

DWELLERS OF THE NIGHT

A POST-APOCALYPTIC NOVEL BY
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THIS WORK OF FICTION IS DEDICATED TO
MY GOOD AND LOYAL FRIEND,

SARAH GABBARD

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Prologue: Oksino, Russia
Thursday Morning, August 11th, 2011
The Eve of the Nightmare

The day begins like any other for the Siberian town of Oksino. The sun has risen early, and children don themselves in overcoats to protect against the cold as they make their way to be picked up for school by rusted busses long in need of repair. The ride to school goes slow and monotonous, and the children press their noses against the frosted glass windows of the bus to watch the landscape passing by: twisting streams, stretching grasslands, and Asian mountains rising in the distance. The Trans-Siberian railroad can be seen through broken mists as the sun rises higher above the snow-capped Altai Mountains. The busses arrive at the school late, and the children flood into their classrooms. The cafeteria and the boarding house are in different buildings along opposite ends of the village, and the school sports no gymnasium. The walls are colored with chalk and falling apart; many of the desks are broken, and the electricity in the room often shorts-out. They file into their classrooms and sit down, talking hurriedly amongst themselves in the Russian tongue. Many of the children are direct descendents of the Pazyryk, an ancient people who lived in the land thousands of years ago, of whom mummies have been found frozen in permafrost. Many Bronze Age tombs have been dug up, and their findings hint that the Pazyryk culture may have been loosely connected with the ancient Scythian culture to the west. Most of the children's parents make income working in the oil fields or doing agricultural work; fewer belong to ranching families, being threatened by the Russian government for hunting such species as Argali Mountain Sheep, the steppe eagle, and the Black Stork.

The teacher enters the room and tells the children to sit down. He walks by the windows and pulls up the blinds, early morning light filtering over the children's faces. He stands before the class and opens an old textbook, long outdated; no money can be found to purchase new textbooks, and basic school supplies—paper and pencils—are hard to come by. The lights flicker, and the teacher grumbles. A moment later there comes a strange screaming noise, coming from above them. He lets the book shut and looks upwards, wondering if the noise comes from the electrical generator. The numbing silence is broken as kids start shouting and leaping from their seats. The teacher hurries over to the window, pushing kids out of the way, peers out: above in the brilliant blue skies, what looks to be a comet streaks overhead, leaving in its wake a plume of black smoke wreathed in fire. A moment later it disappears beyond the mountains. There comes a quick shudder under their feet, then what sounds like the roar of an airplane: and the windows burst outwards, spraying into the children, who scream and dive to the ground. The building shakes and dust falls from the rafters.

And then it is over.

The teacher draws a deep breath and pulls glass from his hair. He asks if everyone is okay. A few scratches, nothing bad. His heart sprints. He put on a calm voice and tells the kids to sit down. As they take their seats, the door to the classroom opens and another, older man enters. He speaks privately with the teacher, then leaves the room. The teacher approaches the class, and tells them, "Российский спутник потерпел крушение вне гор. То, что мы чувствовали, было не что иное, как ударной взрывной волной. Все хорошо. Мне сказали, чтобы продолжить с уроком как нормальный," which means, in English: "A Russian satellite has crashed beyond the mountains.

What we felt was nothing more than the shockwave. Everything is okay. I have been told to continue with the lesson as normal.” He continues teaching the children.

A moment later, a slight headache begins to come over him. It only becomes worse as he teaches, and several students complain of having similar headaches. The teacher tells them that it is because of the shockwave and all the excitement, and there is nothing to be concerned about. The headaches, however, become more and more intense. The teacher stops teaching and sits down. Each breath sends a thousand burning splinters into his brain. He holds his head in his hands and feels ready to throw up. He opens his eyes, and the meager light from the windows burns through him. His fingertips and toes begin to tingle. Some of the kids began to act strange: one begins walking around, murmuring nonsense under his breath; another girl sits on her desk and begins singing a Russian lullaby; another kid steps through the broken window and begins running around outside, laughing hysterically; and another kid begins to tear off his clothes, stripping down to nothing, shouting (in Russian): “She won’t have me! She won’t have me!”

The teacher does nothing, for he is losing all sense of self-awareness. He stands and staggers into his office, mumbling hot-headed conspiracy theories. He reenters the classroom. One of the kids is lying on the floor, writhing and convulsing. The kids stand and say hello to their teacher, saluting. Blood trickles from their noses, eyes, and ears. The teacher feels blood coming down from his own nose as he raises the Ak-47 and begins firing. The children are thrown back by the bullets, laughing the entire time, and are thrown amongst the desks and chairs; bullet-holes scatter over the walls and punch holes in the dirty tile floor. Blood runs down from the children’s bodies. The teacher falls to his knees, blood gushing from every opening in his body—his nose, ears, mouth, and eyes—and his shirt becomes soaked with blood as he pitches over and dies, hailing Old Russia as salvation and victory.

Book One

August 2011
to
January 2012

Chapter One

Dead Silence

"For certain is death for the born
And certain is birth for the dead;
Therefore over the inevitable
Thou shouldst not grieve."
- Bhagavad Gita (ca 250 BC)

I

A calm and steady rain has fallen all day, sweeping in from the north and blanketing the city. It had come on strongly; he had stood outside on his back porch, looking up at the sky, waiting for her to return home. Now the ink-black clouds roll over the city, one after the other, choking the weeping evening sunlight. The clouds cast murky shadows over the skyline and the surrounding hills, and in a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder, the clouds spin and dance, rain coming down so hard that a thick mist comes off the roads and wraps around the steel skyscrapers. The clouds tumble over one another in a rhythmic ballet before finally dissipating, and as they meander above, they continue to weep. The gutters fill with water and the downspouts roar. A stiff breeze comes up and rustles through the leaves of the single oak in the backyard. He stands under the overhang and feels the humidity vanish with the downpour, lighting a cigarette in the cup of his hand, protecting it from the wind. He leans against the aluminum siding and feels the smoke curl in his lungs, then exhales and sends it disappearing into the steady rains. He hears the sound of the engine in the driveway, muted by the thunder. He tosses the cigarette and opens the sliding door, and he finds her setting down her bags on the counter. He smiles and goes forward, embracing her.

"Can I kiss you?" he asks tenderly.

She smiles, kisses his forehead. "That's all you get," she teases.

"Kira, Kira..." he moans playfully.

She pats him on the chest, stepping back. "You know I don't kiss you after you smoke."

He smiles. "I didn't smoke, Kira. Now. Kiss me."

She leans forward, as if she is about to kiss him, then pulls her lips to his ear and whispers, "I can smell it on your clothes." She steps back. "I'm going to shower. You need to shower, too. We're going to the theater tonight, or have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," he says. "What time's the show?"

"It's in an hour, so we have to shower quickly." She turns and heads down the hallway.

He follows after her. "You know, we could both take longer showers... If we showered together."

She turns and hugs him, squeezing him tight. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"You need to make up for not kissing me. That was harsh. And cold."

Thunder sprinkles outside. They can hear the rain drumming on the roof.

She smiles, her eyes sparkling. "Okay. But brush your teeth first."

They load into the purple Escort and pull out of the driveway. Their house rests against a hill in what is known as Lower Price Hill, a segment of Price Hill, a suburb of Cincinnati. The town sits upon the curves and ridges of what had once been known as Mount Harrison. The city of Cincinnati, which could be seen sprawled out like a blanket from Price Hill's hillside communities, graces the nickname "City of Seven Hills," named after Mount Adams, Walnut Hill, Mount Auburn, Vine Street Hill, College Hill, Fairmont Hill, and Price Hill (though more than seven hills pepper the area around the city). Price Hill had at one time been a haven for the rich and famous of Cincinnati, reached only by a streetcar that scaled up the hillside. The haven promised fresh air, suburban living, and tree-shaded sidewalks; Victorian houses and ornate 19th-Century mansions had been built, though now many of these had been torn down or slept in ruin.

"If only we lived here one hundred years ago," Kira would muse.

He would always make the come-back: "But then we wouldn't be enjoying each other here, now."

The town quickly became packed with shops, businesses, theaters, churches, schools, and community centers. The residents of the devilish and feared "Over the Rhine" (the heart of sin in Cincinnati) had been migrating to Price Hill, and prostitutes and drug deals went down all over the place. Murder was not uncommon: last Halloween several youngsters went door-to-door knocking, saying trick-or-treat, then gunning down the residents until they were captured by the police.

Kira would complain, "I don't feel safe living here."

"You're safe. I promise. I've lived here for five years."

"Why can't we move to Upper Price Hill? It's better there."

"Kira. We're fine. We have five locks on the doors."

"Maybe we could even move to Aspen. You know, in Colorado?"

"Yes, I know Aspen. And only rich people live there. Keep dreaming, Sweetie."

"We should live in the country. In Kentucky."

"Kira..."

"It'd be a shorter drive for you to get to work."

"Yes, but you already drive an hour to Dayton everyday. You don't need to drive an hour and a half."

The purple Escort makes its way down Glenway Avenue and over the bridge that spans the railroad stations of Cincinnati, passes the old railway station that had been turned into a museum, and descends into the heart of downtown Cincinnati. The city itself is beautiful: set against the Ohio River, sporting several bridges, and home to famous stadiums: the Paul Brown Stadium and the Great American Ball Park. One magazine rated Cincinnati as "the best city to live in." Two new museums have just recently opened: the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. As the Escort weaves through the city, between buildings, the Newport and Covington skylines can be seen on the opposite banks of the river. They pass what would be called The Banks: a 24-hour urban neighborhood of restaurants, clubs, offices, and homes with sweeping skyline views, right along the city's riverfront.

Kira points to the construction equipment beside The Banks and says, "We're going to live there one day, okay?"

He smiles. "Of course we will. Once you stop spending all your money."

She pouts, "How much did the tickets cost again?"

"Sixty dollars each. For the cheapest seats." Kiddingly, "If you want to live in The Banks, Kira, we can't be spending like this."

With a smirk, "Who bought the tickets? You did. Oh, okay."

"Here it is," he says, pulling into the parking lot of the Procter and Gamble Hall at Aronoff Center, named after one of Cincinnati's major soap manufacturers, the business that started marketing Ivory Soap.

He parks the car and turns off the engine, opens his door, steps into the gentle rain. "What are we seeing again?" he asks as he locks the door, joining her on the other side, casting above him the burgundy umbrella.

"Camelot," she says; and looking over him in his suit, "You look like a dashing prince!"

Sweetly, "And you are my mesmerizing princess." He thinks as much, too, as he devilishly eyes her slender curves and shape in the sparkling blue LA FEMME ball gown.

"Oh, you're too much," she says, kissing him on the cheek. "Do you have the tickets?"

"They're in my wallet."

He takes her hand, and they walk towards the theater.

Rain falls. Lightning flashes. Thunder rumbles in the distance.

He steps out of the theater entrance, and standing under the overhang, he withdraws a MARLBORO and lights the match. He breathes in the smoke in deep breaths, watching cars drive by on the street as the rain continues to fall. Mist wraps around his ankles, caressing the sleeves of his pants. He stands beside a marble pillar and leans against it on one elbow, and holding the cigarette between twin fingers in one hand, he reaches into the pocket of his suit jacket and withdraws a purple satin box. He flips it open and admires the ring inside. He had purchased it online at My Solitaire, and it had cost him a fortune. The three-karat asscher-cut diamond sparkles as his brown eyes dance over its form. He hears footsteps coming towards him and quickly shuts the box and slides it into his pocket.

"What are you doing out here?" she asks, standing beside him. A shiver: "It's cold."

"Just thinking," he replies. "I'm not much of a theater person."

"I know," she says. "But you did it for me. And I think that's wonderful."

He smiles. "You know I love you, don't you?"

"What? Of *course* I know that. And *you* know *I* love *you*." Then, taking his hand in hers, "Now come inside. You're going to catch a cold, and you have a flight early in the morning."

Raindrops rap like delicate fingers upon the large window of the upper-story bedroom; lightning flickers, casting pure white into the room, illuminating the bed, figures moving atop of one another beneath scattered sheets twisting around their ankles. He moves slowly and steadily on top of her, tender not rough, and their lips glide against one another. Her hair falls across her bare shoulders as he kisses her neck. She grips his shoulder-blades between shaking fingers, and her back arches as he gently caresses her.

She clings to him tightly, breathes, "You're so amazing..."

"I love you so much," he says, kissing her cheek. "I'm going to marry you."

She gasps in pleasure, then, "That would be... wonderful."

"I think so, too."

They continue to kiss as the rain steadily falls.

II

The sun has just begun to rise as the alarm clock goes off. At first he ignores it, the incessant ringing echoing in his dreams. It is a sweet dream, and one that he does not wish to leave: he is standing on a white-sand beach with his mistress, and they are holding one another close. The moon eclipses the sun, and the beach is clothed in darkness. Stars twinkled in the sky, and pale crabs scurry at their feet. Yet the alarm beckons him, and he awakes, rubbing his eyes. Soft dawn sunlight comes in through the shades, and he is glad not to hear any rain. He lumbers out of bed and stumbles out onto the balcony, opening the sliding glass door quietly so as not to wake her. He has taken a cigarette from off his dresser, and he lights the match as he looks out at the awakening city of Cincinnati. The storm clouds are breaking, ribbons of sun cascading down, glinting off the skyscrapers. Traffic clogs the multiple interstates—I-471 and I-75 crossing the Ohio River, I-75 stretching north, and OH-50 running along the Ohio shore of the river. He gets a slight buzz as he looks up at the sky, and in the growing light, he sees a shooting star twinkling far overhead. He smiles to himself—*good luck!*—and tosses the cigarette.

He reenters the bedroom. Kira is wrapped up in the sheets, her head buried in the pillow. He walks over to his dresser and opens the top drawer, pulling out the sacred satin flip-top box. He flips it open and looks down at the ring once more. *This is our future*, he thinks. *This is our dreams coming true*. And then, *A miracle*. He never believed it would happen; logically, he knew it would. But he had been through so many broken relationships and experienced so many shattered dreams that the idea of his greatest dream coming true—sharing in romance, laughter, and love—was downright laughable. *But now it's coming true. Now it's a reality*. He smiles and closes the box, setting it on his dresser. He glances back at Kira, making sure she isn't looking. It's a surprise, and he'll propose tomorrow after he returns from his flight. He has it all planned out: they'll go to the overlook at Eden Park, and there he'll fall on one knee beside the duck pond, and she'll be overwhelmed with joy. Their first date had taken place at that duck pond, when they were both in college. The irony is what drives his plan.

He walks around the side of the bed and looks down at Kira. *She's so beautiful*. He can't help but realize how lucky he really is. He leans down and kisses her on the cheek. "I love you," he says. She stirs slightly, but doesn't awake. "I love you," he repeats. A faint smile appears on her lips, and her eyes flutter. He kisses her on the eyelids and glances over at the mounted clock. He has to get ready or he'll miss his flight. "I love you," he says again. This time she doesn't respond. "Sleep well, Kira."

That is the last time he will ever talk to her.

He drives his olive green Jeep Cherokee to I-75 South and crosses the bridge spanning the Ohio River. It's packed with cars, rush hour pressing around him. He raps his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, thankful that his exist is just across the river. He pulls off at Exit 185 and follows the I-275 circle freeway west to Exit 4, State Route 212. He doesn't read the airport direction signs as he enters Erlanger Kentucky. Through the broken trees along the road, he can hear through his rolled-up window the roar of twin jet engines as an airliner takes off. He turns onto the road leading to the airport. The trees disintegrate, and he can see the three-level Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport looming before him. He parks in the Employee Parking Lot, locks the Jeep, latches the keys to his belt, straightens his uniform, grabs his briefcase, and half-walks, half-runs through the revolving glass doors into the airport interior.

The baggage claim is near abandoned, with a few poor lost souls mingling around, tired and exhausted, checking their watches, grumbling, waiting on their baggage. A little girl tries to climb

onto the revolving platforms used to carry luggage, and her mother scolds her and tells her to get down. She giggles, and her father—seeing the man approaching, donned in his pilot's uniform—quickly moves forward, scoops up his daughter, and ducks away. His face blushes as he looks over to the pilot, who can only smile at the child's innocence. He wishes such playful curiosity were contagious. He'd outgrown it ages ago. He passes the baggage claim and takes the escalator up to the security checkpoint. He steps through the scanners and is clear. His briefcase is checked. One of the security officers starts a bit of small talk, but the man must excuse himself—"I'm running late. I can't miss my flight." A trickle of joking can be detected in his voice. The security guard nods, and the man continues on his way, taking another escalator to Terminal 3. He passes Bridgeworks Deli and a line of vending machines. He ducks into the bathroom, takes a quick leak, and scurries over to the Starbucks. He orders a coffee in his personal mug. As he hands the barista her money, he glances over at the 24-Hour Flower shop and considers getting something for Kira. She loves purple flowers. He knows he doesn't have time—*I'll get it when I get back*—and, holding his coffee in one hand and briefcase in the other, he jogs over to his gate.

The attendant smiles, shakes her head. "I thought you weren't going to make it."

"I had to get my coffee," he says, raising the mug.

"God forbid you fly without it."

"Thanks for the concern, Jenny." He rushes past her, down the connecting gate, and steps into the plane.

The plane is a Boeing 777-300ER, belonging to Air France. Air France boasts of 182 destinations in 98 countries, 1700 daily flights, 383 aircraft, and 71,600 employees. The 777 a wide-bodied commercial airliner, sporting six wheels for its landing gear, a circular fuselage cross-section, a pronounced aft neck for the cockpit, and a blade-like tail cone. Its cabin width is 20 feet, and it has a 43,100 maximum foot service ceiling. It's powered by twin GE90-115B engines, each pushing 115,000 pounds-per-foot of thrust. It can carry up to 365 passengers—a combination of 1st-class, 2nd-class, and 3rd-class—but this morning there are only 152 passengers onboard. He nods to the lovely flight attendant and ducks into the cockpit.

Richard is already sitting in the copilot's seat, going over the pre-flight checklist. He looks up as the man locks down his briefcase and sets his coffee inside a custom-made holster. Richard shakes his head. "I thought I was going to have to fly this plane by myself this morning. Long night?"

"My alarm didn't go off," he lies, sitting down. "How are we doing?"

"Everything's reading all right. We're good to go."

The glass cockpit is already lit up with the Honeywell LCD display. The fiber optic avionics network is pulsing information to the glowing blue screens. "How tired are you?" the man asks.

Richard shrugs. "I'm fine. I don't need coffee."

"Let's put it on fly-by-wire today, shall we?"

"Autopilot's fine with me. I've been wanting to finish my John Grisham novel."

"Which one is it?"

"The Testament. It's about a missionary in the jungle."

"Doesn't sound like Grisham."

"Well, it involves wills and testaments and stuff like that."

The pilot reaches into his uniform pocket, pulls out the satin box. "Take a look."

Richard leans over. "You got it?"

"Yep."

"Three month's salary?"

"Hell no. I went all-out on this one. Check it out. Don't drop it."
Richard takes the satin box, opens it up. His eyes dazzle. "Shit, Man. Shit."
"It's nice, isn't it?"
"Had I bought Emily one of these, maybe she wouldn't have divorced me."
"You didn't buy her an engagement ring?"
"Not one this nice. I got it off E-Bay."
"Ouch."
"Yeah, well, in hindsight, it's a good thing I didn't spend thousands on it."
"How much did it cost?"
Richard wickedly grinned. "Forty-nine dollars."
The man laughs. "You deserve to be divorced."
"Are you still going to take her to that park? What's it called?"
"Eden Park. I'll take her tomorrow."
"You say they have a duck pond?"
"Yeah. With a bridge and everything. Right by an overlook of Kentucky."
"I'll bet Clara would like it. She wants to take the dog out more."
"I recommend it. I'll get you directions. Your little girl will enjoy it."
The flight attendant appears behind them. "We're ready to begin."
"All right," the man says. "Let's get the hell out of here."
Richard coos, "I hear the Atlantic is pretty at dawn."

It's 4:00 EST by the time they reach the airport in Germany, drained from the 8-hour flight. Richard had been wrong: the Atlantic wasn't pretty, it was dull; stretching blue water for as far as the human eye can see, for hours at a time, is enough to make anyone bored senseless; and the fact that they have made this identical flight so many times doesn't help. Once at the airport, the passengers disembark. The man's stomach is growling. He leaves the copilot with the plane—"You want anything?" "No, I brought a sack lunch."—and he finds a German grill just down the terminal. He stands in line, continually looking at his watch: he only has thirty minutes before the flight back to the States. He looks up at a mounted television and follows along. The broadcast is in German, but he is required to know the language for his flight plans. He follows the news of a meteorite strike somewhere in Russia. A few stories later, the beautiful woman on the screen is talking about power outages sweeping along Russian territory; and power outages are beginning to be experienced in Northern China and segments of Old Russia. He thinks nothing of it as he orders a deli sandwich, quickly eats, uses the restroom, and rushes back the plane.

The attendant smiles at him. A forced smile. "Haben Sei einen netten Flug." *Have a nice flight.*
"Dank," he replies.

III

The man slides a pair of sunglasses over his eyes to ward off the glare from the sun.

Richard eyes him as he fumbles with the controls. They are 40,000 feet over mainland Germany, nearing France. "Are those sunglasses new?"

"I bought them at the airport a few days ago. I've been itching to wear them."

He reads the engraved type along the side of the sunglasses: HANDMADE IN WEST GERMANY.
"God. How much did those cost?"

"A handsome amount." He pulls the sunglasses from his eyes and hands them to Richard. "See what it says on the side?"

He hands the sunglasses back. "Can you afford all this? These are Alpino sunglasses. The most expensive sunglasses in Germany. *Sunglasses*, Man. And then you bought that ring..."

"Don't worry about it, all right? I know what I'm doing."

"Don't get yourself in debt."

"I won't." To change the subject, "Have you finished yet?"

He nods. "We're flying-by-wire. It's free flying from here to Cincinnati."

"Good. Now you can finish reading your book."

He pulls it from a compartment on the wall. "I'm halfway done with it."

The man unbuckles, stretches.

Richard is thumbing to his page in The Testament. "Where are you off to?"

"The shitter. I've had to go ever since we took off."

He is sitting in the bathroom, ready to wipe. He overhears conversation coming from outside. Two of the flight attendants are talking nervously. He quickly wipes, washes, and flushes. He exits to find them standing beside the cockpit door. One is holding a tray filled with sodas and crackers, a few deli sandwiches. He asks what they were talking about. They exchange worried glances. One of them—a Latino girl—speaks up with a heavy accent: "One of Air France's planes went down in southern China a few minutes ago. Richard was telling us about it." He tells her to serve the drinks and returns to the cockpit. He asks Richard about the plane.

"They don't know why it went down. Radio connection with the plane went dead, and then it crashed. Went off the map."

"Probably a malfunction. Who was the pilot?"

"No one we know. Some Chinaman."

"All right. Why did you tell the flight attendants?"

"I figured they should know. They work for Air France just like we do."

"They're *women*, Richard. They'll spill it to the whole crew. We don't need a panic attack. Go back there and tell them to be quiet about it. They were talking about it outside the *restrooms*, for God's sakes."

Richard nods, stands, and exits the cockpit.

The man awakes. Richard is tapping him.

"I fell asleep," the man apologizes. "Where are we?"

"Over the Atlantic," Richard says, nodding to the window.

The man cranes his neck and looks out. The ocean far below is smooth as glass, and dark. The sun is setting in the far distance. Stars are appearing above them. "How long was I asleep? I didn't mean to fall asleep."

The copilot doesn't answer. "More planes have gone down."

The man is instantly awake. "More?" Shock saturates his voice. "Air France?"

"Not just Air France. Anything over southern China and into northern Korea is dropping out of the sky."

"Holy shit," the man mutters. "Thank God we're not flying over there."

"I've been keeping an eye on the readings. Everything is fine."

The man is thinking aloud to himself: "How could all those planes malfunction..."

"I don't think it's a mechanical malfunction," Richard says.

"It has to be."

"A mechanical malfunction this widespread? I don't think so."

"There's no other reason."

"I know," Richard says. "But I don't think it's a malfunction."

"So you're saying all the pilots, despite years of experience and training, are crashing?"

"I don't know," Richard says. "But it's making me want to shit myself."

"Did you tell the flight attendants?"

"No. But it'll be all over the news when we get back."

"Then let them learn about it then. I don't want everyone panicking. We're fine."

The man is leaning back in his pilot's chair when the copilot talks with Europe control. A few moments later he looks over to the pilot with a grim look. "It's spreading. Planes are crashing in India and the Middle East. Eight Air France planes have crashed. Hundreds of others have gone down, too." He curses under his breath.

The man refuses to believe. "It has to be a mistake. Someone is fucking with you."

"I thought that, too. But then I checked news frequencies. The media is covering it."

The man rubs tired eyes. "Kira's going to freak out."

"She'll be thankful when you land. And think of it this way: once we land, flights will probably be grounded for a while. You'll have lots of time to celebrate your engagement."

"You're morbid," the man mutters, then he laughs.

A nervous laugh.

The pilot makes his ritualistic pass through the passenger's area. He introduces himself to the passengers, assures them everything is okay, and sometimes he even invites the youngsters to come look at the cockpit. But not today. Some of the passengers—especially the elderly, who have seen dark days in their times—can recognize the grim façade plastered over his face, even as he comforts them with niceties. He keeps looking to the attendants, smiling—subtly telling them to smile, too. They don't know about the mass plane crashes. For this he is thankful.

He is in 3rd-class when Richard appears from 2nd-class.

"What is it?" the man asks, almost afraid to ask.

"We need to talk," he says, casting a smile to a young woman with two young girls.

The pilot nods, looks to the woman with her kids. "Enjoy your flight."

They return to the cockpit. The copilot makes sure the door to the passenger's area is shut, and then he speaks freely: "We've just lost contact with Europe."

The pilot's eyes squint in incredulity. "Lost contact?"

"One minute they were talking to me, the next minute they weren't."

"What were they saying?"

"Planes were going down over eastern Germany."

"Have you tried different frequencies?"

"Yes. But the British won't talk."

"They won't talk?"

"They say they're talking only to their planes. That it's confidential."

"What's confidential?"

"I don't know. They wouldn't say."

"Did you check the equipment?"

"Yes. All our equipment is working just fine."

"How're the signals from the United States?"

"Strong as ever."

"All right." He takes a breath. "I'll log it in the logbook."

Richard muses, "Fucking crazy flight, eh?"

IV

The stars shine bright above and the sea is black as tar. Night has fallen. The Boeing-777 cruises at 39,000 feet. The digital display reads 9:08 PM. The man walks down the aisles of the passenger's area. Most of the passengers are asleep. Some are reading by nightlight. Others are listening to IPODs or typing at their laptops. He nods and smiles to the few who are awake. Europe still hasn't come back online. The United States is in contact with them—"Just come home safely," they are told. The man uses the restroom, enjoys idle chat with the Latino flight attendant, then dips back into the cockpit. Richard is sitting in his chair, the John Grisham novel in his hands. He is coolly flipping the pages.

"Are you almost finished?" the man asks, taking his seat.

Richard nods. "Yeah." He coughs. Reads some more. Coughs again.

"Do you need some water?" the pilot asks.

"No, I'm fine." He coughs again, swears. "I'm going to get some water."

He returns to the cockpit, rubbing his temples.

"Tired?" the pilot asks.

"Headache," he responds.

"Why don't you get some aspirin from the medical cabinet?"

"I'm all right. It's not a bad headache."

Richard takes his seat. A few minutes pass. He stands. "Okay. I'll get some aspirin."

The man is trying to figure out why Europe is silent when the copilot returns. "We're out of aspirin. The passengers have headaches, too. They've used up all our stores."

"All the passengers?" the pilot asks. He gazes over the instruments. "Everything's fine. We're not losing air pressure or anything." He can't help but feel his anxiety increasing. He tells himself it's nothing to be concerned about. But why in the world would all the passengers *and* the copilot develop headaches at the same time? The pilot grabs the wheel. "We'll descend a couple thousand feet. See if that helps."

Richard curses under his breath. "*Fuck*, it hurts. The glowing screens are killing my eyes. I think it's a migraine. *Fuck*." Cold sweat popped over his brow. "I feel like I'm going to get sick."

The pilot reaches over, feels his forehead. "God. You're burning up."

The door to the cockpit opens. The Latino flight attendant stands there. "All of the passengers are complaining..." She reaches against the doorframe to stable herself. Her face is flushed white. "Migraines."

The pilot eyes her. "You have one, too?"

She nods. "Yeah. A couple of the children are crying."

"The children have migraines?"

"Yeah."

"I'm taking us down a couple thousand feet. That should help."

The flight attendant vanishes. They hear her go into the bathroom and slam the door. A moment later they can hear her puking, followed by a toilet flush. The pilot can hear muffled cries coming from the back of the plane.

He stands, tells Richard, "I'm going to look for more aspirin."

He makes his way to the rear of the plane, enters a cramped storage compartment, and rifles through empty bottles of aspirin. He shakes his head at the absurdity of it all—does a miniscule laugh escape?—and he returns to the main section of the plane. He finds one of the flight attendants—not the Latino girl, but a French woman—and tells her to relax. She is sitting in one of the seats at the rear of the plane, head in her hands, veins pulsing from her temples. She doesn't listen to him. He shrugs and walks away, wondering if she shaves her armpits—and then he laughs at how stupid a thought that is with everything going on.

He reaches the bathrooms, right before the cockpit, and the Latino attendant is standing outside, rapping on the door. "Are you all right? Ma'am?" It is obvious that as she raises her voice in concern, the effort is causing her agony. Her eyes are all but bulging from the sockets. She sees the pilot coming and says, in a low voice, "This woman went inside, and when she shut the door, I heard something crash. I think she may have fallen." A moment later a feeble voice comes from inside—"I'm bleeding." The attendant tells her to open the door, that it's okay. She obliges. The Latino woman moves inside; the pilot cranes his eyes over her shoulder. The elderly woman is standing by the mirror, blood on her hands from blood streaming from her nose in a trickling waterfall.

"Get her some bandages," he says.

The Latino woman shoots a look back at him. "I know."

He pauses for a moment, then: "You're bleeding."

She ignores him.

He repeats, "You're bleeding."

"It's just her blood on my fingers. I'm trying to take care of it."

"No. You're bleeding from your nose."

The Latino attendant pauses, turns. She reaches up, brushes a finger beneath her nostrils, pulls it before her: stained a crimson red. And then she can taste it running along the contours of her lips. "My God..." She forgets about the woman as she turns and begins unraveling toilet paper for herself. The woman stands quietly, rubbing her eyes.

The pilot turns to go into the cockpit when a sight greets him. He stands rigid, staring out at the passengers. They are speaking in rough whispers. Blood is trailing down their noses. Some of the older children begin to cry, too. Mothers and fathers try to help them, but their blood runs down to their chins. A wave of shock rushes over the pilot. He sticks his head back inside the bathroom: "Give me a roll of toilet paper. Now."

"Hold on a minute..."

"God. Just give me a roll."

"We're bleeding here, dammit."

"So is everyone else," he whispers crudely.

She looks at him, toilet paper stuffed under her nose. "What?" Her voice is stuffy.

"All the passengers... Their noses... They're bleeding."

"You're kidding."

"No."

She hands him a roll. "Try not to use it all. We didn't stock in Germany."

He moves passenger-to-passenger, handing out strips of toilet paper. The roll is dwindling, and the toilet paper isn't helping: it doesn't help the bleeds clot, and the blood just keeps coming, soiling the toilet paper until it is bleached red and damp with moisture.

"Mr. Pilot! Mr. Pilot!"

He turns to see a young woman with frizzy hair in 2nd-class, hollering for him.

"Give me a minute, okay?" he pleads, trying not to sound agitated.

Her voice is shrill: "Please! It's an emergency!"

She's going to scare the shit out of everyone. "Everyone's bleeding, ma'am. Just wait your turn, okay?"

"It's not me," she says, despite the blood trickling from her nose like a broken tap. "It's my baby. She's bleeding from the eyes."

He hurries over, excusing himself from the other passengers. "Let me see."

The infant is cradled in her arms. Its nose is bleeding, and droplets of blood are appearing at the corners of the baby's eyes. He gently brushes them away with the tip of a strip of toilet paper. Tears are streaming down the woman's face. He imagines she is a single mother, flying alone. Frightened. Scared. Hell, *everyone* is scared. He imagines the infant is all she has. He curses himself for thinking so deeply. She's just a passenger on his plane. He assures her he'll call a doctor, and that—He stops mid-sentence. The tears are continuing to flow from the mother's eyes, but now they are tinted ruby-red. *Blood.*

Cries dance throughout the airplane. He turns and sees an old man standing. "My eyes! My eyes! I can't see!" he shouts. The old man swivels around, and the pilot sees—to his ever-increasing horror—blood coursing down the contours of his cheeks. More and more people are beginning to panic, standing in their seats. The French waitress at the back of the plane rushes past him, yelling for help. The Latino waitress finds her, and both of them are bleeding from the eyes.

The pilot forgets about the infant and her mother. He races down the aisle. "Everyone please sit down! Please be seated! We'll take care of you as soon as we can! Please sit down!" He reaches the flight attendants. They are hysterical, crying, hearts hammering. Terror grips them. He pushes past them, rushing to the cockpit. Richard no doubt has heard the commotion, and the pilot wonders why he hasn't done anything. He is ready to prepare for an emergency landing in Boston.

He enters the cockpit. The copilot is standing, facing the monitors. His hands are raised over his eyes. He doesn't respond to the man's presence.

"Richard?" he asks tentatively, suddenly afraid.

No response.

"Richard?"

Nothing.

He moves forward, cautiously, reaches out, grabs him on the shoulder...

Richard spins around, hands covering his face. Blood soaks his shirt, seeps between his fingers, hiding his eyes. "I can't see," he moans. "I can't fucking see!"

The man's heart pounds. "Richard. You're covering your eyes..."

He lowers his blood-stained hands. His eyes are bulging from their sockets, rimmed with blood cascading down his face. "I can't fucking see!" The copilot suddenly lurches forward, swinging his bloody hands; the pilot reacts, jumping to the side, slamming into the back of his chair. The copilot stumbles into the wall, hands smearing bloody streaks against the polished steel. The man watches in terror as Richard spins madly around, shrieking gibberish. The crazed man throws himself against

the cockpit windows, pounding, screaming, the noise unbearable, shocking the pilot's ears. The man finds himself only able to watch as Richard continues hurling himself against the window.

A moment passes, and the pilot finds himself moving towards the door. Everything is in slow-motion. He throws open the door. The Latino attendant is standing between the bathrooms, stabbing herself in the neck with pencils. The pencil-tips pierce the soft of her skin and cut into her neck. Her eyes are gouged, one of her eyes hanging from its socket. The man is repulsed, yet he moves forward, yelling at her to stop, oblivious to the chaos behind her in the passenger's area. Before he can reach her, the pencil slashes across her jugular, and a spray of brilliant hot blood hits him in the face. It seems to burn at the touch, like spilt coffee; he staggers backwards and trips into the cockpit. He rolls against the chair. His legs kick out, hitting the door, slamming it shut. He lies on the floor, staring wide-eyed at the door, breathing heavily, frozen.

He hears a thump outside.

The attendant has fallen.

The door to the rest of the plane is shut. But he is not alone. He cranes his neck and sees the copilot on the floor beside him, going into convulsions, writhing in silence, blood seeping from all the openings on his face. The pilot scrambles against the wall, face ashen, eyes wide: the copilot shudders a few more times and then lies still. Blood continues to flow, soaking the carpet at his feet. His fingers twitch. His leg slowly moves back and forth. And then he is still.

He is crouched in the corner, staring at the lifeless body.

Richard. Richard. Richard. The man's name echoes in his mind.

How much time passes? He doesn't know. The plane is eerily silent. All he can hear is the droning of the engines, the beeping of the equipment. His mouth is dry, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He clenches his eyes shut, can see nothing except those horrific images—Richard going mad, the flight attendant committing suicide, Richard dying. Somehow he finds himself standing, hand wrapped around the handle of the door. He pushes it open. It halts against the attendant's body. He closes his eyes and pushes harder. The door opens, scooting the heavy body against the wall.

He doesn't want to look, but he has to. He can't trip over her body. He looks down and sees her lying in a pool of her own blood. The wound in her throat no longer bleeds. The walls are covered with speckles and smears from the gashing explosion which had covered his face—*his face!* He enters the bathroom. The elderly woman is on the toilet, blood covering her wrinkled features. He ignores her, looks into the mirror, met with his own horrid reflection. He twists the valve and cool water flows. He cups it in his hands and washes it over his face. He cleans most of it off, though specks linger on the fringes of his hair and in the scruff of his eyebrows. He turns off the valve, takes a deep breath, enters the corridor. He looks to his left, towards the passenger's area—and he goes mad.

He looks only for a moment, but it is too much to bear: bodies slumped over in their seats, or riddled with masks of pain and contorted in awful positions, bodies lying on the floor. Blood everywhere. He unconsciously moves backwards. His feet trip over the body of the flight attendant. The last thing he remembers is the world spinning as he falls, and a searing pain courses through the back of his head.

V

When he awakes, he remembers nothing. The back of his head throbs. He wonders what has happened, but all he can see in the darkness of his mind are disturbing images of death and mayhem, snapshots of a world shot to hell. He is sure it is a dream, and that he is lying beside Kira in their two-level house... But when he opens his eyes and rolls onto his side, he is greeted with the body of the copilot, encrusted with drying blood.

The pilot's stomach churns, his throat muscles contract, and he vomits all over the carpet, its sweet stench a pleasant escape from the scent of death and decay.

His mouth tastes of bile. He wants a drink of water, but nothing can force him to leave the only sanitarium he can find. He refuses to look outside the cockpit. He closes the door to the rest of the plane. He sits down in his pilot's chair, muttering to himself, trying to console his burdened mind. He can still hear the screams of the passengers and Richard's incessant babbling. He flips through the frequencies for the United States, but all of them are silent. He tries to raise someone—anyone!—but no one answers. He realizes, with a pall of terror, that he is utterly alone.

He sits quietly in the chair.

And then he begins to cry.

It is 10:02 PM.

He walks down the aisles, desperate to find someone who had not met such a grisly fate, someone who could share with him in his fear and sorrow. But no such persons are found. 1st-class, 2nd-class, 3rd-class... Everyone is dead. Mortifying scenes greet him, images that will forever be tattooed into the back of his mind:

The woman with the bleeding infant had crushed the child's head between her two hands; the infant's feeble bones had snapped and popped, protruding from its skin; its eyes hung lifeless on either side of its blood-stained nose.

A little boy had choked his little sister and then died on top of her. Bruise marks covered the little girl's neck, and her bloodied eyes had gone lifeless in a state of absolute terror. She looked to be about seven years old.

An older man had banged his head against his seat's window, over and over again, until the front of his skull had imploded inwards, stained with brain matter. He had died in a contorted mangle of maniacal delight.

A young man had shoved his head in the toilet at the back of the plane, and then he had pulled the lever. The force of the flush had ripped the hair from his scalp, leaving hundreds of bloody pinpricks. He had died and slumped down, head flopped against the sink.

The man stands at the back of the plane, head hanging low.

A single word dances over his lips: "Kira. Kira. Kira."

He whimpers like a baby.

His eyes hurt from crying. How much time has passed? He doesn't know. He looks at the digital clock on the dashboard: 10:23 PM. They will be reaching the New England coast soon. He tries to raise someone—*anyone*—over the radio frequencies, but all he gets is either silence or white noise.

The first pinpricks of light appear on the horizon. They are nearing Boston.

He frantically tries to call for help. *Why the hell isn't anyone there?*

A nonchalant sideways glance alerts him. Blinking lights in the sky. He leans forward, staring. Another plane. Coming straight for him. The equipment begins to wail. He looks down: an Airbus 310. The wail of the emergency audio is frighteningly loud. He wishes for the silence again. He returns his eyes to the windows. The blinking lights are growing closer. The display on the dashboard gives him the frequency of the airliner. He tries to connect with them. No one answers. He realizes with a striking calm: *We're going to collide.*

His hands move instinctively. He brings the Boeing-777 off fly-by-wire and maneuvers the plane. The rudder responds. He banks to the south, hoping to cut around the Airbus. The other airliner grows larger, and he can see lights in the passenger windows just as it roars overhead. His plane shudders and shakes as the Airbus' thrusts turn the air into a turbulent cesspool. Then everything calms. He returns the airliner to autopilot and walks over to the other window, stepping over Richard's body. He peers out just in time to see the Airbus nosedive. A few minutes later the tiny blinking lights are enveloped in a flash of red and yellow light as the Airbus is scattered into the Atlantic.

He understands. He understands why all the planes were crashing.

The frenzied hysteria, ended only with death, had spread to them.

It's spreading all over the world. The thought makes him shiver.

The time is 10:35 pm. The New England coast vanishes beneath the airplane. He takes over the controls and flies lower, hoping to get a better view. Boston is off to his right. He levels the plane and crawls to the opposite window. He looks down and sees Boston aflame: the entire city is being consumed by fire. The skyscrapers reach into the sky like fiery pillars, and the harbor crumbles into the shallow sea of the Boston bay. Fires pepper the surrounding communities. He closes his eyes, takes several deep breaths, wants to cry again. *No.* He knows that if northern Kentucky is in such bad shape, he'll be unable to land. Power will be out. The landing strip will be dark. The Control Tower won't be sending him any directions. He'll be entirely on his own.

He has never been a man of prayer.

But now he prays so feverishly: for himself... and for Kira.

1:15 AM. The Appalachian Mountains are shrouded in darkness below.

He fondles the engagement ring in his fingers.

The cut diamond glints in the wan blue light from the glowing screens.

Kira's words echo in his mind: "You're so amazing..."

He wishes he would have woken her up last morning.

He wishes he would have held her one last time.

One last time? He curses himself: she can't be dead.

Why can't she be dead?

Because I love her.

He brings the Boeing-777 over Cincinnati, flying south. The city is not on fire; for this he is thankful. Peppered fires cluster on the hills, but downtown is clothed in a sinister darkness. He can't tell much from his vantage point in the sky, but the city looks relatively peaceful. He wonders why Boston had been on fire—maybe a blown gas station? He wonders if cities can burn. *No*, he tells himself, then he laughs. He had seen Boston burning. Yes, cities can burn. But Cincinnati isn't burning. Hope lurches inside him. He imagines Kira locked in their house, pacing back and forth, waiting for her prince to return for her.

"I'm coming, Kira," he mutters as the plane flies over the black and snaking Ohio River. "I'm coming." He begins to go over the landing checklist. He has simulated emergency landings in blackout conditions, during flight school... And he knows that if he doesn't execute it exactly right, he will die.

He makes a pass over the airport. It looks quiet. The power is still on. He can see glows coming from the large bay windows overlooking the airstrips and hangars. He draws a deep breath and begins to circle the airport. He tries to raise the Control Tower, but he receives no response. One of the runways is burning: a plane had flipped onto its side and burst into flames. Debris coated several runways. The firelight illuminated yet another runway with an airline parked at its far edge, ready for take-off, the twin engines still running. He decides to land shallow on that airstrip and hit the brakes just in time to avoid smashing into the idling plane. AMERICAN AIRLINES is stamped along the airplane's fuselage.

He leans back in his chair, breathing heavily, a cold sweat cascading down his brow. The nose of the other plane is only thirty feet away. Lights inside the plane's cockpit illuminate bloody smears over the cockpit windows. He looks down at Richard's body as he undoes his seatbelt and abandons the cockpit. He steps over the attendant's body, keeps his eyes on the floor as he moves down the aisles—he can almost sense the dozens of lifeless, vacant eyes staring at him in silent mockery as he walks. He reaches the door and cranks it open. The ground is fifteen feet below. He activates a switch on a side panel and an inflatable slide extends, reaching down to the ground. Without looking back, he slides down and glides to a stop at the bottom. He stands, brushes himself off, thankful the earth is beneath his feet.

VI

The aching night wraps around him, a heavy blanket pushing him down to his knees. In a rush he loses it once more, curling upon the cold pavement as tears rush down his cheeks in horrendous sobs. How long he lies there he will never know; but soon he is moving forward, abandoning the plane. He looks over at the AMERICAN airliner whose engines are still idling, and in the soft glow of the passenger's cabin windows he can see nothing except bodies slumped against the windows. What madness has overcome the world, that he is left alone? What cruel fate has severed him from the lifeless destiny of all those whom he can see? These thoughts bombard his mind in a torrent of disjointed questions.

He climbs onto the wing of the plane, feeling the cold steel beneath his fingertips as he pulls himself up. He moves over the fuselage, feet thudding dumbly on the metal plates. The terminal wing juts out, and he slides down the fuselage until he is on top. He moves along, leaving the plane behind, the bulk of the airport dark before him. Light flickers in the bay windows; the power is

shorting out, but it hasn't yet lost its grip. He grabs a ladder on the side of the terminal wing and climbs down until he is beside a door. He twists the knob and kicks it with his foot, then leaps from the ladder and into a maintenance room. Odd equipment and hoses line the shelves, vacuum cleaners thrown haphazardly to fall wherever they will. He stumbles ahead in the darkness and finds the door; he tries to open it, but it's locked. He stands alone and frightened, and for a moment he considers just crawling into a fetal position and waiting till morning. But it's the thought of Kira that pushes him forward. He steps back and kicks at the door. It swings open with a rush, and flickering light floods the maintenance room. He cautiously steps out into the waiting area for Terminal C3 and looks around.

The terminal is all but vacant. All he sees, upon swiveling his head upon his shoulders, is a single flight attendant crumpled in the corner, head hung low, dried blood crusting over her face. All of the seats in the waiting area by the large bay windows are abandoned. *Makes sense*, he thinks: *Everyone who was here is now on that plane outside*. The flickering lights cast oblong shadows against the walls as he moves forward. A motorized security buggy sits crashed against the wall, the driver hunched against the wheel, foot pressing against the gas pedal; the buggy's engine chugs, breaking the silence, pressing its nose into the wall. The man continues walking. The airport seems abandoned; of course, by the time the—what should he call it? a disease? a virus? a plague?—struck the airport, it was probably 11:30 or so at night. He passes another gate—D3—and sees men, women and children—sparse, but present—in the chairs and sprawled upon the floor.

His eyes fall upon a little girl. Her head is split open, the foot of a chair having been driven into the top of her skull. Her head lies in a pool of blood and brain. He swivels on his feet, writhes over, and vomits all over his shoes. He steadies himself with a hand upon the wall.

He stares at himself in the bathroom mirror. The light above flickers on-and-off. His eyes are sunken, his hair matted upon his head. His pilot's cap had been lost hours ago when the madness began. He brings his hands up to rub his temples and sees that they are covered in blood. He doesn't know how blood got on them, but he doesn't care. It's not surprising. He twists the sink valve but no water comes out. *But of course*, he thinks sarcastically before opening the stall to a toilet.

A figure sits on the toilet seat, pants down. His mouth is opened in a silent scream. Dried blood clings to his flesh. His arms are outstretched, white-knuckled fingers wrapped stiff around the handicap bars on either side of the stall. The man closes his eyes, quietly steps out, and shuts the door to the stall. *Rest in peace*. A random thought. So grim and depressing.

The other toilet is empty.

He washes his hands and dries them with toilet paper.

The escalators have stopped moving. He walks his way up the frozen electric stairwell and enters Concourse A. The restaurants are closed-down for the night, their signs dull and lifeless: MOE'S BAR & GRILL (he has eaten there several times), PEET'S COFFEE & TEA (good coffee, but more expensive than Starbucks), PANDA EXPRESS (Chinese cuisine, he never did like it). Iron gates have closed off the various shops—BUCKEYES AND BLUEGRASS APPAREL AND GIFTS and VERA BRADLEY GIFTS sit coolly in their recesses in the walls.

He once bought a paperweight with a replica airline inside for Kira from VERA BRADLEY. The thought turns his stomach sour. What is he doing? Why is he going *up* in the airport instead of *down*? Why isn't he going to his Jeep? Why isn't he returning to Cincinnati? Why isn't he seeking Kira? He

doesn't have the answers to these questions. He doesn't know why he searches; he doesn't know *what* he is searching for. Answers? He knows he won't find them.

He calls out: "Hello!" His voice seems foreign and strange as it echoes throughout the twisting chambers and corridors of Concourse A. He opens his mouth and shouts again. One more time? No. Twice is enough. No one has answered. He is alone.

CNBC News & Gifts is open. The lights flicker. He enters, passing racks of books and magazines. A stand of USA Today and Cincinnati Enquirer newspapers sits against the wall. He brushes into a stand of key-chains. They jingle against one another. The sound makes him jump. He leans over the counter. An older woman is lying on the floor, surrounded by dollar bills. The cash register is open. He pulls away and exits. He pauses, looks back, curses, walks over to the newspaper rack. He opens up a USA Today and reads the front cover:

SPARRING BEGINS OVER PETRAEUS REPORT

DEATH TOLL IN IRAQI BOMBINGS INCREASES

US UPS ANTE AGAINST IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS

IRAN ARRESTS CHINESE TOURISTS FOR SPYING

NYPD WARNS OF HOMEGROWN TERRORIST THREAT

That last headline, near the bottom of the paper, stares at him.

He wonders if this is some kind of terrorist attack. 9/11 on a global scale. Biological warfare to reap vengeance on the West for years of capitalistic crimes. He shakes his head. *No*. This is worldwide. At least, he thinks it's worldwide. If it were terrorists, wouldn't it be secluded to certain parts of the world they wanted to attack? But then again, how smart *are* terrorists? What if they *did* unleash this, not knowing its capability? He realizes he is grasping at straws, searching for answers that don't exist.

He drops the paper at his feet and continues on.

Concourse B is above Concourse A, the highest level of the airport. The escalators, being dead, force him to take them manually. He stands at the crest of the decaying escalator and gazes out across the plaza. Several figures are hunched over near the window. Otherwise, it is deserted. He walks carefully, too aware of the echoing thuds his feet makes—*What are you afraid of? You've survived. You're a survivor. You're a hero.* A hero? What makes him a hero? "Hero". The word tastes bitter in his mouth.

The restaurants, like those below, are closed—CARVEL ICE CREAM & SHAKES, MAX & ERMA'S, SBARRO ITALIAN PIZZA. Even the golden arches of the hole-in-the-wall McDONALD'S are dead and lifeless, something he never thought he would see. He stops by the CINNABON and considers reaching in for a pretzel. He loves their pretzels. But his appetite is hung-over, and any remnants of hunger have been trashed by the sight of a young baker who had slit his throat with a carving knife. He wonders if the baker were a survivor, and seeing the devastation, had killed himself? *No*. The man had seen what the people did when they got sick. First they bled from their noses. Then their eyes. And then their ears. And then they went crazy. Screaming gibberish. Stabbing pencils in their eyes. Crushing their own children's heads between their heads. Strangling loved ones. They went crazy. They went mad. This man had gone mad and slit his own throat. It is easier to believe that—he doesn't want to think of a survivor committing suicide. The thought of suicide hasn't occurred to him yet. His mind is too preoccupied with Kira.

He turns to go back downstairs when his eyes catch the DUTY FREE store in their peripheral. He pauses, walks over. The gate is down. He tries to pull it open, but it's locked. He doesn't have a key. He considers finding a security guard and taking his keys. But he doesn't feel like searching all the corpses till he finds the one he wants. He tries to get in again, kicks the steel gate. It rattles under the force of his foot, the creaking metal echoing through the concourse. He kicks it again, and again, with shouts of rage. Energy courses through him, and then he stumbles backwards and falls onto a metal bench, staring at the store, the tobacco just within reach, all he can ever want.

You're an addict, he tells himself.

He just wants a pack of cigarettes. He needs a smoke.

God, I need a smoke.

The metal grate mocks him.

And that's when he hears it:

voices

He runs between the abandoned tables of the dining plaza, the sounds growing louder. He leaps over a fallen body, oblivious. A chair is knocked over in his wake; he nearly trips. He turns down a corridor and sees a door with a foggy glass window straight ahead. The sounds are coming from there. He tries to open it, but it's locked. He stands back and kicks it in, then rushes inside. It's a security office. The television monitors are black. The room stinks of burnt flesh. He turns his head and sees a security guard who had driven his head into one of the monitors. Glass had cut up his scalp and blood had dribbled all over the keyboard. His body stank of electrified flesh. The man reaches for his keys, stops. Won't he get electrocuted? *Fuck it.* He reaches and grabs them. Nothing. Of course. The power is off.

He turns his attention to the radio.

The voice is a man's. He is speaking frantically. Urging everyone to stay in their homes. Hope flares within the poor man's soul. Others are alive! Others are alive, and they are being given instructions! Joy floods into him. He knows he is not alone. The voice instructs the survivors that no one really knows what is happening. Scientists believe it to be some kind of airborne virus. The man sits in one of the security chairs and listens, twiddling the keys on his fingers. Energy rushes into him. All he can think of is Kira, and the possibility that she is alive and listening to the radio at the same time. He knows she is alive. He *knows beyond a doubt* that she is alive.

The voice instructs survivor's to stay in their homes.

And then the voice says: "Scientists believe it is a virus..."

The man's heart freezes.

The voice repeats everything once more.

A recording. A damn, fucking recording. Not a live broadcast.

Hope dies down. All he can see is Kira lying bloodied in bed.

He stands and leaves.

VII

He grabs a bag from under the counter at the DUTY FREE outlet and opens the tobacco cases—he has unlocked and raised the gate using the security guard's key. He hurls carton after carton of cigarettes into the bag. MARLBORO REDS. CAMEL LIGHTS. WINSTON FULL-FLAVOR. VIRGINIA SLIMS. BASIC FULL-

FLAVOR. NEWPORT MENTHOL. He steps outside the shop, into the flickering light of the corridor, and lights one of the cigarettes—a Camel Light—and lets the smoke fill his lungs, calming his nerves. He takes a few more drags. *You can't stay here.* He crunches the cigarette under his shoe and heads back for the escalators, security keys latched to his belt and tobacco-filled bag in his hand.

He returns to Terminal 3. He passes the Starbucks where he had purchased his coffee only... what?... twenty hours before? The Starbucks was open 24/7. Coffee beans are scattered over the floor. A table is overturned, for no apparent reason. The café is empty. He walks past 24-HOUR FLOWER. *I should get a flower for Kira.* He opens the gate with the security keys and peruses the flowers. A sign above him reads in bold letters:

FLOWERS AND ROMANCE ARE INSEPARABLE. EVER SINCE THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS USED FLOWERS AS SYMBOLS OF LOVE, FLOWERS HAVE COME TO SYMBOLIZE ROMANCE, PASSION AND DESIRE.

He browses the different flowers. Red and pink roses, flowered daisies, tulips, lilies, carnations; and gardenias, orchids, lilacs, even sunflowers and some bouquets of wildflowers. Roses symbolize love; he knows this. But the first flower he ever gave her, when they first started dating years ago, was a purple lily. He grabs one—no, he grabs several—and bonds them together with a twisty-tie. He can't wait to give them to her, to hold her, to tell her that everything will be okay.

He is nearing the escalator down to the security checkpoint when he hears a crash come from an open door off to his left. He sets down the bag of tobacco and the flowers, and he moves forward cautiously. Flickering light comes from the arched doorway. The chapel. He steps inside. The cross lies on its side—an omen. And even more horrifying, upon that cross is a naked man, his feet and hands nailed to the crossing beams. His face is covered in blood. The weight of his body had yanked the cross from its bolted moorings, and now the man's face lay bashed against the back-ridge of a pew. The man shrugs nonchalantly and leaves.

A security guard lies on the floor, a bullet wound arching through his head. The pistol lies in his hand. The man steps through the security checkpoint, stolen goods in his hands, and avoids the body, meandering around it. He looks to his left and sees several bullet holes in the wall. An older man lies against the wall, his cheek blown out. A little girl lies a few feet away, her body riddled with bullet wounds. He looks back at the security guard. *Crazy bastard.* Everyone is crazy. He wonders for a moment if he isn't hallucinating, locked in some insane asylum somewhere, sedated under morphine and Ketamine. His eyes fall again to the little girl. His heart doesn't throb. He is growing accustomed to it.

Accustomed to it. The thought makes him sick.

I'm not accustomed to it. I'm just in shock.

That thought offers some comfort.

He doesn't feel so vile and evil anymore.

Only a sick man can become accustomed to such horrors.

He walks past the baggage claim and exits the airport. The air is cold and still. Not even a gentle wind blows. The sidewalk is clear, except for a single car. He walks over and peeks inside the window. The driver's door is open and the seat abandoned. He walks around and gets in, tossing the

lilies and his bag of tobacco into the passenger's seat. He twists the key. The engine starts. *Thank God.* He expected the battery to be fried because the door was open. He adjusts his mirrors, a healthy habit, and sees in the backseat an object wrapped in shadow. He bites his bottom lip and turns around in his seat. There is a crib, and inside an infant, face stained with blood. He turns in his seat, grabs the crib, pulls it against him, and begins to shove it out.

He freezes. *What the hell are you doing? It's a fucking baby.*

What do you expect me to do with it? Keep it? The baby's dead.

Bury it.

I can't bury it. And I can't take it with me.

He steps out of the car and walks over to the side of the road.

The airport parking lot sits all but empty before him.

He sets the crib on the sidewalk and climbs back into the car.

He shuts the door, puts the car in DRIVE, and presses on the gas.

He doesn't get out of the airport before he pulls the vehicle to the side of the road and cries.

Chapter Two

The City of Seven Hills

"Pale Death with impartial tread
beats at the poor man's cottage door
and at the palaces of kings."
- Horace (ca 50 BC)

I

From the airport, Cincinnati could have been seen if it weren't for the rolling hills keeping it from view. Heavy clouds blot out the stars, and the earth is draped in an ink-jet blackness. The black Prizm moves forward, leaving the airport behind. It takes Terminal Drive to KY-212, and all he can see on either side are the dark shapes of clustered trees and the occasional wrecked car. The streets were pretty much abandoned when the disaster struck. He doesn't think he'll see very much. Cincinnati, on the other hand... It was always alive with night-life, at least on its fringes (there was nothing to do downtown). He merges onto I-275E. As he drives, he passes another airport parking lot, deathly quiet and abandoned. A few cars sit serenely on the pavement. He passes a few dark buildings along either side of the road, but mostly there is nothing but rolling forest. He takes Exit 8 to I-75, and he presses the gas pedal down, speeding down the center of the 4-lane north highway. He passes more wrecks: cars had collided into one another, gone off the road. He sees one wrapped around a light pole; the front windshield is shattered, and the driver is nowhere to be—

THUMP.

He grimaces. He has found the driver.

Shadow-laden buildings pass on either side of the highway as he drives. He doesn't watch the speedometer. All he can think of is Kira. The sparkle in her eyes, the beauty in her voice, her hair between his fingers, his lips against hers. He reaches into his pocket and feels the satin box with the engagement ring. It will be on her finger by tonight. He will light a fire and they will cuddle. The world may be going to hell, but nothing could stop him.

The highway bends ahead. His foot is pressed hard on the gas. *Almost there...* Around this last bend, and Cincinnati—yes, there it is, spread out below. Titanium and steel bridges stretch across the murky Ohio River. The highway's approach to Cincinnati, across the Brent Spence Bridge spanning the river, is one of the most dramatic approaches to any city in the United States. The man now takes in the panoramic view of the hillsides on either side; and where the highway descends, the Cincinnati skyline and its surrounding hills are visible, though now masked in darkness. A few fires burn on the surrounding hills. He begins entering into Covington, the town's homes on either side striking 19th century poses, with brick row buildings and traditional city blocks lining either side of the highway.

The city is dark, the power out, but it isn't burning. He is thankful for that. He leans forward in his seat. He can almost hear her laughter over the throb of the engine. The highway continues to turn before it goes downhill into Cincinnati. He thinks he should probably slow down, but he can't seem to take his foot off the pedal, and he—

Something flashes in front of him, rushing across the road.

He slams on the brakes. The car screams and fishtails. He grips the steering wheel and throws himself into his seat, teeth clenched together, face ashen as snow, knuckles white. The left wheels reach off the ground; not even a scream comes from him as the Prizm flips onto its hood. He feels himself jerked against his seatbelt as he hangs upside-down. His ears are filled with the sounds of shrieking metal. The windows blow out, glass flying into his face, tearing at his skin. Now he opens his mouth to scream, but he is cut off as the Prizm slams into the guardrail. The last thing he sees is a figment of his imagination: Kira reaching out to him, so close—*"Please come home,"* she whispers, *"I'm scared."* And then... nothing.

II

Raindrops wake him. He opens his eyes and is immediately aware of the pulsating migraine shrieking behind his eyes. He reaches up with feeble hands and unlatches his seatbelt; he crumples onto the hood of the car, rolls over onto his side—splitting pain—and vomits. He opens his eyes, and the sunlight coming through the shattered windows crawls into the deep recesses of his brains and takes a painful stranglehold. He takes several deep breath, feels his entire face screaming in agony. He reaches up and feels his face, winces; glass is embedded in his skin, adorned with dried blood. Thank God none of them struck an artery. He grits his teeth and crawls backwards out of the flipped car. He tries to stand on the pavement, but he is too weak: he slides down against the car, sitting on the pavement, legs sprawled out, his back against the front tire. He stares forward at the 8-lane highway split down the middle with the grassy median and the forest-covered slopes rising on the opposite side of the highway. Park Hills. He knows the area. One of his friends used to live there before he moved to Las Vegas.

He sits there for what feels like an eternity, feeling off-and-on rain. He looks up and sees scattered clouds passing across the rising sun. Ribbons of light float down onto the highway and dance over the city of Cincinnati off to his right, down the highway. He turns his head—the movement makes his neck throb—and sees the sleeping city, unmoving and still: the skyscrapers, the sports stadiums, the hills ringed with college campuses and state parks.

He swallows. The movement hurts. He needs water.

And bandages, he thinks, touching his face. God, it hurt.

He begins searching for another car. Any that he sees have crashed, the drivers dying at the wheels. And going at the tremendous speeds of the highway, none are now in operating condition. He curses under his breath as he pulls a corpse out of a minivan and tries the key. It doesn't work. He shakes his head, sits in the seat, feels insurmountable rage flushing through him. Anger at the driver for crashing. A SOCCER MOM decal is plastered beside the wheel. He grabs it and rips it off. He gets out of the car and steps over the body, cursing it. He makes it halfway across to the other side of the street before he realizes what he has done. He turns and heads back. Gingerly, he picks up the corpse and puts it back inside. "Sorry," he mutters, surprised at the care and tenderness in his own voice. He closes the door, pauses, opens it, reaches over the body, picks up the torn sticker, and does his best to put it back. "Sorry," he says again as he shuts the door. The corpse doesn't stare back: her eyes gaze lifelessly at the empty city. The empty world.

He finds a car that works. An old and beaten Chevy pickup truck. He looks at the gas needle. Empty. Figures. Just enough to get back. He shuts the door and puts it in gear. A thought occurs to him, and he slams the car in PARK and leaps out. He jogs back to his car, his bruised and broken body shrieking at him. He falls to his knees and throws himself inside the overturned Prizm. He searches frantically among the glass, slicing his fingers and cutting his palm. His heart feels like it's going to explode. Then relief. He draws a deep breath and picks it up, flips it open—it's still there. He thanks any god in heaven and crawls back out of the Prizm, sliding the satin box into his pocket. When he gets back to the truck, it's dead: the gas has run dry. He slams his fist into the steering wheel. When he pulls it away, he sees a bloody smear. His hands, his face... He needs bandages. Fuck the truck.

He sees what looks like a business park on top of the hill next to where he'd wrecked the Prizm, across the highway to the east. He begins climbing the hill, pushing through the knee-high grass. The mid-morning sun beats down on him, refreshingly warm. A cool August breeze sweeps up from the river and ruffles his hair. He thinks back to the crash as his knees ache with each step uphill. What had flashed before him? He can't remember. *Think, damn it, think!* Had it been a person? *No. I know it wasn't a person.* What, then? He tries to think harder, but all he can remember is the car spinning and flipping. And then something flashes in his mind. He pauses with the thought. *Antlers?* It had been a deer. So animals were survivors? Did whatever caused this skip over the animals? And if so, why attack humans and not animals? He doesn't know. But there are no birds singing in the dawn's light, and the silence makes his heart bleed.

He reaches the parking lot of the business park. An arched sign reads GARDEN OF HOPE: AMERICA'S ONLY REPLICA OF JESUS CHRIST'S TOMB. "Fuck," he murmurs. There's nothing here. He moves forward. The parking lot is empty. He walks around the side of a wooden building and sees the replica: a life-size tomb, complete even with a roll-away stone and replica Roman soldiers. He stands next to a plaque engraved with a scripture passage:

In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulcher. And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

- Matthew 28:1-6

His eyes dance over the passage. It means nothing to him.

He tastes blood in his mouth. He needs medicine.

His head throbs. Aspirin would be good, too.

He walks over to a single building sitting in the shadows. He tries the door. Locked. He turns around, spies a wooden bench. He walks over, hefts it in his arms, and walks back to the window. With a grunt and with all the effort he can muster, he slams the front of the bench into the glass window. It shatters under the impact. He pulls the bench away, drops it to the cobblestone ground, and crawls in through the broken window. He finds himself staring at a museum rendition of the crucifixion of Jesus. His eyes spot a scripture verse as he crawls back out:

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

- Matthew 27:51-53

Religion. The thought makes him sick.

What kind of a God would do this to people?

What kind of a God would allow this to happen?

What kind of a God would leave him entirely alone?

I'm not alone.

No? How do you figure?

I have Kira. She's waiting for me. I have to get to her.

But first he needs to take care of his wounds. He knows he is lucky not to have been seriously injured in the car accident. *A miracle*, he tells himself. A miracle? Does he believe in miracles? *Not anymore.* He leaves the Garden of Hope—*What a cruel and twisted name; a mockery of my present condition*—and walks down Edgecliff Road. The road twists east down the hill, intersecting Monroe Street of Covington, Kentucky. He goes south on Monroe Street. The narrow road is clogged with cars on either side, sitting quietly beside the Victorian-style homes. He doesn't see any bodies. That doesn't surprise him. Whatever did this did it at night. He looks into the windows, imagining what lies behind the drawn drapes. Horrors he can't imagine. He thinks about taking one of the cars—*any* car—but knows he'll have to go inside one of the homes and search for a key. He doesn't want to go inside any of the homes. He is afraid of what he may find.

He crosses onto Jefferson Street via Hawthorne Street and goes south, taking a one-way street to West 19th Street. He stands at the intersection, the stoplight swinging back and forth in the stale breeze, none of the lights working. He looks up and down either side of the street. To the east, towards the heart of Covington, a police car sits crashed into the side of the house. He goes west. He doesn't want to look inside that car.

GLENN O. SWING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL sits before him. He stands with his fingers looped through the high fence, the playground beyond. The swings rock back and forth as the breeze kicks up. The jungle jim and slide are still and unmoving. What day is it? Saturday. Yes, Saturday. No kids would be at school anyways. That thought offers a little comfort. He walks around the fence and up to the front door. He tries it. He knew it would be locked, but he decided to try it anyways.

He walks over to one of the windows, peers inside. A classroom. Watercolor paintings with children's handprints cover one wall. On another are posters of the nine planets—*Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto*, he thinks to himself, proud he can remember it (most adults can't name all nine planets). On the far side of the room, facing the desks, is the teacher's workspace and the blackboard. Scribbled on the blackboard is: DUE MONDAY: CHAPTERS 1-3. She was one of *those* teachers, giving elementary kids tons of homework. He hated those kinds of teachers. He imagines her lying dead in her home. And then he imagines all the kids doing the same. He bites his lip. *You can't think about those things.*

He grabs a rock next to the sidewalk and smashes it through the window. He kicks away glass stubble and enters the classroom through the broken window. Sunlight illuminates the empty desks.

He walks past the watercolor paintings, eyeing them, then goes into the hallway. He walks up and down the corridors, searching. He finds the gymnasium, basketballs sitting in a mobile net-case in the corner, the retractable bleachers folded up. The locker rooms stink of body odor, residue from young kids. He finds the cafeteria and walks into the kitchen. He opens the cabinets, trying to find food, but all he finds are industrial-sized cans of canned goods. Finally he comes across a stack of single-serving chips. He tears one open—Baked Lays—and munches on them as he continues his search. Finally he finds it. The Nurse's Office. He tosses the empty bag of chips on the floor and enters.

He fumbles through the cabinets, finds some gauze. He places it on the counter. He continues searching. *Tweezers?* Got it. *Soap?* He doesn't find any soap, but he finds brown and gray bottles of hydrogen peroxide and providone-iodine. *Even better.* He sits on the patient's chair and pulls a mobile standing mirror up against his knees. He works by the sunlight coming through the skylight. Using the tweezers, he pulls the glass shards from his face. He counts maybe fifteen or twenty fragments embedded in his skin. Each yank burns. The blood starts flowing again, and he dabs the tiny yet deep cuts with cotton balls he found in a drawer. Finally, once he has all the glass out and sitting in bloody clumps on the floor, he soaks one of the cotton balls in hydrogen peroxide and dabs it over his face. He lets out a grunt with the searing pain. He dabs his entire face, treating all the wounds—they are everywhere, over his forehead, his eyebrows, along his nose, cheeks, chin, and one nearly sliced his right eye and another spliced his swollen lip. The burning is worse by his eye and lip. He tosses the rag away and kicks the chemical solution on the floor. It chugs onto the tile. He leans back in the chair and takes several deep breaths.

Aspirin.

In a minute. I need a few moments.

Fuck, that stuff hurts. I should have just used soap.

He pops an aspirin as he walks away from the school. He can see the highway from the school entrance. He takes West 19th Street to Highland Avenue, which curves up the same hill that the GARDEN OF HOPE adorns. As he passes baseball fields to his left, he bandages his cut hands. He had already soaked them in hydrogen peroxide and had even dabbed them with Neosporin. *My face is going to be scarred forever.* That thought doesn't carry as much weight as he thought it would. He walks into the parking lot of a retirement home and returns to the highway, crossing the knee-high grass. He easily spots the overturned Prizm, and after grabbing the flowers and his bag of tobacco (the cartons had scattered), he sits on the overturned rear of the car and smokes another CAMEL LIGHT, staring out at the lifeless city. *I'm coming, Kira. I'm coming.*

III

The I-75 bridge spanning the Ohio River has turned into a nightmare. The Brent Spence Bridge is of cantilever truss design, with a main span of 830 ½ feet; approach spans measure 453 feet. It opened in November 1963, with its two decks—the uppermost deck going south, the lower deck heading north—striped for three lanes each. Emergency shoulders were eliminated in 1986 and replaced with an extra striped lane. Traffic overwhelmed the bridge for decades, and now the man sits in the idling S.U.V. staring at the congested mess. The entire entrance to the lower-most decks is congested, filled with overturned and crashed vehicles. The gentle slope of the highway down to the bridge had become overrun with unmanned cars, and they had all come to a stop right at the entrance to the

bridge. Skid marks went off the road, vehicles crashing below, erupting in explosions of fire: now they rest smoldering in the cold dawn.

He isn't surprised at the trauma before him. *You should have expected this*, he tells himself. I-75 was among the world's most important roadways and the second busiest interstate highway. I-71 was routed across the bridge in 1970, adding to the traffic. *But it could be worse*. He doesn't want to imagine how it would look were the plague—if that's what it was—had struck midday. Most of the traffic over the bridge was due to bursting suburban sprawl, shopping centers, apartment complexes, office parks, and light industry. The bridge had a tendency—*had* being the key word here, for now there is no one left to use it—to be the bottleneck of Cincinnati.

He turns off the engine and gets out of the S.U.V., grabbing his bag of tobacco (into which he had placed the antibacterial ointments and extra gauze), and he grabs his lily bouquet for Kira as well. He lights another cigarette and stares at the carnage. In the dawning light, he can see bodies inside the cars. A single arm, pale white and clammy, lies in a pool of splattered blood near one of the smashed vehicles. Most of the bodies are smashed and crunched from the impacts. He doesn't want to look. Smoking his cigarette, he walks along the catwalk on the side of the bridge, avoiding the crashed cars. It's only a two-mile walk home from the bridge. He can easily walk it, despite the pain in each step. His ankle is swelling.

He climbs over a wrecked van and descends down the other side. He looks into the tinted side window and sees an infant in the back, its car-seat facing the rear of the vehicle. Its mouth is open in a tiny scream as rivulets of dried blood course down its rosy cheeks. It looks just like a porcelain doll in some HOUSE OF HORRORS freak-show. The mother is thrust into the back of her seat, the airbag pressing against her, partly deflated. The Radisson Hotel of Covington rises to his right, off the highway. The circular hotel rises 18 floors from the street, including a revolving diner—The Riverview Restaurant—at the top with wide bay windows affording beautiful views of downtown Cincinnati, the wooded hills of northern Kentucky, and the sweeping currents of the Ohio River. Now, he imagines, it has ceased rotating, and men and women in suits and dresses are pitched forward with their heads in bowls of fettuccini alfredo and Italian spaghetti. He ate there with Kira once. They had been able to see their house from atop the rotating restaurant. He can't wait to see her again.

As he crosses the bridge, he looks at the city. It rests quietly. Whispers of smoke rise from one of the windows of a skyscraper, though he can see no fire. Most of the streets of downtown—at least, those he can see—are abandoned of cars. Downtown nightlife is nothing to be appreciated in Cincinnati. He has driven through it many times at night and seen barely any cars. This helps confirm that the plague struck at night. Most people were at home. And those in the city were mainly in their offices, perhaps curled at their desks in grotesque postures of pain and agony. Minutes pass. He tosses the cigarette, considers grabbing another, shakes his head. *No. Not now*. As he nears the end of the bridge, he looks down at the boat ramps along the Ohio shore of the river. Bodies are washing up with the current, perhaps thrown from the bridge when their cars crashed. He doesn't feel anything. *It's just the shock. I've been in shock this whole time, and the car accident didn't help*. Now he'll have another cigarette as he reaches Ohio and takes the OH-50 West ramp.

He hijacks a car that had drifted into the shoulder. The entire right side of the car is scraped clean of paint, and the side mirror is completely lost. He pulls the young man's body from the seat and sets him by the concrete shoulder wall. He throws his bag and flowers into the passenger's seat and tries

to start the engine. It won't work. He curses, tries a few more times. It sputters to life. A faint smile crosses his lips—the first in what seems like an eternity, though he knows it has only been around twelve hours since the nightmare began over the Atlantic. He shuts his door and puts the car in Drive. The engine makes sputtering sounds as he takes the exit to West 8th Street and turns right, then left. Through the back mirrors, the skyline can be seen as he meanders around a car accident in the intersection and takes Glenway Avenue up Price Hill—he can't go right on State Avenue; it's blocked by an overturned Cincinnati Police patrol car.

His house is not far. Forest hangs over the sidewalk on his left and rigid buildings stand straight and quiet to his right. He passes a college campus—Cincinnati Bible College—and then takes a right on Grand Avenue. He takes it up a hill, passing several houses, and goes left onto Lehman Avenue. He knows this street well: he crashed his first Jeep into the telephone pole at the base of the hill. He passes the Christian college on his right, with its freshly-mowed soccer field on his left. The hill curves around several apartment complexes. He reaches the bottom of the hill. The metal plate on the telephone pole is still bent by his impact four years ago. *A long time ago*, he thinks; *back when I was dating Julie*. He turns right on State Avenue and pulls into the driveway.

He sits in his car, unmoving. His girlfriend's car sits in the driveway, cool and quiet. Bird droppings stain the side window. He bites his lip, suddenly overcome with panic. His heart drums like a gong in his chest. *I'm here, Kira*, he thinks to himself. *I'm here*.

IV

The front door is locked. He takes his keys off his belt and puts them into the lock. He twists, realizing his hands are shaking. He is terrified of what he may find. The doorknob clicks as it unlatches, and he pushes it open. The aromatic scent of her perfume washes over him as he stands in the doorway, gazing into the parlor. He fights off a swell of emotions and steps inside. He slowly turns and shuts the door, quietly, so as not to frighten her. He stands rigid and unmoving in the parlor. He looks into the kitchen beyond the parlor. The back door to the porch is shut, and through the slits in the blinds over the door he can see downtown Cincinnati beyond. He walks into the kitchen. An empty tea kettle sits on the stove burner. Packets of teabags sit on the counter beside it, next to her purse. He walks over, places one hand on the purse, feels its leather side. It is heavy. She always keeps too much in the purse. He eyes the tea bag; it reads: PURPLE JASMINE.

He turns his head slightly. His neck still hurts. "Kira?"

The sound of his voice frightens him. Why, he doesn't know.

"Kira?" he repeats again. Nothing.

He leaves the kitchen.

He trudges upstairs. The wooden stairs creak with each step. He moves slowly, hand on the wooden railing to the right. To his left, along the walls, are framed pictures of the two of them: standing outside their home when they first bought it, their first Christmas dinner together, her sitting inside his old truck when they first started dating. The caption under it read, in his handwriting: I FOUND THIS CUTE GIRL AT THE GAS STATION AND STOLE HER. In the picture, she was leaning out the driver's window and smiling widely.

He reaches the top landing. He turns and, drawing a breath, opens the door to the bedroom and steps inside.

Sunlight comes in through the twin windows. The bed is made, the comforter stretched smoothly and without wrinkles, the pillows fluffed and sitting ready at the end of the bed. There are two dressers in the room and a high-backed chair in the corner. Kira's dresser is adorned with framed pictures of him and her family back home in Illinois. His has a framed picture of his first plane—an Airbus for Air France—and a picture he took when they went out to a fine restaurant with some friends. He walks over to the bed and sits down. The mattress sighs under his weight.

She is here. Her car is here.

What if she left the house?

Why would she leave the house? She wouldn't leave the house.

She's looking for other survivors.

No. She wouldn't leave. She knows I am coming back.

He looks over to the bathroom door. It's shut.

She never shuts the door.

His hand touches the knob of the bathroom door. With momentous effort, he twists and opens it. It swings open, creaking on its hinges. The mirror is directly in front of him. He sees his own haggard reflection, the cuts from the glass swollen across his face. The edge of one of his eyes is puffing up. He gently touches it; painful to the touch. He steps onto the linoleum tile and turns. The drape around the bathtub/shower is drawn. He can hear the dripping of water. He approaches and sees the linoleum around the tub glistening with pools of stagnant water. He grabs the drape between aching fingers and pulls it aside slowly.

His breath escapes him. Strength evaporates.

He collapses to his knees.

He twists around, back against the wall, and vomits all over his pants.

She lies in the tub, the soapy water covering everything but the tips of her hands, her knees, and her forehead. The water is a ruby-red color from her blood. Her fingers grip white-knuckled to the edges of the tub, and her knees stick out of the overflowing water like twin islands. Her breasts crest the top of the water, dull and lifeless. He cringes in the corner of the bathroom, staring, unable to breathe, unable to think. He is terrified of moving closer, of looking inside, of pulling her out. No. He can't believe it. He can't believe she's dead. All of this, all of his efforts just to get here to be with her, the driving force of his entire flight of survival. Everything... Gone. Drowned with her.

He stands in the kitchen. His pants reek of vomit. He has no desire to clean them. He holds the bottle in his hand—Bacardi 151, the killer of beers. Nicknamed the Superman—"When you drink it, you think you can fly like Superman; and when you wake up the next morning, you discover you're paralyzed like Christopher Reeves." One of his ancient history professors had told them, "Egyptian beer of antiquity was some of the most potent beer imaginable. Think of 200-proof beer. Even Bacardi 151 doesn't compare." He twists off the cap and raises it to his lips.

No. Not this. Not now.

He sets the beer down. He knows what he must do.

It takes him all his effort. He lifts her out of the tub, soaking his clothes. Her face is clean, for the blood has been washed off by the water. He is at least thankful for that. He carries her out of the bathroom, her body draped lifelessly and stiff between his two arms. He sets her on the bed and sits beside her. He leans over, fights off tears, kisses her gently on the eyelids. "My baby... My precious...

My angel..." He covers her with the comforter and rests her head on the pillow. He places the lilies across her chest, on top of the comforter. "These are for you..." The words end it all. He falls down on his knees beside the bed and buries his face into the pillow. He sobs horrendously. She doesn't move. "I'm sorry..." The words are broken, tainted by his weeping. "I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry... If I would have been here... If only I would not have abandoned you... We'd be together..."

The afternoon has come. He sits in the living room, on the cheap sofa. Sunlight comes through the closed blinds, casting bars against the far wall. The plasma-screen television sits blanket, catching only his exhausted reflection. *She's sleeping upstairs*, he tells himself. He holds the beer now in his hands. A battery-operated stereo sits on the coffee table, splayed atop *INTOUCH* and *GLOBE* magazines. She loves reading those magazines, staying up-to-date with fashion and the stars. He always made fun of her for it. Kiddingly, of course. He would always tease her.

He places a CD into the stereo player. It is a CD she made for him back when they started dating. He pulls the beer to his mouth as the gentle music floats through the living room. He closes his eyes, drinks. The music, the sound of another voice, the melodies and sonnets... It soothes him. He wonders if music isn't the sound of the gods. It is beautiful.

ALL THE SAME—The Sick Puppies. ♪I don't mind, I don't care, as long as you're here...♪ They had ridden in the car, cruising down the 3-lane highways of Cincinnati, and whenever this song came on, Kira would exclaim, "This is our song! It comes on every time we get in the car!"

SHE TALKS TO ANGELS—The Black Crows. ♪She keeps a lock of hair in her pocket; she wears a cross around her neck; yes, the hair is from a little boy; and the cross is someone she has not met...♪ She always wore a cross around her neck. An iron cross her father had bought her when she moved to Cincinnati for college at U.C. The cross hadn't been on her in the bath; he makes a mental note: "I have to find it."

BUBBLY—Colbie Caillat. ♪I've been awake for a while now; you've got me feeling like a child now; cause every time I see your face, I get the tingles in a silly place; it starts in my toes, and I wrinkle my nose; wherever it goes, I always know; that you'll make me smile, please stay for a while now...♪ Whenever she played that song, she would wrinkle her nose. So cute, like a bunny rabbit. And she would wrap her arms around him and squeeze him tight. "You make me feel all bubbly," she would say, grinning wildly. The last bubbles she knew were those escaping her mouth under the water as she choked on her last breaths.

OPEN ARMS—Journey. ♪Lying beside you, here in the dark, feeling your heart beat with mine; softly, you whisper; you're so sincere; how could our love be so blind?♪ The first time they listened to that song together, they were holding one another in the backseat of a car, lying naked together at the park at Mt. Echo. "I feel so comfortable in your arms," she told him. "All my troubles disappear when I'm with you. If only you could see what your love means to me."

EVERYTHING—Michael Buble. ♪You're a falling star, you're the getaway car, you're the line in the sand when I go too far; you're the swimming pool on an August day, and you're the perfect thing to say. And you play it cool, but it's kinda cute; oh, when you smile at me, you know exactly what you do; baby, don't pretend you know it's true, cause you can see it when I look at you.♪ He had taken her to a Michael Buble concert in Dayton one night, and they sat in the first row. The man had asked them to come onstage, and he told the singer that Kira was his love, and that he would marry her one day. And the man began to sing their song.

DREAMLOVER—Bobby Darin. ♪Every night I hope and pray a dream-lover will come my way. A girl to hold in my arms, and know the magic of her charms. Cause I want a girl to call my own. I want a dream-lover so I don't have to dream alone.♪ He had found his dream-lover. They had shared in

his greatest dream—a dream of love and laughter, of bold and daring romance, of devotion and dedication. “Love is not a feeling, it’s an ability,” his father hold told him once. He had never been able to truly practice love until Kira. He was going to marry her. They were going to have children. Their dreams were going to come true.

Now their dreams were dead—crashed on the rocks, broken apart, an abandoned shipwreck. The bottle rests in his hand. The alcohol slides down his throat, burning. He has nothing left. The lyrical melody of Pete Townshend echoes in his mind as he empties the bottle and passes out on the sofa:

♪♪ When tragedy befalls you,
 Let my love open the door.
 Don’t let it drag you down.
 Love can cure all your problems.
 Let my love open the door.
 You’re so lucky I’m around. ♪♪

No one is around.

He is entirely alone.

He. His bottle. His dead mistress.

The satin box with the ring tumbles from his fingers and lies abandoned and useless on the floor. The beer bottle slides from his fingers and tumbles over the carpet, gushing out. Somewhere a dog barks.

V

He awakes to the sound of barking outside. His head sears with pain, his brain thirsting for hydration. *Fucking hangovers*. He lies across the sofa, tries to go back to sleep, tries to escape once more. The dog continues barking. *Fucking dog*. The barks continue. Each bark racks his temples. He grunts and stands, falls onto the coffee table. Two legs snap and he tumbles onto the floor, the stereo at his side. The batteries have run dry. He stumbles to his feet and heads to the front door. He throws it open. Brilliant sunlight tears through him. The dog barks. He closes his eyes, but the sunlight comes through his eyelids and smacks him with blinding pain. And the dog... That bloody dog.

He goes out into the street. Two houses down, a man is lying on his face, half-naked. Blood smears his cheeks, having run down from his ears. The front door to the house is wide open. He must have run outside when the plague hit. A husky dog stands in the street, beside the body, hair on-edge. It clamps its mouth around the corpse’s arm and tugs. The man suddenly remembers a lecture in one of his psychology classes. The professor had told them, “They say dogs are man’s best friends. But if you die in your house, and your dog can’t escape and cannot find anything to eat, your dog will eat you.” He had then asked, rhetorically, “Are we humans any different? Remember the Donner Party, when starving pioneers ate those who had died of hypothermia? Or those soccer players whose plane crashed in the Himalayas? They had to eat the flesh of their dead to stay alive. Desperation will drive us to break the perceived and engrained bonds of morality no matter the costs.” He thinks about eating Kira. *No. You can’t think about that.*

He moves toward the dog, waving his arms blindly. “Get! Skat!”

The dog stares at him, growls.

He bends over, picks up a rock along the curb. He throws it at the dog. It misses. "Get!"

The dog releases the corpse's arm, barks.

He picks up another rock, pauses, throws it through the air.

It hits the dog in the shoulder. It barks and turns, running down the street, tail between its legs.

The man walks over to the body, looks down. "Ben Aldridge." His neighbor. Sometimes they played poker. Not much lately, though. Ben had gotten a job at a factory and worked almost all night shifts. Not last night, though. He had been at home when the nightmare began.

He stands on the back porch. The oaks leaves are turning different colors. *It's changing early this year.* He holds a bottle of Bud Light. He doesn't like the stuff. Kira drank it. This is her last bottle. He'll need more alcohol. It's the only thing that numbs the pain. The bottle is in one hand, a cigarette in another. He smokes an entire pack. His stomach grumbles. He knows he should eat, but he has no real appetite, despite his cringing stomach. He knows that if he eats, he'll just puke it back up again. He stubs the cigarette against the brick of the house, gives one last look at the lifeless city, and returns inside.

Now he sits in the chair in the corner of the bedroom, elbows on his knees, head resting in his hands. The headache isn't so bad. His heart feels heavy and his nerves drained. Empty eyes stare at the figure lying on the bed. He doesn't smell the scent of rot, the stench of decay, that overbearing aroma of a body going through the stages of decomposition. He thinks nothing of it. He is thankful she isn't rotting. He wants her to remain in the bed, frozen in place, always a spectacle of beauty. But he knows that will not be the case. Eventually she will rot. Eventually. The word hangs in the air like a stiletto. *Eventually. But not yet. Not yet.* He has to bury her. He'll take her to the graveyard—no. He'll bury her behind the house. He won't disturb anymore bodies. He won't let her break down like the others: he knows the city will become a cesspool of bacteria and germs as the bodies decompose. In the homes, on the streets, in wrecked cars. The city will become a city of sun-bleached bones, to which threadbare raiment shall cling. And when the snow falls, the rib cages will reach through the snow banks, crawling out into the sunlight. But not Kira. No, not Kira. She will decompose, but she will do so in honor. In the earth. Where she should be. He needs to find a shovel.

He stands beside Ben Aldridge's body. The dog has gone and not come back. He looks over to the open front door. He's been inside Ben's home. He knows where the door to the garage is located. Ben has shovels. But he can't get the shovels now. Now he has to search. For what? He doesn't know. Survivors? No. He has seen nothing but death and devastation. He has been spared. As to "Why?", he can't answer. And he probably never *will* be able to answer. But he finds himself walking down State Avenue, towards the intersection of Glenway and 8th. He isn't searching for cigarettes. He has more than enough. But he has run out of alcohol. Yes, he's searching for alcohol. *Am I really searching? Or do I just want to get out of the fucking house, away from her, away from the reality that has been thrust upon me?* He doesn't know. He doesn't care.

Several bars line the street near the intersection. He sees the overturned police car near the dead hanging streetlights. Closer is a Cadillac that slammed into a building. He sees a body hunched over the front of the hood, pinned between the brick wall of the sleazy apartment complex and the front bumper of the totaled car. Blood smears the wall from the impact, and the eyes of the victim have popped out of their sockets. Probably from the squeezing and clamping of his abdomen between the wall and the classic car; the pressure burst upwards and downwards. His legs are probably bloated

with blood, and the pressure forced the eyeballs from the sockets. These thoughts and explanations sprint through the man's mind.

He walks past, keeping his eyes from the grisly scene. Several bodies lie on the street beside the nearest bar. He stops walking and stares. Four bodies. One is crumpled on the curb, the top of the hair stained with blood and guts. Shattered glass lies around him. Another lies in the street, with half a bottle shoved into his throat. Two others lie on the other side of the street: both lie entangled. The man finds himself taking up the role of the detective, placing the scene together: *Four men exit the bar, lost in a drunken stupor and enraged at the slightest foul word. One of the men has a bottle, and he smashes it on the head of one of the other men. The man crumples under the impact, and the man swinging the bottle now only has half a bottle in his hand, the rim a jagged collection of razor-sharp glass. The fallen man's friend rushes him, and the man drives the deadly end of the bottle into his throat, pushing until a fountain of blood sprays. At the same time, another man leaps on the attacker's back, and the two of them stumble into the street. How do they die? No one knows.*

He knows. They all went crazy. Began attacking one another. It was every-man-for-himself. And by the time the two last men were fighting, with blood streaming from their eyes, ears, and nose, the plague took them down, and they fell together, still wrapped in the intimate dance of combat. He finds piecing together the scene a gentle escape. His mind clicks and whirs. But it is useless. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore.

He pushes open the front door of the bar. A little bell chimes. The place stinks of cigarettes and alcohol. Two young women lie on the floor amidst overturned tables. He walks past them, around the bar. The bartender is nowhere to be seen. It's better that way. He grabs a few bottles of alcohol—some Armagnac, a bottle of brandy, a small bottle of whisky, a scotch, and a rum. He can't carry it all. He walks out of the bar and takes the purse of one of the women on the floor. He dumps the contents on the floor—makeup, some mirrors, a camera, a cell phone—and stuffs the bottles inside. He adds a bourbon and a cognac and zips the purse shut before he leaves.

He walks slowly back home, taking his time; he has no real desire to do what needs to be done. He notices that there are more bodies on the street than he imagined. He had been so preoccupied with getting home—to *being with Kira*, he thinks with a pit of pain in his stomach—that he failed to notice how many bodies there actually were. Lots of people had run out of their homes and died on the curbs. *Why did they run outside?* he wonders as he steps over a teenage boy with striking features: high-brow, wickedly curved lips, and protruding cheek bones. A few cars on the street have bodies in them. Yet there is no body in the car pinning the man to the wall. He imagines the driver must have jumped in a crazed fervor before the car hit the man just before the car pinned the poor victim into the brick wall.

When he gets back home, he opens the purse and sets the bottles of alcohol on the counter. He pulls out a glass to pour in some whiskey but decides against it. *Not yet.* He heads over to Ben's house to get the shovel.

VI

He stands above the grave, a pile of dirt at his side. His pilot uniform is stained with soil and sweat. The August heat is sweltering. He looks down into the grave, sees her lying there. He had dressed her in her favorite dress—the blue LA FEMME ball gown she had worn to the theater what seemed

eons ago. He slid the engagement ring over her finger—"I'm sorry, Baby. I love you. I'm sorry. I should have done it sooner... We should have gotten married. I'm sorry." He then wrapped her in the comforter and tenderly lowered her into the grave. Now she is wrapped up tight. *Like a mummy*, he thinks gravely, remembering the mummies of Pharaoh on exhibit at the Cincinnati Children's Museum.

The sun sinks lower and lower. The day is almost over.

I'm sorry.

He walks around to the other side of the grave, picks up the shovel. It is heavy in his hands. He returns to the pile of dirt and begins scooping it inside. Tears crawl down his cheeks. At first they are a slow trickle, but they become quicker and quicker, until it is an avalanche sweeping down from his eyes. He finishes covering up the hole—he had meant for it to be six feet deep, but after four feet, he had hit bedrock, and could not dig anymore—and then sits down on the dirty earth. He lies down on his back, curls onto his side, and cries. The choking sobs burn his lungs. His face throbs as the swollen cuts pulse with pain at every explosion of muffled cries.

She is gone.

He has buried her.

She has gone.

He stands on the balcony jutting out from the bedroom upstairs. The first stars are appearing in the sky. The sun sinks behind him, casting its last ribbons of light across the God-forsaken city. The cigarette cherry burns bright as night settles. The moon shines through scattered clouds. He sets the cigarette on the railing and goes inside. It nearly burns to the filter before a burst of wind sends it fluttering into the bushes along the side of the house.

THE HANGMAN'S KNOT. He had learned it in Boy Scouts ages ago. It is the only knot he remembers. The instructor had told them very flatly and severely, "Never play Hangman. It can really kill." The essence of the knot's danger cemented it in their minds. They always spoke of it, but no one dared practice it. They were told that while it had been used in the old days for hanging people from the gallows, strangling the victims, it was also used as a knot to tie angles to fish lines.

He found the rope in the garage, among hammers and spilt nails. Now he sits in the kitchen, stringing the knot. He works methodically, finding a strange reverie with the act. He passes a 15cm loop of line through the eye he has made in the rope; he brings the end back on itself, passing it under the doubled part. He then makes five loops over the doubled part, and the knot is worked into shape. And then he hears the rope instructor's voice: *the knot is now sent down the line against the eye of the hook or swivel on the fishing line... There you go, Boys... Good job. And remember, this is not to be used on people. It can kill you. Got it? Good.* A whimsical smile crosses his face. The only thing this knot is going to wrap around is his own damned neck.

He ties the knot over the fan in the bedroom. He then pushes the bed against the dresser and brings the high-backed chair to rest underneath the fan. He gingerly steps upon the chair, feels it warble beneath him—*Good, good...*—and then he brings the noose around his neck, tightening it. *Good.* He can't look down, so he feels around with his feet for the back of the chair. *Just kick it over.* His mother told him, "Only cowards kill themselves." Does he think he is a coward? No. The coward is the one who sees suicide as the only option and yet fails to undertake it because he or she is frightened of what lies beyond. He knows he has no other choice. And he knows what lies beyond: *Kira*. He will join her. He takes a deep breath—*Oh, the irony*, he thinks—and kicks the back of the chair.

The chair topples to the ground.

His body snaps against the knot, which immediately tightens.

He tries not to fight against it. Gravity pulls him down. The noose tightens even more. He tries to gasp for breath, but cannot: the rope has tightened around his trachea. He knows that he will be unconscious in a few moments—10 seconds, he had told himself as he searched for the rope—but time seems to have turned into nothing but a memory. All he knows is the pain: the unbearable, excruciating—

His body spasms uncontrollably.

The fan rocks back and forth.

And with a *SNAP!* it is ripped from its moorings on the ceiling.

The trickle of time becomes a torrent, and the next thing he knows, he is lying on the floor beside the chair, his eyes bulging from their sockets, coughing in lungfuls of sweet, precious air. The fan lies on top of him, and chunks of drywall drop around him like sprinkles. Drywall-dust flowers to the ground like a mushroom cloud. He claws at the carpet. His head rockets with pain as oxygen returns through his system. Then he lies there, breathing heavily, drywall chalk itching his scalding lungs, feeling the weight of the dismembered fan upon him. His knees are bruised from the fall, and his wrist hurts.

He will find a gun in the morning.

He can't mess up with a gun.

But now he sits in the living room, holding the bottle of Calvados brandy from Normandy in his hand. He doesn't smoke. His lungs can't handle it. They still hurt. And his *head!* His *fucking head!* He'd never had a hangover that felt so bad. Cutting off oxygen to the brain hasn't helped any. He drinks and drinks until he passes out, not caring about the gut-wrenching hangover he'll have tomorrow.

The gunshot through the roof of his mouth will take care of that.

Chapter Three

Fallen Angels

"At first cock-crow the ghosts must go
Back to their quiet graves below."
- Theodosia Garrison (late 1800s)

I

"Please... Please, no... Please..."

She stands against the bedroom wall, tears carving lines down blotched cheeks. She squeezes her fists tight, dainty fingers quivering. Her beautiful eyes cut into his. He stands before her, the cutting knife from the kitchen in his hand, the blade pointed toward the ceiling. She pleads with him to stop, to be rational, she pleads with him to stop for the sake of their future, for the sake of their love, for the sake of their future children. Her tears match his, and the two of them weep. But his resolution is certain, etched in stone, unwavering.

She can barely manage the words between choking sobs. "Please... No... Don't do this... Please..."

"I'm sorry." He stumbles over his own tongue. He can't form his words.

Fear is written over their faces as they look into one another's eyes.

"No... You can't..."

Resolutely, "I have no choice."

"You don't have to do this..."

"No. No, there is no other way..."

"Please..."

Her pleas become screams: he launches at her, thrusts his body against hers. She is pressed against the wall, the back of her head banging against a framed portrait of the two of them, all smiles, wrapped warm in love and tenderness. He jerks the blade upwards, into her chest. Her eyes go wide as saucers. He pulls it from her abdomen. Warm blood flows over his hands. Weakly she protests, but he can't look at her as the blade sings once more. Blood trails from between her lips. He thrusts again. And again. And again. Her body goes limp. He steps away as she crumples to the floor. Blood stains her blue LA FEMME gown and spreads onto the carpet of the bedroom. Her mouth moves in stoic cries, and her eyes slowly fade into lifelessness.

He stumbles backwards, falls onto the bed.

The bloody knife tumbles from his frigid, blood-drenched fingers.

"I'm sorry..." he weeps. "I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry..."

He jerks awake. A cold sweat trails down his face. His heart shudders in an off-beat rhythm. Slowly his surroundings come to him. He is in the den, lying on the hardwood floor. The Salem Five-Shelf Cheshire-black bookcase is overturned and pressed against the window, meager light filtering in from the top of the windowpane where the bookcase doesn't cover it. He closes his eyes and takes several deep gulps of air. The hangover is splitting, but he barely notices it. The dream continues to flash before his eyes. It felt so *real*. He props himself up on his elbows and looks around the room.

The roll-top desk sits quiet and closed against the far wall. The coffee table is overturned, the lamp lying on the floor, shattered, the cord twisted among the ceramic fragments. Framed awards and certificates line the walls; one has fallen and lies on the ground, the glass pane cracked. He can't remember how he got to the den, but he doesn't care. He pulls himself up and goes to the door to the parlor. He tries it. Locked from the inside. He undoes the latch and swings it open. He steps out into the parlor. The front door rests on its hinges. A pool of water is crawling inside from the front porch. The street outside is wrapped in a misty haze, prolonged by a cool drizzle. He goes into the kitchen and notices the sliding glass door is shattered, glass fragments lying over the linoleum. Rainwater has come inside. Sunlight from the early dawn enters the kitchen and glints off the thousand glass fragments.

His shoes crunch on the broken glass as he goes out onto the back patio. None of it makes any sense. He doesn't try to figure it out. His head hurts too much. The city of Cincinnati is cloaked in the ephemeral mist; the highways and roads and low buildings are hidden, the tops of the skyscrapers rising like sentinels from the mist. The wind blows cold rain into his face and he steps farther back under the overhang. He fumbles for a cigarette in the pocket of his work pants. He lights it and takes a hit. The smoke in his lungs feels wonderful, but the smell of the cigarette makes his temples pound. Catch-22. He curses the cigarette and his god-awful addiction and tosses the cigarette into the yard. It fizzles in the stagnant pools of muddled rainwater. He turns and goes back inside, not even noticing the dug-up earth around Kira's grave.

It hits him without warning, a sledgehammer driven into the darkest corners of his mind. A vision, a memory, something unexplainable: he sees himself locking the door to the den, panicked, brandy staining his clothes. The vision passes as quickly as it had come, and he glances down at his shirt. It is stained, and he reeks of fermented alcohol. His breath catches itself, and his heartbeat flutters. He bites his lip and glances into the living room. Hadn't he fallen asleep on the sofa? Yes, he had, but how—Another vision: he is overturning the bookcase and sliding it against the window, feet slipping over flight manuals, commercial airline training textbooks, and assorted leather-bound collections of classic literature which he had adored during his days at Bowling Green. The vision fades, but before he can recollect himself, he is driven to his knees by another vision; yet this is not a vision of the eyes but a vision of the ears, an echo that makes him slide into the dark abyss of unconsciousness: a thousand screams of a million broken bodies.

He finds himself in the bedroom, staring at Kira's broken and bloodied body. And he looks down at his hands, and he sees—Oh God!—they are covered in blood, steaming blood that cries out to him, *murderer, murderer, murderer, murderer, MURDERER!!!*

His eyes open.

The dream fades.

He is lying on the linoleum in the kitchen, beside the counter. Shards of glass entangle his pants. His mouth is dry and tasteless, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He grabs the counter and pulls himself up. The movement sends shards of electric pain reverberating through his brain. He stumbles over to the sink and twists the handle. Water flows out, but it dies to a trickle and then stops before he can cup some in his hand and take a drink. He curses and goes to the refrigerator, opening it wide. The box of Diet Pepsi is empty. Kira must have drank the last can. The water bottles are all empty. *Fuck.* He grabs a milk, but it is warm and clumpy. He tosses it into the sink and takes the

quart of orange juice, mostly gone, and though it is warm, it is refreshing. As he puts it back, he notices something that sends shivers of fright rocking through him.

There is dried blood on his hands.

"Oh my God..." he mutters, startled at his own voice.

You killed her.

No! She was dead. I buried her.

You killed her. The bitch's blood is all over your hands.

I didn't kill her. The blood... It's from yesterday.

You know you killed her.

It was only a dream!

You THINK it was a dream.

No. He knows it was a dream.

He looks at the carton of emptied orange juice. He's still thirsty. The only drinks he has are alcohol, and he doesn't want alcohol. Not right now. He wants water. *Maybe Ben has some water.* He leaves the kitchen and goes to the front door. *How in the hell did it fall from the hinges?* He examines it. The hinges are shredded. *It's as if it were kicked in.* He tells himself he is going crazy. Who can blame him? He pushes Kira out of his mind—along with that god-awful dream, though it clings to him like a phantom, refusing to budge.

II

The mist is beginning to let up as he exits his house. The purple Escort sits quietly in the driveway. He can see Kira's plush Bearcat mascot from her days at the University of Cincinnati lying lopsided on the dashboard, blank marble eyes staring at him. Mocking him. He looks away and walks down the driveway, into the street, raindrops peppering his hair. The smell of gasoline is in the air. A muffled explosion comes from the distance. He runs around to the side of the house, and through the limbs of the oak tree with orange and yellow and red leaves dripping rainwater, he can see a plume of acrid black smoke rising from the tall buildings of the U.C. campus. *That'll be on the news,* he thinks for a moment; he catches himself at the irony. *Not anymore.*

He turns and heads the opposite direction, towards Ben's house. The dog is nowhere to be found. *Probably roaming the streets.* He looks to where Ben's body had been the day before and sees that it is gone. *Looks like the dog got what he was looking for.* He walks up to Ben's front door. It is shut. He twists the doorknob and it opens. He steps inside. The entryway is flanked with a staircase leading up to the upper landing. The corridor is dark, the power out, and the shades are drawn over the windows. He finds the darkness spooky. He walks quietly down the hallway and turns left, down another hallway. The darkness is suffocating. He's happy when he reaches the kitchen. One of the windows is shattered, the glass lying scattered over the kitchen table. A plate of rotting food sits untouched. One of the chairs is knocked over. He goes to the fridge and pulls it open. The light doesn't come on, and the refrigerator isn't cold. He kneels down and looks inside. Wrapped ham, a carton of milk, some Tupperware containers filled with noodles. Ah, yes, there. He reaches inside and grabs a bottle of GATORADE. GLACIER FREEZE is imprinted on the colored paper wrap. He twists off the cap and stands by the fridge, taking large drinks. It helps his hangover.

Holding the GATORADE in his hand, he walks over the broken window. The frame is bent outwards and broken, as if something had crawled inside. For a moment he imagines a panther crouched in the darkness, eyes watching him. A quiet chuckle pushes the ludicrous idea out of his

mind. He takes another drink and looks down. He sees that the glass has been shuffled. Something *had* come inside and brushed the glass aside. Suddenly he feels as if, indeed, he is being watched. He takes one more cautious drink, screws the plastic cap back onto the bottle, and heads for the hallway. *No. Wait. Grab some more. You'll want it later.* And he doesn't want to have to come back. He returns to the refrigerator and opens it up, reaches inside for another of the blue plastic bottles.

The attack comes swiftly.

The refrigerator door slams into his arm, sending him careening against the kitchen cabinets with a shout. He spins around, the bottle tumbling from his grasp. A figure lurches at him, hands outstretched, emerging from the shadows. The man lets out a shout and kicks: his foot drives into the knees of the attacker, and the assailant stumbles into the kitchen table, sliding it against the wall with a loud scraping noise. The man lunges to his feet. The figure shrieks, its maw opening, and the man realizes with terror: *Ben Aldridge*. His neighbor's eyes are wild and maniacal, bloodshot, ruby-red. Blood seeps from his neck where the dog had chewed.

"Ben!" the man shouts as the figure tries to get back to its feet. "Ben!"

The figure rushes him. The man leaps aside, thrusting his arms out, grabbing Ben by the bare arm, and hurling him into the refrigerator. Ben staggers against the fridge and turns.

"Ben! Ben, it's me! It's—"

But his neighbor doesn't relent. He charges again. The man sidesteps. The figure slams into the wall, twists around, releases a bloodcurdling scream. Ben's bare feet dribble with blood from where he has slid against the wall.

"God, Ben, your feet—"

Ben charges.

The man curses and turns, runs down the dark hallway.

Ben gains on him.

The man spins around into the hallway leading to the door.

The figure follows but doesn't turn in time. He hurls into the wall of the next hallway, a framed picture falling on top of his head, shattering. The man spins around and sees Ben coming at him, shards of glass stuck in his scalp, blood crawling through his hair. The man turns and runs out the front door, into the cold rain. He trips over a root sticking out of the moist earth, tumbles, falls. He rolls onto his back and raises his hands to protect himself.

Ben is gone.

The man takes several deep breaths. His heart pounds in his chest.

He props himself up on his elbows, looks at the front door.

He can see Ben in the shadows, watching him. *Salivating.*

"What the fuck..." the man murmurs, stumbling to his feet.

Ben just watches him.

"Ben!" he shouts. "Ben! It's me! We play poker together! Fucking poker!"

Ben disappears into the shadows.

The man takes several deep breaths. The wind blows rain into his face.

"What the fuck..." he mutters once more, leaving the front lawn.

He doesn't even have the GATORADE.

The purple Escort takes State Avenue to Queen City, and from Queen City goes onto Harrison Avenue. He had taken the keys from Kira's purse on the kitchen counter, and now he is driving west. His hands are shaking. He keeps seeing Ben attacking him. Ben. The man with whom he had shared laughter, long talks, to whom he had lost tons of money, and who always had the best beer. Ben.

What the fuck?! The windshield wipers streak back and forth. The rain patters on the window. He twists knobs and dials on the radio. Nothing. Only static or silence. All the radio stations have gone quiet. No one is alive. *No one but me.* And Ben. But he doesn't want to think about that.

So lost in the flashbacks of the events at Ben's house, he doesn't even notice for the longest time what is so obvious: the streets are deserted. Cars are wrecked, yes. But there are no bodies. He sees blood stains where bodies had fallen, even some dismembered limbs. But no bodies. Even the bodies from many of the car crashes are gone, the windows broken or doors open. The streets are deserted. *What the fuck?* he thinks again.

A few minutes later he pulls the car to the side of the road. The barred windows of ARMS & ACCESSORIES are impenetrable. He tries to get inside but cannot. The doors are locked too well. He goes around back, walking around a dumpster and several overturned trash cans. A stray cat hisses at him and darts away. The back door is locked, too, and all the windows are barred. He returns to the side of the building and climbs onto the dumpster. He grabs the downspout and gingerly pulls himself up. The loose aluminum shudders under his weight. He wraps his hand around the lip of the roof and begins pulling himself up just as the downspout groans and dislodges, falling with a crash onto the dumpster. The noise echoes in the side alley. He hefts himself onto the roof and finds an entrance hatch. He swings it open and crawls inside.

A few moments later he is in the belly of the store. All of the glass cases holding rifles, shotguns, swords, and handguns are locked. He tries to open them and an alarm begins to blare. At first it scares him, but then he finds it comforting. It doesn't matter. And if anyone else has survived, they may be drawn to it—and he won't be alone anymore. He finds a crowbar in the maintenance room at the back of the building and smashes open the glass panes. He reaches inside and grabs the first handgun he sees. A Glock Model 20 10mm. He uses a manual behind the counter to figure out what bullets he needs, and he grabs a single cartridge. It's all he needs. One bullet will do the job. He smashes the lock on the front door and exits into the street. As he gets into his car, he notices a sign hanging inside the front barred window: 30-DAY LAY AWAY AND FINANCING SPECIAL.

He loads the gun and stands in front of Ben's house. He can't get it out of his mind. He calls out Ben's name. Nothing. He curses and steps forward. Each step in front of the other feels momentous. He enters the house. The shadows surround him. He holds the gun in his hand, the barrel pointed away. *Safety off? Check.* He has only fired a gun once or twice. His father used to take him out before the accident.

"Ben?" His voice is low and quiet, but it sounds so loud in the silence.

No response.

"Ben. It's me. I'm not here to hurt you."

Nothing.

"I know you're scared. I'm scared, too. I forgive you for attacking me. I know... I know what you must have thought. That I was a burglar or something. A looter. But I'm not. Okay? Why don't you just come out? I came here to see if you were okay..."

Nothing.

Just leave. Just leave and don't come back.

But he can't. Someone else is alive. Someone he *knows*.

"Ben? Please, Ben. Just come out. Where are you?" He looks up the flight of steps. "Are you up there, Ben?"

A noise. Something falling. A footstep?

"Ben? I'm coming up. It's all right. Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

You're going up there? Are you crazy?

Ben's alive.

He's not alive. You saw him yesterday. Dead. On the road.

He wasn't dead. He was unconscious. I just didn't check.

He takes each step carefully. The stairs creak underfoot. He reaches the top landing. All is dark. It frightens him. He can feel his heart playing metal music in his chest, beating hard against his ribs. Adrenaline courses through his system. He hears movement. A scuffling. Slurping. "Ben?" His voice catches in his throat, comes out as a meager whisper, barely audible over his hammering heart. The door to Ben's bedroom is closed. The man places his hand on the cold bronze doorknob and turns. The locking mechanism creaks, and the door groans as it opens. He stares into the blackness, steps into the room. The sounds are very close, on the opposite side of the King-sized bed. He stands beside one of the windows with the shades drawn.

"Ben?" Now his voice works.

The sounds stop.

Images come into focus.

"Oh my God..."

Ben's beady red eyes stare at him from the other side of the bed. The dog lies on the covers, abdomen ripped open, blood crawling over the sides. In one of Ben's hands is the dog's intestines. The other is raised to his mouth as he feasts on the liver. Blood trails down his chin.

The man says, almost without emotion, "That's fucked up."

Ben shrieks, leaping to his feet, tossing the liver and intestines to the side.

The man grabs the shades and yanks. The bar holding the shades at the top of the window snaps. They fall to the ground, sunlight coursing through the room. Ben shrieks in pain, raising a hand to his face. The man holds the gun out, shaking wildly, pointed right at him. "Ben... Ben... What the fuck, Man? What the fuck?"

Ben throws himself over the bed, reaching out for the man.

The gun sings. The bullet slams into the wall. Fragments of drywall fly.

Ben isn't fazed. He trips over the dog's carcass and rolls off the bed, onto the floor. The man turns to run and slams into the wall. Blinding pain races up his nose. He turns just as Ben is upon him. He swings the gun up and fires. The bullet arcs through Ben's neck, a spray of blood hitting the man in the face. Ben tumbles to the ground, grasping at his throat, blood seeping between his fingers.

The man turns.

And runs.

He staggers into the street, the cold rain igniting his senses. He falls to the ground, mud soaking through the pants on his knees. He drops the gun into the earth and lets out a choking sob. He falls onto his side and rolls onto his back, staring up at the gray sky. Rain falls into his mouth as he gasps for air among the horrendous tears. He dry heaves and twists onto his side, vomiting. His stomach empties itself, then he rolls onto his back and lies in the rain. The gunshot continues to echo in his ears.

III

He throws the gun onto the floor in his own house.

Blood covers his hands.

Ben's blood.

He rushes up the steps, knowing only one thing: the blood must come off.

An old line from an ancient Shakespeare text rushes through his mind: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red." *Murderer. Murderer. Murderer.*

He throws open the door to the bedroom.

He stops in his tracks. "Oh my God... Oh my God..."

It wasn't a dream.

Kira's body lies entangled in the bed-sheets, bloodied and mangled. Her blue LA FEMME gown is stained with dirt and blood, riddled with multiple stab wounds. The kitchen knife lies on the wrangled, bloodied bed-sheets. He stands in the doorway, staring at her. Her head is twisted to the side, drools of blood hanging from her lips. Those lifeless eyes stare at him, mocking him. He can almost see the lips moving: "Murderer. Murderer. Murderer."

He falls beside the bed. "Oh my God... Oh my God..."

He takes her hand in his. Cold. Stiff.

"What have I done?" he moans. "What have I done?"

He kisses her cryptic hand. "I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry..."

What kind of monster have I become?

He hopes and prays he is in an insane asylum, drugged up, hallucinating.

Because then none of this is real.

And Kira is alive.

And the world is at peace.

"Oh God... Please let it be true... Please let it be true..."

He receives no answer: only the tapping rain on the windowpanes.

He cries and cries, and he drifts into sleep.

ΣΩΣ

He sat across from her, rice pilaf cradled in his spoon. She dabbed a fry in her ketchup, each move slow and labored. The conversation was absent, as it had been the entire meal—and the entire drive to the diner, despite his attempts to spark a little chit-chat. The sounds of the diner—clinking silverware, peels of laughter, muffled conversations—surrounded them.

He nodded at her food. "It's going to get cold."

"I'm not hungry." A swift, sure answer.

"Then why did you want to come here?"

She didn't reply. He tried to read her face: the unkempt frown, the averting eyes, the awkward movements, ever-so-subtle. She hadn't said much of anything, and she had only eaten a quarter of her cheeseburger.

"How was work?" he asked, yet another futile attempt at conversation.

"It was fine."

"Was it busy?"

"No."

"Okay."

Moments passed. He spooned the rice into his mouth. "What did you want to talk about?"

She didn't look at him, continued playing with her food. "Do we have to talk about it now?"

"You said you wanted to talk..."

"I did."

"Do you still want to?"

"Not right now."

A pause. "I think we should."

"Look..." She raised her eyes. A tear speckled.

He froze. A random thought, followed by a bare whisper: "Are you pregnant?"

"What?"

"The condom was old, but I didn't think..."

"No." She shook her head. "No, I'm not pregnant." She took a deep breath, forced her lips to move. "I don't think we should be together anymore."

His heart stopped. His eyes went blurry. The din of the diner faded. All he could hear were those words, echoing like a gong in the back of his head. She hung her head low. His voice was dry; he suddenly felt parched: "Are... Are you serious?"

She nodded, looked up at him. "Yes." Tears crawled down her cheeks.

"But... But last night... Just last night you said you could see us being together... forever. I don't..."

"I'm sorry."

"How can you go from saying that to saying... to saying this?"

"I was confused..."

"You were confused, so you sank your teeth right into my vulnerabilities?" His voice was rising, fueled by a malevolent concoction of desperation and anger.

"I feel horrible... I didn't want to hurt you..."

Too fucking late for that, he thought. "Why?"

She stared at him. "Why what?"

"Why... this?"

She fidgeted, unsure of her answer. "I'm seeing someone else?"

"You're fucking with me," he stated matter-of-factly, refusing to believe.

"No..."

"Who is it?"

Her lips shuddered with an oncoming slew of tears. "Mark..."

His shout silenced the diner: "Fuck!"

ΣΩΣ

He awakes. He is still at the bedside. He pulls himself up and looks into Kira's eyes. "I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry..." It's all he can say. He can't deny the fact that he is done this. Those visions were not visions, but memories. Repressed memories surging to the surface. He takes her hand in his once more. "How could I do this... How could I do this... to *you*?" She gives him no answers. He can only hear her pleas. Her pleas as she begged him to stop. He will bury her again. *I buried her, and she wasn't even dead. And when she came back to me, my dreams thrust into my face, alive more than ever, I took her life. I have become insane, an animal, who shoots and kills as I am locked in this prison of my own making.*

He downs the Captain Morgan Rum. It is late afternoon. He remembers the days before he met Kira. Those dark and tumultuous days, those days he imagined would never end, those days when he believed all his hopes and dreams had floundered. His girlfriend had broken up with him, and he'd

been heartbroken. She had left him for his best friend Kyle. And he had been on the verge of taking his life. He had no idea that she—*Kira*—was just around the corner. The memories...

ΣΩΣ

He stood upon the balcony, cigarette smoldering between his fingers, eyes lost and wandering as he gazed upon the walkways, the city's lights reflecting on the dark Ohio River. He closed his eyes, felt the sharp and cold and biting wind, rustling up from the river and stabbing into him like a thousand frozen needles. The joints in his fingers cried out in the cold, and he flicked the cigarette off the balcony, watching the cherry dwindle in the darkness as it came to rest on the marble stone pathway below.

"What're you doing here?"

He turned to see her standing beside him. Surprise danced over his face. "She told you, didn't she?"

"Yeah," she said. "She's still here, too."

"Oh."

"She *does* care about you."

He was silent. All he could do was stare at her, and even that took effort.

"Please," the girl said. "What are you doing here? You told her that you wanted her to just drop you off her so you could 'have some time alone and think.' You know that's not a good idea."

He turned away and looked out again, watching the people on the streets below. The laughter and shouts of evening play consumed him.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Please."

He didn't flinch. "I want to be like them so badly." He pointed to the joy written on the faces of the people gathering below. "I envy them so much. I just want to be happy. I don't want to wake up sad and go to bed sad anymore. My smiles are fake. My laughter? A lie. But I want them to be real." He turned and faced her, tears in his eyes. "I don't want this anymore."

"You don't want what anymore?"

"This... disease. This life I live. The person I am. I don't want any of it anymore."

"You've got to hang in there. It'll get better in time."

"But I'm losing faith that it will change. I'm losing hope that life will start looking up for me. You know why the breakup hurt me so much? For years and years I've prayed for a girl like her, refusing to lose hope. Finally she came, and she was more amazing than I could ever remember any other girl being. And the very moment I thanked God for answering my prayer, He took her from me."

She was quiet for a moment. "You can't—"

He interrupted her: "In that moment, something... snapped... within me. Hope died. When she broke up with me, hope divorced itself from me. Hope was dashed upon the rocks, smashed into pieces and washed out to sea. And I find myself lying broken and bleeding on the rocks, unable to escape, slowly being pecked apart by pelicans. I can't believe that change will come. I have no reason to think it will come." His eyes bore into hers. "You want to know why I came here today, why my eyes are fixated upon that bridge spanning the river?"

She swallowed, unnerved. "Yes. Of course I do. I care about you."

"I'm losing hope. The more I squeeze onto hope, the more it hurts. Hope is like barbed-wire: the tighter I hold on, the more it hurts. So I'm beginning to let go. The pain is becoming unbearable, so I

begin letting go. And so I'm embracing a life of resignation, becoming a stoic in the face of my existence. 'This is who I am. This is my life. It will not change.' And I'm beginning to accept that."

Her face reflected grave concern. "You can't do that, though. I know it's hard right now. I don't understand, but I see it on your face when you're hurting." As she spoke, he lit another cigarette. "Listen to me, okay? I never thought I'd grow so close to someone in only a few weeks. I care about you so much, and it hurts me to see you like this. I know your chemicals are messed up, that you have a disease in your brain that makes you depressed a lot, and I know that everything that's going on—the fact that she broke up with you and started dating one of your best friends—, I know it's killing you. But you're allowing it to blind you. Life will get better. It sucks right now, but this won't last forever. I promise."

He took a drag off the fresh cigarette. "But I can't—"

Now she interrupted him: "You're not letting yourself believe it. You're an amazing, compassionate, genuine guy. You make people laugh no matter what they're going through. You bring joy into other peoples' lives. You care about people more than you care for yourself, and even in your pain you wouldn't wish harm upon those who have hurt you. You're a great guy with a great future, and it hurts me to see you—"

He cut her off after taking another hit. "I asked her to bring me here..." He spoke slowly... "because I was going to take a walk on the bridge."

She took a deep breath, began to say something.

He wouldn't let her: "I've embraced resignation. This is my life. It won't change. So I need to accept that. And you know what? If this is the definition of my life, well... I don't want it anymore. Why should I continue? What do I have to look forward to? I'll tell you what I have to look forward to: nothing."

ΣΩΣ

He has set the rum aside. Now he holds the gun in his hands. He presses the cold steel of the barrel into his mouth. His heart races. *Soon my heart shall be silenced.* Kira came into his life, the beauty that he had been waiting for, and in a moment of morbid insanity he had stabbed her to death. How does one live with such a thing? He wraps his finger around the trigger, begins to squeeze—

No.

Why can't he do it? Why must he be a failure at everything?

He pulls the handgun out of his mouth, stares at it.

It will all be over. All I have to do is squeeze the trigger.

He sets the gun down on the sofa.

You coward. You fucking coward.

The sun is beginning to set. He sits on the rooftop. The rain has stopped falling, and the skies are clearing. He has no desire to sleep or be inside the house. So he sits on the roof, surrounded by bottles of alcohol. He is finishing the Captain Morgan's Rum. He doesn't mix it with anything, just drinks it straight. He hates the taste, but he can begin to feel the euphoria building. The drunken stupor... That is what he searches for. An escape from the world in which he has found himself. The moon appears overhead. The sun sets to the west, behind him, and the city begins to enshroud itself in darkness.

A lone dog howls in the distance, and more join with him.

The fires burn low at U.C.

Everything—*everyone*— is dead.

IV

The dogs howl. Their wails surround him, floating over the dead city, crawling up the hillsides, reaching into the stars. The sun throbs on its dying legs, and the howls grow in intensity. The man's head hurts at the sounds, and then he hears a dog bark somewhere down the street. A furious, wild, maniacal barking. And the howls continue. There is something in the howls of those animals, something that strikes him as odd. He has never heard a dog howl like those around the city. And how many dogs is he hearing? The cries seem to rise up like a majestic concerto, so magnificent in their intensity that the symphonies of the Sydney opera-house dwindle in comparison. He wonders if it has something to do with all the people being gone. *And the dogs rise and become the new dominant creatures on planet earth.* A twisted smile. Like some subtitle for a B-rated movie. But those howls... Something just isn't right.

And then the dog's barks dwindle, replaced with a whining shriek.

And then silence.

It is at that moment that the man understands.

He isn't hearing dogs at all.

He is hearing something else.

But what? He doesn't know.

He walks across the flat roof and looks down into the street. All of State Avenue is wrapped in shadows. The sun has set beyond the hills, and the stars sparkle in the moonlit sky. He can see figures down the street, walking. Walking on two legs. Coming towards him. He tries to count them. Six? Seven? No, even more. A dozen? *Two dozen?* People. Humans. *Real, live humans.* He realizes he isn't alone!

The howling stops.

The world is silent.

All he can hear is the wind rustling through the trees.

The figures down the street have stopped moving. They stand rigid. Frozen. The breeze picks up, and the clothes they're wearing tug back and forth, but still they don't move.

The man sets the alcohol aside, moves to the edge of the roof. "Hello?"

No movement.

He raises his voice: "Hello!"

The figures start. Their heads snap around. They stare right at him.

A nervous, anxious chill spreads through him, crawling up his spine.

Something isn't right... But the warning of his subconscious is lost at the exhilaration of finding more survivors. He rushes over to the side of the house and swings his legs over. He grabs the lip of the roof and hangs for a moment, then releases. Six feet he falls, and then he is hunched over in the grass. It is still moist from the day's earlier rains. He gets to his feet and moves around the side of the house, past the Escort in the driveway, and into the street. He faces the figures standing some 300 meters away, next to a wrecked pickup truck.

"Hello!" he shouts again.

They just stare at him.

They're just frightened. Hell, I'd be frightened, too, if I were them.

So he begins moving closer.

His feet carry him forward. The darkness peels away. The figures come into sharper focus. There are some men and women. A young child. Their chests move in and out with each breath, almost in rhythm. Their arms hang limp at their sides. They cock their heads and stare at him as if they are birds. He waves his arms, trying to get them to snap out of the trance. *Their trance.* He thinks, *It's almost as if they've never seen another person before.* He is about 50 meters away when he notices the young boy: blood is covering his arm. Dried blood. He doesn't think much about it, especially when the boy steps forward, and approaches him.

The man stops. *Let him come to you. Don't frighten him.*

He guesses the boy is around five or six years old. A scrawny tyke with vanilla-white hair. The boy comes towards him slowly. Cautiously? As he comes nearer, the man notices the face: it, like the arm, is covered in dried blood. The blood has seeped from the eyes, nose, and ears. He remembers when the plague began in the plane. Everyone going crazy. The blood streaming down their faces. He quickly looks at the boy's arm. There is a deep gash, and within the gash he can see a glinted blade protruding from the flesh. A knife of some sort. *Shit.*

He asks, tentatively, "Are you all right?"

The boy stops at the sound of the man's voice.

"Are you okay?" he asks again, unsure of what to do.

The boy just stares at him, head cocked to the side.

The others, 40 meters behind the boy, just watch. On-edge.

The man steps forward as he says, "Let me help—"

He goes quiet. The boy recoils, stepping back.

"It's okay," he says. "I won't hurt you."

The boy doesn't respond, shoulders hunched in agitation.

He bites his lip. "What's your name?"

The boy shows no emotion. Only a cautious curiosity.

"You have a name, don't you?"

The boy attacks, so quickly that the man doesn't have time to think. One moment the boy is rigid, and the next moment he is atop of the man, swinging and shrieking. Frightened, the man raises his knee to brace against the oncoming charge. His knee drives into the young boy's chest, and the man grabs the boy by the arm and swings him around. The boy tumbles to the ground and rolls.

"I'm so sorry..." the man says. "I'm so sorry..."

The boy stares at him as he lies on the ground.

Eyes full of hate and madness.

Drool trailing from his mouth.

Muscles twitching in anticipation.

The others let out a merciless shout and begin running.

The man stares at them. "Oh my God..."

His feet pound on the pavement. They are behind him, chasing and shrieking. Those god-awful shrieks pierce through him like a knife through wet tissue paper. His heart melts. His legs threaten to give way. The horror is unbelievable. He runs straight past his house, unthinking, and curses. *I can't get back there now,* he thinks to himself. The shrieks of his pursuers are taken up all around him. Cries come from the rising tree-studded slopes to his right, and then he can hear the crashing of

undergrowth. More coming after him through the trees leading up to Lehman Avenue. He runs straight down the street, past wrecked vehicles. The intersection with the trashed police car is straight ahead. And the bar. It has a lock, but it's unlocked.

He turns upon the sidewalk. A figure emerges from the shadows, snapping and biting. He ducks and runs, the crazed figure stumbling over his own feet and collapsing in the street.

The dead bar rises like a saloon out of the Old West. He launches inside and turns, slamming the door shut. He slides the lock and steps back. The figures hurl themselves against the door, but it won't budge. They shatter the windows, the glass shards cutting the skin of their hands, but the windows are barred, and they can't break the steel. The man's heart thuds heavily in his chest.

He stumbles back and falls into a wooden chair, taking deep and cutting breaths. He counts maybe twenty or thirty figures right outside, trying to get in, climbing over one another.

Only one thought races through his mind: *What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.*

And then he hears it:

heavy breathing right behind him.

He turns his head and looks back just as one of the women whom he'd seen in the bar only a day or two before launches at him. He is thrown from the chair and sent rolling across the floor. He comes to a rest against the wall, lying in shattered glass. Hands reach through the bars above him. The figures are crazed at how close he is. His eyes are intent on the woman. She is probably about twenty or twenty-five, short and skinny, with dark brown hair. She trips over the chair and falls flat on her face. She looks up at him and snarls. He crawls along the dirty tile floor like a crab, bumps against a record player. He scrambles to his feet. Fingertips brush him: the figures outside are leaning as close to him as they can. He knows he should move, but he refuses. The woman is standing.

He has forgotten about the other woman.

Yes, there were two of them.

The other woman comes at him from the side, knocking him into the bars of the window. The hands grab him. Fetid breath crawls over his neck. The woman is pressed against him, her breasts rubbing against his neck. She takes a long drawl of air and screams. The other woman rushes her, knocking her against the record player. The man is free! He rips himself away from the groping hands—his flight uniform tears—and runs to the bar. He looks back and in the darkness he can see the two women fighting, clawing at one another, biting, screaming. He runs around the bar and flings open the cabinets, searching. But there is no gun. He finds it hard to believe, especially in Price Hill. *Why did I have to leave my gun in the house? Fuck!* He grabs a bottle of brandy.

One of the women stands. Blood trails from her lips.

She looks over at him, licks her chops, then hunches down, bends over the other woman, and starts to eat.

The man's stomach curls. Vomit rises in his throat. He goes weak.

Stay focused. Stay focused.

"Hey!" he shouts, voice crackling in gut-wrenching fear.

The woman doesn't respond as she rips open her former friend's chest and begins feasting.

"Hey!"

Still nothing.

The figures outside moan and groan, thirsting for blood.

"BITCH!"

The woman turns, growls, eyes wild.

His mind reels, cursing him: *You stupid, crazy, fucking bastard.*

"Yeah!" he shouts. "You!"

She abandons her kill, running after the bar, kicking the chair out of the way. The man instantly regrets it, but he grimaces and strains his muscles. She lunges over the bar, reaching out for him. He swings the bottle of brandy down, slamming it into her skull. The glass shatters, shards embedding into her dark brown hair. Blood squirts up at him. He grabs her hair, yanks her head up. She snaps at his wrist, but he doesn't care. He drives the shattered end of the bottle into her throat and gives it a good jerk to the right. She lets out a gurgling scream as blood falls like a waterfall onto his shoes.

The woman has gone limp.

The figures outside groan, reaching through the bars for the carcass by the window.

The man drops the shattered brandy, takes several deep breaths.

Get a hold of yourself. Calm down.

How the HELL am I supposed to calm down?

He knows he has to get away from the windows, away from where the others can see him. He leaves the woman's body lying over the bar, blood draining onto the floor. He opens a door in the back and ascends a flight of steps. There is a door at the top of the steps. He pushes it open and enters a storage room. Wooden crates line the walls. Moonlight comes in through a single window. This one isn't barred. He quietly shuts the door, grabs a crate, and slides it against the door, grunting. It's heavy. He then goes to the window and, standing on his tiptoes, peers out. Down in the street he can see even more figures rumbling around. Some are fighting. Shrieks can be heard all over the city. He slowly lowers himself and pushes a crate against the window. He tries to stack one on top of the crate to block the window, but they're too heavy. Moonlight reflects off a metal dolly in the corner. He sets the dolly horizontal on the floor and huffs and heaves several crates onto it. He lifts the dolly, grunting, and presses it against the window. Only the top of the window is exposed, allowing meager amounts of moonlight to enter the room.

He sits down against the wall and curls his legs against his chest.

He shivers. It's cold.

It is the longest night he has ever experienced. All he can hear are their howls and wails. They keep trying to get inside down below, but the bars are too sturdy. Halfway through the night, he hears the sound of splintering wood, then the shattering of bottles. He knows they have gotten in downstairs. He holds his breath. Footsteps as they come near the door. He dares not breathe. He hears one of the... *What the hell ARE they, anyways?...* stop at the door. It shuffles around for a few moments, then returns downstairs. *They're not the smartest blokes.*

His teeth chatter.

He wants a blanket.

And some rum.

He doesn't sleep. He thinks. He thinks about Kira. He understands why he had to kill her, and the understanding brings no comfort. *She attacked me, and I defended myself. My brain refuses to remember, and it's repressing the memory. But Kira attacked me. She climbed from her grave and attacked me, and I had no choice.* And another thought: *But that doesn't make it right. We can't solve all our problems by violence.* He pushes Kira out of his mind, and he falls into a fitful sleep.

When he awakes, the sun is shining.

The streets are deserted.

V

Weathered leaves scatter between his feet. He stands in the abandoned parking lot at Mount Echo. The basketball courts once filled with teenagers in baggy jeans and loose jerseys are now quiet. A cool wind blows, and the basketball nets ripple back and forth. The wind picks up, and the iron fences creak and groan. The late August sun is hot, but his soul is so cold. He stands staring at the spot where their car had been parked so long ago, where they had forgotten all the rules by which to abide and found themselves naked and alone, shivering in ecstatic pleasure. He had smiled so greatly then—"I love you so fucking much," she had said, and now her words resound like a gong in the back of his mind—but now not a single smile creases his lips. He closes his eyes and listens, hearing nothing but the rustle of dying leaves and the sighs of the wind. There are no rumbling jet engines far above, no dull throb from the highways, no sound whatsoever to speak of what had once been: civilization. His eyes are closed, his breathing deep and labored, and he remembers.

ΣΩΣ

The breeze was cool and delicate, rising off the lapping waves of the Ohio River. A barge passed underneath the bridge as the two of them sat on the bench, staring at the sun setting to the west, bleeding ribbons of light over the dull brown river, reflecting off the steel of the skyscrapers.

She held the cup of Starbucks coffee in her hands. "Every boy I've dated has turned out to be a real jerk. They use and abuse me. I just keep holding out hope that some boy will fall for me who won't be a jerk like that. A boy who will treat me like a princess."

"You deserve to be treated like a princess." He considered wrapping his arm around her. *No.* He didn't want to look like another boy trying to get into her pants.

"Sometimes I wonder if I really *do* deserve that. No one has treated me like a princess."

"That's because you haven't met the right guy yet." *Should I put my arm around her? The war waged in his head. No. She is just a good friend. She doesn't want you to put your arm around her.*

"I don't know." She cradled the Styrofoam cup.

"When the right guy comes along..." His voice trailed off.

"I just want a kiss to *mean* something, you know?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I want my next kiss to *mean* something. I don't want to kiss just to kiss."

"I know."

She put her hand on his knee, tenderly, gently. Her touch felt so good.

Put your arm around her.

No. She's just a good friend.

She put her hand on your knee.

She just feels close to me.

Yeah. But not close as a friend. She's sending you a message.

She stroked his knee with her finger.

His heart pounded. *Do it.* Then, *No.* Again: *Do it. No!* He reached out, placed his arm around her. She scooted in closer. The two of them looked out over the river. The barge was bending around a curve, the Kentucky banks obscuring the front of the vessel. Black smoke rose in plumes from its smokestacks hidden behind the distant trees.

He bit his lip. "What are you thinking?"

She looked at him, a cute smile. "I don't know. What are *you* thinking?"

"Maybe you found the right guy?"

She grinned widely. "Maybe. Maybe. Just... Maybe."

ΣΩΣ

No. Don't remember.

I have to remember. She is all that I have.

You don't have her anymore. Don't remember.

Why can't I remember?

Because it hurts too much.

He curses himself for resurrecting the memories, embracing the pain.

But the human nature is something unmistakably alien to all other species on the planet. It causes him pain, it makes his heart throb in excruciating agony, but yet he allows the memory to continue, to take him later on in that fateful day, that day that will always remain cemented in his mind, the best day of his life.

ΣΩΣ

The sun had set. They were lying on a blanket at Eden Park, the tree limbs ripe with leaves opening up to the spring sky. Stars sprinkled above them, a beautiful patchwork. She leaned close to him. He held her arm and stroked it. No words were exchanged.

He spoke: "Why do you think we're so afraid to admit what we feel?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "Maybe because we're afraid of being hurt."

More silence.

He turned onto his side, looked down at her. So beautiful.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She answered with a tender kiss.

The best kiss he had ever tasted.

"Did that kiss mean something to you?" he asked.

A sweet smile. "Yeah. Yeah, it did."

"Good. It meant something to me, too."

A bird sang, and they kissed once more.

ΣΩΣ

He must face what he knows. He must no longer dwell in memories, in the corridors and pathways of escapism. He must confront that which has confronted him:

Everyone is dead.

He is alone.

And the dead seem to walk the streets at night.

Kira again comes into his mind. Her beauty replaced with an ugliness of death. A rotting corpse, stumbling through the house, arms outstretched, drool dribbling down her lips, eyes glazed with the pall of decay, reaching for him. The images flash before his mind, sending shivers of pain shooting through his brain: the knife in his hands, thrusting the blade into her flesh, his heart hammering and terrified, her mouth reaching for his neck—not to kiss, but to kill. And he sees her body thrown upon the bed, the blood staining the sheets.

He gave his heart to Kira.
And then he killed her.

ΣΩΣ

The vicious circle of a thousand poisonous spiders spinning silk threads tightens around his neck like a Siberian noose. He hangs his head in his hands and nightmares and dreamscapes flutter before his mind's eye, mocking his insanity with their cackling laughter. The memories are a sweet poison, circumventing through his system, latching onto every organ and tissue, and his stomach turns sour, his throat muscles clench, and he vomits all over the floor. Bile dribbles from his mouth, stained crimson with blood, and then he dry heaves: horrendous spasms in his throat make his eyes bulge and his face muscles contort as bitter tears cascade like a Greek fountain down rose-blotched cheeks.

ΣΩΣ

They sat on the polished bleachers in Ludlow, Kentucky, on the banks of the Ohio River. Little children played on the playground, mothers watching them. Several kids in a Little League baseball team practiced on the dirt ball field: throwing baseballs, swinging metal bats, eating sunflower seeds and spitting in the dugout to look cool. He sat there with his arm around her. The warm spring breeze ruffled their hair.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I'm thinking my dreams might be coming true."

"Oh? And what dreams are those?"

"Fall in love. Have a family. Be a mom and a wife."

"My dreams are coming true, too."

"And what are those?"

"Fall in love. Have a family. Be a dad and a husband."

She squeezed his hand, kissed him on the cheek. "You're wonderful."

"You're wonderful, too." He meant it.

He meant it more than he had ever meant it before.

As they drove away, she kept smiling.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked.

"I don't know. I just feel like smiling."

"There's no reason?"

She piped, "I'm just smiling cause I'm happy."

"I'm happy, too."

ΣΩΣ

He has nothing left. The weight of his loneliness and heartache bears down upon him like an anvil, crushing his ribs and pushing all semblance of life from his lungs. *She is gone. She is gone. She is gone.* He will never be with her. He will never hold her again, never smell the sweetness of her hair, never gaze into those deep dove eyes, never build a life with her and have wonderful children and be a family man. All of those dreams, nothing but smoke and mirrors. *Smoke and mirrors.*

ΣΩΣ

A few months following the beloved words at the Ludlow park, the man's sister became pregnant. She had gotten married in late spring, and while the baby wasn't expected, everyone celebrated when she announced it at Thanksgiving dinner. He leaned over to his girlfriend and whispered in her ear, "One day we'll have a little one of our own."

She bit her lip, tried to fight off the smile. "I hope so."

"Me too," he said, squeezing her hand under the table.

Her eyes batted, seductive. "You're my angel."

"You're my angel, too," he said, meaning every word of it.

ΣΩΣ

"One day we'll have a little one of our own." Her voice echoes like a scream.

Smoke and mirrors.

"You're my angel."

Kira was his angel. And she had fallen. Everyone had fallen. He is alone, surrounded by fallen angels. The beauty they had been has become a hellish recreation of the inner sanctuary of the human creature: its rage, jealousy, hunger, and thirst. Mankind has become a horde of demons scraping the earth clean.

A bird cries out in the trees and takes flight.

He watches its slender form vanish in the glare of the sun.

And he feels as if the sun is mocking him.

Chapter Four

The Order of the Ravens

"Death is not the worst;
rather, in vain, to wish for death,
and not to compass it."
- Sophocles (ca 450 BC)

I

Thoughts of her dance through his head, mixed with the desire to slit his own wrists, an ungodly concoction. He doesn't know how long he will live; his days are spent thinking of her—her beauty, her laugh, her smile, the way she danced, and cuddled, and the way she sweet-talked him in their deep sensual embrace—and these thoughts are met with a tidal wave of forsaken desires, and sweat creases his brow and his hands shake and he can only scream as the intense desire to end his own life takes over. Their love did not last, and he is lost in that unthinkable question: not why, not when, but *how*. How will he do it? Pills? The serrated blade of a knife? A gunshot wound to the head? The temptation to take his own life will soon take control, and he will no longer be able to live—just as he is no longer able to love. Soon he will break under the temptation; his heart has already been broken, but it is his life that awaits such a resolution.

He can only run and hide, and no matter where he goes, they are there. He walks the empty streets and gazes upon the deathly city. No matter where he goes, no matter what he does, no matter how hard he tries to take his mind off *her*, SUICIDE whispers its name in his ears. He can live and exist in a world overrun by the mankind-turned-monsters, but what he cannot stand is to not be with her. He cannot live and exist in a world without her—and, even worse, in a world where she has become something ugly and horrific, a monster straight from the maws of hell, and he cannot live in a world knowing that he has taken her life. There is no purpose, no rhythm, no reason and no rhyme to his survival. The pain and suffering are endless; his body aches, but his heart screams, as if it has been wrapped in barbed wire, and each memory of her draws the barbed wire tighter and tighter, the metal points digging into the soft muscle of what was once a live and beating muscle. No one can help him. There are no 1-800 numbers to call. There are no hospitals. No psychiatrists. No medicines. He is entirely alone. All he has are his cigarettes and his alcohol, and he consumes them ritually, finding escape only in drunken stupor. His spirit is dead, his heart is shattered, and he is entirely empty inside. So he drinks. And he smokes. And he tries to forget the world. He tries to forget everything he has known.

It has been said that suicide is the most desperately hedonistic crime committed against every conceivable fraternity of all mankind. But in a world where there are no others, where no one will suffer when he takes his own life, what sin is there in such an action? He shall hurt no one—not even himself. Death, that which he once feared, has become that which he longs for every waking moment—even in his dreams, he can feel the blade slicing across his wrists. He sits in the gloom of the living room, hearing them outside, scraping and groaning, searching and thirsting. He thinks of

all that he has loved and all that he hates. Everything he loved is gone—peace, serenity, tranquility, happiness, joy. Empty words. Foreign words. They find no home in the vacancy of his soul. SUICIDE. It is his fate. He thinks of all the times he used to laugh, and now he just wants to die. Crying every night is not the way to live, and thoughts of suicide haunt his mind. No one will care when he is gone. No one will even know. He will be but another rotting corpse, and he will not be resigned to the fate of those outside—those monsters, those beasts, those shells of once-beautiful human beings, those angels cast down from the highest heights of Heaven. Nobody sees his pain; and no one shall see his mangled body, nor his brains splattered against the wall, and the handgun that will lie in his skeletal fingers. Suicide: it is his bid for freedom. If he kills himself, will anyone miss him? Will he be remembered? Will anyone cry because he is gone? No. Because he is alone. Entirely alone.

The man's heart is filled with an empty hole. He wishes to put himself on fire and fry; but some may whisper, "With life, you can still make an effort and try." Make an effort? Try? For what purpose? To continue living in a world void of human life, where he is constantly alone, chosen randomly by the Sun God to persevere in loneliness and depression? They used to say that if you were considering suicide, take heart, because you are not alone in your sufferings. But he is *entirely* alone. He is shivering-cold to the bone, always weeping, wishing he had something beautiful and wonderful—wishing he had *her*—and wishing he could have treasured and kept her. Love was once on his side. Now LOVE is lying in a grave, rotting under several feet of rocks and clay and dirt. "What is love? A concoction of chemicals in the brain stimulating pleasure." If only he could stimulate those pleasures; but now all the chemicals are low, out-of-balance, and he only knows that final and fateful resolution. Suicide is his thought of dying. Crawling out of the hole he has made. It's the only way out of the pain he feels.

He remembers sitting in the tight chair behind the narrow desk. He remembers being in a classroom filled with students. He remembers the short and stocky psychology professor pacing behind the podium, speaking. "Why commit suicide? With life, there is always hope." He can see the professor now: clawing open the wounds of another human being, feasting on the kidneys and liver and the fetus of a once-pregnant soccer mom.

He can hear them outside.

He sits upon the sofa, sitting in his underwear.

The gun is in his hands. Cold. Cancerous. Calculating.

He stares at the mirror on the wall, focus blurred, and he is coming undone.

A face stares back at him.

Her face.

The face of beauty: twisted, contorted,

now open in a silent scream, blood streaming from hollow eyes.

He is empty inside, bleeding, his head exploding.

He is falling, crawling, and everything grows darker, dimmer.

Blood is on the walls, and he can hear the death-calls outside the window.

He cuts himself. The blade runs deep. Blood seeps from the wound.

He takes a deep, shivering breath.

Their screams are poisonous.

The pain, the pleasure, overcomes him. He slices deeper: bleeding, escaping.

He is twisted, crashing and burning, void of strength.

Everything is fucked up.
 He is sick of life: "My pain will never end."
 His own voice shocks him.
 He has not heard it in so long.
 All he has heard are his tears.
 He drinks from the bottle, running from the past, pushing away the memories.
 "I love you. Do you love me?"
 "Of course I love you. I love you more than anything."
 "Then why did you kill me?"
 He hurls the bottle against the wall, screaming in rage.
 He buckles over, head in his hands,
 uncontrollably weeping.
 He is mentally sick. Seeing death. Forsaken.
 His only cure: the handgun in his hands.
 He hates himself. He hates this world. He hates everything.
 He hates everyone.
 It is becoming unbearable. He wants to die.
 Nightmares overtake his thoughts.
 He will never be free.
 All that he can see, is only
 what's become of him:
 the shell of what was once a man.

II

RIVERFRONT, CINCINNATI. A 12-acre lawn splashed against the Ohio River, boasting a playground with dry mulch, several swings, twin slides, a tire-swing, and a wooden castle filled with walkways and catacombs for little children. Walking and biking paths snake through the manicured lawns, now dry and yellow in the heat of the last week of August. The gardens, floral displays, natural landscapes, and nature habitats are wilting, having not been watered for nearly three weeks; and an S.U.V. has crashed into the foot of the promenade connecting the twin stadiums: the Great American Ballpark—"Home of the Cincinnati Reds!"—and the USBank Arena. He stands upon the wharf, stone steps running in circular arcs down into the low height of the river. The past several days have been dry, without a touch of water, and the river's level is dipping. Bloated bodies bob in the sluggish currents, twisting and turning in the rippling water, the clothes shorn and tattered, the stomachs bulbous and the fat glistening in the harsh sunlight. Some of the corpses have snagged on the wires from a collapsed bridge downriver—the antique John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge. A barge is wrecked into the large Brent-Spence bridge; it hit one of the pillars head-on, and the current swung it around so that it now rest horizontal against the bridge's base. The far end of the barge is ruptured against the Ohio shoreline far downriver. The man's eyes are drawn to a bloated corpse lying on the stone steps a hundred yards away; even from this distance, he can smell the scent of death and decay. The body had come to a rest on the steps when the water level receded, and now it is bloated and blistering, hot sears opening along the skin, revealing a mangled yellow-white puss. A raven spreads its three-clawed talons upon the swelled face and pecks at the eyes. Everything is deathly quiet, the

wind rippling up from the river, dark storm-clouds approaching slowly from the south, rising and bobbing over the rolling hills of northern Kentucky. *The drought will be over soon*, he thinks numbly.

He turns and gazes upon the Cincinnati Reds Stadium next to the USBank Arena. He remembers going to the Reds games with Kira, remembers the Crosley Terrace statues, the Italian-marble mosaics, the famous-dates banners and the Sun & Moon Deck where he and Kira held one another and looked out at motorboats revving up and down the river. Everything had been wonderful then. He had been happy. He closes his eyes, takes several deep lungfulls of air. The memories hurt. He opens his eyes and sees the USBank Arena. He and Kira had gone to see the Trans-Siberian Orchestra play there two years ago. He had not wanted to go, but she had begged him; he finally succumbed, and he ended up enjoying the music immensely—he had even bought the CD, though he made sure Kira never knew. *She should have known*. Fuck. The memories ache. He turns away from the buildings and looks out across the river again, Newport on the Levee across the waters resplendent with corpses. He and Kira would go there and huddle around the telescopes—25 CENTS FOR FIVE MINUTES!!! the sign had read—and they would peep into the apartment buildings and try to see people: 10 points for someone watching television, 20 points for someone reading in bed, 30 points for someone eating dinner, 40 points for someone masturbating, and 50 points for a couple having sex! Fuck. Kira surrounds him. *And you killed her. You killed her, you fucking bastard*.

His body is numb, exhausted, and his muscles scream, aching and throbbing. He cannot sleep. He cannot think. He can only remember. It has been three weeks since that horrific nightmare over the Atlantic, a nightmare that plays itself over and over in his mind, echoing like a cello in a dark chamber. Dry heaves have become his daily diet: the well of tears within has completely dried up. He doesn't eat: he has tried to eat, but he cannot. He feels weak, his body throbs, but he cannot force down any food. He is losing weight quickly, and alcohol has become his new lover. His favorite is the 190-proof EverClear. He downs the drink and becomes lost in the euphoria: the memories do not hurt so much, he finds himself detached, and even their howls and wails and scratching at the doors and windows seem like no more than an awful B-movie dream. He spends his days walking the streets, staring at the city, and he often finds himself in places where he and Kira had spent considerable time, making memories "that will last forever," as she had said: Eden Park, Mount Aries, Mount Echo, the ballpark stadiums, fancy restaurants, Newport on the Levee—and the Cincinnati Riverfront. He can hear his older sister's words echoing in the back of his mind: "You're suffering Failure to Thrive. It's seen mostly in the elderly, but sometimes it's apparent in those who have suffered great loss." He wonders how she is doing. He has never been really close to her, not since the accident, an event which sent a rift between them; she blamed him for his death, and when their mother passed on due to cancer, she pushed him out of his life. She is now working—*was* working—at a geriatric clinic in Maine. He feels awful, for he should care, he should wonder if she is alive, but he doesn't. He doesn't think about her. He knows her fate. He can see her stumbling around the clinic, foaming at the mouth, ripping open the bedridden patients, holding their innards in her hands, feasting. A shiver runs up his spine. Ever since the accident—the accident. Memories swarm: fire, screams, his own high-pitched wailing: "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"

He comes to on his knees. He is buckled over, hands on the warm pavement. A raven perches on the sidewalk several yards away, eyeing him. He stares at it, feeling his head pounding. *I need more alcohol*. The raven hops closer. He swings out his arm—"I'm not fucking dead!" he shouts, his cry echoing through the corridors of the dead city—and the raven takes flight, disappearing into the air,

growing into a mere speck over the Ohio River. He lays down on the dry grass, staring at the sky. The clouds tumble over one another. Thunder rumbles. He turns his head, looks into the hills of northern Kentucky, and sees rivulets of lightning coursing down, sparkling and dancing among the distant hills. A raindrop crawls down his face. He grunts. It is time to leave, and he begins getting to his feet.

That is when he hears it. He is nearly to his feet when the sound reaches him. At first he cannot pinpoint its source: a gentle thumping, the cutting of the air. He then recognizes it, his brain cells clicking, but he refuses to believe it. *No. It can't be. No.* He stands staring across the river, into the hills. And then he sees it. Flashes of red light coming towards him, flying low. "Fuck me," he growls, voice surprisingly sharp and crisp. The helicopter—a slender-bodied chopper, painted blue-and-white, reminding him of those hospital helicopters—flies over the Newport Aquarium, and it soars over the river, one thousand feet above his head. He slowly turns, following it with his eyes, heart pounding. Energy suddenly courses through him, and he finds himself running up the grassy slopes of Riverfront, and he rushes around the wrecked S.U.V.—the driver's window is shattered, and a smear of dried blood leads into the dark confines of the Great American Ballpark loading docks—and he sprints up the concrete steps. His body screams at him, muscles roaring. He doesn't care. Adrenaline surges through his blood. His head is pounding so hard it feels as if his brains are going to squirt from his eyes. He reaches the top of the promenade and runs up a new flight of steps. There is an iron gate blocking his way into the stadium. He hurls himself against it. It rattles and creaks. He wraps his fingers around the grilled iron chains and shakes them madly, screaming. It won't budge. He kicks it several times and stumbles back, heart lodged in his throat. He falls to his knees, still shaking the gate, but now tears stream down his cheeks, and he rolls onto his side, choking on his own sobs, body quivering. The thumping of the helicopter's propellers disappear, and he is alone once more, privy only to the sound of his fresh tears and the beating of his stillborn heart.

He stands under an overhang on the promenade as the stiff rains fall. Thunder booms and echoes, and lightning crisscrosses in the sky. He shivers in the cold: the wind blows ferociously, sending spears of rain into his face. He turns his back to the rain and stares at several posters on the wall: 2012 REDS TICKETS NOW AVAILABLE and MEET THE REDS! LISTEN TO 700WLW FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN! None of this registers with him. He can only think of the helicopter. *I'm not alone. There are others. Other survivors.* This repeats itself over and over in his mind like a broken record. *I'm not alone. There are others. Other survivors. I am not alone. There are others. Other survivors. I am not alone...* The rain is still coming down hard, the storm throwing its entire weight upon the City of Death. He looks down at his digital watch. Dusk is at hand. The sun will be setting—and they will be coming out early, for the darkness from the storm is already enveloping the city. He has to go. He braves the wind and rain and runs down the promenade to the purple Escort parked below.

III

He can hear them outside.

He sits upon the edge of the twin-sized bed, a CAMEL LIGHT smoldering between his fingers. The smoke rises in concentric circles as he taps the filter up and down with his finger. He brings the cigarette to his lips, takes a deep and refreshing drawl, holds the smoke in his lungs, then exhales. *Paradisio.* The tiny oil lantern burns low, casting ribbons of rippling light through the room. There are crates filled with alcohol, a shotgun propped against the wall, and his bed with its covers stashed in

the corner. The single window is boarded up with a large, black, thermal blanket hung over it to keep the light from reaching outside. The wind is roaring and rushing, and the house creaks and groans. He shivers and pulls the blankets tighter, casting the cigarette into the cheap plastic ashtray. It is a cold night. He leans back against the wall and closes his eyes.

He can hear them outside.

"I dub thee THE DARK-WALKERS!" He sees himself standing before an auditorium filled with students. Notebooks are splayed in the desks before them, pens and pencils held at the ready. He paces back and forth behind the podium, and a projector screen behind him flashes several different images. He speaks loudly, his voice amplified. "They were once innocent people, just like you and me. Mothers. Fathers. Brothers. Sisters. Sons. Daughters. Friends. But all of this changed on the eve of August 11, 2011. It has been called The Apocalypse, the Cleansing of the Earth, the Great Judgment, the Second Black Plague, the New Era. Where it came from, no one knows. What it is, no one knows. We only know that there were hardly any survivors—except for myself and a few others, who dwelled in the daylight and hid when the sun fell to avoid falling to their teeth. Whatever the reason, these people became monsters. They began thirsting for fresh flesh. They began attacking anything that did not belong to their possessed kind. They hide in the daylight, avoiding the sun, for the sun will illuminate their true natures: their hideousness, their vileness, their ugliness. They act on impulse, killing and fighting and slaying. But only at night! Stay in the sun, and you will be fine; but at night, you must flee! You must flee and hide and pray that they do not find you. For weeks I was holed up in my own home, listening to them gathering outside my house, trying to find me. They knew I was there. They sensed it. They sensed my presence, my innocence, my hatred for them. How? I do not know. But they were there, every night, moving around my house, trying to come in through the windows, salivating, growling, howling—animals! Some have said that after the Plague—if it were such a thing!—the world became home to zombies. This is ridiculous nonsense. Zombies are characters of fiction; these were merely humans, transformed into animals, given over to their most basic primal impulses: their rage, their selfishness, their greed, their hunger, their desire to survive. Some pity them. Do I pity them? No. I do not pity them. I never did. Night after night I dwelled alone in my home, listening to them, knowing they wanted to sink their teeth into the soft of my neck. Did I pity them? I cradled and stroked the shotgun, and part of me wished for one to get into the house, so I could unleash my wrath. This plague took my fiancé from me, and I would not go down without a fight."

I am not alone. There are others. Other survivors. And with these thoughts resonating in his mind, he has been filled with a new fervor, a new desire to live. The helicopter fills his thoughts, and he believes it may belong to a band of survivors who are searching for others like himself. Knowing this, he cannot give up. He must endure. The house stinks of his own guilt over taking Kira's life, but he pushes it out of mind.

He goes to the Wal-Mart and breaks inside, grabs white paint, and paints a giant S.O.S. on the street outside his house. He then burns down the opposite houses next to his house with controlled fires, and he cuts down the oak tree in the back yard to protect from any clever dark-walkers who might scale the tree and find their way onto the roof. He erects a fence around his property to protect Kira's grave, which he adorns with a headstone and some fake purple flowers. The flowers he took from the airport now sit beside his bed, in a vase, and he is constantly staring at them. *Purple was always her favorite color.* He boards up the windows with plywood, turns the upstairs storage room into his bedroom, and barricades the room where Kira died, thrusting a coffee table with several

books against the closed door. He installs sliding metal bars over all the doors—the door to the back, the door to the garage, and the door to the front patio—and smashes the stairwell, replacing it with an aluminum ladder from the garage (he raises the ladder every night; in case they get inside, they will be unable to get to him on the upper level).

He stocks up on supplies: flashlights, extra batteries, two first-aid kits, non-perishable foods, a non-electric can opener, several crates of bottled water, extra clothes, personal hygiene supplies, toilet paper—he has dug a latrine in the backyard—as well as several sleeping bags, blankets, pillows, and battery-operated heaters—it is the last week of August, and winter will be here soon. At night he uses multi-fuel Petromax lanterns and Aladdin Mantle Lamps that burn kerosene and lamp oil, and he covers the windows at night with heavy thermal blankets that keep the light from bleeding outside and attracting more dark-walkers. He also raids the gun shop and steals several weapons.

He feels as if he is living in the Stone Age:

No electricity.

No running water.

He cooks cans of food over a battery-operated Bunsen burner.

He has a glass of wine every night before bed.

He has stopped drinking heavily.

He must be sober to keep his wits about him.

Because one day they will get inside.

And if he is drunk, he will fall to their gnashing teeth,

and his wails will resonate throughout the dark hills of Cincinnati.

Prior to the Outbreak, he never shot a gun in his entire life. Now he spends three days a week outside, on State Avenue, setting up trash cans, alcohol bottles, and miscellaneous targets down the street, past the smoking ruins of Ben's house. He goes through all the weapons he stole from the Arms & Accessories shop on Harrison Avenue. He takes three handguns—a SMITH & WESSON Military & Police issue, a TAURUS PT1911, and a BERETTA 92FS 2008 model. He also takes two rifles—the British Lee-Enfield and the Russian Mosin-Nagant, both World War II-era weapons yet very reliable—as well as a double-barreled shotgun. He also takes a long, serrated-edged BR7180 Browning Guthook lockback knife, which he keeps fastened to his belt, hoping and praying he'll never have to use it—yet he practices throwing it into the wall in case he must ever defend himself when a gun is not available.

And so the man lives: holed up in the house which has become a prison. Working his hardest to not go crazy despite not having anyone but his own face in the mirror to converse with. He eats. He drinks. He sleeps. He smokes. He remembers. Oh, how he remembers! All those sweet and wonderful memories with Kira play themselves over-and-over in his mind. And the cigarette smolders between his fingers, the smoke rising like incense to unseen gods. And he hears them outside his house, moaning and groaning, searching and thirsting. *You are not as alone as you think. You always have THEM to keep you company.* He grimaces at that thought.

IV

Night has come.

The wan glow from the Petromax lantern dances over his features.

He holds the journal in his hand, staring at the fading blue-ink lettering.

How long has it been? The day he met Kira. It is stenciled forever in his journal:

FEBRUARY 7, 2007

The snow came down in torrents yesterday afternoon. I borrowed Nate's truck to grab some food; when I entered the restaurant, a few snowflakes began to fall, and when I left, the roads had turned into a maelstrom. A ten-minute drive took me forty minutes, and I fish-tailed every which way. Nate met me at the bottom of Grand Avenue to somehow navigate the truck up the slippery road, around a snow-coated corner, and finally into the overflowing parking lot (we almost saw a car spin out of control and smash into a police cruiser). Stranded on campus, I rounded up some people to play "snow soccer." Caleb, Trista, Emily and I met on the quad and kicked a snowball back and forth for close to two hours. Nate joined us near the end. Trista lost her cell phone. We searched for thirty minutes, and when I finally put my hands on my waist and said, "We're not going to find it, Trista. I'm sorry," she looked down in sadness and saw it glinting in the sun. With Trista's phone discovered, we went sledding down the hill behind the girls' dorm, using laundry baskets and large Rubbermaid lids as sleds. Kira, Kirby, Shelby, and Candace joined us. It was a great time. The cold burned at first, but eventually it felt strangely warm. Curling up under my blankets afterwards felt like a taste of paradise.

That was the day he met Kira. He and Kira didn't talk much, but one of his friends started dating her roommate, and so they got to know one another. Over Spring Break, when he went to Washington, D.C. for a conference, he and Kira sent text messages to one another all the time. When he returned to campus, they started hanging out. At first they didn't hang out very much, but then they got to know one another and realized how special the other person was. Every night they would go to Newport on the Levee in Kentucky and stare at the lively city. They would smoke and drink coffee, they would laugh and tell stories, contemplate life, and express their dreams. One evening on the Purple People Bridge, a walking bridge jutting out from Newport over to Riverfront across the river, he and Kira cuddled. They went to Eden Park to watch the stars, and there they kissed for the first time. These memories hurt him. He reads the journal entry the night of their first kiss:

I can't quit smiling. I'm beaming ear-to-ear.
I feel like the luckiest boy in the world.
I've never felt like this before.
All I want to do is be with her.

Tears stream down his face. He chokes up.

Why are you doing this to yourself?

If I forget her, I forget everything.

You're killing yourself.

I love her. I love her, and I will always love her.

He has written again in his journal:

MARCH 31, 2007

I have been spending much time with Kira. Ever since the beginning of February, when she invited me to go sledding with her and some friends, this girl and I have been hanging out nearly nonstop. I didn't plan on falling for her. It just sort of happened. Both of us fell for one another, but both of us were afraid to tell the other person. A few nights ago we went to the Eden Park amphitheater, and lying out on a blanket under the stars, I asked her, "I wonder why both of us are afraid to admit what's going on between us?" She said, "I don't know." The next day, she became my girlfriend. *Kira*. A wonderful name for a wonderful girl! I have been much happier as of late because, I believe, she is in my life. She's funny, passionate, sensitive, has a wonderful personality, and I enjoy hanging out with her and spending time with her. She is adorable! Her eyes just suck me right in.

On April 9, 2007, he wrote in his journal:

She takes my breath away. She is my own precious little treasure, which I would sell all my possessions to attain. Every moment spent with her is fantastic, and when I don't see her—even for just a day or two—it feels like an eternity. I can't believe that I didn't see how amazing she was before we met. Just peering into those wild blue and dove-like eyes takes my breath away; holding her hand as we drive down the interstate is mesmerizing; holding her close and smelling the sweet shampoo scent of her hair is breathtaking. Sitting in the park, walking around Newport, and everything else we do holds a sacred place within me. I look forward to classes just because she is in them. Wow. Seriously, this girl, one word: "Wow."

He pours more Italian Spumante into the martini glass and lights another cigarette. He grabs the journal, quietly folds it up, and sets it down on the hardwood floor beside his bed. He crawls deeper into the corner, sitting atop his bed, and sips the Spumante as he smokes the BASIC FULL FLAVOR. He closes his eyes. *Why do you read those journals? It just makes you hurt more.* He downs the alcohol and begins setting his glass aside—only one drink a night—but instead he puts the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, grabs the warm SPUMANTE bottle, and pours himself another glass. *Another glass won't hurt. Just another glass.*

The Spumante is drained. He leans back, smoking. He feels lightheaded, happy, and he even laughs. He tosses the bottle against the wall; it cracks on impact, falls, shattered. Trickles of alcohol dribble out beside the Lee-Enfield stacked beside the shotgun. He laughs cheerily to himself and leans back on the bed, smoking. His heart flutters, but Kira is out of his mind, and that's all that matters. He lies back and stares at the ceiling, watching the shadows flirt about the room in the flickering light of the Petromax. "Oh, Kira, I loved you. You know that, right? Oh, how I loved you! I'm sorry I had to kill you. I didn't want to do it." He breaks into laughter, leans onto his side, laughs harder. He can hear them outside, scrounging around, snarling. He doesn't care. He snubs the cigarette out on the wall, stumbles from the bed, grabs a bottle of EverClear, screws off the lid.

He staggers to the boarded up window, grabs the blanket, and rips it away. He peels back a piece of plywood; a splinter is lodged in his finger, but he doesn't feel it. He takes a wild drink, bottom's-up!, and downs several gulps. He leans out the window, screams, "Fuckers! Fuckers!" There

are none in the backyard. The moon is full and shining down on the quiet city. He can hear their howls. "Fuckers!" he shouts again. "Fuckers!"

A head pops up beside the fence, twin eyes staring at him, glinting in the moonlight.

"Hah! Fucker! Fucker!" He laughs hysterically. "Fucker! Fucker!" The word is filled with poisonous laughter. The eye stares at him. "Fucker!" he hollers again. Twin hands caress the top of the fence, and in the next moment the creature is pulling itself up.

The man watches, eyes suddenly wide. "No!" he shouts. "No! Get back! Get back!"

The figure topples over the fence, into the dry grass. It stumbles to its feet, stares right at him.

The man ducks away from the window. The EverClear bottle slides from his hand, lands dully on the floor. Alcohol pours out. He takes several deep breaths, shaking. He peers back out the window. He doesn't see the figure. It must have gone back over—No. There it is. In the shadows in the far corner.

By Kira's grave.

The figure hunkers down, hands brushing over the headstone.

Kira's name is engraved onto the tombstone. It took him a while to do it.

The figure looks up at the man.

"Stop it!" he shouts. His voice is painfully loud. "Get the fuck outta here!"

The figure watches him, inquisitive.

Then it looks away, down at the fresh soil of Kira's grave.

And it starts to dig.

He can only watch, heart frozen in fear: it feels as if his chest is encased in ice.

Two more have joined the lone creature.

Their hands spray dirt to the side as they dig madly and cruelly.

Like animals.

Their hands flash in the moonlight, and they growl and hiss at one another.

Monsters.

The man stumbles away from the window, runs a hand through his greasy, matted hair. *Kira. Kira. Kira.* He rushes over to the far wall, nearly tripping over the corner of the bed. He snatches the Lee-Enfield British rifle and rushes over to the window. He numbly makes sure the magazine is loaded and thrusts the long barrel out the window. Tears cascade down his face as he wraps his finger around the trigger. The gun-blast echoes in the small room, bounces off the hills. His ears burn. The bullet tears into the ramshackle wooden fence, spitting splinters. He curses and fires again. The gun swings madly, and the bullet disappears towards the city. Another curse. *You drunken ass.* He tries to aim, but he can barely keep his balance. The next shot ripples past the ear of one of the dark-walkers. The creature's ear perks up, it looks warily at the man in the upper window, then resumes digging. The others show no reaction. The man screams insults and fires several more rounds. None reach their target. He loads another magazine and fires again. The next bullet slaps into the shoulder of one of the newcomers. A spurt of blood drapes over Kira's disturbed grave. The creature snarls and stands, begins walking towards the house, blood flowing from the wound.

A maniacal smile crosses the man's lips. "Come here, you fucker!" he curses under his breath.

Another bullet, this one into the creature's knee.

The creature stumbles, falls. It lies in the grass for a moment, tries to stand, collapses.

The man aims again.

It tries to stand, but the next bullet smashes into the back of its skull.

The creature lies still, blood gushing in a small fountain from its fractured head.

The others give no attention to their fallen comrade. Piles of dirt are hastily thrown to the side. They dig like wild animals, hyenas, jackals. One of them laughs hysterically, reaches into the shadow-shrouded grave. The other moves in front of the man's view. The man begins reloading another magazine.

The creatures are tumbling over one another.

The one blocking his view moves to the side.

They are dragging out her body.

He sees the tattered sheets in which he had wrapped her. An arm falls limp, stained with dirt and rot. The man fires. The bullet arcs through the air, doesn't connect. He fires again. The creatures are dragging her body towards the fence.

You're going to lose her.

You drunken fool, you're going to lose her.

And it's all your fault.

He is wildly shaking as another round cuts through the air.

This bullet hits one of the creatures in the chest. The creature lets out a howl of pain and drops the body. The other looks back at the window, shrieks. The wounded creature bends down, grabs Kira's arm, pulls. There is a ripping, sucking sound, and the figure stumbles backwards, trips over one of the oak's old roots, and falls onto its back, Kira's arm in his hand. He scrambles to his feet. The man shouts insanities and fires again. The bullet splashes at the figure's feet. The other figure grabs Kira's head and twists. The head pops off.

The man turns around, dizzy, lightheaded. He bends over and vomits.

Kira. Kira. Kira.

He turns back to the window, sticks the rifle out between two plywood boards.

The figure with the head is already scaling the fence.

The other is right behind it.

Moonlight falls upon the arm in its hands. Something glints.

The man feels a horror like nothing else. *The engagement ring.*

He rushes out of the room, leaving the rifle, and runs down the hall. The ladder is lying on the floor. He doesn't think as he throws himself off the top of the destroyed staircase. He falls and lands hard amidst broken boards and torn carpet. His ankles scream. He rolls onto his side, coughs. The Mosin-Nagant is beside the back door. He picks it up without checking to see if the magazine is registered. He pulls back the iron bar and wrenches open the door, rushing out onto the patio. He is standing in the backyard. Kira's remains are tattered and torn, lying abandoned. The figure with the arm is beginning to climb the fence. It looks back, sees the man, begins to climb faster, Kira's arm in hand. The man shouts, raises the gun, pulls the trigger.

Click.

He looks down at the gun, mortified. It isn't loaded.

The figure is almost over the fence.

The man swears, tosses the gun aside, and runs towards the fence.

The creature's legs are dangling when he reaches the fence. He reaches up, grabs at one of the feet. The figure kicks madly, and its dirt-smothered foot connects with the man's jaw. He tumbles back and falls onto the ground, the wind knocked out of him. He coughs, staring up at the clear sky, the moon lazily throbbing with reflected sunlight.

He scrambles to his feet and leaps up, grabbing the fence with his hands. He pulls himself up. His eyes pass the top of the fence, and he sees fifteen or twenty of the creatures mingling about in the ruins of the burnt-down house. Several are fighting over Kira's remains. He watches as her arm is snatched back-and-forth between the monsters, and he loses it as he sees one of the animals bite into what had once been Kira's cheek. A bloated piece of flesh hangs from the woman's mouth.

The man loses his grip and falls, landing hard.

He turns onto his side and gets to his feet, running for the gate fence.

Don't do this, his mind screams. *Don't do this*.

He refuses to listen.

Don't do this.

He hears something behind him.

He spins around. One of the creatures has toppled over the fence. Its eyes dart between the man and Kira's desecrated corpse.

It lets out a scream and charges, running after the man.

The man turns and sprints towards the back door. He throws himself inside, slips on the linoleum in the kitchen, falls. He rolls onto his back just as the creature hurls itself in at him. He rolls away, into the counter. The figure slides over the tiled floor and slams into the lifeless refrigerator. It topples to the ground. The man wrenches open a drawer filled with cutting knives, grabs one, and throws himself onto the creature. The creature bites and snaps in rage, but the man's rage is greater: he screams obscenities over and over, the house shaking with his cries, as he drives the blade of the knife into the creature's face. Blood pours over his hand, and he wails and pants even after the assailant has gone limp.

He then staggers back, the figure's face a mask of torn flesh and blood.

He leans against the refrigerator, heart pounding, head searing, lungs heaving.

The last thing he remembers is crawling towards the door, sliding it shut, and bringing down the iron bar just as more infected clamber over the fence and begin to fight over Kira's remains.

V

The city of Cincinnati was spread out before them. The trees ripe with spring leaves swayed back and forth in the calm breeze, and the moon smiled upon their infatuation. He held her in his arms as they sat upon the blanket. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he stroked her hair. She turned, looked at him, eyes seductive and yet reassuring: "*You are safe with me*," she seemed to say. They began to kiss. Quietly. Gently. And then more passionate. Their lips danced and entwined. He sucked on her lip, then moved to her neck, wonderfully nibbling. She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tight.

She pulled away, pressed her forehead against his, their noses touching, her eyes sparkling. "No one's around. We can do it, if you want."

Her offer, so tempting. "I don't want you to think that I'm like the other boys."

"I don't think that," she said. "You've already proven you're not like all the others."

They continued to kiss.

She begged him. "Please? I can show you so much."

His mouth went dry at the idea. "I want to... I really do... But I don't want you to hurt."

She ran a finger across her cheek. "I know you're not like the others."

He grinned, kissed her.

She began to rub his groin. He could feel her hand through his pants. The pleasure...

He could not control himself. The desire... Too great. He rubbed her slender legs. She squeezed her legs tight around his hand. It felt so warm between her legs. The rough jean fabric sent shivers through his hand.

She lied down, and he crawled up beside her, kissing her sweetly on the lips. His fingers danced around the belt of her pants, and he tried to reach down inside, but it was too tight. She smiled and kissed him back, flattening herself out. He could get his fingers through the loose belt of her pants. He felt the strap of her panties, and he slid his fingers underneath. He felt the hair along the crest of her vagina, soft and warm. His fingers continued to crawl, and he felt the crevice. He reached inside, probing, and then he found it: his finger slid in, and he felt the warmth and the wetness. He slid his fingers in and out, felt her clit, tickled it with his finger. She gasped, and they continued to kiss.

Her back arched, and she groaned in pleasure. He felt his fingers inside her, and his heart sprinted a marathon behind his ribs. She pressed her face into his cheek, her hair dappling around her face. Her chest quivered with each breath and with each heartbeat.

"God," she breathed. "I love you so much..."

He kissed her. "I love you, too."

She took several deep breaths of air. He laid down next to her on the blanket.

The stars twinkled above Cincinnati.

She was not satisfied. "Do you want to?" she asked, kissing his neck.

He stroked her bare stomach under her punk t-shirt. Her skin was so smooth, so delicate, and he felt her bellybutton rising and falling with her every succulent breath. "We can't..." He wanted to. He wanted it more than anything. But he couldn't... He couldn't...

"Please," she pleaded. "I can make you feel so good..."

He was breaking. He thought, *Why must she pressure me so much?*

Her words were so tempting. "Please..."

His insides churned. He wanted it so badly. "Maybe we can just lie naked together..."

"Okay," she said, sounding a little defeated.

They moved off into the bushes, laying out the blanket.

He sat down and pulled off his shirt. He began working on his pants and she began to undress. He found himself absolutely stunned at her beauty. She pulled off her shirt, revealing slender bare arms, her wonderful neck, the stomach that spoke volumes of temptations. Her breasts unfolded as she unsnapped the bra and laid it aside. She lied down next to him as he shimmied off his pants, revealing his bare legs. He began pulling down his boxers, finding his penis hard, and she undid the latch on her belt and kicked off her jeans. He could see the rise of her vagina underneath her panties as she pulled those off, sliding them from her legs.

She crawled up next to him, and they lied naked together.

He held her close, feeling her warmth, her breath on his neck.

She wrapped her leg around him. Her breasts pushed into his chest.

Their bodies brushed against one another.

She bit her lip. "So... Now what?"

They began to kiss once more, bodies falling into the rhythm.

She saddled him.

He laid back, his hands upon her bare waist.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He looked deep into her eyes. Their souls connected. "I'm ready if you are."

She positioned herself, taking his penis into her hands, and slid it inside her.

The warmth and wetness sent pleasure streaking through him.

The greatest thing he had ever felt.

Her lips trembled as she began to move atop of him.

Her breasts swayed back and forth as she rode him. She pressed her hands against his chest, squeezed, head back, spine arching. She whispers his name. He thrusts as well. His one hand strokes her bare arm, and with his other hand he strokes her cheek with his finger.

She moved faster. She hung her head down, staring at him, lips hung open, eyes wide in pleasure. She groaned and squeezed her legs tight against his waist. PLEASURE screamed in his ear. She let out a cry and lied down on top of him, breathing hard.

"Did you go?" he asked.

She nodded, continued to move.

He wrapped her arm around her back, felt her spine.

Her stomach lied on his, and her breasts fell upon his chest.

She pressed her face against his, and he could feel her sharp breathing.

Their heartbeats whispered in synch.

He was now on top of her. She ran her fingers across the side of his stomach. Her breasts jiggled with each thrust. He would slide out slowly, then thrust in hard, and each time her back would arch, she would let out a faint cry, her eyelids would flutter. He lied down on top of her, propped up by his elbows, his fingers running through her chocolate hair. He kissed her lips tenderly, and their lips collided as she opened her mouth with yet another orgasm, thrusting her vagina harder and harder against him.

They experienced orgasm at the same time. He let out a cry and lied down on top of her, feeling her sweat, tasting her sweat as he kissed between her breasts—the most delicious taste. He lied his head upon her breasts and took several deep lungfulls of air. She stroked the curves of his back and kissed her forehead. He felt dizzy, lightheaded, void of all energy. He just wanted to lie there, to fall asleep naked in her magnificent arms.

"Did you like it?" she whispered in his ear.

He brought his head up, smiled at her. "Yes. Did you?"

"Yeah," she said, biting her lip once more. "I did."

They kissed once more.

She rubbed her fingers along his upper arm. "You're amazing. Have I told you that before?"

"You're so beautiful. It doesn't matter how many times I say it. It never changes."

They lied naked under the stars, wrapped in one another's gentle embrace.

She leaned onto her side, stroked his stomach. "Do you think we'll be together forever?"

He ran his fingers through her hair. "I hope so. Or what the hell is this life all about?"

VI

Daylight has returned.

He awakes, groggy, and the memory in his dream fades.

He is lying on the kitchen floor, the tile cold, body unyielding.

He stares at the corpse beside the refrigerator, lying in a puddle of blood.

Ravens call to one another outside.

He slowly gets to his feet, groans, leans over, vomits. Bile drips from his mouth.

At first he doesn't remember, and then it comes to him:

Kira.

He staggers to his feet and goes over to the door. He grabs the iron bar and slides it back. He pushes the door open and staggers outside. The day is clear, the sun blinding, and he winces; the brilliant sunlight sends shards of pain rippling through his head. He leans against the side of the house, takes several deep breaths. *You fucking fool. You FUCKING fool.* He looks back up to see what remains of Kira's body: a few tattered clothes, some pieces of flesh, her torn blue dress. He walks across the yard, bends down, picks up the empty Mosin-Nagant. There are several muddled footprints throughout the yard, and he sees that mud has scraped over the fence where they climbed away from the desecrated grave. The dark-walker whom he had killed last night is gone; bloody smears run through the dry blades of grass, disappearing over the fence: the others had become cannibals, feasting on their own demonized kind.

He sits down atop the stump that had once been the oak tree.

He cradles the rifle and stares at the grave.

"I'm so sorry..." he murmurs. Tears begin to fall. "I'm so sorry..."

Vengeance.

It is all he can think about.

He loads all of the weapons and begins to contemplate how he can seek justice. He knows he cannot run out blindly at night and start shooting. They will only tear him limb-from-limb. Sacrificing himself foolishly in the memory of Kira is no vengeance at all. And he wants the creatures to experience the pain. They can feel pain—he remembers shooting one of them last night, hearing their pain-stricken howl. And they can die. *Kira died when you stabbed her.* He pushes that thought out of his mind. But it will be night soon, for the day has nearly passed—he did not wake up till nearly 3:00 in the afternoon. And he still has to dispose of that body. He wants to find one, make them suffer, but they only come out at night, and—And that is when the idea strikes him.

He cradles the rifle, a whimsical, wild smile crossing his face.

He drags into the backyard the corpse from the kitchen. It is a man, perhaps thirty or forty years old, with browning hair and numerous cuts and scrapes. The clothes are tattered, and he is wearing only one shoe. The man carefully places Kira's remains back in the grave—a difficult task—and buries her once more, shoveling the dirt back into the pit. He puts the body in the opposite corner of the yard, next to the fallen oak tree, the limbs splayed out. He works quickly, using rope and a pulley system for his garage, and when nightfall comes, he sneaks back inside, holds the fully-loaded Mosin-Nagant, and he waits.

The scent of the dead dark-walker attracts them once more. At first come the howls, as the sun begins to make its ritualistic descent. *Their waking cries*, the man thinks grimly to himself, the rifle bringing

an odd comfort. The howls spread throughout the house, louder than ever, and he sees a framed picture of Kira sitting on a crudely-built shelf. It only serves to harden his resolution. As the sun finally sets and darkness wraps its cloak upon the city, the creatures emerge from their hiding-places—none of which the man has ever found, though he has never sought to find them—and begin searching. They clamber over the fence and approach the body, tugging. One of them bends over and grabs the corpse's head. The man holds his breath. A cold sweat pops over his brow. The creature pulls, and in the next moment comes the snap of crackling wood, whipping ropes, and the noose tightens around the figure's ankle, ripping her into the limbs of the fallen tree. The creature lets out a shriek as one of the sharp limbs pierces its abdomen, thrusting out the opposite end. Blood trickles down. The man thrusts the gun out the open window and begins firing. He is sober now, and the bullets find their targets. The dark-walkers rush for the fence, but a few drop dead, brains imploded. A moment later the yard is clear. The man sits in the window and waits, watching, as the impaled dark-walker howls for help. But help never comes.

He looks at his watch. Daybreak is nearly upon the city. In the east, the sun is beginning to rise, casting ribbons of light against the sulking skyscrapers. He leaves the upper room and lowers the ladder, climbing down to the bottom floor. He swings the shoulder strap of the rifle around him and unlocks the bolt on the back door. He steps into the yard. It is deathly quiet. The dark-walkers are returning to their hives. His feet crunch in the dry grass as he approaches the creature pinned against the fallen oak. He unshoulders the rifle and aims it at the creature. He looks out over the city, over the fence, and can feel the bitter warmth of the mid-September morning. He sets the rifle down at his feet, pulls out the pack of BASIC FULL FLAVOR, and withdraws his upside-down Lucky. He lights it with a cheap lighter from a gas station on Glenway Avenue and lets the smoke fill his lungs. The creature lets out a shriek. The man exhales, nods, smiles. "Top o' the morning, to ya," he says in an Irish accent. Ravens circle above, squawking and cawing, big and black and gruesome, eyeing the bleeding figure. "They're here for you, you know," the man says. The creature is panicky, eyes wild. He picks up the rifle in one hand and aims the gun at the creature; he holds the cigarette in the other hand and sits down on the stump. Several bodies lie littered across the yard. Sunlight begins to push away the shadows. The creature begins to scream and shout, eyes wide with... Yes, the man pinpoints it: *fear*.

The twisted and gnarled limbs of the oak tree have cast the figure in shadow, but now the sunlight begins to penetrate, and cascading rays fall upon the figure. The man is drawn by curiosity, and he stands, and tossing the cigarette, approaches and watches. The creature is a girl, about nineteen or twenty years old, wearing nothing but pajama bottoms and a bra. The sunlight falls upon the figure's hand, and it snatches it from the light, howling in excruciating agony. The man leans forward, staring at the hand, seeing blotched swelling. The sunlight moves across the figure's face, and it wrenches its head back and screams: the skin swells, blotched and red, and a yellow puss begins to stream from the eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. The figure shakes its head back and forth, eyes clenched shut, squirming against the limb thrust through its abdomen. The man smiles, enjoying this, seeing its pain, reveling in it. He doesn't feel the least bit heartless. *These bastards deserve it. They deserve to suffer.* The skin bubbles and boils. A bubble pops, and warm liquid squirts over the man's cheek. He rubs it away and disgust and hatred. The figure's eyes open, and the eyes convey the greatest sense of sadness and hopelessness that the man has ever seen. Suddenly a switch turns on in his mind, and he sees this girl for a moment, and the vision strikes him with an agonizing guilt and shame:

The digital clock mounted on the wall ticked back and forth. Her legs dangled from the rolling desk chair, and she hung her head back, blond hair falling down over her shoulders. She stared at the ceiling, slowly kicking her legs, moving the chair in concentric circles. Her pupils widened and narrowed as she studied the evolving shapes in the ceiling plaster. She eyed the digital clock, cursed, felt her stomach rumble. She leaned forward in the chair and positioned herself by the desk. The geometry book lied wide open. She picked up the wooden pencil and let it dance between her fingers. Geometric shapes leapt out, but she could only think of her stomach. She pushed away from the desk and scooted the chair across the room to her refrigerator. Atop the compact fridge sat a large bucket filled with peanut butter pretzels. She twisted open the plastic lid and popped a few in her mouth. She decided to open the blinds and gaze out the window as she ate her pretzels. Several students ran about in the courtyard below, between the trees, throwing a Frisbee. She opened the window and felt the warm spring breeze crawling across her arms. She smiled to herself and screwed the cap back onto the pretzel jug, stood from her chair, and waltzed out the door. A moment later she appeared beneath the window, running to her friends, intercepting the Frisbee. The geometry homework lied open on her desk.

He finds a tear dripping down his cheek.

Don't cry for her. Don't cry for these fuckers.

He raises the rifle. "I'm sorry," he says, choking on his own words. "I'm sorry..."

She lets out another scream. More bubbles pop over her face.

The gunshot echoes throughout the hills.

Her head hangs low, blood dribbling from her forehead.

Her face continues to sputter.

The man just stares at her. "I'm sorry," he says again, and he returns inside. He shuts the door and sits down on the sofa in the living room. The blood from the earlier corpse still remains. He stares at that puddle of blood, then he hangs his head in his hands and tries to cry. But he can't. So he gets up, grabs a towel, and begins to wipe the blood from off the floor.

VII

It is the third week of September.

The leaves on the trees have nearly fallen. Autumn has come early.

He continues to live his life, hoping and praying to find others.

He drives to Riverfront every afternoon and waits, watching for the helicopter.

It never comes.

When night dawns, he barricades himself within his house, sits upon his bed, and smokes. He has stopped reading his journals. The memories hurt too much. He often dreams of Kira. Beautiful yet desperate dreams. He is dreaming that he and Ben are driving along the western hills of Cincinnati when a meteor streaks down from the sky and strikes the Ohio River. The southern end of the city is overcome with a tidal wave, and the multiple bridges collapse. In his dream, he knows Kira is downtown, so he jumps out of the car and runs towards the city. Half the city explodes in a great ball of flame from a mysterious underground gasoline main. The exhaust of the explosion hit him, and he was thrown back into the hills, somehow surviving the fall. He is getting to his feet when Kira

comes running after him. He is thankful she is alive, and they embrace, and he begins to feel something is wrong as her mouth closes over his neck and her teeth begin to pierce his skin; but his dream is shattered, and he awakes, and his wristwatch reads 4:12 AM and his body is shivering despite the countless blankets in which he is cocooned.

He lies in bed, closes his eyes, pulls the covers tighter, and—

His eyes open, ears attuning.

The house is silent. He doesn't even hear them outside, scratching at the windows like mice in the walls. *Something isn't right.* He cautiously swings his legs over the bed, tosses aside the covers, and stands. He is wearing pajama pants and an ELDER HIGH t-shirt. He grabs the BERETTA beside the bed and opens the door to the hallway. Deathly quiet. He walks over to the landing and peers down below. Shadows wrap around the walls. "Hello?" Nothing. No movement. He slides the ladder down and descends, holding the loaded BERETTA with the safety switched to OFF.

He hears it.

It is distant.

A shout. A scream.

He goes to the front door and stands motionless, trying to listen.

Now all he can hear is his beating heart, and—

There! He hears it again. Someone shouting. Not growling. Or snarling. But *shouting* in the *human* sense of the word. Not an animal. And the shouting is growing closer.

He pulls back a piece of plywood from the door and peers out.

The sky is heavy and dark. He cannot see anything.

Movement. Coming down the street to the north.

A single figure, sprinting, shouting.

He passes the house. The man watches, stunned.

And then thirty or forty dark-walkers run past, giving chase.

They don't chase their own kind.

For a moment he stands rooted in place, then realization hits him.

He sprints down the hallway to the door leading to the garage, throws back the iron bar, opens the door, runs out to the Escort. The garage door is down. He grabs the rope of the pulley-and-lever system he has concocted and yanks. The garage door groans with a sickeningly loud throb and begins to open. He pulls it harder and harder till it is nearly completely raised. He grabs his keys sitting on the useless washing machine and opens the door. He jumps inside, thrusts the key in the ignition, turns the engine. The engine cranks to life, obnoxiously loud. He doesn't care. He throws the car in REVERSE and stamps on the gas.

The Escort lurches out of the garage, out into the street. He hits the brake and turns the wheel so that he is pointing forward. He throws on his brights, illuminating the backs of the fleeting dark-walkers down the street. They turn and stare at him, mesmerized, as he puts the car in DRIVE. But they don't run. He grimaces, grips the wheel in both hands, and slams the pedal to the floor. The car shrieks as the tires burn over the asphalt. The Escort picks up speed. The creatures begin racing after him. He presses himself into the back of his seat and braces for impact. The Escort cuts a swathe through the creatures; several tumble over the hood of the car, denting the metal. An elderly woman slams into the windshield, and it bursts into a webbed masterpiece; her body rolls over the top and disappears off to the side. He swings around the pistol and fires several shots into the far side of the windshield. The glass shatters, the weak glass splintering, and shards fall into his lap. The cold night air rushes through him. He can see the solitary running figure now.

He pulls up alongside. "Get in!" he shouts.

The young man just stares at him, black hair rustling in the wind.

"Get the fuck in the car!" the man screams.

The boy reaches for the handle. Rattles it. "It's locked!" A high-pitched, frantic voice.

The man hits the UNLOCK button. The boy opens the door.

A figure emerges behind the boy, reaching out. The man raises the handgun, fires.

The back of the creature's head explodes outwards, and it fumbles against the side of the car, topples over.

"Get in," the man growls.

The boy leaps inside and slams the door, shaking. "You nearly shot me. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," the man says, hitting the gas.

The Escort drives through the intersection, avoiding the wrecked patrol car. He pulls onto Glenway Avenue and begins driving up the hill.

The boy takes several deep breaths. "Thank God... They almost had me."

"I know. I saw."

"Thanks."

"You already thanked me."

The hill continues to rise. They pass a bible college on the right, situated on the hill, and then he pulls onto Grand Avenue. *This is where Nate helped me maneuver the truck in the snow*, the man thinks to himself.

They pass run-down houses on either side. Parked cars.

No dark-walkers.

"Where the hell are they?" the man mutters to himself.

"I think I woke up the entire town," the boy says.

He turns right onto Lehman Avenue. "What the hell were you doing outside?"

"They overran my hideout," he says. "I had no choice but to run."

"There were about thirty or forty of them. I ran some of them down."

"They travel in packs. They're hardly ever alone."

Packs? He had never really observed them. "Like pack-hunters," he says grimly.

"They're more like birds. They flock together."

"Birds of a feather will flock together."

"What?"

"Nothing."

He nears the bottom of the hill of Lehman Avenue. A small car is smashed into the telephone pole, and the body of a dark-walker is hanging half-in and half-out of the driver's door window, which is shattered. The man casts it a wary glance as he reaches State Avenue and turns right.

The boy asks, "Where are we going?"

"My house. We'll have to move fast."

The high-beams illuminate several dark-walkers down the street. They see them and start running after the car. The man yanks the car over the curb, through his front lawn, and into the garage. He hits the brakes, but the front end of the car slams into the wall. There is the shriek of twisting metal and the air bags pop. The man opens his door and squeezes himself out. The boy gets out and runs around the car as the man opens the door to the house. "After you," he says. The boy enters. The man grabs another rope and yanks. The garage door creaks and falls just as several dark-walkers appear on the driveway. The man smiles to himself and hops inside. He shuts the door and slides down the bolt.

Chapter Five

The Laughter of the Pleiades

"As men, we are all equal in the presence of death."
- Publilius Syrus (ca 100 BC)

I

The man stares at the boy, who now stands beside the sofa in the living room. The boy stares right back. The man has dreamed of the day when he would run into another survivor. The hope that would flare within him, the excitement, the exhilaration, the companionship and conversations. But now all they can do is stare at one another. Both find themselves at a loss for words. The man sees something in the boy: *fear*. He wonders why the boy would experience fear, and he realizes that the boy has no idea who he is.

The man asks, "Do you smoke?" and the boy just shakes his head *No*. The man nods, bites his lip, says, "You can sit down if you want," and he nods to the sofa; "I'm sorry it's stained. I haven't really had much energy to clean it. It stinks of alcohol, too."

The boy sits down on the sofa, the worn cushions sagging under his weight. The man enters the kitchen and grabs a pack of GT1 cigarettes. He pulls a cigarette from the case, picks up the blue plastic lighter, and lights the cigarette. The cherry burns bright for a moment as he takes the first hit. He leans against the kitchen counter and looks at the boy, slowly smoking. He guesses the boy is around twenty or twenty-one years old. Yet his youthful appearance is scarred: a badly-healed gash runs along the top of his forehead, and there are no stitches, which tells the man that the boy received the gash sometime after the plague struck. The boy's eye is bruised, a purplish-blue hint. The man half-expects the boy's hair to be turning gray. The man sees now that there is blood on the boy's hands, and some in his hair, and along his chin. It is fresh. The man won't ask any questions, not yet. He takes another hit and says, "It's been a month since I've talked to anyone."

"I know," is all the boy can say. He looks down at the blood on his hands.

"Do you want to wash your hands?"

The boy looks up at him. "If that's okay."

"There's a basin in the bathroom. It's old water, I haven't drained it for a few days."

"Okay," the boy says. The man points to the bathroom; the boy returns, hands dried with a towel.

The man takes another drag off the cigarette. "I don't like these."

"What?"

"These cigarettes. They're cheap. But I've used up all the other cigarettes from the nearby stores."

"You smoke a lot."

"A lot more over the last month."

The boy looks to one of the boarded-up windows: "Can they get in?"

"They never have," the man says. "Are you sure you don't want a cigarette?"

"You said they taste awful."

"But they're still cigarettes. And if you've never smoked, they all taste the same."

"I didn't say I never smoked. I just don't want a cigarette."

"So you *do* smoke?"

"I used to smoke. I quit."

"And you haven't started up again?"

"I haven't felt the need."

"God, you're a walking miracle."

They have ascended the ladder and entered the study-turned-bedroom. The man has raised the ladder, and now they sit next to one another on the bed. The man pours himself a glass of wine, and he pours another and hands it to the boy. They can hear them outside, scratching and moaning. They are surrounding the house. They'll be gone in the morning. The man says, "Please tell me you drink. Everyone has to have a vice of some sort."

"I don't like wine."

"This is Italian wine. Imported. It's good." He hands the boy the drink.

The boy takes a sip, says, "It's not bad. It's a little strong."

"Strong is good. Besides, we need strong wine. We're celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"We're not alone anymore."

The boy holds his glass in his hands and doesn't drink anymore.

"What's your name?" the man asks.

"Mark," the boy says.

"Okay, Mark. What the hell were you doing out after dark?"

He doesn't answer for a moment. "My apartment was overrun."

"Where was your apartment?"

"About two miles away."

"You ran from them for two miles?"

"No. I wrecked my car down Lehman. Hit a telephone pole."

"That hill's a bitch. I wrecked my Jeep there several years ago."

"So. What's your name?"

He tells him his name. "It's a simple name."

"So is Mark."

"Yeah." He takes another drink, pours himself another glass. "Want some more?"

"No, thanks."

The boy asks, "Have you been in this house the whole time?"

"Yes. When all of this happened, I was over the Atlantic. I was a pilot back in the day. I was flying a commercial airliner to the States from Germany. This all began somewhere in Russia, and it quickly spread west. Why it didn't spread east, I don't know. Maybe because of the winds. That's why I think this is some kind of plague. Like a virus or something. Because when I was in the plane, we kept hearing about it. We heard about it spreading throughout Asia, and then it hit Europe, and then it hit our plane when the United States was still okay." His voice drones out. "I think about it a lot. What happened on that plane. I was the only one who lived. Everyone else died."

The boy doesn't say anything for a moment. "I'll have another glass of wine."

The man is on his third glass of wine. "There were around 330,000 people in Cincinnati when the plague hit. But not everyone died. I survived. And so did you. Why? I don't know. But we did. And I know there are other survivors, too. I saw a helicopter several weeks ago, flying over northern Kentucky, and then it flew over the city. I've been holding onto hope that I would find someone else, and look at us. We're sitting right next to each other. Now, I figure that if there is one survivor for every one thousand people in Cincinnati, then there are more than three hundred survivors in the city. I've been driving around the city, going downtown, into the surrounding hills, even into northern Kentucky, looking for more people like me. But I haven't found them. And I ask, 'Why?' But I'll tell you why I think I can't find anyone. They're staying indoors, even during the day. Or they hear me coming in my car and decide not to come out; maybe they're afraid. Or they've been killed by the dark-walkers—that's what I call them, 'Dark-Walkers', because they only come out at night. But I think that most people have simply killed themselves." He pours himself another glass. "I tried to kill myself. But I failed. I can't imagine anyone *not* being suicidal. When everything we love, when everything we've held onto, when everything we've believed in is stripped away from us in the twinkling of an eye... How are we supposed to react? I haven't been optimistic. I've been skeptical of ever finding someone, but I haven't taken my own life. I've wanted to. I won't lie about that. But I haven't done it. Maybe because I'm stubborn. Or I'm a coward, afraid of death. Or maybe it's because I knew, deep down, that my solitude would not last forever. That I would find others. That I wouldn't be alone for all eternity." He raises his glass. "And that is what I toast to."

The boy sets his glass of wine on the floor and stands, refusing the toast. "I need to get some sleep."

The man is frozen, holding his glass in the air, and then he lowers it. "I don't have another bed."

The boy just stares at him.

"I didn't mean it like that," the man says. "You can have my bed. I can sleep downstairs."

"I'll sleep on the floor, if that's okay."

"All right. Let me get you some blankets."

There are only two rooms on the upper level: the den and the bedroom, and the bedroom the man has blocked off. The room where he and Kira had held one another in romantic embrace has become sacred to him; sacred, and fearful. He cannot bear to enter, for he knows that in that room he spent his last night with Kira, and in that room he took her life. Now the door is barricaded from the front with a small coffee table covered with worn books of classical history, books he studied and adored during High School. As the man drags blankets and pillows into the hallway where the boy will sleep, the boy stares at the barricaded door.

"What's in there?" Mark asks.

"Nothing," the man says quickly. "Here's your bed."

Mark turns. "Thank you."

"It won't be too comfortable. In the morning we can look for a mattress for you."

"This will do fine," Mark says.

"Okay."

As the man is returning to the den, Mark speaks up: "Wait."

The man pauses, turns. "What?"

"I appreciate what you've done. I'm sorry if I've been cold to you."

"It's okay," the man says. "It will be better in the morning."

"No, it won't."

The man bites his lip. "We're going to be okay. This place, my house, it's secure, and—"

"I watched as they tore her limb-from-limb," Mark says.

The man stops speaking. He just stares the boy.

The boy looks down at his feet, lips moving. "Mom and Dad died in a car accident a few years ago. My sister, she is eleven years younger than me, she was just nine years old at the time. I was going to school at U.C. Dad didn't have any life insurance, so we were left with nothing. None of our relatives would take us in. So I rented out an apartment and worked at FedEx. She stayed with me. I took her to school every morning. I helped her with her homework. I took her to counseling so she could deal with our parents' death. I couldn't afford to go. I had to be the Big Brother. I had to refuse to let my own sorrow get in the way. I had to be strong, resolute. It's been over four years since our parents died. My little sister's birthday was just last week. She turned thirteen. We ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the Montgomery Inn downtown. We dressed up really nice, and we lit candles, and we celebrated that she was a teenager. I got her a stuffed animal for her birthday. She absolutely loved it, even though she knew it didn't cost me anything. I just stole it from Target."

The man's mind flashes to the blood on the boy's hands.

The man finds himself unable to speak. He is flustered at the boy's candidness.

The boy continues, hands beginning to quiver, lips trembling with each syllable: "Early this evening, just as the sun set, they got into the apartment. I forgot to lock the door. I don't know how. But I was putting her to bed, and that's when I heard the door slam open. I ran out of the bedroom and down the hall, grabbing an iron baseball bat on the way. I didn't see anything. And then I heard..." He takes several deep breaths, then speaks, every word sluggish and forbearing, as if each utterance is an eternal struggle. "And then I heard her screaming. And crying. And I ran into the room. There were two of them. They had her by either arm, and they pulled at the same time. Her right arm, it just... It just ripped off. Like something you see in the movies. They twisted her arm, and they pulled, and I could hear her tendons snapping, I could hear her arm shearing off, I could hear it even over her screams. Blood went everywhere. More blood than I've seen in my entire life. I don't remember much of what happened after that. My mind just goes to being in the car, driving, with her in the seat beside me, screaming and crying, blood going everywhere. Me knowing she would die. And I was covered with blood. Absolutely *covered* in blood. I imagine I clubbed those sick people to death, and then we left the apartment. Maybe more we're coming in. I don't know. But all I know is that she died in the seat next to me, and I kept telling her to hang on, but I knew she would die. And when she died, everything that had kept me going, everything that had defined my life, disappeared. I looked over and saw her lying there, blood still soaking the seat, her face pallid and her eyes empty... And I couldn't tear my eyes from her, and that's when I crashed the car. I got out of the car and stripped off my clothes, because they were covered in her blood, and I changed. Right there, in the middle of the street, I changed my clothes. I knew they were coming, but I didn't care. I moved slowly, in shock, and then one of them came out of the woods beside the road, and grabbed me, and threw me into the side of the car." He points to his bruised eye. "And then I grabbed him by the neck, throttled him, and slammed his face into the glass window of the driver's door until the glass shattered, and his face was covered with blood. Something snapped within me; I suddenly felt vulnerable, and I... I forgot my sister... I forgot about what happened to her... And I just cared about *me*." He looks up at the man, tears in his eyes. "She was dead. I couldn't do anything else for her. I couldn't stay with her. I couldn't take her with me. There was nothing I could do. Nothing I could do. Nothing I could do..."

The man chokes over his own voice: "I know."

The boy draws a deep breath, steadies his nerves. "I started running. And then you found me."

The man doesn't say anything for a moment. "Your sister survived the plague."

"Yes."

They just stare at one another.

The man breaks the silence: "Maybe you should get some sleep."

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Yeah. Sure. Anything."

"Tomorrow... Can we bury her? Can we bury my sister?"

He sounds like a little child asking for a piece of candy.

His voice: so innocent and heartfelt.

It is something otherworldly.

The man nods. "Yes. We'll bury her."

The man knows, in his heart, that she will not be there when dawn arrives.

II

The flashing lights from the twin police cruisers dance over his features as he stands at the side of the road. He stands in the snow, feet freezing in the tattered sneakers. The rough leather jacket fails to keep out the icy cold, and his face feels entirely numb from the arctic winds. His fingers hang limp, gnarled and twisted, the knuckles pale white and his fingernails a tinged blue. His heart thuds lazily within his chest, and snowflakes burn his eyes as they fall from the sky. But he doesn't take his eyes off that which rests before him: the overturned six-passenger van. He moves forward slowly, and his eyes look into the open side door. Boxes that had been crammed into the back are now overturned, contents spilled out. Snow has drifted inside, covering everything. His eyes fall upon a stuffed animal lying on the arm of an overturned seat: a spotted Labrador puppy with a pink ribbon tied around its neck, half-buried in drifted snow. He kneels down and reaches inside, taking the stuffed animal by the foot, and he pulls it from inside the van. He brushes snow from the stuffed animal's belly. The lifeless marble eyes stare at him. *Molly*. He grips the stuffed animal tighter, and he sees his sister's face in his mind's eye: the cute little dimples, the strawberry blond hair, the innocence of her jokes, how she would write him letters telling him that he was a "stupid neerd" or a "jrk". She never did spell right. No one knows where she is. When the van overturned, she had been with it; but now she is gone. Some have speculated that, so overcome by terror, she fled into the woods: by now, her tracks would have been covered with the freshly-falling snow. The boy can't imagine why she would run. With the stuffed animal dangling from a clenched hand, he moves to the front of the van. The glass windshield is webbed but not broken, and he is thankful: he doesn't want to see his parents still strapped into their seats, heads hung low and blood dripping from their injuries. He just stares at the windshield and feels no emotion. He feels rotten for it. But he feels no emotion. No one knows why the van wrecked. No one knows what caused it to spin out of control and flip several times before coming to a rest on the side of the road. The snow has been falling, but the roads are clear; there is no ice. The boy doesn't have answers. He just keeps thinking about his little sister. And that's when he hears it. Something scratching. It isn't an overbearing noise; it can barely be heard over the howl of the wind through the trees. He stares at the webbed windshield, ears attuning, catching the scratching. And then he notices that the windshield begins to shake and quiver. He steps back, eyes wide, and with the sound of a thousand shards of glass shattering, the windshield falls apart, landing on the street, amidst slushy snow; the shards of glass glint like diamonds in the flashing lights from the police cruiser. The boy sees his mother, arms sweeping around. She is groaning. Hope fills within

him. He rushes forward, shouting for the paramedics, shouting that his mom is alive. He falls to the ground, on his knees, glass shards cutting through his jeans. He doesn't care. He reaches inside, calling out for his mom. He grabs her hand. It feels clammy and cold. As if there is no blood pulsing through her veins. He calls out to her—"Mom, can you hear me? Mom? Mom?"—but she doesn't reply. He holds her hand in his and reaches for her seatbelt. Her head begins to move, and she slowly raises her chin. The flashing red-and-blue lights illuminate the dark cuts across her face, the smear of blood running down the contours of her nose. And her eyes... Something inside her eyes... A lifelessness, a vacancy, an emptiness. A void. The boy stares at those eyes. "Mom?" Her mouth opens, revealing a mouth filled with blood-laced drool. A single shriek emanates, and the boy's body shudders as she grips his arm with her hand, as she squeezes so tight that her fingernails pierce his skin.

The boy's eyes open. For a moment he doesn't know where he is.

"You were shaking," the man says, standing over him. He holds a cigarette between his fingers.

"I'm sorry," Mark says, chest moving up and down in ragged breaths.

"I made some coffee. And there's canned peaches. It's downstairs."

He rubs his swollen eyes. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon," the man says.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You needed your sleep. Come and get some lunch."

The meal is quiet. Two cups of hot coffee sit on the table, steam rising from the mugs. The man hands Mark some packets of Half-&-Half, but he doesn't want any. He likes his coffee black. The man dishes out some peaches and slides the bowl across the table. At first Mark just picks at his food with his fork. The man gets up and goes over to the coffee maker that is plugged into the small battery-operated generator. He unplugs it, and when he looks back, he sees Mark hungrily eating. The man returns to the table and sits down, lights another cigarette. He dashes the ashes into a porcelain ashtray from Cancun, Mexico. He had found it in someone's house that morning while looking for a mattress for Mark (he hadn't found one suitable). He watches Mark hungrily eat, and he asks, tentatively, "Did you still want to go bury your sister?"

The boy looks up. Peach juice slides down the sides of his chin. "Yes."

The man nods. "Okay..." He extinguishes his cigarette, stands, walks to the back door, unbolts it. He slides it open and steps outside, into the cool September air. Several birds are flocking south, completely oblivious to the hell that drowns their world. The man steps back into the kitchen, shuts and locks the door, and sits down. "I went to the bottom of the hill," he says, speaking slowly. "To your car." Mark looks up, eyes wide. The man searches for the right words. "There's not... They didn't..." He knows there are no "right" words. "They didn't leave much behind," he concludes with a sigh. He looks back at Mark, his face an awful grimace. "I'm sorry..."

The boy drops his fork, forgets his peaches. "You went without me."

"You don't need to see that... You can't remember your sister like that..."

The boy suddenly thrusts his chair back as he leaps to his feet, doing so with such force that the wooden chair flips over and lands with its back on the floor. He turns and sprints down the hallway. The man curses under his breath and leaps from his chair. "Mark!" he shouts. But Mark isn't listening. The boy unlatches the front door as the man gives chase, but by the time the man reaches the front door, Mark is already running across the front lawn, dashing madly down State Avenue, towards the intersection with Lehman. The man leaves the door wide open as he runs after the panicked boy. But the man is short-of-breath, and he cannot keep running; his smoke-torn lungs rage

at him, and he leans against a parked car, taking savagely-painful gasps of air. He sees Mark's form dwindling, then disappearing onto Lehman Avenue. The man draws several deep breaths and begins to run again.

He can already hear Mark's screams.

The boy is sprawled against the totaled car's back left tire. His knees are pulled up to his chest, and his face is buried into his knees. He rocks back and forth, face hidden. The man's legs burn as he walks up the hill towards Mark. His breath feels like chalk in his lungs. He approaches slowly, says nothing, and then he hears Mark whimpering. The man doesn't know what to do. He stands in front of the totaled car, watching. He turns his eyes and turns around, looking out at the city. Little children used to play in these streets, even when it rained. They would be dirty, covered with mud, but smiles would be plastered over their faces, and their eyes would shine like radiant stars. No children play anymore. The man looks out at the eastern hills of Cincinnati, at the rising buildings of the University of Cincinnati on the closest hill across the railroad tracks and highway. He can see the hospital sitting ghostly quiet, nestled between twin hills. And the dome of the Cincinnati Children's Museum is cluttered with a black mass of ravens. He looks up at the sky. Dark clouds are gathering. The wind is picking up. He feels a raindrop. He turns back to Mark. The boy hasn't moved. The man doesn't say anything. The rain begins to fall harder, drumming on the crushed metal roof of the car. He curses under his breath and moves forward. He stands beside Mark, not knowing what to do.

"Get up," he says.

The boy doesn't move.

"You're going to get soaked. Get up."

The boy raises his head from between his legs. His eyes are bloodshot from the tears.

"Come on," the man says.

The boy bites his lip and stands. The man walks to the boy's right side, takes him gently by the arm. His clothes are beginning to become soaked, clinging to his skin. He escorts Mark away from the car, careful to make sure he does not see again what remains within. As they near the intersection, Mark turns back around. He begins to move towards the car, but the man's grip on his arm grows tighter, a vice. The boy cannot move. He turns around, gives the man a death-glare.

The man says, "It won't do you any good."

"She's my sister," the boy says. "She's all that I have left."

"I know," the man says. "I'll take care of her."

"Like hell you will."

The man just looks at him. "What will it change if you go over there?"

He opens his mouth to reply, but he quickly shuts it.

Thunder booms. "Can we go now?" the man asks.

Raindrops slide down the boy's face. He nods.

The thunder shakes the house, threatening to loose it from its moorings. Mark and the man sit across from each other at the table. The rain raps heavily on the boarded-up windows. Another pot of coffee has been made. The man snubs his cigarette in the foreign ashtray and reaches across the table, grabs the pot of coffee, and pours himself some more. HIGHLANDER GROG. He sets the coffeepot back in the middle of the table and takes another drink. The coffee is cold. He cups the mug in his hands, pretending it is warming his fingers. The cold September rains seem to breathe an aching chill into the house that nothing can refuse.

The boy nods towards the pack of GT1's on the table. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"Yeah," the man says, sliding the pack across the table.

The boy takes a cigarette from the box. "Can I have the lighter?"

The man tosses it to him.

The boy takes a hit, leans back in his chair. "It doesn't take away the pain..."

"...But it helps."

"Yeah," the boy says. "It helps."

The boy is lying sleeping on the sofa. The boy had lied down as the man proceeded to wash the coffee pot in a bucket of distilled water in the kitchen. As the boy had drifted off to sleep, he had said his sister's name over and over, and he had cried a little. The man grabs some blankets from the closet and pulls them over the boy, gently so as not to wake him. He listens to the rain hammering on the roof, and he believes it is lightening. He goes into the garage and finds a garbage bag and some gloves. He leaves through the front door and walks down State Avenue. It is nearly 3:30. Dusk is coming earlier and earlier. He finds the wrecked car and moves over to the curb, around the wooden telephone pool, and grabs the front passenger's side door handle. He pulls it up and opens the door. He looks inside, then wrenches away. The stench is unbearable. He quickly slides on the gloves and grabs what is left. A few shredded pieces of clothing. A tennis shoe. The stub of a leg, the edges gnawed and bloodied. He puts it all in the bag and ties it with a double-knot. He tries not to notice the heavy bloodstains soaking the seat, the glove box compartment, the floor. He shuts the door and carefully pulls off the gloves, careful not to get any blood on him, though most of it has dried. He casts the gloves into the ditch, where they fumble along with a slow-moving watery current and disappear into a tubular drain. He gets back to the house around 4:00. The boy is still sleeping. He puts the bag by the front door and goes and wakes up the boy. The boy starts when he is awakened. The man says, "If you want to bury her tonight, we need to start now. It'll be dusk soon, and it'll get darker quicker because of the rain." The boy wants to do it tonight.

They stand before the fresh grave as dusk threatens to fall.

The rain had let up when they had first went into the backyard. Both had taken shovels from the garage, which the man had accumulated over the past month, and they had dug a four-foot-deep hole. The task went quicker than with digging Kira's grave, for the earth had been moistened by the rain, and the rocks and clay easily gave way to the iron spades. They had lain the teenager's remains into the grave, and they had begun piling the dirt back into the hole. Mark had been unable to do that part; he left the gravesite in tears, and he sat down on the tree stump next to the fallen oak, numbly staring at the man's labor, arms hanging limp at his side. The man had completed filling in the hole, and Mark had returned. Now they stand before the grave, the shovels lying to their side, both of them staring at the disturbed dirt lying atop of all that remained of Mark's beautiful sister.

The man looks over to Mark. "Do you think we should say something?"

Mark doesn't answer for a moment, then, "I think so."

"Okay. What should we say?"

"I don't know."

"Okay."

They stay at the grave until the calls of the dark-walkers begin to carry out over the city, shaking the air like the screams of a million coyotes. The ungodly calls beckon forth the storms, and the clouds swirl above their heads. Rain begins to fall. The man takes Mark by the arm. He doesn't resist. They return to the house. Mark ascends the ladder as the man bolts the back door and slides wooden

boards up against the glass, locking them into place. The man climbs after Mark and pulls up the ladder. Mark is nowhere to be seen. A moment later Mark emerges from the den.

The man says, "I didn't get you a mattress today."

"It's okay," Mark says. "I'll just sleep on the floor again."

"We can get a mattress tomorrow."

"It's okay."

III

"You don't cry anymore, do you?" The man is throwing more blankets down onto the floor for Mark, as the night will be even colder than the last. At Mark's words he freezes. Mark is standing beside the wall, the barricaded door to the bedroom next to him. The man looks up at Mark, says, "All my tears have dried up." He has not cried in a long while. Kira still haunts him. In his every dream, Kira is there. He wakes aching, heart throbbing, longing for her. But he cannot deny what he knows to be true. This is no waking nightmare, no anesthesia dream. This is real. And Kira is gone. He has grown cold, bitter towards the world and everything in it. He doesn't laugh. He doesn't smile. He lives day-by-day, throttling all the fiery emotions that threaten to carry him asunder. There are times when he wishes to slice the blade against his wrist, but he is slowly coming to resignation and acceptance of fate's new roll of the dice.

You don't cry anymore. Mark's words echo through his mind. The rain continues to rap on the boarded-up windows, and thunder drowns out the sounds of the dark-walkers outside. He lies in bed, on his side, covered with the blankets, fingers cold, knuckles white as ash. He stares at the bouquet of purple lilies resting in a drained bottle of whisky, sitting on the wooden crate beside his cot. The flowers are wilted, curled up on themselves, drained of all life. *Like Kira*, he thinks. He remembers taking the lilies for her while at the airport. That day lives forever in his mind, is always present, yet is so far away. He rolls onto his other side and stares at the wall. He remembers her laugh, the sweetness of her voice, the way she would stroke his cheek, and he falls into a fitful sleep. He dreams she and him are together, that they are sitting before a fire, wrapped up in quilts on the sofa, drinking hot cocoa with marshmallows. He awakes halfway through the night and feels rainwater dripping from the ceiling as the house creaks and groans. He lies his head on the pillow and lies awake till the sun creeps up and the dwellers of the night return to their honeycomb caverns.

The apartment is nicer than the man expected. It is nestled into a side-street laden with run-down and dilapidated buildings, and the entrance to the apartment complex passes between an open gate that creaks in the stillborn breeze. The gate is decorated with newfound rust from ceaseless autumn rains. There are four different apartment buildings, two on either side of a parking lot with numbered parking spaces. Beat-up pickup trucks, falling-apart cars, and a few assorted minivans and a POP-A-LOCK truck sprawl across the lot. The man pulls the purple Escort up beside the last building on the left, gnarled limbs of dead trees hanging over from behind a stone barricade and an overflowing dumpster. The man and the boy leave the car, and the boy opens the front door of the apartment complex. They ascend two flights of stairs in the dark, and the man feels as if unseen eyes are watching. The front door to the boy's apartment is open, hanging on its hinges. The man raises the pistol and enters first. Light comes in through the windows. He goes room-to-room, searching for any new inhabitants, finds nothing. He stops in the bedroom, where he can see blood covering the bed-

sheets, dried on the floor, crawling pricks of blood staining the far corner and adjacent walls. He returns to the boy and tells him to hurry. The man sits on one of the sofas and looks about the room as the boy gathers some things. Gallons of distilled water stacked against the wall. Books lying scattered on the floor. Soda cans crumpled and thrown into a bare wastebasket. He notices that there is no television. The boy must have gotten rid of it. He goes into the kitchen and opens the fridge. Nothing. He opens a cupboard and finds some bottled water. He takes one out, unscrews the lid, takes a drink. A moment later the boy returns. He is holding a single duffel bag bulging with contents.

"Did you get everything?"

"Yes."

"Okay." The man heads for the door.

Mark is behind him. Trailing footsteps cease.

The man turns. "What is it?"

The boy looks at him, then looks away, dropping his duffel bag. He half-walks, half-runs to the bedroom. The man sees him enter. The boy returns, clutching something in his hand. A stuffed animal, what looks to be a Dalmatian puppy, sprinkled with black-on-white spots. A pink bow is tied around its neck. "Her name is Molly," the boy says. "Ashlie... She loved her. She slept with her every night. She said it brought her... comfort. Somehow, it made things better. I never understood it. I used to have a big stuffed polar bear when I was a little boy. I would have night terrors. Mom and Dad gave me the polar bear, telling me that it would chase away my bad dreams. It worked. But I grew out of it. Ashlie... I don't know. Maybe Molly kept the bad dreams away. Sometimes Ashlie would cry in her sleep, but not all the time. Sometimes she would wake up crying, and I would hold her until she fell back asleep." His fingers are white-knuckled, gripping the stuffed animal in a vice-grip. "She would want me to have it."

"Okay," the man says.

They are driving back to the house, navigating the narrow, winding streets of Upper Price Hill. They pass a construction zone for the new school—GRAND OPENING SPRING SEMESTER 2012—the sign reads. A few car wrecks, absent of passengers. Abandoned vehicles. Leaves scattered across the street, blown into the gutters by the passing car. A cryptic playground surrounded by a high-rise wire fence: the swings wisp back and forth in the sullen breeze. Between buildings, the city of Cincinnati can be seen, sprawled out in the valley, the Ohio River a chalky paste. The boy clutches the stuffed animal. His duffel bag is in the back. The man tries to turn down a street, sees the intersection is blocked by a two-vehicle car crash; he curses and pulls back onto the main road, seeking another route.

"I was taking a Night Class," the boy says.

"What?" the man asks, keeping his eyes on the road.

"A Night Class. Where you take classes at night and work your job during the day."

"I know what a Night Class is. I took them in college."

"I was in a Night Class," Mark says, "when it happened."

"Oh."

"I can remember it perfectly. It was a business marketing class. We were learning about advertising or something. I don't really remember. I was falling asleep. What I do remember is the teacher leaving the room, and everyone starts getting headaches. Rubbing their temples and stuff. It made me get a headache, too. Maybe headaches are contagious. I don't know. But then they started bleeding from their nose. And then their eyes. And then their ears and mouths. I didn't know what to

think of it. I was the only one not affected. I got up and ran out into the hallway to get a nurse. The hallway was abandoned, it was night-time, and then the nurse appeared from another doorway. I called to her, told her we needed help. Her back was to me. When she turned... I saw that she was bleeding, too. And she was holding something in her hand, a scalpel. I don't know where she got a scalpel. I just thought doctors had scalpels. But then she started coming towards me, her body twitching. Arms ticking like a clock. I knew something wasn't right. My defenses went up. She came at me, swinging that fucking scalpel. It cut me right down the arm. Drew a lot of blood. She tried to strike me again, but she missed; probably because she had so much blood in her eyes that she couldn't see. I turned and shoved her in the back, right into the wall, next to the water fountain. She sagged down, and the scalpel fell from her hands. I kicked it away and started screaming for help. No one answered. And that's when I looked down, and I saw that she was lying on the floor, going into convulsions. I just stood there and watched. Fucking *watched*. Part of me was fascinated. *Fascinated*. How can you be fascinated by something like that? I think it was shock... Yeah, it was shock. So I ran back into the classroom, and I saw that all the other students were lying on the floor, toppled out of their desks, or they were still in their desks, but their heads were down and their arms dangling to the side. Some were still twitching. I didn't know what to do. So I ran out of the building, calling for help. I heard an explosion in the street and ran down to see, and I saw that two cars had crashed, and one of them was engulfed in flames. The longest night of my life... I got into my car and drove to the apartment, terrified. The streets were deserted. Most people were inside, you know, it was like midnight or something. I don't remember. But I got to the apartment and ran inside, and I found Ashlie sleeping on the sofa. She had fallen asleep in front of the television, which was now nothing but static. I tried the phones, but none of them worked. The light switch worked for a moment, but then it faded, flickered, and went out. Ashlie woke up. I kissed her on the cheek, took her to her bed, laid her back down. She fell asleep. I sat there all night, right beside her. I didn't want to go outside. I didn't want to see anymore. I wanted to wake up. I was convinced it was a dream, that it would end any moment. It never has. And part of me still refuses to believe it's real. Part of me is still... Still waiting to wake up. You know?"

The man doesn't say anything.

The boy bites his lip, squeezes the stuffed animal. "Where were you?"

"What?"

"Where were you, when this happened?"

"I was over the Atlantic. I already told you."

"You're a pilot."

He doesn't answer for a moment. "I was once a pilot, yes."

"Not anymore?"

"Nothing's how it used to be. You've got to accept that."

The boy doesn't say anything. He just stares forward as the Escort drives the sleeping streets.

A few more days pass. The boy has integrated himself into the man's daily routine. The man refuses to open up, despite the boy's incessant attempts. The man had been craving for human contact, for human relationships, but now that it is here, he just wants to crawl into a fetal position and sleep. He erects a steel cage over his heart, refusing anyone to come close. Perhaps he fears that becoming close to another human being will just end in heartache, as that relationship will one day shatter, and they will be separated by death or disaster. His heart is cold and calloused. He only cares about himself. But the boy is wearing him down.

When night has come, they break out the wine and cigarettes. The man smokes two or three packs a day. The boy only smokes at night. Tonight it is decently warm out, and the skies are clear, the moon is full. They go out onto the roof to let off firecrackers. They have spread out lawn chairs, and in a bucket between them are COCA-COLA glass bottles and a package of double-stuffed OREOS. The man brought up his battery-operated CD player and put in a Led Zeppelin CD. "Kashmir" floats over the whines and cries of the dark-walkers clambering around the house, reaching up in a lifeless gait. They light the firecrackers and watch them soar into the sky, popping and screaming, ribbons of light dancing over their awed faces. The light reflects in the dull eyes of the dark-walkers, and they are drawn to the flashing lights, almost stupefied. The boy laughs at their idiocy. The man can only crack a smile. They exhaust the firecrackers and sit down in the lawn chairs. They look up at the stars, throwing back soda and munching on crème-filled cookies.

"They never looked so bright over Cincinnati, you know?" the boy asks.

The man is mesmerized. "I haven't seen stars in what feels like years."

"...I think it's because of the smog. None of the factories are working. The smog is gone."

A few moments of quiet pass. They drink and eat.

One of the dark-walkers is trying to get over the fence, into the backyard. It seems to be humping the outside of the fence in its efforts. The man drains his coke bottle and hurls it at the fence. It shatters and falls into several pieces in the lawn. The creature on the other side of the fence pauses, then resumes its awkward movements. "Stupid fuckers."

The boy says, "They're not at all what you'd expect, are they?"

The man cranes his neck, looks at the boy. "Who?"

"The zombies."

"They're not zombies. They're just sick. Diseased."

"They act like zombies to me. It's just... Did you ever watch zombie movies?"

"No," the man says. "They're stupid."

"Okay. I've seen a few. In the movies, the zombies are always wearing frilly white dresses or cheerleader outfits or tuxedos. It's all for cinematic reasons, I know, but it's just funny to look out and see them, and most of them are naked, some are wearing bras and panties or boxers. It happened at night, so most people were sleeping in their pajamas."

The man cracks a smile, a brief chuckle.

The boy eyes him. "What?"

"I was just thinking about the naked ones. Do you think they were having sex?"

The boy grins. "I bet some of them were."

The man finds that hilarious. His laughter carries across the city.

IV

A beautiful day had dawned: the air felt charged with electric warmth, the sky hung brilliant blue above them, and birds flew south in torrents, moving in swarming flocks that cast shadows over the city streets. The man and the boy decided to go out for some more supplies. They entered an old grocery store and were looking through the canned goods and bottled drinks. Rats had filled the aisles and had munched through most of the cereal boxes, but they scattered with noisy squeaks into the dark corners, vanishing as the intruders wandered through the rows of food. The fruits and vegetables had long rotted, and what was left were scraps of earthy skin covered with bluish-gray molds. Flies moved in clouds about the place, and they had to swat them from their eyes. Now the

man stands before a rack of magazines, flipping through the crisp pages. The boy is filling plastic trash bags from the back room, throwing in cans of green beans and corn. He even makes it a point to tell the man that he has found some canned salmon. A delicacy. The man smiles to himself and continues flipping through the pages. As they leave, the boy's eyes are drawn to a school down the street, with a playground sitting dull and lifeless. Birds perch upon the bars of the Jungle Jim. He stands watching for a few moments, the plastic bag beginning to slide from his grip. The man watches him for a few moments, says, "What is it?"

Mark says, "Nothing."

They are driving back when Mark speaks again: "What do you think happens after death?"

The man shrugs. "I don't know."

"Me neither."

More silence.

The boy says, "Do you think people go to Heaven?"

"I don't think so," the man says.

"You don't believe in Heaven?"

"Not anymore," the man says.

"But you used to."

"Yes."

"Why don't you believe in Heaven anymore?"

"A lot of things have changed," he says. A few more moments pass. "I used to believe in God. I always figured He was just up in space, watching us. I thought He cared. But this happened... And you have to ask yourself... How can a loving, caring God allow something like this to happen? How can a loving God tolerate a global plague—and I think that that's what this is—and not do anything about it? We are entirely alone. You. Me. Any other survivors. We're totally alone. Civilization has crumbled. All of history—as great and wonderful as it may have been—has led up to this point. The elimination of humanity. No, I don't believe in a God. And without a God, there's no Heaven or Hell. I think that when we die, that's it. We don't go anywhere. We are just an assortment of chemicals arranged in such a way that we can think, see, taste, touch, feel. There's no soul, no eternal quality about us. We're just like the animals, and like the animals, when we die, we return to the dust. And the dust is where we came from."

The boy is quiet for a moment. "Maybe God is still watching us."

The man laughs. "Watching us? Maybe. But if He is, He doesn't care. He doesn't give a shit about us. He couldn't give a rat's ass about us. I can see Him now, up there in Heaven, surrounded by the angels, and they're all just laughing. Mocking us."

The boy doesn't say anything after that.

They are eating at an abandoned diner in Kentucky. The man smokes as he stirs the baked beans in the portable electric stove, now connected to the portable battery-operated generator. Mark wanted to get out of the house, and he decided to bring the man to the restaurant. They had to walk half the way, because the bridge leading to the Kentucky shoreline was blocked by snarled wrecks of twisted vehicles. The boy talks and talks about Ashlie, about the things they did, the games they played, the conversations they had late into the night. The man doesn't say anything. He is tired of hearing about Ashlie. The boy seems to pretend that he is the only one who hurts, the only one dealing with loss. But the man notices that the boy is dealing with Ashlie's death decently well, and he imagines it is because the boy has had practice following the death of his parents. They eat the beans quietly. The

wind shakes the diner, and the man pulls his leather jacket tighter around him. He leans over the plastic plate filled with baked beans and spoons them into his mouth with a plastic fork.

As they finish eating, the boy asks, "So what's your story?"

The man looks up at him. "My what?"

"Your story," the boy says.

"I don't have a story."

The boy cocks an eye at the man. "Everyone has a story."

His reply is poison: "I don't have a fucking story, all right?"

The boy pokes at his food. "Okay. Sorry."

The man curses, stands. "Hurry up and finish eating."

"I'm done," the boy says.

"You barely touched it."

"I'm done, all right?"

The boy watches out the window in the upstairs hallway. It is midday. The man is out back, chopping wood from the fallen oak tree, wearing heavy clothes to fight off the cold. Dark clouds gather in the distance, climbing over one another. Far off in the east, nearly hidden by the rising slopes of the eastern Cincinnati hills, pillars of dark rain fall. The boy bites his bottom lip and creeps away from the window. He walks over to the barricaded door. He looks back to the window, unsure and edgy. He grips the sides of the coffee table laden with books and begins to pull. The carpet groans under the sliding legs of the varnished table. A book slides off the top and hits the ground with a heavy thud. The boy winces, treks back over to the window. The man is wiping sweat from his brow and flexing his hand. The boy watches as the man picks up the axe and returns to chopping. Mark returns to the coffee table and continues pulling. In a few moments, the coffee table is pressed against the far wall. He grips the cold doorknob in his hand and turns. He hears the lock click, and he pushes open the door. Mellow light from the windows bleeds into his face. He steps inside, looks around. Twin dressers. A single chair. A fallen ceiling fan covered with dust, a noose of course rope wrapped around the middle hub. His eyes are drawn to the bed. The sheets are tangled and encrusted with dried blood. Spots of blood are on the floor. He sees a single knife on the carpet, the blade stained a maroon red. He finds himself standing and is lost in time. His heart begins to pound, and his pulse quickens. The blade stares at him, and suddenly he is overcome with fear for his life. The man has never shown much emotion, has been quiet and sullen. The boy suddenly knows why: *he has gone crazy and murdered a member of his own family. And I'm next.* He knows he has to escape. He turns to run.

The man is standing in the doorway, the axe dangling from his hand, the blade stained with woodchips.

Mark's mouth is dry, face ashen. He croaks, "No story, huh?"

The man glares at him. His face contorts into a mask of rage.

The boy shrinks back, eyes the knife. Knows only self-preservation.

The man doesn't move. The two stare at one another for what seems hours.

Finally the man speaks in a harsh whisper: "Get the fuck out of my house."

Mark stares at the man, hearing the words ringing in his ears. The words are drenched with a virulent concoction of rage, malice... and deep sorrow. Suddenly Mark knows. He is facing no murderer. He is not looking into the eyes of a cold, calculated killer. He is looking into the eyes of one who has lost everything, one who has lost all faith in the unseen, one whose heart has become cold as

an arctic stone and as hard as granite. He sees a tear speckle the corner of the man's right eye. Mark speaks, stumbling over his words, "I'm sorry... I didn't know... I just..."

The man won't let him finish. He repeats his demand, dictating his words coolly and without emotion: "Get the fuck out of my house."

The boy curses under his breath. "I'm sorry..."

The man raises the axe. "Get the fuck out of my house."

The boy bites his lip. "Fine. I'm leaving."

The man steps aside as the boy passes, stiff and collected. The man stands staring into the bedroom. He hears the clanging of the aluminum ladder as Mark descends to the ground floor, and then the opening and slamming of the front door. The house is draped in silence. The axe slides from his fingers and clatters onto the floor. Everything, all of it, washes back over him: a repressed memory resurfacing, driving its poisonous talons into his soul. He crumbles against the doorframe and stares at the bloodied bed as tears course down his swollen cheeks.

Two hours have passed. The man sits in the chair in the bedroom. In his hand is Kira's iron cross necklace. The one she wore around her neck every day since they day they met. He remembered how they would sit in his Jeep as he dropped her off at home, early in their courtship, and how she would nervously twirl the necklace between her fingers, how her eyes would glisten and glow. He remembered the warmth of those moments, when everything was right and bright and the future felt so alive and charged with hope. He hangs his head low and weeps, vicious sobs that sear his lungs, the first time he has cried in longer than he can remember.

He dreams. He dreams that he is standing on the beach, the sand between his toes. A shadow falls over him. He turns and sees Kira walking towards him in her two-piece polka-dot bathing suit. He always told her how foolish it looked. The iron cross is around her neck. Gulls sing above them. The breeze wisps plumes of sand into the air. Beach grass clings to the dunes, wrapping their blades about the wooden boards of the crude beach fence. He smiles as she approaches. She takes off her sandals and throws them at his feet. She throws her body against him, and he can feel her bare skin against his bare chest. She presses her face against his forehead, and they look deep into one another's eyes. "Want to go for a swim?" she asks. He nods. She bites her bottom lip as she smiles, and she saunters back. She takes off her iron cross necklace and sets it in the sand. She lets out a shout and runs towards the surf, and she throws herself into the waves, and the man watches as the tide carries her out into the distance, and then she is gone. He kneels down and takes the necklace from the sand. He holds it in the palm of his hand. The iron is warm. When he wakes, he is still holding the iron cross necklace. He can almost feel the grains of sand tickling the creases and lines of his palm. Kira would always look at the creases and pretend she could read them. "The lines in our palms match!" she would exclaim. "That means something good, right?" He would say yes.

Dusk is dawning. The sun begins to slide down to the west of the city, the western hills casting the western valley of Cincinnati in darkness. The railroad trains disappear in the gloom. The boy stands at the overlook at Mount Echo, looking down at the city. His heart labors slow, but yet he is filled with an eternal peace. A raven cries out above him. He imagines it is nearing October. At least the final week of September. He has lost track of the days. He wraps his fingers against the cold metal of the railing. The wind is stronger here, coming off the river below, rising up to the bluffs of the hill, where he stands. He doesn't react as he feels the presence behind him. He simply says, "I didn't expect to find you here."

"This isn't the safest place to be," the man says.

The boy replies, without looking back, "I have nowhere else to go."

The man moves forward, joins the boy, stands beside him, looks out at the darkening city.

The boy says, "This is where we sat the day before the plague happened. She told me, for the first time, that she was falling for me. She clung to me tightly and made me promise to never leave her." He takes a deep breath. "I can't break that promise."

The man says, "It's going to be dusk soon. We need to go."

The boy seems distant, detached. "I have to go find her. She went home for the weekend. That's where she'll be. At home."

"You know that's not a good idea," the man says.

"I have to know for sure," the boy says.

"What if she's one of them?" the man asks.

"Are you afraid I'll kill her like you did?"

The man's heart flares with anger. He pushes it down. "You weren't there."

The boy pays him no attention. "I have to find her."

The man sighs. "I know." He's been there. He remembers his passion for finding Kira, how he was convinced she was alive. He knows that Mark suffers the same delusion. The man has no idea whom Mark is talking about, but he knows that the boy is suffering a great fantasy, that the mystery girl somehow survived the plague. That she was spared. "I know," he repeats.

The boy looks at him. "You think I'm crazy."

"No," the man says. "I'll go with you. Tomorrow. Not tonight. They'll be out soon."

The boy draws a deep breath. "Okay."

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

They walk away from the overlook, down the paved roads towards the parked car.

The boy says, "This is the second time you've saved me, you know?"

"You need to stop putting yourself in these damned predicaments."

Chapter Six

The Realm of the Night

"Think not disdainfully of death, but look on it with favor;
for even death is one of the things that Nature wills."
- Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (AD 121-180)

I

Sparse car accidents dotted Interstate 75 as they headed north. Once they merged onto Interstate 74—slowly meandering between a pile-up on the curving ramp—not many cars were seen. Now they are driving west, pearl cirrus clouds hanging high above them. The day is bright and warm, though storm clouds gather to the west, moving northeast and dropping heavy rains over the quiet Great Plains. The boy rides quietly in the passenger's seat; the man has his window cracked despite the cold of the first day of October. He flicks ashes out the crack in the window and takes another drag. The left side of the expressway is coated with hills that display a magnificent panorama of oranges and reds and yellows. A flock of birds takes flight, having been perched upon a wrecked Sedan, as the Escort with the crumpled fender roars past.

"How much longer do we stay on this road?" the man asks.

"Not long," Mark replies.

Off to the right, down a slight hill, are nestled several cottage-style houses in a row.

Mark says, "We started dating my sophomore year at the college. We had known each other for a while. We had to do a stupid project together for one of our classes. We spent a lot of time together working on the project, and it was then that we kinda fell for one another. None of us saw it coming. But that didn't stop it from coming. I remember us sitting in her basement, watching reruns of Seinfeld, completely oblivious to the loads of paperwork we had to finish by the end of the week. I pretended to stretch; she leaned in closer, leaning against me; and I brought my arm down around her, so my hand was on her opposite shoulder. We sat there watching it for a while. She put her hand on my leg, stroked my jeans with a single finger. And then we started to kiss. Passionate kissing. Kissing like I'd never experienced before. She is such an amazing girl. I'm sure you'll like her. She listens to underground music. Wears punk t-shirts. And these big-rimmed sunglasses that make her look like some kind of bug. Like a centipede or something. It's cute. Ashlie really liked her. And she liked Ashlie. It was perfect. She wanted to talk about marriage, but I didn't let her. Marriage scares me, you know? It terrifies me. It's like your whole life is open to you, and then—BAM!—the rest of your life is already planned out. But she wants to get married. She dreams of being a mother and a wife. I want to give that to her, you know? Being apart from her has made me realize how much I really do love her. I would never admit, before all this happened, that I loved her. Maybe I was scared. I don't know. But I'm sure of it now. I love her. She'll be so happy to see me."

The man doesn't say much. "What's her name?"

"Cara," the boy says, grinning wildly. "You'll like her. I promise."

"Okay," the man says.

Mark points off to the right. The Exit sign reads NORTH BEND ROAD/CHEVIOT. "Get off here."

They pass several empty gas stations. Some of the windows are shattered. A car rests next to a gas pump, the pump still inserted in the gas tank. More buildings pass by on either side. A Daycare. A WAL-GREENS pharmacy center. A stone-built Presbyterian church. A park with overgrown grass yellowing in the noonday sun. Several dogs scatter across the street before the car; the man hits the brakes; the car fishtails; they come to a rest, and the dogs are darting into the shadows behind a McDONALD'S. The man reverses the car from its backwards position and continues driving down the road. The boy points him down an adjacent street. This road swerves around steep corners surrounded by trees, up and down deep hills, and finally it opens up to a stretch lined with homes. The boy's face is a whitish pallor, but his eyes are livid with energy. He points to a driveway nearly hidden. The man pulls the car off the road, and the gravel drive crunches under the tires. At the bottom of the rise is a two-story house with a walk-around porch and a single garage. There is a yellow sports-car and a minivan parked in front of the garage, and a truck with its passenger's door open. A cobblestone path leads to the porch steps. The man stops the car, tells the boy to stay inside. He gets out, opens the side back door, and withdraws one of his pistols. He turns the safety off and, keeping his eyes on the porch, walks over to the truck. He peers inside. There are bloodstains on the dash, and the driver's window is smeared with a spray of dried blood. The windshield is cracked but not shattered. He turns and waves the boy to get out of the car.

"Hurry up," he says.

"I will," Mark replies. "She probably already knows we're here."

Mark tries the front door. "It's locked," he says.

"Stand back," the man says, raising the pistol.

A single gunshot. It rings in the dead silence.

The doorknob creaks open.

Mark quickly steps into the gloom.

"Damn it," the man says, eyeing gathering storm clouds. "Be careful, all right?"

Mark goes upstairs. The man stands in the hardwood parlor. The stairwell runs adjacent to the left wall. There is a carpeted dining room through a doorway to the left. Fresh china sits on the table, and in the middle of the table, several tall wax candles rest in holders, the wicks unlit. Sunlight comes in through the window with the drawn drapes. A thin layer of dust covers the table. The living room off to the right is crammed with boxes and assorted toys. The clock on the wall above a dust-laden leather sofa continues to tick. The man moves forward and finds himself in the kitchen. Cupboards line two walls. A single table off to the right. In the chair sits a book-bag. He goes into the next room. A sofa and two chairs. A single blank television. A stone fireplace with skating trophies on the wooden mantle. Framed pictures atop the entertainment center. A door leading to a wooden back porch. The man returns to the kitchen and rifles through the book-bag. Some school-books. A digital camera. He toys with the camera, turns on the power. He hits the review button and clicks through the pictures. Some pictures of cats. An older woman with fluffy jet-black hair and lovely eyes. And pictures of a teenage girl with Mark. They are smiling, wearing shorts and t-shirts. They are on some sort of train with decorations all over the walls. More teenagers in the picture. The man then realizes he has never even asked Mark's age...

He hears his name called out above. "Get up here!" Mark then shouts.

The man quickly ascends the stairwell. There are three closed doors and one that is open. He steps inside. He finds Mark standing beside a bunk-bed. The top bunk is littered with all kinds of stuffed

animals. Along the walls are overstuffed stuffed animals, the kinds won at fairs, carnivals, and amusement parks—the man thinks of Paramount’s King’s Island, the roller coasters stopped, the seats laden with rotting dark-walkers who were unable to escape the prison bars holding them down. The room is a mess, the floor obscured by notebooks, CD cases, clothes. Mark looks at the man and points to the window. It is broken open, and there is no glass on the carpet. It had been broken out from the inside. Whatever had been trapped in the room had sought to escape. The boy’s face is now white as freshly-fallen snow, devoid of color. His strength gives out, and he falls against the bunk-bed, slides to the ground. Tears stream down his face.

The man thinks he should say something. “I’m sorry...”

“Leave me alone,” Mark sobs.

The man fidgets. “Look... I know this is hard, but we can’t just stay—”

Mark glares at him with wild and bloodshot eyes. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

The man says nothing more, just steps outside of the room and shuts the door.

The man stands out on the front porch, a cigarette between his fingers. The smoke feels blissfully good in his lungs as he takes another hit. He looks out across the wide front lawn, at the Escort parked in the gravel drive, up to the road where no cars pass. Woods cling against the house on either side. The wind picks up, and dying leaves scatter at his feet. He looks down at the autumn leaves whispering on the roughly-hewn wooden boards and a mental image flashes before him: Mark and Cara, sitting together on this porch, carving pumpkins, wrapped warm in jackets and scarves, smiling as they put the candles within and let their light shine. A pain twangs in his heart. He can hear Mark upstairs. The sobbing has grown quieter, but he can still hear him. He is beginning to dry heave. A raindrop kisses the man’s cheek, carried in by a stiff wind. He tosses the cigarette to the porch floor and crunches it underfoot. He steps out under the aluminum overhang and can see the storm clouds swirling. He looks at his watch. 5:47 P.M. “Fuck,” he growls, and he goes back into the house.

The man has hoisted heavy blankets over all the windows. He pulls the blanket to the side and peers outside, through the dusty glass. He swipes some of the dust away with a fingertip. He can see up to the road. The moonlight filters down. The howls come as the night-walkers arise. His heart sprints in his chest. He no longer feels safe, and he wishes he were back at the security of his own home. *Coming here was a damn stupid fucking idea.* Several figures can be seen on the road, moving about, in no hurry. One of them looks in his direction, and moonlight coursing through storm-clouds illuminates its twin eyes. They look like pinpricks of flame in an ephemeral darkness. He ducks away from the window and presses himself against the wall. The blanket flaps back over the window. A mounted picture-frame shakes under his heavy breaths, and it falls and clatters on the floor. The glass webs out. He curses himself.

He can hear Mark coming down the steps. “What was that?” he asks, voice raspy.

“Nothing,” the man says. “Nothing. Come on down here.”

“Is it safe?”

“I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“Yes, it’s safe. Come on. I found a FIRESTARTER log.”

He uses his cigarette lighter to ignite the self-burning log in the fireplace. He opens the chute as the smoke begins to rise. Plumes of ash filter down and nearly extinguish the flames. The house is cold,

and they sit beside the stone hearth in silence. The man lights a cigarette, offers one to the boy. Mark shakes his head *No*. The man shrugs and sets it aside for later.

The boy stares into the fire. "Cara is walking around out there somewhere."

The man eyes the boy. "You can't think like that."

Mark curses under his breath. "I just keep seeing her..."

"Cara is dead," the man says firmly, snuffing out his cigarette on the brick hearth. "The Cara you loved, she's dead. What remains is a hollow shell of what she once was, a nightmare living inside her body. But the girl you loved, she's dead. Find comfort in this."

The boy glares at the man. "How can I find comfort in her death?"

He answers morosely: "Because it's far better than the alternative."

II

The man wakes coughing. He pulls the blankets tighter around him, but they offer meager warmth. He sees his breath crystallizing before his eyes in the pallid darkness. His neck aches as he turns and gazes into the fireplace, where chunks of embers flicker among the smoldering ruins of the starter log. He coughs again, a tear-splitting cough. He rolls onto his side and looks over to the chair where Mark fell asleep. His eyes slowly adjust in the darkness, and he sees Mark's blankets lying on the floor. The chair is abandoned. A ripple of fear sends sparks through him, but he pushes it down. *Maybe he is just getting a drink*. But the plumbing has been dead for weeks, and he can imagine the pipes frozen solid in the fierce autumn cold. He searches for any reason not to crawl out from under the blankets, but he finds none. Cursing under his breath, he pushes the blankets onto the floor and swings his legs over the sofa. He sits upright now, staring into the fire. He coughs again. And as his cough subsides, he can hear footsteps above him, on the second level.

His hand slides over the frigid wooden banister as he creeps up the carpeted steps. The carpet muffles his movement. He reaches the landing and walks ever-so-quietly towards the door leading to Cara's room. There he sees the boy standing, with his back to the hallway, just staring at the bunk-bed.

The boy feels the man's presence behind him, but he doesn't turn. He simply stares at the bed and says, "We held one another naked on that bed. It was my first time. I'd never had sex before. She had, but I hadn't. And we had talked about having sex. We wanted to wait for the right time. And that right time presented itself here. On this bed. We held one another." A tear trickles down his cheek. "I thought... I knew... that we would be together for the rest of our lives. But life never works out the way you want it to, you know?"

"I know," the man says. "Why don't we go back downstairs?"

"I want to stay here." He moves into the room, stepping over folders and binders and books and strewn clothes. He places his hand on the polished wooden frame of the bunk-bed. A stuffed turtle from the Disney movie *FINDING NEMO* slides off the top bunk and hits the floor. The boy bends down and picks it up. "I bought this for her on our one-month. She loved Disney. I always made fun of her for it. So we went to the Disney store in the Florence Mall, in Kentucky, and I bought this for her. She loved it."

"We should go downstairs."

"I wasn't the best boyfriend. Sometimes I was selfish. A lot of the time I was selfish. But I cared for her so much. How can I tell her that now? How can I apologize for all the misplaced words, the

foul deeds, the way I sometimes made her cry because of my insensitivity? I'm not a bad person. I made mistakes. But the worst part isn't the mistakes I made, but how I always refused to admit them, always attempted to explain them away. So that they weren't mistakes anymore. I've thought about that a lot. Ever since all of this happened. I've thought about how I could have been different. I've thought about how I could have apologized. I just wish... There's no closure."

The man steps into the room. "We need to get some sleep."

"It doesn't matter," the boy says. "Nothing matters anymore."

"Mark..." His voice trails off.

Mark heard it, too.

They just look at one another.

The man reaches down to his side. Neither the gun or its holster is on his belt.

Mark's eyes go wide with another sound from below. Movement. "That's her!" he exclaims.

The man can only think about his gun. It's downstairs. *Fuck*.

The boy suddenly launches forward, screaming Cara's name. The man is too surprised by Mark's movements to intercept him; he tries, but he misses, and he stumbles against the dresser, knocking over picture-frames. He spins around to see Mark disappearing around the corner, into the hallway. He can hear Mark racing down the steps, taking them two at a time.

The steps creak underneath as he races down to the lower landing. He spins around and faces the kitchen. He sees Mark standing with his back to the far wall, staring into the living area with the low-burning coals. The man sprints up next to Mark, follows his gaze. In the semi-darkness amongst the wan flickers from the dying fire, a single figure can be seen standing beside the downstairs door to the back porch, glass shattered and lying all over the carpet. The man recognizes the torn face of the figure from the pictures found in the book-bag. Mark and the man are rooted in place, the boy frozen by shock and the man by fear, and the dark-walker stares at them with burning, bloodshot eyes. She sucks breaths in shallow gasps, her chest moving in and out. She is wearing absolutely nothing, and her body is covered with scars, some still bleeding. An image flashes before the man: Mark, naked, and she, the same, wrapped tight, kissing, exchanging sweet pillow talk as they are lost in one another's warm and liquidating embrace. Now she stands, just as naked, but no longer beautiful, no longer a pleasure to behold, but a demon, bloodied and battered, and filled with an unidentifiable rage. She is a monster in disguise, a beast donning the costume of what had once been unscarred beauty.

"Cara..." Mark breathes, stepping forward, reaching out.

The man grabs his shoulder, squeezes, whispers, "Don't move."

His heart hammers in his chest.

Cara just watches, as if confused. Her eyes blink.

Mark cannot tear his eyes off her decrepit and malnourished form.

"Mark..." the man says. "Mark..."

"Cara," Mark says. "It's me."

Suddenly the boy breaks free from the man's grasp and runs after the girl.

The man curses, ducks into the kitchen, nabs the pistol from the counter. He switches the safety to OFF as he swings back into the room. Mark's arms are open wide as he is nearly upon her; and suddenly a switch flips, and the passivity in Cara becomes malevolent rage, and she responds, lurching forward; Mark gives out a shout; she grabs him roughly, spins him around, and hurls him onto the sofa where they would often cuddle and watch movies like *THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN* and *THE BREAK UP*. Mark tries to defend himself as Cara tries to tear him open; her sharp nails tear deep

gashes over his arms and hands as he shouts—"Cara, it's me! It's me! It's me, your boyfriend! Cara!" The man swings the gun back and forth, trying to get a shot. His heart is bleeding adrenaline and sweat burns his eyes; he doesn't dare blink. Mark's shouts continue. The man draws a deep breath, holds still, aims... "Cara!" Mark shouts. "Cara!" Tears stream down his face as blood crawls down his arms. The girl snarls, foam dripping from her mouth; she seems to be a rabid beast. "Cara!" the boy screams.

The gunshot rings out, shaking the house.

The back of Cara's head explodes. Blood sprays in an arc, splattering like wild paint upon the walls and even upon the ceiling. Her body hovers as if frozen in space and time. And then she falls upon Mark, heavier than an anvil, her blood staining his chest.

The man rushes forward, grabs the corpse by the arm, and pulls it onto the floor.

Mark's eyes are wide, his lips quivering. He seems maniacal and deranged.

How does one cope with such a fate?

The man reaches down to help the boy to his feet.

The boy's eyes glaze over, and a demon stares up at him.

"You killed her," the boy mutters, dazed. "You fucking killed her."

What should the man say? Should he apologize? Should he defend himself?

He says nothing.

Mark's mouth opens, contorted as if stricken by rigor mortis, and he launches off the sofa, throwing himself at the man. He becomes a whirlwind of arms and hands and fingernails, blindly swinging and swiping at the man as bitter tears, a mixed wine of rage and sorrow, fall from his eyes like melting wax. The man does not fight back; he holds the boy at bay, lets the boy struggle, lets him seek sweet revenge; but then the boy becomes weak, and he collapses, and he clutches to the man's sleeves as he weeps, "I loved her... I loved her... I loved her..."

The man only says, "I know."

The boy cries some more. The man feels his weight pulling him down.

The man suddenly feels weary, exhausted, absolutely drained.

The boy is now on the floor, curling into a fetal position, weeping.

Cara's corpse with lifeless eyes stares like some medieval manikin.

The man's heart skips a pulse with a sudden intake of breath. "Did you hear that?"

Mark doesn't answer.

"Wait here," the man says. He walks back into the kitchen, into the family room strewn with boxes. He pulls back the heavy drapes over the window and peers out. The rains have stopped, and a stiff moonlight sparkles on the wet grass. The gravel drive leads up to the road, where he can see dozens of scattered and shifting shapes. They meander together, and then they grow still. The man bites his lip, trying to understand if what he is seeing really exists, or if it is some kind of horrid mirage. And then he knows it is no mirage, for he, too, hears it: the figures on the road arc their necks and open their mouths and cry into the night. Under the pale moonlight, they slowly shift until they are facing the house—orderly, with precision and tact, not like dumb brutes, not like cattle, but with elegance like that of swans or geese—and then they begin to run, straight for the house.

III

The man wheels into the living room. "Mark!" He reaches down, grabs Mark by the arm, tears him onto his feet. Mark yanks away, eyes wild and bloodshot. A slur of obscenities escapes his mouth, and he tries to deliver a punch into the man's face. The man dodges, grabs the boy's arm, twists it; the boy lets out a shout and tumbles into the man's chest; the man grips him tight, holds him from escape. The boy thrashes and fights. The man squeezes him tight. "Listen," he growls. "Listen." The boy draws a deep breath, arms roaring with exhaustion, and then he hears it, too: shouts and calls coming from the front of the house. They stand there, feet rooted to the ground, and then they hear scratching and clawing along all the outside of the home.

A sudden noise makes them jump; they spin around to see a dark-walker coming through the broken glass window, mouth wide and stained with fresh blood, eyes thirsting. The man shouts and tosses Mark to the side, raises the gun, squeezes the trigger. The bullet drills a clean hole through the elderly attacker, and the dark-walker slumps to the ground. Two more appear behind him; Mark is already running out of the room. The man raises the gun to fire but stops. The dark-walkers do not attack, but rather turn upon their fallen comrade. The man turns and nearly vomits as he rushes after Mark, hearing the sound of flesh being torn and innards greedily consumed. They sound like sharks in a feeding frenzy, thrashing and biting and fighting for superiority.

The man finds Mark standing in front of the wooden front door. It shakes and shudders as dark-walkers throw their bodies against the heavy oak. The man thinks they can't get in from there, but a hinge snaps, and the door bulges outwards, and hands reach through the narrow opening, swiping through the air as their owners snarl and bicker. Mark sprints up the stairwell. The man follows after. They reach the upper landing just as the door is broken off its hinges and the creatures swarm inside, several pursuing the uninfected up the stairwell. The man turns on the upper step and fires several rounds; two dark-walkers collapse with bullets in their chests, and another is hurled over the stairwell banister, landing hard below with a shriek. The man abandons them and runs after Mark, who is in Cara's room. The man rushes inside, trips over a large stuffed Tigger from WINNIE-THE-POOH, and as he lands, the gun skitters from his hands, under the bed.

He looks up to see Mark wedging his feet against the dresser and his back to the door, trying to hold it shut as dark-walkers beat on the other side like mad dogs. The dresser is sliding. A crack is opening in the door. The man scrambles to his feet and pushes against the dresser. The dresser rocks back and forth, and several books and framed pictures fall to the floor. But the man is not stronger than the dark-walkers behind the door, and the door continues to creak open.

And then it is still.

Both the boy and the man are breathing harshly.

Dark-walkers can be heard below, tearing the house to pieces, searching.

Mark's eyes are wide, his chest thundering with each heartbeat. "Have they forgotten?"

Before the man can answer, the door splinters to Mark's right and left, and a pair of hands reaches through, wrapping around his shoulders. Mark lets out a shout and tries to get away, but more hands reach through and grab at him. The door splinters around his legs, and they grab his calves with shredded fingers. The door heaves and sighs. The man abandons his post and looks around. The room spins. He wants to vomit. His eyes land upon what he is seeking. He rushes to the closet and kicks it open. Mark is screaming for him. He reaches inside, grabs the iron baseball bat. He runs over to the door and begins smashing the fingers of the dark-walkers. The hands around Mark's shoulder wither away; he tries to flee, but the hands around his legs remain, and he topples to the ground. He kicks savagely, punching larger holes into the door, and his foot connects with the face of

a dark-walker. He shimmies away as the dark-walkers outside scream and rant, clawing at their bodies to eradicate the pain.

The man grabs the dresser, calls out for help. Mark joins him, and they shove the dresser against the door. They step away just as the dark-walkers return their incessant beatings. The door splinters some more, and the hinges are shorn; but the door refuses to budge with the dresser shoved against it.

The man and the boy exchange glances.

"It won't hold forever," Mark says, drawing deep breaths.

The man nods, biting his lip. "My gun..." He ducks down and scurries underneath the bed. There is too much junk, and the darkness doesn't aid his cause. "Fuck," he murmurs, cobwebs sticking to his cheek. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

The boy just stares at the door. "Did you find the gun?"

"I'm looking for it. There's too much shit down here."

"You need to find the gun."

"I know."

"They're going to get in. The door won't—"

"Damn it, Mark, I know!" Then, "Fuck!" He shimmies out. "Fuck the gun."

"Fuck the gun?!"

"I can't find it!"

"What do you mean you can't find it?!"

"There's too much shit down there and I can't see a damn—"

The dresser suddenly thrusts away from the door, knocking Mark backwards; he stumbles over strewn clothes and falls against the window, and he collapses through, out of the room. The man shouts, tumbling after him; he looks out the window and sees Mark on the porch overhang, gripping the roof tiles, legs dangling down, eyes wide, mortified. The man looks back to the door. The dresser moves again. One of the dark-walkers is trying to squeeze through a crack in the door. The man curses under his breath and crawls out through the window. On the overhang, he kneels down, grabs the boy's hands, pulls him up. Just as the boy is on the porch roof, several dark-walkers appear below, in the grass, leaping up, snapping their jaws.

Mark's breath is ragged. "Did you get the bat?"

"The bat? What? No. No. I'll go—"

"Not now," the boy says.

The man turns and sees the dark-walkers in the room. He grabs Mark and they sprint across the porch overhang. They climb onto the roof. It is slick with the earlier rains. They climb up the heavily slanted roof and crawl down the other side. The overhang over the back porch is right before them. They crawl on top of it and draw several deep breaths.

"Now what?" the boy asks.

"I don't have a fucking clue."

"What time is it?"

The man looks at his digital watch. "Two in the morning."

"Shit. Daylight's not for a couple more hours."

"They'll find us before then."

"I know."

The snarls of the dark-walkers fill the night.

The air is a bitter cold, but they do not notice: adrenaline pumps through their veins.

"The car," Mark says.

"No," the man replies. "My keys are inside."

"The truck, then."

"What truck?"

"Jeremy's truck. Her brother's truck. It's right outside."

"There's no keys."

"They're in the ignition. I saw them when we went inside."

"But the door was open. The open door light would drain the battery."

"It's an old truck. It didn't have any lights like that."

"There's no way it would start."

"It was turned off when the plague hit."

"There's no way you can know that."

"He parks there when he is working on the truck. He was probably working on it when the plague struck. Probably working with the lighting under the dash. The lights, they would always go out. Blown fuses."

"It was around midnight when it struck here. He'd be in bed."

"He was a night owl. And twenty-three. He would have been awake."

"We can't risk it."

"So you want to just stay up here? Try to wait it out?"

"Shit. I don't know. *Fuck*." He grabs at his greasy hair. "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Let's go for the truck."

"Are you serious?"

"What the hell? You were all about it ten seconds ago."

"I didn't actually think you'd agree."

"Well now I agree."

"I was hoping you'd think of something else that's less risky."

"I'm drawing a blank."

"All right," Mark says. "I'll run and get the truck. You wait here."

"No, I'll go."

"I'm faster. I've seen you run. You've killed your lungs with cigarettes."

He knows the boy is right. "The ground is wet. The tires will sink. The truck will get stuck."

"It's a 4x4. We'll be all right."

Mark walks over to the edge and looks down. It is clear. Most of the dark-walkers are at the front of the house. He wonders how many dark-walkers lurk among what had once been a haven for laughter and romance. He'd only seen seven or eight. But he knows there have to be more. They travel in groups. Flock like birds. He peers over the edge once more, waiting. Still nothing. A ten-foot-drop. He sprained his ankle once doing something like this, trying to fly with a blanket as a kid. The doctor said he was lucky: he should have broken a lot more. Now Mark imagines himself hopping along towards the truck with a compound fracture. And there are no doctors. He won't be able to heal his ankle. And his compound fracture will become infected. Gangrene. Self-amputation using alcohol, a gag, and a skillet of embers to cauterize the wound. "*Fuck*."

"Are you going?" the man asks, behind him, keeping his voice low.

"Don't try to talk me out of it."

"It looks like you're *thinking* yourself out of it."

"No," the boy says.

And he jumps.

He seems to hover in the air, frozen in the cold, and then time rushes to meet him with the ground. He finds himself rolling over the wet grass, the breath knocked out of him, his ankles searing with pain. He comes to a rest on his back, staring up at the sky, the moon half-covered by whispering clouds, head resonating with a dull thudding vibration and the world spinning as if he were on an out-of-control carousel. He hears his name being shouted, and he raises his neck, which throbs in pain, and he sees the man standing on the back porch overhang, face ashen. The boy gives a thumbs-up and rolls onto his hands and knees. He stumbles up and moves along the side of the adjacent garage. He can hear the dark-walkers. They are quieter now. He moves to the far edge of the garage, conscious of his footsteps crackling in the gravel. He moves behind the yellow sport's car—Cara's sister's pride and joy—and feels a presence behind him. He spins around to see a bunny rabbit staring at him. Then it turns and hops away. He almost laughs, but he stifles it down. He hunches down and looks through the car windows, and he can see the S-10 Chevy.

He looks up and sees the man following his progress with his eyes and a frightened look on his face. Mark gives another thumbs-up and continues to venture out. He keeps his eyes on the truck and moves forward carefully. The windshield is cracked, the driver's door window smeared with blood. The passenger's door is open. He creeps across the gravel and grabs the driver's door handle, praying that it's unlocked. It is. He pulls the door open. It creaks. He steps inside and sits on the seat covered with dried and flaking blood. He pulls the door shut ever-so-quietly. The keys are in the ignition. He twists the keys. The engine whines, then starts. The gas gauge goes to $\frac{3}{4}$ full. He puts the car in drive. He presses the gas.

A shriek fills his ears. His body goes rigid, and he twists around. A dark-walker is climbing in through the open passenger's door. Mark's scream is caught in his throat. Its feeble hands grab his legs, the mouth opens wide. And then the creature shrieks and begins to spasm. It falls face-down on the seat. The man stands behind him, and a hunting knife has carved a deep chasm into the back of the creature's skull. The man tries to pull the knife out, but it's jammed in the bone. He pulls the body out and tosses it aside. He climbs inside and shuts the door.

"That's three times you've saved my life," Mark says.

The man wipes blood on his jeans. "That one doesn't count."

The dark-walkers are attracted to the noise of the engine. But by the time they have congregated themselves once more and rushed out of the house, Mark has already turned the truck around. He stamps on the gas. The tires spit gravel. The truck lurches forward, careening down the driveway. The dark-walkers fall in behind, screaming and shouting. The boy twists the truck onto the main road and goes right, back towards the highway.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't have a fucking—Shit!" He swerves around a trashed minivan.

"We can't make it back to my house," the man says. "Not in the dark. Too many accidents."

"I know."

"There's more."

They have reached the intersection. Dark-walkers pour out from a Walgreens Pharmacy and a Day-Care center. Some of them are but children, foaming at the mouth, emaciated. Mark runs one over with the car. "I just hit a kid," he says. It doesn't even faze him. They near the highway. Dark-walkers block the exits. He drives over the bridge. A dark-walker leaps out of the shadows; Mark

doesn't swerve; the body is thrust over the car, kneecaps sheared open; the creature screams as it hits the bridge railing and topples over, falling down onto the pavement. Dark-walkers descend upon it.

The road twists and turns.

"You missed the highway," the man says.

"They were blocking it."

"I don't think they knew what they were doing."

"I know, but they were still blocking it."

Dark-walkers pour in behind them. They pass a road sign: MOUNT AIRY FOREST. More dark-walkers appear in front of them. Mark curses and yanks the car up a narrow drive surrounded by trees shrouded in shadow. The road ascends up a hill. Dark-walkers rush at them through the trees. A Park Ranger car sits in the middle of the road; the headlights of the truck wash over the shattered driver's side window, and Mark jerks the wheel; the truck goes onto two wheels; both the man and the boy are absolutely silent, paralyzed with shock; the truck falls back onto two wheels. The road bends into a clearing populated with scarce trees. A single deer stares at them from straight ahead. Mark swerves around it, and it darts into the clearing. The dark-walkers behind them turn their attention upon the deer, and, as a group, flock after it. The deer is much quicker, however, and disappears into the brush, but only after the truck disappears around another curve cloaked with forest.

And by then, the dark-walkers have forgotten.

IV

The road twists and turns, thick trees resplendent with the last dying leaves of autumn lining either side. There are no parked cars, as the plague struck after dark, when the park had been closed to the public. Empty picnic tables are acknowledged by the truck's headlights, then forgotten just as quickly and given over once more to the impermeable darkness. This is the reign of the dark-walkers, and nothing but flesh and blood is remembered: skyscrapers, fountains, parks, vehicles, statues and gardens and computers and televisions, all of this means nothing. Fossils that will decay and break down, and millions of years later, the next sentient beings will study the Old Age, when *Homo sapien* ruled, and they will study their lives and books will be published on the topic, and there will be a scholarly work entitled The Decline and Fall of *Homo sapien*: the Rise of the Dark-Walkers. Volumes will be written on the Age of Mankind, and a single chapter shall be dedicated—mayhaps even a footnote—to the carnage that struck the planet on August 11, 2011.

"Slow down," the man says.

"What?"

"Look. In the trees."

Mark toys with the brake. The truck slows, but does not stop. The trees on either side of the narrow road pass by. Mark tries to wipe the blood from the window but fails. He grabs the manual crank and lowers the window to watch. The man simply stares out his own. They stand in the trees, solid as stone, the only movement that of their rapid breathing. *Rapid breathing*, the man thinks to himself, and he remembers the hummingbird. *Lampornis clemenciae*, the blue-throated hummingbird, could reach up to 1,260 heartbeats a minute, and its rapid breathing assisted this. The man's mind whirs and clicks: flock together, call to one another, rapid breathing... They are just like birds. A single phrase stretches through his mind and then vanishes: *avian flu*.

"There must be hundreds of them," the boy says, driving the truck.
The dark-walkers pay them no attention. They just stare at one another, not speaking.
The boy grimaces. "They're stupid bastards."
The man isn't so sure. Their stoic features, piercing eyes, icy precision...
It sends chills up his spine.

The road bends around a curve. The headlights splash over a circle in the road. In the middle of the circle, dozens upon dozens of dark-walkers stand, shoulder-to-shoulder, backs to the truck. They wheel around when the headlights dance over them, and their eyes are frozen in a mask of fear, faces contorted into quiet shouts. For a moment they do not move, like deer stuck in headlights, and then they scatter in every direction to avoid the truck. The boy's heart races, hoping that none come towards the truck, but none do. They drive around half the circle and pull onto a road with a sign reading OAK RIDGE LODGE.

The man cranes back in his seat, gazing behind them through the truck's back windows.
The man says, "Did you see that?"
"See what?"
"I thought I saw something."

The lodge is abandoned. Two white vans sit next to it, unused. It is a two-story wooden structure. There is a walk-around portico. All the windows are bolted shut, and a heavy, iron padlock is placed over the door. A sign along the road reads: ADMITTANCE BY RESERVATION ONLY. No dark-walkers are to be seen in any direction. The boy looks over at the man and stops the car beside the portico. He turns off the engine. The silence is engulfing.

In the distance, they can hear howls filling the night.
The sound to the day reminds the man of coyotes.
Everything about the dark-walkers reminds him of some kind of animal.

Because that's all they are. Animals.

Animals driven by the primeval engine of the Mother Nature:

The struggle to survive.

He thinks of the basic impulses of the human creature, that which is innate in all mankind:

The need for shelter.

The need for food.

And the need for sexual gratification.

The man looks at his watch.

"What time is it?" the boy asks.

"It's almost 2:30."

"What should we do?"

"I don't know," the man says.

Mark sits in silence, then opens his door and crawls out.

"Wait..." the man calls after, but already Mark is heading for the lodge.

The man squints out the window, eyeing the trees. No movement of any kind.

"Fuck it," he says, and he gets out of the car.

A cool rain begins to fall, the tiny droplets glinting in the shattered moonlight.

The man is walking after the boy, but the boy turns and approaches the man.

"All the doors are locked," he said. "And there are wooden plates over the windows."

"Why?" the man asks.

"I don't know. Maybe to prevent people from breaking in."

"Shit." He turns around, looks back to the truck. "It'll be safe in the truck. We can leave if anything comes, and—" He turns when he hears the boy moving away. "Now what?" he calls after as the boy reaches one of the vans.

The boy breaks open the small corner of glass in the driver's side window and reaches inside. He is fumbling around for the lock when the man reaches him. He finds the lock and unlocks the door. His arm slides out, and he opens the door. The cab of the van smells of must. Mark cranes his neck inside. There is a solid steel wall between the cab of the van and the back. He ducks down and searches under the seat for the latch. He flicks a small latch.

The man says, "You just opened the gas tank."

"Okay. How about this one?" He flicks another plastic switch.

There is the click of unlocking. The man goes behind the wide white van and opens the back door. It swings open easily. "That's it," he says.

Mark joins him. "Does it open from the inside?"

"Let's see," he says, climbing inside. "Shut the door."

Mark does so. The door opens back up, revealing a grinning man.

"Think we'll be safe?"

"If we're quiet, yes."

"Good," the boy says, and he climbs inside, and they shut the door.

They are immersed in darkness, but it doesn't seem as dark as the night exposed.

The boy falls asleep quickly, despite the cold. The man can hear him breathing in the darkness. He curls up in one of the corners, pulling his knees tight against him. He wishes and yearns to be in that dreaded house, that structure that had once been a home, now a haven to ravenous memories and haunting dreams. There it is warm. There it is safe. He can hear Mark talking in his sleep. "Cara... Cara..." interspersed with mumbling. There is a bang. The man tenses. Then he realizes it was no more than Mark's foot thrusting against the side of the van, his leg twitching in the dream-world. The man clambers through the dark, right hand outstretched, and he finds the boy. He positions him carefully, so as not to wake him, and no more sounds come that night. The man falls asleep, and is awakened only once, when he hears what sounds like sniffing out the van. His heart thumps against his ribs. The unseen creature circulates the van, then leaves, its sniffing and heavy breathing tapering off into the opaque night. And when the man sleeps, he dreams: he sees he and the boy locked in the van, the van resting on a pillar of stone reaching high into the sky, reaching out of the depths of Hell itself, and below them, the souls of a billion dark-walkers, shrieking and tumbling over one another, waiting for their prize, their glee, their delight.

V

The boy is quiet in the morning. The adrenaline is gone. The struggle to survive has vanished, to come only when night falls. No birds sing. A stiff and cold wind blows. The trees hang limp and dead, the last dying leaves scattering to the ground and whisking away. Winter is coming quickly, pushing its head through the door, icicle-teeth grinning like a drunken Cheshire cat. They load into

the truck and head away from the lodge. The trees are empty and bare. No dark-walkers are to be seen in any direction. The man realizes now he has received a privileged glance—if “privileged” is the word one should choose—of the “doings” of the dark-walkers. Every night, with only one exception—that being the night of last—the man has holed himself up in his house, cut off from the world of the night. He tries to figure it out all in his head.

The dark-walkers move in groups. The dark-walkers communicate, though in a primitive sense of the term. The dark-walkers are not pure beasts; there is organization, even if it is subtle. They are not brilliant, but he finds it unsettling at the same time: they are congregating, they are forming communities—in the lesser sense of the word—and they are working together. The man can only be thankful that they will soon be gone: their food source has gone all but dry—how many bones of deer has he seen over the last month? how many fragments of what had once been cats and dogs?—and when winter comes, their bodies will not be able to sustain energy and nutrition, and they will quickly die.

Any consolation in that thought dies as they turn into the circle.

“Holy shit,” the man says, staring forward.

The boy says nothing, only follows the man’s gaze as the truck pulls to a stop.

The morning sunshine breaking through sparse clouds reveals scattered body parts, half chewed, strewn about the middle of the circle. There is no question about what he and the boy are seeing: these are the remains of dark-walkers, killed not by Man, but by the demons themselves. Cannibals.

The man’s throat is dry, and his words are thick as sap. “They’re eating one another.”

“Good,” Mark grows. “Then there will be less of them to worry about.”

The man doesn’t share Mark’s optimism. And he doesn’t share his own thoughts with Mark. That isn’t what Mark wants nor needs. Mark wants only Cara, and that has been nothing short of a hope-filled delusion. The man drives away from the circle, but the thoughts cross his mind like electric lightning:

They’re eating their own.

Why?

Because they’re starving.

They’re killing themselves off.

No. They’re surviving. They have plenty to eat.

The weak are extinguished: the elderly, and the young.

The strong survive.

But what happens when they continue to eat one another, and none are left?

There is no answer to that last question, only an unsettling notion, something just outside of grasp, something that perhaps he speculates but refuses to believe, and thus denies the thought any manifestation in existence. He thinks of the human nature, and of the human impulses, and it sends a shiver up his spine. He convinces himself it is impossible, and they leave Mount Airy Forest far behind.

The streets are deserted.

Chapter Seven

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams

"Better to die, and sleep
The never-waking sleep, than linger on
And dare to live when the soul's life is gone."
- Sophocles (circa 409 BC)

I

The nights grow colder, and the days pass slower. Stubborn winds tear the last dying leaves from the limbs of the trees, leaving nothing but skeletons reaching up with gnarled fingers into the gray and pallid skies. Incessant rains hammer down upon the city, and the Ohio River floods the banks, and water runs down the streets of downtown, carrying with it debris and broken bodies, shattering windows and seeping into the vacant buildings. The cries of the dark-walkers are lost with the thundering of the rain upon the loose shingles on the roof, and with the roaring of the downspouts as the rain turns the grass into a murky slush. Water creeps into the old house, staining the carpet, and the man and the boy wade through two inches of rainwater, scooping it out with buckets and throwing it outside, an endless venture with empty promises. They do not speak much anymore. The boy drowns in his sadness, his hopes having been shattered like a crystal ball thrown into the flames, and the man does not know how to comfort him; and even if he did, the man's energies are sapped and exhausted, his entire body aches, and even the few tears he sheds over Kira come with the price of dry heaves and tingling fingertips.

The rains stop, and the skies turn blue once more, but the cold refuses to dissipate. The man contemplates building some sort of makeshift fireplace, but he decides against it: the risk of fire is too great, and he doesn't appreciate the thought of finding himself running from a burning building into the hungry throngs of the dark-walkers. Instead he treks to LOWE'S HOME IMPROVEMENT several miles up Glenway Avenue, and he takes several battery-operated heaters and sets them about the house. The heat is sparse, for it disappears through the thin house walls, but it is an improvement.

The man finds himself lonely once more. He misses the conversations struck up between him and Mark before the incident at Cara's house. The only sustenance that had kept Mark from going insane over his sister's death had been the hope that he and Cara would be reunited, that in her arms he would find solace and comfort and some stability and foreknowledge, some hope that destiny hadn't scratched his name from the Book of Life and that the favor of fate would shine upon him once more. But Cara had suffered the fate of all the others: she had been transformed into a demon, a "Beautiful Beast." The boy tries not to bring her death into the equation—he knows, logically, that the man had no choice; but yet he knows that his lover has died at the hands of the man whom he lives with—but he still cannot bring himself to talk openly with the man. And so the bond of their friendship stretches, and it nears snapping.

The communion of friendship is absent, and the man now has no distraction from the wonder that had been Kira. He thinks of her often, and he is pained as the memories become foggy and tainted. He sits in bed at night, and by the warm glow from the Petromax lantern, he clutches a wallet-sized picture of Kira, her face shining beautifully at him, eyes sparkling with vibrancy and adoration. He clutches this picture, squeezing it tight in shaking fingers, and not even the cold traversing his spine can tear his eyes from her. His tears freeze and slide down his cheeks as icicles, and he falls asleep with that picture in the vice-grip of his hands. Sleep offers no sanctuary; he dreams often of Kira, and these dreams are fraught with deep horrors. And the dreams are transforming night-after-night as his heart grows more and more calloused: first she is smiling, then she is a dark-walker herself, and the culmination is her slain by his own hand. The dreams shift and contort, and he finds them at the ballet, or walking down a cobblestone path lined with roses and lilies, or they are in the hospital holding their newborn child. In these dreams, which seem to offer some escape, he becomes a monster himself: no, not a dark-walker, but a vicious and deranged lunatic, and he wakes sweating and crying, remembering crisply the dream where he stabbed Kira over and over, with her pleading for her life; where he strangled her in the bed-sheets; where he held her down in the tub, watching with morbid fascination as she kicked and struggled until drowning took her life. He wakes shaking and weeping, and in the darkness he can almost see her thick red blood dripping from his quivering fingers.

The man fears going to sleep. So he paces back and forth in the den, driven mad by the howls of the dark-walkers and his self-imprisonment. He drowns the bottle deep, and he spends his mornings puking out the window and lying sprawled in the sheets, cold sweat beading over his forehead and his heart fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird. He is miserable, but the physical misery is greater than the emotional agony of those god-awful dreams, where he and Kira's fates have switched, and where he is the murderer and she is the victim. It is when he dreams that he is killing his own newborn child—ripping the infant limb-from-limb as Kira and the doctors pound on the bulletproof glass of the observation room—that his sanity truly snaps.

II

The man sits downstairs, at the dining room table, wrapped warm in winter clothes, holding a cup of steaming coffee. A cigarette filter burns in the Mexican ashtray. Mark appears down the hallway, from the ladder leading to the upper level. He quietly walks over, grabs a mug from the cupboard, and pours himself a cup of coffee. He sits down, and the man looks at him: the boy's eyes are bloodshot, and he seems to possess the 20-yard-stare. He doesn't say anything. He looks back down at the steam wafting from his own coffee and hears Mark take a drink.

"In Indiana," Mark says, shattering the quiet, "they had this thing called the Pizza Train. It was this train you could ride around to different sites, and they'd serve you pizza and drinks on the way. It ran on an old railroad track. I remember one weekend, Cara and I went on the Pizza Train with some friends, and we all crashed together at this hotel. It was on an anniversary of my mom and dad's death, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to enjoy the trip, and that Cara would take it personally. I told her that I would probably be upset for most of the trip. She said she understood. But during the trip... I had so much fun. Just being with her, being in her presence, laughing and talking and hanging out with her. The anniversary of the accident didn't bother me much. And it was then that I knew that I would be with her for the rest of my life. She was my deliverance."

The man stares at him, sipping his coffee. "You left your sister on the anniversary of your parents' death?"

The boy is silent, sipping his coffee.

Coffee is the staple morning diet. Sometimes they drink together. This morning, they awake at the same time, and as they drink, the boy speaks: "Every morning, we would go to this coffee shop. We'd order coffee. I always got a drip coffee—Sumatra blend—and she would get an iced coffee. Morning blend. We'd go to Mt. Echo and just drink our coffees. And then I'd go to work. Sometimes it would be a burden to get up that early, you know, especially if Ashlie had a bad night. And I wasn't always in the best mood. I would be grouchy. Sometimes mean. But she would always insist that we do it. It became a ritual. It lost its importance." He lowers his head, a tear in his eye. "All those things... Those rituals... They meant nothing to us back then." He looks up at the man. "But now they mean everything. And it's too late."

It is sixty degrees: a warm and sunny day. Almost paradise. The boy stands in archway of the open front door, gazing out across the lawn, at the trees rising on the other side of the road. The S-10 is parked in the driveway: blood had stained it from when he had hit the little boy and crushed the knees on the adult dark-walker, but the man had cleaned it off. The truck almost looks ceremonial as sunlight reflects harshly off the windshield and front fender. The boy closes his eyes and draws a deep breath. He treks inside and finds the man lighting a cigarette in the kitchen, a half-empty bottle of Norse Whiskey sitting beside his pack of menthol Newports.

"What?" the man asks, lighting the cigarette. The cherry glows bright.

"It's a nice day out," Mark says.

"I saw." He takes a few hits, turns his back on the boy, grips the bottle.

The boy fidgets. "Want to go on a walk? Get some fresh air?"

The man downs a shot, clenches his teeth, sets down the bottle. "No."

"Are you sure?" Mark asks. "You could use the fresh—"

He doesn't turn to face the boy. "I said 'no', damn it. Are you fucking deaf?"

The boy walks down State Avenue to the intersection of 8th Street and Glenway. He heads across the 8th Street viaduct. The wind is high and cool, and he almost doesn't notice the sparse wrecked vehicles. One vehicle is ramped up onto the concrete ledge of the viaduct, one front wheel dangling over the precipice. The boy stands beside the red Miata and looks into the car through a shattered front window. It is vacant. A few bags in the back. He unlocks the door and leans inside, ruffles through the plastic sacks. Nothing but soiled food. An unopened bottle of Diet Mountain Dew. He grabs the bottle and steps away from the car. Screwing off the lid, he leans over the railing and takes a few frigid drinks. The Westside railways below are vacant except for a few parked maintenance vehicles, some gigantic cranes, and a single train with empty boxcars sitting on unused and rusting rails. He watches curiously as a dog meanders about the drags: some kind of collie, with scraggly hair and a loping tongue. He shouts out at the dog; it freezes. The boy calls out again. The dog looks up at him from nearly an eighth of a mile away; it stands stunned on all fours, back arched, tail stiff; and then it turns and darts into the shadows of a warehouse with dust-layered windows. The boy takes another drink and tosses the bottle over the side of the railing, watching the green liquid spiral from the bottle before it hits the ground far below, bleeding its contents into the dust.

The man stirs green beans in a pan of boiling water atop the Bunsen burner. In one hand is the spatula, and in the other a half-smoked cigarette. The boy sits on the sofa in the living room, a cigarette in his own fingers.

"Have you ever gone to the zoo?" Mark asks.

The man doesn't look at him. "Which one?"

"The Cincinnati zoo."

"Once or twice."

"Did you ever go to the Festival of Lights?"

"I don't think so, no."

The boy takes another hit. "Do you know what it is?"

"Yeah."

"They light the whole place up with Christmas lights. Two million of them, I think."

"I said I know what it is."

"Cara and I went there once. One of my friends, Trista, she works... *worked*... there. She usually ran the train—you know, that little train that drives around some of the exhibits? She said she'd always try to hit the peacocks, she didn't like them—but during the Festival of Lights she worked the little theater. They were playing a short segment from that one movie, with Tom Hanks doing the voice-over... It was digital animation... Damn, what was it called..." He takes another drag off the cigarette, and it comes to him. "POLAR EXPRESS. Yeah, that's it. Anyways, she worked there, and she got us in for free. A little bit of snow had fallen, and the pathways were kinda slick, but it wasn't too cold. Not all the animals were out. The rhinos were out. And so were the pandas. And the penguins. Oh, the penguins, they would just stare at the lights and flap their wings, it was the funniest—"

The man yanks the pot off the burner and hurls it into the wall.

The boy goes quiet, eyes wide, the noise ringing in his ears.

Soggy green beans scatter all over the floor tiles.

The man takes several deep breaths. "Stop it," he growls, glaring at the boy. "Just fucking stop. I don't give a shit? All right. I don't fucking care. Cara is dead. She's *dead*. I fucking killed her. So don't go on talking about her like she's still alive. It's not doing you any good, and it's annoying the fucking hell out of me."

Mark's eyes glaze over. Anger boils within him.

The man closes his eyes, flicks the cigarette into the sink.

Mark stands. "You're a bastard."

And he walks out of the room.

III

It had once been an escape for Mark, after his parents had died, and it has become an escape for him once more. It distracts him from the deep and insufferable pain that consumes his heart: he feels as if his heart is bleeding, life dripping from his veins, and he finds himself numb. This is his only way to feel alive once more: seeing his own blood, feeling it trickle down his arm, feeling the pain as the razor cuts deeply and easily; it brings a vibrance and energy that has completely left him. Ashlie is gone. Cara is gone. And the man, for all purposes, has gone, becoming a hollow shell with no emotion save for anger and resentment. So the boy sits in the downstairs bathroom, the door locked, sprawled out in the tub, staring at the whitewashed ceiling with the green shower curtain cocooning

him in his own little realm. He draws the razor against his upper arm, feels the flesh withering, and the warm blood inches down his arm, splattering in pools on the bottom of the porcelain tub.

“What’s the point of living,
when you’re living among the dead?”

The blood is warm, and it chews away at his coldness as the razor chews away at his arm. He takes several deep breaths of air and clenches his teeth. He watches with wide eyes, unable to tear away from the beautiful yet grotesque sight: a mutilated arm. Each gentle caress of the blade in shaking fingers brings more pain and more pleasure. Ashlie feels distant. Cara seems to be but an ephemeral memory, a haunting specter visiting him in his weakest hours.

“So many of these questions
pounding in my head:
Life brings Death, and Death brings Life.”

He does not yet have the courage to embrace that final resolution, but this temporary solvent—the ointment of his own blood on dry and parched skin—is enough to keep him alive, if only by the skin of his teeth. He is hanging onto life by a few meager threads, and that resolution that seems so distant draws closer with each flick of the blade. He closes his eyes and leans back in the tub. He feels the blood snaking down his arm. Electrifying, bright-red blood. Life flowing from his veins. He doesn’t mind. His life has already left him: it abandoned him when Ashlie fell into the hands of the dark-walkers, torn limb from limb; and any semblance of life vanished when the back of Cara’s head exploded with the rampage bullet, and her blood covered his clothes as she lay atop of him, a lifeless corpse, an unimaginable fate.

“As I stand here with a knife,
the blade shaking in my palm,
I beg of you:
Give me one reason to live life on.”

What else does he have? The answer is simple: all he has is this razor and the stillborn heart beating rebelliously behind his ribs. The man is right: there is no God. There is no rhythm, no reason, no rhyme to life. There is no destiny, and there is no fate. There is only chance. Mankind is a machine, a concoction of animal impulses delivered by biochemical reactions in the brain. There is no spark of divinity within the human creature; there is only its base animal instincts, and a “morality” programmed by society’s rules and regulations. The world came into being randomly, without reason, and by chance life developed, and evolved, and reached its “pinnacle” in mankind. But is mankind such a unique creature? How is he different than the others? Is he different because of emotions? But what are emotions? Fluctuations of dopamine and serotonin in the brain. Is he different because he has the capability of love? Love is a farce, a manipulative force guided by selfishness and greed. One loves that which caters to him, that which answers his bidding and calling, and delivers the fulfillment of his needs. Tears now stream down the boy’s cheeks. The razor drives deeper and deeper. Beautiful, excruciating pain. The animal mutilates itself, finally understanding that his only duty is to survive—and when survival becomes tougher than resignation, it is his selfishness and greed that draws him to bring the blade to his wrist.

"Through my wrist the knife goes,
blood seeping down and covering my clothes.
Through my death I find new life,
and in death I escape the night."

He cuts slowly at first, his pulse quickening. His palm is outstretched, fingers curled upwards like a dead spider. The blood runs down his wrist and gathers in his palm. A murky pool that reflects the mask of what had once been an ambitious boy with hopes and dreams and aspirations; a boy who had selflessly given himself over to taking care of his beloved sister; a boy who had been driven by the desire to love and be loved, a desire which became nothing but ash running between his fingers like sand in a sieve.

"Slowly I get weaker,
releasing all the thoughts in my head.
But only one remains:
'What's the point of living,
when you're living among the dead?'"

The razor drops from his fingers. He takes several deep breaths, feeling the blood flow. Something inside him snaps, a great and hovering fear. He clammers from the bathtub; his blood stains the green shower curtain red. He draws several thick swabs of toilet paper and wraps his wrist. He sits upon the toilet, terror engulfing him. That great void of death, having seemed so distant and now seeming so close, fills him with great dread. He sits upon the toilet, feeling his heartbeat with his finger. For twenty minutes he sits. His heartbeat grows weaker, then stronger. An hour passes. He slowly unwraps the bloodstained toilet paper. Flicks of tissue stick to the deep cuts. He takes a deep breath: he had not cut deep enough. He throws the bloody toilet paper into the trashcan and wraps his bleeding wrist anew. The wounds are already beginning to clot. He leaves the bathroom and says nothing to the man, who sits quietly on the sofa drinking cognac. The bloodied razor blade sits abandoned in the tub.

IV

Terrible dreams have accosted him, and now the man stands downstairs. The dark-walkers prowl about outside, but the fence keeps them from the back yard, and all the doors are barricaded tightly. The man smokes his last cigarette and stares into the burning Bunsen burner. On the counter are his diaries, four of them, detailing day-by-day his life with Kira. He puts the cigarette out on the counter and takes each journal, one-by-one, and tears each page lined with cryptic ink, and wads them together and burns them upon the burner. The burning embers scatter in the darkness, and all that remains are ashes. An hour passes, and the empty notebooks with their worn metal spiral bindings sit on the counter. He finds a half-empty box of MARLBORO REDS and lights a cigarette. He stares at the Bunsen burner with morbid fascination. In his hands now is Kira's iron cross; and holding it with tweezers, he places it over the burner. The flames lick up and scorch the metal. It becomes red with heat, then drips in metallic droplets, splattering over the counter and into the red-hot coils of the

burner. Each droplet disintegrates, and he tosses the tweezers aside and trudges to the other end of the kitchen. He uncorks a bottle of liquor and takes several gulps. The alcohol burns in his throat. He sets it aside and lights another cigarette.

In the morning, the boy finds the man sprawled out on the floor, snoring heavily. He quickly dresses and kneels beside the man. He shakes the man by the shoulder, and he awakes. His eyes flutter, the lids lined with crust. He speaks in a slur. The boy tells him he is going to borrow the truck. The man says no. The boy says ok, stands, and walks out the front door. The man falls asleep once again, and he doesn't hear the engine ignite and then taper into the distance as Mark drives away.

The morning is cold and crisp, the skies dotted with low-hanging clouds ripe with rain. The boy parks the truck beside the apartment complex and stares into the apartment window where he had spent much time gazing out in thought and contemplation. He turns off the engine and goes inside. The air is damp and cold, stinking of musk. He takes the stairwell slowly, reaching his landing. He pushes open the door and steps into the room. It is just how they had left it. He meanders into the bedroom. There remains dried blood on the sheets, the walls, even the ceiling. He closes his eyes, and he can hear Ashlie's screams; and he can see as if it were still happening the dark-walkers grabbing her by both arms and pulling until her arm rips off in a spray of blood and shrieks. He opens his eyes, and it is quiet. He takes several breaths and tries to collect himself. He browses the framed photos on his dresser. Images of Ashlie. Images of Cara. The memories swim over him. He reaches into his pocket and lights a cigarette. He breathes deep, closes his eyes, and remembers...



The sand between his toes. The gulls crying out their melancholy sonnets. The stars twinkling above. The waters lapping at the shore. The boardwalk is alight with burning lanterns and the sound of acoustic guitar. Couples meander together, holdings hands, kissing, arms wrapped around one another. The air is warm, electric with energy, hope, promise. Moments pass, and they are lying in the sand, kissing, eyes closed, oblivious to everything. Fireworks burst above them, raining down incendiaries of all the colors of the rainbow. Handel's "Firework Music" echoes over the beach, nearly drowned in the quiet kisses of the waves upon the pearl sands.

She has come over for a pizza dinner. Ashlie is at her friend's house. She enters the apartment door with her key, and she stands rooted in awe. A row of candles is running along the carpet, the flames flickering briefly. She follows the path slowly, and she enters the bedroom: candles and rose petals surround the bed, and upon the bed is a blanket laid out for a picnic by candlelight. The pizza sits on paper plates, and he smiles as he holds up the bottle of champagne.

Their first moment together. An underground concert at a cheap venue. Bands with strange names and music that all sounds alike. A great storm rages outside, and the lights are extinguished. He reaches out and takes her hand, and he pulls her close and holds her tight. In the darkness they are alone, and people are laughing and shouting, and the band continues to play despite the power, but they do not notice any of this. They only know each other, their secret crushes unfurled, ecstasy drowning as they look into each other's eyes in the semi-dark. He smiles and leans forward, and they kiss; they leave the concert and sit outside under the overhang, the rain hammering down. The entire night passes as they talk, conversation that feels like eternity and not long enough.

Sitting on wooden benches at Newport on the Levee, watching the river and the Cincinnati skyline. Cigarettes in their fingers. Talking about all kinds of things. Suddenly she leans forward, eyes wide. He asks what's wrong. She exclaims, "I think I saw a shark!" He explains to her that there are no sharks in the Ohio River. She is adamant. "Maybe it swam in from the ocean!" He just laughs and holds her tight. They laugh together. "I'm such an idiot," she says, and he kiddingly agrees.

Several inches of snow has fallen. They run outside, dressed tight and looking like Eskimo children. They throw snowballs at one another, and he tackles her, and they roll around in the snow, laughing hysterically, tears of enjoyment sliding down their cheeks. They hold one another, ignorant of the arctic cold, and peer into one another's vibrant eyes and cold-blotched cheeks. Together they make snow angels in the soft powder, and they even build a snow couple holding hands. He adds a carrot as a penis and two Oreo cookies as balls. He jokingly says, "His penis and balls are in no way proportional." She bites her lip, smiles at him, remarks, "No, they're just built like you. Giant penis. Small balls."

The rain falls in drenching torrents, and the basement is flooding, but they don't care. They rush outside in the August rains, spinning around and dancing. Lightning arcs across the sky in a panorama of electricity. Thunder shakes the ground beneath their feet. They stand under the blossoms of an apple tree, and he runs a finger across her rain-slick cheek. And as the lightning dances and the thunder rolls, they kiss, their tongues entwining, forgetting everyone and everything. The only thing that is real, the only thing touchable and tangible, is their love—and that will never die.

ΣΩΣ

Now the boy is standing out on the balcony of the apartment, overlooking an overgrown hedgerow. His third cigarette is smoldering. He tosses it to the ground and stomps it out. He grips the railing and looks up at the sky. A raindrop falls onto his pale knuckles, icy cold. He draws a deep and piercing breath. He and Cara. Pure romance. Lovers—almost. He knows what he must do. It has never been so clear. Their love will never die, and that is the only TRUTH in existence. He grits his teeth with bitter resignation and heads inside, confident that there is only one escape from this nightmare.

Ashlie has gone.

Cara has gone.

And soon, he will be with them.

V

It is an early dinner. The man doesn't seem to mind that Mark ran off, at least now that he has returned. They eat quietly: baked beans. The man's face is his usual placid scowl, but the man notices that the boy's face seems more radiant, more peaceful, as if the angst and anxiety has gone.

Mark fingers his fork. "Do you want to know my greatest regret?"

The man shakes his head. "No."

"I never told her I loved her. I wanted to, but she was afraid of falling in love. She was convinced that 'love is a hoax'. People claiming to love her had hurt her in her past, and she didn't want to be hurt again. I wanted so badly to tell her that I loved her—and I *still* love her, with everything within me—but I was frightened of scaring her away." He swirls the baked beans in his ceramic bowl. "I should have told her that I loved her."

The man says, "We should have done lots of things differently."

"But we can't change that now."

"No. We can't."

"All we can do is hold ourselves accountable for our mistakes."

The man excuses himself. He goes upstairs, leaving Mark alone. Mark fumbles around in his jeans pocket and withdraws an envelope. He sets it on the counter, takes one last look around, and leaves the confinement of the house, quietly disappearing into the street, heading south, towards the river.

The man comes back downstairs. He doesn't notice that Mark is gone, and it takes him nearly half an hour to notice the envelope on the counter. A spark of fear erupts within him as he gingerly tears it open. He pulls out a sheet of yellowed notebook paper, upon which are several scribbled lines. He reads it in the dying light of the evening:

I remember when I was happy. I remember when I smiled and laughed, and when my dreams were coming true right before my eyes. I remember, and the remembrance aches, because I lost that which I loved, and the beauty of my life has become an unceasing nightmare. I am broken and hurting. Tragedy upon tragedy is thrust upon me. Tears have become my daily diet—they soil my pillow day and night. What incredible evil have I done that life has become so wretched? I dream of cutting my wrists, and the dream brings comfort. She made me smile; now it is the thought of suicide that brings me the same comfort. I dream of my greatest masterpiece, an epic painted in blood with the brush being none other than serrated knives and the canvas my own flesh. I dreamt last night that I cut my own wrists at the Overlook at Mt. Echo, where Cara and I held one another for the last time. I felt the blood flowing, and it felt so *right*. When I awoke, I realized that I shall never again feel alive. I have no way out, save for this single dark avenue. I cannot hold onto hope that things will get better, for what *is* hope? Hope is barbed wire: the tighter I squeeze, the more painful it becomes. Hope? Fuck it. FUCK IT. Hope is a fairytale we concoct to keep ourselves breathing when we should be dead. And I should be dead. My life is a nightmare, my existence a living hell. All I want to do is die: catch a bullet in the head or a cold blade against my wrists. I used to laugh, I used to smile, I used to love. And now I am bent over in agony, crying endlessly day-and-night. Life is a torture-chamber: broken dreams, shattered hopes, vacant destinies. Where is the Executioner to bring me out of this miserable existence? I don't want to live anymore. I don't want to see her face in my dreams, to remember her precious laughter in all those sweet-yet-poisonous memories. Death. Wonderful, beautiful, fantastic death. I am losing my fucking mind because I lost all that I fucking love. The words of Charles Sanders Pierce resonate within me: "If man were immortal, he could be perfectly sure of seeing the day when everything in which he had trusted should betray his trust, and, in short, of coming

eventually to hopeless misery. He would break down, at last, as every good fortune, as every dynasty, as every civilization does. In place of this, we have Death."

The man stares at the letter, and he realizes his hands are shaking.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

It's all he can say as his world begins to shred apart at the seams.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

A newfound energy floods his veins. He grips the letter in his hands and runs through the front door, into the dying day.

The sun is beginning to set.

They will soon own the night.

"How'd you know I'd be here?"

The man stands behind him at the Mt. Echo overlook. "You mentioned this place in your note. And I found you here a couple weeks ago."

Mark's voice is low and calm. "It's the last place we were together."

"Don't do this, Mark," the man says. "This isn't going to make things right."

"What are you talking about?" Mark demands. "You don't know what it's like."

The man loses it: something snaps within, and he grabs Mark by the shoulder and throws him into the rusted iron railing. "I lost someone, too!" he snarls, glaring into Mark's shell-shocked, wide-soaking eyes. "Why the hell do you think I blocked off that damned room? And why the hell do you think blood covered everything—the bed, the sheets, the wall, the floor? She became one of them, Mark. She became a monster—just like Cara. I may have killed Cara, but I had to kill my fiancé, too! She threw herself upon me, and I stabbed her over and over until she bled to death." He takes several deep breaths: his voice is shaking, and his fingers are tingling. "I fucking loved her. She was fucking everything to me, and now she's fucking gone! And it hurts like hell. I think about her all the fucking time. Don't tell me I don't know what it's like. I had to watch as those fuckers dragged my fiancé's arm out of her grave, with our engagement ring still on her finger. Do you think I haven't been tempted to kill myself? I've tried, but I failed. I tried several times, but I couldn't do it. Why? Maybe because I'm a coward. Or maybe because I refuse to give up hope. Because, deep down, I refuse to believe that this is the end. I refuse to believe that this is it, that there's nothing left. We're here, Mark. You and me. And there are others. And everything will be okay. We just have to survive the night. So don't give me any of this bullshit about me not understanding. I understand too fucking well."

He releases him, draws a deep breath. Mark is stunned.

The man gathers himself, speaks collectively: "And that's why I'm not going to drag you kicking-and-screaming back to the house. This is your decision. You make the call. Want to kill yourself? Fine. I understand. I understand perfectly. I won't force you to come back. Want to cut your wrists? Do it. Want to jump off this railing? Then do it. I'm going to leave, and I'm not going to come back looking for you. I'll give you that much respect. You're a good kid, Mark. A good fucking kid. And you can make your own decisions. I'll let you do that. But I'll be back at the house. I want you to come back. I don't want to do this alone, but I will if I have to. You probably have another hour before night falls. It only takes about twenty minutes to run back. So you'd better make up your mind damned fast."

Mark only watches as the man gets back into the truck and drives away.

The sun sinks lower behind the western hills.

The deep forests of naked trees are becoming enshrouded in shadow.

Chapter Eight

The Screams of the Damned

"Must not all things at the last be swallowed up in death?"

- Plato (427-347 BC)

I

It is the longest night the man has experienced in quite some time, for the boy does not return. He waits till the last moment to shut, lock, and barricade the front door, and defeatedly scales the ladder to the upper floor and draws it up. He sits with his legs dangling above the hewn stairs for about an hour, staring at the front door, masked in gloomy shadows, hoping. But his hopes are dashed, for the silhouettes of dark-walkers can be seen through the veiled window in the moonlit haze outside. The man's body feels weighted down as he enters the den and sits upon the bed with the sheets awash. He fondles the Russian rifle and stares at the blank, whitewashed wall, hearing the howls of the dark-walkers, before he falls into a fitful sleep. He dreams that he is opening the front door, and the boy is entering; but it is no longer the boy, for his eyes are blood-red, and his fingernails shine a ghastly pale yellow. He lunges at the man, teeth gnashing, and the man awakes with a scream.

But it is not his scream that wakes him.

It is the scream of another.

And it comes from within the house.

The man's heart turns to stone in his chest, and it recedes only a little when he realizes rays of sunshine are coming between the cracks in the heavy thermal blanket covering the window. He snatches the Russian rifle that sits upon the floor, and he creeps into the hallway. The screams are louder now. The ladder lies to his side along the wall. He crouches and peers down into the cavern of the ground floor below; he sees a single figure standing in the doorway, with a screaming creature in its arms. The man's eyes adjust, and he recognizes the standing figure is Mark. The one in his hands is a mystery. A curse escapes the man's mouth as he leaps down, ankles burning upon impact. He swings the rifle around, aims it at the figure in Mark's arms. Mark, looking disheveled and wearing a worn face with tattered and mud-stained clothes, goes wide-eyed as he protests with a virulent "No!" The man's heart hammers in his chest. He closes his eyes, draws several deep breaths. He lets the rifle slide from his fingers. It clatters on the hardwood floor. He opens his eyes again. Mark looks relieved.

"She has a fever," Mark says. "She's shaking, and she won't stop."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. I found her at the park. Right after you left."

"Okay." He stands motionless, mind clicking. "Let's put her in the living room."

The man carries her legs and Mark carries her arms, and she squirms and fights in their grasp. Her eyes are wide as saucers, filled with immaculate terror. They lie her down on the beer-stained and odor-ridden sofa. They back away. She curls into a fetal position upon the sofa, shivering under her ragged clothes, breaths coming in sharp and painful gasps. She watches them, like a caged animal, eyes darting between the two figures. The man figures she is eight or nine years old. Any

other day and she would be a bespectacled, nerdy kid running around, kicking clumsily at a kickball in the park. Now she has been degraded into something barely above a monster.

"What's your name?" the man asks slowly.

She doesn't answer.

Mark says, "We're not going to hurt you."

She opens her mouth as if to say something, and then she bends over and vomits onto the floor. Thick, putrid vomit, brilliant green speckled with saliva-strands of blood.

She cries and falls asleep. The man walks over to the kitchen table and lights a cigarette. He stands smoking. The boy joins him, takes one for himself. He lights the cigarette, then sets it down, grabs a towel out of a kitchen drawer, and then dips it in a bucket filled with distilled water. He goes over to the sofa and places the wet towel over the little girl's forehead. She mumbles incoherently in her sleep. She clutches one of the leather cushions as if it were a buoy and she were sinking in the ocean. Mark rejoins the man, and they stand smoking in the kitchen.

"I'm glad you're alive," the man says. "If it means anything."

"Not really," Mark says. "But thanks."

The man finishes his cigarette and snuffs it out on the table. "How'd you find her?"

The boy holds the dwindling cigarette in his fingers as he talks. "After you left, I heard screams coming from the woods. It scared me at first, but then I heard crying in the screams. Like someone was sobbing and screaming at the same time. So I ran into the woods—it was dark, and foolish, I know—and I followed the stone trail down near the creek. She was under the bridge, curled into a ball, soaked from the creek, because it was overflowing. She screamed when she saw me, but I spoke to her, and I think that calmed her down a bit. I was trying to get her to trust me when we heard them coming into the forest, howling at one another like they do. A whole bunch of them, coming from the north into the woods. I grabbed her by the hand and we took off. I knew we couldn't go back the way I'd come, because that just led to the overlook, and we'd be pinned by them with nowhere to go. So we took off down the creek-bed. The sides of the creek rose up on either side of us as we ran, or walked quickly, I guess. I had her by the hand, and her legs seemed unable to move. Eventually I just picked her up, and she fought me, but that's when they got close. She stopped fighting. They were coming down the creek-bed behind us. I kept running. I slipped a couple times but never fell. Water came up to my waist at times, and I kept imagining one of them being under the water, grabbing me by the ankles, yanking me down until I was totally submerged. The creek-bed went downhill a ways, and it opened up into a little meadow filled with junk. The meadow was no more than a few trees and dried grass, but there were mattresses, old television sets, box-springs, plastic chairs, and all kinds of other junk down there. The meadow went over a rise and down towards Route 50. Right along the road was a church surrounded by a high-wire fence with curled barbed wire on the top. I remembered passing it every now and again with Cara, and we'd always wonder why the church was fenced in. We thought it was dumb at the time, but now I couldn't be more thankful. The gate was unlocked, so we went through, and I shut it and locked it behind us. We got into the church through one of the stained glass windows. There was a pile of bricks near the shed, so I grabbed one and just chucked it through. We crawled inside, and I set her down in the dark, and I pushed a heavy pew against the window. I then took her to the baptistery and lowered her inside. She was sweating coldly, shivering, she had the fever. Maybe the coldness had gotten to her. I don't know. Whatever it is, she's still got it. But I lowered her into the baptistery and found a blanket in a backroom and wrapped her up in it. I stayed there in the baptistery with her all night. The dark-walkers never got through the fence, I don't think, but we sure as hell could hear them.

When daylight came, they were gone, and we went through the fence and made our way back here. She was doing fine for a little while, but then she broke out into the fever again, the cold sweats, the shivering... And she screams. God, she screams."

"I know," the man says. "Her screams woke me up."

Mark lights another cigarette. "Hell of a night."

"So she was fine earlier and now she's sick?"

"Yeah. It came and went several times throughout the night."

"Maybe it's just a cold. Or the flu."

"I don't know," Mark says, looking at the girl.

"You have a bad feeling about it?"

"What? Me? No. She'll be fine."

II

The next morning she is wide awake. The man goes downstairs to check on her, half fearing she will be dead, and finds her sitting on the sofa, playing with her golden curls. She smiles at him and thanks him for keeping her safe. He finds himself stunned at the apparent flux in her health, but he says thank you and calls for the boy. She is ecstatic to see the boy, and she runs up to him and gives him a gigantic hug. The man opens a can of peaches, and she devours them hungrily. A can of pears is peeled back, and she eats most of those, as well. She sits at the kitchen table, juice running down the sides of her mouth, eyes alight. She tells them her name is Lindsey—"Miss Lindsey Campbell"—and they give her their names. Mark takes her for a tour of the house.

The next morning, she is curled up on the sofa, a pile of bloody vomit staining the carpet.

It becomes expected: every two or three days, she is struck with intense fever, shivering, vomiting, and sometimes convulsions. When the convulsions strike, Mark holds her gently and lets it pass. Sometimes she spits up on his shirt. She doesn't remember the incidents at all, as if her brain shuts down. Mark finds the bucket for waste tainted red, and he asks Lindsey about it, and she tells him that she peed red that morning.

"Did it hurt?" he asks.

"No," she says. "It didn't hurt."

She is fine all evening, but by nightfall, she complains of being cold. She sleeps next to Mark upstairs, and he gives her all of his extra covers so that she will keep warm. It doesn't help. He feels her forehead, and it is burning: it feels as if he is placing his palm against a lit stove. He checks her fever every hour. Her fingertips begin to twitch, and then her limbs quiver. A cold sweat breaks over her forehead. All he can do is watch with tears in his eyes as she leans over and pukes onto the floor: bloody, reeking vomit. All night long this continues, and Mark eventually falls asleep. When he awakes, she is gone. He is panicked, and he races downstairs, only to find her scolding the man for smoking—"You know it's not good for you!" The man doesn't seem to care, and Mark asks that he doesn't smoke around the girl.

The girl is feeling better one day, and Mark decides to take her to the grocery. They hop into the truck and drive to the Kroger's on Warsaw Avenue. One of the large glass windows is already shattered from the man's excursions to the grocery, so Mark and the girl simply hop through. The cash registers are cold and layered with a heavy filament of dust, and several carts are pushed together

like a deck of cards in a corral. The place stinks of spoiled milk, and packets of once-fresh meat are now laden with maggots that have torn through the plastic-wrap coverings. They wander between the aisles, and the girl fills a shopping cart with her favorite foods: donuts, brownies, maple cookies, ho-hos. They head to the canned goods aisle, where most of the cans have been taken. He grabs a few and throws them into the cart. He browses some Spam, takes one, looks at the paper wrap around the can, and places it into the cart.

They are heading back to the front to bag their goods when the girl says, "They would have gotten me in the woods if you didn't save me."

"Maybe," Mark says. "But they might not have found you. You could have hidden."

"No. They would have found me. They always find you."

The boy stands beside one of the registers. "Paper or plastic?"

"My big brother worked at a grocery store. He liked bagging plastic better."

"Plastic it is, then," and he starts bagging their groceries.

She fidgets in the shadows, curling her hair with a single finger. "Can I tell you something?"

Mark looks over at her, pauses. "Yeah. Sure. Of course."

"I think you should know."

"Okay..."

"Daddy died when the disease came. He was sleeping upstairs and just died in his sleep. Everyone died, except me, my big brother, and Mommy. Mommy cried a lot. So did my brother. I did, too, but I tried not to. Daddy always told me that big girls don't cry. But he was dead, and we had to bury him. We took him to a cemetery and buried him. That was before they started coming out at night. We didn't expect them at all, and Jason, he died. They got him. He was keeping Mommy and me safe, and they killed him. But they didn't get us. Mommy told me that he was a real man, and that he was just doing what had to be done. She cried a lot more, but she always talked about him like he was a hero. Some wanderers found us. They called themselves wanderers. They came from a big city. Indianapolis, I think. All of them survived. We joined on with them. Mommy was really protective of me at first, but none of them tried to hurt me. They were good people. They were going to New York City. They thought there were more survivors there. They said they heard it on the radio. So we were on our way to New York City, and our car broke down, and we were in the country, so we couldn't find anywhere to stay. Lots of them died. But Mommy hid me in the car and locked all the doors, and she covered us with blankets. I cried a lot that night. We could hear them outside. They didn't try to get in, though. In the morning they were gone. They're always gone in the morning. Mommy and I were alone, and we found another car. A truck. Kinda like the one you drive. It was at this old farmhouse, and she found the keys inside the house. On the radio we heard that there were survivors here in Cincinnati, and —"

The boy's ears perk up. "You mean more than just me and —"

"Yeah. A whole bunch of survivors."

"Where?" His heart sprints. Adrenaline tingles in the tips of his fingers.

"I forgot where. Some church. On the Eastside. Mom called it the Eastside."

"I've never heard of the Eastside Church."

"It's in the Eastside. It has a weird name."

"Okay," Mark says.

The girl continues her story, as if her news of a survivor's holdout means nothing at all. "So Mommy and me were staying at this house close to here when they got inside. Mommy locked me in a closet and pushed furniture on the door to keep them from getting me. She told me she'd be okay. But I could hear her screaming. I was in the closet for two days. I finally got out, and there was blood

all over the place. But Mommy was gone. I knew she would want me to find the survivors, so I tried to get there, but I didn't know which way to go. I stayed in houses every night. One night one of them attacked me, but I escaped. I ran and ran and wound up under that bridge. And that's where you found me."

Mark stares at the girl. "You've been through a lot."

"Mommy always said I was a fighter. Daddy said it, too."

"Your mom and dad are right," Mark says.

The girl is playing in the backyard, climbing among the bare branches of the fallen oak, oblivious to the cold and the sparse snowflakes falling in an early December mist. Mark watches her from the window of the kitchen. The man comes in from the garage, wiping greasy hands with a worn towel. He watches Mark for a few moments.

"She's sick," the man says. "Really sick."

"I know," Mark says. "But she's getting better."

"No, she's not," he replies. "It comes in waves. And her symptoms are getting worse."

"How would you know?" Mark demands, glaring at him. "You aren't with her at night."

"I can hear her," he says. "And I can see it in your eyes. You know she's getting worse."

Mark turns away, watches her fall to the ground, laughing and rolling in the grass.

The man lights a cigarette. "I wouldn't get too attached."

Mark winces at those words. "Why do you think she's so sick?"

"Who knows?" the man asks. "She's just a kid. Kids get sick."

"Maybe it's the cold."

"I don't know."

"Or maybe she caught something in the woods."

"Again," the man says, "I don't know."

"I just wish I could help her," Mark says. "Make her better."

"You can't. There aren't any doctors."

"I know," Mark says. "That just makes it that much worse. She's so innocent. Look at her."

The man peeks out the window. She is dancing around, mouth wide open, trying to catch snowflakes on the tip of her tongue. Her eyes sparkle like newfound diamonds. The man sighs, takes another hit. "No one's innocent anymore."

III

The first snow falls, only a light grazing that speckles the brown and curled grass with white dust. The air is cold and the heaters are barely working. The man goes to get more heaters and sets them about the house. He is able to lug a portable generator from a home appliance store, and he carries it to the house in the bed of the truck and sets the generator in the garage. It takes him a few days to get it working, and then he runs extension cords into every room, even tracing them up the wall into the upper story, pinning the cords between closely-hammered nails in the wall. The girl gets sicker, and for a time it seems as if she will never be better. Her shoulders protrude against her pale, taught skin, and her ribs become a washboard upon her chest. She is weak and coughs. Mark's face is etched in worry. The man can see that Mark has found another sister, and he is dedicating himself to her; perhaps he can justify Ashlie's death by caring for this little girl? The man believes it to be a false hope. She is only getting sicker.

The symptoms subside, and one morning she is dancing around the living room, laughing and singing children's songs. "This is the song that never ends, it goes on and on my friend! Some people started singing it, not knowing what it was, and they continued singing it forever just because this is the song that never ends, it goes on and on my friend! Some people started singing it..." The man tells her several times to stop, but she refuses, leaping around. He tries to catch her, but she escapes him. Finally he grabs her and begins tickling her. She laughs hysterically, and they fall onto the floor, sprawled over one another. She continues to laugh, her blond hair falling before her azure eyes, and the man takes deep gulfs of air, the laughter searing smoke-ridden lungs. A great smile dapples across his face.

"They sound like dogs, don't they?" the girl asks. Mark, the man, and the girl are sitting upstairs in the man's bedroom. The howls can be heard as the dark-walkers awake and rise to prowl the dark streets once more.

"Yes, they do," Mark says. "Very mean dogs."

She nods in agreement. "Very mean."

The man hands the girl a donut, then gives one to Mark.

The girl munches on it happily. "They're not like they are in the movies, are they?"

"What's that?" Mark asks.

"Them. Outside."

"In the movies? What movies?"

"I used to see them in movies. Daddy liked to watch them."

The man asks, "You mean zombie movies?"

She eyes him, a whimsical look on her face. "Zombies? What are zombies?"

Mark taps her on the shoulder. "What are *you* talking about?"

"Vampires, of course," she says. "Everyone knows they're vampires."

A chill runs up the man's spine. "No," he says, defiant. "They're not vampires."

"Mommy always said they were vampires. So did the others."

"They're not vampires."

"Then what are they?"

"They're sick people," the man says. "That's all. Just sick people."

"Nope," the girl chimes. "They're obviously vampires."

The man opens his mouth to speak; Mark cuts him off. "Why are you so sure they're vampires, Lindsey? I mean, why can't they just be sick people?"

"Because they only come out at night. And they drink blood."

"Have you ever seen them drink blood?"

"They kill people to get their blood. It makes them powerful."

"Vampires aren't real," the man says. "They're just a legend. A myth."

"Nope," she coos, unyielding. "They're vampires. I don't know why you won't admit it."

The man's temples flare.

Mark interrupts, "Why don't we talk about something else, okay?"

The girl's eyes light up. "Can we play Paddy-cake?"

"I don't know how," Mark says. "But you can teach me."

The man stands and leaves the room.

Mark watches him go.

The girl grabs his hand. "Look! I'm trying to teach you!"

He turns back to her. "Okay. Sorry. I'm watching."

"Okay. This is how you play..."

Mark awakes the next morning to find Lindsey sitting on the sofa, neck craned to the side, eyes wide, foam at the mouth. Alarm ripples through him. He screams for the man and runs over to the girl. He takes her by the hand. Her fingers are shaking. He places his forefinger behind her ear, feels her pulse. The heart rate has accelerated. The man comes down from the upper level and joins him. They lie her down on the sofa. Her neck is stiff, and they can see her eyes darting back and forth, terrified. She makes guttural utterances, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. Mark dabs away some of the foam from her swollen lips.

"Rabies?" the man asks.

"Why the hell would she have rabies?"

"People with rabies foam at the mouth."

"Dogs foam at the mouth when they're hungry. It doesn't mean anything."

"I don't think she's just hungry."

Words fumble through her mouth: "Can't... breathe..."

"She's suffocating," the man says.

Mark grabs her shirt and tries to pull it off, but her stiff arms at her side refuse to budge.

The man glares at him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"She can't breathe. Maybe her shirt's constricting her. Look at how tight it is."

The man walks into the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Mark demands. "Shit."

The man returns with a knife. Mark steps aside. The man bends over the girl, gently running the serrated blade against the shirt. It rips and tears, fibers curling. The two halves of the shirt peel away, revealing her washboard ribs and sunken tummy. Their hearts are caught in their throat.

"What the *fuck*?" the man gasps, stumbling back.

Mark just stares. "What the hell is that?"

The man looks over at him, eyed deadened. "She was bitten."

A small set of teeth marks is set in her abdomen, right below the ribs. They had pierced the skin but are now covered with dark scabs. The area around the bite wound is a red concentric circle, with alternating ovals of black and blue. Olive speckles are tracing out from the wound, looking like mold spreading over yeast, branching out, taking over. The girl's chest moves in and out easier now, but the man and the boy have forgotten as they stare at the wound.

Mark chants under his breath, "Ring around the rosie... Pockets full of posies..."

The man looks at him. "What?"

"A funeral rhyme. From the Middle Ages. Children used to sing it."

"That's morose."

"It was about the bubonic plague," Mark says, almost in a whisper.

The man bends down and runs a finger over the wound. The girl squirms. "It's like jelly."

"What?"

"Her stomach. By the wound. It feels like jelly."

"Shit," the boy says. "Maybe this is why she's sick."

The man has a thought, spoken as if its mention gives it power: "What if she turns into one of them?"

"That only happens with zombies. And they're not zombies, remember?"

The man bites his lip. "I don't know anymore."

Mark keeps watch over the girl. Snow is falling again. The man takes the truck up to the library on Glenway, and he returns with a set of books in his hands. He sets them down on the table as he sheds off his leather jacket laden with melting snowflakes. The snow is falling harder now, and the winds are making the house walls creak and groan. He sits down at the kitchen table as Mark attends to the girl. He is trying to clean the wound with antiseptic. The girl protests, but she's too weak to fend him off. "It's okay," Mark says; "It's okay. I'm just trying to help you." The man flips through the pages filled with medical terminology he doesn't understand. He gets nowhere quickly; taking a pad of paper and a pen, he writes down the symptoms they've seen, and he goes down each disease until he finds one that matches. It takes nearly three hours. The girl's condition hasn't gotten any better, but at least now she is sleeping.

Mark sits down across from him. "Any luck?"

"I don't know. This book is so fucking vague."

"What is it?"

"An encyclopedia of diseases. I've found one that might fit."

"How bad is it?"

"Pretty fucking bad. The worst part is, there's no cure. It's only preventable before it hits."

"Shit." Mark runs a hand through greasy hair. "Okay. What disease is it, then?"

"I could be wrong... But it explains her shivering, vomiting, fever... Her red urine... It explains why it fluctuates every couple days. And it explains the abnormal posturing—her head being twisted to the side, her arms stiff."

"Foaming at the mouth?"

"No. Nothing in there about that. But that doesn't mean it's not connected somehow."

"What disease is it?"

The man takes a breath. "Malaria."

Mark lets it sink in. "You mean that African disease? Transmitted by mosquitoes?"

"Yeah. It says here... Let me find it... It says that malaria is caused by protozoan parasites, whatever the hell that means. Of the genus *Plasmodium*. Only four types of *Plasmodium* can infect humans: *Plasmodium falciparum*, *Plasmodium vivax*, *Plasmodium ovale*, and *Plasmodium malariae*. And the parasites are transmitted by female mosquitoes of the... I don't know how to pronounce this... of the *Anopheles* genus. The parasites latch onto red blood cells and thus spread throughout the body, slowly... killing the victim."

Mark shakes his head. "No."

"It fits her symptoms."

"It's fucking December. There aren't any mosquitoes around here."

"Then how do you explain it?"

"I don't think we're dealing with malaria. I think we're dealing with something else."

"Then what? If it's not malaria, what is it? Cause I've spent the last three hours looking through this fucking book."

"I don't think you'll find it in that book. Or in any of the others."

"Because..."

"Because it's a new disease. The same disease that killed everyone but us and a few others, except now it's transmitted through bites. And it causes that sickness. The sickness that the girl has."

"Maybe it's a weird strain of malaria that travels not through mosquitoes but through the air, and then through the bites of the infected."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's just something different. Maybe a common cold mutated and gone awry. Viruses or germs mutate, and when one of these viruses or germs mutates, it becomes lethal, and it causes this." He opens his arms wide, figuratively engulfing the entire planet. "It causes the devastation of mankind. Only mankind is affected, so the virus or germ is adapted to people. And the virus or germ, when inside the victim, mutates, and then it is transmitted to others through bites. And since it's mutated, it has different affects. Like with this girl."

The man curses, looks over at the girl. "So what do we do?"

"What *can* we do?" Mark asks. "If it's a germ, her white blood cells may be able to fight it off. And she'll get better."

"And if it's a virus?"

"Then it's attacking her cells directly. And it'll probably kill her. Or worse."

"You mean..."

"What if you're right? What if this sickness that she has is just the first stage? What if she'll turn into one of them?"

IV

The man pushes the coffee table laden with books away from the door to his old bedroom. They open the door and step inside. The air is cold, and a broken window reveals snow having drifted inside the room. The covers are all strewn about, still stained with the brown remnants of Kira's blood. The knife lies on the floor, the blade painted with rust. The man takes the sheets and puts them in the bathroom. It is a painstaking procedure; he looks over at the bathtub and sees rings of rust, the water from Kira's bath so long ago having evaporated. He places the blankets into the bathtub. He is leaving when he looks into the mirror. His eyes lay dark and funneled in a hauntingly-worm face. His own bloodshot eyes stare back at him, each looking like a caged animal behind a hot-wire fence. He shuts and locks the bathroom door. Mark helps the man bring an extension cord into the room, and they plug it into a large heater. More blankets are brought in, and a pillow. Together they move the girl upstairs, fumbling with her up the ladder, and they lie her down. The boy brings her water and some cookies, but she won't eat. He sets them beside the bed. The cries of the dark-walkers begin to carry in the early nightfall; the man barricades the windows with furniture and covers the furniture with some heavy blankets from the crawlspace. He exits the room, and after a moment, Mark follows. The girl cries out for them, but they shut the door and push the coffee table with its books back in front of the door. The man squeezes Mark's shoulder and enters his own den, closes the door. Mark sits down amidst his strewn blankets, and he hangs his head in his hands, and he cries.

They awake to screaming. Mark shoves the coffee table filled with books out of the way, and he throws open the door and runs into the room. The man is behind him. His digital watch reads 4:17 AM. The girl is curled up in the sheets, face white as the snow falling outside, her screams piercing. She is staring at the far corner, her legs kicking under the covers. Mark runs over to her side; the man holds the BERETTA pistol in his hands. Mark kneels onto the bed; the girl throws herself upon him; the man swings the gun around, but lowers it when he sees that she is clinging to him, burying her head in his chest. Mark squeezes her tight and runs his fingers through her golden hair. Horrendous sobs soak his shirt with salty tears. Her fingers wrap around his shoulder and arm like in a vice grip, her fingernails poking through his shirt and scratching his skin, drawing blood. He doesn't care. She continues to sob, and she lifts her head, and looks back into the corner, and screams again, gripping

the boy tighter. The boy looks over at the man, eyes shouting confusion. The man takes a deep breath. "She's hallucinating."

In the morning she is better. Mark asks what happened last night, and she tells him that her mother had come, and she had been one of them, but she left a little while after Mark showed up. "She was scared of you. Because you protect me. She didn't love me. Not anymore." Mark tells her that she did love her, and it was dark, so she looked like a dark-walker. But really she wasn't, and she just came to see if her daughter was doing okay, and she left when she realized she was safe. The girl smiles up at Mark and hugs him. "You remind me of my big brother," she says.

Mark stays by her side. Snowfall accumulates, melts, snow falls again. The days go by painstakingly slow. Her symptoms fluctuate, but she isn't getting better. The man recommends Mark distance himself from the girl, but Mark will have none of it—"She's suffering, and she's scared, and she shouldn't be alone." At night, he reads her children's books. Christmas is coming, so he goes to the library and finds Christmas-themed picture books. He reads her the stories, and sometimes she reads along. She really likes the pictures: it serves as an escape. She loses herself in the stories, and Mark does, too. THE LITTLEST ANGEL, SHALL I KNIT YOU A HAT?, SANTA'S STUCK, and CHRISTMAS IN THE BARN are some of her favorite, but she always wants him to read her AN ORANGE FOR FRANKIE every night.

"Christmas is next week," Mark tells the man as they sip lukewarm clam chowder from coffee mugs.

"I know," the man says.

"You don't have to get me anything."

"I wasn't planning on it."

Mark stares into the murky white soup, bits of pale gray clam swimming at the top. "I was thinking about getting something for Lindsey. Maybe a big stuffed animal. They have big ones at Wal-Mart. I could get her one, and it might help her sleep at night."

"Okay," the man says.

Mark is quiet for a moment. "You don't think I should."

The man looks up at him. "She *is* going to die."

Mark leans back in his chair. "It's Christmas. She deserves to be happy."

"Her entire family has been taken from her. How can she be happy?"

"I can at least try."

"Fine. Then get her a stuffed animal. But it won't fix everything."

"I know," Mark says. "I just want her to be happy."

"Are you sure you're not just doing this for yourself?"

"How would me getting her a Christmas gift be selfish?"

"You lost your sister. And now you've found another one."

"You're saying I've replaced Ashlie with Lindsey."

"Subconsciously, yes."

"Ashlie's dead. And I can't change that. I can't bring her back to life."

"Of course you can't. But maybe you're trying to do that. With Lindsey."

Mark shakes his head. "You're incredible. Someone tries to do a selfless thing, and you have to find every excuse to make them feel like shit about it."

A heavy snow falls on Christmas Eve. Mark asks the girl if she wants to go play outside, because she seems to be doing better. The fever has lifted, she hasn't had convulsions for a while, and he dares to hope that she may be getting better. Maybe her body is fighting against the disease and slowly taking her back. But she doesn't want to go outside. She's tired, and she just wants to sleep.

"Tomorrow's Christmas," the boy says.

"Really?" she asks. Her eyes sparkle. "I didn't get you anything!"

"You don't have to," Mark says.

"But I want to."

"You're sick. You just need to rest. When you're better, we can go find me a present."

"Are you getting me something?"

Mark smiles. "Well. You'll just have to wait until tomorrow to find out."

The man stands out on the back porch, smoking, staring at the freshly-fallen snow, feeling the stinging pinpricks of snowflakes driven into his cheeks by the savage winds coming up from the Cincinnati valley. The haze of the falling snow hides the city below, the empty skyscrapers lost from view. The man lets the smoke fill his lungs and exhales. A beautiful, wondrous feeling as the nicotine surges through his blood and alights in his fingers. He tosses the cigarette into the snow, and the filter becomes soggy with the frozen water. He leans against the brick siding and feels the wintry wind slapping him in the face. A tear brims in his eye, but it is frozen before it crawls down his cheek. He remembers his first Christmas with Kira: sitting beside their small Christmas tree with only a few meager ornaments and flickering red-green-blue lights. They opened their stockings, and then their presents. He got her a pearl necklace. She loved pearl necklaces. And she got him a new case for his cell phone, and a frame in which to put his Flight School diploma. They cuddled on the sofa and drank hot cocoa and watched the snow falling outside. A snow similar to this one, except beneath the snow lied only grass and not the teeth-gnawed bones of fallen angels.

Morning comes. The boy has decided to give Lindsey Ashlie's old stuffed dog with the pink bowtie. Ashlie would want her to have it. He places the stuffed animal into a box and wraps it in newspaper. He moves the coffee table away from the door and steps inside. Lindsey is snuggled in her sheets, sleeping. A smile creases his lips. He kneels beside the bed and takes her shoulder. He shakes it gently. Her body rolls over, and the sheets fall away. He falls backwards with a shout: her face is a deep purple, the bloodshot eyes bulging from tunneled sockets; her mouth is open in a silent scream of agony, and her pale fingers stricken with rigor mortis clutch the blankets tight.

Christmas Day is cold. The snow continues to fall. They silently pry her fingers from the blankets and wrap her in them; her eyes refuse to shut, forever engulfing the cruel world in which she died. The man doesn't say a word to Mark, who fights off tears. They carry her outside, down the street, and they put her on a sled beside a large hill bare of trees, and they push the sled down the snow-covered slope until it crashes into a creek covered with frozen ice; they watch without emotion as the ice cracks and the sled disappears underneath with its stiff cargo. They go back to the house and drink coffee, staring silently at the wooden table, saying nothing, hearing only the sound of their own breaths, the beatings of their own hearts, and the broken symphonies of the wind shrieking outside.

The boy goes upstairs to gather the gift he never got to give. He bends down to pick it up and sees something under the bed. He crawls underneath and pulls out two small boxes. He opens them up. Inside one is a drawing of three stick figures: a man, a boy, and a little girl, each smiling. And in the

other a coffee cup that reads PRICE HILL CHILI: THE BEST IN CINCINNATI! He tosses them back under the bed and leaves the room, shutting the door. He never got to give her his present, and she never got to give them theirs.

Chapter Nine

The Legend of the Vampire

“...Vampires are make-believe, like elves, gremlins, and Eskimos.”

- Dan Castellaneta, 1958

I

Mark still hears her whispers in his dreams, the gentle laughter hidden under lips squeezed tight. “Sing me something sad, soft, and delicate; sing me anything.” He buries his face into the pillow at night, soaking the worn cotton with salty tears. Every movement is liquidated with her presence, and any fleeting sparkle of happiness is extinguished when he sees her brilliant brown eyes peering at him from above. His hands shake as he grips the wheel. The snow has half-melted, and the roads are decent. The wrecked vehicles are still covered with snow, appearing as white boulders which he must drive around. Some of the snow upon the windshields has melted, and inside some of the vehicles he can see the remnants of what had once been loving mothers, businessmen, giddy children: now nothing more than skeletons covered with tattered, moth-eaten clothes, hidden underneath rusting hulls. He takes the exit ramp slowly, and in time he is driving down a country road lined on either side with the skeletons of trees, draped in their icy lace. He pulls into the gravel driveway, can hear the rocks growling underneath the slick tires. He parks beside the man’s old car, covered with snow, and leaning back in the truck’s seat, he can’t tear his eyes from the two-story house, the window overlooking the front lawn, long since broken. In the shattered window-frame a bird watches before taking flight. He kills the engine and slowly gets out. The air is cold, sharp, crisp. It burns in his lungs, and his breath crystallizes before his own eyes. His feet carve footprints in the snow as he approaches the front door. He tries the icy knob, but it is locked; he steps back and kicks the door. It creaks once, groans, and with another strike from his shoe, the door handle splinters. The door swings open. The boy enters, surprised at the coldness within the house. Dust covers everything, and the carpet is stained with blood. He moves forward without looking, through the parlor; something crunches under his shoe, and he steps back, looks down: a crunched human femur. A noise comes from above, the sound of squawking, and his blood runs chill. He glances into the kitchen, at the refrigerator plastered with photos long since hidden with mire, the unplugged microwave and the toaster on its side. The backpack lies underneath the table. He turns on his heels and slowly ascends the stairs.

He is shaking as he stands before the door to her room. A million thoughts and images dance through his mind. The wooden door is covered with countless scratches, and a corpse lies farther down the hallway, now nothing more than a skeleton with a toothy grin and empty sockets. He pushes hard against the door. It creaks and groans, slides open; the dresser had been pushed against it. It opens enough for him to slip through. He looks down at his stomach, much smaller now than it had been before all this began. He wonders what he looks like, knowing he hasn’t looked into a mirror for longer than he can remember. Self-reflection is shattered as he looks at the bunk-bed. The sheets are tangled. Stuffed animals litter the floor. He moves towards the bed and falls upon his knees. He lays his head against the sheets, so cold. Her warmth has gone, and he tries to rekindle her

scent—"Consider this song a testament/Of my devotion to your saccharine scent/And to be completely honest/You're not like all the rest"—but the only smell is that of the needling winter air, whistling through his hair from the window. Tears slide down his cheeks, and he remembers.



He and Cara sat on the bed. She had been going through one of her scrapbooks from her high school years, but they had wound up closed upon the floor. They had moved closer together, and they started kissing with small pecks that quickly became intense tongue-in-mouth. Mark's groin went tight, and he found his heart screaming like a tea kettle. Cara began rubbing her hands against his body, playing it off as accidents, but Mark realized they were no mere accidents when her hand squeezed around his jeans, her finger stroking the bulge of his erection. Cara took him by the hand, and she pulled him down beside her on the first bunk of the bunk-bed. Her mother had gone to a work meeting for the night, and they laid there together, holding hands, their bodies close, feeling one another's heartbeats. He rest his head upon her breast, and he heard her whisper in his ear, her breath tickling his skin: "Mom's not home."

Mark didn't say anything. She rolled over, her back to him, and with his free hand (his other arm was wrapped around her head and stroking her sweet-smelling hair), he began stroking her thigh. A wickedly pleasurable smile traced over Cara's lips, and she began rubbing her butt-cheeks against the bulge in his hands. She made the next move by rolling back over onto her other side, so that they were facing, and she slowly unzipped his zipper, being careful not to hurt him; and she reached into the warmth of his groin, folded back the folds of his boxers with her fingers, and discovered his penis. He could feel her cold fingers brushing through his pubic hair, and as she stroked his hard erection, the pleasure was nearly enough to make him sick. He kissed her forehead a few times, and after a few lashes with the tongue, reached for her shirt and began pulling it off. With her bare chest before him, he undid the latch on her bra—quite the struggle, for he had never had sex before—and then his chest was poised against her twin breasts with their swollen nipples. She continued stroking his penis as he rearranged his position and began sucking her nipples, one hand against her quivering cheek and the other groping at her tight shoulder-blades.

"We can do it if you want," she said.

Mark's voice came broken and ragged. "I've never done it before..."

"You'll like it," she said; and in a teasing whisper, "I promise."

The young man's face flushed red. "I don't know how to do it."

"Then let me teach you," she begged.

A few moments later, they were lying naked under the covers, holding one another. Mark's heart felt ready to explode. His stiff penis felt the warmth of her pubic hair as she wrapped her slender legs around his thigh. She began kissing his mouth deep, and he returned the favor. His penis felt ready to implode upon itself, it was so tight. He continued kissing her until she pulled her head back.

"What's wrong?" he asked, alarmed.

"Nothing," she said. "You know what you should do?"

Mark couldn't tear his eyes from the fierce lightning in her eyes. "Tell me."

"You should lick my lips,"

"Okay," he said, and he leaned in closer, began licking her lips.

She laughed, pulled away, bit her lips. "Not *those* lips, Silly."

His eyes swam in confusion. "Not *those* lips?"

She thrust her hip into his. "My lips *down there*."

Mark understood. He had never eaten a girl out before, didn't know what to expect, but he had always wanted to do it. We went slowly, kissing his way down her body—enjoying her slender neck, her swollen breasts, her pale and warm stomach—until he reached her vagina. It was dark, for he was under the covers, but he could feel her warmth against his skin. He kissed the insides of her legs, then proceeded to feel along her scratchy pubic hair until he found the slit. He wiggled his fingers inside and felt them vanish within her. She leaned her head back and groaned, but warned, "Be careful, don't hurt me with your fingernails, okay?" He withdrew his fingers and began kissing and licking her moist slit. Cara's body arched up and her legs quivered as he continued. He had never tasted anything so bitter that tasted to beautiful. Her legs slashed around for a moment, and she moaned, "Yeah, Mark, yeah..." He teased her clit with his finger and fucked her with his tongue. A few moments later she went, and her slit became flooded with juices. The explosion frightened him, and he stumbled backwards as her juices spread onto the bed-sheets.

She laughed, grabbed his bare arms, pulled. "Come up here."

He emerged from the shadows. Sweat popped over brow. "Did you like it?"

"Oh, God, yes," she said. "Now it's your turn. Lay down."

He laid down on his back, and she switched positions. Her movements were elegant, and her breasts swung with each movement. She turned herself around on the bed, and he pulled her legs close to him, clean-shaven, as she began running her tongue up and down his penis. He grabbed her butt-cheeks with both hands and pulled her vagina back upon his tongue and began to lick and kiss again. This spurred her forward, and she began deep-throating, and he felt his penis engulfed in the warm wetness of her mouth. She continued moaning and groaning as Mark ate her out, and she rubbed his balls and sucked his penis as she went once more.

Mark felt the growing sensation he knew so well, and he pulled away from her vagina.

"Cara..." he said.

She pulled off of him, said, "Why did you stop?"

"You need to stop," he said, "unless you want a mouth full."

She grinned. "A mouth full of what, Mark?"

He stammered, "You know..."

She bit her lip, then returned to his penis.

The insides of his legs went tight. "Cara... You really should... *Shit*."

He felt himself ejaculate, and he was surprised that Cara kept going. He could feel her swallowing his cum, continuing to suck. His shoulder blades tightened with the pleasure, and he ashamedly felt drool trace down the corner of his mouth. He continued licking her, and she continued sucking him, and they both went a few more times. Moments later, they were curled up in one another's arms, head upon the pillow, sweat-streaked, reeking with the beautiful stench of sex, and gazing into one another's dazzling eyes.

"Your sweat tastes good," she said. "And your scent... It's a saccharine scent."

Mark didn't want to ask but knew he had to: "When is your mom getting back?"

"I don't want to think about that," she teased.

"I don't want her to catch us and to hate me."

"She won't," Cara promised. "She won't be back for another hour."

They lied there quiet, holding one another, and he began to get hard again.

She kissed his forehead. "I can feel something poking into me."

"Want to do it again?" Mark asked without shame.

"No," Cara said.

Mark's eyes fell, dejected.

"I want to do something else," she said, and she pulled away, leaving him lying on the bed.

She crawled on top of him, straddled her legs around his thigh. Her breasts hung magnificently in the shadows, and her eyes glowed. With one hand she opened up her vagina, and with the other, she guided his hard penis into the warmth and wetness. He went straight into her.

"Oh God," she groaned. "God. You're so large you just hit my G-spot."

That brought a smile to Mark's face. "I'm not a virgin anymore, am I?"

Cara leaned down upon him, her breasts against his chest, arms around his head. She stroked his cheek and whispered in his ear, "No, Sweetie, you're not."

They kissed a few more times, not even moving, just enjoying the feeling of being connected. She then raised herself up and began moving in a rhythmic grind, reaching behind her back with one hand, stroking his balls, the other hand upon his chest. Her breasts jingled like bells, the rock-hard nipples sharp as knives, and she crooned her neck to the side and closed her eyes, enjoying. Mark put one hand upon her right knee and the other upon her slender waist. She continued moving, and he took one hand and wrapped it around her right breast and felt the erect nipple against his thumb. He began thrusting deeper into her, and he could feel himself hitting her G-Spot: each time, she let out a curdled shriek of wonder. She leaned back more, and Mark continued thrusting. She began moving her hips up and down, and with his thrusts, they were moving together so that he nearly pulled out before slamming deep inside her, creating a slurping-wet sound with each tune of their dance. She suddenly pitched forward and covered him, her body close against him, and his penis withdrew as she came all over his groin.

Sweat dripped off her body, and their heartbeats worked in rhythm. "God, you feel so good inside me," she said, running a hand through her bangs matted against her sweaty forehead. Her mouth contorted, and he felt more juices tickle through his pubic hair and trickle down his swollen balls. She went still, breathing hard, and he wrapped his arms around her back. He traced his finger along her spine.

"Oh my God..." she said after a moment, resting her head on his shoulder. "I'm still contracting."

He smiled, turned his head, kissed her neck: the salt in her sweat tasted like harmony.

She moved off from him and laid down close to the wall. "You didn't go, did you?"

"No," he said. "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay. I want you to fuck me, on top of me."

"Okay," he said, maneuvering himself around so that he was looking down at her bare shoulders and breasts. "Guide me in," he said.

She did so, and he began moving inside her. He kept his eyes locked with hers, until the pleasure became too much for her, and her eyes closed behind fluttering eyelids. Her back arched into the air, and Mark pulled himself straight. She reached with her hands and grabbed the insides of her legs and pulled them up close to her side so that he could get in deeper. He began moving quicker and quicker, and she let out several shouts. "Oh, yes, fuck me *hard*..." she spat, and he obliged, bringing about another scream as she went once more. Her warm vagina felt so good against his swollen penis, but he knew he wouldn't last long as he gazed upon her naked body, the breasts shuddering with each thrust, the sweat sparkling in the first peals of moonlight coming through the window.

Cara began fingering her clit as he continued to pound her. She began thrusting herself into him, and her legs came down, and she pressed her bare feet against the bed-sheets to gain more momentum. He couldn't last any longer, but he didn't want to stop, and he let out a strangled shout

as he slammed himself deep into her and felt himself ejaculate deep into her. He lost all energy, and he sagged down, holding himself up with his arms, his cheek resting against her throbbing breasts as she continued to thrust until she went once more.

He rolled off of her and laid upon the bed. They wrapped themselves in each other's steaming body.

"Oh my God," she said, shaking her head as she sought to catch a breath. "It's never felt... Never felt that good."

Mark kissed her quivering lips. "This is better than looking at a scrapbook, huh?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "As much as I love that scrapbook..."

"You know what I wish?" Mark asked.

"What's that?" She began running her finger along his chest.

"I wish I could lay here forever. And never let go of you."

She pulled him tight against her. "Then don't," she whispered in his ear.

A sudden flash of light entered the room from the window. Cara's eyes went wide and her body went rigid. A grinding noise came from downstairs.

"What is that?" Mark asked, his heart beginning to sprint in terror.

"Oh, *shit*, that's the garage. Hurry. Get dressed! She'll be in any minute!"

Mark threw himself over her and fell onto the floor, banging his knee. Fear rippled so tensely through Cara that she didn't even laugh. She threw on her panties and bra, and Mark stumbled around as if he were in a slow-moving dream, searching for his clothes amidst the mess on her floor.

A feminine voice came from downstairs: "Cara? I'm home!"

Cara's face went ashen. "Oh *shit*," she muttered. "Where's my shirt?"

"Just get one from the closet!" Mark hissed, pulling up his pants.

She did, and before long they were dressed and sitting on the bed together, holding the scrapbook.

Cara's mom appeared in the doorway, eyed them.

Cara, still out of breath, asked, "How was the meeting?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "It was good." She looked over at the boy. "Hi, Mark."

"Hi, Ms. Mavis."

The woman smiles, then leaves, shaking her head.

Mark and Cara don't say anything for a moment.

She wrinkles her nose. "It stinks of sex in here."



He stands before the sofa in the living room. She lies there. He can't look upon her, and he can't look away. His eyes feel held open by clamps, his pupils riveted as if fastened in their gaze by electricity. He remembers her as the dazzling beauty, too beautiful to behold, a creature who stole his breath away. He remembers the feeling of her hand in his, her bare breasts against his chest, her hair dangling in front of those enormous and engulfing eyes. He remembers the way she laughed when he tickled her, and the way she yelled when she got upset. He remembers holding her close as she wept over the death of her aunt, how her body shook in his arms and then went still, and she slept in peace upon his shoulder. His heart weeps, but his tears are dried up. The well has been exhausted by the countless memories and reminisces. She looks nothing as she did in his memories: there is no flesh, no sinews, nothing to suggest life. No heartbeat, no brain with chemicals that soared in his presence. There is nothing but a skeleton of disassembled bones and dirty blood-stains soaking the

sofa's cushions. He kneels down beside her, and he looks at her skull: the rosy cheeks are now replaced with knobby cheek-bones. He looks at the teeth grinning at him, and he remembers how their lips met and they breathed as one. Her eyes, so precious and tempting, now lost, gaping holes, empty sockets. A shaking hand goes out, rests upon the cranium. He feels the smoothness and the bumps of her bone, and he leans forward. He presses quivering lips upon her skull, and with a great exhalation, followed by a torrent of brand-new tears, kisses.

The man leaps up from the table as the front door opens. He rushes into the parlor as Mark steps inside. "Where the hell have you been?!" he demands.

Mark shakes his head. "Nowhere."

The man cannot tear his eyes from the pallor etched over Mark's face. "You look sick."

"I went to bury her," Mark says, leaning against the wall.

"Who? The girl?"

"Cara."

The man is quiet. "Oh."

"I couldn't... She was..."

"Do you want some coffee?" the man asks, trying to help.

Mark doesn't answer for a moment. "No."

The night begins to dawn. The man takes it upon himself to fix dinner.

"Are brussell sprouts all right?" he asks, looking through their scarce cans.

"They're fine." The boy sits at the table, staring at the polished wood.

"If you don't like them, we can fix something else."

"They're fine," Mark repeats, not averting his gaze.

"Okay," the man says.

A few moments pass.

Mark stares numbly into the table. "Every time I think of her... I don't see her face... I see her lying on that sofa, nothing but a skeleton. When she died... After we left... I know it's true, don't tell me I'm wrong... Flies ate her. Fucking *flies*. They fucking *ate* her. She was just a piece of food to them. My girlfriend. The girl I loved. Nothing more than nutrients in an abandoned house... And now nothing more than a skeleton. When I die, no one will know her name. No one will think about her. And no one will give a damn."

The man is silent for some time. "Mark?"

"What?"

He stirs the sprouts. "You're not going to try and kill yourself again, are you?"

Mark manages a chuckle. "No."

"Good. Cause I don't know what the hell I would do without you."

II

Mark's eyes slowly adjust to the darkness, widening and engulfing his cold and sterile surroundings. The room is small, constructed of hewn stone molded together with tar. The roof is low, and if he stands, his head scrapes against the rough and jagged rock. For a moment he wonders if he is in a cave, and as he sits upon the cot, legs draped over the edge, hairs standing on edge in the frigid air, he glances to the far side of the room. Seeming to slide through the darkness, like a sponge thrust

through a patchwork, bars emerge. Heavy iron bars, running from ceiling-to-floor, spaced along the entire wall with only a meager few inches between each. He stares at the bars, but he cannot remember how he has found this place. He coughs in his hands, lungs searing, and blood seems to glow phosphorous in the twilight. Footsteps caress his ears, and he pulls his eyes towards the bars. A figure emerges. A girl. She stands about his height, with a slender body, piercing eyes, chocolate hair yearning to be felt. Her cheek-bones are pulled taught, yet elegantly, and she stands before the bars, smiling. Hope lurches within the boy's soul, and he yanks himself from the cot and rushes to the bars. How long he stands there he cannot remember; their eyes lock, and he is lost in the warmth of her gaze; the ice that holds so tight upon his ribs melts, and his heart begins to pump vibrant blood through his veins.

His mouth moves, searching for words: "I'm sorry..."

She shakes her head. "No, Baby. Don't be sorry."

"I'm so sorry..." Tears are crawling down his cheeks.

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

"I loved you. *Fuck* I loved you. I could never tell you. You were afraid of being loved. You were afraid of holding someone close and feeling that intimate connection. That other boy, he hurt you. He treated you like shit, he took your heart in his hands, he took it and he ripped it apart and then left you in the street, bleeding and alone. I hate him. I fucking *hate* him. I see him all the time, and all I want to do is take a bottle and smash it across his face. I want the glass to cut him deep, to cover his face in blood; I want his face to be scarred, so that when people look at him, they'll see what he is under the makeup of feigned politeness and corrupt compassion: he is a *monster*. Baby." He hangs his head low, the tears sliding down his cheeks. "I loved you so much. *So fucking much.*"

She doesn't say anything.

He looks up into her eyes. "Why couldn't I tell you that I loved you?"

"You didn't have to," she says. "You showed it to me every day."

"I should have came for you earlier... I shouldn't have waited so long..."

"Nothing can change what happened."

"Baby, I'm so sorry... I'm so fucking sorry..."

She reaches through the bars, holds his chin up with one finger. "Look at me."

Her face is blurred through the tears obscuring his vision, but he looks, fiercely.

"You're my Googlie Bear. No one else. Only you. You're my only Googlie Bear."

He reaches through the bars to stroke her cheek.

Now tears emerge in her eyes. "I'm sorry, too," she says.

He runs a finger across her cheeks, can feel the warm blood pulsing within.

"I'm not who you thought I was."

"You were an angel."

"I *was* an angel," she says. And then, grimly, "Once."

The boy wakes with a shout, his voice carrying throughout the cold and cryptic house. He lies sprawled upon the mattress in the hallway, and the wind shakes the walls. He had scattered his blankets with his jerk to reality, and now he pulls them over his body before the cold can set in. He lays his head back down upon the table and stares up into the darkness. Outside the house comes the howling of the wind, carrying with it snow that seeps through every crack and freezes every exposed piece of earth. The boy lies on the floor and gazes at the ceiling, stroking his arm, feeling the flesh, still intact. He tells himself that it was nothing but a dream, and he closes his eyes to go back to sleep, but he sees her, so clear and lucid, reaching for him, her lips curled back, revealing dagger-like teeth

covered with crusted blood. And he can feel her biting down on his arm, the blood rushing from his body, him screaming her name—"Cara!"—as she drains the life from his body. *A vampire*. He doesn't want to think about that. Not right now. He is thankful that they cannot hear them this night, with the blizzard moving in from the north, obscuring the city in its blinding wrath. But he knows when morning comes, and when the snow settles, there will be footprints in the snow, hundreds of footprints, all surrounding the house.

It has been nearly a week since the little girl turned into an icicle under the frozen creek waters. The house has been draped in silence, and in memories. The day-to-day life continues, foraging for food at abandoned groceries, barricading the doors and windows when night falls, endless cigarette butts lying scattered on the kitchen linoleum, and empty bottles of vodka and whiskey sitting upon the counter. The man and the boy do not talk much. A great silence has engulfed them, a reef which keeps their two souls apart. The boy's romantic ideal of the victory of life has suffered its final defeat; when Ashlie died, it fought for life; when Cara's body weighed heavily upon him, it gave its last choking breath; and with the collapse of the little girl into a hideous state—the clawed fingers, the gaping mouth, the pain-and-terror-stricken eyes remain engraved into the boy's mind—the boy finally succumbed to what he knew to be true: that life was fragile, no promises were guaranteed, and each day was a blessing—or a curse. Lindsey's words of a survivor's colony on the Eastern side of Cincinnati resonated within him, and he brought it to the man's attention. The man, however, quickly brushed it aside: "Lies."

"She spoke as if she knew it to be true," Mark said.

"I'm sure she believed it. Her mother probably told her that to comfort her."

"I think we should check it out, at least, or—"

"It's December now. It's been four months. How many uninfected people have you seen? *Two*. Me. And the little girl. And the little girl is dead now, and we're not doing her any favors by paying attention to her fairy-tale stories."

"Ashlie survived," Mark had said. "That's three."

"If there are survivors, there's no way they've survived."

"We've survived. Why couldn't they?"

"We're cursed by God," the man said, "and that's the only reason we're still alive."

Mark had refused to press the matter anymore. A constant snow had been falling all week, and the roads were covered with snow-banks three to four feet deep. The heaviest snow Cincinnati had experienced in years. He knew that even if the man were to give in to his demands to check out the girl's story, it would be fruitless: the truck could not withstand the snow, and any 4x4 vehicles would have been dismantled by the cold and misuse. It tore at the boy to acknowledge it, but they were truly alone and isolated. Even if a community were to exist on the other side of Cincinnati, it may have well existed on the other side of the world. For now the man is locked in his fortress, and Mark is with him, his own prison.

There is nothing to do. No churches to attend, no friends to hang out with, no phone calls to make, no projects to work on. Every day is the same, boring, monotonous existence, replayed with each rising of the sun. The man had gone out early in the morning, smoking a cigarette while admiring the freshly-fallen snow. The sky had been a canvas of purples and blues, the clouds climbing over one another. Only a handful of snowflakes fell as he lit the cigarette and stood on the front porch, smoking, watching the smoke curl, illuminated against the backdrop of white, climbing into the air,

disappearing. He saw Kira's face in the smoke, and he saw her face in the footprints that lined the house. He didn't finish the cigarette, but tossed it into the snow. It lay smoldering as he went back into the lukewarm cavern that had once been his home. Now he finds Mark standing in the kitchen, making a pot of coffee, the electricity fueled by the generator in the garage. The man pulls the patchwork of wooden boards down from the kitchen window and looks out into the backyard. He curses under his breath.

Mark begins pouring two cups of coffee. "What is it?"

"They trampled down the fence. I'll have to rebuild it."

"We can't, not in the snow." He walks around the kitchen island and hands him a mug.

The man holds it in his hands, feels the ceramic warmth flooding into his fingers. "I know."

They sit at the table. A daily ritual. Drinking their coffee. Saying nothing.

"I had a dream last night," Mark says.

The man doesn't say anything for a moment. "I don't dream anymore."

"Do you think dreams have meanings?"

"I don't know."

"Sometimes I think they do."

"Maybe." He sips his coffee.

Mark says, "I dreamt that I was in a jail cell. And Cara came to visit me."

The man eyes him, perplexed.

"She was Cara, but then... She wasn't. She was something else."

The man caresses the lip of his mug with a finger. "She was one of them."

"Yes. No. I don't know. She was... This will sound ridiculous... She was a vampire."

"Yes," the man says with a wry smile. "That's *quite* ridiculous."

"What if—"

The man cuts him off: "They're not vampires."

"Lindsey said they were vampires."

"Vampires are mythological creatures. Legends. These people are just sick."

"But... what if the plague turned them into vampires?"

The man shakes his head, incredulous. "Are you listening to yourself?"

The boy hangs his head low, stares at his mug. "It's just..."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"No," the man says. "You brought it up." Sarcastically, "Please. Continue."

"I mean, if they *are* vampires... And I'm not saying they are... But *if* they are, then maybe they have the weaknesses of vampires. Maybe they're allergic to onions, and they can be killed with stakes through the heart, or—"

"It's not onions. It's garlic. Vampires can't stand garlic."

"Whatever. But I think it would be wise to check it out."

"Wise? No. It would be foolish. Stupid. Idiotic. They're *not* vampires."

"If vampires are just mythological, then where did the idea of vampires start?"

The man decided to try and prop the fence back up to prepare for the next night. Mark agreed to help him. Now the man is trying to position the fence back into the holes in the earth where the fence legs had sat, but the holes are dug up and shredded by the claws of dark-walkers. He grunts and lets

the fence sag against his shoulder, looks over at Mark, who is standing beside the lone fallen oak that lies sprawled in the yard.

"All legends have their origins rooted in history," Mark says.

"So?"

"So what if vampires, at one time, *were* real? What if the whole concept of vampires, though now diluted by myth and folklore, originated from people observing ancient dark-walkers?"

The man takes a breath, trudges through the snow, sits down upon the oak stump. "Ancient dark-walkers?" he muses to himself.

"Sure. I mean, what if this isn't the first time this disease has struck the earth. What if whatever caused this plague—be it a germ, or a virus, or whatever—isn't anything new, but something simply reintroduced on a global scale? What if, back in the ancient days, when the concept of vampires first emerged, there was an outbreak of this plague, and dark-walkers emerged, and they started killing and eating people. Being cannibals. Animals. Of course, the government would intervene. Put them to the sword or something like that. But news would spread around. And the concept of the vampire would emerge."

The man shakes his head. "You *want* this to be true, so you're finding every possible reason."

"Is that any different from what you're doing?"

III

NEW YEAR'S EVE, 2011. The night is quiet. The snow continues to fall, climbing up the sides of the house in drifts. The man has constructed a makeshift fireplace in the floor, set upon a platform of bricks, and the small fire warms their hands. The boy glances at a watch he retrieved from Wal-Mart two days ago. The hands glow in the meager dark, ticking off the minutes. He glances over at the man and sees only a stalwart face, glazed eyes staring intently into the fire. The pupils are dilated, and the man is awash in memories: he and Kira, his beloved soon-to-be fiancé, sharing champagne on their first New Year's Eve in the new house—the very house in which they sit—and this memory brings with it the deep-seated revelation and knowledge that never again will he see her, that never again will he hold her. It has been months, but the pain returns in waves. The subtlest movement brings the memories, and not a day passes when his heart doesn't feel as if it drowning in a sea of poison. The boy watches as the man takes the bottle of champagne, twists off the cork, and fills two glasses to the brim.

"It's still half an hour away," the boy says.

"I need to drink now," the man says. He hands him the glass.

The boy takes it, feeling its coldness stinging his fingers.

"Have you ever had champagne?"

"No. We always drank sparkling grape juice."

The man smiles to himself. "It doesn't have quite the same affect."

The boy raises the glass before the fire, sees the flames illuminated in the pale drink.

The man imagines Time's Square, laden with snow. Abandoned vehicles sitting on the narrow roads, windows long smashed open, inhabitants crawling into the night air. Buildings sit quiet and abandoned, and the ball that for so many years dropped down on New Year's Eve is not there. There are no crowds, no fireworks, no live bands. It is 11:52 A.M. on December 31, and Time's Square is

vacant, dead, immune to life. The only movement are those of the shadows—and the creatures crawling within them.

"It's time," Mark says.

The man raises his glass.

Mark raises his. "To a new year."

"A new fucking year," the man mumbles, and he drowns the drink.

Mark takes a sip, whispers under his breath, to himself, "May God smile upon us."

The man hears him, breaks into laughter.

Mark hangs his head low, face burning, and he thumbs the crest of his glass. *To Ashlie. To Cara. To the little girl. May you all rest in peace.* He takes another drink, a long gulp, and drowns the champagne.

The man hands him the bottle. "Drink up."

"One glass is enough for me."

"Nonsense."

In an hour, both are passed out.

Mark lies on the floor; the man, upon the sofa.

Empty bottles of cognac, wine, and champagne litter the coffee table.

Tonight there comes no howls from the dark-walkers.

The first day of January is cold. The man returns to working on the fence. The boy takes a walk down the street in the snow, stopping at the bar with the door propped open. Snow has drifted inside, and the boy grabs the last few bottles of alcohol off the shelves. He admires a shotgun hidden underneath the bar, wonders how they had missed it, but he doesn't bother to take it. He spends the day sleeping off the hangover, and when night comes, neither of them are tired. The man breaks open a new bottle of hard vodka and pours himself a shot.

"Look at this," he says, opening one of the cabinets. He pulls out a can.

"What is it?" the boy asks, rising from the sofa.

"They're limes. I found them a few days ago. And we have shots."

"Tequila."

"Tequila shots, yes."

"Do we have actual tequila?"

The man frowns. "No. We used that up a long time ago. But this will work."

"Is that Kamatchka?"

"No. Pskovskaya. It's Russian, though." He pours two shots. "Open up the can?"

The boy fetches the can opener and turns upon the can. He twists off the lid and reaches into a murky liquid, withdrawing three lime halves. He sets one to the side, keeps one for himself, and gives another to the man. The man hands the boy a shot glass. They both lick the back of their hand, between the thumb and finger; and they sprinkle it with salt. They raise the glasses to one another.

"What are we drinking to?" the man asks.

The boy thinks for a moment. "Let's drink to the new year."

The man smiles. "To a new fucking year."

Their shots rise; they lick the salt, quickly down the vodka, and suck on the limes.

The boy's stomach curls. "That tastes like shit." His mouth puckers.

The man laughs. "Can you feel the burn though?"

The boy nods. "Yeah."

"Let's drink again."

Another long, drunken night, and in the morning, massive hangovers. The boy spends the afternoon over the toilet, and eventually he goes outside into the snow, the coldness rejuvenating his senses. He tries to smoke a cigarette, but it comes as tasteless and nothing more; he tosses it into the snow, where the ember carves itself a cave before whispering down to nothing. The man has fallen asleep in the late evening, and when night falls, the windows are not boarded up. Mark wakes the man, and the two of them begin placing the patchwork of wooden planks back over the windows. The moon sparkles behind shearing clouds, the snow glinting as if layered with a thousand diamonds.

"Here they come," the man says in a harsh whisper.

The fence has not been completely fixed, and several dark-walkers eagerly climb over, spilling into the yard. Most are naked, their flesh swollen purple and blue in the cold, dark lines etched into their skin. Some have sustained wounds, long healed. The dark-walkers snarl and fight among themselves, in the back-yard, and the boy and the man watch with morbid fascination through a crack in the boards. The dark-walkers seem to form a circle, and in the middle is a lone dark-walker, an elderly woman, skin pulled taught against her bones, appearing as a purplish skeleton in the raving cold. The dark-walkers snap at one another, and then one moves forward, grabbing the woman by the arms. The elderly woman struggles, and she throws her head back and screams, teeth glinting in the pale moonlight, as the dark-walker thrusts his teeth upon her neck and bites down hard. A spray of blood dances over the dark-walker's face, sliding down his cheeks; the woman sags down onto her knees, and then she is hidden as the other dark-walkers move forward in a frenzy, like a roving band of sharks gone mad at the scent of blood. The boy looks away, disgusted, as one of the dark-walkers drags a dismembered leg to the side of the yard and proceeds to rip it apart with its fingers, lifting shreds of bloody flesh and ribbons of skin to its greedy mouth.

IV

A few days pass. Mark had wrapped chain-link around the truck's tires, and now the truck sits outside a large brick building, the tires dripping melting snow. The boy moves around the side of the building in the morning light. Most of the snow has turned into an icy slush, and the holes in his tennis shoes leak water. He reaches the front door, grabs the handle, pulls. It's locked. He steps back and kicks his foot into the glass. It webs outwards. Another strike. More webs. He kicks once more, and the glass shatters, raining down on the inside of the door. Using his elbow, he knocks stray shards of glass from the opening and then crawls into the dark atrium. His eyes slowly adjust, meager light filtering through the windows, long since covered with a fine line of dust; the dust is thick, and it makes him cough. He moves forward in the darkness. A few tables, chairs placed upright. A quiet desk with a dark computer screen. An empty coat-rack. Rows and rows of shelves line one side of the room, and on the other are several filing cabinets labeled with the names of different newspapers and subsequent dates. Mark stands there for a moment, engulfed in the silence, hearing only the occasional crinkle of falling glass from the door behind.

He takes one of the chairs that sits upon a table and brings it down to the carpeted floor, swinging it around. He sets a few books on the table and then sits in the chair, pulling his jacket tighter around him. He opens one of the books and flips through the pages. The text is small, and in the dark, it can hardly be read. He stands and moves towards the window on the wall. He wipes his hand through

the dust, and a pillar of sunlight shines into the room, falling upon the polished wood. He smiles to himself, proud of his accomplishment, and he returns to the chair and to the book. He turns to the first page, reads the table of contents. Along the top of the page it reads Vampires: The Occult Truth. He begins reading, and he doesn't stop for lunch.

Mark opens the front door and steps inside, shaking snow off the cuffs of his pants as he slips off his shoes. The man appears from the kitchen, relief washing over his face. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I went for a walk," the boy replies. "It's starting to snow again."

"I went to the store and got some SPAM."

"I thought we'd eaten all the SPAM?"

"So did I. But I went into the backroom and found a can lying in the corner."

"Wonderful. And you waited for me to fix it?"

The man doesn't answer. "You've been gone since this morning."

"The air is always crisp and clear when it snows. It's relaxing."

The man shakes his head. "If you don't want to tell me what you were doing..."

"I'm all right," Mark says. "Want to get drunk tonight?"

"You've been getting drunk every night."

"Is there a crime in that?"

"You're going to become an alcoholic."

"It's not like I'm going to get a DUI."

"If you're a drunk, you won't be reliable."

Mark doesn't say anything as the man lights up a cigarette. "So is that a 'no' to getting drunk?"

The man shakes his head. "Pour us some shots. Just be careful. That's all I'm saying."

The man throws back another shot, swallows. His stomach curls, throat burns, the liquid ignites a fire within his gut. He bends over, coughing, then relaxes, breathing deep. The world begins to spin, and his vision twists and contorts. He leans back against the sofa, takes a deep breath. Night has fallen. Boards are thrust against the windows. The wind howls like a banshee in a hurricane, and they cannot hear the dark-walkers outside the house. Such a thought does not frighten them; it has become commonplace, and they would be surprised if the dark-walkers did not surround the house. Somehow the dark-walkers knew that there were others, not infected by the plague, dwelling within; and yet they were not smart enough to break in, and their numbers were dwindling with the intense cold and the lack of food. Slowly they starved themselves, even turning upon the weaker and elderly of their kind, devouring them in a frenzy.

Mark ponders, "What do you think would be the worst way to die?"

The man is sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, smoking. "Drowning."

"Drowning. Yeah." He takes a shot. "I always thought being strangled would be the worst."

"Yeah, that wouldn't be fun, either. Probably more enjoyable than being torn apart by those fuckers outside."

"What about being impaled?" He pours another shot, knowing he should slow down.

"Being impaled?"

"Yeah. A stake being driven through your body till you die."

"They don't do that anymore. That's from Medieval times. The Assyrians did it, too. They would impale their prisoners and ring them around the cities they were trying to invade."

"No kidding?" Mark croons.

They sit back, listening to the wind shrieking outside.

"I think a gunshot to the head would be the best way," Mark says.

"Or carbon-dioxide poisoning. You just get tired and fall asleep."

"No," Mark says. "That would take too long. Too much time to regret what you're doing."

The man pops the cap off a bottle of beer. "I don't regret anything anymore."

The night's snow-storm had erased all tracks of the truck, and Mark had to navigate the winding uphill road with care. He parked the truck outside the library, and now he stands beside the door, using his boot to kick snow away from the entrance he had carved in the glass the day before. The wind picks up, cutting through him like an icy knife, and he ducks down and scurries into the darkness of the library. A few shards of loose glass tangle in his jacket, and he stands in the gloom brushing them off, cursing as a razor-sharp edge wedges itself into his finger. He pulls it out, admires the blood, and decides that a cigarette is appropriate. He stands listening to the wind outside, finding the inside of the building much colder than yesterday. He tells himself that he should bring a Bunsen burner and set it by the table to keep warm. The cigarette ember burns bright, and in a moment it flares as he takes his first hit. He leans against a wall that leads to a bathroom, and he glances over several posters, illuminated by the faint splash of light coming through the shattered door. He smokes half the cigarette and tosses it to the tiled floor, stomping it out with his wet boots. He trudges into the interior of the library and heads towards the desk, spotlighted by a pillar of light coming from one of the—

The attack comes quickly. The sound of rushing feet. A scurrying movement. He swings around to see a figure leaping towards him. He ducks down and swings his leg out, and his foot connects with the shins of the attacker. The assailant tumbles over him, and the boy is scurrying along the floor, through the darkness. He hears the sound of splintering wood; he scrambles to his feet and glances towards the check-out desk. The figure's head appears, and it stares at him with glazed eyes. The skin is pulled taught, and the hair is a matted mess. In his mind he sees the figure, a beautiful woman with a smiling husband, taking her children to the park on a warm summer day. Now the woman has become a creature from hell—a vampire?—and leaps across the table, landing hard on the ground, rolling, jumping to her feet. Mark turns and runs between two aisles of books layered with dust. The figure follows; he glances back and sees that she runs with a limp, and he imagines a sprained ankle. She is completely naked, and her breasts are bruised and discolored, and the growth of hair around her vagina has stenciled outwards into the calves of her legs. He spins around the bookcase and runs down the next aisle; suddenly books fly out from the bookcase, spinning into him. He turns and sees arms and hands reaching through the bookshelf, groping at him. He steps back, and with a shout, he charges the bookcase, throwing his right shoulder against the wooden frame; it wobbles for a moment, then careens backwards. The woman screams as the books fall upon her, and there comes the sound of cracking bones, and a geyser of blood shoots up, quickly drowned into the tumbling of hard-backed mysteries. Mark steps back, breathing heavily, staring at the fallen bookshelf and the books scattered about; the dark-walker is hidden, except for the arms poking through the bookshelf, the fingers and wrists twitching.

Mark gathers the books in his arms and quickly leaves the library, keeping his eyes from the convulsing digits of the fallen dark-walker. He emerges into the brilliant morning sun and throws the books into the truck. He grabs a cigarette and lights it up, leaning against the hood, smoking and staring into the shattered-glass doorway. *That's where they've been staying. In the buildings, where it's warm. That's how they survive; that's how they keep from freezing to death.* His eyes dance out to the street

and to the surrounding buildings. A rundown theater. A Greek gyro restaurant. A DOLLAR GENERAL. He imagines them crowding together in the darkness, perhaps sniffing the fresh blood running like honey through his veins. The image sends shivers through his spine. *They're keeping out of the cold... The cold is our curse and our weapon, and spring shall be a blessing but an even greater curse, for then they shall walk in strength once more.*

Dinner is baked beans mixed with a package of BACON BITS. The man stirs the baked beans in the pot above the Bunsen burner. Mark lights a cigarette, offers one to the man, who takes one and continues to stir the beans.

Mark stands looking out through the back window, into the pearl snow covering the fallen oak.

"I ran into one of them today," he says.

The man pauses in his stirring. "How close?"

"I was attacked." He takes another hit.

The man thinks of the girl. Hesitantly, "Were you bitten?"

"No. And don't worry. I'm not lying."

"But they don't come out during the day..."

"They're hiding in the buildings. In the darkness. Where it's warm."

The man glares at him. "You went into a closed building?"

"I didn't know."

The man shakes his head. "Which building?"

"I was looking for supplies," the boy lies.

V

The boy comes downstairs to find the man slouched over the table, head buried in a book. The boy walks over, reaches towards the man's pack of MARLBORO, but pauses. His eyes dance over the glittering title of the book. He leans to the side and eyes the page that can be seen, a page decorated with torture devices and a screaming girl with blood streaming from her lips. The boy smiles to himself, the first smile in a long while, and taking the cigarette, ducks outside for a smoke in the pearl-white morning air.

They eat in silence.

Mark finally speaks: "I saw the book you were reading."

The man rolls a brussell sprout with his fork. "You got it from the library?"

Mark nods. "Yeah."

"I thought so."

Mark is quiet for a moment. "So do you think they're vampires?"

The man shakes his head. "I read the book, and I imagine you did, too. Vampires as we know them are a myth, spawned off of historical characters such as Vlad Dracula of Romania and Elizabeth Bathory of Hungary. I imagine that people started telling their children about vampires to keep them in subjection to the government so that the rulers wouldn't impale them or bathe in their blood." He pops a sprout into his mouth. "Vampires are just a myth, just like zombies. There's no reality to them at all. These people are sick. I gave your theory a chance. A hell of a chance, and that chance almost got you killed at the library. But I'm sorry. Or not sorry. I don't know." He shakes his head. "They're not vampires."

"Maybe you should check first."

The man looks up at him. "Check?"

"You know. Find one and put garlic in their face. Or sprinkle holy water on them."

"All of that stuff is just myth."

"Have you researched it? Have you experimented? I mean, if they *are* vampires—and, sure, it's a long stretch if they are, in the true sense of a vampire—but if they *are* vampires, then it would be beneficial to know if garlic hurts them, and stuff like that."

The man pauses for a moment. "We could ring garlic around the house."

"Around all the windows and doors, yeah."

The man nods to himself. "Maybe..."

Mark suddenly stands from the table. "Hold on a second."

Mark had left the table, disappearing up the ladder that leads to the second story, and now he returns with a new book in his hands. He sets it down upon the table, next to the man who continues to sit and eat, and he spreads the book's leaves wide.

"Look at this," Mark says. "Here's the most basic definition of a vampire: 'A dead person who rises from the grave to feed upon the blood of the living.'" He looks up at the man. "So they *are* vampires."

"Seemingly, yes. But I don't think so. These people, these dark-walkers, they're not dead. They never *were* dead. Dead people returning to life? Impossible. I imagine they were in some sort of coma. It can happen: the heartbeat and breathing rate slows down so much that even a highly-trained medical doctor can tell they're still alive. Remember that story about the girl in Massachusetts? She died, right, and her twin sister kept having nightmares where the dead girl is clawing at the coffin, six feet under, trying to escape. Her nightmares drive her crazy, and she puts doubts as to her sister's fate into her parents' minds, and they have the coffin exhumed to settle their stomachs. When they opened the coffin up, what did they find? *Claw marks*. All up and down the coffin. Twins have strange connections, and somehow, the girl's twin sister knew that she wasn't dead."

"I thought that was just a myth?"

"So did I. But I researched it in college. Well, Kira did. And she told me all about it. Apparently the girl had been stricken down with some kind of fever, and the doctors later said that there was a very *minute* possibility that she could have still been alive. I think that's what we're seeing here. The disease—be it a germ, or a virus, or a bacterium, or whatever (what it is and where it came from isn't really relevant at this point)—made these people go into a coma, and when they revived, the disease had completely ravaged their bodies."

Mark doesn't feel like arguing. "Okay."

The man nonchalantly slides the book over to himself. "Says here... The word vampire is of Slavic origin. It means 'Bloodsucking Ghost.'" He looks up at Mark. "Kinda eerie, isn't it?"

He nods. "Sure."

The man returns to the book. "The Romanians... Vlad Dracula was Romanian, I think... Condemned some infants to the fate of vampires. Infants who were born with their amniotic membrane still attached to the head and forming a veil, or infants born with a small tail, or with hair covering its body—sounds more like a werewolf than a vampire, I'd say—were believed to be vampires. They were called *strigoi*. But... Okay, here it shows ways that people could become vampires. Want to hear?"

"Why not," Mark says.

"If a dead body was bewitched—I'm guessing by a witch or warlock—it would become a vampire. Anyone cursed by their parents would become a vampire... And anyone who was excommunicated from the church would become a vampire." A smile creases the man's lips. "Can you imagine the Christian Reformer Martin Luther being a vampire, prowling around Wittenberg?"

Mark shakes his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

The man shrugs, continues, "Witches would become vampires when they were buried... And anyone whose grave was jumped over by a cat or flown over by a bird. Shit. That means there must have been *tons* of vampires... Those who committed suicide or were not given a proper Christian burial would become vampires... People who had been murdered without vengeance would turn into vampires—I imagine to wreak their own vengeance—and evil people, and even people born on Christmas, were likely to become vampires."

"So who *wouldn't* be a vampire?" Mark coos.

"Vampires can take on many shapes and sizes," the man continues. "They can appear as flying insects, particularly moths or butterflies, as crows, mice, and werewolves. Oh, this is gross: the Slavs believed that a vampire appeared as nothing more than a dismembered head with torn and chewed entrails dangling from it. And... Hold on." He flips through the pages, licking his fingers to pull the papers apart from one another.

"What is it?" Mark asks.

"Get me a light. Where's that lamp?"

"It's over here," Mark says. He stands and walks over to the kitchen counter.

"It's getting dark, and it's hard to read..."

Mark lights the lamp with a cheap match and sets it down on the table.

"Here. 'HOW TO STOP A VAMPIRE.'"

"Excellent." Mark takes his seat, fascinated.

"They mention sunlight... Garlic... Silver bullets... Wooden stakes in the heart..."

"Anything a little more convenient?"

"Showing them a crucifix, burying them under running water... Or at a crossroads."

"Wait a minute. You said sunlight kills them?"

The man pauses. "They never come out during the day."

"No. They don't."

He flips through the pages, running his finger underneath a bold heading: VAMPIRES CANNOT EXIST IN SUNLIGHT. "It says... Vampires were believed to be servants of Satan... They were demons capable of all types of trickery and atrocities... Because darkness was synonymous with evil, and light with good, vampires cannot exist in the light... Churches believed that nothing was stronger than God, and even a vampire could not survive under God's light. Thus vampires cannot walk on holy ground or enter a church."

Mark curses under his breath. "That's just a bunch of folklore."

"Of course it is. Vampire mythology evolved in the Medieval era."

"So they don't come out because the light is good and dark is bad?"

"That's what this says."

"Night and day are caused by the planet's rotation around the sun. There's nothing mystical or spiritual or supernatural about it. It's the laws of nature at work, the way our universe is designed. That doesn't explain why they don't come out at night."

"There *has* to be a reason."

"I know. But it's not in that book."

The man is quiet for a few moments. "So we just stop here, then."

The boy doesn't answer for a moment, just stares into the lamp's burning oil-wick.

"What are you thinking?" the man asks.

"What are the other methods for killing vampires?"

"Silver bullet. Stake through the heart."

"What about garlic?"

"It doesn't say anything about... Wait. Ah, here it is. It says here that vampirism can be seen as symbolic of mosquito-bites, and garlic is known in folklore as a natural mosquito repellent. Mosquitoes suck blood, and sometimes spread disease, such as malaria. Some of the symptoms of malaria—exhaustion, fever, anemia—are reminiscent of the first affects of being bitten by a vampire without being totally drained of blood or transformed into a vampire.

They are both quiet for a few moments.

No one will say what they are thinking.

That the little girl was bitten by a dark-walker.

Her symptoms prior to death had been a mirror-image of malaria.

And they had not checked on her since she had died.

Mark finally says, "I think we should bury Lindsey tomorrow."

The man's eyes are glazed. "Yeah."

"The snow should be keeping her... in good shape."

"Yeah," the man says. "We'll do it tomorrow."

Chapter Ten

The Boxcar Angel

"When I die, I shall be content to vanish into nothingness... No show, however good, could conceivably be good forever... I do not believe in immortality, and have no desire for it."

- H.L. Mencken (ca 1950)

I

The phone call had awakened him.

He groped blindly about the room until he found the phone. He hit the ANSWER button and lifted it to his ear. "Hello?"

He could hear her heavy breathing. "Mark."

He propped himself up on one elbow. "Cara? What's wrong?" He spoke quietly, so as not to wake Ashlie, who was sleeping in the other room.

He heard a snuffle. "I'm sorry..."

"Cara," he said, suddenly awake. "Is everything okay? Are you hurt? Where are you?"

"I'm okay," she said. "I'm fine."

"Well. What's wrong? You don't sound like everything's fine. Did something happen?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," he said. "What happened?"

Silence.

"You can talk to me, Cara, okay? You can talk to me."

In a few moments, her words, dark and cutting: "I'm pregnant."

Time became suspended. Her words echoed like an incessant cymbal in his mind. He suddenly felt nauseas as the terror of what had happened rustled through him. A million thoughts sprinted through his head, the most poignant being, *Why in the hell did you have to ejaculate inside of her?!* He talked to Cara for several hours over the phone until she fell asleep, and after he took Ashlie to school the next morning, he drove over to her house. She opened the front door for him, and they were quiet as she fixed macaroni and cheese with BLTs. He kept looking at her slender stomach, imagining the result of their procreation growing within her; he averted his gaze whenever she looked towards him. They ate quietly at the table. Birds sang outside in the spring air. He didn't have much of an appetite, but he ate all his food anyway.

"We need to talk about this," Cara said. Bags hung under her eyes.

"I know," Mark said.

"What do you think I should do?"

Mark didn't answer for a few moments, spinning his fork among the cheesy crescents.

"Do you think I should get an—"

He looked up, glared at her. "Don't even talk about that."

She bit her lip. "Okay."

More silence as they ate.

"Want to watch a movie?" she asked.

"We need to have this baby," Mark said finally, setting down his fork.

"Have the baby?" Cara repeated. "You really want to have the baby?"

"Yes."

"We can't afford it. We've only been dating for a few months."

"It's the right thing to do."

"Mark..."

"It's the right thing to do, Cara. And you know it."

The initial shock and subsequent fear of the realization evolved into excitement. He and Cara began making preparations. His current job wouldn't gather enough income for them to start a family, but Cara didn't have a job, so the balancing of finances fell upon her shoulder. They grew closer over the next few weeks, and she began to bulge. Not extremely, only slightly; "My mom didn't even get big when she was pregnant with me," Cara informed her worried boyfriend. Mark brought up the concept of marriage, but she quickly pushed him away: "I don't want to talk about that right now." He was content with having the baby without marriage, but he constantly wondered what his parents would have thought. He had grown up believing in Heaven, indoctrinated by a small Baptist church on Lehman Avenue. When his parents died in the car crash, he had stopped caring about religion. Sometimes he wondered, though, if there really *were* such a thing as Heaven, and if his parents *were* looking down upon him. They'd probably be shaking their heads.

He met Cara one morning outside her house. He went to the door and found her dressed up and pampered, looking nice for a flurry of job interviews. Her face glowed, and the smile that traced across her lips was contagious: he found himself smiling, too, despite having to wake early on his only day off.

"I dreamed we had a baby girl," she told him. "And it made me so happy!"

Her words began a transformation within him. The nervousness and stress were replaced with a brimming excitement. He would be a Daddy! He began reading books on parenting, reading magazine articles on how to be a good dad. He would go the Barnes & Noble on Interstate 71, on the east side of Cincinnati, and read them for hours while sitting in the overstuffed chairs. His heart leapt at the sound of Cara's voice and the sight of her slightly-round tummy. Mark wanted to get married, but he knew Cara didn't want it. He knew why: her father had married her mother at an early age, and after having a couple children, had abandoned them. He imagined she figured he'd do the same, and maybe she hoped that not getting married would make it easier to bear. He decided to go along with her, and he would show her—with marriage, or without—what true dedication meant. He would show the girl who believed "love is a hoax" that "love is completely real... so forget anything that you have heard."

Cara asked him one evening at McDONALD'S, "Are you going to tell Ashlie?"

"What?" he asked, dipping a nugget in Sweet & Sour sauce. "Of course I'm going to tell her."

"What will she think?"

"She'll be excited." He sipped from his Diet Coke.

Cara chewed on some fries. "When are you going to tell her?"

"Soon," he promised.

They had gone out to Mt. Echo the next night. Some young boys were playing basketball on the hoops, and he and Cara, hand-in-hand, were returning to their car beside the basketball court just as dusk began to fall. The crickets and cicadas came alive in the early summer, and the sun's last bursts of radiant light painted a canvas of reds and oranges and yellows across the sun-streaked sky. They were nearing his car when the kid with the basketball jumped in front of them. Mark guessed he was around fifteen or sixteen years old. His eyes were bloodshot and his blood sterile. Drugs. He laughed hysterically, shouted, "Catch!", and hurled the basketball right at Cara. She didn't have time to react as the basketball punched her in the stomach; she buckled over and fell onto the pavement, dragging Mark's arm down with her. Mark began stepping towards the boy, his veins running thick with anger, but the first scream tore him on his heels. His eyes went wide and his face ashen to see Cara lying on the pavement, hands wrapped tight around her stomach, her mouth opened in a venomous scream. The other basketball players began to gather around, and the one who had thrown the basketball continued laughing, tears of joy sliding down his cheeks. Mark fell down next to Cara, ran a hand through her hair.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "Cara. What's wrong?"

She continued screaming Bloody Mary.

"I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong..."

One of her hands had slid underneath her pants, and she withdrew it.

Blood sparkled on her fingertips.

Mark suddenly understood. The world slowed, and all he could hear were Cara's screams and his own savage heartbeat. He could only be informed by the police—who let him go, seeing the trauma that had been induced by the drug-stricken boy—of what he did next. He couldn't remember. Something within him snapped, and he lurched from the pavement, and in a few moments had reached the hysterical boy. The boy protested with his hands, but Mark fought through him; he grabbed the boy by the collar of the shirt and swung him into the side of the car. The boy shouted as Mark pulled him back and thrust his head into the glass window: the window shattered, and the boy screamed, and Mark kicked him in the groin before pushing him away. The dying sunlight reflected off the shards of glass embedded in his face, the blood running down his chin and neck, and his screams blended like a wicked symphony with Cara's wails. Some of the other boys moved forward to defend their friend.

Tears streamed down Mark's face as he sobbed, "You killed our baby..."

The boys paused, stared at one another with ashen faces. None moved forward.

Mark knelt down beside Cara, pulled her into his arms. He held her shaking body tight, her chest heaving with broken sobs. Through his own salt-burning tears, he didn't turn his gaze from the boys. The druggie tried to apologize, but Mark only flicked him off. The boys stood in a regretful half-circle around Mark and the girl; none moved forward, none backed away. The moment was suspended in time. Ravens cried out in the distance.

II

The man awakes to the sound of wretched vomiting. He lies in bed for a few moments, sleep clinging to him like a wet blanket. He rolls his head upon the pillow and looks towards the window, covered with a heavy black canvas. He closes his eyes and hears the puking again. With a curse he stumbles from his bed and into the hallway. The boy's sleeping area is disturbed, the blankets lying strangled beside the boy's mattress in the hallway. The man walks over to what had once been a stairwell, now

torn down and replaced with a retractable ladder; the ladder would be drawn up at night—in case of the event of a dark-walker break-in on ground level—but now the ladder is drawn down. The man shimmies down the ladder and hears more vomiting coming from the bathroom attached to the hallway. Meager, flickering light comes from underneath the closed door. He hears shuffling within, a groan, hacking. He raps his knuckles against the door. No response. He slowly pushes it open. The boy's silhouette is cast against the shower curtains; a single oil lamp burns upon the bathroom sink, illuminating the boy who is buckled down over the toilet. His hair is matted to his pale-green face; the boy looks over at the man standing in the doorway, opens his mouth to say something, then jerks his head back around and pukes into the toilet.

"How many?" the man asks, rubbing his eyes.

The boy takes a breath. "Eleven."

"Eleven beers?"

"Eleven shots."

"Fuck," the man mutters. "How are you feeling?"

The boy just glares at him.

The man asks, "How's your heart-rate?"

"How the hell should I know?" He rests a hand upon the sink, steadying himself.

The man moves forward. "How long have you been sick?" He kneels down beside the boy, places a finger behind the boy's ear. "God. You're heart's racing. Can you stand?"

"Every time I try... I just get sick again."

"I told you to stop drinking."

"I've never gotten this sick before..."

"You've never drank this much before, either."

The boy tries to steady himself, pukes again. Stumbling over his tongue, "I woke you up..."

"It's okay."

"I'm sorry."

The man muses, "At least the stench will keep the dark-walkers away."

"I just need a hot shower..."

"First of all, there's no hot water. Second, that's a horrible idea. You'll send your body into shock."

"What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing. Just ride it out."

"I'll probably be dead by morning."

"Maybe, but doubtful."

The boy stares at the man. "I never want to taste another shot of alcohol again."

"Wait till you're sober. You'll be craving it. Believe me, I know."

"You were an alcoholic?"

The man doesn't say anything for a moment, looks into the mirror, sees bags hovering underneath his eyes. "After... After my father died, I didn't really know how to deal with it. He always... He always drank at night. He still had some stuff left in the house. I would drink it, trying to be like him, maybe to stave away the memories... I didn't know what I was doing to myself... I almost died one morning, but Mom rushed me to the hospital, and they pumped my stomach... But the alcohol was in my blood... They didn't think I'd make it..."

"How old were you?"

"I was just a little boy."

"How old?"

"I was seven years old."

The boy doesn't say anything, just stares at the toilet mantle.

"I'm going to go back to bed," the man says, and he leaves the bathroom.

He awakes early, just as the sun begins to rise. He crawls downstairs and finds the boy lying on the sofa. A pile of vomit lies on the floor beside him. He breathes shallowly, but he sleeps easy. The man makes a pot of coffee and pours himself a cup. He pulls back the boards from the back door, swings it open, and steps outside. He drinks his coffee in the bitter cold, smoking a cigarette. The sky is bright and clear, the sky shining a vivacious blue, the sun throbbing to the east, sending streamers of light between the towering and vacant skyscrapers. Footprints are scattered in the snow about the house, and the remains of yet another scavenged dark-walker lie beside the dead oak, bloodied bones scattered among the snow where the oak's dead limbs embraced the earth like snaking tendrils from heaven. The man finishes his cigarette, extinguishes it in the coffee, and sets the mug on a folding chair now covered with snow.

The boy continues to sleep. The man sits at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette. His eyes keep drawing themselves to the book sitting upon the table, eyes creeping over the title again and again. Vampires: The Occult Truth. Garlic. Silver bullets. A stake through the heart. *Unable to come out during the day*. Why would they be unable to come out during the day? He doesn't buy into that garbage about Darkness being Evil and Light being Good, and these dark-walkers fearing Good and bathing in Evil. The superstitious, to him, is synonymous with bullshit. He can easily toss aside garlic, silver bullets, and a stake through the heart. Silver bullets and a stake through the heart, he knows, would kill them: they are just as fragile as human beings, needing food and shelter, and breaking—dying—just as easily. But he still cannot explain the avoidance of sunlight. And he continues to think about the garlic. He has seen what happens when they come out in the daylight—their flesh, for lack of a better word, boils—but he has never seen their response to garlic. He can ignore the avoidance of daylight, but if they are allergic to garlic in some strange way... He must settle this. But how? He watches the boy sleep, and, though subtly, he hears Lindsey's innocent laughter sprinkling in his ears.

III

The smells from the kitchen wake him. The boy slowly crawls into a sitting position on the sofa, takes a deep breath, stands... Falls back down. He turns his head and sees the man in the kitchen, stirring a pot upon the Bunsen burner. The boy rubs his eyes, asks the time.

"It's two in the afternoon," the man replies, not looking at him. "How do you feel?"

Mark winces, covering his eyes. "The sunlight is so *bright*."

"Do you have a hangover?"

The boy groans. "Yeah..."

"How's your heart-beat?"

"I don't know..."

"Then feel your pulse. On your wrist or behind your ear."

The man continues to stir the contents of the pot.

The boy says, "It's fine... A little fast, but fine... Where are the cigarettes?"

"The cigarettes are a stimulant. Your heart will just beat even faster."

"I don't care."

"Trust me, you do." The man looks over at him. "I made lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"If I told you I spiked it with vodka, would you be interested?"

The boy flicks him off.

The man smiles. "It's grilled cheese and tomato soup. You need food in your stomach."

"I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself," the man says. "More for me."

Mark lies back down on the sofa.

"Do you still want to go get the girl today?"

The boy's stomach curls. "Can we get her tomorrow?"

"I'm sure she'll still be there."

The boy writhes upon the sofa, pukes on the floor.

"You're cleaning that up before sunset," the man says.

Another day has passed. The sun is bright, and the snow reflects the sunlight as if it were a blanket of a million twinkling diamonds. The wind is tight, and they wrap their coats tight as they trudge through the snow, avoiding the snow-banks and abandoned cars as they head down the street. No one says anything. Fresh snow had fallen overnight, but the clouds had dissipated, and now the cerulean sky hung like a canopy above their heads. They weave their way between several abandoned trailers that had set in what had once been a construction site, and they begin the trek down the steep hill. Mark falls once, and the man helps him back to his feet. They continue onwards, pushing their way through brambles and thorns, and they emerge at the bank of the creek. The ice is thick, and water can be seen rushing underneath the thinner sheets. They pick up rocks and throw them upon the ice until it breaks, and Mark, grabbing a branch with one hand, kneels down and reaches out over the stream. He thrusts his hand into the chilled water, then quickly withdraws with a curse.

"What?" the man asks.

"It's cold," Mark says.

"I know. Did you feel it?"

"Yeah."

"Pull it out."

Mark's heart hammers in his chest. He pulls himself back to the bank and stands in the snow.

The man eyes him. "Now what?"

"Just give me a moment."

The man watches the chilled water gurgling through the cracked ice like blood from a wound. The wind picks up, and snowflakes fall from the branches of the naked trees surrounding them.

"All right," Mark says. "Give me the branch." The man does; Mark leans back out over the creek, plunges his hand into the water; a grimace covers his face as he fights off the liquidating pain, and in a moment he groans and withdraws the sled from underneath the ice. It slips from his hands and chatters loudly in the snow at his feet. He stumbles back into one of the trees, gripping his hand and slowly massaging his palm and fingers. They both stare at the empty plastic.

Mark's breath crystallizes in the air as he speaks: "Where is she?"

"Probably still under the ice."

The boy imagines the little girl: a purple icicle, eyes still wide from their state in death.

The man forces Mark to stop hitting the bottle, and he even resorts to locking the boy in the den and refusing to let him come out until he detoxes. "I'm not going to let you get me killed because you're a drunken mess." And so the boy spends the days locked in the den, hollering his voice dry, but the man ignores him throughout the house. One afternoon Mark, enraged, kicks the door open; it splinters and falls upon the mattress that had once been his bed. He stumbles out into the hallway and descends the ladder. Afternoon sunlight comes through the rectangular window on the front door, which is shut with the boards taken down. Mark slowly moves around the empty house, searching, but finding nothing. The man has gone. All he can hear is his own breathing and the whistling of the wind outside. He enters the kitchen and gingerly opens the refrigerator. There is a half-empty bottle of cognac sitting on the shelf; he pulls it out and unscrews the lid, takes a swig of the warm drink. It bubbles in his throat and feels so soothing. He prepares to take another drink when he hears a sound out in the driveway. He quickly screws the cap back onto the drink, tosses it into the fridge, and slams the door. He hears the truck engine die down and creeps towards the doorway. He peers out to see the man getting out of the truck. One of his sleeves is bloody, and he has a scowl written over his façade.

Mark throws open the door, stumbles into the snow.

The man spins around, frightened.

"What happened?" Mark asks.

The man glares at him. "Nothing."

"Is that your blood?"

"No. I was attacked."

"Where the hell did you get attacked?"

"Nowhere," the man lies.

The boy is staring at the sleeve. "God, there's a lot of blood..."

"How do you feel?" the man asks as he stirs a pot of green beans on the stove.

"Fine," the boy says, sitting at the table. "How long did you lock me up?"

"Only three or four days."

"Were you planning on letting me out?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't been at the house, have you?"

"I've been looking for supplies."

The boy is quiet for a moment. "Uh-huh."

"They haven't been around much lately," the man says the next morning.

"I presume you're talking about the dark-walkers," Mark says, sipping his coffee.

"Yeah. I've been watching... They're thinning out. Disappearing."

"You think they're dying off?"

"No. I wouldn't get too excited about that idea."

"They're hiding."

"Exactly. And surviving off one another."

Mark caresses the tip of his coffee mug. "What happens when spring comes?"

"When the snow melts?" the man shakes his head. "God knows."

She stands in a meadow of tall grass, the stalks blooming with flowers a myriad of colors. The sun is setting beyond the distant pines, its light cutting through the spiny branches in pillars of brilliant light. Her chocolate hair falls in bangs before her beautiful eyes, and Mark senses a detached peace. He wants to move forward, to embrace her, to hold her, to kiss her... But he is rooted in place, frozen as if locked in a block of impenetrable ice.

"Where are we?" he asks, his voice nearly inaudible but raging at the same time.

"We're where we need to be," Cara says.

"And where is that?" Mark asks, refusing to tear his eyes from her.

She doesn't answer his question. Her voice is beautiful yet deadly: "I'm not part of your life anymore, Mark."

A tear builds behind his eye. "But I want you to be."

"I can't be. I'm not here anymore. You need to stop thinking about me and look after yourself."

"I wanted to grow old together, Cara," he says, the tears beginning to slide down his cheeks. "I wanted us to be rich and living in a high-rise apartment. I wanted us to have babies, lots of them. I wanted you to be the mother of my children. I wanted us to go to concerts and county fairs and festivals together. I wanted to win you big stuffed animals. I wanted to fall asleep in your arms every night. I wanted to love you, to be loved."

"You did love me, Mark. And I loved you."

"Then why did it have to end like this?"

She shrugs. "Who can say? But this isn't how it has to end up. You can decide to continue."

"How can I continue without you?"

"You survive. You survive each day. And everything will be okay."

He shakes his head, stubborn. "Things won't be okay. If you were here... If we were together..."

"You can't think like that, Mark."

"I can't *not* think like that. You infect my dreams. My thoughts. My every waking and sleeping moment."

"It's time for me to go, Mark. The sun is setting. I'll see you soon."

"No... Cara..."

"I'll be waiting for you. When you come here, you'll find me waiting by the brook."

"Cara..."

"I loved you, Mark. And I always will. We'll be together, Baby. But not yet. Not yet."

The sun sinks behind the pines, and darkness envelops the meadow. He can hear their breathing, their calls to one another, and he can hear them moving through the tall grasses which split before them and crunch under their feet. He tries with all his might to move, but he is caught by an invisible force and raised from the ground. He can only watch as the dark-walkers merge upon his Love, and he can only weep as she looks up at him and blows him a kiss as they swarm over her... And she is lost in their feeding.

Mark asks the man, "What do you think Heaven is like?"

The man shakes his head. "I don't believe in Heaven."

"I always learned it was this spiritual place where our disembodied spirits go, and we sit on clouds and play the harp and have no emotion except joy."

"That sounds like hell," the man muses.

"But what if Heaven is a physical place? A place like earth? And there are mountains and waterfalls and jungles and deserts and oceans and seas and bears and tigers and giraffes and zebras?"

"So?" the man asks. "If Heaven does exist, we're sure as hell not going."

"She said she would be waiting for me by the brook..."

"Who said that?" the man asks.

Mark shakes his head. "No one. Never mind."

Mark awakes from the throngs of sleep, screams echoing in his ears. His blood runs cold as sapphire, and it takes him a few moments of heavy breathing and shivering even under the layered blankets to realize it is nothing but a dream. He lays his head upon the sweat-soaked pillow and stares up at the ceiling. He closes his eyes only for a moment, then opens them quickly; for in the serenity of closed eyelids are their poisonous, yellow eyes, their fangs dripping blood, the ferocity of hell unleashed upon what had once been a human being. He lies there until sunlight begins to creep through the corridor window, and he pulls himself from his covers and walks over to the end of the corridor to let down the ladder. The ladder is already down. Mark looks over at the door to the man's bedroom, and walking over, he slowly pushes it wide. The man's covers are thrown back and the bed is empty. Mark quickly descends onto the first floor to find a cup of cold coffee next to smoldered cigarettes in the Mexican ashtray. He stands looking around in the silence for a long while, then goes out the front door. The man's footprints in the snow lead to where the truck had been parked, and the truck with its cargo is gone.

IV

Mark emerges from the shadows, a banshee from the darkness, fingers wrapped around the icy steel. The movement is quick and furious; the man turns around, raises his hands, but his pleas are lost in Mark's rage. The iron train-track rail cuts through the air like a knife through jelly, and the man lets out a shout as it crosses against his chest. He stumbles backwards, lungs searing, falls against the side of the box-car; he slides down into the snow, groping at his chest. Mark's shadow looms over him, and Mark raises the iron rail high into the air, gripping tightly, breath fogging in the snow as if he were a race-horse in the arctic. His eyes are wild. Maniacal.

The man lies in the snow, and he splays his hands outwards; "I have a gun, Mark. Don't make me use it."

Mark stands there for an eternity. His strength evaporates, and the iron rail slides from his hands and lodges in the snow. His weak knees give out, and he falls against the side of the box-car. He slides down into the snow and sits with his knees folded against his chest. He stares at the diamonds in the snow. The man crawls over, sits beside him. He reaches into his jacket and with shaking fingers withdraws a pack of CAMEL LIGHTS 100s. He hands one over to the Mark, who takes it gingerly, and he flares the lighter; Mark bends forward and lights his cigarette, then leans back against the box-car, exhaling plumes of acrid smoke into the crystal-clear air.

The boy speaks after a moment: "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The man's voice is rough. His chest aches. "Learning."

Mark had followed the tracks of the truck through the snow, and he had found the truck parked behind a trailer a good ways down State Avenue. Footprints led down the snowy embankment to the creek. He had followed them, carving a path through the snow. The creek had frozen over, and he could see footprints heading over it to an iron suspension bridge that crossed over a man-made canal, now drained of water. The canal had once been used to ferry materials from river boats to the railroad for shipment throughout the country. The suspension bridge had creaked and groaned but had

not faltered. The footprints led to a maze of abandoned box-cars, and had ended at a single box-car covered with graffiti. The door was shut. The boy had pressed his ear against the iron door and had heard nothing within. With two hands, he grunted as he slid the door open. He stepped into the blackness of the box-car, the morning light cutting into the interior: a few scattered beer bottles, crunched cigarette filters, and a few books on vampires sat on the floor. The boy also noticed several wooden stakes and a wooden box holding garlic cloves. He became aware of heavy breathing, and as his eyes adjusted, he could see a small figure in the shadows of the box-car, chained against the wall. Emaciated, bony, eyes fiery red, teeth hanging open as it panted. Chills ran through him as he understood, and he tumbled from the box-car screaming-mad.

"It's not Lindsey anymore," the man now says as they sit outside the box-car. "It's not Lindsey."

Mark doesn't listen. "That's why you locked me up."

The man sighs, nods. "You wouldn't have understood..."

The boy takes another hit off the cigarette. "She's sick and in pain."

The man rubs his swollen chest. "Do you want me to bring her into the house?"

The boy extinguishes his cigarette into the snow. "No."

"Then what do you want me to do? I'm learning about them."

"Learn on someone else. Not on her."

"Mark..."

"Every time I see her, I think of Ashlie."

"Mark..."

"Put her out of her misery. Let her rest in peace."

The man is quiet, saying nothing.

Mark's eyes burn red like the sun. "I spared your life. Now take hers."

The boy watches the cigarette paper at the cherry flare and burn. The cold suddenly feels so cutting, and a swift wind ducks down and blows between the box-cars. Snowflakes rush up between his legs. The gunshot rings out. He squeezes his eyes shut, grips the cigarette tight between his fingers. The ember burns against his skin and he hardly notices. He tosses the cigarette as the man dejectedly emerges from the box-car, the pistol in his hand. The boy's ears ring and the world seems to come to a nauseating halt.

"Can we bury her?" he asks.

"No," the man replies, shaking his head. His eyes are swollen. "The ground is covered with snow. It's frozen solid."

"Then can we cremate her?"

The man glances back over his shoulder, into the dark confines of the boxcar. "No. Just leave her in there."

They stand outside the boxcar for a few moments, and the man lights a cigarette. He winces at the pain; his chest still hurts, and he hopes nothing is broken. Mark stares without comprehension at a graffiti-stained box-car across the opposite tracks. The man flicks his half-smoked cigarette into the snow. "Come on," he says, taking Mark by the arm. "Let's go."

Mark doesn't move.

"Come on," the man repeats. "It's getting fucking cold."

Suddenly Mark tears away, turning on his heels. The man shouts after him, begging him not to do it. But Mark doesn't listen, and he fumbles into the boxcar. The man almost runs after him, then

stops. He steps back and hangs his head low. A moment later, Mark stumbles from the darkness, staggers through the snow, and collapses onto his knees. He pitches forward, catching himself by his hands, and the snow burns fiercely against his palms as his stomach curls and twists, spewing bile from an empty stomach onto the ground.

They walk quietly through the rail-yard. The wind howls between the boxcars.

"Look at that," the man says.

Mark follows his gaze. A scraggly dog sits on his haunches several cars down, eyeing them. A collar is around its neck, worn and frayed. The creature's body is stiff, the skin pulled taught against aching bones. The eyes are sunken and dead, and its tongue hangs from its mouth, swollen and purple. The two men watch, and as their eyes connect with the animal's, the dog leaps to its feet and runs back amidst the boxcars, lost forever.

V

The man finishes boarding up the door and returns to the kitchen. The boy sits at the table, wrapped tight in his coat, warming his hands amid the heat of an oil lamp. The man picks up the pack of cigarettes, lights one, pulls out the chair on the other side of the table, and sits down. A few days has passed. The snow melted, but a new snowstorm brought a fresh batch of snow. The footprints of the dark-walkers vanished, and they had slept peacefully. Mark's dreams had been overcome by nightmares, but he had begun sleeping peacefully. The man imagines it is somewhere near the end of January, but he has not kept track on any calendar. He figures he can find a FARMER'S ALMANAC and calculate the day based upon sunrise and sunset times, and even by the moon if he dares step outside at night, but he realizes there's no reason to. It doesn't matter what day it is. Nothing changes. Not anymore.

"It doesn't affect me anymore."

The man looks up at the sound of the boy's voice. "What?"

"Their deaths," Mark says. "I'm... used to it. I've accepted it. Everything we knew, everything we've believed, is gone. This is our world now. And I've come to accept it."

The man takes a few hits off the cigarette. No words are said.

"I miss Ashlie," Mark continues. "I miss Cara. And it hurts. It hurts like hell. But I've accepted it. And what happened to Lindsey... she got sick, became one of them... We had to kill her. The same with Cara. And if you wouldn't have done it, I would have pulled the trigger myself. Because this is our world now. That's how things have to be."

More time passes. The man finishes his cigarette, extinguishes it in the Mexican ashtray.

"I saw a girl's brains blown out all over the side of a box-car. And I sleep peacefully. What does that make me?" Mark now looks at the man, his eyes full of horrific contemplation. "What does that make me?" he repeats; "Some kind of monster?"

The man has no response.

The next day, they head to WALGREENS PHARMACY to collect supplies. They meet up near the cash registers and begin bagging their canned goods and toilet paper.

"Did you learn anything?" Mark asks, bagging the groceries. "With Lindsey?"

"They're not vampires," the man replies. "At least, not in the legendary sense of the word."

"Then what are they?"

"They're sick." The man looks up, glares at Mark. "Why do they have to be anything more?"

"Because it's not..." He searches for the right words. "It's not *natural*."

"Natural?" the man retorts. "I'll tell you what's unnatural." He turns and grabs a dust-covered PEOPLE magazine from the rack. "*This*," he says, shaking it in Mark's face, "is what's unnatural. The commercialized, western world with its media and the values, and its priorities being sex, pleasure, popularity... That's unnatural. People obsessing over celebrities, people going in debt, people watching NBC and SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE and getting lost in their own ignorance as to how the world really works... *That's* unnatural. This is the most natural it's ever been. Have you ever been to Washington, D.C., in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History?"

Mark shakes his head *no*.

"They had this fantastic exhibit on cave men once. Pre-Neolithic humanity. The origins of *homo sapien*. The cave men lived hard, bitter lives, faced against arctic cold, roves of hairy mammoths, and pitted against the ferocity of the saber-toothed tiger. *That's* the natural life. Living in our air-conditioned homes with satellite television and bumper stickers that say PROUD MOM OF AN HONOR STUDENT are the hallmarks of what civilization had become, and that's *unnatural*. What we're living *now*, though: *this* is natural. We don't just live anymore. We survive. That's how it was when we first evolved, and that's how it is now."

"The cavemen conquered their dangers," Mark says. "Maybe we will, too."

"I hope to God that's not wishful thinking, but I don't know what I believe anymore."

The snow falls unbroken. Dusk is approaching. The man sits at the dining room table, smoking a cigarette. Mark is sitting across the table, reading a GLOBE magazine he'd lifted from the grocery store while searching for supplies. He flips the page and stares, and his eyes go wide.

"What is it?" the man asks. "Did someone 'prophecy' that this would happen?"

Mark doesn't answer.

"What are you reading?" the man asks again.

"I'm reading," Mark replies, "about a world after people. They have an article in here about what our planet would look like if humanity just suddenly vanished."

"Vanished? You mean like the Rapture?"

"Or humans died due to disease," Mark said slowly, "and were unable to upkeep civilization."

"Oh," he says quietly. He taps ashes into the ashtray. "What's it say?"

"Weather, corrosion, earthquakes, bacteria, and animals will reduce buildings to rubble. Within weeks, electrical systems will fail." He is reading by the light from the lamp and smiles to himself. *Yep*. "Within 20 years, animals will have overtaken our cities. It says here 'picture bears and wolves roaming freely along Wall Street'. Within the same amount of time, buildings made of wood will break down or be consumed by termites. In another 20 years, steel buildings will corrode due to the elements and begin collapsing. Cars will rust away to nothing. Ground water will elevate, turning cities into swamplands. All of the electronic and paper documents we have—like CDs and books—will eventually rot and be consumed by insects." He pauses for a moment. "In only 10,000 years, if an alien were to visit earth, there would be no traces that we had ever existed."

Chapter Eleven

Aim Snap Fall

“Destroying is a necessary function in life. Everything has its season,
and all things eventually lose their effectiveness and die.”

- Margaret J. Wheatley (late 20th century)

I

Mark stands as still as a romantic statue in a renaissance graveyard, the only movement that of his ragged breaths and flaring nostrils. His shirt, his arms, his hands, his jeans, his hair, his face—everything is saturated in warm blood that issues brilliant white steam. In his hands is the Russian rifle, and the butt is streaked with blood and bits of broken bone. He closes his eyes, feels the blood upon him, crawling down the sides of his face, fetid in his hair, a beautiful sensation. The images flash before him—Ashlie clutching her stuffed Dalmatian dog, Cara holding the purple lilies he’d picked for her so long ago, Lindsey hunched over in bed and drawing a cartoon of three smiling figures. The images fade to nothing as he opens his eyes, and all he can hear is the wind rustling against the house, the floorboards creaking underneath him. He feels the breath in his lungs, so sharp and full of life. His sensations are heightened, and suddenly the world seems so vibrant and alive. A crimson smile crosses his face, and the echoes of an old professor ring in his ears.

ΣΩΣ

He had almost missed class that night; traffic had been heavy due to an accident, and he had been pulled over by a police-car for a broken tail-light. He had slumped into class and sat in the back row. The professor hardly acknowledged him. He zipped open his backpack, pulled out his notepad, and with a pen in hand, began taking notes. The great clock on the back wall ticked incessantly, and the professor’s words nearly became lost:

“Rage, in psychiatry, is the mental state on the extreme spectrum of anger. Rage is a behavior that everyone experiences in some form, some way, somehow. Rage is often used to denote hostile, affective, reactive aggression. It denotes aggression where intense anger is present, and this aggression is motivated by the desire to cause harm to others, and is often characterized by impulsive thinking and a lack of planning. This behavioral side is one that many would not like to see, but it often becomes dominant in extreme situations. Rage itself, as an emotion, is often distinguished by distorted facial expressions, and is often brought forth due to the threat of, or the reality of, an attack of some sort. Some psychologists believe that rage is physiologically based upon a reaction to high levels of pain or displeasure —whether physical or emotional. Others believe it is the natural, animal response to one’s past injuries. Rage should not be confused with mere anger, however. Anger is explained by current dissatisfactions in one’s life, and this type of anger or frustration is common. Rage, which is less common, is the result of many angers compounding one another, and is often a result of past traumas needing to be dealt with.”

II

The man had gone downstairs to get a drink of water. He opened up the refrigerator, long dead and warm, and grabbed the jug of distilled water they'd taken from the local DRUG MART. He had poured himself a glass, and stood standing beside the kitchen island, listening to the wind rub against the house, and he sipped his water and closed his eyes, trying to escape. Sleep-deprived. He had heard the sound of scratching as a mere whisper, and curiosity drew him towards its source. He slowly walked barefoot past the dining room table and into the living room. He rounded the sofa and stood staring at the boarded-up window. The sound came again. Gripping the glass of water, he took a few steps forward until his face was but inches from the boards. The sound vanished. He shrugged, raised the glass to take another drink—the window behind the boards shattered, and the wooden paneling splintered as twin fists shot through. Shock ran through him, and he dropped the glass, which shattered at his feet, the remaining water soaking into the carpet. His eyes went wide, and he took a few steps backwards. The fists opened into hands, and the arms protruded from the broken boards, one of which now hung from a single nail. The hands groped for him. The man spun on his heels, realizing what was happening. The muscles in his legs flexed to run back towards the ladder, which was now descended, which he would scale to retrieve his rifle; but the sound of more shattering glass and arms breaking through the half-rotted wooden boards tore through him, and he found his feet glued to the carpet as every window in the kitchen and living room broke apart, hands reaching through, groping blindly about in the darkness.

Mark awoke to the sounds of the breaking glass and shredding wood. He leapt up from the mattress and ran into the den to alert the man, but when he shoved open the door, he saw that the cot was empty. A frightened curse escaped his lips, and he ran over to the ladder. He looked down to see the front door bulging, shrieks flooding in through the cracks. His face went pale-white, and he staggered into the den and grabbed the Russian rifle. He returned to the ladder just as the front door burst open, the wooden boards splintering and collapsing to the ground. The door hung from one hinge as a flurry of dark-walkers blitzkrieging the house from the gloomy night beyond. Acting on impulse, Mark raised the rifle, aimed along the knotted sight, and shot off a single round: the first dark-walker to enter swooned to the side and collapsed as the back of his skull issued forth a waterfall of blood and brain matter. The other dark-walkers paused, turned, looked up at him, and with a shriek, rushed for the ladder.

The man had been thankful that the dark-walkers that had come through the front door had been averted, but he turned around on his heels just in time to leap out of the way of an assailant. They had begun climbing through the windows, carrying with them snow that melted on the carpet and tile floor of the kitchen. The dark-walker he'd dodged slammed into the wall and regained its balance; another had leapt at the man, but he grabbed it by the arm and swung it around, hurling it into its companion; both tumbled onto the ground and rolled about, snapping at each other like wild animals. The man ran into the kitchen as he heard more gunshots from upstairs. He grabbed the empty bottle of cognac from the counter as a dark-walker leapt over the kitchen island; the man swiped the bottle into the creature's skull; the bottle shattered, and the dazed 28-year-old-accountant-turned-monster fell headfirst onto the floor at the man's feet. Without hesitation, the man raised his heel off the ground and drove it into the dark-walker's skull. He felt warm blood coat his foot, and he stumbled backwards, stepping onto shattered glass from the cognac bottle; with a shout of searing pain, he fell to the ground.

The dark-walkers quickly scaled the ladder. Mark took several steps into the interior of the upstairs hallway and leveled two who had reached the top of the landing. Their bodies fell back down the ladder, taking those climbing behind with them. More managed to reach the landing, and he turned and ran into Kira's old bedroom, slamming the door. He quickly locked the latch and stepped back. He moved past the end of the bed and towards the far window; the rifle raised in his hands, and he aimed at the door as the dark-walkers threw themselves upon it. The hinges creaked and groaned. Splinters began to emerge from the impacts of their shoulders. Mark held the rifle at the ready and waited, sweat crawling down his face and burning his eyes; he dared not blink.

The man limped to his feet as the two dark-walkers from the parlor entered the kitchen. He limped towards the far wall, looking back over his shoulder, unable to breathe from the terror that lodged itself in his throat. But the dark-walkers fell short of chasing him and knelt down beside their fallen comrade; one bent over like a dog and began to lap up his blood with his tongue; the other, a forty-year-old housewife, grabbed the dead dark-walker's limp arm and began to chew. Blood quickly surrounded her lips, and her eyes were glazed over with delight. The man's stomach curled like sour milk, and without tearing his eyes from the creatures, he began feeling his way towards the garage door: he couldn't reach the upstairs, where his guns were located, but he knew he had an axe in the garage. Just as he reached the garage door, the boards from the back door burst apart and the door fractured wide. Countless dark-walkers surged inside; the man went still. The dark-walkers, eight or nine of them, stood beside the dining room table. The man's heart pounded as one of them—a fourteen-year-old-girl, he imagined—picked up the Mexican ashtray and examined it with beady eyes. One of the creatures let out a shriek, pointing towards the man with an almost human gait. The girl dropped the ashtray and they raced towards him.

Mark waited. And waited. The hinges finally snapped, and the door flung open. Three dark-walkers flooded inside, stumbling over their own legs in their attempt to reach their prey. Mark aimed, squeezed the trigger. *Click*. "Fuck." With the gun still in hand, he ran to the bathroom, entered, quickly shut the door. Wan moonlight came through the skylight. He looked for a lock on the door, but he did not find one. The door suddenly flew open, bashing him in the forehead. He dropped the rifle and fell back into the sink; the edge of the sink sunk into his back, sending lightning pain up and down his spine. He gripped the edge of the sink with both hands, lifted himself up, and slammed his feet into the door. It sagged backwards and clicked. He jumped off the sink and threw his shoulder into the door. He spied the Russian rifle lying on the ground. He kicked towards it, trying to reach, as the dark-walkers threw themselves into the cheap wood. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

The man managed to open the door to the garage and sagged inside. A ring of dusty light came from a window next to an old workbench, and the light dimly illuminated the garage. The man tripped over the heavy cable that ran from the chugging generator into the house; his knee burned with pain when he fell, but he quickly hobbled to his feet. He spied the axe hanging from a shelf, the handle sticking out. He limped over and took it by the hand, swinging it out. The dark-walkers poured into the garage. He held the axe at the ready, knowing he didn't stand a chance. His eyes fell upon something in the corner: an old floodlight used to work on the car. *Battery powered*. Keeping his eyes on the dark-walkers, he crept towards the corner. The dark-walkers slowed, surrounding the corner of the garage in a semi-circle, closing in like wild animals circling their meal. The man held the axe with one hand and with the other fumbled with the POWER switch on the floodlight. The dark-walkers continued to close in.

Mark had managed to pull the rifle towards him with the tip of his toes; he reached down to grab the barrel, and as he did so, the upper half of the door splintered, and hands reached through. He grabbed the rifle and crouched at the foot of the door. The hands of the dark-walkers, skinny and purple from the cold, groped at his wavy hair. One hurled itself against the door, and one of the hinges creaked. The impact shook the bathroom, and the mirror above the sink fell free from its moorings and crashed to the ground, falling to a stop propped between the edge of the sink and the far wall with the window. Mark gazed into the webbed glass and could see his reflection: the haggard façade, the fear in his eyes, the emaciated skeleton he had become, his jaw contorted into a menacing scowl. As he gazed upon the fractured mirror, he hardly noticed the fingers of the dark-walkers caressing his scalp, almost massaging it as Cara had done so long ago. He gazed into the mirror, and everything went quiet, and he saw Ashlie's reflection beside him: she was crouched down with him, horrified, tears crawling down her cheeks, squeezing her stuffed animal tight. Cara appeared on his other side, grasping him with shaking fingers, her head buried into his shoulder. He clutched the Russian rifle with white fingers. All he could see were their faces, and he didn't comprehend his actions as he flipped the gun upside-down, moved away from the door, stood, and let them enter the bathroom.

The man found the switch. He pushed it down with his thumb. Brilliant white light flooded the garage, a light so bright that it burned his eyes. He fell back into several empty cardboard boxes, and he dropped the axe as he instinctually reached up to protect his eyes from the light. The dark-walkers shrieked, groping at their own eyes, spinning around and bumping into one another. They scattered from the garage, terrified, and the beam from the floodlight entered the kitchen, and it reflected off the shattered glass from all the windows, and it carried its way in swooping bows throughout the house. The dark-walkers who had been feasting on the fallen friend leapt up and ran, tripping over its body; the dark-walkers emptied from the house, carrying their screams of fright into the darkness.

The man grabbed the axe and ran into the kitchen. He could hear the sound of a fight upstairs, and his heart reigned with horror. He ran around the kitchen island, leapt over the fallen dark-walker, and spun down the hallway into the parlor. The front door was wide open, revealing an icy tundra vacant of inhabitants; several bodies, some covered with melting snow, lie in bloody pools at the foot of the ladder. The man quickly climbed the ladder while clutching the axe, and he jumped over another body before bursting into Kira's old bedroom, axe raised high, ready, afraid of what he might find: but what he saw confounded all explanation.

III

The man is staring at Mark's back, which heaves back and forth in a slow, rhythmic motion with each seismic breath. Sweat cascades down Mark's face, blending with the blood covering his body. He grips the gun tight as he stands over the mess before him. The man's eyes are drawn to the bed, the furniture, the walls: streaks and goblets of blood cover everything. The boy stands at the end of the bed, facing the far wall next to the bed's headboard; all the man can see are spindly, naked legs protruding from the other side of the bed, the mattress hiding the rest of the body, except for an arm with overgrown fingernails that lies sprawled amidst the twisted bed-sheets, the fingers twitching as rigor mortis begins to set in. The man calls out Mark's name, but Mark does not respond. He moves

forward, looks past Mark's shoulder, sees the mangled bodies, the ribs protruding from broken flesh, splintered bones disjointed, the skulls flattened with the cheekbones molded into brainy matter. The man slowly reaches past Mark, heart pounding, and grabs the gun by the barrel. Mark's fingers loosen, and the man pulls it away. Mark says nothing as he turns and walks past the man without a word, only a stony stare with a lifeless gaze. The man feels the blood warm on the rifle barrel. He turns and sees Mark disappear into the hallway. The man holds the gun close to him and leaves the bedroom to see Mark, still covered in blood, crawling under the sheets of his mattress. The boy quickly falls asleep.

The man raises the ladder back onto the first floor. The cold is sharp from the broken windows, and snow enters the broken front door in drifts, covering the hardwood floor. The man grabs another blanket from the upstairs closet and throws it onto the sheets Mark sleeps under. He returns to the den and shuts the door. He sits on the bed and with a rag cleans the blood from the gun. He sets it next to the British Lee-Enfield and crawls into bed. He lies down and stares at the ceiling in the darkness. He can still hear their screams, echoing in the distance; all of Cincinnati seems alive. The first rays of sunlight are beginning to stretch in from the east.

The man tries to sleep, but all he can see when he closes his eyes is Mark driving the butt of the gun into the dark-walkers, incessantly, even after they had died. When sunlight bears high, he loads more bullets into the Russian rifle and makes his way downstairs. He takes the broken bodies of the dark-walkers still in the house and carries them out into the snow. The skies are clear, and the only snow falling is that from the wind shaking the trees. He casts the bodies into the snow on the road. He kicks snow away from the front entrance until he can find the hinge that had been snapped from the door. He raises the splintered door and presses it against the doorframe, fastening the hinge with its single bolt against the doorframe. He returns to the kitchen, and in the bitter cold, smokes a cigarette. He activates the heaters, and the snow that had come in through the windows and back door begins to melt. He throws on another pair of clothes to stay warm, and Mark appears down the ladder. The man fixes coffee amidst the bloodstains on the kitchen tile, and they smoke cigarettes.

"Mark," the man says.

The boy looks up at him. "What?"

"You'll have to clean your sheets." He nods at his bloodstained clothes. "And your shirt and pants."

"I know."

"Okay."

Mark has dragged his bedding down into the kitchen, and using distilled water is working to clean out the bloodstains, to no avail. The man has entered Kira's old bedroom, and the stench of the fallen dark-walkers is unbearable. He grabs them by the ankles and pulls them into the hallway, then one-by-one pushes them over the ladder onto the bottom floor. Blood puddles up before the last body hits, and the man carries them out into the snow, depositing them in the street with the others. The wind blowing the snow from the trees is beginning to cover their bodies with an icy layer, and some of the snow sparkles red with frigid blood. The man returns to the bedroom and, with a towel drenched in water, begins scrubbing at the walls. Blood is everywhere. He scrubs and scrubs. An hour passes. He is stern and unforgiving, but when his eyes catch hold of a picture frame holding a photo of him and Kira holding one another, smiles lighting up their faces, he loses it. He sags onto the bed, and his head falls in his hands, and he cries.

ΣΩΣ

He remembers leaving for work early in the morning and making a quick drive to KROGER. He bought several purple lilies and made his way back to his house. He wrote a love note and fastened it to the bouquet, then slid the bouquet under the windshield wipers of her car. When he returned late that night from his round-trip to Germany, she met him in the foyer, and had lit all kinds of sweet-smelling candles. He was shocked that she was still awake, and she was dressed in her blue LA FEMME gown. She told him how handsome he looked in his flight uniform, despite the coffee stain, and they danced in the living room, surrounded by candles, in the dead of the night.

When he would get out of the shower in the morning, oftentimes he would take the bar of soap and write "I LOVE YOU" on the bathroom mirror. When he would return after the sun had set, he would go into the bathroom while Kira slept in the bed. He would turn on the lights and see, stenciled underneath the faded dried soap, another message: "I LOVE YOU TOO!!!"

He remembered when they walked down the paths at Mount Echo, when the trees would bloom with the first spring. They would walk over the rickety wooden bridge, and the creek would gurgle as it swept between the polished stones along the banks. They would hold one another upon that bridge and watch birds alight upon the rocks to drink from the water. One time he brought his pocket knife, and holding her hand against his, he carved their initials into the wooden railing: J&K FOREVER.

ΣΩΣ

The man returns downstairs to find Mark sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette.

Mark looks up at him. "Your eyes are swollen."

"I think I have an infection," the man says, reaching for a cigarette.

The boy places his hand over the pack. "Were you crying?"

"No," the man replies, glaring bullets at the boy. "Can I have a cigarette?" he croons sarcastically.

"Yeah," the boy replies, removing his hand.

The man lights a cigarette and stands smoking beside the table. "Did you finish your clothes?"

Mark ashes his cigarette in the Mexican ashtray. "No. I can't get the blood out."

The man takes a deep breath of smoke, closes his eyes, lets it fill his lungs.

"So what are we going to do?" Mark asks. "About the house?"

"I don't know," the man says.

"We should probably figure it out."

"I know." He looks at him. "Do you have any ideas?"

"We could find a new house."

"Hell no."

"We can't stay here."

"If we moved to a new house, we'd have to fortify it and everything, get more supplies."

"We're sitting ducks here," the boy says. "Besides. You can't stay here forever."

"Like hell I can't," the man growls.

Mark is quiet for a few moments. "Or we could reinforce the doors and windows."

"With what? Boards? They broke through those last night."

"With steel. They won't be able to break through steel. We could drill it into the walls."

"And where in the hell are we going to find steel?"

"At a steel factory. There's one just off 8th Street, after the viaduct."

The man watches the smoke from his lungs exhale from his nose. "Maybe."

Mark extinguishes his cigarette. "We need to make a decision, and fast. Dark is coming."

IV

The next day has come. They returned to the house and began sweeping through it. All remnants of the dark-walkers lying in the snow had vanished, except for a few bare bones with notched teeth marks, and the cupboards and pantry doors were torn off their hinges. Watery footprints were embedded in the carpet. The dark-walkers had come while they were away, had scavenged the place. "They could still smell us in the house," the man had said, "and they were searching high and low." They had found nothing, however: the man and the boy had taken the truck to a different house several blocks away, one with an attic that the man knew had not been tampered with. They had brought countless blankets, and even then it was cold: the cobwebs tickled their faces and the wind whimpered through the eaves with a stringent bite. They could hear the dark-walkers in the distance, wailing and crying, shrieking, searching. Now they are standing outside the front of the house as the man wraps the chains around the truck's tires even tighter. He doesn't want to get stuck down on 8th Street.

"Have you checked the oil lately?" the boy asks, smoking a cigarette.

"A few nights ago. It was low. I went to Wal-Mart and found the right oil for it."

"What about antifreeze?"

"I know how to upkeep a car, Mark."

"What about the gas? Have you used up everything from the SHELL station?"

"And the MARATHON and the SUNOCO. But I've been siphoning it from other cars."

"That's worked?"

The man stands. "Shit, that chain's cold." To Mark: "Yeah, so far."

"All right," the boy says, tossing his cigarette and getting into the truck. "Let's roll out."

The sun's orb has reached its zenith in the afternoon sky, but the rays barely pass through the clouds, and a gloom of countless shadows and silent melodies refuses to melt the overbearing snow. The truck slips and slides, and the man drives slower. The boy grips his seat as the truck clatters over the 8th Street viaduct. Footprints can be seen in the snow, some surrounding what had been a wrecked vehicle covered with ice; now the windows are shattered and the vehicle gutted. Claw marks scratch the rusting paint. The viaduct ends, opening up to a row of several gas stations and a US BANK. The man hits the brakes and turns right; they pass underneath a railway bridge and along the side of one of the buildings is a cast-iron collection of real-life Mammoth figures, the eyes hazed in a thin film of snow and the tusks dripping with icicles. The road bends into the shadows, and the man parks the truck beside an old warehouse with antique brick sidings and broken windows. Along the other side of the road, towards the river, is a gated fence coiled with barbed wire; on the other side are several mounds of gravel and sand, now nothing more than white humps as if it were the ridge of a Saracen camel emerging from the earth. The man opens the door and gets out, and the boy follows. The man walks around the side of the truck, unlatches the hatch for the bed, and lowers it. The boy grabs twin flashlights from the bed of the truck and the Russian and British rifle, fully loaded. He tosses the

Russian one to the man. The man takes a flashlight, and they stand before a closed door with faded lettering: EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Mark kicks open the door and leaps back. The man shines his flashlight into the dark entryway and Mark raises his rifle to fire. No movement. No sound—except for their haggard breathing, the wind weeping through the shattered windows, the creaking of the door, their tattered heartbeats. They enter the building slowly. The drywall is crumbling. Iron beams can be seen. Rats are heard scurrying through the walls. They step in puddles of water from snow on the roof that had melted and descended like a cascading, meandering waterfall through the cracks. Their breath fogs before them, paving the way. They move through several large rooms. One is filled with a Bessemer converter, another with several blast furnaces, and an electric-arc furnace and a Stassano furnace. Through one door they find a collection of steel bars, angles, pipes, plates, and sheets. They begin hauling the sheets and plates to the truck, moving quickly, sweating even in the cold: the steel is heavy. They stop only for a few cigarette breaks. They load down the truck, hoping the weight will help it ascend the slight incline along State Avenue.

"That will do," the man says after loading in the sixteenth sheet.

Marks rubs his hands, deep creases and bruises emerging at the joints. "I think so."

They get back into the truck and shut their doors.

Mark stares out the window, looking over the broken windows. God, it was eerie...

The man puts the key in the ignition.

The boy looks into the rearview mirror. The sun is lowering closer to the line of trees on Price Hill behind them. "Come on, let's go." He looks back to the man.

The man's face is ashen. "The truck won't start."

Mark's heart drops like the Time's Square glitter-ball on New Year's Eve. "What?"

The man wrestles with the key, twisting it in the ignition. Nothing. "I left the lights on..."

"How the hell did you leave the lights on?" the boy exclaims.

"I don't know, I guess I turned them on..."

"Fuck!" Mark shouts, slamming his fist into the dashboard.

The man keeps trying to activate the ignition, nervous sweat trickling down his brow.

Mark throws open the door, leaps out.

The man glares at him. "Where the hell are you going?"

"The hell outta here," Mark answers, and he disappears into the dark building.

The man tries once more, curses, opens his door, and leaps out.

They push through a door that reads WAREHOUSE and find themselves surrounded by wooden crates stacked high like bales of hay, stickers with numbers and digits and Chinese symbols splashed over the dusty planks. The boy splashes the flashlight through the room; it reflects upon a piece of glass around the corner of a stack of crates. He and the man run forward, and turning around the crates, they find an old van with blown-out tires. It has an expired license plate.

"Do you know how to hotwire a van?" the boy asks.

"No," the man answers, eyeing the boy. "Do you?"

"No."

"Why the hell couldn't you have been a convict..."

"Maybe the keys are inside." The boy runs up to the driver's door, tugs. "It's locked."

"Then break the glass," the man says, surveying the room. Crates tower all around them, and along one wall is an abandoned work area. Saws and welders and iron bars lay dormant upon the steel shelving. At the far end of the warehouse is a rippled garage door, suffering several dents and scrapes. The man looks back to the boy with the sound of shattered glass; the boy had taken the handle of the flashlight and swung it into the window. Now he sets the flashlight on the seat, reaches inside, and unlocks the door. He steps back and swings it open. "Are there any keys?" the man asks.

Mark shakes his head: *No*.

They both spin around with the sound that carries through the wounded windows.

A soft melancholy tune on an even darker night.

"They're coming out," Mark says, face ashen.

"Maybe they won't find us," the man says. "Maybe they won't—"

His words are cut off:

The echo of footsteps carry down the hallway.

They sound like scurrying mice.

They climb into the back of the van, locking themselves in, crouching in the darkness.

"Isn't this familiar?" Mark croons. "And it's just as cold."

"Quiet," the man hisses.

They can hear them outside the van: they have entered the warehouse. The sounds of their horrid, ragged breathing come through the thin sheet metal of the van's frame. They've picked up the scent, and their hearts pound like hunting dogs on the chase. Slowly and slowly they draw closer to the van, and Mark shouts as the van suddenly rocks to the side. He scrambles in the darkness, and his head bangs into the side of the van. His world goes dizzy for a moment, and he nearly bites through his tongue as searing pain rockets through his skull. The man is thrown onto the floor, rolling like a rag-doll, as the van shakes again. The dark-walkers throw themselves against the sides, and those within the van can hear the attackers' heavy breathing, their snarls, the animals thirsting. A great scratching sound fills the air as they draw their fingernails across the side of the vehicle, trying to get inside. They ram their shoulders into the van once more, and it lifts. The man rolls into Mark, and in the next moment they are shouting as the van tips onto its side. They crumple together, lying on the side of the van, their breath fetid and warm and uninviting. The glass windshield in the front of the van shatters, and the dark-walkers climb into the cab. They work with the small door leading to the back of the van, gracing it with greedy fingers.

"They're going to get in," Mark growls, squeezing out from underneath the man.

"I know," the man says, swinging his hands blindly in the darkness, trying to orient himself.

"You just *had* to leave the lights—"

The van quakes again, and the sound of denting metal from the back of the van echoes.

"They're going to come in through the back door," Mark says.

The back door dents farther in. The lock is about to snap.

"The last ride of the Valkyries," the man says under his breath.

Mark looks up at him, confused. "What?"

The man balls his fist, lets out a raging shout, and charges the door.

Chapter Twelve

Nightmares & Dreamscapes

"Death is nothing to us and no concern of ours... When we shall be no more, when the union of body and spirit that engenders us has been disrupted—to us, who shall then be nothing, nothing by any hazard will happen any more at all. Nothing will have power to stir our senses, not though earth be fused with sea and sea with sky... Rest assured that we have nothing to fear in death. One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born."

- Lucretius (99-55 B.C.)

The back door bursts open; the doors swing outward, slamming into the devilish creatures spit right from the mouth of hell; they stumble over backwards as the two figures leap out with a horrendous cry. The dark-walkers shriek, their yellow teeth aching for speckled blood reflecting in the moonlight coming in jagged pillars through the cryptic windows. They close upon the two figures, which spin and buckle, swinging their fists through the air, throwing out their legs. Dark-walkers are thrown to the ground; fists connect with their taught faces, and they spew bits of teeth and gum as they stagger backwards.

One of the dark-walkers grabs the man in pale blue hands, and the man lets out a shout as he is hurled to the ground: he slides across the pavement and rolls into a crate. The dark-walker descends upon him; using the crate for leverage, he pulls himself up, grabs the crate in both hands, and yanks it outwards. The crates shudder, twist, contort, and fall. The dark-walker looks up with wide eyes and then disappears amidst the broken wooden boards and the gnarled twists of granulated steel. The man runs into the darkness blindly, hearing the boy's shouts, caring only for himself. The steel bench aligned with tools emerges from the darkness; he grabs an iron bar and swings around. A dark-walker lunges at him from the shadows. The man grips the iron bar white-knuckled and swings outwards, gritting his teeth; the bar connects with the dark-walker's face, twisting the head to the side, and the cheek impales, revealing a spurt of blood and chipped bone. The creature falls to the ground and screams, jaw dislocated. The man grunts as he is attacked from behind and knocked to the ground; he rolls onto his back and raises the bar in both hands against the throat of the attacker who has fallen atop of his chest. Spit dribbles down onto the man's face, warm, foaming. The man wrenches over to the side, sends the dark-walker into the steel bench. He shakes as he tries to stand. Another dark-walker hurls itself into him, knocking him into a pile of crates. He swings the bar around and it connects with the creature's neck, which snaps upon impact. The body crumples to the ground. Two dark-walkers emerge before him; the man backs up into the corrugated sides of the crates. They slowly move forward, hands outstretched, fingers—claws—twitching. The man looks up and behind him to the towering stack of wooden boxes, and he hurls the bar at the dark-walkers. He doesn't even stop to see if it connected; he turns and begins climbing. The dark-walkers lunge forward and grab at his heels; he kicks their hands away and continues to climb.

Mark watches the man disappear around the side of the crates. Several dark-walkers lunge at him. Mark turns and runs towards the door. The dark-walkers snap at one another and give chase. He enters the dark corridor that stinks of mildew and guano; his head swims, and he doesn't know which way to go. He turns and runs into the darkness. The dark-walkers are right behind him. He ascends a flight of rickety iron steps and emerges into a large room. The dark-walkers pack themselves into the narrow stairwell and fight over one another to see who gets to chase first. Mark eyes a hideous iron beast in the darkness: a furnace.

The man continues climbing the crates. The dark-walkers congregate below, snarling and snapping at one another, enraged. The crates are stacked against the wall, close to the windows. He reaches the top of the crates and runs towards a window. Most of the glass is shattered. He punches the last remnants of glass away, caring not that the old shards cut deep into the folds of skin between his knuckles. He lifts himself up and through, and he twists and dangles outside the building, the snow-drift fifteen feet below. He closes his eyes, gives a quick little prayer to an unknown god, and releases. He falls into the black void.

The dark-walkers giving chase reach the next floor just as Mark enters the furnace. He turns and sees them in the darkness, nothing but pinpricks of light in the shadows, the scant moonlight, defragmented by the dust on the windows, dancing in their eyes. Mark grabs the heavy door to the furnace and begins pulling it shut. It grinds and catches on the floor. He keeps his eyes from his assailants as he pulls it with more force. The hinges creak and groan. The door slowly moves in its concentric arc.

The man lands in the snow, and his body is quickly engulfed. The freezing ice squeezes through him, and he fights to be free. He emerges from the pale grave and stumbles into the street. The howls of the dark-walkers fill the night, coming from every direction: from the hills, from downtown, from the groceries and the factories and the houses, from across the river that lies dead and dormant, void of ferries or trawlers or tugboats or coal-transporters. He passes beside the truck laden with steel sheets and he reaches the fence. He grabs it with both hands. Behind him, a pair of beady-white eyes watches from the door to the factory. Its hands twitch and its head cocks to the side, examining the strange vision as the dilapidated man begins to climb. It is shoved out of the way by several more dark-walkers who run into the street and throw themselves at the fence. But the man is already climbing. He reaches the top and begins to pull himself over. He gives a last glance to the dark-walker in the doorway. It is an old man with swollen nipples over washboard ribs. At one time it could have been a Santa Claus with the white beard and mustache and thick eyebrows. Now it just watches him with a lazy apathy. The man for a moment sees the dark-walker not emaciated, but plump, dressed in a red gown in the shopping mall, greeting little children and giving them candy-canes. And there are his elves—volunteers dressed in green stockings and wearing oversized red hats. He sees them in their costumes, tearing open the bowels of a screaming child, and the child clutches his candy cane. He shakes the image from his mind as he begins to climb down the other side of the fence.

The dark-walkers are too close. The boy curses and abandons the furnace. He takes off running again, and he enters a room filled with tools. He grabs a saw hanging from a hook in the wall and spins around. A dark-walker runs into the room. The boy swings the saw outwards, and the serrated edges connect with the dark-walker's throat; the dark-walker twists to the ground, and the boy tumbles

over him. He twists on his side. The dark-walker's feet are kicking wildly in the dark, and its hands are groping at its throat, blood staining the rusted saw and bubbling like a Greek fountain. The boy rips the saw out of its gullet, and a pillar of blood rises as the dark-walker convulses on the ground. She is a girl, maybe fifteen, perhaps once a cheer-leader or a nerd who enjoyed studying calculus. The boy doesn't care. Monsters now. He grips the saw as another dark-walker enters. He swings it low, and it connects with the creature's knee-cap. It tumbles over and falls; it tries to stand, but collapses, howls in pain, scratches at its knees, trying to rid the pain of hewn ligaments. The boy leaves the room and a dark-walker comes from the side. The boy doesn't have time to react, and the dark-walker is upon him; its fingers with lavish fingernails slash, and the boy shouts and rips away, blood seeping down his arm through the long-sleeved shirt. The dark-walker growls at him, and the boy lets out a shriek and swings the saw with wild force; it cuts right through the ligaments and bone of the spine, and the dark-walker's head rolls off and onto the floor. The body collapses into a bundle. Warm blood sprays over the boy's shirt, and he stumbles back towards the furnace. He switches the saw blade to his other hand and grips his hurt arm with the other. He heads towards the stairwell only to hear more coming up. He grips the saw tight but can already feel his strength leaving him: his shirt sleeve is already thick with blood. He fears the dark-walker may have sliced an artery.

The chains in the fence are covered with ice, and the man loses his grip; he shouts as he falls, and he lands on his feet, twists to the side, lets out a shout, and falls into the snow. He tries to pick himself, but lightning pain arches through his leg and into his back. He takes several deep, gulping breaths, as if he were underwater for hours and just surfaced. He falls back into the snow and reaches for his ankle. The mere brush of his fingertip brings agonizing pain. He falls backwards into the arctic drift, hears the dark-walkers at the fence, sees the clouds before the moon parting, and the moon wreathed with stars shining down on him. The smiling Man in the Moon grins at him, a bitter mockery.

He has shut the door, a feat as his strength is all but drained. He staggers backwards into the heart of the furnace with its scorched walls and its stink of charcoal. He slides against the far wall and can hear the dark-walkers outside the door, throwing themselves against it—the sound is low and muffled, for the door is heavy. Mark sets the blood-spattered saw beside him and slowly works to take off his shirt. The cold within the furnace—the irony of ironies—is nail-biting, but he has no choice. He grits his teeth as he swings the shirt into a rope with his right hand, admiring the heavy blood with its peculiar scent trailing down his arms like a melting glacier running through a canyon. He wraps the shirt tight around the wound and lets out a sordid cry with the pain. He can feel the blood pulsing through his veins, and his heart flutters in his chest. He has done all he can. He relaxes against the cold steel wall and sees nothing but blackness—a deep, ephemeral darkness that can be cut with a dull knife. He must wait and see—wait, and see, if he is alive come morning.

The man crawls through the snow, whimpering with each movement of his foot through the splintering cold. Between two piles of snow-covered rocks sits a Caterpillar Bobcat, a testament to a world that once was and never will be again. He can almost hear the shouts of construction workers, the crude jokes, the scent of cigarettes in the burning summer heat. But now there is nothing but the wailing of the dark-walkers wailing against the fence and the cold that cuts deep into the bones and the grinning moon with its Cheshire smirk. Each inch feels like a mile, but he reaches one of the large rubber tires. He pulls himself against it, and grabbing the side of the Bobcat, lifts himself up. The cab of the vehicle is huddled behind plate-glass; he grabs the door and swings it open. He tries to lift himself up into the cab, shrieks in pain, collapses back into the snow. He tries again, but resides once

more in the snow, the cold numbing and the pain intoxicating. The moonlight glimmers off the ice-covered fence, and it pools in the eyes of the creatures watching him, their starving drool glistening as it spirals to the ground and mixes with the foot-trodden snow. The fence wobbles back and forth, and a pair of dark-walkers begins to climb. One loses its grip and falls back into the hoard, but the other continues to climb. The man tries to number them but loses count at seventeen. It doesn't matter. Only one needs to get over the fence. He is crippled. A lame housecat surrounded by rabid dogs. A wild buffalo surrounded by Indians. A zebra standing amidst the oasis with alligators closing in on either side. He can only wait for them to reach him.

The boy's world spins. The cold grows heavier, and his heart beats slower. His lips move. "Cara... Cara..." He remembers her words. They will be together again. And soon. He remembers the beauty of that place, the whispering meadow, the beautiful pines, the blooming flowers of a myriad of colors. A place of peace and tranquility, happiness and joy. This is hope. He closes his eyes and lets it come. *Beat slower*, he tells his heart, *for sooner shall we be together again*.

Move, you fucker! his mind screams. His limbs are stubborn. His spirit is willing, but his body is weak. He refuses to move, and then he finds himself doing it. The pain rushes through him like bluegill through the bulrushes, and he finds himself in the cab. He positions himself. He swings his legs over. His throbbing ankle hits the gear-shaft and the pain nearly makes him fall from the cab. He grabs the wheel and reaches for the door with his other hand. He can't reach it. The lone dark-walker falls from the fence and lands on the inside. The others, inspired, begin to climb. The man's fingers brush the handle. *Grab it. Grab it. Grab it.* He leans farther out. His fingers wrap around the handle. He slams it shut. He finds the lock and throws it down. He shimmies across the seat and locks the other door. Plate glass is over the windows, and he is thankful for that. He leans back in the seat as the dark-walker fades in from the shadows. The middle-aged man stands in front of the fork of the Bobcat, and he moves forward, climbs over the engine. The man watches with crimson eyes as the creature begins swinging at the glass. Its knuckles bleed and shatter, and blood smears the window. But it's too thick, and it can't get in. More dark-walkers appear around him, and they climb over the Bobcat, trying to get in. Their bile and bodily fluids crawl down the side of the PLEXIGLAS as the man reaches into his jeans pocket with a feeble hand and withdraws his pack of cigarettes. He flips open the box and pulls out a cigarette. He lights it in shaking fingers and takes a beautiful drag. It is exhilarating and calming. The chemicals swarm his lungs, and for a moment he relaxes. A faint smile, born from shock, crosses his lips, and he mumbles to himself, "And Kira said *these* would kill me..."

The cold begins to overcome him. His senses are dulled. The cold feels warm, and he cannot hear the dark-walkers outside the furnace door, nor can his ears attune to his own stalling breaths. Everything begins going dim, the world fades to nothing, and as his eyes slide shut, she appears again, shimmering in the darkness, almost too vague to touch. He lifts his head. His eyelids are shut, but he can see her. She is in the furnace with him. She kneels down, her spring dress with images of sunflowers and sunshine swirling about her slender legs. She kneels beside him, and she reaches out, caresses his chin, his eyelids. She leans forward, and he feels the cold sweat on his forehead steam as her warm lips meet above his eyes in a crescent kiss. *Do you remember?* she asks. *Do you remember?* He remembers.

ΣΩΣ

They were driving down OH-50, the Ohio River sparkling under the evening sun to their left and the rolling hills of eastern Cincinnati, splashed with two-story buildings with crumbling façades, on their right.

Cara stared out her window, watching the scenery flash by. She played with her pearl necklace.

Mark looked over at her, keeping both hands on the wheel. "What are you thinking about?"

She didn't look at him. "Do you think dreams have meanings?"

He paused to think. "No. Dreams, they're just chemicals in your brain firing and neurons activating."

"When I was with Damon," she said, still gazing out the window, "I always had this dream with wolves. I was at the zoo, and I was standing behind those big plate-glass windows where you could watch the wolves on the other side. But in my dream, the windows disappeared, and I had to run from them. I was running through the zoo, and it was in the middle of the day, and it was abandoned. I was running past animal exhibits, past food stands. I ran through the amphitheater where they played concerts, and I even ran past the dolphins who were swimming and playing with their water-balls. The wolves were behind me the entire time. Every night I would have this dream, and every night I would be closer to the exit where people called out to me, telling me to just keep running, that I was almost free. But the wolves... They got closer and closer until they were nipping at my heels. When I realized that I couldn't be with Damon and broke up with him, the wolves stopped chasing me. Looking back, I think that the wolves symbolized the danger I was in. That relationship wasn't good. He used and abused me and made me feel bad for what he did to me. All those people who were shouting for me, trying to get me out of the zoo safely, they were the ones who cared for me and truly loved me. All my friends and my mom told me that I had to break up with Damon, that he wasn't good for me—and they didn't even know the things he did to me."

Mark was quiet for a moment. "I always dream of me being a pirate or a ninja." He looked over at her profile. "Do you think those dreams have meanings?"

She shook her head, frustrated.

Mark bit his tongue. *You're such a jackass.*

"I just think that... *sometimes* dreams can have meaning." After a moment: "But I hope you're right."

"Why do you hope I'm right?" He wished she would look over at him and stop staring away.

She didn't answer.

"I know you've been having bad dreams. You've been waking up in the middle night, and you've called me. Sometimes you're crying."

She bit her lip, stared out the window. "I have this dream... We're in my house. And something happens. I don't know what happens, but something happens. Something bad. And I'm taken from you. And I know that if you stay with me, something bad will happen to you, too. But if you walk away, if you leave me, nothing bad will happen to you..." She looked over at him, tears in her eyes; his heart broke for her. "I'm afraid that it means that one day, we won't be together. That I'll be taken from you, somehow. Not by choice. And if you stay with me, if you go where I go... then something bad will happen to you. So you'll have to choose. Stay with me and be hurt? Or walk away and be okay?"

Mark looked over at her, took her hand in his, squeezed. "I'll never leave you. I promise."

She smiled sweetly, and she squeezed his hand, too.

The dreams never stopped.

They intensified until the day her dream came true.
 The day she became a monster.



The man smokes, watching the dark-walkers pound against the glass. Their jaws are filled with yellow teeth, speckled with dried blood. Their eyes are empty and yet full of venom. Their movements are quick and surreal, and they move together, like a flock of birds in flight. Their actions are rhythmic; they smash the glass with their broken fists in an unbroken rhyme. They are naked. The men's genitals hang loose and swollen, and the breasts of the women are worn down and the nipples bruised purple, sharp as diamonds in the cold. Several stagger around in the snow, dragging limbs long overtaken by frostbite, watching with caution those who are not so weak: for if they do not dine on the man, they shall dine on those not strong enough to fight back. It is Nietzsche's dream come true in a way he never could have imagined. The man lets the smoke fill the cab. He lifts the cigarette to his lips, but a pang in his ankle tremors his fingers, and the cigarette spirals onto the leather seat, rolls onto the floor, and smolders out of reach. The man curses and leans back. A woman climbs on top of the hood. Her misshapen breasts swing before him like cauliflower on a string as she sends feeble arms into the window, and her spread legs reveal a bushy vagina crawling with translucent lice. Her eyes were at one time a beautiful blue, and the overgrown hair, matted down with sweat and long absent of shampoo, falls before her eyes. In a flash of moonlight he sees an iron cross necklace dangling from her neck, the jewel that rests in the center of the crucifix obscured by dried blood. He imagines that this is Kira reaching for him, scrambling for him, thirsting for him, crazed and inhumane. A tear, the first in what seems like ages, traces a jagged line down his rose-blotched cheek. The darkness is clouding, and he closes his eyes, looks away from the woman. He hears her knuckles crackling against the plate glass as he remembers.



She awoke in the middle of the night, buried underneath Mexican falsa blankets of every color, the eaves of the tent hanging over her, a petition between her wide eyes and the stars above, and she heard only the sounds of the owls and the coyotes and the winds in the trees. Her heart hammered, and sweat dripped down her brow. She rolled onto her side. He lied next to her. She gently slid her hand under the covers and felt his stomach. It moved in and out with each breath. Relief flooded through her veins. She lied back on her side and tried to go back to sleep, but the dream kept reverberating through her mind: she had been in the store shopping for groceries, and several people started screaming outside; she raced out and saw a body lying on the street, and a truck with bloody tires disappearing around a flower gift shop, speeding away; the body was dismembered and flattened, lying in a pool of blood; the face was crushed, the eyeballs hanging from their sockets, tire-marks engraved into the bones; she knew it was him because of his handsome brown hair, once wavy and styled, now matted with blood. She spooned up next to him. He breathed deep in his sleep. She clutched him tight, but not so tight as to waken him, and she whispered in his ear, "I love you." She had never told him before.

He pretended to be asleep. He pretended not to hear her.

But he had heard her.

And at that moment, he knew:

he loved her, too.

ΣΩΣ

The memory is shattered as the air fills with popping explosions. The man's eyes wrench open. The woman on the hood rears her body back, legs sprawled eagle-style on the hood, exposing her bushy crevice with its degenerate colonies. She lets out a shriek, and her chest explodes. The man shudders in his seat as a great wash of blood splashes over the window; amidst the blood the window cracks outwards, and a smoking round is wedged into the webbed glass. The woman falls forward against the window, and the man looks up with a dropped jaw at her contorted face, her pupils shrinking, the side of her face plastered against the window. One eye twitches. More gunshots ring out. The man is bolted to his seat, a memoria of Diogenes, absent in body and fixated in mind. Through one of the side windows he sees the dark-walkers scattering, snapping amongst themselves, and then brilliant light washes over the cab, searing his eyes through the opposite side window. He lifts his hand to his face to block out the light. The door to the cab shudders once, twice. Another gun-blast and the door swings open. The man squints forward; a brilliant beam of light swarms over him, and silhouetted as a shadow against it is a single figure, standing rigid. The man opens his mouth to speak when a searing pain rips through his gut, and he hears the gunshot as he falls onto his back. With a feeble hand he reaches up to his stomach and feels blood seeping between his fingers like sand through a sieve. His eyes roll into the back of his head as rough hands grab his feet and yank him from the cab.

Book Two

February to April
2012

Chapter Thirteen

Saints & Sinners

"We are born with two incurable diseases: life, from which we die; and hope, which says maybe death isn't the end."
- Andrew Greeley (A.D. 1925-Present)

I

The boy awakes. The sun shines bright in his eyes, and he quickly closes them. A groan escapes his lips. He ponders for a moment if he is not dead, and brief flashes of an unknown memory spark before him: shouting, bright lights, strong hands grabbing weak limbs. He feels the heavy quilt tossed over him, and the pillow underneath his head. He tries lifting his neck, but eradicating pain breaks his movement. He lies nearly paralyzed in the bed. His eyes slowly adjust to the light, and through his peripheral vision he can see that the sunlight comes through a tall window. The walls about him are stone. The room is small, perhaps the size of a storage closet, and indeed, he sees that this is where he is: along one of the stone walls are propped several mops and brooms, and on the floor are several buckets. He watches a spider trail across the ceiling, the hairs on its body speckled with dew that reflects the wanton sunlight. Footsteps enter the room. His heart freezes in his chest. The sound of a chair being slid across the floor. A shadow falls over him. A wet towel is placed over his forehead, and a soothing voice, that of a nurse, speaks to him: "How are you feeling? Can you talk?"

His lips move on their own accord: "Where..."

"Quiet, now. You'll be all right. You're still quite sick. You nearly caught hypothermia." She continues dabbing the warm towel above his brows. "Thank God your artery wasn't cut. You wrapped your shirt around your arm. That was smart. It helped the clotting. It will take a few days for your bone marrow to create enough blood for you to be healthy again. And we sutured up your—"

A new movement in the room. "Have you asked him?" A man's voice. Stern.

Mark tries to move his neck to see, but only a silent gasp escapes.

The woman leaves the towel on his forehead, and he can hear her stand. "Please, not yet..."

"You need to ask him," the man says.

They leave the room.

Mark lies in the bed, and sleep quickly overtakes him.

The sun has died down when he is awakened. The woman is above him, and she is gently caressing the back of his hand. His arm quivers, and he withdraws it from her touch.

"I'm sorry," the woman says. "I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay," Mark coughs. His throat burns.

"Here," she says, bringing forward a glass. "You'll need to tip your head up."

"I can't."

"If you want to drink, you will."

Mark lifts his head and flinches with the pain.

The woman tips the glass, and distilled water runs down his throat and across his chin.

"Don't drink too much..." the woman warns.

Mark doesn't care. He keeps drinking. Suddenly he wrenches to the side and heaves. Water spews all over the bed-sheets. His head falls back onto the pillow and his limbs quake with a tiny tremor. His face blushes red in embarrassment.

"It's okay," the woman says. "I'll clean up the mess."

The man enters the room again. "What did he say?"

The woman glares at him. "Not yet."

The man curses and leaves the room.

Mark manages, "What does he want... to know?"

"Nothing to worry about, Dear. Just get some sleep."

He lies in his bed. Night has fallen. He can hear the dark-walkers outside, but their cries and howls are distant. A pale light enters through the window, brighter than the moon but duller than the sun. He can hear distant voices, somewhat muffled, carrying into his room. They are many and collaborative, men and women, and some even sound like children. He hears footsteps coming towards the room and goes quiet. Those approaching stop beside the closed door to the room. He strains his eyes and can hear their conversation.

"It's already been two days," the man says. "We need to find out..."

The woman replies, frustrated, "He's sick, and..."

"And *that's* why we need to find out. I don't want him in here if—"

"He lost a lot of blood. He's getting better. His temperature is getting back to normal."

"That's how it happens. You fluctuate."

"He suffered minor hypothermia. I'm a nurse, I know what he's going through."

"Just because he looks like your son doesn't mean..."

He hears a slap come from beyond the door.

The woman speaks. "Don't you dare say anything like that again."

After a moment, "We need to ask."

"And we will. But not right now."

"How long will we wait?" Earnestly, "We have children here, Nancy. *Children.*"

"I'll ask tomorrow."

"Do you have the shots?"

"Yes."

"Two doses. I want to make sure."

"I know. I know the procedure. I've done it before."

Mark doesn't hear anymore: footsteps dwindle. The people are gone.

The next morning he is propped up in his bed. The sunlight illuminates the room, and he can see sitting on one of the shelves a box filled with strings and beads. One of the strings of beads is dangling from the lip of the container, and along its loop is a titanium cross.

The door opens and the woman enters.

The boy manages a wry smile and greets her.

The woman's face lights up. She is rather short, skinny, but not emaciated. Well-fed. Her eyes are a Hershey brown, and gray hair curls behind her ears. She moves to the bed quickly, and sitting in the chair, takes the boy's hand in hers. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great," Mark says. "But I have more strength."

"I can go get you some food." She stands and leaves without a word.

She left the door open, and a figure enters the room. He is a tall, weathered man with leathery hands and an upside-down crescent scowl. He stands quietly in the corner, eyeing the boy. His cutting stare is mind-numbing. Mark refuses to look away. He says hello, but the man simply leaves the room. A moment later the woman returns with a bowl of steaming soup in which rests a metal spoon. She hands it to him, and he sits up in bed, sipping it slowly, admiring the taste. Chicken and noodles with a mushroom broth. He finishes the soup and hands her the bowl.

She points to his arm. "Does it hurt?"

He looks down and sees a line of stitches running across where he had been gouged. "No."

"Sandra was a nurse during Vietnam. She can do stitches better than I can."

"I'll be sure to thank her."

A shadow falls in the doorway. Concern is etched over the woman's features.

Mark speaks: "I wasn't bit."

She looks at him. "Excuse me?"

"They didn't bite me. I know what happens when you get bit. I've seen it."

The man enters the room. "You've seen it?"

Mark nods. "Yes."

"Then tell me. What happens?"

"It looks like malaria at first. But then it becomes something else."

"Malaria?" the man asks.

The woman lifts a quizzical finger, deep in thought. "Malaria? Yes." She looks at the man. "The symptoms of the sickness are similar to malaria. He's right."

Mark says, "A little girl. She was bit by one of them. She became really sick..."

"And she died?"

"Yes. No. She became one of them. A dark-walker."

"A dark-walker?"

"That's what we call them. They only come out at night. 'Dark-Walkers.'"

"Did you see her become one of them—a 'Dark-Walker'—yourself?" the man asks.

Mark remembers the box-car. The blood on the walls. The awful stench. He hangs his head low, and his bangs flutter before his eyes. "Yeah. I saw it."

The man is persistent: "How did you get that gash?"

"You rescued me from the factory?"

"Yes."

"In the furnace? Then you would have seen the saw."

"Yes," the man says. "So?"

"I was in the furnace... I knew I wasn't going to get out..." His voice becomes low as he speaks. "I knew the cold would kill me. I took Health in High School. I know what hypothermia does to you. So I tried to kill myself. I tried to cut an artery... I guess I failed."

The woman bites her lip. "You're okay now, though. You don't have anything to worry about."

The boy looks up, but the man is gone.

II

He is alone, locked in a darkness he can taste, a darkness darker than the most awful silence, a darkness that makes prison seem full of radiant light. He does not know if his eyes are opened or

closed; the darkness saturates every part of his eternal being. He props himself up on the bed, and he feels the cold. He realizes he is in his boxers lying on a bare mattress with hard springs. One hand traces up to his head, which pounds as if an angel has embedded his brain with a spiked mallet and continues to twist it around until brain matter comes from his nose and ears. He leans forward but it makes the sensation worse; he falls back on his elbows, then retreats even more into the confines of the bed, laying spread-eagled, staring into the darkness, goose bumps carving pathways across his frosty skin. Moments pass but it happens; he begins to see. His eyes widen and he consumes the room, the shadows merging and melting; he sees the stone wall and it is still covered in a thick layer of grime. The mirror on the dresser is shattered and covered with a thin layer of dust; the candle on the dresser has been knocked over and is strewn with cobwebs. He looks into the corners and sees insects crawling; a rat scurries across the floorboards and disappears into the wall. The man winces, trying to get up. He manages to sit on the edge of the bed, bare feet on the chilly stone floor. Pain throbs through his stomach; he looks down, and in the darkness he can see a bruised spot, and he touches his skin and feels the stitches. It hurts to the touch.

He stands. He can feel the ache in his bones, gnawing at the marrow and seducing his veins, causing his eyes to slide close, his spirit to desire sleep. He fights it off, doesn't feel right, doesn't know where he is, a terror screaming silently. Ice travels between his toes as he stumbles in the darkness. He looks to the side and sees his clothes in a neat pile upon a broken chair. He does not remember setting them there, but the headache is bogging down his mind. He quickly dresses and returns to the door. He twists the knob and swings the door open.

The darkness of the corridor pervades and it takes his eyes many moments to adjust. The bare stone walls are laced with grime, and the candle mounts are empty, strewn with feathery cob-webs. He does not look at the floor, feels no need to, only runs one hand against the wall as he walks. It is not long till he feels something crackling under his feet. He cannot see and so he continues walking; it feels as if he is walking upon fortune cookies. He comes to an open door and sees faint light coming from a boarded window; the light laces through the spindly dust, breathing chalk on the walls. He steps upon a broken chair, grabs the wooden board, and rips it down. It comes free in a sea of dust and he falls back, the chair shifting; he lands on his shoulder, the wind sucked from his lungs; the wooden board breaks upon his opposite shoulder and the brilliant light burns his eyes. He lets it waft over him and slowly he opens his eyes; the light brings edges and colors and contours to the grey room.

He is looking into the hollow eyes of a skeleton covered in moss.

He reels backwards, a scream rising in his throat, and he throws himself up against the wall. The light reveals the atrocities of the room; skeletons lie everywhere, most covered in furry moss and eroding clothes. The room stinks of flesh and carrion beetles crawl over the walls. He leaps to his feet, afraid to move, terrified to breathe, the world spinning a million songs of death. The skeletons seem to rise, to move, to reach for him with bony fingers. He kicks a skeleton away, the bones falling apart under beetle-crawling cloth, and he throws himself into the hallway.

A rough hand grabs him by the shoulder.

He swings around. A figure in the shadows grins with rotted yellow teeth.

The man wrenches away, staggers into the room, trips over a femur, collapses onto one of the skeletons. The bones twist and snap, feeble and corroded. He lets out a shout and wrenches to the side; flashing pain rockets through his stomach, and he bends over, clutching at his gut. Blood seeps from the broken stitches.

The figure enters the room, kneels down beside him. He grins. "Be kind with it, now."

The man glares up at the man, eyes alight with fright.

The man nods to the skeletons about the room. "Thank God they're not alive anymore, Friend. Or *they'd* be the ones making you bleed." A wretched smile twists over the awful man's face, and the fallen man knows nothing more as the figure delivers a crackling blow across his cheek.

Consciousness begins to revive, and he finds himself being pulled down a corridor. Candles are lit in mounts along the gothic stone walls, casting shadows about him. His head lulls to each side, and he sees two men dragging him by the arms. They turn down an opposite corner. The man's feet drag, and he tries to move them, but dizziness overwhelms and he feels vomit creeping up his throat. A heavy wooden door emerges; one of the men holds the man up as the other unlocks the door with a heavy iron key. They say nothing as the man is bodily pushed within. The man stumbles and falls to the ground, his insides churning: vomits pour forth. The door is quickly shut. Movement comes from the side of the room. Someone kneels down beside him, places a hand on his shoulder. The man looks up with weak eyes. "You're just a boy..." he murmurs, and then he passes out.

The man awakes. He is lying on a bed. He turns his head. There are two figures in the room. A high yet small square window lets in a shaft of light. His eyes are blurry, but they focus. The boy sits along the wall, drawing figures in the dust on the floor. He has shaggy auburn hair and a hawk-like nose. The other figure sits in a chair on the other side of the room. She is curled up into a fetal position, her head between her knees, eyes vacant and eerie. She rocks herself back and forth. The man looks up at the ceiling and tries to remember. He can hear their screams, he can remember the cigarette between his fingers—*God*, how he wants a cigarette—and he remembers the headlights. Everything afterwards becomes a fuzzy mess. He stops trying to recollect and lies quietly on the bed. He closes his eyes. The pain in his stomach takes him to sleep.

Her screams bring him from the noxious dream-world. His head twists to the side, and he watches as two men enter the room. The girl is standing in the corner, screaming at them. The boy sits dejectedly in the opposite corner, at the foot of the bed. The men grab her. She slaps one of the men across the face, and he grabs her by the throat and lifts her up against the wall, her feet dangling. She wraps her hands around his arms and tries to pull free; her eyes bulge, laden with tears; she squirms for a breath. The man spits in her face, the dribble running down the breadth of her tiny nose. Anger burns through the man, and he tries to shout, but he is silenced by the ridiculous pain scourging through his stomach. The world fades to blackness, and even the girl's screams vanish.

He hears the boy pacing about in the small room. He moves his lips, speaking: "Where... did they take her?"

The sound of pacing stops. The boy speaks: "You're awake?"

"Where did they..." He coughs, unable to finish his sentence.

The boy is quiet, continues pacing. "You don't want to know."

The man doesn't say anything more.

The boy looks over: he has fallen asleep once more.

The light from the window is dimming. The man lies awake but unmoving, dwelling upon Kira. Her smile. Her laugh. They way she would spoon with him at night. The quiet grin it would bring him. The boy is sitting once more in the corner, staring into space. The door creaks and opens. Two men shove the girl back into the room. She stumbles about and falls to the ground. Her limbs quake, and she shudders with each sobbing croak. The boy shimmies over next to her, tries to comfort her; she wreathes away—"Don't touch me!" she screams. The boy's eyes fall as she returns to the corner with

the chair. She pushes the chair out of the way and curls up into a fetal position. The man falls asleep while hearing her quiet sobs.

III

The boy wakes the next morning. He lies in bed for quite some time, can hear muffled conversations outside the door, though they sound distant. He can hear several little children singing. He hears *Amazing Grace* and *He Paid It All* before the door opens and the nurse enters. She is delighted to see him sitting upright in bed, and she approaches as he asks, "They're singing hymns?"

She looks back to the open door. "Yes. It's Sunday, after all."

"Oh," Mark says. He finds it ironic that people are praising God amidst the hell.

She sits down in the chair. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better."

"Healthy enough to walk around?"

"My limbs are still a little weak."

"No worries, Dear. Your strength will return in time. You lost a lot of blood."

"How much?"

"Maybe a few pints," she tells him. "You were shivering and passed out in that furnace when our men found you."

"How'd they know I was there?" Mark asks.

"They were coming back from Kentucky, and they saw the truck parked there, with the doors opened, and they explored the factory to see what had happened. Brave souls, they are. They're lucky none of them were crouching in the shadows waiting to pounce. But, no worries, they did all right. And from what I hear," she says with a twinkle in her eye, "so did you. They found three bodies in that same room. It looked as if you knifed them. Quite heroic."

"It didn't feel so heroic at the time," Mark says. "I was just trying to survive."

"Aren't we all? No one lives anymore. We just survive."

She returns in the afternoon with some hot soup. The boy anxiously devours it. For desert is a strawberry. The boy looks it over with amazement before slowly eating it, letting the tart juices crawl down the corners of his lips. The woman quietly watches him eat. The boy smiles at him. Her face falls for a moment, and her eyes flap shut. A trigger of alarm runs through the boy. She opens her eyes again, and he can see that they have swollen with the first onslaught of trepid tears. "You look like my son," she says.

He doesn't say anything. What *can* he say?

"He was about your age. Andrew Webster. A wonderful boy. He was quite the scholar at English, let me tell you! Everyone joked about it, because of his last name, you know. He would read Dictionaries and Thesauruses for fun. He even wrote his own textbook on grammar! No one would publish it, though: they said it was good, but he didn't have the credentials needed to successfully market it. Thus his greatest success became his greatest failure. But isn't that how life goes sometimes? He was bummed out about it for a while. He became cheery, though, let me tell you, when Harvard accepted him. He made the cut by a hair, that's for sure, but he knew that he could make his dreams come true. Most boys dream of being rock stars or nation-renowned athletes or something like that. My boy, Andrew, he dreamt of writing grammar textbooks!" She shakes her head, biting her lip in a half-smile. "Such a sweet boy." Her face falls. "That's the Andrew I have to

remember. I don't know why the plague didn't get me, but it got him. I remember it. My husband was away on vacation. Golfing in Florida. I am sure he's gone—I held onto hope for some time, but I know the statistics. Only a handful of people for every several thousand survive. My son wasn't one of them. Unlike me, he was affected. I didn't know anything was wrong that morning. I woke up and poured myself a glass of milk. I didn't know the electricity was out, until I drank it. It was sour, you know. Curdled. Like drinking rotten cottage cheese. That's when I noticed the silence. We lived near a highway, and you could always hear the semis. And in the morning, you'd hear them honking in the rush hour traffic. But there was nothing. I went outside. Looked around. I couldn't find anyone. There were some cars wrecked, but the streets were mostly deserted. Most people were sleeping here when the plague hit. I can't imagine the devastation in Europe and Asia... The plague hit them midday. But I couldn't find anyone. I thought I was living in a dream-world. I found a wrecked van and went up to it. The driver, an older man, was lying behind the wheel. His face was contorted into a mask of... I don't know. Terror. Pain. Something. Blood had dried around his eyes, nose, mouth, ears... The disease did something to people, made them bleed from their face. I ran back to my house and went up to Andrew's room. I found him lying..." Her tears swell up, and she puts a shaking hand against her eyes, trying—perhaps—to block out the memory. The boy feels suddenly uncomfortable and keeps looking to the window. She continues speaking, voice quivering: "He was lying there in his bed, with his boxers... Just lying there... And he had a tube of modeling cement in his hand... And he had squeezed the contents into his throat... He had committed suicide. I felt his throat, felt for a pulse... And it just felt solid. The cement had hardened inside. But before... Before he did that, he had opened his Dictionary... and with a bright felt tip marker he had circled a word near the back..." She breaks down. Her head falls into her hands, and her chest heaves with each sob.

Mark doesn't know what to do. He just sits there, watching her, eyes fixated, engulfing.

After a moment, cooling herself off by fanning her dainty fingertips: "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay," Mark says. "It's fine."

"It's just... Somehow, he knew. Somehow, he knew what would happen."

Mark wants to ask, tells himself not to, does it anyway: "How did he know?"

"The word he circled... It was—"

The door swings open. The man stands there, doesn't even acknowledge the boy. "Nancy."

She looks up at him, wiping her eyes. "What?"

"Almira needs you." He looks at the boy and leaves.

The woman stands from her chair. "I'm sorry... I have to go..."

"It's okay," Mark says. He watches her leave the room.

IV

When the man awakes, it is early morning. Sunlight is beginning to move at a snail's pace from the east, and the light is hemorrhaging in rivulets into the stone-walled room. The boy is sitting in the chair, staring into space. The girl is gone. With a groan, the man brings himself forward. His body aches and throbs, the bones cracking and the muscles burning. He swings his legs over the side of the bed and runs one hand through his greasy hair, the other feeling the stubble growing along his jawl. He would shave every other morning back at the house. The boy watches him.

The man rubs tired, bloodshot eyes. He looks at the boy. "Hi," he groans.

The boy asks, "How's your stomach?"

The man feels down to his gut. "It hurts. Like hell. But it's okay. They stitched it up again."

"Yeah. They want you to be healthy."

"For what?"

The boy doesn't answer.

The man looks about the room. "Where's the girl?"

He doesn't answer for a moment. "These people... They're monsters. When civilization breaks down, when rules and regulations cease to exist... There is nothing to curb the animal nature within us. Society trained us and raised us and made us docile. It taught us what it was like to be human—and completely tried to eradicate the animal nature within us. Sometimes it seemed as if society had succeeded. But the moment society vanished... Then we realized that deep within, we are nothing but animals. These men... They're animals. Brute creatures devoid of any sense of morality or conscience, living only to appease the animals within themselves."

A few hours pass. The boy and the man are quiet, not talking much. The man doesn't feel like talking. Never has. He's always been the kind to coil up into his own little world and ignore anyone or anything that encroaches. He had let Kira in, and she had been one of the first. His barriers had fallen down. But Kira is gone, and he is alone. For some time he ponders Mark. He knows that since Mark is not with him, he must have fallen to the dark-walkers. He envies him. These thoughts are trickling through his mind when the door unlocks. He hears a scuffle on the other side; both he and the boy look up as the door opens.

The girl is shoved inside, completely stripped of her clothes. She is about seventeen or eighteen. Her breasts are small, and her skin is flat against her washboard ribs. Her shoulder-blades are knobbed and bony. She stumbles inside and falls onto her hands and knees, long and knotted hair dangling in clumps before her eyes. Tears stream down her face, and she hunches there on the floor like a mangled dog, weeping. The men shout at her—"Filthy bitch!"—and slam the door. The man and the boy stare at broken girl. Blood trickles from her vagina. Her sobs shake the room. The man wants to look away, but he cannot. He sees this girl, wrecked and bloodied, ravaged and scourged; and he sees, despite her closed eyes, a person within: a girl who had hopes and dreams, hurts and desires. A girl who desired to love and be loved.



They had been flirting for a few months. He was twenty-three, the manager of the restaurant, a tycoon in her innocent eyes. He drove a nice car and wore nice clothes and had wit and charm. She had fallen for him quickly, and they had begun seeing each other outside the office. She was eighteen, legal, and so he tried to get her to sleep with him. She refused. They would be curled up on the couch at his condo, and he would begin caressing the shirt over her breast, or he would rub the jeans along the inside of her thigh. She would giggle and tell him to stop, and though he played it off with an childlike chuckle, it frustrated him. That evening he had gone into the back office after the restaurant closed and began filling out some paperwork and hammering out numbers from credit card receipts. She entered the room and said, "We need to talk about something."

He looked up at her from his position in the chair. "Sure."

She shut the door, and a wicked smile crossed her lips.

He eyed her. "What are you doing?"

She moved towards him, leaned forward, grabbed his face between her hands, lifted his chin, and began kissing him passionately. Their tongues danced back and forth within their mouths. He

found this much more enjoyable than paperwork, and he ran his hand underneath the sleeve of her work-shirt, feeling her warm shoulder. She took one hand from his face and tiptoed it down his shirt; she reached the zipper to his work pants, and she fondled with it ever-so-gently, unzipping. She reached inside and felt his warmth. She explored his boxers and found the crease in the fabric, and she slid her fingers within. His heart fluttered as her fingernails tickled him. He kissed her harder and harder, and she squeezed him. His eyes goggled. He stood, still kissing her, and he picked her up and put her on the desk. She was a small girl, lightweight.

She leaned up against the computer and grinned at him. He had grown hard and was sticking through his pants. She fingered the tip of his penis, and he lifted her skirt. He found much to his surprise and liking that she had already removed her panty-house. He stared right into her vagina. She bit her bottom lip and leaned forward, wrapping her bare legs around his waist.

She whispered into his ear, "Fuck me. Fuck me right here, on this desk."

A nervous sweat trickled down his face. He looked back to the door.

She grabbed his chin, turned his head towards her. "Don't worry about them. Look at me."

He didn't look back to the door, but he could hear the clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen.

"Are you going to fuck me?" she asked, her voice so beautiful.

He looked at the BEN'S DINER logo on her breast pocket, imagining the taste of her nipple.

"Well?" she asked, squeezing her clandestine legs tight around him.

"This is your first time," he told her.

"I know," she said.

"It might hurt a little bit."

"I know."

He didn't say anything more. He moved closer, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and their chests rubbed against one another as he entered inside of her. She made a strange sound, her lip quirked to the side. He asked if she was okay, she said to keep going. He went slow, then faster and faster. Her face contorted in pain a few times, but she began breathing heavily, and she began thrusting with him, squeezing him tight, burying her face with its beautiful black hair into the shirt on his chest. She let out a slow moan and fell backwards, her eyes fluttering. He withdrew and spilled all over the floor.

They looked at one another, and she sucked in breath after breath.

"Did it hurt?" he asked her in a whisper. The clambering in the kitchen had ceased.

She shook her head, the world spinning. "That... was... so... *awesome*."

He helped her off the desk. He zipped up his pants as a knock came at the door:

"Marv! Do you have the invoices from last night?"

She sat in her bed, sobbing, the world dark and unfamiliar. The stuffed animals in the hanging basket in the corner of her room glared condemnation. She felt smaller than an ant at a carnival as buried herself deeper and deeper underneath the blankets. She clutched the phone and heard it ring on the other line. Her friend answered: "Hello?"

"Liz?" Her voice cracked.

"Jasmine? Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "No..."

"What's wrong? Want me to come over?"

"No..."

"Jasmine, you sound like something's wrong."

"I had sex with him," she blurted, spilling her guts. Sobbing, "I had sex with him..."

"With who? The guy from the diner?"

Her voice was low, defeated, as she fought off more tears: "Yes."

Liz didn't say anything for a few minutes. "I'm going to come over."

"I just want to love and be loved," she whimpered. "Why is that so fucking hard?"

ΣΩΣ

Now the man stares at that same girl. Naked and exposed. Bleeding from the most precious part of a woman. Treated like shit, despised by mankind, violated. Raped. Her dreams are shattered. Her friends are absent. She is alone, nothing but a play-toy by which the monsters of men worship the god of lust. Her sobs drift away, and she curls up among the floor, folding together, arms wrapped around her knees, completely oblivious to her own nakedness. The man moves away from the bed, takes the sheet, and drapes it over her. She grabs the edges of the sheet and pulls the blanket tight around her shivering form. The man takes a seat upon the bare mattress with its coiled and snapped springs. The boy in the chair looks over at him, then looks away. The man lies with his back to the room and stares at the bare stone wall. The sunlight enters and the cold wind whips back and forth outside.

V

The boy finds the strength to walk. He awakes with the first rays of morning sunlight, and he carries himself from the room. He cannot hear any movement this morning as he walks down the long stone corridor. He sees a bend in the corridor ahead, and he rounds the corner to find a flight of steps running in a spiral downwards, the bare stone walls rising on either side. There is no hand-railing, and he takes the steps with care, feeling the joints in his knees aching. The stairwell continues to snake farther and farther down, though perhaps its distance is elevated only by his weakness, but he can soon hear the sounds of conversation. The smell of freshly baked bread touches him, and he salivates. He takes the steps quicker and comes out onto a concrete floor. About the room, several tables are set up. At the tables are people. Some are older, most are around thirty or forty, and he sees a few teenagers sitting together. A smaller table near the corner holds five or six young children, boys and girls. At the head of the room, a man is standing and praying. The boy recognizes the man, the one who had been so adamant about the boy's supposed ill health. He finishes the prayer, and then from the kitchen an older woman appears carrying a loaf of bread sliced into small squares. The boy counts those sitting and they number about thirty. Each table receives their own loaf of bread, and they share it amongst themselves. The man looks in his direction, and the boy quickly ducks into the shadows. He hears footsteps approaching, and a moment later the man appears.

"I'm sorry," Mark blurts. "I didn't mean..."

"You're feeling better?" the man asks. He has a wiry frame and shaggy gray hair.

"What? Oh. Yes. Much better."

"Good." He takes Mark by the hand. "Come join us."

Mark is amazed at the man's benevolence. The boy is pulled from the shadows, and the man announces their new visitor. He gets several nods, and many people rush forward to greet him. He shakes their hands, and it is nearly overwhelming. The man can perhaps see it in the boy's eyes. He quickly excuses the people and leads Mark to the table with the young adults. "Carla. Kyle. Let this young man in." They scoot aside, and he takes a seat between them. The man calls forth for some

bread. The bread is given to Mark, and he hungrily eats it. The others at the table watch with awe at how quickly he eats. The man tells him, "Once you're fed, I'll show you around."

Kyle says, "I'd like to show him around."

"Thanks for the offer, Kyle, but I'll be glad to do it."

Mark is left alone with the young men and women. He eyes them nervously.

The girl next to him laughs. "You seem afraid of us."

He shakes his head. "No. It's just... I haven't seen a girl in so long... At least, not one that's not... You know."

She smiles. "I'm Carla. I've been here for a few months."

"Good to meet you."

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Oh. 'Mark'. Sorry, I should have introduced myself."

"It's okay. I'm sure you're quite shocked to see so many people."

"I thought... that it was just me and..." He thinks of the man. He looks around the room. He can't spot his face. He shakes him out of his mind. "I just thought that I was alone. That there were no other survivors."

"Where are you from?" a boy asks. He has bleached-white hair and steaming azure eyes.

"Cincinnati," Mark answers. "From the Price Hill area. Westside."

"All the way across the city," the boy says.

"Yeah."

Kyle mutters, "All the way across the world."

Mark looks over at the girl across from him. "What's your name?"

She stares at him, stands without finishing her food, and walks away.

Those at the table are eager to befriend him. Carla has long brown hair and a certain passion Mark has not seen for quite some time: energy and vibrance are the underscore and superscript of her personality. Kyle is twenty-one years old, from northern Kentucky. He had been going to University when the plague struck, and on a journey north with several raiders had found the community and longed for it more than his current state-of-affairs. He had been cold and calloused towards others, but his heart is warming up to the new hope found within the church. Anthony is twenty-four years old. He had been finishing up a Master's program at the University of Cincinnati, and he had been at the church only for a few months. He doesn't talk much, is the quiet type, and finds it hard making friends. While most of the teenagers share their own room within the church, Anthony is aloof, often sleeping in the upstairs rooms, avoided for their draft. He prefers to be alone.

Mark asks, "Who was that other girl? The one who just got up and left?"

"That's Rachel," Kyle says. "She's one of the originals."

"The originals?"

"One of the first people here. She came within the first month. Most of us are relatively recent. I mean, it's been, what, nearly half a year since the accident? I've been here since early December. Carla's been here since mid-November. Anthony, he's been here since the end of December. But Rachel was here by the end of August. She was one of the ones who renovated the place, made it fit for living in. Boarded up all the windows. Erected the high fence around the property. It was her idea to install ultraviolet lights used for greenhouses around the perimeter. That seems to keep them away from us. We don't know why, but it does. She helped begin the radio broadcasts. And she's quite the warrior. She may look like your ordinary kind of girl. The kind who likes flowers and chick flicks and HELLO KITTY paraphernalia. But when some raiders came by here, trying to get in... She led the

counter-attack. She shot several of them, and one of them came up behind her and she broke his neck with her bare hands."

"Raiders?" the boy asks.

A shadow falls over him. "Enough with the horror stories, Kyle." To Mark: "Ready?"

VI

The girl sleeps quietly in the bed. After she had fallen asleep, the man had gingerly lifted her and placed her upon the mattress. She rolls over and mumbles in her sleep. Sometimes she whimpers and cries. It breaks the man's heart—a breaking he has not experienced in quite some time. He has never even spoken to the girl, but her distress has opened up wells of compassion and mercy within him. He cares deeply for her, and he doesn't even know her name. He and the boy have talked some, though. The man introduced himself, and the boy did likewise: "Adrian Malkovich." Now they speak in whispers so as not to wake the girl.

"This is St. Catherine's Monastery. Twenty miles north of Cincinnati. It's on a ridge overlooking the interstate. I-75, I think. I only know because I was awake when they brought me here. They're raiders. Some of the worst I've seen. And they're deranged. Most raiders, they're simply just trying to survive. They won't fuck with you if you leave them alone. We've seen raiders passing by. We always let them know that we're watching but that we're fine with letting them pass." The man doesn't know who the boy means by 'we' but he lets him continue. "But these raiders... They *look* for a fight. They're deranged. Absolutely mad. Sadistic. I've seen what they do. And you'll see it, too."

"How does a person become like that?" the man ponders without seeking an answer.

"It's quite simple, I think. Take away all the positive and negative reinforcements that make us into who we are in society, and we're free to do as we please. Free to be whatever we want to be—whether that is something righteous or something evil. These men—and women, I should add, for they have women among them—have decided to be evil. They've decided to operate upon their animal desires alone: their hunger, their thirst, their need for survival." He casts a glance at the sleeping girl. "And they're need for sexual gratification."

The man's stomach sours. "I'll never be like that. Never."

He looks over at the man. "I'd reign your tongue if I were you. It's easier than you think."

"I'm not a monster."

"We're all monsters inside. Monsters awaiting to be unleashed."

The man shakes his head. "We can't be that bad. Not that evil. Not all of us."

"Maybe," the boy says. "And I hope you're right. I've seen goodness in men before. But goodness pales in comparison to wickedness. Wickedness is easier—and more pleasurable."

"Wickedness hurts others."

"But it gratifies the self. And what are we, in our hearts? Selfish. Greedy. Indifferent."

The man is defiant. "I'll never become like them."

"The choice is yours to make, not mine. They'll let you make that choice."

The man eyes him. "What choice?"

"The choice between life or death. The choice between joining them... or dying."

"I would rather die than become like one of them."

"Jason said the same thing. And at this moment, he's being prepared."

The man almost doesn't want to ask. "Prepared for what?"

The boy looks up at the window. "Do you ever look at the stars anymore?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should." He doesn't tear his gaze from the window. "Tonight's a Full Moon."

VII

Mark walks behind the man. They leave the basement and ascend a flight of open steps that lead into the foyer of the church. Along the oval-shaped wall are several paintings depicting classic moments in biblical literature. Eve and the Snake in the Garden. Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Moses parting the Red Sea. David against Goliath. A painting of the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C., and beside it an image of watercolor depicting Jeremiah the prophet weeping over the city of Jerusalem before her fall in 586 B.C. More painting depict Christ teaching in the synagogue, and a trilogy reveals Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ carrying the cross, and Christ resurrected from the grave. The boy eyes them as they begin ascending a smaller flight of spiral steps that lead straight up. The boy must take it slow, for his strength is only slowly recuperating.

"Rachel doesn't seem to like me too much," he says as they climb.

"I know. Her boyfriend was taken by raiders a few weeks ago. You sat in his place at the table during breakfast."

The boy pants, "Who are raiders?"

The man stops climbing, giving the boy a break. "I've estimated that only 0.001% of humanity survived the plague. That's only three hundred people here in Cincinnati. Worldwide, if there were twelve billion people, that's twelve million. It seems like a large number, but it's probably much less than that. You have to account for the number of suicides—we've witnessed seven suicides in this church since I've been here. People have a difficult time accepting the new state of affairs. They suffer immensely over the loss of loved ones and the fact that their daily, beloved routines have been snatched right out from under them. No one really appreciates what they have until they've lost it. I used to hate waking up at 7:30 in the morning to fix a pot of coffee before going to work. But now I long for those days, and I've accepted that they never will be again. At least, not in our lifetimes. Of those twelve million worldwide, too, many have fallen to the sick. We've lost seventeen to the 'dark-walkers', as you call them. People get ancy and leave the church to get a breath of fresh air, and they never come back. The sick stay in the darkness, they fear the light; but they may venture out in the dusk if they think they have a good chance of seizing something to eat. Food resources are down, and people are starving: the healthy *and* the sick. Others may have been killed by raiders. Raiders are bands of survivors that have grouped together, searching for an identity, but not staying in one place, as opposed to communities. Raiders travel, searching for something they can't quite put words to; and their own vague object of pursuit is futile, for if you don't know what you're looking for, how can you ever find it? Some raiders are good-natured. Others are not. Many live out their own lusts for bloodshed and sex. Incidents of rape and senseless acts of cruelty are all across the board. Before this happened, there were two types of people in the world: saints and sinners. But now, everyone is a sinner, struggling to survive. We're just trying to be the most decent sinners that we can be, but we know that the true nature of a man is revealed not in his thoughts or in his hearts—for the mind and heart can be deceptive—but in his or her actions at the moment of life or death." He takes another drag of his cigarette, is quiet for a moment. "Rachel's boyfriend, he was taken by raiders while we sent out a party for getting food. Michael, one of our older men, and Anthony went along. They barely made it back in one piece. Anthony had been shot in the leg, but he's doing much better now."

"When you picked me up," Mark asks, "did you find anyone else?"

The man eyes him. "You weren't alone, were you?"

Mark shakes his head: *No*.

"We *did* find evidence of raiders," the man says. "There were tire tracks in the snow, and bodies of the sick everywhere. They'd been shot. We imagine them to be the same raiders that have took Rachel's boyfriend. Sometimes they will stay in the cities for long periods of time, because there are numerous grocery stores and supermarkets where canned goods can be found. Why they were out at night, who knows? Maybe they thirst for killing these 'dark-walkers.' But as to the fate of your friend, whoever he—or she—was, who knows? Maybe they killed your friend. Or maybe they'll recruit him or her to their band. It's surprising how many people join the raiders, because every raider party has their own delusions of grandeur and a hope in the brighter future. Hope is something lost these days. Hope is something you have to search high and low for. And there are many false hopes abounding, and in our desire for hope, sometimes we look past the logic and feel only with our hearts." He pauses for a moment. "And that's what gets us killed."

The spiral stairwell comes up against a door. The man opens it, and they enter out onto the roof. Snow covers the concrete, and the wind whips and tears at their clothes. They move around a large air conditioner panel that keeps them from the wind. The man pulls out a cigarette and lights it up. The boy asks for one, and they smoke together. The smoke feels beautiful in his lungs. Calming. He remembers smoking with the man, and the thought brings a twang of pain. *No one really appreciates what they have till they've lost it.* The roof affords them a beautiful view of the city, the snow sparkling under the sun and the windows of the skyscrapers glinting. The view overlooks the sweeping east side of downtown, and the I-471 Bridge spans the Ohio River, which is laden with slabs of ice along the shores. One of the coldest winters Cincinnati has ever experienced. The big yellow arches of the bridge remind Mark of the McDONALD'S logo, and he remembers driving back and forth along that bridge with Cara, visiting Newport on the Levee. He can see the levee now. The sign is unlit, and snow covers the sidewalks. The trees in the square of the outdoor mall are naked and kissed with icicles. The aquarium sits quietly, and as he smokes, he imagines the bones of fish and shark slowly corroding in the green-water tanks. And the sea turtle takes its last dying breaths as it curls into its shell and dies. The small conjunction of houseboats on the river—HOOTER'S and THE BEER HOUSE—are without visitors, and cars sit covered in snow in the parking lot. Off to the west, the Ohio River with its ice-drenched shores snakes between rolling hills, and through the open air between two skyscrapers, Mark can see the 8th Street Bridge, the factory tiny in the distance, and he can almost see the house, and he imagines what he and the man would be doing if they'd never left: eating canned foods, talking amongst themselves, smoking cigarettes. He aches just to see the man once more: the only human he'd known for nearly half a year.

"You know what they used to say about this place?" the man asks. "If you look up from the valley of sin that is downtown, you'll see the church magnificently illuminated atop Mount Adams, judging you." A wry smile crosses his lips. "This is a beautiful church, Mark. It really is. It was built over 100 years ago, built for the service of the Catholic Germans here in eastern Cincinnati. I was one of the first to come here. I had known Friar Williams ever since I was a boy. I grew up in this church. Williams was a great man. You used to hear all those stories about pedophilia among the Catholic priests. Williams was nothing like that. He cared for me genuinely, and he taught me well in the Catholic faith. After the death of my father, I left the faith. I would come here sometimes, though, to meditate and pray. Williams always accepted me." He laughs: "Sometimes we would share cigarettes in the confessional. He married my wife and me. And he dedicated my daughter Sandra to the Lord. We started going back to church. I never really became a good Catholic. I believe in God. I guess I'm

more of a deist than anything: God exists, but He's not really concerned about us." He extinguishes the cigarette in the snow, stomps out the remaining tobacco threads with the boot of his shoe. "My experiences haven't taught me differently."

They return down to the foyer, and the man opens a pair of great wooden oak doors, revealing the sanctuary bathed in darkness. The high stained glass windows are boarded up from the inside, and only meager light intrudes through the cracks. The man lights an oil lamp sitting on a table beside the entryway, and the lamplight flows through the room, dancing over the high-backed wooden pews and crawling its way to the front of the sanctuary. The man says, "We had to board up the windows, but, God, they were beautiful. Did you know that stained glass windows began being used in the church due to Plato's philosophy? Plato taught that the mixture of certain colors brought about feelings that drew a man towards the 'Eternal Good.' The Catholic Church adopted his teachings and applied them to their architecture. The stained glass was made in a panorama of beautiful hues, and these helped people to feel the awe and fear before their God." He begins walking between the pews, and the boy follows him. The lamplight dances over the pulpit and the balcony with its many velvet-colored chairs. A cross with an iron figure of Jesus hangs above the altar. The man says, "Did you know one of the major differences between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches has to do with statues and icons? The Roman Catholic Church condemned icons but approved of statues, and the Eastern Orthodox Church condemned statues but approved of icons." The boy follows the man up a flight of steps behind the sanctuary, and they come to a wooden door: FRIAR WILLIAMS is stenciled on a plaque upon the door.

The man takes a deep breath and pushes open the door.

The room is lit by two windows, high enough off the ground so as not to be boarded up. The man lowers the lamp and Mark enters the room. Bookcases cover the walls, filled with dusty Bibles and commentaries and lectionaries. At the desk is a single electric lamp, strewn with cobwebs. Several pads of paper sit upon the rough wood. And in the high-backed chair is a skeleton, hunched over the desk. Its clothes hang tattered, and between two bony fingers in the right hand rests a pen. The smile grins at them with a toothy reverence, and the eye sockets flicker in the light from the oil lamp.

"Behold," the man says: "Friar Williams."

A chill runs down Mark's spine. "Why didn't you move him?"

"It would have been sacrilegious," the man replies. "By the time we actually came up here and were able to open the door, he had already rotted away. There was no more risk of disease. I figured we should leave him here. He dedicated his life to the church. It's what he would have wanted."

"I thought the Catholics taught that you had to be buried to go to Heaven."

"I think God would look more at your character than where your rotted body lies."

Mark approaches the desk. He looks down and sees scribbling on a pad of paper:

I SEE JESUS BEFORE ME.

HE SMILES AND WELCOMES ME.

THE END IS HERE.

"At least he was half-right," the man murmurs.

"He went mad," Mark says.

"Yes. Just like the others. The plague... It messes with your brain before it kills you."

The man speaks: "I'm sorry for my hostility towards you earlier this week."

Mark turns around. A great wash of sadness has fallen over the man's face.

The boy says, "It's okay."

The man looks out one of the windows, sees clouds climbing over one another far above. "We didn't know if you were bit... And we know what happens after you're bitten. I've seen it. My wife died with the plague. I would have killed myself, too, had my daughter not survived. She was fourteen. A beautiful young lady. She dreamed of going to the Prom. She was in those years when you believe fairy-tales. The Knight in Shining Armor, riding on his White Steed, carrying you away. Living a beautiful life in a castle somewhere with the husband of your dreams. When the plague struck... It became unbearable for her. She didn't know how to reconcile what she was going through with what had become of her world. We came to the church, because I knew she liked it here and would find comfort. She spent many hours a day in prayer before God. That was when Rachel and some others came. She thought it was an answer to her prayers. We boarded up the place, installed the fence... They helped me take care of her. She was doing better. But one night, some of them got over the fence. We've made it higher since then... But they got over, and they broke through. We killed most of them. They carried off one of Rachel's friends, a boy named Alan. We could hear his screams in the darkness, and Rachel was hysterical. Sandra... She was bit. We didn't know what would happen. We thought she just got an infection from the cold, didn't think it had anything to do with them. She started getting better." He struggles for words. "But her health would fluctuate. About a month later, she died. I couldn't handle it. I just broke down. They wanted to bury her, but I refused. I should have buried her." His eyes grow dark and sinister as he relives those moments. "She came back to life. But it wasn't her, you know... It was the plague. The plague turned her into someone else... *something* else. She killed another little girl. Ripped off her arm. The girl bled to death. I heard the screams, and I ran into the room... I found my daughter—my baby daughter, my *angel*—chewing on the other girl's arm, and the girl is in the corner, grabbing at the stump by her shoulder, squeezing it, the blood just gushing out. I can still hear her screams... She didn't stop screaming until her veins ran dry... My daughter looked up at me. I knew what she was. I drew a knife from my belt. She came after me." He stumbles over his words. "It was so fast... I couldn't... I couldn't think clearly... I tried to talk her down... But then my muscles reacted... Instinctually... I know it was what I had to do... I know that she wasn't my daughter anymore." He looks over at Mark. "The disease changed her. And I know that if I hadn't have done it... If I would have let *feelings* overpower *logic*... then she would have killed me. But... that doesn't change how I feel. I know, in my mind, that it was the right thing to do. The *only* thing to do. But in my heart, I keep seeing her. I keep seeing her lying there at my feet, that knife wedged into her eye, her mouth twitching with her last heartbeats..." Tears sprinkle his eyes. "I just keep remembering how she would want me to read her bedtime stories at night. How she was afraid of the bogeyman in her closet. I remember how I yelled at her for going on a date without telling me. I remember how sometimes I was distant and cold towards her when her mom and I were fighting. But most of all, I remember how much I loved her. She was everything to me. Fucking *everything*."

The boy is quiet. He doesn't know what to say.

"I killed my daughter," the man says. "I fucking *killed my daughter*."

And he leaves the room, leaving Mark alone with the skeleton and its cryptic prophecies.

VIII

The man is deep in thought when the door opens. Two men enter the room. The girl is in the bed, and she grabs the sheets and pulls them tight, eyes swarming with fear. The men ignore her. They head straight to the man. One of them grabs the man's arm; the man wrenches it away and launches to his

feet. They prepare to strike. The man says, "You don't need to fight me." A smile creeps over one of the men's lips. They exchange glances, and then he delivers a stunning blow into the man's face; the man hobbles back into the wall, jaw throbbing. They grab him by the arms and yank him from the room. The door is slammed shut, leaving the boy and the girl alone.

They head down a stone corridor. The man can hear laughter and conversation. A thick and heavy atmosphere, wreathed in darkness, descends upon him, and his heart cries out. The corridor bends and opens into a large room. It had once been a sanctuary, but the pews are gone, shoved against the walls; and where the pews stood are men and women. They don't acknowledge the man as he is dragged to the back of the room. A makeshift cage of iron bars sits there, and it reminds the man of the shark cages that would be lowered into the water in all those DISCOVERY CHANNEL documentaries. The men push him inside and lock him in. One of the men twirls the key on his finger and drops it into his coat pocket. The man stands near the back of the cage, wrapped in the shadows, saying nothing. The two men exchange a word the man cannot hear, and then they blend with the crowd.

The man counts fifteen or sixteen individuals. Men and women. Almost all are around thirty or forty years old, and there is a certain evil in their eyes that makes the man cringe. One of the doors beside the altar at the front of the room opens, and a man dressed in what looks like a priest's outfit with the white collar appears. He silences the room, and they all stare up at him in eager anticipation. He speaks: "This is the first Full Moon of February. Tonight we shall seal our contract once more. This is a new world, and protection comes only to those who embrace the shifting powers. This is a time of celebration and joy, not a time of mourning! Let's laugh and share drink and share one another!" The people cheer. Men come from the sides of the room and begin handing out drinks and pills. The people eagerly consume the alcoholic beverages and pop the acid. The man watches as the people begin to stumble around, and he curls up into the corner of the cage as they begin stripping off their clothes, engaging in sexual acts: man-on-woman, woman-on-woman, man-on-man. There is no order to the chaos, and the sanctuary becomes filled with all kinds of degradation. Women shriek in pleasure, men expose themselves, and the natural order of the universe is subjected to futility.

A woman approaches the cage. She is thirty or forty. Her eyes swim with ecstasy, and her words stagger in her euphoric state. She falls against the cage and begs the man to come kiss her. The man looks away. She raises her skirt and flashes him, and she rubs her vagina up against one of the bars. He refuses to look at her. His eyes blend with the darkness in the corner of the room, and he hears the awful shouts of pleasure as he thinks of Kira. Candlelit dinners with glasses of wine. Cuddling beside the fireplace in the cold. The woman at the bars screams for his attention, but he only raises his hand and flicks her off. She curses and spits, and she leaves him.

How long has he been sitting alone in the cage? He doesn't know. The ceremony continues long into the night. Finally the High Priest, the man in the priest's outfit with the white collar stained with decadence, stands before the altar and admonishes those gathered: "The clock has struck midnight. It is now the appropriate time." His words finish, and then drums begin to sound throughout the sanctuary. Heavy, rhythmic, pounding, ominous. The man sees figures in the dark with portable drums, and they bang them in a slow repetition. The people stand, and they begin to sway back and forth in their worship. A side door is opened, and the pounding of the drums mixes with volatile screams: a young boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, is dragged out onto the altar, kicking and screaming.

He is carried by four large men, and he struggles to get free. Tears stream down his face. The man watches with a sickened heart as the boy is held by one of the men and stripped down, his nakedness revealed. He is turned around, and his chest is slammed upon the altar, his rear held high into the air. One of the men guarding him unzips his pants, is hard and erect, and he shoves himself into the boy. The boy wails in pain.

Anger and fury burn through the man, and he throws himself against the cage; he shakes the bars, and he opens his mouth to scream; a figure appears with an iron baseball bat, and the figure slams the man's fingers that wrap around the bar. The man staggers backwards with a shout, gripping his bruised fingers, and he falls to the ground. The figure with the baseball bat dares the man to come forward. The man doesn't move.

The boy is sodomized, and the man retracts himself and ejaculates all over the boy's bare back. The people cheer and holler. The boy is then beaten with whips and rods and burned with red-hot pokers. Blood crawls down his body. He is taken by the High Priest. The boy doesn't fight anymore: he is humiliated, emasculated, weak and drained of blood. The High Priest nails him upon a makeshift wooden cross, and the High Priest urinates upon him, and he becomes covered with feces thrown by the mad crowd. The High Priest draws out a large iron spike. The people begin to chant. Tears slide down the boy's face; the High Priest announces the sacrifice to Dagon, and with one quick motion, he drives the spike through the boy's eye, killing him instantly and pinning his head to the cross. The boy's mouth twitches and his body goes limp as the party resumes. The body is desecrated, and drugs and alcohol are distributed once more. The man curls into a corner in the cage and hangs his head between his knees. Tears slide down his cheeks: he is a calloused man, but his heart is ruptured.

IX

The next day has dawned. The man slept little: he kept seeing the boy, tortured and mutilated, a sacrifice. He awakes to the sound of the door opening. Two men enter the room and yank him from his sleeping position in the chair; they drag him out into the hallway and shut the door behind them. They ascend a flight of steps to a wide corridor with many rooms. They open a door and hurl him inside. He finds himself standing amidst a room illuminated only by burning candles. There is a desk, and behind the desk sits the High Priest. His hair is riled, his eyes are uncanny, his features are chiseled. He waves a hand out towards the man, beckoning him to take a seat. The man looks to the chair and sits down. Dust rises with his weight, gathering in the creases of his dirty jeans.

The man leans back in the chair. "My name is Doctor Teasle. I run this... operation."

The man says nothing.

Teasle leans forward in his chair, opens up a tin case upon the desk. He withdraws a cigarette. The man's eyes are afire. Teasle smiles and hands it to the man, followed by a lighter. The man lights the cigarette and takes a deep and cancerous breath. The smoke fills his lungs. A beautiful sensation. Teasle shuts the case, leans back in his chair. "I never was one for smoking. It shortens your life by up to twelve years."

The man smokes and says nothing.

"When all of this happened... When the world turned upside-down... I was a professor of ancient Near Eastern Religion at the University of Florida. I was in Maine at the time, researching in

my cabin beside the lake. I was writing a thesis paper on the Philistine pantheon, specifically on their chief god, Dagon. When it happened, everything became so clear."

The man shakes his head. "Every one of you is insane."

Teasle laughs. "It would seem that way, wouldn't it? Tell me. What do you know of the Philistine god Dagon?"

The man shakes his head. "I've never heard of him."

"Most people haven't. Our world is... *was*... too modern for such superstitious stories. But let me tell you a story about Dagon. Dagon's name is a diminutive form, a term of endearment, derived from the Semitic root *Dag*. Essentially, Dagon's name means 'little fish'. But don't let that throw you. Most figurines and idols of Dagon that have been found have been shaped like a fish, yes, but with hands and a head. Ancient Philistine coins—and Phoenician coins, for that matter—Dagon was represented as a composite figure: human on the upper-part of the body, fish on the lower-part." Teasle takes a deep breath, closes his eyes. He has rehearsed and given this speech many times. "Sometime around 700 B.C., some prophets of Dagon gave a prophecy. They spoke of a great time of drought and famine, when Dagon would scourge the earth of life. But some would not fall to this plague, and if they sought to be preserved, they must worship Dagon. The drought and famine, I believe, represents what has happened here." He splays his hands outward, engulfing the entire world in his grasp. "Dagon has bestowed upon us a plague, and we are the survivors. Now. We have a choice. We can either align ourselves with Dagon and persevere, or leave ourselves to our own devices—and die. Maybe these creatures will overtake us. Or maybe the virus or germ or strain or whatever it is will mutate and affect the survivors. But those who are aligned with Dagon shall be preserved."

"So that's what all this is?" the man cooed. "A big worship service?"

"Yes. And no. The ancients worshipped Dagon by sacrificing children. They would take a live goat, disembowel it, place a young child—aged zero to four years old—within the bowels of the goat, and then light it on fire. Some of the great cities had statues of Dagon, with his hands outstretched, forming a platform; and upon this platform, they would sacrifice children. Now. Dagon has not left us with children, so I hope he is appeased by the sacrifices we *can* offer. He desires sacrifices every Full Moon, and we work hard to please him."

"That's why you killed the boy. A sacrifice."

"Right. The only response to this, my friend—"

The man exhaled, cursed: "Don't call me your friend."

Teasle's brow flared, but he continued: "...The only appropriate response to this is worship. Dagon rules now. We must become his servants."

The man says nothing.

Teasle says: "You have a choice, and I shall have your answer now. Join us, and be in league with Dagon, and taste security... Or be given over unto him as a sacrifice."

The man smokes his cigarette and ponders his choice.

The men throw the man back into the room with the boy and girl. He staggers and falls against the wall. One of the men looks over at the girl and smiles wretchedly: "Pretty yourself up, Lass. Tonight, I will be enjoying *you*." He laughs and steps out of the room, and they shut the door. The girl stares at the door with hopeless, empty eyes. The man brushes himself off. Adrian, sitting in the chair, asks, "So? What did you tell them?"

The man is quiet.

Adrian asks again: "What'd you say?"

The man answers: "What I had to say."

The boy shakes his head, mumbles something under his breath, and says no more.

X

The boy and girl sleep. The man sits in the corner of the room, his hands clasped together in the corner's shadow. He works slowly and quietly, keeping his eye on the descent of the sunlight against the far wall beside the bed. *How much longer?* He works even faster. He hears the door clicking and unlocking. He scurries to his feet, deposits it in his pocket, and he stands rigid in the corner. The door opens. Two men stand there. One moves forward and takes the man by the hands. The other wrestles the girl, kicking and screaming, from her sleep. The girl is removed from the room first. Adrian is now awake, and he looks into the man's eyes: "May you live forever," he says. The man looks away, and he is led from the room.

Fourteen or fifteen people are gathered together. The pews have been drawn back into the middle of the room, and they take their seats. The man is led to the front of the monastery's sanctuary, and he stands underneath the shadow of the wooden cross, stained with the blood of its last victim. The High Priest comes forward and takes his hand, smiles. The man doesn't smile back. People begin cheering as the girl is brought into the room. Two men drag her forward, holding her by either arm; someone reaches out from a pew as she is led past, grabs her shirt, yanks. The fabric tears, and it hangs loose, revealing the crest of her breast. Tears slide down her cheeks. She looks at the man as she is carried past, and she spits into his face, calls him a "motherfucker." Everyone boos. He looks away. The High Priest brings forth a live chicken; it squawks in his hand; an attendant places a goblet before him, and the High Priest snaps the chicken's neck and, with his fingernails, flakes away the skin. Blood drains into the goblet. He tosses the chicken aside and lifts the goblet, hands it to the man. "Drink," he says, "and become one of us." The man takes the goblet. In its pallid reflection he can see the girl, her black hair falling before her eyes, hiding the tears; her chest heaves with stifled sobs. The man raises the cup... And slams it across the High Priest's face.

The High Priest staggers backwards; the goblet has shattered, and shards have embedded themselves in the High Priest's cheek. The priest claws at his face, the chicken's blood blinding his eyes; shouts arise as the man draws the crude stone shank from his pocket, and flipping the sharp edge upwards in his hand, drives it forcefully into the priest's chin. The priest's body shudders and goes limp, and he slides down to the feet of the man, blood from his throat spilling upon the altar. The crowd is enraged, leaping to their feet; a figure rushes the man from the corner; the man ducks down and swings out his leg, kicking the feet out from under the assailant. The attacker falls upon the altar and rolls onto the floor. The man grabs the 9mm pistol from the folds of the priest's cloak, and he pulls back the safety and stands, holding it outwards. The assailant on the floor leaps to his feet, and the gunshot echoes; the assailant's chest fills with blood, and he crumples to his knees, and pitches onto his side. The girl screams as the man swings the pistol in her direction. The men holding her let their faces fall into a look of terror as the gun barks. Both collapse against the wall; one reaches for his own gun, and the man blasts him in the face, chewing away skin and bone and brain matter, leaving only a slimy mess. The girl, covered with their blood, runs towards the man, spinning around, shrieking. The man turns the gun upon the crowd. They scatter over one another, rushing for the back door,

shouting. The man grabs the girl and they disappear through a side door. The mangled body of the High Priest bleeds, and the chicken's lifeless eyes stare into his.

Adrian heard the shouting, and he hides in the corner as the door flies open. The man shouts his name. Adrian rushes forward, and they enter the hallway.

"What the fuck did you do?!" Adrian screams.

"What I had to do," the man says, "to keep us alive. All of us."

Shouting comes back from the main room. More men with guns are giving chase.

"What are your plans now?" Adrian asks.

The girl is sobbing in the man's arms.

The man shakes his head. "I'm kind of making this up as I go."

"I recommend running away from the sounds of shouting and curses."

"Let's do that."

They take off down the hallway.

The man curses, stops, turns around. Adrian watches him in shock as he runs down the corridor. "Where are you going?!" he shouts.

The man doesn't look back: "They have something of mine!"

Adrian bites his lip, curses, hears the sound of running coming towards them.

The man emerges from the shadows, cradling something in his hands.

"What the hell is that?" Adrian asks.

The man grins. "My Russian rifle. I love this thing."

One of the stained glass windows shatters, and three bodies tumble out. They fall into the skeleton of a bush, knocking snow from its tiny limbs. They roll through the snow in the wan evening light, and Adrian picks up the girl. The man spins around, engulfing his surroundings. They are outside the monastery, facing a large, rising hill. On either side of them are gardens with statues laced with snow, long overgrown with a tangled mess of dead vines and uneaten raspberries swollen in the cold. They hear shouting coming from either end of the building. The man begins running through the snow up the hill, and Adrian follows with the girl on his shoulders.

They are halfway up the hill.

Adrian breaks down, collapsing into the snow.

The man spins around. "Come on!"

The girl is crying, lying immobile.

Adrian snaps, "I can't carry her on my own!"

"Make her run herself!"

"She won't!"

"Why the fuck won't she?" the man growls, making his way down the icy slope towards them.

"I don't know!" Adrian shouts.

The man falls beside the girl. "Hey. Hey." He grabs her chin, twists it towards him. "Look at me." Flecks of snow mingle with her tears, and her cheeks are blotched red in the frigid air. "What's your name?" She doesn't answer. "What's your name?" he asks again.

"Alyssa," she stammers.

"All right, Alyssa. We can't carry you. You need to run."

"I can't..."

"Yes, you can. You have to. Or they'll kill you. Or capture you, which is worse."

She doesn't say anything.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" the man asks.

She nods her head.

"Then let's go."

They are nearing the crest of the hill, nearly into the woods, when gunshots ring out. Bullets sizzle through the trees, spitting bark, and they smash into the snow, their impacts illuminated by waterfalls of ice. The three figures rush into the trees, and they are lost in the darkness.

Chapter Fourteen

The 89 Steps

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;
they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays
many parts, his acts being seven ages."
- William Shakespeare (A.D. 1564-1616)

I

The poplars and oaks with their bare trunks fade, and the three fugitives find themselves standing amidst a meadow laden with snow, dry stalks of dead grass poking through the thick layer of snow. The girl complains of being cold. They are atop the hill, and the man spots large building that looks like a cabin sitting against the far tree-line. He and the boy exchange glances, and they move forward, the girl trotting behind. A sign draped with icicles sits before the building with its dark windows and closed doors: SEVEN HILLS LODGE: ICE FISHING, SKI RENTALS, SNOWMOBILE RENTALS.

The boy looks up at the sky. The last ribbons of light from the sun mix with the clouds.

"I know," the man says, following his gaze.

"You chose one hell of a time to escape," Adrian says.

They shatter one of the windows of the lodge and climb inside. The air is stale and filled with dust. They trample a throw rug and stumble about in the darkness. Couches and chairs. The man finds a doorway and pushes it open. The garage. It is illuminated by shafts of sunlight coming in through the skylight draped with snow. They count four snowmobiles sitting unused. Adrian rushes forward and saddles one. The key is in the ignition. He takes a deep breath and twists.

The engine rumbles to life.

"You know how to drive one of those things?" the man asks.

"My brother used to drive them. Until he hit a tree and became a paraplegic."

"Oh," the man says. To the girl: "You hold onto me tight, all right?"

The snowmobile descends the long drive covered with snow, the sounds of the engine filling the freezing dusk air. He aims for the highway, and they ramp over a snowdrift and land between several wrecked cars. He spins the snowmobile on its axis, and they head south, towards the city.

"You're going the wrong way!" the man yells over the roar of the engine.

"What?!" Adrian shouts back.

"The wrong way! You're heading *into* the city!"

"I know!" the boy exclaims.

The man says something, but his words are silenced with the splicing wind as the snowmobile maneuvers around wrecked cars and heads south on Interstate-75 North.

The skyscrapers loom, the tops sparkling in the last rays of sunlight coming over the hills. The sounds of the dark-walkers can be heard even over the engine. The snowmobile passes under the I-74 bridge, entering the shadows. Figures flicker on either side underneath the bridge; the girl clutches the man

with tight, white-knuckled fingers, her teeth chattering from the cold and from fear. The highway continues to twist and turn. Adrian eyes what he is looking for, and cutting the throttle back, ascends an entry-ramp. He swerves around a pile of wrecked cars covered with snow, and he is soon driving down a narrow road surrounded by decrepit buildings. The man knows this place. Over-the-Rhine: once the denizens of crooks, criminals, prostitutes, drug dealers, and home of at least four or five murders a week. Now the streets are deserted, the stoops filled with snow, trash-cans knocked over. The boy lets out a shout and slams the breaks; the bodies behind him slam forcefully into his.

A deer with its sweeping antlers stares at them, standing in the middle of the street.

The man curses. "What the fuck?"

"It's a deer," Adrian says.

The man looks over his shoulder just as the deer trots away.

Dark-walker shrieks carry over them.

"I hope you know what you're doing," the man says.

Adrian hits the throttle, and the snowmobile lurches forward.

The man looks behind them. Several dark-walkers fill the shadows in the street, fighting amongst themselves, waiting for the daylight to extinguish in its grand finale.

Adrian heads down Race Street, and soon they are driving between the skyscrapers. The ground floors of the skyscrapers are filled with movement, and creatures begin to stumble through the broken glass, emerging onto the street, into the shadows cast by the towering, monolithic buildings. Adrian swerves around a wrecked police-car. Dark-walkers snap and snarl at the intruders. The snowmobile turns left and drives over a bridge that descends into a parking lot, mostly empty. They ramp a petition of grass and are on a road that runs beside both ballpark stadiums. Dark-walkers lurk in the shadows of the stadiums, watching with a jealous fire as the three non-sick humans rush past in a blur, spitting snow behind them.

The girl begins to cry as the sun takes its final breath.

Adrian twists the vehicle to the right, and they descend along a steep embankment. They crash through several dead bushes, their legs torn apart by the whipping tendrils. He emerges onto the grounds of the Riverfront Park. He drives past several statues and through the playground with the swings that rock back and forth in the breeze coming up off the icy river. Adrian eyes Mount Adams, sitting quietly above them. He twists off the road, up an embankment, and onto another road: OH-50. He leans forward, giving the vehicle more gas. Up ahead is an exit-ramp that becomes a bridge stretching across the road, forking against Mount Adams. He takes the exit ramp, slowing, and they rush over the bridge. He jerks the snowmobile to the left, and they ascend a steep hill; the girl clutches the man, trying to hold on. The snowmobile chugs, nearly goes broke, before the incline levels out. Adrian cuts the engine and leaps off the vehicle.

"Where the hell are we?" the man demands.

"No time!" Adrian answers, running towards a fence that rises at least twenty feet, coiled with barbed wire at the top.

The girl sobs, "I can't climb that!"

Dark-walker howls fill the night air. They are growing closer.

The man grabs Alyssa by the arm. "Climb. *Now.*"

They climb the fence. It is cold and covered with ice. The man remembers his ankle. How it doesn't hurt anymore. They must have fixed it. *Maybe you just bruised it.* He finds it funny that he thinks

about his ankle as the dark-walkers in the surrounding German-style buildings begin to emerge. They throw themselves against the fence, reaching up for them. The fence wobbles and shakes. The girl screams, and one hand releases; she dangles. The man grabs her leg, and she slips; he grips her tight; she swings down, plummeting; he grips the coils of the fence between his fingers; she falls beneath him, and the wrenching force nearly tears him from the fence. She screams, hanging upside-down, held only by the man's one free arm; the dark-walkers below snap up at her and leap, slicing through the air with greedy fingers with overgrown nails. The man grits his teeth, can feel himself slipping. *Drop the girl. Drop the girl. Drop the girl.* He refuses.

Gunshots ring out.

He opens his eyes; the dark-walkers below are scattering, and two lie dead.

Adrian is on the other side of the fence, shouting: "Climb! Climb!"

Alyssa regains her composure, and she rights herself on the fence.

They reach the top and navigate the barbed wire; it cuts at the man's jeans.

He drops down. Alyssa is poised at the top.

More dark-walkers appear, moving along the edges of the fence.

Gunshots sing. More fall, and the others flee into the shadows.

The man spins around as Adrian yells at the girl to keep climbing.

He gazes up a flight of 89 steps and sees several figures with guns.

He hears the sound of a shout followed by a crash. He spins around.

The girl is lying in the snow, clutching her leg.

The man rushes forward. "Oh God."

"The barbed wire cut me!" she exclaims.

"Does your leg hurt?"

"I'm bleeding. Yes. It hurts."

"I mean, is it broken?"

She shakes her head. "No. I don't think so."

"Good."

Adrian helps her to her feet. "We're safe now."

The man looks up at the church. "Where are we?"

"The Holy Immaculata Church of the Cross," Adrian says. "My home."

II

Adrian leads the way up the snow-laden steps, and the man helps the girl with an arm around her shoulder. The figures with guns materialize in the light of lanterns within the church, and they help the figures into the hazy warmth of the smoke. Figures stand around, half-masked in the shadows. A shout rings out, and one of the figures runs forward. The man sees that it is a girl. She rushes into Adrian's arms, and Adrian grips her tight. A wry smile crosses over the man's face, and suddenly he feels the sharp pains streaking through his stomach. One of the men with guns shuts the door, keeping out the cold night air, and two women move forward and take the girl from the man's shoulder. The man sags against the wall and runs his hand underneath his shirt; he can feel the warmth of blood. He shakes his head, curses. He watches Adrian and the girl, clutching one another, kissing. A burst of jealousy runs through him, jealousy that he cannot do the same with Kira.

A hand falls upon his shoulder.

The man turns, and suddenly he forgets the pain.

Mark grins, embraces the man, squeezes him tight.

The man reels away. "Not too tight..."

The boy looks down at the man's hand, now withdrawn from under the shirt, the fingertips speckled with fresh blood.

"What happened?" Mark asks.

"I was shot."

"At the factory?"

"Yeah."

"Well. It's good to see you."

"Good to see you, too."

Mark looks over at Rachel, tears of joy crawling down her face. "She won't hate me anymore."

"What's that?" the man asks.

"Nothing," Mark says, turning back to him. "We have a nurse. She can suture you up."

Mark didn't sleep any last night. Nancy took the man to the upstairs room, and Mark hasn't seen him since. He has wandered the empty and cavernous halls of the church, and he has found himself in what had at one time been a theological library. The binds on the books are covered with dust, and he peruses them only with mild interest. There are no windows here, and he holds an oil lamp and lets the light flicker about the room, dancing over the bookshelves and a few dusty chairs, an old coffee table with a broken coffee mug. There is a sound outside the corridor. He turns and sees Adrian enter. His eyes are tired, and he sits down in one of the chairs. Mark nods to him, begins to walk out the door, leaving him alone. Adrian protests, asks him to stay. Mark pauses at the doorway, then sits down in one of the chairs, setting the oil lamp on the coffee table. The flickering light cuts shadows into their faces, and their eyes are hidden in the darkness, empty bowls upon worn faces.

"I have something for you," Adrian says, digging into the pocket in his jacket. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes, tosses it through the air. Mark catches them. "The man requested them." He laughs. "So I went out this morning and grabbed some from a small convenience store. He said you'd probably want some as well."

Mark fondles the pack of CAMEL 99S. "I used to think these things would kill me."

Adrian says nothing. His eyes flit about the room. "You've known him long?"

"Yes," Mark says, wishing he had a lighter. "A couple months now."

"I thought you may have been his son."

"No. He never had kids... And my parents died several years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"It was a car accident. But I think it's better that they lie in their grave rather than..." He has an image of his parents stumbling around their old house, foaming at the mouth, eyes maniacal, thirsting for human flesh, parched for the drink of noxious blood.

Adrian understands. "He's a good man. I didn't... I thought low of him at first."

"He has that way with him. He's not too... sociable."

"It's in his character?"

"I don't know. His fiancé... She became one of them. And he killed her."

"Oh."

The silence is engulfing.

Adrian speaks. "I was on a road-trip with some friends when it happened. We were staying in a hotel. I didn't know it had happened until the morning. My friend had stopped breathing, he had been sleeping in the bed next to me. I was terrified, so I ran out into the hallway and called for help.

No one came. I knocked on the door next to us, where our other friends were, but no response came. I managed to open it with my credit card. It was one of those old doors with actual metal keys, not the electric card swipes, so I was able to open it. My friends were dead, too. Or dead-*ish*. It didn't take long for me to realize what had happened. The busboy at the front of the hotel had smashed his head into the glass several times, and he was laying on the carpet in a pool of his own blood. There was a gas station close. One of those that were open 24 hours, because it was right off the highway. There was a car sitting beside the pump, and the driver was on the ground beside it. The hose for the gas, it was... He had shoved it in his mouth, and his face was stained with gasoline. He drowned himself."

"Whatever this is," Mark says, "it made people go crazy first."

"It has to be a disease. A virus. Or a germ."

"I think so, too."

"Why do you think some people are immune? And others... weren't?"

Mark doesn't answer; he has no answer to give.

III

"It's beautiful at night." They stand upon the roof of the church, together, the stars sparkling like an Arabian carpet high above. The wind has died down, and the starlight dances over the snow that fills the streets and the roofs of the skyscrapers. Clumps of ice slide down the Ohio River, jostling one another in an effortless ballet. The dark-walkers howl no longer, lost in the cocoons of their own choosing, slowly dwindling down in numbers in the sharp Ohio cold. A coyote howls in the distance, and several dark-walkers answer. It sends shivers up his spine. But the dark-walkers go quiet, and both of them stand unmoving. Her arms are wrapped around him, and she rests her chin upon his shoulder; he plays with her fingers, not minding the cold, and he can feel her warm breath kissing his rose-blotched cheek. "I used to stand just down the road from here... And I'd sit and just watch the city at night. The lights were beautiful, and I'd watch the cars driving along the highways and the exchanges. But now... the buildings aren't lit. The highways are covered with snow and ice, and the only cars on the roads are covered with snow and have been dormant for months."

"It's just you and me now," Rachel says, and she squeezes him tightly against her.

He slowly turns and looks into her eyes. They sparkle in the starlight. Words are lost. Their heads lean closer together, the harshness and cruelty of the world forgotten with the delicious, slow, and awkward kiss, the taste of her lips and the pressure of her body against his a sanctuary from the nightmares that have so long accosted his sleep. They have stopped kissing, and now they just hold one another. She murmurs quietly, and he runs his fingers through her hair, the knuckles white with the frosty cold. He buries his head in her hair, and his eyes look upwards, at the carpet of stars twinkling in the atmosphere. *A solitary planet revolving around a solitary sun in a solitary galaxy in a solitary universe. We are entirely alone.* He feels her breathing against him, and a faint smile drapes his face. *We are entirely alone, and everything is perfect.*

She pulls away, and she looks up into his eyes...

part promising,

part pleading.

Wholly needful.

Her lips move in a bare whisper: "What are you thinking?"

He bites his own lip and doesn't answer for a moment. "This is perfect. *You're* perfect."

She pulls her jacket tighter. "It's cold."

"I know. But I don't notice it so much."

"I think we should go inside."

Several minutes have passed. The door to the friar's office is closed, and they ignore the skeleton hunched over the dust-laden desk. She is pinned in the corner, and he is attacking her. She lets out a groan, a desperate plea—not for ceasing, but for more. Their lips graze one another's, and her eyes are clenched shut, her world spinning, engulfed in the moment. His left hand crawls up her shirt. Her slender tummy is warm, and she doesn't protest his ice-bitten fingers. He feels the front strap of her bra, and he slowly pushes one finger through, feels the crest of her breast. Her mouth hangs open as his finger caresses her nipple. He pushes her harder against the wall, and his other hand reaches up the back of her shirt, and he fondles with the latches on her bra. It unsnaps, and he lets it lower. She squirms her arms, and the front of the bra drops down to her belly button. With his right hand he grips her taught shoulder-blades, and with his right he massages her breast. Her eyes glaze over, and she lets out an involuntary cry of surprise. He kisses her delicate mouth, her breath issuing in choked spasms. He can feel her heartbeat through her breasts, a resounding drum; her breath intensifies with each pulse. He rubs her nipple, and she begins moving her hips up and down, her breasts moving in their own rhythm against his hand. He clutches her shoulder-blades tightly, and they kiss with unbridled excitement. She says something, and he can't quite hear it; the pleasure is too much, and it only comes out as a grunt. He begins running his fingers up and down the space between her breasts, his fingertips carving a web like an artisan spider. He slowly bends down and begins kissing her breasts, and his lips find the nipple of her left breast; his tongue flickers in and out, and she presses herself against the corner of the wall. One hand is wrapped around his neck, the other pressed eagle-sprawled against the end of the bookcase with its Catholic catechisms and new testament studies.

"Adrian..." she breathes.

He draws himself up, looks into her watery eyes. "I'm sorry..." he stammers.

"No... It's just..."

He watches her, can feel her hips against his, her rapid breathing. "What?"

"Don't stop... Please don't stop."

He smiles, maintains eye contact, and he slowly lifts off her shirt, revealing her stomach and breasts, the bra hanging limp along the crest of her tummy. He navigates both shoulder straps of her bra down her arms. In a meager moment the bra falls to the dusty floor. She stands straight, steadies herself, grabs his shirt, raises it up. He lifts his arms, and the shirt comes off. His bare chest is against her bare breasts, and they continue exploring one another's mouths. As they kiss, she pants, "You should... Reach inside me."

At first he doesn't understand.

She notices his hesitation, and she takes his hand, guides it downwards, tracing a line across her breasts with the stiff nipples, along the ridge of her stomach, and finally to the hem of her pants. He understands, and he slowly fingers along the waistline. It is an awkward salsa, but he is able to find the upper strap of her panties. The warmth from her inner thighs bathes his fingers. She starts to breathe harder. He fondles the front of her panties, and he rubs softly. He can feel the hair underneath, and he reaches his fingers down along the crest of the panties, can feel the wetness already. She moans, head arching back, and she positions herself against the corner, one hand around his bare shoulder and the other pressed against the bookshelf.

"Do you really think I'm pretty?"

Her words startle him. He forgets his hand in her pants, and he just stares at her.

"What?" he asks, confusion paramount.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she repeats, without hesitation.

He pauses for a moment. "I doubt there is a prettier or more desirable girl on this planet right now." It is a sweet compliment, and for a moment his wayward mind gets the best of him. How many girls who have not become demons truly exist? He can see one of his first girlfriends, whom he dated in high school, wandering the school hallways, past the green lockers, drool crawling down her face and her breasts swollen purple in the arctic cold.

He has reached underneath her panties, and he can feel her hair tickling his fingers. Rachel's soft cries of delight run through him like a wet sword, striking his heart in a plethora of passions. The heat from her vagina is nearly volcanic, and as he fingers her lips, the warm wetness speckling the tip of his finger, her legs shudder and spread farther apart. He finds her clit and rubs it in circles. Her body shudders and her legs quiver.

She bites her lip, mind roaring. "No one's ever done this to me."

He stops. "We don't have to do this."

"No," she says. "I want you to. I want you to do this to me."

"Okay," he says, and he continues rubbing between her lips.

"Adrian..."

"Rachel?"

"Stick your fingers inside me. Deep inside me."

Her words are quite out-of-character, blunt and to the point. The dirtiness of them is almost a turn-off. But he ignores the way she framed the question and obliges. He tiptoes his fingers down to the opening, and he slides them inside. He is surprised at how easy it is, as her legs are semi-open and the wetness engulfing. He delves two fingers inside, and he squirms deeper and deeper until his knuckles are rubbing against the mouth of her vagina. He explores the moisture within, watching her face: her eyes are clenched shut, her face a pallid white, lips trembling. The hand sprawled across his shoulder squeezes tight, and he can feel her fingers digging into his skin. He ignores the sudden burst of pain and wiggles his fingers as deep as he can, and he can feel her G-spot. He flicks it with the tip of his finger, and she nearly collapses.

He wrenches his hand free and catches her.

She falls forward against him, breathing harshly.

"Maybe we should stop," he says.

She shakes her head, says nothing, grips him tighter, begins kissing him again.

They are lost, unable to be found, the hell of the world forgotten in their embrace, their mouths passing over one another's, their lips playing and tongues entwining. His arms are wrapped tight around her, the hair on her back raised either by the cold draft of the room or the pleasures of the moment. One of her hands is rubbing against his neck, and with the other she follows his spine down to his pants, and her fingers reach underneath the waistline and begin tickling the warmth of his hip. She traces them around his side and reaches inside, and he can feel her fingers sliding underneath his boxers, scratching along the crest of his groin. He shudders for a moment, and she grabs his penis, squeezes gently, and he can feel it hardening, swelling against his pants, uncomfortable and yet mesmerizing.

She breaks the kiss and leans towards his ear, whispers, "I want you inside me."

He doesn't argue. His own hands go down to her pants, and he begins unzipping. She does the same for him, and their pants fall at about the same time, his boxers pressed against her panties. His

fingers wrap around the line of her panties and slowly wiggle them down, revealing her furry vagina. She pulls his boxers down, and his penis graces its presence against her hair. She widens her legs, and he presses himself against her, his penis going between her legs, rubbing against the outside of her vagina.

"Be gentle," she whispers, her voice shuddering with anticipation.

"Guide me in," he says.

She reaches down, begins widening her legs...

The scream rips through the church, crawling up the abandoned stairwells and seeping into the derelict rooms, pushing its way even through the shut door. Their moment is shattered, and they stand nearly naked together, their hearts suddenly caught in their chests. His eyes are wide, and he stares into her own orb-like pupils. The surreal is broken, and the existence of their traumatized lives is thrust once more upon them. The scream fades away, and now their hearts are beating faster. They can hear scurrying throughout the church, a gunshot, more screams. The moment is torn, and they forget everything. He turns to run towards the door, but he trips over the pants caught around his ankles, and he falls against the desk, his twisting body knocking the skeleton out of its chair. He hears the skeleton's bones cracking against the floor as Rachel kicks off her pants and draws up her panties, running to the door. He screams for her to stop, terrified of what she might find. He pulls himself up to see her on the other side of the desk.

"Push it against the door!" she shouts, her breasts throbbing with her words.

He stumbles to his feet, pulls up his pants, and grabs the other side of the desk. Together they wedge it against the door, and they step back, oblivious to the desecrated skeleton. They stand beside one another, staring at the oak paneling, hearing running coming from beyond the stairs outside the door. He slowly reaches out, takes her hand. She squeezes his hand in reply, and they stand stark-naked, hearing only their ragged breathing and the fluttering of their hearts.

Now they can hear muffled conversation, no yelling or shouting.

Rachel looks over at the boy. "Do you think we should go down there?"

"I think," Adrian says, gathering his thoughts, "that we should get dressed first."

IV

They find several people gathered, three men holding oil lanterns that dance across the pews and the wooden boards placed over the arching stained glass windows. Adrian and Rachel enter the fray. No one seems to be talking. One woman is crying, and someone is comforting her. Adrian recognizes him: the man's friend. He tries to remember the name. *Matthew*? No... *Mark*. Rachel asks what happened. A woman answers: she is small for her age of 25, with a petite body and strong arms, piercing eyes and chocolate hair that bends in curls around her shoulders. She speaks quietly.

Adrian doesn't listen but pushes forward. The lamplight blinds his eyes, but then he can see the body strewn across one of the pews. There is a gun in the girl's hand, and a hole has chiseled through her forehead, blood and brain matter, laced with skull fragments, dripping along the edge of the pew and staining the satin pew cushion. He recognizes her immediately: *Alyssa. The girl from the monastery*. She flashes through his mind, weeping naked, embroiled in the sheets, bleeding from her vagina. A knot forms in his throat and he pulls away, abandoning the throng.

He takes a seat in a pew on the other side of the sanctuary. He looks up towards the front of the sanctuary, sees the altar for the communion and several high-backed chairs sitting along the distant

wall, underneath a large wooden cross. He stares at that wooden cross and feels tears brimming in his eyes. He looks away as she sits down beside him. She doesn't say anything, just lets her presence be felt. He leans back in the pew and runs a finger along his eyes, wiping away the slithering tears. She wraps her arm around him, and he leans into her. She bites her lip and runs her fingers through his hair.

He tries to keep the flood away, but he lurches forward, and the tears stream down his cheeks with choking sobs. He had pushed away the horrors of the monastery, had tried to isolate and exterminate them in the darkest corners of his mind, but Alyssa's corpse, her resolution, had drawn the memories from the deepest recesses in his brain, and he wept not for sorrow but for shame: he had tried to forget her, had tried to forget what they had done to her, had become so wrapped up in the cocoon of his own life that he didn't even talk to her when they reached the church. Now he weeps, his penance before the cross, and Rachel pulls him close to her, and he cries into her shoulder as the throng departs, two men carrying the body into the foyer. Her body will be thrown into the street the next morning, and by nightfall there will be nothing left.

Several days have passed, and life is getting back to normal in the church. Mark is befriending the others his age. He continues to visit the man, to see how he is doing. He spends considerable hours at the man's bedside, and the man continuously asks Mark to return to the house to get his journals. The overseer of the church, the man who had lost his daughter to the savagery of the new world, a man named James Harker, refuses to let the boy go alone, especially since it is uncharted territory: no one from the church has been on the west-side of Cincinnati since the plague struck. Mark tells the man that he will go once the snow melts, but the man asks for him to go every day. Oftentimes the man will act like Mark is a burden, but the boy knows that the man cherishes the visits. Mark had not gone to the man's bedside one evening, and the man had thrown a fit. Mark found it funny, but he quickly apologized. A bond had formed between the two, something the man would never admit.

Harker made it a required duty for every able person to attend the breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals, and he politely asked that everyone be in bed by a certain time at night. At first Mark didn't understand the man's seeming want of control over everything, but after more conversations with him, Mark began to understand. Those within the church were grieving, and the wounds were not yet beginning to heal. They could be ripped open at any moment and by any means, and Harker had experienced this for himself: a certain scent, a brief memory, anything and everything would send him over the edge, and his dreams were filled with haunting echoes of his daughter crawling around the church, lips dripping with blood. The meals helped the people bond together, and friendships formed, deep friendships with confidence and sharing. He insisted on set bedtimes so that people would be forced to sleep: no one escaped the nightmares, though some experienced them even more intensely—one woman screamed nearly every night, locked in an imaginary battle of dark-walkers in a horrifying night-terror. Exhausted individuals would hallucinate and often do crazy things—things that jeopardized not only themselves but also the community as a whole. Everyone helped with the cleaning of the church, the disposal of waste from the bathrooms, with the gathering of water from the snow outside and the cooking of the meals. The meal supplies were dwindling, and soon a few men would be sent out for supplies, and Mark had wanted to go. But the man had been adamant: Mark was too young.

Mark dresses warm, bundling up in a heavy coat and two layers of jeans. His feet crunch in the snow as he walks down the quiet streets that had once been the epicenter of some of Cincinnati's most vibrant night life. Mount Adams, also known as "The Hill", and home to the Holy Immaculata, is a

neighborhood of narrow, winding streets, ornate Victorian homes and once-beautiful gardens. Shops and restaurants line the streets, speckled by villas with panoramic views of downtown Cincinnati, the snaking Ohio River, and the snow-draped hills of northern Kentucky. He walks past the windows of several art galleries and glass-blowing shops, but the dust and ice over the glass prevents him from looking inside. Mark passes a large wooden sign that rests before the entrance to Eden Park, just a few blocks from the church; the sign reads MT ADAMS and gives a short history of the community. It was originally called Mt. Ida, but the name was changed in 1843 to honor President John Quincy Adams, who visited the community to dedicate the Cincinnati Observatory. In the early 1800s, the hill was the home to the Nicholas Longworth Vineyard; the Catawba grape was developed in his winery, and it became the key ingredient of America's first champagne, "Golden Wedding." Mt. Adams was, at one time, the center of winemaking in America. Mark walks past the sign, following a snow-covered trail lined with naked trees stripped of leaves. The trail weaves past several benches and an assortment of gazebos, eventually emerging into a large clearing with a reflection pool. The fountain that had sat in the middle of the pool no longer bubbles, and the water is covered with a heavy layer of ice and countless inches of snow, nearly invisible—had Mark not known it was there, he would have imagined it to simply be a low hill. The wind coming up the slopes of the hill cuts through him. His breath crystallizes before his eyes, and he decides to turn back and return to the church. Dinner is approaching, and perhaps the man will feel like eating tonight.

The next day has come, and the boy stands in the library, looking over the books. He remembers his time at the house, remembers the days filled with monotonous boredom. He is thankful for the friendships he has forged, but yet he itches for something to do. This itching has drawn him to the library. He spots one book in particular: a dictionary sitting on a lectern. He finds this strange, a dictionary—of all books possible—given the prominent position. He nearly walks past, amused, but then he remembers the nurse's words, about the word her son had circled in the dictionary. He refuses to believe that this is the very same dictionary, but he finds himself cautiously flipping it open, perusing the pages. He flips each leaf quietly, so as not to attract attention. He goes through the letters one-by-one. He reaches "V", and his heart hammers: *What if the boy had circled "Vampire"?* But "Vampire" sits quietly and unmarked. He draws a deep breath and nearly shuts the dictionary, but a burst of wind from a crack in the high window ruffles the pages, and suddenly he finds himself staring down at a letter circled in crude marker:

ZOMBIE

He reads the entry slowly:

VARIANT: ALSO ZOM-BI

FUNCTION: *NOUN*

ETYMOLOGY: LOUISIANA CREOLE OR HAITIAN CREOLE *ZONBI*, OF BANTU ORIGIN; AKIN TO KIMBUNDU *NZUMBE* GHOST

DATE: CIRCA 1871

1. A MIXED DRINK MADE OF SEVERAL KINDS OF RUM, LIQUEUR, AND FRUIT JUICE
2. THE SUPERNATURAL POWER THAT ACCORDING TO VODOO BELIEF MAY ENTER INTO AND REANIMATE A DEAD BODY
3. A WILL-LESS AND SPEECHLESS HUMAN IN THE WEST INDIES CAPABLE ONLY OF AUTOMATIC MOVEMENT WHO IS HELD TO HAVE DIED AND BEEN SUPERNATURALLY REANIMATED
4. A PERSON HELD TO RESEMBLE THE SO-CALLED WALKING DEAD

5. A PERSON MARKEDLY STRANGE IN APPEARANCE OR BEHAVIOR

It is the last entry that catches his attention and makes his heart freeze behind his ribs:

6. IN POPULAR CULTURE, A HUMAN BEING THAT HAS BEEN STRIPPED OF ITS PERSONALITY, EMOTIONS, AND SOCIAL CONDITIONING; A HUMAN THAT IS TOTALLY DEVOID OF RESTRAINT AND IS PRONE TO VIOLENCE

V

"I wondered when you would find that."

He jumps at the sound, spinning around. The dictionary falls to the floor.

The blond-haired young man laughs. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, it's okay," Mark says. "It's just..." He shakes his head.

"Surreal? I know." He walks forward, bends down, picks up the dictionary, puts it back.

Mark steps away. "It doesn't sound plausible."

"You told Kyle you think these things are vampires."

"Yeah."

"And that sounds more plausible?"

Mark shakes his head. "I don't know what the hell to think."

Anthony nods, looks around the library. "I was at the University of Cincinnati when this happened. I was finishing up my Master's in Counseling. The MAC they called it. Anyways, in one of the classes... ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY, I believe... we had to research a strange field in psychology. I always loved zombie movies. Hated zombie books but loved zombie movies. So I chose to research zombies. My professor found it laughable, but I did my research well. Do you know where the zombie 'myth' originated?"

Mark shakes his head, *No*.

Anthony nods. "I didn't think so. Around the 1960s, a voodoo priest used neurotoxins from the Japanese blowfish to zombie people and to put them to work on the plantations."

Mark raises his eyebrows, incredulous.

"There are certain kinds of poisons that slow down bodily functions to the point where a person can be considered dead. One such poison is from the Japanese blowfish. The neurotoxin is extremely potent, and it can render a person paralyzed, to the point of near death: the heartbeat slows so much that only an exceptionally trained doctor can tell that the person is still alive. Now. When the neurotoxin wears off, what happens to the person? The person 'comes back to life.' There's a side-effect, though: their brains are so damaged that they can only live in a trance-like state, though able to do simple tasks. Like eating and sleeping. Or... working on plantations. This became big news in 1962. Clairvius Narcisse, a Haitian man, was declared dead by two doctors and buried. Eighteen years later, in the 1960s, he was spotted wandering around the village. It terrified the people, of course. Eventually they realized that the culprit was a voodoo priest, 'killing' victims with the neurotoxin and then, when they regained consciousness in a nearly brain-dead state, he would put them to work on sugar plantations. He got sloppy with Narcisse."

Mark asks, "So you think that this is some kind of neurotoxin? An airborne chemical?"

Anthony laughs. "I would say that's ridiculous, but what other explanations are there?"

He shrugs. "I don't know."

"Several more, actually," Anthony says, surprising him. "One example is brain parasites."

Mark raises an eyebrow. "Brain parasites?"

"Yeah. Scientists have found brain parasites that could turn victims into mindless, zombie-like slaves. *Toxoplasmosa gondii* is an example. It infects rats, but it can also breed inside the intestines of a cat. It only affects rats, and when it gets inside a rat, it takes over its brain, making it scurry towards where cats live. Thus the rat is led by the parasite to a place where it can be eaten, and the parasite then infects the cat. Ironically, this parasite infected at least *half* of the human population, and it has the tendencies to promote personality changes and to even cause insanity. So. If a *toxoplasmosa* were to evolve to the point where it causes the same effects in humans as it does in rats, it could push the world towards a zombie apocalypse: humans driven mad, with no instinct for self-preservation or rational thought."

Anthony and Mark had talked for several hours that day, and Mark went to bed thinking about what the young man had said. Anthony had mentioned that it was possible for a simple virus to mutate to the point of infecting the entire population with its affects. Theoretically speaking, a virus *could* mutate and turn humans into mindless killing machines. In psychology, several brain disorders have been found that do the exact same thing, though they aren't contagious. Anthony had brought up the Mad Cow Disease that had swarmed Europe several years ago: the virus attacked the cow's spinal cord and brain, turning it into a stumbling, mindless, rage-infested animal. When Mad Cow disease entered humans who ate meat, the Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease emerged: the symptoms included changes in walking, hallucinations, lack of coordination, muscle twitching, myoclonic jerks and seizures, and rapidly escalating delirium and dementia. While those people didn't go around killing and eating people, some scientists secretly feared—only to become public about it later—that the virus could mutate to the point of infecting humans with the same violent tendencies that it had displayed with cows. Anthony had also mentioned Neurogenesis, a scientific term for the re:growing of dead brain tissue, practiced—prior to the plague—in laboratories all around the world. Recent experiments, at the time of his writing of the paper, had sought to reanimate dead brain tissue: they were largely successful, except the brain cortex—the part of the brain that made people nice, giving them personality and such—could not be re:grown. The end result was basic motor function and primitive instincts. If neurogenesis took place with a human—whether at the hands of doctors or, even, at the hands of a virus or germ—the result would be a mindless body shambling about, deprived of thoughts and personality, nothing but an organism of primal instincts and impulses. The definition of a real-life zombie: the living dead.

VI

The man is up and walking again. He takes the first few days easily, and then he spends an entire day in conversation with Harker. Harker drained the man emotionally, requesting to know everything the man had experienced, and he was obscenely interested in the man's study on vampires, despite the man's protest that all of it was myth and legend with no scientific backing, nothing of use to the community or to anyone anywhere. Mark had waken up the next morning to find the man and Harker dressed in warm clothing; he had walked into the lower level of the church to help prepare for breakfast—it was his turn to help with the cooking—and found the man holding an M4. Mark had asked what was happening, and Harker explained that the man had a serious question that needed a serious answer. That was the end of the discussion. Mark had wanted to come along, but Harker had

said *No*; not because of Mark's youthfulness, but rather because Mark already had plans to assist in the breakfast. Harker and the man had grabbed one of the snowmobiles in the basement—an extra had been added to the tally of snowmobiles, thanks to Adrian's daring navigation through downtown Cincinnati at night—and they passed through the gate in the fence and vanished down towards the river.

The wind bites at the man's face as they weave between the snow-covered wrecks that line the freeway. The man tries to spot his house, but a slight snow begins to fall, despite the glaring sun, and the speed of the snowmobile tearing through the snowfall blinds him. They take the bridge across the river, and the man is bothered at Harker's speed. They descend into Newport and are soon driving between abandoned bars and Newport on the Levee. The parking lots are crammed full, the bars having been flooded with people when the plague struck. Eventually they wander down a side-street, and Harker slows the snowmobile, and they come to a stop in front of what had, at one time, been a police station. "Here we go," Harker says; "Stay alert. We don't want any surprises... As if we have a choice."

They make their way through the snow to the front entrance. The door is gone, lying underneath the snow, and the sunlight pours within, drenching the walls and the rain-stained carpets. The wintry draft tears through the man's bones as they make their way through the lobby, past several offices, and finally down a separate corridor. Another door hangs open, long-abandoned spider-webs dangling from the corners of the door. Harker leads the way into the room, steps aside, lets the man come behind him. The man, who is holding the gun rigid, lets it slowly fall down to his side, his eyes engulfing the site.

"We came here a few months after the plague struck. It's where we got the assault rifles and the ammunition. Some were still alive when we got here. They were reaching through the bars, reaching for us, desperate. But they were so *weak*. It was hard not to... Not to have pity on them. They were caged like wild animals... But I guess, after all, that's what they were."

The man almost doesn't hear Harker's words. He stares numbly at the line of four cells, each filled with three or four skeletons. The skeletons are covered with tattered clothing, their flesh long since consumed by carrion insects. The stench has gone, replaced only with the stale air that sticks to the crevices of his lungs. He can imagine the scene, the prisoners dying, and then rising—only to be trapped. He can almost hear them crying out for help, suffering in their bodies, slowly starving to death. Harker's words drip through his mind like a nagging voice: *it was hard not to have pity on them*. The man doesn't share Harker's sentiments.

Harker says, "You asked what our purpose was. Why we chose to hole up in a church. Why we seem so... complacent... about remaining in one place. Honestly, I find it ironic to be coming from you. Your friend Mark tells us that you stayed at your own house until necessity pushed you out. He says that you had no desire to leave the place. And yet you are so shocked that a community of individuals can sit tight and be complacent." He stops speaking for a moment. "Regardless, we are not a community that is just trying to survive without any hope of the future. Our hope of the future is something concrete, something epitomized here in these cells. These monsters, these vampires, these zombies... Whatever the hell you want to call them... They are biological creatures. Nothing more, nothing less. It's haphazard talk to think of them as something supernatural. They are not people indwelt with the spirits of demons. They are not, despite what Mark may think, vampires who thirst for human blood. They are not zombies resurrected to life. *This is no divine apocalypse, no holy judgment imposed upon humanity by a wrathful God. This is a plague.* Whatever infected these

people in August—whether a germ, or a virus, or something never-before-seen—has simply rendered them sick. Sick with a myriad of violent symptoms. And sick people without food die. Sick people, without warmth, die. We've seen what you've seen: they're starving and turning upon one another in mad feeding frenzies. We've found their bodies lying in the snow, purple and swollen, frostbitten and thawed." Harker nods, his mind turning cartwheels. "Here's the truth of the matter." Now he looks at the man, his eyes cold as stones yet alight with a hopeful flame. "These creatures will die. And when that happens, we'll be free to leave hiding. We'll rebuild our lives."

There is quiet for a long moment. Just the two men standing alone.

And the skulls of the skeletons smiling at them candidly.

The man finally speaks. "You don't seem to buy much into God."

"Have I any reason to?" Harker asks. "I used to. But then I saw what happened. And I tried to believe, I really *tried* to believe that He was real, that He cared. But then my daughter was taken from me. It was then that I knew: God isn't real. And if He is, then He doesn't care. And an uncaring God is not a God who should be worshipped. I'm not a pretender. I'm not buying into those cheap fairy-tales they taught us in Sunday School. No. There is no God, no purpose, no divinity. Why are we here? Not because some all-powerful being created us. We're here because evolution followed its random course, and we were spawned after billions of years of natural selection, adaptation, and speciation."

"Then you'll know," the man quips, "that with evolution, life finds a way."

Harker eyes him. "What's your point?"

"After every mass extinction this planet has experienced, there's been a rebirth of life, and most of the time, the life is vastly different from that which preceded it. NASA had been telling us for years that an asteroid might be the harbinger of human extinction, giving rise to a new dominating species. But what if NASA was wrong? What if our extinction has come—not by an asteroid, or even by nuclear war, but by this plague? What if the very system of evolution you put your hope into is the very system that will destroy you? What if what we are witnessing here is the end of the Age of Man—and the beginning of the Age of the Dark-Walker?"

Dusk is beginning to settle. Adrian blindfolded her and led her down a corridor. She had giggled in playful anticipation, and her breath had been taken upon discovering a room with a table upon which sat several tall wicker candles burning softly. The table had been set with a variety of dried fruits and steamed vegetables, which Adrian had scavenged from a nearby grocery store that afternoon. They ate quietly in the candlelight. Now the dinner has passed, and they sit across from one another, arms outstretched over the table, hands wrapped warm together. She bites her lips, eyes batting. He is swallowed up in those eyes, and he can feel his own heart beginning to pound. She can tell by his pale face something is on his mind, and she asks him about it.

"There's something... I want to talk to you about."

She licks her lips, confused. "Is it something bad?"

"Bad?" he asks. He shakes his head. "No. It's... good."

"Okay," she says.

"I want... I want to get married."

She doesn't say anything for a moment, then laughs. "Married?"

He nods, feeling embarrassed at her incredulity.

She realizes he is being serious and wipes the smirk off her face. "You want to get married?"

He nods. "Rachel... You know... I love you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, Adrian, I know."

"And... Well, I've always wanted to get married. To the girl I love. And that's you."

"Adrian... There's no one who can marry us. We don't have any priests."

"Harker agreed to marry us."

She sits back in her chair. "He's not a priest."

"I know. But... Look. Back at the monastery, I saw what people can become. When civilization is stripped away, we become monsters. *I* don't want to become a monster, Rachel. I want to be civilized. I want to do things right. I don't think we should pretend that civilization is still here, we shouldn't pretend that the rules and regulations of society still apply when no one is around to enforce them. But I don't want to just throw off that sensibility which makes us human. We didn't have sex that night last week... And while the reason for not having sex isn't anything desirable... I'm still glad we didn't. I want to wait to have sex with you until we're married."

She eyes him, trying to piece together his words. "You want to marry me to have sex with me?" She laughs playfully. "You don't need to do that. I'll have sex with you now."

"It's not about the sex, Rachel," Adrian says. "I just want... I love you. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to grow old with you." He squeezes her hand. "You don't have to answer now, okay? You can think it over, and you can—"

"Yes," she blurts, a smile spreading across her face.

His voice is hopeful, lit eyes a window into his exuberant soul: "You'll marry me?"

"Yes," she says. "I love you, Adrian. And I want to grow old with you, too."

Chapter Fifteen

Valentine's Day

(or "Adrian's Story")

"Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame."

- King Solomon (Song of Solomon 8.6)

Adrian stands in the parlor, admiring himself in the mirror. He is alone, the rest of the community gathered in the sanctuary. He turns from side-to-side, head cocked over his shoulder, admiring the way the suit fits around him. He has never worn a suit before, and this is the nicest one they could find at a small wedding outlet in the outskirts of Cincinnati. It's Italian. ARMANI, he thinks. He tests the cuffs and the buttons, and he wishes he had a rose to slide into the shirt pocket, or at least a handkerchief of some sort. He takes a deep breath, feels his heart sprinting behind his ribs, and he steps back, gazes into the mirror. He is not looking at the same boy he had been when all this began. His face is drawn taught, lines of stress etched along the corners of his lips, the constant work and healthy diet having eradicated much of the gut that had wrapped around him since high school. He looks into his own eyes, reflected back at him, and a crackle of distant thunder carries his mind into the memories of the past he wishes to forget.

ΣΩΣ

He had his first sexual experiences with the coming of the first frost in the spring of 2005. He had been fifteen years old. He and some of his friends had discovered the great joy of beer, the excitement of intoxication. They would usually go out into the country fields of Iowa, drinking in abandoned and decrepit barns, away from the fuss of police activity. Word had gotten out about their availability for finding alcohol, and some of the more popular kids from the high school had invited them over to a party one night, as long as they provided the booze. It had been an experience Adrian would never forget: he had needed to go to the bathroom, pushed open the door, and found two seniors having sex. He tried the upstairs bathroom to find that it was occupied as well. He ended up taking a leak outside in the bitter Iowa cold, pissing on dried-out corn stalks.

Everyone hit the vodka pretty hard, and his friend Matt had been lying in the front garden, vomiting all over the flower bed. Most of the other guys and girls were out watching him, laughing. Adrian had watched from the large bay window, rooted in a drunken stupor, as some of the older boys kicked Matt in the sides before hauling him to his feet—only in time for him to wrench away and continue drenching the flamingo lawn ornaments. Nearly everyone went outside to play the game with Matt, but Adrian had stayed inside because of the cold.

He wasn't alone: one of his other friends, Alec, had brought one of his many girlfriends, and she was sprawled out on the couch, head nodding back and forth, eyes glazed. She was an odd-looking girl named Catherine, and she had bulging eyes like that of a guppy and no social skills whatsoever. She'd already downed a couple shots of vodka and was passed out on the sofa.

Adrian's heart began to pound,

and he was drunk,
and they were alone.

He stumbled over to the sofa and sat down beside her. He reached out, took her by the arm, gently shook. "Catherine," he said in a slurred whisper. "Catherine. Can you hear me? Are you awake?" She groaned. He reached out and touched her cheek. She had gone a bit gray, didn't look too well, but her cheek was warm and the skin soft. He traced little circles around the side of her face, stroking the soft downy hair next to her ear. He ran his fingers through her hair, the warmth from her scalp tickling his fingers. He drew a deep breath and put his hand between her legs, sad that he could not feel anything through the fabric of her trousers and underwear. *You're just an innocent, lonely fool who's going to kiss an unconscious girl. What harm is there in that?* His mind played devil's advocate, but he didn't protest.

He glanced towards the window, saw that people had abandoned Matt, leaving him alone to crawl around in his own filth. Most of the boys and girls stood out on the front lawn, smoking cigarettes. Adrian turned back to the girl on the sofa and reached for her chest. Her small breasts felt strangely flabby; he had expected them to feel firm. But he squeezed them from outside her shirt and pushed them from side-to-side through her clothes. It didn't feel quite as satisfying as he had hoped, so he changed his position, reaching underneath her shirt.

He felt breasts for the first time.

It's like touching a baby's butt that has been wrapped in a satin curtain.

He drew a deep breath and inched his other hand towards the zipper of her jeans.

The brilliant light blinded him, and for a moment he forgot the girl. He raised his hand to shield the light, and when his eyes adjusted, he could see flashing red-and-blue lights shining through the bay window. He leapt up from the couch and scurried up the stairs, pushing a couple in his way against the wall as he dove under the bed. He hid there for the rest of the night, only to find out later that the ambulance had come for Matt, taking him to the hospital to look after him.

He had found Catherine the next morning.

She didn't remember anything.

All he felt was shame for what he had done... and sadness at how unsatisfying it had been.

ΣΩΣ

He had met her his freshman year at college. A stunningly beautiful girl, who dressed simply. Some joked, saying she was a Mennonite. He was drawn to her immediately, and a friendship had been forged. It was not long before they shared their first kiss under Iowa's famous starry nights, and during the summer after his freshman year, they would take long drives through the cornfields that stretched for miles, sometimes stopping to dress scarecrows in girl clothing. She had been quite adamant that she did not want to have sex until marriage, and he wondered then if she truly *was* a Mennonite. But he obeyed her wishes, didn't press the matter. She thanked him for it—if not verbally, at least secretly, in the way she cherished him and doted upon him, buying him a different stuffed animal nearly every week. She would even order stuffed animal sea turtles over the internet; he had never been to an aquarium, had never seen a sea turtle, but had fallen in love with them after watching Pixar's FINDING NEMO. When sophomore year rolled around, they continued seeing each other every day, and they began making plans for the four-day Fall Break weekend. Both were feeling quite confined on the small campus and wanted to explore uncharted territory (though, for Adrian, uncharted territory included Kristen's body).



He stands at the front of the sanctuary, Harker behind him. The sanctuary is lit with dozens of candles and oil-lanterns, the sunlight from outside unable to shine through the boarded-up windows. The door from the parlor opens, and those gathered in the pews turn their heads to watch as she emerges. The white wedding dress swirls around her slender legs, and she clutches a bouquet of flowers as she slowly makes her way down the aisle. The only sound is that of gentle rolling thunder, the warm front carrying with it rain, but the thunder itself serves as the music for the ceremony. She makes her way towards him, and he is swallowed up in her eyes. His heart burns for her, and he feels a tear cresting at the corner of his eye. He draws a deep breath, closes his eyes.



The leaves were just beginning to turn on the trees when they sat out on the coffeehouse patio in late September. They were sipping hot chocolate and discussing what they could do. He mentioned going to the Appalachian mountains, but she said, "Oh, it's going to be *so* crowded. I hate crowds." He agreed; he hated amusement parks because of the ridiculously long lines.

He remembered something he was supposed to do his Senior year in High School but had never come through: "How about Amish country? They're never crowded."

Kristen raised her eyes. "Amish country?"

"In Pennsylvania. We could go for a few days."

"What does someone actually *do* in Amish country?"

"You're the Mennonite, you should know."

She playfully slapped him. "Seriously, Adrian. What's there to do in Amish country?"

"That's the beautiful part," he said with a grin. "Absolutely nothing. It'd paradise central. All the cares and worries and anxieties of the world go down the tubes. All one knows is country fried steak, okra and mashed potatoes, and beautiful fall sunsets. I think it sounds fun."

She shrugged. "Well, even if it gets boring, it'd be better than being bored here."

So a week before Fall Break they began getting things together. They each had enough money to provide for gas and food, and they stocked up on some canned goods at the local Kroger. They decided to take her little Escort to save on gas. Adrian got online and booked three different motels for three different nights.

They left the day before Fall Break and drove for hours, driving from Iowa to Pennsylvania. It was more wonderful than they could've imagined: after being cooped up in a city for several months, being out amongst the farms and the dirt roads and the smog-free skies—oh! the stars at night were mesmerizing!—was like entering another world. They arrived at the first motel at sunset and unloaded their bags. They sat outside around the pool and stared at the stars, holding hands.

"Do you ever think about how crazy it is?" Kristen mused.

Adrian didn't understand. "Ever think about what being crazy?"

"I mean, God creates this gigantic universe with billions of galaxies and billions of stars and billions of planets. He creates this process called evolution and, using it like a paintbrush, He paints a beautiful masterpiece over the history of just one of these little planets. Eventually there arises, through His design, these monkey-like primates. He takes one of these primates and breathes a spirit. He makes a spiritual creature. He takes a creature with survivalist instincts—a creature whose very nature is rooted in selfishness and survival and getting food and sexuality—and says, 'All right, get

moving. Become like Me.” She shook her head, in a daze. “It’s just crazy, isn’t? The Great Dude in the Sky is crazy.”

They returned into the motel. They had booked two rooms at each motel, per Kristen’s request; he had obliged, though secretly he had hoped they could share a bed together. He kissed her goodnight and entered his room. With the absence of stress and worry, they both slept in well past noon. They checked out of the motel and continued on their journey through Amish country. Kristen was fascinated with the horse and buggies, fascinated by the men with and without beards, fascinated by the women and little girls in their bonnets; in appreciation of the little girls, she exclaimed, “Oh! They’re so cute! I can’t wait till I have a little girl.”

They ate lunch at an Amish diner; he got his favorite Amish dish, country-fried steak and mashed potatoes with toast. His girlfriend got steak and eggs. They watched chickens pluck at the ground outside the window, and they talked about the future—dreams and desires. He had already told her his greatest dream—to love and be loved—but she had never told him his. Sometimes it seemed like she felt hesitant to talk about her dream. She would often say that she didn’t have a dream. As they ate, he tried to get her to divulge what her dream was, but she kept insisting that she just took life as it came. He told her she was crazy and that she should tell him, but he was content with not knowing. “After all,” he said, “it’s not like we’re married. We’re still allowed to keep secrets.”

They drove through Amish country the rest of the day, witnessing a Barn-raising and marveling at the young kids at work in the fields. “You just have to love the Amish,” Adrian said. “I mean, they’re so simple. They’re so humble and simple. A simple life... There, Kristen, there’s a good dream to have.”

She smiled. “I like simplicity. I like snuggling up in quilts beside a fire.”

“Like we did at my house a few months ago?” he asked.

She laughed. “Yes. Yes, that was wonderful.”

That night they were too tired to do much, so they simply hugged, kissed, and went to sleep. They set their alarms to wake early in order to grab the famous Amish-style breakfast the motel hosted. The bacon was crispy and delicious, the “sunshine” eggs gooey and runny, and the toast with honey-jam was the best toast Kristen had ever eaten. She said, “It’s even better than Lee’s Famous Recipe’s biscuits.”

“Really?” Adrian had asked. He tried one. His taste buds went ablaze. “No kidding!”

They had a picnic for lunch out on a hill overlooking much of the surrounding farmland. They both leaned against a lonely tree and talked for hours. “This is the life, isn’t it?” Adrian asked. “Nothing to do, no cares in the world, just the two of us, alone, submerged in nature.”

“God’s unspoiled creation,” Kristen said. “There’s no smog, there’s hardly any automobile pollution because the Amish use buggies... It’s like a snapshot in the agricultural age before the industrial revolution. It’s like... I don’t know...” Her eyes sparkled like dew-speckled rubies as she looked at him. “It’s like this is how God meant life to be lived. Tilling the land, lost in Him and immersed in genuine community.”

“Yeah,” Adrian commented. “The industrial revolution screwed things up.”

“We’ve forgotten what’s important,” Kristen said. “We’ve forgotten the simplicities of life. We’ve become so enamored with materialism that we’ve forgotten the value and goodness of generosity. We’ve become so focused on ourselves when we should be focused on God. Focused on friends.” She cupped his hand in hers. “Focused on family.”

When she said that—when she looked at him and said *family* in that charmingly seductive voice of hers—he felt something inside him break. He realized that, finally, he did not just have a *girlfriend*.

He and Kristen transcended the bounds of mere dating. She was such a part of his life that he could claim her as family; and not just claim her as family, but know—in his heart, mind, and soul—that she *was* family. And the fact that she saw him likewise—it melted his heart. He wasn't just in Amish country with a friend. This was a family trip. Maybe not a family trip in the technical sense of the word—for she was not united with him by birth, by adoption, nor through marriage of any kind—but family in a *spiritual* sense. There was connection, *real* connection, unimagined—and it was the connection that united them.

As they were driving to the next motel, somehow they ended up with a flat tire. She was able to navigate her car to the nearest town, though more than once they almost ended up in the drainage ditches beside the road. She pulled it in to a mechanic who gave the cost of the wheel replacement. It completely threw their plans for the rest of the couple days. While it wasn't extremely pricey—seeing the innocence in the kids' eyes, and being a considerably gentlemanly man, he had not overcharged—it forced them to make a few cutbacks. They did not eat out that night as planned, and when they entered the next motel, they could only afford one room.

The girl behind the counter smiled and gave them the key. "Have fun, you two."

A knot formed in Adrian's throat. "No, you don't understand... We're not..."

Kristen said, "We're not like that. I mean, we just don't..."

The girl laughed and said, "Well, you got your room. Do with your night what you want."

"Umm... Thanks," Adrian said, and they headed down the corridor.



They stand together now, all eyes upon them. They face Harker, who is dressed in his Sunday Best, scavenged from the wedding shop just as Adrian and Rachel's clothes had been. He holds in his hand a small leather book he had found in the friar's office, and he speaks slowly and with passion. "Friends, we have come today at the invitation of Rachel Huntsmen and Adrian Ryan, to share in the joy of their wedding. This outward celebration we shall see and hear is an expression of the inner love and devotion they have for one another in their hearts."

Harker smiles at the soon-to-be-wed and continues. "Jesus Christ reminds us that at the beginning, the Creator made us male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'"

Adrian notices one of the girls in the front row, sitting beside Carla, squirm.

"God loved us," Harker continues, "and He created us to love others. Our lives find completion only as we love and are loved in return. Together, we can become what we could never be separately. Marriage is of God. Rachel Huntsmen and Adrian Ryan come together desiring to be united in this sacred relationship."



They set their bags down and Kristen unlocked the door; they pushed it open and saw a single bathroom, a long coffee-table with a television on top of it, a single window with lowered blinds, and two twin-sized beds. He threw his bags to one side of the long coffee-table and, taking her bags for her, put them on the other side. He asked her what bed she wanted, and she chose away from the window. She said she was going to use the bathroom, so he sat down and flipped through the channels. Every other channel showed two couples rubbing up against each other and kissing, and HBO was showing ONE HOUR PHOTO, and the scene just happened to be the one where Robin

Williams walked in on the couple fucking in the hotel. He swallowed, his Adam's apple squirming, and he shut off the television. "Enough of that," he said under his breath.

Kristen came out of the bathroom. "Okay, so how are we going to do this?"

"Do what?" he asked quickly, heart beginning to race.

She bit her lip. "Umm... Well, I was talking about showers..."

We can shower together. The moment the thought came into his mind, he felt his face blush. "Oh. Well." Ask her. Ask her if she wants to take her shower with you. It's not like she'll say no. His insides burned. "You go ahead. I'll take one when you get done."

"Okay," she said, and after grabbing her stuff, she locked herself in the bathroom.

You can still ask. That insidious voice! He shook his head and opened the door to the patio. He slipped outside and found himself in the pool area. There was an older couple in the hot tub making out. The vision not only disgusted him—for they were surely in their fifties—but drew his imagination to forbidden haunts. He took a walk around the pool; the couple felt intruded upon, but he spent money to rent this pool as well so he was going to take a walk. He felt his burning lust for Kristen gaining control, and he knew he could not fight it. He continued walking, fighting it off, and slowly it dissipated. His nerves waned. His fibers calmed themselves down. His heart returned to its sluggish pace. He stopped in his tracks and looked up into the Pennsylvania sky. Gentle clouds floated over the stars, but some still shone down upon him. A cool breeze reached into the pool deck, ruffling his wild and curly hair. He returned to the door to their room, nodding a silent *Hello* to the couple in the hot tub. He entered the room and shut the door, and as he lowered the blinds he could see the couple exchange a few words before going back at it. He hoped that, as gross as it seemed now, there would still be that kind of romantic spark in him and whoever *she* was when he was—

"Where have you been?" she asked.

He spun around, surprised at her voice. He hadn't seen her in the chair in the corner of the room. A white hotel robe was wrapped around her, and she was combing her hair. She had tied the sash around her waist, yet part in the robe revealed spots of her thigh. His eyes were immediately drawn to her legs, but he refused to let them remain there. Yet then his eyes took themselves to her hands, her arms, and again he moved his eyes. Finally he just saw her own eyes, those dove gems that wooed him. "You scared me," he said, standing beside the door.

"I know," she said. "I saw you jump."

He found himself at a loss for words, something that had never happened. "So... Is the water warm?"

"It's nice," she said.

"Good," he said. He walked past her and peered into the bathroom. "Wow, I guess it *was* warm. You steamed up the glass."

"Yeah, I like hot showers. Is there anything good on television?"

"Umm... Not particularly."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me."

"Okay..." A long pause. He found a towel, and she asked, "So what are we going to do tonight?"

"What do *you* want to do?" he asked. He was so thankful he was feeling *normal* again.

"I don't know. Maybe read or something?"

"That sounds good."

"Maybe we could order pizza?"

"I thought you were watching your figure?" he asked whimsically.

"Oh, come on, Baby, we're on vacation!"

He froze in the bathroom. He asked her through the wall, "Did you just call me 'Baby'?"

She laughed. "So what if I did? I can stop, if it bothers you."

"No, no, it doesn't bother me. It was just... An interesting choice of words."

"So are you taking a shower?"

"Yeah." He shut the door. *Don't lock it.* He ignored the voice and locked it, even making sure it was locked. The water was warm and he let it run over his body. He quickly soaped up and washed his hair. The water felt amazingly good. He called out from the shower, "They have a swimming pool here: maybe we can swim?"

"I just showered!" she hollered back. "Maybe in the morning!"

He finished and stepped out, realizing that he had no clean clothes. "Are there anymore robes?" he called through the door, water dripping all over the floor as he ran the rough towel over his arms, legs, and chest.

"There should be," she said. "Look in the overhead compartment. Do you see it?"

He opened it up. "Yeah. Thanks." He wrapped it around his waist and left the bathroom. He told her, "That *was* warm." She smiled at him; he thought it might have been a nervous smile. Why was she nervous? he wondered. She was now in the bed, snuggled up in the covers. He crawled into his own bed; part of him wanted to crawl in hers, and if she flipped out, make a joke out of it. But he knew better than that. He pulled the covers up close and felt good about it. They were in their separate beds. Half the battle was over.

There was silence for the longest time.

Kristen asked, "So there's nothing on television?"

"Nothing worth watching," he said. "Do you know the time?"

"It's about ten thirty," she said.

"Wow. That's early."

"I know."

Silence. How could silence be so awkward?

"Well," he said. "I guess we should sleep."

"Yeah, I guess so," she said quietly.

"Good night," he said, turning off the light.



Harker turns to Adrian and speaks. "Adrian Ryan, do you now leave your father and mother to establish your own home with Rachel Huntsmen as her husband, to receive her as your wife, to make a home where she will be loved and cared for as long as God grants her life?" The words roll over in Adrian's mind: *leaving your parents... establishing a home... as long as God grants her life...* His parents had become monsters. His home had become the dwelling-place of the living dead. And life could be taken at any moment by the blood-thirsting savages crawling outside the church walls. His thoughts almost seem like a hesitation, and Harker eyes him. Adrian bites his lip, grins ear-to-ear, and he looks over at Rachel, whose eyes are demanding a response. "I most certainly and absolutely do."

Harker seems to breathe a silent sigh of relief as he turns to Rachel. "Rachel Huntsmen, do you now leave your father and mother to establish your own home with Adrian Ryan as his wife, to receive him as your husband, to make a home where he will be loved and cared for as long as God grants him life?"

She looks over at Adrian, smiles back at him. "I do."

He mouths to her, *You're so beautiful!*
 She bites her bottom lip, holding back the wanton grin.

ΣΩΣ

When he awoke, he found that one of the beds was empty. At first he didn't know what had happened, didn't know where he was, didn't know *who* he was. All he knew was that he was not alone. His face graced the back of a girl's bare neck, and he felt her hair falling around him. He slowly pulled his head away and saw that they were in the same bed, sharing the same covers, and wearing absolutely nothing. His neck hurt a little bit as he turned and looked at the chair, where two robes had been thrown. He slowly looked back at the dark brown hair, the lavender skin, the soft scent coming off of her. She groaned and turned, rolling over, and when he saw her breasts, he closed his eyes, the memories rushing at him like an out-of-control train threatening to run off a cliff.

For a moment he had forgotten it. Upon awakening, he had been innocent. Now the innocence was shattered.

He remembered her gasping. He remembered her groaning.

Oh God oh God oh God

He remembered their bodies together, he remembered kissing her skin.

Oh God oh God oh God

He remembered her wild and crazed eyes.

Oh God oh God oh God

He remembered her biting his lip, biting his ear, he remembered her saying his name over and over as he moved back and forth on top of her.

Oh God oh God oh God

He remembered the feeling of her legs around him, her breasts jiggling. He remembered the feeling of... God, that feeling!

Oh God oh God oh God

He remembered the feeling—oh! that feeling that transcended every feeling he'd ever felt, a feeling that bordered on being high, a feeling that invigorated every nerve in his body. He remembered that feeling and longed for it. He remembered feeling connected, remembered feeling as one. He remembered feeling more spiritual than he'd ever felt before. He remembered *being inside her*.

Oh God oh God oh God

He remembered not doing it once. Not twice. Not even three times.

Oh God oh God oh God

He heard the voice: *You're a horrible person*.

She began to awake, pulling herself up, the strands of her hair falling before her eyes. He quickly leapt out of the bed and grabbed one of the robes, sliding it in front of him. The sounds of his movement drew her attention; when she saw him she quickly pulled the covers up all around her. She bit her lip and looked at him. He just stared at her. No blame could be thrown anywhere. They were in this together.

She spoke, her voice hoarse. She had been shouting a lot last night. "What do we do now?"

His face burned. "I guess... I guess we go home."

She was really quiet. "Okay."

"I'll get dressed and get my stuff." He dressed in the bathroom. When he went pee it burned. His entire penis seemed to throb with pain. She felt the pain, too. A feeling of great disappointment,

great loss, a feeling of great guilt and shame and condemnation and judgment crushed him, weighing upon his shoulders. It was all he knew.

When they checked out, the receptionist smiled. "I had customer complaints last night."

He winced. "Here. Take the key. Okay?"

She smiled. "Have a wonderful trip back to civilization."

The trip wasn't wonderful: it was dead silent. A wall seemed to fall between them. Adrian tried to spark conversation but was unable. What hurt worse was that Kristen refused to look him in the eyes. A few times she started to cry. His heart burned for her. As they drove, he reached over to comfort her, but she recoiled, writhed away. His heart burst, and he retracted his hand. "Sorry," he said.

She said something through a clenched throat.

It sounded like, "It's not you," but he couldn't be sure.



"The ceremony of marriage," Harker says, "in which you come to be united, is the first and oldest ceremony in all the world, celebrated in the beginning in the presence of God Himself. Marriage is a gift of God, given to comfort the sorrows of life and to magnify its joys. Marriage is the clasping of hands, the blending of hearts, the union of two lives as one. Your marriage must stand, not by the authority of the State nor by the seal on your wedding certificate, but by the strength of your love and by the power of your faith in each other and in God. You can have this kind of home if you continue to recognize God as the source of romance and love and affection, for these are His gifts. With God, you will have everything; without Him, you will have nothing. Now, will you please join hands and, to each other, express your vows of love and devotion."



The entire drive back to campus from their Fall Break trip had been in silence. She had looked out the window. He had based this upon her own guilt at what they had done, and had tried to resurrect some genuine conversation. His heart wept just to feel her eyes, just to hear her voice turned in his direction, aimed beautifully at his heart. When he had looked upon her on their drive home, he had sensed something different about her, something foreign and mysterious.

"I think," he had said slowly as they navigated the spread carpets of cornfields through Illinois, "we need to talk about this." He had looked over at her and saw only the back of her head, for she was staring out the window. The sun was bright, and he could not see her reflection in the window. She did not respond. "Kristen," he said. He reached out and touched her shoulder.

She wrenched away, gently but sternly. His heart skipped a beat at the movement. She craned her neck and looked at him, and he saw something in those eyes that he'd never seen before. He could not place it, but it looked as if a part of her had died, and something dark and foreboding reigned within.

He could not keep his eyes on the road. He reached out to stroke her hair in an effort to get the Kristen he knew so well to return.

Before he could touch her, she said in a defeated and miserable voice, "Don't touch me."

His hand hovered before her hair, then slowly withdrew. He swallowed hard. "Kristen... Please... Don't think that... I messed up... *We* messed up... I still..." He couldn't say it, couldn't get it to come off his lips. He feared it was a lie: *I still love you*. Did he love her? Did he really love her? A

painful thought sprinkled his mind: *What if she really loved me, and now I took that love she had given me and abused it? What if she gave me herself—her hopes, her dreams, her aspirations—and I took them and pissed all over them?* God, he hoped that was not what had happened! “Kristen... God, I don’t know... I’m sorry, Kristen. Please. You know... I’m not like... Not like that.”

A tear appeared in the corner of one of her eyes. “Please...” She struggled for words. “Please don’t touch me... I just... Please. Okay?”

At that moment, his world had crashed down even more. “Okay,” he surrendered. “Okay. I won’t.”

Nothing had changed. For a week afterwards, he didn’t see her. She skipped the classes they shared together, and she never appeared for lunch or dinner at the cafeteria or coffee-shop. He would often go on walks about the campus, meditating and contemplating and crying out in shame and resolute surrender.

One of her friends approached him and said, “Do you know what’s wrong with Kristen? She won’t come out of her room.”

He feared he knew. *I betrayed her.* “No. No, I haven’t seen her.”

“She’s been different ever since Fall Break. We’re trying to talk to her.”

“She won’t talk?”

She shook her head. “No, she won’t talk.”

He tried to call her several times, but she never picked up. She was never online, either. He would lie in bed at night and wonder, “What have I done? What have I lost?” Then he would feel even worse, because his questions revolved around himself. She was broken and beaten and bloodied because of his selfish actions, and the only sorrow he felt revolved around himself. He was asking, “What have I lost?” when he should have been asking, “What have I done to her, a beautiful creature of God’s creation, a beautiful child of God?” In those moments of frailty, he felt more alone than he had ever been.



Adrian turns towards Rachel, the candlelight illuminating her soft cheeks and vibrant eyes. She moves towards him, and their hands come together, fingers wrapping around one another’s. Both of their hands shake in nervous anticipation. Her face glows like that of Moses off Mount Sinai. Harker says to Rachel, “Rachel Huntsmen, will you repeat this vow to Adrian Ryan, saying after me...”

He speaks slowly, and she repeats, savoring each word: “I, Rachel Huntsmen, will take you, Adrian Ryan, to be my husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward: for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish until we are separated by death; as God is my witness, I give you my promise.”

Adrian listens to her voice, tender and resolute, and he recalls their conversation the night before:

He looked at her profile in the starlight. “God, you’re so beautiful.”

She didn’t hide her grin. “You know what, though? I’m so lucky.”

“No, you’re not,” he said. “You don’t deserve someone like me.”

She playfully slapped him. “And what is that supposed to mean, Mister Ryan?”

“It means,” he said, “that you deserve someone so much better.”

She shrugged her shoulder. “Maybe. But perhaps, like God, I am content to call a lower creature my own, and I would have it no other way.”

He still cannot believe someone such as her would ever—with any real passion—repeat such a vow, promising to hold him for all eternity, to have him in every circumstance; *Of course, she doesn't know the REAL you. She doesn't know about that party with the drunk girl. She doesn't know about you and Kristen. She doesn't know about any of that.*

Harker turns to Adrian. “Adrian Ryan, will you please give your vow?”

Rachel eyes him, expecting him to repeat after the minister.

He smiles at her, feeling the beauty of her confusion. He speaks from memory, guided by the rhythms of his heart. “Rachel... From the day of my conception, I have dreamed of this day. Growing up, my daydreams were filled with what this day would be like, who I would be like, what she—you—would look like. There were times when I doubted it would ever come. There were moments when I wanted to give up. The moment I felt like there was no hope... At that very moment, you walked into my life, and you showed me that God is real, that God is active, and that God really *is* a good God. I can never doubt the goodness of God, for He has given me you. Even in all that has happened, even in this world that has become our home, God has shined His face upon me. In all my daydreams, in my imaginings of the future, I never came close. When God brought you into my life, He showed me that His plans—His beautiful plans—far outweighed anything that I could have dreamed. I want you to know—and I want everyone here to know—and I want God to know this as well—that I am devoted and dedicated, with both passion and commitment, to hold you close, to comfort you when you weep, to laugh with you when you laugh, to share in all life's moments with you—the good and the bad. I want you to know that you are always mine, you cannot be replaced, and you cannot be outdone. With God as my witness, I commit myself to being a good husband and keeping you until the day death may separate us for but a time.”

Tears well up in her eyes.

Her throat quivers in emotion.

Emotion floods the room: it is as if, for a moment, the world has rediscovered the beauty can exist, that flowers can poke forth through the ashes, that even in a fallen world bathed in darkness and shadows, romance and love can become a reality between two souls.

ΣΩΣ

The next weekend, Adrian was absent-mindedly walking the campus, lost deep in his agony, wandering alone. A voice came out from behind him. He turned. His friend Brian stood in the shadow of the towering library building. “Hey, Man,” he said. “What are you doing out here?”

Adrian's guard went up. *Don't give your heart out to anybody, or they'll take it and stomp on it just like you did to Kristen.* “Nothing,” he lied. “Just walking.”

“In that case,” Brian said, “can I walk with you?”

“Sure,” Adrian said, defeated.

They walked around the campus in silence. There was no small talk. Adrian knew it was coming but did not resist. Part of him looked forward to it. Brian finally said, “What's wrong, Man? Don't lie to me. You've totally been not yourself since that trip you took with Kristen. Talk to me. I love you, Man, like a brother. Talk to me.”

Every wall and barrier that Adrian had erected came tumbling down. They were walking by the campus gazebo, and he crawled inside and fell onto one of the benches. Tears welled up within his eyes. Brian seemed stunned and sat beside him. Adrian stared at the city lights. Lightning flashed in

the distance. His vision became blurred with the tears, and he wiped them away. "I hurt her," he said. "I hurt her really bad."

"You hurt her?" Brian asked.

"She gave me her heart." He rubbed the tears from his eyes. He bit his lip and shook his head. "She... She gave me her heart." He looked into his eyes. "She gave me her heart, and I took it... I took it, and I cut it open... She trusted me, but I took that trust and slit it apart... She thought she could trust me... She thought that I loved her... I thought I loved her!... She thought that I loved her, and so she gave me her heart... I took her heart... I... God."

Brian had no idea what to say, so he kept the confession going. "How'd you... hurt her? I mean... I mean, how did you cut her heart open?"

"I slept with her," he confessed. "Four times. I slept with her... Four times."

"Oh," was all he could say.

"She was a gift to me," Adrian said. "She was a gift to me, and I completely destroyed that gift. I feel like... The gift has been taken from me. I had my way with it, I trashed it, so now it's been taken from me."

Brian said nothing.

"I thought I loved her... But I showed that I don't."

"You're torn about it? Torn up about... abusing her?"

"I hate myself in every way possible," he said. "I just want to curl up into a fetal position and die. I keep seeing her... I keep seeing her in her room, hunched over, crying, wondering why God would let me do this to her. God, how *could* He let me do this to her? I just don't want her to be hurt."

"Really?" Brian mused. "It sounds to me like you love her. I mean, really *love* her."

"No. No." Adrian refused to give room for that idea. "I proved that wrong last week."

"Perhaps you just acted in passion. I mean, look at you: it's shredded you. If doing this had been part of your plan all along--"

"It wasn't," Adrian vehemently interjected.

"People make mistakes. *I've* made the mistake of having sex before marriage. I regret it, yes, but I claim forgiveness. It still bothers me, yes, but I know God doesn't hold it against me. We all make mistakes. Are you so arrogant to think that you're somehow exempt from this? Exempt from the pitfalls of humanity?"

"No..."

Brian changed his tone of voice and spoke with authority and conviction. "Dude, you know I love you. You're like a brother to me. But wipe your tears and grow a spine. Grow a pair of broad shoulders. You messed up, yes. But *move on*."

That advice sounded ridiculous. "I haven't seen her... If I could just talk to her..."

"She's been in her room?"

"Yeah, the entire time."

"All week?"

"All week," he said with a nod.

"You haven't talked to her?"

"I haven't seen her! She won't get online, she won't answer her phone... I don't know what to do. It terrifies me. I know I hurt her, Man. I think... I think I ruined everything. It's not anyone's fault but mine. But... On the ride home, Brian... On the ride home, you should've seen her. She was different. She didn't want me to touch her." He peered into Brian's eyes, speaking vividly and with determination. "I hurt her so much. She gave her heart out to someone, and he took a knife to it and ripped it open. I deserve every ounce of Hell."

Suddenly footsteps approached the bench at the gazebo. Both Brian and Adrian turned their heads to see an image approaching from under the trees. "Brian? Adrian?" A girl emerged, one of Kristen's friends. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Kristen's disappeared and she left this." She handed Adrian a note. He unfolded it and quickly read it.

Brian watched as Adrian's face drained of color; the note fell from his hands.



Harker, visibly moved by Adrian's vows, speaks now with sincere passion. "The Word of God tells us what love is and what love does:

'Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'

"The Apostle Paul writes at the end of the chapter, 'So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' Having this kind of love in your hearts, you have chosen to exchange rings as the sign and seal of the vows you are making today." He looks out towards the gathered crowd. "May I have the rings?"



Brian tried to make sense of what had happened but was unable to do so. In a moment Adrian's façade, his very demeanor, changed: his sorrow and regret had turned into panic and harrowing fear. His own eyes became akin to those of a deer in headlights; his muscles froze as if put on ice, and his breath stopped as if he had died with his eyes open. The color drained from his hands and face; his fingers quivered in a state of shock. Jasmine, Kristen's friend who had delivered the letter, had not read the letter for herself; she was unable to say anything in her shock of the moment. Adrian stared forward; Brian leaned over, picking up the note; as he began to unfold it, Adrian leapt to his feet and took off, nearly running Brian over. Brian turned his head to see Adrian running towards the men's parking lot.

Brian demanded of her, "Did you read the note?!"

"No!" she exclaimed. "No, it was addressed to *him*."

"Why didn't you read it?!"

"It wasn't written to me!" she hollered. "I don't read other peoples' business!" Then, "What's it say?" Her chest shook with each resounding heartbeat.

He unfolded it quickly and read it in the light from the lamp at the gazebo. Before she could say anything, he was up and running, calling after her: "Come on! Come on!"

She cursed under her breath and followed.

They ran down the slope of the campus to the men's parking lot. The darkness was suddenly shattered by blinding twin shafts of light. Brian covered his eyes; Monica ducked out of the way. Adrian's Jeep screeched to a halt in front of Brian. Brian ran around to the passenger side and hammered on the window. "Let me in! Let me in!" Adrian reached over and unlocked the door. As Brian got in, Monica reached the other side of the door and begged to be let in. Brian unlocked her door; before she even shut the door, Adrian was halfway up the hill, engine shrieking.

"What's going on?!" Monica hollered.

Brian spoke to Adrian: "Do you know where she is?"

"The overpass," Adrian answered, almost out-of-breath.

Monica whined, "What's going on?!"

Brian leaned forward in the seat. "Shit."

Adrian didn't stop at the stop sign at the school's entrance; he swerved into the street. A car laid on its horn and swerved onto the sidewalk. Monica screamed, thrown around in the backseat. Adrian pressed the gas as hard as he could, taking the wild turns of Old Towne faster than anyone ever had. More than once they almost fishtailed into the buildings along the opposite lane; several cars dove out of their way. The left side of Adrian's Jeep was bruised by a truck, the mirror shorn off. Monica was lying down on the floorboards; she picked herself up and screamed, "Red light! Red light!" She shrieked as they drove right past it, the horn of a business van rattling the windows. She cowered in the back, tears sliding down her cheeks. "Oh God, save us, oh God, save us, oh God save us, save us..."

Adrian yelled to Brian, "Do you see her? Do you see her?"

"No," Brian said. "No... Wait... There! There!"

Adrian slammed the brakes. Monica was thrown into the back of the seat. The car fishtailed, circling upon the road; it smashed into the railing. Concrete crumbled from the impact and fell one hundred feet down to the rushing river. Adrian and Brian threw open their doors upon the overpass and ran out, yelling. Monica felt blood on her forehead and dizziness; she collapsed in the backseat, energy exhausted.



Mark comes forward with the rings, his official induction into the community. A strange look is upon his face, a mask of pain and joy. Adrian ignores him as he takes Rachel's ring, and Rachel takes Adrian's ring from the soft pillow on which they had sat. Mark returns to the pew and sits. Harker continues. "Though small in size, these rings are very large in significance. Made of precious metal, they remind us that love is not cheap nor common; indeed, love may cost us dearly." His words drench the sanctuary, and for a moment he falters; a pang of heartache flutters through Adrian, and he knows that Harker is thinking of his own daughter. But the man composes himself and continues. "These rings, made in a circle, speak to us in their design: love must never come to an end. Love must be continuous. As you wear these rings, whether together or apart for a moment, may they be constant reminders of these glad promises you are making today."

He turns to Adrian, says, "Adrian Ryan, will you take your ring and place it upon the third finger of Rachel Huntsmen's left hand, and repeat after me this promise, saying:" Adrian slides the ring onto Rachel's dainty finger, and he repeats Harker's words: "With this ring, I seal my promise, to be your faithful and loving husband, as God is my witness."

Harker faces Rachel. "Rachel Huntsmen, will you take your ring and place it upon the third finger of Adrian Ryan's left hand, and repeat after me this promise, saying:" She wiggles the golden ring onto his finger—upon feeling the ring, lightning courses through Adrian's soul—, and she repeats the words Harker speaks: "With this ring, I seal my promise, to be your faithful and loving wife, as God is my witness."



She stood upon the concrete ledge of the overpass, tiptoes poking over the side. The wind whisked her chocolate hair about, and her eyes stared down into the churning, icy water below, the waves

frothing at the tips. Her hands seemed to shake as she stood there, her mind overflowing with a million broken thoughts. Brian and Adrian ran up behind her and begged her to come down; Adrian tried to move forward, but she told him that if he touched her, she would jump. He felt tears welling up in his eyes and his knees became like rubber; he fell against a lamppost, pleading with her to come down. Brian pleaded likewise, but it was Adrian's words that came with the most unhindered passion.

"I'm sorry!" he wailed. "Oh God, I'm sorry! It was wrong! God! It was so wrong! I was stupid, I was selfish, I was mean, I took your heart and I gouged it! Kristen..." The tears blended with his choked pleas. "Kristen... Come down... Come down... I'm sorry..."

She looked back at him, shaking her head. Her eyes were bloodshot and her face seemed withered of all life. "You don't understand..." she said, her voice cracking with bottled emotion. "You don't understand..."

Adrian didn't hear her. "I won't ever touch you! I promise! I won't ever speak with you, won't even *look* at you! Please come down. Please don't do this. I'll do anything you want, I'll do—"

Brian was speaking coolly, defying his panic: "Kristen, let's think about this... Let's reason together..."

Adrian slid to his knees, body wrapping around the lamppost. "Kristen... Kristen..." All the memories of their beautiful moments together, all the laughter and joy and the feeling of completion he had felt, all of this swarmed into his heart, and it buckled him down onto the ground. He reached up at her, feeling more weak than he ever had, more hopeless and unworthy and more *wicked* than he had ever felt before. "Kristen... Don't do this... You don't deserve this—"

"I *do* deserve it," she growled. "You don't understand..."

"Kristen," Brian breathed. "Come down. No one is going to judge you or ridicule you or—"

Adrian cried out, "I know I don't understand, Kristen, I know I don't understand how I could've hurt you like..."

Kristen spoke: "I *made* you sleep with me, Adrian! Don't you remember it? I *made* you do it!"

Adrian gawked at her through his tears. "What?" he wept.

She bit her lip, fighting back the tears. "You were asleep... And I crawled over... And I got on top of you and started kissing you... I *made* you do it... I said that if you loved me, you'd have sex with me. You said no, but I made you do it. I made you do it because I threatened to break up with you. I abused the love you gave me. I took it and twisted it and manipulated you to get what I wanted."

Brian stared at her, unbelieving.

Adrian groaned. "No... No, you're lying..."

"You've invented a lie to protect me!" Kristen hollered. "You've invented a lie so that you don't have to know who I really am, what I'm really like. I'm not some princess, Adrian. I'm a horrible creature, a slut of a creature. God! I always wanted real love, Adrian, and God blessed me by giving me a chance—just one chance!—at love, and I murdered that gift."

Adrian could not believe. He didn't want to believe. But with her words came the realization, came the flood of memories. Yes, she had crawled into his bed. Yes, she had started seducing him. Yes, she had manipulated him. He didn't feel a rush of anger at all, but a deeper sorrow. When he looked upon her, his love for her seemed to swell and expand to greater depths, greater heights.

"I'm going to jump," Kristen said. "You're too good... Too good for a girl like me."

Adrian wiped his eyes, panic returning. "Kristen..."

Brian gently stepped forward. "Don't do this, Kristen. Come down. It's okay."

"You deserve such a better girl than me," Kristen said. "Not a... not a manipulative sex-addict."

Adrian shook his head. "No... Please don't do this... Please... It's okay... Please don't-"

"God has a wonderful girl for you," she said, lifting a foot. "A wonderful girl."

Brian reached forward. "Kristen! Don't do this!"

Her foot dangled over the precipice.

To Adrian: "I'm so sorry for hurting you. I'm so sorry."

"I don't want another girl!" he hollered. "I don't want another girl! I don't want another girl!"

She turned her head, stared forward, and in a moment, stepped off.



Two burning candles are set up behind Harker; between the two candles is a taller unlit candle. He approaches them, turns to those gathered, says, "The two outside candles have been lit to represent your lives at this moment. They are two distinct lights, each capable of going its separate way. To bring joy and radiance into your home, there must be the merging of these two flames into one." A sound comes from behind them; Adrian looks over his shoulder to see a figure heading out through the parlor doors, disappearing. The man who had rescued them. Adrian turns his attention back to Harker, who is saying, "From this time onward, may your thoughts be for each other rather than for your individual selves; may your plans be mutual, your joys and sorrows shared. As you each take a candle and together light the center one..."

At those words, Adrian and Rachel move forward, each taking one of the unlit candles.

Harker's voice resonates in the sanctuary: "...you will extinguish your own candles, thus having the center candle represent the union of your two lives into one flesh. As the center light cannot be divided, let not your lives be divided."

Adrian and Rachel take their candles and, in rhythm, touch the flames to the wick of the center candle. It gently lights, flaming bright, and—with soft breaths—they gently extinguish their own candles. They set them upon the table, and their eyes fall upon the center candle.

Harker closes the book and prays: "Our Father, we come today asking Your blessing upon these two lives and this home being established. You have made us so that we are incomplete without the other, so that we yearn for someone whom we can love and whose love we can receive. We are thankful for the love we see here, and even more, for the love we feel from You." Those words catch in his throat, but no one minds. "May we never take... Your love... for granted... We pray that Your love will be the shield and stay for Adrian Ryan and Rachel Huntsmen. When joy comes, may they share it together. When sorrow threatens, may they bare it together. In gladness or in tears, in sunshine or shadow, may they ever draw closer to each other and nearer to You. Grant them patience, gentleness, forbearance, and understanding. Oh Father, protect their home from those forces that would break it apart." These words carry new meaning. "We ask for health, for long life, for the fulfillment of every good dream. May their love continue through life and finally blend into the life eternal. Through Christ we pray, Amen."



He sat sobbing along the shoreline, sitting in the wet sand, feeling the breeze off the river. The bulrushes crackled in the wind, and the coldness cut through him, but not as deep as the pain that riddled his heart. He was bathed in the light of police cruisers, and several patrol boats scouted the river, divers sliding into the water and searchlights scanning the shoreline. A throng of onlookers had gathered on the bridge, even in the twilight. He heard footsteps coming from behind him, and Brian

knelt down in the sand. He asked how Adrian was doing, but Adrian didn't respond: he kept seeing Kristen, leaping off of the bridge; he had ran to the rail in a white shock, his blood drained from his face, bloodshot eyes, swollen with tears, bulging from his sockets. He had watched, icy fingers wrapped around the railing, as her body hit the water with incredible force... And he had called out her name, but she had not responded, and soon her body had sunk beneath the waves. A whistle blew out, and Adrian looked up. Figures had emerged beside one of the boats, divers, and they were struggling with something heavy in their hands. Adrian leapt to his feet, began running towards the water; Brian grabbed him and spun him around. His friend had clutched him tightly, whispered, "You don't need to see this, Adrian. You don't need to see this." His words shattered the callousness of Adrian's heart, and the tear-strewn boy crumpled like a wet sack into Brian's arms, weeping loudly, his cries carrying to the crowds of people standing upon the bridge.



The bride and groom face those who are gathered, and Harker speaks to them. "You have come before us and before God and have expressed your desire to be husband and wife. You have shown your love and affection by joining hands, have made promises of faith and devotion, each to the other, and have sealed these promises by the giving and receiving of rings." The words he speaks now chill Adrian's bones: "I therefore pronounce that you are husband and wife. May God bless you and keep you and you His peace. Amen." He takes their joined hands into his own and says, "What God has joined together, let man not separate." He speaks to Adrian, voice riddled with excitement: "You may kiss your bride."



He stood alone in the placid coolness, staring at the white sheet lying over her body. The mortician stood close by, having given in to Adrian's demands to see the girl. The mortician's only rule was that Adrian could not lift the sheet: the plummet's impact in the water had broken and shattered her bones, and she had been a mangled mess when they dragged her from the water. Adrian stood beside the sheet, lost in a sea of thoughts, remembered her smile, the way she laughed, her teasing. He remembered how everything had been so perfect, and he wondered if there was such a thing as Fate, and if so, pondered how it could be so cruel. He unraveled a sheet in his shaking hands. A poem he had written for her a few days before they left for Amish country. He had written it for her birthday, which, at the time of her death, was just a few weeks away. He had planned to have it engraved into a plaque, and now his scribbled words blurred with the tears forming behind his eyes, and he read it quietly, as if she could comprehend.

Ever since I met you, life has not been the same;
 I know no longer the sorrows, tears, and shame.
 You have redeemed me from my darkest fears,
 Set me free from the chains that held me from love.
 But here I stand in your arms, feeling the warmth of your quaint
 Embrace, wondering how in the world I ever missed you
 In all those dark hours of searching for love.
 All this time you were right in front of me,
 And somehow I was blinded from the beauty you offered.

Anthony Barnhart

What gift in the world is as precious as your affection,
 Your devotion, your splendor, your love?
 I trekked every ravine and climbed every canyon
 To find someone like you, and the moment I had given up
 On finding someone as wonderful as you,
 I learned that sometimes our dreams *do* come true.

He folded the paper and slid it into his pocket. He stared at the sheet, holding back tears. He wished that he could see her breathing, a flutter of life. But she lied completely still, nothing left but an empty shell of what had once been the most beautiful and loving girl he had ever known.

ΣΩΣ

Adrian's hands rise to her shoulders, feeling the soft satin of her wedding dress. He pulls her close. They stare into one another's eyes, lost in the rolling thunder outside, the rain beginning to pat against the walls and roof of the church. He leans close, and their lips touch—for just a brief moment, a simple kiss—but it is better than any kiss either of them had ever shared. As their lips touch, they connect, and they become one: he can feel his own soul enveloping hers, hers enveloping his, and he can feel all of her hopes and dreams, all of her fears and anxieties, all her afflictions and terrors, all of her joys and laughter, all of her swarming into him and becoming one with him. When he pulls away, he sees her face before him, but he feels *different*, a difference that feels altogether like *completion* in its purest, most supreme and primal form.

ΣΩΣ

A calm and steady rain had fallen all day, a mist rising from the ground and wrapping among the boughs of the trees. Umbrellas were sprouted, and the minister's solemn voice carried with the sound of the monotonous drizzle. The crowd was massive, students from the school gathering with the friends and family of the girl. A knot formed in his throat, and the umbrella in his hands quivered as the crews began to lower the casket into the muddy earth. He watched for the last time as her body vanished, and they began shoveling dirt into the rest of the hole. The crowd had quietly dispersed, but Adrian stood alone, hearing the rain tapping on the umbrella, the wetness crawling through his shoes and inching up his legs. He stared at the pile of dirt, rivulets of muddy water coursing down the sides, and for the first time, he did not cry.

ΣΩΣ

Harker speaks, quoting Numbers 6.24-26: "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace." Harker guides Adrian and Rachel to turn and face those gathered. "Dear friends," he says, a tear tracing down his cheek, "may I present to you Mister and Misses Adrian Ryan."

Rachel bursts into tears of utmost joy, swinging around and leaping into Adrian's arms.

He lifts her off her feet, her sweet scent overwhelming him.

Those in the pews stand and begin to clap. One of them is crying.

The moment is surreal. An echo of a forgotten world.

For a moment, everything is as it is, as it should be, as it will never be again.

Chapter Sixteen

The Wedding Night

(or “Rachel’s Story”)

“Come live with me and be my love, and we will some new pleasures
prove, of golden sands, and crystal beaches, with silken lines and
silver hooks...”
- anonymous

Evening is beginning to set. A large storage closet has been turned into a bedroom, with a mattress and several containers that serve as a dresser. An oil-lamp sits upon the sill of the boarded-up window, casting its warm glow over their anxious faces. They stand there in the closed room, looking at one another, hearts racing. Adrian bites his lip, and Rachel’s face blushes in unhidden anticipation.

“What now?” Adrian asks, his nervousness flaming like a Roman torch.

“I don’t know,” Rachel teases, wedding veil falling before her eyes. “You tell me.”

The boy moves forward, and he takes her hand, pulls her towards him.

And it begins: their tongues entwine, their bodies fold against one another, and the howling of the dark-walkers is lost outside the covered window.



The firelight from the campfire inched its way across the freshly-manicured grass, reaching its way into the dark recesses of the woods. The sounds of laughter and singing and the strumming of a guitar danced through the night. She parked her car in the parking lot, ascended the stone steps with peach trees lining either side, and made her way through the covered pavilion, the stone floor littered with cigarette butts and empty bottles of beer. She smiled and nodded at some of those gathered, most underage, some older, around 26 or 27. She grabbed a bottle of Woodchuck Beer from a cooler and twisted off the cap. She leaned against the stone hearth at the far side of the pavilion and drank a few sips. A shadow emerged beside her. She turned her head and smiled. The boy joined her with his own beer, and they sat on the stone hearth’s ledge and drank and smoked cigarettes. Eventually he tugged on her arm, whispered sweet-nothings into her ear. A moment later they were making their way towards a lone cluster of oaks and pines between the pavilion and the dense woods. They sat down and put their beer bottles in the grass. She faced him, and they started making out. She didn’t like the taste of beer in his mouth, the way it swooped its way into her own by way of his tongue; but then again, she had been drinking, too, so she didn’t complain.

She felt his fingers dancing around the hem of her skirt, probing, searching.

She shrugged her shoulders, took one hand, pushed his away.

The boy seemed distraught, but he hid it and continued to kiss.

He tried again, and she responded in the same way.

He pulled away, shook his head. “Rachel, Darling, what’s wrong?”

“I’m not ready for that,” she told him.

“Not ready?”

"I'm a virgin."

"It's not like we're having sex. I just want... to feel you. You know?"

"I'm not ready, Jason."

"Okay," he said.

They continued kissing. Some time passed. The sounds of the pavilion were distant, and they bathed in the songs of the crickets. It was peaceful, and she just wanted to lay in his arms. She told him this. He changed position, leaned his back up against the tree, and she scurried up into him, laying her back down against his legs. She could feel his breathing against the back of her head, which laid upon his chest. She closed her eyes, everything felt perfect... And then she felt his fingers again, tiptoeing along her exposed tummy towards the hem of her skirt.

She swiped his hand away. "Jason. Stop."

He cursed under his breath. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

Rage flowed through her. She writhed away from him and stood, brushing grass off her bare legs. "I'm tired. I want to go home."

His eyes swam with anger. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Yes," she replied. "Now. Take me home."

"Fuck that," he said, getting to his feet. He swooned against the tree, dizzy. Drunk. He kicked his beer over into the grass, and its pale contents chugged into the dirt. He glared at her. "You want to go home? Then go home. But I'm not the one who's going to be driving you. Go find another ride." Under his breath, "Fucking bitches. Always the same."

ΣΩΣ

She has let him undo her top, and now she sits upon the bed, and he sits beside her, massaging her swollen breasts, the nipples hard as hewn ice, and the rings around them tinged like burning chocolate. His bare shoulder rubs against hers, and he pulls her around, and they continue kissing. He presses her down atop the bed, and she swings her legs underneath him. The frills of her dress rub against his trousers, and their stomachs and chests touch. He runs his hand through her hair, and she grips the edge of his shoulder-blade, feeling the blood coursing underneath his skin. They kiss and gently pull at one another, fingers and palms drawing red marks across one another's skin. She arcs her head back against the mangled sheets, her vagina becoming hot and wet, squirming. She begins unlacing his pants, and he pulls at her dress. A moment later they are naked, lying atop of one another, their hearts beating in romantic rhythm.

Adrian grins sheepishly. "What now?"

"I don't know," she replies, biting her lip. "You tell me."

ΣΩΣ

Her phone had rang the next morning. He had apologized, explaining that he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing. The conversation hadn't lasted long: she had to run in to work. While at OLD NAVY, working at one of the cash registers, the flow of customers had been slow, as it always was on Monday mornings. She had told one of her friends about Jason, what he had tried to pull in the park the night before, and the phone conversation that morning.

Her friend, a wonderful girl named Lyndsey, put her hands on her hips and chastised her: "You don't need a bastard for a boyfriend, Rachel. You don't need to settle for shit like that. I can already imagine Jason's reputation. Tell me if I'm wrong: he's a jock, he's popular, he's the Dream Guy; he's

been with several girls, ranging all across the board of the High School social scene. He has a reputation for being sweet, charming, but forceful. He knows what he wants, and he does everything necessary to get it. Am I wrong?"

Rachel had shaken her head, *No*.

Lyndsey had then said, "Take my word for it: you don't need this guy. You want love just as much as everyone else. But *please* don't make the mistake of looking for it in all the wrong places. Look at me: I'm a pretty girl, and I'm dating a chubby kid who is home-schooled! People make fun of me. But you know what? *I'm happy*. Ha! Sometimes it makes me laugh, just thinking about it. The irony of it all. Society tells you that happiness comes from having a certain thing that is packaged a certain way and that has certain qualities. But society, ultimately, is wrong. Marketing has determined the dating scene; but don't let marketing determine your life."

Jason had called her on her lunch-break and invited her to a party. She quietly agreed to go; Lyndsey was in the bathroom, and she didn't want her to know what had happened. After work, she spent some time at home, doing chores and laundry for her mother, and then she jumped in her car and began the drive towards College Hill.

She kept hearing Lyndsey's words throughout the entire drive, but she pushed them from her mind—or attempted to. She found an angel with a halo on one shoulder and the devil with a pitchfork on the other. The angel begged her to turn around, to not give in to Jason, to not fall for his charm and wit and his rugged good looks. The devil told her that everything would work out, that she had misinterpreted him, that he really did care, that he was a good guy and would treat her right.

She reached the house after night had fallen. Stars twinkled in the sky. Storms were coming later in the week. She got out of her car and made her way into the house. People were everywhere, and a keg of beer sat half-drained in the kitchen. A joint was passed around, and the rooms were drenched in smoke from the cigarettes. She searched for Jason but couldn't find him. She asked a few people where he was, but she was ignored. Eventually a girl told her, "He went upstairs with my friend Jasmine." At the news, Rachel's face flushed a myriad of scalding colors. She trudged up the steps, each step heavier than the one before it. The angel and the devil returned. She blocked them out. She reached the upper landing and found the door. It was shut and locked.

She knocked a few times, heard Jason's voice: "This room's taken!"

She knocked again.

He shouted, "You'd better not come in here!"

She stepped back and threw her foot into the door. The lock splintered and it swung open. Meager light from a bedside lamp illuminated the two figures on the bed: Jason and another girl. His shirt was off, and he had her fingers inside her pants, and her breasts hung limp as she stared at Rachel in the doorway.

Jason's face went ashen-pale. "Rachel..."

She turned and left the doorway.

She had exited the house and was nearly to her car.

Jason came from behind, still shirtless. "Rachel..."

She swung around; he came forward, "Rachel, please..."

Her fist swung out, cracking against his chin.

He stumbled back, fell into the grass.

A few onlookers near a lone tree laughed.

He rubbed his chin. "You bitch," he growled. "You fucking *bitch*."

She moved forward, kicked him in the groin.

He buckled over.

She leaned over him as he curled into a fetal position, and she snarled:

"I'm *not* your bitch."

ΣΩΣ

She lies on the bed, and he is atop of her, and she closes her eyes and enjoys how he sucks her all over: her breasts, her neck, her stomach. He is moving downwards, and his head is between her legs, and he begins to suck on her clit. Her legs shudder and wrap tight around his head. She grips his arms as if in a vice as she moans, drawing in succulent and sharp breaths.

She raises her head: "You should let me get on top of you."

He looks up from between his legs, grins. "Okay."

Now he is lying on his back. She swings her leg over him, and she looks down at him. She can see his eyes exploring her body: her round tummy shuddering with each piercing breath, her swollen breasts hanging like church bells, the goose-bumps spreading in anticipation over her arms. She slowly begins lowering herself onto him, but she grits her teeth, feeling the pain. She can get it only halfway inside her, but it hurts, and she wants him to be able to really get inside her; she wants to feel his weight upon her. She mentions this, and they change positions. He mounts her, and he places his erect penis near her vagina.

"You should move your hips," he says. "Rub them against me."

She closes her eyes and obeys, feels butterflies spinning in her stomach.

"Are you ready?" he asks, hovering over her, his nipples gracing hers.

She takes a deep breath. "Yeah."

"It's going to hurt a little bit."

"I know."

He pauses. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Adrian," she moans. "Stop talking."

ΣΩΣ

She knew that Jason wasn't what she needed, even if he *was* what her desperate-for-love mind craved. She knew he was nothing but a jackass, and for the next few days, she was resolute. He didn't call her. She went to work, and she told Lyndsey all about what happened; while disappointed that Rachel had actually gone to the party in the first place, she was glad—despite the emotional pain it had caused her friend—that Jason's *true* colors had burned so brightly. On Wednesday night, Jason tried to call, but she ignored his calls. On Thursday, a sudden bout of storms had swept in, and rain had fallen nearly all day. Most of the rain had dissipated over Cincinnati and northern Kentucky, but the rain still fell in a cool and calming drizzle. Jason hadn't called that night, and she was thankful; but loneliness had consumed her: she had sat out on her back porch, lying in the hammock under the overhang, watching the lightning crisscross in the distance, the thunder shaking the house. The next evening, Friday, he had called again. This time she answered, loneliness getting the best of her.

"Hi, Baby. You want to come over to my place tonight? I've got the house all to myself."

"No thanks," she said grimly. "Why would I want to spend time with *you*?"

"What are you talking about, Baby?"

"You're an ass. Or were you too drunk to remember what happened at that party?"

"What party? The party on Monday? Oh. Don't worry about that."

"You were with another girl, Jason. And you expect me not to be concerned?"

"I'm sorry about ditching you at the party, Baby. I didn't know you were coming."

"And that gave you every right to cheat on me?"

"I thought you had broken up with me, Baby."

"Oh, really?"

"Come on over, Baby. Don't worry about that other girl. I could smell her dirty cunt from a mile away. You don't have a dirty cunt, Baby."

Rage blossomed within her at his words, tracing white-hot lines through her veins.

Her temples bulged, blood vessels flaring.

Her eyes became the haven of madness.

"You want me to come over, Jason?" she cooed.

"I want you and only you, Baby. You and *only* you."

"All right," she said, heart calming. "I'll come over."

ΣΩΣ

He feels so warm and hard as he slides into her. She can feel him deep inside her, and she tries to mask the pain that travels up her spine. She squirms and bites her bottom lip, closes her eyes. Adrian lies on top of her, inside her, caresses her cheek, kisses her forehead; it is warm with blood flowing underneath her skin.

He asks her, "Is everything okay?"

"It just hurts," she answers.

"It's your first time."

"I know. That's why it hurts."

"We can stop if you want..."

"No," she says, kissing his cheek. "No. I don't want to stop."

"It'll hurt worse."

"But then it'll start to feel better. It'll start to feel good."

"Okay," he says. "I'll go slow."

ΣΩΣ

She drives along country roads, the stars twinkling high above in the clear sky.

She listens to the radio.

♪It's the end of the world as we know it.

It's the end of the world as we know it.

It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.♪

She turns the radio off, drives in silence, her headlights washing over the trees along either side of the road. She passes several gravel driveways, and she barely notices a family of deer watching her with stoic bodies as she drives past. Her heart sprints in her chest, hammering against her ribs, threatening to break free from its cartilaginous prison. She slows the car down, and she pulls into a gravel drive. She extinguishes the headlights and drives slowly, the oaks and maples and pines closing in on either side. A fox scurries in front of the car, a mere shadow in the darkness. The gravel

drive twists to the right, and she sees the ranch-style house sitting quietly among a manicured lawn with potted plants and a wooden swing sitting still in the absent breeze. A single window is lit in the front of the house. She stops the car and rolls down the window, hears the cicadas and crickets playing their melodious sonnets in beautiful harmony. She takes several deep breaths and undoes her seatbelt. She leans to the side and opens the glove compartment. She withdraws something and holds it in her hands. It is heavy and cold. Fireflies hover around the car, and their illuminating bodies send spasms of faint light across the polished blade. She fondles the knife and closes her eyes, hears only the resounding *thump-thump* of her heart. She takes a deep breath, tries to swallow her nervousness.

I'm going to cut off that bastard's balls.

She opens the car door and steps out.

ΣΩΣ

The pain subsides after about seven or eight strokes, and they find themselves in a steady rhythm. She stops having to cringe with pain, and she begins to gasp for breath, her lungs diabolically shrieking with the pleasure. She grips his shoulder-blades as he moves atop of her, and he is surprised when she starts to shout, "Fuck me! Fuck me! Fuck me!" He puts a hand over her mouth, a cue to keep quiet, but she rips his hand away and begins screaming. Yelling makes it so much better, the enjoyment so much more intense. Her vagina wraps tighter around his penis as he thrusts into her, and in a moment she can feel him explode inside her; he falls atop of her, breathing hard, panting, sweat streaming down his face; he continues to thrust, jamming his cum deep into her, and she kisses his neck over and over. In a few moments, they are lying beside one another, looking deep into one another's eyes, bodies slowly recharging.

"I hope you weren't screaming in pain," Adrian murmurs with a whimsical grin.

"Oh, no," she says, shaking her head. "Oh, *God*, no."

He muses, "You probably woke up half the church."

"I don't care. They need to know that life can still hold meaning."

"Life still holds meaning?" he asks rhetorically. "You can't prove that."

"Of course I can," she says. "All I have to do is point to you."

ΣΩΣ

She walks up to the door, gripping the knife in her hand. She stands before the heavy oak door for what seems hours, her mind spinning, the world going fuzzy as tunnel vision wraps around her. She prepares to knock, but in the starlight sees a sign on the door inviting her in. She grips the door handle, twists, pushes it open. It creaks loudly, the sound spreading throughout the house. She steps inside, her shrieking heart nearly bursting from her chest. The house is quiet; all she hears is the grandfather clock in the far room, the crickets and cicadas in the yard, the blood pulsing in a marathon through her veins. She glances up the stairwell, doesn't hear anyone or anything upstairs. She moves through the hardwood parlor, her shoes rapping quietly on the polished timbers, and she enters the kitchen. Moonlight comes through one of the windows, sparkling over the magnets on the refrigerator and the kitchen knives stacked in their display case. She takes a deep breath, imagines he has yet again run off into the arms of another girl, that he has once again—

He appears right in front of her, stumbling from around the corner. The fright of his appearance sends her backwards, and she trips over her own feet, landing flat on the hardwood floor, the knife scattering from her grip, prancing over the flooring. He stands there in front of her, head cocked to his side, arms draped down, fingers twitching, convulsing. Through the moonlight from the window

she can see blood crawling from his eyes, trickling from his nose, dripping in drool from his mouth, even carving lines down his sideburns from his ears. She scurries away from him, crawling like a crab along the floor. Her hand falls upon the knife. She picks it up in her hand, holds it outwards, gets to her feet. Her face is drained of blood at the sight. He staggers towards her.

"Jason!" she shouts. "Jason!"

He doesn't hear her, keeps coming towards her.

"Stop!" She waves the knife in front of her, threatening him. "Jason! Stop!"

He obeys, halting in his tracks. He throws his head back, lets out a scream, a spray of blood emitting from his mouth, covering the side of the wall. His hands race up to his head, and he splays his fingers over his face, begins shaking his head back and forth, his screams shaking the house's foundation. She can only watch in horrified fascination as he swaggers into the living room, approaches the fireplace. She calls out his name again, looks over at the phone sitting on a small table along the parlor wall. *Call 9-1-1*. She races over to the phone and picks it up. No dial tone. She curses and slams it down, looks over into the living room just as the maniacal boy begins slamming his forehead into the brick mantle of the fireplace. Her white-knuckled fingers grip the knife at the spectacle: he continues screaming, smashing his head into the brick, staining it with red blood and bits of bone. He slams his forehead against the brick one last time, and then he collapses, body twisting and turning until it lands in a heap beside a reading chair.

The silence engulfs the house once more.

Her heart continues to beat in an electrified rhythm.

Her hands shake and quiver, refusing to release the knife.

She moves towards him, whispering his name.

The sight repels her:

The front of his forehead is crushed.

Blood seeps through the shattered bones.

His eyes are shrouded in twin oases of blood.

A pool of blood spreads underneath his head, soaking into the carpet.

She drops the knife and races from the house, stumbling into the front lawn. The cicadas and crickets greet her. She falls to her knees and screams, cries for help, her voice carrying throughout the countryside.

But there is no one to hear her cries,

no one to answer her calls...

No one but the insects that continue their steady songs in the cool of the night.

ΣΩΣ

She lies beside him, and he now sleeps. She leans upon her side, traces her fingers along his strong arms. She closes her eyes, can hear them outside: they are distant tonight, on the other side of the city. She pulls the covers up around her bare shoulders, lies back on the pillow. She breathes in rhythm with her husband, but she still can't get the sight of Jason from her mind. Even now, more than six months later, the memory is still vibrantly alive. She never loved Jason, but his death had still exacted a toll upon her. Now she is in love, now she is married... Her hand caresses her stomach. And now she may be pregnant. *Don't think like that*. She doesn't want to know what it would be like to lose Adrian. To see him become one of them. She tosses and turns all night long, and she focuses her attention on something quite different: on a future she hopes to experience. When this is all over, she

imagines she and Adrian living in a yellow cottage-style house with a veranda and potted plants, and they will drink iced tea and watch kids play on the playgrounds, hear the laughter of children once more, taste the innocence of a world that is now only a bitter memory.

Chapter Seventeen

Memories & Memoirs

(or “Sarah’s Story”)

“The best thing about loving and being hurt is that you get to know what true love really is... For as gold is tested in fire, and so will love be perfected in pain.”
- anonymous

I

Mark pushes open the foyer doors the next morning, wraps his coat against the cold, and finds the man tossing his knife into one of the naked trees outside the church walls. The sun reflects off the snow, and a cold wind grows colder. He approaches the man, who is now grabbing his knife from the tree—a six-inch KA-BAR he had retrieved from a pawn shop a few days ago—, and the boy stands quietly beside him.

“You got a new knife,” he says.

“Yeah,” the man replies. “It’s the one the Marines used.”

“I know. I’ve seen the movies. I almost bought one once, on a trip to lower Kentucky.”

The man retreats; Mark steps out of the way; he aims, throws. The blade flips, lodges in the bark. Mark nods in approval, and he detects the faintest smile across the man’s façade. Ever since the wedding, the man has been aloof, cold, calloused, the barriers erecting once more. The joy of finding others, being immersed in a community, has worn off. He must face the demons of the night once more.

The man moves forward, tears the knife from the bark. “You know why I practice, Mark?”
“I’m sure I’m about to find out.”

“We’re still in danger.” He tosses the knife in the air, catches it by the handle. He looks at the boy. “This church, these people see it as a haven. Thick walls. Only three entrances. Surrounded by towering barbed wire fencing. Sitting atop a hill. I see it differently. It’s a *prison*. What happens when they get into the church? They will. They’re evolving. They’re getting smarter. They’re fighting off the cold, forming hierarchies, surviving. The strongest are dominating, and they’re taking control of the packs. That’s what I call them. They don’t move alone. They travel in packs. And they’re clever. They’re getting *fucking* clever. One day they’re going to find a way into this church—and all the things that we think protect us will imprison us. We’ll have nowhere to go.” He steps back, hurls the knife at the tree. “It’s going to be a bloodbath.”

They are inside the church, in the basement. Only a few people are up and moving around. The man pours a cup of coffee, lights a cigarette.

“You’re not supposed to smoke in here,” Mark says, pouring himself a cup.

The man doesn’t seem to care. “See that girl over there? What’s her name? Nancy? The nurse? Look at her. She’s so complacent. She’s become numb to everything. This church has become her

home. This place breeds complacency. People are becoming content... Or, at least, that's the word I use to describe how they're giving up."

"I don't think forming a community and helping each other out during the crisis is giving up."

"You *would* think that," the man says. "You're always *so* optimistic."

One of the doors opens, and the newlyweds enter, Rachel clinging to Adrian's arm.

The man shakes his head. "You need an example? Look at them."

Mark eyes the man. "Are you kidding?"

"Their marriage is ignorance. How long do you think they'll last?"

"No one's here to sign divorce papers. I think they'll last."

"Not the *marriage*. Themselves. How long until they die?"

Mark's stomach turns sour. "You can't think like that."

"I can't think realistically? That's all I'm doing, Mark."

"You're just pissed because it's not you and Kira walking arm-in-arm."

The man glares at him. "Don't talk like that."

"I saw how you just got up and left during the middle of the wedding."

"I felt sick."

"Sick to your stomach with anger. You hate the fact that they can be happy when you can't."

"That's not it."

"You and Kira were supposed to get married. But she was taken from you. And you hate that two other people can experience what you and Kira had—love—and that they can experience something you and Kira were never able to experience: marriage."

The man doesn't say anything.

Mark speaks. "You need to move on. It's about time someone told you that."

"Oh, and you're the one to talk. You've been pining about Cara since the day I met you."

"I missed her. I still miss her. But she's gone. I've dealt with it—have you?"

The man extinguishes his cigarette against his jeans. "I'm not going to forget about Kira. I'm not going to treat the love we had as shit by forgetting about her."

"Letting go doesn't mean you have to stop loving her. It simply means you have to accept that there are some things that cannot be. And I'm sorry, but... Kira is gone. What you two had, what you two were *going* to have, the dreams you had with one another... None of it is ever going to be. You need to accept that."

The man doesn't say anything, just sips his coffee.

Mark shakes his head. "You complain about people being so complacent with their heads up their asses that they're going to get us killed. But you've got your head so far up your *own* ass in grief over Kira that you're no better than anyone else."

Harker wakes Mark the next morning: "Where's your friend going?"

Mark rubs sleep from his eyes. "What are you talking about? What time is it?"

"It's daybreak. Your friend... He's leaving."

Mark throws open the door to the basement's garage. He sees the man sliding onto one of the snowmobiles. The man glances over his shoulder, sees Mark. He turns back around, grabs his Russian rifle and slides it into a makeshift gun holster on his belt, alongside the army knife. He takes a deep breath, looks back over at Mark, who is still standing in the doorway. "You're going to try and stop me?"

"It depends on where you're going."

"You're like a babysitter."

"That's because you need one."

"Forget the fact that I'm thirty-six years old."

After a moment, "Where are you going?"

The man takes a deep breath. "I'm going back to the house."

"Why?"

"I just need to take care of some stuff."

"You're coming back?"

The man nods. "Yeah."

"Maybe I should go with you."

"I need to do this alone."

Mark bites his lip. "Can't you tell me *why*, at least?"

"To get some of my things."

"Like what?"

The man ignites the snowmobile's engine. "Raise the garage door for me, will you?"

Mark returns inside the church, shutting the door to the garage.

The snowmobile's engines grow faintly dim, then disappear.

Harker appears. "You let him go?"

"He doesn't need a babysitter."

II

Rachel's nervousness is undeniable. Sarah sits beside her in the sanctuary. Rachel shakes her head, says, "I don't know why we didn't use a condom... I didn't even think about it... We're married, so we don't need to... But all I know is that I've been sick for the last two mornings. Nausea. A headache. Cramps." She looks up at the older woman, her lips quivering. "What if it's morning sickness? What if I'm... pregnant?"

"Morning sickness takes four to six weeks to strike," Sarah tells her.

"In most cases. Not all the time."

"If you're pregnant, then... Well, why are you worried about it?"

"It's just..." She shakes her head. "Everyone knows this plague is airborne. That it's some sort of germ or virus. That's the only *reasonable* explanation. People debate over whether it's space-borne, a terrorist attack gone wrong, a failed government quarantine in Russia... No one knows *where* it came from or *why*... But we know it is airborne, because it traveled east with the wind currents. And it killed nearly everybody. Germs and viruses, they're small. And it's *highly* unlikely that they would miss someone. We were just as infected as everyone else... Except, for some reason, the disease didn't affect us. For some reason, we're immune. Some people are worried about whether or not our immunity will break. But none of us have fevers. If our bodies were fighting the plague with antibodies, then we would at least been sick. And none of us were ever sick... Not by the plague, at least. By fear, sure, but not by the germs or the viruses or whatever the hell caused this. I'm just worried that... Well, I'm immune, and Adrian's immune, but... if I'm pregnant... what if our child isn't?"

Sarah doesn't say anything, doesn't know what to say.

Rachel shakes her head. "What if a baby starts growing inside me, and it's one of them... What if when it's born, it's one of them, and I have no choice but to kill it? I know what everyone says: that I have nerves of steel, that this plague freed me from society's constraints to be the warrior I am at heart. But I just do these things to protect myself. My defense against these... creatures... is self-defense. But if it's my own child... My own *fucking child*... Will I be able to do it?"

Sarah opens her mouth to speak, but Rachel cuts her off:

"And what if the baby grows inside me, and the baby is one of them... And she eats me alive from the inside? Or what if the virus affects her, and through the womb the virus affects me? What if I become one of them... Like you do when you're bitten?" She wipes a tear from her eye. "What if falling in love with Adrian results in my death? Or, God forbid, *his* death... If I become one of them, and he lacks the nerve to do what needs to be done?"

Tears stream down Rachel's face. "How awful is it... that I want to have a miscarriage?"

Sarah's slap carves a red line down Rachel's face, and she hisses: "Don't you *dare* say that."



His name was Patrick. They had met in 7th grade. In 1st period, they both had science with the notorious spelling-bee champion Mrs. Calhoun. Calhoun made it known that she had won the spelling bee multiple times while in junior high, and she held onto those victories as if they were the only victories she knew: she would demand accurate spelling on all papers, and Sarah remembered being given an F on a paper regarding Whale Sharks because she had spelled plankton wrong. When Sarah was in ninth grade, Calhoun came out of the closet as an open lesbian. She received much flak from her classes; she made it a rule that if someone passed a note in class, she would read it out loud. A student had written a lesbian proclamation on a note, passed it in plain view, and Calhoun absent-mindedly read it aloud. The whole class had exploded in laughter, and that had been the end of that rule. It was in 7th grade, the week before School Picture Day, that Sarah began developing a crush for Patrick. She pleaded with her best friend Stacy to find out if Patrick felt the same way. The next day, Maria came back with the joyful news: Patrick most *definitely* liked her back. Sarah had recently broken up with a boyfriend, and even in 7th grade it had been hard. She feared getting involved with another boy, afraid it would complicate things, so she didn't pursue it. When Picture Day came, Patrick looked as mesmerizing as ever, and as they stood in line to get their pictures taken, he asked her out. She said yes.

She didn't tell her parents immediately. Nearly six months later, she finally confessed to her parents the news regarding her relationship status. Her parents asked why she had waited so long to tell them, and she responded that she wasn't sure if it was going to last. Summer was rapidly approaching, and the day before school ended, she and Patrick talked the entire night. The conversation turned to babies, and both she and Patrick confessed that they wanted to have children—the ultimate dream of a 7th grader. Both she and Patrick were virgins, but they both wanted to have a baby. She was heading to Mexico for a few months, and when they got back, they agreed that they would have sex and wear a condom, and then decide when to have a baby.

When she returned from Mexico, 8th grade began. When January came, they were talking on the phone and decided they were ready to have sex for the first time. She snuck him into her room that night. Everyone was asleep, so they had to be quiet. She and Patrick went into her room. "Should we turn off the lights?" she asked. He wanted them on. She convinced him that they should be turned off, in case someone woke up and came into the room, wondering why the lights were still on. So he turned off the lights, and they stood there in the darkness looking at each other. No one said

anything, and she made the first move. Ten minutes later, they were both naked. He put his condom on, asked one last time, "Are you sure?" She said yes, and then he entered into her slowly. It hurt like hell, and she was about to cry. He saw it on her face, asked if she wanted to stop, and she shook her head, *No*. He went slowly, pausing every five minutes to ask if she wanted him to stop; her response was always the same. She wrapped her arms around him, and they continued. Footsteps were heard downstairs; her father had woken up. They quickly dressed, and she sent him out.

They weren't caught, but they were addicted. Over the next several months, they had sex constantly—even in the school bathroom (always using protection, of course). When she missed her period in March, she asked him to buy her a pregnancy test. The result came back positive. Terrified, suddenly realizing the scope of what had happened, she demanded another one to make sure. It, too, read *positive*. She didn't tell him immediately; one weekend, they went to the park near the school, and she broke down in tears as they sat in the swings. He asked her what was wrong, and she confided, "I'm pregnant. Both the tests came out positive." He was quiet for a little bit, and then he hugged her, told her everything would be okay. She cried even harder, joining her in the tears, and he kept repeating, trying to convince himself, "It's going to be okay, it's going to be okay..."

He told his parents a few days later. They didn't seem to care. She was terrified of telling her parents, so she went to the school counselor, explained her situation, and she asked for advice. The counselor recommended calling her mom while at school. The counselor called and left a message, and Sarah went back to class. The counselor called her from English, and she told her that her mom was on her way over. Her mother raced to the school, and when Sarah saw her, she fell into her arms, weeping. She told her mom what had happened, that she was pregnant, and her mom started crying along with her. She told her daughter, "I already know, Sweetie. I already know." Sarah's mom called her husband, and she was hysterical on the phone; Sarah's father told her to calm down, that it wasn't the end of the world, and in a few minutes he was at the school, too. Her dad told her to gather her things, they were leaving.

She grabbed her book-bag and went outside, sat on the bench in front of the school. Her parents stayed inside, talking, and then came out to get her. They loaded into their separate cars and drove to Wal-Mart, where he bought another pregnancy test. "Your mom wants to make sure." She knew that her father was the one who wanted to make sure. She took the test: *positive*. They went to the doctor later that afternoon, and he told them that she was due in October. When her siblings found out, they jokingly called her *Juno*, but it provided some laughter amidst the trauma.

That night, she had to use the restroom. When she sat down on the toilet to pee, she looked down at her underwear and saw brown gunk streaming from her vagina. She cleaned herself off and woke up her mom, showed her the panties. Her mom told her that sometimes during pregnancies, women will have the last of their periods. She went to sleep, and Sarah returned to her room and called her boyfriend. She started crying, knowing she could lose the baby. He cried with her, too, and eventually they fell asleep together on the phone. The next morning she missed school: she was bleeding all over her panties. She began feeling sick all day, and she went to the doctor's, and he told her that it was a miscarriage. Her parents tried to cheer her up by taking her out to eat, but her stomach hurt so badly that she had to go back to the van and fell asleep in the back-seat. When morning came, the impact of the miscarriage struck her like a sledgehammer.

She cried all day, and her mother took her to church where she went to confession and had anointing of the sick. She then went over to Patrick's house. Her face had fallen, and he immediately knew what had happened. He embraced her tight, kissed her, cried with her. "I'm so sorry," he kept telling her, and she knew he was telling the truth. Her summer was not the most enjoyable, but she

and Patrick stayed together. When they graduated high school many years later, they were married and began working towards their first child.

ΣΩΣ

"Did you ever have a baby?" Rachel asks her.

Sarah shakes her head. "No. We never had a kid. I was infertile. It's called Graves' Disease. A malfunctioning of the thyroid gland. Whenever we would get pregnant, I would have a miscarriage. We kept trying, but... I started taking birth control pills. I couldn't stand the thought of having another miscarriage. Each one tore me apart. I never told Patrick that I was taking the birth control pills. He had more faith in my womb than I did. It's something that I regret... I knew he wanted a child so desperately, but... It just never happened. I didn't want it to happen. And I hated myself for it. I *still* hate myself for it. I loved Patrick, but I couldn't... I couldn't give him what he wanted."

Rachel is quiet. She rubs her stomach. "I've always wanted to have children."

"And maybe you will," Sarah says. "And it would be a blessing."

"A blessing? It would be a crime to raise a child in this world."

ΣΩΣ

One of Patrick's friends from his construction company in lower Cincinnati had invited them over for an Italian dinner. It was a double-date, and Sarah chatted it up with the man's wife, a wonderful yet uptight woman named Clarice. The rain had fallen all day, strong storms sweeping through, so they had stayed indoors. After the delicious dinner of spaghetti with meatballs and a side plate of garlic bread and a few glasses of Italian Spumante, the conversation turned to how each couple had come together. Patrick explained how he and Sarah had met in Junior High, leaving out the details of the miscarriage: both he and Sarah refused to talk about it.

Patrick's friend, an older man named Joe—whose wife was nearly fifteen years younger—, had a crude smile plastered over his face as he told the story of how he and Clarice had met. "So there I was in this club, desperately trying to pull some girls, and she walks in. A goddess! What the hell she saw in me, I don't know. Any way, I bought her a few drinks, and one thing led to the next, and she invited me over to her place. Problem was, I really needed to take a dump, but asking her to wait while I went to the shitter didn't seem like the right thing to do at the time. So... I sucked it up, and we jumped in a taxi to head back to her place. Twenty minutes later, we're getting off with each other in her flat, and I just can't hold it anymore, so I ask her if I can borrow her toilet for a second. She said it was fine, but she told me that she wants to take a shower first, so why don't I wait for her in the bedroom. You see my predicament?" He grinned at his wife, resumed the story. "There I am with this sex kitten, but I need to shit, and I need to shit *bad*. Well, I couldn't stop her from taking a shower, so I'm trying not to shake too much as I head into her room. I turn down the lights to make it nice and moody, kinda romantic, and I sit there on the bed imagining the pleasures that are sure to follow. But by now, I really have to go. I'm literally *dying*, trying to think of something I can do. And then it hits me! The greatest idea since lubricated condoms! I take off one of my socks, pull down my jeans and kegs, and I proceed to do the business in the sock. Unbelievably, I don't spill a drop and by tying it up, I can use to the top to wipe my ass, too. After finishing up, then, the only problem I have to deal with is disposing with the dirty sock. I look around the room, but I'm unable to find suitable places to hide the offending garment for the time being. Then I see the window. I look out, and I see that after a small back yard, there's a wall and beyond that a park. So I'm thinking to myself, 'If I can make it

over the wall, I'm safe; no problem!' I start swinging the sock around my head. Once! Twice! And then I let it *fly*. The sock sails over the wall and into the park. I feel as if I've scored the winning distance with the javelin throw in the Summer Olympics. Relieved and horny, I sit on the bed, take off the rest of my gear, and wait for the angel to come from the shower. I hear her finish, and she enters the room. She looks so fucking hot in the towel, and as she lowers it to the ground and turns on the light, her face turns from one of lust to one of horror. And do you know why?" He let his question sink in. Patrick was leaned forward; Sarah tried to hide the smile from her face, seeing Clarice shaking her head at her husband's immaturity. Joe leaned back in the sofa, crossed his arms, shined like a god, said, "Splattered on all four walls was shit that must have leaked out through the sock while I was spinning it around my head!"

Patrick burst into laughter.

Joe gave him a high-five.

Sarah bit her lip, keeping her eye on Clarice.

Clarice spoke up. "He tells that story as if it's as interesting as winning the lottery."

Patrick demanded, "So what happened? Did she have sex with you?"

Sarah slapped her husband across the arm.

Joe sighed. "That night? No. She made me clean it up. She had me whipped before I even knew her last name."

Clarice glared at him. "You *knew* my last name."

"I was too drunk to remember."

"Fantastic," Clarice muttered under her breath.

"So what about you?" Joe asked, nodding to Patrick. "Any exciting sex stories?"

Clarice leapt in. "Don't mind him. I think he's had a few too many glasses of wine."

"Have not," Joe said with a heightened sense of sophistication.

His wife looked over at Sarah. "So are you guys going to have some children? You've been married for, what, five? six years? If you want kids, you'd better start trying soon." She jokingly quipped, "That little biological clock of yours is ticking."

Sarah's face flushed a myriad of colors.

"Excuse me," she said, standing.

She left the living room, disappearing into the kitchen.

There came the sound of a door sliding open and shut.

"Where'd she go?" Joe asked.

"Sounds like the balcony," Clarice said. "Did I say something wrong?"

"She's only twenty-six," Patrick said. "And we're trying. We just haven't been... successful."

"Oh," Clarice said in a whisper.

"I'd better go talk to her," Patrick said, standing.

He met her out on the covered balcony. She was leaning against the railing, looking out over the rolling hills. The air smelled of iron from the freshly-fallen rains, and lightning danced to the west, over the tree-covered hilltops. He stood next to her, took her hand in his, felt a few scarce raindrops tiptoe in his hair.

"She didn't know," he said.

Sarah nodded. "I know."

"It's not your fault, Sarah."

She didn't say anything, just stared at the distant flashes of lightning.

"It's not your fault," he repeated.

Sarah shook her head. "You don't know that. Not for sure."

"Graves' Disease isn't your fault. It's not a... defect... in any way."

"It's not that," she said.

"Then what is it?" He pulled her towards him, looked into her eyes. "You can tell me."

"I know you want to have a child."

"And you don't? It isn't about how much we want one."

She leaned against his shoulder, let him hold her tight. "I just want you to be happy."

He kissed her neck, a soft and sweet kiss. "I *am* happy, Sarah. I'm happy *with you*. The miscarriages... They don't change how I feel about you. I don't see you any differently than on that day in 7th grade when I asked you out. You were beautiful then. You're beautiful now. Even *more* beautiful. In 7th grade, I was attracted by your *outer* beauty. But now... The beauty is so much... fuller. You're outward beauty has only grown, and your inward beauty... '*who you are*'... I love you, Sarah. You know that." He hugged her tightly, kissed her once more on the forehead. "We can try again tonight."

"Can we wait till tomorrow?" she asked. "Joe's story kinda... Turned me off."

Patrick laughed. "Yes, we can wait until tomorrow. You should be ovulating then, too."

She took a deep breath, looked up into his eyes. "Patrick."

He ran a hand through her hair, damp with the moisture in the air. "Yes?"

"There's something I need to tell you..."

The door to the balcony opened. Joe leaned outside. "Anyone want to play some Scrabble?"

Patrick shook his head. "In a minute."

"No," Sarah said, pulling away from her husband. "We can play now."

He touched her arm, concerned. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," she said. "We can talk later. It's not important."

She would never have that conversation.

ΣΩΣ

"I've always wanted to have a kid," Rachel says. "I've always dreamed of making pancakes for my kids before they go to school. I've dreamed of holding my baby and rocking her to sleep in my arms. I've longed for the day when I can yell at my daughter for being rebellious, and then boast about her to all my friends. But I'm afraid that day will never come. If I'm pregnant, then there are only two possible outcomes: the child is born healthy, but she is born into a world of despair and death, of terror and nightmares, a world where every day is either a blessing or a curse—a blessing because you're still alive, a curse because you're not yet dead." She takes a deep breath, mind dancing upon the unthinkable. "Or she will become one of them. The germ will affect her, and she'll become one of them—either in my womb or upon being born."

Sarah takes Rachel's hand, squeezes. "I don't think that will happen."

"You're just trying to be nice. You don't have a reason."

"Actually," Sarah says after a moment, "I do."

ΣΩΣ

He returned from work Friday evening, and he climbed the steps in the apartment complex with vigor, fueled with wicked anticipation. He reached the door to the apartment and pushed it open. He heard the television on in the next room, and he kicked off his boots in the kitchen—something Sarah

constantly chided him about—and leaned into the living room from the open doorway. She was sitting on the couch in a baggy t-shirt from her old work, feet propped up on the coffee table strewn with soda cans, the remote in her hands. Her eyes were glued to the television. He sat down next to her, leaned forward, began kissing her neck.

"You're all sweaty and dirty," she said, pulling away, eyes focused on the television.

He chuckled and leaned even closer.

"Get a shower," she said.

He pulled away. "Sorry. Are we going to play tonight?"

She didn't answer, fixated on the glowing television screen.

He turned to the television, saw a news reporter talking about mass hysteria in Europe.

"It's been on for the past couple hours," she said. "Something's happening in Asia."

"There's always something happening in Asia. Genocide. Nuclear weapons. Civil war."

"This is different."

"I'm going to go get a shower," he said, standing.

He left her alone to watch the screen.

She didn't even realize he'd left.

He entered the living room, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Still watching the news?"

"Something big is happening, Patrick. They're saying it's reached Saudi Arabia."

"What's reached Saudi Arabia?"

"They don't know."

"It's a good thing we're not living in Saudi Arabia."

"It could spread here."

"Stop worrying about it. An entire ocean separates us from them."

"It's a small world."

He picked up the remote, turned off the television. "I think it's play-time."

She rolled her eyes. "Can't I just finish—"

He dropped the towel, revealing his toys.

She lost her train of thought. A smile crossed over her lips. "I think it can wait."

By the time they reached the bedroom, he was just down to his underwear and socks. She wore only her bra and thong, and he hovered over her, tenderly kissing her lips.

Her fingers playfully tracing circles over his chest. "Are you going to wear your socks again?"

"Of course," he mused. "It's business time, and they're my business socks."

They continued kissing, exploring each other's bodies with their mouths. He reached down slowly and pulled down her thong as she slipped her fingers under the hem of the front of his underwear. In a few moments they are naked together, cuddling in the bed-sheets. They peered deep into one another's eyes. He rested his arm on the pillow, and she rested her head atop of it, feeling his bulging muscles. One hand was wrapped around his neck, her palm stretched across the ridge of his spine. Her other hand crawled up and down his hairy chest. He ran his fingers along the smooth contours of her body.

"I love you, Patrick," she whispered.

He was lost in those gorgeous cerulean eyes. "I love you, too, Sarah."

She began stroking his penis, and he began fingering her warm vagina.

"I'm ready," she said.

They started off slowly, but eventually he gained speed and momentum, thrusting his penis deep inside of her, withdrawing it until the head was just grazing the opening, and then slamming it

back inside, tickling her G-spot. Her vagina was tight at first, but it began to open up. He was positioned above her, and her hands gripped his upper arms, squeezing so tightly that her fingernails dug into his skin. He didn't complain, the pain only enhancing the sensation. He could feel he was close to cumming, and he could tell by her rapid breathing, the fluttering of her eyelashes, and her quivering lips that she was on the verge, too. He gave one last push deep inside her, and he exploded; her body arched backwards, and she let out several yelps. She laid back down, sweat trickling down her neck, and he laid atop of her.

A heavy knocking came on the wall, from the apartment next door.

A man's voice: "Not everyone has a girl to fuck, so keep it down, will ya?!"

They both laughed together, holding one another tightly, chests heaving, exhausted.

Both enjoyed sex several more times that night. Patrick had said, in an attempt to explain away his incredible horniness, "We need to make sure we get you full enough so that the chances of you getting pregnant are higher." 3:00 a.m. rolled around, and both were exhausted, physically and emotionally drained. They lied under the sheets holding one another, and Sarah joked that she was surprised he hadn't fallen asleep after the first round. "How can I possibly fall asleep with such a beautiful angel lying next to me?" he had crooned.

With Patrick in her arms, Sarah said, "You're so good to me."

"And you're good to me, Sarah."

"I don't deserve you. You treat me like a princess."

"And why don't you deserve that? You *are* a princess, after all."

"But sometimes the princess doesn't deserve the prince."

"Sarah," he pleaded, stroking her cheek. "You know I don't like it when you talk like this."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you so hard on yourself all the time?"

She didn't say anything.

"You're not a bad person, Sarah, but sometimes you act like you are."

"Maybe it's because I know myself better than you do."

"I know your faults. There are things that you do that throw me up a wall."

She managed a smile. "At least I don't leave my boots in the kitchen."

He laughed. "I was just too excited to see you. I'll go move them."

He began to get up; she grabbed his arm. "You don't have to."

"No," he said. "You're right." He rolled out of the bed and headed for the door.

She propped herself up under the sheets. "Patrick. Come back."

"It'll just be a minute," he said. "I need to get some aspirin, anyway."

"Why?" she asked. "Did I wear you out?"

"I just have a small headache. Nothing to worry about."

She lied in the bed, heard him moving about in the kitchen. The sound of him opening the cap to the aspirin greeted her, the shutting of the cabinet door following as he put the bottle away. He came into the room still popping the pills into his mouth. The light from a streetlamp entered through a crack in one of the window's blinds, and her eyes tried to make sense of what she saw. "Patrick. You're bleeding."

"Bleeding?" he asked.

"You have a nosebleed."

He put a finger under his nose, held it up in the meager light. "I guess you *did* wear me out."

"Go clean it up before getting in bed. I don't want your blood all over the sheets."

"I thought my blood turned you on," he joked, moving towards the adjoining bathroom.

She grinned. "Only when it's keeping your penis hard."

He went into the bathroom, turned on the light, shut the door.

She laid her head on the pillow, rapped her fingers against the warm mattress.

"Sarah?" Patrick called from the bathroom.

"What?" she asked.

"You'd better get in here."

"What's wrong?" she asked, crawling from the bed. Her naked body glistened in the shaft of lamplight as she moved towards the door. She grabbed the handle, tried to open it. "You locked the door, Patrick."

She heard him moaning from beyond the door. "*Shit*, it hurts."

"Patrick?" she asked, feeling her heart accelerate. "What's wrong?"

"My head is *killing* me. And my ears... Fuck."

"Patrick? What's wrong? Open the door."

"I'm bleeding from my ears."

"Patrick. Open the door. Let me see."

"I can't... *Fuck!*"

She grappled with the door-handle. "Patrick. Open the door *now*."

She heard it unlock. She pulled open the door, the light blinding her.

She held a hand up to her face, could see blood splattered on the kitchen sink.

"Oh my God..."

Her husband turned towards her, and her heart lodged itself in her throat.

Blood streamed from nearly every opening on his face.

"Patrick... Just sit down, okay?" She moved away from the door, keeping herself facing the bathroom. "I'm going to call an ambulance..."

"No," he growled.

"What? Patrick. You're bleeding, and your head is killing you."

His voice was cold, resolute. "It's just a little blood and a migraine."

"Migraines don't do that to you, Patrick." She was near the bed now, facing the bathroom; her hand searched the bedside table for the phone. She found it, cradled it in her hand, began lifting it up. He spun around from facing the mirror. "I don't need a fucking ambulance!" he shrieked.

Three words escaped her shaking lips: "Oh my God..."

Blood streamed from under his eyes, forming a cross around the bridge of his nose.

His face was contorted into a mask of pain, into a mask of...

something she had never seen before.

"Patrick..."

He launched forward, rushing at her. She dropped the phone, screamed; he grabbed her by the arms and hurled her onto the bed, the sheets wrapping around her bare shoulders. He pressed her down into the bed, his blood dripping onto her naked breasts. She let out a shout, screamed for him to stop. His fingers wrapped tightly around her arms, bursting blood vessels underneath the skin. He let one arm up, and he reached down for her throat, began to throttle her. With her free hand, she tried to pull his clenched hand from around her throat. He pressed down her other hand with his other arm snarled, "Bitch! Whore! Slut! You fucking cunt-sucker!" His insults echoed throughout the room. Her eyes bulged. Her world began to spin. She kicked her legs wildly, but they collided only with his rigid body. "Bitch!" Her eyes began to roll into the back of her head, strength evaporating...

And then he released, tumbling down beside her.

She kicked at the bed, rolled onto the floor, writhed in pain, gasped for air.

Oxygen flooded into her system like a broken dam, her head searing with pain.

She let out a gargled scream, rolled onto her side, vomited blood all over the carpet.

With weak arms she pulled against the bed-sheets, tried to pick herself up.

She collapsed onto the floor.

Her vision returned, and she could see the bed shaking.

Sucking in deep and excruciating breaths of air, she scooted up against the wall, saw her husband on the bed, fingers clenched into contorted fists, his stark naked body convulsing in the bed-sheets, blood coursing down the sides of his face in rivers, staining the satin pillows a brilliant red.

She threw on her robe, not realizing she had put it on backwards, and stumbled out of the apartment. She screamed for help in the cool silence of the dark corridor with its peeling paint and the rank stench of mildew in the walls. She staggered to the door to the apartment next door, slammed her fists against the wood. Tears streamed down her face, and each knock took so much strength out of her that she felt ready to collapse. She leaned against the door, drawing in painful breaths, her throat still contracting. With her weight against the door, it slowly opened, and she staggered into the apartment. One of the lights was on, and she could see the doorway at the end of the hall open, two feet sticking out. Her voice quivered as she called out Mr. Lambert's name. She made her way down the hallway, balancing herself against the wall, knees knocking and leg muscles wobbling like rubber. She reached the doorway and peered inside. Mr. Lambert lay on his back, pants pulled down, his penis lying limp with semen dripping out. Blood covered his face, and the television in the corner played a VHS lesbian porn. She stared at his face with those empty eyes filled with blood, twin rubies set into barren sockets.

She swooned as she pulled herself down the steps; her legs gave out; she tumbled against the wall, fell down the stairs, twisting and turning, ankles banging against the stairwell railing. She fell into a heap at the foot of the steps, leaned forward, grabbed her burning and scalding ankles. She managed to stand, one of her ankles splintering with pain. She hobbled towards the door and pushed it open, swaggered into the parking lot. Cars sat quietly in their spaces. A dog barked in the distance. She leaned against one of the cars, took several breaths, closed her eyes, tried to compose herself. She found herself moving again, and she reached her car. She pressed her thumb against the electric key opener against the car door, heard it unlock. She grabbed the door handle just as headlights flooded across her. She turned towards the light, was blinded, raised her hand against her eyes. The headlights veered away, and she watched as the truck ramped up the front entryway to the apartment lobby, crashed through the railing, and slammed into the entrance, shattering glass and tearing off the door. She fell against her car and watched the truck come to a stop, its back tires held up over the ground, the wheels spinning, engine chugging. She hobbled over to the Dodge, which stank of gasoline, and she didn't feel the shards of glass cutting into her good foot as she leaned against the passenger's window. She gazed inside, saw the driver hunched over the wheel, blood dripping onto his pants. In the passenger's seat was a little boy, his hands held rigid against the sides of his face, his fingernails having dug deep into his skin, cutting away strips of flesh that hung limp, pale skull revealed in the flickering lamplights. Nausea overcame her, the world overpowered her, and she fell at the feet of the truck, consciousness slipping away, the only sound that of her ragged breaths and the truck engine idling.

ΣΩΣ

"This disease," Sarah says, "I think it's genetic. Why was Patrick killed? How come I remained alive? I think it's something in our D.N.A. Something small, something miniscule... Something that bonds every one of us together. Husbands were torn from wives. Families were ripped apart. But do you remember Diego? The boy who was here for a while before he killed himself? Remember why he put that knife to his wrist? His older brother had been taken by several dark-walkers, and he was unable to live with himself. My point is, siblings often remained together. Something in our D.N.A., I think, prevents us from succumbing to the disease. Something within us refuses the germ or virus to gain a foothold over us. And if it's genetic, and if both you and Adrian are genetically immune, then your child will be, too."

Rachel takes several breaths, wipes tears from her eyes. "Yeah. I guess. I hope you're right."

"I think I'm right," Sarah says. "I've been thinking about it a lot."

"But even if you *are* right," Rachel interjects, "It doesn't matter the outcome... There's no happy ending. There are never happy endings. My baby will still be born into this awful world."

"Then it will be you and Adrian's responsibility to show her that even in a world gone to hell, goodness can still exist."

"Goodness?" Rachel coos. "Goodness? We're not good. We're just as bad as the raiders."

"Rachel..."

"We conceal who we really are by living by the rules and regulations of this community. Talk to Adrian, find out what his experiences were like with those raiders at the monastery. He'll set you straight. He's only spoken of it once. His entire countenance fails. Those raiders, they did things that are... unspeakable... for us. But they didn't find any problem with it. And you want to know why? Because we're *animals*. That's all we are. What separates us from these zombies or vampires or whatever the hell they are? Easy: the fact that we can go out in daylight. That's it. We're no more decent. We defend ourselves just as much as they do. We hunger and thirst just like they do. We're no different, and in the end, whoever survives the longest won't be determined by who is more righteous. The outcome will be decided by who will take the greatest leaps into depravity to ensure the survival of their species."

III

The snowmobile idles in the snowfall covering State Avenue. The man sits upon the vehicle, cradling the Russian rifle in his hands, eyes unmoving from the house that sits quietly. Several of the windows are shattered, splintered wood from shattered boards lying half-buried in the snow. The front door has fallen once more from its moorings, and it lies crooked over the snow-covered front porch. The insides of the house are dark, interspersed with rays of sunlight creeping in diagonal, horizontal, and vertical shafts from the scattered windows. The man takes a deep breath, turns off the engine, and clambers from the vehicle. Gripping the Russian rifle, he moves towards the house, his boots crunching in the snow.

He steps past the fallen door and stands inside the parlor, allowing the darkness to fade as his eyes adjust. The ceiling, the floor, the pictures mounted on the walls, all of this invades his senses, settling in his mind like the talons of an eagle, the claws clenching tighter, gaining more control. Faintness hits him, and he leans against the wall, takes several breaths. He looks down at his feet and sees a shattered picture frame; beyond the shattered glass rests a picture. He kneels down, sets his

rifle against the wall. He lifts the picture frame into his hands, undoes the velvet latches on the back of the frame, and slides the picture out. He blows some dust from the plastic, and he sees a picture of him and Kira, holding one another, grinning sheepishly and yet devilishly. He folds the picture and slides it into the inner pocket of his leather jacket. He stands, grabs the rifle, feels the KA-BAR on his belt, and proceeds up the ladder to the upper-story.

He reaches the top landing, sets the rifle down, pulls himself up. He picks up the rifle again and moves down into the hallway. He sees Mark's old mattress with the pillow and blankets, stained a dark brown from the blood after the massacre. He enters the den. He moves forward in the darkness, leans over his bed, and tears the heavy dark blanket away from the window. Brilliant morning sunlight pierces his eyes, and he turns away. It has been too long since sunlight has entered this room. Cobwebs cover everything, and several rats hide in the corner, poised on their haunches, blinking at him in the newfound light, stunned. He sits on the bed and ignores them, cradling the Russian rifle over his knees. The British rifle leans covered with dust in the far corner. He considers grabbing it but prefers the Russian. He takes several breaths, closes his eyes, and lies down in the bed. He stares at the ceiling, hears the rats scurrying in the walls, thinks of Kira—and how much he truly misses her.



She had called him late that night, had been in tears. "I'm sorry I'm so depressed... I hate being like this, so broken that I'm unable to speak. I'm sorry to hurt you like this."

His heart began pounding like a stallion. "Hurt me?"

"I'm depressed, and I can't be the girlfriend you need me to be."

"Kira." He searched for the words to say, suddenly wide awake. "I know what it's like to be in the hell you're in now. I know it so well. I know you can't control it. I need you to know that I'm going to be here through it, and I will hold you when you hurt."

His words didn't seem to have an impact. "I feel like I'm dead. I've gone numb. I am so afraid of... *everything*. I wish I could trust you, but... I don't know how."

"I know you can trust me, Kira. I'm not like the other guys. I don't know... I don't know how to make you see that."

"This was supposed to be different. *We* were supposed to be different. You weren't going to be like all those other guys, and you're not, but to me, that's what you've been, and I can't make sense of that. If it's not you, then is it me?"

"Kira. Listen to me. *It's not you.*" He was sitting up in bed now, cradling the phone tightly against his chin. "We have things to work on. I wish we could just go back and do it all over again. We've made mistakes—hell, everyone does—but we can't take them back. I'm trying to do everything I can think of to make you realize that I'm not like all the rest, that you can trust me, that I care so madly and deeply for you, with every ounce of the blood that runs through my veins... even if sometimes I fail to show it."

"I'm just confused," she confessed, her tears subsiding. "I don't know how you took that, but don't think I meant it like that." He honestly had no idea what she was talking about. "I just want to know what it all means... Why we fight, and why sometimes we can't stand each other, and why part of me screams that this relationship isn't right, but at the same time I don't have the willpower to let go, because there's something about you that just... possesses me."



He had hated the fact that she was insecure, but now he misses even that.

Holding back tears, he rummages through a box underneath the bed. He finds what he is looking for, draws them out. Sitting on the bed, he leans against the wall, legs propped outwards, and he finds the right journal: the journal depicting his earliest days dating Kira. He begins reading as several rats make a rush for the door, disappearing into the hallway, scattering into the shadows. Tears trace caverns across his cheeks as the memories flood him like water from a broken dam:

March 30, 2008

Nate, Kirby, Kira and I grabbed dinner at a Chinese buffet, then went to Olive Park. Nate and Kirby took the good spot under the trees, so Kira and I went into the woods and laid out the blanket. We cuddled and talked for two hours, then Kirby had to shit really bad so we went back to campus. Before we left, as we laid out under the trees, Kira told me all the reasons she likes me: I'm handsome, funny, quirky, sweet, nice, sincere. Why do I like Kira so much? Because she is adorable, passionate, hilarious, fun to be around, and I can be "free and open" around her. We dropped off Nate and Kirby and went to the overlook on Knob Hill. We sat in the back of the Jeep, with the hood open, and we sat draped in a blanket, looking at the stars. She confessed, "I feel like I have no reason to exist. I had a dream once, but I lost it." I asked her what her dream was. She said, "To be a good wife and a good mom." I told her how I had lost my dream with a previous shattered relationship, but how—in time—it returned. We talked until 1:00 in the morning, and she felt much better. A hug, a kiss, and, "Good night. Call if you start feeling bad again."

March 31, 2008

We sat at the overlook at Mount Echo, arms wrapped around one another. Not many words were said. I asked, "What are you thinking?" She said, cute as ever, "I'm thinking something good." "Me too." "What are *you* thinking?" Bravely, "I'm thinking that one day we might be together... forever... and live out our dreams." She grinned: "I was thinking the same thing!" We kissed, and she held me tight, and she said, "I like you more than I've ever liked anyone." "Me too," I said. Another kiss. As we walked back to the Jeep, she said, "It's weird: I'm actually *happy* with life since I met you. I smile for no reason at all—and I mean it when I smile." How in the *hell* am I so lucky?!

April 1, 2008

Kira and I went to a pickup kickball game at Mount Echo today. Grand old times. When we got back, we sat in her dorm lobby and watched a movie, but I kept falling asleep in her arms. It was the most peaceful experience of my life. She held me, and I laid my head on her shoulder, and she stroked my hair with her fingers, and when I fell asleep, she made sure I was comfortable. And when I would wake up, she would be grinning at me. Do I love her? I don't know. I have feelings for her. But do I *love* her? Love is something so much more than feelings.

April 2, 2008

I have been thinking a lot about love. I went down to the woods, sat on a stone ledge, and pondered what *real* love is. Of this I am certain: it transcends mere feelings. It has to, for feelings are produced by serotonin and dopamine in the brain, and they fluctuate like the tide. *Real* love, I believe, is this: the willingness—no, the *desire*—to sacrifice your own interests for the interests of another. When it comes to Kira, I am asking, “Am I willing and eager to sacrifice my hopes, dreams, and desires for her own?” The beginning of all romantic relationships are born out of selfishness and self-interest: “This person brings me pleasure.” But the relationship must move from self-centered to other-centered, or time and conflict and routine and monotony will destroy it—and the end result will either be a breakup or a divorce, none of which I want.

April 3, 2008

Do I love Kira? I am almost afraid to say it—yes. Why am I afraid to say it? Because, as it has been said, “Love is a hoax.” Love is the most beautiful and yet most painful thing on our planet. Love will make our hearts blossom—or it will turn around and sink its poisonous teeth into our souls. It will make us laugh, dance, and radiate joy—or it will make us weep, sick to the stomach, and sometimes lead us to take our own lives. I love this girl. She is everything to me. I just want her to be happy, and I will do anything to make her happy. But I am afraid that my love will be trashed. That my love will be betrayed. Will it be betrayed? I don’t think so. But I am always afraid that it will happen. Love is a risk. And I can either acknowledge that I love her and run away, because I don’t want to be hurt, or acknowledge that I love her and come to terms with it, knowing that loving her can bring me more pain than good. But I will trust her. She’s not the kind to just leave me.

April 4, 2008

Kira was sick most of the day, so we didn’t hang out very much. When dusk fell, she called and we went out to the patio outside the coffee shop. I sang her love songs on my guitar, and she sang some back to me. She clutched my arm and buried her face in my neck and exclaimed, “Love me!” She felt extremely embarrassed and blushed really badly. I hugged her, kissed her goodnight, and watched her return to the dorm. I then sat out underneath the stars, watching fruit-bats fluttering among the trees, a cigarette in my fingers—the occasional cigarette, I’m not addicted or anything—and watched as white-hot heat lightning arced across the sky. The insects buzzed and the air felt charged. I leaned back against the tree, smiled to myself, felt my heart dance. A gentle rain began to fall. I finally feel alive!

IV

He knows Mark is right. He can’t move on, can’t stay sane, with Kira looming over his head like some banshee from a haunted forest. He gathers the journals together and walks outside. He kicks away snow from a bare patch of earth with dried grass, and he sets the journals down into the snow-carved hole. He returns inside the house, then rejoins the journals, dousing them with a small bottle of kerosene. He lights a match from a matchbox he had taken from the Irish Pub in Newport before

Anthony Barnhart

the plague struck, and taking a deep breath and holding back the tears, he tosses the match onto the pile of twenty-seven journals. The kerosene quickly burns, wisps of gray smoke curling into the air; when the kerosene is extinguished, the flames consume the pages, and the man falls into the snow, ignorant of the cold wetness, and he holds his head in his hands as ashes carry up with the wind and blow against him, tickling the fingers sprawled across his face. They are memoirs of a forgotten world, a world that will never be again, a world that had its reign and then died. They are of no use anymore. Everything has changed. And Kira is now truly gone.

He ignites the snowmobile's engines and drives down State Avenue, hearing the flames consuming the house. He doesn't even glance back as what had been his home, haven, and prison is scattered over all of Cincinnati in the stale late February breeze, the ashes joining the migratory paths of the birds that have long since flown south, oblivious to the nightmare that had consumed the planet just as the flames consume the house. He doesn't even reach downtown until he has to stop the vehicle. He curls up against the handlebars and weeps, Kira's words echoing in his mind like some brazen, ancient cymbal:

"Whatever happens to us... Promise me you'll never forget me."

"Forget you? How the hell could I forget *you*?"

"Sometimes these things don't work out. But I want you to always remember me."

"Kira. I can never and *will never* forget you." After a moment: "I love you."

She had held his hand tightly as they watched the sparkling city lights.

Her words had torn into him then, and they tear into him now:

"And I love *you*."

Chapter Eighteen

The Zombie Hypothesis

(or “Anthony’s Story”)

“It shall also be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the person had been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows.”

- The Haitian Law Against Making People Zombies
(Article 249)

I

Mark was standing outside the front door of the church as the sunlight began to pierce through broken clouds. A warm front had moved in, and the snow sparkles as the top layer begins to melt. The sun is brilliant, reflecting off the thousands of glass windows of the skyscrapers, cutting through the air like diamonds. Mark turns away from the sun and faces the side of the church, a marble statue of a saint covered with snow, a Bible clutched in its hands. Beyond the saint, the ground dropped sharply, intersecting with the towering fence with its coils of barbed wire. Above the top of the coils in the fence, Mark could see the rolling hills of Northern Kentucky, laced with a patchwork of snow. He lights a cigarette and lets the burn engulf his lungs.

Snow crunches behind him. A voice: “Anthony told you his hypothesis?”

“Hypothesis?”

“About the zombies.”

Mark turns and faces Kyle. “Oh. Yeah. When I first got here.”

“How’d you sleep?” Kyle asks with a sly smile. “Dream of zombies?”

“I don’t dream anymore,” Mark replies.

“Then you’re a lucky one.” He looks at the cigarette clutched between Mark’s fingers. “Do you have an extra?”

“Sure,” Mark says. He hands him a cigarette and the lighter.

They stand smoking in the cold morning air, feeling the sun rising behind them.

“Katie jokes that this is Anthony’s wet dream.” Kyle shakes his head, laughs, takes another hit off the cigarette. “He was a zombie fanatic when this happened. It makes sense for him to believe they’re zombies. I suppose it gives him some comfort. It’s something he’s used to. Something he’s familiar with, or, at least, something he’s more familiar with than anyone else. He told me, back before all this happened, he was sitting in his kitchen with his family, and they were eating dinner, and he got all solemn and told them he needed to talk about something.”

ΣΩΣ

His father had returned home from work, and they sat down in the dining room of their woodland cottage as his mom spread out Italian string beans, steamed peas, and corn-on-the-cob over their plates. She had grown the vegetables in the garden in the backyard, and the pork chops came from the local supermarket. As they began to eat, Mom asked how Dad's day had been, and Dad told her, "We had emergency simulations for disease outbreaks."

"What kind of diseases?" Anthony had asked.

"Tuberculosis today. Anthrax tomorrow. No day's the same."

"I have an idea," Anthony said, setting his spoon down on the plate. "Zombie outbreak simulations." His dad shook his head. "I'm serious. There *are* chances of a zombie outbreak. Small and remote, but chances nonetheless. And you think I'm kidding, but I'm not. You should draw out a plan of defense for the office, and in the middle of the scenario, you should have several people painted as zombies burst into the conference room. Because *that* would be realistic."

His dad nodded. "Sure. I'll run it by them."

His mother sighed. "You two are crazy."

"And while we're on the topic," Anthony said, "we need to come up with a zombie defense plan for our homes. Store pieces of wood in the garage to board up the windows. Buy a few guns and an assortment of knives. A battery-operated radio."

His dad just laughed.

"You're laughing now," Anthony said, "but when you go outside one evening and a zombie attacks you from the darkness, how hard do you think you'll be laughing?" He looked over at his mom, a cynical look plastered over her face. "If Amanda were here, she'd agree with me."

"That's only because your sister worships everything you do."

"She graduates this May, doesn't she?"

"Yes. And then she's going to Anderson University. She has to go early in August."

"Early August?"

"For freshman orientation. She's pretty excited."

"Excited? If I were going somewhere where I knew nobody, I'd be nervous as hell."

"Anthony!" his mom hissed. "Don't swear at the table."

ΣΩΣ

Mark finds the man later that evening. He is sitting in the library, leafing through a book. Mark sits in one of the chairs, looks over to the podium. "Have you read the dictionary?"

"Not since grade school," the man replies, not tearing his eyes from the book.

"What are you reading?"

"A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemmingway."

"An odd book for a Catholic library."

"So is a dictionary." He looks up at Mark. "And why the hell do you care?"

"Have you talked to Anthony?"

"A few times. Nice kid."

"Has he told you what he thinks these things are?"

"No. But Nancy did. She told me the crazy story about her son."

"And the dictionary?"

"Yeah."

"That's the dictionary. Over there, on the podium."

"I don't care."

"So what do you think about it? About Anthony's... Hypothesis."

"I don't think much of it."

"They do act like zombies."

"They act more like vampires. And we already ruled *that* 'hypothesis' out."

"I don't know. Anthony knows what he's talking about."

The man closes the book. "The kid knows movies and fiction books."

"Yeah, but they're all about zombies, and—"

"And they're all *fiction*. There's no truth to them whatsoever."

Mark pulls out the pack of cigarettes from his jacket. "Want one?"

"Sure," the man says, reaching out.

Mark hands him a cigarette, lights his own, hands him the lighter. "Can I ask you a question?"

"If I said no, it wouldn't matter."

"Why are you so adamant about the dark-walkers not being vampires *or* zombies?"

The man exhales a puff of smoke. "And why are you so adamant to label them?"

Mark doesn't have an answer.

"They're just sick people. How many times have I told you that?"

"They came back to life."

"Bodily resurrection is impossible. They must not have been dead. A coma or something."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because *dead people don't come back to life*. Except for Jesus. And he was God."

"Now you're getting all religious on me."

"Kira wasn't a god. So she couldn't have been raised from the dead."

"What if this is all some plot of God? Punishing us for social injustice?"

"Now you're starting to sound like Carla. Congratulations."

When dinner comes the next day, Mark sits down between Carla and Kyle. Carla is talking about the necessity of prayer in one's life, and Anthony is crudely interrupting her. Mark eats in silence. Anthony makes a joke, Kyle and Katie laugh, and Carla gets mad. Mark is nearly done with his food when Katie tells Anthony, "You've dreamed of this your entire life. When zombies rule the earth." Mark finds that comment to come out of nowhere, then realizes he hasn't been paying attention to the conversation. That's when he finds that everyone's attention is focused on him. He meets their eyes with a blank stare, and Anthony asks again, "What do you think these so-called 'dark-walkers' are?"

"Oh," Mark answers. "I don't know. We met someone who thought they were vampires."

"Vampires," Anthony says. "I can see that. Have you considered them being zombies?"

Mark smiles wryly. "You've already tried to indoctrinate me, remember?"

"It makes sense," Anthony says. "It makes perfect sense."

Katie folds her arms. "It makes sense to you, because you've been fascinated by them your entire life. You already had these guys figured out before the plague even struck."

"You know," Anthony says after a moment, "that my mom was a librarian at a school in my hometown?"

"No," Kyle says. "I was not aware. Pray tell more."

Anthony ignores him. "I was home for the summer, doing construction work. She was really sick one day, so I brought her some of her medicine from the house. She had to puke when I got there, though, so she left me to watch her class. I took it upon myself to teach them about zombies. I taught about the origin of the zombie myth, different ways real-life zombies could come about, and I taught them about the need for an emergency plan for a zombie apocalypse." He laughs. "Mom was

called into the principal's office later that week. Apparently some kid had told his mother about it, and she, being the concerned parent, called the school." His smile fades. "She had reason to be concerned. A week after I taught that little lesson, the school walls were stained with the blood of the children."

II

Some of the snow has melted. Sarah remembers when she and Patrick would go skiing at the ice pond in Eden Park, and in a moment of frail vulnerability, she makes her way to the closest WAL-MART and finds a set of skates that fit around her small feet. She makes her way to the park. She has been here often, though not since the plague. She and Patrick had taken a tour of the Cincinnati Art Museum and had gone to the butterfly exhibit at the Krohn Conservatory, both located in the park. They would walk down the paved paths in the cool fall air, the leaves crunching crisply underneath their shoes, the trees radiant in their plume of red and orange and yellow leaves. The gardens would bloom in spring like the Las Vegas nights, and businesses would hold organized sporting leagues at the scattered soccer fields. Patrick had once gone out with several friends to rock-climb at the abandoned sewage plant, which had been turned into a garden with several towering rock walls. Now her feet are freezing as she walks down the winding path, passing the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. She remembers when Patrick would dream of the day when they would take their son or daughter to see the bi-yearly electronic dinosaur exhibit. She makes her way past the amphitheater, the wind tickling snowflakes from the gnarled limbs of the trees. She comes to the reflection pool, now a single, oval slab of frozen ice. She sits down on a bench and takes off her boots, putting on the skates. She hobbles over to the reflection pool and climbs onto the ice. At first it is awkward, and she can almost pretend she is there with Patrick, surrounded by others, holding hands and skating as Christmas Carolers sing and a carriage driven by a horse rattles past, a small speaker pouring forth Christmas tunes.

ΣΩΣ

"I don't know how to skate," he moaned, precariously eyeing the ice.

Sarah laughed, squeezed his hand. "It's not that hard, Patrick."

"I've never even been able to go rollerblading."

"You'll be okay. Come on."

They stepped onto the ice, taking short steps away from the edge.

Patrick gasped and fell, sprawling upon his hands and knees.

Skaters swirled around them, some laughing at his expense.

Sarah bit her lip, trying to hide the smile. "Ice tends to be slippery. It's its nature."

Patrick tried to stand, slipped and fell again, cursed.

She grabbed his hand, helped him up.

"I'm not so sure about this." His face burnt red in ridiculed embarrassment, and he watched all the others on the ice, skating as if it were the easiest thing to do. He looked over at his wife. "Maybe we should go sit on the bench and just watch..."

"Nonsense," Sarah said, pulling him farther out onto the ice.

"I could watch you," he pleaded. "And you could show me all the fancy moves."

She leaned forward, kissed his ruby-red cheek. "You're not getting out of this." She wrapped her hand tighter around his. "Just hold on. Move one leg in front of the other. Not in jerking motions. Really smooth. Like it's the ballet. Or like we're dancing like we did on our wedding night."

Patrick said, "Your father laughed at me when he saw me dance."

"Come on," she said, giggling.

Holding his hand, she led him out farther onto the ice, and their skates moved in rhythm with one another's. They circled the reflection pool, bathing in the laughter of children and young couples shooting past. They went slowly, and Patrick feared that she wished she could skate faster, felt that he was a burden. But she didn't say anything, only smiled, enjoying the moment with the man she loved.

A young couple passed them; in between them was their son, holding onto his parents' hands. His face glowed with excitement, and the parents couldn't hide their own joy of bringing their son onto the ice.

Patrick stopped skating, pulled Sarah towards him, their faces touching.

"You know what?" he asked.

Her nose rubbed against his, and she grinned. "What?"

"Maybe one day we'll teach our kid how to skate."

Her face glowed. "That would be nice."

They continued skating.

After a moment, she said, "In all reality, though, Patrick... *I'll* be teaching our kid how to skate. Not you. Hell, he'll probably learn how to skate before you can even climb onto the ice without falling down!"

"That's so cruel!" he playfully mused, pulling her close to him once more.

"It's just the truth," she said, gazing into his engulfing eyes.

"Unfortunately," Patrick said, "it is."

And though surrounded on all sides by other skaters, they felt entirely alone in the world. Just the two of them under the stars and moon. Just the two of them lost in one another, just the two of them leaning forward, just the two of their hearts beating rapidly in their chests, just the two of them kissing—entirely alone in the world.



She is lost in the moment, totally ignorant of the fallen world in which she bathes. The skates cut shallow grooves over the ice, and she finds herself doing spins and leaps, the talent from her preteen skating contests returning with vibrant force. She launches through the air, does a 180-degree-turn, then lands again, bowing; she can almost hear the cheering of the crowds and the popping bulbs of cinematic cameras. She gazes up to the cerulean blue sky, the sun smiling down upon her, and she twists on the skates, shaving the ice in a harmonious ballet. She nears the hub of the fountain, jutting out of the ice like a monolith, and she looks down... She slams the backs of her skates down into the ice and slows to a stop, staring at the ice. The dream is shattered, replaced by the gnawing reality to which she has nearly become complacent. With a sudden onslaught, it all returns to her, and she finds the cold cutting, the wind searing, the silence howling. Staring up at her from the ice is a mottled blue face, the eyes open wide, the mouth gaping. The right cheek is pressed up against the shallow bottom of the ice-sheet, and his fingers, withered by the cold and wind into bony stubs, protrude from the ice like flowers poking through ashes. She stares into that face with its murky eyes, and for a moment she sees Patrick's face, sees him staring up at her.

She leaves the ice.
She takes off the skates.
She tosses them into the woods.
And she will never return.

III

Early spring rains came at the end of February, turning the snow into a slimy mush that disappeared down the street gutters. The food supplies had dwindled, and Harker decided to lead a team to shoot some deer across the river. "Most of the deer around Cincinnati have been consumed, but there are still plentiful deer in the northern Kentucky highlands. The zombies or 'dark-walkers' haven't had the patience to hunt them through the rolling hills. Last time we went out, late in November, the deer were overflowing. Let's hope that nothing has changed." The man decided to go along with them, needing an escape from the church. Mark had watched them set off, and now he stands atop the church in the dying evening sun, watching as the small motorboat chugs across the Ohio River, a mere speck in the distance, dwarfed by the towering bridges. He hears footsteps behind him and turns.

Katie says, "You're worried about them?"

"No," Mark says. "They can handle themselves."

"It's faster to take the boat across," she explains. "And safer."

Mark eyes her. "Safer?"

"The sick, they won't cross the water."

"They can't swim?"

"We used to see bodies floating down the river, when they would try."

"I'll bet it's because of their motor skills. The man is convinced they're nothing more than animals. Humanity stripped of personality, dreams, desires. The human, he learns how to swim. It's not something that comes naturally. But the sick, they've lost everything from their former lives—including knowledge, apparently, of how to swim."

The small motorboat pulls up alongside the shoreline, the buildings of Newport on the Levee standing above them on a hill. They quickly unload, checking their rifles and gathering their supplies. They split the chore of carrying the luggage, and they set out on foot, climbing the twisting stone stairway that leads to the Levee's courtyard. They move through the watery snow in silence. The trees of the courtyard are long dead, their branches hanging limp like skeleton fingers over the cobblestones. They pass COLDSTONE CREAMERY, BARNES & NOBLE, the Aquarium. The man can nearly hear the laughter of young couples on a Friday night, first awkward dates at the ice cream parlor, students excited about reading the latest book in the bookstore while sipping STARBUCKS coffee. They descend down a flight of elegant steps to the road behind Newport on the Levee, and they wait in front of an Italian Bistro as Harker makes his way towards a parking garage. A few moments later, the sound of an engine greets them, and a 4x4 SUV pulls up beside them. Harker rolls down the automatic window. "Get in." The man, Kyle, Anthony, and an older fellow named Malkovich climb into the vehicle.

"This changed everything," Katie says. "Before this plague... I only had a few friends. I guess that's what happens when you're a person like me living in Cincinnati. I considered moving to California, or going north to Dayton. Sometimes a person like me just didn't fit in, even in Cincinnati."

"A person like you?" Mark asks.

"You don't know?"

Mark shakes his head. "No."

"I'm a lesbian," she says. "In Cincinnati, lesbians aren't well liked. I've met lots of lesbians here, before the plague, and they had the same sentiments. If you go either far east or far west, things got a little easier. Here in the Midwest, though, especially towards the south, the homosexual lifestyle isn't really embraced. It's not like we were beaten or anything. But you'd always get the awkward and even demeaning stares as you walk hand-in-hand with your girlfriend. Once on the bus, I was holding my girlfriend's hand, and this woman sat down next to me and started preaching to me. Telling me I'm going to burn in hell, that God hates me, all of that. You know what the funny thing is, though? I'll bet you anything she's one of the ones stumbling around, half-naked, out of her mind. I'll bet she succumbed to the plague. Nearly everyone did. And if Carla's right, then this is the great apocalypse, when God separates the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the tares. Carla's a fanatical nut, just like that woman, but at least she's accepting of me. She believes that God saw something good in me, and that's why I'm still alive. It's funny: it took a while for some of the people here to accept me, but Carla accepted me right away, because of her theology—no matter how twisted or strained it may be. But eventually, everyone else started accepting me. Even Kyle, who used to hate homosexuality with a passion. Because when you have no choice but to bond together or be destroyed, a person's sexual orientation means nothing. Don't get me wrong, Mark. Everything that's happened, it's been a shit-load of hell. But, sometimes, even in the ashes, a few flowers will still poke through."

This is the farthest south he has been since the plague struck. The 4x4 makes its way down I-75 South, and earlier on in the trip, he had spotted the overturned Geo Prizm, which he had foolishly flipped when he tried to avoid the deer running across the road. He realizes that had been nearly seven months ago. The wheels facing the sky had glistened with moisture, and the sun had reflected sharply over the metal siding, the paint long since worn off. They continue driving for a while, and the man feels a twist of nostalgia as they pass the exit leading to the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Airport. He closes his eyes and leans back in his seat. Weariness overcomes him, and he sleeps for a time, awaking as they are getting off the highway. The road twists and turns. Thick woods crowd the road from either side, and they pass a few homes with cars parked in the driveway. Some windows are shattered, doors hanging on the hinges. A flock of birds passes overhead, climbing in the sky, heading north. The man grips the rifle tighter in his hands. They turn onto another road, which twists and turns, following a churning river filled with broken trees and clumps of melting ice. They pass over a wooden bridge that, to the man, seems nearly ready to collapse. A few moments later Harker slows the vehicle. They pass a graveyard, and the man finds comfort that none of the graves are dug up with bony hands reaching forth from the hardened soil: *Zombies my ass*. Harker pulls into a parking lot and stops the car. Everyone starts getting out, and the man is thankful to stretch his legs: the ride had been short but cramped. He leans against the vehicle and pulls out a cigarette, begins to smoke, looking at the building across the street: SOUTHFORK CHRISTIAN CHURCH. A hawk perches on the base of the steeple, watching them with curious eyes.

"Carla believes this to be the 21st-Century version of Noah's flood, and the survivors have been chosen by God to restart the human race." Katie shakes her head. "Her faith in God is stubborn. After

her husband died, she went through a crisis of faith. She nearly abandoned God, but she became terrified of losing all that she had ever known. Religion was that which defined her life, and she had already lost her husband—if she lost God as well, what would she have left? So she delved deeper and deeper into religion, becoming a stoic saint. She began going to one of those extremely strict churches, thinking that if she obeyed God more and more, then God would remove the sorrow she felt over the loss of her husband. While she was there, she had a vision of an angel smiling at her from the cross, and she knew without a trickle of doubt that God loved her and had chosen her for some special mission. She was pregnant at the time, with her husband's child; she had conceived only a week before his death. When her 3-month-old baby boy died with the plague, she found burying the child difficult, and she went through another fit of rage at God for stripping the earth clean, and taking from her the only semblance of an earlier life: her baby. She spent her days in painful, agonizing prayer, tearing apart the Bible, looking for answers. The loneliness and isolation consumed her, and her mind—under great stress—became warped. The only tool for understanding the plague was to be found in her Bible, and she became more and more radical in her beliefs with each passing week. Now she preaches that this is the End of Days spoken of by the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament Revelation of Saint John. She's pretty adamant that those who have become dark-walkers were the wicked and corrupt, and those who survived are the elite, chosen by God to be the elite, and they must *continue* to be the elite, or they will be taken, too."

Mark takes a deep breath. "My sister, she survived the plague."

"And yet she's not here with you."

He shakes his head. "The dark-walkers got her."

Katie doesn't say anything for a moment. "Don't tell Carla."

They had set up the hunting canopy atop the church, accessed by a hatch and staircase leading to the roof. Adrian and Malkovich had the first watch, armed with their rifles and silence of the woodlands. Everyone else gathered in the basement of the church, faces illuminated by scattered oil-lamps and the burning cherries of cigars. The man smokes quietly as Anthony and Harker talk, and Kyle listens. The man remembers when he and his friends would go camping at Red River Gorge farther south in Kentucky; they would sit around and smoke cigars, throw back beers, and then go hiking, rock climbing, and swimming when afternoon came. They can hear owls hooting outside the thin church walls, but yet they feel safe: the nearest town is miles away, and no one can imagine why dark-walkers would be wandering this far out into the countryside.

Anthony says, "So a little blind girl goes up to her mom and says, 'Mommy, mommy, when will I be able to see?' Her mom replies, 'I'll tell you what. I'll take you to the chemist and get you some special cream for your eyes, and you will be able to see in the morning.' So off they went to the chemist, got the cream, and went home, all the while the little girl was getting more and more excited at the prospect of being able to see again. When they got home, the mother put the cream on the little girl's eyes, wrapped a bandage around her head, and took her to bed. The following morning, the little girl stumbled into her mom's bedroom and excitedly shouted, 'Quick, Mommy, take off the bandage so that I will be able to see again!' So the mother took off all the bandages, taking her time, and all the while the little girl was getting more and more excited. Once they were off the little girl's eyes, she said, 'But, Mommy, I still can't see!' To which her mother replied, 'April fools!'"

Harker grins at the joke, throws in his own. "This salesman stopped at a farmhouse one evening to ask for room and board for the night. The farmer told him there was no vacant room. 'I could let you sleep with my daughter,' the farmer said, 'if you promise not to bother her.' The salesman, he was a good-looking fellow with charm and wit, and he can only imagine the joys and pleasures—

not to mention the stories!—following a night with the farmer's daughter! So he agrees. After a hearty supper, he was led to the room. He undressed in the dark, slipped into bed, and felt the farmer's daughter at his side. He tried to pull a few moves on her, but she wouldn't respond. Dejectedly he laid back and ran his fingers over her body, playing with himself at the same time. The next morning, he asked for his bill. 'It'll just be two dollars,' the farmer told him, 'since you had to share a bed.' The salesman said, 'Your daughter was very cold.' 'Yes, I know,' the farmer replied. 'We're going to bury her today.'"

"That's disgusting!" Kyle exclaims, spewing a flake of his cigar.

"Quiet," Anthony hisses. "You're going to scare away the deer."

"They're outside, you idiot."

"All right," Kyle says. "I have one. Two guys were swapping stories in the park one day, and one guy—a Vietnam vet—mentioned that during the war, he was captured and held for weeks without food. The other guy asked, 'How could you survive without food?' 'It wasn't easy,' he said, 'But I had a big meal before I was captured, and I learned to eat my own shit.' The other man was disgusted, refused to believe the vet's story. Without a second thought, the vet reached into his pants, shit in his hand, and promptly ate it on the spot. The second guy exclaimed, 'My God! If you can do that so easily, we can bet big money and rake in a fortune!' The vet liked the idea; he could use the money. The next day, the guy had set up a bet with two wealthy but unbelieving high-rollers. Both were skeptical and thought it would be easy money; 'No one can eat their own shit.' The vet's friend set down a plate full of shit in front of the vet, and the vet looks down, ready to dig in, when all of a sudden he bolts from the table, and projectile puke streaks across the room right on the face of the two gamblers. In a rage, the gamblers kick the shit out of both the vet and his buddy, take their winnings, and leave. The vet's friend weeps, 'We lost it all! Why in the hell didn't you eat the shit?!' The vet replied, 'There was a hair in it.'"

Harker looks over at the man. "What about you? Got a story to tell?"

The man smokes his cigar quietly. "No."

"Come on," Anthony says. "You *have* to know at least one joke."

"A joke?" the man asks. "Here's a joke: we're sitting around in the middle of the woods, closed-off from any kind of help, joking around about shit and dead girls, while we're possibly surrounded by blood-sucking dwellers of the night. How funny is that to you? Because I'm the only one who seems to realize the fact."

IV

The man opens the hatchway and climbs onto the roof. Adrian and Malkovich look over at him. The man tells Malkovich that he can leave, and the older man thanks him, hands him the hunting rifle, and climbs down into the hatchway, closing it behind him. The man joins Adrian behind the hunting canopy, rubbing his hands together against the cold. They don't say much. The sun is setting, and the howls of the dark-walkers can be heard in the distance.

"How far away, do you think?" the man asks.

Adrian shrugs. "They could be in Florence for all we know."

"How far away is Florence?"

"Maybe twenty miles."

"That's good, I guess."

They don't talk anymore. The man stares into the trees. Poplars and oaks and elms, naked and dripping from the sun that had melted the snow and ice clinging to the branches. The ground is soggy, and the only sounds come from the distant howls, the river rushing against the bank across the street, and the droning of early spring insects.

"Last time we came out here," Adrian says, "in November, they did something we didn't expect. A deer had gotten relatively close to us, and Kyle was just about to take the shot when a group of dark-walkers emerged from behind the church. They rushed after the deer. Kyle didn't shoot, obviously, for fear of giving away our position. We knew they weren't going to catch the deer; the deer was much faster, and although it's a chore for us to run from them, the deer has nothing to worry about. So it ran into a thicket. And that's when we heard its screams. The chasing dark-walkers slowed down and joined the fray. When morning came, all we found were scattered bones and droplets of blood in the leaves. They had set a trap. Several dark-walkers hid in the bushes, and the others chased the deer right into their arms." He looks over at the man. "Some people don't want to believe it. They won't talk about it. But these dark-walkers, these zombies, these vampires, they're *learning*. They're moving around in groups now. They have leaders. They're using tactical maneuvers to take down prey, just like the lions and hyenas in Africa. I mean, they set a *trap*. A *fucking trap*. They're not just blood and bones, absent-minded monsters roaming the countryside. They're forming societies. Hierarchies. They're banding together. *Working* together. They've been hiding all winter. They've been weeding out the weak. And guess what's going to happen, now that the snow is melting and it's getting warmer?"

The man shakes his head. "I don't know."

"Me neither," Adrian says. "But I sure as hell don't want to think about it."

"How are you and Rachel doing?" the man asks, a meager attempt at conversation.

"I don't know," Adrian says. "She's just been—"

"Sorry about walking out of your wedding."

The interruption captures Adrian unprepared. "What? Oh. No, it's okay."

"It wasn't right for me to leave."

"It's okay."

"I lost my fiancé... girlfriend... with the plague. And just seeing you guys getting married... It just made me think about her. Think about what we could have had. I'm a selfish bastard. I know that as much as anyone."

Adrian doesn't say anything for a moment. "I don't have any reason to be mad at you. I can't pretend that everything is okay just because I'm married now. I love Rachel. I really do. But I know that marrying her doesn't change what's going on outside the church walls." He takes a breath, scans the tree-line. No deer. "I think Rachel thought that once we got married, something would change, like a switch would be flipped. I think she thought that everything would go back to normal. She's always dreamed of her wedding night. But I don't think her fantasy honeymoon involved standing on a church rooftop and watching the sunset, only to go back down below. She's been really depressed lately, not saying much, really quiet. Sometimes she cries in her sleep. It tears me up. It makes me realize that... Nothing will be normal, never again. Even if this whole thing blows over—which I doubt it will—nothing will be the same."

Anthony comes onto the roof an hour into nightfall, excusing Adrian to go down for some dinner. He joins the man. They stand in silence for some time. Anthony finally speaks. "I'd been here, to this church, before the plague. One of my friends, back when I was in high school, went to this church,

and he was all ape about God and everything, and he invited me to start coming. I agreed to go just once, but I kept coming back. You know why? Because there was this girl here. This beautiful girl with golden locks of hair and the most *fantastic* figure. Her name was Samantha. We hit it off pretty well, and I endured many an agonizing sermon just to sit next to her. We started dating, but a few months later, she cheated on me. I was pretty heartbroken by it, and by that time, I had befriended the youth minister, a good guy named Benjamin with a cool wife named... Megan? Michelle? I don't remember. They lived in the parsonage beside the church, over there." He points into the trees, and the man can nearly make out a wooden structure. "It was a nice little house. When we decided to start hunting deer, I recommended this place. It's out in the middle of nowhere, it's a place that has some protection. And I secretly wanted to see if Benjamin and his wife had made it. When we got here for the first time, it was nearly nightfall. I made my way over to the parsonage and knocked. I laughed then, at the fact that I had knocked, but was instantly thankful I did: I heard scuffling inside, and it was coming towards the door. I jumped back, swung the rifle around, and the door burst open. Benjamin came right through, nothing but skin and bones, and his jaws were covered with blood. I shot him through the forehead, and I can still feel the gun shaking in my hands. Several of the guys came around, shouting. I went into the house, despite their warnings for me to stay outside. I found his wife. She was in the kitchen, lying on the linoleum, dead as a doorknob. Her abdomen was ripped open, and her intestines were draped over the floor like some elegant lattice." He shakes his head. "I forgot about it that night. It was nothing unusual. They tell you that when you kill someone, you change. They're right. I haven't been the same since I... made my first kill."

"Since you killed Benjamin?" the man asks.

"No," Anthony replies.

He looks up at the man, eyes cold and empty.

"The first person I killed was my girlfriend."

V

"Everyone says that this is my wet dream," Anthony says, "that I am somehow so sadistic that I'm actually *excited* about the plague. Maybe it's because I'm so sure that these are zombies. Maybe it's because I am cool and collective when most people are shitting their shorts." He shakes his head. "I don't know. I would always watch zombie movies and read zombie books. There was this one I read, a comical book about how to survive a zombie apocalypse. It was funny at the time. When the dead began to rise, I started leafing through that book, putting together my plan. It actually helped me." He laughs. "Irony, isn't it? But there was a section in the book telling you, when faced with a person you loved who had become a zombie, to recognize that the flesh covering the zombie was not the one you had loved. The person who had become a zombie was no longer your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your best friend. Makes sense, doesn't it? But putting that into practice..." He stares into the shadows. "I never killed my parents, even though they... became one of them. I locked them in my basement. I could hear them screaming all day and all night. Eventually they quieted down, and when I went down into the basement a few months later, they were lying side-by-side, nothing but bones and tattered skin crawling with bugs." A tear speckles his eye. "I couldn't stand the thought of killing them, even if they weren't... like they were before. I had joked with Karen, 'If a zombie apocalypse comes, and you become a zombie, then I'll kill you without hesitation.'"

"Did you?"

"No," Anthony says. "I refused to kill her."

"But I thought you said..."

"I refused to kill her, until I had no other choice."

ΣΩΣ

They had gone out for a night on the town, and as the darkness began to settle, the sun setting, they found themselves in Cincinnati's Fountain Square. The three flags hanging daily around the square whipped back and forth in the breeze cutting between the skyscrapers. He had treated her to dinner at the BOI NA BRAZA BRAZILIAN STEAKHOUSE, dessert at GRAETER'S ICE CREAM, and he even bought her a shot of whiskey at the ROCK BOTTOM BREWERY. His stomach was full, weariness leapt through his veins, and she had been teasing him above the steps around the bronze and granite, nine-foot-tall Genius of Water statue, called affectionately "The Lady." Her arms were outstretched, and water flowed from her hands, sparkling in the last shards of light piercing between the towering buildings. She continued teasing him, and he jokingly slipped away, pulling his IPOD from his pocket and plugging the phones in his ears. He sat down on one of the steps and cradled his head in his hands, music playing in his ears. She followed after a moment, kneeling on the step below him, right at his height. He smiled at her, pulled out one of the earphones, and placed it in her ear. Together they listened to Snow Patrol's "Chasing Cars".

He smiled at her as the song played, drowning out the noise of everything else.

"You have no idea," he said.

"I have no idea?" she asked, confused. "What?"

"You have no idea," he repeated.

She began to understand what he was doing, and she played along. "Can I have an idea?"

His voice became a whisper, nearly inaudible over the song: "It depends."

"It depends?" she asked. "What does it depend on?"

"If you want to have an idea or not."

"I *do* want to have an idea."

"When?" he asked.

Her eyes were like fire. "Now."

As the chorus began to play over in the background,
he leaned forward on the step,
and he kissed her.

ΣΩΣ

"It was like one of those kisses from the movies," Anthony tells him, "but it was our first kiss, and it was *real*. I've kissed a lot of girls. But I've never kissed a girl like I'd kissed Karen. Just feeling her body close to me, the sweet scent of her hair, the way her eyes glistened with anticipation, the way our lips shook as we kissed, fueled by the passion." He looks up at the man. "This is how I have to remember her..." He is quiet for some time. "We met one another at a coffee shop in Western Cincinnati. ZEN & NOW. That's what it was called. And our second date took place at a Hookah Bar in Clifton. We hit it off really well, and we dated for two months before our first kiss. I fell in love with her instantly. I was planning on asking her to marry me, but I was still in college, pursuing my Master's, and I was too in debt to buy a ring or even to provide for her. Looking back... None of that should have stopped me. Love is something surreal, yet at the same time it is something that, when experienced, cannot be denied. I loved her, and I shouldn't have let finances hold me back from

making me her wife. When the plague struck, I knew I couldn't get to Karen's place. I was too terrified to leave the comfort of my own home, even with my parents locked in the basement. When my parents died, I was distraught, and I could think only of Karen. So I went to her house, desperate to find her... And I vowed that even if she were one of them, I would let her take me, because that's how strong love is. It's unbreakable... even in death."



The rain fell quietly, the clouds churning over one another far above. He shivered underneath his wet clothes, standing in the overgrown grass lawn, staring at the front door of the house. Several birds flew past, spinning between the houses lining either street. Thunder crackled in the distance. He took a deep breath and moved forward, shoes sloshing in the muddy grass. He stepped up onto the uncovered front porch, gripped the doorknob, slowly pushed the door open. It was unlocked.

He stepped out of the rain, into the dark living room. Rats were in the kitchen, scavenging the cupboards, and they disappeared into the chewed drywall at his appearance. He wiped water from his brow and moved forward. The television was dark, and the sofas were complete with their twin pillows. He could see the table where her dad always sat while flipping through "Days of Our Lives" and "The Weather Channel."

The boy entered the kitchen. One of the windows was shattered, a bird perched on the rim. It watched him in the rain slanting through the window and into the sink. He stared at it, and then it took flight outside, disappearing. He stood in the deathly quiet, hearing only his ragged breaths.

And then came the sound:

something downstairs, in the basement.

His blood ran cold.

He closed his eyes, listened again. Yes. Something downstairs. He walked through the kitchen and came to the closed door leading into the basement. He opened the door slowly, calling out Karen's name, voice crackling with fright. He stood in the open doorway, peering down into the inky blackness, the stairwell leading to the basement cloaked in a misty shadow.

He took each step slowly, and as the darkness wrapped around him, and as his heart wheezed behind his ribs, he unfastened the flashlight on his belt, thumbing the switch. The light blinded him, and he swung the beam out over the railing, into the basement below. The flashlight beam splashed over the two reclining chairs, several boxes filled with books, a blank television screen with a dust-covered XBOX 360 sitting beside it. He swung the light back around...

Her face illuminated in the light, and she screamed, clawing at her eyes, blinded; she was halfway up the steps, and the boy shouted, swung the flashlight around, smashing it into the side of her face. Her body slumped against his, and he fell back onto the stairs, the flashlight sliding from his grip. He closed his eyes, waiting for that lethal bite in his jugular...

But it never came.

He slowly opened his eyes, could feel her breathing heavily upon him, breath rancid.

Her eyes fluttered behind the lids.



"I had knocked her unconscious," the boy says. "I didn't mean to... I don't feel bad for it... She just scared me so badly, coming out of the shadows... I'm not ashamed to admit that I screamed. Something possessed me, something I can't quite put to words, and I refused to leave the house..."

And I refused to kill her. I don't know what it was that possessed me. Maybe the hope that she would be normal again. I think that's what it was. I'd already lost my parents, and even though Karen was one of them... I just couldn't stand the thought of her facing the same agonizing death my parents had endured. And I couldn't just leave her... Love is a wickedly poisonous thing. It's a venom that floods the veins and causes dementia. I'm sure of it, because no one in their right mind would have done what I did."

The man eyes the boy, almost afraid to ask. "What did you do?"

Anthony takes a deep breath. "I chained her up. I kept her alive."

ΣΩΣ

Her appearance was not what he had expected. His mind had been emblazoned with the portrait of her in the days before the plague, but the woman—the creature!—he discovered in the basement of that old house looked nothing like her. Her skin clung to her bones, and her breasts hung swollen in the cold. Fire lit in the bowels of her eyes, a fire that could not be quenched, and she would glare at him, hungering and thirsting, and he would watch, detached, his eyes downtrodden, as she struggled against her chains, the metal scraping the epidermis from her skin, revealing bloodied tissue. When the darkness wrapped tighter, and the cold grew more intense, he would sit in the chair in her bedroom, covered with blankets, and she would be lying on that bed, the same bed they had laid in months ago, contemplating the future and enjoying sweet pillow-talk. She would be chained down, wrapped in blankets, and she would breathe deep and snarl as his broken voice filled the air with its bitter lullabies:

♪Hush-a-bye, don't you cry,
go to sleep, little baby.
When you wake you shall have
all the pretty little horses.
Blacks and bays, dapple grays,
coach and six white horses.
Hush-a-bye, don't you cry,
go to sleep, little baby. ♪

He would talk to her as if she were human, as if Karen resided deep within the creature, as if she was a coma patient who could hear but not respond. When morning sunlight came through the window, he would sit beside her on the bed, and her head would be fastened down with leather belt straps. He would use an old brush and comb her hair, removing the tangles, and he would tell her how much he loved her, how he would always be with her. He fed her bread and canned goods, which she devoured hungrily; he would shoot squirrels with her shotgun, and he would feed them to her, and he would find some perverted pleasure in watching her feast. "I promised you I would always take care of you, didn't I, Karen? Yes. I promised you that I would always take care of you."

ΣΩΣ

Tears dance behind Anthony's eyes. The coldness of early March wraps tighter around him, and everything seems more distant and remote. He hangs his head and breathes slowly, his breath crystallizing before his eyes. The man watches him, doesn't know what to say. His first impulse is to

condemn the boy for being so... twisted. But yet he wonders if he would not have done the same with Kira. He easily killed Mark's girlfriend, but he wonders if Mark would not have followed in Anthony's footsteps if the gunshot hadn't taken her wretched life.

The boy draws a deep breath, trying to clear his mind. "Love does things to you. Helen Keller once said that 'the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched,' that 'they must be felt with the heart.' But I wonder if she understood what she was really saying. Common sense, which is based upon what can be seen and felt, dictated that I end Karen's life the moment she appeared on those steps. But love, something deep within me, something in my *heart*, caused me to do things that don't make any sense whatsoever. I sit back now, and wonder, months later, how in the hell love could have possessed me to the point of chaining her up like an animal, yet singing lullabies and combing her hair? The Karen I loved, she died with the plague. And it took me a while to figure that out. I eventually took her life. It was when I heard news of this place, knew that there were other survivors. I couldn't just leave Karen chained up, and I couldn't release her for fear of losing my own life. So I went to the store and grabbed a bottle of Valium, and I slipped it into some of her food. She fell asleep in that bed, and she lies there even now."

ΣΩΣ

Her chest with its washboard ribs had stopped moving. He quietly moved about the room, gathering his things. He took one last look at her face, the skin clinging to the bones, the eyes sunken in the withered sockets. He tried to remember what she looked like before she had become one of them, but his memories had been shattered. He broke down in the bedroom, and he crawled into the corner and wept. He looked up at her vanity, saw pictures of him and her smiling together, taken from Cox Arboretum in Dayton, Ohio. It had been early spring then, the flowers just beginning to poke forth in vibrant blooms. They had walked along the paths, through the pine thickets, had seen several deer grazing in the wildflower fields. They had walked down a long sidewalk lined with cherry trees, and had sat down in a covered gazebo, the latticework covered with dead ivy. They had taken several pictures together, and Karen had several printed from WAL-MART and put in generic frames. He scooted up to the vanity, reached up, pulled down one of the picture frames. His tears dropped onto the plastic covering, the pictures beneath magnified. He set the picture down and moved back to the bed, and he kneeled beside the covered corpse, found his lips moving in an ancestral Celtic prayer his great uncle had taught him many years before:

"May you be as free as the wind,
As soft as sheep's wool,
As straight as an arrow,
That you may journey into the heart of God."

ΣΩΣ

"She had become... closed-off... towards the end of our relationship," Anthony says. "She became more and more distant in the days before the plague. I don't know why. I think... I was never the best boyfriend I should have been. I was not as loyal as she deserved. I didn't kiss any girls, and I didn't cheat on her... But sometimes I would look at other girls' bodies, and I would secretly wish that Karen had their body." He looks over at the man. "I regret never being the boyfriend I should have been. I regret never appreciating what I had. But at least... At least I killed her humanely. She

died in her sleep. And I have this comfort: that one day this will end, and I'll go and get her remains, and I'll give her the proper burial she deserves. Maybe, by doing that, I can make up for how pitiable of a boyfriend I was to her. Maybe, by doing that, I can cling to a little so-called decency."

VI

They are silent for a time. The hatchway opens, and Kyle climbs out. He takes places with Anthony, who crawls back inside the church. Kyle takes Anthony's rifle and feels its weight in his hands. No words are exchanged. They gaze out into the darkness, hearing the howls of the dark-walkers in the unknown distance. Kyle pokes the man in the shoulder, points. Across the road, along the trees bordering the river, a deer has cautiously made its way out of the woods. The man takes a breath and raises the rifle. He aims the sight along the deer's neck. He had been hunting only once before, with his father before the accident. He traces the sights over the deer's hide, and he squeezes the trigger. The shot rings out, deafeningly loud, clapping across the rolling hills. The deer moves forward, stumbles over its front legs, and collapses into the grass. A smile dances over the man's façade.

"Oh, shit," Kyle mutters.

The man glances over at him; the boy points.

Several dark-walkers have emerged from the trees on the other side of the road, where the old parsonage lies in shadows. There are maybe twelve or thirteen of them. They are naked, mottled blue in the cold, and he can hear their teeth chattering. Several of them look up at them atop the church, and they stand quietly, innocently watching. The man swings the rifle around, points the hairs over the closest dark-walker's skull. The dark-walker opens its maw, lets out a shriek.

The man yanks down on the trigger.

The gunshot screams in his ears, and he can see the face of the dark-walker implode, blood spraying out in an arc.

It stumbles backwards and collapses into the grass.

"What the fuck!" Kyle shouts. "Now they know where we are!"

"They already did," the man grunts. "Use that gun, will you?"

They begin taking shots. The dark-walkers scatter, moving towards them with a quickening pace. Several fall backwards, the momentum of the bullets throwing their bodies like rag-dolls. They are getting closer to the church, and they disappear out of sight, along the church walls. They can hear them running back and forth along the wall, scraping their hands against the concrete structure.

The man looks over at Kyle. "Now what?"

"They shouldn't be able to get—Shit."

The man swings his eyes over to the deer.

Its legs are disappearing as several dark-walkers drag it into the brush.

"It was a diversion," the man says as the deer disappears.

"I don't know," Kyle says.

"Yes, it was a diversion. They played us for a bunch of fools."

"If it was a diversion," Kyle says, "then how come the ones below haven't left?"

Before Kyle can answer, they hear screaming and gunshots coming from inside the church.

On the rooftop, their souls are drained with the blended concoction of shouts, screams, and gunfire coming from the bowels of the church. Kyle grips his gun and runs forward to the hatch. The man

curses and runs after him. As Kyle grips the hatch to swing it open, the man grabs him by the shoulder and tears him away, hurling him down onto the ground. Kyle rolls, dropping his rifle, and stumbles to his feet, eyes ablaze.

The man shakes his head: "No."

More gunfire. Shouting. Kyle snarls, "Those are our friends down there!"

"We don't know how many of them got in," the man says. "We can't risk it."

Kyle searches for an excuse. "We have guns..."

"Guns won't do shit if there's more than a few."

The screams and shouts die down. No more gunfire.

The man's face goes ashen. "Still want to go down there?"

Kyle doesn't answer, looks out into the trees... "Look!"

The man follows his gaze.

Several dark-walkers are moving towards the tree-line, one limping.

He counts maybe five or six, and they're dragging...

"Malkovich."

"They got him," Kyle murmurs under his breath. "They fucking got him."

Malkovich is struggling, shouting, fighting. But their grip on him grows tighter.

The man raises his rifle, aims.

"You can't kill them all!" Kyle wails.

"I know," the man mutters. He takes a deep breath, tries to calm his nerves.

"They're almost into the trees!"

"Be quiet, all right? I can't concentrate with you screaming in my ear."

Kyle moves towards the edge of the roof, strains his eyes in the darkness.

He hears the gun-blast from the man's rifle.

He sees Malkovich go limp moments before disappearing into the trees.

The boy looks over at the man, who tosses him the rifle.

The man walks past, growls, "Not so fucking funny anymore, is it?"

Rachel stands in the closet in the back of the church, the only light coming from a small wicker candle with wax crawling down the sides. She takes several deep breaths, sets the box on the floor, and pulls down her pants. She situates herself quietly upon the makeshift toilet, not wanting to arouse any suspicion, paranoia swarming over her. She leans back against the wall, feels the seat cold against her cheeks. She licks her lips and squeezes. Nothing comes. She tries again. This time there is a trickle. She leans to the side, fumbles with the box, manages to open it; in the darkness, she can search only with the tips of her fingers, and she finds the stick. She pulls it up into the dim light, can't see a thing, and puts it underneath her. Taking another breath, she squeezes again, and urine dribbles over the stick and into the toilet. She pulls it out and sets it on the floor. She leans back against the wall, closes her eyes, begins to count silently in her head.

One. Two. Three.

Each second is agonizingly slow.

Four. Five. Six.

Upon reaching two minutes, she grabs the stick. Her hands shake as she holds the stick in one hand and the candle in the other. The light dances over the small display on the stick, and in a moment a line appears across the display. Her stomach flips inside-out, and she drops the test, leans forward, head in her hands, feels dizzy and nauseas. One word cycles through her mind, growing louder and more intense with each numbing repetition: *fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck...*

Chapter Nineteen

As the Rain Falls

(or "Carla's Story")

"Religion is a wizard, a sibyl... She faces the wreck of worlds, and prophecies restoration. She faces a sky blood-red with sunset colours that deepen into darkness, and prophecies dawn. She faces death, and prophecies life."

- Felix Adler (A.D. 1884-1963)

I

Morning has come. Rachel had dressed warmly, drinking several cups of dry coffee, unable to sleep for the terror that gripped her in the dead of the night. She talked to no one and climbed the spiral staircase to the roof. She pushed open the door and exited onto the rooftop. Water had collected in the cracks of the cobblestones, rain having fallen upon the city in the early morning, and the sun feels faintly warm against her rose-blotched cheeks. She stands at the edge of the roof, leaning against the railing, staring down towards the Ohio River. She hears footsteps behind her, and she turns to see Sarah joining her. Sarah nods a quaint *Hello* and stands beside her.

"You're waiting for them to return?" Sarah asks.

Rachel nods. "Yeah."

"You must be worried. Him being out there."

"No, they've done it before. They've never lost anyone."

More silence.

Rachel looks over at her. "I'm pregnant."

Her words come as a shock, and Sarah is off-kilter for a moment. "How do you know?"

"I went to the store... got one of those over-the-counter tests..."

"They're not always accurate, Rachel."

"I'm telling Adrian when he gets back. He should know."

Sarah turns her eyes back to the distant river. "How do you feel about it?"

"About what?"

"About being pregnant."

She shakes her head. "I don't know."

"You don't know how I feel?"

"I know how I *should* feel. I look at you, and I see this woman who has tried all her life to get pregnant, but who could never manage it. And then I look at myself, and I have a child growing in my womb, and I know I should feel excited, ecstatic, that I should be leaping off the walls in joy. I've always wanted to be a mother, Sarah, just like you. But now... Now I don't know how I feel. I don't want to give birth to a child who will have to grow up in this world, knowing the horrors that we face everyday."

"But your child won't know anything else." She looks back over at the frightened mother-to-be. "She or he will understand this to be normal. In the Stone Age, children were born into a world filled

with saber-toothed tigers, giant flightless birds with beaks the size of basketballs, in a world of herds of woolly mammoths that would trample a person underfoot. But the children grew up, they knew their dangers, they enjoyed life. Your child will be born into this world, and she'll be a beautiful angel. She'll be everything you imagined."

Rachel isn't listening. She's staring out at the river, face fallen.

"Rachel?" Sarah asks. "Rachel? What's wrong?"

"They're at the river. I can only count five of them. Six left yesterday morning."

Sarah looks out towards the river.

She can see the boat, small and miniscule, figures boarding.

"Oh my God," Sarah murmurs under her breath. "Oh my God..."

She throws open the front door of the church and scrambles down the stone walkway, nearly slipping over the slick steps. She reaches the gated fence, throws the latch, and pushes it open. Her legs carry her out into the street, and she runs to the crest of the hill that runs down to OH-50 below. She stands, heart pounding in her chest, and in a moment sees the 4x4 rounding the bend, climbing the hill. It moves agonizingly slowly, and her mind screams for it to move faster. She steps off to the side as it passes, and she stares through the tinted windows, and she can make out three faces. She follows the vehicle for a short while, then climbs the steps and enters the garage. A moment later the 4x4 appears, pulling inside, having taken another road up the hill and to the church parking lot. The stench of exhaust intensifies her nausea, and she waits, dreading what she might discover. The vehicle is turned off, and the doors open. Figures crawl out. Harker is driving. The man is in the passenger seat. There comes Kyle. Anthony. *Oh God oh God oh God.* Another figure exits the vehicle. Her eyes flush with life, and she loses all semblance of control, leaping forward. Adrian embraces her, and she kisses him all over. He grips her tightly, running his hand through her hair. Tears crawl down her cheeks. "I thought I lost you... I thought I lost you..." Her cries echo in the cavernous chamber.

The man is exhausted, kicking off his shoes in a back room, sitting upon a cot. The door opens and Mark enters. The man looks up, nods *Hello*, goes back to pulling off his last boot. Mark moves into the room, sits down on the cot opposite the man. "Harker told me what happened. That Malkovich was lost."

The man curses under his breath. "Harker's a damned fool."

Mark's eyebrows raise in curiosity. "And you say this why?"

"He thinks we're safe in this church. This 'castle.' We're not."

"We haven't had any break-ins. We have ultraviolet lights combing the grounds at night."

"They'll find a way in."

"They're not like us. They're not capable of thinking, of strategy, of—"

The man snaps his gaze up at the boy. "And you know this how?"

"They're just animals," Mark says.

"Just animals. Did you ever watch the DISCOVERY CHANNEL?"

"Not too much."

"They had this special once. On hyenas. And in the show, the hyenas chased several antelope into a thicket, and in this thicket, more hyenas were waiting. They had set a trap. Adrian told me that last November, the dark-walkers did the *same exact thing*. And did Harker tell you how they got Malkovich? No? They entered the church and made everyone panic. Kyle and I were in the hunting canopy, so we didn't see any of it. But Anthony told me what happened. They came inside. We

started shooting. Killed several of them. But four or five crept along one of the back walls, actually *crawled*, moving slowly, quietly. We didn't even see them. Malkovich's rifle had stopped working, so he retreated back to the far corner—right into their hands. They grabbed him and dragged him out of the church, into the woods." The man lies down upon the cot, head on a pillow, arms folded over his chest. He closes his eyes. "Don't tell me that the dark-walkers can't think, can't strategize. I've seen it. Spring is coming. They're emerging from their hiding places. They're stronger now; winter didn't weaken them, it just weeded out the weak and made the strong even stronger." His eyes open, and he leans his head to the side, glares straight at Adrian. "When spring finally gets here, it'll be warm, and they'll swarm this church, and they'll find a way in. And it will be a slaughter."

There was a small funeral service for Malkovich, followed by dinner, and nearly everyone crept back to their rooms, the dreariness of the day weighing heavy upon the human soul. Rachel kissed Adrian goodnight, told him she wanted to do some thinking alone. She made her way into the sanctuary and sat down in the darkness. Her eyes slowly adjusted, and she stared at the cross, the smiling and crucified Savior. The dark-walkers could be heard outside the church walls, distant but growing closer. A chill runs up her spine.

"Did you tell him?" Sarah asks, emerging from the shadows.

"Not yet," Rachel says.

Sarah sits down beside her. "You should probably take another test."

"I don't need another test."

"Sometimes home pregnancy tests give a false positive."

"I know I'm pregnant. I knew it before I took the damned test. I just... needed to be sure."

"So when are you going to tell him?"

"It didn't seem right to tell him today. Not with Malkovich being gone."

"He'll still be gone tomorrow."

"This was Malkovich's day. Not mine."

"So you're going to tell him tomorrow?"

Rachel draws a deep breath. "I don't know."

II

Sarah had left Rachel alone, giving her time to bathe in her own thoughts. The night drew thicker, and the air became heavier. Resounding footsteps echoed behind her. She didn't look back as Carla sat down behind her. Rachel acknowledged her presence, and Carla had said, "Usually no one is here this late at night. This is where I come to pray and read my scriptures. I can't sleep when I can hear them so close, but prayer and the Bible gives me comfort." Rachel hadn't said anything, and Carla had offered to pray with her; Rachel had just shaken her head, *No*. Carla began peeling through her Bible, a tattered leather-bound scribbled with notes and seeming incantations, desperate pleas to a distant God. Rachel just sat in the pew and stared forward in the darkness, stomach churning like a vat of oil.

"Rachel?" Carla now asks. "Can I share something with you?"

She looks over, can barely see her profile in the blackness. "Yes."

"I have been reading from the Prophet Isaiah, and I have come across some very interesting texts." Her small reading lamp illuminates the page, and she begins reciting from the Holy Writ.

"Behold, the LORD maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usury, so with the giver of usury to him. The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled: for the LORD hath spoken this word. The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world languisheth and fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth to languish. The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left. The new wine mourneth, the vine languisheth, all the merryhearted do sigh. The mirth of tabrets ceaseth, the noise of them that rejoice endeth, the joy of the harp ceaseth. They shall not drink wine with a song; strong drink shall be bitter to them that drink it."

Carla's face glows with excitement. "Don't you see, Rachel? The prophet Isaiah prophesied about *this*. About what we're enduring right now! The earth has been made empty of its former inhabitants, it has been laid waste. Cities and towns are abandoned. I can see cruise ships floating aimlessly through the ocean. Those who have been spared have been spared not by any merit of their own, but they have been chosen by God. God has thrust this upon us because we have broken His laws, we have changed His ordinances, we have broken the covenant He made with the forefathers." She shakes her head in amazement. "Why must we speculate and conjecture about why this has happened when the answers are all right here?" She slams her fist against the Bible, eyes ablaze. She takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Rachel. I must truly be frightening you."

"It's all right," Rachel says, slightly disturbed.

"You must think I'm crazy."

"I'm envious. Envious that you seem to have the answers."

"The answers are all right here," she says, squeezing the Bible once more. "In 2 Peter, we are told that there will come a day when the earth will be wiped clean as if by fire. I believe that is a metaphor regarding what took place last August. In the Gospel of Luke, we are told that when the Day of the Lord comes, two people will be in bed, and one will be taken while the other remains. Is this not what happened? The Christ also taught that when the End Days would come, the world be filled with sex, self-indulgence, greed, envy, idolatry, theft, murder, and adultery, and that people would be so wrapped up in their own little worlds that they would laugh and drink and be merry. But just as Noah's Flood came when no one expected it, when everything was going beautifully, so the End of Days would come when nobody expected it. And who could have expected this?"

Rachel is finding her quite wearying. "No one."

"Precisely!" Carla exclaims. She takes a moment to calm down. "Rachel?"

She rolls her eyes, something Carla cannot see in the darkness. "Yes?"

"There's something I discovered a few nights ago. Something that... I haven't shared with anyone. May I share it with you?" Rachel nods. Carla turns back to the Bible, begins flipping through the pages. "It will take me a moment to find it... Ah, here it is." She clears her throat and begins to read, her voice echoing in the musky sanctuary:

"Thy dead men shall live;
 their bodies shall rise.
 Awake and sing for joy,
 ye who dwell in the dust:
 for thy dew is as the dew of herbs,
 and the earth shall give birth
 to the dead."

III

"When you lost your baby," Rachel asks after a moment of impermeable silence, "How did you deal with it?"

The question surprises her, and she folds her Bible shut.

"I'm sorry," Rachel says, seeing the mask of pain dripping over Carla's face.

"No," Carla says. "You have no reason to be sorry."

"I didn't mean to bring it up. I know... I know it hurts."

"It is good to remember these things," Carla says, "lest we may forget."

ΣΩΣ

The rain had fallen heavily that night, and she had fallen into a fitful sleep. She awoke around two in the morning, finding that her husband had not yet returned. She crawled out of bed and found the telephone, dialed his number. It went straight to voicemail. She left a quick message, then set the phone down upon the hook. He had never been out this late before, and immediately her mind jumped to an affair. She cursed herself for thinking like that. A moment later she heard the doorbell ring downstairs, followed by several quick knocks. She wondered if he had forgot his keys as she threw on her robe and descended the steps. She reached the front door, could see rain tapping on the glass windows on either side. She unlocked and opened it, ready to launch into a diatribe against her husband for coming home so late. But it is not her husband who greeted her, but two police officers, rain falling like waterfalls from the brims of their hats.

"Is Jason in trouble?" she asked, heart hammering. "What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything," one of the officers told her.

Immediately she knew, and she felt her knees beginning to lose strength.

"It wasn't his fault," the officer said. "A bus driver... He fell asleep at the wheel..."

She leaned against the doorframe, felt the rain reaching in, kissing her cheeks.

The other officer looked away, uncomfortable.

The officer said, "We need you to come to the hospital."

"Why?" she croaked, though she already knew the answer.

Compassion drenched his façade, and he spoke:

"We need you to identify his body."

ΣΩΣ

"My husband never got to see our child," Carla says. "He died several months before he was born. I didn't even know I was pregnant at the time. When the child came, I named him Jason. After his

father. He was only three months old when the plague struck. He died in his sleep. He didn't even cry." Tears were beginning to sparkle behind her eyes, and she wiped them away with a single finger. "I thank God... I thank God that he didn't feel any pain. I thank God... that he didn't suffer like the rest."

ΣΩΣ

She awoke with the sunshine coming through the blinds, and she immediately wondered why her alarm clock hadn't gone off. She rolled onto her side, blinked away the snuff in the corners of her eyes. The LCD display on the alarm clock was dark. She stumbled out of bed, in bra and panties, and threw on some pajama pants and a baggy t-shirt. She walked over to the wall and flicked the light switch. Nothing. She moved into the bathroom, turned on the water. *At least the plumbing's still intact.* She stripped down, got into the shower, and quickly bathed. The water had been hot at first, but it quickly became icy cold, and she stopped showering before she had shampooed her hair. As she dressed, preparing to go to work and wondering what time it was, she remembered little Jason, how he hadn't woken her up crying. She was thankful for the break. She went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The power was out in there, too, so she quickly shut the fridge door, not wanting any of the coldness to escape. She made her way into Jason's room, saw the crib beside the window, morning sunlight pouring into the room. She began cooing Jason's name, and she approached the crib. She peered down inside, saw him lying under the think blanket. He was face-down on the pillow, and her heart leapt into her chest. She quickly grabbed him, pulled him up... and she dropped him upon seeing the blood covering his face, blood that had soaked into the fibers of the pillow. She staggered backwards into a dresser covered with stuffed animals, and several fell onto the floor. Her hands rushed to the sides of her face, and the room shook with her horrendous scream. No one was there to hear, no one was there to help.

ΣΩΣ

"It didn't take me long," Carla says, "to discover that I was, apparently, the only one left. I tried calling the emergency services, but I only received a dial tone. I wandered the streets for a couple hours, searching for survivors. There were a few car wrecks, but everyone was dead. I went by a bar, and there had been a concert going on that night. The band had collapsed atop their instruments, and tables were overturned and bodies littered everywhere. It was a nightmare. I considered taking my life. I am ashamed to say it, but I was a coward. But I buried Jason, and I am thankful I did. I can't imagine finding him in the crib, one of the... zombies." She shudders, hating the very sound and thought of this incalculably cold word. "But you ask me how I dealt with losing Jason? I may be crazy, but I believe this is the End of the World. That God chose a few elite to remain and eliminated the rest. As children have no knowledge of right and wrong, they cannot be judged. And so God spares them from this hell by killing them. Do I think little Jason would have become a zombie? The thought mortifies me. But, no, I don't think so. He was only three months old. He was innocent and pure. I find comfort in the fact that my little Jason is at home in Heaven, with God and the angels... and that little Jason has met his father, and they are watching over me, waiting for the day when I shall join them in paradise."

IV

The large display windows are shattered, the tables that had once been covered with books now mostly overturned, the books scattered over the floor, bloated from water due to the melting snow. The man stands in the middle of the Newport on the Levee courtyard, the beginning of March breathing soft whispers of warmth. He sheds his jacket and throws it onto a bench that encircles a dead and wilted tree, turns and looks at the vacant buildings, the ice cream parlor, the abandoned kiosk, the clothing store with its front-porch manikins overturned and gnawed. He finds it ridiculous and rather anticlimactic: a starving dark-walker, seeing something that looks like a person, and gnawing on the tough plastic until finally receiving the hint that there is no blood to drink within. The large multi-story, glass-walled Newport Mall rises at the end of the courtyard, and the sun reflects off the windows, some shattered and others webbed. The innards of the Mall are dark and cloaked in shadows, and the man can almost feel eyes boring into him from its dark recesses. No worries, though: it is nearly noon, and sunlight is reaching its zenith. He doesn't worry about the time as he steps over shards of broken glass and ducks into the building.

Most of the aisles of books stand just as they did on the night of August 11 of last year. He can imagine the workers locking up the building and closing down the cash registers, setting off and dreading another day of work that would never come. Some of the bookshelves are knocked over, the books scattered, and the titles of the books are all covered with a thick layer of immaculate dust. The building is enshrined with windows, and sunlight drenches everything; a shadow cannot be detected. The broken windows mean that, perhaps at night, creatures dwell in this building, the inhabitants of some foreign sanctuary. Or they may mean that someone had been infected inside the building and escaped, as an abandoned mop—the tendrils now dried and cracking—with its mop bucket—now empty—seem to imply.

He moves past the store's information desk. One of the computers lies on the floor. He spies twin escalators, no longer in service. The escalators have become stairs, and this bookstore has become the festival of moths and mice. He moves up one of the escalators, remembering when he and Kira had ridden the escalator early in their relationship, before they had explored one another's bodies in a sensual and erotic embrace.

ΣΩΣ

"Did you just touch my ass?" she demanded, spinning around.

They were halfway up the escalator.

He looked at her in shock. "What? No!"

"Oh. I thought you touched my ass."

"No, I didn't. I swear."

"You don't need to apologize. It didn't bother me. It just... surprised me."

ΣΩΣ

He steps onto the upper level, this section holding the fiction, some nonfiction, and the religious and occult sections. Before him is a small café, enclosed with a decorated railing. The railing is lined by tables on either side. At the opposite side of the café are giant windows that overlook the Ohio River and the beautiful Cincinnati skyline. He had come here many times, during his schooling for aviation, pouring over complicated textbooks, sipping caramel macchiatos, gazing in wonder at the

plethora of city lights that seemed to reach into the highest pinnacle of Heaven. He admits now that he had flirted often with the female barista, a punkish girl with raggedy red hair and freckles, with wild eyes that spoke volumes of wicked desire. This thought flushes his face even now, a secret that Kira had never known. *Secrets are what make relationships work*, a friend had once told him; *Secrets are what keep a relationship together. The moment you know everything about a person, there is no mystery... Only boredom*. He smiles, finding it ironic that the one who had told him this had endured three divorces following those cryptic words. *At least I never did anything with the girl*, the man thinks; *Isn't it okay to look but not touch?*

He walks into the café, past a table with several cubbies filled with sugar and crème packets. At the front of the STARBUCKS café, he peers into the display case. What had once held danishes, brownies, cookies, and a wide assortment of treats is now stained with mold and an eerie mist, and flies crawl along the inside of the glass, probing with their mouths. He wrinkles his nose at the smell and steps away. Sitting next to the cash register is a jar filled with wrapped sticks of biscotti; he takes one—vanilla almond—and unwraps it, chewing hungrily. It tastes much more fantastic than the usual canned goods and occasional candy bar. No one had discovered biscotti in the stories around the church. He munches quietly in the café, sunlight filtering through the windows, and as he eats he imagines the place crawling with science fiction nerds, religious nuts, flirting teenagers with their cups of coffee, a couple arguing in the corner, a blind and awkward date at a small table in the middle of the café. It is a flash from the past, and he quickly shakes it from his mind, returning to the empty store with its volumes of books that, in time, will be reduced to nothing, eaten by moths and disintegrated into oblivion.

He uses his finger to wipe dust from the spines of the books. He is in the Science & Nature section, and he grabs a book called Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture. He reads the back cover: an exploration of how the culture of mankind has evolved into the civilization of the 21st Century. Another book he peruses is The Selfish Gene, and he notes that Richard Dawkins is the author. He remembers watching a video of Richard Dawkins in one of his science classes in high school. He considers taking some books on evolution but decides against it. *This is not why you're here. You don't have to understand the dark-walkers. You just have to survive them*. He leaves the section behind.

He had heard about the book on Discovery Channel before the plague, but he has forgotten the title. He knows he'll recognize it when his eyes lay upon it, and he is right. He hungrily grabs the book and flips through the pages, thanking God that moths had not devoured the sacred text. The SAS Survival Handbook: How to Survive in the Wild, in Any Climate, on Land or at Sea. He moves to one of the tables in the café and begins exploring the book, his heart pounding in his chest. *You can look at it later. You still have work to do*. He can imagine Mark poking his way through the church, trying to find out where the man has run off to; it brings a smile to his face. He sets the book down on the table and makes his way back to the aisles of literature, testaments to a world of intellect, knowledge, and fictional fascination that died seven months ago.

The store only had two books on what he had wanted, but these will have to do. He takes a seat in the café and flips through them. The Milepost and Lonely Planet Alaska. He dares not whisper his heretical plans to anyone save Mark, and he knows that Mark will even be skeptical. It is of no importance. The man has seen the evolution of the dark-walkers, has seen how they are growing smarter, clever, working together, creating diversions and traps. *Even sacrificing their own for the good of the group*. Such altruism has been said to be present only in the human species, and then only in

rare cases. Yet he has seen more altruism in the dark-walkers than he has seen in any *Homo sapien* his entire life, and it begs to be wondered: "Are the dark-walkers, in truth, more human than we are?" He glances out the large windows, suddenly forgetting the books. Storm clouds are gathering in the distance, and raindrops are beginning to peck on the glass. Dark will come sooner with the rain, the sun obscured by thick clouds, and they will pull themselves from their catacombs early. He gathers his books in his hands and leaves BARNES & NOBLE, hurrying quickly as the rain grows stronger.

V

She stands stark nude in the wintry snow, the ice crystals scarring her bare feet. She tries to open her eyes, but ice cakes them closed. She swipes the ice away with a finger and sees Adrian before her, except now he is transformed: a rotting skeleton, crawling with maggots, twin eyes hanging by strands from his cavernous eye sockets. His mouth is open in a scream, and a snake peers at her from between his misshapen teeth. Beyond him all the leaves on the trees are gone, the limbs stripped bare and covered in snow and draped with icicles. The flowers and grasses of the meadow are replaced with rocky stubble strewn with bloody snow. She twirls around and a scream exits her throat; nooses are tied to the limbs, and infants and small children swing from the nooses, hung upon every skeletal oak and elm. Their eyes are vacant of life. Thousands upon thousands of nooses, dozens tied to every branch. She falls to her knees in terror and wrenches her head to the sky: the sun boils and millions of men, women and children are hovering in the abyss above her, screaming and howling as unseen forces rip their limbs from their bodies. The blue sky turns red as a rose. She cries out and turns her head to the earth, avoiding the horrible sight: but then she sees the infant in the snow, and she knows: *It's mine*. The child's skin is pale and mottled, stricken with blue veins; its eyes glisten evil and its mouth reveals hundreds of tiny fangs. It shrieks and leapt upon her; she falls back into the snow, trying to fight off the creature. As the infant sinks its fangs into the soft of her neck, she realizes that it is not snow that blankets the meadow, but the ashes of the leagues who have been burned alive.

Rachel awakes in a cold sweat. She leans up on her elbows, staring into the darkness of the room. Adrian notices, pulls himself from sleep. He reaches out, grabs her wrist; she writhes away, falling against the wall. She can almost see the zombie lying in bed beside her, and the walls seem to melt away as the night terror fades. She sees Adrian staring at her, fear in his eyes.

"Rachel?" he asks. "Rachel, it's me. Adrian."

She takes several deep breaths, closes her eyes...

and sees that horrible creature again, with his dangling eye and hellish grin.

She snaps her eyes back open.

"What happened?" Adrian asks. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"Yes," Rachel says, trying to collect herself. "Yes, I think so."

"Well. It's okay. You're here with me. Lie back down, okay?"

She does, and he holds her.

He quickly falls asleep.

She stares at the wall, and every time she closes her eyes, she can see his face.

Exhaustion overcomes her, and she slips back into the dream-world.

A hospital looms in front of her. She makes her way inside, calling out for help: she's going into labor. She is taken to a room, and doctors and nurses in blue gowns surround her. She gives birth, surprisingly painless—there comes no crying from the baby. She demands to see her child. The nurse tells her that it was stillborn. She demands to see it anyway. The nurse agrees, revealing the infant: the baby girl is blue and cold to the touch. Rachel takes the child in her arms, and a tear crawls down her cheek. She can feel a heartbeat, but convinces herself that it's only wishful thinking. Suddenly the baby opens her eyes, deep and toxic yellow pupils, and the infant's mouth opens, revealing twin fangs dripping with venom. Rachel lets out a scream as the child reaches for her neck.

She stumbles down the dark corridor, the walls closing around her. She doesn't wear any shoes, and the floor is icily cold. She finds the doorway and pushes it open. The old janitorial closet. The makeshift bathroom, where she had discovered her pregnancy. She falls down upon her knees, her mouth opens, and her stomach churns: dark vomit sprays into the toilet, and she leans her forehead against the wall, heaves again. She wipes the bile away from her mouth, reaches down to her stomach, the image of the sterile baby still burning into her mind. She takes several breaths, shaking. Delirium overtakes her, and she staggers to her feet, leaving the bathroom one last time.

She places her hand upon her stomach, can almost feel the infant playfully kick.

Vomit creeps into the back of her throat

at the thought of a little fanged cretin swirling inside her womb.

The door to the roof is thrown open.

She staggers out into the cold night air, a thick wind blowing against her.

The raindrops are heavy and dizzying.

She reels against the railing, leans over, stares down at the sloping hill.

At the foot of the hill is the fence,

and surrounding the fence are dozens of dark-walkers,

their murderous eyes set upon her,

their mouths dripping with drool.

She violently shakes her head, tears tracing her cheeks: "No... No... No..."

She can hear footsteps racing up the stairwell behind her.

Resolution grips her. She crawls upon the railing, rocking back and forth in the wind.

Adrian emerges from the door. "Rachel!" he shouts. "Rachel!"

She shakes her head. "No... No... No..."

He moves towards her. "Rachel!"

She looks back at him. "Forgive me," she pleads. "It's for the best."

"Rachel!" he shouts, surging towards her.

She releases her grip.

The wind greets her, and for a moment she feels as free as an eagle.

Adrian races to the railing, screaming her name, and he turns his head as her body hits the hard earth below, organs rupturing and bones splintering. Blood forms in a pool beneath her body. Adrian stumbles backwards, world spinning, and he claws at his face, screaming for himself to wake up. He falls back into the outside wall, slides down onto the ground, knees curled up against his chest. He rocks back and forth in the rain, eyes staring forward, wanting to awake, but knowing he never shall. The rain falls harder, and the dark-walkers howl.

Chapter Twenty

Cherry Kisses & Autumn Blossoms

(or “Katie’s Story”)

“The love expressed between women is particular and powerful,
because we have had to love in order to live; love has been our
survival.”

- Audre Lorde (A.D. 1934-1992)

I

Rachel’s death struck the community hard, but no one suffered anywhere near the suffering that Adrian endured. They buried her body the next afternoon, at the Spring Grove Cemetery. It rained constantly, and Adrian watched from a distance, standing underneath a marble gazebo beside the lake that wept back and forth in blustery winds. Everyone departed, but Adrian stayed longer. He had approached the dug earth, knelt down next to the crude makeshift cross, and he tenderly kissed the memorial to Rachel’s already-fading memory and forgotten legacy. As he made his way back to the church, several blocks down the road, he couldn’t help but wonder at the cruel fate of his life: he had lost Kristen to the same fate many years earlier, and now he had lost Rachel. The vision of her leaping from the railing chewed through him, and he could not begin to imagine why she would have done such a thing. Sarah kept quiet, deciding to give him the news, knowing that the loss of Rachel *and* a first child would have torn through him like a serrated blade. The days went by, and Adrian turned into a recluse, spending the daylight outside the church, wandering the streets, sitting at the overlooks and watching the dead city. Tears became his diet night-and-day, and his soul quickly became hardened, and he refused contact with others. Katie approached him, always the one seeking to deliver comfort, and she asked why, in the midst of unbelievable tragedy, he isolated himself from others and sank deeper and deeper into the dark chasm that had become his life. She was surprised to receive a genuine answer.

“I’ve given up,” he told her. “I’ve gotten to the point where I have given up on my hopes and dreams. I’ve always wanted to love and be loved. I’ve been called a hopeless romantic, and in college, my friends harmlessly joked that I had the romantic heart of a preteen girl. I’ve experienced my dream, Katie. But whenever I experience my dream, hurt follows suit. Giving up... Giving up on caring, giving up on loving... It’s scary and frightening at the same time.”

“You can’t give up,” she told him. “I know it’s hard, but you can’t give up. You’ve been hurt a lot, Adrian. But you *can’t* give up.”

“The last seven years of my life have been marked by constant emotional suffering, broken only by moments of temporary and fleeting happiness. They say this plague changed everything. In a way, it did. But it didn’t change me. It didn’t change the way my heart feels. It didn’t change the pain that I feel every single day. I am no longer fighting for my dreams, and I squash whispers of hope before they grow too loud. I’ve been constantly hurt by those whom I care about, so part of me wants to grow cold and resolute, closed-off from others, so that I will not begin caring for someone only to have my heart ripped apart at the seams. It’s miserable and pathetic, but I see no other viable options.

The noose of resignation tightens around my throat, and it takes every ounce of strength for me not to kick the chair out from under my feet."

"Rachel is just the beginning," the man says. He and Mark are sitting in a small German pub that overlooks the city, only a few blocks from the church. The snow has completely melted, and the spring rains are incessant, night and day. The man has taken many walks away from the church, exploring, and today he invited Mark to come along with him. At the pub, he broke open a bottle of whiskey and poured them each a shot. GLENFARCLAS 25. He knew it from a layover in Germany before the plague. Mark throws back the shot, feels it burning down his throat, blinks the tears away. It has been months since he's had any kind of alcohol. The man continues, smoking a CAMEL WIDE, "The community is falling apart, and Rachel is just the beginning. We've become complacent. We've forgotten what life is really like outside the church walls. When Malkovich died, everyone was distraught. They wondered how it could have happened. Rachel's death severed an artery in the veins of the church, illuminating the fact that we are small and miniscule, a tiny statistic in a world that's gone to hell." He takes another drag. "It's just a matter of time, Mark. Just a matter of time before the church falls apart completely, before its walls are stained with blood. *Our* blood..." He glares at the boy. "Unless we do something about it."

Mark pours himself another shot. "And this is when you try to convince me to do something insane. Am I right?"

The man shakes his head. "It's the most sane thing I've ever come up with."

"All right," Mark says, taking the shot. He coughs, sets the glass down.

"We need to leave this church," the man says. "I know what it means to all the people. It's a beacon of hope. A spark of normalcy. It's a sanctuary, a haven. But to me, it's a prison. Everything that we've installed at the church to keep the dark-walkers out also keep us *in*. And when the dark-walkers get inside the church—and they will, I promise you—then we're going to have one hell of a party. This city, it's flooding with dark-walkers. They're emerging from their hiding places, roaming the streets once more in the warmth of the night. There have been more and more situating themselves along the fence-line of the church. I know: I've been counting them at night. There were nearly seventy around the perimeter last night, groping at the fence, watching us, staying out of the ultraviolet beams from the lights Rachel installed. If we want to survive, we need to get out of the church. And we need to get out of this city."

Mark eyes him. "And go where? South?"

"South? Hell no. It's warmer down south. The snow here kept them at bay for a few months. In the Southern states, like Florida, they were probably roaming Palm Beach and getting lost in the Everglades on Christmas Eve. We need to go somewhere that's not populated, but somewhere that has lots of resources and lots of protection."

"And this is when you tell me where, exactly, we should go."

"Alaska," the man says.

Mark laughs. "Alaska? Do you know how far away that is?"

"It's not very populated. It's mostly wilderness. Along the north and western borders is ocean, and along the south and east there is rocky wilderness. The Yukon of Canada. Vast forests. Along the shorelines are thousands of islands, most of them abandoned. Dark-walkers don't go into the water. They wouldn't get to the islands. We could build our own cabin, we could live off the land, fish for food, have a constant water supply if we find a way to get the salt out. Look." He extinguishes the cherry of the cigarette on his jeans, flicks it onto the floor. "I know it's far away. But it's *safe*. And we

can map a route that will take us away from the major cities, keep us in places that are relatively abandoned."

"How are we going to get a car? And how are we going to get gas for the car?"

"Just like we did before we came here."

"If we're driving out in the wilderness, what happens when we run out of gas?"

The man scowls.

"Didn't think about that, did you?"

"Fuck," the man mutters.

The boy thinks for a moment. "You could fly."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. There's no power. I'd be flying blind. And what happens when I run out of fuel over the middle of god-forsaken Canada?"

Mark shrugs. "You could parachute out."

"And end up parachuting into some densely populated city in the dead of night."

The boy pours himself another shot.

The man grabs the shot glass, pours it onto the floor.

"What the hell?" Mark demands.

"You've had enough. Look. I'm going to go to Alaska. In a week. I've already begun writing down lists of supplies. You can stay here if you want, but consider this a formal invitation. I'd rather you come with me and stay alive than stay here and eventually die. Or, worse, become one of *them*."

The boy doesn't say anything for a moment.

"What?" the man asks.

"I've made friends here," Mark says. "Kyle. Katie. Anthony."

"We don't have room for all of them."

"We could drive two vehicles."

"It'd just be more complicated."

"I'm not going to just leave them behind."

The man hands him the shot glass. "Then drink up. Because soon, you will die."

The pursuit of normalcy lulls them from the confines of the church. With the snow melted, many of the men in the church had talked about starting a football league. To most, the idea was laughable—but yet it held the promise that some things would never change, that escape from the terrors and horrors of life could be experienced through that which had served as an anti-depressant and a brand of escapism since the dawn of time: sports. And so they loaded up the snow-mobiles and headed down OH-50, branching off at a road that led to the parking lot of the Bengals Stadium against the River. They broke in and carefully swept the decks of the stadium to make sure there were no "visitors". Once it was found to be safe, the men grabbed a pigskin from a display case—one covered with the signatures of former NFL players, all who had become dark-walkers themselves—and started throwing it down on the field. They formed opposing teams, assigned positions, and began laughing and cheering and yelling, cussing and joking, upon the field with its decayed grass. Katie and Sarah sit upon the bleachers, watching the men dive for the ball, proceeding to argue about whether the call was legitimate. They had asked one of the girls to be the referee, but neither of them had known enough about football to take the job professionally.

Katie watches storm-clouds moving in from the south, tumbling over one another.

Sarah says, "I've been thinking about something a lot lately."

"What's that?" Katie asks, looking over at her.

"What's it like to be one of the... vampires. Or zombies. Or dark-walkers."

Katie shakes her head. "Who can tell? We'll never know, really."

"Unless we become one of them."

"I don't plan on getting bitten." She raps her knuckles on the bleacher. "Knock on wood."

"That's aluminum."

"It has the same effect."

Sarah is quiet for a time. "I wonder if they're just animals. You know? I mean, what if being one of... them... is like being a crocodile or an alligator, or some other kind of predator? What if they've just been totally handed-off to the realm of the primal that there's no semblance within them of who they were before? What if when the disease struck, it completely contaminated their brains and eradicated everything that held any resemblance to being... human? What if they're just a bunch of animals? Mark told me that they act like birds. He's right. You've seen it: they flock together, they work together. Some people are worried that this means they're smart. But I don't think they're smart. Are birds smart when they migrate south? Are birds smart when they build a nest? No. They're animals, and it's in their nature. Besides... If these dark-walkers were really *that* smart, they wouldn't have stayed here during the winter. They would have moved south, where it's warmer... That way, they wouldn't have so many of their dead lying around." When the snow had melted, it revealed countless skeletons from where dark-walkers had succumbed to the cold. Many of the bones had been gnawed by the ones who had turned to cannibalism to survive the wintry onslaught.

"Maybe you're right," Katie says. "Maybe they are animals. And *just* animals."

Someone blows a whistle below them, and the men huddle together, arguing.

"Or what if," Sarah says, "they're *not* animals? What if the disease has hijacked their brains, and it's making them act out-of-character? I read this book once, back when I was a kid, and in the book, there was this alien species that invaded people's minds. It took over their brains. The aliens made the people act normal—engage in daily activities, continue in friendship with others, stuff like that. But the people were caged in their own minds—screaming and hollering, weeping, trying to get out of the prison, but unable to do so. They became mere spectators, watching through their own eyes and feeling their muscles move as they walked, talked, slept, laughed and loved." She looks over at Katie, seriousness etched over her face. "What if it's the same with the sick? What if the disease has taken over, and they are forced to watch as they do horrible, ghastly things? What if they see what the disease sees, feel their muscles moving under the power of the disease, and can only watch as they attack the living, can only cry in the prison of their mind over what they've become?"

There is silence for a moment.

A few raindrops begin to fall, the clouds gaping above.

Katie takes a deep breath. "I hope they're animals." She looks over at Sarah. "That will make it easier to kill them if it ever comes to that."

When Anthony discovered the man was going to BARNES & NOBLE the next day, he was adamant to go along: not simply to get out of the church, but to find some good books to pass the time. Now the man is sitting in the café, a UNITED STATES WORLD ATLAS spread out before him on the round table, a heavy, leather-bound volume he had grabbed from a shelf beside the front desk. He had also taken a rolled-up world map in a plastic case from a bucket with a SALE sign near the entrance, and it sits on the floor beside him. Anthony is walking down the aisles, filling a small handheld basket with books. Science Fiction. Fantasy. Horror. Romance. He seemed to love them all. As they had entered the store, Anthony had spotted a book sitting on the Bargain table.

"Check this out," Anthony had said, picking it up. "I read this when I was in high school." He read the cover: "I Am Legend. By Richard Matheson. It was about a malaria virus transmitted by

mosquitoes. It turned everyone into vampires. The main character, he had endured a bout with malaria back in the Vietnam War, and he was immune. It's his story of survival." He pondered for a moment, said, "I wonder if one day, when the dark-walkers are gone, and the world is recovering, if novels will be written on what happened? They'll try to convey the sense of what had happened, but they'll ultimately fail. Because what we're experiencing... It can't be put into words."

"How does the book end?" the man had asked.

"The vampires are primitive at first, but they form their own societies. They cover themselves with special makeup to enable themselves to survive in the sunlight. They form governments, raise children. They capture the main character and execute him. The ironic thing is, the main character is terrified of the vampires... But the vampires are terrified even more of *him*. He was a testament to the old world, and it was something they feared."

It takes him nearly thirty minutes, but he is able to trace a route from Cincinnati to the small town of Ketchikan, Alaska. The man has never been there, but Anthony had been there once on a cruise, and he spoke of Alaska often. He spoke of Alaska as a place that was remote and along the coast, and there were countless islands off the shoreline. He had told them about a town, called Ketchikan, and walking along a boatyard filled with fishing trawlers, floatplanes, motorboats. A small town. The man can't imagine there would be many dark-walkers there. He traces the route in a yellow highlighter, and on the back cover estimates the distance. He sits back, takes a deep breath. *Nearly 3000 miles*. With a straight drive, it would take approximately three days. But he knows he'll have to stop every afternoon and fortify a place to stay for the night. He closes the book and looks out at the city. It is almost surreal, knowing he is going to be leaving in less than a week, but excitement floods through his veins, and he finds his hands shaking in anticipation. *Less than a week isn't soon enough*. He knows he still has to convince Mark. Everyone else is in the dark about his plans, but he wants Mark to go along. He doesn't want to do this alone. He gathers the books and stands, preparing to find Anthony. It is time to leave.

That's when he hears the scream.

She stands before him, and Anthony is pinned against one of the front windows on the upper level of the store. The basket of books is scattered over the floor, and he watches her approach. She stands in the shadows, unable to come any closer. He had been in a remote corner of the store, away from windows, and she had snapped at him from her position on the floor. He had run screaming. Now he looks at her, sees her emaciated form, the tattered and ragged STARBUCKS uniform draping her body like a veil. Her face is torn up, dried over with blood, and her teeth are falling out. She watches him, eyes aflame with thirst. He is pinned, cannot move in any direction.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

He looks around for a weapon, but he is surrounded only by books with dust-covered spines. Suddenly the creature with the reddish, knotted hair turns around, and she takes off into the shadows bare-foot.

The man hears her approach. He draws the KA-BAR from his belt. He hears Anthony shouting, screaming out his name. He closes his eyes, hears the footsteps growing louder. When he opens them, he can see her fifteen feet away, charging right at him. He braces himself for the impact, sweaty fingers gripping the handle of the knife. She leaps through the air, arms outstretched, like some foreign lizard lunging at its prey. He quickly side-steps, and as she passes, he grabs her hair and

swings her around. She snaps at his wrist, but he twists her head to the side, and he draws the knife across her throat. Blood sprays onto a bookshelf, and the creature struggles, thrashing; her eyes go chalky pale, and in a moment he releases her hair from his grip. She falls onto the floor, blood gurgling slowly from her slit throat, soaking her work shirt. He wipes the blood on the blade onto his pants, returns the knife to its leather sheath. Anthony appears behind him, sees the figure bleeding all over the carpet. He turns and buckles over, vomiting onto the floor.

The man glares at him. "You're going to get me fucking killed."

"I didn't know," Anthony says, wiping bile from the corners of his mouth.

"It doesn't matter. Had I not been here, you would have been dead."

"Who do you... Who do you think she was?"

The man turns his eyes back to the girl. "I don't know," he lies.

He remembers her name: *Michelle*.

And he remembers carrying his aviation books under his arm.

And he remembers chatting with her as she made his coffee.

And he remembers pretending he was single.

And he remembers never telling Kira anything.

The man says, "It doesn't matter who she is. Come on. Let's go."

II

Adrian and Katie sit in the sanctuary. It is near the middle of the night. Katie had heard Adrian leave his bedroom, and she followed him into the sanctuary. She stood in the shadows for a time, then sat beside him. He tried to hide the tears, putting on a mask of stoicism. Before she can even speak, he says, "There was an article I read a few years ago. It was in a NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE. It was about love. I'll always remember the first sentence. 'Scientists say that the brain chemistry of infatuation is akin to mental illness—which gives new meaning to "madly in love."' It was about this scientist, Dr. Fisher, who had devoted her life to the study of lust, love, and infatuation. She had been looking at love through the telescopes on an MRI machine. When she began these studies, she had volunteers who were 'madly in love' with someone; she put them inside the MRI machine, showed them a picture of a neutral object followed by a picture of their loved one. Whenever the picture of the loved one was shown, the brain went wild. The parts of the brain linked with reward and pleasure—the ventral tegmental area and the caudate nucleus—lit up like fireworks. So she discovered that the chemicals involved in love ignited the caudate nucleus, in which resides a thick spread of receptors for dopamine. Dopamine is known for creating energy, exhilaration, focused attention, and motivation. The chemicals involved in love excite the dopamine, which brings an even greater intensity of energy, exhilaration, and the like. So love is just a natural high in your body. Borderline mental illness."

Katie says nothing.

Adrian continues: "So I have to ask myself, 'Did I really love Rachel?' Or did her presence just ignite brain chemicals that made me feel happier and more energized? If Fisher is right, then love is selfish: it's latching onto someone for the benefit of increased pleasure chemicals in the brain."

"Adrian..."

"Romantic relationships begin with infatuation. Right? We are attracted to someone's personality or the way they fit into their clothes. That's how relationships are born. It's just infatuation. We throw the word 'love' around like pixie-stick candy and treat it like it's something

we're 'in'. But infatuation isn't love. It's just a way of seeking your own self-interest. 'This person makes me happy. This person makes me feel good. This person really cares about me.' Infatuation is directed inwards to the self, not outward to the other. We search for security, closure, and happiness in the other person. But, eventually, infatuation dies. When infatuation dies, relationships die. Breakups. Divorce. 'I'm not in love with you anymore,' my first girlfriend told me. She didn't want to work things through. She wanted to end it. Love was a joke. She never loved me in the first place. She was infatuated with me. When her infatuation died, so did her desire to be with me. When infatuation dies, relationships can take one of either two routes: death or rebirth. The relationship can expire, fizzle, decay, dissolve. Or that relationship can evolve into something more beautiful, more extravagant, more wonderful. Infatuation is the caterpillar in the cocoon, and love is the exotic butterfly it becomes once it bursts out of its shell. The infatuation dies, and love begins to grow. But... with me and Rachel... I was just infatuated. I didn't love her. Not yet. We just enjoyed how we made each other feel. And when she leapt from that roof, she proved that she didn't love me. She was just looking out for herself."

She slapped him across the face. He was totally unprepared, and now he reaches up, feels his cheek stinging and burning. Her eyes glower like embers in a fire, and she growls, "Don't you *ever* talk like that again. Do you hear me? When you talk like that, you cheapen what you and Rachel had. You turn something beautiful into garbage." She is silent for a moment, and Adrian says nothing. "Yes, Adrian: love includes contentment, happiness, lust, the need for companionship. These are offshoots of love. What love is... It's something that cannot be put into words very easily. Love is a series of emotions, that when combined, result in the greatest feeling that you will ever know. Waking up next to that special someone, snuggling with her for hours. Looking into her eyes and seeing and feeling absolute joy. Knowing that if you had a split-second to choose one moment in your life to spend the rest of eternity, it would be that one. Love is knowing you will always have that person. The shit can hit the fan, but the most important part of your life—her—still remains. You do everything for her, as long as she's happy. Love, Adrian... It's not something you can give a definition to. It's an elusive animal that resists all forms of accurate description. But it is unique in that it will reveal all when the time is right."

She is quiet for a moment. "You may doubt your love for Rachel... But love itself is undeniable. All my life I've searched for love, and I've found it in the most unexpected places." She takes a deep breath, and she begins to tell her story.

III

"I blame myself for everything," she says. "It's my way of responsibility, for various reasons the way I was raised screwed me up. My mom didn't beat me. My dad didn't beat my mom. I lived in a Christian home. So much good that did for me. I was molested as a child, probably by my uncle. My mom got herpes in the middle of her 'faithful' marriage to my father, and after he died she found out he molested his step daughter years ago before he was a Christian. My mother never had her parents talk to her about anything, and so she rarely explained anything to me. She went through multiple abortions and had her own guilt complex. She got pregnant at a young age, abused by the father of her child and nearly everyone after—except for my father. After my father died in a random shooting at a McDONALD'S, I felt that I had no parents. My mother tried to do everything she could do regain her own life, and I was basically left alone to figure shit out on my own. I lost my virginity as a high

school freshman, to a stranger behind some businesses closed for the weekend. I didn't realize I could tell him, *No*. It sounds stupid, but that's how I felt. Young, uninformed, and in competition with my peers. It continued to get worse. I tried to kill myself a few times. This is when my mother decided I was worth no privacy. She would go through my things and invade the little bit of solitude I had. Some time passed, and we always fought. I ran away one day to make her wake up. Instead I got raped. Twice. I was a Junior in high school, I think. I came home, and my mother had called the cops and gone through everything I owned. My diaries. My journals. My scrapbooks. As a writer, it hurt most she threw away all the things I had ever written, because she found a disgusting story I printed from the internet and didn't want to talk about it or to even understand why. I was disgusted because I had written a letter to her and hidden it away with all my papers, and she was in such a hurry to rid her house of my writing that she didn't even notice it. This is when I started to feel the full effect of depression. Soon after, very soon after, I met a guy that saved me from myself. He taught me about the rights we are born with, who I was, how I saw the world... He asked me questions and wanted to know what I thought. How strange it was, after so long of having my mother set me aside for herself, to have someone interested in my well-being and my interests. I became myself, I turned into something new. That wasn't enough, I suppose. After a time of going through high school and finally barely graduating, the fights with my mother got worse. I can't say her intentions were bad. It's the reflex of wanting to keep something and smothering it until it dies. I got fed up with her, and I left. I packed up what I could and stayed with the guy who helped me, Don, and his grandma. I lived there for a time, and she got fed up with us. I don't exactly remember how, but we ended up living in the car off and on, and I went back to live with my mom for a while. Places I was going were making me feel worse and worse."

Katie doesn't say anything for a moment, and then she continues. "Around November one year, Don went on a trip out of town for three weeks. I loved him dearly, more than anything I'd ever known. I don't know what was wrong with me, particularly beyond being bipolar. But he was honorable and had ethics, and he did not want to be intimate in his grandmother's house. It was driving me crazy. I wanted some affection, and I wasn't getting it. While he was gone, I was hanging out with a guy I shouldn't have been and soaking up what attention he would give me and soon after I felt horrible. For those three weeks I didn't eat, I barely slept, and I almost died. I was 19 years old, fresh out of high school, no job, no money, no place to live... and I was weak. I cheated on Don with a 14-year-old boy. Then I tried to slit my wrists. I didn't succeed due to a headache I attained from crying so much. It was all my fault. *All my fucking fault*. I told him when he got here, and I cried and I cried and I cried, and I knew things would be different. Don was a wonderful man, and he wanted nothing more than for me to be happy. Whatever happened in those three weeks, it broke me wide open. I started up with this crap all over again, like when I was a kid and didn't understand sex. I hooked up with an ex-boyfriend. Don would call, and I would be at this other guy's house. I would tell him I was at home, and that I'd be over soon. I'd go home, take a quick shower, and go see Don, feeling sick all day long. In addition to all that awful business, this ex-boyfriend had a cousin I had met, and I was driving out-of-town to see him, too. I didn't understand why I couldn't stop myself. I wanted to die, and yet I understood that I shouldn't, that it would be weak to not suffer the consequences of what I brought upon myself. I finally confessed to Don what was happening. I sobbed and cried and cried, and I wanted only to die for so long."

She wipes a tear from her eye, the memories behind the story painful. "At one point I finally got a job at WAL-MART. It was the worst decision of my life. I was still really sick in the head, off and on living in the car, living with Don and his family. I started up again, writing dirty notes to a guy at work, and then we kissed. I tried to break up with Don, and he was so upset, so I packed up

everything in the car and went to stay with this co-worker I was flirting with. His name was Aaron... I had sex with him, obviously... the first two times I consented. After a time of staying with him and getting drunk and high constantly, watching him smoke methamphetamines, seeing his family and how tore up the whole situation was, I came out of hiding and contacted Don. He hadn't heard from me for several weeks. We talked, and he wanted only for me to be happy, and I was so sick then that I didn't know what to do. A month before this WAL-MART shit started, I went to a mental health clinic to seek some kind of help. They told me I was not sick and to go home. They didn't care about my multiple suicide attempts. And there I was, promising Don I wouldn't have sex with Aaron anymore if he wasn't going to be in a relationship with me, knowing as I said it that it was a lie."

She leans back in the pew. "Finally I was down to the end of my rope. Aaron was raping me repeatedly, and I had lost any urge to fight back or to live to see another day. It was one night when we went to the casino, no amount of weed or beer could give me the attachment I desired, so I snorted methamphetamines. It was horrible. I gave a blowjob to another co-worker in the elevator at the casino. After that night I was sitting at Aaron's house, and I asked him, 'Do you want me to stay?' He said he didn't care. This tore me up. I just... wanted the abyss forever. So I called Don, and we cried on the phone, and he said to come home with him and get some help. I did. I left that horrible place and went back to Don. I realized then that I wasn't just mentally ill anymore, that the repeated violent sex that was forced on me caused me to contract some disease. I was in so much pain. We went to WAL-MART and told them what happened, and they fired the people I worked with and myself. I was horrified that they didn't care that I was raped. That night I was so angry, and I decided that I was going to see Aaron one last time. He had weapons, and he was violent, and I made him lose his job. I was going to convince him to kill me by making him angry. But before I could, Don got a hold of me. I was screaming and clawing at him, trying to get out the window or however I could escape. I did this to myself, I fucked around, I stayed with Aaron... and I was even more sick because of it. What could I possibly want to live for, what could there possibly be in my future besides more pain? Eventually Don calmed me down, and we agreed that I would get better."

Adrian is quiet, listening.

Katie stops speaking for a moment.

"You can go on," Adrian says in a whisper.

"Okay," she replies. "Anyways, I was forced to go to the emergency room soon after. I could barely walk anymore, and at first I refused to be examined. But after a while, I didn't have a choice. I was crying my eyes out, it hurt so much. It was my fault. The cops came and asked me questions about Aaron, and I talked as long as I could, but it wasn't long before I curled into a ball and screamed and screamed and screamed, screaming at the top of my lungs, 'It's my fault!' The E.R. doctor came in and examined me, and his words haunted me for the next year: 'Oh, yeah, this is definitely herpes. Is this from all the sex you've been having?' It was all my fault! I prayed that if God cared for me, that He would just take me, and I convinced myself not to commit suicide, because I deserved to suffer the consequences of my actions. These things I had done to myself. I wish this is the end of my story, but it's not. I worked on recovering for the next few months, and it was excruciatingly painful—physically, emotionally, mentally. Don was with me every step of the way. All of the events of that time period are blurry and out-of-order in my head, but soon we were living in the car again. He wouldn't let me stay alone, he took care of me and made sure I always had something to eat. I refused to go back to the mental health clinic, but eventually I started going to addiction classes. I wasn't addicted. I would smoke weed, because it gave me the chance to calm down and recognize what I feel instead of panicking. But before I left a man told me about Partners for Youth Vision, a drop-in center for homeless and disenfranchised youth. That was me. So I went,

and to this very day, I'm glad that Don made me go. I told him I didn't want to; on the brochure was a picture of the guy that I was first soaking up attention from. How could I possibly go there and just get involved with another guy? But I went, and I think God for it, too. A woman there, named Yvonne, became my strength and guidance. I had been struggling a lot in my homelessness, and it was hard to even get \$20 from my mom for food. I had told Don I couldn't be with him, because I was tainted now. Diseased. Herpes. It was all my fault. We would go to the Holiday Inn a lot for their computer access... and at one point I ended up in bed with a drunken older man, and I went back to Don and sobbed my eyes out. He took me to the E.R., and I can't remember what all happened. But eventually Yvonne convinced me to go back to the mental health clinic, and I knew it was a step in the right direction—even though the workers there caused me so many heartaches, headaches, and problems. They placed me in special housing, and despite my desire to get better, I still struggled with my horrible bouts of mania. At one time I had sex with the pizza delivery guy, at another with a guy in his car that I met from the internet. It just kept happening. I got involved with drinking and took sleeping pills to help me fall asleep. One night I drank an entire bottle of vodka and took two sleeping pills while hanging out with a guy I shouldn't have been with. I don't remember what happened, but I woke up at 5 in the morning, naked, alone, confused, and hurt."

She looks over at Adrian. "I haven't always lived in Cincinnati. All of this happened when I lived in Phoenix. I continued searching for love... Don was killed in a freak motorcycle accident, and that tore me up. I slipped back into depression, and that's when I went to a party and realized that I was a lesbian." She laughs. "How does one realize she's a lesbian at a party? I had been raped and ravaged by so many guys, and I found that I was sexually attracted to Yvonne. No, I never did anything about it. But eventually I turned my attention to girls. Guys crave sex. Girls crave romance. And it was at a party that the tables turned, that I realized that what I had been looking for the entire time—*love*—was simply behind another anatomical frame."

She is quiet for a moment. "I was working a SUBWAY on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona. I befriended a girl at the work. Sierra. It was a Friday night, when it happened, and everyone was meeting for drinks a high-class bar downtown. CELEBRITY THEATER, it was called. Sierra and I rode together, parked in a covered garage, and made our way into the bar. There was a line stretching out of the entrance, with a bouncer letting only the elite inside. Sierra was friends with him, and he let us pass. We both had a few drinks as we sat at the bar, listening to a jazz band playing on stage. Maybe it was because I was vulnerable, maybe it was because I just didn't care... But she began flirting with me, and I didn't resist. We moved our legs closer to one another until they were touching. She invited me to come over to her place, and I agreed. I was honestly nervous about what might take place, but I was excited at the same time. Before we got to her place, both our panties were off under our dresses and we were rubbing each other. By the time we got to the bed in her studio, we were both naked. That was my first... time... with a girl. I wore Sierra out," Katie tells Adrian. "She was totally spent. I loved eating a woman, and I wanted to be eaten like that. I became involved in several incidents of group sex with other women. It was a few years later that I met a girl from Cincinnati. Her name was Elizabeth. She was a lawyer, had graduated from some college in Boston. We became really good friends, and we became closer and closer to one another. She wanted to hold off sex for a while, because she had seen too many relationships destroyed by sex. She stayed in Phoenix for two months, working on a case. When it was time for her to return to Cincinnati, she invited me on a three-day trip to a beach along the Texas coast. She invited me... and *only* me."

ΣΩΣ

Elizabeth had reserved a room at an expensive resort hotel right on the Gulf Coast. They had been there for one night, and though they had slept together, nothing had happened. Morning came, and Elizabeth opened the balcony door to let the breeze from the ocean sweep into the room. With her pajamas on, Katie ducked into the bathroom and shut the door. She began to shower, and a knock came at the door.

"Katie?" Elizabeth cooed. "Can I come in to do my hair and makeup?"

"Sure," Katie said. She leaned out of the shower and unlocked the door.

Elizabeth entered, still dressed in her pajamas, and began getting ready for the day. Katie continued showering behind the fogged-glass door. After shampooing her hair, she turned off the water, felt it dripping from her body. She grabbed the towel hanging over the shower door and dried her hair, her body, wrapped it around her waist. She pulled back the door and stepped into the bathroom. It was small and cramped. Elizabeth smiled at her from the sink. Katie smiled back, reached for the door to the bedroom... and "accidentally" dropped the towel from around her waist. She leaned down to get it, and her bare cheeks touched against Elizabeth's leg. Katie glanced over her shoulder to see if her roommate would turn around and finish her makeup, but she saw that Elizabeth's eyes were glued to her freshly-shaved flower-garden. A strange look came over Elizabeth's façade, and Katie knew that she was turned on. She knew it would be only a matter of time before they explored one another sensually for the first time.

Katie went ahead into the room to get dressed. She rifled through her things, wondering what to wear. She called Elizabeth out of the bathroom for advice. Elizabeth came into the room, saw Katie standing stark-naked, holding two pairs of panties in one hand and two pairs of bras in the other. Elizabeth's eyes danced over Katie's slim figure: the shapely legs, the petite stomach, the pear-sized breasts, her slender arms and stately neck. She didn't turn her eyes away, but even commented on how nice Katie's breasts looked. She recommended a certain outfit, so Katie said thanks and turned back around, continuing to rifle through the dresser drawer. She was turned away from the older woman, and in a moment she felt the warm touch of Elizabeth's hands against her waist. Katie's knees went weak. She could feel Elizabeth's hot breath on her neck, and her insides began to tingle. Elizabeth, coming from behind, wrapped her arms around Katie's side and began caressing her breasts with both hands, and Katie pushed her cheeks against Elizabeth's abdomen.

Elizabeth leaned close against her, whispered, "Want to go to the bed?"

Katie's world spun as she nodded. "Uh-huh."

They moved to the bed. Elizabeth lied down, and Katie crawled atop of her. They began kissing, the passionate kisses they always shared. She began pulling at Elizabeth's pajama pants, and she pulled them off. Elizabeth wasn't wearing any panties, and her shaven vagina stared up at her. The naked Katie worked with Elizabeth's shirt; Elizabeth extended her arms, and Katie pulled the shirt off of her, revealing that she was not wearing a bra. Her breasts were small, too, but they were soft and the skin felt like silk, her pink nipples growing hard. Katie smiled and leaned down, sucking on Elizabeth's nipples; she would suck on one and, with the other hand, roll the other between her fingers. Elizabeth let out a long, soft moan, and they began to kiss passionately once again.

ΣΩΣ

"We didn't leave the hotel room until that night," Katie says. "We spent the entire day there. We ordered room-service and enjoyed one another. It was different than all the other times with other girls. This time it wasn't just about sexual attraction. That was there, of course, but... But it was something so much *more* than that." She can tell Adrian feels slightly awkward, but she continues

telling him her story. "It was with Elizabeth that I realized I could truly love a girl. I told her that night. We were walking along the beach, and I pulled her close to me, and I confessed, like a childish school-girl, that I loved her. She smiled back at me, and a tear crawled down her cheek, and she told me that she loved me, too, that I was the first woman she ever truly loved. She was older than me, had been with a lot of women. But she had never enjoyed sex with anyone as much as she enjoyed it with me. We returned to the room that night and had sex again, and after we both experienced the most intense orgasms of our lives, we passed out naked in each other's arms. She kissed me so gently on the lips, and she told me that we were going to be the best of roommates, and she invited me to live with her in Cincinnati."

Katie stares into the darkness. "I moved to Cincinnati a month later. I lived with her for three months, and she moved to Dayton. I still had a job here in Cincinnati, but I would go visit every weekend. I was working late at night, at a bar in Harrison, when the plague hit here. THE DEW DROP. It was owned by a retired firefighter, and all kinds of firefighter paraphernalia decorated the place. My favorite was a blow-up sex-toy doll with a shirt on, and the shirt said: I HEART FIREMEN. Anyways, that's a night I'll never remember. We were just closing down, sending people out the doors, when everyone got headaches. You know the drill: bleeding all over the face, going crazy, screaming and shouting... And then death. But the deadness didn't last very long. Only a few days."

Katie draws a deep breath, tears daring to slip between her half-closed eyelids, the memories of that night traumatizing, something she only relives in her worst nightmares and in moments of spontaneous vulnerability. "I tried to go see her, tried to see if she was okay... But the roads north of Cincinnati are blocked with cars. You can't get through. That's when I discovered the church. I've been here ever since." She looks over at Adrian. "Love is real. It's something that's remarkable, something that can't be explained, but something that is undeniable. You and Rachel *loved* one another. I don't know why she took her life. But it wasn't because she didn't love you. She *did* love you. And don't you *dare* forget that."

Chapter Twenty-One

When The Sun Shall Never Die

(or “Kyle’s Story”)

“Tell me not, in mournful number,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
and things are not what they seem.
Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art; to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (A.D. 1807-1882)

I

Two weeks have passed. The man never left the church: he couldn’t stand to leave Mark behind, and he mentally kicked himself for his softness. But he and Mark had bonded, and though at times they could not stand one another, the man could not imagine the journey northwest without him. But as the days passed, and as the man continued gathering the goods for the trip—he hijacked a 4x4 S.U.V. from inside a vehicle dealership (keeping it parked several blocks away from the church so as not arouse suspicion), stocked the vehicle with weaponry and extra gallons of oil and several blankets and first aid kits and canned goods and anything else he could imagine—, Mark found himself agreeing with the man. Adrian continued to become more reclusive, the members of the church were becoming hostile towards one another, and then there was Carla: she had begun spewing her religious profanities towards the people at the church, especially towards Katie who was an open lesbian. The dark-walkers would surround the church every night, and their numbers had reached close to ninety. It was then that Mark agreed to go with the man, under one condition: two others could come along. The man had agreed, though reluctantly. He imagined that extra people meant extra baggage and thus even more time until Alaska would become a reality rather than a fantasy. As the sun continued to warm, and as the buds began to appear on the trees growing greener, and as the spring rains continued their march across the Ohio River Valley, the man could finally put a date to their departure: four days, March 24th.

Now Mark stands before the house that had silhouetted many of his dreams. It is 1:00 in the afternoon. Birds fly overhead. The grass is overgrown and bursting green, insects leaping stalk-to-stalk. The trees are sprouting, the limbs casting shadows against the brick walls of the house. Mark takes a deep breath and moves onto the front step. It has been months since he last came to this spot. He knows what lies inside. He pushes the door open and enters. It stinks of mold, and he can see that the walls are damp, the drywall crumbling in spots. The fan in the living room has fallen to the floor, nuts and bolts scattered over the carpet. A rat runs across the parlor floor right in front of him, disappearing into a gnarled hole in the wall. Mark makes his way into the kitchen. The book-bag

stares at him, still zipped up, the school-books remaining untouched for nearly eight months. Mark turns and looks into the television room. He spies the couch, and upon it the skeleton. Had he seen this skeleton anywhere else, he wouldn't have been able to detect its age, its sex, nothing. But he knows who this is, and Cara's name escapes his lips, a bare whisper. He moves over to the couch and kneels down beside the skeleton. He reaches out with a shaking hand and touches the bony hand; the toothless skeleton smiles at him, and twin beady eyes stare at him from one of the eye sockets. The mouse disappears back into the brain cavity. Mark's face falls, knowing that a rodent has made a home in the place where the personality and dreams and hopes and fears of his only true love had, at one time, resided. He doesn't know how to get the mouse out. He doesn't want to touch the skull inappropriately; he tiptoes back into the kitchen, waits several minutes, and then the mouse appears from the hollow socket, races down her bones to the couch, down the side of the couch to the floor, and across the floor into another hole in the wall.

Sweat pours down his face. He wears only jeans and a t-shirt, and dirt and grime cover his hands and knees. He steps away from the freshly-dug-and-refilled hole. Cara's grave. He looks around her backyard, at the lopsided swing-set and the garage that has collapsed in on itself. He doesn't have anything to mark her grave with... nothing except for the shovel in his hand. He moves to the front of the grave and drives the shovel into the earth, stomping his foot down upon the shovel's lip to dig the blade deeper into the soil. He releases the shovel, and the handle points straight into the cerulean blue sky. He kneels down beside the grave, and tears trickle down his cheeks. "Everything has changed..." he says. "Everything has changed... Including me. I'm not the boy you knew back then. I'm not the boy you loved. I wish... I wish I could have been there with you. When it happened. I wish I could have said goodbye." He looks up at the sky, an empty blue bowl with no horizon. He looks down at the grave once more. "I have to leave now... And I can't come back. We're going to Alaska. We think... We think it will be safer there." He touches the soft earth, bites his lip. "I still have a picture of you... in my wallet. I look at it all the time. I'm not going to forget you, Cara. And I'll never replace you." He stands, takes a deep breath, and returns to the front of the house, climbs into the car, and drives away. He doesn't even look back.

II

The man is thankful for the brief intermission of clear blue skies, and he takes the time to continue working on the vehicle. He had gone to WAL-MART and taken various vehicle fluids. He checked the brake fluid and is now lying underneath the engine, back pressed against the cold cement of the abandoned house's garage. Sweat drips down the sides of his face and burns his eyes. He twists the knob from the oil tank and rolls out of the way as oil begins gushing down into the tin pan. He squirms out from underneath the vehicle and stands. He grabs a towel from the bench along the far wall and begins rubbing his hands, smearing the oil. He curses and reaches for a bottle of cleaner fluid when he feels the presence behind him. He grips the KA-BAR on his belt and swings around, ready to defend himself; he sees Harker standing in the doorway, a look of amazement and shock written over his face.

"So it's true," Harker says, eyeing the vehicle. "The rumors are true."

The man releases his hand from the knife and returns to the bench, cleaning his hands. "And what rumors would those be?" he asks.

"That you're leaving. And that you're trying to convince other people to leave."

"You're half right," the man says, turning to face him.

"And what half is that? There are whispers dancing in the hallways of the church."

"And what kind of whispers are these?"

"That you're seceding."

A crude smile crosses the man's façade. "Seceding?" He laughs.

"I fail to see how this is comical."

"I'm not content to stay at the church," the man says.

"Then leave. But don't bring down the entire church in your efforts to—"

The man holds up a hand. "Wait. I'm not quite sure I understand what you're talking about."

"You're leaving. And there's talk around the church about people joining you. They're frightened. Scared. They think that the church isn't safe anymore. I don't know why. Experience has taught us just the opposite. We're secure on the hilltop. The sick may want to get inside, but they can't. We've never had any issues. But now that you're leaving, and trying to win people over to your side—"

The man shakes his head. "I'm not trying to win over everyone."

"That's not what I hear."

"The only person that's coming with me is Mark."

"Mark and who else?"

The man bites his lip. "Two others."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Mark is choosing. He's the one who wanted more."

"He's going around, asking questions, probing. People are getting nervous."

"If you have a problem with that, talk to Mark. Not to me."

"You're the one who started all of this."

The man eyes Harker. "What are you worried about?"

"I'm worried about the people in the church. I'm worried about—"

"Losing control?" the man asks.

Harker glares at him. "What?"

"You're afraid of losing control over the people."

"That's absurd."

"You've been in control for half a year now. And you're afraid to lose that."

Harker's eyes glower like emblazoned embers. "I'm afraid that people will die."

"People are going to die," the man says. "That much is for sure. The only question is where? Stuck in the church? Or pursuing a better life somewhere else? Sitting on our asses? Or actually *doing* something meaningful and worthwhile? I can't speak for everyone at the church. And you have my word that I haven't breathed a word to anyone. The reason I'm gathering supplies and getting ready for the trip in this secluded garage is because I *want* it to be a secret. The more people that agree with me is the more people that will just slow me down."

"Let me see if I understand," Harker says. "You're leaving the church because you're sure that the church isn't a safe place to be. But you don't want to tell anyone your fears because you're afraid they'll want to come—and thus escape death—but slow you down in the process." He shakes his head. "It's all about you, isn't it? You're nothing but a selfish bastard, and you've been nothing but a selfish bastard since you got here."

"I may be a selfish bastard," the man says, "but it's what's kept me alive this far."

III

They stand beside her grave, the two of them amidst the cemetery with its withered tombstones and their faded carvings. The lake ripples in the intermittent spurts of wind, and several geese prowl along the water's edge, eyeing the two human figures with caution. Kyle watches several of them teeter along the bank, then slide into the lake, paddling with their webbed feet and poking at the first hints of spring algae. He hears Adrian breathing deeply beside him. He turns back to his friend, and Adrian is kneeling in the grass beside the grave. He presses his hands down onto the moist earth, feels the mud sticking to his fingers. He wipes the mud on the blades of grass by his feet and stares at the wooden cross. Rachel's name had been stenciled along the epicenter, and he feels tears brimming behind closed eyelids as he remembers their romantic moments, the way they experienced happiness amidst the pain of a fallen world.

Kyle turns and gazes out to the west. The sun throbs above the horizon.

"We should go," he says, putting a hand on Adrian's shoulder.

Adrian writhes away. "No."

"The sun will be setting soon."

"I want to be here. Right here. With her."

"I know," Kyle says. "But they'll be coming out soon."

"I don't care." Adrian stares at the wooden cross, remembering Rachel's beauty.

"Everyone's lost someone," Kyle says. "You're not alone."

ΣΩΣ

"Sing a song, Kyle, sing a song! Sing a song, Kyle, sing a song! No, we won't sit down till you sing a song, sing a song, Kyle, sing a song!"

The kids raised their voices louder and louder, standing from their chairs and even upon tables, clapping their hands and singing a beautiful chorus. The staff stood as well, and they began clapping their hands, joining in. The kitchen crew came out through the entrance and exit doors, standing quietly and observing, feeling slightly out-of-place. Kyle sat in his chair, grinning wildly, face flaming a brilliant red. He stood, and waved his hands back and forth as if he were conducting an orchestra, and with each sweep the crescendo grew louder and more intense. He stood upon a chair, beckoning them on; two of his co-workers, Amos and Kaleb, stood beside him on either side, singing loudly in his ears. For minutes this went on, and the walls of the dining hall shook and quivered, and finally Kyle raised his hands and asked for silence. The kids went still, and he spoke:

"If you will let me, I shall sing a song on guitar for our beloved program assistant. It is a song I myself wrote a few weeks ago. If you will let me return to the cabin and get my guitar, then I will happily sing a song for all of you—and especially for Elysa!" He looked over at the program assistant, who blushed, secretly hoping the kids would demand a song right then. However, Kyle's idea sparked an interest in their hearts, and they gave him permission.

He stepped down from the table as the kids filed to their tables.

"Desert!" the director shouted, and the kids let out an excited cheer.

Kyle smiled at Elysa, who hung her head in mock shame. "This is going to be wonderful," he teased.

"Oh, I can't wait," she cooed sarcastically.

He left the dining hall and began walking across the field, the sun beginning to set behind the line of pines in the distance. He whistled the tune sweetly to himself and felt the cool of the evening beginning to sweep over. He was excited, for in the morning, the parents would come and pick up their children after a week of camp, and he would be able to go and see his girlfriend Sarah. He hadn't seen her in ages, and just to see her pretty face would awaken marvels for him. He worked at a Christian camp called JOSEPH BADGER MEADOWS, named-so after a famous Presbyterian missionary who had traveled throughout Ohio and Pennsylvania planting churches. Many wonderful stories were told about him, including how one night he was attacked by a bear and had to climb a tree and hide for nearly three days before the bear abandoned the prey. Bears hadn't been seen in northeastern Ohio for nearly two decades, though some imagined they still roamed some of the woodlands. The camp was situated in Burghill, Ohio, on the border of Sharon, Pennsylvania; the town was comprised of farms and race tracks, a few hole-in-the-wall grocery shops lining Route 7, the main road that headed straight into Pennsylvania. On the weekends, Kyle would drive to the Yankee Lake Liquor Store and buy Sox City Root beers for the camp staff. Not this weekend, though: he was loading his Jeep Wrangler and heading straight to Sarah's house three hours away. No time could be wasted.

The camp housed a dining hall, ten cabins, two farmhouses for extra residents, and a barn with rock climbing and rappelling. The director had even built a High Ropes course for the high school students. The camp had countless camp-weeks throughout the year, and in the summer they had special camps for young kids, usually around the Middle School age. This camp—Night Owl—was for Middle School kids, and the drive for them to attend camp was that they got to stay up until 1:00 in the morning every night.

Kyle entered his cabin, found his cot, grabbed his guitar case, and made his way back to the dining hall. When evening came, the children anticipated a grand show.

The kids jumped up and down when he entered through the main doors. He directed Elysa to sit in a chair beside the head table, and he sat upon the table with his Alvarez guitar held in his hands. He announced, "This song is dedicated to my good friend and failed love interest, Elysa Bucci." Everyone on staff knew that it was a joke: Kyle had no desire to be with Elysa, and Elysa had no desire to be with him. It all started on July 4th when Elysa's parents came down to camp to celebrate Independence Day with the staff; Kyle kept making jokes about wanting to date Bucci, with the point of making her feel awkward, and ever since then it was jokingly believed that Kyle had an intense love interest in Elysa, but she would not give him the time of day. He began playing the chords—E, Am, A, Cm, and F—and sang the lyrics, which he patterned after "Where Did You Sleep Last Night" as played by a 1990s grunge garage band from Seattle:

♪♪ My Bucc, My Bucc, don't lie to me
Tell me, Do you truly want me?
We'll walk through the pines
With our hands Entwined,
And We'll skip the days away!

My Bucc, My Bucc, don't lie to me
Tell me, Where would you rather be?
On a beach, getting a tan,
With our toes in the sand,
Oh! Heaven's got nothing on us!

A yellow house with a walk-around porch,
And hanging plants bathing in the sun.
We'll drink iced tea and watch the sun setting,
O'er the ice-capped mountains beyond.

And what else could we want, but to be in this place?
Wrapped warm in each other's arms?
There's a future for us, beyond this camp
Tell me, Don't you agree?

My Bucc, My Bucc, don't lie to me
Tell me, Will you be mine?
The wedding bells sound, in the chapel in the pines,
As we walk down that pine-strewn aisle! ♪♪

When he finished, he raised his hands and bowed. Elysa's face burned bright red. The kids were roaring. Everyone laughed. The commotion died down. Kyle stepped down from the table and patted Elysa on the shoulder. "How'd you like it?" he asked.

She pretended to throw up, then, "Oh, it was something else."

A little girl ran up to Elysa and said. "That was so romantic! I wish a guy would sing me a song like that!"

Kyle grinned. "One day, my little friend, one day."

The director announced, "Night Games! Counselor Hunt!"

"Counselor Hunt" was one of the kids' favorite games. The counselors and staff would hide within a certain bounds, and the kids would get in groups and try to find them. Night had fallen, and the area for the hunt included the woods around the cabins, the big field, the swimming pool, and then all the way through the great meadow bordering the pines—all of this had become submerged in darkness. The stars danced overhead; storms had come through earlier, but they had left around noon, sweeping out to the east, towards Boston. He hid in the meadow, pushing through several thorn bushes and crouching down among the big weeds. He had told the campers, "If you find me, prepare to bleed." He had meant it: the thorns were everywhere, one-inch-long, and he hoped not to be discovered.

"Kyle!"

He turned and saw a figure standing beside him. "Nicole? What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to hide with you," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "I mean... Yeah. Take a seat."

She sat down beside him. "Cool place to hide."

"Yeah," he said. He felt slightly awkward: he knew Nicole liked him.

What would Sarah think of this?

A great horn blew at the dining hall, and they could hear kids running through the big field.

"Do you think they'll find us?" Nicole asked.

"No, I don't think so," he said.

They sat there for about fifteen minutes. No kids found them.

Nicole began scooting closer. He tried not to notice. He wished she would leave.

"Who are you texting?" she asked, looking at his phone.

He flipped the cover down. "Sarah," he said. "My girlfriend."

"Oh."

Another fifteen minutes.

She became closer. She put a hand on his knee.

He stood. "I have to go to the bathroom." He ran through the field, legs sliced open by thorns, and he finally emerged by the bathhouse by cabins nine and 10. He ducked inside and drew a sigh of relief. He remained in there until the horn blew: the games were over.

Several hours had passed. The kids slept quietly in the cabin. Kyle sat on the porch, holding his phone, thinking about seeing Sarah tomorrow. Nothing could be more exciting.

Footsteps came towards him.

He turned and looked, and through the light bleeding from the porch lamp, he could see Kaleb.

"My C.I.T. is with my cabin," he said. A C.I.T. was a counselor-in-training, doing whatever the counselor didn't want to do—and a buffer zone for keeping the children under supervision when the counselor needed an escape.

"You're in Cabin 3," Kyle said. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

"I need some advice," he said, sitting down. "Might you be able to grant it?"

"I'm not too good with advice," he said, "but I'll try."

"Something's not right with me and Courtney," he said. "She isn't answering my calls. She isn't answering my texts. I don't know what to think. I'm afraid... I'm afraid she may have found someone else, Man."

"How long has this been going on?"

"A month," he replied.

"A month? Wow. I didn't have a clue."

"It really bothers me. What if she has started dating someone else and just hasn't told me?"

"You don't want a girl like that," Kyle said. "If she did that, then she'd be into 'convenient dating.' You don't want any part of that."

"I don't know. I hope that's not the case." A sigh. "I really like her, Man."

"I know. But you have to grow a pair of balls and be a man about these things."

Kaleb looked confused. "Huh?"

"What I mean is this: you want a serious, long-term, committed relationship that involves trust and honesty. You don't want anything to do with this high school dating crap. If that's what Courtney's into, then you don't want anything to do with it. If she just wants someone to have fun with, then you don't want to be a part of that. I warned you from the get-go that I wasn't a big fan of Courtney. I wasn't a big fan of any of your girlfriends, except Jennifer... And remember, she was the only one who didn't hurt you. The others, well... Anyways, Anth, what I'm saying is that if you two are in different playing fields—if you're more mature about these things than she is—you don't want to have to lower yourself to a more immature level. If you're fear is the case, then she's not the kind of girl you want. Being hurt is inevitable. It would be wise to wish it to come sooner, or break up with her."

"I don't know if she's like that, though. I'm probably just being paranoid."

"Maybe. But how would you feel if that *were* the case?"

"Honestly? Devastated. Heartbroken. Betrayed. Back-stabbed."

"Relationships are demons, Man. They're demons."

Snickering came from inside the cabin.

Kyle stood, opened the door. "Quiet, or no pool time tomorrow! Go to bed!"

The cabin became deathly silent.

When he turned, Kaleb had stood. "I need to be getting back to my cabin."

Kyle said, "I hope, for your sake, that everything works out for you. But I told you from the beginning that she's bad news. You always pick the wounded girls. Sonja. Julie. Courtney. Wounded. And so you force yourself to get hurt."

He was torn from the dream, in which he held Sarah tight against him and kissed her sweetly under an auburn moon. He rubbed his eyes and saw a figure standing over him. He propped himself up on his elbow, and in the wanton light coming from the cabin window he could see the little boy standing at his bedside, face wrapped in shadows.

"Johnny?" he croaked. "Johnny, go back to bed."

The little boy didn't move, only kept staring, and the boy asked, "Have you seen my report card?"

"What?" he asked. "Johnny..."

"Have you seen my report card?"

Kyle swung his legs out from under the bed and sat on the mattress. He reached out, took the boy by the shoulder, pulled him closer. Sometimes the boy had bad dreams, and Kyle knew that his father had abused him—perhaps over a less-than-adequate report card. He pulled the boy close to comfort him, and in the moonlight saw blood on the boy's face: around his eyes, coming from his nose, dribbling from his ear, trailing along the corners of his lips. The boy's face was ashen white, and Kyle immediately leapt from the bed, shouting for the C.I.T. to come and help. He gripped the boy close, told him everything would be okay, not to worry. His eyes darted about the cabin, searching. The C.I.T. sat on his bed, head in his hands. Kyle yelled at him, but the C.I.T. didn't move. Kyle, dragging the boy by the arm, rushed over to the C.I.T. and grabbed him by the shoulder; the C.I.T.'s head fell back, and the eyes were filled with blood. Kyle fell against the wall, and the C.I.T. fell backwards onto the bed, legs kicking in the air as his body went into convulsions. Kyle felt his other arm shaking, and he turned and saw the boy going into a seizure; frightened, he pulled away, and the boy collapsed to the ground, blood spraying from his mouth as his body quaked and his head thumped against the wooden floor. Kyle ran throughout the cabin, trying to wake the others, but he found only convulsing bodies. Every boy had slipped into some sort of fever, had begun bleeding from every orifice on their faces, and Kyle spun around in the middle of the cabin, the world spinning, stomach churning, bile creeping up his throat. Every bunk was filled with a shaking body, and one of the bodies fell and hit the ground headfirst, lying still as blood formed in a pool underneath the head. Kyle ran over to the fallen boy and searched for a pulse, found nothing: only those blood-filled eyes staring at him in an empty gaze.

And then it was over.

The cabin was silent.

The beds were filled with immobile bodies and lifeless eyes.

The beds were filled with corpses.

He had pushed himself into the warm August night, and he had run cabin-to-cabin, shouting amidst the drone of the crickets and cicadas. He threw open every door, finding bodies littered about each cabin. He moved through each building, moving among the bodies, his body pulsing with adrenaline. After searching the nine cabins, every one filled with corpses, he made his way to the Assistant Director's Cabin. Elysa Bucci was dead in her bed, eyes wide in shock, blankets wrapped around her neck like a Siberian noose. He moved down a trail through the woods, pushed through knee-high grass laden with sleeping grasshoppers, and he found the dogs barking outside the

Director's House. Annie and Ladybug. They swooned around his legs, leaping and jumping, tails wagging ferociously. He pushed through the back door and entered the house. He flicked on a light-switch, and in the sudden burst of light, he saw the husband and wife piled over one another. The husband's body was riddled with knife wounds, and the wife was covered in his blood. Kyle's stomach lost it, and he pitched against the humming refrigerator, opened his mouth, and vomited all over the tile. He took several gulps of air, head pounding with pain, thick blood winding its way through his veins. He heard the sound of nails against the floor, and he turned to see the two dogs licking blood off the face of their owner, whining together, unsure of what to make of this freak occurrence. *You're not alone*, Kyle thought to himself. *You're not alone*.

He sat in his Explorer, turned on the radio, heard only static. He leaned back in his seat and stared through the windshield, gazing up at the moon wreathed in stars, hanging poignantly above the tips of the pines that stood still even in a gentle breeze. He clutched the steering wheel in white-knuckled hands, and as the adrenaline drained from his system, he found that he shook uncontrollably. He balled his fists, closed his eyes, fought with himself. Every muscle in his body twitched, and the floodgates behind his eyes opened, and he curled into a fetal position in the front seat, knees pulled up to his chin, arms wrapped around his folded legs. The tears streamed like a hurricane, and he soaked his knees with the salty tears, the images of the fallen and broken rushing through his mind like a cryptic picture-show.

Sarah. Her name echoed over-and-over in his mind. He set out that night, and the headlights of his Explorer illuminated the roads before him. His eyes fell upon a few crashes, cars in ditches or wrapped around trees, broken glass and twisted automobile parts strewn across the roads. He made his way into town, and he slowed as he drove. The lights in McDONALD'S were turned on. One of those 24-hour restaurants. A large Greyhound Bus was parked in the parking lot, and inside the restaurant, bodies were pitched over tables and strewn across the floor. The lights sputtered and sparked as he drove past. He took the highway west. Halfway there he nearly ran out of gas, and he pulled into a SHELL STATION. He walked inside, saw the attendant lying face-down on the cash register, blood trailing down the sides of the machine and forming pools on the counter. He took one look at the woman and walked back outside. He swiped his credit card, shocked to discover that the fuel pumps still worked. He fueled up the car, not even looking at the price of gas, and then continued on his journey. As dawn began to rise, he pulled his wearied and nearly empty Explorer into the driveway of the ranch-style home. He quickly leapt out of the vehicle and ran up to the front door. It was locked. He knelt down and grabbed a key from underneath the welcome mat, thrust it into the lock, turned. The door opened, swinging wide, and the parlor greeted him.

He stood in the parlor, and a quiet rain began to fall. The kind of rain that makes one sleepy, the rain that taps gently on the windows like a jazz symphony, the kind of rain that children laugh and dance and play in. But the rain was nothing but an overture, and he slowly made his way through the house. Each room held great memories. He had cuddled with her on the sofa before the fireplace. He had shared a romantic dinner with her in the dining room on Valentine's Day. They had watched chick flicks and the occasional horror film on the plasma-screen, now blank and ominous. He made his way to her bedroom, and he slowly pushed open the door. The afternoon sunlight came between drawn blinds, splayed across the far wall in concentric, vertical bars. His eyes immediately fell to the bed, and all strength left him. He pitched to his knees, steadied himself with one hand against the wall, and his jaw dropped and tears began to brim in his eyes as he gazed upon her lifeless corpse,

wrapped tight in the bed-sheets, the face stained with blood, the hands having become claws gripping the sheets in mangled clumps. "Sarah..." Her name escaped his lips. His head fell low, and he folded into a ball upon the floor, and he meditated upon her name as the tears inched down his face, and soon he had fallen asleep, the memories overtaking him. His dreams were fraught with terror and death, the cruelest macabre.

He was torn from the dream. Darkness cloaked the room. Not even moonlight came through the window's blinds. The thunder had awakened him, the booming thunder-claps that shake buildings' foundations. The picture-frames on her dresser shuddered with each new roar from the heavens. In the impermeable darkness, he groped at his eyes. A ferocious lightning bolt danced its white-hot light through the room, and his eyes were upon the bed: the sheets lied at the foot of the mattress, and Sarah's body was nowhere to be seen. His heart leapt within his chest, a concoction of excitement and dread.

He pulled himself to his feet, and the brisk light from the piercing bolt faded. He stood in darkness. "Sarah." Her voice came between quivering lips. He put his hand upon the bed, felt the cold mattress. "Sarah."

He looked over to the door. It was open, swung into the hallway. He moved about in the shadows, entered the corridor.

"Sarah."

Lightning cast its light into the house, the light curving upon the walls and glinting in the glass picture frames fastened to the walls on either side. He stood in the hallway, and the lightning illuminated nothing but a dead-end that branched into the parlor and kitchen.

"Sarah?" His voice grew louder, though it found itself filled with more tension.

He crept forward. Thunder shook the walls. Dust fell from the wooden beams held high above. He put one hand against the wall, felt sick to his stomach. Lightning sent its light into the house once more, and at the end of the hallway he saw a figure: a figure in pajamas, the figure of a girl.

Her head was lowered, hair draping around her face. Her arms were plastered to her side, and he could have sworn the hands were curled up into claws.

"Sarah?" He moved forward slowly.

His eyes adjusted, and the figure didn't move.

She continued to stare at the ground.

He went forward some more; she looked up.

Lightning danced, reflecting in her eyes—and he saw something ghastly, horrible, morbid in those eyes: the eyes that once spoke volumes of laughter and love now held the kindling of an evil fire. He staggered backwards, and her mouth opened, and the most hideous and bloodcurdling scream escaped her lips. He turned and ran into her bedroom, legs carrying him; he pulled the door shut, heard her running towards the room; he locked the bolt, heard her slamming against the door. He grabbed her dresser and thrust it against the door, stepped back, heart pounding, mind racing, head spinning. He sat upon the bed, heard her slamming her shoulder up against the door, heard those god-awful shrieks.

It continued until morning.

When daylight came, he moved the dresser out of the way, cautiously opened the door. There were claw-marks over the walls, bulges and splinters in the door.

But Sarah was nowhere to be found.

ΣΩΣ

The geese are returning from the water, moving about in the grass once more, squawking and eating. Kyle looks back over at Adrian, who continues to stare at the grave. Kyle says, "I never saw Sarah after that. I don't know where she went." He kneels down beside his friend, puts a hand on his shoulder. "It's going to be tough, Adrian. But you have to let her go."

Adrian shakes his arm away, growls, "Just be quiet, all right?"

Kyle sighs and stands.

The sun continues to sink lower.

"Adrian. We really need to go."

"In a minute."

"I don't want to leave you out here."

"I'm not asking you to stay."

Kyle looks back over at the setting sun. "They're going to be out soon..."

As if on cue, the first howls of the dark-walkers carry up into the warm March sky.

Adrian stands, brushing mud from the knees of his jeans. "Okay."

IV

Carla sits in the darkness of the sanctuary, and she hangs her head low and hears their growls and screams permeating the thick walls. She clutches the Bible tightly in her hands, and her clenched eyelids beckon a memory that has remained rooted in her mind ever since the day the seemingly dead began to rise:

ΣΩΣ

The choir began to take their seats. She sat in the back row, exhausted, and her eyelids dared to slide shut. She clutched the coffee-cup in her hands and took a long, burning drink. The preacher, a heavysset man with wide-rimmed glasses and cutting blue eyes, took his position behind the podium and opened his Bible. "We left off last week in Luke 21:36 with 'That ye may be accounted worthy.' The last phrase in this verse is what I want to talk about: 'And stand before the Son of Man.' When the Harpazo, the Rapio, the Rapture takes place, we who are God's people will be 'caught up to meet Jesus in the air.' This is what the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Jesus said in John 14:1-3, 'Let not your hearts be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you, I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.' This, I feel, is talking about the very same thing that Paul is talking about in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, where he writes that 'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with a voice of the archangel, and the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first...'"

She had emptied her cup. She set it on the pew beside her.

The preacher shook his Bible in the air. "Let's go now to 2 Timothy 3:1. 'This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.' My friends, we are living in the most perilous times we have ever lived in. On the world stage, one slip, one miscommunication, one miscalculation, one spark could plunge us into a Nuclear Holocaust. Just recently, the weather in the U.S. alone has spawned two huge storms bearing down upon the Gulf Coast, and possibly even the Eastern Coastline. We are

starting to see food being rationed where we buy our beans rice, corn and other foods. The seas and the waves are roaring—just as Jesus predicted in Luke 21:25. We are living in the time that Paul told Timothy about! A lot of friends, and myself included, are having prophetic dreams. We have a feeling that something big, something devastating, is about to happen. Could this be the Rapture? Jesus said in Matthew 24:36 that we would not know the day nor the hour, but that we would know the season.” He closed the Bible and gazed out into the eager congregation with his maniacal eyes. “Something big is about to happen, folks. And the dead who are in Christ shall rise.”

ΣΩΣ

Her eyes open.

The flickering light from the oil-lamp illuminates her Bible.

The weathered pages stare up at her.

Her hands shake as the text seems to crawl from the paper:

“And I looked, and behold, a pale horse: and his name that set on him was
Death, and Hell followed with him.”

V

Morning sunlight is beginning to weave between the blinds of the window as it shatters. Glass shards become tangled in the blinds, and the blinds are madly pushed away as a figure crawls through the broken window. Mark tumbles over a sofa against the wall and lands on the floor. He leaps to his feet, pointing the gun through the room illuminated by morning sunlight. The room is abandoned. He moves to each room, making sure no creatures reside within the building; he rushes to the front door and unlocks it. The sunlight hurts his eyes as the man and Sarah enter, holding a moaning woman in their arms. Mark leaps out of the way as they move into the living room; blood from the woman’s head drips in a trail on the carpet, and he can’t help but remember the tale of Hansel and Gretel and the Wicked Witch. The man and Sarah find the kitchen, adjacent to the living room, and set the woman on the table. The man steps back and curses, blood covering his hands. Katie appears, and Sarah tells her to start searching. Katie begins rummaging through the kitchen cabinets, yanking out plates and bowls and glasses. She finally finds a drawer holding the hand-towels, and she tosses several to Sarah. The man is behind the woman on the table, and he lifts up her head. Blood pours from a wound across her face, and shards of glass, embedded in her face, sparkle with fresh blood. He shouts for Sarah, and she begins bandaging the wound. The woman moans, and her fingertips begin to twitch. Her face goes pale. Mark watches in stoic silence. Katie paces back and forth, watching the woman begin to shake and quiver. She holds her hands up to her head, covers her eyes. Mark looks down to the floor, can hear the man’s cursing and Sarah’s silent pleadings.

Anthony stands out in the street. His clothes are sticky, and they mold over his body. He finds his hands still shivering. Kyle is pacing around the Explorer, shaking his head, mumbling under his breath. Anthony looks up and down the quaint street: the houses lined up perfectly on either side, the streetlights hanging like icons of an ancient world, the well-manicured lawns now overgrown with weeds and briars. The sun breaks through the clouds and sears his eyes. He turns and sees his shadow sprawled over the pavement. He looks at his hands, covered in dried blood. He can see his reflection in the tinted windows of the car, and he can see that his face, his hair, his shirt...

Everything is drenched in blood. He closes his eyes but for a moment, and he can see them all, the limbs torn from their bodies, their blood splashed against the walls, their screams and their cries and the shattering of their—*our*—indulgent complacency. The visions scar him, and he opens his eyes, pushing away the memories. He leans against the Explorer and takes several deep breaths. Kyle comes around and tells him that there is no real damage, just some dents and scrapes. Even the axles are undamaged.

Katie has to leave the kitchen. She enters the living room and sits down on the sofa, a cloud of dust rising with her presence. The picture-frames along the walls are coated with a film of dust, the images behind the glass hidden. A Christmas tree sits in the corner with several boxes of ornaments lying beside it. She can hear the woman's moans in the other room, can see Mark standing in the kitchen, watching. She thanks God that the wall hides the grisly scene. Mark looks over at her, sees her shaking, walks over and sits down beside her. He doesn't touch her, but his presence is comforting. She leans against his shoulder and stares numbly at the wall, and although she cannot see what is going on in the kitchen, the sounds are enough to paint a vibrant portrait. She sees a stream of blood moving into view over the tiles of the kitchen, creeping around the corner, moving along the cracks in the flooring. Mark bites his lip, looks over at her, then looks towards the kitchen.

Sarah presses the wash-cloths against the woman's head, but the blood keeps coming. Several towels have been soaked, and they lie on the floor, the gathered blood emptying. The woman's face is hidden behind a sea of red. Her shaking and moaning grows fainter. Sarah looks up at the man, who suddenly reels backwards, lets out a shout of rage, and slams his fists against the wall, leaving two cracked chasms in the drywall. The woman lies breathless on the table, and the fountain of blood that had been spouting from the gash over her forehead has dwindled down to a mere trickle, and then it stops. Sarah can feel the warm blood on her hands, the blood of a woman who no longer lives, the blood of a woman who has escaped this wretched world. The man fumes next to the refrigerator. He yanks it open, finds a bottle of warm water, twists off the cap, and, standing over the sink, pours the lukewarm water over his hands. The blood rushes down his fingers and into the sink. Sarah walks over and hands him a towel. He doesn't say anything as he wipes his hands, but it only smears the blood. He drops the towel in the sink and leaves the kitchen.

Mark watches the man exit the house, and then he stands and walks into the kitchen. He stares at the lifeless corpse lying on the table. Sarah is at the sink, trying to wipe her hands clean of blood. Mark asks her name. Sarah doesn't look over at him as she answers, "Cameron." Mark doesn't reply as he kneels down, scoops up several towels in his hands, and leaves the kitchen. Katie watches him go, then curls up into a ball on the sofa, rocking back and forth on the dusty comforters, staring at the wall with the dusty picture frames.

The man exits the house, sees Kyle and Anthony sitting on the curb. He moves around the S.U.V., opens the door, reaches inside, grabs a shirt. He walks back around the side of the S.U.V. and throws it to Anthony. Anthony just holds the shirt, then folds it, and sets it down in the olive grass beside him. The man climbs into the driver's seat of the Explorer and stares forward through the webbed windshield. Anthony can see him lean over the wheel and start to cry, his chest quaking. Anthony looks over at Kyle, only to find that he is gone: he has gotten up and is walking down the street, arms dangling at his side, wandering aimlessly towards the west.

Book Three

May to October
2012

Chapter Twenty-Two

Carla's Sonnet

"That which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist."

- Epicurus (341-270 B.C.)

Mark emerges from inside the house. He stops for a moment on the front stoop, looks up into the brilliant morning sky. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, and for a second he has escaped the trauma: but his closed eyes betray him, and he sees again the carnage and feels once more the warm blood splashing across his face. He opens his eyes, returns to reality, feels the towels held tight in his hands. He steps down from the stoop and moves to the S.U.V. Anthony stands and greets him. He asks where Kyle has gone, and Anthony mumbles something, points down the street. He can see Kyle standing underneath a distant tree, hands pressed against the bark. Mark shrugs and grabs the handle to the side door, rips it open. He crawls inside. He looks over to the man, who is trying to bottle his tears. Mark bites his lip, says nothing, and begins scrubbing the blood off the leather seat. He can hear Anthony behind him:

"How could this have happened? How could this have happened?"

Mark doesn't answer. He only scrubs harder.

"How could this have happened?" Anthony asks.

He tosses a bloodied towel to the side.

Anthony leans against the side of the Explorer, stares at the house.

"How could this have happened?"

Mark pulls himself out from inside the vehicle. He turns and faces Anthony, and with a fierce fire in his eye, he says, "It happened because we became numb. It happened because we became complacent. It happened because we forgot what the world is really like. And now we remember."

ΣΩΣ

Harker lied awake in bed. He pulled the sheets tight around him, fighting off the early spring cold. He stared at the ceiling with the muddled wax, and he closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep. But all he could see was his little angel, his beautiful daughter. He saw her running through the meadows, laughing and giggling as the kite danced in a rhythmic ballet upon the wings of the sky. He saw her clinging to his side, begging him to make EGO waffles before she caught the bus to Elementary School. He saw her lying in her own bed, with the purple polka-dot comforter and the Disney princess pillows, and he remembered sitting beside her on the bed, holding open a copy of The Little Engine That Could, telling her the story of courage and heroism in the face of great odds, hinting that she could continue to be proud in class even amidst the pestering of bloated-chest bullies. These memories of his baby girl, the jewel and gem of his life, refused to give him rest, tormenting him with their sweet reminiscences.

Anthony sat upon the makeshift toilet in the lowest part of the church. His stomach curled. Sweat popped over his brow. He cursed his weak stomach. The light from the oil-lamp flickered through the small room, and he held the book before him, reading with fascination, passing the time, trying to ignore the howls of the zombies outside the church walls. *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson: a tale of a mosquito-born plague that turned the entire human race into bloodsucking vampires. He began to read the ending, and it chilled him to the bone: the vampires became sophisticated, formed their own societies, and they eliminated the last surviving *Homo sapien*.

Katie's eyes were closed, and she slept soundly, a smile upon her face. In the dream, she stood on the beach with Elizabeth by her side. They held hands and watched the surf break over the jagged Maine rocks. The breeze whirling from the ocean chilled them to the bone, and they moved closer and closer to one another, feeding off one another's warmth. Their foreheads pressed together, their noses cuddled, and they giggled as they kissed. The waves grew stronger, and the spray became more fierce, slicing into them like a million tiny spears. They laughed aloud and, still holding tightly to one another's hand, sprinted up the beach, skipping among the waving beach-comb grasses, the crescent moon smiling lazily upon them.

Mark sat on the edge of his cot, a BASIC 100 curled between his fingers. He couldn't sleep, accosted by dreams of Cara. He hadn't had such dreams in quite a while, but now they kissed him in his sleep. He remembered learning something in psychology, the professor speaking: "There are, within the brain, channels of neurons, what we call *neural pathways*. Memories, information, experiences, facts, anything that we learn creates a neural pathway. Repetition makes these neural pathways deeper, and thus more easily accessible. In counseling, one will often find that a person will dream of events that took place much earlier in life; this may involve abuse from a loved one, the death of a special person—even a pet—or some other traumatic event. Though the person may have 'moved on' and 'dealt with' the incident, the trauma itself carved a deep-seeded neural pathway in the brain. The result is that, often in sleep, when one's guard is down, the neural pathway may be accessed again, and a person may dream of the trauma that they experienced so long ago." Mark took a deep hit of the cigarette, flicked ash onto the stone floor. He watched the ember burn in the twilight. He remembered going to the park with Cara. He remembered how they would sometimes smoke cigarettes together, and they would see who could blow the most smoke-rings. "Fuck," he muttered, and he dropped the cigarette to the floor. He crunched it with the heel of his bare foot, and he felt nothing. *There is nothing to feel*, he thought to himself. *I have become numb to everything and everyone*.

Adrian, Kyle, and the man stood on the rooftop in the calm March night. They huddled together, and Kyle gripped a hunting rifle tightly in his hands. They spoke in hushed whispers, occasionally glancing down at the fence-line along the edge of the hill that led up to the church. The dark-walkers crowded the fence, half-naked and emaciated, their flesh purple and blue, fingers falling off from frostbite. Many more had gathered since the snow had melted, and more seemed to appear every minute from the buildings surrounding the church. The creatures formed groups and pressed against the fence, creating a line of washboard ribs and swollen fingers gripping the chinks in the fastened iron. They avoided the bright beams of the ultraviolet lights, which Rachel had installed long ago. The ultraviolet light hurt them, made their skin burst into boils... Kyle had seen it once. A dark-walker had been caught outside with the origin of dawn. The sunlight tore through its skin, and it tried to make it inside a building, into the haven of darkness, but the pain became too intense, and it had fallen in the street, immobilized with cries of agonizing pain. Its ghastly moans and penetrating shrieks had lasted nearly an hour before it succumbed. Kyle had poked it with a stick to make sure,

then flipped it over... The skull, bathed in blood, could be seen, the flesh having totally burned off as if dipped in some type of flesh-eating acid.

Up on the roof, Kyle watched the dark-walkers with an uneasy feeling in his stomach. Men. Women. Children. The younger dark-walkers stood amidst the legs of the older ones, and they clung to the fence, watching the church with personality-absent eyes. *They can smell us*, Kyle thought to himself, nearly able to see the nostrils flaring like those of hunting dogs hot on the trail. *They can smell the living blood running through our veins*. The thought sent chills through his spine. He forced the thought away and returned his focus back to the conversation.

"We're leaving in three days," the man was saying.

Adrian asked, "Who all is coming?"

"Me, Mark, you two. Maybe Katie."

"What about Sarah? Or Carla?" Kyle asked. "Others might want to..."

"The less people we have, the sooner we can actually finish the trip."

"If you're convinced that this church is a dead zone, it would be responsible..."

"The responsible thing would be for others to step up to the plate and make decisions." The man was adamant, refused to back down. "The most I'm willing to carry with me is five. Sarah. Carla. Anthony. Harker. If they want to get out, then they can get out. No one is stopping them. But our caravan is full."

Kyle's voice rippled through the air: "What the fuck?"

"I said..." the man said, turning to face him.

He went quiet.

Kyle was staring out at the fence.

And the man immediately realized what had happened.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, glancing over at Adrian.

Adrian's hands began to shake.

Kyle swung the gun around, facing it down towards the fence-line.

The man ran towards the door, shouting for Adrian to follow.

They rushed down the stairwell, taking the steps two-at-a-time. The image continued to run through the man's mind: the floodlights had extinguished, and the dark-walkers had begun going crazy, snarling amongst one another, clambering at the twelve-foot chain-link barricade. The ultraviolet lights had been centered on the fence's weakest points, and now the dark-walkers had begun finding those weak points. He had felt the blood rush from his face as the fence began to wobble and shake, creaking in the quiet of the night. He and Adrian emerged in the sanctuary and rushed past the podium and stage; Sarah sat in a pew, reading a book by lamplight, and she watched them with a nervous interest. Adrian and the man took the stairwell on the opposite side of the sanctuary, and they reached the basement and stumbled through the darkness. The usual sound of the chugging generator had vanished. They saw the door to the generator room, closed in the corner of the basement. The man grabbed the door and ripped it open. Light flooded over them.

Carla stood beside the generator, holding an oil-lamp up to her face. A strange mix of emotions reflected behind her crazed eyes. Adrian rushed forward to work on the generator, but Carla intercepted him, shoving him back into the wall with violent and un-foreseen force. The man glared at Carla, and she began shouting: "It's the will of God! It's the will of God!"

Adrian tried to get to the generator once more, but she shoved him back again. He hit the wall with a rough impact, and he cursed her.

She remained unfazed. "Don't you see?" she exclaimed. "This is God's doing! I was wrong the entire time! The elite were not saved! It was the elite who became the vampires! It is written that redemption is found in the blood! To become a vampire is to be what God desires us to be! To become a vampire is to be freed from the constraints of this life; it is to be free, in the primal nature, as God wants us to be free! Mankind has elevated himself to the status of divinity, claiming to be gods in thought and deed, and now God is putting mankind back in its place by returning us to the animal base! We must honor God! We must join the league of the vampires!"

Adrian tried to reason with her, but she would have none of it. "Redemption is found in the blood, Adrian! We must honor God! We must experience redemption!" Her eyes darted between the two of them, begging them to agree with the insanity that had poisoned her mind. "Only by becoming a dark-walker can we be saved! Only by being bitten, only by our blood being spilled, can we be redeemed! Isn't it clear to you?" The man and Adrian wore numb expressions, unable to comprehend what she had been saying, and she was surprised by their shock; couldn't they see how clear it all truly was? "Christ has promised freedom. This is His deliverance, the fulfillment of His promises, the securing of our salvation..."

Adrian cursed her: "That's enough of this shit."

He moved forward; Carla moved in front of him.

"Get out of my way," Adrian growled.

"You *must* accept the truth," she pleaded. "Please! Accept the truth!"

"The truth is that you're out of your damned mind."

She stepped closer, hands clasped as if in prayer. "Adrian..."

He grabbed her by the arm and swung her away; she stumbled over a pipe coming out of the floor and fell to the ground. Adrian knelt down beside the generator, and in the lamplight could see the wires behind the panel torn as if by a knife. This confused him, and he heard the man's shout; he turned to see Carla upon him, the firelight dancing over the contours of a kitchen steak knife, gripped tight between her twin hands. Adrian lifted his hands to protect himself, but she dodged around to his side and drove the knife into his flesh. He let out a shout and twisted onto the ground; she ripped the blade from his side, revealing a fountain of gushing blood, and she drove the blood-speckled blade into his chest. The man leapt forward, grabbed Carla by the hair, flung her into the generator: her head smashed against the aluminum siding, and she collapsed to the floor with a grunt, unmoving.

The man knelt down beside Adrian, who lied on his back, arms outstretched, fingers twitching. His face contorted, and his eyes were clenched shut, his breathing jagged. He tried to lift his head, but let out only a shout of white-hot, lightning pain. His head collapsed to the floor, and he sucked in several deep breaths, moaning.

"Don't try to move," the man said, voice a harsh whisper. "Don't try to move."

His eyes opened, and the man could see hopelessness hidden behind the veil of pain.

"Adrian..." he begged, gripping the boy's hand.

The boy began coughing, and blood dribbled around his lips. The man squeezed the boy's hand tighter, and the boy's coughs subsided, replaced by gurgling rhythms. The man realized what was happening, and rage billowed through his veins. *The knife pierced his lungs. He's drowning in his own blood.* He held Adrian's hand until his eyes slid shut and the gurgling stopped. Adrian lay cold and silent upon the floor, blood-painted lips frozen in a contorted half-scream.

It took a moment for the man to gather his thoughts. He pulled the belt from around his waist, lifted Carla up from the ground. He tied her hands together with his belt, then tied the belt around a series

of pipes jutting from the wall. Her eyes fluttered open, and she saw the man standing before him. He just stared at her, and he felt the urge to wrap his hands around her throat, to squeeze as tight as he could, to feel her body writhing for oxygen, her eyes bulging, face turning purple. He could already feel the sweet sensation of her death in his hands.

She stammered, "It's the... the will of... the will of God."

Kill her. Kill her. "You're a bitch."

And he left her alone in the room,

shutting the door,

her only company that of the corpse that continued to bleed.

The man ran into Sarah outside the room.

"What happened?" she asked.

He pointed to the generator room behind him. "Don't untie her."

She moved forward, pushed open the door, let out a gasp.

He stood behind her. "She's crazy. Don't listen to her."

Sarah shook her head, not understanding.

"She broke the generator. Do you think you can fix it?"

"I don't... I don't know."

"Well, try, will you?"

Carla began preaching as Sarah knelt beside the generator.

The man walked over to the nutcase and slapped her across the face.

"You shut the fuck up, got it?"

She didn't say anything more.

"I can't fix it," Sarah said. "Not without a soldering iron."

"We don't have one."

"I know." She looked at the man. "Does this control the floodlights?"

The man nodded, the answer nearly unmentionable. "Yeah."

"Shit."

"I know."

"This is bad."

"I know."

Kyle remained alone on the roof, watching the dark-walkers. His insides turned to butter as the fiends pressed against the weak sections of the fence. His heart began to race as one of the sides of the fence tore, and the fence wobbled, breaking. Dark-walkers began flooding through to the other side, climbing the hill towards the church, most half-crawling amidst their hunger-starved exhaustion. Kyle's heart screamed as he raised the rifle. The dark-walkers glared at him, their eyes twinkling under the full moon. There were more than he could count, and he began taking shots with his rifle. Several of them fell, bodies riddled and heads exploded, limbs hewn from the sockets, their blood soaking into the moist grass. They kept coming. He began reloading another magazine, hoping to God that they'd be able to figure out what was wrong with the generator and get it running again. *Because if they don't... we're fucked.*

"Did you hear that?" Sarah asked.

"Gunfire," the man said, the word heavy as an anvil between his lips.

They abandoned Carla, who began screaming at them, and they rushed up the stairwell and into the sanctuary. They were nearing the stairs towards the roof as the sound of shattering glass carried into their ears. They stopped dead in their tracks, amidst the pews, and suddenly the wooden boards covering the stained glass windows began to break apart. They backed into the wall, staring in gut-ridden terror, amidst the flickering glow of the room's candles, as hands burst through the wooden boards, gnarled and ghostly white, the overgrown and ingrown fingernails scraping along the boards, groping in the air. Their shrieks filled the air. Color drained from the man's face. *It's happening. It's happening.* And then, *I hate being right all the time.* Sarah took off towards the women's sleeping quarters. The man watched her go, glanced up the stairwell, cursed, and headed down an adjacent corridor leading to the men's sleeping rooms.

The boards over the windows continued to fall.

The echoes of peppered gunshots swept through the church halls.

Harker's door burst open. The man leapt in.

"What the hell is going on?" Harker demanded, hearing the gunfire.

The man's face, white as snow, held no betrayal: "Something bad has happened."

"How bad?"

"Pretty bad."

Sarah threw open the door to Katie's room.

She continued to sleep, a smile splashed across her face.

Sarah grabbed her by the shoulder, violently shook.

She jolted from sleep, shaking with shock. She rubbed her eyes.

"Get up!" Sarah shouted. "Get up!"

Katie cursed her. "What the hell are you doing?"

"They're getting inside!" Sarah shouted. "They're getting inside!"

Katie immediately understood, and the smile from her dream faded to nothing.

Anthony heard shouting coming from the floor above, followed by gunshots. He quickly wiped and pulled up his pants, setting the book on the floor. He lifted the oil-lamp, strained his ears. He could hear more shouting above, more gunfire. *What the hell is going on?* He pushed open the door and stepped into the darkness of the stone corridor. The light dappled over the cobbled stonework along the walls, the arched stone ceiling. This was the deepest region of the church, firmly secluded and hidden, an antique corridor that ran underneath the basement. But not even the hallway's depth could hide the turmoil above. A million possible scenarios leapt like wild stallions through his mind, and he began moving down the corridor, towards the stairwell leading up to the basement.

All the men had been awakened. Harker unlocked the door to the storage closet, and he moved inside, grabbing M16s from a shelf, extra magazines of ammunition, passing them out to the men. Mark waited his turn, took one of the machineguns. Harker gave quick instructions: head straight to the sanctuary and neutralize any threat, then get to the roof and finish the job. Mark hoped it would be that simple, but he remembered the man's words several weeks ago: *This place is meant to keep the dark-walkers out. But, ultimately, it keeps us inside.* A chill ran through him as he took off down the hallway, following several older men whose names he had never learned.

Nancy, the wonderful and compassionate nurse, gathered the women together and herded them into a large room with tall windows and a lockable door. The room had served as their medical center, and Harker had told her the importance of holing up in there if a break-in had ever occurred. She had never expected the moment to happen, but she had been readily prepared, and she operated with a cool collectiveness that quieted even the most violent sobs. She threw the lock on the door, and they huddled together, listening to the sounds of the distant shrieks and more gunfire coming from the rooftop. Nancy quickly took a headcount and realized three women were missing: Sarah, Carla, and Katie.

Sarah and Katie joined the men, having grabbed M16s from the closet. The men had first opposed the women joining them, demanding they return to the room with the other women, a room promising protection; but Mark had interceded, vouching for them—“We may need all the gun-power we can get.” Harker had let them come—as if his authority meant anything anymore—and they continued down the corridor towards the sanctuary.

As the corridor bent, opening up to the Great Room, they heard pews being shoved and shifted around. They spilled into the sanctuary to find dark-walkers crawling through the windows, and several had already found themselves moving aimlessly between the pews. As if on cue, the men and two women raised their weapons and began firing. The darkness of the room became bathed in splashes of white-hot light, and the sound burnt everyone’s hearing to a crisp. Dark-walkers screeched and howled, bodies torn apart, heads bursting, blood and brain-matter forming rainbows in the air before splashing onto the pews and carpet. More dark-walkers poured into the sanctuary, dodging the bodies of fallen comrades; they gained strength in numbers and charged the men and women with guns. The people scattered, taking off in various directions, horrified for their lives. Katie, Mark, and several others headed into the bowels of the church; the man, Harker, and the others took off up the spiral stairwell leading to the rooftop access and the friar’s cryptic office.

Not all escaped: the dark-walkers had fallen upon one man, ripping the limbs from his body, bathing in his blood; they gripped his head in their hands and twisted it off at the neck, raising it high like a memorial to a forgotten pagan god. Another man had rushed up towards the baptismal, and he stood his ground underneath the cross, his gun blazing. He ran out of ammunition; dark-walkers leapt at him, and he swung the butt of the M16 into their faces, knocking them awry; but they overcame him, and he fell into the baptismal waters, held underneath, his screams merely bubbles rising to the surface as their teeth clamped over his neck: the water turned red with his blood, and his kicking legs ceased to splash, and he lay still under the water as the dark-walkers celebrated by gnawing at his ruptured flesh.

The gunshots sounded much closer. Anthony had climbed the stairs leading to the basement, and he was faced with the impermeable darkness. He began moving through the large basement, past the tables where they had eaten countless meals for countless months; but he stopped short, hearing heavy breathing in the shadows.

He turned and raised the oil-lamp, his blood freezing in the caskets of his veins. The light cast its rays through the blackness, illuminating a brutalized face with sunken eyes, yellowed teeth opened to reveal a mouth filled with drool. A great cut had been slashed across the zombie’s forehead, and gnats crawled amidst the scab. Anthony’s eyes locked with the eyes of the creature, and the zombie let out a bloodcurdling shriek and rushed forward; but the table intercepted its pursuit, and it toppled down, scattering plates and cups with its impact; it slid off the table, landing amongst several chairs. The oil-lamp rocked back-and-forth in Anthony’s hand as he rushed towards the stairs,

hearing the zombie scrambling to its feet. He reached the stairwell but heard more dark-walkers above, in the sanctuary. He turned on his heels, surrounded, and the lamplight reflected off the zombie's façade as it closed in on him. Anthony let out a sudden scream of fright and swung the oil-lamp through the air; it shattered against the zombie's face, the oil soaking the head, the flame spreading. Anthony fell against the wall as the creature ran madly about the room, face ablaze with burning oil, an incendiary torch with legs. The stench of burnt flesh filled the room like ungodly incense, and Anthony watched with a mute expression as the zombie circled like a bird in flight. It toppled down, pitching to the ground in a sputtering mass of flesh and flame.

Katie continued to run. The hallway behind her clogged, and she turned to see several men falling to the ground, dark-walkers upon them. She stopped in her tracks, forced to watch, struck by morbid curiosity: she saw a dark-walker grab a man's arm and rip it right out of the socket, a torrential spray of blood plastering the wall. The man's mouth was opened in a scream that spread down the corridor; Mark grabbed at her arm and tugged her along. She retreated from her daze and continued to run. She ducked into a side room and slammed the door, locking it tightly. She heard the dark-walkers run past, and when the sound of their footsteps diminished, she quietly unlocked the door and pushed it open. She headed back the way she had come, stepping over strewn body parts, her bare feet splashing in the steaming blood. Something soft and round squeezed between the cracks of her toes; she glanced down saw an eyeball staring up at her. A silent scream erupted in her lungs, and she kicked it away. She stumbled down the corridor, her world spinning. A body lay against the wall, the torso removed, blood continuing to spread into a pool on the floor, intestines scattered over the stone floor like the entrails of a nautical squid. The corpse's stared open at her, and the mouth was held in a permanent scream despite the absence of life.

Mark realized Katie wasn't with him. *It's not your problem.* He didn't turn back for her: the dark-walkers were still right behind him, and he figured they had gotten her. He fired his M16 several times, and many dark-walkers fell to the ground, bullet-holes drilled through their skulls. Their comrades clambered over their bodies and continued the pursuit. All the men with him decided to make a stand, but Mark knew such a notion was ill-derived.

Their screams didn't last too long.

Mark ran into one of the bedrooms and slammed the door shut, threw the bolt. He grabbed one of the cots and pushed it against the door. He sat down on another cot, loaded a new magazine into the rifle. He leaned the rifle against the cot and found the pack of cigarettes in his jeans. He lit one, took a delicious drag, felt the smoke crawling through his lungs, breathlessly sweet. *You don't have time to smoke.* He didn't listen to reason. It helped calm his nerves. Helped him think...

Helped him to ultimately realize that he had nowhere to go.

The hallway forked: one direction led to the roof, the other to the friar's office. The man rushed up the stairs leading to the roof, Sarah quick on his heels. Harker and the others separated, heading towards the friar's office, knowing it was a heavy door with an iron lock. Most of the dark-walkers turned towards Harker and the others.

Harker led the way, and the stairs were steep: the dark-walkers worked together, like a pack of ravenous wolves bent on satisfying their hunger, and they reached out at the legs of their prey, swiping several men down. Harker didn't look back as their screams filled his ears. He reached the door to the friar's office and flung it open; he turned to let in the men behind him, but he was alone. He slowly moved back to the stairs and glanced down, could hear more gunfire and screams; the

bursts of light from the gunfire cast extended and transcendent silhouettes against the walls: dark-walkers atop of the men, tearing them to pieces, their blood running among their mutilated bodies, weaving its way down the spiral staircase like multiple waterfalls.

Harker turned away and ran into the friar's office, slamming the door and throwing the lock. He stepped back, bumping into the desk. He drew a deep breath, but any sense of tranquility was shattered as a dark-walker lunged at him from the shadows of the room, knocking him onto the desk. The dark-walker was atop of him, holding him down with its hands, its fetid breath washing over him, the stench nauseating. Harker let out a scream and kicked the creature in the groin, causing the dark-walker to howl and stumble away. Harker rolled himself off of the desk, landing atop of the friar's skeleton. He grabbed the friar's skull and leapt to his feet; the dark-walker came at him, swiping its arms through the air as if they were scythe blades. Harker dodged the assailant and swung the skull into the creature's face. The dark-walker tumbled into the bookcase; Harker fell upon the monster, gripping the skull tightly, smashing it into its face again and again. Blood painted the skull, and several droplets sprayed against Harker's neck and chin. The monster went still, and Harker dropped the skull; it rolled into the foot of the bookcase. His eyes absorbed the impaled face, the mesh of bone and blood and muscle and brain, and he wrenched his face to the side and vomited all over the floor. He hung over on his hands and knees, bile crawling along the corners of his mouth, chest dry-heaving.

The growls and snarls of the dark-walkers greeted him, sweeping underneath the door, and he managed to get to his feet. He pushed the desk against the large wooden door and stepped back, heart pounding weakly in his chest. The creatures hurled themselves against the door, and he began to weep as the door splintered, their hands reaching through, fingers grasping mindlessly at the air. Their hands were covered in blood, and bits of human flesh nestled behind their elongated fingernails.

Sarah and the man reached the rooftop. Kyle shouted that he had emptied his last magazine. Several sick-and-infected appeared behind them, down the stairwell; Kyle shoved the newcomers out of the way and tried to shut the door; a dark-walker managed to pull itself through the crack in the door. It snapped its venomous teeth at Kyle, and he butted it in the face with his rifle; the zombie fell back into the man, and the man gripped its arms and hurled it to the ground. It rolled along the rooftop, snarling and snapping, and reached the edge; Sarah kicked it in the stomach, and it fell, falling twenty feet to the ground, where it landed with the sound of splintering bones and rupturing organs; several dark-walkers changed their course and descended upon it, fighting in a mad frenzy for the remains. Kyle shoved the door shut, and the man pressed his weight against it as more dark-walkers tried to push their way through. Sarah paced back and forth. She looked down at the lawn, could see hundreds of dark-walkers surrounding the fence, dozens more moving into the church through the shattered windows. *It's going to end. It's going to end like this.* Kyle and the man were shouting to one another, but she didn't hear any of it: she could only see the dark figures moving down below, swaying in a rhythmic motion in their march towards the Holy Immaculata.

Katie made her way into the sanctuary. She was quiet, hardly breathing, and the dark-walkers didn't notice. They were huddled in groups about the room, hunched over corpses, feasting and fighting over the remains like rabid animals. She saw one grab a leg and scurry away; two others intercepted and fought for the meat. They snarled and snapped at one another. *Like sharks in a feeding frenzy.* She felt her way along the wall, moving quietly. She tripped over a strewn ankle-bone, still wrapped in a cocoon of flesh, and she slashed a hand across her mouth to keep quiet. She bit her lip and continued

along the wall. She reached the stairwell leading towards the roof and began to climb, hearing the slurping and munching of the creatures in the Holy of Holies.



Mark enters the house. Katie is still sitting on the couch, staring numbly at the wall. He doesn't acknowledge her presence as he makes his way into the kitchen. Sarah is holding several bed-sheets taken from one of the bedrooms.

"Can you help me?" she asks.

"Yeah," Mark says.

They work together, unfolding the bed-sheet and maneuvering it underneath Cameron's body by lifting her legs, abdomen, chest, arms, and head at different times. They wrap the bed-sheet tight around her, and Sarah finds a stapler and begins stapling the edges of the sheet together. Blood is already staining the light cloth where Cameron's head lies. After a moment they step back.

"Now what?" Sarah asks.

"We should bury her."

"Do we have time?"

"It's only nine in the morning."

"Okay."

Mark and Sarah have carried the body out to the backyard. Katie steps into the kitchen, and her eyes are drawn to the floor: the blood has not been cleaned, and it resides in the cross-stitched corners of the linoleum tile. She draws a deep breath, grabs several towels sitting upon a chair beside the table, kneels down, begins to scrub. A moment later Anthony comes in behind her. He kneels beside her.

"Let me help," he says.

She hands him a towel.

As he scrubs, he asks, "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," she says.

"Okay."

After a moment she drops the towel and stares at the smeared blood.

"It wasn't supposed to end up like this," she says.

"I know," Anthony replies.

"They were all good people. Really good people."

"I know."

"They didn't deserve that. None of them deserved it."

"I know."

"Except for Carla. She deserved it."

Anthony doesn't say anything.

"You know what?" Katie asks.

"What's that?"

"I hope Carla is burning in Hell right now. I really do."

Anthony just keeps scrubbing.



The women huddled together in the back of the room, holding one another tightly, knowing the future but unwilling to speak it. The door shook with each impact, the creatures howling in hunger-stricken desperation; with each impact, dust fell from the ceiling, and the women's hearts leapt into their throats and choked their lungs. Nancy moved with a cold detachment. One of the cabinets hung open, and she filled several syringes with a murky liquid. *Allopusmilitoxin 267A*, a poison derived from the jungle's poison dart frogs; Harker had acquired it just in case such an incident as the current would take place. She placed the syringes on an aluminum tray, and betraying the own fear filling her darkening soul, she moved person-to-person, quieting them as she inserted the needle into their skin and depressed the syringe's plunger. The dark-walkers thrashed against the door, and the bolts began to quake and rattle. She injected everyone, and she stepped back to see that their tears had stopped, their eyes were open in quiet wonder, their hearts having stopped beating and lungs having ceased to breathe. She had no syringe left for herself. She turned and faced the door. It burst open, splinters spraying through the air. The creatures lunged inside, and Nancy closed her eyes in a strange serenity as they grabbed her by the arm and flung her to the ground. Her cheek pressed into the cold floor, and she felt warm breath on her neck, teeth along her upper spine, a brief burst of pain... And then nothing.

Anthony refused to climb the steps leading to the sanctuary, though he was thankful that no creatures had descended into the church's bowels. He had ceased to hear gunfire, heard only brief screams, the constant sound of scurrying coming from the upper levels. He knew it was only a matter of time before the zombies decided to explore the basement. He made his way into the church kitchen, eyeing the window over the charcoal stove. He climbed atop the oven, wincing at the loud sounds that echoed throughout the room. He grabbed a frying pan lying on the counter and smashed it through the window, glass scattering outside; *There's no way they didn't hear that one*. He poked his head through the window, saw nothing but grass and a tree, the moon's light scattered by the freshly-budding flowers sprawled across the limbs. He bit his lip and scurried through the broken window, pulling himself forward, hands pressed down in the mud. He crawled through the moist grass towards the tree, and using the tree's trunk as a mask, pulled himself up and looked down towards the fence.

It was totally abandoned.

He could hear sounds coming from the other side of the church. He dropped down to all fours once more and began crawling amidst the overgrown grass, feeling only half-sheltered, fully aware that no longer did he have walls to mask his movements. If he were to be seen, the fence that had sheltered them for so long would become the only barrier to his escape, and he would suffer an agonizing death.

Carla remained fastened to the pipes. She had heard the sound of shattering glass, but she didn't dare make a sound. Moments passed, and she could hear movement outside the wide-open door.

Her mouth moved, totally dry: "Hello?" she croaked, hoping it was one of the others.

A figure entered the room. Long blonde hair. A freckled face. A sigh of relief flooded through Carla. The figure, a teenage girl dressed in footy pajamas, stood watching her. Carla begged for help, to be unleashed. The girl knelt down beside Adrian's body. Carla promised she didn't do it, but then she went quiet.

The girl lifted Adrian's shirt, revealing the lethal knife-wound in his side. Her hand darted inside the slash, and her fingers explored the forbidden warmth; she removed her hand, holding a

clump of his intestines. Carla's eyes watered, nausea rippling through her system. The girl lifted the intestines to her nose, sniffed. A faint smile crossed over her lips, and she opened her mouth.

"No..." Carla moaned, and she could only close her eyes, refusing to watch.

The girl sank her teeth into the warm organ. Carla opened her eyes after a moment, saw the girl stuffing her mouth full of the boy's intestines, moaning in pleasure. She tugged the intestines from his side, her movements causing Adrian's body to rock back and forth, his lifeless eyes showing no emotion. Carla could only watch, hoping the girl would simply ignore her.

Katie climbed the stairwell. Bodies littered the steps, dismembered and decapitated, body parts strewn about like LEGOS in a child's playroom. She had to press her hand against the stone wall for balance, the blood from the corpses coating the steps in a slick paste. She recognized some of the faces, men she had enjoyed conversation with often in the past. She identified one man in particular: he had preached to her about the sinfulness of her lesbian lifestyle, threatened that God would punish her if she did not repent. She found it ironic that her heart continued to beat in her chest, but his heart had been yanked from his ribs—which now poked between the flesh of his gutted chest like a budding April flower—and resided in the stomach of a zombie. She bit her lip and continued to move up the stairs. As the spiral staircase continued to wind heavenward, the bodies began to become much more sparse. That was when the sounds came: the crunching of bones, the searing of flesh, the occasional growl as the dark-walkers above fought over the remains.

Tears began to crawl down Carla's face. The girl that had been feasting on Adrian stood and approached her. The oil-lamp sitting in the corner cast light over her face: the eyes that read NO VACANCY, the robust lips encircled with a mesh of blood, the freckles that were not really freckles but spots of splattered blood from some earlier victim. Carla shook her head, begging for mercy. A wicked smile spread over the zombie's face, and the girl gripped Carla's shoulders. Carla's chest heaved with sobs growing in intensity. Thrill sketched over the girl's face, and she tore the fabric of Carla's shirt at the shoulder, revealing her bare skin. The creature pressed up against Carla, and the tongue—warm with Adrian's blood—flickered over Carla's cheeks, tasting her salty tears. Carla closed her eyes, began to beg louder; the zombie traced its tongue down the side of her cheek, to her neck, and Carla began shaking madly in her chains, screams echoing throughout the room, as the girl sank her teeth into her neck.

Kyle couldn't hold the door much longer, even with the man's help. Sarah stood at the railing, watching the zombies. There were not so many now, most having entered the church. The ones that had swarmed upon the dark-walker that had fallen from the roof had now departed; all that remained were scattered body parts, bones hewn of flesh, the grass stained ruby-red. She ran along the side of the railing, and she came to a spot on the roof that dropped five feet to a lower tin roof.

The garage.

She turned and yelled at the others, told her their idea. They refused to accept it. She cursed, began crawling over the railing. She dropped down onto the roof, the thin aluminum roofing denting under her weight. It was slippery from the earlier rainfall, and she grabbed at the edges of the tin plates to keep from sliding off. She maneuvered herself to the edge and looked down: a ten-foot drop. No zombies had come to that side of the church. She swung her legs over the edge and swung them back and forth until her feet connected with the glass window, which shattered under the impact. She tried to figure out how to get into the tall window when the tin roof shuddered. She looked up to see Kyle and the man dropping from the railing; Kyle shouted, "Run!"

She cursed and released her taught fingers from the edge of the roof; she fell, grasping at the air; a scream escaped her lips as her palms gripped the bottom edge of the shattered window, glass shards digging into her flesh. She grimaced, fighting the pain, and crawled into the window, submerged in the darkness. She dropped down onto a wooden bench laden with tools, felt splinters digging into her fingers. She hopped down onto the pavement of the garage, and in the moonlight coming through the window, she raised her hands and could see blood surrounding the deep tears and punctures from the glass. The moonlight was blocked, and the man entered through the window, followed by Kyle.

The cigarette's ember had nearly reached the filter. Mark dropped it to the ground and crunched it underneath his shoe. He could hear the dark-walkers outside the door, in the hallway, scurrying around. He knelt down at the foot of the cot and felt around in the darkness. He lifted the small digital watch to his face, pressed the button that made it glow. 9:16 P.M. He did the math in his head: *Nearly eight or nine hours until daylight.* "Shit." He immediately regretted speaking; he heard the scurrying in the hallway cease, and in the next moment the door handle twisted. The doorframe rattled against the lock. A howl came from the other side of the door. *He's communicating with the others.* The thought chilled him.

He climbed on top of the cot and reached for the window. He undid the latch as the zombies began throwing themselves against the door. He pulled himself through, and his legs banged against the frame just as the door burst open, the barricade of cots thrown to the side. The zombies burst into the room to see the boy's tennis-shoes disappearing through the window. Their screams of rage carried out into the night as Mark landed in the grass.

He picked himself up and began running towards the fence. Several zombies huddled along the edge of the church, and they took off after him. Adrenalin surged through his veins, his leg muscles working like those of a race-horse; he jumped atop of a large stone near the fence and leapt through the air, grabbing the crisscrossing iron links. He began to climb as the zombies hit the fence beneath him. One reached up and grabbed his sneaker. He looked down, cursed, kicked his heel into the zombie's face, drawing blood along the crest of its nose. Mark continued to climb, reaching the top. He ignored the barbed-wire, cutting up his hands and arms and chest as he pulled himself over the edge. His shirt ripped as he released the chain-links.

He hit the ground hard on the other side and rolled through the thick grass, the blades slicing into his arm. He crossed the empty street, nearing a stone building. He glanced up either side of the street, saw some movement to his right, several dark-walkers moving about in the shadows, coming towards him. He cursed and darted into an alleyway lined with dumpsters and corroded cardboard boxes soggy from the day's rain. The brick walls of the buildings closed in on either side; a window above shattered, and he glanced up, dodging falling glass, to see a zombie reaching out towards him, face open in an angry shriek.

He looked behind him, and in the shafts of moonlight cutting over the narrow rooftops and dappling into the rustic alleyway, he could see zombies following him into the narrow straight. Ahead was a large stone wall covered with faded graffiti. *Fuck!* He spun around on his heels. The zombies bumped into one another in their pursuit. He glanced down and saw a sewer manhole cover. He knelt down and gripped the handle. The adrenaline in his system gave him super-strength, and he was able to lift the manhole cover. He crawled inside, feet finding the rungs of a metal ladder. He dropped down several rungs and pulled the cover back over the manhole. He heard the zombies only inches above him, shouting and shrieking, clawing at the cover, insane with rage.

Mark clung to the ladder, submerged in total, pitch-blackness.

His chest heaved in broken breaths.
He suddenly felt so weak.

Katie moved much slower now, the noises of the ungodly feast growing louder in her ears. She reached a fork in the staircase. She moved to the right, towards the friar's office. The staircase spiraled, and she stepped over several more bodies. Her foot plunged into the bowels of a man whose abdomen had been ripped open. She muffled a shriek and stumbled against the wall, jerking her foot from the mush; his small intestines had coiled around her ankle, and she put a finger into her mouth and bit down hard to keep from screaming. Chills danced up her spine as she shook the entrails from her shoe. She gathered her composure and crept back down the stairs, unwilling to go any further.

The desk against the wall had kept them from getting inside, but now they lunged over the furniture, having totally shattered the upper portion of the door. They were all women, much to Harker's surprise. He pressed his back up against a bookcase, knocking several Catholic liturgical encyclopedias to the floor. The zombies surrounded him in a half-circle. He gripped a metal lamp in his hand, having torn off the lamp's concentric cover. He waved it in front of them, threatening any who drew close. He knew his end had come, but a certain peace was felt in that he could take a few with him. The female zombies glanced between one another, as if asking, "Who shall go first?" But Harker's concentration fell; for in the darkness, moving between the legs of the dark-walkers, he saw his beautiful angel. She skipped around their legs, her flower skirt swaying around her dainty feet in pearl Sunday School high-heels. In her hand was a basket filled with Easter eggs, and she giggled as she watched her father. A smile crossed Harker's face, and the lamp-post fell from his hand, clattering onto the floor. The zombies grinned in unison; they took a slow step, and they launched forward, grabbing Harker and hurling him to the ground. He landed on his side, and he could see his daughter sitting on the desk, swinging her legs, begging her daddy to come home. He didn't even feel pain—only the warm rush of blood crawling down his neck—as the zombies began their victorious feast.

Mark descended the ladder in the shadows. The ladder abruptly ended; he looked down towards his feet but could see nothing. He took a deep breath and released his grip from the ladder. He fell several feet, let out a shout as his body was sucked into a deep vat of water. He was submerged, and he fought for the surface. He erupted from the murky water, spitting grime and mire from his mouth. Several grated manhole covers lined the length of the sewer, and moonlight filtered down. Mark waded through the filth, pushing away bits of trash from the days when mankind ruled in civilized form. He did the math in his head, managed to figure out which way went north, and he began moving in that direction. He continued his sluggish, cautious pace until he heard splashing coming from behind him. He turned and stared into the darkness, the pillars of moonlight splicing into the water at distant intervals. He heard the sound of rippling water, and nearly two hundred feet down the sewer, a shaft of moonlight illuminated the eyes of a dark-walker. The creature paused, let out a shriek, and began to move quicker through the water. Mark spun on his heels and tried to run, but the water formed a barrier against his legs. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." He remembered something Rachel had told him a long time ago: *They can't cross the Ohio River. I've always been a fan of the idea of just getting a houseboat and floating along. If it weren't for raiders prowling the waters, I'd be doing it right now.* Mark let his feet fall from underneath him, and he dove into the water, swimming furiously.

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Mark sets the shovel in the moist grass. He and Sarah stand side-by-side, staring at the crude grave. They both know that it is not worth it: the dark-walkers will just dig her up. In the morning, both are sure, there will be nothing here but strewn dirt and an empty hole, perhaps a gnawed femur or some discarded cartilage. They stand together, watching the sun rising to the east, over the rooftops of the squat rural-style homes. The subdivision at one time would have been wonderfully nice, with front-lawn gardens and street-lights at every block. There is a wooden fence propped against the back of the house's lawn; Mark walks over and pulls himself up. A swimming pool, long green with algae and littered with clumps of dead weeds. There is a swing-set, the plastic swings with their chains creaking in a stale wind. He drops back down to the ground. Sarah is behind him.

"You should get a change of clothes," Sarah says.

"What?" Mark asks.

"You smell. You smell... No offense, but you smell like shit."

"Oh," Mark says. "Well. I *was* in a sewer."

Her eyes open in shock. "How the hell did you end up in the sewer?"

He walks past her, towards the house. "I'll find a change of clothes."

Sarah turns on her heels. "And disinfect those cuts!"

"I will," he calls back, aware of the soreness from the barbed-wire.

"They'll get infected! Especially since you were in the sewer!"

"I'll disinfect them," Mark promises, and he reenters the house.

Mark finds Katie and Anthony standing in the kitchen.

"You cleaned it up," Mark says.

Anthony nods. "Yeah."

"Who lived here?" Mark asks, walking to the refrigerator, looking for pictures.

"Does it matter?" Anthony asks.

"It does right now."

Katie says, "I saw pictures in the living room. It's a man and a wife."

"It *was* a man and a wife," Anthony corrects. "They're not here anymore."

"Good," Mark says. "I'm going to change some clothes."

Anthony leaps forward. "You're going to wear their clothes?"

Mark eyes him, standing at the entrance of the hallway. "Yeah. Why?"

"Isn't that... sacrilegious... or something?"

Katie glares at him. "I thought it didn't matter?"

"We can debate ethics later," Mark says, moving down the hallway and towards the bedrooms. He spins on his heels, holds up a finger. "One more thing: find me some antiseptic, could you? Maybe some hydrogen peroxide or something?"

"All they have is soap," Katie says.

"Soap..." He thinks for a moment. "Soap will work." He looks over at Anthony. "And you need to get a bath. You're covered in blood. There's no water in the pumps, obviously, but there's a swimming pool behind the neighbor's house, out back. Kinda murky, but it'll work. And let the others know in case they want to bathe."

Chapter Twenty-Three

They Own the Night

“Oh, Death, rock me asleep!
Bring me to quiet and rest.
Let me pass my weary, guiltless life
out of my careful breast.
Toll on the passing bell, ring out for my doleful knell;
Let thy sound by Death tell;
Death doth draw me, Death doth draw me;
There is no remedy.
- Anne Boleyn (A.D. 1501-1536)

Anthony reached the fence, having descended the steep hill. He quickly began to climb, thanking God that no dark-walkers accosted him from around the opposite side of the church building. His shirt received only a few tears from the curled barbed wire at the top of the fence, and he climbed down the other side of the fence, reaching the pavement. He made his way across the street, keeping low in the darkness. He reached the overhang of a MISS PETUNIA'S FLOWER SHOP. He grabbed the front door's handle, twisted the knob, pushed the door open. He glanced over his shoulder, and across the street and up the hill, he could see dark-walkers moving about behind the windows, their silhouettes cast by the burning candles. He entered the flower shop and shut the door. Moonlight came through several dusty windows. He moved past the cash register, which was strewn with cobwebs. Several pots sat stacked in aisles along the wall. Bags of fertilizers. Pesticide. Racks of flower seeds. He could barely read the seed labels in the darkness: AMARYLLIS, SNAPDRAGON, QUEEN ANNE'S LACE, RANUNCULUS. He pushed through another door, which emptied into what had been at one time a greenhouse. The arching glass walls were thick with dust, and several spots along the glass panels had been shattered, weathered glass lying amidst the dead, hanging, and dried-out remains of what had once been lively and beautiful flowers. Rats scurried underneath the tables that had once been visited by women seeking to win flower tournaments or to simply decorate their homes. He moved in the coolness of the room. He stopped and peered up through one of the holes in the glass; he could see stars smiling down at him. *I can hide here until morning*, he thought. He began to become comfortable with that thought when the assailant emerged from the shadows with rattlesnake-speed, arms outstretched, fingers twisted into claws, mouth open with teeth that glistened in the starlight.

The man leapt onto one of the snow-mobiles, twisted the key which was kept in the starter, and ignited the engine. Sarah crawled onto the seat behind him. Kyle found the handle to the garage door, twisted, began lifting it up. The gears creaked and groaned, and a harsh wind tore across his ankles. He grunted and shoved, and the garage door curled up along the ceiling. He leapt back, preparing for an attack, but nothing came. He glanced over to the man, shrugged, and jumped onto his own snow-mobile. The man took a deep breath; Sarah squeezed his shoulders, encouraging him; Kyle twisted his own snow-mobile into life. The garage reverberated with the chugging of the engines, and Kyle led the way, slamming the gas pedal. The snow-mobile launched into the grass, the

undercarriage wheels carrying it down the hill. The man followed after him, the headlights splashing over the twelve-foot-tall fence as they gathered speed. Kyle watched the fence looming closer, and he braced himself for impact; several dark-walkers leapt in front of him, screeching. Kyle grinned, a devilish notion, and pressed the gas pedal down harder. Most of the zombies scattered, but one hit the front of the snow-mobile and somersaulted over Kyle's head, landing on its back in the grass behind him. The creature lifted its head and screamed as the wheels of the man's vehicle drew two deep slashes across its chest and legs; blood surged against the side of the snow-mobile, droplets flinging off with the speed like crescent waves. Kyle gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, hunkered down close to the vehicle as it hit the fence; the snow-mobile rode up the side of the chain-links, and he feared the snow-mobile would flip backwards; the engine screamed and the wheels spun. The fence toppled under the weight; his snow-mobile leveled, and he took off across the fence, crunching the barbed-wire under the wheels. He spun around in the street and took off to the left. The man's snow-mobile rattled over the fence; Sarah shouted something; a dark-walker lunged at them from the side. The man delivered a punch into its face, sending it to the ground; he hit the gas and sped after Kyle, leaving the monster alone on the pavement.

Anthony didn't expect the attack, and he was thrown onto one of the tables, the zombie jumping on top of him. Its fetid breath stank of rotten flesh, the teeth decayed and hanging loose from the black gums. Long and knotted hair dangled in Anthony's face, and he could almost see the creature before the plague, a hippy playing the Jim bay and smoking marijuana from a hookah. Drool dribbled onto Anthony's chin, and the creature's jaws snapped open and close as it tried to feast on his face; Anthony's hands groped at the knotted hair along the base of the zombie's scalp, holding the toothy weapon away from his skin. He let out a shout and kneed the assailant in the groin; the zombie released, fumbling backwards, groping at its testicles. Anthony leapt down from the table, grabbed a ceramic plate that held dirt and a dead flower, and he hurled it into the creature's face: it shattered into a dozen pieces, and the zombie scraped dirt and grime away from its eyes.

Anthony spun around and headed for the door leading out of the greenhouse; he heard what sounded like a car engine as the glass wall to his left burst open, a zombie pummeling through. It knocked into him, and Anthony fell to the ground, the zombie rolling over him and across the floor. Anthony crawled to his feet as the first zombie came at him from the side; he kicked it in its swollen abdomen, and it tottered into the table, the potted plants quivering with the force of its impact. It snarled at him and charged; Anthony backed into a wall, and he found himself pinned by the assailant. The creature bit at his neck, but the teeth found no substance; Anthony had lifted his legs, allowing gravity to pull him to the ground. He shoved his hands around the back of the zombie's bare knees, and he yanked them close to him; the zombie pitched over backwards, landing on its back. The other zombie attacked; Anthony collapsed onto his side as it crawled all over him, snapping.

Anthony kicked it away with his feet and scurried over the dirty floor. His head bumped into a bucket filled with pottery tools. He reached inside, found a handheld hoe with curved iron spikes. The second zombie crawled after him, reaching for his ankle; Anthony kicked it in the face, and it reeled backwards. He leapt to his feet, kicked the creature in the face once more.

The first zombie had come to its feet, and it jumped at him; Anthony swung the hoe, the three-pronged spikes slicing a trinity of deep gouges across its face. Blood dribbled onto the floor. Anthony swung the hoe again, this time bringing the spikes into the creature's neck; it let out a shriek and a spray of blood spit Anthony in the face, the jugular severed. Anthony staggered backwards, releasing the hoe in the assailant's neck, and he groped at his eyes, which were now covered with the attacker's

blood; his heart raced, for he was blinded. He heard a loud *thump*, and when he managed to get the blood out of his eyes, he saw the zombie writhing on the floor, blood gushing from the open wound; the hoe rested in its hands, and its body shook as the blood seeped like an artesian spring down its neck and onto the floor.

The other zombie stared at its fallen brother-in-arms, looked over at Anthony, screeched, and rushed him. Anthony ran to the other side of the greenhouse, then went onto the other side of the table that lined the middle of the hall. The zombie glared at him from the opposite side of the table covered with pots and dirt and withered, dried-out plants. Anthony looked over to the bucket of tools, saw a larger hoe with one-foot prongs leaning against the wall. He bit his lip, summoned the courage, and bolted down the length of the table; the zombie followed. He reached the end of the table, leapt over the body of the still-quivering but dying zombie, and had nearly reached the larger hoe as the other zombie intercepted, grabbing his ankles and yanking him to the ground.

Anthony's forehead hit the cement floor, and stars danced before his eyes. For a moment the world went quiet, and then he felt the zombie biting into his shoe. He jerked away, crawled over the pavement, and grasped the large hoe. He rolled onto his back; the zombie had stood and now jumped into the air, poised to fall upon him; Anthony swung the hoe around, laid it upon his chest, the spikes pointed upwards; the zombie fell atop of him, and the spikes ripped through its chest, severed its heart and lungs, and erupted from its back. The zombie's eyes went wide, the mouth opened, and the tongue lolled out. Its eyes darted back and forth in its sockets, and blood dripped from its mouth, splattering on Anthony's forehead.

The creature went stiff.

Anthony grunted and pushed the zombie off of him. He pulled himself to his feet, rubbed his sore forehead, saw that he was *drenched* in its blood. The zombie on the floor had gone still, eight pints of blood soaking the floor in a ruby-red pool. Anthony leaned against the wall, took several deep breaths, and then stepped onto the table against the wall and disappeared through the hole in the glass, the only testimony of the zombie that lay on the floor with spikes poking through its back.

Mark broke through the surface of the water and waste, gasping for air. A beam of moonlight shined down above him. He wiped a layer of grime and algae from his brow and looked back the direction he had come. The sounds of the dark-walkers could be heard, but it didn't matter now. He moved to the ladder and began to climb upwards, finding the stench wafting off his soiled clothes revolting. He found that his muscles didn't quite cooperate as he tried to lift the manhole cover at the top of the ladder. He stopped moving when he heard splashing coming towards him. He hunkered himself against the ladder and stared downwards, watched as five or six dark-walkers passed underneath. *They can't smell me because of the sewer's stench.*

He finally enjoyed the thought of smelling like the inside of a trash compactor.

He bit his lip and tried to open the cover once more; he grunted and slid it a fraction of an inch. He curled his fingers around the cover and pushed, sliding it a few more inches across the pavement above.

That's when the sound came.

A car engine?

A moment later he ripped his fingers away from the opening as some sort of vehicle rushed overhead, spitting gravel down into the vertical tunnel.

What the fuck? he wondered, grabbing the lip of the cover.

He yanked his fingers down once more as another vehicle rushed overhead; its wheels tore into the manhole cover, yanking it away from the hole. Mark shrugged and climbed out, pulling himself

onto the street. He saw two snow-mobiles crossing a small bridge that spanned the I-71 interstate highway below. He heard shrieks and howls behind him; several dark-walkers were giving chase. He began running after the vehicles, crossing the bridge under the uncaring moon and naïve stars.

The zombies were nearly upon her. Tears danced down her cheeks as she ran, leaping the fallen fence outside the church and spilling into the street. Katie glanced behind her, could see that they were gaining. She ran harder, passing the Celestial Restaurant. She ran uphill, several ostentatious, \$250,000 homes on either side. Zombies spilled out from the buildings, jumping off the stoops, dodging the parked cars, joining in with the others. A zombie emerged from a German restaurant and stepped in front of her; she took off towards the sidewalk, against which were several parked vehicles. A zombie stood stoic on the sidewalk; she froze in her tracks, spun around, the throng almost upon her. She jumped onto the hood of a nearby van and crawled onto the roof. The zombies surrounded the van, reaching up at her and shaking the vehicle upon its wheels. She stretched out her hands, trying to gain balance; across the sidewalk was a large brick fence that opened up into a small park. She didn't even think as she leapt across the sidewalk and slammed into the brick wall, her arms dangled over the top. She groaned as she pulled herself up and fell off the other side. She landed hard on her back, the wind knocked out of her, lungs not working. She feared that she had paralyzed herself, but her fingers worked. She could hear them on the other side of the wall. She pulled herself to her feet and hobbled towards a line of trees splashed across an apartment building. Several zombies began clambering over the fence, having leapt from the van. She made her way between the trees, half-skipping and half-running. Katie's legs seared with pain, the muscles straining. She fell against a Jeep Liberty, grabbed the door handle. *Unlocked*. She ducked inside and slammed the door shut, threw the lock. She crawled down between the seats, body shaking and tears streaming down her face.

Kyle slammed on the brakes, the vehicle spinning to a stop. He left the engine running as he leapt off the seat. The man and Sarah followed, stopping their snow-mobile. The bridge was down the street, and they had left the dark-walkers far behind them: their shouts and cries could be heard, though somewhat distant. The man grabbed the keys from his belt, led them up the stoop of a three-story house with a one-car garage; it was one house out of dozens lining either side of the street. He unlocked the door, pushed it open. Sarah moved past him, into the house, and Kyle followed her. The man gazed down the street, could see the zombies appearing on the crest of the sloping road, and he darted inside, slamming the door shut and hurtling the lock down. The three of them stood in the quiet of the house, hearing only their private harsh breathing, screaming hearts, and the quivering of their muscles as the adrenaline began to subside.

Kyle wiped sweat from his brow. His voice shook: "What a night, eh?"

"Oh," the man muttered. "It's been sublime."

The dark-walkers were gaining on him. Mark's lungs dared to explode. He abandoned the bridge, ran to the far sidewalk. He ran, parked vehicles passing to his right and abandoned houses to his left. He heard a car alarm sound as a zombie pitched into one of the expensive vehicles. He glanced back to see the zombies freeze in their tracks, hunkering down, heads darting back and forth upon their shoulders, eyes wide. Mark ran up a stoop's small flight of steps and grabbed the front door. He paused, trekked backwards, peered around the corner. The siren continued to wail, and he found it amazing and somewhat unnerving how the dark-walkers reacted. They still refused to move, just

looked back and forth, scanning the night skies, hunched down. Their heads turned back and forth in perfect, unbroken harmony with one another.

The siren ceased to sound.

At that instant the dark-walkers stood, and in unison they let out a single bellowing cry. They resumed their chase, darting past the vehicle. Mark cursed under his breath and returned to the door. *Locked.* He knelt down, pulled up the welcome mat, found a key. He fitted it into the lock and opened the door. He slid into the front room and shut the door, locked it, pressed his shoulder-blades against the heavy oak. He heard them running about outside. Heard one or two come onto the stoop. Heard them rapping on the window, snarling and breathing harshly. They abandoned the stoop. He wiped sweat from his eyes, began to see shapes emerging from the shadows of the house.

They had seen her crawl into the Jeep Liberty. She buried her face into her hands, her back exposed between the leather seats. The zombies smashed their fists against the glass windows, and they began to web and crack. Their palms became bloody, knuckles cracking with each new thrust of the fist. The window of the front passenger's seat began to splinter apart, and a zombie's hand reached through, groping mindlessly, searching. Katie's tears became more and more strenuous, and her chest felt afire. The zombies' screams echoed in her ears, and she prepared for—

The screams stopped.

She opened her eyes, engulfed by silence.

A sound came from the door handle.

She spun around in the seat.

The door opened.

Anthony stood there, an iron bar, splattered with blood, in his hands.

"Come on," he said, reaching for her hand, the iron bar dangling in the other hand.

She just stared at him, disbelieving. *He was covered in so much blood.*

"Come on," Anthony said.

She wouldn't take his hand. Droplets of blood fell from his fingertips.

"Katie," he said. "It's me. Anthony."

She still didn't move.

"It's not my blood," he promised.

Nothing.

"Katie," he growled, *"I'm not one of them."*

Her hand reached out, tentative. She took his hand.

He pulled her out of the van.

The bodies of dark-walkers lay about the vehicle, skulls imploded.

"Let's go," Anthony said. "There will be more coming soon, I'm sure."

Mark made his way up the stairwell of the house, the steps creaking under his weight. He ran his hand over the banister, dust gathering between his fingers. He reached the top landing, and something strange tickled his ears. *Crying.* It came from a room on the far side of the upper hall. He crept forward, the door drawing closer, the crying louder. He reached the door, twisted the handle, pushed it open. A skylight in the ceiling sent down a shaft of light upon the bed, where a figure could be seen curled underneath the sheets. He recognized her immediately. She had been at the church. Must have somehow escaped. A full-grown woman, she hid under the sheets and clutched a stuffed giraffe in her hands. Mark licked his lips, moved forward, speaking softly. He moved around the other side of the bed. The room had at one time been some girl's bedroom, to which the plethora of

stuffed animals, the NSYNC and BACKSTREET BOYS and JONAS BROTHERS posters on the closet doors, and the wall-spanning collage with KODAK snapshots of preteen boys testified. He neared the edge of the bed. "Cameron." Wasn't that her name? "Cameron."

She suddenly leapt forward, hurling the giraffe against the wall.

Her face was contorted into a mask of rage, eyes billowing hate.

Mark ducked down as she swung the kitchen knife through the air.

He scrambled around the other side of the bed, shouting her name.

He turned around next to the girl's desk, facing the maniacal woman.

She stood on the other side of the bed, knife held high.

"It's all right!" Mark exclaimed. "I'm from the church, too!"

It took a moment, but the woman set the knife on the bed.

Sheepishly, "Sorry."

"No," Mark said, taking a deep breath. "It's okay."

She sat down on the bed. "How bad was it?"

"What?" Mark asked, drawing closer, still cautious.

"I won't bite you," she said, patting the mattress. "I'm not one of them."

Mark sat down beside her. "It's pretty bad."

"How many others have made it?"

"At least two," Mark said. "I saw them driving away on the snow-mobiles."

"They didn't drive very far," she said.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed to the window. "Look outside."

He stood and walked over to the window facing the street. He pulled the blinds away and peered out into the road. He could see several dark-walkers surrounding the two snow-mobiles parked in the street; one still idled. His heart sank, and he backed away, letting the blinds fall against the window. He trudged back to the bed and sat down.

"They didn't get away," he moaned, the knowledge weighing upon him.

"No," she said. "They're inside a house, too."

Mark eyed her. "Did you see who it was?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "But I think your friend was with them."

The boy grinned.

"God," she said, wrinkling her nose. "You smell something awful."

"I was in the sewer," he said.

"How'd that happen?"

"It's a long story."

"We've got time. We aren't going anywhere till morning."

Anthony and Katie moved together. She had stopped crying, and now she moved with a renewed vigor, feeding off her friend with the shovel. They moved along the brick wall, could hear the dark-walkers along the opposite side. The brick wall merged with the bridge, and they followed a path that wound down towards the interstate. The stone path meshed with a walking bridge, and they moved across. Below them were several wrecks along I-71 with shattered windshields and rusted paint. They made it to the opposite side, and the path wound to the right, following the ridge of the slope which stretched down towards the interstate. An owl hooted somewhere in the woods, and Anthony found it somewhat comical: *Nothing has changed for some creatures on this planet.*

He told Katie to be quiet and wait; he moved forward to the end of the trail, which passed under an ornate, ivory arch and ran into a street lined with apartment complexes. These were nice apartments, with ivy crawling along the sides. The street was narrow, and it wound its way up the hill. He retreated back down the path, beckoned Katie forward. They made their way up the hill, moving slowly and silently, listening to the wind. They could hear the zombies in the distance, somewhere on the other side of the hill. He imagined them suddenly crashing through the trees on their left, spilling into them from above. The thought sent chills tracing along his spine, and the darkness didn't help. *Why do they have to come out during the night?* he wondered to no one but himself. *Why couldn't they be like lizards, bathing in the sun?*

Katie suddenly stopped, grabbing Anthony by the shoulder.

Anthony turned. "What is it?" he asked in a harsh whisper.

She bit her lip, didn't say anything.

"What?" he asked.

And then she embraced him, squeezing him tight.

He wrapped his arms around her, feeling slightly awkward, hugged her, too.

"Thank you," she whispered into his shoulder. "Thank you."

He didn't say anything for a moment. "Katie?"

"Yeah?" she asked, refusing to let go.

"We should probably keep moving."

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Mark stands in the bedroom, the sunlight streaming through the windows, illuminating the décor. The bed is a king-size, the covers strewn about in a heap upon the floor. Along the walls are photographs of World War Two-era American aircraft: B-24 Liberators, B-17 Flying Fortresses, F4F Wildcats. There is a map of the Solomon Islands hanging upon the far wall, and there are several faded awards mounted beneath dust-stained picture-frames. He walks to the wall, scrubs dust from the glass plate of a picture-frame, sees a black-and-white image of several men standing underneath the wing of an F4U-Corsair. Mark looks above the closet door and sees two old rifles hanging upon ledges: a pair of M1 Garands. *He served as a fighter pilot in World War Two*, Mark thinks to himself, opening up one of the dresser drawers. *He probably served in the Pacific Theater*, considering the map of the Solomons. *And he was a golfer, apparently*. All he can find are plaid shirts and golfing shorts. He finally finds a pair of khakis, strips down, throws them on. He changes into a polo shirt and quietly shuts the dresser drawer. He looks at the pile of his sewage-soaked clothes on the floor. He had worn them once when he and Cara had gone to a place called Big Bone Lick in northern Kentucky. He pushes her out of his mind and leaves the room.

He finds Katie rummaging through the kitchen cabinets.

"What are you looking for?" he asks.

"Some food," she says. "I'm shaking all over."

"The adrenaline is wearing off."

"I know." She finds a can of split peas. "Do you like vegetables?"

"Yeah," Mark says. Looking around, "Where's Anthony?"

"I don't know. He went out back in a hurry."

Mark steps out the back door, passing Sarah, who is on her way inside. He sees Anthony standing at the fence-line bordering the miry pool. Mark walks over to him, stands quietly beside him.

Anthony says, "I didn't notice it when we came in."

"Notice what?"

"The street name. It's Maranatha."

"All right."

"My girlfriend... She lived on Maranatha."

Mark doesn't say anything.

"She died with the plague," Anthony says.

"I'm sorry."

"Everyone lost someone. It doesn't matter anymore."



Their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and the man found the door to the garage, retracing his steps from memory. He pushed it open, feeling a cold back-draft. He stepped down two wooden steps and rummaged around in the shadows. Sarah and Kyle stood in the doorframe, exchanging glances. A sudden burst of light hit them in the face, and they twisted their faces away, clenching their eyes shut, blinded. The flashlight beam danced over the charcoal Explorer sitting in the garage, loaded up with supplies, sitting like a quiet banshee waiting to be unleashed. They could hear the garage door creaking and bending, the dark-walkers outside scraping their frail hands against the weak aluminum frame. Sarah and Kyle gingerly stepped down into the garage. The man splashed the flashlight beam over the garage door.

"Maybe you should turn off the light," Sarah said, voice a harsh whisper.

"It doesn't matter," the man said. "They know we're here."

Sarah walked over to the Explorer, peered inside. "What is this?"

Kyle exchanged glances with the man, asked her, "Want to go for a ride?"

"Where to?" she asked, confused.

The man shined the flashlight in her face. "Alaska."

The sound of shattering glass and splintering wood reached their ears. They leapt up from the bed. Cameron threw herself against the door, pressing her shoulder into the wood, eyes suddenly alive with terror. Mark ran to the far window, grabbed the blinds and pulled them away. He looked outside, could see dark-walkers surrounding the house. One of them looked up at the window and shrieked. Mark ducked out-of-sight, looked over to Cameron. Her face had gone completely white, her entire demeanor changing. They could hear them running through the house downstairs, overturning furniture, knocking pictures off the walls, yanking drawers out from the kitchen counters and scattering the contents over the tile floor, the zombies blinded in their mad desire for blood. The house began to shake as they tumbled over one another, climbing up the stairwell. Mark shouted that she couldn't hold the door against them. As if on cue, it quaked against Cameron's weight; she was thrown back, sprawled over the floor; the door swung open, a dark-walker entering the room, screaming. Mark grabbed a glass lamp upon the desk and swung it at the oncoming monster. The glass shattered against its face, digging into its skin; it spun around, fingers clawing at its blood-riddled flesh. Mark kicked it in the side, knocking it to the ground. He lunged for the door, another dark-walker entering; he tackled the zombie, knocking it back into the hallway. He ducked back into the room, tucked his toe under the open door, and swung it shut. He pressed his own

weight against the thin wood. A howl burned in his ears; he turned to see the dark-walker with the mangled face charging him; suddenly Cameron appeared with the kitchen knife, intercepting the monster. Mark turned his eyes as her knife dug deep into its eye, gouging the brain. The zombie collapsed to the floor in a quick fury. Mark continued to hold the door shut, could feel it splintering, shards of wood digging through his shirt and into his shoulder. "They're going to get in!" he hollered. "They're going to get in!" Cameron grabbed her hair in her hands, squeezed and pulled, her mind a chaotic cesspool, the screams beyond the door shaking the room as if it were submerged in an earthquake.

They could hear the sounds of the zombies entering the other house. At first they feared it was the home they were in, but the sounds were distant, muffled. They exchanged worried glances. Kyle said, "Maybe they're going house-to-house, trying to sniff us out." But his words just forced their eyes upon the fragile garage door, which continued to bend and twist as the dark-walkers moaned and groaned. The man shook his head, told Kyle that they knew where they were. Kyle's response: "Then how come they're breaking into the other house?" The man didn't answer, knowing the only possibility: *that there were other survivors, others hiding out on the street*. They could only wait to hear those too-human screams, followed by silence as the dark-walkers munched on the flesh of the fallen.

Cameron had unlocked the bolt on the window, raising the lower glass up to rest with the upper glass plate; this enabled them to climb onto the roof of the stoop overhang. She helped push the bed against the door, a dangerous process. But they had done it. Mark climbed out through the window, standing on the overhang. Below, zombies next to the stoop leapt up, swiping their arms with gnarled fingers through the air, trying to reach them. Mark didn't worry: they were twelve feet off the ground. Cameron began climbing through as the zombies broke the top half of the door and began entering the room, worming their way through the shattered door, landing on the mattress, and rolling onto the floor. They leapt at the window; Cameron shouted and kicked, her heel smashing them in the face. She tumbled through the window, landing on the rooftop; she rolled towards the edge; Mark reached down, grabbed her by the hand; her body swung out and dropped, bringing Mark to his knees in a shout of pain. Her legs dangled over the edge; Mark glanced back at the window, saw zombies fighting over who would crawl through first. Cameron screamed at him; a zombie grabbed her leg, threatened to drag her down; Mark swore and pulled with all his might; the dark-walker released, and Mark gritted his teeth, pulled Cameron up to the overhang. One of the zombies was coming through the window; Mark let out a shout and kicked it in the face, sending it tumbling into the room, knocking the other zombies onto the floor. *Like a bowling ball hitting pins*, he thought to himself as he slammed the lower glass plate back down into position. Cameron picked herself up, winded, eyes dazed. Mark leapt out of the way as a zombie smashed into the glass, turning the plate into a shower of shards. Mark grabbed Cameron by the hand, and they began climbing the slick tiles of the roof, knowing they had nowhere to go, that their actions had not saved them but only prolonged their ultimate fate.

The road with the apartments had begun winding downhill in a steep incline, slightly banking. They walked quietly, keeping close. All that greeted their ears were the distant howls of the dwellers of the night, and the sound of old rainwater falling like a waterfall into the city drains, vanishing into the underground sewer catacombs. The road leveled out next to several gas stations and a supermarket. SHELL, MARATHON, BP. Anthony had never understood why gas stations from different corporations always monopolized on a single intersection. They stopped beside a broken-down car in the middle

of the intersection (at one time there had been an accident, but the other car had disappeared). They gazed down each road, seeing nothing but inky blackness. Anthony looked up, found the north star: right ahead of them. Katie broke away from him, walking towards one of the gas stations. He followed quickly. She passed underneath the awning of the BP. Anthony looked up at the digital sign, now blank, that had once upon a time held the figures for the escalating gas prices. Katie's hand draped over the nozzles of the gas pumps. Anthony ran up beside her, shoes thudding loudly on the pavement. She pressed her face against the large glass window of the store.

She looked over at the boy: "It might be unlocked."

Anthony bit his lip. "We can try."

She moved over to the door, pulled.

It swung open.

Anthony said, "It must have been open late at night. Maybe a 24-hour station."

He entered the building, the air stinking of mold and musk. Katie came in after him, closing the door behind her. She grabbed a newspaper rack and slid it against the door. Anthony told her that it wouldn't hold it shut; she told him that it would fall if anything entered, alerting them to its presence. He moved between the aisles. The vents crawled with mold, and though no air circulated, the smells still reached them. He reached the front counter, reached up, grabbed several packs of cigarettes. He stuffed them into his pockets.

Katie, behind him, said, "Smoking is a disgusting habit."

"I know," Anthony said. "Come on."

He led the way around the counter. There were two chairs, and Anthony sat in one of them. Katie sat in the other. He opened one of the packs of cigarettes. A MARLBORO-100. Katie had sat down beside a rack of lighters. He asked for one; she tossed one to him, and he lit up. The cherry burned bright in the darkness. He swung his dangling legs back and forth as he smoked.

Katie wrinkled her nose. "That smells awful."

"You can go outside if you can't stand it."

"It's not *that*..." She went quiet. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Anthony asked, heart leaping into his chest.

"I don't know. I thought I heard something."

"What did you think you heard?"

"It's probably just the rats."

They climbed up the slick roof, feet sliding over the shanty tiles. Behind them, zombies crowded on the overhang's roof, began trying to pursue. They were unable to match the coordination and balance of the uninfected, and most of them slipped off the sides, falling down to the ground, limping away into the darkness. Mark and Cameron reached the top angle of the roof. The zombies moved slower, patient, realizing that impatience would result in their own injuries. Cameron's lip wavered as she watched. Mark looked out to the left, could see only the city wrapped in darkness, highways intersecting, buildings peppered around abandoned car lots. Off the other side of the roof was a steep drop, several hundred feet, to a slope that splashed into the wreck-scattered I-71.

"They're getting closer!" Cameron shouted.

Mark didn't say anything, looked at the house opposite them.

"Mark!" she shouted. "Mark!"

"Cameron," he said in a low voice. "Look."

He pointed, and she followed the line of his finger.

Across the narrow gap between the two houses was a single window.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No."

"It's our only way out."

"No," she refused.

He grabbed her by the arm, shook her. "Cameron. *It's the only way.*"

They stood in the garage, ears strained. Suddenly the sound of shattering glass came from the upper story of the house.

"What the hell?" Sarah asked. "How the hell did they get in up there?"

"Fuck," the man muttered, grabbing a set of keys from off the wall.

"Whoa!" Kyle shouted, glaring at the man. "You're kidding me, right?"

"They move in flocks, remember? Where there's one, there will be more."

"Shit," Sarah groaned. "So we're just going to... start driving?"

"Maybe we can get out into the country," the man said. "Get away from them."

"You dream," Kyle said. "But I'll dream with you."

The man unlocked the driver's door, leapt inside. It had that sweet "new car" smell, and the leather felt oddly comfortable. He hit the electric unlock button, unlocking the other doors. Kyle opened the front passenger's door, climbed inside. With the door open, he turned and shouted to Sarah, who stood beside the door leading into the house. "Sarah! Come on!"

"Something's not right," she said.

"Yeah, you're head! Come on!"

She glared at him. "Wait twenty seconds."

"Sarah..."

But she had already opened the door and entered the house.

The man looked over at Kyle. "What the fuck is she doing?"

Kyle slammed his door shut. "I don't have a damn idea."

"She's going to get herself killed."

"Then we should go ahead and go."

"Yeah," the man said. "We should."

But they didn't go anywhere.

Mark picked himself up, brushed glass from his clothes, surprised that his hands and face hadn't been sliced open. He stood in what seemed to be an attic, with a low-hanging roof of crisscrossed timbers. Cardboard boxes were scattered everywhere, large stuffed animals in one corner. He turned and beckoned Cameron forward. She bit her lip, closed her eyes, let out a scream—and leapt. Mark cursed and leapt out of the way, head slamming against a slanted timber. Cameron soared into the room, landed hard on her face, flipped over backwards. Mark raced over to her, knelt down in the darkness. He pressed his fingers against her throat, feeling for a pulse. *You killed her.* Her eyes suddenly opened; he fell backwards, shocked. She groaned, pulled herself up onto her rear, complained about her back hurting. He laughed, found it hysterical. He got to his feet and ran over to the window. The zombies had reached the top of the roof, watched them from their perch. *They perch like birds,* Mark thought, observing them squatting in a row, staring. One of them moved forward, shrieked, leapt; Mark didn't even budge, knew what would happen. It hit the siding of the house to the left of the window, fell backwards into several bushes. Dark-walkers from the street converged upon it, and Mark turned away as the dark-walker's screams of pain and agony commenced.

"Don't move."

The words cut through the dark attic.

Mark froze, staring into the blackness.

The voice, feminine, repeated: "Don't move, or I'll shoot."

"We're not them," Mark said.

A figure emerged from the darkness.

"Sarah?" Mark asked.

"Yeah," she said. "And I don't have a gun."

"Help me get Cameron to her feet," Mark said.

Cameron spat, lying on the floor, "I'm not a fucking paraplegic."

"Holy shit," Kyle muttered.

The man turned and looked out the back window of the Explorer.

Sarah had appeared, and two people were behind her.

"Who is it?" the man asked, unable to identify them in the shrouding darkness.

"Mark," Kyle answered. "And Cameron."

"Mark," the man said, grinning to himself. "That fucker will survive anything."

Sarah swung open the side door of the van. "Got room for three more?"

"Get in," the man said. "And shut the door. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

The ember of the cigarette burned near the filter. Anthony watched the smoke curling out of his nose and climbing towards the cobweb-speckled ceiling. Katie hopped off her chair, knelt down, began rummaging through stacks of old candy bars. SNICKERS. KIT-KAT. REESE'S CUPS. Anthony watched her, thought, *She must be bipolar or something. Just twenty minutes ago she was literally clawing at me, sobbing.* His thoughts were interrupted as Katie suddenly leapt back with a shout; a zombie stood between two aisles, near the abandoned refrigerator coolers. Its arms dangled at its sides, and blood caked the corners of its mouth. Its eyes glowed like a cat's eyes in the darkness. Anthony leapt off his chair, let the cigarette fall from his fingers, where it spun to a stop on the floor, ashes sputtering. The zombie stared at them, and they stared back: no one moving, no one daring to make the first move. *Probably just the rats, my ass,* Anthony thought. The zombie blocked their exit; they were pinned in. A slew of curse words danced through his mind. Suddenly the zombie shrieked and ran forward, rushing at them from down the aisle. Anthony froze, out of options, faced with the grueling certainty of his own demise. Suddenly Katie ducked down; Anthony stepped back into a rack filled with cheap cigarettes: SWISHER SWEETS, GISPERT CORONAS, BLACK & MILDS. The zombie was nearly upon them, arms outstretched, jaws gaping—it leapt into the air like something out of a NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC magazine, some bird-of-prey descending upon the frightened feast. Anthony's eyes clenched shut, barring for impact.

The blast of the gun resounded in his ears, burning into his mind like red-hot poker.

He opened his eyes to see Katie standing in front of him, the shotgun gripped in her hands, smoke rising from the barrel. She slowly lowered the gun, began shaking all over. The gun began to slip from her hands, and Anthony moved forward, took it from her. She stared at him, her face drained of color, eyes a swirling mess. He moved past her, holding the shotgun, and he walked around the edge of the front desk, peered around the corner. The body of the zombie lied on the floor, and its arms and legs twitched as its muscles went into spasms. Where its head had been, there was nothing but a growing pool of blood, the fractured edge of its spinal column sticking out of the stub of its neck. Blood, bone fragments, and brain matter stained the shelves and dripped from the yellowed pages of the magazines. Anthony took a deep breath, set the gun upon the counter.

Katie stared at him as he came back around, her body quivering with fear.

He stopped, just stared at her.

She tried to say something, but no words could be found.

He said, "Katie..."

"I killed him," she said, voice almost a whisper. "I... I killed him."

"You didn't have a choice," Anthony said.

Her strength gave out; she collapsed into the rack of cheap cigars; Anthony rushed forward, took her by the arms, helped her balance. She slowly wrapped her arms around him, pressed her cheek into his neck. Her eyes stared out at the carnage over the shelves, the walls, the ceiling. She moaned, "I killed him..." as tears began to trace patterns down her cheek once more.

"You did nothing wrong," Anthony said, squeezing her tightly.

He repeated, "You did nothing wrong... You did nothing wrong..."

But her tears kept coming.



The man has gotten out of the Explorer. He waves at Kyle down the street, and Kyle begins walking over. Sarah emerges from the house and walks across the lawn. The man looks over at her, says, "We'll stay here tonight. I don't think anyone has the energy to go farther west now."

"Farther west?" Sarah asks. "I think we should talk about this..."

"There's nothing to talk about," the man snaps.

Kyle reaches them, speaks: "What'd you need?"

"What were you doing?" the man asks him.

"Just walking," he says. "Where's everyone else?"

Sarah answers, "Inside."

"We're staying here tonight," the man says. "So everyone can get some rest."

"Okay," Kyle says. "We should probably start fortifying the house early."

"Definitely," the man says. Then, "We'd better bury Cameron."

"We already did," Sarah says. "Mark helped me."

"Where's he?"

"In the back with Anthony. And Katie's inside. She's pretty worn out."

"We're all worn out. We should try to get some sleep."

"If sleep is even possible," Kyle mutters. He sighs. "I'll get the guys together. We'll start working on the house." The man nods to him, and Kyle turns, walks up to the house, disappears inside.

The man turns around, returns to the driver's side of the Explorer.

"Where are you going?" Sarah asks.

"We need to put some gas in it," the man says.

"Can I come?"

The man doesn't answer. He climbs inside, shuts the door, turns on the engine, hits the gas, and leaves her alone, driving the Explorer away from the house. She stands on the curb, watching as the S.U.V. stops at the far stop-sign at the end of the road and turns left. *Back the way we came*, she thinks. She can't remember passing any gas stations.

Kyle runs into Mark when he enters the house. Mark is standing in khakis and a golfing shirt, admiring several photographs above the fireplace mantle. He turns with Kyle's arrival, and Kyle asks, "Where's Anthony? I thought he was with you."

"He was," Mark answers. "But he wanted to... check something out."

Kyle doesn't understand. "So it's a secret or something?"

"His girlfriend lived near here. Or so he says."

Kyle remembers searching for his girlfriend. Remembers what he found. "Shit."

"He'll be okay," Mark says. "He can handle himself."

"No, he can't," Kyle says. "Which way did he go?"

"I don't know. East, I think. Maybe south. I don't know."

"Okay. Well, we need his help. He'll have to go romance-reminiscing later." He looks over at Katie, who is sitting on the couch. "Can we get your help for something?"

She nods, standing. Her cheeks are bloated and eyes bloodshot. Her voice is weak: "Yeah."

"Thanks." To both of them, Kyle says: "We need to fortify this place. We're staying here tonight."

"We should go back to the church," Katie says.

The boys stare at her, shocked at her words.

"I mean..." She doesn't say anything else. "Never mind."

"Okay." Kyle says. "Now. I'm going to go find Anthony. Get his ass back here."

The man stops at a gas station. An old MARATHON. Most of the gas stations are unable to be used, the pumps operated by electricity, which had been gone for months. Some of the older gas stations, many of which are around the Cincinnati Metro, are older, with pumps that can be manually activated. He stands in the coolness of the March morning, feels the pump's hose quivering as gasoline travels through the nozzle and into the Explorer's tank. He thinks to himself, *An S.U.V. probably wasn't the best choice. I should've gotten something good on gas mileage.* But he doesn't care right now. He finishes pumping the gas and hangs the handle upon the hook. He opens the door to the vehicle to get back inside, but he pauses: he stares at the gas station marketplace, the glass windows shattered, the door swinging listlessly in the wind. Several birds perch upon the shattered windowsills, staring at him with curious eyes. *How long has it been since they've seen a human being standing in broad daylight?* He gives them a salute and climbs into the Explorer. He ignites the engine, and the birds scatter, becoming mere specks in the blue sky, twirling over one another in their acrobatic dances.

He pulls out of the gas station and turns left.

He heads away from the house, towards the interstate.

Anthony stands in front of the house. It had been months since he had last been here, and the nostalgia is sickening. His heart feels heavy in his chest. *It was raining the last time I was here.* He takes a deep breath and moves forward. The grass is spongy beneath his feet. Dandelions are beginning to sprout between the cracks in the cement of the uncovered front porch. The door is unlocked. He enters the house and shuts the door behind him. From across the street, Kyle stands in the shadow of an oak with budding leaves. He looks down both sides of the street, tightens the jacket tighter around himself, and he crosses the street, begins to jog as he nears the door. He reaches the door, reaches for the doorknob... And stops. *Give him some time,* he thinks to himself. He curses and sits down upon the front porch. He picks at the grass and stares at the sky. *Just give him ten minutes. Ten minutes is all he needs.*

ΣΩΣ

Anthony and Katie stood within the gas station, just listening to the sounds outside. The howls and cries of the dark-walkers had drawn closer, and Anthony feared that they were following their scent. He imagined them walking single-file, hunched over, noses to the ground, weaving up and down the streets, slowly coming closer and closer. Eventually his heart began to hammer like a Greek chime behind his ribs, and he took the shotgun, and they left the station. They merged once more with the darkness, moving farther down the road, hearing the zombies in the distance. Katie began to sniffle. Anthony checked and rechecked to make sure the shotgun was ready to be fired. The road descended, apartments and hole-in-the-wall bars lining either side of the street. They meandered around several wrecked vehicles, and came to see a line of cars and trucks stretching far into the distance, hogging the road. A banner fluttered in the wind, tied between two stoic light-posts: THE FAIR OF SAINT AUGUSTINE. Anthony thinks, *The disease struck as the fair had begun to close down; people died in their cars, stuck in traffic.* They walked between the lines of vehicles, most of the windows shattered, some of the doors hanging open, the hinges rusted. *What a sight it must have been: the doors opening, the windows shattering, the undead lumbering from their vehicles to search the night for flesh and bone.* The road began to rise along an incline, and suddenly Katie stopped, gripping Anthony's arm.

He mouthed, *What?*

She pointed up ahead, into the blackness.

And then he heard it, too.

It sounded like a car engine.

Brilliant white light washed over them as a vehicle crested the hill.

The vehicle bore down upon them, the headlights flooding over the street.

Katie screamed and dove between two stalled cars.

Anthony stood, staring into the brilliance like a deer in headlights.

The sound of screeching rubber and metal tore through him.

The vehicle came to a stop, and the stench of gasoline wafted over him.

Anthony raised a cupped hand to his eyes, a protection from the brightness.

There came the sound of a door opening, and a moment later a figure emerged. Anthony felt his arm grabbed, and his immediate thought was, *Raiders!* But the headlights illuminated Kyle's face, and Anthony took a deep breath, relieved. Katie emerged from her hiding spot, shaking once more.

No words were spoken.

Kyle led them to the Explorer, and they got inside.

The dark-walkers crested the hill just as the doors were shut and the engine flared.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Princess Diaries

"Empty-handed I entered the world.

Barefoot I leave it.

My coming, my going—

two simple happenings

that got entangled."

- Kozan Ichikyo (ca A.D. 1360)

I

The wooden steps leading down to the basement creak underneath his weight. Anthony takes them slowly, feeling about in the darkness. He reaches the bottom of the steps and stops, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. Images begin to come into focus: the blank television, the couch, the assorted boxes, the drain on the floor. He remembers spending four hours sweeping water into that drain when the basement flooded. He moves forward in the coldness, and he reaches the open doorway leading into the bedroom. He takes a deep breath and enters. Sunlight creeps into the room through the single window, reflecting off the shiny faces of the porcelain dolls lining shelves nailed into the walls. His eyes are drawn directly to the bed. The bundle of sheets wraps a cocoon around what had, at one time, been the most amazing and mesmerizing girl in the world. He doesn't know how long he is standing there, but then he walks over to the bed and kneels down. He doesn't dare pull back the sheets, revealing what lies inside: he knows she has already withered away, that time has brought about nothing but a skeleton covered in clothing. He weeps for a time, remembering their most precious moments together, wonders how it ever came to this.

He rummages through her dresser drawers, searching for mementos, anything to carry with him on the journey that he knows lies ahead. He finds several Chinese stone elephants; she had given them out to all her friends, but she had let him have the largest. He finds a folded-up straw cowboy hat, something she had purchased on a trip down to Mexico. He continues searching, hunting for that perfect memoir that would hold all their richest memories, and he comes across a folded-up piece of paper. He unfolds it, and by the sunlight entering the room, he reads the familiar cursive, realizes it is a letter he had written to her during his business internship in Minnesota.

These past several weeks have been rough. I knew it would be hard, me leaving for Minnesota for three months, but I never imagined it would be this difficult. The only thing that keeps me sane is hearing your voice every night on the phone. It is the only thing that can put me to sleep (and I mean that in a good way! You're not boring, I promise!). Yes, hearing your voice is bitter-sweet: it is the most precious and beautiful thing, but it is not the same as feeling your warmth and looking deep into those beautiful blue eyes! I was told some time ago that completeness is found only in God. My experience teaches me otherwise. God designed us for one another, and without

your love, I am incomplete. I can't express how much I adore you. These three words I've said too much and not enough... but how else can I explain it? I want to marry you and grow old with you and lie next to you in death, our pine caskets lying next to one another in a grove of spruces and cherry blossoms. I have been in many relationships, and I told my friend Josh today, "There's something different about this one. There's something different about this girl, something I can't put into words." But now I *can* put it into words: you're different than every other girl because you're *The One*. Every night when I go to bed, after hearing your sweet voice on the phone, I imagine us living in a little yellow house with a portico; and we live in the mountains, and we drink iced tea and cuddle under the stars; and I imagine us lying together in our bed, covered in quilts, a fire burning in the hearth. But what warms us is not the quilts nor the fire, but the warmth of our own bodies as we fall asleep in each other's arms. I can't wait to see you, Karen. I can't wait to hug you, to whisper sweet-nothings into your ear, to fall asleep in your arms. Words fail to describe how much I miss you, and in fear of doing it injustice, and in the words of Martin Luther, "Here I stand." Love, Anthony.

He remembers writing that letter. He folds it up and slides it into his pocket. He returns to the drawer and begins to shut it when he sees her diary hidden underneath several skewed socks. He sweeps the socks away with a finger and grabs the journal by the spine, pulling it into the light. He opens it, and several papers fall out. He unfolds them, and he sees Karen's handwriting, and as he reads them, he realizes they are letters she wrote for him while he was in Minnesota, letters she never got to send.

I wish I didn't miss you. If only you could be with me always. I know I could never be any happier. But then again, I know that the day will come when I will be able to spend my every waking moment with you. I even miss you when I am sleeping! I love you so much, Anthony. You are my first

and only love, and I thank you for being so kind with my heart. Hopefully, soon I won't have to hate missing young.

♥ Karen

I know we don't get to talk for hours everyday like we used to. But though you are far away in Minnesota, that doesn't change the way I feel about you in my heart. Sure, I'm lonely, and sometimes I've overwhelmed with this emptiness in my chest. But I love you, Anthony, with everything that I am. That's what gets me through every minute that I'm without you. You don't know what I would give just to kiss your lips, to feel your touch, or even just to see your sweet crescent smile! I don't care if you forget our first kiss, our first date, just as long as you remember that I love you with every aching bone in my body no matter what.

♥ Karen

From day one, I knew there was something in you that no other guy has. I had always searched for my blonde-haired, blue-eyed, tan dream-lover... and I dreamt of having my fairytale wedding. You may not be tan, but, Anthony... you're perfect! From your gorgeous smile, to your warm and loving eyes, to your strong arms, to the way your

hands fit into mine... Everything about you is fantastic. I was scared to love you after everyone said we wouldn't even make it two weeks. But we did. It was after those first two weeks that I knew something just *clicked* between us. We made it through the best 10 months of our lives, and then that's when you left. Now you are 750 miles away, and I can't be with you until August! Although these are the hardest months of my life, I would wait forever to be in your arms again. People have been saying we won't make it through this... but I dare to believe that we can prove them wrong! Anthony, I live for you, and only you. I dream of the day I can be your wife. I want so badly for that dream of mine to come true. You have *no idea* how much I long for it! When we talk about getting married, about having kids together, my heart melts. I know that we're young, and I know that you want what's best for me. But I know in my heart that *you are the best thing that has ever and will ever happen to me*. You have been my sweetest sin since Day One. My parents didn't want us to last, some "friends" didn't want us to last... But you have no idea what it's like to be me when I get to sleep with you, to feel your hands caressing my body, to feel your body next to mine. Marry me, Anthony. Marry me! I love you!

♥ Karen.

Anthony, it's difficult for you, as it is for me, to be separated for so long. Life seems to be full of trials of this type, trials that test our inner strengths, and more importantly, our devotion and love for one another. After all, it is said that "True Love" is boundless and immeasurable and overcomes all forms of adversity. In truth, if Love is genuine, it will grow stronger with each assault upon its existence. Anthony, our love has been assaulted many times, and I am convinced that it is true, because the longer I am away from you, the greater is my yearning to be with you again. I cherish any thought of you, prize any memory of you that rises from the depths of my heart, and I live for that future day when our physical separation will cease to exist, when we will be together once more. Until that moment arrives, I send to you across the miles my tender love, my warm embrace, and my most passionate kiss.

♥ Karen

Tears are crawling down his cheeks, inching towards his mouth, tasting of bitter salt. He clutches the letters in his hands, and he leans back against the dresser, stares up at the ceiling. He can hear birds singing in the distance, returning from their migrations to the south. He sprawls his legs before him on the floor and closes his eyes, hears her sweet laughter, feels the brush of her lips against his, remembers running his hands through her hair, drifting his fingers along the tips of her hair; it would give her shivers, and she would push up against him, bury her face into his shoulder, make cute sounds of enjoyment. Sometimes they would act like animals and crawl around on the floor, growling at one another. Immature and foolish actions, but their most beautiful moments together happened in the arena of spontaneity. These moments of reflection consume him, and the tears blur his vision. He lets the letters fall from his hands, and they drift to the floor. The journal unfolds on his lap, open to the last entry; his lips quiver and shake, and the tears turn into a waterfall. He knows nothing except the richness of their love—and the depth of its absence.

Like everything else, the tears are short-lived. In this brand new world, nothing is certain, there are no guarantees, and anything resembling normalcy or "a better life" is swept away in the darkness of

the night. His tears have stopped, and he takes several cavernous breaths, feels his cheeks sore and tight against his bones, his eyes aching from the tears. He wipes tears from underneath his eyes, snuffles at the congestion in his nose. He looks toward the high window, the sunlight pouring within. The shaft falls upon the journal in his hands, and he begins to read her writing, unable to look away, unable to forsake the memories of romance that bring him so much agonizing pain.

My breasts are swelling and sore, I have a heightened sense of smell and strange food cravings, I become nauseous at the strangest and most unpredictable times... And I have missed my period since last week. I am terrified. How could we have been so stupid to mess around? I knew the risks and the consequences. I want to get a pregnancy test, but I'm scared—what if it's positive? I know Anthony loves me. I know that he cares about me. I know he wouldn't duck out on me. But even common sense doesn't make sense anymore. How well do I really know Anthony? Would he really stick beside me through this? Would he really help raise the child? I am so scared. I have been pushing him away, and I'm sure he knows something is wrong. Maybe he thinks that I don't love him anymore. God, I hope not. I love him so *fucking* much. I can't talk to anyone about this. I know I should, but I'm just too scared. I even told Anthony that I had my period, so that he wouldn't ask questions. He thinks I'm in this mood because I'm menstruating. He doesn't know what's really going on. I should take that pregnancy test. I'll take it tomorrow—hold me to it.

He stares at her words, a tightness beginning in his chest and spreading throughout his arms and legs, tracing up his spine and spreading like a spider's-web through the neurons in his brain. It feels like a droplet of ice has been stabbed into his heart, and his veins have frozen, the ice branching out throughout his entire body. He can almost feel the icicles dangling from his ribs. His hands begin to shake, and he reads her words over and over again. He stares at the date: AUGUST 11, 2011. The night the plague struck. *She never took the pregnancy test.* It all makes sense now—the way she had become closed-off, almost untouchable. He would try to hug her, but she would just reel away. "I'm sorry," she said; "I'm on my period." He hadn't believed her, had thought she had found someone else, had been cheating on him since he left for Minnesota. He closes his eyes and remembers the night they had sex. He had gotten back from Minnesota. They had gotten a hotel room near the River. He had taken her to Shawnee Lookout, and they had eaten at a fancy restaurant—he forgets the name—and then proceeded to the hotel, where kissing led to touching, and touching led to sex. It had been the most marvelous experience of his life, though the guilt and shame had weighed upon him heavily. *She never took the pregnancy test.* He hadn't known such guilt and shame to be possible. He'd always preached abstinence until marriage, and had lived by that Golden Rule. But seeing her after so long, having thought about her every night for several months straight, everything he held onto, everything he believed, had fallen apart. He had succumbed, and they had slept together in that bed, wrapped naked in the sheets, feeding off one another's warmth. *She never took the pregnancy test.* He had fallen asleep imagining that they were living in their yellow cottage in the mountains, that they were sleeping underneath a quilt, and he buried his face into the pillow beside hers, had gazed deep into her eyes, had rubbed his fingers up and down the breadth of her spine. She had smiled so beautifully. *She never took the pregnancy test.* When morning came, she was throwing up—he blamed it on food poisoning from the restaurant. She had agreed—at least verbally. *She never took the pregnancy test.*

Now he stands beside the bed, staring down at the sheets. He reaches forward, fingers quaking. He grips the edge of the sheet, begins to unwrap. *Like unwrapping a mummy from the dungeons of a pyramid.* He knows nothing but his own stagnant breath and the beating of his own heart. Adrenaline surges through his veins. He continues unwrapping the blankets. Sunlight crawls over his shadow, reaches its tendrils down onto the bed. The refracted sunlight dapples against her skull, the pale bone of her forehead. Shivers trace up and down his spine like lightning in the African Serengeti. He forces himself to continue moving, and his eyes behold the undercarriage of what had once held the smoothest skin; he sees the bones over which muscles had clung, muscles that moved on that fateful night to maneuver himself into her. He sees her collar-bone, her sternum, the ribs. He continues unfolding the blankets—and then everything stops. The world goes to silence, and his lungs stop inhaling, his heart ceases to beat. The silence grows louder and louder until it becomes a pulsating scream in his ears: he stares down at her abdomen, underneath tattered clothing, and he can see the small eye sockets staring up at him, the tiny finger-bones wrapped around her spine, the mouth open in a crooked grin, and he can almost hear its speech: “Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!”

Anthony falls back onto the floor, his strength completely evaporated. He tumbles backwards into a bookcase, which collapses under his weight, the wooden frame splintering, books on psychology and dreams and astrology scattering, a glass Buddha doll shattering into a dozen fragments upon the floor. Kyle rushes into the room, bearing a knife. He sees Anthony on the ground, curling up into a fetal position. Kyle curses under his breath, slides the knife into the belt on his jeans. He feels awkward, but he kneels down beside his friend. Anthony reaches up, wraps his arms around Kyle’s leg, buries his face into his blue-jeans. The tears have come once again, a fresh onslaught. Kyle looks up at the window, can hear birds singing outside. Anthony moans, “I was going to be a daddy... I was going to be a daddy...” but his words are choked away with the lung-searing sobs.

ΣΩΣ

The Explorer sped into the night, loaded fresh with its passengers. The Man. Kyle. Sarah. Mark. Cameron. Katie. Anthony. The wheels rolled through stagnant puddles of rainwater, splashing the zombies behind them with in a miry shower. The man wiped sweat from his brow, felt the tears stinging his eyes. *Pay attention to the road. Pay attention to the road.* He hated the fact that there were so many in the car, and he hated even more the fact that he had let compassion overtake him. *Compassion is what will get everyone killed. The Survivor is not The Compassionate. The Survivor is the Ruthless, the Brutal, the Realist.* But when he looked into the rearview mirror, and when he could see the faces of the others—mere *children* to him, only around twenty years old a head—he felt something like *Responsibility*. He had seen that youthful look in Adrian’s eyes, and it had drawn him to the boy. *But now Adrian is dead. And you will be, too, if you don’t pay attention.*

II

The man stops the Explorer in the middle of the street, but he leaves the engine idling. He leans back in the leather seat and stares out the window. The entire fence has been torn down, the barbed wire merging with the muddy grass. The grass itself, once a beautiful canvas of green, has become a mudslide from the countless dark-walker hoards that had surged upwards into the church. The man takes a deep breath, twists the key, turns off the engine. He opens the door, the sound of the creaking

metal deafeningly loud. He stares at the section of the downed fence where he, Sarah, and Kyle had madly shot into the road only about twelve hours before. Then it had been dark, and dark-walkers had crowded around them. Now sunlight illuminates the road, and the man is surprised that there are no dark-walker remains to be seen in any direction. *It makes sense. They're starving, and they'll eat their own kind if it suits their own selfish needs.* He wonders if that is such an awful thing, and he remembers back when those soccer players crashed in the Himalayas: *Hadn't they resorted to eating their own dead?* The man pushes these thoughts out of his mind and steps out of the car, feels his feet touch the pavement, and it becomes so real to him once more.

Mud clings to the bottom of his shoes. He has climbed the slope of the hill, and he walks along the side of the church. The windows that had once been boarded-up are now no more than gaping holes, through which sunlight cuts into the sanctuary, scattering amongst the manhandled pews. He moves to the front of the church, finds the front doors still bolted shut. He shakes the doors, tries to open them, resigns to moving back around the church and crawling inside through one of the broken windows. Glass crunches under his feet, and he moves between the pews. Several are knocked over, the bibles scattered over the floor. He stops and kneels down, picks up one of the bibles. It is bloated from moisture, and dried blood crusts over the edges of the pages. He sets it back down on the floor and moves forward. There are streaks and puddles of blood everywhere, but no remains of the carnage that had commenced only hours before. He figures that as dawn began to surmise its appearance, they dragged the remains into the confines of the shadows, where they continued their feast. He does spot, however, several pale bones, stripped entirely of flesh and gnawed by blunt teeth. It is then that the smell reaches his nose, and he slaps a cupped hand over his nostrils and mouth, trying to ward off the stench of dead flesh.

He takes the stairwell that leads down into the basement. Darkness cloaks the stairwell, and he grips the shotgun tightly in his hands (he had nabbed it from Mark before leaving the house on Maranatha Street). He walks carefully. He feels something squishy underneath his feet. He pulls out his cigarette lighter, kneels down, strikes a flame. He sees that he is standing in a pool of blood upon the step. The blood has become like jello, and his feet leave imprints in the gelatin fluid. He uses the lighter as a meager light as he moves farther down the steps. He reaches the basement and navigates between the tables. He finally reaches the door and pushes it open. He is greeted by a scream.

Carla is chained to the wall, but she is no longer Carla. The man finds the oil-lantern in the corner and lights it with the cigarette lighter. He raises the lantern up to his face, and the issuing light illuminates Carla. She is chained to the wall, and dried blood covers her neck. At her feet lies the body of what had at one time been a dark-walker: the throat is ripped out, and its head with lifeless eyes lies in a puddle of its own gelatinized blood. The man stares at the girl he once knew, and she pulls against the chains, yearning to be free; her jaws snap open and close, and her eyes speak venom. The man feels no compassion. He pulls the shotgun up, points it at her face. She lunges forward once more, but her shriek is drowned in the gun-blast, which shakes the corridors as it echoes through the stone-walled church. The man lowers the weapon: Carla's body, with the stub of her neck, relaxes in the chains. Her head has become a splatter of blood and brains against the wall, dripping amorphously to the stone floor. Blood rises like a fountain from her neck, but it slowly subsides to a gurgle, and then there is nothing.

Adrian's body is covered with a swarm of flies. The man tries to brush them away, but they dodge the swipes of his hand only to return to their feast. He decides to ignore them, and he tries to lift Adrian off the ground. The boy's body buckles and snaps, and suddenly the man is holding only the boy's arm, the edges gnawed and frayed. He curses and drops it to the ground, feels guilty for treating his friend's body with such disdain. He leaves the room, returning a few minutes later with a trash-bag. He gathers Adrian's body and stuffs it into the bag. Not much is left. He ties the bag shut, and a cloud of flies follows him out of the church and to the Explorer. He loads the trash-bag into the backseat, shuts the door. He gives one last glance to the church, standing still and alone, void of life, and then gets into the driver's seat. The rumble of the engine is the only sound in the air as the vehicle does a U-turn in the middle of the street and heads towards the heart of Mount Adams.

The Spring Grove Cemetery. The man parks the Explorer on the turn-around, and he pulls the bag out of the back and trudges through the grass. He spies the cross beside Rachel's gravesite. He sets the bag down and leaves, returning twenty minutes later with a shovel taken from the caretaker's shed on the other side of the hedgerows. He begins digging, and even in the coolness of the late March afternoon, sweat pops over his brow. His palms burn, the skin blistering, before he can set the shovel aside and lower the bag, the bottom of which is slick with blood, into the hole. He takes a break, standing in the gazebo, smoking a cigarette. He returns to the grave and fills in the dirt. He lays the shovel beside the freshly-dug grave and returns to the Explorer. Before he gets into the car, he spots something in the grill. He kneels down, sticks his finger in the grill, pulls at clumps of hair, which have welded to the metal via dried blood. He wipes his fingers on his pants and gets back into the Explorer. He leaves the cemetery, not even looking back, and heads east towards Maranatha Street.

ΣΩΣ

The Explorer's headlights flashed over a concrete wall; the man hit the brakes, swerved, fishtailed. The back end of the vehicle smashed against the concrete, shattering one of the translucent tail-lights. The man grimaced and pressed his foot harder upon the accelerator. They continued driving down the twisting and turning road, which sloped down a great hill and dove-tailed into a part of the city filled with factories and warehouses. The headlights reflected off the thousands of rustic glass windows lining the buildings. Dark-walkers poured out of the structures, emerging from their catacombs to give chase. The man gripped the steering wheel tighter, knuckles going white. His heart pounded in his brain, threatening to burst out of his ears. They passed underneath a series of bridges, over which crossed the train-tracks back when the day trains ran out of Cincinnati and to Pennsylvania. The man peered up through the windshield, and the splayed arches of the headlights illuminated dark-walkers upon the bridges, dressed in tattered clothing, their eyes glowing blue in the headlights. The man turned his eyes back to the road, and he saw a girl standing fifty feet in front of them, her head cocked to the side, eyes doused in wonderment. Hesitancy pervaded his muscles, and he began to slow down. Kyle turned and shouted at him: dark-walkers along the sides of the road continued to squeeze in upon them. The man kept slowing down, the Explorer losing precious speed, and suddenly the vehicle was attacked on either side, hands smearing against the glass, faces grinning in a blood-hungered pleasure. Kyle cursed and swung his leg over the gear-shifter, and he slammed his foot down upon the man's foot, shoving it down onto the gas pedal. The Explorer lurched and raced forward. The man released the wheel, covered his eyes. The grill of the vehicle slammed into the girl's legs, and her tiny body somersaulted through the air, her head smashing into

the windshield. Blood splattered in great goblets, skewing their vision. Kyle flicked the wipers—"You'll need these."—and they began to wash away the blood in sweeping strokes. The man stared at the windshield as he continued to drive, saw several small teeth embedded in the glass.

III

Kyle and Mark return to the house. The Explorer is still missing. They enter through the front door, find that the house is empty. Anthony snuffles and heads to one of the bedrooms. His shirt is still stained with blood from the night before. Kyle watches him go, calls out into the house. A moment later he hears movement, and Mark appears from the kitchen. He tells Kyle that there is a basement, that it can easily be fortified. Kyle is uneasy with the idea, doesn't like the concept of holing up in a place with only one exit. But he is tired, and he doesn't complain. He tells Mark that he'll be down in a second, to keep working. Mark says, "Okay," and returns back through the kitchen and through the door leading into the unfinished basement. Kyle goes to the back room, where Anthony stands shirtless, holding up a polo shirt with rough cotton weave.

"All he has are golfing clothes," Kyle says.

He wants to comfort Anthony, to tell him something meaningful.

But what is there to say?

Anthony doesn't respond for a moment, then, "Okay."

Kyle turns to leave, pauses. He looks back at his friend. "Anthony?"

The boy looks over at him. "What?"

"You would have been a good father."

He smiles weakly, tears beginning to brim in his eyes once more. "Thank you."

Kyle nods, then leaves the room.

Mark is taking a break. His hands are sore. He stands outside on the front lawn, lights a cigarette. He takes a large drag, lets the smoke fill his lungs. He exhales, watches the smoke climb aimlessly into the sky. He hears footsteps behind him, turns and sees Sarah. She stands beside him, asks for a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked," Mark says, handing her a cigarette.

She puts it up to her mouth. "I used to," she says. "Can I have a light?"

Mark lights the cigarette.

She takes several deep drags. "I started smoking when I was twenty-four. I had gone out and foolishly driven drunk. Got a D.U.I. I was kicked out of school. It was a private school, and they frowned upon drunkenness. I didn't even dare go back to school, because I had the 'Party Plates'—those yellow plates they give you if you get caught driving drunk. Anyways, I couldn't drive, had to walk to work every day. I spent most of my time in this bar a few blocks from my house. I got drunk one night and ended up fooling around with this *huge* jackass. His name was Keith. He drove me crazy, but yet part of me wanted to be with him. We dated on and off. He cheated on me. I still dated him." She shakes her head. "I know. It's stupid. Anyways, eventually something happened—I don't want to get into the details—but I was evicted from my apartment. Keith said I could move in with him. Biggest mistake of my life." She is quiet for several moments, takes more hits off the cigarette. "He cheated on me constantly. Verbally abused me, threatened to physically abuse me. So I started smoking, and it helped... not a lot, but it helped."

"This Keith character sounds like a deuschbag," Mark says.

"Quite the understatement," Sarah replies with a chuckle. "I felt trapped: I didn't have a car, I didn't have any money to get a new place, I was locked into the lease. Did you ever see the movie 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind'?"

Mark shakes his head, *No*.

"In the movie, there's this organization that will wipe out your memories for a hefty fee. It was for people who had lost loved ones, due either to divorce, breakups, even death. And all I could think about was how *sweet* it would be to just remove all those experiences from my mind. Even after I finally got out of that situation—I moved in with my aunt up north, in Wilmington—I was *still* depressed because of what had happened. I just wanted to wipe an entire two *years* out of my memory. It wasn't until I met this cute boy named Patrick that I could finally get a handle on myself."

They smoke together in silence for a while.

The front door behind them opens.

Katie asks, standing in the doorway, "Where did he go with the car?"

"He said he was getting gas," Sarah answers, not even looking at her.

"He's been gone a while."

Mark tosses his cigarette to the ground, snuffs it out in the grass.

Katie looks over at him. "He's *your* friend. Where do you think he is?"

Mark shrugs, turning to go back inside. "God only knows."

"Do you think he's getting gas?"

He walks past her, entering the cool of the house. "Like I said, 'God only knows.'"



The man turned right at the railroad tracks, and the narrow service road passed between countless rows of box-cars with closed doors and fading graffiti stenciled over their titanium sides. He kept looking at the teeth embedded in the glass, imagined what the little girl would have looked like before the plague: a girl who excelled at spelling bees, enjoyed coloring books, and watched Disney movies over and over. He could not tear his eyes from the teeth. *The Tooth Fairy's Heyday*.

Once upon a time, a Tooth Fairy lived up in the sky. She lived in her mansion, and her mansion looked like a castle. She lived way up in the sky, amongst the clouds. Whenever a little boy or girl would lose a tooth, the Tooth Fairy would descend from her throne and return to the land of children. There she would enter the homes of the children, and she would sneak under their pillows and find their teeth. She turned the teeth into money with her wand. Some people have asked, "What does the Tooth Fairy to look like?" The Tooth Fairy looks like a princess, with a pink skirt and a bow on her head. She has wings on her back, and she uses them to fly.

The windshield wipers only streaked the blood on the window, and the man cursed, unable to see.

Lightning danced in the sky above them, and suddenly the world became ever darker.

Torrential rain fell downwards, hammering on the roof of the Explorer.

Rivulets of rain tore across the windshield, mingling with the blood.

"Thank God," the man muttered, finally able to see the road ahead of him.

Kyle leaned back in his seat, took a deep breath.

Mark spoke up in the back: "Can I have a cigarette?"

"No," Kyle said. "Don't you dare roll that window down."

"I was just kidding," Mark said. "It's raining. My cigarette would get wet."

One day the Tooth Fairy knew of a girl who had lost several teeth. She went down to her house, which was in a big city. She entered the house underneath the door, and she flew up the steps and went under the door and into the girl's bedroom. The girl was curled up under the covers. The Tooth Fairy moved quietly, as is her preferred style, and she snuck under the pillow to gather the teeth. But this time the little girl awoke. She grabbed the Tooth Fairy in her hands, and the Tooth Fairy's tiny screams could not be heard as the girl ripped off the Tooth Fairy's arms. Pixie dust scattered over the pillow. The Tooth Fairy could feel her wings being torn off, and she could only watch as the little girl with gaps in her teeth feasted on the veiny membranes. The little girl grinned with devilish malice, and the screams of the Tooth Fairy vanished as its head disappeared into her mouth.

The Explorer crossed a pair of railroad tracks, the axles and shocks grinding.

The teeth wobbled and fell, disappearing.

Kyle looked over at the man. "Those teeth were driving me fucking crazy."

"Yeah," the man said. "Tell me about it."

Someone in the back—Cameron—spoke up: "It'll be dawn soon."

ΣΩΣ

Anthony is in the basement. He hears footsteps coming down the stairs, and he turns to see the others returning. He sets down a piece of wood, doesn't say anything. They enter the darkness, which is broken only by meager light from assorted candles lit about the room. Mark enters the closet and rummages around, returns with several sleeping bags. He tosses them onto the floor, says, "I'm going to go get some pillows," and returns upstairs. Katie sits down on the couch, stares at the blank television screen. Sarah sits down beside her. Anthony listens as they talk, picking the wood up again and begins to hammer it over one of the small windows near the ceiling: he stands on a chair so that he can reach.

"Do you think he's coming back?" Katie asks.

"Of course he's coming back," Sarah says. "He's not just going to abandon us."

"He didn't want to bring us in the first place."

"He's not a bad man."

"I don't know. He doesn't like me very much."

Sarah smiles. "He doesn't like anyone very much."

"You just say that because you like him."

"I don't like him," Sarah responds. "I just... understand."

"What is there to understand? He's a jackass."

"He lost his fiancé with the plague. I can understand that. I lost Patrick."

"But you're not treating everyone like shit to cover up your pain."

IV

Mark is outside, a cigarette burning between anxious fingers. He looks out to the west, sees the sun sinking lower and lower. *Where the fuck is he?* The cigarette is smoldering, the ember nearly to the point of burning his skin. It is at that moment that he hears the sound of the engine, and he looks down the street to see the Explorer coming into view. Mark smirks and tosses the cigarette down into the grass, stomps it out with the heel of his shoe. The man parks the Explorer in the driveway. As he is getting out of the car, Mark walks over to him, arms outstretched: "Where the hell have you been?"

"I had to take care of some things," the man replies.

"What in the hell did you need to take care of?"

"I thought I didn't need a babysitter?"

"You just up and left! Half of us thought you abandoned us!"

The man glares at him. "Did you?" he asks.

Mark sighs. "No."

The man walks towards the back of the Explorer. "I got some stuff."

"Like what?" Mark asks, following him.

The man opens the back, revealing a cardboard box filled with pistols and ammunition.

"Holy shit," Mark breathes. "Where'd you get all this?"

"We passed a small arms factory in the city."

"I didn't know we had a small arms factory in Cincinnati."

"Neither did I. But I'm not complaining. Help me carry them inside."

ΣΩΣ

Cameron's words brought with them hope: *Dawn is coming*. The night had nearly ended. And so far, they had survived. They were tired, aching, many of them injured and bleeding. But they were breathing—and they hadn't been bitten. That's all that mattered. The road passed underneath a walking bridge: they had been driving up I-71, and the highway had not been filled with dark-walkers. The Explorer weaved between vehicles, and more than once Kyle had told the man to slow down—"You're going to get us fucking killed by running into a wrecked car." As they passed underneath the bridge, something hard landed upon the roof of the car. Katie asked, "What was that?" just as two hands burst through the metal roof: the knuckles bled and the fingers were broken, the bones of the hand shattered; but the hands swept back and forth above Cameron's head, the fingertips tickling her hair. She let out a scream and leaned forward—right into the clutches of the zombie. The creature grabbed Cameron by the neck and began trying to pull her out of the vehicle: but it could only rip her upwards so that her head slammed into the roof of the car. Cameron kept screaming, and Katie and Sarah—sitting beside her—just stared in terror. The man shouted, "Are you going to help or just sit there and stare!" Sarah grabbed at Cameron, tried to pull her away from the zombie's grasp; but the dark-walker was intent, and its hands refused to release her hair. Tears crawled down Cameron's face, and suddenly she went quiet: the zombie yanked her upwards, and the impact of her head against the roof ruptured her forehead, and blood began to course down her face, covering her eyes, nose, cheeks and mouth in a mask of brilliant red. It was at that moment that sunlight suddenly pierced over the rolling hills to the east of the highway, and the sun's snaking tendrils instantaneously swept across the road. The zombie let out a howling scream and released Cameron, tried to withdraw; but its hands were stuck. Katie grabbed Cameron, pulled her to her—blood gushed over Katie's pants, and she pushed Cameron into Sarah's lap, began shouting in

disgust at the blood. The shrieks of the dark-walker shook the Explorer, and then there was silence. The hands protruding from the roof went limp. Kyle leaned over his seat, grabbed the hands, pushed them upwards and out. The zombie rolled off the top of the Explorer and landed on the road behind them. Anthony and Mark stared out the back window, saw the creature lying in a heap upon the road, its skin bubbling and boiling.

Kyle leaned back in his seat, feeling the warmth of the sun. "Thank God. It's over."

"It's not over yet," Sarah shouted. "Cameron's going to bleed out."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The House on Maranatha Street

"It isn't enough for your heart to break, because everybody's heart is broken now."

- Allen Ginsberg (Born A.D. 1926)

I

Night has fallen. They had completed barricading themselves in the basement, sealing the windows and posting a guard beside the stairwell leading to the ground floor. Now Mark sits on a sofa, feet propped against a wooden coffee table. The cigarette ember is the only light, and it illuminates only the crests of his fingers. He watches it slowly burn, the coals igniting the paper wrap in jagged lines. He hears the others snoring, sleeping. Anthony cried before he finally fell into a fitful sleep, the exhaustion of spending nearly forty-eight hours awake, plus the sapping of strength by the adrenaline, overcoming him. Katie is nearest to Mark, and he can hear her moaning in his sleep. He never cared much for the girl, but her brokenness following the tragic night has left a deep impression upon him. He considers waking her from troubled sleep, but chooses against it: the waking will only be a slight reprieve, and she would succumb once more to the phantoms that haunt her dreams. Instead he sits quietly, the shotgun sitting across his lap. The cigarette is nearing its death. He takes one last hit and drops the filter with the slight snub of tobacco onto the concrete floor, stomps it out with the heel of his shoe. He lies back, engulfed in the comfort, feels sleep weighing heavily upon him. He leans forward, refusing to become too comfortable. He shifts his position and listens. It is awfully silent, and he cannot hear the sounds of the dark-walkers. The subdivision is slightly secluded, and he imagines most of them have migrated towards the city.

His mind is drenched in thoughts, a smorgasbord from which there are too many choices to choose from. He tries to sift through the fragments and sentences dancing through his thoughts, but he cannot elect any to focus upon. The silence becomes heavier, the monotonous melody of snores aligning with the sounds of crickets back in the day when he would lie out in the hammock at his old house, before his parents died. He would stare at the stars and contemplate life on other planets, and then he would feel so insignificant: a tiny speck in an ocean of specks, all upon a single planet rotating around a lonely star in the midst of a galaxy filled with millions of stars. The insignificance would bring about freedom, redemption from the cares of the world. The universe would spin without him. His decisions lost their ultimate meaning. *The universe will spin once we are gone. Whether, when all is said and done, we or the dark-walkers have the final say, the universe will continue spinning. The moon will revolve around the planet. The planet will revolve around the sun. And the Milky Way will continue its monotonous pulsations as if nothing ever happened.*

He misses the church. He misses being able to sleep soundly. He misses the comfort and the warmth. He misses the familiar faces, most of whom are now nothing more than fly-coated and gnawed-upon bones. He had always found himself, in the dead of night, looking back. Looking back to Cara, to Ashlie, to the way the world *had* been. The night's tragedies had thrust a new horizon into focus, and now his mind is upon the future. The man had spoken of Alaska, had spoken with such

hope and vigor. Mark hopes that the man's ideals will not be lost in fate. It is a long trek to Alaska, and the journey is perilous. No longer do they have the comfort of a secluded fortress, of strength in numbers, in the mastering of preparedness. He knows that some of those with them this night do not know of the man's plans for Alaska, and Mark knows that the man will not listen to any objections. He will simply invite them to come with him or send them on their own merry way. In the end, it does not matter. They are going to Alaska. And Mark hopes they get there. He remembers Alaska in pictures, remembers the small towns, the jagged mountains, the pine forests wreathed in mist. The low population will provide less encounters with dark-walkers, and the bitter climate may have starved and frozen most of them to obliteration. Yet the road there passes through major cities, journeys through mountains capped in snow, crosses land as flat as the eye can see in every direction: nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide, just endless fields and silos and tractors. He closes his eyes, doesn't want to think about it.

He falls asleep, and is awakened.

Anthony stands before him. "It's 3:00."

"Okay," Mark says, groaning. He stands, stretches.

"You fell asleep."

"I know," Mark says. He hands him the shotgun. "Hopefully you have better luck."

Mark falls asleep quickly, and Anthony cradles the shotgun in his lap. His body aches to return to sleep, but he refuses. His hands wrap around the icy-cold shotgun barrel, and he stares into the numbing darkness. He sinks deeper into the couch, sets his hand against the sofa comforter, feels something under his fingers. He lifts it up, feels it in the darkness. A pack of cigarettes. Mark's, undoubtedly. He pulls one out, thinking the nicotine will help him stay awake. He puts it in his mouth and feels around for a lighter. No luck. He stands and kneels, searching along the ground, hands fumbling in the darkness. He curses after a minute or two, tosses the cigarette to the floor, sits back upon the couch. He leans his head back, feels the linen wrap around his neck. He closes his eyes. *Just for a moment. I'm still listening...* He concentrates on the sounds of the others' snoring and breathing, Katie's moans. He decides to wake her up, but his body refuses to move. *Let her sleep.* Those are his last thoughts, and he slips into unconsciousness.

II

He doesn't know where he is, and it takes a few moments for him to gain his bearings. He is standing in her backyard: the creek-bed runs behind the old wooden shed filled with boxes full of rocks: amethysts and crystals and geodes and fossils. The trees stand silently among him, and he stares at the single willow. The leaves have fallen, and the spidery branches hunker down under the weight of encapsulating ice, and the tips stab into the fresh layer of snow coating the ground in its sparkling serenity. He suddenly feels cold, as if the gods have breathed ice into his lungs. He turns towards the house, icicles hanging from the gutters. She stands there, wrapped warm in her polka-dot coat, the coat he always made fun of her for wearing. She just stares at him, her dark hair falling before her eyes. His heart ruptures, and a thousand emotions flood through him. He tries to move forward, but he is frozen; he looks down and sees that from his knees down, ice bolts him into the snow. He looks back up and sees her moving towards him. She is wearing a skirt, and it dances back and forth in the unfelt breeze. Her smile radiates from her eyes, and he can feel her warmth as she nears. She is

abruptly before him, and he tries to say something, but his tongue is full in his mouth, rolling about like a giant marble behind his teeth. She reaches out and caresses his cheek, and that is when he realizes how cold she is. She strokes his cheek, and he can feel the absence of a pulse in her fingers. His heart begins to pound, and the encasing ice cracks and shatters, dispelling into his bowels.

Her lips don't move, but he can hear her words: "Why did you leave me?"

She repeats it, over and over, her voice growing stronger with each syllable and vowel:

"Why did you leave me?"

Why did you leave me?

Why did you leave me?"

He wants to answer but cannot. Her words resonate within him, and then something begins to happen. She continues to "speak", but she begins to change. The skin on her fingers shrivels up, flaking off, revealing the pearl-white bone. He can feel her bones upon his cheek, hard and cold. He tries to move away, frightened, but he is rooted in place. He stares at her face, and it begins to melt away, dripping onto the ridge of her coat in great splotches of blood and tattered skin. Soon all that is left is her skull, with its smiling teeth, her sunken eyes. "Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me?" He cannot answer, doesn't want to answer, only yearns to escape. But he cannot move. She continues to wither away. The hair on her scalp falls off, revealing the crescent of bone. Her coat sags, then falls to the ground, revealing an empty skeleton covered with a thin layer of mummified skin. Her beautiful eyes are now filled with rage, and she continues her question: "Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me?" Her skeletal hands abandon his face, and she presses them against her abdomen. The mummified flesh begins to shake and quiver, something poking to escape. An incision occurs, and he watches with a frozen heart as tiny hands protrude, the skeleton-fingers twisting and turning in the chilly air, stretching for him.

His lover asks, "Why did you leave me?"

And then, "Why did you leave *us*?"

III

He awakes from the dream, startled. His heart is sprinting in his chest. Sweat is coursing down his face. He can still feel her bony fingers against his cheek, can still see the tiny hands emerging from the swollen flesh. He leans back in the couch, draws several deep breaths, clutches the cold shotgun barrel between his shaking fingers. The sounds of the snores and Katie's rough sleep greets him once more. His mouth is parched, aching. "I need some water," he says to no one in particular. He sets the shotgun beside him on the couch, stands, and begins slowly crawling up the stairwell towards the kitchen.

He reaches the top of the steps and stands before the door. He grips the doorknob and slowly pushes the door open. The cryptic hinges squeak, the noise deafeningly loud. No one is supposed to go downstairs, and he glances down into the darkness, doesn't hear any movement. He just wants a drink of water. His shoes tap against the linoleum as he enters the ground-floor kitchen. He glances over at the table to his left, blood dried upon the floor. *Cameron*. He pushes her out of his mind. He walks over to the sink faucet and turns the handle. Nothing. *Of course. You idiot. There's no water pressure*. He doesn't bother returning the handle to its original placement, and he goes over to the refrigerator and pulls it open. Mold lines the insides of the refrigerator, and the milk has turned

green. Slippery gunk crowds the shelves. He finds a collection of water bottles near the back, twists one open. He lifts it up and swallows the lukewarm water. He twists the cap back on and slides the water bottle into the pocket of his pants. He leaves the kitchen and is nearing the door leading down into the basement when something catches in his peripheral vision. He slowly turns, and he finds himself staring through the sliding glass door leading into the backyard. The dust on the mirror obscures the stars, but he can see a figure standing in the middle of the yard, unmoving. His heart trumps logic, and he presses his hands and face against the mirror. *Karen*.

His mind shrieks for him to turn back, to descend the steps, to let out a shot, to grab the shotgun. But his heart burns, betrayed by his own phantasmal love for a ghost who resides only within his dreams. His heart obscures what can be seen through the dust-laden window, but his mind recognizes reality for its true colors: *Cameron*. She begins approaching the glass, and he *yearns* for it to be Karen, returned from the grave, full of her pristine beauty and overcome with affection; he yearns for the renewal of what they had, yearns for restoration, yearns to take her hand and run headlong side-by-side and hand-in-hand towards all their hopes and dreams. Reality slaps him cold in the heart as Cameron breaks into a run at the window. He turns on his heels and takes a step towards the door leading down to the basement: then comes the cry of shattering glass, and Cameron's hands shoot through the glass, her fingers torn and twisted by shards of glass; her hands wrap around his throat and yank him backwards into the glass. Her cold fingers twist like a vice around his throat, and alarm rips through him. He is pulled against the window, and on the other side of the glass, Cameron smears her face against the windowpane, swiping her saliva over the glass in great swathes as she tries to sink her teeth into his neck, unable to recognize the invisible barrier between them. Her hands, wrapped tight around his throat, squeeze the air from his lungs, and in his ears he can hear his own organs crackling. He tries to pry her fingers from around his throat, kicks at the linoleum floor. His leg twists to the side, smashes into a trash-can, knocks it onto the ground. The titanium lid crashes to the floor, resounds throughout the house.

Anthony's mind is going dark. He sees spots, his lungs are on fire, brain screaming. The world becomes blurry, and suddenly he sees Katie standing in the open doorway. Everything moves in slow-motion: her hands reach up to her face, and she lets out a cacophonous howl of fright. A moment later, Mark and the man appear. Mark is carrying the shotgun; he raises it up to shoot past Anthony's head and into the glass, but the man grabs the barrel and pushes it down. Anthony tries to cry out, but he is now overcome with weakness. The man darts past him, to the side of the door, and with a grunt pushes it open, sending both Anthony and Cameron stumbling, locked together between the door. The man withdraws his KA-BAR knife and steps out into the wet grass. Cameron looks over at him, screams, releases Anthony; Anthony tumbles forward onto the floor; she tries to yank her hands out to attack the man, but he viciously sets upon her: he grabs the back of her head and thrusts her eye into the blade of the knife; she grunts, and he steps closer to her, wraps his arm around her, and thrusts the knife deep until it pierces her brain. She goes limp and collapses into the grass. He bends down, grips the handle of the dagger, and yanks it from her eye. A geyser of blood shoots out. He wipes the blood onto his pants as he steps back into the kitchen and pulls the door shut. Loose glass from where her hands had emerged tingle onto the floor like Christmas chimes.

Mark stands beside the kitchen table. Katie stands in the doorway, tears crawling down her cheeks. Anthony is hunched over on the floor, gasping for breath. The man slides the knife back into the

sheath on his belt and, staring at the boy cowering on the floor, snaps, "Why the *fuck* did you come up here?"

Anthony speaks, coughing the syllables: "I just... wanted... wanted some water."

The man curses and slashes his foot into Anthony's side.

The boy lets out a shout and falls onto his side, choking, eyes saucers.

The man moves towards him.

Mark leaps forward, reaches out, grabs the man by the arm. "*No.*"

The man is fuming, eyes alight with a savage fire. "You compromised *all* of us," he snarls. "This is the third time I've had to save your fucking life. Next time I'll just let them have you. Next time... Next time..." He doesn't finish his words, just curses once more. He steps over the boy, doesn't acknowledge Katie, and returns downstairs.

Sarah is downstairs, and she intercepts the man as he reaches the bottom of the steps. "What happened?" she demands.

The man doesn't answer.

She touches his arm, and he freezes.

He slowly turns, looks at her.

"What happened?" she pleads, voice low.

"Cameron... She came back," the man says.

Sarah glances towards the stairwell. "They always move in packs..."

"Not this time," the man says. "Cameron, she was... fresh. She wasn't a part of a flock yet. She was traveling alone. A lone wolf. And I kept Mark from fucking shooting at her through the glass. He would have blown off half of Anthony's face."

"That would have been awful."

"Not as awful as him attracting the dark-walkers with his stupidity."

IV

No one wakes up till early afternoon. No more attacks came in the night, and the man stood watch till dawn, refusing to have anymore repeat incidents. Once dawn broke, he went back to sleep. The first one up was Katie. She sat quietly on the steps, not wanting to go upstairs alone. Sarah awoke, and the two of them went upstairs and stood outside, feeling the warmth of spring and watching the birds return north from their wintry vacation. Now the man is checking the engine of the Explorer. Katie and Sarah are in the backyard, burying Cameron's body for the last time. Mark and Anthony stand in the kitchen. Kyle, who had slept through the entire ordeal, is out at the car with the man. Anthony is perusing the cupboards, stomach churning. Mark sits quietly at the table, rapping his fingers on the polished wood, deep in thought.

"He doesn't like me very much."

Anthony's words catch Mark off-guard. He looks over at him. "What?"

"You're friend," he repeats nonchalantly. "He doesn't like me very much."

"Oh," Mark says. After a moment, "Don't worry. He doesn't like me very much, either."

"It shouldn't bother me," Anthony says.

"But it does?"

"Yes. Back at the church, I fit in. I was happy. Well, *somewhat* happy. But now..."

Mark bites his lip. "But your friends from the church... Some of them..."

"I know they're here. But *he* is in charge now. And he loathes me."

"He isn't in charge..."

"No," Anthony says, staring at him. "He *is* in charge. It just hasn't been verbally acknowledged. If we're going to survive, we have to band together. He's threatening to fucking *kill* me. I'm sorry if I might be overreacting, but I can't be safe when the leader of the pack wants me dead."

"He doesn't want—"

"Doesn't want me dead? Did you hear what he said last night?"

"He was just... flustered."

"He's insane. Did you see how easily he killed Cameron?"

Mark pushes the chair back, props the back against the wall, throws his feet onto the table. He crosses his arms in his lap, interlaces his fingers. "The man is compassionate and caring. Deep down, he's a decent man. I don't know much about him. We honestly don't talk about our hopes and dreams and ambitions and all that shit. Frankly, none of that matters anymore. But I know that before the plague, he had a fiancé. He was going to get married. And he loved her. We stayed at his house for a while, and all over the walls he had pictures of the two of them together. He actually *smiled*. And they were *real* smiles. 'Once upon a time'. But his fiancé was taken from him, and he wasn't able to deal with it. He's become cold, a calloused shell. Dealing with death, dealing with what's happened... He doesn't know how to do it. He says he's dealt with it, but his 'dealing with it' is still in its infancy stage. This new world that we live in, it has poisoned him. He doesn't want to get close to anyone, because he fears that they'll be taken. His fears are well-founded." He glances towards the open doorway into the living room. No one else is in the house. "Chances are, Anthony, none of us are going to get to Alaska at all. We have to come to grips with that." He returns his gaze to Anthony, and he speaks with no emotion save for acceptance: "We're all probably going to die."

Anthony doesn't say anything else after that. Mark can see the pain etched over the boy's face. Anthony had all but dealt with Karen's demise when the revelation of her pregnancy had smashed him in the face like a brick. And now Anthony feels lost, totally alone. Mark remembers his sociology class, the professor speaking: "Some species live alone, while others have learned that if you form a tribe, you can share the work, have protection, and live more safely. *Homo sapiens* are a part of the latter, tribal species. While living in a tribe *does* have its costs, since you have to abide by shared rules and cannot do whatever you wish, evolution has shown that the benefits far outweigh these costs, and now we are pre-programmed, biologically, with a deep need to belong that drives us towards forming and joining tribes." One of the professors in his associative PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION class told him, "Religions teach that mankind has the innate need to belong due to the imprint of a Higher Force—call it God, The Ultra-Mind, whatever—upon the soul. Christianity teaches that God is a Trinity, bound in relationship, and so human beings, made in the image of God, are relational in nature as well... Saint Augustine said that the heart is restless until it finds its home in God; but the Christian scriptures teach that the human heart is restless until it has all its relational needs met—including but not limited to the need for a relationship with God." All these memories dance through Mark's mind as he watches Anthony poke through the cabinets.

"Maslow's Hierarchy," he mutters under his breath.

Anthony pauses, turns. "What?"

"Nothing," Mark says. Maslow's Hierarchy was a pyramid diagram, showing human needs. The need to belong came directly after the need for health and safety. Maslow placed it there because he recognized how fundamental belonging is to the human psyche. Mark remembers that a

psychological experiment was done where infants were separated from tender love and care at birth, and every one of them died. *The need to love and be loved saturates our being. Without it, we die.* He watches Anthony, who has returned to his search for food. *If Anthony doesn't find it, he will die. It's the world that we live in. This time last year, we just died emotionally without belonging. Now, on our own, we will die emotionally and physically.*

Emotional Death.

Physical Death.

Mark doesn't know which is worse.

"People deal with this differently," Mark says. They are sitting at the table, and the boy is eating cold canned corn. "Some of us accept it and move forward. We overcome the obstacle of unbelief, grief, and sorrow. We accept the fact that things have changed, that we must change with it or die. There are others who refused to accept it. They couldn't accept that things have changed, that they couldn't change themselves. And so they died—almost always at the end of a knife or amidst the noose. Others refuse to accept what happened but change to live accordingly. They say that they've accepted it, but in their hearts they haven't. They're still living in the past. You and me... We've accepted what's happened. We've changed. Our acceptance didn't just magically happen. We went through hell and came out alive. We wrestled and we struggled and we endured cognitive dissonance—our perceived reality of the world smashed upon the rocks as reality, in all its true splendor and majesty, was thrust upon us in the twinkling of an eye. But the man who threatens to kill you... He still lives in the past. He still thinks of his fiancé often. He has symbolically erased her memory from his mind, but she is still there, always at the forefront, always whispering. He hears her in the day, sees her at night. Some part of him still believes things will change, still believes that the world will come back together. Maybe he believes that he will one day wake up and realize this is all a dream. But until that day comes, he's a bitter and hardened man, shoving people away from intimacy and caring only about himself."

"He waits for a day that will never come."

"Yes," Mark says. He sighs. "But he doesn't know that."

"Maybe you should tell him."

"He doesn't even know he's waiting for that day to come. He's living a delusion."

V

Everyone sits in the living room. It is nearing early evening. 4:45 PM. The man stands before them all. Sarah, Katie, and Kyle sit together on the sofa. Mark sits in a chair, and Anthony sits beside the Christmas tree. The man draws several deep breaths and tells them of his plans for Alaska. "I never intended to bring all of you along. It was just supposed to be me." He doesn't mention any of the others recruited, for he doesn't wish to breed animosity between them. "But now that we're here, I can't just leave you guys behind. But I'm not going to force you to come along. I plan on going to Alaska. It's cold, loosely populated, filled with vast wilderness and small towns, lots of natural resources. Things should be decently okay there. It's going to be a long road, but I'm determined to make it. If you wish to do something else, then that's your choice. But the Explorer is coming with me. I'll let you have some of the weapons if you decide to go your own way."

No one speaks for a few moments.

The man continues: "When we were at the church, we bathed in complacency. We had no purpose. Now we *have* a purpose. We have something to strive for. Maybe not all of you share my sentiments, but I don't think these dark-walkers or zombies or whatever the hell you want to call them will just 'die off.' Evolutionary history has proved such hopes to be nothing but delusions. Waiting at the church for them to just die off was idiotic. The church was located in a densely-populated city with thousands upon thousands of dark-walkers. Harker's plan was a great idea, but it failed pragmatically. The dark-walkers won't die out. They're thinner than they were in December, but I'm afraid that they'll grow stronger and start reproducing." The idea of them reproducing is new, but no one laughs or chuckles. No one says anything. "All right," the man says. "We'll spend the night here again. And hopefully," he says, eyeing Anthony, "we won't have any more... incidents. Tomorrow we'll set off."

The man begins to leave the room when Katie raises her hand.

The man shakes his head. "You don't have to raise your fucking hand."

Her face blushes red. "What route will we be taking?"

The man doesn't understand her embarrassment. "We'll go down Interstate 75 to 74. We'll follow 74 to 465. We'll merge onto 70, and —"

"Interstate 70?"

"Yeah," the man says. "Why?"

"Why don't we just... Why don't we just take 75 north to 70 west?"

The man pauses. "That would take us through Dayton. I want to avoid big cities..."

Sarah looks over at Katie. "Wait a minute. You told me Elizabeth lived in Dayton..."

The man asks, "Who's Elizabeth?"

Katie glares at Sarah, hangs her head low. "Elizabeth is... was... my girlfriend."

The man doesn't say anything. No one says anything. Anthony finally breaks the silence. "My sister went to school at Anderson University. It's right off Interstate 70. Just a few miles off one of the exits. It's secluded, and —"

The man realizes what's happening, and he interrupts: "No."

Anthony begins to stand in protest, but the man's glare sets him back down beside the Christmas tree.

"Absolutely not," the man says. "We're not going to be gallivanting all over the country."

"It's on the way," Katie pleads. "All we need to do is go through Dayton..."

"I already have the map laid out. If you want to go visit your dead relatives and lesbian lovers, do it on your own time."

Katie's face turns maroon with rage.

A knot forms in Anthony's throat, and he fights down tears.

Mark curses under his breath, stands. He walks up to the man, whispers in his ear.

They leave the room.

They stand in the kitchen. Mark speaks in a harsh whisper. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Every minute we waste going here and there is time that we can't get back."

"It's not like we have a deadline."

"I have a deadline. I want to be out of here as soon as possible."

"That's fine and grand, but we should respect their wishes..."

"Why?" the man growls. "Why the hell should we? Katie's lesbian erotica is probably hiding in the buildings of downtown Dayton, salivating at the mouth. And Anthony's sister? What's the chances that she's survived? Slim to none. The college will be filled with dark-walkers, and the city... We've seen what the cities are like. We fucking lost Cameron."

"Fine," Mark snaps. "But don't treat their emotions like shit."

"Like hell I did."

"Just make a few provisions for them, all right?"

"Hell no. If I back down, it'll look like I have no backbone."

Mark runs his fingers through his greasy hair. "You're aggravating."

The man smirks. "You're soft."

"Look. They need to find closure with these things, just like you did. Just like I did. You flew all the way to Cincinnati from *Germany* to see if Kira was all right..."

"That was my scheduled flight. And it happened *after* we left Germany."

"Whatever. My point is that even though *logic* told you that she was dead just like everyone else, you held onto hope that things would be different for her, that she would be safe just like you. Anthony and Katie, they have the same hopes, as illogical as they may be. I'm just asking that you have a shred of decency and selflessness to tack an extra day of driving onto our little tour around north America so that two of our friends can—"

"Friends?" the man coos. "They're not my friends."

"Fine. They don't have to be. But they're *my* friends."

"They can go by themselves. I'm not forcing them to come with us."

"But you're forcing them *not* to," Mark says.

The man doesn't say anything.

Mark says, "If you refuse to treat them like human beings, if you refuse to actually *act* like a human being yourself, then I'll go with them. And you can take whoever else with you. But chances are, you'll be traveling alone. You're a jackass, and everyone knows it. No one wants to be around you. I'm not insulting you. You're fine with that fact. But face the reality: your selflessness pushes people away. And guess what happens when you take off all alone? You'll die. Or you'll go crazy and become a nut, talking to a soccer ball called 'Wilson' the rest of your life. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

The man is quiet.

"Good," Mark says.

Mark reenters the room. Everyone stares at him.

"We're leaving tomorrow," he says. "Katie, we'll take you by Elizabeth's place in the morning. Anthony, we'll go to Anderson University in the afternoon, or the day afterwards if we have to. And then we're going to Alaska. Does anyone have any objections?"

No one says anything, no one raises a hand.

"All right," Mark says. "We head out of here in the morning. Say your goodbyes to Maranatha Street."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Beauty of Forbidden Desire

"There is only one happiness in life: to love and be loved."

- George Sand (A.D. 1804-1876)

I

They leave at the crack of dawn. No roosters crow. There is no parade, no farewell. They quietly make their way out into the street. They find their assorted places within the Explorer, crammed tightly together—there is room from where Cameron had sat. The man takes his place behind the steering wheel, ignites the engine. The gas is on $\frac{3}{4}$. He curses. There must be a leak. He puts the Explorer in gear and begins the drive down the street. The sign reading MARANATHA STREET is speckled with dew. No one looks at it as the man rolls past the stop-sign and ascends the hill leading towards the highway.

Interstate 75 North winds its way through the hills of northern Cincinnati. Low-income houses, run-down gas stations, and empty factories line either side of the four-lane road. The digital billboards are blank, and the paper billboards are slowly falling apart, ribbons hanging down, reaching for the ground, blowing listlessly in the stale morning breeze. The man puts on a pair of sunglasses, the sun's rays splicing over the hills to the east, cutting into the S.U.V. in jagged arcs. A year ago the highway would have been clogged, bumper-to-bumper traffic, fumes climbing into the air, covering the city in a carcinogenic fog. Horns would have blared, men and women would have cursed, radios would have played popular songs: country, pop, rap. Now the air is clear, free of smog, as blue as the Atlantic ocean. Now the road is empty except for a few wrecked vehicles; a semi had run off the road, its trailer having flipped; the back doors had opened in the overturned trailer, and cardboard boxes that had been filled with bottles of beer now lie in rain-rotted heaps, the glass of the bottles shattered and reflecting the sunlight in a dazzling display. The Explorer weaves between several wrecked cars, and the man rolls down the window, hears nothing but silence and the slicing of the wind into the car, ruffling his shaggy hair. Katie coughs, breaking the quiet. There is a skeleton lying in the road ahead. The man does not speed up nor slow down. The bones crunch and disintegrate under the rolling tires.

The man slowly presses the brakes, and the Explorer comes to a stop. They are nearing the city limits. The man leans forward, curious. There are wrecked cars on the road, but they are all along the shoulder, knocked apart, some shattered and broken. Across the pavement is the scar of charcoal. A bridge $\frac{1}{4}$ a mile down the road has a large chunk missing. The iron supports that had been driven through the cement poke out into the empty chasm, twisted and contorted, spindling in every direction. The man looks over at Mark, who sits next to him. Mark shrugs. He presses the gas and continues on. A few miles farther, past the city limits, they stop the Explorer again. The wreckage is everywhere. The man drives slowly. He recognizes the destruction, the hewn metal. The far right wing, with its slat, spoiler, aileron, and flaps, is off to the side of the road, giant tears torn through the

metal, as if it had been slashed with the talons of a great beast. Farther down, the tail-end lies in the middle of the road: the vertical stabilizer, rudder, and elevator are corroding under the beating sun. The man takes a breath as they pull onto the shoulder: the fuselage of the commercial airliner lies in the middle of the street; GULF AIRLINES is stenciled onto the side. The windows are shattered, the edges consumed with burn marks. He doesn't see any remains, any skeletons, anything. *They all burned away.* The nose of the plane stares at them as they drive past. The last object is one of the jet engines; it is colored blue and beaten apart by its detachment from the body of the aircraft and its high-powered rolling across the ground. It lies embedded into the side of an overturned city bus; many of the bus' upturned windows are shattered, and there are only a few skeletons inside. They leave the wreckage behind. The man imagines the plane descending in total radio silence, spiraling out of control, banking out, then hitting the highway, bursting into flames, knocking death-stricken cars out of the way with the blast of its passing, completely tearing apart a two-lane bridge spanning the highway. *And we may be the first people to have ever known.*

Forty minutes later the man takes an exit off the freeway. EXIT 36: FRANKLIN. Right off the exit, under the shadow of the bridge, is an old MARATHON gas station. He pulls up beside one of the pumps and turns off the engine. Everyone clambers out, no one speaking. Anthony wants to stretch his legs, heads off towards a line of trees farther down the road. Kyle asks the man if he wants help filling up. He doesn't. Kyle joins the others and they go inside. Katie unwraps a candy bar and devours it hungrily. Sarah observes the rack, grabs one, eats it. Mark heads towards the back of the store with Kyle. They observe the alcohol selection: beers, a few wines. The most exotic drink is CORONA.

"We shouldn't get any," Mark says. "Our designated driver will be tempted to drink."

Kyle shrugs. "It's all right. I never was much of a drinker. I just like the wine coolers."

Mark smiles. "I used to be that way, too. Then I became an alcoholic."

"And the plague made you sober up?"

"No. The plague turned me into an alcoholic."

Kyle seems confused. "But you're not..."

Mark points out the window. "*He* made me sober up."

"Oh really?" Kyle coos. "It seems he has a heart."

"It's small, but it's there."

"They have ALE-8!" Katie exclaims.

Sarah looks over at her. "Say what?"

She grabs a bottle from off a stack, wipes dust from the glass. "Have one."

Sarah catches one Katie throws to her. She unscrews the cap. "It smells awful."

"It's a type of ale."

"I don't like ale."

"Just try it."

Sarah takes a sip. "Yeah," she says. "I don't like ale."

Katie is looking for a handheld basket to load up as many as she can.

"Don't worry about it now," Sarah says. "We can get some later."

"They only bottle this stuff in Kentucky. I'm surprised they even sell it here."

"Okay..."

"Elizabeth and I would always drink ALE-8 together. She got me addicted." She clutches one of the bottles close to her breasts. Her face seems to glow. "I can't wait to see her. She'll be so glad to see

me! I'll have to apologize for not going up there sooner... But she didn't come to see me, so she can't hold it against me."

"Yeah," Sarah says, biting her bottom lip. "I guess she can't."

Mark weaves between Katie and Sarah, who are debating about some type of drink. The checkout counter has a gate pulled over the front, locked from the inside. He moves around to the entrance to behind-the-counter, but it is held shut by a door. He tries to open it but can't. He steps back, drives his foot into the door. It creaks. Kyle appears behind him, asks what he is doing. Mark doesn't answer as he kicks the door once more. The lock shatters, and it swings open. They stare down at the floor. The skeleton of what had been the late-night employee lies underneath a tattered uniform chewed-through by moths. Several mice that had been gnawing aimlessly on the corpse's bones look up at the two figures standing like renaissance statues. Mark enters behind-the-counter, and the mice scatter. He grabs a bag from underneath the register and begins shoving it full of cigarette cartons. He doesn't even bother to move around the skeleton, pushes it aside with the tip of his shoe. Kyle shakes his head and leaves Mark alone, joining the women.

Anthony pushes through the trees and emerges into a clearing. There is a parking lot that leads right up to a whitewashed church. The front sign, weathered and worn, the paint fading, reads: FRANKLIN PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH. Underneath, there are stenciled letters, some hanging loose as if upon a thread: FREE COFFEE. ETERNAL LIFE. MEMBERSHIP HAS ITS BENEFITS. Anthony remembers back to his days as a youth, when his family had attended Grace Baptist Church in their hometown. He remembers all their rules: don't drink, don't cuss, don't smoke. A crude smile plaasters his façade: "And those are the only ways to deal with what's happened," he muses aloud. He walks up the short steps leading to the wide double doors. He tries to get inside but cannot. He steps down and moves around the side of the building. The windows are too high for him to reach. He goes and stands beside the church's sign, lights a cigarette, watches the smoke rise and catch the breeze, dispensing into the air. The preacher had always told them, "There is no salvation outside the church." He had always disagreed with the church's doctrine on that particular point, and he found himself ostracized. His family had left the church when the whole ordeal hit the roof. *I didn't belong there. I don't belong here.* He feels so totally alone. He smokes his cigarette.

II

They reach Dayton, Ohio by midmorning. The highway narrows then becomes larger, and accidents become more common. The city is nowhere near as large as Cincinnati, but the skyline still approaches. The two tallest buildings of the Dayton skyline are the KETTERING TOWER and the MEADWESTVACO TOWER. The KETTERING TOWER had once been the WINTERS TOWER, the headquarters of WINTERS BANK. It had been renamed after Virginia Kettering when WINTERS merged into BANKONE. As various highways intersect, widen, and shrink, as the highway merges with bridges spanning large roads lined with houses, the architecture of Dayton catches the man's eyes. He has been here many times before, especially with Kira; they would go to the Frazee Pavilion in Kettering, and then hit up the HAMBURGER SHOP downtown. "The best hamburgers in the world!" Kira would shout as they would hop into line. The architecture of Dayton is wide and varied, ranging from the Neoclassical to the Tudor Revival, from the English Gothic to the Colonial Revival. He

always favored the Italianate-Style buildings, with their mansard roofs, rotundas, and marble porticos. Kira always loved to tour the simple Prairie architecture homes, always yearned for the day she would have enough to build her own Prairie-home in the hills of Cincinnati.

Katie bites her lip, anxious. "We're almost there..."

She leans forward in her seat.

Sarah stares out the window.

The city of Dayton sits in the Miami River Valley, some forty miles north of Cincinnati. It rests at the gathering-place of the Great Miami River, the Stillwater and Mad Rivers, and Wolf Creek. It was founded on April 1, 1796 by a small band of U.S. settlers seven years before the acceptance of Ohio into the Union. In 1797, Daniel Cooper laid out the Mad River Road, the first overland connection between Cincinnati and Dayton. It was incorporated into the state in 1805 and given its name after Jonathan Dayton, a captain in the American Revolution and a signer of the U.S. Constitution. In the 1830s, the Miami and Erie Canal was built, connecting Dayton to commerce from Lake Erie via the Great Miami River. In 1913, the city was ravaged by a catastrophic flood, which pushed citizens to migrate farther from the rivers, populating the higher ground.

"Her apartment is in the Oregon District," Katie says. "It's this exit."

The man slows down the Explorer. The city is looming upon them. "I know where it's at."

Dayton has ten historic neighborhoods—the Oregon District, Wright Dunbar Dayton View, Grafton Hill, McPherson Town, Webster Station, Huffman, Kenilworth, St. Anne's Hill, and South Park. Most of the historic neighborhoods are filled with single-family houses and mansions in a vast myriad of architectural designs. The Oregon District boasts Federal, Italianate, Greek Revival and Queen Anne architectures predominantly. And the road is bumpy, unpaved cobblestone. The Explorer's shocks creak and groan as they drive slowly down the empty street; a street once flooded with people, celebrations, parties and festivals. A street now empty and dry. Buildings with shattered windows. Cars rusting like ghosts. A city just as dead as every other city on the planet.

The Oregon District houses the earliest surviving architecture in Dayton. Before the plague struck, it was one of the most popular attractions in Dayton, heralded by many as the Mardi Gras of the Gem City. It sits between Patterson Boulevard and Wayne Avenue on East Fifth Street. More than fifty businesses once thrived along this street, ranging from bars and dance halls to government agencies and theaters. Now every building is quiet and serene, the windows dark. Some of the doors creak back and forth in the stale breeze, the rusted hinges sighing. Katie directs the Explorer down the cobblestone street, past THE TROLLEY STOP and PACCHIA CAFÉ. "It's one of Elizabeth's favorite restaurants," she tells them; "It serves tapas-style foods. She also likes the Thai and sushi restaurants. Like that one." She points to an elegant building with a patio, the chairs and tables thrown this way and that; THAI 9 is scribbled on the entrance in fading letters. "Her apartment is right beside the Oregon Emporium coffee shop and The Jazz Room." The man nods, pulls up next to THE JAZZ ROOM a few moments later. She points out the window: a five-story brick building with multiple windows and several doors. "That's her apartment building," she says. The man tells her that it is most likely dark inside, that dark-walkers might be hiding in the hallways and rooms. He tells her that the men will sweep it clean first. She says, "No bother. There's a fire emergency ladder along the side. It reaches right up to one of her windows."

The steel ladder whines under their weight, and the man is fearful that it will collapse. Katie leads the way, followed by the man with the shotgun and Mark with a pistol. The others wait down below at the Explorer, in case something awful happens—not everyone needs to die. Katie reaches the third

floor. The ladder reaches a platform, and the ladder continues upwards on the other side of the platform. Upon the grated steel platform, Katie points to a single window against the brick building. The man pushes her out of the way and leans forward, brushing dust from the windowpane. Sunlight weaves past his head as he peers inside, and he can see that the room is decently lit. He knocks on the window a few times. No response from inside. He takes the butt of the shotgun and drills it into the window; the windowpane shatters, the glass fragments spiraling down at his feet, falling between the holes in the metal platform, dancing down to their demise in the alley. The man crawls into the apartment. Katie follows, and Mark is right behind her.

The apartment walls are whitewashed, and the décor is simple yet attractive. Katie rushes to the bedroom, shouting Elizabeth's name. Mark winces at the loudness, stands beside the door leading to the apartment hallway, ready if anything—*anyone*—should try to enter. The man moves about the living room, eyeing the walls. Framed black-and-white pictures of The Eiffel Tower, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Big Ben in London, and Time's Square in New York City are arranged perfectly in an unbroken symmetry. There is a cold and calculating feel to the room itself: white spindly chairs, a black bookshelf elegantly organized with books on American law and empty white vases. There is a large snow-white couch facing a coffee table holding feminist and lesbian magazines. *Her girlfriend was a lawyer. That explains the books on law, and it explains why this room is logically impeccable. She must have been a damned good lawyer.* The man sits down on the couch; a cloud of dust rises to greet him. The glass is blurred with filth, and he opens one of the lesbian magazines. His eyes dance over the image of two girls in lingerie holding one another, face-to-face, the tips of their tongues touching. He hears footsteps and drops the magazine. His face blushes as he looks up at Mark.

"She's not here," Mark says.

"Did you expect her to be?"

"No," Mark replies. "But Katie did."

"Where is she?"

"She's in the bedroom. Crying."

"But of course," the man sarcastically muses.

"Maybe we should comfort her or something."

"Good idea," the man says. "You do that." He picks up the magazine. "Meanwhile..."

Mark shakes his head and makes his way towards the bedroom, Katie's cries growing louder.

The bedroom is immaculate. Undisturbed. There is a King-sized bed with white comforters and pillows splayed against the far wall, and upon the other wall is a mounted wide-screen plasma T.V. On the bedside table is a bottle of half-consumed CASTELLA MONACI PRIMITIVO PILUNA bottle of wine, long since oxidized. On the opposite side of the bed, upon another bedside table, are several still-standing framed photographs of Elizabeth and Katie. Katie sits on the bed, holding one of the pictures, her thumb covered with dust from where she had swiped the plate. Mark stands awkwardly in the doorway.

Katie looks up at him, tears in her eyes. "We used to hold one another on this bed."

Mark's mouth is dry, and his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. "I'm sorry," he croaks.

She clutches the photograph tightly, looks up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," Mark repeats.

She stares at the far wall. "She's not here."

"I know."

"She always worked late. She was probably working late."

Mark doesn't know what to say, stammers, "If you know where she worked..."
"No," Katie says. "If she were alive, she would have come back. She felt safe here."
He glances over at the window, sunlight pouring between the blinds.
Katie sets the picture back upon the bedside table. "I was stupid for thinking she was alive."
Mark takes a breath. "No," he says. "You weren't."

Mark finds the man perusing the books on the shelf in the living room.

The man looks over at the boy, says, "Are we ready to go now?"
"She's fine, thanks for asking," Mark snaps.
"I didn't want to come here in the first place."
"No. But you *did*. You're a decent human being." A pause, then, "Maybe."
"The only reason I came," the man retorts, "is because I can't make the trip alone."
Mark shrugs. "She wants some time alone."
"How long?"
"I don't know. She needs to mourn."
"She can sob her heart out in the car."
Mark glares at him. "Come on. Let's give her an hour or two."
The man curses. "This is fucking ridiculous."

III

He just needs to get away. Anthony abandons the Explorer, knows that Katie will be alone in the apartment for a few hours. He is irritated, wants to go to Anderson University as soon as possible, wants to find his sister, hopes to find her alive. But he must wait. He must be patient. He must not be selfish—Katie is hurting, and she needs to grieve. But how long does she deserve to grieve? How long must it be until he is given the chance to find his sister—or, likewise, grieve? He abandons the Oregon District and makes his way towards one of the winding rivers. The river is nowhere near as large as the Ohio, and it seems small after seeing for months upon months the Ohio River snaking underneath the Cincinnati-Kentucky bridges. He is frightened of leaving Cincinnati, which is now over fifty miles behind them, and yet excited at the same time. A new fervor has gripped him, a new exhilaration. He wishes that his beautiful sister Amanda will be able to join them on their quest. He knows that Mark's sister survived—for a while. Maybe Amanda will have survived, too?

Several ruddy ducks frolic in the water. He sits down upon the grassy bank and watches them swim in concentric circles. He thinks this might be the Great Miami. He has only been to Dayton a few times, and only as a child. He came down for a WALK FOR BREAST CANCER with his parents before the plague struck. The path had wound down next to a river, and he sees a path on the opposite bank. There had been a lot more people. Lots of water and pretzel stands. Everyone wearing pink ribbons. "Breast cancer will be the death of us!" they exclaimed. He now finds that statement ironic. Something flutters close to him, dancing in the breeze. It tugs past, and he grabs it from the air. A MILKY WAY candy bar wrapper. He wonders if its devourer had partaken in the delight prior to the plague. *Maybe this little bit of plastic has ridden the winds all the way down from New York City?* He releases the plastic wrapper and watches the wind whisk it into oblivion.

Moments pass. The ducks have moved farther downriver. He imagines standing on this bank, fishing with his son. He would teach him how to cast the line, how to watch the bobber, how to tell if

the bait was getting a bite, how to wrestle with the fish. He would take his son to the big lake by the old house, where Northerns would fight to the death to get free of the hook. The thought brings him momentary happiness, but reality shatters it like a sledgehammer against an antique Chinese vase. *There is nothing to hope for. Your son died with your love. And this world is not a world where hopes and dreams can be ascertained. You don't live anymore. You survive. And then, A child would just be a burden.* The thought brings tears to his eyes, and he doesn't dare bat them away as the sun reaches its zenith in the cerulean sky.

The Oregon District is right next to downtown Dayton, and the man walks down the abandoned roads, his legs the only things moving in the cool spring afternoon. Dayton's streets are broad and straight; they had been designed that way early in the city's history because it served as a vast marketing and shipping center; the streets were built wide to enable wagons, drawn by teams of three or four pairs of oxen, to turn around in the middle of the road. Some of the largest streets were once barge canals flanked by draw-paths.

The towering buildings, mostly economical in design, tower above him, and he is lost in their shadows. He looks inside the front windshield of a police cruiser, can see a skeleton with its skull half-poking through the glass; the front end of the cruiser is smashed into a lamp-post, which is bent and twisted, the lamp hanging awkwardly to the side. He continues walking. He finds himself standing in front of the old courthouse, neoclassical in design. Farther down the road is the new courthouse, complete with a park and several memorials to war veterans. He enters the park and runs his hands over the large barrel of a World War II-era howitzer.

He loses track of time as he walks. The BENJAMIN AND MARIAN SCHUSTER PERFORMING ARTS CENTER at the corner of Second and Main has a large truck ramped up onto the front stone steps; the glass of the theater's wide windows is shattered, trampled to the ground. The man figures that the plague struck during a play, and when the dead resurrected, they burst out of the theater and flooded the city streets, joining the thousands of others within the confines of Dayton. The theater had been home to the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra and the Dayton Opera. It had been a place for concerts, lectures, traveling Broadway shows, and a hotspot for weddings, receptions, and public events. At the corner of First and Main is the VICTORIA THEATER. He stands in front of the beautiful and weathered building for nearly an hour. It looks as if a day hasn't passed since its last performance. Kira had dragged him out here once to watch ballet. *Kira.* He pushes her from his mind. *No need to dwell on the past.*

He notices the sun's rays refracting off the windows of the skyscrapers.

The sun is beginning to set.

He isn't worried. There are still a few more hours of daylight.

Taking a breath, he leaves the VICTORIA THEATER behind and walks alone in the broad streets.

SLOOPY'S is a karaoke bar along the main strip of the Oregon District. Over the entrance is a large yellow sign with a picture of a long-eared dog clutching a surfboard. On the UPCOMING EVENTS placard behind one of the main windows, it reads: SATURDAY: GIRL'S NIGHT! 93-CENT COSMOS, APPLETONIS, LONG ISLANDS! SUNDAY: INDOOR CORNHOLE! WEDNESDAY: KARAOKE WITH JOSH! Kyle and Sarah sit out on the patio, underneath an umbrella sprouting from a table. Mark is inside, rummaging through the liquor selection.

"How do you think she's doing?" Sarah asks.

"I don't know," Kyle says.

"Maybe someone should check on her."

"Maybe."

Mark crawls through a window that he had shattered to get inside. "They have some *really* good liquor."

Kyle asks, "I thought you're sober now?"

"I just want a shot or two."

Sarah eyes him. "You were an alcoholic?"

Mark answers swiftly: "A while ago."

"A few *months* ago," Kyle corrects.

"I just want a shot or two," Mark whines. "Sarah? Want anything?"

"No," Sarah says. "Alcohol isn't a good idea."

Mark shrugs and disappears inside.

Kyle leans back in the chair. "Relapse at work. A case study."

IV

Katie sits alone in the bedroom. The silence is engulfing. Elizabeth had always been a clean-freak. The entire apartment looked as if it had come right out of an article from a home decorating magazine. Katie hasn't moved from the side of the bed, has just stared at the whitewashed wall, knowing nothing except the blankness and void in her heart. Memories of Elizabeth dance before her mind's eye: holding her tightly, walking the Oregon District at night, playing chess and taking shots with each knock of a pawn. She remembers how they would lie in bed and fall asleep in one another's arms, their naked limbs entwined and stomachs touching with each peaceful breath. It was with Elizabeth that she had discovered love was real, and that love was beautiful—even when forbidden. Her mother had disowned her for her choice of sexual orientation, although Katie didn't view it as a choice: something within her was wired for loving other women, and only in the arms of Elizabeth did she ever feel truly alive. "There is nothing wrong with forbidden love," Katie had told her mother, in tears; her mother had insisted that her love was a farce, nothing but a delusion. "You're hurting yourself," her mother had said; "and you're going to end up hurting Elizabeth." Katie didn't believe her. *I never hurt her*, Katie thinks to herself. *She died too early for me to hurt her*. The pain of her actions tears through her like a knife through rotted fruit. She clutches the photograph of her and Elizabeth, moans behind tear-soaked eyes, "I always loved you... I always loved you... I always loved you..." The tears swell behind her eyes, and she remembers one of the last conversations they ever had.

ΣΩΣ

They had lied together, coiled as one underneath the sheets. Their hearts spun in their chests, their bodies wracked and weak. Moonlight poured through the window, the city lights of downtown twinkling. Cars honked somewhere in the distance. Sirens wailed. Elizabeth lied on her right side, facing the window; Katie spooned up behind her, her twin breasts touching Elizabeth's shoulder-blades. Her one arm was underneath Elizabeth's head, and the other wrapped around Elizabeth's left side, and they held one another's hands. The warmth from Elizabeth's body created an ethereal cocoon around Katie, provoking contemplations, both daring and violent.

"What do you think will happen to us?" she asked.

Elizabeth didn't answer for a moment, then, "What do you mean?"

"The two of us," Katie said. "What do you think will happen?"

Elizabeth began stroking Katie's fingers. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," Katie said. "But you know that."

"Do you think I love you?"

Katie's heart fluttered for a moment. "Do you?"

"Yeah," Elizabeth replied matter-of-factly. "I love you."

"Okay," she said, relieved.

"You know what, Katie? People who love one another stay together."

"But it doesn't always work out that way," Katie said.

"Are you afraid I'm going to leave you?"

"No."

"Are you afraid I'm going to cheat on you?"

A brief silence.

Elizabeth rolled over, faced her girlfriend. "Katie." She reached out, stroked Katie's cheeks with her delicate fingertips. "You know that I love you. We've been together for a while now. Do you remember when we first met? We decided we weren't going to be sexual, because we wanted our relationship to be more than that. And do you remember how it felt to hold one another naked for the first time, to explore one another, to discover one another?" She wrapped one of her legs around Katie's waist, pulled her close. Katie rested her head on Elizabeth's bare breast, said that she remembered. "That first day at that resort on the beach, that first day with you, was perfect," Elizabeth said. "It was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced. And do you know why?" She knew Katie would not give a reply; she kissed Katie's sweat-soaked hair, said, "It was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced because it was with the most beautiful girl, inside and out, whom I've ever met: *you*." She took a breath, drawing in Katie's sweet, dreamlike scent. "I'm never going to cheat on you. You're the girl I love. And we're going to be together until we get old and wrinkly—and then we will sleep eternally beside one another's grave."

ΣΩΣ

Katie's hands are shaking.

It was on this very bed that they had held one another.

Upon this very bed that they last spoke.

They had fallen asleep together.

When Katie awoke, Elizabeth was gone, off to work.

Katie gathered her things, got into her car, and drove back down to Cincinnati.

Elizabeth's words ring over and over in her mind: *I'm never ever going to cheat on you*.

Katie falls back onto the bed, and her chest heaves with each violent and vicious sob.

V

The man is furious that Katie had taken so long to mourn, and Mark doesn't even say anything to counter his insensitivity: he expects it now, and he doesn't want to waste a breath on the man. They cannot make the journey to Anderson University in the same day, so they resign to staying at

Elizabeth's apartment. The man parks the Explorer in a parking garage, hopes that nothing will happen to it, and everyone climbs the ladder and enters Elizabeth's apartment. Katie, Sarah, and Anthony barricade the door leading to the hallway with the majority of Elizabeth's furniture—"Not the bedroom furniture," is Katie's only demand. Mark, Kyle, and the man find a way to raise the lowest ladder so that it isn't touching the ground. They admire their work, and Kyle asks, "What if they get onto the ladder through another window?" The man's only reply: "Then we're fucked." They will have guards posted at either possible exit all night long. Katie is relieved from guard duty: she doesn't want to leave Elizabeth's bedroom, and she wants to be there alone. Mark breaks out some BAILEY'S IRISH CREAM and mixes it with half-and-half packets he'd found at the OREGON EMPORIUM coffee shop: "It's called a 'Nuttie Irishman'. Usually it's cold, with some hazelnut liquor, but it'll still do the trick." The man decides to have one, too.

The dark-walkers came out on schedule, spilling out from dark buildings and hitting the streets. Their cries rose like incense into the night sky, and it was not long before they were crowded along the side of the building below, knocking shoulder-to-shoulder. Mark and the man stand out on the steel grate, smoking cigarettes. They silently stare at the dark-walkers, who have molded together rank-and-file, shoulder-to-shoulder, unmoving except for their rapid breaths, chests expanding and deflating with lightning intensity. Their eyes are shadowy and empty, and their heads swivel back-and-forth upon their necks. Their eyes scan the building, up-and-down and side-to-side, searching for a way up to the precious feast. Mark remembers when they would clamber over one another, snap at one another, like sharks tearing through a school of tuna in a feeding frenzy. Now their motions are cold, calculating, mechanical. They move together, as a unit.

"They're evolving," Mark says under his breath.

"I know," the man says, exhaling smoke from his lungs.

"They're more and more like birds."

"I know."

"They're working together, as a single entity." Shivers run down his spine. Not from the cold.

"They've gone from ragtag bands to consistent packs. Their craze and madness has become swift precision."

"Harker was an idiot," the man mutters under his breath. "He didn't factor evolution into his equation. He didn't factor in the fact that these creatures are animals. That they struggle for survival. That they *will* survive. That they'll evolve. There were billions and billions of people on this planet when the plague struck. Almost all of them became these dark-walkers. Many of them have died. But the stronger have survived, and they're learning that if they work together as a tribe, then they can survive. It isn't long before their cleverness outsmarts us." He looks over at Mark. "Then we're *really* fucked."

"Something I keep thinking about," Mark says. "Cameron. She came back."

"Yeah. I know. I was there."

"But we didn't see any bites on her."

"That doesn't mean she wasn't bitten."

"What if the virus or germ is inside us, and when we become too weak, and when our bodies begin shutting down, it has a chance to replicate and then take over? What if Lindsey didn't turn into one of them because she was bitten, but because she grew so weak that the germ or virus or whatever the hell it is was able to overcome her immune system and do to her what it did to everyone else?"

The man doesn't have an answer.

Sarah holds a lit tea-light candle in the palm of her hand. She pushes open the door to the bedroom, and she sees Katie sitting on the bed with her own candle. Katie looks up at her.

Sarah asks, "Can I come inside?"

Katie doesn't say anything.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," Sarah says, backing out.

"No," Katie says. "No, you can come in."

Sarah obliges, and she sits down beside her on the bed.

No one speaks.

The candles cast their shadows upon the whitewashed walls: two figures, quiet, alone.

Katie looks over at her friend. "Do you think I'm a bad person?"

"What?" Sarah counters, surprised at the question. "What? No. Why would I think that?"

"I don't know." Then, quietly, "Because I'm..."

"A lesbian?" Sarah asks. "Just because I'm not doesn't mean that I frown upon you because you are. I don't care what the hell your sexual orientation is. Whether we're attracted to members of the opposite sex or members of the same sex, that's not what makes us good people. What makes us good people is whether we put others before ourselves, whether we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for other people, whether we are kind and compassionate and generous."

"Do you think I'm... those things?"

Sarah sighs. "I don't really know you that well, Katie. But what I *can* tell is that you loved Elizabeth deeply. That you were willing to do anything to come and see her. I saw how your face lit up as we got closer. And I can see from your grief that you miss her."

Katie looks away, says with resolve, "I'm not crying because I miss her."

Sarah's brows rise as she seeks to understand.

"I *do* miss her," Katie says. "But that's not why I'm crying. I've missed her for months."

"I know," Sarah says. "You're crying because there's no hope of being with her again."

"No," Katie says. "I'm crying because I'm a bitch."



The clock on the wall ran as slow as usual. Time dragged by, and each step to the liquor cabinet made her feet scream in pain. The air conditioners were broken, and the loud shouting of the people outside and the juke box playing Led Zeppelin and the cracks of pool tips against pool balls only made the bitter heat more nauseating. Her replacement came in ten minutes after her shift ended, and waiting only made her even more miserable, rage tickling at the back of her throat. When Brian finally arrived, she threw the cleaning cloth in his hands and didn't say anything. She stepped out of the bar and stood in the cool night air, the stars twinkling overhead, a canopy of diamonds. She took several breaths and leaned against the brick wall. She missed Elizabeth. She always missed Elizabeth late at night, and crawling into the empty bed without feeling her warmth beside her only made it all the worse. The most empty nights were the crisp ones, where the air filled your lungs with crackling intensity. Despite it being august, and despite the heat, the air somehow felt crisp in with each breath. She turned and saw a man standing close to her, saying nothing, smoking a menthol cigarette. *That's why*, she thought to herself. She reached for her keys and realized they were still behind the counter. "Fuck." She went inside, walked behind the bar, grabbed her keys. Brian apologized in blabbering sentiments for being late, offered to buy her a drink. She said, "Fine," and sat down at the bar. He asked what she would have. "Two shots of tequila," she told him. He asked if she was driving home.

"Yes. And put big grains of salt on the glass. Better make it damn good." He poured the first shot, and she threw it back, felt it inching its way down her throat in its fiery, mind-numbing intensity.

"Is anyone sitting here?"

She turned and saw a thin girl with long black hair.

"No," she said. She looked away. "It's open."

"Okay," she said, sitting down. She ordered a BUDWEISER.

Brian poured her another shot. She threw it back.

The girl beside her looked at her, smiled. "Rough day?"

Katie rolled her eyes. "I just got off work."

"Oh? Where do you work?"

"Here," she said.

"I bet it's fun, serving alcohol and everything."

"Try it sometime. It's actually quite disenchanting."

They didn't talk for a bit.

Katie buried her head on the counter, felt the alcohol flooding her veins.

She looked up. "Brian? Another shot."

"Katie, that's two already."

"I can fucking count."

"In two minutes."

"I can fucking tell time, too. Give me another shot."

Brian sighed, poured another shot in her glass, ran the rim with salt. "Want a lime this time?"

"I don't need a lime," she said, throwing back the shot. "Stay close."

The girl bit her lip. "You're a feisty one."

Katie eyeballed her. "Excuse me?"

"Feisty."

"I heard you." She returned to staring at the liquor cabinet against the far wall.

"My name's Jasmine."

Katie ignored her. "Okay."

Twenty minutes passed. She had taken two more shots, and she and the girl had struck up conversation. Katie didn't really like her, forgot her name, just wanted someone to talk to. She didn't have many friends in the area, and it was better than sitting in her own house taking back shots. As they talked, the strap of Katie's tank-top fell off her arm. Jasmine, without flinching, reached forward, and with her hand slid it back onto her shoulder. The touch of Jasmine's fingers against Katie's bare shoulder sent electrifying bursts through her veins. She was stunned for a moment, as if a switch has been flicked, and she felt herself getting tight. Her heart began to flutter in her chest, but she pushed it down. "Thanks," she told Jasmine weakly. Jasmine smiled at her playfully. Katie began to stand, saying, "I'd better go..." and fell backwards; she hit the ground hard, landing on her back, the stool lying atop of her. The girl reached down to help her up. A crowd gathered. Brian rushed around the side of the bar, apologizing like a blabbering fool. Katie cursed, told everyone to mind their own business, she was okay. Jasmine helped her up, and she wrenched away from her, half-walked, half-hobbled out of the bar, into the warm night with its buzzing cicadas and crickets and the roar of a nearby airplane.

Jasmine followed her out of the bar. "Wait."

Katie spun around. "What?"

"I just..."

"It was good talking to you. But I do need to go. I have to work in the morning."

"You've had, what, five shots? Six shots? Maybe seven."

"I know," Katie said, making her ways towards her car.

"You can't drive home," Jasmine said, on her tail. "You'll get pulled over. Or killed."

"I'll be okay." She reached her car, pulled out her keys.

"The roads in every direction are crazy. You work here. You know that. Twists and turns."

"Yes. I drive them all the time." She tried inserting the keys into the lock, missed.

Jasmine touched her shoulder. "Katie. Please. Let me take you home."

She felt the strange sensation, something she had only felt with one girl.

"I'm fine."

"No," Jasmine said, "you're not."

Katie could feel the pressure of her hand against her shoulder.

She imagined the hand elsewhere.

Between her legs.

"Okay," Katie said, stumbling over the vowels.

"I'll take you to my place," Jasmine said, snatching Katie's keys with her other hand. "I'll bring you here in the morning. I have work off tomorrow."

Katie knew what was happening. Intoxication deprives the human faculties of common sense, shattering inhibitions, but the drunk person, even if unable to remember what took place overnight when next morning arrives, is not lacking free will, is not under the spell of intoxication to the point of being unable to make decisions. Katie knew what was happening when they reached Jasmine's apartment, and as they stood in the living room, she didn't protest as Jasmine leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips. Katie had never felt lips so soft, not even on Elizabeth. Jasmine's hand slid down her neck and shoulder. Katie returned the kiss, and their tongues playfully entwined. Katie reached up her hand and stroked her fingers against Jasmine's soft face, could feel her long jet-black hair tickling the back of her hand.

Jasmine pulled away, eyes afire. "Want to go to the bedroom?"

Katie stumbled over her words, world spinning—a concoction of drunken euphoria and forbidden excitement. "Okay."

They reached the bedroom, the furniture mere shadows in the darkness. No lights were turned on. They were kissing as they reached the door, and Jasmine kicked it open. They tumbled inside, fell upon the bed. No words were spoken. Jasmine lied down on top of her, reached underneath the tank-top; Katie was mesmerized by the feeling of foreign fingers against her bare stomach. Jasmine's fingers pried underneath the sports bra, found her left breast, began stroking Katie's nipple with her forefinger. Katie moaned, lied back, reached forward, grabbed the hem of Jasmine's shirt, yanked it upwards. Jasmine slid her shirt off of one shoulder, off of her arm, revealing the side of her bra and bare skin. She couldn't take the shirt off: her other arm was underneath Katie's tank-top and bra. Katie gripped Jasmine's free bare arm, felt the blood pulsing under the skin. Jasmine bit her lip in a crimson smile, withdrew her hand from underneath Katie's clothing. She pulled the shirt off her other arm, reached behind her, fumbled with the bra snaps. The bra fell to Katie's chest, and the woman's round yet perky breasts seemed succulent, demanding attention, even in the shadows. Her small brown nipples were accented by the diamond-studded navel wring along her tight stomach. She unzipped her pants, revealing pink panties. Katie moaned, wanted to suck and lick and explore Jasmine's body. Jasmine just laughed, began to undress her.

Katie closed her eyes as Jasmine went to work. She lifted her arms to make it easier for her new friend. As Jasmine took off her clothes, she felt her hands rubbing over her body. Jasmine crawled backwards in the bed, used her teeth to unbutton her shorts and then threw them onto the other side of the mattress. Katie lied on the bed, naked except for her thong. Jasmine's hand slipped underneath her thong, her fingers gently probing the inside of her vagina. Spots danced before Katie's eyes. Jasmine pulled the thong down her legs, tossed it onto the floor. She began kissing Katie's inner thighs, looked up.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Why?" Katie panted. "Don't be."

"I'm sorry, because I have to taste you right away. I can't wait *any* longer."

Jasmine's soft pink tongue parted Katie's lips, and she began licking up and down her slit. Katie rested her head on the pillow, stared up at the ceiling, felt the pleasure shooting through her veins like million-dollar heroin. Jasmine shot her tongue deep inside her, and she writhed in pleasure, her feet pushing at the sheets, toes curling. Jasmine's tongue danced over her clit, and she could feel an orgasm building. Jasmine wrapped her lips tight around her clit and sucked hard, began thrusting two fingers inside, searching for her G-spot. Katie couldn't take it anymore. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she let out a gurgled cry, half-silenced by the twisting of her lips, and she practically screamed as she gushed all over Jasmine.

All strength had left her. She couldn't move a muscle, didn't dare move a muscle, as Jasmine kissed up her body, began sucking her nipples, then kissed her on the lips. She could taste herself on the woman's lips. Katie's weak arms wrapped around Jasmine's bare back. Her feeble fingers reached underneath the hem of Jasmine's pants, and she could feel the ecstatic warmth of her skin. She slid her fingers around the outside and then inside of the woman's legs, and she reached underneath the panties and found her well-trimmed garden. Butterflies danced behind Jasmine's eyes. "Want to return the favor?" she asked in a shuttered whisper. Katie didn't answer, just reached down farther inside Jasmine's panties, opened her lips with her fingers, began spreading her wetness around. They continued kissing. Jasmine's eyes shuddered and her breaths were magnificently hopeful.

They pushed against one another, so close that their nipples touched one another's. They kissed with more passion. Jasmine clutched Katie's head between her hands, and Katie withdrew one hand from underneath the woman's pants and ran it through her silky black hair. Katie pulled her other hand free, wrapped her arms tight around Jasmine, nuzzled her neck, kissed softly. She rubbed her breasts and played with her hard nipple. She slid her hand back into Jasmine's pants, began playing with the new toy; Jasmine whimpered.

Katie took Jasmine's nipple into her mouth, sucking and gently biting. Jasmine's eyes clenched shut, and her body shook as she groaned. Katie sucked and bit harder. She pulled away, looked up into Jasmine's shadow-obscured eyes. She began kissing her way down Jasmine's beautiful body, flipped her onto her back, crawled on top. They held one another and kissed a while longer. Katie slid down her body, grabbed her pants, and pulled them down, panties and all, revealing her quivering vagina and slender, tan legs. Jasmine opened her legs, and Katie knelt down, pressed her face into the warmth, licking and sucking. Jasmine opened her legs wider, grabbed the insides of her thighs, pulled her legs up into the air, giving Katie more room to operate. Katie returned the favor well:

sucking the clit, fingering her, exploring her and pampering her until she burst inside Katie's mouth. She climbed back on top of her, and they kissed and kissed, completely forgetting everything except their entangled bodies and the sweat dripping down their labor-wracked bodies.

ΣΩΣ

Katie is crying. Sarah sits next to her. The dark-walkers howl outside.

"I cheated on her," Katie sobs, clutching the photograph of her and Elizabeth.

"Katie..."

"I got drunk, I let down my guard, I cheated on her."

"Everyone cheats."

She stares at Sarah, tears fogging her vision. "That doesn't make it right."

There is silence.

Sarah reaches out, tries to hug Katie, but Katie writhes away.

"Don't touch me," she snarls.

"Sorry," Sarah says quickly. "I didn't mean..."

Katie interrupts her. "I told everyone that I was at work when the plague hit. I've lied to them all. I was with that girl, that girl I hardly remember, except for the guilt that's cemented her in my mind. We fell asleep in one another's arms, and I didn't even think about Elizabeth that night... When I woke up in the morning, the girl... She was dead. Like all the others. I didn't even hear it happen. I didn't think about Elizabeth as I fell asleep that night, but she's been all I could think about. Every damned day I've wished that I could take back what I did, that I could come up here to Dayton, that I could be with her when it happened. It would have been somewhat... romantic. But that didn't happen. The night she died, she had no idea that I was with another woman. I can never tell her how much I love her, I can never tell her sorry."

Sarah doesn't know what to say.

Maybe nothing is meant to be said.

Katie snuffles, tries looking at the photograph in the candle-light.

"What we do," Sarah says slowly, piecing together words, "isn't what makes us who we are. It's who we love that determines who we are. You were drunk, and you acted stupidly, and you didn't even think about Elizabeth when you passed out that night. But you didn't give a damn about the girl the next morning. All you cared about is Elizabeth." She reaches for Katie's hand, takes it in hers. Katie doesn't react. "And that shows that even though you made a stupid mistake, you loved Elizabeth. You still love her. And that's honorable." She takes a breath, says, "This apartment is untouched. We're the first ones to be here since that night. And we're the only ones. Only one person cared enough to brave death to come see if she was okay, and that was you. I think she's in Heaven now, and I think she's very proud of you."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Splendid Setting Sun

"They tell us that suicide is the greatest piece of cowardice... that suicide is wrong; when it is quite obvious that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person."

- Arthur Schopenhauer (A.D. 1788-1860)

I

They leave when dawn strikes. The man only slept for a few hours, and Mark didn't sleep at all. Katie had fallen into a fitful sleep around four in the morning. The dark-walkers had dissipated, and thankfully they hadn't destroyed the Explorer. The paint along the sides of the vehicle had been chipped and scraped in great grooves, and the man imagined dark-walkers clawing mindlessly, smelling the residue of non-infected *Homo sapien* somewhere within the vehicle. *What a disappointment they would have experienced had they actually gotten inside*, the man thought to himself as he drove the vehicle down the cobblestone street and picked up the others. They navigated the confusing highways that crisscrossed along the western side of the city, and after turning around a few times, found Interstate 70 West. Now the man drives silently, the great buildings of Dayton being replaced with sprawling suburbs, factories, and fast food restaurants. Katie sleeps. No one talks. The buildings slowly dissipate, and soon they are driving down a highway absolutely void of vehicles, nothing but farmland and woods on either side, broken only by a few sparse exits with conglomerated gas stations. The man finds it strange to see nothing but abandoned crop-fields, nothing but large cumulous clouds whirring in the sky above, nothing but droves of birds flying across the highway. He has not left the remnants of metropolitan civilization in nearly nine months, and being in the countryside almost makes him nervous.

"It's creepy," Mark says. He eyes the man. "It's creepy, you know?"

"Yeah," the man says.

"I bet most of the dark-walkers have migrated towards Dayton."

"Yeah," the man says. He hopes so.

Mark leans over, taps on the dashboard. "The 'low gas' light just came on."

"I know," the man says. "I think there's a leak."

"Was there a leak when you got it?"

"No. We must have ran over something and damaged the tank."

"It was probably a dark-walker."

"Yeah," the man says. "We hit quite a few of them."

He remembers the little girl, and his eyes are drawn to the crack in the windshield.

Let me tell you a story about the Tooth Fairy...

He doesn't want to think about her.

The man pulls off at the next exit. A semi is flipped on the exit ramp, the trailer lying in a scattered heap, long smoldered; the cab's windows are shattered and the insides charred black. The man pulls right off the exit, passes a MCDONALD'S and A PILOT GAS STATION. He pulls into the PILOT and stops the car. He leans back and wakes up Katie. "Restroom break." Everyone piles out of the vehicle, and the man goes to work.

Anthony stands beside the man. "How do you get the gasoline out with no electricity?"

"It doesn't need electricity," the man answers.

The boy doesn't move.

The man sighs. "Look. See what happens when I pull the nozzle off the hook? I flip this little lever up. That opens a valve between the hose and the tank. When I insert the nozzle into the tank, just like this, and squeeze the handle, the hose opens. The underground tank is pressurized, and when I depress this handle, the pressure is broken, and gasoline comes out. All right?"

Anthony nods. "Okay. Thanks."

The man stands filling up the tank. He keeps glancing at the small digital display on the fuel pump. At one time it had made him groan and moan, pennies and dollars floating out of his checking account with each passing second. Now it is silent, unmoving, a mockery. He still looks at it out of habit.

Anthony says, "Do you have any portable gasoline tanks?"

The man stares at him. "What?"

"You know. Those red containers you put gasoline inside."

"No."

"You might want to get some."

"I'll think about it."

"I mean, who knows how many gas stations we'll pass on our way to Alaska?"

"I said I'll think about it."

Anthony's face flushes red. The tension is unbearable. He leaves.

The man finishes filling the tank, replaces the nozzle. He screws on the tank lid.

He goes inside the store to find some gasoline containers.

"The girl's room is on the left," Mark says. "Guy's is on the right."

Sarah laughs. She and Katie go to the left side of the building.

Mark and Kyle move around the right side of the station.

"Holy shit."

They round the corner and stop dead in their tracks.

Their noses wrinkle, the stench unbearable.

"Dark-walkers?" Kyle asks, voice high and nasal: he's plugged his nose.

"No," Mark says. "They're wearing clothes. And healthy."

Kyle looks at him. "They *were* healthy."

They stand staring. Flies buzz towards them.

Mark swipes several flies away from his face. "What do we do?"

Kyle shakes his head. "I don't know."

"We shouldn't tell the others."

"No," Kyle says.

Several moments pass. "All right," Mark says, moving away. "Time to go."

"Yeah," Kyle says, following him. "Time to go."

Anthony, Kyle, and Mark have climbed into the Explorer. Sarah is on her way, and the man stands next to the driver's side with the door open. "Where the hell is Katie?" he shouts to Sarah.

She nears the vehicle. "She's still using the bathroom."

"How long is it going to take her?" the man demands.

She glares at him. "How the hell should I know?"

"Does she need a tampon or something?"

Sarah shakes her head. "You're ridiculous."

The man leans forward, presses down on the horn.

The blast sends several birds climbing from their hiding places in the overgrown grass.

Sarah runs around to the side of the car, slaps his hand away from the horn. "Stop."

The man hisses, "She's already slowed us down enough."

"She's going to the *fucking* bathroom," Sarah growls. "Give her some fucking privacy."

"All I want—"

The man doesn't get to finish his sentence.

His words are cut-off by Katie's hidden screams.

II

Katie stands in the overgrown grass, cast in the shadow of the gas station's ivory brick walls. Her screams have ended, followed by a global stare that swallows up the picturesque mural. Footsteps scramble behind her, and suddenly she is flanked by Sarah and the man. Behind them come Mark, Kyle, and Anthony trotting at a belligerent pace. No one says anything for a moment, hearing only their frozen breaths and the buzzing of the carrion flies. The man's jaw slackens and his eyes become chiseled like ancient stones. Behind the gas station, thrown about in the weeds, are several bodies: seven, two men and five women. They are fully dressed, and their bodies lie entangled, limbs twisting upwards into the sky, palms and fingers clenched into hopeless grasps. Their eyes are wide, mouths held in contorted frames, flies swarming about their teeth. The clothes are stained with blood, riddled by bullets. Katie suddenly bursts into tears and falls to the ground; Sarah kneels down to comfort her. The man looks over at Mark, who shakes his head, mouths, *Raiders*. The man is reminded once more that the road is perilous not merely because of the denizens of the walking dead, but also because of the vagrants of a ruined society, those who feast on their wickedness and bathe in their vileness. The man doesn't understand how anyone could so ruthlessly execute people, but he knows he will never partake in their schemes.

Katie and Sarah are standing next to the Explorer. The men huddle together at the entrance to the gas station, four figures whose shadows are stenciled across the asphalt. Kyle ponders, "How fresh, do you think?" The man says maybe a few days, probably less. No one says anything for a moment, and then Kyle ventures, "How far do you think they are from us?" The man says that they haven't passed anyone, so they're most likely heading the same direction, probably farther up the road—as to how far, who can know? The man excuses himself and walks away. Mark and Kyle exchange glances. Anthony sits down on the pavement, plays with the loose gravel. The other two turn and follow the man around the side of the building.

"What're you doing?" Mark asks, running to catch up with the man.

He doesn't answer.

Kyle, right behind Mark, asks, "Are you going to bury them?"

The man doesn't look over his shoulder: "No."

They walk right past the dead bodies.

The man stops in the overgrown grass, points to a parking lot. "Right there."

The two boys follow his gaze: a large parking lot filled with semi-trucks.

"How come we didn't notice them?" Kyle asks.

The man says, "If there's a scorpion in your food, do you notice the fly?"

Kyle stares at him. "What?"

The man shakes his head. "It's an analogy."

"Sounds more like Confucius. But what does it mean?"

"Who would notice several semis when we're staring at dead bodies?"

"Oh." He looks over at the man. "And why are semis important?"

The man moves forward, not answering.

Mark and Kyle trot to keep up.

He reaches the nearest semi. EAST COAST CARRIERS is stenciled along the side of the trailer, with a phone number underneath. The driver's side window in the cab is shattered, the glass fragments having disappeared months earlier. The man crawls up to the door, reaches through the broken window, fumbles with the lock. It clicks free, and the man shuffles to the side, swings the door open. He hops into the cab. Mark and Kyle look at one another, confused; Mark shrugs his shoulders. Anthony comes up behind them, asks what the man's doing. They tell him they don't know. A moment later the man drops down from the cab, holding something in his hand. Mark's eyes go wide: "Oh."

The man holds a CB radio. "It's battery-powered. One of the older ones. I was hoping it would be. But... the batteries are dead." Mark says there are probably some in the gas station. They make their way past the corpses, around the building, and shatter the glass windows, hopping inside. Katie is sitting down next to the vehicle, crying, and Sarah is with her, watching the men enter the store. They rifle through the shelves and aisles, and eventually they find what they are looking for. The man hands Anthony the radio and cuts open the package with his KA-BAR knife. He slips the knife back into the sheath on his belt. "Give it to me." Anthony hands him the radio. He inserts the batteries into the radio and turns it on. A green light tells him that it's working. He fishes through the channels, receives only silence or static.

"Who's going to be broadcasting?" Anthony asks.

"Hopefully the raiders," the man says. "But this damn thing isn't picking up any signals."

"Probably because the raiders are too far off," Kyle says hopefully.

"Or," the man says, "because they're not using a CB radio."

Mark asks, "Why would they use a radio?"

Anthony morosely speculates, "Maybe so they can give people the hope of salvation and then throw them behind a gas station and kill them execution-style."

Kyle rolls his eyes, says, "God, you're morbid."

"And unfortunately," the man says, "he may be right. Let's hope so. Then we'll know where they are, and we can hopefully avoid them. But for now, we're just going to have to keep our eyes open. The guns loaded. Safety's off. If it comes down between me and another human, then I'm going to kill him—or her. Gender doesn't mean shit anymore. Not here, not now."

III

In less than an hour, they reach Anderson, Indiana. Anthony is becoming more and more nervous, more and more excited, at the foolish prospect of seeing his beloved sister, of being reunited. Everything he's loved has been taken from him, and he dares to believe that there is some goodness in the universe to be bestowed upon him, some favor earned by his life of good merit. The man finds him absolutely ridiculous, but he keeps his mouth shut. He drives silently, smoking a cigarette, flicking the ashes outside the cracked window. Anthony bubbles forth stories of him and his sister Amanda, how they were always best friends, breaking the stereotype of siblings-at-arms. No one says anything to him; they let him talk. He becomes quiet as they near the campus; he directs them down the main street, past shopping malls and restaurants and hole-in-the-wall Chinese buffets. At a dead light, he instructs the man to turn left. The road passes several churches and a DRUG MART, and then is flanked on either side by Kwanzan Cherry trees, blossoming in vibrant plume. There is a fenced-in graveyard, overgrown with weeds, and then two dorm buildings come into sight along the right side of the road: RICE HALL and DUNN HALL. Anthony nearly shouts, and the man jerks the S.U.V. into the parking lot of RICE. Before he has stopped the vehicle, Anthony is already clambering over Sarah, kneeing her in the stomach, and thrusting open the door. He falls out onto the pavement, grunts at a searing pain in his kneecap, then leaps up. He races to a flight of steps leading to the door to the dorm and takes them two-at-a-time. He reaches the door and tries to open it, but it won't budge. He lets out a curse and yanks it harder and harder. The man gets out of the Explorer, grabs the shotgun next to the gear-shifter, and makes his way over to Anthony.

The boy glares at the man, eyes afire. "It won't open."

"I noticed," he says.

"It's opened by an electric card-swipe. Electricity's out. The door's locked."

The man raises the shotgun.

Anthony shouts, covers his ears.

The blast rings out. The side of the door shatters, chunks of metal flying. The man grabs the smoking handle and wrenches it open. Sunlight pours into the corridor.

Anthony lowers his hand-muffs over his ears, takes a deep breath, throat knotted.

"They couldn't get out," the man says, staring. "Like you said, the door wouldn't open."

Skeletons lie in jumbled heaps, the bones mixed together in a disjointed mess. The carpet of skeletons extends towards the far stairwell leading to the upper floors, the bones forming a meshed carpet, ribs reaching up into the air, skulls tumbled about with their stoic, toothy grins. The others are joining them, and the man moves forward, his boots crunching the bones underfoot. He kicks several skeletons out of the way, reloading the shotgun with fresh shells as he moves. Anthony is behind him, and the others form a group of try to form a path without touching the skeletons. Katie decides to stay outside, doesn't want to go tramping through the remains of college students. Mark decides to stay with her; he wants to smoke a cigarette, anyways. The man and Anthony reach the stairwell leading up to the upper floors. Anthony bursts pasts the man and starts racing up the steps. The man yells at him to stop, that they haven't cleared the building, that there might be a dark-walker who has been feasting on its brethren. But Anthony doesn't listen. The man curses and follows, legs muscles burning as he sprints up the stairs.

There comes a snarl up above, undeniable, and he raises the shotgun; he hears Anthony shout, races to the next landing. A dark-walker is tumbling down the steps, a young and naked girl with jet-black hair crawling down past her shoulders. She lies on the stairs, howling in pain, feeble legs

snapped, blood gushing over the steps. The man thrusts the barrel of the shotgun into her wailing mouth; he looks away, closes his eyes, depresses the trigger; the gun-blast echoes like a cannon in his ears, and he feels blood speckling against his cheek and his hand. He doesn't look down as he continues moving up the stairwell. His boots are slick with blood. He hears Anthony shouting for him. He reaches the next landing and enters the hall. Anthony is standing in the shadows next to a door. "This is her room," he says. "It's locked."

The man joins him, loads a new round of shells into the shotgun, raises it up against the door.

"Wait!" Anthony shouts. "The shells might go through the door and kill her."

The man eyes him, knocks on the door. "Hello?!" he shouts. "Hello?!"

Anthony despises the man's sarcasm, shakes him away. "Stop."

"No one's in there."

"She's probably sleeping. She always sleeps till late afternoon."

The man raises the gun. "Step back."

Anthony jumps in front of him, shielding the door, eyes enraged: "No."

The man lowers the shotgun. "Fine. Want to keep knocking till she answers?"

The boy bites his lip. "Let's find her R.A."

"Her what?"

"Resident Advisor. You know, the person in charge of the floor. She'll have a key."

The man sarcastically muses, "I think I just killed her a minute ago."

Anthony moves away, down the hall. He stops at one of the doors. "This one."

The man doesn't move, shouts down the hall, "How do you know it's the R.A.'s?"

"It says so on this plaque," Anthony says. "Shoot this door down."

"Fine," the man growls.

They have entered the room, the door lying on a single hinge. The windows are covered with dust, and the boy swipes the dust away, allowing piercing sunlight to dance down into the room. It is a small dorm room, with a single bed, a couch, a desk, and a dresser. There is a skeleton lying in the bed, a protractor lying next to the neck of the spine, speckled with long-dried blood. *She slit her neck*, the man thinks to himself, *when she went crazy*. Anthony is scrambling around in the desk, holds up a ring with several keys. "Got it," he says, bolting out of the room. The man follows him.

The keys jingle in Anthony's hands as he searches for the right one. Finally a key fits the lock, and as it turns, the door cracks inwards. He pushes it open and enters. The man decides to wait outside. Anthony stands, the dim light coming from the weathered windows illuminating the bunk-bed with its plethora of comforters and pillows and stuffed animals. There are two bean-bag chairs next to the air conditioner. A single dark television screen with an XBOX-360 and several games. He had owned the XBOX, but Amanda had taken it for her own. As his eyes adjust in the darkness, he sees two skeletons: one lying in the lower bunk, and the other lying atop of it. Anthony moves forward, kneels down. Already he is accepting the fate; his dreams shatter and he moves immediately into grim acceptance. *Amanda slept on the lower bunk*. Suddenly he knows which skeleton is hers, and he just stares at the skull, where his sister's eyes had once resided. Her brain had once been home to laughter and love and great weirdness, a charming weirdness that made you feel awkward but yet comfortable and at-ease, all at the same time. Now there is no brain, and all that remains of his beloved sister is the frame upon which her muscles and sinews had attached and moved and had their being. He begins piecing things together, the scene forming in his mind: the disease striking,

Amanda being attacked; Amanda fights back with a kitchen knife, and she is able to kill her assailant—her roommate Krysten. But Krysten had already bit deep into her neck, had drawn forth a geyser of blood, and she died of blood loss—attested to by the dark stains covering the sheets. *She survived the plague.* He knows it to be true. He knows it in a way he has never known anything to be so sure. *She survived the plague, but her roommate, infected, took her life in her craze.*

He stands and exits the room.

The man is standing against the far wall, shotgun propped against his leg.

Anthony says, "She survived the plague."

The man eyes him. "No. She's dead."

"She survived the plague. Then her roommate killed her."

"That's idiotic," the man says. "You know she died like the rest. Just accept it."

Anthony doesn't defend himself. "Just give me some time alone, okay?"

The man bites his lip. "All right." He hands the boy the shotgun.

"Is this to kill myself?" Anthony asks. "To keep you from the guilt of doing it?"

"No," the man says. "In case there are more in the building. To keep you safe."

"I thought you didn't care?"

"I don't," the man says, turning his back on the boy. He points to the far window that looks down in the parking lot. "But *they* do."

IV

Everyone else is waiting outside. The man descends the stairwell. Mark tosses his cigarette onto the pavement and races up to him. He stares at the blood on the man's face, on his shirt, his hand. "Where's Anthony? Is he all right? Is that his blood?"

The man raises his eyebrows. "What?"

Kyle, standing aside, says, "We heard gunshots. We heard one of the zombies."

"Oh," the man says. "This isn't his blood. I killed it. The dark-walker, I mean. And Anthony is up in his sister's room. He's all right, too. I gave him the shotgun."

"Did his sister make it?" Mark asks.

The man looks at him, incredulous. "Are you kidding? Of course she didn't."

Katie asks, "Why did you give him the shotgun? What if he kills himself?"

The man shrugs. "We can only hope, can't we?"

Sarah shakes her head. "You're a bastard."

Anthony kneels next to the bed. His eyes fill with tears. He speaks, rambling, "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I'm sorry... It's not fair... It's not fair that I make it, that I survive, and you... I'm so sorry... I'm sorry that whenever you wanted to play, I would just want to read... I'm sorry for always making you mad... I'm sorry for not calling you back whenever you called... I'm sorry for not always being there for you... I'm sorry for being a selfish bastard... I loved you so much, Amanda..." He reaches out, caresses her skull with his finger. A shiver runs down his spine. He withdraws his hand. "I'm sorry for touching you like that... It's not right... You're dead, and I shouldn't be touching your bones..." Tears crawl down his cheeks, and he begins to weep. His chest heaves and breaks and

snaps. His blond and ragged hair falls before his eyes, and his tears drop upon her crooked fingerbones, dissolving into nothing.

The man walks across The Valley, a low slab of land between several academic buildings and the NICHOLSON LIBRARY. The long grass tugs at his jeans, and several insects hop off blades of grass at his approach. He passes underneath several oak trees, the leaves bending towards the sun. He makes his way up the stone steps to NICHOLSON LIBRARY. He tugs on the door. *Locked*. He kicks his boot into the glass of one of the vertical windows, and it shatters. He squeezes in, shards of glass cutting at his jacket. He stands in the darkness, draws out his KA-BAR. He shouts out. No response. He moves through the darkness, between the aisles. Several towering windows at the end of the building let in foggy beams of light. He hurries towards the light, and his nerves settle. Against the far wall is the MCCLELLION CAFÉ, a gourmet coffee shop. A gate is lowered against the entrance. The man sheathes his knife and bends down, grips the gate. It slowly rises, unlocked. He steps into the dimly lit café. Tables with chairs hoisted atop are lined up against the counter. A chalkboard with faded chalk lettering gives the Monthly Special: Peanut Butter Hot Chocolate. The man moves around the counter and begins searching. He finds a case of coffee beans in one of the under-cupboards: ETHIOPIAN YIRGACHEFFE. He searches for a grinder, but it's electricity-powered. He leaves the beans on the counter and exits the café, moves down along the aisles of the library, breathing in stagnant, free-floating dust. He hears the echo of a cry in the darkness, somewhat distant, followed by rushing feet. He draws his KA-BAR, and holding his breath, runs between the aisles, nearly tripping over his own feet. Another shriek comes behind him, closer. He wheels around and sprints towards the exit, the shattered glass reflecting in the pouring sunlight. He leaps out through the broken window and stumbles onto the stone steps and falls, tumbling down the steps. He lands on the sidewalk, curses, feels blood coursing down his hand. He looks over his shoulder, towards the entrance. He hears another cry, but there is nothing. He grabs the KA-BAR lying next to him. The blood streams from a deep cut on the back of his hand; it sears in pain. He bites his lip, stands, sheathes the knife. Gripping his hand, putting pressure on the cut, he walks back across The Valley, cursing under his breath, the sun simply smiling.

Anthony manages to contain his tears. Acceptance isn't as easy when reality sinks its fanged teeth into the rhythms of a beating heart. The muscles in his bent legs ache, so he grabs one of the bean-bag chairs and pulls it underneath him. He leans on the bed, looking at Amanda's empty eye sockets, says, "If this had never happened... If this wouldn't have taken place... You'd be an aunt right now. Karen was pregnant. You know that? Of course you don't. But maybe you're in Heaven, and you already know. Maybe you knew before I did. But it doesn't matter. You always wanted to be an aunt. You always talked about how my kids would be the most beautiful kids in the world, and how they'd be weird and quirky just like me. You were going to be an aunt, and I was going to be a daddy." He is quiet for a moment. The tears are returning. "But that's not how it's going to be. Maybe it was never meant to be that way. Maybe this is what fate had in store for us. Fate's an elegant, cold-hearted bitch. I know that now. But we can't fight against fate. We just have to accept it. It doesn't matter what our dreams, our hopes, our desires are... Fate has the final say. And you can't fight fate and win—you'll only be bloodied and left alone to mend your own wounds with the salt of your own tears."

Kyle is sitting on a park bench along one of the winding paths that encircles The Valley. He watches the man walking away from the library, disappearing behind a building, on his way to the Explorer.

He wonders what the man was doing inside a dark building, doesn't care. It looks as if the man is holding his hand, maybe it's hurt. *Maybe he was bitten.* He pushes the thought away. The man is the type of creature who would gladly shoot itself to keep from becoming one of the dark-walkers. If he were infected, he'd have killed himself already. Kyle pushes the man out of his thoughts, stares at The Valley. The grass is overgrown, the crisscrossing sidewalks nearly hidden. It is mid-April. This time last year, there would have been students in The Valley: groups huddled together, laughing and chatting; boys and girls walking hand-in-hand; college kids feeding the squirrels that watched from the trees—he notices there are no squirrels; they were probably eaten by the dark-walkers, or are hiding in the trees, out-of-sight, acknowledging bipedal creatures as a dangerous threat to be avoided at all costs. He can almost see kids biking down the paths, or throwing Frisbees on the once-manicured lawn. His eyes are drawn to the oaks, the leaves a brilliant green. *Spring is the season of rebirth. Summer dies with fall, and fall takes its final plunge with winter; but when winter seems as if it shall never pass, spring comes, bringing new life and rebirth.* He looks at the trees, wondering if this is a new life dawning, a rebirth for their little group. His father once told him, "Time doesn't heal all wounds. Action heals all wounds. If you sit on your ass and do nothing, then nothing will change. But if you get off your ass and work towards something, then things *will* change—they will have no choice but to change." They lived lives of resignation within the church, back at the city that now seems so many hundreds of miles away. Now they have a mission, a goal, something to accomplish: *Alaska.* The thought brings a smile to the boy's face.

Sarah and Katie are alone at the Explorer. Katie says, "This was a Christian campus, you know? Affiliated with the Pentecostal Church of God tradition." Sarah asks how she knows that. "Anthony was telling me. You know what? When people found out I was a lesbian, I was accosted by these Christians who 'cared' about my salvation. They cared so much that they took pleasure in condemning me to Hell. One time Elizabeth and I were at a baseball game in Orlando, and this little kid comes up to us. He asks if we are lesbians. We tell him we are. We weren't ashamed of it. He then proceeds to give us a gospel tract, and he tells us that we are sinners damned for Hell, and that if we do not repent, then we will be raped by demons in the underworld." She stares at Sarah with piercing, cold eyes. "How can people raise their children like that, to hate everything they don't understand? It's pathetic. If you're an adulterer, you're human. If you're an idolater, you're human. If you're addicted to food or alcohol or drugs or cigarettes, you're human. But if you're gay... Then you're the scum of the earth, stomped on by God, hated by everything Holy and Divine." She laughs. "You know what I keep thinking about? Whatever happened to that little boy? I know what happened. He became one of them. And he's running around someplace down in Florida, roaming the palm trees and white sand beaches, foaming at the mouth. And you know what I wonder even more? Whatever happened to his so-called 'god'? If I am condemned for who I am, then why didn't I become infected?" She shakes her head. "This proves there is no God." Sarah doesn't have anything to say.

Mark nears one of the buildings, elegantly designed with ivy crawling up its sides. There is a cobblestone patio with several benches, ringed by bushes. He makes his way up to the patio, sees something erected in the middle of the laid cobblestone. He approaches, sees a plaque along the cylindrical, four-foot-tall column: THE ETERNAL FLAME. There is no flame. It is no longer burning. *Everything dies. Everything extinguishes.* He looks around at the buildings, the sky, the trees, feels the crisp spring air in his lungs. *One day, all of this will fade. The buildings will fall apart. The cobblestone will shatter. The benches will disintegrate. This entire campus—this entire town—will succumb to nature, and it*

will be nothing but a vast wilderness with a few monuments of a forgotten age: slabs of concrete, rusted car skeletons, shiny plaques weathered by the elements. Civilization with all its trappings will fade, and no one will remember us. The thought doesn't affect him anymore.

Anthony takes several deep breaths. He closes his eyes, tries to calm down. His heart flutters rebelliously in his chest. "You were a wonderful girl," he says, not opening his eyes. He then looks at her. "You always thought you were a horrible person, because of the things you'd done. But you weren't a horrible person. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone does things they shouldn't. Everyone has regrets. You screwed up a lot. So did I. But we were still compassionate. We were still caring. We still put others before ourselves. That's what made us good. It isn't what we did, it wasn't our mistakes that defined who we were. It's how we treated other people. And we treated people well. I mean, I didn't. Not all the time. But I was always proud of you. Always proud." He takes her bony hand into his. "You made me proud, Amanda. So fucking proud."

Sarah sees the man walking towards them, along the road around RICE HALL. "He looks hurt."

Katie looks up at her. "What?"

"He looks hurt," she repeats, and she runs over to him. "You all right?" she asks.

"I'm fine," he says, not breaking his pace.

"What happened?" Her voice quivers: "Were you bitten?"

"No," the man says. "I cut myself on my knife."

She walks with him back towards the S.U.V. "How'd you manage that?"

"I was being stupid."

They reach the vehicle. Sarah opens the door and reaches inside. The man leans against the hood of the car. His hands are covered with his own blood.

She grabs a hand-towel. "Give me your hand." She grabs his hand; he doesn't refuse. "Let me see it."

He says no.

"Let me see it," she demands.

He lifts his hand. She wipes blood away from the slice.

He grimaces, the rough cloth tearing at his ruptured skin.

"It's pretty deep," she says. "We can suture it up. Nancy taught me how, back at the church. We'll need to get needles and stuff."

The man doesn't say anything.

She presses the towel tight against his wound. She tells Katie to get another rag. Katie obeys, hands it to her. She gives it to the man: "Clean yourself up. You've still got blood on your face. Hopefully none of the blood from the dark-walker got into your system..." The man hasn't even thought about that. She looks at him. "If you start feeling sick..."

"I know," the man says.

Tears brim in Sarah's eyes.

"I'll be fine," the man says.

Katie is staring at him.

He snaps, "What the fuck are you looking at?"

"Hopefully not a dead man," she whispers under her breath.

He looks back at Sarah. "Stop crying."

"I'm not crying."

"I'll be all right. It's the bites that matter. I've gotten their blood in me before."

V

They decide to spend the night in RICE HALL. Mark and Kyle sweep it clean, finding no more dark-walkers. They use the R.A.'s key to open several more dorm rooms. They drag skeletons out and put them in the hallway, then flip the mattresses onto the opposite side to prevent the spread of disease. They find blankets and pillows in closets and put them over the mattresses. "Don't use the ones the skeletons were on," Sarah told them, "because they're not going to be the most sanitary." Mark and Kyle take a room, Anthony and the man take a room, and Sarah and Katie take a room. It is early evening, and everyone is quiet, walking around, thinking. Anthony has disappeared, and the man and Sarah are in the room. He sits on a sofa, and she sits next to him. He bites his lip; she holds his hand, running a needle and thread between the frayed flesh, sporadically splashing hydrogen-peroxide into the wound. She found the suturing equipment in the R.A.'s room. The man doesn't say anything, and she sews in silence, working by the dim light coming through the window.

"It doesn't hurt too badly, does it?" she asks, voice drenched in compassion.

"It's fine," the man says. "I deserve it for being so fucking stupid."

"What happened?"

"I went into the library. Looking for coffee. Anthony had mentioned that there was a café in there. Anyways, I found the coffee shop. They didn't have any coffee I could make, ironically. I was on my way out when I was chased. There was one in the building, maybe more. I barely escaped, and I lost my footing. I was holding my knife, and as I fell, I cut myself."

"Well," Sarah says, "it's better than them getting you."

"I know," the man says. "Ouch."

"Sorry."

"You're okay."

Anthony moves across The Valley. The leaves on the oaks are beautiful in the last moments of daylight. His heart had beaten quickly at first, but now it has calmed down. This is something he knew he should have done a while ago. He had been on the campus a few times before, knows his way around. He walks past WARNER AUDITORIUM, the concrete sidewalk clapping loudly under his feet in the still and silent dusk. He nears the KRANNERT FINE ARTS BUILDING; on the patio at the main entrance is a fountain, the water long since having stopped flowing. The fountain is composed of a pool with a helix statue rising up, an emblem of the human D.N.A. strand. *The Helios*, it was called. He sits down on the ledge around the pool. It is filled with murky rainwater. He takes a deep breath and sets his hands on his knees. He looks up and sees the sun lowering beyond one of the oaks, its rays splitting between the branches and sparkling on the leaves.

"Mark tells me that you were engaged when the plague hit."

The man doesn't say anything.

"Were you?" she asks.

"No," he says. "I was going to propose to her the night after the plague hit."

"Oh."

"It's okay."

"I bet it was hard losing her."

"Yeah," he says. He remembers stabbing her in the bedroom. "It was."

Sarah doesn't say anything for a moment, continues the stitches. "I lost my husband."

"I'm sorry."

"His name was Patrick. He was... fantastic."

"I'll bet he was."

"He really was. He was my knight in shining armor."

"Okay."

"We were... We were trying to have children."

"Did you?"

"No. Thank God. Losing Patrick was hard enough..."

"I understand."

"Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever really be over losing him."

"I don't know."

"Are you over losing your girlfriend?"

"Yes," the man says.

After a moment, with the quaking of his heart, "No."

The sun continues to set. Anthony remembers sitting with Amanda on their front porch. He had bought three zombie movies—"Dawn of the Dead: 2004," "Land of the Dead," and "Diary of the Dead." She had made fun of him, saying, "You're obsessed with zombies." He told her that he was, that the concept of a zombie apocalypse was exciting. He had told her, "My life isn't very exciting. I'll bet a zombie apocalypse would make it exciting. Sure, I'd have loads of emotional and psychological baggage to deal with afterwards—in the event that I didn't end up bitten and so join the Legions of the Undead—but it would make my life a little more... interesting." She told him that he was crazy, asked why zombies fascinated him so much. He thought for a moment, said, "I don't think it's the zombies necessarily, but the collapse of everything we hold so dear. For nearly five thousand years, mankind has been erecting a civilization filled with monuments to their glory and achievements, to their accomplishments that reach into the stars. And a simple plague destroys all of that when it turns mankind into mindless creatures who only hunger and thirst and know nothing more. Order disintegrates into chaos. Hope becomes hopelessness. Our greatest dreams and ambitions die in the twinkling of an eye. The hunters become the hunted. Families are torn apart, friends become our worst enemies, and society crumbles. *This* is why a zombie apocalypse is so... fascinating... to me. I find myself contemplating the future, wondering what it would look like if this were to happen. How would our theologies change? How would our perceptions of the world be transformed? How would we live our daily lives? Would we seek to rebuild civilization? Would we even be *able* to rebuild civilization? Our environment would take a one-hundred-eighty degree turn, would be flipped upside-down, and we would have the ultimatum of either changing and adapting, or dying—and joining the Legions of the Undead."

"I'm almost finished," Sarah says, drawing the last threads with the needle.

"All right," the man says. "Take your time."

"You know... Sometimes you act like you're totally okay with what happened."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't talk about your girlfriend much."

"You don't talk about Patrick much."

She looks up at him. "I told you, didn't I?"

"Yes. And I told you about Kira."

"That was her name?"

He nods. "Yeah."

"I bet she was beautiful."

"She was the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

"What'd she look like?"

The man is quiet for a moment. "Indescribable."

The sun is sinking lower behind the oak. Shadows begin to lurch across the overgrown grass. A wind picks up, the chill tickling his skin, goose-bumps spreading up his arms, across his back, and to the breadth of his neck. His heart begins to hammer in his chest, crying out for life, but he has control of his limbs, and he doesn't move. He stares at the setting sun, and the vision is lost in the memory: Amanda lying in the sheets of her bed back home, coiled up and weeping, her tears staining the pillow. Thunder had crackled and rain rapped on the window. Wind made the wooden walls of the frail house creak and moan. He had knelt down beside her, had run his hand through her hair. She wept, told him that she loved Matthew, that she didn't understand why he would just toss her to the street. Anthony didn't have any answer. She looked up at him with bloodshot eyes, cheeks bloated, lips quivering. Her nose flared with each snuffle. He didn't feel right telling her that the world was fair, that it catered to one's hopes and dreams. So he told her the truth: "When it comes to love... It's over-rated. Love is a joke, and if not a joke, then a myth. When we realize this, we become cold and broken. The weariness saturates our beings, rots in our bones. We realize that the world isn't a romantic sun over strawberry fields, but it's tragic, depressing, empty. Reality is that what you want, you can't have; what you have, you can't keep; and what you love is taken away from you." He remembers his words, and they echo through his mind, in whispers and shouts:

What you want, you can't have.

What you have, you can't keep.

What you love is taken away from you.

He had been his own prophet, and now his prophecies have come to life. Tears brim in his eyes, and he doesn't fight them back. He won't be crying for very long. He can already hear the cries of the dark-walkers, floating from the buildings scattered about campus, rising like a chorus in the wasteland. They are awaking, arising, crouched down, salivating at their mouths, waiting for the last rays of the monotonous sun to dissipate from the sky, so that they can seek the fulfillment of their lusts for human flesh and human blood.

"Do you think about her a lot?" Sarah asks.

The man doesn't answer for a moment. "I try not to."

She pauses in her stitching. "You try *not* to?"

"Yes."

"Why would you..." She tries to form the right words. "Why would you try *not* to?"

"Because it hurts too much," he answers matter-of-factly.

She is quiet.

The man looks at her. "Are you done?"

"Done asking questions?"

"No," he says. "Done stitching."

"Oh. No. Sorry." She continues threading.

The man closes his eyes. Exhausted.

"If you try not to think about her," Sarah says, knowing she's treading dangerous territory, "You'll forget her."

"I know," the man says.

"You want to forget her."

"Yeah."

"Why would you want to forget the woman you loved?"

He is irritated at her questions. "Because then it won't hurt anymore."

For a moment he questions what he is doing, but he stubbornly refuses to give thought to such nuances. *This is what reality demands. Maybe my perception of reality is flawed, but what the Hell, it's my life, these are the cards I've been dealt, and I can make my own decisions. I have lost everything due to forces outside my own control, and now I am securing control: now I make the decisions. If I were to chart my life, I'd end up dying cold and alone, in the wintry wilderness of Alaska, void of friends and having no memories to smile upon. EVERYONE WILL DIE, AND DIE ALONE. These sentiments, this understanding of reality, has carved within me a desire to end this farce of life as soon as possible. Here I sit, looking upon a world slowly going dark...*

What is it that has kept me from moving forward?

What is it that has kept my lungs inflating and deflating?

What is it that has kept my heart beating rebelliously between the prison of my ribs?

*It is a question with no answer,
a question with no meaning.*

After knotting the thread, she uses scissors to snip off the end. "I think I did it right."

The man withdraws his hand. It aches. "If the stitches fall out, we'll know you did it wrong."

"Then we can stitch them again. Hopefully the right way."

"Yeah."

She takes a deep breath.

"All right," the man says, looking at her. "Thank you."

"You'll want to bandage it up. There's a roll of gauze at your feet."

"Okay," the man says.

"Okay," Sarah says.

They sit in the silence, hearing only the cries of the dark-walkers as they begin to awake.

"I'm tired," the man says.

"Me, too," she says. "It's been a long day."

"Yeah."

She pauses, sighs, stands. She stretches, yawns. "I'll let you sleep."

"Thanks," he says. "Shut the door behind you."

The sun vanishes beyond the horizon, and its light extinguishes. The shouts and cries of the dark-walkers disappear, and then the air is filled with the sounds of doors flying open and bodies leaping from their hiding places. The boy feels so desperately alone, so desperately weak, and yet so insanely powerful. Adrenaline floods through his veins. He stays rooted on the ledge of the pool. He hears noises behind him, coming from inside the Fine Arts building. He lowers his head and stares at his fingers, can see them quivering with each heartbeat. Snarling and growling are nearing from behind him. He takes a deep breath, looks up, sees the WARNER AUDITORIUM forty meters away doused with movement along its sides, dark-walkers exploring, following his scent along the sidewalk. Something falls upon his shoulder. He looks up, sees a gnarled hand covered with scrapes and cuts on his shoulder, the fingers swollen from the cold and malnutrition. The dark-walker stares at him, a wiry old man with a stenciled face, sunken eyes. Anthony has seen the man before, had sat in on one of Amanda's psychology classes. *Professor Wimbleton*. The dark-walker's eyes explore the boy, and drool

drips from a half-opened mouth. Anthony smiles: "Hello, Professor." The calmness in his voice frightens him. Another dark-walker comes up along his other side, grabs him by the shoulder. Anthony doesn't resist, just closes his eyes. He sees Karen and Amanda standing together, smiling at him, memories flashing from the back of his tortured mind. The dark-walkers thrust him into the pool, and he submerges under the stagnant rainwater. He opens his mouth; water runs between his teeth; he takes a deep breath; water fills his lungs; his legs and limbs kick in automatic motion, struggling for breath. The dark-walkers thrust their heads under the water and begin feasting on his flesh. In a few moments his blood turns the pool's water red and his arms and legs cease their kicking and thrashing. A new-come dark-walker grabs the boy's wrist in its hands and sinks its teeth into his soft flesh; its teeth gnaw upon the tendon, and Anthony's dead fingers twitch, betraying the silenced heart within the prison of the boy's ribs.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

In Memoriam

"The leaves of memory seem to make
A mournful rustling in the dark."

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (A.D. 1807-1882)

I

When morning comes, the man awakes and finds that Anthony is gone, the sheets on his bed untouched, the pillow unruffled. He moves to each room, waking up the others, asking if they've seen him. No one has. Anxiety floods through the group. The man tentatively pushes open the door to Amanda's room, but it is abandoned. They split into groups and scatter, searching for him somewhere on campus, hoping that he may have risen early, having been unable to sleep out of remorse over his skeletal sister, and that he went for a walk to clear his mind and be alone. Sarah and Katie head along the southern side of the campus, and Kyle and Mark take the northern rim of buildings. The man takes off across The Valley. Birds sing to one another in the limbs of the trees, and a fresh dew sprinkles the long grass, which crunches underfoot as he carves a path. Something at his feet catches his eye. He kneels down, brushes blades of grass out of the way. A bloodied sneaker, the sole ripped. He stands up, looks out across The Valley, searching for movement: the only movement is the wind shuffling the fresh leaves upon the trees, the blades of grass sweeping back and forth like waves in the ocean. The ephemeral silence is shattered with a single syllable: "Shit."

Sarah and Katie walk the path past WARNER AUDITORIUM, saying nothing. They are nearing the Fine Arts building when Sarah stops in her tracks. "Katie," she says, "wait here." She leaves her friend behind and approaches the building. *The Helios* is before her, and she takes her steps slower, looking down at the sidewalk. The concrete is splashed with splotches and streaks of blood drying in the warm morning sunlight. Her heart begins to race like a stallion, and her steps are methodical and sluggish. She reaches the fountain with its helix statue. The statue is coated with great swathes of blood. She looks down into the water that gently laps in the stiff breeze. The water is stained red. A knot forms in her throat. She looks back at Katie, who is frozen in her place; Sarah shakes her head, and Katie sits down on the pavement, leaning back on the palms of her hands. Sarah looks down into the crimson water, can almost see Anthony's reflection, his eyes meeting hers. A tear slides down her cheek and plunks into the pool, the ripples shattering Anthony's reflection. She wipes another tear away, and she sees something floating in the water: a severed finger, the bone chewed off at the base, the fingernail wrapped in blood.

Kyle and Mark return to the Explorer. Sarah, Katie, and the man are already there.

"We didn't find him, either," Kyle says.

"We did," the man says grimly. "But only the pieces they didn't like."

No one says anything.

"We should probably get going," the man says.

"Yeah," Kyle says.

They begin to load into the Explorer.

Mark walks right past the man, pauses, looks at him. "You happy he's gone?"

The man doesn't say anything, just looks away.

II

In a former age, things would have been different. Anthony's suicide would have been met with a grand funeral, great mourning, and a weighing sense of guilt upon those who outlived him. But this is a new age, and there is no funeral, no mourning, no guilt... only quiet acceptance. In a former age, Anthony's death would have sent ripples that would have carried on through the lives of those who knew him, rippling into decades upon decades. Now Anthony's memory is already faded, for there is no one left to remember him. The man, Kyle, Mark, Sarah, and Katie do not speak of his death, do not speak of what has transpired, only accept the roll of the dice, the twisted hand of fate, and they continue. There is one less mouth to feed, one less liability, one less soul to care for. In this world, care and compassion are exhausting. Only the selfish survive—and they survive in misery.

No one speaks much that day. The Explorer has difficulties with the engine, and the man pulls it off an exit and stops it at a gas station. He spends most of the day working on the engine, trying to fix a leak somewhere in the gasoline tank, staining his clothes and spilling out a slur of filthy words. Everyone else just huddles around in the cold; a cold front had swept in from the west overnight, and the sky had turned inky blue, clouds tumbling over one another, rays of sunlight penetrating their thick carpet for only moments at a time. "It's almost sunset," Kyle says. They load up into the Explorer and drive down the road. They find a gravel driveway leading to a mansion with an iron gate, the paint peeling. The man and Mark get out of the vehicle and push open the gate; they get back inside, and the Explorer drives up a concrete driveway to the Victorian-style house with a turn-around in the front drive. In the middle of the turnaround is a patch of grass with a fountain. No water flows, and the water within the fountain is stagnant and filled with algae. They enter the house, and the moment they step inside, two dark-walkers rush at them. The man fires a single round from the shotgun, and their bodies split open and splatter over the walls, ceiling, and carpet. The rest of the house is clear. They enter and begin pushing furniture against the windows. They head upstairs, and they shove all the furniture from the rooms against the top of the stairs. They find candles and light them once the night falls, and they don't even hear any of the dark-walkers outside.

Mark roams the hallway. He doesn't know what time it is. The candle lights his path, meager light splashing against the ornate walls with their elegant trim designs. He can hear the others sleeping in adjacent rooms. Movement behind him. He twists around, raising his free hand in defense. The light dances over Katie's features, her face appearing like an orb in the darkness. The candlelight reflects in her eyes.

"I can't sleep," she says.

"Neither can I."

There is silence.

"Do you think we'll get used to it?"

"Get used to what?"

"People dying. I didn't even cry for Anthony. Not much, anyways."

"It's okay."

"It's *not* okay. I used to care about other people."

"You still care about people."

"Did I care about Anthony?"

"Yes. You just didn't cry that much."

"He died. I should have cried."

"You did."

"Not a lot."

They stand in the quiet. Wind makes the walls creak and groan.

"Maybe," Katie says, "we're just so... desensitized."

"Maybe."

"A year ago, his death... It would have traumatized us. We were his friends. We cared about him. But now... Everything's changed so much. Death, it's just... It's not even frightening anymore."

"It doesn't frighten you?"

"No. It does. It's just... We've come to accept it."

"Yeah."

"Do you think we're all going to die?"

"I don't know."

"Is that really what you believe?"

"I think we've done all right so far."

"A lot of people have died."

"We haven't."

"But we're just a handful. Most of us... Most of us have died."

"But we haven't."

"Does that mean we're stronger than everyone else?"

"Maybe."

"I don't think so. I think it means that we're luckier."

"Maybe."

"But luck doesn't hold out. Not for very long, anyways."

"Let's hope it holds out long enough for us to get to Alaska."

"That's quite a thing to hope for."

"I'm going to hope for it anyways."

Silence.

Katie yawns.

"You should try to get some sleep," Mark says.

"So should you."

"I'm not tired."

"My body is tired. My mind isn't."

"Yeah."

"That's how you feel?"

"Yeah."

Silence.

"Do you think Anthony's in heaven?" Katie asks.

"I don't know."

"Do you believe in heaven?"

"I don't know."

"I never did believe in Heaven. I've never believed in Hell, either. I think heaven and hell, those are moments in our lives. When we feel alive, when we are loving and being loved, *that's* heaven. But when we want to do nothing more than curl into a ball and die, when we don't love and when we're not loved in return, *that's* hell. I think the afterlife concepts of Heaven and Hell were created to give people hope. That those whose lives are a living hell can look forward to a paradise in Heaven once they die. And those people who are wicked and who hurt and abuse other people and live a life of luxury and wealth... Those people will get what they have coming. There's a promise of revenge, and that makes people feel better when their lives are rotten."

"I don't know," Mark says. "Maybe."

"So you don't know if you believe in Heaven?"

"I used to," Mark says. "When I was younger, my life was horrible. I was always depressed. Even suicidal. I prayed and prayed that God would take it away, that He would make me happy. My prayers were never answered. So I thought to myself, 'Maybe I'm just being selfish, and that's why God isn't answering my prayers.' I kept praying for myself, but I prayed for other people, too. And you know what? My prayers for others, *they* were answered. But my prayers for myself? Things just kept getting worse. Eventually I stopped praying altogether. I started working to change things on my own, not leaving it in the hands of a... Higher Being... who may or may not exist. That's when things got better. God didn't change things for me. *I* did. Ever since then, I never really believed in heaven or hell. A god who won't answer peoples' prayers, who will treat them like ants under the magnifying glass... How can He be good enough to make a place called Heaven and Hell? I know it's not logical, but... But that's when I stopped believing in Heaven and Hell."

Katie is quiet for a moment. "If God doesn't answer prayers... Then what about all those prayers for other people that were answered?"

Mark thinks for a moment. "Either God is a sadistic being, torturing people for their selfishness, or... Or those answers to prayer were just coincidences. They were just sporadic and ironic moments of luck."

"The same luck that we're trusting in?"

"Yeah. Except let's hope that our luck doesn't run out like theirs. Their luck was only short-lived. Chances are, every one of them died with the plague... and then came back."

Mark yawns. "If you're right," he says, "and heaven and hell aren't real places, that they're just experiences of life... Then maybe we'll never again know what heaven feels like. Maybe we're doomed to live in this hell forever."

"I think that's why Anthony took his life. Because he knew he'd never experience heaven. He knew that his life would be nothing but running, hiding, trying to survive, longing for something more, waiting for a resolution that would never materialize. So he took his own life. He ended it there. Nonexistence is better than suffering." She takes a breath. "Maybe that's what our ultimate hope should be. Not Alaska, but Death."

Mark extinguishes the flame. Darkness crowds among them.

Katie's voice comes in the darkness: "You know what my aunt always told me?"

"No."

"She told me that I should always live for the moment, that I never should get attached to anything. She said that whenever we find something worth keeping, it is bound to be taken from us."

Mark doesn't say anything.

"I think she was right."

Mark thinks of Cara. Sees her smiling face. Hears her laughter. His heart melts, and a knot forms in his throat. It has been a while since he's thought of her, and now the memories of their time together are as sharp as a double-edged sword, peeling back the shadows and shining into his life like a perpetual sun. He pushes the thoughts away, fears tearing up. "I think she was right, too," Mark says. He gets no response. "Katie?" She is gone.

III

The night passes without incident. When morning comes, they move the furniture blocking the stairs and descend down into the kitchen. Sarah rummages through the cupboards, finds canned fruit and vegetables. She, Katie, Mark and Kyle sit at the BONAPARTE dining room table, pulling peaches and pears and sliced oranges from the cold tin cans. The man smokes a cigarette and stands by the far wall, examining bottles of brandy, cognac, and Scotch in the charcoal-colored dining chest. He crunches the cigarette on the wooden top and grabs a small cup from the overhead cupboard. He screws off the cap to the Virginia Scotch and begins pouring a glass.

Mark, not even looking over at him, says, "If you drink, you're not driving today."

The man fills the glass to the top, sets the bottle down with the cap still off. He stares at it for a long time, then lights another cigarette. "Fine," he says, staring at the bottle. "But I'm bringing it with us."

Mark says, "Bring the brandy, too."

It is eleven in the morning by the time they reach the highway, the cornfields on either side lined with gnarled trees barely bristling with spring leaves. It isn't eleven-thirty before the man curses, the gas light coming on. "I thought I fixed the fucking leak," he says. He pulls off at the next exit. They drive down the abandoned road for several minutes, the man's eyes searching. He pulls up INDUSTRIAL AVENUE and into the parking lot of a TOYOTA car dealership. He stops the vehicle and turns off the engine. Everyone piles out, and the man kneels down on the pavement, can smell the stench of gasoline. He squints as he rolls onto his back and examines the fuel tank along the undercarriage. Gasoline drips from several spots. He weasels his way out and stands, hands on his hips.

Kyle says, "This is a FORD. This dealership might not have the right parts for the model."

"We're not here for parts," the man says. "We're getting a new car."

"Do you think the cars here have gas in the engines?"

"Maybe. Probably. But find a bucket and get underneath here and try to collect as much gas as you can. It's dripping out pretty steadily." He looks over at Mark. "What's your dream car?"

The only S.U.V. in the display room is a red TOYOTA RAV4. The man finds the keys behind one of the desks, and he crawls inside. It still smells of fresh leather and has the new car scent. He leans back in the seat and puts his hands on the wheel, wrapping his fingers around its curvature.

Mark stands beside the open door. "What do you think?"

"I'll take it," the man says, looking over at him. "How much?"

The boy smiles. "Is there any gas?"

The man turns on the engine. It chugs for a moment; the gas light comes on; the engine dies. He twists the key back into the OFF position. "We need gas," the man says.

They go outside.

Sarah and Katie are looking at some of the cars in the lot.

Kyle's feet are sticking out from underneath the Explorer.

The man kneels down, asks how much gas he's got in the steel bucket.

Kyle tells him that the leak is nothing more than a few droplets now.

The man curses and stands. He tells Mark to get inside and find the red gasoline container he'd nabbed at the gas station a night or two ago. *It seems so long ago.*

Mark opens the door and climbs inside.

The man turns and shouts at the women: "Start unloading the car! Take everything inside, to the red car with the door open!"

They exchange glances and trot over.

Mark and the man head towards a gas station across the street.

Kyle, coming out from underneath the vehicle, asks what he's supposed to do.

The man pauses, looks around, points to a STARBUCKS located on the corner. "See if they have any ground-up coffee," he says.

Kyle nods and heads away, thankful to be alone.

Kyle walks across the street, and as he reaches the median, he stops. Something tickles the back of his mind, and he looks back and forth, sees cars driving up and down the road, headlights on in the dying evening light. The moment passes, déjà-vu. He stands in the middle of the empty road, and suddenly he remembers. His head jerks around, and he stares at the coffee shop with its windows catching the light of the sun and reflecting its rays sharply into his eyes. He moves forward, walks through the overgrown grass, across the solid pavement. There are few cars. Maybe three. He walks along the side of the building, under an overhang, passes the above-ground speaker that once served the drive-thru customers. He half-walks, half-jogs to the Taurus sitting in the back lot, facing a MENARD'S grocery store. He takes his time as he walks around to the driver's side window. The glass isn't shattered. He doesn't know if that's good or not, and he gives a feeble glance towards the building. He kneels down, puts his hand to the glass to block the sunlight, peers inside. The car is empty. Along the ridge of the front seats squat two stuffed green frogs. He bites his lip and stands again, looks over at the STARBUCKS building. He looks back across the street to the TOYOTA dealership. Sarah is propping the door open with a tire, and Katie is sauntering past with a bundle of equipment layered over outstretched arms. Kyle takes a deep breath and moves forward, past the speakers, under the overhang. He stops and looks into the store through the bay windows. There is a mop bucket lying on its side, the wooden mop with its dried and bristled tendrils lying on the tile floor beside it. He walks over to the door and tries to open it. Locked. He walks back over to the car and smashes open the window with a fist-sized rock, unlocks the door, opens it, reaches down, flips the latch for the trunk. He searches through the trunk and finds what he is looking for. He carries the car-jack to the window, and gripping it with both hands, smashes it into the glass. The glass webs outwards, groaning. He swings again. Flakes of glass fall at his feet. He bites his lip and swings for the last time. The glass shatters, raining down over his hands. He drops the car-jack at his feet and steps through, into the stale warmth with the faint scent of residue coffee.

He's been here before. He tries to piece together the dates. At least a few years. Before he ever met his girlfriend Sarah. He stands silently amidst the tables, the artwork covered in dust. He walks over to the bar, next to the cash register. There are espresso machines and coffee grinders and bottles of coffee syrups. He has stood here before, in this exact spot. He had come here on a cold November evening. Night had fallen early, as it always did in the winter-time. He had come in through these doors. He had shed off his leather jacket and set it upon one of the chairs. He had bought some spearmint gum and ordered an iced tall vanilla latte. He had sat down and read a book. What book was it? He remembers: Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men. One of the baristas had just gotten off work, and she sat down next to him. They chatted for a few moments. Her name was Jessica. He remembers just staring at her, thinking, *She's beautiful. She's so fucking beautiful.* They went to a local bar. He wasn't old enough to drink, but she had recently turned 21 and had an Apple Martini. They left the bar and went to CRACKER BARREL for chocolate pecan pie *a la mode*. The vanilla ice cream had been delicious. They crowded into a movie theater. A romantic movie called "Twilight." A movie about vampires. *It was nothing like the real thing*, he thinks to himself, lost in the transcendent memories. Preteen and teenage girls thronged at the entrance. They slipped through when the doors opened, got good seats. Whenever main characters appeared, the little girls would scream in excitement and glee. He would smile, mocking them, found it obnoxious and annoying at the same time. He rested his arm on the armchair of the seat. He wanted to hold Jessica's hand. But he didn't think she wanted it. After the movie they went to THE SUNSHINE DINER. It was around midnight, 1:00 in the morning. Four cups of coffee. She shared her French Toast with him. They went back out to their cars. They spoke for a few moments. He desperately wanted to hold her. The cold was biting. He wanted her warmth against him. He said good-bye. He had a two-hour drive home for the weekend. She said bye. They loaded into their cars. He never saw her again.

Kyle moves away from the bar, passing the glass case with rotted and mold-covered food. A sign on the case read: FRESH-BAKED, ALWAYS FRESH, NEVER STALE! In the corner, next to the restrooms, are two shelves. They are lined with coffee thermos and mugs. Jessica had told him, "If you want anything for Christmas, let me know. I get a forty-percent discount. But just so you know, these mugs aren't worth their price. See this mug? It's ten dollars. You're buying the label, not the mug." Upon the shelves beside the mugs are bags of coffee from all around the world: Latin America, South America, Africa, and the Philippines. He grabs one of the one-pound bags. He squeezes it, doesn't feel any beans underneath the heavy plastic wrap. *It's ground.* He grabs two more bags from different regions and turns to head back to the dealership when something dances behind him: "Kyle." His name. Spoken. He turns around.

She is standing there, emaciated but alive, still dressed in her black-and-green STARBUCKS uniform. Her nametag is faded: SHIFT MANAGER, JESSICA, HAPPY TO SERVE YOU. Her eyes are hidden in the shadows that wrap around her frail form, and she doesn't come forward, doesn't come into the light. He grips the bags and just stares at her. His eyes manage to push through the shroud of darkness, the sunlight from the windows unable to crawl across the walls unable to reach her. She stands there and watches him. Drool crawls down from her mouth. Her sunken eyes betray any emotions except blood-lust. He remembers wanting to take her hand in his, remembers wanting to hold her close, remembers the beating of his heart in a faint but present expectation. Now he licks his lips and looks at her. "Jessica." His voice is frighteningly loud, and he realizes that she never said his name. He had imagined it, a sixth sense alighting him to her presence. He holds the bags of coffee and just watches her. He remembers her telling him after the movie, "It would be so freaking awesome to be a

vampire!" A knot forms in his throat. *Not so awesome, Jessica, is it?* He begins backing away, his footsteps echoing loudly on the tile floor. He wants to say something, but he doesn't. She watches him go until he is out of sight. He climbs through the shattered glass window and makes his way back to the dealership.

IV

The night is spent at a DAYS INN farther down the road. Everyone takes their own separate rooms. When night falls, the man lies down on the twin-sized bed and stares at the white-plaster ceiling. He kicks off his boots and pulls the extra pillow underneath his head, layering one atop the other. He folds his hands across his chest and closes his eyes. He can almost hear the distant rumble of jet engines: BOEINGS, AIRBUSES, BOMBARDIERS. He finds the remote on the bedside table, runs his fingers over the rubber buttons. He remembers how he would turn on the television and try to understand what was being said. He usually flew to Great Britain, Germany, or France, and he would always try to polish up on his linguistics by watching foreign soaps or news shows. He presses the power button, almost expecting the television to turn on. But that was a long time ago, and everything is different.

He misses Kira. He would always think about Kira, staying the night in a foreign hotel room, separated by a great ocean of endless and innumerable miles. Now it is not an ocean that separates them but life itself. His eyes begin to water as he remembers the dark-walkers tearing her corpse apart, teeth biting down into her rotting flesh. His hand wraps tightly around the remote control, and he hears the cheap plastic casing snap. The sound of its cracking pushes the roar of the jet engines out of his mind, and all he can hear now are the faint raindrops on the windowpane and the shrieks of the dark-walkers outside.

He closes his eyes and tries to sleep. He is drifting off when the sound of thunder greets his ears. He rolls over in the bed, and then the sound comes again. *That's not thunder.* He rises up in the bed, sitting up in the darkness. He swings his legs out over the edge and stands. He approaches the window and stands by the blinds. The screams of the dark-walkers are intermittent, growing louder. Then the sound comes again. Not thunder. Popping. Shells. *Gunfire.* He puts his finger up to the blinds and pulls one of them to the side. Raindrops smear the window, but through the eerie darkness he can see faint flashes of light, followed by the rattling sound of magazines discharging. He tries to estimate the distance. Several miles west. Perhaps in the next town. He lets the blinds slide back into place when there comes a knock at the door.

He walks over to the door, throws back the latch, swings it open.

Sarah is standing there. "Did you hear that?"

He doesn't answer for a moment. "Hear what?"

"Gunshots."

He eyes her, whimsical. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She stares into his eyes. "The fuck you don't."

She pushes past him, into the room.

He turns, says, "I'm trying to sleep."

She walks over to the window, pulls back the blinds.

"Why don't you go look out your own window?"

"Mine faces east. The sounds are coming from the west."

"It's thunder."

She doesn't say anything.

He shakes his head. "Sarah. It's *thunder*."

She lets the blinds fall back. She turns. "You were looking, too."

"Lightning. Just... flashes of lightning."

"Flashes of lightning on the ground?"

The man takes a breath. "Don't tell anyone."

"I won't," Sarah says.

She walks past him, into the hall, disappears.

The man shuts the door, throws down the latch, and returns to his bed.

He lights a cigarette and smokes, tapping his ashes into the room's glass ashtray.

A few minutes pass, and then the gunfire stops.

He snubs out the cigarette, lies back, closes his eyes, and sleeps.

V

Kyle sleeps. He dreams that he and Jessica are standing outside THE SUNSHINE DINER, their heavy winter coats wrapped tightly around them, fighting off the late November chill. They are looking at one another. He steps closer. She doesn't react. He reaches out, takes her hand. It is warm in his. She tilts her head to the side, bites her lip and smiles.

The scene changes. They are in the hotel room. The same hotel room in which he is sleeping now. They are drinking hard whiskey. SOUTHERN COMFORT. They are throwing back shots, playing cards. Rummy. When he loses a hand, he takes off a set of clothes. When Jessica loses, she takes off a set of clothes. His heart is hammering in his chest.

The scene changes. They are lying on the bed. He is wearing nothing but his boxers. She is wearing nothing more than her bra and panties. They rub against one another, kissing, feeling one another with adventurous hands, intoxicated fingers.

The scene changes. She is on top of him. His boxers are gone, her panties are gone. She's still wearing her bra. Her legs hold him tightly, and she hovers over him. His arms reach up and hold her waist. He reaches his arms around her back, fondles with the strap of the bra. It unsnaps, the straps falling down either side of her arm. She lifts one arm, pulls the strap free. The bra tilts to the side, revealing a single breast. She leans to the other side, lets the other strap fall off. She grabs her bra in her hand, crunches the fabric in a fist, tosses it to the floor. Now her breasts rock back and forth in front of his face, the nipples a deep brown, hard in the cold. The heater is broken. She throws her head back, chocolate hair falling around her shoulders. She moans, feeling him inside her. He closes his eyes, her warmth spreading down the sides of his legs. She lets out a shout, and he smiles, knowing he is pleasing her. She lowers her head, and suddenly her eyes are sunken, the skin on her face pulled taught, cheekbones elegantly sharp. Her mouth opens, revealing a ring of fangs. Drool crawls down her chin, drips in goblets onto his chest. He tries to throw her off of him, but she grabs his upper arms

in her hands, thrusts them down onto the bed. Her strength is enormous as her fingers clench tight around his arm, breaking his skin. Blood dribbles out. He tries to kick her off, but her legs are spread on either side of him, pulled tight, keeping him free. Kyle looks up at her. "Jessica... Jessica... Jessica..." He pleads with her to stop, and as her hair falls into his eyes as her head lowers to sink her teeth into his neck, it is his own scream that wakes him.

He finds himself alone in the room, the raindrops tapping on the window. His heart sprints behind his ribs. He can almost feel her on top of him. He sits up, breathing heavily, sweat popping over his brow. He scans the room, eyes slowly adjusting. It's empty. He stands, limbs weak, walks over to the bathroom. He grips the doorknob, opens it. Nothing. He leans over the sink, sweat dripping into the porcelain bowl. He leans his forehead against the mirror, and his breath fogs up the glass. The dream was so real, so vivid, so... believable... and he fights with his own mind to accept that it wasn't a reality, that it never happened. The pain in his arm from her sharp fingernails is still present, but there are no marks. He returns to the bed and lies down. He listens to the rain and thinks about nothing, thinks about everything. He doesn't even realize that he falls asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Flowers Quickly Fading

"Ah, vanity of vanities!
How wayward the decrees of fate are,
How very weak the very wise,
How very small the very great are!"
- William Makepeace Thackeray (A.D. 1811-1863)

I

The man awakes with the first rays of sunshine cutting into the room. He dresses quickly, throwing on his jeans, plaid shirt, boots, and jacket. He fastens the KA-BAR sheath around his belt. He tiptoes down the hallway, can hear the others sleeping. He descends the flight of steps leading to the ground floor, passes through the empty lobby. He unlocks the front door and steps into the crisp spring air. The sky is clear, a magnificent bowl of brilliant blue, and the wild grass is covered with drops of dew. The scent of fallen rain lingers. He opens the side door to the RAV4 and finds what he is looking for. He opens the cardboard box and withdraws one of the pistols he'd taken from the factory in Cincinnati: a "full size" 92-model BERETTA. Alloy frame, no glare finish, ambidextrous safety lever, double action, reversible magazine release, open top slide, chamber loaded indicator, triple safety, rear sight for split-second aiming. He grabs a 9mm magazine and loads it into the chamber. He stuffs two more magazines into his jeans pocket. He shuts the door and enters on the driver's side. He ignites the engine. It rumbles to life. He glances at the hotel windows on the second floor that are facing him; no movement. He puts the S.U.V. into gear and pulls out of the parking lot, heading west. He runs the dead stoplights.

It takes him several minutes to find it. He passes underneath the I-70 bridge, and a few blocks down, sees skid marks on the road. He follows them up an adjacent street lined with restaurants and bare-faced businesses. He slows the RAV4 as he approaches. There is a truck wedged against a light-pole, the front end crunched. The glass in the cab is shattered, and the tires are blown, the rubber shreds lying flat and lifeless on the pavement, the ends clinging to the steel tire-frame. The man flicks the safety off on the pistol and pulls up to the side of the road. He steps out onto the street, pistol at the ready. The only movement is the splicing wind that blows ice into his face. He slowly moves towards the truck. The pavement is chipped and pocked by bullet impacts, and great swathes of blood are drying in the sun. He steps over a femur bone gnawed to the marrow. He stands at the back of the truck. Maine license plates. *You're a long way from home*, he thinks to himself. He moves around to the driver's side door. He brushes fragments of glass from the window frame and looks inside. The seat is covered with blood, the top layer drying. The rest of the blood has turned into a sordid jelly. There is a single leather boot propped up against the gear-shift. A rifle lies between the seat and underneath the dash. The man opens the door, the creaking of the hinges painfully loud. He leans inside, grabs the rifle, pulls it into the light. An M16. Military issue. He checks the chamber. An empty cartridge.

He doesn't know what bullets the gun takes. He sets it back on the seat and backs away, looks out at the rising sun behind him. "Fuck it." He grabs the gun and returns to the car.

He finds a DICK SPORTING GOODS STORE in a nearby business complex. He breaks the glass and enters. He makes his way towards the back, the pistol held at the ready. Nothing attacks him. He passes by aisles filled with sporting jackets, golfing outfits. Baseballs and basketballs and soccer balls. Paintball guns. Tents of all shapes and sizes. Something crashes off to his right. He swings on his heels and raises the pistol. A raccoon blinks at him in the shattered sunlight coming from the front of the store. The man lowers the weapon. The raccoon saunters away. He reaches the ARMS DEPARTMENT and hops over the counter. He places the pistol on the counter and searches underneath. He finds what he is looking for and spreads it out next to the pistol. He maneuvers so that his shadow doesn't break a ray of sun coming from the skylight above. He searches through the inventory. No M16s even mentioned. *It's not a civilian gun.* He begins going through the bullets, trying to fit them into the chamber. *You're going to get yourself fucking killed.* He doesn't care. The comfort of an M16 is too great to pass up. The 9mm bullets are too thick, and the .50 caliber slugs won't even fit into the chamber. Finally he finds the 5.56mm bullets. They fit perfectly. He raises the gun, squeezes the trigger. There's an arc of flashing light, the scream of the bullet rushing out of the barrel, and then the rumbling impact of the bullet into a manikin—all the sounds blended into one cacophonous chatter. The manikin teeters and topples, lifeless eyes pinned to the floor. The man smiles, grabs as many boxes of 5.56mms that he can carry, and exits the store.

II

No one is awake by the time he gets back. He wraps the M16 with its magazines in a plastic tarp found in the lobby, and he stuffs it underneath the floor mat under the RAV4's driver's seat. He wakes everyone. He stands outside smoking as they file out, eyes heavy, movements sluggish. They get into the vehicle, and the man starts the engine. They drive up the ramp onto I-70 and continue their journey west in silence. He and Sarah say nothing about last night, and no one brings it up. The man considers telling her about the wrecked truck and the assault rifle. He decides not to. He isn't sure if they're out of the woods yet. If that were a raider—and it very well may not have been—then there may have been more. *Must* be more: one man in a single truck could not do what had taken place behind the gas station many miles down the road.

Signs along the road tell them they are about fifty miles from Indianapolis. The land is nothing but abandoned cornfields, planted before the harvest but never harvested. Many of the stalks stand erect, but some are bent and cracked, kernels and cobs of corn scattered among the cold and still-frozen ground. Three ravens fly overhead, their black feathers before the sun casting brief shadows over the road. The man plays with the radio for a while, gets nothing but static. He leans back in the seat and stares forward. They pass a wrecked car. A skeleton in the front seat, the bony fingers still grasping the wheel. No one pays it any mind. Thirty miles until they reach Indianapolis. The man looks up at the sun. They should be well out of Indianapolis before the sun even begins to— "Shit!" He slams on the brakes, the S.U.V. skidding across the pavement, brakes locking and choking. No one says anything, despite eyes as wide as saucers and fingers gripping one another's arms. The brakes whine

and the RAV4 lurches to a stop. The man takes several deep breaths. "What do you make of that?" he asks Mark, who is leaning forward in the seat beside him, staring through the windshield.

"Open the glove-box," the man says.

Mark obeys, hands him the BERETTA.

"Stay here," the man says, getting out of the car.

Everyone exchanges glances. Seatbelts undo. Doors open. They pile out.

"Shit," Mark says, following after them.

The man raises the pistol. "Stop!" he hollers.

The traveler doesn't stop moving, his back towards them.

"Stop!" the man shouts again.

No response.

He squeezes the trigger.

The blast rings out.

Birds flock from the field off the side of the road.

The traveler turns around and smiles.

He had been pushing a grocery cart along the road, laden with ramshackle supplies: a few battery-operated lamps, several blankets and extra clothes, a can of mace, and several leather belts. He is dressed in heavy garments and wears frayed boots. His face is hidden by the mask of growth, his dark beard crawling down the sides of his face. His eyes are sunken behind wrinkled sockets, and yet they sparkle with a livelihood the man hasn't seen since Adrian and Rachel's wedding night. The traveler raises his hands in surrender. The man senses no threat and holsters the gun. He approaches the old man.

"Where are you headed?" he asks.

The traveler replies, "I'm headed west."

"So are we," the man says.

"How far west?"

"Pretty far. How about you?"

"A decent stretch."

The others file behind them, saying nothing.

The traveler looks over them. "Gracious God, they're young."

"Yes," the man says. "They are."

"You're all young," the traveler says. To the man: "How old are you?"

He tells him his age.

"When I was your age, I was going through my second divorce."

The man doesn't say anything.

The traveler bites his lip. "You're not going to rob me, are you?"

"No," the man says. "No, we just... We didn't expect you."

"Everyone's in a hurry these days. It's good to slow down."

"Where you from?" the man asks.

"Pennsylvania," the traveler says. "I've been on the road since November."

"How many miles you travel in a day?"

"However many I can," he says. "It don't bother me none. It's healthy."

The man glances back at the others, steps towards the traveler. He looks him in the eyes, whispers, "You seen anyone else come through here?"

"I've seen lots of people," the traveler replies. "There's lots heading west."

"Lots?"

"Just a few days ago I met a couple from Tennessee. Heading towards... Oh, shoot, where were they going..." He looks up into the sky, fingers twitching. His old mind seeks to recover what has been lost. "I'm not sure where they were going. I wish I was. Some big city someplace. Not Indianapolis. On past that. They've got some kind of... I don't know. Complex out there. They said it was the new Las Vegas. I've been to Las Vegas a few times. I don't know how Kansas City would compare to Las Vegas..."

"They were going to Kansas City?"

"Kansas City? Maybe. That or Saint Louis. Someplace west of here."

"All right. You seen anyone else?"

"No one I minded seeing."

"Raiders?"

"You mean the vagabonds?"

"I guess."

"Yeah, I've seen them. They came through here last night."

"You were out at night?"

"No. I'm never out at night. No one in their right mind is out at night."

"How'd you see them, then?"

"I was in this old grocery store. They had an upper story. I barricaded myself in there. Through the window I saw them drive past, shooting and hollering, carrying on like they always do."

The man muses, "I thought no one was out at night."

"No one in their right mind," the traveler says with a wry grin.

The man asks, "How many?"

"Hell if I know. I saw maybe three or four cars. Trucks."

"Well. There *were* five of them. One of them was..."

The traveler doesn't let him finish his sentence. "He got what he deserved."

"You could say that."

The traveler takes a deep breath, sighs. "I stay away from them if I can. I stay away from all people. An old man like me, I just slow people down. I like to take my time." He holds up his hand, palm outstretched towards the man. "Before you even invite me to join you, let me tell you, 'No', up front. I'd just slow you down. Be a burden."

"Don't worry," the man says. "I wasn't going to ask. We're full."

"But of course."

The man looks back towards the others, then to the traveler. "All right."

"All right," the traveler says. "You take care now."

"Okay," the man says. He turns to go, beckoning the others towards the car.

"Wait a minute," the traveler says.

The man turns around. "What?"

"Do you have any food? I'm fresh out."

"I thought you were at a grocery store last night."

"I was. But all the good stuff had already been taken."

"All we have are some canned fruits and vegetables."

"That will do nicely," the man says, sitting down on the road. "I'll wait here."

Katie takes some canned fruit and a can opener, returns over to the group. She hands the traveler the goods, and he cracks open a can of sliced plums. He pops them into his mouth, the juices curling around his cracked lips. He doesn't say much. The man keeps looking at the sun. It's nearly 11:00. He's never been to Indianapolis, doesn't know how big the city is. There could be lots of wrecks. Lots of detours. He wants to be out of there as soon as possible. He knows what happens in the big cities.

"Where are you all headed?" the traveler asks.

The man looks over at him. "I already told you. We're headed west."

"I know," he says. "But *where* west? You going to the Complex?"

"I hadn't even heard of it."

"Me neither. That couple. So lovely. Probably your age."

The man winces, imagining traveling with Kira. "We're going to Alaska."

"Alaska?" The man laughs. "That's a new one." His laughter fades. He eyes the man. "Alaska, you say?"

"Alaska."

"You know... That's not too bad of an idea. You ever been to Alaska before?"

"No. Never been."

"I have. I led a rally there one time. For the National Republic Convention."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Sir. Beautiful place. Miserable place."

"I've seen pictures."

"It's cold. It's foggy. It's rainy. No one likes to live up there."

"I know."

"Which is exactly why you're going there."

"It has one of the lowest state populations. Much of Alaska is wilderness."

"You are smarter than you look," the man says, popping a plum into his mouth.

The traveler has moved on to a can of peaches. "Want to know where I'm going?"

"Not particularly," the man replies matter-of-factly, irritated.

"Aspen."

"Aspen? You mean Colorado?"

"Yes, Sir. They have a little community up there. They've been doing pretty well, from what I hear. There were three survivors in the town. When they realized what had happened, they went house-to-house, killing everyone that hadn't survived the plague... Well, hadn't survived quite like they did, at least. Everyone, for the most part, survived. Except some of us have... remained as we were... before it happened. Aspen, I've never been, but I know it's in a mountain valley. There are only one or two roads that reach it. Right in the middle of the Rockies. They've completely sealed it off. The town's livable again. You show up, they give you a job inside the town, they provide you a place to stay, meals to eat, warmth. Friends. One time I considered retiring in Aspen. I guess maybe now my dream will be a reality." He laughs, jokes: "Hopefully they won't treat an old man like me too poorly!"

The man asks him, "How'd you find out about Aspen?"

"It was on the radio, last November."

"The radio?"

"Yes, Sir. An AM station. They had a radio broadcasting station in the town, and they were able to relay their messages outbound by bouncing them off satellites."

"I haven't picked up any radio stations on the car radio."

"They stopped broadcasting in February."

"Why?"

The traveler shrugs. "Who knows?" He finishes his can of peaches, thanks Katie. She offers him another, he waves it down: "Keep it for yourself, Sweetie." He looks back at the man. "The satellites were kept in orbit from stations around the planet. The people manning the stations weren't able to man them anymore. So the satellites spiraled out of control. Burned up in the atmosphere."

"You saw it?"

"No. But I know how these things work."

"Okay."

"I've always been thinking... Maybe they were attracting the wrong crowd."

"The wrong crowd?"

"Vagabonds. Your 'raiders'. They have fresh *meat* there."

"And you think raiders started fucking with them?"

The traveler smacks him. "Watch your language around the ladies, Young Man."

The man is forced to hold back his laugh. "My apologies."

"Maybe the vagabonds were... trying to mess things up." The traveler shrugs. "So they stopped broadcasting, to keep them away. I'm just theorizing, mind you."

"Let me theorize," the man says. "Maybe they weren't as safe as they thought they were."

"No one's as safe as they think they are. Not today. Not now. But these people in Aspen, they know what they're doing. They had everything orchestrated to a decimal point. Their brilliance, coupled with the geographic nature of the town, makes it impossible for them to be overrun."

"But like you said, no one's as safe—"

"I said no one's as safe as they think they are. Not that no one is safe."

The man doesn't say anything for a moment. "It sounds like a long stretch to me."

"I have faith in them. I hope that you're wrong. We all hope, don't we?"

"Yeah," the man says. "For better or for worse, we all hope."

The traveler thanks them for the food, wishes them farewell. Then he turns, grabs his grocery cart, and begins pushing west, walking slowly and with a limp, the wheels on the cart rattling. He doesn't even look back, just whistles between broken teeth. Katie watches him go. A tear speckles in her eye. Sarah takes her by the shoulder, and they head towards the car. The man and Mark take the rear. The man shakes his head, says, "He's a damned fool. There's no way that Aspen's still working... If it ever *was* working. He has the memory of a goldfish. He's just rambling. And he's pushing a fucking *grocery cart*. The fact that he's alive means that evolution's process of natural selection by weeding out the idiots is called into—" Mark grabs the man's shoulder, spins him around.

The grocery cart is abandoned in the roadway.

The traveler is nowhere to be seen.

The man furrows his brow. "Where the hell did he go?"

That's when they hear the gunshot.

III

The man yells at the women to stay back. He takes off down the road, feet pounding heavy upon the asphalt. Mark and Kyle are behind him, the women following in their path. The man reaches the grocery cart, one of the loose wheels still spinning. He turns and runs into the cornfield. Stalks whip out at him, their fibrous leaves and tendrils slapping at his face, burning and stinging. He guards his face with his hand. He ducks into the next corn-row. Mark and Kyle separate, one following up the middle and the other taking the next row. A moment later Mark shouts out. The man spins on his heels, tears through the row of corn, nearly knocks Kyle over. They find Mark, who is with the girls. He is standing above the old man's body. A clean bullet-hole is chiseled through the man's forehead, blood crawling down his face and soaking his beard. His eyes stare poignantly at the sky, and a crimson smile is etched over his face. The man sucks in several deep breaths. Kyle leans down next to the man. "Shot himself." The man nods. "Yeah. He did."

"What are you doing?" Katie asks. "You shouldn't do that."

The man has knelt down. He grabs the arm of the traveler and flips him onto his front. Blood gurgles onto the cold, hard earth. He pulls back the traveler's jacket, revealing his ragged jeans. He reaches inside, grabs his wallet.

"You're robbing him?" Sarah asks, whimsical.

"No," the man says, opening the wallet. "I'm finding out who he is."

Mark overshadows him. "What's his name?"

The man examines his driver's license. "Ralph Frankton."

"That name sounds familiar," Mark says.

The man goes through the wallet some more. Credit cards. Some pictures of an older woman. Probably his wife. "Look at this." He holds it up. An identification card. GEO OIL is stamped in the upper right-hand corner, and underneath the wizened old man's photograph—a much younger version, though with the same wrinkles and same lively eyes—it reads: C.E.O. "Look at this," he says again, handing it to Mark.

Mark eyes it in the sunlight. "I'll be damned."

Katie asks, "Who is he?"

The man replies, "A dead man lying cold and alone in a cornfield."

"Who was he *before*?" she clarifies, aggravated at the man's inconsiderateness.

Mark answers her: "He owned a company."

"Not just *any* company," the man says, dropping the wallet and standing. "A Fortune 500 company. Ever hear of GEO OIL?" Katie shakes her head. "Of course not. You don't strike me as the type who would watch the news very much. He started an oil company, one rivaling most of the big off-shore oil businesses. He got all his oil from the United States, or from Canada. He negotiated an oil drilling operation in the Yukon, just east of Alaska. A lot of rioters—you know, those vegan 'save-the-whales' and shit like that types—opposed him. Said he was siphoning the oil from Alaska. No one could prove anything. He became well-known in the public arena. He gave half of his income to charities. Promoted social reform and clean water and urged a cure for AIDS. Shit like that. Not that he was dirt-poor. He still had millions."

Katie stares at the corpse on the ground. "And this is what he looks like now."

"Yeah," the man says. "Pathetic, really. He should have died happy."

Sarah says, "He seems to have died happy. He's smiling."

"Then he's got something on all of us," the man says.

They make their way back to the vehicle. No one says much of anything. As they reach the road, Sarah mutters something under her breath: "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade in all his ways."

The man asks, "What's that you just said?"

"It's from the Bible."

"What's it mean?"

"It means that nothing lasts forever," she says, looking back into the cornfield, the stalks shuddering in a stillborn breeze. "Especially wealth."

"And sanity," the man muses. "He was a fucking lunatic."

Kyle shrugs. "He died with a smile on his face. Maybe *we're* the lunatics, trying to overcome what we know to be true: that running, hiding, fearing, surviving... That it can't be escaped. Maybe he realized it."

"He was delusional."

Kyle ponders, "Maybe *we're* the ones grasping at delusions."

The man doesn't say anything.

Chapter Thirty

The Children of the Corn

"The sun also shines on the wicked."
- Seneca (1st Century A.D.)

I

They make it through Indianapolis by early evening. The highways were clogged with wrecked cars, but they were able to weave their way through. They stopped the RAV4 at the highway exchange in Warren Park, right outside the city. The man examined the NORTH AMERICA map and charted their course towards Alaska. Interstate 65 North would be their route. He folded up the map and started the engine. They followed the exchanges and drove north of the city, the highway spanning railroad tracks and passing two parks filled with benches and gazebos and overgrown grass and gnarled trees. The road bent south, and downtown Indianapolis rose up through the windshield: several skyscrapers, many of the windows blown out; the streets filled with cars but empty of movement; Monument Square with its neoclassical, oolitic limestone statue: the Indiana Soldiers' & Sailors' Monument. The White River flowed west of the city. The man followed the signs to Interstate 65, driving north of the city. The road followed the White River north for a few miles, and then they knew nothing except suburbia: shopping malls, neighborhoods, average-Joe restaurants. Indianapolis was soon lost behind them, and suburbia followed suit. The highway stretched north, and now they are driving once more between endless fields of corn and ground-hovering beans. They are nearing a small town. Munroe, Indiana. They pass over a set of railroad tracks. A small lake to the left of the highway. Several buildings come into view. Old-fashioned, squat and brick-walled. They pass a sign that reads: MONROE, POPULATION 356. The 356 has been scratched out and painted over: POPULATION 0.

Katie's shout nearly freezes the man's blood: "Stop!"

The man hits the brakes. They are right next to the on and off ramps for Monroe.

Katie is pressing against the glass, her nose flattened.

"Roll down the window," the man mutters, "and it will be easier."

She obeys.

"Why did we stop?" Mark asks, craning his neck from the front passenger's seat.

"Good question," the man mumbles under his breath.

Katie says, "I'm sorry, I thought I saw something..."

The man is suddenly attentive. He looks back at her. "What did you see?"

Sarah looks at him, mouths, *Raiders*. The man just shakes his head.

Katie says, "I don't know. Movement."

"Probably just a dog," Kyle says.

"Yeah. Probably."

The man taps his fingers on the steering wheel. Half of him wants to forward, leave whatever she saw behind. But the other part of him wants to check it out. If she happened to see raiders, then

the raiders would probably continue on their route, and suddenly *they* would be the ones snuck up upon. The man doesn't relish that thought. If it *is* raiders, and logic tells him that it probably isn't, then they probably won't be expecting anyone too soon. Or at all. And the man has the M16 wrapped underneath his seat. "Which way was whatever you saw?" he asks.

She points to the east. "Down that street. See those buildings?"

"Yeah."

"I saw something move between one of the buildings."

"All right," the man says.

He pulls the RAV4 up the off ramp and turns it around so that it faces back towards the highway. He opens his door and gets out. Mark asks if he wants him to come along with him. The man says, "Yes," tells the others to stay with the car. If anything happens, they need to leave and not come back. The man takes the BERETTA, hands one to Mark. Mark checks the chamber, makes sure it's clear, loads a 9mm magazine. The man offers a whimsical smile to Sarah, and they trot down the road, moving slowly. The road dips down into a recession and is lined by old brick buildings on either side, buildings with flat faces and gaping windows, loose tiles on the shingled roofs, dead vines crawling up the sides. There are several trucks parked along the road. The man approaches them, puts his hand upon the front hood of the first. *Cold*. If they'd been used, the engines would be warm. Relief floods through him. "Let's check these alleys one-by-one," the man says. "I'll take the right side of the road. You take the left." He looks back at the RAV4, a quarter mile away. He can see their heads sitting still. He flicks off the safety on the BERETTA and moves forward.

The man is standing in the alley staring at the skeleton of a dog next to an overturned trash can when he hears Mark shouting for him. He runs back across the street and finds Mark standing in front of a house, pistol held down at his side.

"What?" the man asks.

"They're in there," Mark says, pointing at the house.

"All right. Who?"

"Two little boys. Maybe four and six. They saw me and ran inside."

"You're carrying a gun. You probably scared the shit out of them."

"I guess. What do we do?"

"How long has it been since August?"

"What is it now? The middle of April? Last week of May?"

"I don't know. Something like that." He repeats his question: "How long?"

He does the math in his head. "Almost nine months. Maybe nine months altogether."

"Okay," the man says. "They've survived nine months. I think they're okay."

Mark watches as the man turns and heads up the street, towards the RAV4, pistol lowered. The boy looks at the building, steps forward, grabs the door. He tries to open it. It's locked. He knocks a few times, looks back at the man. The man doesn't look back at him. Mark steps back and throws his foot into the feeble wooden door. It swings open. He steps into the darkness. The man is now watching, and he curses, trotting over to join him.

Mark moves inside the house. A thick layer of dust assaults his lungs, and he coughs. He calls out, telling the boys that it's okay, that they're not here to harm them, they just want to make sure they're okay. He doesn't get a response. The man enters the house as Mark walks to the steps leading to the second story. The man grabs Mark's arm, but Mark rips away, begins ascending the stairwell. The

man looks back at the open door, the sunlight, sits down on the step. He hears Mark moving around upstairs. Opening doors. Then there comes the sound of shouting, the squeal of little boys. He gets up off the step and Mark comes tumbling down the stairs. The man smiles, asks if they scared him away. Mark ignores him, runs right past, knocking the man into the railing. Mark disappears out the front door and turns left, running around the side of the house. The man follows. As he rounds the side of the brick building, he can see one child running into the corn. The other is sliding down the rainspout. The boy looks reaches the ground, turns, looks at them, eyes wide, face ashen, and he takes off into the corn. Mark runs after them, telling them to stop. The man runs after Mark, telling him to stop. The three figures disappear into the cornfield, leaving the man behind. The man curses and enters the cornfield, running between the rows of weathered stalks. He can hear Mark shouting, one of the boys screaming. The man stops, takes a breath, leans forward, hands on his knees. He looks up, shouts, "You're scaring the shit out of them, Mark! Leave them the fuck alone!" The shouts are dwindling. He considers going back to the RAV4, telling the others to drive the S.U.V. into the cornfield to find Mark. The field has to be fucking huge. But the man doesn't want to risk losing his friend, so he pushes forward.

He has half-run, half-trotted nearly a mile. His lungs are searing. His vision is foggy. His muscles are shrieking. He stumbles forward, falls, the BERETTA skittering across the hard ground. He grabs it and continues forward. The corn thins, and he can see Mark ahead of him, legs flashing back and forth, shoulder hidden by crisscrossing rows of corn. The man pushes through. The corn thins, opening up into a clearing. The man stops behind the corn, kneels down, sees an old farmhouse, a silo off to the right, a large oak tree with its knotted branches obscuring the far side of the two-story building. The farmhouse is dilapidated, falling-apart. He estimates that it was built maybe in the late 1800s or early 1900s. He sees the two boys run inside the house. Mark is following after them. The man sees movement in the upper windows, and suddenly he realizes what has happened. "Shit." He leaps up, runs forward, shouting after Mark. Mark is at the front door; the door bursts open, slamming him in the face; the boy drops the gun and collapses against the building, sliding to the wooden front porch, blood seeping from his nose. Two figures emerge from the doorway, men carrying automatic weapons. The upper-story windows shatter, and men push guns out through the gaps. The world is suddenly filled with the crackling of gunfire; the man turns, slips, falls to the ground. Bullets whip past, screaming; the ground bursts with bullet strikes, dirt and grass spraying into the air. The man stumbles forward, reenters the field. Bullets tear at the corn-stalks, and the severed limbs fall among him. He keeps his head low, running diagonally. Searing pain rips through his leg, and he falls. He rolls onto his back, grabs his leg, can feel blood pushing through a rip in the jeans. "Shit." The shooting has stopped, and now there is shouting from the men, and he doesn't even look back as he pushes away from the farmhouse, half-crawling and half-walking, limping the entire way. A trail of blood weaves between the rows of corn, etching out his path.

II

Mark's world slows, and he feels himself grabbed by his arms and dragged across the porch. The sound of gunfire dies, and he blinks his eyes, dazed. His ears ring and his nose screams. He can taste blood in his mouth. His head rolls about on his shoulders, and he can see the silhouettes of two men on either side of him, gripping his arms in a vice-like embrace. He is brought into the farmhouse, and

the wooden walls on either side swirl past. The hallway opens up into a kitchen, and he feels his strength evaporate as he is slammed down into a chair at the dining room table. He reaches up and feels his nose, the warm blood. A man comes in from the porch, sets Mark's BERETTA on the kitchen counter; it had fallen into the weeds beside the porch when he took the hit to the face.

Everything is coming back to him, the fog lifting. He can see two figures standing by the refrigerator: the two little boys. They stare at him and smile. Mark leans down, coughs; bile dribbles from his mouth. The two boys are hidden behind the shadow of a larger man, who kneels down and looks at the boy. The boy looks up at him, doesn't say anything. The man smiles, stands, turns and faces the children. He says something, but his words are lost in Mark's haze. The man goes over to the counter, opens a drawer, draws out a hand-towel. He tosses it to Mark; it lands in his lap, slides down his pant-leg, onto the tiled floor.

"Clean yourself up," the man says. His voice is deep and rusty.

Mark kneels down, grabs the towel with weak and shaking fingers, brings it up to his nose, begins to dab the blood. The towel turns crimson and becomes damp. The memories of what has happened begin to return to Mark's mind, and he remembers the door flying open, remembers falling to the ground, seeing the man running into the cornfield, guns chattering. Shattered glass falling into the overgrown grass.

The large man returns, hovers over Mark, arms on either side of him, fingers gripping the table. "We're searching for your friend right now," he says; "He's probably lying dead in the corn. We're going to bring him in here and let you look him in the eyes. The boys here tell me that he was chasing you, telling you to turn around. Should've listened to him, I think. Don't you?" He grins, yellow and broken teeth. "Maybe you can apologize to him." There comes a shout at the front of the house; the man retracts from the boy and goes to greet the newcomers.

Mark looks at the children. Their hands are clenched before them, and they are rocking back and forth on their heels, chuckling and whispering to one another.

The man returns, grabs Mark by the hair, wrenches his head back. He spits in Mark's face as he talks: "Where the *fuck* did he go?"

Mark can still taste blood on his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your friend? Where the fuck did he go?"

The boy doesn't answer.

The man yanks his hair harder, and Mark whimpers in pain.

"You're going to fucking tell me where he went."

"Go to hell," Mark coughs.

"You tell me where he went."

Mark tries to hold back tears from the pain, snaps, "Didn't you hear me?"

The man releases his hair; Mark slides down in the chair. His scalp still burns.

The man faces the boys. "Get out of here. Bring Banks."

They disappear. A moment later, a scrawny man with spectacles appears.

The man walks over to the counter, opens a drawer. "Make him talk."

Banks nods, walks over to the counter, reaches into the drawer.

The man returns to the table, grabs a chair, sits down beside Mark.

"I'm not going to tell you a fucking thing," Mark growls.

"We'll see about that," the man says.

Banks is holding a pair of lamb-scissors in his hands.

Mark stares at them, his eyes growing wide.

"We'll see," the man repeats, words dripping with excitement.

The man is limping up the street, blood coating his pants. The doors to the RAV4 burst open, and the three others run towards him. He yells at them to go back to the S.U.V., but they don't listen. They crowd around him. Sarah tells him that he's bleeding, and he just stares at her; "Yeah. I figured that out," he says. Katie asks where Mark is, but he doesn't answer. Sarah tells him that there's a doctor's office on the other side of the bridge, they probably have stitches and antiseptic. He agrees to go. Katie keeps badgering him about Mark; Kyle helps the man limp forward. The man ignores her, but she keeps pleading to know, and finally he stops, turns his head, and snaps, "He fell behind. What the fuck do you think happened if he's not with me?" She's quiet after that. They load into the RAV4 and drive across the bridge. There is a single-story building with a fading hinged sign in the front yard; it reads, DOCTOR REBUALLAR, FAMILY DOCTOR. They crawl out of the vehicle. Kyle grabs the shotgun and kicks open the door. There are no attacks. The building was no doubt locked and empty even before night fell. There is a small parlor with several chairs, and farther down the hallway is an office and an examination room. They carry the man into the examination room, and he sits down on top of the examination bed, the paper wrap coiling underneath his weight. He swings his leg up and sets it on the end of the bed. Kyle continues exploring the building. Katie stands in the corner. Sarah tells her to search for suturing equipment and antiseptic. She doesn't respond. Sarah raises her voice, commands her a second time. Katie quietly nods and begins searching through the plastic cupboards.

Kyle returns. Sarah has cut away the pant-leg around the wound. There is a ragged tear along his calf. "I don't think it hit an artery," she says. "The bullet just nicked you." She looks at him, confused. "Who the hell shot you? Mark?" The man shakes his head, *No*. Sarah unscrews the cap to the bottle of rubbing alcohol. She looks at the man. "This is going to hurt." He says he knows. She overturns the bottle, and the alcohol gushes into the man's wound. He reels his head back and screams, fists balling, leg quivering. He nearly kicks Sarah in the face. Katie comes forward with a packet of powder: morphine. Sarah rips open the packet and dumps it into the wound. The man takes a deep breath, numbness spreading through his leg. Sarah sees him settling down, takes the packet of thread and needles, begins to work. The man doesn't do anything, leaves her to the task. Katie sits down on a stool, watching. Kyle paces back and forth, the shotgun held in both hands. He asks what happened.

"It was a deception," the man says. "What Katie saw, those were two little boys. I told Mark to leave them alone, but he wouldn't. They ran from him. He chased after them. I told him that he was scaring them, just to leave them alone. They ran into one of the cornfields, right to this old farmhouse. They ran inside, and Mark followed. That's when I realized what was happening. The boys were a trap, leading us right to the raiders. They took Mark. Tried to kill me." He points to his leg. "Obviously, they were awfully close to doing it."

Katie asks, "So the boys... They were like bait?"

"Yeah," the man says.

Her face is ghostly white. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Sarah stops sewing, looks over at her. "It's not your fault."

"If I wouldn't have said anything..."

"Katie," Sarah repeats. "It's *not your fault*."

The man murmurs under his breath, "Like hell it isn't."

Sarah glares at him.

Katie hangs her head low, staring at the floor.

"So what do we do?" Kyle asks. "Do you think they'll send anyone after you?"

"I don't know," the man says. "Just... sit here for a moment."

Kyle says, "Did they kill him?"

There is silence. Everyone holds their breath.

The man says, "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't remember much. All I know is that they were shooting at me."

Katie says, "We should go to the next town. It's not safe here."

The man glares at her. "We should leave *you* here. You're the one who got us into this fucking mess."

Sarah punches him in the wound.

He lets out a shuddering gasp, the morphine hardly masking the pain.

She stares at him.

He looks away, refusing to meet her eyes.

The man finally speaks: "I'm going to get him."

Sarah stops suturing.

Kyle stops pacing.

Katie looks up.

Kyle breaks the silence: "No. You can't."

"I'm going."

"You're hurt."

"I'm all right."

"You were shot in the leg."

"I was grazed in the leg. Not shot."

"You know as well as I do that there's no way you can outfight them. You don't know how many of them there are. Sunset will be here in an hour. There's no way you can do anything."

"I'm going back for him."

Katie says, "You were ready to abandon us back in Cincinnati, and now you're willing to risk your life for us?"

The man meets her eyes. "I wouldn't go back for you. But I'll go back for Mark."

Mark doesn't break: even when they tear at his flesh with scissors, even when his skin is tinged red with his own blood, he doesn't break. They shove needles underneath his fingernails. He screams and howls, but he doesn't break. Banks shakes his head. He knows Mark won't talk. The large man curses, begins punching Mark in the face. Mark's jaw sears with pain, and his vision is soon blurred by the blood inching down his face, weaving along the bridge of his nose. The man then starts cooking. Real meat. The scent of it tears through Mark, even through a broken nose, and his will begins to break. The large man sets the plate of juicy meat in front of him, on the table; Mark doesn't recognize the cut, but he doesn't care. He salivates at the mouth, and in a magnificent feat of will-power, he spits the salivation in the man's face. The man recoils, grabs Mark by the throat, lifts him up out of the chair. Mark grabs at the man's rough hands; his eyes bulge and his mouth twitches, and his world begins to grow dark, his face turning muddy purple. The man releases Mark, and the boy crumples onto the tile floor, lying in a fetal position, sucking in deep breaths. The man grabs him by the arm and drags him into the next room. He opens a door and kneels down; with a free hand, he grabs a latch on the floor and lifts up the cellar door. Mark looks down into the murky darkness, and then he can feel himself falling. His limbs crash against the wooden stairwell, and then he lands on his side, a cloud of dust wrapping around him, dirt sticking to his blood-slick face.

The man is adamant: he is going back for Mark. Everyone protests, but when Kyle realizes that the man won't back down, he says he'll go with him. Sarah finishes suturing the man's leg, and although she tells him that he needs to take it easy, that the stitches may come out, he doesn't listen. He hobbles out to the RAV4, Kyle alongside. Sarah and Katie stand in the doorway, watching, feeling as if this is a funeral procession. Both are convinced that by nightfall, they will be the only ones remaining. Cameron and Anthony have gone, and now they both believe that Kyle, Mark, and the man will never return. But they are quiet, knowing they can't stop the oncoming nightmare. The man opens the front door of the vehicle and reaches underneath the seat, grabs the wrapped assault rifle. He unwraps it, checks down the sight. Kyle asks where he got it; the man doesn't answer. There is only one pistol remaining; the man slides it in the hem of his pants. He takes his KA-BAR and slices open the sleeve of his shirt; he grips the handle and twists the blade inwards, along his arm, and the cloth folds back around it. Kyle takes the WINCHESTER hunting rifle from the back of the vehicle. They look back at the women. The man says, "Make sure to find someplace safe when night comes. We might not come back." He says nothing more, and the two of them begin walking towards the bridge spanning Interstate 65.

They reach the crest of the bridge, and the man grabs Kyle's shoulder. He freezes. They duck down. The man points: down the road on the eastern side of the highway, among the buildings, are three men with assault rifles. They are following the droplets of the man's dried blood that lead right to where the RAV4 had been parked an hour before. The man gives Kyle the M16, takes the WINCHESTER. He lifts it up to his shoulder and squints down the sight. His leg throbs. The three raiders stand where the RAV4 had been, where the man's blood disappears, and they stare dumbly at the ground. The man drops the sight over one of the men, and he pulls the trigger. The gunshot roars, and the man's head twists around, the side of his face bursting in a blooming display of blood. The M16 slides from his fingers, and he falls. The other two stare at him, shocked, and then there comes another gunshot: one of them falls backwards, face suddenly gone, and his friend is covered with the other man's blood. The third raider turns and begins running up the road. The man fingers the trigger. *Click.* He slowly lowers the gun, reloads. Kyle grips the assault rifle, legs burning, yearning to move forward. He stands to chase. The man says, "Get back down." He finishes reloading the WINCHESTER, raises the rifle. The third man is distant, running towards one of the houses. The man aims, yanks on the trigger. The gun bucks. The figure doesn't stop moving, disappears around the house. "Shit," the man growls, standing. He winces, his leg enflamed with pain.

Mark lifts his head, a crackling pain resonating up and down his spine. He flexes his toes and his fingers. The spine isn't broken. He opens his eyes, but the dust burns. He rolls onto his side, shuffles his feet, pulls himself up, sits on the ground. He leans against a wooden beam jutting down from the ceiling and rubs his eyes. He blinks away the dust and squints into the darkness. The dust is settling, and he begins to see images emerging in the shadows. Figures standing, scrawny, emaciated, not moving, just watching him. Barely dressed. His heart flutters. *Dark-walkers.* One of them moves forward. The figure is illuminated by a shaft of light coming through a crack in the ceiling above. It is an elderly woman, wrinkles drenched over her face, baggy clothes drooping from her gnarled bones. She approaches Mark and kneels down. She looks at him with compassion in her eyes. Several more of the prisoners come forward, in the same condition: malnourished, empty eyes, hearts void of hope. The elderly woman reaches out, takes Mark's hand.

"I'm fine," he says, and gritting his teeth, he stands. He's weak.

The woman's face is masked with sorrow. "I'm so sorry."

He doesn't answer, looks at them all.

There is a cot in the corner, and a man lies upon it. His legs are missing, leaving nothing but stumps wrapped in bloody rags. He doesn't move, but his fingers twitch, and his lungs slowly inflate and exhale.

She asks, a tear in her eye, "Did you eat anything they gave you?"

Mark understands, shakes his head. "No."

The man tries to forget the escalating pain in his leg. They move down the opposite side of the bridge, past the two bodies lying on the pavement. Pools of blood are collecting underneath their heads, and their lifeless eyes stare at the steadily-darkening sky. Kyle looks over his shoulder, out to the west. Storm-clouds are moving in, tumbling over one another, and the sun barely pokes through the chaotic, atmospheric cesspool. *It'll be an early sunset.* He finds an odd peace about everything. For once he feels as if he is doing something right, albeit insane. They round the house where the man apparently missed the shot, and they discover the third raider crumpled in the blood-stained grass. The man kneels down, grabs him by the sleeve of his jacket, turns him over. The character looks up at them with pain-stricken eyes. His throat is ripped out, nothing but tattered flesh and shattered sinews. His head is barely attached to his body. The man looks towards the corn, back down to the body. He sets the gun to the side and begins to strip the corpse.

III

The captives surround him. Their skin clings to their bones, and their clothes are nothing more than rags. All beauty and radiance that at one time had emanated from them has all but disappeared. They are nothing but cattle being led to the slaughter, rodents in a laboratory, nothing but flowers long wilted and simply waiting to be blown away by the nostalgic breeze. The elderly woman guides Mark to an old chair in the corner. There are shelves along the walls, filled with empty canning jars for grapes and jellies and vegetables. The woman tells him, "They keep us locked down in here. They beat us. They torture us. They do... unimaginable... things to us. At one time we cared. But we've grown to accept it. This has become our fate. We are prisoners here, and there is no way to escape. We let them do what they want. We no longer protest." She points to the man on the cot; he is sleeping: "He was here long before us. They cut off his legs, and they've been cooking his meat for dinner. They'll come back in a day or two. Take his arms. And then they'll take the rest of him." She begins to tear up. "That man... He served in Vietnam. He was a family man. He lost his wife and two daughters with the sickness. He was just trying to find a place to belong, just trying to survive, and this is what they did to him. These men, they are animals. Brutes. Beasts. They are worse than the night-stalkers themselves. To them, we are nothing but pieces of meat. They do to us what they will. And when we die, or even before we die, they will eat us, too. Just like they're eating that man." She shakes her head. "I used to think God would come and deliver us. I used to go to church. I used to sing in the choir. I used to read my Bible every night and pray before every meal. But this changed everything. The Bible tells us that mankind is made in the image of God. But I have seen what these people do, and if that is the image of God... Then God is not deserving of my worship. He is not even deserving of existence. He isn't going to help us. Our only hope is to die."

The elderly woman leaves him. He sits alone in the chair. Some time passes; Mark doesn't keep count. He can feel the blood drying on his skin, his wounds scabbing up. Each breath hurts his lungs, and his head is wracked in pain. Someone comes up to him. An older man. Probably the man's age. He looks somewhat healthy. The man sits down on the floor next to Mark, and he tells him, "I'm from Pittsburgh. There was a little haven there. A prison that had been cleaned out. It was pretty safe. We heard on the radio about what was going on in Aspen. We were stuck in a prison—a fucking *prison*—and then there was Aspen. Far away... But not too far. There's a town there. It's fortified. You can walk the streets at night. You can make friends. Start families. Begin a new life. Thirteen of us renovated a GREYHOUND BUS. We put bars on the windows, locks on the doors. We made it impregnable. And we headed west. We didn't have any problems. Even at night, we stayed in the bus, and none of them got inside. The bus broke down just south of Indianapolis. We'd gone through Kentucky and up into Indiana. We were working on the engine when they came. They acted as if they cared. As if they were normal, compassionate people. And then they proceeded to shoot. They killed several of us. The rest of us... They bound us with rope and put us in the back of their trucks. Some of us tried to escape. We were able to get out of the truck. They rounded us up, of course. And then they punished us—by punishing everyone who *didn't* try to escape. They took them behind a gas station, and they just... Shot them all. Execution style. They were screaming and crying. They shot every one of them. Now we're here. They're starving us. And we know what they're going to do. They're going to eat every one of us."

Mark asks about Aspen, how the radio signal had gone dead. The man tells him, "They announced that they were going off the air. Said that they'd attracted some rogues, that the rogues had tried to get in, shot up a bunch of people. They killed the rogues, of course. And they said that the radio signal was deteriorating, because the satellites in space were going out-of-sync. So they went off the air. I have no doubt they're there. But what does it matter? We're never going to get there. Hope is a sick son of a bitch, full of empty promises."

The man asks how Mark had been captured, and Mark tells him about the boys. The man nods, silent. Then he says, "They've done that to lots of people. These men, they're just... Words can't describe how awful they are. They prey upon peoples' compassion. Humans, we are compassionate creatures. We care about others. We're altruistic. I was a social worker, I've seen lots of shit. Lots of brutality, lots of cruelty, abuse of all kinds. But I've seen so much care, so much benevolence, so much self-sacrifice at the same time. There are people in this world—good people—who would break their own back and lie paralyzed in a hospital bed for the rest of their lives just to grant someone his or her dreams. I remember one time, I saw on the news, there was a car burning on the side of the highway. A random driver got out and ran up to the car. There was a little girl stuck in her seat-belt, and the mom had passed out in the grass. There were people standing there, just staring. This random driver, he got down and crawled inside, through the shattered window, and helped the little girl out, knowing the risks. He got her out, and then the gasoline caught fire. He put the little girl underneath him and hovered over her; his back was torn apart by the blast, and he died in the hospital. Why would someone do such a thing? He didn't know the girl. He had a good life. But he was a *good* person. He put others before himself." He points upstairs, to the sound of muffled laughter. "These men are the total opposite. They prey upon those who are altruistic. They prey upon those who care."

"I heard someone say that this sickness has brought out the worst in people," the man says. "I don't agree. It's simply shown people for who they really are. There are people who have sacrificed

themselves so that others will survive. They were good people before the sickness, and their goodness was just exemplified when it mattered most. Then there were people before the sickness who cared only about themselves, who treated other people like toys, people who would backstab someone for their own gain. This sickness has just exemplified who they really are. And it's a sad reality, but in this world we live in, this new... 'Dark Age'... it is the selfish, the cruel, the barbaric who survive the longest." Mark doesn't say anything, only hopes that they'll get what they deserve: an equally cruel and barbaric death.

IV

The two men move slowly through the corn. Their feet are wrapped in shadows, the sun barely penetrating the tips of the stalks. The man quietly directs Kyle, and Kyle moves in the opposite direction, staying low. He moves up along one of the rows and crouches down. He is looking out into the clearing with the overgrown grass weaving back and forth in the wind. He lies down on his stomach and pulls the M16 around, facing it outwards. The WINCHESTER is at his side. He is silent as the man moves forward from the other side of the clearing. Kyle watches as the man nears the house. He is wearing the corpse's jacket and coon-skin cap. He is holding the dead raider's M16, moving slowly, at a casual pace. The guard at the entrance stomps out his cigarette, grabs his own assault rifle. He approaches the man, asks where the others are. The man turns and looks into the corn, pointing. The guard stops behind the man, and then he realizes his mistake. Before he can raise his gun in defense, the man wrenches around, slamming the butt of the rifle into the guard's face. The guard lets out a grunt and falls, his vision obscured with blood, the artery in his forehead rupturing. He scrapes at his eyes and opens his mouth to shout, but the man drops the M16 in the grass and drops on top of the man, crushing his lungs with his knee. The man looks towards the closed door and, flipping the knife out from the slit in his jacket, draws the blade over the guard's throat with a vicious slash. A spray of blood greets the man, and he grabs the M16 and stands, moves towards the doorway. Kyle flips off the safety on his own assault rifle and waits.

The man steps up onto the porch. In the dying light he can see some of Mark's blood on the rickety wooden boards. He presses his ear against the heavy cedar door, can hear laughter inside. The strumming of a guitar. His fingers are tense, and a cold sweat pops over his brow. He looks towards the corn, cannot see Kyle amidst the perpendicular rows of stalks. He steps away from the door, takes a breath, raises his foot to kick in the door. That's when he hears one of the men inside: "I'm going for a fucking smoke, can anyone bum a damned light?" The man hears muffled conversation, and then footsteps coming towards the door. He ducks to the right side of the door, and he waits.

Kyle draws the M16's sight over all the windows. There is no movement. He is well aware of the setting sun, and nervousness consumes his bones. He looks off to the side of the house, and in the back there are several trucks with 4x4 tires parked in the grass. There is a gravel drive leading north to the next road; a chicken walks past, clucking and pecking at the ground. It looks at Kyle, then continues on its way, ruffling its feathers. Kyle bites his lip and squints down the sight, watching the man at the doorway.

The front door opens, and a figure emerges. There is a cigarette in his mouth, and right as he ignites the cheap gas station lighter, the man attacks him with his knife. The man lets out a scream as the man grabs him, but his scream becomes a gurgling brook as blood fills his lungs. The knife is bloody once more, and the body falls to the ground, going into spasms, the legs kicking and squirming, making a racket. The man hears the others running towards the entrance. He sheathes the knife and yanks up his gun, hops in front of the door, trigger depressed. The flashes from the barrel stun the assailants, and bullets scatter and pepper the walls. The roar is deafening. Bodies collapse in the hallway. The man rushes forward. A figure comes from the side, slamming into him; he is knocked onto the ground, the M16 skittering across the wooden floor, coming to rest against the legs of a cushioned chair. A large man with hairy fists and a wicked scowl jumps on top of him, delivering stunning blows into the man's face. Blood pours down the man's face, and he reaches up with his hands, grabs the assailant's head. The assailant mutters and growls under his breath, and the man applies sixty pounds of pressure and twists; suddenly the overweight raider on top of him goes limp, his neck snapped, and he falls heavily on top of him. Raiders in the corridor start shooting their assault rifles, but their bullets splash harmlessly into the corpse. The man huddles underneath the body, sweat mingling with his blood, and he doesn't know how he's gotten there, everything has happened so quickly, and he doesn't know what to do. He's fucking pinned.

Kyle can see the flashes from the gunfight through the windows. A stray bullet hits a window, and it shatters. Something in his peripheral vision registers, and he swings the sights of the M16 over to the side of the building. Several men with guns are running towards the entrance. Kyle doesn't think, feels nothing but recoil: the M16 sings, and the bullets tear into the group. It only takes a second or two, and their bodies are lying in the grass, and the wall is stained with their blood slowly dripping into the weeds, puddling up among the dead vines scaling the wall in a leafy embrace.

The man can hear them reloading. He groans and shoves the bullet-riddled body off of himself. He reaches across the floor, grabs the M16. The raiders shout, raising their weapons; he rolls onto his side and opens fire. The bullets spray into them, and their bodies stumble backwards, weapons falling from their hands; their bodies open up into wells of blood, and they collapse against the wall. A framed picture creaks, snaps, and falls, shattering at their twitching feet. The man slowly gets to his feet, wipes blood from beneath his brow. His lungs are searing. His heart is sprinting. He raises the M16 and slowly moves into the hall. He steps over the dead bodies, enters the kitchen. The guitar is speckled with bullet-holes, and the strings are tattered and recoiled. The two boys are standing in the corner, their entire bodies shaking in fear. He ignores them. He peers out the back window, sees the trucks driving down the gravel drive, high-tailing it north. He hears shouting and finds the cellar. He kneels down, grips the handle, opens it up. The dim evening light coming through the back window reflects in several pairs of eyes. He lets them out, helping them up the ladder, tells them that they need to move fast. Most are too weak to move, having lost limbs and being undernourished. Mark greets the man, but he doesn't say anything. The man pulls his pistol out of his belt and gives it to him, is shocked at the scars and bruises over the boy's body. Those within the cellar know they cannot escape before nightfall, they won't be able to run through the fields. They ask to stay behind, to come out when morning comes. The man hands them his M16. "We'll come back in the morning. I promise." He looks over at Mark, whose eyes are wide, shocked at the man's apparent compassion. The man now has no weapon. He moves into the corridor as they shut the cellar door. He wrangles an M16 out of one of the guard's hands. Mark is now behind him. "It's almost night-fall," he says.

"They'll be coming—" His words are cut short. They can hear the wails of the dark-walkers growing louder in the distance. "Never-mind. It's a moot point."

V

Mark and the man rush out of the house. Kyle leaps up and joins them, emerging from the cornfield. In one hand he carries the M16 and in the other the WINCHESTER. The sun is nearly set, and the cries of the dark-walkers waft over the tips of the corn, carrying amidst the rows, reaching out into the darkest regions of the human heart. The rows of corn flash by on either side, and the darkness consumes them. Then there comes blinding light, the roar of engines; they look behind them and see three pairs of headlights swirling around them. Three of the raiders have turned their 4x4s around and are sweeping after them, creating great swathes through the field. There comes the ringing of gunfire, and the bullets whiz past them. The man's leg burns with radical pain, and he reaches out, grabs Mark by the hand; the boy is faltering, his worn and weary body threatening to give out. The man shouts at him, ducks his head low. A bullet grazes his ear, drawing blood. Someone emerges in front of them, and the man realizes it is a dark-walker; he raises the M16 and squeezes the trigger, the bullets firing wildly; the dark-walker is hit in the chest and drops. The man nearly trips over it.

They reach a ditch and leap over it. Behind them, one of the 4x4s hits the ditch; the front end of the truck slams into the earth, and the wheels suddenly stare at the sky, and the truck flips onto its back, the headlights shattering. The wheels continue to spin as dark-walkers attack the vehicle, tearing into the shattered windows, grabbing the unconscious riders. One of the other 4x4s ramps the ditch, lands safely, a dark-walker's head turning into brainy mush against the grill. The man looks back and sees the dark-walkers pulling a body out of the overturned vehicle, and he can hear screams as he continues running through the corn, screams that spread through the night, an eerie orchestra.

A light rain begins to fall. They reach the end of the cornfield, emerge in the backyard of a house. There is a swing-set, the swings with the rusted chains creaking in the strong breeze of the arriving storms. Lightning dances and thunder crackles. The three figures run towards the side of the building as one of the 4x4s crashes through the corn; the windshield is streaked with rain, and in the glare of the lightning, the driver doesn't even see the building. The 4x4 slams into the swing-set, the metal poles twisting upon impact; one of the poles snaps, swings around, shoots through the windshield; the driver lets out a scream as he is impaled. His head falls forward, resting against the pole, and his foot presses the gas pedal to the floor. The passenger at his side tries to open his door to jump out, but the truck smashes right into the house; the impact sends it fish-tailing, and the aged concrete wall breaks apart; the truck flips and rolls inside. The house's foundation is shattered, and the top floor falls upon the 4x4 in a shower of dust and debris.

They are running towards the bridge over Interstate 65. Mark is going in and out of consciousness, the world slowing; the pistol is left somewhere behind, having slipped from numb fingers. The man has to keep from screaming at the pain in his leg. Kyle trots beside them, slowing his pace to keep with them. The third 4x4 turns onto the street, emerging from the cornfield and driving between two houses. Its headlights sparkle against the falling rain, which grows more intense. The thunder blares in their ears. The three figures are upon the bridge, and they can look out over the railing and see

shapes and shadows moving in the corn, several dozen, heading right for the road. Kyle shouts for them to hurry up, turns just as the 4x4 is upon them. There comes a flash of light from the vehicle, and Kyle lets out a shout, falls, both guns hitting the ground with him. The truck roars past, more gunfire: the bullets disappear harmlessly into empty space. Another gunshot, a single blast, carries through the air, and the truck dive-bombs into a telephone pole; the front end wraps around the pole, and the side door splits open. A man tumbles out, landing hard on the pavement that is slick with rain. The man drops his M16, grabs Kyle, lifts him into his arms; he takes Mark by the hand, and they make their way towards the doctor's office. There are several flash-light beams waving back and forth in one of the windows, and Sarah stands on the front porch, holding an M16. Mark hobbles towards her. The man shifts Kyle's weight, reaches down, grabs the fallen raider by the hand; he drags the raider, who is in a daze with broken ankles, and he carries Kyle towards the office. Dark-walkers pour from the cornfield, and Sarah shouts at him. She raises the M16 and starts firing. The dark-walkers fall in the road. Mark reaches the building and enters; the man, Kyle, and the raider are right behind him. Sarah yells at him, tells him to drop the raider, but he doesn't listen: the trio enters. She fires several more shots, downing the sick humans, and then she steps inside and shuts the door, throwing back the lock.

Katie comes down the hallway. Mark is leaning against the wall, slides to the floor, tries to catch his breath. Sarah sets the M16 on the floor and takes Kyle. "He's shot," the man says, struggling for breath. "I don't... I don't know where... But he was shot, and he just went... He just went down. Like a stack of cards." She nods and takes him to the clinical room, telling Katie to join her. The man turns and faces the raider, who is lying on the ground, groping at swollen ankles. The raider looks up at the man, begins to thank him; the man doesn't let him finish as he takes Sarah's M16 and drives it into the man's face. The raider collapses onto his side, blood dribbling from his mouth.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Crimson Dawn

"He who seeks vengeance must dig two graves: one for his enemy and one for himself."

- A Chinese Proverb

I

The raider awakes. He lifts his hands and feels his forehead, the dried blood, splitting pain in the back of his head. His mouth shifts, and he leans forward, spits a tooth onto the floor. The room is dark, lit only by a few scarce candles. He is sitting in a cushioned chair, and along the walls are shelves filled with books on medicine. There is a desk with several overturned pictures, and behind the desk sits a figure, unmoving. The raider's eyes adjust to the gloominess, and he remembers the person sitting behind the desk: the man is sitting in the desk-chair, and across his lap is a shotgun. The raider asks for water; the man doesn't move.

The raider says, "Why'd you... Why'd you save me?"

The man answers: "I saved you so that I can do to you what you did to my friend."

"I didn't do anything..."

"You shot him as you drove past."

The raider looks at the man. "So you're going to shoot me, then? You saved me just so you could kill me?"

The man shrugs. "Not necessarily. You see, you shot my friend Kyle. He is in the room across the hall. He's been bleeding pretty badly. Two of my other friends and trying to get the bullet out, trying to get him calmed down, trying to stitch up his wounds. You haven't killed Kyle. Not yet. If he doesn't die, then you don't die."

The raider stares at the man. "And if he does die?"

The man's fingers rap against the shotgun barrel. "Then *you* die."

The raider doesn't say anything for several minutes, just stares at the flickering candles.

"You scared?" the man finally asks.

The raider shakes his head, *No*.

"That's strange," the man says, "seeing as I'm hastening your arrival at Judgment Day."

The raider looks at him. "Judgment Day? You believe that shit?"

"I want to believe it," the man says. "It'll make squeezing the trigger on this gun all the more enjoyable."

"There's no Judgment Day. You want to know why? Because there's no God to judge us. And you know why else? Because there's no such thing as 'Right' or 'Wrong.' You can't be judged if there's no standard for being judged. You. Me. Your friend Kyle. We're nothing but matter, flesh and blood. Our matter is eternal—it had no beginning, no end, and it has no personality. It's just *matter*. There's nothing spiritual about us. We're just like the animals that roam this planet. We may be complex machines, but in the end, our only purpose is to return to dust. When I die, when you kill

me, I'll cease to exist. 'Who I Am'—my personality, my aspirations, my fears—is controlled not by some unseen, unphysical, immaterial 'soul': it is nothing but the chemicals and neurons in my brain working together to create a functioning organism. When you kill me, my body will fall apart. The chemicals will stop interacting. The neurons will stop firing. I'll be no more, and I'll return to the earth. Does that frighten me? Why should nonexistence frighten me? And I'll tell you this: because we are nothing but organisms, because there is no supernatural realm to all of this, then there are no true Rights and Wrongs. What we interpret as values is simply what society has taught is."

"You think that since society has fallen apart, you can live however you want."

"Society was a prison. It tried to tame the animals that we are. There's no society now. No law enforcement. Only organisms. And we're nothing but animals. You may criticize me for going against your own values, but what's the point in having values when there's no ultimate Right or Wrong in the first place? I have done nothing wrong. I have tortured. I have raped. I have killed. And I've done nothing wrong. And I don't regret it."

"You know what I was before all this happened?" the raider asks.

The man shakes his head. "No. And I don't care."

"I was a professor of philosophy. From Indianapolis. I was a student of literature. Frederick Nietzsche. You're familiar with him?"

"I've heard his name."

"He was the one who came up with what is known today... or *was* known... as Nihilism. In his youth he wanted to be a member of the church, and he went to school for theology. He read an essay called *Fate and History*, and he called into question the historical validity of Jesus' teachings. He turned his own attention outside theology and to philosophy. He wrote a book, called Daybreak, in which he began his 'Campaign Against Morality.' He called himself an immoralist and criticized the overbearing moral themes of Christianity, Kantianism, and Utilitarianism. He didn't want to destroy morality. He actually wanted to initiate a reevaluation of the moralities presented in the Judeo-Christian worldview. He taught that morality was the result of what he called 'Master-Slave Morality.' In traditional moral systems, values arise out of a contrast from 'Good' and 'Bad.' He taught that good values were life-affirming, and bad values were life-denying. Thus good values became wealth, strength, health, and power. Bad values were associated with the poor, the weak, and the pathetic. But he said that morality, in the Judeo-Christian lens, was corrupted: it became about Good versus Evil, not 'Badness.' All the values of Judeo-Christianity—charity, piety, self-control, meekness, submission—were elevated above the 'cruelties' of the selfish, the wealthy, the indulgent, the aggressive. This happened as an ingenious ploy among the slaves and the weak to overturn the values of their masters and to gain power for themselves. They ultimately justified their situation, and they even fixed the broader society into slave-like life. Nietzsche taught that this twisted, Judeo-Christian morality was a social illness that had overtaken Europe. Christianity was a hypocritical state where people preached love and kindness but gained pleasure out of judging and condemning and punishing others. Ultimately, Nietzsche called the strong in the world to break their chains and assert their own power, health, wealth, and vitality upon the weaker and lesser mortals."

"And you rely on Nietzsche," the man says, "because in his system of morality, you've done nothing wrong. If the Judeo-Christian worldview is right, if there is a difference between 'Right' and 'Wrong' based on 'Good' and 'Evil,' then you are obviously in trouble. Because you've raped, you've killed, you've tortured. You rely on Nietzsche and his philosophy because he validates what you're doing. You're the strong one, you're the powerful one, you're the great one. And so you have an excuse to assert your own 'greatness' upon others, manifested by your wickedness."

The raider grins. "But of course... Unless you're wrong, and there is no Judeo-Christian worldview with any validity whatsoever. Unless you're wrong, and Nietzsche was right. Nietzsche taught that 'God is Dead.' This didn't mean he was an atheist. It meant that he viewed the recent developments in modern science and the vastly increasing secularization of European society as having killed the Christian God, who had served for the basis and meaning for value in the West for over a thousand years. Nietzsche said that the 'death' of God would eventually lead to the loss of any universal perspective on things, and along with it any coherent sense of objective truth. People would simply be locked in their own diverse and fluid perspectives. The ultimate end-point, however, past 'Perspectivism,' is that the 'death' of God would lead to blatant nihilism, the belief that nothing has importance and that life lacks purpose."

"And you believe that?" the man asks.

The raiders nod. "How can you not? Look at what has happened. Nietzsche spoke philosophically about the death of God. But where is God now? Look at this world in which we live. How can we ignore what has happened? How would a loving God who cares for His creation allow this to happen, allow his prime creatures—those made 'in the image of God'—to be turned into blood-sucking dwellers of the night?" The raider shakes his head. "I have simply interpreted what I have seen. I was not a nihilist before this happened, but Nietzsche's system of thought is the only system of thought that makes sense."

"Well," the man says, "I hope you're right."

The raider is confused. "You do?"

"Yes. That way you won't have to stand in judgment for what you've done."

"You don't know how it feels," the raider says, "to hear a woman scream when you're on top of her."

The man reaches into his jacket, pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

He lights it and takes a hit.

The pain in his leg throbs.

"It's quite unlike anything," the raider continues. "They say it's wrong. But it feels so... right."

The man cradles the shotgun. "You know, before the plague," he says, "I was dating this woman. Her name was Kira. She was raped before we met. She was walking down the street in a small town outside Cincinnati, and she was mugged, beaten, assaulted. She was sixteen at the time. By the time I met her, the assailant had already been captured, and he was in prison. I felt so much rage, so much anger, that I went to the prison. I looked at him in the eyes. And if it weren't for that plate glass, I would have killed him right then and there. His eyes, they were... So empty. There was nothing but a great void. The same void I see in your own eyes. You talk and talk about how proud you are of your exploits. All you're doing is fanning the flame, and I'm not quite sure if I'll wait to see if Kyle lives or dies to take your life."

The raider is quiet, bites his lip. "You're no different than me."

"Bullshit," the man growls. Cigarette ashes fall onto his jeans.

"Oh, you think you're different. But the moment you pull that trigger, you become like me."

"This isn't pleasure," the man says. "It's vengeance. It's justice. Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth. Limb for a limb. Life for a life."

"You say it's justice," the raider says. "But you'll enjoy it. Won't you?"

The door to the room opens. Sarah is carrying a candle. She steps inside. There is blood all over her clothes, her hands. Her eyes are heavy, speckled with tears. The raider stares at her, and his heart

begins to beat quicker behind his ribs. She looks at the raider, and her eyes are filled with an unholy hatred. She looks back to the man, says, "He didn't make it. He was shot through the lungs. There was nothing... Nothing we could do... But to make him comfortable. We gave him lots and lots of morphine. He didn't seem to be in pain. He kept talking about his girlfriend Sarah, and about some girl named Jessica. He died about five minutes ago."

The man nods, snubs out the cigarette. He looks up at the raider.

Sarah eyes him. "You're going to kill him."

The man nods. "Yes."

She looks at the raider. "Okay." She closes the door.

Sarah stands in the corridor holding the candle. There is silence. She doesn't even flinch when the roar of the gunshot comes. Footsteps nearing the door. It opens. The man comes out, the shotgun in his hands. He quietly shuts the door. The stench of burnt gunpowder carries with him. Sarah looks up at him. The candle falls from her hands, hitting the tiled floor. The murky wax extinguishes the flame. She wraps her arms around the man. He shifts the shotgun to one hand and wraps the other arm around her. She cries into his shoulder. The night is quiet except for her sobs.

II

They left Kyle's body in the clinical room and shut the door. They'd deal with him in the morning. Sarah tended to Mark, bandaging his wounds, stitching him up in places she didn't even know he had. The raiders had done quite the work on him. She gave him some morphine and pressed two cushioned chairs together, the backs facing outwards, and he lied down, curled into a ball upon the cushions. Katie stood in the front lobby, next to the locked door, and peered out the window. Now the man enters the lobby and sees her standing there. He moves forward, sets the shotgun on the receptionist's counter. He then stands behind her, and together they stare out into the night. Dark-walkers are moving about in the street, bending over, hefting up their fallen comrades. The man feels an eerie shiver crawl up his spine. They have never done this before. One-by-one they saunter into the cornfields, disappearing as the moon's rays break forth through the scattered storm-clouds. Scanty drifts of rain speckle the window. Distant flashes of lightning, brief flashes, their fingertips dipping into the rain-soaked cornfields.

"You should sleep," the man says.

Katie turns around. "So should you."

"We can push some of these chairs together."

"I'll sleep on the floor," Katie says. "There are blankets in the back."

The man faces her. She's covered with dried blood, just like Sarah.

"You helped," the man says matter-of-factly.

"I don't see how much I helped," Katie says.

"You did good," the man says, squeezing her shoulder. "Now get some sleep."

She doesn't know how to handle his new compassion. "You shot the raider."

"Yes," he says.

"Did he fight back?"

"No. He just sat there."

"Okay."

Katie lies down on the floor in the back room, alongside Mark. Sarah and the man are in the kitchen. He sits in one of the chairs, one hand gripping the armrest and the other pressed upon several dusty magazines sitting on a small side-table. Sarah sits down on the floor, beside his legs, stitches up his wounds, and he asks for morphine.

"We're out," she says. "I gave the last to Mark."

"It fucking hurts."

"I know," she says. "You're the one who made the stitches fall out."

"I didn't have a choice."

She doesn't look at him. "You damn well had a choice."

"Then why didn't you stop me?"

She doesn't say anything.

He grimaces, pain shooting up and down his calf.

She says, "Now we're down to just four."

"I know."

"Did you think it'd be like this?"

"I knew it might be like this."

"We're not even out of Indiana yet. We've only crossed one state line."

"I know."

"This is a suicide mission."

"Then how come you're coming along?"

"Because there aren't any other viable options."

"You could stay here."

"Do you want that?" She tightens the thread, making him gasp.

"No," he says, blinking the pain out of his eyes. "I don't want that."

"I didn't think so."

The man leans back, takes several deep breaths. "Are you almost done?"

Sarah stops for a moment, looks up at him. "Why'd you shoot him?"

"He deserved it."

"You wanted to make things right."

"Did it?"

"Kyle's still dead."

"But at least he's avenged."

"He's still dead."

"Would you prefer I not have killed him?"

Sarah returns to stitching, doesn't answer.

The man smirks. "I didn't think so."

III

Morning comes. Mark and the man sleep. Sarah takes the shotgun and leaves the building. The storm-clouds are gone, and the sky is perfectly clear. Several birds fly overhead. She walks past the RAV4 and heads down the street. There are splotches of blood where the dark-walkers had fallen only to be removed into the cornfields. The buildings are quiet and stoic. The truck wrapped around the telephone pole at the foot of the bridge has been broken into, and splotches of blood covers the

webbed windshield. She moves over the bridge and descends down to the other side of Monroe. There are human remains—tattered clothing, flaked bones—where dark-walkers had feasted on fallen raiders. She sees smoke rising from one of the buildings; she grips the weapon tighter and moves towards it. She moves through the overgrown grass slick with rain. The house has fallen down upon another truck. She is about to head into the corn when she hears a groan. She moves towards the rubble, and she can see an arm poking out from behind a fallen concrete slab. The fingers twitch. More moaning. She climbs over the debris and bends down, lifts the fragmented slab away. It is heavy, and she grunts. A face stares at her from inside the compacted cab. A man with spectacles. His forehead is covered with dried blood. He reaches out for her. “Water... Water...” She grabs the shotgun, lifts it up, presses the barrel against his forehead, looks away. The gun-blast thunders in her ears. She can feel droplets of warm blood alighting onto her face: blow-back. She steps away and doesn’t look back as she pushes into the cornfield.

She follows the trampled corn from where the two trucks had torn through the field. She climbs up the ditch beside the flipped truck, and the soles of her feet splash in a puddle of jellied blood. She makes it to the clearing and stands in front of the house. There are great splotches of blood all over the porch, and many of the windows are shattered. Assault rifles lying haphazardly in the tall grass. She enters the building, wrinkles her nose at the stench. She tiptoes through the hallway, which is filled with human remains. A lonely eye squishes underneath her shoes and a pair of glasses crunches underneath her weight. She stands in the kitchen, stares at the broken guitar, the bullets all over the walls. There is an adjacent room off to the left, and she can see two legs sticking out the door from inside the room. Small tennis shoes. Frayed limbs. *One of the boys*. Her throat knots, and she follows the man’s directions, turning the opposite way. She finds the cellar door. It is closed, covered with scratches, bits of bloody fingernails. *They tried to get inside*. She kneels down, grabs the cellar, knocks. No movement. She calls out to the survivors below. No response. She then yells that she’s going to blow the hatch, that they need to back away. She steps back and blows several holes into the hatch with the shotgun. She sets the shotgun beside her on the floor and leans down, reaches into the splintered holes, finds the latch on the inside. She flips the latch and opens the hatch. She takes the flashlight from her belt and flips it on, shines it down into the hole.

“Oh, God.”

She shuts it off, looks away.

The smell is revolting; she wrenches to the side and vomits all over the floor.

Bile crawls down her lips.

Sarah returns to the doctor’s office before noon. The man is awake, standing outside, leaning against the paneled siding of the building, keeping weight off his bad leg. He smokes a MARLBORO RED. As Sarah approaches, the shotgun dangling in her hands, he asks where the other survivors are.

She reaches him, stands beside him, shakes her head.

“Dark-walkers got them?” he asks.

“No. Somehow they had an assault rifle. They killed themselves.”

The man is quiet for a moment. “Oh.”

“I guess they thought the dark-walkers would break through the hatch.”

“They didn’t.”

“No,” she says. “They didn’t.”

“Well,” the man says after a moment. “That fucking blows.”

Sarah doesn’t reply, just goes inside.

The man finishes smoking his cigarette and tosses it into the weeds.
The moisture soaks into the paper and the cigarette snuffs itself out.

They stay in Monroe for a week, fortifying the building, gathering more blankets and mattresses from the houses along the street. The man hobbles out into the cornfield and gathers the WINCHESTER and three M16s with multiple magazines. He only has one BERETTA pistol now. Sarah and the man move the raider's corpse outside and throw it in the street; at one time, the vultures would feast, but now the dark-walkers ruled the cadavers. They bury Kyle out back, the soft tilled earth, moist with rainwater, giving easily to the hammering of their shovels. There is no ceremony, no sweet reprise, nothing to signal that anything has changed: they simply cover his grave with dirt and return into the building. The man is able to move around and walk within two days, but Mark still needs to recuperate. His wounds are substantial, and at one point, Sarah didn't know if he would make it. When she gave her concerns to the man, the man holed himself up in the cleaned-up office and just sat there in the silence, staring at the wall, not even hearing the howls of the dark-walkers when night fell. Mark did get better, and within a week, he is moving around, talking, thanking the man and thanking Kyle post-humously for their heroic actions.

"He died trying to save me," Mark tells the man. "He deserves to be where I'm at. I deserve to be where he's at."

The man tells him, "It doesn't matter what you deserve or don't deserve. You get what you get. And it's usually *not* what you deserve."

Sarah quips, "The raiders got what they deserved."

"Yeah," the man says. "I guess they did."

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Girl in the Yellow Dress

"The hottest love has the coldest end."

- Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.)

I

The man has decided they will leave the next morning and continue north on Interstate 65. The hope of Alaska burns brightly in his mind, a great torch that cannot be extinguished, a comforting guide in the times of greatest affliction. There are only a handful of them left: himself, Mark, Katie, and Sarah. Cameron fell to the disease. Anthony killed himself over remorse regarding his dead sister. And Kyle was shot through the lungs by wicked men who received what they rightly deserved. The man is not quite sure anymore if a God exists, but watching the smoke crawl upwards from the raider's magnified head made him feel such a quench of justice that he wondered if God may exist after all: *Where does the craving for justice originate? Is it an animal instinct, or something much greater?* These thoughts have consumed his mind.

This morning Sarah and Katie made coffee from a battery-powered burner found in the local hole-in-the-wall supermarket. The man drank his coffee quietly, and he noticed that Mark—who can now walk around and has been healing quite well—had disappeared. He followed him from a distance, watching him walk over the bridge. The man crested the bridge over the interstate and saw Mark enter a SHELL gas station.

Now the man stands outside the large bay windows, nearly out-of-sight, and sees Mark standing in the corner, flipping through pages in a book. A yellow notepad is beside the book on the counter, and he is holding a fresh rolling-ball ink pen ripped out of its packaging. The man takes a breath and pushes open the door. A bell chimes.

Mark swings around, raises his BERETTA pistol, quickly thumbs the trigger.

The man drops to the ground with a shout.

The bullet shatters the window, and glass rains down upon the hunched-over man.

"Shit!" Mark exclaims, setting the gun down. He races over to the man's side, extends a hand.

"I'm so sorry."

The man takes his hand, stands.

Glass falls from his clothes.

"I thought you were one of them," Mark says.

"They only come out at night," the man snaps, eyes afire.

"I meant the raiders."

"We killed them all."

"I'm sure some escaped. Anyways. Sorry."

"It's fine," the man says. "At least you didn't fucking shoot me."

"My aim's a little rusty."

"Good," the man says. He nods to the corner. "What are you doing?"

Mark suddenly looks anxious. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" the man asks.

"Yeah," the boy says. "Nothing."

"Then you won't mind if I look at it..." The man pushes past the boy and walks over to the counter. The book is actually a road atlas of the entire United States, and it is flipped open to western Colorado. The man shakes his head, perplexed, looks over his shoulder at Mark, who is still standing beside the broken window. "Colorado is a little out of our way. I'm not making anymore detours."

Mark doesn't say anything.

The man flips the book shut. "Come on, let's go."

"Wait," Mark blurts.

"What?"

"It's just... Alaska is a hell of a ways away, right? We've already lost... We've already lost more people than I care to think about. We're only right outside Indianapolis! We're not even an *eighth* of the way there. Do the math, all right? By the time we make it a *quarter* way there, only one of us will be alive."

"We just need to be more fucking careful, not running after little boys."

"Do the math, all right?" Mark pleads.

"Here's the math: Cameron was bitten by a dark-walker. We were ambushed. We weren't prepared. Carla flipped the switch on the lights, fucked us all over. Extenuating circumstances. At least the bitch got what she deserved. And Anthony? I didn't much like the kid, but I didn't want him to die. I'm not a fucking sadistic bastard. His death didn't excite me. But he committed *suicide*. He took his own life—it wasn't because of the trip, it was because of his inability to cope with his sister's death. Kyle was shot by raiders. I'm not saying it's your fault, but as long as we can avoid raiders, keep a better eye out, and be... wiser... in what we do, then we should be all right. We've hit a patch of bad luck, and I'm hoping it's over. But there's no statistical reason why we should abandon our only hope for survival."

"I'm not asking us to abandon our only hope for survival," Mark says.

"Mark..."

"Hear me out, all right? Remember the crazy man by the side of the road? Remember where he was headed? Aspen. We can get there in less than a week if we try. *Less than a week*. Alaska could take us several months. And the road to Aspen, it cuts through big cities. Lots of gas stations."

"The radios from Aspen went quiet," the man says. "You want to do some math? Do the math yourself on what that means."

"I'm getting to that," Mark says, speaking quickly. He takes a step towards the man, tentatively, not wishing to push him over the edge. "Those prisoners, in the old farmhouse? *They* were heading to Aspen. They said that before the radio went silent, the broadcasters said that the satellites were wobbling out of control, and they wouldn't be able to deliver the signals. Which means that Aspen is still intact. They're just silent. Not dead. Just silent."

The man doesn't say anything for a moment.

Mark reiterates, "Less than a week."

The man runs his hand through his greasy hair. Suddenly he is aware of the awful taste in his mouth. The beard growing around his chin and the sides of his face. *How long has it been since I've shaved? Since I've even taken a fucking shower?* "No."

"Look..."

"We're going to Alaska. We've decided on that."

"*You* decided on that," Mark says. "No one else had a say."

"I'm the one in charge."

"Really?" Mark asks. "Because Sarah's been the one keeping us alive."

The man's eye twitches. He's uncomfortable.

"I already told Sarah and Katie about Aspen," Mark says. "We were going to talk to you about it tonight. I've just been charting out the route. Everyone—except for you—wants to do this."

"No."

"If we get there," Mark continues, "and it's nothing but a wasteland, then we can head for Alaska. It'll be the same net distance whether we go north on Interstate 65 or hike over to the Rockies first."

The man is quiet, looks away.

"What are you thinking?" Mark asks.

The man doesn't reply.

"I'll tell them that you followed me here to express interest in Aspen."

The man looks confused. "Why would you say that?"

"And I'll say that you had been thinking about it more logically than I have been, and you were the one to promote the idea. This way it still looks like you're in charge."

"No."

Mark shakes his head. "You're unbelievable."

"We're going to Alaska."

"Why can't we just go through the Rockies, then? It's scenic."

"Bullshit."

"Three of the four of us disagree with you."

"I'm driving."

"We all have a license. We all know how to drive."

The man shakes his head. "This conversation is over, Mark."

"Yeah," the boy replies after a moment. "This conversation is over. Sarah, Katie and I, we're not asking you if we can go. We're asking if you want to come with us."

II

They leave Monroe the next morning, heading south on Interstate 65. They hit Interstate 465, which loops around Indianapolis, and passing the towering buildings of the city, Mark—holding the atlas in his hands—directs them back onto Interstate 70 West. They leave the city behind them, and the sprawling suburbs are once more replaced with abandoned cornfields stretching to the horizon on either side of the road. They pass through several quiet, sleeping towns—Plainsfield and Terre Haute—before driving underneath a THANKS FOR VISITING INDIANA, WELCOME TO ILLINOIS highway sign. The cornfields begin to dissipate after several hours of driving, and they are in the suburbs once more. The man pulls off an exit in Effingham, Illinois to get gas. After filling the RAV4, they head back onto the road. The sun has crested the sky, and 1:00 is approaching. Mark follows their path along the map, flipping through the pages, a great black circle around Aspen, Colorado. He begins to feel hope once more.

The sun begins its last dying stretch as the skyscrapers of Saint Louis, Missouri become visible in the far distance. The man presses the gas pedal down harder, and weaving around wrecked cars, they follow Interstate 70 as it bends around a curve, descends a hill, and opens up with a spectacular view of the dead city.

"When did we reach Missouri?" Katie asks.

The man shakes his head; there wasn't a sign. They'd passed a few that were faded, worn down by the weather and neglect, and he figures one of those may have been the state-transition billboard. The interstate passes over the cantilever-truss Martin Luther King Bridge, and on the bridge is a sign for Missouri.

"I guess the river is the boundary line," the man says to no one in particular.

"Look," Katie says, pointing. Along the steel girders of the bridge are several large nests, and bald eagles watch the travelers from their perches.

"I've never seen one of those before," Sarah says.

"Neither have I," Katie says. "They're so... beautiful. Majestic."

The Mississippi River rages beneath the bridge, its currents sweeping over the rising slopes of the banks, churned forth by wild rains earlier in the week. The bridge opens up into downtown, and the man stops the RAV4. The streets are deserted of movement, but cars are everywhere. The city was known for great parties, and in the heat of August, when the plague struck, the downtown bars and theaters and fanfares would have been packed. The man rolls down his window and lights a cigarette.

Mark takes one for himself, asks, "Now what?"

The man leans forward, stares out the windshield.

The sun's rays cut between two skyscrapers.

"Now we find a place to spend the night."

"Downtown is probably crowded," Mark says. "With dark-walkers, I mean."

"I know," the man says.

He turns the car left, passes underneath a dead spotlight, and heads south.

The sun's rays continue to sink behind the towering buildings.

They drive past JEFFERSON EXPANSION MEMORIAL, the downtown riverfront park. Within the park is the GATEWAY ARCH, 630 feet tall, the tallest manmade monument in the United States. Mark remembers his history class in high school, learning about the adventures of Lewis and Clark. The GATEWAY ARCH symbolized the beginning of the west, praising the Westward Expansion inaugurated by president Thomas Jefferson. Their journey takes them west, and now the monument stands as a symbol for their own adventure, their own seeking of discovery. He wonders what they will discover in Aspen. Lewis and Clark didn't know what to expect, and neither do the travelers. But Lewis and Clark made it to their goal, despite tragedies and setbacks and opposition. *We have experienced all of that*, Mark thinks to himself. *Hopefully we'll be as successful as they were.* His thoughts are shattered by the man's voice: "In a thousand years, that arch will be gone. We may be the last people to ever see it." Mark forgets about Lewis and Clark. Suddenly the gnawing fear of the future builds within his gut once more. They continue driving.

"It's a stampede," Mark says.

They stop the car between two large gated business complexes. At the intersection in front of them, nearly forty or fifty whitetail deer storm down the street, the antlers of the bucks casting shadows against the cracked asphalt. The ground shakes beneath the S.U.V. One of the deer is straggling behind, limping on a leg swollen with blood. The deer pass. The man puts the vehicle in gear and presses the gas. He hits the brakes as four or five wolves stream past, yapping at one another, bodies streamlined, tails rigid. The travelers make it through the intersection, and the man pulls the car forward. They enter the intersection, and off to the left, they see the straggling deer taken down, a wolf sinking its fanged teeth into its neck. Katie presses her face against the window,

eyes stricken with a panicked sorrow. The deer lets out a mournful cry and sags, and the wolves fall upon it, tearing at its flesh. Geysers of blood shoot into the air, and the wolves' maws are stained with blood. The deer's body is hidden beneath the feasting hunters.

"The poor deer..." Katie moans.

The man says, "The wolves, they're just trying to survive."

"Just like us," Sarah says.

"No," the man says quietly. "We're the deer. We're the prey now, not the hunters."

III

The MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDEN, also called SHAW'S GARDEN, is located along the southwestern side of Saint Louis. It is one of the world's largest botanical research centers with countless greenhouses and research facilities. The rest of the park is shaped immaculately, with sweeping monuments and majestic lakes. They follow the road through the Garden, and they find a street facing the garden. The road is lined with massive stone buildings, once built as palaces for heads of state visiting the 1904 World's Affair. Now they have become apartment complexes. There are several other buildings along the adjacent street, bungalows and loft districts.

The man parks the RAV4 outside one of the stone buildings. He and Mark take the two M16s they've brought along and enter the building through a sliding window. They follow the stone steps up to the highest floor, and they try the doorknobs on the apartment doors until one opens. The man pushes it open, and Mark enters, scanning the entryway with a flashlight.

The beam falls upon a person on the floor, curled into a fetal position. The woman is dressed in rags, emaciated, the washboard-ribs slowly moving with each breath. At the sound of their entrance, it raises its head and stares at them with feeble eyes. It had once been a dashing young woman, a great actor starring in A-rated films. Now the creature can barely move, starving.

It tries to crawl towards them, reaching out with gnarled fingers.

"Shoot her," the man says.

Mark doesn't move, watching the woman slinking towards him.

"Shoot her," the man repeats.

The boy shakes his head. "I can't... She's so... helpless."

"She's one of them." The man moves past Mark and sends a single bullet into her head. She goes still, body sagging to the floor, her fingers expanding from their clawed positions. Blood pools on the floor underneath her head.

Mark takes a deep breath. "Let's find another room."

"All right," the man says.

An unlocked apartment is found on the floor beneath them. They gather their weapons, and everyone joins inside. No dark-walkers are to be found anywhere. The sheets on the beds are coiled upon the floor. The room stinks of mildew. There is a single window overlooking the park, facing the Japanese gardens and the manmade lake filled with koi fish. The rose garden beside the lake is speckled with weeds, and the roses have a difficult time facing the sunlight. The sun continues to set, and the howls of the dark-walkers greet them as they barricade the front door. There are two bedrooms, and the man gives one to Sarah and Katie. He and Mark will take the other. Sarah and Katie retire early, and the man lies in bed, closes his eyes. He can't sleep. He gets up and walks out into the living area. He

sees Mark standing beside the window facing the park, smoking a cigarette. The man stands next to him.

"You got anymore?" he asks.

"The pack is in the kitchen," Mark says. "The lighter's next to it."

The man leaves, returns, brandishing his own MARLBORO RED.

"You out of cigarettes?" Mark asks.

"Yeah. I have to get some more tomorrow."

The boy points out the window. "Isn't that something?"

In the pale moonlight, they can see several dark-walkers wading into the shallow lake, swishing their hands through the stagnant water, groping about in their own blindness. Others stand along the bank, underneath the flowering dogwoods, rocking back and forth on their haunches, staring at their own pallid reflection in the murky water.

"They're fishing," Mark says.

"Have they caught anything?"

"No."

"Maybe the fish are dead."

"They're koi fish. I saw the sign. They don't need to be fed during the winter. Their digestive tracts shut down. They just hibernate. I'm sure the pollen from the roses spills into the lake, giving them something to eat. And insects, too. The mosquitoes are horrible. I got bit several times just unloading our weapons from the car."

"The mosquitoes," the man says. "They're from the Mississippi."

"I know."

The man continues smoking his cigarette, watching the dark-walkers.

"They look so stupid and clumsy," Mark says.

"It's just an illusion. We know that."

"Yeah," the boy says. "We do."

The man drops his cigarette to the floor, stomps it out. "I'm going back to bed."

"Okay."

"Don't wake me up when you come in."

"Okay."

"I mean it," the man says. "I'm exhausted."

"I won't wake you up," Mark says.

Mark can't see them anymore. Rain-clouds moved in from the northwest and blanketed the city. Now the rain continues to fall, and Mark smokes his fourth cigarette. His lungs feel heavy, and his heart beats quicker. He stares into the rain, and in the lightning that reflects off each raindrop, creating a sparkling sea of dazzling light, he can see Cara's face, and he remembers when the rain fell on that ancient night so long ago.

ΣΩΣ

He had picked her up at her house. Rain-clouds had been building all evening, and as he stood in the foyer, waiting for her, the rain began to fall. She came down the steps from her room, and he had been absolutely mesmerized. The yellow dress wrapped around her slender waist, and it was low-cut, revealing her small breasts. She bit her lip as she descended, and when she reached him, she took

his hands in hers. He had spent two hundred dollars on his tuxedo, but faced with her beauty, he suddenly as if he were dressed in rags. *She's so beautiful.*

She leaned forward and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"It's raining," he said. "I didn't... I didn't bring an umbrella."

"It's all right. We'll just have to run to the car."

Mark pointed at her feet. "Can you run in high-heels?"

"Probably not," she said. She bent down, took them off, handed them to him.

"On the count of three?" Mark asked, opening the door.

"One, two, three!" she shouted, giggling, and raced out the door.

He chased her to the car, fumbled for his keys in the rain, opened the door, helped her inside.

He ran over to his side and got in, shut the door. The rain tapped delicately on the roof.

Cara shook her head back and forth, droplets of water spinning through the air.

Mark laughed: "You look like a dog."

She gasped, playfully slapped him.

"I meant by how you were shaking your head!" Mark exclaimed. "I didn't mean..."

She squeezed his arm. "I know. But you'd better watch what you say. If you call me a dog in front of your friends at the dance, then I'll probably have to kick your ass. You wouldn't like that."

"Not as much as you would," Mark said with a wink.

They drove three miles to the school. There were limousines parked in front of the rotunda entrance.

Mark looked over at her. "I couldn't afford a limousine."

"It's fine," she said. "I'll bet most of those guys are jocks who had their rich parents pay for their ride. They spend their money on alcohol and tennis shoes and sports cars. You spend your money on rent, paying the bills, putting Ashlie through school. You're far more of a man than any of them are."

He parked the car as close to the entrance as he could. "Wait here," he said.

She undid her seatbelt. "Where are you going?"

"To get an umbrella."

He left and returned with one he borrowed from someone inside. He opened the door, extended his hand. She grabbed his hand and swung her leg out, stood.

RIP.

The sound seemed extraordinarily loud. Cara looked down, saw a great rip in the swell of her dress. "Shit!" she exclaimed.

Mark's heart broke; she looked as if she were about to cry.

She exclaimed, "I can't go to the prom like this! Everyone will make fun of me. And this dress was fucking expensive."

"It's all right," Mark said. "No one will say anything."

"Take me home," she said.

"Cara..."

"I don't want to be embarrassed!" she shouted at him.

"All right," Mark said. "Okay."

He shut the door, leaving her in the car, and he returned into the school. The dance was just beginning, a disco ball showering its light over the dance floor. Couples held hands and started dancing. Fruit punch was being offered in the corner. He had been looking forward to this for weeks,

and now it all came crashing down. He handed the umbrella back to the lender, and he returned outside, tried to calm down his nerves, got inside the car, started the engine.

Cara was in tears, running her fingers over the rip.

"I'm sorry," Mark said.

"It's not your fault."

"I'm still sorry."

They made their way towards her house in silence.

Suddenly Mark took another road, heading out of town.

Cara eyed him. "Where are we going? My house is back that way."

"I know," he said.

"Mark..."

"It's a surprise. Okay?"

Something sparkled in her eyes. Excitement. "I like surprises."

"I'm hoping you'll like this one."

"I'm going to beg you to tell me, but you'd better not."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Pinky swear?"

He offered her his pinky. "Pinky swear."

She took it, wrapped hers around his, released. "So..."

"Don't ask."

"What is it? What's the surprise?"

He shook his head. "I'm not going to tell you."

"But Mark," she cooed, "I'm *begging* you!"

He grinned, was resolute. "Nope."

"Mark..."

"I said 'No', Cara. 'No' means 'No'."

She crossed her arms, scowled. "You're a jackass."

They crossed the Brent Spence Bridge and entered Kentucky. They drove down the highway for a while, the sprawl of northern Kentucky turning into rolling wooded hills on either side. The rain became more intense, and lightning fought in the skies above. He took the exit towards BIG BONE LICK STATE PARK, and after navigating the narrow and winding road for a while, he pulled into a gravel drive. An old graveyard next to a decrepit and abandoned PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH.

"Mark," Cara said, looking around. "This is a graveyard."

"I know," he said.

"This isn't Halloween. There could be creepers out here."

"It's raining. No one's out here."

"What about zombies?"

"Zombies aren't real. You know that."

"They could be one day."

Mark laughed. "You think what you want to, okay, Sweetie?"

He leaned forward in his seat, twisted the knob on the radio, turned up the music. She recognized the lyrics: OUR SONG by Taylor Swift.

"Is this our song?" Cara asked.

"It could be," Mark answered. "If you wanted it to be."

"I didn't say that," she said.

"Okay."

They listened to the song together.

Mark opened the door, stepped out into the rain.

Cara shouted at him: "It's raining, Mark!"

He didn't answer. He moved around to her side of the car, opened the door.

She shook her head. "No. I'm not getting out."

"Come on."

"I said, 'No', Mark."

"Your dress is already ruined."

"You're going to get your suit wet."

"It's already wet. Come on."

"Mark," she said, mocking him: "'No' means 'No'."

He grabbed her hand, pulled her out.

She stumbled out of the car, and he held her in the rain. She didn't protest. They began to dance, the rain falling around them, the tombstones silent. She almost complained once, but she didn't even finish her sentence. The song continued to play, muffled through the speakers, and with the lightning dancing overhead, they looked into one another's eyes, raindrops crawling down their cheeks. Their lips grazed each other's, and they kissed in the rain, clothes soaked. She was totally lost in the moment, and she knew nothing except him holding her, and she knew that the dance in the rain, in the middle of the graveyard, was far better than anything she could have experienced in the high school gymnasium.

The ruined yellow dress was well-worth every minute of it.

ΣΩΣ

Mark stomps out his cigarette, enters the dark kitchen. He opens up the cupboards, finds what he is looking for. He grabs the bottle and moves to the couch. He sits down and screws off the cap. It reeks something awful. He tilts it back, takes a giant gulp. He swallows the ABSOLUT vodka, leans forward, coughs, lungs searing. His throat burns as if it's been coated with acid. He sits on the couch and takes several more shots. He begins to feel warm, and then the vodka hits him like a sledgehammer. He is soon sitting on the floor, back propped against the feet of the couch, the bottle of vodka lying on the carpet, the contents spilling out, spreading like a urine stain. He leans his head back and stares at the ceiling, eyes unable to adjust. The world spins. "Cara..." He mutters her name over and over before he passes out, falling onto his side. Bile streams from his mouth.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Angel & Her Dress

“Character contributes to beauty. It fortifies a woman as her youth fades. A mode of conduct, a standard of courage, discipline, fortitude, and integrity can do a great deal to make a woman beautiful.”

- Jacqueline Bisset (Born A.D. 1944)

I

“Did we relapse?”

Mark blinks his eyes, awaking. Morning sunlight comes through the windows facing the park. Sarah and Katie stand in the kitchen, staring out the window. The empty lake. The man stands over him, holding the M16. He extends a hand. Mark takes his hand, and he stands, wobbling, nauseas. Mark apologizes, doesn’t even defend himself.

The man says, “It’s all right. Come on. Let’s get out of here. You can sleep in the car.”

The movement of the car makes Mark even more nauseas, and a cold sweat pops over his brow. The man curses and pulls off at an exit west of Saint Louis, amidst the suburbs. They clamber into a MOTEL 8 and find two unoccupied rooms. Katie asks what they’re doing. The man says that he doesn’t want Mark to be on the road with them if he’s passed out because of a hangover. If they run into raiders, he wants the boy to be able to shoot straight and keep up on his own two legs without falling over. He says he’ll let him sleep it off. Sarah begins to protest, but the man glares at her, and she goes quiet. Mark says, “No,” doesn’t want to be a burden, but the man slaps him across the face and shoves him into the room. “Go to sleep,” he growls, and he shuts the door. He hates the fact that they’ve lost another day.

Mark sleeps. Sarah and the man decide to go “shopping,” and they invite Katie to join them. She declines, wishing to stay with Mark—“In case he wakes up, so he doesn’t think we’ve just abandoned him.” Sarah and the man get into the RAV4 and leave the motel. They snake around several different roads, passing business complexes and restaurants. The man pulls into a large, empty parking lot. A mall. The mall was closed when the plague struck, so there are no cars, except for a few semis in the back rows and a mall security cruiser parked by one of the main entrances. The man takes the first M16 and gives the other to Sarah; she asks if the mall is safe. The man says they’ll soon find out. The glass on the doors is untouched, and he peers inside, sees nothing but murky shadows. Dust covers the other side of the glass. He stands back and fires several rounds into the glass, which breaks apart, scattering onto the floor along the inside of the door. The man knocks the remaining jagged glass fragments from the edges of the window and sticks the nose of the gun through to the other side. A waft of dust hits him in the face, and he coughs. He pushes himself through, shoots the lock, shoves the door open. Sarah comes in after him. The various shops—DISNEY, NATURAL OUTFITTERS, ABERCROMBIE & FITCH, FOREVER 21, CLAIRE’S—are barred with the steel gates down. There are benches down the corridors, several closed and quiet stands for cell phone booths. The man remembers back in the day when he and Kira would walk through CINCINNATI MILLS and always get

hounded by the cell phone merchants. Sometimes he would entertain them with a fake sense of curiosity just to see them squirm.

The man is walking when he realizes that Sarah is not behind him. He swings around, raises the gun. His heart begins to race. He trots quickly back the way he had come, then starts to run. He turns a corner and sees her standing beside a glass display case of the BRIDAL SHOP. He tries to catch his breath from running and approaches her.

She points through the window, at a beautiful white flowering dress with a veil.

"Yes," the man says. "It's nice. Can we go?"

"That's the exact same dress I wore for my wedding," Sarah says, looking at him. "I actually got it from the same store. I mean, not the one here in Missouri, but one back in Cincinnati. It was Florence, actually. In northern Kentucky. Anyways. It was that same exact dress. I went to the store with a bunch of girlfriends, and they had it in the display just like they do here, and every one of us wanted it for our own. When I bought that dress, it was like I bought my future. It was expensive. Several hundred dollars. But I felt as if I were buying peace and security and love. I felt as if I were buying my dreams, and no one could take them away from me. Patrick's birthday is today. He would have taken off work from the construction company, and we would have gone to see a movie and then out to a fancy restaurant. He always liked TEXAS ROADHOUSE. He was such a... 'manly man'. He didn't care for sushi or caviar or anything like that. 'Rich foods pompous jackasses eat' he would say about them. He wanted his big steak, the kind where the juices would just squirt out with each bite."

"Rare," the man says.

"Yes," Sarah reminisces. "He was rare."

"No. The steak. He liked it rare."

"Oh. Rare." She looks at him. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I act like my tragic life is the only thing that matters."

"It's okay."

"And here you are. You never got to get married."

The man is quiet.

Sarah shakes her head, curses. "I'm sorry..."

"It's all right."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Sarah." He reaches out, grips her shoulder. "It's all right."

She takes a deep breath. "Okay."

"Let's go," the man says. "There's a hardware store up here. Stay with me this time."

ACE HARDWARE was locked up, but the man was able to shoot the lock and raise the gate. They entered, and with their flashlights bouncing, began exploring the shelves. They found several batteries, some knives, some assorted goods. They filled a red handheld basket with wrenches and screwdrivers and bolt cutters. Now they are standing outside the store. The man holds the M16 in one hand and the basket of goods in the other. They head back the way they came. When they walk past the display case for the Bridal Shop, Sarah stops again. The man begins to say something, but she ignores him. She raises the M16. The man rolls his eyes. The bullets dance through the glass, and she steps through, glass shards crunching underneath her tennis shoes. The man sets the basket down and enters after her, asking what in the world she is doing. She is standing behind the counter, flipping through a book, the flashlight beam upon the pages. He stands on the opposite side of the

counter, says, "Sarah." She mutters something under her breath: B-29. She doesn't answer him when he says her name again, and she goes into the back of the shop. The man curses, hops up, sits on the counter. He sets the gun beside him and fumbles for the pack of CAMEL LIGHTS in his jacket pocket. Sarah returns holding a large bag about her height. She doesn't come towards him, heads over to one of the dressing rooms, enters. The man swings his legs back and forth, sighs. "Women," he mutters under his breath, lighting the cigarette. He stares at pictures on the far wall, brides in varying dresses, brides of every size and shape. He smokes his cigarette. *They can even make the fat ones look good.*

II

The door to the dressing room opens. Sarah comes out. The man looks over, the cigarette cherry nearly to the filter, the gray smoke curling into the air. He stares at her, and his heart shudders for a moment. The ivory and silver DERE KIANG wedding dress molds around her slender form, clinging to her curves with absolute perfection. The sophisticated sheath and the sweep of the cathedral train hiding her legs makes the man's mouth go dry. He blinks his eyes, looks away, takes another hit off the cigarette. Sarah moves forward, stops. She asks him how she looks. He snubs the cigarette out on the counter and turns his head. His legs have stopped swinging back and forth. He feels as if he is in the spotlight, and that his every motion is judged. "It looks good," he says, voice crackling. His cheeks flush red with embarrassment, but the hues are hidden in the musky shadows.

The man gets down from the counter, faces her. In the darkness, she reminds him of Kira, and he can almost see his beloved fiancé wearing the wedding dress before him now. He knows it's not Kira, he knows it's just an illusion, he knows his heart is simply overwhelmed, and everything that he's feeling is directed towards Kira, not towards Sarah. But his mind cannot overcome what he feels.

He steps closer towards her.

She stares at him, eyes searching, wondering.

His own eyes do not deny what he feels, do not deny what he wants.

She keeps looking back and forth between his eyes and lips.

He takes another step closer.

So does she.

The tension is undeniable and unbearable,

a tension forged in the fires of tragedy and despair.

They stand next to one another, facing one another, noses nearly touching. Her deep eyes tear into his, and he has never realized how beautiful those eyes really are. Her black hair falls around her shoulders, and even though it is laden with grease and strained with knots, it seems like it is the most alluring hair he has ever seen. She closes her eyes, and her breath becomes more fierce, rapid. She can smell the scent of cigarette smoke in his hair. The tips of their noses touch. She can feel his beard brushing against her chin, his weathered skin rough against her silky cheek. Her mouth is dry, and she licks her lips. No words are spoken. The man reaches out, puts his hand on her bare upper arm, fingers tentatively embracing her skin; he can feel her heartbeat in his fingertips. She does likewise with him, extending her arm around his neck. Their foreheads touch. *We shouldn't do this*, the man thinks, but he doesn't dare speak it. He wants it too much. He draws in closer for a kiss, and their lips brush.

Sarah grabs him, shoves him to the floor with electric intensity. He lands hard, head banging against the tile, and a shot of pain shoots through him. She kneels down beside him. He grabs her by the arm. "Be a little more gentle..." he says playfully, lifting his head to kiss her. She slaps a hand over his mouth, shakes her head, thrusts a jabbing finger towards the door, which is hidden by the end of the counter. The man's head cocks to the side, and his eyes ask, *What?* She crawls down beside him, her bare feet pushing against the dusty floor. The man slowly gets to his knees, moves over to the counter, grabs the lip of the counter with his fingers, and slowly pulls himself up so his eyes crest over the top. He looks towards the locked door and the shattered window.

"Shit," he mutters under his breath.

A dark-walker stands outside the door, sniffing, hands dangling at its sides.

The man's knife is in its sheath on his belt.

His M16 is on the counter.

Sarah's M16 is... He doesn't know where the hell she put it, but she doesn't have it.

"Shit," he says again.

Sarah is next to him, rising; he grabs her by the arm, pushes her down. He looks down at her and shakes his head: *No*. When he looks back up, the dark-walker is standing beside the shattered window, staring straight at him. "Oh, *fuck*."

III

The man stands, in full view of the creature. In the dim light, he can see that it had been, at one time, a security guard. The clothes fit loosely around its emaciated body, and a pair of ear-rings in the left ear are infected and swollen. A night-stick still swings from its belt. The man slowly moves forward, reaches for the M16. A ripple of fear runs through him, and he abandons the assault rifle, draws the KA-BAR from his belt instead. There could be more, and the sound of the gunshot might attract them. The dark-walker watches him from the opposite side of the broken window, its chest heaving with each laborious breath. He looks weak, probably on the verge of starving. The man holds the knife at the ready, daring the creature to make a move. Sarah slowly stands, watching with global saucer eyes. The man looks the creature in the eyes, can see nothing but a great emptiness, like looking into the eyes of a rabid, wild dog. The dark-walker breaks concentration and leaps forward, jumping through the window. Its arms swing wildly, reaching for the man; it lets out a horrendous screech; the man launches forward, and he side-steps the creature, spins around, kicks it into the broadside of the counter. The dark-walker falls upon the counter, face-down, and the man grabs it by its overgrown hair, wrenches its head back, and yanks the edge of the knife across its throat. Warm blood gushes all over the countertop, puddling against the assault rifle. The man steps back, and the body slides to the floor. Those lifeless eyes stare up at him, just as lifeless as they were when it lived, and the blood slowly stops gurgling from its slashed throat.

Sarah's scream turns his attention around. She is on the ground, and another dark-walker is on top of her. It had come from the door leading to the storage hallway that ran behind every store. Sarah wrapped her hands around the creature's neck, holding it away; the fiend snapped at her, drool dripping from its chomps, splashing over her chest, crawling between her breasts and sliding underneath the dress. She cries out for help, and the man rushes forward, slams the tip of his boot

into the monster's side. The dark-walker tumbles onto the floor next to her, and the man leaps over the woman, falls down upon the assailant. He pins the animal to the floor, legs on either side of its abdomen; it gropes at his sides with its gnarled fingers with the elongated fingernails, and the man doesn't make eye contact as he drives the tip of the knife into its eye. Sarah is getting to her feet, and the man yanks the knife out of the eye socket, a geyser of blood spraying onto his knee.

He hears Sarah shouting, and perched atop of the dead dark-walker, he turns and sees her grab the M16 from the counter. Several more dark-walkers are coming through the entrance, and the assault rifle sings. Her aim is imperfect, but the bullets find their marks: they rip into the flesh of six or seven of them, and their bodies tumble down. The man is up now, sheathing the KA-BAR, and he grabs her by the shoulder. More dark-walkers are streaming towards the broken window, pushing and shoving to get through, trampling their comrades. More throw themselves against the window on the other side and against the door. The opposite window shatters and they begin piling inside, tripping over one another, falling into racks of dresses.

Sarah turns to run into the dressing-room to get the other M16; the man grabs her, shouts, "No time!", and tears her away. She fires the weapon behind them, the bullets spraying harmlessly into the walls. They move down a narrow corridor and find an open door. Sarah continues shooting, and the gun clicks.

The magazine is empty.

"I need another magazine!" she shouts.

"They're in the car!" the man hollers back. He grabs her by the bare arm and throws her through the door. Down the corridor, the dark-walkers are pushing and shoving to catch up with their prey. The man grimaces and slips through the door; the moment he enters the next room, Sarah pushes the door shut.

The room is filled with shelves covered with dusty cardboard boxes and wooden crates. He pulls a crate from the nearest shelf, but it's too heavy, and it falls to the floor, splintering. Sarah is pressed up against the door, which shakes underneath her weight, the dark-walkers trying to get through. The door doesn't lock from the inside.

She stares at the man:

her face is so pale that it looks like the full moon on a dark winter's night.

The man turns on his heels, searching. He sees another doorway. He runs back to the fallen crate, pushes it across the concrete floor, props it against the door. He grabs Sarah and pulls her with them. The door opens, but it jams as the crate wedges against the end of the shelf. The dark-walkers try to weasel through, groping in the darkness with hands greedy for the warmth of fresh blood. The crate slows them down enough, and the man and Sarah escape through the other door. The door opens up to a giant room filled with even more shelves, and there are loading dock vehicles parked in the aisles, behemoths of a forgotten age. The man's shoes echo loudly on the floor, but Sarah's bare feet make no sounds whatsoever.

They pass one of the parked vehicles, and then the man stops short. Sarah, behind him, runs into him. The man points forward; in the darkness, there is a huddle of seven or eight dark-walkers, most scarcely clothed, skinny with flesh clinging to knobby bones. They are all facing one another, breathing in unison, gathered for warmth. *Sleeping*. The man puts a finger to his mouth, whispers, "*Shhh*." They step backwards, move around to another aisle, and slowly walk past. They maneuver

around the denizens of the shadows, and then Sarah points to a sliver of light ahead. *Outside.* They continue moving slowly, but then they have no choice but to run: their pursuers have gotten through the door leading to the smaller storage room, and their snarls and commotion have awoken the others, who are now giving chase as well.

The man and Sarah run towards the door with its meager sliver of light—its meager sliver of hope!—and they gain speed. There is a large locking mechanism on the door, and it has a quiet keypad. *Electric operated.* They're pinned with no way out. *Fuck it,* the man thinks to himself, and with a raging shout, he speeds up, and before he reaches the door, he twists to his side and jumps through the air. His shoulder slams into the door, and under the impact of his weight, the rusted hinges snap and buckle; the door falls backwards from its moorings, and it hits the solid pavement. The man rolls off the door, arm shuddering with pain. He lets out a shout as he comes to rest against the large wheel of a parked semi. He looks up and sees Sarah running through the doorway, into the brilliant sunlight. The howls of the furious dark-walkers can be heard, but they're safe now.

The man bends over, sucking in deep breaths, tar-soaked lungs throbbing. Sweat drips down his face, the perspiration cool in the calm spring breeze. Lazy clouds pass overhead, forming shapes of elephants and rhinoceroses and leprechauns. Sarah stands beside him, the dress ripped and torn. The strap over her right shoulder has ripped, and she holds the dress up to cover her breast. The pavement is chilly beneath her bare feet.

The man looks over at her, still gasping for breath. "I've always... hated... the mall."

"Yeah," Sarah says. "Me too."

IV

They return to the MOTEL 8. Katie is sitting outside, along the curb, and when she sees Sarah get out of the RAV4, donned in the tattered and torn wedding dress, a whimsical expression crosses her features. She jumps up and walks over to the car. "Why in the world are you wearing that?"

Sarah shakes her head. "I was being stupid."

The man comes around the other side of the RAV4. "Katie."

She looks up at him. "What?"

He tosses her the keys. "There's a K-MART down the road. Take Sarah with you and get her some new clothes."

Katie eyes him. "Why don't you take her?"

"Because I smoked my last pack of cigarettes," he says, "and K-MART didn't sell them. I'm going to the gas station. *You* take Sarah to the store. All right?"

She nods. "Okay." She looks over at Sarah. "So tell me what happened."

Sarah turns to get back inside the vehicle. "I'll tell you on the way there."

The man looks over at her.

She looks away.

The man curses and starts heading towards the gas station across the street.

It is evening by the time they get back. Mark is awake, albeit groggy and still suffering a splitting headache. He and the man are in one of the rooms, and on the table the man is stirring several

different kinds of vegetables—string beans, brussell sprouts, and corn—in a saucepan atop the Bunsen burner. Sarah and Katie enter. Both are wearing new jeans and shirts, and they are both carrying shopping bags filled with clothes. Sarah is wearing a new pair of sneakers. Mark nods weakly at them, rubs his temples. The man tells them that dinner has been prepared, and he grabs a pack of paper plates and tears it open. “We don’t have any silverware. You’ll have to eat with your hands.” They don’t complain. No one talks as they gather around the table and begin to eat.

The man decides to sleep in his own room. Once dark comes, he draws the blinds over the windows and begins pulling the dusty sheets from the bed. Some of the sheets are riddled with holes from moths or mice. He doesn’t know which. A knock comes from the door. He walks over, throws back the lock, and pulls it open. Sarah is standing there in her new clothes.

“Hi,” the man says.

“Hi,” she replies.

An awkward pause. “What do you want?”

“I want to talk,” she blurts.

“Okay. What do you want to talk about?”

“Can I come in?”

“No. I don’t think... I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Okay.” She steps back, away from the door. “Good night.”

“I thought you wanted to talk.”

“I already know what I need to know,” she says. “Sleep good.”

“Okay,” the man says. He shuts the door.

The man sits on the edge of his bed. His mind is overtaken by thoughts, and he finds himself pondering what Sarah wanted to talk about, and what she discovered through his words. He keeps looking at the digital clock, as if to read the time, to count the minutes passing by slowly as sand in a sieve, but there is no electricity, and all he sees is a blank stare returned. Finally he curses and gets up, opens the door, goes out into the hallway. He approaches Sarah’s doorway. He can hear movement inside. He raises his hand to knock, but he slowly lowers it. Something prevents him from fulfilling his desires. He shakes his head and abandons the door, returning to his room. He lies in bed for a while before falling into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Under the Pale Full Moon

"What whispers so strange at the hour of midnight,
From the aspen leaves trembling so wildly?
Why in the lone wood sings it sad,
When the bright full moon beams upon it so mildly?"
- Bernard S. Ingemann (A.D. 1789-1862)

I

They leave the MOTEL 8 at the crack of dawn. Sarah tries to talk to the man about what happened the day earlier, but the man keeps pushing her aside. The four of them load into the RAV4 and continue west along the highway, navigating small towns and overgrown cornfields. Mark apologizes several times for holding them back, and eventually the man just tells him to shut up. At a UDF gas station in Booneville—a small town bordered by a snaking river—the man has Mark fill up the tank while he plasters the map over the hood of the S.U.V. He flips through the pages, follows the highlighted course through Aspen, tries to calculate the distance. He has done this many times before, dealing with air travel, but with airplanes, the course was generally either straight or, with pan-global flights, they were circumvented. He finds it somewhat difficult to trace various roads, and he tries to estimate crowded highways near the major cities. The next city is Kansas City, and they are about 100 miles from there. He looks up at the sky, the noon sun, can feel its warmth radiating upon his face, tickling the growth of beard. *100 miles*. It is such a short distance, and yet it feels so long. He thinks they can probably get through Kansas City and on into the suburbs before finding a place. He tells this observation to the others, and they just nod their heads.

Katie says, "The plan sounds okay to me. How far, then, to Aspen?"

"I don't know," the man says. "About 600, maybe 700 miles."

She asks, "Can we cover that in a day?"

"On a good day," the man answers, "maybe."

Mark muses to himself, "And we know how many of *those* we've had."

They reach Marshall Junction by 1:30. It is a weaving assortment of bridges and ramps that connects I-70 East and West with I-65 North and South. The man must drive down onto I-65, head south, and then ramp back up onto the highway: a tractor-trailer had lodged itself in the railing and flipped, its remains scattered about the road, decaying and rusting in the sun, the skeleton of the mammoth vehicle blocking their way. They continue on I-70, heading west.

They stop in Concordia for gas, and everyone is starving. It is near 3:00, and no one has eaten yet. Mark spies a beer tavern, DEBBIE LYNN'S COUNTRY CORNER, along Main Street. After filling up gas, the troop enters the restaurant. It stinks of oxidized wine. There are several tables with overturned chairs, and one of the glass windows is shattered. Splashes of blood are on the floor. A 24-hour pub, filled with farmers and 21-year-olds when the plague struck.

Mark goes behind the counter and opens the massive refrigerator. It stinks of mold. He grabs several bottles of beer and sets them on the counter.

The man reaches for a dark ale, but Mark stops his hand: "If you're going to be driving the rest of today, you can't drink." The man begins protesting once more, telling him that there are no cops and that there's no traffic, but Mark reiterates that if the man didn't want Mark coming along with them with a hangover, how hypocritical is it to let himself drive buzzed, if not drunk?

The man doesn't want anyone else to drive, wants the wheel to himself, and so he heads back over to a table where Sarah is opening cans of fruits and plopping them down onto paper plates.

"I forgot the plastic silverware," she says.

"It doesn't matter," the man says, plucking a pear half into his mouth.

Katie opens up a bottle of beer, begins to drink.

Mark stands at the counter, eyeing the selection. He makes his choice, sits down with them, screws off the top. The sweet smell radiates outwards. The man watches him drink, is irritated. He finishes his peaches and sits back. Mark sips his beer. The man watches him for a minute, and then he angrily shakes his head: "We're just wasting time here."

Mark shrugs. "You wouldn't be saying that if you were the one drinking the beer."

"We're really wasting our time," the man repeats.

"Don't worry," the boy says. "The beer's pretty flat. But, hell, it's still beer."

The man reads the label on the bottle. "Only pussies drink that stuff."

"It's a Royal Raspberry. It's delicious."

"You're a pussy," the man growls.

Mark edges him on: "But at least I'm a pussy with a beer in his hand."

Sarah says, "Mark... Stop it."

The man looks at her. "Can we go now?"

"Are you sincerely asking me, or are you just being a jackass?"

"I'm just being a jackass."

"I thought so." She turns back to Mark. "Finish your beer. Take your time."

The man crosses his arms, mutters something under his breath.

Sarah glares at him. "What was that?"

"Nothing," he says, standing. "I'll be waiting at the car."

"All right," Sarah says. "You do that."

The man stands outside the bar and lights a cigarette. He looks up and down the vacated street, sees a few parked cars. He walks down the road and stops next to an old station wagon. He looks inside and sees a folded-up baby stroller and an empty baby carriage. He continues smoking the cigarette. Something tickles his ears, almost to the point that he doesn't notice. It is almost inaudible, and for a moment he thinks it is a helicopter. He tries to identify the sound, but he hears the door to the bar opening. He turns and sees Mark waving at him: "We're leaving," the boy says. The man looks up into the empty sky and drops the cigarette. It burns down to the filter by the time they're in the RAV4 and heading down the interstate.

They reach Odessa by 5:15. It is a somewhat large city, now abandoned. A ghost town. Mark asks if they should stop here for the night. The man tries to hold back his tongue, fails: "If we wouldn't have spent an hour at the bar, then we may be on the other side of Kansas City right now."

"An hour wouldn't get us that far," Sarah says.

"Whatever," the man retorts. "We'll go to the next town. What town is it?"

The map is unfolded in Mark's lap. "Bates City. It's not too far. Maybe twenty miles."
"All right," the man says. "We can make it there in time. We'll just have to speed."
They leave Odessa behind.
It is 5:20. Sunset is coming soon.

The highway is lined with cornfields on either side. The sun sinks lower and lower before them, and the shadow lingering behind the body of the RAV4 grows longer and longer. Darkness begins to weave between the broken and destitute corn-stalks. They pass a sign: BATES CITY, 5 MILES. The man is nervous, his heart fluttering in his chest. *We should have stayed at Odessa.* His eyes keep drawing themselves to the setting sun, sinking lower and lower, threatening to extinguish, to hang its head in defeat to the twilight. No one says much. Katie grips the arms of her seat, knuckles white. Sarah bites her lip. Mark stares into the cornfields. No one tells the man, *We told you so.* Blame-shifting isn't what's at stake here, not anymore. Everyone knows what happens when the sun's rays are extinguished, when darkness comes. An S.U.V. won't protect them against—

"Shit!" the man shouts, yanking the car to the side.

The RAV4 shakes, something rolling underneath the wheels, and then there comes a frightening sound: the gushing of a liquid underneath their feet. Katie swirls around in her seat, looks back, sees the skeleton of a buck deer pulverized and falling apart, the antlers broken and lying in pieces around the flattened skull. "We're leaking something!" she shouts. "It's something black, something—"

"It's gasoline," the man growls. "How the hell didn't I see that?"

"It was dark," Mark says under its breath.

"The antlers must have torn the fuel line. *Shit.*"

The vehicle rolls to a stop, the engine light blinking.

The man sits back in the seat. "We're out of gas," he says, voice pitched.

Mark stares out his window, into the darkening fields.

"We're stranded," he says.

Sarah says, "The next town is only, what, three or four miles?"

"There's no way we can make that on foot," Katie moans.

The man kicks open his door. "We have to try."

II

They leave the RAV4 behind, and it vanishes in the distance, entombed in shadows. The placid cornrows on either side of the highway, separated from the highway by a shallow ditch with overgrown weeds, trot past them as their legs carry them forward. They have left their baggage behind: the man carries the WINCHESTER rifle, Sarah and Mark hold the two M16s, and Katie is equipped with the BERETTA pistol.

The man's lungs are afire, as if Hell itself has swallowed them in its depths, and his side aches and burns, the stitches sliding free, blood trickling down his side, underneath his shirt, a warm current in the icy spring breeze.

Mark stumbles and falls, his injuries returning in full display, and his strength is evaporated. Sarah and Katie grab him by the arms and pull him forward.

The sun continues to set, the shadows growing longer. The sun is suddenly split down the middle, and the man realizes that there is a bridge ahead. *An exit.* The others see it as well, and they pick up their pace. The race is on: the muscles in their legs versus the steady descent of the maroon-red sun.

And behind them, the referee: the rising full moon, pale and smiling at the plight of earth's inhabitants.

The shouts and cries of the dark-walkers emerge in the distance, but the distance cannot be measured. In the still silence, broken only by their ragged breathing and the sound of their shoes thudding against the pavement, the wails of the dwellers of the night could be five miles away—or a quarter-mile.

They near the bridge, and they see that atop the bridge is a train: slick and sleek, a mottled white, with tinted windows along the body of the carriages. At the head of the train is the engine, streamlined and white. A red painted stripe runs down along the length of the train, and there are several painted American flags. Along the side it reads AMTRAK. It is no exit into a town, but only a bridge for the Amtrak service. The four travelers turn off the road, push through the corn, and climb a steep rise slick with mud from previous rains. They file up onto the steel train-track, and they face the train. They exchange glances and move forward, saying nothing, hearts racing, lungs expanding and deflating with wicked speed. They move around the front of the train. The man finds the door, elevated off the ground, and he tries to open it. It's locked. He looks over at the others. The cries of the dark-walkers are growing louder: they can smell their prey, the sweet scent of uninfected flesh.

Katie moans, "We should have stayed in Odessa..."

The man leans the rifle against the side of the train and kneels down. He can see a small latch. The baggage compartment. "Sarah," he says. "Your gun." She hands him the M16. He steps back, pulls the trigger. The gun-blast roars. His ears ring.

The intermittent shot brings about an unearthly silence, and then the shouts of the dark-walkers become louder.

Katie turns and stares out into the corn from atop the bridge, and she can see great swathes being torn through the stalks. "They're coming..." Tears speckle in her eyes.

The man tosses the assault rifle to the ground and grabs the broken lock. He wrenches the hatchway down, and he steps back as dusty duffel bags and suitcases fall at his feet. He reaches inside, grabs more luggage, yanking them out. He carves a tunnel through the baggage, and he crawls inside, moving upwards in the darkness. His fingers grope around in the blackness. He can hear the muffled talking of the others outside. He finds what he is looking for, a latch, and he twists it. It unlocks, and he scurries forward a few more inches, pushes upwards with his hand. The hatchway opens, revealing the inside of the driver's quarters. He shouts back to the others, crawls out into the room. There are bare white walls, several posters and calendars, their decrees lost in the darkness. The air is stagnant and thick. He turns and helps Katie up, and she moves to the side. Mark and Sarah come up the chute.

When everyone has gathered, bringing with them their own weapons and the man's WINCHESTER, the man closes the hatch.

There is the sound of shattering glass, and the man's heart leaps in his throat. He settles down when Sarah appears, carrying a fire-safety hatchet that is nearly four feet long. She pushes the man out of the way and wedges the axe's head against the door, and the end of the handle is pressed up against the opposite wall.

The corridor is tight, and the man is thankful.
Katie's face is wet with cold sweat. "Now what?"

They abandon the driver's engine. The individual carriages are connected by enshrouded walkways. They enter one of the passenger carriages. There are oak tables with booths along one wall, and along the other are half-circle couches facing the walkway; within the crescent space created by the swooping couches are glass tables. The floor is littered with broken dishes, wine-glasses, and rotted food. The PLEXIGLAS windows along the walls bring in shafts of moonlight from the east, and to the west, the last dying rays of the sun are disappearing behind the endless miles of corn.

"Where are the vampires?" Katie asks.

"It isn't night yet," Sarah says. "They're staying in the corn until the sun's gone."

"Oh," Katie says, looking out towards the sun. "That won't be long."

"No," the man says. "It won't... Come on." He moves forward.

"Where now?" Sarah asks.

"Away from these windows," the man says. "They'll be able to see us."

"They're plate glass," she says. "They can't get in."

"Trust me. They'll find a way. They'll have all night."

"Where's Mark?" Katie asks.

They have moved three cars down, more carriages with windows and dining.

The man turns around, looks over his shoulder, sees only the women. "Shit."

Sarah turns to backtrack; the man grabs her by the shoulder. "No."

She turns, glares at him. "We have to get him. We can't leave him."

"We're not," the man says. "You guys keep going. I rode an Amtrak once, in San Diego. They have dining cars, and then they have sleeping quarters. Amtraks go cross-country, even from the Pacific to the Atlantic, or from Mexico to Canada. If we find the sleeping quarters, we'll be safer. You two go and find them, stay there. I'll get Mark."

Sarah takes a deep breath. "All right." To Katie: "Let's go."

The man watches them depart, grips the WINCHESTER, and heads back the other way.

He moves to the next carriage. Mark isn't there. Several wine-glasses crunch underneath his feet. On into the next car he goes, and he spies Mark slouched in one of the semi-circle sofas. The man rushes over to him. Mark's eyes are closed, his breathing labored. Fresh vomit lies on the floor, dribbles off the edge of the sofa. The man sets the rifle down next to him, grabs the boy's shoulder, violently shakes him, shouting his name. Mark's eyes open, glazed and numb. The man doesn't ask Mark what he's doing, knows full well: his injuries haven't wholly healed, and the pain he is feeling is causing his body to react in quite deplorable ways. The man abandons the WINCHESTER and picks Mark up off the sofa, hefting him into his arms. "God, you're heavy..." he mutters. Mark breathes on him, that awful, sickly, sweet smell of nausea. The man makes his way back towards the next carriage, says, "What did I tell you, Mark? You shouldn't have drank that fucking—"

Something slams against the window, jarring his concentration; the man falls against one of the dining tables, the corner digging into his back. He lets out a shout, releases Mark, and they tumble to the floor together. The man picks himself up, looks out the window.

A single dark-walker stands there, grinning at him with a demonic Cheshire smile.

"Aw, shit," the man says under his breath.

The dark-walker places its hands on the window, the pale palms twin full moons.

The man looks back down to Mark, who is crawling along the floor. He vomits again.

"Mark," the man says. "Mark, we need to move *now*."

The boy looks up, past the man, asks, weakly, "Why are they... waiting?"

The man follows his line of sight.

Outside the window, thirty or forty dark-walkers are positioned in a line along the lip of the bridge, facing west. The sun has completely gone now, and they have emerged from the cornfields. None of them move forward, except for the single man standing in front of the PLEXIGLAS window, watching them with that god-forsaken grin. "I don't know..." the man says. He looks right into the eyes of the single dark-walker, and he feels nothing but coldness and pleasure looking straight back at him. It is something different. He has looked them in the eyes before, has experienced nothing but that bitter and lifeless stare. But he looks into this dark-walker's eyes, and he feels something extraordinarily... *human*. Maybe not human, perhaps semi-human, or sub-human. But it is a step up from the animalistic nature of the creatures. This monster, this fiend, this dweller of the night, he is something different, something inexplicable, something the man cannot quite put into words.

It is something that makes shivers trace up the man's spine.

The man turns away from the figure behind the glass.

Mark is getting to his feet.

The man stands, takes Mark's hand, and they move towards the next carriage.

The man glances behind them, and the dark-walker hasn't followed them, except with his eyes: those bottomless, quasi-human eyes trace their journey, and the grin never leaves his narrow and emaciated face.

The next carriage is a dining car as well, and the floor is littered with bones, tattered pieces of clothing not eaten by the mice and moths. They hardly acknowledge them, a sight all too common in this new and frightening world. The man understands: *they were caught in the train, unable to escape, and when the power finally went out, the train rolled to a stop with its cargo. When they awoke, they could not get out, were forced to dine on one another, to reenact 'The Donner Party', and the last remaining dark-walkers had to fight for survival, and then the winners became the losers as they suffered the worst fate of all: starvation and death.* The tips of the man's shoes kick skulls haphazardly across the floor. There is a tiny skull, perhaps belonging to an infant, and it is crushed underneath the man's shoe, the bones splintering and folding atop of one another. Through the windows, illuminated in the pale moonlight, are the dark-walkers, naked and emaciated, shivering, but not moving. Staring forward, into the train, watching their prey, but not advancing. The man pushes into the next carriage, Mark right behind him.

They've reached the first of the sleeping quarters. The man shouts out Sarah's name, and a door down the corridor slides open. She waves at him. The man reaches her, and she takes Mark, pulls him into the room. The man ducks inside. It is a small room, with two beds: one is up against the window, and the other is atop of it on a loft. There is a single window, with the blinds pulled over it. There is a dusty laptop sitting on a chair in the corner, and a small fridge filled with warm bottles of water. Katie sits on the floor, knees tucked to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs. Sarah helps Mark over to the bed, and he lies down. She grabs a bottle of AVON water, screws off the cap, hands it to him. He drinks it in small sips, his body shaking.

The man asks what's happening to him.

She looks over, replies, "He's in shock. We need to get him warm."

"I thought shock had to do with blood. He's just in pain."

"He's in psychological shock. It's something different."

Katie stands, begins ripping blankets from the top bunk. "Will these work?" she asks.

"Good thinking," Sarah says.

She turns around to say something to the man, but he has gone, sliding the door shut.

III

The man exits the sleeping quarters carriage and returns to the dining cars. Outside the windows, illuminated under the pale moonlight, the dark-walkers stand silent and staring forward, into the cars. He avoids their eyes. He pushes through the final accordion walkway between the carriages and sees his gun lying on the floor in the next car. The ominous figure still stands where he had been standing before, and the scowl across his features returns to a strange grin. The man doesn't pay him attention, grabs the WINCHESTER off the floor.

He turns to return to the others, but an undeniable curiosity accosts him. He slowly spins upon his heels, and he faces the figure in the window. There is something about that creature... No, *creature* doesn't seem quite right. There is something *more* in those eyes. When you look into the eyes of the others, you feel nothing but deadness. But there is a certain electricity that travels from the eyes of this odd dark-walker, passing through the PLEXIGLAS window and meeting the man in his rooted position amidst the sofas and booths. The man feels an ethereal uneasiness at the monster's liveliness, and he finds himself moving forward.

His face is now inches from the window, and his heartbeat accelerates at the close proximity. They face one another, their eyes connecting, and the man is overcome with a hypnotic blend of terror, dread... and awe. He is in a trance, and his own eyes go wide as the creature suddenly moves, wrenching its head back, throwing its eyes to the full pale moon. Its throat warbles with its cry, a shrill, deep-throated, and rasping shriek that lodges the man's own sterile heart in his own mirrored throat.

The cry is answered by the others, and their rank-and-file assemblage along the bridge's railing is broken.

They blitzkrieg the carriage in a maddening rush.

The dark-walkers throw themselves into the side of the carriage, lifting the heavy wheels off the steel track. The man loses his balance and falls backwards, the gun sliding from his hand. The carriage is tilted at a steep angle, and the man rolls across the floor and slams into the legs of one of the tables. The leg snaps and the lip of the table falls down next to him, splinters emerging from the shattered wood. The carriage groans and falls back into place; several dark-walkers are caught under the wheels, limbs severed, bodies crushed, but the others return to the bridge's railing, take a deep breath, and rush after the carriage again, oblivious to their fallen comrades: a new development. The man leaps to his feet, grabs the edge of a sofa to steady himself as the carriage lifts up once more. It rocks back down into its original position, and the impact against the ground sends cracks through several of the glass windows. The man bends down, grabs the WINCHESTER, and he looks up as one of the windows shatters. A dark-walker struggles to get inside. "Fuck me sideways," the man growls. He begins moving backwards towards the other cars, and he raises the gun and fingers the trigger. The gunshot is deafening, and the bullet carves through the creature's forehead; the fiend topples to

the floor, bleeding out amidst the skeletons. The man turns and runs as more pile into the carriage. He hears another window shatter as he reaches the next dining car.

Sarah is standing in the hallway, gripping the M16 in white-knuckled fingers. She sees the man appear. He swings around, facing the opposite direction, fires another shot. She yells at him. He turns, sees her, runs over. She asks what happened. He tells her there's no time to explain.

They duck inside the cramped quarters. Katie is standing next to the bed where Mark is lying. Sarah and the man shut the door, and the man grabs Mark, yanks him out of the bed. Mark stumbles against the wall, dazed. He collapses to the floor, weak.

Sarah and the man wedge the end of the bunk-bed against the door. They step back.

Katie kneels down next to Mark, trying to comfort him. He turns to the side and vomits. A cold sweat pours down his face.

Katie stands, moves to the window covered by the blinds.

The man sets the WINCHESTER at Mark's feet and takes the other M16. He and Sarah stare at the door, can hear dark-walkers inside the corridor. The man looks at her, puts a finger to his mouth: *Shhh*.

Katie turns, fingers the blinds, pulls them away.

Her scream makes Sarah and the man turn around, and the man can see the figure with the otherworldly eyes standing with its face in the window, grinning at them, mocking them in their demise. The man rushes forward, elbows Katie out of the way, draws the blinds back over the window. He glares at Katie, who is up against the wall, next to Mark.

Sarah shouts, points to the door.

The dark-walkers are throwing themselves against it.

The man aims the M16 at the door, yells at Katie: "You fucking gave us away!"

Katie shakes her head, face pale as freshly-fallen snow. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

"Fucking bitch," the man says, moving up next to Sarah.

Sarah mutters under her breath, "This wouldn't be an issue if you hadn't left."

The dark-walkers continue hurling themselves against the sliding wooden door.

"They're going to get in," Sarah says.

"I know," the man says.

"We don't have anywhere to go," Sarah says.

The door begins to splinter.

The man curses. "I know."

Katie wails: "I'm so sorry! I'm so fucking sorry!"

The man's eyes are glazed over.

Sarah looks at him. "What's wrong?" she asks.

"What the fuck *isn't* wrong?" he replies.

"You don't look so good."

The man turns away from her. "Katie."

"I'm sorry!" she weeps, tears streaming down her face.

"Katie. Give me your gun."

She pulls the BERETTA pistol out of her belt, hands it over.

The man flicks checks the magazine. Full. He flicks back the safety.

"I'd prefer you use the M16," Sarah says, confused.

The man looks at the door, splinters emerging in various places.

"We can't go out like this," the man says. "We can't... We've seen what they do."

Sarah understands, but she doesn't want to. "No..."

Part of the door splinters, a hole, and a pale arm emerges, groping with knobby fingers and overgrown fingernails.

The man takes a deep breath. "There's too many of them."

"We can shoot them as they come through..."

"There's at least forty. Maybe fifty of them. We can't get all of them."

"You can't do this."

The man ignores her, turns around, faces Katie crying in the corner.

Katie looks up at him, and she sees it: he is pointing the gun at her. Her tears stop, and her eyes go wide, her body tensing. She tries to understand, tries to make it all make sense, but all she can hear is the man calling her a bitch, and now all she can see, with that refrain playing over and over in her mind, is the pistol pointed right at her. Sarah stands in the man's shadow, and she lowers the M16, begins to cry. The pounding against the door grows louder, more intense. Sarah looks at the ground. Katie looks at the man, can see the coldness in his eyes, the placid resolution. "No..." Katie moans. "No..."

The man chokes on his words. "I'm sorry..."

Katie falls to her knees, begins crawling across the floor. "Please... Please..."

The man follows her with the gun. His trigger finger shakes.

She wraps herself around his legs, squeezing him tightly, begging, pleading.

He can feel her breath against his knees.

He can feel her heartbeat through his pants.

The breath he will put an end to.

The heart he will extinguish.

"Please..." she moans, squeezing his legs tightly. "Please..."

Her tears return, soaking his jeans.

"I'm so sorry," the man says. He places the cold barrel against the top of her skull.

"Don't do this..." Katie looks up at him, shoving the gun away. "Please... Don't..."

He now places the barrel on her forehead, bites his lip, looks away.

"Please..." Her cries bounce around inside his head, a morbid symphony.

"I'm sorry," the man repeats, knowing nothing but her wrapped around his legs and the gun placed against her clammy skin. "I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry, but... But you won't feel a thing this way."

The gunshot screams.

And Katie continues screaming.

Sarah throws herself against the man, hurling him into the wall. His shoulder throbs with the impact, and he spins around. She is upon him, her M16 lying on the floor, and she begins delivering punches into his face, attacking him physically as well as verbally with a slur of insults as giant tears gush down her face. He grabs her by the arms, turns her around, pushes her into the wall.

He steps back, shouts, "I didn't shoot her! I didn't shoot her!"

He points at Katie, who is on the ground, screaming, grasping her head in her hands.

Her unscathed head.

Sarah stares at her.

She heard the gunshot,

she saw the gun against Katie's head,

Mark didn't have a gun, and she didn't fire a single shot.

Sarah looks over at the man, who is now beside the window. He draws back the blinds and steps back. In the middle of the PLEXIGLAS window is lodged an arrow bolt, and the bolt has passed through the back of the strange dark-walker's skull, exploding out the other side and lodging into the glass. Now the dark-walker's eyes are lifeless, but yet his grin remains. Bright light washes over the man's eyes, and he shields them with a hand. He gets closer to the window and looks out. He can see a large vehicle parked in the street, and there are spotlights washing over the train, and he can make out shadowy figures, men with guns, firing at dark-walkers running back and forth along the bridge.

The man ducks down from the window.

He says, "Things either got a lot better, or they just got a lot worse."

IV

There is the sound of gunfire within the train. The dark-walkers at the door abandon their clawing frenzy, and the sounds of their feet rushing back towards the dining cars causes the man to move forward. The man grabs the bunk-bed and pulls it away from the door. Sarah wipes tears away from her eyes, kneels down next to Katie. Mark has curled into a fetal position on the floor, knows nothing except coldness and sweating. The man slides the splintered door to the side, and holding the BERETTA tightly, maneuvers into the abandoned corridor. Mud stains the carpet from the dark-walkers' bare feet. He looks towards the dining cars, through the accordion, sees nothing but shadows. He hears movement behind him, swings around, raises the pistol. There is a figure standing in the accordion to the next car, and he raises a handheld crossbow in one hand, and with the other waves back at the man in desperation: "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

The man doesn't lower the pistol. "Who are you?" he demands.

The reply: "Your only hope."

The man licks his lips, feels sweat on his brow. "That's not enough."

"Then let me leave in peace," the newcomer says. "Once they regroup and form a new strategy, they'll return. You may be content staying here, but I'm not. So just let me turn and walk away."

The man says nothing.

The newcomer asks, "What will it be, then?"

Sarah and Katie take Mark in their arms, and they follow the man. The man follows the newcomer through the back of the train, an open door busted open with some sort of weak dynamite. The hinges of the door lie amidst the train tracks, still smoldering, the smoke rising wistfully into the night air. The four of them follow the newcomer around the side of the bridge. There are more armed men carrying automatic weapons. They descend down the steep embankment, and the man slips in the mud. He picks himself up, tosses a casual glance to Sarah, and they nervously reach the highway that passes underneath the Amtrak bridge. The large vehicle is a renovated school bus. Along the side it reads, visible in the backwash of the gigantic spotlights hooked onto the edges of the hood, PARK HILL SCHOOL DISTRICT. The yellow paint is mottled. Atop the bus, the roof is ringed with a makeshift railing, and men with sniper rifles and night-vision scopes laugh amongst themselves, firing into the corn. The dark-walkers are gathering a quarter mile away, ducking low to avoid being shot. More men are guarding the entrance to the bus. They nod and smile at the four strangers as the man with the hand-bow leads them up the steps. The man remembers his youth, climbing into the

school-bus, anxious about his first days at the Junior High. The man sees that the bus windows are reframed with solid plate glass, and the insides *and* outsides of the windows are barred. The seats have been removed, with boxes of food and supplies crowding the back, and weapon-racks near the front. A ladder leads up to the roof, an open hole being the exit and entrance. A barred steel frame separates the cab from the back of the bus. The man with the hand-bow leads them towards the back, and he helps them position Mark against several boxes. There are a handful of men off to the corner, smoking cigars and playing "Rummy" by flashlight. A whistle sounds, and the guards outside and up near the train assemble into the bus. The doors close. The man leans against a box. The engine revs, and the bus begins to move. The boxes jostle. The men on the roof continue making pot-shots into the corn. The bus does a U-turn and proceeds west, the floodlights splashing over the empty road. The man turns, peers over the boxes, can see out the top of the back window. The bridge disappears into the shadows, but he can barely make out dark-walkers returning to the bridge, grabbing at their fallen companions, dragging them into the corn.

One of the men playing "Rummy" stands and approaches them. He pulls the stubby cigar from his mouth, exhales a puff of smoke. "Give us your weapons," he growls.

The man grips the pistol in his hand, suddenly wary.

The man with the hand-bow steps forward. "It's all right."

The man shakes his head. "We'll hold onto them."

Hand-Bow Man says, "It's just for the ride. We'll give them back."

Sarah quietly shakes her head, *No*.

"We're not bandits," Hand-Bow Man says. "No more than you are. If we were bandits, we would have left you to rot. Besides, you weren't forced to come here. You were invited. And when you're invited into someone else's house, you take your shoes off at the door. You know?"

"But when you take off your shoes," the man retorts, "your host doesn't pick them up and beat you with them."

"We're not going to harm you," he says. "I give you my word."

The man with the cigar continues smoking, uninterested.

Hand-Bow Man says, "Give us your weapons, or you can step off the bus."

Sarah stands, hands him her M16. "We left the rifle and the other M16 on the train."

"Thank you," Hand-Bow Man says. To the man: "And your pistol."

The man curses, hands it over.

The man with the cigar says, "Your knife, too."

The man curses again, draws the knife from the sheath on his belt, hands it over.

Hand-Bow Man looks it over. "You were in the Marines?"

"No. But I know how to use it like one."

"All right."

"I want it back. When we get to where we're going, I want it back."

"All right. I'll see what we can do." He looks over at the boy lying beside the boxes, shivering. "And we'll get some blankets for your friend. Mind giving me a hand?"

There are several crates at the front. Hand-Bow Man sets his own weapons and the weapons from the others in one of the weapon racks, and he begins sifting through the crates. He pulls out several blankets, hands them to the man. They return to the back of the bus. Sarah and Katie take the blankets, wrap Mark tightly.

More gunshots can be heard overhead. The bus rocks for a moment.

Hand-Bow Man grins. "It sounds like we're going through Bates City right now. There's always a lot of them out this way. Some time ago, some travelers holed up in this town. They were overrun. Most of the buildings are old, hard to fortify. You were safer in the train, anyways." He sits down, leans against one of the boxes. He extends a hand. "Nathan Gambill."

The man sits down next to him, shakes his hand. Gives him his name.

"Where you people coming from?"

"Cincinnati."

"How long ago did you leave?"

"I don't know. A while ago. It feels like that, anyways."

"Cincinnati's only... less than a one-day trip from here."

"We ran into some problems along the way."

"That's the usual story."

The man looks out the window, sees the looming moon. He turns his attention back to Nathan. "You're not a raider, are you, Nathan?" His words are more of a statement than a question.

"No. We're not rogues, if that's what you mean."

"You're just travelers."

"No. We're from New Harmony, actually." He boasted with the identity.

"New Harmony?"

"Never heard of it? Trust me: your days of running are over. You'll *love* it there."

V

The school bus merges off the highway onto Route 4. The road gracefully curves south, the town of Grain Valley with its gas stations and supermarkets and business complexes and subdivisions sprawled out on either side of the road. The man looks out the window to the left and sees a small airport, The East Kansas City. There is a Learjet sitting outside one of the hangars against the road. His heart aches for flight, a small passion that had been extinguished in the clamor for survival. He turns his eyes away from the airstrip. The subdivisions to the right disappear, replaced with overgrown meadows and gatherings of trees bursting in their spring décor. The bus slows down and turns onto another street, Brizendine Road. Several dark-walkers in the street stand illuminated in the wash of the floodlights, and they quickly scatter to the sides of the road, throwing themselves into the ditches to the left or into the trees on the right. There is a golf course to the side of the road, and a hotel: ELK'S LODGE. Up the road, Brizendine intersects with Mize Road, and the bus turns left. The man can see flagpoles at the golf course, the tattered flags waving in the wind. An overturned golf cart. They pass through Adams Dairy Parkway, going straight. Business complexes on the right and a large subdivision on the left. The bus slows down, turns around. Hand-Bow Man says, "I was wondering where he was going. It's easy to get lost. The signs on the roads are faded." The bus returns to Adams Dairy Parkway and turns right, heading south. The road goes on for several miles, passing the opposite end of the golf course; "We had to go up and around, because there's a big two-prop plane crashed on the road. Probably was taking off from the airport when the disease came, and the pilot died. The plane went down with him." The road enters into the country, and they pass more cornfields and several silos rising serenely in the darkness. The paved road soon becomes a dirt road, and the bus lurches and groans, spitting up dust and gravel. The floodlights dance over a structure straight ahead: a mansion enshrined with a humongous stone wall.

Several dark-walkers pour from the cornfields, chasing after the bus. The men on the roof scale down the ladder, setting their sniper rifles into the racks. The bus stops at the front gate. The gate creaks open, the hinges rusted. Dark-walkers surround the bus, clawing at the windows, wrapping their hands around the wrought-iron bars.

"Why don't you kill them?" the man asks.

"It would destroy the fun," Hand-Bow Man says with a strange smile.

The gate is open, and the bus pulls forward. There is a fifty-foot expanse before them, surrounded on all sides by 20-foot-tall stone walls. The bus comes to a stop before the next gate that opens up into the lawn of the mansion. The man moves forward in the bus, stands behind the barred gate separating the cab from the back of the bus. He peers through the windshield and can see several more figures moving in the lawn, massive stand-alone spotlights casting their long shadows across the well-manicured grass. The gate behind them closes, and the bus is enclosed.

The driver looks back at the man, grins: "Ever seen a magic show before?"

"I've seen them on television," the man says. "Back in the day."

"Not one like this, you haven't." The driver reaches down, flicks a switch.

Suddenly the sides of the bus ignite with brilliant heat, and a pair of flame-throwers along the bottom of the bus begin to operate, slowly rotating back and forth, coating the area around the bus with fire. The dark-walkers scream, their bodies igniting, and the flame-throwers extinguish. The man watches with morbid pleasure as the dark-walkers writhe about on the ground, their limbs rotting in the fire; their skin sputters and pops, and their hair goes up like torches. They settle down, now nothing but roasting flesh, smoldering cinders.

The next gate opens and the bus pulls through, into the mansion's lawn.

"The tanks are along the undercarriage," the driver says.

"That can't be safe."

"We take precautions."

"You're still driving a napalm bomb on wheels."

The bus comes to a stop in the lawn, facing the mansion. The gate behind them closes. The driver stops the engine, stands, stretches, unlocks the gate to the back of the bus. The man streams past as men exit the bus, going around to the back. There is a *click* as the makeshift door to the back of the bus is opened. A forklift appears from the side, and it begins ferrying out the boxes. The man steps down into the grass. It is spongy beneath his feet. The others ignore him. He moves away from the bus, looks at the elaborate mansion, something that could have been pulled straight out of Victorian England. Along the sides of the mansion, next to what had at one time been a pool but is now nothing but a cement hollow in the ground, are three parked Agusta helicopters. Men are laughing amongst themselves as they siphon fuel into the engines. The man feels strange standing in total ease amongst the darkness. He can hear dark-walkers clamoring in the distance, but the walls keep them safe. Hand-Bow Man appears beside him, says, "Come on. We'll get you guys set up. And we'll take care of your friend. He's doing better, but he needs to sleep. His body is pretty battered up."

The mansion was built in the late 1900s, fashioned after Victorian architecture present in along the East Coast in the pre-Civil War era in America. The mansion is three stories tall, with a brownstone exterior. The bushes that had once been well-kept along the fringes of the house are now decayed, choked by the fumes from the helicopters. Dead ivy crawls along the side of the house. Hand-Bow Man leads them around the cobblestone patio encircling a dead fountain with leaves rotting within

the shallow bowl. The large front doors are held open, and they stand amazed at the front hall. Elaborate wall paintings and stained-glass windows are illuminated by the candlelight of several mounted oil torches. A large chandelier hangs above them. The man leads them up the large staircase, and the next hallway is lined with coats-of-arms, figures in chain mail and holding axes and swords, ghostly helmets with shadowed eye slits. The furniture in the rooms they pass is taken straight from the Italian Renaissance and French Neoclassicism styles. The carpet under their feet has been imported from Glasgow, Scotland. The man stands outside a door, ushers them inside. Mark begins to enter, but two men appear, and they take him away. Sarah, Katie, and the man enter the room. At one time it was a Turkish smoking room, and the furniture is still intact. Behind a desk sits a heavyset man with spectacles, smoking an expensive cigar. Two oil lamps burn on the corners of the desk. He looks up at them and leans back in the chair, asks them to sit. The three newcomers take their seats along a single Turkish sofa.

"This is how it goes from here," the heavyset man says. "Give me your names and your former occupations."

Katie gives her name, says she was a bartender.

Sarah gives her name, says she was a receptionist for an Oncologist lab.

The man gives his name, says he was a commercial airline pilot.

"What about your other friend?" the cigar-smoking man asks.

"His name is Mark," the man says.

"And what did he do?"

"I don't remember," the man says. "He doesn't really ever talk about it."

The man with the cigar takes all of this down. He looks up. "Where are you from?"

"Cincinnati," the man says.

"Ohio?"

"Yes." Then, "I didn't know there was another Cincinnati."

"I'm just making sure. How long have you been on the road?"

The man searches for an answer. "I don't know."

He looks at the others. They just shake their heads.

The man says, "It feels like months. But it may only be one... At the most."

The man with the cigar says, "It's June 4th today."

The man does the math in his head. "About a month, then. We left in May."

"Only four of you have been traveling?"

"Only four now," the man says.

"How many were there when you began the trip?"

Sarah stands from the sofa. "Is this really necessary?"

"It's book-keeping," he replies. "Sit down. And tell me how many."

She steps forward to protest; the man stands, grabs her by the shoulder.

The man says, "Cameron... Anthony... Kyle... Seven of us."

The man with the cigar nods to himself. "I've seen worse."

Sarah wrenches away from the man, approaches the desk. She leans over the desk, hands sprawled on the cold wood paneling. "They were fucking *people*, not fucking *numbers*."

The man with the cigar leans back in his chair, sets the pen down on the pad of paper, crosses his arms. "Everyone's lost someone, Love. When you count 'em up, what ya get is numbers. When all is said and done, numbers are all that remain. Names fade. How many people died in the Holocaust? Six million, right? Or something like that."

Sarah curses. "That has nothing to do with—"

She is cut off: "How many of their names do you know? How many individual faces do you see? It was a tragedy, but all we have now are numbers. I'm not downplaying what you've been through. I lost my wife and both my children to this disease. But in the end, all we have are numbers. Numbers speak the truth. Names... They don't matter anymore." Sarah just glares at him. The man continues, "My wife's name was Emily. My son's name was Jonathan. My daughter's name was Alicia. But when it comes to the books, all I write down is a number: *three*. Because no one, except for me, cares about their names. You don't care about the family I lost, and frankly, I don't give a flying *fuck* about who you have lost."

VI

A man outside the Turkish smoking room leads them down a hall and up another flight of steps. The stairwell leads to another corridor, much darker, with only a few candles. They are taken to what had, at one time, been a guest bedroom. There is a single bed with a silk canopy, several ornate pillows and satin sheets. Mounted candlesticks have been lit preceding their arrival. There are several shelves with Chinese pottery, and opposite the wall with the vanity and its clean mirror are several makeshift cots with blankets and pillows. The man tells them that Mark is being given preferential treatment, and, noticing the bloodstain on the man's shirt from where his wound has opened, the man says that the doctor will be with him shortly. He points to a doorway at the end of the room: "That's the bathroom. The plumbing has been fixed, and you have running hot water. There are towels and several toothbrushes and some toothpaste. Even some razors and shaving gel. We'll get you some new clothes. Feel free to freshen up." He smiles and leaves.

Katie rushes over to the bathroom, nearly knocking Sarah out of the way. She opens the door and goes inside. A moment later they hear running water and a shout of glee. She closes the door, says, "I'm first," and she leaves Sarah and the man alone in the room.

Sarah sits upon the bed. Her veins are still bulging, face flushed red.

The man sits down next to her. "You're still angry with him."

"He's an insensitive bastard. It seems there's no one decent left."

The man bites his lip. "There's me."

Sarcasm drapes her words: "Oh, you're *quite* the shining example of decency."

The man tries to comfort her, but she explodes: "Just shut the fuck up, okay? Don't pretend to be empathetic towards me. Cameron. Anthony. Kyle. The others at the church. They've never been names to you. Only numbers."

The man's throat tightens. "They're not numbers to me."

"You're full of shit."

"To *him*, they're numbers. *Not* to *me*."

She turns her head, glares at him with wrathful eyes. "How many people were onboard your plane when it happened? How many?"

The number stains his memory.

He remembers walking up and down the aisles,
the absolute terror amidst the pall of death.

"One hundred fifty two."

"And what were their names?" she asks.

He is silent.

"That's what I thought. Just numbers."

"Some things change."

She shakes her head. "Nothing changes. Only our perceptions of them. I can see through the bullshit, see you for who you really are: a sick, selfish, son of a bitch who can't man up to the fact that you stabbed your own fucking fiancé."

Rage surges through his veins as if a burst of electricity has cut through him. He stands, yearns to hit her across the face, but he refrains. His hand shakes with absolute madness. He curses under his breath and moves away, around the foot of the bed, walks to the door. He grips the handle, opens it. He looks back, sees her still sitting on the bed, her back to him. "Please," he snarls, "Don't put me on a pedestal." He disappears into the murky corridor and slams the door behind him.

The man found a doorway to a balcony, and now he stands there, feeling the cool breeze in his face, the distant howls of the dark-walkers and they press against the stone wall encircling the mansion, trying to break through the barrier and feast upon the smorgasbord of uninfected flesh. He hears the door to the balcony open. He turns, expecting to see Sarah, some slur of apologies, but he is disappointed to see Nathan. Nathan nods to the man. The man moves over to the side, lets Nathan join him. Nathan leans against the railing, watching the commotion in the yard: the supplies being loaded into the helicopters, the helicopters being refueled, the bus being maintained by a few mechanics. The man withdraws his pack of cigarettes and lights one up. He offers one to Nathan, but Nathan says, "No, thanks. I don't smoke." They stand quietly. It's nearly midnight.

The man looks over at Nathan. "So what's up with the fucking crossbow?"

"It's not a crossbow," Nathan says. "It's a hand-bow. I have a crossbow, it's larger. I prefer them: they're silent, and they're just as deadly and accurate as a rifle. The hand-bow is smaller, has less range and accuracy, but it's easier to reload and can be fired quickly."

"Why not just use a gun?"

"I don't like guns."

"You're a Democrat."

Nathan laughs. "No. Pure-blooded Republican. Before the plague, I owned a hunting ranch in Colorado. I mostly stuck to the hunting rifles. REMINGTON, WINCHESTER, BROWNING. Hunters would come in with their crossbows, and I couldn't help but notice that women crawled all over them." He laughs. "So it got me thinking: crossbows attract women. In different regions, women are attracted to different things. On the East Coast, women like preppy jocks with sports-cars. On the West Coast, women like the grunge appearance, guitar players, shit like that. Eskimo women, I hear, are more attractive if they're heavy-set. I'll never understand that. I think it has something to do with keeping warm? It's pretty cold in Alaska. Anyways. *Colorado* women, they love men with crossbows. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe the crossbow is more primitive and barbaric, and women like that. I started practicing more and more with the crossbow, and I fell in love with it. I felt more... manly... using one. And women were attracted to that. In fact, a certain woman, named Desirae, fell for me the night before the plague. I was with her when she died, sprawled under the sheets in the lodge. She resurrected, of course, and I blew her away with my cross-bow. Define irony: what drew her to me is what killed her... Well, killed her *again*, anyways. The bolt shattered her sternum and pierced her heart. Came out the opposite end. I still have it. Framed it. It's back at New Harmony."

"This isn't New Harmony?" the man asks.

"This? Oh, no. This is just checkpoint. New Harmony is in Kansas City, a few miles from here. Downtown. Within the first few months of New Harmony being founded, refugees flooded in from every direction. We told them about it over the radio, before the radio stopped working. Something

about the satellites in orbit breaking? I don't know. We soon had well over three thousand people, and feeding them was a *bitch*. We soon extinguished all food supplies from New Harmony—we get the water from the river—and so we began airlifting them in from outside the city limits. We have six checkpoints established around the city. We work 24-7 on alternating shifts. The next shift leaves in fifteen minutes, ferrying the gathered supplies back to New Harmony. And by the time they get here, the next crew will be gone and back from gathering more supplies. And the process will continue."

"You gather supplies at night?"

"We don't have a choice. The demands are too rigid. There's even talk about leaving New Harmony in the future, unless we can find a way to grow our own food. A difficult task, with the large numbers, the suburbs, and the absence of electrical engineering. It's like it was back in the 1600s. We're currently planning a trial run several miles north of the city, fortifying several hundred acres and then growing crops."

"Yes, but at night, the dark-walkers are out, and..."

"And it's dangerous, to be sure. We've lost some people. But we've gotten good at what we do. That's why we have the men with the sniper rifles and night vision goggles. We have grenades, explosives, automatic shotguns. We have an edge on the dark-walkers. But to be honest, some people are getting... anxious. It's almost as if... and slap me across the face for being ludicrous, please do... But it's almost as if they're evolving, growing smarter. Leaders are emerging. Alpha Males."

The man nods. "I know. I looked one in the eyes."

They don't talk for some time.

"Tell me about New Harmony," the man says. His cigarette is almost out.

"The Boss likes to meet everyone new. He'll explain it to you tomorrow."

The door opens again. They both turn around.

A man in a doctor's gown stands there. He gives the man's name.

"That's me," the man says.

"We're ready for you. Your friend is taken-care of. He'll be fine by morning."

"All right," the man says.

As he leaves, he pauses, turns back to Nathan: "I want my knife back."

The man is exhausted by the time he leaves the doctor's room. His side aches, freshly stitched, and he can still feel the hydrogen peroxide burning. He finds the door to the room and enters. The candles along the walls still burn. Katie and Mark sleep in the bed, lying next to one another, under the covers. The man doesn't see Sarah anywhere. He moves to one of the cots and sits down, wincing in pain. It is nearly 1:30 in the morning. He pulls out another cigarette and lights it up, the cherry burning bright.

The door to the bathroom opens and Sarah exits the bathroom, wrapped in a towel.

The man looks up, sees part of her upper thigh through the folds in the towel, and he quickly looks away. "I'm sorry."

Sarah doesn't say anything, walks over to the vanity. A set of clothes. She grabs them and walks back to the bathroom. She goes inside and shuts the door. The man continues smoking. A few moments later, the door opens again and she exits, dressed in a pair of khakis and a loose-fitting shirt. The man's eyes are drawn to her damp hair, falling over her shoulders. He looks away again. Sarah tosses a pair of clothes into his lap as she walks past: "Those are yours. We're leaving early in the morning. You'd better shower. You smell like shit."

"Thanks," the man mutters. He goes into the bathroom.

The hot water running over his body is intoxicating. For the first fifteen minutes he doesn't wash, just stands there, leaning against the shower wall, feeling the water coursing down his back, his arms, his legs, tickling his hair. He forces himself to lather up with soap and shampoo. He turns off the water, steps out of the shower. The mirror is fogged. A candle is lit upon the tall window's sill, the flame sending light in arcs about the cramped bathroom. Water drips down his legs and onto the tile floor. Kira would always yell at him—"Dry off in the shower, you're getting water everywhere!" The last time he took a hot shower was the morning he left for Germany, the morning he kissed her sweetly on the lips, told her he loved her. The last time he ever truly saw her before the disease turned her into a hell-bent monster. He stands before the mirror, sees his gaunt face, and he can spy a tear tracing down his cheek. The ambience and the atmosphere restores to life long-lost memories. He draws a subterranean breath and refuses to think about her. He quickly shaves, the stubble falling into the sink. Ten minutes later, he rubs his hands over his chin and face, feels the smoothness. He brushes his teeth for twenty minutes, trying to remove the buildup of plaque. He is standing before the mirror, looking at his new appearance, an image that could have been taken during the good days of being a pilot and being in love with a woman he could hold every morning and every night.

A knock comes at the door.

The man takes a deep breath: "What?"

Sarah's voice: "I'm sorry."

The man doesn't say anything back.

"I didn't mean it," Sarah says. "I swear I didn't mean it."

The man just stares at his own reflection, his own hollow eyes. "It's all right."

"I know you're decent," she says. "Everyone's selfish."

"Thanks," he mumbles.

"No. That's not what I... Shit."

The man turns, opens the door. She's standing there in pajamas.

"You changed," he says.

"They had pajamas in one of the drawers. I got some for you, too."

"That's okay."

She nods. "All right." She looks into his eyes. "Again, I'm sorry. Foolish words."

"Again," the man says, "it's all right. We all say... foolish things."

"Okay," Sarah says.

"Okay," the man says.

"Good night."

"Good night."

The man shuts the door, returns to the mirror.

His thoughts of Kira are gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

New Harmony

"Illusion is the first of all pleasures."

- Sir Oscar Wilde (A.D. 1854-1900)

I

The man stands outside the front doors to the mansion, smoking one of his last cigarettes. He hopes that wherever they're going, cigarettes will be readily available. He hears footsteps behind him, and Nathan emerges with the others. Katie is tired, Sarah is holding a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee, and Mark looks surprisingly well. The man continues smoking his cigarette, asks Mark how he's feeling. Mark replies that he's still somewhat weak, but feeling "capital." Sarah hands the man her cup of coffee. The man thanks her, tosses out his cigarette, begins sipping the coffee. Sarah says, "It's black. No sugar. No cream. Just how you like it." The man nods, doesn't say anything more. Nathan leads them across the lawn to the only remaining helicopter. The other two have already taken off, and the last one can be faintly heard in the distance, the steady thrum of rotating propeller blades. Nathan slides open the door to the passenger cabin, and they climb inside. The floor of the passenger cabin is padded leather, the seats are leather, the walls are leather with pockets. Underneath one of the seats is a cooler; underneath the other seat is a compartment filled with emergency flotation devices. Nathan is the last one in, and he slides the door shut, throws back the lock. They buckle up as the pilot ignites the engine, releases the propeller brake, and allows the propellers to begin their steady whine.

"This is like the helicopter from 'Jurassic Park'," Katie says as the Agusta AW109A Power Elite helicopter begins to rise off the ground. The Pratt & Whitney PW206C engine floods the helicopter with power, and soon their slow ascent becomes much quicker. The man leans to the side and peers out the PLEXIGLAS window, sees the Victorian mansion with its stone shrine disappearing beneath them, then arcing off to the right as the helicopter's rudders bring it to face west. The helicopter levels out, three thousand feet above the ground, and the man leans back in his seat, takes a deep breath, tries to relax. He wants another cigarette. And another cup of coffee. He lets the empty Styrofoam cup fall to the padded leather floor.

The helicopter flies west. No one talks. The man peers out the window, watching subdivisions and malls and parks slowly roll past. They fly over the infamous Fleming Park, with the snaking Blue Springs Lake to the north and Lake Jacomo to the south. There is an old yacht thrust against Jacomo's western shore, half-sinking and lodged in the mud. The helicopter banks northwest, and the intersecting Missouri River and Kansas River can be seen to the north. The helicopter flies over Raytown Athletic Field Park, which is adjacent to the Arrowhead Stadium and its sibling, Kauffman Stadium. The helicopter's rudders pull it west, and up ahead are several skyscrapers: downtown Kansas City, Missouri. The helicopter begins to slow, and out the window, the man can see that several of the buildings surrounding downtown have been burned to the ground; amidst the rubble

have been erected fifteen fifty-foot concrete barriers with assorted gates for the passing of vehicles. There are several guard-towers, and the man can see figures inside, the size of ants. Nathan tells him, "They're to keep out your infected and the bandits."

The helicopter is slowing now, and it flies around the Kansas City Power & Light skyscraper. It heads towards the buildings not burned down, those encompassing several city squares. There are ten large buildings held within the encompassing barriers, and Nathan rings them off his tongue. The man hardly listens. They near the largest skyscraper, a black monolithic tower: the Doubletree Downtown, once a fantastic hotel for the rich and famous. The man sees the other helicopters sitting atop a shorter building, the Westin Hotel; they are being unloaded, the goods carried inside. The helicopter descends, and the man grips the chair's armrest as it makes a quiet landing atop the Doubletree. The engine is cut, the magnetos flipped, the rotor brake ignited. The propellers whine to a slow, monotonous crawl. Men appear from the small covered doorway of the roof. They open the doors and help everyone out. They stand upon the roof, in the warm morning sun, feeling the wind ripping at their clothes. Nathan sucks in a deep breath of air, says, "Welcome to New Harmony: the final utopian society on planet earth."

II

From his perch atop the rooftop, the man can see to the north the Wheeler Downtown airport. There are several commercial airliners parked against the gates, the accordion walkways stretched to the airplane entrances. The man has not seen an intact commercial airplane for some time, and he closes his eyes, pushes back the memories of his flying days. Nathan grabs him by the arm, and the man looks at him. "This way. The Boss wants to meet you guys." His trance is shattered, and the four of them follow Nathan down the roof doorway and into the stomach of the skyscraper.

They descend several flights of stairs until they reach Level 184. They walk down the hallway until they get to the room at the end of the hall. There are several guards standing beside the door. Nathan talks to them in hushed whispers, and they step away. Nathan beckons the newcomers to come with him, and they enter the room. At one time it had been a presidential suite, with a living area, a dining room, a large bathtub, and two bedrooms. A balcony. The man notices that the lights in the room are turned on, and a radio plays some sort of jazz CD. The room is finely kept, with several sofas and chairs, a bookcase filled with books. Atop the glass coffee table are several philosophical writings. Nathan leads them to one of the bedrooms, which has been turned into an office. Behind the desk, against the window overlooking the Wheeler airport, sits a lanky man with nicely-combed auburn hair. The man looks up at them, smiles, stands. He shakes their hands, tells Nathan he can leave. Nathan slips out the door. The man introduces himself: "The name's Keith Sampson. Welcome to New Harmony. We're glad you're here."

Keith leads them to the living area, and he instructs them to sit down. Mark, Katie, and Sarah take one of the sofas, and the man sits alone on one of the cushioned chairs. "The first New Harmony was constructed in 1814. It was just called Harmony at the time, and it was founded by the Harmony Society, led by a German immigrant named Johann Rapp. It was a pietist commune. A religious society. It was built in Indiana, and when the Germans decided to move to Pennsylvania, the

community was bought by Richard Owen, a religious skeptic known worldwide. Owen sought to make a utopian society, but it eventually failed. What we have here is 'New Harmony.' It's a new experiment in communal living, and it's been working out *wonderfully*. The reason the German pietists and Richard Owen failed in their attempts is that they sought to distill the innate human nature through rules and regulations. Where they have failed, we are succeeding. A true utopian society acknowledges the nature of mankind and lets mankind live as he is *supposed* to live."

Keith crosses his arms, smiles. "Before August 11, 2011, society constrained mankind's passions. Society erected all sorts of rules and regulations to try and 'civilize' man. A foolish endeavor, don't you see? It is like taking a tiger and thrusting it into downtown New York City and demanding that it shop for its goods and pay rent for its living quarters and to not eat bloody meat. It just can't happen. Society took mankind—we are, after all, just animals—and tried to turn us into gods. The result? Vast dullness and emptiness in life. Thoreau said that the majority of men live their lives in quiet desperation. This is because they were forced to wear shoes not fit to their shoe size. What I mean is, they were forced to be something they were not. New Harmony is without constraints. We encourage everyone to live out their passions. There are three primary ingredients to what it means to be human: the need to survive, which we have accomplished. The need for community, which we have provided. And the need for sexual gratification, which we have allowed—and encouraged. No one who comes to New Harmony ever wants to leave. They find everything they are looking for, and they enjoy life even more than in the days prior to the infection."

Katie's eyes are wide at his words, and she begins to tremble in excitement,
the excitement of holding another girl close,
of feeling that companionship and love.

"The first of us came from the suburbs of Houston, Texas," Keith says. "We were wanderers at first. There were about seventeen of us, give or take. I can't remember the exact number. Before the infection, I did heating and air, even some construction work here and there. When we got to Kansas City, we found that, for some reason, there weren't many infected. We think they may have migrated south for some reason, or that there had been some sort of non-related disease that wiped out a lot of them. We came up with this crazy idea, and we got to work. Within a month, we had cleared out all the downtown buildings. We lost a good woman, Annie, during that time. She let her guard down, something she knew better than to do. We burned the outlying buildings facing downtown, and we built the first barricade. We've constructed more since then. We started broadcasting over the radio that we had a place available, and people began flocking from every direction. We have around three thousand members at the current moment-in-time, from all over the region. The refugees have been trickling, and you're the first that have arrived since the beginning of the month. I suspect you heard of us from the radio broadcasts?"

"No," the man replies. "We're on our way to Aspen."

"Aspen? Colorado?"

"Yes."

Keith laughs. "Can I give you a bit of advice?"

The man doesn't say anything.

The Boss leans forward in his chair. "*Forget Aspen.*"

The Boss leads them out of the room and to the elevator. "Yes, we have working elevators. We've been able to reestablish electricity through a series of battery-operated generators. Ninety-three of them, to be fact, monitored around-the-clock." He presses the button on the wall, and the elevator doors open. They cram inside. "Please forgive the absence of elevator music," Keith says as he

presses FR17 on the panel. The elevator descends, then opens up to a hallway. They exit. The corridor is abandoned. Keith leads them to one of the rooms and unlocks the door with a skeleton key. "Your key is sitting on the dresser in one of the bedrooms. Please get comfortable. We have hot running water and a full bar." He turns to go, pauses, turns back around. "Before I forget, there is a party tonight down in the courtyard. I encourage you guys to check it out. And Sarah?" He looks up at her, having known her name from idle chat in the elevator. "How would you feel about having dinner with me tonight?"

Sampson's words catch the man by surprise, and his blood runs cold.

Sarah looks over at the man, and he doesn't look over at her.

She turns back to The Boss. "Sure. I'd love that."

Keith grins. "Excellent. Meet me at my place at 7:30."

The man enters one of the rooms and shuts the door.

III

The man awakes, woken by a dream of Kira that fades as his eyes slowly open. He doesn't remember falling asleep, remembers only lying down. He pulls himself out of the bed. In the Twin against the opposite wall, separated by a white bedside table, sleeps Mark. The man opens the bedroom door and exits into the living area, the kitchen to the left with a large window with the blinds pulled over the glass. The living area is empty. The door to the other bedroom is shut, and he imagines Katie and Sarah are sleeping. No one got much rest back at the mansion. The man goes into the kitchen and finds the mini-bar, opens it. Several beers, a few different bottles of whiskey and rum. He closes it, rubs his eyes. He fixes coffee instead.

The door to the other bedroom opens.

Sarah comes out, wearing a blue dress, LA FEMME.

The same design Kira wore on the last night they were together.

The man pretends to ignore her as he pours coffee into a mug.

She comes up next to him, holds up two different necklaces. "Which one?"

He gives a casual glance, turns away. "I don't know."

"Choose one."

"I said I don't know."

"I can never decide."

The man stirs his coffee. It's black. Nothing to stir.

"Wear both," he says. "It'll increase your chances of getting lucky."

"It's just a dinner," Sarah interjects. "He's just being nice."

"Why are you going?" He still refuses to look at her.

"He invited me."

The man stops stirring, stares at the countertop. "Bullshit."

"You were there when he invited me."

The man eyes her. "Why'd you look at me when he asked?"

She doesn't answer.

"You're a woman," the man says. "Saying 'Yes' usually means something else."

She shakes her head. "You're reading into things."

"Why so defensive?" the man asks. "Did I strike a nerve? Perhaps play the wrong chord?"

She chooses a necklace, moves away.

The man takes a sip of his coffee, sets it back down on the counter. "Sarah." He turns and looks at her. She is standing beside the door leading into the hallway. She stops, looks over at him. The man confesses, "I don't have a good feeling about this guy."

"Thanks for the warning," she muses.

"He plays a good game, and he may be charming, but..." The man tries to choose his words, fails. "There's something in his eyes."

She's incredulous. "You're basing this off his eyes?"

"Sarah..."

"Why does it bother you so much that I'm eating dinner with him?"

"Sarah..."

"Why so defensive?" she coos. "Did I strike a nerve? Perhaps the wrong chord?"

He is quiet.

She says, "I can make my own decisions, all right? I'm not Kira. You don't have any say in what I do." She says nothing more, turns, opens the door, and slips into the hallway. She shuts the door behind her.

The man sips his coffee, gazes out the window.

The sun is setting behind the blinds.

The man has wakened Katie and Mark, and together they dress and descend the stairwell towards the courtyard. They pass through the skyscraper's lobby and walk out onto the marble steps leading to the street from the skyscraper's lobby. People are everywhere and loud music is playing. The man is amazed at the number of souls walking the street in the night. There are several booths filled with assortments of vodka and liqueur and whiskey and assorted beers. There is rave music playing down the street, and Katie breaks from the others and begins walking in that direction, remembering the times when she and Elizabeth would go to raves and pop pills and just get lost in the reverie. The man feels uncomfortable. Several girls come up, from teenagers to thirty-year-olds, flirting with Mark. Mark just nods and looks away, and the girls leave, giggling. He can see Cara's face in their eyes, and it pains him.

Mark and the man walk down the street, throngs of people crowding the sides, couples holding hands walking past. The music from the rave is getting louder, and the flashes from several whirling lights can be seen reflecting in the buildings' dark windows. The man is reminded of a small carnival in Kira's hometown that they would go to every year or so. 'Christmas in Springboro.' Caramel popcorn, Chinese food, grilled pork-chops; booths filled with carolers, church yards sporting nativity scenes, giant covered tents filled with hole-in-the-wall arts and crafts. The streets would always be packed, and you had to move out of the way to avoid getting run over by the horse-drawn carriages. The man's thoughts turn to Sarah, and he wonders how her little dinner is going.

Mark sees an odd look etched over the man's face, and he asks, "So... You and Sarah?"

"What?" the man asks.

"You and Sarah," Mark repeats.

"What about her?"

"You like her," Mark says.

"No," the man says. "No, I don't."

"Okay," Mark says.

They walk in quiet.

The man eyes the boy. "Why do you ask? Do you think I like her?"

"When I was in high school, one of my friends had this thing going with another one of my friends. He liked her, she liked him. But they never really admitted it. It became a sort of cruel game. He would go on dates to piss her off, she would date boys to piss him off. And the circle went round and round. It was pathetic, really: none of them would succumb to being the one asking the other out."

"It's not like that," the man says.

"They argued a lot, too. Always trying to undermine the other."

"It sounds like they were in love," the man sarcastically coos.

"They were," Mark says. "They were more in love than anyone I've ever met. It was a pure Shakespearian tragedy. Two lovers, unable to be united, because of their own stubbornness." The boy shakes his head. "Love is something we'll never understand. It's unpredictable, it's undeniable, it's untamable."

The man is quiet for some time. "Most of all," he says, "it's a lie."

"A lie?"

"Love's supposed to last forever. It never does."

"Maybe our preconceptions of love are flawed."

"If love doesn't last forever, then it's a brutal, cut-throat whore."

Mark breaks away, heads towards a booth. The man follows him. The woman behind the booth pours Mark four shots of ABSOLUT vodka. Mark throws them down, leans over to the side, takes several sharp breaths. He asks for some water, and as the woman reaches underneath the booth's counter, the man asks, "Drinking again?" Mark takes the water, takes several drinks, washes back the aftertaste. He says he might as well, there's nothing else to do, and they're not going anywhere.

The man says, "We're not staying here. We're still going to Aspen."

Mark coughs. "Aspen? You hated the idea."

"But when I get an idea in my head, I don't give up. We're close."

"We have everything we need here."

"This is just one big circus." The man shakes his head: "This isn't what we need."

Mark points: "Katie seems to be satisfied."

The man follows his finger, sees Katie sitting on a bench in the shadows, a girl on either side. The two girls are leaning over her breasts, passionately kissing one another, tongues entwined, and Katie's hands have slid under the hem of their pants, exploring their buttocks. The man returns his attention to Mark: "She'll feel ashamed of it in the morning. And then she'll break and want to come with us."

"Will Sarah want to leave?" Mark asks. "She seems to have met quite a nice guy."

The man flinches.

Mark laughs.

"Stop playing games with me," the man growls.

"You should drink," Mark says. "It'll take your mind off things."

"I'm tired," the man says. "I'll leave the door to the room unlocked."

The man begins heading back up the street. He ducks into a side alley to smoke a quick cigarette. The boy uses alcohol to take his mind off things, and the man uses cigarettes; there is a certain escapism experienced as the smoke fills the lungs. He takes several hits and leans against the brick wall behind him. He hears muffled noises coming from the shadows towards the back of the alley, and he steps away from the wall. He can see movement, figures moving on top of one another. His eyes slowly

adjust, and he sees several men and women, naked, crawling over one another, exploring one another. *A giant fucking orgy.* The man is repulsed and he turns away, nearly knocking over an older man with wild eyes: "Want some cocaine?" the wild man asks, "It's free of charge." The man says *No*, tries to move away, but he is pinned: "Come on, Dude, try it, it's magical..." The man spits, "I said *No*," and he grabs the wild man by the shoulder and thrusts him against the brick wall. He leaves the alley, and his cigarette lies on the ground, slowly smoldering.

IV

It is a candlelit dinner. Before she had even knocked on the door, Keith had opened it, beckoning her into his suite. He was there with another man, a jock-looking type with well-oiled black hair and clothes that fit too tightly. Keith, wearing an Armani suit with a rose poking out from the left breast pocket, told her: "That's my assistant, the 'Vice President', if you give him a title. He handles the day-to-day affairs of New Harmony, leaving me to deal with the 'Bigger Picture' stuff." Keith had then commented on her dress, and he had taken her by the arm and led her to the dining room table in an adjacent room. A butler had appeared, delivering two wineglasses and pouring them each bubbling champagne. He had asked her a series of questions, listening intently to her answers: questions about her former life, her fleeing and hiding with the plague, sympathizing with her every stumble and pitfall and broken heart. When the butler arrived with the food—an assortment of mashed potatoes, corn, rolls, and turkey ("We breed chickens and turkeys," Keith had told her, "and we hope to one day raise cattle; just the very *idea* of sinking my teeth into a rib-eye makes me salivate!")—the conversation quickly turned upon Keith, and he spoke highly of himself, highlighting his achievements, his successes, the way the plague had opened the door to a brilliant new life: "Before this, I worked sixty hours a week doing heating and cooling. I had no time for friends or family, and I exhausted nearly all my money just paying rent on a house I never should have bought. It was a miserable life. The plague was deliverance for me. It enabled me to become who I was meant to be: a charismatic leader that puts a viable hope into people's hearts." Now Sarah sits back in the chair, sweating underneath her dress, rubbing her fingers against the half-consumed glass of champagne. She feels nauseas, and she regrets agreeing to join him for dinner. Something within her *aches*, and she can easily identify it: sitting here, with this self-absorbed egomaniac, she can't help but see Patrick in her mind's eye, tears inching down his cheeks, his own heart rupturing at the betrayal.

"You're beautiful."

Sarah doesn't hear him for a moment, and then she realizes what he has said. An electric shock runs through her, and her fingers twitch upon the glass, nearly knocking it over. She looks up at him, mouth suddenly dry. "Excuse me?"

"You're beautiful," Keith says again.

"Oh." She searches for words. "Ummm... Thanks?"

"You can have anything you want here," Keith tells her. "The nicest clothes. The most delicious food. Warmth. And *security*. That is the best we offer: *security*. I know what it's like to run, to hide, to always wonder if you'll see another sunrise." He lifts the glass of champagne, takes a sip, looks away from the table. Sarah follows his eyes to the door leading to the balcony. Keith looks back over at her, sets down the champagne. "Can I show you something?" he asks.



It had been a fantastic day. They awoke in the small country cottage along the shores of Maine, and they had gone into town to do some shopping. Patrick had bought several Maine King Crabs from a small fish factory in town, and when they returned to the cottage, he followed directions in the SEAFOOD COOKBOOK and made an excellent dinner of crab legs. Once dinner was finished, he took her by the hand, asked, "Can I show you something?" She bit her lip, and her boyfriend led her outside onto the porch. They descended the wooden steps to the small dirt path that wound through the trees, emerging along the cliff that dropped forty feet into the raging Atlantic qualms below. They sat along the cliff, legs dangling over the precipice. She clutched his arm for dear life, and he wrapped his arm around her side. She leaned her head on his shoulder. The sun was beginning to set behind them, and the water below turned a murky black, cast in the shadow of the cliff; in the distance, the sun's rays tickled the water in a dazzling display of translucent ripples. Sarah looked out at the sun upon the water, and she let out a cute giggle when Patrick tickled her arm. She looked down to see what he was doing, and he was holding a small box in front of her; the box was open, revealing a gorgeously-cut diamond ring. She looked up at him, and his eyes, fixated upon her, were filled with such unearthly adoration that Sarah nearly burst into tears. He asked, "Will you give me the honor of being my wife?" She lost it, couldn't hold it back anymore, and she kept crying and crying, lost in the joy of the moment. She said, between her tear-soaked cries, "Yes... Yes... Yes..."

They spent the whole night out on the beach,
cuddling and holding one another,
watching the stars until the sun rose the next day.



He had taken her out to the balcony, and now they stand side-by-side, feeling the first warm breeze felt in such a long time. Winter has finally passed, and now summer is on the doorstep. Sarah holds the wineglass in her hands, taking precarious sips. Keith stands like a stoic statue, staring out to the west, where the last rays of sunlight pour over the horizon, reflecting in the windows of the large buildings along the Kansas River. He doesn't say anything for a long time, and they just watch the sun setting together.

The howls of the dark-walkers come, but they are distant, nearly inaudible.

It is almost as if they don't exist.

Keith turns, faces Sarah. "Here, you can *always* see the sunrise."

She doesn't say anything.

She wants to leave.

She sips her champagne.

The glass is nearly empty. She looks down, sees the champagne wrapped in shadows in the bottom of the glass. Her hands shake, the last traces of the drink sloshing in the bottom of the glass. Her eyes are open, but she sees nothing except that which replays over and over in her head.



She had awoken to the smell of the fire, the logs crackling in the fireplace. The dream had been splendid, but it didn't compare to the harmonious joy of reality. She rolled over in the bed, the quilt wrapping tighter around her naked body. She rested her head upon the pillow and opened her eyes.

Patrick was wearing a green-and-blue checkered robe, and he was kneeling down, stoking the fire in the stone hearth. She pulled herself out of bed, trying to be quiet, and grabbed the robe lying on the floor. She wrapped it around her body and tiptoed over to him.

"I can hear you," he said, not looking back at her.

She grinned, pretended she didn't hear him.

She threw her arms around him, squeezed him tightly from behind. "Hi."

He bit his lip as she buried her face into his neck, kissing him. "I haven't showered."

"I don't care," she said. "I like your scent."

"My scent?" he asked, pulling away.

"Yeah," she said, gazing into his eyes. "You know. Your scent. Your musk."

"I didn't know I had a scent."

"Everyone has a scent."

"You mean like body odor."

She laughed. "No. It's just a... peculiar smell."

"By 'peculiar' you mean the smell of testosterone and pure manly strength."

"More like the smell of FEBREEZE and cigarettes."

Patrick winced. "Ouch."

"I'm just kidding with you," Sarah said. "However... When we first met, do you remember that leather jacket you used to wear to school all the time? You smoked even in junior high, and you didn't want anyone to know, so you would FEBREEZE the shit out of your jacket." She laughed. "It didn't really work. You just had this sickly-sweet smell all the time."

He eyed her. "That's how I smell now?"

She chuckled. "No, no. You smell different now."

"How do I smell now?"

"Different. Patrick. Relax. It's a good smell, all right? It's good because it's *yours*."

"Oh," he said. "Well. I'm glad you like it."

She squatted down next to him.

He continued stoking the fire.

"You're making a fire to keep me warm?"

"Yes. I wanted it to be warm when you woke up."

"You could have just crawled into bed with me. That would have kept me warm."

"I didn't want to wake you." He pecked her on the cheek. "I made coffee."

"You're magical," she said with a grin. She kissed him again. "I do love you."

He returned the kiss. "I do love you, too."

"Stop playing with the fire. Come get some coffee with me."

They had stood out on the cabin's back porch. The sun was rising over the rolling green mountains, and birds performed acrobatics above the trees. His arm was around her waist, and she clutched both hands around her warm coffee mug. The autumn cold had just begun to slash its talons into the woodlands, and the leaves were just beginning to change colors, a melting-pot of reds and oranges and yellows and browns. A black bear crawled through the thickets at the bottom of the hill, and they watched him for some time. Eventually he wandered deep into the forest, disappearing from view. Her coffee was nearly gone. The sun continued to rise, its rays pushing back the darkness and the shadows and the dreariness and the hidden monsters of Appalachia.

"You know what I was just thinking?" Patrick asked.

She looked up at him. "What were you just thinking?"

He turned on his heels, wrapped both arms around her, kissed her on the forehead.

"Do you *really* want to know what I was thinking?"

"Tell me, Patrick. I don't like it when you play these games."

He laughed, said, "I was thinking... See the sun rising?"

"Yeah..."

"That sun is rising on our new lives together."

She buried her face into his chest. "Now *that's* something that I like."

ΣΩΣ

The memories are shattered, and she suddenly becomes aware of everything around her. The sun dies, its rays extinguished, and heart sinks like a stone in the sea. *The sun had risen on their new lives together, and just as quickly it had set, and the darkness and the shadows and the dreariness and the hidden monsters had returned.* A tear speckles her eye, and she throws back the rest of the champagne.

Keith doesn't notice the tear, and he moves towards her.

She moves away, refusing his advance.

He backs down, continues sipping his champagne until it's gone. He sets the wineglass on the railing, and he moves towards her again, this time with fierce intensity: he grabs her by the arm, his fingers clenching down like a vice over her skin.

She gasps in pain as he maneuvers her against the railing and comes in close.

She reacts, doesn't even know her own movement: suddenly she feels her free arm swinging outwards, and the wineglass in her hand shatters against Keith's face. He releases her, reaches up with a slur of profanities, blood beginning to course in rivulets down his face.

She ducks away and runs through the door, through the apartment, and she throws open the door to the hallway. The guards look at her with a look of surprise, and as she saunters away, gripping her arm, they laugh to themselves, calling her out as a bitch and a whore.

Standing out on the patio, Keith pries glass shards from his cheeks. "Fucking cunt."

V

The man opens the door to the apartment, and he sees Sarah sitting on a couch in the dark. He freezes, takes a breath, enters, shuts the door. He flips the switch on the wall, and the bulbs along the ceiling sparkle into life. He looks over at Sarah: her legs are curled up against her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs, her chin resting on her folded knees. Her cheeks are puffed and red, and her eyes, which don't move from their placid stare at the carpet, are blotched and bloodshot. She is no longer wearing the dress, once more in her jeans and faded t-shirt. The man slowly walks towards her and sits down. There is silence. He doesn't know what to say, despite his morbid curiosity. He opens his mouth to say something, but she unfolds out of her position and stands. "I'm going to bed," she says. The man watches her enter the girls' bedroom and shut the door. He sits on the couch, pulls out his cigarettes, lights one up. The smell fills the room. He hears a toilet flush. The sounds of Sarah getting into bed. He watches the smoke curl to the ceiling, then expand and crawl over the dripped plaster. He hears muffled crying, wants to open the door, wants to comfort her. "Fuck," he growls. He extinguishes the cigarette on the oak coffee table and goes to bed.

"This is where her friend said she would be," Mark says.

They are standing in front of a door at the Westin Hotel, down the street from the skyscraper where their apartment resides. When the man awoke, morning sunlight was filtering in through the blinds, gently warming his exposed cheek. He had passed out on the bed, and Mark had never returned. He smoked a few cigarettes, fixed some coffee. He knocked on Sarah's door, asked if she wanted anything. He didn't get a response, shrugged. He took the elevator down to the lobby and walked out onto the street. The benches along the road were taken, people passed out, often with half-empty bottles of whiskey in their feeble clutches. He had meandered around the sleeping bodies, and he found Mark lying in the arms of another girl. He began to wake him, decided to do something else: he woke the girl, and he quietly told her to get out of there. She cursed him, and he pushed her away: "Get," he had said with a few choice words. He then woke Mark, and the boy rolled over to the side, vomited on the pavement. The man told him that he'd been passed out alone, and he asked if Mark remembered anything from the night before. Mark had said, "No... There was this girl, she was all up on me. Thank God I didn't do anything. I'd be tore up about it. I know Cara's gone, but... Sometimes the mere thought of doing *anything* with *anybody* makes me feel like I'm cheating on her." The man had said nothing, and they returned to the room. Sarah was up and dressed, showered, and she was drinking a coffee, standing silently by the window overlooking Wheeler Airport. She told them, "Katie never showed up last night." Mark said that he'd seen her go into the Westin Hotel with some girl. Sarah shook her head, said, "I figured." Mark went to shower, and the man focused his attention on Sarah. He asked her what happened last night, she said, "I don't want to talk about it." He pressed her, and she snapped: "I said I don't want to fucking talk about it, all right?" He took the moment to express his desire to leave, to continue their journey to Aspen. Surprisingly, Sarah agreed. When Mark came out of the room, clean-shaven and dressed, rubbing his temples to alleviate a slight hangover, the man asked him what he thought about heading on to Aspen. Mark said he was fine with it if they were. Sarah said, "We still need to find Katie." They left the skyscraper, returned to the street, made the walk to Westin Hotel; along the way, the girl the man had tossed off the street rushed up, shouting Mark's name. Mark pushed her aside, and when they left her behind them, he told the man: "She was just as annoying last night." The man said nothing. At the hotel, they began searching, asking if anyone had seen Katie. There was a girl they talked to, a certain Rebecca, and she told them that Katie had gone to Michelle's room. She gave them the room number, and now they are standing outside the door, huddled together.

"What do we do?" the man asks. "Knock?"

"Either that or break down the door," Mark replies.

Sarah raps her knuckles on the door. "Rebecca!" she shouts. "Katie!"

She hears footsteps, the unlocking of the bolt.

The door swings open.

A young girl is standing there, maybe about eighteen or nineteen. She is wearing nothing except panties and a bra, one of the straps hanging loose on her bare arm. Rashes crawl up the side of her abdomen. She looks at them, confused. "I don't know you."

"We're here for Katie," Sarah says.

"Who the hell is Katie?"

Mark says, "I think we have the wrong room..."

Sarah says, "The girl you slept with last night."

"Oh. Yeah." She rubs her eyes. "I don't even remember if it was that good or not."

"Is she here?" Sarah asks.

"She's sleeping."

"We need to talk to her."

"It'll have to wait." The girl winks at Sarah: "She had a *long* night."

"I'm not her fucking partner," Sarah says. She shoves the girl out of the way and enters the room. The room is smaller than their apartment, with nothing but a Queen-sized bed, two chairs, a desk, a dresser, and an adjoining bathroom. There is a figure lying in the sheets. Rebecca shouts at Sarah, tells her she's trespassing, but Sarah ignores her. She goes to the bed, leans over, pulls the sheets back, revealing Katie's bare chest. She grabs her by the arm and shakes, and drool crawls down the corner of Katie's cheek as she pulls her arm away from Sarah's grasp. She blinks in the awful sunlight, and she rolls over, moaning.

Rebecca is right behind Sarah, yelling at her; the man has moved forward, into the room, and he grabs the girl by the arm, rips her away, shoves her into one of the chairs along the far wall. He glares at her, and she stares back at him, hatred boiling in her eyes. She doesn't move.

Sarah is on the other side of the bed now, and she leans down, whispers: "Katie."

Katie moans, digging her face into the pillow.

"Katie," Sarah whispers.

The man curses, moves around the bed. "Step aside," he says. He grabs Katie by the arm, violently shakes her. Katie awakes with a start, yanked from her dreams, and she bolts upright in bed, the blanket falling to her waist, revealing her bare breasts. The man looks away, face flushing red. She grabs the blanket and pulls it up to her neck. She looks back and forth at Sarah and the man, confused, and then her face scowls, and she snaps: "What the fuck are you doing here?!"

"We're leaving," the man says, looking at her again. "Come on. Get dressed."

"Leaving?" Katie asks. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes," the man says. "You're coming with us. We're leaving."

Rebecca, in the chair, grins: "No one leaves."

The man points at her: "You shut up." Back to Katie: "Get dressed."

She pulls the sheets tighter around her. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Katie..."

"Do I have to write it out for you?"

The man's breathing is more rapid, more intense.

Sarah touches his arm: "Please. Just go outside."

"We don't have time for—"

"Go outside," she says. "I'll join you in a minute."

The man looks back and forth, between Sarah and Katie, and with a grunt and a bitten lip, he moves towards the door.

Sarah says, "Take Rebecca with you."

The man moves towards the chair.

Rebecca tenses up: "Hold the horses, this is my fucking room!"

The man grabs her by the arm, and he drags her into the hallway.

Mark shuts the door, leaving Sarah and Katie alone.

Sarah sits on the bed, and Katie pulls the covers tighter around her. "Let me go back to sleep," she says.

Sarah shakes her head. "Katie. We're really leaving."

"All right," she says, burying her head into the pillow. "Good luck."

"That's it? Good luck?"

She lifts her head from the pillow, looks at her. "We're finally safe, finally secure. We don't have to worry about the dark-walkers anymore. We can go out at *night*. And there's people here, too. Really nice people."

Sarah thinks of Keith. "Not all of them are nice."

"No place is entirely full of nice people," Katie says.

"Katie... This place... This is just..."

"Why do you want to leave?" she asks.

"I don't feel... good... here."

"Well, I *do* feel good."

"You're just trying to escape your loneliness."

"It's working."

"Katie..."

"I'm happy here. I'm *finally* happy. I don't have to be scared all the time. I don't have to always run and hide. And I don't have to worry about a friend shooting me in the fucking head."

She takes a deep breath. "He was doing it to protect you."

"Can you tell me how that makes one *bit* of fucking sense?"

"He didn't want you to suffer."

"The last thing he said to me was that I was a bitch."

"He was just frustrated. He was scared."

"He was going to kill me, and you're defending him."

"He was going to kill all of us," Sarah says.

"Oh. Well. In that case, let's all hold hands and run into the sunset."

"He was thinking of our own interests. You've seen what they do." After a moment, she prods Katie's memory: "Remember the church?"

She is quiet.

"Katie. Please. We're a team. We move together as a team."

"A team?" Katie asks. She laughs to herself. "All this has been so far is 'follow-the-leader.' How many of us have gotten to make our own decisions? How many of us have really had a say in what we do? It's always *him* leading the way, always *him* making the decisions. Well guess what, Sarah? I'm happy here. I can enjoy myself. I don't have to spend every night terrified out of my fucking mind. I'm going to make my own decisions. And don't you dare tell me what to do, because you're not my fucking mom. We're practically the same age."

The man stands in front of the door to the room. Mark is beside him, and Rebecca is against the far wall. Mark points to the rashes crawling up and down Rebecca's side. "What's that?" he asks. "Gangrene?"

Her eyes are iced with malice. "None of your fucking business."

"It looks venereal."

"I'll look into it."

"Do they not provide condoms in the room?"

She rolls her eyes.

"Oh, wait," Mark says. "That's right. You wouldn't have anywhere to put them."

"You're an ass," she snarls.

He muses to himself, "I guess she could put them on the end of the dildo..."

She rolls her eyes again, trying to ignore him.

"They might have cream or something..."

"You're an ass," she says again. "You're why I don't like men."

"So it's a choice now? You guys need to make up your damned minds."

She doesn't respond, moves towards the door.

The man stands firm, not letting her pass.

"So what are you, like, her bouncer or something?" she asks.

"I'll bounce your ass down the stairs if you don't back up."

"You wouldn't."

"Keep it up."

Mark snickers under his breath.

She rolls her head on her shoulders, stares at him. "What in the hell is so funny?"

"That's what she said."

"What'd she say? Who's she? Me?"

"No. 'Keep it up.' That's what she said."

The man understands, laughs, too.

Rebecca returns to the wall, crosses her arms. "You're a pair of jackasses."

The man says, "I've heard those lyrics a lot, but always to a different tune."

The door opens inwards. The man steps away.

Sarah emerges. "She's not coming."

The man curses under his breath. "So what do we do now?"

"We can't force her to come. If she wants to stay..."

"That'll be another that we lost."

"Maybe it's better for her here."

"You don't believe that."

"No," Sarah says. "I don't."

Rebecca approaches, squeezes past them, into the room. "It was nice meeting you," she says with a wanton grin, and then she slams the door shut.

"What a bitch," Mark says under his breath.

"She's all right," Sarah says. "I've met worse."

"What was that on her side? Did you see that? Katie must have been fucking blind or drunk to sleep with her."

"It's just a rash. It's not an S.T.D. Probably an allergen to the sheets."

"God, I hope so," he says. "For Katie's sake, I mean."

"You really don't like her?"

"No," Mark says. "I don't. She didn't even remember Katie's name."

"This is the life that Katie wants?" the man asks.

"It's the life she *thinks* she wants. But that's the most beautiful and wretched thing about free will. We can decide what we want, even when it's the exact *opposite* of what we want. And even though I think Katie is being an *absolute idiot*, she's just as capable as any of us, and we need to respect her decision."

The man shakes his head. "And just leave her here?"

Sarah takes a breath. "Yes. We can't force her to come. And we all know that."

Mark proposes, "Maybe we should talk to her again."

"We'd have to fight Rebecca off with a stick."

"I'm not fighting her," he says.

"Afraid of the girl?" she asks.

"I'm afraid of that god-awful rash."

The man moves down the hallway. "Forget Katie," he says:

"Let's hope she wises up before it's too late."

VI

They take the elevator to floor 184. Down the hall, in front of the door to Keith's suite, are the two bodyguards. Another bodyguard stands at the far stairwell. The man leads the way, and the four of them reach Keith's door. The bodyguards remember Sarah and snicker. The man tells them that they want to see The Boss. The bodyguards shake their heads—"Not without an appointment." Sarah steps forward, tells them that Keith invited her and her friends up. The bodyguards exchange glances; one opens the door to ask The Boss if the story is true, and when the door is opened, Sarah sprints inside. The other bodyguard curses and follows, and Mark and the man slip into the main living area behind him. Keith comes out from his bedroom, wrapped in a robe. He has just woken up. There are bandages on his face, and he scowls at Sarah. The man can only imagine what Sarah did to him.

"What do you want?" Keith demands, not taking his eyes from her.

"We want to leave," Sarah says. "Today."

"No one leaves," he says.

Sarah is resolute: "We're not asking."

Keith nods, then bursts into laughter.

Mark asks, "Why can't we go? We are meeting some friends in Aspen."

"Your friends are probably already dead," The Boss says. "Hardly anyone makes it there alive. The mountain passes are buried in snow. There's no food. It's twenty miles of barren wilderness, and people nearly always get lost. They die from the cold, and they become frozen mummies that will never be found."

"How the hell do you know?" Mark asks.

"I just know," Keith says. "It's my job."

Mark and the man exchange glances.

Keith walks over to the kitchen, pours himself a glass of Italian SPUMANTE. "New Harmony takes some use getting used to. I'll give you that. But you can't make a decision in less than twenty-four hours. Besides, we have our rules." He takes a sip of the wine, looks at Mark. "You want to know why no one's allowed to leave? First of all, we don't want bandits to know our weaknesses. We don't want them to know about our guard-towers and our weaponry. And second of all, it's safe here. A good parent doesn't let the child gorge himself on candy. A good parent doesn't let the child run around with knives or scissors or saw blades. Because it's not *safe*. I am the father here. You are my children. I care about your safety. Within these walls, you are safe. All of your needs are provided-for. We have hot water. We have electricity. We have walls and guns and guard towers. No infected has *ever* gotten inside here since the walls were constructed. We've suffered *no* casualties to the infected. Out of my concern for you," and he looks at Sarah when he says this, "I cannot let you leave."

The man is adamant: "We've only been here twenty-four hours. We don't know enough about this place to give any information to raiders."

"It's a dangerous world out there."

"But it's a dangerous world we're willing to brave."

"Oh, how *heroic*," Keith sings.

He looks over at Sarah. "How badly do you want to leave?"

The man doesn't answer.

"Give me Sarah for one night," Keith says, "and I'll give you a fueled bus with ammunition."

"Fuck that," the man growls, moving forward.

One of the guard grabs him by the arm, pulls him back.

Keith laughs. "Too bad."

He nods to the guards.

The guard holding the man throws him to the floor; the man tries to stand, but the guard is upon him. There is a syringe in his hand, and he thrusts the needle into the man's neck. The man lets out a piercing cry, but his world slowly darkens, and he collapses into a stagnant heap. Mark leaps forward; the other guard grabs him, injects him as well. Mark falls onto the coffee table, which shatters on impact. Sarah turns and darts for the door, and she runs out into the corridor; the third guard is waiting, and she runs straight into him. He wraps one arm around her, squeezing her tightly. She can feel his warm breath on her neck as the needle enters her abdomen. She lets out a stifled cry, a tear tracing down her cheek, but then she knows nothing more, except the world growing hazy and dark, and the strength leaving her muscles. She doesn't even feel the impact as she hits the ground, and the last thing she sees is Keith kneeling down beside her, smiling with his toothy and evil grin, his bandaged face.

Sarah lies sleeping on the bed. Keith kneels down beside her, strokes her cheek. He looks towards the door, stands, opens it. The living area is empty, the two collapsed figures taken away. A piece of glass still clinging to the frame of the coffee table succumbs to gravity and crinkles on the carpet. Keith steps back and shuts the door, throws the lock. He moves back to the bed and kneels down on the floor, looking straight into Sarah's sleeping face. "We will love one another," he says, keeping his voice low. "You will be a faithful and obedient wife. My Sarah, how precious you are to me..." He stands and slowly moves to the closet. He opens the door, ruffles through his clothes, pulls out a white wedding gown covered with a plastic drapery. He looks back at Sarah. "We have waited till our wedding night for this. How self-controlled we are, Sarah. This will be the night you fall for me—for I have already fallen for you."

VII

The man's eyes open.

The world is a haze, blurred beyond recognition, and his head throbs behind his temples. He opens his mouth and gasps in pain, feels the crackling dryness, the desire for water. He sits up, his world spinning. Nausea billows through him. He looks around the room, everything morphing into focus. Two beds. No windows. On the other bed lies Mark, drool tiptoeing down the corners of his mouth. The man looks towards the door, and as he does, it swings open. Brilliant light enters through the hallway. The man raises his hands to his eyes to shield from the light.

The light is abruptly blocked by a large figure, and then the large figure is before him, kneeling down. The man looks into that round and unshaven face with deep-set eyes. The figure toothily grins: "Breathe deep. For these breaths shall be your last." He cackles in laughter, stands, moves over

to Mark's bed. He slams his foot into the boy's side, and Mark rolls over, coughs. His eyes open, and the big man laughs: "Wake up, pretties," he snarls, "because there's a big party tonight. You're the main act!" He laughs again and leaves, shutting the door.

Mark rubs his side, wincing in pain.

"How are you feeling?" the man asks in a gravelly voice.

"I've felt better," Mark replies. "They drugged us."

"I know."

"What the hell do you think he meant, 'main act'?"

The man looks towards the door, grits his teeth. "I think he means that no one leaves New Harmony, and those that want to leave—they suffer for their decision."

"That's fucked up," Mark says.

"It's the world we live in now."

"So what do we do?"

The man doesn't answer for a moment. "I don't know."

Sarah awakes. Her head feels heavy as it rolls on her shoulder, and she spits up onto her arm. She manages to gather her senses. She tries to sit up, but she is brought down: her wrists are handcuffed together, and the handcuffs are connected to a bolt-iron chain that wraps around one of the bed poles holding up the snow-white silk canopy above. Her heart hammers in her chest, and she looks around, sees that there are several candles mounted on the walls. She looks down, and in the candlelight bits of diamond in the dress sparkle. *A wedding dress.* Terror runs through her like a winter storm. She struggles against the chains, but she succeeds only to bruise her wrists.

"Don't fight against it."

Keith's voice makes her heart freeze in her chest.

The Boss appears from the corner of the room. He is wearing his ARMANI suit.

"You fucking shit," Sarah says under her breath.

He is next to the bed now.

She glares at him.

He rests his hands on the bed, leans over her. "Don't struggle."

She leans forward, spits in his face.

His lips tremble in anger as he wipes the bile from his cheek.

He slaps her across the face, and her head twists the other way.

A deep red mark is forming on her cheek, the fingers and palm illuminated.

He slides on top of her, straddles her. He leans over her. "You're so beautiful."

She clenches her eyes shut, struggles madly against the chains.

"You're so beautiful," he says again. He begins fondling her breasts, feeling the smooth curves poking underneath the dress.

"So *fucking* beautiful."

The door to the room opens. Several men armed with SKORPION machine pistols enter the room. Mark and the man stand, and they are violently grabbed by the arms. The men drag them out of the room, and they are taken down the abandoned corridor to a single stairwell. Along the wall of the stairwell is written in fading graffiti:

ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.

"Not a good sign," the man mumbles under his breath.

The stairs are submerged in darkness, and they move quickly, half-running and half being dragged down the steps. The darkness wraps tightly around them like a shadowy noose, and then something begin to tickles their ears: rock music. It is soft at first, but it becomes louder as they continue to descend. Eventually they reach the last floor. The hallway is dark, but bursts of intermittent light comes from underneath the far door. The music is louder now. Rob Zombie. "Dragula." Mark and the man are pushed against the wall, and handcuffs connected to chains mounted in the ceiling are brought down and snapped around their free wrists. A single guard stands watch, and the others go through the door into the room with the music. The prisoners lean forward, watching the men leave; when the door opens, they briefly see people dancing, jumping up and down, grinding upon one another, most wearing barely anything. All bathed in the thrum of the music and in the flashing disco lights. Mark sees someone slip a pill under their tongue. The door closes.

"It's a rave," Mark says.

"I've never been to one."

"Me neither. But I've seen them on television. In movies."

The man looks over to their guard. "Want to tell us what's going on here?"

The guard smiles, shakes his head.

"Sadistic bastard," the man mutters under his breath.

Mark tries to weasel his hand free of the cuff, is unable. "Damn."

"We should have risked it with the dark-walkers back at the train."

"Tell me about it," Mark says.

The door from the rave opens, and one of the guards approaches them. He has an UZZI set in a holster around his waist. He lights a cigarette. The man asks if he can bum one. The guard delivers a cracking punch to the man's face, and the man reaches up with his free hand and feels blood squirting along a split upper lip. "I just wanted a fucking cigarette, Man."

The guard ignores him. "Do you know much about ancient history?"

"You mean history before the plague?" the man asks.

"No. I mean, like, ancient Rome."

"No."

"There was a popular form of entertainment back then. They had this giant round building, and they would throw people inside. The people would fight to the death. They'd fight wild beasts, they'd fight one another, they'd fight Roman soldiers. It was terrific sport. It is something that the Enlightened Western world has... forgotten. But it is the most primal of sports, and the most... exciting... to watch."

Mark says, "You're talking about the coliseum."

The guard grins. "Behold..." He sweeps his arm out at them: "Gladiators!"

Keith leans over her, pulls the chain from around the bed-post. "Don't you see?" he asks. "I will not bind you for this. This is not something to which you should be repulsed. Love is the most beautiful thing in the world."

Sarah says nothing, just glares at him.

Keith straightens up, unbuttons the tuxedo's jacket, pulls it off, tosses it to the floor. He begins unbuttoning his undershirt, revealing his hairy chest. He grins at her, pulls off the shirt. He falls back down on top of her, begins kissing her neck. She leans her head to the side, feels her temples pulsing,

the rage threatening to burst from the lining in her veins. He sucks on her neck, and he trembles with each kiss. He pulls away, looks down at her. "Put your arms around me, Sarah. Let me feel you holding me."

She swallows hard. Her voice is rasping: "My pleasure."

She reaches the chain around his back, and she holds his arms in either hand.

He begins kissing her again. "Isn't this beautiful?" he asks.

She doesn't respond.

"You're my wife," he says. "My most beautiful, precious wife."

She moves the chain between her wrists up his back, towards his neck.

Keith looks at her. "Tell me you're my wife. Tell me I'm your husband."

She smiles at him, a wicked smile. "You want to know?"

"Yes."

"You want to hear me say it?"

"I so *desperately* want to hear you say it."

"Then kiss me. Kiss me deeply, passionately. Kiss me like you mean it."

He smiles, leans down...

She brings the chain to the back of his neck, and she speaks:

"I'm *not* your wife. And you are *not* my husband."

The rave music stops outside the door.

A great silence falls.

The guard with the UZZI looks over at them. "This is your moment of glory."

Mark looks at the man. The dread in his eyes is mirrored in the man's.

The other guard unsnaps their cuffs from the chains attached to the ceiling.

One guard grabs the man, and the other grabs Mark.

Outside the door, an announcer can be heard over a PA system. "Tonight's special entertainment involves two brave men from Cincinnati, Ohio! They have traveled far and endured much, and we can only hope that their trials and tribulations have molded them into men who are able to fight... and survive! Are you ready to see some blood?!" Cheers. "Are you ready to see some fighting?!" Cheers. "Are you ready to see *death*?!" The cheers are louder this time. "Then let's hear it for our brave contestants, who have volunteered for glory and honor!"

The man looks at the guard. "Volunteered? What kind of bullshit is that?"

The guard laughs. "What the people don't know won't hurt them."

He pushes the man hard in the back, and the man staggers forward.

"Get moving!" the guard says.

The door opens, and dizzying light blinds them.

Keith doesn't expect those words, and he doesn't have time to react as Sarah drives her elbow into his face; his body twists to the side, and she knees him in the groin. He collapses onto his back, dragging Sarah on top of him. He looks up at her, anger etched over his face. Sarah wrenches her body to the side, and the chains grate over Keith's neck. He tries to fight against her, but now she is at his back, on top of him, and she pulls the chains against his throat. His head arcs back, and his raspy screams fill her ears. He struggles against her, and he summons his strength, throwing her to the side. Now he is on top of her, his back against her chest, and she grits her teeth, resilient: she pulls the chains as tight as she can, her arms crossing behind his neck. His legs kick against the sheets, and the chain breaks the skin of his throat. Blood courses down the sides of his neck, running over Sarah's fingers;

she lets out a muffled cry, the handcuffs biting into her flesh, rubbing her wrists raw, exposing trickling blood. Keith's mouth opens up to the ceiling, and his eyes bulge from their sockets. She closes her eyes, tries not to scream, focuses all her attention on the act.

And then Keith goes still.

She slowly relaxes, is suddenly aware of the burning in her wrists, the cacophonous pounding of her heart, her lungs rapidly inflating and deflating behind her ribs. She rests her elbows on the mattress beneath her. Keith's body is heavy. She pulls the chain up and around the top of his head; the locked chains are stained red, flecked with bits of scathed flesh. She pushes Keith off of her, and he rolls onto his side, facing her. Her vivid eyes look into his blood-filled pupils. She looks away and crawls out of the bed.

She searches through the room, searching for the keys to the handcuffs.

She takes one of the candles on the wall and moves it in front of her.

She finds the keys on the dresser, sets the candle down, unlocks the cuffs.

The cuffs fall to the ground, thudding softly on the carpet.

She rubs her sore and stinging wrists, then quits: each touch is numbing with pain.

She hears noises coming from beyond the door. Voices: "Boss?"

Shit. She ducks down into the corner, amidst the shadows, beside the vanity.

On the vanity is Keith's GLOCK 9mm handgun.

She takes it, checks the magazine: full. Throws back the safety.

The door opens. Two guards enter.

They stare at the bed, Keith's lifeless corpse, blood staining the sheets.

The guards look at one another.

"Where's the girl?" one of them asks.

"What girl?"

"The bitch he was with. She did this to him."

"How do you know?"

"She was the only one in the room."

"Then she's still here."

"Do you see her?"

"Maybe she jumped."

"She killed him and then leapt to her death?"

"I don't know."

Sarah takes a deep breath, leaps out, raises the 9mm.

The guards shout, reach for their weapons.

Sarah's gun sings, and the bullets find their targets.

Both guards collapse to the floor, holes drilled through their foreheads.

The sound of the gunshots echo through the room.

She knows there's another guard in the hallway.

She moves over to one of the dead guards, drops the pistol.

She pries the SKORPION from his rigid fingers and moves into the next room.

Sarah pushes open the door to the hallway and steps out.

The guard down the hall is running after her, swinging his gun around.

She raises the Skorpion, squints, looks away, pulls the trigger.

The gun bucks in her hands, and she feels the spray lurch to the ceiling.

When she opens her eyes, she sees the guard twenty feet away,

lying on the ground,
a pool of blood forming underneath his body.
She has no idea where Mark and the man have been taken,
but she knows how to find out.

She can hear them on the other side of the door. The bed rocking against the wall, the creaking of the bed's legs, the woman's moans, the guy's panting. She tries the doorknob. It's locked. She fires the weapon into the lock and kicks the door open. She hears shouting as she moves into the room. The man on the bed leaps off the woman, and he lowers his hands to his privates, protecting himself.

"Who the fuck are you?!" he shouts.

She keeps the gun fixated on him.

The woman rolls over, tries to reach for the man's pistol on the bedside table.

She swings the SKORPION around: "Don't."

The woman freezes, her hand dangling over the gun.

"Leave," she says, "and you won't be hurt."

The woman says nothing more, gets up, quickly dresses, and leaves the room.

Sarah turns the SKORPION back on the New Harmony V.P.

The man glares at her. "You're Keith's bitch."

Sarah laughs. "I was."

"He'll have your head for this."

"I don't think so."

"You don't know Keith."

She doesn't say anything.

The man growls, "He's probably looking for you right now, calling his guards."

"I don't think so. He's lying dead in his room. So are his bodyguards."

The man's face goes pale, and then it flares with red-hot anger. "Cunt."

"Where'd they take them?"

"I don't know who the hell you're talking about."

"The men who were with me."

The man grins. "Are you sure you want to know?"

She pulls the trigger.

The man shrieks, falling to the floor.

Blood streams from his upper leg.

"You bitch!" he screams, grappling at the wound.

"Next time I'll shoot something a little more valuable," she says.

He grits his teeth, sweating. "Fine. I'll tell you."

"Where are they." More of a statement than a question.

"They're in the basement. 'The Dungeon.'"

"There's a dungeon?"

"No. It's like a... club. I never go. It's not my style."

"Why are they down there?"

"They're the entertainment."

That didn't sound good. "What kind of entertainment?"

He glares at her. "Why don't I show you? I'll show the way."

"No, thanks," she says. "You already told me where."

She shoots him in the head and leaves.

They are pushed through the crowd, and the throng cheers. The lights are dizzying, flashing from mounted bulbs fastened to wires that rock back and forth. In a recess above the floor, against the far wall, is the D.J., and the crowd lets out a whooping cry of approval as he puts on the track "Down With The Sickness" by Disturbed. The lyrics fill the smoke-choked room.

They move along the wall to the left, and the man is mortified at what he sees. There are several dark-walkers chained to the wall, and people clamber up next to them, right outside bite range, and get their photographs taken. The dark-walkers howl and shriek in the room void of ultraviolet light, and their eyes are filled with envy and sadness. The man stumbles to watch, but the guard drives the butt of the UZZI into his back, and the man continues, following after Mark.

There is a corridor branching off from the room, and down the hallway are several rooms. They walk past the corridor, and the man looks over his shoulder, peers through the window on one of the first doors, and through the glass he sees a dark-walker chained to a bed, its head held down by leather straps, and there is a man on top of her, raping her emaciated body. Bile creeps up the man's throat, and he turns to the side and dry heaves. People laugh—"Having second thoughts, are we?!" an overweight woman chimes—and the guard forces him forward.

They walk past a large cage with several armed guards. Within the cage are fifteen or twenty dark-walkers, crawling all over one another, reaching through the bars, groping at the crowd with hungry and delicate fingers. Mark stares at them, looks back at the man, mouths, *Why?* The man shakes his head. He doesn't know. The guard behind him nudges him in the back, points towards the center of the room, the crowd peeling apart to let them pass. The man looks back at the caged dark-walkers, and he understands. "Oh, *fuck*."

They are led forward. In the middle of the room is a depressed pit with wrought-iron bars surrounding it. There is a door with a padlock leading into the arena. Mark and the man are pressed up against the barred gate. The depression in the floor is filled with dirt and broken bones. There are swathes and stains of blood along the walls surrounding the pit and painting the bars against which they stand. Their hearts begin to beat in synch, a pensive and rapid rhythm. The guards undo the handcuffs around their wrists, and after unlocking the padlock on the door, they are thrown inside. They land on their hands and knees, a cloud of dust washing over them. They pick themselves up. The people are pressed against the cages, the party over. *Maybe the party isn't over*, the man thinks: *Maybe it's just beginning*. He looks over at Mark.

The boy says, "We're supposed to be gladiators."

"I know."

"Gladiators kill one another."

"I know."

"I'm not going to kill you."

"I know."

Mark takes a deep breath. "But you're going to kill me?"

"I don't think that's how this game works."

The music stops, and a great silence fills the room.

Mark looks at the man. "Then what kind of game is it?"

"A different kind of game."

The guards open the cage containing the dark-walkers, and using cattle prods latched onto chains around their necks, they guide one out, directing it towards the pit. The dark-walker fights against its entrapment, swinging its arms out at the crowd, foaming at the mouth. It is an older woman, maybe forty or fifty, the wrinkles of her face replaced with dark lines forged in the heat of deprivation and

desperation. She is maneuvered towards the entrance to the pit, and then the guard stops. Mark and the man stand side-by-side, facing the entrance, their muscles twitching in anticipation. A guard shouts behind them, and they turn, and there lands in the dirt before them two Medieval replica weapons. Broadsword. They kneel down and pick them up. The swords are heavy. The man turns and faces the dark-walker, gripping the sword in white-knuckled fingers. The D.J. turns on a heavy metal song, and the dark-walker is released. It leaps down into the pit, and it runs after the man in great strides. The man ducks out of the way, extending his sword; the dark-walker buckles over the blade and falls to the ground. The man spins around and drives the tip of the sword into its chest. The dark-walker spits blood and lies still. The man withdraws the blood-stained blade.

Mark, now standing next to him with his own sword, says, "That wasn't too hard."

The man looks over at him, doesn't say anything.

The crowd cheers.

They look towards the entrance.

Three dark-walkers are being led forward.

"Shit," Mark says under his breath.

"That was just a warm-up," the man mumbles.

"How many did you see in the cage?"

"Maybe twenty."

"That means there's... sixteen after these three."

"Yeah."

"We're fucked."

"I know."

The dark-walkers are at the entrance to the pit. Mark and the man stand shoulder-to-shoulder, swords held before them. The dark-walkers are unleashed, and they storm into the pit. The man grits his teeth, prepares to swing the sword. A shot rings out, followed by two more. The dark-walker closest to them is tossed to the side, its nose blasted away, revealing a bloody chasm under smoke-filled eyes. The other two drop in their tracks, bleeding into the dirt, turning the dirt into foaming mud. The room goes silent. Mark stares at the fallen creatures, and the man scans the crowd around the pit. "Thank God," he says.

Sarah stands at the entrance to the pit, dressed in a torn and blood-spattered white wedding dress, clinging to one of the guards with one hand and pressing the barrel of the SKORPION into his head. Everyone stares at her. More guards move forward, slowly, fingering the weapons in their holsters. She demands that the man be released. No one says anything. She presses the gun harder into the guard's temple, demands it once more. There comes some laughter, some foul words regarding "fear of a woman", and one of the guards moves forward, calling her "Sweetie" and "Honey." She doesn't flinch as she swings the gun outwards and pulls the trigger. Before his body falls to the ground, the gun is placed back against the other guard's head. It is over in milliseconds, and the guard's body goes into convulsions on the floor as he grasps at his wounded throat, a hole drilled through his jugular and trachea. His eyes swim with blood, and he is silent. "You'll rush me and you'll get me," she snarls, "but not before I kill this man, too." No one moves. She demands, again, that Mark and the man be released. The guard she is holding hostage tries to pull a quick one on her, and she yanks down on the trigger; a hot geyser of blood sprays her in the face, and the guard collapses. The blood is warm on her face as it traces lines in great goblets down her cheek. One of the guards grins, moving towards her: "You just lost all your cards." She grins at him; "Not quite." She steps back, towards the door, and she swings the gun around. It sings, the bullets finding their marks on the

electric breaker. The lights sputter out, and the crowd screams. Sarah ducks down and pushes her way through the darkness, abandoning her gun. The guards shout at one another, and she weaves her way through the crowd. She can see Mark and the man climbing out of the pit, and she grabs them by their hands, whispers to them: "It's me.". Together they move towards one of the corridors. A guard sees them, shouts. "Run!" Sarah hollers, and they duck into the hallway. The guard in the room fires at them with his Uzzi, mowing down several partiers. One of his bullets clips the padlock to the cage containing the dark-walkers, and they pour into the room, masked in the darkness. No one knows they're there until it's too late.

VIII

An illuminated sign along the top of the ceiling reads PLAYBOY HALL. The rooms on either side are filled with the chained dark-walkers, and they are ridden by sex-mongers who enjoy the thrill of erotica with the seemingly dead. The man keeps his eyes from the windows looking into the rooms. It had been, at one time, some sort of office complex. He figures that this might have been the security hub of the building, and the larger room being where they kept the vault and such of that nature. He glances over his shoulder and can still hear screaming from The Dungeon. He doesn't know why. They round a corner, and Sarah stops. Mark runs into her, and they topple to the ground. The man stumbles forward as he slows. A figure stands before them, wielding a hand-bow. Nathan shouts, waving his arm to the side, and the man ducks. Nathan raises the hand-bow and fires a bolt. It slices through the air, striking its mark: an armed guard. The bolt cuts right through his forehead, and the slender point explodes out the back of his skull in a great wash of blood, brain matter, and bone fragments.

"I heard you guys were in trouble," Nathan says, fitting another bolt.

"Yeah," the man says, helping the others to their feet.

"Don't cross The Boss. He'll play his little games with you."

"Thanks for the warning," the man grimaces.

Nathan eyes Sarah. "Why the wedding dress?"

"I crossed The Boss."

"I'm guessing that's not your blood on it."

"No," she says. "It isn't."

"Okay."

The man says, "We need to get the hell out of here."

"I know."

"Take us to one of the helicopters. We'll hijack it."

"You know how to fly?"

"I flew a helicopter once. I should be able to get us far enough away."

"Too bad. No more shipments are flying in for another forty minutes."

"We can wait," the man says. "Hole up somewhere."

"No," Nathan says, pointing. "You can't."

The man turns, looks.

Down the corridor, dark-walkers are stumbling into the rooms, feasting on the sex-mongers. Their screams travel down the corridor.

"What'd you do?" Nathan asks, mortified.

"It was dark," Sarah says. "Shit happened."

"Come on," Nathan says. He turns and heads down the hallway.

The others follow.

They take the stairwell, leaping up two steps at a time. The electric bulbs above sputter and flare. They are soon out of breath, and they stop to take a break. Mark leans over the railing, his heart pounding, lungs heaving. He opens his mouth, feels ready to vomit, closes it and stands erect. He feels weak, his legs are like rubber. Sarah leans over the railing. "They're coming up," she says, pointing down into the flickering shadows. The man follows her gaze, and in the intermittent sparking of the lights, he can see figures running up the stairs, stumbling over another. They are half-naked or totally nude. "Dark-walkers," he says. "Shit." Nathan says they need to keep moving, stomach the pain. No one argues. The man wonders why there are so many of them; *weren't there only about twenty?* And then he remembers that there were some for the photographs, others in PLAYBOY HALL. He wonders if the dark-walkers freed their captive comrades, but that thought doesn't sit well in his stomach. It's too civilized, too caring, too... *human*. And then he remembers the eyes of the figure back at the Amtrak train, those sub-human eyes. He pushes the thought away and continues to ascend the stairs.

They reach Level 184. Nathan pushes open the door and steps out into the hallway. The lights are still sputtering, and in their scattered bursts, he sees a body lying in the corridor, a pool of stagnated blood underneath. He looks over at Sarah, sweat crawling down her face, the wedding dress sticking to her damp skin. He beckons the others forward, and they move down the hallway. The door to Keith's room is open. He goes inside. There are two guards lying in the doorway leading to the master bedroom. He enters, sees Keith's body lying amidst the bloodied sheets, his face a contorted mask of pain. The others are behind him, and Sarah looks at the grisly scene with pleasure. She looks down and realizes she doesn't have the SKORPION anymore. She grabs the other guard's weapon, and the man takes the GLOCK 9mm off the floor. Mark goes back into the hallway and takes the fallen guard's UZZI. Nathan says, "He was the only tenant on this floor, so we should be all right. We won't attract too much attention. But we need to barricade this place. Start shoving any furniture you find against the door. There's only one way in, so if we get that fortified well, we should be all right till morning." He looks out the window. "*Of course* this had to happen at night."

IX

They have barricaded the front door with couches and chairs and even the bed from the master bedroom; Keith's body lies in a heap on the floor with the other two guards. The lights have completely gone out, and the four of them sit quietly. The man smokes a cigarette. He closes his eyes, can hear distant screams, spurts of gunfire. He curses, stands, moves through the kitchen and to the dining room, opens the balcony and steps outside. He peers over the railing, into the street. It looks deserted, until there are intermittent sounds of chattering gunfire; the flares of the weapons illuminate the buildings, and he can see dark-walkers dropping to the ground like flies. The men (or women?) with guns retreat, disappearing around another building. The man finishes smoking his cigarette, drops the filter, watches the cherry ember disappear in the shadows. The door behind him opens and Nathan comes out.

"I guess New Harmony isn't too safe anymore," the man says.

Nathan says, "I thought you might want this."

The man turns, takes the KA-BAR from his hands. "Thanks."

They stand quietly on the balcony.

The man says, "How come there are so many?"

"I don't know."

"There weren't that many earlier."

"It's probably the bites. They're infecting the populace."

"Swell."

"I know."

"The Dungeon' was a shitty idea from the start."

"Yeah."

"What kind of an idiot lets dark-walkers into this place?"

"Keith had the idea."

"He's an idiot."

"Was an idiot," Nathan corrects. "Your woman killed her."

"She's not my woman."

"But she's a hell of a woman, though."

"Yeah," the man says. "She is."

Mark and Sarah sit on stools next to the kitchen's bar. He had found two glasses in the cupboard and a pitcher of water in the fridge. He poured them both a glass, and they sit drinking, watching Nathan and the man out on the balcony.

Mark doesn't look over at Sarah. "What about Katie?"

She doesn't answer for a moment. "She had her chance. She chose her path."

"I wonder if she's still alive."

"For her sake," Sarah says, "I hope not."

Mark runs his finger over the ridge of the glass. "That's cruel."

"It's better than being alive but being... dead... at the same time."

"I can't imagine her as one of them."

She looks at him. "Could you imagine Cara as one of them?"

He doesn't look back at her, and he doesn't have an answer.

"This place was too good to be true," Mark says. "They tried to cover up everyone's sadness through the escapism of sex, drugs, and alcohol. They tried to hide the fact that they were suffering. Katie is a prime example. She still hurts over Elizabeth, and she's turned to sex with other girls to escape that pain. But you can never cover up your pain adequately enough. It will always resurrect itself, when you're not paying attention, not *trying* to ignore it. This place offered the illusion of happiness, and it promised the illusion of security. But no place is secure anymore. No place is really safe." He is quiet, sipping his water. He continues, "It makes me think... What about Aspen? How safe could it really be? And how do we know it's really there, that's it's really survived? Maybe we *are* best on our own. Maybe Alaska *was* the safest bet. I can't help but feel some guilt. You're right. Katie's probably dead. And if we wouldn't have pressed him to turn the car around and head to Aspen, then we never would have been here. We'd be spending the night in some remote hotel somewhere north. Maybe in Missouri or Minnesota. And Katie would still be with us."

Sarah says, "You don't know that. Maybe this decision has kept the three of us alive."

"Maybe."

"We don't know what awaited us up north. Maybe it would have been worse."

"Maybe."

"But we can't dwell on the past." She says that, but then she thinks of Patrick.

He shakes his head. "It's pretty fucking hard not to."

Her mind is still upon her dead husband. "I know."

"Do you ever wonder what life would be like now if the plague had never even happened?"

Sarah nods. "Yeah. Patrick and I would still be together."

"Cara and I would be together, too. Maybe even engaged. Ashlie would be alive."

She points to the window. "And he would be married. And he would be happy."

"We can't dwell on the past," Mark says. "But it isn't good to dwell on a future that will never be."

She winces. "It's pretty fucking hard not to."

He sighs. "I know."

Nathan and the man return inside. The screams have died down, and the gunfire has become sparse, nearly absent. Nathan goes into the master bedroom, and Mark goes into the bathroom. The man sits down next to Sarah. They sit on the carpet in the silence.

"You look good in that dress."

Sarah eyes him. "Okay."

"I mean, even with the blood... You look good."

She manages a smile, the first smile all night. "The blood's a nice touch, huh?"

"It makes you look like some sort of warrior princess."

"Sarah, The Warrior Princess."

"It doesn't have quite the same ring as 'Xena', but it'll work."

Nathan returns to the room, tells Sarah that there are probably some clothes in the bedroom that she could change into. He tells her that The Boss was a womanizer, had all kinds of outfits. She thanks him, and she and the man enter the bedroom. The man starts rifling through the dresser drawers, pulling out pants and shirts and boxers and socks. He lets them fall, scattered onto the floor. The room is illuminated by moonlight coming in through the tall windows.

Sarah stares at the three bodies lined up against the wall. "It's odd."

He looks over at her. "What's that?"

She points to the corpses. "That we're not even fazed by them anymore."

"It's commonplace now."

"I killed every one of them," she says. "And I feel nothing."

"You were protecting yourself."

"I never thought I could kill anyone."

"Neither did I."

"I feel proud about what I did. My innocence, it's gone."

"Nothing lasts forever," he says.

The man finds some women's pants and a women's button-up shirt. "You'll have to wear boxers, but I think you'll manage." He holds up two pairs. "Do you want MICKEY MOUSE or DAFFY DUCK?"

She laughs. "You've got to be joking me."

"He must have liked DISNEY."

"I'll take DAFFY DUCK." She takes the boxers and heads into the bathroom.

The man sits on the bed, avoiding the blood stains.

He hears her getting dressed.

He stands and walks over to the bathroom door, leans close. "Sarah?"

"What?" she calls back.

"Thanks for helping us out down there."

"It's all right."

"We would have been killed. You know that, right?"

"That's why I helped."

"Okay." He turns to go.

"Thanks for standing up for me, back before we were drugged."

"Oh," the man says, pausing at the door. "You're welcome."

She doesn't say anything more.

The man exits the room, and he sees Nathan and Mark against the far wall, ears pressed against the painted plaster. The man asks what they're doing. Nathan raises a finger to his lips: *Shhh*. The man joins them, places his right ear against the wall. There is the sound of scuffling and growling on the other side.

The man looks over at Nathan, asks in a whisper, "What are the walls made out of?"

He doesn't have a chance to respond: the wall breaks outwards, and two gnarled hands extend, grabbing at the man's shirt. The man leaps back, as do the others. More holes are punched in the wall, chunks of the wall and flakes of plaster falling to the carpeted floor, and the hands grasp blindly in the air. The sound of snarling and growling grows louder, more frenzied.

"Drywall," Nathan says, voice crackling.

X

"They smelled us," Mark says, watching in horror as limbs protrude through the wall. "They fucking smelled us."

The man runs to the bedroom. "Sarah!"

She comes out of the bathroom.

"We've got to go!" he shouts, and he turns and runs back to the others.

Nathan has his hand-bow ready, and Mark holds the UZZI at the ready.

Nathan looks back at the man. "There's too many of them."

Mark says, "Doesn't this look familiar? Weren't we in the same damn predicament just two nights ago?"

"We should be in Aspen by now," the man says.

"We should have stayed at Odessa."

"I know."

Sarah runs out, wielding the SKORPION. "The balcony."

The man glares at her. "So now it's okay to commit suicide?"

"No, there's a ladder on the balcony. I saw it yesterday. It goes all the way down."

Mark and the man exchange glances.

The boy says, "It's better than just waiting for them to get through."

The dark-walkers burst into the room, the last chunks of drywall crumbling. Their frenzied madness drives them forward, and they run about the apartment, the scent of the uninfected still heavy, suffocating, intoxicating. But the uninfected are nowhere to be found. The dark-walkers become crazier, thrashing about, tearing apart the furniture with their hands, breaking down the walls, exploring every room. One dark-walker gets entangled in the shower curtain, another feasts on Keith's body, and yet another moans, grappling at its face, having cut itself while shattering a lamp. Several of the dark-walkers go out onto the balcony, and they shout at one another. Scaling down the ladder, at least fifteen stories below, are the uninfected, moving past the other balconies and windows, vanishing out of sight. One of the dark-walkers leaps onto the ladder, is uncoordinated, and falls.

The man grips the ladder tightly, squeezes against it. The dark-walker falls past, flailing and shrieking. The man looks down, leading the way, and sees the dark-walker vanish into the shadows. There comes the sound of shattering glass, a car alarm. Snarls alert him to dark-walkers closing in on the fallen creature. They scale down to the tenth floor, and the man climbs onto the closest balcony. He draws the 9mm and peers into the darkened glass door. He slides it open and ducks inside. The moonlight wafts past his body and illuminates the room. It is covered with dust, unused. The others file in behind him, and they shut the door. The moon is still rising. It's not even midnight yet.

Nathan says, "We can get to a bus from here. Take the janitorial hallway."

"Where's that?" the man asks.

"It's down the hall. If this is the right floor."

"It's the tenth floor."

"Then, yes. Once we get there, there are stairs that lead down to the garage. Some of the buses are kept there, for maintenance and such. We should be able to hijack one. The keys are almost always left in the ignition."

"That's our way out," the man says. "Can you navigate us through the gates?"

Nathan nods. "I helped build them."

The hallway was abandoned, and Nathan led them to a door marked **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**. It was unlocked. They went down a flight of concrete steps. It felt as if they were descending into a bunker. They reached the garage, and they entered. Nathan led the way. The garage was underground, with concrete pillars upholding the roof, parking spaces with faded paint arranged between them. Near the back of the garage, close to the maintenance room, were several parked buses, the windows barred and the roofs lined with railings.

Now Nathan tells the others to stay back, to stay quiet, as he opens the door to the first bus. He goes inside. The driver is hunched over the wheel. His head is missing, and blood from his severed neck has gushed down his shirt and onto his pants, and it drips onto the paneled floor. The iron-gated door leading to the back is unlocked, the padlock lying shattered amidst the driver's blood. Nathan pushes it open. The sound of the squeaking hinges is deafeningly loud, and Nathan sees movement in the back. He raises his hand-bow. The figure stares at him, nearly masked in the darkness. The shadow shifts, and there comes a horrifying screech. Nathan coolly releases the bolt, and there comes the sound of a thud. He moves forward, kneels down next to the body, yanks the bolt out of the creature's head.

He calls out to the others. They climb inside, move into the back, and Nathan takes the driver's seat, shoving the driver's headless body out the door, onto the pavement. He ignites the engine, and the headlights splash over the wall.

“Holy shit.”

Along the far wall of the underground garage are hundreds of bodies, and moving amidst the bodies are dozens upon dozens of dark-walkers, feasting on the remains. A bloodbath. Nathan feels a knot in his throat and steps on the gas. He drives the bus right past them, watches them through the window. They pay him no attention, focused on the smorgasbord of intestines and bladders and livers and muscles.

He shakes his head and takes the ramp up and out of the garage,
onto the moonlit street.

The streets are abandoned, except for tossed and torn bodies. A few dark-walkers move along the edges of the buildings, holding severed limbs in their hands, feasting with blood-soaked jaws. Sarah looks away, her stomach churning. None of the dark-walkers approach them. The bus lurches up and down as it rolls over broken bodies. They pass a burning building, flames roaring from the windows. The lobby’s glass windows burst into a spray of shattered glass, and the lobby’s overhang, jutting out over the road, collapses. Mark sees a sign amidst the flames: WESTIN HOTEL. That’s where Katie was. He looks away, trying with all his might to find comfort in the knowledge that even if, amidst the chaos, she had been bitten, and had become a dark-walker, she was most likely dead now, consumed by the flames. He tries to find comfort in that thought, but he fails. The man sits down next to a weapon’s rack, the rack empty, and he wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt. He looks over at Sarah. “What a night, huh?” She doesn’t have a response.

The guard towers are abandoned, the inhabitants having fled for their lives when the outbreak had occurred. Nathan is thus met with no hostility, and he accelerates and blows through each gate. At the twelfth gate, they ram it apart and descend upon the road. There are burnt buildings on either side, and the wind blows remnants of ash into the air. Charcoal skeletons are tossed about the rubble. Nathan heads northwest, and soon a bridge comes into view. The bridge spans the river, and along the top of the bridge it reads: TO WHEELER AIRPORT. They drive up a slight incline that leads to the bridge, and the headlights flash over hundreds upon hundreds of dark-walkers moving across the bridge, towards the ruins of New Harmony. Nathan hits the brakes, and they watch. The man moves to the front, and just as he reaches Nathan’s side, the first wave of dark-walkers breaks into a run, charging the bus. “Ram them!” the man yells. Nathan obliges, slamming down on the gas. The bus lurches, gains speed, and they plow through the dark-walkers. The creatures are mowed down underneath the wheels, splattered against the grill, somersaulted over the top of the bus. One of them slams into the windshield, which shatters, and its body soars inside, knocking the man to the ground. The dark-walker’s leg gets caught in the wheel, and as the man shoves the heavy body off of him, the leg moves, jerking the wheel. Nathan shouts, tries to move the wheel, but he cannot. The man hears Sarah and Mark scream, and suddenly he feels himself lifted off the ground. Wind smacks him in the face. Everything becomes slow, and he looks out the window, hair blowing in the wind, and he sees nothing but inky blackness. For a moment he does not understand, and then he opens his mouth to scream in sync with the others—and then he swallows cold, icy water.

XI

The coldness of the river, even in early June, is shocking. The man feels as if his body is riddled with icy electricity, and his eyes burn as they fill with water. Everything is wreathed in the murky shadows of the aquatic underworld, and he sees the bus disappearing beneath him. He has floated through the broken window. He looks around, alarmed, doesn't see anyone else. A figure swims up past him, not even noticing him. Long brown hair weaving back and forth in the water. *Sarah*. He swims downwards, searching for Mark, and then the boy swims past him. The man turns and swims for the surface, and when he breaks into the moonlit sky, he draws deep breaths of oxygen, his head spinning. Nathan and Sarah are already swimming for the nearest shore, New Harmony behind them. The man sees Mark next to him, and he joins him. They reach the opposite bank and clamber onto the rocks. They ascend a steep embankment, shivering in the cold, grabbing trees in an effort to pull themselves up. The hill reaches a highway littered with abandoned cars. Nathan is leaning against one of them, and Sarah stands shivering, staring at the bridge. He and Mark reach them, and he follows her pointed gaze. The dark-walkers continue to move rank-and-file above the river, shuffling in unison, moving in sync with a common goal. The flames of the Westin Hotel have spread outwards, and the entire complex burns like a Roman torch. The man says, panting, "It's good... we didn't... stay there." No one says anything for a moment, and then Nathan says, "This way. There are probably more around here."

They move down the four-lane highway, moving car-to-car, trying to keep out-of-sight from the dark-walkers on the bridge. The dark-walkers, however, have their backs turned to the refugees, and they are too intent on the burning New Harmony to give them any attention. Nathan leads the way, and he moves up a back alley. Everyone follows him. There comes a scream, the sound of shuffling. The man reaches for the Ka-Bar on his belt, realizes it's gone. Sunken with the bus. All their weapons are gone, too. He rushes forward, and the shadows peel away, and Nathan stands there, surrounded by three dead dark-walkers. His hand-bow is in his hand. He looks over at them. "I had it attached to a loop on my belt when the bus sank. Thank God for that." He bends down, collects three bolts, and he continues leading the way. Mark and Sarah exchange glances, noticing that Nathan is limping.

"You're hurt," Sarah says.

They are still moving down the alley, large buildings with fire-walks on either side.

Nathan says, "One of them knocked me over. I think I sprained my ankle."

"Do you want some help?" she asks.

"No, I'm fine," he says. "We're almost there."

The alley ends, opening up to an overgrown park with scraggly dogwoods. Opposite the park is a towering metal fence with barbed wire at the top. Beyond the fence are several hangars. A parked BOEING. A LEARJET on the runway. Wheeler Airfield. Nathan tells the others to stay back, kneels, looks in both directions. No sign of movement. He ushers the others forward, and they run through the tall grass. They reach the fence and begin to climb. Navigating the barbed wire is difficult, and the man rips his pants. He winces as the sharp, rusty barbs dig into his skin. He is thankful for the tetanus shot he received only a few months prior to the plague. They descend down to the pavement on the other side, and Nathan leads them forward. The hangars grow closer, and refueling trucks emerge out of the darkness, monuments of the great heights of human civilization. They near the LEARJET parked on the runway. The man runs forward, to the door, and grabs the handle. Unlocked.

It swings open. He jumps inside. There are skeletons with moth-eaten business suits on the floor. He turns and helps everyone inside. The moon is blocked by clouds, and a calm and steady rain begins to fall. The same kind of rain that fell the day before the plague. When everyone gets inside, the man shuts the door and locks it. The rain drums on the roof.

XII

The man moves to the back of the airplane, finds the storage compartments. Per required law, there are several heated emergency blankets. He activates them and passes them out. Mark takes his and falls into a cushioned seat, and he quickly falls asleep. The man hands one to Sarah. She says, "Thanks," and moves to the seat across the aisle from Mark. She sits warming, teeth chattering, under the blanket, looking out the window. Dark-walkers are gathering along the fence. She closes her eyes and falls asleep.

The man hands a blanket to Nathan.

Nathan hands it back to the man. "You can have it."

"You've got to be fucking freezing," the man says. "We all are."

"It doesn't matter," Nathan says, voice low.

"You'll get hypothermia or something. Come on. Take it."

Nathan refuses. "No." He sits down in a chair, leans down, pulls up his pant leg.

A chill runs through the man.

"They got me back in the alley," he says. "I didn't say anything... I know what's going to happen... But I wanted to get you guys here. I knew it would be safe here." He looks up at the man, tears in his eyes. "Sometimes I wonder, why did I think it would end any other way? Are we really so naïve?"

The man looks away, guilt enshrouding him. "This is all our fault..."

"Don't talk like that."

The man shakes his head. "I don't know what to think anymore."

"Shit happens, Man. It's nobody's fault. A world where people are to blame is a world that makes sense. But this world, it doesn't make sense. Things that happen, they don't make sense. None of this makes sense. Perhaps it never made sense before the sickness, but maybe then we just covered it up. Now the veil has fallen, the curtain has been torn, an earthquake has struck. We know reality for what it is: we *don't* know what it is." He coughs, the coldness setting in. "You guys be smart."

The man looks over at him. "What are you going to do?"

"What I have to do," he says.

The man nods, moves to the door. He opens it up, the rain falling in sheets.

Nathan shakes his hand. "Aspen's a wonderful place. Hopefully it hasn't changed."

He steps down out of the airplane.

The man says nothing and shuts the door.

He watches through the window as Nathan walks away,

becoming a speck in the distance, moving behind a hangar.

And then he is gone.

The man places the extra thermal blanket over Sarah, careful not to wake her. He checks to make sure the door to the outside is locked, and then he sits down in the cockpit, draping the blanket over himself. He stares at the rain streaking on the windshield, and the warmth from the blanket spreads through him. He closes his eyes, thinks of Katie. He never really cared much for the girl, never really disliked her, either. But he keeps seeing Westin Hotel burning, keeps hearing the screams she would have screamed, keeps seeing her face in his mind, the hopefulness of reunited love. His heart throbs, and he cries again, very quietly, very weakly, but a cry nonetheless. His tears are lost in the falling rain, and the sky joins him in his weeping.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Weeping of the Damned

"Therefore I will wail and howl. I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing
like the dragons, and mourning as the owls."
- The Prophet Micah (Micah 1.8)

I

The sunlight piercing through the windshield awakes him. He slowly opens his eyes and yawns. He looks through the windshield, the remnants of the rain, tiny droplets forming a carpet of diamonds, sparkling in the sunlight. He pushes the heat blanket off of himself and stands. His legs ache. He bends down, feels dried blood through the rip in his pants. The barbed wire. He moves towards the back of the plane. Mark and Sarah continue to sleep. He moves quietly, so as not to wake them, and unlocks the door, pulls it open. Sunlight enters the body of the plane in a great shaft. There are several small birds, perhaps sparrows, perched on the wing of the LEARJET. At the opening of the door they scatter, flapping into the cloud-laced sky. He steps out into the warm June breeze, and he walks across the pavement. He looks out towards the south, sees great billows of smoke rising from the ruins of New Harmony. The nearest hangar grows larger, birds perched upon the roof. They watch him with goggling eyes as he moves around the hangar, out of sight from the plane. Nathan lies on the ground, the hand-bow still in his hand. A single bolt protrudes from the top of his skull, delivered from underneath his chin. His eyes are filled with gelatinized blood. The man stands and smokes, looking at the corpse. He has not said a prayer in quite a long time, but he prays now, thanking God—if there is such a creature—that such a man has ever lived. He turns and heads back to the plane.

Sarah is standing outside the plane, watching the man return. "Where's Nathan?" she asks when he reaches her.

He shakes his head. "They got him back in the alley."

"That's why he was limping."

"Yeah."

"He said he had a sprained ankle."

"If he had a sprained ankle, he wouldn't have been able to climb the fence."

"I know."

"You knew he was bitten."

"Yeah."

"You should have told me."

"I didn't want you to do anything stupid."

"He could have become one of them."

"I trusted that he would take care of it."

The man nods. "He did."

Mark comes out of the airplane, yawning. "Hey."

They both acknowledge him with nods.

The boy asks, "Can you fly this thing?"

"I've never flown a LEARJET," the man says.

"We could refuel it."

"I don't know how to fly it."

"We could fly it to Aspen. They have an airfield there."

"I don't know how to fly it, I said" the man repeats.

Sarah leans against the plane's fuselage. "So what do we do now?"

The man looks at the billowing smoke above downtown. "Find some cigarettes."

Mark looks around. "Where's Nathan?"

Sarah looks at him. "He didn't make it."

"Oh," he says. He doesn't ask what she means: he already knows.

The man enters the LEARJET and searches, digging through the tattered clothes of the skeleton crew. He finds what he is looking for. He gets out of the plane, twirling a pair of keys on his pointer finger. "Come on." The three of them abandon the plane. They walk past the hangars, towards the terminals. They pass underneath the shadow of a BOEING's wing. They walk around the side of the nearest terminal, refusing to go inside. The man remembers the countless bodies inside the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, and he knows that Kansas City's airport was probably more crowded. They don't know how many dark-walkers may be hiding in the terminals' catacombs. They find the parking lot, and the man moves car-to-car, fitting the keys into the locks. A few car alarms go off. He finds a red MERCEDES, and the key fits. He smiles at the others, and they load inside. It takes a few twists of the key to get the engine started, and they lean back in the leather seats and look out the dusty windows as the man turns the car around. He wipes the windshield with washer fluid, and they pass through the main gate, tearing down a wooden retractable barricade on their way out.

There is a STAR TEXACO gas station down the road, a few blocks from the airport. There is a large GREYHOUND parked in the side lot and a single minivan in the employee's parking. The man tells Mark to refuel, and he goes inside, pushing open the door. A 24-hour joint. He walks around the counter and grabs a paper sack from underneath the register, and he begins filling it with assorted packs of cigarettes. Sarah enters and watches him in silence, and she rummages through the candy racks, takes several bags of COMBOS. The man holds the bag in one hand as he rifles through several pamphlets in a wall-mounted rack for tourists. He finds what he is looking for, a colorful map of Kansas City. He explores it for some time, then slides it into his pocket. He looks over at Sarah. "You ready?" She nods *Yes*, and they both leave the gas station. Mark is done refueling the MERCEDES, and they climb inside and head back towards Interstate 70 West.

II

The drive is in silence. No one talks. Everyone thinks. The man thinks about Kira. Sarah thinks about Patrick. Mark thinks about Cara. Everyone thinks about Katie. It has been said, "Three's Company." They wonder how many of them will be left when they finally reach Aspen, that holy grail,

seemingly untouchable, a mysterious fortress, the substance of their hope, the sustenance in their sorrows.

The sun is setting by the time they reach Durrance, Kansas. They had driven through many towns—McFarland, Solomon, Salina, Strasburg—and even through small cities—Lawrence, Topeka, Junction City. Durrance is tiny, composed of a few roads lined with houses, some hole-in-the-wall shops, a supermarket/restaurant. A single 711 gas station. The man takes the MERCEDES through town and down an adjacent road lined with trees on either side, fields of corn and beans stretching in every direction, overgrown and dead. They find a small house nearly out-of-view, hidden amongst a somewhat large accumulation of woodlands. The man pulls up the gravel drive and parks in front of the house. He and Mark get out. They need to sweep the house, but they don't have any weapons. The man pops the trunk and pulls out a bolt-loosening bar for the tires. He grips it in his hands and leads the way. The house is a one-story building, with a small kitchen, a living room, a family room, a single bathroom, and three bedrooms. It is decorated with fading black-and-white pictures, antique furniture. Sparse décor. It is free of any dark-walkers. Sarah joins them, and they proceed to barricade the windows and doors. By the time the sun sets and darkness returns, they are crowded in the living area, next to the fireplace, sitting in silence. They receive no visitors.

They leave at the break of dawn the next morning, driving through town and returning to the interstate. Ten miles down the road, Sarah begs the man to stop the car. The man obliges, and when the wheels halt to a stop, she throws open her door and stumbles outside, pukes into the grass. The man throws on the parking brake and gets out, walks around the side of the car, kneels down next to her.

"You all right?" he asks.

She looks away from the green vomit lying on the pavement. "I just feel a little sick."

"What kind of sickness?" he asks, trying to hide the alarm in his voice.

She glares at him. "Not *that* kind of sickness."

"Then what kind?"

"I don't know." She wipes bile from the corners of her mouth. "Maybe the flu."

"Does it feel like malaria?"

"How the hell would I know what malaria feels like?"

"Are you okay to drive?"

She nods, takes several deep breaths. "Yeah. I should be fine."

"Okay."

She isn't okay to drive. They don't drive five miles before she asks him to pull the car to the side again. This time she throws up for nearly fifteen minutes. The man sits on the hood of the MERCEDES, smoking a CAMEL FULL FLAVOR. Mark stands on the other side of the car, leaning against the window, looking out at the stretching fields barren of life. A few crows cry out, taking up into the sky.

"You know what a flock of crows is called?" Mark asks the man.

"I don't know."

"They're called 'murders'."

The man moves over to Sarah, puts his hand on her head. "You're burning up."

"Probably because I have a fever," she says.

The man looks west. He can't even see the mountains yet.

"Come get in the car," he says.

"Let me finish, all right?"

"We're not going anywhere else. You need sleep."

"I can sleep in the car."

"No," he says. "You can't. We've seen what happens."

"I know what happens when you're bitten."

"I didn't say you were bitten."

"You're thinking it."

The man is quiet.

"I would know if I've been bitten."

"Not if it was small."

"I didn't run into any of them."

"Okay."

The highway continues for miles, unending fields on either side, broken only by occasional patches of woods. Sarah feels woozy again, and the man doesn't know how much longer until they reach the next city. They pass by a sign that reads VICTORIA: 15 MILES. He looks over at Sarah, who sits in the front passenger's seat, leaning against the window, and he says, "We'll be there soon, all right?" As they drive, Mark leans forward from the backseat, taps the man on the shoulder, points off the highway. Down a small embankment is another road, and shooting off from that road is a paved driveway leading to a small farmhouse and barn encircled by woods bordering the fields. The man slows the car and turns left, and the MERCEDES lurches in the tall weeds. They reach the road, old Route 40, drive west, and turn down the drive. The man slows the car down, the oaks and hickories on either side casting them in shadows. Songbirds cover the limbs of the trees. He pulls in the front drive, the two-story farmhouse to the right and the decrepit barn before them. Outside the barn is a skeleton of a horse, the bones bleached from the sun. The man turns off the engine and gets out. "Try to get some fresh air," he tells Sarah. He leans back in, pops the latch for the trunk, and takes the tire-bar out from the back. He moves up the wooden steps on the house's portico. The boards creak underneath his weight.

Hanging wind-chimes tinker as he stands before the front door. There are windows on either side of the door, and he tries peering through both, but they are covered with dust from the inside. The door hasn't been opened, the windows haven't been shattered. He has no reason to believe that the place is inhabited; besides, haven't most migrated towards the cities in search for sustenance and warmth? He kicks the door open and steps inside. A heavy cloak of dust invades his lungs, and he turns his head, coughs. There are two living areas on either side, and he moves down the hallway. To the left is the kitchen, and to the right is a room with a closed door. He cautiously opens the door and steps inside. Paltry sunlight lights up the room, and the air is drafty; the bottom right pane of the only window, facing the backyard, is broken. The bed is made, and there is sparse furniture. A guest bedroom. He climbs the chairs accessed from the kitchen and reaches the second floor. He moves down the hallway. There are picture frames mounted on the wooden walls, but the glass is smeared with grime, and sunlight barely penetrates the fogged windows on either side of the hallway. There are three doorways. The first is a reading room, the second a bathroom. He opens the door to the third and steps inside.

It is another bedroom, except with more furniture: two dressers, a vanity, two bedside tables. There is a King-sized bed in the middle of the room, and lying on the bed are twin skeletons. The man moves closer, lowering the iron bar. He has nothing to fear. The figures are dressed in pajamas, and he guesses that one was male and the other female. They are holding one another, enraptured in an eternal, skeletal embrace. On the bedside table is an empty glass of wine and a spilled bottle of pills. The man understands: they survived the plague, but they knew that life would never be the same. They died together, falling asleep in one another's arms, never waking up. "Maybe you were the smart ones," he says under his breath.

"One can only wonder."

The man turns at Mark's voice. "Where's Sarah?"

"She's outside."

"You should have stayed with her."

"They don't go out in the daylight. You know she's fine."

The man looks back to the bed.

The boy moves forward. "It's almost romantic, isn't it?"

The man doesn't answer.

"A classic Romeo-&-Juliet love story."

"We can put Sarah in here," the man says. "We'll move the bodies."

"No," Mark says. "Let's leave them here."

He eyes the boy. "They could have diseases."

"They've been dead for months," he says. "They're all right."

The man almost persists, but he stops.

He understands why Mark wants the room untouched.

It is what Mark always wanted, what he could never have:

to grow old with the one he loved, to die in her arms.

They say dreams never come true. But maybe, sometimes, they do.

Mark goes down to help Sarah inside, and the man is behind him. He stops before the stairs, and he turns, faces one of the picture frames. He takes the sleeve of his shirt and wipes the dust from the glass. He squints, and he can see the photograph. An older couple, with deep-set eyes and slashing wrinkles. The woman is in a dress, and the man is in a flannel shirt and a JOHN DEERE cap. The picture was taken outside, and the barn can be seen off in the corner, the field spreading in the background, a tractor sitting underneath the burning sun. It is a faded black-and-white, perhaps taken a decade ago. The man returns downstairs.

III

Mark is helping Sarah into the house as the man reaches the bottom of the steps. He leads them to the guest bedroom, and he takes the sheets off the bed, flaps them around. A cloud of dust rises. He inspects the bed, checking for roaches, bed bugs, lice, anything. He is content, and he guides Sarah to the bed. He turns to Mark, who is standing by the window. "Leave us for a minute," he says.

Mark doesn't understand, but he leaves anyway, saying, "I'll go see if I can't find some wood in the barn to board up the windows." He shuts the door behind him.

Sarah is pulling the sheets over her, and she asks for a trash can.

The man finds one in the corner of the room and moves it over to the side of the bed.

She turns onto her stomach and dry heaves. Strings of bile drip into the trashcan.

The man sits beside her, looks out the window, at the oaks with their spreading green leaves and the withering field beyond.

Sarah finishes and rolls onto her back, stares at the ceiling. She closes her eyes. The entire room seems to move, shuddering with her each breath, a monotonous vortex.

The man looks over at her. "Sarah."

"What?" she asks.

"I know you're sick..."

"I just want to sleep."

"I know. But we have to make sure first."

"I told you I wasn't bitten."

"Sarah. I'd demand you do the same for me."

She is quiet for a moment. "Fine."

The man stands, moves to the side of the room.

She crawls out of the bed, stands. "Lock the door."

"Okay." He moves to the door and throws the lock.

Sarah is already undressing when he turns around.

She removes her shirt, stands only in pants and a bra.

She glares at him. "Are you just going to stare?"

"Sorry," he says, turning around.

He hears her unlatch the bra, unzip her pants, strip down.

"Tell me when you're ready," he says, facing the closed door.

A few moments pass. "Okay."

He turns. He finds himself rooted in place, staring at her naked body: the slender legs, the flat stomach, the perky breasts, the bare arms, her hair falling onto her broad shoulders. He bites his lip, feels his face flush red. "This isn't going to be... like that," he says, and he moves towards her. He looks over her neck, over her arms, over her back. He bends down and inspects her buttocks, her thighs, her legs. Her skin is smooth, freshly shaven. His fingers quiver. He hasn't seen a naked woman in so long, hasn't felt the bareness of skin in months. He tells her to turn around, and he bypasses her privates, moves up her stomach. His eyes dance momentarily over her breasts. He looks her in the eyes.

"Are you satisfied?" she asks.

"Yes," he stammers. He moves to the door. "Get some rest."

She doesn't say anything more, crawls into bed, pulls the sheets tight around her.

She is soon asleep.

The man shuts the door behind him.

The front door to the house opens, and Mark enters.

"Did you find any wood?" the man asks.

"Yeah. There's a ton. But it's rotted."

"If it's all we have, it's all we have."

"I found something else, though," Mark says. "Check this out."

They leave the house and walk to the barn. Mark leads the way. They maneuver around the horse's skeleton and enter the barn. The back end is entirely falling apart, crushed under the weight of

neglect that has been taking place for years. A tractor lies underneath the rubble, the tires deflated; it is the same tractor from the cryptic photograph. There are stalls for horses along the far left wall, but the doors are open, the stalls abandoned. The man imagines their skeletons lying in the fields, in the woods, anywhere. But he knows horses are fast. Maybe they've adapted, too, just like the survivors; whereas the survivors hole up during the night, the horses may sleep during the day and be alert at night. They could certainly outrun the dark-walkers. Shafts of light come from between the rotted boards, and the sunlight dapples upon the old hay at their feet. Mark takes him to a small door along the right side of the barn, and he pushes it open. It is a tool shed, but what draws the man's attention are several mounted rifles. M1 GARANDS. American rifles from World War II. The man moves past Mark and takes one off the holster. Mark flips open a footlocker on the floor, revealing collected magazines and bayonets.

"It's a gold mine," Mark says, grinning.

"Do these work?" the man asks.

"Let's find out."

They leave the barn and stand out in the cornfield along the house. The man loads a magazine and raises the rifle. He aims down the notched sight and pulls the trigger. The gun bucks, and the bullet tears apart several free-standing corn stalks. The crackling of the gunshot disappears with the endless horizon. Mark takes a rifle for himself and fits it with a bayonet. He takes a spare bayonet and gives it to the man. The man slides it underneath his belt.

"You're supposed to put it on the gun," Mark says.

"What happens when you lose the gun?" the man asks.

He doesn't answer as he takes the bayonet off his own gun and puts it in his pocket.

They enter the house. Mark moves to the cabinets in the kitchen, sets his rifle on the dining room table. He opens one of the cupboards, shouts, leaps back. The man rushes into the room, the GARAND held at the ready. The boy's face is pale, and he leans against the refrigerator, grabs at his chest. Several large rats eye them from the darkness of the cupboard. The man tiptoes forward, turns the gun around, and with the butt of the rifle closes the cupboard door.

He looks over at Mark and laughs. "You pussy."

"I've never seen rats that big. I didn't know they could *get* that big."

The man says, "Oh, they get big. When Kira and I first got our house, there were rats in the walls. They carved entire tunnels through the house. We got them exterminated, and the exterminator was shocked at how big they were." He looks at the cabinets. "Anyways. We're going to need some food. Fruits and vegetables. It will help Sarah get better. Grow a pair of balls and look through these cupboards. I'm going to go refill the MERCEDES and find some groceries at the next town. It's only fifteen miles."

Mark grins. "You just want to see how fast you can get that car to go."

The man shrugs as he leaves the kitchen. "It crossed my mind..."

IV

The man has left, and now Mark rummages through the cupboards, poking at the rats with the bayonet. He kills one and folds it in a paper towel from a roller on the cabinet, and he uses a pair of

knives to carry it outside to throw in the field. He finds several jars filled with corn and green beans, probably canned by the owners of the house sometime before the plague struck. He then checks on Sarah, makes sure she's sleeping well. He shuts the door and begins dragging in wood from the barn. He finds a hammer and nails and begins boarding up the windows. He leaves the front door open, so the man can get inside, and he does Sarah's room last, apologizing for waking her. She just rolls onto her side and continues sleeping. He finishes all the windows, upstairs and down, and he lights up a cigarette. It is about three in the afternoon. He stands smoking in the kitchen when he notices it: a breeze coming from underneath a standing cabinet lined with china plates and glasses.

He extinguishes the cigarette and removes the glassware from the cabinet, then shuffles the cabinet across the floor. There is a door against the wall. Mark grabs the GARAND and opens the door. The hinges creak and groan. Pitch blackness down a flight of stone steps. He descends with caution, lets his eyes adjust to the murky, damp gloom. It is a stone cellar, lined with several shelves filled with aging bottles of wine. Mark smiles. It is a small treasure trove. He walks between the aisles, examining the wines. He estimates that there could be over a million dollars worth of alcohol. No wonder they were hiding it. He hears footsteps above and abandons the cellar, taking the steps two-at-a-time.

As he reaches the top of the steps, Mark sees the man standing in the kitchen, staring out numbly at the boarded-up window. "You'll never believe what I just found!" he exclaims, pointing down the stairwell, into the inky blackness.

The man slowly turns, and Mark's excitement fades.

The man's face is white as snow, and his fingers twitch.

"Are you all right?" Mark asks.

The man shakes his head, moves to the table, sits down.

Mark grabs the pack of cigarettes, pulls one out, hands it to the man.

"You have a lighter?"

He nods, hands him a lighter.

The man lights his cigarette, sits smoking.

Mark takes a seat. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

The man takes several hits, tries to relax. "I don't know..."

He doesn't finish his sentence.

"You don't know what?" he asks.

He looks at the boy. "I don't know... what I just saw."



He had pushed the MERCEDES to its limit, driving down the highway at nearly 260 miles an hour. At that speed he reached next town, Victoria, in only a few minutes. He slowed the car down and got off at the freeway, turned right to reach the closest gas station: a PHILLIPS OIL. As he filled the gas tank, he pondered how quickly they could get to Aspen at that speed. Certainly the Denver highways would be crowded, and it would be dangerous to navigate the mountain roads at that speed, but... *One day.* Those two words danced around in his mind, a symphony of hope. A smile crossed over his lips, and he didn't even notice when the gasoline started overflowing from the tank. He set the nozzle back on the pump and screwed on the gas cap. He pulled onto the main road and drove past several businesses. An I.G.A. came into view, and he pulled into the parking lot. It was nearly noon.

He took a grocery cart and moved through the aisles. Skylights sent sunlight down into the empty store, so he didn't have to worry about any dark-walkers. It was habit that made him grip the GARAND as tightly as possible. Most of the aisles were empty, most likely raided by past travelers. Cereal boxes were torn apart by rats. He found a few cans, some bags of dried fruit, threw them into the belly of the cart. He walked past an aisle with HALLMARK cards, considered getting one for Sarah—GET WELL SOON!—but decided against it. He was headed towards the entrance when he heard it. He stopped the cart, didn't hear it anymore, figured it was just his ears confusing the sound of the squeaking cart wheels. He continued moving forward, noting with unease that the cart wheels *didn't* squeak. He was nearly to the entrance when he heard it again. He stopped the cart and looked off to the left, down the aisles. He could see a doorway, propped open with a rubber door-stopper. Darkness beyond. The sound came again, and this time it was unmistakable: *crying*.

He abandoned the cart, moving forward, the GARAND in his hand. The sound of weeping grew louder as he reached the open door. He peered into the darkness, cursed himself for his stupidity, and moved forward. His eyes adjusted to the blackness. There were calendars and post-it notes stuck to a bulletin board with tacs. Down the hall was a single employee's bathroom, and off to the left, at the end of the hallway, was a staircase. He reached the stairwell and stared upwards, into the shadows. The crying continued. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, and he ascended the steps, taking them slowly. He reached the upper floor, a small room submerged in darkness, a single table, some chairs, some filing cabinets against the wall. There was a narrow corridor branching off from the room, and the sounds of weeping, much louder, came from that direction. He slowly rounded the table, his brow beading with sweat, the palms of his hand wet and slippery. He gripped the rifle in iced fingers. He reached the hallway and squinted, trying to see. It was when he saw her that his heart broke.

She reminded him of Lindsey. Probably about the same age. She was hunched over a body, her shoulders shaking, her blond hair falling around the sides of her face. The man realized everything was okay, and he set the rifle upon the table. He moved down the hallway, slowly, so as not to frighten her. She rocked back and forth, crying, her arms shaking. She shuddered with each agonizing sob. "It's okay," the man said quietly. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not one of them." He continued speaking to her, almost in a whisper. She didn't respond. He nearly reached the room when his heart froze, filling with ice as if it were an acidic winter. *Oh my God...*

In the little girl's hands were coiled intestines, and she looked up at the man, tears filling her eyes, then weaving down the sides of her bony and emaciated cheeks. She looked away, moaned, took another bite out of the cold muscle. The man's gag reflex choked up, and he fell against the wall, the world spinning. The little girl wept, nearly dropped the half-chewed intestine, but then she regained her strength, lifted it to her mouth. The man could hear the ejection of bodily fluids as she bit into the organ. He turned and leaned against the wall, opened his mouth. He tried not to get sick, and he moved away, stumbling down the hallway. Everything slowed, a slurring haze.

The shock wore off, and panic lit like an unbearable inferno within him. His legs moved all on their own, and he surged down the hallway, running for his weapon. He reached the next room and grabbed the rifle. Standing in the stairwell were two male dark-walkers, foaming at their mouths, watching their prey with extreme glee. The man raised the GARAND to fire when the attack came

from the corner of the room; he was thrown to the wall, the rifle falling from his grasp. The assailant pinned him against the wall, tried to bite him in the neck. The man whipped around, threw the dark-walker against the opposite wall. The man pressed himself against the wall, trying to disappear, as the dark-walker stood. The man tried to look for his gun from his position, but the darkness wrapped around it like an invisibility cloak. The dark-walker shrieked and charged after him; the man ducked to defend himself, and the dark-walker slammed into the wall. The wall shuddered and fell backwards; the man realized it wasn't a wall but a filing cabinet, and when the cabinet fell, it revealed a small, single window through which gushed brilliant sunlight. The dark-walker on top of him howled and leapt back, groping at its tender and bubbling skin. Its cries continued even when it backtracked into one of the corners still submerged in shadows.

The man couldn't reach the rifle. The dark-walkers crowded in the shadows, insane with rage, shouting and howling like wicked wolves. The man cursed and turned, slammed his fist into the window. The glass shattered. He grabbed the overturned filing cabinet and dragged it across the floor. He stood on top of it and wedged himself through the window. Ten feet below was the top of a loading van. He wiggled himself free and fell, landed hard on top of the vehicle, the wind knocked out of him. He groaned and rolled onto his back, looked up at the cerulean sky. He moaned in pain, could still hear the frantic screams of the creatures within, and he could still hear the girl's cries, her weeping, her mourning, her *humanity*.

He returned to the MERCEDES and got inside. He tried to insert the keys into the engine's ignition switch, but his hands were wildly shaking. He threw the keys into the passenger's seat, cursed, leaned over the wheel. He gripped the wheel with both hands, squeezing tightly, trying to get a hold of himself. He sat there for twenty minutes, bathed in sunlight, his heart sprinting. He never went back into the grocery store, and he left the cart sitting full of groceries in the middle of the store.

ΣΩΣ

"So you lost your gun," Mark says after he finishes telling him the story, "and you don't have any groceries."

The man glares at him.

"I'm just trying to lighten the mood."

The man snubs out his cigarette. "I want to believe it was a trap."

"They *are* growing smarter. Everyone's noticing it."

"Yeah."

Mark lights a cigarette for himself. "You *want* to believe it was a trap?"

"Yeah."

"So you *don't* believe it was a trap?"

The man shakes his head. "It's just... She was crying. And it was *genuine*. There were real tears. It's as if... It's like she was filled with remorse for what she was doing. She was doing what she had to do, to survive, but... But she regretted the fact that she had to do it. I *want* to believe it was a trap, but I'm afraid I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. I can't get the image of her crying, the sounds of her sobbing, out of my head. But most of all, I can't forget her *eyes*. It was as if I was looking at another human being, a little girl mourning over the death of a loved one. And if that's the case..." He looks at the boy, grave concern stretched over his features. "If that's the case, then we can't call them animals anymore."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

No Perfect Endings

"Nothing lasts forever."

- anonymous

I

The man can hear her weeping in his sleep. He wakes with a start, sweat cascading down his forehead. In the dream he had slain a dark-walker, and as he reloaded his rifle, a little girl appeared. She had knelt down next to her fallen mother, and as she wept, she had looked up at the man, and with tears in her eyes, had asked, "Why have you done this? Why have you done this? She was not an animal! She was a human being, just like you! You say that we are awful. But you are the one who killed her. You are the one who committed murder. *You* are the animal!" When he awakes, he is lying on the couch in the living room. He rolls onto his side and sees Mark smoking a cigarette in the hallway. The man watches the boy smoke until he falls back asleep.

The man awakens to the smell of coffee and the birds singing outside. He pulls himself up and lights a cigarette. He takes a few drags and stands, walks into the corridor, down the hall, into the kitchen.

Mark hears the man behind him, doesn't turn around. "They had a battery-operated coffee maker in one of the lower cupboards. I was able to find some coffee. It's stale, but..."

"But it's coffee," the man says, finishing his sentence. He finds a mug in one of the cupboards and pours some of the black liquid into it. He takes several sips and looks to the doorway to his right.

Mark follows his gaze, says, "She's still sick. Doing better, though. I checked in on her when I woke up. I didn't sleep much last night. I could hear them outside. They were far-off. In the distance. Calling out to one another, like coyotes. An awful sound."

Not as awful as them weeping, the man thinks, drinking his coffee.

The man sets the coffee mug on the table and goes into the guest bedroom. Shafts of light enter the room through cracks in the rotted wooden boards nailed over the window. Sarah lies entangled in her sheets. He walks to the side of the bed and stands over her. Her face is buried into the pillow, greasy hair flattened across her one exposed cheek. He kneels down and whispers, "Sarah... Sarah..." Her exposed eye opens, and a smile cracks over her face. "How are you feeling?" he asks. She says she's doing a little bit better. "Do you want some coffee?" he asks. She says, *No*. He nods and stands to leave. He is nearly to the door when he hears her say his name. He turns and sees her propped up on one elbow, eyes squinted as she watches him. "What?" he asks.

"Thank you," she says.

"Oh," he says. "You're welcome."

"We could have been to Aspen by now."

"It's okay."

"The ride for me would have been miserable."

"I know."

"But we're still outside Aspen. Not even to Denver, yet."

"I know."

"You didn't have to cater to me. They say you're not compassionate. They say you're just a selfish bastard. I've said that before, too. But you *are* compassionate. They're wrong. Even if you try to hide it, you *do* care. Or at least you care about *me*. And I haven't had anyone really care for me. Throughout my entire life, I was just pushed to the side. And then I met Patrick. And he cared for me. He cared for me just like you care for me."

"Okay," the man says.

Sarah continues speaking, her voice strained and sore. "The second year of our marriage, I was in a car accident. Someone broadsided me in an intersection. Both my legs were broken. My neck was strained. I was in two casts and a neck brace for six weeks. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't go anywhere. Patrick had to work, and I would spend the entire day at home. But when he came back to the house, he would fix me dinner. He would fix me dinners he knew I liked, and they were *expensive* dinners. We were in debt because of medical bills, but... But he still found ways to get me the food I wanted. And he would rent movies every night, and he would hold me as we watched the movies. I was in pain, I was frustrated, I was angry... But he cared for me, and his compassion, his romantic compassion... It helped me get through it."

The man doesn't say anything.

Sarah sighs. "I'm tired."

"You should get some sleep," the man says.

She doesn't say anything, just lies back down.

She is asleep before the man can even leave the room and shut the door.

They spend the entire day at the farmhouse. Mark takes a few walks outside, through the corn fields, exploring the barn, looking for anymore weapons. He finds another GARAND, but the stock is broken, so it's useless. He grabs a few more bayonets and lays them on the table. The man works with the battery-operated coffee maker, and he finds a way to fix some soup in it. He finds some CAMPBELL'S CHICKEN NOODLE in the cupboard and manages to somehow cook it. He pours the steaming soup into a bowl and delivers it to Sarah's room. Soup is something she has not had since the days in the church. She is excited, and she tells the man, "You're so sweet." He blushes. He leaves her alone with her dinner. Mark comes in from outside and tells the man, "There are scratches all up and down the MERCEDES. Did they chase you from the grocery store?" The man says, *No*. Mark says, "They must have been closer last night. Right outside the house. But we didn't hear them. They were keeping quiet." That is a new development in their sociological structure, and the man doesn't like the sound of it. Mourning, working together, alpha males emerging, sociological structuring, keeping quiet amidst the hunt... He is just thankful his worst fear has not yet been realized. Until he has evidence that his worst fear is a reality, then he can cling to hope that the era of the dark-walker will, indeed, come to an end—regardless of whether or not he lives long enough to tell of it.

Sunset is creeping upon the farmhouse. Mark and the man smoke cigarettes in the kitchen. The man twirls the tip of a bayonet upon the polished wood of the table. Mark taps ash from the cigarette onto the table and says, "We would be in Aspen by now."

"Maybe," the man says. "Maybe not."

"We're close," Mark says. "By tomorrow, Sarah should be better."

"Or at least better enough to ride in the car," the man corrects.

"Yes," the boy says. "That's what I meant."

Silence.

"If we leave at dawn tomorrow..." Mark tries to formulate his words... "Then by this time tomorrow, we could be in Aspen."

The man likes the thought of it, but something on his face cries anxiety.

"What is it?" Mark asks.

"What if I was right?" the man replies. "What if there's nothing left of Aspen?"

The boy doesn't answer for a moment. "Then we head north to Alaska."

"Okay."

The boy fidgets. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight."

"Why?"

"I'm excited. *Excitement*. That's not something I've felt too recently. It's like an emotion of the old world."

"Maybe we're beginning to grow accustomed to this world," the man says.

"I don't even know if that's a possibility."

"Mankind has always adapted to his environment. Whether we're doing it now or not, eventually, we will, too. And it won't be like the adaptation of New Harmony. They didn't adapt. They just used what happened as an excuse to satisfy their own lusts. No, I'm talking about something different. Not about us escaping from the world, nor hiding from the world, but conquering the world. I never was much of a Bible-believer, but I'll always remember that story in Genesis. Adam and Eve. And what God told mankind: *subdue the earth*. One day, that's what mankind will do once more. We'll subdue the earth. And I hope I'm alive long enough to see it."

II

The man can't sleep. He paces back and forth in the kitchen, clutching a cigarette between two fingers. He takes scarce hits, and the ember slowly burns. His feet tap softly on the linoleum floor. He keeps seeing that weeping demon, that creature of hell with tears crawling down her cheeks. *Compassion*. No. He refuses to believe it, refuses to give such characteristics to the dwellers of the night. They are mere animals, humans stripped of their sparks of divinity, humans emptied of all coherent thought and conscience, humans void of personality. No. They are not even humans. They were *once* humans, but on the night of August 11 of last year, all of that changed. Now they are nothing but animals, on the same plane as hyenas, jackals, and wolves. And they cannot feel compassion. They cannot mourn. They do not know *how* to mourn. Mark had told him, "Mourning over the loss of a loved one is not something unique to humanity. A friend of mine, he was a zoology major, he went to Africa two years ago to study wild elephants. The elephants came across an elephant bone-yard, where their bones had been discarded after poachers took the good parts. The elephants knelt down and bobbed their heads back and forth, were moaning to themselves. He said it looked like they were weeping over fallen members of their clan." The man didn't like Mark's explanation, and he still doesn't. The dark-walkers are bloodthirsty savages, not gentle and graceful elephants. Elephants may have a mean streak, but the dark-walkers are defined by that characteristic, that inhumane lust for death and destruction. No. He refuses to believe it.

"Can't sleep?"

The man turns around. Sarah stands in the doorway.

"How are you feeling?" the man asks.

"I've slept a lot."

"I mean your stomach."

"I'm fine."

"Good."

She moves over to the table, sits down. She rests her head in her hands.

"Why can't you sleep?" she asks.

"A lot on my mind, I guess."

"What's on your mind?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? 'Nothing' is keeping you awake at night? Your eyes are tired."

"It's nothing of importance," the man says. He doesn't enjoy being badgered.

Sarah catches the annoyance in his tone, says nothing.

The man continues pacing, as if he has forgotten she's there. Standing by the refrigerator, he turns around, takes a hit off the cigarette, looks at her. "They're animals, Sarah. They're just animals. They're not *people* anymore."

"I know that."

"So do I, but..." He doesn't finish his sentence.

She eyes him. "But what?"

"Something just isn't... They're not acting like they used to."

"Like they used to?"

"You remember when it first happened. How *stupid* they were. How senseless."

"They're still senseless."

"They're senseless in their cruelty, yes. But..." He shakes his head. "I was attacked two days ago. I went to the grocery store, to get some things. They set a trap. I *think* it was a trap. I *hope* it was a trap. I got out, unscathed, thank God. I barely got out of there, too. I thought for sure they had me. But I got out. When I was in there... There was this little girl. Maybe eight or nine. Maybe even as young as seven years old. She was eating someone. I think it was another dark-walker, but it was dark, I can't be sure. She was eating her, and... And she was *crying*. As if she felt *compassion* over her food."

Sarah is quiet for a moment. "Or remorse."

The man extinguishes the cigarette on the counter. "I like the sound of 'compassion' better. Because if they have remorse... Then they have a conscience. We can maybe get away with them being animals and being compassionate at the same time. Elephants are supposedly compassionate, even to their dead. But *remorse* over something implies a conscience. And no creature on earth has a conscience, no creature but man. And if they have a conscience... Then we can't call them animals."

He stops rambling. Sarah says nothing.

Some time has passed. Maybe forty minutes. They haven't said much.

Sarah says, "They're quiet. We can't even hear them."

"They're far away," the man says. "Probably heading towards Denver."

"In that case, a farmhouse was a good choice to hole up."

"Yeah," the man says.

She is quiet for a moment. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

She puts a finger to her lips, *Shhh*.

The man listens, shakes his head. "I don't hear anything."

"It sounds like scratching. In the walls."

"It's probably rats." After a moment, "Or raccoons."

"There are raccoons in the walls?"

"No one believes me when I tell them that story."

"What story?"

"Never mind."

"You should try to get some sleep," Sarah says. It is around 2:00 in the morning.

"I'm not tired," the man says.

"You'll be tired tomorrow. I think we should try to make it to Aspen."

"Me, too."

"If you're tired, you won't be able to drive."

"We have coffee. I'll fix some coffee."

"You'll crash."

"I know how to drive."

"No. I mean you'll crash after the caffeine rush is over. Have Mark drive."

"I can drive the car."

"Then just get some rest."

"Okay," the man says, standing. She's surprised at how quickly he succumbs to her pleas. The man stretches, his back cracking. He sighs, says, "There's a couch in the living room. I'd sleep in your bed, but... I don't want to catch whatever the hell you had."

Sarah smiles. "I don't blame you. I'm immune to it now, so I'll sleep in there."

"I thought you weren't tired?"

"Mentally, I'm wide awake, but physically, I'm exhausted. My body is aching."

"You're still sick."

"I know. But not sick enough to hold us back another day."

The man nods. "Good night, then." He turns to leave.

Sarah, still sitting at the table, asks, "Where's Mark?"

"He's upstairs," the man says.

"In the bedroom?" She knows about the skeletons locked in an eternal embrace.

"No. He's in the reading room. There's one of those... pull-out... chairs."

"Oh. Okay. Good night."

"Night." And the man leaves her sitting at the table.

III

Mark is drawn from sleep, his body aching in its slumped position in the chair. He coughs, dust from the old books filling his lungs. He opens his eyes, and the darkness begins to peel away as his vision adjusts. He sees Sarah standing at the foot of the chair, arms draped at her side, wearing nothing but a worn bra and frayed panties.

"Sarah," Mark says. "Are you okay?" He shifts his position in the chair.

She doesn't move.

"Are you sleep-walking?" he asks, sure of it.

She still doesn't respond.

He is uncomfortable seeing her like that, dressed in hardly anything, and he knows he should take her back downstairs. He begins to get out of the chair when she moves forward, and a shaft of moonlight coming through the open window—*open?!—*illuminates her features. Mark's Adam's apple is locked in his throat, and his eyes go wide as saucers as his heart refuses to beat. *It's not Sarah.* The skinny, scantily-clad dark-walker lunges forward, and he doesn't have time to shout as she pounces upon the chair.

Her frail arms are stronger than they look, and she grips his upper arms and presses him down into the cushioned chair. Mark's lungs refuse to inhale, and his mind sears with unimaginable fear. He rips one of his arms out from under her grasp and presses his hand against her cold stomach, trying to push her off; her free arm then wraps over his mouth, preventing him from screaming. She snarls, drool running down her speckled chin, and her eyes radiate an insane glee. Mark looks up at those maniacal eyes, and he rips his hand away from her stomach and swings it out over the chair. She bites her lip, salivating at the thought of this precious meal, and she begins to lower her head, her teeth chattering in the anticipation of closing over his neck, the anticipation of tearing through his flesh and shearing his jugular, the anticipation of his warm, lively blood filling her mouth in a titanic spray.

She is so lost in the ecstasy of the moment that she does not realize he is holding a weapon, the bayonet-fixed GARAND. He had grabbed it from its leaning position against the wall beside the chair. Her eyes freeze in their sockets, the pupils going into spasms, as the bayonet is thrust through her throat, the tip bursting out from the back of her neck in a radiating spray of blood. With a grunt, Mark shoves her off of himself, but he refuses to let go of the gun. She stumbles backwards, groping at the rifle's barrel. Mark is pulled forward, the bayonet caught between the strong tendons in the throat. She looks at him with fear in her eyes as he wrenches his finger down on the trigger. The gun-blast shrieks through the house, the framed pictures on the walls chiming. The blast of the bullet racing through her throat and shattering her vertebrae sends her head flying into the air. Her body thumps onto the ground, her legs shivering, blood coursing over the hardwood flooring, pouring as if from a spicket from the bloody stump where her neck had been. The head rolls and comes to a stop against the foot of a bookshelf, the teeth chattering and eyes swimming in their sockets like tadpoles in a PETRI dish.

Mark is standing alone, staring at the decapitated body on the floor when the man rushes into the room, Sarah on his heels. The boy looks over at him, swallows hard, says, "She got in... Through the window..." He points to the open window. The man leaps over the corpse and runs to the window. The boards have been knocked out of place, and the pane has been lifted. He sticks his head out and stares down at the ground. The overgrown grass is void of any type of life. He looks over at the trees, and in the pale moonlight, broken by towering clouds floating lazily above, he can see the illuminated eyes of dozens of upon dozens of dark-walkers standing in the small grove of trees that wrap around the barn. "Shit." He looks to his left and sees several dark-walkers crouched down upon the porch overhang. Somehow they had crawled on top, and one of them must have managed to wisely maneuver to the window and open it. They blink at him, faces nothing but blank stares. The man pulls his head back into the room and slides the window frame back down. He throws the latch, locking it tightly. He turns around. Mark is still staring at the body, and Sarah is staring at the man. The man says, "This isn't good."

"They're on the roof," the man says. "And they're in the woods."

"How many?" Sarah asks.

"I don't know. Maybe twenty. Even thirty."

"I thought you said they were all in the city."

"I was wrong."

"Apparently."

Mark looks over at Sarah, points to the body. "I thought it was you."

"What?"

"When she came into the room, I thought she was you."

Sarah shakes her head. "She looks nothing like me."

The man says, "Yeah, you still have your head attached. But if we don't think of something quickly, there's no guarantee it'll stay that way." He looks back towards the window. "They were smart enough to open the window and knock out the boards without waking you up, Mark. And somehow they got onto the roof. They could be surrounding other parts of the house for all we know."

He finishes speaking, and then they hear the sound of breaking wood downstairs, followed by the overturning of the kitchen table, the shattering of the coffee maker on the tiled floor.

Sarah's face goes white as snow. "They're in the house."

The man grabs the GARAND from Mark's hands, wrenches the bayonet off from its mount. He slides the bayonet into his belt and checks the magazine on the rifle.

Sarah says, "What about us?"

"What about you?"

"You have all the weapons."

The man nods, draws out the knife, tosses it to her.

She grimaces, wiping the blood from the blade on the chair's arm.

They can hear the kitchen cupboards being rifled-through downstairs, cans and silverware thrown around.

The man says, "They're going to be pouring into the house any minute." He looks over at Mark. "Remember that cellar you found?" Mark nods. The man continues, "We'll aim for that. Shut the door. Cellars usually have locks on the inside, especially in old houses like this. We should be able to lock it and barricade ourselves in for the night." He looks over at Sarah. "How's that sound?"

"We're wasting time," she says.

They move quickly. The man leads the way. They exit the room and run down the hallway, and the man takes the steps two-at-a-time. A dark-walker meets them halfway up the stairwell, and the man blasts it in the face with the rifle. The dark-walker's face is carved with a precise hole, and the bullet bursts out of the back of its skull, lodging in the wooden wall. Its body slumps to the ground and rolls down several steps, its legs getting caught in the banister. They leap over the body. The kitchen is directly below. Several dark-walkers stand there amidst the overturned table and the cupboard's contents littered on the floor. The GARAND pops off several shots, and they drop where they stand. The man reaches the kitchen floor with such speed that he cannot control himself; he stumbles forward, trips over the body of one of the fallen dark-walkers, and he pitches forward, the gun sliding from his fingers. He sees the corner of the kitchen counter rushing up at him, and then he knows nothing.

IV

He hears birds chirping outside. He opens his eyes, and he immediately shuts them: the light is blinding, reaching back behind his eyes and scalding his brain. He lifts his heavy hand and touches his face. His nose is sore to the touch. He draws his fingers upwards, the fingertips tiptoeing across the bridge of his nose, and—He winces, extraordinary throbbing rippling through his forehead. He sucks in a deep gasp of air, settles down, touches the stitches with great tenderness. He groans and rolls onto his side, away from the window, and he opens his eyes. Sarah is sitting on the edge of the bed, and she is watching him. A smile creases over her lips, and she reaches out, takes the man's hand in hers, squeezes.

She says, "I was afraid you weren't going to wake up."

The man's tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. "Your shirt..."

She looks down, dried blood clinging to her clothes.

"It's mine," the man says.

She looks back to him, nods. "The important thing is, you're alive."

The man closes his eyes, moans, pounding cymbals resonating behind his temples.

Sarah begins to stand, says, "I'll get you some water..."

"Wait," the man says.

She sits back down. "Okay."

He opens his eyes again, looks at her. "What happened?"

She looks towards the door, takes a deep breath, and she tells him.

ΣΩΣ

The man had tripped, hit his head on the counter, and fallen backwards onto the floor, sprawled like a manikin amongst the freshly-dead dark-walkers. They could hear others swarming into the house, the sound of splintering wood and shattering glass, creatures barging unwelcome and yet unhindered into their falsely-sound fortress. Mark had rushed forward and grabbed the man; and Sarah, though weak, had knelt down and taken up the GARAND. Only a few more rounds were in the gun, and she didn't have another magazine. She swung around to face the hallway as two dark-walkers burst into the kitchen, their long hair falling about their shoulders like wild manes. She raised the GARAND and fired two shots into the first creature, sending it backwards into the wall. The other rushed her, and she squeezed the trigger: the bullet grazed its neck, tearing out a chunk of flesh and giving birth to a geyser of blood that sprayed against the pasty-white ceiling. The dark-walker continued coming after her despite its wound, and the weapon was out of ammunition. She swung the gun around and bashed it in the face with the butt, splitting its nose, and it staggered backwards. She dropped the gun and drew the bayonet from her belt. The dark-walker's eyes swam in a daze, but it reoriented itself and faced her. She stood ready, glancing between it and Mark, who was hefting the man into his arms. The dark-walker looked over at Mark and the man, and Sarah leapt forward, slashing the knife through the air. It tore across the dark-walker's throat, and the creature staggered backwards into the overturned kitchen table; it stumbled and fell, and one of the kitchen legs pierced through its back and protruded from its chest. The dark-walker groped at its throat, eyes wide in terror as blood spilt down its bare and hairy chest, a crimson waterfall that trailed along its sides and splattered in great goblet upon the underside of the table.

Mark then had the man, and he was moving towards the cellar door. Sarah turned, rushed and opened it; she stepped back as he descended the stairs. More dark-walkers came into the kitchen, looking at the bodies thrown about, the blood filling the tiled floor. They looked over to Sarah, but she was already inside the cellar door, pulling it shut. She threw the inner bolt as they hurled themselves against the door, and she stood on the wooden steps, hearing their growling and snarling. And then there was silence, followed by the muffled sound of moaning, ripping flesh, snapping bones and stretching tendons. *They're eating the fallen*, she thought, and she turned and took the steps down into the subterranean cavern.

She had found Mark standing over the man next to one of the many shelves lined with aging wine. She pushed him out of the way and knelt down on the grime-stained concrete floor. The dark-walkers above them, in the kitchen and living area, trampled a great deal, in their frenzy for food, and waves of dust fell from the rafters above. Mark looked up, blinked his eyes free of dust, feared that the ceiling would cave in. Sarah ignored the commotion above, tended to the man. Even in the blackness her eyes adjusted, for there were small windows, barely a few centimeters long, around the rim of the walls, facing outside; and milky moonlight traced its way in with leisurely pace. "There's so much blood..." she said under her breath. The man's eyes had rolled into the back of his head, and his breathing was shallow and contorted. Blood spilt from the gash in his forehead, covering his face. She used her sleeve to wash some of the blood away, but despite soaking her sleeve, the blood continued to pour from the wound. She feared he had burst open some of the branching vessels of the carotid artery. She didn't voice this fear to Mark, who stood over the man, fidgeting, his face pale as the moon itself. She looked up at him, said, "Mark. Your shirt." He understood, quickly undressed. He stood half-naked and tossed his shirt to Sarah. He began shivering in the damp coldness. She wrapped the shirt around the man's face, careful not to obscure his nostrils, and pressed down tightly on the wound. A makeshift tourniquet. Blood soaked through the cloth, pooling between her clenched fingers. Mark asked if he was going to make it. *I don't think so*, she thought, saying, "I don't know. He should." Mark asked if she was being honest. She didn't answer.

Twenty minutes passed. The blood began to let up, and the shirt stuck to the man's forehead. Sarah kept checking his pulse along the carotid in his neck. Slow but steady. She propped him against one of the stone walls, to keep as little blood as possible flowing into his head. He moaned some in the darkness, uttering words she couldn't comprehend. She noticed a name: *Kira*. And then another name, one less familiar: *Jessie*. She hadn't heard that name before. She repositioned him, and she leaned against the wall, and she held him up against her, wrapping her arms around him, holding him tightly, keeping him warm. As Mark paced back and forth in the darkness, she kept whispering to the man: "You're going to make it. Don't give up. This isn't your time. Keep it together. Don't bail out on us. Stay strong." The dark-walkers would become silent for a while, and then the commotion would begin again, a new frenzied search for food. Banging at the door above them. God-awful wails, pitiful cries spawned from the pit of hunger within their acidic stomachs.

Several hours into the night, the dark-walkers nearly got into the cellar. They had cleverly found another entrance, accessed from outside. A cellar door that had been covered with old mulch and dried leaves. They had ferociously dug away at the dirt, their fingernails bleeding, whining like dogs closing in on elusive prey. Mark had heard them and moved forward, feeling a draft of cold air. He had seen an old wood-burning stove propped against what looked like a grate, and pushing the rusted stove out of the way, he knelt down beside the grate and peered inside. He didn't have time to

react as two hands shot through the grate and grabbed him by both arms, yanking him against the rusted bars. He let out a shout and ripped away, fell backwards. In the dim moonlight coming through the small windows—which were now covered with the eyes of dark-walkers peering inside, enraged that they were too large to fit through—Mark could see a figure of a naked, hunched woman, snarling at the gate, gripping the bars with white-knuckled fingers and bloodied, overgrown fingernails. Mark composed himself, heart racing, and he pushed the stove back against the grate. He walked over to Sarah and the man, on the other side of the room and separated by the shelves of wine, and she asked what had happened. “They found another way in, but it’s blocked,” Mark told her. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Dawn was approaching. The dark-walkers were becoming even more agitated, knowing that they would lose their prey if they didn’t find a way in quickly. They covered the windows, tried to bust through the heavy door leading to the kitchen, and they flocked up against the grate, throwing themselves against it. The iron, though rusted, was too strong. The man’s pulse was growing weaker, and his murmurings had stopped. Sarah asked Mark to bring her some wine. He grabbed the closest bottle and gave it to her. She popped the cork with the edge of the bayonet, and she poured the wine down onto the cloth pressed against the man’s forehead. His body shuddered in pain, and she knew he was conscious. She whispered: “You can hear me. Stay with it, all right? Stay the course. The sun is almost up. Everything’s going to be okay.”

The dark-walkers let out a final shriek and departed, and they could hear them exiting the house. They didn’t leave the basement until sunlight could be seen coming through the small windows. Mark took the bayonet and walked up the stairs, unlocked the door, took a breath, and opened it. Sunlight came through the broken kitchen window and blinded his eyes. He blinked, let his eyes adjust. The kitchen floor was strewn with scattered bones, the flesh completely gnawed off. Blood formed a gelatinous mass upon the floor, and flies crawled over the walls in their carrion-glee. He quickly scanned the house, which was totally ransacked. He called down to Sarah, and she came up the steps. They went into the bedroom against the kitchen and laid the man down upon the mattress. Sarah left Mark with the man and went upstairs, into the bedroom with the skeletal couple. Their bones were thrown about, and a femur had been smashed into the vanity mirror, left lodged amidst the spider-web cracks in the glass. She searched the closet and found what she was looking for: a FIRST AID kit. She knew an old couple with farming experience would have one. She returned downstairs and pulled the shirt off of the man’s wound. He didn’t move an ounce. Totally unconscious. Mark stood like a statue and watched as she stitched the wound, then laid the man down upon the pillow. She looked up at the boy, said, “Now all we can do is wait.” He nodded, thanked her, and then left: “I need to lie down, I feel sick to my stomach,” he had said. And she remained in the bedroom, sitting upon the bed, hearing the birds returning to life, singing their songs, watching the man sleep.

ΣΩΣ

The man rubs his stitches again, lightly, with little pressure. “Where’s Mark?”

Sarah replies, “He’s on the couch. Feeling sick.”

The man pauses at those words, begins to stand.

She reaches out, grabs his hand: “You need to rest. You’ve lost a lot of blood...”

He withdraws his hand from hers. He stumbles out of the bed, feels his weak knees wobbling, staggers against the wall next to the broken window. He places one hand against the wall to steady himself, and he moves past the window. He dodges the broken and rotted wooden boards lying on the floor, and he winces in pain as he steps on glass. Sarah curses and moves around to help him, saying, "You're barefoot, you're barefoot..." He just shakes his head. He moves around her as she tries to placate him into lying back down. He reaches the bedroom door and pushes it open, and leaving bits of blood on the floor as he walks, he enters the kitchen, turns left, and heads down the hallway towards the living room. Sarah is behind him, quiet now: she knows no words will stop him. Under her breath: "Stop being so fucking stubborn."

The man reaches the living room, looks over to the sofa. Mark is lying there. The boy is curled up upon the sofa's cushions, one hand draped over the edge, fingertips grazing the floor. His eyes are clenched shut, and his body quivers and quakes. His eyes flutter for a moment, and then he leans onto his side, vomits into a trashcan. The stench is overwhelming. The man turns and goes back towards the bedroom, leaving Sarah alone. He returns with the blanket from the bed and places it over Mark. He glares at Sarah: "He was shivering, and you didn't do a damned thing?"

She just shakes her head. "He wasn't shivering earlier..."

"He's shivering now."

"I know. But you got a blanket. He'll be fine."

The man stands, overshadowing the boy. "I don't know."

"He probably just caught what I had. I was still kind of sick, and it was cold in the cellar." She is resolute: "I'm sure he just got whatever I had."

"No," the man says, his voice cold and resolute. "He didn't."

She looks over at him. "How do you know?"

"This is different," he says, stepping forward, kneeling down beside the boy. "I've seen this before." He pulls the blanket back. Mark doesn't react. The man gently takes the boy's arm and pulls his body to the side, revealing his shoulder. The man turns away, suddenly feeling dizzy, and he nearly loses all strength, nearly falls backwards onto the floor, his body threatening to reel in shock.

Sarah moves forward, and her breath is taken.

Her heart stops.

Three words escape her icing lips: "Oh my God..."

She is staring at a bite wound.

At first Sarah didn't realize what she was seeing. She had never seen and recognized one of the bite wounds herself, and though she had beheld it earlier while setting Mark upon the sofa, she had thought nothing of it. Now she can see so clearly, as if a veil has been lifted, the blindness extinguished, the dark and concentric circles around each of the three teeth marks, each scabbed-over. Around the entire wound are alternating ovals of black and blue, and radiating around the hued ovals are olive speckles, stretching out in currents across the skin. In time the moldy patches will crawl down to his fingers, and in time the disease shall ravage his brain, and in time he will become one of the dwellers of the night.

V

The man's pulse is sprinting, and he is overcome with dizziness. He falls away from the couch and sits upon the floor, staring at the bite wound hewn into Mark's shoulder. He cannot pull his eyes from the gash, and he feels a cold sweat beginning to pepper his brow. Sarah moves forward and takes him by the arm, helps him up, and he begins gasping for breath, his lungs searing. She pulls him away from the sofa and into the kitchen. She has removed the remains of the fallen dark-walkers, but the peeling floor tiles are still stained red with their blood. She leaves the man at the counter, and he leans against the cupboards, rests his forehead against them. She grabs a jug of distilled water and pours him a glass, dumps some salt inside, and she hands it to him. He begins to set it down on the counter, but she says, "You're showing the signs of rapid blood loss. Sweating. Dizziness. Air hunger. Drink it. It will help." The man takes several drinks, nearly vomits, but is able to keep it down. He feels better. Sarah looks towards the hallway leading into the family room, where Mark sleeps, and she says, "I'll make us some coffee."

She was able to get the coffee maker working again, and she overturned the table and slid the chairs underneath. There are bits of flesh cloven to one of the table legs from where the dark-walker was impaled. They sit at the table, and the man drinks coffee, feels his head pounding with a resonating migraine.

Sarah looks to the window, the sun shining forth in its brilliance, says, "We need to figure out what to do before nightfall."

"I know," the man says, clutching the cup of coffee in his hands.

"They'll be back tonight. And there's no way we can fortify this place again."

"I know."

"We'll have to find someplace else."

"I know."

"But you're weak. And Mark..." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

The man had been exhausted, returned to the bedroom, curled up on the bed without blankets. Sarah had gone out to the car, had contemplated going into town and seeking a new hideout. That was when it struck her, and she felt foolish for not thinking of it before. She returned into the house and spent the majority of the day in the cellar: she was able to slide bricks into the small windowsills peering into the cellar, and she pushed the wine-shelves against the far wall to allow for the bed and sofa to be brought down. She went outside as the sun began to lower from its zenith in the sky, and she filled the trap-door leading to the cellar full of dirt and rocks, then shut the trap-door and nailed boards from the barn overtop. They had not been able to get in last night, and she prayed they would not find a new way in once darkness fell. She returned inside, and she waked the man, told him what she had done. He approved. He was weak, but he helped her pull apart the bed and carry it into the basement, where they reassembled it against the far wall. Sarah went upstairs, hefted Mark into her hands, and carried him down, laid him on the bed, and she grabbed the blanket from the couch and pulled it over him. He shivered, white and clammy, cold and opaque. She then brought down the couch, and the man found several candles in one of the rooms upstairs, brought them down. As the sun began to set, Sarah barricaded them inside. She and the man sat down on the couch, holding the candles, and they said nothing as the howls and cries of the dark-walkers once again began to awake over the Kansas plains.

The dark-walkers surround the farmhouse, and they can hear them moving about upstairs. They are not so frenzied this time, more calculated and cool. They don't find a way in. The man lights a cigarette, and Sarah takes it from him, snubs it out on the sofa's arm. He glares at her, and she tells him, "It will accelerate your heart-rate. That's not a good thing for you, not right now, until your body is able to replenish its blood." The man shakes his head and says nothing. He tries to listen to the dark-walkers, pinpointing their movements, but the next thing he knows is bits of sunshine weaving between the cracks in the bricks against the tall windows, and Sarah is curled up on the sofa beside him, her head on the sofa's arm. He looks over to the bed and sees Mark sleeping, cocooned in the blankets, and he closes his eyes again, and he falls back asleep.

Sarah and the man are upstairs. Mark is sleeping in the basement. He has been vomiting all morning, moaning and shivering, his skin cold and clammy. The house has been ransacked once more, but they had hid the coffee maker in the back of a cupboard, and it was untouched. Now they drink the coffee, their only sustenance, and they avert their eyes from one another, desiring only to crawl into the vacuum of their own thoughts.

Then Sarah speaks.

The man looks up. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

"What are we going to do?"

"About what?"

"About Mark."

The man looks back down at the black coffee, says nothing.

Sarah looks towards the door leading down into the basement. "We shouldn't be here... We shouldn't be here when it happens."

The man winces, the thought painful. His hands squeeze tightly around the mug.

Sarah looks at him, but he doesn't look at her. "We have to face what's happening."

"We don't know what's happening," the man says.

"Bullshit. You know very well what's happening."

He looks up at her. "Why weren't we infected last year? How come nearly everyone we knew died, but we were uninfected? For some reason, our bodies were not susceptible to the virus or germ."

Sarah nods. "We know this."

"But then, when we get bit, what happens? When something in the saliva, maybe a hothouse for the germ or virus, gets into our system, then we become one of them—but only after a debilitating sickness."

"And we know this, too."

"My point," the man says, his grip on the coffee mug growing tighter, "is that the virus or germ or whatever the hell it is mutated to the point of being able to infect us after its widespread distribution. So what if it's mutated again? What if it's mutated in such a way that it causes sickness, but not death; it causes sickness, but not..." He searches for the right word, can't discover it, just stops talking.

Sarah leans back in her chair. "You're going to bank on that?"

"We can hope."

She is quiet for a moment, then, "Can we?"

VI

Several weeks have passed, and Mark's situation has not improved. It has followed, step-by-step, the steady progression the man had witnessed months earlier with the death of Miss Lindsey Campbell. The fever, shivering, and cold sweats had continued, along with the prominence of bloody vomit and red urine. He began convulsing madly at times, and more than once the man and Sarah had to hold him down to prevent him from making too much of a racket during the night. He was unable to eat, and he became emaciated, his skin clinging to his bones. The coughing intensified, a deep and cacophonous coughing that kept everyone awake during the night. The bouts of sickness were interspersed with moments of clarity and longevity, and sometimes Mark would go on long walks during the daytime, contemplating his future. "Finding his peace with God," Sarah would say. The man didn't want to hear any of it. And although Mark's progress had been downhill, a steady yet quickening pace towards the inevitable, the man has regained his strength, his forehead wound has healed, and the stitches are beginning to fall out.

Now sunset is approaching, in the first week of July, and the man stands in the kitchen. He hears Sarah shouting, and fearing the worst, he grabs the GARAND sitting on the table and dashes down the stairs. He finds Sarah holding Mark in her arms, sitting upon the bed. Mark's back is arched in a crooked posture, his eyes are wild and rolling in their sockets, and foam spills from his mouth, tapering in great droplets onto the bed-sheets. The man lowers the rifle and looks with forlorn eyes at the sight behind him. Tears cascade down Sarah's cheeks, and she weeps, "Make it stop... Make it stop..."

The man has no strength, simply shakes his head. "I can't."

"Please..." she sobs. "Please..."

The man turns and walks over to the sofa.

He sits down.

He runs his hands through his greasy hair and stares at the floor.

He hears Sarah crying.

He wants to do it. He wants to be merciful.

But he had promised Mark he wouldn't.

ΣΩΣ

It was the third day after they found the bite wound, and it was the first time Mark woke conscious, the fever and shivering and cold sweats abated. The man had heard him walking upstairs, and pulling himself from sleep, he abandoned the sofa and followed up after him. Sunlight was already breaking across the farm, and the heat of the morning sweltered in through the broken windows. He heard the front door open and shut, and he made his way down the hall, pushed his way out onto the porch. Mark was standing beside the RAV4, just staring down the gravel drive leading towards Interstate 70, the thick lines of trees flowering with their green radiance casting shadows upon the drive. The man pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Mark turned and saw him, walked slowly to the porch. The man handed him the lit cigarette, grabbed one for himself. They stood smoking in the morning, saying nothing. An awkward pale of silence.

"I've been sick," Mark said.

The sound of his voice sent several birds flocking from the trees.

"Yes, you have," the man said.

"So what are we going to do?"

The man refused to look at him. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"It's up to you."

"Maybe you guys should just go ahead and leave."

"No."

"It would be better if..."

The man spun around, glared at him. "I said 'No', damn it, what the fuck is so hard to understand about that?"

Mark was taken aback, suddenly quiet, and his face flushed red.

The man shook his head. "We're not abandoning you."

"I'm not safe."

"We'll worry about that when that time comes. Maybe it will work out differently."

"It won't."

"You don't know that."

Mark shook his head now. "That's always been your problem."

"What's been my problem?"

"Your refusal to accept this."

"To accept what?"

"Reality. You refuse to accept reality." He exhaled, took another hit, let the smoke fill his lungs, blew it out as he spoke: "The reality is that I've been bitten, and the reality is that I will grow sick to the point that I become one of them. The reality of our world is that everything has gotten fucked up, everything's been blown to shit, and yet you hold onto hope that maybe, if you play your cards right, you'll be able to escape reality. You're living in a dream-world. We've all been living in a dream-world. Aspen? What did we expect to find there? A paradise? Everyone's just trying to escape what's happened, but no one's accepting it. Or maybe those who *have* accepted it have all killed themselves—because if this is reality, then what other logical choice is there?"

The man was quiet, saying nothing. "So you want to kill yourself?"

Mark cursed under his breath. "That's not what I said."

"I know. I just want to know what you want me to do."

"I don't want you to do anything."

"Nothing?"

"No. I want you to do *one* thing."

"Anything."

Mark looked him in the eyes. "I want you to leave."

The man shook his head. "I'm not abandoning you."

"Everyone gets abandoned sooner or later."



The next morning has come, preceded by yet another uneventful night with dark-walkers surrounding the farmhouse. The man is upstairs with his coffee, standing in the kitchen, smoking a cigarette, feeling the warm breeze coming through the broken windows. It had rained overnight, and muddy footprints are scattered over the tile floor, slowly drying into a flaky crust. The man becomes lost in his thoughts, contemplating the frailty of life, and then his concentration is shattered: Sarah is shouting downstairs. He extinguishes the cigarette, grabs the GARAND, and exits the kitchen, taking the stairwell into the wine-cellar.

The man finds Sarah kneeling into the bed's mattress with one knee, speaking hurriedly to Mark. The boy has cocooned himself in the sheets, and he has pressed himself against the bed's headboard. His eyes are global and the color of egg whites, his pupils are dilated, and cold sweat pierces his brow.

The man tosses the gun aside and moves forward, grabs Sarah by the arm, pulls her away. "You can't help him," the man growls; "He's hallucinating."

"Hallucinating?" she asks, looking up at the man.

"It's one of the symptoms of the disease."

She looks back at Mark. "What's he hallucinating?"

"God only knows," the man says, "and it's probably better that way."

Mark is biting his lip, shivering under his sheets, shaking in a fogged fear.

"There's nothing we can do," the man says.

She moves forward, crawls onto the bed.

"Sarah..."

She ignores him, and she curls up with Mark, holds the boy close, whispers comforting words into his ears. Sarah looks over at the man, begging him to join her. He shrugs and backs away, returns upstairs, to the warm morning, and he smokes another cigarette. He can still hear Mark whimpering down below.

ΣΩΣ

In the days leading up to the frightening and unknowable hallucination, Mark had gone through several bouts of relatively healthiness. It was in these times that he and the man shared a gauntlet of conversations, conversations that the man would remember for the rest of his life.

Mark had come upstairs to drink some coffee and smoke cigarettes, to sit on the front porch in the warm June afternoon sunshine, to watch the sun burning high in the sapphire sky. The man had joined him in silence, and they drank their hot coffee and sat in the hot sun and shared their smoldering cigarettes. Mark said, "I met you before the plague."

The man looked over at him. "What?"

"I took Amanda to Tampa Bay to see a concert. 'The Jonas Brothers.' You were our pilot on the flight."

The man was quiet, then, "Why didn't you say anything?"

The boy shrugged. "Had none of this ever happened, we wouldn't have come to know one another. If I mentioned it... It would mean that the circumstances of this plague gave birth to our friendship. But that would mean something good came out of the plague. And you know what? Nothing good came out of this. Nothing." He was silent. "This plague brought us together, and now the promise of eventuality causes the plague to tear us apart."

Another conversation, this one in the basement in the middle of the night, while Sarah slept on the couch. The man had taken watch over the boy, and they spoke quietly in order to not attract the frenzy of the dark-walkers crawling about outside.

"We let our dream consume us," Mark said.

"What dream is that?" the man asked.

"The dream of Aspen. The dream that things would get better."

The man didn't know what to say. "Oh."

"We let the dream consume us, and then we proceeded to consume the dream, feasting upon it as if it were the very sustenance keeping us alive. But that's the nature of dreams: they take our hands, as we're grasping the mire and clay, and we let our desires and imaginations and hopes lead us to fashion that which promises, even in hidden shadows, to deliver us to redemption. We breathe life into our naïve creations, hoping our creations will bring us what our hearts long for. Yet while we are its creator, its tamer, we bend down and submit to its lashings and blows. The creation takes the chains and snaps them upon our ankles and wrists; we don't resist, for this enslaving demon cracks a wicked smile and crackles, 'My name is Hope.' And so we find ourselves stripped naked, dragged through the mud, humiliated before the world, beaten and bloodied and scourged—our skin rips, our bones snap, our tendons shatter, and our chests heave in agonizing sobs of despair riddled with falsified whispers of hope. And here is the unimaginable thing: while we hold the keys to the chains, we continue to bow down before this devilish creation we made out of our blood-soaked hands. We are *willfully* dragged through the thorn-beds, scratched raw, emotionally broken, physically and mentally scarred." He was quiet for a second, then looked over at the man, tears beginning to tiptoe down his cheeks. "How could we have been so blind? How could we have been so ignorant? How could we have been so naïve?"

The next day Mark was sick, but two days later the sickness subsided. He continued ranting in the same vein: "Dreams are such ungodly demons. We give ourselves over to them, hoping that they will come true, and we convince ourselves that our destinies lie in our dreams. This is a naïve illusion. Dreams are demons masquerading as angels of light. And you know why? Because dreams ignore the reality of the world we live in. Life is unfair, unpredictable, and full of countless sufferings. And though our dreams ignore reality, we let them take hold of us, and they drain life from our veins. How much of my own life has been consumed in the pursuit of a dream that I now realize could never be possible? My dream was to be with Cara, forever, but it didn't work out. It'll never work out. I gave myself over to that dream, and my foolishness led to the dream bitch-slapping me across the face. How much sleep did I lose over that dream? How much of my precious time had I squandered over pursuing this futile dream? I don't know, perhaps dreams are good. Perhaps they serve some hidden purpose. I don't know. All I know is this: the more I learn, the more I see, the more I understand, the more our dreams must fade, being replaced with a philosophy bordering on nihilism. Nothing matters. There is no meaning. Dreams are empty because dreams don't come true. Ultimately, our hopes are ill-founded dreams. It means nothing. It's all meaningless. This world is fucked up, and hope is a damn illusion."

The next week, Mark found the man going through several old crates in the barn, searching for more bayonets. The man had stopped searching and gone outside with the boy, and together they smoked a pair of cigarettes. Mark closed his eyes and spoke, his words cool and precise, and the man wondered if the boy had not practiced this speech prior to coming outside: "As I lied in the bed downstairs, staring at the wall, reflecting on all that had come and all that has continued to come, I began to perceive that the world may not have been as I'd always perceived it. I opened my mind, and I began to suspect that I was living a lie, quietly putting my hope in a fate that would never come. Somehow, in some ways, our souls are opened to the bitter truth: we see the devil leading us on with his blood-stained whip, we feel the sharp iron on our wrists and ankles rubbing our skin raw, and suddenly we hear our aching body crying out in protest to this awful enslavement. We discover the keys lie in our hands, so we unchain the clasps and shackles binding our wrists and ankles, we lift ourselves up out of the thorn-beds and mud-patches, we wash and bandage our

wounds, and we face the horizon. There is a deep sense of remorse within us—‘We have been living a lie!’ Those haunting demons—those dreams and hopes that enslaved us, suffocated us, strangled us, and beat us—whisper in our ears, ‘Let us back in,’ but we fight against their conniving lies. ‘The world is not our friend,’ we say; ‘We were naïve, ignorant, and full of false hopes, aspirations, and dreams. We have now embraced reality.’”

“Do you remember that conversation we had driving home from the grocery store? Back when we were still at your house?” Mark had asked another evening.

“No,” the man said. “I’m sorry.”

“The one when I looked at the playground and you asked me why I was staring at it.”

“I remember,” the man said. A lie.

“I was thinking of Ashlie. That was her school. Right after Mom and Dad died. I would always go to the school to pick her up, and she wouldn’t want to leave the swings. She’d have me push her, do what was called a ‘Superman’: I would get behind her on the swing, and I’d run underneath her, lifting her as high as possible into the air.” The boy smiled, remembering his beloved sister. “I asked you if you believed in Heaven, because I wanted to believe that Ashlie was there. Do you remember what you said?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You said you didn’t believe in Heaven. And I protested you. Know why?”

He handed Mark the cup of water. “No.”

“Because I believed in Heaven. Or, at least, I *wanted* to. Because that would mean that I hadn’t lost Ashlie forever. It would mean that I would see her again someday. But that’s just... just wishful thinking. There’s no such thing as Heaven. There would have to be a loving God for a good Heaven to exist, and the concept of a loving God is irreconcilable with what has taken place here.” Mark shook his head. “That’s just the way it goes, though, you know? You have family, you have friends, you have lovers... And then they’re gone. Relationships are so fleeting and futile. If I had to do it over again, I would strangle myself on my umbilical cord—because it would save me the pain of what this world has given me.”

VII

Mark is sick again. He has hallucinated several times, and more than once he has cried out for Ashlie, Cara, even his parents. It is mid-morning, and the man and Sarah sit upstairs. He is smoking and drinking coffee, kept awake overnight by Mark’s incessant screams of pain. They don’t say anything for a long while, just listen to the cardinals and grosbeaks singing in the limbs of the trees. Their melodies are sweet, a calm symphony, steadying the nerves, and—

The man curses, speaks up: “He’s suffering.”

Sarah looks up at him. “I know.”

“It’s intolerable for him.”

“He wants us to leave.”

“I’m not going to leave him.”

Sarah knows what he is saying. “We only have four rounds left in the rifle.”

“I know,” the man said. “And I can’t find anymore in the damn barn.”

She lowers her head, stares at her hands sprawled out on the counter. “It’s your call.”

The man tries to look her in the eyes, but she won't look up. "Why mine?"

Keeping her eyes averted, "You've known him longer than me. He's your friend."

"He's *your* friend, too."

Now she looks up, and her eyes glower. "He trusts *you* to do the right thing. *Not* me."

They are in the bedroom upstairs, the scattered bones of the twin skeletons lying on the floor. The man kicks a femur out of the way and approaches the dresser. His movements are sluggish yet precise, his head a whirlwind of thoughts, scattered like the bones on the floor, thoughts that cannot be given any semblance of understanding. A cesspool of mind-games. Sarah stands in the doorway, watching him, her face white as a ghost, the sweet paleness of the ash of Mount Vesuvius. The man opens the drawer and begins rummaging around, spreading the moth-eaten clothes against the far sides of the dresser. He quietly shuts it, not finding what he is looking for, and he moves to the next drawer.

He doesn't realize he is speaking. "I told Mark, with Lindsey, 'Don't get attached. It will only make it harder in the end.' I went against my own wisdom. I got attached. And now I have to do the thing I've feared doing ever since I met him."

He realizes he has spoken aloud when Sarah says, "If we let ourselves get attached, we risk getting hurt."

The man pauses in his searching, closes his eyes. "Yeah."

A moment of silence.

Sarah says, "But if we don't get attached, we risk never feeling alive."

The man continues shifting clothes through the drawers, saying nothing.

He finds what he is looking for:

a belt.

Sarah decides to stay upstairs. She doesn't want to be there when it happens. The man stands at the top of the stairs for what feels like an eternity. He keeps seeing Mark, his smile, their conversations, the way he wept at the death of his sister, their journey together, helping one another. He has never had a closer friend. It has been said that tragedy and desperation forge the greatest intimacies, and the man has never felt this close to another man before. It is not homo-erotic but a deep friendship forged in the fields of fire. And now that friendship must end... and by his own hands. He takes a breath and begins making his way down the stairs. He reaches the cold dampness of the cellar, and he makes his way to the bed. Mark is lying in the sheets, his eyes barely open. The belt hangs from the man's coiled fingers, the leather strip rubbing against the palm of his hand. He approaches the bed, and the light coming from the burning oil lamp casts his flickering shadow over the boy's prostrated figure.

The boy props himself up on his elbows, a strength-draining task, and he speaks. "Death isn't a bad thing. Perhaps it is the most beautiful thing. We've seen what life is, our experiences teach us well: life is empty, meaningless, and full of suffering. Life is a great drama of suffering, interspersed every so often with intermissions of happiness. But the drama just goes on and on, and life teaches you this lesson: 'What you want, you can't have; what you have, you can't keep; and that which you love is taken away from you.'" With tears in his eyes, coiled up in the blankets, his words stumble over another, driven by a brain that is faltering and failing, slowly succumbing to the sickness. "My meaningless death is the best... it's the best culmination to this meaningless life."

The man has nothing to say. What can possibly be said? He crawls onto the bed.

"What are you doing?" Mark weakly asks.

The man wraps his legs around the boy's waist.
 He draws the belt up into the sparkling candlelight.
 And then the boy knows.
 "No..." the boy says, but he doesn't have time to say anything else.

The man presses the belt against the boy's throat, silencing his words. With one hand the man twists the boy's neck to the side, and he slides the belt around the back of his neck, and he brings the two ends together, sliding them across one another so that the boy's neck is held in the loop. Mark begins to kick and slap with his arms. The man ignores him, moves his knee forward, presses it into the boy's chest. The man pulls back, the muscles in his arms searing. Mark's hands stop slapping at the man, and they go to the belt, and he tries to wiggle his fingers between the straps, tries to pry them off, tries to breathe. The man pulls tighter: tears scale down his nose and fall from its bridge, splattering onto the boy's agonizingly-contorted face. The boy's eyes are wide as saucers, bulging from their sockets, the veins in his forehead are flaring red. His face becomes a grueling purple, and the man looks away, tries to ignore the squirming body underneath, the kicking of the legs, the sputtering and guttural utterances of his strangled friend.

ΣΩΣ

They were sitting in the kitchen at the man's house, drinking their coffee. Smoking their cigarettes.
 "If I were bitten..." the boy asked, breaking the silence... "would you kill me?"
 The man had looked up, eyes cold and heartless. "Without hesitation."

ΣΩΣ

The boy's choking gasps for air are matched by the man's choking sobs. Time seems to crawl forward, like a snail inching its way through a mud pit, moving but going nowhere. Only ten seconds have passed. The boy writhes his head back and forth, and the frayed edges of the belt tear into his neck. Blood begins to flow, and it flows warm and fetid against the man's white-knuckled fingers. The boy's kicking begins to subside, and then he lays still underneath him. His bulging eyes roll into the back of his head, and then there is silence. The man leans forward over the boy's body, knows he must keep the belt tight, must continue strangling even after unconsciousness. He doesn't know how long he hovers over the boy, his muscles burning with the stretching of the belt, but then Sarah is beside him, and she touches his arm, says his name.

VIII

The man reels backwards, releasing the belt, and he falls backwards onto Mark's cold legs. He rolls off the bed and onto the floor, and he lies there, weeping, horrendous sobs that tear at his lungs, sending shivers of pain up into his neck. His cheeks swell with blood, and bile drips from his mouth as he rolls into a fetal position upon the floor, his back against the cold stone wall. Sarah moves around the bed and kneels down beside him, trying to comfort him, but the man kicks her away, sends her falling against the wall: "*Don't touch me!*" he shrieks.

ΣΩΣ

"You wouldn't hesitate?" the boy asked.

"No," the man replied.

"Why not?"

"It's what would have to be done."

"But what about the human emotions..."

"What human emotions?"

"I don't know. Friendship?"

"Friendship? We're not friends."

"Of course we're friends."

"We're not friends."

"Whatever."

The man extinguished his cigarette on the table. "We aren't friends. Having friends is what will get you killed. If you get bitten, and I find out, then I will kill you the moment it happens. Because I am not going to risk losing my life because of you. I've saved your life, and I'm not going to let you take mine. Want a good idea? If you're ever bitten, run. Leave me. Because it'd be better for you to be away from me and what I'll do to you than to be around the dark-walkers. I'll make sure I *torture* you if you're willing to endanger my life."

ΣΩΣ

The man pulls himself off the ground and runs around the bed, his eyes drawn to the corpse lying among the sheets, the belt lying loose around the neck that is smeared with blood, blood that has stopped flowing, a heart that has stopped beating. He backs up against the wall and stares at Mark's body, feels the strength completely evaporating from his legs. He nearly falls over as he runs his bloody fingers through his greasy hair. Sarah comes towards him, but he pulls away, races past the couch and to the stairwell, ascends the steps leading upstairs. Sarah runs after him. She hears him throw the bathroom door shut, and she slowly walks over, presses her ear against it. She can hear him crying. She says his name several times, trying to comfort him, and then she lurches away from the door at the sound of a shriek, followed by the shattering of glass. She throws herself against the door and it bursts open, slamming into the man; the man stumbles against the toilet, trips, and falls backwards into the bathtub, bringing the shower curtains down around him. Blood seeps from his hands, and shards of glass are dug into his knuckles. Sarah looks over at the mirror above the sink: it is webbed and cracked, flecks of glass falling into the washing basin. She looks over at the man, who is holding his bloodied hands against his quivering lips, and he weeps: "I killed him... I killed him... I killed him..." Sarah has never seen anyone, especially a grown man, so broken. She doesn't know what to say.

It is early afternoon. Once the man composed himself, he went into a deep quiet. He washed his hands in the sink, using a bottle of distilled water, and he grunted as he poured hydrogen peroxide over the several small wounds carved by the glass. The only thing he said was, "Stitch them," pointing to several of the gashes in his knuckles. Sarah had nodded, and she performed the duty in less than ten minutes, and she bandaged his hands. Now they sit at the table, sipping coffee. Every once in a while, Sarah says something like, "You had to do it..." or "It's not your fault that he was bitten..." or "You had to do it to protect me." Anything to shift the blame from himself, even shifting

it onto her own shoulders. But he never says anything, and the sun reaches its zenith around 4:00 and begins sinking down. Sarah finishes her coffee, and she stands to get ready for the night. The man speaks: "We should bury him. It rained last night. The ground will be soft." She pauses, nods: "Okay."

Sarah carries Mark's cold body up the flight of steps and out into the backyard. The man found a shovel in the barn, and he has dug a shallow grave. They lay the boy down inside and cover him with dirt. Using a wheelbarrow, the man ferries several bricks from the barn to the grave, over and over again. By early evening, when the distant howls of the dark-walkers from the nearest town begin to float up to the sky, the man says, "I'm done."

Sarah is standing beside him. She clutches the man's arm.

"We should go inside now," the man says.

"We should say something first."

"We should go inside."

"We should say something."

"Okay."

Silence.

Sarah looks up at his sweating profile. "What should we say?"

The man shakes his head, tears in his eyes. "I don't know."

"Me neither."

The man takes a breath. "Nothing lasts forever."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Escapism & Shame

"With what a deep devotedness of woe
I wept thy absence o'er and o'er again,
Thinking of thee, still thee, till thought grew pain,
And memory, like a drop that, night and day,
Falls cold and ceaseless, wore my heart away!"
- Thomas Moore (A.D. 1779-1852)

I

They sit in the dampness, hearing the dark-walkers scurrying about outside. They are quieter tonight, and the man knows why: they have found Mark's grave, a semi-fresh feast buried underneath brick and earth. He doesn't want to think about what they are doing to him. He remembers what they did to Kira, how they tore her body limb-from-limb. He remembers them carrying her arm over the fence, the hand still attached, the engagement ring sparkling in the starlight. He remembers, and it aches, but it is a cold memory, a frostbitten remembrance. It brings him back to the coldness of the cellar, the coldness running through his veins, the breath crystallizing before his eyes. It is a cold Kansas night, and in the middle of July. He wonders if it is really that cold or if his breath is simply exhaling ash from the deadness within. Sarah is cold, too, sitting beside him, but their blankets are upstairs, and the blankets on the bed are soiled with Mark's dried blood. If it were anyone else's blood, the man would have no qualms about staying warm underneath the blankets; but it is Mark's blood, and he knows that when he sleeps, he will be visited with nightmares of killing the poor and bitten boy.

The man wants to believe that Mark is in Heaven, that the deed he performed was not a period but a colon, ushering in a new chapter in Mark's existence. He wants to believe that at this moment in time, Mark is walking through the golden fields of Elysium, hand-in-hand with Cara, the two of them basking in the glow of their love that radiates from their lively eyes. He wants to believe that, but he cannot. Not anymore. Mark is being torn apart, his body consumed, and this is the world now. The age of fairy tales and dreams has passed. Mark was right: dreams are ungodly demons. They ignore reality. And the reality is that there is nothing beyond death. The man doesn't try to sleep but just stares forward, into the murky darkness, hearing the dark-walkers scrounging around above. He doesn't even yawn.

"I'm cold," Sarah says. She snuggles up close to the man. "Hold me."

The man can barely see her in the darkness. "What?" he asks.

"Just hold me so I can keep warm. I'm fucking freezing."

"Okay," the man says, wrapping his arm around her.

She snuggles up close to him, buries her head into his chest.

She crawls up onto him, and he wraps his arms around her.

"You're shaking," the man says.

"I'm so cold."

Sarah's cheek is pressed against his. "Who's Jessie?"

He doesn't answer for a moment. "What?"

"Jessie. When you were hurt... You kept repeating her name."

He lies: "I don't know."

Twenty minutes have passed. Sarah is nearly asleep. She speaks: "Patrick used to hold me like this." He doesn't say anything, knows she is barely conscious. He just continues to hold her, thinks to himself, *I used to hold Kira like this*. His memories of Kira are dying. Sometimes he can barely even see her face. In his mind there is a great darkness, a shadow with a title, but yet that shadow is losing its form and substance, fading into the background. His memories of the parks and the theaters and the littlest moments in the house are sharp and clear, but she is always just a dark vapor fading into nothing. He dwells upon this, and it makes him hurt. He does not hurt for Kira. He does not hurt for what they had. These hurts are common, but they are not what hurts now. What hurts now is the knowledge that the simplest truths about her are slowly dwindling from his memory. He clutches Sarah tightly and fights off the tears. Soon she is snoring in his arms.

The next morning Sarah awakes on the couch alone. She trudges upstairs and finds the man sitting with his coffee at the table. Fresh muddy footprints cover the floor. She eyes him, and her face flushes red. She sits down at the table, and he begins pouring her a cup of coffee. "I can do it," she says, taking it from him. "You don't need to fucking pamper me." The man is taken aback, but he says nothing. They sit and drink.

"It frightens me," the man says, suddenly breaking the quiet.

"What frightens you?" Sarah asks.

"What we've become," he says. "Mark and I used to sit and drink coffee every morning. Just like we're doing now. It was our ritual. Those rituals... Back before the plague, when someone died... Those rituals took on new meaning. They became *saturated* with memories, with meaning. But here we sit, drinking coffee... And I feel nothing." He is quiet for some time. "What have we become? You slept peacefully last night. You slept peacefully in the arms of a man who strangled his best friend." She begins to protest, but he won't let her: "It terrifies me, Sarah. Cameron. Anthony. Kyle. Katie. Mark. I've barely mourned for any of them. Death has become commonplace, and our emotions are seared." He releases his coffee mug and rubs his temples, and his eyes are filled with rage pointed upon himself. "My mind has become cold, bitter, calloused. A graveyard with freshly-dug graves ready to swallow and bury and forget the next fate-stricken soul."

II

Sarah is loading up the car. The man goes down into the basement one last time. He peels the bricks away from the windows, and great shafts of light burst into the damp room, pushing away at the darkness. The man stands in the light, shading his eyes, and turns, and he sees the bed with blood-soiled sheets tossed to and fro from the struggle which ended the poor boy's life. The man walks over to the bed and looks down at the bloody stains, illuminated in their red-brown hues under the brilliant sunlight. The man feels something burning within him, and he understands this feeling, the

same feeling he felt after Kira's corpse was mutilated, the same feeling when he beheld the horrors of the Cult of Dagon, the same feeling he felt when Mark was carried away by the ruthless savages. This feeling that spawns acts of lunacy. The man grits his teeth, and he turns, moves to one of the shelves lined with bottles of alcohol. He grabs one and heads upstairs. He hears Sarah coming in through the front door of the farmhouse. He reaches the kitchen and goes through the drawers, finds what he is looking for: a table cloth.

Sarah comes up behind him, asks what he is doing.

"Nothing," the man replies, stashing the cloth in his jeans pocket and clutching the bottle of wine.

She takes the wine from him, turns it over. "My God."

"What?"

"This is ROMANEE CONTI."

"Okay."

"It's one of the most expensive wines in France."

"We're not going to drink it," he says.

Her eyes spell confusion. "Then why do you have it?"

"We need to make a stop in town."

The MERCEDES reaches Victoria in fifteen minutes. The man slows down the car and gets off the exit, passing the PHILLIPS OIL. It has been three weeks since he's come into town, three weeks spent waiting hour-by-hour in that decrepit farmhouse, three weeks beholding the drama of Mark's decay, three weeks that ended when the man's hands strangled the breath and life out of the boy. The man's blood boils, and he accelerates, the force of the propulsion pushing both he and Sarah into the backs of their seats. The I.G.A. comes into view, and the man swerves the car into the parking lot. He pulls it to a stop, throws it into PARK, gets out. He glares at Sarah. "Wait here." She watches him with confusion as he pops the gas tank lid and gets out. She cranes her neck around in her seat and watches as the man unscrews the tank's cap and stuffs the towel inside. She shakes her head as he withdraws the cloth and sets it on the trunk's hood. He sets the bottle of wine beside it and pulls out the bayonet. He carves out the cork, and then he stuffs the towel deep inside the wine bottle. *He's making a bomb*, Sarah realizes. The man walks away from the car, not even looking at her, and he enters the grocery store. Sarah sits back in her seat and stares through the windshield, the sun reaching its zenith in the sky. She leans forward and cranks up the air conditioning. It's hot in the car.

The man moves between the aisles, searching. He finds the aisle with canned goods, and he grabs several, stuffs them under his arm. He moves towards the stairwell leading up into the employee's area. He sees the doorway shut, the doorway he had passed through, where he had heard the weeping of the damned. The stairs had moved upwards into a room with filing cabinets, and that room had windows that overlooked the innards of the store. The man looks up at the tinted windows, knows who—*No, what*—lies beyond. He sets down the wine and cloth and cans. He bends down and picks up one of the cans, stands, fits it into the palm of his hand. He reels back his arm and prepares to throw.



The two of them stood in the baseball field outside their hometown. Late June. The worn leather glove felt so large wrapped around his hand. He picked up the ball and just eyed it, the dirty

whiteness and the stitches. His father stood twenty feet away, told him to throw it. He had never thrown a ball before. He looked up, a boy of only six years old, and his father told him, "Just arch your arm back and throw it!" The boy did so, and the ball lifted off, then pitched into the ground after ten feet, rolling through the dirt. His father moved forward to pick up the ball, tossed it back to his son. The boy tried to grab it with his free hand. "Use your glove," his father said. After a while the boy was throwing the ball, and though he was not the best—his father generally had to stumble to the right and left and then kneel down to pick up the ball—his father was proud of him.

As they left the baseball field, the sun sinking behind them, his dad said, "You're going to be a star baseball player when you grow up, you know that?"

"I don't know," the boy said, clutching his glove.

His father looked down at him. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I want to be a pilot."

"Everyone wants to be something," his father said.

"Yeah, and I want to be a pilot." He looked at his dad, grinned wildly, spun around in a circle, arms outstretched, still holding onto the glove, laughing. "I want to fly!"

His dad chuckled, rubbed his son's sandy-blond hair. "That's nice, but you're going to be a baseball player. We're going to come out here every evening and practice, okay? And then we're going to put you in a baseball league. You're going to blow all of those kids out of the water."

"I like throwing the ball with you, Daddy."

"I like it, too."

"I like baseball. It's fun. But I want to be a pilot."

"That's nonsense," his father had said. "You'll never be a pilot."



The man winds back, and with a shout of pure and un-adulterated rage, he releases. The can shoots through the air like a rocket and slams into the glass; the impact sends the can *through* the glass, and the glass webs and shatters, falling down like rain onto the tiled floor below. He can hear shuffling and screaming within, the sunlight making its way into the room. A crimson smile crawls over his lips, and he bends down, picks up the wine with its gasoline-soaked cloth. He pulls out his lighter and ignites the flame, presses it to the cloth. The end of the cloth ignites, the flames beginning to creep downwards towards the wine in the bottle. The man winds back to throw again.



They sat around the dinner table that night. The boy ate quietly as his mom and dad "talked."

His mother said, "Let him be what he wants to be, Michael."

"Pilots don't make a damn penny. His life will be worth nothing."

"And baseball is a guarantee of happiness?"

"It's not about happiness. It's about success."

"Just because *you* didn't succeed at your dreams doesn't mean you get to thrust them onto your son and make them *his* burden."

His father reached across the table, grabbed his mother by the neck, throttled her. "You're just a fucking cunt bitch, you know that?! Fuck." He released her, settled down, looked over at his son, who hung his head in shame. "Eat your fucking vegetables. I'm getting you out of school tomorrow, so you'd better eat those damn vegetables."

His mother rubbed her sore neck, tears in her eyes.

The boy ate his vegetables, pretended nothing happened, tried to hold back the tears.

He just wanted to be a pilot.

He just wanted his mommy to be safe.

He just wanted his daddy to die.



He chucks the wine with its cloth into the air, and he watches with a malicious grin as it soars into the room. There comes a moment of silence, the sound of the bottle breaking, the liquid spilling. And then there comes the great rush of fire, and flames burst out from the broken window, licking up at the ceiling. The fire is hot against the man's face, tinting his skin maroon. He watches the flames, mesmerized at their beauty and functionality. He can hear the weeping of the damned once more, the miserable creatures pinned between a boiling death in sunlight and a burning death in the fire. There is no viable choice, and the man can only close his eyes and draw in the deep scent of burnt human flesh, a sickly-sweet incense. He hears the sound of a splintering door, and he opens his eyes and turns his head, sees two dark-walkers spinning out into the sunlight to escape the fire. Almost immediately their flesh begins to sputter and boil, and they tumble into an aisle filled with oriental sauces, knocking it to the ground with the chattering of glass and spilling of sauce. The man patiently walks over, the fire now at his back, scaling up the walls, and he looks down upon the creatures, their skin a fiery mess, their eyes wild with pain, their mouths contorted into eternal screams. He hears movement behind him, and he turns to see the little girl stumbling outward, scraping at her own face with hands turned into claws. She falls onto the ground, twists and moans, kicks her feet and flails her arms. Burns cover half her body, and the jaw bone on the right side of her face is exposed, a marshmallow white. The man bites his lip and walks over. He looks down at her, and then he lifts his boot and slams it down into her forehead, crushing the bone into the brain. Blood and puss seep onto the heel of his boot. He leaves her alone and exits the store as it raises itself up in flames.

III

They leave Victoria behind, the I.G.A. blooming in flames like the unfurling petals of a newborn lily. Hard rains come, hammering upon the roof of the car, and they drive slowly, blinded by the fog and rain. Lightning dances around them, reaching down like the fingers of God, splashing into quickly-forming puddles amidst the strewn cornfields and patches of woodlands. It gets so bad that the man cannot see in front of him, and he stops the car in the middle of the highway. They sit listening to the rain, a cacophonous drilling on the roof of the car, and the man smokes his cigarettes and ashes in the ashtray. Sarah complains that the car is becoming too smoky, and without a retort he cracks the window. Water drips inside. He continues to smoke.

The rain continues.

The man speaks. "Katie was a good girl."

Sarah looks over at him. "What?"

He stares forward into the rain. The windshield is a smeared mess. "Katie. She was a good girl."

"Oh," Sarah says, turning back to her own window. "I know."

"I didn't treat her right."

She doesn't say anything.

"I treated her like shit. I always accused her of slowing us down. I blamed her for what happened to Kyle. I told her that I didn't give a shit about her. I told her that I would go back for Mark, but I would never go back for her."

"And you're remorseful over it?"

The man is quiet for a second. "No."

Sarah is shocked, looks over at him.

His eyes are cold, his features stern. "I despised her. I don't know why. I didn't even care that much that she died. I cried a little bit. I cried over her more than I cried over Mark. I don't understand it, that's for sure." He looks over at her, his voice crystal-clear despite the rain hammering on the roof of the car. "I don't know why I hated her. I really don't. But I genuinely *despised* her. I even wanted her to die, in some sadistic sense." His eyes are filling with tears. "I'm not... I'm not crying for her..." He looks away, blinking the tears from his eyes. His vision is smeared just like the windshield. "I'm crying because of what I have become. I've become a monster."

Sarah bites her lip, undoes her seatbelt, leans over to comfort him.

He reels away, pressing himself against the door of the car. "No. It's not okay."

She says his name, sweetly.

He will have none of it. "We're just animals. That's all we are." His voice is clear of its shaking, now hard and resolute. "Society taught us differently. Religion taught us differently. But now reality has bitch-slapped us across the face, proclaiming, 'Arise, Soul-Less Creature, and be deceived no longer.' It's not okay that I'm a monster. And it's okay that I'm a monster. Because I'm not a monster. I'm just an animal. We're all just a bunch of animals, a bunch of big, hairy beasts—some hairier than others—running around like ants. Before this plague, I thought I was a good guy. But now this has revealed who I really am."

"But you *are* a good man," Sarah says.

He shakes his head, the tears returning. "No. I'm a selfish, self-serving bastard."

"No..."

"You told me as much. Don't deny it now just because I cry."

"I was wrong..."

"That's convenient," he says.

"Then how come you're crying? If you're a bad man?"

"Because I'm realizing who I really am."

She is quiet now.

The man composes himself. "The only reason I loved Kira... is because I wanted to fuck her."

The slap across his face burns, and his eyes are blurred with confusion.

Sarah is leaning forward in her seat, facing him, her teeth gritted, eyes afire.

He rubs his cheek, the burning sensation growing, the shock wearing off.

"Don't *ever* say that again," Sarah growls. "Do you understand me?"

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Do you *fucking understand me?!'*" she shouts, her voice echoing in the car.

He bites his lip, nods.

"Tell me. Tell me you will *never* say *anything* like that again."

He stares forward at the wheel wrapped under his white-knuckled fingers.

"Say it," she snarls.

He takes a deep breath. "I won't say it. I won't say it again."
She leans back in her seat. "You'd better not. I'm fucking serious."
"I know," the man says.

They sit in the quiet. The man lights another cigarette. His fingers shake.

Sarah says, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"I deserved it."

"I know you loved Kira. I know it. I just... I want to make sure *you* know that."

"I still love her." He takes his first hit off the cigarette, trying to calm his nerves.

"I know," Sarah says. "I still love Patrick."

"The love is different," the man says. "I love her. But sometimes I can hardly remember her. I have these memories, but the setting and scenery is more memorable than her. I can hardly remember her face anymore. I can hardly remember her laugh. I just remember the things we did, conversations we had. It's like I'm flipping through someone else's journals, reading about someone else's life. I have the knowledge, but it's empty. I mean, there's still attachment. There's still love. But it's becoming more like worship and less like genuine care and compassion. Maybe because... Maybe because I *can't* care for her anymore. I *can't* have compassion on her anymore. Because she's dead, and she's never coming back." He extinguishes the cigarette in the ashtray. "I already lost her once, and these memories, these fading memories..." He bites his lip, his voice warbling. "I don't want to lose her again."

"What you're experiencing... It happens to everybody."

He looks over at her. "Is it happening to you?"

No. "It will happen eventually."

The man looks away.

Sarah reaches over, grabs his hand, holds it. "It's okay."

He closes his eyes, bows his head. "I can't bear the thought of losing her again."

"You won't," Sarah says. "Trust me. You won't. It's going to hurt. It's going to hurt like hell. But she'll never leave you. Just like Patrick will never leave me."

"I remember this one time," the man says. "Kira and I were at the park. Mount Echo. Back in Cincinnati. And we were there, and we found a turtle. A box turtle I think. And we were feeding it dandelions. I remember the weather. The way it felt. The clothes I wore. The clothes *she* wore. I remember where we were at that park. I remember how green the grass was, how green the leaves were. I remember the patterns on the shell of the turtle. I remember it all so *vividly*. But I can't remember Kira's face." He looks out his own window, hiding his tears. They emerge in his voice: "I can remember everything except her."

Sarah shifts across the seat, moves over the gear-shift, wraps her arms around him.

She buries her face into his shoulder, whispers into his ear: "You love her."

"I know," the man says, not refusing the embrace.

She squeezes him tighter. "You *love* her. You *love* her. You *love* her."

The tears stream down harder, and he curls up in the seat, Sarah holding him.

She repeats it again and again: "You love her. You love her."

He continues to cry, a child in the arms of a mother. The rain patters on the roof.

IV

The rains let up in the early evening, and they are forced to find lodging in the next town. The man had hoped to be past Denver by nightfall, but they are not even into the Denver city limits. The man knew that the Denver skyline would have been visible from Genoa if not for the mist and fog that overlaid the ground due to the wretched rains. He is thankful, at least, to be out of Kansas and into Colorado. Genoa is a small town, with a handful of crisscrossing roads and decrepit buildings and antique shops. They drove down an intersecting road for several miles, reached a small cottage with a walk-around porch; it is stranded amidst a cornfield with stalks hanging low amidst the muddied earth. The sun's rays split between the heavy mist, and the clouds above them were in tumult, locked in mortal combat as more rain threatened to fall. The man cleared the house—it was empty of inhabitants, though surprisingly neat and up-kept, and the man wondered if someone had lived there for a time following the striking of the plague—and they found that it was already fortified. The living room has three couches centered around a stone fireplace, and off from the kitchen is a family room with a dust-covered flat-screen television and an immense stereo system mounted to the wall. In the far bedroom are three beds, all kept clean and made. "Do you think anyone's going to be coming back tonight?" Sarah had asked, and the man had replied, "Doubt it: it's almost nightfall. If they've survived this long, then they're smart enough to be bunkering down wherever they are." Sarah decided to fix supper on a BUNSEN burner sitting on the stove, and the man went to stoking a fire in the stone hearth.

The man enters the kitchen. Sarah has found several canned goods in one of the drawers, and she turns and looks at him. "I've got corn and green beans going. Even some asparagus." All of the vegetables are mixed together amidst distilled water from a jug found in the cabinet. She raises her hands, a can in either hand. "Peaches or strawberries?"

"Strawberries," the man says, holding out his hand.

She begins to turn around, says, "Okay, if you can set the table..."

"Sarah."

She turns towards him. "What?"

"I'll finish making dinner, all right? You go get some rest."

"I'm okay."

"We've both had a long day. We can split the work."

She is quiet for a moment, then, "Okay." She hands him the strawberries, sets the peaches on the kitchen counter.

He says, "The fire's nice and warm. It's peaceful. Go lie down and rest for a bit." He extends his outstretched palm towards the small pot upon the BUNSEN burner. "I'll finish up with this."

"Okay," she says. "And thank you."

"You're welcome."

She is on the couch beside the fire for only a little while. She moves into the master bedroom, sees the bed made up with several quilts. The windows are boarded up, and some of the wooden boards are covered with claw marks. A chill runs up her spine. She imagines them getting inside, how they'd be trapped: there is no upstairs, no downstairs, and only flat and muddy cornfields in all directions. She pushes that thought from her mind, and it gets easier as her eyes fall upon a vanity wedged in the corner, beside one of the boarded-up windows and the queen-sized bed. It was an antique wooden vanity: the engravings and etchings and the curves of the wood and even the scent of the rich cedar

reminded her of the one her mom used to have. She approaches the vanity and stands before it, extending her hands. Her fingertips run over the smooth wood. She looks into the mirror, and she cannot believe what she sees. She runs her hand through her hair, but it makes no difference. Her face looks like the face of a skeleton wrapped taught with leathery skin. Her cheeks are deflated, eyes sunken, deep lines carved across what had at one time been skin rosy and beautiful, skin that smelled of shampoo and conditioner, household commodities that are now mere memories. Antiques, just as antique as the vanity before her. She abandons the vanity and goes to the bathroom that is attached to the bedroom, and she searches for soap. She twists the handle on the faucet. No water comes out. She sighs and returns to the master bedroom. She moves around the side of the bed and sits down. The bed creaks underneath her weight. She stares into the mirror, the light in the room—coming between cracks in the boards over the windows—slowly dying with the sun's steady descent. The shadows grow longer, and her image reflected begins to fade into a murky abyss.

She just stares at herself in the mirror, thinking. Always thinking. Remembering everything. She thinks of Patrick. Thinks about his smile, his laugh, the way he touched the small of her back when they danced. A tear runs down her cheek. She tries not to think about him, but she remembers the way they danced at their wedding. The way even the music faded into nothingness, and it was just the two of them, swirling and circling, moving and grooving. She remembers how his one arm was wrapped around her back, and how his opposite hand clung to hers with a grip that refused to let go. His fingers had been a warm-blooded vice. He was so afraid of losing her, and yet she was the one who lost him.

She stands from the bed and moves towards the vanity, her image growing in the mirror, the shadows drawing even closer. She begins searching through the vanity. She finds some makeup, decides to put it on. She has a crazy look in her eye, but truth be told, she always does these days. She remembers an old song she and Patrick would sing, a song by Bob Marley. They would sing it when things got rough. He would sing it while she was overcoming the trauma of her miscarriages, and though it pissed her off, she never told him how it made her feel. He was just trying to be supportive and comforting. It had made her mad, even made her want to kill him at times, but now she misses it, misses his voice missing each note and warbling the words. ♪♪ Don't worry about a thing... 'cause every little thing is going to be all right. ♪♪ She doesn't believe that anymore. She'd never believed it in the first place. Perhaps she had been wiser than that all along. Perhaps the curse of her hopelessness had been a blessing. She hadn't been naïve and ignorant, and she was prepared for what happened on August 11, 2011. As prepared as she could have been. But never prepared enough to lose Patrick.

She uses eyeliner and puts brown eye-shadow under those sunken eyes.

She adds some mascara across her leathery skin.

She puts pale lipstick over chapped and worn lips.

She watches herself. Tears run down her cheek, blotching the freshly-applied makeup. She feels something deep inside, something deep within the core of who she is, something pulling, always pulling, pulling her farther deep and down inside herself. She can't stop it.

She wipes away the last tear and leaves the room.

Patrick's scent remains.

The man is putting the strawberries into ceramic bowls when Sarah enters the kitchen.

He looks over, and he stops stirring. She looks beautiful. "Hey."

She walks right past him, to one of the cupboards, swings open the door.

The man watches as she pulls out a bottle of cheap whiskey, unscrews the cap.

He says, "Maybe you could wait until after dinner..."

She takes an ample gulp. It burns in her throat. It tastes horrible, but she doesn't care.

She just wants to forget.

She leaves him in the kitchen and goes into the room with the fire.

She sits down on the couch and cradles the bottle of whiskey in her hands.

The flames begin to blur as she takes several more drinks.

She just wants to forget.

The man brings the dinner out to her. The fire roars up the chimney.

He sets the food down on the coffee table between the couches.

She sits down on the floor and begins eating the stewed vegetables.

The man sits across from her, reaches for the bottle, tries to grab it.

Her reaction is fast but jerky, and she nearly spills the bottle. "No."

He watches her, uneasy. He's never seen her like this. "Are you okay?"

She doesn't answer, takes another drink. "Let's just eat, okay?"

"And drink, apparently," the man says.

She laughs at his comment, takes another swig.

"Sarah. Seriously. Slow it down. You're going to be sick all night."

Her world is blurred and sluggish, and she remembers.

ΣΩΣ

"You know I need you. If you ever left me, I would die." Patrick had said that to her as she looked down at him. They were laughing in bed one morning before he had to leave for work.

"Oh, yeah," she mused. "I'm like air to you. Without me, you'd die for sure." She eyed him suspiciously, then cooed, "Oh, I've got you figured out. You just keep me around for my world-famous pancakes. I know all about your little game." She bended down close to him, nuzzled her face into his hairy chest, then raised her neck, peered at him. "I've been onto you for a while now." She grinned and moved forward, her bare breasts rubbing against his hairy chest. She kissed his lips, and then she reeled out of bed, stood half-naked before him, wearing nothing but tight panties that rode up into her.

Lying in bed, his eyes danced over her figure. "You're such a tease."

She flashed him a smile and grabbed a light-blue t-shirt off a hangar on the door, left the bedroom. She entered the kitchen. Patrick was right behind her. He watched her getting the things ready to make breakfast, pulling out the eggs and the batter and setting the pan on the stove and spraying it down with CANOLA oil. He stared at her in her cotton panties and loose t-shirt. She was so beautiful.

He ran up behind her and put his arms around her waist, pulled her up against him. He leaned in close, kissed the back of her neck. He whispered into her ear, "I guess you *do* have me figured out. What can I say? I'm a sucker for good pancakes, and you have the best!" She scowled, and he swung her around, planted a kiss right on her lips. He pulled away, and their eyes sparkled as they looked deep into one another's eyes. "I love you," he said. "You know that, right?" She just smiled back at him. He let her go, then started to walk back towards the bedroom, but not before smacking her butt and playfully asking, "So you're going to make me those pancakes, right?"

She spun around and leapt up onto him. "Ha! I knew it! You're horrible! But you know what? I love you, too, forever, and no one else. There'll *never* be anyone else."

ΣΩΣ

She returns to reality.

The food is left in the bowls before her, cold and soggy.

She is the only one in the room, and she is staring into the fire.

The flames are low.

The bottom of the hearth is filled with embers.

The embers sparkle and sizzle, slowly dying.

Just like her life with Patrick.

Except there was no sizzling, no slowly dying.

There was just sparkling—and then death.

She is crying, and she feels dizzy, woozy. Drunk. She doesn't know where the man went, but she doesn't really care. She tries to stand from her squat between the couch and coffee table, but she loses her balance and falls back into the couch. She curls up on the sofa, bringing her knees to her chest and resting her chin on her knees. How did all of this happen? She was *so* happy. There was a time when she didn't ever think she would find love, and then she met Patrick. They just seemed to click. They quickly became best friends, and before long they fell in love. But now she feels so scared and alone. She knows there is no one, no one other than Patrick. And Patrick is gone. The feeling is overwhelming: a dark cloud hovering over her, covering her so deeply that she feels like she will just fade into a foggy nothingness.

She leans forward, grabs the bottle of whiskey.

She raises it to her lips.

She takes another drink.

And then he is standing behind her.

V

She doesn't know how long he has been there. Her thoughts had consumed her, riddled with memories, and even her acknowledgement of his presence doesn't eliminate the tears. They continue to slide down her cheeks. She is hunched over on the couch, her head practically between her knees. The man moves forward from behind the couch, and leaning over the sofa's back, he puts his hands on her shoulders. He doesn't know what to do, but he wants to console her. She has tried to comfort him, but her words do not work. Only her touch brushes away a handful of the hurt. He tries to understand what she feels; she hasn't told him much about Patrick, only bits and pieces, fragments of a puzzle that fail to portray the entire picture. But he misses Kira, and even though the memories of her are transforming and morphing, there are times in the quiet, in the darkness, when he can remember every part of her: her body, her laugh, her kiss, her touch, her corny jokes. He sees her weeping, feels the shuddering sobs trickling into his fingers gripping her shoulders, and he wants to cry himself. But he holds himself together, only for her. He releases her shoulders and moves around the couch, and between her and the fire, he takes a seat next to her upon the couch cushions. He puts one arm around her and looks into the fire. They sit there side-by-side. His own eyes are brimming with tears, the nightmare resurfacing amidst the peace and quiet, and Sarah's own choking yet quieting tears are contagious.

Sarah looks over at him, shakes her head, blinking at the tears. "I'm sorry..."

"Shhh," he says. With his thumb he wipes some of the tears from her eyes. "You don't have to apologize." He puts his arm around her, and she leans into him. He wishes he could take away her pain, his pain, the pain of the whole damn world.

She looks up at him again.

Their faces are inches apart.

ΣΩΣ

He didn't want to go, but Kira had insisted on it. A double date was an atrocious idea, especially on Superbowl night. But Kira always got her way, and he found himself at a RED LOBSTER down Glenway Avenue, sitting in the booth with Kira, munching on cheddar cheese biscuits and glancing at his watch.

"How long do we have to wait for them to order?" he kept asking.

"Be quiet," she scolded him.

Eventually the other couple appeared: Justin and Jessie.

Justin was half-Korean, with a wry smile and charming wit.

Jessie looked like a scarecrow, so thin and skinny, with yellow-golden hair down past her shoulders, a narrow and bony face, wisened and compassionate eyes.

They ate dinner and talked, and he ordered SEAFOOD PORTIFINO.

Kira had known Justin from high school, and while the two of them caught up over dessert, the man and Jessie talked with one another. Kira kept eyeing him, and eventually she put her hand on his knee and announced, "It was lovely, but we'd better get going."

On the car ride home, she glared at him: "Why were you flirting with Jessie?"

He swore up and down that he wasn't, but he dreamt of her that night.

He dreamt he and Jessie had slept together.

He dreamt that Kira never found out.

He awoke ashamed—and excited.

ΣΩΣ

Neither of them know how long they have been looking at one another. She stares into his eyes, and her tears have stopped flowing. There is something else there, something foreign, something felt only a few times before. Something experienced that day so long ago, that day they stood together in that store in that distant mall, when she was wearing that wedding dress. The way he had looked at her, the way she had looked at him, it has been resurrected. The tension is undeniable, the terror of anticipation, the vulnerability and the openness and the resentment...

She kisses him.

He doesn't reject it.

It is a slow kiss, their lips grazing.

She doesn't know why she is kissing him.

He doesn't know why he is accepting it.

She kisses him harder, and now she opens her mouth, bites his lip.

His tongue finds hers, and their tongues dance together, a ballet.

She wants to be on top of him, wants to kiss his chin, his neck.

He pulls away, breaking the kiss.

She looks up at him, pain filling her eyes, glistening behind salt-laden tears.

His fingertips brush her face, and he feels the deep edged lines, the remnants of a nightmarish existence. He doesn't know what he is doing as he lets her kiss him again, and he knows he should stop her, knows he'll regret it. But he is enslaved, gripped by his passions, a death-grip upon his willpower. He is no longer in control. He needs this, too, just as much as she does: needs to feel someone near, to hold someone close, to kiss someone deeply and passionately and richly—even if it's not Kira.

He kisses her softly, then harder. His hands explore the hem of her shirt. Her shirt comes off, and he is kissing her neck and her chest. She arcs her back, reaches behind her, unsnaps her bra. Her breasts hang exposed as the bra slides down and falls upon her pants. She pulls off his shirt, and she pushes him back against the couch. She straddles him, bends down, kisses his chest and stomach, licks up to his neck and then probes with her tongue his mouth once more.

Her breasts rub against the hair on his chest,
just as they did with Patrick so long ago.

ΣΩΣ

Kira was away for the weekend, and the man was stuck in his dorm.

It was nearly midnight, and he was slowly succumbing to sleep.

His phone rang. An unidentified number. He answered: "Hello?"

He could hear tears on the other end, a girl saying his name. A familiar voice.

"Who is this?" he asked, the voice familiar but not identifiable.

"Jessie," she said. He heard more tears.

"From RED LOBSTER?" he asked. That had been weeks ago.

"Yes."

"Oh. Umm. You're crying?"

A sniffle. "Yes."

"What's wrong?"

"Can we talk?"

Thunder boomed outside. "Yeah."

"In person?"

Kira would *hate* that.

She didn't have to know.

And Jessie needed help.

"Where?"

ΣΩΣ

He knows this is wrong, knows it won't deliver—it won't bring an end to the emptiness, won't bring an end to the pain, won't fill that hole where Kira used to dwell. But he needs this, and it feels so good, the intimacy and the connection—a shattered memory from so long ago. Something he hasn't experienced in so long. A lie, but a beautiful lie. He lies back and lets her crawl over him, feels the warmth of her body against his cold skin. Her hair falls around his face, and his eyes are closed, and they are kissing, and he pretends she is Kira, that they are back in their house in Cincinnati, kissing on the sofa underneath the stars and the rain rapping on the roof and the cars on the highway and the life and laughter and love not a memory but a reality that would never fade. This is crazy, but he can't stop. He wraps his arms around her bare back and hugs her so tightly that his fingers carve ash-

white lines into her skin. She pulls backwards, breaking the embrace, and something within the man hopes that it is over, that they can proceed to regret. But now she is undoing her zipper, and he watches as her pants fall, and her panties follow. She is naked now, and she is straddling his knee. She fondles with the zipper of his jeans and leans forward, continues kissing him. He is hard, and she can feel him through his pants. She wants him more than anything, and he wants her. He wants to feel anything besides the emptiness that is beside him with each passing day and night. Her fingers continue in their artsy dance, and now his zipper is down. She pulls away from him, stands between the couch and the coffee table, totally exposed; she bends over, her breasts jiggling, twin rubies in the firelight, the nipples hard and erect. She pulls down his pants, and then his boxers. They are naked together.



Fifteen minutes later the twin headlights of his JEEP swerved down the gravel drive leading to a small park in Colerain Township. The trees along the side of the road were drenched in murky shadows, darkness having settled, and a gentle rain tapped on the windshield. The JEEP's wipers creaked back and forth. He peered forward and drove slowly, the fog clinging to the ground separating against the grill of the car. He sought out a figure in the rain, but there was nothing: only the steady drum of the rain on the roof and the gravel crunching under the tires.

He turned his head and jumped in his seat.

She was standing beside his window, wearing nothing but a flannel night-gown, soaked in dripping rainwater, wild hair awash.

He put the JEEP in PARK and pushed open the door, jumped out. "Oh my God. You look sick."

She wiped rainwater from her eyes. "Thank you for coming."

In the wash from the headlights he could see her eyes were bloodshot and cheeks bloated. He walked around the front of the JEEP, for a moment obscuring both headlights, and he helped her inside. She pulled the door shut herself, and he walked back around, passing like a phantom before the lights, and he made his way into the vehicle, shut the door. They sat there in the car, in the middle of the park. She didn't say anything, nothing at all. The two of them just listened to the rain on the roof, and his ears were attuned to the sounds of her broken breathing. He wanted to ask so many questions, thousands urging to be voiced, but he said nothing at all, just let her breathe. He cranked up the heat to keep her warm. She didn't react. She kept her arms close to herself and stared out the rain-streaked window, the falling rain sparkling in front of the headlights, falling like tiny daggers from the sky.

"I just want him to stop," she suddenly said in a coarse whisper.

He looked over at her, compassion dripping from his eyes. "Stop what?"

"I want him to stop... To stop hitting me..."

And then she looked at him in the light from the dashboard, and he could see one of her eyes was swollen, and there was a thick-blooded gash across her cheek. Horror traveled through him, mingled with rage.

He didn't know what to do.

She was hunched over in the seat, started to cry.

And she continued crying, the sobs becoming harder and more violent.

He reached over and put an arm around her, could feel her ribs.

She was so skinny.

She looked up at him, leaned over, buried herself into him.
He wrapped his arms around her.
She cried into his chest, her arms shaking as they gripped at his biceps.
He looked up at the roof of the car, closed his eyes, felt his heart ripping for this girl.
“Why couldn’t he be like you?” she moaned into his shirt.
“Why couldn’t he be like you?”
He didn’t know what to say.
And then she pulled herself up.
She tried to kiss him.
And he let her.
A long, passionate, mesmerizing, *beautiful* kiss.
He swore to himself that Kira would never know.



She has him inside her, and she feels free, if but for a second, a fleeting moment, free from her pain and free from the reality that lies howling over the vast stretch of cornfields. She is on top of him, and he is inside her. She leans overtop of him, kisses him, takes him deeper inside her, deeper and faster. He thrusts with his hip, places one hand on her smooth butt-cheek, and the other is gripping her chocolate hair, slightly pulling. His hand on her butt slides up her spine, pulls her down harder on top of him. She closes her eyes, moans, pretends it is Patrick underneath her. He turns her over, and now he is on top. He pushes himself into her as deep and hard as he can, feels the warmth of her underneath him, her warm legs wrapped around his waist, the crackling fire spreading its heat against his side. She is trying to forget her pain, and he is trying to forget his, they’re to rid themselves of it all. He is reckless, she is reckless; he loves it, and she loves it. He lets himself go, looks down at her, at her closed eyes, feels the warmth below, lets himself get lost in the rhythm of their bodies, a sacred and sacrilegious fantasy. She grabs his butt, tells him to move faster. She leans forward, kisses his hair, and he kisses her neck, and he keeps moving inside her, faster and faster. Her lips tremble as the dawn dares to break...



He had taken Kira out to eat, then confessed to her what had happened. “I’m so sorry... I didn’t even know what was happening... It happened so fast... I’m so sorry...” She hadn’t known what to say, couldn’t formulate her words. He became aware of nothing but her, the look on her face: the way it fell, the way her eyes filled with tears, and the way she staggered away from the table, dazed, stumbling to the bathroom. He had sat alone at the table for the longest time, watching the couples about the diner, holding hands and sharing laughter, and he pondered what had happened, and he held back his tears. One of her friends showed up. She glared at him, then went to the bathroom. Kira left with her, refusing to even look at him. He tried calling her for the next three days, but she would never answer. He knew he had lost her, but he left her voicemails, pleading that she would return to him. He was confident that it was over, and that confidence tore through him like an icy sword. He wept every night.

Eventually she called him back, asked him to swear to her that it would never happen again, that he would cut off all contact with Jessie. He swore that he would. The next month went decently well, but

after that things became strange. She was closed-off, didn't want to hang out, became a recluse. She called him in tears a few nights since she had seen him, waking him from sleep in his dorm room. A conversation he will always remember. She had said, "I'm sorry I'm so depressed... I hate being like this, so broken that I'm unable to speak. I'm sorry to hurt you like this."

His heart began pounding like a stallion. "Hurt me?"

"I'm depressed, and I can't be the girlfriend you need me to be."

"Kira." He searched for the words to say, suddenly wide awake. "I know what it's like to be in the hell you're in now. I know it so well. I know you can't control it. I need you to know that I'm going to be here through it, and I will hold you when you hurt."

His words didn't seem to have an impact. "I feel like I'm dead. I've gone numb. I am so afraid of... *everything*. I wish I could trust you, but... I don't know how."

"I know you can trust me, Kira. I'm not like the other guys. I don't know... I don't know how to make you see that."

"This was supposed to be different. *We* were supposed to be different. You weren't going to be like all those other guys, and you're not, but to me, that's what you've been, and I can't make sense of that. If it's not you, then is it me?"

"Kira. Listen to me. *It's not you.*" He was sitting up in bed now, cradling the phone tightly against his chin. "We have things to work on. I wish we could just go back and do it all over again. We've made mistakes—hell, everyone does—but we can't take them back. I'm trying to do everything I can think of to make you realize that I'm not like all the rest, that you can trust me, that I care so madly and deeply for you, with every ounce of the blood that runs through my veins... even if sometimes I fail to show it."

"I'm just confused," she confessed, her tears subsiding. "I don't know how you took that, but don't think I meant it like that." He honestly had no idea what she was talking about. "I just want to know what it all means... Why we fight, and why sometimes we can't stand each other, and why part of me screams that this relationship isn't right, but at the same time I don't have the willpower to let go, because there's something about you that just... possesses me."

ΣΩΣ

They are both moaning now, groaning together, and her scream shakes the walls of the house as she comes, and then he withdraws, grabs himself and gasps, ejaculates onto the inside curve of her right leg. He collapses onto the sofa next to her. Both of them are panting and sweating, looking into one another's eyes, knowing that their affection is directed towards others. He reaches over to hold her, to cuddle, but she crawls to the opposite end of the sofa. He watches her, and then she curls into a fetal position upon the couch, and she begins to cry.

VI

He wants to hold her, he wants to cuddle. He moves towards her across the couch, to comfort her, feeling the weight of guilt and shame bearing upon him. She won't let him console her, gets up off the sofa. She grabs her clothes, quiet now, the tears silent but steadily trickling down her cheeks. The man covers himself with one of the sofa's pillows, and he tries to think of something to say, anything to keep her by his side. He is spent, tired, but he wants to hold her naked, wants the two of them to

kiss and cuddle and even become one once more. But he can't think of anything worth saying: his tongue is tied, but he wants it to be tied with hers. He can only watch as she carries her clothes to the master bedroom, opens the door, snuffles, looks back at him, and goes inside, shutting the door. He hears it lock. He leans back on the couch and looks at the crackling fire. The flames are dying now, the embers throbbing in synch with his pulsating heart. A wounded, shattered, unfulfilled, weeping heart. He stares into that fire, and his lips tremble. He grabs the bottle of whiskey sitting on the coffee table, and he takes a burning draft, and leaning back naked in the sofa, he closes his eyes, and he remembers, the memory becoming a dream.

ΣΩΣ

Kira was working Christmas Day, so he went to the CLADDAGH IRISH PUB in Newport to have a few drinks and study for his flight examination the next morning. The lights were dim, candles lit upon the walls, fires roaring in the scattered stone hearths, Irish folk music playing over the speakers. He sipped his nutty Irishman—two shots hazelnut liquor and Irish cream whiskey mixed in steamed milk—and went through maps and sketches and diagrams, studying the intricacies of the Boeing 777. He had arrived around 3:00 that afternoon, and the bar had been empty. As evening approached, people began thronging inside, and he found it difficult to concentrate. He put in some earplugs and listened to music and ordered another drink. He swiveled around in his chair and peered out over the sea of faces, and that was when he saw her: she had entered with several other women, and they were dressed in swooning dresses and doused in makeup. His eyes were drawn down to her skinny legs and the red high-heel shoes. Something within him sparked, and his face flushed red, and he swiveled his chair back around, hunkered down over the counter, stared at the textbook—the statistics for the engines faded to a blur—and waited for his drink. The feeling rose quietly, refusing to subside, something burning, craving, inside him. He knew what he wanted, and his hands shook. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, tried to remember Kira: but her face faded into the sound of high-heels approaching.

The conversation had started off slow, but he had a few more drinks. This was her going-away party: she was boarding a plane tomorrow morning for a trip out to Boulder, Colorado, where she was going to work at a printing company as an editor. They ended up sitting at a table away from the other women, and he'd had a few too many shots. He kept bothering the waiter, asking for more whiskey and bourbon. They drank together, and her words would always be seared into the back of his mind:

“Is your plan to get me drunk and then take advantage of me?”

He had smiled, a wicked smile. “Oh, I’ve seen you’ve done this before?”

She had playfully bit her lip.

They both knew what they wanted.

He stepped outside to have a cigarette, to try and compose himself. He leaned over the railing facing the Ohio River. A casino-boat with its sparkling neon lights and passengers crowding the railings while holding wine and beers in their hands passed beneath one of the arching bridges.

Think of Kira. Think of her right now.

The cigarette ember burned between his fingers.

The smoke filled his lungs.

None of it helped.

He heard her coming towards him. He turned away from the railing.

She moved up next to him, wrapped herself around the railing, stared out.

He turned around and continued smoking, facing the water, too.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she cooed.

"Yes," he said.

Quietness.

"Do you ever wonder?" she asked.

He looked at her, the moon's reflection off the water dancing in her eyes. "Wonder?"

"Yes." She turned, faced him, blew golden strands of hair from her eyes.

"Do I ever wonder?" he repeated.

"Do you?"

"Wonder about what?"

"Don't play these games with me."

"I don't know what game."

She stepped forward, grabbed his hand. "Do you ever wonder about us?"

His mouth suddenly went dry, and his voice crackled: "Yes."

VII

He awakes to the sound of birds outside. His eyes slowly open, and he licks chapped lips. The fire in the hearth has gone out, and dismembered rays of sunshine are coming in through the wooden planks over the windows. He is lying naked on the couch, torn from the dream, and he tries to recollect what has happened. For a moment he wonders if it was *all* a dream, every moment of it. But he knows that it happened, that he and Sarah had done the unthinkable, had tried to escape their pain in the warm embrace of their naked bodies—and that this search for escapism had ladled out nothing but shame.

He sits up on the couch and rubs his eyes, reaches for the bottle of whiskey.

No.

He sets it down, stands, aches. He is lightheaded, nearly falls over, recovering from last night's drunken debauchery. He leans against the stone fireplace and takes several deep breaths. He moves away from the fireplace and gathers his clothes. He dresses and stumbles over to the door leading to the master bedroom, knocks. "Sarah." He repeats her name again: "Sarah." No response. He imagines she is sleeping, coiled up in the sheets. "I'm going to make coffee," he says through the door.

They had brought the coffee equipment from the old farmhouse, and the man goes outside, smokes a cigarette on the front porch, and then carries the coffee maker and a bag of ground coffee from the MERCEDES into the house. Mud clings to the soles of his boots. He notices there are no footprints in the mud: the house had been unvisited overnight. *We were loud; it's surprising we didn't attract attention.*

He fixes the coffee in the kitchen, having pried the planks from all the windows, allowing sunlight to enter. He watches the coffee filling the pot, tries to formulate the words he will speak to comfort Sarah, to apologize. He doesn't know what to say. Sometimes saying nothing is the best route to walk: had he told Kira of what happened that night with Jessie, she would have broken up

with him then and there. He loved Kira, but he had been stupid with Jessie. Being honest would have simply forsaken that love. Honesty is not always the best policy, the man is sure, but he wants to say something—anything—to Sarah. He doesn't want to do it again, and he doesn't want there to be an awkward tension between them.

"Shit," he mutters under his breath.

He wishes he would've not succumbed to her advances. He wishes he would have used his balls in quite a different way and not fallen to her seduction.

Seduction.

"Shit." She's not like that, and he knows it. He speaks to no one but himself: "We were both lonely. We were both vulnerable. We were both stupid. No one's to blame more than the other." *And we need to talk about this.* The coffee is finished. He rummages through the cupboards, finds two coffee cups, and pours the coffee.

ΣΩΣ

"Kiss me."

He was frozen in place, the cigarette between his fingers, eyes staring across the river.

"Kiss me," she repeated.

He gritted his teeth, wrenched his eyes shut. "No."

She was still holding his hand, and she squeezed it tightly in hers. "Please."

He shook his head, stern and resolute. "Kira... She told me not..."

He couldn't even formulate his words.

"Kira's not here," Jessie said, slowly moving in closer.

Her body was closer to his.

The wind came up off the water, but her body broke their coldness.

Her warmth so close.

The scent of strawberry shampoo in her hair.

The tingling heat of her breath against his neck.

"Kiss me."

And then he found himself turning.

He found himself looking up.

His mind screamed at him: *Stop!*

But he didn't care.

The two of them looked at one another, and his hand shook in hers.

She pressed her body against him, and the tips of their noses touched.

He watched her lips, their quick and precise and beautiful movements:

"Kiss me."

The tongue forming words behind those lips.

That tongue, tantalizing, anticipating.

His own lips quivered in exhilaration.

"She isn't here," Jessie said, their lips threatening to collide.

His own lips quivered in exhilaration.

"She isn't here," Jessie said, their lips threatening to collide.

He promised himself Kira would never know.

This time, he wouldn't tell her.

She didn't need to know.

And he kissed her under the moonlight.

ΣΩΣ

He knocks on the door to the master bedroom. "Sarah?" No reply. "I made coffee."

Still nothing.

He grabs the doorknob and twists. It opens. He pushes the door wide, revealing the master bedroom. Sunlight is coming in through the cracks in the boards, and birds are perched on the large oak outside, their soft melodies filling the room. The bed is made, unruffled, unused.

The man's eyes are drawn to the antique vanity.

His breath escapes him, but somehow three words pour forth: "Oh my God."

VIII

She is sitting in the chair facing the vanity, her back to him, the shoulder-blades pressed against bluish-purple, blood-deprived skin. Her head is bowed, as if in prayer, and across the mirror is a great wash of dried blood, molded into the shape of a wretched grin, which had inched its way down from its arc of splatter in great rivulets, spattering onto the vanity's counter. The man moves forward slowly, around the side of the bed next to the vanity, and he sees that her front is covered with blood: the blood had flowed down over her breasts, down her stomach, between her legs, and pooled in a gelatinous puddle amidst her stone-cold feet. On the counter of the vanity are open containers of old makeup, but her face is hidden in the shadows. The bloodied bayonet is still clenched in the icy fingers of her right hand. He stands on the opposite side of the bed watching her. He feels nothing. His heart beats sluggishly behind his ribs. Hers doesn't beat at all.

The man leaves the room and shuts the door. He turns and faces the living area, the fireplace filled with its spent and dusty embers. That sofa where they had kissed, passionately embraced, where they had become one. It had been magical, something straight out of the greatest of all fairy-tales. It had been something that made the stars align and the galaxies collide. And now she is gone—she is gone because of what he did. She is gone because of the shame she felt in betraying her love for Patrick. She is gone because of her decision to leave him alone.

Alone.

That is what he is now.

Alone.

Again.

The man stands out on the portico, smoking his cigarette. He looks to the east, where the sun is rising above the decrepit stalks of corn. A throbbing yet gentle rise into the sky, pushing back the night; on the other side of the world, the dark-walkers are just beginning their reign of terror as dusk is dwindling to night. But here, in Colorado, the sun is rising, and it is rising on the dawn of a new epoch for the man, a new age. He left Cincinnati with several others, but now he is the only one remaining. He tries to remember their names, but they are fading into the background. Part of him feels awful for this, but another part of him knows that if he is to survive, it must take place. He cannot be overwhelmed by sadness. They are gone. It is the end of that. He must continue. And he

tries to convince himself that what he feels—no sadness, no remorse, nothing—over Sarah's death is something good, that it is not something within him to be feared. But he cannot convince himself of this. So he stands and smokes his cigarettes and goes back into the house. He has two cups of coffee to drink now. He sits down and lights a cigarette.

He gets up from the table and goes into the bedroom. He stands in the doorway staring at the corpse's backside. She had been alive just hours ago. Alive. And moaning. And groaning. And sweating. He had been inside her, and it had been warm. It's cold now. He walks over to the vanity and leans around her. The side of his hand brushes her shoulder-blade, the cold skin against his frightening. Her stiff body, stricken with rigor mortis, shudders in its chair. He grips her arm and lifts it, the joints creaking. He pries her fingers away from the bayonet and pulls it from her. He leaves the bedroom, shutting the door, and he goes to the kitchen. He pours distilled water from the jug over the bayonet, and he scrubs off the dried with a washcloth from a drawer. He fits the bayonet into his belt and sits back down at the table. He picks up his coffee, sets it down, lights a cigarette, smokes. The smoke rises to the ceiling, crawls along the wax paneling, licking towards the windows like a thousand tongues.

He drinks his coffee, wonders what to do with Sarah. He decides that he will leave her there. It is obviously what she wanted. Had she performed the act in the bathtub, or hung herself from the ceiling, it would be different. But her steps had been methodical, well-planned. And he decides that he will respect her wishes by leaving her alone. He grabs the GARAND from the kitchen and heads for the door. He pauses, looks to the bathroom, the empty toilet bowl. He sets the GARAND against the wall and enters the bathroom. He unzips and flips it out, begins to urinate, looks up at the ceiling.

Something catches in his peripheral vision.

He whips his head to the side, but there is nothing.

Just the dusty and cracked window.

He wonders if he saw anything at all.

You're imagining things.

And then he hears it: footsteps on the front porch.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Angels of Sunset Avenue

"For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out."

- James Baldwin (A.D. 1924-1987)

I

How did it come to this? Those words resonate like a gong in his mind, nearly drowning out the sound of the snarling dark-walkers outside, the wooden timbers shaking and quivering, the entire foundation quaking. Dust fills his eyes, mixing with his tears, and he grips the GARAND in his hand.

Three bullets.

Not enough.

Just enough.

He turns in the gloom, sees them cowering against the rusted tractor with blown-out tires and cobwebs strewn along the gearshift. He looks back towards the door, the heavy wooden beam placed over the hinges. A fissure had appeared down the middle of the beam, right in the crack between the two doors, and with each bulge and push from the other side it threatens to snap. He knows they will be in soon. He knows what will happen. A sense of clarity grips him, a clarity that is defied by his own saltwater tears. He walks over to the tractor, and with his free hand he grabs the first one by the arm, pulls her away from the tractor. She looks up at him, her twinkling eyes hopeful, the golden strands of hair curling along her shoulders. She looks up at him hoping for strength, wisdom, comfort—but all she finds looking back at her is the cold, steely glare of resolution.

He begins sobbing, and she realizes what is happening, tries to pull away.

But he tightens his grip, and she gasps, his fingers bruising her bare skin.

"This won't hurt..." he chokes. "This won't hurt..."

And he raises the GARAND and puts the end of the barrel against her forehead.

The last thing he hears before the gunshot are her frantic shrieks.

ΣΩΣ

He quickly zipped up his pants and ran out of the bathroom, grabbing the GARAND on his way towards the door. He checked to make sure it was loaded, and without losing speed, charged the door, kicking it open. Brilliant sunlight blinded him, and he stumbled out onto the porch, the rifle held at the ready. He swung around and pointed the gun down the stretch of the porch leading to the corner of the house, and standing on the porch there were three little girls, their eyes filled with fear, one standing before the others, the two remaining hiding behind her. The man didn't realize what he

was seeing, thought it was some sort of illusion, a mirage, shook his head, tried to shake the image away. But they stood there still, as real as the breath in his lungs, breathing rapidly, just watching him. The man kept the sights trained on the girls, and then the one barring the others stepped forward, held her arms out, like an angel, and said, "Please, Mister. Don't hurt us. We don't mean any trouble."

The three girls sat at the kitchen table, and the man asked if they wanted coffee. None of them did. He found some cans of pears and peaches and opened them with a can opener, a can for each of them. He sat down with them, and they ate quietly as the sun continued to rise. The silence was suffocating, the only noise that of their fingers sloshing through the juices in the can, the popping of fruit into their mouths, the methodical chewing as juices streamed down the corners of their lips. The girls watched him, and he felt uncomfortable, so he looked away. He looked towards the bedroom, adjacent from the living area, and something twisted in his stomach. *The girls shouldn't be here.*

His thoughts were jarred as the one girl spoke: "Why are you here?"

The man looked at her. "What?"

"Why are you here?" she repeated.

He didn't know how to answer. "It was just for a night."

"I know," she said. "But why are you here?"

"I'm traveling west. We just... I just stopped by here."

"What do you mean 'we'? Is someone with you?"

"No," he said. Grimly: "Not anymore."

The girl was quiet for a moment. "Your friend is in the bedroom."

"Yes."

"How did it happen?"

"By her own hand."

"Why?"

"Does there have to be a reason?"

"There's always a reason."

"Not always."

"That's interesting."

"What's interesting?"

"You say there's no reason. But there's always a reason."

"There's not always a reason. Sometimes there's no reason."

"You're ashamed of why your friend did it."

"You know why I'm here," the man said. "Why are *you* here?"

She folded her hands on the table. "This is our home."

"Your home?" he asked.

"Yes."

"If this is your home, then where were you last night?"

"We were at the orphanage."

"What orphanage?"

"The orphanage in Strasburg. Where we grew up."

"What were you doing there?"

"We were hiding. Trying to be quiet."

"Oh."

"They found us."

"Who? The dark-walkers?"

"You mean the vampires?"

"Whatever."

"No. They know we're there. We're protected from them."

"Then who found you?"

"The bandits. They found us."

"So you came here to escape."

"Yes."

"Okay."

The girl smiled. "Do you believe in fate, Mister?"

"No."

"I believe in fate."

"Okay."

"I believe that God brought you to us."

"You don't know anything about me."

"You seem like a compassionate man."

"I would kill you here and now, but I'm keeping you around for sport."

The girl grinned. "Okay, Mister. But I don't believe you."

"Don't make me prove myself. Eat your peaches."

She continued eating quietly. Then, "Do you want to know what happened to us?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Every story is the same."

"Every story is different. It has different characters."

"The plotline is the same. It's wearying after a while."

"Let me tell you what happened to us."

"I don't care."

"I know you don't care," she said. "But I'm going to tell you anyways."

II

"Our mother abandoned us when we were born," the girl said. "She was a drug addict. Heroin. She worked the streets of Denver, and she was knocked up. I guess she couldn't take care of the three of us. She left us on the doorstep at the Saint Francis Orphanage. I'd like to think that it was selfless, that she knew she couldn't give us what we needed, couldn't raise us well, couldn't give us an education. I'd like to think that she abandoned us for our sake, not just for her own."

The man noticed that one of the girl's sisters was glaring at her, something spiteful in her eyes. She acknowledged her sister, said, "But there's no way to be sure. Maybe she abandoned us because we'd be a financial burden, drain her heroin funds dry. I like to think positive, you know?"

The man wasn't quite sure that such thinking came warranted in the world, but he didn't say anything.

The girl continued, "Whatever reason for it, she left us on the orphanage steps. We were taken in. It's the law... Excuse me, *was* the law... that orphanages had to accept any infants left on their steps." She shrugged. "And so we were raised in the Catholic faith. We were raised to be good, devout Catholic women. Sister Clancy believed that if she raised us well enough, we would become good citizens in society."

A frown draped over the girl's façade. "Truth be told, Mister, most of us, when we turned eighteen, went to work on the streets. So many girls got caught up in selling their bodies, so many became alcoholics, so many became enslaved to hard drugs: heroin, like my mom. Or cocaine. Or meth." She shook her head. "It is a sad story. But I guess it doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

The man shook his head, finished his peaches.

The girl said. "When everything happened, we were just sleeping. I'll always remember that night. Everyone remembers the night it happened; how can you not?"

"We were sleeping. They always made us go to bed early. I remember what woke me up was my bunkmate. I heard her groaning and moaning, and I thought she was crying. She would always have these awful nightmares. So I got up to comfort her, and I climbed onto the top bunk, and she was just lying there in her sheets, and she was bleeding like they all did: blood from her nose, her mouth, her eyes. Everywhere. It was all over her face. And she was moaning and scratching at her face. I don't mean scratching like you scratch an itch. I mean *violently* scratching, digging her fingernails into her skin, and scraping so hard that her skin broke and began coming off in ribbons. I remember... I just crouched there on the top bunk and watched, and I couldn't take my eyes from her. I thought I was dreaming. She was scratching so hard that she scratched the skin off her cheekbones, and I could *see* her bones, they were as pale as the moon and as white as the snow. That was when I knew I was dreaming, knew I needed to wake up. You know how when you scream when you're in a dream and you wake up? That's what I tried to do. So I screamed and I screamed. But I didn't wake up. My screams were met by those around me. Everyone was screaming. I was screaming in fear, but they were screaming in pain. I looked out over the rest of the room, and there was chaos in the bunks. Girls were grabbing at themselves, banging their heads into the bedposts, attacking one another, attacking themselves, screaming obscenities and shouting and just... I remember it was chaos, and it's hard to remember the details. I lost my balance and fell from the bunk, and I was knocked out. It was my sisters who woke me. They'd been through the same thing in their own rooms. When I woke up... When I saw all the bodies around me, the blood on the floor and on the walls and on the bedposts, when I saw how they had ripped one another apart and smothered one another with pillows, when I saw what they had done and what had happened to them... The blood drying on their faces... That's when I realized it wasn't a dream. But it wasn't any less of a nightmare."

"We searched the entire orphanage. We were the only ones who survived. We went outside. Everything was empty. The entire town. All of Strasburg, nothing but a ghost town. There were bodies everywhere. In every building. And they were horrific. People went crazy, did awful things to themselves and to one another. Jessica wanted to go into Denver, but I knew that it wouldn't have mattered. So we just went back to the orphanage. And we began burning the bodies. One at a time. There were nearly two hundred girls in that orphanage. We weren't supermen, we couldn't carry all of them out and burn them in a few days' time. But we got most of them. Burned them right out back, on the soccer field. It smelled like burnt pork. That's what they said it smelled like with the Holocaust. And honestly, that's what it was like. A new Holocaust. A different Holocaust. Except the culprits weren't evil men. The culprits were unseen. And not just specific ethnicities were targeted:

everyone fell under the curse. Everyone, it seemed, but the three of us. And that was, in a way, a sort of curse."

"Why didn't you just leave the orphanage?" the man asked. "Abandon it altogether? If there were hundreds of bodies there, you must have known the risk of disease. There's no way you could've known about... the full effects... of the plague. But you should have left the orphanage, gone out to the countryside." He rapped his knuckles on the wood of the table. "Come to a place like this."

The girl shook her head. "We *knew* the orphanage. It was familiar. It felt *safe*. It wasn't. We knew that. But it was like a sanctuary to us. It's where we grew up. The great halls, the sweeping rooms, the bell-tower, the courtyards, the towers. It was *home* to us. And we were determined to stay there." She shook her head, wrung her hands, scowled. She looked up at the man, her eyes piercing. "But you're right. We should have left. We couldn't get all the bodies burned before... Before the first night... Before the first night they... The first night they came back."

"We weren't in the bell-tower yet. We wouldn't—couldn't—sleep in the rooms where it had all happened, so we were sleeping in one of the classrooms. There wasn't a bathroom there, so we had to go down the hall to use the restroom. We all had nightmares then. We still do, just not as much. You grow accustomed to things, even this, and it becomes normalcy, just another day, like any other. It's terrible, but that's the way it is. You grow used to the world you live in, and over time it doesn't begin to faze you. It's like what they would always tell us at the orphanage: we are growing up, but we have to remain children, we have to see the eyes with fresh eyes, or we will grow cold and calloused towards it, and it won't affect us anymore. They were right. We've grown cold and calloused—even though the nightmares remain.

She took a long, drawn-out breath, prepared herself, continued: "But the night it happened, when they came back... My sister had to use the bathroom... And she went, and she came back, and she looked white as a ghost. She woke both of us up, and she told us Sister Clancy was in the nursery. We didn't believe her. We'd found Sister Clancy dead in her quarters just like everyone else. But she was adamant, and she wanted to show us. She said Sister Clancy must have been deaf, because she called out to her and she didn't respond, but if she saw all of us... So we joined her, and she took us to the nursery, just down the hall. We looked through the large windows on the wall and we saw Sister Clancy standing in front of one of the cribs. There was something wrong with her, something not right... A clumsy... animal... gait to her. Like they used to have, before they... became more accustomed to themselves. And she was standing over the crib, and my sister raised her hand to knock, but something inside me told me that it would be a horrible idea, so I grabbed her hand in mine and put a finger to my lips, told her not to, shook my head. And then I saw my sister's face go white, and her mouth opened to scream, and I instinctively covered her mouth and followed her eyes into the nursery. Sister Clancy had reached into the crib and grabbed one of the babies. The babies were dead, we just hadn't gotten to burning them yet, maybe because it would have felt sacrilegious, I don't know, but this baby was *alive*, and it was squirming in her arms. It didn't make any sense, it still doesn't. But I remember what she did. I remember how she raised the baby up, holding it up as if to examine it in the light, and then she snapped her head forward and bit into the baby's neck. There was so much blood, and it covered everything, I didn't know so much blood could... could be in a baby. And Sister Clancy just let the blood flow into her mouth, down her chin, down her neck. My other sister screamed, and Sister Clancy dropped the baby and turned her head and just *stared* at us. And her eyes were like the eyes of all the others—devoid of any resemblance to who they were before the plague. Sister Clancy was the nicest, most compassionate, most religious and devout and caring

and pious woman you would have ever met, but she became an absolute *monster*. She stared at us through the glass, and then she charged at us. We were moored to the ground, frozen in place, and she was knocking over cribs in her beeline right towards us. Common sense grabbed hold of me, and I grabbed my sisters and we ran down the hallway, just as Sister Clancy threw herself into the glass window. It shattered underneath her impact, and she tumbled through, fell to the ground, rolled in the glass, came sprawled up against the wall with her legs in the air. We turned down the corridor, and we could hear screams coming from the rooms in the building that we hadn't cleared. Thank God we were far enough from those wings of the building that they couldn't get to us. We just had Sister Clancy to worry about, and she was right behind us. We reached the room and leapt inside. There were candlesticks mounted along the walls, because they would light them at night to provide a monastic atmosphere, because we would have nuns who would sometimes come and teach and live. I yelled at my sisters to get inside, and I grabbed the iron candlestick and turned just as Sister Clancy was upon me. I drove the candlestick into her eye, and she immediately went down. I had her blood on my hands. I stood staring at her body lying at my feet, the end of the candlestick protruding from the back of her skull. Her bones had broken in such a way that they created a flap that moved up and down with the gurgle of blood. My sisters were yelling at me, so I ran inside the room. We shoved desks against the door, every desk in the room. They tried to get in that night, but they weren't able to. They weren't as smart then as they are now."

"There are three things that can explain how we were able to survive that night," she said. "The first is luck. The other is fate. And the third is divine providence."

"Which do you believe?"

"I don't believe in luck."

"Do you believe in fate?"

"I believe in God."

"You're a walking miracle, then. No one believes in God anymore."

"People choose not to believe."

"God chose to let this happen. People simply follow in His footsteps."

One of the girls continued eating her peaches.

The man was agitated. He just wanted to leave.

The girl continued her story. "All of the wings of the orphanage have large stained glass windows, windows that let in light. Except one wing. That's where they all went. We barricaded it off, went outside, poured gasoline on the foundation, and lit it afire. We could hear them screaming inside." A tear dotted underneath her left eye. "It was an awful thing to hear, to hear them screaming. To hear them in pain. They were people we remembered. People we'd eaten with, played with, studied with, worshipped with. It was easier, just carrying out their bodies... Because then they were dead, and there was nothing you could do, and you knew that, even withstanding the failure to understand why God would allow this to happen, that they were with God, in paradise. But hearing them *screaming*. And *smelling* them. And seeing their bones the next morning, arising out of the dust and ash of the rubble... To look at their skulls and see those empty eye sockets scorched black by the flames... That was awful. Absolutely awful."

She wiped tears from her eye. "We boarded up the windows. Put padlocks on the doors. We put all of our stuff in the bell-tower and built alternating doors leading up to it, which we could lock and barricade from the inside. They couldn't get up to the bell-tower, it rises one hundred feet from the ground with no ladders. And we would spend every night there, and we could hear them, and when

there were no clouds, and when the moon was full, we could see them. Moving about in the courtyard. Trying to get inside. Just standing down on the green, watching us. Always watching us. Always hoping. I used to think hope was something limited to mankind. But I have seen hope in their eyes. A wretched hope. And I don't like to think of them as people."

"Neither do I," the man said.

"They look a lot like people."

"It's a stretch," the man said.

He believed her.

"We wondered why we survived, why everyone else didn't. Why it was the three of us. Triplets. And we wondered, and we wondered, and when we understood, we felt like idiots. Something connects every survivor, something within them. And it's what connected the three of us."

"Genetics," the man said.

"Yes. Genetics. Something within our D.N.A.."

"I didn't know Catholic girls knew about science."

She ignored him. "Where did our genetics come from? From our parents. So one of our parents, if they were alive the night it happened, would have survived... Probably. There's always the chance that whatever genetic normality—or *abnormality*—that makes us immune could be recessive, and that our parents were dominant and we received the recessive genes."

"You've thought this through."

"We decided to look for our parents. We didn't know our father. And we didn't know our mother. But the orphanage knew our mom, not our dad. When we were infants, they ran genetic tests on us. A name came up in the database, a woman who had been charged with assault several years ago, had her D.N.A. on file. Her name was Tabitha Staten. Like the island. In New York?"

"I know Staten Island."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"Okay."

She continued, "We looked in the paperwork in Sister Clancy's office. And we found our files. We had a last known address for our mom. It was on the outskirts of Denver. Along this old road with rundown houses. A drug lane. You know what that is? A place where nearly every inhabitant was a habitual drug user or drug distributor. The cops generally left it alone. We went in late October. It was already getting cold. We hoped we would find our mom. We did, but it wasn't what we expected."

"I told my sisters to wait outside. I tried the door. It was locked. The windows were boarded up. Most windows on the street were boarded up. It's the kind of neighborhood, you know? I'm sure they had drive-by shootings. But maybe that's just in the movies. I was able to climb on top of an old truck parked alongside the house, and I was able to pull myself up onto a shingled overhang. The shingles were loose, I nearly fell, and I was afraid of breaking my neck. I was able to get in through one of the second-story windows. The room was empty, covered in dust. Just boxes of papers stacked everywhere. I went down the hall and into another room. There were vats of chemicals everywhere, and there was a laboratory table and vials and mixers. It was a methamphetamine lab. I hated the idea that Mom partook of such things, but we knew what to expect of her character. But that doesn't make her a bad person, you know? People make bad choices and get enslaved by those choices. It

happened to her, it could happen to anyone. I went downstairs and searched around for a while. I found her on the sofa. She was just a skeleton then, a skeleton without clothes. She'd killed herself naked. Lying next to her skull was a jagged rod of cement. And clutched in her bony fingers was an emptied tube of modeling cement. It became clear what had happened: she killed herself. She poured modeling cement down her throat, and it hardened, and she suffocated. When she was down to just a skeleton, the cement that had molded in her throat was left in its original form."

"We never knew if she went crazy with the plague, or if she killed herself afterwards, unable to handle what had happened."

"Who knows," the man said.

"Either way... She was gone. And I guess it didn't bother us too much. Because she'd always been gone, you know?" She shrugged. "I don't know what we hoped for. Maybe we hoped that when she saw us, she would become a loving mom and protect us from the hell of this world."

"That's ridiculous," the man said. "You went for her. She didn't go for you. And she knew where you were."

The girl stared at him, her green eyes afire. "Don't judge, lest ye be judged."

"That's not the first time I've heard the Bible quoted," the man growled. "And last time it didn't end so well."

"What happened? Did it shake your perceptions?"

"No," he said, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. "A lot of people died."

She felt uncomfortable, tried to swallow it away. "Oh."

The man looked over at the third sister. "Are you almost done eating?"

Her face flushed red; she enjoyed hiding in her sister's shadow.

The man glared at her. "Hurry up."

The talkative girl continued with their story. "When winter came, things got easier. It was colder. And we couldn't have a fire in the bell-tower, it would attract the bandits. We would always shake in our sleep, and Deshay nearly lost her toes." She nodded to the quiet girl still eating peaches. "But it was easier, because the vampires, they began to dwindle, and then they disappeared. Most of them went straight into Denver, into the big buildings, where it was warmer. Even into the sewers. We got a lot of snow. None of the factories were working, there was no energy being produced. It got a lot colder, and it snowed a lot more. We had fifteen feet of snow at one point, and we had to carve paths to the gas stations and supermarkets to get supplies and food. When the snow melted, there were bodies everywhere. The vampires, they're not like the ones in the legends. They're not supernatural, they're just as fragile as we are. And a lot of them froze or starved to death. Every now and then we still find another skeleton in raggedy clothing, the flesh rotted away. Not that there aren't anymore vampires. There's lots of them. Denver had a population of around 600,000 people. Most of them—the vast majority—became vampires. And there's still a lot of them around. But we're knowledgeable about them. We know their weaknesses. Sunlight, for example. And they're not the brightest, though recently they've been showing... promise. But our main worry now is bandits. Some of them found us last night. They tried to get inside, but they couldn't find us. They always come at night. They get some sort of perverse thrill out of it. And that's why we made this place." She swept her arms outwards. "This is our safe haven. The bandits don't know about it. We've stocked it fully and pre-fortified it. They won't find us here."

"Really?" the man asked. "I found this place. Why won't they? You're better off in the orphanage, if you ask me."

"You're not a bandit."

"How do you know?"

"You would have already done awful things to us."

"I may still be planning on it."

She leaned back in her seat, eyed him. "You're strange."

"I've been called a lot of things. But never 'strange.'"

"You act like an ass. But you're not."

"You haven't known me long enough."

"You fed us when you didn't have to."

"It's your food."

"And you stayed here with us when you didn't have to."

"I'm just trying to decide how to cook each one of you."

The girl smiled. "And you're funny."

The man said nothing, looked away.

"What's wrong?" the girl asked.

"Nothing," he said. He pushed the chair, back stood. "I have to go now."

III

"Where are you going?" the girl asked.

"It doesn't matter," he said, grabbing the GARAND from against the counter.

"You're just going to leave?"

"Yes."

"At least tell me where you're going."

He looked at her. "Why?"

"So I can pray for you."

"I don't need you to pray for me."

"Maybe you do."

"I don't *want* you to pray for me."

"I'll pray for you anyways."

"Thanks," he said, turning to go.

"Please, Mister. Just tell me where you're going."

He sighed, turned. "Why?"

"I'm curious. That's all."

"Fine. I'm going to Aspen."

"That's in the mountains."

"Yes it is," he said. "I want to be there in a few days."

"Why are you going to Aspen? It's populated. Just like Denver."

"It's not as big as Denver."

"But it's secluded. All the vampires would have stayed there."

"Maybe they froze to death."

"Tell me why you're going to Aspen."

He looked down the hallway, towards the door, back to the girl. "There's a small community there. Or at least there was, a few months ago. They've fortified the entire town. It's like a microcosm of civilization."

The third girl, quiet until now, spoke up: "Sa-Rah."

The bold girl looked over at her. "What?"

She asked, "Do you think they have other kids there?"

"I don't know," she said. She looked at the man. "What do you think?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe. Sure. Probably."

The girl leapt up from her chair, knocking over the empty can of peaches.

"Jessica!" the bold girl scolded. "Sit down."

She refused to sit down, just stared at the man, eyes hopeful. "Can we come?"

"No," the man said.

"Why?" she asked.

The bold girl stood, reached across the table, grabbed her sister's arm. "Sit down!"

"I want to go!" she wailed.

The man repeated, stern, "No."

"Why not?" she demanded once more.

"Because you'll just slow me down."

And he left, exiting through the front door.

Sa-Rah leapt up from her seat, told her sisters to stay put, and followed after him.

The man was down the front porch's steps and nearly to the MERCEDES when he heard the front door opening behind him. He gripped the GARAND tighter and turned. The bold girl—her name was Sa-Rah—stood watching him.

"What?" he asked.

She answered him with a question, her voice tender, pleading: "Why not?"

He didn't answer for a second, then, "You heard me."

"We won't slow you down."

"I've heard it before," he said. "It won't end well."

"We won't be a burden."

"You'll be a burden to me," he said. "You're safe here."

"You just said we weren't."

"What the hell do I know?"

She seemed irritated by his language. "Please. Let us come with you."

"I said, 'No,'" he said.

"Give me a real reason."

He walked around the side of the sports-car, opened the front door. Looking at her from over the hood, he said, "You want a real reason? Here's one: you're right. I'm an ass. And I don't give a damn about you or your sisters."

Sa-Rah glared at him, her eyes wound into a frightening scowl.

"Oh," the man said. "Remember: don't go into the bedroom."

He got into the car and set the GARAND in the seat next to him and put the keys in the ignition and twisted the keys. The engine rumbled to life, a gentle throbbing. The gas gauge went to $\frac{3}{4}$ full. He looked out the window, and he could see Sa-Rah standing on the front porch, her sisters flanking her. Jessica and Deshay, if he remembered correctly. He listened to the engine idling, and he just stared at

them, and they stared back. Jessica began to cry, and Deshay moved around Sa-Rah and wrapped her arms around her sister, comforted her. The man watched them, but his vision blurred, transformed, and he was in the living room again, and they were cuddling on the couch, commercials playing between back-to-back television shows, and they were warm and it rained outside.

ΣΩΣ

"We should try for children."

Her words caught him off guard. He had no response.

"I'm taking your silence as affirmation," she said, nervousness in her voice.

"Children would be nice," he said after a moment. "Or maybe a child."

"What's the difference?"

"A child is just one."

"You only want one?"

"I don't... I don't want more than one at once."

She snuggled up closer to him. "We should talk about this."

"We *are* talking about it," he said.

"No. I mean, like, seriously."

"I know," he said dejectedly.

She rubbed her cheek against his. "Do you think we should try for kids?"

"You mean, like, right now?"

A wicked grin. "If it's okay with you, can we finish *FULL HOUSE* first?"

"Oh, I see," he said, poking her cheek with his finger.

"What do you see?"

"It's those Olsen twins, isn't it? They're inspiring you."

"You don't think they're cute?"

"There's one too many of them for me."

"You don't want twins?"

"It'd be... a lot of responsibilities. You know?"

"What if we had triplets?"

He chose his words carefully. "We're thinking ahead of ourselves."

"When, though?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "We should wait until we're married."

"You're definitely not abstinent," she said, grabbing the inside of his leg.

He squirmed under her advances.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" she asked, trailing her hand up his leg.

"This *conversation* is making me uncomfortable," he replied.

"You've always wanted to have kids."

"And I do. I want to have kids. And I want to have them with you. But not now."

"When, then?"

"Once we're married."

"You've been pushing marriage off for years now."

"One day we're going to get married."

"We should get married soon. Half my family has disowned me because of my... premarital... relations."

"Don't blame *me*," he said wryly. "*You're* the one doing the fucking."

She slapped him. "So that's what you want? Just someone to play with?"
"Sure. But not right now." He pointed to the television. "FULL HOUSE is back on."
And their conversation ended.

ΣΩΣ

The girls stood on the porch, waiting for him to go, knowing he would go. The man leaned back in the seat and drew several deep breaths. "Fuck," he muttered to himself.

He couldn't save Kira.

He couldn't save the others.

And he couldn't save Sarah.

But maybe he could save these three little girls.

Maybe he could honor Kira's dream.

Maybe he could do something *right* for once.

He hit a button on the inside of the door. The passenger's window rolled down. He shouted, "Get in the fucking car!"

The girls looked at one another, confused.

Jessica wiped away her tears.

Sa-Rah took a tentative step forward.

The man slammed his fist on the horn. "Come on!" he shouted.

The girls scrambled down the steps and came to the car.

He unlocked the doors.

Deshay and Jessica got into the backseat.

Sa-Rah took the front seat.

The man said nothing. They shut their doors. He pressed down on the gas.

Mud spit up from the tires as they hit the driveway and left the house behind.

He knew they would find Sarah's body at nightfall.

But at least she wouldn't suffer as they tore her limb-from-limb.

IV

The little girl's body goes limp, her mouth caught in the slack of her dismembered shriek, and she falls backwards, landing hard beside the tractor, a cloud of dust wrapping around her face, her features twisted and contorted, eyes wide open—and between them a single bullet hole. Blood pulls beneath her head, bubbling amidst the broken dirt and scattered manure of months past.

The man turns to the other girls.

They stare at him in absolute terror.

The doors are about to burst.

Tears fall from his eyes, blurring his vision. He doesn't know who he grabs next, only that she is struggling, futilely, against his iron grasp. He yanks her away from the tractor. The bullet will exit out of the back of her skull and possibly ricochet against the steel of the tractor if he shoots her where she stood. He cannot bear the thought of being shot by a ricocheted bullet, not before killing the third girl. He cannot bear the thought of lying immobile in the dirt, strewn amidst the two other bodies, his

lungs filling with his own blood, watching as the girl—*hearing* as the girl—is torn apart into several pieces, her blood painting a masterpiece against the rotted wooden boards of the barn.

He is holding the second girl, and she is crying, doesn't even plead for him to stop as he puts the end of the GARAND against her forehead and squeezes the trigger, discharging a single bullet from the magazine. The back of her head explodes against the stacked hay, and she tumbles down on top of her sister. Her splattered blood against the stacked hay drips like acrylic paint.

ΣΩΣ

"Are you going straight through Denver?" Samantha asked.

They were driving down the highway, nearing Strasburg.

The mist had cleared, and the tops of Denver's skyscrapers could be seen.

And behind them: the Rocky Mountains.

"Yes," the man said. "It's the quickest route."

"Maybe," Samantha said. "That's where the bandits are."

"Bandits are everywhere."

"There's seventy or eighty of them downtown," she said.

The man was quiet.

"You should go around."

"Okay," the man said. "How?"

"I don't know."

"I mapped it out to go straight through downtown."

"Find a new map."

They stopped at a gas station a few miles outside Strasburg. The man told the girls to wait in the car, and he took the GARAND and broke into the store and swept through the aisles. It was clear. He found a rack of Denver maps sitting next to a cigar case that had been shattered, the cigars dry and crisp. He fumbled through the map in the meager light coming from the tall dusty windows, and he was able to plot a course around Denver following different highways. There was no direct route around the city, so he had to improvise with city roads and state routes. He mouthed it as he read his notes back to himself: Interstate 70 West, then onto State Highway E-470 North, followed by a right onto Denver Boulder Turnpike. Go down that a ways, and then take a left on South Boulder Road, then go south on State Route 93, right onto Route 6, and then right onto Route 70 West—straight into the Rocky Mountains. He calculated the distance, knew they could be at the foothills of the mountains by evening. Away from the city. A smile creased over his lips. He knew they would make it.

"What are you doing?"

He turned around, startled. "Shit."

"You shouldn't talk like that," Samantha said.

"I'm sorry," he said, though he wasn't. "I told you to wait in the car."

"Jessica wants her stuffed turtle."

"What?"

"She left her stuffed turtle at the orphanage. She wants it back."

"We're not stopping for a damned... for a turtle."

"It means a lot to her. It's on the way."

"Now do you see how you're a burden?"

"It'll take about five, maybe ten minutes. Please."

The man broke under her pleas. They got off at the Strasburg exit, and she directed him down several blocks until they reached Sunset Avenue. He turned left, and against the side of the road was a large iron fence and a single gate, and behind that gate a towering stone building with arching stained glass windows and three towers, a bell-tower rising from the middle like a spire from a London church. The man saw the wing that had been burnt down, now nothing but mud and debris. He pulled in through the open gate, and Samantha directed him to drive around the orphanage. Along the massive, shut front doors was a sign reading in faded lettering: SAINT FRANCIS ORPHANAGE. The tires kicked up pockets of mud, and she guided him towards a low arched overhang leading into a courtyard. Even the MERCEDES with its low top barely fit.

There were trees blossoming with spring flowers along the sides of the courtyard, and in the middle was a gazebo with several benches. An old pond.

"They ate all the fishies," Jessica said.

He stopped the MERCEDES next to the gazebo and leaned back, said, "Hurry up. Find your turtle and let's go."

Jessica bit her lip and got out of the car.

He cursed, apologized to Samantha, grabbed the GARAND, and fumbled out after her. Before he shut the door, he told the two other girls, "Wait here." To Samantha: "Seriously. *Stay here.*"

He told Jessica to wait up and ran after her, toting his rifle in hand and the cleaned bayonet in his belt.

Jessica went through one of the many doors leading inside from the courtyard, and they stepped into blackness. Terror ran through the man, but Jessica looked back in the shadows and said, "It's okay. It's safe here." He didn't feel too comfortable trusting her, and he gripped the GARAND tighter in his hand as he followed her. The narrow corridor went past several rooms with faded lettering on paled glass windows. Classrooms. She took a flight of steps up into a wide corridor with boarded-up stained glass windows. There were tables and chairs everywhere. A dining hall. She took him down an adjacent hallway that was narrow with a towering ceiling, chandeliers pointing downwards with their shattered bulbs. Glass crunched under his feet. They passed a great room that he recognized from going to Mass as a child, his mother demanding it, his father always complaining. His father beating them during the week and then taking communion on Sunday. She turned and waved at the man, who had stopped in his steps, gotten lost in his gaze into the sanctuary. "Come on, this way, hurry up!" He found it ironic that he was being told to hurry now. He followed her up a spiraling staircase. Built upon the staircase were several doors, which she unlocked with different keys. Seven in all. The stairs climbed up and up, and the man gasped for breath, tar-soaked lungs demanding compensation. Eventually the stairwell ended, and they stood in the wide bell-tower. It was twenty feet by twenty feet, with a giant bell right in the middle. Sunlight came in through the large windows on all four walls, illuminating the creases and grooves and dents in the archaic gong. Along the floor were several chairs, some suitcases, three beds with tossed blankets and greasy pillows.

Jessica ran to one of the beds, ruffled through the covers, found her stuffed sea turtle, clutched it to her tightly, grinned: "I found my turtle."

"Good for you," the man said. He dug through his pockets, found a cigarette, lit it.

Jessica walked over as he smoked, reached up, grabbed the cigarette from his fingers.

"What the hell?!" he shouted as she stomped it underfoot.

"It's not healthy," she said. "It'll give you cancer and kill you."

"In these days, cancer isn't the worst thing to worry about. Or don't you know that?"

"Have you lost your breath?" Samantha asked.

The man turned, cursed. "Can't you follow the simplest directions?"

"This is our home," she said. "We would like to see it one last time."

"Snap a picture, then. Let's go. We don't have time for this."

Deshay walked past him, to her bed, kneeled down, pulled out a box, began rifling through it.

"Does *everyone* have a keepsake?" the man asked.

Deshay stood, holding a black-and-white photograph.

"What is that?" the man asked.

Samantha leaned close to him, looked up, whispered: "Our mom."

"You didn't have a color photograph?"

"It's a scanned copy of her driver's license. It's all we have."

Samantha walked over to her sister, whispered something, took the picture. She returned to the man and stood with him, showed him the photograph. "It's a picture of our mom," she repeated. "We love her, and we've never even seen her."

The man handed the picture back to her. "Okay. Let's go."

Samantha handed the photograph back to Deshay, and the two of them left.

Jessica walked towards the man, who glared at her for snuffing out his cigarette, and she stopped next to him, said, "I don't love her. I hate her. She abandoned us once. And then she did it again."

Samantha overheard, standing in the doorway leading to the stairs.

She didn't say anything.

Jessica went forward and joined Deshay in the stairwell.

Samantha fell back with the man. "She doesn't understand," she said.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He had to duck under the makeshift doors.

"She doesn't understand that our mother left us out of love."

"You don't know that."

"In my heart... I know that."

"Okay."

"It isn't the action that matters. It's the motive behind the action."

The man wondered what his motive was for sleeping with Sarah.

It was escapism.

It was to escape his pain, his heartache, his sorrows.

It was to escape the nightmare of his existence.

It was to escape the nightmare of *their* existence.

And it was selfishness.

It was to gratify his own lustful desires.

It was to take what he wanted and give nothing back.

It was to do what he wanted without any regard for her.

"You know what I mean?" Samantha asked.

"What?" he said. He was standing on the step, broken from his thoughts.

She was standing a few steps beneath him. "It's motive, not action, that matters."

"I don't know," he said. "It doesn't matter."

Jessica and Deshay were far ahead of them.

Samantha and the man left the stairwell, entering the giant hall with the stained-glass windows, the glass hidden underneath a complicated web of nailed-together wooden boards.

The man looked over at Samantha. "Why do you trust me?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why do you trust that I'm not just as bad as these bandits?"

"It was your eyes."

"My eyes?"

"I've seen the eyes of the bandits. I've seen their evil. I've seen what lies in their hearts. But I see something different in your eyes. I see that you're broken. I see that you're hurting." Without hesitation: "What is it that hurts you?"

"Nothing," he said.

"You can tell me."

"Forget I asked," he said.

"You can—"

Her words were cut short:

Jessica's screams carried down from deep inside the orphanage.

V

Samantha was lost behind the man as he rushed down the great hall. He reached the doorway leading to the narrow corridor with the chandeliers, and upon entering he saw, standing at the far end, in the wan unfiltered light from two windows, two raiders with hunting rifles, holding the girls at their sides. The man reacted instinctively, not breaking his speed: he wrenched the bayonet from his belt, flipped it around in his hand, and with the precision honed in by practice, he hurled the bayonet through the air. It flipped end-on-end, and the closest raider could not react before the tip of the bayonet dug into the flesh of his throat, piercing his esophagus and lodging in his spine. He released the girl and stumbled backwards, blood pooling in his eyes, blood falling down atop of Jessica's beautiful blond hair. The raider collapsed into his companion, and his companion released Deshay in his fall, and the two of them fell to the floor.

The man yelled for Jessica and Deshay to get out of the way.

The lively raider threw his dead friend off his chest, and he reached for the rifle lying on the ground. The man reached him, kicked the rifle away, and, with his other foot, slammed the heel of his boot down into the raider's face, sending the bridge of his nose into his brain. The raider's body went into convulsions, and the man stepped back, the heel of his boot covered with blood and bits of bone. The raider's face was impaled.

Jessica and Deshay stood off to the side, their faces ashen, and then Jessica began to scream, grabbing at her bloody hair.

The man hollered at Samantha, "Shut her up!" and went to the window. He wiped away dirt and grime from the glass and peered through. He could make out several 4x4 trucks on Sunset Avenue below, and standing amidst the trucks and in the opposite front yards of the houses at least twenty men armed with an assortment of hunting rifles. At the same time came the sound of

footsteps coming from the courtyard: they'd found the MERCEDES. The man looked over to Samantha: "Please tell me you have another exit out of this place."

"The utility tunnel," she said, regaining her composure.

She kept looking at the two corpses.

The one with the impaled face continued to convulse.

The man knelt down, wrenched the bayonet from the fallen man's throat. "Forget about him," he said. He looked over to her: "Get your sisters out of here."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'll hold them off." He wiped some of the blood from the bayonet off and onto his jeans. "If you want to pray for me... Now would be the time."

"I want you to come with us."

"Stop talking and start moving."

"We're not leaving until you come with us."

"No. I'll get you fucking killed. I told you this was a bad idea."

"You're the only reason Jessica and Deshay aren't being raped right now."

Those words cut through him.

The raiders are coming towards them from the courtyard. Closer.

The man kneels down, grabs one of the rifles. A REMINGTON.

"We need you," Samantha said. "And *you* need *us*."

They backtracked to the large great hall. Samantha led the way, holding the hands of her two sisters. The man noticed how she was always in charge, how she seemed so much more mature. Something was different about her, something that differentiated her from her twin sisters. The man made a mental note to ask about it later. They went through a door and down a flight of steps. Mold and grime clung to the walls, and the air was heavy and damp. It reminded him of the wine-cellar, where he had strangled Mark. *How long ago had that been? A single night? Two nights?* It seemed like ages ago. The stairwell ended and they reached a narrow corridor with an arched stone wall. Mice scurried and squeaked along the floor as they moved past. The girls didn't mind: the man cursed and kicked at them. Movement above. The man told them to stop, to be quiet. Footsteps. He looked up, into the stone ceiling, heard muffled voices. Raiders asking where the girls had gone. And then shouting. They'd found the bodies. Lots of rage and anger. And then something else: the mentioning of a blood trail. The man turned and looked down at his feet. It was too dark to see, but he cursed himself for his idiocy. There was blood on his boot. It would lead them straight into the cellar. "Move," he said under his breath. "Now. *Now*."

There came the sound of gurgling water, and then they were splashing ankle-deep through an old sewer now filled mostly with rainwater and residue from melted snow. The man told them to go on, and he set the REMINGTON against the stone wall and scraped the heel of his boot against the floor underneath the water. He could hear shouting coming from down the corridor, and he grabbed the REMINGTON and caught up with the girls. They were climbing up a ladder, which led to a heavy metal grate.

"We can't open it," Samantha said.

He handed her the rifle—she had two now—and climbed the ladder. He wrestled with the gate, feared it was locked from the other side—*we're fucking pinned*—but he was able to get it open with a grunt. Sunlight filtered down amongst them. He dropped down and took the REMINGTON and told the girls to climb. They did so.

The shouting from the raiders was growing nearer.

The girls were up.

The man climbed onto the ladder and raised the rifle upwards; "Careful," he said as she took the other end and hefted it up with her. He looked back down the corridor, heard the raiders talking, and then there was excited shouting, and then the ring of a bullet. The stone beside him chipped away, the debris burning and scalding as it smacked into his cheek. He quickly climbed. More gunshots, the bullets bursting into the stone wall around the ladder.

He climbed up into what was a storage room with several boxes and bags of pebbles and racks filled with dusty glass aquariums. He kicked the grate down and grabbed several bags of pebbles, stacked them on top of the grate.

"Now what?" he asked.

They left the storage room and stepped into a vast display room. There were signs on the walls—LIVE CORAL! LIVE ROCK!—and a cash register at the front. Massive tanks lined the walls, now void of water. The glass insides were covered with dried algae, wearing away with time; and inside the tanks were skeletons of all sorts of exotic fish. Angelfish, boxfish, butterfly fish, scorpion fish, jaw-fishes. There were even the skeletons of long-dried stingrays and seahorses. The man went to one of the windows and rubbed away at the dirt and grime, looked through the glass. He saw the outside of the fence encircling the orphanage, and he could see part of the road with a few trucks parked and abandoned. He could see movement in the windows of the orphanage. Most of the raiders had entered the building, on the scent of blood, lost in the hunt. The man ducked away from the window and checked the REMINGTON, checked the number of bullets. Seventeen. Fair enough. "Come on," he said, motioning them towards the front door.

"We're going outside?" Samantha asked.

"Yes," he said.

"There are bandits out there."

"And soon there will be bandits in *here*. Trust me."

"They'll see us."

"Hopefully not before we hijack their truck. Stay close and stay quiet."

VI

He changed his mind, told them to wait in the store; he didn't want them out on the street in case he was spotted. He slowly pushed open the front door, and an old rusted bell chimed. He gritted his teeth, stuck his head out, looked to the left, saw the truck. The driver and the passenger stood facing the orphanage, their backs towards him. The man reached up and grabbed the tiny bell, and he held it as he shut the door. He wiggled his arm out and with the REMINGTON in hand slowly began making his way down the street, towards the 4x4 truck. They didn't turn around or notice him. Fifteen feet away, he slowly knelt down and laid the Remington on the asphalt. He pulled the bayonet forth, and he moved forward, holding his breath, his world screaming: they both had rifles. He was upon them, and he wrapped his arm around the first and wrenched him down, dragging the bayonet across his throat. A waterfall of warm and steaming blood ran over his hands, and he tossed the man to the side as the other watched, stunned. His friend opened his mouth to shout for help, but the man attacked him, slashing the knife across his throat. Blood sprayed him in the face, and the

wounded raider dropped to his knees, losing grip of his rifle, and he sat there on his knees, groping at his throat, eyes wide with terror; and then he pitched over and died, sprawled out next to his fallen comrade.

The man rushed back to THE HOUSE OF TROPICAL MARINE & FRESHWATER FISH—it was stenciled along the side of the building across a faded mural of a coral reef with stingrays and sharks and multi-colored fish—and beckoned the girls forth. “Stay together,” he said. The four of them made their way to the truck. The girls crouched along the side of the truck facing away from the orphanage, and the man searched through the bodies, couldn’t find the keys.

“Shit.” The driver must have been inside the orphanage.

Samantha got his attention: “They’re in the car.”

He breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He wiped blood from his face with his shirt as he got into the truck. The three girls squeezed together in the passenger’s seat. He started the ignition, and the engine turned over, flared to life. He stepped on the gas, and the moment he did, the back window shattered, a bullet arching past his shoulder and smashing into the windshield, creating a webbed masterpiece.

“Get down!” he shouted, and the truck lurched over the fallen bodies, their bones splintering and sides rupturing and organs extending out onto the pavement. Intestines coiled around the front tire, and they left a smear as he drove towards the end of the road. He looked out the shattered back window through the rearview mirror and could see men in the orphanage, shooting from the formerly boarded-up windows. The bullets sprayed all around them, carving smoking craters into the truck’s frame. The man took the left turn wildly and headed for the highway, the gunners’ lines of sight then broken by rows upon rows of cottage-style and ranch-style homes.

“We lost them,” Samantha said.

“No. They have more trucks. They’re going to follow.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“Shit, I don’t know.”

“Don’t talk like that. It’s not proper.”

He glared at her. “Are you fucking kidding me?!”

They reached the highway, and the man drove the truck wildly up the exit ramp. A van was overturned before them, its windows shattered, wheels stuck sideways into the air. He maneuvered around it and continued driving, planting his foot upon the gas pedal, the Denver skyline drawing nearer. The raiders had abandoned the orphanage and were right behind them. The man was a quarter mile from the overturned van when he saw through the rearview window the trucks following his maneuver around the van and proceeding down the freeway towards him and the three girls. The truck’s engine warbled, and the man cursed: *we chose the wrong fucking truck*. The trucks behind them were gaining, and he could see the riders leaning out of their windows, hunting rifles in their hands. He muttered under his breath: “Once they get close enough, it’ll be a turkey shoot.” The highway stretched straight ahead for miles, eventually splashing into Denver, and dropped behind the Denver skyline was the cloud-soaked Rockies. On either side of the road were fields of corn and bean, the plants long shriveled up from the winter. “Shit.” He glanced behind him. The trucks were closer. He looked over to the girls. “Hold onto the seatbelt.”

He took the next exit, refusing to slow down: the truck nearly fishtailed into the concrete barrier of the ramp. The ramp flattened out and the concrete sides disappeared, and the road dug deep into the

withered rows of corn on either side. There was a railroad off to the right, and upon the railroad were several train cars, many overturned, lying in the bare earth. The railway extended into the town of Bennett, which they drove through. The main train engine had smashed into the train station, and it lied covered in a pile of aging bricks and mortar. The other trucks slowed at the exit and were thus farther behind them. The man knew he wouldn't be able to keep this up. The engine rattled underneath the hood, and the hood vibrated with the engine's pulsings. They quickly abandoned the small town, following the single road, and the railroad tracks ran parallel to them. Something then caught the man's attention, something far ahead, nearly masked by the upended corn stalks, something glistening in the sunlight. Sunlight on metal, a curvature. Wings. An airplane. *An airport.* The man suddenly had a crazy idea.

The man wrenched the truck off the road. The girls screamed as the truck's wheels thundered over the railroad tracks. They tore through the corn stalks, the earth underneath shaking the truck's frame. Eventually the rows of corn died to reveal a towering fence. The man stamped on the gas and pushed himself back in the seat and yelled at the girls to get down. Jessica and Deshay obeyed, throwing their heads between their knees; but Samantha remained staring forward, her eyes wide as saucers. The truck launched through the gate, tearing it down, and the front wheels became caught on the barbed wire that had encircled the front. With the section of the fence flattened underneath them, and the rest of the fence bending and waving under the stress, the man stomped harder on the gas pedal and looked behind them. The raiders were pushing into the cornfield, over the railroad tracks. Suddenly the wheels gave way, and their truck went forward, and the fence rose back to its position. The truck sped across the wavy grass of what had once been a well-manicured lawn. The man looked into the rearview mirror and saw the first truck hit the fence; but he hit it so slow that his wheels spun, and the truck was upended; and it teetered to the side and splashed into the ground, the sound of crunching metal and shouts wafting across the long-grass. The truck lay on its side, wheels spinning, kicking up dirt and mud.

The front tires were blown, lacerated with barbed wire, and the truck leaned forward. The man could feel the hubs of the tire rubbing against the outside of the tire, hitting the ground. The truck throbbed with each rotation of the flattened tires. The grass ended to reveal the tarmac of a runway, the painted colors designating direction and halting locations as brilliant as the day they were first painted. Upon the halting section was a CESSNA CARAVAN with wheels extended underneath the floats. The windows were shattered and scratch marks covered the outside of the paint. Either someone had gotten in or someone had gotten out. *Probably both*, the man thought. He neared the main terminal, and he looked back behind them. The other trucks had gotten free of the fence and were once more in pursuit. The man followed the taxiway away from the runway tarmac and drew near to the building.

Samantha looked over at him. "We're trapped."

"No," he said, "we're not."

"There's nowhere to hide."

They neared the great shadow of the building. "Of course there is."

"Where?" she asked.

And then she knew.

"But we *can't*," she moaned.

"It's the only chance we have," he said.

The truck was submerged under the shadow of the airport's main building.

"Everybody out!" the man yelled, grabbing the REMINGTON and the GARAND.

VII

There is only one bullet remaining in the rifle. He turns and faces the third girl, who is plastered against the tractor, trying to mold into its steel frame, trying to escape the impending consequences of their decisions. The man can barely see her due to the tears obscuring his vision, but he is able to grab her by the shoulder. He squeezes tightly, securing her, and pulls her away from the tractor.

The bottom of the door leading outside is splintering apart, and their arms are protruding through the broken woodwork, and their eyes can be seen glistening in the pale moonlight as they crouch down and watch their prey, so close. One hunches down in the narrow hole in the wooden framework. Rainwater drips from its chin and mats its hair down, and it looks at its prey with a hunger and a thirst unparalleled by any normal animal creature.

The man tries to ignore it, tries to focus on the girl.

Her blond curls. Her eyes sparkling in the moonlight weaving its way between the spaces and cracks in the barn's rafters above.

The way her skin is pale with fright and cool and damp with terror.

The way her body shivers not from the cold but from the awful knowledge of what will happen.

He is focused upon her, and the frantic pleas of the dark-walkers fade.

Samantha begs with him: "You don't have to do this... You don't have to do this..."

But he has heard it before. He remembers Katie. He remembers how he didn't have to kill her. He remembers how she resented him. But there is no freedom here, no hope of salvation. There is only the single bullet in the gun, the two of them standing together, the dwellers of the night throwing themselves at the barn's doors. There is only the resolution, and the knowledge that he will face them alone.

ΣΩΣ

They abandoned the truck and ran towards the building. It was two stories, and there were several large steel doors facing the tarmac. Behind them the sounds of the raiders' trucks grew closer, and then there came the popping echo of bullets. The man shouted, grabbed Jessica, threw her behind an uncovered vehicle loaded with mold-covered and grimy baggage. Bullets pepper the duffel bags and suitcases upon the vehicle, bursting forth ribbons of cotton and cloth. They hunker down behind it, and the man sets the GARAND on the ground and clutches the REMINGTON close to his chest. He stares forward, sees a single door with a padlock leading into the building. *There are dark-walkers in there*, he thought; but he knew that they would not stand a chance against four trucks filled with raiders and guns. *What the dark-walkers will do to the girls is terrible; what the raiders will do to them will be even worse.* He raised the gun and aimed along the sight, and he squeezed the trigger three times. The rounds splashed over the padlock, snapping it into three pieces; it fell to the ground, and the door creaked open inwards, into the shadows. The man yelled at the girls to go, and he leapt up, swung the rifle out over the top of the bags upon the vehicle, and he aimed along the sight. Two of the trucks were parked thirty feet away, the men fumbling out. They didn't have time to react as the man popped off several rounds, and two of them fell to the ground, holes chiseled into their chests. The girls were already to the door leading into the airport building, and the man followed suit. The raiders moved

around the bleeding bodies of their own and tried to shoot him, but the man ducked into the building unscathed. He became lost in the darkness.

"Keep moving." He spoke quietly, so as not to awaken any sleeping inhabitants. They could still hear the shouting of the raiders outside, and the man hoped they wouldn't follow; yet at the same time he knew the degradation of man, and he knew the evil lusts that burned within them, lusts that could not be quenched. The door had opened into a large room filled with machinery and belts and assorted cargo lying in dusty piles on the floor. A large sign above them read FRONT RANGE AIRPORT. Rats and mice scurried away from them. Machinery creaked and groaned in the draft from the cracked door leading outside. They went up a metal stairwell that led to a steel walkway that weaved its way between the machinery. The girls led the way and the man followed, one rifle in either hand. He stopped them, gave one to Samantha, knew he wouldn't be able to fire either one of them with one hand.

The walkway jarred up against a door with a dust-covered glass window, MAINTENANCE stenciled on the outside. They pushed their way through and found a hallway. The sounds of the raiders grew stronger, and their shouts began to echo: they had entered the machinery room. The refugees followed the corridor until it reached another door, and they went through. They were in a large room with benches and tables and chairs, a few dark restaurant stands. A MCDONALD'S and a WENDY'S, chained-down. They clung to the wall and made their way, and there were scarce windows that let in isolated sunlight, shafts of radiance that splashed onto the tile floor, illuminating footprints in the dust.

The raiders were loud, and their loudness was abruptly met with the sound of shrieks and cries, coming from ahead of the refugees. The man froze, and the girls did, too: ahead of them was the shifting of shadows, the sounds of scurrying feet, tiny pinpricks of light reflecting in their eyes. Daring creatures.

The man grabbed Jessica and clung her to himself; Samantha and Deshay turned.

The man went to the nearest door and pushed it open. Absolute darkness. They all filed inside, and the man turned and shut the door. He told them to get to the back of the room, and he searched for a lock on the door. There was a bolt, and he slammed it down. He stepped back, facing the door, and in the subterranean darkness, Samantha said, "We're in a bathroom. I just ran into a sink." He could hear the dark-walkers right outside the door, sniffing and moaning, clawing at the door. Trying to get in. *Fuck*.

The dark-walkers abandoned the door, and the man winced as he heard the popping of gunfire and the blended shrieks of the monsters and the men. It was over almost as soon as it began, and then there was silence, the sounds of breaking bone and tearing flesh and the gurgle of blood being swallowed into cavernous stomachs.

He pulled out his lighter and flicked the igniter, and the flame rose, spilling its light through the white-walled and green-tiled bathroom. He turned on his heels and heard something splash at his feet. He knelt down and examined the floor. A puddle of blood was forming around his boots, issuing forth from underneath the door. Pale fingers stuck underneath the door, the nails long and the knuckles bruised, and the fingers scraped at the blood, pulling it back towards the door in currents. A single tongue stuck out from underneath the door, lapping at the blood.

The man's stomach curled and he backed away, swung around.

The flame's light danced in the girls' eyes. Six eyes watching him.

Samantha asked, "What do we do now?"

The man looked back down at the blood forming around his feet. "I don't know."

"What are they doing?"

He shrugged. "They're eating."

"We should be quiet."

"They know we're here. They don't care."

"Why not?"

"Because they already have a meal," the man said.

She was quiet for a moment. "Do you feel bad for the bandits?"

"No," he said. "Do you?"

She shook her head. No remorse, no guilt, no shame:

"No."

VIII

They sat along the back wall of the bathroom, wedged between the long sink with its dust-covered mirror to their left and the stalls with the rusted-hinged doors to their right. They sat quietly, listening to the dark-walkers outside, listening to the feast. The man tried to think of a plan of escape, but he couldn't fathom anything. His thoughts were broken by Samantha's words, and he didn't know how much time had passed:

"You never answered my question," she asked.

He turned to her. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and he could make out her golden hair.

"What?"

She spoke matter-of-factly: "What it is that hurts you."

"There's nothing to answer."

"You said everyone hurts. That includes you."

"I never said that."

"I know," she said.

"Then why did you say I said that?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me what hurts you."

"Nothing hurts me."

"Sister Clancy always told me that the eyes are the windows of the soul."

"It's too dark for you to see my eyes."

"I saw them earlier. Your eyes are filled with hurt."

The man had nothing to say.

The man wished he had a watch. It would have been something smart to have.

"I hurt someone," he said.

"Who did you hurt?" Samantha asked.

"I hurt lots of people."

"Everyone hurts people. We hurt people all the time."

"I know."

"I know you know that. But you feel bad about hurting someone."

"I just said that."

"Who did you hurt? Was it the woman you left at the house?"

The man winced. She couldn't see it. "No."

"You didn't hurt her?"

"She hurt herself."

"Why did she do it?"

"I don't know. Maybe because she was ashamed."

"Why would she be ashamed? What did she do?"

"She... She didn't do anything wrong."

"What did she *think* she did wrong?"

"She thought she cheated on her husband."

"Did she?"

"No."

"She kissed you."

"Something like that."

"And her husband, he died with the sickness."

"Yes."

"And she thinks that because she kissed you, then she cheated on him."

"She *thought* that. Past tense. She's gone now."

"Did you take advantage of her?"

His neck muscles tightened, and he glared at her: "No."

"Then why do you feel bad about it?"

He calmed down. "I could have prevented it."

"You can't always control what happens."

"I know."

"It's not like you put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger."

"I know."

"It's not like you killed her. You didn't kill her, right?"

"She hurt herself. I didn't touch her."

"Then it's not your fault."

"I know."

"And you couldn't have prevented it."

"I said I know."

"But that's not what hurts you."

The man said nothing.

"You hurt someone else. And that's what hurts you."

"We should be quiet," he said.

Samantha didn't say anything else for a while.

Some time had passed.

The man spoke: "I cheated on the woman I loved."

"Your friend back at the house?" Samantha asked.

"No," he said. "Before the sickness... My fiancé." A pause. "*Ex fiancé.*"

"She died with the plague?"

"Yes."

"Why did you cheat on her?"

"I ask myself that every day."

"You don't know why?"

"No. I don't."

"Did you ever tell your fiancé about it?"

"I told her the first time."

"Oh." She was quiet, then, "How many times did you cheat on her?"

"Twice. Only twice. And then... And then I never saw her again."

"Do you think you would have cheated on her more than twice?"

"I want to say, 'No,'" he said. "But I cheated on her twice. What does that tell you?"

"It tells me you cheated on her twice. Not three times."

"If I had told her about the second time... I would have lost her."

"Why did you cheat on her?" she asked again.

"Maybe I didn't... Maybe I didn't really love her."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"Because I didn't want to lose her."

"Why didn't you want to lose her?"

"Because I loved her."

"Okay."

After some time, Samantha said, "Nothing will change what happened."

"I know," the man said.

"You can't dwell on what happened in the past," Samantha said, putting her hand upon his knee. "You have to look ahead to the future."

"Do you believe in Heaven?" the man asked.

"You know I do," she said. "Do you?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I always told one of my friends... His name was Mark... I always told him I didn't believe in Heaven because this plague proved that God did not exist. If God existed, and if He was deserving of worship, and if He was the kind of God who would make a Heaven for people... Then He would not have let any of this happen. But I think..." Tears swelled up in his eyes. "I think that I don't believe in Heaven... Because I'm afraid Kira is there... And I'm afraid that she knows what I did to her." He looked at the girl, but he could barely see her in the darkness, and the tears grew stronger, and his chest began to throb as he wept. "And if she... If she knew what I had done... Then it would... It would be Hell to her. If she saw what I did with Sarah... while loving her... then it would be Hell for her. I already lost Kira once... And I don't want to lose her again."

He wept in the coldness of the basement.

The little girl wrapped her arm around him. She laid her head on his shoulder.

And she cried with him.

IX

"Please..." she weeps. He is holding her with his free hand, and the other hand holds the rifle, the end of the barrel pressed against her clammy forehead. She reaches forward with her free hand and grabs the hem of his shirt. "Please... Please..." He cannot see her tears through the mask of his own, and he turns his head, he closes his eyes. He can hear them coming through. There is a nether-

worldly shrieking, a shrieking whose source is in the bellies of Hades, and the man turns his head to avoid the splatter of blood, and seeing shapes dancing in the wan moonlight filtering down from the rafters, hearing the scuffling of feet and the shattering of wood, hearing the girl's cries abruptly evolve into screams of terror... The man pulls the trigger.

ΣΩΣ

"How long has it been?"

Her words brought him forth from sleep.

He blinked his eyes in the darkness of the bathroom. "I don't know."

"Were you sleeping?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to wake you."

"It's okay," the man said.

He got up and moved forward. His legs ached. He ran into one of the open doors leading into a stall. He shut the door quietly and made his way to the entrance of the bathroom. His feet splashed in the pool of blood on the green-tiled floor. He checked to make sure the door was still bolted shut, and then he pressed his ear against it. He could hear shallow breathing outside, moaning, the occasional snapping of a bone. The sounds of marrow being sucked out of femurs. He backed away from the door and returned to Samantha.

"Are they outside?" the little girl asked.

He sat down beside her, leaned against the wall. "Yeah."

"What are we going to do?"

The man rubbed tired eyes. "I don't know."

"We shouldn't have come in here. We would've been safer outside."

"Maybe. We'll never know."

"How are your sisters?" the man asked after a while.

"They're sleeping," she said.

The man was quiet for a moment. "You're different than they are."

"How so?" she asked.

"You just seem... So much more... mature... than them."

"I know," she said. "They're autistic."

That caught the man by surprise. "Autistic?" he asked.

"Do you not know what it is?"

"No, I know what it is. They just... They don't seem... like that."

"You can say the word. It's not a bad word."

"I know."

"Their autism is mild. They can still function. They're just really quiet."

"Okay."

"It's because of Mom. Her drug abuse. It affected them."

"And it didn't affect you?"

"No."

"Why do you think that?"

"I think that God chose to keep me from that so that I could keep us all together."

"I bet it's nice to believe that."

"I'm the only reason we're all still alive. What else do you want me to believe?"
"That the god who got you into the mess in this bathroom can get you out of it."
Her face was stern: "God didn't get us into this mess. *You* did."

"You don't have a watch, do you?" the man asked after a bit.

"No," Samantha said.

"Do your sisters?"

"No."

"Damn."

"Don't talk like that," she scolded. "Why do you want a watch?"

"So I can know what time it is. If we get out of here, I don't want to run out of this building right into the night-time. You know?"

"Yeah," she said.

The man paced back and forth between the sinks and the stalls. "It's hopeless," he muttered.

Samantha stood beside the sinks, watching him pass. "It's not hopeless."

"Yes, it is," the man said. "We're fucking *fucked*."

"Don't talk like that..."

"I know, I know." The man stopped, rubbed his temples. "God."

"Why do you think it's hopeless?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to have this conversation."

"Hope is a good thing."

"No," he said, turning and facing her. If she wanted to talk about it, then, damn, why not?

"Hope is just escapism. Hope is trying to escape the reality of the moment by burying your head into the metaphorical sands of the future. Sands that hold no promise."

"Maybe," she confessed. "But it keeps us alive."

"Alive?" the man countered. "It kills us. It drains us. A friend of mine said that hope is like barbed wire: the tighter you hold on, the more it hurts us. The more it makes us bleed."

"Maybe," she said. "But we still hold onto it."

"Some of us do," he said. "I don't."

"Yes you do. Even if you deny it."

"How the hell do you know?"

"You're still alive. Without hope, you would have killed yourself. Suicide is the logical conclusion to hopelessness." After a moment she asked, "What do you hope for?"

The man was quiet.

He wasn't even sure if he knew the answer.

"Sometimes," Samantha said, "when it's the darkest, we can't keep looking down into ourselves. We can't keep looking at how bad things are. We need to look up, because when we look up, that's when we find hope... That's when we find something to hope for."

The man started moving quickly, exploring the bathroom.

Samantha backed into the wall as he rushed past. "What are you doing?"

"You're brilliant," he said, his voice excited.

"Why am I brilliant?" she asked.

"Because," he said. He emerged out of the shadows, grabbed her by the shoulder, squeezed. Even in the darkness, she could see him smile. "Because you just told me how we're going to get out of here."

X

He opened one of the stalls and climbed on top of the toilet. He flicked the lighter and let the flame's light pour forth, illuminating the wall above the toilet. Upon the wall was a three-foot by three-foot iron grill. He turned off the lighter and grit it in his teeth and wrestled with the grill until he was able to wedge it out of its place upon the wall. He set it down beside the toilet and grabbed the lighter and flicked the flame upwards, and the flame's light poured inside the shaft and reflected in the sleek and thin aluminum insides of the shaft. The man tried to hold back his excitement as he told Samantha to wake her sisters.

Everyone piled into the stall, and he explained to them what they were going to do. One-by-one he pushed them up into the ventilation shaft, and after strapping the GARAND to his side—he decided to leave the REMINGTON behind—he pulled himself up and in. "Move slowly," he said. He didn't know how much weight the shaft could hold, but he was willing to risk it, because it was better than sitting like poor stoics within the bathroom. The squeeze was tight and compressed, and the man's shoulders ached, the heavy cloth of his shirt brazing against his bare skin. They moved for what felt like hours, and they passed over another grill facing downwards. The man flicked his light to see what was below, and he let the flame hover close to the parallel-running bars. The light bled through the bars and danced reflected in tiny pools of eyes. The eyes looked up at them, and he heard them growl. "Keep moving," he said, and they continued their trek. They pushed onwards.

Samantha stopped, told the man that the shaft reached a decline, and she couldn't see where it went. He told her that it was okay, just to go anyways. He heard the sound of her body thumping around, a few *oomphs*, and then she told him, her voice echoing in the shaft, that she had reached the bottom, where the shaft continued unhindered into the darkness. Deshay and Jessica followed suit, and the man crawled after them. He lost his balance and pitched headfirst, and his clothes moved freely against the aluminum siding. He gained speed, and with a shout he slammed into Jessica, and the aluminum bottom creaked, groaned, snapped; and he felt air all around him, found himself somersaulting head-over-heels, and then he landed hard on his back. He heard the girls shouting, and they fell around him. The man pushed them off of himself and stood. His arms shook as he flicked the lighter. The flame's light danced outwards, and he found they were not alone.

The light from the flame extended outwards, and it pooled in the eyes of dozens of dark-walkers surrounding them in a circle. They were completely naked, their clothing long lost. Many were covered with scrapes and bruises. A few were missing limbs. They watched the pitiful refugees with a strange glint in their eyes. Their mouths hung open, slack, and their chests moved in and out with each rapid breath. Their skin clung to their bones, and they were merely skeletons. Some had dried blood clinging to their jaws. One drooled. Another held a fibula in its clutches and let it fall to the ground as it stared at the new prey. The man's heart dropped into his stomach, and he reached for the GARAND which he had strapped to himself. There were only three bullets, but the bayonet

remained at his side. None of it would help: there were too many of them. He closed his eyes, accepting his fate, wondering why he ever believed it would work out differently than this. He could hear Jessica and Deshay whimpering. Samantha closed her eyes and prayed. *It won't do any good, the man thought; God has forsaken us. He forsook us the night this all began.*

The dark-walkers began to move in rhythm... and they didn't attack. The man opened his eyes, wondering what was happening, and he half-expected to see one of the dark-walkers, the alpha male, grinning that awful grin, letting the prey drown in the knowledge of what was about to transpire. But his eyes beheld something different, something he couldn't quite comprehend. The dark-walkers moved to either side of the room, revealing a path leading into the shadows. One-by-one they knelt down, bowing, and they fell to their hands and knees, their faces hovering inches above the tiled floor. Jessica and Deshay stopped crying, and Samantha took their hands. She took the man's hand, and she led the way. *And a child shall lead them.* They walked past the dark-walkers on either side, and the line of bowed creatures continued unabated for nearly forty feet. Then the line ended, revealing a single doorway with PASSENGER CHECKPOINT painted above in white lettering. Samantha grabbed the door and opened it, and a burst of light hit them in the eyes. The man blinked the light away, and he was pulled into the next room. Samantha abandoned his hand and shut the door. They stood alone.

XI

The man felt strange standing in the passenger waiting area. He had been here so many times, though never at FRONT RANGE. He remembered the evening before it happened, standing in such a place, conversing with the German gate attendant. He stood in a place quite like it, though nearly halfway across the world, and at a time when nothing was as it had been. The seats facing the large bay windows were abandoned, and there was an overturned trashcan filled with the bones of rats. Cobwebs covered everything. The air stank of mildew. Through the large bay window was a CESSNA CITATION, sitting with a ladder reaching up into the open door. There were skeletons strapped into the cockpit. Past the CESSNA the sun was setting behind a line of trees, several old homes and barns on the opposite side. The sky was painted a ruby red, with charcoal streaks off to the west. The man didn't want to see if the strange activities of the dark-walkers would continue after the sun set, and he told the girls to follow him. They maneuvered around the seats and reached the gate. They pushed through the accordion, and they went through a door that led to a fifteen-foot drop. The man cursed, knew they would have to jump or find another way. They didn't have time, and he wanted to get inside that CESSNA and close the door and wait for sunrise to continue on their journey. He crawled towards the edge of the ramp, swung around, gripped the edge of the ramp, and swung his legs outwards. He dangled eleven feet above the ground, and gritting his teeth, he released. He hit the ground quickly and rolled to mellow-out the impact. He stood and called to the girls to jump. They wouldn't. He began cursing. Samantha talked to them quietly, and sniffing, they managed to jump. He caught them and set them down beside him. Samantha came last, and he caught her, set her down. "Come on," he said.

He led the way to the CESSNA. The sun continued to sink, and the howls of dark-walkers arose from the plains leading up to the feet of the mountains twenty miles west. He stepped upon the ladder and was nearly inside when a hand shot out, grabbed him by the shirt, and tried to yank him inside. He

shouted, writhed away, but the hand didn't release. The dark-walker tumbled out with him, and they fell onto the pavement together. The dark-walker shrieked and screamed in the meager sunlight, ripping away from the man. The three girls watched, terrified, as the dark-walker clawed at its own naked flesh, its long fingernails tearing ragged and bleeding lines into its skin. The dark-walker groped at the ladder and crawled back into the airplane. The man got to his feet, stunned, his heart pounding, and he heard the creature whining inside, nursing its sun-licked wounds. He looked over to the girls. "Let's try somewhere else, shall we?"

They ran across the pavement of one of the runways and reached the fence bordering against the tarmac. The man wanted to get inside one of the homes on the opposite side of the woods. He led the way over the fence, the barbed wire tearing at his bare hands. *Hope*. He dropped down on the other side, and he caught Jessica as she slipped and fell. Once Deshay and Samantha reached the bottom, they ran across a dirt road and into the woods. Brambles tore at them, and wet leaves slapped them in the face. The trees emerged at them from the darkness, and they dodged them. A bird cried somewhere in the trees. They splashed through a half-dried and muddy creek, and the man heard growling off to their left. He gripped the GARAND and swung around. The first rays of moonlight pierced the tops of the trees and sprinkled against the form of a malnourished, naked dark-walker hunched over a deer carcass. Its head had been buried into the deer's bowels, and it looked up at them, its face stained red, and it growled, daring them to come forward. "Move *slowly*," the man hissed, and they left the creature with its meal. The trees broke apart, revealing a clearing with long grass waving in a slight breeze, a few sparse trees, several nude and dead. A single barn, decrepit and falling apart, sat in the middle of the clearing.

They pushed through the waist-high grass, and then Samantha grabbed the man's hand, told him to stop. He asked what it was. She pointed into the darkness wrapping around the bowels of the trees on the other side of the clearing. "They're coming," she whispered. She had seen it first, her eyes more clear and attuned, but then the man saw them. Shifting figures in the shadows, figures with legs and limbs and heads, figures moving towards them, entering the grasses. "Fuck." His voice was surprisingly loud. He grabbed Jessica and Deshay's hand and pulled them towards the barn; Samantha followed. The dark-walkers at the opposite end of the clearing let out a unified scream and took off into a run. The man and the three girls reached the barn, and he opened the heavy wooden door, told them to get in. He followed and shut the door, locked it tight. "We should be okay in here," he said. But he didn't believe it. He gripped the GARAND tightly. *How in the hell are we going to last an entire night in this shithole?*

XII

They had surrounded the barn, and they had gotten inside. Now Samantha's body collapses to the ground, a hole chiseled into her forehead, blood spurting out like sewage from a broken cistern. The dark-walkers come at him from behind, and the man is suddenly lost in rage. He turns the GARAND around and strikes with the butt of the rifle, slamming the first dark-walker in the bridge of its nose. It staggers backwards, and the man tosses the rifle into the hay, withdraws the bayonet, and he slashes the blade across the stunned dark-walker's throat. A geyser of blood shoots out, spraying the man in the face. The blood feels electrifying. The man lets out a war-cry and charges the other dark-

walkers; they stop in their pursuit, watch him approaching, don't know what to do. His screams terrify them, and with a shout they dart out of the barn, scrambling into the trees. One is caught in the makeshift exit, its leg jammed; the man grabs the leg with his free hand and yanks the dark-walker back inside the barn. The dark-walker tries to get away, but the man drives the tip of the bayonet into its spine, paralyzing the creature. The monster lies still, continues breathing, and the man drags it towards the three girls lying dead on the dusty floor of the barn. He pulls the dark-walker up and thrusts it against the tractor; he stares the creature in the eyes, and he can sense fear. The man doesn't break the gaze, just stares at the creature, letting its fate sink into the back of its mind. The man places the edge of the bloodied bayonet against its throat, and with a howl of vehement rage, yanks it across the exposed skin. The jugular is severed, and blood pours forth, flowing down the dark-walker's chest. The man sticks his hand inside the wound, the warm blood running between his fingers, and he grabs the dark-walker's spine, and he yanks it into several pieces. The body falls to the ground, the blood bleeding down into the dirt between the flattened tractor's tires.

The man falls to his knees, the bodies of the little girls scattered around him.

Their lifeless eyes stare at him, their pupils frozen with the last image beheld:
an image of the man standing like a romantic statue,
the gun placed against their foreheads,
the tears running down his cheeks.

He can hear their question: *Why did you do it?*

He didn't have to.

They would've made it.

He falls onto his hands, and he weeps, his tears falling like droplets of blood.

He couldn't save Mark or the others.

He couldn't save Sarah.

He couldn't save the three little girls.

And he wonders if he will be able to save himself.

But in the end, it doesn't matter:

because he is entirely alone.

Chapter Forty

Ice Heavy Branches

“Who knows what true loneliness is—not the conventional word but the naked terror? To the lonely themselves it wears a mask. The most miserable outcast hugs some memory or some illusion.”

- Joseph Conrad (A.D. 1857-1924)

I

The dark-walkers had abandoned the barn, and the man did, too. He crossed through the clearing and into the opposite trees, and he made his way through the woods hearing the dark-walkers in the distance; and the woods opened up to a street lined with houses, and he broke into one of the two-story houses and ascended the steps and found the entrance to the attic. He lowered the wooden stairs to the attic and climbed up and brought the steps back up. He moved into the back of the attic, staying low, moving over the wooden planks, pushing boxes out of the way. He sat by a window overlooking the airport, and everything—the street, the trees, the roof of the barn in the clearing, and the airport beyond—could be seen in the pale moonlight. The moon smiled upon him as if it were mocking him, and he lit up a cigarette and smoked and let the smoke fill his lungs and exhaled it. He sat looking out that window all night long, feeling nothing. His tears had dried and he thought of the girls, how beautiful they were, and he remembered Samantha asking him what he hoped for. The odd thing about hope is that in the present sometimes you do not know what you hope for, but when it passes from you, when it fails to come to fruition, the hope that has been lost becomes so clear. The man had hoped that he would be with the girls forever. He had hope that they would be his children and he would be their father. An odd and twisted hope, but what other kind of hope existed? The girls had made him laugh. He had cracked jokes. He had felt freer around them. But now they are gone. The man smoked his entire pack of cigarettes and tried to sleep but couldn't get comfortable. He waited until sunrise and left the house. The streets were abandoned and a mist clung to everything, a mist that wrapped around his legs and wreathed the Denver skyline and inched its way up the mountainsides to ring the mountaintops in an ethereal fog.

Now the man stands inside a BP gas station. He fills a sack with NATURE VALLEY granola bars and packs of MARLBORO and CAMEL and BASIC and VIRGINIA SLIMS. He leaves the gas station and stands out on the road. He takes a deep breath and carries the bag with him. He leaves the gas station and walks back down the street past where he had stayed overnight. He crosses through the woods and reaches the clearing. He stands in the tall grass and stares at the barn. Flies swarm around the entrance, and he knows that maggots and worms are crawling over the bodies, chewing upon the dead and slowly-decaying flesh. He doesn't go inside, doesn't want to see what he has done. Instead he walks past the barn and through the woods, and he finds the deer carcass half-eaten, its consumer long vanished. He reaches the fence to the airport and throws the bag over the top. He climbs over and descends the other side. He picks up the bag and walks down the runway. He walks around the building and finds the truck with its front flat tires. The other trucks are all there, abandoned. Only one of them has a set of keys inside. There is a sawed-off shotgun in the back. He opens the door and

tosses the bag of food and cigarettes into the passenger's seat, and he takes the sawed-off shotgun and puts it on the floor underneath the glove compartment. He gets inside and starts the engine, and he pulls back onto the road leading to Interstate 70. He needs to get gas. He makes his way to the BP and fills up, and then he returns to Interstate 70. He sits in the truck, the engine idling, and he stares at the Denver skyline with the mist-cloaked mountains beyond. He takes a deep breath and puts his foot on the gas. Fumes billow out of the exhaust pipe and the truck heads west on the interstate.

He is on the East 470 toll road, north of Denver, when he stops the truck. Something catches his attention, something bringing him forth from the nightmarish memories of Mark and Sarah and the three little girls, memories that creep forth from the darkest sectors of his mind to tiptoe before his eyes. He stops the truck and looks out the window. He is looking at a golf course that loops around the ADAMS COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS. There are several geese in the scattered ponds, without young, and the trees are swaying listlessly in the stale breeze. Down in the fairgrounds are several tents, some carnival rides, a carousel, a listing Ferris wheel. Birds are perched upon the cars of the rusted Ferris wheel, clustered together in small groups. There are several trailers along the side of what had at one time been a lively carnival. The lights are now extinguished, the garbage having blown away, and the carnival-goers having fallen and gotten back up. All that remains are the skeletal insignia of what had at one time been a festive occasion. Now the festive occasion is a graveyard. The man puts the truck in gear and continues driving.

He stops for lunch at the ROCK CREEK FARM PARK, northwest of Denver, off the parkway. He has parked the truck in an abandoned parking lot, and he has taken his bag and walked through the long grass and sat down on some rocks facing Stearns Lake. He eats half a granola bar but throws the rest of it into the lake. The wrapping paper flutters upwards with the wind and vanishes in the glare of the sun. He has no appetite. He sits and smokes on the side of the lake, looking at his reflection in the waters lapping against the cool rocks. He meets his own eyes, and he doesn't break the stare, cannot break the stare, just looks into his eyes and tries to see deep into his soul: but there is nothing there except for a shallow bed of sands and pebbles and flitting minnows. He finishes his cigarette and tosses it into the water. It fizzes out upon impact and becomes clogged with water, then sinks halfway and bobs with the lapping current. He stands and grabs the bag and returns to the truck. He hopes to be at the foot of the mountains by nightfall. He hopes he doesn't get lost: the only map is the one in his head. He wonders if he should stop at a gas station and calculate the directions. He decides not to do so.

He decides to avoid Denver and its sprawl and instead heads northwest towards Boulder. He passes through the city with its many blocks and abandoned buildings and cryptic quarters. He passes through the University of Colorado, the elegant architectural buildings standing with their stone walls and pillared porticoes like the monuments of ancient Rome. He leaves the city and follows Route 119 through BOULDER MOUNTAIN PARK and further west.

Soon there is nothing on either side of him except thick woodlands with pines and spruces and waterfalls carved into the rock. Patches of the road are thick with weeds growing through the cracks, and the weeds entangle in the truck's tires. The steep slopes of the Rocky Mountain foothills rise on either side of him, the tops covered with solid stone speckled with outcroppings of bushes and solitary pines. Soon the hills rise up so high around him that they seem like miniature mountains, and he pulls over at a place called Sunnyside. There is a small 50's-looking diner along the road. He

stops the truck and goes inside the diner and searches behind the counters for a map. He doesn't find one. He goes back out to the truck and smokes a cigarette while gazing upon the towering hills all around him. He cannot imagine what it will be like in the Rockies. He has seen photographs, but nothing compares to even the foothills. He just wishes the girls were with him, that they could enjoy this beauty. *Beauty*. He looks upon the hills and is confident that it has been eons since he has seen beauty. Beauty unscathed, beauty unscarred, beauty pristine and radiant and unspoiled. He smokes several cigarettes, and his body feels numb, his muscles ache and throb, and laziness cuts through him. The moon can be seen in the sky high above despite it being only early evening. The man decides to drive down the road a little while longer. He doesn't fear dark-walkers here: they have probably gone to the city.

He reaches Barker Reservoir, a long and narrow lake wedged between two large foothills. He stops the truck and walks onto the top of the eastern dam, and he watches the sun setting over the Rocky Mountains in the distance. He leans over the edge of the dam with the cigarette between his fingers and looks at the water lazily rocking below. The wind tugs at his clothes. Across the lake he can see a town with several blocks, and he decides that he would rather stay away from the town when night falls. He rolls up the truck's windows and locks the doors and finds a doorway leading into the dam. It is dark and cold, and he moves forward with the sawed-off shotgun, illuminating his path with the lighter. There are large pumps along the walls, no longer moving, silenced alongside the silencing of man. There are cracks in the cement and a thin sheet of water at his feet. He finds a storage room and goes inside and shuts the door, and he climbs on top of several boxes and curls up. The thick concrete walls prevents him from hearing the dark-walkers this night, and he sleeps soundly, listening to the steady dripping of water through the cracks in the walls. He pretends that he and Kira are sleeping in one another's arms beside a lazy brook, and in his sleep tears trace lines down his cheeks.

II

He leaves the dam in the morning. He cracks open the door leading outside and sunlight filters inside. He opens the door wider and leaves, and he returns to the truck. He drives around the reservoir to Nederland, Colorado, set upon the reservoir's western bank. The man drives up the main road and through the circle, and he stops next to a gas station in the center of town. He doesn't know what time it is, only that the sun has risen high into the sky, and it is nearly above him, so he guesses it is close to noon. He slept so well last night that he lost track of time, but he cannot remember his dreams. He goes into the gas station, breaking one of the windows, and he finds a map and spreads it out on the counter and finds Aspen, Colorado. He draws a deep breath, surprised at the greatness of the distance. He calculates the miles in his head: it is almost 200 miles on mountain roads that pass between the mountains in sinking valleys. He remembers what Keith from New Harmony had said: the roads are swamped with snow. He curls up the map and walks outside, and he walks around the gas station and gazes over the rooftops of the surrounding buildings, and he looks at the mountains, so close they can nearly be touched, rising up out of the earth in their jagged rock formations with pine-covered slopes, and the tops are crested with snow. It is mid to late July, and the man doesn't think there will be much snow in the mountain passes. But he has never been to Colorado before, and he doesn't know what to expect. So he drives to a mechanic's shop down the street and goes inside and finds several chains, and he goes back out to the truck and wraps the chains around the tires and

secures them tightly. He smokes a cigarette and finishes one of the packs of MARLBORO and drops the pack to the ground. He turns and flattens the map on the hood of the truck, and amidst the sounds of several birds flocking overhead, he plots his journey with his thumb. He will head southwest to Idaho Springs via interconnected roads weaving between the Rocky foothills, a distance of about sixty miles. From Idaho Springs he will take Interstate 70 West through the worst of the Rockies, and after about 200 miles will reach State Route 116. He will take State Route 116 East until he reaches Route 82, and that will take him straight into Aspen. Nearly 200 miles. He knows he is wasting time standing in the center of Nederland so he gets into the truck and starts the engine and heads south, once again lost in the foothills with rolling slopes on either side peppered with pines and spruces and clefts of bare polished rock.

He is halfway to Idaho Springs. The road ducks and twists and plunges and rises amidst the sprawl of the hills, and the Rocky Mountains rise like sentinels off to his right, their peaks reaching high into the sky, caressing the bottoms of cirrus clouds coming in from the west. The man presses down on the pedals and takes the turns wickedly. It feels like a roller coaster. The bag of cigarettes and granola bars spill into the bottom of the seat amidst the butt of the sawed-off shotgun. The man finds a smile creasing his lips, because he finally feels free. It is a strange feeling. Everyone had been a burden, even Mark, even Sarah, even the little girls. Now he does not have to suffer the burden, does not have to suffer the guilt of slowing down for their petty excuses. He doesn't have to worry about moving at someone else's timetable. Freedom: he tastes it sweetly in his mouth. Aspen is so close, *so close*. And he won't be held back anymore.

He is only twenty miles from Idaho Springs when he stops the truck along the side of the road. He stumbles out of the truck and staggers around the front, his hand sliding over the warm hood. He swaggers into a thicket of ferns and presses himself against the base of a towering pine. He wraps his hands around the rough bark and buries his head into the tree. It is sticky with sap and smells sickly-sweet. Tears fall down his cheeks, and he falls to his knees amidst a puddle of pine needles, and he falls to his hands and bows to the ground. The tears run off the bridge of his nose and splatter in the needles. The pointed tips of the needles dig into the palm of his hand and into his clenched fingers, but he doesn't care. He had seen them—he is *sure* of it—standing along the side of the road. Every one of them. Just watching him drive past. Their former beauty had been turned into a wilting frame, and they had been discolored and naked and the skin had clung to their bones, and their jaws had hung slack and their eyes had been sunken-in and lost amidst their skulls. They had watched him, those empty sockets pooled with venomous hatred. They were supposed to be with him. He wasn't supposed to be alone. They had journeyed together, struggled together, despaired together, hoped together. But he is the only one remaining: the jackass, the jerk, the asshole. He is the one who should've fallen first, but he is the only one still standing. The wretchedness of his own person, and the knowledge that the unfairness of life is not an excuse for complacency, has forced him to his hands and knees, has forced upon him the realization that he is entirely alone, and he was always meant to be alone—but not like this. His curse was to be loneliness in death, but his curse has become loneliness in survival. A squirrel watches him from the branches of the pine above, clutching to a pinecone. The man raises himself up and lets out a hurtling scream, a scream that echoes through the valleys and resonates against the rocky outcroppings, a scream that is carried by waterfalls into gulleys and ditches and into towns and villages. A scream that carries up into the mountains, a scream that no one hears.

He reaches Idaho Springs by 2:00 in the afternoon. His cheeks are bloated red with broken capillaries, and his eyes are swollen from crying. He gets out of the truck and stands on the road that intersects with Interstate 70. The town is small and narrow, running between three large hills and parallel with Interstate 70 coming from Denver. Down Interstate 70, over the tops of the bluffs, the tips of the Denver skyscrapers can be seen. The man grabs the bag of granola bars and cigarettes, and he walks down the road, past several old buildings—a grocery store, a post office, a gas station—while eating one of the granola bars. His appetite is no better than it was yesterday, and he drops half the granola bar to the ground and crunches it to pieces underneath his boot. He sits on the curb next to a drain and smokes his cigarette and watches the miniature tornadoes of dust rising from the streets and splashing into the buildings and disintegrating into nothing. He finishes his cigarette and turns and faces the mountains. He can maybe be in Aspen by nightfall. He knows it is a reality, knows it will take place... But that thought brings him no comfort. He knows no one in Aspen, and he is sure there is no one in Aspen whom he *wants* to know. He doesn't even know if the refugee community remains anymore: for all he knows, it could be a death-trap, having succumbed to the plague, crawling with the denizens of the dead. He doesn't care. He will go anyways. He has nothing to lose: he has already lost everything.

III

Interstate 70 follows the passes between the mountains, weaving its way between the great pine-laden slopes. The man drives carefully. At some points there are boulders in the road, having dislodged and fallen and having never been cleared. Parts of the interstate have crumbled due to erosion from rivers where the concrete barriers have ruptured. It is surprising what can happen in only eleven months when no one is around to take care of things. The road is bathed in the shadows of the mountains as the sun begins its long descent into the west. The man knows night will come earlier here, because of the mountains blocking out the sun before it sets, and he knows he will have to find somewhere to lodge. He has not gotten as far as he hoped, maybe only forty miles. He continues driving, and the shadows grow deeper in the gulleys, and the moon behind him sparkles in the sagging currents of the creeks running beside the road. He begins to get anxious, can hear howls of the dark-walkers coming from somewhere in the mountains. He ponders if they dwell in stone caves, like cave-men before their rise to dominance. A thought runs through him, and he wonders if the dark-walkers will ever rise to dominance, if they will ever become more than animals. It is not a thought he wishes to dwell on.

The last dying rays of sunlight sparkle against something metallic ahead of him, and he slows down the truck. He rolls to a stop next to a semi whose cab is wrapped around a crooked pine tree devoid of needles, a spindly tree with naked branches. He stops the truck and grabs the sawed-off shotgun and gets out. He checks to make sure the safety is off and walks around to the cab. He grips the driver's door handle and swings the door open. Inside is a skeleton in a tattered red-and-white striped shirt and moth-eaten khakis. The bones of the hand are still wrapped around the steering wheel. The man sees something in the worn and frayed shirt pocket, and he pulls it out. A GRENADIER cigar. Leaf wrapping from the Dominican Republic. He slides it into his pocket and shuts the door and returns to the truck. He grabs his bag of granola bars and cigarettes and shuts and locks the door. He has forgotten to turn off the lights so he goes back and unlocks the door, opens it, and

flicks the switch; the lights extinguish. By this time the cries of the dark-walkers are booming, coming down from the mountainsides, puddling together in the mountain pass. The man walks back to the driver's door of the semi and pulls the keys out of the ignition. He walks to the back of the trailer and unlocks the door and climbs inside. He pulls the door shut and flicks the lighter. He holds the lighter up, and the firelight illuminates several wooden pallets covered with white boxes wrapped in cellophane. The man manages to shove several of the pallets against the back door, and he moves to the front of the trailer and squats between the pallets. He pulls out the GRENADIER and lights it, puffing slowly. It has a different taste, something foreign and exotic. Something different than his cigarettes. Something he likes. And it doesn't even bother him that he retrieved it from the pocket of a man who has been dead for eleven months. He smokes, and he thinks.

IV

What greater curse is there than to be alone? To become aware of your nothingness and insignificance? To come face-to-face with the bloodcurdling reality that you are worth nothing? What greater curse is there than to stand alone amidst a sea of faces and have not one meeting of the eyes? He has felt this way before. He remembers standing in the mall at Newport, sitting on that bench, just waiting and begging and pleading for someone to acknowledge his existence. The couple had sat down next to him and turned their backs and thus resigned him to the yet-only-contemplated fate. He had gone to that bridge and stood at the railing and stared at the icy waters below. The water churning and groaning and swelling, the waters captivated him, held him entranced with their mystical promises. The gloves and the wool cap did not hold back the ice-laced wind, and it stung him in the eyes and chewed his fingers to the bone but was only a minor discomfort that paled in comparison to the icy fingers of resolution that had crawled their way, hour-by-hour and day-by-day and week-by-week into his stillborn heart. His heart had ruptured and ceased to beat but yet he lived on, each arctic breath that pierced his lungs with pinpricked pokers continuing to give life and sustenance to a form long since destined for death. He stood upon that bridge and looked into those waters and knew only what had been, what was, and what would never be.

LONELINESS: THE CONDITION OF BEING LONELY; SOLITUDE; SECLUSION. No: an infectious disease, contracted at birth, infecting every man, poisoning the bones and sinews and muscles and organs, symptomized by tears and resentment and the beautiful art of suicide. A disease to which there is no cure, a disease which every man tries to cure: wealth, popularity, fame, success, love. A disease that is always present, sometimes quiet, but deafeningly loud in the most tender of moments. He has tried everything to eliminate this disease, has embraced the only radiation therapy that is tried and found to be wanting. Alcohol. Cigarettes. Sex—but only left empty and sad while lying next to her, nauseas with the disease that seemed to go into remission only to return. And he has tried to love—but love is a farce, a lie, no better than brandy and scotch, an intoxicating drink that only makes the disease that much more unbearable. Alcohol. Cigarettes. Sex. Love. Placebos. Masks. Veils. Lies. Empty hopes and futile dreams. It is a disease that can go into remission but always comes on so strongly when the oncologist proclaims, "Thou art healed!"

The curse of loneliness infects the bones, but there is a greater curse that infects even the marrow of the bones. This curse is greater, deeper, darker, exacerbating and exponentially multiplying the

disease and curse of loneliness. This is a curse accepted, a curse adopted. It is a curse that is tempting and promising—with what fate-stricken futility!—to relieve and even eradicate the disease. It is a curse that promises to deliver the antithesis to loneliness, a curse that promises peace and joy and contentment and even the oh-so-sought-after happiness. It is a curse that has stricken mankind, a curse that is a pill to be swallowed whole and without restraint. This curse is a pill, coming in all shapes and sizes and in a myriad of different colors and tastes. It is a pill that promises no ill side effects but yet delivers only another disease, a greater disease, a disease that makes the heart heavy behind the ribs, a disease that coats the lungs with sophomore residue, a disease that will eventually paralyze... and even kill.

This curse is deceptive. It wraps itself in light, in a technicolor dream-coat, and it poses as the most beautiful of creatures: as the streamlined dolphins in the sea and the clownfish amidst the coral reefs; as the striped zebra and the elegant giraffe; as the great moose with its moon-reaching antlers and as the soaring eagles that climb even higher than the moon. It disguises itself as the most wonderful of creations: the lilies of the field, the towering sequoias, the blood-red sunrises and sunsets. It is the most seductive of all God's creatures, a siren wrapped in wet white silk with eyes filled with lust and desire. It comes with the sound of the waterfalls, with the melodies of the songbirds, with the great symphonies that fill the ornately-designed opera-halls. It seduces man with its illusion, and its façade shatters upon embracement: it is the fanged hammerhead dwelling in the barnacle-laden hulls of sunken ships; it is the crocodile with its killer jaws; it is the hyena with its mocking laugh; it is the wolf with its disemboweling claws; it is the bird of prey with its shearing talons. It is the Venus fly-trap, closing its jaws around those lured into its grasp. It is the rose, promising beauty but delivering only pain. It is the whore playing the harp of enchantment but leaving her "lovers" mauled and mangled and bloodied and empty. It comes with the sound of drowning rains, with the cries of the ravens on the hunt, and it is the quiet man who walks the dark aisles of the opera-halls, abducting the weak and slitting their throats in the bathroom and leaving them abandoned upon the toilet seats with frozen eyes and slack jaws and necks that smile with the ear-to-ear jugular slash.

What was it that kept him from gripping the railing and pulling himself up and plunging headfirst into the surging waters? He knows the answer. That which kept him from completing the most sane and logical and reasonable resolution is that which holds him now in its grasp. It was that fierce curse, the curse even worse than loneliness, that bittersweet curse that poisons the heart and constricts the limbs and forces the enslaved feet to carry you where you do not want to go: deeper into the darkness, deeper into the misery, deeper into the abyss. It is the curse of HOPE, a curse that promises a future but delivers only inexorable agony. HOPE: the great oxymoron, marked most pointedly by its synonym HOPELESSNESS. It was hope that convinced him things would get better, it was hope that pulled him away from the bridge and back through the mall and back to his JEEP, and it was a hope that could only disappoint. It is now hope that keeps him from slitting his wrists with the bayonet, hope that has enslaved him, hope which leads him deeper into the mountains. He hopes and does not know what he hopes for. This hope is a mist, a fog, with no definite shape, nor even an apparition. It is a hope that clouds his mind and scrambles his logic: for he knows that the only logical course of action is to take his own life, to depart from this wretched and empty and miserable existence, to feel the warmth of his own blood on his spasming fingers, to see the blood smoke and steam in the coldness as it delivers death and thus delivers life. The logical course of action is to become nothing more than yet another skeleton in tattered clothes; for what is he but a dead man walking, void of life and sustenance, never smiling, tears his daily diet, never laughing, never

enjoying, yet striving for something unseen and unknown and yet hoped for? It is the logical course of action to resign, to fondle the bayonet with its serrated blade, to look upon it no longer as a dagger but as a medicine to ease his aching heart. But he sits. And he smokes. And he hopes. And he hates himself for it. But he has been seduced, he has been enslaved, and the choice is no longer his own: he must carry on.

V

He leaves the trailer in the morning. He has not slept much, and his body aches from the cramped quarters. He had tried to sleep amongst the boxes but had been cornered in the side by the hard corners of the pallets. When he opens the door, a burst of brilliant cold splashes him in the face, a cold so dark and deep that it splices right through him. He pushes the door open wider and drops down to the pavement cracked and interwoven with weeds. His throat is sore, and he feels as if he is swallowing razorblades. He looks up to the sky, and dark storm-clouds, laden thick with rain, are stumbling over one another in a drunken ballet. He goes back to the truck and carries his bag of granola and cigarettes in one hand and the sawed-off shotgun in the other. He munches on granola as he starts the engine and continues driving west, the mountains on either side, the tips bathed in the dark shadows of the clouds.

He is thirsty. He curses himself for not gathering bottled water from the gas station. He doesn't know how long it will be until the next town. As he is thinking about the stupidity of his lack of foresight, the road bends around the slope of a mountain and opens up into a valley. The road stretches into the valley, and it is lined on either side by rich woodlands, the trees towering and flowered in green leaves. As he drives into the valley, he sees that one of the mountainsides is sloped low, and upon the mountainside is row after row of cabins. He gets nearer, and a large sign off to his left emerges: COPPER MOUNTAIN RESORT. He has never heard of it. He drives past several recreational buildings, and he breaks away from the interstate. He climbs the road leading to the rows of cabins, and he stops the truck in front of one. It is a two-story with a walk-around porch and tall windows that reflect the sunlight. These are summer homes, and immediately he is anxious: the plague struck in the middle of the summer. This place would have been populated. He stops the truck and grabs the sawed-off shotgun and gets out. He walks onto the front porch and nears one of the windows. There is dust on the other side, so he cannot see through. He swings the butt of the shotgun into the glass and it shatters. He punches away the remaining slabs of glass and crawls into the room. It is a living area with a quiet fireplace and several leather sofas and an ornate mahogany coffee table. There is a stairwell leading up to the loft. He shouts but gets no reply except for the echo of his own voice. He goes into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. The stench is nauseating. He sees several bottles of flavored water and pockets them. He stands in the kitchen and drinks and then goes out to the truck and leaves the resort behind.

The mountains are drawn out on either side of him, and the interstate follows a large valley lined with trees and bubbling creeks filled with water-polished rocks. Lightning dances in the skies before him, and he can see rain falling in the distance, a dark sheet of blue drenching the tops of the mountains and making them fade into nothingness. He stops the truck at a rest stop at Shrine Pass and takes a walk to stretch his legs. There are a few scattered cars, most with wheels flattened of air

and sporting shattered windows. He stands in front of the welcome center and smokes his cigarettes and shivers in the cold. He wants to turn on the heat in the truck but knows it will waste gas; he hasn't seen any gas stations yet. He stands and smokes and he watches the sheet of rain approaching from the west. The wind becomes stronger, and it blows at him with a ferocity that kicks up dust from the ground and makes it sting in his eyes. He turns his back to the wind and walks back to the truck, flicking the cigarette to the ground: the wind catches the butt and carries it upwards, and the cherry bursts and sprays its embers in a solemn firecracker dance before they are extinguished in the cold.

By noon he is in Gypsum, Colorado. It is a small town facing several towering, jagged mountains that reach up into the sky. The rain has fallen heavily, and a mist clings to the ground. He pulls off the interstate and parks next to the Town Hall. The rain has let up for a moment, and he gets out to stretch his legs. He splay the map over the hood of the truck and instantly regrets it: the wetness soaks through the map and makes the colors bleed together. He holds it up and curses his misfortune, and he opens the door to the truck and places the map on the seat and leans over it, trying to trace his route. After Gypsum there are few towns, and the mountain passes dwindle. The road cuts into the mountains via tunnels, and it climbs along the mountain's slopes with stiff sheer drops along the side of the road. It will be a difficult trek if the road is broken and if boulders have fallen onto it, and it will be even more difficult if the rains continue. He is just thankful that it isn't snowing. It is summertime, and he knows it won't snow. Not even in the Rockies.

He has refilled the gas tank in Gypsum and now he is driving deeper into the mountains. Excitement surges through his veins: he can be in Aspen by dusk. The thought seems so unreal, so strange, that he doesn't quite know how to process it. He tries not to think about it as he navigates the winding road, the road that climbs along the slopes offering beautiful panoramas of the interlaced mountains, the road that ducks down into tunnels submerged in darkness—he hates these tunnels, always fears dark-walkers within them, but has not had any troubles—, the road that twists and turns just like the rhythms of fate and destiny. He tries not to think about what he will find at Aspen, for it makes his heart free and heavy all at the same time. Instead he thinks about *them*, the dark-walkers, how they are changing and evolving. He remembers New Harmony: the rapid pace of their spread, how the dead fell and rose so quickly. It was disturbing, but he has not thought about it in depth till this point. He thinks about the events at the JEFFCO AIRFIELD, how the dark-walkers let them pass. He does not know why they would do such a thing, but he has an idea, that they were delivering them because of their compassion, that they had assisted them in their devouring of the raiders and then let them continue on their journey. He doesn't want that to be the case, because then it would make them more *human*. And the fear that made the dark-walkers flee from him at the barn, the fear in his resolution and in his coldness and in his barbarity. He had put fear in their hearts, and that terrified him—for then he would be just as terrible as them, even more-so, and any distinguishing lines between normal humanity and the dark-walkers would be torn apart, shattered like cryptic buildings under the blasts of Pompeii. He thinks about these things, and he is lost in his thoughts, and he hardly even realizes it: a snow has begun to fall.

VI

The gentle snowfall becomes a blizzard, and soon the truck is stuck in several feet of snow. The man can see nothing out the windshield except a sheet of white, and the snow continues to build around the truck. He smokes his cigarettes and stares out the windshield and curses his luck. He knows he cannot stay in the truck, knows he must continue on. He guesses there is a town near, but the snow is at least three feet thick, and the road is climbing uphill. He finishes his cigarette and grabs the bag with the scarce remnants of granola and a few more packs of cigarettes, and he takes the sawed-off shotgun and tries to open the door. It wedges against the snow. He is able to get his foot out and kicks at the snow, and he cracks the door open wide enough to slip through. He clutches the shotgun to his chest, and his fingers wrap around the plastic handle of the bag, and he moves forward in the snow, keeping his head down, staring at his face, feeling the stinging pinpricks of snowflakes blasting into his forehead and fingers. He continues on, into the white blindness all around him, the towering mountains lost in the snow's fog.

He walks, and he thinks. Did he truly love Kira? Love is selfishness. Did he truly love her, or did he find himself bonded to her because of what she fulfilled in him? Did he love her, or did he use her because she fulfilled his needs? And what is love, anyway, but biochemical reactions in the brain? He is cold, he is dizzy, and the tears freeze against his cheeks. He is sure of it: he didn't love Kira, and he never did. He used her to satisfy his own desires, he used her to try to ease the ache of loneliness. But she did not erase the loneliness, and when loneliness burned deep inside him, he turned to Jessie and thus revealed that any love he had for Kira was nothing but a damned lie.

The road dips downwards and bends around the side of the mountain. The snow does not lessen: instead it builds. Soon it is up to his shoulders, and he is pushing through the snow with his balled hands, and his fingers are red and cracking and bleeding. He tries to forget the pain, and he gets lost inside his thoughts once more.

Did he truly love Kira? If he did not, then why does he miss her so? He is sure of this: he misses not her but what she gave him. Her face is fading in his memory but what she gave him is intensified; and thus he misses not her but the way she fulfilled his selfish desires. He misses what they had, what she gave him, and he knows that it is not Kira he misses but what she symbolized: an end to the loneliness. He misses what they had, and he tried to find it once more with Sarah. But, indeed, he never truly filled with Kira the aching hole of loneliness; what possessed him to think he could fill it with Sarah?

The road bottoms out in a valley, and here the snow is thicker. He cuts his way between several trees with their boles wrapped in snow. He leans against one and fondles the bag with numb fingers. He sets the sawed-off shotgun beside him and with his teeth tears the wrapping off one of the granola bars. He eats it quickly, the granola cold and tasteless. He smokes a cigarette, the smoke in his lungs giving him energy, and then he continues on, pressing forth through the valley, the towering mountains around him masked with the heavy snow draping the earth like a carpet of diamonds.

Did he truly love Kira? Why does he ponder this? If he didn't love her, maybe he can make the pain go away; if he didn't love her, maybe he can stop from missing her. He had burnt his journals in his attempt to forget her, but he knows now this was foolishness and nothing less: he cannot, will not,

will *never* forget her. And yet he is plagued with that question, that haunting and decapitating question: *did he truly love her?* He wonders if there is a type of love that *is* selfless, a type of love that is self-sacrificing and self-giving and self-annihilating, a type of love that is characterized by bowing and submission? If there is such a love, he failed to have it with Kira, for he gave himself over to Jessie. If there was such a type of love, he is sure, he and Kira never had it.

The snow is lessening, and the sky above him opens up. He can see the sun breaking through the clouds in vibrant rays that splash down onto the snow-drenched mountaintops. He can see the snow falling around him, the snowflakes moving in the wind like flocks of birds numbering into the millions. The man is hungry again, is losing strength, but he is out of granola bars, has only cigarettes. He has left the bottles of water back at the truck; no doubt they are frozen. His fingers and toes burn and tingle, and he knows he is at risk of frostbite. He digs his hands into the pockets of his jeans, but snow comes in the top of the boots and pools between his toes. He knows he must find shelter, and he keeps moving, searching for anything—a shack, a vehicle, a house, a cave, a hollow—where he can curl into a ball and warm himself. He is finding nothing.

Did he truly love Kira? If not, then why does he dream of her? He knows that no love is perfect. He knows that even the truest and most beautiful and most radiant of romances is imperfect; but imperfection does not render that love a farce. He knows that he misses Kira—not Sarah, not Jessie, no one except Kira. Even Mark is fading into the back of his mind, with the omnipresent shadow of Kira looming ever so intensely and painfully in his thoughts. He is succumbing to the cold, his vision is becoming blurred, and strength is leaving him, and he knows: he loved Kira, he still loves her—and that just makes the pain worse.

VII

The storm has stopped, and in its wake it has left five feet of snow that wraps around the trees and blows in titanic drifts and obscures the road and coats the creeks. The man has no idea where he is, and his mind is beginning to fog. He is slowly losing feeling in the tips of his fingers, and his feet have gone all but entirely numb. He knows he must find warmth, or frostbite will begin to overcome him. He knows he must find food, for he is finding it hard to continue, finding his legs refusing to make each laborious step. Up ahead he sees something in the dying evening light, sunlight reflected off the roof of a building half-submerged in snow. He pushes his way through a towering snow-bank and reaches a fence. He manages to climb overtop and falls down into the snow. He picks himself up and approaches the building. At one time it had been some sort of maintenance building: a perfect square, hewn concrete, no windows, a single metal door. He pushes snow away from the entrance and tries the doorknob. It is unlocked. He pushes it open with his shoulder, and he stands facing the innards of the building, his shadow tall against the backdrop of evening light filtering into the shadows. He draws a deep breath and enters.

He stands in the doorway and sets down the bag and the sawed-off shotgun, and he digs into his jean pockets, searching for the lighter. His fingers are so numb he can barely flick it once he digs it out, and the minuscule heat from the flame makes his fingertips throb. The light crawls its way down a corridor and then vanishes when the hallway intersects with a single room. The walls are dark and

gray, and the man's footsteps echo loudly as he walks. He is sure he has found the shelter he has been looking for, and if he were any sort of praying man, he would have thanked God for such providence. He steps into the large room and swings the lighter to the side, the flame bowing with the movement, and as the flame's light extends through the room as if it were a magnificent torch spreading light to the darkest corners of the world, the man sees something that will remain with him forever, a prophetic sight that gives birth to all his deepest and darkest fears: squatting in the corner of the room is a single dark-walker, hunched over brambles and nettles, and underneath her naked and bloated form are several babies, groping at one another with tiny fingers, their eyes dancing in the flame's light, huddled together in the makeshift nest. The man's mouth drops, and he forgets the cold and his frostbitten fingers, and he sees the female dark-walker staring at him, her eyes filled with rage at his intrusion. She opens her mouth and lets out a terrifying shriek, and the man drops the lighter and lunges for the corridor, and he runs into the brilliant sunlight, trips and falls into the snow, picks himself up, and runs into the trees.

He collapses against a single pine and draws in deep breaths of frigid air. The oxygen scourges his lungs, and he bends over and vomits into the snow. Blood traces along the bile as it splatters in a web at his feet. He grips the tree and presses his forehead against the ice-kissed bark, and he tries to force the image out of his head. He remembers when he had first contemplated the thought, first explored the possibility, when he and Mark had been stranded at Mount Aries. He remembers thinking of the basic impulses of the human creature, that which is innate in all mankind:

The need for shelter.

The need for food.

And the need for sexual gratification.

He had forsaken such a thought, had refused to give it any sort of leeway into his mind, but now it comes back to him: *they're reproducing*. Harker had believed that in time all the dark-walkers would die, driven to extinction by their own inability to survive. They would starve and die and decay and rot. The man had never spoken his fear, a quiet fear that had for all this time been running through his veins like a virulent virus just waiting to expose itself. Now it has exposed itself, and he knows that Harker's hope was certainly an ill-founded hope. Not only had the dark-walkers organized themselves, not only had they developed their own primitive societies, but they were reproducing. They were creating more of themselves. The thought makes the man's stomach churn, and once more he vomits into the crystallized snow at the base of the tree.

He knows he must find shelter soon: dark is approaching.

He knows he must find warmth soon: or the blood in his fingers will freeze.

He knows he must eat soon: he does not have the strength to carry on.

He curses this storm.

He curses leaving his cigarettes at the building.

He curses abandoning his shotgun.

He curses being alone, he curses his own existence, he curses everything, everyone.

He knows what he must do.

He must find warmth.

He knows where to find it.

He must find food.

And he knows where to find it.

He abandons the tree and follows his own footsteps until he reaches the building. He stares at that open door, knows what lies beyond. He knows what he must do. He enters the doorway and reaches down and grabs the sawed-off shotgun. He takes a deep breath and grits his teeth and moves forward. He makes his way down the corridor, stops before entering the room. He can hear her moaning, and he can hear the muffled cries of the infants. They almost sound like chirping baby birds. He wraps his finger around the trigger of the sawed-off shotgun and forces himself to move. He does not control his own actions, and he closes his eyes. He enters the room and swings around. The mother screeches, and the man raises the shotgun. She is up off her nest and charging him. He squeezes the trigger. The shells tear through her, exploding out her back in great swells of blood and hewn flesh. One of her arms is ripped from its socket, blood coating the wall. Her body collapses at his feet. He opens his eyes, and he lowers the shotgun, the barrel pointed at her distorted face. Her eyes are frantic, staring up at him, and he squeezes the trigger once more: her head becomes nothing more than a pallet of mush on the concrete floor. He moves over to the nest, and he raises his boot. He doesn't look as he stomps upon the infants, crushing them underneath his feet. Soon the nest is nothing but broken bone and tattered flesh and a pooling ocean of blood.

He finds his lighter and moves back down the hallway and shuts the door. In the distance he can hear the dark-walkers' cries echoing between the snow-laden mountainsides and carrying down into the valley. He shuts the door and bolts it from the inside. He returns to the single room and sits against the far wall. He curses and moves to the nest with the dead infants. He is able to pull from the nest dry brambles, and he creates a small heap of foliage on the floor at his feet. He lights it with his lighter and lets the heat warm him. He has no more granola left. He doesn't want to do it, but he knows he has to. He knows he is immune, but that doesn't bring him any comfort. He takes one of the infants, whose head is missing, and he puts it on the end of a stick from the nest and roasts it over the fire. The smell of the burnt flesh is nauseatingly delightful, and he tries to pretend he hates what he is eating, but truth be told, it is absolutely wonderful.

VIII

He leaves the shelter in the morning. He is still hungry, but he decides to eat nothing more. The night was spent cold and shivering, but he knows he would have died had he been truly exposed to the elements. The sky is clear and the snow is brilliantly white in the sun, so white that it burns his eyes. He keeps his eyes focused on the ground as he continues making his way down the snow-covered interstate. He passes a truck covered in snow. He breaks the window and searches for a map—he left his with the truck—and finds one in the glove compartment. He doesn't quite know where he is, doesn't know how much longer until the junction with... is it Route 82? He doesn't know. He hopes he'll remember it when he sees it. He abandons the truck and continues his march through the snow.

He soon reaches the intersection of Interstate 70 and State Route 82. It is a small town, Glenwood Springs, and he breaks into a small restaurant and finds several economically-sized cans of vegetables. He eats quietly, snow falling from the roof and drizzling out the large windows. He decides to stay the night in the town, hoping to get a better start with the morning. When the next day comes, he leaves once more, heading down Interstate 82. By the time evening is setting, he is in a tiny village named Basalt. He barricades himself in the bathroom of a gas station and waits for

morning. It is the third day since his encounter with the dark-walker and her children, and he wonders how much longer until he reaches Aspen. He continues down the highway, and the wind picks up, and the cold intensifies, and the wind blows the snow up from the ground and it stings him in the face. He finds it difficult to walk, and soon the cold begins to overcome him.

He thinks of nothing except for keeping one foot ahead of the other. He does not think of the cold, he does not think of the lonely road, he does not think of Aspen, and he does not think of Kira. All he knows is his step-by-step march through the wintry wind.

Left.

Right.

Left.

Right.

He begins to shiver, an uncontrollable shivering that begins in his fingertips and extends through his veins and even into his heart. He lurches through the snow, cresting snow-banks and dodging trees, following the creeks with the water bubbling under sheets of ice. He thinks of nothing, knows only the walk, and then he is forced to stop. He looks up and sees a towering fence, and beyond is an airport with an abandoned runway, several unused hangars with closed doors. He tries with all his might to wrap his hands through the rings in the fence to climb, but his fingers are not responding, and his limbs are heavy. He pitches against the fence and tries to call out, but he feels as if he in a dream, for all that ushers forth is a high-pitched, rasping whisper. Tears begin to crawl down his cheeks, and he looks beyond the airport and in the evening twilight can see twinkling lights, and he can almost hear the distant sounds of music and laughter.

Utopia.

But he is forced to a halt at the fence, and he cannot scale it, cannot overcome. He has come this far only to fail, and that realization sinks into him like a stone sinking to the bottom of the sea, and he collapses to his knees in the snow, and he presses his head against the fence, and his tears freeze on his cheeks as he loses strength and pitches to his side. The snow wraps around him like a blanket, and it feels so warm, and he feels so sleepy, and he closes his eyes, and he draws a deep breath, and he lets the warmth run through him as the sun continues its monotonous descent beyond the snow-capped mountains.

Chapter Forty-One

No Baptism, No Reprise, No Sweet Kiss

"My fate is to live among varied and confusing storms. But for you, perhaps, if as I hope and wish you will live long after me, there will follow a better age. When the darkness has been dispersed, our descendants can come again in the former pure radiance."

- Petrarch (A.D. 1304-1374)

I

He sits upon the sofa and watches the embers smolder in the fireplace. Their inflation and deflation fascinates him. He looks down, and in his hands he holds the bayonet, that sweet-singing blade that has delivered death countless times. He cradles it in his hands like a newborn infant, excited yet nervous at the same time. As a mother gazes at her newborn child and ponders the future her child will have, so the man looks upon that blade and ponders its own future: how its blade will be stained with his blood. He looks back up at the fire, can feel the warmth spreading through the room, can hear the gentle rapping of rain on the window. He draws a deep breath and looks out the window, can see the streetlights below, can almost hear the laughter as a couple makes their way down the street towards the warmth of their own bed. He looks back to the fire and then back down at the bayonet. Nothing has ever felt so wonderful and beautiful in his hands. He had told Kira, "I wonder what it will be like to hold our first child in my hands..." He will never know, but he imagines the feeling will be somewhat close to the feeling he has now as he clutches the blade in his palm. The blade cuts into his fingers, and he begins to bleed, but he doesn't care. He closes his eyes and lets the pain run through him, a beautiful pain. He had thought he'd find something different here. He had thought that upon reaching this beautiful town, he would be delivered from the troubles that had plagued him. But nothing can suave the pain in his heart, and hope? It is but a damned illusion.

ΣΩΣ

He had been found shortly after collapsing and rushed into town. The freak snow storm had stranded a truck coming in from a nearby town laden with supplies, and the driver and the crew had come across him just moments after he fell. They picked him up and carried him through the gates and to the town, and he had been nursed to health in what had at one time been the local hospital. He had been in and out of consciousness for nearly thirty-six hours, and upon awakening found an old man with a stethoscope and a white gown standing over him.

"Was it all a dream?" he had asked.

"There is no such fortune," the old man had replied.

The old man went on to explain the man's circumstances, how he had suffered hypothermia. "You lost several toes due to frostbite, but you should be able to walk fine." In several days he was

walking down the hospital corridors, albeit helped by a walker. A man had kept coming to see him. He identified himself as Malone, the town mayor. He promised to take the man through the town once he was well enough to be discharged. The man spent his evenings and nights lying in bed staring at the ceiling, overcome with nauseas guilt: he had made it, but he was utterly alone. Everyone else was left behind, past the rugged mountains, their bones scattered and bleaching in the swelling August heat.

The snow from the freak storm had melted by the time the man got to leave the hospital. Malone met him out on the front steps, and they got into a SEDAN, which Malone drove around town.

"We have electricity, open streets, music and bars, parks, even a theater," Malone told him as they navigated the roads.

The man barely listened, kept his eyes glued outside the windows. It was strange seeing so many people walking around, some with dogs on leashes, groups of children playing on a swing-set, a man erecting a white picket fence.

"There are three hundred houses here in Aspen," Malone said, "with 450 people. Many of them are families or friends. You'll have your own place, since you came here alone. Ah. Here it is."

He pulled into a driveway and stopped the car.

"Want to check it out?"

It was a one-story ranch house. They went through the front door, which opened to a parlor. There was a living room off to the left, and on the other side of the living room the kitchen and dining area. Down a hallway to the right were several rooms. One was a study, another a bedroom. A bathroom. All furnished.

"We've kept the rooms in good condition," Malone said, "anticipating the arrival of more refugees. The number of refugees is declining, however. Last December it had been a flood, but now it's become a trickle. You're the first one we've had in seventeen days."

He showed him to the bedroom and opened the drawers and waved a hand at the clothes. "We have all sizes and shapes in here. We never know who to expect."

The man walked out onto the back porch. It overlooked a stand of trees back-dropped by the pine-strewn mountains.

Malone stood with him, said, "Everyone has a job here, and we have one lined up for you. It's something special."

The man asked what it was.

Malone just smiled. "It's something right up your alley." He took a deep breath, said, "We'll let you get settled in. Feel free to explore the town. Three blocks down is a pub, and four blocks down is the Aspen theater. I believe there is a play scheduled for Thursday night."

The man asked what day it was.

"Tuesday. You should try to make it. Meet some people. Make some friends."

The man didn't say anything.

Malone excused himself and left the house.

The man stood on the back porch watching the mountains, heard the car engine start, then fade into the distance.

He stood alone once more.

The man found his bayonet sitting on the desk in the study. Someone must have delivered it to the house during his stay at the hospital. He slowly dressed in the bedroom, fumbling with the buttons on his shirt. He headed for the door, felt strange, realized what it was. He went back into the study and grabbed the bayonet, set it into his belt. He wondered if he could ever feel at ease walking around without a weapon. He doubted, after all he'd been through, that such a day would ever come.

The man went to the pub down the street. There were only a few people inside. A young couple playing cards in the corner. An old man at the bar. A whistling bartender. He sat down on the far side of the bar and ordered a shot of whiskey. He quickly downed it, rested his head in his hands, and allowed his eyes to pool upon the carvings in the wooden countertop. He heard someone sitting down next to him and looked over. The old man from the other side of the bar.

"You're the new one," the old man said, his voice gravely and rasp.

"Yes," the man replied.

"Okay," he said. To the bartender: "Give this man another shot. On me."

The bartender laughed, poured another shot.

"Why is he laughing?" the man asked.

The old man grinned. "No one pays for alcohol here. There's no money."

"Then why isn't *everyone* in here?"

"People have to work. And not everyone drinks."

"I thought everyone would be drinking by now."

"People deal with their problems in different ways."

"And how do you deal with your problems?"

"Apparently the same way you do."

The man threw back the shot. It burned in his throat.

"You visited the bars much before this happened?" the old man asked.

"No," the man replied.

"I did. I would always sit at this bar in Oregon. I would sit there, and I would hope." He eyed the man. "This plague didn't change much. I still sit at the bar. And I still hope. Hope is ignorant. Hope is naïve. But it keeps a man alive."

The man remembered Samantha, aches. "Yeah."

The old man asked, "What do *you* hope for?"

"I don't hope for anything."

The old man laughed. "Really? Because those who drink are those who hope."

"Maybe those who drink are those who have lost hope."

"So you hope to have hope?"

"No."

"That's the essence of hopelessness. Hoping to hope."

"Maybe hopelessness is just acknowledgement of the way things really are."

"Perhaps," the old man said. "But let me ask you this: if things are truly so hopeless, then why continue living? If hope is just an illusion, then why not take your own life? Everyone who comes to Aspen has hope. Hope of security. Hope of safety. Hope of being able to sleep peacefully at night once again. But not you. That's not what you hope for."

"Really?" the man sarcastically mused.

"Yes," the old man replied. "Really."

"And you know this how?"

"You asked why the bar is empty? Because drinking is made to lift one's soul. If a person's soul is already lifted, what purpose does he have in drinking? The bar is empty because people hoped for security, and they found it. They hoped for safety, and they found it. They hoped to be able to sleep peacefully at night, and they found it. Their anxiety has gone. They have no need for the bottle. But you, Sir, still sit here. You still drink. Which means you didn't hope for any of those things. Not deep down, at least. But you still hoped. And I am curious: what is it that you hope for? What is it that beautiful little Aspen failed to deliver?"

The man had no reply.

He returned to the bar the next day, following a fitful night of sleep riddled with nightmares regarding Kira. They were wonderful dreams, and he had seen her face brightly, but they became nightmares when he awoke, finding the bed empty except for his own equally-empty heart. The old man did not come to the bar that day. The man sat down at the bar alone and pulled forth a pad of notebook paper and a pen he had found in the desk in his study, and he took a few shots and began writing.

The bartender asked, "What are you working on?"

"I don't know," the man replied.

The bartender took the notebook from him, flipped it around, read it.

The man angrily pulled it away from him. "Mind your own business, all right?"

"You're writing a story?"

"No. A memoir."

"A memoir? Of whom?"

"Of everyone," he said.

"You're writing about what happened?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Because I don't have anything better to do."

"Okay," the bartender replied. "You going to the play tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"I think you should."

"Thanks for the recommendation."

"It'll help you meet some people. Make some friends."

"I don't need to meet anyone. I don't need friends."

"Then why are you so miserable?"

"Maybe because I understand that if you make friends, you have to lose them, too."

He decided to go to the play the next evening. It was packed, entirely filled with townsfolk. It seemed the entire town had descended upon the theater to watch the next scene in what had been an unfolding story. This scene depicted people dancing and singing in a house, the cut-out walls constructed of cardboard. Outside the walls, actors dressed in black clothing crawled around on their hands and knees, crept up to the house, tried to get inside. But the people kept dancing, ignorant of it all.

This is what this community is, the man thought to himself. A place of ignorance. Outside the gates the dark-walkers remain, and they are multiplying, growing stronger, smarter, wittier. We live in ignorance, believing we are truly safe. This is no different than the church with 89 steps. Complacency begets disaster.

He stood to leave right before the ending, wanting to get back to the house, but his blood ran cold when the director was announced: a certain girl named Amanda with a last name the man knew too well.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath.

He waited by the back entrance, smoking a cigarette. Night had fallen, and he felt uneasy standing in the street. Most of the town had returned to their dwellings, and he could hear music coming from one of the houses down the street, mixed with the scent of a barbecue. The town had chickens—lots and lots of chickens—and he had already eaten enough to last him a lifetime: it had been his daily diet while at the hospital. He dropped his cigarette to the ground and crunched it under his boot as the door behind him opened.

He turned around, facing the young girl with strawberry blond hair. "Amanda?"

She looked at his face, down to his belt, saw the bayonet.

She looked back up at him, her eyes filled with terror.

He splayed his arms outwards. "No. It's not like that."

"You... liked the play?" she asked, her eyes darting to either side.

"I didn't care for it," the man said.

"Okay." She began to step backwards.

"I knew your brother," the man blurted.

She froze, just stared at him. "My brother?"

"Yes. He was a... friend of mine."

"How can I believe you? How do I know you're not just trying to get under my dress?"

"His name was Anthony. He loved zombies. He was fascinated by them."

Her countenance broke, and she rushed forward, wrapped her arms around him, wept. He held her, felt her body shaking in his, the tears cascading down her cheeks and puddling in the creases of his shirt.

She finally pulled away, her cheeks bloated red, eyes swollen. "How did he... How did he die?"

He killed himself after being convinced you were dead. "He died... heroically," he lied.

"How?" she demanded. "How did he die?"

"We were... in a house. And they were coming inside. There were... five of us there. He left us, he went through a window, started screaming and shouting, drew their attention away from the house. They chased him into the woods, giving us time to escape. If it weren't for him... We all would have died."

"They got him? In the woods?"

"Yes."

"You know this for sure?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"We found his... We found his remains."

She started crying again, a fresh torrent, and embraced him once more.

"I'm sorry," he said, holding her tightly. "I'm so sorry."

And for once, it wasn't a lie.

He went to the bar that Friday afternoon. The old man was there. He sat down next to him, ordered some shots from a bottle of whiskey.

"We're all out," the bartender said.

"Make it a bourbon, then," the man said.

"Okay."

The old man eyed him. "You drank all their whiskey?"

"I was bored yesterday."

The old man scowled. "My friend, you must acknowledge what you hope for."

"I don't hope for anything."

"You are full of lies. You must admit you hope for *something*."

"I don't hope for anything."

"Then do what you must do. Shoot yourself in the head."

The man said nothing.

"You've tried?"

"No."

"Don't feel bad. Who hasn't?"

"I don't know."

"And you didn't go through with it why?"

"I don't know."

"I do: because you had hope. Or else you would have gone through with it."

"Maybe."

"There's no maybe about it. You had hope. And you'd better find out what you're hoping for."

"If I *do* have hope, then I don't know what it is."

"Yes you do. You just haven't acknowledged it yet."

The man took another shot, stood, wobbled. "I'm going home."

He couldn't sleep all night long. He tossed and turned and listened to the wind creaking against the walls and bundled deep under the blankets and tried to drown out the noise. But the noise didn't come from without but from within, and tears slid down his cheeks and he thought about everything and he began to understand that which he hoped for. When morning came he went to the bar with his notebook and sat down, and the old man showed up two hours later and took a seat beside him.

"You look exhausted," he said.

"I couldn't sleep," the man said.

"You know what you hope for. I can see it in your eyes."

The man said nothing.

"Confide in an old man, an old man who knows the bitterness of hope all too well."

The man took a shot of bourbon, emptied the bottle.

He looked at the old man. "I hope to be happy again."

"We all do," the man said. "How do you want to be happy?"

"I want to have what I lost."

"And what did you lost?"

"I lost Kira."

"Your wife?"

"My fiancé."

"She died with the plague?"

"Yes."

"And you came here hoping to find her?"

"Yes. And no. I know she's not here. I know she's back in Cincinnati. But I just... I guess I hoped that when I came here, things would be like they used to be. That I would be able to feel full and

complete. That the loneliness would escape. There was this woman. This wonderful, fantastic woman. I met her several months ago. A survivor. And she was great. But she... she died. She took her own life, because she couldn't handle... couldn't handle the way things were. I had hoped we would get here together, and that with her I could find what I found with Kira."

"You want to replace Kira?"

The man's heart ached. "I don't like to think of it that way."

"You hope to have Kira again, no matter how you color it up."

"No."

"But this girl, she symbolized Kira. You wanted her to be Kira."

"Yes."

"But that's ridiculous. Because Kira is gone."

"I know."

"You hope in something that will never come to pass."

"I know."

"Don't feel bad: everyone hopes for something. You hope for happiness. Your hoping for Kira is symptomatic of a greater hope for happiness. But do you see the irony? We all hoped for happiness *before* the plague, and we all hope for happiness *after* the plague. That hope for happiness, it was futile before. Is it any less futile now?"

ΣΩΣ

The man holds the bayonet in his hands.

Hope was futile before: is it any less futile now?

He realizes his hope will never be realized.

Aspen was real, but its promise was not.

Its promise of fulfillment.

Its promise of happiness.

Its promise of joy and peace.

Empty promises.

He places the blade against his wrist, closes his eyes.

He has reached Aspen. His journey—his purpose—has ended.

And he is equally miserable as before.

He knows that he shall never taste that which he longs for.

And this life of misery? this life of torment?

It is better left undone.

He depresses the blade against his wrist, prepares to slash.

There comes a knock at the door.

He sets down the blade, looks towards the doorway.

The knocks come again.

"I'm coming," he growls, standing.

He walks over to the door and opens it.

Standing in the rain is a man wearing a dark suit. A white collar.

"You're a priest?" the man asks.

The visitor nods. "I was told to come speak to you."

"Who told you?"

"Raymond Black."

"I don't know him."

"He said he was a friend of yours."

"I don't know the man."

"He killed himself last night. He left a note for me, telling me to talk to you."

The man thinks for a moment. "He went to the bar a lot?"

"Yes," he says. "And he wants me to talk to you."

"Okay," the man says, stepping aside. "Come in, I guess."

"Thank you. The rain is seeping through my clothes. Forgive me for bringing in rainwater."

"It's okay," the man says. "I'll get you some towels. You can change into dry clothes."

II

"What do you want?" the man asks. "A confession?" They are sitting across from one another in the living area, the man on the sofa and the priest in the chair across from him.

The priest smiles. "Do you have something you wish to confess?"

"No," the man says.

"Then I don't want a confession."

There is quiet for some time. The man is uneasy.

"You are not a religious man, no?" the priest asks.

"You're right," the man replies.

"May I ask, 'Why?'"

"Is it not obvious?" the man asks, spreading his arms to engulf the entire world.

"This disease has wracked many a man's faith," the priest says after drawing a deep breath. "Men wonder, 'How can a loving God allow such a thing to happen?' Since it has happened, the logical corollary is that, either, God does not exist, or He is not loving as we surmised. In either case, there is no reason to worship and adore Him. But, my friend, tragedies happen all the time. Do you remember the bubonic plague? It killed a third of Europe. Many a person fainted at the thought of God allowing such a thing to happen. But don't you see? God allows things to happen, allows things to run their course. What we have endured here is not some apocalypse, not a judgment of God, not proof of God's non-existence. It is, rather, a biological season. This disease is biological. It isn't supernatural. We understand it—and soon, you will, too. These... things, whatever you want to call them, zombies or vampires, even—are biological. They will die. And decompose. And break down. And then they will be gone. And we, the survivors—though scattered across our planet—will rebuild. This is nothing more than the bubonic plague on a planetary scale."

"I was angry at God for allowing this to happen," the priest says, his face drawn-out in a contemplative scowl. "I became bitter towards Him. I remember, vividly, standing in the snow outside my house in Montana, carving I WANT TO DIE into the snow with a stick. I sliced at my arms with a pair of scissors, and raising my bloodied arms up to Heaven, I blamed God for what had happened. I contemplated the goodness of God, and it made me sick to my stomach. I came to view God as a Cosmic Sadist, taking delight in torturing me. I believed that my purpose in life was to be subjected to God's torture for His sadistic pleasure, and one of the things that kept me from taking my own life was the belief that if I committed suicide, God would be winning. I didn't want Him to win. So I became cold and calloused, closed off to God. But there was one day, walking through the

woods behind my house, that I was overcome with the presence of God. An overwhelming presence that brought to my knees, and I wept in joy at His presence and in shame over what I had become."

He now looks up and glares into the man. "The suffering of this world hasn't ended. But there are two things that keep me going. The first is my remembrance of that day on the trails, when God's presence swarmed over me, overtook me, drowned me. And the second is hope. My friend, hope is hard. This is because hope is centered on a future object that is not yet present, and it is tempting to come to the conclusion that hope is nothing more than a futile, empty dream which we give ourselves over to in order to escape the pain and suffering of the present. And though some things we hope for in this life remain unfulfilled—and can even turn into nightmares—there is one hope that is sure for the Christian: Heaven."

Tears sprinkle in the priest's eyes as he speaks. "The hope of the Christian is centered on Heaven. Heaven is the remaking of the heavens and the earth, where God's people will dwell with Him and with one another in a restored creation, a restored Eden. It is a physical realm which we will inhabit with physical bodies. It is a restoration of the Garden of Eden. Even amidst our suffering, we Christians can find hope in the knowledge that this awful world will come to a brutal and bloody end, and that we who are in Christ will inherit a new universe that is wonderful, beautiful, and joyful. This is the hope that sustains me day by day, the hope that one day I will suffer no longer, that one day I will not have to fear what lies beyond these gates, that one day I will live in peace and joy. It is a hope that is certain, promised to me by God. My friend: where is your hope?"

The man is caught off guard, just shakes his head. "I don't know."

"You, like most men, place your hope in this world, no?"

"I don't know."

"You hope for something to change in *this* lifetime."

"We all do."

"Yes. But our hope is better to be placed in the future reality of God's full and realized kingdom. It is futile to put our hope in this life. When we search for wealth, fame, success, or importance; and even when we strive so diligently for that perfect and honorable dream, we are putting our hope in the here-and-now. I used to do this, putting my hope in this life, and sometimes I still do. But I have seen that it is absolutely ludicrous to do so. Why? Because this life doesn't deliver. Let me tell you what this life is: 'What you want, you can't have; what you have, you can't keep; and that which you love will be taken from you.' How come life is this way? Simply because it is not Heaven. It is not the complete kingdom of God. Reality for us now is totally, wildly, and even depressingly different than Heaven. In Heaven, 'What we want, we will have; what we have, we will keep; and that which we love will remain with us forever.' You must not put your hope in this life with its pains, sufferings, disappointments, and its prosperity of evil."

III

It is several weeks later. A knock comes at the door. The man is asleep on the couch, weary after the long day of work. He gets up and trudges to the door, grips the handle, pulls it open. He looks out and sees no one in the dying evening light. He steps out onto the front porch and looks in either direction. There is no one. *Wait.* He steps farther out, sees a long shadow disappearing around the

corner of the house next to his. Two long shadows, one taller and the other shorter. And then they are gone.

ΣΩΣ

The funeral was held the next afternoon. Closed-casket, as the old man had taken a shotgun to his face. A few dozen people showed up. No one wept. The man stood along the fringes of the group, and the priest said a few words, and they began cranking the casket into the fresh six-foot deep hole in the earth. The man broke away from the crowd and walked between the graves that had come from a different time, and he stood under a pine tree and unfurled his last cigarette and lit it and began to smoke. He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Malone standing there.

"The priest made you a promise," he said.

The man exhaled smoke. "I don't remember a promise."

"Then let me show you."

They got into the SEDAN and left the graveyard, and Malone drove southeast, and soon they were on a lonely road with trees on one side and wooden lodges on the other. The road dipped down and ran between two mountains, and up ahead was a large concrete building and beyond it a fence that ran up the side of either mountain and then descended again, making its loop around the town. Malone parked the car and they got out, walking along the fence-line towards the building. Beyond the fence was a bubbling creek, and scattered amongst the creek's polished rocks were broken skeletons, holes chiseled into the skulls. They went into the building with low lighting and descended a flight of steps into a large room. There was a guard there with a rifle, and he nodded to Malone and stood from his desk where he propped his legs and he opened a door. He grinned at the man, and they entered the next room. The man froze, his mouth dropping at what he saw.

"We experiment on them," Malone said in a grisly voice.

There were several cells with wrought-iron bars, and beyond the bars were dozens of dark-walkers, some strong and others malnourished, huddled together in the dim artificial light. They glared at the men beyond the bars, and their mouths dripped with drool. The man found himself frozen in place. The creatures slowly made their way towards the bars, and a guard appeared, and went forward, and banged a night-stick against the bars, shouting at them. They recoiled towards the back, huddling together.

The man looked over at Malone. "You experiment on them?"

"It's a germ," Malone said. "Upon infection, it begins in the heart, erodes the capillaries. Stronger veins, such as the arteries, are not affected. And then it travels to the brain, where it attacks the brain cells and such, making the person go mad before they... die. And they don't really die. They slip into a deep coma, where they are barely alive. The germ, lodged in the brain, spreads and brings the people out of the coma. They are then autonomous: the brain cortex is unable to function correctly because of the germ, but the brain stem is alive and functioning in its totality. What you have, then, with these... sick people... is mindless bodies, void of thoughts and personalities, nothing but organisms of primal instincts and impulses."

"And why do they come out only at night?"

"Simple: sunlight kills the germs. It's the disease's safety mechanism."

They left the complex and headed back up the flight of steps and into the sunlight. The man reached for his cigarettes and cursed. He'd smoked the last one. Malone went into his car and opened the

glove box and pulled out a pack of MARLBORO. He gave one to the man, declined to have one for himself. The man smoked and looked out past the fence at the bodies in the creek. *We experiment on them.*

Malone kicked at pebbles in the dirt. "Have you ever wondered what it's like?"

"What 'what' is like?" the man asked.

"To be one of them."

"Sure. I guess. Who hasn't?"

"We know," Malone said, looking at him. "There was this girl. Her name was Francine. She was bitten. By blood transfusions we were able to bring her back, even after the sickness had completely overcome her. She spoke of being 'chained' in her own mind, being entirely conscious of what was happening. And hating every minute of it." He seemed to shiver when recounting the story. "She killed herself. She couldn't get over remembering how badly she wanted to eat human flesh. How we had smelled so delicious to her as we began the transfusion. How she wanted nothing more to sink her teeth into our necks. She killed herself, because she came face-to-face with her own wretchedness."

They were driving back towards the man's house when suddenly the man started weeping. Malone didn't know what to do, just continued driving. The man composed himself, wiped tears from underneath his eyes, said, "Kira... I killed her. And she would have... She would have known what was happening... When I killed her..."

Malone was quiet for some time. "She would rather you have killed her than she killed you. Can you imagine her torment over eating the man she loved?"

"Stop the car," the man said.

"What?"

"I said stop the fucking car."

Malone depressed the brake, and the SEDAN rolled to a stop.

The man opened his door and got out.

Malone followed suit, shouted over the hood, "Where are you going?"

The man began walking along the tree-line. "I'm walking home."

"It's three more miles."

"I need the exercise."

"Come on," Malone said. "Get back in the car."

The man paused, cursed, turned around, returned.

They both got back inside.

Malone continued driving.

"I'm sorry," the man said.

"It's okay."

IV

The next day Malone came to see him. "Ready to work?" he asked.

The man grabbed his jacket, the air cool that day. "Where you putting me up?"

He only smiled. "It's right up your alley."

They had driven to the ASPEN-PITKIN COUNTY airfield along the northeast quadrant of the town. Malone had parked the Sedan outside one of the hangars and, using a key, let them inside. He carried with him a flashlight, and upon turning it on, he splashed the beam over the bolted metal airframe of a FORD TRI-MOTOR. The plane was positioned awkwardly, its nose pointing into the air, the twin engines hanging with cobwebs. The man approached the airplane and ran his hand over the rough metal siding. Malone stood back and grinned, said, "We've been driving supplies in and out from nearby towns. You're the first pilot who's come across the town. Except for one woman, but she only flew small single-engine planes and wasn't comfortable with this."

He faced Malone. "How'd you know I was a pilot?"

"You had your pilot's license in your wallet. No credit cards, though."

"Credit cards?"

"Most people carry credit cards with them. Relics from the old world. It provides comfort."

"Oh."

"So do you think you can fly it?"

A newfound energy pulsed through the man's veins, and he looked at the plane. "Maybe."

"I don't know how good of shape she's in."

"We can figure that out." He looked back to Malone. "How long do I have?"

"How long?"

"To get it air-ready."

"You're a mechanic, then?"

"I think I may be able to figure it out. There's usually mechanic's handbooks in the plane."

"Oh, okay. Well, whenever it's possible."

"My job is to fly supplies in and out?"

"Yes. It's faster, more convenient, safer. And you'll get to fly again."

"Yeah," the man said, looking back to the plane. "I'll get to fly again."

For the next several days, the man was consumed with getting the plane air-ready. He cleaned the engine, worked on the rotors, fixed on new wheels (the old ones had gone flat), and he even cleaned out the insides. By early next week, he and Malone stood staring at the airplane.

"It still looks like shit," Malone said.

"I didn't clean the outside."

"But it's flight-ready?"

"I think so."

"You 'think' so?"

"I won't know until I take it up."

"When do you want to do that?"

"Soon. But there's a problem."

"What's that?"

"I need a co-pilot."

A young man named Davidson had volunteered for the job.

"Have you ever flown before?" the man asked him.

"No. But I've logged over two hundred hours in a flight simulator."

"Which flight simulator?"

"Umm... MICROSOFT."

"MICROSOFT? You mean a computer game."

"It's more than a game. It's flight realism at the maximum."

Malone was standing close by, spread his arms in apology. "He's the only volunteer."

The man sighed. "All right. But you don't actually fly the plane unless I tell you."

Davidson saluted. "Yes, Sir."

"Don't salute me," the man said.

The next day was sunny, and flowers were growing in the grass along the fringes of the tarmac. Davidson and the man climbed into the airplane. Malone raised the hangar doors, and after igniting the engine, the man taxied the plane out of the hangar; he had to lean out the side window to see beyond the nose which pointed into the sky. He taxied the airplane to the end of the runway, then leaned back, drew a deep breath.

Davidson sweated. "You sure about this?"

"No," the man replied. "But we're going to do this."

"Okay."

"You volunteered."

"I'm not complaining."

"All right."

The man put the mixture at full richness, made sure the props were forward, checked to make sure the carburetor heat was cold, and then he set the trim for takeoff. He drew a deep breath and released the brakes. The plane lurched forward upon the runway. He took all three throttles in his right hand and thrust the throttles forward to 1000 rpm. The plane gained speed, and the nose dropped, revealing the runway rushing past beneath them. Davidson pressed himself into the back of his seat. The man calmly thrust the throttle to 2000 rpm, and then he pulled gently on the yoke. The plane's wheels thudded over the tarmac, and then they lifted off the ground. He kept the throttle at 2000 rpm for the climb, and the plane climbed at 75 miles per hour. He banked the plane to the right and leveled out, taking the throttle down to 1850 rpm and the mixture to lean. Below them the ground rushed past, the sweeping pine forests and then the town itself. People gathered in the streets and looked upwards, pointing, as the TRI-MOTOR thundered overhead. He looked over to Davidson, and his own smile was met. Both of them were giddy like schoolboys: the man back in the air again, and the young man living his dream, a dream that had only been toyed with on a computer game. The man flew the airplane over the city and banked it back around and prepared for landing. He descended, and on the approach he set the mixture to rich once more. He approached at 80 miles per hour and cut back to sixty miles per hour as they neared the tarmac. Malone could be seen standing in the overgrown and flower-splattered grass along the runway, anxiously crossing his fingers. Upon touchdown the man yanked the throttle back to idle, and he depressed the brakes. The plane whooshed past Malone and slowed to a stop. The man turned off the electrical equipment, set the trim for takeoff, and set the parking brakes. He cut off the mixture as well as the ignition, generator, and master-switch. With the parking brakes set, he released the speed brakes. He and Davidson sat in the cockpit, and the man suddenly burst into laughter. Davidson exhaled a sigh of relief and leaned back in his seat. Malone ran towards the plane, jumping up and down, shouting shouts of joy.

V

"Did you come by my house last night?" the man asks Davidson the next morning.

"No," he says as they climb into the airplane. "Why?"

"Someone came by, and then they ran off. It looked like they had a child with them."

"I don't have any kids. I'm only twenty-two."

"I know. I was just wondering."

"Where are we flying today?"

"We'll go to the Denver airport. Scrounge up some supplies from around there."

Behind them, several men climb into the plane: the supply crew.

"All right," the man says. "Let's put in another day."

A friendship has developed between Davidson and the man. It is a friendship that does not compare to his friendship with Mark, but what ever shall? His friendship with Mark is something that he believes will never be met again. It was the most beautiful friendship possible, and beautiful friendships only come once and then are gone forever. The moment they reach their peak of beauty, they are taken, and that is the way the world works. Davidson and the man have gotten to know each other well; Davidson was a psychology major at Colorado State University, and he had been one of the first to populate Aspen. He had been there since it's "Grand Opening." He seeks to bring the man to some sort of closure, and the man pretends to be annoyed, but he truly listens and seeks some type of knowledge from the boy, anything to ease his aching heart.

"There are stages you go through when something tragic happens," Davidson says.

"I know," the man says. "I've heard it all before."

"The first stage is denial. You deny that the tragedy has taken place."

"I am well aware of the tragedy," the man says.

"The second stage is escapism."

"I'm not drinking as much anymore. And I'm not using drugs. Or sleeping around."

"Escapism can take on many forms."

"You're thinking I'm an escapist?"

"You're formulating this hope in your mind that is unreal."

"Isn't all hope unreal?"

"But you hope to be reunited with Kira."

"That's unrealistic."

"But you still hope for it. You deceive yourself into thinking it's possible."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you know *exactly* what I'm talking about, and you know I'm right."

"Have you ever heard of 'cognitive dissonance'?" Davidson asks another day.

They are flying between the mountains, heading to a small town to the west.

"No," the man replies.

"People hold naïve views of reality. For you, you believe that you and Kira will meet up one day, fall in love again, be reunited. It's foolish, but yet you hope for it. But then you experience reality: Kira is gone. She's not coming back. You'll never be with her again. Forgive my bluntness. And then you go through cognitive dissonance. The first stage is disillusionment, which results in resignation. You realize you'll never be with Kira again, so you resign from life. Resignation takes on

many forms. Drinking. Lots of sex. Or even suicide. But then if you get past disillusionment, you get to rebuilding. You rebuild your perspective of reality and live differently, more in tune with reality."

"Where do you think I'm at?"

"Somewhere between resignation and rebuilding."

"You think I need to rebuild."

"Yes. Everyone does. Reality is different. We need to acknowledge this and live in accordance with this new reality, not clinging to artificial hopes and dreams that are merely echoes of the old reality."

They are sitting on a crate outside the airplane in the hangar. Rain falls outside. The supply crew has left, and they sit alone with the plane, smoking and throwing back bottles of beer they'd retrieved from another small town.

"You came here hoping to start over," Davidson says.

"I don't know."

"It's a ridiculous thing to do. There's no such thing as 'starting over.' The past forms with us, and we cannot escape it. It has molded us to the point of trying to start over. And when we *do* 'start over', we're doing nothing more than changing. And change exists only with the reference point of the past. The past forever haunts, forever poisons, and forever blesses."

"I'll agree with you on the first two assumptions," the man says.

They are flying beyond the mountains, which dwindle behind them to the east. Beneath them are old agricultural fields, stained brown in the early autumn. Abandoned houses and empty towns.

"The people of Aspen aren't ignorantly happy," Davidson is saying. "People came here, thinking they could start over. But that's not how it works. People are finding happiness in Aspen in the ways that they can, but they still have nightmares in their sleep. I still have nightmares. And *you* still have nightmares?"

The man nods. "Yeah."

He continues, "But people are opening their hearts again, finding warmth in the coldness. And you can do this, too. But *not* by trying to forget about the past. It's about acknowledging the past as true and acknowledging the future as true, as well. You can take small steps now to find some semblance of happiness. The first step is having a purpose. And you have a purpose here. This," he says, patting down on the controls in front of him.

"Careful," the man says. "You'll hit something and make us crash."

He ignores him. "Sometimes you can spend so much time obsessing over the past that you forget about your future. Ultimately you just have to put a tourniquet on the past to stop it from bleeding into the future."

VI

It is early October. The man is sitting in the study, writing by candlelight. The candlelight soothes him; he can use electricity, but he prefers the organic nature of the candle. There comes a knock at the door. He curses, sets down the pen, flips the notebook shut, and stands. He leaves the study and enters the hall and goes to the door. He twists the doorknob and swings it open. Even in the darkness he recognizes the face. "Oh my God." He looks down, the little girl standing beside her, her dark

auburn hair curling around her ears. She looks up at him with a hopeful glint in her eye. He looks back up to the taller figure, the skinny woman with shoulder-length blond hair and that ravenous hawk's nose. "Oh my God."

ΣΩΣ

She pushed him into the bathroom stall, and forgetting the possibility of anyone else being present in the restroom, they began stripping off their clothes. His hands shook in anticipation, and he fumbled with the buttons on his shirt as if he were sluggishly caught in a fading dream that he didn't want to depart from. She sat down on the toilet, and he lowered himself and slid into her. He thrust himself in and out, and she moaned even though they could hear people washing their hands along the wall-length sink outside the stall. She gripped the handicap bars on either side of the stall and threw her head back and let out a cry towards the ceiling as he went inside her. His knees wobbled as he withdrew, and she pulled herself up and embraced him, the hairs on their bodies sticking up from the sharp cold. He held her, and she kissed his neck, and he had never felt so empty and sad and happy and despairing all at the same time.

ΣΩΣ

Now the same woman stares at him, six years later. Lines have cut across her face, but her eyes remain the same, still piercing and radiant with depth. But the man isn't looking at her eyes. He is looking down at the girl beside her. He now looks back up at the woman, and his mouth feels parched as he croaks, "Is she... Is she..."

"Yours?" Jessie asks.

"Yes," he replies.

"Yes, she is."

He looks down at the girl.

The light chocolate curls.

The depth of her wonderful eyes.

The hopeful glint in her dimples.

He looks back to Jessie. "What's her... What's her name?"

"Her name is Hope," Jessie says.

"Hope," the man repeats.

"Yes. Hope."

He kneels down beside the girl. "Hello, Hope."

She twists her arms behind her back. "Are you my daddy?" she asks, stern.

Something inside his gut twists. "Yes."

She leaps forward, wrapping her arms around him, squeezes tight.

His arms move slowly, but then he is holding her, and she is crying into his shoulder.

The man begins to cry, too.

The man spends all his time between flights with Jessie and his daughter. It slowly begins sinking into him that he is a father, and it is a feeling quite unlike anything he has ever felt before. The girl is just over five years old, but he feels as if he has known her throughout his entire life, that there is an un-severable bond between them. The man invites them over for dinners, and he goes over to their place four streets down for dinner, and sometimes in the afternoon the man takes the little girl to one

of the parks with a slide and swings and little metal horses in the ground that rock back and forth on rusted springs.

On one such day he and Jessie are watching Hope play.

"Why did you name her what you named her?" the man asks.

"Why did I name her 'Hope'?"

"Yes. Why that name? Why not... Amanda. Or Ashlie. Or Sarah. Or Katie?"

"Because one day I hoped she would meet her father," Jessie says.

She squeezes his arm. "And it came true."

They stand at the swings one day in the dying evening light. Hope is waiting in line at the slide with other children.

"We should get married," Jessie says.

"What?" the man asks, suddenly facing her.

"We should get married," she says again.

He doesn't know how to respond. "Why?"

Her face flushes red. "Maybe we can rekindle... What we had."

"We didn't have anything," the man says.

"Then what was it that we had that night back in Kentucky?"

"It was stupidity. That's all we had."

Jessie goes quiet, doesn't bring it back up that evening.

The next day Jessie says, "Hope needs a man like you in her life."

"A man like me?"

"A father figure."

"I *am* her father."

"I know. But... You're more like an uncle right now."

"Why? Because we're not married?"

She shrugs. "I wasn't going to put it like that..."

"Let me tell you something," the man says, facing her. "I'm not the person you think I am. How long have you been in Aspen? Since this began? Then you don't know what it's like to be out there, day after day, night after night. You don't know the things I've seen. You don't know the things I've had to do. So don't act like I'm your knight in shining armor, because I'm not. Not a day goes by that I'm not haunted by what I've done. You want a guy like me in Hope's life? Then you don't know what you're asking." He raises his hands. "Look at these hands. They're covered in blood, the blood from three little girls that were Hope's age. I shot them. Each one of them. Right through the *fucking* forehead." He taps on his forehead for effect. "So don't act like you know me. Don't act like you know what I've been through, because you don't. I've seen things that I'll never forget, done things I'll never forgive myself for. This plague did more than take me from Kira. It absolutely *ruined* me. The man you think I am, he's gone. He was left in Kentucky over a year ago. I have his hair color. I have his eyes. I have his face. But I'm someone else. You don't know me, so stop acting like I'm a fucking godsend."

They are eating dinner the next evening at Jessie's place. They are sitting in the dining room, eating vegetables and chicken. Hope hums a song to herself as she eats. The man picks at his food. Jessie watches him. Hope gets up to go outside to play with her friend Danielle, and the man and Jessie are left alone.

The man sets down his fork. "I should go now."

"No," Jessie says.

"We're flying out to Kansas City tomorrow. It'll be a long flight."

"Why did you kill those little girls?"

"What?"

"You tell me I don't understand who you are. But I want to."

"No, you don't."

"Why did you kill them?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't think you killed them for some evil pleasure. I've seen how to interact with Hope. She's brought life and vigor and vitality to your life. You tell me you're not a godsend. Fine. Maybe *she's* the godsend to *you*."

The man picks up his fork again, stirs remnants of what had been peas and carrots.

Jessie leans forward, reaches across the table, grabs his hand, squeezes.

The man recoils, setting down his fork, and he folds his hands in his lap.

"Tell me," Jessie says. "Please."

The man glares at her. "You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

He has told her how it happened: the flight from the airport, holing up in the barn, the dark-walkers coming through, how he shot the girls out of mercy, not desiring them to be torn limb-from-limb; and then how the dark-walkers fled, and how he had been left entirely alone. How had he not killed the girls, they would still be alive. They would be with him. Hope would have three more friends.

"You did what you had to do," Jessie says.

"They would have survived."

"You acted on the only knowledge you had, and you made the right decision."

"The 'right decision' was shooting them one-by-one, execution style?"

"The 'right decision' was sparing them from what you were going to experience."

The man looks down at his plate, and tears begin to crawl down his cheeks.

"You think about it often?" Jessie asks.

He snuffles. "Every day. Every *fucking* day. I still see their... faces... in my dreams."

Jessie stands and moves around the table.

She kneels down next to him, wraps her arm around him.

He leans his head into her shoulder, and his eyes blur with tears, and he weeps.

The next week has come. They are at the park again.

"We can get married," the man says.

Jessie faces him, shocked. "What?"

"For Hope," he says. "We can get married."

"Okay. And what about... What about 'us'?"

"What about us?"

"Do you think... Do you think we'll... rekindle?"

"There's nothing to rekindle, Jessie. I'm doing this for Hope. You understand?"

Jessie nods, biting her lip. "Yes. I understand."

"Okay," he says. "Good."

VII

He is at a motel in his dream. There comes a knock at the door. "Room Service." The voice is high-pitched and raspy. He stands and wraps a towel around his waist. He approaches the door and swings it open. He leaps back, his heart surging into his throat. A little boy is standing there, his skin rotting, and he wears baggy clothes, and his eyes are beady red jewels set into sunken sockets. He reaches out for the man, his rotted hands protruding from the long sleeves.

The man awakes. He is in the quiet of the bedroom. Jessie sleeps next to him. He draws several deep breaths and rolls onto his side, facing away from her. He stares at the wall, and he feels a great emptiness within him.

He has Jessie.

But he wants Kira.

He has married Jessie.

But he was supposed to marry Kira.

He wakes up next to Jessie.

But he wants to wake up next to Kira.

But this is life:

What you want,
you can't have.

What you have,
you can't keep.

And that which you love
will be taken from you.

