

Twice Dead

Zombie Crisis, #1

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



Chapter 1

Commander Jacob Peterson awoke to the shrill sound of his emergency beeper. He opened his eyes, disoriented, trying to remember where he was. He surveyed the small room and saw a TV screen flickering static, saw blinds swaying from a humming air conditioner. He then looked over and was surprised to see a petite, platinum blonde woman, early twenties, sleeping beside him, nude, on top of the sheets. Their bodies were entangled, at peace.

Not anymore. The beeping wouldn't stop, and Peterson reached over, untangling himself, and grabbed it. He knew what the beeping meant, but he checked anyway, as if just maybe, this one time, he would catch a break.

No such luck. The blinking numbers on the beeper were all too familiar—another emergency—another mission. Peterson took one look back at the sleeping beauty, her curves, her soft skin. Absorbing her with his eyes, wishing he could get back into bed with her. But the beeping meant serious business.

Shit.

He dressed quickly. His body was muscular, scarred with small circular indentations—bullet wounds. He left quietly, not waking her.

Tossing a black satchel over his shoulder, Peterson stepped out from the suburban ranch home. The house was picturesque, as was the entire neighborhood. Well-groomed yards, blue skies, and room to breathe.

I would settle down here, Peterson thought, if I had a different life.

He walked to his Ford pickup, but then stopped abruptly. Looking up and down the block, he detected an eerie silence. In the middle of the road, a red tricycle was on its side, its front wheel spinning slowly in the wind. Peterson looked up at the trees. Not even the birds were chirping.

He shook it off. Too many years of combat had begun to haunt him, stirring odd sensations from time to time. Lately it felt as if he were watching himself in the third person, as if his life was not his. And then, as quickly as it came, it passed. He'd heard that feelings of surrealism were a sign of combat fatigue.

That made sense. He had been at war his entire life—if not with special operations, then with himself, his childhood, his father. It was an uphill fight.

Sooner or later, even the strongest men can cave—but Peterson refused to accept this.

Just keep looking forward, he thought, and everything will be okay.

As he wound through the community's newly paved roads, the low rumble of his pickup's engine disrupting the quiet of the neighborhood, he reached into his satchel and felt through its items: a 9mm pistol; clips of ammunition; a federal ID card, and finally, what he was searching for: his government-issued, secure cellphone.

Peterson flipped it open, and as he did, it sped dial automatically.

He waited.

No answer, then static. He shot the phone an odd look. It was an important tool of his trade and had always been reliable.

Peterson suddenly looked up, back to the road, and slammed on his brakes.

Before him, shattered glass and skid marks tore a trail over a front yard, leading to a silver Honda minivan, turned upside down. Dark smoke rose from its belly. Ten feet from the van, a child lay flat on her back. Motionless, her pink dress matted with blood.

Peterson stared at the wreckage before him.

No people. No sounds. No commotion.

Struggling through his initial shock and battle fog, he slid out of his car and bee-lined to the little girl.

A layer of blood stuck to the girl's body and matted hair. Her face was sickly pale, her lips cracked, and her eyes were open—staring into the abyss. For Peterson, it was an all-too-familiar sight. He had seen it in the faces of a hundred comrades and a hundred enemies. It was the face of death. Whatever happened, he had arrived too late for this little girl.

If only out of respect, he reached down and felt for a pulse. As expected, her flesh was cold and already hardening. No pulse. This girl was long dead.

Peterson immediately turned his attention to the van. Staring back at him from the driver's seat were the wide eyes of a middle-aged woman. She was upside down, with the top of her head pressing against the ceiling. Her eyes blinked rapidly, and it seemed that she was trying to gain some sense of her surroundings, but unable to.

Peterson leaned down beside the smashed window.

"Can you hear me?" he asked gently, although he did not expect the woman to respond clearly. He recognized the signs of a concussion and knew too well the disorientation which accompanied it.

"Yes," she responded, in a dazed whisper.

"What is your name?" he asked in a soothing voice.

"Elizabeth," she responded. "My name is Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth, my name is Jacob Peterson. You've been in a car accident. Try not to move. I'm going to help you."

Words trembled from the woman's lips. "My little girl. Sandra."

Peterson looked over his shoulder at the little girl, and hoped the woman hadn't seen her.

"She's okay, miss."

He struggled to open the car door, but it caught on the cement, jammed under the van's pressure. He needed the jaws of life to get her free; he knew it was a fruitless wish.

"I'll get you out. Just hold on," he said, speaking more to himself, as he hurried to his vehicle.

Peterson rummaged quickly through his backseat, finally finding a crowbar. He then hurried back to the van, ready to try again—but as he neared it, he suddenly stopped in his tracks, frozen in shock.

Before him, the little girl—the one he *knew* was dead—was standing. Alive. Facing her mother, just a foot away.

That's impossible, Peterson thought. *That girl was dead.*

Elizabeth's face lit up with a look of relief.

"Sandra baby, Mommy's here," she said in an encouraging tone, her voice coarse and weak.

In a strangely mechanical manner, the mangled child, her back still to Peterson, walked toward her mother. Peterson watched, too shocked, for the first time in his life, to know how to react.

The little girl crouched down, getting close to her mother.

That was when Peterson saw the mother's face contort from joy to fear.

"Baby?" came Elizabeth's suddenly terrified voice.

Before Peterson could react, the child leaned in, as if to give her mother a kiss, but at the last second, instead bit a chunk of flesh out of her mother's face. She chewed and swallowed...and then bit down again.

The mother screamed with a scream that would raise the hairs on the world's toughest men. Peterson was used to sounds of agony, sounds of death, but in all his years, he had never heard a sound like this. He felt his skin grow cold.

The little girl leaned in again, as if to bite her again, and this time, Peterson burst into action. He ran toward them, and upon hearing him approach, the child suddenly turned, revealing her face. It was a sick pastel, and her eyes, sunken low into their sockets, were filled with madness. She stared at him like a rabid animal as she chewed and swallowed the remaining flesh in her mouth.

Peterson stopped in his tracks. He didn't back away, even though he wanted to. Two decades of elite military training and countless combat missions had hard-wired his mind to face and defeat any threat.

Yet, now, he was frozen and didn't know how to react. He stood there, facing her, not sure what to do—not comprehending how any of this could be possible. Was he dreaming?

Suddenly, there was the rev of an engine and the sound of screeching brakes, as a police car pulled up, skidding to a halt.

Two police officers leapt out. The lead cop, a tall, brawny guy, wielded a twelve-gauge shotgun, and the other, a young rookie, aimed his 9mm Glock pistol at Peterson.

"Get down!" the lead cop shouted at Peterson.

Peterson recognized the look in the cop's eyes: panic. He knew that if he didn't move, he'd get shot.

He dove to the ground, and as he did, the police opened fire.

Rounds of bullets from the twelve-gauge shotgun and 9 mm pistol ripped into the child and her mother. The twelve-gauge hit the little girl like a cannonball and ripped a baseball- sized hole through the back of her skull and blew her face off.

The cops kept firing, unloading every round of ammunition they had, until their weapons stopped with an empty click.

Peterson looked over and saw that, over the smoking barrel of their guns, the little girl and her mother had been blown into bits of pulp and tissue. The cops turned their attention to Peterson.

“Are you okay?” asked the lead cop.

“Okay?” Peterson stumbled.

The rookie was suspicious. “Have you been bitten?”

“Bitten? Bitten by what?”

The world was becoming surreal again to Peterson, and he fought for his bearings. It was uncommon for Peterson to have this many episodes in one day, or even one month.

The cops looked at each other, communicating without words.

“I don’t understand,” Peterson said.

“What did you see?” the lead cop asked.

Peterson turned and looked at the remains of the girl and her mother.

“I saw a car accident. I saw that girl. She was dead, or at least I thought so. She got up. She bit her mother’s face...” Peterson could hardly believe his own words.

The second cop demanded an answer: “Have you been bitten?”

“By the girl?”

“By any of them?” the cop snapped.

The brawny lead officer was more cool-headed, and took control.

“What you witnessed is not an isolated event. We’ve already seen about a hundred of them, some in the next county over, a large group just half a mile from here... and now these two.”

He pointed at the girl and her mother, and his voice changed into a scared, slow drawl. “Something is spreading. Fast.”

Peterson saw that the rookie was unsettled, still anxious for an answer to his question. Their eyes met, and Peterson’s thoughts wandered.

She was mortally wounded. She got up. She was biting her mother. It’s not isolated.

Suddenly, the rookie’s question made horrifying sense.

“No,” Peterson answered, “I have not been bitten.”

The rookie’s face relaxed, as did his posture.

He became forthcoming. “It’s all over the news. It’s happening everywhere. Nobody can make any damn sense of it,” he said, as he holstered his pistol.

The lead cop stepped in. “Get to a safe place, sir, and don’t waste any time.”

A crackling voice came from inside the patrol car’s two-way radio, and without looking back the cops jumped into the car. The lead cop yelled, “Board yourself up too,” and the patrol car skidded away.

It was strangely silent again, and Peterson looked at the remains of the girl and her mother.

And then, as if on cue, his beeper sounded once again.

Chapter 2

Peterson rode in a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter as it cut through the air, its fiberglass, four-blade main rotors pumping, vibrating the passenger cabin. Peterson was wearing his out-of-place civilian clothing amongst the three other soldiers in the cabin, all dressed head to toe in full combat gear.

Peterson checked his watch and realized something wasn't right.

He spoke into his headset, having to shout over the noise: "You're heading in the wrong direction, pilot! I'm going to special Command Warfare Center."

"Sorry, sir, you're being routed," the pilot hollered back.

"Routed? To where?"

"Confidential, sir, sorry."

Peterson sat back, beaten. In his angular face, chiseled out of years of combat, his eyelids were tired and heavy, making his eyes intense blue slits. He knew the routine, but it still annoyed the hell out of him. It didn't matter how much blood and sweat he'd sacrificed for his nation—in the end of the day, he knew, you either give orders, or you follow them.

The irony was that policymakers were almost always wrong. Peterson's instincts demonstrated he knew a hell of a lot better than most of his superiors, no matter their rank.

One of the soldiers, an eighteen-year-old kid, leaned over, yelling over the chopper's noise.

"What force are you with, sir?"

The kid was a cherry, or he never would've asked. Peterson just shot him a sideways glance.

"National security," Peterson said in a flat voice, not inviting further conversation.

But the kid wouldn't give up.

"What do you make of what's going on, sir? Do you have any more information?"

"If I did, son, wouldn't I know where we were going?"

As the chopper sailed over the Virginia landscape, Peterson took advantage of their bird's eye view. Interstate 95 was congested with bumper-to-bumper traffic, and state trooper sirens lit up as they attempted to make headway. Peterson was mesmerized at the never-ending line of vehicles. It just didn't seem real.

Peterson closed his eyes and willed himself to believe that this was all just a bad dream. His fantasy life had become more vivid lately, at times even overwhelming. He drew on it. He saw himself in a sailboat, docked in clear blue waters. He envisioned a beautiful woman, carrying his child.

A second chance at life.

The young soldier, though, interrupted Peterson's thoughts.

"The news reports said it was a viral infection, sir. Do you think that's true?"

"It can't be viral, because I heard it's not contagious," chimed in a voice.

It came from a soldier in the back of the cabin, a twenty-year-old black man chewing a cherry cigar, with a tattoo of a dragon on his right arm.

“The TV said that it’s spreading fast. How can that be if it’s not contagious?” the young soldier snapped back.

“All rumors, man. Can’t believe a word they telling us,” the black man said, speaking with his hands.

“I heard the infected don’t have heartbeats,” the young-faced private retorted, “that they aren’t breathing, but they’re getting up, rising, and attacking people.”

Sitting quietly in the back of the cabin was an overweight soldier. He unwrapped a candy bar. His hands were trembling.

His voice was so soft that Peterson could barely hear him: “I saw it.”

“Saw what?” the young private yelled over the thumping rotors.

With a surprising anger, the heavysset soldier screamed back, “I SAW IT!”

“Saw what, fat man?” the black soldier jabbed.

The heavysset soldier’s anger turned to fear.

“My friend, Patricia May. She was as dead as can be. She was scrambling cross the street and then I saw her get hit by an ice cream truck. It just damn near cut her in half. Her innards were all over the cement, god shoot me down. I tried to help her, but she was long gone. No pulse, no nothing.

“Then, a few minutes later, she opened her eyes again. Her mother, Mrs. May, ran over and touched her. But then Patricia did something awful. She turned around and bit her poor momma’s arm! Oh, my good lord. She was dead. I swear she was dead!”

The men in the chopper fell silent as the overweight soldier wiped tears from his eyes. Abruptly, his voice changed and was replaced by a terrible wisdom, as if he were placing a curse on the world:

“Hell has emptied and the devil is coming our way.”

* * * * *

Peterson hung on as the Black Hawk took a sharp turn, its pumping motors taking them at high speed to some destination. Peterson wanted to see what the TV broadcasts were saying. After his incident in that whitewashed suburban neighborhood, he’d had no time to pause. At first, he felt as though he had seen enough, had gotten the picture. And the picture terrified him.

Now, however, he was hungry for more information. He also needed to drown out his fellow passengers’ bickering. He took out his iPad from his satchel, plugged in his earphones, and tapped the CNN icon. “Internet connection weak,” read a pop-up window.

The satellites must be overwhelmed.

Finally, CNN came up. The headline read: “Take Shelter.”

But Peterson didn’t want to read—he wanted to view. He tapped the screen, enlarged the window, and a female journalist appeared, reporting from the field, a microphone in her hands with a CNN logo. She was pale, frantic, her head darting from side to side, alert for danger. She was sweating as she reported into the camera:

“This is Betty Baretta reporting from the small town of Winsbur, Michigan. Here at CNN, we believe in the freedom of the press, and we believe that the federally mandated media blackout is unconstitutional, and we are devoted to continuing

our coverage. My cameraman and I are bringing you uncensored footage of the situation here in this small Michigan town.”

Through the eyes of the video camera, Peterson watched pedestrians run frantically in the streets. A small fire burned from the second story of a grocery store, its black smoke darkening the sky. A mob of people appeared and someone smashed the front window of the grocery store with a brick. The crowd yelled and charged inside.

“As you can see, panic has overtaken this town. There is widespread looting of food and water. Also, an out of control fire burns, with no firefighters in sight.”

Behind the anchorwoman, a police officer appeared. He drew his pistol and opened fire, shooting at something outside of the camera’s view. The image shook as gunshots rang out. Then the camera swung and focused on a man covered with blood, limping toward the cop. The cop fired three rounds, hitting the man in the chest.

The bloodied man was halted for only a brief moment, though, and then continued to walk toward the cop.

The anchorwoman spun around to watch: “As you are seeing... we are seeing... there is an infected man in our vicinity,” she said, her tone filled with fear and naïve excitement.

The cop pulled his trigger again, but his gun was empty. The camera zoomed in on the infected man. He was mauled, part of his face torn, exposing cheekbone and muscle tissue. Peterson stared in amazement; it was seemingly impossible that this man was on his feet and walking after taking three bullets to the chest. His skin was the color of a corpse, his eyes almost black, soulless.

The cop snapped a new round of ammo into his police-issued 9mm pistol and opened fire with only feet to spare before the infected man reached him. He fired a spray of bullets, and they tore through the infected man’s neck, spraying blood. Then one hit the head. The back of the infected man’s head blew open, sending out chunks of brain.

Betty Baretta screamed at the sight. Out of the camera’s view, Peterson heard more shrieks, and then a yell: “There’s too many of them—too many!”

The camera spun and showed a frightening image: closing in on Betty Baretta were three infected.

Suddenly, the iPad screen went blank: “Internet connection lost. Unable to connect to a server.”

Peterson immediately wished he hadn’t watched. Somewhere in the back of his mind there had been a voice telling him that everything would be all right, that what he experienced really couldn’t be happening everywhere. In the far reaches of his mind he had hoped beyond hope that this phenomenon was simply not real.

But CNN brought the situation home, and, finally, Peterson realized: they were at war.

Chapter 3

Peterson held on as the Black Hawk rose over the horizon, banked a turn, and descended rapidly. It swept over what appeared to be a bunker. Only a cement roof was visible. He looked down and saw soldiers with assault rifles guarding the perimeter.

The chopper drew close to a landing pad, its blades thumping, the sound of its powerful turbines overwhelming. It lurched forward, kicking up a tornado of dust.

Peterson looked out and saw, waiting for them, a squadron of soldiers standing on the rooftop, with a single figure standing out before them. General Moore, fifty years old, with austere, cropped graying hair, his rigid uniform and rows of stars classifying him as a man not to mess with—and Peterson knew that was the case. Wind from the chopper whipped Moore's face, but he seemed to barely notice. Moore's squadron of armed soldiers bore assault machine guns and stood in formation around the landing zone. Someone shouted commands, absorbed by the thumping blades of the chopper.

Peterson felt more underdressed than ever as he jumped out of the chopper in his civilian clothes. He briskly approached Moore, giving him a smart salute. Moore gave a hard stare back and saluted.

* * * * *

Peterson, Moore, and several soldiers stood in a large, steely elevator as it descended quickly, Sub Level 2... Sub Level 3... Sub Level 4. They stood silent, Peterson uneasy by Moore's side. He respected Moore, but knew him to be an unforgiving bastard who only saw things one way: his. He knew it was better not to initiate small talk, unless he wanted to be chewed out.

Finally, the elevator came to a halt and the two of them stepped out.

A controlled chaos greeted them. Glass-plated partitions separated super computers, and a display of strategic images flashed on immense glass screens. It was like the whole world was electronically dancing around them. Military personnel moved urgently, typing frantically, working the phones, yelling to each other.

Peterson was in his element, instinctively connected to these high-tech military surroundings.

Peterson followed Moore as they strutted through the war-room, down a long corridor, and past an armed guard, who snapped to attention and saluted.

They reached a door which read "*Authorized Personnel Only.*" Moore placed his hand on the wall and a light scanned his palm. The door slid open, revealing a modern, white hallway which seemed to stretch forever.

As they entered, the door swooshed closed behind them.

"In God's name, what's happening?" Peterson finally asked.

"God has nothing to do with it." If Peterson didn't know Moore better, he'd say the general almost sounded frightened. "We are doing our best to understand the situation."

They reached the end of the hallway and another door slid open, and there, leaning with his back against the wall and rotating a pencil in his hand, stood an African American male around thirty-five years old. Maybe it was his eyeglasses, or maybe it was his dated suit, but to Peterson he had the look of a liberal 1960s equal rights activist. Peterson disliked him already.

Moore provided a quick introduction: "Commander Peterson, meet Doctor Jamal Washington."

Doctor? thought Peterson. *What the hell is he doing here?*

Neither stepped forward to extend a hand.

Moore, wasting no time, turned and marched down a hallway, Peterson and Washington quick on his heels.

"What has the Pentagon reported?" Peterson asked.

"The infection is spreading," Moore answered, the scratchy sound in his voice signaling fatigue.

Peterson struggled to stay respectful. "Infection? General, I saw a dead little girl get up and bite her mother's face off. What type of infection can do this?"

"You seem shaken," General Moore stated, sounding disappointed

In a too-calm voice, Dr. Washington spoke up: "Permission to speak very frankly, General."

"Go ahead," Moore snapped, clearly in no mood for formalities.

"Why should we trust you, Commander Peterson, as shaken as you are?" Dr. Washington was overly self-assured.

Peterson swallowed his ego and took a deep breath. "I'm not shaken, Doctor. I'm simply trying to put the pieces together." He was lying. Shaken was exactly what Peterson was. What was strange was that Washington wasn't.

Washington's eyes drilled a hole in Peterson. "What do you think is happening?"

Peterson was stumped and didn't know how to respond. "I'm not certain, Dr. Washington."

"I understand how you're feeling," said Washington, speaking to Peterson as if he were a fifth grader, "scared, confused, as is the rest of the U.S. public. But you have to look at this with logic. There truly is no other rational explanation for this event, this phenomenon, except that it is some sort of viral infection which has simply been unseen before. Therefore, we crack the biological nature of this infection, we find answers, and we find an inoculation. Situation over."

"We have a mission," Moore interrupted, as he stopped walking. He inched closer to Peterson. "Once you commit, there are only two ways out of this. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Peterson had been cautioned this way only once before in his career. The mission he'd accepted then was unlike any other before or since. He'd operated outside of constitutional law, beyond levels of national security classifications.

The only two ways out were success or death.

"You can bow out right now, Commander, and I will not hold it against you."

"I am ready to move forward," Peterson said sternly, as if insulted that Moore would question his courage.

"No matter what it might entail, Commander Peterson?" Washington chimed in, twirling his pencil.

Peterson never took shit from a non-commissioned officer, or from a doctor for that matter, but he had never turned down a mission in his life and was never passed up. It was a record he was proud of, and he wasn't about to change it. It was embarrassing to have to answer to Washington, but with tight lips, he said, "No matter what it involves, Dr. Washington."

Moore tensed up, and Peterson could sense that he was pissed that Washington overstepped his boundaries.

“Listen up, Peterson,” Moore said. “I’ve already been briefed by the NSA, the CDC, and the Pentagon. I’ve put together a good team for you—actually, the best. They are preparing now. At zero one hundred you will all be briefed.”

“Sir,” Peterson said, about to ask a question.

“That is it, Commander,” the general cut him off. “Prep your team ASAP.”

Peterson knew the routine, but he had so many burning questions he’d wanted to ask, as Moore and Washington marched off down a different corridor, leaving him standing there alone.

You either give orders, or you take them.

Chapter 4

Peterson entered an underground bunker, walking past an endless cache of military equipment. It was like a supermarket for the latest military hardware: racks upon racks of assault rifles, handguns, flame throwers, C-4 explosives, hand grenades... It was a soldier’s wet dream.

But Peterson had other things on his mind. Now clean-shaven, sharp, dressed in full black combat gear, an MP5 assault rifle in hand, he was focused. He didn’t look like the same man. His expression, the look in his eyes: he had his war face on.

He wanted to survey his team, to see for himself whose hands he’d be putting his life into, and whose lives he would be responsible for. And he wanted to come upon them by surprise, and to observe them unannounced.

His first stop was the men’s locker room. He opened the door quietly and spotted Corporal Sharon Berman, toweling off, naked. Her body was tight, Amazonian in stature, more muscular than many men, and she wore a sheering crew cut. There was a tattoo on her ass—a mean black skull with the caption hell on earth.

Next to her, naked and toweling off as well, was Corporal Tag Winston. Peterson remembered him: he was an adrenaline seeker, a damn good chopper pilot, and Peterson observed, with approval, that he had more scars than could be counted: shrapnel, bullet holes, knife wounds.

“Did I ever tell you that you have a nice ass?” Tag said to Sharon, as he looked her up and down.

Sharon turned and looked between Tag’s legs: “Did I ever tell you that you have a small dick?”

Tag opened his locker and pulled out his black combat fatigues. He grew serious: “What do you think is going on out there?”

“People without heartbeats are walking around. Must be a bird flu. Who cares? Line ’em up and I’ll shoot ’em down.”

Tag put on his shirt. “Amen to that.”

Peterson ducked out and proceeded down the corridor to the main prep room. As he went, he noticed an inscription scratched on the wall in handwriting. It was a mantra that was all too familiar to him. The first time he saw it was during his induction into the elite unit which he now led:

*“Locked and loaded, ready to kill,
always have and always will.
Squeeze the trigger and let it fly,
hit the bastards between the eyes.
Before they died I heard them yell:
this shadow team is bad as hell.”*

As Peterson entered the vast, cavernous room, an ammunition banana clip was snapped into the chamber of a CAR 15 assault rifle. Holding the rifle was Corporal Cash, mid-thirties, a 260-pound, muscle-bound, mustached veteran of every war they never told about. A deep scar ran from his cheekbone to his chin. He bolted open the breach on his rifle’s under-mount grenade launcher and chambered a round, lovingly inspecting the bore. Peterson had mixed feelings upon seeing him there. He was a good soldier, but reckless, a danger junkie. And hard to control.

Sitting beside him on an ammo crate was Sergeant Armstrong. Muscular, bald, and proud to be black, Armstrong was no slouch either, at six three and over 250. He sat there and ignited a flame thrower, fire shot from its insidious barrel. But Peterson knew him to be as warm-hearted as he was war-hearted. He flashed a great smile, wide and sparkling, as he stared at his weapon. Peterson and he went way back, and he was probably the one person Peterson could most trust on this mission.

Peterson knew Armstrong’s life well. Growing up, all Armstrong ever needed was a male figure to give him a bit of guidance, to tell him he was a good person. A judge finally gave him a choice of six months in the slammer or a tour in the military. His military experience gave him a new life.

Not only did Armstrong ace basic training, but he went on to become a career soldier. He was so good that he was recruited into an elite, classified combat unit, a secret fighting force trained for very particular scenarios.

Upon his arrival in that well-hidden operation, Peterson first met him. He was fifteen years Armstrong’s elder, and he became Armstrong’s trainer and mentor, picked him up when he fell down, gave him encouragement and, most of all, showed him how to be amongst the deadliest fighting and killing machines in the world. Unlike others, they were expected to be independent “thinking” soldiers, and were trained to sharpen their brains as well as their knives.

The father figure Armstrong never had appeared in the most unlikely of bonds, with a white man, and a superior officer—Peterson.

“What the hell is going on out there, Sergeant?” Cash asked Armstrong. “I just can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

Cash was about to say something, but then looked at a man standing nearby, staring at him. “Who the hell is that guy?”

“Intelligence,” Armstrong responded matter-of-factly.

Peterson looked over. There stood Spooky. He was a talented jack-of-all-trades. Peterson never much cared for him. He was a CIA spook who didn't have a rank—or a name for that matter. His face was pockmarked, his eyes darting. He finished rolling a cigarette and lit up. Then he went back to his package of C-4 explosives, attached to which was a keypad. Spooky entered three numbers, and the digital read-out beeped.

“Make nice, Spooky,” Armstrong said, an edgy tone to his voice. “This mission is the last of it for me.”

Spooky didn't look up. “Not to worry, soldier. If she blows up, the last thing that will go through your mind is your ass.”

Sharon entered the room, now dressed in bad-ass full combat gear. She walked up to Armstrong and grabbed his cheeks. He was like an overgrown baby in her hands.

“Retirement, my ass,” she jested. “What are you gonna do, get a job as a ballet dancer? Two minutes in the real world and you'll be climbing the fucking walls. You need us, man.”

“Like shit on my shoe,” smiled Armstrong as he took out a picture.

“Well, I'll be... Daddy?” Berman said, surprised, snatching the picture. “I didn't even know you got married.”

“I'm not. But I will be after this is through. Her name is Annabell.”

Cash took the picture and looked at it inquisitively, confused. “A baby?”

Berman spit her words. “Yeah, you know, one of those things that come out of a woman?”

Tag entered, too, his hair still wet from showering. “Cash wasn't born. It took his mother nine months to take a shit.”

Cash was tongue-tied. Murder flashed in his eyes.

Armstrong took the picture back and stared, lost in fatherly love. “My baby, a girl.”

Peterson surveyed the room. He saw, kneeling on a small rug, Ali Ishmael, who was bowing down and muttering prayers. A Muslim and a holy warrior, he looked like a statue, at peace with his existence, with dark skin and severe blue eyes.

Then, checking his gun, was Angelo, early twenties. Peterson knew that he was proud Puerto Rican first, and American second. He also knew him to be hard-skinned, growing up in the ghetto. His extraordinary, unequalled talent as a sniper brought him quickly to be a member of the nation's most deadly unit. He slipped a shiny bullet into his sniper rifle.

And lastly was Johnny-Boy. He was a red-blooded all-American, and the fucking new guy. Peterson knew very little about him except that the new guys are always too eager to please. That's why they are usually the first to die.

Ishmael rose from his prayers and joined the team.

“Allah is our compass,” he began. “It is his direction that leads one to know that there is no greater honor than to fight and die as a warrior.”

“Not on my watch,” Peterson said, his voice resonating throughout the room like any great leader's would. He'd had enough observing; it was time to make his presence known.

The group turned, silenced by his presence.

“Commander on deck!” Armstrong yelled, snapping to attention. The team snapped to attention, too, rigid as boards, eyes forward.

“From here on in, *I’m* your compass,” Peterson said as he paced, inspecting them, letting them know who was boss. “There are plenty of other missions out there if you want to die. On this mission everyone gets back home safely. Understood?”

The team pronounced in unison: “YES, SIR!”

Peterson stood in front of Armstrong, who remained at attention.

“Commander Peterson,” Armstrong acknowledged with a smile.

“Sergeant,” Peterson replied in a formal voice.

“I heard you landed in the loony bin, sir,” said Armstrong, surprisingly out of order.

“You’re right, and I arrived this morning,” Peterson responded, and his composure broke, a smile sweeping across his face.

He grabbed Armstrong’s shoulder, and they embraced as old friends.

“It has been a long time, you son of a bitch.” Peterson beamed.

Armstrong lowered his voice so the others wouldn’t hear. “I’ve missed working with you, sir.”

Peterson shot him a look of concern. “I think we’re about to make up for lost time.”

Armstrong turned and bellowed to the team: “This is Commander Peterson. We’re piss-ass lucky to have him. If you ever give him shit I’ll personally fuck you in your eye sockets.”

“YES, SIR!” came the response.

Peterson nodded as he surveyed them one last time. *Yes*, he thought. *If we’re going to fight the devil, this team just might do.*

Chapter 5

Peterson sat in the command room at a long conference table, his team sitting behind him in a row of bleachers. Moore and Washington were at the table as well. Moore reached up, pointed a remote at the far wall, and clicked. An image popped up, and Peterson leaned back to watch.

The President of the United States sat at his desk in the war room, in front of a camera. A thick conglomeration of personnel were watching: generals, advisors, the chief of staff, the secretary of state, and more.

The President’s eyes darted, nervous. His face was tense, his jaw clenched. He looked dazed. A makeup artist placed the last dab of facial powder on his forehead and then quickly dashed away. A voice preceded the President: “We are on the air in three, two, one...”

The President cleared his throat and addressed the nation.

“For those of you who are able to receive this communication, as the world’s satellites have been temporarily overwhelmed, I address you, the American public, in an address of critical importance.

“Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives: only forty-eight hours ago the United States of America was suddenly confronted with what is believed to be a viral infection unlike any other we have seen in our time.

“Indeed, one hour after the Centers for Disease Control reported the very first case in the state of Pennsylvania, I and the Joint Chief of Staffs acted swiftly, deploying the army’s third regiment to establish a quarantine.

“Today, as you know, the quarantine was not effective against the contagious and inexplicable phenomenon. This infection is also spreading throughout the world at large.

“As Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense, in keeping with the yet unknown nature of the threat against us.

“Today, at four thirteen p.m., I signed a declaration of martial law. Such declaration places all law enforcement in the hands of the armed forces.

“As of now, I ask citizens and law enforcement alike to peacefully abide by such declaration by following the charge of the U.S. armed forces, National Guard, and military reserves.

“We must not be mistaken that those who have become infected can be cured. Or that family members, friends, and loved ones who are infected can be restored to health. Because of the danger of those who are infected pose to the stability of our nation and the world, as difficult a decision as it is for me to make, I have ordered that all infected be terminated on sight by any and all means necessary, and their bodies disposed of in a fashion in keeping with what is best for the health of our nation.

“Amongst civil unrest, hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. I plead with you today that we come together and put an end to civil disobedience. We must strengthen ourselves in this grave time and come together as a people. Those disobeying the basic laws of the United States, such as looting and other such reproachable acts, I now order to be punished by the full extent that martial law allows.

“It is my belief that such law and order is imperative in order to regain calm and to properly face this challenge. Without civil order, we face a danger more grave than the infection itself.

“No matter how long it may take us to overcome this unheralded event, the American people, I have faith, will, as we always have before, come together as one and re-establish law and order. With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbending determination of law-abiding American citizens, we will inevitably regain control.

“It is my promise and oath as President that we will find an answer to the nature of this infection—and, as soon as can be, a cure. We will bring this event to a prompt and complete end. So help me God.”

General Moore and Dr. Washington stood and turned away from the wall-size screen as it went blank, and the lights went up.

Peterson and the rest of his team were frozen. There was a thick silence in the briefing room. Peterson could not believe what he had just seen.

My god, he thought. Martial law.

Moore took a deep breath.

“There you have it,” he said. “Now the military is in charge. That means us, people,” he said, looking visibly upset.

He held up the remote, and a bright light flashed from a projector. A virtual image appeared, showing strategic maps and coordinates with cutting-edge technology. Moore was illuminated by the projection as he stood before the team, who were listening intently, experts at work.

“The video you are about to see was taken approximately fourteen hours ago.”

Aerial photography flickered, followed by footage through the eye of a camera mounted to a helicopter.

Into view came a small, rocky island. The ocean pounded the rocky shore with waves and foam. As it zoomed in, a sprawling complex came into view. It was maximum security, protected by a fortified wall.

Moore paced.

“Located on Plum Island, about two hundred miles east of New York City, code named Ice-Fox, this laboratory was issued by ARPA to support the CDC with sensitive, classified issues. It is a gem in the military science community.”

Peterson interrupts. “More sensitive?”

Washington interjected disdainfully. “Obviously, Commander, there are a lot of viral and biological threats out there which fall into classified territory. Really, I’m surprised you’re so naïve.”

Peterson just got one more reason to hate Washington, that little fuck.

Moore continued: “The ARPA pursues research and development where risk and payoff are both very high and where success may provide dramatic advances. This is their brainchild.”

Peterson looked hard at Moore.

“I’ve never heard about this lab, General.”

“That’s because it doesn’t exist, got it?” Moore snapped back.

“Excuse me, sir, but is there a relationship between this facility and the infection?” Armstrong called out.

The general worked the remote, and images of faces appeared.

Washington picked up: “There was a community of seventy-five scientists. They are the leading scientific minds of our nation, totaling one hundred and sixty-five occupants in all.”

But Armstrong never took well to being ignored. “Sir, do you intend to answer my question? I think we all deserve to know.”

Moore lost his cool. “What the hell do you think? This is why you’re fucking here.”

Washington turned to Moore. “I thought this team was the best, General. They seem like amateurs to me.”

Peterson had enough of Washington and his prissy attitude. “Who is this limp dick freshman, General?”

Washington was taken aback by Peterson's insult, as if shocked that such an inferior man would launch such an assault.

"Listen up!" Moore snapped. "This situation has all of us stressed out. Keep your damn cool."

Washington stepped forward again.

"This is about Doctor Rudolph Winthrop. Graduate from Harvard's child program. He finished his undergrad studies at the age of twelve and went on to accumulate over eight doctorates in every subject from math to physics to biology and much, much more. His IQ can't be measured. There's never been anybody like him, in our generation, at least. He is in fact the greatest scientific asset of the United States."

Moore interjected. "Now he may hold a cure of what may become the greatest pandemic the world has ever seen. Does this answer your question, Armstrong?"

"Yes," Armstrong answered with a calm, controlled voice. "It certainly does."

"Was there an accident, General? A mistake on our behalf of some sort?" Peterson asked.

"No," the general emphasized. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it like, General?" Peterson persisted. "Are you saying this lab and the infection are somehow related?"

Moore thought hard for a moment. "No. It's not."

"Then what caused it?" came Tag's voice.

"I don't know," Moore responded, and rested his hand on his chin, deep in thought.

Peterson was confused. "Then exactly how does this scientist know how to solve it?"

"He *may* know how to solve it, Commander." General Moore's voice lowered in anger. "That's what I was told, and that is all that I've been told."

Washington interrupted. "That is because how it started is irrelevant now. And it is not what you need to know to successfully accomplish your mission. Dr. Winthrop may hold the answers we need—most importantly, how to bring this infection to an end."

"Simply put, as of now, Dr. Winthrop is the best bet the world has at beating this infection," Moore concluded.

Cash raised his hand, like a schoolboy waiting to be called upon.

Moore hesitated. "Go ahead, Cash."

"What does the infection do to people?"

Moore looked to Washington, who responded, "We don't have enough information yet. All we know is that people have begun to act with random extreme violence, and are void of basic rational senses. And that it is contagious, and spreading at a lightning-fast rate."

"Extreme violence? Void of basic instincts?" Sharon piped up.

Moore looked at her. "You have something to say, Corporal?"

"You're a doctor, right?" she asked Washington. "Or a scientist? Or whatever creep you are, I expect you can share a bit more about the nature of the infected. The news is reporting that corpses are returning to life and eating people's flesh. *Void of basic instinct* sounds like just a bit of an understatement."

Washington smiled politely and turned to Moore. “Perhaps now is a good time, General?”

Moore rubbed his temples, fighting a headache, then said, “Why the fuck not?” He flipped the remote and a video appeared on the screen. “Watch up, children... and learn.”

Chapter 6

Peterson edged forward with curiosity as the projector flickered, then showed an image captured by a video camera documenting a procedure. A tired-looking doctor performed open heart surgery on an elderly woman. Her ribcage was open, and the doctor reached in and put a clamp on an artery. The beeping heart rate monitor suddenly flat-lined, emitting a sound all too familiar: a long, endless beep—the stopping of a heart.

“You’re watching video from a teaching hospital in New York. We have been told this is Patient Zero.” From his tone, it sounded like Moore had seen the video countless times; he paced away from the screen. “It’s amongst the first documentation we had.”

Washington stepped in. He seemed to take a perverted joy in outlining the situation.

“Marcy Grey was a ninety-one-year-old woman who had lived a conservative life. Grinding her way through a nine-to-five job, she never got married, never had children, and had no one to mourn for her as her heart stopped on a sterile operating table at New York Central Hospital. The doctor was making a last attempt to save her. Her old body just gave way.”

The video’s audio became louder than Washington. “We lost her, Doctor,” the anesthesiologist said blandly. The doctor snapped off his surgical gloves, responding with a routine voice: “Time of death, four-thirteen. Get her down to the morgue.” The doctor turned to the nurse: “And turn that damn monitor off. The sound is driving me crazy.”

The flat-line machine went silent as the nurse reached over and turned it off. Abruptly, she halted, looking at the patient in shock.

Heart and chest cavity still open, Marcy Grey’s eyes had opened. She was looking at the nurse.

“Doctor, she’s alive. She’s awake!” the nurse shouted, confused.

A muffled shock spread throughout the operating room.

“Damn machine!” the doctor yelled as he hurriedly placed his hand on the old lady’s heart, feeling for a beat. He looked into the eyes of Marcy Grey, who slowly looked back.

The anesthesiologist quickly checked the readings.

“There’s just no way!” he said with a shaking voice. “There’s no way she can be awake!”

The doctor was overcome by anxiety, too. “Her heart’s not beating!”

He slowly took his hand off her heart.

“Just stay calm, Ms. Grey, stay calm,” the doctor said, clearly not knowing what else to say.

A guttural snarl suddenly arose from deep within her throat. Then it happened: she sat up, grabbed the doctor, and bit his forearm.

He was so shocked he couldn't even scream. Marcy Grey gnawed, tearing a chunk of flesh out of his arm.

She sat up. Her chest cavity was still opened, and blood and innards spilled out. She chewed on the flesh of the doctor, who pulled away his arm in disbelief. The nurse let out a blood-curdling shriek of absolute horror.

The screen in the briefing room finally went black.

Moore faced the room. “Get the picture?”

The team was silent for a long moment.

“How does it spread?” Peterson asked.

“Through contact with infected blood,” Washington eagerly answered “We know that if you're bitten, within twenty-four hours you will be fully infected. It's also possible that if you get their blood in your eyes or mouth, you may become infected as well. This is still an outstanding question.”

“But that's not the burning question, Dr. Washington,” Peterson snapped back.

Dr. Washington looked at him. “Then perhaps you can enlighten us?”

“The question is...are they alive, or are they dead?”

“They are infected,” retorted Washington.

“Fucking zombies if you ask me,” Cash chimed in.

“How can we cure what is not alive?” Sharon added.

Washington gave them a smug, superior smile.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “we are dealing with an infection. Viral, most likely. Where there is an infection, there is at least, if not a cure for those who have already been infected, an inoculation for those who have not been. Get it?”

Peterson spoke up. “We recover the information so that an inoculation, or cure, can be created?”

“Yes, but all you worry about is recovery. We need Dr. Winthrop safe and sound.”

“What makes you think Dr. Winthrop is still alive?” asked Peterson.

“We're not sure. We pray,” Moore said, clearing his throat.

He flipped a switch and a series of grids appeared on a projected map. As the images shifted, a blueprint of the Ice-Fox building compound came into view.

“In addition to Dr. Winthrop, there is another primary target.” Moore pointed to a particular grid. “For security reasons, there is only one hard drive which contains the accumulation of all the research. There are fifty separate hard drives which contain the research in piecemeal. Fifty hard drives is out of the question. So we go for the primary—it's referred to as ‘Darling.’”

“It is located here, on sub-level four. It is the central nervous system of the complex, and this is where Darling is seated. You will possess the security codes, you will manually unlock the system, you will establish a satellite uplink, and we will download the information.”

“Rumors are, sir, that satellite communication has become unreliable,” Armstrong chimed in, sounding concerned. “Nonexistent in some places.”

"You are correct, Sergeant," Moore said, apparently approving of Armstrong's insight. "Then we move to plan B."

"Which is?" Peterson asked.

"Rough and tumble. You bring the packages back manually, and find a way to get your asses back here."

"Back where, sir?" inquired Angelo.

"Back home, son, where your ass is seated now."

Moore changed the image. "It is important to know that though there are many scientists, if any are still alive, their recovery is not part of the mission. Your mission is to recover Darling and Dr. Winthrop only."

The projection changed, flashing a picture of a white-bearded man. His hair was tousled, unkempt, and his glasses were crooked. He looked like a mad academic, the type of man who spent all his time thinking and neglected everything else.

"This is Dr. Winthrop. He invented the Ice-Fox project."

The images changed in a slideshow, revealing a series of men and woman, apparently important scientists at the lab.

"We are not to help the scientists, General?" Ishmael asked, sounding puzzled.

Moore hesitated. "No," he finally said, almost ashamed.

Peterson looked at the faces of the scientists as they flashed by on the screen.

Disposable assets, he thought. Just like us.

The screen went blank.

"The hard drive, or black box if you will, will give us answers as to what is happening. Its recovery may equal the survival of hundreds of thousands of people."

Washington stepped up. "At this pace more likely millions and millions of people."

Peterson looked at Moore quizzically. "It sounds like double deuce, sir."

"It is," responded Moore. "If you can't save one, save the other. Ideally, however, we need both packages intact if we are to have a shot at a cure."

"Last reports said the infection has reached over forty-one nations; this is now a global pandemic." Washington sounded proud to be able to relay such information, as if any form of knowledge made him special, even if it was horrible.

The team murmured, and Peterson spoke up, confused. "Just four hours ago it was limited to fifteen states."

Moore stepped up, figuring now was the right time to lay some more news on them.

"Doctor Washington is a scientist with the ARPA."

Washington stood there, staring the team down, clearly proud of himself. If looks could talk, he would be calling the team white trash.

"Washington was one of the first scientists assigned to this project. He knows his way around the compound. He knows the location of the hard drive. He has the security codes. He will be accompanying you as an on-site adviser."

Washington suddenly looked at Moore, shocked.

"General, I'm sorry, but we never discussed my joining the group. I'm a scientist, not a soldier, for god's sake. It's not safe out there."

"Tough shit," Moore snapped back. "You'll accompany them, whether you like it or not."

Washington's face turned pale. Finally, he was speechless.

Peterson saw the obvious shift in Washington's demeanor; he was wringing his hands with anxiety, and lowered his fearful eyes to the ground.

With satisfaction, Peterson smiled to himself.

The son of a bitch didn't know.

Moore concluded: "Team, you have clearance to achieve this mission by use of all means necessary. Civil and humanitarian law which existed forty-eight hours ago no longer exists. Now, *you* are the law. Anything or anybody gets in your way you have the authority to do as you must to succeed in this mission."

Shit, Peterson thought. *There are truly only two ways out of this mission. Not just for me, but maybe for the world at large.*

Chapter 7

Night had fallen and spotlights illuminated the helipad and the surrounding area. Peterson and his team moved with urgency as they loaded the waiting Black Hawk's belly, hurrying up and down the ramp with equipment. They were carrying enough high-tech gadgetry and weaponry to start and win their own war, and as they walked up the ramp, side by side, into the night, they looked like a wall of sheer force.

Peterson wanted to get this bird loaded and in the air ASAP. He had an uneasy feeling in his gut—it was one of the rare times in his life when he felt unsure of himself. There were too many unknowns, too many variables, from his team members to the satellites to their destination. He felt the mission was haphazardly planned, and the sooner they were in the air, he hoped, the better he would feel.

Holding a clipboard, he went down an inventory checklist, trying to confirm everything. But something caught his eye, and he turned.

Sharon was standing there, off to the side, staring at him, and probably had been for some time. She looked slightly embarrassed.

"Never thought I'd see you again," she said, hesitantly.

Peterson wasn't sure how to respond. He wanted to say so much to her, but this just wasn't the time or place.

"I'm sorry, Sharon, I—"

"Don't." Sharon spared him. "Just happy to see you in one piece."

Peterson could see Sharon looking at the crucifix around his neck. It was the one she'd given him, years ago. Peterson reflexively reached down and fingered it nervously. They shared a look of passion, and regret, and then she moved on, loading her stack of machine guns.

"The shit is really going to hit the fan, gentlemen, isn't it?"

Peterson turned and saw Doctor Washington standing there. He looked nervous. He was clearly trying to appease him, and the entire team, now, with a friendly and kind tone. He was suddenly trying to make friends. Boy, he had changed his tune fast; all his arrogance and intellectual superiority were suddenly gone.

Peterson responded with a victorious smile. "It already has, Doctor Washington."

Armstrong shouted orders to the team: "Get moving, people! Every day in the military is parade! Every meal a feast!"

The team scurried, loading equipment as fast as they could.

"What do they call you guys, anyway?" Washington asked. "I mean, the general never told me your official name. You're clearly not the Seals or Delta Force. What branch are you with?"

Peterson wasn't about to enlighten him. The people who needed to know, knew, and the people who didn't, never would. Everybody knew they had no official name, unlike Delta Force or the Navy Seals. Peterson's shadow force was more highly classified, originating from intelligence operations. Each member of the team was selected for a very special reason—their psychological profile. Their minds were the most resilient. Under the most pressure, under the most painful, demanding circumstances, their minds bent instead of broke.

There was a catch, however. These types of psychological profiles, Peterson knew first-hand, had a pattern. There were also mental weaknesses. To endure pain in the present, they usually had endured pain in the past—namely their childhood or teenage years—leaving each member a bit flawed. It took a great deal of time to train these types of people to follow orders, and they typically had their own idea of the law. They tended to be, on the most subconscious level, drawn to violence. Not that they liked hurting others, or being destructive. It was more like an undercurrent: they were born from violence, and could never seem to let it go.

Peterson stared coldly back at Washington, silent. "Get moving, Doctor."

Washington, rebuked, hurried off to the chopper.

His clipboard finished, Peterson surveyed their surroundings, feeling on edge. He looked out and saw the silhouette of a tree line which surrounded the bunker—tall, old oak trees shielding it from the peering eyes of the outside world. The chopper was in on the landing pad, and dozens of regular army soldiers stood guard while they loaded all around the perimeter, moving restlessly. They were in the middle of nowhere, so Peterson didn't know what he was worrying about. But something was gnawing at him. Some sixth sense was drawing his eye to the tree line.

As Peterson looked even closer, he could have sworn he noticed some subtle movement in the woods. He looked more closely, and there suddenly was movement: a silhouette of an obviously infected man lumbered out of the woods and then into the glaze of a spotlight, stumbling onto the field. The man, who walked like he was drunk, wore a torn-up pin-striped dress suit and had a grossly disfigured face. The flesh on his left shoulder was gone, leaving bone and muscle exposed. His skin was the deep pale color of a long-dead corpse.

It wasn't just that these beings looked like corpses, however; something happened to their faces. Most of all, Peterson was taken aback by the feral and ravenous eyes of the creature. The eyes were sunken deep into their sockets and possessed a look not of a dead person, but of a wild animal. Just like the little girl from before.

Behind this infected man, branches snapped, and a crowd of infected, slow in their movements, broke through the tree line. They walked in a mechanical

manner, rigor mortis creating rigidity within them, stiffening their joints. They were slow. They wobbled without balance, placing one foot in front of the other, slowly gaining ground.

Guttural moans suddenly filled the air.

Peterson couldn't make sense of it. It had never struck him as possible that the infected could make it so deep into the woods. The fact that the infection had arrived at this location, so far from the neighboring towns, came as a great surprise. It sent a chill down his spine. The infection had already traveled so far, and so fast. Squinting, he saw more and more of them stumble out of the forest.

Shit, there must be fifty of them.

He also realized that he was, for now, the only one who had noticed it.

"PERIMETER BREACHED!" he screamed.

The regular army soldiers around the helipad and near the tree line seem confused. The spotlights were only able to illuminate some of the area, leaving dark patches. Peterson watched as one of the soldiers, who was standing nearest to the incoming zombies, finally looked out and saw what was coming. Although he had a machine gun strapped over his shoulder, he didn't move, frozen in fear. He wasted too much time and now the first infected man was only feet in front of him. The soldier reached up and grabbed the neck of the infected man, holding his head backward as its mouth opened and snapped shut, trying to bite him. The soldier's hand slipped, and the infected sunk his teeth into his shoulder. The soldier shrieked.

Gunfire and shouts erupted. The perimeter soldier opened fire and let the bullets fly. A torrential downpour of bullets and the crackling of machine gun fire exploded, filling the air.

Peterson spun and saw, from all sides of the perimeter, more infected were coming out of the woods, and closing in.

The perimeter forces had finally noticed this too. Spinning in all directions, they were uncertain what to do. People started shouting orders which overlapped and contradicted one another.

Peterson knew that his team, trained to a razor's edge, was waiting for orders from him before entering into combat. He could sense all of their eyes on him. *Do we enter the fray, or do we load up and take off?*

Peterson stepped out from the loading platform. He looked slowly around three hundred and sixty degrees, taking in the situation. Steady and cool, he raised his hand high above his head and made a fist.

"Shadow team," Peterson ordered in a calm, confident voice, "do your thing."

His team burst into action, dropping their loading supplies and taking up positions. Like the well-oiled machine they were, they fanned out in a wide circle, covering strategic fields of fire.

As Peterson watched Angelo set up his high-powered RKG sniper rifle, he remembered Angelo's story. Since Angelo was a child, he'd been shooting rifles. In high school he was introduced to firearms during his attendance at the local police club. The officers took him to a fire range, put a .22 caliber rifle in his hands, and told him to shoot the target. The first shot he took hit the bull's-eye. Everybody applauded.

Nothing else in his life brought him the attention and approval which he so desperately needed. Since his first shot, he was hooked, and went to the firing range as often as possible. He would shoot all different types of weapons, anything he could get his hands on. As time went by, he developed a very strange habit. Before he pulled the trigger for the first time, he would take his right thumb and tap it three times in the side of the rifle. Soon he became superstitious. It was good luck.

Peterson watched as Angelo slowly steadied his rifle and tapped his thumb three times. He chose his target, adjusted his site, and fired. He hit an infected between the eyes from a hundred yards away.

“Fucking cannibals,” Cash cried out. He opened fire with his CAR 15, spraying a group of infected. It was a good thing his muscles were larger than his childlike mind, as his torrent of bullets cut down an entire line of zombies.

Cash ran out of ammunition, and on cue, Tag ran forward and laid down cover fire. Flames licked from his assault rifle. Ishmael then ran past Tag, took a knee, and joined in the duck shoot. They were experts, killing machines, creating a wall of fire, chopping down the zombies like trees in a forest.

The perimeter guards were not as nearly well disciplined. They were firing in every direction, ad-hoc, and several bullets ricocheted off the tarmac, next to the chopper. Peterson was pissed. The damn bullets almost hit him, and almost hit the bird.

“Fucking son of a bitch rookies,” Cash exclaimed through clenched teeth.

A volley of more bullets ricocheted around him, sparking off the tarmac.

“We are not going to get off the ground at this rate!” yelled Johnny-Boy, eyes wide, fear in his voice.

“Stop being a pussy,” hissed Sharon. “We can handle it easy.”

She pulled out her Glock 9mm sidearm out of its holster, leveled, and fired, placing a single shot between the eyes of a forty-something heavysset female. The walking corpse collapsed like a sandbag.

“There are too many of them!” Johnny-Boy yelled.

Peterson, busy firing his 9mm Glock, stepped forward in his collected and calm manner. He understood what Johnny-Boy was experiencing. Seeing these creatures on TV was one thing. Seeing them in person was something totally different.

“Get hold of yourself, Private,” he reprimanded. “This is just a small taste of things.”

Johnny-Boy was hesitant. “Sir, I just can’t believe what I’m seeing.”

“I grant you permission to leave,” Peterson said, his tone of voice dropping a few decibels. He refused to accept a weak link in his team, and his words carried gravity.

Armstrong appeared and joined in on the exchange. He leaned in close to Johnny-Boy. “But if you stay with us, Johnny-Boy, and you flinch in the line of fire, I will execute you on the spot.”

Spooky, off to the side, was clearly amused by Armstrong’s disposition.

Peterson knew that Spooky once had a favorite commander who used to put bullets through the heads of fellow soldiers who lost their backbones. It became no

big deal to him. Spooky, Peterson knew, came to accept that anybody who pussies out on a mission deserves no less.

Johnny-Boy's eyes widened.

"Do you want out?" Armstrong asked.

"No sir," he wasted no time in responding.

"Good. Then get the fuck in line and get a hold of yourself."

Taking control of the situation, the shadow team moved in point-lock step, rotating around and spraying the perimeter with a deadly tidal wave of machine gun fire. Among the chaos of the perimeter guards, the shadow team moved as their name suggested, in unison, like a storm cloud covering an area, casting a dark shadow and destroying everything in its wake.

Peterson and his team cut through the zombies like a knife through butter. While the regular soldiers did their share of the job, the shadow team, with their surprising speed, sense of tactical positioning, and lethal accuracy, did the bulk of the work.

Armstrong and Peterson shot down the two last zombies on the east flank. It seemed as though nothing was left standing, and the flow of zombies out of the forest had stopped.

Then, from the shadows, an infected woman wearing a white wedding dress appeared. She was pregnant. Murky circles were around her sunken, untamed eyes. Armstrong looked at her belly and saw something inside move. It's the God damn baby. He lifted his M-16, but then halted briefly. The white wedding dress caught in the wind and flowed. It must have been a beautiful dress at one point. The zombie was a pregnant bride-to-be. Armstrong's expression spoke to Peterson: Hell has truly come upon this earth. The infected woman and her unborn infant wobbled closer to Armstrong. He lowered his rifle, aimed at her belly, and closed his eyes shut, unable to digest what he was about to do. He fired a burst of bullets into the woman's stomach, killing the infant first. Armstrong couldn't bear to open his eyes to look.

Peterson stepped forward, took certain aim, and blew the woman's face off.

That seemed to be the last of the zombies.

Finally, they stopped coming, and Peterson wasn't about to wait around to see what happened next.

"TO THE CHOPPER!" he yelled.

Chapter 8

Peterson gazed out the chopper window, looking into the moonlight. He figured they were flying somewhere beyond Newark, New Jersey. He noticed his reflection: his piercing blue eyes stared back at him, a ghostly reflection.

Beyond his reflection, looking at the landscape, he saw the industrial lights of New Jersey, which sprawled endlessly. Peterson couldn't help wondering what the people around the world thought of this catastrophe. Maybe they accepted it is a biological infection. Maybe some believed a curse had descended upon the world,

that this was the end of days. Maybe some already realized the inevitable truth: only the strongest would survive.

Their plan was to fly over New York City airspace, hit the Atlantic Ocean, skirt off the coastline, and head directly for Plum Island. It seemed simple enough—but so did getting out of the bunker and airborne in the bird.

Peterson was still surprised that the infected had reached the bunker. It sent a chill down his spine. It was so unexpected. A lesson.

Expect the unexpected.

Looking forward into the cockpit, Peterson saw Tag Winston tucked neatly in the pilot seat, his face aglow from the dashboard's instruments. He hadn't slept in thirty-six hours; his eyes were bloodshot, and he rubbed them as he checked the navigation controls.

Peterson looked over and saw that his copilot, Spooky, was asleep, his head resting against the glass window.

Peterson was damn pissed, and leaned forward.

"Tag, keep your fucking copilot awake," Peterson ordered in a demanding, harsh tone.

"He hasn't slept in a while. I got control of the bird. Don't worry about it," Tag responded flippantly.

Peterson personally disliked Tag, and the feeling was mutual. It was over Sharon Berman. Tag loved her but could never have her, and it was Peterson's fault.

"Wake up your copilot," Peterson said, steel in his voice. "And if he falls asleep again I'm holding you responsible."

Sluggishly, Tag reached over and smacked Spooky in the arm.

Startled out of a deep sleep, Spooky jumped. He looked confused, and just stared at Tag, blinking, trying to orient himself.

"That's the last time you fall asleep on the job," Tag said. "Boss's orders."

With a yawn, Spooky responded, "I didn't mean to, just feeling a bit sick."

* * * * *

Peterson was awakened by the sound of a harsh beeping noise. Although he was going on just a few hours' sleep, his eyes immediately shot open, wide awake, the product of years of discipline and hard training. With an adrenaline rush, he surveyed his environment, ready to burst into action.

He quickly realized he had fallen asleep sitting up, in the rear of the chopper beside the open wall, the air rushing into his face drowned out by the sound of the rotor blades. It was amazing he could even hear the beeping over all that noise, but he could. He looked over and saw immediately that it was coming from the cockpit. He also noticed, in that same glance, that his teammates were fast asleep. His was angry at himself. They should have all been more alert. They weren't yet in the mind frame of being at war—and that was exactly what they were in: war.

In one quick motion, Peterson undid his seatbelt and leapt across the chopper, right into the cockpit, cramming his head into the cabin. At least they were both awake, and were scrambling with the controls to try to figure out what was wrong.

"It's the fuel gauge, sir," Tag said. Peterson could hear the fear in his voice. This wasn't good. "We're low on gas."

“Didn’t you finish fueling up before we left?” Peterson’s voice was harsh.

“Of course, sir.”

“He’s right, sir,” Spooky chimed in. “We definitely had a full tank, sir.”

“Must be a leak,” Tag added, as he reached up and played with several switches.

“Did you check the body?” Peterson asked.

Tag looked over at him, puzzled.

“Of the bird. After the firefight. Before we left the base. Bullets were flying. Did you check the body?”

Tag gulped. “No, sir.” He shook his head.

“Stupid mistake,” Peterson said. “We probably got pinged.”

“It was dark out, and it was chaos back there, and even if I looked, I doubt I could’ve seen anything. When we took off, all systems checked. There’s no way I could’ve known,” Tag said.

“It’s your bird,” Peterson said. “You’re the pilot. Your excuses won’t help us now.”

Peterson quickly surveyed the mechanicals and saw the flashing light. He wished the beeping would stop. It was shrill, and each beep felt like a knife in his head. He hadn’t had enough sleep, and he was edgier than usual. He hated the feeling.

“How much is left?” Peterson asked.

“It reads a quarter tank, sir,” Tag said.

“If we can trust it,” Spooky added.

Peterson looked out at the horizon. Dawn was breaking, and the industrial lights of Jersey were being replaced with the early-morning landscape. They were far enough away from the city that they now were flying over rural terrain. Farms and rolling hills spread out beneath them. They were in the middle of nowhere. That was good.

Peterson hated to have to check in with his commanders, especially this early in the mission. It made him look bad. But this would mean a serious change in their plans, and he had to check in with them before making such a big decision.

“Get HQ on the line,” Peterson ordered.

Tag and Spook exchanged a worried glance.

“We’ve already tried, sir,” Tag said, fear in his voice. “Radio is down. Satellites, too.”

“Roger that, sir,” Spooky said, fiddling with some more switches. “I can’t get an uplink. I tried everything, from our cell phones to our backup systems. Everything is down. No internet. No GPS. Nothing. Just a wall of silence.”

Peterson felt his stomach drop with those words. The implications were staggering. There was no possible way that all of the military’s communication systems could be down—unless all hell had truly broken loose in the last few hours. The ramifications were overwhelming.

“Are you telling me there is no GPS whatsoever?” Peterson asked Tag, slowly.

Tag shook his head, gravely. After a pause, he added, “We navigated off our compass. And some old printed maps. But that’s about it.”

Peterson’s stomach dropped further. So that was how it was going to be. Reverting back to the old days. Pre-internet, pre-GPS. He could deal with this. He

was trained for this. Hell, the hardest wars he'd fought had been in the Stone Age. A part of him didn't mind going back, didn't mind at all.

"Okay, bring her down," Peterson ordered.

Tag and Spook exchanged a worried glance.

"Where, sir?"

"There's a military base about thirty miles east of here," suddenly came a voice. They all turned. It was Sharon.

Well, Peterson thought, relieved, *at least one of us is up*.

"Can't risk thirty miles," Peterson said. "We don't know what we've got left. Plus, the base could be overrun."

"Then where, sir?" Tag asked.

Peterson looked out the window and surveyed the landscape. He remembered it well from his childhood. Jersey. Most people thought of the state as a huge industrial stink hole, and he still thought that it was, but he also remembered being shocked as a boy by how rural it was, how many farms it had. It was little known, but go two hours outside the city, and you might as well be in Yellowstone Park.

Peterson tried to push back the memories, but whenever he opened the floodgates, they came rushing in, and it was too hard to stop them. He suddenly had a flash, a hot day in June, a day with his father, the two of them blueberry picking. His father had thought it would be a good way to teach him about the great outdoors, to teach him fortitude, to show him the labor that real farmers went through. So instead of the leisurely outing that other fathers and sons had, Peterson's dad made him stay out there all day, hour after hour. Ten hours later, Peterson's skin was burned badly, he was dehydrated, covered in bug bites, and his bleeding fingers hurt so bad he could barely open them for days. What upset Peterson most, though, were the images of his little brother. He was weaker and more sensitive, an easier target, so his father bullied him somewhat horrible. Remembering his little brother crying, sometimes days at a time, racked Peterson with guilt. He wished he could have protected him. That was his father.

"Sir?" came Tag's voice again.

Peterson snapped out of it.

"Keep heading east," Peterson said. "See that smokestack on the horizon? That's Trenton. There's a small local airport about four miles east of here. Set down there. It's close, and small, and if things get hairy, it will be easier to defend ourselves."

Peterson went back to his seat, sat down, and checked all of his guns for the third time today. They were well-polished, locked and loaded, the alignment perfect, the action easy. He felt that itchy feeling in his fingers, which he always did when he knew a battle was coming. He tensed up and looked down at the ground.

He couldn't wait.

Chapter 9

The beeping noise of the fuel gauge grew louder as the chopper's blades slowed and it descended for the rural airfield. It was just where Peterson said it would be. And, as he predicted, it was empty.

It was the right decision. Peterson kept glancing at the fuel gauge and noticed it had dropped, in just the last few minutes, to close to empty. They wouldn't have made it to the military base if they'd tried. And landing in someone's backyard would have been a hell of a lot worse.

Peterson kept trying his technology—his secure line, his two-way, his relay headset—but nothing was working. He'd woken all the others, too, with a rough push to their shoulders, and had ordered them all to check their devices as well.

But no one was having any luck.

As their chopper descended, Peterson felt a sense of relief. At least it was a controlled landing. He only prayed that the airfield's fuel tanks hadn't been tapped. This bird needed a lot of gas.

Still, as the chopper descended lower and lower, as they came down within two hundred feet, then a hundred, then fifty, there was something about this place that Peterson did not like. It was too exposed. Too close to the woods. And the woods were too thick, too deep. And there were too many outbuildings. Right now, everything seemed quiet. There were none of those things walking around down there. And that was good. But still, there were a dozen places from which they could be ambushed, and just too many angles. They'd have to hit the gas tanks quick and get out.

"No delays!" Peterson barked in a loud voice, as the chopper neared the ground. "No wandering off, no piss breaks. I want us back in the air in ten minutes. Understood?"

"YES, SIR!" came the chorus of voices.

The chopper touched down, landing on the overgrown grass about ten feet from the pump. It was a smooth landing.

"Armstrong," Peterson yelled, "I want you at twelve o'clock. Ishmael and Angelo, nine o'clock, Cash and Johnny-Boy at six o'clock, and Sharon, you are with me are at three o'clock. Tag and Spooky, you stay with the bird. Fuel her up and see if you can patch this leak."

"What about me?" came a voice.

Peterson spun and noticed Dr. Washington sitting there.

He snorted. "What about you? Stay with the bird."

"Don't I need a weapon?" he asked.

"Shit," Armstrong said, grinning, "you wouldn't know what to do with one if you had one."

The chopper touched ground. "OK, MOVE OUT!" Peterson screamed, and in tactical formation, they all jumped out of the Black Hawk.

The team broke off into four directions, establishing a fifty-yard perimeter around the chopper. As Peterson jogged in the early morning through the grass, it felt good to have Sharon at his side again. He tested his gun for the zillionth time, felt it at his hip. He kept his eyes fixed on that patch of woods, and he knew that Sharon was doing the same.

He looked in all directions and saw his team fanned out, as ordered. They were tuned to perfection.

Expect the unexpected, he told himself. A lesson well-learned.

His sixth sense for danger was acting up. There was no reason for it, but there it was. It was gnawing away at him. The hairs rose on the back of his neck.

And that only meant one thing: trouble.

* * * * *

Spooky stepped out of the chopper with the others, but unlike everybody else, when his foot hit the ground, he was struck by a jolt of pain. It was his side. No one else knew it, but he'd been bit. And bad.

Back there, before they first took off, in that firefight, one of those things, just a child, had gotten behind him. When he was shooting another one—probably its mother—point-blank in the head, it had crept around him and bitten him right in the side, right on his love handle. It had hurt like hell and back. He'd spun and elbowed the little bastard right between the eyes, then shot him dead. But little good that did him now.

Spooky had hoped that during the chopper ride the pain would go away. He'd snuck pain killers, and, during the chaos before they lifted off, had injected himself with morphine.

But it hadn't worked. Instead, it had grown worse by the second. He felt his side stiffening up, like rigor mortis. He never knew anything could hurt this bad.

That's why he'd fallen asleep that back there, in the chopper. It had been getting harder and harder for him to keep his eyes open. He felt himself getting cold, and sweat trickled down his back.

A few times during the flight Tag had asked him if he was OK. He probably sensed that something was up. Spooky had just nodded, looked away, and popped another pain killer.

He couldn't tell them. Of course he couldn't. Dr. Washington said that people who are bitten become infected. If they found out, they'd have killed him on the spot.

Spooky hadn't known what to do. But this, this landing at the airfield, was a godsend. It gave him the chance he needed to get some privacy, to check the wound, to try to dress it. With just a few minutes of privacy he could really take a close look and give it whatever treatment it needed. Maybe, just maybe, he could pull through alive.

"All right!" Tag suddenly announced with a cry of delight. "This one's good!"

Tag had checked pump after pump and had finally found one that worked. Tag excitedly hit the lever and then ran with the long hose, five, ten, fifteen feet to the chopper. He began to fuel it up.

"Did you check the leak line yet?" Tag screamed over the rotors. He'd left the rotors running, just in case they needed to take off quick.

Spook had meant to do it. In fact he would have loved to do it, as he loved all things technological. But his head just wasn't clear enough. He was having a hard time concentrating, and sweat was pouring down into his eyes. He needed to get some more drugs in him, and fast.

"I'll check in a minute," Spooky answered, breaking into a trot and hurrying past Tag. "I need to take a piss. I'm just going to head off to the hangar."

"What the fuck you talking about?" Tag yelled back, angry, as he filled up the bird. "You got to check the leak!"

Spooky felt bad about it, but he couldn't wait another second. The pain was just too bad. So he took off for the hangar, about a hundred yards away.

"Spooky! You fuck!" he heard Tag yell out behind them.

But he didn't care. His life was on the line, and he had more important things to take care of.

Spooky ran into the old, abandoned hangar, sweating, already out of breath from the exertion. He'd barely walked in the door when he pulled back his shirt and looked down.

It was much worse than he'd thought. The wound had actually grown bigger, was now the size of his fist, and was turning green and brown at the edges. It smelled like crap, and he recoiled at his own smell: rotting flesh.

He swallowed hard. He had seen too many wounds in combat, and he always knew when one turned for the worse. And this was worse than anything he'd ever seen.

With shaking hands, Spooky opened a CPR kit he'd grabbed from the chopper, took out a big needle, and injected himself hard and deep, right around the edge of the infection, with a boatload of penicillin. He then took out a wet cloth, sponged away the pus, then took out a dry bandage and taped it up. He popped a fist of Advil, chugging it back with his canteen.

He slowly stood up straight and breathed. Maybe, just maybe, this would do the trick. Perhaps Dr. Washington didn't know what the fuck he was talking about, and he could beat the infection.

* * * * *

Peterson checked his watch again for the tenth time. Eight minutes had already passed, and as he turned and looked again, he saw Tag standing there, still fueling up. Peterson was pissed. Tag had taken too long to find a working pump, and as far as he was concerned, they were already behind schedule. He'd wanted to be up in the air in two minutes flat.

Why was it that no one else ever seemed to get things done in the right way but him?

Peterson scanned the horizon again, looking at all his teammates. They all seemed to be in good position, and there were still no zombies in sight. So what the hell was he so worried about? He should be relieved. They'd found a station. They found gas. And even if they couldn't fix the leak, they would still probably have enough gas to make a good run for Plum Island.

So why couldn't he relax?

As Peterson scanned the group again, he suddenly noticed something. Of course. Something always had to go wrong.

Spooky was missing. He couldn't follow a simple order, and he had the simplest of all of them. Stay with the bird, check the leak, and watch Tag's back. Now Tag was standing there, fueling up, his back to the bird, and exposed in every direction.

Peterson broke into a trot, heading back to the chopper—and just as he did, two zombies suddenly appeared from behind the rear of the chopper, heading right for Tag. Tag didn't see them coming. One of the infected looked like a mechanic. It's right eye was gone, as was its left arm. Just behind it was a fat woman dressed in a polka-dot dress.

It would do Peterson no good to scream; Tag would never hear him over the chopper. Peterson couldn't fire, either, as he might hit the chopper. Tag was sitting bait.

Peterson broke into a sprint, running for all he was worth, right for Tag.

Come on Tag, he willed, look this way.

Tag was focused on the gas pump, though, as a good pilot should be.

"Tag!" Peterson shouted, uselessly.

As Peterson watched, the infected mechanic grabbed Tag's arm, dug his fingers into it, and leaned his head in for a bite.

Luckily, Tag was an expert martial artist. He responded quickly, elbowing the zombie in the face and dodging out of the way just in time.

But the gas line came flying out of Tag's hand, out of the chopper, and was now spraying gas all over the zombie, all over the bird—all over everything.

Peterson's heart dropped. A bad situation had just gotten much, much worse.

Peterson still had a good fifty yards to go. He ran for all he was worth, but, as if watching a bad nightmare unfold before him, he knew he just couldn't get there quick enough.

Tag had been thrown off balance, and Peterson watched while he scrambled for his gun. Surely he knew he couldn't use it, Peterson prayed. He couldn't fire with gas everywhere. Tag did realize it. He gave up going for his gun and was now reaching for his knife.

But before he could pull it out, the fat zombie grabbed him from behind and was bringing her mouth down right for his shoulder. There was no way for Tag to respond to this one in time. He was about to lose a chunk of flesh.

Suddenly, there was a gunshot. Peterson was shocked to see Dr. Washington leaning out of the chopper, holding a handgun aimed right at the zombie's face. In one clean shot, he had hit the fat zombie square in the middle of her head. Miraculously, he didn't hit the bird or any of the gasoline spraying all over the place.

Washington had just saved Tag's life, and that was for damn sure.

But still, it was the dumbest thing he could've done. Firing a pistol so close to the chopper, and with gas everywhere. He'd nearly jeopardized the mission.

Tag finally extracted his knife, and, with an arcing blow, put the blade right through its temple. He left his knife embedded in its head, too startled to pull it out, and the zombie collapsed to the ground.

Peterson finally caught up with them all, Sharon just a few yards behind him. The first thing he did was to try to shut off the gas pump. He hit all the switches, but it wasn't doing any good. These old gas pumps were unfamiliar to him, and gas kept leaking everywhere. The fumes were becoming overwhelming.

"BACK IN THE BIRD!" Peterson yelled.

Tag quickly, gladly, got back into the chopper.

"You, too!" he yelled to Sharon.

"I'm going with you," she yelled, stubbornly running behind him as he fanned out toward the others.

Slowly, the others saw him running toward them. Veteran soldiers, they all turned on a dime and ran back to him.

As they did, Peterson could suddenly see countless zombies starting to exit from the outhouses, from all directions, to completely enclose them. In just a few more minutes their position would be overrun, for sure.

Peterson scanned the grounds, counting the team as everyone else filtered back into the chopper.

"Where the fuck is Spooky!?" he screamed.

Everyone looked at each other, but nobody seemed to know.

Suddenly, on the horizon, Spooky exited the hangar, pulling down his shirt and running with a limp. Why the fuck was he limping?

Peterson couldn't give a shit. He was more pissed than he'd ever been.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he yelled, as Spooky came close.

Spooky looked down, ashamed. He should be.

"Sorry, sir," he said. "I had to piss."

Peterson looked him over carefully. Was he lying? He'd never trusted this intel bastard. He was just like all the other intel—filled with lies.

"Why are you limping?" he asked.

"Sprained my ankle, sir. Tripped. It was dark in there."

"You weren't only stupid," Peterson snapped, "you also defied an order. I should kill you right now," he said, staring him down, fuming.

Spook looked down with just enough humility to make Peterson change his mind.

"I'm really sorry, sir," he said. "It won't happen again."

Peterson looked him down, hard. He felt he was hiding something, but he didn't know what. Finally, grudgingly, he nodded for him to enter back into the chopper. He had about two hundred zombies heading his way, after all. He'd have to deal with this dumb fuck later.

Peterson was the last one in the chopper, and as he got a head count, he saw they were all there. He nodded to Tag, who immediately lifted up.

Just in time. The zombies were not more than twenty feet from the chopper. Just a few more seconds, and they would have been toast.

As Peterson looked down, he saw all that gas, still pouring out of the pumps, still spraying everywhere.

What a waste, he thought.

And then he remembered.

Peterson reached over, grabbed Washington, and stripped him of his pistol, yanking it out of his vest.

"That's my gun!" Washington cried out. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking it from you until you learn how to use it," Peterson said.

"What do you mean? I saved Tag's life!"

"But you nearly killed us all. You NEVER fire around an open gas leak," Peterson scolded.

Washington looked like a chided schoolboy.

Peterson looked over and saw Cash on the far side of the chopper, leaning all the way out.

What the fuck was he doing?

At just that moment, Peterson saw him take out a flare gun, lean all the way out, and take aim.

“NO!” Peterson screamed.

But it was too late. There was the muted pop of a flare gun shot.

Peterson looked out just in time to see the glowing flare hit the gas-stained ground.

A massive explosion suddenly lifted up into the air. The chopper was already a good hundred feet off the ground—but that barely mattered. The ball of flames rose and rose, and the shockwave sent the aircraft rocking wildly. Peterson could feel the heat, too uncomfortably close to his face.

Luckily, the explosion stopped just low enough to spare them.

It was a glory shot. Cash had aimed for the gas tanks, just as the hundreds of zombies had surrounded it, and the gas that had been pouring out everywhere lit up. It was a massive explosion, taking out hundreds of zombies with a single shot. And the fire below spread and spread, over the grass, over the zombies, like wildfire.

But it had also shot up into the sky like a mushroom cloud, so high it nearly consumed the chopper.

Peterson was in a rage. He’d always known Cash to be a reckless soldier—but he’d never realized that he was stupid, too.

While the other teammates were yelling in approval, Peterson lunged across the chopper, grabbed Cash with both hands by his shirt, and pulled him close.

“You do something so stupid again, Corporal, and I’ll throw you out of this bird myself. Understood?”

Cash stared him down, a wild craziness in his eyes. Peterson realized that he could not be controlled, that it was like trying to scold a wild stallion.

But finally, something, somewhere deep down from military discipline must have finally clicked into Cash’s mind. He grudgingly nodded.

“Sir?” came a hesitant voice.

As Peterson sat back, he turned and looked over. It was the rookie. Johnny-Boy.

“But wasn’t that a good thing? He killed, like, three hundred of those things with a single shot.”

“And what’s that going to do us?” Armstrong asked the boy. “By now there must be three hundred million more behind that.”

Chapter 10

This isn’t just one of those missions... it’s worse, Peterson thought. Beirut came to his mind. 1987. He’d had a mission where everything went wrong from the start. There wasn’t enough manpower. The enemy intel was underestimated. There was no exit strategy... He’d lost some of his closest friends on that mission, and he

still had three scars from bullet wounds to show for it. He was the only one who'd made it out alive, and all throughout it, he'd never thought he would. He'd had a bad feeling about that one, from the second they'd set out, a feeling that no matter what they did, things would just get worse. He hadn't had that feeling for at least twenty-five years.

Until now.

From the start, it was like a black cloud was hanging over them. It was that gritty, awful, unshakable feeling, deep in his gut, that things would just keep snowballing, just keep going wrong, until they spiraled down to the bottom a black hole where life merged with hell. This one was jinxed—he was convinced of it now. He wasn't a superstitious man, but then again, he could only ignore the signs for so long. He wanted out of it already. He wanted any other mission except for this one. And ironically, he was the one in charge.

Not that he planned on losing, or backing down. He didn't. He'd get whatever the hell it was his bosses needed, find a way to keep his men safe, and make it back. But the more things progressed, the more he started to wonder if victory—whatever that was—was even possible.

"Sir?" came a voice.

Peterson looked over. Tag was looking at him with that wide-eyed expression he always had after he'd asked a question twice, and Peterson hadn't responded.

Peterson snapped back into it. He saw all his team looking at him, all still pumped up from the battle.

He looked down and saw that that airfield was already becoming a dot on the horizon.

"Where to now, sir?" Tag asked again, glancing back and forth between Peterson and the controls.

Peterson thought.

"How much gas did you manage to fill?"

"We got lucky. Nearly full. But now the gauges are already reading three quarters of a tank. We're still losing gas, sir. I don't know how fast."

"Didn't find the leak?" Peterson knew the answer but was choosing to blame Tag for his failure.

Tag looked over to Spooky. If looks could talk, Tag would be ripping Spooky's head off.

Peterson returned to thought. Armstrong edged up beside him, as he always did in times of trouble. The two of them had been through it all together, and Armstrong had always been one of his closest friends. It felt good to have him at his side. But still, Armstrong liked to overstep his authority, to offer an opinion when it wasn't his to give. He always thought that because they were friends, he could get away with it. But on a mission, they weren't friends. Peterson was boss.

"Maybe we should head back to base, get a new bird." came Armstrong's deep bass voice.

Peterson turned and gave him a hard look. But Armstrong didn't back down. He was too tough of a soldier. And too anti-authoritarian.

"We're not going back," Peterson said in an extra loud voice, with as much authority as he could muster. "We are proceeding with our mission."

"But you heard the man," Armstrong said, "we ain't got the fuel."

“We’ve got enough fuel to make it somewhere,” Peterson said, and that’s exactly where we’re going to go. As close to the destination as we can get. From there, we’ll figure it out.”

Dr. Washington chimed in, shaking his head. “I don’t like it.”

“Well then it’s a good thing you’re not in command,” Peterson said coldly.

Dr. Washington got the message and slinked back to his seat.

Peterson could feel all eyes on him.

“I’m changing the flight plan,” Peterson announced. “I know it’s not as direct, but we’re not going to fly out over the ocean. If we go down out there, we’re toast. I’d rather fight my way against those things than go down in the ocean.”

Peterson unfolded a map and surveyed the landscape around them. He held out his compass and checked the horizon.

“I want you to cut over Manhattan. Cross the rivers, then we’ll fly over Long Island. We’ll have land beneath us, all the way. And gas stations, if we’re lucky. And if we go down, at least we’ll have a fighting chance.”

“But that’s too dangerous,” Angelo chimed in. “We can’t fly over the city. We go down there, we’re done.”

Peterson felt his anger rising. A little chaos and now everyone thought they were in charge.

“And you can’t just go changing the flight plans,” Dr. Washington chimed in. “Not without approval from HQ.”

Now Peterson really felt pestered. Armstrong’s initial challenge of his authority was breaking down the entire chain of command.

“Other planes could collide into us,” Dr. Washington continued. “The sky is still full of traffic.”

“Have you seen any other birds yet?” Peterson asked Dr. Washington, staring him down.

Washington paused. “Well, no, not exactly—”

“Then shut your mouth,” Peterson snapped. “I’m the one giving the orders here. You’re the one taking them.”

Dr. Washington finally leaned back, as did Armstrong.

“We’re flying over the city, then over Long Island, and that’s the end of it. Tag, keep trying the radio, and Spooky, keep checking the satellites. Find us a damn connection however you have to.”

“Yes, sir,” Tag said, as he adjusted the controls and altered the direction of the chopper.

As Peterson leaned back into his seat and settled in, he stared out at the horizon. In the back of his mind, he had only the slightest awareness that Spooky hadn’t formally answered him. It bothered him a bit, but he was distracted. He had much more important things on his mind. And anyway, everything about Spooky bothered him.

* * * * *

As they flew east, right into morning sun, Peterson sat on the edge of the chopper, his legs dangling over, his hand resting on his machine gun, just like he used to when heading into battle. Behind him, he could hear soft Islamic prayers

coming from Ishmael, who was kneeling and bowing on his small carpet, praying. Despite himself, Peterson kind of liked it. It distracted him.

Sharon came over and took a seat beside him, dangling her legs out, too. She didn't look at him, but instead looked out at the horizon, then down at the changing landscape. He liked sitting beside her, like they used to do. They usually never spoke. They didn't have to. They both knew what the other was thinking. In a different life, and in a different place, they'd be together. Maybe settle down, have some kids. Some normalcy.

But in this lifetime, it just wasn't meant to be. They both just weren't wired that way. They were professional soldiers. Assets to be used by the government. It ran in their very DNA. They were born into violence, trained to be warriors, and ordered to be on the hunt. A life of sitting still just wasn't meant to be for either of them.

"You made a good call," she said, still looking ahead.

He turned and looked at her, but she didn't look back.

"You mean, not heading back?" he asked.

She nodded, expressionless, still not looking his way.

He nodded back, grateful for at least one consenting opinion.

"Next time we go down, I'm not taking any chances," she said. "If one of these men makes another mistake, I'm not letting them risk this mission. Just so you know where I stand," she said, a hard edge to her voice.

That was Sharon. Always the cold, formal, professional warrior. She was a hard woman to get close to. But he loved her for that.

"I already know," he said.

Beneath them, the skyline changed as they crossed the Hudson River. Peterson looked down and saw the George Washington Bridge spread out before them. He couldn't believe it. Black smoke rose in patches, originating from blazing fires. It was completely logjammed with cars, and worse, the cars were smashed into each other, chaotically wedge into the barriers, twisted in impossible directions. Many of the car doors were just wide open. The cars had been abandoned. The bridge was useless. He could make out a unit of soldiers on the bridge, holding a line, firing their machine guns. They looked like National Guard.

They were shooting at hordes of zombies, hundreds and hundreds of zombies, walking up and down the bridge between the cars. What was once a functioning bridge between New York and New Jersey was now a freaking war zone.

If things were this bad already, before they'd even crossed the city line, Peterson could only imagine what would be in store on the island of Manhattan.

"Holy shit," came the Puerto Rican-tinged voice. It was Angelo. "There is the Bronx, homey," he said, "or what's left of it. That's where I was raised. Those are my people."

"You mean were your people," Cash said, as they flew over another war zone of what was once the Bronx.

"Yo, shut the fuck up," Angelo said.

Cash just smiled back.

Below them, the Bronx was, indeed, a war zone. Cars were strewn everywhere, and the streets were occupied by zombies and people running in all directions. Sweeping fires dotted the Bronx, coughing up plumes of black smoke. Police and

fire sirens flashed, seemingly lighting up the entire borough. Peterson spotted the occasional military unit holding an intersection, but that was the exception. Chaos was the rule. And those things ruled.

Peterson glanced nervously at the gas tank, praying that they weren't anywhere close to empty. The last thing he needed was to crash down here.

But the gauge read half a tank. The news was bad. At this rate, there is no way they'd reach Plum Island. They'd have to find more gas somewhere pretty soon. But at least they wouldn't go down here.

Peterson watched as they flew over the city, then over the East River, then over the Brooklyn Bridge, which was in the same disarray as the George Washington Bridge.

It was really everywhere.

* * * * *

Peterson closed his eyes, just for what he thought was a minute. But when he opened them and looked out, he realized the sun was already high in the sky, that they had already cleared Brooklyn and Queens. They were already flying over Long Island.

The urban landscape had given way to a suburban one, perfectly laid out on the grid below. The concrete gave way to a plethora of trees, lawns, parks, and perfectly manicured small towns. Yet still, while it was a lot prettier, the streets here were also empty, cars abandoned. It didn't look like they had fared any better.

Peterson surveyed the chopper and saw that his teammates were awake, each staring out into space, each lost in their own world. He wondered what was going through their minds, if they were looking down and thinking of their family members, their own hometowns. Of all the wars he had been in, this one was by far the most demoralizing, the most psychologically destructive. He couldn't reliably trust the state of mind of any of his soldiers. How could he? They might each have nothing left to live for.

They had all settled into a comfortable, tense silence, bracing themselves privately for whatever might come next. Based on what they had already encountered, they all knew that, whatever it was, it could only get much worse.

Peterson, just for a moment, thought he heard a soft moaning noise. He assumed he'd imagined it. He was just replaying in his head the nightmare of the scenes before.

But then it came again. He was sure of it this time.

His eyes opened wide, alert.

He looked all around again, but everything seemed fine.

As Peterson looked back again, this time toward the cockpit, he noticed that Spooky was leaning over toward Tag, as if to whisper something in his ear. He wondered what they could be talking about. Was Spooky trying to suggest a change of flight plan? Had they spotted a gas station below?

Before Peterson could get his answer, he was shocked to see Spooky lean over further, even closer to Tag, as if he were about to kiss him. What the hell was going on?

It was at that moment, in that split second, that Peterson realized. He suddenly caught a glimpse of Spooky's profile, saw his face up close, how pale it was, how inhumanly pale. He also suddenly smelled it: the smell of rotting flesh. He looked closer and saw the craziness, the inhuman wildness in Spooky's eyes. They were the eyes of a roving shark—emotionless, lifeless, and with just one thing on its mind: to feed.

Before Peterson could react, in that split second, Spooky leaned down, all the way, and sunk his teeth deep into Tag's arm.

Tag shrieked in surprise and agony, and Spooky leaned back with a mammoth chunk of his flesh in his mouth.

Peterson jumped into action, but before he could get very far, the chopper suddenly jerked and swerved wildly. Tag, even being the veteran pilot that he was, wasn't prepared for this. He was clearly in shock, and in agony, and as he went to push Spooky off of him, he lost control of the bird. It spun hard to the left, throwing Peterson across it. He banged his head hard against the metal casing and found himself on the far side of chopper.

Peterson rebounded, determined to make it to the cockpit, to stop Spooky from attacking again, to help stabilize the bird. But he couldn't risk firing in this situation; he reached down and extracted his knife, knowing that would be the safest way to kill the thing that Spooky had become.

The chopper stabilized just for a second, just long enough for Peterson to launch into action. But as he was preparing to attack, suddenly, Ishmael appeared, his pistol already drawn and aiming right for Spooky's face.

"NO!" Peterson yelled.

But it was too late. Ishmael fired.

The bullet went right through Spooky's temple, and chips of skull and blood splattered on the windshield. Ishmael, in his nervousness, didn't just fire once—but kept on firing.

Exactly what Peterson was afraid of. The bullets went right through Spooky and pierced the dashboard in several places. Within moments, the chopper reacted, jerking even more wildly than before. The controls had been hit. Alarms sounded, lights flashed, and the chopper began to spin wildly in circles as it plummeted.

Peterson turned around and grabbed Ishmael's pistol, long and hard enough to get him to snap out of it and stop firing. As his vision spun with the chopper's whirling descent, he managed to squeeze into the copilot seat himself, sit on top of Spooky's dead body, and grab the controls, fighting to stabilize the bird.

It helped. The spinning slowed. But still, there was not much he could do. They were going down. And fast.

At least it could be a somewhat controlled crash. Peterson was able to stabilize it just enough to slow the descent speed, to make sure they didn't land upside down.

As he looked down, he saw the ground approaching fast. He saw a field and leaned into the controls, aiming for it. Too fast. This wouldn't be good. He hoped that maybe, just maybe, he could slow the bird just enough so that it wouldn't kill all of them on impact. Death flashed before his eyes.

Chapter 11

Peterson braced himself, protecting his head, instinctually putting himself into crash-landing position as the ground came forward.

It did little good. They hit with a tremendous crash, and he felt himself flip, his back slamming into the windshield. The chopper spun again and again, and his world turned upside down.

It was complete mayhem—and the spinning never seemed to end. As Peterson's world finally slowed just enough for him to get a glimpse, a flash, of what was happening, he saw they were on the ground, that the chopper was breaking apart, and that what was left of it was skidding on the ground.

The chopper kept sliding, at a speed faster than any car he'd ever been in, and it didn't seem to want to slow down. The rotors were still spinning like crazy, cutting into the ground. Peterson managed to look up through the broken windshield, and saw what they were sliding toward. They were about to smash head-on into a large marble statue of what looked like a Civil War general. It was absurd. At the last second, he crouched down and braced himself again.

There was a stomach-turning crack as they slammed into it, and Peterson found himself again flying forward, and felt his head cut into a metal casing, as the wind was completely knocked out of him. He heard the screams of his fellow passengers as bodies went flying everywhere, some on top of each other, and someone seemed to disappear out of the chopper. He heard the rotors snap, the nauseating noise of metal on metal, and the sound of the blades breaking apart and flying in every direction.

And then, after about thirty seconds of hell on earth, all seemed to finally die down.

All that was left was quiet. Deathly, unreal quiet. Peterson felt his world go black.

* * * * *

Peterson saw his hands bleeding as he picked berries under his father's cruel eyes. The images flashing through his mind were dreamlike, surreal. There was a scream. Just thirteen years old now, Peterson was kneeling beside a water well, reaching down. Twenty feet down was his little brother, Charlie, splashing and trying to stay afloat.

Peterson was crying, pleading, "Keep fighting, Charlie, keep fighting!"

"Save me, Jacob. Save me." Charlie was using his last breath.

He had never felt so helpless in his life, before or again. He would have given his life for his little brother. He best friend. Peterson always tried to look over him. And, most of all, to protect him from their father. "I love you, Charlie," said Peterson, as if sensing it was the end.

"Please save me," Charlie begged again.

"I can't reach you." Peterson could barely catch his breath between his tears.

"It was Dad," Charlie said and then disappeared under the water...

* * * * *

White light filled Peterson's vision. He yanked himself up, more pain in his head that he'd just about ever felt. His world was blurry and his eyes stung. Blood was running into them. It took a few long moments to orient himself.

He got a hold of his bearings just enough to survey the situation. Spooky, of course, was dead, his brains blown out. It was his corpse that had probably acted like an airbag for Peterson. Tag had smashed his head into the windshield too, pretty bad, but Peterson saw him moaning and knew he wasn't dead—at least not yet. He looked with concern at the chunk of flesh bitten out of his arm and knew that, even if he survived this, he couldn't live for long. Peterson's first thought was stone cold—*So much for our pilot*. But then he immediately felt bad. Though Peterson didn't like Tag, he was still one of his men, and he felt responsible for his well-being.

Peterson spun around and looked for the others. Armstrong was on the floor, curled up into a fetal position, holding his leg. Peterson looked down and saw a piece of smoking steel sticking out of it.

Johnny-Boy and Angelo were sandwiched together in the back, wedged between two seats. Dr. Washington was not moving, eyes shut. And as Peterson looked out the cabin, he saw Ishmael. He was on the ground. He had fallen out, or had been thrown out, and what was left of him lay on the grass. A rotary blade had severed him. He was cut clean in two. Dead. At least it had been quick for him, and painless. Maybe his prayers had worked.

Peterson spun in the other direction, looking everywhere for Sharon. He was shaken to see that she wasn't anywhere inside the chopper.

He stepped forward and looked out, and there she was, on the grass, on the other side. He couldn't believe it. She looked completely fine. In fact, she had already taken up a position, kneeling there with her loaded gun, fixed on the horizon. Incredible. She had already established a perimeter around the crash site. He shook his head. Somehow, he wasn't surprised. She was the toughest of all them. The most disciplined. There was Armstrong, a 260-pound black man, lying curled up on the floor like a baby—while there was Sharon, a five-foot-six girl, without a scratch, already armed and ready to fight.

Peterson broke into action. He knew there wasn't much time. He heard the hissing and leaking noises coming from the bird and saw smoke rising from its engine. It could be in flames in moments.

"SHARON!" he yelled.

She turned.

"Let go of the perimeter! I need you here!"

She looked at him reluctantly, and he wondered why she was hesitating.

Then he looked out and saw it. Approaching them, already, were countless zombies. Maybe fifty yards away, they were well spread out, however, and closing in slowly. She was holding the line.

Reluctantly, she turned and ran to the chopper, bounding in, ready to help.

"Can you walk?" Peterson asked Armstrong, looking down at him.

Armstrong held out a hand and Peterson pulled him up. He got to his feet, wobbly, limping badly from the shrapnel. Armstrong looked down, grabbed the piece of steel in his thigh and, with both hands, tore it out with a shriek. He then

dropped the hot piece of metal and it landed with a clink on the floor of the chopper.

“Now I can,” he said, as he wrapped a bandana tightly around his wound.

With that, he stumbled his way out of the chopper, grabbing his assault rifle and flame thrower as he did.

“Guard our flank,” Peterson ordered. “Those creatures are closing in.”

Sharon helped Peterson pull out Angelo and Johnny-Boy, both wedged in the seats, both moaning in pain. They were lodged in with the force of God. But Peterson and Sharon pulled with all they had and managed to pry them loose. The left side of Angelo’s head looked unnaturally large, horribly swollen. It looked painful as hell. But he bore it well, grabbed his gun, and hobbled out of the chopper with Johnny-Boy, dazed, by his side.

“Go guard our flank at twelve o’clock. MOVE!” Peterson yelled.

There was no better way, he knew, to take a soldier’s mind off of a wound than to give them an order.

“I got Tag,” Peterson said to Sharon. “You get Dr. Washington.”

Peterson grabbed Tag, dragged him out of the cockpit, and threw him over his shoulder. Sharon grabbed the unconscious Washington and lifted him over hers. The two of them, burdened down with weight, ran toward the others.

“Cash,” Peterson suddenly realized. “Where the hell is Cash?”

“Right here, Commander,” Cash said.

Peterson spun and saw Cash standing there, his right arm blackened, charred. It didn’t seem to bother him a bit, however. He had a big smile on his face.

“My kind of landing,” he said with a grin.

Of course. It would be.

Peterson quickly surveyed the situation and calculated scenarios. It appeared as though they had landed in a neighborhood park. A playground was off to their right. The chopper was about to blow, and the zombies were closing in now from several directions.

“THIS WAY!” Peterson yelled. “MOVE!”

Peterson bore the burden of Tag on his shoulders and moved as quickly as he could, heading south, the one direction in which they weren’t being approached by zombies. The others followed, limping, carrying each other. The ragtag group moved as quickly as they could thirty yards away from the chopper, then fifty...

And then it blew.

The concussion from the blast threw them off their feet, and face first into the ground. A tremendous explosion ripped out, sending heat and flames and shrapnel in every possible direction. Peterson felt a piece of metal whiz over his head, and thanked God that he’d pushed his face all the way down, deep into the dirt. An instinct he developed from years of combat.

The waves of heat seemed to go on forever, wave after wave, and the noise was deafening. Seconds later, when it finally stopped, shrapnel rained down from the sky, like manna from heaven.

Finally, it quieted down.

They all sat up, looked at each other, and took stock. Luckily, they were just far enough away. No one was hurt from the explosion—except the incoming zombies.

Many had been blown to shreds. Others struggled on their backs, like turtles turned upside down, while some were still walking, engulfed by fire, ablaze, burning like human torches as they wobbled, directionless.

“WOOHOOO!” Cash yelled, jumping to his feet with laughter. “LET’S DO THAT AGAIN!!!”

Tag sat up weakly. “Holy shit,” was all he could say.

Peterson’s relief quickly turned to worry. There was a new battle line of zombies closing in. There were just too many of them. Kill ten infected, and suddenly twenty appeared to take their place. Peterson noticed something, but had to blink twice. A horrified look crossed his face. He was looking at Ishmael. Now he was just a torso, and using his hands to crawl his way toward them. He was back from the dead already.

“Ishmael?” Johnny-Boy asked, in disbelief, as they all stared in horror.

“It’s not him anymore,” Armstrong said. “He’s something else now.”

“Yeah,” Cash said, stepping forward and raising his pistol. “Target practice.”

Cash fired a single shot right to Ishmael’s head, killing him on impact.

“You son of a bitch!” Johnny-Boy yelled. “He’s one of us!”

“Like hell it was,” Cash said.

“SHUT UP!” Peterson snapped and looked at Johnny-Boy. “He was dead, and we will be too if don’t deal with our situation.”

Peterson quickly took stock. He saw that they’d landed in some suburban town, right in the center of it, in some town park. It was a bad situation. He saw that they were surrounded by countless zombies. He’d already lost two men, with a third on the way. The others were wounded. They were without a pilot, without a chopper, and without any additional weaponry or food or medicine, with whatever they’d had left in the chopper blown to bits. Whatever they were hauling on their backs and in their hands was all they had.

He scanned the horizon, looking for something, anything, some destination, some place they could go. They needed to take cover.

“OVER HERE!” suddenly came a voice. The voice had been carried on a megaphone, from some far-off location.

Peterson wheeled and saw it. There, in the distance—a municipal town parking lot which was completely barricaded by a strong eight-foot metal fence, and inside of it stood a large group of people, survivors. Humans. Alive, like them. Peterson could see that among them were some local policemen, and one of them stood on a crate, facing them, holding a megaphone.

“OVER HERE!” he yelled again. “MAKE IT TO THE GATE!”

Peterson surveyed the situation. They were about 300 yards off, and if they beelined for it, they might just make it. They’d have to cut their way through hundreds of zombies, but they had little choice.

Peterson watched as Sharon pulled a small first aid kit out of her backpack. From it she drew a syringe. Dr. Washington was on his knees, next to her, holding his head and still reeling from the chopper crash. She stabbed him in the bicep with the needle. It only took moments and then Washington’s eyes opened wide and he stood up on his feet.

Good idea, thought Peterson, she’s using adrenaline.

Tag was holding onto Peterson for support. But not for long. Sharon didn't waste any time as she approached them, syringe in hand. She did the same to Tag, stabbing him in the arm with the needle and pushing the plunger all the way down. It looked like the adrenaline went straight to his heart as he stood on his own two feet.

"That will get your heart pounding, soldier," Sharon said with a taste of satisfaction.

"Damn right," Tag replied, catching his breath.

The population of zombies around them was becoming increasingly dense, and their numbers multiplying. "TO THE PARKING LOT!" Peterson yelled. "MOVE OUT!"

The team maneuvered into cover and flank position, and then moved as a single unit, heading to the far-off parking lot. Just ahead of them was a thick line of zombies. There was no way around them. In all other directions they were completely encircled by these things. They'd just have to fight whatever stood in their way.

Peterson raised his pistol and took careful aim and began firing, up close, into the crowd. He aimed for their heads and, knowing that he had twenty-five rounds per clip, he counted his shots. He blasted one zombie after the next, and their bodies fell to the ground like wet sacks.

Beside him, his teammates did the same. As experts, they ignored their pain and maintained perfect composure. Walking steadily toward the zombies, they remained in complete control, conserving their ammunition and aiming for the heads of the infected only. The cracking of their machine guns overlapped, their barrels flashed, and empty shells cartridges spit from their rifles.

They began to clear a path. Zombie after zombie fell. They marched forward without hesitation and found themselves at point-blank range, and face to face with the infected. Peterson got closer, within several feet, and pulled out his knife. Friendly fire now became a threat. It was going to have to be hand-to-hand from here on in.

Peterson felt a bile of rage fill his gut and, surprising himself, he charged directly into the crowd. He stabbed the closest zombie, thrusting his knife through its skull. Blood spurted as the creature's eyes rolled into the back of its head. Others reached out to try to claw him, to grab him, to scratch him. He spun around and kicked one in the chest. It rebounded backwards, knocking over several other zombies as it fell. His team had charged with him, and were doing the same. Kicking, stabbing, and using the butt of their rifles to smash skulls.

Peterson noticed Cash, that maniac, whip out a machete from God knows where. Peterson was happy he had it now. Cash, with a wicked swing, chopped the head clear off a zombie, and then brought the machete down overhand into the skull of another. It was as if he were chopping coconuts, as if it were the most natural thing in the world and he'd been doing it his whole life.

Peterson and his team busted their way out of the crowd. The parking lot was right ahead. He was proud of their team; they kicked some zombie ass.

They sprinted for the parking lot, with nothing left between them.

"Commander!" came Sharon's yell.

He spun and looked. Cash was still standing back there with his machete, chopping at the heads of the zombies left and right. He was smiling with delight, and laughing out loud. He didn't seem to care that he'd lost track of the team, that the zombies were getting closer and closer to him. That it was a losing battle. He was like a kid in a candy store, having a great time.

"CASH!" Peterson yelled.

Reluctantly, Cash finally looked toward Peterson.

"Don't wait!" Peterson yelled to the rest of his team, and they all took off as one, all continued running for the lot, Cash about twenty yards behind them.

Cash, he realized, was more than a maniac. He was a self-sabotaging maniac with a death wish. He was now a liability.

"THIS WAY!" came the voice on the megaphone.

As the team bee-lined for the parking lot, they saw that the fence which surrounded it was under attack by zombies in every direction, trying to get in. There was only one entrance, around which clustered a dozen more zombies. He saw that the police were standing on the other side of it, getting ready to let them in.

Peterson knew immediately that the entrance could only be opened for a few moments, that they'd have to get in quick as the cops shut it behind them. He also saw that they couldn't risk firing on the crowd of zombies congregating around it, given the proximity of all cops. He prayed that these cops weren't amateur enough to try fire themselves. Their bullets would hit Peterson and his men as much as they would the zombies.

Peterson waved to Cash, who reluctantly began to fight his way toward the parking lot.

Peterson was conflicted. Should he wait? He wanted to, but the rest of his team needed him more.

He turned and ran toward the parking lot, the air burning his lungs with every step he took. Out of breath, he neared the crowd of creatures at the front of the gate. His energy was wearing thin. Getting into this parking lot was going to be harder than he first thought.

"I'VE GOT THIS!" Armstrong yelled, as he stepped to the front of pack. He extracted his flamethrower from his back and held it out in firing position.

"WAIT" Peterson yelled to Armstrong, and then turned toward the cops. "GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY!"

The cops saw the flame thrower. Their eyes widened with fear and they scrambled for cover as if their lives depended upon it.

A wicked flame licked from the barrel. Armstrong pulled the trigger, leaning into the flamethrower with all he had. A jet of gasoline pissed from the barrel and landed on the infected. They burst into flames. The putrid smell of burning flesh and hair filled Peterson's nostrils as the zombies moaned and shrieked and scrambled every which way.

Moments later, a pathway to the entrance was available.

The local cops burst into action and opened the gate. The shadow team ran through it and entered the parking lot, but Peterson stopped and turned. Cash wasn't with them.

He was about twenty feet behind, trying to make his way for the parking lot. He shouldered one zombie out of the way and swung his machete as another zombie clawed and grabbed at him. There were just too many of them. A zombie from behind Cash opened its mouth. It was about to bite down.

Suddenly, a bullet entered the zombie's right eye, blowing its brains out. Peterson turned and saw Angelo, smoke rising from his sniper rifle.

"Move your ass, amigo," Angelo said under his breath.

He'd just saved Cash's ass.

Cash sprinted clear of the remaining infected and directly through the opening of the gate. Peterson, the last man, followed him into the parking lot.

Once inside, the cops slammed close the gate behind him.

A group of about six local cops and three state troopers stood looking at Peterson with a combination of fear and respect.

A tall, brawny cop with gray hair, who looked old enough to be on the verge of retirement, stepped forward, "Sheriff Jones," he said, introducing himself with a nod.

Peterson didn't nod back.

"Commander Peterson."

Chapter 12

Peterson and his team followed Sheriff Jones as he led them through the crowd of civilians.

"It's been nearly forty-eight hours now," Jones said, as they wound their way across the cement parking lot and through the masses. "We got hit pretty hard. Just like everybody else. One day everything was fine, the next, everything went to hell. Most of the town got wiped out. We're all that's left."

He began to choke up as he spoke.

"I've never seen anything like it. Kids turning against parents. Husbands against wives." He shook his head. "People got bit, then they... turn... then... it was like we couldn't recognize them anymore..."

"Me and my officers, we took over this parking lot and rescued whoever we could. It was the only safe place I could find at the time. I had to make a decision. People were dying on the streets, and they had no place to go. This lot was right in the center of town, and it has this fence to keep them out."

Peterson looked around. Some of the civilians were armed, and they followed at a little distance behind him. Spread all about were about fifty more civilians. They looked like they'd been through a war. There seemed to be a general state of despair and shock. Most of them just sat there, staring into space, heads lying on their knees. Others openly wept.

Some, though, stood as Peterson and his men walked by them. Hope in their eyes, they looked at Peterson and the team as if, perhaps, they were salvation.

"God bless you. Thank you," came the voice of a heavyset man. "I'm the mayor. Thank God you're here." He had the stink of a politician.

Peterson didn't respond. A civilian man approached, holding the hand of his wife.

"We knew you would come. Where are the rest of you?"

Peterson stopped and blinked hard. It struck him. *These folks think we are here for them.* Peterson wasn't sure yet how to respond, so he kept walking.

He surveyed the area and saw the zombies outside the fence, all reaching up and grabbing it, sticking their faces against it, trying to get inside. They moaned and snarled and pulled the metal. It swayed and bent hard under the weight.

There were hundreds of them. Peterson could hardly believe it. They were on all sides of the fence, pulling and tearing at it every which way. He felt like he was an animal trapped in a giant zoo.

It was disconcerting, to say the least.

Peterson looked even closer at the joints of the fence for signs of strain or tear. The fence was giving way. It wouldn't hold much longer.

"You can't stay here much longer," Peterson warned.

"My thinking exactly," Jones said. "We need to make a run for it. I don't know how much longer this fence will hold. I've got people here who are sick and hungry. We're out of food and low on ammo. We have no shelter from the sun, and they're getting burned. We need a real shelter. And we need medicine. And a place that might not get knocked down any second. You guys came at the perfect time. We need to break out of here."

"We need to make for the school," came a low, heavy voice.

Peterson turned, and saw a tall stocky man standing over him, a state trooper donning a handlebar mustache, dark sunglasses, and knee-high boots.

"I'm Trooper Willis," he introduced himself. "It's our best bet. The school's got a cafeteria. Bound to have some food. And we can defend it."

Sheriff Jones shook his head. "But it's too damn far," he said.

"No it's not," Trooper Willis countered, exasperated.

"It's a good mile away," Jones continued. "A few might make it. But the sick and the elderly... we just can't get everyone there."

Peterson looked around carefully, not choosing sides. Frankly, this wasn't his concern. He had his own men to look out for, his own mission to fulfill. He just needed to take stock, to figure out his next move.

"Where are we?" Peterson asked. "What town is this?"

"Coram," said Jones.

Peterson nodded, thinking. Coram. Long Island. Far enough out there, maybe Suffolk County, but not far enough to get them where they needed to go. It would still be a long haul to make it from here to the island.

Peterson's men crowded around him.

"Coram," Cash said. "Shit."

"We're still a good way off, Commander," Dr. Washington piped in.

Jones looked at Cash, and then at the other members of the team.

For the first time, Sheriff Jones noticed that they were an unusual-looking group. "What force are you with?" Sheriff Jones quizzically asked.

"I wish I could say, Sheriff," Peterson said, noncommittally.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter," Sheriff Jones responded. "At least you made it to us."

Peterson wasn't sure how to break the news. However, he didn't have to. The expression on his face said it all.

Trooper Willis was very observant. "You're not here for us, are you?" he asked.

Sheriff Jones was shocked at the idea. "Tell me this isn't true, Commander."

"It is correct," Peterson said, his voice dropped.

A tense silence filled the air.

Sheriff Jones finally caught his breath. "We were told the military was coming to help us. We've been waiting." The tinge of hope that first rang in his voice was now gone, deflated.

"Then I suggest you hold on," Dr. Washington spoke down to the sheriff. "Because we ain't it."

"We just saved your asses." Anger rose in Jones's voice.

Peterson looked around. "You pulled us into a death trap. We would have been better off out there."

Sheriff Jones's resentment continued to grow. "Well, whatever your mission was, your chopper is down, and your men are hurt, so clearly, you need to abandon it. Your mission is our mission now. We're all in this together. And our mission right now is to survive. And to get these civilians to some food, water, shelter, and medicine. Like it or not, you're with us."

"The police station won't work," a third cop said. "It's too small and doesn't have food."

"But it's close," Sheriff Jones countered, "and it has weapons and ammo. We can all find a way to fit. And our first task is finding shelter. Once we secure it, we can figure out how to get food."

"Bullshit," snapped Trooper Willis.

"So, what's your opinion, Commander?" Sheriff Jones asked. "Do we try to make a run to the school? Or to the police station?"

"I appreciate your dilemma, gentlemen," Peterson responded, "but as I said, we won't be sticking around."

"You have no God damn choice. What the hell are you going to do? You barely made it in here alive. Your men are hurt, and you have no fucking place to go." Sheriff Jones was on the verge of yelling.

"As I said, we're on a mission. And I intend to fulfill that mission. I'm sorry, but our orders don't allow for distractions. We have to move on."

Jones laughed. "And how you gonna do that? Your bird is down. You think you can just walk out of here? Have you looked out there? There are hundreds of those things. There's eight of you. And where do you go after that?"

"I told you, it's classified."

Jones's stare turned cold. "So, is that it? Is this just about you? You just gonna let these people die?"

Peterson suddenly felt a tug on his sleeve and looked down to see a boy, about ten years old, standing there. Peterson was struck, as if seeing a ghost. The boy looked exactly like Charlie, his deceased little brother. His eyes were exactly the same. The breath left Peterson's lungs.

"I'm scared. Please, save me?"

Peterson's heart was in his throat. He was looking at the spit image of his little brother. "What is your name, son?" he asked.

“Doug,” his little voice answered.

The voice of Peterson’s little brother rang in his ears... *Save me.*

Peterson surveyed the crowd again. Most of the civilians were standing now, looking at him. He saw all the desperate and hopeful faces. A priest stepped forward.

“We’ve overheard you, Commander. You didn’t come here for us. We understand and we won’t cast stones if you choose to go on your way. But, maybe, sir, you send us help when you can?”

A voice rang out from the crowd. “Please sir, please. We’re going to all die here.”

“We won’t survive without you,” the mayor pleaded.

Then the rest of the crowd joined in, begging Peterson to help.

“We need your help, Commander,” Sheriff Jones said. “I’ve only got a few officers here. If we bust out without you, a lot of good people are gonna get hurt and killed. With your help, we can make it somewhere. You guys are better trained, and better armed.” His voice softened. “Please. I’m asking you for a favor.”

Peterson surveyed the crowd again. Then he looked back at the ghost of his brother, at little Doug.

Something moved deep inside of him.

“Yes, Doug,” he said, finally. “I’m going to do my best.”

Peterson then turned to Sheriff Jones. “You got us. But we’re just going to get you out of here and get you to your next spot. Then we’re done.”

“Commander,” Armstrong interjected, “that’s a bad idea. Those are not our orders. We have to stay on track with our mission.”

“This is absolutely unacceptable,” Dr. Washington complained. “I’m on direct orders from our government. You have no authority to take this side trip anywhere. I outrank you, Commander. You have to submit to my rank.”

Peterson turned and gave Washington a steely glance.

“You can go off on any mission you want, Washington,” Peterson said. “I’m not stopping you.”

Washington gulped, realizing that without Peterson and his men, he would be helpless.

Peterson turned back to Sheriff Jones.

“I assume this town has a hospital?”

Jones looked back at him, then slowly nodded.

“Mercy Hospital. It’s about a mile down the road. The last I heard, it was overrun.”

“Well, that’s where we’re taking you,” Peterson said.

“That’s a bad idea,” Jones said. “It’s a huge facility. We can’t possibly secure all of it.”

“We’d get killed in that place!” interjected another cop.

“How are you gonna secure a building like that?”

“We don’t have to,” came a voice. She was an attractive woman with short hair, in her late twenties. She turned to Peterson.

“My name is Nurse Dee. I work at Mercy Hospital.” Her voice was tough, and Peterson liked that. “The basement was once an old World War II bunker. It was converted for storage a long time ago. We keep a lot of stuff down there, including food, water, and medicine.”

“That basement is for shit, Nurse Dee.” Sheriff Jones turned to Peterson. “It’s seventy years old and no more than an old, beaten-up basement.”

Trooper Willis had a tone to his voice which annoyed the hell out of Peterson. “When everybody got sick, they went to the hospital. That place will be crawling with these things, Commander. It will be a downright crazy idea.”

“If we’re going to do this, lets do it right,” Peterson said. “It has safety, and sounds like a good supply of food, water, and medicine. My men could use it, too—I’ve got some wounded. It makes the most sense. That’s where we’re going.”

“Who made you leader, Commander?” Sheriff Jones said.

Peterson just stared back, calmly. “You want our help?”

Jones looked back, clearly defeated.

“Then from now on you’ll take orders from me. And so will your men.”

Chapter 13

Peterson’s team, the cops, and ten armed civilians all huddled around Peterson as he laid out the plan.

“We’re going to use that eighteen-wheeler.” Peterson turned and pointed to a large truck. The cabin was painted with red and yellow flames, and a shiny metal skull was mounted on its hood. “How is it on gas?”

“It’s my truck, sir,” came a voice. It was a civilian, in his mid-forties, wearing a cowboy hat and holding an eight-gauge shotgun—an elephant killer. He stepped forward. “At your service. It’s running on fumes.”

“How much distance do you think she’s got left?” inquired Peterson.

“Not much, soldier,” the cowboy said as he scratched his five-o’clock shadow. “She can give up at any time.”

“Well,” Peterson said, “all we need is for your truck to make it about five hundred feet. Running on fumes will have to do. I will need you to drive it, and a volunteer to ride shotgun.” Peterson’s voice was confident and direct. “It’s going to be risky.”

“What’s the idea, Commander?” Trooper Willis demanded.

Peterson shot Willis a hard glance. He didn’t like being questioned.

“The truck is going to ram right through the front gate, and, like a wrecking ball, will hammer a passageway right through those things.”

“Good idea,” the trucker said with some eagerness in his voice.

“Good, Cowboy.” Peterson liked this guy. He looked up at the rest of the armed civilians. “And who will ride shotgun?”

Another civilian stepped forward. He looked like a member of a motorcycle gang. He had a thick beard and mustache, long hair, and was wearing sunglasses. He also sported a bandana and a weather-beaten leather biker jacket. Cradled in his arms was a mean-looking machine gun.

“Call me Hatchet,” he said in a cool, unruffled voice. “I’m the man.”

“Yes, you are,” Peterson said with approval.

Kneeling down, Peterson used his finger to outline an invisible map on the cement.

“Cowboy, you’ll need to back up to the other end of the lot, right here. Then I want you to make one loop, gain speed, and then break right through the gate.” Peterson looked at Cowboy and then continued. “Keep driving right over those bastards. You got to bore us a pathway right through those walking bags of flesh, understand?”

“Understood,” Cowboy said, sounding self-assured.

Peterson turned to Sheriff Jones. “As soon as the truck is through, my team is going to move outside and blast until we establish a perimeter, at least thirty feet wide, for the civilians to bust through. Your men need to usher the civilians outside the gate, and provide suppressing fire for us. Got it?”

Sheriff Jones nodded back. He looked nervous.

“Once we make it through, I want half of the armed men up front leading the way and the other half behind, making sure our rear is covered and that no civilians get left behind. My team will hold the flanks. This way, we have firepower in all directions, and everyone is accounted for.”

“Got it,” Sheriff Jones said with a jumpy voice.

“And then what, Commander?” Trooper Willis clearly wasn’t used to being ordered around. It seemed to piss him off. “We just walk off into the sunset?”

“If you stay here, Trooper, you are all dead for sure.”

Willis gritted his teeth and grudgingly looked away, having nothing to say to that.

Peterson then surveyed the group of armed civilians. They were ragtag, ranging from an all-star-American teenager with a six-shot pistol, to an old, frail man with a rifle from World War II.

“How many of these civilians are armed?” he asked.

Sheriff Jones glanced at them. “Ten.”

“Have them fill your ranks, Sheriff. We need the fire power.”

“You men ready for this?” Sheriff Jones addressed the armed civilians.

Some didn’t respond. Others nodded back hesitantly.

“Follow my orders, hold the line, and remain side by side.”

Peterson continued, “We’re going to move as a single unit to the hospital. Put the weaker civilians in the middle. You know the way, Sheriff, so I want you up front. We take the main streets, whatever is least populated, easiest to navigate, and widest. I don’t want us getting stuck in a narrow space. Got it?”

Sheriff Jones nodded back.

“DOES EVERYONE HERE GOT IT!?” Armstrong yelled fiercely.

“YES, SIR!” came the chorus from the shadow team. A trained response which, in comparison, made law enforcement and the civilians seem like amateurs, who just mumbled and nodded their heads yes.

Peterson was concerned. Everybody had to do their jobs if this was going to work, and he was asking a lot from armed civilians and local cops. However, he also knew that there wasn’t any other option. These people had to move somewhere, and quick. On the outside, Peterson’s expression relayed belief in those around him. Inwardly, he calculated that this scheme had, at best, a fifty-percent chance of working. If it didn’t, they were all going to be devoured alive. He

was sacrificing everything—himself, his team, and the entire damn mission to save a group of civilians.

How the hell did I get into this?

“All right, round up all the civilians and hand me that megaphone. I want to talk to them.”

Sheriff Jones and his men broke into action, rounding up the crowd, herding them from all over the sprawling parking lot, and bringing them close to Peterson.

As the crowd thickened around him, Peterson stood up on a crate, raised the megaphone, and faced them. He saw the fear on their faces, the nervousness, but also some hope.

“We’re going to get you out of here,” Peterson announced. “We are all going to safety, to the hospital. It’s only a mile from here. As we leave, my men will surround you, and you will be safe within our confines. We must move together as one. No one leave our perimeter, for any reason.

“Once we reach the hospital, we will secure it, and then you will be safe, and have shelter, food, and medicine. It will not be easy getting there, but we’re all in this together. Be strong. Follow instructions carefully. I repeat: do not stray from our perimeter. Our firepower will surround you, but stay close, hold together as a pack. And no matter what happens, keep moving as fast as you can. We can only move as fast as the weakest link here. If you see someone too sick, or too slow, carry them. I want us moving in at least a trot.

“These gates are about to bust open. As soon as I give the signal, and not before, I want you to hurry through them in a fast and organized manner. Get ready.”

Peterson stepped down and handed off the megaphone.

* * * * *

Peterson and his team took positions a safe distance on either side of the gate.

“Nice job, Commander,” Angelo whispered, as he took his position by Peterson’s side.

Sharon stood across from him, determination in her eyes. She was the consummate professional, and just looking at her relaxed Peterson. Beside her stood Cash, a devilish grin on his face, his eyes wide and frenzied. He looked like he was enjoying this.

The engine of the truck turned over and revved hard. Black smoke hissed from its exhaust pipe. Peterson made eye contact with Cowboy in the driver’s seat, his eyes wide and edgy.

Peterson raised his hand like a flag. “NOW!” Peterson yelled, and brought down his hand, chopping the air.

The truck’s engine roared, and its body kicked. Cowboy started his loop around the lot. Gradually, he gained more and more speed. Everybody was holding their breath.

The truck gained some decent speed. Its wheels screeched as it turned the final bend and came fully around, aiming at the gate like a guided torpedo. The engine roared as the truck gained further speed. Twenty feet, ten feet, zero.

The fence gates buckled like paper under the force of the truck. Upon impact, like a bomb had been detonated, the gates literally ripped and flew into the air.

The crowd of zombies which were standing against the gate had no chance. Peterson was surprised as he watched the infected rebound off the truck, somersault, and twist through the air, sailing twenty feet and slapping the cement.

The infected that didn't fly away were simply driven over, flattened under the weight of the ten-ton truck. There was a revolting sound of crunching and popping bones.

The truck tore a damn bloody path right through the thick crowd of zombies, successfully opening a decent-size corridor.

Peterson didn't waste a moment. "GO!" he shouted.

Armstrong was the first outside. He fired his flamethrower to the right, spraying a long blaze across a line of zombies which stood about twenty feet away. They ruptured into a fiery wall of human flesh.

The rest of the team fell into line, each member laying down fire with fatal accuracy.

With the help of the truck, they had already established good clearance. Peterson was firing like mad, trying to widen the thick perimeter and establish even more breathing room. All around him, Sharon, Cash, and the others did the same, while Armstrong continued setting groups of the infected ablaze. The path wouldn't stay open forever, and the civilians would have to move quickly. Peterson noticed that the zombies on the outskirts, missed by the truck, began to form lines and close in. It seemed to Peterson as if they were unifying, gaining strength before striking.

Peterson spun and gave a hand signal to the waiting cops.

At that moment, all the civilians came running out into the open perimeter, surrounded by Peterson's team, which stood there, providing suppressing fire in every direction as person after person ran out of the parking lot.

Within minutes, all the civilians were out, and Sheriff Jones's men and the armed civilians broke into action. Some of them moved to the front line, while the others stayed back and held the rear. The action was going according to plan, and Peterson was hit with a rush of adrenaline that felt a lot like satisfaction.

Sheriff Jones, firing, approached Peterson at the front of the group.

"Time to move our asses," Peterson said out of the side of his mouth.

They began to jog at a good pace, and Sheriff Jones pointed which way to go. Everybody moved as one—the shadow team, cops, troopers, and civilians—following the pathway which was created by the truck, the flame thrower, and the blazing rifles.

As they ran down the street, gaining ground, it began to open up. Now the zombies' perimeter was at least fifty yards, and the group began to really pick up speed. The cracking of rifles decreased, as now less suppressing fire was needed.

The truck had run out of gas not far from the exit point, and Cowboy and Hatchet jumped out and ran, zigzagging their way over to the group. They had victorious smiles on their faces, clearly basking in victory.

"Good job, boys," Peterson said, as they got close.

Because the civilians had been encamped in that parking lot for so long, Peterson realized, all the zombies in town must have been drawn to that location, and had clustered there. That was a good thing. As they trotted down a street,

hardly any were out in the open now. They had made it out of that darn parking lot unscathed. Success.

But there was still a ways to go.

Peterson turned left, following Jones onto Main Street, and he and his men fired at an occasional roving zombie. Peterson kept checking over his shoulder to make sure the civilians were moving. They were.

They continued moving down Main Street. Peterson could tell that this was the center of a once-wealthy suburban town. But now, it looked like the aftermath of an unnatural war. The street and sidewalks were littered with abandoned cars. A Mercedes Benz was turned on its side, a Lexus was on fire, and as far as the eye could see, there was wreckage of passenger vehicles.

And all the dead bodies—the corpses of policemen, paramedics, women, men, babies—the entire town's population seemed to be spread out and dead. The stench of death was heavy in the air. And the horrible gore—intestines, severed arms and legs, heads, every body part imaginable—littered everywhere. Nothing was alive here anymore. Everybody, other than the fifty or so civilians at Peterson's back, had faced a hideous, gruesome death.

Surveying the haphazard and chaotic wreckage, Peterson realized that when catastrophe strikes, people die in the most peculiar ways, and the living can behave in ways which are equally as shocking. When panic sinks in, nothing is out of the question. Peterson was still alive, in part, because he understood this fine point. In these times, he realized, people can be equally as dangerous as the dead, and he had to be darn careful of both.

Peterson kept an eye on the rest of the team: Sharon, Johnny-Boy, Angelo, and Cash, all holding up the flanks. Sharon noticed Peterson looking at her, and she gave the "okay" sign.

In front of Peterson, from behind a stalled Mini Cooper, an infected woman appeared. "Putrid, stinking motherfuckers," came a grunt from Armstrong under his breath, as he walked up to the infected woman. He stopped just feet in front of her and shot a round point-blank, hitting her matted, greasy head. The gleaming bullet split the woman's skull right down the center. Bone chips splintered and dots of blood speckled Armstrong's face.

"What are you, stupid, Armstrong?" grunted Peterson. Armstrong was one bald, muscle-bound motherfucker, and the last person on earth one would want to call stupid. But Peterson was the only man on earth who could get away with it.

"What?" replied Armstrong, playing dumb as he simultaneously wiped the blood from his face.

"You know what will happen if you get that blood in your eyes or mouth?" exclaimed Peterson. "You're acting like you want to get infected. Put on your gas mask if you insist upon doing shit like that," Peterson ordered.

Appearing like a specter behind Armstrong was another walking dead. This female infected was full frontal naked and, in the most perverted sense, beautiful. The zombie's toned body said that this was once a woman any man would be lucky to screw. Now she was a walking corpse. Her skin was an impossible, unnatural gray, and her sunken, shark-like eyes were without a soul. She was fucking dead... and she was walking.

She almost looks alive, thought Peterson. He signaled to Armstrong, who spun around fast and was ready to fire, but Cowboy beat him to it. The gun blast from Cowboy's elephant killer connected with the zombie's neck, severing her head clean off her shoulders. It took a moment, and then blood jetted out of her neck socket like it was shot from a garden hose. The headless corpse kept walking, however, as if it needed time to catch up with the fact that it no longer had a head. Then it collapsed.

"Where did she come from?" Armstrong said, as he wiped sweat from his forehead.

But the eyes on the decapitated head, now on the ground, moved and looked around. The damn head was still alive.

"It's not dead yet!" Peterson said, stunned.

Armstrong turned and looked. "Oh, man. You gotta be kiddin' me."

"When they said destroy the brain, they weren't kidding," mused Peterson.

And with a burst of rage, Armstrong brought his foot down on the head, flattening it with a disturbing crunch. The job seemed done, but the face moved again, not willing to give in. Armstrong lost his cool and slammed down his foot again, and again, and again, until gray matter finally oozed out of the skull. The brain finally destroyed, the head stopped moving—this time, for good.

Armstrong wiped his bloody boot on the ground, like he'd just stepped in dog shit. His last bit of mental and physical energy drained, he let out a deep, tired breath.

Desensitized to the gruesome scene, Peterson turned toward the horizon, as he continued trotting with the rest of the group down Main Street.

"It's getting dark again, Armstrong. We're in for another fucking night." Peterson spoke almost to himself as he gazed at black plumes of smoke rising from a great distance away, as if an enormous fire had engulfed the forest. Unfortunately, it was not a forest. Peterson became stern and clenched his jaws tight. He was looking in the direction of New York City.

"We can't keep going like this, boss," Armstrong said, trotting alongside him. "I'm tired. Not to mention, hungry and thirsty. We've had one good stroke of luck after another, but it has to run out sooner or later." Armstrong got serious. For all of his bravado, he also had no-nonsense survival instincts. "Liberty to speak freely, Commander," Armstrong said.

Peterson didn't make eye contact and just kept looking at the burning horizon. He knew this was coming.

"Permission granted."

"With all due respect, Commander, I believe our mission has been compromised." Armstrong spoke in a low tone, so the others could not hear.

Peterson was ready for it, but pretended to ignore Armstrong's statement. He raised his hands and the group stopped running.

"What's up Commander?" Sheriff Jones asked.

"Give 'em one hundred and twenty seconds to catch their breath," Peterson said, motioning to the civilians.

Peterson pulled the remains of a cigar out of his front pocket and lit it up. He blew smoke out slowly and, for a moment, looked as if he were a part of the burning horizon.

Peterson never really ignored a person; sometimes he just had the tendency to think for a while before responding. He knew this bothered Armstrong. And to some, it seemed a bit self-righteous.

“The hospital might be a hell-hole,” Peterson said, finally. “But if we make it into the shelter, these people will be able to hold up awhile. So will we. We can stay the night there, at least.”

Armstrong looked west to the setting sun, and east at a darkening sky. “Doesn’t seem like we have much of a choice. The hospital is just as good a bet as anywhere, I guess.”

Peterson broke his gaze away from the smoking horizon. With sadness, he reached into his front pocket and pulled out dog tags—they belonged to Ishmael and Spooky.

Peterson turned the dog tags in his fingers. “I will make sure their deaths mean something.” Peterson put his hand on Armstrong’s shoulder and tried to fortify his resolve. “We’re not losing, not as long as we’re still breathing.”

However, as he looked out upon the street, death and destruction littered everywhere, he couldn’t help think, *Maybe Armstrong’s right.*

But Peterson wouldn’t let this thought fester. He always tried to speak himself out of defeatist ideas. “I know our mission has been compromised, and I know you want to scuttle the job, but it’s all we have left. Either we accomplish this mission, as unlikely it may seem now, or die trying.”

Armstrong wasn’t about to give up so easily. “We’re far away and far behind. We never knew if Dr. Winthrop was alive to start with, sir. Our window of opportunity has shut.”

Peterson could always read Armstrong’s mind, and right now he knew what Armstrong was thinking. He knew he was wondering: is it really worth it?

The callous answer was Yes. The mission was worth it. Dr. Winthrop’s life was worth that of a thousand soldiers, and even a thousand other scientists. Not everybody is created equal, and somewhere deep down inside, in the current of Armstrong’s subconscious, Peterson knew he felt this indignity.

But Peterson saw the big picture, in large part because he was granted permission to read classified files which Armstrong was not. Peterson had a glimpse of just how powerful Dr. Winthrop’s mind was, and how important he could be in fighting this unnatural war. Dr. Winthrop was a torch where only blackness otherwise existed.

Armstrong continued, “And what happens when we don’t roll in with the cavalry, boss? When just our team goes limping in. Then what do we do? Where do we go? The world has fucking collapsed.”

“I don’t have all the answers. I just know what must be done.” Peterson’s conviction was always amazing, one of his great strengths. In situations where other men crumbled, by sheer force of will and faith, Peterson always seemed to find the eye of the needle. He was hope where hope had no right existing—and he had proven this to Armstrong again and again.

“Well, I’m having a hard time seeing the justice in it,” Armstrong concluded with an unusually disobedient tone...of which Peterson took note.

* * * * *

After about half a mile, they cleared Main Street, and they all followed Sheriff Jones as he turned down a wide boulevard. This boulevard was pretty empty of infected, too. Peterson took out the occasional zombies as he went, as did the others.

Five blocks later, Sheriff Jones, breathing very hard, stopped at an intersection.

“To your right,” Jones said, unable to catch his breath.

There, in the distance, Peterson saw it: the hospital. It was a huge, brick structure, impossible to miss. “Get everybody in formation,” Peterson ordered Armstrong and Sheriff Jones.

“The entranceway and parking lot look good.” Sheriff Jones’s voice cracked as he made this observation. “But there are going to be a hell of a lot of crawlers inside. We may be heading out of the frying pan into the fire.”

Peterson shot him a look. “Just do as I ordered and get the civilians ready.”

Johnny-Boy edged up to the sheriff with a sly smile and gave him a rib. “Never say something like that before a battle, Sheriff. It brings bad luck.”

Chapter 14

Moving in point-lock step with trained precision, the shadow team led the way, straight down the throat of the devil, running up the driveway which led to the front entranceway of the hospital. A big sign which read “emergency” hung above the plate-glass doors.

A four-story institutional building with an American flag on the lawn was this town’s excuse for a hospital. On the fourth floor some windows were black, charred, and hollow. A fire obviously ate through a part of the building. The first floor, though, appeared intact. Dead bodies were scattered all over the hospital grounds.

Peterson felt something wrong in his gut. There were too few infected in this area.

It wasn’t long before they arrived at the front entranceway. A few zombies that had collected at the front turned and began moving toward the group.

A volley of gunshots rang out behind Peterson, and the infected fell.

Peterson stopped before the main entrance, breathing heavy from all the jogging.

“Now what?” Trooper Willis asked with his typical argumentative tone of voice, appearing behind Peterson.

Peterson stared at the entrance with a familiar bad feeling. It felt like an ambush.

He spoke up. “My team will go in first and clear the emergency room. Cover the civilians here. When you hear the all clear, get your asses inside.”

The shadow team moved in precision, by the numbers, and strategically positioned themselves for an assault into the emergency room. Sheriff Jones provided a few shots, hitting some faraway zombies.

“GO!” ordered Peterson.

They all rushed into the emergency waiting room. It was surprisingly small. A few infected seemed almost surprised by their sudden appearance, and turned to attack. There weren't many of them, however. Johnny-Boy and Sharon fired, easily dropping them.

"I don't see any more!" Sharon yelled.

"Cover the corners, east and west!" Peterson yelled back, using his hands to signal positions.

The team fanned out and covered corridors leading into the waiting room. Peterson went to the entranceway.

"SECURE!" he yelled outside to the group.

Peterson turned and saw all the civilians rush into the waiting room. The sound of the mayhem drowned out his thoughts. The hospital had seemed like the best idea at the time. Available medicine, food, and enough space to make sure everyone had safety. During crises, it's the focal point of most neighborhoods, after all. And if help was going to come, the hospital was the first place search and recovery units looked.

Now, cramped inside the small lobby, there was not as much room to maneuver as Peterson had expected there to be. Also, as Peterson surveyed the civilians, he noticed clearly that the trip here had taken its toll on the women, elderly, and children especially, who seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

A particularly high-pitched scream came out of somewhere. The crowd of civilians screamed, then swayed.

Peterson was pushed, and practically lost his balance. On the east side of the lobby, a woman with dyed blond hair and a large chest stood before a set of double doors, which were being opened by a zombie. She was petrified by the sight before her.

This infected was once a hospital patient, and it wore a blood-stained robe. What was most scary, however, was that, like a dog, it held a bone between its teeth—a human bone.

Cash caught sight of something, appearing over the woman's shoulder, which created excitement in his face. Behind the incoming zombie, down the long hospital corridor from which it came, were countless more zombies moving toward them. The walking dead broke into a chorus of hair-raising moans.

Peterson watched as exhilaration swept across Cash's face. Anytime Cash seemed happy, there was big trouble in the area. Yet, when the dead walked the earth, a crazy, dull-witted killing machine like Cash was an important addition to any team.

Cash raised his assault rifle with one hand while simultaneously brushing the woman aside with the other.

"Excuse me kindly, ma'am," Cash said in a hospitable and gentlemanly tone of voice.

He then peered down the rifle's sight and put his crosshairs on the forehead of an incoming zombie, now only a few feet away. Cash gently tapped the trigger and a single crack from his rifle rang out. His bullet entered through the bridge of the zombie's nose, exiting swiftly out the back of its head. The neck of the zombie snapped back with the force of the blow and then fell on its back with a loud thud. The double doors swung closed behind it.

Cash yelled, "We have incoming, and lots of them!"

At Cash's words, the civilian crowd began to panic.

As if they weren't already scared enough, Peterson thought. He noted again the limited space available to maneuver in here, and realized that this was the last thing they needed.

"You said this place would be safe!" an anonymous, high-pitched voice rang out.

"We're trapped in here!" another voice rang out.

The civilians were losing faith. They were exhausted and petrified, but without their control and cooperation, this mission would quickly turn into disaster.

The sheriff doubled back and made his way to Peterson.

"You and your men barricade the front entranceway," the sheriff said. "My men will establish a perimeter and keep them off you long enough."

Peterson scanned the crowd as the sheriff was speaking. He looked out the main entranceway windows: in such a short period of time, the infected had already materialized outside en masse. The parking lot was filling up with zombies. They were surrounding and closing in on the hospital.

"Let's go!" the sheriff said, still unable to catch his breath. "We don't have much time!"

"No. We don't need to barricade the hospital," Peterson finally replied. In contrast to the sheriff's fearful face, Peterson's was stern, as hard as a rock. His thoughts were lucid, his voice confident. "We agreed upon the shelter. That's where we are going. We have to get these people in order. We're going to need them to get things done."

Trooper Willis appeared before them. "I don't know about you," he interjected, "but I'm not going to be trapped down in that old shelter with no way out. It's suicide."

"The trooper's right," the sheriff said, trying to pull his eyes off the growing crowd of zombies in the parking lot. "We have to barricade this whole damn place."

"That was not the plan," Peterson snapped. This was no time for negotiation.

Trooper Willis inched towards Peterson's face. "That wasn't your plan. But you're not in charge here anymore. You're not going to just lock these civilians down there and leave them to rot, soldier. What do you think we are, idiots?"

Peterson stared back hard, contemplating his options.

"There are two main entranceways and a door which leads to the loading dock," came the voice of Nurse Dee. There was resilience and toughness in her voice. "That makes a total of three ways for those things to get in."

"How many patients did this place hold?" Peterson asked.

"We have one hundred and forty-five beds. We were full to capacity when things went bad." She spoke in rapid fire, not wasting any time.

"That means we probably got a shitload of infected in here, like we warned," Trooper Willis said to Peterson with a vicious stare. "Which is why we didn't want to come here in the first place."

"And that's exactly why we can't barricade this whole place, either," retorted Peterson. He was doing his best to remain calm, but his voice raised just a notch. Trooper Willis was getting dangerously under his skin.

"We don't need to lock the whole place down, boy, only the first floor," Willis snapped.

“We are heading to the shelter,” Peterson decided, ignoring the sheriff and Trooper Willis. “Nurse Dee, are you all right to lead the way?”

“No, disobey that order, Nurse!” Sheriff Jones hissed through clenched teeth. Previously cooperative, his sudden change was an unpleasant shock to Peterson. “We needed your help in that parking lot, Commander. Thank you. Now that we are out, I’m no longer taking orders from you.”

The crackle of machine-gun fire suddenly rang out. Peterson whirled his head to see Cash popping off rounds. Obviously, there was some bad company moving in on Cash’s position.

Then there came a shout from the other side of the lobby. “INCOMING!”

It was Armstrong, holding his pistol in hand. About ten feet before him was a walking dead, a doctor with a stethoscope around his neck. Large chunks of flesh were bitten off his neck, exposing his Adam’s apple. Armstrong took quick aim and popped a round through the doctor’s head.

“And I got a lot more behind him!” Armstrong hollered.

From the opposite side of the lobby came Sharon’s voice. “Get down!” Peterson just had time to see a group of civilians duck, revealing a walking corpse coming upon them. Sharon was on top of it, however, her MP5 assault rifle tucked tightly in firing position. Flashes spit from her barrel as she fired a cascade of bullets.

The grouping was perfect. Three 9 mm rounds hit the corpse squarely in the side of the head, taking apart its skull. Blood showered the nearby civilians. The zombie fell, revealing an army of infected just behind it. More unearthly moans of the walking dead filled the lobby.

A civilian cried out, “They are fucking everywhere!”

The townspeople, in unison, screamed in panic.

“We don’t have time to argue, Sheriff,” Peterson demanded, with a pressured tone of voice. “First things first, get everyone to safety in the shelter. Will you help me or not?”

The mayor had overheard the conversation. He stepped forward, his voice trembling and his eyes watered with fear. “Listen to him, Sheriff. For God’s sake, listen to him. He got us this far.”

Sheriff Jones turned to Peterson, his voice hard. “We don’t take orders from you anymore.” He swung over to Trooper Willis, his mind made up. “We barricade this damn place first.”

Sudden bursts of machine-gun fire crackled from all sides of the perimeter. The shadow team was now engaged with swarms of incoming infected.

The sheriff turned to address the crowd. He was about to say something to the civilians, but Peterson pushed him aside.

Peterson spoke: “Listen up, people. Stay calm and do exactly as I say. Stay tight, stay close, don’t push, and move swiftly. We’re going into the shelter now.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Sheriff Jones shouted.

Another particularly loud shriek caught Peterson’s attention. From the looks of the situation, the zombie must have attacked from behind the reception desk. It had taken hold of a woman’s arm and was chewing a mouthful of her flesh. She attempted to pull her arm away, to no avail.

From the midst of the crowd, Cowboy jumped out with his eight-gauge shotgun in his arms. At point-blank range, he pulled the trigger. *BLAM.*

The retort of the rifle was deafening. The powerful weapon just didn't blow the entire head off the zombie, it also blew the woman's hand off. A pulsating stream of blood sprang out of the hole where her hand used to be. She was too stunned to scream.

When Cowboy realized what he had done, he seemed to be in more pain than the woman. His wide eyes bulged in astonishment. The woman turned to him and, with her good hand, reached out for help. Her face was a tight ball of pain. Her eyes pleaded to Cowboy, and then she collapsed.

Just when Peterson thought he was about to get control of this crowd, their chaotic screaming created a sound wave that hit him in the face. He snapped his attention back to the group of leaders surrounding him and fixated on the Nurse. Something had changed in his eyes. He was going to execute his plans, and anything standing in his way, the zombies or the sheriff, would make no difference. He would tear them apart equally.

"Will you lead us to the shelter, Nurse?" Peterson's tone was flat. Not angry. This was how Peterson's brothers-in-arms knew that he was ready to unleash the killer animal which boiled deep inside of him, when he was about to ignore the responsibility of his command, the meaning of law, the rules of civilization. It was when his fellow soldiers knew he had reached his limit, teetering on his personal edge. And with a sense of disconcerting omnipotence in his voice, Peterson continued: "I will part the Red Sea."

The people around him—the sheriff, the trooper, Washington, the mayor, and the nurse—were all silent. They must have seen in Peterson a glimpse of the darkness in his soul, and it must have scared them.

"Yes, Commander." Nurse Dee cleared her voice, and then, with a good deal of confidence and bravery, continued, "I'll get you there. I'll get us all there. Follow me."

"Sheriff." Peterson's word shot like piss from his mouth as he turned to leave. "If you or your men get in my way from protecting these civilians, we will have a war on our hands."

"These are my people, Commander. You have no fucking right!" Sheriff Jones was a sneaky bastard. Earlier he had feigned weakness and pleaded for help. Now he was like a different person. "If you want a war, I'll give you one."

"We had a deal," Peterson said, making just one last attempt to change the course of the situation. "I am in command."

"Deals change, Commander," Trooper Willis interjected. He loved the turn of events. He really hated Peterson. "And you're not the only one with guns. *We* keep the people. You do what we want, or we *will* have a war on our hands."

"This is madness!" The mayor was on the verge of tears.

Then the clear, logical voice of Dr. Washington rang out. "Gentlemen, the solution is simple. Let the people decide." Washington turned to the mayor. "Address the crowd, and quickly."

Peterson, Sheriff Jones, and Trooper Willis didn't know how to respond to this suggestion.

The mayor didn't wait for objections to be heard. He moved into position and stood before the civilians. He shouted out quickly: "Some of us are following the soldiers and are heading to the shelter in the basement. Sheriff Jones thinks it's

best to stay upstairs. There is no time for hesitation. I'm going downstairs with the soldiers. The rest of you do as you will."

Some leadership skills the mayor had, Peterson thought. When push came to shove, he just wanted to save his own ass. A wave of confusion and fear arose from the crowd.

Peterson was already planning for a possible armed engagement with these cops. Nurse Dee slipped by Peterson, brushing his shoulder, leading the way. "Follow me," she said.

Peterson fell into place and followed her through the crowd. The mayor and Washington fell in line behind Peterson.

"I'm with you," trembled the mayor.

"Good," Peterson said without looking back. "You're responsible for those who follow us. Keep them close to our backs."

Peterson could clearly see Cash. He was laying down a fiery wall of well-directed fire. With each crack of his rifle, the thud of a falling body could be heard. And Sharon he saw off to the right, covering the flank of the civilians. She too was laying down fire.

But Peterson couldn't see the entire team. Armstrong, Tag, and Johnny-Boy were holding up the rear. He knew that much. But he wasn't too concerned about them. They could take care of themselves. And when he moved, he knew they would move, too. Despite Dr. Washington being a major pain in his ass, Peterson had come to realize, despite himself, that in order to complete the mission, they needed Washington alive.

"Stay close behind, Washington. I want your butt in one piece."

Washington looked surprised by Peterson's concern.

Peterson turned to the mayor. "Do it now."

The mayor took a deep breath and hollered at the top of his lungs. "THOSE COMING WITH US, WE ARE MOVING! STAY CLOSE TOGETHER! STAY WITHIN THE PERIMETER OF THE SOLDIERS! DON'T HESITATE! WE ARE GOING TO THE SHELTER!"

Peterson liked the style of Nurse Dee. She was a natural leader. She walked right up behind Cash without hesitation. In fact, Peterson had to keep up with her. They stopped, stood side by side, and for the first time caught a glimpse of what Cash was shooting at. The double doors, now propped open by dead zombies, revealed a long and deep hallway. It was populated by at least fifty of those things. Their ghostly moans reverberated off the walls.

Shit.

"The entranceway to the shelter is at the end of that hallway," Nurse Dee said, taking a deep breath. "Just have to make it to the end of the hallway, and the door is right there."

A zombie was approaching Cash, its neck and jaw broken, creating a grotesquely disfigured appearance. Its eyes rolled up in the back of its head as it lumbered slowly, mechanically, ever closer to Cash. Peterson wondered what Cash was waiting for, why he wasn't shooting it.

Behind the zombie were many more, and Cash didn't have time to screw around.

Peterson stepped forward, about to say something, but then stopped abruptly. Cash was no longer smiling; no longer was there excitement in his face. Now his eyes seemed, Peterson found it hard to believe, a bit watery. His jaws were clenched tight, and he just stared at the inward-bound zombie. He wasn't even looking through the sight of his rifle. The abrupt change in Cash's disposition scared Peterson.

He's losing his fucking mind.

"Cash?" Peterson said lightly. "Cash, you okay?"

The incoming zombie let out a guttural moan and, walking as if drunk, moved ever closer to Cash.

"What the hell are these things?" Cash's left eye twitched when he spoke. "In God's name, what are they?"

The zombie stepped within feet of Cash and Peterson. The nurse backed away. Peterson drew his pistol and, with a level hand, aimed at the zombie.

"They're the fucking walking dead," Peterson hissed and pulled the trigger.

The zombie took the bullet between the eyes, its body reeled, and it fell flat on its face. The back of its head revealed the exit wound.

Cash let out a deep belly laugh. His shoulders shook.

"What do we do, boss?" Cash's question was deeper than it appeared on the surface. For the first time, Peterson saw the deep vulnerability in Cash. Underneath his crazy, tough exterior was a scared little boy, just like everybody else. And for the first time, Peterson's heart went out to him.

"We kill them, friend." Peterson looked down the hallway at the rest of the approaching zombies. "Squeeze the trigger and let it fly."

Cash's expression turned on a coin. His emotions were unraveling. Now an odd smile crossed his face. He raised his rifle, took aim, and fired. Shot by shot, he hit six infected—all in the head. They dropped like bowling pins. Yet for every zombie killed, another seemed to appear. Like an army of ants crawling out of their hill.

The rate of firing increased behind Peterson, and the crack of machine guns and pistols resounded through the air. The fight was closing in on them. Peterson turned around and saw the crowd of scared and confused civilians at his back, huddled together, following him. However, the crowd was smaller than before. Some of the civilians had decided to stick it out with Sheriff Jones.

God help them.

Sharon was covering the rear of the civilians. She snapped a new clip of ammunition into her rifle and resumed firing. She was confronted with a surprisingly large group of zombies, and they had moved into point-blank range. She was popping them off, one by one. It seemed she was barely holding the line.

"We have a lot of company!" Sharon yelled out to Peterson. "I hate to interrupt your good time, but if you're going to do something, now is a good moment!"

Peterson looked down the hall. It didn't seem to matter how many Cash killed—more and more just flowed out. I need more guns, Peterson thought.

As if on cue, Cowboy appeared over his shoulder.

"Looks like you could use some help." Cowboy no longer sounded tough, his voice was trembling.

Then Hatchet stepped up next to Peterson, gripping his machine gun. "The truck was a good idea," was all he said.

Peterson glanced at them both. He liked their loyalty. He looked for any signs of the cops, hoping maybe they'd changed their minds and decided to join the right side of the fight. But there was no such luck.

At least they're not getting in our way, Peterson thought.

"Okay, line up side by side. We're going to make a wall of fire headed straight down the mouth of this hallway." Peterson slung his assault rifle off his shoulder, pulled back the bolt, and loaded a round. He released the bolt and it snapped back into place. "Watch the doorways, make every bullet count, and most importantly, don't get in each other's line of fire."

Cash smiled in acknowledgment and slid a bayonet on the barrel of his machine gun. The shiny, razor-sharp blade fastened with a smooth click.

"They must be flowing in from somewhere," Nurse Dee said. Her observations were sharp, and her instincts correct. Indeed, the horde of zombies got thicker in front of them and occupied the entire hallway from side to side and front to back, and were lumbering closer every second.

A disfigured black nurse was leading the pack of infected. Her right arm was gone, and her right foot was a bloody stump. Her arms reached out and she let out a bizarre, eerie groan.

Peterson, Cash, Hatchet, and Cowboy quickly got into formation. They lined up shoulder to shoulder, side by side. They raised their rifles and took aim. They looked like a firing line getting ready to execute a person. Not waiting, Cowboy shot the black zombie nurse. He blew her head off.

The rest of the firing line followed. Their four rifles shot in unison and shredded to pieces everything in their path.

In all his years of combat, Peterson had rarely seen such a gory scene. As their bullets ripped into the heads of the undead, blood, brains, and bones splashed on the ceiling, walls, and floor. The cracking of the guns was deafening, creating a ringing in Peterson's ears. His spent bullet casings discharged in rapid succession from his rifle, and the smell of gunpowder grew thick in his nostrils.

It was a duck shoot. The zombie's rigid, slow movements were no match for the accuracy of Cash and Peterson—and the civilians were doing all right, Peterson noted. One by one, the zombies were falling fast.

"Forward!" Peterson yelled over the gunfire.

As they marched down the hallways, blasting every zombie in their path, a new obstacle presented itself. Now the men also had to watch out for their footing. As the walking dead were shot, they fell on top of one another, creating significant blockades to be climbed over. Also, their blood pooled heavily on the floor, creating the equivalent of an oil slick. The more zombies they killed, the harder the hallway became to navigate. Peterson had not foreseen this.

In front of the men was floor to floor carpeting of dead zombies. In unison, the team stopped. The next steps they had to take were on top of the corpses. There was no way around it, Peterson thought, as he led the way, taking the first step. The consistency of the ground changed from hard and smooth to wobbly, crunchy, and soft.

"Don't look down," Peterson snapped, "just do it."

As if stepping up onto a platform, the rest of the men followed, walking on top of the corpses while continuing their march forward. A sickening crunch filled the

air, and Peterson glanced over to see that Cash had stepped on the skull of a dead zombie. Now his boot was in its brains.

At that moment, more than ever, Peterson wished this was over. He just wanted every fucking walking dead person to be dead again. He wanted this passageway cleared. He wanted the civilians safe in the shelter, and he wanted to be on the way to finish his mission. A rage and bile filled his gut, and like a volcano, his anger spewed outward from the tip of his toes right to the end of his finger trigger. He screamed a war scream, which rose from the blackest depths of his soul. He opened up with his machine gun and brought down upon the zombies the wrath of hell.

Peterson's scream was contagious. It lit up Cash like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Finally, Cash had a partner in crime—another person as insane as he. Cash started screaming, too, a cry of rage and venom which rose louder than the machine-gun fire itself.

At first Hatchet seemed jolted by the sudden war screams, but then he too suddenly screamed. He screamed at the top of his lungs and began to fire his rifle like a maniac. The repeated deafening boom of the elephant shotgun was enough of an indicator that Cowboy was on board, too. All four men had let loose, throwing everything they had at the walking dead before them.

Flashes spit from the barrels of the rifles, creating a strobing effect which made Peterson feel lightheaded. His surroundings became surreal, the blood before him a stunning red, and the bones splintering from the zombie's skulls a bright white. He blinked, trying to regain normalcy. But he also felt a bizarre sense of control, as if he were playing a computer game.

As if a sixth sense had come upon him, he could see so clearly now, as each zombie fell. He counted as he squeezed his trigger in rapid succession. One, two, three, four, five, six. With pin-point accuracy he dislodged the brains of every goddamn zombie that stood in the hallway. He marched forward, squeezing the trigger, and his team marched with him. Stopping at nothing, they were homicidal, relentless, mass murderers of the walking dead.

In the back of his mind, Peterson knew he was having another episode of psychological dissociation. But he didn't fight it. *It is serving me now*, he thought, as he fought his way to the very end of the hallway. But he was lying to himself. Dissociation, he knew, was just a coping mechanism, and it existed for one reason: to defend a person's psyche from what it otherwise couldn't handle. Even before this curse fell upon the earth, Peterson had been teetering close to the edge.

Peterson and the firing squad were arriving at the end of the hallway. Just in front of them was a doorway adorned with a sign which read "Storage." Peterson knew this must be the entrance to the shelter. However, the end of the hallway was a T-section. A hallway to the left, and to the right, from which zombies were flowing from. His team would have to turn the corners and hold back the incoming infected from both the left and the right, creating a passageway for the civilians to safely enter.

Maybe five minutes had passed since they'd started the fight down the hallway, or maybe an hour. Time was standing still. Peterson didn't even notice that the civilians, being led by the mayor, were right behind them until Nurse Dee shouted out.

“That’s the shelter door!” she exclaimed with a fierce sense of urgency.

Zombies continued to appear into the hallway. So close to the end, the fighting was almost at point-blank range. Peterson knew they had to move fast. They had to turn the corners and take control of the other two corridors.

A zombie, probably in the middle of an autopsy before it returned from the dead, turned the corner. It was cut open from belly to neck. All of its organs were removed, simply gone. This zombie was faster than the others. Its speed was surprising as it jumped forward and took hold of Cowboy. It opened its mouth, wide and terrible, to clamp down upon Cowboy’s face.

A bayonet entered the skull of the zombie with such force that it pinned the zombie’s head to the wall. Cash stood with a vicious look and pulled his bayonet out of the zombie, allowing the dead body to slide to the floor like a sack.

Peterson caught Cash’s attention and provided a series of complicated hand signals. Peterson took up position, getting ready to turn the corner of the hallway to the left, and Cash the hallway to the right. Then, in unison, they pulled two hand grenades each from their vests, pulled the pins simultaneously, and lobbed the grenades around the corners.

“FIRE IN THE HOLE!” Cash shouted and everybody ducked for cover, including the crowd of civilians.

The hand grenades detonated back to back, putting forth explosions which shook the walls. Shrapnel, debris, and smoke mushroomed around the corners, covering everybody in smoke and dust.

Peterson and Cash wasted no time. They turned the corners ready to fire, covering each hallway. In front of Peterson was a salad of body parts and blood. His hand grenades had torn to shreds a good number of zombies. However, what presented itself a bit further down the hall put a pit in his stomach. It was just like the hallway they’d just cleared. There were more zombies, slowly walking right at them.

“Holy shit” Cowboy said, as he appeared over Peterson’s shoulder and saw the incoming zombies. “There’s no end to them.”

“I got more here, too—a big crowd!” Cash’s voice came from behind Peterson, sounding like a boy in an amusement park.

“Get everybody into that damn shelter!” Peterson demanded, as he turned to the mayor. “NOW!”

The mayor reached for the door that read “Storage” and turned the knob. Locked. He reached over and grabbed a gun from a civilian and aimed it at the door.

“STOP!” yelled the nurse as she grabbed his shoulder. “We have to lock the damn thing behind us.”

“This is the only freakin’ line of defense? This one damn door?” he retorted in surprise.

“No, idiot!” she said. “But every door counts.”

Machine guns crackled from behind. Armstrong, Sharon, Tag, and the rest fought a war in the rear, and Cash’s machine gun erupted. He opened fire again, plugging holes in the infected coming down his corridor. Peterson’s position was also getting worse, and he didn’t have much time—they were moving in closer.

“Can you open it?” Peterson yelled to Nurse Dee, and then fired two rounds from his machine gun, putting down two zombies.

“Hold on!” she said as her eyes filled with hope. She turned back down the hallway, climbed over a pile of bloody corpses, and found what she was looking for: a corpse wearing a dark brown jumpsuit, the familiar dress of the hospital maintenance men. She reached down and grabbed a ring of keys attached to his belt. Peterson was impressed as he watched her.

“Keys to salvation,” she said with a cool and collected ring in her voice.

She suddenly threw the keys in the air, sailing across the hallway to the mayor, who fumbled and dropped them, uncoordinated.

He finally picked them up and slid the key into the door. The lock opened with a smooth click.

“We got it!” he yelled. “We Goddamn got it!”

A sound wave of hope and relief bounced through the crowd of civilians.

A voice rang out from the civilian crowd. “Well, what the hell are we waiting for? Let’s get moving!”

Peterson must’ve had at least fifteen zombies in front of him, now within about twenty feet of his position. He squinted his eyes down his rifle and smoothly pulled the trigger. One, two, three, four. The crack of his rifle was like seconds ticking on a clock, precise and consistent.

Peterson turned quickly to Cowboy. “Can you take my position?”

Cowboy slid more ammunition into his shotgun. “You bet I can.”

Peterson did like the guy. He blew off that woman’s hand, but still acted bravely. Underneath, a man who was scared was a man who was trying to be tough. “Okay, Cowboy. But if you let any of them through, people are going to lose their lives. Don’t forget that.” Cowboy and Peterson switched places, and Cowboy raised his rifle, preparing to shoot.

Peterson looked down Cash’s corridor. The situation wasn’t much better. Cash was holding off maybe fifteen or twenty of those things. Peterson, for better or for worse, wondered where those damn local cops were. He heard shots of pistols in the far distance. He figured they must be trying to barricade the first floor.

Stupid bastards.

Even worse, an image of the hospital parking lot flashed through Peterson’s mind. He imagined a larger and larger crowd of those monsters gathering, surrounding the hospital, moving in on all of them.

Hearing the shout of Armstrong, Peterson turned and saw that, behind the crowd of civilians, the rest of the team had gathered, holding their positions and not letting any of those zombies get through. Armstrong, Tag, Johnny-Boy, and Sharon were a sight for sore eyes. Empty shell casings spit from their rifles as they pulled their triggers relentlessly. The crack of their assault rifles stung his ears.

Peterson calculated the field of play. In effect, they were surrounded. But they held good tactical positions. And, most importantly, they were a lot faster and a lot smarter than these dumbass walking bags of flesh. As long as they had enough ammunition, they were going to be successful. They were actually going to pull this thing off.

Despite himself, and despite his nagging concern that detouring from the mission was the wrong decision, he felt good. He was going to save these

vulnerable people. After all the horrible shit he had seen in this world, and all the terror that had taken place over the last seventy-two hours, he felt, for a moment, that something good could come out of all of this. Acts of decency in times of tragedy were what being human was all about. This thought made Peterson feel flushed for a moment. For the first time in his life he had *saved* people—instead of killing them.

Nurse Dee appeared over Peterson's shoulder and looked into the darkness which lay beyond the open doorway leading to the shelter. "You parted the Red Sea," she said, admiration on her face. "Like you promised."

Armstrong came up from the back line, drenched in sweat from head to toe. "How's everything going up here in the first-class cabin?" Armstrong said with a grin. "Good news, sir: we got the rear under control. The crowds of infected have thinned out considerably. We still have some wobbling around, but it ain't nothing we can't handle in a snap." Armstrong stared at the open shelter doorway. "Is that it?"

"Do me the honors and lead the way." Peterson's eyes never stopped shifting, surveying the surroundings, estimating scenarios. Now it was going to be easy to get the civilians into the shelter. His new concern, however, was what the police would do when they realized they were locked out.

Armstrong turned to the scared, huddled crowd of townsfolk and shouted a charge: "FOLLOW ME!"

Chapter 15

Peterson, Armstrong, and Cash struggled against the weight of a huge, cast-iron door. It probably hadn't been moved in fifty years. It was rusty, and looked like a remnant of an ancient battleship.

They grunted, and with a squeal the door finally slid on its hinges. Using their momentum, they pushed even harder, all three men straining their muscles. It slowly came around and shut with a thud which echoed throughout the shelter. Armstrong reached up and pulled down a hefty lever, and like an old prison cell, the door locked and sealed the basement shut.

The men were absolutely exhausted, as if shutting this door took the last bit of energy from them. They were also emotionally exhausted. They were safe, though, and the people were safe—at least for the meantime.

The old WWII shelter didn't look like much more than an old cement basement converted into a storage chamber. It was vast, however, probably the length of a football field. It was dark and a bit chilly, and the emergency lights had turned themselves on, which were no more than encased red light bulbs fixed intermittently to the ceiling. Patches of the shelter were not well lit, leaving areas of shadows.

Peterson took the entire room in, pacing it, and walked by a barely visible sign on the wall. It must have been eighty years old. It read *Bomb shelter*.

As Peterson surveyed the surroundings, he saw a very impressive array of items which had been stored. Medical machinery, boxes upon boxes of what appeared to be dried and canned food, and several hundred jugs of spring water. There were also medical supplies, surgical equipment, wheelchairs, and old computers. There were even hospital sheets, blankets, and even some old beds. The inventory was vast and would have to be closely examined. He felt more confident than ever that he had made the right choice coming here.

Some of the civilians moaned in pain, while others couldn't stop crying. Nurse Dee and the mayor led them to an open area and guided them to sit or lie down. Peterson estimated there were about thirty civilians who had made it. The nurse moved promptly, rolling out old hospital beds. Not missing a beat, she was already scavenging, testing and preparing the available supplies to serve the civilians.

As Peterson gazed upon the townsfolk he further grappled with the unbelievable fact that the dead were walking. He was beginning to wonder if maybe survival wasn't all that life was about. Maybe it is not the length of time, but the quality of life that really matters. He had spent his whole life in survival mode. Now, as he looked at the people he'd just saved, he felt a pang of uncertainty. *Have I lived a life of worth?*

Right then and there he resolved anew to do whatever it took to make it to that island, to find that lab, to do his best to save humanity. It would be his redemption, for all the mistakes he'd made in his life.

He remembered the words of General Moore: *There are only two ways out of this mission.* But that statement now dawned with new meaning. Two ways out: the redemption of his soul, or death.

The civilians clearly had no energy left, their last bit of reserves completely gone. They huddled up against one another, as if by some protective instinct, like gazelle herding together in order to increase the chances of survival of the whole. It was odd how much humans could resemble animals in times of panic. Peterson knew that some of these survivors could be counted on, while others would be big trouble—the type that would stop at nothing to save only themselves.

In life and death situations, Peterson knew, some people will throw themselves on a hand grenade to save another person's life. But other people will throw their neighbor on the hand grenade to save themselves. He knew that in just a little while, once they started getting their energy back, both the ugly and the good would rear their heads amongst the survivors. And when they did, Peterson had already determined, he would make certain the folks of good character would be the ones with the lethal power. At least that much he could do for them.

Nurse Dee helped a man onto one of the beds. He had a nasty wound and was bleeding badly. Once on the bed, she pulled up the man's blood-soaked shirt. Underneath was a very nasty bite wound, already turning black around the edges. Peterson wondered how many people in this crowd were infected. The nurse placed her hands around the wound and gently touched the surrounding area.

"Nurse!" Peterson almost shouted.

She turned to him, startled.

"If you insist upon providing first aid"—Peterson lowered his voice—"wear protective gloves. That's an order."

Tag sat down on the floor and clutched the bite wound on his arm. Blood had soaked clear through his bandages. His face had turned pale, dark circles had formed around his eyes, and cold sweat look liked tears on his forehead. He twisted in pain. *The virus is moving through him*, Peterson realized.

Tag had been fighting without blinking an eye. He swallowed his pain even though he knew he was infected, and going to die. *He is here because of me*, Peterson knew, *following my orders*. He looked weak now, and his time was limited. In the saddest of ways, Tag's selfless nature made Peterson proud of him.

The bastard hates my guts, but he's a damn true soldier.

Looking upon the crowd, Peterson could better understand now how this virus moved so damn fast. He watched as a pretty woman in her late thirties cradled her son, a boy of about ten. The boy had deep scratches on his arm. If Peterson didn't know better, the kid was probably also infected. He noticed, perhaps for the first time, that most of the survivors seemed to be with family members. An elderly couple held each other tightly, a younger couple and their two children huddled as one, and twin brothers lifted a big bottle of water together, working as one to help some others.

The infected all die. But when they rise back up, if it was your son, brother, or mother, would they really be dead? Peterson wondered. They would be the people you love dearly, standing before you, resembling the ways of life. And even if you could accept their death, could you actually bring yourself to smash in their skulls?

His stomach hurt as he wondered how many people became infected as a result of being bitten by a family member, a loved one, or a friend. Peterson looked carefully at that mother in her late thirties holding her injured son, and he understood. This infection had them beat from day one.

At that moment, more than ever, Peterson felt the aloneness of his own life. He turned, almost involuntarily, and looked at Sharon, the woman who, deep down, he still loved. She knelt down next to Tag and placed her hand on his forehead. Peterson knew what she was doing. She was providing a dying man with what he wanted most... her.

Peterson shook it off. Johnny-Boy was standing next to him.

"See to it that the wounded are separated from the others," Peterson ordered. "And ask the nurse to perform triage. Then I want you to distribute some food and water. Also, give me a head count while you're at it."

Johnny-Boy gave a nod. Somehow, his eagerness to please still hadn't faded. With a sad, childlike face, he was about to turn and carry out orders.

"Johnny-Boy," Peterson said with a fatherly voice, "you're doing a damn good job."

"Thank you, sir," Johnny-Boy responded, his expression showing surprise and gratitude and still that star-struck loyalty he held for Peterson. "Thank you very much, sir."

"Boss." The mayor's voice was calmer now, even friendly. He arrived over Peterson's shoulder. "You did the right thing," the mayor said with a twang of moral righteousness. Now that they were safe, the mayor was playing politician again.

"I'm glad you approve." Peterson drawled his words with a bite of sarcasm.

“Look, Commander, I have a wife, and I have a daughter down here.” The mayor’s voice was shaking with emotion as he turned and looked at his family. “The police and the other townsfolk made their decisions. They chose to stay upstairs.”

“What’s your point?” Impatience strained Peterson’s voice.

The mayor leaned in close, as if sharing a secret. “You’re not thinking of helping them out, are you? Those people upstairs?”

If he didn’t know better, Peterson would think that the mayor was trying to manipulate him.

This man was dangerous. People turned to him for leadership, but he was spineless and weak. Peterson wanted to reach out and smack him in the face.

Peterson had, in fact, been thinking of that very thing. Ever since the sound of that iron door slamming shut, locking them in safe and sound, all he could think about was those unlucky bastards caught up there. The cops deserved it. But those people didn’t.

Most of all, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking of Doug, the ten-year-old boy he had met in the parking lot. He had hoped that Doug had followed them down, but it seemed that his father had kept him up there. He didn’t deserve to pay for his father’s mistakes.

“And what if I think about it, mayor?” Peterson challenged.

The mayor straightened his back and did his best to seem strong. “I won’t let that happen, Commander. I will rally these people and we will cast a vote against it.”

Peterson placed his hand on the mayor’s shoulder and squeezed tightly. “Democracy is dead.”

* * * * *

“This world has turned to fucking shit, and did a long time before this virus broke out,” Cash said to himself. He was standing off to the side, almost hidden by the shadows. Lost in his own world, he pinched a wad of tobacco and put it between his lip and gum.

Nearby, some civilians overheard him and became visibly unnerved. Peterson turned on his heels and walked straight toward Cash.

“Keep that down, soldier. The civilians are scared enough,” Peterson hushed.

Cash looked at Peterson sideways, carrying a one-thousand-yard stare. Peterson recognized that look all too well: it was like someone was looking straight through you, not at you. In the glazed reflections of Cash’s eyes, Peterson again saw a man who was losing his mind. Peterson had to find a way to stop Cash from unwinding, from continuing to spiral down into the abyss.

“What has got your goat, Cash?” Peterson took a deep breath, doing his best to sound collected and supportive.

Cash acted like he was speaking to himself. “Besides the fact that dead people are walking, that you have routed us from our mission, that we are with a bunch of wimpy civilians locked in the basement of a crumbling World War II shelter? Tag is dying, Armstrong can barely walk, and Johnny-Boy is injured. Spooky and Ishmael are dead. Our chopper is gone. The only others who are in operating condition are that piece of crap scientist, and lovely Sharon and her firm breasts.”

Cash rolled the wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth and spit a dark stream of saliva.

A fake smile crawled across Peterson's face. "Yes, besides those minor details?" He was trying to be amusing, hoping to bring out some twisted humor. He thought Cash would appreciate such a thing, but he was wrong. Cash eyeballed Peterson, looking like he was about to explode.

Sharon appeared and said blankly, "Follow me. I have a present." And then she looked at Cash. "And my firm tits are reserved for a man, not for a whining overgrown ape who should be wearing panties instead of me."

She arrived just in time, thought Peterson. *He's unpredictable, and a danger to us all.*

Chapter 16

The old shelter was sprawling. Dim lights and cement beams cast shadows which fooled the eye. Sharon led Peterson and Cash further away from the civilians and into the guts of the shelter. It grew darker. The place was much bigger than it first appeared, probably the size of two football fields.

"Where are we going?" Peterson didn't like the silence. Sharon didn't usually withhold information. It was out of character for her.

But Sharon didn't need to answer. Nearby was the sound of a television set. She turned left and walked directly to an open door.

There was a hidden little alcove, easily missed in this massive shelter. The sound was coming from inside the room.

An image from a small TV illuminated Peterson's face. He was amazed and stepped closer.

Text scrolled on the bottom third of the screen. It read "Emergency Broadcasting System." A male voice, shaky and tired, was speaking: "Reports are coming in that the President and his entourage may have been taken to a classified bunker. However, this information cannot be confirmed. There has been no word from the White House, or the President, Senate, or Congress in over thirty-six hours. The silence has caused some to speculate that the President may in fact be dead. In addition, there has been no relay from the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs, or any other official body of the federal government since ten a.m. yesterday."

Another broadcaster interrupted. His voice was too composed and collected, a logical-sounding man, like a scientist—or an atheist. "This is not legitimate news that you are reporting. You are reporting rumors from extremely limited resources. There is a clear and logical reason for the lack of communication. I must state the obvious: all communications have been bottlenecked. We have only been on the air for two hours. We can predict that there has been a drastic decrease in the use of cell phones, computers, and other such devices which I believe taxed our systems—"

The first voice interrupted, "If we can relay now, why can't our government, for God's sake? It just doesn't make any sense..."

As the voices droned on, Sharon walked over to the TV cable box and took hold of the ethernet wire attached to it. She grabbed the line which was attached to the wall, and they followed it with their eyes. It snaked its way across the entire ceiling. "This is satellite TV. They must have a receiver on the roof."

Cash stated the painfully obvious, a bit of hope in his voice. "We're getting a signal."

Peterson didn't waste a second. He removed the cable from the television, which then went blank. He took his two-way radio—sophisticated, with 256 channels, various scanning methods, and phone system integration capability—and connected the cable into the side of his phone. Watching the LCD carefully, he saw connectivity bars appear.

"We got a signal!" Peterson was half amazed. He punched a code on the keypad. Encryption numbers scrolled, and there was an unusual dial tone. The phone rang.

There was a loud click on the other end of the line. Silence, then a beep, and another beep. The beeping was in an unusual pattern.

"Morse code." Sharon was urgent.

The group crowded around the phone, listening.

"What is it saying?" asked Cash.

"Shut up," Sharon growled.

Peterson spoke slowly, along with the rhythm of the beeping code. "Base abandoned." He looked up and caught Sharon's eyes. They exchanged a glance.

Base abandoned. Holy shit.

There was silence as they continued to listen to the ominous beeps.

"Incoming coordinates," stated Peterson. Sharon needed no further instructions. She took a pen out of her pocket.

"Coordinates...sixty-nine latitude by thirty-nine longitude."

Sharon wrote the numbers on the palm of her hand. "Got it."

The beeping stopped for a moment, and then began again.

"It's a loop. The code is repeating itself," Peterson said, letting go of a deep breath. "That's all there is."

"That's fucking it?" Cash said. "What the hell does it mean?"

There came a deep, baritone voice. "It means that home base has been overrun." Armstrong had entered the room and had been standing there for some time. "It means that nobody is left."

"It means we have new drop-off coordinates." Peterson corrected. "After we're finished on Plum Island, we move to these new coordinates."

"You don't know that, Commander. Those coordinates could mean anything." Armstrong stepped toward Peterson.

"They could mean a regrouping point," Sharon abruptly stated. "They're not necessarily new drop-off points, Commander."

"No." Peterson walked toward Armstrong and stood face to face with him. "That was our designated channel. Nobody else has access to it. General Moore left us that message."

“You’re working on a hunch.” Armstrong spat his words, his tone surprisingly confrontational. “And you heard the TV. Even the President hasn’t been heard from. All departments of the federal government are down. Even if we do by some amazing feat get to Plum Island, then what? There’s nobody fucking left.”

Johnny-Boy appeared from the shadows and without warning attacked Armstrong, grabbing his collar, flipping him around and slamming him on the table. Armstrong countered and kicked Johnny-Boy in the chest, which propelled his body away, smacking against the wall.

Sharon raised her rifle and warned with a deadly serious tone, “STOP! Or so help me I will put your asses down.”

Cash raised his rifle and pointed it at Sharon. “You won’t do no such thing.”

In return, Sharon pointed her gun at Cash. “Try me, motherfucker.”

Peterson moved quickly and stood between them all. He was directly in the line of fire now. “The penalty for disobeying my command is death, and so help me God I will kill you all with my own hands. I order you to lower your weapons and CHILL THE FUCK OUT!”

Johnny-Boy’s eyes were locked on Armstrong, who seemed damn surprised by the kid’s attack—as was everybody else in the room. But Armstrong made no further attempt to fight. Cash and Sharon looked at each other with murder in their eyes. Slowly, they lowered their weapons.

Johnny-Boy took a ferocious, out-of-character stance. “Remember what you told me back at the base, Armstrong? Huh? You told me that the next time I hesitate in battle you were going to shoot me dead. Now look at who’s hesitating and disobeying command. I looked up to you once. I thought you were invincible. Now you’re just a weak-ass spineless bastard who doesn’t have the guts to carry out this mission.”

Peterson was damn surprised by Johnny-Boy. In fact, he was impressed, especially by his loyalty.

Armstrong took a deep, self-satisfied breath. “Congratulations, Johnny-Boy, you finally grew a set of balls.” Then he turned to the group as a whole. “How many of us have to die for this Dr. Winthrop? We are puppets on a string, following orders blindly without even having asked the question: What is really going on in that lab? How can one man be so important? Our whole lives, we’ve been nothing but disposable assets. Our lives mean nothing to our leaders, and for all we have done for our country, our lives never have. You’ve always told me, Commander, that we either take orders, or we give them. Well, those days are through for me.”

Peterson’s head was down as he sadly listened. His voice wasn’t angry anymore. He was just doing his best to hold on to his dear friend. “I don’t like leaving these people alone any more than you, but how about others just like these people? Still alive, hiding away, hoping for a miracle. Maybe what’s in that lab will make a difference, maybe it won’t, but I have to try. We all have to try.”

“And I need you all. I can’t do this alone. I need you to keep your emotions in check, to keep your heads together, and most of all I need you to have faith in me. It may be the last chance our nation, maybe even our world, has to win this war.”

Sharon, for the first time, had a kinder, softer voice. “Then why did we stop to help these people?”

“Because we had to. We’ve done our jobs here. Now let us take this lesson with us and move along.”

Chapter 17

The television had been set up in front of the civilians, who were crowded around it.

The anchorman continued, “At least a little good news to broadcast. It appears that some of our uplinks are returning to operational status. We can guess that if this is so with us, it will be with many others. We can only hope to hear from high command. In the meantime, we are about to try and broadcast video which was captured some time ago. Please stand by...” As if trying to come back to life, the TV screen flickered.

And then video footage appeared. A shaky news camera captured the Manhattan Bridge in New York City. The image was shaky and grainy. It showed countless news vans and cameramen, capturing the scene from every angle. The bridge had been locked down by authorities. A formation of NYPD cops stood at the ready, riot shields and nightsticks in hand, and blocked the mouth of the bridge.

A camera zoomed in, showing a high wall of sandbags and a regiment of National Guard soldiers wearing tear-gas masks and bearing assault rifles. The image cut to another camera showing four tanks, placed to stop any vehicles that might attempt to break the line. And, as the last line of defense, perched on each tank was a soldier manning a fifty-caliber machine gun.

A frantic mob of civilians stood at the mouth of the bridge: husbands and wives holding their children, elderly folks, teenagers, and just everyday New Yorkers. They were jam-packed, shoulder to shoulder, with barely enough room to breathe. They clearly wanted out of New York City—at any cost.

As they viewed the broadcast, a murmur of shock and awe swept through the civilians. They hadn’t yet seen anything of this nature.

Peterson and Sharon stood and watched. “We’ve already seen this type of shit, Commander,” Sharon said. “Turn it off. We know what’s going on out there.”

“Maybe we can learn something new,” he shot back.

“This broadcast is two days old. We got a signal now, let’s see what else we can do with it.” Sharon sounded pissed, impatient.

“We will, but some people need to see this.” Peterson turned and faced Sharon. She was as beautiful as always, even when angered. “They need to know what is happening, so when we leave, they have a chance of fending for themselves.” Peterson looked back at the television.

A camera snapped around and captured a portion of Manhattan. There were fires blazing, army forces running, ambulances and police vehicles racing, panicked people filling the streets.

Another camera focused on a petite, blond news reporter with nice tits and red lipstick, the famous Patricia Surefire. She was standing outside, in the crowd.

Publicly, she was known for following hurricanes and all other natural disasters. The crowd elbowed and shoved her, and she was caught in its sway.

Surefire hollered over the noise of the crowd, "This is Patricia Surefire reporting for CNN live from the scene of the Manhattan Bridge. As the final bridges, tunnels, and transit have been shut down, effectively quarantining New York City and barricading all exits, the public has grown outraged. The tension is reaching a breaking point as residents and visitors alike are attempting to flee the city for safer grounds, or to return home, or to connect with loved ones. As you can see all around me, a terrible situation may just be turning worse..."

The broadcast cut to another camera angle, which zoomed in and focused on a line of National Guard soldiers; they were wide-eyed and afraid. They were besieged. A colonel could be seen standing amongst them, his posture and expression odd, like that of a Roman conqueror. He raised a bullhorn.

It looked like the colonel greatly enjoyed his power, and it sang in his voice. "Any individual violating the quarantined will be shot. Disperse now."

An NYPD officer approach the colonel.

The video footage was incredible, just like a horrifying reality TV show.

"You are NOT going to fire live rounds upon these civilians. They are just scared. And mouthing off into your bullhorn is not making the situation any better!" the NYPD officer shouted.

The colonel shot a venomous look at the cop. "Like hell I'm not. We defend this quarantine, and therefore this bridge, at any cost. I have my orders, and in case you're not up to date, this is military jurisdiction now. First person to step over the line gets shot." The colonel looked away, his eyes teary with excitement. There was a scary lunacy in the colonel's face.

"Sir, you are in power here," the NYPD officer reasoned. "I know this. Please consider there are woman and children in the crowd."

"Return to your post, cop," the colonel spat, entirely disregarding the authority of the NYPD.

Unable to control himself, the officer burst into a rage. "This infection has already spread throughout our entire damn nation, and you know this, you son of a bitch! This is not a quarantine, it's a firing line. I'm pulling my men out!"

Another camera captured a National Guard soldier, a young private, manning a fifty-caliber machine gun atop a tank. He swiveled the machine gun torrent out of nervousness. This kid was the very last line of defense. At his back was just the empty bridge.

The image caught something moving behind him. A silhouette appeared, limping and swaying without balance. Step by step the figure advanced closer. It was a horrid sight: an elderly man missing the left half of his skull. His sticky whitish and pruned face was otherworldly. Any person with such wounds would be dead, but not this person.

A shout from the cameraman: "Behind you!"

The zombie opened its mouth and let out a hair-raising groan.

The young private was startled and swung his machine gun one hundred eighty degrees. There, point-blank in the private's crosshairs, was the infected. The kid seemed to freeze.

"Shoot it, soldier. SHOOT IT!" came the cameraman's voice.

The private squeezed the trigger.

The fifty-caliber machine gun exploded bullet rounds at the rate of 300 rounds per second, and practically sliced the infected man in half, from the bottom up. For a split second, the infected remained standing, its head still intact, the look in its eyes somewhat startled. Then it collapsed, hitting the ground with a wet slap.

“Holy shit,” came the voice of the cameraman. “It’s still fucking alive!”

The private gasped, aimed at the infected man’s head, and squeezed the trigger again. The violent flow of bullets was so powerful that the infected man’s head simply blew up, bone and brain matter popping in all directions. The zombie stopped moving, but this time, for good.

The crackling sound of the fifty-caliber gun was like a starter pistol, and it sent the crowd into a panic.

Hundreds of wide-eyed people, parents grasping the hands of their children, elderly couples fighting to stay afoot, just everyday folks, suddenly shrieked in unison, charging the Manhattan Bridge barricade. The screen went blank for a moment, and then the broadcast cut to another angle: the NYPD riot police raised their shields like Roman soldiers, waiting for the swarm of civilians to strike them. The impact of the crowd was much greater than they could have anticipated. The panic and terror had turned the crowd into a tidal wave, which slammed the NYPD riot shields with such incredible force that the cops were simply smothered and crushed, drowned in an ocean’s undertow.

Having trampled the riot police, the wave of civilians slammed into the wall of sandbags, which swayed with the massive impact. The colonel stepped forward and screamed: “Fire! Fire! Fire!”

The NYPD commanding officer let out a futile scream: “NO!”

The formation of National Guard soldiers squeezed their triggers. Assault machine guns exploded, the flashes of barrels spitting bullets without mercy. A wave of shrieks burst from the crowd—the people targets, trapped in a kill zone.

Patricia Surefire was fighting hard not to get swept away by the crowd, and was still fighting. Her blouse was suddenly ripped open. A large-caliber bullet hit the back of Surefire’s head and exited through her face, ripping it off. There was a gutted red hole where her face once was and the once pretty blonde reporter’s body dropped like a sandbag.

The TV screen flickered to black. Soon after, the emergency broadcast signal appeared again.

The broadcast ended, and the crowd of civilians watching it was shocked. Some of them started to cry again; others stood with their hands over their mouths.

“Learn anything new, Commander?” Sharon asked, sarcastic. “Or did you just want to scare the hell out of these people?”

“Yes,” Peterson says gently, “both.”

Johnny-Boy arrived beside them. He stroked the barrel of his rifle, as if it brought him comfort. “What did you learn, sir?”

Peterson turned to Johnny-Boy. He was really coming to like this kid. “We’re killing each other, son.” Peterson turned to Sharon. “You know what that means?”

“That people panicked.” Armstrong appeared, throwing in his two cents.

“No, Armstrong. It means we’re not being beaten by the zombies. We’re beating ourselves.”

Chapter 18

The civilians sat in front of Peterson, listening intently. The mayor stood off to the side, his arms crossed tightly against his chest.

“You have shelter, protection, food, water, and medicine now. You have a television signal and, if you use the connection as we have taught you, you may be able to make contact with others.” Peterson turned, lowered his head in thought, and then said, “Do not count on the military or any other armed force arriving to help you.” Peterson’s words drifted off. He regretted this speech, felt a growing pit in his stomach. In the back of his head he knew the chance of their survival was almost none.

The injured child with the scratches on his side raised his hand politely, as if still in his third-grade class. Peterson looked at the cute young man, and his heart sank even further.

“I see a hand from a young brave man,” Peterson said in a soft, fatherly tone. “What is on your mind, friend?”

“Mr. Peterson,” came the child’s voice.

“Call him Sir,” whispered his mother.

“Sir,” the young man corrected himself. “My friend Doug is upstairs, is he okay? Are the others okay?” With the type of insight and wisdom only children have, and the unfiltered way in which they speak their minds, the kid said what was on everybody’s mind.

Peterson thought of the ten-year-old boy, Doug.

Why does this kid get to me so much? Peterson wondered. He remembered the old days with Sharon, how they spoke about having a child. He wanted a son. She didn’t care. Or maybe it was that the kid reminded him of his younger brother. *Those eyes, are they really the same? Am I just imagining it?*

The kid was the loss and suffering in Peterson’s heart and, at the same time, his dreams and hopes that he still, even in the midst of the pandemic, couldn’t let go of. The child was everything wrapped into one. And Sharon knew it.

Peterson again looked at her, and she avoided his eye contact, as before. She knew him better than he knew himself, and from the very start, with this kid, Peterson believed she had been reading his feelings.

A part of Peterson was so cold. Nothing would stand in this way of the mission. Another part, when confronted with a person in need, always seemed to act in a contrary way. He was conflicted, and this conflict lived deep in his soul.

“The more of us there are, the better chance of survival we will have,” said one of the civilians, a twin brother who Peterson noticed had been very compassionate to the others from the start.

“It’s not even a consideration,” the mayor’s voice boomed. “The likelihood that they are still alive upstairs is slim anyway. And even if they are, those things will be all over the place! We barely got inside this shelter alive. I absolutely refuse to let this happen.” The mayor’s wife, still rocking their daughter, spoke up, “My

husband is right. We're all safe now. Opening that door again is like opening Pandora's box. We might all die, then. What good will that do them?"

Peterson's conscience was growing on him. The mayor was wrong, the twin kid was right. The more of them, the better chance of survival they would have. Also, the right people needed to be in charge. Maybe help would come later. Maybe there would be a miracle. *I promised myself that I would give them the best chance of survival.* Peterson thought of Doug and got lost in his mind for a moment. I owe them at least that much.

The civilians broke out into an argument. Some agreed with the mayor, others argued to help the others upstairs.

"But our supplies are limited!" came the voice of a teenage boy whose jacket was sprayed with dried blood. "They made up their minds. Let them face the consequences!"

A wave of agreement swept over a portion of the crowd.

"But they may still be alive upstairs, fighting against those things. We can't leave them to be eaten alive by those monsters!" The high-pitched, horrified voice came from an elderly woman.

Voices of agreement supported the elderly woman's comment.

"Boss," Armstrong said, about to give his opinion.

"Keep it to yourself," Peterson said in a fierce tone. Their friendship was gone, and Peterson detested Armstrong's disobedience.

"Commander?" came Johnny-Boy's voice. "Request the liberty to speak, sir."

"Permission granted, Johnny-Boy." Peterson now favored Johnny-Boy.

"We haven't heard any gunshots for the last ten minutes. That doesn't bode well. However, if any of the cops or armed civilians are still alive, they will be an invaluable asset to the survival of these folks in the long run." Johnny-Boy gave his thoughts in an even, professional tone.

"And how about you, Sharon?" Peterson caught her attention.

She looked out upon the crowd of arguing civilians and noticed the elderly, the children, the sick, and the weak. She looked at the kid. "We were able to handle those things pretty well getting down here, Commander. I agree, the more survivors, the better their chances. I'm game."

An unearthly moan of agonizing pain rang out from somewhere in the crowd. It was Tag, lying on a hospital bed. Peterson felt a shot of guilt. He had been too busy to give him the decency and honor he deserved. Peterson walked through the crowd and over to Tag.

Tag's face had pruned, and was a deathly pastel. The telltale signs of black circles surrounded his gaunt eyes. He appeared to be on the verge of death...and worse.

Peterson placed his hand on Tag's arms in a gesture of warmth and concern.

"She always liked you best," Tag said, almost unable to speak through his pain.

"We didn't get along, Tag. I'm sorry for that. Perhaps we can put it behind us."

Tag gave a dark, morbid laugh. "What do you want from me, Commander?"

"Your voice, Tag. Do we try and rescue the folks who remained upstairs or not?" asked Peterson.

"Why the hell are you asking me?" Tag was on the verge of delirium. "I don't want to turn into one of those things. You won't let that happen, Commander."

Please, don't let that happen. When the time comes, you will do the right thing, won't you, Commander?"

"Yes," Peterson said. He hadn't thought about it, couldn't. In the back of his mind he was praying that somehow Tag would still make it, even though he knew that was impossible.

In an eerie voice Tag spoke. "I only want to die once."

Tag's words gave Peterson the chills. "How do you want it done?" Peterson asked.

"Sharon," Tag stated flatly. "I want her to do it. Promise me."

"I promise." Peterson looked Tag dead in the eyes. His word was solid. "You gave your last bit of strength to save these people, Tag. This is why I am asking you. I have decided that you have the final word."

"Good," responded Tag through his pain, teeth clenched. "Then I say save the damn civilians."

With these final words, Tag lost consciousness. His eyes shut and his head rolled back.

Peterson turned and waved Sharon over.

The entire shadow team stood over Tag's bed. Sharon stood at the foot of it, with her rifle at the ready. The civilians became absolutely silent. A pin drop could be heard. They watched on from behind.

Tag's body twisted and his skin turned gray. Before their eyes, his faced seemed to slightly transform.

"Give him another shot of morphine," snapped Sharon.

"It's too late," Washington said, amazed at what he was seeing. "He's about to turn."

A single tear fell from Sharon's eye. She raised her rifle and pointed it at Tag.

Tag's eyes popped opened. At first he seemed disoriented. Then he looked left, then right. Slowly, rigid, he sat up. It was unmistakable. He had died, and returned to life.

Sharon peered down the sight of her rifle, and with all her strength, she pulled the trigger.

Chapter 19

Peterson couldn't concentrate. The words of his fellow team members were muted in his head; he imagined, instead, the pain of the civilians trapped upstairs. He couldn't stop thinking about the boy, Doug, whose father was stubborn and had refused to follow them down. He kept flashing on the faces of all those unlucky civilians, protected only by those lame-dick cops. The cops deserved to go down. They wouldn't listen to him.

But the civilians didn't.

The civilians should have trusted him, not the cops. And most of them did, but some of them didn't. They'd made a mistake. But they shouldn't have to suffer for that with their lives.

Peterson had been trained to fight for people who couldn't fight for themselves. It was in his blood. Now with his team behind him, he couldn't allow himself to just sit down here, safe and sound, while those people up there were being mauled to death. He just couldn't do it. Their faces shined brighter in his eyes, and the sound of their voices became almost deafening. He became furious with himself. He felt a familiar fire burning in his veins, and he knew that that only meant one thing: he'd have to venture up there and save their sorry asses.

"We're going up," he said and strode across the room. His team members followed behind, hurrying to catch up, and he saw determination in the faces.

"What are you talking about?" a civilian said.

"Commander, you can't go up there!" came another voice.

"Peterson," came Dr. Washington's sharp voice, as Peterson felt a hand dig into his arm. He pulled him hard, and he stopped him. His face was hard and cold. "It's suicide. You know that. They had a choice. They didn't want to follow us. You have a responsibility to these people down here. If you go up there, we might all die." He leaned in closer, lowering his voice. "We can't save everybody. We also have a responsibility to our mission. You were not authorized, Commander, to diverge on this mission to start with. Our success is more important than these people. It is more important than one thousand lives, even ten thousand. What is waiting for us in that lab may save millions."

Peterson stared at Washington. *The logical damn prick may be right, thought Peterson, but my decision has been made.*

"I'm with you," Cash suddenly said. "I'm tired of sitting in this basement. There's no action. Let's go off some more of these fuckers!" he said with a full-sized smile, and locked a fresh clip of ammo into his CAR 15 assault rifle.

"I'm with you, sir," Johnny-Boy said again.

Johnny-Boy was pleasantly surprising Peterson. He had been coming into his own all throughout the mission, and Peterson was amazed at how fast he was transforming from a rookie to a veteran soldier.

Peterson scanned all their faces and saw them staring back with a mix of fear and anticipation. It was as if they were all staring death in the face.

He had to assert his command.

"We're all going up," he said, mustering his most authoritative voice. "It's not a command. Those of you who want to stay behind"—Peterson looked at Armstrong—"go ahead and do so. If you follow, you will answer to me by the numbers."

They all stared back, and nobody dared say a word.

"I'm not going," Dr. Washington said. "I'm not a combatant. I don't have to go. And I won't."

"Nobody invited you," Peterson spat back. "You're not part of my team."

Washington retreated, meekly.

"There are civilians up there," Peterson said to the rest of his team. "If they are still alive, they won't be for long. Whoever is alive, we will bring back. And then we will lock down this bunker for good."

"What about the cops, sir?" Armstrong said. "They didn't go along the first time. What if they get in our way now?"

"I'm betting that they failed, and that they'll be in bad shape by now," Peterson said. "They'll probably see us as the second coming of Jesus. But if they don't, and if they get in our way, we waste them."

His team stared back in silence.

"But what about *us*? The people down here?" came a whiny, pleading voice.

Peterson turned and saw the mayor standing there, now sweating and looking very nervous. He had fought his best fight, and now he knew he had lost. "Like Dr. Washington said," the mayor continued, "you have responsibilities to all of us. You can't just leave us alone down here. You have the firepower. And if you go up there, some of them might get in here. We need you down here. It's—um"—he cleared his throat—"very unfortunate that some of our town members might not survive up there. But we have to think of the others now."

Peterson smirked at him. He hated politicians, always looking out for their own skin, and this guy was no exception.

"I've heard the people out, mayor, even though civilian law means nothing now. I gave you all that much. You can't make up your minds, so I have made it up for you."

Peterson turned to the growing crowd of civilians flocking around them and addressed them directly, in a loud voice.

"I want the armed civilians watching our back as we exit this staircase. Some of you have rifles. You will provide suppressing fire, and secure the door behind us as we leave. When we return, we'll bang three times. That's our signal. You open it when we do. Wait at the top of the staircase. If we don't come back within the hour, consider us dead. And then don't open it for anything."

"But you can't bring the other people down here!" the mayor yelled. "There's not enough food and medicine for all of us!"

Peterson shot him a look of disgust.

"You are one pathetic human being," he said, steely cold.

Peterson turned on his heel and marched across the room, heading for the staircase. He hoped to hear the sound of all his team's boots following him, hoped that all of them, even Armstrong, would be on his heels, and he hoped that the civilians would also be following, taking up their guns, ready to unbolt the door. But he couldn't risk turning and looking. That would indicate a lack of confidence in his command. So he strutted, hoping they would follow.

They did. He could hear their boots right on his tail, and he knew that this would work. As he headed up the steps, he could hear the boots heading up behind them, single file, along with the clicking of guns being prepared.

They opened and passed through the cast-iron door and then ascended the staircase. Reaching the top, he rested his shoulder against the final door, listening. Finally, he turned around and looked.

The staircase was already filled with his people, and civilians, ready to follow orders. That was one great thing about the shadow team: they might all disagree, but at the end of the day, they acted like soldiers. And like good soldiers, they would follow orders.

Peterson turned and looked the civilians in the eye. Good old Cowboy was along for the ride as usual, and so was the tough-ass biker, Hatchet. He felt that they would be up to the task of fulfilling their duties.

“Don’t forget,” he reminded, “we open the door, you shoot anything that may get inside, and bolt it behind us. Can you handle that?”

“Yes sir,” they responded in unison.

Peterson surveyed his team one last time. He felt good.

“Let’s cause some hell.”

Chapter 20

As Peterson stood before the door, getting ready to go, he couldn’t help thinking that this was exactly the type of situation he was hoping to avoid.

Sharon leaned in and spoke in a whisper, “If the cops didn’t succeed, we’ll be walking into an army of those things.”

Peterson looked at her. “Yes, we will,” he acknowledged.

Peterson turned to his men one last time. “If we find ourselves in a zero sum lose situation, then on my command, we will give up the mission and we will retreat back into the shelter.”

He turned back to the door. He nodded, and as he did, Sharon reached over and unbolted it.

“MOVE!” Peterson yelled.

With that, he kicked open the door with his heavy boot, sending it flying out.

He burst into the hallway, zigzagging. His heart was pounding as in his chest, expecting zombie resistance.

Indeed there was. There were a handful of zombies clustered around the door, as he suspected, and he ran right into one. He knew he had to clear the way for the others, so he raised his machine gun and butted it hard in the face, knocking it back. He then swung the butt, knocking another one hard in the throat. He leaned back and kicked the third one in the chest, sending it flying across the hall.

Peterson then swung out of the way, making room for the others to follow. He saw three zombies just off to his right, took out his handgun, and fired three quick shots, killing them all.

On his heels, brushing past him, was Cash, who wasted no time. He extracted his beloved machete from his belt. A zombie leaped toward him, and Cash swung like a medieval barbarian. He decapitated the creature, and blood spurted out of its neck. Then Cash sidestepped for the rest of the team to charge out behind him.

Johnny-Boy, Sharon, and Armstrong took up the rear. They all went to work, using pistols and taking careful aim; within seconds, they easily took out several remaining zombies moving in on their position.

Peterson heard a loud crash. It was the huge cast-iron door slamming closed, pulled shut by Cowboy and Hatchet. He then heard the bolt slam closed.

Good, he thought. At least the hall was cleared, and the door was locked behind them. The first step was done, no one was hurt, and all seemed to be in good order.

Luckily, there were no more of those things in sight. Most of the infected were probably distracted chasing the remaining civilians and cops, somewhere on this floor.

In the distance, Peterson thought he could hear something like a faint gunshot, or a crashing noise, or maybe even the shout of a civilian. He wasn't exactly sure where it was coming from, but he had to take control, be assertive, and choose a direction. He decided to head back the way they entered. The civilians and cops might have moved on elsewhere, but they might just still be there. His guess was as good as any.

Peterson signaled with his hand, and he ran down the hall.

As they went, there were carpet-to-carpet corpses. Floors and walls were painted with blood and organs. And most eerie of all: silence. The hallways, once filled with the horrible groans of the undead, were now filled with an equally ominous stillness. Nothing was moving.

In point-lock step, the team leapfrogged one another down the hall, as they were trained to do, providing intersecting cover. Sharon took a knee, and Cash leaped past her. And so the movements of the formation continued, as the team, like a nest of deadly snakes, slithered their way in perfect harmony, a well-oiled killing machine.

Nearing the end of the hallway, Peterson took the lead. He knelt and gave a hand signal. The rest of the team read it, and all took a knee.

Slumped against the wall, right near Peterson, was Trooper Willis. He was mauled, having been bitten multiple times. Willis's pistol was clamped in his frozen hands, and the barrel of the pistol was in his mouth. Behind his head was a splattering of blood. Clearly, he had killed himself. His face was frozen in fear and torment. He had probably wanted to spare himself from the pain, or maybe the terror of becoming an infected.

"That is one less pig we have to deal with," Cash said, a sadistic ring in his voice.

Peterson wasted no time and made a beeline toward the hospital's West Wing. They continued to execute sweep and clean maneuvers as they wound their way through the hospital. The sight was the same everywhere—dead corpses sprawled out, littering the floors.

As Peterson turned another corner, he could suddenly hear a shout vividly, and the clear sound of gunfire. He now knew for sure that he was heading in the right direction. This new hallway was dark, some of its emergency lights smashed out and the others flashing red. This hallway, too, was filled with corpses, and luckily there were no live zombies in it. Peterson assumed they were all attracted to the remaining civilians and cops.

Despite everything, despite all that he was doing right now, all he could think of was that he had not come up to rescue them sooner. He was suddenly wracked with guilt as he wondered how many had been wasted while they were down there, safe. He never should have let those cops take control of any civilians. Now was the time to make up for it.

Peterson gave a sudden hand signal, jumped to his feet, and sprinted down the hallway, his team on his heels. He ran all the way to the end, braced himself, and

put his shoulder through the closed door, bursting it open, ready for whatever might lay behind it. It was show time. And he knew it wouldn't be good.

It wasn't. He burst into a large, open, brightly fluorescent room, the cafeteria, which was filled with utter chaos. About a dozen civilians were still alive, their backs to the wall, and around them were three cops, including Sheriff Jones, and one armed civilian, raising their handguns, firing at a cluster of about thirty zombies. The creatures were packed tightly together, lumbering like drunkards toward fresh meat.

Peterson observed all the details of the scene before him at once, as he had done numerous times in battle, and as he was trained to do. He saw numerous dead cops and civilians being eaten and chewed upon by zombies, which were too focused on their food to join the fight. He saw a partially barricaded door and realized that the cops hadn't succeeded in locking down the place. Just as he had predicted.

He could see all the signs of struggle, of tragedy. It had been a bloody battle in here, and there were few people left to show for it. The police began clicking away on empty rounds, too panicky to realize they were out of ammo. The zombies were thickening, pouring in through open windows, and he saw that within a minute or two, the remaining civilians would all be dead. And he saw with relief that that little boy, Doug, was still alive, cowering behind his petrified father.

Not wasting time, Peterson sidestepped out of the way, raising his machine gun and firing at the cluster. He was careful not to aim too close to the civilians. He felt his team burst through behind him, and there was no better feeling than that.

Cash brushed by him, firing, and Sharon, Armstrong, and Johnny-Boy followed on their heels. They zigzagged past each other, spreading out, each focusing on separate targets, each instinctively knowing who the other was going for. They were instinctual killers.

They did considerable damage. Within seconds, their rapid fire in every direction took down dozens of zombies. They shot their way closer to the group of civilians, being careful not to hit them. Cash switched his gun for his machete and went to work. Peterson, like the others, resorted to using his boot, kicking back those things that got too close, then taking aim with his pistol and firing. Kick, aim, fire. Kick, aim, fire. In situations like these, Peterson had seen more civilians wasted by friendly fire than by enemies. Peterson was impressed to see that even Johnny-Boy got this, and didn't aim once in the direction of civilians.

But the cops were not as well trained. They had let themselves become overrun with panic, and the one cop that still had ammo was raising his hand and, stupidly, firing at zombies in their direction.

Peterson jumped out of the way just in time, a second before a bullet grazed his head. The cop, in shock, kept firing. A sound of pain came from behind Peterson, and he whirled around to see Angelo, still standing on his feet, holding his hand to his heart. He had been shot. Blood gushed from his wound. It was fatal, Peterson could tell instantly. The only thing keeping Angelo standing was pure shock. Then he collapsed, dead.

Peterson lunged at the cop, tackling him hard to the ground. After he knocked the wind out of him, he jumped to his feet and kicked the gun from his hand. Peterson placed his pistol to the forehead of the cop. Rage filled his eyes.

“STOP,” Sharon shouted. “Friendly fire,” was all she said. It was enough to change Peterson’s mind.

He spun and surveyed the room. His team had managed to wipe out every nearby zombie and not hurt a single civilian. But he also saw the large door and open windows, which had only been partially barricaded. More and more zombies were pouring in. It was a no-win situation.

“Get ‘em and move out!” Peterson yelled.

He ran and grabbed the civilians off the floor. They were sitting, kneeling, or slouching against the wall, too terrified to run. Peterson had seen it before, and he knew they wouldn’t move unless he forced them to. He ran over, grabbed Doug with both hands, and stood him up.

“I knew you would save me,” Doug said through his tears.

Peterson had a lump in his throat. “You bet, friend,” was all he could muster.

He then looked at Doug’s father, who had a deep bite wound on his waist. Peterson lifted him quickly to his feet. His team saw what he was doing and joined in, prodding the civilians to stand and run. It worked; it got them moving. Their fear broken, they ran, heading toward the shelter.

Peterson’s men fell in behind them, providing retreating fire. Peterson was the last one to leave the room. Right before he did, he surveyed the area and steadied himself for one last shot. Instead of taking out another zombie, he took aim at Angelo, on the ground, who would soon turn into one of them. With tears in his eyes, he raised his pistol and took aim. With one shot, he hit Angelo in the head. He had, he felt, spared his man, his friend, from a soul-less existence.

Peterson followed his team down the hallway and saw that they were positioned around the shelter door, pounding on it. A wave of shock ran through him, as he realized the civilians inside were not opening it. He hadn’t anticipated this. He heard the mayor’s whiny voice behind it, yelling at the civilians not to open it. That fucker.

“GOD DAMN IT, OPEN THIS DOOR!” Peterson yelled. He took the butt of his gun and banged again and again. But nothing came in return.

“I told you,” Cash yelled over the din. “I told you not to waste time on these civilians! Now we’ll get wasted because of them!”

Peterson looked down the east and west corridors and saw zombies creeping their way. They were being closed in, were low on ammo, had no room left to maneuver, and had a dozen panicking civilians and cops on their hands. This wasn’t good.

Peterson turned back to the door.

BLAM! A shotgun blast reverberated from the basement, followed by the thud of a body.

Before Peterson could react, he heard a lock turn and the door opened. It was Cowboy, bearing his elephant killer, smoke rising from its barrel. Next to Cowboy, flaccid against the wall, was the mayor, his head was blown off and his brains smeared against the wall.

“The bastard tricked us,” Cowboy said with rage in his voice. Peterson took quick note: *This guy really is a cowboy, unpredictable, and a damn good guy to have on our side.*

Peterson took several steps back and allowed the civilians to submerge into the basement. His team had already taken flank positions, and were laying down a torrent of lethal fire at the arriving zombies.

Once all the civilians had filed in, Peterson yelled for his men to follow. They all did. Johnny-Boy was the last one in. Peterson finally followed him, too, and as he did, he slammed the door shut behind him, locking it.

It was just in time, as a cluster zombies immediately banged on the door.

Chapter 21

Peterson walked slowly through the basement, taking stock. He had accomplished his mission, and he knew he should be satisfied. But somehow, he wasn't. Angelo was dead. The rest of his team was down here, safe and sound, and he had managed to get those civilians, and even some cops, back without a scratch. No one else was injured, or even bitten by one of those things.

But his conscience gnawed away at him. He kept beating himself up for not going up there earlier. All he saw in his mind were the faces of those wasted civilians on the floor, being eaten by zombies. Corpses that wouldn't be up there if he'd gone up there sooner.

"Commander Peterson," came a meek voice.

Peterson turned and saw Sheriff Jones standing there, facing him. Dejected, humbled, like a broken man. He lowered his eyes, lowered his face, before Peterson. "I just want to say how grateful I am—we all are—for your coming back up for us. You were right all along. I was wrong."

Peterson nodded back coolly. It felt good hearing it. But he was still mad at himself for not taking action sooner.

"What will you do now?" Jones asked.

Peterson had been thinking about that very thing. Clearly, he couldn't stay down here. They had gotten the civilians to safety. Now they had permanent shelter from those things, and they had food and medicine, at least enough to last for a while. They couldn't ask for more than that. Peterson had fulfilled his immediate objective.

Now he had to turn back to the mission. The real mission. He had to get his team out of here, and to the island.

But now, it was a vastly different situation. Now, all those things up there knew exactly where they were, and they had no other distractions. There would be hundreds of those things clustered outside that door, and many hundred more outside the hospital. Breaking out up there again was not an option. They were stuck.

"It's your fault, Commander," came Washington's voice. "You saved a few civilians. So what? Now we'll never make it out of here. Now we're trapped down here with the others. You've jeopardized our mission to save a few civilians, but at what price? It could mean the lives of millions of people around the world. Was it worth it for just a few?" Washington snapped.

Peterson stared back, cold and hard, and surveyed the room, looked at the face of Doug, that ten-year-old boy, who stared back at him with a huge smile.

“Yes,” Peterson finally answered. “Yes, it was.”

Washington’s glare hardened.

“When we get back,” he said, “I’ll have you know that I’m going to report you, and you’ll be court-martialed, if not worse.”

Peterson laughed in his face, a short, dark laugh. “If you survive.” Peterson turned away. He didn’t care about Washington, and was tired of his pompous face.

“I’m proud to serve you, sir,” came a voice.

Peterson turned and saw Johnny-Boy standing there, looking up approvingly. “And I know you’ll find a way out of here for us.”

Peterson nodded back in gratitude.

He then turned and surveyed all the faces, and he couldn’t help noticing that they were all looking to him, as if waiting to take orders from him, like he was their Messiah, ready to lead them to the promise land.

The problem was, he had no other way out. He was as stuck as the rest of these people.

But as he scanned the room again, something caught his eye. Something gleamed in the corner of the room; it caught the light, just for a second.

He took several steps closer and looked up at the ceiling. It was hard to make it out, but up there, it looked like some sort of remnant of ductwork.

“Nurse Dee!” Peterson yelled out.

She came running up alongside him.

“How many years did you say you worked at this hospital?” he asked.

“Oh my, at least ten years now,” she said.

“Did you ever have occasion to come down to this basement?”

She nodded. “Sometimes, yes.”

“Has there always been central air-conditioning here?”

She looked back, thinking. “As far as I can remember, I’d say yes.”

“Do you know where the air processor is?” he asked, an idea starting to warm up to him.

She shook her head blankly. “I’m sorry, sir, I don’t.”

Peterson scanned the walls carefully.

“What are you thinking, Commander?” came Armstrong’s deep voice, as he stood next to him. His team crowded around close and stared at the ceiling with him.

“I’m thinking that’s another way out of here,” he answered.

He took several steps forward, reached up with the point of his machine gun, and poked the ceiling. A solid sound came back. But he kept poking as he walked, and suddenly the solid sound turned hollow, metallic. He poked harder, and it clanged back.

“Bring me that crate!” he ordered a civilian.

Within seconds, a crate was at his feet. He jumped up on it and in one motion, banged hard on the aluminum with the butt of his gun.

It bent at first, but as he continued to hit it, finally, it crashed open. He reached up, took the aluminum, and yanked it down. It was a wide air-conditioning duct. He stood up higher and stuck his head in

“A flashlight!” he commanded.

Within seconds, another civilian thrust a flashlight into his hand. Peterson stood on his tiptoes, put his head all the way in the duct, raised the light, and looked.

As far as he could see, the light shone. It was blackness all the way. But the same time, there was no end to the light. The ducts went on forever.

“Sir! I found this!” came a voice.

Peterson stepped down and saw another civilian hurrying over with a large, bound notebook. She flipped it open, and Peterson saw it was filled with floor plans and designs of the hospital infrastructure.

They all crowded around close as Peterson flipped the pages and then traced a diagram with his finger.

“It’s definitely ductwork,” he said. “It looks like it leads up a flight, and then out to the rear of the hospital.” He looked back up at the ceiling, then back to his men. “It looks like this just might work.”

“Yeah, and what if it doesn’t?” came Washington’s nasty voice. “That could be our death trap, too.”

Peterson looked from the book to the ceiling again, ignoring Washington. He nodded, coming to a decision.

“This is our way out,” he decided. He faced his team. “We’ll rest up here tonight, stock up on food, medicine. Tomorrow, at oh five hundred, we’re up and out, through the ducts, and out to the parking lot.”

“Wait!” yelled a civilian. “What about us? You can’t leave us in here!”

Peterson scanned all the faces and saw the desperation. As he did, he came to a decision.

“I’ll come back for you,” he said. “When we finish our mission.”

Doug tugged on his sleeve.

“Do you promise?”

Peterson looked at Doug’s father, who was lying on the floor, bleeding badly from his bite wound. He was infected and soon to die.

Peterson then looked into Doug’s eyes, long and hard. They were his brother’s eyes, and they were the eyes of the child he never had.

“I promise,” he replied...
