

## WHO:

**Angie Land** – Young single mother and nurse's aide at Lakewood Memorial Hospital.

**Maylee Land** – Angie's fourteen-year-old daughter.

**Dalton Land** – Angie's twelve-year-old son.

**Parker Welch** – Local hunter who was at Lakewood Memorial Hospital when the dead moved and ate. He has two twin daughters he has not seen in years.

## WHAT:

A sudden and massive attack has left the world in chaos. Corpses have risen from their graves and are eating the living.

## WHERE:

The parking lot of Lakewood Memorial Hospital, the only hospital in the small town of Lakewood. It is burning and destroyed from the events of the night before. Angie Land and Parker Welch are the only survivors. Angie's children have raced to the hospital to meet her and have just arrived.

## WHEN:

The morning after the initial attack. It is late fall.

## WHY:

No one knows.



# Ashton Memorial

Book 2 of a zombie trilogy

A novel by Robert R. Best



# Ashton Memorial

By Robert R. Best

Copyright 2010. All Rights reserved

ISBN10 -

ISBN13 -

Edited by Laura Best

Interior formatting by Kody Boye

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means (electronically, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the proper written permission of both the copyright owner and "Library of the Living Dead Press," except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. People, places, events and situation are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living, dead or undead, or historical events, is purely coincidental.

# ZERO

“We gotta move,” said Angie, pushing Maylee and Dalton forward. The burning hospital behind them bathed everything in orange light. The sun was coming up, but long shadows hid large portions of the parking lot. Corpses could be anywhere. Angie’s back tightened at the thought.

“Same here,” said Park behind her. Angie stopped and turned. Park was heading off to her right, toward the outer wall of the hospital.

“Where’s your truck?” she said.

He pointed as he walked. Angie followed his gesture to see a pickup crumpled against the nearby wall. The front was crushed in and a metal ladder lay across the top of the cabin. Angie recognized it as the ladder that had been attached to the wall.

“Is that even gonna run?” she said. Maylee and Dalton stopped a few feet ahead of her, turning back to look.

Park shrugged and kept walking. “Fuck if I know. We’ll see, I guess.”

Angie turned to look at her kids, then back at Park. “Thanks for your help,” she said, almost yelling as Park got farther away.

Park chuckled. “Let’s not start that shit. We both needed to get out. We just happened to be doing it at the same time.”

Angie snorted and turned back to Maylee and Dalton. Dalton was looking at stumbling corpses, far in the distance. Maylee held her aluminum bat over one shoulder and watched Park move to his truck. Maylee’s eyes met Angie’s. Maylee frowned. “What?”

“Don’t what me, young lady,” Angie said, walking forward and motioning for them to follow. “You could have gotten you both killed coming here.”

Maylee let out a pained groan. “We couldn’t very well stay home, Mom.”

“You stole a car.”

“We had to!”

“You shouldn’t have been driving.”

## ROBERT R. BEST

“Someone had to,” Maylee protested. “Dalton’s too little!”

Dalton shot Maylee an angry look. *I’m twelve*, the look said.

“You’re too little,” said Angie. “You’re fourteen!” They drew near to her car. Angie fished around in her hospital-issue smock, looking for her keys. For a panicked moment she thought she had left them in her purse, back in the breakroom of the burning hospital. Then her hands met metal and she sighed.

From back toward the hospital, she heard the groaning complaint of an engine attempting to start. Over and over but not kicking in.

“Who is that guy, anyway?” said Dalton.

“Parker,” said Angie, flipping through her keys to find the right one. “He helped me get out.”

The truck engine groaned and clanked in the distance. Over and over. Not starting.

“Is his truck going to start?”

“How would I know that, Dalton?” Angie snapped, then immediately felt bad. Dalton frowned at her. Angie sighed. “Look, I don’t know, alright? I just have to get you guys safe and ...”

A gargling groan came from their left. Angie spun to see a corpse, a man with a burned face and bloody exposed ribs, staggering toward them.

“Shit!” said Maylee.

“Don’t say ‘shit,’ Maylee,” said Angie. “Get in the car!”

“I’ve got this one,” said Maylee. She gripped her bat and ran toward the corpse.

“Maylee!” yelled Angie, furious and terrified as her daughter ran at the approaching corpse. Maylee let out a roar and swung the bat at the corpse’s head. The bat connected with a sickening “snap” and the corpse’s head fell to one side. The corpse dropped to its knees. Angie raced up and grabbed Maylee’s arm just as Maylee brought the bat over her head.

Angie snatched the bat from Maylee and threw it to one side. The bat clanged across the parking lot. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Mom, the bat!” Maylee yelled back. The corpse groaned and fumbled around at their feet. “I need that!”

Maylee started to push past Angie, toward the bat. Angie

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

pushed back, stopping her. “You will do as I say, young lady! Get in the goddamned car right goddamned now!”

Maylee snorted. The corpse groaned as its head lolled around, limp. “Oh sure, you get to fucking cuss all you want.”

Angie slapped her across the face.

Maylee’s jaw dropped and she put one hand to her cheek. She stared at Angie.

“Goddammit, Maylee!” Angie yelled. Her body shook. “I’m your goddamned mother and you will get in the goddamned car!”

Maylee rubbed her cheek, staring at Angie. The corpse groaned. Tears grew in Maylee’s eyes.

“Please,” said Angie, her throat tightening.

To their right, Dalton screamed.

Both Angie and Maylee turned. A large woman, throat ripped out and blouse covered in dark gore, closed her arms around Dalton from behind.

“Dalton!” Angie screamed, running toward him. Maylee followed.

They reached Dalton as the corpse lowered her mouth toward his scalp. Angie grabbed the woman’s matted hair and pushed as hard as she could. The woman’s head snapped backward. She hissed at Angie, thick clotted fluid running from her open neck and pooling on Dalton’s hair. Dalton screamed.

Maylee arrived next to Angie. She grabbed hold of the woman’s fingers and pulled them apart. Dalton wriggled free and ran past Angie, furiously wiping his head with his hands.

The woman wrenched free of Maylee and grabbed hold of Angie’s smock. The woman was stronger than Angie would have thought.

“Dalton! Maylee!” Angie yelled. “Get out of here!”

Angie kept hold of the woman’s hair and pushed back with all she had, but the woman pulled her closer. Angie heard Maylee running away. *Oh God*, Angie thought, *please let them get away in time*. She struggled with the woman as best she could. She heard the broken-neck corpse groaning behind her. The woman’s mouth drew near to Angie’s cheek.

A blur flew from the side and a loud “thud” rang out. The

ROBERT R. BEST

woman's head flew back, her hair pulling free of Angie's grip. The woman let go of Angie's smock and Angie jumped away. Dalton threw his arms around her waist. "Mom!" he shouted.

Maylee stood to one side of the woman, gripping her bat. She brought the bat over her head and slammed down on the woman's skull. There was a sharp "pop" and the woman toppled over backward. Maylee panted and lowered the bat, looking at Angie sheepishly.

Angie sighed. "Thank you, but don't ever do that again."

Maylee nodded.

Park's truck groaned and whined, still not starting. "Shit!" Park said, far away. Angie looked and saw corpses closing on the truck.

"Dammit," said Angie, biting her lip and sighing. "Dumbass."

She turned to her kids. "Everyone in the car."

Both Maylee and Dalton moved to the front passenger door. They both stopped, scowling at each other.

"Both of you in the back," said Angie, opening the driver's side door.

"What?" said Maylee.

"Why?" said Dalton.

"One, because we don't have time to stand here arguing," she paused to nod toward Park's truck, "and two, we're gonna have to save dumbass over there."

Moans came from behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see two corpses approaching the car. "See," she said. "No time. Now hurry!"

Maylee and Dalton ran to opposite back seat doors. They opened them almost in unison and clambered inside. Angie climbed into the driver's seat and they all shut their doors at once.

Angie tuned the key, grateful when the engine started. She grabbed the shifter and pulled down.

"Seat belts," said Maylee from the back seat.

Angie looked in the rear-view mirror. Maylee was clicking her belt into place. Dalton was grabbing his and frowning. "What is your deal with seat belts?" he said.

Angie's eyes met Maylee's in the mirror. Maylee adjusted the belt and frowned. "Seat belts, Mom."

Angie chuckled. "Okay. Seat belts." She pulled her belt across her chest and clicked it into place.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Thuds came from the rear. They all turned to look. The two corpses had reached the car. One of them was a fat man with a huge gouge down his face and neck. He pawed at the back window and moaned, the loose skin around his wound shaking.

“Mom,” said Dalton anxiously.

“I see them,” said Angie, pressing down on the gas pedal. The car jerked backward. The second corpse, a thin woman missing most of her scalp, fell backward and out of view. The fat man fell forward, toppling onto the trunk of the car.

“Shit,” said Angie, slamming on the brakes, hoping the corpse would fall off. He did not. He groped and pawed and groaned.

“Mom,” repeated Dalton.

Gurgling came from the front of the car. Angie looked to see the broken-neck corpse climbing onto the hood.

“And there's that fucker,” said Angie. “Wonderful.”

“If you'd let me finish it off earlier,” said Maylee.

“Zip it, Maylee,” said Angie. She pulled the shifter into drive and slammed down on the gas. The tires screeched and the car lurched forward. The corpse on the trunk slid down, cracking its gouged chin. The corpse on the front rocketed forward, flying across the parking lot and slamming into the hood of a van. The “crack” of the corpse's back was so loud Angie heard it over the engine.

Angie hit the brakes again. She and the kids rocked forward. The corpse on the trunk slid toward them. Black fluid spilled from the corpse's mouth and flowed over the trunk.

“Gross!” said Dalton, looking backward. Angie pushed the shifter into reverse and gunned the engine. The car raced backward with such force the seat belt dug into her shoulder.

She spun the steering wheel to her right. The tires screeched and the car twisted in a half circle. The corpse, moaning and clawing at the trunk, slid off and rolled across the pavement. Its head spun free of its body.

Angie braked, and she and the kids rocked violently in their seats. They paused for a moment, panting and looking around.

“Shouldn't have put off having the brake pads replaced,” Angie muttered.

“Mom!” said Maylee, pointing to their right. Angie looked. The

ROBERT A. BEST

broken-neck corpse was pushing itself off the van. Its head hung limply and its broken back twisted impossibly.

Angie pulled the shifter to drive and sped toward the hospital.

The hospital was almost completely in flames. Black smoke obscured most of the front. Park's truck sat to the right, still immobile. Park sat in the front seat, visibly frustrated as he tried again and again to start it. Five corpses were closing in.

Angie turned the wheel hard to the right, aiming for the two closest corpses. They heard the car coming, and turned to stare with empty eyes. One, a young man with no arms or tongue, hissed at them. Angie gunned the engine harder and knocked both corpses aside. They flew in either direction, limbs coming loose and scattering. Angie slammed down on the brakes, stopping just short of Park's truck.

Park looked up from the ignition, frowning. He turned his head and saw the car, then Angie. He snorted and tried the engine again.

Angie rolled down her window and leaned out. "Hurry up, jackass!"

Park looked over at her, shaking his head. "I got this."

"You ain't got shit!" said Angie. "Get in the car or I'm leaving you here!"

He glared at her. "I need the truck to get to my girls!"

The remaining three corpses were getting closer. One reached out to grab the tailgate of the truck. Black smoke crept up from behind Angie's car, the acrid smell stinging her nose. She could feel the heat from the fire behind her.

"For fuck's sake," yelled Angie. "We'll get you another truck!"

Park tried the engine one last time. "Fuck!" he bellowed, striking the steering wheel. He looked back at Angie. "You better."

Park pushed his door open and climbed from the truck. Angie leaned over in her seat to unlock the passenger door. When she straightened back up, Park was struggling with a corpse.

"Great," she said. She undid her seat belt and let it retract. "You both stay here or it's your ass!"

"Mom, no!" said Dalton as she opened her door.

"Just stay here!" Angie yelled in a tone she knew scared both of them whenever she used it. She hated to use it. She climbed outside and shut the door. Smoke stung her eyes and heat assaulted her. Corpses were nearby. She could hear them groaning.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

She rushed over to Park. He was struggling with a bald man in boxer shorts. Thick dark blood flowed down his leg, from a large gash on one thigh. The man's eyes were white and his rotten teeth snapped together, inches from Park's face.

"Fucker," Park grunted as Angie arrived and grabbed the bald man's arm. His skin was slimy. She pulled as hard as she could, managing to put a few inches between him and Park.

"You should have told me your truck wouldn't start!" she yelled at Park, straining as she pulled at the bald man.

"It fucking started before!" Park yelled back, pushing at the man's face and struggling to avoid getting his hand bitten.

Angie mustered up her strength for one more pull. She tugged so hard she felt her back twinge. The bald man pulled back another inch. The smoke grew thicker around them. Groans and the sound of flames came from all sides. "Before you crashed it into the wall?"

"Pretty much," Park said, bringing up his free hand and punching the bald man across the cheek. The bald man let go and fell to one side.

Angie looked around, coughing in the smoke. Dark shapes swayed and groaned.

Park leaned back into the truck.

"What are you doing?" yelled Angie, between coughs.

Park slung a hunting rifle over his shoulder.

"I thought you ran out of bullets," Angie said.

"I did. In there." He straightened back up, jingling his hand. "But there were three loose in the truck. Plus, this." He held up a long hunting knife, then stuck it in his pocket. He looked around at the smoke and moving shapes.

"Gotta admit," said Park. "Your car's looking better right now."

"Yeah, well," Angie said, moving toward her driver's side door, "It needs an oil change and there's trash in the back seat, but it'll do."

She opened her door and climbed in. Park sat next to her and they both shut their doors. Angie glanced in the rear-view mirror, making sure the kids were okay. They were. She pulled the shifter to reverse. "Everyone hold on."

She gunned the engine, hurling the car backward into thick

ROBERT A. BEST

smoke. Shadows moaned around them. One appeared in the back window. The car shuddered with impact and the shadow fell out of sight. They bounced in their seats.

“Where the fuck are we, even?” asked Park, looking back.

“No idea,” said Angie. “So here's hoping.” She wrenched the steering wheel to the left. The car banked toward where she knew the hospital to be. She prayed they were not close to the wall.

Maylee was staring out the back window. “Mom!” she yelled as a large dark figure emerged from the smoke. Angie slammed on the brakes. The rear of the car slammed into the figure and the shape flew backward, smacking against something. Angie heard glass shatter. One of the windows in the front wall of the hospital. The shape moaned and toppled forward, out of sight.

Angie sighed and pulled the shifter to drive.

“Seat belts, Mom,” said Maylee.

Dalton groaned.

Angie looked at Park. She grabbed her belt and pulled it into place. “You heard her. Seat belts.”

Park stared at Angie, then looked back to Maylee. He turned back to face front, reaching for his seat belt. “Well fuck me. Seat belts.”

He clicked it into place and Angie slammed down on the gas. The tires squealed and the car shot forward. For a few tense seconds, they sped blindly through thick smoke. Shapes appeared and vanished around them, reaching and grasping at nothing.

Then the smoke separated and they broke out into morning light. Parked cars sped by, closer than Angie had realized. *A few more inches*, she thought, *and we would have crashed.*

“Yeah!” said Dalton, looking back at the receding smoke and ruined hospital. “Go Mom!”

Angie frowned. “Maylee, what happened to the car you used to get here?”

Maylee paused for a little too long, looking out the side window.

“Maylee?”

“We crashed,” said Maylee flatly.

“My god,” said Angie. “You could have died. You could have killed your brother. You're fourteen!”

“Almost fifteen.”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

"I swear Maylee, if the world wasn't coming to an end..."

She saw Park look over at her and she let the sentence trail off. She'd been partly joking. The world wasn't really coming to an end.

Was it?

Angie brought the car to a halt as they reached the end of the lot. The street was empty.

"Where are we even going?" asked Maylee from the back seat, still sounding sullen.

"Ashton," said Park.

"I love Ashton!" said Dalton, leaning toward the front. "Can we go to the mall?"

"Mr. Welch is going to Ashton," said Angie, casting a sideways glance at Park. "We're going home."

"What?" said Maylee, also leaning forward. "Mom, home's wrecked."

"We'll fix it up, we can get it back in shape," Angie started.

"Mom, no," said Maylee. "I mean *wrecked*. And it's full of those things."

"We'll get them out," she repeated, staring to her right, up the road that eventually led to her driveway. "It's our home and we're going to save it."

"Mom..."

"Maylee, please!" Angie snapped. She glared at Maylee in the rear-view mirror, but barely saw her. What she saw were corpses stumbling around her home. The home she had sought out, the home she paid the rent on, the home she raised her kids in. All without *him*. The thought made her chest hurt. "I'm your mother and I'm in control! We're going to save our house!"

She blinked, surprised at the moisture in her eyes, and saw Maylee clearly again. Maylee stared but eased back in her seat, silent.

Angie looked at Park. "Once we're there, you can take the car if you want. Or maybe Maylee can steal you one."

Park shrugged and nodded. Angie nodded back and turned onto the road.

ROBERT R. BEST

They saw the smoke before Angie even turned down her street. Long tendrils, drifting up into the sky, seemed to come from the entire neighborhood.

“Fuck,” Park said from the passenger seat, staring out the window.

“Kids,” Angie said as she turned down the street, “was the house on fire when you left it?”

“No,” said Dalton.

“You can tell me, I won't be mad.”

“No, Mom,” said Maylee.

Angie's stomach clenched as they came to the first house. It was in flames. Who had lived there? Angie tried to remember. An old couple, she thought. She hoped they hadn't been home when it went up.

The next house burned too. The person who lived there was new to the street. Angie wondered where he was as the car crept by. The four of them stared at the flames.

The next house burned. And the next. And the next.

“Fuck,” Park repeated under his breath. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Oh god,” said Angie, stopping the car in the middle of the street. It didn't matter. They were the only moving vehicle in sight.

Her house was next up.

And it burned.

“Oh no,” said Dalton from the back seat.

Angie pushed the shifter to park and undid her seat belt. “How did this happen?”

Park pointed out the windshield. “Look.”

Angie looked. Farther up the street, the houses were still intact. Corpses stumbled from place to place. Among the corpses, living people ran in and out of houses. The people held televisions, computers, anything that looked valuable. The people did their best to avoid corpses as they loaded the valuables into cars and trucks.

“Were any of these people our neighbors?” said Maylee.

“No,” said Dalton. “I don't recognize any of them.”

“Are you shitting me?” said Angie, tears starting. “Looters? One fucking night of this and we have looters?”

Park snorted. “So much for the friendly small-town bullshit.”

Angie slammed the heel of her palm on the steering wheel. “Our

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

things are in there! The kids' things!"

Park nodded silently.

Angie opened the door.

Park grabbed her arm. "Where are you going?"

Angie wrenched her arm away. "I have to see how bad it is."

"You can see how fucking bad it is from here!"

"Mom!" said Maylee, pointing up the street.

Angie turned to look. A chubby man with glasses wandered side to side up the street. He carried a gas can in one hand and was laughing.

Angie looked at her burning house, then at the man. "Son of a bitch." She slammed the door and stomped up the street. She heard car doors opening behind her but kept her eyes on the chubby, laughing man.

"Hey!" she yelled as she stomped. The chubby man kept stumbling and laughing.

"I'm talking to you, fucker!" Angie shouted, drawing near. The man paid her no mind. He laughed and staggered. The gas can sloshed from side to side. Angie saw a lighter in his other hand.

She reached the man and grabbed his shoulder. He spun and Angie drew back. The man's eyes were wild and staring.

He screamed.

Angie stepped back, unsure. "What the hell is your problem? That's my house back there, you son of a bitch!"

The man blinked at her, then smiled. "You're human!"

"Of course I'm human! Now why the fuck!"

The man cast wild eyes up and down the street. "I thought you were one of the demons! They ate my family! *Ate* them! I was lucky to escape. And I discovered the secret! Do you know the secret?"

The man stepped toward her. Angie stepped back. Smoke from the burning houses crept in around her.

"Fire!" the man said. "The Lord is a roaring lion and a consuming fire! Fire purifies! Fire is the only way to destroy the demons!" He shook the gas can at her.

Angie stepped back again. The man frowned. "You don't understand? Fire will save you. Fire is GOD!"

Angie heard movement behind her. She whirled, terrified it was a corpse. It was Park, rifle in hand. Maylee and Dalton were coming up

ROBERT A. BEST

behind him.

“Why didn't you keep them in the car?” she yelled at Park.

“They aren't my kids!” yelled Park, slinging the rifle over his shoulder. “You need to get your ass back in the car so we can get out of here!”

“No!” said the chubby man. “You must all stay with me! Stay with the fire! The fire will protect us! The fire is our salvation!”

Angie spun back on the man. “You destroyed my fucking house!”

“I saved your house, you foul-mouthed whore!” the man screamed.

“Watch your mouth!” yelled Park, shoving the man back. He turned to Angie and the kids. “We need to get out of here!”

Angie stared at the man. Smoke stung her nose. She heard the crackling of flames around her. Flames destroying her street. Her home.

“Mom,” said Dalton. “Look.”

Dalton pointed at the man's leg. Angie looked.

There was a small bloody hole in the man's pants. Beyond that was a small bloody tear in the man's shin.

The man saw them looking. “Yes! They tried to consume me! The demons tried to eat me as they ate my family. But I purged them! I purged them all with fire!”

Angie, Park and the kids stepped backward.

The man faltered, his mouth hanging open. “What?”

“You don't know,” said Angie.

“What don't I know?” said the man. “The secret of fire has been revealed to me! The fire embraces and purifies!”

“Shut up about the goddamn fucking fire for a minute,” said Angie.

“We need to go before he turns,” said Park.

“The bite,” said Angie. “If you're bitten, you...”

The man blinked, some of the wildness draining from his eyes. Angie imagined she could see what he looked like yesterday. How he looked before the world descended into madness. “What are you saying?”

“She's saying you're going to turn into one of those things!” said Park. “I'd shoot you to help, but I've just got the three bullets and you're a crazy-fuck arsonist. Now enjoy setting shit on fire, we're getting out



ASHTON MEMORIAL

of here!”

Park started back toward the car, stopping when Angie stayed put.

The man looked at Park, then back to Angie. The madness was fading from his expression. “No, the demons.”

“You said they ate your family,” said Angie. “Did any of them get back up?”

“My wife, the demons took her shape, to try to fool me, but...”

“It wasn't her shape,” said Angie. “It was her body. She was gone, but it was her body.”

The man stared at the street. Park sighed, looking around.

“I'm sorry,” said Angie. “I shouldn't be. But I am.”

“Mom,” said Dalton, taking Angie's hand. Angie looked down at her son. He looked up at her with pleading eyes. “Can we go?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

Angie took one last look at the man. He stared dumbly at the ground.

Angie turned to Park and her kids. “Come on. We have to go.”

“Really?” said Park. “If only someone had been saying that for the last two fucking hours.”

Angie started walking for the car. Maylee, Dalton and Park turned with her.

“You guys should have stayed in the car,” Angie said, desperate to talk about anything but their house. She could smell the smoke of it burning. All their things.

“I said so, too,” said Dalton. “But Maylee insisted.”

“I'm sure she did,” said Angie, her throat thick as they passed the house itself. In the corner of her vision, it registered as a shapeless mass of smoke and fire. “But don't be a tattletale.”

The man started laughing behind them. Angie heard liquid splash. The man gurgled and sputtered but kept laughing. Against her better judgment, Angie stopped and turned.

The man held the gas can over his head, the spout pointed downward. He shook the can up and down, pouring gasoline over his face, shoulders and body.

“Shit,” said Park.

“No!” said Angie, taking a step toward him.

## ROBERT R. BEST

Park held out a hand to stop her. "What exactly were you going to do?"

Angie swallowed, looking around. Looters, corpses and fire. Madness. Chaos.

"Kids," she said quietly. "Don't watch."

Dalton buried his face in her side. Maylee and Park kept looking.

The man dropped the can, still laughing.

He looked straight at Angie.

"Fire purifies."

He lit the lighter. Flames engulfed the man and he screamed. He twisted from side to side, then slowed. Finally, he toppled over.

Angie blinked back tears and looked over at her home. Flames and smoke poured from windows and doors. She caught glimpses of the living room. Their furniture, their TV. Their lives.

"It's all gone, isn't it?" she said.

"Yeah," said Park. "You got any other family?"

Angie swallowed, her mouth bitter. "I have a brother. In Ashton."

"Looks like we're all going to Ashton."

Angie nodded, then turned to her kids. Dalton was still averting his eyes. Maylee was staring at the house. "Back to the car."

# ONE

Lori strained against the cords around her wrists and bit at the tape over her mouth. She screamed into the tape. Her throat hurt. She'd screamed more in the last few hours than in all fifteen years of her life.

Mom was dead. The thought of it weighed on her like something physical. If Mom were alive, maybe she'd have the strength to break free.

Dad stepped into view. No, not Dad. Gregory. The man who'd married Lori's mother years ago. Lori'd be damned if she ever called him Dad again.

Gregory looked at her. Lori looked back. His balding head, trimmed beard and round cheeks had smiled out from many a family photo. Now, Lori hated that she even knew what he looked like.

He knelt in front of her and smiled. She strained against her bonds and screamed at him through the tape.

"Please, Lori, stop it," he said. Calm and quiet.

She screamed, muffled, until her breath ran out. Then she settled for panting and glaring at him.

Gregory reached out to touch her. She jerked back as best she could. He sighed and let his hand fall.

"See, Lori," he said. "This is the part where I'm supposed to say how disappointed I am in you. But I'm not. I understand."

She swore at him through the tape.

"Poor Lori," he said, nodding. "What you've seen. You were in shock. You're still in shock. Why do you think I restrained you? Why would your own father restrain you?"

Lori panted and shot her eyes around the room. Where was she? *Somewhere in the zoo*, she thought. But where? She'd never seen this room before.

"That's right," Gregory said, nodding again as though she was somehow responding to him. "You're panicked. You're a danger to yourself. I have to keep you restrained until you calm down. I have to keep you safe."

He stood and started pacing. Lori followed him with her eyes,

ROBERT A. BEST

taking in more of the room. It was an office of some kind. But not Gregory's normal office. She'd been in that, back when she called it Dad's office. It was much nicer than this one.

He walked to a desk and leaned back against it. The desk had a computer monitor, a series of switches and a microphone. "And I can keep you safe. Both you and your sister. I made this zoo what it is, Lori. The most technologically advanced zoo for five states around. Maybe even the country. St. Louis can't say that, Memphis can't say that. *Chicago* can't say that. Ashton can, thanks to me. Do you know how hard it was to keep a project like that under control? But I did it. I managed that, and I can manage this."

Lori stared at him, wishing she could kill with her eyes. He started pacing again, leaving Lori to stare at the switches and microphone. Lori recognized the setup. One of the communication centers he had installed in the zoo. You could talk to most rooms in the zoo, or broadcast your voice over the entire zoo at once. "The most expensive intercoms ever," her twin sister Ella called them. Ella was always saying smart-ass things like that.

He stopped with his back to the desk. It was clean and shiny and very out of place in the dingy room. He smiled at her. She wanted to spit at him but knew it wouldn't get past the tape over her mouth.

"I like you, Lori," he said. "I really do. You're much more levelheaded than your sister. I'd hoped you could even run the zoo one day. Ella could never do that. I love her, you understand. She's my daughter, but she couldn't run things."

His face shifted and he took a step toward her. He wasn't smiling anymore. "So maybe I am disappointed in you after all. You're acting like Ella, Lori. All emotional and flighty. You have to be levelheaded!"

He took another step forward. He was calm and methodical in his movements, but there was a hardness to his face Lori hadn't seen before. Lori pulled back in her chair, more out of fear than hatred.

Gregory looked down at her. "Don't disappoint me, Lori."

He blinked, looking around the room. The smiling face from the family photos returned. "But what am I saying?" He reached out to stroke her head. Lori couldn't pull away any farther. She hated the feel of his hand on her hair. "I'm sure you won't. You'll calm down eventually. You'll understand."

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

He knelt down, his face a few inches from hers. “You have to understand. I had to do it.”

He nodded at her.

“I had to kill your mother.”

\* \* \*

“Watch it!” yelled Park from the passenger seat.

Angie blinked and realized she was nearly off the road. She jerked the steering wheel to the left, almost sending the car into the other lane. She eased the car back as smoothly as she could, her chest pounding. What had happened?

“You okay over there?” said Park. “You falling asleep?”

“No,” said Angie, rubbing her eyes and blinking. A thin film started to form over them, obscuring her vision. She blinked again to clear it. The road sped by, trees and farmland on either side. And no shoulders, only ditches. “I’m fine.”

“Fuck you are,” he said. “You’re falling asleep.”

“I said I’m not and I’m not,” Angie said, casting him a quick glare. She let her voice drop to almost a whisper. “And could you please stop swearing so much around the kids?”

She glanced in the rear-view mirror, positioning her head so she could see all of the back seat. Both Dalton and Maylee were asleep, leaning against their respective windows. They’d fallen asleep ten minutes out of Lakewood.

Park shot a quick look back at the kids, then back at Angie. “Look, we aren’t even on the freeway yet. And if you pass out there we’re ultra-fucked. Ultra-screwed. I can drive if you want.”

“We’ve all been up all night,” said Angie. “I’m fine.”

“Up all night, sure. But I’m not exactly gainfully employed.”

Angie frowned over at him, confused.

“What I mean is I sleep in pretty late. Wanna know what time I got up yesterday?”

Angie shrugged, thankful for the conversation. Thankful for something to focus on other than the monotonous hum of the car. “Eleven?”

Park chuckled. “Try two. P.M.”

ROBERT R. BEST

Angie smiled and shook her head. “Shit, Park. What do you do all day?”

“Jerk off, mostly.”

“Park!” she said, glancing back at the kids. “I said watch the swearing.”

“Jerk' and 'off' are both acceptable words.”

Angie chuckled as the car rounded a hill. The exit to the freeway came into view. Farther up, the road they were on became an overpass. Under that, the freeway to Ashton ran east to west. A few cars sped by, but not many. A gas station sat to the left, just before the exit.

“We need gas,” said Angie. “Our little road trip was unexpected.”

She slowed the car and pulled into the gas station's parking lot. It was empty. The neon sign in the window said *Open*, but Angie could see no one inside.

“No one's here,” said Park.

“Yeah, but this station's pay-at-the-pump. It should be all automated.”

“You know that?”

“I hope that.”

She pulled to the nearest pump and pushed the shifter up. She looked at the pump, relieved to see its automated display was still lit. She shut off the engine.

“What's going on?” said Dalton from the back seat. Angie turned in her seat to see him stretching and looking around. Maylee was waking up as well.

“We're getting gas before we get on the freeway,” said Angie.

“Are we really gonna stay with Uncle Bobby?” he asked.

“Maybe,” said Angie, her stomach clenching at the thought. “But we have to get to Ashton first.”

She opened her door, letting the cold fall air into the car. “You guys stay here.” She climbed out and shut the door.

She shivered, looking around. She was still wearing her hospital smock and the wind went straight through it. The sky was gray and cloudy. It looked like rain.

She walked over to the pump. *Please Insert Card Or Press Pay Inside*, the display said. Angie realized again she'd left her purse back at the hospital.

ASHTON MEMORIAL

She cursed under her breath and tapped on Park's window. Park rolled it down. "Yeah?"

"I need in the glove compartment," said Angie, shivering again.

"Keep a gun in there?" he said, leaning forward to open the compartment. "We could use that."

"Yeah, I guess we could. But no. I need the owner's manual for the car."

Park frowned, reaching in and producing a battered booklet from the glove compartment. "I used to work at a gas station, you know. Fixing cars and shit." He handed the book to her.

"Don't need that right now, thanks." She opened the book to the back. A credit card was hidden between the back cover and the last page. She took out the card and showed it to Park. "I keep this in here for emergencies."

"Like the end of the world?" Park scratched his scruffy beard and looked at her.

"Stop saying that." Angie closed the book and handed it back to Park. "It's not the end of the world."

"Seems like a pretty likely candidate for it."

"Just roll up the window. It's cold and the kids don't have their jackets."

Park shrugged and rolled up the window. Angie turned to the pump, credit card in hand. She slid the card into the slot and pulled it out.

*Processing, the display said. For a long time.*

*Then it said, DATA ERROR 332.*

*Then, Please Insert Card Or Press Pay Inside.*

Angie frowned and slid the card in again. She pulled it out and waited.

*Processing.*

*DATA ERROR 332.*

*Please Insert Card Or Press Pay Inside.*

"Dammit," she whispered to herself. She stepped to one side, trying to see inside the gas station. It looked empty. All the lights were on, but it looked empty.

She heard a car door open and turned. Park climbed out of his seat and shut the door. "Problem?" he said, adjusting the rifle on his

## ROBERT A. BEST

shoulder.

“Card's not going through,” Angie said, sighing and looking around.

Park frowned. “Let me try it.” He held out his hand for the card.

“I said it wasn't working, Park. I know how to use a gas pump.”

“No one's saying you don't. I just want to fucking try it my fucking self.”

Angie sighed and gave him the card.

She turned as he started messing with the pump. She took a few steps away from the car, looking around. The lot was empty and quiet. The surrounding woods were quiet. The cold breeze and the occasional car on the freeway were the only sounds.

Was that a faint groan?

“Well fuck,” said Park. “Phone line must be down.”

Angie turned, a little startled, and saw Park step back from the pump.

“It's okay,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself. She was suddenly anxious to get back in the car. “We have enough gas to get to another one off the freeway.”

“Don't be stupid,” said Park, tapping the card against his other hand and looking around. “I used to work at a gas station. There's a panel inside to turn the pumps on.”

Angie stomped over to him and snatched her credit card back. “I'm not stealing gas, Park.”

Park snorted. “Well excuse me, but we need the gas. And by this time tomorrow someone else will have taken it anyway.”

“You're no better than those fucking looters on my street!” she yelled.

“This is different and you sure as fuck know it!”

“How?”

“No one's living in the goddamned gas station, for one!”

They both stopped yelling and looked over at the car. Dalton and Maylee were staring at them.

Angie turned back to Park and whispered. “We're going.”

“Wait,” whispered Park. “How much gas do we actually have?”

Angie sighed. “Under a quarter of a tank.”

He snorted again. “Unless you get great mileage, that's not enough to get us to the next gas station on the freeway. And even if it



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

was, how do we know it won't be the same as this?"

Angie looked at him, then over at the kids. She imagined them broken down on the freeway, corpses closing in around the car. She imagined the corpses reaching through the windows, their rotten and slimy arms grasping at Maylee and Dalton. She could smell the blood as they bit into her children. She'd smelled a lot of blood in the past twenty-four hours.

She blinked the image away and looked back to Park. "Fine. For them. I'll let you steal the gas for the kids."

Park nodded, looking at the car then at Angie. He shrugged and smirked. "You can tell the cops I forced you."

Angie smirked back. "You bet your ass I will. Now go turn the gas on." She leaned back against the car to wait. "But be careful. It looks empty from here, but you know how that goes."

"Yeah." He nodded, staring at the station.

Park stared for a moment longer. The he shrugged and started walking.

Angie watched him. For a moment his footsteps were the only sound. Then another breeze rustled the dry leaves still clinging to the surrounding trees. Angie looked around. There never was much traffic on these country roads, but still, where was everyone? How many had been lucky like Angie, her kids and Park? How many had died? And Angie knew full well what dying now meant.

Again, was that a faint moan?

Angie felt cold, colder than the wind would account for.

A noise behind her sent fear up her spine. She spun to see Dalton rolling down his window. She let her breath out and bent down to his level.

"What is it, baby?" she said.

"I have to pee," said Dalton.

"Me too," said Maylee from across the back seat.

Angie sighed. "Fine. Go behind the car."

"What?" said Maylee. "There's a bathroom right there!" She pointed at the side of the station.

"Maylee, I can't let you guys out of my sight right now. Those things are everywhere. So either go behind the car where I can see you or wait until we get gas and I can go with you."

ROBERT R. BEST

Maylee scowled and sat back. Dalton squirmed and looked at Angie.

“Mom?” he said.

“Yeah baby?” said Angie. “What is it now?”

“I don't just have to pee.”

“Gross!” said Maylee, pulling away from Dalton.

Angie sighed. “You mean number two?”

“Double gross!” said Maylee.

Dalton nodded. “And I'll need toilet paper to wipe.”

Maylee stuck her fingers in her ears. “La la la la!”

Angie looked at the gas station. Park was nearly to the door. It would be a few minutes to get the gas pump going, then several after that to fill the tank. She looked back to Dalton. Maylee removed her fingers from her ears.

“Bad?” asked Angie.

Dalton nodded.

Maylee leaned forward to look at Angie. “It's daylight now. We can see those things coming.”

Angie sighed and looked at Dalton. He was squirming and clutching his stomach.

“Fine,” she said. “But hurry. And if you hear the slightest thing, even a bird, you get the hell back here.”

Maylee nodded and undid her belt. She opened her door and climbed out. She reached back inside and pulled out her bat. “Damn,” she said, shutting the door. “It's cold out here.”

“Just hurry,” said Angie, looking back to the station. Park was opening the door. “Before Dalton has an accident.”

“Double ultra-mega-gross.” Maylee walked over to Dalton's door. Angie stepped to one side as Dalton opened it and climbed out. Maylee took his hand.

“I don't need my hand held!” said Dalton, snatching it away.

“Hold your sister's hand, Dalton,” said Angie. “I can't have you guys getting separated.”

Maylee held out her hand and Dalton scowled at it. Then he grabbed hold. “I'll be sure to use that hand to wipe, then let you hold it on the way back.”

“Gross times infinity,” said Maylee.

“Go, guys, now,” said Angie. A raindrop hit her hand and she

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

looked up at the clouds. Another hit her cheek and she looked back to her kids. "Before I change my mind."

Maylee set off across the lot, pulling Dalton with her. She had her bat in her other hand. Angie hoped she wouldn't need it.

\* \* \*

Park pushed open the glass door and stepped inside. He looked around, letting the door swing shut behind him.

The lights were on, one of the fluorescent tubes giving off a slight flicker. Static blared from behind the counter. Park guessed it came from a radio.

"Hello?" he said, just in case.

Nothing.

He took a step farther inside and saw blood. A pool of it, just outside one of the aisles. Red smears ran from the pool, up the aisle and out of Park's sight.

"Fuck me sideways," said Park, sliding the rifle strap from his shoulder. He readied the rifle and took a cautious step toward the blood. Static blared. The flickering fluorescent tube was giving Park a headache.

He took another step and drew near to the aisle. He looked back outside through the window. Angie was waiting for the gas to turn on. Maylee was leading Dalton across the lot, toward the side of the station. To the bathroom, Park figured.

Park turned back to the blood. "You better just be blood," he said. He drew in a breath, cocked the rifle and rounded the corner.

The smears ran to a body. A young man, maybe a teenager, was sprawled face down in the aisle. The blue vest on the teen's back told Park he'd been working the counter. The large shallow hole in the teen's head told Park he was dead.

"Shit, son," said Park, reshouldering the rifle. He stepped closer. The teen's head looked chewed open. Park prodded the teen's leg with his foot. He hoped the head was damaged deeply enough to keep him down.

"Well," said Park down to the teen. "I guess if you were gonna get up you would have done it before we got here."

ROBERT A. BEST

The teen's body remained still. Static blared and the light flickered.

"I'll be taking some gas and turning your radio down, if that's okay." He stared at the teen, watching for any sign of movement. He wondered if he should use a bullet to be sure.

"Okay then. Don't get up on my account." Park turned and walked out of the aisle, doing his best to avoid stepping in any blood.

\* \* \*

Maylee held tight to Dalton's hand, pulling him along with her.

"Hurry, Maylee," said Dalton, hand on his stomach.

"I am," said Maylee. "Please, just don't shit your pants."

"I'm telling Mom you cussed."

"I'll tell her you shit your pants."

"I didn't!" said Dalton.

"You will, though. Any second now."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Hold it, then," said Maylee. She stopped as they reached the corner of the station. She gripped the handle of her bat tightly with her free hand.

"Hurry!" said Dalton. "I have to go!"

"I know, Dalton, I know. But we have to be careful." She peered around the corner, looking down the side wall where the bathroom was. "These things can be anywhere."

"But you told Mom we could see them now."

"We can't if they're hiding in the trees." She scanned the woods behind the gas station. She saw nothing.

But was she sure?

After a moment, she turned back to Dalton. "Okay, it's clear. Come on."

They hurried along the side of the gas station. The bathroom was set midway along the wall. The door was dirty and rusted. *Men* was printed on it. Next to the printing were words scrawled with magic marker. *And Women. Other One's Busted.*

"Joy," said Maylee. "Get in there and hurry before I piss my pants."

Dalton ran for the door and pushed it open. She caught a

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

glimpse of the toilet. It was filthy. Dalton stopped, looking at it.

“Gross.”

“It’s that or the woods,” said Maylee. “Just hurry. And leave the door unlocked in case you have to get out quick.”

Dalton scrunched up his nose and stepped inside. The door shut with a squeak behind him.

Maylee leaned against the wall, just next to the door. She could hear muffled sounds of Dalton going to the bathroom.

“Gross beyond all space and time,” she whispered, focusing on her surroundings. The raindrops came more quickly now. Several pattered at her feet, disappearing into the dry leaves and grass. She scanned the trees again. Still nothing.

She looked up at the sky. Gray and cloudy. Raindrops fell toward her face. A few hit her cheeks. It would have been refreshing but Maylee was tired and cold.

A rustle came from the woods.

Maylee’s breath caught and she looked back to the trees. She gripped her bat with both hands.

*Just a breeze,* she thought.

Then she heard it again. A rustle followed by a crunch of dry leaves or maybe a twig.

*That’s no breeze.*

She froze, staring at the woods. Afraid to make any sound. It could be an animal. Or it could be a corpse. Or several corpses. What if she’d led them to the gas station?

She heard another crunch and a shape moved through the trees. It looked like a woman, chubby and short. From between tree trunks, Maylee could see one of her eyes was missing and her face was coated in blood.

“Shit,” Maylee whispered. As far as she could tell, the corpse hadn’t noticed her. Hadn’t noticed the gas station at all. Maylee inched toward the bathroom door. The corpse kept staggering among the trees.

Her hand shaking, Maylee slowly reached for the door. Slowly, slower than she’d ever done anything in her life, she pushed the door inward. She heard Dalton grunt and a splash.

“Gross,” she whispered. She pushed the door farther in. It gave out a loud squeak.

ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee gasped, watching the corpse. It whipped its head around but did not focus on her.

“Maylee!” came Dalton's voice behind her. “Shut the door, sicko!”

The corpse looked right at Maylee. It groaned.

“Shit!” said Maylee, ducking inside and slamming the door.

\* \* \*

Angie watched through the front window of the gas station as Park moved behind the counter. He looked left to right, then found something. He walked over and looked down, studying and fiddling with whatever it was.

She looked around, cold creeping through her. What was taking him so long? What was taking the kids so long? Was everything actually taking this long or was she losing her mind? She was so tired.

A beep came from the pump. The display flashed for a second, then said *Lift Nozzle And Begin Fueling*. Park turned to the window and gave her thumbs-up.

Angie sighed and nodded to him. She undid the gas cap on the car and lifted the nozzle from the pump. She pushed the nozzle into the gas tank and squeezed the handle. The nozzle clicked and she heard gas pouring.

She breathed out again, thankful it had worked.

Then she heard rustling from behind the gas station. More rustling than the wind had made earlier.

Then moans.

\* \* \*

Park gave Angie a thumbs-up through the window. She nodded to him and started pumping gas into the car.

He took one last glance down at the control panel for the pumps. As far as he could tell, everything seemed to be working. Static still blared from somewhere nearby. He found a radio under the counter, set on top of some empty boxes. The box was labeled with the logo of a potato chip company. Park knelt to switch the radio off, then spent a second staring at the logo.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Fuck, now I’m hungry,” he said.

He straightened back up and looked down the aisle at the teen’s body.

“Hey, mind if we get some food for the road?”

He stared at the teen. Enough of the teen’s head was gone to be safe, wasn’t it? How fresh was the body, even? How long did it take for corpses to get up, if they were going to? If he just had more ammo, he could be sure.

Park nodded at the body. “Okay, then. I’ll just grab some chips then get out of your hair.”

The teen was still. Park nodded again, this time to himself, and walked out from behind the counter. He scanned the aisles, reading the signs. The one on the end, farthest from the door, was labeled *Snacks*.

“Fuck shit hell,” grumbled Park. “It would be the one way the hell over there.”

He walked over to the snack aisle and turned down it.

A corpse sat on the floor, gnawing at the mangled remains of another body. It was a little girl, fingers coated with blood. Her ears were missing, along with most of the skin on her face. Her black hair was matted with gore. Park stopped midstep, staring down at her. No ears. She hadn’t heard him come in.

Then the girl saw him. She hissed, bloody meat falling from her mouth, and lunged for him. Her tiny fingers closed around his pant leg. Park twisted around, attempting to kick at the girl, then fell into the snacks. The shelf and Park toppled over backward. The girl held on to his leg. The rifle was pinned between his back and the shelf, out of reach.

“Shit!” yelled Park. “Fucking kid!” He heard a creak and a thud as the shelf behind him fell over. Then the next, then the next. There was a chaos of clattering and crashing as cans, bags and auto products fell to the floor.

The girl clawed her way up Park’s clothes, coming for his face. Park’s hand flailed to one side, grabbing at anything nearby. It closed on something. He brought it up and slammed it into the girl’s face. It was a bag, which split as it connected with the girl’s skull. Potato chips rained down on Park. The girl gnashed at the bag and the few chips that remained inside, trying to get to Park. The blood from her skinned face

ROBERT A. BEST

mingled with the plastic and salt.

Using the remains of the bag as a shield for his hand, Park pushed the girl's face back until he had enough leverage to shove. When he did, he flung her to the floor next to the ruined body she'd been eating.

"Just be happy with what you got there," Park said, turning to climb up the fallen shelf. "Looks delicious."

\* \* \*

"Get out of here, Maylee!" yelled Dalton from the toilet, drawing up his legs and covering his lap.

"Shh!" said Maylee, as quietly as she could. "There's one of those things out there!" She spun to face the door, looking for the lock. She found it and pushed it closed.

"What?" said Dalton behind her, flushing. "Get Mom!"

"There's no time!" said Maylee. Moaning came from outside. Then a scratching noise as the corpse ran its fingers up and down the metal door.

"What are we going to do?" said Dalton. Maylee heard him zipping up his pants and she turned.

"I don't know." She remembered the bat in her hand. "I guess there's just the one, and we got the bat. If we can get to Mom..."

A second groan came from behind the door. A different voice. Something slammed against the door so hard it shook.

"Shit!" said Maylee, spinning around. The door rattled. The old lock would give before long.

"Maylee," said Dalton.

Maylee scanned the room, panic creeping through her. She saw the toilet Dalton had been on, a sink and an old rusted space heater.

She pointed to the heater. "Plug that thing in."

"Why?"

"Just do it!" yelled Maylee. A third moan came from the door. The metal door shook again, harder than before.

Dalton went to the space heater and, kneeling down, plugged it in. The coils hummed and started to glow.

"Pick it up!" ordered Maylee. She ran to one wall and set her bat against it. She'd need both hands for what she had in mind.



ASHTON MEMORIAL

“It'll get hot!”

“Don't touch the hot parts, dumbass!” Maylee ran to the toilet paper dispenser. She unrolled as much as she could as quickly as she could. She tore the mass free and ran to the sink. She shoved the paper into the drain until it was completely clogged.

“What are you doing?” said Dalton, gingerly holding the space heater.

Still standing at the sink, Maylee used her foot to kick the lid of the toilet down. “Stand on the toilet!”

“What? Why?” said Dalton. The door shook and rattled hard. Any second now, Maylee knew, the lock would break. Groans and hissing came from outside.

“Just do it!” Maylee turned on the water in the sink. Both taps, full blast.

\* \* \*

Angie whipped her head from side to side, looking for the source of the moans. They seemed to come from everywhere. The gas nozzle clicked off behind her. The tank was full. The rain started full strength. Cold, hard and fast.

Corpses stumbled from the right side of the gas station. Five of them, maybe. The rain made it hard to tell.

Angie looked to the station. Park struggled with a corpse inside. Moans came from the left side of the station. From where the bathrooms were.

Angie's chest tightened and she ran toward the bathrooms. “Maylee! Dalton!”

Corpses stumbled around from the left side, blocking her way.

\* \* \*

Park climbed up the fallen shelf, heading for the shelf behind it. Bags of chips crunched underneath him. The girl's fingers closed on his leg from behind.

“Dammit, girl! You could have attacked me when I didn't have my fucking gun on my fucking back!” He considered reaching for the

## ROBERT A. BEST

rifle, but if he let go of the shelf he would slide down to her waiting hands and mouth. He kicked blindly with his free leg. He connected and heard a wet crunch. The girl let go and Park clambered to the next shelf. Magazines. Cars, musicians and porno. He climbed up the shelf but the slick glossy paper gave him no footing. He slipped and fell back toward the first shelf. He turned, struggling to reach the gun. His hand found the barrel but it was again pinned between his back and the shelf. He saw the girl coming for him.

He grabbed a magazine as he slid toward the girl. *Drunk and Willing*, the magazine said. Park had several issues himself. He rolled the magazine up and slammed the girl across the face. Her head whipped to one side but she quickly corrected. She climbed back up on his chest, hissing and snapping at his face.

Park shoved the end of the rolled-up magazine into her mouth. She gurgled and gnashed her teeth at the paper, shredding it. Bits of paper floated down to Park's chest as he pushed the magazine and the girl away from him.

He shoved hard and she fell back. He turned and climbed up the shelf. This time he made it over the magazines and onto the next rack. Auto supplies. Oil and steering fluid. This was the aisle the teen was in. Park briefly wondered where the teen's body had gone, then realized it was hidden under the fallen shelf.

He cast a glance back at the girl. She was coming after him but was still climbing up the snacks. Again he considered the rifle, but he couldn't afford letting go of the shelf.

"Sorry kid," Park said, "but I gotta go."

He turned and started to climb up the auto supply shelf. A new hand closed on his arm.

Park looked at the hand and followed it to the source. The teen, most of his head chewed open, was grabbing for him.

"You gotta be fucking kidding," said Park, pulling his arm away. The teen was weak. He moaned softly and moved his head limply from side to side. Dark blood and slime oozed from the shallow hole in the teen's head.

Park heard hissing from behind him and turned to see the girl. She was on the magazine rack now. Her bloody face dripped onto the paper. She gnashed her red teeth at him. The teen from his side moaned and grabbed for him again.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Park turned back to climb up the shelf. Beyond the shelf lay the window leading outside the station. The teen clutched at his shoulder, stronger now. Park struggled to pull away. He could hear the girl getting closer behind him.

Park grabbed a can of motor oil and turned as best he could with the teen's hand on his shoulder. He flung the can at the girl as hard as he could manage. It slammed against her forehead with a loud "crack". She blinked her bloody eyes and slid back down the shelf.

The teen to his side gurgled and leaned in to bite. Blood pooled in the teen's mouth and drained from his ears. Park grabbed a second can and brought it down on the teen's head. The teen gurgled and let go. Park brought the can down again. The boy's skull popped and brain matter oozed out. The teen gave a final, soft moan and fell back.

"Dammit," said Park. "Stay down this time."

The girl hissed behind him. Park looked back to see her nearly upon him.

\* \* \*

Maylee watched the sink fill as Dalton climbed onto the toilet, holding the space heater. Corpses banged on the door. The door shook and rattled, sounding looser all the time. Maylee wondered how long they had.

"Maylee," said Dalton from the toilet. He sounded nervous.

"Hold on," she said. The sink filled up and water overflowed onto the floor. Water spread to Maylee's feet and beyond.

Maylee turned and looked at the door. The groans behind it were too numerous to count. The banging and clawing were coming faster. The door rattled hard, nearly giving way.

She ran to the toilet and climbed up next to Dalton. There was barely enough room for both of them. She struggled to balance.

"Give me the heater," she said.

Dalton handed it to her. "No arguments there!"

Maylee winced as she took it. "Shit, this thing is getting hot."

"I told you," said Dalton, rubbing his hands on his shirt.

The door shook so hard Maylee thought it was opening. She tensed, afraid they weren't ready yet. The door held, but barely. Dalton

ROBERT A. BEST

squirmed behind her. Maylee watched the water on the floor spreading from wall to wall, sink to door.

“Maylee,” said Dalton.

“Hold on,” she said, waiting. The heater burned her hands. She held it as loosely as she could. The water covered the entire floor now. It kept pouring from the sink.

“Maylee!”

“I said wait!”

The door shook and slammed open. Corpses stumbled into the room. The one in front was a muscular man missing one arm. Thick blood ran down his side from the stump where his arm had been. He groaned and came for Dalton and Maylee. His feet splashed in the water.

Maylee screamed and flung the space heater to the floor. It hit the water and sparks shot from it. There was a loud crackling sound and the corpses shook violently. They convulsed and twitched. Sparks flew from the heater and from the outlet. Dark fluid oozed from the corpses' mouths.

The outlet and heater gave out one last spark and the room went dark. The corpses all fell into the water, still.

For a moment Maylee panted and stared at them. Her hands smarted. The running water in the sink was the only sound.

“How did you know that would work?” said Dalton.

“I didn't. I just hoped shocking the brain would hurt them.”

Then she heard Mom screaming.

“Mom!” she yelled, leaping from the toilet. She hit the water and nearly slid into the wall. She stepped over the still corpses as quickly as she could and got her bat. Behind her, Dalton jumped off the toilet.

“Come on!” she said. She ran to Dalton and grabbed his hand. Holding the bat in the other hand, she pulled him from the bathroom.

\* \* \*

“Dalton!” screamed Angie as she backed toward the car. Corpses stumbled toward her from both sides of the gas station. “Maylee!”

Angie backed up until she met the metal of the car. She had to

### ASHTON MEMORIAL

get to her kids. Her insides screamed at her to do it. But how? There were too many of them. The cold rain pounded all around her. Corpses stumbled through it, toward her.

The lights in the gas station flickered, then went dark. The display on the pump went out.

Angie screamed at the corpses coming for her. She wanted to rip them apart with her bare hands. One got close enough for Angie to reach. Angie rushed up and shoved it backward. It moaned, reaching for her as it fell backward into the corpses behind it.

“You bastards!” she bellowed at the corpses. Into the rain. She felt like she was losing her mind. She heard moans behind her and saw corpses approaching the car from the rear.

She screamed and ran at the corpses, stopping when she nearly tripped on the gas hose. A corpse, a woman with a torn throat and ripped cheek, hissed at her. Angie screamed back and pulled the nozzle from the tank. She flung the hard metal nozzle at the corpse. The nozzle cracked against the corpse’s head and it went down.

“Mom!” she heard from behind her. She turned to see Maylee and Dalton run from the side of the station. Maylee let go of Dalton's hand and started swinging her bat.

“Maylee, no!” yelled Angie.

\* \* \*

Maylee rounded the corner, pulling Dalton with her. Cold rain fell everywhere, running into her eyes. Corpses were everywhere, their backs to Maylee. Mom was at the car. The corpses closed in around her.

“Mom!” yelled Maylee. She let go of Dalton's hand and gripped her bat with both hands. She swung at the head of the nearest corpse. Its skull cracked and it went down.

“Maylee, no!” yelled Mom, sounding very far away through the moaning corpses and the pounding rain.

“Maylee!” yelled Dalton somewhere behind her.

“Stay close to me!” yelled Maylee, swinging wildly. “We gotta get to Mom!”

Corpses turned and moaned at her. At Dalton. Maylee swung as

ROBERT A. BEST

fast and hard as she could, but knew there were too many. She'd made a mistake.

Maylee swung and Dalton clung to her back. The corpses closed in.

\* \* \*

Angie screamed in anguish as she watched the corpses close on her children. She grabbed hold of the gas hose and pulled the metal nozzle back to her. She ran to the front of the car and swung the hose to her left. The nozzle connected with three corpses' heads, one after the other. The corpses fell back.

"Maylee!" she screamed. "Dalton!" She swung the hose to the right, knocking three more corpses to the side. She swung the hose over her head, whirling the nozzle round and round. The corpses groaned and tried to draw near, but the nozzle slammed into any corpse who got close.

Angie heard a loud crash and looked to the gas station. The large window in the front of the station exploded outward and Park fell out into the rain.

"Park!" Angie yelled. She swung the hose over her head round and round, keeping the corpses at bay. "The kids!" She felt tears coming, mingling with the rain. "The kids!"

\* \* \*

Park fell out onto the pavement as the window exploded around him. He'd had no time to get to the door. The little girl climbed toward him, over the fallen shelves.

Blinking through the rain, he saw corpses everywhere. "Fuck," he said. Then he saw Angie swinging the gas hose in large circles, using the nozzle to hold the corpses off.

"Park!" she yelled through the rain. "The kids! The kids!"

Park looked to his side and saw Maylee and Dalton. Maylee held the corpses off with her bat but was seconds away from losing. The corpses moved in close, too many for Maylee to keep up with.

"Hey!" yelled Park at the corpses. "Over here!" He yelled as loud as he could, so loud his throat hurt.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Hey!” he repeated, running up and shoving the corpse nearest him. It turned and moaned at him. It was an old man with exposed ribs and yellow, rotting teeth.

“That’s right dickhead!” he yelled, shoving the corpse again. “More meat over here! Hey fuckers! Over here!”

The old man moved toward him, but the others stayed focused on Maylee and Dalton.

“Shit hell fuck!” yelled Park. He took the rifle from his shoulder and fired once, into the air. More of the corpses turned to face him. “That was one, you dumb-fuck bastards! You better look! Come on!” He took a few steps backward and they followed him.

“Get to the car!” Park yelled to Maylee and Dalton, then ran back into the now-dark gas station, leading the corpses with him.

\* \* \*

Angie swung the hose round and round, watching as a large group of corpses followed Park into the gas station. As the group of corpses disappeared into the building, Angie saw Maylee and Dalton. Maylee was swinging her bat and Dalton clung to her back. They both looked unharmed.

“Maylee! Dalton!” she yelled. “Over here!”

Maylee saw her and grabbed Dalton’s hand. They both ran for the car, rain pounding down around them.

Angie heard a moan from her left. She looked, still swinging the hose, and saw a corpse drawing near. It was a short man, short enough to get under the swinging nozzle. Then Angie realized he was missing his legs from below the knee. It hobbled toward her on raw, bleeding stumps, reaching for her and gurgling.

Angie screamed and swung the nozzle downward. It cracked across the corpse’s jaw, sending bloody teeth flying. The nozzle followed through to the pavement, sending up sparks as it slammed against it. Angie kicked the corpse back and swung the hose back over her head.

She grunted, swinging it in a wide arc over her head. It connected with several corpses’ skulls, knocking them aside.

Maylee and Dalton drew near. “Duck under the hose!” Angie

ROBERT A. BEST

yelled. They did, joining her in the circle of protection provided by the swinging hose.

“Are either of you hurt?” Angie yelled.

“No!” yelled Maylee.

Angie let out a relieved sigh. “Good. Now get to the car!”

Angie backed up, swinging the hose round and round. The kids backed up with her. Slowly, inch by inch, they made their way to the car. Angie kept swinging, careful to keep the hose high enough to avoid hitting the car.

“Get inside!” she yelled when they reached it.

Maylee and Dalton ran to the back seat and scrambled inside. Angie heard them shut the door. She gave the hose one last swing then let it go, aiming for the nearest corpse's head. The nozzle connected with a loud “pop” and the corpse went down.

Angie ran to the car. She wrenched open the driver's door and climbed inside. She slammed it shut as the corpses closed in. Rain pounded on the hood and roof.

She started the engine and pulled the shifter into drive. She slammed on the gas and the car shot forward, running down several corpses.

“Mom,” said Dalton. “What about Mr. Park?”

Angie gunned the engine and turned the steering wheel.

\* \* \*

Park pushed open the door to the gas station and ran inside. The corpses behind filed in after him, moaning and reaching. It was dark inside. The power had gone out and the storm outside allowed for little sunlight.

He ran for the back of the room, hoping for a back door, a window, anything. He was quickly lost in the dark.

He felt around the back wall for a door handle. He found one but it wouldn't turn. It was locked. He heard the corpses behind him drawing close, moaning and hissing.

A familiar hiss came from his right and he felt a small corpse wrap itself around his leg. The girl.

“Shit!” he yelled, kicking her free of his leg. She flew off into the dark, slamming into something Park couldn't see. The kicking motion



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

twisted Park around and he stumbled to one side.

The corpses pressed forward, backing him into a corner. He tried to bring up the rifle but there was no room. It was dark and their fingers closed on his clothing. *My girls*, he thought. *Gotta get to my girls*.

Suddenly the gas station lit up red. Crimson light from outside backlit the corpses into black groaning shapes.

The red light focused into taillights, racing toward the station. There was a huge crash and the wall exploded inward. Corpses groaned and splattered as Angie's car hurtled backward into the room. Park pressed himself against the wall. The car flew past him.

It came to a stop with the front passenger door nearby. It opened. Angie was leaning across from the driver's seat, holding open the door. "Get in!" she yelled. "Now!"

Park raced to the car and climbed inside.

\* \* \*

Angie straightened back up in the driver's seat as Park climbed into the passenger side and shut the door.

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem," said Angie, pulling the shifter into drive. "You'll just need to pay for any trunk damage."

She gunned the engine. The car shot forward through the gas station. Two corpses stepped into view but were immediately knocked aside. The car bucked and rocked over debris and screeched its way back into the parking lot. Rain pounded onto the windshield and roof. Angie turned on the wipers but they did little good.

Angie spun the wheel to the right, barely avoiding the gas pumps. Corpses pawed at the car as it raced by, leaving bloody stains on the windows. The pounding rain quickly washed the blood away.

"You okay?" she said, steering the car back to the road.

"Yeah," said Park, nodding. He put one hand on the dashboard for support as the car swayed from side to side, avoiding staggering corpses.

"Good," said Angie. The car reached the road and she banked hard onto it. The back wheels of the car slid on the wet road and she nearly lost control.

## ROBERT R. BEST

“Mom, look out!” said Maylee from the back seat.

“I’ve got it Maylee!” she snapped, steering the car back straight. “I told you to stay in the car!”

She raced toward the exit. The freeway was close now. A few cars went by through the rain, but not nearly enough for this time of day. Angie was going close to 80 miles an hour.

“Mom, the things are gone! We’re okay!”

Angie steered the car onto the exit, not slowing down. “I’ll decide when you’re okay!”

The car roared down the exit ramp.

“Mom!” screamed Maylee, real fear in her voice.

Angie slammed on the brakes as a semi raced by, inches from the car. The semi’s horn bellowed in complaint. The car’s tires slid in the rain for several more seconds before coming to a halt.

Angie opened the door and vomited onto the street. She panted and gasped, letting the rain run over her head. Her head spun and her body shook.

“Mom?” said Maylee.

“What is it, Maylee?” said Angie, still facing the pavement with the rain running down her cheeks.

“I never got to pee.”

Angie sighed and nodded. She straightened back up and shut the door. She looked at Park.

“You drive.”

# TWO

Ella bit her thumb and paced the Communications Office of Ashton Memorial Zoo. She didn't know where her mom was. She didn't know where her twin sister Lori was. She didn't like it. It made her nervous. Especially with the stories of what was going on outside.

She paced past screens, speakers and microphones. All shiny and new. She didn't know how they all worked but her stepdad talked about them constantly. The whole zoo connected. Everyone able to talk to everyone else.

So why couldn't she talk to Mom and Lori?

Caleb sat at the main desk. Caleb was a college student, working part-time at the zoo while he studied to be a vet. He was nice.

"Where are they?" said Ella, to no one in particular.

"With your dad," said Caleb. He had short blonde hair and sideburns, and wore his zookeeper vest loose and wrinkled.

"Not my dad," said Ella.

"Your stepdad, then."

"You're a wealth of information."

"Don't be a smart-ass, Ella," said Shelley. Shelley also worked at the zoo. She was Caleb's girlfriend. She walked over to where Caleb sat.

"You're not my mother," said Ella. "If you were my mother you'd look like my mother, and that's how I'd know you were my mother and not Shelley." She bit her thumb and kept pacing.

Shelley gave her a look as she walked away. "Don't be rough on her," she heard Caleb say to Shelley. "She's worried."

"She's a weirdo," said Tom, walking in from the attached breakroom full of Keepers. "Keeper" was short for zookeeper. It was a nickname most of them used. Ella knew Tom considered himself the unofficial leader of the Keepers. The only Keepers who didn't accept his leadership were Caleb and Shelley.

"And we're all fucking worried," Tom continued. "Turn the outside cameras back on."

Caleb shook his head. "No point."

ROBERT A. BEST

“Screw your point from behind, asshole,” said Tom.

Ella turned to Tom. “That sentence made absolutely no sense.”

“You don't make any sense, whack job,” said Tom. “You wrote *Steve* on the back of my chair. My name's not Steve.”

“First, Tom, it's not your chair, it's a chair that belongs to the zoo that you happen to like to sit in. Second, I know Steve's not your name, it's the chair's name. I can write *Tom* on you if you like.”

“Just keep away from me, weirdo,” said Tom. “I don't care if you are the boss's daughter.”

“Stepdaughter.”

“Whatever.” He turned his attention back to Caleb. “Turn the cameras back on, pussy. I wanna see more of the freaks. If we're stuck here, we might as well have fun.”

“Fun?” said Caleb. “Are you insane? My parents are out there!”

“I didn't see your parents earlier,” said Tom. “Are they all fucked up?”

“You know what I mean, Tom. Out there in the city. I haven't been able to reach them.” Caleb pulled out his cell phone and checked it. He frowned and put it back in his pocket.

“My grandma's in a nursing home,” said Shelley, wrapping her arms around herself and frowning at the floor. “I have no idea if she's okay.”

“Hey, dumbshits,” said Tom, throwing out his arms. “I just turned psychic! No one out there is fucking okay! It's just us trapped in the zoo and the crazy shit outside. We're all that's left.”

“You don't know that,” said Ella.

“It's obvious,” said Tom. “You get straight A's and shit, you should know better.”

“A's aren't straight,” said Ella. “They're sort of like triangles.”

Tom shook his head. “Fucking weirdo.”

A two-tone chime came from the speakers set around the room. *Bing-bong*. Caleb spun his chair back to face the bank of buttons and dials.

Gregory's voice came from the speakers. Ella still called him Gregory, despite Lori's insistence on calling him Dad. *Dad* was an inaccurate label. An inaccurate name. And there was no socially-accepted label for her stepdad. Ella tried just calling him Stepdad from time to time. “Hello, Stepdad,” she'd say, but everyone said that was

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

too weird, even for her.

“Good morning, Keepers,” said Gregory's amplified voice.

“Sir!” said Caleb, leaning into a microphone and clicking a button. “Sir, where are you?”

“Is that you, Caleb?” said Gregory. “How nice to hear from you. How are you doing this morning, young man?”

Caleb frowned. “Fine, sir, fine. But where are you?”

Silence came from the speakers for a moment. Ella and the others looked around at each other, puzzled. Tom rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

Finally, Gregory's voice returned. “I'm afraid I cannot divulge my location at this present time. Things are ... complex. And dangerous.”

Ella walked over and pushed past Caleb. She leaned into the microphone. “Stepdad? I mean, Gregory? Where's Mom? Where's Lori?”

“Ella, is that you?” said Gregory's voice. “Thank goodness. I'm glad you're safe. The safety of you and your sister are very important to me.”

Ella sighed. “Where's Lori? Where's...”

“Lori's with me, Ella. She's here, she's safe.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“I can't right now, Ella. And I'm so sorry. She's not able to talk at the moment. She's had a terrible shock.”

Ella blinked at the microphone. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I'm afraid you're about to have the same shock too, Ella. I wish I could tell you in person but circumstances are preventing that. Please, sit down.”

Ella remained standing.

“Are you sitting?”

“No.”

“Please, Ella, sit.”

Ella sighed and moved one of the chairs back and forth, causing the wheels to squeak. She didn't sit.

“Are you sitting now?”

“Yes.”

And he told her. He told her how Mom had changed into one of

## ROBERT A. BEST

those things outside. How he had barely saved Lori from her. How he had rushed Lori to the safety of the zoo and was hiding her until he was sure they were safe. Ella stopped hearing words. Her blood rushed in her ears and hot tears ran down her cheeks. Caleb and the others were silent.

“Mom's dead?” said Ella.

“Yes, child, yes. She almost got your sister, too. But I saved her. I'll save you too. I'll save all of you.”

Shelley walked over to put a hand on Ella's shoulder. Ella snapped her shoulder away, shaking violently. “Mom's dead?”

“Yes, Ella, yes. I know how you feel. My wife of all these years. Your mother. But I'm your father and...”

Ella leaned into the microphone and screamed, “You're not my fucking father! Give me back my sister!”

\* \* \*

Angie sat in the passenger seat, watching the freeway speed by. The rain had let up somewhat. Park sat in the driver's seat, steering the car. Maylee and Dalton were asleep in the back seat.

“You're gonna have to sleep soon,” said Park.

“I know,” said Angie. “I just can't yet. I'm still shaking.”

They were both silent for a moment, driving through the gray rain.

“Look at that,” said Park, nodding out the window.

Angie looked and saw what had once been a graveyard. Every grave had been dug open, leaving a ragged and empty hole. “My god,” she said, quietly.

“What the hell is doing this?” said Park.

Angie shrugged, her shoulders aching. “I dunno. A virus maybe?”

Park snorted. “No. You know how hard it would be to dig yourself out of a grave? These things aren't much stronger than a living person would be. No way a virus dug them out of their graves.”

Angie watched the graveyard disappear past the window and listened to the click of the windshield wipers. She looked over at Park. “What are you saying?”

“This is a plague.”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“So like a virus, then.”

“No, not that kind of plague.” Park scratched at his beard, watching the road. “An old-fashioned, Bible-shit style plague. Locusts and shit like that.”

Angie turned back to the window, saying nothing. Way off in the distance, she saw a corpse stumbling alone through a field. It staggered from side to side, reaching at nothing.

“This,” said Park, “is a curse.”

They both fell silent. Angie laid her head against the cool glass of the window. Her head bumped along with every rough spot in the road, but she was too tired to care. She stared at the gray pavement going by.

“You asleep?” said Park after a few minutes.

“No,” said Angie, not moving her head.

“You should be.”

“I know,” said Angie. She lifted her head up and turned to look at the kids sleeping in the back. Her eyes lingered on Maylee. Park glanced at Angie, then back at Maylee. He turned back to the road.

“I know it's not my place,” he said, quietly, “but you sure give her a lot of shit.”

Angie looked at Park. Part of her brain felt like it should be angry at him for what he said, but she was too tired to muster it.

“It's not your place,” she said, almost at a whisper. She looked back at Maylee again for a moment, then turned back to face the road.

Angie sighed. “She turns fifteen in a few days.”

Park watched the road for a moment, then smirked over at her. “You worried about finding her a present?”

Angie smirked back. “Not that. I'm thirty, Park. My oldest child is about to turn fifteen. Figure it out.”

Park nodded. “You were fifteen.”

Angie nodded. “Yeah.”

“That doesn't mean she'll do the same thing.”

“I know. But it doesn't matter.”

And they were both silent again. Angie laid her head back against the headrest. She closed her eyes and focused on the rocking of the car.

*Angie sits crying on the living room floor. She hears Dalton*

ROBERT A. BEST

*wailing in his crib. Maylee is asleep in her room, Angie thinks. Then she berates herself for being stupid. How can a kid sleep through all this screaming?*

*Jake stands with his hand on the doorknob. He has his coat on and his car keys in his hands. Their car keys. They only have the one car. He looks down at Angie without expression.*

*"We're done," he says. "I'm sorry."*

*"Fuck you you're not sorry!" screams Angie, sobbing. "If you were sorry you wouldn't be doing this!"*

*"Whether I'm sorry or not, this is what I'm fucking doing. I can't take this. I can't take the sobbing kids, our crappy lives or you. I'm done." He turns the handle and opens the door.*

*"What the hell are we supposed to do?" Angie says. She has no job and no experience. She's never worked. She and Jake married while she was in high school. He always worked. Angie stayed home. That's how they'd planned it. That was what their lives were going to be. They'd stayed up nights talking about it, before Maylee was even born.*

*"Whatever the fuck you want," says Jake. "That's not the point. The point here is that I don't care, Angie." He opens the door and walks out. Angie sobs as the door slams shut. Dalton wails from his crib and Angie somehow knows that Maylee is awake and listening.*

*She realizes she's dreaming and anger floods through her. Now-Angie is furious at Then-Angie. Get up, she wants to scream. Quit crying! She realizes that since this is a dream, she can change things if she wants. She can revise history so she gets up, chases Jake down and punches him in the face. But she knows there's no point. No point to playacting with herself in her sleep.*

*She stares through her Then-eyes at the floor. The stained carpet. The messy room. Chaos. She's never felt so out of control. Helpless.*

*No, thinks Now-Angie, blinking Then-Angie's eyes. Never Again.*

*Angie jerked awake and pulled up from the headrest. She looked around, disoriented. The landscape outside had changed from farms and truck stops to strip malls and fast food.*

*"We're closer," she said, rubbing her eyes.*

*"Yep," said Park, steering the car. "You got a good hour there. Feeling better?"*

*Angie nodded.*

*"Good," said Park, smirking at her. "Don't want you yakking on*



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

me.”

Angie said nothing, staring out the driver’s side window. “Oh my god.”

The other side of the freeway, the side leading away from Ashton, was packed full of unmoving cars. Two unending lines of stopped cars, stretching back and ahead as far as Angie could make out.

“Yeah,” said Park. “Been like that for miles.” He nodded at the road in front of them. There were just a few cars ahead of them, moving at roughly the same speed they were. Other than that their side was empty. “We’re all the only ones stupid enough to be headed *to* Ashton.”

Angie glanced back to the kids. Still asleep. She turned back to face the road. “Must be bad there.”

“I think the theme of today is that it’s bad everywhere.”

Up ahead, on the other side of the freeway, a car broke away from the others and raced across the grassy strip dividing the two sides. It drove up onto their side and down the wrong direction, toward their car.

“Shit!” said Park, wrenching the wheel to one side. They swerved and the car raced by them, speeding the wrong way down the freeway. The cars in front of them swerved back and forth. “Asshole!”

Angie and Park had seconds to notice that a truck had followed the first car.

“Goddammit!” yelled Park, slamming on the brakes. The truck collided with one of the cars up ahead. Glass flew across the pavement as the car and truck spun around each other. A few spins and they stopped, steam rising from both engines. Park turned the wheel hard and the car skidded sideways, stopping inches from the wreck.

Angie looked to the back seat. Both kids were wide awake and staring.

“You guys okay?” Angie said.

Maylee and Dalton nodded. “What happened?” said Dalton.

“Some people are fucking stupid,” said Park. “That’s what happened.”

“Are they hurt?” said Maylee, leaning forward.

“Who cares?” said Park, putting the car into reverse and backing up.

ROBERT R. BEST

“Parker!” yelled Angie. Park glanced at her and stopped the car.

“What?”

Angie leaned in to whisper, sharp and brittle. “You will not talk to my children that way.” She leaned back and spoke at a normal volume. “Maylee might be right. We should check on them.”

“They’re the idiots. They almost got us killed.”

“Not the other car. The ones they hit.”

Park shrugged as if to indicate she had a point. “Fine. Let’s check.”

He and Angie undid their seat belts and opened their doors. Angie turned to Dalton and Maylee in the back. “Stay here.”

Angie shut her door and looked up the road to the wreck. The truck and car were badly crumpled. Neither looked remotely drivable. She saw movement inside both.

“They’re moving in there,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Park, shutting his door and readying his rifle. “But that could mean fucking anything nowadays.”

Angie nodded. “You just have two shots left?”

Park nodded.

“Let’s be careful then.”

They both walked toward the wreck. Angie glanced over at the long line of cars filling up the other side of the freeway. She saw people staring at her, Park and the wreck.

The truck shook as they approached. The driver’s side door opened with a loud creak. A man climbed out, crawling across the seat on his hands and knees, and stood shakily on the road. He had a ball cap and a work shirt that read *Chuck*. He saw Angie and Park approaching.

“Everyone okay?” said Angie, tension creeping up her back. Was the guy even alive?

Chuck looked around, blinking his eyes. Then he rushed to Angie and Park. He moved like one in pain, using a kind of limping run, but moved faster than any of the corpses Angie had seen so far.

Both she and Park stopped.

“You better say something soon, buddy,” said Park, aiming the rifle.

“What?” said Chuck, seeing the gun and stopping. “Don’t shoot! I’m still alive. I just need your car.”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

He resumed limp-running toward them. Angie took a step back. Park cocked the rifle.

“Well, that ain't fucking going to happen,” said Park. “Sorry buddy.”

“No!” yelled Chuck, stopping and whipping his cap off in frustration. “You have to! I have to get to my fiancé! You don't understand!” He had a wild look that made Angie nervous.

“We understand,” she said, holding up her hands in a gesture she hoped would stop him from coming any farther. “There's nothing we can do. We can't give you our car.”

Park stepped forward, still aiming the rifle. “So turn the fuck back, buddy. I've seen a lot scarier than you in the last 24 hours and I'm getting to my fucking girls!”

Chuck stopped, looking honestly, tragically confused. Angie noticed blood creeping from his hairline. *Shit*, she thought. *He's hurt*. She considered calling an ambulance, but knew full well none would come. Not today.

“But...” Chuck started.

“Hey!” came a voice from behind Chuck. “Asshole!” Chuck turned to look. Angie and Park looked past him. The driver's door on the wrecked car was open. An older man, Angie guessed maybe in his fifties or sixties, climbed out. His arm was crooked and bleeding. Behind him an older woman climbed from the passenger seat. “Norman?” she called.

“Stay in the car, Martha!” yelled the older man, presumably Norman. Martha limped to the back seat. A much older woman sat limply there.

“Sir?” said Angie. “Are you okay? We saw the accident.”

“How nice for you,” said Norman, walking toward them. “Now give me your fucking car!” Angie noticed something in his good hand, swinging with him as he walked. A crowbar.

“This is nuts,” said Park, slinging the rifle over his shoulder and holding up his hands. “You both have your little wreck party, we're going.” He turned to Angie. “Aren't we?”

She looked at her car, at the kids, then at Chuck and the approaching Norman. She sighed. “Yeah.”

They both turned and moved toward the car.

ROBERT A. BEST

“Hey!” said Norman from behind them. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

Angie saw something hit Park in the back. It was shiny and fell to the ground with a jingling sound. She and Park stopped.

Park looked to the ground, then at Norman. “Did you just throw your fucking keys, old man?”

“You’re giving me your fucking car, hillbilly!” said Norman, still coming.

Chuck blinked at Norman. “Does your car work?”

“You shut up,” said Norman, pointing at Chuck as he walked past him. “This is your fault!” Then he pointed at Angie and Park. “And you! I’m taking your car! My mother has to get to her heart doctor in Ashton.”

“Listen, sir,” said Angie, growing increasingly nervous with each step the man took. “Maybe we can give you and your family a ride.”

“I never said anything about sharing, redneck bitch! I said you were giving me your fucking car!”

Angie heard a door on her car open. She turned and saw Maylee climb from the back seat. “Mom?” said Maylee.

“Get back in the car, Maylee!” said Angie, turning back to the older man.

“No, get out of the car!” said Norman, still swinging the crowbar with each step. “Everybody out of the car!”

“Please!” said Chuck, reaching out and grabbing Norman’s shoulder. Norman wrenched away.

“Keep your fucking hands off me!” he yelled, swinging the crowbar at Chuck. It connected with Chuck’s chest. A loud sharp “crack” rang out. Chuck staggered back, blinking in surprise. Norman panted.

Chuck reached up to his chest. He opened his mouth to speak and blood leaked out. He swayed, then fell backward and was still.

“Great!” yelled Norman crazily. “Just great. Now he’s dead and they’ll blame me!”

Angie and Park took slow steps backward. Toward the car. Park slid the rifle strap from his shoulder. “I really don’t want to waste the bullet, buddy. So back off!”

“You!” said Norman, pointing the crowbar at Angie. “You saw him! He attacked me! He might have been turning into one of those

ASHTON MEMORIAL

things!”

Martha gave a moaning cry from the back seat of the wrecked car. “Norman!”

Norman either didn't hear or ignored her. He stepped toward Angie and Park. “Now give me the car and we'll call it even.”

“You're not making the slightest little bit of fucking sense, asshole,” said Park.

“Fuck you!” yelled the man, raising the crowbar and running at Park.

“Get to the car!” yelled Park to Angie. He moved to shoot. Angie moved to block Norman's run. There was no way he was getting to her kids.

“Norman!” shrieked Martha. Norman stopped mid-run and frowned. He turned back to face the wrecked car. “What the fuck is it, woman? I'm getting the car! We're getting her to the doctor.”

“She's dead! Your mother is dead!” Martha yelled. The back door of the wrecked car was open. She sat in the back seat with her legs out and feet on the road. The much older woman, Angie guessed Norman's mother, lay across her lap. Norman's mother was still.

“What?” said Norman.

Martha was crying. “She must have died in the wreck!”

Norman took a faltering step toward the wreck, then stopped. “Mom?”

Norman's mother sat up and bit into Martha's cheek. Martha gasped in surprise, then screamed. Blood, thick and red, poured from her wound and down Norman's mother's face. Norman's mother reared back, tearing free a long strip of flesh from Martha's cheek. Martha shrieked, the muscles in her face exposed and flexing. Norman's mother moaned greedily and chewed.

“Martha!” yelled Norman, running back toward the wrecked car. Norman's mother leaned back up and buried her wrinkled face into Martha's throat. Martha's shrieks turned to gurgles. Norman's mother's head bobbed back and forth as she chewed. Martha kicked and convulsed, blood and foamed saliva dripping from her mouth. Her eyes rolled back into her head.

“Martha! Mom!” Norman yelled, stopping in the road and staring. “No!”

ROBERT R. BEST

“We gotta go,” said Angie.

“Fuck yeah we do,” said Park.

They turned back toward the car. Angie felt a hand close on her ankle. Angie cried out in surprise. She twisted her head around to see that Chuck had crawled across the pavement. Or rather, his corpse had. He groaned and jerked at her leg. Angie lost her balance and fell face forward onto the street.

“Mom!” yelled Maylee, opening the car door. She had her bat ready.

“Stay in the car, Maylee!” said Angie, lifting her head. She felt blood seeping from a split lip. Maylee stayed where she stood, door open, but did not approach.

Chuck growled, tightening his grip on her leg. Angie flipped over onto her back just in time to see Park aiming the rifle for Chuck's head.

“Don't do it!” she yelled. “Don't waste the bullet! Just get him to let go!”

“Fine, crazy-ass,” said Park. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and kicked at Chuck's arm. The kick was hard. Chuck shook from the impact but did not let go. He moaned a wet, gurgling noise and tugged at Angie.

“Fuck you, you fucking fuck fucker!” said Park, kneeling. “Making me get down on my bad fucking knee. Fuck!” He grabbed Chuck's hand and pried the fingers away from Angie's leg.

Angie scrambled to her feet. She ran the back of her hand across her lip and scowled at the bright smear of blood left behind. Park, still on his knees, wrestled with Chuck. Chuck writhed his arms around and growled. Park struggled to keep hold.

“Keep him down!” yelled Angie, looking around for a blunt weapon. None presented itself. She saw that Norman had turned around. He stared at Chuck and Park. His eyes were wide and he held the crowbar defensively.

She gave Norman a look. “Fuck it,” she whispered. She stepped over to Chuck and brought her foot up over his forehead. She slammed down, pounding the sole of her sneaker against his skull. He blinked and moaned. She grumbled and slammed down again, harder. This time she heard a “crack.” Chuck slowed a little but kept writhing and moaning.

“Fucker!” she yelled and stomped down a third time, so hard the

### ASHTON MEMORIAL

impact jarred her spine. There was a loud “pop” and thick globs of red shot out from behind Chuck's head, spreading across the asphalt. Chuck's arms went limp.

Park let go. Chuck's arms fell to the ground. Chuck was still. Park stood, nodding to Angie.

“I got him ready for you,” he said.

“Sure you did,” she said.

They both looked over at Norman. He was staring, mouth open, at them. The crowbar hung loose in his hand.

Angie dragged the bottom of her sneaker across the road, wiping blood and bits of flesh onto the pavement. She looked at Norman. He stared at her.

“What?” she asked.

He dropped the crowbar, turned and ran. He ran past the wreck, past Martha's corpse and his chewing mother. He ran up the freeway, farther and farther away from Angie and Park.

“Now where's he going?” said Angie.

“Fuck knows,” said Park, shrugging. He scratched at his beard. “Back to the car?”

Angie nodded. “Yeah. I'll drive.”

# THREE

Ella watched a tapir wander back and forth in its exhibit. The red-brown animal shuffled its feet and sniffed the air nervously with its snout.

“Gary's upset,” said Ella, leaning on the railing that separated the public from the exhibit. Beyond that was a deep concrete ditch to keep the tapirs from escaping. Beyond that was a fairly convincing re-creation of the creature's South American habitat. “He can tell what's going on outside.”

Tom stepped up next to her, pulling his Keeper vest around himself in an attempt to block the fall wind. “How the hell can you even tell them apart?”

Ella rolled her eyes at him, pointing at the different tapirs in order. “That's Gary, that's Ricky, that's Bella, and that's Steve.”

“Steve?” said Shelley. She stood next to Tom, her arms crossed. “The same Steve as the chair in the breakroom?” She nodded to the tapir Ella had last indicated. “Is that his chair?”

“Yes.” Ella nodded. “But he can't sit in it because he's a tapir.”

Shelley shook her head, looking flustered, and walked away. Ella smiled. She liked flustering Shelley.

“Where's my sister, Gary?” said Ella to the first tapir.

“I doubt he knows, Ella,” said Caleb from behind her.

“I know,” said Ella, turning. Caleb adjusted a rifle on his shoulder. Several other Keepers stood behind him. The closest, a young man just out of high school, nodded at the rifle.

“Do you think we'll need that?” he said, looking nervous. He pushed his greasy black hair back and rubbed his hand across his face.

“It's just tranquilizer darts, Lee,” said Caleb. “In case one of the animals got out during the confusion yesterday.”

Ella shuddered, remembering the day before. It had been late afternoon and she and Lori had told the bus driver to let them off at the zoo. They wanted to visit Mom. Lori complained about having to still take the bus.

“Another year,” Lori said, “and I'll have a car.”



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Nope.” Ella shook her head as they walked across the zoo's parking lot. “Just me. Mom said. She also said I could paint it to look like a spaceship.”

“She said no such thing,” said Lori, sticking her hands in the pockets of her denim jacket and drawing in her arms to block the cold.

“Don't worry,” said Ella. “I'll give you rides. But you'll have to wear an astronaut helmet.”

Lori rolled her eyes and Ella chuckled. It would be the last good thing that day.

They made their way into the zoo and to the Communications Office. “Hey girls,” Mom said, stepping over and hugging both of them in turn as they entered. “I gotta run back home real quick. Your dad's...”

“Stepdad's,” Ella said, quietly.

“...car is acting up. I need to give him a ride back here.”

“I'll go with you,” said Lori.

“Sure,” said Mom, smiling. She looked at Ella. “You coming, El?”

Ella thought about it, then made the decision that would later make her chest hurt. “Nope. I'll wait here.”

So off they went. Ella spent a good thirty minutes making Caleb switch the view screens from camera to camera so she could look at the different animals. Then Lee ran in from the breakroom, pale and wide-eyed.

“There's something bad on the news,” he said. Ella and the others followed Lee back to the breakroom and crowded around the small TV.

They saw a group of people holding down a screaming woman in front of a grocery store. The woman grunted and jerked, trying to pull free. A cop ran over, the news camera jerking to follow him, and pulled the people off her. He bent down to help her up and she bit into the cop's neck. The cop pulled away, clutching his neck in shock as blood ran through his fingers. He fell to his knees as the woman crawled to him. The group ran, knocking the camera over.

Within a few minutes of channel surfing, they had gleaned what was happening. Corpses were moving and indiscriminately eating. Clip after clip of people running or dying. Sometimes both. And the ones that were dead got up and attacked. Caleb flipped to another local

## ROBERT A. BEST

channel and they watched the grocery store footage again.

“Wait,” said Shelley, leaning in closer to the TV. “Oh my god, I know that store. It's three blocks away.”

They all rushed back to the Communications Office. Caleb switched on as many screens as he could at once. The cameras outside the zoo all showed corpses gathering. Mangled and misshapen people, bent and torn and gnashing their rotten teeth. The cameras inside the zoo showed no sign of them. Just visitors wandering the zoo, most of them oblivious. A few were on cell phones and looking very worried.

“Lock it down!” yelled Tom. “Before those fuckers get in!”

“But Mom!” said Ella. “Lori!”

Caleb looked at Tom, then at Ella. “I'm sorry, Ella. Your mom has a keycard for when they get back.”

He flipped open the panel that controlled the electronic locking system Gregory had recently installed. Another of his advances he was so proud of. The panel had two lines of switches. The ones for the animal cages were lit up red. The ones for the doors were lit up green. Caleb flipped all the door switches to red, using his palms to flip as many at once as he could.

“No!” said Ella, stepping back and biting her thumb. She reached in her jeans pocket for her cell phone. Her heart dropped when the pocket was empty. She'd left her phone at home. She'd complained about it all day at school. It was a minor annoyance then. Now it was devastating

Caleb looked at her and shook his head. “I'm sorry. We have to keep everyone safe.”

The TV showed increasingly worse images, culminating in graveyards filled with holes, some with corpses still clawing their way out. Any graveyard anywhere could easily produce hundreds of the things at once. Almost everywhere was overrun within hours.

As the night went on, they slowly lost all contact with the outside world. The TV channels went out one by one. Then the radio channels followed. Finally, the Keepers were no longer able to reach loved ones on their cell phones.

Finally, somewhere around 3 A.M., Gregory's voice came over the speakers. He said everything was fine, he was in the zoo and he would share more later. Before he clicked off, Ella thought she heard Lori screaming.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Where did he call from?” Ella said, rushing over to the controls.

Caleb looked at screens Ella didn't understand. He frowned. “I can't tell. That's weird. I should be able to tell.”

Then nothing the rest of the night nor into the morning, until the second call from Gregory came. The one where he told Ella her mother was dead and he had her sister. He had her sister and wouldn't tell her where. He'd hung up after she'd screamed at him. Again, Caleb had not been able to tell where he called from.

A brief meeting had been held then among the Keepers. It was decided it was light now and the zoo appeared to be clear. They would look for Gregory and Lori themselves. Once they were all together, they could wait out the chaos outside. There was food in vending machines and in Zoo Bites, the overpriced restaurant set in the center of the zoo. There were water fountains. They could last for weeks if need be.

Ella looked at Gary the tapir, then down at the concrete ditch keeping him in the exhibit. Tom nodded at the ditch, then looked back at Caleb. “I don't see how the animals could get past those. Isn't that the point?”

“Not this way,” said Caleb, indicating the front of the exhibit. “That way.” He pointed to the back, behind Gary and his habitat. Set in the back wall, in concrete made to look like stone, was a door. The red light next to the door indicated it was locked.

Ella nodded, looking at the door. Behind it and the concrete wall was a large cage, also locked with its own red light. The cages were used when the weather was really bad. The chances of both locks being accidentally opened were slim, especially with the electronic system Gregory had installed.

“Gary's still locked in,” said Ella. “Red light says so.”

“What happens if the power goes out?” said Lee.

“Everything defaults to locked,” said Caleb. He jingled keys on his belt. “That's why we still have old-fashioned keys.”

Caleb adjusted the tranquilizer rifle on his shoulder. “We ready?” Everyone nodded.

“Then let's find them.”

They slowly made their way from building to building, looking. All the animals they came across were still safely in their exhibits. Ella

## ROBERT A. BEST

gave them each a little wave as she passed. She grew more and more nervous as hours went by with no sign of Lori or Stepdad, but interacting with the animals made her feel a little better.

The group rounded a corner. Ella looked around. To her left was the giraffe exhibit. A giraffe stuck out his long tongue to grab at the dried leaves clinging to a nearby tree.

“Hey Lenny,” said Ella quietly. “Sorry you're hungry. No one fed you yesterday.”

She turned and saw a small administration building set behind a vending machine. Caleb walked toward it, keycard in hand. He pressed the card up to a panel to the right of the door. A light on the panel changed from red to green. Caleb opened the door and went inside. A moment later, he came back out, shaking his head.

“Nope,” he said. “Not in there.”

“Hey!” a strange voice yelled from one side. They all turned to see a balding man stomping up the concrete path toward them. He wore jeans and an *Ashton Tigers* T-shirt under a thin jacket. Behind him stood a woman and two teenage boys. They all also wore *Tigers* T-shirts.

Caleb blinked in surprise, then stepped toward the man. “Can I help you sir?”

“You can let us the motherfuck out of here is what you can fucking do!”

Tom stepped over, in front of Caleb. “Okay, dude, time to settle down.”

“You'll settle down on my dick!” The man jabbed a finger at Tom, then walked past him to confront Caleb.

“What seems to be the problem sir?” said Caleb. Ella knew what it was. She couldn't believe they'd all forgotten last night. She knew what the man was about to say.

“The problem,” said the man, “is you people locked the damn gates last night! You locked us all in here, you stupid prick!” The man shoved Caleb. Caleb staggered backward. The tranquilizer rifle slipped off his shoulder and clattered to the concrete.

“Caleb!” yelled Shelley, running up behind him and putting her hand on his shoulder.

“You stay out of this bitch!” yelled the man. “Now let us the fuck out! We're cold and hungry and you trapped us in here!”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Caleb held up his hands. "Sir, please, it's dangerous outside."

"I don't give a fuck about a few homeless-looking assholes outside. I'm getting my family home! And you will unlock the gate or I will pound you and your stupid bitch girlfriend into paste!"

"Back off, fucker!" yelled Tom, stepping up and shoving the man.

The man roared and punched Tom across the jaw. Tom staggered back.

Behind Ella, the giraffe shuffled its feet and gave a nervous snort.

The man turned to punch Caleb then stopped as they all heard a rifle cock.

Frozen mid-stance, everyone turned their heads to see Lee holding the tranquilizer rifle. His hands were shaking as he kept the barrel trained on the balding man.

"Everyone just settle down, please!" said Lee.

"Lee," said Caleb.

"You gonna shoot me now?" said the man, face turning red, but staying still. His fist was still up in the air, mid-punch. "You gonna gun down me and my family to cover up your little mistake?"

"It's just a tranquilizer dart, sir," said Caleb. "Please, Lee, put it down."

"No!" said Lee, his voice shaking in time with his arms. "He's crazy. He's crazy and we need to sedate him."

"Lee, it could kill him!" said Shelley.

"No," said Lee. "It's a low dose. Enough for a monkey. Enough for a big punch-happy monkey like fuck-face mcgoo here. I dealt with fuckers like you in high school. Now you calm down or I will calm you down myself!" His shaking voice went up in pitch as he ended the sentence. He panted, ragged and wheezing. He kept the gun trained on the man.

"Dad," said one of the teenage boys behind him.

"Stay out of this, son," said the man, licking his lips and looking among the group of Keepers. "Listen, buddy. We don't want any trouble."

"Fuck you don't," Lee said.

"Lee," said Caleb, taking a slow step toward him.

"Stay back, Caleb!" said Lee.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Tom stepped over quickly and grabbed the barrel of the rifle, moving it a few inches off its target. “Lee, let it go!”

Lee screamed in surprise and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp “crack” as the rifle went off and a whistling noise as the dart flew from it.

The bald man grabbed his throat and stumbled back. Blood shot from between his fingers and over the dart embedded in his throat.

“Dad!” yelled one of the teenage boys, rushing forward.

“Shit, Lee!” yelled Tom. “What the fuck did you do?”

Lee recocked the rifle and pointed it at the rushing boy. “Back!” he yelled. His voice shook violently. “Everybody back! That was an accident! I swear it was an accident.”

The bald man clutched at his neck. Blood raced down his arm and splattered onto the ground. His eyes were wide. He choked and gurgled.

The woman behind the man screamed. The giraffe behind Ella snorted and stamped its feet.

The man's face turned red. He bellowed in rage, blood spattering from his mouth, and rushed at Lee and the other Keepers. Lee screamed and fired again.

With a high-pitched whistle and *thwack* the dart lodged in the man's forehead. The man stopped, legs wobbling. He toppled down and was still.

“Dad!” yelled both the boys in unison. The woman screamed and cried.

Caleb looked around in panic.

“We'll kill you!” yelled one of the boys.

“Run!” yelled Caleb. “Everyone run!”

The Keepers and Ella ran back the way they had come. Ella turned back to see the boys and their mother crowding around the bald man's body.

One of the boys saw Ella. “You're all dead, bitch!” he screamed.

Ella turned and ran.

# FOUR

Ashton was chaos.

Homes were torn open, their contents spilled onto lawns and driveways. Businesses were looted and broken. Bodies littered streets and sidewalks. And everywhere, *everywhere*, corpses wandered and ate.

Angie took side streets everywhere she could. Any time she took a major road, any time she got anywhere close to downtown, she saw mobs of corpses and screaming victims. The asphalt was streaked with blood. The side streets were quieter, more manageable.

Rain pattered on the windshield as she drove up a residential street. The houses were old and packed way too close together. Angie wondered how anyone lived like that. She clicked the wipers on, then off. They squeaked their way across the windshield, smearing the rain more than removing it. The intermittent switch had given out years ago.

“Here,” she said as an apartment complex came up on their left. More rain collected on the windshield. She clicked the wipers on, then off. She turned into the parking lot behind the complex. She had to steer around a car that stuck out from a spot at an odd angle.

Angie stopped in the middle of the parking lot, looking around. She didn't see much point in trying to find a spot. The idea of parking spots seemed to have been abandoned within the last twenty-four hours. Cars were parked crookedly or across multiple spots. A large trash bin had been turned over. Garbage was strewn out across the pavement. A few stray cats sniffed at it.

She put the shifter into park and shut off the engine. Maylee and Dalton snored in the back seat. Angie sighed, looking at the building. As best as she could remember, Bobby's apartment was on the second floor of the two-floor complex.

“This where your brother lives?” said Park, looking at the complex then back at her.

“Yeah,” said Angie.

“You don't seem too thrilled to be here.”

Angie took in a deep breath then let it out. “When my ex, Jake,

## ROBERT A. BEST

left me with the kids, my wonderful brother in there took his side in the divorce. They'd been buddies when we were married. He chose his buddy over me."

"Fuck me," said Park, shaking his head. "You always stick up for family, whether they're right or not."

"Well, I was right, and he stuck up for Jake. So let's go see how good old brother Bobby's doing. If he's okay and his truck's still working, you can have the car."

Park looked at her and nodded. She leaned into the back seat and put a hand on Maylee's knee. Maylee jerked awake, blinking and rubbing her eyes. Dalton followed.

"Hey guys," Angie said, softly. "We're here."

Maylee and Dalton looked around the lot from the car. Maylee picked up her bat from where it rested against her knee. "Looks bad, Mom."

"It does," Angie said. "We have to go see if Bobby's okay. And it's too dangerous to leave you two in the car. So we're all going. Just stay really, really close. Got it?"

Maylee and Dalton nodded.

"I said 'got it?'"

"Got it," said Maylee and Dalton, almost in unison.

"Good," said Angie. She looked back at Park. "Then let's go."

They all opened their doors and climbed outside. Cold rain pelted down on their heads as they looked around.

Angie nodded toward a bright red pickup parked facing the building. "That's his truck. When we talked last Christmas, he kept going on and on about it." The truck glistened in the rain, like it had been recently waxed. A long gouge ran up one side.

"Looks like it had a rough trip home," said Park. He shut his door and readied the rifle in front of him.

"Yeah," said Angie, shutting hers. "Two bullets left?"

"Two."

"Okay then. Let's go."

Maylee and Dalton shut their doors and they all walked slowly across the parking lot. Rain fell around them. It dawned on Angie that it was unusually quiet for a city block. She heard a siren, far away. But nothing else. Whether this was a good or bad sign, she couldn't tell.

They came up to the truck from the side. As they got closer, it



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

became apparent that the truck hadn't been parked facing the wall so much as slammed against it. The front was crumpled and a headlight hung loose.

"Shit," said Angie. They stepped toward the wall and inspected the front of the truck more closely. "Think it'll run?"

"Not sure," said Park. "I'd have to take a closer look and..."

And they all jerked back as a scratching noise came from the truck bed. Park pointed the gun through the windshield, toward the back of the truck. Maylee gripped her bat and stood close to Dalton. Angie grabbed Dalton's shoulder and braced herself, waiting for something to come around from the back.

Nothing did. Just more soft scratching. Slowly they relaxed and looked at each other.

"Whad'ya think?" said Angie, softly.

Park shrugged, scratching his beard. "Dunno. Got two shots left, I guess. Let's check it out."

Slowly, Park leading the way with the rifle, they walked around the front of the truck and up the side. With each step they took, the scratching noise grew louder. Rain fell around them. They reached the truck bed and looked over the side, Park pointing the rifle down into the bed just in case.

A rotten and nude female corpse lay there, face down. She was missing both legs and she dragged her rotten fingers across the truck bed. She moaned softly. Her naked skin was gray and pockmarked, with blue veins clearly visible all over her body.

"Gross," said Dalton.

Park kept the gun pointed at the corpse's head. It groaned and clawed at the bed, not noticing them. He lowered the gun and looked to Angie. "Guess if the truck runs you can get her out later."

"Yeah," said Angie, looking down at the clawing naked woman. "Better save the bullet."

They turned and left the corpse, and the truck, behind. Slowly they made their way to the door that led into the complex.

Angie pushed open the door and looked around. She stepped inside, Maylee behind her, then Dalton. Then Park with the gun.

The hallway was dim and quiet. Doors lined both sides of the hallway, each with a number indicating an apartment. One door,

## ROBERT A. BEST

halfway down the hall, was open. Light flickered from inside but there was no other movement.

Angie looked to her left and saw a flight of stairs leading up. "Okay," she said, startled at how loud her voice sounded. "His place's on the next floor. Come on."

They walked up the stairs to the first landing. With each step, Angie became increasingly aware of the silence in the building. The air was thick with it. The creaks of their footsteps on the stairs seemed unnaturally loud.

They reached the landing and turned. A corpse stood waiting on the first step of the next flight.

It was a fat man with no shirt and a large split running across his abdomen. The split was deep enough that his intestines poked out. He moaned and took a step forward.

Angie and the others rushed back to the first flight of stairs and the fat man stumbled onto the landing, almost falling into the railing. Park stepped on the landing and pointed the rifle at the man's forehead.

"No!" whispered Angie, stepping up to grab the barrel and push it downward. "There might be more of them! We have to be quiet!"

Park scowled at her for a second, then shrugged. He pulled the gun away from her grip and flipped it around to hold it by the barrel. The corpse groaned softly and came at him. Park jabbed the butt of the gun at the corpse's forehead. It connected with a soft smacking sound and the corpse stumbled backward into the railing.

Park stepped forward and smacked the corpse again. It fell backward, its back bending over the railing. Its head and shoulders hung over and its legs shuffled on the landing floor. Its arms flailed. One of its fat hands closed on Angie's smock. It groaned and pulled her toward him.

"Mom!" said Maylee, rushing back up onto the landing and brandishing the bat.

"Shh!" whispered Angie. "No noise! Just stay back."

"Fuck that," whispered Maylee, rushing farther toward them.

"What did you say young lady?" whispered Angie, struggling with the corpse's hand.

Maylee stayed quiet and knelt down. She set the bat down and grabbed the corpse's legs.

"What are you doing!" whispered Angie.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Mom, shh!” said Maylee. She looked up at Park. “Push him!”

Park looked at Maylee, then at Angie. He shrugged. He leaned over the railing with the rifle, putting the butt on the fat man's forehead. He pushed. The corpse groaned.

“Harder!” whispered Maylee.

Park grunted and pushed down hard. Maylee tightened her grip on the corpse's legs and pushed them toward the railing. There was a sickening cracking noise as the corpse's back broke. Part of the man's intestines spilled out through the slit in his abdomen. Blood ran down the man's front. Maylee let go and jumped back before the blood reached her.

The fat hand went limp and let go of Angie. She pulled away. Maylee picked up her bat and stood. She and Park stepped over to Angie. Dalton came back onto the landing to join them.

Maylee looked very proud of herself. Angie glared at her. “Don't you ever do anything like that again, young lady!” she whispered. Her heart was pounding. “And second, that was good thinking. But still, don't do it!”

Maylee scowled at her and looked at Park. Park lifted his hands, rifle in one, as if to say not to involve him.

The corpse moaned, his head hanging down over the railing. His body was limp and still. They all looked over at it, then back to each other.

“Okay,” whispered Angie. “Everyone stay quiet and let's go.”

They reached the top of the stairs quietly. Angie leaned out the door to the stairwell, looking down the second-floor hallway. It seemed as still and quiet as the first. The quiet felt like it was closing in around her. She shook the feeling off and turned to the others.

“Okay, looks clear,” she whispered. “Bobby's place is down at the end. Come on and stay quiet.”

They all stepped off the stairs and made their way down the hall. They stepped slowly and softly, Angie in front, Park behind her with the gun, then Dalton, then Maylee with the bat. Angie felt proud of Maylee for her quick thinking. Hell, she felt proud of her for getting herself and Dalton to the hospital the night before. But she couldn't tell her that, could she? She couldn't encourage that kind of behavior. It was dangerous.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Angie slowed and stopped when she saw an open door up ahead, about halfway to Bobby's apartment. She looked back at the others, nodding silently at the door. Park nodded back.

"Two left," he whispered, readying the rifle.

Angie nodded and turned back. She motioned for them to move forward, slowly.

They crept up the hall until they were outside the open door.

A corpse, an old woman with white hair stained red with blood, was on the floor crouching over an old man. The old man's head faced the hallway. The old woman's head was down, buried in the man's stomach. She pulled up slowly, pulling out what looked like a liver with her teeth. She grabbed hold of the liver and bit free a hunk of it, slowly and feebly. She moaned ecstatically as she chewed. She hadn't noticed them.

Angie turned slowly to Park. He had the gun trained on the woman, but was relaxing as though realizing they weren't seen. Angie motioned for the rest to keep moving. Park and the kids moved past her. Angie took one last look at the old woman gnawing at the liver. Her wrinkled face was caked with dried blood, flecks of it falling to the floor as she worked her jaw up and down.

Angie moved on.

The rest of the hallway was quiet and all doors were shut. They crept up to the last door on the right. Bobby's apartment. Angie looked back down the hallway, making sure nothing was nearby. There was nothing she could see.

Slowly, she moved her hand up the door and gently knocked.

The door creaked and moved inward. Angie blinked at it. The door was unlocked. Unlocked and open.

"Shit," whispered Park, behind her.

"Yeah," she whispered back. "Shit, indeed." She looked back to the others, put a finger to her lips, and pushed the door inward.

Angie stepped inside first. Immediately inside the door was a small foyer, branching off in two directions. To the left was the living room. To the right was the kitchen. It seemed like every light in the apartment was on.

"Bobby?" she whispered, looking around.

Dalton shuffled in the hallway behind her. Angie held up a hand, indicating for everyone to be quiet, and leaned toward the living

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

room. "Bobby?" she repeated, low and hoarse. She strained to listen.

Nothing.

She walked farther into the foyer, making room for the others to file in behind her. Dalton first, then Maylee, then Park. Park shut the door behind them, slowly and quietly.

A noise came from the kitchen. A shuffle followed by a crunch. Dalton gasped. Maylee grabbed his shoulder. "Shh!"

"I got it," whispered Park. He lifted the gun over the kids' heads and moved toward the kitchen. Angie stepped toward the living room and the kids followed her.

The living room was cluttered, strewn with clothes and empty food containers. Angie frowned at them. Bobby was always a slob. The far side of the living room connected with the kitchen and a separate hallway led to the bedroom and bathroom. Angie heard Park moving in the kitchen.

"Park?" she whispered.

Park walked in from the kitchen, holding a bag of corn chips. "These fell off the counter."

Angie smirked. "Figures."

A moan came from behind her. Angie spun to see Bobby coming toward her. His eyes were yellow and blood ran down one side of his face.

Dalton screamed.

Park leveled the gun at Bobby. "That's two."

"No!" yelled Angie, stepping back from Bobby and whipping her head at Park. "It's just the one. Don't waste the shot."

"Uncle Bobby!" yelled Dalton.

"Shut up!" yelled Maylee.

Uncle Bobby limped forward, one of his legs broken and bent beyond human use. His fingers were caked with something dark. He clutched at Angie but she kept backing away from him.

"Kids," she said. "Get into the hallway. The bedroom or something. Shut the door."

"Mom!" said Maylee.

"Uncle Bobby!" said Dalton, tears coming.

"Maylee!" snapped Angie. She glared at Maylee, then nodded to Dalton.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee looked over at Dalton. Dalton was crying and his lip was starting to quiver.

“Get to the bedroom!” Angie repeated. “Park and I will handle this.”

Maylee took another look at Uncle Bobby, then reached down to grab Dalton's hand.

“Uncle Bobby,” said Dalton, his voice breaking.

“I know,” said Maylee. “I know. Come on. Let's check out the bedroom.” She led him out of the room and down the hall. Angie heard the bedroom door shut.

“You think the noise'll bring any more?” said Park. He stepped forward and shoved the corpse of Uncle Bobby backward, away from Angie.

“I don't know,” said Angie. “Let's hope not. Let's just deal with him for now.”

Bobby moaned and came toward her again. Angie stepped back, toward the kitchen.

“Bobby,” she said as she walked backward, “I know we didn't get along before. Truth is, we probably wouldn't be getting along now anyway. But I'm afraid I'm going to have to bash your head open and I guess I'm a little sorry for that.”

“Seriously?” said Park, following behind Bobby as he and Angie stumbled into the kitchen. The counters were cluttered with food and dirty dishes.

“Well, he is family,” said Angie, looking around for a weapon. A heavy pan, a knife, anything. All she found were snack foods and dishes. Bobby'd never cooked a thing in his life, so far as Angie knew. “There's nothing to hit him with. Damn it Bobby, why don't you have anything heavy?”

Bobby gurgled and stumbled toward her, clutching his crusty fingers at nothing.

“You sure I shouldn't just shoot him?” said Park, shaking the rifle in his hand as he followed behind Bobby.

“No,” said Angie. She backed toward the foyer. “I've got an idea.”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Maylee led Dalton inside Uncle Bobby's bedroom and shut the door. Dalton let go of her hand and started pacing. Tears glistened from his cheeks. "Uncle Bobby Uncle Bobby Uncle Bobby..."

"I know, Dalton, I know," said Maylee. She set her bat in the corner and walked over to grab Dalton's shoulders. She eased him to a sitting position on the bed. He gulped and looked up at her.

*This is the first time, she thought. The first time he's seen one of those things that used to be someone he was really close to.* Then she realized it was the first time for her, too. With the realization came flashes of visits to Uncle Bobby. Mom didn't like him, so visits to him had been rare. And there was a lot to do in Ashton. They'd had fun with Uncle Bobby.

Maylee stopped herself, pushing the thoughts down. She was being strong. She was being strong for Dalton.

"Uncle Bobby," said Dalton.

"I know," said Maylee, hugging him.

Dalton cried into her shoulder for a few moments. His sobbing slowed. Maylee's own eyes stung but she kept the tears from coming any further. She swallowed them.

Dalton settled down and Maylee pulled back. She looked down at him. "You gonna be okay?"

He nodded and sniffed.

Maylee stepped away from the bed, wiping her own eyes. She looked around the room. It was cluttered, with clothes on the floor. The bed was unmade. Dresser drawers sat half open. Maylee noticed a bra hanging from one dresser handle. She stepped over and picked it up. She showed the bra to Dalton, raising an eyebrow in question.

Dalton shrugged and coughed. "Maybe Uncle Bobby has a girlfriend." He looked down. "Had."

Maylee nodded and put the bra back where she'd found it. She walked past the bed, toward a large open closet set into the far wall. It was dark inside. She leaned in and found the chain for an overhead light. She pulled it and the closet lit up.

A woman stood at the back of the closet, facing the wall. She was making a sobbing noise.

"Dalton," whispered Maylee. "Stay there."

She stepped into the closet, toward the sobbing woman.

ROBERT A. BEST

“Ma'am?” she said.

“What is it, Maylee?” said Dalton. Maylee heard him climb from the bed and come up behind her.

“Stay back, Dalton,” said Maylee, taking another step inside. “Ma'am?”

The woman showed no sign of hearing Maylee. Her back and shoulders moved up and down. Low sobs echoed in the closet.

“Ma'am,” said Maylee. “Are you okay?” She reached out and touched the woman's shoulder.

The woman stopped sobbing and turned. Maylee let go. The woman's face was gray and covered in blood. She had a hand in her mouth. It looked like it had been torn from its original owner's arm. She pulled the hand free, a tendon stringing from a finger to her mouth. She pulled the tendon free and sloppily sucked it into her mouth. She made a grunting sound as she chewed. The sound was like sobbing.

Maylee jumped back, colliding with Dalton. They both fell over, Maylee on top and Dalton pinned underneath her. The woman groaned and fell forward toward Maylee. Maylee put up her hands, hoping to block.

The woman ground her teeth together and bit at Maylee. Maylee had one palm pressed against the woman's forehead. It was the only thing keeping the woman's teeth from sinking into Maylee's skin.

“Get off me, Maylee!” said Dalton, muffled underneath her.

“Kinda busy right now, thanks,” said Maylee. She pushed up as hard as she could, but the woman was bigger than her. Maylee was only able to push her up an inch or so. Not enough to escape.

“Maylee!” yelled Dalton, squirming underneath her.

“One second!” said Maylee. She used the inch of space her pushing had made to bend her knee up. She folded her leg against herself, knee and shin against the woman's chest. The woman bit and hissed, clutching at Maylee's clothes.

Maylee grunted with effort and repeated the motion with her other leg. She now had both knees against the woman's chest and her hand against the woman's forehead. Dalton writhed beneath her, trying to get free.

“Hope this works,” Maylee muttered to herself. She let go of the woman's forehead and extended her legs. She managed to unfold them an inch or two. The woman balanced on top of them, biting at the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

air and moaning.

Maylee looked the woman in the yellow eye. "Thank god you're an idiot," she said. She put her palms flat against the floor beneath her and pushed herself up off of Dalton. The strain on her muscles was almost unbearable. For the first time in her life, Maylee was glad for gym class.

"Move!" she yelled to Dalton.

Dalton squeezed himself out from under her. Maylee's arms shook, then gave just as Dalton was free. She fell to the floor, pain shooting across the small of her back as she connected. The woman rocked on her knees, tipping toward her. Maylee held up her hands, catching the woman's forehead and blocking her. Her arms ached from her previous effort, and the woman gained ground every second. The woman's teeth drew near.

"Get off my sister!" Dalton yelled from somewhere behind Maylee's head. Dalton's foot flew into view, cracking the woman across the temple. The woman groaned and fell to one side, off of Maylee. She collided with the edge of the closet.

Maylee scrambled to her feet and backed away as quickly as she could without falling over. The woman groaned and stood. Maylee and Dalton panted at the woman as she slowly moved her head, looking at one, then the other of them.

"We need Mom," said Dalton.

"Nah," said Maylee, eyeing her bat propped against the wall. "I got this one."

They panted and stared at the corpse a moment longer. Maylee looked to her bat, then back at the corpse.

She dove toward the bat. The corpse responded to the sudden movement with a loud groan. She lunged forward, reaching for Maylee.

"Mom!" screamed Dalton. He ran to the door and threw it open.

"Dalton wait!" yelled Maylee as she grabbed her bat and turned to face the woman.

"Mom!" Dalton repeated, running out into the hallway.

"Dammit," said Maylee, turning to follow.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Angie backed out of the kitchen and into the foyer. The corpse of Uncle Bobby, groaning and clawing at nothing, followed her. Park brought up the rear, holding the rifle but not using it.

“So,” said Park from behind Bobby. “This plan of yours.”

“Yeah?” said Angie.

“Does it involve leading him around in a circle until he falls apart?”

“Nope,” said Angie, turning a corner and backing into the living room. She glanced quickly behind her, seeing a large set of vertical blinds. Behind that, she knew, was a sliding glass door. And behind that was a deck overlooking the parking lot. “It involves that.”

She ran to the vertical blinds and tugged down on the hanging chain nearby. The blinds opened with a loud clacking sound. She heard Uncle Bobby moaning behind her, getting closer. She unlocked the sliding door and pulled it open. Fall air blew in from the parking lot.

She spun in time to see Bobby drawing near to her. She stepped backward onto the deck. It creaked slightly under her weight. *Cheap piece of crap*, she thought.

Bobby staggered and lurched after her, onto the deck. “That’s right Bobby, come on,” she said. She could see Park in the living room, stepping over to follow.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton. He ran screaming from the hallway and out onto the deck. Angie could tell by his eyes he didn’t really see where he was going.

“Dalton, look out!” yelled Angie.

Dalton blinked when he saw Bobby. He tried to stop but was too late. With an “oof” sound, he collided with Bobby’s back. Bobby moaned and fell forward, onto Angie.

Angie tipped over backward, her upper back slamming into the railing of the deck. She pushed back on Bobby’s shoulders. He bit toward her arms and face, close but not connecting. Thick drool hung from his lips, inching toward her.

“Dalton!” yelled Maylee, running from the hallway and onto the deck. She bumped into Dalton and they both stumbled onto the deck. The deck creaked, louder than before.

“Get off my mom!” yelled Dalton. Angie heard smacking sounds and Bobby’s body shook with each smack. Angie guessed it was Dalton hitting Bobby. The railing behind her back creaked and

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

groaned.

“Dalton,” she screamed, struggling with Bobby. “Stop hitting!”

Dalton screamed and gave Bobby a hard shove. Bobby's body slammed against her. The railing beneath her upper back gave a loud creak, then gave way.

Angie fell back onto the deck. Pain shot down her spine as it connected with the wood. The back of her neck hit the edge of the broken railing. The pain made her grit her teeth.

Bobby fell with her, biting and clawing. He landed on top of her. Angie kicked her legs and pushed back at him. He was close.

“Mom!” screamed Dalton.

“That's two,” said Park, leveling the gun at Bobby's head. He moved the barrel back and forth, trying to get a clear shot.

“Not so close to my head,” yelled Angie, struggling with Bobby.

“Figured you might say that,” said Park. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and stepped forward. He brought up one of his hunting boots and kicked Bobby's rear. Bobby slid forward, past Angie's head and off the deck. Angie heard him slam against the truck below.

Angie stood, loose bits of wood falling from the deck beneath her. The wood cracked against the truck. She and Park looked over the edge. The truck's front was worse than before. Bobby had landed in the center of the hood, buckling it. Bobby rocked back and forth in the indentation he had made. Soon he would stand up, Angie knew, but the truck was too far away from the deck for him to be an immediate threat.

“Some plan you had,” said Park.

“There were complications,” said Angie.

Maylee screamed from behind them. They turned to see a female corpse stumbling across the living room. She was nearly to the deck.

“Where'd the hell she come from?” said Angie.

“Bedroom closet,” said Maylee, backing away and holding her bat in front of her. She bobbed the bat up and down, waiting for the corpse to get closer. The deck creaked under her steps.

“Don't do anything stupid, Maylee!” yelled Angie as the corpse stumbled onto the deck. It moaned at them, dragging its feet across the wood. It now blocked the door.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee grunted and swung her bat hard, nearly hitting Angie in the head with her backswing. Angie leaned back as the tip of the bat whipped past. She started to fall backward off the deck. Park grabbed her shoulder and stopped her fall.

“Stop it, Maylee!” yelled Angie, using Park's grip to hoist herself back up straight. “There's not enough room!”

The bat smacked against the corpse's temple. The corpse's head whipped to one side from Maylee's blow. Several rotten teeth flew from its mouth and clattered across the deck.

Its head came to a stop pointed at Dalton. It groaned and took a shaky step toward him. Thick blood seeped from its right ear, running down its cheek and neck.

“Sorry lady,” said Park, stepping around Maylee and shoving the corpse away from Dalton. “Not today.” The corpse stumbled until her stomach rammed into the right-hand railing. The railing shook and cracked. More pieces of wood fell to the parking lot. The corpse doubled over. A thick glob of blood fell from her mouth.

The corpse groaned and straightened, turning toward them all. Dalton tried to back away, but was blocked by Angie. Angie tried to back up to give Dalton room, but her feet were at the edge of the deck .

Park aimed the rifle at the corpse's head.

“Not so close to the kids!” yelled Angie. She grabbed Dalton and pulled him sideways across her front. She almost fell off the deck doing it, but she managed to jerk him away from the corpse and Park.

Dalton stumbled sideways into Maylee. Maylee had been focused on the corpse and hadn't seen him coming. She screamed in surprise and fell backward. Her back collided with the left-hand railing. It cracked. “Oww!” she yelled, nearly dropping the bat.

Park adjusted his aim and cocked the rifle. The deck beneath them all creaked and groaned.

Then it gave way.

They all screamed as the deck fell to a forty-five degree angle and then stopped. The deck hung precariously, sloping downward toward the parking lot.

Time seemed to slow down. Maylee and Dalton grabbed the left-hand railing. Park grabbed what was left of the front railing. Angie tipped backward, grabbing at nothing.

Park reached out and caught her wrist. Angie jerked to a halt,

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

straining her shoulder.

For a second they hung there, shaken and panting. Seconds inched by. Maylee and Dalton clung to their railing. Park had one hand on his railing and the other hand clutched around Angie's wrist. Angie had her feet on the edge of the deck. Her back bent backward, her head pointed toward the parking lot.

Angie slowly looked up and saw the corpse laying on the deck next to Park. The corpse groaned, then slid toward Angie.

Angie gasped and time began to speed up. "Inside!" she yelled as the corpse plummeted toward her.

Dalton and Maylee scrambled off the deck and into the apartment. Angie leaned to one side, doing her best to avoid the falling corpse. Her wrist, wet with rain, slipped in Park's grip. He clutched tighter, his knuckles turning white.

Moaning and reaching, the corpse bounced off Angie's shoulder and fell to the truck below. Angie heard the windshield shatter.

Park grunted and pulled Angie toward him. Angie reached up with her free hand and grabbed the edge of the deck doorway. Time returned to normal.

Then the deck broke free of the wall.

Angie screamed and pulled herself into the apartment. Park, still clutching her wrist, began falling. Angie spun and grabbed Park's arm with both hands. She put her foot up on the door frame to brace herself. The deck crashed into the truck beneath Park. The side windows of the truck exploded, shooting glass out to either side.

Angie's back strained. Park kicked at the wall, trying to get traction. The wood of the ruined deck shifted below, hunks of it falling away from the truck. The corpses of Uncle Bobby and the woman in the closet appeared underneath. Bobby's face was split from his fall and the woman's legs were broken. They moaned, gargling in the rain, and reached for Park. Their fingers scraped the bottom of his boots.

"Shit!" Park said, kicking at the corpses and trying again and again to get a foothold. His boots slipped off the wet brick of the wall and dangled back over the corpses.

"Hold on!" yelled Angie. She pulled as hard as she could. Park inched up, but not enough. And not nearly fast enough.

"Kids!" Angie yelled. "Help!"

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee and Dalton rushed up behind her. Maylee grabbed hold of Park's arm. Angie felt cold sweat as Maylee's hands brushed hers and knew how scared Maylee was. Dalton grabbed hold of Angie's waist.

Angie readjusted her foot on the inside of the door frame. Despite her nap in the car, she was shaking from exhaustion. Her back ached. Her knee burned.

She drew in a breath. "Pull!" she yelled. She and the kids pulled. Park moved upward, more steadily than before. Then he stopped. Suddenly he seemed twice as heavy.

Angie strained her eyes downward, not wanting to bend forward and lose any of the lift they had gained. "Shit!" she yelled.

Uncle Bobby was dangling from Park's left leg. He moaned and bit at Park's boot.

"Fuck!" Park yelled, kicking at Bobby with his right boot.

Park kicked again, harder than before. The motion sent a shudder up his arm and into Angie, Dalton and Maylee. Maylee's grip slipped off. Park dropped several inches. Angie's back pulled hard and Dalton dug his arms into Angie's waist.

"Shit!" yelled Park. He dropped closer to the corpses below. Bobby tried to bite him farther up the leg. Park's kicks were the only thing keeping the corpses at bay. The woman from the closet could not stand on her broken legs. She reached up, her bloody fingers grasping at Park. The legless corpse from the truck bed was climbing over the roof of the truck. Angie's whole body shook. She knew she couldn't hold on much longer.

"Sorry!" yelled Maylee. She reached past Angie's hands and grabbed hold of Park's arm. "Pull!" she yelled.

All three of them pulled. Angie's muscles ached. She strained as hard as she could. She pushed her foot against the door frame so hard the thin metal of the frame bent.

Park gave Bobby one last hard kick to the forehead. Bobby grunted, blood spattering from his mouth, then let go.

Angie and the kids heaved upward. Park rose to the lower edge of the doorway. He grabbed the edge, his fingernails clawing at the carpet, and pulled himself the rest of the way up. Maylee and Dalton let go. Angie let go, almost falling over backward.

Park stood up. He spun and slammed the glass door shut. "Fuck

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

me backwards!” he said, panting into the glass.

“You okay?” said Angie, her back and knee aching.

“Yeah.” Park nodded, then turned to look at Angie and the kids.

“You guys okay?”

Maylee and Dalton nodded. “Yeah,” said Angie.

Park nodded. Angie walked over to the glass and looked down. The truck was destroyed beyond any hope of driving.

Park saw what she was looking at and smirked. “So much for the truck, I guess.”

“Looks that way,” said Angie.

They fell silent, staring at the truck. A soft scratching noise wafted through the apartment. *Scratch-scratch-scratch.*

Angie looked around, stepping away from the glass door.

“What is that?”

Park looked around. Maylee and Dalton looked around. *Scratch-scratch-scratch.*

Angie's back went taut. “Shit,” she whispered “The door.”

Everyone listened intently. *Scratch-scratch-scratch.* The noise was coming from the front door. From the hallway beyond.

Angie put a finger to her lips and slowly walked through the living room, toward the foyer. Park slipped the rifle off his shoulder and followed. Maylee and Dalton brought up the rear.

Slowly, they all crept into the foyer. *Scratch-scratch-scratch,* went the noise behind the door. It was low, near the bottom. Angie put her hand on the handle and looked back at Park. Park nodded and readied the rifle.

*Scratch-scratch-scratch.*

Angie drew in a breath and opened the door.

The corpse of an old woman was on her knees in the hallway. The woman they'd seen earlier, in the open apartment down the hall. She'd been eating the man's liver.

Angie pulled back, ready to run or fight. But the corpse stayed where she was, scratching at the carpet just inside the door. She moaned, softly. There were many rings on the woman's hand. She was wearing an expensive-looking top and had long dangling earrings. Angie wondered what the old woman had been dressing up for, what she'd been about to do with her husband, before the death plague hit

ROBERT R. BEST

and she ate his liver instead.

“Come on, guys,” said Angie, turning around and motioning for Maylee and Dalton to back up. “Let's go.”

She led her kids back into the living room. She sat them down on the couch and looked back to the foyer. Park stared down at the old woman. He rubbed his face with one hand, then aimed the gun down on her.

He paused, then sighed.

“That's two,” he said, softly.

Then fired.



# FIVE

Ella twisted back and forth in a free chair in the Communications Office. The breakroom to her left was crammed full of Keepers, all talking nervously. Ella ignored them, trying to focus on the relative quiet of the room she was in. She stared at the screens, dials and buttons. She understood none of them. She'd never cared too. Now, she wished desperately she did. She wished she could use them to find Lori. She'd set Lori free and then they'd get out of this zoo. This place Gregory had built. Stepdad.

She was still trembling. The look that teenage boy had given her, kneeling before the freshly-killed body of his father. The raw, bleak hate in his eyes.

*You're dead, bitch.*

Caleb sat a few chairs down. He clicked switch after switch, changing the screens to different camera views around the zoo. Every so often a camera would catch a visitor, sometimes whole families, who'd been trapped in the zoo overnight. Some huddled together, some argued with each other. All looked scared and angry.

“How could we?” Caleb asked, staring at the screens. “How could we forget all these people?”

“We were distracted by the things outside,” said Shelley, leaning against a chair across the room. She chewed at her nails and tapped her foot. Ella thought she looked scared.

“But what do we do now?” said Caleb, turning to face her.

“Nothing,” said Shelley, dropping her hand and glaring at him. “We're only making it worse. They're trapped in here? So are we. We'll leave well enough alone and wait all this crap out.”

Caleb shook his head and turned back to the screens. “No. We need to get everyone together. Pool our resources. Help. Something.”

Lee stepped up, still holding the tranquilizer rifle. “Are you nuts? You can't trust these people. You saw what happened.”

“Please Lee, shut up,” said Caleb, gritting his teeth. He didn't look at Lee, but Ella saw his back tense. “I'd rather not talk with the

## ROBERT A. BEST

murderer right now.”

“Don't you dare!” said Lee, pacing and gripping the rifle. “Don't you fucking dare! He attacked us. We're Keepers, Caleb. Keepers stick together.”

“The man was scared, Lee.”

“The man was a bully! A goddamned bully who thought he could yell and threaten things into his way. He needed to be put in his place!”

“I said shut up, Lee!” yelled Caleb with a force that surprised Ella. Caleb turned to glare at Lee. Lee fell quiet and stepped back. Caleb slowly turned back to the screens. He reached over and flipped a switch. The screens switched to cameras placed outside the zoo. Each one showed corpses. “We'll let the cops sort it out,” said Caleb after a moment.

Shelley started pacing. “I doubt the cops are coming, honey.”

“Somebody, then,” said Caleb. “Someone in authority.”

“We're in authority,” said Lee, quietly.

Caleb ignored him. Ella stood from her chair and stepped over to Caleb. She watched the corpses on the screens wander and reach at nothing. “How did Stepdad get in?” she said.

“Hmm?” said Caleb, turning to face her.

“Gregory, I mean,” said Ella. “He got in the zoo after the things outside had surrounded us. How did he do it?”

Caleb sighed. “He got lucky. Watch.”

Caleb turned back to the instruments. He flipped through cameras until he found one that only showed a small group of corpses, four or five at the most. Ella watched them for a moment, almost entranced by their jerking movements and silent chewing mouths. After a moment, the corpses dispersed, some distracted by something off screen, some just carried away by their own jerking. For maybe twenty seconds the street in front of the camera was empty. Then, more corpses stumbled into view. Some the same as before, some new.

“See,” said Caleb. “Those things just stumble around all the time. I sat up all last night, looking for a back door we could get out through.”

Ella nodded, imagining escape. The cool air on her face.

“But,” Caleb continued, “every time I'd find a place like this, a small break in the corpses, new ones would fill in the gap long before

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

we could have ever made it there. We'd have no way of knowing which doors were safe before we got to one and opened it. And even then, we'd maybe only have seconds to open it and get out. And once we were out, those things would just close in from every side."

Ella nodded, watching the corpses.

Caleb flipped to another camera, then back to the first one. "So it's almost impossible for us to get out that way. But, if you wanted to get in, you'd only have to hide from those things and wait for a gap. You could rush through one of those openings and have the door open and shut before they could get you."

"So that's what Gregory did?" Ella asked.

Caleb nodded. "Yeah."

"How do you know for sure?"

Caleb sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I saw it."

"What?"

"After your dad called last night, I went back through the camera recordings. I saw him sneak in with your sister."

"I want to see it."

"Ella, there's nothing to see."

"I want to see it." Ella stepped closer, using her best insistent face. "Please."

Caleb sighed, looking at her for several seconds. "Fine. Hold on."

He spun in his chair and fiddled with some knobs and switches. One of the screens changed to a fast-moving blur of images. Corpses stumbled in and out of frame, so fast and jerky it would have been comical if things were different. Ella quickly realized she was seeing a recording from the middle of last night, going by at high speed.

"It'll take a moment," said Caleb watching the screen.

Ella nodded, watching the images race by. After another minute, a different blur rushed across the screen, toward the zoo. Caleb clicked something on the panel and the image froze. He clicked again and it reversed. Then it paused, showing a single frame of empty street just outside one of the back doors into the zoo. Ella knew corpses were hiding just out of frame, unseen by the camera, but the single image gave the impression that none of this had happened.

Caleb turned back to face her, leaving the image frozen on the

## ROBERT A. BEST

screen. "Now, Ella, this is..."

"What the hell's that?" said Lee, stepping up and gesturing at one of the other screens. Ella turned to look. Caleb and Shelley followed.

The camera showed the outside of Zoo Bites, the zoo restaurant. The Keepers who manned it stood outside. A group of visitors surrounded them, gesturing and telling. The Keepers looked like they were struggling to remain calm. A few of them had already started yelling back.

"Sons of bitches," said Lee. "Those sons of bitches are trying to take over the Bites."

"What the hell do you mean 'take over'?" said Caleb, stepping over to face Lee. "It's theirs as much as ours. We should be sharing with them."

Lee turned to Caleb. Ella could see his eyes. They reminded her of a dog she'd seen once just after it was hit by a car. It had happened right in front of her. The dog was injured badly, injured beyond living, but it hung on for several minutes. And while it did, the pain in its eyes gave it a fury and rage Ella had never seen in a living thing before. That dog's eyes then were Lee's eyes now. His eyes scared her.

"There's no sharing with those people," said Lee. "They will take and take unless you keep them in line. That's where we come in. We're Keepers. We keep." He nodded to Caleb, then turned and started toward the door leading out into the zoo.

"Where the hell do you think you're going, Lee?" said Caleb.

Lee stopped, turning back. "To stop them. To save the Bites. We run this zoo, not them. If we let them have their way, we'll have chaos, looting. More death. And you know damned good and well what dead bodies mean now! Are you coming to help or not?"

Caleb sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "This is crazy. Shelley, help me out here. This is crazy, right?"

Shelley held up her hands and stepped back. "Don't drag me into this. I say we just ride things out here. Let the outside do whatever the fuck it wants."

Caleb shot her a look. "Fine. Tom, is this crazy? Tom?"

He stopped, looking around. "Tom?"

Ella looked around. They all looked around. Tom was nowhere in the room. Ella tried to remember when she last saw him. Had he

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

even been in the room this whole time?

“Where the hell is he?” said Caleb, walking to the breakroom. He shook his head and turned back. “Tom?”

“Use your thing,” said Shelley, pointing to Caleb's belt.

Caleb looked down at his belt, then pulled off a small handheld communicator. Like a walkie-talkie, only much more expensive-looking. Stepdad had been proud of those as well. He insisted Ella not call them walkie-talkies. They looked like walkie-talkies to Ella.

“What's Tom's frequency?” said Caleb, turning a small dial in the top on the communicator.

“957, I think,” said Shelley.

“We're wasting time,” said Lee, sighing and adjusting the tranquilizer rifle on his shoulder.

“Just hold on for one fucking moment, Lee,” said Caleb, still turning the dial. He stopped and held the communicator to his mouth. He clicked and held down a button. “Tom? Tom? You there?”

He released the button and they all paused, listening.

Nothing.

Caleb clicked the button again. “Tom? Do you hear me?” He released the button.

Nothing.

Caleb growled to himself and walked back to the bank of screens and dials. He switched the screen showing the Zoo Bites to another camera. Then another, then another. All showed different animals or visitors. No Tom.

Caleb sighed and clicked quickly through camera after camera. Images flew by so quickly Ella barely had time to register any of them.

Caleb stopped and slapped his palm on the panel. He lifted the communicator back up and clicked it. “Tom? Goddammit, Tom?” He released the button, sighing.

“Nothing?” said Lee.

“Nothing,” said Caleb. “I went through all the cameras too.”

“Not all of them,” said Shelley.

“What?” said Caleb.

“You didn't do the one right outside,” said Shelley.

“Right outside where?”

“Right outside here. Outside this office.”

## ROBERT A. BEST

Caleb blinked, looking back to the screens. Ella knew Shelley was right. There was a camera just outside the office door. They rarely used it. Usually it was easier to just open the door and look outside.

“If he was right outside why wouldn't he just come in?” said Caleb. He turned to look at Shelley. They all fell quiet.

“Dammit,” said Lee. “Again with the time wasting. I'll just go open the door and see.” He turned and started for the door.

“Stop!” said Caleb, holding up a hand. Lee stopped.

Caleb turned to the screens and put his hand on the controls for the camera. Lee stepped up and looked at the screens. Shelley followed. Ella stayed in the back but kept her eyes locked on the screens.

Caleb clicked a control and a screen switched to the view just outside the building. There was the familiar walkway. There was the familiar large tree which the walkway had been built around.

And a body hung by its neck from the tree.

All four of them gasped. “Oh god,” said Shelley, putting her hands to her mouth.

The body rocked back and forth, swinging as wind shook the dry leaves of the tree.

“Is that Tom?” said Shelley.

“Who else would it be?” said Lee.

“Shut the fuck up Lee or I swear to god.” Caleb turned and headed for the door. The others followed behind him. Ella stayed at the back, afraid of what might happen when he opened the door.

Caleb reached the door and put his hand on the handle. He paused.

“Open it, pussy!” said Lee. Ella looked at him in surprise. Lee had never talked like that in his life.

Caleb glared at Lee silently, then turned the handle. The door swung open.

They all stepped outside, slowly. The cold fall air bit at them and a light rain was falling. It was silent except for rustling leaves and the slow, methodical creak of the branch the body hung from.

It was Tom. A rope had been tied around his neck and then to the tree. His face was purple and bloated and saliva ran from the corners of his mouth. Blood ran from his nose. He hung limp and still. His shirt had been torn open, revealing his bare chest. Words were carved into his chest, crude and bleeding.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

*For Dad.*

“Those sons of bitches,” said Lee. The door to the Communications Office opened. Other Keepers filed out, muttering among themselves and gasping when they saw Tom's body.

Tom's eyes opened and his body jerked. He blinked and moaned down at them. His hands clutched at them. He hissed and gurgled.

“Dammit Tom,” said Caleb, quietly. “I don't suppose that's you coming to.”

Tom groaned and kicked his legs, struggling to get to them.

Lee cocked the rifle, aimed and fired. The dart lodged in Tom's forehead. Tom jerked, then was still.

Caleb looked back at Lee.

“You see?” said Lee. “You see what I mean? These people are animals. We have to stop them. We have to maintain control.”

Caleb was silent for a second. “To the Bites, then.”

\* \* \*

Angie stepped up to the glass door and looked down into the parking lot. The collapse of the deck had, oddly, saved them. The noise they'd made in Bobby's apartment would have attracted every corpse in the building if the deck hadn't made a much louder noise outside. A good twenty to thirty corpses stumbled around the parking lot, rain running down their torn, rotting faces.

*Now if only we could get to the car,* Angie thought, sighing and biting her lip. The corpses from the building were all outside, which was good. But they blocked the way to the car, which wasn't.

Park stepped up beside her. “They'll probably thin out after a while.”

Angie nodded. “Yeah.” A few stragglers had already wandered off, distracted by noises outside the apartment building.

She turned away from the door and looked around the living room. Maylee and Dalton sat on the couch. Maylee rubbed her eyes. Dalton's head slowly slumped forward, then jerked up. He blinked and looked around, yawning. They both still wore the clothes they'd worn to sit at home and eat pizza with the babysitter. They were lucky they

## ROBERT A. BEST

were wearing shoes when the corpses attacked. It all happened so fast. There had been no time to prepare, no time for anything.

Angie looked down at herself. Her hospital smock was torn, wet and dirty. Her whole body ached, trembling with exhaustion.

She had to sleep. The kids had to sleep. More than just catnaps in the car.

She looked at Park, who must have guessed what she was thinking. He nodded to her.

Angie turned back to the kids. "Okay, guys. We're spending the night here."

"Oh thank god," said Maylee, slumping back deeper into the couch.

"I know how you feel," said Angie. "Let's also see if we can scavenge some clothes from Uncle Bobby."

Dalton frowned. "Isn't that stealing?"

Angie blinked. "Well, yeah, I mean, no. Not really. Bobby's family. And I'm sure he would have given you clothes if, well, you know."

Dalton nodded, then looked down at the floor. He scratched the top of his head and yawned.

"Alright then," said Angie. "Let's go."

She led Dalton and Maylee to the bedroom. Park followed, leaning against the door frame and watching.

After a quick search of dressers and the closet, they found suitable clothes. Angie found jeans, new socks and a T-shirt of her brother's that would reasonably fit. Maylee found jeans, a jacket and an *Ashton Tigers* T-shirt among Bobby's girlfriend's clothes.

Then they discovered Bobby's girlfriend had a son. Several years younger than Dalton, judging by the size and content of his clothes, but his clothes just barely fit. Dalton wasn't happy, especially when Angie handed him the biggest child shirt she could find. It had a smiling panda bear on it and big letters reading *Mommy's Big Boy*.

"Mom!" said Dalton, looking at the shirt and frowning at Angie. "This is a baby's shirt!"

"What, you saying you aren't my big boy?" said Angie, smiling at Dalton. "Besides, if it fits, wear it. Turn it inside out if you want."

Dalton looked at her, then sullenly back at the shirt. Park smirked, then pushed off the door frame. He walked back into the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

hallway.

“Okay, guys,” said Angie. “You guys change in here and I’ll go to the bathroom.”

“Okay,” said Maylee, nodding. Dalton nodded, still glaring at his new shirt.

Angie stepped into the hallway, shutting the bedroom door behind her.

Angie carried her new clothes to the bathroom and set them down on the counter. She saw Park back in the living room, staring at the parking lot. She walked over to stand next to him.

Down in the lot, the corpses had thinned out further. By morning most of them would be gone.

“You guys won’t be able to stay here for long,” Park said, not taking his eyes off the corpses.

Angie nodded. “Yeah. I figured we’d head back to Lakewood. If we’re going to just take some house and live like squatters, we might as well do it in our hometown.”

Park looked over at her.

Angie looked back. “I mean after we give you a ride to your ex’s.”

Park nodded and looked back to the lot.

Angie looked at him a moment longer, then turned back to look outside. A corpse in the parking lot dragged its broken leg behind as it wandered in a perpetual circle. Its ruined foot scraped the asphalt with each step. “How old are your girls again?” she said.

“Fifteen,” said Park.

“Twins?”

“Yeah.”

Angie nodded. They were both quiet for a moment. A corpse in the parking lot had a long split down the center of its chest. Ribs could be seen, stained red and black, but slowly washing clean in the rain. “How long since you’ve seen them?” said Angie.

He snorted. “Fuck if I know. Years.”

“You know where they live?”

“Yep. I get letters. Court papers. We got joint custody. She’s required to let me know when she moves.”

Angie frowned at him. “You have joint custody but you never

## ROBERT A. BEST

used it?"

"No," said Park, rubbing his stubble. "Never did."

"Prick," said Angie, quietly. She looked back to the parking lot. "A dad shouldn't leave his kids."

"They left me." Down in the parking lot, a corpse with no eyes reached around aimlessly. Its fingers landed on other corpses, clutching at them.

"At first, maybe," said Angie. "You left them after." She walked away, leaving him at the glass door. She moved into the bathroom and shut the door.

She went to the sink and turned on the water. She leaned forward on the counter, watching the water run into the basin. She cupped her hands in the water and washed her face. Straightening, she looked at her dripping face in the mirror. She looked tired.

Then the weight of the last twenty-four hours hit.

Twenty-four hours ago she was getting ready for work, and Maylee was complaining about Angie's insistence on using a babysitter. Maylee was old enough to babysit kids herself. Maylee was right, but Angie didn't care. Maylee and Dalton were children, and children needed protection. And Brooke, the babysitter, had died protecting them.

Brooke, dead.

Freeda, Angie's best friend from the hospital, dead.

All the patients and staff, dead.

Her brother, dead.

Dead.

She wiped her face with her hands and looked over at the shower. She sighed. She was exhausted and there was no time for luxuries. But she had to. Who knew when she'd get the chance again?

She stripped as quickly as she could, tossing her hospital uniform to the floor. She noticed, for the first time, all the dirt, scrapes and flecks of blood all over her arms and torso.

She turned on the shower as hot as she could stand. She climbed inside and washed herself. She moved as quickly as she could, but slowed down with each passing second.

For a moment she cried.

Then almost fell asleep standing up.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

\* \* \*

*It is the day before. Lori sits in the car with Mom, driving home to get Gregory. "What's wrong with Dad's car?" Lori asks, looking over at Mom.*

*Mom thinks as she turns the steering wheel, then shrugs. "I don't think he said."*

*Mom looks like something is wrong. She stares blankly at the road as she steers the car.*

*"Are you okay, Mom?" says Lori.*

*"No," says Mom.*

*Later, Lori watches her mother's driving as they turn up their street. She observes carefully, so she will be a good driver when it's her turn.*

*Mom sees her looking and smiles. "What?"*

*Lori looks away, embarrassed. "Nothing."*

*"Here we are," says Mom, drawing near to their driveway.*

*Lori looks at their house as they approach. Their large front window is decorated for fall. Big plastic decals, shaped and colored like fall leaves, are carefully arranged on the glass. It looks very festive. The garage is open. Gregory's SUV is inside.*

*Mom pulls into the driveway and pushes the shifter to park. "Wait here," she says, leaving the engine running. "I'll go get your father."*

*Lori watches as Mom exits the car and shuts the door. Mom walks up the sidewalk and onto the porch. She unlocks the door and, leaving it open, walks inside.*

*She takes longer than Lori expects. Lori hears a creaking noise from outside, loud enough to be heard over the engine. She looks over and sees the large tree in their front yard. Its thick branches are swaying back and forth in the wind. Dry, colored leaves fall to their yard. Rain spatters on the windshield.*

*Something about the creaking branch bothers Lori, so she turns on the radio. She finds nothing that interests her, so she turns it off. She shifts in her seat nervously. What is taking Mom so long?*

*A loud "pop" comes from the house.*

*Lori is so startled she jerks back in her seat. Later she'll realize*

## ROBERT A. BEST

*she heard a gunshot. Now, she's mystified. The sound is nothing like the massive explosions guns make in movies. It's a sharp, cracking sound. Like something breaking.*

*A few seconds later, Gregory exits the house. He doesn't stop to close the door. He looks pale and shaken. He looks as though he's headed for the garage, then he stops, seeing Lori in the car.*

*For a moment Lori sees panic on his face.*

*Then it's gone. He smiles, looking like it hurts him to do it, then walks toward the car. Lori recognizes the smile. It's the smile he uses when he's explaining something very serious.*

*He opens the car door and climbs inside. "Hello, Lori." He shuts the door. "I'm sorry but we have to hurry." He pulls the shifter into reverse, without even pausing to put on his seat belt. Gregory always uses his seat belt.*

*"Where's Mom?" says Lori.*

*"She's staying behind," says Gregory as he eases the car back out of the driveway. "I'll explain in a second."*

*Lori knows that can't be right. Mom had just started her shift at work. Sure, Gregory ran the zoo so Mom could skip work if she wanted, but Mom isn't the type to abuse her position.*

*"Where's Mom?" repeats Lori, a little more insistent this time.*

*"Please Lori, give me a second. I'll explain." Gregory backs out of the driveway and turns. He backs along the road, straightening the car. He slows alongside the open door to the house. Lori sees inside.*

*She sees Mom's foot, lying on the floor. The rest of Mom is hidden from view.*

*"Mom!" she yells.*

*Not thinking, not planning, not acting like herself, she opens the door. The car is still rolling as she jumps out. She hits the ground and stumbles, not thinking of how crazy she's being. Not thinking of how she's acting more like her twin sister than herself. Just thinking of the sight of her mother, lying on the living room floor.*

*"Lori stop!" yells Gregory, slamming on the brakes. The tires make a squeaking sound as they skid on the wet road.*

*Gregory's calls come from behind her. She recovers from her stumble, clutching the wet grass and using it to pull herself back to standing. She bolts for the house.*

ASHTON MEMORIAL

*She hears the car door open behind her. "Lori!" yells Gregory, farther away as she draws near the porch.*

*She hits the concrete of the porch, her wet shoes nearly skidding. Not stopping, she runs inside.*

*"Lori!" yells Gregory from outside.*

*"Mom!" yells Lori, stumbling into the living room and turning.*

*Seconds later, she runs back out, screaming and crying. She collapses, screaming until she's hoarse.*

\* \* \*

Lori jerked awake. She'd fallen asleep sitting up. Her neck ached. She couldn't move her arms or legs. Her mouth was covered with something. For a moment she panicked.

Then she remembered. She was tied to a chair somewhere in the zoo. Tied there by her dad. By Gregory.

He stepped into view. Lori grunted muffled obscenities at him, biting at the gag over her mouth. Then she slumped in her chair. God, she was so tired. How long had this been going on?

"I'm sure you are tired," said Gregory, apparently noticing her slump. "You've been screaming and thrashing all night and most of the day."

She glared at him. Her eyes blurred. She blinked to clear them. They blurred again.

"Poor girl," said Gregory. "You're exhausted."

She pulled herself straight in the chair. She would not show weakness. Not to him.

"I bet you're starving, too."

Oh god, she was. The realization sent a cramping wave through her stomach and throat.

"Aren't you?" Gregory said.

She stared at him, then nodded. She hated herself for doing it, but she nodded.

He nodded back, then knelt down before her. He rubbed his neatly-trimmed beard. "I can take off the gag. Maybe even untie your arms. But you have to understand why I did what I did. You have to understand I had to."

## ROBERT A. BEST

She panted into the gag, her stomach quivering from hunger. She stared at him, saying nothing.

“Do you?”

She looked down at the floor. God, she was hungry.

“Lori look at me,” said Gregory. He reached out and lifted up her chin. She recoiled from his touch. He dropped his hand. She lifted up her head and looked at him.

“Do you understand, Lori?”

She stared at him.

Then shook her head no.

He hung his head. He sighed, then looked back up at her. “Fine. Do you at least promise not to scream? Or try to hit me?”

Her stomach clenched. Her hands, tied behind her back, trembled from exhaustion.

She nodded.

“Okay then.”

Gregory stood and walked behind her. She felt his fingers working at the cords around her wrists. She flinched at his touch, but did her best to hold still. A few more seconds and her hands were free. She briefly entertained the thought of punching him, but repressed it.

She brought her hands around to her front, rubbing her raw and aching wrists. Gregory's hands changed to the gag. She felt him tugging at the knot, wincing as it tangled with her hair. The gag loosened and slipped off.

She panted and spit. Her mouth was dry and her stomach ached.

“Ready for some food?” said Gregory, walking back around to stand in front of her.

“Okay,” she said, her voice low and hoarse.

She looked down at the cords around her feet. Gregory followed her gaze down, then met her eyes when she looked back up at him.

“Not yet, Lori,” Gregory said. “Not until you understand.”

She looked down at the floor. “Food.”

“Okay,” said Gregory. “I’ll be right back.”

He stepped over to a closed door. He fished a keycard from his pocket and held it up to a reader set in the wall next to the door. A red light on the reader changed to green, and the door clicked. He opened the door and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

She waited for a moment, making sure he was gone.

### ASHTON MEMORIAL

She shifted in the chair, hiking up one hip. She dug around in her jeans pocket until she found her cell phone.

She pulled the phone out and flipped it open. Her first thought was to call the police, but she was afraid Gregory would hear. How close was he to the door? Her next thought was to text Ella, let her know where she was. She frowned, trying to remember clearly. Had Ella forgotten her phone yesterday, or was that some other time? She couldn't remember.

She glanced at the door. The lock still showed red. How long did she have? And did Ella have her cell phone or not?

Her head hurt from hunger and exhaustion. She couldn't remember. She opened the text function on her phone and started typing.

# SIX

Park inched Angie's car down the road, reading the house numbers as they went by. Angie looked out the passenger window, doing the same.

"There," said Dalton from the back seat. He pointed over Park's shoulder, out the windshield and farther up the street.

Park nodded and drove to the house Dalton indicated. He pulled alongside the house and stopped.

"This look right?" said Angie.

"Don't know," said Park. "Never saw the house."

Angie gave him a look. He didn't need it. He surveyed the house, as if he'd see any element that would indicate to him his daughters and ex-wife lived there. How the hell would he know? What the hell was he doing? He briefly reconsidered his old plan of killing himself.

He dropped that line of thought and returned to investigating the house. The number was right, which he liked. What he didn't like was the large front window, which was smashed. Large plastic decals of fall leaves hung from what chunks of glass remained. The front door stood open. No movement inside.

"Something happened here," said Maylee from the back seat.

*No shit, kid*, Park wanted to say. But the kid didn't deserve that. Park was just upset he hadn't seen his girls for so long. Upset at the state of the house he assumed they lived in. Shit, *assumed*. They were right. They had just been little girls when they gave him that look, but they were right. He was a failure.

"Something happened everywhere," he said in response to Maylee. He opened the door and stepped out, slinging the rifle strap over his shoulder.

Rain fell, just intermittently enough to be annoying. It hit Park's head and ran down his face. Angie and her kids climbed from the car. Maylee had her bat.

They all looked up and down the street. At the far intersection,



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

a corpse stumbled by, not noticing them. That was fine with Park.

Faint screams came from far off. A siren sounded somewhere far away. Rain pattered on the dry leaves of the huge tree in the front yard.

“Seems quiet,” said Angie.

Park nodded.

A dog barked, so loud and close that all four of them jerked at the sound. Park turned and saw the dog standing on a lawn across the street. The house behind the dog was badly damaged. The dog barked over and over at them but did not leave its yard.

Park snorted at the dog and turned back to the house.

Maylee kept looking at the dog. “What’s that dog’s problem?”

“It’s probably scared,” said Angie.

They all stood quietly for a moment, taking a last look around. Rain pattered down. Faint moans and screams came from far away. The dog barked.

“Alright,” said Park, swallowing. “I guess this is what I came here for.”

Angie stepped up next to him. “I’m sure they’re fine, Parker.”

Park looked over at her. “You mean that?”

Angie looked at him, saying nothing. Her expression was blank.

“Yeah,” said Park after a moment. “That’s what I think, too.”

The dog barked and rain fell.

“Let’s go,” said Park.

Park walked up the street, turning into the driveway. Angie and the kids followed behind. “Stay close to me,” Angie said to them.

“Fine,” said Maylee, sounding annoyed.

Partway up the driveway, Park stopped and stared into the garage. A SUV sat inside. There were no signs of movement. Angie and the kids stopped behind him.

“Someone in there?” said Dalton.

“Shh!” said Angie and Maylee in unison.

“Hello?” said Park toward the open garage. “Anyone there?”

They listened and stared at the garage, at the back of the SUV. No sound and no movement. Slowly, Park slipped the rifle strap from his shoulder. He brought the rifle around to his front.

“You just have the one shot?” said Angie.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Just the one,” said Park.

“Great,” said Angie. “Everyone keep quiet and be careful.”

Park slowly stepped into the garage, stopping at the back of the SUV. He peered through the tinted glass of the back window. It was empty.

He stepped back and looked around the garage. He turned to Angie and the kids. “I’m gonna look deeper.”

Angie nodded, walking in on the other side of the SUV. She motioned for the kids to stay in the driveway. Maylee frowned but stayed put. She gripped the bat and Dalton clung to her.

Park walked along the driver’s side of the SUV. Angie kept pace with him on the other side. Rain echoed off the roof. No other sound or movement presented itself.

A clatter came from Angie’s side. Park jerked around, startled. The butt of the rifle scraped along the driver’s door of the SUV. The SUV’s alarm started going off, loud and blaring in the confines of the garage.

“Shit,” said Park, wincing at the noise.

“Sorry,” said Angie. “There was a can on the floor.”

Park grabbed the door handle and pulled, meaning to turn the alarm off. The door was locked. The alarm blared, making his ears ring.

“Fuck,” said Park, stepping out of the garage and back into the rain. “That goddamned thing is gonna bring dozens of those things.” He pulled on the back door to the SUV. It stayed put. He brought up the rifle butt and slammed it into the glass. It cracked but held together. “Fucking safety glass,” he muttered.

Angie looked up and down the street. The siren blared and the dog kept barking. “The front door’s open. I’ll go see if I can find the keys. Maylee, you and Dalton stay here.”

Angie turned and headed up the sidewalk, toward the house. Park watched her go, then returned to trying to break into the SUV.

Angie disappeared into the house. Park hit the glass again with the rifle. Nothing. The siren kept going. The dog barked. Park turned and saw Maylee clutching the bat. “You wanna have a go?”

Maylee looked at him, then realized what he was saying. She nodded, looking almost happy to use the bat. “Sure.”

She stepped up and was about to swing for the glass of the SUV when Angie called out from the front porch.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Park,” she called, loud enough to be heard over the alarm and barking. “You need to see this.”

Park frowned at her, then walked toward the door. Maylee lowered the bat and followed, motioning for Dalton to come along.

“Not you guys,” said Angie. “You stay out here with me.” She stepped aside to let Park by.

Park stepped into the living room and looked around. Furniture was overturned. Pictures hung crookedly from the walls or were simply smashed on the floor. Glass from the window crunched under his feet as he stepped farther inside.

Then his breath caught as he looked down.

Jennifer, his ex-wife, lay dead on the floor. She was facedown, but he recognized her hair. He recognized the shape of her body. Even after all these years.

She lay in a pool of thick blood, congealed and still. A hole in the back of her head stained her hair red. The hole was torn outward. Park swallowed. He'd hunted for years, and he knew a gunshot wound when he saw one.

“Oh shit,” said Park, stepping forward and kneeling next to the body. He grabbed her pantleg and flipped her over. Her limp hand fell into the congealed blood, splattering thick globs of it along the carpet.

“Shit, Jenny,” said Park. Her face was smeared with blood, originating from a bullet hole that took up most of her left eye.

Angie stepped in, her arms crossed. She kept her eyes on the kids in the front yard. The alarm was still going off, sounding far away. “I'm so sorry Parker.”

Park nodded.

“I was never a doctor or anything,” said Angie, alternating her gaze between Park and the kids, “but it looks like this happened before we even left Lakewood.”

“Yeah,” said Park, sitting back on his heels and wondering why he was so upset. He hadn't seen Jennifer in years. And for most of those years he hated her. “She must have been bitten.” He looked over her body for bite marks.

“Mom!” yelled Maylee from outside. She ran up onto the porch, pulling Dalton with her. “Those things are coming!”

Park stood and looked out the front window. Corpses stumbled

## ROBERT A. BEST

down the street, nearing the house. He turned to Angie. She was looking past him, seeing the same thing he saw.

“Shit,” said Angie. “Okay, we gotta...”

A groaning corpse stumbled from the bathroom behind Angie. It was a young man with sideburns and a large red hole in his stomach. Wet, slick organs inched out with each step.

“Fuck!” yelled Park. “Look out!”

Angie spun as the corpse reached for her. Angie twisted away from the corpse, falling into the living room.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton, running inside. Maylee ran in after him.

“Where'd he come from?” yelled Angie, struggling to regain her footing.

“Who knows? The door and window's been wide open,” said Park, stepping over to help her.

The corpse groaned and changed focus, reaching for Dalton. A loop of intestines flopped out the hole in its stomach as it strained for him, turning its back to Angie. Dalton screamed.

Angie yelled and rushed the corpse. She grabbed its shirt from behind and pulled it backward. Dalton slipped free of the corpse's hand. Angie pushed the corpse hard, running it forward into the door frame. It groaned and clawed at the wall.

“Fuck you!” yelled Angie, grabbing the corpse's hair and ramming its forehead into the wood of the frame. A loud “crack” sounded and dark blood splattered across the wall. The corpse went limp.

“And stay the fuck away from my kids,” she said, letting go. The corpse slumped to the floor.

The corpses outside reached the door and window. They groaned and hissed, clawing at the window frame. They staggered through the door, moaning and chewing the air.

Maylee and Dalton stepped backward, toward the hallway and away from Angie and Park. The corpses continued to stumble inside, quickly blocking Maylee and Dalton from reach.

“Dammit!” yelled Angie, moving to reach for them. The corpses groaned and reached for her.

Park grabbed her shoulder and pulled back. “Don't be stupid!” he yelled. Dalton hid behind Maylee as they both inched backward. Maylee held the bat in front of her, jabbing at the corpses to keep them

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

at bay.

“Guys!” Angie yelled over the corpses as Park pulled her back. He could see the anguish on her face. “Run! Get to a room and hide! We’ll get you!”

\* \* \*

Maylee took careful steps backward, slowly swinging her bat back and forth. Dalton was behind her. He clutched her shoulder and stepped backward in time with her. Three corpses followed them down the hallway. They bit their teeth and pawed at the walls. The lights were off in the house and the hallway grew darker as they moved farther away from the living room.

Maylee could hear Mom and Park in the living room. Mom was screaming for her and Dalton. Park was grunting and swearing as he knocked corpses aside. Maylee knew he had one shot left, but she knew there were too many corpses for it to do any good.

Maylee darted her eyes from one corpse to another. The frontmost one, a woman with a flap of her cheek pulled away to reveal teeth and wet red muscle, reached for her. Maylee slapped the corpse’s hands back with her bat.

“Dalton!” she shouted, keeping her eyes on the corpses. “What’s behind us?”

“Um...” said Dalton, trailing off. Maylee heard his voice change volume as he turned to look, then turned back. “Two rooms at the end of the hall. One on each side.”

“Bedrooms?” Maylee swatted at the corpse’s hands again.

“How should I know?” Dalton whined.

“Really?” said Maylee, jabbing the bat at the three corpses. Two more were entering the head of the hallway. The darkness grew around them and the groans of the corpses echoed off the walls. “Really, Dalton? You want to have an argument right now?”

Dalton sighed behind her. “Fine, sure. Bedrooms.”

“Pick one. We’re going to make a run for it.”

Maylee kept backing up, Dalton behind her. The corpses followed, groaning and clawing. Maylee jabbed at them with her bat. The two new corpses reached the group of three she was already

ROBERT A. BEST

dealing with. Three others appeared at the head of the hall.

“Um,” said Dalton, “left, I guess.”

“Which left?” said Maylee. The three corpses stumbled down the hall. Soon there would be a total of eight for Maylee to hold off.

“What?”

“Left facing this way or left facing that way!” Maylee had seen the hall when they first stumbled down it. She didn't dare take her eyes off the corpses to look, but she knew they had to be running out of room.

“Umm...” Dalton trailed off. Maylee heard panic creeping into his voice.

“Fuck it,” said Maylee. The corpses drew near. “Just run!”

She turned and they both ran. Maylee made it a few steps, then jerked to a stop as a cold hand closed on the back of her jacket. “Dalton!” she yelled, almost involuntarily.

Dalton stopped running and turned around. His eyes grew wide when he saw. “Maylee!” he screamed, turning back to help.

Maylee brought her bat up backward over her shoulder. She slammed down as best she could at the awkward angle. Her wrists jerked as the bat connected with something. A corpse grunted behind her and the hand slipped off.

She stumbled forward, almost colliding with Dalton. Guilt flooded her. She should have let Dalton keep running to safety. He was just a kid.

“Maylee!” repeated Dalton, looking up at her with big scared eyes.

“I'm fine now!” she said. “Get to a room!”

“But Maylee...”

“Just do it!” Maylee yelled. Groans came from behind her. She cursed under her breath and spun, bringing the bat up as she turned. The cheek-flap corpse still headed the group, a thin seeping crack in its forehead indicating where Maylee struck before.

Screaming, Maylee slammed the bat into the corpse's temple. The corpse fell sideways against the wall. The follow-through of the swing cracked the corpse's skull, sending a sheet of dark gore up the wall.

“Maylee!” yelled Dalton from behind her.

“I said run!” yelled Maylee. Another corpse drew close. It was

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

on old man with bony legs and a large open slit down the entire left side of his body. Red strips of skin dangled as he jerked toward her. Maylee brought the bat up over her head and rammed it down on the corpse's head. He jerked and bucked, one of his red bloated eyes jutting from its socket, then he slumped downward.

Maylee watched him fall, making sure he was still. She heard Dalton run away from her, headed for one of the rooms.

"Hurry Maylee! Follow me!" he yelled, his voice receding from her. The corpses grew thicker at the head of the hall. Their groans grew louder, filling the hallway. Maylee lost track of Dalton's voice. She couldn't tell which room he had run for.

Satisfied the old man was still, she jerked her head back up. More corpses pushed toward her. Too many to beat back. They groaned and reached. She looked back to the end of the hall. Two doorways, each open. No sign of Dalton. Which door had he used?

"Dalton?" she yelled. "Where are you?"

The groaning grew louder behind her. She heard Dalton somewhere, but couldn't pinpoint the source. She looked back at the corpses. They were close now, too close.

She picked a doorway at random and bolted for it.

\* \* \*

Angie stepped backward as corpses poured into the living room. They came through the door. They crawled through the window, oblivious to the jagged glass shredding them as they pulled themselves inside.

With each step she took backward her chest grew tighter. Her children were farther and farther away. The corpses grew in number between them. She couldn't do anything. The chaos was swallowing them.

She heard Maylee and Dalton in the hallway, screaming to each other. Or were they just screaming? Or dying?

"Maylee!" she yelled. "Dalton!" She and Park were pushed into the kitchen. Corpses filled the living room.

"Goddammit all anyway!" said Park, stepping over to the stove and grabbing a stainless-steel frying pan.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“How do we get to the bedrooms from here?” yelled Angie, knowing full well what the answer was. Knowing full well the only way was through the thick mob of corpses pressing toward them and her children.

“I have no idea!” yelled Park. “I wasn't so much with the regular visits.” He flung the pan at an approaching corpse. A loud “clang” rang out and the corpse's head snapped back. Thick dark fluid spilled from a crack in the corpse's head and it fell forward.

Park snorted, unslung the rifle from his shoulder and leveled it at the nearest corpse.

“Park no!” yelled Angie. “We need that!”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “And what the fuck else would that be for?”

“When we get to Maylee and Dalton,” she yelled, feeling like she was going insane. The noise around her was maddening. The stink of corpses stung her nose. “We may need it to...”

“Be fucking realistic!” yelled Park back at her. “This is it! Jennifer's dead! My kids are probably dead! Your kids are...”

“You can go fuck yourself!” yelled Angie, her cheeks growing hot. Tears were coming. “You go fuck yourself so hard your asshole bleeds for a fucking week! We're getting to them!”

Park stared at her as the corpses grew closer. Finally he shrugged and replaced the rifle strap over his shoulder. He grabbed a large thick stock pot from the stove and tossed it to Angie. She caught it as he opened a cabinet above the stove. He pulled out a cast-iron skillet and nodded to her.

She nodded back. They turned to face the corpses that poured into the kitchen. They put their backs to the sink and waited, clutching their weapons and bracing themselves.

\* \* \*

Dalton ran inside the bedroom and looked around. *I'm not running*, he told himself. *I'm making sure the room is safe. I'm helping.*

He whipped his head from side to side, taking in the room as quickly as he could. It was neat and tidy with a mix of hunky-guy posters and stuffed animals. A girl's room. No corpses to be seen.

“Dalton!” came Maylee's voice from somewhere in the hall.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Which room?”

“Here!” Dalton yelled, turning back to the door. He took a step then fell forward as something caught his foot. His stomach slammed to the floor and the air rushed from his lungs.

His throat clenched as he heard a groan come from behind him. From floor level. He felt cold fingers grip his foot. He screamed and kicked blindly with his free leg. His foot connected with something, and his other foot slipped free.

He scrambled forward and stood so quickly he almost fell into the nearest wall. He turned and looked down.

A corpse was on the floor, mostly hidden under the bed. It was a lanky teenage boy missing an eye and an ear. Dried blood caked the side of his face and neck. Its head and one arm jutted out from under the bed. It reached at Dalton and gnashed its teeth.

“Crap!” yelled Dalton, backing away from the corpse. He turned and ran to the door, trying to ignore the groaning corpse behind him. “Maylee!”

A young woman with burnt hair and no lower jaw grabbed at him from the doorway. Two other corpses stood behind her, hissing and biting. Dalton screamed and slammed the door. The corpses outside groaned and dragged their fingernails across the wood of the door. Dalton fumbled with the handle for a panicked moment, then found the lock. He pushed it in, his hands shaking.

Groaning came from behind him. He spun, chest thudding. The corpse under the bed was pulling itself out.

The teen boy grabbed the carpet and pulled. He slid a few feet, then grabbed the carpet and pulled again. Flakes of dried blood scraped off of the corpse's skin as it dragged itself along the carpet. The corpse's other arm emerged from under the bed. It was burnt beyond use. A few more tugs and Dalton saw the corpse had no legs, just black charred stumps.

Dalton looked frantically around for a weapon. Something heavy. *Anything*. All he saw were small knickknacks and stuffed animals. He sighed and braced himself. The corpse kept pulling. He would have to do something.

Mustering his courage, he ran at the corpse. He did his best to build up speed in the small space of the bedroom. As he drew near the

## ROBERT A. BEST

corpse, he brought up one foot to kick. He aimed for the corpse's head, hoping it would be enough.

The corpse hissed and bit at his foot. Dalton screamed and stopped mid-kick, almost tripping. He fell forward onto the mattress.

His heart thudded as he drew his legs up to safety. *You're not scared*, he told himself. *You're not a little kid*. It didn't work. The corpse moaned from the floor, scraping its body across the carpet. The door shook and corpses groaned from just beyond it. Dalton fought back the urge to shake.

"Mom!" he yelled, hearing only groans in reply.

\* \* \*

Maylee ran into the bedroom and looked around. Dalton was nowhere to be seen. Her heart dropped as she realized she'd picked the wrong room.

"Dalton!" she yelled, turning to run across the hall to the other room. Two corpses moved to block her. They grunted and reached for her, rotten teeth grinding.

"Fuck no!" she yelled at them, knocking them back with her bat. She shut the door and slammed her balled fist against it. "Dammit! Dalton! Mom!"

The corpses outside groaned and ran their hands along the door. "Shut up!" she yelled at them.

She fell silent, panting and putting her forehead against the door. The corpses scraped their fingernails along the wood. Crashes came from the kitchen. The corpses groaned outside the door.

"I said shut up," she said, quietly. She stepped away from the door and turned to survey the room. It was a little cluttered, but clean. Movie and music posters covered the walls. Books were crammed into a small shelf above the bed. The edge of the shelf had something written on it with what looked like glitter glue. *Ella*, it said.

"Dalton!" she yelled, trying again. She heard nothing but groans.

Her eyes settled on a window at the far side of the room. She saw gray, overcast sky through the slats of the lowered blind.

Holding her bat ready just in case, she rushed toward the window. She stopped when her foot struck something on the floor. The

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

object flew across the floor a few feet, then stopped. Maylee's back grew tight and she looked down, gripping the bat.

A cell phone sat on the floor, a few feet away from where she'd kicked it. *Ella* was painted across the outer shell of the phone, apparently in the same glitter glue used on the shelf.

*Park'll want this*, she thought, reaching down to grab the phone. She glanced at it, rubbing her thumb over the raised glue forming the letters. It lit up when she pressed the button on the side and seemed to be working. She slipped it into her pocket.

She took another look around, having seen too much in the last few days to take anything for granted. The corpses in the hall scraped at the door, but remained outside for the time being. She was alone. Satisfied, she ran the rest of the way to the window.

Holding the bat with one hand, she pulled the blinds up to reveal the side yard of the house. Rain spattered the window and the sky was gray. She looked down at the yard and was elated to find it clear of corpses. She set the bat down against the wall and grabbed the window frame. She pushed up but the window wouldn't give. She frowned and pushed again, harder. Still nothing.

The groaning from the hallway grew louder. The scraping of the corpse's fingernails on the door grew louder.

Maylee felt along the middle of the window frame, looking for the lock. She found it. It was open. She pushed a third time. The window gave a little, creaking upward maybe half an inch.

The corpses outside groaned and started pounding on the door.

"Well fuck the shit out of that," Maylee muttered, picking up the bat. She stepped back and swung for the window as hard as she could. Glass exploded, bouncing off the window screen and back into the room. Maylee let out a little cry and jumped back, feeling stupid.

She stepped back over, her feet crunching the glass, and ran the bat all along the window frame, clearing out what was left of the glass. She jabbed at the screen until it popped free and fell to the yard.

She stuck her head out the window to look around, blinking in the cold rain. All clear. Satisfied, she climbed out the window, doing her best to avoid any glass she'd missed. The corpses from the hallway pounded away at the door.

"Whatever, dumbasses," she muttered, dropping to the grass

ROBERT A. BEST

below.

A corpse came around the backside of the house and stumbled toward her. It was on her before she had time to regain her footing.

The corpse was the dried husk of what had once been a very old woman. A tattered faded-blue dress clung to her withered frame. Her eyes were gone, long rotted away. She had no lips and her teeth, yellow with streaks of dirt, clacked together as she pulled Maylee close to her.

Maylee dropped to her knees, slipping free of the corpse's feeble grip. She crawled away and stood, turning back to face the corpse and brandishing her bat. The woman bit and reached blindly at her.

Maylee stared at the woman for a moment, almost feeling sorry for her. Then she swung the bat in an upward motion, striking the woman on the jaw. The woman's head whipped back, the dried skin of her neck cracking and splitting open. The woman staggered backward.

Maylee screamed and raised the bat over her head. She brought it down hard, slamming into the woman's lolling head. The woman jerked, grunted, and fell.

Maylee stood, holding the bat and panting, for several seconds. The cold air made her lungs constrict. The corpse at her feet was still. She heard screaming from inside the house.

Human screaming. *Mom. Dalton.*

Maylee raced up the side of the house, heading for the front.

\* \* \*

Dalton stood on the bed, struggling to keep his balance on the mattress. Part of him felt guilty for getting his dirty shoes all over the sheets. Most of him was concerned with the burnt corpse crawling around on the floor, trying to get to him.

The corpses in the hallway were loud now. He heard glass breaking somewhere nearby. Was someone hurt? Maylee? Mom? He had to get out of the room. He had to get to them.

But first, he had to get past the corpse on the floor.

The corpse craned its burnt and bloody neck around, the skin creaking as it did. It ground its teeth, biting up at Dalton but unable to reach him.

Dalton sighed and stared down at the corpse. He had an idea for

**ASHTON MEMORIAL**

what to do with the corpse. After that, he didn't know what he'd do to get out the door. But first things first.

He did his best to ready himself, watching the corpse crawl around on the floor. He waited until the corpse craned its head to face away from the bed. Then he ran, leaping off the bed and aiming to land on the corpse's skull.

He did, his left foot landing square on the back of the corpse's head. The corpse's head slammed to the carpet, cracking. Dalton's ankle twisted, sending pain up his leg. He cried out and fell forward. For a panicked second he saw the door racing toward his face. Then his forehead smacked against the door. The thin wood of the door cracked and Dalton slid to the carpet.

"Oww!" he said to no one in particular, rolling onto his back. His forehead hurt bad. His ankle hurt worse. To his side, he could see the corpse was still. The corpses in the hall banged on the door behind him. Dalton knew he needed to stand, needed to get out of there somehow. But he was too dizzy to move.

\* \* \*

Maylee rounded the corner into the front yard. A few corpses wandered around, far enough away from Maylee not to be an immediate concern. She ignored them and ran toward the front porch. The SUV's alarm was still wailing, piercing through the moans of the corpses. The dog across the street was still barking, angry and staring at her.

As she reached the porch she saw the front door was jammed with corpses, all facing away from her and into the house. Beyond them, the living room was jammed with corpses. And beyond that, the kitchen and hallway, both jammed with corpses.

Maylee heard Mom and Park yelling to each other. She heard clanging metal and the sounds of struggle.

"Mom!" she yelled. One corpse, a man with a loose eyeball and torn tongue, turned to groan at her.

"Oh go fuck yourself," said Maylee, whacking the corpse aside with the bat. "Mom!" she yelled, straining to see over the corpses. Several more corpses responded to her cries, turning to face her. They

## ROBERT A. BEST

grunted and worked their jaws.

Maylee looked back at them, an idea forming in her mind. "Yeah! Look over here, asshats! Here!"

She whacked the bat against the siding, making as much noise as she could. She backed up across the porch as more corpses turned to face her.

"Yeah! That's it, dumbasses! This way!" she yelled, backing up farther. More corpses turned to groan at her.

Then more crashes came from the kitchen. Mom and Park yelling and fighting corpses. The corpses who had trained on Maylee lost interest, and turned back to continue crushing toward the kitchen.

"Dammit!" yelled Maylee, slamming the bat into the face of the nearest corpse. It fell back, teeth falling from its newly-bloodied mouth. Maylee stomped to the edge of the porch, feeling like she could cry. "Mom! Dalton!"

Her eyes roamed to the garage. She realized it might be attached to the house.

"Mom!" she yelled, running off the porch and toward the garage.

"Shut up!" she yelled at the squealing SUV as she pushed past it, heading for the back of the garage. She grinned when she saw a door set into the back wall. She ran to it.

She grabbed the handle and twisted. She cursed when she found it locked.

"Shit!" she yelled, twisting the handle as hard as she could. "Mom!" She pounded on the door. She could hear Mom's voice inside.

She backed up and readied her bat. The SUV's alarm squealed in her ears. "I said shut up!" she yelled, feeling like she was going crazy. The dog across the street barked furiously.

She yelled and slammed the bat down on the door handle. It shook and the wood around it splintered. Screaming, she hit the handle again, harder this time. It broke free and clattered to the cement floor of the garage. Maylee let out a little cry of triumph and shoved the door open.

Running inside, she found herself in a laundry room just off the kitchen. Looking to her right, she saw Mom in the kitchen. Mom was cracking a corpse's head open with a large metal pot. The corpse jerked from the blow and fell away. Many other corpses crowded the kitchen,

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

reaching for Mom and Park, who stood a little farther away brandishing a skillet.

“Mom!” Maylee yelled, running inside the kitchen.

Mom stopped mid-swing, gaping at Maylee. “Maylee? Where did you come from?”

A corpse came up behind Mom and reached for her. “Mom look out!” yelled Maylee, pointing with the bat.

Mom turned to fight the corpse. Maylee ran to help, but a group of corpses moved to block her. More poured in behind them. They groaned and came at her.

“Ah shit!” Maylee yelled, backing up toward the laundry room.

“Language!” yelled Mom, ramming her stock pot into the corpse attacking her. The corpse fell aside.

“Seriously Mom?” yelled Maylee, backing up farther.

The corpses moved to block Maylee from Mom. Maylee was pushed farther back. The corpses groaned and reached.

“Not again!” yelled Maylee, smacking the nearest corpse with the bat. She rammed it across the jaw, sending blood and thick drool up along the wall.

She cast a quick glance back into the garage. Still empty. Just the wailing SUV. She looked at the corpses. They were still coming for her.

“This way!” she yelled, backing into the garage and waiting for the corpses to follow. They did, stumbling into the garage.

Then a loud crash came from the kitchen. More clanging and Mom and Park yelling. The corpses groaned and turned back toward the kitchen.

“You gotta be shitting me!” yelled Maylee. “I said this way!” She stepped to the SUV and smashed the bat into the windshield. The safety glass cracked and splintered but held. Maylee smacked it again and again, making as much noise as she could. “This way!”

The corpses stopped and turned back to her. They grunted and pawed at each other, trying to get to her.

“Yeah! You know it!” yelled Maylee, backing out of the garage along the side of the SUV. “This way!”

The corpses followed her through the garage.

“Ha!” yelled Maylee, running out of the garage and into the

## ROBERT A. BEST

yard. The dog barked crazily at her. "Shut up dog!" she yelled, stopping and looking back to the garage. The corpses stumbled out after her.

Maylee ran across the yard and back to the side of the house. She heard the corpses stumbling after her. Rain pelted her. Her joy at getting the corpses away from Mom began to fade. The corpses behind her groaned and she began to worry she had made a fatal mistake. She ran, her feet pounding on the wet grass. All she heard was the moaning behind her and her own panting.

She raced under the bedroom window she'd climbed out of. She tripped on the fallen window screen, stumbling and almost running into the wall. She paused to regain her footing, gulping air and looking back at the corpses. They were still coming for her, groaning loud and long. Rain stung her cheeks.

She grunted and kept running, clutching her bat in her right hand. She heard the corpses behind her. She reached the corner leading to the back yard. She wished she had time to peek around it. She didn't. She ran blindly into the back yard.

She stopped, almost stumbling when she saw five or six corpses standing around the back yard. They staggered around aimlessly.

"Shit!" she yelled in frustration. She turned to look at the corpses coming up the side of the house. They were close.

She heard moans from the back yard and realized her mistake. She turned back to see the back-yard corpses staring at her.

They groaned and came at her. The closest one was a fat shirtless man, covered in yellow and white boils. He worked his flabby cheeks, splitting one of the boils open. Pus oozed down his ashen face. He reached for Maylee.

Maylee swore under her breath. She swung the bat at the fat man's face, hitting it with such force three more boils broke. Yellow liquid splattered across her bat and onto the lawn. The fat man gurgled and stumbled to one side. Maylee ran past him, doing her best to ignore the disgusting liquid coating her bat.

She dodged a second corpse, a woman with most of her scalp ripped off, and was clear of the second group. She heard the corpses from the side of the house round the corner and join the group she had just gotten past. She stopped, wiping the bat against the wall as she cast quick glances back to make sure no corpses drew near. Satisfied the bat was as clean as she could get it, she ran around the corner and along the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

other side of the house.

Thankfully, this side was clear. She ran as hard as she could. She heard the dog barking and the SUV alarm squealing as she neared the front of the house. Rain pelted her face and her feet nearly slipped several times in the wet grass.

She rounded the corner so fast she nearly lost control. The yard was clear of corpses, save the ones clogging the front door. They still faced inside. She stopped at the corner, heart pounding, and prayed she'd find the garage empty. She had to get back to the kitchen. Back to Mom. Then Dalton.

*Oh god, Dalton.* What if she'd left him to die? What if she'd failed to protect him? He was the kid. He was just a kid.

Running into the garage, she would have cried for joy when she found it empty, but her lungs burned from running so hard. She hit the cement floor, nearly skidding from her wet shoes, and ran past the SUV. The alarm howled in her ears. She was too tired to yell at it.

She screamed when a figure burst from the door leading into the house. She couldn't stop herself in time. She fell into the figure's arms.

"Maylee!" said the figure as it resolved into Mom. "Are you okay?"

"Mom?" said Maylee, panting. "Oh god, Mom. Mom." Maylee hugged her tightly. Behind Mom, Park was smacking a corpse across the temple with the skillet. Dark red splattered across the skillet and a nearby wall.

Mom hugged Maylee back. "Where's Dalton?"

Fear and shame flooded Maylee and she pushed away from Mom. "Oh god, Dalton. He's still inside." She turned to run out of the garage.

"Which room?" yelled Mom behind her.

"Follow me!" Maylee shouted, exiting the garage and running back into the front yard. The dog barked viciously at her.

"Maylee!" yelled Mom from her back.

Maylee ignored her as she ran across the yard, struggling to do quick calculations in her head. She tried to remember the layout of the house. Based on the window she had climbed out of, the room Dalton was in should have a window somewhere around ...

## ROBERT R. BEST

*Shit*, Maylee thought, realizing something. What if the other room didn't have a window? She pushed the thought down and ran around the corner of the house.

She was overjoyed when she saw a second window. "Dalton!" she yelled, stopping beneath it. She brought her bat up and swung at the window. The overhead angle was awkward and the outside of the window was covered with a screen, but she managed to break the glass.

"Dalton!" she yelled again, swinging the bat again. More glass broke and the screen came loose, falling into the yard.

She jumped up and caught hold of the windowsill. It was too high and she struggled to pull herself up. "Dalton!"

Mom's voice rang out behind her. "Maylee stop!" Maylee felt Mom's hand catch her leg and pull her down.

"Mom no!" yelled Maylee as her grip came loose and she dropped back to the ground. "I have to get to Dalton! I have to!"

Mom slapped her across the face. The sting of it silenced Maylee. For a second she stood in the cold rain, staring at her mother.

Mom was crying. "Goddammit, Maylee, do you have any idea what it would do to me if I lost you?"

Maylee blinked and put her hand to her cheek.

Park came around the corner and ran up. "What the fuck?"

"Park!" yelled Angie. "Come here. Give me a boost."

Park looked at Maylee, Angie, then the window. He nodded in understanding then stepped over to Angie.

# SEVEN

Ella drew her jacket tight around herself, walking quickly to keep up with the Keepers as they marched through the zoo. Heading for the Bites. Caleb and Lee were out front, arguing. Lee had the dart gun slung over his shoulder.

Cold and intermittent rain pelted Ella's cheeks as she walked. She blinked and sputtered in the cold water. Why was she even coming along? She didn't care about the Bites. She wanted to find Lori. When she thought about it, it was obvious she was just following because they were adults and she was not. She hated that.

They passed several animal exhibits as they walked. A llama trotted from one side of his exhibit to the other, stamping his feet a little harder than Ella had ever seen before. Ella called him Tom. Tom was usually happy. Today Tom was not. The same was true of Linda and Bo, a pair of red foxes Ella loved talking too. She could swear they bared their teeth at her as she passed. Their eyes glinted in the gloomy daylight.

They heard the Bites before they saw it. Many voices, yelling. The animals they passed grew more agitated the closer they got to the noise. A large brown bear Ella called Geoff was on his back legs, front paws pressed against the side of his exhibit. Geoff drew his head back and roared at the sky. Then he slammed his head against the wall. Ella gasped but had no time to stay and comment. The group moved on and she followed. Geoff turned his bloody face to look at her.

Ella saw the building come into view. *Zoo Bites*, said a large sign in front. The normally-lit letters were dark, looking hollow and sad in the cold rain. A large crowd of people, all zoo customers judging from their clothes, stood around the front entrance. A small group of Keepers stood in the entrance. Both groups were yelling at each other. The customers made wild, violent gestures as they screamed. The Keepers looked defensive, a few stepping farther back into the protection of the building.

"Hey!" screamed Lee in a volume Ella had never heard from him. Neither had anyone else. Caleb, Shelley and the other Keepers

## ROBERT A. BEST

looked at him in surprise. The customers and the Bites employees kept arguing.

“I said 'Hey' goddammit!” screamed Lee.

The crowd fell quiet and looked over to him.

“Alright then,” he said, holding up the tranquilizer rifle. “I need everyone to disperse.”

“You fuckers trapped us in here,” said an older woman in the crowd. “The least you can do is give us some fucking food.”

“Okay, first of all, watch your fucking mouth, grandma. And second of all, we don't have to give you shit.”

The crowd started yelling again.

“I said be quiet!” yelled Lee. The crowd quieted down. “Trapped you in here? We saved your fucking lives! Have you seen what's going on outside?”

“No, we haven't!” said a fat man toward the back of the crowd. “Because you trapped us in here!”

“Those things trapped you in here!” yelled Lee, his cheeks turning red. “We're protecting your huge ass, so you better be hiding a newfound sense of gratitude under your gigantic fucking stomach roll.”

“You scrawny little shit,” said the fat man, stepping toward Lee. Lee raised the rifle and the crowd gasped. The man stopped, holding up his hands.

“You better back off, bubba,” said Lee, cocking. The crowd stepped back.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” said Caleb, stepping between Lee and the man. He looked at the crowd. “It's a tranq rifle, everyone. It's just sedative.”

“You're going to drug us?” screamed a woman, holding her children close to her.

“No one is drugging anyone!” said Caleb, looking back and forth.

“No one's feeding anyone either!” shouted a man in the back of the crowd. The crowd yelled their agreement to each other.

“Let us out!” screamed someone else.

“No one gets out!” screamed Lee. “We're keeping you safe! We're the Keepers here! We're the Keepers and you will all be fucking Kept!”

“Fuck you, crazy ass!” yelled someone. A rock vaulted though

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

the air, smacking Lee in the side of the head. Lee jerked and stumbled to one side. The gun went off. The dart flew across the lot and with a sharp “thud” embedded itself in the stomach of the fat man.

The crowd exploded, rushing at the Bites. The fat man stumbled back, clutching at his stomach. The Keepers inside the Bites backed up hurriedly and slammed the doors shut. Lee yelled obscenities and fired his dart gun into the crowd. Several people fell, clutching at arms or chests.

“Dammit Lee stop!” yelled Caleb, snatching at the gun.

“Keep the fuck away or I’ll drop you too!” yelled Lee, pulling away from Caleb and aiming the gun back at the crowd.

Ella backed away, chest pounding. She looked at the people fighting. Customers pounded at the glass doors to the Bites. The Keepers inside pressed their bodies against the doors, keeping them shut. Lee yelled and fired. Other Keepers, behind Lee, started taking their own tranquilizer rifles off of their shoulders.

Behind Ella, animals howled and screeched from their exhibits. The noise from both sides, the people in front of her and the animals behind, was deafening. It was madness. It sounded like the world coming to an end. The rain picked up, pounding cold water down on her head. Ella drew herself close and tried to look small.

A woman, at the back of the group of customers, turned to see Ella standing there. For a moment Ella thought the woman looked sad. She stepped over to Ella and opened her mouth.

“She’s with them!” the woman said, pointing. “Get her!”

Several customers at the back of the group turned to Ella. An older man grabbed her across the shoulders. Ella screamed and tried to pull away.

“We’ve got the girl!” screamed the woman, looking crazy as the rain poured down her taut face. “Let us out if you want her back! Give us food if you want her back!”

Shelley, up toward the front with Caleb, saw and heard. “Ella!” she yelled, running over.

The old man saw Shelley running up and clutched Ella tighter. “Back off, Keeper bitch!”

*My god, Ella thought, struggling against the man. He’s talking like Lee. They’re using Lee’s words. Everyone’s crazy.*

ROBERT A. BEST

Caleb, up front with Lee, clutched the front of Lee's rifle, trying to pull it away. He let go when he saw Ella and the old man. He ran toward them.

Shelley reached Ella and grabbed her arm. "Let her go!" Shelley yelled, pulling at her. The old man held tight. Ella struggled but the man was too strong for her and Shelley.

"Not until we get some food or get free!" yelled the old man.

The woman, the one who'd called the others over, grabbed Ella and pulled against Shelley. "Not until we get let out of here!"

"Let me go!" yelled Ella, twisting side to side, trying to pull herself free.

"Let the girl go!" Caleb shouted, arriving and grabbing Ella's shirt.

"Everyone let me go!" screamed Ella. The animals behind her roared and howled.

Up front, Lee and the Keepers kept firing into the crowd. Crowd members jerked and fell. Those left banged on the doors to the Bites. One door was cracking. The Keepers inside did their best to hold the crowd off.

A tall muscular man wearing a thin jacket walked over to a large metal trash can. He picked it up and turned to the doors. "Everyone out of the way!" he yelled, lifting the can over his head.

He jerked as a dart thudded into his back.

"Put it down!" Lee yelled, cocking the rifle and aiming to fire again.

The man turned to face Lee, still holding the can over his head. His face was red and the veins in his neck throbbed. Rain pattered on the can, running down his arms and shoulders.

"I said put it down!" said Lee.

The man bellowed and ran at Lee, still holding the can.

Lee aimed and fired. The dart shot from the rifle. The man jerked to a stop and his head snapped back. He slowly lowered his head down. The dart jutted from his eye. The man blinked his one good eye, then fell over. The can clattered to the pavement and rolled away.

The crowd had stopped to watch. The old man let go of Ella. He and the woman stepped away, staring and open-mouthed in the cold rain. Lee grimly cocked the rifle and readied it.

*Oh shit, Ella thought. That wasn't a mistake. Look at Lee's face.*

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

*He meant to do that.*

The crowd roared and rushed at Lee. Lee and the Keepers fired into the crowd. People dropped as they ran, not clutching anything. Lee and the Keepers were shooting to kill.

Shelley came up to Ella. Ella realized she was shaking and crying. "Are you okay?" Shelley yelled over the chaos around them.

Ella nodded, shaking in the cold rain.

"We have to get out of here!" said Caleb.

People around them screamed and fought to get to the Bites. Fought to get to Lee. Some of them simply began fighting with each other. Cold rain pounded and the animals roared.

Caleb helped Ella and Shelley away from the crowd. Once they were clear, they ran.

\* \* \*

Dalton lay on the floor, his head spinning. His forehead smarted and his ankle throbbed. The corpse whose head he'd smashed was still, which gave him some solace. He'd been hearing all manner of chaos coming from outside the room, and the thought of Mom or Maylee or even Mr. Park dying out there sent a hot sorrow through him that hurt worse than either his head or ankle. He wondered if he could stand.

He jerked when the window on one side of the room broke inward.

"Dalton!" came Maylee's voice from outside.

"Maylee!" Dalton tried to yell, surprised at how hoarse he sounded. The groans behind him were so loud he doubted she could hear him.

"Dalton!" came Maylee's voice again. Something hit the window screen and it dropped away.

Then there was yelling outside the window. Dalton couldn't make it out. The groans behind him were too loud.

A few seconds later, he heard scraping on the outside wall and two hands appeared inside the window.

"Maylee!" said Dalton, feeling like he could cry. She was okay. But was she the only one who was okay? "Mom?"

The figure in the window pulled itself into view. It was Mom.

ROBERT A. BEST

“Mom!” yelled Dalton, trying to sit up.

Mom climbed up over the sill and jumped down into the room. Her eyes went wide when she saw Dalton on the floor.

“Dalton!” she cried, rushing over. “Oh god, Dalton!”

“I’m okay,” he said, propping himself up on his elbows. He tried to push himself up farther and fell back down. “I’m fine.”

“Oh shit,” said Mom, kneeling next to him. That scared Dalton. Mom rarely swore around him.

“Really, Mom, I’m fine.” Dalton pushed himself up again. The corpses in the hall banged on the door.

“Hell you are, Dalton,” said Mom, frowning and feeling his ankle and head. He was still a little dizzy and his head throbbed. The pain in his ankle had subsided to more of a dull pulse. “What happened? Were you...”

“No, Mom. I’m fine. I’m not bit. I just fell. I did that.” He pointed at the corpse on the floor and its cracked skull.

Mom looked back at the corpse. Then at the bed with its rumped, dirty sheets. Then at Dalton. She seemed to figure out what had happened. She let out a long sigh. “Okay. Can you stand?”

Dalton nodded. Mom grabbed his hands and helped him to his feet. He winced when his foot landed on the floor.

“How’s your ankle?” said Mom. “Can you put weight on it?”

He tried. It hurt, but he could. He nodded.

“Okay,” said Mom. She looked past him to the door. Dalton could see her picturing the corpses beyond, filling the hall. She looked back at him. “Come on. We’ll have to go out the window.”

\* \* \*

Maylee stood on her tiptoes, trying to see through the window. She could hear Mom and Dalton talking inside. She strained, but couldn’t see them.

“Hey,” said Park, standing a few feet away.

She lowered herself down and turned to face him. “Yeah?”

“Maylee, right?” he said, rain running down his long stringy hair and scruffy beard.

Maylee nodded.

“I think they’re okay, Maylee,” he said, nodding toward the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

window. “We can both hear them talking and no one sounds upset.”

Maylee looked up at the window, then back to Park. She nodded, then crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. Her bat was propped up beside her. She knew corpses were crowded on either side of them. She'd left a group of them in the back yard. Another group was crowding the front door. But they seemed to have no memory at all. Once she and the others were out of sight, they were forgotten.

“Hey Maylee,” said Park.

“Yeah?” she said.

“You and your brother saw the hallway, right? The girls' rooms? My girls, I mean?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He paused to scratch at his beard. He wiped rain from his face. “You didn't see any...any sign of...”

Maylee understood, and shook her head. “No. Nothing.”

Park nodded, looking down at the ground. “Well, that's something.”

Maylee nodded.

For a few minutes they stood quietly. Corpses groaned off in the distance. Maylee kept glancing at the corners of the house, wondering how long they had before one of the corpses in the front or back yard noticed them. The rain slowed to a light mist.

Groaning came from above her. She jerked, her hand flying to the bat propped next to her, before she realized the groans were Dalton. Glass crunched.

“Dalton!” she cried, spinning to look up at the window.

“What?” said Dalton as he crawled out onto the ledge. He had a purple bruise on his forehead. “I'm fine. Geez.”

Mom's head appeared in the window, over Dalton. “Be careful.”

“I am, Mom,” said Dalton, crawling farther out.

Mom grabbed the back of his shirt. “Park. Help.”

Park stepped up to help Dalton down. Dalton took a step, limping.

“You okay there, kid?” said Park.

“I'm fine,” said Dalton, waving him away.

Groans came from the back yard. Closer. Park looked up at

## ROBERT A. BEST

Mom. "We gotta move."

Mom nodded, climbing out onto the ledge and hopping down. "Okay." She looked left and right. Maylee followed her gaze, looking for corpses. "Shit, Park. I'm sorry your kids weren't here."

"Yeah, well," said Park, "the way things have gone here, I'm kind of glad they aren't."

Mom nodded, then started for the car. Maylee followed, helping Dalton limp along next to her. Park followed.

They moved across the yard as quickly and quietly as they could. Corpses still crammed into the front door, still faced away from the street. A few corpses had wandered far off. The dog barked at them as they hurried toward the car.

Groans came from the porch. Louder than before. The whole group stopped. Tension shot up Maylee's back as she looked toward the porch.

The corpses had seen. They groaned and stumbled off the porch, toward them.

"Aaaand shit," said Park. "Move!"

They ran for the car, corpses stumbling behind. They yanked open the doors and climbed inside as fast as they could. Mom in the driver's seat, Park passenger, Maylee and Dalton in the back. Corpses stumbled up the yard, halfway to the car.

Mom fumbled with the keys and jabbed them into the ignition. She turned them. The engine complained but sprang to life. The nearest corpse reached the car. It was a woman with long stringy hair and blood-covered teeth. She hissed and pawed at the hood.

"Sorry babe," said Mom, pulling the shifter to drive and stomping on the gas. The car shot away from the curb, leaving the house and corpses behind.

"Where are we even going?" said Mom, steering the car up the street.

"I don't know," said Park, pounding his fist on the door handle. "The school maybe?"

Maylee's pocket buzzed. It surprised her so much she jumped a little in her seat. Then she remembered the phone. She fished it out so fast some of the glitter glue scraped off into her pocket.

"What school?" said Mom.

"The school my girls went to," said Park. "They weren't home,

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

so maybe they were still at school.”

Maylee flipped open the phone and looked at the screen.

*Message: Lori, it said.*

“Hey,” said Maylee.

Either Mom didn't hear or was ignoring her. “Do you even know what school they were going to?”

Maylee pressed a button on the phone to open the text message.

*Ella?, it said.*

“How would I fucking know what school they were going to?” said Park.

*Who is this?, Maylee typed and sent.*

*Your sister. No time for joking around.*

Maylee frowned and typed. *I'm not Ella.*

“Oh I don't know, Parker,” said Mom from the front seat, steering the car. “Maybe you would know something about them through the magical power of being their fucking father!”

*Who is this? said the phone.*

“Guys!” said Maylee. No one listened. She frowned and typed as fast she could. *My name's Maylee. I'm with your dad.*

*Gregory? Here with me.*

*No, your real dad. Parker. We found your sister's phone. Where are you?*

“Oh don't you dare start up with that shit!” said Park. “Just because you think you're mother-fucking parent of the year or some shit.”

“Guys!” shouted Maylee, staring at the phone. No one listened. The phone buzzed as a new message came in.

*At the zoo. Ella must've left her phone at home. We're both here. Gregory has me tied up, won't let me go.*

Maylee typed, moving her thumbs over the small keypad as accurately as she could. *Let me call you. You can talk to your dad.*

*No time. He's coming. Gotta go.*

Then the phone was silent.

“You're no fucking parent at all!” yelled Mom. “The only reason you even fucking know where they fucking live is because you're legally obligated to be told!”

“Guys!” Maylee yelled at the top of her voice. The car fell

## ROBERT A. BEST

silent. Dalton stared at her.

“Goddammit what, Maylee?” yelled Mom.

Maylee held the phone out toward the front seat. “I know where they are.”

\* \* \*

Ella paced the Communications Office, her arms wrapped tightly around her frame. She hated that she was back in the office without Lori. She hated that she was pacing again. She'd made no progress whatsoever.

She shuddered, feeling free to do it since the room was empty. She remembered the old man gripping her, the crazy woman yelling at her. How long had it been? Two days? Did people lose their minds that quickly? And what was wrong with the animals? They used to love her.

Ella heard Caleb and Shelley talking from the breakroom. They spoke quietly to each other, sounding scared. Caleb and Shelley were the only ones in the breakroom. The three of them were the only ones in the whole office. All the other Keepers were at the Bites.

Lee and the Keepers had won. The crowd, tired of being drugged or killed, had panicked and broken up. Lee and the Keepers had taken over the Bites, high-fiving each other and laughing. Ella had seen it on one of the screens Caleb used.

Ella paced faster. She was scared and angry. Where was her sister? What were Caleb and Shelley going to do to help find her? They were older than Ella, but they were just as scared as she was.

They were hurt, too. Ella stepped over to the breakroom and stood in the doorway. Caleb and Shelley sat at one of the tables, leaning toward each other and talking. Caleb clutched one of his arms. Shelley had bruises on her face. Ella was the only one of the three who was unhurt. Caleb no longer wore his Keeper vest. He'd left it slung over one of the chairs in the main room. Ella wondered if it meant Caleb was done being in charge. So who was left?

They didn't notice her standing there.

Ella shook her head and paced back into the Communications Office. She sighed at the screens, all showing different aspects of the zoo. She could see more animals biting and growling. Stomping their feet angrily at nothing.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Her eyes landed on one screen, showing a still image of the street outside the zoo. Ella suddenly remembered. Caleb had been showing her the recording of the night Stepdad brought Lori back to the zoo. The night everything had gone insane.

She stepped over to the screen and stared at it. It was paused and frozen in place. She briefly considered calling to Caleb. Asking him to unpause it. But no. He was hurt and scared. Ella could do it.

Ella looked at the panel below the screen, confused by the dials and buttons. There were too many to make sense of. But there was a button that was blinking. Ella shrugged and clicked it.

The image unfroze and continued.

First it showed nothing new. Just the same view of the street. Then a man came into frame. Ella blinked and recognized it as Gregory. He pulled a teen girl after him. The image was blurry but Ella could tell it was Lori. Lori struggled as Gregory tried to lead her across the street.

The image was silent but Ella saw Lori yell something at Gregory. Gregory turned to her and yelled back. It made Ella's chest constrict. Stepdad never yelled like that. Lori's face was too blurry to make out full expressions, but Ella knew she was scared. Ella wished she could climb into the recording and knock Stepdad in the head. Free Lori from him.

Gregory pulled on Lori, trying to force her across the street. Lori wrenched away, screaming something at him. Gregory stepped over and slapped her across the face.

Hard.

Ella gasped, stepping back from the screen. Fury built in her. She'd have smashed the screen in if she believed there was the slightest chance of it somehow hurting him.

She was done. She stepped back up and clicked the button she'd used before. The image froze and the button resumed blinking. In the image, Lori had her head turned, still reacting to the force of the slap. Stepdad's arm was extended in the follow-through of the slap.

Ella looked toward the breakroom, breathing through her teeth. Caleb and Shelley would try to stop her. She couldn't ask them. She couldn't even tell them.

She'd find Lori herself.

## ROBERT R. BEST

She walked to the chair with Caleb's vest slung over it. She felt in the front pocket until she found his keycard. She slipped it into her jeans pocket and strode toward the door that led out.

She opened it as quietly as she could, bracing as cold wet air rushed in. She looked back toward the breakroom and listened. Caleb and Shelley were still talking quietly. No sign they'd heard.

Ella looked back at the paused screen. At the frozen image of Gregory striking Lori.

"Fuck you, Stepdad," whispered Ella. She stepped outside and shut the door.

# EIGHT

Angie pulled the car into the lot of Ashton Memorial Zoo. It was clogged full of cars, parked at odd angles. Cars were crushed into others, blocking any way through. Angie only got the car in a few feet before she had to stop.

She pushed the shifter into park and drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. Night was falling. Light rain drummed on the windshield. “Gee,” she said. “And I thought parking was a bitch the last time I brought the kids here.”

Park nodded, staring out at the lot. “Okay. Just let me out here. I’ll find them.”

“Don’t be a fucking moron, Parker,” said Angie. “I’ll help you.”

“And do what?” said Park, turning to her. “Leave the kids in the car? Or will you bring them with you? Either way’s not safe. These are my kids. My issue. You get the fuck out of here.”

Angie frowned at him, then looked at Maylee and Dalton in the back seat. Dalton was staring out the side window. Maylee was clutching her bat and looking very serious. Like she was straining to appear adult.

Park had a point. But she didn’t have the slightest idea what to do about it.

“We’ll come, too, Mom,” said Maylee, leaning forward. “I’ll protect Dalton. We’ll be safe.”

Angie sighed back at her. “Maylee...”

Dalton looked at her. The bruise on his forehead still looked angry. “We have to help Mr. Park, Mom.”

Angie looked at him, then at Park. Park shrugged. “You know what I think,” said Park. “So whatever you want to do.”

Angie took in a deep breath and let it out. “Fine. We’re going. If the kids are in the zoo, they must have it locked down or something. If we can get inside, it’ll be safer than here. We can decide what to do in the morning.”

Maylee nodded.

“But,” Angie said, turning around in the seat and giving Maylee

## ROBERT A. BEST

her best stern look, “you be more careful than you've ever been in your life. You stay the hell away from anything that even looks like a corpse.”

Maylee frowned but nodded. “Fine.”

Angie nodded back. “Good.”

They all opened their doors and climbed from the car. Cold rain pelted Angie's head. She looked toward the front entrance. Cars clogged the whole way. It would be a long, winding walk.

She looked at Park, who took the rifle from his shoulder and nodded.

“Okay,” said Angie. “Let's go.”

They slowly started working their way through the cars. They squeezed between bumpers and worked their way around hoods and trunks. Dalton was still limping, Maylee helping him along. Angie made sure they all stayed together. The light patter of rain on metal was the only sound.

They reached a spot they couldn't get past. Three cars had crashed into each other, crushed together so close there was no opening they could get through.

“Here,” said Park, stepping up onto the hood of one of the cars. He looked around, then took a step. The car bounced under his weight.

Groaning came from the front seat.

Park spun to face the windshield. Angie moved to block the car from the kids. Inside she saw a man crushed against the steering wheel. His ribcage was exposed, bone crunched around the plastic and steel. He tried to pull free, straining to reach Park. His ribs caught on the steering wheel, red glop falling from his chest with each tug.

“Shit,” said Park, stepping back. The hood crunched under his boots. The metal creaked and groaned loudly.

Moans came from all around. Angie whipped her head from side to side, looking for the source. A chill gripped her as she realized the source was the cars surrounding them. She cursed herself for being so stupid. There'd been a panic in the parking lot. People rushing to get out. People crashing into each other. People dying. Dying and...

Maylee screamed. Angie whipped around to see a corpse reaching from a car and clutching Maylee's hair. Maylee twisted away and smacked the hand aside with her bat. A second corpse reached from another car, almost snagging Dalton.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Look out!” yelled Angie just as a hand closed on the back of her shirt. It yanked her backward, toward the nearest car.

“Mom!” yelled Maylee, running forward.

Angie twisted her head around. A woman, forehead split and embedded with glass, leaned from the car and gnashed her teeth as she pulled Angie closer. Angie pulled back but the awkward angle kept her from getting any traction.

Maylee's bat slammed downward, narrowly missing Angie's head. The bat slammed into the corpse's arm. Angie heard bone snap and the corpse let go. Angie fell forward against the car Park stood on.

“Up here!” Park yelled, kneeling down to reach for Angie.

Angie straightened and stepped back. She grabbed Maylee and Dalton and pushed them toward Park. “On the car! Hurry!”

Maylee and Dalton climbed onto the hood of the car. Park helped them up. Once they were up, Angie followed. She stood and pulled her kids close. Corpses groaned and reached from all around, bloody arms and heads protruding from windows.

“Fuck,” she said, looking around. “What now?”

“We go car to car,” said Park. “Don't see what else we can do.” He stepped across the hood and hopped to the nearest trunk. It buckled under his weight. A corpse in the back window groaned and reached for him, but was unable to break free of the window.

“See your point,” said Angie. She motioned Maylee and Dalton to follow. “Go. Hurry.”

Maylee nodded. She hopped to the next car and helped Dalton limp across. Park backed up and climbed on the roof of the car to make room. The corpse reached upward for him. He kicked the hand away, cursing. Maylee and Dalton backed up for Angie to follow. Angie did, jumping to the trunk and wincing as the car bounced under their weight.

“Okay,” she said. “Good job guys. Let's keep it up until we're clear. And be careful!”

They climbed across, and jumped to the next car, keeping clear of the reaching corpse. They slowly climbed across the next car, watching the old man inside as he bit and clawed at the windshield, at them. The rain increased, slamming down cold and hard on the cars. Groans and the sound of rain on metal filled Angie's ears.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Park climbed across the hood of the car and jumped to the hood of a nearby truck. He ran up onto the roof and turned to look back. He motioned for them to follow.

Maylee stepped up to the edge of the hood, helping Dalton along with her. Dalton waved her away and made the jump himself. He let out a little cry when he landed and Park caught him.

“Dalton!” yelled Angie.

“I’m fine, Mom!” yelled Dalton, wincing and bouncing on his good foot.

“You need to let your sister help you, bubba,” said Park, stepping back to make room for Maylee.

“Yeah,” said Maylee, stepping forward. She jumped and landed on the hood of the truck. Her sneakers gave off a squeaking noise as they slipped out from under her. She stumbled and began to fall off the truck.

“Maylee!” yelled Angie, jumping across and catching her arm. Maylee jerked to a stop, straining Angie’s back. Angie almost slipped herself. Park grabbed her shoulder and pulled them both up.

Angie hugged Maylee and looked over the side. A corpse was leaning out of a nearby window. It looked back at her with yellowed eyes and hissed. Maylee would have fallen straight into that thing.

“Goddammit, Maylee, be careful,” Angie whispered, hugging her.

“I will Mom, I will,” said Maylee, pushing away. She gripped the bat and drew herself up but Angie could see fear in her eyes.

“Just a few more,” said Park.

Angie turned to follow Park’s gaze across the remainder of the lot. She wasn’t so sure she’d call it “a few,” but they were over halfway to the end. The rain was coming even harder now, cold and pelting. Angie felt her shoes slowly slide along the metal of the hood. “We’ve gotta keep moving. Soon we won’t be able to keep our feet at all.”

The next few cars went without incident. They jumped from hood to trunk, car top to car top. Corpses groaned and reached but they were able to stay clear.

“Just one more,” said Angie as they caught their footing on the back of an old truck. Park nodded and they slowly climbed over the top of the truck to the rain-slick hood. Angie struggled to keep her footing.

Park steadied himself and jumped to the hood of the next car. It

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

crumpled as he landed. The car had a broken and bloody windshield, with red-stained cracks running along its surface. Behind it, Angie could see rotting hands working their way along the inside. Reaching for them, slow but relentless.

Park looked at the hands for a moment, as though making sure the corpse behind them was safely trapped in the car. After several seconds he turned to Angie and nodded.

“Okay, guys,” said Angie. “Go.”

Maylee jumped. Angie winced at the sound of Maylee's shoes squeaking on the hood of the car. Maylee kept her footing and reached back for Dalton. Dalton took Maylee's hand and hopped across. He let out a little cry when he landed on his bad foot. He limped a few times and settled, holding onto Maylee's arm.

Angie turned to look back at the lot. The cars were all motionless in the pelting rain. Moans told her corpses were inside them, struggling and biting. But the corpses were all safely stuck. She turned back. The last bit of light slipped from the sky. She could barely make out the outline of the car in the wet gloom.

*Just one more*, she told herself. Then jumped.

She landed and for one panicked moment she felt her feet slip beneath her. Park caught her arm and she slid to a stop, inches from the edge of the hood. The corpse behind the broken windshield pounded on the glass.

Angie let out her breath slowly, her chest pounding. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” said Park. “No shit, shit.”

“Good thing we're almost done,” she said. “Much more of this and...”

With a cry, Dalton slipped and fell off the car. Angie heard him slam into the pavement, yelling as he landed on his bad foot.

“Dalton!” Angie yelled. Not thinking, she ran and leapt off the car, into the darkness.

She dropped down between the hood of the car and the door of a nearby truck. It was too dark to see. Rain pounded on her head. She heard Dalton whimper and mutter.

“Dalton!” she yelled, feeling around in the dark. Her hands fell on pavement, on metal.

“Mom!” came Dalton's voice. His hand closed around hers.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Dalton!” Angie pulled Dalton toward her, clutching farther and farther up his arm until she had all of him. She hugged him tight. “Oh shit, Dalton.”

“Mom!” came Maylee's voice from above.

“Everything okay?” came Park's.

“You okay, baby?” said Angie, not wanting to let Dalton go.

“Fine Mom, fine,” said Dalton. Angie expected him to pull away. He didn't.

“Everything's okay!” Angie yelled up to the others.

Glass shattered above them, raining down on their heads. Angie remembered seeing the outline of the truck's side window, just before she dropped down on the ground. There'd been a shape behind it, pounding on it.

“Dalton,” Mom started. Then a bloody arm, shards of glass jutting from it, reached down and grabbed Dalton's hair.

Dalton screamed. Mom reached to the arm and wrenched it away. A cold cheek brushed against hers as the corpse in the truck leaned out and bit at her neck. She twisted away, pushing Dalton back.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton as his form vanished in the dark.

“Just stay back!” she yelled, holding on to Dalton with one hand and pushing the corpse back with the other. The corpse strained and Angie strained back. Angie pushed as hard as she could, but the corpse had a better angle and gravity on its side. She couldn't see the corpse's features, but it sounded like a hoarse old man. It hissed and bit, drawing closer to her every second.

“Mom!” came Maylee's voice from the car hood. Something struck the corpse's head, knocking it off course. Angie looked up, blinking in the rain. She could make out the outline of Maylee, kneeling on the hood of the car. She was jabbing downward with the bat. She could see Park too, moving in position to jump down.

“I got this!” yelled Maylee. She jabbed down again. This time she connected full on. Angie heard the corpse's skull crack. It went limp in her grasp. Angie shoved it upward and spat at it. She pulled Dalton back to her. She heard the car hood creak as Park prepared to jump.

“We're fine!” she yelled upward. She grabbed Maylee's bat. “Just pull!”

Park moved to grab Maylee around the waist. Together they

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

heaved and pulled Angie and Dalton upward. Angie braced her feet against the car and pulled Dalton up after her. A few more heaves and they were all back on the hood, panting and crouching in the rain.

“I told you I had it,” said Maylee, looking back at Park.

“Well fuck me, I guess you did,” said Park. Angie could see him smirking in the dark.

“Everyone okay?” said Angie.

They all nodded. Angie watched their heads bob in the dark. She nodded back. “Come on. Let's get down while we still can.”

\* \* \*

Ella drew her jacket tight around herself and walked, head down, against the rain. It was cold. The sun had gone down and while the power was still on in the zoo, no one had bothered to turn on most of the outside lights. It was dark and Ella was scared, but she had to find Lori. If only she had the slightest idea where to look.

Stepdad had hit Lori. She and Lori were the same age. If Stepdad could hit Lori, he could hit Ella. Could Ella fight him back? She could try, but he was stronger than she was. Just what did she intend to do when she found him? She pushed these ideas down and kept walking, focusing on the sound of the rain and her own breathing. She would go building to building, like Caleb had planned. She would find the building where Gregory was hiding Lori. Then, something. Something.

A hiss came from her left, startling her so much she almost tripped. She stopped and looked.

An emu was bobbing its long neck up and down at her, behind the fence that separated him from the walkway. Ella recognized the emu. It was Ray. Ray was a nice emu.

Ray hissed at her, then let out a loud screech. Ella had never heard him make a noise like that.

Ella took a step toward the fence. The rain pelted down around her. “Ray?” she said.

Ray screeched and snapped his beak at her. Ella screamed, jumping back. Ray craned his neck around, looking at her with wide, hateful eyes. She'd never seen Ray's eyes like that. Ray's eyes hated

ROBERT R. BEST

her.

What on earth was going on?

She backed farther away from the cage, staring at Ray. He jabbed at her, darting his head outward with such force his lower body slammed against the fence. The fence shook. Ray did it again, harder, screeching at her. It was dark, but Ella thought she saw blood seeping down Ray's front.

"You're hurting yourself, Ray," said Ella, feeling like she might cry.

Ray screeched and jabbed at her again. The fence shook and Ray bled.

Ella turned and walked away as fast as she could.

\* \* \*

Angie held her arms out to her sides as they reached the sidewalk in front of the zoo. Park and the kids stopped behind her. Angie looked from side to side, straining to see anything other than dark outlines and rain. To hear anything other than wind.

"Clear?" said Park behind her.

"Shit, I don't know," said Angie, straining to see in the dark. The few lights that were on along the sidewalk only served to make the surrounding darkness worse. In between the few scattered lights were pools of darkness in which she could make out nothing. "I guess. I hope. Let's go."

They trotted, almost running, to the front entrance. *Ashton Memorial Zoo* could be made out on the glass doors. Behind them, all was dark. Rain ran down the glass.

Angie stepped up to the doors, hoping they would slide open like normal. She wasn't surprised when they didn't.

"Well, no shock there, I guess," said Park. He stepped up to the door and felt around the surface.

"What are you doing?" said Angie, looking around. Were those groans in the distance? Wind? The kids drew closer to her.

"Looking for some kind of handle or some shit," said Park, patting his hand along the glass. "Some way to open it by hand."

Angie stepped to the side of the door, looking for a button, a panel. Anything.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“How do people get in?” said Maylee, behind her.

“I don't know,” said Angie. “We've never tried to get in when they're locked before.”

“Look!” said Dalton, pointing past Angie. He said it at full volume, loud enough for anyone to hear. For anything to hear.

“Dalton, shh!” said Angie, trying to keep her voice down. She looked where he was pointing. Far beyond the glass, in the darkness of the zoo, she saw something. A figure moved from side to side. It didn't walk like a corpse. It looked like a young girl, maybe Maylee's age.

“Someone's in there!” said Maylee.

“I see them,” said Park. He slammed his palm on the glass. “Hey! Hey!”

“Park!” said Angie, looking around for corpses. “Those things might hear.”

“That person might shitting hear!” said Park, pounding on the glass. “Hey! You in there!”

“Dammit,” said Angie under her breath. She slapped the glass, softly at first but then harder. “Hey! Let us in!”

Maylee and Dalton joined in, banging the glass and shouting. The glass shook under the force. Their pounding echoed through the lot. Angie thought she heard moaning. Was it from the parking lot? Closer? Her imagination? She couldn't tell.

Angie strained to see the figure inside. It made no sign it saw or heard. It kept walking, disappearing from sight. Rain ran down the glass, obscuring her view.

“Hey!” yelled Park.

“Dammit!” said Angie, slapping the glass so hard her palm stung.

Groans came from their right, loud and close. Three corpses stumbled from the darkness. The closest one, a skinny man with no hair and a large open sore on his face, groaned and reached for Maylee.

“Shit!” screamed Maylee, jumping back. Park punched the corpse in the side of the head. It jerked and fell away, collapsing in front of the other two corpses. They tripped and fell, slamming into the pavement. Maylee gripped her bat and held it ready. Dalton clung to Angie.

More groans came from behind the fallen corpses. Lots of

## ROBERT A. BEST

groans. Lots of corpses shambling toward them in the dark.

“We gotta go,” said Angie, pulling Maylee back.

“Come on,” said Park. “There’s more doors along the side. Gates and shit.”

They ran, as quickly as they dared in the dark. The corpses behind them groaned and hissed. The sidewalk led out of the parking lot and around the zoo. They ran along a dark side street. Angie strained to hear past the sound of their own pounding feet. Were there more groans up ahead? Angie felt colder than the rain would account for. The whole zoo could be surrounded by those things and it was too dark to tell.

“There!” said Maylee, pointing off to the right. Trusting that her daughter’s eyes were better in the dark than hers, Angie turned. A second, smaller glass doorway emerged from the dark. They all stopped, panting.

This door had a handle. Angie reached out and grabbed it. A corpse grabbed her arm and leaned in. It had come from her left, the way they had been running moments before. If they’d kept running...

“Fuck me!” yelled Angie, wrenching her arm away and stepping back. The corpse, a biker with a large crack down the front of his helmet and a torn bloody leather jacket, stumbled forward. He groaned, muffled by the helmet, and reached for her.

Maylee stepped forward with the bat. Angie held her back. She hiked up one foot and kicked the corpse backward. He stumbled back into the door, his helmet slamming against the glass. The impact echoed around in the dark.

The corpse righted itself and came for them again.

“Shit,” said Park, stepping toward it. “He’s just gonna keep coming.” Park reached out and pulled off the cracked helmet. The corpse had long reddish-gray braids and a pale face with a long split running down the center of it. Dried blood coated his mouth and nose. He hissed at Park.

“That looks nasty, pal,” said Park, flipping the helmet to grip it by the front. “Let me help you with that.”

Park slammed the back of the helmet into the corpse’s head. It fell back against the door again. The impact echoed. Angie heard groans coming from somewhere.

Park brought the helmet up and smashed it down on the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

corpse's skull. Something went "pop" and the corpse fell to the ground, still. Park snorted and dropped the helmet to the sidewalk.

Groans came from very close. Angie whipped her head around, peering into the dark. "Shit. We don't have much time." She stepped over to the glass door and strained to make out what was beyond it. She failed.

"Damn," she said. She pounded on the glass. "Hey! Anyone! Let us in!"

Park and the kids joined in, slamming on the glass and shouting.

The groans became louder. Angie realized they were coming from the street behind them. She turned and saw several outlines emerging from the dark. Then more. Then more.

"Hey!" yelled Park behind her, pounding on the glass.

"No time!" yelled Angie, turning back to them. "Next one!"

"Well shit!" yelled Maylee.

"Language, Maylee!" yelled Mom, pulling her and Dalton away from the door.

They ran down the sidewalk, into the dark and rain. Moans came from their left and backs. How long, Angie wondered, until they came from the front? What if she had trapped her kids in the dark with these things?

The next street sloped downhill. Angie didn't dare slow down. She could hear Park and the kids keeping pace behind her. Moans came from all around. They had to find a door. A door that would open.

A large shape loomed in front of her. Fear shot up her back and she stopped abruptly, so fast she almost toppled forward.

"Shit!" yelled Park. She could hear him and the kids struggling to stop behind her.

The shape resolved into a long flatbed truck, parked longways and blocking the street and sidewalk. Large metal barrels lined the back of the truck.

"Dammit!" yelled Angie. She looked around, panic creeping in. How far were they from the car? Where the hell was the parking lot now anyway? Rain fell from the dark and pelted her face. Groaning came from all around.

"Under!" said Park. "Hurry!"

## ROBERT A. BEST

Angie looked down. Park was right. The truck was high enough off the street that they could easily climb under. "Come on!" she said, pulling Maylee and Dalton into the street. She grabbed them by the shoulders and kneeled, pushing them down with her.

She crawled forward, under the truck. Maylee and Dalton were right behind her. She made it about a quarter of the way under when a human shape lunged at her from under the truck. No, not a human, Angie realized. Something that was once human.

"Fuck!" yelled Angie, jerking her head back so quickly she slammed it into the underside of the truck. Pain shot down her neck and spine. The shape lunged at her, grunting.

"Back!" Angie screamed, crawling backward as quickly as she could. She felt dizzy. She heard Maylee and Dalton scrambling backward behind her. She heard the shape crawling toward her, gurgling and snarling.

"What the hell?" said Park as Angie scrambled back out onto the street and stood. Maylee and Dalton were standing next to her. Maylee grabbed Dalton and pulled him back away from the truck.

"That the hell," said Angie, pointing as the shape emerged from under the truck. It was a young woman with large bloody holes in her arms. Her knees had been reduced to pulp. Somehow, the woman managed to stand. She hissed and lunged at Park.

"Sorry lady," said Park, punching the woman in the head. She fell backward, stumbling and waving her ruined arms. Angie shoved her from the side and she fell over, clawing across the wet pavement. She almost immediately started climbing to her feet.

"Dammit," said Maylee, breaking away from the group.

"Maylee!" said Mom.

"I got this!" said Maylee. She rushed over to the corpse just as it finished standing. Maylee swung her bat in a wide arc, connecting with the front of the corpse's skull. The side of its head caved in and it went down.

Maylee grinned back at them. "One hit."

"Get back here!" said Angie. "You can be proud of yourself later."

Maylee frowned and trotted back over.

"Clear now to go under?" said Park.

"Fuck that," said Angie. "Over."

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Over it is.”

Park stepped to the back of the truck. He put his palms flat on the bed and pushed himself up until he could climb onto it. He turned and motioned for the others to follow.

Dalton limped over and lifted up his arms. Park took hold. Angie came up behind, painfully conscious of the approaching moans behind them. She took hold of Dalton's waist and hoisted him up. Park pulled him up the rest of the way. Dalton limped to stand next to Park, working his way in between two of the large metal barrels.

Angie looked to Maylee on her right. “You're next. Hurry.” Groans came close. Angie imagined she could hear the wet scrape of dead limbs on pavement.

Maylee stepped over and set her bat on the truck bed. Park and Angie closed in to help her, but she shook her head. She pushed herself up, picked up the bat and stepped over to squeeze in between two barrels. Angie was surprised at her daughter's strength.

Satisfied her kids were safely on the truck, Angie moved to climb up, her heart pounding in her ears.

“Mom!” yelled Maylee from the truck.

Angie stopped midstep. Groans and the sounds of shuffling feet came from behind her. She spun just in time to see an old man with a scarred face and yellow pus-filled eyes emerge from the dark.

“Great,” said Angie. She stepped forward and shoved the corpse. He stumbled backward. She turned and started climbing onto the truck. Park and Maylee knelt down to help her. She heard the old man gurgle behind her. His hands closed on her legs.

Angie kicked her legs, shaking the man free. She spun, putting her back to the truck. The old man recovered from her kick and came at her again.

“Goddammit, old man,” said Angie. “I don't have time for this shit!” She watched the corpse warily, wondering how hard she'd have to shove him to gain time to climb up. She heard more groaning in the darkness behind the corpse.

“I got an idea!” said Park from above her. “Get his back to the truck.”

“What?”

“Just do it!”

## ROBERT R. BEST

Angie sighed. The old man lunged at her and she darted to one side. The old man slammed into the truck. Angie stepped behind him. Rain pelted the street around her. The old man turned and gurgled at her.

Angie looked up to the truck. Park had his back to one barrel and his foot propped up against another. Angie realized what he had in mind and jumped back a few more steps.

“Shit!” she yelled. “You crazy fucker!”

Park grunted and used his leg to push the barrel over. It toppled off the truck, slamming the corpse into the pavement. Dark gore shot out from each side of the barrel. Bits of broken pavement scattered across Angie's feet.

Angie glared up at Park. “Again, crazy.”

“Just hurry, Mom!” yelled Maylee, kneeling and holding out her hand.

Angie ran to the truck. Maylee and Park helped her up. The downward slant of the truck on the hill almost threw her off balance as she stood.

“Whoa,” said Park, catching her. “Steep here.”

Angie nodded and righted herself. She turned to look back the way they had come. The groans grew louder. More corpses emerged, approaching the fallen barrel and crushed corpse. Soon, they would reach the truck.

She turned to look at her kids. Dalton was shivering in the cold. Maylee was clutching her bat and staring at the approaching corpses. The look of determination on her face broke Angie's heart.

She looked at Park. He nodded.

“I know,” he said. “We're getting inside. I'm not letting your kids get killed and I'm surer than fuck getting to mine.”

Angie nodded. “So let's move, then.”

The four of them picked their way through the barrels until they got to the other side of the truck bed. Angie could hear the corpses closing in behind them. A few of them were already pawing at the truck.

One by one they hopped off the other side of the truck. They almost stumbled at the downward slant of the hill. Angie peered into the dark. Rain ran down her face.

“There better be another entrance nearby,” she said.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“There is,” said Dalton. “There’s a gate up ahead.”

“How do you know that?”

“I love the zoo, Mom.”

Maylee sniffed in the rain. “I’d love to get inside.”

The groans grew louder behind them. “Come on,” said Angie. “We gotta move.”

They took three hurried steps down the hill. They stopped when a groaning mob of corpses emerged from the dark in front of them.

\* \* \*

Ella shivered as she approached a small storage building set among some bushes. The trees groaned and twisted in the wind around her. She couldn’t shake the feeling the trees were groaning at her. Twisting to grab at her.

She stepped up to the door and fished the keycard from her jacket. She moved to hold the card up to the reader, then froze. She had a clear image of Stepdad waiting behind the door. Waiting to attack her. To keep Lori from her. Maybe he even had a gun.

Ella shivered, mostly from the cold. But just mostly.

Her only hope would be to surprise him. To throw open the door and rush inside. Maybe he’d be sitting down. Maybe even sleeping. Ella could free Lori before he’d have a chance to hurt either of them.

Could she hurt Stepdad? Standing there in the cold and wet dark, she would have liked to. But was she capable of it?

She drew herself up, did her best to ignore the creaking trees around her, and held the keycard to the reader next to the door. The light clicked from red to green. She shoved the door open with her shoulder, screaming and hoping the noise would startle Stepdad.

The room was dark and empty.

She stood in the dark, panting and shaking. “Shit,” she whispered.

A woman emerged from the corner of the room. Her hair was wild and tangled, and her clothes were wet.

“You!” said the woman, stepping closer.

Ella stepped back. Her back went tight when she recognized the

ROBERT A. BEST

woman. It was the one who'd pointed her out in the crowd at the Bites. The one who'd yelled for the others to grab her.

"I'm sorry," said Ella, backing toward the door. "I was just looking for my sister."

"You won't make me leave!" the woman yelled, her eyes wide and feral. "This is my room! I found it! I broke the window! I cut my arms getting inside! This is mine!"

Blood ran down the woman's arms and onto the floor. Rain pattered through a smashed window in the back of the room.

"I'm sorry," Ella repeated, taking another step backward. "I'll just go."

"You can't take it!" yelled the woman, looking through Ella more than at her. "I'll kill you!"

The woman lunged at her. Ella screamed and ran from the building. She ran back out into the rain, not bothering to shut the door.

\* \* \*

Angie held out her arms to block Maylee and Dalton behind her. She stepped back, taking them back with her. The mob of corpses shuffled closer to them. The rain pelted on the corpse's heads as they jerked their dead bodies toward Angie, the kids and Park.

"Shit," said Angie.

"Yeah," said Park, taking the rifle from his shoulder.

"There's too many of them for that," said Angie.

"Don't insult me," said Park. He turned and aimed back up the hill. At one of the tires on the truck.

Angie stepped backward again, pushing the kids with her. The mob grew closer. "You know what you're doing?"

"Never did," said Park. He cocked the rifle.

"Great," said Angie. She stared at the corpses. No way they were getting to her kids. She'd tear each corpse apart herself if she had to. She knew it was crazy. Crazy was all she had left.

Park sighed. "And that's three."

He fired. The rear tire of the truck jerked and started deflating. The air squealed as it rushed out of the tire. One corner of the truck bed slumped, shifting the barrels downward.

"We should get the fuck out of the way," said Park.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Angie nodded and pulled the kids to one side. The corpses were close behind them. She could almost feel their hands closing in.

The tire exploded and collapsed. The truck dropped violently and barrels began toppling off. The noise of the barrels clanging on the pavement drowned out everything else. Some rolled, some toppled end over end. Chunks of pavement flew off with each strike of metal on pavement.

“Run!” yelled Angie.

They all rushed toward the zoo. Barrels flew past them, sounding like small cars going by, smashing into the approaching corpses. Corpse bodies broke and squelched as barrels crushed them into the street.

They were halfway to the sidewalk when Dalton fell. He stumbled on his bad foot and crumpled to his knees.

Angie turned, watching Dalton drop as though in slow motion. Barrels flew by him, crunching corpses and breaking the pavement underneath.

“Dalton!” Angie raced back. She dodged a rusty barrel as it careened by, crushing a corpse who'd been coming up behind her.

“Mom!” said Dalton, reaching up to her from the pavement. Angie rushed over and grabbed his hand. She heard a loud clanging in front of her. In front of Dalton.

She looked up. A large metal barrel was falling toward them, end over end. It was inches away.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton.

Angie dropped to her knees, covering Dalton with her body. Pain shot through her legs as the pavement ground into her kneecaps. She put her head down on the road, cradling Dalton's head in her arms.

“Mom!” he screamed, muffled by her body.

With a loud “clang” the edge of the barrel hit the road inches from the top of Angie's head. So close she felt the weight of the barrel tug at her hair.

Dalton squirmed underneath her. Angie drew up her feet as close as she could manage. The darkness around them grew deeper as the barrel loomed overhead. For a moment all she could hear was her and Dalton breathing. She braced herself, waiting to be crushed.

Another clang rang out. She felt the other end of the barrel

## ROBERT A. BEST

crunch into the pavement inches from her toes. The darkness lessened as the barrel continued on behind them.

Angie lifted her head and let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She turned to watch the barrel flipping end over end, away from them. A corpse grunted at it seconds before being crushed. Gray slop spread out in its path.

"Mom?" said Dalton underneath her.

Angie turned back to him. She smiled down at him. "Shit, huh?"

Dalton nodded.

"You okay?"

He nodded again.

Angie stood and helped Dalton up. Maylee and Park were standing on the sidewalk, staring.

"Well fuck the hell out of me," said Park.

"Mom!" said Maylee.

Corpses groaned from farther down the hill. The clanging of the barrels was receding. The crushed ones would be replaced soon.

"Come on," said Angie. "The gate, remember?"

Park and Maylee nodded. Angie and Dalton rushed over, Dalton still limping. They all rushed down the sidewalk until they came to a large metal gate set into the wall. The darkened zoo was visible behind it. A lone light, set over an abandoned vendor cart, revealed no one.

All four of them grabbed hold of the gate and started shaking it. They all yelled into the darkness beyond it. Angie wondered if they'd really seen anyone behind the door earlier. She pushed the thought down. There had to be someone. There had to be.

"Let us in!" she yelled, slamming her hand into the gate.

\* \* \*

Ella ran until her lungs burned. She stopped, panting in the rain. She'd run blindly, imagining the crazy woman behind her. If she didn't know the zoo as well as she did, even in the dark, she'd be completely lost by now.

She knew the zoo too well to be lost. It should have been comforting. But Mom was dead, Lori was a hostage somewhere and the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

world had gone crazy. Comfort was a thing of the past.

She stood under a lone light, looking around to get her bearings. She was near the polar bear exhibit. There were two of them, Ella knew. Tony and Tina, she called them.

She rubbed her cold hands on her jeans, trying to get warm. The rain stung her face. She heard animal whines coming from her side. From the direction of the polar bears.

“Tony?” she said. “Tina?”

She took a step toward the exhibit, then stopped. She remembered the way Ray had looked at her, the way he'd craned his neck around and screeched. Did all the animals hate her now?

More whining came, followed by a small growl.

“Tony?” Ella said. She stepped over until the exhibit appeared in the dim light.

It was Tina who'd been whining. She was pacing the exhibit, limping with one paw held up close to her body.

“Oh Tina,” said Ella, running the rest of the way to the exhibit. She leaned against the glass fence separating the visitors from the exhibits. She leaned her head out over the deep, concrete-lined trench that kept the bears in their enclosure. “You poor girl. What happened?”

Tina noticed Ella. She bared her teeth and growled.

Ella blinked and took a step back. “Tina?”

Tina roared at Ella and limped to the edge of the trench. Rain pounded the ground.

“Tina, please,” said Ella, feeling like she might cry. Why did everything hate her? “You're hurt.”

Tina bellowed and leapt at Ella. She leapt out over the trench. Ella screamed and jumped back. Tina made it halfway to the fence before dropping down into the trench. There was a horrible crunching sound, and Tina howled as she hit the concrete bottom.

“Tina!” yelled Ella, running back to the fence. She leaned out and looked over. Tina lay crumpled in the bottom of the trench, her legs at odd angles and obviously broken.

Ella gripped the glass fence and leaned down farther. Tears ran down her face, mixing with the rain. “Tina!”

Tina looked up. She roared and bit at Ella. She strained upward, and Ella had no doubt she'd jump again if she was able to stand.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Ella heard new growls coming from the exhibit. She looked up from the trench to see Tony, the other polar bear, crouching next to the inflatable ball Ella had watched him play with many times. Tony bared his teeth and growled. He strode forward, toward the trench. Ella knew what was coming.

“Tony don't,” she said, shaking in the cold rain. “You can't make it.”

Tony roared and leapt. Ella jumped back reflexively. Tony plummeted down into the trench, just like Tina. Ella screamed as he fell. She braced herself, flinching at the yelp and crunching of bone as Tony connected with the concrete bottom of the trench. Ella stepped over and looked down. Tony lay next to Tina, twisted like his back was broken. He roared up at her, blood coming from his snout.

Ella stepped back from the fence, crying. She walked backward, away from the exhibit, until she couldn't hear the growling of the bears anymore. She wiped her eyes, forcing herself to calm down. She had to keep it together. She had to find Lori.

She stopped, listening. She wasn't sure. It could have been the rain or the wind. But she could have sworn she heard the sound of metal banging. And people shouting.

\* \* \*

Angie gripped the gate and shook it as hard as she could. “Hey!” she yelled, forcing down the thought she was shouting to no one. “Let us in!”

Park and the kids pounded at the gate, shouting along with her. The noise they made echoed around in the dark. Angie heard groans approaching them. They were running out of time.

“Dammit dammit dammit,” grumbled Park beside her. She could hear the desperation creeping into his voice.

“Let us in!” yelled Dalton. He shook the gate as hard as his small frame would allow. He stopped, staring. Then he pointed inside. “Look!”

Angie stopped pounding on the gate, almost not believing what she saw. A young girl stepped into the lone light by the vending station. She had a jacket drawn tightly around her, and she looked shaken and scared.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“You see her, right?” said Dalton.

“I see her!” said Park. “Hey! You! Let us in!”

The girl backed away from them, looking at them with wide eyes.

“No no no no!” said Angie, shaking the gate. She pounded her palm against the metal. “Let us in! Please!”

Groans came from behind them. Angie turned to see corpses approaching from the darkness. A lot of them. More than the barrels had smashed. More than there'd been in the parking lot. More than she could even begin to count. If they didn't get inside and get inside now, this was it.

She turned back and shook the gate furiously. “Please!”

“Wait,” said Park, stopping and staring at the girl. He didn't say any more. He just kept staring.

“Let us in!” yelled Dalton, slapping the gate.

The girl took a cautious step forward, watching them. She looked like she was trying to figure out their intentions.

“Oh my god,” said Maylee. “I've got an idea.” She let go of the gate and fished around in her pockets. She pulled out the cell phone she'd shown them earlier. The one with glitter-glue writing on it.

Maylee held the phone over her head and shouted at the girl. “Hey! Is your name Ella?”

The girl took a step backward, looking confused. She opened her mouth, then shut it. She nodded.

“Ella!” yelled Maylee. “I've got your cell phone!”

Ella frowned at them. “I lost that!”

Maylee shook her head. “You left it at home! We've been there! I've been texting your sister!”

“Oh my fuck,” said Park, so low only Angie could hear him. “Ella?”

Ella took a step toward the gate. “What?”

Angie turned to look behind them. More corpses had emerged. They were getting closer. The corpses groaned and jerked toward them. The smell of their dead, wet flesh was terrible. She turned back to look at the girl called Ella. They had no other chance now.

“Your sister, Lori!” yelled Maylee. “She texted your phone when I had it. I've been talking to her. That's how we knew you guys

## ROBERT A. BEST

were here!”

“Ella!” yelled Park. His voice had a hoarseness Angie hadn't heard before. “It's Dad!”

Ella frowned. “Stepdad?”

Park frowned back at her. “No! Your father!”

Ella's frown straightened. “Dad-dad?”

Park nodded.

“Let us in!” yelled Maylee.

Ella ran toward them. Groans came from behind. The rain picked up, pounding down hard and cold. Angie cast a quick glance behind them. In less than a minute, corpses would be close enough to bite and kill.

Ella reached the gate. She looked wet, ragged and scared. She glanced at each of them, then saw the corpses coming up from behind. “Shit,” she said, feeling around in the pockets of her jacket.

“Tell us about it,” said Angie. “Please hurry.”

Ella kept fishing around in her jacket. The corpses groaned from behind them. Angie could hear dead limbs being dragged across wet pavement. She imagined she could hear dead jaws working, dead teeth gnashing together.

“Hurry!” said Maylee nervously, casting quick glances behind her.

Ella's eyes lit up as she produced a small plastic card from her pocket. She stepped to the side of the gate and held the card up to something Angie couldn't see. The groans from behind told her the corpses were very close.

There was a click off to the side and the gate came loose. Park and Angie almost fell forward from the way they'd been leaning on it. The gate swung open at the middle.

“Hurry!” said Ella, grabbing the gate and swinging it back. Angie and Park stumbled through. Angie turned to grab Maylee and Dalton. Maylee already had hold of Dalton and was rushing him through the opening.

Corpses were inches away. Those at the front came through the gate before they had any chance to close it. Corpses lurched into the zoo, biting their rotten teeth at Angie and the others. Rain pelted off their rotten skin.

“Shut the gate!” said Ella. “Hurry!”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Park was staring at Ella like he hadn't heard. "Ella."

Angie whipped her head over to Park. "Not now Parker!"

Park shot her a look so hateful Angie paused for a second. But only a second. "The gate, Parker!"

Park's eyes said he'd heard her. His face returned to normal and he gave her a short nod.

Angie ran to one half of the gate. Park ran to the other. More corpses crowded into the opening. Both Angie and Park pushed as hard as they could, but the corpses were coming too quickly to push the gate shut.

"Mom!" yelled Dalton, running over to help her. He leaned into the gate, adding a little force but not much.

Maylee was closer to Park's side. She rushed to join him. She gripped the gate and pushed. The corpses groaned and continued coming through. With each corpse that appeared at the gate, it became harder.

Ella ran over to Park and Maylee. She pushed. Angie and Dalton pushed. The gate didn't budge.

"It's no good!" yelled Park as the corpses poured between him and Angie.

"Shit!" yelled Angie, realizing he was right. "Everyone fall back!"

Angie let go and pulled Dalton away from the gate. She backed up as quickly as she could. Park, Maylee and Ella let go and backed away. Corpses groaned and shuffled their way through the gate. They bit and hissed and gurgled.

Angie's stomach dropped when she realized how many corpses were between their two groups. She and Dalton were blocked from getting to Maylee, Park and Ella.

"Maylee!" Angie yelled as she and Dalton were forced farther back by the crush of corpses. They kept coming. Soon the entire area inside the gate would be full of them.

"Mom!" yelled Maylee. She, Park and Ella backed the other way. Maylee swung her bat from side to side, keeping the corpses at bay. But Angie knew she couldn't keep it up for long.

Within seconds the two groups were forced onto different walkways, heading into different sections of the zoo. Dalton clutched at

## ROBERT R. BEST

Angie's side. Angie could only make out glimpses of Maylee as more and more corpses crowded in to block the way between them.

“Mom!” came Maylee's voice, getting farther and farther away.

“Maylee!” Angie yelled, knowing it was futile. Her throat hurt from screaming. The rain pounded down around them.

“Get to the Communications Office!” yelled Ella over the mob of corpses. “I have friends there!”

“What?” yelled Angie, not sure she'd heard right.

“The Communications Office!” came Ella's voice.

“Mom!” yelled Maylee, almost drowned out by moaning corpses and rain.

Then her voice was gone. All sounds were gone except the groans of the dead.

“Maylee!” Angie yelled one last time. She felt like she could cry.

Dalton gripped her side tightly. “Mom?” he said.

She reached down to grab his hand. The corpses came for them.

“We need to run, Dalton.” she said.

They did.

# NINE

Angie and Dalton ran until the corpses were out of sight. There were occasional lights on around the zoo, but not enough to comfortably see by. In the dark, the zoo only vaguely resembled the place she took the kids every so often. It was always a big deal, something the kids looked forward to. Lately, only Dalton looked forward to such things.

Angie stopped and panted in the rain. Dalton stood next to her, coughing.

“You okay, baby?” she said, kneeling down next to him.

He nodded and sniffed. The rain let up, shifting to a light mist. It was better, but still cold.

“Your foot okay?”

He nodded, but not very convincingly.

“Probably be better if we stopped all this running, huh?”

Dalton nodded. Angie stood and looked around. “We can stop soon, baby. I promise.”

“There's a map,” said Dalton. Angie looked down to see him pointing off to her right.

She followed his finger and found a map display. One of the ones they used on their trips here. To find where the monkey house was, or the bird exhibit. Or the lions. Dalton loved the lions.

“Where did the girl say they were going?” Angie said.

“The Communications Office,” said Dalton.

Angie nodded. “Come on.” She stepped over to the map, Dalton limping alongside her.

There was no light to see by. Angie squinted, trying to make out the map as best she could. She located a bright dot labeled *You Are Here*. She put her finger on it.

“Okay,” she said. “So we're here.” Dalton nodded next to her.

Angie squinted harder, studying the map for a long time. Dalton studied with her, leaning in close and moving his head side to side, scanning the map.

A man's voice boomed from all directions. “Hello visitors to the

## ROBERT A. BEST

Ashton Memorial Zoo.”

Angie jerked back, looking in all directions. She realized the voice was coming from speakers set all around.

“Please try to remain calm,” said the man's voice. “We are doing all we can to keep you safe.”

Angie snorted and leaned back into the map. “Yeah,” she said. “Sure looks like it.” Then she fell silent, staring at the map. Dalton stared with her.

“Here,” he finally said, putting his finger on a different spot on the map. Angie looked to where he'd pointed. She made out faint letters spelling *Communications Office (Employees Only)*.

“Got it,” said Angie. She scanned up and down the map, tracing out a path between the two points as best she could in the dark. It was farther than she would have liked, but it would have to do.

“Okay.” She sighed and straightened. “I think I've got it. We just need to head...”

A rotting hand closed on the top of the map display. Angie gasped and jumped back, pulling Dalton back with her.

A bloated old man stumbled from behind the map. A straw hat hung sideways on his head. His tongue was gone. Blood coated his chin as he worked his mouth at them. A big chunk of skin was missing from the back of his right hand. His button-up white shirt was torn and bloody.

“Run, baby,” said Angie, keeping hold of Dalton and turning to run. She stopped as a group of corpses came stumbling at them from the other side.

“Crap,” said Dalton.

“You got that right,” she muttered. She looked around quickly. Both paths were blocked, one by the bloated old man and the other by the approaching group. To their left was the kangaroo exhibit. There was a glass fence but no trench. Dalton had always wanted to climb in and pet them.

“This way,” said Angie, pulling Dalton with her. She ran for the exhibit.

“Ow!” said Dalton, limping as they ran.

“I know, baby, I know,” said Angie. “And I'm sorry.”

They reached the glass fence. Angie looked around. No kangaroos to be seen. She hoisted Dalton up so he could climb over.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

"I know this place," said Dalton, looking around. "The kangaroos."

"Yeah, the kangaroos." Angie looked back to the corpses. The bloated old man had joined the others and now the larger group was approaching. They moaned and bit at them. "Hopefully they're all hiding."

"Are they dangerous?" said Dalton.

"I have no idea," said Angie. She climbed over the fence and dropped down next to Dalton. "But best to stay out of their way. And hope those things are too stupid to climb a fence."

She nodded at the corpses. Dalton looked at them. He bit his lip and stepped back. Angie took his hand.

"Come on," she said. "We'll cut through here and then get to that office."

He nodded. Angie turned and the two of them ran deeper into the enclosure. They were about halfway across when Angie stopped and turned back.

The corpses were butted up against the fence. They pawed at it and reached for Angie and Dalton. But none looked capable of climbing over.

"Ha!" said Dalton.

"Yeah," said Angie, grinning down at him. "See? We're gonna be okay."

She turned to lead him the rest of the way through the enclosure. She was about to take the first step when a kangaroo hopped in front of them.

"Whoa," said Angie. Dalton let out a little gasp.

The kangaroo looked at them quizzically.

Angie smiled and shook her head. "You scared us there, buddy."

The kangaroo ran one paw through the dirt of its enclosure.

"We're just passing through, okay?" said Angie, blinking in the light mist falling all around. "We'll be out of your hair soon enough."

The kangaroo kept its eyes on them and lowered its head toward the ground. Like a cat preparing to pounce. A low keening came from its throat.

"Mom," said Dalton, swallowing next to her. "Do kangaroos

## ROBERT A. BEST

make that noise?"

"I don't know honey," said Angie, her voice almost a whisper. She took a step backward, slowly and carefully. Dalton stepped with her. "But I think we should go now," she said, "just in case."

The kangaroo whined at them. It hunkered down on its haunches.

"Now," Angie whispered.

She pulled Dalton to one side just as the kangaroo leapt. Its powerful legs carried it past them in a blur of hair and muscle. It landed, skidding in the wet dirt. It turned and hunkered down again.

Angie pulled Dalton hard and they ran for the other side of the enclosure.

They ran, their feet pounding on the wet ground. Angie was so focused on the sound of the kangaroo racing along behind them, she didn't see the shape coming in from the left.

"Mom!" yelled Dalton. "Look out!"

Angie stopped, skidding in the dirt. Dalton jerked to a halt next to her. The shape from the left resolved into a second kangaroo pounding toward them, baring its teeth.

Angie gripped Dalton's arm. She heard the first kangaroo pounding closer behind them. She saw the second one draw nearer. They both growled.

Angie pulled Dalton to the side. She spun around just in time to see the two kangaroos slam into each other. The first one had built up more speed, and the force of the impact sent the second one flying backward. It slammed into an embankment built into the dirt of the exhibit. Its neck snapped with a sickening "pop." It slumped, dead.

The first kangaroo turned to Angie and Dalton. Blood trickled from its nostrils. It lowered its head and let out the same weird keening growl.

"Mom," said Dalton.

The kangaroo lunged at them. Angie dodged, pulling Dalton with her. Angie spun to face the kangaroo as it righted itself and turned toward them.

Angie took a step back, pulling Dalton along. She was afraid to turn her back and run again, but she couldn't just keep dodging forever.

Dalton reached down and wrenched a handful of grass out of the dirt. He flung it at the kangaroo in a gesture Angie would have

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

found comical if she wasn't so terrified. "Leave us alone!" Dalton yelled.

The clod of grass and dirt hit the kangaroo in the forehead. It blinked and for a moment was a normal kangaroo again. It looked the way Angie remembered them looking, when she showed them to a very small Dalton.

The kangaroo blinked again and feral rage flooded back into its eyes. It lowered its head and growled. A low, gurgling sound.

Pounding came from Angie's left. She shot a quick glance to the side, then locked her eyes back on the kangaroo crouching in front of her.

"Shit," she said. A third kangaroo was coming up from her right. How many did this zoo have? She couldn't remember.

She still had hold of Dalton's hand. She ran, pulling him with her, just as the first kangaroo jumped. It missed them, passing so close Angie felt the warmth of its breath.

She kept running, hearing the kangaroo land but not turning to look. Her hand jerked with every other step Dalton took. Her heart ached for making Dalton run on his wounded ankle. But he was either struggling not to cry out from the pain, or too scared to feel it. Either way, Angie knew he couldn't keep it up for long.

A far-off lamp lit up the rail at the top of the nearest fence. Angie bore down harder, Dalton keeping pace beside her. She could hear the kangaroo pounding the ground behind them. She could hear a second one getting closer, not directly behind them but coming in from an angle.

The fence came closer. "Almost there," she said, panting as the cold mist in the air made her lungs constrict. Dalton said nothing. He panted with effort beside her.

Groans came from their front, growing louder. As they ran, the dim light revealed a mob of corpses clawing at them from behind the fence.

"Oh no!" said Dalton, starting to slow down.

"Keep running!" yelled Angie, pulling his arm and keeping the same pace as before. She heard how close both kangaroos were behind them. If they slowed down, even a little, they would be trampled.

The fence loomed in front of them. The corpses pawed at them,

## ROBERT A. BEST

their wet rotten skin smearing across the glass fence and leaving dark slimy streaks. An idea formed in Angie's mind. It was crazy, but at the moment, so was everything.

"Mom!" yelled Dalton, not slowing down but sounding terrified as the fence drew very close.

"This'll hurt," Angie said. She let go of Dalton's hand and fell sideways onto him. She caught him mid-air and twisted to land on her shoulder. Pain shot through her as she rolled across the ground, carrying Dalton with her.

As she rolled, she saw things in flashes. The kangaroo that had been right behind them crashed into the glass fence, blind in its own fury. The thick glass shook from the impact. The kangaroo fell backward and struggled to right itself.

Angie slowed and Dalton fell away from her, rolling a few more feet. The kangaroo stepped back from the fence, thrashing its head side to side as if trying to clear it.

"Mom!" said Dalton, climbing to his hands and knees and crawling toward her.

"I'm okay, baby," said Angie. She rolled to her stomach and put her palms in the dirt. She pushed herself up, keeping her eyes on the kangaroo. It staggered and made that low, keening growl. The corpses just beyond the fence bit at the air and reached for them. Thick drool ran down the glass.

She heard Dalton crawl up beside her. In a few more seconds, Angie knew, the kangaroo would get its bearings and come at them again. There was no time to climb over the fence, even if they could find a spot not lined with corpses. They would have to...

Her thoughts were cut short as a furious pounding came from behind her. She swallowed hard as panic clenched her chest. She rolled, knocking Dalton over. He fell to his back, looking up at her with wide, questioning eyes.

His eyes grew wider as the second kangaroo barreled past them, missing Angie's side by inches. She felt the ground shudder as the kangaroo's legs slammed down.

Angie grabbed Dalton's wrist and stood, pulling him up with her. She saw the second kangaroo turn in a wide arc. It collided with the first kangaroo, knocking it aside.

"Run," said Angie, backing up and pulling Dalton with her.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Where?” said Dalton.

“I don't know yet.”

She turned and ran, switching hands with Dalton. Guilt scraped at her insides as Dalton limped hurriedly next to her. She heard the thumping of another kangaroo behind them, growing louder over the sound of their footfalls.

“Mom,” said Dalton nervously from beside her.

“I know, I know,” said Angie. She sucked in painful gulps of cold damp air. She scanned the back wall of the exhibit as they ran. It was some sort of faux-rock, made of painted and roughed-up plaster.

She was looking for a gate, or a doorway. She knew the zoo had both. Doors for the zookeepers to access the exhibits. Gates that led to the cages where they kept the animals in bad weather. She'd seen them during the tour she'd paid for once.

Then she saw it. Set into the fake rock, almost a foot back to obscure it from the public, was a metal door.

“There!” she yelled, wrenching Dalton to one side and rushing toward the door. She heard the kangaroo race past them as they turned. She didn't dare look back. From the sound, it was very close, and it would only take seconds to correct and come back.

The entryway for the door was narrow, only allowing room for one person. Angie pulled Dalton around until he was running in front of her. She almost tripped over him but they both corrected in time to run, single file, into the entryway.

Dalton stopped when he reached the door. Angie stopped behind him, the wet soles of her shoes skidding on the concrete floor of the entryway. Dalton pounded on the door. Angie grabbed the handle and pulled.

It was locked. Two feelings flooded her. One was a blind outrage at how unfair it was. The other was a bitter anger toward herself for not realizing the door would be locked. Of course it would be locked.

“Dammit!” she screamed, shaking the door so hard Dalton stopped banging and looked up at her. Set next to the door was some sort of electronic box. A red light shone from it. *Locked*, read small raised letters on the light. She slammed her fist against the box. It rattled.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Pounding and snorting came from behind her. Angie spun in the narrow entryway. She held up her arms at the blur of the kangaroo rushing toward her. She braced herself for impact, dimly hoping her body would lessen the blow for Dalton.

The concrete and plaster around her shook as the kangaroo hit the edges of the entryway. It bounced back a few feet, snorted and came at them again. It hit the edges, snarling and screeching at them but unable to fit into the entryway.

“Mom,” said Dalton behind her.

“It’s okay,” said Angie. Her voice shook as she stepped backward, deeper into the entryway. She cast a quick glance behind her. A small window was set in the door. Through it, she saw an office. No cages. The gate to the cages was somewhere else, with a wider entryway. One of the kangaroos could have fit there, if she’d chosen the wrong way.

A loud thump came from in front of her. Angie turned back. The kangaroo snarled and stomped its feet, almost frothing in its desperation to get to them.

It rammed against the entryway again. A loud “crack” rang out. The kangaroo whimpered and hopped backward. It was off-balance and limping. It whined and stumbled, snorting fog into the cold mist. It looked at Angie.

“Please,” she said, bracing herself against the walls of the entryway. “You’re hurting yourself.”

It snorted at her and rushed at the entryway again. It was inches away when a second kangaroo rushed up from behind. In its blind fury to get to Angie and Dalton, it completely ignored the kangaroo in front of it. Its shoulder rammed into the back of the first kangaroo, shoving it to the side. The first kangaroo rammed into the wall alongside the entryway. The second one tripped over the legs of the first kangaroo. It crashed to the ground, its head smacking into the dirt at an angle that made Angie wince. It stood and moved to shake its head. It whined and stopped, a sharp “pop” coming from its neck. The first kangaroo tried to right itself and fell into the other kangaroo.

The two kangaroos fell backward across the ground, stumbling over each other. They whimpered and snarled.

“Now!” yelled Angie. She reached back and grabbed Dalton’s hand. Pulling him with her, she ran from the entryway back into the

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

exhibit.

She whipped her head side to side desperately, clutching Dalton's wrist so tight she was afraid she'd leave a mark. The injured kangaroos were struggling a few feet away. Angie heard their broken bones grinding. They growled and whined. The corpses surrounding the outside fence groaned and gurgled.

She spun around to face the wall. Several bumps and ledges had been built into the faux-rock.

"Climb, baby," said Angie. She let go of his hand and stepped over to the wall.

"What?" said Dalton, blinking at her in confusion. The kangaroos groaned and struggled behind him. Soon they would regain their footing.

"Climb, Dalton!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the wall. He stumbled, wincing. Angie's heart ached. *Oh god, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

She grabbed Dalton's waist and hoisted him up to the lowest ledge. He realized what was happening and took hold of the wall. He started climbing, doing surprisingly well for an injured child.

Angie followed, climbing up the wall and trying to ignore the whining snarls of the wounded kangaroos behind her. Her hands and feet slipped in the cold mist coating the wall, but she held on. They climbed as fast as they could, moving from ledge to ledge as they worked their way up the wall.

The wall shuddered as a loud "whump" echoed through the exhibit. Angie craned her head around to see one of the kangaroos ramming itself against the wall. It snarled and hissed up at her. She turned and kept climbing.

The wall at the back of the exhibit was taller than the fences along the sides. The wall shook a few more times as the kangaroo slammed into it. Angie felt the impacts less and less as she and Dalton climbed.

Soon they reached the top. Dalton was sitting with one leg on each side of the wall as Angie climbed up beside him. She sat on the edge and swung her legs out over the far side. She panted, her sides aching. Dalton panted next to her, gulping down air.

Angie slowly became aware of all the noise behind and below

## ROBERT R. BEST

them. The kangaroos were growling and snarling from the exhibit. A mob of corpses grunted and groaned from around the glass fence.

She turned her head to look around, finally settling her eyes on Dalton. He panted and looked back at her.

Angie looked down. Thankfully, there were no corpses down below. Even more thankfully, a ladder was attached to the wall.

“Hope you liked climbing,” she said, smirking at him.

He chuckled back at her.



# TEN

Maylee ran, her bat clutched in her right hand. She had no idea where in the zoo they were. The corpses kept pouring into the zoo, pushing them farther and farther inside. Periodically she would turn to swing at one with her bat, but Park or Ella would yell at her to keep running.

Ella ran next to her, occasionally casting glances behind them.

“Anything?” said Maylee.

“No,” said Ella, shaking her head. “I can't even hear them.”

“Well fuck, girls,” said Park, slowing down behind them. “How about we lay off all the running shit?” He stopped and stood, leaning forward and panting.

Maylee stopped and looked back. She half hoped to see Mom and Dalton behind them. She'd been half-hoping the whole time. They would appear, explain how they'd gotten around the corpses and been able to follow. Then the three of them would hug.

Instead, she saw nothing.

“I told you,” said Ella from beside her. “No corpse-things.”

Maylee shook her head and drew her arms up around herself. She felt the cold more intensely than she had earlier in the night. “That's not what I was looking for.”

Ella looked at her and bit her lip. She nodded to herself. “Your mom and brother?”

Maylee looked down and kicked at the pavement. “Yeah.”

“Don't start that shit,” said Park, stepping over to Maylee. “I've only known your Mom for a few days, but it's pretty clear that she gets through shit.”

Maylee lifted her head to meet his eyes.

“And,” Park continued, “we're all headed to the same place. They'll get there. We'll get there. Okay?”

“Okay.” Maylee drew herself up and turned the bat around in her hand. “I'm just tired of running.”

Park snorted. “No fucking argument there, kid.”

“Hey,” said Ella, stepping closer to Maylee. Mist collected on

## ROBERT A. BEST

her forehead. She wiped it off. "You said you were talking to my sister."

Maylee blinked. "Oh yeah. Shit." She fished around in her pockets until she found the phone. She handed it to Ella. "This is yours, I think."

Ella smiled and took the phone. She started typing furiously at the keypad, frowning and biting her lip.

Maylee looked to Park. He looked around scratching at his stubble.

His eyes fell on her. "Any idea where we are?"

Maylee looked around. "Um. It's dark and I can't be certain, but I'm pretty sure we're at the zoo."

Park stared at her.

Maylee smirked.

Park smirked back. "Smart-ass."

"Lori's not answering," said Ella, closing the phone and sighing.

A man's voice echoed from the trees around them. "Hello visitors to the Ashton Memorial Zoo."

"The hell?" said Maylee, whipping her head around.

"That's Stepdad," said Ella. "He has speakers all over the place."

"Please try to remain calm," said the man's voice. "We are doing all we can to keep you safe."

"The guy who has Lori?" said Park.

"Yeah," said Ella, a slight tremor in her voice. She balled up her fists. She raised her head and shrieked at the trees. "Give me back my sister!"

Park reached out to touch her shoulder. "Shh!"

Ella pulled away, glaring at him.

"Ella," he said.

"Not now," she snapped, backing up farther.

Park held up his hand. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Just keep it down, okay? I doubt fuckface can hear you and those things sure can."

Groans came from all around them.

"Shit," said Maylee, looking around.

"I'm sorry," said Ella, backing up and looking small.

"We gotta go," said Maylee, running over and grabbing her

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

arm. She ran. Ella ran with her.

“Where?” said Park, not moving.

Maylee stopped. Ella almost ran into her back. Her arm slipped from Maylee's hand. Groans came from every side, growing louder.

“Shit,” said Maylee. “I have no idea.”

“Wait,” said Ella. She stepped away from Maylee.

“Okay girls,” said Park. “We need to get to the Communications Office, right? What's the quickest way?”

Ella looked around, like she was doing her best to concentrate despite being scared. Unseen corpses groaned.

“Come on,” said Park. He pulled a hunting knife from his pocket. Maylee recognized it as the one he had grabbed from the truck back at the hospital. He looked around nervously.

Ella was panicking. Maylee saw it in her face. Maylee reached out with her bat and touched Ella lightly on the hand. “Hey,” she said, quietly.

Ella blinked, coming to her senses.

Maylee gave her best smile. Fear gripped her, but she did her best not to show it. “You can do it.”

Ella smiled back. She looked around, then nodded. “Got it. This way.”

She hurried off to one side. “We can cut through the bird sanctuary. It's faster than going around.”

They trotted through the dark, looking side to side for corpses. Maylee heard their groans from all sides. None came into view, but Maylee could tell they were close.

“Where the fuck are they?” said Park, off to Maylee's side. Maylee glanced over at him. She saw his face in the dim light. He was frowning at Ella as he stuck the knife back into his pocket. Several times he looked like he was going to say something to her. He didn't.

“Here we are,” said Ella as a large dome came into view. Crisscrossing iron beams and thick iron mesh formed an ornate structure that looked old-fashioned and beautiful, even in the dark.

Maylee tried to remember their previous trips to the zoo. The bird sanctuary was the pride of Ashton Memorial. It was constructed for the World's Fair over a hundred years ago. Later, the zoo was constructed around it. A walkway led through it, winding around trees

## ROBERT A. BEST

and bushes, all filled with exotic birds.

As they drew near the dome, Maylee noticed the groans grew quieter. And they no longer seemed to be coming from all around. Now they came from behind.

Park let out a sigh. "Thank fuck. I think we outran them."

Maylee nodded to herself in the dark. They hurried along in silence, Ella leading the way. The groans behind them faded to nothing. Their own breathing and footsteps were the only sounds.

Ella screamed as a corpse stumbled from the bushes and closed its arms around her. It was a young man with small round glasses. One lens was smashed in, and dark blood coated his cheek. He gurgled and leaned in to bite.

"Ella!" yelled both Park and Maylee in unison. They ran forward, rushing to save her. Ella struggled in the corpse's grip.

Park unslung the rifle from his shoulder. He gripped it by the barrel. "Ella!" he repeated. "Duck!"

Ella lifted her arms over her head and dropped down. She slipped through the corpse's grip, falling to her knees. Park swung the butt of the rifle at the corpse's head. The butt snapped and chunks of it flew to either side. The corpse's head rocked back, and it let go of Ella.

Park pulled the hunting knife from his jacket and shoved it into the corpse's forehead. It made it halfway and stopped, stuck on something. Blood seeped over the blade and down the corpse's face. The corpse leaned toward Park, hissing and biting. Park held the corpse back with the handle of the knife. "Fuck!" he said.

"I got it!" said Maylee. She ran to stand behind the corpse. She swung her bat up at the back of the corpse's head. The bat slammed against the corpse's skull, driving it forward on the knife. Something popped and the knife went into the corpse's forehead up to the hilt. The corpse twitched, then slumped forward, still.

"Shit on me," said Park. He twisted around to let the corpse fall to the ground. He bent down and grabbed the handle. Putting his foot on the corpse's chest, he wrenched the knife free. He grimaced at the knife and wiped it on the corpse's leg. He straightened and put the knife in his pocket.

Maylee reached down and helped Ella to her feet. She shook and looked around frantically.

"You okay?" said Maylee.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Ella nodded.

Park stepped over. He nodded to Maylee. "Thanks."

Maylee nodded back. Park turned to Ella, looking her up and down. "You hurt?"

"I'm fine," said Ella, moving away from him.

Groans came from behind them. Ella's eyes grew wide as she stared past Maylee and Park. They turned to see a mob of corpses stumbling down the walkway toward them.

"Shit fucker," said Park. He turned to Ella and Maylee. "Go go go!"

Maylee turned and ran, pushing Ella forward as she went. Park brought up the rear. The three of them ran down the walkway toward the sanctuary. As they pushed the door open and ran inside, Maylee tried not to think about how easy the door was to push. How easy it would be for anything to push its way inside.

Inside was dark. The interior lights were off, and what little light came from outside was filtered through too much foliage to provide any kind of visibility.

The path through the sanctuary was a raised metal walkway with guard rails on each side, more to keep people on the path than to protect them from the two-inch drop. Their footsteps pounded on the metal as they ran, clanging and echoing around the enclosure. Maylee heard Ella in front of her and Park behind her, but quickly lost sight of them.

"Stop!" yelled Park from behind. "For shit's sake stop!"

Maylee did. She heard Ella take a few more clanging steps in front of her, then stop.

Park sighed in the dark behind Maylee. "Can either of you girls see shit?"

"No," said Maylee.

"I can't see shit or any other substance," said Ella from the darkness.

"What?" said Park.

"Never mind," said Ella.

"Just listen to me," said Park. Maylee strained to make out Ella in the dark. All she saw was the outline of dark trees and mesh against the dim light coming from a lamppost outside. "Since none of us can

## ROBERT A. BEST

see fuck,” Park continued, “let’s slow down and try to stay together. Okay?”

Maylee and Ella muttered their agreement. The three of them started moving, at a slower pace this time. Their footsteps creaked on the metal walkway.

The trees rustled around them. They rustled again, a little louder than before.

“What was that?” said Ella, stopping up ahead.

“Just birds, Ella,” said Park. “This is the bird house or some shit, right? It’s just the birds.”

Maylee nodded to herself in the dark. He was right.

“Oh,” said Ella from up front. “Okay.” They all started walking again.

The rustling in the trees grew louder. They all kept walking, slowly moving deeper into the sanctuary.

“Ow!” yelled Ella from up ahead. They all stopped.

“What is it?” yelled Park, sounding angry and scared.

“Something jabbed at my shoulder,” said Ella.

“Shit. Are you hurt?”

“No, no. It was small. Like...” she trailed off. The rustling in the trees grew too loud to ignore.

“Like what?” said Maylee, although she’d already guessed.

“Like a bird,” said Ella.

The air around them exploded with loud squawks and a frenzy of flapping wings. Blurs of beaks and feathers whizzed by Maylee. She reflexively waved her arms in front of her face, almost smacking herself with her bat.

Ella screamed and Park cursed as the mass of birds swirled around them. Maylee felt beaks and claws narrowly miss her face. She felt them scraping against the material of her jacket. She swung her bat side to side, screaming.

The mass of birds moved past them, leaving them shaken and panting. Maylee heard the trees rustle again as the birds moved through the leaves and branches.

“Anyone hurt?” said Park.

“No,” said both Maylee and Ella, at almost the same time.

“Okay then. Still, what the fuck?”

“I dunno,” said Maylee. “It’s like...” Then she was screaming as

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

cold rotting arms closed around her waist and pulled her over the railing.

“Maylee!” yelled Ella.

“Shit!” yelled Park.

Maylee struggled against the arms as she fell off the platform and onto the ground of the sanctuary. She kicked at the dirt and leaves. A gurgling groan came from just next to her right ear.

She felt a cold cheek brush against the back of her neck as the corpse moved in to bite the side of her face. The cold, spongy skin made her body constrict.

Not knowing what else to do, knowing she had only seconds before the corpse bit, Maylee did the only thing her panicked brain could think of. Pushing against the ground, she slammed herself back against the corpse. With a groan, the corpse fell over backward, pulling Maylee with it.

The corpse hit the ground first. Maylee rammed down on top of it, her small frame slamming into its stomach. The corpse grunted and its hands fell away.

Maylee scrambled to her feet and turned, clutching her bat tightly. The corpse, more of a dark outline against the ground, groaned and scraped its limbs against the dirt. Maylee couldn't make out any details, but the corpse smelled awful.

“Fuck you!” Maylee yelled, bringing her bat up over her head. She slammed down with all her might. The impact was loud and squelching. The corpse groaned, its voice now more of a wet gurgle.

Maylee screamed and slammed down again. This time she felt the bat connect with skull. There was a sickening “crack,” and the impact sent a shudder up her bat and into her arms. The corpse was quiet and still.

A hand landed on her shoulder. She screamed, her voice more anger than fear, and spun, bat over her head and ready.

Ella jumped back, holding up her hands. “Whoa whoa! It's me!”

Maylee lowered the bat and sighed. “Shit. Sorry.”

Park rushed from the darkness. “Look out!” he yelled.

Maylee darted to one side, turning to see Park punch the dark outline of a corpse in the face. Or, the area Maylee assumed the face would be if there was any light to see by.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee moved back to guard Ella, holding her bat in front of her. Park pulled the knife from his pocket as the corpse groaned and came at him. Park put his palm on the corpse's forehead and shoved the blade up into the corpse's chin. He wrenched side to side and pulled the knife free. The corpse's head fell backward, loose on its own neck. Maylee heard blood patter against the leaves. Park kicked the corpse and it fell over, shuffling slowly side to side on the ground.

"Shit," said Park, wiping his face with his clean hand. "I've got to get a new gun."

He turned to face them. "You guys okay?"

Maylee nodded, lowering the bat. She turned to look at Ella, who was nodding also.

"Okay," said Park. "We're gonna have to..."

Then the air exploded with squawks and beating wings as the mob of birds found them again. Maylee turned in time to see a huge black mass of bird outlines coming at them.

"Fucking birds!" yelled Park. "Run!" He grabbed Maylee and Ella and pulled them along.

The three of them ran to the side as the mass of birds sped past them, screeching and cawing. Maylee ran, straining to see the outlines of trees and bushes in the dark. She could hear the birds behind them.

"What's the matter with the birds?" yelled Ella as they ran.

"Fuck if I know," said Park.

"Are they..."

"Dead? No, they seem alive to me. Just crazy as all fuck-out."

They rounded the dark outline of a tree, almost tripping through a small pond built into the exhibit. Maylee guessed they were halfway through the sanctuary. She could see the walkway off to their left. She wished they could run back to it, but didn't dare suggest anything but continuing to run forward. She was scared to even take the time to look back.

Odd shapes loomed in front of them. Maylee thought they were small trees or bushes. Then they moved. And groaned.

"Shit!" said Park, stopping so suddenly Maylee and Ella ran into his back.

The dark mass of corpses moved toward them, reaching and writhing. Loud rustling and squawking came from behind them.

"Oh no," said Ella, quietly.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Park spun. In the dim light, Maylee saw him looking up and over her shoulder. He moved to stand between Maylee and Ella. He clamped his hands on their shoulders, so hard it hurt.

“Ow!” said Ella.

“Down!” yelled Park. He dropped to his knees, pulling Maylee and Ella down with him.

Maylee's torso slammed to the ground, the air rushing from her lungs. She heard Ella cry out as she hit the ground nearby.

“What the hell?” Maylee started to yell, then understood as the thick mass of birds raced by overhead. Inches from their backs. Hundreds of tiny claws scraped against the back of Maylee's jacket. At her hair. She screamed into the noise, feeling like she was losing her mind.

With a loud stream of “whump-whump-whump,” the crazed birds hammered into the approaching mob of corpses. The sheer amount of birds pelting into the corpses slowed their approach. Then caused them to stagger back. Then caused them to change direction. The corpses, knocked off course and distracted from Maylee and the others, started to break up and wander in different directions.

As the last bird careened overhead, chattering furiously at nothing, Park stood. “Move!” he yelled. Maylee and Ella followed.

They ran toward the separating mob of corpses. Park drove his shoulder into the corpse closest to him. The corpse stumbled back, clearing a path for Ella to run through. Maylee swung her bat at a second corpse. It connected somewhere in the vicinity of the corpse's face. The corpse fell to one side. Maylee rushed through the opening, following Park and Ella.

They ran, mostly blindly, through the underbrush of the sanctuary. Maylee strained her eyes, trying to see more clearly. Shapes were all around, most likely trees or bushes. Hopefully.

The shadows in front of them began to join together. Rustling came from everywhere. Birds squawked as the mass of shadows rushed toward them.

“Dammit!” yelled Park. “Down!”

The three of them dropped to the ground, laying flat on their stomachs. The swarm of birds raced overhead, screeching and clawing at them. Maylee put her hands over the back of her head and pushed her

## ROBERT A. BEST

face as far down as she could. She heard the dull “whump-whump” as the birds pummeled the corpses behind them, but not as many as before. A chill ran through her as she realized the corpses could be anywhere now.

The last of the birds raced overhead. Maylee lifted her head and looked around. She brushed off a leaf that was stuck to her cheek and blinked in the dark. As far as she could tell, it was clear.

“Go!” yelled Park from up ahead. He pushed himself up. “Fucking go!”

Maylee put her palms in the dirt and pushed herself up. A hand closed on her calf. Groaning came from behind her.

“Shit!” she yelled. “One’s got me!” She kicked backward but couldn’t find the corpse’s head. She slammed her foot down on the hand gripping her calf. The grip held.

She twisted around in the dirt, trying to sit up. She heard Park and Ella rushing up behind her. She managed to sit up just in time to see the dark outline of the corpse crawling up her leg. She struggled but could not wiggle free. The corpse reached out its other hand and grabbed her shirt. This one was fresh, she realized, and stronger than she expected.

The corpse crawled up her, knocking her back against the dirt. Maylee pushed upward on the corpse’s shoulders, keeping it away from her face. She tried to get her legs up under it, tried to do the same trick that saved her from the corpse in Uncle Bobby’s closet. The corpse whose clothes she was wearing. She couldn’t get any traction on the wet ground.

Suddenly Park was above her. Ella’s hands closed on her shoulders. “Maylee!” yelled Ella.

Park grabbed the corpse by the head and pulled it to one side. “Lean!” Park yelled.

“What?” said Maylee, too panicked to understand.

“Fucking lean your fucking head the other fucking way!”

Maylee did, leaning her head in the opposite direction from how Park was pulling the corpse’s head.

Park grunted and, using his free hand, shoved the hunting knife into the corpse’s temple. The corpse groaned and bucked. Blood and other foul-smelling fluid poured from the corpse’s mouth, pooling next to Maylee’s shoulder. She could hear it splatter and smell its thick

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

rotting stench.

“Oh god!” she yelled. “Fucking sick!”

The corpse bucked two more times, then slumped forward on her upraised palms. She pushed it off of her and stood, shuddering and wiping her palms on her jeans.

Park wrenched the knife from the corpse's temple with a wet slurping sound. “Shit. Again, fucking gun. Soon.” He whipped his knife hand downward over and over, trying to clean the blade.

“Are you okay?” said Ella. Maylee could see her wide eyes in the dark.

“Yeah,” said Maylee. “Shit.”

“What shit?” said Ella.

“Down!” yelled Park.

They all dropped as the mass of birds whipped overhead, moving the other direction this time. Maylee knelt at first, not wanting to lie down again. She held her forearms up to her face, curling her hands up inside the sleeves of her jacket. Birds buffeted her arms. They screeched and tiny claws pulled at her hair. “Fuckers!” she screamed into her arms, then gave up and fell to the ground, out of harm's way.

After a few seconds of the deafening roar of wings, the birds moved past. Maylee lifted her head at the same moment Ella did.

“So,” said Park. “Who's sick to fuck of that?”

“Here,” said Ella, lifting her hand.

With the noise of the birds gone, Maylee could hear groans coming from behind and to both sides.

“We hear you. We hear you,” said Maylee, standing. “We're going.”

“Amen to that,” said Park as he stood and helped Ella up.

“How much further?” she said, looking around.

“I dunno,” said Park. “We need to get back to the walkway. It'll be better than rolling around in the bushes.”

Maylee nodded, shifting her bat from one hand to the other. She peered into the dark until she could make out the outline of the walkway.

“Everyone see it?” said Park.

“Yeah,” said Maylee and Ella together.

“Good.” Park ran, pushing Maylee and Ella out in front of him.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Stop pushing!” yelled Ella.

“Just run!” yelled Park.

The walkway drew closer. Maylee kept glancing side to side, looking for any sign of corpses. Shadows moved and corpses groaned from somewhere unseen. The trees around them rustled but she couldn't pinpoint where the birds would come from next. There was no time to stop and figure it out.

Ella was in front, followed by Maylee, with Park in the rear. As Ella drew near the walkway, a corpse emerged from a shadow and stumbled toward her. In the dim light, Maylee could see it was an old man with dried blood caked in the wrinkles covering his face. He hissed. Ella screamed.

Maylee ran up behind Ella and shoved her aside. Ella stumbled to the left. Maylee swung her bat up and slammed the corpse across the face. The corpse's head snapped to the right with such force the corpse spun around and dropped to its knees, facing the walkway. Teeth and thick dark glop shot out across the metal platform.

Maylee stopped running and moved to the kneeling corpse's side. She hoisted her bat above her head, preparing to slam down on the corpse's skull.

“Save it!” yelled Park as he arrived. He used the momentum of his running to kick forward against the back of the corpse's head. The corpse's jaw cracked and its head split open horizontally as Park kicked it forward. More glop and teeth spread out across the walkway.

Park stopped and looked down at the corpse. Most of the upper half of its head was on the walkway. Its body was still attached as it knelt on the ground. It gurgled and weakly moved its limbs. Maylee lifted up her bat to finish it off. Ella came up from where she had staggered to.

Park held up his hand for Maylee to stop. “I said save it.” He kicked a second time against the back of the corpse's head. The top half of its head snapped free and slid across the walkway. The body fell to the ground and was still. Park nodded at the body, then at Maylee. Maylee lowered the bat and shrugged.

“Come on!” yelled Ella, running to the walkway. She moved farther up the walkway, avoiding the gore the corpse had left. Ella climbed over the rail. Maylee set her bat on the walkway and followed. She picked her bat up as Park joined them.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Move!” said Park and they ran for the other side. Maylee felt exposed to both corpses and the crazed birds, but she was thankful for the lack of obstacles the walkway provided. She was in front this time, with Ella and Park behind her.

The trees rustled, too faint and far-off to pinpoint. Groans came from either side of the walkway. Maylee couldn't tell exactly from where.

“How much further?” yelled Ella from behind her.

Maylee strained to see in the dark. From the outline of the dome over her head, she could tell they were steadily approaching the other side.

The rustling grew louder. A few squawks became audible. The sound was focusing behind them. The groans to each side grew louder.

A dead arm reached out across the walkway.

“Arm!” yelled Maylee. She dodged to the far side of the walkway, narrowly avoiding the arm's grasping fingers as she ran past. Behind her, she heard Ella's and Park's footsteps change direction as they did the same.

Maylee ran harder, her feet pounding on the metal walkway. The rustling behind them increased. A corpse's head leaned out over the walkway. It was a woman, her long black hair caked with dirt and blood.

“Head!” yelled Maylee, moving to the other side of the walkway. The woman hissed and bit at her legs as Maylee raced past. Again, Maylee heard Ella and Park follow suit.

The swarm of birds grew loud behind them. The birds screeched and squawked furiously.

“They're getting close again!” yelled Ella.

“Just keep running!” yelled Park.

“Why?” yelled Ella.

“Trust him!” yelled Maylee as she kept her legs pounding. She could see why Park had yelled to stay upright and moving. They were dim and faint, but she could clearly see the outline of corpses very near the walkway. On their stomachs, unable to move because of the birds, they would be easy prey for dead mouths and rotten teeth.

A muscular but torn arm reached out across the walkway. Maylee couldn't see the rest, but the corpse that owned it must have

## ROBERT A. BEST

been large. The arm covered the whole of the walkway.

“Big arm!” yelled Maylee, jumping as she ran. The arm writhed as it passed under her. She landed, skidding on the wet metal of the walkway. A surge of panic went through her as it took her half a second to regain her footing. She could see herself sliding off the walkway, into the arms of the corpses lining it. She could see them tearing her apart.

Then her footing was back and she was running. She heard Ella jump, then Park. The birds coming from behind grew louder. They didn't have much time.

The door came into view.

“The door!” yelled Maylee.

“Thank fuck!” yelled Park.

The birds grew deafeningly loud behind them. Corpses groaned from each side of the walkway. Maylee ran harder than she thought possible.

She hit the door with her shoulder. It flew open and she stumbled out into the zoo.

She turned as Ella raced out, almost stumbling. The door had almost swung back to closed when Park hit it with such force it nearly broke.

“Hold it shut!” he yelled, turning to close the door. He put his shoulder against it.

Maylee ran up to help. She leaned against the door. She heard Ella rushing up from behind.

The birds hit the door. Hard. Squawking and clawing at it. The momentum of the birds pushed the door open an inch before Ella reached them and pushed. The door shut again.

“Oh shit. No,” Ella cried, as bird after bird rammed against the door. Maylee could hear their little bodies breaking.

“Fuck that,” yelled Park. “Those crazy bastards were trying to kill us.”

“But why?” yelled Ella.

The birds kept hitting the door. It shook with each blow. “How much longer can we keep this up?” yelled Maylee.

“Wait!” yelled Ella excitedly. “I have an idea. I'm going to let go so push harder!”

“What the fuck?” yelled Park as Ella let go.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Maylee and Park pushed harder. The birds slammed against the door. None of the blows seemed very large by itself, but the combined force of them all coming so fast was almost impossible to hold back. Maylee's back strained with effort.

Maylee saw Ella pull a card from her pocket. She moved over to the side of the door. An electronic box with a green light hung there. She held the card up to the box and the light changed to red.

The door clicked. The birds kept slamming against it.

"You can let go now," said Ella.

Maylee tried, slowly at first. Ella was right. The door stayed shut on its own. "She's right."

Park followed suit, straightening and backing away from the door. He turned to Ella and nodded. "Shit. That'll come in handy."

Ella put the card back in her pocket. "I stole it to help find Lori."

Park looked pained for a moment. "Well, don't fucking worry about that. We'll find her."

Ella nodded. Then screamed as a bird whizzed by her head, screeching and clawing.

"Fuck!" yelled Park, whipping his head around as he tried to locate the bird. "One must have slipped out."

It whizzed by again. Ella jumped out of the way, watching as it went past. "Oh god," she said. "Bill."

"What?" said Park.

Ella shook her head, looking embarrassed. "Nothing. I named all the animals. Forget it."

Park frowned, watching the bird whip around. It screeched furiously.

Maylee saw it coming at her. She readied her bat. "Sorry Bill."

She swung as the bird drew near. The bat connected full force, sending the bird slamming into a nearby tree. It crumpled to the ground, dead.

"Shit," said Ella, biting her lip.

"Damn, kid," said Park to Maylee. "Home run."

"You know it," said Maylee, smirking and nodding. Her face fell when she saw how sad Ella looked.

"What's happening?" she said, looking between Maylee and

ROBERT R. BEST

Park in confusion. “First all the dead people, now this.”

Maylee looked at Park. He shrugged and shook his head.

“What’s happening, you guys?” repeated Ella.



# ELEVEN

Angie awoke and immediately knew she'd slept too long. After climbing down from the kangaroo exhibit, she and Dalton had been too exhausted to continue. Angie found an open shed that was thankfully clear. She helped Dalton, now limping worse than ever, inside and shut the door. She assured him they'd make it back to Maylee the next day. She lay down on the cold concrete floor, telling herself they'd only sleep a few hours. They'd get up early and find their way to the office where Maylee would be waiting.

But now, as she awoke stiff and cold and aching, she could feel they'd slept more than a few hours. Much more. The morning was gone.

"Shit," she murmured to herself, sitting and looking around. Her back clenched and complained at the movement.

Dalton was curled up nearby, looking far too peaceful for the situation they were in. Irrational fear clenched her before she heard him snoring, light and soft.

Relieved, she crawled over to him and put a hand on his side. He kept snoring, obviously exhausted and deeply asleep.

She felt guilty for it but she rocked him gently. "Dalton."

His eyes fluttered open and he lifted his head. For a moment he looked lost, confused. Then he seemed to remember. "What time is it?"

"Not sure," said Angie. "But later than it should be. We gotta get going. How's your foot?"

He gingerly rocked his foot back and forth. He winced. "Stiff. But I think it's better."

"Good," she said, standing and helping Dalton to his feet.

"I'm hungry," said Dalton.

"Me too, baby," said Angie.

She stood silently for a moment, trying to gauge where they were. Trying to remember the map she'd seen. Trying to dredge up her own memories of trips to the zoo. If she was right ...

"I think the restaurant is near here," she said, patting Dalton on

## ROBERT R. BEST

the shoulder. "Maybe they'll have some food."

\* \* \*

Angie topped the hill and was relieved to see the Zoo Bites restaurant down below. She'd taken Maylee and Dalton there several times, paying way too much for mediocre hamburgers that seemed delicious after a full day at the zoo.

Dalton walked up beside her. He limped, but slightly less than he had yesterday. The sky was gray and light rain fell around them.

He frowned down at the Zoo Bites. She followed his gaze, but she knew what he was frowning at. She'd seen it when they first came over the hill.

Several people milled around the Zoo Bites, wet and dirty. Several of them had their arms wrapped around themselves from the cold. Angie could tell from the way they looked and moved that they were alive.

A zookeeper stood in front of the Zoo Bites. It was a young man with short brown hair and small round glasses. He had a rifle over one shoulder.

Angie frowned too. The man looked like he was standing guard.

Angie watched the scene for a moment longer. It made her uneasy. None of the people milling around attempted to go near the restaurant.

She looked side to side, then behind her. No corpses anywhere in sight. She heard a few animals growling from their exhibits.

She turned back. "Okay, baby," she said, putting a hand on Dalton's shoulder. "Let's go see if they have some food."

They started down the hill. Rain pattered lightly on the concrete path. People moved out of the way as they approached. Some eyed them warily.

The zookeeper noticed them approaching and drew himself up. Like he was standing at attention.

"Good morning," said Angie, smiling as they drew near.

"Morning, ma'am," said the zookeeper. He looked a little nervous.

"Is there any food?"

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

"There is, ma'am," said the zookeeper, adjusting his glasses and shifting the rifle strap on his shoulder. "But it's not feeding time yet."

Angie blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Lunchtime," the zookeeper corrected. "Sorry. I mean lunchtime."

Angie looked at the people milling around, then back at the zookeeper. "Well," she continued, chuckling and trying to keep her tone light. "I think we're past regular mealtimes right now. And my son's really hungry so..."

"We have to follow strict times, ma'am," said the zookeeper. "We have to ration what food there is."

Even with the cold rain peppering them, Angie's cheeks grew hot. "Rationing I understand. But this is insane."

"Yeah," said an older man from behind Angie.

The zookeeper shifted from one foot to the other, looking increasingly uncomfortable. "We have to follow the rules, ma'am."

"Whose rules?" said Angie, close to shouting. Several of the people milling around murmured in agreement.

"Lee, ma'am," said the zookeeper.

"Lee?" said Angie. "Who the hell's Lee?"

"Leader of the Keepers, ma'am."

"The what?" said Angie, looking him up and down. Part of her reminded herself that she addressed what was essentially a scared kid. But most of her was mad and didn't care.

"The Keepers, ma'am. That's what I am. A Keeper."

Angie stared at the young man, blinking in astonishment. She looked back at the people. They were no longer milling. They were gathering behind her and looking angry.

Angie looked at Dalton, who looked up at her in confusion. She could see in his eyes how hungry he was. She could feel it.

Angie looked back to the Keeper. He swallowed. She cleared her throat.

"And just what are you keeping?" she said.

The glass door to the Zoo Bites swung open. A second young man stepped out. He was small, with greasy black hair slicked back on his head.

"Is there a problem?" he said. Angie noticed his name tag. It

## ROBERT A. BEST

read *Lee*.

“Oh look,” said Angie. “It's the Lawgiver. Hello, Lee.”

“She wants food,” said the first Keeper to Lee.

“I guessed that,” said Lee, looking irritated. “That's what they all want.”

“Really?” said Angie. “What a shock. Any chance they'll be getting it?”

“Yeah!” said the older man behind her, louder than before.

“Look,” said Lee, stepping farther away from the door. “Ma'am, lunch isn't for another two hours.”

Hunger and exhaustion gnawed at Angie's brain. Fury built in her. “Really? Well shit. Should I go get the milk cartons for all us kids while we wait?” She stepped closer to Lee and the door, pulling Dalton behind her.

Lee stepped toward her. Angie caught a good look at his eyes. If she wasn't angry and getting angrier, his eyes would have scared her. They were feral, animal.

“Look, ma'am,” he said, sniffing and rubbing his mouth. “I don't know if you've fucking noticed, but someone was stupid enough to let those dead fucking things in here. And you all standing around making outrageous demands is just asking for those things to come and fucking eat you. I suggest you all find shelter and come back *at fucking lunchtime*.”

Angie looked back at the crowd that was developing behind her. She turned to look at Lee and the building behind him. “Are you saying you'd keep us out if those things attacked?”

The muttering of the crowd behind her grew louder. Angrier. It was beginning to scare her. *This whole thing is crazy*, she kept telling herself.

Lee took the rifle from his shoulder. He pointed it at the ground but it was clear he wanted everyone to see it. “Listen, everyone! We've been through this! The Bites belongs to the Keepers. We protect you and give out the food. You stay the fuck away!”

Angie stepped up closer, screaming at Lee. “You're insane! My son needs your help! These people need your help!”

A rock flew past Angie's head. It flew past Lee and smashed into the glass door of the Bites. The glass cracked but held. Lee raised the rifle and pointed it at the crowd. “Back off!”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Mom!” yelled Dalton, stepping closer to Angie and gripping her side. Lee, looking startled, jerked the rifle downward to point at Dalton.

Angie grabbed the barrel of the rifle and jerked it away from Dalton. The motion pulled Lee forward, causing him to lean toward Angie. She stepped in closer and slammed her forehead into Lee's face. Lee let go of the gun and stumbled back, clutching his nose.

“Crazy bitch!” he yelled. He snatched the rifle away from the Keeper next to him.

Angie moved to put herself in between Lee and Dalton. Lee leveled the rifle at her chest before she could turn around the rifle she'd grabbed.

“Now,” said Lee, cocking the rifle. “Let's see you go beddy-bye.” Blood ran from his nose, pooling inside his bottom lip.

“Bastard!” yelled the older man in the crowd. He flung a rock at Lee, knocking him in the shoulder. Lee fell back a few inches. The older man bellowed and ran at Lee.

Lee aimed at the older man and fired. A dart shot from the rifle and thudded into the old man's chest. He fell down face first, sprawling in front of Lee.

“You shot him!” Angie yelled, moving to knock the rifle from Lee's hands. Lee snapped his attention back to her, pointing the rifle her way.

“You, lady, are way more trouble than you're worth.”

He cocked the rifle and kept it leveled at Angie. More blood pooled in his lips. He trembled slightly, his stare furious and crazed.

Finally he let out a long, slow breath and lowered the rifle. “Now, give me the gun and get the fuck out of here. And we'll see how lucky you are when lunch comes around.”

Angie stared at Lee as Dalton clung to her side. She considered swinging her rifle at him, knocking him upside the head and running into the Bites to get her and Dalton some food.

Then she dropped the rifle, half hoping the impact would break it. It clattered to the pavement. She reached down and slipped her hand into Dalton's. Then she turned and led him away.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee rubbed her eyes as she looked around. She blinked away raindrops as they slowly ran down her face.

"This is taking way too long," said Ella as she stepped up next to her. They stood at the top of a hill overlooking an intersection of different paths through the zoo. Large friendly arrows pointed to different exhibits.

Corpses filled the intersection. They wandered around, groaning and stumbling. They hadn't noticed Maylee and Ella on the hill above them. At least not yet.

"Way too long," Ella repeated. "We should have been able to get back to the office last night. At this rate we won't get there until tomorrow. Especially if we have to hole up for the night again."

Park stepped up beside them. He sniffed, looking down at the throng of corpses. "Yeah, well, it's been crowded around here."

"We're gonna have to take the long way around. Again," said Ella, not taking her eyes off the corpses.

"Don't worry," said Park. "We'll get there." He put a hand on Ella's shoulder.

Ella spun, snapping her shoulder away from his grasp. She glared at him.

"The fuck, Ella?" said Park.

"Not now," she said, then made a big show of looking back at the corpses. She frowned, then nodded sharply down a second path, winding and more obscured. "We're going this way."

Park looked at Maylee and Maylee looked back. He looked like someone who'd tried to pet a dog and gotten bitten. He looked confused, hurt and angry.

"Guess we're going this way," said Maylee, shrugging.

Park shrugged back and they both followed Ella. Maylee was a few feet behind Ella. Park was at the rear.

Ella glanced back at Maylee. At first she looked angry and confused. Then the look was gone. She smiled.

"What's your bat's name?" she said.

"What?" said Maylee.

"Your bat," said Ella, nodding down at the bat bouncing in Maylee's hand as they walked. "What do you call it?"

"Um...bat."

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Ella chuckled and pushed her hair out of her eyes. "You should name it. It's fun."

Maylee frowned down at the bat, then shrugged. "I guess."

"It is," Ella continued. "I name everything. It makes things interesting."

"You mean like the birds?" said Maylee, then immediately felt stupid and sorry as a pained look flashed across Ella's face.

"Yeah," she said, silent and sad for a moment. Then she looked back at Maylee and smiled. "I name all the animals. Been doing it since I was little. I imagined they were my friends. Sometimes they seemed to recognize me. It was fun."

She fell silent, plodding on through the light rain. Maylee plodded along behind her. She heard Park sniff and cough. Maylee eyed a vending machine as they passed it. The glass was smashed in and the inside stripped bare. They all walked along silently.

They all stopped when a grunt came from around an approaching corner.

"Shit," said Ella. Maylee gripped her bat. Park walked around to stand in front of them. He pulled out his knife and held it down at his side.

Another grunt came from around the corner. Followed by a soft "thud", like something heavy hitting the ground.

"Shit," came a voice from the same place as the grunt. "Missed."

"I'll try again," came another voice. Then the voice grunted. A few seconds later came another soft "thud".

Park slipped the knife back into his pocket. "The hell?"

He walked toward the corner. Maylee and Ella followed.

Rounding the corner, Maylee saw to the left two young men standing outside the exhibit for a creature that looked like a large boar with a hamster-like face. One of the young men, tall and fat, was lugging a large rock over to the exhibit, holding it down in front of him and struggling with the weight. The creature snarled from behind the wooden fence separating it from the rest of the zoo. Two other large rocks sat inside the exhibit a few feet from where the creature stood.

"Tara!" yelled Ella, rushing forward.

The two young men stopped as they noticed Ella. The fat one

## ROBERT A. BEST

with the rock held back, uncertain. The other one, thinner than his friend, stepped forward, looking scared and angry.

"Back off, kid," he said. "The pig's ours."

"She's not a pig!" yelled Ella. "She's a capybara and her name is Tara!"

"Her fucking name," said the young man, "is fucking lunch!"

"Dude," said the fat one with the rock. "Aren't capybaras big rats?"

"What the fuck do you know, genius?" said the thin man, turning on him. "It's a pig. And we're eating it!"

Park stepped between Ella and the thin man. "You wanna tone that shit down, ass crack? That's my kid you're talking to."

"You back off too, buddy," said the thin man. The fat man shuffled back and forth, struggling with the rock. The thin man ignored him. "You ain't getting any of our pig either."

"She's a South American rodent," said Ella.

Park stayed focused on the thin man. "No one wants your fucking rat!"

"This is heavy," said the fat man, shifting his grip on the rock.

The thin man spun to face him. "Well quit jerking off with it and kill the fucking pig!"

"No!" yelled Ella.

The fat man carried the rock over to the fence. The capybara growled and clawed at the dirt. The fat man heaved the rock over, grunting as he did. The capybara shuffled out of the way as the rock thudded to the dirt.

"Stop it!" yelled Ella.

The capybara snarled and wheezed from behind the fence. It shook its head and huffed through its snout. The fat man jumped back. "Rat's pissed."

"It's not a fucking rat!" yelled the thin man. "It's a pig and I'm fucking hungry!"

Ella dug around hurriedly in the pockets of her jacket. She pulled out a half-eaten candy bar and flung it down at the thin man's feet. "There! Eat that!"

The two men stared at her. The thin man pointed. "The kid has food!"

Ella stepped back, raising her hands. "Wait, no!"



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

The two men stepped toward Ella.

Park stepped toward them, shoving the closest one back. “Back off, son. She said she didn't have any more.”

“It was left over from school,” said Ella. “We ate the rest for breakfast this morning.”

Park whipped his head back to Ella. “It's okay. You don't have to explain shit to this inverted-dick-having piece of fuck.”

“Breakfast!” said the thin man, sounding more crazed by the minute. “How nice for you all. Did you have tea with your fucking breakfast? We're starving!”

The capybara ran side to side in its exhibit, stamping its feet and snorting.

“I'm sorry,” said Ella. “It's all I have.” She looked near tears. Maylee stepped over to her.

“Don't, Ella!” yelled Park. “Don't you dare say you're sorry for anything to this shit-fuck!”

The thin man stepped forward and shoved Park. Park turned and stared at him.

“Seriously?” he said, then punched the man across the face.

The thin man stumbled back, shock and anger spreading across his face. For a second everyone just stared at each other in silence. Maylee thought she heard groans coming from somewhere nearby.

“Guys,” she said, looking around for the source.

Everyone ignored her. The thin man's face turned red and he rushed at Park. He punched clumsily at him. Park stepped to one side and let the man stumble past.

“Just let it go, asshole!” he said.

The man straightened and looked at Ella. More groans came from somewhere. The rain picked up, getting heavier.

“Guys,” said Maylee, still trying to pinpoint the source of the groans.

Again, no one noticed. “No!” said the thin man, responding to Park. “I say we search her for food first!” He jabbed a finger at Ella.

Maylee forgot the groans for a moment. She stepped between Ella and the man. Park grabbed the man by his pointing finger and bent it sideways. The man grunted in pain as Park spun the man around to face him.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“How 'bout not?” Park said. He let go of the man's finger and grabbed his shirt with both hands. He tossed him back, toward the fat man. The fat man stood there, looking uncertain and worried. He bent down to pick up the candy bar Ella had thrown.

“Hey, man,” he said to the thin man. The thin man didn't turn, staring at Park while he panted and grew redder. The rain pelted down on all of them.

The fat man coughed. “You know, man, maybe we should just go.”

The thin man turned on him. “Maybe you should just go! Or even better, how about you drop out of pussy school and help me beat this redneck's ass! Then we can fucking eat!”

“Hey, man,” said the fat man, stepping toward the thin one. “I'm just saying...”

“Fuck you and your saying!” yelled the thin man. He shoved his friend backward, into the arms of a corpse that had just stumbled out from around a corner.

“Shit,” said the thin man.

“No,” was all the fat man managed to say before the corpse, a large woman with one eye missing and most of the skin on her left shin gone, bit into his neck. He jerked violently as blood shot out across the woman's face and across the paved ground. The blood immediately streaked and ran in the rain.

“Fuck,” said Park, pulling the knife from his jacket and rushing toward the corpse. Maylee rushed forward with her bat.

The thin man reached his friend first. He pulled at his arm to no avail. The fat man's head lolled as blood spurted from his neck. His eyes opened and closed sleepily as blood leaked from his mouth. The corpse moaned and chewed, pulling the fat man to the ground.

“Oh shit, man, hold on,” said the thin man, tugging and kneeling. “Hold on!” More groans came from around the corner.

Park held up his arms to block Maylee and Ella. “Whoa! More coming! We gotta get out of here.”

“He have to save him!” yelled Ella.

“He tried to fucking hurt you, Ella,” said Park, slipping his knife back into his pocket.

“He's a human being, Dad,” said Ella.

Park blinked. “Wait, what?”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

"I said he's a human being."

Park opened his mouth to speak, then shut it. He looked back at the thin man. The thin man was tugging at the fat man. The corpse chewed on the fat man's neck from the other side.

"Well, shit," said Park. He ran over to grab the thin man's shoulder. He tried to pull him away.

"No!" said the man, pulling back and clutching his friend. "It's gonna be okay. We're gonna find some food."

The corpse chewed at the fat man's neck, oblivious to the thin man for the moment. The fat man's head lolled back. The fat man was still.

"Look, buddy," said Park. "Sorry about the punching and all, but we gotta move."

More corpses came around the corner. Ella screamed. Maylee readied her bat.

Park, kneeling beside the two men and the corpse, pulled his knife from his pocket. The thin man grabbed his wrist. Maylee could see in the thin man's eyes that his mind was gone.

"What are you doing?" yelled the man. "Get away! All of you get away!"

One of the approaching corpses dropped to its knees behind the thin man. It was a small boy with tight leathery skin and yellow eyes. Dirt clung to his small frame. He snarled and bit into the thin man's back. The thin man sucked in a sharp, surprised breath.

Maylee held back, watching. Ella clung to her shoulder. The rest of the corpses drew close to Park. Too close.

Yelling, Maylee ran up to where Park knelt. She swung her bat at an old woman with loose, slimy cheeks. Her head exploded into the rain, spreading wet glop across the pavement.

Park stood. The thin man screamed and clutched at the corpse behind him.

"We gotta go," said Maylee.

"You're telling me?" said Park.

They both ran over to Ella. She was staring at the corpses. And at the two men as the corpses ripped them apart. The first corpse had moved to the fat man's stomach and was pulling loose what looked like a liver. The thin man bucked, trying to reach the child on his back.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Blood poured from his mouth, mixing with the rain running down his cheeks.

"Come on," said Park, reaching down to grab Ella's hand. Ella snapped out of her staring and jerked away. Park looked confused.

Ella stared at him briefly, then nodded at the mob of corpses. At the corner they were coming around. "That's the way we have to go."

"Fuck," spat Park. "The only way?"

Ella nodded. "Pretty much."

"I'm so fucking happy about that," said Park.

The group of corpses finished coming around the corner. Maylee guessed there were fourteen, counting the two eating the two men. She glanced down to see the small boy bite into the thin man's forehead and wrench free a red strip of skin. The boy chewed, his small cheeks bulging.

Park gripped the handle of his knife and looked back and forth between the different corpses. He glanced over at Maylee. "I think I might need your help, kid."

"You kidding me?" said Maylee, clanging her bat on the ground then holding it up and beside her head, like a baseball player. "I've been doing this for days now."

Park smirked. "Your mom would kill me for letting you near them."

"So don't tell her."

"I've never fought any," said Ella, behind them.

"That's fine, Ella," said Park.

"I don't think I'd be very good," said Ella.

"Don't worry about it," said Park.

"Maybe if I had a gun?"

"No one's giving you a gun, Ella," said Park.

A corpse stumbled past the bodies of the two men, heading for Maylee, Park and Ella. It was a gangly old man, his withered arms working up and down like claws on a pale, dry insect.

"I got this one," said Maylee, stepping up and readying herself.

Park stepped in front of her. "Oh no. I said I might need *your* help. Not the other way around."

He moved toward the old man, knife ready. A second corpse, a short woman with red hair and a gaping hole torn in her chest, came up behind the old man. Maylee could see part of her dead heart sticking

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

through the hole.

“Fine,” she said, moving toward the woman while Park was occupied with the old man. “I got this one.”

Park reached the old man first. The old man noticed Park approaching and moaned, opening his mouth to reveal a swollen, gray tongue. It reached for him, like a child eager for an approaching treat.

Park brought up his knife and shoved it deep into the old man's forehead. The old man blinked and gurgled, dark fluid spilling from his mouth. Park put his free palm on the handle of the knife and pushed upward, toward the top of the man's head. The skull cracked as the blade ground upward. The old man slumped and was still. Park wrenched the knife free and the old man fell over backward.

At the same moment, Maylee reached the woman with a hole in her chest. She swung the bat into the woman's sternum. Bone shattered and the bat smashed into the exposed heart. The woman staggered back, hissing and grasping at Maylee. Maylee brought the bat up and slammed downward on the woman's head.

The bat crunched down into the woman's skull. She jerked as her forehead split. A thin line of fluid seeped out, running down her face. The woman hissed, more weakly than before.

Maylee brought the bat around and smashed the woman across the temple. The woman's head crumpled in on one side, forcing more fluid out of the split down the woman's forehead. A thick glop splattered out after the fluid. The woman stopped hissing and fell over.

Maylee stepped back, gripping her bat and scanning the approaching corpses. She counted twelve remaining. She gauged how close they were to reaching Ella, Park and herself.

She glanced over at Park, who had also fallen back. She could tell from his face that he had made similar calculations. “This ain't gonna work,” he said. “We're either gonna have to run or do something faster.”

Maylee nodded, looking around for any ideas.

Two corpses stumbled against the bodies of the two men, which by now had been completely torn open. Red and gray organs were splayed out. Rain pattered down on them, streaking red across the pavement. The little boy corpse lifted a rope of intestines to his mouth and gnawed on it.

## ROBERT A. BEST

The two corpses who had stumbled into the men grunted and noticed the freshly torn bodies below them. They reached down, toppling to their knees and grabbing. They pulled meat and organs into their mouths and chewed.

“I just got an idea,” said Park.

“Me too,” said Maylee. “And it’s gross.”

“Whatcha gonna do?” said Park. He stuck the knife back in his pocket and ran to the bodies of the two men. The now four corpses on the ground ignored him, engrossed in eating.

He knelt down and grabbed an organ that had fallen several inches from the bodies. It was a gray-red hunk of meat Maylee couldn’t identify. He stood, frowning.

“Goddammit,” he said. “Fuck my grandpa with a spoon, this is gross.” He hauled back and flung the organ into the approaching group of corpses. It slapped against the chest of a middle-aged woman missing an arm and with two scab-crusteD gouges across her face. The organ distracted both her and another corpse. They both fell on the organ, biting and pulling on it.

“Mega gross,” said Ella. “Plus, I can’t believe it worked.”

“Good thing these things are stupid,” said Park.

Maylee rushed over and started to reach for an organ.

“Whoa!” said Park, holding her back with his left hand while he tried to wipe his right clean. “Don’t get too close. They’re not that stupid.”

A young man with a dark hole in his throat drew close and came at Park. Park pulled his knife but only got it halfway up before the man grabbed him.

“Look out!” yelled Maylee. She and Ella moved to help.

“I got this!” yelled Park, struggling with the young man. “Just distract more of those fuckers!”

Maylee frowned. The approaching corpses were too close to reach another organ. There were ten left undistracted, counting the one fighting Park. Not yet enough to get past.

Ella ran up. “What can I do?”

“Shit,” said Maylee. “Here, hold my arm.”

Ella did and Maylee leaned out, holding her bat outward with her free hand.

“The fuck you doing?” yelled Park, still struggling with the

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

young man.

Maylee ignored him and stuck the end of the bat into the pile of meat, blood and organs. She leaned until she felt the bat touch pavement.

“Yeah,” said Ella behind her. “What are you doing?”

“Pull!” yelled Maylee. Ella pulled on her arm and Maylee leaned back up, dragging the bat along the ground toward her.

“And dammit!” she yelled as she saw the bat had snagged a loop of intestines and not a free organ.

“Again?” yelled Ella. Park was still struggling with the young man. He was holding him back with one hand and trying to bring up the knife to strike with the other.

Maylee looked at the corpses. The remaining undistracted ones were drawing closer. “No time.”

She dragged the bat along the ground, pulling the loop of intestines toward her and Ella. Either end of the loop ran back to the stomach of the thin man's body. He jerked slightly with each tug.

“Gross gross gross gross!” yelled Ella as the intestines scraped along the concrete. Bits of intestines broke off, stuck to rough spots in the pavement.

“I know,” said Maylee. The intestine was close enough for her to lean forward without Ella's help. She shook her hand free of Ella's grip and twisted the bat around until the intestines had looped over the top of it.

“What are you doing?” asked Ella.

“No idea,” said Maylee. She whipped the bat upward. The intestines flew up into the air in front of her and Ella. Maylee gripped the bat with both hands and brought it up over her shoulder. She watched as the intestines arced and started to fall.

*No way in hell this'll work*, she thought. As the intestines fell in front of her, she swung.

The bat hit the coil of intestines square on. With a solid squelching “thwack” the intestines flew back toward the approaching corpses. It draped over four of them, smearing red glistening slime over their rotting clothes and bodies. The four corpses lost interest in Maylee, Ella and Park and turned on the intestines. They clawed at it, shoving it greedily into their gnawing mouths.

## ROBERT A. BEST

"Shit," said Maylee, lowering the bat. "I can't believe that worked."

"Me either," said Ella.

They turned to Park to see him pulling his knife from the temple of the young man. He rocked the knife up and down, then wrenched it free. The young man slumped, dragging his rotting hands across Park's torso. He crumpled on the ground and was still.

Park turned to look at the corpses. The four Maylee had distracted were chewing furiously at the intestines. He looked to Maylee and nodded in approval.

"Damn straight," said Maylee.

He stepped quickly back over to her and Ella. "What's that leave? Two?"

Maylee looked. Of all the corpses, only two seemed to still care about getting to them. "Yeah."

"I think we can handle two. Let's move."

The two corpses broke free of the group and came at them. One, a thin gangly woman with thick curly hair, came at Park. The other, a chubby older man with a gray mustache and no lips, came at Maylee.

Park stood in front of the woman, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Like he was looking for an opening. The woman lunged at him. He ducked to one side, grabbing her by one of her outstretched arms. He pulled the woman to him, holding the knife out and toward her head. She fell forward, driving the blade into one of her yellow, pus-filled eyes. The woman growled and gurgled.

Park grunted and pushed the knife in farther, twisting. The woman convulsed, then was still.

Maylee ran at the chubby older man, screaming. He chattered his lipless teeth under his blood-crusting mustache. She swung her bat around from her side, smashing it into the corpse's mouth. His jaws collapsed and he fell backward, gurgling and choking on his own teeth.

Maylee brought her bat around the other way, throwing her back into the blow. She whacked the corpse across the side of the head. It jerked to one side, neck breaking and skull crumpling. It kept falling over sideways and was still.

"Go!" Park yelled and they ran for the opening the two fallen corpses had left. It was a small strip of pavement between the walkway



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

and the capybara exhibit to the left.

They stopped running when they realized what a small opening it was.

“Shit,” said Park, looking at the corpses feeding, then back at the opening. Maylee followed his gaze. They would have to move single file. And pass very close to the corpses.

“Should we kill a few more?” said Maylee.

“No,” said Park. “Don't want to call attention to ourselves. They seem so happy.”

Maylee smirked. The corpses tore and chewed at the two men. Soon they would run out of meat. Or they would want to move on to something fresher.

“Okay,” said Park. “I'll go first. Take my hand.” He held it out for Ella.

Ella took it, frowning at the feeding corpses. “I knew they were doing that, but...”

Maylee looked at Ella and remembered seeing corpses feed on Brooke, the babysitter Mom had insisted on the night the world ended. Remembered the cold, deadening shock of it. The feeling of nauseous imbalance.

“But it's different seeing it,” said Maylee.

Ella nodded.

“We going?” said Park.

Ella sniffed and nodded again. She reached out for Maylee's hand and took it. Park stepped slowly toward the opening. Ella followed and Maylee went last.

Park pressed his back against the fence and slowly inched past the feeding corpses. The corpses grunted and chewed. The capybara snorted and stomped its feet on the ground.

“Keep it down, fucker,” muttered Park.

“Tara,” said Ella next to him. She pressed her back against the fence, trying to get as far as possible from the corpses. They tore free hunks of flesh and gnashed their teeth, grunting in ecstasy. The capybara snorted and huffed, angered by Park's and Ella's proximity.

“Keep it down, Tara,” said Park. He reached the end of the opening and stepped out behind the corpses. He kept hold of Ella's hand and led her along the fence. Ella pulled at Maylee's hand and

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee moved into the opening.

She put her back against the fence and slowly slid along, sidestepping past the corpses. Blood and meat trailed from their mouths. Grunting and the sound of smacking lips filled the air.

The capybara behind her snorted angrily. It stamped its feet and butted its head against the fence. It did it again, hard enough that Maylee felt the wooden fence bow against the small of her back.

"She's never like this," said Ella. Her hand was wet and slippery in Maylee's. "None of the animals are ever like this."

The capybara gave a loud snort. Maylee heard it turn around and run away from the fence. She kept inching past the corpses, hoping she was wrong about what was coming.

She wasn't. With a frenzy of huffing and stamping feet, the capybara ran back to the fence and rammed it. The impact of the capybara's head with the wood echoed around the area.

"Shit," said Maylee, slamming her back against the fence. The corpses grunted more loudly, slowing their eating.

"Hurry," said Ella, hurrying along next to her.

The capybara rammed the fence again, more loudly than before. The corpses slowed their eating further, blinking their clouded eyes and moaning.

Maylee moved along as quickly as she could while still remaining silent. She couldn't risk drawing any more attention.

The capybara huffed in frustration and ran away from the fence. Maylee sucked in her breath, waiting for the impact. But none came. From what she could hear, the capybara was running in circles, grunting and growling. The corpses grunted and resumed eating, still unaware of Maylee's presence. Maylee let out her breath, chest pounding. She kept inching along, about halfway through the opening.

Then what was left of the dead men sat up and moaned. The corpses that had been eating them lost interest suddenly, like a switch had been flipped. Maylee felt cold as she realized she'd never seen moving corpses attempt to eat each other.

The corpses looked around, already starting to climb back to their feet. Their unsteady gazes fell on Maylee. They groaned.

"Oh shit," said Maylee.

The closest corpse, a man with dark black veins showing beneath his gray skin, reached for her. She kicked at him, leaning back

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

as she did. She lost her balance and started sliding over the fence.

“Maylee!” yelled Ella, letting go of Park's hand and grabbing Maylee's with both of hers. Maylee slid downward into the capybara exhibit. Her legs were hanging on the fence and her head hung toward the ground. The bat in her right hand scraped along the dirt of the exhibit.

The corpses groaned, sounding closer than before. Ella screamed, clutching at Maylee's left hand. Maylee heard huffing and pounding footsteps behind her head. She craned her neck back to look, upside-down, into the exhibit. She saw the capybara running straight for her head. Its eyes were crazed and a fine mist blew from its snout as it pounded along toward her.

Maylee screamed. Ella pulled on her hand, wrenching her upward. Her head moved up as the capybara passed under it, missing her by inches.

She sat up straight on the fence. Ella pulled at her arm, her eyes wide and worried. Park rushed in from the side, knife out and aimed at the nearest corpse. The corpses crowded behind Ella, almost close enough to grab and kill.

“Look out!” Maylee yelled.

A tremendous cracking sound came from beneath her as the capybara smashed through the wooden fence and came out the other side.

Snarling and grunting, the capybara ran into the legs of the approaching corpses. The corpses stumbled and fell forward. The capybara thrashed around, like it was trying to get clear of the corpses so it could come back at Maylee. The capybara showed no interest in the corpses and the corpses showed no interest in it.

At the moment the capybara smashed through, Ella jumped to one side, out of the way of the rampaging animal. She clutched Maylee's wrist as she jumped, but the awkward angle made her hand slip. Maylee slid backward on the fence, struggling to maintain her balance but unable to.

“Maylee!” yelled Ella.

Maylee's hand slipped from Ella's completely. She fell backward into the exhibit. Air rushed from her lungs as her back slammed into the dirt. Her bat clattered from her hand.

## ROBERT A. BEST

She blinked, dazed, at the rain falling from the gray sky above her. She heard Ella screaming and Park shouting. She shook herself out of her daze and climbed hurriedly to her feet.

Looking out over the fence, she saw Park pulling Ella away from the throng of corpses. They both looked unhurt.

“Kid!” yelled Park.

“Here!” she yelled. She ran over and grabbed her bat from the ground. “I’m okay!”

Park saw her and nodded. He brought up one of his legs and kicked back the group of corpses. “We’re going that way!” Park nodded behind him, the direction the corpses had originally come from. He grabbed Ella’s hand and backed hurriedly toward the next corner. The corpses stumbled after them.

Maylee turned to her left and ran along the exhibit, parallel to Park, Ella and the corpses. She got out in front of the corpses and curved back toward the fence. She pulled one foot up and started to climb over.

The child corpse was waiting on the other side. He hissed and grabbed her leg with blood-caked fingers.

Maylee let out a little scream of surprise and fell backward off the fence. She landed on her back in the exhibit. Pain shot up her tail bone and into her spine.

With a sharp, loud “crack” that sent bits of wood flying into the exhibit, the capybara broke back through the fence. It rushed blindly forward for a moment, huffing and grunting at nothing. Blood, bright and red, ran from its forehead. Its angry panting sent a fine mist of blood into the cold damp air.

Maylee struggled to climb to her feet. She knew she didn’t have much time before the capybara corrected its course and came at her. Her tailbone and back were killing her. She could hear Ella and Park yelling, getting farther away as the corpses pursued them.

The capybara turned and came at Maylee just as she finished standing. She ran, trying to ignore the pain.

The capybara pounded its feet into the dirt behind her as Maylee ran as hard as she could, heading for the far end of the exhibit. She wanted to put distance between herself and the capybara before she attempted to climb the fence. She quickly wondered if she’d made a mistake. The capybara behind her sounded faster than she would have

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

expected. It snorted and grunted, sounding enraged as it ran.

She drew near the far end of the exhibit and started to curve right, toward the fence. She could see the mob of corpses. Ella and Park backed around the corner. Ella looked around frantically. The corpses shuffled toward them. Another minute and the corpses would block Maylee's escape.

The capybara sounded close as she drew near the fence. Too close for her to stop and climb. She jumped, surprising herself at how well she did. Her foot caught the edge of the top of the fence. She pushed herself up with her leg, doing her best not to slow down.

As she crouched on the fence, mid-run and about to come down the other side, the capybara hit the fence beneath her. It broke through, coming out the other side. The approaching corpses tripped over it as it raced in front of them.

Maylee jumped down, landing on the pavement in a kneeling position. The capybara, crazed in its rage, kept running until it hit the faux-rock wall on the other side of the walkway. There was a horrible popping sound and the capybara yelped.

Maylee watched from where she knelt. The capybara turned to face her, looking dazed and weak. Blood leaked from its forehead. It snorted thick blood from its snout.

"Oh god," said Maylee, feeling sorry for it. The capybara fell down.

The corpses to her right were getting close.

"Maylee!" yelled Ella from just out of sight.

Maylee stood, gripping her bat in her right hand. She ran for the corner, leaving the corpses and the wounded capybara behind her.

# TWELVE

Angie looked around, frowning. The sky was gray, making it hard to gauge what time it was. But she felt it was getting late in the day. Could they get to the Communications Office before dark? She tried to remember the layout of the map from the night before.

“My head hurts,” said Dalton next to her. He rubbed his head and blinked in the light rain falling around them.

“Mine too, baby,” said Angie, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s hunger, and I’m sorry we haven’t found any food.”

Angie cocked her head as a faint groan reached her ears. Maybe two groans. It was too distant to be sure.

“Hear that?” said Dalton.

“Yeah,” said Angie, biting her lip. “They’re far away for now, but who knows for how long. We need to find one of those map things. Double check where we’re going.”

“There,” said Dalton, pointing. Angie looked. Across the way from where they stood, partially hidden by a bush, was the back of a map display.

“Shit,” said Angie. “How’d I miss that? Good job, honey.”

They trotted across the pavement, Dalton limping slightly. Angie looked left to right as they moved. No corpses emerged. They reached the display and walked around to the other side. The side the map was printed on. More groaning floated their way. Again, faint. But not quite as faint as before.

A thin layer of condensation coated the plastic of the display. Angie ran her palm up and down, then side to side, trying to clear off an area she could see clearly. Satisfied, she bent forward for a closer look.

The groans sounded again, closer than before. “Mom,” said Dalton behind her. She could hear the nervousness in his voice.

“I know,” she said, meaning to sound soothing but hearing the annoyed edge in her voice. She felt guilty but pushed it down. There was no time for that. She ran her finger along the map, locating where they were and then trying to figure out the best way to get to the

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Communications Office.

The rain picked up around them, sending cold streaks down the map. Angie wiped them away in frustration. The groans came again, close enough now to send tension up Angie's back. Dalton moved closer to her.

"Okay," she said, frowning. "We still got a ways to go yet, unless..."

"Unless what?" said Dalton, looking around,

"Unless we cut through the primate exhibit," said Angie. She pointed across from where they were. A large entranceway loomed there, a big sign next to it. *Primates In Person*, read the sign in large safari letters.

"But..." Dalton started.

The groans became louder, sounding like corpses were moments from stumbling into the area. Angie grabbed Dalton's hand and pulled him toward the entranceway.

"Mom," repeated Dalton, looking around. Angie kept her eyes on the door up ahead.

"We need to hurry," she said. "Those things are getting closer."

They were a few feet from the stone steps leading into the exhibit. Dalton stopped walking, jerking Angie to a halt.

She turned to look down at him. "What?" she said, again feeling guilty for the edge she heard in her voice. Groans came again, so close Angie could hear the wet gurgles of the dead throats.

Dalton looked up at her. He sniffed and ran the back of his hand under his nose. "Mom," he said. "The animals."

Angie realized. "Oh, right. But it's okay. The monkeys are all behind that thick glass, remember? When you were little you'd bang on it, trying to get their attention. I'd yell at you, but the glass was so thick they couldn't even hear you."

Dalton eyed the steps behind her. She could tell he was thinking of the kangaroos. Thinking of their frenzied rage.

"Remember?" said Angie.

"I..." said Dalton. He stopped when three corpses came around a corner and stumbled into the area. They jerked their stiff rotting bodies across the pavement, groaning and moving toward Angie and Dalton.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Damn,” said Angie, pulling Dalton toward the stairs. As they ran up them, Angie worried Dalton would slip on the wet concrete. He didn’t, but they weren’t able to move as quickly as Angie would have wanted. The corpses groaned behind them.

They reached the last step and raced for the glass doors. Cartoon primates grinned from paintings on the glass. Angie’s stomach sank when she saw the doors were automatic. They slid open with a “whoosh” sound as she stopped. She looked up at the motion sensor just above the door.

“What?” said Dalton, behind her.

Angie turned, hoping the stairs would keep the corpses away. But the steps weren’t steep, and there weren’t that many of them. The corpses were slow and stumbling, but they had already begun to navigate the first step. Angie knew they would eventually reach the doors.

“The doors are automatic,” said Angie. “They’ll be able to follow us.”

She turned back to the door, looking up at the motion sensor. She looked back to the ground and scanned it as quickly as she could.

“Mom,” said Dalton behind her. The corpses groaned, sounding close.

“One second,” she said, finding a small rock set among some bushes close to the door. She rushed over, picking up the rock as the doors slid shut. She ran back over to the door and reared back with the rock, aiming at the sensor. The doors slid open.

“Mom!” said Dalton.

“What?” said Angie, whipping her head back at Dalton. She still had the rock poised to throw.

“If you break the thing with the door open, they’ll be able to get inside.”

Angie cocked her head back at the door. The corpses groaned behind them. Angie stepped back. The doors slid shut.

“But,” said Dalton behind her, “if you break the thing with the door shut, we won’t be able to get inside.”

Angie turned to Dalton, dropping her arm to her side. Dalton sniffed in the cold rain and looked up at her. Behind Dalton, the corpses had staggered their way to the second step and were working on the third.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Dammit,” said Angie. “You may be right. Well shit.” She hurled the rock at the nearest corpse. It smacked into the corpse's forehead, splitting the skin but not enough to kill it. The corpse staggered back to the first step. The other two kept coming.

“Come on!” said Angie, grabbing Dalton's wrist and pulling him through the open doors. They slid shut behind them.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the low light. The room was hot, almost suffocating. The zoo kept the room hot for the primates. Primate body odor hit her nostrils.

“I smell the monkeys,” said Dalton.

“They're behind glass,” said Angie. “And we could always smell them before, remember? It's fine. Come on.”

Dalton looked around, nodded and stepped forward. Angie walked ahead, moving as quickly as she could while still allowing Dalton to keep up with her. As she moved she listened behind her, waiting for the moment the sliding doors opened, letting the corpses in. She waited to hear groans behind her.

A groan came, but from the front.

Angie stopped. Dalton almost ran into her back.

The groan came again. It was faint, but clearly coming from in front of them. From somewhere within the building.

“Crap,” whispered Dalton.

Angie nodded, frowning into the dim light. The sudden switch from the wet cold outside to the oppressive heat inside was making her head swim. Her stomach churned as she realized that if the corpses behind them could get through the sliding doors, so could any others. The whole building could be full of them.

The doors behind them opened. Angie looked back to see the three corpses stumble inside. The gray overcast sky outside was brighter than the dim hallway. The three corpses were dark, stumbling silhouettes against the door.

“Dammit,” said Angie. “Come on.” She grabbed Dalton and ran, deeper into the exhibit.

Groans came from in front of them, faint but closer. Angie gripped Dalton's arm, waiting for the moment a corpse would appear in the hall in front of them. She would hold Dalton behind her, blocking him with her body. She imagined the pain as the dead mouth would bite

## ROBERT A. BEST

into her and rip hunks of her free. She imagined Dalton running to safety as she bled out on the floor. She waited for the moment to come, trying hard not to slow down from fear. She had to be strong.

They stopped when they reached a split in the hallway. Angie remembered now. One way led to a balcony overlooking the large glass enclosure. The other way ran downward, winding along at the bottom of the exhibit for a closer view. The lower way also led to the out door. Two large wooden arrows, painted bright cartoon colors and bolted to the wall, indicated up and down.

Angie turned to cast a quick glance back down the hall. They'd rounded a curve in the hallway as they ran, but she could hear the corpses getting closer.

"Come on," she said. She pulled Dalton ahead and ran for the hallway leading down.

They made it three steps when a group of corpses came into view. Their rotting smell mingled with the humid BO-filled air. They gurgled and reached for Angie and Dalton. Dalton screamed.

"Back!" yelled Angie, pushing Dalton behind her. She backed up until they were back at the spot where the two hallways split off.

The corpses were drawing nearer on both sides. A few more minutes, Angie knew, and they would be trapped. Pulled down and eaten. She looked around frantically. She didn't have a weapon. Why the hell hadn't she picked up a weapon by now?

Her eyes landed on the large wooden arrows. A small spotlight in the ceiling illuminated their bright happy paint. Angie realized they were the exact same arrows she'd seen when she and Jake first brought an infant Maylee to the zoo. She peered more closely. The wood was splintered around the bolt holding the arrows to the wall.

"Cheap piece of crap," she said. "Thank God."

"What?" said Dalton, sounding very nervous. The groaning corpses closed in from both sides.

"Stay close, baby," said Angie. She stepped over to the arrows and grabbed hold of the top one.

She pulled, leaning back with the effort. The wood cracked around the bolt but the arrow held. The corpses drew closer on both sides. Dalton pressed against her.

Angie put her right foot against the wall and pulled again. The wood cracked further, grinding against the bolt. The grunts and groans

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

around her and Dalton grew louder.

“Mom,” said Dalton. He pressed harder against Angie, clutching at her back. Angie started sweating in the muggy air inside the building. A cold realization came over her. She'd made a mistake wasting time on the arrow. She and Dalton were about to die. She'd hear him scream, yelling for help.

She pulled harder than she thought possible. Her back and shoulders strained with effort. The corpses drew in close. Dalton let out a low whine, like a frightened animal.

The wood around the bolt splintered and the arrow came free of the wall. The momentum of her pull flung her arms and the arrow outward in a wide arc. The large hunk of wood slammed across the heads of the three corpses coming up from behind. All was a blur of speed as her head whipped around, but she saw the corpses had been inches away from Dalton. The three corpses fell to one side. The far one spit dark gore onto the wall and Angie heard its neck pop.

She spun the rest of the way around to face the split in the hallway. The corpses coming up from the lower level were close.

She swung the heavy wood at the head of the nearest corpse. Its head snapped around. Angie heard the bones of its neck pop. It gurgled as it fell against the wall. Its head lolled but it still moved. She brought up the arrow to swing again.

Behind her, Dalton screamed. She spun to see the corpses, coming from behind, were righting themselves and grasping at Dalton.

Angie grabbed Dalton by the collar and pulled him past her, onto the upward-leading hallway. She knew it was a mistake. She knew the hallway was a dead end. She told herself she would beat back all the corpses. She told herself she would win and they would be able to get back onto the lower walkway. She desperately wished it was true.

She turned back to the corpses who'd followed them into the building. The frontmost one, a young woman with thick yellow fluid running from her ruptured eyes, hissed and bit at Angie. Angie jabbed the point of the arrow into the woman's eyes and shoved her backward. The woman fell back as yellow muck splattered out across the wood of the arrow.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton from behind her. She turned, calculating she only had a few seconds before the corpses coming from outside got

## ROBERT A. BEST

to her. As she turned a cold hand closed on her shoulder. She screamed and pulled away, almost stumbling as she finished her turn.

The corpses coming up from below were upon her. Her face was inches from a large man with rotten teeth and oozing sores on his cheeks. He lunged and bit at her. Angie jerked her head back as the man's teeth snapped shut a fraction of an inch from her nose.

"Fuck!" she yelled, mostly to herself. She swept her leg wildly from side to side. It connected with the large man's legs. He jerked with the impact and fell to his knees. Angie slammed the point of the arrow downward, embedding it into the man's head. She twisted, feeling the wood grind into bone and pulp. The large man jerked, gurgled and slumped, still.

Dalton yelled to her right. She whipped her head around, conscious of the corpses coming up from below and how close they were. Dalton was backing away, farther up the dead-end hallway. The corpses from outside were following him, grasping and moaning. Angie thought there were more than there should have been. She cast a quick glance down the entranceway hall. More corpses had come in from outside. Raw dread gripped her. She'd made a mistake. She'd made a mistake and gotten her and her son killed.

"Dalton!" she yelled, reaching for him. A corpse coming up from below grabbed her shoulder. She screamed and spun to face them.

"Fuck off!" she yelled, kicking the corpse in the stomach. It stumbled down the hallway, toppling over the corpses behind it. The group stumbled and fell down the incline, groaning and grasping at the walls.

She turned back to reach for Dalton. The corpses had backed him farther up the hallway. Soon he would pass the end of a wall separating the two hallways. Soon he would be out of reach. She strained to the side, grabbing for his hand. "Dalton!"

Dalton saw and reached to her. He grabbed her hand and gripped it tightly, but the corpses coming in from outside were too close to allow him to get to her. Several of the corpses went down the lower hallway, pushing Angie farther down.

"Mom!" yelled Dalton. "I'm scared!" The corpses in both hallways pushed in closer, forcing them both back. Farther away from each other. The wall dividing the hallways drew near.

"I know baby, I know!" yelled Angie, clutching desperately at

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

his hand.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton again. His hand was wet in the muggy air. Their hands began to slip apart.

“Dalton!” yelled Angie. The corpses drew closer. She could hear the ones she'd kicked down the hallway righting themselves. Her wrist hit the edge of the dividing wall.

“Mom!”

Their hands came apart and Dalton was pushed out of view.

Angie screamed in anguish. The corpses drew close, stumbling down the walkway toward her.

Bellowing in rage, she grabbed the arrow with both hands and swung it hard at the heads of the corpses. It connected with a sharp series of quick thuds and the nearest corpses fell to one side.

“Dalton!” she yelled, starting to run up the hallway, desperate to get to her son. She stopped. There were too many corpses. She would be running to her own death. She heard Dalton screaming above her, calling for her. It broke her heart, but it didn't sound like he was in pain. Not yet.

“Shit shit shit!” she spat, whipping her head around. She felt close to tears. Her head throbbed in the muggy heat of the building. Groans came from both sides.

She gripped the wooden arrow desperately and looked front and back. The corpses in front of her were getting close. There were too many to get past by herself. No way she could get past them and back up the upward hallway to Dalton. The ones behind her were regaining their footing, struggling their way back to a standing position. If she hesitated much longer she'd be trapped.

Dalton screamed above her. He sounded farther away, behind and above her. Like he was being backed toward the balcony. A primal need gripped her. She had to follow Dalton, she *had* to. She turned and ran down the exit hallway, desperate to keep him above her. To keep as close to him as possible.

The corpses farther down the hallway were halfway to their feet. They looked up, groaning at Angie as she ran toward them. She didn't slow down, more conscious of Dalton's screams than their groans.

Angie reached the corpses. She was still running at full speed.

## ROBERT A. BEST

The closest corpse, an old man with stringy white hair and black veins running across his cheeks, hissed at her. Angie screamed at it, more in anger than fear, and flung the arrow toward its head. The arrow, whipping round and round in the air, whacked into the forehead of the hissing corpse. Its head snapped backward, thick black fluid spraying across the ceiling of the hallway, and it fell over. Angie jumped over the prone corpse, the corpses next to the fallen one grabbing for her but missing.

She landed on the other side of the corpse. Her feet slipped and she collapsed to one knee. Pain shot up her leg but she ignored it, forcing herself to her feet, and running. She paused for a second to pick up the fallen arrow, now battered into an indistinct hunk of wood. Then she ran on, leaving the corpses groaning behind her.

She ran until the roof above her ended and she stumbled out into the main room. A huge glass wall was to her right, the primate exhibit behind it. She didn't have time to look, but she knew the room was full of faux-trees and ledges, with ropes and sticks and various things for the apes to play on. Dalton had loved this exhibit once.

Dalton screamed above her. Angie whirled around and looked up. Dalton was on the overlook that hung out over the viewing area. His back was to a small wall that kept guests from falling. He was kicking at corpses that groaned and grabbed at him.

"Dalton!" Angie yelled. A flash of light blinded her for a moment, then was gone. Angie blinked in confusion, straining to see Dalton. A light hung in the ceiling just above him, glaring in Angie's eyes as he moved.

He didn't hear her, straining and kicking at the corpses. The corpses seemed to be farther back than before.

"Dalton!" Angie yelled again, squinting through the glare. It wasn't as bright as the first flash, but she desperately wished she could get a better view.

He spun around and looked down. "Mom! I'm stuck!"

Angie, terrified she was being ridiculous, terrified she was making a huge mistake, held her arms out and up. "Hurry, baby! Jump!"

Dalton looked back at the corpses drawing closer behind him, then back down at her. "What?"

"I'm sorry honey," said Angie. She squinted in the glare of the

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

light above Dalton. His silhouette was fuzzy against it. "There's no other way," she said. "Jump!"

Dalton looked back, then down at her. He looked scared. It broke Angie's heart. She almost stopped, almost reconsidered.

Then the corpses drew up right behind him.

"Hurry!" she yelled. "Jump!"

Dalton took a quick glance back over his shoulder. The corpses leaned in to bite. Dalton screamed, climbed over the wall, and jumped.

For a panicked second, Angie stared into the light, trying to position herself to catch her falling son. It seemed like forever.

Then he was in her arms and she was straining to slow him down. Her back ached and she almost fell forward, but he settled and she straightened.

For a moment they stood clutching each other. Dalton clung to her like a baby. He was heavy but Angie couldn't bring herself to put him down.

"You okay?" she said.

"I think so."

"Okay, we gotta..." then a muffled "whump" came from Angie's left. It startled her so much she stumbled to the right, almost dropping Dalton. He jumped from her arms and landed awkwardly, bent over and looking around.

Angie backed away from the source of the sound, first only seeing a dark shape against the glass. Then her panicked mind settled and the shape resolved into a chimpanzee. It glared at her through the glass and pounded a hairy fist against the barrier. It screeched at her. The sound was muffled by the thick glass but still very audible. Angie remembered how a young Dalton would bang on the glass and the chimpanzees wouldn't be able to hear it. She wondered how loud the chimpanzee must be screeching for the sound to come through.

"Crap," said Dalton. He ran back over to her.

"It's okay," said Angie, forcing herself to calm down but not taking her eyes off the chimpanzee. "The glass is too thick."

A blur of movement caught Angie's eye. A second chimpanzee was running across the exhibit, toward them. It frothed and banged its arms angrily on the ground. It reached the glass and pounded at it, screeching. It seemed to aggravate the first chimpanzee further. They

## ROBERT A. BEST

both screeched and pounded. Frustrated, the second chimpanzee ran over to a large tire swing hanging from one of the faux-trees. It grabbed the tire and, screeching in rage, ripped the tire from the rope that held it. The thick rope frayed and snapped away from the tire as the chimpanzee ran back to the glass, carrying the tire with it. Screeching in anger, it flung the huge tire at the glass.

Dalton jumped back and Angie flinched as the tire slammed into the glass. The noise reverberated around the exhibit. The chimpanzees bellowed in rage and pounded on the glass. Moans came from both ends of the hallway.

“Crap,” said Dalton.

“It's the noise,” said Angie. “It's attracting them.”

“Think we can get the monkeys to stop?”

“Doubtful,” said Angie, picking up the arrow from where she had dropped it. “Just stay close to me.”

Dalton did as corpses emerged from both ends of the hall. They staggered toward Angie and Dalton, working their dead jaws and groaning.

One corpse, a middle-aged man in a torn suit with a deep gouge running down one cheek, drew close and reached for them. Angie grunted and slammed the point of the arrow into the corpse's face. The corpse groaned and fell back.

“Duck!” she yelled to Dalton as she whipped around, swinging the arrow around behind her. The arrow slammed across the heads of the corpses approaching from behind, knocking them back.

The chimpanzees behind the glass were furious. The two that had already appeared were pounding on the glass, the sound echoing around them. A third chimpanzee appeared, slamming its massive arms into its chest and shrieking. It tore a branch from a tree and ran to the glass. It whacked the branch against the glass, pounding again and again until the branch broke. The first two chimpanzees' hands grew bloody as they pounded. One started biting at the glass, so hard its teeth chipped.

“Mom,” said Dalton, looking at them.

“They can't get through,” said Angie, hoping it was true. Chimpanzees were strong and she'd never seen any this enraged. But the glass was thick. She hoped it was thick enough. “The only way they could get out is through that door with the red light.” She nodded



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

toward the door, set far back behind the chimpanzees, as she swung at a corpse that had come too close.

Dalton screamed and Angie whirled to look. A corpse, a young woman with large chunks of skin peeled from her arms, had grabbed hold of his neck. She hissed and pulled him toward her. Angie screamed and slammed the arrow into the woman's face. The woman fell back and Angie slammed the wood downward onto her skull. The woman jerked and fell, still.

The chimpanzees howled and pounded. The corpses groaned all around Angie and Dalton. Angie bellowed back at them, feeling her sanity slipping. She swung and slammed the arrow back and forth, round and round. She lost track of how many corpses there were. She lost track of how many she'd hit. She was conscious of two things, the corpses she needed to put down and the need to avoid hitting Dalton. She pounded and pounded, one corpse after another falling as she did.

Finally, there was only one left still moving. It was an older man with no nose and dirt clumped against his face. A worm crawled out of the hole where his nose would be and inched along his face. He growled and came at Angie. Angie swung the arrow around and downward, snapping the man's neck. The man stumbled to one side, head bobbing limply. Angie brought the arrow up and slammed downward, knocking the man's head into his shoulder. The head caved in and thick black muck spilled out of his ears. He fell, still.

Angie panted. She held Dalton close to her side.

She heard pounding behind her and turned to face to glass. A chimpanzee was inches from her, pounding on the glass with bloody hands. It snarled and hissed and bit.

Angie flipped it off, panting. "Eat it, asshole."

Then she patted Dalton on the head. Dalton said nothing, looking around at the still corpses and at the furious chimpanzees.

"Okay, honey," she said. "Let's go. The exit's this way."

# THIRTEEN

“Guess we're sleeping here,” said Maylee, looking around. She stood in a narrow alcove of concrete and plaster. The ceiling was low and claustrophobic. She felt a little trapped, but reminded herself they'd had to climb a ladder to get here. And from what she had seen, fresh corpses could navigate stairs if given time, but she'd never seen any manage a ladder. It bothered her that she was becoming an expert on what walking corpses could and couldn't do.

“We'll swing it,” said Park, leaning against a wall of the alcove. “It's cold and the floor is nice and hard. And don't forget fucking damp. What's not to love?”

Maylee smirked and looked behind her. Ella was standing outside of the alcove, looking down with her back to Maylee. Climbing up here had been Ella's idea. She knew of all sorts of hidden areas that the zookeepers used for storage and shortcuts. This alcove, set high up along one of the fake-rock walls, was one of them. The ladder was almost impossible to see from the regular zoo walkways, but Ella had gone straight to it.

Maylee walked out to where Ella stood. The rain was a light, cold mist. It stung her face but Maylee was glad to be out of the dim alcove.

Ella was looking down at a bear exhibit. A bear paced angrily next to a large pool of water, one the bears would normally play and swim in. A beach ball bobbed in the water. A dead bear, head smashed and bloody, lay next to the pool.

“I saw him do that,” said Ella.

“What?” said Maylee.

“Geoff,” said Ella. “I mean, that bear. I saw him pounding his head against the wall. I guess he did it too many times.”

Maylee nodded, not knowing what else to do. She stared down at the bear with Ella for a moment, then walked slowly back into the alcove. Park was still leaning against the wall, looking down. He saw Maylee approach and gave her a quick nod. Maylee nodded back. She sat cross-legged on the cold floor and set her bat next to her.

### ASHTON MEMORIAL

Ella slowly walked inside and sat next to Maylee. She sighed. "I can't believe we're still not there."

"It's a big zoo," said Maylee. "Plus, dead people are everywhere."

Ella frowned. "Plus you've got me for a guide." She stared silently at the floor for a moment. "People think I'm stupid. Weird and stupid."

"Hey!" said Maylee, kicking Ella's foot then resuming a cross-legged position. "I don't think that."

Park, who'd been watching this whole time, came over and sat next to Ella. "Listen, Ella," he said. "Everything's gonna be okay." He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. She pulled away.

"Not now," she said.

Park stared at her for a second, then stood angrily. "When, goddammit, Ella? When?"

"I don't know," said Ella, standing and pacing.

"Well give me a fucking time frame, Ella. I'm your fucking father and I haven't seen you for years!"

Ella whirled on him, a fury in her eyes Maylee hadn't seen from her before. "Big damn whup, Dad! I'm so sorry your stupid little plan isn't working out for you. You think you can just show up after years and be some sort of stupid scroungy hero? Where were you when Mom died? Where were you when Stepdad stole Lori? Where were you when dead people started eating everything? Where were you ever?"

Park stared at Ella for several seconds. Maylee tried to read his face. He looked angry, embarrassed, sad, and several other things all at once. Maylee wished she had sat somewhere farther away.

Park sniffed and stepped closer to Ella. "You guys. Your mother, your sister, you. You guys left *me*."

Ella stared back, then shook her head. "Shit, Dad. I'm fifteen years old and *I* know how childish that sounds."

She spun and stomped out of the alcove. Park watched her go, then looked down at Maylee. Maylee looked back, no earthly idea what to say.

"The fuck you looking at?" said Park.

Maylee shrugged, stood and walked away.

ROBERT A. BEST

\* \* \*

Angie grabbed another handful of paper towels from the dispenser. She walked to the center of the bathroom and knelt, spreading the towels out as neatly as she could in the rapidly-fading light. Dalton stood a few feet away, looking around the bathroom. The public restroom at a zoo was not Angie's first choice for sleeping, but it had only one door and one window. The window was high up the wall and narrow, making it unlikely that anyone, or anything, could climb through. And the door was locked thanks to a plunger Angie found and shoved through the vertical handle.

"We should get there tomorrow, sweetheart," said Angie. She spread the paper towels out until they formed a thin layer against the floor of the bathroom. It would have to do. "I'm so sorry this is taking so long."

Dalton came over and sat on the makeshift bed Angie made. Angie sat next to him. Dalton stared up at the frosted window high on the wall. "Do you think Maylee's okay?" he said.

"I'm sure she is," said Angie. She desperately hoped it was true. She reminded herself that Maylee had Park with her. And for all of Park's issues, he could handle himself. Then she reminded herself that Maylee had gotten Dalton through that first night. The first night of the end of the world, Maylee had kept herself and Dalton safe. It made Angie proud, but it was too scary to think about for very long. Maylee was only fourteen.

*Shit*, Angie realized. *No she's not.*

"Shit," Angie said aloud into the dark.

"What?" said Dalton.

"I forgot your sister's birthday was today. I completely forgot."

"It's okay."

Angie chuckled. "Not so sure about that, buddy. I strongly suspect I may be a terrible mother."

"There's a lot going on right now," said Dalton.

"You got that right," said Angie, putting an arm around him and pulling him closer. "Too much. Way too much."

She sat silently in the dark. Dalton put his head on her shoulder and was snoring in less than a minute. Angie knew how exhausted he must be.

ASHTON MEMORIAL

"I'm so tired of running, Dalton," she said, quietly.

"Mmmm?" said Dalton, half asleep.

"Nothing, sweetie. It's okay." She leaned over to kiss his forehead. He fell fully asleep on her shoulder. Angie sighed into the dark.

"So sick of running," she whispered, careful not to wake him. "I need to get you guys safe. Get you guys a home again. I'll build one if I have to."

\* \* \*

Park stared at the ceiling of the alcove. The cold concrete hurt his back, but he didn't give a fuck right now. The girls were outside the alcove, looking down at bears or some shit. He was glad for it. He couldn't stand to have Ella looking at him right now. He felt exhausted and embarrassed.

He stared at the ceiling, trying not to picture the look Ella gave him just before she stormed out.

*It is years ago and Park is sitting in his dirty old recliner. Jennifer, all pulled-back hair and seriousness, stands before him. Ella and Lori, small and confused, stand to either side of her.*

*"You're serious," says Park, not bothering to get up. He hopes the gesture is defiant. He suspects he looks pathetic. He is not sure he cares.*

*"Of course I'm serious, Parker," says Jennifer. "I told you things aren't working. I told you you need to find work. I told you you need to be more involved. You won't listen. No, it's worse. You do listen. You just don't care."*

*Park isn't sure she's wrong. He ignores that part. "Work? I've got my garage."*

*"Your garage, Parker? What garage? You fix maybe one car a month for one of your stupid friends. They give you fifty bucks if you're lucky. We can't live on that. Even with my job, the girls can't live on that."*

*"Fine," says Park. "So I haven't actually rented out a building yet. But I still have a business. Things are slow right now."*

*"Things are as slow as you want them to be. You're lazy,*

ROBERT A. BEST

*Parker. You're lazy and you don't care."*

*Park stares at her, at the girls. He's half drunk from a morning full of beer. He wishes it made him feel better. "You can't talk to me that way," he says, hoping he sounds strong.*

*"I am," says Jennifer. "I did. And now I'm going and I'm taking the girls with me."*

*"Fuck you," says Park. He pushes himself farther back in his recliner, making a big show of not giving a shit.*

*"Hell of a comeback, Parker," says Jennifer. She opens the door and steps toward it. She motions for Lori and Ella to follow.*

*Just before they go, Lori and Ella look at him. They are confused, but Park can see the core emotion on their face.*

*They are disappointed. In life. In their father.*

*They look at him like he is a failure.*

*Then they are gone.*

Park shook the memories off and forced himself to shut his eyes. Before he fell asleep, he saw the image of Ella staring at him a few minutes ago. Her eyes had the same disappointed look.

Then he fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Lori strained her legs against the ropes holding her to the chair. They were tight and they dug into her skin. She didn't care. She wanted to be free. She dug at the ropes with her hands, but they were too tight to get anywhere.

Gregory sat with his back to her at the desk in the corner of the room. The one monitor showed one camera view, then another, as Gregory clicked a switch on the desk. The cameras showed various images of guests fighting, guests running from corpses, and sometimes guests being eaten by corpses. Lori looked away when those images went by.

But mostly she glared at Gregory's back, hoping she could burn holes into him with her eyes.

He clicked a different switch on the desk and leaned into the microphone a few inches from his mouth. "Attention guests of Ashton Memorial Zoo."

"Hope you're enjoying your stay!" yelled Lori, hoping she was

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

loud enough for the microphone to pick up.

Gregory clicked the switch off and turned to look at her. She glared defiantly back at him.

“Please Lori,” said Gregory, shaking his head. “Don't make me gag you again.”

Lori flipped him off but stayed silent, remembering the sweaty taste of the rag across her mouth.

Gregory ignored her gesture and turned back to the microphone. He flipped the switch to activate it. “Sorry about that folks,” he said in his best cheery customer-greeting voice. Lori had heard it for years. Before, she was mildly irritated by it. Now it made her want to vomit.

“This is Gregory, the owner of our wonderful zoo. I want to personally thank you for your continued patience. Remember that the fine employees of Ashton Memorial Zoo are working around the clock for your safety during this time of crisis. We trust that this crisis is temporary and that authorities are restoring order outside as we speak.”

He cleared his throat and continued. “It has also come to our attention that, regrettably, some of the ... things outside may have found their way into the zoo. Please do not approach them. Instead, report them to the nearest zookeeper and we will deal with the problem. Please be assured that only a few of the creatures have found their way inside, and we will deal with them all swiftly and surely. Good night.”

He clicked the microphone off and turned back to Lori. She tried to kill him with her eyes. It didn't work.

“Don't look at me like you hate me, Lori,” he said.

“But I do hate you,” said Lori. “And maybe you've forgotten since a lot's happened, but a day or so ago you tied me to a chair, so it's not like I can look much of anywhere else.”

He scratched at his neatly-trimmed beard and stared at the floor for a second. Then he looked back at Lori. “I can't untie you yet, Lori.”

“I bet you could if you tried,” said Lori, straining against the ropes. “I believe in you, Dad.”

He shook his head, quiet for the moment. Lori was very conscious of the cell phone in her hip pocket. She wished Gregory would leave the room so she could text Ella. She wished she could call Ella, but she couldn't risk Gregory overhearing. She had no idea how

ROBERT A. BEST

far he went when he left the room.

He smiled, sadly. “Now, don't be silly like your sister, Lori. You know what I mean.”

“I know what you did.”

Something approaching anger flashed across Gregory's face. His forehead turned red, then it was gone as he visibly pushed his reaction down. “I had to, Lori. You think I wanted to? You think I wanted to shoot my wife? Your mother?”

Lori stared at him as he talked. He looked sad. Most people would believe honestly sad. But Lori had watched his face for years. She knew how he could be, when he wanted to impress guests or investors. She couldn't be sure he wasn't acting.

He sighed and pushed his chair away from her. “Well, let's try to get some sleep.”

*Good idea*, thought Lori. *Why don't you go outside to do that.*

He smiled at her, kindly. Most people would believe honestly kindly. “I'll be in the corner if you need me.”

*Shit.*

\* \* \*

Lee leaned against the doorway to the kitchen in the Bites. He held a clipboard in his hand. A handwritten chart was attached to the clipboard. Another Keeper, a young man with a bald head and goatee, stood inside the kitchen, looking around.

Lee checked the clipboard. “Loaves of bread?”

“Um,” said the young man, turning to stare at the back of the kitchen. “Twenty-three.”

Lee nodded and clicked the pen he held in his other hand. He marked a hand-drawn box on the chart. “The guests will have to eat a lot of bread in the next few days. The bread will go bad fast.”

The young man rubbed the back of his bald head. “How long do you think we'll be trapped in here, Lee?”

Lee shrugged, not looking up from the clipboard. “Not sure. That's why we have to ration food. Why we have to keep order. We're the Keepers.”

The young man chuckled softly.

Lee looked up from the clipboard to stare at the young man.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“What's so funny?”

The young man looked out at the other Keepers scattered around the Bites, then back at Lee. “Well, we *were* Keepers, Lee. I don't think we work here anymore. It's not like we're getting paid.”

Lee placed the clipboard under his armpit and crossed his arms. “What in the hell difference does that make?”

All the other Keepers fell quiet. The bald man looked around for support, then back to Lee. He rubbed the back of his head.

Lee stared at him for a second longer, then pulled the clipboard from his armpit. He looked back down at it. “Boxes of corn chips?”

The bald man paused, silent for a moment. “Hey, Lee...”

Lee cleared his throat. “*Boxes of corn chips?*”

The bald man stared at Lee, then turned to look around the kitchen. “Um, fifteen. One opened.”

“How many bags in the open one?” said Lee.

The bald man counted. “Um, let's see. Ten.”

Lee frowned at the chart. “There's supposed to be eleven.”

The man turned red, looking embarrassed. The other Keepers chuckled. The man coughed. “Well...”

“Why aren't there eleven?” said Lee, looking up from the chart.

“I took an extra one at lunch.”

Lee lowered the clipboard. “You what?”

The other Keepers chuckled louder. The man turned redder, scratching his goatee and looking around. “I didn't see what the big deal was. I was hungry and we have plenty.”

Lee said nothing. He stared at the man.

The man chuckled, sounding more nervous than amused. “Look, Lee, it's no big deal. I just won't have chips tomorrow. Whateve...”

Lee whipped the clipboard up and slammed the edge into the man's throat.

The other Keepers gasped. The bald man stumbled back, his eyes bulging as he clutched his throat. He choked and coughed. “Lee,” he wheezed. “What the fuck, dude?”

Lee stepped forward and slammed the edge of the board into the man's neck again. Harder. The man stumbled and fell over, rolling onto his back. He wheezed and coughed and flecks of blood flew from

## ROBERT A. BEST

his mouth.

Lee knelt to straddle the man. He dropped his pen and took the clipboard with both hands. He slammed the board down on the man's throat a third time. The man bucked under him. Blood shot from his mouth, spattering across the clipboard and chart. He wheezed and coughed, his breathing thin and gurgling. The other Keepers said and did nothing.

Lee slammed the board down again and again, until the man's throat collapsed and the board was hitting the floor beneath. Lee sat back, panting at the man. Blood pooled from his mouth and he choked and gurgled. His neck was caved in, bruised and bloody. The man clutched feebly at the floor. His eyes glazed over as he stared up at Lee.

Lee stared back, then stood. Dropping the clipboard, he strode over to the closest counter and grabbed a tranquilizer rifle placed there. He walked back to stand over the man. The man gurgled up at him, spit and blood frothing on his lips.

Saying nothing, Lee leveled the rifle at the man's forehead and fired. The dart flew from the rifle and thudded into the man's forehead. The man jerked and was still. Blood seeped around the point of the dart, running down onto the floor.

Lee lowered the rifle and looked at the other Keepers. They stared back at him, silent.

"We're Keepers, people. And one of the things we keep are the fucking rules!" He shook with fury as he yelled the last part. He forced himself to calm down, looking to each Keeper in turn.

They all nodded at him, silent.

\* \* \*

Maylee slowly walked out of the alcove. Ella was staring, arms crossed, down at the bears. The light mist in the air coated Maylee's face and she blinked. It was almost completely dark outside. The only light came from a dim bulb inside the alcove. Maylee wondered how much longer the power would hold out.

Ella said nothing as Maylee approached. She stared down at the bears as though no one was there. Maylee walked up next to her and looked down. The live bear huffed and snorted as it paced the exhibit. Despite how high they were, Maylee was glad the bear hadn't noticed

### ASHTON MEMORIAL

them. She looked down at the wall, wondering if anything could climb it. Then she noticed a short ladder placed to her right, running from their level up to something above the alcove.

“What’s up there?” she said, feeling awkward as she broke the silence.

Ella looked, then resumed staring at the bears. “There’s a big hill on the other side of this wall.” Her voice was quiet and flat. “The ladder goes to the top. Zookeepers use it as a shortcut sometimes.”

Maylee nodded and fell silent.

Ella turned and looked at Maylee. She smiled. “Hey, cheer up, it’s Wednesday.”

Maylee blinked. “Huh?”

Ella shrugged. “I dunno. That’s just something I say when Lori’s upset. I say whatever day of the week it is, then I say cheer up because of it.”

“Does it work?”

“Nope,” said Ella, shaking her head.

Maylee chuckled. Then she gasped. “Wait, did you say Wednesday?”

Ella frowned. “Yeah. Why?”

“Shit,” said Maylee, shaking her head. “Today was my birthday. I completely forgot.”

Ella gasped and smiled. “Cool! How old are you now?”

“Fifteen,” said Maylee, feeling weird saying it. She knew the significance of the date to her mother. It hung over her like a threat for years.

Ella clapped her hands. “Double cool. Like me! You know what you need?”

“What?”

“A party!” said Ella, then she pushed past Maylee to hurry into the alcove. “Wait here!”

Maylee turned to watch as Ella looked hurriedly around the alcove. She found something and rushed over to pick it up. She knelt and Maylee saw she held a small piece of white rock.

“Here,” said Ella, waving for her to come over. “Sit, sit.”

Maylee walked over and sat on the ground across from Ella. Ella leaned forward and scraped the rock across the concrete, leaving a

## ROBERT A. BEST

jagged white line.

She drew a large, misshapen circle on the ground, then smiled up at Maylee. "This is your cake." Then she leaned forward and drew a rectangle next to it. "And this is the ice cream."

Maylee chuckled. "You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

"Don't worry about it," said Ella, smiling. "Nothing but the best for your party." She sat back and placed the rock on the ground. She made a big show of clearing her throat. Then she started singing.

"Happy birthday to you," she sang.

"I belong in a zoo?" said Maylee, raising her hands to indicate their surroundings.

Ella stopped singing and laughed. "You don't look like a monkey, though."

Maylee nodded. "At this point, though, I bet I smell like one."

They both laughed.

"Happy birthday, Maylee," said Ella.

"Thank you," said Maylee.

# FOURTEEN

Angie and Dalton walked slowly, keeping a lookout for corpses. Angie felt ridiculous, still clutching the bright yellow hunk of wood that was once an arrow. But she needed a weapon. She couldn't be caught off guard again. The rain picked up around them. It was cold, but Angie scarcely noticed any more. She felt like the wet, cold misery was becoming a part of her. Dalton shuddered next to her. She had to get him shelter and warmth. Something better than storage sheds and public restrooms.

They rounded a corner and saw a small building across a large walkway. *Communications Office: Employees Only*, read a sign next to it.

“There it is!” yelled Dalton, pointing.

Angie sighed, relief flooding her. “Yep, buddy. There it is.”

“Come on!” said Dalton, running forward.

“Wait!” said Angie. “We need to be careful.”

Then Dalton screamed as a corpse stumbled from behind a nearby tree and closed its arms around him. It was a thin woman with most of her clothes dried and rotted away. She gripped Dalton with thin, leathery arms and hissed through her taut, papery throat. The tendons in her neck worked as she bent in to bite.

“Dalton!” yelled Angie, running forward with the arrow. Dalton screamed, trying to pull away.

“Duck!” yelled Angie when she reached him. Dalton did the best he could and Angie whipped the wood over his head, missing him by inches, and slammed into the woman's face. The woman let go and staggered back, hissing and groaning as yellow teeth fell from her mouth.

“Get your own kid, bitch,” said Angie, stepping closer to the woman and slamming the point of the arrow into her eye. The wood was splintered and jagged, and one thin splinter was long and sturdy enough to bury itself deep in the woman's skull. The woman let out a long, low moan, then slumped to the ground in front of Angie.

“That's pretty satisfying,” said Angie. “I see why your sister

ROBERT A. BEST

likes beating these things so much.”

“You think Maylee's inside?” said Dalton, looking warily down at the corpse, but his voice full of excitement.

“God I hope so,” said Angie. “Let's go see.”

They slowly walked to the building, looking side to side as they went. Angie could hear, or imagined she could hear, faint and far off groaning, but she couldn't be sure. No corpses emerged to attack and they made their way to the building in relative peace.

“Gross,” said Dalton, stopping on the metallic stairs leading up to the office. He looked up and Angie followed his gaze.

A dead zookeeper, tranquilizer dart embedded in his forehead, was hanging by the neck from a tree in front of the door. He'd clearly been dead for days and the rain had sped up his rotting. His skin was slimy and gray and the smell made Angie back up a step.

“Yeah,” said Angie, pulling her shirt up to her nose. “Just cover your nose and we'll get inside. Okay, baby?”

Dalton nodded and walked up the stairs. Angie followed, doing her best to ignore the corpse and the slow creaking noise the branch made as it rocked back and forth in the rain.

Dalton reached the door first but looked too scared to knock. Angie guessed what he was thinking. They'd taken days to get here. Anything could have happened in that time. Anything could be behind that door. The rotting body hanging from the tree did little to make Angie feel better.

Angie shook the feeling off and, reaching out over Dalton's head, knocked on the door.

Angie heard movement inside and her back tensed. Then she heard voices and she felt slightly better. At least it wasn't corpses moving in there. But it bothered her that she didn't recognize the voices. It sounded like a man and woman. Young, too.

The door opened and a young man with round glasses peered out. He eyed Angie warily. “Who are you?”

Angie wanted to push the man aside. Get Dalton inside and warm. She forced herself to stay civil. “I'm Angie Land and this is my son, Dalton. Is there anyone else here? A fourteen-, *fifteen*-year-old girl and a man about my age? They would be...”

“We don't have any food!” yelled a woman's voice from behind the young man. Then the woman walked into view. Her arms were

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

crossed and she looked warily past the young man at Angie. Angie noticed both of them were wearing zookeeper uniforms. She tensed, remembering the Zoo Bites, but she forced herself not to show it.

“Just shut the door, Caleb,” said the young woman.

“Just let me deal with it, Shelley,” said the young man, apparently named Caleb. “She’s right though, lady, we don’t have any food.”

“You can’t trust these people!” said Shelley. “They’re all crazy. Just shut the door!”

Angie cleared her throat, forcing herself to smile. “Look, we were told to come here. Some girl named Ella?”

“Ella?” said Caleb, opening the door wider and leaning out. “Where is she? What have you people done with Ella?”

Angie leaned back, a little surprised by Caleb’s intensity. The branch behind her creaked as the body swung back and forth. “What?” she said. “We don’t have her. She told us...”

Caleb looked her up and down. There was a desperate craziness in his eyes Angie didn’t like. “Look, lady. I’m sorry we don’t have food. I’m sorry we locked you all in here.”

“Just shut the door Caleb!” yelled Shelley.

Caleb ignored her. “I’m sorry for all of that. Just give us Ella back, please.”

The branch behind her creaked as Angie stared at Caleb and Shelley. “Look, I told you. We don’t have her. And no one locked us in anywhere. We got here two nights ago. Ella helped us get inside.”

Shelly’s eyes grew wide and she pointed at Angie. “They’re the ones that let those things inside! Shut the door!”

Caleb frowned at Angie, his eyes narrowing behind the round glasses. “Is that true?”

“Screw this,” said Angie. She grabbed the door and shoved it inward, pushing Caleb back in the process. She and Dalton walked inside as Caleb and Shelley backed away like frightened animals. The room stunk of sweat and desperation.

“Get out!” yelled Shelley, pointing at the door.

“What’s your problem, chickie?” said Angie, feeling very sick of this shit.

Caleb let out a long sigh and adjusted his glasses on his face.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Look, let's all just calm down for a moment.”

Shelley ignored him and stepped toward Angie. “My problem? All you guest fuckers are crazy. That's my problem. The whole world's gone crazy. There's one too. Oh, and corpses are eating people! Let's not forget that one. The only person I can trust is Caleb and he won't shut the fucking door!”

Shelley pushed past Angie and walked to the door. She held it open wide and gestured out of it. “Now leave, please!”

A groaning corpse stumbled into the doorway and grabbed Shelley. She screamed. The corpse, a bloated old man with thick slimy strips of skin hanging from his head, moved in to bite. The slimy strips of his flesh brushed across Shelly's face and she shrieked, sounding like she was losing her mind.

“Shelley!” yelled Caleb, moving forward to help.

“Shit,” said Angie, putting Dalton behind her and rushing forward. She arrived first and grabbed the corpse by the forehead. She pushed back, recoiling inside at the feel of the corpse's slimy skin.

Caleb reached Shelley and grabbed her arms. He pulled her toward him, out of the corpse's grip. The bloated man gurgled and bit at Angie's forearm.

“Someone wanna give me a hand with this?” yelled Angie, pushing against the corpse as he bit and grabbed at her.

“Here!” said Dalton, running up and putting a pair of pliers into her hand.

“Where'd you find those?” said Angie, struggling with the corpse.

“Drawer.”

“Okay. Thanks honey, now stay out of the way.”

Dalton nodded and ran farther back into the room, away from the corpse.

Angie brought the pliers up and shoved the point into the corpse's eye. The corpse groaned and fell back, working its jaws limply. Angie grabbed both handles of the pliers and shoved them deeper into the eye socket of the corpse. She wrenched the pliers open, hearing bone crack and something squelch. The corpse gurgled and slumped to the floor, its head inside the door and the rest of its body outside on the porch. Angie kicked the corpse's head outside and shut the door.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

She turned. Dalton stood against the wall, looking warily at the door. Caleb stood next to Shelley. Shelley stood, arms crossed and looking shaken, staring at Angie.

“Thank you,” said Shelley. “Now please leave.”

“What?” said Angie.

Caleb put a hand on her shoulder. “Now, wait a second, honey.”

Shelley pulled away and glared at him. “Don't you honey me! You can't trust these people!”

“Who are you even talking about?” said Caleb. “Do you even know any more?”

“Her!” yelled Shelley, pointing at Angie. “Them! Everyone! And don't you dare give me your college bullshit like you're some goddamned psychiatrist! You study animals, Caleb. Stupid animals! Not me!”

“Okay, sweetie,” said Caleb, an edge creeping into his voice. “You need to calm down.”

“No,” said Shelley, “what I need to do is get the fuck out of this place! I hate this fucking zoo! I only work here because of you! I don't even like animals all that fucking much!”

Caleb stared at her. “You think I don't realize that? You think I haven't thought about how easy it would be to leave you? How easy it would be to go out with any of the girls at school? Someone with my interests? Someone more at my level?”

Shelley pulled back as if she'd been struck. “You motherfucker.”

“Wait,” said Caleb, turning red. “Wait, that came out wrong.”

“Fuck it did,” said Shelley. She stomped to the door, flung it open and ran outside.

“Shelley!” yelled Caleb, following her.

Angie watched them go. She stood, dumbfounded, staring at the door for a moment. “Well shit,” she said.

“Shit,” repeated Dalton.

“Watch your mouth,” said Angie, a little shocked. She'd never heard Dalton swear. Maylee, all the time. Never Dalton.

She looked down at him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Look around here and see if you can find any trace of your sister or Park. I'll

## ROBERT A. BEST

go check on the crazy twins. Got it?”

“Got it,” said Dalton, nodding. He ran off to check out the office and Angie turned back toward the door. She nearly ran out after them, then thought better of it. It would be better, she realized, if she found a weapon first.

\* \* \*

Lori snapped her head up as she heard the door shut. She'd been pretending to sleep, head propped on her chest as she sat upright in the chair. Her legs and back ached. She longed to be free.

She looked quickly around the room to confirm what she'd heard. Gregory was nowhere in sight. She heard his footsteps receding from the door.

As quickly as she could manage, terrified she would run out of time or be discovered, she fidgeted in the chair until she got her hand in her hip pocket. She found the phone and pulled it out. The screen lit up as she clicked the keypad, showing a low battery and several unanswered texts from Ella. Ella was worried and clearly upset, but Lori was relieved at the evidence she was still alive. Or at least, she was alive at the time the texts were sent. Lori pushed that thought down and opened a new text message.

She typed furiously, hitting several wrong keys and almost losing the message several times. Her hands were wet and they slipped across the keypad, making typing harder than usual.

She heard movement outside the door and hurriedly sent the message. She was hitching up one hip to slide the phone back into her pocket when the door opened and Gregory walked in.

He saw her. And the phone.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, closing her hand over the phone and pressing it against her hip. She knew it was too late. She knew he saw it.

“Is that a phone?” he asked, stepping farther into the room and shutting the door.

“No,” said Lori. She pressed the phone further against her hip, trying to flatten her hand out. Trying to make it look like there was nothing there.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Don't lie to me, Lori.” He strode over to where she sat, leaned down and snatched the phone from her hand. He looked at the phone, turning it over and over again in his hand and frowning.

Then he spun and flung it against the wall with such force it broke apart. The sudden violence of the motion made Lori jerk in her chair.

He turned back, red spreading across his face, and looked down at Lori. “I thought I could trust you more than that, Lori. Not only are you just as flighty as your sister, you're as deceitful as your mother.”

Lori said nothing. She stared at the broken remains of the phone in the corner. She felt her heart draining out of her. The phone was gone. Ella was gone. Even if Lori could figure out where she was now, how could she get the information to Ella?

Gregory knelt down like he had before. But this time there was nothing kind in his look. Now his kneeling looked more like a crouch. Like a threat.

“That's it,” he said, his voice almost a hiss. “I'm done trying to talk to people. Trying to explain things to them. To you. I'm done explaining. You don't want to understand, fine. Don't understand. But you will do what I say. Everyone will.”

He stood and looked down at her. Lori looked back, her breath ragged and her body sore.

“Everyone will,” he said.

\* \* \*

Caleb ran out onto the metal stoop of the Communications Office, almost slipping in the rain. Tom's dead body swung back and forth from the tree in front of him. Caleb ignored it, looking around for Shelley.

“Shelley!” he yelled, looking around.

He felt terrible for what he'd said. He didn't know where it came from, what even made him think such terrible things. He loved Shelley, he'd loved her since they both were kids. Long before he'd even dreamed of going to college and being a vet. He had always known it would be him and Shelley. Always.

He heard her crying to his left. Farther away than he would

## ROBERT A. BEST

have liked.

“Shelley!” he yelled and ran off of the stoop, past Tom's swaying body. Oh god, how it smelled. Caleb continued toward the sound of Shelley's cries.

The sound of Shelley crying cut into him like something physical. He hated to hear it. He always had. And now, now that the world was ending and nothing made sense anymore, he hated it more than ever.

He took a few more running steps and saw her. She was up by the red panda exhibit. The small, fox-like creatures were one of the few animals at the zoo Shelley liked. She had her back to him, looking into the exhibit.

He ran up to her and stopped. He knew she heard him. She had to. She was just ignoring him, staring out into the exhibit.

“Shelley,” he said, quietly.

“These things are cute,” she said, staring into the exhibit. “I like these guys.”

“I know you do,” said Caleb, happy she wasn't screaming. He followed her gaze to the red pandas. They were clinging to the trees in the exhibit, baring their teeth and hissing at Caleb and Shelley. They growled and snarled. Caleb felt like he was losing his mind. Rain fell lightly around them and the adorable red pandas wanted to kill him and the woman he loved. The world was over. Caleb knew it.

“I didn't mean those things I said,” said Caleb.

“Yes, you did,” said Shelley, turning to him. “But it's okay. We decided we would be together as kids. We didn't know. It doesn't mean we have to stay together now.”

“But I want to stay together,” said Caleb, putting his hands on her shoulders. She tensed at first, then relaxed. “I love you. I've always loved you.”

She started to cry. “I'm sorry I don't love the animals like you do. I'm sorry I'm not like the smart girls at your school.”

“Oh sweetie, sweetie, no,” said Caleb, pulling her to him. They hugged, clutching at each other desperately. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” said Shelley. Then she jerked and let out a scream that clutched at Caleb's heart.

“What is it?” he said, jerking back and looking around.

Then he saw it. A corpse with no legs had crawled its way to

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Shelley and sunk its teeth into her calf. Red blood ran down her zookeeper pants and onto the walkway, mixing with the rain in long thin streaks.

“Oh god no!” said Caleb. He kicked the corpse away from her. Shelley screamed as the corpse tore away from her leg, taking a large hunk of cloth and flesh with it. It rolled onto its back, staring dumbly up at the rain and chewing.

“Oh god oh god oh god,” he said, holding her close. “We've got to get out of here. Get you to a hospital. You'll be okay. You'll be okay.”

He felt her shaking her head against his shoulder and he knew she was right. They heard what bites meant before the radios went out. He knew Shelley was gone.

“No, sweetie, I won't,” she said, crying into his shoulder.

He pulled back and put his forehead to her. Her tears were hot and wet against him. He couldn't help it. He started crying too.

“I'm so sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

“For leaving you,” she said.

“No no no,” said Caleb, holding her tight. He knew they should be running. He knew they didn't have much time. He could feel her blood seeping from her leg, pulsing with heartbeat against him. But he knew there was nowhere to go. “Please don't say that.”

“I'm so sorry,” she repeated.

Groans came from all around them. Caleb pulled back and looked. A group of corpses, jerking and shuffling in the rain, were coming toward them. Fear gripped him briefly, but then sadness overwhelmed it.

“You need to run,” she said.

“No,” he said, moving back and holding her close. “I'm not going anywhere.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“Please stop saying that.”

He felt cold hands close on his shoulders. He jerked and let out a sharp cry as cold teeth bit into the back of his neck. The pain was worse than he could have imagined, but he felt relieved. Now he would die with Shelley. It was decided and he could relax.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Then Shelley screamed and he screamed too. The corpses tore into them in a slow ecstasy of feeding. Hands tore and mouths bit. He held Shelley tight as long as he could. Before long he grew weak and dizzy. Shelly's screaming grew fainter. They fell away from each other and onto the ground.

Caleb's head lolled around limply. He felt things pulling on him, tearing at him. But the pain was duller now. He knew he was going into shock. He felt cold. He couldn't hear Shelley anymore. All he heard was groaning and chewing.

A corpse, an old woman with dark blood matted in her blue hair, crawled over and looked down into his face. She hissed. Then her head jerked sideways as a dart embedded into it.

More shots were fired from somewhere Caleb couldn't place. His head was swimming and he pawed limply at the pavement beneath him. *No, no*, he thought. *Let them finish.*

The corpses he saw from where he lay each jerked and slumped, one by one, as darts thudded into their heads. One by one each groaning throat was silenced. Finally, there were no more. He heard footsteps approaching. Not the broken shuffling footsteps of corpses. The steady pace of a living human.

The woman who had shown up earlier came into view. Was her name Angie? She had a tranquilizer rifle and looked around. Her son clung to her side.

Angie looked around one more time, then down at him. She frowned.

*Please*, he thought. He couldn't speak no matter how hard he tried. *Finish it.*

"I'm sorry," she said down at him, cocking the rifle. She aimed it at his head.

"Look away, baby," said Angie. The boy did. Angie fired. Caleb felt a sharp pressure against his forehead. Then nothing.

\* \* \*

Maylee woke with a start and sat up. Her back ached from the cold hard floor. It was raining hard outside, making it too dark to know for sure, but she could tell it was late morning. Park snored from the other side of the alcove. Ella was nowhere in sight.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Then she heard Ella from outside, in the rain. She was crying.

“Ella?” said Maylee, climbing to her feet and grabbing her bat. She walked out, blinking and sputtering in the rain. Ella stood, head down and staring at her phone.

“What’s the matter?” said Maylee. She stepped closer.

Ella saw her coming and wiped her eyes. Even in the gray light and pouring rain, Maylee could see how red her eyes were. “It’s Lori. She texted me and I missed it. I missed it and now she won’t respond!”

Ella held out the phone to show Maylee. Maylee took it and stared at the screen. It showed a text from Lori and several frantic ones sent by Ella.

“It’s okay,” said Maylee. “I’m sure it’s okay.”

Ella shook her head, gulping down tears. “No. No it’s not.”

“No, no, it is,” said Maylee. She slid Ella’s phone into her pocket. “I’m not stealing your phone, I’m just making sure it doesn’t get any wetter, okay?”

Ella nodded.

“Now listen,” said Maylee, stepping closer and setting her bat against the wall. “This way you at least know she’s still alive, right?”

Ella nodded, still sobbing but slightly less so.

“And we’ll get to the office today, right? You said we were close.”

Ella nodded, calming further. “Yeah,” she said, gulping. “We could have made it last night if it weren’t too dangerous in the dark. It’s just that way.” She pointed behind her, out across the bear exhibit and down the walkway that led past it.

“Okay,” said Maylee. “See? It’s fine. We’ll get there today, regroup with my mom, then we’ll find your sister. You did a good job getting us there.”

“Thank you,” said Ella. She sniffed and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her jacket. “People think I’m not good for anything.”

“I told you not to say that,” said Maylee. “I think you’re great. You’re smart and funny and cool and I like you.”

Ella stared at Maylee, then rubbed her eyes and sniffed. She rubbed her hands on her pants. She looked like she was about to say something. Then Ella leaned in and kissed Maylee. Quick, awkward and uncertain. It was over in less than a second. Maylee didn’t know

## ROBERT A. BEST

how to react. They both pulled back, staring at each other in shock.

“Oh god,” said Ella, stepping back. She put her hands over her mouth and her eyes grew wide. “Oh god, I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” said Maylee, stepping back. Her mind was blank. “No, it’s...”

Ella backed up farther, almost to the edge of the overhang. “I’m sorry. I...”

Then rotting hands reached down from the upper level and closed on her head. Ella screamed. A second pair of hands reached down and grabbed her head.

“Ella!” yelled Maylee, rushing forward.

It happened fast. Ella was pulled upward, her head disappearing from view. Maylee grabbed Ella’s kicking legs and pulled. However many corpses had hold of her, they were too strong. Ella screamed and kicked.

Then Ella shrieked and thick red blood ran down her torso. It ran onto Maylee’s hands and arms.

“No!” screamed Maylee. “Oh god no!”

Ella shrieked and bucked. More blood ran downward, splattering onto Maylee’s cheeks. Ella’s screams grew softer and wetter. More gurgles than screams.

“No!” Maylee screamed, pulling as hard as she could. She heard moaning and chewing from up above.

“What the fuck!” came Park’s voice from inside the alcove. Ella was pulled upward, out of Maylee’s grip. She vanished from sight.

“No!” Maylee bellowed. She ran over to the wall and grabbed her bat. She ran to the ladder that led to the upper level and grabbed hold. She swung out over the bear exhibit and climbed. She could no longer hear Ella screaming.

“Ella!” came Park’s voice from below her. “Kid!”

Maylee climbed, rain pounding down around her. Her hands slipped on the wet rungs but she managed to hold on, even with her bat tucked under one of her arms. She reached the top of the hill and climbed over. A group of corpses surrounded a broken, bloody form on the ground. Maylee knew what the form was but refused to look at it.

“Fuckers!” yelled Maylee, slamming her bat into the nearest corpse. It fell to one side, still clutching at the torn form of Ella. A second corpse turned to hiss at her. Maylee screamed at it and slammed



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

her bat into its skull.

The rest of the corpses groaned and turned to her. She knew there were too many to take on herself. She didn't care. She swung like a crazy person, slamming into every corpse she could.

"Kid!" came Park's voice from below, sounding closer. Maylee heard him grunting, heard the ladder creak, and knew he was climbing up after her.

"Fuck!" yelled Park behind her, clear and unmuffled. "Fuck! No!" His voice sounded thick, choked, and Maylee knew he'd seen what was left of Ella. Maylee refused to look fully at it. She forced the image to remain a vague mass of red and rumpled clothing. She screamed and kept swinging. She knocked one corpse aside but three more drew close. She knocked another one down but five more took its place. She screamed into the pounding rain, beyond thought or caring.

"Kid!" yelled Park, his voice still thick and hoarse. "Get out of there!"

Maylee ignored him and kept swinging. Her bat thudded into corpse after corpse, sending jolts up her body. She refused to look at Ella's body.

"Dammit kid!" yelled Park. Maylee heard him pull himself the rest of the way up the ladder. She felt his hand close on her jacket.

"No!" she yelled, swinging blindly. "Let me kill these fuckers!"

"Don't get your goddamn stupid self killed! Get out of there now!"

Park pulled her toward the ladder. Maylee stumbled backward, still swinging. She didn't pay any attention to where she was going. She swung as she staggered backward, Park's hand still clutching her jacket. Then the ground vanished from under her feet.

"Fuck, kid!" yelled Park. "Look out!"

Maylee screamed and fell backward off of the ledge. Park, still holding her jacket, fell as she pulled him off the ladder. He followed her down. They both plummeted through the pounding rain, past the alcove and toward the bear exhibit. Maylee braced herself for impact.

Then, with a tremendous crash, water engulfed her. For a second she was confused, gasping and sputtering before she sunk. The bat slipped from her hand and Park let go. Then she realized. They'd fallen into the pool.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee kicked herself to the surface. She broke through the water, coughing into the rain. Park burst through several feet away.

“Kid!” he yelled.

“Here!” said Maylee, swimming to where her bat had bobbed to the surface. She grabbed the bat then swam to Park.

“Fuck, kid, that was stupid.”

“I’m sorry,” Maylee said, then before she knew it she was crying. Sobbing. “I’m sorry! I tried to save her! I tried!”

“Kid, kid,” said Park, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking. “It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault.”

A loud snorting and growling came from Maylee’s left. Getting closer. Maylee gasped as she remembered.

“The bear!” she yelled.

She heard the bear race to the edge of the pool and leap. The water around her and Park grew dark.

“Shit!” said Park.

Maylee put her feet on Park’s torso and pushed away from him. Park swam backward as Maylee shot back through the water.

They got roughly ten feet away from each other when the bear slammed into the water between them. It thrashed around, enraged and looking for them.

“Get to the edge!” yelled Park, his voice obscured by the furious thrashing of the bear.

The bear growled and swiped a wet paw at Maylee. She screamed and swam backward, swinging the bat as best she could. The water slowed her down and made swinging too awkward to do any good. The bear lunged for her. Maylee swam to one side, the bear passing her so close she could see its hair glistening as it went by.

“Get to the fucking edge!” yelled Park. With a grunt, Park kicked the bear in the side. The bear growled and turned to face him.

“That’s right asshole,” yelled Park. “This way!” He backed up in the water and the bear followed. The bear lunged and Park swam away. The bear turned in the water to growl at Park.

Park looked at Maylee. “What the fuck are you staring at? Get to the edge!”

Maylee nodded and swam for the edge of the pool. She heard Park taunting the bear and the bear lunging. She heard splashing as Park stayed out of the way. Mostly she heard her own breathing and the

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

splashing of her own limbs in the water. She wondered how long Park could keep away from the bear. She wondered if he wanted to. She told herself the craziness that seemed to grip all the animals also made them make stupid decisions. She hoped that would help Park. She hoped Park wanted the help.

Maylee reached the edge and threw her bat onto the dirt of the exhibit. She pulled herself up, panting as the rain slammed down around her. She heard Park shouting, splashing in the water and taunting the bear. She snatched up her bat and turned to face the pool.

Park was close to the far edge of the pool. The bear growled at him and thrashed around in the water. "Come on, asshole!" yelled Park, splashing water into the bear's face. The bear sputtered and snorted in fury. "What the fuck are you waiting for?"

"Park!" yelled Maylee. She ran along the edge of the pool, around to the far end where Park was. The bear was about to lunge. Park wasn't moving. *Oh shit*, Maylee realized. *He waited until I was out of the pool and now he's letting the bear kill him.*

Screaming, Maylee ran to the edge and slammed her bat down onto the skull of the bear. The bear stopped mid-lunge. It whined and fell back, still snarling and looking at Park.

"Get back you motherfucker!" yelled Maylee. She swung the bat underhand at the bear, catching it on the chin. The bear's head whipped back and it fell backward into the water. It floated there, stunned.

"Hurry!" Maylee yelled to Park. "Now you get to the edge!"

Park swam to the edge and climbed up. "You should have let him kill me, kid."

"Nothing doing," said Maylee. "We gotta get to my mom and brother. And we gotta save Ella's sister."

Park stared at her. Then he nodded. "Fuck yeah we do."

"So let's go," said Maylee. "Ella told me the way."

# FIFTEEN

Maylee stomped through the rain in silence, bat tightly gripped in her right hand. Park plodded along next to her. They both were quiet, determined. Maylee had lost track of how long they walked. Of how long they'd gone without speaking. It felt like she would never speak again.

The death of Ella ate away at her heart with a ferocity that surprised her. But she felt too guilty to say so. As bad as she felt, she was certain Park felt worse.

No corpses had attacked during the last hour. Maylee wished some would. She wanted to beat some to a pulp. She could tell Park felt the same.

Ella had been her friend.

Ella had kissed her.

Then Ella was dead.

They rounded a corner in silence, then stopped. A small building sat on the other end of a paved walkway. A sign next to it read *Communications Office*.

“Fuck,” said Park, his voice sounding odd after hours of silence. “Finally.”

“I hope Mom and Dalton are there,” said Maylee.

Park said nothing, then nodded.

“Sorry,” said Maylee.

“Don't,” said Park. “Fucking don't.”

Maylee said nothing. They both stared out at the opening in silence. Maylee wanted to make a run for it, rush to the office, throw open the door and embrace Dalton and her mother. But she knew they couldn't take the risk. They had to be smart. The events of the morning had proven that.

“At least the rain's let up a little,” she said. And it had. It still came down, but not as heavy as before. Visibility was better. They'd be able to see the corpses coming. Hopefully.

Park nodded. “Yep. Let's go.”

Maylee nodded and they stepped out into the area. Groans

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

erupted all around them.

“Fuck-a-doodle-do,” said Maylee, gripping the bat.

“Well said,” said Park, pulling out his knife.

Several corpses stumbled from the surrounding trees and bushes. Rain pelted on their rotting heads, running down the folds and tears in their ruined flesh. They hissed and worked their jaws. They reached for Park and Maylee.

“Come get some,” said Maylee, quietly. She brought the bat up and swung for the nearest corpse, a large man wearing a sports jersey and with part of his face burned away. The bat whacked into his skull, sending him stumbling into a small elderly woman with her throat torn out. They both fell over onto the pavement, groaning and grasping at each other. Maylee ran up to them and beat both their heads to pulp with short, sharp whacks. Part of her was troubled at how easy it was. Most of her didn't care.

To her left, she saw Park rush up to a fat man missing both eyes. Park shoved the knife into the top of the fat man's head. The fat man hissed and bit at Park, seemingly oblivious to the blade in his skull.

“Shit!” said Park. “This guy's got a thick skull or a small brain!”

“Let go!” yelled Maylee, rushing toward Park and the fat man.

“What?”

“I said let go!” yelled Maylee. As she drew near, she brought the bat up over her head.

Park nodded, seeming to realize what she had in mind. He let go of the knife and stepped back. Then, at the last moment, he kicked at the fat man's legs. The fat man fell to his knees, sending a horrible cracking noise across the pavement. The fat man gurgled and reached for Park, knife sticking out of the top of his head.

Maylee reached the corpse and, letting out a loud scream, slammed the bat down on the handle of the knife. The knife was driven down so deep part of the handle disappeared into the fat man's skull. The fat man jerked, gurgled, and fell forward. He crashed onto the pavement with a wet squelching noise and was still.

“Thanks, I think,” said Park.

Maylee turned to him, frowning. “You think?”

ROBERT A. BEST

“You think you could get that fucking knife out of there now?”

Maylee frowned down at the knife handle buried deep in the fat man's skull. “Oh yeah. Sorry.”

“I told you to stop saying that.”

Five more corpses drew close. Maylee yelled and rushed the closest one. It was a thin man with no pants and blood covering where his privates should have been.

“Sure wish I had a goddamn knife right now,” said Park, to Maylee's right. She saw him stoop down to pick up a rock and fling it at a teenage girl in a fast-food uniform. The rock caved in the front of the girl's skull and she fell over backward.

“I bet you do,” said Maylee, smirking as she reached the thin man with the missing privates. She whipped her bat down and across, connecting with his stomach. He doubled over, groaning and vomiting black blood. Maylee brought the bat up and slammed down on the back of his head. He fell forward, smacking into the wet pavement. Maylee slammed down on his skull, cracking it. The man flopped and was still.

Maylee turned. Three corpses left. They staggered and lurched through the rain. The one closest to Maylee, a withered old man covered in dirt that had turned to mud in the rain, grabbed at her, chattering his rotten teeth.

“How many rocks left?” she yelled to Park.

“One,” said Park, kneeling with a grunt to pick up the rock. “Thanks so much for asking.”

“No problem,” said Maylee, twirling her bat round and round as the old man approached her. When he was close enough, Maylee whacked him across the temple with the bat. The old man's long-rotted skull exploded, sending bone and thick muck across the wet pavement. Rain pelted the muck, splattering it onto Maylee's shoes. Maylee was past caring. The old man was still but locked in midstep, balanced in front of Maylee mid-grab.

“Just fall already,” said Maylee, whacking the corpse across the chest. It fell and stayed there.

She turned to see Park brandishing a rock as the second corpse, a man with mutton chops and a wet gaping wound in his chest, reached for him. Park dodged the man's grasp and rammed the rock into his skull. The man fell back, dark blood seeping from a split in his forehead. Park grunted and threw the rock. It smashed into the man's

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

forehead. The crack spread and the man fell down. He hit the pavement and did not get up.

“One left,” said Maylee, nodding at the remaining corpse. It was a chubby lady with a *Baby On Board* T-shirt. Maylee's stomach fell when she realized the woman wasn't chubby. She was pregnant.

“Fuck me,” said Park. “You take that one.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Just kidding. Give me the bat.”

“No,” said Maylee, gripping the bat and watching the pregnant woman hiss and stagger around. “I've got it.”

“Just give me the damn bat.”

“No!” said Maylee with a force that surprised her.

Apparently it surprised Park too. “Fine. Have at it, kid.”

Maylee readied herself, watching the pregnant corpse stumble.

Then a sharp “crack” rang out. Like a gunshot. The pregnant woman jerked and drew back, stiff. She fell forward, revealing a dart embedded in the back of her head. The woman was still.

Maylee looked around, confused. Then saw figures standing on the stoop of the office. One was holding a rifle.

It was Mom.

\* \* \*

Angie lowered the gun, watching the pregnant corpse fall. Her heart leapt. Dalton was right about what he'd seen out the window.

“Maylee!” yelled Angie, slinging the rifle over her shoulder and rushing off the stoop.

Maylee, standing across the walkway over the bodies of several corpses, lowered her bat. She looked like she could cry. “Mom!”

Angie and Maylee ran for each other. Park was there too. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his hunting jacket and slowly walked over, behind Maylee.

Angie grabbed Maylee and hugged her tight. She held her as long as she dared and Maylee didn't resist. Then she pushed her back and held her by the shoulders, looking her up and down. “Are you hurt? Were you bitten?”

“No, Mom, no,” said Maylee, looking relieved and exhausted

## ROBERT A. BEST

and somehow sad. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"Maylee!" yelled Dalton from the stoop of the office. Angie let go of Maylee and turned to see Dalton standing on the stoop, covering his nose from the stench of the dead body hanging from the tree. He started down the stoop.

"Wait, Dalton," said Angie. "Stay there. We're coming." She trotted back toward the office, motioning for Maylee and Park to follow. They did.

Dalton backed up, back into the office. Maylee rushed along with Angie. Park walked slowly, quickly falling behind them.

They reached the stoop and Maylee jerked back, bringing up her bat and looking so determined it frightened Angie. Angie followed Maylee's eyes to the body hanging from the tree.

"Wait, honey, no," said Angie, turning back to Maylee. Maylee was already lowering the bat, looking relieved.

"Someone got that one already," said Maylee.

"Yeah," said Angie, not knowing what to make of the comment. Maylee sounded disappointed.

Maylee wrinkled her nose and brought her jacket sleeve to her face. "God it smells."

"Been there a while," said Angie. Park reached the stoop, silent and looking down. Angie opened the door and motioned Maylee and Park inside. "It was there when we got here."

"How long have you been here?" said Park. It was the first thing he'd said since they arrived.

"Just since this morning," said Angie, shutting the door. Maylee and Park looked wet, dirty and beaten. Angie realized there were only two of them.

"Where's Ella?" said Angie.

Park shook his head. Maylee looked down. Angie realized why Maylee looked so sad.

"Fuck," said Angie, quietly. "I'm sorry, Park."

"Everyone *really* needs to stop saying that," said Park.

Angie said nothing for a moment. Dalton crossed his arms and looked down. Angie looked at Park, then Maylee, then back at Park. She tried to think of what to say. Finally she decided there was nothing to say. She nodded to herself and turned.

She briskly walked to a gun case set along the far wall of the



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

office. Several rifles hung inside. She grabbed one, then grabbed a box of darts from the shelf above the rifles. She turned and strode back to Park.

“Here,” she said, handing the rifle and box to Park. “They're just tranquilizers but the dart tips are long enough to puncture the brain.”

Park nodded and took the rifle and box. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and put the box in his jacket pocket. “Miles better than what I've been using.”

“I'm hungry,” said Dalton.

“Me too,” said Maylee, already looking more like Angie's daughter than the killer Angie saw earlier.

“Yeah,” said Angie, sighing. “That's a common theme around here. No food in the office, either. Vending machine's broken open and raided. And to add to all the fun, crazy zookeepers are keeping people out of the restaurant.”

“Joy all around,” said Park.

The loud speakers around the office crackled to life. The four of them jerked in surprise.

Gregory's voice rang out. “Good afternoon, citizens of Ashton Memorial.”

Angie turned to the others, sighing. “And that asshole keeps talking.”

“We've heard it too,” said Maylee.

“Ella said he's got Lori,” said Park.

“Did he just say 'citizens?’” said Dalton.

Gregory continued, his voice booming around the room. Angie heard it coming from outside too, from speakers throughout the zoo. “We are working hard for your safety.”

Angie cocked her head, listening. Whenever Gregory paused, she heard a fainter version of his voice coming from somewhere else in the room, a fraction of a second late. “Anyone else hear that echo?”

Gregory continued to drone on about how hard he was working to protect everyone. Angie ignored the content, listening for the echo, trying to place where it came from.

Finally she located it. Across the room, in one of the chairs, was some sort of small handheld device. *AM PerComm*, said a logo

ROBERT A. BEST

etched into the side. Angie guessed it stood for “personal communicator.”

Gregory droned on in the background. Angie clicked a large button on the side of the communicator and held it to her mouth. “Hello?”

Gregory made no sign he'd heard her. He kept talking, now praising the bravery of the Keepers. Angie noticed he used the same terms the people at the Zoo Bites had used. She also noticed he was talking about them as though they were some sort of police force. Or army.

“Hello?” she said, clicking the communicator and trying again. This time she noticed her own voice echoing from another chair in the room. She walked over to the chair and found a second communicator laying there.

She clicked the button. “Testing,” she said into the communicator in her hand. Her voice echoed from the second communicator in the chair.

Frowning, she turned the communicator over in her hand, looking at it more closely. Gregory continued talking in the background. On the side of the communicator, she found a dial with two settings. One said *Direct* and the other said *Broadcast*. It was set to *Direct*. Angie clicked the dial to *Broadcast*.

She clicked the button on the side and held the communicator to her mouth. “Hello?”

Her own voice boomed out over the speakers around the room. She heard it echoing from the speakers outside.

Gregory stopped mid-sentence. “Who is this? This channel is not for citizen use.”

Angie clicked the communicator. “My name is Angela Land and I am not your citizen.”

“You live within my borders, ma'am,” said Gregory's booming voice. “Now please get off my channel.”

Angie clicked the communicator. “Do you have a girl with you? A girl named Lori?”

“Help!” yelled a girl's voice over the speakers. She sounded farther away than Gregory, but clearly audible.

Maylee and Dalton gasped. Park stepped forward. “That's her. That son of a fucking bitch.”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Angie held up a finger to Park, indicating to wait. Gregory was silent for several seconds. Angie guessed he'd turned off the microphone. Then there was an audible click and Gregory returned.

"Citizens," he started.

Park snatched the communicator from Angie. He screamed into it, louder and with more force than Angie had ever seen Park exhibit. "Give me back my fucking daughter you fucking dog-cunt!"

Angie took the communicator back from Park. "What he said."

Gregory sighed through the speakers. "I built Ashton Memorial, ma'am. You and your friends need to respect me."

"Whatever," said Angie, clicking off the communicator and dropping it into her pocket. She strode to a map display hanging by the door. She snatched out a map and shoved it into her other pocket. She turned back to Park, Maylee and Dalton.

Park nodded. "You thinking we got guns and a map now?"

"Yep," said Angie. "That pretty much sums it up."

She motioned for the others to follow and turned toward the door. As they exited, she pulled the communicator from her pocket. Gregory was talking and talking. The rain pounded relentlessly now.

Angie clicked the communicator on as she walked. The others walked close behind her. Park had his rifle out and ready.

"Shut up," said Angie into the communicator, feeling a little thrill as her voice echoed all throughout the zoo.

Gregory stopped mid-sentence for the second time. "I thought you had finally developed some sense."

"And I thought I told you to shut up. We've got guns now. Guns and a map. We can move much more quickly now. So here's what's going to happen. We are going to march to the restaurant and your people will give us food. Then, we're finding you and we're getting Lori."

Angie stopped mid-stride as she saw a corpse emerge from the rain in front of them. It was a young woman with broken glasses and a large gash running down both forearms. Rain pooled in her wounds and she ground her rotting teeth.

"There," said Angie to Park, pointing.

"Got it," said Park. He aimed the rifle and fired. The corpse stumbled backward as a dart thudded into its forehead. The corpse fell

## ROBERT A. BEST

to the ground, still.

Gregory had been silent this whole time. Angie clicked the communicator on and kept walking. The others fell in behind her.

“You didn't even know about the restaurant, did you?” said Angie. Her voice echoed all around. “You have no idea what your own people are doing. You don't own shit. You don't run shit.”

Angie stopped and pointed. “There.”

Park nodded and aimed at a corpse that had staggered from behind a tree. It was an old man wearing a ripped tank top and missing part of his scalp. Rain collected in the holes in his skin and ran slimy rivulets down his cheeks. He gurgled and came at them. Park fired and the man fell, dart deep in his forehead.

“Thanks for all the help, by the way,” said Park.

“Mommy's on the phone,” said Angie. She motioned for the others to continue and they pounded through the rain. She was going from memory. They could round a few more bends before she would have to get out the map and find the quickest way to the restaurant.

They came around one of those bends and found themselves by the hyena exhibit. The hyenas ran around furiously in the rain. They snarled and bit at the wooden fence separating them from Angie and the others. Angie looked across the exhibit, finding the light that indicated the door at the back. The light was red. She assured herself the animals couldn't get to them. Maylee watched the hyenas warily. Angie suspected she'd had a different experience with wooden fences. Angie hoped that whatever it was, it was an isolated incident.

“Which way?” said Dalton, wrapping his jacket tightly around himself in the rain.

Angie nodded to their right and clicked on the communicator. “But whatever,” she said, hearing her own voice echo around. “We'll go to the restaurant, which you have no control over, get some food, which you'll have no control over, then we'll find you and get Park's kid. And you'll have no control over it!”

Angie clicked off the communicator, listening to her voice fade from the speakers. Through the rain and growling animals, she heard something else. People, far off, little pockets of them spread throughout the zoo. It sounded like they were cheering.

Gregory cleared his throat, the sound of it rumbling throughout the zoo. “Citizens of Ashton Memorial, this woman is clearly unstable.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

She has obviously stolen equipment from the brave men and women who keep you safe. She is using stolen Keeper equipment to spread her madness.”

Angie snorted and dropped the communicator in her pocket. She looked around, making sure the way was clear to go. She took her own rifle from her shoulder.

Gregory continued, his voice booming all around. “From my vantage point, I have seen the things this woman has done. She and her group are the ones who let those creatures into our borders. Into your home. Those things have invaded the sanctuary of Ashton Memorial, and she is responsible.”

“He’s fucking crazy,” muttered Park, spitting rain out of his mouth.

“But fear not,” said Gregory’s echoing voice. “We have creatures of our own. Proud, noble creatures who will not hesitate to defend us. To drive these invaders away. Rest assured, citizens. This is my kingdom. And I hold the keys.”

A click rang out from somewhere far off. Then another. Then another. Then one click after another so fast Angie couldn’t keep up. She and the others looked around, straining to see through the heavy rain.

“What’s going on?” said Dalton.

“Not sure,” said Angie. The clicking continued as Angie looked all over, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. Her eyes fell on the hyena exhibit. The hyenas snarled at her, their wet hair bristling in the rain. The light by the door at the back of the exhibit was red.

Then the door clicked.

And the light turned green.

The hyenas jerked, startled by the loud clicking noise. They turned to see the door slowly swing open. Snarling and yelping, they ran for the open door.

“Oh shit,” said Angie.

“That’s bad,” said Park.

Growling and snarling came from all around. The growls and the clicking of the locks seemed to have alerted every corpse in the area. Groans erupted from all sides.

“Really bad,” said Angie, gripping her rifle and looking around.

## ROBERT R. BEST

“Who knew taunting the crazy man could go so badly?” said Park.

A goat raced from the rain, bleating and grunting in fury. It raced toward Maylee.

“Look out!” yelled Angie.

Maylee dodged to one side, bringing up her bat as the goat ran past.

“I got it!” yelled Angie, leveling her rifle at the goat as it stopped and turned. It lowered its head and barreled back at Maylee.

Angie fired. The dart thudded into the goat’s hip. It slowed, staggered and slumped to the ground, inches from Maylee. Maylee stood over it warily, bat over her head. Finally she lowered it, looking at Angie and panting. “Thanks.”

Angie nodded, whipping her head around as more growls and moans came from the rain.

“I think we may need to fall back for the time being,” she said.

“I think you may be pretty fucking right,” said Park.

A horde of lizards raced from the rain. None more than a foot in length. Angie recognized them from the reptile exhibit. The lizards raced to Dalton. He screamed and fell back, the lizards almost swarming him.

“Dalton!” yelled Angie and Maylee in unison. They both raced to defend Dalton. Maylee got there first, slamming her bat down into the mob of lizards. Several splattered against the pavement. Angie arrived and kicked as many as she could away. One hissed and turned on her, racing up her leg. It flared a membrane on the back of its head and bit at her clothing.

“Mom!” yelled Dalton.

Angie grabbed the lizard and threw it as far away as she could. She spun as she turned, then gasped as the thrown lizard thudded into the chest of an approaching corpse. It was a bloated naked woman, deep black sores in her stomach and breasts. The lizard clawed madly at the corpse’s flesh, trying to get back to Angie. The woman ignored the lizard, groaning and grasping for Angie. The lizard tore huge hunks of skin free, revealing black blood and rotting bone.

“Shit!” said Angie, watching the corpse and feeling more lizards swarming around her legs. She heard Dalton screaming and Maylee crushing lizards with her bat. Sharp, squelching clangs rang out

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

as the bat smacked the pavement over and over again.

The woman jerked and spun as something hit her from behind. Angie saw a dart protruding from the back of her head. The woman fell, crushing the lizard as she splattered onto the pavement. Park lowered his rifle and ran over.

Angie turned back to Dalton and the lizards. He brushed the last one from him, tossing it away in revulsion. It hit the pavement and Maylee swatted it farther away. One was racing around Angie's legs. She kicked it and it skittered across the pavement. It turned back to hiss at her. Park arrived and kicked it so hard it flew out of sight. "We heading back to the office?" he said to Angie.

"Fuck yes," said Angie. "Go go!" she yelled, motioning for everyone to run. Everyone did, heading back around the corner and racing toward the office.

They ran as hard as they dared, unable to see more than a few feet ahead in the driving rain. Growls and snarls and moans came from everywhere. "Everyone be careful!" she yelled.

She took three more pounding steps and a corpse emerged from the rain. It was a big man with slimy rotting jowls and yellow teeth. He was on her before she could get her rifle out.

"Mom!" yelled both Dalton and Maylee behind her.

Angie pushed back as the corpse wrapped his thick slimy arms around her. Angie turned her rifle upward against her chest and fired. The dart shot up into the man's chin. He jerked and fell backward, trying to work his mouth open. The dart pinned it shut. Angie stepped back, bringing the rifle up to fire again. A dart flew past her head and thudded into the man's forehead. His jowls shook and he dropped straight down, motionless.

Angie cast a glance back to see Park lowering his rifle.

"Thanks," she said.

Park nodded. "We gotta get."

Angie nodded and turned back. She motioned for the others to follow. She started again, more slowly than before. She kept looking left to right, waiting for something else to emerge.

They reached the large open walkway. Angie knew the office was at the far end. She could make out the vague shape of it in the pounding rain.

## ROBERT R. BEST

She could make out another shape too. Large and hulking, it blocked the way to the office. It snorted and stepped toward them.

“Oh fuck me sideways,” said Angie as the shape became clearer.

“Is that a fucking rhino?” said Park.

The rhino snorted and stomped its feet. It grunted and huffed. Then it charged.

\* \* \*

Maylee tensed as the rhino charged. It snorted and pounded through the rain. The ground shook from the impact.

“Get out of the way!” yelled Mom.

Maylee, Mom and Park all ran to the right. Dalton didn't move. He stood, staring at the charging rhino. His eyes were wide and he looked like he was trembling. Mom and Park were in front and hadn't seen.

“Dalton!” yelled Maylee. “Run!” Her voice was drowned out by the rain and the pounding of the charging rhino. Dalton didn't move.

Maylee ran back toward Dalton, into the path of the rhino.

“Dalton! Maylee!” yelled Mom. Maylee saw Mom turning as she ran.

Maylee reached Dalton and grabbed him around the waist. She dove, taking Dalton with her, to the left as the rhino charged by. It missed them by inches.

Maylee and Dalton rolled across the pavement. Dalton yelped as their elbows and knees banged into the pavement. The pavement turned to grass. Then they stopped suddenly as they crashed into something hard.

Maylee scrambled up, terrified they'd hit some other crazed animal. Dalton stood next to her. Maylee let out a sigh as she realized they'd hit a large tree.

“That hurt!” said Dalton, rubbing his elbows.

“Not as much as the rhino would have hurt,” said Maylee, looking up at the tree. It was old-looking. Tall and sturdy.

“Maylee!” came Mom's voice through the rain. Maylee whirled to see the rhino turning left and right, looking for them. It found them and roared.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Shit!” yelled Maylee. “Up in the tree!”

“What?” said Dalton.

“It’s all I can think of, Dalton!” Maylee yelled, dropping her bat next to the tree trunk. “So unless you can fly, get up in the tree!”

Maylee climbed up onto the lowest branch. She laid flat on her belly and reached down for Dalton. He took hold of her hand and put his feet on the trunk. She pulled him up. The rhino, snorting and pounding, drew close. It roared.

Maylee screamed and pulled Dalton up to the branch. The rhino passed right underneath them, slamming its head into the tree. The whole tree shook with the impact. Maylee almost slipped off the branch. She wrapped her legs and arms around it as tightly as she could. Dalton took hold of her arm and gripped so tightly it hurt.

The rhino staggered back, shaking its head in fury. It staggered around, looking confused. Somewhere in the rain, Mom and Park were yelling.

Maylee shifted to her knees. “Climb!”

She and Dalton climbed to the next branch up the tree. Maylee stood on the branch and moved to help Dalton up to the next one. She had her arms around his waist when the tree shook with another impact. The rhino snorted as it rammed the tree.

Maylee started to fall forward with Dalton in front of her. Reflexively, she took one hand off his waist and caught the branch above her. Screaming, Dalton slipped from her other arm and fell. Flailing wildly, he caught Maylee’s free arm and gripped it tightly. Maylee clutched his arm desperately, holding on to the top branch for balance. Dalton swung out over the ground below them. And over the furious, pounding and snorting rhino.

\* \* \*

“Dalton!” yelled Angie as he started to fall out of the tree. Maylee caught him with one hand and he swung out over the rhino. The fall would be enough to seriously hurt Dalton, and once the rhino noticed him on the ground...

“Hurry!” she yelled to Park, loading her rifle and readying it. “Shoot it! Take it down!”

## ROBERT A. BEST

She fired. The dart embedded into the rhino's hip. It didn't notice. It stomped around the tree and roared, sounding desperate to get to Maylee and Dalton.

Dalton screamed as he hung there. Maylee looked like she was giving her all to pull him up. It wasn't enough.

Park fired a second dart into the haunch of the rhino. It snorted in anger but otherwise did not react. It stomped the ground furiously and rushed the tree again. It slammed against the trunk. Angie heard wood crack, and Maylee and Dalton screamed as they leaned out farther.

"Shit," said Park, cocking the rifle. "Fucker can handle his dope."

Angie cocked and fired. The dart hit the rhino in the side. It let out a grunt of pain and anger, whipping its head around. Its eye landed on Angie. It bellowed and turned to face her.

"Whoops," said Angie. She hurriedly recocked the rifle.

The rhino charged. Park fired and the dart thudded into the rhino's cheek. It roared in pain, putting its head down to slam Angie. Angie prepared to dodge, knowing she wouldn't get the rifle ready in time.

The rhino slowed down, its lowered head bumping along the ground.

"Huh," said Angie, bringing the rifle up and firing into the top of the rhino's head. The rhino let out a low whine and stopped, slumping to the ground, limp.

"Mom!" yelled Maylee from the tree. Dalton kicked his legs as he rocked back and forth over the ground.

"Hold on!" yelled Angie, slinging the rifle over her shoulder and running for the tree. Park ran up behind her.

Angie ran to position herself under Dalton. "I got him!"

Maylee nodded and let go. Dalton dropped into Angie's arms. Angie's back strained and she stumbled forward a few steps, but she caught him.

She smiled as she set him down. "Second time in two days, huh?"

Dalton nodded, shivering in the rain.

She looked back up the tree to see Maylee making good progress climbing down. She ran up to help her.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Maylee dropped to the ground, Angie's hands around her waist. Angie let go and stepped back as Maylee stooped to retrieve her bat. Maylee stared, panting at the rhino. They all jumped a little as it grunted, but it remained still.

"Shit," said Maylee.

"Yeah," said Angie.

Groans erupted all around them. Fading in and out through the driving rain.

"And on that note," said Park.

"To the office!" yelled Angie.

They all ran across the walkway, heading for the office. A group of corpses slowly emerged from the rain. The corpses jerked and staggered their stiff rotting bodies across the wet pavement. The corpses were coming in from the side, toward the office. Angie ran as hard as she dared through the rain, determined to get to the office before the corpses blocked them.

They reached the porch. The stairs were on the other side. Angie lifted Dalton up and over the railing, onto the stoop. The corpses groaned and drew closer. Maylee tossed her bat onto the stoop, then climbed up and over. The dead body in the tree rocked back and forth in the pounding rain. The corpses groaned and drew nearer.

The frontmost corpse, a middle-aged woman with a ruffled blue hat bouncing on her torn bloodied head, came at Angie. She hissed and bit. Angie spun, taken by surprise and trying to get her rifle up in time. A "crack" sounded to Angie's right and the woman fell back, dart embedded in her left eye.

"Thanks," said Angie, glancing over at Park.

"I could do this all day," said Park. "Now get the fuck up there."

Angie nodded and slung the rifle over her shoulder. She took hold of the wet metal railing and pulled herself up. The railing was cold and slippery and she almost fell mid-climb. The dead body swung from the tree. The branch creaked in the rain. The corpses drew closer on all three sides of the porch. Park fired again. Another corpse dropped.

Angie made it over the railing. She turned and held her hands out and down to Park. "Come on!"

Park slung the rifle over his shoulder. "Don't insult me," he

ROBERT A. BEST

said. "I think I can manage a couple of feet."

Angie stepped back and Park grabbed hold. He'd made it halfway when he suddenly stopped.

"Shit!" he groaned. "Stupid fucking bad knee son of a bitch burn in hell!"

Angie smirked. "Doin' okay?"

Park held out a hand. "Think you could take a break from your fucking stand-up comedy and help?"

"Of course sir," said Angie, grabbing hold and pulling him up. "How rude of me. I should have offered to begin with."

"You're a fucking riot," said Park, dropping onto the stoop.

Angie smirked and turned to rush inside the office. Park followed. The kids were already inside, standing stock still and staring at something off to Angie's right. Angie followed their gaze.

A deer stood inside the room. A large buck with ten-point antlers. It snorted angrily at them, running its hooves along the carpeted floor of the office.

"Shit," said Park. "And my ass without a hunting license."

"Everyone stand very still," said Angie. The door to the outside was still open. The corpses were gathering around the stoop. A few attempted to crawl through the railing. The buck dragged its hooves on the carpet and snorted. Angie slowly unslung the rifle from her shoulder.

She had it halfway up when the buck huffed, snorted and charged. Maylee and Dalton screamed, diving out of the way. The buck crashed into the far wall of the office, cracking the wood paneling and sending a bulletin board flying.

Angie stumbled, turning with the rifle. She leveled it at the buck.

"Wait!" said Park, holding up a hand. He was looking back and forth between the staggering buck and the corpses trying to navigate the stoop. One had nearly crawled through the railing. Another was slowly staggering up the stairs. "I have an idea!"

The buck backed away from the wall, snorting and shaking its head. A trickle of blood ran from its nose.

"Hey fuckface!" yelled Park, waving his arms and backing toward the open door. The corpses on the stoop saw him and groaned. They started to reach for him.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Look out!” yelled Angie.

“I know what I'm doing!” yelled Park as the buck focused on him and charged. The corpses behind Park nearly had him. As the buck drew close, Park dove out of the way. The buck crashed through the open door and into the approaching corpses. It jumped over the railing, its hooves slamming into corpses' skulls. The corpses fell back moaning. Several fell down and were still.

Park turned back to the door and shut it. “Shit!” he said, leaning against the door. “I can't believe half the shit we do ever works.”

Outside, the corpses groaned and gargled in the rain. The buck could be heard also, snorting and huffing in the rain.

Angie ran to the window and peered out. The buck was thrashing its antlers back and forth, trying to free itself from the group of corpses. Corpses staggered and fell around it, torn and ripped by the buck. The buck freed itself and turned back to the office. It snorted and stamped its feet.

“Shit,” said Angie. “The crazy thing is going to ram us.”

“Open the door,” said Park, cocking his rifle.

“Don't be crazy!” said Angie.

“That thing can easily clear the railing and break this door down! You wanna find new shelter?” He leveled the rifle at the door.

“Damn crazy ass,” said Angie. She ran over to the door and opened it. The buck saw her and charged. It stomped furiously through the rain. The few corpses who were left upright moan and staggered around.

“Get out of the way!” yelled Park.

Angie ducked to one side just as the buck leapt. It was halfway over the railing when Park fired. The dart thudded into the buck's chest, throwing the buck off course. The startled buck's back legs caught on the railing and it slammed downward, onto the metal stoop. A loud “crack” rang out and the buck let out a sharp yelp.

“Shit,” said Maylee from the other side of the room.

Angie stepped over to Park to look outside. The buck flopped around on the stoop, its neck broken and the tranquilizers taking effect. It whined and snorted, blood spraying from its nose.

Park brought the rifle back up and fired, into the buck's skull. The buck jerked and was still.

ROBERT R. BEST

“Okay,” said Park, panting. “Now shut the door.”

# SIXTEEN

Angie walked as quickly as she dared across the wet pavement just outside the Communications Office. She held a tranquilizer rifle in front of her, angled down but ready to use at any moment. Park was a few feet behind her, pushing a wheelbarrow they'd found propped up against one side of the office. *Staff Only* was imprinted in faded white letters on the side of the wheelbarrow. It was empty.

Angie looked side to side. The rain had let up considerably since the night before, and she could see much farther. No corpses or crazed animals were in sight. Rain pattered on the wheelbarrow as Park pushed it along. The wheel squeaked just loud enough to worry Angie. She worried something might hear. She gripped her rifle and kept walking, heading for a large shed hidden among some bushes across from the office.

Angie fell back a few steps to let Park come up alongside her. She was going to speak when Park nodded at something to their left. Angie looked and saw a corpse, a small woman with most of the skin ripped from her face, stumble from the nearby trees. Rain pooled in the black and red mass of rips and scars where her face had been. The woman moaned and moved toward them.

Angie leveled her rifle at the woman and fired. The dart thudded into the woman's head off-center, nearly taking off the woman's temple. The point evidently found brain, though, as the woman jerked, spit rain water from her dead mouth, and fell.

"Not bad," said Park.

"Yeah, yeah," said Angie. "It kind of sucked and you know it."

They both kept walking. Light rain fell and the wheel on the wheelbarrow squeaked. Angie wondered if the noise had attracted the corpse. She tried not to wonder about it too much.

They were about halfway to the shed. She glanced over at Park.

"Some people were here when Dalton and I got here. It looked like they'd managed to stay safe in there for days."

"On your right," said Park, nodding in that direction.

Angie looked and saw a tall man, wearing a white T-shirt

## ROBERT A. BEST

stained with blood, staggering from behind a bush. A huge gaping wound in his torso showed white bone and gray organs. The organs jerked and shook as he walked. Angie sighed, cocked her rifle, and fired. The dart nearly missed, thudding into the man's head just to the side of his eye. The point of the dart jutted out from the man's temple. The man kept coming, oblivious to the injury.

"Dammit to hell," said Angie, cocking and firing again. This time the dart thudded into the man's forehead, much closer to center. The man staggered backward, groaning and blinking. Then he toppled to the pavement, still.

"Damn right," she said, mostly to herself. She glanced at Park to see him smirking. She considered telling him to fuck himself. She stayed quiet.

They walked for a few more seconds. The rain fell and the wheel squeaked. Angie was now certain the noise was bringing corpses. She braced herself, ready for the next moan. Or the growl of a crazed animal.

Nothing came.

They drew to a halt just in front of the shed. *Staff Only*, said chipped white paint emblazoned across the front.

"Uh-oh," said Park. "Staff only. Guess we'll have to go back."

Angie smirked but stayed quiet. She fished around in her pocket and located the keys they'd found in a desk in the office. She stepped up and found a padlock on the door of the shed. She tried the keys and was relieved when one slid in easily. She turned it and the lock opened. She pulled open the shed door and stepped back.

The shed was full of tools. Shovels, hammers, wrenches. There were even a few pickaxes. All neatly organized and stacked.

Park sighed. "Think that'll do?"

"It'll have to," said Angie. "We've just got the three rifles, so we'll need all the weapons we can get."

They loaded the wheelbarrow with tools as quietly as they could. Rain fell around them. Angie was careful to make little noise as she loaded the heavier tools.

When the wheelbarrow was full, Angie shut the shed and looked around. Rain pattered on the trees around them and on the tools in the wheelbarrow. No other sound could be heard. No moans. No growls.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Okay,” said Angie. “Let's go.”

After one more quick glance around, they started back toward the office. The weight in the wheelbarrow made the squeaking of the wheel louder than before.

“Anyway,” said Angie. “This place is pretty out of the way. Someone...”

A loud moan came from behind her. She spun in time to see an old man with ruptured eyes and rotten yellow teeth reaching for her. He was closer than the others had been. There was no time to ready the rifle.

Angie jumped back as the man lunged for her. He missed, moaning and stumbling forward. Angie shoved the man back, struggling with the rifle. The man corrected himself and came back at her.

“Here!” said Park, grabbing a wrench from the wheelbarrow and tossing it at her. Angie caught the wrench and slung the rifle over her shoulder.

The corpse came at her, moaning and working his rotten teeth. Angie slammed the wrench across the man's temple. The man's head whipped to one side and he staggered to the left. Thick black ooze seeped from a crack Angie's blow had made.

The corpse was righting himself when Park came up behind him with a hammer. Park slammed down on the corpse's head. The skull splintered and caved, sending black pulp upward across Park's sleeve. The top of the hammer buried itself into the man's head. The man jerked, then slumped.

He didn't fall, though. He hung there, his head still stuck to Park's hammer.

“Oh dammit to fuck,” said Park, shaking the hammer. The corpse hung there, jerking as Park shook his arm, but otherwise still. The hammer didn't come free.

Angie chuckled and stepped over.

“The fuck you laughin' at?” said Park, still shaking the hammer.

“Oh I think you know,” said Angie. “Hold still.” She brought up the wrench and slammed downward onto the man's skull, to the side of Park's hammer. The blow knocked the corpse free, and it fell to the ground.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Thanks,” said Park, grimacing at the black all over his arm and hammer. He whipped the hammer clean as best he could. He dropped it back in the wheelbarrow and Angie tossed the wrench in after it.

They both looked around in silence. No other threats were seen. Park took hold of the wheelbarrow and Angie unslung the rifle from her shoulder. They continued, Park pushing the wheelbarrow and Angie holding her rifle ready.

“So anyway,” said Angie after a few moments of silent walking. “Like I was saying. If someone kept quiet, if they didn't call attention to themselves, I bet they could stay holed up in that office for quite a while and be pretty safe.”

Park said nothing. They walked along in silence. The wheel squeaked and rain fell. They reached the office without further incident. Park left the wheelbarrow by the stoop. Angie walked up the steps, doing her best to ignore the hanging corpse and the horrible wet rotting smell it gave off. She stepped over the dead deer still covering most of the stoop. She put her hand on the handle and watched Park coming up the stairs after her.

“They'll be fine, you know,” he said.

“Hmm?”

“I've been listening to all the crap you're saying. How safe the place is, how long someone could hide here. You're right and they'll be fine.”

“I know,” said Angie, her hand still on the handle. “At least I hope I know. I'm just trying to make myself feel better.”

Angie stepped farther inside the office as Park shut the door behind her. Maylee and Dalton were sitting at the bank of monitors and switches. A box of crackers was open in Maylee's lap. She sat watching the monitors, slowly raising a cracker to her mouth and chewing. The crackers were a big find the night before. One of the zookeepers' lockers had thankfully been left open. And inside, among various articles of clothing and a few books, was a half-eaten box of stale crackers. That and a working water fountain in the breakroom had provided a very meager dinner.

Dalton was chewing a cracker in his hand and staring at the screens. He saw Mom and swallowed.

He snatched the box from Maylee. Maylee made no protest, sitting back farther in her chair and chewing slowly.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

"Mom!" said Dalton, standing and walking over with the box. "Have some more."

"No," said Angie, shaking her head. "Park and I have already eaten. You guys need to have most of it."

"Why?" said Maylee from her seat.

Angie sighed. "Because you guys are hiding in here while Park and I go to get Lori."

"What?" said Maylee, sitting up straight.

"Don't start," said Angie. Dalton shrugged and started pacing the room, carrying the box and watching all the screens.

"But I want to help," said Maylee.

"I said don't start."

Maylee stood and walked over.

"I can't believe this," said Maylee. She spoke quietly, calmly. Angie noticed this. Just a few weeks ago, Maylee would have screamed and stomped around. "I can't believe you still don't trust me."

Angie glanced over at Dalton. He was oblivious to them, investigating some maps of the zoo that were plastered onto a far wall. Angie turned back to Maylee. "I am trusting you, Maylee. I'm leaving you in charge here. Dalton's still limping. He needs to rest. I'm trusting you to keep him safe."

Maylee fell quiet, looking at Dalton. She looked back to Angie. Angie could tell she was conflicted. She bit her lip, then nodded. "Okay."

"Thank you," said Angie, and meant it. She unslung the rifle from her shoulder and handed it to Maylee. Maylee took it, frowning. "Take this," said Angie. "Darts are in the desk over there."

Angie walked to the gun case to get the last remaining rifle. She saw Maylee frowning at the rifle and looking at her bat propped up against her chair.

Angie took the rifle from the case and slung it over her shoulder. "Not everything can be knocked on the head, Maylee."

"A lot of things can be knocked on the head."

"Still, try to keep things far enough away that you don't need to."

Maylee nodded. She walked back to the chair and sat, placing the rifle upright on the floor in front of her. Angie wanted to change her

## ROBERT A. BEST

mind. To hide with her children there in the office and make the best life they could. But she knew it was untenable. She knew eventually they would have to deal with the corpses, the animals and the crazy man who had made the zoo his own kingdom. They would have to deal with Gregory. And she'd rather have the kids safe here than in the middle of that.

Angie turned and looked around. She found another of the hand-held communicators sitting in a chair across the room. She walked over and picked it up. She took the one she'd been using from her pocket and read the number on the back. Dropping hers back into her pocket, she adjusted various dials on the one she'd just found.

"You're becoming a real whiz with those things, Mom," said Maylee.

Angie smirked as she adjusted settings. "Well, we had lots of free time last night."

Satisfied she had it working, she walked back to Maylee and handed her the communicator. She took hers from her pocket. "Try it."

Maylee frowned at the communicator. She clicked the large button on the side and held it to her mouth. "Hello?"

Her voice came from the communicator in Angie's hand. But not from the speakers set all over the room and zoo.

"There you go," said Angie, smiling and putting the communicator back in her pocket. "This way you can talk directly to me. I can tune mine to talk back to you if you need anything."

Maylee nodded. She shifted in her chair to hike up one hip. She slid the communicator into her pocket and sat back. "Got it."

Angie nodded and looked at Dalton. He was staring intently at one of the maps on the wall. She looked over at Park, who shrugged back at her.

"So what's the plan?" he said.

"Well," said Angie. "Here's what I've been thinking. There are lots of people scattered all over this zoo. They hate being trapped here. They hate Gregory. They hate the crazy zookeepers."

"We ran into a few of them," said Park, looking over at Maylee. Angie followed his eyes and saw Maylee nod. Park nodded back and continued. "They seem a little on the bat-shit side."

"They're desperate," said Angie. "They feel helpless. We'll give them weapons so they can defend themselves against the corpses. And

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

the animals. And the zookeepers. We'll round up as many as we can, we'll get food for them, we'll find Lori, and then..."

"Mom," said Dalton from across the room. He was leaning forward on his tiptoes, staring intently at a large map on the far wall. "Come here a sec."

Angie stepped over and looked. Park and Maylee followed. The map was far more detailed than the ones for the general public. It detailed staff-only buildings, security routes and shortcuts for employees to take.

"According to this," said Dalton, "there's only two places someone could have opened all the cages from."

"Where?" said Angie, leaning in to look more closely.

"Well, one's here, where we are," said Dalton, pointing at a spot on the map labeled *Communications Office*. Several icons on the building indicated the services housed there. One of the icons was a small padlock. Angie guessed it indicated, as Dalton had said, the ability to control the locks in the zoo.

Dalton kept pointing and moving his hand in a long line clear across to the other side of the map. It came to rest at a small building labeled *Emergency Backup Station*. "And the other one's here," he said.

Angie scanned the map quickly. Dalton was right, only the Communications Office and the Backup Station had the padlock icon. "So that must be where Gregory is."

"That must be where Lori is, too," said Park.

Angie nodded and stepped away from the map. She took the folded map she'd grabbed the night before from her pocket and unfolded it. She held it up to the large map, comparing. She found the spot on the smaller map that corresponded to the Backup Station. She made a mental note of it, then folded the map and shoved it back into her pocket. "Okay, then. Now we know where we're going."

"Then what?" said Park.

"Hmm?" said Angie.

"You said we find Lori, then something. Then what?"

Angie thought about it. "I'm sick of running, Park. We have no home left back in Lakewood. This place is big. We can clear out the corpses and lock it back up. Let everyone who wants to go, go, and everyone who wants to stay, stay. We could stay here for who knows

ROBERT R. BEST

how long.”

“What are you saying, Mom?” said Dalton.

“I’m saying that once we get Lori and force Gregory to step down, we’re taking over the zoo for ourselves.”

# SEVENTEEN

Lee sat on an overturned milk crate in the kitchen of the Bites. He wiped a steak knife on a rag in his other hand. The knife left a thin line of blood on the rag.

Lee smiled at the young blonde woman sitting on a second milk crate across from him. "You're all set."

The young woman smiled, sweat collecting on her forehead. She rolled down her sleeve, trickles of blood running down her arm.

The woman stood, revealing a line of Keepers behind her. Some looked stern and focused. Many looked scared. Lee felt for them. These were tough times.

"Next," said Lee.

A young man with fat cheeks stepped up and sat down on the milk crate. He looked around nervously. He looked at the knife in Lee's hand, then over to Lee's left. Lee followed his gaze to the three bodies stacked in the corner. All with throats sawed open and heads pushed back. Dark blood stained their faces and the floor beneath them. Darts were embedded in each of their foreheads, assuring they wouldn't get up again.

Lee looked back to the young man. The young man swallowed and looked back at Lee.

"It's sad, really," said Lee. "I think one or two of them might have changed their minds at the end. I saw it in their eyes, but by then the knife was already in and the blood was already out."

The young man blinked and nodded.

Lee smiled at him. "But this isn't about them. This is about you. About us. The Keepers. Are you a Keeper, son?"

The young man, who might have actually been a year older than Lee, nodded. "Yes, sir. I am."

"Do you commit to the Keeper's Code? Do you promise to keep order? To keep the weak ones safe and the strong ones in line?"

"I do, sir."

"Good," said Lee, nodding. Outside, the rain picked up. Lee heard it pounding on the windows. It was late morning but the room

## ROBERT A. BEST

was dark. "Lift up your sleeve."

The young man paused, then swallowed again. He grabbed his left sleeve and rolled it up, exposing his bicep and shoulder.

"Lean in," said Lee. The young man did, turning to present his upper arm, just below the shoulder. Sweat already collected on the young man's forehead.

Lee leaned forward and brought up the steak knife. Slowly, carefully, he carved a large *K* in the young man's shoulder. Blood pooled in the lines and the young man winced with each stroke.

Lee finished and sat back, examining his handiwork. Blood trickled from the *K*, but Lee knew that could be wiped away. The *K* would last. Lee was proud.

"Good job," said Lee. "You can go." The young man nodded and rolled down his sleeve. Blood seeped into his shirt. He stood and walked to the side.

Lee wiped the knife on the rag and surveyed the others. Still quite a few to go. It would be a long morning.

The communicator on his belt crackled to life. Lee jerked in surprise. He'd almost forgotten he had the thing.

"Lee?" came a voice from the communicator. It was Gregory.

Lee placed the rag and knife on the crate in front of him. He took the communicator from his belt and held it to his mouth. He clicked the button on the side. "Sir? Is that you?"

\* \* \*

Lori strained against the ropes holding her legs to the chair. Gregory had his back to her, focusing on the microphone on the desk. She desperately wanted to believe the ropes were looser after days of straining, but she knew they were not. She wasn't going anywhere, but she couldn't stop trying. She pulled at the ropes with her fingers, tips already raw from effort. The ropes wouldn't budge.

As she struggled, she stared at the remains of her phone in the corner. She wondered if she could put it back together. She longed to try. She wanted to rip the ropes free, run to the phone and call Ella. Just speak to her for a few seconds before the phone finally fell apart for good.

Gregory spoke and Lori flinched. His voice grated on her, even



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

when he wasn't speaking to her. He spoke into that stupid microphone. Someone responded over the speaker that also sat on the desk. Lori thought she recognized the voice. It sounded like Lee, the quiet zookeeper boy. But then, it didn't sound like Lee. Not anymore.

"Sir?" said Lee's voice. "It's an honor to hear from you. We've been listening to your broadcasts and I would like to thank you for all you've done."

Lori rolled her eyes to no one and pulled at the ropes. Her heart jumped when her right leg shifted. Just a tiny bit. Nothing that would even be visible. But it was more than she'd managed in days. Lori almost couldn't believe it. She had hope.

*Mom looks like something is wrong. She stares blankly at the road as she steers the car.*

*"Are you okay, Mom?" says Lori.*

*"No," says Mom.*

"Thank you, Lee," said Gregory into the microphone. "You're too kind. I'm calling because I need your help."

"Help, sir?" said Lee's voice. Lori pulled and tugged at the ropes, desperate to replicate the movement she'd managed a few seconds ago. She couldn't. "Anything, sir," said Lee. "The Keepers are at your command."

"Good, good," said Gregory. "That's good to hear. As you're no doubt aware, a woman has brought chaos to our zoo. First she let those things outside in. Then she and her gang have somehow turned the animals themselves against the zoo. They should be attacking the creatures, driving them back. But instead they attack our own citizens. It breaks my heart to see it. She has to be responsible. It is the only explanation."

"I agree sir," said Lee's voice. "She came to the Bites the other day and nearly started a riot. If I had realized how truly dangerous she was I would have put her down on the spot."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Lee. These times have been trying on us all."

Lori rolled her eyes again, pulling on the ropes. She felt another little shift. Tiny, barely any movement at all. But it was miles to Lori.

"But it gets worse, I'm afraid," Gregory continued. "This woman has infiltrated our buildings and stolen our equipment. She has

ROBERT A. BEST

access to our weapons and our maps. Which means that my attempt to call on the animals to defend us has had a tragic side effect. She knows where I am, or will very soon. She intends to steal my daughter from me. She broadcast her intent over the entire zoo. Using my equipment, Lee. Our equipment.”

“I heard, sir,” said Lee's voice. “It's a terrible thing. The Keepers will fight to the last to defend you and your daughter, sir.”

“I know Lee, I know. But first things first. We must move. She knows where I am. She knows where the food is. We must consolidate our power somewhere else. Somewhere she isn't expecting.”

“Sir, if I may make a suggestion. We should retake the Communications Office. We could command the whole zoo from there.”

“No, Lee, no,” said Gregory, shaking his head at the microphone. Lori pulled at the ropes. She heard rain pounding outside. Gregory drummed his fingers on the desk. “There's no point in that, I'm afraid. We don't know how many of her people are there. We can't risk good Keeper lives on what may be an ambush. Second, it is only a matter of time before the power goes out. The world has ended, Lee. Soon the outside resources will fail. All of our cameras and communicators will be useless. We will have to work on a more basic level.”

“What do you suggest, sir?”

Gregory leaned forward, speaking lower than before. Lori could still make out what he was saying. She didn't care anymore. Gregory had lost his mind. Everyone had. She had to get out. She had to get free. The ropes wouldn't give anymore than they had already. She felt like crying. The rain outside pounded and Gregory's low voice muttered into the microphone. She hated him. She hated everything but Ella. She had to get out. She had to.

\* \* \*

Lee lowered the communicator and looked around the kitchen. His heart felt large with pride. With purpose. The other Keepers looked back to him. Some looked confused. Lee knew they would come to understand.

Gregory's voice came back over the communicator. “I know I

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

can count on you, Lee.”

Lee raised the communicator back to his lips. “Thank you sir. I won't let you down.”

A click came from the communicator, signaling Gregory had switched off his end. Lee hooked the communicator to his belt. He surveyed the Keepers.

“You heard him. We have work to do. Which means we'll have to step things up here.” He turned to the Keepers he'd already given the *K*. Blood smeared on their arms from where they'd wiped away the trickles. He indicated roughly half of them. “You guys, come over here.”

He led the group to the nearest stainless steel counter in the kitchen. He slid open a drawer, revealing dozens of steak knives like the one he was using. “Everyone take one,” he said. Each of the Keepers reached into the drawer and pulled out a knife.

Lee nodded to each of them holding a blade. Rain pounded outside. “Alright.” He nodded at the others, the ones waiting in line to receive their *K*. “Give them all the mark. Be careful. Be neat. An injury would just make it harder for them to fulfill their duties. And that's one less Keeper to help you. Understand?”

The others nodded.

“And if any refuse, well...” Lee trailed off. The others nodded. “Just make sure to put a dart in their head afterwards. To be sure.”

They all nodded a third time. The young man with fat cheeks swallowed again. Lee noticed he did that a lot. He worried about the young man's resolve.

“To work, Keepers.”

They all left Lee there and moved to the Keepers line. Lee watched them get started. They had Keepers rolling up their sleeves and were carving in no time. Lee felt proud.

When he was satisfied in their work, he grabbed a handful of knives from the drawer. He moved back to the second half of the *K* Keepers. “The rest of you,” he said. “Come with me.”

He led them across the darkened kitchen, out into the eating area. There was slightly more light here. Outside the room's large windows, all was gray. Rain pounded down on the glass.

He reached the front doors and turned to face the Keepers. He

ROBERT A. BEST

handed each one a knife. "Alright," he said, turning back to the door. "Follow my lead."

He opened the door and stepped outside into the pounding rain. It pelted his head and shoulders, soaking him in seconds. He ignored it. Today was a glorious day.

Many people huddled outside, waiting for feeding time. They looked at Lee and the others, all hunched shoulders and hungry eyes.

Lee smiled, holding the knife down at his side. "Who here would like some food?"

\* \* \*

Angie lowered her rifle, watching the corpse of a small old woman fall. The dart embedded in her forehead bobbed up and down as she slumped. Angie shouldered the rifle and wiped rain from her face. It was immediately soaked again.

Angie looked around, willing herself to go slowly. The rain had picked up and it was harder to see. She stared at the large figure in the area up ahead. She felt ridiculous, but she had to make sure it wasn't moving. It was still.

"Okay," she said, nodding. She walked forward. Park grunted behind her, pushing the wheelbarrow.

They walked slowly and the shape resolved into a large stone statue. A rich man looked proud and serene with bushes surrounding him. *Richard Ashton IV*, said a plaque underneath the statue. *Founder of Ashton Memorial Zoo*.

"Here," she said. Park set the wheelbarrow down.

"Fuck about time," he said. "Fucker was filling up with water."

"I could have pushed for awhile."

"I didn't say that," said Park, smirking. "I just wanted to bitch a little."

Angie nodded, looking around. No corpses or crazed animals in sight. "Okay," she said. "Here goes nothing."

She took the communicator from her pocket and held it to her mouth. She clicked the button. Her voice boomed from speakers all over the zoo.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "My name is Angela Land. If you are trapped in this zoo, or if you just want to free this place from

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

the madness that has overtaken it, please join me. Together we can make the Keepers give us food. Together we can force the madman who has taken over to step down. We have weapons but I pray we won't need them. Our numbers should be enough. We are waiting by the statue of Richard Ashton. Join us. Thank you."

She lowered the communicator and switched it off, feeling ridiculous.

"You know you just told the crazies where we are, too," said Park.

"I know," said Angie. "I don't know how else to do this. We just have to risk it."

They waited, staring silently into the pounding rain. Five minutes later the first people appeared. They were scared, confused, and alive. They looked at Angie questioningly. She nodded and motioned them to the wheelbarrow.

\* \* \*

Lori sat motionless as Gregory opened the door and stepped out of the room. She stared at the floor, making her face as blank as possible. She wanted to look defeated, helpless. She wanted him to think nothing of leaving her alone. She wanted him to think he'd won. He told Lee where they were moving to. Right in front of her. She wanted him to think there was no point in hiding information.

He shut the door behind him, leaving Lori alone. Lori grabbed the ropes on her legs with both hands, pulling as hard as she could. She kept glancing at her broken phone across the room. The more she stared at it, the more repairable it looked. She could see how the battery fit back in, how the keyboard could be snapped into place. If she could just get a message to Ella. If she could just tell her where they were going. It was possible she was being ridiculous. She knew it. But she had to try.

She pulled, feeling hope when her leg shifted slightly. She'd heard that woman the night before. Her father was with her. Her real father, not the bearded monster who kept smiling at her. She hadn't heard from her real father in years. Ella hated him for it. Lori was indifferent about him, but at the moment he was preferable to Gregory.

ROBERT A. BEST

Her leg shifted again and she risked a small hop. The chair inched closer to the corner. To the phone. She was crazy. She knew it. But she had to keep going. She'd heard the woman over the speakers. She'd heard her dad. They said they were coming for her. They said nothing about Ella. That meant Ella was with them. It had to.

That, or...

She forced that line of thinking to stop. She pulled at the ropes and hopped again. The chair slid forward, then tipped. For a moment her chest pounded and she teetered, then she fell forward. She put up her palms to brace herself.

She hit the floor hard. Her palms smacked against the floor and the chair cracked against her legs. It hurt. It hurt a lot. But more importantly, it was loud.

"What's that?" came Gregory's voice from outside the door. Not right by the door, but close enough.

Panting against the cold floor, Lori reached for the ruins of her phone. Her shoulders and legs hurt. Her palms were raw and sharp pains shot up her wrists. She ignored it as her fingers closed on the mass of plastic and metal that had been her phone.

She pulled the mass to her, working as quickly as she could. She heard Gregory approaching. She had seconds, if she was lucky.

Her hands shaking, she snapped the battery into the back of the phone and pressed the keypad into place. For a moment she stared at the dead phone, feeling heartbroken and so very very stupid.

*Mom looks like something is wrong. She stares blankly at the road as she steers the car.*

*"Are you okay, Mom?" says Lori.*

*"No," says Mom.*

Then the screen lit up.

Her heart leapt as the phone booted to a start in her hands. Gregory was close. She heard his footsteps right outside the door. She heard him fishing around in his pockets, looking for his keycard.

As quickly as her shaking fingers could manage, she typed a text message.

The sound of Gregory digging through his pockets stopped. Lori pressed send and watched as the message was delivered.

The lock clicked open. Lori slammed her phone back onto the floor, shattering it. She flung the pieces away from her as the door

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

opened. He couldn't know what she'd done. He had to think his plans were still secret.

She forced herself to cry as the door swung fully open and Gregory stepped inside. His feet walked over to where she lay on the floor.

“What are you doing, Lori?” He said. His voice was cold, annoyed.

“You broke my phone!” yelled Lori. She wanted to sound like a child having a tantrum.

He reached down and pulled her to her feet. A little roughly. It scared Lori.

“Grow up, Lori,” said Gregory, reaching down to pull the broken chair out of the ropes. He left the ropes on her legs. He pulled the wood free and tossed it aside. The rope was looser, but not loose enough to fight. Or loose enough to run.

He sighed and shook his head at her. “Well, I hope you're happy you broke your chair. You've got quite a walk ahead of you and you could have used the rest.”

Lori glared at him, glad at how wet and red her eyes were. She wanted him to think she was weak. Helpless.

He shook his head. “You're in danger, Lori. You have to be more careful. You're the daughter of the ruler of Ashton Memorial. Try to start acting like it.”

He left her standing there, shaken and bewildered. She watched as he prepared to leave.

# EIGHTEEN

Angie held up her hand, motioning for the others behind her to stop. They did. They'd amassed a good-sized group by now. All the weapons Angie and Park collected from the shed were spoken for. The wheelbarrow was abandoned, and Park stood next to her, rifle ready.

The Zoo Bites stood at the bottom of the hill.

"We're hungry," said someone behind her.

"I know," said Angie. "We all are. But we can't risk just rushing it. Who knows how the crazy zookeepers would react?"

"They better react by giving us food," said someone else behind her. Angie heard the clank of tools being brandished.

"The weapons are for defense against corpses or animals," said Angie. "Not people." She took the communicator from her pocket and made sure it was set to broadcast.

"Keepers aren't people," muttered someone behind her.

Angie ignored that and clicked the communicator on. She held it to her mouth. "Attention people in the Zoo Bites." Her voice echoed around. "My name is Angela Land. I have a group of hungry people here with me. We just want food. Please step aside and let us have it. I promise we won't take more than we need."

"Don't speak for me," said someone behind Angie. "I'll take as much as I want."

Park frowned next to her. "Think you're making a mistake thinking you can control these people?"

Angie lowered the communicator. "I'm not controlling anyone. We're just trying to get food. Then we're going to get your daughter."

"You think crazy-ass will just give her up?"

"When he sees how many of us there are, he'll have to."

"You mean when he sees the army you're raising," said Park.

"I'm not raising an army," said Angie.

"Like to know what else the fuck to call it."

Down below, the Zoo Bites was quiet. No sign that anyone inside heard her. No sign there was anyone inside.

Angie raised the communicator to her lips and clicked it on.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“We're coming down now. Please be ready for us with food. Thank you.”

She lowered the communicator and stuck it back into her pocket. She looked over at Park, then back down at the Zoo Bites. “What do you think?”

Park shrugged. “Don't think we can keep your army waiting much longer.”

“Quit calling them that.” She turned to the others. They all clutched tools and shovels. They all looked desperate and hungry. “Okay, everyone. We're going down. If they start shooting, don't panic. Everyone retreat back up here as quickly as you can. Got it?”

They nodded. Angie nodded, both to them and to herself, and started down the hill. Park followed her. Then the rest of the group.

Rain pattered down around them as they trudged down the hill. Everything was silent. No groans. No growls. No sounds from inside the Zoo Bites. It occurred to her that there were no people outside, either. When she'd been here before with Dalton, there were people milling around outside. Waiting to be fed. Where were they?

They reached the doors and Angie held up a hand to stop. Everyone did. She hadn't planned on this. She'd assumed by this point a group of zookeepers would come out. She assumed they would argue. She assumed they would eventually bring food. She hadn't planned on opening the doors herself.

She peered through the glass. Plastic tables and chairs sat empty. Gray light came from large windows and a skylight in the ceiling. No movement.

“The hell?” she said. “Where is everybody?”

She heard the people behind her getting restless. She pulled back from the glass. She adjusted the rifle on her shoulder. She looked to Park. He nodded, his rifle ready.

“Okay,” she said. “Everyone be careful. We're going to check it out.”

She pulled on the door and it opened easily. Slowly, carefully, Angie stepped inside. Park followed. Angie stepped farther inside, hearing the others file in behind her.

“Hello?” she said.

Nothing.

## ROBERT R. BEST

Then she heard it. Sounds from the kitchen, low and insistent. Something like muttering. Or maybe moaning.

And chewing. It was faint, but Angie had no doubt. She heard chewing.

“Fuck,” she said, low and sighing.

Park cocked the rifle next to her. “Too bad they're where the food is.”

Angie nodded. She turned to the others. She spoke low, not wanting to alert the creatures in the other room. “Everyone be quiet and go slow. If we surprise them, we should be able to overpower them easily.”

She slung the rifle off her shoulder and crept forward. Park and the others followed. The sounds of chewing grew louder as they approached the kitchen. Teeth tore and jaws gnashed.

Angie reached the doorway to the kitchen and paused. She looked back to make sure everyone was ready. Park and others nodded. Angie nodded back and rounded the corner.

A group of people sat on the floor. In the dim light from an overhead bulb, Angie saw a mass of bloody meat between them. They greedily shoved the meat into their mouths, pulled off hunks and chewed.

“Go!” said Angie, leveling her rifle at the nearest one. Park stepped in and aimed. The others came around the corner, weapons ready.

The people on the floor looked up, blinking. The one nearest to Angie dropped his meat. His eyes grew wide. He understood what was happening.

“Wait!” she yelled. Park lowered his rifle, frowning.

“Don't shoot! Don't shoot!” said one of the people on the floor. He dropped the raw meat he was chewing and stood. “We aren't dead!”

Angie frowned, looking around. She saw wax paper and masking tape, stained red with blood, wadded on the floor next to the pile of meat. She realized.

She put her hand to her mouth.

Park snorted, slinging his rifle back over his shoulder.

“I know it's disgusting,” said the man standing. The others also dropped their meat and stood. “But it's all that's left. They took everything else. They smashed the stoves and ovens. Nothing works.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

It's all gone."

"Who took everything else?" said Angie.

"The Keepers," said a young red-headed woman. She stood, wiping blood from her mouth. "I saw it."

The people behind Angie grew restless. She heard them shifting position and muttering. They realized there was no food here.

The young red-headed woman stepped over to Angie. "The Keepers came out of the Bites a few hours ago. They offered food to everyone who would join them. They killed everyone who refused."

"Except you," said Park. Angie heard mutters of distrust from the people behind her.

The young woman nodded. "I hid. I saw it happen. About half an hour after that, they brought out wheelbarrows full of food. Cans, boxes, everything. They left. I was too scared to follow."

Angie sighed and rubbed her temples. "Any idea where they were going?"

The young red-headed woman shook her head. "No."

"Where's the food?" yelled someone in the crowd behind Angie.

"Unless you all would like some frozen raw meat," said Park, "there isn't any."

Angry mutters spread through the crowd.

"Everyone stay calm," said Angie. "The Keepers have probably gone to where Gregory is. They took all the nonperishables. They probably intend to regroup at the backup station with him. There's no kitchen there, so they couldn't take the meat."

"How the fuck does that help us now?" yelled someone else in the crowd. Others muttered their agreement.

"This is a minor setback," said Angie, ignoring the angry muttering that followed. "We know where they're going. It's where we were going after this anyway. We're just making one trip now instead of two. If we can just wait a little longer..."

The crowd grew angrier. They yelled back at Angie, too many voices to pick out any one statement.

The light flickered in the kitchen. Everyone stopped, staring at the bulb overhead.

"How long until the power goes off completely?" said Park.

## ROBERT R. BEST

“Who knows,” said Angie. “I’m sure the only reason it’s stayed on this long is that the stations are automated.”

She looked back at the crowd. They had calmed, but not much. She cleared her throat. “Everyone listen to me. We have to stick together here. We have to...”

Loud groans came from outside.

“Shit,” said Park, turning toward the big room. The people crowding the doorway backed up. Angie pushed past Park and them, into the big room to look outside.

A large mob of corpses were stumbling toward the doors.

“All the yelling must have caught their attention,” said Park, readying his rifle.

“Are there any other doors out of here?” yelled Angie.

“Yes!” said someone behind her. “There’s a service door that leads out from the kitchen!”

“Everyone move!” yelled Angie, pushing back past the crowd of people. She saw fear on their faces. She wondered how many of them had fought corpses before. She guessed not many. She understood why so many of them focused their aggression on the Keepers. The Keepers were alive. People knew how to handle living people. These things were something new and awful.

Angie looked side to side for a few seconds. She found a metal door at the back wall of the kitchen. She moved toward it. Park and the crowd followed behind her. The others, the ones who’d been eating the raw meat, joined the larger group.

Angie reached the door and grabbed the large metal handle. She tugged and the door swung open.

Outside, in the rain, stood two zebras. They were pacing angrily, huffing and snorting at nothing.

Then they saw Angie.

“Hey guys,” she said, backing back into the kitchen. “Any chance on us getting past?”

The zebras snorted and rushed at the doorway. Angie slammed the door and held it shut as the zebras rammed into it. The force of the impact shook the door and Angie’s frame.

“Yeah,” she said, as Park stepped up to help her. “That’s what I thought.”

Angie and Park pushed against the door as it shuddered a

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

second time. "We gotta lock this thing," she said, grunting with effort. She heard the closest members of the group rush up behind her. She heard a flurry of activity.

"Here!" said someone, handing Angie a large, long padlock.

The door shuddered a third time as Angie scanned the handle, looking for where the padlock could conceivably go. She found a round hole in the handle and slid the padlock through it. She clicked it into place and stepped back. Park stepped back too. The door shuddered and held.

The groans became louder. Angie ran back to the big room. The corpses were close to the front doors. Angie ran to the doors and locked them. The corpses groaned as they reached the glass and pawed at it.

Park stepped up next to her, peering out at the corpses. "What do you think? Let them in and beat the hell out of them?"

Angie considered it, frowning at the corpses and back at the armed group she'd assembled. "I don't know. We would have the corpses in a bottleneck, but I'm afraid of trapping these people in here with them. If something goes wrong, there's no way out."

"What have you done?" yelled someone in the crowd. "You've trapped us all in here!"

Angie ignored them, scanning the room for something she could use. She found a velvet rope threaded through several pedestals standing in the corner. Angie recognized it as the rope the restaurant would set up to organize long lines. She looked up at the large skylight in the center of the room. Gray sky showed behind the rain-pelted glass.

She looked back at the doors. Corpses were piling up against it, slapping on the glass. The glass was already cracked. She looked at Park, then pointed at a large table in the middle of the room. "Okay, Park, you and some others move that table under the skylight."

She ran over to unthread the rope from the pedestals. She heard Park and a few others moving the table.

When the rope was free she ran back to the table. She looked quickly up and down, gauging the distance from the table to the skylight. Rain pounded down. The corpses outside beat on the doors. Cracks spread along the glass.

Angie climbed onto the table. Park nodded to himself and did

## ROBERT A. BEST

the same.

“You get where I’m going with this?” said Angie, dropping the rope on the table and unshouldering her rifle.

“Believe I do,” said Park.

Angie turned her rifle around so that the butt faced upward. She rammed it against the skylight. The glass cracked. Rain began to seep through. Park rammed it and the cracks spread. Angie grunted and rammed upward a third time, slamming the butt of her rifle into the skylight.

It shattered, spilling glass to the table and onto the floor below. People jumped out of the way. Rain poured through the opening, slamming down onto the table and soaking Angie and Park in seconds.

Angie did her best to ignore the rain. She reshouldered her rifle and stooped down to grab the rope.

“I got this,” said Park, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. He hopped up from the table, catching the edge of the skylight. He hung there for a moment, rocking to build momentum, then pulled himself up and outside, onto the roof.

Angie straightened, holding the rope. Park got down on his knees, leaning back into the room. Rain poured down, pounding onto the table. The corpses clawed at the doors. Cracks spread, growing loud enough to be heard over the rain.

Park reached down, toward Angie. “Here.”

Angie handed him one end of the rope. Park stood, pulling the rope up with him. Angie tied a quick loop in the other end. “Everybody, up and out!” she yelled.

People started rushing toward the table. One by one, they climbed on and grabbed hold of the loop in the rope. Park pulled them up, then tossed the loop end of the rope back onto the table. Several people slipped in the rain soaking the table. Angie kept her eyes on the doors. The cracks spread as the corpses banged on them. She took her rifle from her shoulder and waited, ready if time ran out. Several people gathered behind her, brandishing their shovels and tools.

After another minute of scrambling and climbing, just a handful were left down in the Bites. A corpse outside slammed its dead fist on the door. The glass gave, a chunk of it falling to the floor. The corpse started pawing at the hole, oblivious to how the edges ripped at its skin.

“Go go go!” yelled Angie to those gathered behind her. They

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

rushed over and climbed onto the table. One by one, as quickly as they could manage, they grabbed hold of the rope and Park and the others above hoisted them up and out. Angie kept her eyes on the doors.

Another corpse slammed into the glass. The cracks spread and the glass shattered inward. The frontmost corpses, tearing themselves to shreds in the process, pushed inside, groaning and gnashing their teeth. Angie cocked her rifle and carefully fired. A dart embedded in the forehead of the closest one, a young man with organs spilling from large wounds in his torso. The man jerked and fell. Angie shouldered the rifle and ran to the table.

She climbed up as the corpses drew nearer. Rain pounded on her face and shoulders. She sputtered and looked around for the rope. The corpses were close. She could hear them. She found the rope and grabbed hold with both hands. "Pull!" she yelled.

Park did, wrenching her up as hands closed on her legs. She kicked downward, feeling her foot connect with skull. Something groaned, gurgling in the rain, and let go. Angie was pulled up and onto the roof.

Angie rolled onto the roof and stood, dropping her end of the rope. Rain pounded down everywhere as she looked around. The group she'd assembled stood huddled together, looking nervous. Below, Angie saw the corpses stumbling around the Bites. Those directly under the skylight looked upward, reaching and grasping at the falling rain. They blinked their dead eyes as water pooled in their rotting skin. Angie looked back to those on the roof. They all looked back expectantly. Park looked like he wondered what she had in mind next.

"Okay," she started. "Everyone just give me a second and..."

A woman at the back screamed as two dark shapes swooped down from the gray sky. Screeching sounds echoed around through the rain.

"The fuck?" yelled Park. People stumbled around in panic. One fell, screaming, from the roof.

Angie ran, pushing her way through the crowd, to the source of the panic. A young woman lay bloody and dead. Rain pattered on her bloody skin, streaking red across the roof.

"What the hell happened?" Angie yelled.

Screeching came from above. Angie looked up and saw the two

## ROBERT A. BEST

dark shapes circling, preparing to dive again. She squinted into the rain. Two hawks, now freed from their exhibit, sped toward her and the others.

“Get out of the way!” yelled Angie, ducking aside and pulling those closest with her. The hawks dove into the crowd, screeching and clawing. People stumbled to each side, desperate to get away. Several fell. Angie heard them scream and thump onto the pavement below. She heard bones snapping and people screaming.

Angie pulled her rifle from her shoulder and leveled it at the closest of the two birds. She fired. The dart just missed, grazing the hawk and knocking it off course. The hawk screeched in fury as both birds raced forward along the roof. They clawed at everyone who stood close. Angie cocked and fired again. The dart thudded into the underside of one of the birds, sending it into a long spiral. The bird spun away from the roof and collided with a nearby tree. The remaining bird barreled on ahead, clawing and screeching.

“No no no!” yelled a young man, backing away from the hawk as it raced toward him.

“Look out!” yelled Park from behind him but was too late. The young man stepped backward over the edge of the skylight. He fell screaming, into the Bites.

Angie rushed to the edge, kneeling so fast she almost slipped over the side. She picked up the rope and was prepared to toss it down to the man. She was too late. Corpses had him. The man screamed from the table. He lay flat on his back, arms and legs held down by corpses. They bent over his torso, biting and tearing. He screamed, blood pouring from his mouth and bubbling in the falling rain. The corpses pulled hunks of meat and organs from his twitching body. Angie dropped the rope and held out her arms to stop those who were rushing up behind her. She shook her head silently and looked up at Park.

Park's back was to her. He had his rifle pointed to the sky, moving slowly to follow the path of the remaining hawk. The hawk screeched as it turned, coming back around for another attack.

People started backing away as the hawk drew near. Park didn't move. He kept the rifle trained on the hawk.

“Park,” said Angie from her kneeling position. She slowly stood, moving to grab him and pull him aside.

“Not yet,” said Park.



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

The hawk drew closer, screeching and clawing.

“Now,” said Park, and fired.

The dart thudded into the hawk's chest. Park stepped aside as the hawk plummeted past him, spinning round and round. It crashed to the roof, sliding forward in the rain until it came to a stop inches from the crowd.

“Fuck,” said Park. “We could probably eat that if it wasn't full of tranqs.”

“We gotta get off this roof,” said Angie, running to the front edge and looking down.

The paved area in front of the Bites was empty. All the corpses were inside. No animals there either. She looked around as Park and the others moved up behind her. Then she saw it.

“There!” she yelled, pointing to a large dumpster to the side of the building, obscured by bushes. The top was open and it was stuffed with bags of garbage. Angie hoped they were soft.

“It's too far!” yelled the red-headed young woman in the crowd. The one who'd seen the Keepers leave the Bites.

“I'm working on it,” said Angie. She ran back to the skylight and grabbed the rope. She turned and ran back to the edge, heading for the corner. She tossed one end of the rope to Park.

“Hold on to this for me,” she said, and leapt off the corner of the roof. For a few seconds she flew through the air, wondering if she'd lost her mind. Then she landed in the dumpster. The bags were wet, slimy, and smelled worse than she would have guessed, but they were soft.

She turned over in the dumpster to lie on her back. She put her feet against the side of the dumpster and wrapped her end of the rope around her forearm. “Pull!” she yelled.

Park nodded and motioned to a group of nearby people to help. They all grabbed Park's end of the rope and pulled. Angie strained as the rope pulled her against the side of the dumpster. Park and the others heaved harder and the dumpster slid, screeching across the pavement, toward the Bites. It came to a stop against the corner of the building and Angie let go of the rope. She climbed from the dumpster and looked inside the doors. The corpses were stumbling around inside, oblivious to her for the moment.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Come on!” she yelled. “Hurry!”

Park led one person after another to the edge and they leapt into the dumpster. Several cried out in disgust as they hit the rotten trash, but each one climbed out unhurt. As they jumped, Angie ran around to either side of the building to check on those who had fallen earlier. None had survived their injuries.

She ran back to the front as the next to last person climbed from the dumpster. She watched as Park looked over to check his aim, and jumped.

She heard him muttering as he hit the trash. He climbed from the dumpster and jumped down to stand in front of Angie. “I’m so glad I got to smell that,” he said.

“I was too,” said Angie, looking over the others. They all looked unhurt and still had the weapons she and Park had given them.

“You know,” said Park. “Some day one of your batshit ideas isn’t going to work.”

“I know,” said Angie, nodding and adjusting the rifle on her shoulder. She surveyed her arm, noticing rope burns. “I’ll worry about that once my kids are safe and we have some sort of home again.”

Park nodded. “Speaking of kids, we need to be getting to Lori.”

“That we do,” said Angie, nodding. She looked back to the Bites. Corpses stumbled around inside, many still staring dumbly at the skylight. Angie knew she and the others would have to leave soon or the corpses would spot them. She looked back to Park. “That we do.”

# NINETEEN

Maylee sat at the long table in the zookeeper breakroom. Her bat was on the table in front of her. She held a black marker she'd found in another open locker. She dragged the tip of the marker along the metal of the bat slowly, deliberately. The smell of the marker stung her nose.

“What the heck are you doing?” said Dalton, coming in from the other room. Rain beat down on the roof.

Maylee considered saying nothing at all. “Naming my bat,” she said.

Dalton frowned. “What?”

“Just leave me alone, Dalton,” she said. Dalton frowned bigger, made a mocking face, then turned and left the room.

Maylee made one last line, the marker squeaking as it dragged across the metal. She put the cap back on the marker and set it down. The fumes from the marker made her blink. She was exhausted.

She put her head back and stared at the ceiling.

*It is years ago. Maylee is a little girl and can't sleep. Mom and Dad are yelling in the front room. The yelling stops and Mom is crying. Maylee stares at the dark ceiling of her bedroom, trying to ignore the sounds coming from the living room. She can't.*

*She sits up and climbs from her bed. She can hear Mom saying something, too low for Maylee to make out the words. She hears Dad respond. His voice sounds tired, cold. Maylee feels scared and doesn't know why.*

*She walks to the door of her bedroom. The door leads out to the hall. She opens it and hears the front door open at the same time. She hears more talking, then the front door shuts. Maylee walks out into the hall and toward the front room. The floor is cold on her bare feet.*

*She walks into the living room and sees Mom sitting on the floor, crying. Mom hears her come in and turns. She wipes her eyes and smiles.*

*“Hey baby,” says Mom. “What are you doing up?”*

*“What's going on?” says Maylee. She hears Dalton crying from*

## ROBERT A. BEST

*his crib.*

*“Nothing, honey, nothing,” says Mom, climbing to her feet. Mom wipes her eyes again and looks down at Maylee. Maylee looks back. She is little, but she can see the fear in Mom's eyes. Maylee wishes she could help. Maylee hates herself for being too little to help.*

Maylee jerked back to awareness when something in her pocket buzzed. She sat up straight, blinking and looking around the breakroom. “Shit!” she said.

“What?” said Dalton, coming back in from the viewing room.

Maylee dug around in her pockets. “I completely forgot.”

“Forgot what?” said Dalton, stepping up to her.

“Ella's phone,” said Maylee, finding the phone and pulling it out. “I can't believe it didn't get ruined when I fell in the bear pool.”

“You fell in a bear pool?” said Dalton. Maylee noticed a jealous element to his voice.

“It wasn't fun, Dalton,” said Maylee. She flipped open the phone and saw a text message from Lori.

“Lemme see,” said Dalton.

“Shh!” said Maylee, feeling guilty for how harsh she sounded. She read the message. It was hurriedly written and full of typos. But she got the gist of it. Gregory and Lori were moving. It gave the location. It said it would be soon.

“We gotta call Mom,” said Maylee, standing and dropping the phone back in her pocket. She grabbed the communicator from the table and clicked the button on the side.

The whole room went dark.

“Shit,” said Maylee.

“Think you blew a fuse?” said Dalton.

“I didn't blow a fuse, Dalton,” said Maylee. “The power went out.”

She clicked the button on the communicator again. “Mom?” she said.

Nothing.

“Dammit.”

“What?”

“This stupid thing runs on batteries, but apparently it needs all that shit out there to work!” She motioned toward the viewing room. “Who designed this shit?”

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

"The crazy man who kidnapped Park's daughter?"

Maylee nodded, tossing the communicator on the table. She stared at her bat. At what she'd written.

"How's your ankle?" she asked.

"Better."

"Good. Don't tell Mom, but we're going to rescue Lori. We just became the only ones who know where she's going to be and we have to do something."

She sighed and looked at Dalton. He looked back at her, like a scared little boy trying to look brave.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"I'm putting you in danger. I promised Mom I'd protect you."

Dalton looked insulted. "You aren't that much older than me, Maylee."

Maylee picked up her bat. *Ella*, it said.

"Actually I am," she said.

\* \* \*

Maylee fumbled with the rifle on her shoulder and looked around. Her bat was in her other hand, lowered toward the ground. Dalton stood next to her, sputtering in the rain.

"It's cold," he said.

"I know," said Maylee. "But now that the power's out it would have gotten pretty cold in the office, too."

"It's wet, too."

"We have to save Lori, Dalton. Mom doesn't know where she's going to be." Maylee pulled a crumpled map from her pocket and smoothed it out. She tried to read it despite the dim light and the rain pounding down. She didn't have much luck. The rifle began slipping from her shoulder. She sighed and lowered the map, moving to readjust the strap.

A loud groan came from behind them. Maylee spun to see a large man, with huge dark gouges in his face and arms, stumbling toward them. He moaned, gurgling in the rain.

Maylee dropped her bat and stuffed the map back into her

## ROBERT A. BEST

pocket. She unslung the rifle from her shoulder. The corpse stumbled closer. She fumbled with the rifle, then sighed. "I hate this stupid thing!"

She flung the rifle away. It clattered to the pavement, sending drops of water flying. She picked up her bat and ran at the corpse.

The man groaned at her, opening his mouth for the approaching meal. Maylee screamed at him, slamming the bat across his jaw. His head whipped to one side, teeth and bone shooting from his mouth. Maylee brought the bat up and slammed downward. She heard his neck pop and felt his skull give way. Black gunk spilled from his mouth and he fell over backward. He was still.

"That's better," she said, panting down at the corpse.

Gurgling came from behind her. Cold arms closed on her shoulders.

"Shit!" yelled Maylee, struggling to turn and face her attacker. A woman had her, tangled black hair partially obscuring the oozing sores on her face. The woman hissed and leaned in to bite. Maylee couldn't get free or bring up her bat. She screamed.

A "crack" rang out behind her. The woman jerked. Her rotting arms slipped off of Maylee and the woman fell to the pavement. Maylee turned and looked. A dart was embedded in the back of the woman's head. Dalton stood a few feet away, holding the rifle.

"Not too shabby, huh?" he said, grinning.

"Well shit," said Maylee. She dug around in her pockets and found the box of darts Mom had given her. She handed them to Dalton. "Here. Just don't get too close trying to aim."

Dalton stuck the box in his pocket. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and looked around with purpose. Maylee smirked to herself and pulled the crumpled map from her pocket. She smoothed it out and squinted at it. She looked at their surroundings, then back at the map. Finally she nodded to herself and put the map back into her pocket.

"Through here," she said, heading for a large structure to their right and making sure Dalton followed.

"I know that place!" said Dalton. "That's the sea lion show!"

"Yep," said Maylee. "I figure as long as we stay away from the pool, we'll be okay. I don't think sea lions move very fast out of the water."

"You sure about that?"

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

“Nope. So I hope they just aren't there at all.”

They were. Maylee heard them bleating and splashing furiously as soon as she entered the large amphitheater. There were five sea lions in the large pool covering one side of the building. They thrashed in the water, infuriated at the sight of Maylee. Maylee held up her arms for Dalton to stop. He did. Maylee watched the sea lions for a moment, making sure they had no way to easily get out of the pool. When she was satisfied, she nodded and stepped farther in.

The sea lions bleated and thrashed louder than before but stayed in their pool. Their cries echoed around the empty amphitheater, bouncing off the concrete walls and the metal bleachers that lined the other side of the building. Maylee and Dalton walked as far away from the pool as they could, almost tripping over the first row of bleachers in the process. The sea lions bleated and slapped against the thick, high glass wall surrounding the pool. She wondered if one could leap up and over the wall. Then she saw the high platform sticking out over the pool and remembered. A trainer would stand on the platform and hold out treats. The sea lion would leap up and snatch the treats from the trainer's hand. The board was well above the walls of the pool. She tried not to think about that and focused on walking forward.

Groans came from the far side of the building. “Shit,” hissed Maylee, stopping. Dalton stopped behind her. A group of corpses stumbled in through the exit at the other end of the amphitheater.

Dalton raised his rifle at the group. Maylee shook her head and pushed the barrel down. “There's too many for that and besides, we can go around.”

“How the heck do we go around?” said Dalton. The sea lions bleated and splashed next to them.

“We go up,” said Maylee. She turned and climbed onto the first rung of bleachers. She turned and motioned for Dalton to follow. The corpses stumbled farther into the building.

“Oh yeah,” said Dalton. He followed.

Maylee and Dalton climbed farther up into the bleachers and the corpses drew closer. They reached the edge of the bleachers and began climbing. They were much slower and clumsier.

Maylee stopped midway up the bleachers and turned. Dalton stopped next to her. “Now what?” he said.

## ROBERT A. BEST

“Now we wait,” she said, watching the corpses struggle up the bleachers. “When they're all good and stuck on the bleachers, we go that way.” She pointed to her right and down, indicating a path across the bleachers and down to the now clear exit.

“Hmm,” said Dalton. The corpses below groaned and the sea lions bleated. “Pretty smart.”

“Don't have to tell me.”

Growling came from behind. Maylee's back grew tight. She turned, slowly.

Two spotted hyenas were crouching on the row just above them. A third was coming up from the side. They growled and let out a laughing noise that sent chills through Maylee.

“Maylee,” said Dalton, sounding very nervous.

“I see them, Dalton,” said Maylee, reaching out and grabbing his arm. The corpses below them groaned, climbing closer. The sea lions bleated and splashed.

One of the hyenas leapt, flying straight at Dalton. Maylee pulled him aside. The hyena crashed into the approaching group of corpses. It thrashed around, trying to regain its footing.

“Run!” yelled Maylee. Pulling Dalton with her, she ran across the bleachers, heading for the far wall. She heard the two remaining hyenas pounding along on the metal behind her. They were about halfway to the wall when she realized they weren't going to make it. Even if they could make it to the wall, they'd still have to climb back down the bleachers. And the hyenas would be on them.

She stopped and spun, putting Dalton behind her. The closest hyena was only a few feet away. It lunged, leaping at Maylee. Maylee whacked it midair with her bat. The hyena fell, rolling down the bleachers as it bounced from row to row.

Maylee corrected from her follow-through, straightening and waiting for the last hyena. It crouched low and growled. Maylee backed up a step. Dalton backed up with her. The hyena jumped down to the same row as Maylee and Dalton. It crept forward, growling and giggling.

Maylee heard Dalton behind her, fumbling with the rifle. “Not now, Dalton. Jump down to the next row.”

“What?” said Dalton. “Why?”

“Just do it!”



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Dalton did. The hyena let out a high-pitched bark and leapt at Maylee. Maylee jumped up to the next highest row and the hyena passed underneath her. She swung her bat down, smashing the hyena in the face. The hyena, knocked off course, crashed into the bleachers. It rolled down, banging off the seats as it went. Dalton leapt aside and watched it fall.

Maylee watched it fall for a moment, then looked to her left. Several of the corpses were already to their level. They stumbled along the bleachers, coming toward them.

“Come on!” said Maylee. She ran down the bleachers, grabbing Dalton as she went. They ran as fast as they dared down the rows of seats, leaving the groans of the corpses behind them.

They ran so fast that Maylee had to put up her palms when they reached the bottom. Momentum carried her into the glass wall surrounding the pool. She caught herself, panting at the water behind the glass.

A sea lion jerked into view, bleating and thrashing at Maylee. Maylee jerked back, startled.

“Come on,” she said. “We gotta go.”

They ran out through the exit.

The exit led into another exhibit. Maylee recognized it immediately. It was a hallway running by a huge glass tank. The tank was full of water. Normally a hippopotamus swam inside of it. It had been a wonderful sight when she was young, the huge hippo gracefully swimming in the water or climbing out onto the faux-rocks at the far side of the tank. At the moment she saw nothing in the tank. The water was dark and dirty.

“Come on,” she repeated. “We just gotta get past this and then get outside.”

She stopped when she almost slipped on the floor. She frowned, looking down. Water coated the floor. She looked around. “Where’s the water coming from?”

Her eyes fell back on the tank. She saw cracks splintering its surface. Water seeped out.

“What’s...” Dalton started to say. Then they both saw it. A large shape emerging from the dark water, rushing toward them. The hippo was in there after all. Its head was bloody and torn. It did not seem to

## ROBERT A. BEST

care. It raced toward the glass.

“Get back!” yelled Maylee. She jumped backward, almost knocking over Dalton in the process.

The hippo hit the tank and the glass exploded outward. A huge wave of water engulfed the hallway. For several moments all Maylee knew was water and the feeling she was drowning. Then the water was gone and she was left sputtering in the hallway and looking for Dalton.

She found him, crouching and coughing farther down the hallway, back toward the amphitheater. She ran to him. “You okay?”

He nodded, standing. He stopped, looking behind Maylee with wide eyes.

Maylee turned. The hippo was straightening itself up the hallway. It thrashed around furiously. Maylee knew what would happen as soon as it saw them.

“Run!” she yelled, grabbing Dalton's hand and pulling him back toward the amphitheater. She heard the hippo behind them bellow and come after them.

They reached the amphitheater and Maylee looked around desperately. She heard the hippo behind them, coming fast. To her right she saw a large raised stage. It was where the trainers stood during the shows.

“There!” she yelled, pulling Dalton up onto the stage. The hippo raced past, missing Maylee by inches. She stumbled onto the stage, letting go of Dalton and turning to watch the hippo. She wanted to grab Dalton and run back to the exit. But the hippo corrected itself surprisingly fast. It would be back on them soon.

Maylee looked around. Her eyes landed on the ladder leading up to the platform that extended out over the sea lion tank. The sea lions bleated and splashed. The corpses on the bleachers groaned and stumbled. The hippo thrashed its head around, looking for Maylee and Dalton.

“Climb!” Maylee yelled. She grabbed Dalton and practically pulled him up and onto the ladder herself. Dalton took hold of the ladder and started climbing. The hippo saw them and rushed at the stage, snorting and huffing.

Maylee climbed up after Dalton. The hippo smashed onto the stage and rushed the ladder. It hit with such force that Maylee nearly slipped off. It bellowed up at her in rage as she regained her grip and

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

pulled herself up onto the platform.

Dalton was kneeling at the top, rifle aimed down at the hippo.

“Dalton,” said Maylee, panting. “What are you...”

Dalton fired. The dart thudded into the hippo. It thrashed around in anger before looking up at Dalton and bellowing.

“I'm getting him!” said Dalton, grinning and preparing to fire again. The hippo slammed into the ladder a second time, sending a shudder up to the platform. Dalton fired. The dart hit the hippo in the torso.

Maylee heard bleating and splashing coming from behind her. She turned to face the tank. She swallowed. It hadn't looked this high from the audience. Down below, the sea lions swam around furiously. One leapt straight up, startling Maylee so much she took a step back. It missed the platform and fell, bleating in fury, back into the water.

Behind her, Dalton fired a third time. “Got him!” he said. “He's slowing down!”

“Good,” said Maylee, not taking her eyes off the sea lions. She heard the hippo roar and slam the ladder again. The force of the shock was less this time. “Hurry.”

“Why?” said Dalton.

“Because,” and she stopped as another sea lion leapt out of the pool. She could tell by its arc it would make it. She didn't know how much damage one could do up close, but she knew it could surely knock her and Dalton off the platform.

“Shit,” she said to herself, backing up as the sea lion shot up into the air. She readied herself, waiting until it was a few feet away. Then she swung her bat so hard she almost fell off the platform. She connected with the side of the sea lion. The sea lion bleated in anger and fell, spinning, back into the pool.

“Hurry!” she yelled back at Dalton. Her arms ached.

Dalton fired a fourth time. Maylee turned to watch. The dart thudded into the hippo. It staggered and slumped, snoring.

“Good job,” she said, pushing him toward the ladder. “Hurry hurry hurry!”

They climbed back onto the ladder just as Maylee heard a sea lion jump again. They climbed down as fast as they could. It was more difficult now that the ladder was bent from the assault by the hippo.

ROBERT R. BEST

Maylee heard the sea lion land on the platform and thrash around angrily.

They reached the bottom. Maylee looked at the hippo, then back at Dalton. "You okay?"

He nodded.

"Good. Let's go," she said. And they ran.

# TWENTY

Angie and the others plodded along through the rain. She wished they had made more progress. She wished she had food for everybody. She wished a lot of things.

“Where's the food you promised us?” said someone in the crowd.

“Right next to shut the fuck up,” said Park.

“We'll find food,” said Angie. “My guess is Gregory's hoarding it. It can't be a coincidence that right after I mocked him for not controlling the Keepers, the Keepers packed up all the nonperishable food and moved.”

“So where the hell are we going?” said a woman in the crowd.

“Some place called the Emergency Backup Station. He let the animals out, and that's the only place he could have done it from. We get there, we demand food and we rescue Park's daughter.”

“Then what?” said the red-headed young woman behind Angie. The one who'd seen the Keepers leave the Bites.

“Then,” said Angie, “we convince Gregory to step down.” She plodded along through the wet. The others walked along behind her. “He won't let people leave. He's gone insane with power. We force him to let go. Then those who want to go can go. I'm staying behind and making this place safe again. We can live here until help comes.”

There were murmurs of assent around the crowd.

“You really think Gregory and the Keepers will step down?” said the red-head.

“That's what the weapons are for,” said Park.

“It's just to scare them,” said Angie. “And to defend against the corpses and the crazy animals. We won't have to use them on people.”

“You hope not,” said Park.

“I know not,” said Angie. “Things can't have gone that insane. Surely they'll listen.”

Deep down, Angie feared they would not.

The group rounded a corner. Angie held up her arms for the others to stop. They did. Her chest grew tight.

## ROBERT A. BEST

A large gray elephant stood in the center of an open area ahead of them. Its back was to them and it had not noticed their arrival. It stomped its feet and snorted in the rain.

“Shit,” said Park. “Not sure how much use tranqs and shovels are going to be against that thing.”

The crowd behind Angie muttered nervously. Angie looked around for an idea. She saw a gift shop to her right. It was large, taking up most of the area on that side. Angie fished the map from her pocket and squinted at it through the rain.

“The gift shop,” she said, putting the map back into her pocket and nodding at the building. “It has two doors. We can go in there and come out the other side. Completely bypass the elephant.”

“Don't see what choice we have,” said Park, taking the rifle from his shoulder and holding it ready. “Let's go shopping.”

The group slowly walked toward the gift shop. Angie kept her eyes on the elephant. It stomped and whipped its trunk around in the rain. It didn't turn and notice them.

They reached the door without incident. Angie pulled it open and looked inside. It was dark but looked clear. She looked back to the group and nodded. They all filed inside.

Angie had only taken a few steps inside before they were completely enveloped in darkness. She heard the door shut behind her, indicating the entire group was inside.

“Where the hell are the lights?” said someone in the crowd.

“Also right next to shut the fuck up,” said Park. “It's a happening place. You should go there.”

“The power's off,” said Angie. “It's off all over the entire zoo, and it's probably not coming back. So everyone just stay together, move slow and keep calm. We'll be fine.”

They all moved through the dark. Angie could make out dim outlines. Racks of souvenir T-shirts. Shelves of animal-themed knickknacks. She found herself hating the gift shop for being so large.

“I think I heard something,” said the red-headed young woman behind Angie.

Angie strained to listen. All she heard were the fumbling movements of the crowd and their mutters.

“I heard it too,” said someone else in the crowd, farther back.

“Everyone just stay calm,” said Angie.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Groans erupted from all sides. People screamed. Angie whipped her head side to side, trying to pinpoint where the groans were coming from. She saw moving shapes and realized they were coming from everywhere. Corpses had been standing in the dark of the shop the whole time. For a moment she thought she'd killed herself and everyone with her. Then she heard the sounds of people using the weapons she'd given them. She heard the clang of shovels and wrenches. She heard corpses groan and fall. She felt hope.

Then a tightly-wound band of cloth closed around her neck and pulled tight. She fell backward against her attacker. The cloth tightened further, pushing the air from her throat.

Her attacker spoke, and Angie recognized the voice. The red-headed woman. "Long live the Keepers, bitch," she said.

Shafts of light exploded around her and Angie was convinced she was dying. Then she realized the lights were real, bobbing around in the dark as people moved.

"I found flashlights!" someone said. "They still work!"

Angie struggled, clutching at the cloth as it dug deeper into her neck. She was failing.

Several of the lights fell on her.

"What the hell?" said Park's voice.

Park rushed over and shoved the red-headed woman back. She let go of Angie. Angie stumbled away, coughing and wheezing. She pulled the cloth from her throat and saw it was a zoo souvenir T-shirt. Angie turned back to the red-head. Her shirt sleeves had been pushed upward during the struggle. A crude "K" was carved into her arm.

"Dammit," said Park to the red-head. "I knew there was something wrong about you."

"Did you now?" said the red-head, looking defiant in the beams of light trained on her. "Good for you, hillbilly! Too bad you're all going to the wrong fucking place! You people think you can take over this zoo? All our true leader has to do is move himself and his daughter and you fuckers have no idea where you're going. You're a joke!"

"What are you saying?" said Angie. "Where have they moved to?"

"Where the fuck is my daughter?" yelled Park.

"Traitor spy bitch!" said an older man in the crowd. He rushed

## ROBERT A. BEST

to the red-head. Angie saw the wrench in his hand just before he slammed it across the woman's temple. The woman cried out and dropped to her knees. A split in her skin showed a crack in her skull. Blood seeped out. She twitched and moaned.

"What the fuck is the matter with you!" yelled Angie, shoving the older man back. The older man looked at her in shock.

"She attacked you!" yelled the man. "She attacked our leader!"

"I'm not your fucking leader!" yelled Angie, shoving him again. "Get out! Just get out of here!"

The man looked bewildered. He would have looked sad if not for the blood on the wrench he carried. The lights bobbed in the dark, moving from him to Angie to the dying woman on the floor.

"But," the older man said. "Where the hell am I supposed to go?"

"I don't give a shit!" yelled Angie. "Just get out!"

The man looked from Angie to the others. He looked shocked, then hurt, then angry. "Fine. Fuck you anyway." He stomped out of view, headed toward the far exit.

Angie heard the young woman on the floor moaning. Angie dropped to her knees. She struggled to think of what to say. She felt guilty. The woman had attacked her, but she'd been stopped. Angie opened her mouth to speak, then shut it.

"Where the fuck is my daughter?" Park yelled again, his voice shaking.

The young woman moaned, blood falling from the split in her temple and onto the floor. "Cat Country," the woman said.

"What?" said Angie, leaning closer. Her nurse's aide training came back to her and she desperately tried to think of ways she could help. "What did you say?"

"Cat County," said the young woman. "They're going to Cat County." Then she slumped, fell over, and died.

\* \* \*

Maylee and Dalton stomped along through the rain. Dalton had his rifle over his shoulder. Maylee had her bat held down at her side. They passed trees, bushes and empty exhibits. Maylee heard faint groans, somewhere far off. She also thought she heard a few growls



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

from somewhere. Again, too far off to tell.

Dalton spoke, breaking the silence. "Is this the way to Cat Country?"

"We're coming from the back way," said Maylee. "This way we'll be at the top and can see the whole thing."

Dalton nodded and kept walking. They drew near a bend in the path. They approached it silently. Maylee thought she heard something coming from behind. She turned her head to look, continuing to walk forward. She saw nothing. She shrugged and turned back.

They rounded the corner.

Three corpses stood there, moaning and grabbing at them.

The closest one, a fat man with no skin on his hands, grabbed at Maylee. His muscles flexed in the rain as he grabbed and hissed. Maylee brought up her bat and slammed it across the man's face. His head whipped to one side and he stumbled back. She brought her bat around and slammed his head the other way. His skull cracked and he fell to the ground, dead. Black ooze seeped from his cracked skull.

Dalton screamed. Maylee whipped around to see him struggling with his rifle as a young woman, missing one eye and an ear, groped at him. She hissed through her bloody teeth. He couldn't get the rifle around in time and she grabbed him. He screamed.

Maylee rushed over through the rain and slammed the woman in the back of the head. She fell forward, letting go of Dalton. He scrambled out of the way and the young woman stumbled in the rain. She turned, hissing at Maylee. Maylee brought her bat up over her head and slammed downward, screaming as she swung. The woman's head buckled inward and her remaining eye bulged. She slumped and fell to the ground. She was still.

Maylee looked at Dalton, who was standing a few feet away. "You okay?"

He nodded.

A low, dry moan came from behind her. Maylee remembered there had been three corpses. Hands closed on her shoulders and pushed her forward. She fell to her stomach, her bat flying from her hand and clattering across the pavement. She felt the corpse crawling up her back, moaning in a dry rasp and preparing to bite. She screamed.

"Maylee!" yelled Dalton.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Maylee heard a rifle fire. She felt the corpse on her back jerk and slump. Maylee squirmed free and scrambled to her feet. She quickly looked at the ground. The corpse, an old man with leathery skin, lay still. A dart was embedded in the back of his head. She turned to where her bat had flown. She ran to it, stooping to pick it up. "Thanks," she said.

"It wasn't me," said Dalton.

Maylee frowned and turned back.

"Freeze!" said someone. Maylee squinted through the rain and saw five zookeepers, all holding rifles. The rifles were pointed at her and Dalton.

"We got stragglers!" said one of the zookeepers.

"They could be spies!" yelled another. "Take them out!"

They cocked their rifles. Maylee tensed, preparing to grab Dalton and run.

"Wait!" said one of them. The others kept their rifles trained but didn't fire. The one who'd spoken stepped forward. It was a young man with greasy black hair. *Lee* was written on his shirt.

Lee stepped closer to them. He looked at Dalton and nodded.

"I recognize this one," he said. "He was with the woman when she came to the Bites. She said he was her son. And she kept going on about her kids when she was on the intercom."

He looked at Maylee and nodded. "I'm guessing you're the other one. You two are coming with me. Gregory's going to want to meet you."

Maylee considered slamming him in the face and running. The rifles trained on her and Dalton said otherwise.

"Yeah," he said, nodding again. "He's definitely going to want to meet you."

# TWENTY-ONE

Cat Country was the centerpiece of Ashton Memorial Zoo. It was built along the side of the largest hill in the zoo. The lion exhibit was at the bottom. To either side were exhibits for cheetahs and tigers. Moving up the hill were several exhibits, all separated with thick glass fences, for various breeds of pumas and leopards. All with layers of rocks and ledges for big cats to climb or rest on. Paved walkways ran along either side, giving visitors many angles to view the cats from. It was by far the most popular exhibit in the zoo.

Angie and her group approached it from the bottom, plodding through the rain toward the lion exhibit. Angie was relieved to find it empty, but realized it only meant the lions could be anywhere. She held up her arms for everyone to stop. They did. Park stopped next to her and looked up. Angie followed his gaze.

The top of the hill was lined with Keepers. They stood inside all the different exhibits, separated by the fences. They stood on the rocks and ledges, all with rifles. Rain pelted down, running into Angie's eyes as she scanned the hill. Her gaze reached the center and stopped.

At the center of the Keepers, standing atop the highest point of the hill, was Gregory.

\* \* \*

Maylee sat on a stone inside an exhibit meant for a puma. She was gagged and her hands were tied behind her back with a strip of cloth. She pulled and tugged, making little progress. Dalton was a few feet to her left. He was also gagged, tied and struggling. Maylee's bat was a few feet to her right. She desperately wanted to free her hands, grab it and smack the hell out of the Keepers lined up all around her. She knew she'd get shot full of darts within seconds of starting, but she didn't care.

Gregory stood in front of her, his back to her. He looked down at something Maylee couldn't see. The one called Lee had been right. Gregory was very interested in meeting the daughter and son of the

ROBERT A. BEST

woman causing him so much trouble. He ordered them tied and kept close to him. Maylee was certain he intended to use them as a bargaining tool. She was determined not to let him.

Lori sat across the way from Maylee. She was also gagged and had her hands tied behind her back. Maylee stopped struggling, staring at her. She looked exactly like Ella. The hair was different, the clothes were different, but otherwise exactly the same. She felt like she knew her and didn't all at the same time. They hadn't had time to speak when Maylee and Dalton were brought to Gregory.

Lori caught Maylee's eyes and gave her a questioning look. Maylee knew what she was asking. Lori wondered if she was the one who had texted days ago. The one who had found Ella's phone. The one who had later found Ella.

Maylee nodded.

Lori nodded back and looked to Maylee's bat. Specifically, she looked at the word *Ella* written across it. She looked back at Maylee, with a questioning look so desperate it made Maylee want to cry.

Maylee paused, not wanting to do it, then shook her head.

Lori's eyes went wet and bloodshot. She blinked and looked down. Rain fell all around them but Maylee could see tears.

She heard footsteps coming and looked their way. Gregory was walking toward them. He smiled down at the three of them. Maylee saw the murderous look Lori gave him and concurred.

"Well, well," said Gregory, smiling through the rain. Maylee pulled at the strip of cloth holding her wrists so hard she felt her circulation being cut off.

Then she felt the cloth tear. A tiny bit, but it sent a thrill of hope through her.

"It looks like your mother has arrived," said Gregory to Maylee. She pulled at the cloth furiously, again feeling it tear a tiny bit.

"Let's all go say hello," said Gregory.

\* \* \*

The crowd behind Angie muttered and looked around. Angie and Park kept their focus on the top of the hill. Where Gregory had been. A few moments ago, he had stepped out of view. The crowd behind Angie grew louder when he returned, looking down at them.

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

Angie held up her hand for the group to be quiet. They were. Rain pounded down around them.

“Ms. Land,” shouted Gregory, loud enough to be heard over the rain. “So nice to finally meet you.”

“Give us the girl,” yelled Angie, spitting out rain as she tilted her head back to aim her voice at Gregory. “Then feed these people and let them go!”

The crowd behind her murmured their assent.

“They were being fed!” yelled Gregory. “At designated times and in designated amounts!”

“You can't treat these people like animals! You can't keep them locked in here against their will!” yelled Angie.

“I can if I know what's best for them!” yelled Gregory. “You think you would be a better leader than I am?”

“I am not their leader!” yelled Angie. “We are just scared hungry people who want food and freedom!”

Gregory laughed. “You organize a mob against me, bring them to this place and say you are not their leader? Have you seen what's going on outside? People need to be kept in line! They need control! Otherwise you have chaos! Those people behind you would storm this hill like animals and kill me if you weren't holding them back! Now explain to me again how you are not their leader!”

Angie stared at him through the rain. The people behind her muttered, sounding very angry. “He's just trying to confuse the issue,” she said to them. Then she raised her voice and yelled back at Gregory. “Just give us the girl and some food!”

“Step down and I will feed you!”

“Step down? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Step down and accept my rule!” yelled Gregory.

“Your rule? This is a fucking zoo! You have lost your mind!”

Park, who was silent and glaring this whole time, finally spoke up. He yelled up the hill at Gregory. “Give me my fucking daughter!”

“Your daughter?” yelled Gregory. “You mean the one I've been raising all these years? The one I've been providing for? Just like I've provided for all my citizens here? You think you can just show up now and act like you have any say in what I do with my child? With my people?”

ROBERT A. BEST

“They are not your people!” yelled Angie.

\* \* \*

Maylee stood a few feet behind Gregory, struggling with her bonds. Two Keepers stood to either side of her, hands on her shoulders and gripping tight. Dalton stood just in front of her, also struggling with his bonds. Two Keepers held him in place. She heard Mom's voice coming from the bottom of the hill. She heard Gregory shouting down at her. She desperately wanted to break free and run to Mom. She felt the cloth binding her wrists ripping, but not enough. She bit into her gag and pulled.

Next to her, Lori struggled with her bonds as well. She looked so much like Ella, Maylee couldn't look at her very long. It was disorienting. Maylee thought she heard groans somewhere behind her but there was too much other noise to be sure.

Gregory turned back to the Keepers holding her and Dalton and nodded. The Keepers walked them forward, toward Gregory and the edge of the hill. As she passed close to Lori, Maylee heard Lori's bonds rip.

\* \* \*

The crowd behind Angie was angry. Park was angry. Angie didn't know how much longer she could control them. She hated thinking about it in those terms.

Gregory had his back to the crowd, motioning to the Keepers behind him. He turned back.

“Listen!” yelled Angie up at him.

“No, you listen!” said Gregory, and pulled a bound and gagged Maylee into view.

“Maylee!” yelled Angie, shock jolting through her. Gregory reached back and pulled Dalton, also bound and gagged, into view.

“How in the hell,” said Park.

Angie pushed down her shock and rage, nearly shaking in the pounding rain. “If you hurt them when you were kidnapping them, I swear to god I'll...”

“Kidnapping?” said Gregory, laughing. “They came to me! Lee

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

found them not a hundred feet from where I'm standing! Do you see, everyone down there? Do you see what a good job Ms. Land does of controlling her own?"

"You son of a whore-sucking bitch!" screamed Angie. "Let them go!" Through her rage, Angie thought she heard moans coming from somewhere. She couldn't be sure, and she was too angry to focus. "Oh I will," said Gregory. "Just as soon as..."

He fell silent as another young girl ran out onto the ledge. She looked just like Ella. Angie knew immediately who it was. The girl was pulling torn cloth from her wrists. She wrenched a gag free from her mouth.

"Lori!" yelled Park.

"Dad!" yelled Lori, screaming down through the rain. "Gregory shot Mom! He killed her!"

"I had to!" yelled Gregory, looking furious that Lori had gotten free. "She was bitten! She was sick!"

"She wasn't! She was fine!" yelled Lori.

\* \* \*

*Mom looks like something is wrong. She stares blankly at the road as she steers the car.*

*"Are you okay, Mom?" says Lori.*

*"No," says Mom.*

*She is silent for a moment, driving. "It's your stepfather, Lori. He scares me."*

*Lori says nothing. She just watches Mom drive and listens.*

*"He's getting paranoid. Paranoid and jealous. He thinks I'm having affairs on him. He threatens to stop letting me leave the house. He's threatened to hurt me, Lori. To hurt you and your sister."*

\* \* \*

"She told me he was scaring her!" Lori yelled down the hill. "She said he would hurt her and then he did! He killed her!"

The crowd was silent. Gregory was silent. Rain pounded down. Angie was sure she heard groans, coming from all sides.

## ROBERT A. BEST

Gregory spoke at a normal level, but his voice carried down the hill. “You ungrateful little bitch.”

Then he pulled a revolver from his coat pocket and shot her. Lori jerked as the bullet rammed into her back and burst out her chest, just below her collar bone. She coughed, blood spraying out into the rain, and crumpled to the rocks.

“No!” yelled Park.

The crowd around Angie erupted and stormed the hill.

\* \* \*

The gunshot startled Maylee so much she jerked her hands free of the cloth without noticing it rip. It took her several seconds to realize she was free. She saw Lori jerk and crumple. She heard Park yell and the crowd roar. All around her the Keepers snapped into position, kneeling with rifles aimed at the crowd below.

She shook herself from her stupor and ran to Dalton. She wrenched the cloth from his wrists and pulled the gag from his mouth.

“Hurry!” she yelled, pulling Dalton with her as she ran back to where her bat was propped against a rock. Her plan was to get the bat, then run along one of the two walkways that led down the hill. To get to Mom. Her brain screamed at her to save Lori, but a sick heaviness in her heart told her Lori was gone. Both sisters were lost.

She ran to her bat, bent down to grab it, and stood, ready to run. She stopped, staring.

A massive group of corpses stumbled toward them. Too many to get past. They groaned and jerked through the rain. Keepers, their backs to Maylee and Dalton, were firing frantically. The corpses closed on them, biting and tearing. Keepers screamed. An old man with long gouges down his face bit into a young female Keeper's face. She screamed and bucked as bright red blood shot out into the rain. Another Keeper was down on his knees, fighting weakly as two fat men bit into the top of his head.

Maylee turned back the way they had come. The Keepers on the hill, still oblivious to the corpses coming up behind, were firing down the hill. Maylee knew she and Dalton would be pelted with darts almost instantly.

She turned back, gripping her bat and staring grimly through



## ASHTON MEMORIAL

the rain. "Get behind me, Dalton," she said.

\* \* \*

Angie climbed over one of the glass fences and dropped into an exhibit. Darts flew all around her, thudding into people as they raced past her. She looked around for Park. He was off to her right, climbing over a different fence, heading in the best straight line he could manage to where Lori had fallen. Angie looked up to the top of the hill. She saw Maylee and Dalton were free. She saw Maylee backing up, brandishing her bat at an approaching mob of corpses.

"Maylee! Dalton!" she yelled, barely noticing as a dart whipped past her cheek and thudded into the torso of a man climbing over the fence behind her. The man slumped forward onto the glass. Angie turned to help but Maylee was screaming above. She turned back and raced across the exhibit, dodging darts as best she could.

She was heading for the far fence when a shape leapt into view, landing in front of her. She stopped, staring. A snow leopard crouched in front of her, snarling and scraping its claws in the dirt. She heard screeching birds overhead and a hundred different growls and roars all around. First the commotion had attracted the corpses, now it was attracting the animals.

"Shit shit shit," said Angie, slipping her almost-forgotten rifle from her shoulder. The leopard crept forward, snarling.

It leapt just as she brought the rifle up. The leopard was headed straight for her face. She dropped to her knees, moving the barrel up to keep it leveled at the leopard's chest. She fired and the dart thudded into the leopard's chest as it passed, snarling, over her head. She turned and watched the leopard fall onto a woman running up from behind. The woman screamed and fell to the ground as the leopard tore and bit into her. Red blood shot out across the roaring cat's coat. The cat pulled a hunk off the woman and chewed, moving more sluggishly as the dart took effect. Angie stood, backed away slowly, then turned and ran.

A mob of birds swooped from the sky, descending on a group of people struggling with a few Keepers who had run down the hill. The birds pecked and clawed. The people screamed and gurgled in their own blood. Two angry chimpanzees climbed into another exhibit,

## ROBERT A. BEST

descending on a family of four who had been rushing up the hill. The chimpanzees grabbed the husband and pulled his arms backward until Angie heard a sharp “pop.” The man screamed. His wife screamed as a chimpanzee picked up a rock and hurled it at her head. The rock crushed her skull, sending her bloody and twitching into the dirt. Angie didn't want to see what happened to the kids. She ran, willing herself not to watch.

\* \* \*

Park ran across an exhibit, desperate to get to Lori. He'd seen what happened. He knew she was probably already dead. He didn't care. He had to get to her.

Darts flew around him, thudding into other people as they rushed up the hill. He heard animals screeching and growling. He ignored it all. He kept his eyes on where he'd seen Lori fall.

In an exhibit next to him, a young man screamed as snakes crawled up his legs, biting as they went. In another, an older woman shrieked as a group of spider monkeys dug and clawed at her eyes. Blood and pulp ran down her cheeks.

A baboon rushed at Park from out of the rain. It beat at the ground and grunted in fury.

“Best get out of my way, monkey,” said Park, stomping at it through the rain.

The baboon kept charging. Park ducked aside at the last moment, watching it pass him. He unshouldered his rifle and fired. The dart thudded into the baboon's back. It spun, howling in rage. It charged at Park. Park fired again. A second dart thudded into the baboon's stomach. It crumpled, clutching its torso and slowing.

Park snorted at it and turned back toward the top of the hill. He ran on, ignoring the screams and the flying darts.

\* \* \*

“Watch out!” screamed Maylee as a fat woman with one eye torn and bloody staggered toward Dalton. Maylee rushed over, slamming the bat into the woman's mouth. The woman's jaw shattered and she fell back, gurgling on her own teeth and bone. Maylee

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

screamed and slammed her bat across the woman's temple. The woman's head collapsed inward and she fell.

Maylee spun on the group of corpses. The group had closed around her and Dalton. Most were attacking the screaming Keepers to either side. Maylee kept her back close to Dalton, watching for any that came too close. She'd already taken out six or seven. She wondered how long she could keep it up.

A loud honking roar blared out through the rain and over the chaos. It took Maylee a second to recognize it.

"Oh shit," she said, grabbing Dalton and pulling him out of the path as an elephant burst through the mob of corpses, running for the Keepers who were shooting down the hill. It snorted and blew through its trunk. Corpses broke and splattered underneath its pounding feet.

The elephant raced by. Maylee stopped as a corpse drew near. It was a young man with a green T-shirt stained dark with blood. His eyes oozed with pus and his tongue was swollen and black. He hissed and reached for Maylee. Maylee swung her bat upward, cracking him under the chin and sending his head snapping back. She heard his neck break as she brought the bat up and back down, slamming into his skull. His head split and he fell.

Maylee turned, looking and pulling Dalton close to her. The elephant trampled corpses as it struggled to get to the Keepers. The Keepers turned to look and screamed, several losing their balance and toppling down the hill.

"Maylee!" came Mom's voice from farther down the hill.

"Mom!" yelled both Maylee and Dalton in near unison. Maylee pulled Dalton behind the elephant and down the hill, avoiding the corpses and frantic Keepers as best she could.

\* \* \*

Angie climbed into another exhibit, running as soon as she hit the ground. She'd heard Maylee and Dalton. She'd called out to them and they had responded. People screamed around her. She heard corpses groan from the top of the hill. Animals screeched and growled. Rain fell, so hard it was almost blinding. She raced through it.

She stopped when a man stepped into view. Angie's first

## ROBERT A. BEST

thought was that it was a corpse. Then she saw the Keeper uniform. Then she recognized the wearer.

“Bitch,” said Lee, stomping toward her through the rain. “You ruined everything! We had a place of safety and order here!” He stopped several feet from her and slipped the rifle from his shoulder.

Angie unslung her rifle from her shoulder. “Back off, Lee. We don't have time.”

“It's the end of the world, bitch,” said Lee, pointing the rifle at her. “All we have now is time.”

Angie whipped her rifle up and they both fired. Both rifles clicked, empty.

“Fuck,” said Lee, tossing the rifle aside and rushing at her.

Angie brought her rifle up longways, attempting to block. Lee wrapped his arms around her waist and drove her down into the dirt. She kicked and punched at him. He slapped her across the face.

“Fucking bitch,” he grunted, leaning in close and closing his hands around her throat. “Fucking chaos-bringing bitch.” He squeezed and Angie kicked at the dirt.

Angie heard noise to her right. She looked and saw a lion racing at them from the side. It roared and snarled. Lee didn't see it.

Lee leaned in closer, whispering into her ear. “Die, you lousy bitch! Just die already!” he said. Angie wheezed and coughed.

She brought her knee up under Lee and pushed him upward. The lion drew close and roared. Lee let go, noticing the lion and screaming. The lion leapt over Angie, catching Lee in its mouth and carrying him off of her.

Angie clambered to her feet. Lee screamed and the lion ripped hunks of him free. It clawed and roared. Angie knew she had seconds before it turned on her. She rubbed her throat and ran.

\* \* \*

Park climbed over the last fence and reached the top of the hill. He looked around, squinting in the pounding rain. Then he saw it, and the sight ripped into his chest. Lori lay crumpled and limp in the rain. He ran, almost tripping over the many rocks and bushes, to where she lay.

He knelt by her, whispering to himself. “No no no come on

## ASHTON MEMORIAL

fuck no.” He looked down at her, cursing himself for having missed the years between.

She coughed, a fine mist of blood spraying into the rain. She looked up at him. “Dad?”

“Lori,” he said, lifting her shoulders and cradling her. “Oh god Lori I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Dad,” she said, coughing. Her voice was weak and her eyes unfocused. “It’s okay.”

“No, Lori, no it’s not. You have to know how sorry I am.”

“I do, Dad, I do. And it’s okay. I ...”

Then she was gone.

She slumped, her eyes empty. Park stared at her for a moment, not believing. He bit his lip and clutched her tightly.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, his throat hoarse, knowing she was gone.

He sat there quietly. The darts had stopped flying. Corpses groaned and people screamed. Animals growled. Park barely heard it.

Then he heard Gregory.

“Everyone,” he was saying, standing atop one of the highest ledges and waving his arms. Park saw a mass of corpses below Gregory, reaching and groaning. “Please be calm. We at Ashton Memorial will restore order.” He still held the gun that shot Lori. Several corpses lay near him, bullet holes in their heads. Park knew it was the same gun that had also killed Jennifer.

Park slowly lowered Lori’s body and stood. He stomped toward Gregory. He slipped his rifle off his shoulder. He considered firing it, then shook his head. He noticed a ladder leading up the wall on one side of the ledge. He opened the chamber and pulled out a dart. He tossed the rifle aside.

Gregory noticed Park approaching up the side of the ledge. “Stay back!” he said, pointing the gun at Park.

“Better use it quick, son,” said Park, climbing onto the ledge.

Gregory fired. The gun clicked, empty. Gregory dropped the gun and raised his hands. “Listen, things have gotten out of hand here.”

Park said nothing. He stepped up to Gregory and grabbed him by the back of the head. He shoved the tip of the dart into his throat. Gregory jerked in shock. Blood shot out across Park’s hand. Park

ROBERT A. BEST

dragged the dart across Gregory's throat, ripping it open. Gregory gasped and flailed, clutching at his throat. Blood squirted past his fingers, thick and dark.

Park dropped the dart and let go of Gregory's head. He put his bloody palm on Gregory's forehead and pushed him backward. Gregory fell into the mob of corpses below. The corpses groaned and bit into him. Gregory tried to scream but only managed a wet gurgle as the corpses pulled him apart. They dug their fingers into the hole Park had made in Gregory's neck. They dug their hands into his torso. He bucked and wheezed as they pulled out organs and shoved them into their mouths. The corpses chewed and moaned.

Park watched for a second, rain pounding down around him. Then he turned and walked back toward Lori's body.

\* \* \*

Angie reached the top of the hill. She looked around in the rain. Screams and groans came from all around. Animals growled and shrieked.

"Maylee! Dalton!" she yelled.

"Mom!" came Maylee's voice.

Angie looked and saw Maylee and Dalton running toward her. Angie ran to meet them. She clutched them both as tightly as she could.

"I'm sorry, Mom!" said Maylee. "We found out they were moving Lori and we couldn't reach you! I wanted to save her."

"Are you both okay?" said Angie, looking them both over.

They nodded back at her.

Angie sighed, feeling a mix of relief and guilt. Guilt because she knew Park was somewhere with Lori. And Lori was most likely...

"You did good, Maylee," Angie said. Maylee looked shocked, then nodded. "We gotta get out of here."

Angie turned and pulled them through the rain, away from the chaos and the screaming. A corpse stumbled out in front of her. It was a small-framed man with tiny round glasses and exposed bloody ribs. He growled and hissed.

"I got this, Mom," said Maylee. She ran up and whacked the corpse across the skull. The corpse fell and Maylee slammed down again, breaking the corpse's head open. Maylee looked back at Angie

### ASHTON MEMORIAL

and smiled through the rain. "See. A lot can be whacked in the head."

Angie shook her head. "Fine, but you both have to be more careful."

Then Dalton was screaming. Angie turned in time to see a large man, with a torn business suit and a large blood-stain across his torso, grab Dalton's arm. He pulled Dalton's arm to his mouth and bit down. Dalton screamed and blood shot out across the man's face and suit.

"No!" shrieked Angie, turning cold as Dalton jerked away from the man, his torn arm bleeding into the rain.

"Dalton!" yelled Maylee, running at the man. The man was backing away, jerking and twitching as he chewed. Dalton fell, clutching at his arm. Angie fell with him, dropping to her knees to cradle him.

Maylee slammed her bat into the man's skull. The man convulsed, vomiting a thick white fluid. Maylee slammed again and the man fell, still, to the ground. Maylee shrieked and kept pounding. Her bat clanged against the pavement as she slammed downward.

Angie barely heard it. She barely saw it. She kept her eyes on Dalton. He looked scared and confused, clutching his arm and looking at her. Angie gripped him tight and rocked him.

"Oh god no. No no no no."

\* \* \*

Angie knelt on the stone floor, next to Dalton. They'd carried him to a nearby faux-cave that was part of a leopard exhibit. Rain pounded down outside. Maylee crouched by the door, her bat on her knees. She stared outside. The screams, growls and groans had faded.

Dalton was sweating and staring at the ceiling. Angie mopped his head with a rag she'd torn from her shirt. The wound on his arm oozed through the makeshift bandage she'd made from part of her pants. She wondered how long he had. Hours? Days?

Maylee crawled over to where she and Dalton sat. Maylee looked heartbroken. "How are you doing?" she said.

"Okay," said Dalton, looking at her and smiling weakly. He looked scared.

Footsteps arrived outside. Angie turned to look. Park knelt

ROBERT A. BEST

down. He had Lori's body over his shoulder. She was bound and gagged.

"Park," said Angie, quietly. "I..."

"Save it," said Park, adjusting Lori's body on his shoulder. "I've got my kid and I'm going."

"Park, she's..."

"I know that, dammit. I also know she's going to come back and I'm going to have to kill her again."

Angie was quiet, staring at him.

He stared back. "I'm done, Angela," he said. "I've seen both my kids killed and I dug a man's throat out with my own hands. I'm done. I'm taking my kid and I'm leaving. I'll put her down again, then I'll end myself. Like I should have done days ago. Thanks for the waste of time."

He stood and walked off, taking Lori's body with him.

Maylee started to stand. "Parker!"

Angie grabbed her and shook her head.

\* \* \*

Hours went by as they sat in the cave, huddled over Dalton. He coughed and sweated, passing in and out of sleep. At Angie's bidding, Maylee went outside to find a loaded tranquilizer rifle. She brought one back, looking like she could cry as she handed it to Angie.

Angie sat with the rifle, staring at Dalton. His breathing was labored and he looked pale.

They sat there for hours, silently.

At some point, Angie fell asleep sitting up.

She jerked awake as she heard Dalton groan.

"Dalton?" she said, clutching the rifle and fighting the urge to turn it on herself. If it wasn't for Maylee, she would.

"Mom?" said Dalton. Angie loosened her grip on the rifle and rubbed her tired eyes. His color had returned.

Angie put her hand on his forehead. It felt normal. She pulled the bandage from his arm. The oozing had stopped. It looked sore, but no different from any of the animal bites Angie had seen back in the ER.

"What's going on?" said Dalton.



**ASHTON MEMORIAL**

“I don't know, baby,” said Angie. “Maylee!”

Maylee jerked awake from where she was slumped against the cave wall. She crawled over, blinking. She gasped when she saw Dalton. “Dalton? Mom, what's going on?”

Angie pushed her fingers into Dalton's neck. She felt his pulse, steady and normal. She rubbed his cheek, feeling like she would cry if she wasn't so stunned.

Angie turned to Maylee. “I think Dalton's immune.”

