't believe what he had just done but there was no time to think about it. Because Anna had bolted for the trails.

Jared took off after her. He didn't know these trails as well as she did. But he had to get to her. Sweating, panting, he rounded a corner and tripped over a rock, crashed into the brush. The gun slipped out of his hand.

It was almost fully dark now.

“Anna!” he yelled out. He moved his shaking hands out in front of him. *The gun, I have to get the gun I have to get the—*”

Anna shrieked somewhere in the

distance. Jared's instincts were to run toward her cry. But he needed that gun. He heard footsteps ahead of him, coming fast.

“Shit, oh, shit!” He was coming undone.

He made one last effort, moving his hands around on the ground. His right hand fell on cold steel. He picked it up, rose up, and Anna came crashing into him.

“Jared!” she sobbed.

Jared swore to himself he would not let go of that pistol ever again. He put one arm around her.

“Another one,” Anna tried to whisper. She was hysterical now. “Up ahead.”

He put a shaking, dirty finger to his lips.

Anna tried to slow her uneven sobs. It was too late. The dragging, it was the noise of dragging feet.

“They’re in front of us,” she whispered.

“And behind us,” he replied softly.

She shook her head nearly uncontrollably, losing it herself.

The teenager thought quickly. He shushed her again, took her hand, and guided her off the trail. They found a scrub oak and hid behind it. Their hearts were pounding; they barely dared to breathe.

They could hear *them* on the trail. Three or four by the sound of it, Anna

figured. They met where Jared had fallen and Anna had run into him. The two teens held their breath, not daring to move. They listened to moaning, snarling, snapping jaws, and then the slow dragging of their steps as they faded into the night.

“Ohmygod, Jared, what are we going to *do*?”

“I don’t know,” he answered miserably. *I actually shot someone*. He pushed away the memory of exploding brains. “Calm down, let’s just calm down.”

For once, she listened to him. Jared held the gun tightly, listening. It was quiet. For now. “Let’s go back to the street. Maybe they’ve moved on.”

“We can’t go back to the street! They’re waiting, I know they are!”

“We can’t use the trails,” he countered. “In the street, we have a better chance of dodging them. I think they respond to noises.”

“But Jared—”

“Look. We’ll be quiet. Like cats, all right? Carla’s coming for us. And she won’t be on the trails; she’ll be in a car. That will be safe, to be in a car.”

“But—”

God, he was tired of arguing with her. He gripped her hand and guided her back to the trail. “Take us to the road. You know the way back better than I do.”

Anna understood the tone in his

voice. Finally, she nodded and led him by the hand, slowly. Listening, always listening for movement.

It didn't take long to reach the road. The rows of houses were behind them. They could barely see an occasional street lamp through the fog. The lights were of little comfort.

"I feel so exposed," Anna whispered.

"Only a couple of blocks to go. Can you run?" he asked. He didn't need to ask her twice.

They ran like the wind.

* * *

"Where did they all come from?"

Anna asked, out of breath.

“I don’t know,” Jared answered. He was having trouble holding Anna’s hand, running, and keeping her father’s pistol tightly in his other hand.

They had dodged two more of them, and then three more by the time they arrived at the Greek Theatre. The place was shut down and dark. They positioned themselves in the center of the front of the building, in order to see and hear anything moving from left, right or in front of them. They had the wall to their backs.

Jared was panting louder than Anna. Too loudly. She shushed him. They couldn’t see very far. Anna thought that if Carla was waiting for them, she would

have her patrol car running. But nothing. It was dark and she couldn't see anything anyway.

“Should we call for her?” Anna panted softly.

“No. We'll wait. Quietly,” he reminded her.

They waited. And waited. Jared was thirsty. He tried to ignore it, but after a miserable, timeless twenty minutes he gave into the drinking fountain a few feet away. Anna wouldn't leave his side. She let him drink and then, even though the fountain hissed loudly, she drank. Running from zombies was thirsty business.

Jared put a hand on her shoulder halfway through her drink. Those slow,

uneven footsteps, coming closer. There was more than one of them. Even the sound of the fountain was too much.

They were coming from the right, so Anna and Jared slipped around to the side of the building. Anna almost stumbled on something. She bent down to feel out what it was. A pipe, about three feet long.

“Perfect weapon,” Jared whispered. He could hardly see Anna nod. “I’ll shoot again if I have to. If you have to use that, aim for the head, Anna.”

The footsteps were coming closer. They moved further back, into a small corridor leading to a locked door. Waited.

Closer, closer. Finally, the two

teens could see the zombies' silhouettes from the distant lamppost light. They tried to stay quiet, but this time it was Jared who couldn't hold his breath any longer. He couldn't help it; he blew a soft, anguished cry.

Zombies, Anna whispered. They're here.

There were at least four of them, but it was difficult to tell for sure. Jared knew they had nowhere to go. They were trapped. And outnumbered.

So, Jared did the only thing he could think of: he brought up the gun.

Anna whimpered next to him as he aimed for the head again, and again, his aim was true. Anna brought her pipe down on the second one, but it did no

good. She drew the pipe back like a sword now, and, with all her might, plunged it between the Zombie's eyes. The breaking bone shivered up the pipe to her arms, but she pushed in deeper. Broken skull fragments and blood poured out onto her.

In the back of her mind, she heard Jared fire again, and again. Anna pulled her weapon out of the skull, the body falling to the ground.

She gasped. Another one was just behind the fallen one and stepped right on it to get to her. She transformed her fear into rage and plunged again, this time harder.

By the time they were done, the two teens had six zombies lying dead around

them. Six one-time humans. Silence once again prevailed. Except for Jared's loud breathing. Anna turned away and vomited. She kept vomiting until long after her stomach was empty.

Jared attempted to reload his pistol with hands shaking. He dropped a couple of bullets but kept trying. He had just locked the barrel with fresh rounds when they heard a car racing up the road. They sprinted to the street to see a patrol car fast approaching. Surreal, the car's headlights cut through the fog.

"It's Carla!" they both said at the same time.

Carla braked and slid around, pointing the cruiser in the opposite direction, facing back down the road. It

was the perfect pitting maneuver of a well-trained cop.

This brief shine of headlights showed Anna and Jared at least a dozen other Zombies in close proximity, their eyes blinking and glowing in the darkness like animals.

Carla got out of her car and fired at three in a row. “Come on!” she yelled at them. “Get in the car!”

Anna and Jared moved toward the patrol car, but already the undead blocked their way. Gun reloaded, Jared took down three and Anna another two. Carla covered them by taking out two more. The teens jumped into the back seat.

“The area is infested with them!”

Carla said.

“No kidding,” Jared replied. “And we were on foot!”

Carla took down another before she flew into the driver’s seat and once again did a one-eighty, gunning the gas pedal and heading up the road. She ran down two more undead.

Anna looked back and couldn’t believe what she saw. They had been run over, but they stood up and began slowly, slowly, but steadily, walking again.

“How are they not dead?” she asked, almost to herself.

“I don’t know, honey,” Carla answered, “but I’m not going to stop and figure that out right now. Are you two

okay?” Carla glanced in the rear view mirror, studying the two teenagers.

She’s wondering if we’ve been bitten, Jared thought. “We’re okay,” he told her. “We haven’t been...infected if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No, no,” Carla half-lied.

Anna realized they were heading up the hill, not down to what she considered safety. “Why are we going up here?” she said, sitting forward. “There are only more of them, I can feel it!”

It was hard for her, too—Anna had never killed a living thing in her life. *But they’re not living*, she reminded herself. At least, she didn’t think they were. *Not living in the normal sense. They’re not*

human anymore. Something else.

“Because your dad’s up here,”
Carla answered fiercely. “And he’s
waiting for us.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Hindsight, as they say, is twenty-
twenty.

So, how could I have ever thought
things would work out as planned? I was
a stupid, irresponsible father. Nothing
would ever be the same.

I knew Carla had planned to pick up
Anna and Jared at the Greek. I thought I
had enough time. But then again, perhaps

the time I took was necessary.

I had driven down to Sunset Boulevard, where I parked and had to walk a couple of precious time-consuming blocks to find a pay phone. There weren't many these days. I thought about the hookers, junkies and indigents who used these phones and then laughed. What were their germs on the handsets, compared to what I was facing?

Fortunately, I had a second hand on my wristwatch. I dialed the number Carla had given me. I had one minute.

"Sheriff's office," an impatient voice answered. I started watching the seconds.

"I need to talk to Chief Nelson," I said as firmly as I could.

“He’s busy right now. What can I help you with?” Still, that unconcerned impatience.

“I need to talk to him about what’s going on,” I said. “Look, I have military and police information and I’m calling on a pay phone. I have less than a minute, I’m told. I have to talk to him about the murders and the infected. So, if you want him to have this info—”

“Hang on.” This time, she sounded a little more interested.

Fourteen seconds later, a commanding voice said, “Nelson here. Who is this?”

“This is an anonymous call,” I said quickly. “I have about forty seconds. This is a worldwide pandemic. I

understand a couple of your officers have been infected. Bitten. They are not safe; I know they've been released."

"How do you—"

"No time," I said. "You want to contain them, do you understand me? The military is having problems with this same infection. Your force needs to know that if they come across these...infected people, they have to kill them. Shoot them in the head. The head. That's the only way to kill them."

"That's not proper protocol. Again, who is this?"

"Someone who knows. Someone who cares. Someone who's gonna help you. I just wanted you to know. The rest is up to you."

I hung up at fifty-five seconds. I didn't have time to tell him more.

I put the phone back on its hook and looked around. Sunset Boulevard was a crazy place on the most ordinary of Saturday nights. The streets thronged with people from all ethnicities, genders and backgrounds. Kids having fun, hookers, people in costumes, photographers, and musicians trying to pay the rent and playing for dollar bills thrown in guitar cases. I started walking back to my truck. A police car cruised by and I lost myself in the crowd. They couldn't be looking for me already. Could they?

I was a little paranoid, anxious. I had to get to Carla and the kids. Anna

and Jared. I felt conflicting emotions for Jared. He obviously loved my daughter, but they were so young. Too young for real love, right? Hell, I didn't know. I guess love was love, no matter the age.

I frowned as I maneuvered myself through the crowds back to my car. Jared's parents were missing. Brice had told me that earlier in the day. So, where were they? Jared hadn't mentioned it, and I wondered if he even knew. I also wondered if I should tell him.

Back at my truck, I knew I still had one stop to make before I headed back. Perhaps another decision that changed the course of things. Who knew? But I think I did the right thing.

I drove a mile and took a left on a

little-known street. I parked in front of a small shop and entered.

The muscled-up, tattooed guy at the counter gave me no smile. He just waited for me to say something.

“I need four semi-automatics and about twenty clips,” I said simply.

“I can’t sell you that much.” He folded his arms, frowning, daring me to argue.

I flipped out my ranger badge. “It’s an emergency, man,” I told him. “I’m not a fucking gangbanger or drug dealer.” I slipped him a hundred, careful to avoid the multiple cameras monitoring the shop.

He glanced down, then up at me. Sizing me up. I stood my ground. “Shit’s

going down. You gotta know that, right? I need a little protection.”

He considered a moment, his hand covering the bill. Then he nodded and went to the back, out of sight. When he returned with the weapons, I asked, “Do you have any handcuffs?”

He blinked, then nodded.

No questions asked.

Chapter Twenty-seven

My detour to the gun store made me late in arriving at the observatory.

By now, the fog was pea-soup thick. I could barely see ten feet in front of me

as I made my way up the hill, my anxiety increasing with each step. I saw signs of violence and death. The first was a man who'd had his head blown to bits just a few blocks before the Greek. It was right where Carla had promised to pick up Anna and Jared. I wondered if she had done it or if Jared had.

Mostly, I wondered where the hell my kid was.

Oh, sweet Jesus.

The theater was closed, but I slowed long enough to see several more bodies, scattered. Tire skid marks pointed both ways. Carla had been here. I didn't know if my daughter and Jared were with her or which way they'd gone.

The street was empty of any vehicles so I threw the truck into park and got out to see what I could see, automatically drawing my own gun. So still, no sound, not a mockingbird, not a coyote, no sounds of any animal whatsoever. That chilled me to the bone.

All of the zombies had been either shot in the skull or killed with blunt force to the head. I took in the obliterated remains of each one and wondered if Anna or Jared had anything to do with this. My Anna. *My sweet Anna*. I had been worried about her sexual innocence, but a far worse knowledge had been thrust upon her. One of violence.

Thud.

The sound came from behind me. I whirled around to see a man and a woman drudging into view, materializing from the thick fog.

They were not sane. I didn't think they were even human anymore. They came slowly, methodically, with measured, lurching steps. Hair disheveled, clothes torn. Blood-red eyes, snarling. I knew they wanted one thing. Me.

Specifically, my brain.

I didn't even think as I fired twice. Once into each head. They fell, but now I could hear the others coming.

I jumped into the truck and sped up the road, hoping I was heading toward Carla, Jared and most importantly, my

Anna. And I couldn't help but wonder how this thing had spread so quickly and so pervasively.

Chapter Twenty-eight

At about the same time on the same evening, former Lieutenant Commanders Joe Carter and Mike Mendoza found themselves locked in a medical facility room at the Seal Beach Navy base, wondering how they'd managed to be tricked by the Agent in Black.

They had indeed cured Cole, the Agent in Black. He had thanked them. After the fright of being drowned, that is.

He said he felt more like himself. The two Navy buddies assessed that the red was completely gone from Cole's eyes, and he seemed coherent.

What they didn't know was that Cole had almost drowned as a child. He'd gone too far into the deep end of a pool and no one had been paying attention. The event had scarred him for life. The result was that this new experience of drowning was just more than he could take. What he'd gone through for a "cure" had driven him close to the edge of insanity. No, he wasn't insane, not yet, but he was far from stable.

Carter and Mendoza didn't need to know that, no. Cole would put on a

brave face for them. He'd promised to take them back to the base, to let them help him "sort things out."

But Cole, the Agent in Black, for that was what he intended to be again, could not ever forgive them for what they had done. He remembered it all. Being blindfolded and handcuffed, he had no idea what was coming. His head forced down into the toilet, the flushing, flushing. The memories of his near-drowning as a child surfaced and utter fear overtook him. Much deeper than what either lieutenant commanders had experienced.

So, Cole had talked with them reasonably...and secretly formed a plan to take command of the base. The three

had driven straight there. Cole had slight reservations about being questioned at the check-in point, but oddly, it was unmanned.

He drew them into one of the medical facility rooms, and promised to return with coffee for all.

Before they knew it, Cole had locked them in.

Now they sat, Joe on a bed and Mike in a chair, wondering what to do next.

“This is the thanks we get for saving his life,” Mike said.

“Yeah. What’s he doing, anyway?”

“I don’t know. The place is empty. Bad sign.”

“I bet things got out of control here,

and everyone bailed,” Joe said. “Maybe we’re safer in here.”

“I don’t like being locked up, and we’re trained for emergencies.”

“I’ve never been trained for this,” said Joe. “Have you?”

Mike shook his head, face grim.

Joe added, “I mean, how long have we been gone from here? Four, five days? We were lucky enough to be cured. God only knows what could have happened.”

“So, you think everyone here was somehow infected?” Mike asked. “How did this spread so fast?”

“I don’t know,” Joe answered.

“Maybe not everyone has it. But you remember how we were...that would be

damned scary. Maybe some were infected, and the rest fled.”

Mike considered this train of thought. “Maybe there’s still someone here.”

“*I* wouldn’t be here, not if I valued my life,” Joe said.

“I didn’t say the living were here. Maybe the...crazies. You know? Maybe the ones in that horrible state of mind.”

They had time to think about this. They had time to become thirsty and drink water from the sink. They had time to search the medical drawers and find what could be used as weapons: a couple of hemostats and even a scalpel. Then they had time to wait some more.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Cole didn't give the two mongrels a second thought.

Let them starve, for all I care, he told himself. *Turnabout's fair play.*

But it *was* a little disconcerting to find the place empty. He *thought* it was empty. Sometimes, he thought he heard noises. Scratching sounds.

Just my imagination.

He was in the command room, on the computer. Every communication he read increased his anger. And yes, his fear. Reports from all over the world stated that cities, especially in third

world countries were more and more out of control. More and more infected, going crazy. Becoming brainless cannibals. The military was overwhelmed. A United Nations meeting had to be canceled because airports were down, inundated with chaos, fear and murders.

Cole reconsidered his two prisoners. Certainly, they didn't trust him now that he'd locked them up. But really, he couldn't command this base alone. Could he convince them to help him?

Except he could not get the drowning out of his mind. He shuddered over and over again. No, from now on, no matter what, he couldn't trust them.

Never mind that they'd saved his life, he could see that from the communications he read. If Carter and Mendoza could do that to a person, they could be capable of anything. But that could make them an asset. He'd have to think about it.

Then he heard it.

Drag, thump. Drag, thump.

Someone was coming down the hall.

Cole flew to the door, locked it. He peered out the small window in the door. Three of them were coming. They were in Army fatigues but they were...*insane*. Their jaws snapped wildly, and their eyes didn't seem to be focused on anything. They were searching. For prey, Cole realized.

Then he recognized one of them. It was Stetson. Cole couldn't help feeling a little pity for the doctor. Former doctor. At least he didn't have to worry about the man's whereabouts.

So, this is what happens if you're not cured in time, he thought. How Stetson had made it back to the base, he didn't know or care.

Cole remained still. He watched as they moved slowly, awkwardly down the hallway. Cole remembered that when he was in the weak state, he responded to sound.

One thing for sure, he didn't want to find out. For the first time in his life, the Agent in Black felt helpless.

Chapter Thirty

Joe had found some metal wiring and was working on the door lock.

He and Mike had decided to get as much ammunition as they could and get the hell out of there. They would return to Los Feliz. Do whatever they could to help. Coming back to the base, they realized, had been a bad idea. But they couldn't have known that before.

“Dammit,” Joe cursed. “I broke the wire in the lock. Hand me one of those hemostats, would you?”

Mike handed them over. Joe was sweating now. He had one of those

feelings. Like being in the ocean, in shark territory and waiting, waiting to be lifted up to safety before being devoured from below. Bitten, torn apart.

“Come on, man,” Mike said.

“You’re welcome to try.” Joe was irritated.

“I’m sorry. It’s just so...fuckin’ creepy here.”

“Well, shut the hell up so I can concentrate,” Joe snapped.

“I mean, we don’t even have any weapons, dude,” Mike continued, now pacing. “How’re we gonna defend ourselves if, you know—”

“Christ, will you clam the hell up? Why don’t you gather up our stuff, whatever you think we need and then...”

Click. Joe sat back, wiped his forehead.

“You did it!”

“Damn straight I did.” Joe grinned. He opened the door a crack.

The three zombies were waiting outside of the door, which had been heavy enough to mask their arrival. Joe instinctively grabbed the nearest hemos, wheeled around to find one of them almost on top of him. He shoved the thing back, hard, but the one-time soldier and now full-time crazy snarled and snapped his jaws. Joe drew back his hand just in time.

Mike was beside his buddy in a flash. The two could barely get a punch in. All these Crazies wanted was to take

a bite out of them; the infected had no sense of pain whatsoever.

Joe side-kicked his attacker. It bought him a couple of seconds. He used them to plunge the hemostats into the guy's forehead. No, the *crazy's* forehead. It collapsed to the floor.

Mike was fighting off the other two but had seen what happened. He used the scalpel to do the same while Joe took out the third.

They stood there, both panting, adrenaline rushing through their veins.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Joe finally said.

This shook them out of their initial shock. They took off down the hall. Mike stopped long enough to break the glass

from a fire-ax, which he weighed for good measure as they continued.

Cole was standing in his office at the end of the hall. He'd heard the commotion; when he saw Carter and Mendoza pass by, he opened the door. "Take me with you," he pleaded.

"Fuck you," Mendoza told him.

"Please. Don't leave me here alone."

Joe Carter didn't get angry too often but he was angry now. He doubled back to Cole. Stood about two inches from the Agent in Black's face. "You left *us* alone," he spoke in a quiet but menacing voice. "Alone and defenseless. You bastard. At least you have a gun."

"I—I'm sorry," Cole said. "I didn't

think there was anyone here. I wasn't going to keep you in there for long."

"You're lying," Mike said. "Nobody ever trusted you. Except us, in the end. Look how you repaid us. You almost got us killed."

"Come on, Mendoza," Joe said. "We've got plans."

"No, no," Cole begged.

They were halfway down the hall when they heard more crazies ahead, just around the corner. They turned around to see two more trudging from the other end. When they turned back, that bastard Cole was trying to shut them out. Mike roared and kicked the door open. Unfortunately, he broke the lock.

Cole had scampered back deeper

into the office, fear on his face. He was nothing like the man in charge the lieutenant commanders had seen days earlier. Little did they know that the fear of drowning had awakened something deep within Cole, something primal and ugly and afraid.

Six crazies were at the door trying to get in. Mike first fumbled with the lock, but it was useless. He pushed his back against the door and leaned as hard as he could. The horrible grunts and growls from the other side were louder now.

Joe scanned the room for anything that could hold the door shut. His eyes landed on a metal half-file cabinet. It was bolted to the wall. "Your ax!" he

called to Mike. Mike tossed it to him. Joe began prying the thing loose.

Cole was frozen at the far side of the room.

“Do something, goddammit!” Carter shouted at him as he worked on the file. The crazies’ snarls were so loud now he had to yell. “We need your fucking help!”

But Cole, eyes wide with fear, just shook his head and backed further into the corner.

Finally, the cabinet tore loose. Joe carried it across the room and under the door handle. It held. For now.

Mike wasted no time. He crossed the room in one step and picked up the semi-automatic that Cole had left on the

table. Two more steps and he had the weapon pointed at Cole's forehead.

“Face the wall, motherfucker.”

Cole registered the fury in Mike's eyes. He turned around.

“Search him,” Mike ordered his friend.

Joe did so, searching the Agent in Black and found two more pistols on him. “Where'd you get these?” he demanded.

“They—were in the office.”

“Any more?”

Cole shrugged. The file cabinet rocked as the Crazies banged and pushed. Joe tossed one of the pistols to Mike, who pocketed it.

“I'll tell you what you're going to

do, Mr. Agent in Black.” Joe’s voice was deadly now.

“Get over to that file cabinet and keep those bastards out. You hold them out. Mike’s going to have his gun on you while I search this place.”

Instead of waiting for an answer, Joe shoved the agent over to the door. “You’re not calling the shots anymore. Keep them out any way you can.”

Cole did his best. The file cabinet was dangerously close to coming loose. He pushed it back into place and kept pushing for dear life.

Three angry men locked in the same room can be a dangerous circumstance. Mike wanted to shoot Cole in the head, and regretted like crazy saving the

bastard in the first place. Some thanks. Meanwhile, Joe shuffled through drawers and cabinets. He came up with two more semis and surprisingly, a pair of handcuffs.

He thought about cuffing Cole to the desk and letting them get to him. As for Cole, he was frightened but infuriated. No one had ever treated him that way. Back at the Sunset Beach cottage and now here. No one. He'd be damned if he'd let these two punks get away with it. Once he got out of here...well, they would see.

Joe took a couple of deep breaths. Saw the anger in both Mike's and Cole's eyes. "Look, we need to calm down," he said to Mike. He gestured to Cole. "You,

too.”

Cole was sweating, putting all his strength into keeping the filing cabinet in place. “Help me, goddammit,” he grunted.

Joe traded Mike’s pistol for a semi and stashed the others in his jacket pocket. “I’ll help,” he said, moving to the cabinet. His strength relieved Cole a little. “We need to quiet down. They respond to sound. Cole, Mike has us covered. You’re going to get a piece of paper and some tape. Cover the window so they can’t see us. If you make one wrong move, you’re history. Go.”

When that was done, the three remained completely silent. It took a few minutes, but they finally heard the group

of crazies drag their feet away and down the hall. Mike still had his gun pointed at Cole.

Joe had his ear pressed against the broken door. "They went that way," he whispered, pointing to the right.

"Good." Mike sighed in relief. "Front door is the other way."

"Lie down," Joe ordered Cole. "Arms locked behind your head. And keep that hole in your face quiet while we figure out what to do."

Cole knew he had no choice. He was defenseless, and he understood the danger of causing a ruckus.

The two LCDRs sat on the desk, both with a gun aimed at Cole beneath them. They talked quietly.

“We have to get the hell out of here,” Joe said, and then laughed a little. Understatement of the year.

Mike smiled. “What, you don’t want to stay? We got all the food and drugs in the world, and our best friend here.” He kicked Cole in the leg.

“Right, I forgot. What do you want to do about him? We can’t bring him to...you know.” He didn’t want Cole to know where they were going.

“Leave him here?” Mike asked.

“Please, God, no,” Cole said.

“Shut up,” they both hissed.

“We could drop him off somewhere,” Joe suggested, “but I don’t even trust him in the car with us.”

“We could cuff him,” Mike offered.

“I never knew how handy handcuffs could be.”

“Yeah. But we need to move fast. Find a good vehicle, load it up with ammunition, and be on our way.”

“I could help you,” Cole tried again. “I’ve been reading all the reports and communications. I know a lot.”

“The thing is,” Mike said, “we can’t trust you. We tried that. We saved your life, we trusted you, and what did you do?”

“But you can’t just leave me stranded somewhere, unarmed.”

“Oh, but I think we can,” Mike smiled. He tossed the handcuffs to Joe.

Joe caught them and turned to the Agent in Black. “Hands behind your

back.”

Chapter Thirty-one

I knew the park’s side roads like the back of my hand.

I tore up the winding pavement, hugged curves, leaving dust in my wake. Even if Anna and company were safe, I had to see with my own eyes.

Finally, I pulled up to the observatory’s top parking lot. What I saw was worse than anything I could have imagined.

Carla’s patrol car was parked just below the main steps to the great

building. She was fumbling with the keys, it seemed, to unlock the front door. Anna and Jared stood to either side of her. The undead, at least a dozen, were slowly climbing the steps.

I pulled my truck up beside Carla's car. The trio saw me but dared not let their guard down. I honked my horn. Long and loud. The zombies paused and turned in my direction.

"Daddy, no!" Anna screamed. They turned back to her.

I honked again, this time longer. I got their attention back. I honked again and again. I opened my door and stood on the running board. "Hey, assholes!" I hollered. "Over here!" I reached a foot up to the steering wheel and started

honking again.

I got what I wanted. They were leaving Anna alone. And Jared and Carla.

I got back into the truck and started loading. Good thing these guys were slow. I had time to load three of the guns. If my hands weren't shaking so badly, I could have had all four. Three would have to do.

The zombies came closer...and closer.

Although the fog barely reached this level, it was still there and difficult to see. I had a weapon in each hand. When they got close enough, I started firing. Straight for their heads....and away from my daughter and others.

The shots echoed loudly. If any normal person had been around, they would have called the cops. But nobody was crazy enough to come up here. Not now. The public had been warned. Nobody was here except us.

I missed a couple of precious shots and cursed.

Focus, Carter, focus.

One of them was a woman with a gashed neck and blood oozing down. A woman? There went that theory of Anna's. *Splat*. Her brains were gone. I turned to the next and did the same. There were too many of them. They just kept coming. How many bullets did I have left?

“Jack!” It was Carla, on the other

side of them. “I can’t see you. I don’t want to fire in your direction.”

“Get inside!” I hollered. “Get Anna safe!”

I guess hearing my voice was enough for Carla because she started firing at the ones to my left. I heard more shots on my right; that must have been Jared. So much for listening to me.

There was no time to argue. I whirled around just in time and fired almost point blank. Blood and brain and bone splattered on me.

I took out three more. That these had once been people, neighbors, tourists and even friends, was too horrific to imagine now. Thank God I didn’t recognize anyone. I heard Carla and

Jared firing, firing...and then silence.
The zombies were gone or dead.

I came around to the other side of the truck where I could see them. Bodies spread out on the ground, everywhere. Then...

“Anna, duck!”

She hit the ground as the three of us pointed our weapons in her direction at once, and took out another one.

Now my daughter was in my arms. She had an iron rod and she was covered with blood. Holy hell.

“Quiet,” I ordered. We stood still. No movement. I glanced at Carla, who was amazingly calm. “Is it unlocked?”

“Yes.”

“Inside. Now. Everyone.”

“I’ve got food and water—”

Carla jerked her head to her patrol car.

I nodded. “Good. We’ll get it. Anna and Jared, get up there. We’ll bring the food inside.”

Jared grabbed her hand and pulled her up the stairs.

Carla had been thorough. She’d thought of food, water, first aid, even a deck of cards. It took two trips for us to carry everything up the stairs. Jared opened the door just long enough to bring the bags inside.

We were just getting the second load together when we heard more crazies in the distance.

“Come on,” I said. We rushed up the

steps. Carla tripped, dropping a case of water. Bottles scattered down the stairs. I rushed my load to Jared and then went back to help Carla. Water was our most precious commodity; if the observatory was really closed up, the drinking fountains might not be working.

Outside, they were coming closer. Another fifteen or so. How did this happen so fast?

“Leave the rest,” I told her. She picked up one more and we dashed for the entrance.

Inside, Carla relocked the door. All the doors and windows were glass in the observatory, but they had strong brass crisscrosses barring the way for any intruders. We all collapsed in the main

entry, breathing hard.

Anna found her way over to me. “I thought you’d died,” she told me. “Dad, I thought you were gone for sure.”

“Not me.” I tried to sound brave. “I’m not going anywhere, angel.” She snuggled up to me. Rested her head on my shoulder. I could see Jared had conflicted emotions. He wanted to comfort her. Or, more likely, he probably wanted the comfort of his own parents. The thought of his parents worried me all over again.

I held my daughter until we heard movement on the steps outside.

“They’re here,” whispered Carla.

The observatory was dark. Whoever had left last hadn’t taken time to set the

alarm. That was good for us. We had to move, though. No more time for comfort.

Chapter Thirty-two

“Get out of sight, out of hearing distance,” I said.

I felt worlds better now that I knew Anna was safe. At least physically. I was back, and I was calling the shots.

We moved to the other side of the large enclosed circle with the pendulum that counted seconds. It was a real crowd pleaser. In normal times, that is. Now, there was no one to admire it but us. Still, it was solid, and we were

hidden from *them* on the far side.

We took a moment to calm ourselves, catch our breaths. I said quietly, semi-sarcastically, “Family meeting. Where do we want to set up a command post?”

“The office,” Carla suggested.
“We’ll have computer access there.”

“No,” Jared countered. He was feeling more comfortable giving input. After all, he’d been with us for over a week now. He continued, “We could be trapped there. In case they get in, we’ll have nowhere to go.”

“Good point, son,” I said. I thought I saw a trace of a smile on his face at the endearing term.

“What about the lower floor?” I

offered. “There are bathrooms down there and plenty of room to move.”

“But we can’t hear anything down there,” Anna countered. “What if Uncle Joe comes? He’ll look for us here probably.”

So far, it was the best argument. My brother Joe. I hadn’t heard from him all day, but I still had hope. Anna, of course, would never abandon her Uncle Joe. Neither would I.

“Okay,” I said. “This is going to have to be a democracy. From here on out. Ruling vote wins. If we settle in the office, we have internet. If we go downstairs, we have room. If we stay here, I think we can have both, although we’ll have to be very careful to not be

seen or heard. Very careful. Shall we vote?"

Everyone nodded.

"Who wants to go downstairs?" I asked. No one raised their hand. Not even me, especially after Anna's reasoning. Yes, I wanted to know if my brother was outside. And, yes, he would come looking for me here, eventually.

"Who votes for the office?" Carla raised her hand. Alone.

"Who wants to stay here, out of sight?" Anna, Jared and I raised our hands.

"That's it," I said. "I say we move our stock, quietly, over to the theater entrance. We can bolt those doors closed with..." I paused, "with whatever

we find.”

“We can keep watch,” Jared suggested. “There are four of us. Two, three hours each. Stay close with weapons handy.”

“Right.” I glanced at Carla. She had been a saint the last few days. I could tell she still felt safer locked up in an office.

Anna and Jared began to move our stock toward the theater entrance.

“Jack,” Carla whispered, “being in the center of this building is a mistake. We don’t know that we’re alone here. And the...zombies.” She made herself say the word. “They could come from any direction. It’s not safe. Just think, please.”

Her face held nothing but affection for me. I was a park ranger, but she was a cop. Despite my ranger training, she had more training than me.

I thought about how I should answer her, then said, “It’s my brother, Carla. Anna’s right. In the office, or down below, we wouldn’t be able to hear him, even if he did come. I couldn’t live with that.”

Carla turned away. “If you say so.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Like what? Like saving our lives?”

“Yeah,” I said more loudly than I intended. “You all saved my ass out there. What if no one is there to save my brother?”

Carla took a deep breath, blew it

out. “I might have to leave tomorrow. I can help by finding out what’s going on. Why the hell are there so many of them, so soon?” She looked me dead in the eye and said loud enough for Anna and Jared to hear, “I’m just trying to help, Jack. Because I care about you. And Anna and Jared. And your brother. Believe that.”

Chapter Thirty-three

Too late, I realized we didn’t have any sleeping bags or blankets.

So, we bedded down for the night, jackets on and clothes strewn over us.

Carla and I stayed next to Anna and Jared, for more than one reason. I knew Jared respected me, but I also knew what teens did. I had been one once.

Minus the zombies.

I'd given both Anna and Jared one of the semis I'd picked up. Made them practice switching clips until they could do it quickly. Carla took the first watch.

"Have you tried calling Uncle Joe?" Anna asked me, while we lay next to each other. Knowing she was close and temporarily safe meant the world to me.

I told her I had called, but there was no answer, adding, "But I'm sure he's okay. Your uncle is smart and strong."

"Yeah, I guess so," she said, but I heard the concern in her voice.

“Just sleep, sweetie,” I said, and noticed she was cuddling up to Jared for warmth. Lord, first zombies and now teenage hormones. I wasn’t sure which was worse, or more out of control.

I settled myself as best I could. Soon, Anna and Jared were out. Long, crazy day for them. Long, crazy day for *anyone*. They held hands in slumber. I gazed up at Carla, who stood watch near the main entrance. She held her gun down, but looked this way and that and listened for any unwanted visitors.

“Carla, you do understand, don’t you? About my brother?”

“I understand what’s good for the many as opposed to the good of the one.” The line sounded like something out of a

Star Trek movie.

“Do you have family?” It was the first time I’d considered this.

She looked down at me coldly. “No. I don’t.”

“I’m sorry about that.” It was all I could come up with.

“Don’t be.”

I let it go. I was too tired. Physically and emotionally. I trusted Carla to watch over us. I drifted into fitful dreams. Dreams full of brains and splattered blood. Somewhere in my dreams I saw Anna. She was running for her life. I tried to follow her, but my feet were too slow and I kept getting lost.

I think I was trying to cry out when someone pushed me.

A desperate whisper penetrated the dream. “Jack! Jack! Wake up.”

I opened my eyes. Remembered where I was. Carla was shaking me. “What...?” I asked, not quite fully awake.

But her next words brought me to full consciousness. “Get up now, Jack,” she whispered. “They’re here. They’re inside the building.”

Chapter Thirty-four

It was fully dark by the time Joe and Mike were ready to go.

Things would have gone more

smoothly if they hadn't had to keep an eye on Cole. And a gun. But the two former LCDRs soon found a nice Suburban with government plates and almost a full tank of gas. Then they had to break into the weaponry barracks and take as many firearms and as much ammunition as they could. If this thing was spreading like wildfire, they wanted to be prepared. They loaded the vehicle with every gun they could find: automatics, rifles, a few machine guns, and even some grenades. At the last minute, they decided to change into officers' uniforms, in case of any mishap driving such a vehicle.

Joe tried not to think about how many laws they were breaking.

And, throughout all of this, they had to watch out for the crazies. They shot and killed about a dozen more while they prepared to leave.

Joe laughed at Mike when he came out of the room where he'd changed into an officer's uniform. He saluted Mike. Mike smiled, returned the salute.

"I always wanted to wear one of these," Mike said. "Never thought I'd earn it this way, though."

"I know what you mean," Joe said. He turned to Cole, who was sitting, handcuffed, away from them. "What should we do with him?"

"Well, we can't bring him with us," Mike said. "I don't trust him any farther than I can throw him."

“No, of course not,” Joe agreed. He would never let Cole near his family, either. “But I really think we should drop him off somewhere. As much as I hate the bastard, I can’t leave him here. If we just un-cuff him here, he’ll follow us.”

“It’s dark,” Mike said. “I have an idea.”

* * *

Joe drove.

Mike sat in the back with Cole. He kept his gun down low, but watched Cole like a hawk. They were cruising up Beach Boulevard.

“Just look for any dark alley or

something like the back of a 7-Eleven,” Mike said.

“Got it,” Joe answered.

Eventually they found a tire store with a large but unlit back parking lot, and a row of trees and shrubs lining a tall brick wall. The place was closed. Joe pulled in, close to some pathetic bushes.

Mike got out, motioned for Cole to get out of the car as well. Joe kept watch as Mike said, “On your knees, asshole.”

Cole did as he was told.

“Carter, take off his shoes and socks.”

Joe hesitated.

“It’s necessary,” Mike said firmly.

“He can deal. We’re not in Minnesota or

anything.” To Cole he said, “Try anything, and I’ll blow your brains out.”

Jack bent down in back of Cole and removed his shoes and socks. He put them in the back of the truck.

“Don’t shoot me,” he pleaded.

“You would think that, you sick bastard,” Joe answered. “If we wanted to kill you, which I kind of do, we could have left you handcuffed back at the base. Fortunately for you, we’re not like that. I don’t know why, but you’ll probably live. Get in the car, Mike.”

Mike moved around to the passenger side and got in. “You’re going to stay here until we leave. If I see you move, I will come back and shoot you. Understand?”

“You’re making a big mistake,”
Cole told him.

“Maybe, maybe not. I saved your life once, and I’m doing it again. You’re a smart guy, I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

Joe threw the keys to the handcuffs into the brush. “You’ll find them,” he said, “and you’ll figure out a way to get those off.”

Cole just knelt there. He didn’t say anything. In a way, Joe felt a little sorry for the man. After all, Joe was returning to family. He didn’t know if the Agent in Black had anyone. Probably not, he was such a dick. So, it was pity that made him pull a twenty out of his pocket and toss it in front of Cole.

“If we meet again,” Joe said, “Just remember. I saved your life. *Twice.*”

He got into the car and the lieutenant commanders drove off.

Chapter Thirty-five

Joe tried calling his brother, Jack, but he couldn't get through for some reason.

He wondered why. Things were getting out of control more quickly than he could have ever imagined. Was there something wrong with the satellites? Or maybe Jack hadn't paid his bill. Or was out of reach.

Hang in there, brother, he thought, the troops are on their way.

That was how Joe felt. He had enough guns, rifles, and even grenades for a small squadron. It actually made him a little nervous driving around with all these explosives just behind him.

For most of the drive up to Los Feliz, he and Mike were silent. They listened to the news on the radio, mostly traffic and weather, but also news here and there of mysterious murders. The newsman announced that the zoo, the Greek, and the Griffith Observatory were all closed due to “several homicides,” but that the police “had everything under control.”

“I’d bet the farm that’s not true,”

Mike observed. “They’re trying to avoid panic.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. He had a bad feeling about this. Those areas were his brother’s beat.

Still, he kept his speed at sixty-five and his hands at ten and two on the wheel. The last thing he needed was trouble.

Soon, they arrived at the house in Los Feliz. The front door was unlocked, the place empty.

“Where do you think they went?” Mike asked, opening a can of tuna in the kitchen and eating it straight.

“Probably the zoo or the observatory,” Joe answered, opening a can for himself. He didn’t want to wait

around, but a guy's got to eat. They both needed their strength. He thought for a moment. "The zoo's too open. Too dark. Lots of places to hide," he said.

"These crazies don't care about hiding," Mike countered. "And your brother knows the best hiding places, I bet."

"True," Joe considered. "But the observatory can be locked. Contained. That would be my choice, if I were him."

They tossed the empty tuna cans in the sink. "All right," Mike said. "Let's head up there and see what we can find."

They felt safe with their ammunition, and confident as trained military men. But they had no idea what they were

walking into as they pulled the car out and started up the winding road.

Chapter Thirty-six

The Agent in Black wasted no time.

He was furious beyond reason, but kept his wits about him. As soon as they left, he rose onto his bare feet and looked around for anyone who might be watching. He saw no one.

He'd seen exactly where the keys had landed. He was no fool. He knelt down to where he could see them glinting from the street light. It only took him a couple of minutes to lay down on

his back, grab the keys with one hand and get himself free.

He told himself he didn't give a shit about walking down Beach Boulevard barefooted, but he had never been humiliated like this. The Agent in Black was one of the most respected officials on the planet. He'd always been treated as such.

He bought a pack of cigarettes and flip-flops from a 7-Eleven. Then, waiting at the bus stop—*the bus stop, for God's sake*—he started forming a plan.

* * *

It took him over three hours to get

back to the base.

He knew he had to work fast. He needed information. Even more than that, he needed protection. Those two fuckers had taken a lot with them, but they could never have emptied out the base's considerable weaponry into one vehicle.

Carrying a machine gun in each hand, he walked boldly through the front entrance. He took out a dozen or so crazies, as Carter had called them, before he got to his office. He got out his gym bag and put on his Converse shoes and a pair of socks. The flip-flops went into the trash.

The file cabinet secure, he worked quietly at his computer. It was almost laughable that Carter and Mendoza were

unaware of the tracking devices that all military vehicles had. He could calculate their location to within fifty yards.

Cole was slightly surprised to find the car's location at the Griffith Observatory. Then he remembered that Carter's brother was a park ranger. Cole was also aware that the observatory was closed down temporarily, due to murder investigations in the vicinity.

He began clicking for news of the area, but froze when he heard the dragging footsteps pass by. *As long as I'm quiet.* He fought anxiety. But he'd learned a hell of a lot, even from Carter and Mendoza, about how they handled the infected ones. For the time being, he

was safe.

The military news was much more informative than the local media. He still had his classified status. He entered his code. Cole thought he was prepared for anything. Nevertheless, he was shocked at the words on the screen.

This was indeed turning into a worldwide pandemic. With chaos everywhere, airports and many government buildings had closed down. Especially in Third World countries. The White House was on lockdown. That made sense. The President of the United States could take no chances. He was in touch with other countries, but couldn't afford to give aid. All National Guard troops were deployed here in the

US, trying to get a grip on the infected. From what the Agent in Black read, it seemed like a losing battle.

He rubbed his eyes. He'd waited all his life for something like this to happen. He had envisioned himself a real hero, taking command, control, and being recognized for it. He was no fool, though. He knew the chances of a recovery from something of this magnitude, and it was next to zero. He knew the world would never be the same again. The world, as he and everyone else on the planet had once known it, had gone bye-bye. How many others realized this? Not many. *Not yet.*

He was alone. He realized it, and accepted it. He could deal with it.

He did have another agenda. Crazy people never think they're crazy. Cole didn't see anything wrong with getting his revenge on the two Navy lieutenants commanders who had so easily outsmarted and humiliated him. They obviously didn't know who they were dealing with. No one treated him that way. *No one.*

Cole had no way of knowing who was with them at the observatory, nor did he really care. He didn't know what condition the place was in, but it was a pretty good choice for refuge.

It was dark; he would wait until morning. He could stay in the office tonight. He would use the time to map out his plan. Didn't Joe Carter have a

teenaged niece? He smiled to himself. By the time he was through with them, they would be kissing his shoes. His Converse, no less. He laughed to himself, but ever so quietly.

Chapter Thirty-seven

I was on my feet in an instant.

“Where are they?” It was dark but the moon gave us a little light.

Carla jerked her head to the south hallway. I heard them moving slowly in our direction. *Them*, as in the crazies.

Carla pointed in the direction of the

offices. “We can lock ourselves in until they leave,” she whispered.

I didn’t like it. I was still thinking of my brother and his friend. She was right, though. If we got in there and stayed quiet, the zombies would move on. Then, come dawn, we could formulate a new plan.

If I could only put a sign on the door for my brother...

But first things first. Get Anna and Jared to safety.

I nodded to Carla. The undead were coming closer. There was no time for anything but to get to safety.

I was up and soon kneeling next to Anna, with Carla by Jared. We tried to wake them quietly, but Anna cried out as

soon as she woke up.

“Shh,” I hissed. “Come with me.”

“What...why?” And then she heard them and gasped. Apparently, the zombies had heard her, too.

I could see them now, about twenty feet away. Dragging their feet, head hanging. They moved in, coming straight for us.

We all had guns. My baby girl ran with her own, swinging it recklessly. *Lord help us all.* We took off down the dark hallway for the office. Once inside, we locked the door. Now, it was completely dark. Somehow, our movements sounded louder in the darkness. Anna was breathing hard. Could they hear her? I didn't know.

Then Carla, bless her, turned on her flashlight. Cops always have a good one. So did I, but I'd left it out there. Should have thought of that, dammit.

We could hear them coming, shuffling and snapping their jaws. Jesus, why did they *do* that? Probably, they didn't know what the hell they were doing. Mindless. I had nearly been mindless, too. I had nearly been one of them.

We were all frozen, not daring to move. When one of them scratched at the door, Anna flinched and knocked over a set of files on the desk.

Shit.

It was enough for them. More scratching, moans, snarls. I could hear

their jaws snapping shut, over and over again. They pushed on the door, actually rattling it.

I thought they would give up and leave, but they didn't. The door's hinges rocked a little. This seemed to make them more aggressive, even though it wasn't us who made that sound.

It was a little crowded in the office, just one desk. It was the only thing I could think of to barricade the door. I motioned to Jared to help me. Carla gave us light; Anna backed into a corner.

We tried to make it quick. In one sweep, I shoved everything on the desk to the floor. Carla had to jump out of the way. Then we pushed the desk on its side and up against the door. Jared and I

leaned our backs into the door, holding it closed.

Anna slid down the wall to sit where the desk had been. Carla held her stance, her gun still drawn. “Now, absolute quiet,” she ordered softly.

We did our best to comply. These Zombies were more aggressive. Weren’t they supposed to just move on? That’s the way it was in the movies, right?

It took all of Jared’s and my muscle to keep the door and barricade still. Eventually, mercifully, they did leave.

When we were sure they were out of earshot, Carla said, “Sorry, guys. I have to save these batteries.” She shut off her flashlight and we were in utter darkness once again. “Who knows how long we

will be in here?" came her voice from the blackness. "We've got to have light in case of emergencies."

"Jared..." Anna said, and there was a little movement. He went over her to her and I heard him whisper quietly to her that everything would be okay. A good kid. Tough kid. Glad we had him on our side.

Carl found my hand and held on. Her hand was sweating; so was mine.

"My brother's coming," I said. "I can feel it."

"Call him."

"Cell's not working, you know that."

"It wasn't working, but maybe now it is."

Still holding her hand with my right—I was reluctant to release it—I took my cell out with my left and looked at it. “It’s got a bar or two.”

“Try it.”

I did and, amazingly, Joe picked up.

“Joey!” It took all my restraint to keep my voice to an exited whisper. “Where are you?”

“On my way, bro,” he answered.

“Figured you were at the observatory. I’m halfway up the hill. Am I right?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “But listen, Joe, it’s not safe here. We’re barricaded in, and locked up—”

The line went dead.

“Shit. Fucking hell.”

“Quiet, baby,” said Carla, gripping

my hand tighter. And hearing her own term of endearment settled me down.

Had my brother heard my warning? I didn't know, but he would be here in less than ten minutes. I had to figure out a way to get him in. God only knew what was going on outside, but it sure as hell wasn't safe in here, either.

Chapter Thirty-eight

“Jack? Jack, are you there?”

The call dropped. *Crap.*

“What?” Mike asked.

“He's trapped in the observatory, and the crazies are there. that's all I

heard before I lost him.” Joe was on fire now. Joe, who was driving, hit the gas harder. “We need a plan now. I bet they’ve locked themselves in.”

“Who’s with him?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know. I hope Anna is, and her boyfriend, probably. Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Mike said. “Pull over, dude.”

“Pull over? Are you crazy?”

“Listen,” Mike took a tone of authority. “Pull over for just a second. If we’re going in there, we need to be prepared. That means armed. If the crazies are there, we can’t waste time getting ammo out of the back. We need to move in with guns firing.”

Made sense. A ton of sense. Joe stopped the car in the middle of the street and they jumped out. Went to work.

“Lock and load.”

Trained as they were, it took less than five minutes to lock and load everything they could carry.

They continued on to the observatory.

Chapter Thirty-nine

“So, he knows you’re here,” Carla offered.

“Yeah, but I didn’t get a chance to

tell him everything. If I know him, he'll burst in like Yosemite Sam, guns blasting. He doesn't know what he's walking into."

"Daddy," Anna said. "If he's going to be here in a few minutes, we need to cover him. Make sure he's okay, you know?"

Carla wasn't having any of this. She switched on her flashlight again, and I could see she was angry. "Jack, we have no idea how many of them are out there. It's suicide to leave this room right now."

"And it would be murder to leave my brother out there."

I knew Carla was thinking of protecting all of us, but I'd be damned if

I was going to leave my kid brother outside. I had to let him in. And Mike, too, if he was with Joey.

“I’m with you, Dad.” Anna was firm. “Family is family. What about the democratic vote?”

Carla fumed. Jared was quiet as usual.

“All right,” I said. “Whoever wants to go outside and get my brother, raise their hands.”

Carla was the only one who didn’t, but she was resigned to stay with the consensus.

“Fine,” she said. “This is how we’ll do it. It’s the safest way. *My way.*”

We removed the desk as quietly as we could and listened for movement

outside the office. *Nothing*. I was to go first, with the keys for the front door. Jared behind me, then Anna, and Carla in back covering us all. We had to be quiet, and hope that Joe was wise enough to be as well.

I crept through the hallways, staying low in a combat crawl. Finally, I got to the front to wait for Joe and Mike and be ready to cover them.

I waited at the main entrance, ready to unlock the door. Soon, I saw headlights through the thick fog, then an official-looking SUV pull up to the steps.

Thank God. I could just barely see two people in the car. Mike was with him. That was better. As I'd predicted,

they got out bearing arms. Armed to the hilt. They searched the premises. Of course, there were Zombies roaming around. Within close proximity, they took down about seven.

They couldn't have known. They couldn't possibly have known that the shots would stir those inside.

I unlocked the door, hands shaking. I could hear them coming from all around within the large building, but I couldn't see them.

Carla started firing, and then Jared did, too. Joe and Mike sprinted up the stairs. I let them in and relocked the door.

Anna screamed at that moment and another shot fired.

Joe and Mike were armed, but it was dark and they didn't know where everyone was. They didn't want to fire at the wrong person.

There was no time for polite greetings. "Follow me." I now trotted down the dark hallway. "It's us, Carla." I tried not to speak too loudly. "Me, Joe, and Mike."

Anna ran to Carla's side, and Jared followed. We were right behind them but the zombies somehow got between Anna and Carla.

There were dozens of them. Where had they come from? The place must not be secured, I thought from the back of my mind as I tried to rally around them to get to Anna. She was backing herself

into a corner, the worst thing she could have done.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She fired her last shot and in the dim light, I saw her trying to reload, her hands shaking.

It was too dangerous to fire. They were all in front of her, and I couldn't risk missing them and hitting her. I drew my hunting knife and charged them.

Mike and Jared were taking down those near Carla. Joe moved with me. He also had a knife and we split skulls right and left, trying to get to my daughter. She did reload finally, and her aim was true. She took down six more. My little girl, the zombie killer.

It was close, but not enough. Every

time I thought I was getting closer to Anna, I felt a presence behind me and I had to take down another one. I did use my gun then, knowing Joe was on my left and the rest were further away. The floor was slippery with blood and grey matter.

Anna was outnumbered, even with my brother and me doing our best. She was backed up against a window, the moonlight shining down on her. She was out of bullets now. She used the butt of her gun to try to fend them off. I had but an instant to be proud of her, but no time to really think. I had to get to her now.

Right now.

“Cover me!” I shouted to my brother. I dove in, gun in one hand and

knife in the other. All I wanted to do was get between my precious daughter and these fuckers. I would take the hit. I didn't care. *Just save her.*

I made it. Within a couple of minutes, I killed about nine of them. I got to the last zombie that separated me and my daughter. I would get this one and reach my daughter.

Anna was out of energy, sobbing, and blindly hitting at anything that came near her.

Together, and with Joe's help, we took them down. I almost couldn't believe it when there were no more zombies left to kill.

Chapter Forty

Anna was brave; I had to give her credit for that. She had used real muscle to fight off these suckers. If she hadn't been in shape, we wouldn't have made it.

"I'm so proud of you." I tried to hold her but she pushed me away. She simply gazed at all the death, the blood and guts and brains that surrounded us. She began shivering.

The rest joined us.

Joe took in Anna's state. "She's in shock. We need to lay her down and keep her warm."

Jared didn't hesitate. He ran to the

center of the great hall, and sprinted back with a couple of jackets. We wrapped them around my daughter. We brought her into the office and barricaded the door once again.

She lay with her head on Jared's lap. He kept feeding her sips of water until she stopped shaking.

The office was now crowded. It was warm from all of our bodies, but we kept still, recovering from a battle I never would have dreamed of.

Some of us must have slept. I know I dozed fitfully. It didn't seem like so much time had passed, but finally, I could see a little light coming in from under the door.

Carla always had a plan. "Jack,"

she whispered.

“Yeah? You still mad at me?”

She gave a small laugh. “No, of course not. You were right. I was just frightened.”

I took her hand. “What were you going to say?”

“Well, that...I know this might not be the best time...but if it's safe, and now that we have back up,” referring to Mike and Joe, “We really need to get those bodies out of here. It's going to start smelling.”

I hadn't even thought of that.

“She's right,” Joe agreed. “There's a small door where you and Anna were fighting last night. We could just pick them up and throw them out that door.”

I didn't know Anna had awakened.

"I don't want them in here," she said bitterly. "I'll be happy if I never see one of them again. And we have to get our food and stuff."

We all pitched in. After careful searching, we found the place empty except for the Zombie bodies. Carla covered us all. We propped open the door to find a small walkway with a fifty-foot drop to a slope on the hill. Good enough.

The men, Jared included, heaved the bodies up and out the door and let them fall. It was a dirty business.

For the most part, Anna watched. Then her eyes fell onto one of the bodies. One of them wore a backpack,

with what looked like a computer hanging out.

“I’m going to get that,” she said.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I told her.

But she gingerly made her way through the heaps of dead zombies to reach it.

I should have been watching her.

We all should have. We were focused on our cleanup work, and Anna wanted that laptop.

She kneeled down and reached for it

And that’s when a hand shot out and grabbed her leg. She screamed and let go of the backpack. She tried to kick loose, but fell to the ground.

If I had gotten to her a second sooner, I would have made it. *But I*

didn't.

She shrieked just as the zombie bit into her ear. In pain and terror, blood running down her ear and neck, she cried out, “Daddy!”

“*You motherfucker!!*” I plunged my knife into his skull and he fell to the ground. He was dead, but I was too late. Anna had been bitten.

To be concluded in:

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(read on for a sample)

It was another unproductive day.

I don't like unproductive days, especially as a self-employed private investigator living and working in the city of Los Angeles. Unproductive days meant I don't eat, pay my rent or pay my alimony. Hell, I hadn't had a haircut in months. I made it a new manly style, but the truth was I couldn't afford regular cuts. Unproductive days meant creditors would come knocking, and I hated when

creditors came knocking.

Most important, unproductive days meant I didn't get to drink myself into oblivion, which is exactly what I'd been doing these past few months.

I was in my office, alone, my feet up on my old desk.

It wasn't much of an office—or a desk, for that matter. The office was just a small room with stained carpet, a couch on the far wall, where I had napped one too many times. The often-broken ceiling fan did little to disperse the hot air. A water cooler occasionally gurgled by a sink and faucet, where I kept my booze. An old TV sat on a bookshelf that was filled with novels I'd always meant to get to, but haven't found

the time yet.

Not much of an office...and not much of a life, either. When I was working, I was usually tailing cheating wives, one or two of which I ended up cheating with myself.

Now, as the ceiling fan wobbled above, as the drone of traffic reached me from nearby Sunset Boulevard, I idly wondered how I could drum up more business. Perhaps start a Facebook account? Or even Twitter? Maybe both? Maybe now was a good time to see what, exactly, a Twitter was.

I hadn't a clue.

Truth was, I could barely use those new-fangled cell phones. You know, the ones that are practically a computer.

Hell, I had a hard enough time with my laptop, let alone a computer the size of my palm.

I shook my head, and absently longed for the days when people actually used a land line. When a phone sounded like a phone, and not the latest Lady Gaga song.

I'd always suspected I was a man born out of time. As a kid, I often wore a cowboy hat and toy six-shooters to school—back when they allowed kids to bring toy guns to school. I longed to be a cowboy—hell, I still did. Now that was the life. No computers, no smart phones, no Twitter. Just me, my horse and the open range...

I awoke with a start.

How long I had been asleep, I didn't know. I'd been dreaming of the Wild West, of the Great Plains, of beautiful showgirls, and of whiskey. Mostly, I had dreamed briefly of long rides on my trusted horse, of its hooves pounding hard through the hot desert sand, kicking up dust a mile long behind me.

Oddly enough, as I sat up and rubbed my eyes, I was hearing just that: the sound of hooves.

“What the hell?” I mumbled.

I knew the sound of horse hooves well. Although I didn't have much, I always made a point of keeping a horse at a nearby stable, just outside of LA. Whenever I could, I took this horse out—and longed for simpler times.

The sound came again. Yes, hooves. In fact, many hooves.

“What the hell?” I said again, a little louder.

And just as I slid my cowboy boots off the desk and stood, I heard another strange sound: heavy boots approaching my office door. I’ll admit, I briefly considered going for my gun located in the top right drawer, a gun I now kept nearby since an incident with a client’s husband. Long story.

And so I stood there, undecided. I mean, was there really a horse just outside my door? Or had I imagined that? After all, wasn’t I just dreaming of horses?

I nearly laughed. Of course, that was

it.

I'd dreamed of the horses.

Maybe. I certainly wasn't dreaming of the approaching boots, which grew louder and louder. I considered again the gun in my drawer, and was just reaching for it when my office door opened.

All thoughts of my gun disappeared when I got a load of the man standing there in my office.

A man out of time, indeed.

* * *

The stranger was short, no more than an inch or two over five feet, and was wearing clothing that I was certain I'd never seen outside of the Renaissance fair. And even then, the clothes still seemed *off*. Just damn

unusual. The man's shirt had a ruffled collar and wide stitching down the front. It appeared hand-stitched, and of a rough material that I was certain I'd never seen before.

Oh, and he wore a cape. Yes, a cape. As in Superman, minus the giant "S". It hung from his shoulder and nearly touched the ground and was embroidered with a material that looked, to my eye at least, like actual gold.

"What the hell?" I whispered yet again. Admittedly, my day had taken a dramatic turn to the weird.

Strangest of all, was the sword that hung from a scabbard at the man's right hip. Strange because it was an actual sword. A sword. Here in my office. And

a highly unusual one at that. A bejeweled pommel poked up from the scabbard, a jewel unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Mostly because it seemed to be...

Glowing?

I shook my head. Surely, I was dreaming.

I was about to ask what the devil was going on when the stranger opened his mouth and...began to sing? And beautifully too...except he sang in a language I was certain I had never heard before.

And then it hit me—a singing telegram!

An old-fashioned special message. I nearly clapped, and was briefly relieved. After all, I'd been about to

question my sanity. Yes, times have been rough of late. I was beginning to suspect too rough, that I'd finally lost it.

But, yes. A singing telegram.

And the guy sang beautifully...albeit in another language. Hungarian maybe?

I laughed and clapped and sat on the corner of my desk and enjoyed the show. One of my buddies had obviously set me up. Granted, I didn't have many buddies these days—and most were fellow private investigators. And, as I knew all too well, private investigators often had a *lot* of free time on their hands.

The man sang and sweated, and when he was done, I clapped again and offered him some water.

The little man frowned, scratched

his head, then finally nodded. He next removed something from his pants pocket. It was a small pouch, held together with strips of colorful leather. The little man pulled open the pouch and proceeded to tap out something onto his open palm.

A white powder. Cocaine?

Next, the man did something highly unexpected. He raised his open palm to his face—and blew hard. The dust exploded out and quickly filled my small office.

“Hey,” I said. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“I did it,” said the man after a moment, “so that we might communicate. Can you understand me now?”

“Of course I can understand you,” I muttered, coughing.

“The spell worked, I see. Very good. It’s one of my own creations, in fact. The princess will be pleased.”

“Spell? Princess?” I said, admittedly confused as hell. “Oh, I see, you’re still in character. So, what are you, like a magician or something?”

“A wizard, in fact.”

“Like Harry Potter and all that?”

“Harry Potter—” the man paused, cocked his head slightly. “Ah, you are referencing something in your popular culture. Yes, I suppose I am a little like Harry Potter and his gang of adventurers. There is, of course, one big difference.”

“And what’s that?”

“I’m a *real* wizard.”

I grinned. “Of course you are.”

“I see by your smile and easy agreement that you are using sarcasm. You are humoring me. You don’t really believe me.”

“I believe that you’re quite a showman.”

“In more ways than one, my good man.”

“Now *that* I believe.”

The man frowned slightly. It was almost as if he was, in fact, trying to understand me, or the intentions of my words. This day, certainly, could not have gotten any weirder.

He said, “Well, kind sir. My name is DubiGadlumthakathi—but you may

call me Dubi—and I have no doubt that you will believe soon enough. You are Roan Quigley?”

I nodded, still grinning through all this madness.

He continued. “You are something called a private investigator?”

“Yes.”

“And we are presently in the city of Los Angeles in the third dimensional physical realm of the planet Earth?”

I was about to grin again, but something suddenly stood out: the man sounded so...sincere. And so odd. I still could not place his accent. And had he really ridden up on an actual horse?

“Very good, then,” said the man and reached inside another pocket. He

extracted another pouch, this one clearly heavier than the first. I was certain I'd heard the clink of metal. And not just any metal. Gold? "We are here to hire you, Mr. Quigley."

I was momentarily caught off guard. "Hire me?"

"Of course. You do assist those in need, correct?"

"Yes, of course," I said, knowing that my grin was faltering a little.

"Well, Mr. Quigley, the Realm is very much in need of your expert services."

"The Realm?"

"Yes, Mr. Quigley. The Realm, from which we hail."

"Of course, right. And who's we?"

“Myself and the princess.”

“Princess?”

“Yes, she’s right outside your door. Would you care to meet her?”

“Er, I’m really quite busy—”

“I understand, which is why I’ve brought this.”

And with that, the little man emptied onto his palm a dozen or so golden nuggets that looked, at least to my untrained eye, very real. Dubi said, “I trust this will be enough to retain your expert services?”

“Is that...?”

“Gold? Yes, Mr. Quigley, and there’s more where that came from.”

My mouth, inexplicably went dry, because I was certain—dead certain—

that it was real gold. Real, honest-to-God gold. And tens of thousands of dollars worth of it.

“Sweet Jesus,” I muttered.

“Your realm’s deity, I assume?” asked Dubi.

“You assume correctly,” I said, and did my best to get a handle on the situation. I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. “So who set you up? Rick? My brother maybe?”

“Neither ‘set me up,’ or directed me to be here. I am here by the princess’s directive only.”

“Princess,” I said. “Who’s right outside the door?”

“Yes, with the others.”

I stared at Dubi. He stared at me,

smiling politely. I stared at the gold in his open palm. Then I pushed myself off the desk, and marched past the little man, who turned and followed me.

I stepped outside...and was not entirely prepared for what I saw...

* * *

The summer sun was high in the sky, baking the mostly empty parking lot. Mostly empty, since it was presently filled with six massive horses and four riders. Three men and one woman. Three heavily armed men, with broadswords that reached well below their boots. Even more weapons hung from various scabbards along the saddles.

They all regarded me curiously,

especially the woman. I blinked in the bright light, trying my damndest to comprehend what I was seeing, but I couldn't. For the life of me, I couldn't get a handle on what I was seeing: six horses, three warriors and a woman. Here in the middle of LA. On horseback.

And not just any woman, either. A stunning beauty who took my breath away—and who regarded me shyly.

I realized my mouth had dropped open, but I didn't care.

I was dreaming, of course. Or this was a seriously elaborate joke. Or I had lost my mind.

“I can see you're confused, my good man,” said Dubi, coming up behind me. “I do not doubt that you are. Truth be

known, this is a new experience for us all, too.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, still staring at the horses, at the weapons, at the stunningly beautiful woman sitting high above me.

“We’re here to hire you, Mr. Quigley.”

A very troubling thought suddenly occurred to me, one that made me doubt my sanity and to immediately swear off another drink: this is real.

“What, exactly, do you need me to do?” I heard myself ask.

“We need you to help us find a killer. An assassin, actually.”

“An assassin?”

“Yes.”

“And who did he assassinate?”

“The king, of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “The king. That makes perfect sense. And the young lady...?”

“Is his daughter.”

I nodded, trying my damndest to wrap my brain around what was happening to me...and couldn't.

“So why me?” I asked.

“We can explain that on the way,” said the little man. “Really, we don't have much time to lose. The killer is getting away as we speak.”

I felt dizzy. “I need to sit.”

“We have provided you a horse, Mr. Quigley. We understand you are an expert rider.”

“I...I feel sick.”

“I am an expert at curing ailments, my good man. Please. We must hurry. We have a killer to catch. Will you help us?”

I looked at him, and looked at the horses—the beautiful horses. I longed to be astride such a beautiful creature. And then I looked at the princess. I sensed her sadness, her grief. Had her father actually been murdered? Assassinated?

And then she did something that warmed my heart and caused all doubt and confusion to melt away. She smiled at me.

“Yes,” I said, barely able to believe the words that were coming from my mouth. “I will help you. I think.”

“Very good!” said Dubi, clapping me on the shoulder and striding past me. “Then we must hurry. We haven’t a moment to lose. Your mount awaits.”

Dragon Assassin

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