

After

Part One

Book one of

The Phoenix Curse

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By D.R. Johnson

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DEDICATION

For Sierra, my lovely daughter, who helped me find something I lost long ago.

My inspiration.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to think this is the beginning of a wondrous journey. Not only a journey for Ali and Joss, but a new chapter in my life. I am happy to have each and every one of you with me as I set out on my new endeavors.

This is the story of how the first book, *After* of *The Phoenix Curse* trilogy, came to be.

I was a bit of a book nerd back in high school. Always reading. Always writing. I even had unsupported dreams of becoming a writer someday. Here and there I would jot something down, mostly a little bit of prose or poetry, nothing substantial. When the attack in Florida happened, my friends all joked about zombies. That night, I was lying in bed unable to sleep, and I hopped out of bed to write down what eventually became the intro to the trilogy.

Then, last year about mid-October, I stumbled on to something called National November Writing Month (NaNoWriMo for short). For those of you who have never heard of it, it is a challenge to write 50,000 words during the month of November. There are only a few stipulations. One, the book has to be a work of fiction, and two, it has to be a brand-new book.

I had never written anything this big before, but just recently, my daughter had started writing on her own. She asked me for my ideas on her stories, and I started editing her work. While doing that, my passion for writing that I thought long dead rose again to the surface.

I decided to try the NaNoWriMo challenge.

I have many books that I have started, maybe gotten as much as 10,000 to 20,000 words into them over the course of many years, but I needed something fresh. Without having any outline at all for what I was about to start, I fell back to the little blurb I had written over the summer. As I started writing, the characters blossomed, and the story started writing itself.

I succeeded in winning the NaNoWriMo challenge with five days left to spare, and I kept going. On March 25, 2013, I finished the first draft of my first book at a little over 130,000 words. The feeling of accomplishment was indescribable. Not only did I complete the NaNoWriMo challenge, but I finally crossed the finish line in a life goal that I thought I would never achieve.

And I kept going.

Book 2, *Dreamland*, has already been started, and I am well underway into that story line as well as continuing to edit the other 2 parts of *After*. I cannot promise a timeline at the moment, although I wish I could. I still put in forty hours a week at my day job, and add in the unpredictability of life in general, any timeline I give truly is a shot in the dark.

But now that I know that I can do it, I will keep going.

I have to thank my beautiful, inspirational daughter. I don't think that I ever would have lifted the metaphorical pen again if it had not been for her. Her spirit is indomitable, and despite any setback she's ever come across, she has faced it down and charged right through it. I cherish her as my daughter and as my friend. It was from her strength that I drew the courage to try again.

My husband's role in this was no small part, either. He tolerated my midnight ravings, and always listened as I bounced ideas off him. He was my beta reader, editor and, most importantly, he supported me. This book would not be what it is now without him.

Now, I'd like to invite you all to join me on my blog for all the latest updates on *The Phoenix Curse* as well as my new projects I have lined up on the horizon.

<http://drjpublishing.blogspot.com>

<http://www.thephoenixcurse.com>

If you enjoy the book, please remember to stop by Amazon and leave a review.

Thank you all!

## PROLOGUE

It's after...

I can't give you an exact date, but I know I'm heading into the fifth winter since the world tumbled into chaos. I was only eighteen when it started. Young. Irresponsible. Selfish. The traits every child had by right as they floundered into adulthood. At least until everything was stripped away.

I can still remember what started it all. It was a hot summer morning when an article popped up on my news feed that piqued my interest.

*Zombie Attack in Florida!*

Who could resist clicking *that* link? Not to mention, it was from the Washington Post, a news source that even I recognized as creditable.

After quickly scanning the article and finding out the attack was drug induced, my curiosity died, but the details of the attack were still chilling. The 'zombie' had been high on a new drug called *bath salts* and apparently decided he was hungry enough to chow down on the most convenient meal he could get his hands on. That just so happened to be the face of the nearest homeless man.

Drugs are bad, m'kay?

As disturbing as that image is, that wasn't the most bizarre thing I read in that article. To me, the worst part was reading how the cop tried to stop the face-eater. I imagine he started off by saying something along these lines;

"Excuse me, good sir. Could you refrain from eating this gentleman's face?"

Or maybe he went with something a bit more commonplace and just yelled 'FREEZE!' The details weren't very clear on that. What *was* dear was the fact that he shot the guy and only got growled at for his trouble. Then our zombie went right back to munchin'. A bullet in his stomach barely fazed him! The second bullet the cop put in his head certainly proved more of an inconvenience. He may not have felt pain, but that killed him. He was for real dead after that. None of that *undead* bullshit.

The article was just a flash in the pan that quickly faded away.

Then came that fateful December and the doomsayers were saying what they will. Surprisingly enough, the Mayans had it right, but the world didn't end in volcanoes and earthquakes and hurricanes.

No. It turned out to be us all along. We wanted so badly to believe in something that we ended up pulling the trigger on ourselves.

It started with more face-eaters popping up around Christmas, and the media informed us it was all linked to the bath salts drug again. Only it wasn't bath salts. Maybe it was a virus, or an outbreak of some kind, but those first face-eaters were our warning before everything went to hell. Most of us weren't even paying attention to the beginning of the end.

By New Year, there was no recovering from the infestation. Before the news stations went down, they'd finally decided to stop feeding us the bath salt bullshit. They told us to stay in our houses. Lock the doors. Load the guns.

Five years ago, the end of days arrived.





*The Phoenix Curse - After*

Part One

## CHAPTER 1 - ALI

My heart thundered in my chest, racing so fast I thought it might explode. I gasped for breath to quench my aching lungs as they burned for air, the deprivation a result of panicked flight.

*How did they get in?*

My limbs felt numb and disjointed, like I was trying to control hands that weren't mine.

"Go!" I yelled. Tears ran unheeded down my cheeks. My father was standing there in the dark hallway, a forlorn look on his face, refusing to leave with the rest of the group. "Get them safe!"

*Nowhere is safe.*

He yelled something back, but I couldn't make it out over the growls and screams of the diseased. Smoke and steam obscured my vision, and by the time it cleared, he was gone.

I wiped the tears and sweat from my face as I pulled out what was left of my bullets.

*Thirteen.*

The last time I was able to get a good visual, there were easily twenty of those things out there. That number could have grown since then.

"You're mine," I said solemnly as I pulled one bullet out and dropped it in my pocket.

I loaded my father's revolver, a beautiful piece of workmanship that would soon be entombed with me. I sniffed, but held back my sobs. I had a job to keep me focused, and damn me if I didn't give them enough time to get away.

Dodging another burst of steam from the broken water pipe, I ran to the door my father had been standing at. The hallway on the other side was empty.

Good.

I dosed the door and pushed the old oak desk in front of it. It was heavy and took longer than I would have liked, but I could feel my strength dwindling. Already, the sweat was drying on me as the fever set in.

Turning to the door on the other side of the small room, I could see the barricade was holding... barely.

The door rattled and shook and the wood started to splinter at the handle.

I could see them through the glass panel that ran halfway down the side of the door. By some miracle, the glass was holding, but I was about to change that.

The balding freak at the front was getting crushed by those behind him, but that didn't stop him from hissing and clawing at the glass. It looked like his nose had been busted up pretty bad judging by the amount of blood that gushed from it. It splattered everywhere, and through the red smears, his eyes fixed on me as I moved in front of the window.

He raged and screamed, dawing at the glass to get to me. He hated me, and nothing short of death would stop him.

I leveled the revolver between his unnatural red eyes and ended his frenzy.

The glass shattered in a rain of shards, and the freak's body was pushed forward by the press behind him. I didn't think it would fit through the window frame, but I heard bones cracking as they gave way. I watched the macabre scene as the torso flopped lifelessly into my half of the room, dangling at an awkward angle as the bottom half remained trapped on the other side.

Now that the glass barrier was gone, their bloodlust renewed. I cringed as their screams of rage assaulted me, no longer buffeted by the glass.

Stepping doser, my boots crunched on the broken glass, and I took aim again. Two fell in quick succession.

I had to wait for the rest to push the bodies out of the way and find their way to the window. It wasn't worth risking a bullet if I wasn't positive it would be a kill shot. I didn't have to wait long.

I emptied the gun, and found my hands shaking terribly when I reloaded. Frowning at the wound on my arm, I saw the red welts had spread considerably. The bite was getting worse very quickly. I wasn't sure how much time I had left, but I had the feeling it wasn't much. My fingers felt numb and fuzzy. Two bullets fell and rolled across the floor, only to fall down the drain in the middle of the room.

"Dammit!"

I ground my teeth together as I took aim again, the last four shots going fast. The deadbolt no longer held the door closed against the pressure behind it. The only thing holding the door was a hastily made barricade. There was a groan as the metal locker started to give way, and I knew it wouldn't be long.

I retreated to the supply doset, pulling the door closed behind me. The darkness made me shiver. They would never be able to figure out how to open the door, but they'd never leave either. Given enough time, they'd eventually break through.

*No way out.*

Didn't matter, I was dead already. I pulled out the last bullet and clenched it tightly in my palm.

*One way out.*

From beyond the doset door, there was a loud crack, followed by a crash as the barricade gave way. Despite knowing it would happen, I couldn't suppress the scream I let out as beating hands fell against the door, scratching and clawing at it to get to me.

I broke down, unable to hold onto my composure any longer. The fever dragged my weakened body to the floor. The sound only seemed to incite them more, but at least it was keeping them here instead of going after my father and the others.

There was a small stream of light coming in from the bottom of the door. It was just enough to see by so I could finish my last task.

I sat up, and fought a huge wave of dizziness. Leaning against the metal shelving, I waited for it to pass, but my strength didn't return. It was never going too. I pulled the revolver into my lap.

*It's so heavy now.*

My fingers were useless as I tried to dump the empty casings, and everything dattered to the floor. Even over the cacophony of moans on the other side of the door, I heard the cylinder land and roll away into the darkness.

I groaned, laying down against the concrete floor and reached into the void to find the lost cylinder, the other hand still clutching the last bullet.

The void swallowed me.

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I gasped awake, covered in a film of sweat. The cool morning air was chilling as it dried the sheen.

It was just a dream of a memory. A memory turned into a nightmare. Moaning slightly, I covered my head with the blankets and burrowed into the bed, still shivering.

Closing my eyes again, I invoked the good memories to combat the bad. I recalled my father's laughter and my mother's singing, thinking back to a time we were all together and happy. A time before the divorce ripped us a country apart. The old times, before the world turned.

I wondered again, for the thousandth time, if my father had made it out of that school. Those thoughts led down a dark path, though. A path I couldn't afford to let my mind wander down. I had searched for months, followed trails that led me in the wrong directions and never managed to find any evidence he was dead or alive.

I eventually accepted the inevitable and moved on.

Now, it might be some time in late September, maybe even early October, but there was no way I could know for sure. I could feel the ache of loneliness growing deep in the pit of my stomach. It was a longing to have someone to talk to, to travel with, and share stories and ideas with.

I swallowed it down. I knew it was better to be alone. Better to be alone than watch someone I love get ripped apart. I couldn't go through that again.

I let the thoughts die away as I reluctantly stretched to work the stiffness out of my muscles. After finally abandoning the sanctuary of my bed, I looked down on the world from my second story window. For roughly three months, I had called this little neighborhood home and had spent a good amount of time spying on its inhabitants.

They were all there, milling about like listless cattle. They were always there. I had heard them called many different names. Face-eaters, walkers, demons, infected, and even zombies.

Unlike the traditional undead zombies, as was the fad that was rampant before the infestation, these things weren't dead. They still breathed and still bled, but all humanity was left behind when they turned. To me, they were just freaks. No other name fit better in my mind.

My breath fogged the glass as I watched them. The balding beasts shuffled around each other with no real purpose. Some of them would walk from one end of the street to the other, just to turn around and walk back in the other direction. Others were a bit more ambitious, walking around the entire block but never changing direction. They were forever walking in circles, wearing away the soles of their shoes in their endless loop.

A few carried tools they had used in their normal life. There was one that wore what I assumed to be gardener's clothes and dragged a rake behind him. Another one wore what was left of a suit, complete with a tie, and he toted around his briefcase. A lot of the women held their purses, or what was left of them anyway. I had been here so long I could recognize most of them now by sight.

*My neighbors.*

Maybe it was time to move on.

I wasn't able to stomach watching them for more than a few minutes anymore. I turned away from the window to get started on my morning ritual; taking inventory and planning out my day.

I went through the same motions every morning without fail, even though I hadn't been mobile since before the heat of the summer set in.

I was taking quite the chance living in this house. Even if the freaks were docile towards me, there might come a day when that would change without warning. For right now, the freaks offered protection from those out there that were still unaffected by the disease.

Some of the people that were uninfected seemed less than human. Losing the foundation of society changed people. It let the monster inside come out. The people like that were just as deadly to me, if not more, than those freaks outside.

I spread the blankets over my bed and smoothed out the wrinkles, making it look clean and tidy. The notion was ridiculous in this day and age, but this house, this whole neighborhood, had hardly been damaged, and at least I could return to a semblance of normality and daily routine while I stayed here.

Grabbing my packs, I set them out on the bed. First, I tossed up my sturdy hiker's backpack that I'd recently pulled out of one of those old supercenter department stores. It was nice and new, unlike my well-worn belt pack that I'd removed from a dead GI back in the early days. I'd had that belt pack for so long it was like it was a part of me now. I dropped it on the bed, ignoring it for the time being and starting with the big pack.

Going through the contents systematically, I set everything out on the bed in proper order so I could get a quick visual if anything was missing. I knew nothing would be. Not now. Not in the relative safety of this little utopia I'd stumbled on, but regardless, I faithfully repeated my ritual on a daily basis.

The pack probably weighed about twenty pounds now. I knew it was going to take some time getting used to the weight when I decided to move on again, so I tried to make sure I didn't over-stuff anything. That would also cause the zippers to break and the fabric to wear out early. Never knowing when I'd come across a good pack again, I took care of the ones I had.

Starting with the blankets and spare clothing, I set them out on the bed first and followed that with my many different containers for food and water. I had one container dedicated to eating utensils, including a new can opener I'd found in this house. It was much better than the old rusty one I traded out for it.

My extra bullets and a few small games, which included a deck of cards and a few dice, were set in their place next. The containers full of miscellaneous things came last. These were just a small treasure trove of things I thought might come in handy at some point. Once I got my visual on everything, I meticulously repacked the bag and moved on to the belt pouch.

The items in my belt pouch were much more personal. Anytime I was on the move, even for a brief scouting run, I strapped the pouch on. Although it seemed unlikely that I wouldn't be able to make it back to the house, I wasn't willing to take that chance. Always err on the side of caution.

Some of the contents of my belt pouch included an old Swiss army knife, a hairbrush, a toothbrush, and my old broken MP3 player. I also kept a notepad and a collection of pens and pencils in the pouch, although I didn't write much down anymore.

In the smaller side pocket, held shut by a tiny zipper, was where I kept a locket that had a picture of my mother in it and a ring my father had given me on a Christmas Eve ages ago. I only unzipped the pocket to get a visual. There was no need for me to lay these out on display.

Finally, I pulled out the little stuffed kitten that Seth had given me. I always saved this one for last, and I only pulled it out for a second today. It was black with bright green eyes, and it wore a lacy ribbon around its neck that had yellowed from age. Smiling sadly, I pet the little head with my thumb before tucking it safely away again.

The next on my list were the extra backpacks I had stumbled across here and there. I decided it would be a good idea to collect them. This was much lighter, but something that would definitely be going with me. Essentially, it was nothing more than one big backpack full of smaller packs, pouches and containers. I figured it was better to have extra and not need them, than need one and not have it.

Once done with the packs, I moved on to my ever-important weaponry. I slept with these near me almost one-hundred percent of the time. My dad's old revolver had a special place under my pillow. I was so thankful he had taken the time to teach me how to shoot before we were separated. Out of the many things he taught me, this was one of the most appreciated.

The next on my list was my most preferred weapon, my large Bowie knife. For protection, I had slept with this blade for so long it was hard for me to sleep without the feel of the hilt in my hand. Of course I kept it in its sheath during the night. No reason to accidentally slice my ear off while I was sleeping, but it was convenient if I needed it. Also, using the knife meant no reloading, no noisy discharge, and no running out of ammo. That's a short list of important benefits.

I kept my holsters on the bedside table. They were made of sturdy leather, and I had one for both my knife and gun, along with a smaller sheath I normally wore strapped around my thigh. That sheath carried another blade, more like a dagger. It wasn't as big as the Bowie knife, but shaped differently. I could cut from either side with that one, so it was a good backup.

The last weapon I carried was a small skinning knife that I kept inside my boot. Can't say that I would be fighting anything big with that little thing, but it might come in handy in a pinch. Be prepared.

At least I was secluded enough here that I didn't have to fear anyone stealing. The freaks didn't steal. They no longer had a use for the material things in life, but I forced myself to keep up my watchful habits as if I was out in the open. I couldn't let myself forget what it would be like out there when I started traveling again.

I looked over my food supply. I only brought enough food to the bedroom to last for a few days. Everything else I stored in the kitchen, just like back in the good old days. It might have been a ridiculous practice, but I held on to everything I could consider normal. It kept me sane.

I finally decided it was time to remove the barricade from the door. I had never gone more than four days without leaving my room, but if I didn't go out today, I would break my record.

Normally, the heat of the summer alone was enough to drive me down in search of a cooler place to hide while the afternoons sweltered away. The thermostat in the lower part of the house would sometimes read 105 when the sun was creeping down from its peak. I hoped this cool morning was a sign that this hellish summer was coming to an end.

Sometimes I regretted I had chosen to spend the summer here instead of moving north to a cooler climate. I was aware I had that choice every day to move north, it wasn't as if there was anything, or anyone, to stop me from going, but the truth was I just didn't want to leave this neighborhood. My initial reasons for staying here were absurd, but now I had grown used to my daily routine and didn't want to disrupt the norm.

I came across these neighborhoods from time to time, although I had never stayed in one for more than a couple weeks. This one had running water and electricity at odd intervals, which was a blessing I didn't want to question. If I tried really hard, I could pretend that everything outside my little house was just a dream. I was aware that was a dangerous line of thinking, though. If I let myself walk down that path, I might end up wandering out there with the freaks. Or maybe taking one in as a pet just so I could have someone, *something*, alive I could talk to.

No. It was too dangerous to think that way. My stay here was coming to an end. The loneliness was there to help flush me out of the city, but, more than that, there was a gnawing at my mind now. It took me a little while to figure out what that disconcerting feeling was that always seemed to be haunting me lately. It was like an annoying gnat always buzzing around my head that I couldn't shoo away.

I wanted answers.

Over the past five years, I'd traveled with quite a few survivors and never met anyone else like me. I was someone that the freaks ignored. I was someone that had been bitten and yet I lived on, uninfected.

I needed answers.

~ ~ ~ ~

I dressed, taking care of what articles of clothing I chose to wear. It was cool now but would warm up soon, and the excursion would raise my body temperature. I decided the double tank tops I had slept in would do. I slipped on a pair of baggy jeans that I had actually found here in the downstairs bedroom, and then finished up with my heavy hiking boots. I was very attached to this pair of boots. I'd had them long enough to be considered well worn-in and they had a good few months of travel before they would be entering the realm of wearing out.

After belting on my blades and slinging one of the empty backpacks over my shoulder, I cautiously left my room. Old houses creaked all the time and this one was no exception. I remained alert for anything that might be out of the ordinary. At least it wasn't a windy day out today.

As I counted out my wait at the top of the stairs, I listened and watched for shadows moving on the lower walls. Nothing.

Descending the stairs, I continued to move cautiously out of habit. The threat of having company at this point was slim. The freaks never made much noise themselves, as they had all lost the ability to communicate when they turned, but they were still noisy due to their clumsiness.

This house had been dean when I found it. It had remained untouched in the middle of the ruined neighborhood. All the doors had been locked and the windows unbroken. It was pristine, at least until I climbed to the second floor and broke into one of those windows myself.

Luckily, I had found an extra set of keys in a kitchen drawer. I liked to lock up while I was out on my little savaging runs. I was almost completely sure that there was no one here to break in, and even if there was someone else in Dallas, the likelihood of them finding me was barely worth considering. Being able to lock my doors just made me feel better.

Per my routine, I made a quick sweep of all the rooms on the lower floor, saving the kitchen for last. All was dear, as expected.

Peering out the glass window in the door, I made sure the back yard looked dear. Once satisfied that everything looked exactly as I remembered, I opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight.

There was a pool in the back yard, and this one was, thankfully, drained of water. I walked to the edge to see the normal gang of freaks milling around inside. At my last count, there had only been five, but now they'd added a new member. Milling around in the deep end was a teenage boy in a torn red shirt, bloodstained from an attack. That meant he was a wanderer. None of the other freaks here had been turned by bite. Whatever had turned the Dallas population had been airborne.

The newcomer was very young, maybe thirteen or fourteen at the most, and looked to still have a full head of hair. He was probably one of the youngest freaks I'd seen yet, and judging by his appearance, hadn't been turned that long ago. There was one merciful thing about this curse. You never saw a child freak. Children that became infected normally died within hours. Their little bodies couldn't handle being turned into these monsters.

The freaks in the pool might be able to find their way out, but I'd never seen them try. Only four had been in there when I first got here, and the most I'd ever seen them do was turn in my direction if they noticed me. I figured the boy's traveling days were over now.

It had been disturbing at first, having the freaks right outside my door, so why would I pick *this* house out of all the houses Dallas has to offer? It's not that simple. There are matters of dilapidation I have to consider, as well as finding a house far enough away from a *deathpool* that I didn't find myself gagging constantly. It was all about location.

*Location, location, location.*

It seemed every yard in Texas had a pool, and the pools that actually still had water in them were the worst. When the freaks fell in, they drowned. The bodies bloated, rotted, and turned the water into a murky, chunky sludge. Then there's the smell... Oh god, the unbearable smell. Not much smelled pretty in this world anymore, but a fresh deathpool would knock you on your ass.

I shook my head thinking about it. Turning from the pool, I decided to get on with my day.

Normally, I enjoyed exploring the neighborhood to see what I could scavenge. About five miles away, there was an old supercenter grocery store that was a goldmine of items. However, the trail of freaks I picked up from pushing a shopping cart that distance was unnerving. I only did that once.

After that episode, I chose to exploit the nearby houses instead. It was easy to get to them and back home without drawing a lot of attention. Making shorter trips and filling one pack at a time kept me busy most days. Also, unlike the other cities that people had easy access to, these houses hadn't been stripped and vandalized. They all looked to be missing the loving care and upkeep of our former lives, but windows weren't broken and doors weren't opened, so their precious contents hadn't been exposed to Mother Nature. All I had to contend with was a little dust, mold, and mildew.

There was a house about a block over I wanted to revisit. I had been there a few weeks ago, and remembered seeing some books I wasn't able to take with me at the time. With the lack of electricity-fueled entrainment, books had become a decent commodity in the smaller settlements. I could use them as trade goods when I moved on.

Usually the freaks ignored me if I could avoid them. If I kept a ten-foot distance between us, and moved slowly, sometimes they would never even notice me. They still didn't do much if they *did* notice me, but their curious stares were bad enough. It was disconcerting to look into those red eyes. I knew they saw something, but any human thought behind those eyes was gone. The only thing that motivated them was food and rage.

The initial hopes that these things would starve and die away had faded within the first year. What was left of humanity had assumed they were using us for food, but that wasn't exactly the case. Of course, if they were hungry when



they caught someone uninfected, they didn't let that meat go to waste, but we couldn't figure out what they were using as a food source when humans weren't available.

I heard rumors from other survivors, but my little stint here in Texas had really been eye-opening. For starters, it looked like the freak population had slimmed down as a whole, but they weren't starving by any means. When I noticed they were hungry, which seemed to me that didn't happen often, they would eat anything they could get their hands on. Trash. Animals that foolishly wandered too close. Each other. Themselves.

It was disgusting, and I'd witnessed it all with my own eyes. Even the freaks in my pool had scars where they'd taken bites out of each other. Once I got over my initial disgust, I paid a little bit more attention to the wounds. I was in utter shock to see how quickly they actually healed. If a freak was trapped by itself and had to take a bite out of its own arm for sustenance, they would regenerate within a week. That was plenty of time for them to heal up before they'd take another bite.

I did realize that I might possess some of this insanely powerful regeneration, but the closest I got to testing it was pressing the blade to my skin. I just couldn't bring myself to draw blood. I also still ate on a daily basis, although they were small, rationed meals, and I still felt pain. Another difference I clung to was my full head of red hair, where most freaks looked to be going bald.

Up to this point, I had never really had an interest in the characteristics I shared with the freaks. Now it was gnawing at me, and I couldn't shake it. At least I didn't share their rage.

Whatever it was that differentiated the freaks from the rest of humanity was something they could sense, and it angered them beyond any madness I'd ever witnessed. They would attack the instant they sensed anyone not like them, and their growls incited others nearby to join them until they became a swarm. It was commonly referred to as a *frenzy*, like they were sharks or piranhas. I guess it fit.

They were fast, they didn't tire, and they felt no pain. How could humanity stand up against these self-sustaining beasts? Some days, I remembered thinking it was only a matter of time before we were all gone. Our biggest weapon against them was their own stupidity and single mindedness.

And maybe me. I only hoped I wasn't the only one.

I knew I was in a town called Grand Prairie. I could see the Dallas skyscrapers from the neighborhood I was in. From what I could tell once I made it past the barricades circling the outer city, this whole area had been virtually untouched by humans since the New Year's Day when everything went to shit. I couldn't imagine anyone even trying to come in here, at least not this deep anyway. The milling freaks were too thick.

This is what made it safe for someone like me. I didn't want to be surprised by someone else showing up in the middle of my stomping grounds. The possibility that there were others out there like me hadn't escaped me. On one hand, they could be just as evil and consumed by darkness that they made the freaks look sane, and on the other hand... Hope.

The thought ate at me and ate at me. It urged me to move on, and search for the answers to my questions, but I didn't trust most of the other people I came across. At least the freaks weren't malicious. They didn't rape and steal.

I trudged through the overgrowth from backyard to backyard, hopping fences as I went and doing my best to avoid the yards with deathpools. I couldn't use the actual roads since most of them were so overcrowded with freaks it was

hard to move about unnoticed. A lot of them tended to stand or walk in large open areas. I did pass a few that had managed to make their way into the backyards. It was unlikely they'd ever find their way out again.

The first time I was traveling alone and discovered a neighborhood like this, I had killed those that were trapped so I wouldn't have to look at them anymore. It didn't take long for me to realize I hadn't fully thought that idea through. Having no real way to dispose of the bodies, the smell of rotting flesh drove me in search of a new camp. Avoiding them seemed to be the best option while I was alone.

I actually used the demeanor of the freaks to judge what was going on around me. If they became drawn to something, other than me, of course, I would definitely need to find the source to determine if it was some kind of threat. Also, they served as a sort of humanity alarm. They would start growling as soon as they sensed someone uninfected, although I doubted they would have a reason to frenzy this deep in the city. All the freaks I passed were maintaining status quo.

"Just another day at the office, Bob," I thought to myself but didn't speak. I hadn't spoken much since Joss and I separated. We decided he would be safer in this little settlement we had run across out east of the city.

I urged myself on, not wanting to think about Joss. I missed him. Sometimes I thought I had failed him, and had failed Seth. I had only promised to get him somewhere safe, so that he could *be* safe. I never promised I would raise him.

I shook my head to shake out the memories and kept moving. It seemed like no time had passed before I was at my destination. It was a small, blue, one-story house. If I got back early enough, I would still have time to scout a few other houses for more goods. I doubted I would be able to take everything with me when I left, but at least I could pick out the most useful items.

I circled the house once, taking the time to check out the perimeter before going in. I always tried to proceed with caution into any enclosed area. You never knew what could be in there.

All seemed clear. No broken windows and both of the doors were shut. Coming around to the back of the house, I stopped again at the kitchen door and listened before turning the knob. The usual sounds greeted me. I pushed the door open cautiously, barely wide enough to stick my head in to peer around the kitchen. Everything was as I had left it, as best as I could remember.

I slipped in, dosing the door quietly behind me and pulling the pack from my shoulders to toss on the countertop. Books were my main haul for this trip, but I decided to rummage through the kitchen drawers and cabinets to see if I could find anything rare and useful. It was always worth a look, and I honestly couldn't remember if I'd already checked these or not.

I came across a drawer that seemed to be packed with every assortment of small items you could think of. I smiled a little to myself, thinking about all the other drawers I had found nearly identical to this. It was the proverbial junk drawer.

I yanked at the drawer, finding myself in a brief tug of war with the tracks that didn't want to let it go, and then turned with the intention of dumping all the contents out on the table.

As soon as I looked up, I froze. Panic and adrenaline shot through me as my grip on the draw instinctively tightened. Lucky that, or I would have dropped it.

In front of me stood a freak, a creature that used to be a woman. It was standing so close to me I could almost reach out and touch it. As its blood-red eyes bore into mine, the contents of the drawer started to rattle.

~ ~ ~ ~

Moments slipped by before I remembered to breathe. My heart was slamming against my chest, and I couldn't hear anything over the blood rushing through my ears. I remained frozen, not wanting to make any sudden movements. The creature wasn't moving either. I was disturbed by its doseness and the way it was staring at me. The red eyes were focused on mine, but I didn't see any calculation beyond that.

I slowly released my grasp on the drawer with my right hand and reached for my knife. Feeling the handle in my palm calmed me, and my ragged breathing began to steady. The adrenaline that was rushing through my body was already doing its work on my stomach, making me feel nauseated.

The freak had on a dassy, rust-colored dress, or at least what was left of it. Although her hair had thinned, a butterfly clip managed to dangle precariously from the strands still attached to her scalp. She wasn't terribly dirty either, aside from the dried blood on her hands. It was obvious the blood came from the sores and scars running up and down her forearms. All these were dues that she had not been mobile these past few years.

Mentally, I berated myself over being so careless. She had to have been here on my first sweep a few weeks ago, and I had somehow missed her. I broke one of my own rules as I had assumed everything was dear. I should have done another sweep of the house before turning my back on it. It was sloppy.

The opening and dosing of the door must have alerted her, and she came to investigate the noise. That is, as much as freaks could investigate things. That meant she came over to stand and stare blankly, and judging by past observations, she would continue to stand there until something else pulled her away. I figured some freaks would be standing still until the end of time, like this one surely would have done if I had not come in to interrupt her.

Standing where she was, she blocked me into the small, boxed kitchen, and I couldn't edge around her without touching her. I didn't want to find out what would happen if I did brush against her. I had spent enough time freak-watching that I knew they all didn't react the same way. Some let themselves be jostled around, but others would snap and bite at those that ran into them. I wasn't really looking forward to finding out what type of freak this one was.

I could take the chance that she was docile and push her aside. On the other hand, if she wasn't docile, then I would be in a difficult position if she attacked. I would be too close to counterattack, and at too awkward of an angle to block. If I chose to kill her, she would smell the whole place up as she was rotting.

Softly, I exhaled. The sound was enough to cause a reaction in the freak. As if my exhalation was a cue, she started swaying back and forth, her body rocking to an unheard tempo. Her mouth started working, opening up slightly only to close back down again but never dosing all the way. She looked like a fish. That was disconcerting to say the least.

I was still trying to decide what my best option would be when she took a shambling step closer. My body reacted as if it was spring loaded, my mind only processing action with no time to think things through. I stepped forward, dropping the drawer and unsheathing my Bowie knife all in one smooth motion. I fully intended to stab upward, my target being the soft flesh where her chin met her neck and drive the blade into her brain.

I didn't count on the freak reacting to my attack. Hissing, she rushed forward to meet me as her arms came up. That startled me, fear blooming in my gut because this was different. Normally the freaks didn't react when I attacked them, but this one did. Her movement threw off my aim and the blade sliced into her cheek and was pushed backward to cut into her scalp. The sharp knife separated the skin from her skull, and her ear flapped to the side, no longer connected to her head.

She didn't seem to notice.

Warm blood squirted onto my hand and spewed across the cabinets, and countertops. She came at me again, her red eyes locked onto mine. Her mouth continued to make that gnawing motion as she tried to lodge her teeth into any part of me. Flashbacks from before I was bitten raged into my mind then. This was the first time I'd been full-on attacked by one of these freaks since the change.

I grabbed her by the neck with my free hand and was able to stab her in the stomach, doing my best to ignore the hands that were clawing at my face. She was able to get a few good swipes at me, and it forced me backwards to the sink. The blood that was pooling on the tile floor had created a slick mess, and she slipped as she advanced, falling hard.

These creatures lacked grace. Her head lashed to the side, cracking against the cabinet on her way down. She collapsed to her stomach, obviously dazed by the blow, and I wasted no time stepping on her back to pin her to the floor. Holding her in place, I stabbed the blade into her neck.

She struggled against me, and for a while I didn't think I would be able to hold her. Slowly, her struggles died down as the pool of blood beneath her grew. She was dying, even though she couldn't feel it. Minutes passed before she finally lay still.

Panting, I pulled myself to my feet, leaving bloody smears along the countertops. Face-eaters were stronger than humans, and this fight had zapped all my strength. I took in the gore splattered around me, on me, and knew this was a particularly sloppy kill. I had let myself get caught completely off guard, and had no idea what her motivation for attack had been. It had all happened so fast. I had no idea if she was just reacting to my attack, wanting a quick bite to eat, or was going into a frenzy.

*Did she frenzy?*

More questions and worries instantly plagued my mind. What if my immunity was wearing off? What if the freaks were evolving into something else? If I became a target again, I was in one of the worst places I could possibly be. I swallowed hard, finding that my resolve to leave this place was absolute now. I had to get my belongings together and get back on the road as soon as possible.

"Bitch," I said out loud, surprised at how raspy my voice sounded. It felt appropriate. The blood was soaking into her rust colored dress, making the scene look even more macabre. She looked like she was shrouded in blood. I wiped my knife clean on a patch of fabric, and grabbed my pack. There was no point saving the contents of the drawer. I left it all where it had scattered as the blood pooled around it.

I grumbled to myself, deciding to go through the rest of the house quickly to see if I could find anything useful. I decided not to sheath my knife. I got caught off guard once today and wasn't about to let it happen again.

Creeping down the hallway after clearing the living room, I paused at the first closed door. I remembered what was in that room from the first time I was in the house. I had opened the door to see a crib and little bones, and immediately shut the door again. Maybe that creeper had been in there and that was how I had missed her? But the door was still shut, and I had yet to witness one of them operate something as simple as a doorknob.

My heartbeat sped up again as I gripped the doorknob. I dosed my eyes, counted to ten, and listened. Nothing.

But I couldn't do it.

I looked down at my fingers curled around the knob and let go. That door could stay shut.

Moving on to the second bedroom, which had been turned into a sewing room, I fussed at myself again for being sloppy. I figured living here for so long was starting to have its effects on me, and I would be a sitting duck out there if I didn't get it together.

Shaking it off, I explored the sewing room, grabbing some needles, thread and a few swatches of fabric. I had never learned how to sew but this stuff might prove valuable for trades. I quickly rifled through the dresser drawers and found a pair of scissors, another useful item that would come in handy.

Suddenly, a stereo blared to life somewhere in the house as the lights flickered on. My stomach did flip-flops as it took a second for my addled mind to grasp what happened.

The electricity was pulsing through the neighborhood again, as it did almost daily. There were no radio stations anymore, so this freak had been listening to a god-awful CD when the world went to hell. This would not have been the last thing I'd have wanted to hear on my way out.

*No, I don't want to be a big rockstar.* I thought as I huffed and tried to steady my jumpy nerves.

I had my own little stash of CD's back at the house for the few hours out of the day I was able to listen. This one would not be going back with me.

Grumbling about the timing of it all, I gave the room one last look. Satisfied with my find, I moved on to dear the master bedroom. There were plenty of clothes here I could find some use for, but with the supercenter so close, I would pass this up for new stuff. Bringing items into settlements that still had tags on them could sometimes prove to be a huge bonus.

Three years ago, I would have thought I hit the jackpot, but now I knew there were tons of places like this. Guarded by freaks, it was difficult and deadly for others to scavenge but wide open for me. I was always able to stock up on fairly good gear whenever I needed and hadn't been truly desperate in a long while. The thought nagged at me that my good fortune might be coming to an end as I considered what had happened with the freak in the kitchen.

I paused, replaying the quick fight in my mind. Had she really jumped at me as a reaction to my attack or was she already attacking before I moved? I couldn't remember. Even though the memory was fresh, it had happened so quickly. Everything was jammed together in my head and it was making me second-guess what I thought happened. These freaks didn't have the greatest of response times unless they were frenzied. It was easy for me to out maneuver them, but her quick reaction had me baffled.

*How?* I thought to myself, bewildered. I chewed on my bottom lip in contemplation, staring back towards the kitchen. Suddenly, an overwhelming urge to be back in my own house and away from this freak forced my feet to move. I grabbed the books I'd come for and decided I wouldn't be coming back here. I had to push her body out of the way to get to the back door. When she moaned, I jumped. I guess she wasn't quite dead yet.

I threw my pack over my shoulder, the weight bogging me down. The anxiety inside me grew as I opened the door on the two freaks that stood in the backyard, half expecting them to rush me. There was no change in their behavior. They continued to stand silently and stare at nothing, much the same as they had been doing when I first passed them.

I decided to leave the back door open and let the birds have the body at least. It would help with the rotting process anyway. Making my way back to my house wasn't easy with the books. Books were heavy, and I wouldn't be able to travel with them on foot when I left. As long as I had made the correct adjustments to that new SUV, a dark blue Murano that I'd pushed into the garage, I wouldn't have to worry about that for a while.

Even packing the Murano full, there would be a lot I'd have to leave behind, even some of the books. That thought made me sad because I loved them. I read so many of them myself, I didn't want to part with even one, but that wasn't practical.

There were other things that I was reluctant to leave behind. Creature comforts mostly. If I weren't so nervous about staying here, this neighborhood would be able to sustain me for years. Even as it occurred to me, I knew that thought was a ridiculous notion. I wouldn't find any answers here.

Making my way back to my house, I remained nervous and jumpy each time I found myself close to a face-eater. I really was expecting another attack, but I managed to make it back without incident. Once I was safely behind my locked doors, the threat seemed to diminish in my mind.

I trudged up the stairs to one of the bedrooms I used as storage, and let the pack slide from my shoulders to thump on the floor. I was exhausted.

Turning, I caught my reflection in the mirror and groaned at myself. I was a bloody mess, nearly covered from head to toe. There was even a long scratch down my cheek where the freak had caught me with her claws. I rolled my eyes at my reflection as I left the room.

Back down stairs, I tested the hall light to make sure the electricity was still on. Some days it would last for a few hours, and other days it would only flash on for a few minutes. I began to notice that there were more and more days when it didn't come on at all. I wouldn't be surprised if there came a day when it never came back on.

I had turned off all the lights, and unplugged all the appliances not long after I had moved in here. I was getting tired of jumping every time the electronics roared to life. The only two things I left hooked up was a light in my bedroom and the fancy electric hot water heater.

I always showered in the downstairs bathroom because of the huge window that would let in plenty of light if the electricity shut off mid shower. That had actually happened more than once. At least the water kept flowing for a little bit.

Letting the water run for about a minute, I watched as the steam pooled overhead. Stripping off my soiled clothes and tossing them to the floor, I was going to let myself enjoy this. I set my knife in easy reach, just in case, before stepping into the cascading water.

I had plenty of shampoo and conditioner, as that is one of the necessities I had stocked up on over the past few months. I even had plenty of different fragrances to choose from when it came to body wash.

The soap washed the blood and dirt away, and I watched the pink suds swirl down the drain. For a brief moment, the smell of lavender enveloped me, and I could pretend I was *home*.

Then the tears came.

## CHAPTER 2 - JOSS

It was early afternoon when I wandered off to the barn. I was hoping to avoid Jeremy, knowing he was going to make me work again, but I wanted a little time to myself. The calluses on my hands were already cracked and bleeding from this morning, and they felt like they were burning. He was so determined to turn his land into a productive farm and, at the moment, I didn't care.

Instead, I retreated to the back of the barn out of view from the house and pulled out my carving knife along with a piece of wood. Seth had taught me how to carve shapes into the wood, but my carvings never seemed to turn out as pretty as his did. He told me to keep trying and someday I would be the best in the world.

Before I got started, I set out a wooden panther that Seth carved for me a long time ago. It was one of the few things I had left of him, and I cherished it. It was all the company I wanted out here.

A couple times, I had even tried carving my own likeness of the panther, but it never turned out even close to what Seth had given me. I abandoned the whole idea of trying and decided it was better to make my own things. I was just getting started on the figure of a girl with wild hair when I heard Jeremy's voice calling me to the house.

"Kevin! Becky!" He bellowed. "Joss!"

I groaned, not wanting to move. For a second, I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the splintered wood of the barn wall and listened to world. The breeze carried voices from one of the nearby houses, along with the sounds of barking dogs.

Sighing, I finally pulled myself to my feet. Reluctantly, I gathered all my things and placed them back in the proper pockets. I knew I had a responsibility to help this small community thrive, so I answered Jeremy's call. He would be assigning the afternoon tasks.

*This farm ain't gonna rebuild itself, y'all hear?* His voice dattered around in my head. He said it all the time, and I knew he would say it again today. He was waiting for us at the porch, and I saw that Becky was already standing next to him.

Becky was a year or two older than me, but not as old as Ali. She had long, straight blonde hair and blue eyes where Ali had wavy red curls and bright green eyes. She was very petite too, where Ali was strong and fierce. It wasn't fair to compare her to Ali, I knew that. I caught myself doing it from time to time without even thinking about it. Ali had been like a big sister to me, and Becky was just... distant. A stranger. She had never been cross with me, but she had never been nice to me either. It seemed like I was nothing more to her than the charity case that lived under the same roof as she did.

Kevin, on the other hand, was closer to my age and was the one that had reached out to me when Ali left. He was a nice kid, talking to me and dragging me into his games, but I felt more comfortable being alone. I wanted my time to remember Seth and Ali. These people never knew Seth and didn't know Ali well enough to help me keep their memories, so I cherished them on my own.

Kevin ran from around the house, a shovel already in his hands. It looked like he was working on a project that I didn't care to know about. Seeing the shovel in his hands made me wince as I glanced down at my own damaged palms.

Looking back to Jeremy, a round man who had the same blue tint to his eyes that Becky had, I waited for him to dole out our assignments. I was hoping mine didn't involve helping Kevin with the shoveling, or using the axe. That's how I'd gotten these stupid blisters in the first place.

Jeremy gave another version of the same speech he repeated every day. My mind drifted to other thoughts as his deep voice droned on, but I knew the gist of what he was saying.

*We are a family and a community.*

*With our hard work, times are changing for the better.*

*We need to prepare for the colder months ahead. Winter is coming.*

"This farm ain't gonna rebuild itself," he grumbled at the end, and I snapped back to attention. I shared a quick glance with Kevin to see that he looked as bored as I felt. When he started to smirk, I looked away, hoping Jeremy wouldn't notice. I knew he'd give Kevin a piece of his mind if he caught him. The last thing I wanted to do was have Jeremy think I was disrespecting him.

The moment passed, and Jeremy didn't seem to notice or care. He sent Becky back to the house to help his wife Mary, whom he commonly referred to as 'Mother.' Between the two of them, they kept our clothes washed, the food cooked, and the house clean.

Sometimes it felt like I was in one of those old-timey movies that my granddad liked to watch. I didn't figure that would have gone over well at my house, at least what I could remember of it anyway. My dad cooked just as much as my mom did, while Seth and I did a lot of the cleaning. I didn't know why that had to change just because the world was all shot to hell now. Also, the thought of them trying to get Ali in the kitchen made me laugh.

Jeremy was talking about a storage project with Kevin before he sent him back around the house. Then he turned his gaze to me, and I shifted nervously, almost feeling guilty over my own thoughts.

Even though he seemed gruff, I knew it was only because the situation was so dire. I truly respected Jeremy and what he was accomplishing here. In fact, I was quite grateful that he and Mary had taken me in when they did, even though I knew I didn't show it very well. I was too quiet and sullen for their tastes and it felt like Jeremy didn't know what to make of me at times.

Mary, on the other hand, had more patience with me. She would let me have the space that I so desperately wanted, although she always wanted me close to the house. She would not have liked me going out behind the barn without telling anyone.

As Jeremy's eyes scrutinized me, I swallowed hard and took a chance, turning my sore hands out to him. My palms were up so he could see the bleeding calluses, and he immediately pursed his lips together.

"Well boy, no point in working you till your hands fall off," he said, falling back into thoughtful consideration, stroking the whiskers on his chin with one hand. "Why don't you go have Mother clean those up for you? Then see if she might have something you can put a little muscle to in the house. I'll help Kevin out back till supper."

"Yes sir, Mr. Powell," I nodded politely, and he grunted in reply. That was the extent of our relationship for the most part, and I was happy with that.

Not waiting for Jeremy to say anything else, I entered the house, finding both Becky and Mary in the kitchen. Becky gave me a solemn glance as I walked in, but Mary offered me a warm smile.

"Well, what do we have here?" She said, coming to me as I held out my hands for her to inspect.



"Mr. Powell sent me in to be bandaged up," I stated, but she was already gasping and pulling me over to the sink before I had even finished talking.

We didn't have running water in the house, but there was a well out back and a wood stove in the kitchen that was almost always smoldering. It was hot as hell in the depths of summer, but it kept Mary with a handy supply of clean, fresh water. She used some of her store to wash the dirt off my hands and out of the sores so she could get a better look.

"Hrm, looks like you might get a break for a day or so while these heal up, huh?" She smiled at me, turning to leave the room. She was probably heading for the medicine cabinet in the washroom. If I was lucky, there might even be some cream to help with the healing.

I sneaked a look at Becky while she plucked a scrawny hen for dinner. Her blue eyes flashed up at me briefly but she quickly returned her attention to her task. Thoughts swirled in my head, and I wondered if she was as scarred and numb to pain as I was. Maybe that was why she would never talk to me. That wasn't a topic of conversation I wanted to bring up, though. It would result in questions about my past, and I wasn't ready to share. These people knew about Ali, but neither Ali nor I had told them about Seth.

I looked at my hands, my thoughts again drifting to my brother and I wondered what he would do right now. I desperately wanted to make him proud of me, so I often thought about how he would handle a situation. He would smile at Becky, and be as nice to her as he possibly could. He might even be able to get her to laugh. That's the kind of guy Seth was.

I tried to think of something, anything, to say before Mary came back in, but my mind failed me. I was still standing silently at the sink when she returned.

"I found something that will help with those sores, love. Why don't you come have a seat at the table while I fix you up?" Her voice was so warm and inviting that I had no trouble smiling and talking to her.

"Yes, Mrs. Mary," I returned her smile as I sat beside her. "Is there anything else I can help you with in here? Mr. Powell doesn't want me working outside today."

"Is that right?" she mumbled as she started rubbing some ointment into my blisters. It stung, but I managed to only wince a little bit. "Well, Becky and I have dinner handled, but there's a lot of sorting that needs done from the last haul you boys pulled in."

"I can do that!" I quickly jumped at the opportunity. I actually liked looking through all the new supplies that we brought back from our hauls. It was easy work, too. It consisted of separating clothes from tools and other useful items we brought in. Normally the food was pulled out first, so there wouldn't be anything left from the last haul as far as that goes. It had already been over a week since we had gone into Sweetwater.

Mary laughed richly at my enthusiasm, and she nodded. "Sorting it is then. Just let me get these bandages on and it's off you go."

She started humming an old song as she continued to work on my hands. I thought I recognized it, but I never paid much attention to music and lyrics when I was nine. Mary sang and hummed all the time, but if it wasn't a Christmas carol, I couldn't even begin to sing along. I didn't care, though. The humming seemed to make this place more like home.

Becky knew the song and surprised me as she started singing along. Her voice carried softly through the house.

*Well it seems to me you lived your life  
Like a candle in the wind,  
Never knowing who to cling to  
When the rain set in.*

The song seemed haunting and beautiful at the same time. I became entranced by Becky's soft voice. It was better than any radio I could remember.

*I would have liked to know you  
But I was just a kid  
Your candle burned out long before  
Your legend ever did.*

Mary stopped humming as she finished with my dressings, and Becky fell silent. I looked at my hands, opening and closing them a few times to check my flexibility. Mary had done a fine job dressing the wounds. I found the sores restricted my movement more than the bandages.

Thanking Mrs. Mary, I left the table and started for the stairs. Something made me pause as I passed Becky. I realized I finally had something to say to her.

"You sing really pretty. You should do it more often." It sounded dumb to my own ears and heat began to seep into my cheeks. She looked startled that I had spoken to her for a second, but then she smiled. I saw the blush rising in her cheeks as her blue eyes sparkled.

"Thank you," she whispered, and I fled up the stairs.

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A few hours passed and I was sorting dothes into different piles when I heard the front door slam. Jeremy and Kevin had come in for dinner. I finished up the pile of shirts quickly before I headed downstairs. Jeremy and Kevin had already washed up and were sitting down to the table. Jeremy caught me peaking around the corner from the stairs and waved me over. Feeling awkward for no reason, I took my usual seat beside Kevin.

"So how are those hands, boy? Will you be out in the garden again tomorrow?" he asked, and it was hard for me to tell if he was joking or not.

"Now, you leave him be. I need his help tomorrow too." Mary gave me a sly wink behind Jeremy's back. "He did an excellent job today, and it helped free up my time." She made a round of the table, setting down bowls and plates for all of us and I smiled at her as she passed by me. She patted my back affectionately.

"Well," Jeremy said, scrutinizing me as he gnawed on a celery stalk. "Can't disappoint Mother, now can we?"

He smiled a bit as he reached for the salt. At least I think it was a smile, but his eyes were thoughtful. Now that I was hurt, he had to be calculating the extra days it would take to finish the storage project. It meant more work divided between himself and Kevin until I could get back out there.

The Powells had been farmers before everything happened, and had taught me quite a few things about raising crops. We even had a couple big horses and a nice cow in the barn that Mary could get milk from. Milk meant butter and cream and cheese.

They also weren't the only family out here raising animals and crops. Some tended chickens and pigs, and there were as many dogs as anything else. All dogs hated dead-brains, and were a great alarm if one actually wandered close.

The families shared or traded to help each other out. It reminded me a lot of the way it was when I was in Oklahoma. We had been secluded there, just like we were here, but bad things still managed to happen. I guess it was okay to feel safe here, but I didn't want to let myself believe any place was safe anymore.

Jeremy had grown up on this farm, even though he had been living in Sweetwater with his family when the outbreak happened. He came back to find the couple that had bought the place turned into mindless dead-brains. Jeremy and his brother Jacob took the farm back the hard way. That old couple is buried outside now, beyond the garden.

This area hadn't been very populated. Some of the neighboring houses survived, others didn't. New survivors had come in to take their places, though. We were up to eight houses occupied with families now. It seemed odd to me that there were so few travelers here, but considering how close we were to Dallas, I guess it wasn't so odd after all.

I watched Becky as she brought out the soup pot. Her blue eyes flashed me a look so quickly I thought I might have imagined it. Mary was right behind her, and they both took their seats. Jeremy said grace, and I respectfully bowed my head with the rest of the family. Prayer seemed useless to me now. I knew I was like Ali in that respect. Either God wasn't there, or he was no longer listening.

"Amen." Jeremy ended, and we echoed him. He stood up to serve us, making sure to divide the portions evenly. It was enough to get us full, but never overeat. Even with Jeremy taking those precautions, we didn't have leftovers often.

I could feel my mouth salivating as I looked down at the rich chicken and vegetable soup swimming in my bowl. It was no small amount of torture waiting for it to cool to the point it wouldn't burn my mouth. I caught a glance from Kevin and knew he was thinking the same thing. Between the two of us, we could probably eat the whole meal ourselves.

Twice since I'd been here, the people in our community had come together to butcher one of the cows. All the families shared the meat, and we ate on it for two days. Those two times were the only times I could remember being full in the past year.

The meal was spent in silence for the most part. When Jeremy let his spoon drop into his empty bowl, he finally spoke. "Jake and I have been talking, and we both think it's getting time for another run. With one worker down anyway, this might be the time to do it."

Both Kevin and I looked up in interest while Mary snorted her disapproval. We both knew that being able to get off the farm and away from the daily chores always made for a nice break in the monotony. "I'm going to run over to Jake's in the morning to see if he wants to go with us up north."

I turned back to my stew almost immediately, hoping to hide my face and my reaction. Even though Jacob was Jeremy's brother, I didn't much care for him. He lived in the neighboring farmhouse with his new wife and baby. His wife came to visit us often with the little one, but I only saw Jacob during hauls. I preferred it that way. He enjoyed killing the dead-brains way too much. After witnessing the brutal way he took them down, I found myself uncomfortable being around him.

"Papa, can I go this time?" Becky said, and I glanced up in surprise. She never went on hauls. Mary gave Jeremy a warning look, but Jeremy just sucked at his teeth in contemplation. His refusal to acknowledge Mary had her face turning three shades of red.

"Now Rebecca, I'll need you here working with me tomorrow," Mary said, obviously irritated that Jeremy hadn't responded negatively yet.

Becky looked down at her plate, frowning. She spoke again, but she didn't have the courage to look up. "It'll be safe, Papa. We haven't seen a madman in nearly a year now."

"Harrumph," Jeremy grunted, lost in his contemplation. "We'll see in the morning, child."

Jeremy pushed himself back from the table and retired to the master bedroom. Mary immediately followed, slamming the bedroom door behind her. I could hear them as they argued behind the door.

Wanting someone else to break the awkward silence, I turned my attention back to the stew. No one else spoke, though. Becky finally rose from the table, gathering up the dishes to take to the kitchen. I finished quickly and decided I would help as much as I could. When I brought my bowl into the kitchen, Becky was already washing the dishes.

"I can help with those," I said. She glanced up to meet my eyes briefly, then her gaze dropped to my hands. I noticed her eyes were red-rimmed from crying.

"Your bandages... You shouldn't get those wet," and she turned back to the sink.

I flexed my hands, looking at the bandages and shrugged. "I can help you dry at least."

She didn't look at me again, but nodded after a few seconds. Kevin joined us a few minutes later, storing the extra food as best he could. I knew the stew would be our breakfast in the morning since it would only last a few days. The vegetables would keep a bit longer.

The three of us cleared the dinner table and cleaned the kitchen in silence. We retired to our beds without seeing Mary or Jeremy again that night. Their voices drifted up to my bedroom on the second floor, though. I knew they had lost their youngest daughter before I met them. Mary had understandable fears. She didn't want to risk losing her last daughter. I didn't blame her. I didn't want to lose anyone else either.

Sleep came slowly for me. I had gotten used to the hot nights, but tonight was different. The wind that rustled through my open window wasn't enough to keep me cool. I was thinking about Seth and Mom and Dad, missing them all. I didn't want to be alone anymore. I didn't want to feel so alone anymore. I cried.

We only had one working dock in the living room, so I had no idea what time it was when I finally drifted to sleep. When I did sleep, I dreamed of Ali. She was coming back for me, but the dream was long gone by the time the dawn gently woke me. That, in itself, was a refreshing change from Jeremy's harsh wake-up calls. Not wanting to linger, I hastily got dressed and went downstairs to find Mary patching up some of our clothes. Becky was outside working on the wash.

"Good morning, love," Mary flashed me a quick smile, but the light that was normally in her eyes wasn't there this morning. The *talk* she and Jeremy had must have been rough. She was back to her sewing without another word.

"Morning, Mrs. Mary," I replied politely as I made my way to the back door. I wanted to find Kevin so we could talk about the haul today. I figured Jeremy was already over at Jacob's and we would have a free morning until he returned. I could take the time to work on my carving, but for once, I didn't want to be alone. I found Kevin helping Becky hang the wash.

"Hey, Joss!" Kevin replied, overly excited to see me. I actually got a smile from Becky as I walked up. "Guess what?"

"Um..." I started, but Kevin had no intention of letting me guess.

"Becky gets to come today! Pa went to get Unde Jake's truck and we're heading out as soon as they get back!"

"That's great news." I smiled at Becky and tried to match Kevin's enthusiasm, but I fell short. It wasn't because Becky was going with us, and I hoped that she didn't take it that way. It was the mention of Jacob that soured my mood, even though I wasn't really surprised by it. After all, he was the one with the running vehicle. Chances of him letting us use it without him were slim, but I didn't want to be reminded of it.

I habitually started to help hang the clothes and asked, "Are we going into Sweetwater?"

"Nah, Pa thinks Sweetwater has been too deared out," Kevin replied. "There's a small town just up the road to the north he wants to start going through. It's not far, maybe twenty miles or so. He said the Wilsons have been up there a few times already," Kevin chattered, his excitement bubbling over. "And there's that little airport up there too, maybe we can check that out sometime!"

I was frowning to myself, hoping the Wilsons had been able to clear out the dead-brains. New places normally meant running into a few, and that meant having to watch Jacob sadistically kill them. Unease spread inside me and I briefly thought about offering to stay with Mary to help her today. I didn't want to look like a coward in front of Becky, though, so I dismissed that idea pretty quickly. The worry was making my stomach upset, and I was glad I woke up late and missed breakfast.

Kevin continued to rattle on about the airport and maybe learning how to fly a plane someday to find other survivors. I nodded and grunted at appropriate times during his one-sided conversation while Becky stayed silent through it all.

Kevin may have been older than me, but he hadn't seen what the world out there looked like now. They'd moved from Sweetwater to this farm not long after the outbreak started. He'd lost his little sister to the flu, but I had lost my whole family to the outbreak. He was so naive.

The dread was building in me every second. No wonder Mary was so worried about Becky going. Going to Sweetwater was one thing, but knowing that we were going to a new location, I didn't even want her to go. It wasn't my place to say anything or intrude in this family's business. By the time I heard the horse galloping up the driveway, I was back to my sullen, quiet self. Turning to watch Jeremy guide the old mare to the barn, I could see the dust trail being kicked up by Jacob's old Ford truck.

Kevin actually jumped with his excitement and took off for the barn. I barely even glanced at him as he left, determined to finish hanging the wash first. Becky wore a puzzled expression for a bit as she noticed my mood, and she soon drifted back to her indifferent attitude toward me. The smiles were gone. I sighed to myself as I finished hanging the last shirt.

"Becky," I started and she looked at me while she gathered the baskets. Again I felt foolish for what I was about to say, but I had to get it out. "If we see any of those diseased out there, please don't get near them. Let Jacob and Jeremy take care of them."

She straightened and stared at me for a second, the puzzled expression back on her face. I wished I could hear her thoughts. Finally she nodded her agreement and said, "Of course."

With that, she walked to the house and my gaze turned to the barn and the rusted, blue truck that was rolling up. Even though the unease was sitting heavy in my stomach, I decided it would be best if I joined them to help with the preparations for the trip.

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In less than an hour, we were on the road. Despite my best efforts to skip breakfast, Mary gave me a thermos of soup for the trip. I could hear the liquid sloshing around in the can as we drove. The thought of eating it wasn't appealing, but I gave it a shot.

Jacob drove, and Jeremy was sitting in the passenger seat. That left the three of us kids to cram into the backseat. Kevin and I were at the windows, and Becky sat in the middle. This left me little room to manage the thermos, but I did my best. My nervous stomach only allowed me to sip at the broth.

Kevin was rambling about all the things he wanted to find in this little town. He had only been to Sweetwater before, so he could hardly contain his excitement. I was lost in quiet contemplation, questioning Jeremy's decision to take us to a place he hadn't scouted first. They hadn't seen much of the world since the outbreak. From the stories Kevin told me, I had picked up on the fact the dead-brains weren't thick around here. Maybe they had never seen a real swarm of them. If that was the case, they weren't aware of how dangerous it could be.

I swallowed down the nervousness. I didn't feel it was my place to tell them what to do or how to do it. Instead, I sat quietly and fiddled with my thermos while everyone else talked excitedly. Even Becky spoke every now and then, but I just let the conversation drift by me unheard, watching the countryside pass by.

The road was clear, allowing the truck to travel at a decent speed. At one point, we passed by a mess of cars that were abandoned on the side of the road. Jacob slowed down as we passed, and three dead-brains wandered out. Kevin fell silent immediately, and Becky gasped. Jacob started to slow the car even more but Jeremy intervened, which I was thankful for.

"Nah, Jake. Keep it rollin'," and he pointed to the field beyond. There were more dead-brains out there, drawn by the noise of the car.

Jacob grunted a reply and sped up, skirting around the monsters. As we passed them, we had a clear view of their blood red eyes staring into the car. They were curious at this point, not having been able to sense us inside. They weren't in attack mode yet.

Kevin and Becky stared at them wide-eyed. They had seen dead-brains before, I knew, but I wasn't sure if they were fully aware of what they were capable of. They needed a healthy fear and respect for them because once they frenzied, if you didn't have a plan of action, you were dead.

I avoided watching them. I had no curiosity towards them anymore, and wished they were all dead.

After that, Kevin's enthusiasm grew again, evident by his excited chatter, but I just wished I could tune him out. I couldn't believe how excited he was. Jeremy and Jacob didn't seem fazed by it, but Becky didn't say another word. She was staring straight ahead, and she looked paler than normal, too. I wanted to say something, do something that might be reassuring, but everything I thought of felt too awkward. I turned my gaze out the window again.

I would guess the drive only took a little over thirty minutes. Now that we were rolling up to the edge of the town, the drive seemed entirely too short. I became more alert then. This was what I was dreading.

I scanned the countryside leading up to the town. Dead-brains milled around out in the fields, but they were too far away to take interest in us. Unless they heard a frenzy call, they'd probably stay put.

Dead-brains in the field meant that this little town probably wasn't looted clean yet, but it also meant the town could have its fair share of infected inhabitants. There was no activity outside the buildings, but that could be misleading. The first two buildings on the outskirts of town were a bar and a gas station. The town itself looked deserted, but I knew every building could have something trapped inside, unable to get out.

People hid in buildings when the outbreak started. That's where they turned and that's where they stayed. At least until someone uninfected came along and let them out. I didn't like buildings.

Jacob rolled into the nearest parking lot and killed the engine. We were too close to the building for my taste. A dilapidated sign signified that this used to be Bobby's Bar and Grill. I briefly wondered what became of Bobby, and had the macabre thought that he might still be inside.

Even though Kevin and Becky hadn't been exposed to the new world, they knew the drill at least. We sat in silence for five minutes. Since sound attracted the dead-brains, we waited to see if any heard us. If five minutes passed, you were normally in the clear. They weren't conniving enough to wait for us to exit the vehicle before they attacked.

Five minutes passed that felt like an eternity. I could see how eager Kevin was to go, but Becky didn't have the color back in her cheeks. Once again I had the overwhelming urge to reassure her, and this time I found the courage to awkwardly pat her hands. She had them clutched together in a white-knuckled grip in her lap, and she jumped at my touch. When she turned wide eyes to me, I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. It felt like a grimace. She did manage a nod though, and she visibly relaxed a little.

"Kevin, Joss," Jeremy whispered, but it sounded loud in the silence. "You stay here with Becky and the truck. Hit the lights if you see anything."

"Can't I come with you?" Kevin started to plead but Jeremy cut him off before he was even finished.

"No. You stay with the truck till Jake and I say it's clear." His tone brooked no argument. Kevin slumped back in his seat, and Jacob and Jeremy exited the truck, making sure not to slam the doors.

The bigger weapons were in the bed of the truck, and I watched Jacob walk past my window to grab his half-moon sickle. I looked back toward the building, avoiding even looking at Jacob. I hated that weapon. I suppressed a shudder as a bloody memory flashed through my mind.

Kevin immediately moved to the front seat, wanting to get a better view, but Becky and I didn't move. She didn't even slide to the empty space that Kevin had left. Whatever reassurance I had given her earlier was completely gone now. She was as rigid as she ever was, if not more.

I sighed. I didn't like this any more than she did and wondered why she had even wanted to come in the first place. I thought to myself that this would be the last time she would ask to come anywhere for a while.

Outside, the brothers were inspecting the building. The two men peered into the windows before trying the front door. When it didn't budge, Jacob motion toward the back, and they both disappeared around the side of the building. I glanced at Becky. She had her eyes closed.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked her, reaching out for her hands again. She didn't jump this time, but instead grasped at my hand like it was a lifeline.

Kevin wasn't fazed and didn't even look back at us. He just replied to me over his shoulder. "She'll be fine. This is why Pa doesn't like taking her places. At least you can stay with her."

"Shut up, Kevin," she snapped at him, and I raised an eyebrow at the confrontation. They didn't bicker often, but was that what they expected of me? I was going to be Becky's babysitter? I didn't mind actually. Being in a car that could actually drive was better than being in any of those unexplored buildings.

Becky looked at me, her face still pale. "I didn't think there would be so many."

*So many?* I thought to myself. I looked at the handful of dead-brains out in the fields. Is that what she meant? I started to tell her that this was nothing, but quickly thought better of it. That might frighten her even more. Instead I asked, "How many have you seen? Ya know... Before today?"

"Well," she started, "There was those two that wondered up to Unde Jake's farm when Jessica was birthin' Nathan. Unde Jake took care of them, though. They didn't even get a chance to hurt anyone." I looked from her to Kevin then. Kevin was straining to see anything of interest out the front window, ignoring us. Becky continued, "And then there have been a few that wander up to the farm, but the dogs never let them get dose without us knowing 'bout it. Papa has always gotten rid of them."

I nodded, turning my worried eyes to watch the dead-brains in the field. I didn't want her to see my expression. She asked me, "How many have you seen?"

I almost snorted.

*Hundreds. Thousands. They ate my neighbors, my friends, my mother. They took my brother away from me. They took all the family I ever loved. All of them except for Ali and now Ali's gone.*

"A few," I said.

She didn't press for more. At this point, I didn't think she could even imagine that there could be more. Not a minute passed before the front door of Bobby's Bar and Grill opened and Jeremy came outside waving us in.

"Yes!" Kevin exclaimed and was out of the cab in seconds, running for the front door. He was so excited he forgot to grab an empty pack. Jeremy gave Becky and me one last wave before turning back inside, but she didn't budge.

"We can stay here if you want. I'll stay with you," I said, her hands still clasping mine. I don't even think she realized she was holding my hand.

She shook her head. "No, I'm going inside."

I was shocked to hear her voice sound so determined, and she immediately slid to the door. I glanced around again to see if any of the distant dead-brains had picked us up on their radar, but they were only interested in the weeds they were standing in. I made sure to exit the truck as quietly as possible, Becky doing the same. Grabbing a couple packs from the bed of the truck, we both walked to the bar together.

I was worried. She had a determined expression fixed on her face and was staring straight ahead again. I didn't know how she could be aware of her surroundings like that. Hopefully she could get a handle on her fear inside. Being brave was not the same thing as knowing how to stay alive in this world.

Once inside the bar, the other men had opened up all the shades so enough daylight was coming in through the windows. If this little town had made any type of stand against the outbreak, this is not where they had done it. It also did not appear to have been looted at all. That was a good sign. We would be able to stock up here.



"Let's be quick about this," Jacob called gruffly as he started to pull out bottles of alcohol from behind the bar. Jeremy disappeared into the kitchen, Kevin at his heels. I grabbed some salt and pepper shakers off the tables I passed as I made my way into the kitchen. I figured that would be the best place to fill my pack.

I glanced back at Becky to see she was looking at the wine glasses and beer mugs at the bar. I knew she'd be safe around Jacob. He would jump at the chance to kill any infected.

"Flour!" Kevin exclaimed as soon as I walked into the kitchen. He was holding up two big sealed containers, one in each hand. "No bugs!"

I smiled at that, knowing that would make Mary happy. Kevin ran past me to stack the bags by the door, as per our stocking routine. All found goods were stacked at the exit door, and everyone loaded at the same time once we had enough for a haul. Keeping the group together and the noise down to a minimum was the best chance for avoiding the dead-brains.

At a very cursory glance, I could see this kitchen was stocked with some very fine cookware that I thought Mary would appreciate. I started to load up my packs with what pots, containers, and utensils I could and I left Jeremy to sort out which food would be best to take back. I didn't always have the best eye for that, and it wasn't worth the bag space to take back something we couldn't eat.

I filled my first pack up quickly and started out to sit it by the flour when Kevin rushed back into the kitchen, still jittery with excitement. I chuckled a bit, the nervousness relenting now that we were safe inside a building. I dropped my pack at the door, and turned to check on Becky. I was hoping that her mood had also lightened.

She wasn't in the room. I looked at Jacob still sorting through the various alcohol bottles and swallowed my distaste for him. I asked, "Where's Becky?"

He grunted back at me, "Feminine needs."

I blinked at that for a second not understanding what he meant, then it dawned on me. It dawned on me a split second before I heard her scream.

The restroom!

My eyes found the sign in the back corner of the building, and I was already running towards the door before Jacob could drop the bottle in his hands. Her continued screams sped me on and I had the faintest of perception that someone had burst out of the kitchen behind me, but I was the closest. I would get there first. If it were a dead-brain, I would kill it. My belt knife was already in my hand.

*Don't take anyone else from me!*

I slid around the dividing wall that hid the bathroom doors, and launched myself into the swinging door labeled *Chicks*. I ran in so hard, my body slammed into the opposite wall, halting my momentum.

Every feeling of dread and nervousness that I had felt this morning was now justified. In the dim light, I could see the scrawny dead-brain pinning Becky against the floor, her body halfway in one of the stalls.

I grabbed the dead-brain by its hair and jerked it backwards fiercely, strands of hair coming loose in my hand. Becky was shrieking now, utterly terrified, and she scuttled backward into the stall away from her attacker. She got one good kick against its jaw, knocking its dangerous mouth away from her.

I knew what I had to do. Without hesitation, I slid the blade of my belt knife across its neck, the red spray of blood painting the floor. I slammed its head into the tile as hard as I could. Becky was still screeching, and the echo was so

loud I nearly missed the hiss of frenzy behind me. By the time I heard it, it was already too late. Something heavy fell over me from behind.

Pressure.

There was severe pressure on my shoulder. I could smell it now. It was the stench of dirt and piss and sweat. I could see its head buried against my neck, and one of its blood red eyes staring at me wildly. I jammed my knife up into that eye with as much power as I could. My stomach roiled at the soft squishy feeling as I met no resistance. It was dead but Jeremy was jerking it off me, tossing the body to the floor. He cleaved its head in two with his axe, causing brain and blood to splatter everywhere. My stomach roiled.

The first one was trying to rise, but I had somehow managed to pin it beneath me during the struggle, purely by coincidence. I scrambled out of the way and Jeremy's axe landed with a solid thud in the middle of its back.

It was over.

I jumped to my feet, covered in blood and gore, yelling at him in a sudden fury. "Why the fuck didn't you check the bathrooms?"

Kevin and Jacob had squeezed in behind him, all three of them casting wary glances between Becky and me. Jeremy's face was ashen, more so than what Becky's had been earlier.

Becky was sobbing now, trembling in the bathroom stall, but Jeremy didn't go to her. I looked at her then, really looked at her. I wondered why no one else was moving, but then everything inside me sank like lead to the pit of my stomach.

Flesh was torn from her right arm, leaving a bloody, messy wound. She was bitten.

Finally, Jeremy pushed me aside as her screams faded from wailing to quiet sobs. He pulled her from the floor and we made way for him as he carried her out of the small, crowded room.

Still, no one spoke. The only sound filling the silence was Becky's sobs.

I started to follow but it was Kevin's wide-eyed stare that drew me up short. He was staring at my shoulder, and when I felt the shirt sticking to my back I knew before I even turned to look. In the rush to save Becky, I didn't even realize it. My adrenaline had been so high, I didn't even feel the pain. The dead-brain never got the chance to rip me open, but his teeth still penetrated the t-shirt and my skin. That was enough.

For some reason, this didn't feel as horrible to me as when I realized Becky had been bitten. I was okay with my life being over, but the thought of Becky's life being over filled me with despair.

I walked past Kevin to collapse in a chair beside Becky. She had her good arm folded on the table, her head down in the crook of her elbow, still sobbing. Jeremy and Jacob were staring at her arm. I could see the red welts already forming and knew my back must look the same.

"Next time, check the fucking bathroom." It was all I could say.

Jacob snorted at that, then grabbed Kevin by the arm and led him outside somewhat roughly. Kevin didn't even try to resist. Tears welled in his eyes as he looked over his shoulder at me before disappearing out the door.

Becky raised her head and looked up at her father. "I'll be okay, Papa. It was just a small bite, doesn't even hurt much. Mother can fix me up."

The innocence in her voice struck me like lightning. Did she not know? I quickly glanced at Jeremy's face and saw it was turning a shade of green. Jeremy knew.

"How could you?" I said. Jeremy couldn't even meet my eyes. "How could you bring her out here without even telling her what this world is now?"

My accusation hung in the air, unanswered.

Becky looked back and forth between us, confusion written on her face.

"Papa, I don't feel so good," she said, and Jeremy sobbed once before catching himself.

I knew the fever was already in her, pulsing through her. I was starting to feel it too. Now, she laid her head on the table because she had to, not because she wanted to hide her tears.

"Papa?" she whispered.

"The bite is turning you," I said softly.

"What?" Her head shot up so she could look in my direction but her eyes couldn't focus on me. She started to fall. I reached to catch her, but Jeremy was there first. He cradled her against him as they both slumped to the floor. She shut her eyes tightly and whispered, "But you were bitten, too."

"I'm turning, too."

Jeremy sobbed again, and kissed her forehead. His voice was hoarse. "I love you, baby girl. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Take me home, Papa, please!" she pleaded, but her voice wasn't above a whisper.

I watched silently, the feelings inside me twisting into anguish as Jeremy cradled her and rocked her slightly. Tears were openly streaming down his face now as he held her frail body against him while she cried into his shirt. The moments passed, stretching into minutes and drawing into an hour. I could feel my own strength starting to fade as I waited.

Finally, I dropped to the floor beside them and pulled her body from Jeremy's arms. He was reluctant to let her go but we both saw the truth of it. I stated flatly, "You should go."

Jeremy relinquished his hold on her and she clung to me, sobbing. She felt so thin and frail in my arms. Her pleading voice was like a dagger in my stomach. "Don't leave me here. Papa, don't leave me."

I glared at Jeremy, knowing that it was his fault and feeling no sympathy for him. I ran my hand over Becky's forehead and whispered down to her, "I won't leave you, Becky. I'm going to stay here with you."

Her body shuddered, wracked by sobs, and her hand found mine and grasped tightly. "Papa?"

Jeremy stood, wiping away tears and pulling his revolver from its holster, but he didn't take aim.

"Do it," I sneered.

His red-rimmed eyes met mine and we stared at each other for a few more moments.

"Do it," I repeated more firmly. Becky cried in my arms. She seemed to be unaware of what was going on in the world around her now. I could feel the heat in her body starting to burn against my own.

Jeremy held the gun up, aiming it at my forehead. It would be a mercy, and I welcomed it.

Closing my eyes, I waited for the darkness to come, waited for the blackness of death to envelope me. I wondered if I would even hear the shot.

All I heard were Becky's sobs.

Finally, I felt, more than heard, as Jeremy turned and walked away. At the sound of the front door closing, I opened my eyes to see Becky and I were alone. They didn't even grab the packs we had already set out for the haul.

"Coward," I growled.

## CHAPTER 3 – ALI

I felt caged. That day was spent studying the freaks' behavior, going from one window to the next on the second floor of the house. Once I reached one end of the house, I reversed direction until I was back to where I started, standing at a window staring down at the freaks.

That night, I loaded my SUV.

The following morning, after barely getting any sleep at all, I was back to pacing. It was difficult to control my anxiety, and I had been too nervous to see if Murano would actually start. The last time I had tested it, it had taken me a whole week to thin the freaks out of the driveway.

I had left the mobile battery charger hooked up, so every time the power was on, the juice was flowing to the battery. It had started easily a month ago when I had finished the conversion. I had no reason to believe it wouldn't start now.

The SUV was roomy enough, but the gallons of kerosene and vegetable oil I was using for fuel took up a lot of space. I wouldn't have room to bring everything I wanted. There were many things here I would miss, like my bed and the running water. I sighed heavily, not wanting to go but knowing that staying here was no longer an option.

I needed a distraction to dear the freaks out of my driveway and had devised a plan. I was going to venture up the road to light a fire. I was sure that would lure the freaks away from my house and give me room to back the big vehicle out. As much as they were drawn to noise, they were also drawn to light. It seemed to be a good plan.

Everything was set. It was time to go.

I'd dosed and locked all the windows in the house to make it secure, even going so far as to board up the window I'd broken months ago. I looked around my room one last time as I belted on my weapon. Before I turned away, I flipped off the light switch. Old habits die hard.

I decided I was keeping the keys to the house. Having a backup plan just in case never hurt anything, and it gave me a sense of security. So now I had house keys and car keys on my key chain. I snorted at the normality of it. Leaving the door to the garage unlocked, I manually raised the garage door cautiously, keeping my eye out for the freaks.

They were there, waiting on me.

Those that heard the creaking as the door was pulled up came to stand in the driveway, stopping when they sensed nothing else of interest. I had moved back into the shadows of the garage, but they didn't seem to care about me. A few shambled away after a while, going back to their daily activities of pacing up and down the street. The three that remained looked like they had decided this was as good a place to stand as any other.

I approached slowly, watching for any movement or hostility from the freaks. They didn't even look at me.

Holding an old yardstick outstretched in my hand, I nervously walked up behind the one closest to me and nudged its shoulder with the stick. It swayed forward off balance, even stumbling a few steps to stay upright. That was it. I didn't even get a moan of protest from it, and the other freaks didn't bother turning around. It was commonplace for them to be jostled around by their own kind, and it wasn't enough to warrant an investigation.

I tested the other two as well and received the same response. I didn't matter to these things. Leaving the yardstick resting against the side of the house, I subconsciously rubbed my fingers over the scar on my forearm. As I looked out at the road, the unease rose inside of me. I was going to venture out into *that* crowd?

Eventually, I pushed myself to move. Grabbing the pack full of dry wood, matches, and kerosene doused rags, I slipped the straps over my shoulders and slowly walked out of the garage.

I knew exactly how many freaks were on this section of street. Twenty-seven who stood unmoving, seven that made their rounds at various different paces, and fifteen that walked up and down the street. That didn't include the freaks on the lawns. I had initially tried to count the ones standing in the surrounding lawns, but overgrown trees and hedges, not to mention other buildings, blocked my view and my count came up inaccurate.

Regardless, knowing how many were in the street was enough to know how much danger I would be in if they turned on me. It would be a tough fight to break myself away from them, but I had my escape route firmly laid out in my mind. My route had been planned from the upstairs window, but things were already looking much different at the edge of my driveway. I was a mere five feet away from one of the immobile freaks. When I noticed the fresh wound on his arm and the blood dripping from his fingertips, I cringed.

I looked down the street to where I had planned to set the fire. It was only two houses down, but it looked so far away. I swallowed, trying to drum up my wavering nerve, and took a few steps. One of the standers further up the road turned to look towards me, and I froze, but it made no other movement.

My gut was twisting in knots, but I continued. I wasn't able to discern which ones would take notice or ignore me completely, but every time one turned towards me I shuddered. Chills were running through me and I was beginning to think this was a horrible idea.

*No Ali, this was a good idea. How else are you getting that tank out of here?*

I berated myself, taking a moment to drive the fear back down. One step at a time, and I was inching further, getting that much closer to my target. I wasn't able to follow a straight path there, as I had to weave around the standers and make sure I was out of the walkers' paths as they came around.

*One step at a time.*

Now I was in front of the neighboring house and had managed to keep the face-eaters out of striking distance, but there was a cluster of six standing ahead of me under a tree, blocking the sidewalk and my path. I wasn't able to move out to the road either, or I'd end up in a walker's path. I would have to walk close to the group, passing maybe two feet from them, easily within arms' reach. I paused, considering my lack of options before moving again.

My hand was on the hilt of my knife, but I hadn't pulled it yet. I was unsure if the freaks had enough of their memories left to recognize a weapon, so I kept it sheathed but ready. The palms of my hands were sweating but the leather grip was tight in my white-knuckled grasp. It wouldn't slip if I had to use it. I trusted this weapon.

I knew my pace had slowed to a crawl as I was barely inching up to the group. A couple of them were staring up into the tree, probably noticing birds or watching the leaves rustle in the breeze. I was only five feet away from them and they had taken no notice of me.

I took another step. Four feet away. Still nothing.

Another step. Three feet away. One of the freaks in the back took notice. She looked down at me, but stilled.

One more step and I was beside them. The stench of unwashed bodies was so nauseating this close to them I had to breathe through my mouth.

I stepped away from the group then, increasing the distance between us. The thought that I was in the clear was beginning to form in my mind when one of them backed away from the group, turning to regard me. It was so close I could feel its hot, sticky breath on my shoulder. Before I could stop myself, I side stepped into the road, right in front of the walker I was trying to avoid.

It ran into me. A businessman judging by the suit and what remained of his tie. I stumbled back a step, clenching my teeth together so I wouldn't scream. He stepped into me again, his chest was flush with mine and my nose was a hair's breadth from his chin. My body went rigid. I didn't dare breathe.

Time stopped.

Looking up into his sunken eyes, I watched his pupils dilate, the black dots growing wider through the red swirling irises. The gaunt, hollow cheeks moved just a fraction as his disgusting breath washed over my face. My heart thundered in my chest as if trying to break free. He had my arm pinned against my stomach, the arm that grasped the knife. I had yet to move, thinking through the steps of how I would pull the weapon to dispatch the walker.

He took another step forward, pushing me backwards with him. I actually pushed him back a step as I drew the blade, my body reacting instinctively. He didn't seem to notice and he walked forward again, right back into me.

My addled mind put the pieces together before I raised my hand to strike. He was just trying to continue his walk.

With his next step, I let him brush me aside. He was free of me and walking down the street again, not even fazed by his interruption. I looked back at the freak that had startled me and found him staring at me, staring through me.

I still didn't matter to them.

I felt like I was going to throw up.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and upper lip, and I could feel it dripping down my neck. I was only halfway to my target location. I closed my eyes and struggled to calm myself. Deep steady breaths would slow my heartbeat and ease my nerves, but I couldn't stop the trembling in my hands. Even though it was the very last thing I wanted to do at that moment, I sheathed my knife.

When I opened my eyes again, the target location looked even further away.

*One step at a time.*

I stayed in the street, as it seemed to be the clearest path now. When the walkers got too near me, I stopped and they continued past. Ten more steps and I was done. My original target still a few yards away, I couldn't make myself go any further. It was close enough. It would do.

I found a clear spot in the middle of the street. The closest freak was at least five feet away, standing motionless with its back to me for the time being. I very slowly pulled the pack off my shoulders and started to unzip it. It could have been the sound of the zipper or the smell of the kerosene that caught their attention, but every freak that was close to me turned to watch. My stomach roiled but I didn't slow. As I lowered the pack to the ground, I gingerly pulled out the wood and rags and set it all on top of the pack.

Some of the freaks were taking curious steps toward me, and I sped up my process, pulling the matches and striking one to life. I hastily touched the flame to my kindling and watched the fire eat away at the sodden cloth. Grabbing another match, I lit a few more pieces of cloth on fire before dropping it in the pile.

The fire built up quickly, flames dancing more than a foot in the air. I stood, noting the face-eaters that stood close to me were focused on the fire. I stepped backwards as the freaks stepped forward. One brushed past my shoulder, and then another, but all of them completely ignored me.

My plan was working. The idle freaks nearby were drawn to the flame, including those that had milled up into the driveway. Even the walkers had stopped to stare. I was the only one moving away. I could feel the doubt and dread fading from my body the closer I got to my house, but I couldn't celebrate yet. I was so close, but they could still prove to be a huge hazard to me if they blocked me from getting to the main road. My small distraction wouldn't clear all the freaks between here and there.

Nevertheless, I was elated when I got back to the garage and climbed into my nice new SUV. I allowed myself a sigh of relief then. Sliding the key into the ignition, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and would have truly prayed then if I still believed.

*Start please, Dear God, start!*

I turned the key.

The engine rumbled to life.

~ ~ ~ ~

I was free! The drive out of the neighborhood had gone better than I'd expected. Only one group of freaks was large enough to cause an issue, but the Murano was able to push them out of the way before I got overwhelmed. The problem I was having was remembering my way out of the city. I didn't have a map, and had never been to the Dallas area before, not to mention that my trip here was full of meandering paths and exploration. I couldn't begin to backtrack now.

I angled westward, and even though I had to dodge cars and freaks as I came across them, I was able to weave my way through the streets until I finally found an interstate. I-30 the signs said, but I didn't recognize it at all. That didn't matter. As long as the way wasn't blocked by cars, I should be able to navigate the highway.

One thing I had found out about Dallas, whatever had caused the turn here had been so quick there was no rush to exit. No attempts at an evacuation of any kind. That meant there weren't a lot of spots on the interstates that were completely blocked. Another thing I found out in Dallas, you could broil a freak alive in a closed car just by the heat of the summer sun. They did not regenerate fast enough to outlive that.

Most of the cars I had come across had mostly rotten skeletons in them. I didn't even want to imagine what the highways smelled like that first summer. It probably rivaled the death pools in comparison. I could smell the decay, but it faded into the background quickly enough. Nothing smelled pretty anymore.

Rolling along at a nice pace, I studied what used to be the bustling landscape of Dallas. Maybe I had wasted my time holed up in that neighborhood so long. Maybe I should have moved around more.

I dismissed the thought, knowing that I needed the safety of my house so I could recharge my will to keep fighting. There were too many times recently I had thought about giving up. Losing Seth. Leaving Joss. I needed time to forget about the mistakes I made, heal from the wounds, and find the strength to move on.

I was lost in contemplation when I spied an old amusement park coming up on my left. That was something I hadn't thought about in a long while. I slowed the SUV to a stop, knowing it would be safe. There were no freaks here. Taking the time to look over all the rides I could see from the road, I imagined them moving again; the exhilaration of

the roller coasters, the serenity of the Ferris wheel. As I stared at the relics of a lost past, I wondered if the world could have anything like this again.

Heaving a heavy sigh, I continued my journey. After seeing the amusement park, I lost interest in the buildings and wanted to put it all behind me. I was actually surprised how clear the road was and made good time. The SUV was running smoothly, too. That in itself was a huge relief.

I drove through what used to be Fort Worth and was passing through a place called Arlington Heights when I saw something that caught my eye.

Army tanks.

I immediately pulled off the interstate to investigate since this was not a normal sighting. I might be able to find some very useful supplies here as it looked like the vehicles were positioned to attack, or possibly to hold something off. Maybe this had been a rescue attempt and it was defeated so quickly the military never let word get out. It wouldn't have been the only time that happened.

I rolled alongside the line of tanks, five in all, and peered around. The usual number of freaks roamed close by, some wearing army fatigues, and the handful that picked up interest in the Murano were coming closer. I had some flares in my glove box I could use for a distraction if absolutely necessary, but I wanted to save them if I could. That might not be an option, though, since I didn't have the material ready for me to build another mini bonfire.

The truck was surrounded pretty quickly, so I had to wait a bit for some of them to get bored and wander off before I could get out. I sat there for at least thirty minutes after I'd killed the engine with only one window barely cracked. The car was stifling hot, and I was dripping with sweat. I finally had to chance opening the door and test their reactions. Thankfully, I got what I had been hoping for. They ignored me.

Slipping out of the truck, I pushed the door shut as quietly as I could. As I turned to the tanks, my hand went instinctively to the hilt of my knife as I looked around.

I had seen a few tanks since the world ended, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to open these up with so many freaks around. I assumed there would be some army face-eaters still inside the tanks, but I was also banking on them being long dead from the hot Texas sun. It would be a broiler in those things.

If they were in there rotting, then so were their weapons. I couldn't pass that up.

I climbed to the top of the first one I came to and started to fiddle with the hatch. I tugged on it and thought it might be locked from the inside when I couldn't get it to budge a centimeter, but after one hard pull I was rewarded with a loud squeal. I groaned inwardly as many of the freaks turned to me and started meandering up to the edge of the tank, but there was nothing I cared to do about that now.

Pulling up the hatch, I smiled a little at my good fortune when I didn't smell decay from the inside. I poked my head in, watching for any movement. When I saw nothing of interest, I lowered myself into the belly of the tank to have a look around.

Nothing. The tank was picked clean, which I found very odd. I would assume there wouldn't be enough time to pull out all the supplies and leave the tank itself here. After one last, perplexed look around, I hauled myself out of the hatch.

Greeted by my audience of red-eyed freaks, I climbed back out into the daylight. Briefly, I felt an overwhelming compulsion to kill them all. I considered it, knowing I was at a good vantage point to start a fight, but I also knew it could take hours. Hours I didn't want to waste here while I could be driving out of the city to my new destination.



*Where am I going?*

I hadn't even considered where I was going. I had just started driving, not caring where I would end up once I was out of here. I bit my lip to stop myself from grumbling as it dawned on me. Deep down inside me, I did know.

*Joss.*

The idea solidified in my mind as I sat on top of the hot metal for at least twenty minutes, waiting for the opportunity to tank jump. I met the same resistance and the same loud squealing from the hatch on the second tank, and I cinged again. Executing the same routine, I poked my head in to look around, saw nothing, dropped into the tank, saw even more nothing, and dimbed back out again, perplexed by it all. I sat on the tank with a thump, running my fingers through my wavy hair and wondering what to do now.

"Mmmhmm." A voice, not my own, not a freak, had me spinning around in a crouching position on the top of the tank. My knife was pulled and my heart was thumping crazy in my chest. A human voice was the last thing I expected to hear. "Making enough noise out here to wake the dead, missy."

I saw him then, standing about ten paces beyond the group of freaks. An old man wearing ragged overalls, a beige undershirt, and a Rangers baseball cap. His thumbs were casually hooked into the lip of his pockets, and he looked completely relaxed. Heartbeat after heartbeat thundered in my chest before he broke the silence again.

"Well," he started, seeming to be lost in contemplation. "Guess I could walk away and we can pretend we never saw each other, or ya could come down from there and we can have ourselves a little chat. What ya say, missy?"

My eyes darted to the freaks that were surrounding the tank I was on, and it dawned on me in that moment that none of them had reacted to him.

"I'm assuming that you're immune or these assholes would be in a rage by now," he continued, taking a few steps closer to me. "Ya care to come down or should I just walk away?"

My mind was blown. He was immune like me. I glanced at my knife and back to him. He caught the movement and easily slipped his hands into his pockets then pulled them out, showing me they were empty besides a red-handled pocketknife that he held up for me to see.

"This all I got, missy, if that's what you're worried 'bout." He gestured to my knife, dagger, and gun. "Looks like ya got enough to take out this whole bunch here if ya had a mind to. However, I'd like to ask that ya don't. I can't abide the smell and don't have it in me to be buryin' all the bodies. If ya'd like to have that talk, ya keep all your weapons on ya if that makes ya feel better. Just thought a talk would be nice. I've been alone for quite some time now."

I relented, moving to a standing position. I noticed that the freaks were watching me avidly, but paid the old man no mind. I used my knife to gesture toward them.

"How do you get them to ignore you?" I asked. My voice sounded strange in my ears. I hadn't said that many words together in a very long time.

He chuckled. "Because they're use ta me. I live just there." He pointed a crooked finger at some houses that were behind the tanks. "I talk to the bastards and they don't even notice me when I walk around outside now. Curious 'bout ya, is what they are. And you up there making all that racket, calling them to ya. Did ya expect any less?"

I looked at them as they stood above them, blocking me from leaving the tank from any direction. The old man snorted and walked forward. My eyebrows lifted in utter surprise as he started shoving them out of the way, and they

went where he pushed them. No moans, no reaction, just shuffling steps as they wandered off. He looked up at me from the base of the tank.

"Well, ya comin' now, missy?"

I swallowed hard and nodded.

~ ~ ~ ~

"The name's Walter. Ya can call me Walt, though. That's what they use ta call me before all this happened." He waved his hand through the air, encompassing everything.

"Ali," I said simply. I sheathed my knife but walked a few steps behind him. I was nervous, wary of Walt, not to mention all the freaks surrounding us. Walt had his back to me, completely unguarded. I followed him to a duster of rundown houses. They looked like their better days had been far behind them even before the outbreak.

"Are you the only one out here?" I asked as it occurred to me he might be leading me into a trap. He chuckled.

"It's just me. Ain't seen a soul, immune or otherwise, in nigh on two years. Been a lonely place, it has." He stopped in front of a little lime green house. At least I thought it used to be lime green but the paint was wearing thin now, most of it flaked away. "I still got well water, thankfully. And the lights come on every now and then. How long ya been here?"

"A few months," I replied, watching him stretch as he stood on the first porch step. Green eyes shone brightly under his bushy gray eyebrows, and he was quite thin, but otherwise looked healthy.

"Just passing through, eh?" he said as he sat down on the step and offered the only chair on his porch to me. "Have a seat if ya care to."

I nodded, but decided to stay standing. "Trust issues."

"Suit yourself," he grunted. "Like I said, ain't nobody here but me, and I ain't no one." He looked at me and offered a smile, his green eyes sparkling in the early afternoon sunlight. "Don't know about ya, but I got a hankerin' to talk. I don't get a lot of word from the outside."

I frowned. "Other people come through here?"

"Not so much. Can count 'em all on my hand." He held his hand up and watched his fingers wiggle, then heaved a sigh as he let it drop back to his lap. "Where were ya when everything hit?"

"Los Angeles, with my father," I replied and Walt nodded.

"I was right here. Watched the red mist come down like rain early one Sunday morning. The Misses and me, we just watched it fall. No one knew what it was, but we figured it weren't good. Not with what was going on with Florida and the White House and whatnot. Happened so fast, it was on us in minutes." He stared off in the distance, and I could see the pain in his eyes along with a weary resignation.

"Everyone just fell where they stood, even me. There was a horrible fever on us, and I just knew it was the end. Then it passed. I was still here." He tapped his forehead with a thick finger. "And they weren't."

"I never heard anything about a red mist," I said flatly.

He looked at me and scratched the whiskers on his chin. "Is that right? How did Los Angeles go down?"

I smirked wryly then. "The red mist?"

Walt chuckled at that. "Why don't you sit, girl. Figure we have a lot of information we can share."

I relented and made my way to the big lazy-boy that occupied most of the porch space. I shrugged inwardly and decided there was no harm in talking. I spoke softly, my voice warming up after going so long without use. "My mom lived in DC, but I had been spending Christmas with my father. We saw the reports of another face-eater in Florida, but we didn't pay much attention to it."

"Face-eaters, huh? I remember those," Walt said as he relaxed against the railing. It groaned at his weight, and I was surprised it didn't give way. "They blamed it on some new-fangled drug, didn't they?"

"Bath salts," I said. "More reports popped up in Utah and Washington State. I read some of the eye-witness blogs online. Some of it was pretty scary, but I was a kid. I went right back to ignoring it. It all seemed so far away."

Walt grunted. "The Misses was all about that online web. I couldn't manage it myself. I just kept to the TV, but a whole hell of a lot of good that did me. They never gave us no warning until after Florida went silent."

Despite the warm weather I shivered as I thought back to that morning. We had gone to bed with everything as it should be and woke up the next morning to confusion and despair. The whole state of Florida had virtually disappeared. The cars and planes that went in never came back out. Calls weren't being answered or returned. Florida based internet sites were down as well as television and radio broadcasts. All communication was gone.

"I talked to my mom a lot those last few days," I said solemnly. "She wanted me to come back home but dad wanted her out there so we could go to his cabin. Then DC was gone too."

My voice trailed off and Walt grunted again. "Sorry to hear that, kid."

I shook it off. Those of us left all lived with pain and loss. I swallowed down the lump in my throat and continued. "We never did find out what took out all the big cities. My dad and I, we left for the mountains when Japan went silent and stayed out there for maybe six months or so.

"We had a nutty neighbor who lived up there year round. He was one of those conspiracy theorists, but I guess he showed us all. He was ready for this to happen. He actually taught me and my dad a few things." I pointed at the truck sitting out by the tanks. "He taught us how to convert a diesel engine to run off vegetable oil."

"Is that right?" Walt said, peering out at my truck and chuckled. "Well, that sure beats all."

"Still have to fire it up with kerosene, though. I don't know how long that'll last until it all goes bad."

"What about getting one of those fancy sun-powered vehicles?"

"Maybe someday." I smiled at the teasing look Walt gave me, watching his fuzzy eyebrows wiggle. I was starting to feel more at ease.

"Anyway, about six months in, we finally saw our first freak," I continued my story. "A small group of them wandered up onto the property, tried to kill the dogs or they tried to kill them. Our crazy neighbor took them out. No questions, he just fired. I don't think that set well with my dad. We left not long after that, looking for answers."

"And ya just found more of these assholes instead, eh?" Walt asked, but I didn't answer. I don't think he really expected one. It was obvious what we'd found.

He turned to me then, squinting one eye as he regarded me. "So how'd you come to be like ya are if you never saw the mist?"

He waited expectantly and I shrugged. "I was bitten."

"Bitten?" He seemed mildly surprised. I held out my right arm where the scar showed up clearly. He grunted in mild disbelief.

"A few years back, we were hiding out in an old school. I don't know why the freaks found us when they did, but we weren't prepared. Some of us died. My dad was still alive the last time I saw him."

Walt snorted at that. My eyes narrowed for a second, wondering if he was being judgmental of my father or the situation. I went on, regardless, "By then we knew bites spread the disease, so I stayed behind to hold them off. Didn't take long for the fever to hit me and they've ignored me ever since."

"I see," he said while nodding in contemplation. "When these army boys came through here to try to take back the city," he gestured to the tanks. "One of them was immune too. He never mentioned anything about being bitten. I just figured that red mist had taken over the world."

I leaned forward, my curiosity growing at the mention of someone else being immune.

"Well, that army boy," Walt said, "His name was Michael. He was a good kid, but he didn't know much more about what was happening than I did. The stuff he would go on about, I didn't understand half of it. He blamed the military, the terrorists, all sorts of things to the point that I didn't know if he was telling truths or he'd gone all nutty." He tapped his temple with his middle finger.

Walt continued more slowly, his sentences full of long pauses. "He stayed with me maybe two years. Not much to say it was living. He finally put a bullet in his head couple years back. I buried him over yonder in that little field. He seemed to like it out there."

Walt heaved a heavy sigh when he was done speaking. I understood his pain more than I wanted to. We let the silence linger for a while.

"Care for some water?" Walt finally said, standing up. I shook my head no in answer, still somewhat untrusting. He disappeared into his house for a while before coming back out with some water and a pipe. I watched him pack it and wondered how long his supply would last.

He grinned at me, seeing the question on my face. "Ole tobacco shop 'round the corner just there. Figure I could live two more lifetimes before I run out. They got some expensive stuff there, stuff I couldn't afford before. I sure miss beer, though."

I chuckled at that. I never had the chance to drink beer but it sure would be nice to have a soda. At least I was able to brew some tea every now and then when the craving hit.

Moments after he lit the pipe, the sweet smell of tobacco hit me and for a while something in this awful world smelled good. The stifling smell of dust and dirt and unwashed bodies was covered up by the sweet aroma. I thought this might not be such a bad way to waste away the afternoons.

"Have you noticed any changes?" he asked me suddenly, breaking the serenity of the silence.

I looked at him questioningly. "Changes?"

"Mmmhmm," he replied, looking at me under those heavy gray brows. "We're infected as much as they are. We just changed for the better. Michael use ta say we changed the right way."

My skin crawled. My suspicions were being confirmed. I felt justified and disgusted all at the same time.

"I think I might be a bit stronger," I finally said.

"Stronger, healthier and ya heal faster too now. Ya always had green eyes?" He asked and I nodded in answer. "I didn't. I was born with stone cold blue eyes. They look good on ya. All that red hair. Fittin'!"

He took a long puff on his pipe, and I kept my silence. I remembered after I was first bitten, I had tried to convince myself I was naturally becoming stronger due to the exertion of my new lifestyle. I had been lying to myself. I didn't want to believe I was like the freaks. They were all slowly going bald, and I was worried all my hair was going to fall out too. I couldn't help but sneak a quick glance at Walter's thick graying locks. I figured we only shared some similarities with the diseased and was grateful that wasn't one of them.

"I was sick when the mist came," Walter said. "Dying actually. Emphysema had settled in pretty good. Never could shake this tobacco habit, and I was paying for it, certain as the sun rises. When Emma turned into one of those red-eyed... what ya call em? Freaks? Well, I was ready to embrace death. Didn't want to live without the Misses. God had another plan for me, though, and wasn't a week out from the mist when I was able to breathe again. The damnedest thing."

"Emma was your wife?" I asked gently.

"Yep. Fifty-three wonderful years, and five bad ones."

I was curious as to what he alluded to, but thought asking might be intruding. He'd been open with me so far, but I was thinking I didn't need to hear about the bad years of his marriage when a thought dawned on me. Walt was watching my face intently, and when he saw my eyes widen in shock, he shrugged his shoulders and looked almost sheepish.

"Ya ever have to put someone down that you loved?" his voice was stern, despite his guilty expression. I shook my head, the thought of Seth coming to the forefront of my mind. I could only stare at my hands folded in my lap, and it was my turn to look sheepish. "Takes a strong soul to live through that, and I ain't that strong."

His eyebrows came together as he stared down at the pipe in his hands for a few heartbeats before going on, driving the topic away from his confession. "There's another thing I've noticed. We don't really need a lot of food. Think I could live off one pot of beans for a whole week."

"Yeah," I replied to that. "Guess I've noticed that too."

"Ali," Walt started, a serious look coming into his eyes that captured my attention. "I'm old. I've lived here, I'll die here... eventually. But you're just a kid. There's others of us out there, ya just need to find 'em. I betcha there are other survivors out there living that aren't immune and still they're making it. I tried to tell Michael this, but he'd lost his will, and I could only talk him down for so long. Couldn't even blame the boy for putting that bullet in his head."

"You're strong, girl. I can see that in ya. Listen ta me. Michael may have been off his rocker, but he seemed ta think there was something going on in Vegas that might have been intact when this shit-storm started. Area 51 or some such."

"Aliens?" I interjected in my shock.

"No, dammit. Just listen." He snapped back in a grumpy grandfatherly way. "Michael talked a lot of bullshit, and it was hard ta dig through to find any sort of sense in what that man said, but I believe something must have happened there. You're headed west anyway, ya might want to make it a point ta stop by. Bound ta stumble onto something if ya keep looking hard enough. Ya do want to find something, dontcha?"

"I do," I replied. I wanted to find *something* more than anything.

"Well, there ya go, then." He stated, matter-of-fact. "Now, ya still got quite a bit of daylight left, ya want a little supper for the road?"

"I'm stocked. I don't want to take any of your supplies."

"Nonsense, I got fresh meat that's gonna spoil soon." At his comment, my eyebrow shot up in surprise and I got a hearty chuckle out of him. He seemed quite proud of himself now. "Got me some squirrel the other day. Ever had squirrel stew?"

I laughed at that. I actually laughed. The sound was so strange in my ears. It had been so long since I'd been able to laugh. Walt kept talking, enjoying telling me about his hunting skills.

"I get me some squirrel and rabbit quite a bit. Raccoons every now and then too. Caught a skunk once, but you don't eat skunk. That shit is downright nasty."

My laughter continued until I saw the freaks taking notice of me. I quieted immediately and remembered why I didn't laugh anymore. Walt scowled and stood, walking towards them and yelling all the way.

"Y'all get out of here, ya mangy bastards! I ain't got nothin' here for ya!" To my surprise, they stopped their advance. He came stomping back and I shook my head in awe. It never entered my mind that the freaks could be controlled so easily.

"Alright Missy," Walt said as he started into the house. "Let's get ya some of that squirrel stew."

~ ~ ~ ~

Walt didn't keep me much longer. I think he could feel I wasn't comfortable, and he wasn't going to invite me inside with the Misses still around. I wished I could have told him it had nothing to do with him. There was a part of me that did want to stay and talk longer, but a bigger part of me needed to get away from his pain. I had enough pain in my own life that I couldn't take on his as well.

He did manage to give me a container of squirrel soup. It sat in the passenger seat beside me, sloshing around as I drove and I really wasn't sure if it was going to get eaten or dumped along the side of the road. I gave him some packages of noodles and some spices. I'm sure he had enough food stored away, but he thanked me greatly for them.

Sharing food that would spoil was one thing, but passing on the things that would keep was something completely different. Those were precious commodities you tried to hang on to for as long as possible. Some days you never knew when you were going to eat again, but if what Walt said about our diminished need for food was true, then that should relieve some of the stress.

Inevitably, as I was driving, my mind wandered to Walter's stories about his wife and Michael. Everyone left on this wasted earth had lost someone. There was no escaping it. I didn't want to try to count all the people I'd lost, but I couldn't help but think of Joss.

Did I really do the right thing for him? That old farmhouse seemed like a much better home than traveling around with me. Their growing community looked stable and safe. Guilt rattled around in the pit of my stomach though, and I couldn't pinpoint why.

I let my mind continue to drift in memory, going back to when I met Joss and Seth. I was passing through El Paso and saw a grocery store with the lights on. Normally I would avoid something like that, or at least approach with more caution, but the tide of freaks that were banging on the doors and windows told me someone in there was desperate for help. I couldn't let it be.

I was driving an old red truck at the time and decided I could use it as a battering ram to take out a handful on the outside. It left me room enough to get into the store through a broken window so I could find what had caused the frenzy.

There were waves of them inside the store, rushing up and down the aisles. That was a good sign they hadn't found what they were looking for yet. Someone in here was alive.

"Hello!" I called out, going against my cautious nature. I found myself hoping it wasn't too late.

I started killing the freaks I could corner. Although they were ignoring me, they were fast and hard to pin down while they were frenzied. Wanting to save bullets, I had resorted to my knife, but death by knife was extremely messy. It was best to get a killing blow in one swing because it contained the mess to where they fell. If I missed, then I had freaks running up and down the store, raining blood on everything until they collapsed.

No one answered my calls, and I already had more than a few face-eaters down when I noticed a group of them starting to converge in one aisle. They were crowding in, all of them trying to get into one spot, jostling each other around, biting and snapping as they were shoved. I couldn't see what was drawing them there. I spotted a broken ceiling tile being trampled under their feet. I looked up.

The ceiling in this section was low, like the designers were going for a homey feel for the bakery. Someone standing on the top shelf would easily reach the low ceiling. I was looking past the ceiling into the blackness beyond and someone moved up there.

"Are you okay?" I shouted, assuming they were uninfected. The freaks were moaning and growling quite loudly, but I heard a muffled reply over the din.

"You should run!" A child's voice. I pulled my revolver without a second thought. Even the loss of the precious bullets didn't cause a moment of hesitation. I was a crack shot, my dad taught me extremely well, but I took two steps forward before I started firing. There was no reason I needed to take any chances.

Six shots later, there were six freaks on the floor. Only three were left standing. In their frenzy, they hadn't taken their focus off the child in the ceiling so I brought out my knife. With their heads thrown back and looking up, they were all giving me a great target to shove the long blade of my bowie knife into the soft flesh of their neck and twist it up into their brain. I dropped the final three, one by one.

"How you doing up there?" I called up, my eyes trying to penetrate the darkness.

A boy with dark shaggy hair and clear blue eyes poked his head down to look at me, his eyes wide with shock and fear. "Where's Seth?"

I shook my head at him, "I just got here. Haven't seen anyone else. You okay up there for a few minutes still? There's more freaks running around down here."

He nodded vigorously, "Seth was leading them off. Please find him!"

"Just stay there," I warned as more freaks started to make their way over to us, the noise attracting them. I backed the opposite way down the aisle and pulled my spare cylinder out of my belt pouch.

I knew they'd stop under the kid and not go for me, but he didn't know that. He tried to scream a warning when I saw an adjacent tile to him crack and break, a worn Nike shoe pushing through. Whatever had been supporting him in the ceiling was starting to give way. His scream of warning turned to fright as he slipped down to the top shelf, inches away from the grasping hands of the freaks. Again, I wasted no time and used more bullets to dispatch the four freaks that were raging to kill the boy. The imminent danger gone, I quickly tallied the body count.

"Thirteen here, at least seven outside." I looked up into his frightened little face. "I haven't got them all yet. Stay up there."

"No, don't leave me!" His pleading whine stopped me, and I groaned against my instinct. I couldn't leave him there.

I glared at him, calculating the best course of action to make sure this kid stayed safe. "What's your name?"

"Joss."

"Joss, I'm Ali. Can you see any from up there?" He looked around, stretching up to the ceiling and quickly ducking back down.

"There are some by the front doors. I can't see Seth."

"How many?" I asked and was hoping this Seth guy was still alive. I couldn't take a child under my wing now.

"Five or six, they're stuck in a checkout lane." He gave me a nervous smirk and a shrug, but the frightened look immediately returned to his features a second later.

"Okay. Joss, this is what's going to happen," I started as I reloaded my gun and my extra cylinder. "You are going to stay up there, but you can follow behind me and keep a look out. Can you get back up in the ceiling if we get surrounded again?"

He nodded vigorously and I continued. "You tell me if you see anything, and stay down. Make sure they don't spot you."

"Okay," he said weakly. I gave him an encouraging nod and started to move towards the front of the aisle. As soon as I could get a clear shot, I was going to take them all out and worry about the ones outside the store afterwards.

Then all hell broke loose.

Before I even made it to the end of the aisle, my truck...

*MY TRUCK!*

My old red Dodge truck came barreling through the sliding glass doors, sending shattered glass flying everywhere. It crashed into the checkout lane, sending splintered wood and plastic raining down around it. The fact that the five freaks ended up underneath it was no consolation to me at all.

"Seth!" Joss yelled out with an enthusiasm that I was not feeling. I was ready to make this jackass wish the freaks had eaten him.

"You son of a bitch!" I yelled as I withdrew from the cover of the aisle. The crash had caused the driver's side door to jam, and I could see the man inside kicking at it to get it open. Joss was on the ground now and running forward in his excitement, but he didn't realize the danger wasn't completely over. As he was running past me, I grabbed him by the back of the shirt and jerked him behind me. Two more freaks were coming in through the newly made opening.

"Seth!" Joss screamed again as he saw the freaks, his voice taking on a desperate tone. Seth had managed to kick the door open as I leveled my gun, but I had to readjust to get a clear shot.

"Get down!" I yelled at the man as he staggered out of my truck, but he didn't hear me through his daze. His head was bleeding, and I figured he must have taken a pretty hard hit against the steering wheel during the collision. Joss was screaming frantically behind me, and one of the freaks was five feet away from Seth, already in a frenzy to get at him. I had to take the shot.

The freak crashed into Seth, causing him to stumble forward against one of the remaining checkout tables and he shook himself free of its tangled arms in a surge of panic, but he was safe. The freak was already dead. I didn't miss. I took the last one out easily, and Joss tried to rush past me again, but I held him fast.

"Are you bitten, you truck stealing son-of-a-bitch?" I yelled at him, letting Joss lead us at a slow approach.



"What?" Seth mumbled as he stood up, spitting out a mouth full of blood.

"Are. You. Bit." I ground out through clenched teeth. If he wasn't bitten, I was going to kill him myself.

"No." His blue eyes finally focused on me. The same clear blue eyes as Joss's. The same hair, the same long face, he was an older version of Joss. Brothers. "Who the hell are you?"

I let Joss go, and he barreled into Seth, wrapping his arms tightly around his mid-section. I saw Seth groan inwardly, but to his credit, he didn't make a sound and even managed to pat Joss on the back.

"That's Ali, and she's fucking awesome!" Joss exclaimed as he backed away from Seth.

My eyebrow rose in surprise and amusement for the briefest of seconds before Seth snapped, "Watch your mouth."

Seth glared at me, and I glared back. He couldn't have been much older than me, and the two of them looked like they had been eating decently. They weren't the skin and bones some of the survivors I ran across were. One quick look at my truck, and I knew it wasn't going anywhere ever again. That glance renewed my anger, and I directed it at Seth.

"Alright asshole, you better have a vehicle. Since you destroyed my truck, you're stuck with me until we're out of here," I grumbled as I moved to grab my packs out of the cab.

"I don't think so," Seth returned, but Joss came to my defense.

"She saved my life, come look." He was pulling Seth's hand to lead him to aisle three. I finished collecting my bags before I followed them to find Seth and Joss standing over the bodies of the thirteen freaks I killed.

"She saved your life too, Seth," Joss said quietly.

Seth glanced at me, his brow furrowed. Then he turned and walked down the aisle, stepping over the freaks and pools of blood. He motioned me to follow. I distinctly remember Joss's ecstatic expression as he ran back to me, grabbed my hand and led me behind Seth.

Pulling my mind back to the present and wiping tears from my cheeks, I took a right in Sweetwater, heading north. Wherever this guilt was coming from, I had made a mistake leaving Joss there. Ten minutes later I was rolling up the driveway to the old ranch, my stomach doing flip-flops with anticipation. When I saw Jeremy coming around the back of the house holding a rifle, I rolled down my window to call out a greeting. He relaxed and stood with the rifle propped against his leg, waiting on me.

Something was wrong. I knew it before I even got out of the truck. I didn't see any of the kids, and the look on Jeremy's face was grim. So grim it made me want to turn around and not look back. With a knot growing in the pit of my stomach, I approached him. When he wouldn't meet my eyes, I could hear his words before he even spoke them.

"Ali, good to see you're doing well." His voice didn't even have its usual gruffness. It was flat and lifeless.

"Where's Joss?" I demanded immediately. I was surprised to find a lump already growing in my throat.

"A day ago, we went up for a haul to Romy," he started, but fell silent. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. I didn't want him to tell me. When he spoke again, it was barely a whisper. "Jake and I, we forgot to check the ladies room. Becky..." His voice cracked.

My eyes opened wide at that. Tears glistening on his cheeks, and he choked back sobs as he continued, "He tried to save her. Bravest kid I ever saw. Killed two of those bastards."

I wanted to collapse. I wanted to scream. I stumbled away from Jeremy, back to the SUV. My emotions twisted into rage, and I punched my fist into the hot metal. My knuckles cracked under the pressure and pain reverberated up my arm. I let the physical pain course through me, grasping on to it like a lifeline.

"Are they dead?" I had to know.

"Turned." Jeremy choked out. I faced him again, seeing he was openly crying. Tears streamed down his cheeks and snot dripped from his nose. The sight of Kevin standing on the porch watching us caught my attention for a brief second. Their only child now.

"Ali," Jeremy continued. "I couldn't do it. I tried, but I couldn't do it."

My thoughts drifted to Walt and his Misses. Walt couldn't do it either. Could I? I had to see it for myself. The ache in me for leaving Seth wouldn't allow me to let Joss live like this. I didn't want to cry while I was in front of Jeremy, but my eyes welled up with tears.

"Where's this Romy," I managed to say through gritted teeth.

"Just north up 70. You can't miss it."

I turned without another word. In that moment, I hated him. His carelessness had gotten Joss and his own daughter killed. I didn't care about his pain. My rage at this injustice was too strong. I knew I shouldn't have left Joss here. They didn't take this new world seriously.

By the time I was back in the truck, I had myself convinced it was my fault. I never should have left him. I could have stayed and protected him. He should have been with me.

I turned the truck north, heading to Romy.

## CHAPTER 4 – JOSS

Becky wasn't doing so well. Things got really rough after we were first bitten, but the fever seemed to have leveled off some. I never watched someone turn and had no idea how long it would take.

So many thoughts had crossed my mind since yesterday morning. I thought about trying to find a way to end Becky's pain and not let her become one of those things out there. I didn't want to think about her turning into a dead-brain. Focusing all my thoughts on her made it easy for me to not think about what I was going through. I could forget that I was turning also.

I wasn't able to find anything suitable enough for the task, and instead I bandaged up her arm as best I could. I wished Jeremy would have ended it for both of us. The only thing left for me to do was make sure she was as comfortable as possible while her mind died.

After pulling out a table from one of the private dining nooks, I was able to rig a bed for us both to lie down on comfortably. The booth cushions came out easily, and I wrapped tablecloths around them to hold them together. I even found some actual blankets in the kitchen that I covered her up with. Throughout the afternoon, she lay there sobbing while I made what preparations I could before the fever left me too ill to continue.

We had plenty of water near us, buckets to throw up in if we needed them, and some uncooked spaghetti noodles. I figured that was safe to eat, and if it wasn't safe, it didn't matter anymore anyway.

By that evening, I was too exhausted to go on. I lay on my pallet beside hers and the hours slipped by. At one point, her muffled sobs stopped and I panicked, thinking she had turned. After a nervous inspection, I found she had just fallen asleep. I lay back, feeling the fever moving through my body. Somehow, I relaxed enough to drift into an uneasy sleep myself, not knowing if I would wake up in the morning.

The restaurant was dark when a shriek woke me. I sat up frightened, wondering why I wasn't in my bed at the Powell's when the memories seeped in through my fevered haze, settling heavy in my nauseated stomach. Becky was sitting up, hunched over her blankets. The whites of her eyes shown in the dark restaurant and she was panicked. She still hadn't turned.

I grabbed one of the empty bowls as quickly as I could and got it underneath her bowed head before I collapsed. The sounds of her retching filled the silence, and I tried not to let my own groan escape. I wasn't successful.

"Joss?" Her voice was weak, and I did my best to sit up and guide her back to her pallet.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, trying to get us both rearranged.

She groaned and I could barely hear her. "I don't feel good."

I reached out a hand to her, and she found it in the darkness. "Me neither," I replied. "Are you cold?"

"A little. I'm okay," she whispered back. "Are you sure we're dying? Maybe we're just sick."

I sighed, wishing that were the truth.

There was silence again, and I listened to her wheezing. I had only seen a few people get bitten and they had all turned. I decided it wouldn't hurt giving her that hope, though. If it would ease her last few hours and days of conscious thought, I would do it.

"Maybe we are just sick. I haven't seen that many people get bitten," I finally said.

"I haven't seen anyone get bitten," she said, "But I helped take care of Julie when she got the flu. We didn't have any medicine, and she never was very strong. Mama had her too early." She paused at that, drifting back into painful memory. "Mama was head-sick for a while too after Julie died."

I sighed again, partially from the weight of it all and partially to get my breath. I wondered what this would do to Mary. She was so adamant about not letting Becky come with us, and the horrible thing she feared would happen had actually happened. Finding the energy to talk was difficult but I struggled through it, not wanting to give in to the silence.

"Who is Seth?" Her soft, seeking voice brought up my own painful memories. "I heard you calling out for him in your sleep."

I wondered now if this is what Seth went through. I figured it didn't matter what I said anymore, and there was no reason to hide my memories from Becky. "He was my brother," I finally got out. "We lost him a little bit before Ali and I found you guys." I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Becky asked, "Did he get bitten?"

I nodded in reply before realizing she couldn't see me in the dark. I couldn't bring myself to answer out loud, but I think she sensed my movement. She squeezed my hand tightly in response.

"Seth and I grew up in a little town in Oklahoma. I was only nine when all this started and Seth was graduating high school that year. We were lucky for a bit. The world was collapsing around us, but we lived out in the country and nothing reached us for a long, long time."

The effort it took to talk was draining, and long pauses separated my sentences. I could tell Becky was patiently listening by her hand that held mine. She was gently caressing my thumb with her own and would lightly squeeze my hand in response to my words.

I continued. "Dad taught us both how to hunt, and there were streams nearby. We had a few neighbors and we all banded together to get a farm going so we could eat. We had a nice little community, just like at the farm. Life was not the same, but we were surviving.

"It lasted like that for a few years. All it took was one dead-brain to come along and ruin everything. It caught Mom out in the garden and," I couldn't go on. I had seen her body even though Seth tried to keep me away. It was such a bloody mass of flesh there was nothing left of her to recognize. There wasn't enough left of her to turn either. At least she didn't have to go through what I was going through now.

I didn't want to cry, but the tears were running down my hot cheeks. I heard Becky sniffle too and wondered if I could remember a good time to talk about, but I couldn't. All the good memories belonged to the dead now. All except Ali, and I would never see her again. I determinedly wiped away the tears.

"Can you keep going?" Becky asked. "I've only lived here. I don't know what it's like anywhere else."

"Yeah, I'll try," I answered, not feeling at all like talking, but I continued. "After what happened with Mom, we started putting up perimeter fences. It was hard since the houses were so far apart. I remember we used all the wire fencing at the local hardware store, and a few of the men had to run to town to get some more.

"They came back with candy, canned goods and tons of other stuff. It was great for all the other families, but Dad wasn't ever the same. He did what he could for a while, but it ate at him every day. I didn't understand it back then, but I know he was losing his mind.

"One morning, Seth and I woke up and he was gone. Seth thinks he went out to kill as many of those dead-brains that he could find. Revenge for killing Mom, ya know? We decided we were going to follow him, and there was no one there to stop us.

"We never did find him, but we didn't stop moving, either. That was a couple years ago." I had to stop then. Talking was exhausting, and I needed to take a break. The silence seeped back in, more oppressive than it was before. It was unbearable, but I didn't have a lot I could combat it with.

"Becky?" I asked into the darkness.

"Mmm?" she answered. She was exhausted too, but I hoped she could give me one good memory.

"Do you have any happy stories?" My request was met by a few minutes of silence before she started talking, her voice low and weak.

"Christmas," she said. "Every year, Papa makes sure we get a good Christmas. He goes out to find us a tree, even though it's not always a good tree, but he gets us something. Even if it is some straggly looking loblolly pine sprout, he brings it in and we decorate it with whatever we can make.

"At first, I thought it was stupid that he was trying to hold on to that old tradition. It was Kevin that helped me realize what Papa was doing. When I pitched a fit about having to decorate another tree, the look on Kevin's face made me realize why Papa always did it. He made sure we stayed a family. He made sure we had hope.

"I never said anything bad about Christmas again after that." She had to pause, and I heard her take in a few deep breaths. I feared she might be done and was grateful when she kept going. "On Christmas Eve, we would make sure we got what presents we could together. We put them under that old tree and on Christmas Day, Mama would make as big a meal as she could. We ate until we were full and then opened all our presents. Kevin made me a stick doll once. It wasn't anything but two sticks tied together with some string and he'd poked at the wood with a knife to make a face. It was such a horrible little thing, but I loved it. It's still sitting on my dresser under my mirror.

"After dinner, we would sit in the living room and sing all the Christmas carols we could think of. Every Christmas, Papa made sure we always had good memories." As her voice trailed off, I realized that was the most I'd ever heard her say at one time. The idea of Christmas was beautiful, and the pain and longing inside me brought more tears. I thought she was done, but in the silence, her voice wavered from a whisper and bloomed into the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard.

*Silent night, holy night*

*All is calm, all is bright*

I knew these words. I did my best to join in with her, hoping I wasn't destroying the beautiful sound of her voice.

*Round yon virgin mother and child*

*Holy infant so tender and mild*

*Sleep in heavenly peace*

*Sleep in heavenly peace*

Our weak voices faded away, and the silence boomed loudly in my ears. I stared into the darkness, completely drained. Too weak to continue our conversation. Becky must have sensed it because she moved close and slipped her arm around my waist, snuggling against my shoulder.

I had never been this close to a girl before, and this felt really nice. It was the comfort I needed, and I didn't want her to let me go. I reached my arm around her and she settled down against me. The heat from both our fevered bodies was stifling, but I didn't care.

I closed my eyes and let sleep overtake me, all the while thinking that this was a good last memory.

~ ~ ~ ~

Dawn was shining through the windows when I woke again, and I doubled over with severe stomach cramps. I was barely able to grab a bowl before I started throwing up everything I'd ever eaten and then some. Tears were streaming down my face from the effort by the time I was done, and I slid the bowl away and collapsed back on the pallet.

It took a few minutes for me to recover. Once everything settled, I felt better than I had for hours, even though the fever still gripped me. I sat up to check on Becky. She had been still on her pallet while I was puking, and that worried me. I crawled to her, moving her to see if she was okay.

She rolled over, listless at my touch, and began whimpering and shuddering in convulsions. I dreaded doing it, afraid of what I would see, but I forced myself to pull her eyelids open to see if she had turned. Her irises were still a beautiful, light blue.

I heaved a sigh of relief but that was short lived. I didn't know what else I should do.

Her whole body was shaking and spittle foamed at the corners of her mouth. I pulled her against me and held her, rocking her as she shook. My tears landed in her soft blonde hair, and whispered comforting words to her, hoping she could hear me. I was so scared and helpless. There was nothing else I could do for her. The turn was going to happen soon but a part of me wished she would die of the fever. I wished again I had the strength to end her pain.

It could have been hours or it could have been minutes. My only sense of time was the sun steadily growing brighter through the windows. She finally stopped her violent shaking and drifted in and out of fevered dreams. I didn't have the strength to keep holding her and had to ease her down to rest against my side.

Every now and then she would call out for her mother or father. Sometimes she would just scream. She was never lucid, and I cringed knowing this is what I would be going through in a few hours. Again, I wished for the strength to kill us both.

Drifting in and out of sleep, the sickness grew worse. I was unable to keep myself awake to watch over Becky. Something inside me thought that if I stayed awake to watch over her, the inevitable wouldn't happen, but I didn't have the energy to keep my vigil.

I was dreaming fever dreams, and during the short periods of time my mind was able to reconnect with the waking world, it was difficult to distinguish reality from dream.

I was at a wedding. I was in a tux, standing as Seth's best man beside him at the altar. I could hear the wedding march playing, and the pews full of red-eyed dead-brains stood up to honor the bride as she appeared at the end of the

aisle. My father was there, leading her alongside him. The veil covered her face so I couldn't see who it was, but I knew it was Ali. We waited for her as the song droned in the background, and she was walking so slowly. The dead-brains moaned and dawdled at us, but they were chained to the pews.

When Ali finally reached us, Seth smiled as he lifted her veil to reveal her red eyes. I screamed as she lunged forward, her teeth sinking into Seth's throat. Blood sprayed everywhere.

My screams woke me, and I felt I was being smashed by Ali's dead weight on top of me.

*No, not Ali. Ali's not here. Ali left me. Did she die? Did she turn too?*

I pushed Becky from my side, trying to check on her as I did so, but immediately lost myself in the fever again.

Now I was walking in a field of wild flowers, and Ali walked beside me. She was telling me things I needed to hear, important things, but the wind stole her words. She was trying to tell me how to save Becky. I was pleading with her, but she seemed unconcerned. When Seth appeared in the distance, Ali started running towards him and I screamed for her to wait.

I ran after her, calling out to her, but she was too fast. Ali looked over her shoulder at me and I could see fear in her eyes. Why was she so afraid? I looked to Seth for a clue, but he was as frightened as she was. His terrified eyes were glued to me.

I tried to call out to them, but it came out as a growl. Ali continued to run to Seth as he waved her on, and I realized they were running from me, but why?

Because I wanted to kill them. The need to catch them and rip them apart drove me on. When Ali tripped in front of me, I fell over her instantly in a rage. She turned to fight me off...

But it was Becky I was staring down at, not Ali. Becky's panicked and pleading blue eyes were staring at me in horror. We were in the restroom in Bobby's Bar and Grill, and it was me that was trying to kill her.

I screamed in outrage and terror at what I had become and jumped away...

Falling backwards from my pallet onto the restaurant floor. The rough fall jolted me out of the horrible nightmare. I was crying, sobbing, wanting it all to end, but I didn't have the strength to pull myself off the dusty floor.

I managed to raise my head enough to see Becky's lump under the blankets. She was so still, and I was so afraid and so... angry! I needed to check on her, make sure she was okay, give her all my life force and will so she would make it through this. She would be missed. There was no one left to miss me, but I couldn't. I remained weak and helpless.

By strength of will alone, I rolled to my stomach. Resting there for a few moments, I summoned the energy to drag myself toward the pallet. I had only fallen a few feet away, but it might as well have been a mile. With one last burst of energy, I pushed myself forward as far as I could, and was able to reach out and touch Becky's leg.

That's as far as I made it when I fell into a swirl of fever dreams again.

Hours later, I was in the same position. The sun was already high overhead, dimming the light that was coming in through the windows. I was soaked everywhere, and for a moment I thought I had knocked one of the water pails over.

Then I realized it was sweat. I was sweating everywhere, profusely. My fever had broken. I was still extremely weak from the sickness, but the nausea was gone. I reached for Becky, the hope blooming in me that she was okay too. My hand only touched empty blankets, and I raised my head enough to see the pallets. Becky wasn't there.

Blinking in confusion, I didn't know what to think. The brief hope I felt was rapidly disappearing. How could she have had the energy to move anywhere on her own? Then I remembered how I had ended up in the floor and thought maybe she had moved during her nightmares.

I gathered my growing strength and looked around at what I could see of the restaurant floor. She wasn't anywhere.

Panic bloomed in my chest when I heard footsteps coming from the other side of the restaurant, from the other side of the big glass dividing wall. Looking under the table legs, I could see Becky's white sneakers and blue jeans as she stopped in front of a table. The sound of dattering dishes followed, making a clunking sound, as they were set.

I swallowed hard, trying to clear away the dryness in my throat and pushed myself up to a sitting position.

"Becky?" I called to her softly. She turned at the sound of my voice, facing me. Her red eyes stared through me.

~ ~ ~ ~

I collapsed to the floor like I'd been hit. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't focus. So many thoughts were whirling in my mind, it was like grasping at smoke.

*Am I a dead-brain?*

My heart thundered as I panicked.

No, I couldn't be. I knew who I was. I knew who Becky was.

I covered my face with my hands, willing myself to be dead. I just wanted to be gone. I lay like that for a long time until I heard Becky moving around again. I spread my fingers so I could watch what she was doing through my hands.

She was shuffling between the tables, setting plates on one, then taking those same plates and setting them on a different table. I rolled over on my side and sobbed. She was gone, and I would be gone soon, too.

I decided I would lie there and wait. Again my thoughts turned to Seth and I wondered if this is how it all happened with him. The fever. The sickness. The horrible nightmares assaulting him right until the end.

Was there a beyond? Was Becky already there now, or did her body have to die first?

I thought about trying to end Becky's sad un-life again. I forced myself to sit up and watched her for several minutes. She ignored me.

Reaching for one of the many bottles of water that I had left sitting out, I guzzling the whole thing down, surprising myself. I grabbed a second and drank over half of that one before I was satiated.

Again, I had to rest for a few moments, waiting for my energy to return. Then I pulled myself back onto the pallets, my eyes never leaving Becky for long. I hoped I would have the energy to kill her before I turned into a dead-brain, too.

As I lay there, I began to wonder why she didn't attack me. Maybe she was different? Maybe there was something still inside her that remembered me? Maybe she could sense that I was turning and knew to leave me alone?

I once again thought about Ali and Seth, the dream I had of their wedding dredged up memories. Seth wasn't much older than Ali, maybe a few months at most. They absolutely hated each other when they first met, but that had changed by the end.

I remembered the first time I saw her. I was hiding in the dusty ceiling of a grocery store, knowing I was about to be killed. The visions of all the furious red eyes under me, reaching up to grab me, still haunted me from time to time. At least they couldn't climb, but I was going to fall. The thin framing wasn't made to hold my weight.

Seth had been my only hope, but he needed to come back for me soon. He had sent me up to the ceiling and ran off with what looked to be about ten dead-brains chasing him. He was trying to draw them away from me, but not all of



them followed. I'd been up there alone for what seemed like forever when I heard a girl's voice calling out, asking if I was okay.

I could see her at the end of the aisle. I told her to run.

But she didn't run. She pulled out a huge revolver and started shooting. Blew six of those dead-brains away without even pausing, and stabbed the other three in the neck, dropping them all.

She looked at me, her bright green eyes glowing with life. She could have been a super hero. She was vibrant and so alive. It didn't make sense to say, but she was the most alive person I had ever seen, before the world turned and after. It made her beautiful, and she was in control of this chaotic world.

Then Seth wrecked her truck and she was stuck with us. It made me so happy to have her with us. It had only been Seth and I since we left Lawton trying to find Dad. Ali and Seth didn't get along at first. They were so stubborn, but I was glad to have someone else around to talk to besides Seth.

It took a while for me to get Ali to talk, but eventually I wore her down. She was quiet, and all kinds of pissed off about her truck, but Seth was really sorry for that. He didn't know it was hers when he took it. He was just trying to save me.

I guess we only got to spend a few months with all of us together. Ali was awesome. She taught me how to shoot better than Seth could. I don't think he much cared for being beat at that, but Ali was really athletic and knew a lot about guns. She even knew stuff that Seth didn't know.

I don't know what happened that night Seth got bitten. Ali went in to get some supplies and told us to stay behind. When she was gone too long, Seth went in to find her. Ali was the only one to come back. As soon as I saw her face, I knew Seth was gone, but I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't imagine losing him. She held me back from running in to find him, and we both cried. She had to drag me away because I wasn't going to leave him on my own. He couldn't be gone. I couldn't let him be gone.

Before the dead-brains came, he was the one that was always there for me. Because Mom and Dad were so busy working all the time, it was Seth that made the most time for me. He was the one that helped me with my homework and played video games with me. Every now and then when his friends came over, he'd let me watch movies with them if I behaved. I always looked up to him so much. He was the perfect big brother.

Knowing that he wasn't there anymore hurt more than losing Dad did. Ali was crushed too. I always thought they might want to get married someday, if there could still be weddings in this world. It was horrible. I was so sad, and Ali got really quiet after that. She hardly talked at all. I caught her crying a lot at first, even though she tried to hide it from me. She never told me if she let Seth turn, or if he died from his wounds.

I lay still while my thoughts ran all over the place, waiting for the inevitable. I didn't understand why it was taking so long for me to turn, but then I wasn't sure how long Becky had been gone before I woke.

*What was this going to feel like?*

With the fever gone, and the awful vomiting stopped, it almost felt like I was getting better. I'd lost the will to move, though. It was easier to lie here and let the minutes pass by while I listened to Becky shuffle the table settings around.

I picked at the bandages on my hands, finally pulling them away to expose the blisters underneath. I was mildly surprised to see how well they had healed, and thought ruefully that I could have been able to work in the gardens today. It even made me sad knowing that I would never work in those gardens again.

For hours I waited as the rest of the day passed by. My thoughts continued to wander randomly, and I cherished the memories while I still could. The light was starting to dim in the building signifying early evening, and somehow, I was still me.

I decided to test my muscles to see if I could stand. Maybe I had made it through? Maybe not everyone turned when they were bitten? That thought made me angry. Why would I be the one to live when I had no one, and Becky had her whole family that needed her there?

As I stood, I felt the strength flow back into my limbs. I was weak but thought I would be able to walk now. My clothes were wet, and the smell of vomit was everywhere. It was probably on my shirt. I needed to find some fresh clothes to change into, but I didn't think I would find anything here in the restaurant.

Becky was ignoring me, still moving from table to table, setting and resetting the dishes. I tried walking on my wobbly legs to see how far I could make it and surprised myself by being much more surefooted than I thought possible. A few years ago, I had come down with a pretty bad stomach virus and didn't remember recovering this fast.

I wanted to see what I could find in the adjacent gas station before it got dark and stumbled out the front door, barely catching myself against a rusted pole that held up the awning. It groaned at my additional weight but held. I thought I'd better slow it down.

Stay vigilant. Move slowly. Ali taught me that. Always be aware of my surroundings and never assume a place was too small for a dead-brain to hide in. The dead-brains out in the field were too far away to notice me, but in the dying light they were also hard to spot. I was second-guessing my decision to take a trip to the gas station, afraid I might get ambushed, but decided it was now or never.

I took one slow step after the other to the neighboring building, keeping my energy in check. Once there, I made sure to look through all the windows for any signs of movement before I decided it was safe. I gave the door a tug.

A bell hanging above the door announced my entrance, and I winced. If there were any dead-brains in here, they knew I was in here now. I stood there, waiting, but nothing came. Maybe I had caught a little bit of luck.

Judging by the disarray of the store, it looked like someone had been through here before, but not everything was taken. My first thought was to check behind the counter for a weapon. I figured if there was anything here, that would most likely be where it was stashed.

I was rewarded when I found a wicked looking axe behind the counter. The curved blade was painted red and the metal head was fitted into a solid wooden handle that tapered into a point at the bottom, making both ends dangerous. It was a vicious looking thing but much too heavy for me to try to do anything with while I was so weak.

I opted for the lighter-weight aluminum baseball bat, which I was also able to use as a cane.

The next thing on my list was finding a change of clothes. There were some Texas Longhorn t-shirts hanging in the front window, so I grabbed one. They didn't have my size, and the one I grabbed hung on me like a sheet, but I was thankful I could get out of the rotten smelling shirt.

As I dropped the disgusting garment on the ground, a flash from outside the window caught my eye.

Headlights.

I froze. It had to be Jeremy coming back. Why? He knew what was going to happen, did he come back to kill Becky? Kill us both?

I ducked down to hide myself, suddenly worried and scared. What if he did come back and killed me without even talking to me first? I didn't think I was going to turn now and, although the thought of living in this world wasn't the greatest option, I really did not want Jeremy to kill me.

As the headlights drew closer, I realized it wasn't Jacob's truck. Who the heck could it be? I had never seen this vehicle before, and I wasn't about to take any chances, so I kept myself hidden.

I watched the black truck roll to a stop in the middle of the street, and then the driver stepped out into view.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw her unmistakable red hair.

## CHAPTER 5 - ALI

I was angry. Even when I lost Seth, I hadn't been this angry. How could they be so stupid, so careless?

Tears of rage ran down my face as I drove north on the old highway. It was careless, but I dared every face-eater to come against me now. I would kill them all.

The road was clear except for a pile-up of cars that I was swiftly approaching. There were quite a few of those bastards milling around the rusted metal.

*Freaks.*

I had their attention by the time I rolled to a stop and was pulling my knife before I stepped out of the cab. The first freak that came within range got my knife shoved into its eye socket, the blade sliding into its brain. I kicked its dead body from me to watch it tumble into the ditch, ready for the next one.

Systematically, I moved from freak to freak, killing them all and pushing their bodies off the road. Tears were streaming down my cheeks in hatred, rage and pain, but I didn't slow. They were watching me with those red eyes, not able to process the thought that would doom them in on their mortal danger. Looks of cold curiosity were silenced by my knife. I didn't stop till they were all lying dead in the drainage ditch.

I cried.

The destruction helped calm my rage but uncovered the pain. For a moment, I wondered why I should keep going. Everyone that I ever loved was dead and everyone else would die eventually. Who was left for me to keep going for? Myself? Was that a strong enough reason to keep moving forward?

I choked on my sobs and spit out a mouthful of blood. Apparently I had bitten my tongue in my fury.

Pulling at the edge of my shirt, I wiped the blade of my knife against it, cleaning it of blood, and then peeled the shirt off to toss it on top of the bodies. I always wore double layers as a precaution. This would not be the first time I had discarded a ruined garment.

The walk back to the SUV was done with slow, wavering steps, my thoughts again drifting to Walter and his Misses. Walt couldn't do it for Emma, but could I do it for Joss?

A wave of memories rushed me, swirling through my thoughts until they stole the strength from my knees, and my steps faltered. My last moments with Seth replayed themselves in my mind, and now that I was facing the same situation with Joss, I was grateful that Seth had not put that burden on me. Within the haze of the painful memory, my decision was made. I had to do it. This was no life. Joss wouldn't want to be left like that. Not with the chance he could take an innocent life. I wouldn't let Joss become a mindless killer.

At least I knew the end of my current road but not what I would do once this task was done. I didn't want to think that far ahead. This wouldn't be the first time I had been in this position, and I didn't want to face it again.

I dimbed back into the SUV and continued down the road.

The town wasn't far ahead. Jeremy hadn't told me where he'd lost Joss and Becky, but I figured it would have been in one of the first buildings coming into the little town. That didn't leave a lot of choices.

I parked in the middle of the road in front of an old bar. That was as good a place as any. As I walked around the Murano, I was eying the building with apprehension. My stomach was rolling in nauseous waves, and I had to stop to collect myself for a moment before I soldiered on.

Then the door of the gas station burst open, and I jumped back in shock, my knife already instinctively in my hand. My first thought was a freak was on the attack, but then he called my name before stumbling to the ground.

"Ali!"

Everything inside me froze. My mouth went dry. He wasn't turned yet. How long had it been? How long did it take?

Hesitantly, I started forward, not knowing what I would find when I got to him. He lurched to his feet again, calling to me. I couldn't hold myself back any longer and broke into a run.

"Joss!" I yelled, tears streaming down my face. My mind was full of chatter, pleading with any god anywhere that he was okay.

And then we were together, his arms thrown around me so tightly he knocked the wind out of me, and he was sobbing. I grasped him just as hard, never wanting to let him go. He was weak and pulled me off balance. As he sank to his knees, I went down with him, the two of us collapsing in the parking lot of the old bar.

"I never thought I'd see you again," he said through his sobs, and I held him tight while he caught his breath.

"I never should have left you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." My own voice cracked, and I truly hated myself for leaving him. He pulled away from me then, wiping the tears and snot from his face.

"I got bit, and I was really sick." He mumbled as he looked at me. My eyes widened in surprise, and he immediately shook his head, not understanding my look of shock. "I feel much better now."

I grabbed his face in my hands and held him still as I stared at him. His eyes were green. Beautiful, emerald green.

Everything I knew in this world changed in that moment. I fell backwards, stunned. I couldn't even breathe to speak as Joss stared at me in utter confusion.

"Am I still dying?" he whispered. Frightened by my reaction, he immediately assumed the worst.

"No!" I nearly yelled as I grabbed him and pulled him back to me. "No, no, no!" I got out more firmly, and I started laughing and sobbing at the same time. "You're going to live!"

He collapsed against me in relief. "Promise me you'll never leave me again?"

"I promise, Joss," I said softly, calming down a little, though my heart still thumped against my chest. "I promise you I'll never leave you again."

We sat like that for a long time, embraced awkwardly in the parking lot. The noise we had made brought quite a crowd, as I knew it would, but Joss didn't realize it until he raised his head.

"Ali," he said in hushed tones, catching sight of the freaks that had come to investigate the noise. I looked around, only seeing a handful. I remained uneasy as I always did around the freaks, but I wasn't scared.

"It's okay," I said simply and calmly. "They won't hurt you now."

"What?" he gasped, not understanding me and clearly not put at ease.

"You and I, we're both infected." I stared at him, waiting for him to take in what I was saying. "We've both been bitten, but we were infected the right way," I said, using Walt's terminology.

I held up my right arm to show him the scars of the bite. His wide green eyes looked from it, back to me, and then back to the freaks that circled us. "How?" he asked, but I had no answer for that.

"I don't know. I thought I was the only one for a long time." I shrugged. The panic lingered in his eyes, but I felt him relax a little bit. I continued, wanting to get away from the crowd as well. "Can you stand?"

He nodded slowly. "I think so."

I stood, pulling him up beside me and helping to support his weight. "If you move slowly, they won't react at all. They think we're one of them."

I felt him shudder and understood how he was feeling. It took me a very long time to come to terms with it myself. I didn't know how well he was going to take this news.

"Do you have a place here you can rest while you get your strength back?" I asked him.

The expression of pain he turned to me broke my heart.

"Becky," he said, pointing toward the bar.

I nodded solemnly, knowing that Becky had already turned. I asked instead, "What about the gas station?"

"I didn't get to look around the whole place, but I didn't see anything while I was in there."

"Alright then, we'll rest there." I nodded and helped him walk to the building. He leaned heavily on me, one arm wrapped around my waist as he limped along, but I didn't think he was doing it just because he was weak.

I didn't mind. I needed him too.

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There was no running water in this town, but I was able to find enough jugs and bottles in the store to help Joss wash up. I hated wasting clean water, but I also knew we weren't going to be staying here much longer, and the washing would help him feel more human again.

"You still need to rest some," I told him, concerned when I caught him wobbling on his feet. He was a wiry kid, but it looked like the Powells had managed to get some meat to stick to his bones. He had grown a few inches and was already taller than me. It hurt to realize he still looked so much like Seth, even with the green eyes.

"Ali," Joss said quietly, after we settled in. "What are we going to do about Becky?"

I sighed deeply, seeing the pleading look in his eyes. Becky was such a sweet girl. She didn't deserve what happened to her. So many innocent lives had been twisted into these monstrosities, and none of them deserved it. I thought briefly of Walter and Emma before responding, knowing already I had failed with Seth. I could never make up for that, but at least I could end this for Becky.

"Let me take care of it," I finally said.

"Okay, just..." He paused for a few seconds. "Should we take her back to the Powells? Ya know... after..." His words choked off.

I nodded, feeling tears sting my eyes again. I blinked them away as I fetched Joss some magazines I'd found by the register, hoping for a distraction. The gesture seemed weak, but he took them from me without pause. Changing the subject, I offered what I could of a smile as I said, "I'm going to go find us some supplies for the night."

Joss frowned at my announcement, but he didn't protest. He knew it was better to use what was readily available rather than to break into our stash. We had both learned that lesson a long time ago.

"Please don't be gone long," he said as he clutched the magazines in his hands, seeming not to notice the tight grip he had on them. "I don't want to be alone."

"I know," I said as I reached out to reassuringly pat his shoulder. "I don't want to be alone either. I promise I won't be gone long."

He nodded, and I could see the sadness in his eyes. How dose he had gotten to Becky during my time away? I didn't want to ask him what happened yet. He would tell me when he was ready. Even so, I wanted to understand how it had come to be Joss that tried to rescue her and not her father.

The bitterness roiled in my stomach as I dwelled on it, and I found myself growing angry at Jeremy again. Frowning, I left the gas station before Joss could sense my mood. He had enough trauma on his plate right now, and he didn't need to be worried about mine.

I heard him sniffle softly as I walked out the door.

The anger faded as I ran up the street of the small town, searching for some type of general store. Finding a small shop that looked promising, I had to shatter the glass of the door to get inside. Stepping through the shattered frame, I was greeted by a freak wearing an apron with the store's logo on it. The name *Doug* was written on the upper right side of the apron in black marker.

I froze for a few seconds, monitoring Doug's behavior. He stood stoically, staring at the door, slack jawed. His pants had fallen around his ankles due to his disease assisted weight loss, but most of his hair was probably gone prior to him being infected.

I sneered as I advanced slowly, finally gaining the courage to push him out of my way. I flinched back almost immediately, cringing from having to touch a freak. His feet got tangled in his pants, and he stumbled backwards, colliding into one of the shelves behind him. Astonishingly, he kept his footing and turned his attention to me.

His vacant eyes stared, but he didn't advance. I would never get used to these things like Walter had. Shuddering, I went on about my business, ignoring Doug as long as he stayed put.

After a quick search through the small store, I found a nice tool set as well as a stash of batteries and flashlights. These were excellent trade goods. I also came across some sweatpants, and I grabbed a few pairs to take back to Joss. I had been gone under thirty minutes, but was already feeling anxious to check on him. Stuffing a few more supplies into a duffle bag, I left Doug to mind the store on his own.

I dropped the supplies next to Joss, who immediately started rummaging through the bag. He seemed extremely grateful when he pulled out the sweatpants.

"Sorry. That's all I could find," I apologized with a shrug. "I know I've got some more stuff packed away in the Murano. I can pull it out in the morning."

"This is fine," he said, even managing a smile up at me. It never touched his eyes though. Bright green eyes that I wasn't used to seeing on him. I sighed softly as I gave him privacy to change.

Minutes of silence passed before Joss finally asked the question I'd been dreading. "Have you always been this way?"

I shook my head in answer to his question and was surprised by how hard it was to summon my voice to speak. My words barely made it over a whisper. "I was bitten a long time before I met you."

"Why did you never tell us?"

I turned to him, dropping down beside him on the floor. He tossed his dirty pants as far away from us as he could before looking back to me, waiting for my answer. I searched his eyes for any sign of anger but only saw questions glimmering in the green depths. He wanted, no... He deserved an explanation, and I didn't have a good one to give.

"I've met people since I changed," I started, searching for my words carefully. "There were a few that didn't like me or trust me once they found out I'd been infected. I've been driven out of more than a few settlements because of that, but they never minded my trade goods.

"When I met you guys, I didn't think I'd travel with you for so long. By the time I knew I wanted to stay, it seemed like it was too late to tell you. I never could find the words."

The floor was covered in cheap linoleum tile, and Joss was picking at the edge where it warped along a crack. I waited for a reaction, but his demeanor never changed. When he finally looked at me, he simply asked, "They really kicked you out?"

I nodded in answer. "They didn't understand me. I don't even understand what we are."

He turned his attention back to the tile. "Are there others?"

"Yes," I replied without pause, thinking about Walter and the soldier he had buried. "At least a few but I've only actually met one. He didn't know much more than I did."

"I see." He turned his sad green eyes up to me and he tried to smile again. "Maybe we can find more."

I returned what I could of the smile. The sadness between us was almost suffocating, overshadowing the joy of our reunion. I wasn't sure if this immunity we had was a blessing or a curse, but a weight lifted off my shoulders now that I was back with Joss.

The growl of hunger from Joss's stomach ended our conversation.

"You must be starving," I said, remembering Walter's gift.

Joss was already starting to rise, saying, "I think there's some noodles..."

"Stay," I scolded, interrupting him. He dropped back down and pouted up at me.

"I'm not completely helpless," he muttered, and I chuckled lightly in response.

Feeling myself relax, my smile seemed less forced. Sadness lingered in Joss's eyes, but some of the tension had left him. I asked, "Have you ever had squirrel soup?"

There was a pause before he replied, and he seemed almost bashful. "A few times, if Jeremy could get one. Mary would cook it up in a stew. Never tasted much different than the chicken to me."

"I'll be right back," I said as I ran to fetch the stew from where it sat in the front seat of the Murano. I also pulled one of my candles and some matches out of the glove box, and I grabbed my pack filled with blankets before I headed back in.

I didn't even have the candle lit before Joss grabbed the soup. His body needed to recharge after the fever and he must have been starving. I didn't feel like eating, so I let him have the whole bowl. It wasn't enough to satiate his hunger. I ended up soaking three packs of ramen noodles in some water for him before he finally slowed down some. I wasn't sure how long it would be before his need to eat lessened due to the infection.

He was also exhausted. The sun hadn't faded completely when he turned the old office chair on its back so he could use it as a pillow. The only other cushiony thing in the store was a bundle of neck supports for traveling. We stuffed



those in the duffle bag for another pillow, and I spread out one of the blankets. It did little to cushion the hard tile. Sleeping in the SUV would have almost been more preferable. Almost.

The night passed slowly for me, and I was grateful when Joss woke at the first light of dawn. Having spent so much time alone, it shocked me how starved I was for company. I fixed another round of noodles for his breakfast, which he eagerly ate. There were only a few packages left, so I skipped another meal. Joss didn't notice.

Eventually, I helped Joss to his feet and watched over him closely as he moved around, testing his strength. He already seemed to be surefooted, no longer wobbling like he was the night before. I gave him a nod of encouragement as he met my gaze after a test walk around the store. As he approached, his face fell into a frown again, and my own stomach lurched as I knew he was thinking about Becky.

I hadn't been dwelling on the task I had committed myself to, although there had been a heavy knot in my stomach all night. Now that there was nothing left to delay the inevitable, I floundered.

"What if there's a cure?" Joss asked while I was using the facade of packing up our things, trying to hide the fact I was stalling.

I glanced at him, already having been down that road before. It wasn't the first time I'd thought about it, but I truly didn't think there could be a cure. Too much of the world had deteriorated, and there were no signs of humanity making a comeback. I hadn't even come across a hint of a rumor for a cure.

I had to force myself to speak. "No, I don't think there is one."

We stood in silence for a moment as Joss accepted my answer. Finally, he asked, "How do we do this?"

I met his eyes, completely at a loss. I had killed countless freaks over the course of five years, but this was different. This was still Becky, even though her mind was gone. I cringed.

The knife was too messy, and the gun seemed far too brutal. I didn't want to take her body back to her family with a gaping wound. I wanted to preserve what I could of her young beauty. I looked down at my hands, wondering if I could do it. I stated with a shudder, "Suffocation?"

He shook his head immediately, already knowing what I intended by my gesture. "Not like that."

He slipped behind the counter and pulled out a stash of plastic bags. He tossed them on the counter top. I studied them as my mind walked through what the process would be like. It could work. I grimly nodded my agreement.

I studied Joss for a moment before taking a deep breath and going outside. He followed close behind me as we walked to the sports bar. We entered from the back, and he guided me towards the swinging door on the far wall. I led as we exited the kitchen into the main area of the restaurant, the anxiety inside me rising with the bile in my throat.

There she was.

I gasped despite my vain attempts to steel myself. It was horrible seeing her, and my knees grew weak before I was able to recover. Her hair was a little matted and her clothes were filthy, but she looked like the sweet, quiet girl I had met at the farm.

Becky had taken notice of us and was facing our way. There was no recognition in her red eyes. She stared at us, not comprehending who or what we were. Her vacant stare was no different than any other freak I'd ever seen. After a few moments, she went back to setting the table.

I looked at Joss, looking for reassurance in what I was about to do. He nodded grimly, his face a mix of sadness and anger. I turned back to Becky, and minutes passed as I watched her set and reset the tables. I wondered how long she would continue to do that. Probably forever, if no one ended it for her.

I approached slowly, cautiously. I didn't want to startle her. Gingerly, I reached out to her, not sure how she would react. My heart skipped a beat as she turned to me, but other than that, she remained still. My fingers clumsily fumbled to open the plastic bag I had brought, and I cringed at the sound of the material when I finally pulled it apart.

I took a deep breath and held it, quickly placing the bag over her head, all the while thinking she would struggle. Instead, she was docile. She remained still and obedient as I secured the ties around her neck. Done with stage one of the horrific task, I retreated back to where Joss was standing, all my strength drained.

I don't know who moved first, Joss or I, but we grasped each other's hand as we watched Becky. For several moments, she remained still. The only movement was the slight rise and fall of the bag as she breathed. Then she turned back to the table and began to reach for the dishes. The bag completely obscured her vision, so she was working on memory and touch alone. The first dish dattered to the floor as she knocked it off the table. The sound echoed through the stillness, and Becky paused. I was surprised her breathing remained steady and even. Tearing my eyes away, I glanced at Joss momentarily, seeing a stoic expression plastered on his face.

Frowning, I turned back to the spectacle of Becky's slow death. She was moving again, reaching for dishes until another one dattered to the floor. Again she paused, waiting and listening for one agonizing minute after another. I was beginning to think she may have some regenerative power helping her breathe. Then she reached out to the table again, and that's when she faltered.

Becky collapsed to her knees, and Joss's stoic facade broke. He sobbed as he turned into me, burying his head against my shoulder. I held him as I dosed my eyes, also unable to watch the scene any longer. Minutes slipped by.

There was a thud as her body collapsed completely, landing on the hard wood floor, and still neither of us moved. I had no desire to open my eyes and see Becky's lifeless body lying there, but there was little else I could do. If I didn't take care of this, then the task would fall upon Joss, and there was no way I would allow that to happen.

I finally pushed him away, holding him out at arm's length, as I made sure he was stable and steady enough for me to leave him. He wiped the tears away, keeping his face averted.

Forcing myself to finish it, I slowly turned from him and went to Becky's fallen body. She had fallen on her side, and as I knelt beside her, I could see the faintest rise and fall of the bag. It didn't persist, though, and I reached out to check her pulse, feeling like I might faint.

Nothing. The task was done.

I gently removed the bag and closed her lifeless red eyes. If I remembered right, they had been a lovely shade of sky blue before. That was the way I wanted to remember them.

I lifted her body easily. She had been a little wisp of a girl, and it was nothing to carry her to one of the long tables on the other side of the restaurant. Joss joined me.

"Let's get her cleaned up some," I said solemnly. "Let me grab a few things from the Murano."

There was a guttural sound that I took as agreement from Joss, and I could feel that he wanted a few moments to himself to say goodbye. I quietly slipped out the front doors and headed to the gas station. I might as well clean up camp.

I took my time packing up, making sure to leave enough room to accommodate Becky's trip back to her family. I gathered the few things we would need to clean her up, and I even considered grabbing a clean set of clothes for her, but then decided against it. That was too personal. Best to leave that to her family.

Finished, I slumped against the SUV, taking the time to let my mind process what was happening. I felt numb. I thought I would cry, but there were no tears. I didn't know Becky that well, so my mourning was for the loss of a life that could have been. I also mourned for Joss and another piece of his innocence lost.

Nothing could stop the inevitable. I gazed back at the old bar and decided it was time to head inside.

I found Joss sitting in a chair next to Becky, holding her hand. He looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes, but I noticed he no longer had any tears either. He had gathered a few tablecloths and had them sitting to the side. We would be able to use those as a shroud for her body.

I went to him, gently patting him on the back and hoped he felt some comfort in the gesture.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked, knowing it was a stupid question. None of us were okay, but I needed to say something and no other words were forming in my mind.

Joss shrugged as he stood up. That was all the answer I received.

With no more attempts at conversation, we went to work cleaning up Becky's body. I unwrapped the dressing Joss had put on Becky's bite, and was surprised to see it was almost healed. Joss went to work on her hair, a pained expression on his face as he tried to ignore what I was doing.

I cleaned and dressed the wound as if she were alive, bandaging it tightly in hopes to stave off an infection that would never happen now. I continued to wash her skin and what I could of her clothes as Joss worked out the mats and tangles in her hair.

Once finished doing what we could for her appearance, we began to wrap her in her shroud of tablecloths until only her face remained uncovered. I backed a step away, giving Joss his space as he stared down at her. He gingerly touched her cheek with the back of his finger and then leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"We won't have time to say goodbye later," he choked out as he straightened.

We loaded her body in the back as gently as we could. There was nothing left for us to do but take her home. We drove in silence, the anxiety weighing down on us. It seemed like no time had passed when we pulled into the driveway. When Jeremy stepped out onto the porch, Joss finally spoke.

"I'll get her."

"Are you sure? Do you have your strength back?" I asked, truly concerned about his recovery.

The stern look he gave me was answer enough. This was something he had to do himself.

I stepped out first, but when Joss made an appearance, Jeremy froze in his tracks. I ignored him, stepping around to the back of the SUV to help Joss unload our cargo. He cradled Becky tightly in his arms as he turned to walk towards the house.

I followed him as far as the front of the Murano and stood stiffly with my arms wrapped around myself, watching helplessly as the macabre scene played out in front of me.

Joss was only a few feet away from me when Mary and Kevin filed out of the house. As soon as Mary laid eyes on Joss, she stumbled off the porch, her face ashen with grief.

"Rebecca?" Her anguished croak made it to my ears. She rushed past Jeremy, her cries becoming louder the closer she drew to him. "Rebecca? Is that my baby? Becky?"

Joss only made it a few more steps before she converged on him. Mary grabbed at the makeshift shroud until she uncovered Becky's face, letting out a wail when she finally laid eyes on her. She pried Becky from Joss's arms, forcing him to relent his hold on her. He lowered her body to the ground as he passed her to her mother's arms.

"Oh God, my baby girl! My poor baby girl!" Mary's wails thundered through my thoughts, and the tears that I had thought run dry came on again in full force. Jeremy took two steps forward and collapsed to his knees. Kevin stood frozen on the porch, unable to move. Mary continued to wail, rocking Becky's body back and forth. It was the only sound, the only movement for many terrible, agonizing seconds.

Finally, Joss dumsily pulled himself to his feet and stumbled back a few steps. I was surprised to see him move forward, heading toward the house. He disappeared inside for a few moments, returning with something small in his hands. It was too small for me to make out at that distance.

He forced Kevin to face him, trying to hand him the object, but Kevin only shook his head. He pushed it back into Joss's hands and they embraced in a brief hug. When Joss left him, Kevin sat down on the porch steps with his head in his hands. I could see his shoulders shake from sobbing.

Joss walked by Jeremy without a word, his face a mask of stone as he passed him. He briefly paused as he came up beside Mary, as if he wanted to console the hysterical, grieving woman, but he finally tore himself away. He approached me with a determined look plastered on his face that melted into a weary resignation as he reached me.

"I'm done here," he whispered. "Let's go."

~ ~ ~ ~

The driving was slow and quiet. The grief weighed heavily on us both, and it kept conversation to a minimum. Joss was toying with the small object he had retrieved from the Powells. To me, it looked like a couple small sticks tied together, and I was curious as to its significance. I would wager it had something to do with Becky, but I felt Joss wasn't ready to talk about it yet. Instead, I focused on the drive.

With no one around to keep up regular maintenance on the highways, nature was taking its toll. There were a lot of obstacles to deal with – obstruction, damage, freaks – that it slowed our progress to a crawl.

I had pointed the Murano northwest shortly after leaving Sweetwater. My goal was to avoid getting anywhere near Carlsbad if I could help it, and so far Joss hadn't mentioned it. I wasn't sure if that was because he didn't want to face what we might find there or if it hadn't occurred to him that we were heading in that general direction.

We had only traveled maybe sixty miles west when we decided to find a place to camp for the night. I didn't feel like hunting down a nearby settlement so I found the next best thing. A neighborhood full of freaks. That was the fastest way to find a place safe from strangers. I didn't trust most people nowadays.

The freaks wandered the streets of this small, rundown neighborhood. There were so many places like this, places that humanity never tried to take back. It was testament to how few of us were left on this earth. To say we were outnumbered by the diseased was an understatement.

Spotting a two-story house that seemed to be in pretty decent shape, I pulled the SUV as far into the driveway as I could get. Most of it was blocked by overgrown hedges and fallen tree limbs. There was a small forest of rose bushes we would have to wade through to get to the front door, but it wasn't unlike most of the other houses, and the upper story

made it worth it. Freaks could climb stairs but they were clumsy and noisy. They always gave ample warning when they were in a building, so being on the top floor gave us an added sense of security.

"Remember," I whispered to Joss before opening the door. "Move slowly and make as little noise as possible."

He just cocked an eyebrow at me and I had to bite my tongue. I reminded myself Joss was no novice to this life, but that would never change my over-cautious nature.

"Sorry," I said flatly, and his face broke into a smile. It was enough to lighten the heavy mood, and the smile I returned was genuine. Then I, once again, saw him as a reflection of Seth, and my mouth went dry as I turned away.

"Come on," I croaked as I dimbed out of the cab, hoping I was fast enough to cover up my mood swing. Luckily, Joss didn't seem to notice.

We both moved toward the house, keeping an eye on the freaks that were milling toward the SUV but ignoring us. Through the window of the house, I could see at least two freaks keeping a stoic vigil in what looked to be the living room. I motioned Joss to the back of the house, and we circled around from opposite sides.

I found the back door locked but the window to the side of it slid open easily. Joss moved in front of me, slipping through the window quickly before I could argue. I waited impatiently for him to unlock the back door and met his smirk with a frown.

"Alright, show off," I grumbled. "Let me see if I can lead these guys out of here without a fight."

He stayed behind me this time as I walked into the living room. The two freaks, who looked to be an older couple, turned to regard me as I entered.

My lip curled in disgust at the thought of touching them. This wasn't the same as when we had dealt with Becky. These smelly freaks had never been people to me, and I couldn't bring myself to reach out to them.

Instead, I circled behind them, which was another thing I didn't like doing as it put them between Joss and me. I saw no way around it, though, and I reminded myself they wouldn't hurt him.

Grabbing an old dusty cane I found lying on the floor, I started to prod the man forward with it. The old woman snapped at me suddenly, causing me to jump backwards and drop the cane. It dattered as it hit the floor. I was tensed and ready to defend myself, but aside from the snap, the freak was still. Regardless, my heart was already thumping in my chest.

"The hell was that?" Joss said from the doorway, and both freaks turned to him.

I grumbled under my breath, thinking again about the freak that had attacked me in the blue house before I'd left Grand Prairie. "They do that sometimes."

Both freaks pivoted again to look at me.

"And you didn't think that was need-to-know info?" he asked, raising his eyebrow again. The freaks volleyed their stares back to Joss.

"When did you turn into such a smartass?" I said as I retrieved the cane, poking it at the woman as she turned to me. Joss disappeared from the doorway and called out a little too loudly for my taste.

"Learned it from you!"

I sniffed at that and waited for the freaks to turn to him. They started moving toward the kitchen on their own, following Joss's voice. I gave the woman freak a good hard bump with the cane and she snapped at me over her shoulder, but didn't stop her forward momentum.

"You're just an old bitch, now aren't you?" I snarled at her.

She didn't deny it.

The male freak had made his way into the kitchen, and I could see that Joss had armed himself with a broom. He was pushing the old man out the back door with its bristles. The freak was craning his head back to watch him, but continued moving out the door.

Once he was outside, the old woman followed with less hassle. I guessed she wanted to stay close to her husband so she didn't put up a fuss. I quickly shut the door behind them and locked it, also locking the window for good measure.

"I hope that was it," I said, turning to Joss who was still wielding the broom. "So, how do you want to do this?"

I wanted to leave the planning for tonight up to him. I had to see how comfortable he was with his new life. He had shown confidence with my plan, but he fumbled at this. He looked older, but he was still just a kid. In the end, he managed to surprise me.

"I'll make sure the downstairs is clear, you go up," he said, motioning to the stairs.

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow, but I only said, "If you find anything, let me know right away. Don't engage it."

"Sure," he said, but I didn't trust his smile. He was relieved he didn't have to fear the freaks anymore, but I hope he kept a healthy respect for them. At least he hadn't made any mention of trying to kill them all yet, like I had tried to do.

I left him to it and started up the stairs, making sure to open every window I could find. It was sweltering hot in the house, and I needed to air out the stench of unwashed freak that had been building for years. After my sweep of the upstairs floor, I descended the stairs to find Joss back in the kitchen, going through the cabinets.

"All clear," he stated as I walked in. "No gas, no water here."

I nodded. "I have plenty of water stocked. If you want to, we can check the other houses for supplies too. We have a lot of daylight left."

He seemed much too excited about that news, and I gave him a warning look. "We stay together, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned.

I rolled my eyes at him. My show of annoyance was feigned though, and he was aware of it. The banter was going a long way to help ease the tension and pain for both of us.

The little town I'd found for us to rest in wasn't anything spectacular. It hadn't been looted, but there wasn't a lot there to begin with. We found water, food to eat so we didn't have to break into our stores, and Joss found some comic books he could read. He preferred the graphic novels over my plain text books. That was fine with me.

In the dying daylight hours, he spent time going through the pictures of the house and finding out all the information he could on the old couple that had lived here. This was a practice I generally avoided. I didn't want to humanize these monsters, but I couldn't find the words to warn Joss away. What he was trying to do seemed to be innocent and pure, so I didn't object.

They were older than I had thought, both of them in their mid-eighties. Being infected caused a nearly miraculous regeneration, but it was almost like their aging process had been reversed. I wouldn't have thought they were out of their sixties.

Joss was going on about their sixty-year marriage and their children, but I was lost in my own thoughts. Once again, I found myself thinking about Walter and what he had told me of his emphysema being gone within two weeks of

becoming infected. He had looked so healthy. I found myself regretting the topic of age never coming up in our conversation. Now I had more unanswered questions.

Joss stopped talking as he went through the pictures, a dejected look taking over his features. Looking at him then, he became the sad fourteen-year-old kid he really was. A kid that should be worrying about homework and girls, not mourning a world lost that he would never know. I reached over and squeezed his hand.

"I wish there was something we could do," he mumbled.

"You're doing it, Joss," I reassured him. "You're remembering them. I think that's all any of us would want in the end."

His green eyes glittered with tears as he glanced at me, then he blinked them away. His voice was full of melancholy that was nearly tangible when he spoke again. "Can we remember Seth?"

My stomach turned at his question, feeling like I'd been punched in the gut. I squeezed his hand all the tighter and forced him to look at me again. "I will always remember Seth."

He fell against me, his arms wrapping around me in a huge hug. I held him tightly, feeling him break down into wracking sobs.

"I miss him so much," he got out between breaths. His emotions were run ragged after what happened with Becky, but I couldn't hold it together either. The tears ran down my cheeks into his hair.

"Me too," I whispered. "Me too."

I held him until the tears ran dry and there was nothing else to say. He slipped into a deep sleep that I don't think he'd been able to achieve in a while. I let him lie on the floor of the room he'd chosen to sleep in. He hardly stirred as I put a pillow under his head and covered him up with a thin blanket.

There was more to this bond that held Joss and I together, but losing Seth was a deep wound for both of us. A jagged wound that was still healing and it would take years before it faded. Hopefully being able to talk about him would bring the closure we both desperately needed.

~ ~ ~ ~

That night I dreamed about Carlsbad, and winter, and Seth.

A white blanket of snow was covering the ground, and even though I knew it couldn't be, it felt right. It was a thick blanket of snow, the kind we got when I was back in DC with my mom, but deep down I knew it never really snowed like this in Carlsbad.

I was standing on the porch, watching the fluffy white snowflakes dancing in the air. Seth stood beside me and he reached out for my hand, clasping it in his. It felt so natural. I took it in, relishing standing next to him and being able to steal a few more moments while reality was far away in the waking world.

"Take care of him, Ali," he told me, turning me toward him, and I stared up into his wonderful, beautiful blue eyes.

"I promise," I whispered back to him softly. He brought his hands to my face, caressing my cheek and tilting my chin up so his lips could brush softly against mine for the briefest of seconds. He pulled me to him, wrapping his arms around me, and I nestled my cheek against his broad chest.

In my dream, his heart was still beating strong and loud against my cheek, and I was able to relax against him. The heat of his body was warming me in the winter cold, a moment to cherish. In my mind he was still with me and I didn't want to let him go.

The morning sunlight shattered my illusions, and I awoke to a pain I thought buried months ago. All I could do was roll over into the dusty pillows and bury my face to muffle my sobs. It was Joss's hand on my shoulder that brought me out of my lapse, easing the ache inside me slightly.

He didn't ask me what was wrong. I think he already knew.

It was inevitable that Seth would show up in my dreams again now that Joss was back with me. There were too many memories being dragged to the surface, and I wasn't able to prepare myself for the tricks my own mind could play on me.

We both spent a good majority of the morning in silence, unable to break the melancholy mood. Joss had ceased his search for information about the last residents of the house, and I wondered if that might be the last time he would try to dig up old ghosts. The effects it had on both of us lingered on painfully.

I wasn't in the mood to drive, so we stayed in the house through the mid-morning hours after breakfast. Joss whittled away at a small block of wood, and I grabbed one of my many books to read. It was a book about elves, dwarfs, and dragons in a world far different from what we lived in. It led the way to an escape I sorely needed.

"Can you read it out loud?" Joss asked as he worked.

I smiled at him and started back at chapter one, happy to share the tale with him. The story was what we needed to lift our spirits some. We lingered in that house for a few days before we decided to get back on the road in search of a settlement. If memory served, I thought we might be able to find a decent trading community outside of Lubbock.

After a short driving lesson, Joss took the wheel as we set out toward the west. It was slow going at first, but it didn't take him long to get the hang of it. Driving a real vehicle might truly become a thing of the past, and there were no laws anymore to say he couldn't. Besides, it was nice to have someone else share in this responsibility.

Joss didn't remember many songs from before the outbreak, but I had a nice collection of CDs I had found along the way. I let him choose the music. Having a working CD player in the Murano turned into a real treat.

We made it to Lubbock as dusk was starting to settle. I drove up and down the southern streets of the old city until I finally caught the glow of lights indicating people. After a quick sweep to make sure we hadn't picked up any freaks, I kept the SUV at a slow speed and turned on the hazards while Joss and I both waved a white t-shirt out our respective windows. This was the new symbol for *I come in peace*, but it still wasn't one-hundred percent trusted.

As expected, we were met by the armed town guard before we even got close to the gates. Luckily, one of the men in the patrol recognized us, and waved us through.

The mayor, although she didn't like being referred to as that, was happy to see we were doing well. I graciously unloaded nearly half our supplies to buy us shelter for a while. Even though it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision that we stay, Joss didn't seem to mind that I hadn't consulted him on it.

We ended up staying there for weeks, maybe months. It was easy for me to lose track of the days. I found it curious that not one person mentioned the color of Joss's eyes during our stay. Of course, neither one of us pointed it out. These people didn't know we were different.

Being in a community again was doing me good and helped the healing process along. Both Joss and I contributed on a daily basis, making sure that we did what we could to see that the needs of the community were met. The activities kept my mind busy so I wasn't always dwelling on a past I couldn't change.



The questions in my mind never faded, though, and they continued to haunt me for answers. When I broached the subject of moving on to Joss, he was expecting it. In fact, he was surprised I had wanted to stick around for so long.

The good folks of Lubbock had a different view on our departure. It seemed no one wanted to see us go, especially not with winter coming on. Regardless, Joss and I both made our apologies and said our goodbyes to the disappointment of the town. On a cold December morning, we were back on the road.

We were traveling north this time, working our way up to Amarillo. We didn't quite make it before we got hit by a winter storm that turned the roads to ice. It was easy enough for us to find shelter in an old freak-riddled neighborhood and wait till the roads cleared. Three days in and another bout of ice and snow came blowing through.

The storm seemed abnormal for what I knew about the south, but everything was so white, pristine and beautiful. I didn't mind the delay. I was interested to see how the freaks would handle the exposure. It was certain they were moving about less, but the cold didn't seem to be killing them. That was disappointing but it didn't come as a surprise. Humanity would have already been making a comeback if it were that easy.

We used our downtime to search the nearby houses and shops to restock our trade goods. There was a place just west of Amarillo that we had stopped at last spring. The first time Joss and I passed through there, I had been in such a daze after losing Seth, I wasn't thinking right. Now it seemed I could recall there may have been some ex-military in or near the town. I wanted to pay them a visit.

Eager to get moving again, it didn't take more than a day or two for all the snow to melt off. The travel was stop and go once we got back on the road. It was impossible to say if all the downed trees were due to this latest storm, or ones prior, but we were moving a lot of debris off the road to make room for the Murano.

In the end, it took us a week to reach our destination. All things considered, I thought that was decent time. I had a good idea where the town was, and we were nearing our destination when I noticed the smoke. It was thick and black, far too much smoke to be coming from a campfire or even a house fire.

I slowed to a stop, mulling over what to do next. It was Joss that pointed out the hills along the southern edge of the town so we could get a better vantage point. Part of me wanted to bypass the town altogether, but curiosity got the better of me, and we swung to the south.

I searched for a bit until I found a place to hide the Murano. When we started our hike into the hills, a nervous buzz made its way through me. We were a couple miles out and each step closer, the buzzing grew. Something wasn't right here, and I began to question why we didn't turn around and move on. In the end, curiosity drove me forward.

The further up the hill we got, the more barren the terrain. There were no houses, cars, or even trees for us to hide behind, so we dropped down on all fours, hiding in the weeds as we crested the hill. Joss and I both gasped as the town came into view. Half of the settlement was on fire.

"God, what happened?" Joss mumbled as he stared out at the town.

I frowned, unable to answer. There were quite a few people I remembered from our first trip through, and it had been one of the few places that had accepted me. I shook my head, hoping that there were some survivors somewhere.

I started to back up when the sound of a gun cocking made my blood run cold. Instinctively, my own hand was already on the hilt of my knife when the long barrel of a rifle tapped me on the back of my head.

"Not so fast." Came a woman's voice, hushed and full of gravel.

I froze.



## SNEAK PEEK

Within the next few pages, you will find a sneak peek for *After – Part Two*. These were written in Ali's perspective and they remain accurate to the storyline. However, this is a unique viewpoint of the following events and these scenes will not appear in the second book.

Enjoy!

~ ~ ~ ~

## DELETED SCENES

Ali

My head snapped to Joss, seeing he remained crouched in the weeds. His eyes were wide, the panic threatening to take over. The rifle pressed harder against the back of my head, reminding me again to remove my hand from my knife. I ignored it, debating my options.

Then, from the other side of Joss, a skinny wisp of a girl stepped into my view, and I relented. She may have looked thin and frail but the gun she had trained on Joss was the deciding factor.

“Slowly, now.” Came the raspy voice from behind me again. This time I complied.

I rose to my knees with both hands in the air, Joss doing the same. My captor made a slow circle around me, and when I saw her face, I felt a surge of relief. Her face was a mess of dirt and possibly dried blood, but I recognized her. It took me a moment but finally her name drifted to the surface of my memory.

“Vanessa?” I questioned, hoping she recognized me.

She cocked her head to the side and her face skewed as she scrutinized me. She turned the same glare on Joss before addressing me again. “I remember you two. Why are you back here now?”

Her voice ran thick with suspicion, and she didn’t lower the rifle. The relief I felt was short lived. I swallowed, trying to wet my throat before answering her. “Passing through. We saw the smoke.”

Her eyes were dark, smoldering coals as they bore into me. She was calculating everything I said. “Where you coming from? Where you heading?”

“Lubbock.” I replied, maybe too quickly. My nerves began to fray as my control faltered. I tried to regain my focus before I finished my answer. “Been there a couple months. We’re heading back to Nevada.”

“Why?” She rasped, not missing a beat.

This time I huffed. I was worried about Joss, terrified actually, but that didn’t stop the annoyance from bubbling to the surface. Vanessa noticed my reaction, and she shifted the rifle, a reminder or a threat, letting me know she was still in control. It wasn’t likely I was going to forget it. Struggling to keep my voice level, but answered sharply. “Because we travel. That’s what we do. That’s what we’ve always done.”

The tense silence stretched as Vanessa stared down at me, and I glared back. Finally, unexpectedly, her face cracked into a smirk. “You look like you could spit nails, girl.”

It caught me off guard, and I had no response. I chanced a quick look at Joss and his captor. His face was devoid of emotion, but I recognized that look. That was the same stoic mask he wore while we dealt with Becky. His captor, on the other hand, looked bored.

I turned my gaze back to Vanessa and waited.

“As you can see, Sundown isn’t what it used to be.” Vanessa said, turning slightly to gesture to the billowing smoke with the rifle. When she turned back, she deliberately held the rifle’s tip toward the ground. She continued, “You’re immune. If you’re immune, then you ain’t part of who did this to our town.”

She stepped forward then, one hand extended to help me stand. I looked again to Joss, and saw the girl had lowered her gun as well, taking her cue from the older woman. I let my arms relax, and accepted Vanessa’s offer. As soon as I was on my feet, she tightened her hand on mine and pulled me in close.

“You keep those weapons right where they are or we’ll take them from you.” Her voice was low when she spoke. I stared wide-eyed into the dark pools of her eyes as she delivered the warning. Her nose wasn’t even an inch from mine, and her breath stank of rotted meat. It was all I could do not to choke as I quickly nodded my assent.

She let me go as she backed away. Joss was immediately beside me, grasping my arm. I looked at him and nodded, patting his hand. I wanted to calm him more, but I wasn’t sure everything was going to be okay.

“Alright Marley, keep that gun out.” Vanessa said as she motioned for us to go ahead of them, back the way we came. “I think we got us some new friends here but better safe than sorry. Ain’t that right, Ali?”

Impressed she remembered my name, I glanced at her over my shoulder as we started down the hill. I wanted to make sure they were keeping their word about the guns. So far so good but the smirk on Vanessa’s face was still unsettling.

I scoured my memory, trying to dredge up what I could about the woman. For some reason, other than her name, all I could pull was a vision of rows of knee-high corn stalks. I must have worked a shift or two with her in the fields, but other than that, I was drawing a blank.

Neither Joss nor I had been social the first time we had come through. We had lacked in trade supplies, so we tried to pay for our stay with chores. Our output had been sluggish, and we were on the verge of being asked to move on when I decided to make a supply run. I slipped out early one morning into the depths of Amarillo and was back before lunchtime. That earned us a few more days, and I managed to keep Joss oblivious to the whole thing. He had been unaware of my secret at that time.

Even though Joss had overlooked my seemingly amazing feat, the town Elders did not. Made up of a council of four men and two women, the Elders wanted answers as to how I was able to accomplish the task without backup. Amarillo was infested with roaming freaks. It wasn’t until they threatened expulsion from their town did I come clean, mostly for Joss’s sake.

It took some convincing and even a demonstration that was almost disastrous when one of the Elders, Clive Roberts, inadvertently took it to the next level.

He had been so disbelieving. He actually thought the freak I was using as a demonstration was a friend in disguise. Why anyone would think I would play such a horrible prank is beyond me, but he stepped out in the open, trying to call my bluff. Instead, he ended up with an enraged face-eater charging him down.

I’ll never forget the look on his face. The wide-eyed mix of disbelief, shock, and terror was etched in my mind. Accompanied by the screech of the frenzy call, it was blood curdling.

Clive, a big, lumbering man, had managed to scramble into the bed of an old truck and climb on top of the cab. Freaks could still climb when enraged, so that, in no way, was going to save the man. It bought him enough time for me to get to the freak and kill it before it could do any damage.

Denise and Jerald, the other two Elders that had come with us as witnesses, had wisely remained hidden in the old building. It was a good thing they had stayed put because the frenzy call was answered.

The face-eaters materialized from buildings and alleys, coming for Clive from every direction and seemingly spawning from thin air. Somehow, Clive was quick enough to get from on top of the truck to inside the cab before any managed to make it to us. He screamed for me to get inside with him. I slammed the door on him, breaking his wrist but saving his life. The first face-eater arrived only a heartbeat later, rushing past me to crash into the door.

The freak had rammed the truck so hard the glass cracked where its head collided and it bounced away dazed. It was an easy kill. There had to have been at least a dozen freaks closing in on the truck, and my eyes met Clive's through the shattered glass. He had all the proof he could ever ask for as he watched the freaks ignore me. Clive became a believer.

I went to work.

Dispatching the raging face-eaters wasn't difficult. I'd been desensitized to it long ago and it had become methodical. Thrust, twist, and drop them where they stood. I was a bloody, gory mess by the time it was done but Clive was safe.

I hauled him out of the truck, and he followed behind me, stunned and abashed. As soon as he was safe inside the building, Denise rushed him, screaming and crying so uncontrollably that I figured she'd call even more freaks down on top of us if she couldn't get herself under control.

First she slapped him, twice for good measure, and then collapsed against him, completely overcome by her tears.

I shook my head, wanting to wash it all from my mind. That had been far from what I had expected to happen, and I was glad no one had gotten seriously hurt. Clive's wrist would heal.

In the end, after what seemed a few days of deliberation between the Elders, I was accepted and they promised to keep my secret. It seemed there was a split vote between them, some having the normal fears that I was infected and a monster, but I also had some Elders in my favor. Clive ended up being my biggest supporter.

They gave me list after list of needed supplies, and I did my best to retrieve everything on those lists. The question of Joss and I being able to stay faded as I proved my worth. The invitation to become a permanent resident arose soon after, and that's when I decided it was time to move on. I was too uncomfortable with people knowing my secret. Leaving seemed the safest option.

Nowhere in those memories could I place Vanessa or the scrawny little thing she had called Marley. I thought maybe some conversation would help jog my memory, and I could also figure out what was going on here.

"So," I started, "What caused the fire?"

"Not what." Vanessa answered readily enough. "Who."

I tossed her a wry glance over my shoulder before I responded. "Who then?"

She chuckled, and dodged the question. "You were a ghost the first time you came through here. Looks like something put the life back into you." She addressed Joss then, "What was your name again, boy?"

Joss stuttered when he answered. "Joss, ma'am."

Vanessa cackled. It was a hoarse, dry laugh but it didn't sound forced to me. "No one's called me *ma'am* in a long time. Ali's been raising you up proper it seems. Not much place for that left in this world, but good to see it ain't gone completely."

I tensed at her assumption, and I was sure Joss could feel it. We both ignored her comment. I was hoping no one found out I had abandoned Joss for months. The shame in my failure was enough with just me knowing about it. I didn't need the burden of judgmental eyes to weigh me down even more.

"You got room in that truck of yours to get us all back to our camp?" Vanessa's question surprised me. My emotion was evident by my body language, and I got another hoarse chuckle out of the woman. "You think we didn't notice a vehicle driving around out here? That is one rare sight indeed."

She actually managed to drag a chuckle out of me. I had been a fool to think I could be stealthy in that big truck in this new world. “Sure,” I replied. “We can make room.”

“Good.” Vanessa said. “Most of the diseased were attracted to the showdown over there but might still be a few wandering about. Don’t want to take any chances.”

“I understand.” I changed our course to where the Murano was stashed. I took one more glance backwards at our two new companions, wanting to make sure they were keeping their guns down. They followed without comment. Their weary eyes only occasionally flitted over us. With the mention of freaks, they had become more alert to all of our surroundings. Even Joss was staring around at the landscape. It was a common reaction. However, I was more nervous about the people at the camp.

We made it to the truck without incident. As we took to arranging the supplies from the back seat to make room, I noticed Vanessa paying close attention to everything we moved. When she knew she’d been caught, I was surprised to see her blush.

“I’m sorry,” she said and immediately picked up her pace. “It’s just that we’ve lost a lot in the past two days.”

I studied her for a few moments. Marley too, who was watching me warily. Finally I turned back to Vanessa, “Most of what I carry is for trade supplies, and I always meant to pass it on to the Elders in Sundown anyway.”

Vanessa nodded, continuing to pack the items in the back cargo space. It wasn’t until I saw her wipe the tears from her cheeks did I realize she was crying. I frowned but decided it best to keep my questions to myself for the time being. I was getting the feeling whatever happened here had truly been catastrophic for the whole town.

When we were finished shuffling items around, I motioned for Joss to take the back seat with Marley so Vanessa could sit up front with me. By that time, she had regained control of her emotions.

“We’re not far from here. It’s the trailer park past the old Stop-n-Go.” Vanessa instructed, and I nodded. I had been back and forth through this ruined city enough to know the gas station she was talking about. Things really didn’t look that much different from the last time I had been here. “We’re working on clearing out some of the houses, but that’s dangerous work right now. Not safe out there in the open either, but we do what we have to do.”

As I drove us to our destination, I chanced the question. “So what happened here?”

I was met by silence and was starting to think I wasn’t going to get an answer when she finally spoke. “Well, you did.” I gasped, my mindset swiftly shifting from trying to avoid a confrontation to demanding an explanation, but I didn’t have to say anything for Vanessa to continue. She said, “In a roundabout way, that is.”

Vanessa sighed when I put the Murano in park. I wasn’t moving until I knew what was going on. I stated simply, “I need to know what we’re driving into.”

“I know, I know.” Vanessa answered, chewing on her bottom lip with worry as she stared out the window. “It wasn’t you, really. It was just that you were the first immune we ever knew of.”

“The first?” I picked up on her wording quickly. Despite the circumstances, a buzz of excitement started in my belly.

“After you left, I guess the Elders thought it okay to share your secret. Once word got out, Nicolas Wenfry stepped forward. He’d been immune the whole time, just never told anyone. Scared to. Just like you were.” Vanessa turned her dark eyes back to me and shrugged. “Now we know to pay attention to the eyes.”

“He was the soldier?” I said, remembering the name instantly.

“Well, National Guard.” Vanessa corrected. “But that didn’t matter. He didn’t know what was going on any more than anyone else.”

I glanced back at Joss who had leaned forward to listen. Marley, on the other hand, was picking at her nails and ignoring us. I prodded Vanessa to continue, “So, what exactly did Nic do?”

“Let me back up a sec.” She started, clearing her throat. “You did a lot for this town. Just how much was pretty evident after you left. You’d think we would have learned how to live without all the frills after the world went to shit but we didn’t. We’re all a bunch of selfish bastards, do you know that?” Vanessa looked at me and I could see the weariness in her eyes, possibly even disgust. She continued before I could begin to formulate an answer.

“It was the little things you brought in. The toothpaste, the diapers, even the trash bags. When those went away, you’d think the end had come all over again. More than a few of us were demanding the Elders figure out a way to get more. That’s when Nic decided to step up, share his secret and fill our lives with the trivial things again. God bless that man for trying to do the right thing.”

Vanessa gave me a hard look then, leaning towards me to add weight to her words. “I suppose you can guess what happened next, can’t you?”

I cringed and turned to face forward again. As I shifted the truck into drive, I answered. “People didn’t like it.”

“People didn’t like it.” Vanessa reiterated. “It was just a few bellyachers at first but sure didn’t take them long to gain ground. It split our town right down the middle. Some of us hailed him as a hero. Some of us wanted him gone. I just wanted it to all wash away so we could get back to living.”

“Who did it?” I cut her off. I knew I didn’t remember everyone here, but I had to have a name. I let the truck roll at a slow pace, waiting on her answer. If memory served, we weren’t far from the trailer park, and I needed to know before we reached our destination. When she answered me, I wasn’t surprised but that didn’t stop my blood from running cold.

“Jerald.” Vanessa said softly. “A few others backed him but he was their voice, their ringleader.” She paused then to exhale, as if she’d shrugged off a heavy weight. Her voice had taken on a noticeably lighter tone when she continued. “We’re not far now. You better let me out so they can see me coming. Clive can fill you in on all the details.”

As soon as she mentioned Clive, the relief knowing he was still here was enough to remove the sting of Vanessa’s revelation about Jerald. I chewed on that memory while I stopped to let Vanessa out and she led us the rest of the way on foot, the Murano rolling slowly behind her.

I thought back to what had happened with the Elders before I left Sundown. Jerald had reluctantly come over to my side when the Elders discussed my special skill set, but it never set well with him. Prior to him finding out what I was, he had been an incredibly nice man, grandfatherly and trustworthy.

He had turned on a dime as soon as he found out I was different. Jerald wasn’t the only one that turned away from me, but his betrayal had been the most painful. Even knowing that, it was a shock to find out he was the one responsible for what had happened in Sundown.

As soon as we passed the gas station and I laid eyes on the trailer park, I gasped. It was nothing but a string of ramshackle tents. It looked like the Sundown residents had been able to get a barricade of sorts together, made of trailers, cars, trucks, and whatever else they could find to surround the area, but they were fooling themselves if they thought it would be successful in stopping even a small number of freaks on a rampage.



Marley spoke for the first time, her voice soft and lilting, a stark contrast to Vanessa's gravel. A mournful sadness permeated her words. "Home sweet home."

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The first residents of Sundown to come out to meet us were those on guard duty. Then more people started to file out and press against the makeshift barricade; men and women, children and the elderly. Some faces I recognized and some I didn't.

Eventually, the crowd stopped growing and a sinking realization swept over me. There couldn't be more than a hundred people standing there, and somehow I knew this was all that was left of Sundown. They had been more than cut in half. I parked the truck along the side of an old, half-collapsed semi-trailer and killed the engine.

Marley rushed out of the truck to quickly disappear in the throng but Joss and I took our time, the apprehension obvious in both of us. I stared into a sea of unwashed and tired faces and had more than a few frowns returned my way. I decided it best to stay by the truck till either Vanessa or Clive came to escort us. We didn't have to wait long.

The town-folk parted as Clive made his way through. He was loud and abrasive, but he had been the closest thing to a friend that I had here. As soon as he broke through the last line of people, he swept his arms out in a huge arc and beamed a smile at me.

"Ali!" Clive bellowed, loud enough to make me wince. I figured he was pretty confident there were no freaks around. "You're certainly a sight for sore eyes."

I summoned a smile, finally gaining the courage to step away from the protection of the Murano. Joss followed, glued to my side. "It's good to see you, Clive."

His smile didn't hide the sadness in his eyes. Our audience made the conversation awkward. Everyone was so intent on the new arrivals to their little town. Clive shifted uncomfortably and glanced over his shoulder at everyone watching. "We've been through a rough patch lately."

I cocked an eyebrow, staring up at him incredulously. His head bowed as he lost his bluster to the weariness and grief. He mumbled almost to himself, "Obviously."

"Got a place we can talk?" I whispered, finally giving in to my nervousness.

Clive shook his head as if coming out of a trance. "Of course, of course." He grumbled as he turned back toward the crowd. "Follow me."

Joss grasped my hand tightly as I followed after Clive. The crowd parted for us, and as we entered the small sea of bodies, my pulse started to race. None of the looks we were getting were reassuring.

Midway through the crowd, a small voice spoke up. "Is she one of them?"

It may have come from a child or young woman, I wasn't sure. I could only sense curiosity in the voice. There was no malice or hostility. Clive paused to look back at me, and I could tell he was stumbling for words. He shrugged apologetically. "I didn't know you'd come back."

I took a deep breath and pulled Joss close to me. Taking a huge risk, I answered the small voice. "Yes, I'm immune."

A hand reached out to Joss then, old and wrinkled. I turned quickly to block but saw there was no need. The look

in the old woman's eyes was imploring as she stared up at Joss. "You too, boy?"

I wanted to answer for him and say no, but I knew his eyes marked him. He swallowed nervously as he nodded.

The old woman reached out to me then, grasping my arm tight enough to hurt. Tears were welling in her eyes and her voice was shaky when she spoke. "Will you help us then? The fire took everything. They burned it all and left us with nothing. It's like the end all over again."

Tears spilled down her cheeks, and I stared at the old woman in astonishment. This was not the reaction I had expected. Again, I looked at the faces that were surrounding me. They were wounded and beaten, struggling to survive in a world that no longer wanted them.

But there was no hostility. No malice. A lump formed in my throat.

I turned back to the old woman just as Marley materialized out of the crowd and pulled her from us. I swallowed the lump down and spoke, hoping it was loud enough to carry. "Yes, we'll help."

It was as if everyone exhaled at once, releasing the pent-up breath they had all been holding. It occurred to me then that if they needed me so badly, that this Nic was no longer around.

Clive's heavy hand patted me on the back, and I looked up into his weak smile. He tilted his head for me to follow, and the crowd began to disperse around us. It seemed they had gotten the answer they wanted.

I was shaking by the time Clive led us into an old travel trailer, one of the few structures that looked to be in use. I would have rather taken on a mob of freaks than deal with a crowd like that again.

Clive's big body crumbled down onto the built-in couch and he rubbed his face with his big hands. "Thank God you're here, Ali. You couldn't have come back at a better time."

"What the hell happened?" I asked, leaning against the wall as Joss went to peer out the window at the people milling about.

"Jerald." Clive said simply, unable to meet my gaze. Judging by the evidence around us, his story was going to be a difficult one to tell. Joss came to stand beside me, his fidgety movements giving away how nervous he was. He wasn't willing to take even a few steps away from me. I could understand that. I offered a small smile, hoping to give him some reassurance. He returned it but was still turning back to the window occasionally to peer at the people beyond.

"I don't get people, Ali." Clive finally stated, turning his grey eyes up to meet mine at last. "We had a good thing going with Sundown. A real good thing. We had a shot to make it last for a long time."

"It's not over. We can help you rebuild."

"And that's appreciated." Clive cut me off. "But did you see those people out there? They're broken. In a way, what Jerald did was worse than when the plague hit. Seeing the evil inside someone, to see the dark side of someone's soul... Witnessing that has stolen their faith and their hope."

"You have to tell me what happened, Clive. Vanessa filled me in on some of it. I know about Nic. Tell me about him."

Clive winced, the despair in his voice sinking into his posture and he slumped forward. "Poor Nic. Do you know what Jerald was before the plague?"

I shook my head as Clive briefly glanced up at me. He continued. "He was a preacher. A man of God. Somewhere along the way, the good word got twisted in his mind and you became a demon to him. It's hard to argue against Revelations right now and he had you pegged as one of the horsemen. Disease. He thought you started it all."

My eyes widened in shock and my voice escaped me. Clive caught a glimpse of my face and gave a wry chuckle, devoid of mirth.

“Don’t worry. You’re safe. No one was buying into it at first, and he wasn’t pressing the subject. It wasn’t until Nic stepped up did he turn into a zealot, screeching his bullshit to anyone who would listen. He gained a few followers, maybe twenty or so. I thought they were annoying but harmless. I should have paid more attention.

“He was constantly saying we needed to banish the devil from our midst or God would never be with us again. Three days ago, he took matters into his own hands and decided to purify our town. Gabriella, that little engineer graduate, you remember her?”

Still unable to find my voice, I nodded.

“She went over to his side. We didn’t know it then, but she had laced our whole town square with explosives. First thing I heard that morning were the screams. Won’t ever forget walking outside to see Nic crucified in the middle of the square and a bonfire lit beneath him.”

Clive choked up and I felt the lump return to my throat. Joss gave me a horrified look but any ability for me to give him comfort was gone. My heartbeat sped up as the feeling of safety drained away.

“Jerald’s followers had him surrounded, protecting the sacrifice from being saved by us non-believers. We couldn’t even get close. They’d doused him with some old fuel and he was being eaten alive by the flames.

“We don’t have much ammo left to spread around, so what bullets we have left are precious. Everyone knows to only use them in dire emergencies. Sean Porter did the right thing when he put a bullet through Nic’s head. There was no saving him, we all knew that. He just put the poor man out of his misery.” Clive sighed, shaking his head.

Joss had dutched on to me, and I wrapped my arm around him. I wanted to ask Clive what all this meant for us, but he went on before I had the chance to form the words. “I don’t know how they had originally planned to set off those explosives, but I don’t think what happened next was what they had intended. Sean’s next bullet took Jerald in the shoulder. The third hit what was left of the fuel tank they’d used on Nic. That caused the chain reaction.

“It was chaos by that point. Some had run, others were grabbing weapons. We had Jerald’s men circled around the bonfire when I ran inside to grab my shotgun. That’s when the first explosion went off. Best I can tell, the fuel leak from the tank had spread the fire to the fuse, or whatever Gabby had concocted. That blast took out Jerald, his followers and most of the men and women that were keeping them at bay. We lost Sean in that blast. I would have been gone too if I hadn’t went back for my gun.

“The fire just kept spreading, setting off more explosions every now and then. We had no way of knowing what all Gabby had trapped, and we weren’t safe. We evacuated everything we could here. Figured it was the best place for now but we need to find a better solution soon. The nights haven’t gotten below freezing yet but that doesn’t mean another cold snap isn’t on the way.”

“Jesus, Clive,” I groaned, slumping against the wall as he finished his story. “Are we even safe here?” I glanced out the window at the camp. It was obvious the people out there were desperate for help, but I didn’t want to share Nic’s fate.

Clive grunted before he responded. “I never thought we needed to be afraid of our neighbors. I never thought they were capable of doing something like that. The best answer I can give you is that none of those folks out there harbored any ill will against Nic. All of Jerald’s followers are gone. We just need the help now.”

I looked to Joss, seeing fear in his eyes. Outside, I had promised them help but that help could mean dropping off what supplies I had left in my truck and hitting the road. I wouldn't force Joss to be here against his will.

Then I watched as the fear dissipated from his eyes and was replaced with concern and determination.

"We can help, right?" He asked, and in that moment, his intentions became clear to me. Despite my own hesitation, I smiled at him and nodded.

Turning back to Clive, I asked. "Where do we start?"

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Widespread release of *After* – the complete Book One of *The Phoenix Curse*  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debra R. Johnson was born July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1976 in Oklahoma. She lived the first 30 years of her life there before moving to the Dallas Metroplex. She currently resides in Grand Prairie, Texas. Reading has been a passion of hers from a very young age, her favorite authors include Stephen King, R. A. Salvatore, Robert Jordan, and George R. R. Martin.

Debra has three children. Her eldest son is a musically gifted genius. Her daughter is as equally gifted with her inspirational stories, and her youngest son of two is mastering the art of walking, talking, and using the big boy potty. Debra is married to a wonderfully supportive and loving husband.

They also have two carpet whales that some people would call cats.