

STEVEN RAMIREZ



DEAD

IS ALL
YOU GET

Book Two of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD

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STEVEN RAMIREZ



Glass Highway
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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Praise

“A shoot first then shoot again horror thriller of the highest order.”

Simon Oneill, author of *Magic Is Murder*

“All in all, *Dead is all You Get* was like *Resident Evil*, *28 Days Later*, and *The Crazies* all wrapped up into one powerful novel.”

Aaron Dennis, author of *The Lokians Series*

“A literate and philosophical zombie apocalypse.”

The Haunted Reading Room

“These are realistic heroes whose dangerous escapades leave you breathless and keep you turning the pages.”

Amazon Reviewer



About the Author

Steven Ramirez is the author of the horror thriller series *TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD*. He has also published short stories as well as a children's book, and he wrote the screenplay for the horror thriller film *Killers*. Steven lives in Los Angeles with his wife and daughters.

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Also by Steven Ramirez

Tell Me When I'm Dead (Book One of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD)—When a plague decimates the town of Tres Marias, recovering alcoholic Dave Pulaski, his wife, Holly, and a band of soldiers must kill the living and the dead to survive. “A hard-hitting splattergore zombie thriller, told by the ultimate antihero.” —Travis Luedke, author of *The Nightlife Series*

Even The Dead Will Bleed (Book Three of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD)—In Los Angeles, Dave Pulaski is on a mission to rescue an innocent girl from a secret facility experimenting on humans, then kill the man responsible. But he encounters dark forces that will deliver him to the brink of hell. “Death, despair, and the way things are.” —Danielle DeVor, author of *The Marker Chronicles*

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To the men and women who serve our country. If the zombie apocalypse ever did come to pass, I know you'd have our backs.

“People don’t burn themselves, or drown themselves, if they got sense, do they? All them in that town were good, normal folks until that night. Then they just seemed to go crazy.”

“Just relax, Mr. Jackson. Everything will be all right, but you must relax. You’ve been a sick man.”

—Michael Crichton, *The Andromeda Strain*

Opening Shot

IT WAS THAT KID—THE “EXPLORER.” THE GUY DRESSED IN AN OXFORD SHIRT, skinny jeans and Tiger shoes and wearing Google Glass. He was the one I was worried about. I could’ve gone to Pappy’s, but that place is way too crowded. So I ended up at this greasehole. He had come in a little while ago and sat at the counter. I was sitting way in the back, choking down a grilled cheese that tasted like burnt cardboard. I wanted to stay invisible—needed to make sure I did nothing to draw his attention. Or he’d turn around and start recording me.

And I didn’t want to be captured.

The other people in there—the locals—they were okay. Or maybe not. Some of them could have been undead. Only you wouldn’t know it right away because they weren’t like the ones we encountered in the beginning. Lumbering and flat-eyed, coming at you to get a piece of your face or your neck. These little beauties were smart. They only showed themselves when they wanted to. And at this particular moment, they didn’t look like they were in the mood.

You think I’m crazy. I’m not. Just cautious. Want to know why? Sure, you do. Don’t make me tell you. Because to tell you is to remember. And I don’t want to remember any of it. The people I lost. The pain I suffered—both physical and spiritual. That I’m even alive is a miracle. Yeah, about that. You see, the thing is with miracles? You only get one. And

miracles were in short supply during those last dark days when we thought we had a way out but didn't. When a few of us—a brave few—banded together to take it all back. Not only for us but for all the survivors. Don't make me tell you.

But you'll insist, won't you? Like a kid begging for a toy. As if this is some kind of campfire for Webelos and you're craving a good story. *Tell us*, you'll say. And you'll hassle me till I do because foolishly I already recounted the facts as I remembered them up to now. How I lost my best friend to a vicious, creeping plague, and how I was a miserable coward who not only cheated on his wife but left the other woman—the bad woman—to die out there when I could have saved her. And she needed saving, trust me, but I wasn't up for it.

I didn't stop there, did I? I told you how our town of Tres Marias became infested by an evil no one could have imagined. Normal, everyday people turning into dead—not dead—*undead* grasping things that hungered for the living, who didn't quit till everything was cored out and soulless, like them. And how some who remained human—if that's what you want to call them—fought to make slaves of the rest of us in a desperate attempt to reinvent the world in the image of a cool, fork-tongued madman. I don't know why I told you all those things, but I did. Maybe it was because I'm a drunk, and sometimes drunks like to confess. Especially when we're loaded. But I'm not loaded now. The constant pain keeps me sharp. Somehow you knew, didn't you, that I would still have a need to purge myself of the writhing pestilence eating out my insides like a gale of guinea worms.

Okay, that damned kid was walking over here—coming straight towards me. Probably had to use the toilet. It was too late to get up and move past him. That might make him suspicious. Then he'd turn on the camera and go to town. I had to think of something fast—he was looking right at me.

I tripped him.

His skinny body went flying—arms all over the place—and as he

tried to catch himself, his head hit the corner of my table, snapping his headgear in two. There you go. Fifteen hundred bucks gone to shit. Groaning, he got to his feet and glared at me. I had already left money on the table, and when I slid out of the booth I made sure to crush his camera with my boot.

“Hey!” he said and took a swing.

I weaved and hit him in the gut hard, making him double over, and walked out of the coffee shop without looking back. No one tried to stop me. They were too busy looking at the explorer leaning against the table, holding what was left of his busted cool. All they would remember is some faceless guy wearing a Giants baseball cap. My truck was parked a few blocks away. No one followed me as I climbed in and headed back to the motel. Time to hit the road again.

Dead. Not dead. Undead. Doesn't begin to cover it. Because what I learned—what *we* learned, I think—is that everyone is dead in one way or another. Dead morals, dead conscience. Dead heart. We found a few you could trust—people like my wife Holly and my friends Warnick, Springer, Griffin and Fabian. But most of the other suckholes you couldn't. Because for them it was about the lizard brain in all of us that will survive any way it can, even if it has to make you adapt and turn into something from a child's night terror. But don't kid yourself—it's not nature and it's not natural.

That lizard brain—our old brain—has an agenda.

I'm not crazy, I swear, but sometimes the dead speak to me. I hear them in my head. Asking questions. Offering advice. Sometimes I wish they'd shut the hell up. Mostly, they ask me how I'm doing. Great, I say. Couldn't be better. Driving endlessly without sleep, surviving moment to moment, adrenaline rushing through my veins every time somebody blasts their car horn. Life is good. You believe me, right?

And God.

What do I even say to Him? That I am fallen but want to get better? That I hope I can be forgiven for all the wrongs—all the bad behavior?

That despite all the mistakes I've made in my life, I think I deserve a chance? Would it matter? Will He throw me a bone?

Khalil Gibran wrote, *Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother*. At this moment I'm staring at my twin, but it's through a wall of suffering that makes me doubt he's really there. Yet I continue to look, hoping. I am not who I was. Too much has happened. Death has washed over me like a blood rinse, taking with it my eyes, my ears and my heart. It's what happens when Hell sets up camp and starts barbecuing the locals like Ball Park Franks.

It was getting dark. The 5 was a mess, so I decided to keep to the back roads, making sure to stay within the speed limit. There were a lot of cops around. Maybe they were looking for me. Who knows? I couldn't afford to get pulled over—not in Bakersfield. Not with all these weapons. I had things to do.

Still here?

Don't lie to me. Telling you this story won't be cathartic—won't be spiritually uplifting. Why? Because a good part of me has already died—in more ways than you could ever know. All I have left is sorrow. The kind that Time doesn't heal because the wound is gangrenous and foul. The kind that is with you when you rise in an uncertain, fog-shrouded morning of another damn day you can't face and when you close your eyes at night, with the blood-awful screaming of those soulless bastards still in your head. Whatever.

But I really haven't convinced you, have I? I didn't think so. You don't care that I have this long road ahead, with bad food and little sleep, the nightmares chasing me like rabid dogs. You want to know everything, even if it means I will die a little more. I can't. Don't make me. Please.

All right, I'll tell you.

Cornered

THE HORDE CAME FROM THE WEST, DRIVING US DEEPER INTO THE FOREST. Warnick went ahead of us through the fog, his face grim like the keynote speaker at a mortician's convention. Springer remained at his side, his finger close to—but not on—the trigger of his battle-worn AR-15. Springer. That blond kid from Santa Rosa, looking fresh out of high school, was born ready.

Both stood silent and still, as if willing themselves to become part of the forest, unseen and unheard. We'd spent so much time together these past few months, I felt they were my brothers. I relied on them completely, and I hoped I was of some small benefit to them, even though they were experienced soldiers who'd served in Afghanistan and I was an amateur who'd learned to kill using an axe and a gun.

I knew nothing about Warnick—not really—even though we had fought against draggers and the Red Militia. What I did know was that he was a man who put his trust in God. Around thirty, he was stocky and dad-like. He had saved me on many occasions, finally getting badly wounded himself. And with that worn, black, blood-soaked bible of his, he showed me the power of Faith, which—like miracles—was in short supply.

I knew even less about Springer, who seemed too young to have seen combat. Maybe *he* was the miracle. Shot in the neck to almost dead in a

blind alley, somehow he'd made it to our base and revealed to Warnick and the others the location where I was being held captive by the Red Militia, halfway to dead myself.

So many debts to repay.

A crow cawed plaintively high in the trees above us, but it didn't give away our position. My heart thudded like a punch press on Red Bull. I turned to my wife, Holly, who stood behind me with our "adopted daughter" Griffin. Our dog, Greta—her ears forward—watched intently the clump of undead as they paraded through the mist like bent robots. The dog's black and tan face was alert, her body tensed and ready. If they attacked us, she would bite and tear at them and—though unable to kill them because they were already dead—she would at least hobble them long enough for us to get away.

Holly. I had almost lost her, not because of the craven stupidity of infidelity—although that would have been enough for any woman—but because I had in my "old life" demonstrated a cowardice she couldn't fathom when I could have saved Missy, the adulterous young thing, from my undead friend Jim as he savaged her. Instead I chose to hide. In the months following that shameful act—when all this started—I had fought my way back to my wife on my belly like a legless dog—eating my own shit every inch of the way. And somehow I'd made her mine again, promising never to betray her or myself. Thank God she believed me.

Holly, with her fine blonde hair and huge green eyes. She didn't just pick me up—she made me right. I'd fallen away from Life, from God, from everything that mattered, and she'd brought me back. I may have owed others my life but I owed Holly *my soul*. When I confessed this to her in a moment of extreme weakness, her response was so Holly.

"No charge," she said.

And Griffin, the trembling teenager we'd rescued from her violent, pedophile stepfather—that piece of work Travis Golightly. She had lost her younger brother, Kyle, to the insanity of the Red Militia. Frightened

and withdrawn when we'd met, she'd grown into a tough soldier who knew how to use a weapon. When it came to draggers, she was no nonsense. Griffin was badass, and we cherished her.

These four—and the dog—were my family.

The other soldiers in our unit remained scattered among the trees, watching and waiting. These were men and women who, like Warnick and Springer, were used to fighting human combatants bent on blowing themselves up at military checkpoints seven thousand miles away, taking with them as many innocents as they could. Now these American warriors fought demons made of rotting flesh, with grey, mealy skin and doll-like eyes that looked but didn't see, who wanted only to devour the warm meat of living humans. Though survival among these hungry undead hardened us, we were nevertheless afraid.

And it was always better to stay afraid.

We'd come here to rendezvous with Evie Champagne, the intrepid news reporter, and Jeff, her longtime cameraman. Together, we hoped to find answers to the mystery of the contagion that ravaged Tres Marias, the town where I lived. Though other places had initially seen evidence of the plague, it originated here. Evie had hinted that Robbin-Sear—a secretive company hidden somewhere deep in the forest—might be the key.

And so, several vehicles had set out in the cold early morning to find the truth. We'd already decided to park two miles out and hike in. We didn't know whether the facility was heavily guarded, and we didn't want to announce our arrival. If all went as planned, Evie and Jeff would be waiting for us. But somewhere along the way we'd taken a wrong turn and ended up in a desolate place, with a 360-degree view of dead and dying trees looming like grey ghosts in mourning.

We were well over a mile from our vehicles when we heard the unmistakable sound. Not marching. Not walking. Not shuffling.

Dragging.

We couldn't see them through the fog, but they were getting closer.

We had to get to the safety of higher ground. So we ran.

WE SAW them clearly now in the sketchy patches of sunlight that broke through the trees—hundreds of them. Lurching and ravenous, like blood-soaked marionettes on guy wires from Hell. Where had they come from? A few towards the front took charge, leading the others—a phenomenon I'd witnessed only once before when my dead extramarital girlfriend ordered my dead manager to kill me.

Blood pounded in my ears and hot streaks of red lightning danced across my eyes. I took Holly's trembling hand. As we retreated into the darkness of an October morning, I knew this might be it. Figures. We'd come all this way since July when the thing started—through what I had really believed was the worst of it. You always think that, right? The worst is over. But it never is. Always another corner to turn, another hell to survive. By rights we should have been dead a long time ago. Maybe now we would be. What if in trying to get to the truth of what happened in our town, we died out here alone?

That nagging crow, joined by others, cawed loudly, confirming my assessment. *Death ain't pretty*, it said. *We'll begin with the eyes*.

Griffin looked tense and scared, one hand on her weapon. Why not? She was still a kid—a tall, lanky fifteen-year-old who might lose her own life at the hands of the undead. What teenager thinks about that? But it was the world we were in now. An upside-down world where things that shouldn't, walked.

Holly brushed the light brown hair from Griffin's dirt-smudged face and forced a smile. "We'll be okay," she said. Her voice was a whisper. Griffin nodded and gripped her weapon tighter.

"Warnick," I said. "Where to?"

He turned towards Springer, his eyes like agate marbles, and signaled north. We moved silently over the pine needles and fallen branches. The

others had already gone ahead and were no longer visible. We were twenty in all. Couldn't spare any more. The rest were at the Arkon Building, protecting civilians. Dammit, but we could have used them now.

When does it get better? I asked myself. *When you're dead,* came the answer.

We waited motionless as the horde moved closer, relentlessly traveling east, as if late for the train. None were freshly dead. Many looked to me like they were part of a Japanese tour group. Even in death they stuck together. They were all ages too—some missing limbs. Others with ears, noses and eyelids chewed off. The worst part was seeing the children, slack and grey-eyed, their small arms flopping uselessly, their tiny and undernourished grunts signaling a crippling desire to feed.

They were almost past us when Griffin yelped.

"Sorry, sorry."

"What was it?"

"Something on the ground. I—it was crawling on my foot. I don't know."

"Probably a gopher snake," I said.

The dog moved towards the spot to investigate, but I held her back. We didn't need more surprises. Then we heard a sound echoing through the forest—a bone-chilling prelude to a mauling that told us we were finished. It was a death shriek.

They had found us.

We ran for it as the draggers descended on us like a swarm of locusts. Griffin, Holly and I sprinted ahead with Greta while Warnick and Springer laid suppressive fire and took out the front line as best they could. But more came. And more. A plague of fast-moving draggers with only hunger driving them. We could've stayed and fought, but there were too many. And the sound of gunfire would only attract more.

Out of breath, my lungs searing, I saw a fire road up ahead. We ran towards it. But the draggers ran too, as if sprung from a racetrack

starting gate. Those leading the horde darted to either side of the road, splitting the followers between them. I realized—almost too late—what they were up to. Warnick saw it too and called for Springer and the other soldiers to take cover up ahead in the trees. Relentlessly, the creatures followed, closing in from either side, and I knew I was right.

They were herding us.

“Dave,” Warnick said, “get Holly and Griffin out of here!”

We ran for our lives. More came. The commanders barked unintelligible orders to the rest of the draggers. It wasn't so much speech as animal noises. As we passed Warnick, Springer and the others, they fired at the oncoming horde on either side from behind the trees, going for the knees rather than the head. The draggers fell, creating a barrier for the others, and continued crawling, their faces twisted in hungry hatred. One of the soldiers took out two of the commanders with a grenade. As their rancid bodies blew apart like fireworks made from sausage, the followers scattered.

I spotted a ridge directly ahead. A drone hovered over it. If we could get to the top, we might have a chance.

“Up there!” I said, and we got off the road and headed up the embankment. Halfway up, I stopped and turned as another dragger commander went down in a stream of rapid fire that tore its face off. As it fell, its hands grasping at air, the rest of the leaderless horde fanned out but kept after us.

The soldiers, led by Warnick and Springer, followed us up the steep trail. Angry draggers caught up with the stragglers in our unit and took them down, devouring them in seconds. The ones whose throats were torn out no longer screamed, their voices drowned in gurgling blood that only incited their attackers to field dress them even faster.

We ran as hard as we could, burdened with weapons and heavy backpacks. My lungs ached and sweat streamed into my eyes, nearly blinding me. When I looked up, the drone was gone. I was faster than Holly and had to slow down for fear of losing her.

“Dave!” Holly said. I turned.

Griffin lay halfway up the road on the forest floor. The horde was approaching fast.

“Don’t leave me!” Griffin said.

I hurried back down and grabbed an arm as Holly took the other.

“Never,” Holly said.

A dragger—a middle-aged Japanese woman with painted-on eyebrows—grabbed Griffin’s foot and yanked her towards it, its mouth open incredibly wide, ready to bite. Holly and I slipped on the pine needles and went down on our knees while the dog went after the attacker. As the filthy wretch pulled the screaming Griffin closer, its eyeballs spinning in their sockets, Greta tore at its hands and neck. Warnick and Springer appeared and sent half its head flying towards a tree. The rest of its skull dropped and its body followed. I unslung my axe and hacked off the arm as the still-grasping claw clung to Griffin’s ankle.

“Get it off!” she said, kicking violently.

“Hang on!”

The thing felt cold in my hands. I pried the crablike appendage off and checked Griffin’s ankle. The skin wasn’t broken. Holly and I got her to her feet and started up again.

A few minutes more and we were at the top of the ridge with the others. Then we heard it. Tom Petty’s “American Girl” came blasting out of the sky like high-pitched thunder. I couldn’t believe what I saw below.

Black Dragon soldiers on bright red ATVs streamed towards us like angry wasps. There must have been a hundred of them. The noise from their vehicles was deafening. They shot past us over the ridge towards the horde. Using AR-15s, they mowed down ravening draggers like screaming wildgrass. Others double-teamed and, with heavy iron chains strung taut between them, pulled down whole lines of the creatures while more followed and, using shotguns, blasted their heads to sawdust.

The tops of the trees swayed and dust and pine needles churned around us as black helicopters with the familiar Black Dragon logo circled the area—one of them pounding the song out through its speakers. I didn't know if the music was meant for the draggers or for the troops.

Not far off below was a clearing. One of the choppers set down there, the blades still beating, and a tall, uniformed African-American man jumped out and jogged towards us. He was around fifty, with short greying hair and a clean-shaven face. His only weapon was a handgun.

"We need to get you out of here," he said, looking at Warnick and Springer. "Now!"

"Whoo! It's the damned cavalry," Holly said.

The man smiled and waved us towards the helicopter.

"What about the rest of my men?" Warnick said.

"Don't worry, we'll take care of the others. This dog coming too?"

"Yes," Griffin said, already leading Greta towards the aircraft.

Once we were aboard, the helicopter roared off and we were away. Below I watched as the ATVs plowed through the horde, taking them out by the dozens. A few of the soldiers weren't so lucky, though—draggers yanked them off their vehicles and consumed them.

As I caught my breath, Holly tugged at my sleeve. I followed her eyes.

Evie Champagne, the reporter we'd sought out in the forest, stared at me with haunted eyes. The last time we'd seen her was with her cameraman Jeff over a VTC connection in the Arkon building, their wooden faces staring silently on the large TV monitor as we tried to communicate without sound. Now, a grey blanket laid over her shoulders. She looked shell-shocked. I hadn't been sure I'd ever see her again after that videoconference when draggers had overrun their building and they'd had to escape to God knew where.

We'd gotten so used to seeing her on the local news in her smart suits and black stilettos, going to places where she shouldn't and digging up

story after story as the outbreak spread. Now, even with her hair tangled and her clothes in shreds, her powerful presence filled the cabin. But where was Jeff?

She leaned forward and, lowering her voice, spoke into my ear. "Glad we found you," she said. "I have so much to tell you."

Dream Faster

APPROACHING THE SCHOOL, WE PASSED OVER RESIDENTIAL STREETS WHERE lone draggers wandered like lost souls. We landed on the high school football field. Tan camo-colored Humvees and Light Medium Tactical Vehicles—LMTVs—bearing the Black Dragon logo moved along the roads surrounding the school. Hundreds of fresh Black Dragon soldiers protected the area, wearing helmets and body armor and carrying AR-15s. A few draggers had made it to the school and pressed up against the chain link. Soldiers patrolling the fence line on ATVs took them out with bayonets. I assumed the bodies would be burned in a pit like all the others we'd seen since summer, but I could no longer smell the foul, greasy smoke that had hung in the air for weeks. In fact, the air smelled clean.

Climbing out of the helicopter, we made our way towards the main campus. There were no signs of the draggers we'd escaped from only days earlier when we'd made a full assault on the Red Militia and rescued Griffin from her stepfather, and where the militia's leader Ormand Ferry had died. It looked like Black Dragon had brought in reinforcements and regained control of the property and turned it into a clean, organized command center.

As we strode across the grass, I saw workers in coveralls patching and painting the bullet-scarred walls of the buildings. Others replaced

outdoor lights and tended to the greenery that dotted the landscape. Another soldier approached Warnick and Springer and said something I couldn't make out. They followed him off in another direction, and we followed our escort.

Up ahead I saw a row of large, black trailers in the parking lot. Long lines of civilians queued up in front of each one.

"What are those?" I said to the soldier escorting us.

"Mobile medical units. We're testing everyone for the virus."

"There's a test?"

"Finally."

"And if they're infected?"

"We put them in an isolation ward."

"Where?"

"That's classified."

"What if they're well?"

"We're using the gym as an evac center again. If they develop symptoms later, we transfer them out."

In the beginning, when all this had started and Black Dragon had taken control of the town, the gym had been converted to an evac center. But when things went sideways, it became a charnel house. I broke away and headed straight for it. The last time I'd been here, it had been infested with draggers and smelled like meat rot. Now, the doors were open and bright lights shone inside, giving the place a cheery atmosphere. So I went in.

The interior was clean and smelled of disinfectant. They'd set up coffee stations on either side in front of the bleachers. A sea of army surplus cots and blankets stood in neat rows in the middle of the floor. Civilians sat at round banquet tables, playing games and chatting. They were all ages and included children, some of whom belly-laughed their way through a game of Twister. Though armed soldiers stood watch along the perimeter, the mood was relaxed. I remembered searching for Holly here, when we were separated and I didn't know whether she was

alive or dead. And I also remembered Mrs. Hough, an old neighbor whose mind had faded and who I'd tried to help. She'd been lost to the draggers.

Holly and the others joined me.

"It's like it never happened," I said. I ran my fingers down the freshly painted doors. No sign of blood anywhere.

Far off, I recognized Eddie Greely, the owner of the skating rink where I'd almost died in Chavez's twisted version of sudden death. He was frail but alive. When he saw me, he waved. I started towards him, but our escort took my arm.

"We need to test you."

As I turned to leave, a girl let out a scream that sent shards of glass down my spine. Soldiers ran to where she was playing with the others. She pointed underneath the bleachers. Dropping to his knees, the soldier peered into the shadows and signaled for the children to move away. Then he reached way back and pulled something out.

It was a severed hand.

The escort led us towards one of the MMUs and to the front of the line. Holly instructed Greta to wait for us outside. The German shepherd lay down near the steps, wearing that disappointed look that only a dog can manage, and rested her head on her paws. A young girl tried to pet her, but a woman took her hand and gently pulled her away.

"Careful," the woman said.

Inside lay an impressive array of medical equipment and electronics. A physician's assistant guided us in and proceeded to perform a series of standard tests—the kind you would expect during a routine physical. After our exams, phlebotomists drew vials of blood from each of us.

"You've identified the virus?" I said to the physician's assistant.

"We have."

"But there's no vaccine, right?"

"No—I wish."

Though I didn't think any of us was infected—through sheer luck and

God's good grace—I worried that the possibility existed, and it frightened me.

Evie sat next to me, her bare arm extended, as they inserted the needle.

“Where did they pick you up?” I said.

“Along one of the fire roads.”

“Thanks for alerting the troops. Did you ever make it to—”

“Not here.” She smiled at the phlebotomist. “I can't wait to take a hot shower.” The guy smiled.

“How long before we know?” I said to the phlebotomist.

“A couple hours.”

“What about communications?”

“Cell service is still out.”

“Internet?”

“Tits up.” Then to Evie, “Sorry.”

“Trust me, I've heard so much worse,” she said.

AFTER WE FINISHED THE EXAM, they led us into the administration building, where the grey-haired man who'd rescued us stood waiting, along with Warnick and Springer. The guy seemed genuinely pleased to see us.

“Kelly Pederman,” he said, extending a hand. “I'm the new supervisor.”

“So I guess you heard about Chavez,” I said.

He made eye contact with Warnick and cleared his throat. “A tragic loss.”

“Yeah, tragic.”

An uncomfortable silence polluted the air. I looked at Warnick. His face was like smooth stone. What had he and Springer told this guy about us?

“We’ll have the results of your tests shortly,” Pederman said. “In the meantime, I’d like to extend what hospitality we can. Anyone hungry?”

They led us into a conference room to wait for the results. Greta accompanied us again and stayed close to Griffin. Shortly after, they brought actual food—not the MREs we’d come to loathe these past few weeks. We had our choice of McDonald’s Egg McMuffins or pancakes with bacon and coffee and orange juice.

“It’s stupid, but I’ve been, like, craving McDonald’s,” Griffin said and tossed a handful of bacon to Greta.

“I’ll catch up with you folks later,” Pederman said. On his way out he instructed another soldier to bring a bowl of water for the dog.

“What happened to Jeff?” I said to Evie after the soldier left.

Evie looked at me strangely, her eyes distant, as if struggling to ward off the memory traces of a bad dream. “He didn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If it wasn’t for him, I’d be dead. He was a stand up guy. Never complained, no matter how bad things got. And trust me, I’m no picnic.”

“Sounds like a great guy,” Holly said.

As we ate, I watched Evie. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her, but I knew this wasn’t the time. I could tell she didn’t trust these people. But they were the authorities. Did she think there was still a rogue element at work? I didn’t think so, but she was a reporter with amazing instincts. How else could she have survived so long without weapons? But I did ask her one question.

“Is there hope?” I said.

She thought about that a long while and smiled. “There’s always hope. It’s what I’ve traded on my whole life. That and a good story.”

AFTER OUR MEAL, we relaxed as best we could in the leatherette chairs that school districts can almost afford. When I closed my eyes, vivid

images of these past months played through my brain like a disjointed slide show without music. I saw myself skating on the ice at Happier Times, desperate to keep away from Missy Soldado who, reduced to a hungry skeleton covered in leathery skin, was hell-bent on devouring me as crazed soldiers hooted and whistled. I saw Chavez, the former supervisor, dying in a pool of blood, his skull crushed by a pipe wrench. And that kid Barnes whimpering in the corner of a different conference room in another building across town, his right leg chewed to shit, the life lazily leeching from his body to be replaced by a more vicious life of feasting on other people.

I saw armies of the undead surging like a red tide through Tres Marias, backlit by the angry roaring fires of pit-bound burning bodies. I saw everything that had gone wrong since that first night with my friend Jim, when he'd died in my car but wouldn't stay dead. I saw his enormous dog Perro, bloody and rabid, panting in the cold night air, waiting patiently. For me.

Finally, I saw Nina Zimmer's baby daughter, Evan, smiling and happy. Her face warmed me, reminding me that there might still be hope.

When I opened my eyes, Pederman stood in the doorway holding a pile of sealed manila envelopes.

"Well," he said as he handed each of us our results. "You're all clean."

"Thank God," Holly said and squeezed my hand.

"It's pretty unusual, considering what you've been through these last few months."

"What happens now?" Holly said.

"Well, Warnick and Springer are on the payroll, so they'll be getting their assignments."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. We were not only a team but a family. We'd survived together and saved peoples' lives. Now it was over?

“And us? The three of us and Warnick and Springer are a team,” I said. “We fought together.”

“I understand how you feel, Dave. But we’re in charge, now. Things will have to change.”

“Where will you send us?” Holly said. “It’s not like we can go home.”

“Mrs. Pulaski ...”

“Holly, please.”

“Holly. I’d like you and Dave to step into my office.”

“I can’t leave Griffin,” Holly said. She was already on her feet in that mini-power stance I knew so well. Evie watched her—she seemed amused.

“Holly, I’ll be fine,” Griffin said.

Warnick stood. “Springer and I aren’t going anywhere at the moment.”

Holly relented and, as Pederman led us out of the conference room, glanced at Griffin. She seemed relaxed, stroking Greta’s head. We continued down the hall to the principal’s office.

“Have a seat,” Pederman said.

I remembered this office. The smell of stale coffee and Mennen Skin Bracer. The photos of countless school functions and awards banquets. I saw my old science teacher and friend Irwin Landry in one of the photos, shaking a grinning student’s hand at a science fair. The familiar steely blue eyes, hawk nose and shock of white hair. My heart ached as I thought about how he’d died. Infected. Finished off with a bullet to the brain.

The last time I’d sat in this office, the principal had warned me that I might not graduate. He’d told me “in confidence” that my mother had called him expressing her concern. Though her illness had advanced to the point where she couldn’t easily leave the house, she’d never stopped pressuring me to succeed at something.

“Let’s get those grades up, huh, Dave?” he said. “You don’t want to disappoint your mother.”

He was a prick and I hated him, but the approach worked. I'd managed to squeak by and get the cap and gown, with my dying mother as witness. Though my parents were now long dead, that was one regret in a pile of regrets I wouldn't have to slink by with.

"So what's this about?" I said as Holly and I sat.

Pederman smiled professionally. "Considering everything that's happened, I get that you don't trust me, Dave. I'm confident I can earn your trust."

"Are we in trouble?" Holly said.

Pederman laughed. It was full and deep and made me dislike him a little less. "Far from it. Did either of you ever serve in the military? I couldn't find anything in the files."

"No," I said. "Why?"

"Well, because for a couple of civilians, you've both proven to be more than capable under fire."

"Thanks," I said. Warnick must have been up front about everything that happened.

"We've made a number of corrections to our program. We've weeded out a few ... uh ... misfits and are rebuilding the organization. We lost a lot of good people in this operation, but I think in many ways we're stronger. I'm sure you've noticed it." He waited for us to agree.

"I guess," Holly said.

I leaned in. "How were you able to turn this place around so fast?"

"As you know, Dave, most of us are ex-military. And the military knows how to get things done."

He rose and came around the desk. Took a seat on the edge directly in front of us. It was awkward, but he had our attention.

"Would you consider coming to work for us?" he said.

Holly was stunned. "Wait, what?"

Pederman laughed again, then became serious. "I'm prepared to make you both an offer. We're one of the few companies who provide a full pension. And the medical is awesome." He was looking at Holly

when he said this—I wondered why. “We have a robust bonus structure ...”

I couldn’t help myself—I laughed, which seemed to annoy Pederman. “I’m sorry, it’s just that ... This is unexpected.”

“I understand. It’s a big step. Why don’t you think about it? No hurry.”

He got up stiffly and led us out of the office. His manner was decidedly cooler—possibly resentful. He’d put real money on the table and I’d crapped all over it. Nevertheless, he shook hands—a real pro.

“I’ve already set up quarters for you and the girl.”

“What about Evie?” I said.

“The reporter?”

“She’s also part of our group.”

“I like your loyalty, Dave. I’ll see what I can do.”

When we reentered the conference room, Springer and another largish young Latino soldier were attempting to teach Griffin how to play Texas hold ’em. From what I could see, Griffin wasn’t even trying to be funny, but these guys couldn’t stop laughing. Warnick sat alone, reading his bible. It was a comforting sight.

Holly looked at me, half-smiling. “I think you pissed him off.”

“I seem to have that effect on people.” I poured myself a cup of coffee and joined the game.

THEY’D SET up a series of trailers across the campus to accommodate the managers as well as the medical staff. Holly, Griffin and I were given our own trailer. We’d been expecting to be placed in a converted classroom.

“Who’s paying for all this?” I said. “The city?”

Holly began exploring. “This is incredible! And look, they even stocked the refrigerator.”

“Shower time!” Griffin said.

“Not if I get there first.” They raced to the bathroom, but Griffin had the advantage with her long legs.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “But you lose!”

While Griffin showered, Holly and I brought in our few belongings and stored them. For security, they’d confiscated our weapons but left me my axe. This was the instrument I’d relied on at the start of the outbreak. I’d taken it from my mother-in-law’s house. I’d destroyed Missy—as well as countless other draggers—with it. It had kept me alive.

I found a narrow closet at the rear of the trailer and placed the axe inside towards the back. Then we opened our test results. The computer printout showed that my white cell count was normal, I didn’t have high cholesterol, and I wasn’t currently at risk for prostate cancer. Good to know. When I asked Holly about hers, she slid the paper into the envelope and smiled in a strange way.

“It’s normal,” she said. “Everything’s normal.”

Later, Holly and I walked the grounds, feeling safer than we had in weeks. Soldiers patrolled everywhere. The fence surrounding the school was now reinforced. Occasionally an errant dragger would wander up and a soldier would dispatch it. We didn’t see what they did with the bodies, but there were no longer any open pits smoldering with human meat.

Warnick and Springer returned to the Arkon building, our former command center, to coordinate the evacuation of the civilians. There was talk that Black Dragon had taken over a number of apartment buildings and was in the process of converting them to temporary living quarters. Like the school, these would be heavily guarded.

“So do you see yourself wearing one of those uniforms?” I said.

“I don’t know. It isn’t like we’re new to this kind of work.” Holly seemed distant. “Besides, we don’t have jobs, remember? At some point, life will return to normal and we’ll have to join the rest of the unemployed.”

“With a mortgage on a house that’s uninhabitable,” I said. “What

about Staples?”

“I don’t ever want to go back there again.”

“Fine by me. And what about Griffin?”

“She stays with us, no matter what.”

“Agreed. But if we’re working for them, we can’t come and go as we please. What is she supposed to do all day?”

“I don’t know, Dave. Go to school? Assuming the high school reopens.”

I could hear the irritation in Holly’s voice. I knew she wasn’t mad at me. We were at a crossroads—no longer soldiers, but ordinary citizens without guns. And a girl to look after. I decided to change the subject.

“We still need to find out what Evie knows,” I said. “How the outbreak started.”

“Why? If they can stop it, what does it matter?”

“I need to know.”

“Why?”

“Because of Jim. He’s a part of this—I know he is.”

“You’d better talk to Warnick first,” she said. “I don’t wanna lose the chance to have a life again.”

“Don’t let all this fool you, Holly,” I said. “It isn’t over.”

MY DEAD FRIEND Jim stood at the gate ready to let me in as I approached. He looked good. Shaven, wearing fresh clothes and a new pair of Nikes like the ones I’d seen at Wal-Mart the time we rescued Nina and her baby from a horde of teenaged draggers. I wept as I took his hand, which was smooth and wound-free.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Forget it, dude. Not your fault.”

“How have you been?”

“Can’t complain. Hey, I want to show you something.”

As he opened the gate, I noticed the reddish gash that ringed his neck. I swooned, suddenly feeling the impact of the car crash that had sent my friend through the windshield and into the night where I lost him forever. Now, I was on that dark forest road again.

“Jim! Come on, man, this isn’t funny.”

Something moved in the distance. I struggled after it. It was my friend. “Hurry up, lard ass!” he said, waving. He seemed impossibly far away. I struggled to catch up, but my leg hurt bad from when Travis beat me.

He led me to his dog, Perro. The beast lay in the road, hardly breathing. Steam rose off his body like a red mist. He was smaller than I remembered him. Emaciated. Harmless.

“They had no right to take him,” Jim said. “No right at all.”

Jim was receding into the darkness, his dying dog in his arms. Perro was very small—the size of a puppy.

My shoulder throbbed from when I was shot. “Jim, don’t go! You have to tell me what happened.”

“No time,” he said. “Dream faster.”

Then I was alone.

Evie's Story

WARNICK AND SPRINGER CAME BACK. EAGER TO HEAR HOW THINGS HAD gone at the Arkon Building, we joined them as they headed towards the administration building.

“So how are Nina and her baby?” I said.

“Fine.” Warnick moved at a brisk pace and didn’t bother to look at me.

“And the others?” Holly said.

“All fine. We’re evacuating them in the morning.”

“Warnick, slow down,” I said, grabbing his arm. “Hey, I need to know what’s going on.”

“Dave, can’t talk now—I have a meeting.”

“Dude, really? A meeting?”

“I’m sorry.”

He and Springer continued up the steps to the front entrance and sailed past the guard. I saw Pederman inside, standing in the foyer speaking to an aide.

Holly, Griffin and I tried following but were turned away by the guard. Greta snapped at him before Holly could pull her away.

“Sitz!” she said. As if someone had pulled a string, the dog sat. “*Braves Mädchen.*”

“We’re still part of this team,” I said, looking past the guard and

directly at Pederman. He avoided my gaze and continued his conversation as another soldier on the inside closed the door in our faces. I grabbed the door handle and pushed.

"I'm sorry," the inside guard said.

"Warnick! What the hell?"

Warnick glanced back, almost embarrassed. Springer wouldn't even make eye contact. Incredulous, I watched as they followed Pederman to a conference room.

"You need to leave," the other soldier said.

I felt like an ass. Furious, I stomped down the steps, kicked over a trash receptacle and marched over to our trailer. Holly, Griffin and the dog wisely followed at a safe distance.

"THAT SON OF A BITCH!" I said, sinking onto our small sofa.

"Dave—"

"We helped save all those people. This is Pederman's doing. What gives him the right to cut us out of the picture like we're some kind of ... of *outsiders*?"

"Dave, you don't get it."

"What don't I get? This guy's just another Black Dragon stooge."

"No, he's not."

"And he got Warnick and Springer to turn against us."

"No, he didn't."

"Why are you disagreeing with me?"

"*Listen*. He's sending a message."

"I've got a message for him," I said, getting to my feet.

"David Michael Pulaski, sit down or, so help me, I *will* remove a testicle!"

I froze mid-stride and looked at Griffin, who wore an expression of polite sympathy, like you'd have for an animal who'd crapped on the

carpet and was about to get laid into. Red-faced, I took a deep breath and sank onto a seat cushion.

"I'll wait outside," Griffin said.

"No, honey," Holly said. "This concerns you too." Griffin sat next to me, stroking Greta's head as Holly paced like a head coach in a locker room before the big game.

"Okay, so what am I missing?" I said.

"Can't you see? Pederman is forcing our hand. He offered us those positions, and he expects us to take them."

"What? But what does that have to do with—"

"Dave, think about it. When we first spoke to him, he told us things were changing. Remember? 'We're back in charge.' That's what he said. And that means we're *just civilians*."

"But—"

"Look, who cares if we saved all those people? That's ancient history. Unless we join Black Dragon, we're out of it for good."

"Wait," Griffin said. "They want to, like, hire you guys?"

"We were planning on telling you, Griffin."

"And what happens to me?" I could hear the worry.

"We're not going anywhere," Holly said, stroking the girl's hair. "No matter what happens. I promise."

"So basically," I said, "unless we sign up, he's sending us out there to fend for ourselves. Like the rest of those rubes over in the gym."

"Pretty much."

I was still pissed off. *I like your loyalty, Dave*. Pederman had said that, too. What a load of crap. But what made me angrier was the fact that Holly had put it together so easily, when all I saw was betrayal. She'd always possessed a better mind than me, and once again I was getting schooled.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "How did you figure this out? I mean, I'm not exactly stupid." I turned to Griffin for confirmation. She pretended to notice a flea on the dog's ear.

Holly knelt and rested her head on my knee. "Dave, don't try to think like a woman. You'll hurt yourself."

"Shit—I suck."

"It's not your fault," she said, getting up.

"I'm an idiot." She hugged me, probably out of pity.

"No, you're a *guy*."

So that was it. More evidence that women were smart and men were morons. Alert the media. I desperately needed a comeback, but I had nothing. So I changed the subject.

"I need to talk to Warnick."

Holly shook her head. "I don't think he can help you. Don't forget, he works for them. I'm sure he has his orders." I got up and headed for the door. "Where are you going?"

"To find Evie."

"We're coming with," she said.

WE FOUND EVIE, notebook in hand, interviewing a physician's assistant outside one of the MMUs. I almost didn't recognize her. She wore clean clothes that were, in truth, not her style. They fit well enough, but were nothing like the tailored jackets and skirts she normally wore and resembled something off the rack at Target. Her makeup and hair, though neat, were different too. She could have passed for a Tres Marias homemaker.

"We need to talk," I said as we approached her.

"Thanks for your time." She shook the interviewee's hand and waited as he headed into the MMU. Then to me, "Not here."

"There are Black Dragon people all over the place. Where can we go?"

"I know a place," Griffin said.

We made our way along the main building and around the side, past the shed where we'd found Griffin being dragged away by her deranged,

gangrenous stepfather. Like the rest of the school, the area was clean. The ground was swept and flowers planted along the pathway leading to the common area. I could still hear Griffin's desperate screams in my head, and I had to look at her again to remind myself she was safe.

She led us to a basement entrance at the rear of the building and trotted down the few concrete steps while the rest of us stood watch. The door was locked. She slammed her shoulder into it once, springing the door, and went in.

"Griffin, how do you know this place?" Holly said as we followed.

The girl's voice was low and afraid. "It's where Travis kept me prisoner."

"Who's Travis?" Evie said.

"Travis Golightly," I said. "Her stepfather. He's dead."

"Sounds to me like the girl caught a break." Evie touched Griffin's shoulder. "Listen to me, kid. For years my dad terrified my mother and ... hurt me, which is why I left home at sixteen. It is what it is. All you can do is move on."

I wasn't sure if Griffin needed to hear the raw, bitter truth coming from this veteran reporter. It made me uncomfortable. When I looked at Holly, I saw a rising anger. I wondered whether it came from Evie's powerful words or from the truth of what happened to Griffin in here.

Griffin nodded meekly. Maybe she'd found a kindred spirit—someone who knew firsthand what she'd been through, including the years of sexual abuse. "How ... how did you get through it?" she said.

"Like you." Evie's voice was softer now. She smiled at Holly and me, then took Griffin's hand. "I was lucky enough to find good people who were genuinely interested in helping me. Not wanting anything in return other than my promise to better myself. They made all the difference in my life. I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Thanks, Evie," Griffin said.

Weak light filtered in through the dirty basement windows like distant starlight, and I saw the hard expression on Evie's face melt like

snow, leaving the careworn lines of worry that come from the wrong kind of experience. She was an attractive woman—older in person—but one who had been damaged in so many ways over the years. It made sense to me that she was fearless, having suffered at the hands of whatever demon had possessed her father and destroyed her childhood. She was a dark survivor who had not only found a way to live but discovered in herself a way to make a real difference.

As my eyes adjusted, I could make out dusty grey metal racks of junk—old homecoming dance decorations, pep rally banners and discarded furniture. Griffin froze, her body shuddering as if from the cold.

“You okay?” Holly said.

“Yeah. I need a minute.”

A pair of bloodstained handcuffs—the kind the police use—hung from one of the metal racks. On the floor lay an overturned grey plastic bucket. A shudder ran through me as I imagined Griffin trapped here, at the mercy of a deranged sex offender, forced to pee in a pail. I thought about my own ordeal, held prisoner by the Red Militia and beaten mercilessly. But I was a grown man—I was capable of moving past it. How was a young girl supposed to come out of this living nightmare?

Finally, with the grace of an angel, Griffin made her way to a sturdy metal table and chairs. Gently squeezing her hand, I took a seat with her and the others.

“So, formal introductions,” I said to Evie. “I’m Dave Pulaski, and this is my wife Holly. And this is Griffin Sparrow.”

“Well, you know me. Everybody knows me. I’m Evie Champagne, ‘star reporter.’ As you can see, somewhat worse for the wear. Sorry about the clothes. I’ll speak to my producer.”

“We saw you talking to that physician’s assistant,” I said. “I’m guessing you’ve tried interviewing everyone here.”

“Yeah, the civilians don’t know anything and no one in Black Dragon is talking—including the medical staff. It’s radio silence.”

“Speaking of which. Do you know what’s going on with the cell

service?”

“That is one helluva mystery, isn’t it?” she said. “No one can explain it, nor can they tell us why the land lines don’t work. I’m guessing it’s intentional.”

“Well, it didn’t stop us from communicating with you a few days ago,” Holly said.

“I remember you wrote down ‘Robbin-Sear Industries.’ What do they have to do with all this?”

“You have to understand,” Evie said. “The evidence I’ve collected is sketchy. But it’s my belief that they’re the ones responsible for what happened.”

“You mean, the outbreak?” I said. “How?”

“Look, being a reporter is hard. Most of your time is spent chasing down leads, doing research, putting the pieces together until you have a story. You check and double-check the facts, you know, to make sure the station doesn’t get sued. Every once in a while, you get lucky. I mean, *really* lucky. You live for those moments.”

Her eyes sparkled in a way that told me she was born for this.

“Before I became a television news reporter, I was a researcher at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A friend of mine, Rudy Moritz—you might’ve heard of him—knew I was good and asked me to help him research a story he was working on. Something bizarre had happened in a remote mountain village in Guatemala, somewhere near Jacaltenango. There were somewhere around a hundred people in the village—mostly elderly. The place was so small it wasn’t even on the map.

“Something came over the AP wire. It seemed that practically everyone in the village had come down with a strange illness. The symptoms were very similar to what you saw here in Tres Marias in the early days. People wandering the streets like ghosts—their eyes blank—gibbering like idiots.”

“The jimmies,” I said.

“Exactly. At first, the doctors thought it was Hantavirus or Ebola. But

everyone tested negative for those. Rudy, who has a medical background, went down there to investigate. I tried to find out what I could using public records, talking to immunologists, stuff like that. We explored every angle. Tainted water, drugs, the military. Nothing fit.

“Then Rudy called me on his satellite phone and told me he’d seen a group of Americans ‘sneaking around’ down there. That’s how he put it. They claimed to be researchers from some NGO and were very reluctant to talk to my friend. You can guess who they really worked for.”

“Robbin-Sear,” Holly said.

“Yep. Rudy was persistent, and he was able to get an interview with the guy in charge. He told Rudy that they were there simply as observers. That was bullshit, and Rudy knew it. But he played along in order to get the interview. The next day, he was expelled from the country. His notes, computer—everything—were confiscated. As a result, the paper didn’t allow him to write the story.”

“What happened to the people in the village?” Griffin said.

Evie gazed at the ground. “They never said, officially. But all of the bodies were incinerated.”

My head hurt. I tried sifting through the information in my head, tying it back to what was happening in our town.

“Tell us about Tres Marias,” I said.

Evie laid everything out for us, based on all the investigation she had done up to then.

She and her cameraman, Jeff, had covered the story, getting what information they could from the locals. She hadn’t had much luck talking to Black Dragon, though. Understandable, considering the town was in lockdown mode. At the start of the outbreak, people had begun coming down with the jimmies. At the time it was thought that they’d either been bitten by infected animals or other people—no one was really sure. When they died off, the hordes appeared. And after death, people “turned” by the hundreds, becoming undead things that craved human flesh. There was no evidence, though, that this had happened in

Guatemala.

“When Black Dragon rolled into town,” Evie said, “they got to work burning bodies.”

Things had really turned ugly when the Red Militia clashed with Black Dragon. It was open warfare in the streets.

“I was able to get an interview with Ormand Ferry, the leader of the Red Militia. He insisted that the whole episode was a government conspiracy, and he was trying to save the town.”

After that, things had become too dangerous on the streets, and Evie and Jeff went into hiding. But they continued to investigate. A break came when their news van nearly collided with another van traveling in the opposite direction and driven by a researcher from Robbin-Sear named Larry Evans.

“He was pretty wound up, if you ask me,” she said.

They both pulled over to make sure everyone was all right. Seeing the company name on the van, Evie went to work. I could just see her standing there in her fitted blazer, tight skirt and black stilettos, working Larry like a sock puppet.

Robbin-Sear was a privately funded bioscience technology company. They were under contract—he wouldn’t say to whom—to develop a vaccine to inoculate American troops fighting overseas. He claimed not to know anything about the current outbreak. But Evie pushed hard. That’s when Larry referred her to his boss.

“I tried getting more information, but it was no use. By then, Black Dragon had quarantined the town. There was no way for Jeff and me to get out. The evac center was overrun, and we needed to find a place to hide. We were lucky enough to discover that satellite building—the one belonging to Arkon.”

“How long were you there?” Holly said.

“Weeks. Seemed like forever. We had electricity and running water. Jeff made food runs, bringing back whatever he could scavenge.” She rubbed her eyes. “He kept me alive. One day we found the VTC

equipment in one of the conference rooms. Jeff decided to try calling out on it. He worked on it for days, but there was no one on the receiving end. I think it was a total accident that we made the connection with you."

"Then someone broke in," I said. "Was it the Red Militia?"

"No, a horde. We were on the second floor and could hear them downstairs. We barely made it out alive."

"And you headed straight for Robbin-Sear?"

"We were able to get the van out of the city—away from the Red Militia—and into the forest. It was dark by the time we got out, so we slept in the van, intending to drive to the facility in the morning. To meet you."

"And you were attacked."

"Yes. It was that horde that came after you. They found us. Jeff stayed behind, trying to hold them off so I could get away. I ran and ran—for what seemed like hours—but it was only a few minutes. I got to the top of a ridge and when I looked down, I saw the horde. They were already dispersing, and that's when I knew they'd ... that Jeff was dead."

We waited as she choked down her sorrow and took a long, deep breath.

"When I saw the helicopters, I flagged them down, waving my jacket like a crazy woman. Fortunately, it was red, and they spotted me right away. I knew you guys were headed there too, so I told them to keep searching for other survivors. You know the rest."

Holly touched Evie's hand. Anyone else would have broken down, but this woman held it together.

"Sorry to get emotional," she said.

"So you think these events are connected," Holly said.

"Oh, yeah."

"But how?" I said.

"Dave, history is filled with examples of the US testing modified viruses and experimental vaccines on its own citizens. I'll give you one.

In 1994, Senator John D. Rockefeller released a report stating that for fifty years, the Department of Defense experimented on military personnel."

"Okay ..."

"So what's to stop them from sacrificing a few isolated villagers in a country nobody cares about?"

"Guatemala, you mean. But now you're talking about a town in Northern California!"

"Why are you surprised, Dave? In 1951, the DOD began open-air tests in this country using disease-producing bacteria and viruses. This continued through 1969."

It was too much. I got to my feet and paced back and forth. Ran into a huge cobweb. Pissed off, I swatted it away as the three women stared at me. Then Holly turned to Evie.

"Are you sure the two things are related?" she said.

"Positive," Evie said.

"Why?" I said.

"Because the person in charge in Guatemala is the same person who runs the facility here. He's the one Larry Evans pointed me to. Guy by the name of Bob Creasy." I froze. "You know him?"

I turned to Holly. "He was the one who picked me up after my car accident in July."

"I read something once," Holly said. "About the Department of Defense building a special facility to manufacture vaccines." Then to Evie, "Are you saying these guys are somehow tied to the DOD?"

"While I was researching that story a few years ago," Evie said, "I learned that an ex-DOD official is now the COO of Robbin-Sear. A little cozy, don't you think?"

I took a seat and ran my hands through my hair. Holly laid her hand gently on my arm. We sat in silence for a few moments.

"If what you're saying is true," I said, "then somehow my friend Jim got mixed up with these guys."

"What makes you say that?" Evie said.

“Because, whatever it is that’s spreading through this town, Jim got it early on.”

“Dave,” Holly said, “when Creasy picked you up, didn’t you say he was looking for stray dogs?”

“Yeah. He was especially interested in Jim’s dog, Perro.”

“That might have something to do with how the virus got out.”

“You think they were experimenting on animals?”

“That sounds likely,” Evie said.

“So do we know what happened to Perro?” Griffin said.

“He was out there on the road the night Creasy picked me up. But he got away. And he was definitely rabid.”

“Why would a government research facility care about a rabid dog?” Holly said.

“What if he was sick on purpose?” Griffin said.

Evie looked at the girl intently. “Go on.”

“My stepdad used to meet with these Red Militia guys at the house, right? Me and my brother, Kyle, weren’t supposed to hang around, but we always heard them talking about this big conspiracy. You know, medical experiments and stuff.” Griffin turned to Holly and me. “What if they were right and someone, like, gave the dog something to make him sick?”

“Jim was bitten—and not by a human,” I said. “I saw the autopsy photo. To Griffin’s point, Perro could have been infected and bitten Jim. And others too.”

“But why didn’t people get rabies, instead of whatever this is?” Holly said.

“I don’t know,” Evie said.

“So how does Black Dragon figure into all this?” I said. “I mean, normally, the police would be involved and—if necessary—a state of emergency would be declared by the governor and the National Guard sent in, right?”

“Yes,” Evie said. “Remember the LA riots in ’92?”

"I was kind of young," I said. "So Black Dragon shows up. A *private* security company. Who made that call?"

"No clue," Evie said. "All I know is we need to get inside that facility on Old Orchard Road. That's where the truth lies."

"Now that Black Dragon is running things again, I'm not sure how easy that will be."

"Dave," Holly said. "If we join them, we might be in a better position to do something."

"I need to talk to Warnick. He's the only one I trust."

"I don't think that's going to happen."

Holly was right. Everything pointed to Pederman and his damned offer. Unless we agreed to join up, he'd keep us shut out. But being part of the operation would give us access to communications—and more importantly, intelligence.

It was the only way.

"WE'D LIKE to speak to Supervisor Pederman," I said to the guard at the entrance to the administration building.

"What's this concerning?"

"Tell him we're ready to talk. He'll know."

The guard radioed someone who escorted us inside and asked us to wait in the foyer. After twenty minutes, another soldier walked us to the principal's office. Inside, Pederman was waiting, along with Warnick. On the coat rack hung two fresh uniforms in clear garment bags. And on the floor, two shoe boxes.

"How did you know our decision?" I said.

Pederman smiled broadly. "Let's say we were hopeful."

"Welcome to the team," Warnick said. He extended a hand to each of us.

"We need you to fill out some paperwork," Pederman said, handing

us each an official-looking packet. "Once everything has been processed, we will issue each of you a weapon. We're fast-tracking the whole thing. I'll get up to headquarters and make you an appointment with HR. Someone can be onsite tomorrow to take care of the employment contract and go over your benefits package."

"No signing bonus?" I said, skimming the paperwork. I totally wasn't being serious.

"I'm authorized to offer each of you twenty-five thousand dollars. Of course, it will be grossed up to account for the taxes."

Holly's jaw dropped as she stared at me. "Oh my gosh ..."

"I think you're going to like working for us," Pederman said.

"Can't wait to get started," I said. As I've explained before, I'm a good liar.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Pederman said. "Because of the unusual nature of the events over the last few months, we'll need to interview both of you and take statements."

"You mean, like a deposition?" I said.

"Sort of. But it's nothing to worry about. We're trying to gather all the information we can about what happened. Sooner or later there's going to be an investigation—and possibly lawsuits. We need to know all the facts."

"And we won't be charged with anything?"

"No. If it makes you feel any better, Warnick and Springer have vouched for your character. They told us their version, which frankly makes you guys look like heroes. But now we need your statements."

"Sure," I said.

"Fine with me," Holly said.

WALKING BACK, I took in the crisp air. The sky was clear and, other than the sounds of the ATVs patrolling the fences, all was quiet. Far off on the

outdoor basketball courts, a group of men and teenage boys was enjoying a pickup game. It all reminded me of how things used to be, before the plague.

As we reached our trailer, Holly stopped and took my hand. "Dave, thank you for doing this. I mean it."

"I get the feeling you really want this."

"I do. But not for the reasons you think."

"Is this another one of those fly-bys and I'm standing here clueless?"

"No." She laughed and laid her hand on my arm. "No, honey. It's just that, well ... I'm pregnant."

Misdirection

ELATION AND PANIC DIZZIED ME. I DIDN'T KNOW WHETHER TO CELEBRATE OR mourn. I don't normally weave—unless I'm drunk. But I felt myself tilting back as Holly reached for my other arm.

“Easy there, cowboy,” she said.

We found a shady spot under an oak tree. A squirrel stared at us from halfway up the light brown trunk, chittering and flicking its tail. I had nothing but love for it as I sat and pulled Holly down next to me. No one wanted to be the first to speak, so we did the staring game. After a few seconds I blinked.

“Aw!” I said. “Come on, do-over.”

“Forget it.”

It was surreal, us sitting under that tree, the sun breaking through white billowy clouds, while not fifty yards away two groaning draggers pressed up against the chain link fence, as if eavesdropping. We were between two worlds, it seemed. The sane and the insane. So far, our choices pulled us towards the former. But that other world was never far away.

Somehow, Greta got out of the trailer and found us. She lay at our feet and waited for someone to stroke her neck. Some guard dog, I thought. At least the kid will have a pet.

Holly took my hand. “I didn't mean to spring it on you like that. I

was pretty sure, but the blood test confirmed it.”

“I wondered why you were acting all weird. How far along are you?”

“A few weeks. I’m still getting used to the idea. Are you upset?”

“What? No, I’m ... Everything is so crazy. I mean, we’re safe now. But are we going to be able to have that kind of life?”

I watched as a young recruit hopped off her ATV and skewered the draggers through the head with her bayonet. It was deliberate and routine, like picking up trash in a public park. She wiped her blade on the grass and radioed someone. The cleanup crew probably. Being the new recruits, would Holly and I end up on that detail?

“Life is always going to be hard,” she said. “And we’ll be dead someday. We have to try to live it the best we can. Raise our family.”

“Circle of life?”

“Pretty much.”

Maybe it was the effects of the killing and the blood and the suffering we’d gone through over these last few months. Maybe it was the glimmer of a possible future where Holly and I might actually be happy. Or it might have been a moment of weakness. But I felt myself choking up with emotion and I had to swallow it all back down and keep it there. We’d been through so much together, Holly and me—barely surviving sometimes. Seeing friends and comrades killed. Experiencing the worst of humanity. And sometimes the best. Losing a part of ourselves, yet becoming stronger together.

How did a person do it alone in this life? How did they survive? There were so many out there with nobody to help them. And plenty to hurt them. There’s an old French proverb that says God always helps fools, lovers and drunkards. I could attest to that last category. In my drinking days, I’d been on that lonely road, surviving miraculously from one bender to the next. And I believed that, without Holly, my luck would have eventually run out.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m a pussy.”

“No, you’re not.” Holly rubbed my shoulders and pulled me close. I

could smell her fragrant hair, the scent of her perfect skin. She kissed me.

"I will always love you, David Michael Pulaski. I know things are hard right now, but that's one thing you never have to worry about. Got it?"

Those were words I could happily take to my grave.

As we made our way to our trailer, Holly holding my hand, Greta bounding ahead like an errant puppy, her tongue lolling out of her mouth, I thought of my baby. *Our* baby. Would it even have a chance? I knew Holly would be an awesome mother, but what about me? I barely knew how to take care of myself. How would I ever measure up? Be an example?

Stay sober, a voice said. Good advice. Especially since I knew there were more dark days to come.

WHEN WE TOLD GRIFFIN, she made dolphin noises. Though she'd become a formidable fighter in her own right, there was still the girl in her, filled with a tenderness and hope that only the young can feel. Perfect big sister, I thought.

"When will you know if it's a boy or a girl?" she said.

"It'll be a while," Holly said. "Four to five months."

"Can I name it? Holly, please? Say yes."

"What?" I said. "Griffin Jr.?"

She laughed, then became serious. "Or Kyle?"

"After your brother," I said. "Very cool."

"Holly, they're not gonna, like, send you out on patrol, are they?"

"Hey, I'm not crippled. I've got moves."

Holly pretended to round a corner, holding an imaginary weapon out in front of her. I sneaked up behind her and poked her in the ribs with my index fingers, sending her through the roof. It was one of the things I loved most about her—her ticklishness.

“Oh, you did not just do that,” she said.

Now everyone was tickling everyone as Greta barked and spun in circles.

A knock at the door put a stop to the hilarity. It was Warnick. “Sorry to barge in,” he said.

I could tell he was uncomfortable. As if on cue, Griffin took the dog for a walk. Holly and I sat on the sofa as Warnick paced, worrying two manila envelopes in his sweaty palms. I’d never seen him so edgy.

“Warnick, calm down,” I said. “You’re starting to worry me.”

“Look, I know you want to find out what’s really going on. But I think you should forget about it and accept whatever assignment they give you.”

“We’re happy to be the good corporate citizens and all, but someone needs to look into this thing and—”

“No, they don’t!” As long as I’d known Warnick, I couldn’t recall a single time when he’d raised his voice.

Holly rose and got a soda from the refrigerator. “Want anything?” she said to me.

“No, thanks.”

“Warnick?”

He ignored her. “Dave, you need to understand. Black Dragon has a mission.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Really? What is it?”

Groaning, I leaned back and rubbed my eyes. “To make the town safe so the regular authorities can take over.”

“Right. And it’s important that we focus on that.”

“Warnick, can I ask you a question? Did something happen?”

He walked over to the refrigerator and turned to Holly. “May I?”

“Sure.”

He popped open an orange soda and drank deeply. “This is way beyond what I thought it was when we first deployed.”

“You never told us how you ended up working for Black Dragon,” Holly said. “Did they recruit you?”

He took a seat across from us. I could tell he was tired.

“Me and my brother were serving in Afghanistan.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” I said. “Younger or older?”

“Older.”

“Is he a Weezer fan, too?”

“No, but he’s the person who taught me my faith. Someday I’ll tell you what my life was like before that. But not today.”

“Sounds like an amazing person,” Holly said. “Where is he now?”

Warnick fiddled with his soda can and spoke softly. “He was stationed at a COP—combat outpost—and went on patrol in a village, searching for Taliban. He was killed by an IED.”

“Dude, I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Anyway, I finished my tour.”

“What were you doing?”

“Training ANA forces—Afghan National Army. I was getting ready to come home when the Black Dragon recruiters showed up. They were signing up people like crazy. Guys like Chavez, Estrada, Springer and me. A job right out of the military? Why wouldn’t I do it? They offered us a great package, so we took it.”

Warnick told us that their first mission had been to remain in Afghanistan, providing private security for various Afghan leaders. Warlords mostly, who were friendly with the US. Chavez was their supervisor, and unlike his command in Tres Marias, he’d handled it fine. They didn’t see much combat—till the Taliban sent a suicide bomber—a kid on a scooter—to one of the leaders’ homes. Warnick, Springer and Estrada were almost killed in the blast. And Chavez almost died when more Taliban followed and started shooting up the place. After they recuperated in the hospital, they were sent home to Black Dragon’s regional office in San Francisco.

“We weren’t even there three months when the outbreak happened,”

he said, “and we got deployed here. As you know, they put Chavez in charge.”

It all fit—why Chavez went over the edge and why Estrada and the others followed him in his insane quest to create a new hell on earth. Somewhere along the way he must have lost it over there, along with the others. Maybe it was because he’d almost died. Or maybe he had already been on his way to madness—a madness that was irresistible to others. But not to Warnick and Springer. Somehow, they had remained sane. Why?

“Then it all fell apart,” Warnick said. “Chavez and his men. Other soldiers going rogue and palling around with the Red Militia. A lot of our people died at the hands of those nailheads.”

During those insane days, Warnick had been a rock. He’d kept me going even when things were at their worst. But he seemed different now. Had the events of the last few months finally gotten to him?

“It didn’t have to be this way,” he said, staring at nothing.

Holly went up to him. “What do you mean?”

Another knock. It was one of Pederman’s aides. “Is Warnick in here?”

“Yeah,” Warnick said, getting to his feet. “I’m finalizing things for the meeting with HR tomorrow.”

“Well, Pederman wants to see you.”

“Be right there.”

He remained at the door. When the aide was gone, Warnick handed us each an envelope.

“Report to the administration building tomorrow at oh-nine hundred sharp,” he said. “You have a meeting with HR. And don’t forget, they’re going to ask you to give depositions. Your assignments are in those envelopes, assuming everything goes well. It’s light duty for the next few days. Mostly target practice and physical training.”

“Warnick, what are you not telling us?” I said.

“Stick to the mission,” he said and left the trailer.

I WENT out to find Evie, but she wasn't anywhere around. I asked a number of Black Dragon soldiers—no one knew anything. When I returned to the trailer, Holly was already fixing dinner. Griffin lay on the couch reading a book she must've gotten from the school library.

"What are you reading?" I said.

"*The Catcher in the Rye.*"

"Ah, the classics."

"I don't get it. Why is Holden, like, so depressed all the time?"

"I don't know. Too much money and all."

"Did you find Evie?" Holly said.

"No. And no one has any idea where she is."

"Do you think they released her?"

"I keep wondering about Warnick. I've never seen him like that. You have this 'little woman' who tells you stuff, right? So what's she telling you now?"

"I don't know. Only that's he's acting strange."

Springer passed by the window. I bolted out the front door after him. He must've seen me coming—he walked faster.

"Springer, wait up!"

He stopped and pretended to act casual. "Oh, hey, Dave. S'up?"

"What's going on around here?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Come on, cut the crap, Calvin. Warnick is acting all weird. I can't find Evie. There's a lot of strangeness somebody needs to explain."

"I think you're imagining things," Springer said, faking a smile.

"I need some answers. Can we go somewhere to talk?"

"I'm not supposed to." His voice was barely audible.

"Springer, we've been through too much. Come on, man. Throw me a bone."

He quickly checked his surroundings and whispered. "By the

maintenance shed. Midnight.”

I watched him go, his gait stiff. People were watching, I noticed. They were definitely watching.

I WAITED near the entrance to the shed. It was dark, and there were no other soldiers around. I heard a crunching noise as someone made their way across the gravel. I backed into the shadows and waited. A lone figure approached and stepped into the light of a naked bulb hanging off the side of the shed.

It was Warnick.

“Warnick—”

“Shh!”

“What’s going on?” My voice was a whisper.

“Inside.”

He eased the metal door open and we slipped in. We didn’t turn on any lights, instead making our way carefully along the wall. Moonlight shone through one of the windows in a luminous pool in the center of the oil-stained floor. We stood close to one another so we wouldn’t have to raise our voices.

“So are you going to tell me the truth?” I said.

“You shouldn’t be asking all these questions. I thought I told you.”

“Look, we agreed to sign on like you and Pederman wanted. We’ll do our jobs. But I need to know what happened to my friend Jim. We won’t feel safe till we know.” I looked directly into Warnick’s eyes. “There’s something else. Holly’s pregnant.”

“All the more reason to keep a low profile. Congrats, by the way.”

“Warnick, I know you came here to convince me to stand down. But, dude, you know me. And you know I’m not going to do that. So you might as well come clean.”

Warnick began pacing again, then stopped and stared at something

across the room. Our eyes adjusted to the darkness, and we saw a couple of metal folding chairs lying next to a wall. We set them up and sat across from each other.

"I don't know if I have any answers for you," he said.

"Tell me what you know."

"This is strictly confidential. If you breathe any of it—"

"Warnick, I get it."

"I was in one of the offices in the administration building this morning, doing some paperwork. The walls are kind of thin. In the office next to me, I could hear them interrogating Evie."

"Interrogating? You mean, taking a deposition?"

"Not exactly. They were asking her all kinds of questions about her investigation during the outbreak. What she'd seen. Places she'd gone. People she'd interviewed. They wanted to know how she survived all this time by herself. And they wanted to know what she and her cameraman filmed."

"And what did she tell them?"

"From what I could hear, she kept her answers very general. She talked about the pits of burning bodies and the close calls they had with draggers and the Red Militia. She never gave them any specifics. When they asked again about the news footage, she told them that other than what was broadcast before the quarantine, it was all lost when the draggers attacked their van and killed Jeff."

"What about Robbin-Sear?"

"They didn't ask her about it directly. They talked around it. Asked her if she had any thoughts on how this thing might have started, or how far she thought it might have spread. She told them she assumed that it was some kind of virus and that it had made it as far as Mt. Shasta. All stuff that's generally known."

I leaned forward and lowered my voice. "When you say 'they' you mean Pederman, right?"

"No. Someone else."

“Huh. Then what?”

“They let her go. Said they’d ask her to come in again if they had any more questions.”

“And you saw her leave?”

“Yeah.”

“What does Pederman say?”

“He’s still in San Francisco.”

“Weird. Are you planning to tell him?”

“Of course.”

“Who do you think it was?”

“Someone whose voice I didn’t recognize.”

“But they work for Black Dragon, right?”

Warnick stood and checked behind him, as if someone might be listening. “No, I don’t think so. After it was over, I heard him leave the room. When he walked past my door, I saw him briefly. He was a stocky guy. With red hair. Wearing a really nice suit. Any idea who that is?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said, getting to my feet. “He’s the mayor.”

END OF SAMPLE