



CHRISSY PEEBLES

The Zombie Chronicles

Apocalypse Infection Unleashed

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Apocalypse Infection Unleashed Series

by

Chrissy Peebles

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Chapter 1



One year earlier...

It had been a long day in July, with heat waves rampaging throughout South Carolina. Even though nighttime had long fallen and the temperatures had cooled down noticeably, my shirt still stuck to my back. I wondered what good that shower had done that I'd taken before meeting Sherry.

A rush of wind blew through my hair as we rode to the top of the Ferris wheel and then stopped, hovering in midair. I breathed in, relaxed, and listened to the distant screams, music, and laughter echo below us. Sherry set down the stuffed pink pig I'd won for her in the ring toss and folded her hands in her lap, enjoying the silence. I dared a quick look at the stuffed animal, fighting with myself whether to be proud or sink into the ground. The guys back at school surely would've suggested the latter, but I didn't care. Granted, it wasn't the giant teddy bear I'd spent twenty bucks trying to win, but Sherry seemed happy with her little plush pink prize nonetheless. She squeezed my hand, and I smiled.

I rocked the cart back and forth with my legs.

"Hey! Stop it," Sherry said, twining her fingers through my hair.

“But you told me you loved it when somebody shook the cart at the very top. And I do too. Love that adrenaline rush.”

She smiled and batted her lashes at me. Her whole demeanor screamed flirty, so I inched closer and wrapped my arm around her to pull her closer. “Do you want to play games or make out?” she whispered suggestively.

Her eyes sparkled like big onyxes as I gazed into them. We had liked each other for months, and we’d been shamelessly stealing glances at each other until I finally plucked up the courage to ask her out. It was our first big date, and I’d been dying to kiss her all night. “What do you think?” I asked with a smile.

She inclined her head as though in thought.

That same moment, a piercing scream echoed from below us. Forgetting our first intimate moment, I peered below into the darkness to the gathering mass.

“What’s going on down there?” Sherry asked.

“I dunno.” I squinted to get a better view, but the steel rods of the Ferris wheel blocked most of my view from where we were dangling. All I could make out were red and blue lights flashing in the distance, blinking in rhythm to the sound of blaring sirens. I leaned out until I could count five police cars speeding toward the midway.

“What’s happening?” Sherry asked again, this time more quietly, as though she was talking to herself.

I paid her no attention as I continued to scan the commotion below. A man tumbled to the ground. The same moment, a group of people pounced on him. From up above, they looked like they were attacking him with their bare arms and legs.

Sherry grabbed my shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze to get my attention. “Oh my gosh, Dean! I think a gang of thugs are attacking the people in line.”

I shook my head. *It can't be.* We lived in a family tourist town, its biggest crimes consisting of kids stealing sweets from the local supermarket and old ladies complaining about Friday night litter on their porches; the crime rate was so low that misdemeanors made the front page. I couldn't even remember the last time there'd been a public beating or any kind of vicious attack. “Maybe it's nothing,” I said, my brain trying to justify the picture before my eyes.

“It sure doesn't look like nothing,” Sherry said. “You think they're on drugs?”

I shrugged, hesitating. I wasn't naïve enough to think there were no drugs where I lived, but to see their effects creeped me out big time.

Bang! Bang!

Before I could answer, shots echoed from the nearing cars. I wrapped my arm around Sherry and forced her head down the way I had seen on television and in all those action movies. "It looks like the police are firing into the crowd!" I yelled.

"No! They can't be." She clutched her chest. "My sister's down there. I hope she's okay."

The ride jerked forward. As we started to descend, Sherry leaned over me to peer at the blinking lights on the bar that rotated inside the wheel.

I gripped her hand. "We'll find your sister. I promise."

"Thanks, Dean."

A scream tore through the air, followed by growls and hisses.

"What's that noise?" Sherry asked, frantically glancing below us.

Peering past the yellow bulbs twinkling all around me, I tried to see what was happening below. My senses were on full alert because of the danger we were in. I knew a stray bullet could hit us, or one of the drug-crazed people might decide to attack us. We had to get out of there, fast, before something happened. A cold chill rushed through me as the cart stopped at the wooden platform.

I scanned the area for the best possible escape route. Crazed weirdoes were biting and tearing into the flesh of screaming, innocent bystanders, their blood staining their clothes and the asphalt beneath their feet. My stomach protested, ready to hurl up all the greasy hotdogs, funnel cakes, and cotton candy I'd eaten. My mind screamed, *This can't be true! People just don't go around biting each other like cannibals! It has to be a joke.* But I knew from the grotesque salty-metallic smell wafting through the air that the blood was all too real. It wasn't a joke...but the grossest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

"Dean, what's happening?" Sherry asked, shaking my shoulder frantically.

"I have no idea, but we've gotta get out of here."

The possessed people shuffled toward us. My pulse pounding in my ears, I spun quickly in hopes of getting out the other way, but the entrance was blocked with more people flooding in. The silver line dividers dropped to the ground with a loud *clang*.

"We're trapped!" Sherry said, grabbing my arm tight.

“No!” I shook my head vehemently. “Don’t even think that. We’ll climb up the Ferris wheel.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

I hesitated, considering my words. “Then we fight,” I said, suppressing a gag at the rotten smell.

Guttural sounds—strange growls—emanated from the group as they stared us down like they wanted to rip through our flesh. They had greenish-looking, cracked skin, torn clothes, and white eyes. *Contacts? A wicked case of cataracts? Liquid latex? Special effects?* I had no idea, but I was ready to take them on.

A girl with long blonde hair inched closer. She looked dead, her head unnaturally askew. Sudden recognition hit me with a jolt: *Sherry’s sister!*

“Jenny!” Sherry shouted; her voice overwhelmed with emotion. “Oh my gosh! What happened to you? You’re creeping me out.”

Jenny suddenly lunged at me, snapping her jaws like a rabid dog. She came within only inches from sinking her teeth into my carotid when a policeman fired shots. Jenny—or whatever she was—crashed down to the ground.

Shocked beyond all belief, Sherry leaned over the cart door, letting loose of her stuffed animal. It fell to the ground, right next to the thing that looked remotely like Jenny. Her gaze darted to the policeman holding the gun. “You shot my sister!”

“I’m sorry, miss, but that’s not your sister anymore!” he shouted back. “She would have killed and eaten the both of you!”

More of the possessed group shuffled toward us. My heart raced. I clenched my fists, ready to take down anything in my path. I slid my leg over the bar, preparing to jump out of the cart and fight when one of the policemen fumbled with the controls. We took off with a jerk. I fell back into Sherry’s arms, and we shot up about five feet in the air.

The beings lunged after us, shaking the bottom of the cart so violently we nearly fell out. Sherry clung onto me with a death grip. The group continued with their guttural chanting, and I swore I was trapped in some kind of lucid nightmare.

“What are they?” Sherry screamed in my ear. “What’s going on? What happened to Jenny? Why was she...like that?”

I steadied myself by holding onto the steel bar with one hand and wrapped the other around her as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Below us, the group of possessed people seemed to have multiplied, holding up their arms as if they wanted a ride too. I dared another peek over the edge and regretted it instantly. The whole gathering looked like something out of a horror flick, blood covering their clothes and caking their skin.

Some started to stumble toward the officer, who shot anyone—or anything—who got too close. “Hang on, kids!” the officer said. With another yank, we sped up into the sky, stopping at the very top. This time, shaking the cart for thrills or making out was the last thing on my mind.

“That policeman...he...that cop shot my sister!” Sherry said between gasps. She buried her face into my chest and wept. I pulled her close, not sure what words of comfort to give her. More shots were fired, followed by ear-piercing screams and then...nothing. Panic ensued from other riders still stuck on the wheel at various positions. *Better to be up here than down there*, I figured. We had to be at least 150 feet up in the air, and that made me feel safe from whatever was happening below.

My cell phone rang jolting me out of my stupor. I fumbled in my pocket and answered the call.

“Dean?”

“Dad!” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, son, thank God you’re alive. There’s no time for explanations. Where are you?” he asked, his voice betraying an edge.

“I’m on a date with Sherry. We’re stuck on top of the Ferris wheel at the beach. It isn’t moving. Dad, I think everybody’s dead down there! I-I don’t know. It’s all just so...it’s crazy, Dad, like some kind of horrible movie!”

“We’re coming to pick you up, and then we’re getting the heck out of town.”

“It’s too dangerous,” I said. “I know this is going to sound absolutely crazy, but you gotta believe me. People are turning into some kind of cannibals...and they’re attacking people.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ll be armed. I’ll get you out of there, I promise. Got it, son?”

“Where are we going?”

“Your brother’s flying us to the island with Grams where we’ll be safe. These things are attacking everybody in Myrtle Beach. We’ve gotta get far away from here as fast as we can.”

On the other end of the phone, glass shattered with a *crash*, followed by my mom's piercing scream. I gasped as the line went dead. "Dad!" I shouted. "Dad?"

Chapter 2

One year ago, a deadly virus decimated the world leaving swarms of brain-eating zombies in its wake. Survivors rushed to the makeshift fortresses, walled-in cities protected by towering concrete walls and a military force to be reckoned with. I managed to make it to one of these safe havens with my brother and parents, and that afforded me the chance to spend the last year sheltered from the gloom that rocked the land. My brother, on the other hand, decided to leave the safe confines and continue fighting with the U.S. Army to fight the onslaught of the undead. He became a top-notch zombie-hunter, but my parents and I didn't see much of him after that. My mother feared he might not come back alive, if at all.

Initially, the virus immediately turned anybody into zombies who had type O+ or A+ blood. The rest of us seemed safe as long as we didn't get exposed through broken skin. We never knew what really caused the outbreak. And when scientists thought they had it figured out, the rules would change slightly. The virus mutated, and now if somebody was bitten or scratched, it could take up to five days before they turned... unless they died which meant the change came immediately.

I tried to make the best of the situation. It wasn't that bad. Our house had electricity and water, and I led a fairly normal teenage life—right up until I had to leave and jeopardize my safety (and consequently my future) for the sake of a girl I'd only just met. But I really had no option. She was scheduled for a lethal injection, and I could not stand by and watch that happen. I planned on stopping the execution, even though I knew the stakes were high. After all, if I'd have been caught by the authorities, they would have promptly booted me out into *Zombie Land*. It was a fate I did not want to subject myself or my parents to, but after pondering it and considering my options—and the girl's, which were none—I realized it was a chance worth taking. I had to save her, no matter what, and I could only hope my parents would understand.

My plan was bold, daring, and sneaky, as a proper rescue mission should always be. I knew that getting her out of the clinic fast, before anyone noticed, was the key to success. I smoothed

my hands down my crisp white scrubs, smirking beneath my “borrowed” surgical mask as I adjusted it. I knew I would need a good disguise in order to get past the soldiers, and I was proud of myself for so easily snatching the medical uniform from the linen room.

Lucas, a friend of mine, laughed at the sight of me in the baggy cotton get-up. “I thought this was some kind of James Bond mission, not a pajama party.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” I muffled out from beneath the mask.

He eyed me up and down. “Well, you look ridiculous, but you definitely fit the part.”

“Well, secret agents have to hide their identity somehow, right?” I punched him in the arm, and he grinned. Lucky for me, Lucas had the security clearance to sneak me into the isolation area of the clinic, and he’d owed me a favor for a while. *It’s about time he paid up*, I thought, and I knew I could always count on Lucas. He was a fitness buff with huge arms, and he was the one who fit the part: He made for a perfect soldier with his camouflage uniform, Army boots, and buzzed head.

“This is a huge risk you’re taking, but I completely understand.” Lucas swiped a card over a control panel, and the door opened with a loud *click*. “Be careful, though, and whatever you do, don’t underestimate her. That virus is flooding through her veins. They have good reasons for putting her in quarantine.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan on joining Bite Club any time soon, I promise.” With a last glance back, I walked in through the heavy steel door. As soon as the door closed behind me, it hit me: *There is no turning back now*. I took a sharp breath and focused my gaze ahead.

The room looked just like any other sickbed, complete with sterile-looking white walls and the strong, bleach-like aroma of a plethora of medicines. On the far right was a huge lamp that cast an unnatural glow on the tiled floor. On the far left, a narrow bed with white sheets that were arranged around a frail woman told me I had the right room. I took a hesitant step forward, then stopped, suddenly unsure of whether or not I really was doing the right thing. What if she’s already turned? What if it’s too late to help her and I’m risking my safety for nothing? Fighting with myself, I took a step back.

Suddenly, Val rose to her feet. Her fists were clenched, and her eyes were wide with terror.

I pulled down my mask before she got the chance to pound me. “Hey! It’s me.”

“Dean!” she said. “You know I’ve been...bitten. But why are you...? Look, you shouldn’t be in here. You know being anywhere near me is a death sentence.”

I slowly unwrapped the bandages from her arm and cringed. The zombie bite looked worse—far, far worse—than I had anticipated. Green pus drained from the open wound on her lower arm, and it reeked of dead, rotting flesh.

“That bad, huh?” Val asked when she saw my ghastly expression, her voice echoing off the white walls in the confined isolation room. She brushed back her disheveled, long brown hair. “It’s funny how fate works. I spent so long trying to find you…” Her voice quivered as tears welled up in her blue eyes. “And now that I have, we won’t even get to spend one day together.”

I let out a long breath. “Don’t talk like that. We’ll have plenty of time together—so much time that you’ll probably get sick of me.”

“How do you figure that? And for the record, I don’t think I’d ever… I would never get sick of you.”

“Because I have a possible cure?”

She cocked a brow. “You mean the experimental serum?”

“Yeah, I snatched a bag of vials from the lab.”

She gasped. “Do you know what woulda happened if you’d been caught?”

“I don’t care. I’ll do anything to save you.” I wasn’t lying. I’d barely known the girl a few hours, but there was something about her, something worth saving, even at the risk of imprisonment or death. The funny thing was; I never thought I had that kind of sacrificial savior in me—especially for a girl I wasn’t even in love with. But after hearing her story, I knew there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her. She needed me, and I was going to be there.

“I can’t believe you’d go through all this for me, basically a stranger. It’s impressive. Thank you.” She softly touched my arm. “But those vials haven’t been tested, so there’s no guarantee.”

“Doc was sure this batch would work. He told me they’re on the verge of a major breakthrough, so it’s worth a shot—no pun intended.”

She smiled at my accidental joke. “Okay, if you say so. Give me the medicine. I’d rather be a guinea pig than one of those brain-munching things out there.”

“I can’t, Val. It’s too early. The virus has to be in your system for… well, for a set amount of time before the medicine has a chance to work.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the medicine couldn’t be given to her until *after* she turned into a zombie, a process that usually took about five days with the mutation of the virus now. *Yeah, she has a right to know, but just not now.*

“A set amount of time? How long before you can give it to me?” she asked, sounding a bit more panicked and demanding.

“Just a little while more.”

“You know I don’t have that kind of time.” She threw the bandage back on and pressed firmly on the tape. “Be realistic, Dean. You know the rules. I’ve been compromised. They’ll be in any minute to kill me, humanely of course.”

Her words pierced my heart, especially since I knew they rang of truth; if I didn’t intervene, she was doomed. “That isn’t happening! I’m here to break you out.” My plan was to sneak Val out, take her to the next sheltered city, and then give her a secret potion that the doc had been working on for months—the supposed cure to the nasty Necrotina virus that had spread across the U.S. and the globe, turning men, women, and children into zombie-like beings with the burning desire to feed on human flesh.

“Really?” She grabbed my arm as if I was kidding.

“Really.”

“Well, in that case, what’re we waiting for?”

“We can’t go until Lucas comes back and gives us the go-ahead. If we run into the general, our plan is screwed. It’ll just be a minute.”

She nodded and then placed her hands on her hips, her gaze imploring. “Is your brother going to help us?”

“I haven’t told Nick anything about you. He’d just flip out, and right now, we need him focused if we want our little plan to work.”

“I want to meet him. I *need* to meet him.”

“You will. I begged him to take us to the next city, told him we have to deliver some antibiotics for the doc.”

“Great. Think your smokin’ hot plan will work?”

“Trust me, nobody will suspect a thing.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“For starters, we’re flying.” Making it up to the roof was the only way to get past the heavy security. Nevertheless, even though flying was the safest option, in those days, nothing was a safe bet any more.

“Wait...did you say we’re flying?”

“Yeah. Didn’t I mention that Nick’s a pilot?” What I hadn’t told my brother was that I’d be hiding a secret stowaway in the back of the helicopter. *Oh well. I’ll worry about that later.* I was sure Nick would understand once I told him the entire story.

The door burst open, and Lucas peered in. “You guys ready? There isn’t much time.”

I motioned her out of the cell and pointed to a gurney. “Hop on!” I helped Val onto the gurney, then threw a sheet over her body up to her neck, mimicking medical protocol for handling the diseased on their way to the morgue.

“You’ve got to play dead,” Lucas said. “So no blinking.”

Val blotted the sweat from her brow.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I asked her, ignoring the sudden dread in the pit of my own stomach.

Her jaw clenched. “Don’t worry. I’ll bring home the Oscar. My life depends on it.”

As I wheeled her down the long corridor past a group of soldiers, I was hit with a rush of adrenalin like I’d never felt before. Danger aside, I was having the time of my life. I’d never wanted my parents’ version of the “normal teenage life”. I had been thrust into the middle of a real live—or dead, if you think about it—zombie apocalypse, the kind people had been joking about and making videogames and movies about for years. Like my brother, who had chosen the military for his own adventure, I lived for that stuff, always seeking a thrill. I craved being where the action was, and finally I was there, immersed in a risky rescue.

When we approached the guards, a chill ran across my spine. We all knew that if we didn’t get past that squad, it was all over before we even really got started.

“We’re putting her on ice,” Lucas said without so much as a nervous quiver in his voice.

The sergeant shook his head. “It just never ends, does it?”

“Nope.” Lucas looked at me. “You got this from here?”

I nodded and moved down the corridor fast, my heart thudding against my chest. Once we were around the corner, I bolted. Metal wheels screeched against the tile floor in protest of the speed I was pushing, and I hoped Val didn’t fly off the thing as we took the corners. The hall turned right, then a sharp left, and then a right again. “Okay, it’s safe,” I said, stopping. I started to strip off my white pants. Having Nick see me in scrubs would blow the entire plan, especially if he knew I was up to no good.

She sat up abruptly. “Please tell me you have clothes on under there.”

“Of course. Now c’mon!” I helped her down and pointed. “The helicopter pad’s this way.”

We raced through the corridor and up the stairs and finally reached the helipad, where a healthy gust of wind rushed through my hair. Val jumped into the back of the military helicopter and lay down, and I threw a U.S. Army-issued olive green wool blanket over her.

“I have a little confession to make,” I whispered between breaths, just in case Nick made a sudden appearance and caught me off guard.

“You secretly wear women’s clothing?”

“Geez, no!” I couldn’t stifle a tiny chuckle; the girl was funny, even in the most stressful of situations, and I appreciated that.

Her gaze narrowed. “Well, that’s good to know. So what is it?”

“I didn’t tell Nick about any of this. He has no idea you’re coming whatsoever.”

She let out a huff. “Ah. So when you said nobody will suspect a thing, you *really* meant *nobody*. Geez. I don’t believe this. I thought he knew a girl was coming, but he hadn’t been informed about my identity.”

“Nope. Please just keep quiet until we get to the city, okay?”

“Fine,” she mumbled, “but you should’ve told him.”

A minute later, Nick jumped into the helicopter and put on his headset. “Ready, bro?”

I jumped into the copilot seat and buckled up. “Yep.”

“You got the list of antibiotics we need for the doc?”

“Sure thing.” My big brother always played by the rules. That made him perfect for the military, of course, but it was exactly why I didn’t tell him about Val. He would’ve never agreed to sneaking her out of the city; he did nothing against the rules—ever. He lived by the moral code 100 percent. I don’t know where he inherited that from, though, because I didn’t mind bending the rules when it was appropriate.

He turned over the helicopter engine, and a few minutes later we lifted off and climbed slowly into the sky over Kelleys Island. The island wasn’t far from Sandusky, Ohio. That’s where Cedar Point was located. I had triumphantly ridden all seventeen roller coasters in that amusement park. Well, before everything happened, but I’ll never forget the adrenaline rush I felt.

Kelleys Island was the perfect place to go for refuge because we were completely surrounded by water. Zombies couldn’t swim, and as a backup, there were towering walls to

keep the undead from penetrating the safe haven. That helped us all sleep easier at night. We had a nice cottage that was owned by my grandma. She lived next door in a spacious bed and breakfast that she ran before the zombie outbreak.

All the Lake Erie islands had become refuges for a multitude of people, and citizens were making lives there, living almost normally, with the exception of knowing that outside those walls, the hungry dead were walking. In order for everyone to maintain such a lifestyle, the city had very strict rules in place. One of those rules stated that if a person was bitten, execution was mandatory—without exception, whether the victim was the mayor’s son or the housekeeper’s daughter. The safety of the many could not be compromised for the life of one.

“We should be back before supper,” Nick called out.

“Yep!” I yelled over the noise of the helicopter.

Halfway there, I heard a loud *pop*, something like a car backfiring. The floor and walls began to shake and vibrate. My head jerked back and then snapped forward as the helicopter plunged, cutting through the white clouds like a knife. Looking out the window, I noticed a plume of dark smoke swirling outside the copter.

“Wh-what’s happening?”

Nick fumbled frantically with the controls. “Malfunction. We’re going down!”

“Mal-what?” I asked with a gasp.

Chapter 3

The helicopter dropped in altitude at a pace that felt like light speed. A sudden loud banging, like hundreds of baseball bats smacking against us, echoed beneath my feet. Gripping the arm rests tightly; I looked out the window, though I shouldn’t have. The copter skidded on its belly and skipped across the treetops. The vibrations shook the floor like an earthquake. I braced for impact, knowing that even if we somehow miraculously survived the crash, we’d still have to live through the flames and/or toxic fumes that were sure to envelop us. I shook away the thought of blackened, tangled, twisting metal burning in the charred trees. My head jerked forward as Nick clipped a row of towering trees on a thirty-foot ridge. The helicopter jerked, forcing the side of my head into the metal wall. In an instant, everything was dark.

I don't know how long I lingered in that quiet darkness, surrounded by nothing but tranquility and carelessness that had become a sure death sentence in the real world. As I hovered in that dark place, unconscious of my body, the softest whiff of fumes assaulted my nostrils, slowly but steadily jolting me back to the grim reality: *We crashed...in Zombie Land.*

With a groan, I opened my eyes and took a deep breath, but the fumes from scorching metal burned my lungs. Nick's big head was staring down at me, and I pushed him away and vomited into the grass. Glancing around, I noticed Nick must have gotten me out and dragged me away from the wreckage. Vines, flowers, and towering trees surrounded us. We must've crashed into a forest.

My brother squatted beside me. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice wavering.

The blazing sun beat down on my skin. Spots danced in my vision, and my head ached, especially when I rubbed the bump that had formed on the side of it where I'd clunked against the dashboard. I'd never felt so crappy in my entire life, yet I knew we had to get moving. I slowly sat up and rubbed my pounding head. "I'm fine...I think."

"Fine is perfect, especially when we're lucky to be alive." He patted my back. "I tried the radio, but it's dead."

As my mind cleared, I suddenly remembered Val. *Wait...only both of us?* My jaw set as I peered around, frantically searching for her. "Where's Val?" I blurted before I realized what I was saying.

Nick regarded me from under drawn brows. "Val? You must have hit your head pretty hard. We crashed in the middle of freaking nowhere. Don't you remember anything?"

His words barely registered with me. *Of course he couldn't check on Val or pull her from the wreckage. My idiot self didn't even tell him she was onboard.* Ignoring my brother's questioning look, I jumped to my feet and dashed for the pile of burning metal. I twisted my body through a jagged opening and climbed inside, ignoring the shark-like metal teeth tearing at my skin and clothes, then dove through the fire and smoke, searching desperately for Val. My hands dived right in, ignoring the searing pain that ran up my arms from when I'd tried to shield myself against the dashboard during the crash.

"Dean! What are you doing?" my brother yelled after me. "I told you the radio's not working. It's fried, man, just like your brain."

Ignoring him, I kept looking. The black bag of vials rested upside down on the floor; I was relieved they were plastic and not glass, so they hadn't shattered, and there was still hope for Val. Coughing and choking, I continued to stumble through the wreckage.

"I'm not gonna be the one to tell Mom and Dad that your foolish crap got you killed!" Nick shouted again. "Get out now!"

Smoke poured from everywhere, and the crackle of fire unnerved me. Even though I couldn't see a thing, instinct commanded my hands to push through the debris. About halfway through, I thought I felt something warm under my touch. *Val! Crap, she's not moving. Is she even breathing?* "Val! Val!" I choked out. I could hardly breathe myself from the pain and smoke, so I dragged her toward me. I scooped up her seemingly lifeless body and shuffled out as fast as I could. "Oh, Val, I promise everything's going to be okay. Don't you go dying on me."

As I felt for a pulse on her neck, Nick ran up to us. "Who is that, and how'd she get aboard my bird?"

"Oh, thank God," I said.

"What?"

"She has a strong pulse."

Nick's brows drew together, darkening his features. "Dean, what's going on? Who is *she*?"

Shaking my head to signal him that it wasn't the appropriate time for a million questions, I laid her down far from the wreckage, just in case it exploded like crashes always do in the movies. "I'll explain later."

Nick grabbed my shoulder. "No! You'll explain now. Who the heck *is* this girl, and why's she with us?"

I swung around and shot him a venomous look. "Chill out! Her name is Val, and she needs our help."

We held each other's gaze for what seemed like forever.

Then, as if something suddenly clicked, his shoulders finally dropped. "Val, huh? Well, is she okay?" He ran a hand across her forehead. "She's burning up." Then his gaze drifted to the bandage on her arm, and he peeked under it, gasping. "She's been bitten." Nick stared at me in disbelief. "What were you thinking? Sneaking a bitten chick out of the city? This is against protocol, Dean... not to mention you're gonna get us all killed with your knight in shining armor crap!"

“Let me explain...” I hesitated, gathering my words, but he cut me off.

“I don’t want to hear it, and I want no part of this. You’re helping a zombie victim. What’s wrong with you? You know there’s no hope for her.” He punched the tree as sudden realization hit. “Wait a minute. You lied to me, didn’t you? You aren’t taking antibiotics to the doc. You were just using me to help you drag *her* out of there! Do you ever use your effing head?”

I looked away. I felt so guilty for landing us all in such a dire situation, such a mess. “No,” I whispered.

“No what? No you weren’t delivering antibiotics, or no you never use your thick head?”

“Both, I guess.”

“I don’t believe it This was nothing more than an elaborate hoax.” He ran a hand through his dense hair, his eyes throwing daggers. “Tell me one thing. How long have you even known this girl?” he asked, sounding as if he dared me to tell him an answer he already knew and was disgusted by.

“Less than a day.”

His lips pressed into a grim line; he was definitely losing his cool. “I put my neck on the line for you,” he shouted. “I got us the special clearance to go, and for what? So you could pull a stunt like this, putting all our lives in danger for someone you don’t even know?”

“Yeah, but would you have helped me if I’d told you about Val?”

He said nothing and just continued to stare at me with rage and disbelief storming behind his eyes.

“Well, would you have helped me or not?”

He waved his hands wildly. “No! Never! Not like this. Not in a million years! But still, I have connections. I woulda tried to talk to the general and help you guys out. There is a way to go about things and we have to follow orders. You just—”

“Wait, did you say you would have talked to the general?” I snorted, my gaze fixing on the bare trees in the distance as I conjured the guy’s image. He was about as helpful as a sleeping pill and just as dampening on one’s hopes and dreams. “If that’s the only kind of help you can think of, I’m glad I kept her hidden. We’d be burying her as we speak.”

“Better than the fate you just handed to her—and likely to us by association. I don’t know her, but I bet she wouldn’t want to wake up as a flesh-eating monster.”

“And she won’t.”

“Right. What are you going to do about it?”

“I’m going to save her! You aren’t the only one capable of doing something about this zombie nightmare, just because you enlisted.”

“Save her? You? Please. We’ll be lucky if we can even save ourselves. If we run across a herd of zombies, we’re as good as dead. We’re all alone out here. We’ve got no communication, no weapons except my handgun, and we’re gonna be lugging an injured woman around—until she decides she wants a taste of us.” He shook his head. “You risked my life for a girl you barely know, you idiot.”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, irritated. “Seriously. How many times do I have to apologize before you believe me? I really was just trying to do what’s right, trying to help someone.”

“Apologies don’t mean anything if you’d do the same crap over again...and you would.”

He was right, and I couldn’t argue with that, so I kept quiet.

Nick paced in a circle, his brows drawn. I’d never seen him so mad...or scared. “We’re in North Carolina. And our original destination is 600 miles away. I say we head back home which is 500 miles away. It’s going to take us three times as long to get back because we can only go certain routes.” He shook my shoulder as his voice thundered again. “Do you have any clue how dangerous it is out here? Do you? Well, I guess you never had a reason to think about it, all holed up safe and sound on the other side of those city walls on an island.”

I pushed him back as hard as I could. “Death and gore...it’s all people have been talking about for months, but—”

His blue eyes were intense, and I knew with one flash of them how pissed he was at me. “But nothing! You have no idea. This land is crawling with zombies that want nothing more than to eat our brains. You’ve been sheltered in the city since the breakout of the virus. While you’re out flirting with girls, going to school, and trying to live a normal life, the other troops and I have been out here in...in hell. I’ve seen it up close and personal, and I can tell you it ain’t pretty. In fact, it’s probably worse than those stories you’ve been hearing.”

“You’re treating me like a kid,” I admonished; I hated when he did that.

“Fine. Well, if you want to grow up, now’s the time.” He thrust his gun into my hands. “You’ve always begged me to be part of the action. Here’s your chance. You’re eighteen now, and I’ve protected you from all this ugliness long enough.”

“I don’t need your protection, Nick. I can take care of myself—and of Val if I need to.”

“Spoken like a true idiot. But anyway, keep that attitude. Even if it’s a load of crap you tell yourself, you’re going to need a bit of that cocky nonsense to survive.”

“I know it’s a hard, cruel world outside the city, but I can handle it. I’m a survivor!”

“Love your attitude. I just hope you’re prepared because you’re going to have to fight like you’ve never fought before.”

“Fine. You want me to take down some zombies? I’m up for that.” It wasn’t that I’d had much experience at such a thing, but I was sure it couldn’t possibly be that difficult to defeat a mindless army of already-dead freaks who walked around stumbling over everything. I’d been taking lessons at the shooting gallery all year, and I’d pretty much amazed myself.

“You’ll have plenty of chances to mow down some zombies later, trust me. Right now, though, you have to get rid of our other little problem.”

“What problem?”

“You’ve gotta kill her. You have to kill the girl and put her out of her misery.”

“What the heck are you talking about? I’m not killing anyone unless they’re dead already and trying to gnaw on my leg like a drumstick.”

“But leaving her to her fate is just...it’s cruel.”

My heart lurched. “No way.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re such a liar. You didn’t just meet her. How long have you been hiding your secret girlfriend from us?”

Girlfriend? She’s pretty and everything, but that’s just wrong. “It’s not like that, man. I really did just meet her.”

“Here’s your chance to be a man, Dean. A real man has to make tough decisions—decisions that will save his own life and the lives of his trusted comrades. This girl—this Val—will kill you in a heartbeat, giving no thought to all your pillow talk or those cute little hearts she scribbled around your name in her diary. Leaving your friend here to face her fate is heartless and cold. If you care about her at all, whether you just met her or have been seeing her for months, please be a man and put a bullet in her head for all our sakes.”

I shook my head violently. He would never forgive himself, just like I wouldn’t.

“I’ve had to make hard decisions myself,” Nick continued, unfazed. “For goodness sake, I even walked in on my zombie girlfriend devouring a couple of my best friends. Shooting her was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do...but it had to be done, so I pulled the trigger.”

I shot him a hard look. “Who *are* you? You’re so cold, so heartless—not the big brother I grew up with. Protecting the city and killing zombies has made you a merciless killer.”

“We have to face the reality of the situation. I know what she’ll become. Except for the first night it happened, you’ve never seen it outside of television reports, but I have.”

“You’ve changed, Nick. When you suited up for the Army, you became...different. You talk about *her* becoming a monster, but maybe you should take a good look at yourself.”

He cocked a brow. “You’re calling *me* a monster? Really?”

I nodded. Even though I could see the way he clenched his fists, I kept going. “Just look at you. You’re somebody else. I don’t even recognize you anymore.”

His eyes narrowed into slits, as if he might argue for a moment, and then they softened with the pain of the truth. “Well, yeah. I guess being out here all the time...well, it changes you.”

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I just wanted to get Val and get out of there before the army of the undead showed up. “Val’s coming with us, and that’s final.”

“Dean, come on. Don’t you get it? Once she dies...” He threw his hands up in the air to make his point. “Look, I’ve seen it myself. When they come back—when she comes back—they aren’t people anymore. Give me the gun, and I’ll do it myself.”

“Don’t you dare!” I shouted. I wanted to pound the idiot so hard. “Listen—”

Grabbing the gun out of my hands, he cocked it and pointed down at Val’s head. “We’re doing her a favor. Besides, she’ll try to eat us the second we fall asleep. Is that what you want, little brother? I mean, I’m sure you would love her to nibble on your ear and all, but not literally.”

Ignoring his attempt at sick humor, I jumped into the path of the gun.

“You’re pathetic,” he shouted. “Just move out of the way.”

I flung up my arms like a madman. “No! Put down the gun! You can’t kill her.”

Nick shook his head. “You’re emotional, not thinking straight. She’s as good as dead anyway.”

I hadn’t gone through all of that just to watch my brother murder the girl before my very own eyes. I lunged at him, but Nick twisted and dodged me; his military training had paid off. I lunged again and shoved him hard, and he threw me full force on to the ground. *Crap!*

Cool, calm, and collected, my brother aimed the gun at Val’s head. Obviously, it wasn’t his first time, and I was sure it wouldn’t be his last.

“You can’t do it,” I shouted. “She’s...”

“What, Dean? Why is this girl so important to you?”

I couldn’t believe he was being so cruel, so nasty. “She’s... we can’t kill her because Val is our sister!” And just like that, I’d played my trump card. Even worse, I’d broken my promise to Mom not to say one word to my brother.

He lowered the gun as confusion washed over him. “What? Our sister? Either you’re lying or you hit your head harder than I thought when we crashed.”

“It’s the truth, I swear.” I sat up carefully, but I didn’t inch any closer. I didn’t want him to flip out and shoot her just because he felt threatened or even more pissed. “You pull that trigger, and you’ll be murdering our flesh and blood, our very own sister.”

The gun trembled in his hands. “I...I don’t believe you.”

“I know it’s a lot to swallow. I just found out this morning. Mom and Dad have been keeping the entire thing a secret. You just can’t—not now that we know who she is.”

Nick met my gaze. “How do you know this is true? You got any proof?”

“For starters, look at her. Who else do you know with blue eyes and brown hair in those exact shades?”

He shifted his stance. “There are a lot of blue-eyed brunettes in the world. That doesn’t mean we’re all related.”

“You know what I’m talking about. Look at her! She looks just like us!” I shouted. “Just look! She has Mom’s nose and Dad’s chin. Take a real good look. Deep down, you can’t deny it. Just open your eyes for once and ignore the rules and protocols. Some things aren’t so black and white, and you can’t just kill your sister because it’s in the rule book.”

He stared down hard at her, as if taking in every feature. “You’re...you’re right. She’s the spitting image of us. If it’s true, why didn’t Mom and Dad tell us? Why did they keep her a secret?”

I let out a long sigh. “They gave her away when they were teenagers. She’s two years older than you.”

“Two years, huh? That makes her twenty-four.” He pushed the gun into his waistband and then ran a hand through his hair as emotion overwhelmed him. “You shoulda told me right off the bat.”

“Like I said, I just found out. Besides, I promised Mom I wouldn’t say anything. She wanted to tell you in her own way... later today.”

“So how did you find out?”

“I overheard Val talking to Mom. I couldn’t believe it.” I pulled out a vial from my black satchel; it contained the precious green serum.

“You stole for her too?”

“She’s not just any girl. She’s *our* sister. Should we give her some and see if it works? Doc seems to think it will do the trick.”

“It could kill her, like the last guy,” he snapped. “I don’t know what to say, what to do. I do know we’ll never make it to a city before she turns into a full-fledged monster. Wouldn’t that look great on the front of the family Christmas card? Yeah, she’ll make a lovely addition to the family reunion next year.”

“We have to do something. Like you said, we can’t just leave her to her fate.”

He crossed his arms. “You hold the possible formula in your hands, right?”

“Right.”

“So why haven’t you put it to good use already?”

“Well, Doc says it won’t work during the transformation. We can’t give it to her until she actually *becomes* a zombie. That’s how the formula works. The problem was, General Lofters planned to execute her right away, as soon as he found out she’d been bitten. And you know darn well there’re no exceptions.”

“So what do you propose? We wait, invite her to lunch, and then hand her a cup of tea? She’ll rip our heads off as soon as she turns. I’ve seen how these things work...and eat. They’re almost unstoppable.”

“She couldn’t wait to meet you,” I said. “You’re her little brother.”

“Yeah, right. You mean she couldn’t wait to *eat* me.” He shook his head. “Play the guilt card, why don’t you?” Then he swiftly picked up Val and cradled her close. “It’s not safe out here.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Well, what are you waiting for? I’ve got sister dearest, so let’s go.”

I nodded and swung the black bag of vials over my shoulder. “You’re going to love her when you meet her.”

“Maybe, as long as she doesn’t get hungry.”

Chapter 4

Nick and I took turns carrying Val. My arms clasped beneath her body to hold her in place. I struggled along the woody path, intent to keep up with Nick, even though he didn’t seem to want to make it easy on me. Granted, he was still pissed that I hadn’t told him about our sister right away, but knowing I had saved her life was my personal redemption and justification. I released a long, settling breath and moved the thicket out of the way; still, the deeper we moved into the woods, the denser the thicket became. To make matters worse, Val’s long hair almost trailed down to the ground, and I had to be mindful of it so it wouldn’t get caught in anything and hurt her. It seemed to me that she should have woken up already, but as the seconds and minutes ticked by, I began to worry that she might not ever wake up again.

“Are you okay?” Nick asked hesitantly after what seemed like an eternity. I noticed his worry lines straight away as his gaze shifted from Val to me then back to Val, as though he couldn’t make up his mind whether to forgive me for the sake of our sister or keep being a jerk about it. “Let me take her,” he muttered, grabbing her out of my arms.

I opened my mouth to thank him, but he’d already turned his back on me, leaving me standing in the middle of nowhere while he continued his march.

For the next hour, Nick carried Val without complaint. The bulging veins in his arms and neck told me his muscles were nearly at their point of fatigue.

Unable to watch his struggle any longer, I put my arms under her. “Hey, man. It’s my turn again. Take a break and let me carry her for a while.”

He jutted out his elbow, and ignored me as if I was nothing more than some pesky fly.

We spotted a trail and decided to follow it. It was a brilliant stroke of luck, because we soon came to a clearing, and our pathway ended at an overgrown dirt road. Nick was hopeful that there was a city nearby, so we started to walk off to the side.

I tried not to worry about Val, but it was difficult to put her failing condition out of my mind. “I wonder when she’ll wake up,” I said.

“Don’t go getting all worked up over it. This is completely normal.” He shrugged, as though he’d seen it all before—and he had. “During transformation, she’ll have these long sleeping spells.”

I nodded and then pointed at a green metal sign. “Next town’s just a mile away. We need to get our hands on some emergency supplies.”

“Yeah, especially food and water, but also a car and gas, if we can get our hands on any.”

“Guns and ammo too,” I chimed in.

“Right! A heck of a lot of ammo!”

A smile spread across my lips as my mind began to race, searching for ways we might get out of the predicament we found ourselves in. “If we can’t find guns and ammo, there’re always chainsaws. We could check garages.”

Nick shook his head. “Nah. They’re too noisy and might attract more zombies. Besides that, chainsaws weigh around ten pounds, compared to two-pound weapons like machetes, crowbars, trench spikes, or baseball bats. Remember, we’re looking for anything that can crush or decapitate a skull in one blow. If it can’t, there’s no use lugging it around.”

I was impressed; Nick sure knew his business. “Great tips, Mr. Zombie Hunter,” I said with a laugh.

“This is serious stuff, Dean. Let your guard down once—just once—and you’re a dead man. Even worse, you might get others killed in the process. Got it?”

I nodded, even though Nick’s back was still turned on me.

We walked as fast as we could, remaining silent. My nerves were on edge, and my ears strained to pick up any unusual sound, but the only noise I could hear was the steady *thump-thump* of my heart, beating like a drum in my ears.

I broke the silence first. “So, we’re gonna get ourselves a cool set of wheels? I like that idea.”

“It’s not exactly a shopping spree. Going into town at all is risky. Our goal has to be to get in, get what we need, and get out—as quickly as possible. You got that?” Nick said without turning.

“Yeah, I got it.” His camouflage shirt stuck to his sweaty back. I wished he’d let me take a turn carrying Val.

We walked for another minute or so before footsteps thudded behind us. I swung around, ready to battle whoever it was. As I squinted against the glaring sun, I made out two figures in the distance, running straight toward us. My first thought was to run away, but then I came to my senses. *Zombies can't run that fast. Who could that possibly be?*

“Quick, take Val!” Nick handed our sister to me and whipped out his pistol.

I could only make out long hair, so I figured we were being approached by women. “It looks like a couple of girls, running from something. Put the gun down, Nick!”

Ignoring me, Nick held his weapon steady. “No! One of them has a weapon. Don't you know the first rule of survival out here in Zombie Land?”

“Huh? But—”

“Take no chances!”

“Don't shoot!” a female voice shouted.

“Drop your weapon!” Nick shouted.

She dropped it on the ground and raised her hands in the air. “It's a stun gun.”

I craned my neck to get a better glimpse as she inched closer. Fear mirrored in her wide, green eyes. Her dark hair hung over her skinny shoulders in long, disheveled clumps. From the looks of her, she'd fallen in the mud while running. A pair of sandals dangled from her hands, and her bare feet were black and dirty.

“Please don't hurt us!” she yelled again. “We're already being followed by zombies.”

The cute brunette with blonde streaks was a teenager about my age. In spite of being sweaty and dirty, she still looked hot in plaid shorts and a black shirt that showed off her tan midriff and navel piercing. I tried not to stare, but she was gorgeous.

Nick refused to put his gun down. “Have you been bitten or scratched in any way?”

She gasped for air. “No! I swear we haven't.”

He slowly lowered his arm, but hesitation was clearly written on his face. “C'mon then, we need to keep moving.”

The girl sighed relieved. “Thanks.” A frown appeared across her forehead as she reached down and picked up her stun gun.

Nick resumed his previous brisk pace.

The girl rushed to keep up. “I'm Jackie.”

My brother kept moving but shot her a glance. “Nice to meet you. I’m Nick, and this is my brother Dean.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, stepping carefully over a few moss-covered logs. If I took one wrong step, Val would fly right out of my arms.

Jackie stomped down on a large fern in her path. “It’s nice to meet you too. And this is my cousin, Claire.”

I turned my attention to the redhead standing behind her, wondering how I could’ve missed her before. The girl was in her early twenties. She wore a sundress with a low V-neck and was pretty cute herself. Though she didn’t speak, the look on her pale face told me all I needed to know: She was scared to death.

Nick broke through a patch of vegetation. “I wish we coulda met under better circumstances.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Claire said, pushing aside a dangling branch.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be okay now,” I said trying to ease her nerves.

“Yeah?” she said. “That’s what the last group of people told me. You know what? They’re all dead now.”

“Really?” my brother mocked. He hated being underestimated. “Well, maybe next time, they should consider more powerful weapons than stun guns.”

As we walked, Nick turned to meet the redhead’s gaze. “How many zombies were on your tail?”

“A bunch—not sure how many, but there were a lot. It sucks so much. We’ve been safe for months. We had the perfect hideout, a mansion just south of here. We had food, clothes, supplies, everything, but they bombarded it yesterday.”

That explained why the girls weren’t wearing cargo pants and combat boots like Nick and I. Those sandals wouldn’t do them any good if they stepped in a puddle of blood or had to climb over a few dead corpses. They’d made the mistake of getting comfortable, something no one could afford to do in Zombie Land. The only safe place was in a sheltered city, with a military force backing it up—or even better, an island like the one I lived on back in Ohio.

Claire frowned as she peered from me to Val, who was still lying unconscious in my arms. “Who is she?”

“We survived a helicopter crash,” I said.

“That’s horrible,” Claire said. “I’m so sorry. I’m glad you were able to get out before it exploded.”

“That was you guys?” Jackie said as she briskly walked along. “We saw the flames and smoke at the bottom of the hill after we hiked up it, and then the helicopter—yours, I guess—burst into flames. We hoped nobody was hurt.”

“That crash is nothing compared to what we’re about to face,” Nick said.

We kept walking for a few minutes, following the road I hoped would lead to somewhere. Eventually, we rounded a bend and stopped to peek at a large, contemporary, two-story glass mansion. It seemed to catch the sunrays from every angle. Who did it belong to?

“We can hide in there, right?” Claire anxiously headed in that direction.

Nick darted after her. “Wait. I need to know exactly how many of those things were after you. ‘A bunch’ doesn’t cut it. Can you give me a more specific number? Five? Fifty? If it’s a herd, hiding in that house would turn out to be a suicide mission. We’d be trapped with no way out.”

“There were about four or five of them,” Jackie called back to him.

“Cool. That’s not a problem at all. I can definitely handle four or five,” Nick said, sounding sure of himself.

“Good thing we ran into you then.” Claire smiled shyly, her eyes taking him in. Clearly, had circumstances been different, she wouldn’t have hesitated to make it clear that she liked him, but flirting days were over. In the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the very hungry undead, there was little time for exchanging phone numbers. It was more important to tell each other how to avoid a zombie bite.

If Nick did notice the girl’s rising interest in him, he certainly didn’t show it. His commanding voice barked at them, “Just in case more come, can you girls fight?”

“Fight? Who do we look like? I’m not going anywhere near those nasty things!” she shouted.

My brother let out a long sigh and then met my gaze. “Wait here. I’ll check out the house.”

“I’m coming!” I argued.

“No! I need you here to watch Val. She’s out cold, in case you didn’t notice. Do you want something to start nibbling on her leg like a piece of fried chicken?” He clapped my shoulder.

“I’ll be right back.”

He headed off into the house, and my stomach clenched; I didn't like him going in there alone.

"We can't just wait out here forever," Claire said. "Those things are coming!"

I shot her a look. "Aren't you wondering why that door's not locked? You want to run into a house full of zombies that'll eat your brains?"

I could almost see a light bulb flickering to light above her head as realization struck her. "You're right," she said eventually.

Jackie met my gaze. "Thanks for looking out for us."

"Not a problem." I craned my neck to the left and right, spinning in a circle as much as the added weight of Val would allow me; though Val was thin, she was a dead weight. My gaze focused in the distance, taking in every detail that might give away a possible pursuer, but I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The sky was blue, and the birds chirped away like they didn't have a care in the world. It was hard to believe I could be facing a zombie at any given moment. It all sounded like some bad dream—like something I'd read in my comic books as a kid.

A few minutes passed, and my brother's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "The house is clear, but there aren't any good weapons. Let's head into the garage."

"Sure," I said.

Nick nodded. "Look, I need you out here to help me fight. You up for it?"

"Sounds like a plan." I'd always wanted to jump into the action, especially when my brother came back and told me all about his zombie-fighting adventures. Finally, I was going to get that hands-on experience I'd been longing for. My heart pounded as realization kicked in.

"Let's get Val inside where it's safe," I said, shuffling into the mansion. I didn't have much time to check the place out, but it was pretty clear that the former residents had been loaded. If the place truly had been abandoned, we'd surely find some useful supplies to take with us.

After setting Val down on a yellow sofa, Nick motioned for us to go.

I turned toward the girls as I set my black bag down beside the couch. "Please watch Val and my stuff...and lock the doors behind us!"

"Got it. And don't worry. I got your girlfriend's back," Jackie said.

Nick yelled for me to hurry, so there was no time to explain who Val really was.

"Wait!" Claire said. "Do you want my stun gun?"

“What good is that going to do?” I just sprinted out the door, calling the girls to make sure they’d lock it behind me, just in case they’d already forgotten or misheard my first instructions. I didn’t know them all that well yet, so I naturally didn’t feel like I could trust them with my sister’s safety. At the moment, all I could think of was protecting her so no one would get to her in the first place.

With one hard yank, Nick opened the sliding garage door. It was as loud as a flippin’ freight train, and I only hoped it didn’t draw any attention. Once it was open, I dashed into the garage and stumbled over a few bicycles that had fallen backward against some white wicker patio furniture. I caught myself by hanging onto a monster-sized grill.

“You okay, klutz?” My brother rolled his eyes.

“I’m fine. Missed a step, that’s all.” I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and regained my balance. Tools hung neatly on hooks along a giant pegboard attached to the wall next to a large workbench. Wrenches were hanging in order of size. The owner had certainly been organized, and I felt almost bad even considering messing up his neat little display by taking a wrench, but then something better caught my attention: a sledgehammer, sitting right there on the table, begging to be used. Granted, it wasn’t the most lethal weapon, but I figured it was better than a screwdriver.

“Good choice,” Nick said, “but remember, a zombie with a broken collar bone is still a zombie. Smash the skull and kill the brain.”

“Yeah, I know. Stab, smash, penetrate, crush, or puncture the skull. It’s pretty simple if you ask me.”

Nick frowned. “Don’t you dare get cocky! And never underestimate those freaks. Do you understand? The minute you do...you’re dead.”

“A little confidence never hurt anybody, Nick. It’s worth its weight in gold in any arena.”

He glared at me. “Dean!”

I could tell my brother wasn’t keen on involving me in an episode of *Man Vs. Zombie*, so I tried to reassure him. “I can do this, Nick. Really, I can.”

“If I didn’t think you could, little bro, I’d have left you in there with Jackie and Claire who are very ill prepared to live in the world we’re now faced to live in.”

“Hey, your gun’s loaded, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, but we’ve gotta save our ammo. I’ll only use it if I feel it’s absolutely necessary. Plus, we don’t want to attract the zombies with noisy gunfire. We can handle a few though. No worries.”

We left the garage and walked down the long, straight driveway. I spun toward my brother. “I don’t see anything.”

Just as my brother was trying to assure me that’d we’d have the upper hand, my jaw dropped. Something growled behind me.

Chapter 5

An unmistakable menacing growl erupted from behind me. Crap. I held my breath and turned slowly. My hand clutched the sledgehammer more tightly as I mentally prepared myself for the unavoidable.

“Don’t try to be a hero,” Nick mumbled.

Unfortunately, his words didn’t quite register in my brain as I raised my gaze at the disfigured human being before me. The gaping mouth, full of black, putrid, rotting teeth and oozing gums made me want to take a step back, but I had to prove myself—to Nick as well as to my own ego. I stood my ground and forced the bile back down my throat. Ugly blue veins stuck out from a shiny bald head. Where strong, healthy arms had once been, there remained only holes, flesh eaten away by bugs. But what scared me the most were the eyes: human, yet dead. I swallowed hard and shook my head slightly. In that moment, facing that thing, I realized that the naïve confidence I’d had before was not enough. No way was I prepared for a real-life confrontation with the undead. Yes, I’d originally been thrilled about the opportunity to kick some zombie butt, but seeing them in person again was a totally different story. For a minute, I was reminded of the Ferris wheel incident all over again. That was the very first night people had become sick and turned into zombies. I froze in my boots, but not for long.

The creature began lumbering toward us. As it moved, thick, dark blood—something like motor oil—ran down its face, dripping off its rotting chin to the dirty shirt, the result of a recent

head wound. The hole in its left cheek looked fresh, and clearly its last victim had fought back with a gun.

With my heart thumping, I zigzagged left, away from the bullet-ridden zombie. I grabbed my weapon, but before I could put it to any use, Nick leapt forward and chopped into the zombie's skull. The left eye socket made a suction sound as the eye propelled onto the ground. The corpse stopped dead and then fell backward onto the ground.

I punched the air. *Yes!* My brother nailed it. He absolutely knew what he was doing, and he'd had plenty of experience. After all, he'd been out there fighting those things for a year now.

Nick raced over to the downed zombie and jerked out his axe; I cringed, hoping the zombie wouldn't spring back to life like they always do in horror movies. "Get ready!" Nick yelled. "More are coming."

"I'm ready." I bolted down to the end of the driveway. As I looked over my shoulder, I saw two more zombies to my left. One was heading toward Nick, and the other had its sights on me. I needed more preparation, more weapons, and more tips from my brother, yet I knew there was no time left; the zombie wasn't about to wait for me to get over my rookie stage fright. I knew I had to fight. Nick's and Val's lives depended on me.

Dragging its right leg, the zombie inched closer and then swung its rotting arms at me. He fought like a small child. I knew I could easily take the monster on, especially since everyone knew zombies had an IQ barely above freezing, and they were slower than constipated turtles.

It was such a grotesque foe. I stared into sunken white eyes with no visible pupils. It had green-tinted skin and dirty blond hair, and the red, exposed muscles around its mouth made me want to gag—or maybe it was the foul stench of dead and rotting flesh. He wore a dirty, ripped mechanic's uniform, and his nametag read "Bob". *Poor Bob*, I thought. *How could this...this thing have been a human?* Had he been in a Halloween costume contest, he might have won for his makeup application and most interesting contacts alone, but I knew it had nothing to do with elaborate Hollywood special effects. It was all too real, and regardless of what he'd been in his life, in his living death, Bob was an enemy, and I had to take him down.

Bob hissed, flashing his black, sticky teeth at me.

I was ready to give the mummified mechanic the biggest headache of his life. The sledgehammer smashed through meat and bones like they were breakfast cereal, sending a pang of pain through my upper arm as it reverberated from the impact. I pulled away and then

slammed it into the creature one more time, this time with less thought and more power. The second time did the trick, and he dropped to the ground. Realization didn't kick in straightaway, but as my breathing quickened and my eyes focused on the bloody mess at my feet, I knew I'd have to fight off nightmares for a while.

For a whole second, I breathed out, relieved and thinking it might just be over. But barely had I had time to congratulate myself for surviving before the sound of footsteps thumped behind me, warning me of someone's arrival. I spun around quickly, focusing my gaze on the tall figure hovering over me.

"Your first zombie kill." Nick slapped my back. "You did good, man! If the girls' headcount was right, there're about two left."

Adrenalin pumped through my veins. "Well, what're we waiting for? Let's go take down those slimy suckers!" I glanced around, and my senses went on full alert.

Another goon advanced toward me. This one was missing an eye. Its decomposing leg was covered with thin, blackened and bloodied shreds of rotting flesh, and severed bone was visible through its torn, tattered jeans.

I gagged.

"You got this, bro?" Nick asked.

I held my position. "Bring it on!"

"Good. I'll take the other one—the one coming from the right. The more we can knock out with the first strike, the better."

I wiped my brow with my sleeve. "Don't worry! I got this."

A female zombie stumbled over like a drunken sailor, letting out a gurgling moan as she held out her arms, as though she were a long-lost friend aiming for a hug.

"Sorry, honey, but you're not my type," I muttered. "Besides, I'm pretty sure you like me for my brains and not my looks." Focusing on my target, I charged, running toward the zombie at full speed before I kicked it. As it fell on the ground, I swung my sledgehammer and dealt the final blow, crushing its skull. The zombie slumped into a messy heap at my feet, but I had no time to marvel about how easy it had been. As I glanced up, I noticed another one coming and another one after that. *Crap! Where are they all coming from?* The girls had told us that only a handful of zombies were after them, but there were far more than that. Nick was busy taking down one after the other, which meant I was on my own.

Another rotting corpse headed toward me on unbalanced feet. I struck him, but then another one came right from behind. I swung around and struck him in the nose as I turned my hips into the blow. He stumbled back. I raised my sledgehammer and readied myself to take down the next zombie. Suddenly, something grabbed hold of my ankle and started to pull with a might that didn't seem possible, especially from a dead thing. I fell backward on my butt, sending my weapon flying straight out of my hands. The zombie I thought I had killed wasn't actually dead. *Crap! Nick was right. Never underestimate these things.* I kicked and flailed, trying to smash its face, but it would not release the death grip it had on my boot; I had forgotten that zombies were not capable of feeling—even pain.

I assumed a combat fighting stance and immediately went for the closest zombie with scraggly black hair and a missing left arm. It was shirtless and flat out nasty. I wanted to gag at the missing chunks of skin that were missing from its bulbous stomach, and the ropes of intestine that dangled, dragging behind the man with every lumbering step. I struck it hard in the nose, sending the shattered bone up into the thing's brain. The man slumped to the ground with a gurgling sound in his throat.

Another one came. I swung. The sickening sound of shattering skull seemed to reverberate throughout the air. I watched it tumble forward, and then brought my booted heel down hard on its head.

From a distance, ghouls staggered toward me in every direction. Their zombie moans made the hair on my neck prickle. "Remind me why I wanted to do this again," I muttered. My brother didn't answer. A zombie snapped at my boot like some kind of wild animal and bit me. Luckily, its teeth couldn't penetrate leather. Or so I hoped.

A shot echoed in the crisp morning air, and the zombie suddenly let go of me. Its brains seemed to explode from its head, painting the grass in a fresh coat of gore. Nick fired four consecutive shots and took down the zombies closest to me, but others kept coming.

I jumped to my feet, scanning the grass for my weapon. A glint of light shone off to the left. I scrambled over and picked up the sledgehammer I'd dropped when the zombie had attacked me.

After three more shots cut through the silence, Nick yelled, "I'm out of ammo!"

My heart thundered against my ribs. I wanted to play action hero, but reality set in: I couldn't do it on my own. We were outnumbered. "Nick!" I shouted. A zombie's head flew off

its skinny neck as Nick's blade whacked through its throat. My heart almost burst through my chest as I watched a dozen zombies surround him. There was no doubt he was tough, but there was no way even *he* could take on so many at once.

The rotting lady in the red dress sneered and growled as she moved toward me. The left side of her face, from cheek to throat had been ripped away. I had nothing but my wits about me. Well, that and a wicked sledgehammer. The decomposing woman half staggered toward me. I took her down in one quick blow.

My fingers tightly wrapped around my weapon as one of those things growled behind me. I spun around. Black slime oozed from its mouth, and for a split second, I stared into its lifeless eyes. Moaning in a grotesque fashion, it inched closer to me, but I was ready. Before I even got a chance to swing, a loud *crack* sounded in the air, and the zombie collapsed in front of me.

I glanced at the house. Val stood just outside the door, a rifle tucked into her shoulder as she squeezed out one shot after another, taking down the rest of the undead army like some kind of female gunslinger. If Nick had ever doubted her being our sister, she had just proven his doubts wrong. Without hesitation, I started pounding skull after skull.

She smiled at me and then turned her attention to Nick, who looked stunned.

"Camouflage gear and combat boots?" she asked. "You're military all the way, aren't you?"

"You know it."

"I figured as much."

"Where did you find a rifle?" Nick asked.

"There's a false wall in the bedroom closet. It's loaded with guns and ammo."

"That's awesome!" I said.

Nick flashed his famous white smile. "You're as resourceful as me."

Val shrugged. "Well, what can I say? I'm the curious type."

"That was a compliment," Nick said, slapping her shoulder slightly, "because I'm pretty resourceful myself."

A hue of red flushed across her cheeks. "Uh...okay. In that case, thanks."

Never much one for giving out words of praise, Nick rubbed the back of his neck, slightly embarrassed. "Uh...I didn't have too much time to look around. You were passed out, and I was worried for everyone's safety with all those zombies around, and—"

Val grinned. “No need for explanations. We’re all on the same team. But if I were you, I’d go upstairs and get some more ammo for your gun.” She then reached down and threw me a handgun, which I caught in one swift move.

She regarded me from under lowered brows. “You know how to use one, right?”

“Yep,” I said. “I’ve been training at the shooting gallery for some time now.”

“Good.”

Nick put his gun away. “Thanks for saving our butts back there.”

Her blue eyes twinkled. “Hey, what are long-lost sisters for?”

We both smiled.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Nicholas,” she continued.

“Please call me Nick. I-I don’t even know where to begin. I have so many questions. This entire thing has totally taken me by surprise.”

She grinned.

Nick ran up to her, hugged her tight, and spun her in a circle. “Dean told me a little, but not much.”

“We’ll catch up later, huh?” she asked.

He nodded, and then motioned around to the dead zombies on the ground. “I didn’t know I had such a tough sister.”

I laughed and joined in on the reunion.

Val held our hands as tears welled up in her eyes. “I’ve waited so long for this moment. I’ve met my biological parents, and now I’ve met both of my siblings. This is the best day of my life! I couldn’t possibly let those monsters take that away from me.”

My brother tucked his gun away. “Girl, we crashed in the middle of Zombie Land.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re together, and that’s all that counts.”

Even though it had barely been a day, I already loved her just as much as I loved Nick. I knew how important it was for us, a family, to stick together through thick and thin. I did have to wonder, however, if humanity would even survive the cruel plague of reanimated cannibals. It wouldn’t be easy, but deep down, I felt we’d somehow make it. We had to; failure was absolutely not an option.

“Hey, do you have that cure with you?” Val asked. “Now might be a good time to use it.”

She wanted to use it because she was slowly beginning to change; I could see that much in her eyes. I thought about how I could break the news and soften the blow, but it would be like trying to hit someone gently with a battle axe. “I do, but I can’t give it to you yet.”

Mistrust filled her voice. “Why not?”

I realized I’d have to tell her delicately, so she wouldn’t flip.

“You’re going to have to let the change occur first, become a zombie,” my brother chimed in. “I’m sorry, because it’s going to suck, but there’s no other choice. As much as I detest it, we’ll be there for you. When the time is right, I’ll give you the antidote.”

Val’s jaw dropped, and various emotions crossed her features, from dread to disbelief, then back to dread.

I elbowed my brother. “I was going to tell her in a nicer way than that,” I half-whispered.

“There’s no way to sugarcoat it, bro. She needs to know the truth.”

“But I...I can’t...I don’t want to turn into one of those things!” Val’s eyes brimmed with tears.

“It’s the only way,” I softly said, rubbing my hand up and down her back, which was about all I could do. As much as I wanted to help, I was helpless. I couldn’t even find the right words to soothe her, if soothing was even possible at that point.

I expected a fit or lots of crying. She did neither. She just spun around and headed toward the house, her long hair dangling behind her like a curtain.

“Wait!” I shouted, running after her. “Where’re you going?”

“I need to punch something, preferably a wall.”

I looked at Nick. “Yep, she definitely has our temper.” Of course, if I’d have been faced with the same dilemma, I’d probably have wanted to start punching holes in things too.

“C’mon,” Nick said. “Punching a wall will solve nothing. Trust me on that. I’ve only done it a million times. Some of the holes I’ve left aren’t pretty, and my knuckles weren’t either. Like I said, it accomplishes absolutely nothing.”

She stopped and turned slowly, her eyes ablaze. “Fine! Then I’m going to give those chicks you picked up a piece of my mind.”

“Geez. You should’ve just let her go hit the wall,” I mumbled.

She threw her hands up in the air. “You two left me in the hands of complete and utter idiots. Had I not woken up, we’d all be dead!”

I hated to admit it, but she was right. Even if the girls didn't want to fight, they could've been our eyes and ears and let us know which way the zombies were coming from so we wouldn't have had to worry about sneak attacks. Instead, they just hid inside the house after we risked our lives to help them find shelter.

"You're angry at *us*," Nick yelled, "not them. You're mad at the way the cure works. I understand, because I'd be pissed, too, but you can't take out your anger on them."

"Who in the heck dresses fashionable in the middle of a zombie apocalypse anyway?" she said. "Look at me. I'm wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt, and some great running shoes to get me the heck out of Dodge should the need arise. Really, who are they trying to impress? You can't turn on a freaking zombie, no matter how cute your outfit is!"

"Maybe they have a thing for Bob."

"Bob?"

I pointed down at the dead zombie in the mechanic's work suit. "At least that's what his name tag says."

She rolled her eyes, obviously not finding my joke very funny, and I really couldn't blame her for being in a bad mood. We didn't even know if the cure would work. If I was a nervous wreck myself, since the thought of losing my only sister scared me to death, I knew she had to be even more on edge.

"Those little fashionistas hid in the house like a couple of scared mice," roared Val before she slammed the door, beyond pissed.

I certainly hoped those girls had found some weapons, because it seemed my sister's wrath might be more fatal than any brain-devouring zombie.

Chapter 6

Nick and I hung outside for a few minutes, and I listened to his monologue as he went over our game plan. I tried to listen as closely as I could, but after a while, I couldn't help but interrupt his train of thought.

“Those zombies looked like animated corpses, like something out of a horror movie. It’s just...unbelievable.”

“I think you’re still high from all that adrenaline. As you can see, it’s not all movie magic getup. It’s the real thing. We’re fighting against the living dead here.”

I shook my head, trying to comprehend his words. “They’re pretty easy to take down when they come at ya solo.”

“Like I said, never underestimate them. All it takes is one scratch or bite. We lost Martin from just one tiny prick from one of their nasty nails.”

I nodded, thinking back to the one guy everyone on our street liked, Martin. We had grown up together and gone to school together, where we’d been trained in combat, since that had become customary. I still couldn’t believe he was gone. “I know,” I said, eager to change the subject before my emotions got the better of me and I slumped into that depressing dump I always sank into when I thought of poor Martin. “That’s why I was freaking out when a zombie bit my boot.”

Nick’s eyes grew wide. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He knelt down and started examining my scuffed-up boots.

I pushed him away, a bit rougher than intended. “Hey, I’m fine. He didn’t get through.”

Nick stood. “You’re pretty lucky. Their teeth can cut right through leather.”

“Yeah...lucky.”

His gaze pierced mine. “Don’t ever let a zombie get that close to you ever again.”

I returned his glare, ready to stand my ground if need be. “It wasn’t like I planned it.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s what Martin said too,” Nick said dryly.

We had both been through so much personal loss: friends, comrades, and even Nick’s girlfriend Darla, whom he was forced to shoot. But while I liked to talk about things to unburden my heart from all the fear and guilt over being alive while others were dead, Nick insisted on bottling up his pain, which consequently grew stronger by the day. “I know Martin was your friend as well,” I said slowly. “You’ve been through a lot. I-I’m sorry I called you a monster back at the crash site. I guess I overreacted. I just couldn’t believe you’d want to kill our sister.”

He hesitated a moment before answering. I could see his emotions on his face, playing out like a film, right before my very eyes. He felt guilty, but at the same time he also felt it was his responsibility to take on the lion’s share of work. “It’s okay. I’ve never claimed there isn’t any

blood on my hands. I'm probably everything you said and more, but it's what I've had to do to stay alive and defend the city... to survive."

I cocked a brow. "We're cool then?" I asked, knowing we'd just about reached our limit of sentimental, emotional talk.

He gave me a fist bump. "Yup, little brother. Cool as ice."

As we took a quick walk around the house, I noticed two four-by-four Jeep Wranglers in the back yard. "They're perfect! I love Jeeps, man. It's the perfect go-anywhere, do-anything vehicle."

"No off-roading, Dean," Nick said. "We don't want to give the zombies an advantage over us. We stay on open, paved roads. Got it?"

I nodded.

My brother's gaze darted toward the house. "The first thing we need to do is see if anyone lives here. We're all fighting to survive out here, and we have to learn to respect each other, so no stealing. If the owner has abandoned this place or is, uh... gone, then the trucks are up for grabs."

On first glance, the house had looked abandoned to me. I felt confident that we'd soon have ourselves a set of wheels as I swung the door open. I knew the place had to be unoccupied because dust was caked on the furniture and mirrors. The fireplace wasn't stocked with wood and was ice cold to the touch. The living room was spacious and furnished in ugly yellows, antique furniture, oak floors, and cream-colored walls. A mirror hung over two large yellow sofas. I listened to Val going off on the gals and had absolutely no doubt she was my sister; she acted exactly like Nick—and maybe a little like me too.

Claire ignored Val and kept playing a simple tune on an ebony grand piano sitting in the corner of the room.

"You're a natural," I said.

She closed the lid of the piano as tears welled up in her eyes. "I know now isn't the right time to be playing. I just couldn't help myself. That was the last song my mom and I played before we got separated."

"I'm sorry," I said softly, hoping the words would convey just how much I meant them.

She walked away, and my gaze drifted over to the spiral staircase that led up to the second-floor balcony, which stretched across the room with a glass railing. I glanced around for Jackie,

who was sitting on the sofa, sipping on a can of Pepsi. My eyes roamed over her perfect body. I knew Val hated her outfit, but it sure showed off her incredible curves and long, pretty legs. I was mesmerized.

Val stared at me for a while, her mouth pressed into a thin line. For a moment, I thought she wanted to say something, but then she just shook her head, as though she found it a hopeless cause to share what was on her mind. She turned her back on me, hesitating, then poured bottled water over a towel and handed it to me. “Clean that thing off! And don’t think I didn’t notice your drooling.” She pointed down at my sledgehammer.

I wasn’t sure whether she meant I should clean it or that she thought she’d seen me drooling over it. My gaze wandered from the damp towel to the sledgehammer, and a smile crossed my lips. “I didn’t realize a sledgehammer could be so sexy,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m pretty sure you know what I meant.”

“Thanks. I know you mean well.” With a nod from her, I started to clean all the zombie guts off the hammer.

Val had calmed down some, but I could tell my sister’s theatrics weren’t over. “When did you have time to change that dress of yours?” she asked Claire, her voice sweet as honey. “While I was out there saving our butts?”

“It was bloody!” she yelled back with mock disgust.

“If all you care about is looking cute, you’ll never survive out here! How far do you think you’ll get in flimsy sandals?”

Jackie cut in, “Hey, if we’d have known zombies were about to break in and we’d end up running for our lives, trust me, we would’ve chosen other shoes.”

Val set her bottled water down on the coffee table. “If you’re going to hang with us, you darn well better get yourself a decent pair of tennis shoes...and next time, you better have my back.”

“We will,” Jackie said. “We’ll go find some jeans and better shoes upstairs. I think I saw some close to our size.”

“Why do I smell perfume?” Nick asked.

Val motioned to the girls. “These geniuses found a bottle upstairs and slathered themselves with it.”

“We were trying to get the smell of blood out of our hair and clothes!” Claire whispered, the telltale hue of red covering her cheeks. “We’ve been through a lot, so please, can you just...?” Her voice trailed off insecurely.

I regarded her intently. The way her gaze shifted across the floor uncomfortably told me she knew she should’ve been out there helping us instead of cleaning up, but either she couldn’t help herself or it was her way of dealing with the prospect of an untimely death. *Who can blame her?*

Val looked at me and shrugged. “Can you believe these girls? How are they still alive? I’ll tell ya. They’ve been riding everyone’s coattails and—”

“Val, that’s enough,” Nick said as he sipped on a can of warm Pepsi from the pantry. “These girls have lost people they’ve cared about. They’re in shock and doing the best they can. Besides, they’re the least of our worries right now. Let’s scavenge the house for supplies.”

I nodded. “Yeah, let’s look for any possible weapons, canned food, bottled water, and medical supplies,” I suggested, knowing Val’s dressing needed to be changed as soon as possible.

“You guys are right.” Val stood and walked over to the glass wall. “There’re Jeeps outside. Whoever lived here might’ve tried to make it out alive, but they obviously didn’t, which explains why the place is deserted. Let’s load the Jeeps up with survival gear and get our butts on the road before the same fate befalls us.”

“We need to hurry, people,” Nick said. “Lingering in this fancy glass house makes us sitting ducks. The only way to stay safe is to keep moving.”

Claire suddenly cleared her throat. “Why can’t we all just stay here? You killed the zombies who were chasing us.”

Val shot her an irritated look. “You’re crazy! You might think you’re safe in here, but you’re not. You can do whatever you want, but we’re not staying here. Come with us if you want, or stay here and play dress-up and die.”

“What makes you such an expert? After what we’ve seen out there, you couldn’t pay me to come with you, and surely not if you keep being bossy.”

“Bossy? Me?” Val looked at me like she was shocked to be called such a name. “Am I bossy?”

I bit my lip. “Uh... well—”

“Well?”

“Maybe just a tad.”

Val blew out a breath and turned back toward Claire. “Trust me, the feelings are mutual. I’ll drop you off in a heartbeat at the first safe place we find.”

Claire tossed her long red hair over her shoulder. “I’m not hitching up with a new group. I’ve been there, done that. The last one couldn’t protect us, and I doubt you can either. My new game plan is just to stay here.” She nudged Jackie’s arm. “This is a great hiding place, right?”

Before Jackie could answer, Val cut in. “Suit yourself. It’s your funeral. But we’re outta here, right, guys?”

Nick carried a case of bottled water. “Definitely. Staying here is like signing your own death certificate, especially with these glass walls. Besides, you girls don’t even know how to defend yourselves.”

“I packed up all the guns, but I left two out for Claire and Jackie,” Val said, pointing to the fireplace mantel. “I also put a bunch of holsters on the table for everyone. Well, I think Nick has his own. But anyway, give Claire and Jackie one, and while you’re at it, maybe you should give them some pointers.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “I’m really not into violence.”

“I don’t care what you’re into. It’s all about survival now,” Val said. “Cause those things will tear you apart. They’ll munch on your flesh—gnawing, biting, and chewing—all while you’re still alive watching.”

Jackie threw a couch pillow at Val. “C’mon! That’s gross!”

Val placed her hands on her hips. “No, that’s reality. You better get hip with the times, ‘cause we’re living in a post-apocalyptic world now. This isn’t some pretty world filled with colorful daffodils and butterflies. It’s do or die.”

“Does your sister think she’s Lara Croft or something?” Claire asked.

“We’re giving you some guns,” Val said, turning to face her.

She shook her head. “No!”

Val met her gaze straight on. “Yes. You have the right to defend yourself! If a zombie crosses that line, you’re gonna need an equalizer.”

Claire rolled her eyes as Val continued.

“Now, we’re gonna give you a quick lesson, Glock 101.” Val picked up a pistol and handed it to the stubborn girl. “Take it! I’m not leaving you here defenseless, Princess.”

“Well, I’m not going to let *you* teach me anything,” Claire hissed.

Val motioned toward Nick and me. “Fine. We’ve got two capable guys here. Pick one to coach you. Let me tell you something, Little Miss Thing, zombies don’t discriminate, and they’ll...”

I tuned her out, glanced at the sunset, and picked up a Glock 26 Gen4 from the mantel for Jackie. She squeezed past Claire, making her way out into the hall. Through the open door, I watched her enter the kitchen. It was the perfect opportunity to have a minute alone with her.

“They need to take a gun and know how to use it. Best-case scenario, they’ll smarten up and come with us. Try to talk some sense into her, Dean,” my brother said. “I’ll work on Claire.”

Claire stepped toward him. “Hey! I’m right here you know! Quit talking about me like I’m not even in the room.”

“Claire...” he began as I walked out of the living room.

I needed to convince Jackie somehow to leave with us, but if she refused, I still wanted her to have a weapon so she could take down any of those undead freaks who ventured near the house. I knew we couldn’t actually fire off bullets without attracting every zombie within miles, but I needed to teach her the basics. I found her standing near the kitchen counter, her arms pressed against the smooth Formica, her forehead creased with fine lines from anger and worry.

Her eyes lit up the second I walked in, and her forehead smoothed, as though all her worries disappeared the moment she saw me. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

She held my gaze. “What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I asked.

“I’m not so sure your girlfriend would like that. She might kick my butt and feed it to the zombies.”

“Val’s not my girlfriend,” I said.

“Your brother’s?”

“Nope. She’s our sister.”

“I didn’t know that, Dean,” she whispered. “What do you have there?” she asked, looking down at my hands.

“If you’re going to stay here—which I still don’t think you should—you’re gonna need this.” I handed her the gun.

She bit her lip and ran a hand across the smooth chrome. “Dean, I can’t—”

“Humor me.”

She nodded.

“Okay, first rule,” I said. “Never place your finger on the trigger unless you’re about to fire. Pretend the gun is loaded at all times.” I took out the magazine and unloaded the gun. Then I showed her how to properly hold the Glock pistol and lock her arms.

Jackie’s trembling hands reached for the gun. She wrapped her palm around the grip and secured her hold with her other hand. “It’s empty, right?”

“Yes, but it shouldn’t be. A zombie can come at any given minute. Always be prepared.”

She slammed the magazine in with shaking hands. Cocking the slide back, she successfully chambered a round. She slowly raised the gun and put her finger on the trigger. “I watched those things tear apart a sixty-five-year-old woman right before my eyes.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “She was in our group...my friend.”

I softly touched her back. “Jackie, I’m so sorry.”

“I couldn’t do anything to help her. Maybe if I’d have had a gun like this, I could’ve done something.” She inhaled and let it out slowly. “Your sister’s right. I don’t want to watch a zombie munch on me while I’m still alive, screaming, and I don’t want to watch another friend die in front of me. I’ll give this gun thing a try.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

She gripped the gun tightly and pointed straight ahead at the fridge. “You know what?”

“What?”

“The next zombie I meet will die.”

I didn’t want to point out the irony of her words: Technically, they were dead meat already, but I got her point anyway. She wanted them “dead” as in unmoving, shapeless heaps. We all wanted the same thing. I knew she meant every word because the pain was evident in her voice. I couldn’t imagine losing the ones I loved in such a horrible way. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said.

“She’s in a better place, and so are the others. Bless their souls.” She paused for a moment and then met my gaze. “Teach me, Dean. I want to learn everything. From this moment on, I refuse to run anymore.”

I came from behind and held her arms. I couldn't help noticing her perfume, which smelled so good. "Stand facing the target with your feet shoulder-width apart."

She glanced at me.

I smiled. "Now bend your knees slightly." I inched closer and said in her ear, "Extend the handgun toward the target, keeping your arms straight and locked. Got it?"

"Yeah."

I shot her a grin and continued with the lesson. "Okay. Now, with your shoulders squared, your arms form the perfect position for shooting."

"I can do this," she said with confidence.

"Hold the gun on target," I said in her ear. "If it's a zombie, aim for the brain and shoot. It's the only way to kill it. If that's not comfortable for you, I can teach you another way to hold the gun."

"Show me."

I nodded. "Okay. Stand like you're ready to hit someone."

"Like a boxer?"

"Exactly. Now, angle your support arm shoulder toward your target." My hands moved across her body to help guide her.

"Okay." Her contours smoothed under my touch as she followed my instructions.

"Bend your knees while keeping your body weight slightly forward. Grasp the gun using opposite pressure with both hands. Keep both elbows bent, with your support elbow pointing downward."

She spun around. "I think I can do this."

My eyes drifted down to her flat, toned stomach. I could have sworn she caught me looking at her belly ring, but I tried to change the subject quickly. "Look, I've given you some really good pointers, but I'm afraid it's still not enough to survive out here. Why don't you come with us?"

She set her bottle down. "Why?"

"Because it's dangerous. You know you can't stay here."

She let out a long breath. "Claire's right. Getting together with another group won't guarantee our safety. You could stay here with us."

"There's safety in numbers, and staying here is crazy," I said.

“You don’t think we can make it on our own?” she asked.

“Not without concrete walls and an army.”

“Do you think we could just stay for the night? I know Claire will see things differently in the morning, and so will I. We’re just so tired after everything we’ve been through.”

Nick peeked his head in. “Absolutely not! This place isn’t safe. We need to get some supplies and load them and our butts in those Jeeps.” He grabbed my shoulder. “Get moving now!”

Chapter 7

Val, Nick, and I quickly loaded up the two Jeeps with bottled water, a case of Pepsi, and canned food we found in the pantry. I also packed the black bag holding the precious vials. I started up both Jeeps; they ran great. Val found a few red plastic gas cans in the garage next to the lawnmower, which was great; we didn’t want to stop anywhere if we didn’t have to. It would be wise to get a head start, with nothing to slow us down.

We were all set to go, but my heart sank. I couldn’t imagine leaving Claire and Jackie to their fates. I just hoped I could convince them to change their minds—especially Jackie, who I was really taking a liking to. Nick gave me ten more minutes to try and convince her to go with us. I found her in the humongous master bedroom on the bottom floor. What made the room really neat was that it extended from the house with three glass walls and a glass roof. “Hey,” I said, noticing she had cleaned up and changed into new clothes. They were a size too big, but they were much more practical than what she’d been wearing earlier. I was sure Val would be impressed with her blue jeans, white t-shirt, and black tennis shoes. She’d also put her hair up in a long ponytail. “We’re getting ready to leave, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got the gun you gave me.” Jackie glanced out through the spacious glass wall, watching as the setting sun flooded the sky with brilliant colors. She placed her hand on the clear glass. “It’s so beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yep. Something like that could even fool you into thinking the world hasn’t gone to hell in a hand basket.”

She frowned and sat down on the bed. “I was trying to block all that out, if only for a minute.”

I sat next to her. “This is a cool bedroom. It’s kind of like a glass cube.”

She glanced up. “Yeah. I bet it’s neat to see the stars shining at night.”

I stared at her black hair with blonde streaks. It was striking, original, and beyond cute. I loved her bold look. “So, what’s your story?” I asked.

“My story?”

“Yup. Everyone’s got one, right?”

“Right, but I guess right now I’m only concerned about the ending.” She sighed. “I just want to live another day. Tell me, Dean, is it really possible to survive in such a hostile, undead world?”

“Yes, and that said, I have to make one last-ditch effort to try and convince you to change your mind and come with us. We’re leaving in a few minutes.”

She continued to stare off into the sunset. “Give it your best shot.”

“Jackie, there are plenty of cities out there that are still safe, like the island in Ohio where Nick and I live. I’ve been there since the outbreak, with no problems. The zombies aren’t immortal beings. They can’t bust through brick walls or get through our military. We have machineguns, bombs, and all kinds of ways to stay safe. Supplies are flown in every day to help people survive the battle.”

She met my gaze. “If it was so great, so safe, then why’d you leave?”

“I didn’t—not on purpose anyway. Our helicopter crashed on a trip for make-believe supplies.”

She cocked a curious brow.

I continued, “I know it sounds weird, but it’s a long story. I can tell you all about it on our road trip.” I was pretty cocky and certain she’d change her mind and come with us. By the twinkle in her eye, I could tell she liked me, at least a little.

“I’m sorry you crashed.”

“It was what it was,” I said. “I can’t cry about it now. I need to stay focused and keep moving.”

“Can we ever defeat these things? I mean, do you think our lives will ever be normal again?”

I reached for her hand. “Yes, I believe we will prevail. Zombies will die off, and eventually their bodies will rot away. All we have to do is outlive the infected. Yes, there are overwhelming odds stacked against us, but we can do this. I believe with all my heart that humanity can overcome anything, as long as we don’t lose hope.”

“So you’re heading to a safe haven, one of the walled cities?”

“Yes. We can hold out in the fortresses created around the United States. Zombies will run out of food and die, and we’ll get our world back. We just need a little time.”

She nodded. “You make a good point.”

“Then come with us. I’m sure Claire will cave once she sees you’re serious about leaving.”

A *thump* on the window drew my attention.

Jackie jumped. “What was that?”

I turned and couldn’t believe my eyes. A zombie with rotting flesh and oozing eyeballs was hitting his head against the glass. He shot me a stone-cold, glazed-over look that said in not so many words, “*I want your brains...now!*” The stupid thing seemed stumped as to why he couldn’t pass through the transparent glass wall.

Speechless, Jackie pointed to the other glass walls.

I gasped. Crap. Another one stared me straight in the eyes. This one looked like a raccoon, with blackened skin around her eyes; she definitely had that I-just-got-out-of-the-grave look about her. The dead seemed to be coming out of the woodwork like cockroaches, multiplying before our very eyes. Our beautiful view of the sunset had turned into a grotesque nightmare.

I stood, but my sudden movement made them moan and groan even louder. Decaying human hands pounded on the glass walls from all three sides of the bedroom, and my heart raced. Brain-hungry walking corpses staggered around with white, sunken eyes and green, mottled skin. It was downright disturbing. I sucked in a deep gulp of air.

The glass shook, and I wondered if it would shatter. I gasped as bloody handprints streaked across the glass. Windows are notoriously easy to break, but I wondered how well a glass wall would hold up. I sure didn’t want to find out.

I backed up slowly, focusing on the zombie who was making the most fuss. Even though he had decayed hands with exposed tendons, he still kept pounding. I cringed at his blue-green veins and the open flesh wounds on his forehead, cheeks, and neck. Through a tear in his shirt, I noticed an exposed ribcage with decaying flesh hanging off of it in grotesque shreds. The right

pant leg was also torn to reveal a long white femur. Even a famous horror writer couldn't have invented anything as horrible as the very real monster I was staring at.

"Let's go!" Jackie said, grabbing my shoulder.

"Nick!" I yelled. "We've got to go...NOW!"

Chapter 8

With the orange light of the setting sun as a backdrop, the zombie looked like a creature out of a horror movie. His decaying palms pressed against the smooth surface of the glass wall, and his open mouth dripped with spit and blood as his dead gaze focused on me, making me flinch. For a whole second, I could barely breathe, let alone form a coherent thought in my head, and then it dawned on me that we had to get the heck away from there.

I grabbed Jackie's hand and headed down the hallway, calling as loudly as my lungs would allow, "Nick! Val! There's a pack of zombies out there. We need to get going now!"

Our feet pounded the hardwood floor as we passed the hall and rounded the corner into the living room. The door stood ajar, as though no one had bothered to close it behind them. I yanked it open and stopped in my tracks when I took in the two towering guys resembling wild mountain men with their unkempt appearance, greasy hair, and long, thick beards.

"Going somewhere?" one asked.

"What the heck?" I took a step back, unsure whether they were friends or foe. They didn't look like zombies, but for all I knew, they could've been bitten and might turn on us any minute. Even if they weren't part of the undead army yet, they could have still wanted our food and weapons. "Who are you? How did you get in here?" My grip tightened around Jackie's hand as I pushed my body forward to form a shield between her and the wildlings. If they wanted her, they'd have to force their way past me first—not that I could have been much of a safeguard against a pair like that, but I hoped I could at least buy her a few seconds to get away.

The one in the red checkered shirt raised his hand and waved his rifle at Jackie and me. "You two with them?" He pointed behind him, toward my brother and Val, who were lying on the ground, their mouths pressed in a grim line that didn't leave me much hope. With Nick

holding the back of his head and Val's bloody lip, I knew they'd been attacked and put up a good fight. The wildlings were clearly after our food and weapons. Whether they'd leave us alive or not wouldn't make much difference with the zombies out there, ready to burst in any minute.

I took a deep breath, and then a step forward while pushing Jackie behind me. "Look, mister, there're zombies out back! We've got to get outta here now!"

The other wildman regarded me for a second, probably considering my words and trying to read my expression, to see if I was telling the truth. He patted Jackie and me down and took our guns.

"You don't trust me?" I spat through gritted teeth. "I wouldn't either in your situation, but if I am telling the truth—which I am—we're all dead. Go and see for yourself."

The red checkered shirt guy motioned the other forward and then aimed his gun a bit higher, right at my face. I didn't even flinch as I watched his companion walk past. The mountain man then forced me and Jackie to stand next to the others. A few seconds ticked by before his friend returned, his face a pale mask of horror. I saw his faint nod, and then the red checkered guy lowered his weapon. "We're gonna have to work together if we wanna make it out alive."

I nodded and heaved a big breath. "Give us back our weapons," I said, pointing at my brother and the girls. "We won't be of much help if we can't shoot."

The red checkered guy nodded and held out his hand. "I'm Earl, and that's my friend Tahoe, like the lake."

I ignored him as I walked past. We had to work together to get out of this mess, but I had no doubt the hillbilly twins would happily shoot our heads off and take all our food and supplies once the zombies were properly dispatched.

"I'm Nick," my brother said. "That's Dean, Val, Jackie, and Claire. Give us back our weapons...*now!*"

Tuning them out, I headed for the side door, pulling Jackie with me. I wanted to see if the zombies were starting to come around to the front of the house. Unfortunately, we didn't get far before a flat, metallic *click* warned me of danger. I turned on my heel slowly, my gaze focusing on Earl's rifle, which was now pointed at me again.

"Stop, or I'll shoot you both dead in your tracks."

My automatic response was to touch my holster, but then I remembered that Tahoe had disarmed me, so I remained frozen to the spot. “I figured that much,” I said dryly. “But I thought you said we need to work together.”

“We were just trying to get a position on the zombies,” Jackie said. “Do you think we’d leave our friends behind?”

My gaze became harder and colder, signaling I wasn’t scared of him.

Earl narrowed his gaze. “We *are* working together. You help me ward off any zombie attack, and I’ll spare your lives...for the time being. Sure sounds like cooperation to me.”

“Right. Sounds like a great deal...for you.” I snorted. “What makes you think we’ll have your back the moment those zombies barge in here?”

“What makes you think they’ll barge in here at all?” Tahoe said, speaking for the first time.

For some reason, the younger gruff one seemed to feel safe, as if the zombies were no threat and couldn’t possibly get inside the glass house. I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t a military fortress. I marveled how young he seemed. On closer inspection, I realized beneath the facial hair hid a wrinkle-free face.

He stepped closer as he stared at us. “You have yet to answer my question. What are you all doing in our house?”

Val picked up a family portrait and ran a finger across the dust. “Funny. You don’t look like these happy people, and pictures like these are plastered all around the house.”

Earl’s mouth twitched at the corners, as though her sarcasm amused him. “They’re all dead. Zombies got ‘em. So we figure since they don’t need the place anymore, and we were the first ones to get our hands on it, it’s our house now—at least as of two days ago.”

His eyes sparkled, making me wonder as to the validity of his story. *Did zombies really get the poor inhabitants, or was it these two?* I bit my tongue hard so I wouldn’t comment and risk their wrath. After all, they were still the only ones holding weapons.

“We’re not monsters,” Tahoe said, reading my disgusted expression. “We didn’t kill ‘em. They were dead long before we arrived. Can’t you tell from all the dust in this place? Nobody has been here for ages.”

He had a valid point, and I hoped they weren’t murderers. Just because they didn’t kill the inhabitants of the house didn’t mean they wouldn’t kill us.

“Fine. You’ve claimed the house,” Val chimed in. “Just let us go, and we’ll be on our merry way. You can have your home sweet home all to yourselves.” Of course she forgot to mention the part about us loading up all their food and water in their vehicles.

“Sure. You’re welcome to go, as soon as the zombie threat is over,” Tahoe said. “Don’t worry. We got four strong men here. Besides, they’ll never break in.”

I was almost inclined to believe him when a loud *thud* echoed through the room, startling us. Urban legends about zombies touted their slow reaction time and their inability to form coherent plans, but they were just that: legends. No one knew for sure whether they still had any morsel of humanity in them. For all we knew, their brains retained some ability for reasoning and possibly for their own survival. If they did, which was pretty obvious from their attempts to get in, then we were screwed; it would only be a matter of time before they would double and triple their efforts and succeed.

“We have to go, even if it’s on foot,” Nick said with a glance toward the hall. “Trapping ourselves in this house is suicide. I don’t know about you, but we’re leaving.”

“And going where?” Claire yelled. “Zombies will rip us to shreds!”

Nick shrugged and shot her a hard look. “I don’t care. I’d rather die trying than to sit around in here doing nothing.”

“I’m sorry, Claire, but I’m with him. The faster, the better,” Jackie whispered.

For a second, I felt like hugging her. I was so proud of her for standing up for herself, even if it meant defying her cousin’s wishes.

“You don’t know anything for sure,” Claire said. “None of you do. Maybe we should hole up here until those things leave. They’ll get bored and go eventually, and we can leave in a few hours, once the coast is clear.”

Jackie shook her shoulder. “No, Claire. Waiting is a horrible idea!”

“You’re safe here,” Tahoe said. “There are a lot of them, but they can’t bust through these walls. And like Claire said, they’ll get bored after a bit and move on for easier prey. I’ve seen it a million times before.”

“I agree,” Earl said. “It’s best to hide out here until they leave. It’s stupid to engage them, but if they break in, of course we’ll fight with everything we have.” Earl shot me a look. “You owe me for saving your lives.”

“What?” I asked. “If you would’ve let us leave, we would have been long gone already.”

Earl gave me a cocky grin. “Wrong, my boy. What you’d be is dead. I’m offering you protection here, and when this is all over and done, I expect to be paid for it.”

“Paid? With what? We don’t have any money,” Claire said. “We only came with the shirts on our backs.”

Earl smirked. “Who said anything about money? I just want one of you cute gals to keep me company tonight. Is that so much to ask for the price of saving your lives?”

Nick’s hands balled into fists. The vein on his forehead throbbed so hard that I prayed he wouldn’t do something stupid, like try to hit the guy. Fortunately, he either came to his senses on his own or the rifle pointed at his face made him reconsider.

I grabbed my brother’s arm, just in case, and hissed, “Don’t let him rile you up. We gotta leave with our heads still attached to our shoulders.”

Claire scowled at Earl. “Our lives are on the line! How can you blackmail us like this?”

“Mmm. Feisty. And I love redheads.” Earl looked her up and down, then inched closer. “I bet we could have a lot of fun, you and me.”

“You’re sick!” Val shouted but didn’t inch closer.

I glared at Earl. The man was a disgusting sleaze ball and an absolute idiot. Zombies were literally knocking down our doors, but all he could think about was bedding down with a helpless girl. *Maybe we can find a car in town*, I considered. Zombies were prowling out back, but I was willing to take my chances if it meant keeping all three of the girls as far away from Grizzly Adams as we could.

Nick straightened his stance. “No deal, jerk! Move out of my way because we’re leaving.”

“Fine. You boys can go,” Earl said.

“We boys?”

“Yep, but we’re keeping the women. You owe us for all the dead corpses I’ll have to clean up in the front yard tomorrow morning.”

Jackie gasped.

“What do you need us for, huh?” Val spat. “Let me tell you, mister, if you come anywhere near me, I’ll bite just as hard as those zombies will. You might lose something really valuable if you go waving it around at me!”

Tahoe cleared his throat, as if he was trying to stifle a laugh.

Val took a step toward him, her eyes darting in my direction, signaling something. She was trying to get their attention so we could devise a plan.

Nick must've realized it, too, because he nudged Claire. "You still got that stun gun?" he whispered.

She nodded, wide-eyed, and touched her pocket.

Nick bobbed his head slightly. "Good. On the count of three, stun Earl while Dean and I tackle the other guy. Then stun him too."

"And then we run," Jackie said.

I moistened my lips and signaled that I was ready.

Claire wrapped her fingers around the stun gun just as the zombies from the back of the house moved onto the front lawn. They were shuffling everywhere. The scratch of their cracked, yellowed nails raked against the glass. There were so many that I had no idea how we'd get past them without being attacked. We had lost our precious opportunity, thanks to Earl and Tahoe.

Nick grabbed Claire's arm and whispered into her ear, "Wait! Hold off. The house is surrounded now. There's no way can we just walk out the front door." He glanced at me. "If zombies break in, we'll need the mountain men to help us fight them off."

I nodded, and Claire slipped her stun gun into her pocket. Our plan was ruined, and it was too late for us to make an escape. We all knew we should have run the second we saw the zombies entering the back yard, but the two sasquatches had foiled that little plan. We could've been in the Jeeps, long gone before the zombies had come around to the front of the house, but that chance had slipped away. Now Nick was right: We needed the mountain men conscious so they could help us battle the undead. On our own, we might not make it out alive.

"What the..." Earl said, locking the door. "We've never had to fight this many before."

"I tried to tell you!" Jackie said.

Earl rubbed his chin. "I thought there might be a group of them running around, but I never would have imagined anything like this...and it's all your fault!"

"What!?" Val screamed, furious.

"That's right. Y'all brought them here to my doorstep! Look at all those corpses in my front yard. I bet you idiots used a gun, attracting them from everywhere!"

The banging and scratching sounds made my stomach churn. Twigs snapped under their rotting feet as they shuffled around the place, hammering against the glass in various locations

with various body parts. Something began to shatter, and for a moment, I wasn't sure whether the sound was coming from the walls or the door. I even heard muffled footsteps somewhere at the back of the house, or maybe it was the basement. They were fighting their way in, and that meant only one thing: We had to fight our way out, and the front door was out of the question.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a zombie licking and clawing at the glass in front of me. His decomposed face with black and brown muscle wrinkling over the skull stared at me as though he had already chosen his main course for the evening. I didn't want to be trapped while those monsters fought their way in, but just walking out there and hoping for the best wouldn't work either. I looked out the glass wall of the living room and saw zombies dotting the entire front yard. *Earl's right. I bet the gunshots we fired off earlier attracted the herd. We'll have to be way more careful next time...if there is a next time.* The dead army surrounded the entire house, like some kind of scene straight out of *Night of the Living Dead*. The only thing that kept us safe from them for the time being was a towering sheet of glass. I shuddered and vowed to never set foot inside a glass house again; that was one nightmare I wouldn't soon forget. "I need a weapon!" I shouted.

Earl thrust my gun into my waiting hands, then handed Nick and Jackie their weapons.

"Hey, girl, catch! You look like you know how to use this," Tahoe called out a moment before he tossed Val a rifle.

My sister caught the gun in midair and wore a proud smile.

My rifle was already packed in the Jeep, but I still had my handgun. My grip tightened around it, even though I doubted it'd do any good against an entire herd of zombies.

A *crack* echoed in the air a moment before the door splintered and the hinges burst. I froze in place as countless zombies fought with each other to get first pick.

Chapter 9

The penetrating howling noise outside the house grew to ear-splitting levels. My finger found the trigger of my weapon as my gaze steadied on the door. Recklessly determined to sooth their constant hunger, I knew the zombies would find a way in. The fact that we were having

such a near encounter with so many in such a confined space wasn't exactly confidence-boosting, but I vowed to fight until my last breath.

My gaze focused on the door a moment before it splintered open from the weight of countless zombies leaning and pushing against it. Some of them fell headfirst on the floor, gnawing and thrashing. Horrible odors of rotting flesh seeped into my nose, making me want to bend over and puke my guts out. Their unearthly moans echoed in the air, and I shivered at the thought of them tearing through my flesh, devouring me little by little.

I waved my arm, beckoning the others to follow me upstairs. "C'mon! This way!" My voice reverberated from the walls, but it didn't quite manage to drown out the zombies' hungry calls. Without waiting for an answer from the others, I bolted up the spiral staircase, jumping two steps at a time, faster and faster. My boot glided on the smooth surface, and I tripped. *Crap! This is not the time to panic and lose your cool or your balance, Dean!* I scrambled to my feet but stumbled again, nearly losing my grip. As I hung on to the railing, I peered down. *No flipping way!* The door had been broken in completely, but the opening was too narrow to fit them all through. The zombies who had managed to squeeze in had gathered in front of the doorway in a messy heap, pushing and pulling and attempting to get up, while the ones coming from behind kept tripping, making any ascent impossible. I gawked at the way they had buried themselves, thankful for the tiny distraction that might just buy us a few minutes to get upstairs and find the safest room.

"Come on, boy! Move!" Earl yelled. "You're in my way. If you don't move your butt, I'll personally shove you down there to get acquainted with those things."

I didn't need to see his face to know he meant every word he said. The edge in his voice betrayed his sincerity. So, my legs rose under me as I pushed up the stairs, focusing on my feet so I wouldn't trip again.

The moment I reached the top step, Earl jammed his elbow into my stomach, making me double over, then made room for Tahoe to hurry past. "Blow the staircase up, Tahoe!" he yelled.

"Blow it up?" I asked. "With what?"

"Don't you worry about that!" Earl said.

Tahoe motioned to his friend, then they took off down the hall and disappeared through one of the doors I hadn't inspected before.

My brother raced past me, shouting over his shoulder, "Dean! Come on, man! Don't just stand there! Move it!"

“Coming!” I yelled, taking off after him. By the time I reached him, Nick was already pushing a large oak dresser toward the door, leaving scuff marks across the shiny wooden floor. “What are you doing?” I asked, stopping in my tracks.

“Help me roll this thing down the stairs,” he said.

“Why bother? I thought we were gonna lock ourselves in a room and then climb out the window.” I peered at him from under raised brows. Granted, my grand plan seemed a lot more fascinating inside my head, before I spoke it out loud, but it still wasn’t as bad as the expression on his face made it seem.

“Right. We’re just gonna let those things slither up the stairs after us while we pick a random room, lock ourselves in, hear them bang on the door, and then jump out the window to the million zombies waiting for us below? Sorry, bro, but that’s a dumb plan. We’ll be even more trapped and screwed than we are now.”

“I didn’t think of that,” I said, but he was right. Creating a blockade gave us extra time to find the perfect window to jump from. It would also help us save ammo, since we’d be out of bullets in no time. Our piddly little arsenal was no match for the number of zombies waiting to devour us.

“Come on, Dean,” Nick said, unable to suppress a tiny sneer. “We don’t have time for discussing it. Just trust me and do what I say.” With that, he dashed past and turned his back on me, signaling the conversation was over.

We hauled the heavy dresser to the top of the landing, and then I kicked it until it tumbled down the stairs. It crashed into some zombies on the way down, knocking them to the ground like bowling pins. When I turned around, the girls were sliding a fancy antique couch toward me. With a last heave, I pushed it down the stairs toward a zombie who was heading toward us. I let out a few choice words. Of course it wasn’t the most mature thing I could have done in front of Jackie, but I couldn’t help myself. The adrenaline running through my veins was making me say things I wouldn’t usually say. Besides, every single triumph—no matter how tiny it was—counted when death was lurking savagely around the corner in the vacant eyes and slimy mouths of those things.

Val had dragged an enormous chest of drawers to the top of the stairs. Jackie and Claire began slipping out the drawers and throwing them down on the zombies, hitting them on their heads. Finally, the two girls gave the furniture a final shove, and it flew down, taking out a

couple more of the hissing creatures. Nick threw a box spring, followed by a mattress tossed by Val. Our furniture onslaught wouldn't last forever, but we hoped it would grant us enough time to find a spot where we could safely jump from a window into a smaller crowd of zombies that we could fight off.

"Watch out!" Earl called from behind. I moved out of his way as he lit up a stick of dynamite and threw it down the stairs.

I watched the fire eat through the cord, slowly but steadily flying through the air in what seemed like slow motion. It all happened so fast, yet I felt as though a million years must have passed.

"Get down!" Earl yelled as it landed with a dull *thud* with uncanny precision, right in the middle of the gathered zombie herd.

I ducked and threw my body over Jackie and Claire as a loud *boom* echoed in my ears and smoke swirled all around me. Raising my head, I coughed and peered through the blanket of fire at the gap between the upper and the lower levels of the house. The stairs had evaporated into a huge mess of wooden splinters, interspersed with blood and gore. My stomach protested at the sight, but I didn't have time to digest the image because the next wave of zombies was already gushing in.

I peeked over the banister. There was absolutely nothing left of the stairs, so our only way back down was gone. I didn't know whether to feel relieved or pissed off that the guy didn't consult us before doing something so bold and irrevocable. *What if Nick's plan fails? What then? He blew up the freaking stairs! We're stuck up here!* "Where did you get the dynamite from?" I asked, miffed.

"That's no concern of yours, boy," Earl spat.

Again I had to bite my tongue hard to keep from lashing out at him. I could only assume he must've hidden a stash somewhere and didn't feel the need to tell us about it. For all we knew, the doomsday mountain dudes probably had a stash of every kind of weapon known to mankind hidden all over the place, so I mentally prepared for more surprises to come along the way. "You should've told us," I muttered under my breath. "We had the situation under control."

"Right, like furniture would've stopped all those things!" Earl said, shooting me and Nick a glare as he bolted down the hallway with Tahoe on his heels.

"It did slow them down some," Val shouted, as if defending our honor.

“Hey, Dean,” Nick called out, “now’s the time to put that plan of yours to good use.”

“Great. I’ll go look out the windows for a possible escape route,” I said.

“I was talking about myself,” he said. “I need you guys to stay here and be a distraction.”

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” Val said. “We’re safe up here. They can’t fly.”

Nick continued, “If the zombies see food, they’ll focus their efforts toward this part of the house. We need as many of them as possible here in the living room and front yard so we can sneak out the back or side window.”

“I like it,” I said. “Let the freaks gather up here while you find the perfect place for us to sneak out. Then we’ll be gone...and they’ll still think we’re up here, the dummies.”

“That’s the plan,” Nick said. “So stand here so they can see you.”

Claire grabbed his arm and gave it a squeeze. “I’m coming with you. There has to be a way out of this place.”

“I’ll be right back,” Nick said.

“Um, okay. Be careful, man!” I said, scrambling to my feet. The idea of splitting up sat in the pit of my stomach like a rock. Especially when I was the distraction...the human bait.

With a nod, he shot off down the hallway, with Claire following after him.

“They’ll be right back,” Val muttered to no one in particular.

I opened my mouth to tell her everything would be all right, but the sound of shattering glass boomed in my ears, stopping my words from coming out. I peered down at more zombies breaking through the towering glass walls and gasped.

“Oh my gosh!” yelled Jackie. “They’re busting through the walls!” Her gaze bore into mine, questioning the meaning of it all.

For once, I was at a loss for words and couldn’t give her the answer she wanted to hear. If the walls were coming down, it would be only a matter of time before the upper floor was compromised.

We fell silent for a moment. The *crunch* of dragging feet on broken glass as the zombies flooded into the spacious living room was all we could hear. My stomach lurched when a loud choir of the undead groaned, echoing in my ears. The giant room had filled up with moaning, groaning, and hissing, as though the zombies had multiplied. I’d never seen anything like it. I had only seen such horrific scenes in movies and videogames, but now it was happening right in

front of me. I was witnessing a real-live (or dead, as the case was) zombie apocalypse with my very own eyes.

Val clapped my shoulder. “Stay calm, okay? The plan is working perfectly. They’re all coming to the front of the house. Nick will be back any minute with the perfect spot to sneak out. And then we’ll run to the Jeeps as fast as our feet can carry us.”

I nodded and forced the fear that was quickly grabbing hold of me to the back of my mind.

“You still got the keys?” she asked.

I nodded, remaining stunned and silent.

She continued bravely, “Good. We need to be ready to pound the pavement the second Nick comes back.”

I felt my pocket, just to make sure the keys were still there, but they weren’t. Much to my dismay, I suddenly remembered that I’d left them on the table. I pointed at the living room. “No flippin’ way! I left them...they’re down there!”

“I can’t believe this!” She took a trembling breath as she regarded me. Her face became an impenetrable mask as her mind began to weigh the possibilities.

I breathed in sharply to calm my nerves. With the staircase gone, no zombie could climb up, but we couldn’t climb down either. Unfortunately, the keys were down there. Our chances of getting out before the walls collapsed down on us were pretty slim, and I felt it was my fault for stupidly leaving the keys downstairs.

“How are we going to get down there to get them?” Jackie asked, her eyes wide, mirroring my own thoughts.

“We aren’t,” Val finally said, “but I can hotwire the truck.”

Earl and Tahoe came from behind, making me jump.

Earl’s eyes shimmered with malice as he looked at me. “We need a big, giant distraction. How about some blood?”

“Yeah,” Tahoe said. “You know how predictable the little freaks are.”

“One whiff, and we’ve got ourselves a huge distraction,” Earl mumbled, still looking at me, making it impossible to miss his vile and threatening insinuation. “Hmm. Blood. Where can we possibly get any of that? Any suggestions, boy?”

My heart raced. I put my hand on my holster, already determined that if I had to shoot either of the bushy-haired crazies in self-defense, I wouldn’t hesitate to use a bullet.

“Do you have any more explosives?” Val asked, unfazed.

“Fresh out,” Earl snapped, “but you know what? You reek of death.” He suddenly reached for her.

Val let out a scream as he ripped the bandage off her arm, revealing the infected flesh. I couldn’t help but stare at the darkening gash and the white bone peeking from beneath.

“I knew it!” Earl yelled. “She’s nothing but zombie bait!” His eyes shined, his sneer revealing tobacco-yellowed teeth.

For a moment, I thought he might be talking about himself, because everything about him was far more grotesque and rotting than Val’s wound—including his soul, if he even had one.

Val kicked him in the nuts and turned to run, but he grabbed her around the waist and forced her to stay put.

My hand instinctively moved to the gun in my holster, but someone gripped my arms from behind and yanked them hard, sending jolts of pain through my shoulders. *Crap.* My weapon flew out of my hands and clattered to the floor, not far away from my feet. I peered at it and pulled toward it, but the guy was in the more advantageous position, making it impossible for me to twist out of his grip. Earl followed my line of vision and kicked the weapon under the railing. It sailed across the floor and under the banister, landing in the crowd of zombies below.

Glancing over my shoulder, I yelled, “Tahoe, let me go!”

He continued holding me in his iron grasp as he hissed, “I have my instructions. He’ll kill me if I don’t follow them.”

“No!” I shouted. “Then at least let her go!”

“Ain’t happenin’, boy. You might as well just give up now before the same fate befalls you!” Earl said.

“Take me instead!” I begged.

“You’re not infected. She, on the other hand, is. She’s one bacteria away from being one of those nasty things!”

Jackie whipped out her gun, her eyes shifting nervously from Earl to Tahoe, then to me. She seemed hesitant about shooting another human being, and I knew we were losing the battle. Before she could even make up her mind, Earl shoved her back, and she crashed helplessly through the glass banister, almost plummeting into the void below. She clung on the second-floor

railing as her legs dangled dangerously close to zombies. The way they kept reaching up made it obvious they wanted nothing more than to devour her legs as an appetizer.

My stomach clenched as their mouths started to snap open like hungry piranhas. “Val!” I flailed against Tahoe, but he only tightened his grip on me.

Earl grabbed Val and swung her over the banister, hissing, “Sorry, sweetheart, but you’re gonna die soon anyway. Might as well go out like a hero and save our butts in the process.”

“Don’t do this!” she yelled. “Try and show some compassion. At least put a bullet through my head first so I don’t have to feel them...so I won’t know they’re eating me.”

“No!” I squirmed and desperately tried to free myself. I knew Jackie wouldn’t be able to hold on much longer, and my sister desperately needed my help. I yelled for Nick down the hall, but I doubted he could hear me over the screams and chaos of the zombie frenzy.

“I can’t hold on to him any longer,” Tahoe shouted. His grip loosened a bit, and for a moment, I thought he might have done so on purpose, as though he wanted me to escape and save Val, but at the same time he feared for his life.

“Well, goodbye.” In one swift motion, Earl hurled Val into the herd of zombies. Her scream chilled my blood, etching the memory into my brain forever.

In disbelief I watched as hands and arms pounced on her like a lion on a piece of raw meat. “Nick!” My own voice sounded alien in my ears, as if it couldn’t possibly be coming from me.

Finally, Tahoe let go and stepped back.

I tumbled forward, my arms reaching out to strangle the guy who had killed my sister, but Earl was faster, or maybe he had the advantage of being emotionally unattached to the whole situation. My forehead exploded in pain as he threw me against the wall so hard that I blacked out for a second. When my vision cleared, I saw the two mountain men running off. I crawled to the balcony and grabbed Jackie’s hand; I managed to pull her to safety, even though my arms were on fire.

As soon as she stepped over the balustrade, she buried her head into my chest.

“Nick!” I yelled again, almost choking on the sudden nausea in my stomach and the bile in my throat. Tears threatened to spill down my face. “Nick!” I yelled again, but no one answered. I looked for Val below, but I couldn’t see any sign of her under the hissing pile that had pounced on her. I’d never seen anything so horrible in my entire life. The images threatened my sanity, yet I couldn’t look away. I was suddenly fueled by thoughts of revenge, and I swore to myself

I'd avenge my sister's death, no matter what. Even though I had yet to make it out of there alive, I'd already contemplated the different ways I could accomplish that goal. *Earl is gonna pay...and so is every freaking zombie I ever come across!*

Chapter 10

Standing on the balcony, I stared at the monsters who had killed Val. In one moment, my sister and I were there, valiantly fighting back to back, stubbornly determined on making it out of there alive, but in the next moment, she was gone, just like that. My mind spun in an endless loop of memories that didn't quite make sense to me. My heart raced, pumping blood through my body. My fingers twitched, and my skin prickled, which made the whole situation even more surreal. She was dead, and I was still alive. The world seemed more unfair than ever before. I was caught in a daze, and not the pleasant kind, until Jackie's words snapped me out of it.

"We have to find Claire and your brother," she said softly, though her voice betrayed a frantic edge.

The sudden urge to get moving didn't go unnoticed. I turned to face her. Her eyes were burning with something: *Pain? Disbelief? Anger?* I couldn't tell because my own pain had numbed me. My own shock and disbelief wouldn't allow me to comprehend that experiencing a comrade's death couldn't be easy on her either. "I'm—I'll stay," I whispered. "I'm not going anywhere until every single one of them is dead."

"No, Dean. You can't. We need you. Your brother needs you. Think of those who are still around, those who care about you, and the pain you'll cause if you give up now and sacrifice yourself for some impossible try at revenge." She grabbed my arm and yanked hard. "She... Val wouldn't have wanted you to do something so foolish. Your sister would want you to get yourself to safety. That was what she was fighting for."

I didn't budge. Her words registered with me somewhere, somehow in the back of my mind. She was right, of course, but I also felt as though I would be betraying Val if I ran away.

"Please," Jackie continued. "Nick has already lost one sibling. Don't make him lose both."

“Let’s go!” Claire’s voice called from around the corner a moment before my brother and she appeared in my line of vision.

“Dean,” my brother said with a nod, “thanks for holding it together here, man.”

I turned away, avoiding his gaze. I couldn’t bear to tell him what had happened.

“The bathroom window in the back seems like our best bet,” Nick said. “We can make a clean getaway. So c’mon, let’s go!”

My brother’s gaze sliced through me. A single worry wrinkle creased his otherwise smooth skin. I peered into his blue eyes, begging him to understand; I couldn’t dare speak the words that burned a hole in my heart.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go! This place is turning into Zombie Central.” His gaze became stubborn, and his hands clenched to his sides, as though he already sensed something was wrong but didn’t want to acknowledge it just yet.

I froze and closed my eyes to avoid his probing stare.

“What’s wrong with you?” he hissed, grabbing me hard by the shoulders.

I opened my eyes again and saw him scanning the open landing, his mind putting two and two together.

“Where’s Val?” his shout echoed in my ears. His arms yanked me around like a ragdoll, forcing me to face him.

“Those men...they...” I stammered, my voice barely snaking its way out of my constricted throat. “Earl... he, uh... Tahoe wouldn’t let go, and I couldn’t... Earl just threw Val over the balcony! He used our sister as a distraction.” I pointed a trembling finger to the pile of zombies where she’d been tossed in. The spot was covered in squirming bodies now, and on the remote chance that she was still alive, there wasn’t a thing we could do to save her.

“No!” he screamed as sudden realization set in. “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“I tried!” I shouted, shoving him as hard as I could. “Why would you think I didn’t try!?”

“Well, you should’ve tried harder!” he said, pushing me back. “For goodness sake, she was our sister, and you just let those jerks—”

“Hold on now! We both tried everything we could,” Jackie interrupted. “They took us by surprise. The older one, Evan or whatever his name is, almost killed me.”

“It’s Earl,” I corrected, for it was a name I would never, ever forget.

“He pushed me over the balcony,” Jackie continued, “but I was able to hold on until Dean helped me back up.”

“Oh my gosh!” Claire said, throwing her arms around her. “That’s horrible. Are you okay?”
“I’m fine,” she breathed out.

“Where’s Val?” Nick bellowed. “Maybe we can still help her.”

I shook my head. “She’s dead, Nick, and even if she weren’t, she’d be torn into pieces by the time we made it down there. There’s nothing you—or anyone, for that matter—can do.” The sudden realization that I was right hurt me more than Nick’s pained expression. My jaw clenched until I thought my bones might snap.

Claire placed a hand on Nick’s back, trying to steady him, but she didn’t say a word.

“Don’t!” Nick said, violently shrugging her off.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she whispered, ignoring his command not to touch him. Even though her words were thin and sparse, I could hear the sincerity in her voice.

Nick nodded and kept his head low, and for a second I thought he was choking back tears. Then, letting out a sudden loud yell, like a war cry, he tore away from Claire and began pounding the wall with his fist, threatening revenge on every single one of those cursed things and on the two men who had done such an awful thing, throwing two helpless women over a banister.

I wanted to stop my brother, but there was no chance. Instead, I fought back the urge to join in his cursing. “I’m sorry, man.” My voice trembled, and I felt a tear roll down my face. Even though Jackie wrapped her arm around me to comfort me, I could barely breathe, and the room around me seemed to grow hot.

“There was nothing we could do,” Jackie said. “You can’t blame anyone for this except Earl and Tahoe.”

“We gotta go,” Nick whispered, ignoring her. “If we don’t get outta here, we’ll be next. But first there’s something I need to do for Val.” He disappeared into one of the bedrooms and reappeared a minute later with a gas can. Leaning forward, he started pouring it down from the balcony, soaking the zombies below.

I wanted to stop him before he set the house on fire and risked our lives in the process, but his grim expression stopped me.

“Fire and explosions are fantastic ways to destroy the walking dead.” Grabbing his lighter, he yelled, “Die, you undead suckers! DIE!”

“Dean!? Nick!?”

At the sound of Val’s muffled scream, we froze, dead cold.

Claire grabbed Nick’s hand. “STOP! Listen...that’s her!”

I leaned over and saw Val crawling out from under the pack, unscathed. *What? How is that possible? They didn’t even touch her?*

“I hit my head,” she said. “Blacked out for a minute. But I’m fine.” She stumbled through the moaning crowd and over to the table. There, she bravely snatched the keys for both vehicles and held them up high.

I shot Nick a confused look.

He smiled, mirroring my relief that she wasn’t dead.

“Meet me out back!” she yelled up.

I nodded and pulled Nick’s arm. “How is that possible? She’s still alive, but how?”

His eyes widened. “It must be because she carries their scent. That wound of hers means she’s turning into one. I’ve heard they don’t eat their own kind, but...” He shook his head. “To tell you the truth, I’m not even sure.”

I laughed, relieved. “Yeah, they must have thought she was one of them. Then again, I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

“I can’t believe it,” Claire said. “If you’re bitten, then you get reprieve from the zombies.”

“It appears that way. And since you haven’t been bitten, no reprieve for you.” Nick thrust a bat into Claire’s hands and motioned her forward.

She let out a shaky breath but didn’t protest. The poor girl was terrified; I could tell from the way her eyes darted to and fro, and her knuckles had turned white where she touched the smooth, cold wood. “What am I supposed to do with this?” she whispered.

My brother cupped her cheek. “Well, it isn’t for playing baseball, that’s for sure. I know you’re scared of guns, but you’re gonna need a weapon of some sort. Just beat the crap out of anything that tries to bite a chunk out of you.”

“I’m sorry, but I just...can’t,” she said eventually. “I can’t hit a—”

“A what? Another person? They aren’t people anymore, Claire. They’re monsters, animals, waiting to eat you alive.”

I felt sorry for the girl to some degree, but my patience was growing as thin as Nick's. "You know what? Just give it to me." I snatched the bat out of her hands. After all, my gun had flown over the balcony, and I was in desperate need of a weapon to protect myself. I knew I'd be okay once I got to the Jeep, because my half-zombie sister had packed plenty of weapons, but in the meantime, I had to make do with anything I could get my hands on. I thought my words might talk some sense into Claire, but she just shrugged and let me have her only weapon without protest. I didn't get the girl, but at that point, with survival on my mind, I didn't even care.

"Ready, Val?" Nick yelled.

"Yep! Let's make them pay, boys and girls!" she replied from somewhere to our right.

I craned my neck until I thought I could distinguish her brown locks from the mess of dead people around her, and I saw her standing near the edge of the house, where the glass wall and the door had been.

"C'mon!" Nick said with a wink. Once Val was safely away from the horde, Nick went to work. He pulled a lighter out of his pocket and threw it onto the gas-drenched crowd, starting a zombie roast. Smoke and fire engulfed the small undead army while Nick yelled for us to run down the hall, then motioned us into a small bathroom with a narrow window that we hoped would be just big enough for us to squeeze through.

"There's a huge tree we can shimmy down," Claire said.

I nodded. Squinting, I could see the Jeeps in the driveway, and it was a relief to see that there weren't any zombies in that general area. It appeared as if they had all headed toward the front of the house, where the glass walls had collapsed. I could only assume the noise from the explosion had attracted them and drawn them in that direction.

"Okay, everyone. No talking until we're safe," he said, sliding the window open.

Without so much as a look back, I threw the bat out the window and watched it land next to a towering bush. I climbed out. Branch by branch, I clambered down the giant oak tree. The moment I jumped down and landed on the bare ground, I saw Val running toward me. "Val! I'm so glad you're alive," I said, burying my face in her hair as I hugged her tight. "I tried to stop him, but I—"

She nodded but didn't reply. A rush of emotions overwhelmed me, choking me. We just stood there, holding each other. In that moment, no words were needed, because I could feel how

relieved she was. The other's presence was enough to convey even more than we could possibly say.

Suddenly, our Hallmark moment was interrupted by a rude gurgle echoing from the left. Instinct kicked in, and I reached for my weapon. The smell of decaying flesh assaulted my nostrils. The moonlight served as a spotlight, enhancing every black vein, rotting flesh chunk, and seeping, oozing, smelly wound the zombie had endured. I wound up my bat to hit a homerun, hoping to knock the zombie's head out of the park, but Jackie yanked the bat out of my hands. I shot her a look, but she just shook her head and replied with a grim expression of her own. I knew she was trying to make up for being hesitant about whipping out her gun to save Val. She wanted to prove to me that she was ready to fight now. I knew she had finished the thing off when a *whack* echoed in the air and the hissing stopped.

"You drive this one." Val pointed to the black Jeep and opened the driver door so I could jump in, then tossed me a set of keys; a second set to the red Jeep dangled from her fingers. I nodded and took the driver spot while I watched her jump into the other vehicle.

Nick grabbed Claire's hand and led her to my Jeep. I looked for Jackie, but she had jumped in with Val. I started the Jeep and threw it into gear. As I backed up, I noticed a handful of zombies to our left. My eyes scanned the area for an escape route, but that was about the only path wide enough for the Jeep to muddle through. "They're blocking our path!"

"Run those slimy numbskulls over!" Nick yelled. "They're already road kill!"

I hit the gas and sped out of the driveway, ignoring the loud *thuds* and *crunches* under my wheels. When a corpse hit the hood, I jumped in my skin; filmy white, glazed-over eyes connected with mine. Clenching my jaw, I threw on the brakes and sent him flying off, then sped up again.

Flames engulfed the giant glass mansion and burned brightly against the night. In the flickering lights to my left, I saw a swarm of zombies eating what looked like a human being. It had to be the mountain men...or what was left of them. The beasts tore at an exposed ribcage, oozing what I took to be intestines. The car Earl and Tahoe had ridden in was still sitting in the driveway. "Look! They didn't make it," I said.

My brother followed my line of vision and shook his head. "Justice served and good riddance. What they did to Val was inhuman."

"Gosh, it's so...awful," Claire said.

I pressed the gas pedal down hard, revving the engine and making my brain hurt from the grinding sound. Blackness covered my vision for a second, and I shook my head until my vision returned. Through the blur before my eyes, I saw Val in the rearview mirror, easily following my lead. The vehicle moved at a fast speed down the narrow driveway and onto the unpaved terrain of the woods. Behind us, the glass building became nothing but a burning spot in the evening sky. We drove in silence for a while, until I could see nothing but trees and the darkening sky. Only then did I let out a long breath that it seemed I'd been holding for hours. We had made it, and we were all alive.

"I'm an idiot!" Claire said. "I can't believe I actually wanted to stay. Had you left without me and Jackie, we'd be dead." Tears streamed down her cheeks as reality set in. "I've never been on my own before. Our group—the group we were with—took care of us. They were like my family." She took a trembling breath.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Nick squeeze her hand, soothing her. "It's okay, Claire. Our world has devolved into one where people have to fight and kill each other just to live another day. The people around you sheltered you because they wanted to take care of you, and they fought to keep you alive and safe. Not all people are bad, but not all of 'em are good either," he said, pondering Earl and Tahoe's cruel fate.

"You're right." She sniffed. "We didn't have to fight before, not until today. I've never even held a gun in my life. It was surreal that you asked that of me today. I just...couldn't."

"I know, but you have to understand those people who looked after you—good as they were—didn't do you any favors by protecting you, by sheltering you too much. Now you're unprepared and ill-equipped for what's waiting out there." Nick's tone was soft, but there was a sharp edge to it, as if he was breaking bad news to someone he didn't want to hurt. I hoped Claire would listen and take his advice at face value. My brother was blunt, but his advice—hard as it was to swallow—would help her stay alive longer. "You won't stand a chance out here if you don't learn how to fight and protect yourself," Nick continued.

I listened intently, his words ringing true in my ear. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was enraged with his brutal honesty, for much of what he said applied to me as well. I suddenly understood why he'd been so angry with me for smuggling Val inside the helicopter. I, too, had been sheltered, living naively on Kelleys Island, having no idea that the rest of the world was crumbling around me. Sure, I'd heard stories and plenty of urban legends, but quite like Claire, it

didn't seem real until I was thrown right smack dab in the middle of it. The truth was a painful thing for all of us.

Claire laid her head on my brother's shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her. I was sure he felt awkward about it and was only trying to be nice, for Claire was definitely not his type. He usually liked girls who took on the action, not the ones who ran away from it, squealing about chipping their nails or breaking their expensive heels. *But then again, who knows? Maybe he needs a girly kind of girl right now to balance out all this blood and nastiness. Opposites still attract, right? Or maybe it's just a bad case of nerves.* I knew whatever it was; we had no time for soap operas. We had more important fish to fry, like finding the freeway, for starters.

Once we were finally on the highway, I felt a bit safer. Val's Jeep now led the way and we drove for a few hours in absolute silence. I would've loved to have thrown some tunes on, but I was sure all the DJs had been gobbled up by zombies.

Then, out of nowhere, I noticed my sister slowing down, and her brake lights flashed as she pulled over to the side of the road.

"What the heck?" I yelled to my brother.

He jolted awake when I stopped behind her and cut the engine.

"It's Val. She's pulling over."

"Why?" Claire asked. "It's dark outside. Stopping isn't a good idea, right?"

I shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe she needs a potty break or has a flat or something."

My brother jumped out of the car and dashed toward her Jeep, yelling, "Are you mad? No stopping unless I deem it safe!"

Claire and I rushed over to the other Jeep, then stopped the moment we reached Val.

She was on the side of the road by a sign, puking into the bushes.

Jackie's hand rested on her back. She shot us an apologetic look, then went about rubbing Val's back.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly the moment the heaving stopped.

She nodded but didn't seem to want to move from the spot.

My brother and I scanned the area as we waited for her to finish. The long stretch of deserted highway posed no imminent threat, or so it seemed. Nick tapped his gun, signaling that we should get a move-on; I was glad for that, because I didn't want to stick around either. The

full moon reminded me of werewolves, and a chill pricked my spine. *Get it together. Werewolves are fake, just something for teenage girls to giggle over, unless they prefer sparkly vampires.* But zombies were real, and my sister was about to turn into one.

“Sorry, guys,” Val eventually said, standing.

“It’s okay,” Nick said. “I’m the one who should be sorry for yelling at you.”

Claire touched Val’s shoulder. “Is there anything I can do?”

She straightened and flipped her hair out of her eyes. “I’m fine, guys. Thanks for asking. Let’s just get outta here. Sorry for stopping.”

“Wait,” I said, holding a hand up to stop her. “You shouldn’t be driving in your condition.” I knew she needed rest.

Val motioned for Jackie to get back in. Once Jackie did, Val jumped in the Jeep and slammed the door in my face. Her behavior was moody and sporadic, and it went beyond the normal female oddities. Turning the key, the engine cranked but refused to turn over.

“Why won’t this thing start?” she asked. She tried a few more times and the engine finally fired.

Nick peeked his head in the open window. “Dean’s right. You’re in no condition to drive. Also, we need to re-wrap that nasty wound of yours.”

She smiled. “I’m fine, baby brother.”

“That’s for me to decide,” he said.

“Listen, each Jeep is stocked with a first aid kit,” Val said. “I made sure of that. So don’t worry. I’ll have Jackie wrap it up as soon as possible.”

“Let me slap on a dressing from the medical kit, and then Dean’s driving while you get some sleep.” He motioned to the back seat.

“Are you worried I might hurt Jackie?” Val asked. Before Nick could answer, she continued, “Listen, the first thing I did was give Jackie a gun. If I try to bite, she can just shoot me.”

As he reached for the keys, Val threw the car in reverse.

Nick jumped back. “Val! You about ran me over.”

Tires squealed, and she sped off ahead of us. Clearly, the girl had a mind of her own, and she didn’t like being told what to do.

I tapped Nick’s shoulder. “C’mon! We gotta catch up!”

He jumped in the driver seat, looked over his shoulder to make sure Claire and I were in back, and stomped on the gas.

I let out a breath, my gaze focusing on the road ahead. “Why’s she acting like that?”

Nick gripped the steering wheel tightly. “She’s stubborn. It runs in the family.”

My heart jumped when I saw Val exit the freeway into the next city.

“Oh my gosh!” Claire said as my brother swerved into the opposite lane. “What’s she doing? She’s driving like a maniac! She’s gonna kill my cousin!”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. We have plenty of gas, food, and water,” Nick said. “There’s no reason to venture into one of those cities. I’m gonna have to kick her infected butt when we catch up to her!”

“Not if I get to her first,” I said.

He pulled off the ramp and turned left into the city. A sharp jolt rushed through me as we ran over a deep pothole, then another. Nick didn’t slow down one bit and rushed to keep up with Val. The place seemed deserted except for a few stray zombies stumbling aimlessly down the street, groaning in unsatisfied hunger. There were no streetlights and no traffic—just eerie silence, darkness, and walking corpses.

Nick looked over his shoulder at us, “I don’t like this one bit.”

“Neither do I! Venturing into the city is beyond stupid. I really don’t want to follow her, but what choice do we have? We can’t just desert them.”

We watched as Val carelessly swerved around a corner, past an abandoned subway station.

Nick beeped the horn.

“Stop!” Claire screamed, popping her head out the window.

“Try cutting her off,” I said.

He sped up and swerved around her as my seatbelt strained against my shoulders. The headlights fell on the other Jeep, illuminating Val’s face for a brief second.

In that second, I saw the dangerous look in her eyes. I yelled for her to pull over.

She suddenly turned left and came to a halt in the empty lot of a grocery store where shopping carts were scattered all about.

“All right. She stopped,” Nick said. “Let’s go talk to her! I’m dying to see what she has to say.” Frowning, he pulled next to her and parked the Jeep.

Claire jumped out after Val. “Val!”

“Claire,” my brother yelled. “Don’t go out there without a weapon!”

“Got the stun gun,” she replied.

I didn’t believe in giving lectures, but Val needed a good talking-to, and I was going to give it to her, whether she wanted it or not. I opened the door, but my brother yanked my arm to keep me inside.

“Wait! You can’t go out there unarmed either.” He reached down and pulled a gun from a strap on his ankle. “Take this. I’ve got another one.”

Nick was right—again: Walking out in dangerous territory without a weapon would have been suicide, so I grabbed the gun. “Let’s go see what Val’s little problem is, and then we’ll get back on the road again. And she’s NOT driving again, no matter what.”

“Exactly.” Nick nodded.

“Hey, sis,” I yelled.

Like a madwoman, Val grabbed a loose brick and whipped it through the window. Glass shattered with a *boom*, making me lower my head to protect my face. My sister was losing it big time, and I realized Nick and I were going to have to wrangle her back because she wasn’t playing with a full deck.

“What are you doing?” Nick yelled, waving his arms in the air.

Jackie came from behind and shook my shoulder. “Your sister’s talking all crazy. She says you have a cure for her zombie bite, but she has to turn into a zombie first. She’s going mad or something!”

“We do have a possible cure,” I said, “but she’s right about having to become a zombie first.”

She nodded slowly, as if trying to process the words. “The cure... it’s in that black bag you were carrying over your shoulder when I first met you. Isn’t it?”

“Bingo. Hey, you got a weapon?” Nick asked her.

“I lost my gun when I almost went over the banister,” she said, “but Val gave me another one.”

“Good.” Nick said.

“Let’s wrangle my sister back into the Jeep,” I said.

“Crap!” Jackie yelled.

My heart leapt when Val suddenly darted inside the store, disappearing into the darkness stretching beyond.

Chapter 11

Nighttime had descended a few hours earlier, and the streets ahead of us seemed devoid of life. A narrow slice of the moon peeked from behind thick clouds that looked almost black against the night sky. Without lampposts to show us the way, we knew anything could be lurking in the shadows, waiting to ambush us. Luckily, though, the light of the stars cast just enough light to illuminate our way. My breath misted before me as I jumped out of the car. I left the door open and hurried past overflowing trashcans, toward the entrance to the small building into which Val had disappeared a minute ago.

“Shoot anything that looks suspicious,” Nick said. “I don’t care how many bullets you waste, just stay safe. We have plenty back in the Jeep.”

Even though his back was turned on me and he couldn’t see me, I nodded and hurried after him. I didn’t know what kind of goose chase my sister was leading us on. Why she had decided to pull off the highway and lead us into a creepy, deserted ghost town at night, only to break into a grocery store, was beyond me, but for her own sake, I hoped she had some viable reason. Nick, however, wasn’t as understanding and patient as his little brother.

“C’mon, Dean. Move your butt. We haven’t got all of eternity,” Nick said, motioning me forward.

“Wait!” Claire said. “We’ll never see a thing in there.” She whirled around and headed back to the Jeep, then returned with what looked like an overstuffed purse full of flashlights, which she passed around.

Nick met her gaze. “What do you mean, ‘we’? You’re not going in there with us.”

“What? Of course I am.” As though to prove a point, she walked past him, calling over her shoulder, “It’s your sister, isn’t it? You guys might need my help.”

I raised my brows at Nick. I’d assumed Claire hated Val, but either they’d suddenly bonded over killing a few zombies, or else she really did dig Nick and was just trying to impress him. I

didn't know her all that well, but from what I had seen so far, I was ready to bet my most precious friend and possession—the gun in my hands—on the latter.

“Just be careful. She's been bitten!” Jackie yelled after her.

Claire stopped and turned. “I know. Nick told me everything back in the Jeep.”

Yeah, definitely the latter. She probably thinks they share something special now that Nick has confided in her. Shaking my head, I let out a long breath and took off through the parking lot. I stopped abruptly in the doorway of the market when I heard Val's screams echoing through the air. The air smelled of damp earth and rotting garbage, but there was also something else: the scent of death.

I gritted my teeth as I looked at Nick, “Val's going to alert every zombie from here to kingdom come if she doesn't be quiet.” If I'd have had a roll of duct tape, or if we'd have been fortunate enough to stumble into a hardware store where they sold the stuff, I would have been highly tempted to use it. My sister's big mouth was going to turn us all into zombie bait.

The bobbing beams of our flashlights swept back and forth as we hurried up the cereal aisle. I only knew we were in the graveyard of Rice Krispies and Golden Grahams because the sign over our heads said so; there was nothing left on the shelves but layers of dust and debris and a box ripped right down the middle of Tony the Tiger's striped head. Then something scurried past to our right and I craned my neck and swept the flashlight over a dark head with long hair. I nudged Nick, then sped up to catch my sister. “Val, c'mon! We gotta go!”

The filthy linoleum, carpeted by an inches-thick layer of dust and grime, barely made a sound as I dashed through the darkness, then stopped. A sickly scent hit my nostrils, making me want to puke. I moved my flashlight around and illuminated the darkness as I scanned the area to spot the culprit...packages of rotting meat.

Val held up a blue box with a picture of noodles and fancy writing. She didn't even turn as she said, “Look! It's smashed. Rodents have been nibbling it as well, so this one's a no-go.” She tossed the box on the floor, and it landed with a loud *thud*, then pulled out a giant, moldy piece of steak from its wrapper. To be honest, I wasn't even sure what it was and I didn't know what possessed her to pick it up in the first place. “Is this going to be my new choice of food?” she asked.

“I sure hope not, Val,” I whispered.

Ignoring me, she rolled her eyes and threw the steak away. It plopped onto the ground a few feet away and remained stuck to the ground. “It’s expired! You can have it, miss!” Val yelled, her voice reverberating from the walls. “And get some clothes on. Who comes to a store dressed in a robe anyway? When you’re done snacking, go home and cook your man some brains or something.”

“Who’s she talking to?” I whispered to Nick.

“I dunno,” he said. “But it’s kind of freaky. I bet she’s hallucinating.”

My attention remained glued to Val as she held up a can and rolled it in her hands, continuing her monologue. “And this one’s dented. This store sucks! Where’s the manager?”

Footsteps echoed behind me a moment before Claire and Jackie appeared and Claire’s hand wrapped around my upper arm.

“What’s going on?” Jackie whispered.

I shook my head, signaling that I had no clue, and turned my gaze back to Val, who was still regarding a can as though it was a famous painting hanging in an art museum.

“Are you trying to memorize the ingredients or something?” Claire asked, her voice oozing with sarcasm. “Surely you’re not counting calories now, are you?”

In one swift move, Val lunged at Claire, hissing like some kind of vampire chick in a horror flick. Claire’s arms flew up to protect her face, but Val was stronger. In a single motion, she tossed Claire to the ground and landed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. I had to admit, it kind of freaked me out, almost to the point that I wanted to summon the men in white coats to bring their paddy wagon and lock her up in a straightjacket. After the initial shock, I finally unglued myself from the spot and leapt forward, but Nick was quicker on the draw. He wrapped his arms around her and dragged her up in an iron grip as she kicked and screamed.

“She’s trying to kill me!” Claire yelled.

I rolled my eyes. “No, I don’t think so. I think she just didn’t like what you said. If you knew anything about zombies, you’d know to keep your mouth shut rather than provoke their short temper.”

Val’s eyes bulged in her skull, and she looked like a serial killer. “You’ll be the first to go, Claire! You didn’t watch my back, so now I’m going to eat yours.”

Nick held her tight and I was thankful for that.

Claire gasped, hiding behind me. “She’s mad, freaking crazy! Get that monster away from me,” she chanted over and over again. “Get her away!”

“She’s not a monster,” I whispered. “...yet,” I wanted to add but didn’t.

“My gosh! It’s like she’s possessed or something,” Claire said.

“Okay, okay. I’m fine! Let me go,” Val said quietly. She had stopped struggling and seemed reasonable again, but I didn’t trust the sudden calmness.

“You sure?” Nick asked.

She nodded, her gaze sweeping over Claire, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker in her eyes. I wanted to shout at Nick to watch out when he pulled away a few inches. Like a wild beast, Val lunged forward again, her hands cutting through the air inches from my face. Claire buried her face in my shoulder, and her hands clutched the shirt at my lower back.

“What’s wrong with you?” Nick said through gritted teeth, grabbing hold of Val again. “I trusted you, and you’re acting like a psycho again. Calm down, Val!”

I smacked my tongue and peeled Claire off my shirt, and then I shot my brother a look. “You can’t trust a zombie. Wasn’t that the first lecture you ever taught me? Funny that you’d forget it now.”

“I’m not a zombie,” Val hissed. “I’m just a girl on a mission.”

Yeah, right...the mission of eating a friend. I flashed my beam in her eyes and then gave Nick a sideways glance.

“What?” he asked.

“Her irises are dilated, her eyes bloodshot. The skin on her forehead is beginning to crack.”

“The virus is kicking in,” Nick said. “She doesn’t mean to act like a maniac. I hate to tell you this, but it’s only gonna get worse, so you’d better get used to it.” He pushed Val past us. His knuckles had turned white where his fingers had sliced into her arms.

She struggled, her legs tangling with his, making it impossible to inch forward.

“Move it, Val,” he whispered, “or I swear I’ll tie you up and drag you out of here. You won’t like that little trip through the express lane. Trust me.”

“How are we going to get her back in the Jeep?” I asked.

“She’ll either cooperate, or else I’ll knock her out using pressure points.”

Val hissed and spat but didn’t argue. Slowly, she began to take one pace at a time.

When I heard a growl that wasn't coming from my nearly zombified sister, my senses kicked in on full alert. I shined my light around until the beam fell on a pair of glowing yellow eyes that came out of the darkness. "Nick!" I yelled. "Zombie housewife at three o'clock!"

"Don't panic!" Nick whispered. "I've got this."

I squinted to get a better glimpse as I swung the beam around so I could catch any attack. The zombie inched forward, then stopped and bent forward, allowing us a glimpse beneath her dirty white robe. I smirked and moved my gaze from her naked legs to the bulging red veins covering her face. Val's words echoed in my ears, and I wondered if she'd been talking to that half-dressed zombie, advising it to throw on some clothes, but I had no time to ponder her strange comment. The zombie moved again. Slowly, she knelt to the ground and picked up the piece of meat Val had tossed away, then started to lick the spoiled steak in a bloodthirsty frenzy, like a starving stray dog.

Val slapped her forehead. "That's sick! I can't believe that's going to be me in less than a day!"

"Put that thing out of its misery please," I said.

Nick aimed his gun and shot the corpse in the head.

She fell straight back and landed in a large display of macaroni and cheese boxes.

"Will you shoot me too?" Val asked sweetly. "You did just shoot my sister, in a sense. I mean, we're all part of the same happy meat-eating zombie family, right?"

"Stop talking like that!" Nick said through gritted teeth.

She grabbed my collar and shook me, her unnaturally shiny eyes piercing into mine.

"What's it like to have a zombie for a sister?" she asked.

I set my jaw and forced myself to stare at her. *What am I supposed to say? The truth? That it completely sucks?* Whatever my brain came up with, it wouldn't be good enough, and I knew it sure wouldn't change anything. "It's not fun—no fun at all! Especially when she breaks into stores at night in the middle of Zombie Land." It was hard to see any life behind those eyes of hers. I was losing her after just so recently finding her, and that hurt me more than anything. "Try and think straight, Val! We gotta go, big sister."

"Big? So now I'm fat, huh?"

"No way!" I shook my head.

“I don’t want to become a zombie,” she said sadly, knocking over another display, sending several red and white cans to the floor. “Mmm, mmm, good,” she mocked, looking at them. “I’m not really into brains as a delicacy,” Val said.

Her thoughts were all over the place, and I realized I needed to keep her focused. “You won’t be a zombie forever, Val. I’ve got the cure, remember?” My voice remained calm, but inside I was shaking like a leaf in the wind, hoping that what I was telling her was true.

“You do? Why didn’t you just say so?” She yawned. “I’m so tired. What’s your name again?”

“I’m your brother, Dean.”

“And I’m your other brother, Nick. Now come on, sis. I have a nice blanket and pillow waiting for you in the Jeep,” Nick coaxed softly. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.” She leaned forward as though to hug me.

Nick grabbed her arm to put a few inches between us.

If she noticed, she didn’t comment on it. She simply said, “Dean and Nick, I love you guys so much. I couldn’t ask for better brothers.”

I prayed to God she wouldn’t bite me while my guard was down. “It’s gonna be okay. I promise.”

“Why are we here? In a grocery store of all places?” Val asked, as if she had just snapped back into reality. “Are you guys that hungry? Didn’t we take enough food from that glass house?”

“I’m not hungry at all,” I said, pushing her forward as gently as I could. Luckily, she began to move.

“Then why are we here?” she asked.

“Well, you hightailed it off the freeway to take us on some kind of midnight tour of this place,” I said. “I figured maybe you were looking for a fast-food drive-thru.”

“I’m losing my mind. You better not let me drive again. I’m so sorry, guys. I-I just don’t know what’s happening to me.” She squeezed my hand and then let it go, as though she didn’t trust herself any more than I trusted her. In the very next second, she yelled, “Get away from me! Who are you? I’m not going anywhere with you!”

In an instant, Claire pressed her stun gun on Val's arm, sending my sister crumbling to the ground on jellied legs. "Sorry for zapping your sister and all, but I think we need to get outta here," Claire said.

"It's okay. She was out of control." I scooped her up and realized she was burning up.

Nick shined the light down. "She's out cold. Let's get her back into the Jeep."

We barely moved a few steps before zombie groans came from our right.

Jackie gripped my hand. "We've got company, and I don't think they're here for this week's sales." In spite of her attempt at infusing humor, I could feel her rigidity.

"This isn't good!" Claire said.

"Don't worry," Jackie said. "Val gave me a gun, so we'll be okay."

"I hope you're right," Claire said. She peeked around an aisle, then gasped.

I followed her line of vision, and my own breath caught in my throat. "There're so many of them. That gun of yours better be a dead aimer...and I mean that literally."

We moved forward at a snail's pace, careful not to draw any unwanted attention. About twenty zombies stumbled around aimlessly, knocking over boxes and cans as they rummaged through the stock, looking for any kind of raw meat.

We were almost halfway down the aisle when a zombie's gaze fell upon me. I forced myself to remain calm, even though my whole body screamed to run. "Nick!" I nudged my brother harder than intended. "We're outnumbered. How are we ever gonna get out of here?"

He grabbed my arm and pulled me down the aisle where we hid behind a giant display.

"We need a distraction," Jackie said.

Nick glanced around, as if pondering. "Flour," he finally said. "And it's not for baking a cake."

"Brilliant idea. We can cover them in the stuff," Claire said.

"Perfect distraction," I said. "I saw flour too."

"Where?" Claire said.

Without giving her an answer, I darted a few aisles over, flashing my light on the overhanging signs until I found the right aisle. I turned left and started frantically looking until I found it. Just as I snagged a package, a zombie's hand burst through the shelf opening from the other side, grabbing my arm and startling me. My gun clattered to the floor, next to a cellophane bag of broken plastic forks.

Through the shining beam of my flashlight, I looked through the gap, and I saw the zombie's white, lifeless, hungry eyes. My heart lurched. I knew if the thing broke my skin, I'd be in as much trouble as Val. I tried to wiggle my hand free, but it had amazing strength and just tightened its grip, pulling while rattling the shelf. I feared it might draw the attention of the other undead late-night shoppers, but my main concern was freeing my arm without sustaining a wound. I prayed it wouldn't scratch or bite me with its jagged teeth, because I knew that would be more fatal than any saliva dropping on my skin. With my free hand, I tried to hit it with my flashlight over and over again, until my arm hurt, but still the thing wouldn't let go.

Footsteps rushed behind me, and my heart raced. A zombie? *How am I supposed to fight while this thing's got a hold of me?* I glanced over my shoulder and saw it wasn't a zombie. It was only Claire. She was hurrying over to me, holding her stun gun. I bit my lip hard as she stunned the corpse's arm. When it released its cold grasp, I yanked my arm free. "Thank you, Claire! I so owe you."

"Did it get you?" she whispered.

I ran my hands over my arm, fearing that I might find myself in the same predicament as Val. "No blood," I said, letting out a huge sigh of relief. When I suddenly heard footsteps, my gaze jerked up.

"It's okay," Claire said. "It's only the others."

Nick carried Val securely in his arms. "Grab as many bags as you can!"

We all went to work and started grabbing bags of flour. I was pretty sure Nick hadn't seen my little 'shelf battle' with the zombie and I wasn't about to say anything at the moment. There was no time for lectures. Carrying the sacks, we sped down the aisle.

"Our goal is to confuse them, to distract them!" Nick whispered, setting down Val.

We clambered to the top of the shelves and opened the bags. When we threw them, flour spewed everywhere. I coughed from the blanket of white sifting through the air, but our plan seemed to work: The zombies hissed and started to stumble around like big, clumsy idiots, and it looked as if they were completely disoriented from the flour fog we'd created.

"Run now!" yelled Nick, jumping down and scooping up Val.

Nick and Claire darted off ahead of Jackie and me. We were right behind them when an avalanche of cans and boxes tumbled over my head. The shelves had collapsed right down on us, probably from the weight of so many zombies filling the store. I gripped Jackie's hand tightly,

peering through the smog of flour. It appeared as if Nick, Val, and Claire had made it out okay, but I hadn't. *Murphy's Law. Go figure.* I glanced helplessly at all the zombies flooding in through the doorway.

"We'll have to find a different way out," Jackie whispered.

I glanced at the zombies flooding in through the doorway and realized we definitely couldn't use the main entrance. From what I had seen so far, the only other way out was the back, where the zombies were gathered. *Crap! We're so screwed.*

Chapter 12

From outside, the grocery store had seemed deserted, even peaceful, but there was nothing peaceful about the place. Unfortunately, we had to discover that tiny detail after following Val inside, and now we were trapped. The countless growls and moans cutting through the night made my skin tingle, and my brain was working overtime as I tried to figure out a way to make it out alive. Nick, Val, and Claire had made it out of the store, but Jackie and I were still trapped inside, and it didn't look like we were going to be able to come up with an exit strategy before the zombies noticed our presence. One had already spotted me, and with more flooding in through the front by the minute, the place would grow crowded soon. My heart was already drumming in my ears, and I was sure that if I could hear its terrified *thump-thump* so loud and clear, the zombies would hear it too. It was only a matter of time.

I bit my lip as I glanced around the darkness, then pointed to a high window way over to the right.

Jackie nodded in silent agreement, then took off in the right direction.

Our shoes barely made a sound on the tile floor as we zigzagged through a few aisles and finally made it to the horizontal window, then stopped to peer around. Long shelves filled with cans jutted out of the wall.

Giving Jackie's hand a last squeeze, I stepped on one of the rickety bottom shelves and pulled myself up to the next horizontal surface. "C'mon!" I whispered. It was difficult to shimmy

up it without knocking off any of the merchandise with my feet, but we couldn't risk making any noise. The last thing I wanted to do was give away my location to the army of the undead. I placed a foot on the hard surface and held on to the metal rod, then heaved myself up. My clothes made a chafing sound that wouldn't have been noticeable under normal circumstances, but nothing about our circumstances was normal. I held my breath and peered around me, trying to determine if we'd been spotted. The zombies went about their business, fighting and hissing over a slice of foul-smelling meat. Letting out my breath, I tested the shelf with my leg. When I realized it was strong enough to support me, I moved up to the next level, then stopped again when the shelf trembled. A few cans knocked against each other; two or three rolled to the side, but didn't drop to the ground. *Thank God!* I knew if I could keep it that way, we might just stand a chance. The last thing I wanted to die over was a can of black-eyed peas.

Using the shelf as a ladder to reach the top, I climbed up slowly but steadily, taking one step at a time. I was almost up when one of the cans clattered to the ground, the sound reverberating from the walls. Crap! Suddenly, a few zombie heads snapped in our direction, causing my breath to catch in my throat. I prayed their interest wouldn't be piqued but, as usual, luck wasn't on my side. Hurrying as fast as I could, my legs on fire, I dashed up, then reached down to help Jackie. I wrapped my hand around her thin arm to pull her up, and once she reached the top, we glanced down. Because of my fumbling cans fiasco, zombies had spotted us and headed in our direction.

Jackie unlocked the window. We pushed and pulled as hard as we could, our arms straining as we forced the latch, but it was painted shut and refused to budge. I reached for my gun but it wasn't there and I knew it must've fallen out when the shelves collapsed on us.

"Give it another push!" I yelled. "On three!" I began to count, and then hurled my whole weight forward, to no avail. My heart began to race again. I got on my knees and reached down for anything we could use to bust the window or knock the latch off. My hands wrapped around a can of spaghetti sauce, the mushroom variety. It was a bit small, but the edges were sharp enough to do the trick. "Cover your face!" I said to Jackie.

"No need," she said, sliding out her gun from her holster. Pulling the trigger, the window shattered with a boom, glass spraying outside onto the gravel below. The shelves started to wobble as zombies began to rock them from below, and Jackie fell back with a loud yelp.

I quickly grabbed her around the waist to steady her, while holding on to the railing with my other arm. "Wrap your arm around my neck," I shouted through the moaning noise below. When

Jackie reached up, I scooped her into my arms and held her tightly against me, then kicked out the rest of the window while Jackie kicked the shelf over. Her body was still pressed against me as we teetered on the edge of the windowsill, dangerously close to the floor below and the hands reaching up to grab us and tear us into tasty, bloody morsels. With a loud *thud*, the shelf crashed on top of the zombies.

I peered out into the night, exasperated. There were no trees to shimmy down, no ladder, no rope, and nothing to aid our descent. Only after leaning out did I notice that directly underneath us, there was a tall dumpster with flat, open doors on the top and metal sliding doors on the side. “We’ve gotta jump,” I said.

Without hesitation, Jackie climbed out and took the plunge.

I followed right after and fell into a giant pile of black bags. I could hear the plastic crinkling beneath me a moment before the reek of rotten eggs hit my nostrils and made me gag. Pushing up, I struggled to grip something hard without spreading the garbage and smell all over me. When I finally managed to sit up, I realized the only thing that wasn’t covered in trash were parts of my face. “Are you okay?” I whispered, looking around for Jackie, who’d disappeared into the abyss of garbage.

She popped up and peered over a few bags. “Yeah, I’m fine. You?”

I nodded, even though I couldn’t tell whether she could see anything in the pitch black.

“See anything?” she continued.

The moon cast a glow over city buildings, and graffiti-covered walls stretching into the distance. To the left of a broken lamp post, I noticed a long alley strewn with garbage. My gaze scanned the area for any suspicious movement, but everything remained silent. “The coast is clear,” I whispered to Jackie.

The loud rustling of plastic bags next to Jackie startled me. Then, a green, rotting hand burst from the boxes and tried to clench the air. My heart lurched. I felt around the trash looking for anything I could get my hands on. All I could find were empty boxes that wouldn’t even smash a fly, let alone fight off a zombie.

The oversized container shook slightly on its wheels as the zombie fought its way through the trash and sprung toward Jackie, snapping its jaws. She whipped out her gun and shot it straight in the forehead. Dark liquid squirted everywhere, and the zombie fell sideways. Jackie scrambled up.

I was right behind her, so I helped her climb over the edge of the dumpster, and then followed. “Which way should we go?” I whispered as I scanned my surroundings.

“Let’s circle around. Maybe we’ll find Nick and Claire... and your sister.”

Before I could even answer, I heard a moan and spun around. I gasped. More zombies had spotted us and shuffled in our direction. Jackie aimed her gun, but we both realized there were too many and we wouldn’t stand a chance. With my heart pounding, I gripped her hand, and we turned around. “C’mon!” We took off down the alley, and I spied the perfect getaway vehicle, an abandoned motorcycle. Nick had taught me how to ride his motorcycle ages ago. I was a pro and could handle this with no problem. “Think it runs?” I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the zombies weren’t gaining on us. Luckily for us, they were slower than turtles, and they were still a good distance away, but I wanted to get out of there before they caught up.

“It won’t even start without keys,” Jackie said, searching for them in the darkness.

It would have been far too easy for them to have been left in the ignition, I supposed. I glanced down and noticed a leather coat lying on the sidewalk in a bloody heap. I was about to open my mouth to say something about it, but before I could, she had followed my line of vision and was poking her foot into the heap. Bending down, she felt the pockets and pulled out a set of dangling keys. I prayed one of them would start the bike. I hopped on, she hopped on behind me, and I slid the most appropriate-looking key in the ignition. There was a *click*, but the motorcycle wouldn’t start. Beads of sweat rolled down my face.

“Try again!” yelled Jackie. “They’re getting closer.”

“I am!” I said, wondering why the thing wouldn’t cooperate. With a terrified glance over my shoulder, I tried one last time. The engine spluttered for a moment, but then it finally started! We sped down the alley, my heart racing. I had always dreamt of riding a magnificent Harley with a beautiful girl, the blasting gusts of wind whipping through our hair. Of course, I’d pictured it more on a highway, not in a back-alley labyrinth, in the middle of the night, with zombies hot on our tailpipes.

We took a few twists and turns, but I really wasn’t sure which way to go. I slowed and turned the motorcycle down another alleyway, which ultimately led us to a beach.

“Turn around,” Jackie said.

Just as she said it, I heard hissing and moaning wafting through the night air and glanced over my shoulder to see a new group of undead coming out from behind deserted buildings and heading toward us. “Um, scratch that!” I said. “There’s no way we’re going back.”

Chapter 13

“The sand! It’ll slow them down big time,” I said, turning left onto the beach and hitting the gas. I scanned my surroundings. To the left, tall trees stretched into the sky, their crowns swallowed up by darkness. Behind us, a white sign glowed in the darkness, pointing out that it was a private beach and any intruders would be prosecuted. We didn’t know what we might stumble upon in either direction, and I wasn’t sure which way to take. While I was deliberating, my wheels suddenly squealed, throwing up sand everywhere.

“What’s going on?” Jackie asked behind me. Her frantic tone and the way her hands clutched my waist told me she was slowly getting worried.

“Hold on,” I said calmly, even though my hands were shaking. There wasn’t enough time to dig the tires out. If we were stuck, we’d have to make it out of there on foot. We had no flashlights and, worse, no idea what was lurking around the next corner. Shuffling through the sand, groups of zombies slowly came from every direction, drawn to us like moths to a flame. I assumed they were attracted to the roar of the motorcycle. I met Jackie’s terrified gaze. “If we can get free, we can zigzag around them.” It was a crazy idea, but it wasn’t impossible. They were still at least a hundred feet away, but one particular zombie seemed to move faster than the rest; I wondered if he’d been just recently turned. I kept the zombie MVP in my line of vision.

Jackie pulled out her gun. “I’m going to keep these freaks from getting too close. You just work on getting us outta here.”

“Remember, aim for their heads.”

“I know,” she said flatly.

The motorcycle rattled as I revved it up, the tires digging deep into the sinking sand. Time was running out, and I contemplated running on foot if we didn’t get the Harley out within the next minute or so.

“Hey!” she said. “Try not to spin the tires. Digging us halfway to Australia isn’t going to do us any good.” She squeezed the trigger and missed.

“Concentrate!” I said.

“I am!” she said. She fired again, this time hitting the zombie in the chest. “It’s still coming!”

“They will unless you hit them in the *head!*” I yelled. With the zombie inching forward, I needed to get the motorcycle tire out of the sand, but I couldn’t focus on helping Jackie and digging our way out all at once.

“Got it!” She slid off the bike. She walked right up to the zombie, until she was only a few feet away, then aimed and shot him right in the forehead, sending him to the ground, where he flailed around for a moment like a dying fish out of water.

“Are you crazy? Get back on the bike!” I yelled.

“I’m not going down without giving us a fighting chance.” She aimed at the approaching crowd, and three more fell. Jackie was finally realizing that fighting had become a necessity for life, but she was failing to realize that two people couldn’t take on an entire zombie herd by themselves.

“You need to quit playing hero and get your butt back on this bike!”

Reaching down, she grabbed some loose branches from the beach. “I have an idea.”

“I think your gun’s a much better choice,” I said.

“Try to lift the motorcycle when I count to three,” she said.

I heaved as hard as I could, but with the sand shifting everywhere, I only managed about two or three inches.

“Hold it up,” Jackie said, kneeling down.

I clenched my teeth and held the weight of the machine as I watched her squeeze the branches under the front tires, then move to the back. I held my breath as I dropped the front tire, then lifted up the back so she could stabilize the branches beneath it.

“The branches will provide traction, or at least I hope so,” she said.

It was a brilliant idea; I had to give her that. I rocked the motorcycle back and forth, spewing a cloud of sand in the air. Some of the smaller twigs snapped beneath it, making me doubt it would hold. I knew we had to hurry. I could just picture that undead army pulling us off the motorcycle and biting into our flesh, and I shuddered at the thought. “Jump on,” I said to Jackie before starting the engine. I could feel the twigs giving way beneath the tires, so I hit the gas. With one last squeal, the tires were free. I turned in the direction with the least amount of zombies and was able to easily pass by them, my heart racing even faster than the bike.

Speeding up, I followed the beach strip, my thighs clutching to it to keep it steady. I turned right. *There has to be an opening or exit somewhere. If we could only find it...* “Look for a gate

or something.” I yelled to Jackie, my gaze still fixed on the ground. As I turned the bend, I saw that the south side of the beach was also swarming with zombies. To make matters worse, I was sure our loud motorcycle had just rung the dinner bell.

“There’re too many of them!” Jackie said. “We’ll never get through.”

She was right, for I saw no way to break through them without becoming their midnight snack.

Jackie started shooting, and two dropped in our path.

I abruptly turned the bike and zigzagged past a few stragglers. I revved up the motorcycle and sped toward a nearby pier.

Jackie wrapped her arms tight around my waist. “What’re we doing?”

“Can you swim?”

“Yeah, sure. I take it we’re going for a dip?”

“Yep, hold on.” Adjusting my speed, I raced down the pier. The engine revved and the tires squealed as the motorcycle drove into the lake with a giant *splash* and began sinking, pulling us beneath the surface.

Cold water gushed into my mouth and soaked my clothes. Somewhere in the back of my swirling mind, I realized I could no longer feel Jackie’s hands around my waist. With deliberate, long pushes of my legs and arms, I broke the surface and spewed out water, my whole body screaming for oxygen. I took giant gulps of air and searched for Jackie. “Jackie? Jackie! Where are you?” I asked between breaths.

A few moments passed, but the dark surface of the water remained undisturbed. I scanned the area around me frantically, fearing the worst. Suddenly, a spluttering noise echoed from behind me. I turned sharply to Jackie, throwing her arms around me.

“You’re okay!” She laughed.

I melted into her embrace. “Never been better. I shook my head to push the scary images to the back of my mind. If anything had happened to her, I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself.

She motioned toward the shore. “You don’t think they can swim, do you?”

“No way! I live on an island. Trust me, those things can’t swim, and they know it.” My gaze darted over to the shore. Under the bright moonlight, zombies were pacing up and down it,

moaning and groaning, just waiting to tear us apart. Lots of them had also followed us up the pier. It gave me the creeps, but I knew they wouldn't come into the lake.

She squeezed my arm. "I bet they'd love it if we were stupid enough to swim back."

"Yeah, but we're not that stupid."

"Let's swim to the other side and get our butts out of here," Jackie said.

I had no idea how big or deep the lake was, but I didn't even want to think about it. With no other choice, I had to remain positive, so I glided forward with long strokes.

After a few minutes of swimming, Jackie stopped. I halted next to her and followed her line of vision, down the water surface to the darkness stretching in the distance. "You see that?" she whispered, pointing at what looked like a shore.

"What?"

She started forward, then swung back. "There's somebody over there."

I was sure it was just more zombies, so we'd have to keep swimming until we found a safe way out. I could see the opposite shore not too far away. Squinting to get a better look, I made out figures in the distance. A second later, a strong breeze carried their shouts to us. My lips curled into a big smile when I realized Nick and Claire were pacing along the shore, waving their hands wildly. "I can always count on my brother!" I pounded the water with my fists, splashing it in all directions.

Jackie smiled. "We're saved!"

I met her gaze when she gripped my shirt tight and pulled me close, wrapping her legs tightly around me. Catching me off guard, she captured my lips in a hot, hungry kiss. I swirled my tongue over hers. My heart pounded as adrenaline surged. I had never kissed such a hot girl before—or many girls, for that matter—and it was the most amazing feeling in the entire world.

She broke the kiss and said with a coy smile, "C'mon. Your brother's waiting."

I smiled. "Yeah, let's go." With powerful strokes, I cut through the water and swam toward shore.

"Hey, we saw headlights, and then a bike drive off into the lake!" Claire called as soon as we were within earshot, only a few feet away. "When we saw it, we raced our Jeeps over here to the other side, hoping it might be you."

"Yeah, with all that screaming to get your attention, I thought we'd attract zombies," Nick said.

I scanned the beach for any shadows, but saw none. It looked safe for the moment, and I was happy when my feet finally touched the ground beneath me. As I waded through the waist-high water, pebbles and sand shifted under my feet. I climbed out, shivering in the cold breeze running over my body. “How’s Val?” I asked my brother.

“Sleeping,” he answered. There was something in his voice though, some kind of hesitation, as though he was keeping something to himself, but I didn’t press the issue.

Happy to have made it out, I let out a sigh of relief and squeezed Jackie’s hand, and then my gaze fell on the gun in Claire’s hand. “You pack heat now?” I asked.

She noticed my staring and held it up. “Your brother showed me some tips at the house, so I thought this might be the perfect time to put them to good use.”

“Yeah, well, Nick can talk anyone into anything,” I said.

“C’mon,” Nick said. “You know a stun gun wouldn’t cut it out here.”

“I thought that too,” I said, “but then Claire saved my butt back in the store.”

“What?” Nick gasped.

“One of those zombies grabbed me through the shelves and I lost my gun. If Claire hadn’t come and stunned the freak, I’m sure the thing would’ve bitten me.” I threw Claire a thankful look. “Thanks, Claire.”

“Not a problem.” Claire slipped her gun into a holster around her waist, then threw an old blanket around me and Jackie. The wool felt so warm against my freezing skin; I couldn’t stop shivering.

Nick hugged me. “I’m so glad you two are safe. You scared me to death!”

“Sorry, man.”

“That was crazy!” Nick said. “Don’t you dare ever pull a stunt like that again. The bike could’ve dragged you underwater and drowned you.”

Jackie laughed. “A stunt? As if we planned it.”

I nudged her, smiling. “Yeah, I knew he’d be totally freaked.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Claire asked, as if standing up for his honor. “The last thing we saw was you guys heading off to the lake on a motorcycle with a herd on your butts.” She let out a trembling breath. “We tried to distract the zombies by beeping the horn.”

“And then Claire’s Jeep wouldn’t start at first...about giving me a heart attack,” Nick said.

“I really think we should be on a lookout for a new vehicle,” Claire said.

“Yeah,” Nick agreed. “Anyway, Claire laid on the horn like you wouldn’t believe!”

Claire nodded. “Some of them turned, but most of them had their eyes set on you.”

I found it funny that Claire had tried so hard to deter the undead army. The girl I’d met only hours earlier wouldn’t have dreamt of attracting their attention when she could have just run away. It was quite a change, quite an accomplishment. I was sure she didn’t do it entirely for me though. It was for Jackie, her cousin. When someone’s loved ones or friends are in trouble, they’ll go to astonishing lengths to save them, no matter how scary it is. I learned this firsthand with Val.

“We got separated when the zombies knocked the shelves over,” Jackie said. “We made an escape out a window.”

“Yeah, we were totally freaked out when we lost you guys.” Claire wrapped her arms around both of us. “I’m so glad you’re safe now.”

“Thanks for finding us,” whispered Jackie, hugging her tight.

“You think I’d let my BFF and cousin get eaten by zombies?”

Jackie chuckled. “Not in this lifetime.”

We all laughed.

Nick insisted I ride with him because he wanted to discuss game plans and routes, so Claire and Jackie drove one Jeep while Nick, Val, and I took the other. We took off, heading for the highway. Val was sprawled out across the back seat, Nick drove, and I rode in the passenger seat.

“You really think Val’s okay?” I asked. “She looks so pale.”

“She’s fine, but I’ll tell you one thing. If our crazy sister pulls another stunt like she did back there, I’m gonna…” He didn’t finish the thought.

She had definitely put us in a dangerous situation, and I hoped she would stay passed out for a while because I had no idea how to handle her. “When’s she going to turn so we can see if the cure works?”

“Soon—very soon.”

A thumping sound startled me. Turning sharply, I signaled Nick to keep quiet as I listened for any more strange noises. A second later, the thumping started again, stronger than before. My head snapped in Val’s direction, even though I knew she was out cold. With my heart racing in

my chest, I whipped out my gun and motioned for Nick to pull over as I prepared for yet another surprise coming from the storage compartment of our Jeep.

Chapter 14

We'd been on the highway for at least half an hour, listening to the rhythmic sound of our tires on the asphalt, when a strange noise made me look up. I held my breath and listened. For a whole second, nothing stirred, but then a thudding sound reverberated from inside the Jeep, the strange thudding and thumping we'd heard before. "What the heck?" I mumbled, motioning Nick to pull over and cut the engine. "I think something *is* in here with us."

"I hear it too. Stay calm," Nick said. "Let's not confront *anything* until we're all safely out of the Jeep. That'll give us a huge advantage."

The moment the Jeep ground to a halt, I grabbed Val and jumped out, setting her softly on the grass. If something was in that Jeep with us, I didn't want her to get hurt, especially while she was out cold and couldn't defend herself. I dashed for the back of the vehicle, with my weapon drawn.

Nick reached me in two long strides and placed his large body on the other side of the rear hatch.

Signaling him to keep quiet, I pointed my gun at the storage compartment located behind the second set of seats, and mentally prepared myself to shoot the miserable stowaway between its dead white eyes. I had no idea how a zombie could've gotten in there, but I was going to make it pay. With my eyes glued to the rear hatch, I inched closer and reached to open it.

Suddenly tires screeched on the asphalt behind us, and the doors opened and slammed shut.

"Get back inside!" Nick yelled. "There's nothing to see."

"What's going on?" Jackie asked, ignoring him. "You just stopped in the middle of nowhere."

"Is it Val?" Claire asked, appearing beside me.

I pushed her a step back and peered at Nick's face, which resembled a mask of irritation. "We all have to be quiet," I whispered, "or you might just wake up the monster—and I'm not talking about the zombie in the storage compartment of the Jeep."

As though in answer, a *thud* echoed from inside, followed by a louder one.

Claire jumped back, startled. "What the heck? A zombie? How did it get in there?"

"Probably while Val was on her little moonlight shopping spree." I shrugged. "As to why it would have wanted to crawl in there, don't ask me. I guess they're not claustrophobic or prone to motion sickness."

"Okay, we're opening," Nick said, pointing at Jackie. "Can you stand guard?"

She nodded, pulling out her gun.

"Okay." Nick sighed heavily, then unlocked the rear hatch and slowly opened the compartment door.

I drew a sharp breath and held it, bracing myself for the worst.

Something stirred inside, as though whatever was in there had sat up groggily and tried to maneuver themselves out. Then a voice echoed from within.

I blinked several times before a face came to mind to match the voice.

"Please don't shoot, Nick! Don't shoot, man!" Tahoe pleaded, appearing in my line of vision. His face was covered in darkness, but I would have recognized his hands anywhere, for they were the hands that had almost cost Val her life.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Nick stepping closer, his jaw clenched in anger. "Nice touch remembering my name, Lake Tahoe, but do you think that's gonna actually save your sorry butt? The tables have turned for you, buddy. Now I'm in charge."

I shined the flashlight in Tahoe's eyes, unable to believe the guy's luck. He'd ventured out into the night, and when we'd watched his friend being eaten alive, we'd all mistakenly assumed Tahoe had been a side dish. I couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone standing in front of us. Either he had to be the luckiest moron in the whole wide world, or else he'd been bitten, so the venom had kept his future kind at bay. I knew which option was more likely. Taking a step back, I pushed Claire behind me, just in case, and focused my attention back on Tahoe. His hands and clothes were bloody, but whether the brown and red stains were from his blood or someone else's, I couldn't tell. If he had been attacked and infected by zombies, I knew Nick wouldn't

hesitate to shoot him; at least that would have given Nick the perfect excuse to put a bullet in his head, a fitting death sentence for his attempted murder of our sister.

“You’re the scum of the Earth. You know that, right?” Nick pointed his gun directly at the scraggly man’s head. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t pull this trigger.”

Tahoe held up his hands, his eyes wide with fear. “Please don’t shoot! It was all Earl! I let Dean go so he could help her. Just ask him. I let go!” He pointed at me, his gaze begging me to tell my brother my part of the story.

I’m not gonna play along with his little games.

My brother glanced over at me as if to acknowledge his claims.

“What?” I asked Tahoe. “You want me to remember? Hmm. Well, I’m afraid that might not work right now since I have a little concussion leftover from trying to save my sister from you and your sleaze-ball friend.”

Tahoe paled, and a sheen of sweat covered his forehead. His hands clenched and unclenched, and his gaze fixed on the gun in my brother’s hand.

“Is that so?” Nick said, grinning.

I inclined my head and tried to keep hard from laughing at Tahoe’s shocked expression. “Yeah. Look, Nick, you might hafta draw your own conclusion here since I ain’t gonna be of much help.”

Tahoe swallowed audibly.

I couldn’t help but feel justice had been served by terrifying him, if only a tiny bit. “Okay. He did let me go, technically,” I said eventually. “Thing is, I still couldn’t reach Val in time, and if it weren’t for him and his half-wit friend, she wouldn’t have gone through the horror she experienced.”

Nick nodded. “Right. An accessory. I think any judge and jury would condemn a man who tried to assist in the murder of an innocent woman.” He pointed the gun into Tahoe’s forehead.

“Hey! You’re not the judge and executioner,” Jackie said, grabbing Nick’s arm.

Even though I’d sworn it when Val had supposedly died, I didn’t believe in cold-blooded murder. Those vengeful thoughts had been nothing more than the result of my emotions spilling over when I thought my sister had been murdered. “Just let him go,” I said with a heavy sigh. “He’s not worth a wasted bullet. Besides, we need to get back on the road.”

“Get out of the trunk, Tahoe!” Nick said through gritted teeth. “Make one wrong move, and I’ll shoot you dead in your tracks.”

Tahoe slowly climbed out. “I’ll just be on my way. Thank you.”

“Everybody get back to your vehicles,” Nick said, motioning Claire and Jackie back to their Jeep.

“Nick...” I said, hesitating. Knowing my brother, I doubted he’d just let Tahoe be on his merry way, but Nick was hard to read. He’d always been like that, but he was no killer. *Or is he?* “Nick?” My hand wandered to grab his arm, but he shrugged it off.

Jackie picked up on his vibes too. “You can’t kill him, Nick. We’re not murderers!”

Tahoe coughed and fell to the ground. He’d lost a lot of blood and was pretty weak.

“Nick,” Claire said, “you’re not a killer. You know that.”

He regarded her coolly. “How would you know? You’ve known me for all of five minutes.”

She pressed her fist against her chest, right above where her heart was beating. “I can feel it.” Her voice quivered with emotion. “Let’s help him get better, and then you can kick him out.”

Laughing, Nick shook his head. “Why shouldn’t we just leave him here? He’d make a nice little buffet for any zombies who happen to come along.”

“You can’t just leave him out here to die,” she said, her gaze imploring him to listen, “and you can’t kill him either.”

We were trying our best, but in the end, we knew it was Nick’s decision to make. We hoped he would do the right thing. *But do I really know him?* I wondered. What I’d seen of him during our brief stint in *Zombie Land* had changed my perception of him. He was tougher and colder than I ever imagined he could be.

“They won’t touch him if they recognize their kind,” Nick said, regarding Tahoe.

“They didn’t bite me,” Tahoe insisted. “Really, they didn’t!”

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “But wouldn’t that be sweet justice?”

“I’m with you on that one,” Jackie said. “He had no qualms about helping to throw an innocent woman over the railing as a distraction to save his own butt.”

“I would never hurt anybody!” Tahoe said, shaking his head vehemently. “It was all Earl! I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am for your loss. If I didn’t help him and do what he said, he would have killed me too!”

“Not a loss,” Claire whispered. “The girl lived.”

He gasped. “What? How? I-I mean that’s wonderful, but how? Where is she? I’d like to personally apologize.”

“Let’s bandage him up,” Jackie said. “Give him some food and water and a weapon. Whatever happens after that is his problem.”

“You want to waste our precious supplies on this loser?” Nick asked.

Jackie stepped toward him, her eyes sparkling with determination. “Yes. I don’t want to have his demise on our conscience. That’s the only thing that makes us any more human than those things out there, isn’t it?”

Nick waved his gun in the air. “This jerk almost cost my sister her life!”

“Listen, Nick…”

“No, Claire! If he and his friend hadn’t stopped us, we could’ve made it out in the nick of time, before the herd came around to the front of the house.”

Claire shook her head vehemently. “That’s not entirely true, and you know it. I slowed you down in the first place. If you hadn’t stayed there long enough to convince us to come with you, you would’ve been long gone.”

“That’s different.”

A dangerous glint appeared in her eyes. “Why?”

Nick ran a hand through his hair as he contemplated her answer. “Because you didn’t *try* to kill my sister,” he said after a moment.

Claire’s shoulders slumped. She was losing the argument, right or wrong, and she knew it. Whether we wanted it or not, Nick would make the final decision.

“Claire, Jackie, you can’t just leave me here,” Tahoe pleaded. “Zombies will shred me to pieces. Earl’s a psychopath and told me he’d kill me countless times. I believed him after I saw the things he’s done in the past. But he was my uncle and I couldn’t leave him.”

“Oh, you’re good,” Nick said. “Go on, storyteller. Humor us.”

“No, really! It’s all true. My father’s the chief of police and I was going to tell him all about Earl.”

“Right,” I said.

“I swear I’m telling you the truth. Earl and I left the city we resided in to go pick up family members stranded in another state. We got sidetracked trying to lose a herd. I planned on getting back home, zombie apocalypse or not.”

He was good at making up stories, but none of us believed Tahoe for a second.

“Do you really have the heart to kill a cop’s son?” he said. “Not to mention, I have a wife and twin girls. Please think of them before you do anything to me.”

“If I was you,” Nick said, “I might’ve tried telling the story with one kid. It’s way more believable than twins.”

“Please think of my girls,” Tahoe added. “They have beautiful blonde hair like their mama. If you met my babies, you’d instantly fall in love with them.”

I raised my brows at him when he tried to play the sympathy card. I was sure no one in our group could possibly fall for such a tall tale, yet I could tell Jackie was softening: Her frown and the angry crease in her forehead disappeared, and her hands clutched into fists at her side as she turned to regard Nick. “We need to get going.” I said. “Having an argument out here is bound to draw attention—and not the positive kind.”

Nick nodded and took another step toward Tahoe, but Claire jumped in front of him as if to block Nick from shooting him. “He has nobody to look out for him!” she said. “You know what would’ve happened if no one had helped me in my time of need? I’d be dead.”

Nick let out a long breath. “Fine. Get the medical kit, Dean.”

I sighed. *Is he seriously caving just because of a pretty face?* Then again, I didn’t care. I just wanted to do whatever we were doing so we could get the heck outta there. When I grabbed the first aid kit, Claire snatched it out of my hand and began tending to Tahoe’s wounds.

“Hurry up. We don’t have time for this,” Nick said. “Every minute we stick around here just makes a bigger target on our backs.”

“Then help us get him into the Jeep so we can leave,” Claire snapped.

“No,” I said. “Nick’s right. Tahoe can’t come with us. He’s a liar and nothing but trouble. Tend to his wounds like you wanted, and we’ll give him a little food and water and some kind of weapon to defend himself, but that’s all we’re going to do for him.”

“Check him for any scratches or bites,” Jackie said.

Tahoe wiped a sleeve across his eyes. “I wasn’t bitten. Earl stabbed me. The zombies were on my butt, and I saw the rear hatch wide open from where you were packing supplies. I threw out the stuff in my way and I squeezed into the compartment, then shut the door. If I would’ve climbed into the back seat, they would’ve seen me. My idea worked. The dummies had no idea where I went.”

“And how did you plan on getting out?” I asked.

“I didn’t think that far ahead. I just wanted to get away from them.”

“Wow,” Nick said in a sarcastic tone. “You’re pretty smart for a cop’s son.”

“All I knew was that I couldn’t outrun them,” Tahoe said. “I was bleeding, and I didn’t have the energy to hotwire the Jeep. I was about to pass out. I knew if I fainted in the Jeep, the zombies would’ve broken in and eaten me. I thought it would be safer to try and hide in the storage compartment, and I must have passed out and not woken up till now.”

“He’s coming with me,” Claire said, determined. “Cut out the tough guy act and try to show a little compassion, because there’s nothing you can do about it.” As though to prove their point, Claire and Jackie helped Tahoe up.

When he hobbled over and climbed inside their Jeep, I knew there was no changing their minds; we were stuck with him.

Nick’s eyes blazed as he pulled Claire aside. “Have you lost your freaking mind?” I could tell that he was a bit miffed at her outright defiance, but the girl had a mind of her own.

“What if he hurts you?” I said.

“Just look at him.” Jackie pointed at Tahoe, now slumped over the back seat. “He’s a conman, not a murderer. We can handle him. I really don’t think he’ll hurt us. He’s barely in any condition to breathe, let alone anything else.”

“True,” I said, “but what if he dies? It takes up to five days to turn into a zombie from a bite or scratch, but if one dies, it’s immediate. You need to know that.” I didn’t even want to think about what might happen to the girls if he turned and attacked them.

Jackie’s eyes grew wide. “He won’t. I grabbed the medical kit, some antibiotics, and pain pills. But just to be safe, I’ll let Claire drive. I’ll watch him closely. If he dies, I’ll shoot him straight in the head.”

I pulled her close. “No! This is a bad idea, Jackie—a really, really bad idea.”

“I just can’t stand by and leave somebody in this condition in such a horrible, lonely, scary place. Please try to understand.” She kissed my cheek and hopped in the passenger side.

“It’d make me feel safer if you at least tied him up,” I said.

“We can handle it.” Claire turned the key and started the ignition. “We’ll be right behind.”

“Change of plans,” I said, peering in through the open window. “Tahoe’s coming with us in our Jeep whether Nick likes it or not. That way I know you two will be safe.”

Jackie shook her head vehemently. “Nope! Not happenin’. Nick will use any little excuse to kill him and you know it.”

“Then we move onto Plan B,” I said.

“What’s that?” Claire asked.

“Hey, Nick,” I yelled. “I’m riding with the girls.”

“Okay, that’s fine. See if Claire wants to ride with me?”

“Yeah, I want to ride with him,” Claire said, opening the door, when Jackie grabbed her arm.

“No you don’t,” Jackie said. “They’re insisting a guy needs to be in each Jeep. We’re strong, independent women. We can handle a Jeep just as well as they can.” She looked up at me. “I killed that zombie with a bat because I was trying to make a point. From this moment on, I can take care of myself. And I don’t need a guy to protect me ever again.”

“I’m just trying to keep you safe from a psychopath,” I said. “So here’s Plan C. You know I won’t kill Tahoe, so he and I will ride in my Jeep and Nick can ride with you two.”

“I like it,” Claire said.

“I don’t,” Jackie said. “Again, he feels like a man has to be with us so we’re safe. Go back to your Jeep, Dean, and please trust me that I can handle this.”

A moan echoed from the trees as a zombie stumbled out of the vegetation toward us.

“Get in the Jeep, Dean. Now!” Nick said. He then shot the zombie with perfect aim. “We don’t have time to stand out here arguing. Listen, they’re big girls. They can make their own decisions.”

I ran back to my Jeep and jumped in, slamming the door. “They’re trying to be all independent now,” I said.

“Not again,” Nick said, peering out the window. “Their Jeep just stalled.”

We definitely needed to find them better transportation. I let out a sigh of relief as the Jeep suddenly turned over.

Biting my lip hard, I struggled with the decision of leaving the girls with a possible zombie.

“At least we know Val’s safe with us,” Nick said, shooting her a glance over his shoulder. “We need to stick with the mission and save Val. It’s easy to get sidetracked, but we have to stay focused for her sake.” I opened my mouth to argue my point, but my brother raised a hand to

stop me and continued, “Today has been a horrible nightmare, and I’m dead tired. Let’s just go and leave it at that.”

The crease on his forehead deepened, and worry wrinkles had emerged around his eyes. He was tired, and I didn’t want to add to his problems, so I pressed my lips shut and made myself comfortable in my seat. I wasn’t happy about the girls letting Tahoe ride with them, but there wasn’t much I could do about it.

Chapter 15

The highway was one long strip stretching out into the night, illuminated only by our headlights and the rising moon above. Sitting in the passenger seat, with my head pressed against the cold, smooth window, I stared at the road ahead, my mind scattered in a million directions. I knew I should try to get some sleep, in case I had to relieve Nick from driving, but for some reason, any shred of fatigue seemed to have eluded me. Every now and then, my gaze moved to the rearview mirror to check on Claire and Jackie, following in the second Jeep with Tahoe for a passenger. With nothing stirring, silence engulfed us, just three siblings. *Siblings. Brothers and sister.* It sounded strange to me. Up until recently, it had been just Nick and me. Never in a million years would I have guessed that might change, but then Val came along, and just like that, we had a sister. I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it.

My brother suddenly rolled down the window, jolting me out of my thoughts. “I can’t stand the stink in here. We need to get a clean dressing on Val’s wound before it turns completely nasty.”

“We don’t have to stop out here. I’ll do it while you’re driving,” I said, crawling into the back seat. I dug around for the medical kit we’d snagged from the glass house. Inside it, I found all the necessary sterile bandages, antiseptic, and tape.

Suddenly, our sister awoke and sat up.

I stopped, unsure how she’d react to me looking at her wound.

“You’re changing my bandage?” she asked groggily. “Because Jackie gave me a new one while I was driving.”

“Yeah? Well, we need to put a fresh one on again,” I said, clearing my throat. “It’s, uh... it looks like it’s seeped through.”

“Just be sure to wear gloves,” she said, pointing to the medical kit. “We don’t want to take any chances of you getting infected.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. In silence, I grabbed a pair of latex gloves, tore the packaging open, and pulled them on with a snap, just like a surgeon.

“Ready?” she said, pulling her sleeve up. When I nodded, she switched on the flashlight and held it up, instructing me step by step on how to cleanse and change the bandage like she’d done seemingly a million times before.

As I worked, the scent of foul flesh intensified. Taking in shallow breaths, I followed Val’s instructions to a T, then threw some tape on it and smiled. Back when we first met, she’d hinted at having some basic medical knowledge, but I’d never had the chance to ask about that. I sensed it was now a good time to learn more about her. “What did you used to do—you know, before all of this?”

“I was a cop,” she said, looking at me with an amused expression, as if anticipating my reaction.

It wasn’t what I expected her to say, but it did make perfect sense. “I should’ve known by the way you handle a gun,” I said. “So where did you get your medical knowledge from?”

“I was engaged to a doctor,” she whispered. “His name was Travis. I used to help him change bandages at the clinic. Infected people swarmed that place. His staff was swamped when the outbreak happened, so he had no choice but to let me assist him, even though he didn’t want to and we argued for hours whenever the chance presented itself.”

Nick glanced over his shoulder. “Our hospitals, doctor offices, and clinics in South Carolina were also teeming with people who wanted help and demanded to know what was going on.”

“Yeah, I imagine every medical facility across the world was jam-packed just like ours. So, whether Travis wanted it or not, I helped out at the clinic when my shifts were over.”

“That’s dedication,” Nick said.

“Yeah, well, we didn’t know what was going on at the time. Travis was so sure he could help them, and I was naïve enough to believe him.”

She seemed sad to talk about him, and I wondered what had happened between them. *Did things go sour and not work out, or was he killed when the zombie thing went down?* I didn’t

have the nerve to ask, but she must've sensed my interest, because it didn't take long to get my answer.

She pressed her lips into a grim line. "He's dead. He never shoulda been at the clinic with all those infected people. I still can't believe we were treating zombie victims like real people. They wanted nothing more than to rip our heads off. How could we have been so stupid?"

"You couldn't have known," I said softly, "but what you were trying to do was admirable."

"If only we had known what we were really dealing with, maybe things would have turned out differently. If only I could go back in time and save him."

"I'm so sorry, Val." Even though nothing I could say or do would ease my sister's pain, I leaned in and rubbed her back gently in the hopes that she might draw some relief from it.

Her voice quivered. "They're all dead—all my family in Philadelphia and most of the people I've ever known. I thought I'd lost my entire family until I met you. Now, you guys are all I have left. I thought I couldn't lose more until zombies broke into my home and killed my dogs. That was the moment when I knew I couldn't stay in Philadelphia. I had to get the heck outta there, or else I would've been next."

"Pennsylvania?" I asked.

"Yep. Born and raised." She nodded and smiled, her gaze turning distant. "When I found adoption papers by accident, I was shocked. I demanded answers, and my adoptive parents finally told me about my past and about you. A few weeks later, they died. I spent months traveling around, trying to find you, slaying I don't know how many zombies in my path." She reached in her pocket and pulled out a crumpled Christmas card, then handed it to me.

With trembling fingers, I reached for it and recognized it immediately. "Nick, this picture is of us, last year at Christmas," I said, passing it to my brother.

He glanced at it briefly, his gaze barely brushing it. "The Christmas card with those goofy Santa hats Mom made us wear? Come on! That was so freaking embarrassing."

"Yeah." I studied our bright smiles and glowing faces. *We were so happy.* I shook my head and swallowed the lump in my throat. "How did you get this?"

Slowly, the words tumbled out of her mouth. "Your...er, *our* mom sent it to me."

I gasped, shocked beyond belief. "When did she find you?"

She reached for the Christmas card. Her eyes glazed over, as though she'd lost herself in memories. "We'd been talking for only a few weeks, barely able to share much about our lives,

when the epidemic destroyed everything, from the police force to the postal service and radio stations, and we lost touch. At first, the phone lines went dead. When the letters stopped arriving, I feared the worst.”

“Mother talked to you? I don’t believe it,” Nick whispered, in just as much shock as I was.

“That picture kept me going on my long journey from Philadelphia to that island in Ohio,” Val said, her hand still clutching the photo. With shaky fingers, she brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes and continued, “After I got in touch with our mom, she begged me to relocate with you in South Carolina. That was right before the whole zombie thing happened and you left South Carolina to come to the island to join Grandma.”

I nodded, thinking back and remembering how hard it was to leave our old lives behind.

“She said she wanted us to meet and start from scratch, so I went through this zombie-infested landscape in order to be with my new family.”

“I’m so glad you did, Val,” I said. “Meeting you is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ve always wanted a sister.”

She grinned. “And I’ve always dreamt of having some little brothers.”

“Have you met Grandma?” Nick asked casually.

“Yes,” Val said. “As a matter of fact, she was the one who called me when we realized the virus was a full-blown zombie dilemma that might just wipe out the world. She told me to get my butt out of Pennsylvania and move to the island, but we stayed behind because we thought we could change something. We were wrong. We should have listened to Grandma.”

“I can’t believe you met Grams,” I said, my jaw dropping. My grandma was the most understanding, caring, forgiving person in the world. It made sense that she would have met Val right away, but I couldn’t understand how she managed to keep it a secret. My grams and I were so tight, and I thought she always told me every secret she knew.

“Yeah, she’s sweet. She texted me every day before all communication went down.”

I smiled, proud of myself. “I taught her how to text.” I’d even taught her how to email, and I got a message from her every day when I lived back in South Carolina.

“I know. She told me all about your mad skills.”

It seemed as if everyone had already known about Val except Nick and me. I wondered why it had been kept a secret from us. Mom had told me they’d planned on sitting down later that day with the entire family and explaining everything, but it still didn’t make much sense why we’d

been left out of the loop. My thoughts raced. *So Val didn't just pop up on the doorstep to give us all a heart attack. She was invited.* I could completely imagine Grams begging Val to be with us in our safe haven. Heck, I'm surprised she didn't try to go out and find Val herself, guns blazing. Upon our arrival on the island, I noticed Grandma being more absentminded than ever. I suspected something was bothering her, but every time I'd tried to ask her about it, she'd just clammed up and brushed me off, calling me paranoid. One evening, however, she'd disclosed that she was worried about a girl in Pennsylvania. Her words had made no sense at the time, but now a light bulb went off in my head. Now, it all made sense.

"Our grandma is amazing," she continued. "She showed me a picture of Mom and me in the delivery room. By the look on our mother's face, I know she didn't want to give me up. Dad looked happy too."

"They should've never given you up," I said.

Val smiled bitterly, and for a moment, I thought she was going to agree with me, but then she said, "That's not true, Dean. You know they couldn't have taken care of me. I mean, they were only fifteen years old, just kids themselves. Besides that, Grandma seemed to be losing a battle with cancer, and Grandpa had just died in a car accident. So much was happening that raising a kid was out of the question. Keeping me just... it just wasn't possible."

"Did you ever flat out ask her why she did it?" Nick asked.

"Yes." Val hesitated a bit, considering her words. "She said it was because she loved me so much that she wanted me to have more than what she could give me. She also told me that not a day went by when she and Dad didn't think about me."

"They should've never given you up," I repeated, anger edging my voice. I swallowed hard and stared out the window as I tried to process everything.

She brushed the hair behind her ear and sighed. "Mom and Dad's decision to choose adoption for me must've been a difficult one. Dad said it left them with a sense of deep loss and that they were haunted by it."

Nick kept quiet during most of our conversation. Several times, I noticed him shooting interested looks into the rearview mirror, his tired, bloodshot eyes shining in the darkness. He kept driving at a fast and steady pace, but the way his hand clutched the steering wheel rather than casually lingering on it as usual told me he was taking in every word being said.

Val touched my hand, sensing my sadness. “Hey, it’s okay. They gave me to a really great family because they loved me and wanted the best for me. I have no regrets. I had an awesome and fantastic life. My adoptive parents truly loved me with all their heart.”

I didn’t even know what to say. Maybe I was in complete and total shock that my mom had hidden something so big from us when we were such a close-knit family. I was happy that Val had enjoyed a great life.

Her voice quivered. “I was almost there. My group got attacked in Sandusky.”

“You’ve been through so much,” Nick said. “We’re here for you.”

“Thank you, Nick,” she said. “When I lost everyone, Grandma’s words rang in my ear. ‘Get your butt to the island. You’ll be safe. I promise.’ So, I decided to come and find you, to meet all of you in person.”

I put my arm around her and pulled her close. “I’m so sorry for your loss, sis. I can’t even begin to imagine what kind of pain you’re in and all of the horrible things you’ve seen and experienced, but you’ve got family here. We’re not going to ever let you go.”

“Well, I wish I wouldn’t have gotten bitten on the way, but that was probably fate.” She let out a long sigh.

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Travis and I thought we could find a cure, so we kept close to the infected, treating them, searching for ways to make them feel better. If this cure works, that means our prayers were heard, and our mission is complete. I can finally focus on helping the infected to get cured.”

“See?” I asked. “You are destined for something great, and you’ll be famous, because you’ll be the first one to survive a bite!”

“Yeah, I can see it in the papers now. ‘Guinea Pig Zombie Cop Girl Lives to Tell the Tale.’” She smiled faintly, then yawned. “Gosh, I’m so tired,” she said, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“You should rest,” Nick said. “We still have a long journey ahead of us, and you should get as much sleep as you can.”

Val closed her eyes, as if drifting off to sleep.

I closed mine too, but I knew that my racing mind wasn’t going to let me doze off anytime soon. Apart from the tiny detour through the grocery store, we drove without a break for most of

the night. When morning came, we made good time until we ran into a major roadblock...a helicopter had crashed into the ground upside down on a major road. This meant we had to take a different route. We had gotten lost and spent the entire day trying to get back on track.

After hours of driving, we finally took a break and parked in the middle of a wide and very shallow river. It was Nick's brilliant idea and I loved it. The rushing water was shallow enough to keep us from getting our vehicles stuck, but would wash away any zombie who dared to come brave the strong current. Nick and Val were getting to know each other over lunch on the hood of the Jeep. Val scooted to the edge, her bare feet swaying in the air over the trickling water. Nick never had alone time with Val so I headed over to the other Jeep.

My boots sloshed through the water as I waded through. The sky was a neat shade of blue and a cool breeze blew through my hair. Tahoe was passed out and sprawled across the backseat. Claire sat on a huge boulder nearby and seemed to be in deep thought while Jackie sat on the hood of her red Jeep sipping a bottled water. I loved how the afternoon sun brought out the blonde highlights in her dark hair. A frown creased her forehead and I knew something was on her mind.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, jumping up next to her on the hood.

"Yeah, I was just thinking, that's all."

"About what?"

"I should've never hesitated," she said, setting the bottle down next to her.

"Hesitated?"

"I can't stop thinking about the glass house. The second Earl took Val, I should've whipped out my gun and shot him in the arm or leg."

I reached for her hand. "Jackie, you can't blame yourself. You were just handed a gun. And you never held one a day in your life. How could you expect to be some kind of Lara Croft and kick the bad guys butts? Trust me, that will come in time. 'Cause you have mad skills."

She playfully slugged me. "Not yet, but I will. You can count on it."

"Jackie, you do have skills. You were spectacular when you sprang into action to save our butts. I mean, you didn't hesitate to shoot out that window back at the grocery store, hit the zombie with the baseball bat, walk straight up to that zombie on the beach and shoot him, and the way you took down that zombie in the dumpster was impressive."

“It’s a start. But I need more practice with shooting. I sucked back at the beach.”

“It was dark and you have absolutely no shooting experience, but it’ll come in time. I sucked when I first started, but I’ve been practicing for a year now. By this time next year, you’ll be slinging down zombies like second nature.”

“When I watched Val get thrown into that pit of zombies...” Her voice trailed off.

I cupped her cheek. “It’s okay.”

She blinked away a tear. “When that happened, I swear something inside of me snapped. I thought my actions just killed this poor girl. I was devastated.”

“But Val’s okay,” I said. “Everything turned out fine. Dwelling on that horrible memory is just going to eat you up alive.”

“When I thought she died, it was one of the worst moments of my life. I felt like I was struck by lightning. I knew from that second on, I could never be scared of defending myself or my friends. All of this anger boiled up inside of me, and I swore I was going to take down the next zombie I met.”

“Uh-huh. So that’s why you grabbed the bat out of my hands and pounded that zombie.”

“I took out all my frustration and pent-up anger in a few powerful hits. I refused to fear them anymore. Believe it or not, it was a major turning point in my life. I was going to fight to survive. And I would never hesitate shooting anything or anyone that threatens me or my friends lives ever again.”

“We’ll fight together,” I said.

Her fingers entwined into my hair and pulled me closer, her green eyes shining bright. I kissed her on the lips...slow, gentle, and romantic. Everything felt perfect.

“That was nice,” she said. “I’m so glad I met you. Thank you for not wanting to leave me back at that glass house. I know it could’ve been so easy to just drive away without ever looking back.”

“No, it wouldn’t have been easy. Not easy at all.”

“Really?”

“I was hoping not to leave without you,” I said.

She smiled.

“And I’m so thankful you didn’t freak out about Val’s bite. You were so cool about it. I mean, you even rode with Val in the same Jeep.”

“I knew she was still a day or two from turning so I wasn’t worried. But I didn’t expect her to stop at the local grocery store.”

“Even still, you stood by her. That means so much to me.”

“I felt like I owed Val. So when she ran off into that grocery store, I didn’t hesitate going in after her. Even though I know she’d never admit to it, she needed my help.”

“She’s so much like Nick,” I said. “We just met Val for the first time yesterday.”

“That’s what Claire told me. Nick told her everything. I think it’s an amazing story.”

“Let’s just hope it has a happy ending.”

She brushed a stray hair out of my eyes. “It will.”

I wanted to believe her more than anything.

“Hey, I also wanted to apologize to you about what happened when we met. I can’t believe I hid in the house with Claire. We should’ve been at your side fighting.”

“Seeing those zombies for the first time all by yourselves had to be terrifying. I hadn’t seen a zombie since the outbreak a year ago. And when I saw them again, I was...”

“Shaking?”

I laughed. “Let’s just say my heart was racing a million miles a minute. We’ve got a lot in common. I was sheltered over the last year too. And then—*bing, bang, boom!*—we’re both thrown into Zombie Land at the exact same time.”

“Two newbies just trying to survive another day, huh?” she said.

“Yeah. Why didn’t somebody give us a zombie survival handbook?”

She laughed. I loved her laugh. We talked some more. Jackie was so easy to talk to and we had so much in common. After a few minutes, I went back to hang out with Val and Nick. Jackie and Claire gave us siblings some space. I think they both knew that we needed to get to know each other by spending time together.

A growl made me glance up. A zombie with those horrible white eyes broke out of the thick vegetation. The thing that really caught my attention was the axe sticking out of its head. I whipped out my gun, my heart racing.

“There’s only one,” Nick said, scanning the vegetation around us.

“I can take on one blindfolded,” Val said.

I motioned to Val and Nick. “Don’t worry, I got this.”

“I thought you lost your gun back at that grocery store,” Nick said.

"I did. But Val got me another one." I shot her a thankful look and she smiled.

Val cringed as she stared down the zombie. "Wow, if that dude could feel pain...ouch. I bet he'd have a pounding headache the size of Texas."

Just as the zombie stumbled to the water's edge, it lost its balance and was swept away downstream.

"Good riddance!" Nick yelled.

"We better get a move on before more come," I said.

"Dean's right," Val said. "I planned on stopping for lunch, but not becoming it."

Nick motioned over to the girls that we were leaving because it wasn't safe anymore.

And once again, we were all back on the road.

Chapter 16

I'd driven for hours giving Nick some time to sleep, but then he woke up and we switched. I stared out at the stars in the night sky. This would be my second night out here in Zombie Land. I don't know when tiredness overwhelmed me, but at some point, my eyelids became so heavy I could no longer fight off sleep. It seemed like I'd only managed to doze off for seconds, minutes at the most, when the horn blew, jolting me. I sat up groggily and looked around, disoriented. "Wh-what's going on?" I asked Nick. "Is Val okay?" My voice sounded hoarse and slurry, so much so that it took me a second to recognize it as my own.

"She's sweating up a storm, but she's out cold," Nick said, cool and calm as ever. "Look up ahead."

I rubbed my eyes to get rid of the foggy sensation and peered out the windshield as Nick hit the brakes slowly. The Jeep came to a halt a few feet away from our obstacle. The headlights shone on a figure in the middle of the road. I couldn't make out his features because a dark hood hung over his face. "Is it a zombie? Run it over, Nick!"

Nick shook his head. "No, it's not a zombie."

I didn't reply because he was right, as usual. I squinted to get a closer look, and as my sight adjusted, I could make out more details.

He was at least six foot, maybe six-two, with a strong physique that boasted of regular physical activity. His feet stood apart, turned toward us, and his hands hung by his side, hidden beneath his coat. Something shimmered at his waist, and it appeared to be some kind of belt buckle. When I inclined my head to get a better look, I realized it was a weapon, pushed halfway up to his shoulder. The guy's hand moved ever so slowly up to the gun, and his fingers hovered there, maybe to signal us he wasn't afraid, but he didn't retrieve it.

"I think he's dangerous," I whispered to no one in particular.

If Nick heard me, he didn't reply. There was, after all, nothing to say. No one could argue that point.

"What is that shadow on the right side of the road?" I said, pointing ahead.

Nick leaned into me and followed my line of vision, to the place where the headlight didn't reach. "I don't know."

Keeping the guy in focus, I peered from him to what looked like a black, shapeless pile cast in darkness. It looked like someone had gathered a mound of firewood, but some of the timber seemed larger than the rest, like whole tree branches instead of twigs. *What would anyone need all that for? If he's trying to barricade the street, why is it all piled over there?* I was inclined to believe it was nothing but a pile of wood, until a strong breeze blew against our windows, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of dead flesh, even stronger and more noxious than the one coming from Val's wound. The latter was probably the reason why we hadn't noticed the stench before.

"Looks like the guy's killed a zombie or two," Nick said, mirroring my thoughts.

"I hope he's not infected. If he's healthy, he might need help," I said hesitantly, almost expecting Nick to ask why I was being so stupid. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we should offer him a ride or anything, but—"

Nick slipped out his gun. "Okay. I want to help him if we can, since the guy looks like some kind of master zombie slayer, but we have to be careful. Even if he's not infected, he's armed, and he might try to steal the Jeep. Times like these will turn otherwise good people into all sorts of things, zombies and thieves included."

"Well, just a thought, but it looks to me like he's pretty good with whatever weapon he's slinging. There are more than a couple dead zombies on that heap," I offered.

Nick put the Jeep in park, flung the door open, and jumped out, then stopped in his tracks.
“What the...?”

I peered from him to the figure, who was still standing in the middle of the road.

“Dean, you aren’t gonna believe this,” Nick said, laughing.

I frowned and jumped out of the car, my hand wandering to the weapon attached to my waist. Out of the car with the headlights no longer reflected by the windshield, I could make out more details.

The guy tossed back his hood and headed straight for us. His military short hair and Army fatigues caught my attention before my brain registered his facial features.

My mouth gaped in sudden recognition. *It can’t be!* “Lucas? How did you—”

“Dean!” He came over and slapped my shoulder, laughing.

I noticed spots of blood and gore on his coat, but I didn’t pull back.

“You know Rambo?” Claire asked, approaching us from the left.

“Hey, ladies,” Nick said. “Next time, wait for me to deem the situation safe before you leave your vehicle. What if this guy was some kind of serial killer or something?”

“And that’s supposed to scare me?” Jackie asked. “For all I know, I could be riding with one.”

Lucas raised a brow.

“They picked up a straggler we had a run-in with,” I explained.

“Let’s not open up that can of worms right now,” Claire chimed in. “I’m not up for another fight. So, Nick...” She turned and gawked at my brother, wearing the most obvious I-have-a-crush-on-you smile I’d ever seen. “Now, do you know *him*?”

“This is my best friend Lucas. We go back a long way.”

“Hey, gals. What’s up?” Lucas smiled and gave me a fist-bump, then turned to Nick. “I’ve been looking for you, man! When you didn’t come back to the city, we were all worried. I came with a team, but we all got separated in the woods when a group of zombies ambushed us.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We meant to get in touch, but we had no phone out here in the middle of nowhere,” Nick said quietly. “I’m just glad you made it. Can’t believe you even found us! How’s that possible?”

“I tracked you. Bet you didn’t know the bag of vials Dean took were tagged.”

I tried to make sense of his words. “Whoa! What? Wait a sec! What tracking device? You never told me about that.” I didn’t know whether to be pissed or hug the guy. Having Big Brother on my heels felt kind of intrusive, but at the same time, it was nice knowing that someone had known our whereabouts all along.

Ignoring my question, he eyed the girls cautiously, as though to warn us that he didn’t want to divulge that information in front of civilians. “I’ll explain everything, but how about some introductions first?”

I motioned toward Nick. “Well, you know my brother.”

Lucas playfully slugged him. “Nick? That’s your name? I’ve always called you The One-Man Army, dude. You’ve got more zombie kills than all of us put together. It’s good to put a name to that face.”

“Stop messing around.” Nick rolled his eyes. “I’m still pissed at you. I can’t believe you helped my brother break Val out without telling me.”

“Come on, man! You woulda done the same in my situation. When Dean came to me, I understood his point straightaway. The girl didn’t deserve the death she was going to get,” Lucas said. “I felt compelled to help her just as much as Dean did. When we see something going on that just isn’t right, we gotta step in and try to do something to fix it.”

“Had you told me the truth, I would’ve helped you,” Nick said.

Lucas sighed. “With those high morals of yours, always sticking to the rules and the code? I highly doubt that.”

Lucas was right. Nick would’ve come up with some stupid legal way that wouldn’t have worked in a million years. My brother always played by the rules, no matter what. It was his strength in many cases, but it also drove me nuts at times. Eager to change the subject and ease the tension, I continued with the introductions. “Lucas, this is Jackie and Claire,” I said. “We met them along the way.”

Lucas held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, beautiful ladies.”

They smiled and shook his hand.

“And where’s this drifter you picked up?”

“Tahoe’s sleeping right now,” Claire said. “He’s recovering from a knife wound.”

Lucas cocked a brow. “A knife wound? Who stabbed him?”

“He had a fight with his psychopath buddy. The dude’s doing just fine. It looks like it’s just a flesh wound.”

“You’ll have to introduce me,” Lucas said. “I’m a good judge of character.”

“Don’t get too attached,” Nick muttered. “We’re dropping the idiot off as soon as he’s better.”

I still couldn’t believe Lucas was there, yet there was something else I couldn’t wrap my head around either. “Okay, let’s get back to the topic at hand here. Don’t keep me in suspense. How did I get tagged like a wild animal?”

Before he could answer, a zombie ventured out of the woods, moaning.

Lucas pointed his gun and nonchalantly shot it in the head. “It’s not safe out here. Let’s get moving, and I’ll fill you in on everything. Mind if I drive? We had to leave the cars behind, and I’ve kind of been hoofing it everywhere. I miss driving.”

Nick clapped his shoulder. “You’re still the same old Lucas. It’s great to see you, man. Even still, the answer is no. I’m driving.”

He nodded. “Fine.” He then turned his gaze to me. “I didn’t know it at the time, but every bag of vials had a tracking device installed.”

“I should’ve known,” I said.

Lucas opened the door and peered onto the back seat, where Val lay sprawled, still sleeping, her hair spread around her like a soft blanket. She looked so serene that it was hard to believe she was about to turn into one of those monsters, but there was no denying the inevitable.

“How’s your sister doing?” Lucas asked.

“Good as can be expected,” I said.

“I can’t believe you knew about Val being my sister before I did,” Nick said.

“Dean tells me everything. Why do you think I put my neck on the line like that to help her escape? She’s family, and I knew I had to help. I just hope the cure works. It hasn’t been tested enough, and no one knows what it’s capable of.” Lucas threw his backpack over the back seat. He scooted Val over and sat down.

“It’ll work,” I said in a stern voice. *It just has to.*

“Not again,” Nick said, glancing out the window.

“What?” I asked.

“The girls are having a hard time starting the Jeep again.”

“We need to hotwire them a better car,” I said. “Let’s keep an eye out for one.”

“Definitely,” Nick said.

“Okay, looks like they got it started,” Lucas said.

Nick pulled out onto the empty road.

Lucas then pulled a thin black computer out of the satchel dangling over his shoulder. It looked like an iPod or something. He turned it on, and it beeped loudly. “See? The bag with the vials is in here.”

“Of course it is,” I snapped. “I don’t get it. There’s an entire lab filled with those vials. Why do they care about one missing bag of them?” I asked. When he looked away, I knew something was horribly wrong. *Am I in big time trouble? I bet they saw me on the security cameras! Lucas would never rat me out.* “Did they send your team here to arrest me? And why would they risk their lives just to bring me in?”

“Just the opposite, buddy,” Lucas said, avoiding my gaze.

I blinked. “The opposite?”

“Yeah. You’re being hailed as a hero for stealing them out of the city.”

“Why?” I asked. “What are you not telling me?”

“There’s something else.” A shadow crossed his features.

I tried to make sense of his words. *Why would I be a hero for sneaking out a bag of vials?* “What’s going on, Lucas? Just spit it out.”

He bit his lip and then finally spoke. “There’s no easy way to say it, but the city’s been overrun by zombies.”

A shudder shot down my body. “How’s that even possible? It’s an island, with walls, and those undead freaks don’t go in the water!”

“They didn’t actually break in. It was the virus itself. Somehow, it accidentally got inside, and many people became sick and started attacking everyone.”

“I-I don’t believe it,” Nick said, shocked.

“Too many people were bitten, and an overzealous general even bombed parts of Kelleys Island. The lab is completely demolished.”

“No!” I shouted. “How could they do that?”

He swallowed hard. “The formula’s gone. All that’s left are those vials you stole.”

“No! Quit joking,” I said.

Lucas nodded gravely. "It's absolutely true, pal. I'm sorry, but you have the only remaining vials."

I froze, numb. Parts of me wanted to believe him, but it all sounded so far-fetched that I just couldn't. We'd been safe for months on the island, but now all was lost. Our safe haven had been compromised, infected, blown to bits. I sucked in a trembling breath as my mind contemplated his words over and over again.

"No! I can't believe this," Nick said, his harsh tone jerking me out of my trance.

"I was on zombie patrol inland, battling a herd in a tank, shooting as many of those smelly, decaying freaks as I could. I missed the whole thing so there was no way I was exposed to the virus."

My heart lurched as horrible images and thoughts and worries flooded through me. "What about Mom and Dad? Grams? Dr. Hamming? My friends and family?"

"Lots of people escaped to South Bass Island. I think your grams and your parents were with them, but Dr. Hamming is dead. As of now, Dean, you hold the only cure in your hands."

"I don't believe this," Nick said, slowly letting out a breath. "It's impossible."

"I assure you it is entirely possible and entirely true, crappy as it is. You're our only hope, Dean. General Rika didn't send my team to capture you, but to bring you back to safety, along with those precious vials."

"Is the island totally destroyed?" I asked, fearing his answer.

Lucas hesitated. "All the zombies have been killed. We're rebuilding the parts of Kelleys Island that were bombed. The south side, where you live, was untouched, so I'm sure your family's safe, but they don't know how long the restoration will take."

"I hope they weren't infected," I said quietly.

"Like I said, a lot of people escaped to the other islands around Lake Erie. The important thing is that we managed to avoid an epidemic."

"But you don't know specific names," I said. It wasn't Lucas's fault, and I knew I shouldn't be taking my anger and helplessness out on him, but I couldn't help it. Not having answers frustrated me big time. In a brief moment of anger, I punched the window until my knuckles ached.

“It’s a big mess over there,” Lucas said. “Everything’s in total chaos, but I plan on going back and helping the island get back on its feet. We just have to be more careful about letting anyone new onto the island. Stricter guidelines have been put in place.”

“How much stricter could they get?” I’d already felt like I was living in a prison.

“Every resident has to carry an electronic ID badge. If you leave the island and come back, you have to be put in isolation for one week for observation.”

As much as it infuriated me, I was willing to do whatever it took to be safe. Nick and I questioned Lucas for the next hour, but that interrogation didn’t change anything. For all I knew, my parents and my grandma were dead—or worse, undead. I wanted to scream from the emotional torment ripping through me like a knife. *No! They aren’t dead! They aren’t infected! Not my family!* I didn’t believe that for a minute, and neither did Nick. I had to quit thinking about everything, because my mind was turning to mush.

We took turns driving through the night so everyone had their turn for a catnap. When it was my turn to ride in the back, as much as I tried not to think about things, thoughts of my parents wandered into my head. I wondered if they were okay and when we’d be reunited. I thought about them giving Val up for adoption. I wasn’t even sure why that popped into my head, but it did. I still couldn’t believe I had a sister, and even though my parents had had their teenage reasons for giving her up, I was still bitter about missing out on all those years I could have had with her. I hadn’t had the chance to grow up with a big sister. Maybe part of me wanted to make up for it by protecting her and saving her life, now more than ever. Knowing my parents, even if they had only been teenagers at the time, they wouldn’t have given Val to just anyone. I knew my grandma would have made sure Val had a loving, caring, safe, happy home. I only wished I would have known about her. *Why did she have to be a big secret? Was that really fair, keeping our sibling away from us like that?* But there was no use dwelling on things I couldn’t change. I had to keep my mind focused on getting to the next city. Nick, Val, and I had become fighters, and somehow, I knew we’d get through it together.

Beams of sunshine shone through the trees, and mist billowed and swirled all around us. Morning had come so fast! Val was sleeping quietly in the back seat next to me, and I was thankful for the chance to focus on my thoughts and form a plan. There was no way I could have dealt with any of her crazy antics at that moment.

Lucas shook his head, jamming to songs on his iPod, and Nick drove us down the highway, past deserted towns.

“Great! Another obstacle,” Nick suddenly said, breaking the silence.

Black skid marks caught my attention as I peered through the windshield. Further down the road, cars and trucks had crashed and were now abandoned on the little stretch of road. *What the heck happened here?* I wondered.

Chapter 17

The sun shone brightly in the early morning. Through the windshield, we peered at the scene before our eyes. Even though months must’ve passed, the car accident looked like a picture frozen in time with countless vehicles piled up on top of one another, stretching out as far as my eyes could see. Scraps of metal were strewn all along the road.

I swallowed hard and pointed at the mess, even though Nick had already gotten a good look at it. “Whoa! Look at that. I’ve never seen such a big collision before.”

“There’s broken glass everywhere,” Nick replied with a frown.

I could sense the implication in his words: That glass could have led to a flat tire or two, and we had no time for obstacles.

“We can swerve around some of the cars to get past,” Lucas said, hesitating.

I stared at a crumbled blue car that was resting upside down. The thing that scared me the most was that I didn’t see one dead person, and I knew there weren’t exactly any clean-up crews or EMTs around—at least not human ones. I didn’t even want to think about where the bodies had gone.

“What’s going on?” Val asked from the back seat.

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders to pull her close and pointed ahead of us, explaining the situation.

Val’s jaw dropped open. Her hands wrapped around my arm, either to support herself from the shock or to keep me in place. Either way, she was distressed.

“We’ll be okay,” I said.

Nick swerved around a red sports car and slammed the brakes, tossing us forward.

I pushed my hand against the driver seat to steady myself and Val, only then noticing the beads of sweat rolling down her face. In the soft glow of the sun, her skin pallor reflected the light. Her grip was more flaccid than before, as though she was losing strength, which she probably was. My heart went out to her. "Could you hit those brakes with a little less vigor?" I asked my brother.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It looks like the girls blew a tire. We better go help them."

I craned my neck to see what he was talking about. "Pull up closer," I said.

Nick shook his head. "I'm not parking on all that glass. You want us to be the next ones to get a flat tire? No way. We're not moving from this spot. Once we get the girls moving, it'll free me to swerve around in the grass."

"Makes sense," Lucas said.

"Stay here," I whispered to Val, who nodded, wide-eyed. "If you hear or see anything, don't move. Don't get out of the car or do anything stupid. You hear me?"

She nodded again.

I wasn't convinced that she'd listen, but taking her word at face value was about all I could do.

"Hey, Nick," she called. "Can't we just have them ride with us? We can all fit in here I'm sure."

"And lose a perfectly good vehicle loaded with supplies just because they have a flat tire?" he retorted.

"He's right," Lucas agreed. "We can change it in less than fifteen minutes. It's no biggy and not worth losing a Jeep."

Nick opened the car door to step out, but I tugged at his arm and nodded my chin toward Val. "I still think we should park a little closer to the girls."

He narrowed his gaze the way he always did when he was irritated. "Why?"

"Because she's not doing so well, and I'd like to keep an eye on her," I whispered so Val wouldn't hear me.

"Park here," Val said. "I can change that tire in a hurry."

"Remember what we talked about? Nick and I got this." I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

She wasn't doing well at all. The girls' Jeep was at least fifty feet, maybe a hundred, down the road. Nick wasn't doing us any favors by stopping so far from where we were heading.

Val shook her head and tried to squeeze past me.

I grabbed her around her waist to hold her in place. "Where do you think you're going?" I hissed.

"Look at that accident." She struggled in my grip, but her attempts were feeble. "You'll need backup. I'll call this in."

Nick shot me a look that warned me our big sis was drifting back into La La Land, and I couldn't have agreed more. "Val, you're not at work," Nick said.

She flopped back down. "I'm so confused. I can't even tell what's real anymore."

"Go back to sleep," I said, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "I'll take care of things until you're better."

She nodded, her eyes shining unnaturally again. "I'm so sorry. You must think I'm a horrible partner. Just don't take my gun and badge, okay?"

It was so sad to see her like that, and I felt like shouting and kicking at something. Instead, I just bit down hard on the inside of my cheek until I thought I drew blood. "Just promise you'll get some rest."

She peered over my shoulder, her gaze clearing a little. "I'll try. Hey, am I imagining things or is this the dude who arrested me and threw me in that hole back on the island?"

Lucas's fingers reached up, as though to touch her cheek. When I shot him a venomous look, he pulled back. He smiled, but his eyes never left her as he spoke, "Yeah, that'd be me, the one and only. But don't worry. I'm on your team now."

Val met my gaze. "Slap the bracelets on that perp!"

"This is Lucas," I said patiently. "He's a friend, not a perp. He's one of the few friends we've got left."

She grabbed the collar of Lucas's shirt. "My mistake. But, hey, will you do me a quick favor?"

He smiled. "Sure. Just name it."

"Tell Claire she's safe." She leaned back into the back seat.

I could see she was overwhelmed with tiredness by the way her brows drew together with a tiny crease forming in between.

Lucas cocked a brow at me. “What’s she talking about?”

“I’ve taken her off my hit list,” Val said simply.

“That’s good.” Lucas nodded.

She licked her lips, as though she was thirsty. I raised a water bottle to her mouth, but she shrugged it off. “Yeah, it’s good. For her. This might be one fight she couldn’t win.”

“Why’s that?” Lucas asked, as if humoring her.

“Because once I change into a zombie, I’ll probably end up bored and determined and particularly hungry. Combine that with the fact that I won’t be very choosy as to what or who I eat and how I get my next meal, and you’ll have a deadly combination.”

A dark shadow crossed Lucas’s features for a second, but it disappeared quickly, and his easygoing smile was back in place. “You’ll be the first pretty zombie,” he whispered. “I think that makes up for the deadly part.”

With her confused gaze focused on him, she leaned back into the seat and wrapped her arms around her waist. Her lips moved still, but no words came out.

Lucas inched closer, until his fingers almost touched her cheek. He shot me a questioning look. When I nodded, giving him permission, he brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face and leaned in to whisper something in her ear.

I strained to listen, but I couldn’t make out his words.

Val’s fingers clutched his forearm, and her head bobbed once, then again.

Lucas reached into his backpack and pulled out a mini black bag. Unzipping it, he pulled out a syringe and a vial full of blue liquid.

“What’re you doing?” I yelled at him, already picturing the worst. Whatever he’d said to her, I could only hope he hadn’t asked her for consent to kill her, or he would have been the next to go.

“She needs it,” Lucas said.

Nick pushed me aside, taking charge of the situation, probably fearing what I might do if Lucas didn’t explain himself immediately. “You can’t just whip out a needle and not explain to Dean what it is.”

“It’s Tyrima,” Lucas said, as though I was supposed to know what he was talking about.

“What the heck is that?” I asked.

“It’ll take a few hours to work, but once it kicks in, she’ll feel better. I’d rather give her the last vial than see her suffer.” He met Nick’s gaze. “You cool with that?”

“Yeah, do it,” my brother said.

“Nick!” I shot him a glare. “I hope it doesn’t slow down the process because we need her to change into a zombie as soon as possible so we can give her the cure.”

Lucas fumbled with the equipment while my brother steadied Val, who assured me, “It won’t slow down the zombie transformation one bit, but it’ll help her keep her mind until the very end. It’ll just take a little while to kick in.”

“It’s safe,” my brother reassured me. “We’ve used it on the front lines to get important information from people going loony from zombie bites or scratches.”

Nick obviously knew what he was talking about, and I trusted him. Val was my sister and I hated to see her suffer going through this zombie transition. I slowly nodded my consent, albeit not quite convinced. “Okay, but if something goes wrong, I’ll hold you responsible for it.”

“I would expect nothing less,” Lucas said, turning to Val. His voice became softer, more soothing. “Hey, like promised, this is going to help you, but you need to trust me. It’s going to keep you from losing your mind. Nick told me about the grocery store incident.”

Val’s voice came so low that I had to crane my neck to hear her. “I don’t want to put the others in danger. If you can help me keep my mind a little longer, please do whatever it takes.”

Lucas nodded and gripped the syringe tightly.

The serum caught the light and shimmered blue. Val’s gaze fell on it, and her face paled like a ghost. For a moment, I thought she might be sick, but instead of showing fear, she broke Nick’s grip and jumped out of the Jeep, yelling, “You touch me with that thing and you’re a dead man.”

“Val, we’re trying to help you,” I said.

“I’m going to bite Lucas,” she said. “He’d better watch out because I’m pretty hungry.”

“No you’re not!” I said.

“I repeat, suspect is armed and dangerous,” Val said. “All Philly PD units be advised; suspect is armed and dangerous! I need backup immediately.”

Nick gripped her arms from behind. “Quick! Do it!”

She let out a long growl a moment before Lucas pierced her skin, injecting her with the serum as she thrashed about, calling him every name in the book. I knew it was a temporary fix, but we had to do what we could to keep Val sane and calm. She was starting to get weird again

with all that growling and hissing, just like back at the grocery store. It was for her own good, and I knew if she could think straight, she would've agreed with me.

Val's eyes fluttered shut as she slumped back into Nick's arms.

"Okay, she's out cold," Lucas said. "I didn't know a girl could even talk like that. Where did she learn that kind of language?"

"She was a police officer back in Philly. Couldn't you tell from the cop lingo?"

"I seriously thought she just watched too many cop shows on TV." Lucas grinned. "If she had her gun, I bet she'd have shot me dead."

"Lucky for you, Nick disarmed her earlier," I said.

"Did you see the hate in her eyes?" Lucas asked.

"C'mon, man. She can't help it. She's not herself. She's just mad that you dragged her out of our parents' house and threw her in jail, and now you just injected her with something."

"Yeah, I put her in jail, but I was just following orders!" he said. "And did she forget I helped you get her out? Without me, you wouldn't have gotten anywhere! She'd be dead right now."

Reloading my gun, I smiled. "Yeah, we'll remind her about that later, but right now, she's kind of grumpy."

Nick rested his rifle on his shoulder. "Yeah, really grumpy."

"Zombifying will do that to a girl." I slipped my weapon into my holster.

I looked up at the towering pines along the road. The jungle-like ground was covered in a blanket of green ferns and colorful wildflowers. "You guys keep watch, and I'll change the tire," I said. A gust of cool morning air brushed through my hair. For a quick second, I considered getting a jacket, but I just wanted to get the heck outta here.

Lucas nodded and took off after Nick. I watched them with my weapon aimed, making sure I had their backs. Glass and metal crushed beneath their feet, the sound reverberating in the early morning.

Half the distance in, my brother turned and waited until I had caught up with him, then grabbed my arm. "Just a sec."

"What?" I asked, following his line of vision as he scanned the area. As I gazed around myself, it made me think I was living in a dead world of chaos and twisted metal. I wondered what had happened to the drivers and their companions. *Are they dead? Turned into lost souls*

who never asked for that kind of sorry existence? Souls who were never given a choice, just handed a monstrous fate? I stared at an empty baby seat still strapped in the car and tried not to think about what had happened. There was no dried blood, so I hoped that meant the people were able to get away in time. It sure was a different world out there; my brother was right about that. Back home, I'd had no idea how bad it was. Now I was getting a taste of it firsthand. I wondered if the people out there even knew about the safe cities around the U.S. *Maybe the government should have a rescue mission to help those who are still stuck out here in this disease-ridden place.*

"All's clear." My brother motioned for me to continue, and we reached the Jeep in no time.

Sure enough, the rear passenger-side tire was flat as a black rubber pancake. I grabbed a jack out of the trunk while Nick fetched the spare. The girls stood at the rear of the car and kept watch. They both offered to help, but I assured them we had it under control. I placed the jack under the side of the Jeep and hooked the crank to it, then started cranking it up.

"It's so freaky out here," Nick said. "What a place to break down. I don't like it. There's no visibility."

"Me neither." Thick fog swirled around everywhere, putting my overactive imagination into play.

"Don't worry," Lucas said. "I'm keeping a close eye out. Kind of reminds me of a Stephen King novel though. Remember the one where a thick mist descends from the mountains to cloak the land in fog?"

Nick chuckled. "Yeah. I saw that movie, and now's not the time for a recap. Creatures lurking in the mist? They're real, and they're called zombies. You can't scare me with that Stephen King crap. I've seen worse than that movie in real life."

"You're not kidding," Lucas said, nudging me. "Hey, we aren't scaring you, are we?"

Their chitchat wasn't exactly settling my nerves, but I wasn't going to admit it. I set my jaw and rolled the bad tire out of the way, muttering, "Just keep a lookout, okay?"

"Sure," he said. Just as I glanced up at him, Lucas suddenly threw his head back and pointed his gun into the trees. "There's something up there. See it, Nick?"

Nick stepped closer and peered into the overgrown vegetation. "Yeah, I think I see it, but I'm not sure what it is."

I tilted my head to look at a black patch of shadow in the trees. I had no idea what it was, and frankly, I wasn't keen on finding out. The mist and eerie silence added to the scary atmosphere and made us feel like we were on pins and needles. "We better hightail it outta here," I whispered. "If whatever that is gets a good glimpse of us, it might decide it wants to join our little crew—for dinner."

"It's probably nothing," my brother said, "but let's hurry up, just in case."

I didn't like the "just in case" part. Rubbing a hand over my face, I let out a breath to calm my nerves, then focused back on the tire.

"Hey, I got a good look," Nick said. "It's only a deer foraging for food so you have nothing to worry about."

"Good," I said, relieved.

The Jeep door slammed behind us.

Groaning inwardly, I looked up at Val dashing down the street toward us.

"What are you doing here?" Nick growled.

Ignoring him, she wiped her forehead with her sleeve. "I can smell it." Her nostrils flared as she sniffed the breeze that washed over us, as though to prove her point.

"Get back in the car, Val," my brother said. "We got this."

"The smell's getting stronger by the minute," she said.

"Okay, I'll bite," Lucas said. "What smell?"

She spun in a slow circle, sniffing the air like a dog. "Death, terror, affliction, torment, horror—"

"Way to use a thesaurus, Val, but you're tinkering a little in the dark side there," Lucas said.

She met his gaze as the sunlight reflected in her eyes, giving her an eerie glow. "One of humanity's greatest fears is the terror of death. You better flee while you can, because the living dead are on their way!"

Lucas nudged me. "She always so dramatic?" His tone was nonchalant, but I could tell her words were getting to him from the way his gaze scanned the area around us.

I shrugged. "How much longer before that shot starts working?"

"Maybe a few hours."

I nodded. "Good. The faster, the better."

Val walked a few steps closer to the forest. "There's more than one."

“Your sister’s kind of freaking me out,” Claire said, pacing around the Jeep as her gaze scanned the trees around us.

“She’s hallucinating,” Nick said.

“I’m keeping a close eye out,” Jackie said. “Just in case she isn’t.”

Val spun around. Spots of decaying flesh mottled her once perfect skin. Thin flaps of greenish skin peeled from her face. Her bloodshot eyes met mine. “They’re coming,” she hissed.

I swear she looked like she was possessed. I tried to ignore her and tighten another lug nut.

Lucas patted me on the shoulder. “Focus, okay? She’s hallucinating. Nothing’s coming.”

“Lucas is right,” Nick said. “It’s all in her head.”

“I’m going to call this in,” Val said. “We’ll need backup and medics on the scene as soon as possible. How could anyone have survived such a horrible pileup? Have you checked for survivors?”

“Let’s get her back in the Jeep,” Nick said.

She shot him a look. “Bite me.”

“Please, Val. You need rest,” Nick said gently.

“No! And why are you looking at me like that? It’s my face, isn’t it? It is! I can’t help the botched-up chemical peel.”

Nick gently grabbed her arm. “Come on. Let’s get you a bottle of water from the Jeep.”

She yanked her arm away. “Listen, Sergeant, just because you took my badge and gun, that doesn’t mean I can’t fight as a civilian. They’re coming! Don’t you smell them? I do!”

Nick ran a hand through his hair, seemingly frustrated.

“Play by her rules,” I whispered. “It might help.”

He moistened his lips and nodded, then turned back to her. “As your commanding officer, I order you to get back in the patrol car so we can drive back to the station. I’ll expect a full report.”

“You’re a dirty cop, and I’m going to prove it. I saw you taking a bribe from a major drug dealer, and then you had me raid that house, where a million bullets happened to come my way. In case you haven’t learned by now, I’m hard to kill.” Her voice thundered. “I’ll spend the rest of my life taking you down. You’re going to regret the day you messed with me.”

Jackie and Claire suddenly yelled for us to get back in the Jeep. Out of nowhere, six or so zombies moaned and broke through the thick blanket of fog. Val’s nose told no lies.

“We can handle a few zombies, right?” Nick asked casually as he aimed to make his famous lethal headshot.

“Oh yeah. No problem. Dean, you done?” Lucas asked calmly over his shoulder.

“Almost!”

“Just hurry!” Claire said.

Gunshots echoed as they all fired away.

My hands trembled. *Get it together. Concentrate!* I tightened another lug nut.

“It’s not just a few. More are coming!” Lucas shouted. “Dean, that looks good enough to me. Let’s roll!”

I scrambled to my feet. A zombie in a torn suit walked toward me, his head leaning to one side. He had a metal rod protruding from his head, and bite marks ran across his green arms and neck. Behind him and out of the fog, more zombies stumbled toward us.

Val jumped straight into their path, with no weapon. “I’m going to arrest every single one of these sorry thugs. You have the right to remain silent...” The girl had guts. She started taking one down with her bare hands, using impressive karate chops and lethal roundhouse kicks like in those old Kung Fu movies. She sent the zombie rolling across the asphalt. If I hadn’t been so utterly terrified, I’d have been cheering her on.

Nick grabbed me by the upper arm. “Let’s go! Who has the keys?”

“Me.” Claire jammed her hands down her pockets and whipped them out. Jumping into the front seat, she tried to start the Jeep, but it just clicked when she turned the key. “It won’t start!”

“What?” Jackie asked in a frantic tone. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No!”

“Let me try then.” Jackie pushed her aside and turned the key.

The engine spluttered but didn’t start. It wasn’t good, because I knew we’d never make it to the other Jeep without being mauled to death.

Nick covered Lucas while he popped open the hood to see what the problem was.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with it,” Lucas yelled over the gunfire.

“Have you checked the belt?” I yelled back, firing away, hoping to stall the zombies until Lucas could fix the Jeep.

“Negative.”

I frowned as I tried to focus on doing two things at the same time. I knew a bit about cars—not quite as much as Lucas, but enough to possibly be helpful. I thought if I could take a peek under the hood, maybe we could figure it out together and get the thing up and running again.

Jackie stood close by, with a determined look on her face. She wasn't the best marksman yet, but she was going to stand next to me and help me fight. I admired that. If there had only been two or three zombies, I would've let her have a go at it, but this wasn't the movies. There was no way she could take down all those zombies after one fighting lesson. "Get back inside the truck!" I yelled.

"I'm not leaving you." She aimed and fired, letting out a round of shots, but she only managed to hit a zombie in a blue, sparkly party dress.

It threw its head to the side and let out an angry roar but didn't drop to the ground. The thing kept coming at her, this time with more vengeance than before.

Chapter 18

Stopping near the car pileup had been a bad idea. I'd known it all along, yet we had to help the girls change their tire. *If only we'd just picked them up, squeezed them inside our Jeep, and driven away before we managed to raise half the undead population in the area.* But Nick and Lucas didn't want to lose a good vehicle loaded with precious supplies over a simple flat tire.

Swallowing hard, I peered around me. The sun was breaking free from behind the clouds, but the fog made it difficult to see into the trees. Lucas continued to try to fix the Jeep and the rest of us gathered in a circle, pressing our shoulders and arms together so we could watch all angles as the undead neared us, their calls breaking the silence of the morning. From the corner of my eye, I noticed a zombie in a fancy sequined dress, heading straight for the girls. Jackie and Claire began to shoot, but their bullets did nothing to slow down the corpse.

"Headshot!" Nick yelled.

"I'm trying," Jackie said, frustrated.

But we had no time for trying. I took aim at the party girl zombie, measuring her raised arms and swaying body as she hobbled toward us. My gaze moved to her undead white eyes, and I

pulled the trigger, nailing her right between them. Dark blood squirted in a wide arc, landing not far away from us. As I watched the zombie drop to the ground in a crumbling, bloody heap, adrenaline rushed through me.

Jackie grabbed my arm. "Dean! Your sister! Look!"

Val gripped a zombie's hands behind his back and was telling the thing he had the right to remain silent. She hauled him over to the Jeep and opened the door.

"Val!" Claire yelled. "That's not a police car. You wanna kill Tahoe?"

It wasn't that I particularly cared for the guy, but I couldn't just let her kill him. For one, we needed all the backup we could get. Also, there was the tiny inconvenience of him turning into a zombie if he was bitten; one more zombie might have been just one too many. I rushed over and shot the zombie in the head. He dropped down, crashing at Val's feet, and I poked him in the ribs just to make sure.

Val yelled in my ear, startling me. "How dare you? Where's your code of honor? You can't take justice into your own hands like that."

I couldn't believe she was taking her job so seriously, even in the throes of delirium. I wanted to scream; my only sister was turning into a monster right before my eyes.

Claire let off several rounds, but she did not hit any zombies. We needed all the help we could get, but she was really just wasting ammunition, so I motioned her back into the vehicle.

"Try and start it!" I said.

She opened the door, jumped in, and pulled Jackie in with her.

Rolling down the window, Claire asked, "Hey! Can't you just hotwire this thing?"

"Hot wiring just starts the car without a key," I said. "You can't hot wire a vehicle that isn't working." I then turned my attention to Lucas. "Well? Anything?" I asked, shooting him a questioning look over my shoulder.

"Claire, turn the key," Lucas said, ignoring my question.

I assumed he was either too busy and didn't hear me or that he had bad news and didn't want to tell me; I would have wagered on the latter. "Nick, cover me," I said. "I'm gonna have a look under the hood."

"Lucas's got it under control," Nick said. "Besides, I can't cover you both." His tone betrayed his tension.

I took a few steps to my right, arguing with myself about whether or not Nick could handle it. Suddenly, I saw a figure passed out on the grass, her long brown hair spread around her in disarray. Sudden recognition hit: It was Val. Zombies were stepping over her, some of them tripping, their feet burying into her flesh and kicking her limbs. They'd obviously accepted her into their clan. If Nick or I had been over there, they certainly wouldn't have ignored us and kept on walking. Those zombies would have ripped our throats out without hesitation. Even though I'd seen them bonding and recognizing their own before, it still creeped me out.

I had to help her, no matter what, so I aimed and fired until I had a clear path to reach Val. My feet moved quickly, minding the broken glass and dead zombies, until I was a step away. Kneeling down, I gently scooped her up in my arms and slung her over my shoulder, then sprinted back to the Jeep. Val's eyes turned in their orbits as I laid her in the back seat and slammed the door shut, making sure to lock it to prevent her from venturing out again.

The Jeep sputtered and started, but then it stalled, refusing to turn over.

Lucas frantically let out a few choice words.

More zombies broke out of the woods, as if they were multiplying by the minute. My heart began to race, pounding adrenaline quickly through my veins. *We have to get out of here right now!* I knew, but I began to lose hope as Claire turned the key again and again, to no avail. Just when I thought the car was beyond saving, though, the engine started.

Lucas let out a loud, "Woo-hoo! Got it!"

"Get your butts in here NOW!" Jackie said, rolling down the window.

Lucas slammed down the hood. "Listen to Jackie. Get in there and lock the door."

"You too!" I said, not about to leave him or my brother out there to die like some kind of martyrs. Even if the tire wasn't finished, we could still drive away. Even if we weren't able to drive as fast, we'd still move faster than the clumsy zombies could on their decaying feet. None of the corpses would be joining the Olympic track team anytime soon, that was for sure.

"I'm coming!" Lucas said.

I shot another zombie right in the forehead, then gave him a hard kick in the gut. He fell straight back, sailing down to the ground, his badly shredded arms flailing. I slipped inside the truck, but I refused to lock the doors until I knew Nick and Lucas were safe inside.

"Hurry!" Jackie shouted.

Claire screamed out the window, “Nick! Lucas! Get in here! I’m leaving, with or without you two.” She laid on the horn to prove her point, but I knew it was just a bluff; she wouldn’t ever leave them behind.

After a few more shots, they jumped into the Jeep, tumbling over sleeping Val, an unconscious Tahoe, and me in the back seat. Once they were all inside, I frantically locked the door.

“Drive!” Nick yelled.

Lucas rolled down the window and started firing. “Yeah! Run the bony freaks over!”

Claire shifted gears, and we were about to take off, fixed flat or not. She peeled out, but we didn’t get very far with all the zombies pounding on the glass and rocking the Jeep. Before we knew it, we found ourselves helplessly sandwiched next to a semi.

Claire kept gunning it, squealing the tires, but the Jeep wouldn’t move an inch. “It won’t budge!” she wailed. The engine roared, but we remained wedged, even after Claire jammed her foot on the gas over and over again.

“You’re destroying the pedals,” Lucas said calmly.

“I don’t care!” she yelled at him. “They’re not working anyway.”

“Claire, you need to listen to Lucas,” I said. “We need this Jeep to get away from here.”

She nodded, and her expression softened a little, as though his words made sense to her.

A zombie with black hair and bald patches of bloody scalp crawled onto the windshield and began slapping at the glass.

My heart raced. I gripped Jackie’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, though I wasn’t sure whether it was meant to calm her or myself. I didn’t want to go out like that, surrounded by zombies who couldn’t wait to get their paws and their nasty rotting teeth on us. Then, an idea struck me. “Nick! We can climb out through the sunroof onto to that semi next to us.”

“It might work!” Nick tucked a gun in the waistband of his jeans and slung the rifle back over his shoulder.

“What about Tahoe?” Claire asked. “We can’t just leave him.”

I glanced down at Val, lying on top of him. “Val’s smell will repel the zombies. As long as he stays under her, he’ll be safe. Even if he turns, they won’t attack each other.”

Jackie sucked in a deep breath, and I gripped her hand tight. “You can do this.”

She nodded, and Nick slid the electronic sunroof open and climbed out. He reached down to help Jackie and Claire, and I was right behind them.

Claire stumbled, almost losing her balance, but she clung tightly to Nick.

“Don’t look down at them,” I said. “Concentrate on getting to the roof of the semi.”

Nick wrapped his arm around her waist, trying to steady her.

I balanced on the roof of the Jeep waiting for the girls, Nick, and Lucas to get on top of the truck. As I did, a blue-veined, beyond-creepy hand grabbed my foot, trying to force me to lose my balance. I thrust my boot into the zombie’s face, sending him flying back into the crowd. “Hurry up, you guys!”

More zombies grabbed for me, and I lunged to temporary safety on top of the eighteen-wheeler. I wanted to jump and run off into the woods to try to lose the suckers, then circle around and get back to the Jeep Val was in. Val was safe for the time being, but I knew if we didn’t get her out of there, we might miss the turning and our chance to administer the antidote when the time came. The problem was, the semi was completely surrounded, so that little plan of mine wasn’t going to work.

Chills swept through me. I glanced down at the zombies crowding us. Swarms of hands were reaching up to grab us, and countless others pounded the steel walls of the truck, causing an unnerving clatter. Groans, gurgling, and moans came from everywhere, making the hair on my neck rise. It was worse than being trapped inside the glass house. At least there, we’d been safe on the balcony after the stairs were blown to shreds, but in this situation, there was no safety net. I felt like I had done nothing but fight to survive since we’d crashed in the middle of what my brother called *Zombie Land*. I had been naïve to the dangers all around me, and I felt like an idiot—a terrified idiot.

Next, the hungry zombies began to rock the truck. Claire and Jackie let out long screams, and I couldn’t blame them. We had no idea how to get out of that predicament. Desperate for some kind of escape, I swept my gaze over the area one last time. When I did, I saw it: a hornet’s nest, hanging just above us. I picked up a loose branch and poked at it, trying to find the entry hole.

“What’s that gonna do?” Lucas asked. He aimed his gun and began shooting at the zombies who were rocking the truck.

“There’s a method to my madness!” *I hope*. I used the stick as a baseball bat and swatted the nest as hard as I could, right into the group of zombies. Granted, they wouldn’t feel the pain of the stings, but I hoped it might be enough of a distraction to allow us the time we needed to get away.

A mass of angry hornets immediately swarmed the zombies, and the undead began to swat them away. It didn’t cause the zombies to retreat, but it did distract them from rocking the semi-truck. We huddled close together.

I looked at the others. “At least I gave it a try. Anyone have a Plan B?”

“We could try and make a run for Nick and Dean’s Jeep,” Lucas said.

“No way!” Claire hissed. “If they so much as grab our sleeves, we’ll be dead in no time.”

“I agree. It’s way too risky,” Nick said. “We can’t possibly take a chance like that. If we could only divert them to the back of the semi, I could move toward the front and see if I can slip into the driver seat and try to hotwire this thing.”

With a serious look, Lucas gave him a fist bump. “I like it, but if you get it running, just don’t go too fast. We’ll all fly right off the top.”

“Maybe the keys were left in the ignition,” Jackie said, hopefully.

“It could be out of gas, especially if the driver left it on when he was dragged out.” Tuning out, hundreds of thoughts raced through my head, until I came up with a better plan. I swatted at a few stray hornets that were headed our way, and I screamed my lungs out for Val. Everyone caught on quickly and started yelling for her too.

I thought maybe she could bring the other Jeep around, the one Nick and I had driven, and open the sunroof so we could all slip in. It sounded like a great plan to me. I saw Val walking toward us to the back of the semi through the sea of zombies. They didn’t pay her one bit of attention, and her appearance—greenish skin and long, stringy hair—was allowing her to blend in with them.

“Get my Jeep!” I yelled to her.

Squinting, she pointed a gun at the gas tank. She obviously had her own plans, but I didn’t like them one little bit. I was sure she wasn’t thinking straight. *Did that shot Lucas gave her even work? She’s still deranged!*

“What in the world is your sister doing?” Lucas yelled.

She peered up at him, droplets of sweat pouring down her face. “I’m going to fry these suckers.”

“Yeah, and us too!” Jackie shouted down.

My brother shot Val a glare. “Don’t you dare!”

I waved my hands up and down, trying to get her attention. “No, Val!”

Ignoring us, she shot a hole in the gas tank, and a river of fuel began to trickle down into the dirt. She pulled a pink lighter out of her pocket and was preparing to throw it to spark the flame when Tahoe appeared behind her.

He grabbed the lighter out of her hand. “Don’t throw it until they’re clear!” He motioned for us to jump as he shot the zombies blocking our path.

Val elbowed him in the ribs and grabbed the lighter, throwing it into the trickling gas on the ground.

“Holy crap!” I shouted.

“GO!” Lucas gave me a hard shove that made me stumble forward. “It’s gonna blow!”

Chapter 19

I couldn’t believe Val had shot the gas tank and thrown a lighter into the trickling gas. *What was she thinking? The semi’s gonna blow up any minute!*

As we jumped off the truck, Nick, Lucas, and Val started shooting at the zombies to clear a path for me and the girls. Everything moved so fast that it seemed to be a blur before my eyes: bodies dropping to the ground in front of us, us jumping over them to get to safety (whatever safety we could find in such a situation), and our voices slicing through the morning as we called instructions to each other. Glancing over my shoulder, I was thankful to see the others right behind me. It was about all I could hope for, but the moment of weakness left me unprepared for the attack.

A zombie’s jaws snapped just inches from my neck when a bullet hit him in the head, sending him crashing to the ground. Almost choking on my breath, I shot Tahoe a thankful look and forced myself back into the moment, a hundred thoughts racing through my mind. I didn’t

necessarily like the guy, but I had to admit that Tahoe was covering us like a champ, mowing down anything that got too close to us. Had he not been there, that thing would have taken a sizeable chunk out of my throat, and I would have become one of them. Tahoe quite literally saved my neck.

“Get away from the truck!” Nick yelled a moment before a loud *thud* echoed through the air.

The roaring blast sent me tumbling through the air. I landed on my stomach as hot air rushed into my lungs. Everything throbbed, but at least my brain seemed okay. *Or is it?*

Groaning, I lifted my head off the ground and turned to peer at the exploded truck—or what was left of it. The stench of burning zombie bodies made me gag. Instead of the truck, I saw snapping jaws and flailing bodies in the flames, their flesh burning from their bones as they held on to the hot metal. The Jeep the girls had been driving was covered in leaping flames that seared everything in their wake. If Nick hadn’t been so paranoid about running over glass, we would have had to fight our way out of there on foot. Finally, I was thankful Nick had refused to budge on that, even though we gave him a bunch of gruff for it.

“You guys okay?” I called out to the others.

“Everyone’s here!” Tahoe yelled back.

I scrambled up, and we all hopped into my Jeep. Just as I slammed the door shut, a burning zombie pounded on the glass. I had never locked a door so fast in my life. When the zombie slammed its pasty, ugly skin against the glass, I shuddered. “Let’s go!” I shouted to Lucas, who now sat in the driver seat.

Lucas backed up, turned around, and hit the gas pedal so hard that the Jeep jerked forward.

As we sped off down the road, I glanced out the back window at the shocking scene stretching behind us. Billowing, thick smoke twisted into the air, interspersed with burning bodies. Their pained moans gathered to a crescendo that was only nearly drowned out by the Jeep engine.

Closing my eyes, I leaned back and let my nerves get the better of me. As we moved away from the burning heap, my hands began to shake from the aftershock. I couldn’t believe we’d survived—again. It had been a tough one, and there had been times when I wouldn’t have bet on us living to tell about it, but we had.

At one point, the highway became an impenetrable maze of tangled vehicles. I would've insisted on driving through, but as usual, Nick made the better decision, and Lucas followed it through. We backtracked through the woods, and I swear we lost hours because of it, but no one complained. Everyone was still in shock, realizing how close we'd all come to losing our lives.

Val stayed out cold for hours, so I assumed she'd used up all of her energy. How the girls and Tahoe could sleep while we rode over one bumpy road after another was beyond me, especially with Lucas's music playing on his iPod in the background.

My brother met my gaze. "You're so lucky I didn't park close to the girls like you suggested. If we had, this Jeep would've been toast."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "You're awesome...and always right. You want a medal?"

"No, but some respect would be nice."

I smiled. "You know I respect your decisions. Heck, I'd probably be dead if it weren't for you."

"I'll watch your back," he said, "even if you're a royal pain in my butt sometimes."

I chuckled and closed my eyes again. It wasn't long before I drifted off, and by the time I woke up, the windows were rolled down, and the sunroof was wide open. The sun cast a warm sensation on my face, while a cool breeze whipped through my hair. I opened the glove compartment and fumbled around, then pulled out a nice pair of men's sunglasses and slipped them on.

"Oh yeah," Nick said, shooting me a sideways glance. "Now you look cool."

I noticed he and Lucas must've switched seats at some point, and I wondered how long I had been out cold, unaware of anything around me. I chuckled. "They give me character."

"They make you look older," Nick said.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Well, my life has been turned upside down. I guess I do feel more mature. I can't believe the crap we've been through. It's mind-blowing, you know?"

"I feel ya, little brother." Nick let out a long breath, giving me the impression that he had something else on his mind.

"What's wrong?" I finally asked.

He refused to look at me, keeping his gaze focused on the road. “I’m sorry I yelled at you when we first crashed, and I’m even sorrier I even suggested that you should kill Val. That had to be tough, knowing she was our sister.”

“It was horrible,” I agreed, “but I should’ve just told you the truth. If I had, it would’ve never even crossed your mind, I’m sure.”

He grimaced, his gaze still focused on the road. “It probably would have, but I might’ve given her another day to live. Letting my sister turn into one of those things... well, I just couldn’t let it happen. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge you have a possible cure.”

I considered his words carefully. *Would he really kill his own flesh and blood if I didn’t have the vials in my possession?* I reasoned that Nick must have thought he was saving her from a fate worse than death, and perhaps he was right. I knew I would have rather been shot dead than become one of those things.

“I don’t blame you for anything,” Nick said. “Yes, you broke some rules and went outside of protocol, but you saved Val’s life, and I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said.

His lips pressed into a grim line, but I could tell something else was bothering him.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head and ran a hand through his disheveled hair, speaking out what I had been trying to push out of my mind ever since boarding that helicopter. “What if the cure doesn’t work, Dean?”

I clenched my fists, hoping against all odds that it would work. “It will,” I said with less conviction than I wanted.

“But what if it doesn’t? I don’t think I can bear having a sister one day and having to put her down humanely the next day. It’s just not fair—not freaking fair at all! I never even got a chance to really know her.”

“I dunno,” I said. “All I know is that we’ll get through this.” I tried to keep my voice from quivering.

He nodded in agreement and didn’t say another word. He’d never shown me his emotional side before, and I could tell how hard it was on him. I decided not to pry any further; I left him alone and didn’t talk about it any further. Besides, I knew if we continued discussing such touchy

subjects and sentimental things, a tear might slip down my cheek, and I wasn't about to let him witness that.

We drove for another hour before something caught my eye. The Jeep drove past a zombie, hunched over a dead deer on the side of the road. I didn't have much time to grasp details, but in the brief second our eyes connected, a chill ran through me. I knew I would never get used to their cold, dead eyes. A few years back, my buddies and I had enjoyed a good laugh and chatted about how the world was going to end. We'd even joked about a zombie apocalypse, but we didn't think that would really happen, not in a million years. I'd come to realize as of late that life does throw curveballs we never quite expect. The girls slept. Lucas and Nick glanced at the venison-devouring zombie for a second, but then their attention drifted off like it didn't even faze them. *There's something seriously wrong with this world when we can drive by a zombie feasting on a deer on the side of the road and accept it as normal. Yeah, this is seriously messed up!*

The world seemed to be crumbling all around us, and the undead army seemed to be growing in numbers daily. Sooner or later, though, they would have to run out of healthy people to infect. My hopes were that we could take the remaining healthy people out of the equation. I wanted to get them into safe cities, even build more cities if we had to. I didn't understand why the authorities weren't trying to do just that. It seemed simple to me. I figured the leaders needed to focus on solving major problems first and then deal with after-effects. Getting help to everyone in Zombie Land had to be hard, if not impossible.

The living dead would eventually die, and survivors could rebuild, but in the meantime, the healthy people out there needed help. They were always on the run or hiding out. I quickly learned that it was an everyday battle to survive, with death lurking around the corner. Life was rough and totally sucked out there, but there was little I could do about it. Whether I wanted to or not, I'd have to deal with it, and I could never give up on thinking humanity might stand a chance after all. Whatever happened, I knew I'd never get accustomed to the things we witnessed out there. My head ached. Thinking about the last days' events, Mom and Dad, and trying to save Val was driving me insane. I needed sleep—some peace, if only for an hour—but sleep felt as though it wouldn't come for a long time. Trying to block the image of the half-eaten deer out of my head, I eventually drifted off to the girls' shallow breathing. It felt as though I had only closed my eyes for a few minutes when someone shook my shoulder hard, jerking me out of my slumber. What?" I groggily opened my eyes to Nick towering over me. "Where are we?"

“Look up, sleepy head,” Nick said, pointing up to an air traffic control tower. “It’s an airport. I think this would be the best place to stay the night and get some rest.”

Without another word, I followed him out. It was late afternoon and we’d been driving all day. My whole body felt cramped. I squeezed out and stretched my legs, thankful to get out of the truck. I glimpsed at our surroundings. To the right, there was nothing but woodlands. To the left was a tall, gray building. In front of us, there was a ramp that probably served as a runway. Apart from the usual sounds, such as chirping birds and a soft wind rustling the leaves, the area seemed completely deserted. And I couldn’t believe this would be my third night out here in the middle of Zombie Land.

No planes were out, but a giant steel hangar lined the north side of the field. For some reason, the hangar doors were slid open, as if somebody was in a quick hurry to leave. I craned my neck until I could see right in. Everything was empty.

Nick was right: The control tower was the perfect place to spend the night, and I felt like we would be safe. “We can see a zombie coming from anywhere.”

Lucas playfully slugged me in the arm. “Yeah, but the best part is that we can talk and be as loud as we want.”

I gave him a fist-bump. “Yeah!”

“I like it!” Jackie said, grabbing a box of food from the trunk. “I can whip up some dinner with this stuff. How about cold chicken noodle soup with crackers, baked beans, and Spam?”

“Mmm. A meal fit for a king.” Claire laughed as she grabbed some candles and other supplies.

I got a crowbar out of the trunk and wedged the lock until it finally snapped. I agreed to stay downstairs with the girls while Nick and Lucas checked things out. We left Tahoe sleeping in the back seat; we weren’t about to carry his sorry butt up all those stairs. But then a thought struck me: *Wait a minute...he did save my life back there. Maybe I should cut him a break and not ride him so hard.* I decided if he didn’t come up by dark, I would go out and get him. I owed him that much.

“Your brother is so brave,” Claire said, wearing a big smile. “He’s not afraid of anything. When I’m with him, I just feel so safe.”

I smiled and decided to put her on the spot. “You have a thing for Nick, don’t you?”

Her cheeks grew red. “Yeah, he’s really sweet.”

Jackie grabbed my arm and smiled. “So is Dean here.”

I flung my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, my heart racing. “Is that all I am to you? Sweet?” We’d shared a rather passionate kiss, and now I was standing there with my arm around her, so I was pretty sure there was more to it than “sweet”.

“Is there something wrong with sweet, mister?” she chimed, meeting my gaze.

“No, but I’d rather be sexy and irresistible.”

She batted her eyelashes like a puppy dog. “Should I rephrase?”

“Oh brother,” Claire said.

“Yes, please do.” I shot her a playful look.

She wrapped her arms around me and stared into my eyes. “Dean, uh, what’s your last name?”

“Walters,” I said.

“Dean Walters, you are sexy and irresistible *and* sweet, and I like you. I also trust you, and I consider myself lucky to have met you.”

“That’s more like it.” I softly kissed her lips. “But I could say those same things and more about you.” My lips brushed hers again. When she leaned into me, I put some distance between us. “No, let me tell you what I think about you.” My voice grew slightly husky. “You’re gorgeous and clever, brave and adorable.”

Her face lit up, and her lips curved into the most beautiful smile I had ever seen.

“Get a room, you two!” Lucas said.

Jackie turned around and playfully punched him. “Shut up!”

He chuckled. “Just because we’re in the middle of a zombie apocalypse doesn’t mean you can’t get arrested for public displays of affection.”

We all laughed, and the mood seemed lighter.

“So I take it everything’s safe up there?” Claire asked.

“All clear,” Nick said.

We went out to the Jeep to get Val. I scooped her up from the back seat. She was still out cold, but she looked a lot paler, and she was sweating profusely.

Claire and Jackie glanced over. “Is she okay?” Jackie asked.

“It’s all part of the process of becoming a zombie,” I said.

Nick nodded. “We’ll prepare her bed upstairs.”

Claire didn't waste a minute. She was right by his side, holding some pillows and blankets and a box of supplies to be carried up.

"Here, Claire, let me help," Nick said, taking the box before he turned and looked at me. "You got the vials in case sis changes?"

I nodded. "Yep." Carrying Val, I climbed up what felt like a million flights of stairs, but eventually, we reached the open space overlooking the airstrip below, and I could finally lay her down.

Claire hurried to cover her with a blue blanket.

Val opened her eyes briefly and said. "Hey, do you know what a lobster feels like when it's boiled?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

"I do."

I could tell she was roasting, so I took off the blanket and chuckled at her attempt at sarcasm, something she'd obviously inherited from our mother. "There. I hope that's better. Just get some rest, sis."

She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

The view from the top of the control tower was amazing. I could see from every direction. I picked up a pair of binoculars from a desk and realized I could see as far as the woods stretching in the distance. Nothing would get past us.

"We're taking those," Lucas said, pulling me aside.

"I'm sure nobody cares at this point."

He opened my black bag and inspected the vials. "Everything looks good here."

"Of course. I've been guarding them with my life."

"Keep up the good work. You're doing great."

I nodded. "Well, there's a lot on my shoulders, I'll tell you that."

"Yeah, I know. It's to be expected since we're the world's only hope for survival."

"No pressure or anything."

His expression darkened. "Seriously, Dean, you're doing a fantastic job. You really are a hero."

"I wonder if they'll even work. You really think we've got the cure?"

“If not, it’s the closest thing we do have. We’ve got to get those vials to the scientists in Washington. This is the most important mission of our lives.”

I bit my lip hard. “I know.”

His eyes glimmered with hope. “We’re gonna be able to help so many people. We can’t think of this as the end of the world. We need to think of it as the beginning of a new life... for everyone.”

“I hope it’s the miracle we’ve all been praying for,” I agreed.

He zipped up the bag. “Well, there’s only one way to tell. We need to test it on your sister.”

“That’s the plan,” I said.

“For her sake, as well as the sake of all humanity, I sure hope it works like we want it to.”

“Doc ensured me this is the final formula, and I believe he was telling me the truth.”

Lucas nodded gravely. “Yeah, me too.”

Jackie’s laugh drifted over, and we both smiled. She was joking around with Claire and Nick. When I met her gaze, she smiled; she had the cutest smile, teeth gleaming white like a Hollywood movie star.

“Hey,” Lucas whispered, “Jackie’s really cute.”

“Yeah, she’s hot, smart, funny, and super sweet. I like everything about her.”

“She seems perfect for you. I guess time will only tell.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, she looks a lot like, uh...”

“Who?” he asked.

“A lot like my *next* girlfriend.” Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. After all, we hardly knew each other, but I was smitten. I wasn’t going to rush anything, especially with everything we were going through. We’d just take it nice and slow. Besides, my main focus right now was saving Val and getting home.

“She’s all yours,” Lucas said. “Besides, I like your sister. She’s pretty when she isn’t threatening to eat me.”

“I could tell you like Val,” I said.

“The second I laid eyes on her back on the island, I was totally blown away. It sucked that I had to arrest her. I really hated that. Would it bother you if I asked her out sometime when this is all said and done?”

“It’s fine with me if you wanna go after my sister. You’re the most honorable guy I know.” I playfully slugged him. “Just don’t go pulling pranks on her the way you do to the guys back on the island.”

“She might like a guy with a sense of humor.”

I laughed. “Yeah, or she might punch you in the face.”

Chapter 20

The airport control tower was the best possible place for us to rest and stay the night. The highest story boasted fantastic visibility, allowing us to see any approaching zombie from a mile away. We weren’t worried about single zombies though. Our main priority was not to draw any attention; we had to avoid a herd. Scanning the area below the tower, I realized that even if a whole bunch of them tried to corner us, there’d be enough time to jump in the Jeep and race down the airstrip that led to the main road.

“What are you thinking?” Jackie whispered from behind me.

I smiled but didn’t turn to face her. “Nothing Earth-shattering. I just realized we can get from the airstrip to the main road by taking a few different directions.”

She rubbed my back gently. “Always plotting ahead, aren’t you?”

I inclined my head, not sure where she was headed. “Sometimes.”

She laughed. “Relax. It’s a compliment. I wish I was more of a planner rather than jumping in headfirst without thinking of consequences. I might’ve saved myself a bit of trouble in my life.”

“And I wish I was more carefree,” I said, finally turning. My gaze fell on her lips first, then trailed up to her beautiful eyes. “My paranoia’s something I learned from Nick. Did you know he’s already plotted our escape plan in case we have to evacuate?”

She cocked a brow. “Impressive. I haven’t even planned my dinner yet.”

I laughed and pulled her against my chest, marveling at how good she smelled. “That’s something I like about you.” My heart picked up in speed at the realization. I liked a lot of things about her—a whole lot of them.

We settled in, and Claire laid out a red and white blanket on the floor. Jackie dished out cold chicken noodle soup, baked beans, and Spam, just like she promised, on paper plates. I lit some thick white candles and put them in the center. Girls usually dig candles, and I had a strong hunch Jackie would like them too.

“Our first romantic dinner,” she said.

I grinned while everyone sang, “Awww!” trying to make light of a tough situation. I laughed as I drank a warm, flat Pepsi. I was so hungry and thirsty that I didn’t even care. I could have eaten a whole other can of baked beans, and I didn’t even like them.

The stairs creaked as someone walked up them. We all exchanged shocked glances.

Jackie ran to the window and glanced out. “I don’t see any zombies around and it looks like Tahoe isn’t in the backseat anymore.”

My heart raced as I rushed to the door. “Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

“Lake Tahoe?” I asked. I was so thankful it was a human’s voice and not a zombie’s moan and heavy breathing. At this point, I just needed a little breather from all that kind of crap. I’d only been out here for three days and seen enough to last me a lifetime. Of course, after a good night’s sleep, I’d probably be ready for more adrenaline rushes tomorrow.

“Funny. Just let me in. My side’s killing me.”

Hesitating, I opened the door. Even though he had saved my life, I was still ticked at him for almost killing Val. How can someone forget something like that? I knew I needed to forgive him. And I would... in time.

Jackie offered him a plate of food and a beer. He sat next to us like he was part of our gang, as though all was forgiven and forgotten. Personally, I couldn’t wait to be rid of the mountain man once and for all, and Nick’s expression told me he thought the same.

Keeping to himself, my brother downed a beer, then another, as though alcohol could help him forget his worries. The city we’d lived in for the last year had been destroyed. We didn’t even know if our family had survived. He didn’t usually drink, so I could only assume it was all quite devastating for him. As much as I understood him, I didn’t like him drinking while continuing to play tough. We needed to be on alert, but after everything we’d been through, a beer was nothing. Heck, we all decided to have one. Nick didn’t even speak for the first hour we were there. He just drank while Lucas kept guard using the binoculars we found. Finally, he said,

“I’ve been thinking. I know my parents had to make it out safe, and I’m not even going to waste another minute worrying about it.”

I nodded. “I agree. Mom and Dad had all kinds of escape plans and drills. We’ll find them, no doubt about it.” I lifted up my can and smiled. “To survival and new friends.”

Jackie’s brown eyes twinkled, and we all clanked cans.

“I’ll toast to that,” Tahoe said.

Val even opened her eyes. “How can anyone toast in this day and age? I’ve lost so much and so many people I cared about.” The pain was evident in her whisper.

“She makes an excellent point,” Lucas said. We all nodded as he continued, “Death lurks around every corner, making every breath a choice. We fight to live another second, another minute, another day. All of us come from different backgrounds and walks of life, but we all have one thing in common.” His lips pressed into grim lines. “We’ve all experienced the loss of a loved one. Let’s stop making toasts and just live to see another day.”

There was a moment of silence as we all contemplated his words. Somehow, he hit home with every single one of us. I wrapped an arm around Jackie to draw her close, and she snuggled into my shoulder.

“I can’t argue with that,” Nick said, “not after losing countless friends and even my childhood girlfriend.”

“I’ve lost friends too,” I managed to choke out.

Nick lifted his chin. “This one goes out to Sam Moalny, who was killed last month in the line of duty. He was a great patriot, humanitarian, and loyal friend. And this also goes out to all those who have died in vain to this wicked epidemic that has taken place all over our world. Our loved ones are gone but never forgotten. This thought goes out to them. May you rest in peace.”

“Thanks, Lucas,” Val said quietly.

He smiled. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You understood what I meant.” She leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes again. For a moment, silence ensued, and I believed she had drifted off to sleep, but then she opened her eyes again and smiled. “Hey, if I said anything crazy to you, just forget it, okay? I wasn’t thinking straight. Also, I think I might’ve attacked you. It’s all fuzzy. I’m trying to put the pieces together.”

“Then you’re not going to eat me?” Lucas asked.

Her face blushed. “No way. Did I really say that?”

He smiled.

I chuckled. “That...and a little more.”

“Yes, with a very descriptive cursing vocabulary,” Claire added.

“I’m sorry, Lucas,” Val said. “I talk like that in front of the guys on the police force to blend in, ya know?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lucas said.

“That shot took a while to work, but it finally kicked in. I can’t thank you enough. Nick filled me in about how I fought you over it. I’m sorry I was such a bear. Also, thanks for breaking me out of that medical prison.”

He threw his arms up in the air. “Well, it’s about time you gave me some credit for that great escape.”

“You did a fantastic job of planning it.” She shot him a tiny grin. “You’d be kind of cute if Uncle Sam would let you grow your hair out.”

“What? You don’t like the buzzed look? What do you expect? Are you looking for some brooding sap or some Fabio from the cover of one of those romance novels?” He made a fist and the huge muscles bulged in his arm. “I’m a born and bred soldier, and this is a soldier’s hairdo.”

She grinned. “If you’re ever interested in going out with me, you’ll have to grow out your hair.”

He grinned back. “Are those your final terms?”

“Yep.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll grow out my hair for one date with you.”

She smiled. “Deal. Hopefully, by the time that happens, I’ll be back to normal too.” She walked back to her bed. “I’m going to rest over here for a bit.” She pulled the cover up to her chest and closed her eyes.

“Get some rest,” Lucas said, carrying over a second pillow and propping it under her head.

Tahoe approached. “Hey, Lucas, I need a minute with Val, okay?”

Lucas cocked a brow.

“It’s okay,” Val said. “I want to hear what he has to say.”

Tahoe apologized for Earl and even his own involvement. His words were mumbled, but whatever he said, it seemed to make Val smile. I regarded her from the corner of my eye, unable

to believe what I was witnessing. A few times she just nodded, and then she raised her arm to touch his shoulder, as though all was forgiven and forgotten. He said something under his breath, making her giggle and then laugh, reminding me of the old Val I'd met not long ago. He irritated me, but I let him chitchat with my sister because he seemed harmless. I knew Val could handle him, but I couldn't help inching closer to tune in.

Val was telling him about the cure and that there was hope for her life. He squeezed her hand and gave her words of encouragement. Even though she seemed tired, her mind was clear, and it had been hours since she last growled, hissed, or said any off-the-wall things. I was happy the shot had worked after all. If it hadn't, she would have been taking down Lucas or Claire and trying to bite their necks at that very moment; or else she would have been trying to arrest me, thinking she was a cop hot on a case. I chuckled to myself at the thought.

"Hey, Lake Tahoe," my brother said, "I'm watching you."

"Love the nickname," he said. "I guess I'm stuck with it, right?"

Lucas and Nick started telling us Army stories about their narrow escapes with death and zombies. Tahoe even joined, sitting at Val's side as he told some stories of his own. I used to think my brother was an exaggerator, but after all I'd seen, I knew the stories were true. I wondered if the guys back home would believe me when I told them about the glass house or the multitude of zombies that surrounded the semi-truck we stood on top of. Those were the crazy kind of stories Nick used to come back and tell us, and we'd always thought he was full of it. Of course, I had never said that to his face.

Nick squashed the beer can he was drinking from and threw it across the room, making the basket. "Yes!"

"Woo-hoo!" Claire squealed. "He shoots; he scores, and beats the buzzer at the last second to win the game."

"He's so getting a championship ring," Jackie said.

Nick laughed, then grabbed another beer and took a swig. "So, Claire, what's your story?"

Jackie almost spat her drink out in a fit of laughter. "Dean used that line on me earlier, back at the house. Is that some kind of brother pick-up line?"

We all laughed, and I elbowed her playfully.

"I just want to know more about you, Claire," Nick said. "I don't know a darn thing except that you're twenty-one, smokin' hot, and gorgeous."

“That’s the corniest thing I’ve ever heard,” Lucas said.

I laughed. “It is, isn’t it? But he gets so daring once he’s had a couple of beers.”

Jackie chuckled. “Yeah. He’s not beating around the bush now, is he?”

Nick stumbled over and wrapped his arm around Claire as he slumped down next to her. “I like the direct approach.”

“If he gets on your nerves, Claire, just let me know,” Lucas said. “I can throw his butt on the other side of the room.”

“I’m fine, Lucas.” Claire grinned and turned her attention to my brother. “I’m from New York City. Jackie and I aren’t only cousins, but also roommates.”

“Cool,” I said. “Nick and I are originally from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. When all this happened, we got relocated.”

“Did you like it there?” Jackie asked, chiming in.

I nodded. “I miss the ocean big time. My buddies and I used to surf all the time. We had fun, but we also had goals in life.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed it gently. “I really wanted to be a broadcast sports reporter. I wish we could all go there. I’d love to show you the beach and how to ride a wave.”

“Oooh, I would love that,” Jackie said. “By the way, sports journalism is a cool career choice.”

I pointed at her. “Thanks, but back to you.”

“We used to attend Parsons before the zombie thing went down,” Claire said.

I cocked a brow. “Never heard of it.”

“Fashion school,” Jackie elaborated, brushing a strand of hair back. “It’s not what you think. It’s more than pattern-making and sewing courses. I was taking classes in fashion photography and journalism.”

“Yeah,” Claire said. “It’s one of the oldest institutions of its kind offering undergraduate and graduate degrees. We were taught valuable industry knowledge while designing innovative clothing and products. Parsons is credited with launching the careers of various fashion legends like Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, and Tom Ford, and so many more.”

Jackie seemed quite enthusiastic about it, and I wished I knew more about her career choice, but given that I’d grown up among boys with absolutely no fashion sense, I was glad to even know what fashion school was.

Nick grinned, probably getting as little out of it as I was. “Well, that explains the cute outfits.”

Claire nudged him and batted those long eyelashes of hers. She really liked my big brother, and she wasn’t embarrassed to flirt with him.

I met Jackie’s gaze. “I think you’d make a wonderful fashion photographer.”

My heart began to race as Jackie flashed her bright smile. “Thank you,” she said. “I started taking pictures at ten. I thought about the great adventures I could have taking beautiful pictures all over the world. But as a teenager, I began to love fashion, so I thought I’d just combine my two great loves.”

“You gotta do what you love,” I said. “Did you work as well?”

Claire cut in. “Yeah. Jackie and I worked as wedding gown models in some of those wedding shows. We got to wear beautiful gowns and have our hair all pinned up in some elaborate up-dos.”

Nick reached for her hand. “I bet you made the most beautiful bride.”

“Thank you, Nick,” she said. “We weren’t allowed to move one muscle or even blink.”

Jackie chuckled. “Yeah, and Claire kept giving me this silly look, and we’d end up busting out in laughter. She always got me in trouble.”

I shot Lucas an amused look.

“What were you doing when all of this happened?” Lucas asked.

Jackie looked off, as if remembering a horrible event in her life. “We were actually on a photo shoot as wedding models for a fashion magazine in Hershey, Pennsylvania when the virus broke out.”

“Why would you leave New York City to go to Pennsylvania?” Nick asked.

“The title of the article was ‘Chocolate, Wine, and Weddings’,” Jackie said, “so they chose to do it in the chocolate capital of the world. Everything turned to chaos. We couldn’t get back to New York City. There was gunfire everywhere. People started killing and eating their friends and neighbors, and there Claire and I were in these fluffy wedding dresses.”

“We hid out in the basement of a pet store,” Claire said. “The poor animals were going nuts. The glass door was shattered, so we let them go so they’d have a fighting chance. Leaving them locked up in those cages would have been a death sentence for sure. I watched the parrots squawk and fly off into the sky, and I envied them.”

“I remember where I was too,” I said. “I was stuck at the top of a Ferris wheel with a date. Innocent people were being killed below, and I couldn’t do anything to help them.”

“That’s awful,” Jackie said.

“It was like something out of some B-grade horror movie, and I thought maybe I was dreaming. Hours later, Nick and my dad let me down. My date ran in the other direction and I haven’t seen her since. Nick then flew our parents and me to Kelleys Island where my grandma lived.”

“So you’re a pilot?” Claire cut in, her gaze meeting Nick’s. “I dig pilots.”

A soft hue of red covered his cheeks, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure if it was from the alcohol in his blood or the compliment from a pretty girl.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, my grandma owned a bed and breakfast and a small cottage. About 200 residents lived there before the outbreak.”

“My best friend from school went to Kelleys Island two years ago,” Jackie said. “She went fishing, sea kayaking, and hiking. And even took a trip to that amusement park, Cedar Point in Sandusky. I remember all the pictures she showed me. It looked like a lot of fun. Kelleys Island is a tourist attraction, right?”

I snorted. “It used to be. It was the perfect place to hole up, considering we were completely surrounded by water. It’s a great island and we love it. I just wish Nick was around more.”

“And where’d you take off to, Nick?” Claire asked.

“I was home on leave from the Army, but when this zombie thing happened, I chose to fight over here in Ohio,” Nick said. “With everything happening, the Army was cool with it. I wanted to give back, to save the people who weren’t dead yet.”

“Me too,” Lucas said. “I had lots of connections so I got stationed at Kelleys Island too. Nick and Dean’s family… well, they’re like the family I never had.”

Claire gripped Nick’s hand. “That’s very honorable to serve your country.”

He leaned in and whispered something in her ear that made her laugh.

Jackie squeezed my hand and I smiled. We talked about everything, and I learned so much about her. She’d been born and raised in New York City, and family and friends meant everything to her. She also loved burgers with all the fixings, and she demanded gobs of mustard, just like me. She used to jog Central Park every morning at six a.m. with her brothers,

and she loved cats. She'd always wanted a dog, but her landlord wouldn't allow it. She wore pajamas and pink slippers every night—or at least she had before the zombies took over.

"I've got one question," said Val, looking at Jackie and Claire.

"Val!" I said.

"You're awake," Jackie said. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a zombie is eating my intestines." She cringed. "Well, you asked. Anyway, here's my question."

"Yes?" Claire said.

"This zombie thing has been happening for a year now. Why were you dressed so fashionable when we met?"

"We ran until our group found an abandoned mansion," Jackie said. "We got comfortable and didn't see more than a handful of zombies for over eight months."

"There were giant closets filled with the most gorgeous designer clothes," Jackie said, "so we started relaxing and letting our guard down. We dressed up every day and did our hair and makeup. All the girls in our group did. We were led into a false sense of security. I know now that it was a big mistake. We should've been training to fight, but the men treated us women like china dolls. They took care of us, and I guess we let them."

"At three o'clock one afternoon, a window shattered," Claire said. "I'll never forget it to this day."

Jackie sipped her beer. "That was the end of our group...and our time together. A herd broke in and killed everyone else." Her voice wavered. "We barely escaped."

I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close. It had to be awful. I couldn't even begin to imagine what that night must have been like for them, mourning the loss of their protectors and running for their lives with no supplies or weapons.

"I'm sorry," Val said, looking out the window.

"Isn't the sunset gorgeous?" Jackie asked, changing the subject.

"Yes. And I want to watch it one last time before I...before I die," she said between breaths.

"How can I deny my wonderful sister her last wish?" I rushed over to help her up.

"Technically though, you're not really dying, Val." I scooped her up in my arms and brought her next to Nick. We all sat together and watched the sun sink into the horizon.

“That was beautiful,” she said and looked up at me, then at Nick. “Hey, guys, what if the cure doesn’t work?”

I gripped her hand tightly. “Don’t even think about it.”

A tear ran down her face. “I don’t want to die, Dean. I want to live to see another sunset.”

“Shh.” I wiped her tear away and pulled her into my arms. “You’re my sister, and Nick and I are going to do everything in our power to save you.”

“You’ve got to trust us,” Nick said.

She smiled, but I could see the hopelessness in her eyes. “I’m not giving up yet.”

Nick touched her hand. “That’s my girl.”

“Just promise me one thing,” she said.

“Anything,” I said, meaning it.

“If the cure doesn’t work, I want you or Nick to...one of you have to put the bullet in my head—nobody else!”

Tears welled in my eyes as I met Nick’s gaze; he was choking up too. I tried to compose myself because I didn’t want to cry in front of everyone. “I...we promise.” It was the hardest promise I’d ever had to make to anyone, and I hoped it wasn’t one I’d have to keep.

She sniffled. “Thank you.”

I squeezed her hand. I prayed against all odds that the cure would work, but if it didn’t, I knew I’d have to keep my promise, no matter how much it hurt.

Val let out a sigh. “I wish we could’ve been a real family, that we could have grown up together.”

“Well, we’re a real family now,” I said, “and that’s what counts.”

“Tell me about Mom and Dad,” she whispered.

I laughed. “You remind me a lot of Dad, with that temper of yours. I think that’s a family trait.”

Nick chuckled. “I’m the worst. I punch walls when I get pissed off.”

“My adoptive parents were as sweet as can be. I knew I didn’t get my temper from them.”

“You’re funny and sarcastic like Mom, but tough like Dad,” Nick said.

“And you’re a fighter, just like Mom,” I said. “When she had cancer, she never gave up. She beat it years later.”

“Mom almost died?” she said.

Slowly, the word came out. “Yes.”

A tiny gasp escaped her throat. “Why didn’t she tell me about it?”

I sucked in a deep breath as I considered my words. “Even though the ordeal was over and done with, maybe she didn’t want to worry you.” I shrugged. “I honestly don’t know.”

“I’m glad she made it,” Val said softly.

“Me too.” I nodded. “Imagine if she didn’t. Then I might never have met you, and she would’ve died without having a chance to meet her only daughter.” I met her gaze. “During chemo, she said she only had one regret about life. She wanted to meet Valarie again. Yeah, she called you by your formal name. I thought she was talking about an old high school friend.”

“But it was me.” She let out a sob. “I never cry like this. It’s the virus. It’s doing crazy stuff to my emotions.”

Lucas put an arm around her, and she playfully slugged him.

“Hey! I’m willing to let that one slide,” he said, “but I’m warning you, if you try to bite me, our little friendship is all over.”

Val smiled. “You don’t look like the type of guy that dates zombie chicks.”

He shot her a gleaming grin. “I’d date a zombie, as long as she didn’t treat me like a piece of meat, though I’m not at all opposed to a little nibbling.”

“C’mon,” she said. “Be serious. You know I want your braaaaaains.”

“You know what else I like,” Lucas said. “Zombies aren’t quitters. I mean, if they want you, they’ll keep coming after you...and I love being chased!”

“That’s a no-brainer.”

We laughed some more as we continued to tell jokes and stories. For just a little while, we let go and allowed ourselves some fun; we knew that soon enough, we’d be back to fighting for our lives. Settling into our beds hours later, when the sun had long set and countless stars dotted the skyline, we decided to take turns standing guard to make sure no zombies crossed the perimeter and to watch out for Val changing while the others slept.

Morning had finally come. The sun beamed in, and we all immediately got to packing the little bit of supplies we had.

“Okay, I’m starting here. You guys split up. Check every corner and crevice so we don’t leave anything behind,” I said, glancing around one last time.

“Where’s Lake Tahoe?” my brother asked.

I peered at him, surprised. “He’s not with you?”

“I thought he was with you.” He shrugged. “He’s gotta be around somewhere. Let’s just pack up the Jeep. He’ll turn up.”

Ignoring the sudden uneasiness in the pit of my stomach, I grabbed a box and some blankets and looked out the window. My heart lurched. “Nick! Lucas! The Jeep’s gone,” I yelled, my voice reverberating from the walls.

Val’s eyes darted about, not really focusing on anything. The way Nick regarded me told me he knew before I even opened my mouth.

“He must’ve left during his short shift of staying awake and guarding. We’re so screwed,” I said. My heart lurched in my chest as I checked our belongings, or lack thereof.

I swear Val’s face turned another shade of red as she wailed, “He took our food, water, guns, freakin’ everything!”

“He didn’t take the stuff we dragged up here,” Jackie said, swinging a backpack over her shoulder. “We’ve still got some food and water and some guns.”

Nick grabbed my arm and pulled me aside, whispering so the girls wouldn’t hear him. “Where’s the serum?”

I scanned the naked floor, willing my eyes to see something that wasn’t there. “I-I don’t know. The bag’s gone!” I managed eventually. “I thought you or Lucas had it.”

“We’ll find another vehicle,” Lucas said, “and catch up with him. I still have the tracking device.”

“You’re right.” My heart raced, thumping in my ears like a drum. “We can’t stay here.”

“We’ll have to leave on foot,” Nick said, “and I mean right NOW!”

A chill washed over me. We were right back where we’d started: running for our lives and in dire need of transportation. And now, we didn’t even have the cure in our hands. Val’s life depended on those vials, and without them, my sister was doomed, dead and gone forever.

“What are we waiting for?” Val asked.

“Let’s get outta here...and find those vials,” Nick said.

I couldn’t have agreed more.

The End of Installment One

To be continued in the next book, *The Zombie Chronicles: Book 2*

See covers below for other books in this series.

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The book cover features a close-up portrait of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair. Her face is pale and covered in a thick, greyish, textured substance, likely representing zombie makeup or a disease. She has a single, light-colored eye visible, looking slightly to the left. The background is dark and out of focus. The text is overlaid on the image in three distinct sections.

CHRISSY PEEBLES

The Zombie
Chronicles

Race for the Cure

Book 3

CHRISSY PEEBLES



The Zombie
Chronicles

Deadly City

Book 4



CHRISSY PEEBLES

The Zombie Chronicles

Poisonous Serum

Book 5



CHRISSY PEEBLES

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