

Dead Highways

Dead Highways, prequel

by Richard Brown, ...

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.



Chapter 1

March 10, 2012, was the day the apocalypse began.
But we'll get back to that later.

Chapter 2

February 13, 2012, was the day before Valentine's Day, and I (your loyal guide, Jimmy) was at the gun shop.

Guns Unlimited.

I wasn't there to get a present for my imaginary girlfriend. I wanted a gun for myself—needed one, just in case things got worse.

The biggest problem was I knew nothing about guns. I'd never held a gun before, let alone fired one. Sure I'd seen plenty of guns on TV and in movies, but how much of that was just camera tricks and special effects? How many times would I have to shoot someone to make sure they stayed down? But first I needed to know—

"Where do you put the bullets?" I asked, thoroughly examining the pistol Ted handed me. The gun was cold and heavier than I expected.

Ted was the owner of Guns Unlimited. He was a rather large man with equally large hands. His skin was darkly tanned and he had freckles everywhere, more than I think I'd ever seen on one person. I found myself staring at them curiously, even while he did his best to ease my anxiety and answer my stupid questions.

He took the gun from me. It looked like a toy in his hands.

"See this," he said, pointing at what looked to be a button or switch of some kind on the left side of the gun, near the top of the handle. "Push it to release the magazine."

He demonstrated and then handed me the magazine.

"And so the bullets go in *here*?"

He looked at me like I was an idiot.

I suppose that was fair.

"You sure you want to buy a gun? I mean, you've thought this through?"

"Yeah, sure."

He looked at me like I was a liar.

“Okay then, hang tight.”

He turned around and walked through an archway to the rear of the store.

“I really appreciate your help.”

“It's no problem,” he said from the back storage room. “We all have to learn from someone. My dad taught me when I was young.” Ted returned to the counter with a small box of ammunition. “I could sell you a gun even if you have no clue how to use it. I could let you shoot yourself in the face, and my hands would be clean. But that's not good enough for me. I want a clean conscience, too. So I take gun safety very seriously. I really hope you're listening. I don't want to see on the news that you committed suicide. You ain't depressed or anything, right?”

“No sir. Though it might be hard to shoot myself if I can't figure out how to load it.”

“I'd say it would be difficult to shoot someone else too, assuming you must. You said you wanted the gun for protection.”

I nodded.

“Well then, since an unloaded gun is about as useful as a pecker on a priest, I guess you'll need a crash course. Follow me.”

He led me across the store and through a heavy wooden door to an adjacent building. The building was colder than the store and had a funny smell. Later I would know the smell as gunpowder. To say I was out of my element would be an understatement—I stuck out like a headless man in a hat store.

Ted explained to me that this was a gun range, a place for people to come and practice their marksmanship. Ten dollars for a half hour was the current rate, but freckle face was happy to let me shoot a few rounds for free.

There were six stations with a maximum shooting distance of fifty feet. Ted set my target up at half that. He showed me how to load the magazine, and then outfitted me with a pair of earmuffs and protective eyewear.

“Is all this really necessary?” I asked.

“Yes, it's the law.”

“Like wearing your seatbelt?”

Ted pointed out the different parts of the gun and then took a few shots downrange to demonstrate.

Holy crap!

I still didn't know why I had to wear the goggles, but I was glad I had the earmuffs on.

Ted had put two holes in the paper man-shaped target right between the eyes.

Next, it was my turn. He handed me the gun.

“Always keep the safety on until you're ready to shoot,” he said. “Did you pay attention to how I was holding it?”

“A little.”

He helped me into the correct position. “Go ahead and take the safety off. Then aim and pull the trigger. Try to hit the target in the chest.”

“Shouldn't I try and hit the head like you?”

“No. The chest is a much bigger target, and just as effective.”

I took a deep breath and then pulled the trigger.

“Nice. Not bad for your first shot,” Ted said.

I had hit the target in more of the stomach region, but at least I hit it.

“The gun almost flew out of my hands. Is that normal?”

“You did okay. You just gotta get used to it. Every gun is gonna have a little kick, some more than others. It just takes practice. Go ahead and shoot off the rest of the rounds.”

I wanted to buy the gun that day, but Ted said I had to wait three days.

Three days later, I went back to pick it up. Over the course of the next few weeks, I would spend a lot of hours hanging out at Guns Unlimited. Ted was glad I hadn't killed myself or someone else, and was just as glad to take my money to use the range. My speed and accuracy was improving. I was feeling more and more confident that when something *did* happen, I'd be ready. It was like preparing for a hurricane I knew was on its way; only instead of food and water, I wanted guns and ammo. It was only a matter of time.

Now, I know how all this must sound. But so that you don't think I'm some psycho with an itchy trigger finger, let's back up a little and I'll explain how I came to need a gun in the first place. It's (how do I say this?) complicated.

Chapter 3

For much of my life, it had always been grandma and me. I won't get into what happened with my parents. Let's just say I hate them both.

Moving on.

Grandma owned a small used bookstore in a nice part of Cocoa, Florida, and by nice I mean in the 1980s when she bought the place. By 2012, it was only nice if you wanted to score some rocks. So the market for book buyers was rather limited, especially since crack heads don't have much free time to read, what with doing crack all damn day.

But the store was paid for and so sales didn't matter much to grandma anyway. She liked to read, as did I, and that was what kept us going. Our love for books. That and her monthly social security check. Those two things.

The few customers we did get were usually people who knew grandma—most of them old ladies.

Mrs. Harrington with the pacemaker.

Mrs. Rose with her house of cats.

Mrs. Goldie with the bad perm.

Old ladies.

They would come by on a regular basis, talk about the results of their latest blood test, and then be on their way. I would usually be sitting in the corner reading a fantasy novel, trying to ignore them, wishing I were in another world.

Middle-Earth. Oz. Canada.

Anywhere.

The bookstore had two stories (*get it? stories*), the second floor being our apartment space. Yeah, that's right. I was twenty-two and still living with my grandma. Probably why I was still a virgin too. Go ahead, have a laugh on me.

Moving on.

The apartment space was no more than eight hundred square feet, with two bedrooms, one bath, and a shared living room. It also had a “kitchen,” but no bigger than what you’d find in an RV, cramped and useless. The second floor was only accessible via a narrow staircase in the back room, so no customers could curiously wander up.

I often tried to persuade grandma to move, fearing one day she might take a tumble down the stairs. She was almost eighty, after all. But she refused to stray too far away from her pride and joy.

No, not me, her only grandchild.

The bookstore.

Still, for as old as she was, she was as lively as they come. No walker. No memory loss. No old person smell. Her hearing was the only thing that didn’t quite make the trip into her senior years. I constantly had to yell, even when I wasn’t angry.

Forgive my lousy painting, but I think you get the picture. My life sucked more than those *Paranormal Activity* movies. Nothing that an apocalypse couldn’t solve.

And now that I’ve established where I worked, where I lived, and the fact that the only girlfriend I ever had was imaginary, we can move on to the next phase.

Chapter 4

Don’t.

Do.

Drugs.

Remember that, kids.

Or you might end up like Kevin.

Kevin was the nicest addict I’d ever met. Hell, he was the *only* addict I’d ever met. He would shuffle by the bookstore twenty times a day, much like a zombie, always looking ruffled and beaten like he’d just gone for a long ride in the trunk of some maniac’s car. And maybe he had.

His hair was long and dirty and blonde, like Kurt Cobain’s before he killed himself. He wore the same clothes every day. Ripped blue jeans. Black T-shirt. Old pair of scuffed-up boots with the heels hanging off. I don’t think he owned any other clothing. Or anything else, for that matter. And my God did he smell—worse than the dumpster behind the building, worse than the TV dinners grandma always made.

But Kevin was nice.

He never tried to rob me, not that I had much money to take. He got his fix by doing good, honest work, begging for spare change at the Haji-Mart across the street. I even donated a few coins to the drug fund, usually after buying a hot dog or taquito for lunch. And why not? Finally, here was someone I could feel bad for. Here was someone more pathetic than me.

Then came the day when Kevin decided to pay me back for all my charity, in the only way he knew how.

By offering me a joint.

You know, even after all that has happened, and let me tell you there is a lot left to tell, I still remember that day so clearly. I suppose you never forget the first time you're offered drugs.

It was a really cold day, which doesn't occur often in Florida, and it caught me by surprise. I was halfway to the Haji-Mart before realizing I should have grabbed a coat. I jogged the rest of the way across the street to keep my blood from freezing.

Kevin was sitting outside when I arrived, head down, coatless, huddled against a black trash can for warmth. He was pulling the last drags off a cigarette he'd probably picked from the community ashtray. Gross.

He looked up at me and nodded.

I nodded back and rushed inside the store.

Few things feel better than entering a warm building after being out in the cold, even if the warm building is just an old, filthy convenience store.

I made my way to the hot dog roller and fountain drink stations located on the far end. Ah, yes, that was where I usually spent my lunch money. The rest of the stuff on the shelves was usually expired. It didn't matter if it was candy, potato chips, or even headache medicine for crying out loud, it probably went out of date last month. Even some of the ready-to-eat stuff, like the donuts sitting in the glass case with the big sign saying Fresh Donuts, looked like they'd shriveled up and died long ago. And don't get me started on the fresh-brewed coffee. It seriously looked like shit water. I guess the manager, an East Indian man named Aamod, believed in a different definition of the word *fresh* than me. The only exception to this seemed to be the hot dog roller, which Aamod was forced to restock throughout the day due to the strict budgets of people like me, the neighborhood poor, and there were a lot of us going around.

I paid for my hot dog and soda and then left the store. Few things feel worse than going outside in the cold after being in a warm building. Kevin was still leaning against the trashcan, still looking miserably cold. I felt extra bad for him on this day, so I gave him all my leftover change, a whopping two dollars and fifteen cents.

"Gee thanks, bro," he said to me.

I smiled politely and then walked away. I did my part to help the less fortunate. I could sleep soundly that night, knowing my good deed for the day was done. Two dollars and fifteen cents? Why, he could buy a few cups of that shitty-looking coffee for that. I call that progress.

By the time I finished my hot dog, I had realized I could do better than two dollars and fifteen cents. I patiently waited for Kevin to shuffle back by the bookstore to wherever he went, and when he finally did, I met him outside with a present. It was an old coat, and an ugly one if I may be totally honest. Grandma got it for me years ago, back when I was in high school. Since then it sat in my closet collecting dust, like a lot of the clothing she'd bought me over the years. Until now.

"I thought you might want this," I said, holding the coat out to him.

Kevin looked down at the coat, then back up at me, then back down at the coat. "Are you for real? I mean... that's a nice coat, bro."

"If you say so," I said. "I mean... yeah. It's yours if you want it."

“Sure, sure, I’d love to have it. What do you want for it?”

“Nothing. I’m just trying to help out, that’s all. I know the cold doesn’t give much warning around here.”

“Nah, man.” He took the coat and tried it on. “Fits real good,” he said. “How does it look?”

“Looks fine,” I said. Not really a lie. The coat was actually an improvement over Kevin’s other clothing. At the very least, it was clean and still smelled rather new.

“Well, if you want your money back, you got it.”

“No, no. It’s no big deal, really.”

“You sure? Hey, wait a minute. I got something for you.” He reached into the pocket of his ripped jeans and pulled out what I at first thought was a crumpled up receipt.

He held it out to me so I could get a closer look.

Nope. Not a receipt.

“Is that a cigarette?”

“It’s a joint. Take it. What do ya say, even trade?”

“No thanks, I don’t smoke.”

“Everybody smokes, bro.”

“Not me.”

“Why not?”

I thought about the question for a moment. “I don’t know. Never had the urge, I guess.”

“Well, today’s your lucky day,” he said, still holding the joint out for me to take. I looked around nervously for any sign of police, but didn’t see any around. “It’s the least I could do, since you’ve been so kind to me. I don’t have much else to offer. Take it, and I’ll leave you to your books.”

The debate continued for another five minutes before Kevin won. I grabbed the joint from him and shoved it into my pocket, feeling like a criminal. By that point, I would have done just about anything other than sexual favors to get him to leave me alone. I never had many friends growing up, so this was the closest I’d ever come to experiencing peer pressure. And it worked. I felt like I was living inside one of those after school specials.

We said our goodbyes and Kevin headed off with my coat, and I headed back inside the bookstore with his joint.

Of course, I had no intention of smoking it, officer. I only took it so he’d leave me alone, your honor. I wondered if the law would accept that rationalization. Grandma would certainly be upset if she knew I had it, so I’d have to get rid of it as soon as possible. Until then, it would stay hidden out of sight under my mattress.

For the rest of the week, I avoided going to the Haji-Mart, fearing I’d run into Kevin and he’d ask me about it.

Truth was; I was wrestling with the idea of smoking it, but I was also scared of what might happen to me if I did. I had never done anything so crazy in my life. The craziest thing I’d ever done was spend a whole weekend reading the *Lord of the Rings* for the third time.

Gandalf smoked, didn’t he?

I had to remind myself that Gandalf wasn’t real.

Finally, after a week of contemplating, the intelligent part of my brain, the part that kept me out of trouble, the part that allowed me to leave high school with a solid C+ average, said enough was enough.

I would get rid of it, once and for all.

I would say NO to drugs.

By the time the bookstore closed at six, the sun was already beginning to go down, but the cold days that had made their mark a week earlier had come and gone.

After depositing that day's money in the safe, Grandma and I headed up the stairs and said our goodnights. I sat on the floor in my room and watched TV for a few hours. When I was sure she was asleep, I took the joint out of the mattress and put it into a plastic grocery bag with some other random trash I had lying around. Now I just had to toss the grocery bag into the dumpster behind the building and all of this drug nonsense would be behind me.

As I made my way across the dark bookstore to the door, I saw a man and a woman arguing outside in the parking lot. They stood next to a red car under the dim glow of the streetlight, yelling at each other.

A moment later, the man pushed the woman to the ground. Then he hopped back into the red car and peeled out of the parking lot.

"Holy shit," I whispered. For a fleeting moment, I considered calling the police, then remembered the joint in the trash bag.

The woman slowly got back to her feet and began to walk toward the bookstore. *Could she have seen me*, I wondered, standing in the dark watching her altercation like some creeper. She sat down on the curb right outside the store and hung her head. Calling the police was out of the question, but I had to do something. Maybe call her a cab.

I set the trash bag on the counter and then unlocked the door. The woman raised her head when she heard the door open. I stepped halfway out.

"Hey, are you all right?"

"Oh, yeah, I'll be fine," she said, turning back to look at me. She swept her curly orange-blonde hair out of her face.

"I saw what happened. Who was he?"

"Just some guy. Nobody special."

"Clearly."

"What's your name?"

"James, but my grandma always calls me Jimmy."

"Pleasure to meet you, Jimmy. This your store?"

"Yeah, me and my grandma's."

She smiled at me. "Ya know I won't bite you unless you ask nicely."

"What?"

"You're standing there like I've got some disease. I ain't got nothing like that, so you ain't got nothing to worry about. I'm not a bad person."

"Sorry," I said, slowly coming the rest of the way outside. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"Well, then you won't mind sitting down next to me." She patted the concrete curb with her hand. "Come on, don't be shy."

And this was how I met...

“Peaches, at your service.”

I shook her hand and sat down. “Peaches, huh. That’s an unusual name.”

She giggled. “Thanks.”

Peaches had quite a cute round face with tiny little orange freckles sprinkled about that matched her hair color. She wore a tank top with cutoff jeans and sandals. She carried a little extra weight around the hips and thighs, and her breasts were almost as big as my head. Not that I was staring or anything—they were just out there for everyone to see—I just so happened to be the only one in the vicinity at that moment.

Okay, I was staring.

“You want to talk about what happened?”

She sighed. “Not really. He owed me some money, that’s all. Wasn’t the first time, won’t be the last, I’m sure.”

“Well, if you want I could call you a cab.”

“Nah, that’s okay. I got a cell. And I don’t live far from here anyway.”

“Might be dangerous walking the streets at night.”

“Eh, I’m used to it.”

I should have known then because she made it so obvious, but I was a dunce. We were worlds apart.

“Tell you what I *could* go for though.”

“What’s that? A glass of water.”

“A cigarette,” she said. “I left mine in stupid’s car. You smoke?”

I thought about the joint inside the store. “No, never.”

“Really? Good for you. It’s a bad habit.”

“Why don’t you quit?”

“I don’t know. It gets me by. I started when I was young, and it’s just stuck with me all these years.”

“How old are you?”

“How old do I look?” she asked.

“Is this a trick question?”

“No, just curious.”

“I’d say twenty-nine then.”

“And I’d say you got a lucky guess. How old are you?”

“How old do *I* look?” I asked.

“About seventeen.”

We both laughed.

“Are you serious? I’m twenty-two.”

“I was just messing with ya,” she said.

I didn’t realize this at the time, but what we were doing was called flirting. I hadn’t done it before. It felt good.

“Care to escort me to the store across the street?” she said. “It’s been a long night and I could really use a cigarette. Don’t worry, I got my own money.”

I smiled. “Sure, why not.”

As we walked across the street, I kept looking around for Kevin. Luckily, he was nowhere to be found. He was probably passed out in some alleyway. As we reached the front of the store, Aamod greeted us outside and flipped the open sign around so it read closed.

“You got to be fuckin’ kidding me,” Peaches said.

“Sorry,” Aamod said in his thick Indian accent. “Store is closed. No more hot dog.”

“We don’t want a hot dog,” I said, looking at my watch. It was ten p.m. on the dot.

Peaches sighed. “Look, I just need a pack of cigarettes.”

“And there are other stores.”

Over to our left, Aamod’s daughter Naima sat in the passenger seat of a silver Toyota sedan. She worked at the store with her father. Even through the tint, I could see she was staring at me. God knows I had stared at her more times than I could count. She was a few years younger than me, and way out of my league. I felt sorry for whatever guy was in her league though, as Aamod would likely make that poor guy’s life a living hell.

“Come on, don’t be like that,” Peaches pleaded.

“No is no,” Aamod said. “Now run along. Or I call the police. Okay?”

Peaches and I began to walk back across the street. “What an asshole,” she finally said.

I nodded. “He can be... difficult sometimes.”

When we got back to the bookstore, Peaches said, “Well, I guess I should head on home.”

“Husband waiting on you?”

She shook her head. “I’m not married. Almost happened once. These days it’s hard to find a guy who wants to be with a gal like me. I suppose if he had enough money I could be swayed.”

“You said you live close by.”

“Yeah, a few blocks from here, in Shady Villas.”

“The trailer park.”

She smiled. “That’s the one. Don’t be jealous or anything.”

I smiled.

“It was nice meeting you, Jimmy.”

“Yeah...”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want her to leave. For once, I didn’t feel awkward talking to a girl, especially one with such large breasts. She made me feel comfortable in my own skin, and for that, I wanted to make her happy. I wanted her to stay in my life just a little longer.

She began to walk away.

“Wait,” I said. She turned around. “I don’t have a cigarette, but I have something else.”

She gave me a curious look.

“Hold on,” I said, and went back inside the store.

When I returned, I had the joint cupped in my hand. I opened it so she could see.

“You’ve been holding out on me. So you just don’t smoke cigarettes then?”

“No, I don’t smoke anything. Somebody gave me this. Do you want it?”

“How ‘bout we share it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on.” She stepped closer to me and looked up into my eyes. “I wanna be your first time.”

Yeah, that made me blush. “I really shouldn’t.”

“You’ll be okay, I promise. You’re making a big deal out of nothing. You’ll see.”

She talked me into smoking it with her. Then she talked me into smoking it with her inside the bookstore. She could have talked me into anything, I think. But if I was going to do it, I didn’t want to do it outside where we could be seen. No chance grandma would wake up either; she could barely hear anything when she was awake.

After digging up some matches, we sat Indian style on the floor in the back corner near the romance section. She lit up the joint and took a long drag.

Then it was my turn.

After a few failed attempts, she showed me how to properly inhale. And then I coughed my lungs out.

She laughed and took the joint from me. “What do you think?”

“I think I don’t feel anything.”

“Give it time.”

Ten minutes later, my world turned magical. I felt like Gandalf after a long day of spell casting.

I was so high.

And from that moment on, I knew my life would never be the same. For the first time, I felt like I understood my place in the world. Every color was brighter. Every shape more defined. The world was at my fingertips. I could be anything. Do anything. I had the power. I was He-Man.

I was so high.

The high went away less than an hour later, and I slowly returned to my senses. I guess with this scrawny body I’d make a lousy He-Man anyway. But still we sat there and talked for another hour, laughing at how ridiculous some of the romance titles were on a nearby shelf.

Bunking Down with the Boss.

Daddy Long Stroke.

Nick All Night.

Then Peaches told me her life story. She told me she was from Kentucky. She told me how she followed a man down here after dropping out of high school. How they got engaged. How he ended up cheating on her with multiple, *skanky-assed* women. How she sold the ring he got her at a pawnshop for a hundred dollars, and then blew all the money at the dog track on a greyhound named Last Place Finish. How she had thought the name was just a joke. How she bought the trailer in Shady Villas from a nice man with one leg and two teeth. But she never told me the one thing I should have known at the time.

No.

I had to hear it from a big dumb redneck who called himself Bad Moses.

Chapter 5

The very next day.

The next morning, to be more accurate.

10:08 a.m. to be exact.

I knew from the moment he walked into the store that he wasn't there to buy the latest Danielle Steele novel.

He was well over six feet tall and built like an ox. Early forties, I'd say. He wore an old pair of blue jeans, a sleeveless T-shirt with stains all over it, and a Pennzoil motor oil hat that he'd probably bought out of a vending machine at some truck stop. Oh, and let me tell you about his mullet. He had one. Even under the goofy hat, you could easily tell.

He wasn't a reader, that much was obvious. He could only have come in for one reason.

"You owe me some money," he said.

Okay, never mind. I was wrong. I figured he was there about Peaches.

"What money?"

"Don't play dumb with me, boy." He slammed his big claw-like hands down on the counter and snarled down at me. "You know damn well what money."

Grandma sat in the back corner pricing some new books that had arrived earlier that morning. She didn't notice anything was wrong. She didn't even look up. Not that I was expecting her to rescue me.

"Um, refresh my memory. Who are you?"

"I'm your worst nightmare."

"A clown with no makeup?"

"You gettin' smart with me?"

"No, sir."

"People in Shady Villas call me Bad Moses. I believe you were with one of my fruit last night."

"Your fruit, Mr. Moses?"

"Peaches."

Oh, wrong again. He *was* there about Peaches.

Shit shit shit.

"So you must be her husband then. Sir, I promise you we didn't do anything. Just talked."

He smirked, showing off his crooked teeth. "Just talked, huh." He looked over at my grandma, smirked again, and then looked back at me. "You know I'd hate to embarrass you in front of the old lady, but I will if I have to. My money. *Now!*"

"What do I owe you money for?"

"You really think I'm dumb, don't you?"

I wasn't gonna answer that. Not if I wanted to keep all my teeth.

"I saw you with Peaches last night. I see everything. I keep a close eye on my fruit."

"Why do you keep saying... your fruit?"

"I name all my girls after fruit. Peaches. Mango. Raspberry."

"Wait a minute, are you telling me Peaches is a—"

"Of course she is, fucko. And you were with her for a good two hours last night. I hope you enjoyed yourself. I'd say you owe me at least two hundred."

"Sir, I swear I didn't know she was a prostitute. All we did was talk."

“You can stop callin’ me sir, okay. I ain’t your grandpa, and being polite ain’t gonna stop what’s comin’ to ya. Look, I don’t care what you did, kid. I don’t care if y’all sat around reading from these dumb books you got here. You did it on my time, and my time is valuable.”

“But I don’t have two hundred dollars. Would you accept store credit?”

Again he slammed his hands down on the counter. “Do I look like I want store credit?”

“No, no,” I said, trembling, suddenly concerned I might pee my pants. The last time I’d done that was in seventh grade when a Doberman chased me home from the school bus stop. “It’s just, you see, the problem is, this store doesn’t make much money. And I don’t think it’s fair that I should have to pay when I swear to God I didn’t know.”

“Not fair, huh?”

“Go ask her, she never said anything to me.”

“Oh, I’m gonna deal with her. Don’t you worry about that. Right now I’m dealing with you.”

“Look, I promise I’ll never talk to her again. I don’t know what else to say. Please. I’m sorry.” He stood there glaring at me, chewing on his tongue. He didn’t look like much of a thinker, but I prayed he was doing just that. “Please,” I said again. Sweat was gathering around my eyes.

Finally, he pulled back from the counter and sighed. “You really are something else, but you seem like you just might be that fuckin’ stupid. So I’m gonna let you off the hook, just this once.”

“Thank you.” I took a deep breath. My heart was running a triathlon inside my chest.

“But if I catch you so as much lookin’ at one of my girls again, I’m gonna come back here with a baseball bat. Make this store my own personal batting cage. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Have a nice day, kid,” he said before sauntering out of the bookstore.

“Who was your friend, dear?” Grandma asked, looking up from her stack of fresh paperbacks.

“Nobody, grandma,” I replied.

I realized I was still trembling. But I survived, and unlike the time in seventh grade, this time I didn’t pee my pants. I dodged a big, bad dog named Bad Moses.

I wondered if Peaches would be so lucky.

Chapter 6

Peaches wasn’t so lucky.

It was obvious Bad Moses had roughed her up. There was some light bruising on her face, scratches on her arms and neck. She had surprised me with her presence. One second I’m sorting some books on the shelf, the next second she’s standing there behind me. This was the day after my meeting with Moses, sometime in the afternoon.

“I’m sorry. I know I should have told you.”

“You can’t be here,” I whispered. Amazingly, we had a customer in the store at that time and I didn’t want them to overhear our conversation. “If he finds out you came here, he’ll kill me. I’m not ready to die.”

I went back to putting books on the shelf.

“It’s not something I’m proud of, you know.”

“I can’t imagine why not.”

“I don’t like talking about it. It’s embarrassing. I just got roped into it because I needed the money.”

“Oh, believe me, I get it. In fact, the bookstore isn’t doing very well lately, so I was thinking of asking my grandma to find a nice street corner to work.” I continued to file books on the shelf. I didn’t want to look at her face. “Know of any good ones, Peaches?”

“Fuck you.”

“You probably would for the right amount of money. I hear you go for around two hundred these days.”

She turned away from me. I immediately wished I could take it back. I tried to continue working. After a moment, I gave in.

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said. I just wish you would have told me.”

She had her head down, her bouncy blonde curls falling across her face. “And if I had you wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with me, right?”

I couldn’t answer because I didn’t want to hurt her anymore. She’d been hurt by enough men in her life.

Still, I should have lied. I should have told her that wasn’t true. Even though it was.

After I didn’t respond, she raised her head and looked up into my eyes, melted my cold soul with that look, and then said, “I thought you were different, Jimmy.”

And began walking away.

“Wait...” I called out.

But this time she kept on going.

Chapter 7

For the rest of the day, I moped around the store feeling like the biggest asshole in the world. For once, I felt bad for Mel Gibson. Must be tough feeling that way all the time.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the conversation I had with Peaches. There was a lot I wished I could say to her, but I knew it was probably better this way. We were worlds apart, after all. Words wouldn’t change anything.

I wasn’t too worried about Bad Moses, either. If he came back then I guess I’d have my own scars to show for it. For being such an idiot. And maybe I deserved them.

The only thing that could put a smile on my face and take my mind off things was *The Walking Dead*. The show was coming back from winter break, season two,

and I couldn't wait to see what was gonna happen after the incident with Sophia in the barn.

I said goodnight to grandma and headed to my room. After preparing a nice bowl of chocolate ice cream, I settled into bed and turned on the TV.

An hour later, I sat there in my pajamas feeling excited. No, not that kind of excitement. The show had ended with Rick's wife Lori hitting a zombie and flipping her car. I had hoped she might be dead.

I crossed my fingers and turned off the lights.

I dreamt of how I would handle things in the event of an apocalypse, and what crazy personality disorders would infect my group.

An hour later, I was back up.

Somebody was downstairs in the bookstore, I realized, lying in bed and listening, hearing the sound of breaking glass and various thumps and crashes. I had an idea who the somebody might be.

I hopped out of bed and felt around in the dark for the light switch. I always kept the door to the stairs locked in the unlikely event that some psycho from the trailer park up the road would break in and make the bookstore his own personal batting cage. But I never thought it would actually happen.

I called 911 and ten minutes later there was a knock on the staircase door.

It was the police, said a man from the other side.

I was greeted by a black cop who introduced himself as Officer Robbie Robinson. He looked like Carl Winslow from that old sitcom, *Family Matters*. I immediately felt safer.

I knocked on grandma's door, told her to get dressed and come downstairs.

"Cosmic bears?" she asked.

"COME DOWNSTAIRS, Grandma," I yelled. "And make it quick. The police are here."

Officer Robinson gave me a funny look.

"She's a little—"

"Old," he interjected.

"I was gonna say hard of hearing, but old will work too."

"I understand."

I followed Officer Robinson downstairs to the bookstore and was immediately transported into a place much different than the one I had left the previous evening. All that hard work I had done sorting all the new books onto the shelf was just wasted time. New and old, all of the books in the store were scattered on the floor like firewood. Everywhere. It was impossible to walk from one side to the other without stepping on them. I picked up a hardback copy of Stephen King's *Firestarter*. The cover was wet with something. I brought it up to my nose to smell it, praying it wasn't urine.

Officer Robinson stopped me and said, "It's gasoline. Whoever did this planned on torching the place. I guess they forgot the matches."

I threw the book back into the pile. "Lucky me."

By this time, Grandma was downstairs, and Officer Robinson began explaining to her what had happened. I was afraid she might have a heart attack; she didn't appear to be taking the news all that well. A couple more police officers had also

arrived and were examining the broken front glass window. On the ground amidst the big shards of glass was a baseball bat.

Fuck.

I wanted to blame Kevin. If he'd never given me that damn joint, none of this would have happened. But then if I had never given him that ugly coat...

Stupid butterfly effect.

No, I couldn't blame anyone else. Not Kevin. Not Peaches. This was my fault. I mostly felt bad for my grandma. I knew how much she loved the bookstore, and because of my actions, we might have to close up shop. She'd be okay financially. She still had her social security, and would probably get some money from the insurance company. On the other hand, I'd have to get a job bagging groceries or asking people if they'd like to supersize it, and I guess that would be my punishment for causing all this mess.

I carefully stepped back behind the counter where my grandma and Officer Robinson stood. I put my arm around my grandma.

"Any idea who may have done this?" Officer Robinson asked me. "Any enemies we need to know about?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to say anything in front of grandma, didn't want to scare her anymore than she already was.

"It just seems like whoever did this went way out of their way to destroy your property. This wasn't just some everyday robbery or vandalism. It's not often we see people robbing used bookstores anyway. Do you know how much money you had in the safe?"

"They took the safe?" I checked behind the counter. Yep, the bastard pried the safe off the cabinet it was hidden inside and took it with him.

"Not much," my grandma replied. "Maybe a few hundred dollars."

A few hundred. The price of Peaches. I should have just given Moses what he wanted and called it a day.

"We'll dust for fingerprints. I'm sure we'll catch whoever did this in no time."

Officer Robinson joined the other cops examining the exterior premises. I got a chair for my grandma and had her sit down.

"What's gonna happen, Jimmy?"

I rubbed her shoulder. "Everything will be fine. Don't worry."

"How are we supposed to go on?"

I noticed tears beginning to well up in her eyes. The last time I'd seen my grandma cry was at Grandpa George's funeral ten years ago. I was just a twelve-year-old kid then getting my first pubic hairs, and she'd asked me that same question. *How are we supposed to go on?* In either case, I had no idea what to say. Seeing her on the edge of tears broke my heart. She was the nicest lady in the world; she didn't deserve such an idiot for a grandson.

"I promise I'll make it up to you, grandma. Somehow, I'll make it up to you."

When Robinson came back inside, I met him halfway. "I wasn't totally honest with you before," I said.

"About what?"

"About not having any enemies. I didn't want my grandma to be worried, but I know who did this."

I told him about the night I met Peaches, about the altercation the next day with Bad Moses. The only thing I left out was the part where I smoked marijuana. There are some things you never ever tell the police.

“He’s been arrested a few times,” Robinson said, referring to Bad Moses. “That Shady Villas is a shady place.” He stepped past me and addressed my grandma in a softer tone. “Dolores, I might recommend moving locations if I were you. This area isn’t exactly full of saints these days.”

“Move? But I’ve been here almost thirty years.”

“I understand. Trust me, I do. But we’ve had a lot of problems with prostitution and drugs in this area, and it doesn’t look like much is going to change anytime soon. At the very least, I’d consider getting an alarm system installed. Maybe put bars on the windows.” He turned toward me. “Or perhaps, getting a firearm.”

“No, I won’t have a gun around,” my grandma replied. “George had guns and they always made me nervous.”

“George was my grandfather,” I said.

Officer Robinson nodded. “Believe it or not, I don’t like guns much either, but sometimes they’re necessary as a last resort.” Grandma looked like she wasn’t paying any attention. Perhaps she hadn’t heard a word he’d said. He looked back at me. “Just something to think about,” he said, and then rejoined his uniformed buddies.

And think about it I did, like Lionel Richie.

All.

Night.

Long.

Until the next morning, the day before Valentine’s Day, when I decided it wouldn’t hurt to go have a look around. There was a gun store not too far from the bookstore. Guns Unlimited, it was called. Yeah, sure, I’d have a look around, that’s all. I never thought for a second I’d actually *buy* a gun, let alone fall in love.

But that’s exactly what happened.

I fell in love with a gun named Sally.

Chapter 8

Three days later, I put her on the MasterCard and brought her home, but I didn’t dare introduce her to grandma. We had to keep our relationship a secret, see. Sally had to hide in my pants just to get her upstairs where I wanted her, and from there stay hidden in an old shoebox under my desk. I was Bill Clinton, and she was my Lewinsky. Every so often, I’d take her back to Guns Unlimited to play with her, and she’d again have to hide in my pants where grandma couldn’t spot her. I felt like a nerd gangbanger, only I didn’t kill people. Not yet, anyway.

Other than the time me and Sally spent getting to know each other, a lot happened over the next few weeks.

First, we decided to keep the store open. Grandma’s old lady friends would certainly be happy. The insurance money paid for all the repairs and the cost of an alarm system, which I had one hell of a time teaching grandma how to use. We

had to get the front window fixed, and replace some of the bookshelves, but most of the books were still in decent shape, those that weren't soaked with gasoline. It was no fun sorting the keepers back onto the shelves, but it kept me busy, kept my mind off the fact that Lori managed to survive the car crash on *The Walking Dead*.

Every few days Officer Robinson would check in on us and update me on the status of the investigation. And it was always the same. Bad Moses had gone missing. No sign of him. No witnesses. The trailer park crowd wasn't talking. They had a warrant out for his arrest. They'd find him eventually. Just have to wait it out. He said they brought Peaches in for questioning, but she was no help. He'd always end our chat by telling me to keep my eyes open and to call him immediately if I spotted Moses. And I'd always tell him I would.

I was settling back into my normal, boring life. Burying my face in a book. Hot dogs at the Haji-Mart. Long looks at Naima, the Indian princess.

And Kevin.

Dear God, Kevin.

It had been a month since I'd seen him. I began to think maybe he'd joined Moses on a vacation getaway, perhaps on a cruise to the Bahamas, or just overdosed or something.

Can you even overdose on weed?

Anyway, I knew the day would come. I couldn't avoid him forever.

I was forced to change it up on this day. Aamod was being extra lazy and never filled the roller. It wasn't even running. That meant no hot dogs or taquitos or egg rolls, not even the sausages that looked like dried-up dog turds. I could tell Aamod was in a bad mood, which was typical of him, so I didn't bother saying anything about it. Instead, I searched the store for damn near twenty minutes for something else that could satisfy my appetite, something still in date. Aamod must have thought I was going to steal something because he watched me like a hawk. Finally, I settled on an assortment of powdered donuts and other pastry items, and a thirty-two ounce Coke.

After paying, I headed outside and noticed Kevin come around the corner to my left. I tried to pretend that I hadn't seen him, but I swear that never works, does it?

"Hey, bro," he said, shuffling up to me as I tried to scamper off like a scared rat. "Haven't seen you in a while."

I turned my head back but kept walking. "Yeah, I've been busy."

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I saw some guys repairing your window. You get robbed or something?"

"You could say that."

"Sorry to hear that, bro." I had to wait to cross the street. Kevin pulled up next to me smelling like stale cigarettes and beef jerky. "How was the joint?"

I shrugged. "No big deal. How's the coat?"

Kevin frowned. "I sold it. I hope you don't mind. I needed the money, and it's not exactly that cold out anymore."

"Well, it is March now. How much did you sell it for?"

"Five bucks."

“That’s more than I paid,” I said.

The traffic cleared, and I began crossing the road. To my dismay, Kevin followed.

“You want any more weed you let me know, okay? I can hook you up.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

We were almost out in front of the bookstore when he emerged from around the back corner. He was well over six feet tall, black, bald, and bulky as can be, and had a thick bushy beard. He was wearing a black tank top that gripped his bulging muscles like a glove. Later, I’d find out his real name. On this day, Kevin called him by his street name.

“Bowser. Wasn’t expecting you so soon, man.”

“Who’s this?” Bowser said, nodding at me.

“Just a friend.”

“Cop friend?”

“Come on, bro. You know me better than that.”

Bowser finally looked over at me. “What’s in the bag?”

It took a moment for the question to register in my brain. I had almost forgotten I was holding the plastic bag from the Haji-Mart. “Just some pastries.”

“Donuts?”

I nodded.

He looked back to Kevin and smiled. His teeth were whiter than grandma’s dentures. “You sure he ain’t a cop?”

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “Cops. Donuts.”

“Nah, he’s cool,” Kevin said.

For once in my life, I was cool, even if it was only in the eyes of a druggie and his dealer. I left them to do their business and went inside the store to enjoy my lunch.

It was later that day that I first heard of the virus.

Chapter 9

I was upstairs in my room watching Judge Judy scold some bald dude for telling her lies, when the show was interrupted with a breaking news report.

The attractive female news anchor began speaking about a potential security breach in a communicable diseases laboratory in southeast Nevada. She wouldn’t disclose the exact town where the lab was located, only that government officials had the situation under control and there was nothing for the public to worry about.

Hadn’t heard that one before.

There were no clips of military personnel providing perimeter support. No shots of people in hazmat suits. None of the fun stuff generally associated with potential viral outbreaks. Nothing like you’d see in the movies.

Not yet.

I changed the channel and started watching an old episode of *South Park*, the one where Mr. Garrison gets a sex change. I laughed my ass off and didn’t think twice about the news report. The next day I heard more about the outbreak.

March 11, 2012.

This time there were shots of all the fun stuff. Hazmat suits. Soldiers in humvees patrolling a temporary fence line. ARMY helicopters circling above. Police threatening to arrest reporters if they didn't turn off their cameras. Apparently the media wasn't allowed inside what the news was calling the "containment zone," and government officials, while still offering their kind reassurances to the public, were tight-lipped on the nature of the problem or what exactly they were trying to contain. This was when I began to get a little concerned.

March 12, 2012.

One day later and I was very concerned.

The containment zone had grown by a hundred miles overnight, and now encompassed the entirety of southeast Nevada, including Las Vegas, where no one was permitted to leave the city. On the internet, the conspiracy buffs were going mad. There was a lot of talk of biological warfare. Chemical and nuclear weapons testing also made the rounds among the tin foil hat crowd. Some were convinced it was the work of Islamic terrorists; others said it was the communists, or the capitalists, or God punishing us for our sins. There was even talk of aliens. It's always the aliens.

The outbreak *was* in Nevada, home to Area 51. Maybe the little green spacemen had something to do with it.

March 13, 2012.

First reports of illness, most in Nevada, a few in California and Arizona. People becoming lethargic, falling into sudden comas. Scary stuff. If there was still a containment zone, it wasn't being talked about. The thing had obviously long broken free and was loose in the wild frontier.

That night the president interrupted the regular scheduled programming to deliver a live televised address to the nation regarding the outbreak. This was the first time the government admitted there was a serious problem. Still, the president reassured everyone they had it under control. No need to panic. Go about your daily lives.

And may God bless America.

March 14, 2012.

Officer Robinson hadn't called or visited the store in a few days. I wondered if he was glued to the TV like me. I wondered where the hell Moses could have gone. I thought about Peaches. Strangely, I missed her. I felt more alone, afraid to leave the store.

I finally told grandma about the news reports that had been coming in on a semi-regular basis. She seemed less worried than me.

March 15, 2012.

Tens of thousands of people were now believed to be sick with the virus. Falling asleep on the job had become a widespread epidemic, sweeping across the west coast and as far east as Mississippi. Overhead shots of cars idling on highways,

passengers inside them, sleeping. The Las Vegas strip was littered with bodies lying motionless on the ground, while high above the flashy casino signs continued to flicker with color and life. Airports and other transportation services were forced to shut down after a number of planes fell out of the sky, some on top of residential neighborhoods. Hospitals, police stations, and other public places were overrun with concerned citizens. And church had become popular again.

I decided I wasn't going to leave the store until this thing worked itself out.

March 16, 2012.

Second national televised address by the president. The fake-looking background immediately gave it away that he was no longer in the White House. He said to avoid travel if possible. He said not to be alarmed. He said that the CDC was close to having a vaccine. He said that because we are Americans we could get through anything. He said nothing of the most recent reports that over fifty percent of the residents of Nevada, California, and Arizona had become infected.

Fallen into a deep slumber.

March 17, 2012.

First reports of the virus crossing national borders. Canada. Mexico. China. Australia. Japan. Great Britain. France. Germany. Brazil. Any country popular with businessmen or tourists began to experience the virus firsthand; thus all flights out of North America, South America, Europe, and much of Asia were suspended indefinitely. On the home front, the virus had made its way to all fifty states, including Alaska and Hawaii. There were massive power outages. Protests turned into violent riots on the street. Looters had their way with defenseless businesses. From coast to coast, cities burned as unrest among those not infected grew out of control. Systematic bombings of entire regions became a common occurrence, as the last remnants of the government and its reduced military tried any and all methods to slow the inevitable death of civilization.

Unsuccessfully.

March 18, 2012.

I woke early, and as I had for almost an entire week, I turned on the TV to see the latest news, praying that somehow a miracle had taken place overnight. Where was God when you needed him? Instead, there was no signal. I checked every station, even the ones I never watched like C-Span and NatGeo. They were all down.

I snuck downstairs, trying not to wake grandma. Despite the apocalyptic news reports, I was in denial. My head was lost in a cloud of fear and doubt. None of this was real. I felt like I was dreaming, and at any moment I would wake up. Television was an escape from reality, not a reflection of it. Whatever happened in that rectangular box wasn't the truth. It wasn't the world. It was how man viewed the world. In order to see the truth you only had to turn off the TV and look outside. Then it will all become clear. And so I did.

As I approached the long glass windows lining the storefront, a military humvee passed by on the street going no more than five miles per hour. A soldier was

hunkered down at the rear behind some sort of machine gun, while someone from within the vehicle barked instructions through a horn mounted on the hood.

“Attention. All citizens must stay indoors until further notice. I repeat, all citizens must stay indoors until further notice. This is not a request. This is for your own safety. Refusal to follow this order will result in severe consequences.”

I figured the soldiers must have been stationed out of Patrick Air Force Base, about twenty miles away. I didn't dare challenge their rules, even as they rolled further down the road and out of sight. Throughout the day, I heard that same vehicle or one like it pass by and bark similar instructions, even long after the sun went down.

I kept checking the TV but still no signal. We didn't have much in the way of food, seeing as how I had stayed inside glued to the TV all week, so that night I had to settle for one of grandma's microwave dinners. Surprisingly, they smelled worse than they tasted. I sat across from her at our tiny kitchen table and ate in silence. I think by that point we both had a grasp on what was happening. I think we knew no help would come. I think we were both wondering how much longer we had.

After we had finished dinner, I gave my grandma a big hug and told her I loved her. All of this made that break-in we'd had over a month ago seem like nothing.

“What do you think we should do, Jimmy?” she whispered as I held her close.

“What *can* we do?” I replied. “Just wait it out. That's all. Just wait it out.”

Since the TV was no use anymore, I checked the internet for anything new on the outbreak. Except for a few personal blogs, it seemed most reporting within the United States had stopped. I figured most servers were down. Internet service providers asleep at the switch. I did find some reports about the worsening conditions outside the U.S. But as I began to scroll through them, the power went out.

And it never came back on.

I decided I'd call Officer Robinson to see if he'd be able to tell me anything. Without television or internet, I felt completely disconnected. Robinson was a cop. He should know something. More than me, anyway. My cell phone only had half its life left, but luckily, it was still showing that I had service.

Unfortunately, Officer Robinson did not pick up, so I left a voicemail. Next, I called 911, but it just rang and rang and rang. Later that night, when checking the battery life on my phone, I realized service was down. I powered off the phone and threw it against the wall.

“Jimmy, what was that?” grandma said from the other room.

“Sorry, grandma,” I yelled.

Hours later I was in bed staring up at the ceiling, a single candle beside me on the nightstand the only light in the room—silence the only sound. I tried to start a new book, an undead mash-up called *Titanic with Zombies*, with no luck. My mind was incapable of focusing on anything but my fear of what was to come, and the frustration of not knowing.

Finally, my thoughts were broken by the sound of someone knocking on the door downstairs. I rolled out of bed. *Who could that be?* I wondered.

Robinson?

Moses?

The military coming to take me away, or put me away?

I grabbed Sally from the shoebox, and she accompanied me down the stairs. With the power out, the store was almost pitch black, as was the parking lot outside. Still I could see a silhouette of someone standing out there, their face pressed against the glass window.

“Jimmy,” said a familiar voice. “If you’re in there, open up.”

Of all people, it was Peaches.

I shut off the alarm and unlocked the door.

Peaches hurried inside. She looked down at the gun in my hand. “You gonna shoot me?”

“I didn’t know it was you,” I said, putting the gun down on the counter. “What are you doing outside? Didn’t you hear the warnings?”

“Yeah, I heard them. But I couldn’t stay there anymore. Jimmy, they’re all dead.”

“Who?”

“My neighbors in Shady Villas. They’re all dead, well most of them. The others must have already run off.”

“By dead you mean infected?”

“Yeah, infected, but they’re gonna be dead if they don’t get help...and Jimmy, I don’t think there’s anyone left to help ‘em. I’ve never seen it so quiet out there. It’s like the whole world has just gone to sleep.”

“Not us. Not yet. Are you sure you’re not infected?”

“If I were, would I be standing here right now talkin’ to you? I didn’t know where else to turn. I’m really sorry. Do you mind if I sleep here tonight? It’s too creepy out there.”

“Sure,” I said.

She ran up and put her arms around me, rested her head on my shoulder. “Thank you.”

I put my arms around her. “Peaches, I’m sorry about how I treated you. I shouldn’t have said—”

“It’s okay. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

I could feel her trembling in my arms. I brushed my hand against her curly blonde hair. “We have to stick together now.”

I grabbed Sally from the counter and had Peaches follow me upstairs. When we reached the top landing, grandma was waiting for us.

“Why who is this?”

“Grandma, I thought you were in bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“This is—”

“Jessica,” Peaches said, extending her hand.

Grandma smiled and shook it.

“Jessica, huh?” I said. “I mean...yeah.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m not used to seeing Jimmy with a girl.”

“We’re not together,” I said, trying to break this line of embarrassing conversation.

“How did you meet my Jimmy?”

“It’s a long story grandma. Maybe we’ll tell you tomorrow. Peaches...um, I mean Jessica just needed a safe place to stay for now.”

“Is it safe to go outside yet?” grandma asked.

Peaches shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. I wish I could say it was.”

Grandma looked shattered. I told her we’d figure something out in the morning. We said goodnight and Peaches followed me into my room.

“You’re grandma is sweet.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said. “Holy shit.”

Peaches stopped examining my room and looked over. “What is it?”

I held up the gun. Sally.

“I forgot I had this in my hand.”

Peaches frowned. “Are you okay?”

“No, I mean yes, but... you don’t understand. My grandma hates guns. She doesn’t know I had this. I’ve been keeping it a secret. She must have been so enamored with you that she didn’t even notice it in my hand.”

“Enamored with me? It sounded like she was more surprised.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the first girl I’ve had up here.”

“I feel so special. And you even lit a candle. How romantic.”

“That’s so we can see.”

“I know, I’m just messing with ya.”

I sat down at my desk. Peaches sat down on the bed.

“So Jessica is your real name?”

Peaches nodded. “How’d you guess?”

“You went from having one of the strangest names to one of the most common.”

“You can still call me Peaches. Everybody does.”

“But everybody’s gone now.”

“Not everybody.” She bowed her head. I sat there staring at her, hoping she wouldn’t start crying. Finally, she raised her head back up and said, “This is not the way I expected to go out.”

“I know what you mean. I thought the end of the world wasn’t until December.” Peaches bowed her head again, telling me she didn’t think that was funny. “Sorry, I’m just tired of thinking about it. I don’t know what else to do.”

“There’s got to be others like us.”

I nodded.

“We have to find them.”

“And then what?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Figure something out.”

On the floor against the wall was my cell phone, right where I had thrown it. I bent down and picked it up, turned it on. Still no service. I turned the phone back off and set it next to Sally on the desk.

“This might be the wrong time to ask you,” I said. “But do you have any idea what happened to Moses? He vandalized the store a while back and the police never caught him.”

Peaches sighed. “I know, and I’m sorry. That was my fault.”

“It’s okay. I just remember the police saying they questioned you about him.”

“Yeah, I told them I hadn’t seen him in forever. Kinda been running things on my own. Feels good to be free of his control.”

“I bet.”

“I’d like to think he’s—”

“What? One of them. The infected.” Peaches smiled. “Me too.”

I told Peaches she could sleep in my bed, and that I’d just pile up some extra sheets and make a nest on the floor, but she wasn’t having it. She insisted that there was plenty of room in my double bed for the both of us. The room was getting muggy with no AC, so I cracked open a window to let some fresh air in. The night was soundless except for the calm hum of the wind and the purr of the humvee sitting in the middle of the road. It was too dark to tell if it was the same one I’d seen earlier, but it was definitely of the military variety.

“Was that there when you got here?”

Peaches was rolled up under the covers. It was a strange sight, seeing a girl in my bed. She peered over the covers at me looking out the window. “What?”

“This humvee.”

“There was no one outside. I was very careful not to be seen or followed. Why...what is it doing?”

“Nothing. It’s just sitting there.”

“Strange.”

“You sure you weren’t followed?”

“Pretty sure, Jimmy.”

“Hmm. I just don’t trust them.”

“I’m sure it’s okay. They’re just doing their job, after all. Why don’t you come to bed? You need to rest.”

“I will in a minute,” I said, and blew out the candle on the nightstand.

I sat by the window in the dark watching the military humvee for another thirty minutes. I thought I could see the gunner perched in the back but was unsure. It was just too dark to know with any certainty. If they had followed Peaches to the store, wouldn’t they have done something by now, I wondered. And if not, didn’t they have somewhere else to be. It didn’t make any sense. Before long, I was asleep with my head on the windowsill.

Two hours later, I woke up with a terrible crook in my neck. I quietly sneaked into bed with Peaches, but not before taking another peek outside. The humvee was still sitting there in the road, still running.

It hadn’t moved one inch.

Chapter 10

I woke up the next morning wishing I hadn’t slept with my clothes on, wishing I hadn’t been so self-conscious because there was a girl in my bed. It wasn’t even hot in the room, but still my body was covered in sweat. I felt like I was gonna have a heat stroke.

I quietly got out of bed so I wouldn’t wake Peaches.

Or Jessica.

Whatever.

My alarm clock was no good for telling time anymore due to the lack of power, and the fact that I never bothered to put backup batteries in it, but I had a wristwatch that told me it was 6:17. Sunrise was right around the corner.

I resumed my perch by the window and looked out at the humvee still sitting in the middle of the street. I couldn't believe the engine hadn't shut off during the night, even if the occupants inside already had.

Peaches groaned and rolled over the wet spot I had left behind on the bed. She didn't seem to mind sleeping in my sweat. I was just glad she was still moving, glad that both of us hadn't yet become infected like the poor people on the news. I returned my gaze to the street. Like the poor people out there.

I left the room and got a bottle of water from the kitchen, drained it fast. The water seemed to help cool me down. I didn't remember fever being one of the early indicators of the infection, just fatigue, loss of motor control, blurred vision.

Then coma.

My stomach growled, unsatisfied with just the water. The last thing I had eaten was one of grandma's lean chicken and rice TV dinners, and it wasn't particularly filling. So I checked the cupboard. Stale wheat bread. Instant grits. Rice cakes. A few cans of vegetables. Not bare, but nothing to jump up and down about. Nothing to make a good meal. The fridge and freezer didn't contain much more than the cupboard, and what it did contain would spoil soon enough. I instantly regretted not going to the grocery store earlier in the week to stock up on food and supplies. The food here wouldn't feed three hungry people for more than a few days.

I went back into my room and sat at the windowsill. As I watched the sun come up, I considered my options. Let's see. I had no phone, no TV, no internet, no power, and only a meager supply of food and water. I couldn't solve the first four problems, but I at least had a shot with the fifth.

I decided I would go across the street to the Haji-Mart. I didn't think they would be open, but maybe I could force my way in somehow. Moments later, I realized I wouldn't have to, as I saw the door to the store open and Naima poke her head out. She stared at the humvee dead in the road, just as I had for so long, and then ducked her pretty head back inside.

As I gathered together some stuff for the trip, like Sally and plenty of extra bullets, Peaches woke up.

She looked over and frowned at me. Her hair was a mess and her face puffy and red from sleeping on her arm.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Going somewhere."

I nodded.

She quickly rolled out of bed. I don't think I'd ever seen someone move so quickly that soon after waking up. "If you're going outside, then I'm coming with you."

"No."

"Yes."

I stuffed the muzzle end of Sally in my brown khaki pants like a real gangster and then turned to Peaches. "I should really get a holster, huh?"

"Might be a good idea if you don't want to blow your dick off."

I shook my head. She began to slip her sandals on. "I told you you're not coming with me."

"Why...where are you going?"

"Just across the street to the convenience store. We need food and water."

"But I thought..." She walked past me and looked out the window. "Jimmy, they're still out there."

"They're infected."

"How do you know?"

"You see the gunner in the back hunched over."

She looked closer. "Oh."

"Yeah, I bet I can sneak by them just fine. But still I want you to stay here with grandma, in case something does happen. There may be others wandering around. You never know."

"But I could help you carry stuff."

"Or I could make more than one trip. Look, I just don't want to take any chances. Why don't you sit by the window and you can watch me. If I have any problems, I'll signal you. Can you do that?"

"What if you become infected?"

"The window's been open all night. If the virus is in the air, it obviously doesn't like us very much. And if it suddenly decides to change its mind, then I guess that'll be our fate. You can't do anything about fate, right? But we won't survive here for long if we don't get some more food. That we can do something about."

Peaches smiled. "Look at you, suddenly taking charge. You have an energy drink for breakfast or something?"

"I wish. Just stay here with grandma, and keep an eye on me from the window. K?"

Peaches sighed. "Sure."

"Don't look so miserable," I said, "we're still alive."

"Yeah, but what does that even mean anymore?"

"I guess we'll find out."

Chapter 11

From the first step outside, I sensed something in the air, and it wasn't just the stench from the dumpster behind the building. It was more visceral than a smell, something electric and unnerving. There were cold whispers in the wind, deafening sounds of chaos in the silence. And warnings of terrible things to come.

I walked steadily, building more strength with each step. Peaches had asked, *what if I get infected?* I had blown it off, but the thought sat on my mind like an anchor, weighing me down. What if I *did* become infected? What if I already was? Or what if I never did and I had to live the rest of my life in a world where there was a corpse around every corner. I wasn't sure which I'd rather prefer.

Live or die.

Like I had told her, I guess I'd find out.

I had always been an introvert, staying mostly indoors, escaping the harsh reality of the world outside by living inside fictional worlds. I told myself I didn't need many people in my life. That I was independent. That I was just misunderstood. That I was okay with being alone. But now, with the world undergoing immediate and perhaps irreparable change, I was forced to reexamine everything I thought I knew about myself, with the conclusion unclear.

I began to cross the road. I slowed down as I came upon the rear of the humvee. It was the color of sand. The gunner in the back was hunched over with his face out of sight and his right arm clutching the top of a high-caliber machine gun. A stream of large bullets hung from the left side of the gun. The sleeping gunner wore desert camo, a matching hard hat, and what looked to be a pair of safety goggles around his head. The back of his neck was the only part of his body exposed. I couldn't imagine how badly he'd be sunburned after a full day in the Florida sun; even in March it could be unforgiving.

I walked along the front of the vehicle. The engine droned on at a constant pace. The windows had a decent tint, but still I could see human shapes from within. Did I have the courage to look inside the cabin?

Yes, I did.

If this was going to be the new world, I'd either have to get used to it or find somewhere to hide. There were no other options. There were no good options. Take it or leave it. I'd have to learn to be brave one baby step at a time.

The door was heavy but swung open rather easy.

"What are you doing?" a voice yelled from far behind me.

It was Peaches at the window in my room on the second floor of the bookstore. I frowned and held a silencing finger to my lips, and then turned my attention back to the humvee. Two soldiers were inside, dressed identical to the gunner except without the eye protection. Unfortunately for me, their heads weren't down. They stared straight ahead like wax figures—eyes closed, mouths open, drool dripping down their chins. The driver still had his hands planted on the wheel. As I climbed up and reached over to feel around for keys on the other side, he suddenly slouched forward, trapping my arm between his upper chest and the steering column.

I felt a sudden urge to scream like a little girl but held my breath. I had to remind myself these men weren't dead, even if they looked like they could be. I slowly pulled my arm back out as though I was afraid of waking the driver, and as I did, a line of thick, ice-cold saliva oozed down onto my forearm.

Now I screamed, fell backward to the pavement. I looked at my arm and felt a burning sensation rise in my throat. I forced it back down and tried to take another deep breath. I wiped my forearm against the concrete until most of the drool was off and then wiped the remainder on my pants. Then I got back to my feet and slammed the door to the humvee.

Fuck figuring out how to shut it off.

"Are you okay?" Peaches yelled.

I turned and gave a thumbs-up, checked my arm one last time for drops of spit, and then hustled across the street to the convenience store. A quarter mile down

the street, I saw a car slowly cross the road and fall out of sight behind some buildings. It wasn't a particularly busy time of day, and this wasn't a busy road, but it was good to know there were still some signs of life.

As I approached the store, I noticed Aamod's Toyota wasn't parked along the side where it usually sat. It was possible they could have left in the time it took me to get downstairs, but I couldn't remember seeing the car earlier from the window either.

I tried the door, but it was locked. No surprise there. I put my face to the glass, knocked a few times. The lights were off inside, and I didn't see anyone moving about in the shadows.

I sighed. "Crap."

I looked back at Peaches sitting at the window across the street. She never took her eyes off me. She was doing the job I gave her well. She really cared. She hardly knew me, but she cared what happened to me, even if it was just that without me, she'd be all alone. Regardless of her motive, it felt good to be needed. For this moment in time, I was all she had. I was like... her hero.

I smiled at her and then turned back around.

"*Shit!*" I yelled, recoiling backward, thinking I'd seen a ghost.

Naima stood on the other side of the glass looking out at me, scaring the hero piss out of me. I wondered what Peaches would think of me jumping like a spooked cat.

"What do you want?" Naima asked.

"Can you open up?" She shook her head. "Please. I just need some food and water."

She shook her head again. "Sorry. The store is closed."

"Please," I said again.

But she didn't respond. She just stood there staring at me through the glass like I was some beggar. I felt like one. I felt like Kevin. I thought about the gun tucked into my pants. Yeah, I'm sure Sally would get her to open the door. More like run and hide in the back.

I sighed and walked away.

Maybe it was because I gave her some space that she felt comfortable opening the door. But she did, only enough to poke her head out.

I'll never understand how a man as repulsive looking as Aamod could have produced a daughter as attractive as Naima. I figured she was either adopted, or her mom had ultra-strong genes. Her cheekbones were well defined, her lips soft, her nose small but sharp, her hair long and dark and shiny. But unlike Peaches, Naima dressed conservatively, probably due in part to her father, and while her breasts weren't nearly as big, neither was the rest of her. From my little experience doing small business with her, she was also very kind and well spoken. A major contrast to Aamod's stern and overbearing personality.

"Do you know what is going on?" she asked. "I see the soldiers around and it makes me nervous."

"Me too. I only know what I saw on the news, and it wasn't good. I'm not sure what to do."

She slowly came the rest of the way outside. "I could sense something in my father this morning that wasn't right. Like he wasn't telling me something."

“Where is he?”

“He went to my house to get my mother.” She took a deep breath. A look of concern ran all through her face. “He left over an hour ago. He should have been back by now.”

So that’s why the car wasn’t there.

“He wanted me to keep an eye on the store,” she continued. “He thought people might try to break in.”

I thought about how I had considered the idea of breaking in, and suddenly felt guilty.

“You’re guarding the store?” I asked, surprised.

“There’s a shotgun on the counter.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, even more surprised.

“Not that I would ever use it. But it’s there. And it’s loaded. He told me not to open the door for anybody until he got back with my mother.”

“You think something could have happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice quivering. “I sure hope not.”

“Tell you what,” I said, “maybe we can make a deal.”

Chapter 12

The deal was simple. In exchange for a few boxes of food and water, I would take my grandma’s car and drop Naima off at her house. That way she could find out what happened to her father, which I suspected wasn’t good news. She said her house was no more than fifteen minutes away. Fair trade for thirty minutes of driving, I thought, even if some of the food was expired.

We found some empty wine boxes in the back, and she said I could fill four of them. Not just with food, with anything I wanted, so as long as I didn’t *ever ever* tell her father.

“What are you crazy?” I said. “I don’t think he likes me very much as it is.”

Naima smiled. The first smile I’d seen out of her that morning. “He’s not so bad. A little protective, but at least he’s not trying to arrange a marriage.”

“There’s always that.”

I stuffed the four boxes with as much junk as I could, three with food and water, and one with other stuff like ibuprofen, batteries, and assorted first aid supplies. I even grabbed a pack of cigarettes for Peaches. That’ll make her love me.

We carried the boxes outside and then she locked up the store. Naima agreed to help carry the stuff over to my place and then I’d take her to her house. Peaches watched us from the window the entire way across the street and then met us downstairs at the door.

“We got some stuff,” I said.

“Great,” Peaches said. She looked over at Naima. “Hi there.”

I introduced them, and then told Peaches the deal. She didn’t look too happy about staying there with my grandma while I ran off escorting Naima around. But what was she going to say? I got us food and water.

Peaches took one of the boxes, and we all went upstairs. We set the boxes down in the kitchen and then Peaches began to sort through them to see what I had picked out.

“Hold on,” I said to Naima. “I’ve got to tell my grandma that I’m gonna take the car. She won’t mind.”

I hadn’t even thought about what time it was, but it had to be pushing eight a.m.

I knocked on her door.

Then again.

Peaches looked over, concerned. I met her gaze and could tell immediately what she was thinking.

Terrible thoughts.

I pushed them away and entered grandma’s room. She was curled up in bed, on her side facing me, eyes closed, looking solemn. She wore a nightcap to bed that gave her an innocent, childlike quality.

I lightly nudged her shoulder, but she didn’t move.

I nudged her again. “Grandma, wake up.”

I could feel Peaches and Naima standing behind me in the doorway, looking on quietly.

I knelt down beside her. “No,” I whispered, continuing to lightly shake her. “No, no, no. Grandma, please, please wake up.”

I started to cry.

“Don’t leave me.”

I took her hand in mine, and as the tears ran down my face, I could feel the pulse of her heartbeat still going strong even after eighty years. But nothing I could say or do would wake her up.

