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# Fortress of the Forgotten

Mark Burger

This work is dedicated to Angela,  
my inspiration, with love.

# P r o l o g u e

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Throughout the long ages of the past, philosophers have successfully argued that representation of oneself dominates the representation of other people in society. The individual is, therefore, more important than the community. Greed takes hold of the sense of self in one of its many forms: gluttony, glory-seeking, attention-mongering, jealousy. This happens in large groups. Altruism dies. In capitalism, a currency makes a pitiful prey of altruism. By no means will it ever survive in the world. A sense of self: what is it worth? Is selflessness to be pitied or rewarded? In the church or in the home, we would like to claim the latter; however, so long as the question is posed in a place of business or politics where precious money is on the line, the former is most-always the case.

In Washington D.C., the capital of the United States of America and, at the time, the capital of self-representation, corruption, greed and any other vice one may wish to apply, a fatal mistake is to be made. The entire city itself was a flawed place. It was a place of work, where one could find no residences here for common human beings. Politics ruled the city. Mistakes occurred every day here. Policy was made so that elected officials became wealthy while pauperism and hunger swept the masses. These mistakes took lives.

Alas, Washington D.C. has received, perhaps, more scorn than it truly deserves. For this, we must reconcile in proposing that Washington D.C. deserved our unkind words throughout the epoch when our story unravels.

Allow us, though, to remain in Washington during that tremulous time early after the beginning of the second millennium. This was an era where people sought approval in many new ways. The computer had allowed individuals to receive praise for taking their own photo. Cellular telephones were in the hands of men, women, and, especially, children. Washington D.C. was a thriving metropolis made of brick, mortar, and personal enterprise.

The city, planned carefully before being constructed, was a pitiful eyesore that late-autumn morning as rain saturated the soil and rolling thunder dominated the atmosphere. This rain dominated the people and, through its harsh persuasion, caused men and women to scurry along the sidewalks in a frantic hurry. Its hand caused tourists to stay in their hotels,

elected officials to get a few extra hours of sleep, common workers in the local buildings to hide under umbrellas or, for those less fortunate, briefcases. Janitors would have a hard day of drying the floors in all of the tiled buildings. The nation's giant pentagonal structure serving as the brain of the nation's defense with its monstrous labyrinth of hallways stood a daunting challenge to those who kept it clean. So long as businessmen, lawyers, paper-shufflers of every weight, size, color, and ethnicity came charging through with muddy shoes, there would be no end for their daily work.

At nine in the morning on that sad, gray, bleak day, the rain pounded office windows as lightning broke the sky with occasional, blinding streaks of light. Thunder, with its steady roll and surprising crash shook the ground.

An hour later, only the rain persisted. The weather became obnoxious rather than frightening. The ferocity of the rain would vary for the remainder of the day. At ten o'clock, however, it was falling in regularly in sheets made of the cold droplets.

This was the time that, in the building established for the American Medical Association, there was a meeting being conducted. It was on the second floor of the building in a very ugly room. The room itself was decorated in a style some thirty years previous to the events of our narrative. Anyone entering this room would receive an impression of neglect. It could be explained that doctors and people interested in saving lives have little time to worry about the style of their conference rooms. However, the effect was, nonetheless, the same disconcerting feeling.

The room's bleak brown appearance gave it the power of solemnity which came after the initial revulsion wore away. Sitting at the head of the table was a balding man whose hair, what was left of it, was gray. He wore black plastic glasses and a frown. His wrinkles weren't pronounced but, nonetheless, lined his face. His countenance was one of polite interest. Surrounding him were five members of a development team representing some private conglomeration that wanted the government to endorse their product. This development team wore uniforms of white with fashionable white vests. Each bore a silver badge on their chests. Around the table, these badges read, "Arnold Hughes," "Marissa Block," "Richard Morris," "Kent Williams," and "Donald Nelson." To each of these vests and bright silver badges belonged an austere face.

The bald gentleman at the head of the table had an office in the building. It was more fashionably appointed. On his

desk of teak stood a small gold-embossed name plate that read "Clark Stewart." His position was well-known. He liked reform, or, rather, the idea of reform interested him, but he would not go far out of his way to put these ideas of reform into action. Therefore, with polite interest, he listened to what the first of these five gentlemen had to say.

Of the five gentlemen, Clark observed that only Mr. Hughes could speak. The rest were there, presumably, to answer any questions he would pose. In the mean time, Mr. Hughes continued talking in a monotone babble that would, if he were not in such an environment, put Clark to sleep very efficiently. After an hour of such droning, the speaker finally finished.

"I must admit," began Dr. Stewart carefully, "I doubt I got as much out of your presentation as you would have liked. Therefore, I ask that you be patient when I begin my questioning."

"Very well," answered Mr. Hughes.

"Firstly," started Dr. Stewart, "what does your product do? I gather from your explanation of its mixture of chemical formulae that it is an organic preservative and a dangerous biological toxin. I gain from my own perception the knowledge that it is a gray-white paste."

At these words, Dr. Stewart motioned to the sample that the development team brought with them. It was in the center of the table and it bore resemblance to a tea-saucer filled with generic grayish toothpaste.

Mr. Hughes answered this first question, "When applied liberally to the insides of a cadaver, it is able to preserve the body indefinitely by mixing with the organic compounds of decaying matter to reproduce itself."

"I congratulate you, sir," said Dr. Stewart, "on your creation of a parasitic virus."

"That isn't what this is. We've developed it in conjunction with several major cosmetics companies."

"So, I take it they're receiving money too?"

"A small sum to cover the cost of the research team they provided."

"Right. Carry on," said Dr. Stewart, waving his hand in submission.

"The idea is to reduce contaminants in groundwater by slowing the decaying of corpses. For that, we suggest this new type of embalming fluid."

Dr. Stewart chuckled at this. He knew the procedures for embalming, and what he was witnessing was ludicrous.

"So, instead of polluting the groundwater, which already doesn't happen because our sorrowfully departed are in large, metal, air-tight boxes, we will be having to deal with cleaning up waste from your automatically-regenerating toxic toothpaste? Please, correct me if my assertions are somehow incorrect." Doctor Stewart's face was clearly reddening even though he enjoyed his outburst.

"Sir, we have actual scientific data stating that the contamination of our nations ground and well waters are being polluted by runoff from cemeteries."

"Wonderful. Putting your goo into effect now wouldn't retroactively fix all the years of people chucking dead bodies into the ground. These dead bodies, might I add, continue a natural cycle of life. I'm certain that they didn't infect dead bodies with parasites before burying them for the past few centuries. Aren't you?"

At this, one of the silent members of the development team finally broke his unintentional vow of silence. Kent said, "Sir! Your assertions are misrepresenting us. The 'toothpaste' that we represent would allow for families to take more time with their funerals because their relatives would continue to look like themselves. It would allow people to feel more confident that, when they put their family to rest, they are at peace."

Clark was content to end this matter that day. He didn't like the idea. At the time, though, he had heard their ideas through. The chemistry behind them was astounding. His quarrel was more with their presentation, his surroundings, the interminable rain, and their way of stating so forcefully that this was being done for the benefits of the people who were being buried. He could see that it was more for the producers of make-up than the families who had lost loved ones.

Thoughts rolled through his head as the rain rolled down the window. He looked over his shoulder. He saw the rain-spattered view of the parking lot. He would go home that night. What a pleasant thought! In the meantime, he would have to give these barbarians an answer.

A lady's voice broke the silence. "Doctor Stewart, think of the advancement you could make to science by giving us the opportunity to show the world a new side to organic chemistry!"

"That is precisely what I am thinking about, Miss Block," he replied.

To the rest of the room, he appeared to be blankly staring out of a cold, dark window. Thoughts were visible behind his eyes. Unbeknownst to him, the development team and their

indefatigable orator were also beginning to feel the length of the meeting. Their eyes blinked to fend away the sweet feelings of rest. Hands covered mouths and lungs stifled yawns.

"Would you like us to return when you have made your decision?" a voice from the development team asked. Clark wasn't looking, so he couldn't tell who had uttered them.

"That's not a bad idea. I'll give you all a half-hour recess. After which, return to this room and you shall have your verdict."

From the initial sighs of relief, the development team were now rather saddened. Their intention was to go home for the rest of the rainy, miserable day and spend time with their families or catch up on sleep. Perhaps they could have beat the evening commute by leaving the meeting and returning on a different day. A half hour wasn't enough time for much. Upon the threshold of the building, five individuals went in five directions each of which terminated at some reasonable distance by a restaurant.

Clark watched them leave. He could see their departure from the window of the conference room. He inferred that, while they claimed to do most of this research themselves and cooperated in compiling their research, these five individuals were not friends. They were business partners. They probably did not understand friendship. Their idea was not entirely bad. It was well-developed. The chemicals which were being used in this new fluid were some that he had never thought to use in an embalming agent. The fluid allegedly contained microbes which were genetically engineered to administer the synthetic cosmetic agents to organic cells and, even more astounding, to reproduce the synthetic agents.

This thought took Clark aback: the thought of an organic microbe, that is to say a germ, an organism with very few cells, a microscopic animal, even, could re-create a much larger, synthetic, man-made chemical that was a potential toxin to itself. This is astounding, if it's true. This could change science itself. This, in an abstract and elemental form, is the principle behind modern factories: the element of organic people making inorganic cars, toys, plastics, and everything else. The ideas coalesced.

He imagined a world where cars could fix themselves because a canister of some embalming-fluid derivative was fixed under the hood. It could produce metal and deliver it to parts of the car where fatigue had taken hold. He imagined a world where prosthetic limbs could actually heal themselves because some chemical could make the plastic, rubber, or

metal and deliver it to the part of the limb where it was needed. Such remarkable ideas could come of this. Why was it being wasted on dead people when it could so benefit those people still living?

Then it occurred to him. The modern jet airplane is made up of smaller inventions. Man didn't happen to create a jet shortly after discovering how to eat. Progress, be it scientific or social, must have stepping stones. Some new prototype car-engine isn't immediately set in the turbine of a jet plane. A cancer-fighting drug isn't tested on the president of the United States or the Pope.

"Testing," he actually muttered aloud.

He could test it on corpses and see how it works with his very own eyes. Dead people make the perfect laboratory test subject. They decay. They are, theoretically, all the same. The only flaw is that people die differently, and this could offset things. Would the fluid move faster in cells that died of natural causes? What would be the effect of these so-called cosmetic preservatives in people who have died of various diseases? Could this fluid even function in cells that were mutated by melanoma, cancer, or exposure to radiation?

Clark thought that, perhaps, the fluid would survive better in natural causes of death, but, still, if the death isn't of old age, the effects still aren't known.

With this ground-breaking realization, he understood why such remarkable technology wouldn't be wasted on a living soul: the effect from one person to the next could be so vastly different. The number of individual elements that separates one healthy person from another is monumental. The number of elements that separates a person who is diseased from another person who is diseased is exponentially monumental. Furthermore, these reproduced agents might be toxic to living humans or might not be able to reproduce drugs, plastics, or other useful things. However, if they could produce cosmetics, which are potentially toxic to all living things, then, Clark decided, they could reproduce veritably anything. They were already going to be reproducing themselves.

The second half of his conundrum was decided: the first half remained. He did not understand exactly how these agents would affect the body. He begun formulating. As he did so, he looked at his watch. His recess was half over. He scratched his bald head, looked around at the dismal conference room, then looked out at the dismal parking lot, and sighed.

For the remaining fifteen minutes, he decided a course of action to put this plan into effect. At last, the four men and one woman piled back into the conference room.

"Welcome back," began Dr. Stewart. He took a breath, "I hope everyone enjoyed their recess and got a little stretch. I think our meeting is going to be over pretty shortly."

"Sir, before you dismiss us without giving us a chance," began Miss Block, "I think we should tell you that this product could have a substantial effect on embalming."

"Before you leave," Dr. Stewart began, "I think you should know that your agent could have a substantial impact on more than just embalming. Seriously, folks, embalming is the beginning."

"What do you mean, sir?" said Mr. Hughes, thoroughly enjoying his chance to speak again.

"Good sirs and madam, I accept that this agent is ideal for corpses, as corpses cannot die. However, an agent that feeds off of cells without destroying them, forming an equilibrium with animal tissue, being able to construct synthetic resins on its own... These are not properties that should stop with those who are dead! These are the properties of a chemical that could change the nursing profession forever. People whose legs have been replaced with metal ones, their metal parts could be repaired by a microbial doctor. People with artificial teeth could have their teeth treated and strengthened by a microbial dentist. There is much more than just keeping dead people fresh in that dish."

"Nonetheless, as it stands, it is merely an embalming agent for which we have come to ask the government's support," replied the initial orator.

"The government's support you shall have. We shall find some test subjects and offer it to their families at no charge. You five shall do the procedures required to utilize this new product personally. In a few months' time, we will have seen how this agent works on a variety of different people who have died of various causes."

"Do you suspect that the effect will be different? Dead tissue is dead tissue."

"I can see that you, sir, have no medical training."

The gentleman who spoke was, in fact, on the cosmetic end of the development process. He had formulated what chemicals needed to be reproduced by the agent. His name was Donald Nelson.

"Cancerous tissue is very different from healthy tissue. Furthermore, and more importantly, the tissue of the liver is different from that of the intestine, which is different from

that of the skin, which is far, far different from that of the brain."

He took a breath and continued, "I would wish to ask this to someone with a medical background," he paused and looked around until he made eye contact with Kent Williams who nodded, "have you tested this on any tissue yet?"

"Yes, sir," declared Mr. Williams, "We gave it to several dead mice. There were no visible effects to the mouse after several weeks of decomposition."

"Based on these findings, you believe that such an agent will perform well on a human?"

"Some of the compounds in our new fluid are present in current embalming techniques. If the new microbes fail, there isn't anything lost. Corpses will decompose the way they would in current situations. This isn't our intended outcome, but, if things go awry, there is at least that to go on."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained, eh?"

Mr. Hughes spoke again, "Sir, we will need more than five of us to do extensive testing. Furthermore, some of our team does not even have the proper medical training to administer our fluid to a cadaver."

"Very well," smiled Dr. Stewart, "then we shall appoint more people. However, I would prefer if all five of you worked on this project together. Those who do not know how to conduct the application of your fluid should, at least, witness the proceedings. Either way, I want you five to be the driving force of this project."

The sentiment he conveyed was one of government interest. He did not want the federal government to be gambling, so he desired to keep it at a low cost. Personally, he thought it rather amusing to think of these five people of different backgrounds to become a single unit. These people could not even find lunch together. He hoped that this experience might show them proper teamwork. As for their idea, he wanted to see it succeed.

When all six people left the dingy room, two and a half hours after having entered it for the first time, they all breathed a little easier that the future for mankind might be a little brighter, and, even if all was in vain, at least they tried. At least the five members of the development team, while possibly having to correspond with Dr. Clark Stewart, would never have to step foot in that awful conference room again.

Upon entering back into the rain, the five development team members shared a cab.

Clark Stewart took the rest of the day off. He stopped by his office to regain his hat, coat, and briefcase and headed toward an empty house.

# Chapter One

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In the few trees that remained in an American suburb, one could hear the last birds of autumn chirping merrily through the early morning air. Winter was beginning. As the cold sun began its ascent, trees began to shiver and rattle their naked branches over the deserted sidewalks. The sidewalks themselves were seeing the last of the brown, windswept, fallen leaves. The suburb on the edge of a grand city was seeing the first light of Tuesday. All around the peaceful neighborhood, quiet families were waking up and turning off their buzzing alarm clocks and slipping out of bed. One of the first families awake this morning, as every morning, was the Blackstock family which had resided in a large corner-house for about twenty years.

In relation to other atomic families, this one nearly defined the stereotype. There was always some episode causing the entire family grief. Of its five members-- a mother, a father, two young boys, and one little girl-- the father was the most dominant figure, but the children remained the center of attention. This morning, the family was crowded around the breakfast nook. The father, Rick Blackstock, was eating his cereal and complaining of the time he would have at work. The children were eating their cereal and complaining of the time they would have at school. The mother was eating her cereal and complaining of the time she would have at home. All in all, it was the typical suburbanite household.

The day commenced. The sun rose higher in the sky. Cars passed the local elementary school where Angela, the little girl, and Christopher, the youngest son, attended their classes. In a similar way, children of questionable reputation loitered outside of the junior high school where Paul, the oldest son of Rick Blackstock, sometimes bothered to attend his class. Nothing could be farther from the ordinary in this, the average neighborhood.

Suddenly, in the large corner house of the Blackstocks, the phone rang, startling Linda Blackstock out of the sleep into which she had fallen in front of a soap opera.

"He..hello!" she stammered into the telephone after having dropped the remote control trying to turn down the volume on her television set.

"Hello. Is this Blackstock residence?" an uninterested male voice said on the other end.

"Yes. Yes it is. This is Linda," she replied, "May I ask who's speaking?"

"Linda, my name is Robert Tompkins from Shady Valley Senior Center. We're calling to tell you that your mother, Agatha Lindsay, died this morning after a terrible fall."

"Wasn't someone there to watch her?" she ejaculated in surprise. She knew this shouldn't have been the first thing to ask or the polite thing to say in such a situation, but, upon hearing this news, etiquette was somewhat behind her.

"Yes. We have a large staff of fully-trained professionals ma'am," he began, finally beginning to sound actually concerned, "but things like this happen when our precious seniors make strives for independence."

Linda came to the realization that her mother was, in fact, a fiercely independent woman who had for many years begged and pleaded to stay out of a nursing home until she had a fall in her own home. This fall, probably similar to the one in the senior center, prompted Linda to take a more decisive action with her mother and sent her to Shady Valley. Once this realization was complete, she continued with the man in a more civil tone.

"Yes. Of course. You're right," she admitted.

"Our deepest condolences."

"Where is she now?"

"We've sent her body to a local morgue. From there, if you wish, we can handle the basic preparatory procedures while you set up a funeral for her.... Unless you have other arrangements, of course."

"Oh. No. That's fine. You can take care of that end, and we'll set up a funeral. You'll be hearing from us soon about the details."

"I'd rather if we called you when all the procedures are finished. At that time, we'll finalize all the little proceedings and you may have your funeral-- but enough of this talk now. This will be sorted out in a few days. In the meantime, we're very sorry about your loss."

"Yeah. Me too."

Hours passed. Linda paced. She thought about what had happened. She pictured herself helpless. She felt that she couldn't do anything. While she loved her mother, she was also afraid to do anything. This was the first time she had been responsible for planning a funeral. Lots of things buzzed inside her mind. She felt lost. Throughout all the recesses of her brain, not once could she imagine dealing with what she was about to do. After these long hours passed in quiet consternation, she took a nap.

At three thirty that afternoon, she woke to pick up Angela and Christopher from the elementary school. This routine had become so familiar; her mental presence wasn't required to make the journey, and, as she picked them up, she imagined how she would break the news to her family. She could also imagine how they would react. This frightened her the most. It would be then that she would find out if the young ones even cared about their loving grandmother and, perhaps, hear what Rick really thought about the old woman.

At three forty-five, her shiny, blue car pulled in front of the local junior high school. Here her oldest son got in the car with the rest. He knew suddenly that something was bothering her mother.

His keen perception was aided with anecdotes. Driving home, he noticed his mother's vacant expression. His mother seemed to move as though habit alone were steering the car. Her movements were jerky. Upon entering the house, she fumbled and dropped her keys. Paul knew his mother to be clumsy, but this somehow seemed different. She spoke very little to her children and seemed keen on waiting for her husband to come home and bring with him all the answers for which she was waiting.

At last, six o'clock arrived, and with it arrived Rick Blackstock, the family's champion. The tall man with the short brown hair entered the room with a stately gait. He was tired, but he wore a smile because he was happy to see his family after a long day working as an underpaid civil engineer.

Immediately after he greeted his children, Linda had him in the privacy of their bedroom. She seemed worried to him as well.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Ye- well.. No. Not so much. I got a call today from Mom's nursing home."

"What's the matter there? What happened?" he asked, though only as a formality. He seemed to know in advance what had happened. It seems, in nursing homes, when there is bad news, it is virtually all the same: death.

"My mom had a fall," she began. Rick thought for a very brief moment that he was in the wrong. "It was fatal."

Rick looked surprised that he was right in the beginning. He was astounded. He was sad. He was moved for his wife.

Linda was not in the proper mind for cooking, so, with that, they ordered a pizza. A half-hour later, the family was crowded around the same table at which they sat twelve hours previously, and, rather than idle complaints, the room was

filled with an awkward silence. Two fifths of those present knew something that would have to be shared with the other three fifths, and the communication of this would be a rather delicate operation.

"So, what happened at school today?" her mother said, as she usually said every evening.

"Nothing," answered the boys in near-unison.

"My friend got cancer," said the girl.

Of all the things that their child could have said, this was the thing that no one could have expected. This compounded the parents' consternation. Now, in addition to mentioning that their grandmother had perished, they had to explain the fineries of a cancer diagnosis to their youngest child. If they could have been anywhere else in the world at that moment, they would.

"What was that?" Rick asked stupidly.

"Dorothea Rayburn got diagnosed with cancer," Angela repeated. She seemed unmoved by this information. This lack of emotion led her parents to believe that she did not understand the full meaning of these words.

"Honey, that's serious," her mother began.

"I know," said Angela, "She won't be coming to class for a while-- until they cure her."

Silently, Rick and Linda decided for themselves not to pursue this topic of conversation-- Angela knew that cancer was a disease and, in light of the circumstances, that was all she needed to know.

"That's not why Mom's been acting weird all afternoon, is it?" Paul blurted out.

"This could be the perfect time to tell them," Linda thought. Finally, she put this thought into an speech, "No. Actually, it's not. I have something else to tell you."

While Linda looked gravely at her children, they did not share her sense of occasion and had become feverishly thirsty for the news. They begged and pleaded, and, after having been told a half-dozen times to wait until after dinner, won the argument. With pizza on their plates, grease on their fingers, and thoughts of their current school affairs mixed with the promise of news on their minds, the children were silenced by four words.

"Your grandmother is dead," Linda said directly.

It would be impossible for their appetite for news to disappear more rapidly. Their thoughts subsided. The affairs of school cleared away as mist does when the sun finally rises. Their appetite for food, as well, had disappeared with

the speed and sense of disbelief that could only otherwise be created by an illusionist.

They sat in quiet reflection.

Lisa had her memories of her mother that sprang from her youth. Her father had died when she was young. Her mother raised her. Her mother profoundly affected the lives of her children. Weeks previously, they played in the park together. The little ones played. Paul talked with his friends. Agatha sat on a bench and talked with Rick and Linda. Weeks previous to that, Agatha was invited to dinner at their home. She gave the children money hidden in the palm of her hand through a rather-obvious handshake to which Rick and Linda gave a polite blind eye. The bright star that was the grandmother of this family had twinkled its last and was extinguished in some horrific accident that was, in all probability, witnessed by no one but felt by everyone.

The grief was palpable. The entire family looked sadly in disbelief at each other before quietly retiring.

Linda's concern evaporated. The worst part was over. She planned that any speech in the next few days would be respectfully quiet. She would start funeral planning with her husband. After the funeral which would happen in about a week, things might return to normal. There would be no grandmother to raise the kids, but her husband didn't have any parents anymore, and he seemed like the perfect father. He didn't drink, smoke, or have any other recognizable vices. The kids would no longer have a grandmother. These things are life. So, that night, she slept with her husband by her side, giving her all the comfort she could ever want.

Alas, in the middle of the night, she woke. She left her bed and walked around the house. In the unnatural light of both the night and the events that had transpired that evening, she took notice of her family and her surroundings.

The house was built in two stories. The second of which was intersected by a high-traffic, narrow hallway. It had shaggy green carpet and white walls that were freshly painted and quite clean. It was immaculate to be the pride of any hospital, especially if one considers the amount of traffic it saw. There were three bedrooms. Rick and Linda shared the largest and most accessible. It was at the top of the stairs. Down the hallway, the next bedroom was that which was shared by Paul and Christopher. Their bedroom was notable for having the largest change in cleanliness relative to the pristine hallway. Adorned with their piles of toys, books, music, and various other collected oddities, it is doubtful that any horizontal surface could be ready

recognized without a considerable amount of effort. The door on the corner, that is to say forming the corner with the bathroom, was Angela's room. It was decently appointed without being overly feminine. Her room was well-kept in the same manner as the room of her parents.

Her mother stood in the doorway of each of these rooms-- as none of her children were allowed to close their doors at night-- and peered in on her snoozing children.

She looked back into her own room before proceeding farther. She saw Rick, her pride. He would snore occasionally, but he was, otherwise, a good husband and father. He was tall. He had short, straight, brown hair. He wasn't fat, but he would not fit into the realm of the adjective 'lean'. "Average," Linda would say. He didn't smile much. When he did, it could fill her with happiness.

Her first stop was Angela's room. She slept softly on her single bed with a warm, pink comforter. Her peaceful, pale face had a slight frown on it. Linda contemplated that she was dreaming some melancholy dream that might help her better understand the events of that day. As Angela's mother, she felt doubly sorry for the events of this evening. Dorothea, who had just begun her battle with cancer, was Angela's closest friend at school. Angela, being six years old, could hardly understand what cancer was. It would be difficult explaining to such a precious young lady that she very well might lose one of her friends. Linda sighed. Angela was a wonderful child. As the youngest, she held the highest parts of Linda's hopes. As Paul and Christopher were boys, they couldn't hold the hopes of their mother in quite the same way as Angela, being largely the image of her mother, could.

Angela shared her mother's long, straight blond hair. They were both of slight build and had large, sorrowful blue eyes. Their faces were of the same angular shape and, probably least noticeably, they both had the same narrow nose. To see one was to recognize the other.

Turning from Angela's room, she crept to the room shared by Paul and Christopher. Over the mounds of toys, papers, schoolbooks, and other assorted belongings could be seen a bunk bed with Paul on the top and Christopher on the bottom. The lower one resembled a miniature rendition of the one on top, for the lower one tried to emulate the upper. As a result, Christopher got his hair cut in the same style as Paul who, in turn, got his hair cut in the same fashion as was popular in junior high. They were also rather thin, though Christopher enjoyed sweets very much.

Linda smiled at the sight, even though she wished her children would clean their room. As she maneuvered stealthily back towards her bedroom, Angela woke up.

"Mommy..." Linda heard spoken softly.

She crept back to Angela's room. "What is it, sweetie?"

"What happens when people die?"

"They go on a trip to a better place."

"I heard they get buried in the ground."

"Well, their body does."

"That's terrible."

"Not at all! Grandmom's body is going to be in a nice warm... Well, anyway, her spirit is going to heaven to be with all the other people who've died."

"Like Einstein?"

"Well... Yes. Just like Einstein. Now why don't you try and get some sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

With that, Angela, with all the curiosity of youth still raging in her head, rolled over and placed her head on the pillow. She lay awake for some time after her mother left. She was thinking about Dorothea and what might become of her as well. Her sleep, when it finally came, was very deep. Her body's unconscious had much to comprehend.

Rick was awake soon, too. He had noticed his wife missing and gotten up to search for her. He knew instinctively that the worries of the day wouldn't allow Linda to sleep. He was surprised that the children had slept so quickly and so readily without wanting a family talk of any type. He shrugged at it all. The matter didn't concern him quite as much as it did his wife and children who had grown up with the poor old lady. His interest leaned toward keeping the funeral respectful but, at the same time, frugal. His job paid little and the family, while having many beautiful things, spent their money irresponsibly.

Even with the risk over over-spending, his worry was very little. His job was secure and he could usually count on an advance in his salary. Money, the root of all evil and sole concern of many thousands of people, rarely interested Rick Blackstock. He could be frugal when the situation demanded it, which wasn't very often. He thought of himself modestly. He was a good father, and, to some extent, he knew it. He also knew there was room for improvement, as there always would be. He wished that he spent more time with his children and it showed in his occasional sleepless nights. He made up for this feeling by spending more time with his children on some weekends. At this very early hour of the

morning, he was regretting more and more that he didn't have a talk with his children about his mother-in-law's death.

He arose. He stumbled around the room. His blue eyes adjusted slowly. His vision was rather fuzzy as his blood, which was previously pooled throughout his body, began making its way for his head. He looked around the room. He was a tall man. The floor was a long way down. He teetered and gained his balance. Nighttime was not his place. He preferred the warm, sunlit world through which he could demonstrate a sense of balance and coordination. At night, his senses were dulled by darkness and his coordination shaken by the effects of food digestion.

Nonetheless, he did arise and make his way downstairs. The stairs had a burgundy carpeting which kept his feet warm. There were slight creaks as he stepped, but the house was thirty years old and had weathered some terrible storms. The living room with its oak furnishings and old, multi-colored plaid sofa opened up around him. Some light from the kitchen threw itself upon the floor of the living room. Rick headed for the kitchen. He stopped in the dining room--through which one must traverse to reach the kitchen--because he saw his wife seated at the table in partial darkness. The only light to be seen was shining from the kitchen. Linda sat pensively in the darkness.

Rick wasn't much for theatrics. He turned on the light and pulled up a chair.

"What are you thinking about, Honey?" he began.

"This and that. Mom and Dorothea."

"Annie's cancer-patient friend?"

"The same."

"I hope it's not that serious. I would hate for Angela to suffer the double blow of her grandmother and one of her best friends..."

"Yeah. Me too."

"C'mon. Talk to me," he said gently. After a pause, he added, "Tell me how you're feeling."

"Rick, I'd really rather not bother you with that right now."

"It's what I'm here for."

"Well, my mother was always the biggest thing in my life next to you. She was there for me when Dad wasn't. She was the best thing I'd ever had growing up-- a mentor, a protector... She gave me everything I needed."

Here she stopped for a few moments of quiet sobbing. Rick was frustrated on the inside. He would much rather be in bed sleeping. His mother had passed several years previously. With this detail, very few heard or even cared.

The children didn't know Rick's mother because she was in an insane asylum out of state. Rick loved his mother as any child is required to love their mother. Otherwise, Rick was independent-- probably more independent that would be required by conscience. Nonetheless, years ago his mother died a quiet death alone. Rick was sad, but his wife's sadness was irritating. To him it seemed rather theatrical and unnecessary. Nonetheless, the importance of his presence to his wife was easily observable.

"Let's go to bed. You need some rest. We'll have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. The kids will stay home from school and we can deal with this like a family," Rick said after listening patiently to his wife for about a half hour.

"Okay," she agreed hesitantly.

With this simple word of acknowledgement, the husband and the wife-- the mother and the father, the daughter and the son-in-law-- climbed the stairs and made their way to bed.

"I love you," Linda said.

"I love you, too," Rick said.

Finally the trying evening of the family was ended. Sleep filled the house. Dreams did not visit that house, as they would be unwelcome if they entered any minds that night.

## Chapter Two

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"Honey!" exclaimed Rick Blackstock the very next day, "We could save some money on your mother's viewing and funeral by signing up for this government experiment." As soon as Rick spoke, he regretted the word "experiment." In vain, he added, "er... Program."

"What?! Do you think I'd let my own mother be a guinea pig in some government experiment?" recoiled Linda in terror. Her reaction was unfortunate horror. What sort of butcher would want to experiment on the loved one of such a loving family, or, for that matter, what government employee would want to perform an experiment on a dead relative of any family?

"Honey. The funeral arrangements you showed me are expensive. I'm trying to save us from the poor house. Your mother is costing us a lot: first with the legal fees of selling her old house, then with the placing of your mother in a senior center, then with paying for her to be entertained and given a senior community at the recreational facility, and now with her funeral."

After a long pause, Rick started up again, "I don't want to sound insensitive," but this time he was cut short.

"...but you are, and it's terrible. You've shown no emotion about my mother's death and now you want us to turn her into a lab rat for some experiment..."

"We're giving her the finest funeral I can afford. I miss the poor woman as much as you do, but putting us in a poor house isn't going to do her much good." He sighed and continued on, "Look. It's not like it makes any difference to us. They're going to embalm her anyway. Signing this just means they'll be using a different process. It might help the funeral business in the long run."

"So? She's my mother!"

With this, Rick Blackstock wanted to drop the entire matter. In fact, he would have dropped the entire matter if it weren't for the substantial amount of money he would receive just by signing a paper. It promised that there would be no noticeable differences in the funeral arrangements. Everything would be the same as if the government had not interfered, but there would be a cash bonus.

He tried communicating these facts with his wife politely, without mentioning money again. He began, "Look. They

say it that the entire process would be done with no other involvement from us but signing this paper. It seems very harmless to us."

"This is my first time doing this," she began, pointing at the pile of books she had checked out from the library on the matters of dealing with death and funeral arranging.

"I know. They say that all the things you've learned still apply. They'll just handle a part of it usually taken care of at the morgue."

"And all the insurance information?" asked Linda, looking skeptical.

"It all still applies. The American Medical Association will reimburse the insurance company and pay us some extra money for being so cooperative. We can even meet with people in person if we have any questions during the process."

Linda Blackstock was confused. Once again, she didn't know what to do. If she went along with this, she'd undeniably make Rick happy and save him some of his hard-earned money. If she didn't, then she would be giving her mother a more traditional and respectable method of handling her body. In the end, the choice fell between two granite beings-- both human, but only one of which was living.

She caved in.

"Okay. You've sold me. Sign the paper."

With that, another day passed and the arrangements flew. Things were made easier and, in the end, everything went according to their plan.

Then, another day later-- that is to say on Friday-- the first of three viewings came.

The long black limousine bearing the family of the departed arrived. The occupants entered the funeral home. The group of five-- the first to arrive for Agatha Lindsay-- entered the oaken French doors of the establishment, sorrowfully glided over the green carpet of a mosaic pattern, and entered the chamber appointed for them. The room was a large hall with a low ceiling with the casket against the far wall parallel with the longitudinal axis of the room.

There were flowers at the head and foot of the room. There was only one door to the low hall. Upon entering, after noticing the lavish floral decorations and teak coffin, one noticed the podium bearing the register of mourners. Mr. and Mrs. Blackstock went accordingly to this register and signed their names. There were a dozen candles burning around the room to illuminate the flowers. There were six rows of metal

chairs, each with a black metal frame and dark red cushions for the seat and backrest. The carpet here had a mosaic pattern as well, and there were paintings behind the floral arrangements. These paintings were abstract and contained various shapes and contrasted various hues of color. They interested the children.

These children wandered around. They wore their most-suitable finery. Angela wore a simple black dress. Her blond hair was unusually undecorated. The boys wore their best suits. All were clothed in black. Paul, who hadn't worn a suit in a few years, had his ankles visible because his trousers no longer properly fit him. The rest of his clothes fit rather tightly, but, with the time constraints, the family was unable to provide him with a new suit. We must remind ourselves that our departed family is undoubtedly happy that we came to pay respect and is probably not conscious about the fit of our apparel.

While the children looked at the flowers placed pell-mell around the room, the parents immediately went toward the casket to pay their respects. A simple kneeler was placed before the casket for this purpose. Linda went first. Her silent prayer was mingled with audible crying. A detail that was left unmentioned: this funeral chamber, like most viewing rooms, contained ample boxes of napkins.

The children seemed dazzled. The effect of the hall had amazed them. They had seen nothing like it. The lights were dim. The carpet's tiled pattern was unlike the solid color at home. They ran their hands along it. They pointed and discovered the paintings. They had not realized that their grandmother was in the room.

By the time Rick was finished his prayer of respect, the children were hiding under chairs. Children have a tendency to play. Mischief wasn't their intention, neither was disrespect. Scenes of great emotion for those who have lost loved ones are often misunderstood by children. Sadly, Linda and Rick did not understand.

"Children, what are you doing?" Linda asked politely. She looked miserable. Her eyes were red and sore from crying. Upon hearing this, Rick turned from looking at the coffin to see what was happening behind him.

"We're here to pay our respects. Please don't play around. Go over and say a prayer."

The children silently obeyed. Rick and Linda fell to talking quietly. We dare not transcribe the effects of their conversation.

An hour passed thus. The children spoke amongst themselves, and the parents did the same. The time was three o'clock in the afternoon.

One more of these sad hours passed thus. The sun was beginning to set outside. There was light and life beyond these walls of suffering and despair. At this time, children were leaving school and having fun. People returned from their work to eat a dinner with their family. Others still would be playing ball. Other parents might still be cooking. Others still might be watching the television. Nonetheless, it is irrefutable that nearly every family was happier on this early winter afternoon than the Blackstocks.

At around five o'clock, Rick's brother Steve and his wife Josephine arrived. The children were happy of this because this couple loved children and usually had presents when visiting. After signing the registry, Steve looked around and found the children looking at the candles at the head of the room to the right of the podium.

"Hey, guys," he said quietly.

"Hi!" they said respectfully.

"This is a pretty awful occasion, isn't it?"

"Yes," Angela responded.

"Are you guys okay?"

"Yeah," they responded.

Josephine came over to speak to the children as well. They spoke of their feelings and what they knew. They also spoke of lighter things. Funerals also serve as reunions.

Minutes later, more people arrived. The new arrivals included Laura McQuade, Linda's sister, and her husband William. They brought their three children-- Geoffry (called Jeff), Stephanie, and Jacob (called Jake). The Blackstock children now had people with which they could mingle.

Also arriving were five people that no one in the family recognized. They wore black like everyone else present. They looked rather sad, but not in the same sense as the mourners. Their eyes were cast down. They seemed as though they'd made a routine of coming to funerals. Their walk seemed rehearsed. Their glances, the way they signed the register, and the seats they chose all seemed to be part of some ritual that they had previously undertaken. Perhaps they had rehearsed funeral manners before they had come hither, or, more likely, they had visited other funerals recently. Nonetheless, pleasant thoughts did not come to Linda and Rick Blackstock when they saw this quintet make their entrance.

Rick went over to the four men and one woman. They bore no unique physical features. They all stood when Mr. Blackstock made his presence.

"I don't believe I know you," he said addressing the entire group, "Are you sure you have the right room?"

The five people looked at each other, "Yes. Quite sure. Mister Blackstock, we come from a private company supported by the A.M.A. to discuss your mother-in-law's proceedings," said the group's orator. It seemed that even he had previously made this speech.

Linda approached as the gentlemen continued, "We are here to explain why the casket lid is closed, rather than the open-coffin funeral you requested."

Linda Blackstock wanted to know this from the moment she had entered the room nearly four hours ago. She asked them to continue.

"Our new procedure had some rather unsightly side effects that we had not anticipated-- some effects that were not able to be corrected using traditional medical cosmetic practices."

"Who, exactly, are all of you?" Linda demanded.

The orator seemed all too familiar to this otherwise-awkward situation. He presented himself and his league, "I am Arnold Hughes, this is Marissa Block, that gentleman is Richard Morris, behind him is Kent Williams, and, over here, is Donald Nelson."

They all gave nods as their names were mentioned. The five people present wore one face. They carried the same look of projected guilt and embarrassment mingled with sadness.

Arnold Hughes continued speaking, "We are personally responsible for this situation. We're greatly sorry."

"Rick, I told you this was a bad idea. I told you, and you told me that everything would be okay. 'All my arrangements would be just the way you wanted them,' you said."

"That's what they told me," Rick said, defensively, pointing at the five strangers.

Before the situation could escalate, more family arrived. Mary Burke, another sister of Linda, and her husband Frank arrived with their three children Lily, Douglas, and Richard. Linda was close with her sisters because they had each married a man and had three children in the same way that she had. This rather pleasant visitation by a beloved sister distracted her from the situation at hand.

"You'll be hearing from me at a later date," she told the strangers.

Shortly thereafter, by forty-five minutes past five, more arrivals came including a half-dozen of Rick's coworkers.

There were also several neighbors, a dozen people from the nursing home where Agatha had lived. These elderly people were mostly unknown to the family. They paid their respects and received a warm welcome from the family.

The room was abuzz with quiet conversation. People were continually kneeling on the kneeler before Agatha's coffin to say a prayer. No one had any words of wrong to cast at Agatha. Her life is mostly unknown. No records were kept of any great deeds she did. Most of the people she knew are now, unfortunately, deceased.

Of the records that were kept, we may decipher that she was eighty-five years of age when she died, and that she had never driven in her life. Also, she was a devout catholic.

The people of the place came together. The direct relatives of Agatha Lindsay made great strides to learn about and mingle with the people who had come from the nursing facility who had known Agatha before her death.

Around six o'clock, friends of Angela, Christopher, and Paul had arrived. The number of children in the room had nearly equaled the number of adults. With this, Angela and her friends found a quiet corner. They were all little girls. Her friends had not all worn black as she had.

Stacy, one of the girls, spoke quietly, "Did you hear that Dorothea died?"

A great tidal wave of grief hit Angela. It was almost more than her young brain could handle. Her impulse was to scream. She tried but only succeeded in creating a sob. She whimpered. She was in a state of such sore distress. Her friends hugged her. They knew Dorothea, too. Angela's eyes were red. Tears stormed down her little face. She trembled.

At the same time, little Stacy's parents were telling Angela's mother and father the news. They were aghast. They turned to see if Angela had received the news. In the flickering light of the candles, under a display of lilies, with a black dress of mourning, and bearing in her the heart of true innocence, Angela could be seen by her parents crying madly. Her arms were around her friends. Her heart was wrung dry and the tears which fell from her eyes seemed to be the output.

Rick and Linda rushed over. They couldn't find in themselves the proper words to console their daughter; therefore, they didn't try. For an unknown amount of time, Mr. and Mrs. Blackstock sat on the floor with their daughter in their arms. The small throng of children who knew Angela from school had no words to break this familial silence which was only broken intermittently by sobs escaping from Angela's contorted soul.

In a matter of moments, the entire chamber knew of Angela's friend's fate. All but the five members of the American Medical Association were quick to offer support. All eyes seemed to be on Angela.

This wasn't what Angela wanted at the moment. She wanted to be left alone with her thoughts, so she understandably excused herself.

When she returned a few minutes later, she saw her mother and father speaking with the five pharmaceutical strangers once again. It would seem that Linda had forgotten her civility and the warmth she had experienced from the entrance of her two sisters. Upon Angela's entrance, though, the only thing that her mother said was, "We'll see what the manager of this place thinks about that."

After these words, the mother returned to her child's side. Angela's brothers had already returned to their friends from their respective schools.

Another fifteen minutes passed. The quiet talking had continued again. The last of Agatha's friends from her nursing home had finished paying her respects. There was more talking among these elderly people. Conversation, in general, became less about sad things. Laura, Linda, and Mary, the three sisters, spoke together of things they remembered from youth. Most of their stories were ones that their husbands had heard on countless other occasions. Accordingly, the three husbands of those women: Stephen (called Steve), William, and Francis (Frank) were discussing their favorite sports. At that time of year, talk of football was in vogue among men. William McQuade and Frank Burke especially enjoyed this talk of their favorite sport. Steve did not enjoy football as much as his compatriots, but he understood the game and the situations among the top teams to understand and add to the conversation.

The children spoke mostly of school-life, with the exception of Angela's circle of little girls. They were still in shock and quietly coping with their grief.

Finally, at half past seven, a balding gentlemen wearing all black and bearing a rosary entered the dark chamber. He seemed to bring a little light with him. He was old. His face was wrinkled, but he was strangely handsome. His lines weren't deep and his face held a rather pleasant, peaceful expression. He was a priest from the church that Rick and Linda usually attended. He entered, signed the register, and then headed towards Rick and Linda.

"Richard. Linda. I wish it were under happier circumstances that I am meeting with you," he said.

"Thanks for coming," replied Linda. She and Rick shook hands with the priest, giving him a curt nod.

Angela, Chris, and Paul joined their mother and father in greeting their favorite priest from the church. The priest knew the children fairly well. He had conducted their baptisms, and they had attended his mass every week since their births.

After some more words between the family and Father Sebastian, the priest stood with his back to the door. He removed from his pocket a small book and placed it on the podium containing the registry. The podium became a pulpit.

The throng abandoned their quiet chatter.

"Good evening. I would like to begin by saying a quick prayer." He looked down at his book, but he knew the prayer by heart. He had said it more than once a year for forty years. He recited:

"Almighty God, we remember before you today your faithful servant Agatha Lindsay; and we pray that, having opened to her the gates of larger life, you will receive her more and more into your joyful service, that, with all who have faithfully served you in the past, he may share in the eternal victory of Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

"Amen," the crowd replied.

After this, Father Sebastian led the group in a reciting of the Lord's Prayer. To finish off his short sermon, he said, "I'm now leaving the pulpit; you've all suffered enough," to which there was some polite laughter, "But, before I do, I would like to invite anyone who has some words to say to stand here and share them. They can be a memory or just some kind words to share."

At this, a few people stood, debated who was going to speak, and Linda Blackstock got the vote. She walked up to the registry. She was nervous, but she did not show it. She was overcome with emotion. She could see everyone else was as well. The only exception, once again, were the five strangers in the middle row. They had presumably heard the prayer that the preacher had said in other experiments in the past.

Linda chose to ignore these five people. She began to speak. Her words filled the hearts and minds of all who heard them. Even the five individuals whom she was trying to ignore were somehow transfixed. She even mentioned them and asked them to forgive her appearing uncivil. She forgave

them. She emptied her head and her heart of all that seemed unbearable.

After this, many others began to speak.

# Chapter Three

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Two days preceding the funeral of Agatha Lindsay, the hospitals in the locality were assigned to distribute American Medical Association pamphlets to the families of patients who had recently died. These pamphlets contained letters and phone numbers similar to the ones that Rick Blackstock had read and signed two days previously. These pamphlets upset seemingly all but the poorest families. Many of these families were enraged about the government's experimenting with terminally-ill patients. Nonetheless, this "many" was a still a minority. The families were contacted when their family was still living. This added to the complaints received by the hospital staff. These complaints were, once again, made by a minority.

Conversely, the majority of people were interested. At that time and in that locality, one could simply place a check in a box on a form to have a group take your organs after the applicant died. The government said to these people, "Be a hero." Most people signed onto this program because, as far as accomplishing hero status is concerned, checking a box is a simple method. They would be dead when the collection occurred, so it didn't make any difference to anyone. Such was the case with this government study. They would check the box or give the proper authorities a telephone call. Everything would be sorted out and no one would ever have to know. The deceased would be help the government's research; the government would pay money to the applicant. The money received by the applicant would, probably, go toward the funeral or medical expenses of the deceased. This circle was beneficial to everyone. The most important benefactor would be, of course, science.

Dorothea's father received this information from the hospital on the same day that the hospitals were assigned their distribution. Immediately, he signed Dorothea up in this program. It was mentioned when he spoke on the telephone that this program was exclusive and that they were trying to gain as varied a group of subjects as was possible, Dorothea's father was excited. They were happy to have, firstly, a fresh corpse-- this one not even having died yet-- and, secondly, a cancer patient. Since Dorothea was not dead when her father made the telephone call, the health team would, theoretically, be able to collect the body nearly as soon as she had died. The

five-person development team instantly granted Dorothea's access to this program.

Dorothea's father, Martin Rayburn, was not a cruel man. He wanted the best for his daughter. He was a single parent and Dorothea was his only child. He had been through sore distress when his wife had died several years previously. His sadness and grief lined his face. He looked eternally sad. It seemed as though he would never be happy again. Afterwards, his daughter was diagnosed with cancer. We may only imagine the amount of torment that his unfortunate soul has received. Fate had agonized him. These days, that is, these days leading up to Agatha's funeral, Martin neither ate nor slept. His daughter's health was slipping. He hadn't much money-- even less since Dorothea was placed in the hospital for full-time treatment.

The government's program was, perhaps, the best care he could give Dorothea. He didn't regard any of it as an experimental procedure. He knew that it must be safe enough if "they" were applying their treatment to humans. He assumed his daughter would be a forerunner-- a pioneer. He also saw the money. This money, admittedly, was the first prospect about this venture that he could appreciate veritably. His job didn't pay as well as he might have liked. Charities contributed to the care of Dorothea after having contributed to the funeral of his wife. Martin, sad and lonely, still couldn't eat well, even if he had wanted to, due to his financial situation. He had already taken an advance on his paycheck to pay for some of Dorothea's medicines. His house was mortgaged and, therefore, not truly his anymore. His double-grief was mixed with overwhelming financial anxiety.

With these reasons in mind, he happily gave consent to the American Medical Association.

Two days later, that is to say, on the day of Agatha Lindsay's funeral, Dorothea died.

It was around two-thirty in the morning when Martin Rayburn received a telephone call from the local hospital. He knew immediately what they had phoned to tell him. He knew the news before they told him. For the next four hours, he was in the hospital waiting room crying. He spoke to counselors.

By seven o'clock in the morning, the governmental task-force assigned to Dorothea's case had already moved Dorothea's body.

Dorothea had, due to the treatment for cancer, no hair. Her small, frail, six-year-old body was taken from the hospital while the winter sky was still dark. She was transported to

a local facility. The entire trip lasted approximately fifteen minutes.

After transporting her body to an operating theatre, the process commenced. The body being stripped, sterilized, and marked with lines and points was set out upon a cold metal table. The room was a large operating theatre. They used this building for more advanced surgeries where doctors would watch. This new procedure being performed in secrecy, saw no observers. The A.M.A. did not want this new agent to be leaked into the wrong hands, as its developers would see a tremendous loss of money.

The process itself was overseen by Richard Morris. He represented the corporation that produced the agent and, therefore, he was the prime candidate to watch.

The operation began that very morning. A single doctor entered to see the body laying on the table waiting for him. He approached. Under supervision, he primarily applied the syringes of the fluid to the deceased girls' lungs. He then applied them to arteries and tissue in the lower legs and feet.

A half hour later after the beginning of the procedure, he signed some documents and left. Richard Morris had the body covered, cleaned, and taken to the morgue.

Once there, gravity and the pressure of moisture leaving Dorothea's lungs, partially due to the dry air of the morgue, caused the paste to be pushed from her lungs. It eventually made its way into the left and right pulmonary arteries and, eventually into the superior and inferior vena cavae.

Once in the heart, micro-molecular reactions began occurring. The theorized actions began taking place. The actual application was of just over a pound of this fluid. In two hours time, the cells of Dorothea's heart began reproducing it. Not long afterward, the rest of her body began doing the same. By the time people were arriving at Angela's grandmother's funeral, Angela's friend had nearly doubled the amount of fluid present in her body.

This happened very rapidly since the body was so fresh when the procedure had been done. The results had been better than expected. The five-person team appointed by the American Medical Association had agreed later to do an examination of the corpses after a one-month period to see whether their new embalming agent had worked. If only they could have been in the morgue at five o'clock to see what they had done. Their brutal application of sludge had created a sludge factory inside the dead host.

The motions of this fluid had begun pushing against the muscles of Dorothea's heart and the walls of the lungs. These

motions set the fluid running through her arteries. It returned to her heart in much the same way blood might. It filled the pores and tissues beneath her skin. It saturated muscle groups. In mere hours after the application, the plans of the development team were more than merely surpassed. The team that had set out on creating a self-reproducing agent with only dead cells as fuel had over-accomplished their goal.

If one were to examine this effluvium more carefully, one would assume that the fluid was sentient. It moved with a purpose: to reanimate this body so that it could create more fluid. It had the intellect of its designers. As such, it is not known whether it was supposed to happen or not, but, by the time that Mary and Frank Burke were signing the register at Agatha's funeral, Dorothea's lungs began to move of their own accord.

The morgue was closed at the time. The cold blue light and the metal drawers full of bodies stood silent. Then, from one of those silent rooms came the solitary sound of a single, quiet, muffled sigh.

All of everything science had known until this moment was a lie. Chemistry has a motive. Everything that is created merely wants to be re-created so that it may continue. We, as humans, have the urges to continue our species. Trees, worms, flowers, all brainless life, just want to duplicate. This new pseudo-organism which took the shape of gray-white ooze carried the same motive of all organic chemistry. Nature had applied its principles to this new wonder-paste.

It would be seen, if Dorothea had exposed her innards to us, that the paste would turn into a liquid when in the state of reproduction. Therefore, most of the paste in her body which was not dormant near her skin was in a liquid state. It will be worth noting that this liquid bore little viscosity and was similar to blood in its texture. It would seem that this organism bent on recreating itself was working toward helping young Dorothea, snatched early from life, to return to the land of her friends.

When the young and fragile Angela was tearing her heart out in grief over the loss of Dorothea, Dorothea was already beginning to breathe. The fluid had returned some warmth to her. When a body becomes infected with a bacteria, the body heat increases. This is the physical symptom that occurs when antibodies are produced. When a nation is under attack, heat is produced by factories. This production of weaponry must always produce heat. Whether it is into the grand environment of air that we breathe, or into the enclosed system of our body, creation produces heat. Furthermore, the

heart is a pump. The lungs are bellows. The muscles are cranes for lifting our extremities. The body is mechanical, and mechanical equipment can be restarted once stopped.

Therefore, Dorothea's heart began beating. Her brain received a flow of this fluid. It, not being able to properly put together the stimulus it received, created a sporadic series of violent pulses. These brainwaves were enough to get the heart pumping properly. The fluid circulated, leaving deposits this fluid in every porous patch of tissue that it traversed. Within another hour's time, there was double the fluid that was injected nearly twelve hours previously. This remarkable success could only be attributed to the freshness and youth of the supplied subject. In an older body, such a remarkable process of regeneration could have taken two days or more--if it happened at all.

The creation of this agent in a system could be related to the origin of man. The seemingly-inert microbiological cells need only the capability to reproduce. Once this is established, evolution could create anything from the multiplying cells. Such was the case of Dorothea, where the cells had begun bringing life back into her young, cancer-ridden body.

At seven-thirty in the evening, the morgue was temporarily re-opened to get Dorothea's body. At this time, she was no longer a corpse. Those who had come to retrieve her body did not know this, of course. They roughly handled her body.

"She's heavy for a little kid," said a heavy-set official sadly. He looked down at the swollen body covered in a thin sheet. He didn't mind his job of moving around dead people, usually. This time, however, it was a child. This always saddened him. He saw the bald head and the sad, bluish face. He inferred cancer. He shed a single tear.

His companion wasn't as emotional as he was. He was younger and generally less sensitive to matters of the heart. He looked at the body. Upon lifting it, he noticed it was heavy as well.

"You're right. I guess the cancer got too heavy for her, and she had to drop the whole ordeal."

"That's not funny."

The younger gentleman had, in fact, just said it as an attack on the older gentleman's sensitivity.

The older man continued, "the one thing that you must learn about these cases is that they are all people."

"They were people."

"They still are. She's just as human as you or I. The only difference is that we are alive, and she was called to heaven early."

"Right. Whatever. Let's just get out of here. It's chilly back here."

With that, the two gentlemen left with the little girl. They were taking her to be prepared for her viewing, which was prepared for the next day. They had to get her dressed and suitably made up for the occasion. They had special orders to do their job anyway, even if the body began to decompose in front of them. They were told to close the coffin lid when they were finished due to possible complications.

They put the body in storage for the next day's grooming work. They had absolutely no idea that she was not a corpse any longer. There were fluctuations, though. The body passed between life and death many times between her original coming to life and the end of the night.

The next morning, the body was dead and cold again. There were long, thin gashes in her skin where the ooze had begun to seep out. This upset some of those who were assigned to dress her. After being told what had happened, though, they seem less distraught. It was not the quality of being unprofessional that had disfigured her but, rather, the development of science for mankind. Subsequently, she was dressed and placed in the casket her father had picked out. She looked like an angel when they had finished dressing and making her up.

She was taken to a funeral home many blocks from the one wherein Agatha lay. At noon on a Saturday, the second day of Agatha's viewing had begun. Many of the same visitors from last time had begun arriving already. Nearly the entire younger population of the local elementary school were divided into visiting these two scenes of grief.

The viewing for Dorothea Rayburn was taking place in a different funeral home that was closer to the elementary school. It was also to take place at three o'clock that afternoon. Therefore, the viewing hall for Dorothea was empty around the time Agatha's was filling. It would seem that the two sides of the town were on a scientific balance where the populace made up the material to be measured. Agatha's funeral, the left pan of this balance, was loaded first with people as a fixed measure. Dorothea's balance pan would be loaded later. The outcome of weighing this one funeral against the other would be a quantified measurement of both grief and affection.

To tip these scales, many of the people who visited Agatha's funeral were those who had been present the previous evening. Steve and Josephine Blackstock, William and Laura McQuade and their three children, and Mary and Frank Burke and their three children were all present once again. Angela Blackstock wanted sorely to see the viewing for her friend Dorothea. They had planned on doing that when evening befell. This set many sad hours between then and now. It had taken the Rayburn family, evidently, only one day to do what the Blackstocks had done in three. This further angered Angela. On the other hand, there was more time to inform people of the viewing for Angela's grandmother, and it took place in the richer, more lavishly-appointed side of town.

While Dorothea's viewing was not to begin for another three hours-- that is to say the time was around noon-- Agatha's viewing chamber looked exactly as it had the previous evening. It smelled the same. There were no external windows, so the candles once again cast an eerie glow on the room. These candles were, obviously, replaced by the maintenance staff early that morning before the Blackstocks arrived. With that, the room was in exactly the same state that it was the previous day. Much to the dismay of the family, around twelve thirty, the five-person pharmaceutical team arrived.

"What are you doing back here?" asked Linda Blackstock with impatience.

"Making our rounds. We will only be here for a few hours today. We have another funeral to attend later," said the group's usual narrator.

"Well... Good!" answered Mrs. Blackstock.

She curtly turned and walked away from these five people. She had absolutely no desire in starting another discussion with them. They had, in her opinion, ruined her funeral since she could not see her poor mother one last time before the funeral. This proper church funeral was scheduled for Sunday which was to be followed by the burial.

A few minutes later, the priest returned. The scene was set almost exactly as it had been the previous night at seven thirty. The similarity was very eerily exact. The only difference was that there were entirely more people. Eight of Rick's coworkers were present, and there were a full twelve people from the nursing home. Neighbors were present from the entire area. Many of the students from the local elementary school were present to comfort Angela and Christopher. Paul's friends were not as supportive.

For Angela's friends, there were arrangements for visiting Dorothea's viewing later that afternoon.

Thus, with Agatha being loved and venerated for one last time before the funeral, the young afternoon began the same way the previous night had ended. There was prayer. There were tears. There were orations.

Dorothea was patiently waiting her turn while being on the very verge of returning to life.

## Chapter Four

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As Dorothea's frail body was teetering between life and death after being pumped with the new experimental fluid, nearly a hundred people were crowded in the viewing chamber of Agatha Lindsay. The rows of chairs were surrounded by a large semi-circle of mourners. The priest spoke his prayers with words that struck the hearts of even the most granite hearts in the room.

Afterwards, once again, people were invited to stand behind the podium-- behind the nearly-full registry of names-- and say a few kind words. Linda was out of words. This was untrue for the throng of seniors. They politely waited while each of them went to the makeshift pulpit and said some words.

The first stood, walked slowly to the podium and began to speak, quietly, through some tears, "I would like to thank Father Sebastian for his kind words toward Agatha. They do her justice. She was a good friend. I could always talk to her about things over tea. She could make me laugh." She began to trail her words. She then paused to wipe her eyes before continuing, "I loved her. She was a real people-person."

She began to cry and went back to her seat. Others followed. Octogenarians gave their words of praise to the group. Later, Paul, Agatha's grandson, stood up. All others gave him space to get through. His sister, brother, mother and father watched from the chairs near the center of the room where they were seated.

"I know I'm only twelve years old, but I knew my grandmother my entire life. I loved her like I loved my mom. She was a great woman who really cared for my family and me. Also, she taught me lots of things about life itself."

As he said these words, a rattling came from to his far right. It was as though it were coming from the coffin. These faint rattling and scraping noises were generally ignored as some of the older people present had unsteady hands which could against anything to produce such a sound. No matter the cause of this disturbance, Paul kept speaking.

"She gave me many of the toys I played with when I was little. Most of them I still have. She was smart. My sister, brother, and I know a lot because of her. She gave us a special insight into things that happened to mom when she was young."

Here, again, the rattling got louder and subsided.

"She knew a lot about a time that I would have otherwise not known about. I really liked hearing the things she had to say."

At this time, there were three knocks. After a second of silence, all eyes upon the coffin, there were a series of more and more violent thuds. Finally, the top half of the coffin began to move. It made a wide arc while slowly opening. An old, torn, scraped, arm appeared with the flesh beginning to peel from it. There were long thin gashes, like the scratches of a wild animal, in odd intervals down the length of her forearm.

"Grandmom!" shouted Paul, rushing over.

"Mom?" shouted Paul's mother.

They pushed through the crowds at odd angles. The crowd, made up of older, less flexible people slowly caved out of the way for the direct family. Christopher got up and followed in the wake of people created by her mother. Angela and Rick, as well as most of the throng, looked terrified and bewildered. This solitary arm raised in the air was followed by a second arm.

"Mom, is that really her?" asked one of Linda's sisters, sounding terrified.

Linda approached, followed by Chris and Paul. They lifted the other half of the coffin lid.

The reader has probably figured that Dorothea's incident where she was nearly reanimated was not a singular occurrence. The fluid reanimated Agatha as well. It is presumable that she needed only blood transfusions, fluid removal, and some stitches before she could be an active member of the community again. The three family members, upon rushing closer, saw these gashes filled with white ooze which reminded Linda of caulk. She assumed this was holding her together. It was, in fact, giving her life.

Linda looked at her mother's face. The eyes were glassy. Her mouth was open. It was clear she was trying to talk, but her mouth was filled with ooze. This ooze looked like it was about to be expectorated from Agatha's mouth, and so she gagged. Linda tried to help her mother sit upright.

Agatha bent her back. She moved from laying to sitting. She did not need Linda's help. It was a miracle. Firstly, that someone so old could sit upright as easily as Agatha had just done, but, secondly, that someone presumed dead could do so.

Agatha's arms, which had previously been held upright to support the coffin lid now jutted out straight in front of her

awkwardly. She turned to face her daughter, placing her arms on either side of Linda. She bent them in an embrace and tilted her head as if to give Linda a kiss on the cheek.

Linda was ecstatic. She could tell her mother needed immediate medical care. The five people endorsed by the American Medical Association stood bolt upright and stared, disbelievingly, at what they had done. They did not know that Dorothea might be, at this time, alive. It might also be mentioned here that more than fifty people across America, by this time, had been given the fluid. These thoughts rendered the five development experts crazy with curiosity.

They were touched, just as the seniors from the nursing home were, just as the relatives of Linda and Rick, just as the priest, when Agatha gave Linda a kiss on her cheek. It seemed Agatha was thanking Linda for welcoming her back to life. Paul's eyes were full of tears. Rick's eyes were wide.

A second later, Linda's eyes were full of pain. She screamed.

The crowd, which had been sitting quietly for moments watching this unnaturally spellbinding event take place, now sat with curious minds eager to know why Linda was screaming and trembling.

Linda was, in fact, convulsing in pain. She shrieked. She pulled away from her mother. When she did, she turned the side of her face where she had received her kiss toward the onlookers. Blood was smeared there, and it rolled down her cheek. There was also the white ooze, in liquid form, mingled with this gash. Agatha had just bit and tore a large chunk of skin from her daughter's face. While the blood ran from Linda's face onto her shirt with startling rapidity, Agatha could be seen chewing on the flesh. She swallowed it with ease. Then, her eyes were wide. She looked as though she had experienced the first of what would, perhaps, be a rapid succession of flesh. Her teeth chattered, and her eyes grew wild.

The spectators were mesmerized, and, subsequently, could not move from their chairs.

Agatha swung her legs out of the coffin and stood, knocking over the coffin clumsily. There was silence. In Agatha's head, a little voice was crying out. It made her head reel. After the first euphoria of flesh had entered her head, her brain demanded more. It demanded blood and skin, and it wanted at that moment.

"I just want to consume. I need food," the voice screamed, "I need it now. I have been dead. I died. I have seen the light

after death. Now, I need to regain my energy. Food! Blood! Flesh! These will restore my senses!"

She could say none of this. The glands beneath her tongue were constantly producing the fluid in its liquid form which was ripe for reproduction. This, if not outwardly spat, would roll to her throat and congeal, sealing her mouth. Therefore, this fluid came from the corners of the poor woman's mouth. She looked at the people. There was one right in front of her: Linda. Agatha's arms were still around Linda's torso.

She took another bite, this time, of her neck. Agatha clenched her teeth around the skin and muscle of Linda's delicate shoulder blade. She applied as much force as her newly-reinforced jaws would allow. To Agatha's delight, the muscle severed easily with a loud, cracking, popping noise. She skin tore unevenly as Agatha's head pulled away. She realized that it was as easy as tearing fabric. The muscle was much tougher, but still negligible.

After a few painful seconds, Agatha let go of Linda. Linda's head wobbled. She was screaming as her shoulder felt as though it was on fire. Her eyes were in tears. The throng rushed to her aid. The large segment of muscle and flesh missing from her right shoulder made her head fall to that side. Blood covered her clothing. Grey ooze had already begun congealing.

Agatha's arms lashed. She saw Chris and Paul at her feet. She grabbed one of them; Paul was easiest to reach, as he was most near her height. She stumbled closer to have a bite. He stepped away.

"Rascal! Stay here and feed me," she thought. "Such a nice boy," she told the voice in her head, though she could not remember who the boy was.

She wondered what the inside of a person might taste like and, more importantly, if it might stop this high-pitched, tormenting scream that pierced her head. This noise could make her betray anything she ever loved; therefore, she tried to grab the person closest to her. Sadly, it was Paul, though she did not even recognize him. Unfortunately for her, while she was strong, her flexibility seemed impaired. She thrashed and moved closer to him. Finally, after three steps, she grabbed his skull. The voice wanted this boy dead. This voice wanted to her to take a bite from her grandson. She thrashed and flailed with his head still in her hands. She managed to smash his head on the lid of the overturned casket. She saw the boy still alive. She smashed it again with a terrible thud.

Again she smashed it.

Again.

Finally, blood spurted from the young boy's head. The blood splashed atop the casket and sprayed as far as the wall behind it. Paul's eyes rolled back in his head. By this time, people were trying to restrain Agatha. She kicked at them.

The sight was enough to make Father Sebastian run from the chamber to get the director of the funeral home. Everyone else in the chamber began trying to restrain the beloved grandmother. The priest told the director in his office of what was happening. Out of disbelief, he agreed to see the chamber and the events that were happening within it.

He came to the door and stood with his eyes wide. His expression of shock was the same expression mirrored on every face in the dimly-lit room. The old lady, dressed in a flower-patterned dress and covered in a gray-white paste had picked up one of the tall candlesticks within arm's reach of her coffin, tore off the dish-shaped top that held the candle, and used the remains as a weapon to break the skin around Paul's navel. She then threw away the weapon and put her hands to the wound she had just created in the seemingly-dead child. With her hands clutched tightly to the flesh surrounding the wound, she pulled the wound wide open. There was a quiet splitting sound while blood shot out from this long, wide gash. It extended from his waist line up to the middle of his chest. His dress shirt's buttons popped off easily and the opening of the shirt paralleled the opening in his body. Agatha reached her hand into his warm, pulpy abdomen and pulled out whatever she could grab. She had his kidney in her hand and she bit it as to taste it. Then, she devoured it noisily. She began pulling things out of him as fast as her frenzied hands would allow. His lungs were torn out, several ribs ripped from his spine, his heart was wrenched from its location and thrown into the crowd of confused and angry storm of people. She began to pull at his intestine, but it stopped. She moved her face closer to his body and used her teeth to sever the intestinal chain.

Furthermore, by this time, the crowd had agitated her by trying to remove her from the boy. After the violent removal of the intestines, she threw the boy down to the ground. The taste of the intestines still on her tongue, she began to bite at the hands restraining her. She punched and kicked. Linda was laying on the ground at Agatha's feet bleeding out onto the floor. The old people were lined up. She punched them, and she kicked them. She scratched at their faces and they easily submitted to her violence. She regained the candlestick-weapon. As she shuffled toward the circle of

people around her, she silently demanded that these people would pay for restraining her by stabbing them in the arms with this candlestick. She found that she would need a better weapon to stop these people from hurting her. She kicked the boy's body at her feet. She found what she sought.

She bent down. There was, surprisingly, no pain in this movement. She picked up Paul's intestine and straightened her new spine. She looked around wildly. Christopher was pushing her back against the overturned coffin. His hand was at her abdomen. She reached her hand down and quickly, in a fluid move, with the hand that didn't contain Chris' brother's intestine, twisted Chris' hand at the wrist. She twisted it and she twisted it. Then, there were ripples of skin at the wrist where it had begun to tear. In another second, she had torn Chris' wrist from the socket with a loud pop. He emitted a loud scream. Many others echoed his scream. Another second after that, the hand was cleanly removed from the body. The screams redoubled as the old woman put it in her mouth. Then, as she had originally planned, she wrapped the intestine around the neck of the first person who was holding her. In this case, it happened to be Frank Burke. The intestine was surprisingly strong. The blood and food bits from this fleshy tube ran down Frank's shirt. His hands clenched toward his neck.

While Agatha applied still more pressure, she was using her right foot to kick at the rest of the throng that encroached.

Frank's head lolled back. He fell to the ground as his legs crumpled beneath his weight. Once again, Agatha began moving across the room. She grabbed people and stabbed them with her candlestick as she passed. She bit people sporadically as the impulse attacked her. She could move very quickly. She shuffled and limped, but it did not impede her speed. The object attracting Agatha's attention was a tall floral display on the far end of the room. It was held up by a tall tripod. She ran toward it, pushing people out of her way and stopping very abruptly several times. The first time she stopped, she turned to her right side, grabbed an old lady by her blouse and bit off her nose with a snap. As she continued running down, she stopped a second time to bite off the ear of an old man who gazed at her in horror. These bits that she bit off left blood all over the seniors' faces. They screamed and placed their hands where their face used to be. She shoved them away after she bit them. They stumbled into the rest of the crowd. The third and final stop she made on her way to the pedestal was one of her other grandchildren, Jake McQuade. He was young. The pants he was wearing when she grabbed

him filled with feces with the rapidity that could only match the abruptness of Agatha's halt in front of him. She bit his lips. She tore them off. The skin on his face stretched and distorted as she did. There was a quiet tearing sound that frightened the child nearly as much as the pain. He shrieked with his eyes opened widely and tears flowing profusely. There was blood. It filled his mouth and nose. He screamed with the blood bubbling in his mouth. His sorrowful outcry finally convinced everyone else to try and leave. The funeral director had already left this horrific scene.

Agatha saw this. This is why there were no more stops on her trip to the tripod. She grabbed it, threw over the flowers, causing them to knock candlesticks to the floor. She ripped the frame apart piece by piece until she was left with a five-foot long piece of sharp wood that could be used easily as a spear. The people who had been nearer the door to begin with, which included the priest, Rick Blackstock and his daughter Angela, were soon trapped by Agatha and her spear. With Paul's intestine still thrown over her shoulder, people trying to exit now would face either strangulation or impalement. Either of which, Agatha's savage eyes conveyed to the onward-looking crowd that she was not afraid to inflict. Angela and her father drew back into the throng. They knew better than to cross Agatha in her current state.

Unfortunately Jeff McQuade and his sister were less intelligent and decided to rush Agatha. They were joined by Lily and Doug Burke while other frightened mourners stayed frozen in their place. These children thought that, because they were small, they could out-manuever the old lady. Agatha attacked the leader, Jeff, by rapping him hard on his head with her spear. She sent the tip of the spear through Stephanie's face. It broke her nose, broke her teeth, and, as the general force of the spear was applied in a downward trajectory with Stephanie's small height, the spear crashed through her brain and nape of her neck with a terrible crunching noise.

Agatha raised her spear for the next of the rushers. Lily was next, but, since Stephanie had died so easily, she slowed down. As Agatha raised her spear, she found the end heavy. Stephanie was attached to it by her head. Her body was raised in the air. Agatha jostled her spear handle to free Stephanie, but she would not separate from her spit. She used her spear as a bludgeon and wrapped Lily on the head. She fell. Agatha used her spear next as a toothpick. It went through Lily's head as she lay on the floor as a toothpick might go through cheese. It went from Lily's left ear to her right, crushing her brain

and shattering her skull. Brains, blood, and gray goo were splattered all over the floor with a terrible, familiar crunching sound and the strong smell of blood.

She lifted her spear again. This time two bodies were attached. With one, graceful, swift pitching motion of her spear, she threw the bodies into the throng sending with them a deep-red ribbon of their own blood to shower the mourners. This pair of bodies hit the crowd gathered around, knocking some to the ground causing thuds to mingle with the screams of horror.

By this time, the viewing room began to fill with smoke. The candles that had been previously overturned now set another floral display ablaze. There were screams from the back of the room. The inhabitants could face a certain death from the fire or a certain death from the revived grandmother.

Agatha ran at the crowd. She impaled people with her skewer. She bit at them and tore at them. She managed to knock over Mary Burke, whose husband she had killed moments prior.

"No! Mom! Stop! Please!" Mary screamed.

Agatha wanted to scream back, "I must!" and "Who are you to call me your mother?" but she only managed to produce a gargling noise. The gray ooze had once again filled the back of her throat. Agatha came closer and closer to her daughter.

"No! Stop!" Mary beckoned. Tears were beginning to fill her eyes.

Agatha stomped on Mary's head. Her screams stopped very suddenly as her teeth were violently pulled from her gums and scattered across the floor. People were escaping. Agatha didn't care anymore. She had some food. She tore off her daughter's leg at the hip. She stomped on Mary's groin to get the leg free. The tough tendons and muscles took a terrible beating before they finally relented in giving her mother a leg. Loud ripping and tearing noises filled the room causing the mourners to scream and cry. She bit at the severed leg and tore at the flesh. She smiled. The blood that had been in the leg flowed down her face. She was in ecstasy.

As her ecstasy wore off, her pains returned. She ran back to the door to stop the people who might try to escape. En route, she kicked and threw people to the ground. She used her hands to strangle. She lost Paul's intestine when she had tied them tightly around William McQuade's neck. Her fist knocked out people's teeth. She grabbed something heavy--it turned out to be a Bible. It was a good enough bludgeon that she could use it to bash those who stood in her way

back toward the chamber's only exit. The huge throng rushed against the small aperture that had made escape virtually impossible. She began knocking people with the bible in her one hand and her bare fist made by the other. She tore at the people with her teeth. She kicked at the people with her feet. She grabbed at the people between punches. She did everything she could to stop the congregation from leaving, even though they weren't able to escape anyway.

She regained her spear and began impaling people with frightening rapidity. Soon, none of her family was left. All had bite-marks and gray ooze spattered on them. Lily Burke, Stephanie and Jake McQuade, and Josephine Blackstock formed the base of a barricade for the door. This barricaded was growing by the moment as the spear entered the cranial cavities of the senior center members. It entered through ears, and noses. Agatha noticed that it went much faster when she applied the spear to peoples' eyes. She pushed it through until it reached the back of their skulls and then pulled it back out, so that people would not get stuck to her weapon as Stephanie had done.

Before long, the barricade was enough to obstruct the door enough so that those who were still alive could not easily escape. Thus, the bodies were piled high. There were only a few people left. Agatha figured that they could not escape before the ever-growing fire would take them. The room reeked of blood. The sounds of screaming had subsided. Ooze dripped from Agatha's mouth onto the pile of bodies, into open sores were eyes and noses used to be, where brains were at one time, and where limbs had been torn off of bodies for food.

She stumbled from on top of her barricade out into the hallway. She pulled the bodies that she could closer to the door. Her increased strength made this task easier. She bit and gnawed on her fleshy barricade while she heard the screams die out.

She looked around at all the doors in the hallway and wondered if there were any other viewings taking place in this building today.

Rick Blackstock and his daughter Angela were two of the handful of survivors. While the rest were badly injured, Rick and his daughter managed to survive nearly without injury. They climbed stealthily over the barricade a minute after Agatha. They passed a brown-haired man in the hallway. Rick recognized this as the funeral director.

# Chapter Five

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The events of the previous chapter-- more specifically, from the rising of Agatha's coffin lid to the piling of bodies into the heap-- scarcely took ten minutes to occur. Agatha was fast. She seemed indestructible. Now, with one room still smoldering, she ran down the hallway. As she scurried, she heard a footstep. Upon turning, she saw Rick and Angela near the main door on their way to the parking lot. She ran after them.

Rick stealthily pushed open the door and took a step outside. Angela, who was behind him as he started through the threshold was no longer behind him when he passed through it. He looked back and saw Angela being carried away by her grandmother. She was screaming. He took a step to rush back and return to his daughter's aid. As he did this, he saw his beautiful daughter's arm ripped off by his wicked mother-in-law. He left and closed the door behind him. Now that he was out of the building, he turned past the corner of the brick wall, and collapsed to the ground crying.

Racing around in the back of his mind, out of his conscious thoughts, he should have known that Dorothea's funeral might happen the same way. Furthermore, her funeral would begin in a few hours. A similar scene might occur. However, what was actually presently in his mind was the most pure, pellucid, authentic horror. Tears stormed out. Behind him, inside the building, he could hear muffled crashes. He knew without seeing what was happening.

Agatha had discarded Angela. She, covered in the gray sap, lay in the hallway dead. Her blood spilled all over the floor. A door, merely three feet away, was kicked through by the peaceful old lady. There were screams. She began bludgeoning people with the tall, bronze candlesticks again there. An entirely unknown crowd had fallen prey. By this time, the fire from Agatha's own room had gotten to the point of setting off the smoke alarms. Automatic sprinklers all over the building began to douse everyone. It also sent a dilute form of the constantly-reproducing fluid onto the floors. It flowed like wine at a picnic.

The room Agatha currently occupied, after having being alive again for only fifteen minutes, was that of a retired statesman. He was a lawyer who went to become a senator. He was revered by most of his colleagues. In truth, he was

corrupted by his colleagues. Nonetheless, He had a private viewing in his home town for his close friends and family. Unfortunately for him, those mourners, approximately three dozen, who had come to visit him and pay their last respects were the targets of this insane demon. As she staggered into the room, she was moaning, crying, and looking carefully at those assembled.

The voice in her head had already caused a catastrophic amount of damage. The blood of her own family and friends was all over her hands and face. The voice in her head told her to get more blood and to try to convert people. Her own brain-- the center of thoughts that she could still muster from her brain-- still told her the reality. She had seen many nameless people bitten and violently mutilated and murdered. She was horror-struck herself. Her impulse was a high pitched squeal of a voice in her head; the very sound of which caused her torment. She obsequiously followed its every order in wanting it to stop. Under the voice's direction and Agatha's new strength, she pulled the statesman out of his coffin and started to eat him. She tore off his shirt and applied her face directly to his gut.

The statesman, in life, was a fat, jolly fellow. In death, he had a woman gnawing the fat from his abdomen. As her face entered his round layer of fat, she found his intestine and hurriedly consumed it. Even though the embalmed body was bloodless while she was eating it, the voice in her head relented slightly. When she tried to stop eating at the man's insides, the voice returned with doubled intensity. The old woman's head reeled. She ate as far as his celiac ganglion. She tore out skin and tissue with her teeth. The stretched, distorted skin around this man's insides were now covered with the ooze with which they had embalmed the old woman. His insides were transformed into shredded ribbons that leaked out of him constantly.

The throng of mourners was astounded!

They thought they might defend themselves against the woman. Her eyes were wild and her skin was bulging in her abdomen. Her arms were swollen. Her cheeks were puffy. Her neck was swollen. There were oozing, gray gashes covering her entire body. She no longer had any wrinkles. The injected material was filling every porous cavity of the poor woman's tissue. She smelled of blood though the material oozing from her every pore was completely odorless. The room was silent except for the poor woman's sobbing.

Suddenly, the congregation of mourners abandoned their defensive position and ran toward the door. The old woman pushed, shoved, and, ultimately, blocked the door before anyone else could make an escape.

As the throng tried to fend her off, she grabbed one of the abstract paintings on the wall next to the door. It was similar to one found in Agatha's own room, which was probably now scorched. The painting was torn from the frame. Agatha ripped one of the two long arms of the frame from the rest and used it, again, as a spear. This spear was only two feet long and served as more of a large knife which could also be used to bludgeon people. Such was Agatha's belief.

She rushed at the crowd. She gnawed. She bit a man's cheek clean off-- and another man's ear-- and a woman's breast-- and a little baby's eye-ball. She smashed at abdomens and chests with her makeshift weapon. She hurled herself upon this throng, and the throng seemed to collapse under her violence. It took tremendous force for her to break a person's skin with this weapon, but she had tremendous force. For one man, she applied her weapon just above his groin and tore upwards with it. His bowels, everything that digested his food, flowed forwards onto the floor while his lifeless body stood in amazement. He then dropped backwards into the faceless mass of people.

Agatha's eyes lit up. She saw food on the floor. She bent down to eat at it. She pushed handfuls of this man's innards: his stomach, still containing recognizable bits of bacon and sausage; his intestine, long and twisted with a tough casing; his pancreas, with its pancreatic juices; his liver, full of blood; and his gallbladder that was full of bile. She was in ecstasy. She shoved these organs into her mouth at faster rate than she could ever hope to digest them.

She didn't quite finish her meal, leaving some leftovers on the floor, and she turned toward the crowd. As she rushed them once more, she experienced a terrible pain. She had eaten far too much far too quickly. She spat out some blood onto the terrified people who were backing toward the door. Of the three dozen people who were once there, one third were lying on the floor. Most were dead; others were close to death. Once again, all of their bodies were splattered by a trail of Agatha's gray venom.

The group, Agatha's stomach pain, and the incessant screaming in her head, led her to scream. The sound was feeble and high in pitch. Her venom had narrowed her vocal cords so that it could be more easily transmitted. However, it also strengthened them. Her cry, which began feebly was

soon amplified. People trembled and covered their ears. For a moment soon following, her voice was quelled as a stream of mostly-undigested vomit poured from her mouth onto the people directly in front of her with a loud splash. The vomit was full of chunks and particles. It was crimson from blood, and it smelled rank. Furthermore, it caused the people on whom it landed to begin to vomit as well. The floor was slippery in the arc formed by Agatha and bounded by her vomit radius and the radius of the vomit produced by the four people on whom her vomit had spattered. The viscous vomit mixed with the ooze and copious amounts of blood caused thirteen people to slip and fall. She stomped on their heads with her own shoes. These shoes were, as those of the people who had fallen, thickly coated in the fetid mixture.

Agatha's room, since the fire was now extinguished, was covered with bodies. Most of the bodies were burned or at least singed. The Blackstocks, the Burkes, the McQuades, and a hundred nameless families would be missing members, and the missing members were missing parts: an arm from one, the lips of another, the eyes from several, the innards, a leg, another arm. The smell was rank of charred flesh. The floor was covered abundantly with a mucus made up of bile, blood, and the ooze that had started this mess. Agatha was impaling the people who lay on the floor with the legs of a chair. As these victims wallowed in their own bodily fluids, the ooze in Agatha's own chamber had begun solidifying in people and taking hold. Dorothea was fresh when they had injected her. She had been dead several hours. These victims had been dead several minutes.

It entered the brains of some who did not have a skull left intact. It entered through the punctures or wounds of the rest. The great body pile soon had people on the bottom feeling their first, very basic motor function. The old people who had died closest to the door served as the base of the barricade that trapped those few survivors. These corpses began to flail and writhe in pain as they heard the first whispers of the fluid's terrifying voice.

The people in the statesman's chambers were mostly dead by the time Agatha parted. The funeral home was virtually empty by now. Those people who had heard the screams and cries had left in a screaming panic.

Rick was still outside the funeral home. He was sitting on the cold ground with his back against the brick of the facade. His head was in his hands. The backs of his hands were on his knees. He heard the door open. In an instant, he was on

his feet. He didn't bother to look; he just ran and refused to turn back. He jumped in his car and drove.

If he had turned back, he would have been frightened. He would have seen the funeral director covered in blood, but clearly capable of movement on his own. His name was Lawrence Fowler. He had been in Agatha's chamber minutes after the massacre. He had seen the barricade of zombies. He, seeing Rick run, tried to run after him. He wanted to catch up with him, to make an alliance, and, maybe, to figure out just what exactly was happening.

Mister Fowler wasn't sure if he should bother phoning the police or any authority. He had seen the fellows from the American Medical Association just a few moments previously. More properly speaking, he had seen their bodies on the floor with legs and arms missing. Arnold Hughes had a large portion of his neck chewed out. Donald Nelson was impaled with Agatha's wooden spear. Kent Williams and Richard Morris presumably died of blood loss with various limbs missing. Kent was missing his left arm; it was ripped off from his shoulder and partially eaten. The remnants lay next to him. It would seem that Agatha had gotten very good at removing legs, as Richard was missing both of his. The last of the five development-team members was disemboweled like several others had been. She was missing several ribs, which lay scattered in various places of the room. She loaned the most blood to the quagmire upon the floor.

With all this in his mind, he dare not call the police. He wouldn't want to embarrass himself. He stood outside the building on the driveway where Rick Blackstock's car had just been. He was out of breath. He wiped the blood from his hands on the pants of his dry-cleaned suit. He breathed heavily with the sights he had just seen still whirling through his head like a typhoon. Suddenly, the typhoon had a landfall: he vomited. He saw the barricade and the fire. He watched the horrific things he had just seen once again flash before his eyes. He was still seeing the events again in his mind when he opened his eyes and looked at his vomit. It smelled. He looked over his shoulder at his building where so many viewings had taken place with no quarrels or problems. Then, in his eyes, the United States' government took control, and it all went up in smoke. The building was still physically standing, though, and that was one small condolence for this terrible disaster. Then, he thought, perhaps this would bring publicity. He would, however, have to figure out how to get the murdering woman who was once grandmother to nine children out of his establishment.

Lawrence Fowler, his life and dreams on the line, turned back and entered his funeral home. He wanted to know what was happening now. He thought to himself, "I could call the police and just say that there was a fire. I could say that there is a maniac on the loose, but then there's the government substance spilled everywhere. This is a nightmare!" He entered his establishment. He turned into his office, which was thankfully untouched. He picked up his phone and dialed the local police department.

"You've reached the ... County Police Department. This is Dispatch Control; how can we help?"

"I'd like to report a fire."

"Would you like us to direct your call to the fire department?"

"Not so much, no. No. It was caused by a maniac who broke into a funeral and started attacking people."

"Do I understand you correctly when you say you're reporting a homicide and arson?"

Lawrence Fowler felt crazy. He could hardly believe the words he was saying. "Yes," he said hollowly.

"Okay. We're sending some squad cars and a fire engine. May I ask your name?"

"I'm Fowler-- Lawrence. I am the director of Bentley Funeral Home."

"Bentley Funeral Home: That's from where you're calling?"

"Yes. Yes it is," he said mechanically. He stared at the wall of his office which was starkly decorated containing only a painting. He did not hear the next question.

"What? What did you say?" he stuttered and regained himself.

"Are there any injured people there, sir?" the calm woman's voice said.

"Yes. Dozens. Hundreds."

"What happened to them?" the woman said, trying to keep Lawrence on the telephone line.

Mister Fowler, a family man, a father and a husband, looked at his office again. He was beginning to bald. He had grayish-brown and thinning hair. He was trim. His eyes were sad but wise. His suit, of which he had a half-dozen that he wore for work, was besmirched with blood. He had scraped off any remnants of the gray ooze from his hands. He heard thrashing in the hallway.

He dropped the receiver and ran from his office to see what was happening. A few people from Agatha's chamber had wrestled their way from the pile of corpses. There was

yelling. Lawrence left the building. He fumbled through his pockets to find the keys that locked the door. He secured it as quickly as his shaking hands would allow. He could see through the outer door of the funeral home into the small vestibule. Through this was the hallway which had doors on both sides that led into the private viewing chambers. The brown, stoic carpet now had deep red streaks across it.

There were two of these reanimated people. They ran dumbly against the door and turned back. Their heads were wobbling around on their necks as they adjusted themselves to their new legs. The fluid was reproducing and pushing blood out of their systems to take its place. As they walked back down the hallway, their bodies streamed blood behind them.

Fowler breathed a sigh of relief. He saw two police cars screaming down the street. They turned into the driveway leading to the doors outside of which Fowler stood. The police officers were sent in place of a fire engine or ambulance. In small localities where service is short, and when stories of such an unbelievable nature were phoned in, sometimes the dispatch officers thought it more appropriate to send a police officer or two to see the sanity of the caller. The police officers took the keys from Fowler, who did not speak but bid them enter and see for themselves using frazzled gestures. The police officers-- there were two of them-- entered. They were young recruits. They were clean-cut and confident.

No sooner had they entered as the two old ladies turned and stared at them. There were two one-on-one brawls. One old lady, Diana, took on one young recruit. The second one, Edna, took on the other. Diana slashed at the recruit. She clutched at him with her own skin just beginning to tear under the pressure of the fluid beneath it. The police officer reached for his service weapon. Diana's brain told the fluid's voice that the gun could ultimately stop her. The voice redoubled in its fury causing Diana to reel and scream. She knew she had to grab the officers weapon, and she did so. Her reinforced arm muscles tore the gun from the officer's hand, taking the officers index finger and thumb with it. The tendon was torn from the socket. The officer uttered a scream and fell to the floor in agony. The other officer was grappling with Edna, and, to the police officer's surprise, Edna was clearly stronger than he was. As he reached for his own service weapon, a bang was heard. The officer who Diana was fighting was shot in the face. A second bang, Edna no longer met any resistance in her struggle with the second officer. They both took part in

tearing the police officers apart. They ate at the officers with a fiendish delight. Blood was spattered all over the ladies' faces, their mourning clothes, and the brown carpet.

Lawrence Fowler, standing outside, fled. He wanted to contact the American Medical Association and find out just what had happened. He wanted to find Rick Blackstock, who he had very narrowly missed. His head was rumbling. He began to cry. He screamed to the heavens. With none of these things working, he got in his car and drove toward his home at a great speed. He ignored everything. The road was a tunnel to his house.

Once there, he would put things in their proper order. He would find the person responsible.

# Chapter Six

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Rick Blackstock was driving as fast as he could. He was on his way home as well. The little houses passed him by on both sides with wild rapidity. There was an occasional tree already bare by winter's oncoming chill. He passed joggers in warm attire without noticing. His eyes were glazed.

On the path home, he passed the police station. He was thunderstruck. He stamped his foot on the break. He turned and pulled his car into the parking lot of the station. He got out, slammed his car door and entered the low brick building. He had blood on his shirt. The police officers at the desk took notice of him.

"Good afternoon, sir," one of them said.

"Hello. I'd like to report," he took a long pause, "zombies."

"Zombies, eh?"

"Zombies. Actually just one zombie, and that was my wife's mother. She killed... She killed everybody. There's a big pile of bodies." He stopped here. He knew he sounded crazy. He stammered on anyway, saying, "There was a viewing for my mother-in-law, and I guess there was something crazy in the new government funeral operations, because she rose up and started killing people."

"I don't know what kind of joke this is, sir, but we are going to have to ask you to give us your name and the names of some of your relatives or close friends, so they can come and pick you up."

"I'm not crazy," though, when Rick said this, he was stammering and his face was turning red. He looked more and more crazy. He decided that he wouldn't find any help from these two police officers. He looked around. The office was bare. There was a very bland-looking white tiled floor. The desk behind which the officers sat was brown and void of all detail. The room was small and dingy. The clock on the wall made a quiet humming sound during the lull in the conversation. It said twelve thirty. He sighed. He had a better idea.

The officer continued, "So, you're mother-in-law's a zombie, eh? So's mine. You want a ride home or something, buddy?"

"No. I'm sorry officers. I think I was having an awful daydream. I've been under a lot of stress lately. I'm sorry for wasting your time."

"Eh. That's okay, pal. We'll still give you a ride home if you want it. You're not the first person daydreaming about zombies today."

"No," he paused, "I'm better now."

Rick left and got back in his car. He drove to his house. The ride was long and uneventful. There, once he was in the comfort and privacy of his own home, he opened the telephone directory. He thumbed through it finding retailers of sporting goods. He phoned up the first one, that is to say the one closest his house, and asked the man on the other end of the line whether it required a permit to get a shotgun for hunting. His response was a "no." It would seem the only thing it required a permit for was a handgun.

He hung up the phone after a short question of pricing. He checked his checkbook where he kept the amount of available funds listed. To his surprise, with the money he had received from the American Medical Association, he could easily afford a shotgun and some ammunition. With the money he had previously in his account, he could buy more ammunition. He knew that there would be more bloodshed.

He got back into his car, drove toward the arms retailer, and decided to take a route that passed by the funeral home. He wanted to see what was going on at this time. While passing by, he saw a police car outside and blood on the glass doors that led inside the building. He slowed his car down. He could see a small blaze burning. He entered the driveway to get a better look at what was going on inside the building. He looked into the hallway from the main door. He saw piles of body parts in front of the door. He looked into the hallway and it seemed as though there were now several dozen zombies-- all missing various parts. They were having a party in the hallway eating some of the burnt corpses and setting fire to the establishment. As Rick put his face to the window, the zombies saw him. They turned towards the door and started to run towards it, slipping on blood and tripping on entrails. The herd was grotesque. Each of the corpses had flesh missing from their face and arms. Many of them had the embalming fluid starting swelling their organs. Blood was freely dripping out of all of their orifices as the fluid took its place. Rick saw the zombie herd with blood oozing from their eyes, nose, mouth, ears, even various parts of their skin-- especially their finger tips.

Rick drew back in shock. He saw the assemblage flowing toward him at a dizzying speed. He turned back toward his car and ran away from that scene. He hastened toward the sporting goods store. As he drove away, there was a loud

crash of glass as the people who were previously dead broke through the glass of the door and started climbing toward the parking lot. Those who couldn't make it through the fragments of broken glass started pounding at the door jamb. Rick could see in his rear-view mirror, that this horde of zombies was pouring into the street and knocking on the doors of local houses. He punched the accelerator with his foot and hastened down the deserted road. When he came to more traffic, he slowed his car. He kept his eyes on the right side of the road to see the arms dealer.

To his surprise, the store was on the left of the road and much farther from the funeral home than he'd originally planned. He pulled into the parking lot and got out of his car as inconspicuously as he could. He had done a little research in the past about hunting and hoped that he could convince the people in the establishment that he was a hunter of wild deer and not of previously-living relatives and their undead army.

He got out of the car and headed toward the door. He had been wise enough to put an overcoat over his blood-stained clothes. Upon opening the door, a gust of hot air surprised him. The store was warm and inviting. His heavy overcoat caused him some discomfort, but, in his grand design, nothing could go wrong for fear of not having a weapon with which to combat the evil insurgents. The simple act of removing his coat would let those in the store see the blood on his shirt and stop him from purchasing a firearm.

Rick had been introduced to lifeless beings. He had seen his own mother-in-law rise from the dead and exhibit violent behavior. Popular culture of that time stated that zombies came in large quantities and did not take long to reproduce. With these simple and related facts in mind, Rick wanted to amass as much firepower as possible.

He entered the store. He saw around him a dazzling selection of sporting goods tightly packed into the single room of the store. The shelves were crowded in the first aisle with fishing rods, reels, baits of every shape, size and color, and a surprising array of tackle-boxes and hats. The next aisle to the left contained more sporting goods ranging from baseball bats and baseballs to tennis racquets, gear for squash, and hundreds of other sporting-related trinkets he could not identify. He turned into this aisle and walked to the end. Being a small, local merchant, the store carried guns behind the counter in the back of the store. Rick approached this counter to see a beautiful collection of firearms. Handguns were kept in a locked container while the rifles and shotguns

were held in a rack behind the counter. The salesman, who was also the owner of the store, stood there.

He was a chubby man with a full head of hair. He smoked a cigarette and wore a wide, friendly smile. Through this smile and this cigarette, he said, "What can I do for you?"

Rick had rehearsed his story in the car, "I'm a new hunter. I sort of agreed to go on a hunting trip this afternoon and I'm not prepared. I need a shotgun."

"You agreed for a hunting trip without a gun? Are you a nut?" His smile gave way to a chuckle.

Rick smiled, "No. My boss is a hunter and I had to go along with it to impress him. I know, basically, how to hold a gun, where the safety is, and enough not to kill anybody."

"I can get you a gun right now. What are you looking for more specifically?"

"Just a heavy shotgun-- preferably an over-and-under. You understand-- I need something a dummy like me can shoot."

"I gotcha." He reached down behind the counter and picked up a sleek, shimmering, new firearm. It was a bolt-action twelve-gauge shotgun. He continued, "It's got a balanced center of gravity. Also, it's pretty heavy, so the recoil won't be too bad. The aim on it is good. I hunted with a gun like this when I was a kid. It's a solid sucker. You load two at a time. Fire the trigger... Well, you know how it works."

"Looks great. Can I hold it?"

"Of course!"

Rick took the gun from the owners' hands. He looked at it closely. He did not touch the steel, as he knew owners hated that. He held it to his shoulder-- mostly so he could show the man that he was, in fact, not a real novice. He did not really know what to look for in a gun. What he had read in a guidebook in his car on the way would have to be suitable.

"Looks good, and I've got to meet my boss, so I'll take it."

"Sounds good."

Rick took the gun and a box to carry it so he wouldn't look too suspicious while traveling. He also picked up a single box of ammunition. He knew that this would not be enough, but purchasing more than this amount might look suspicious. Buying shotgun shells from several retailers might make him seem less threatening to the general public.

He got in his car and headed toward a local department store. It sold a huge range of various things from clothing to sporting goods. He hoped that they might have some cheap ammunition. He went into the automatic doors and was overwhelmed at all he saw. He asked the greeter where the sporting goods section was located. The kindly woman

smiled and pointed him toward the farthest quadrant of the store. Once there, he picked up five boxes of ammunition. Each box contained twenty-five shells. That was one hundred and twenty-five zombies he could kill, assuming his shot was accurate. He knew this would not be the case, but that was the most he would purchase from a single store.

The woman at the cash register gave him a very wary look. He spoke to alleviate her concern by saying, "I'm taking the entire family skeet shooting this afternoon." He added a polite smile.

He paid the woman and took his ammunition into his car. He threw it on the back seat where his weapon was laying. He started driving again. He stopped by a gas station when he was running low on gas. He hurriedly filled his tank and paid. The time was approaching one o'clock. He drove toward another store. His destination was another branch of the store he had just visited. It took twenty minutes to drive there. At last, he picked up five more boxes of shells and left in the same way. He even made a similar remark about taking his family skeet shooting when he left the checkout queue.

On his way back toward the funeral home, he stopped by one last sporting goods store. He had driven in a large circle beginning with the funeral home, then the first small independent store, the first store of the large franchise, then the second store of the large franchise, and, now he was entering another small store. Here he picked up five more boxes of ammunition, provided the same reasoning to the wary cashier, and threw it into the back of his car. He now had an even five hundred shells. He was armed. He felt safe. Now he just needed a plan. He wasn't very excited in the prospect of going back to the funeral home where this whole ordeal began. He stopped in another gas station to lay his head on the top of his steering wheel and rest.

By this time, nearly two o'clock in the afternoon, a zombie version of Rick's son, Christopher, had knocked on the door of a residence that stood directly across the street from the funeral home. His moaning caused the door to be opened immediately. He was crying. He had the gray-white ooze all over him. The liquid version of this ooze was pouring out of his right arm where his hand had once been. It was also streaming with blood. A kindly middle-aged woman wearing a yellow dress opened the door. She saw the young boy standing there. She pulled him inside immediately and stooped to be eye-to-eye with him.

"What's happened? Are you okay?"

He wanted to tell her. In his head, he was telling her, but the pain that the voice in his head was inflicting to his poor head did not allow him to talk. He could only sob uncontrollably. The pain of his hand was also crippling.

"Please! Please, answer me," the woman pleaded. More footsteps came.

The woman's husband was walking down the stairs directly behind the woman. The woman already had blood and ooze down her dress from holding the child of Rick Blackstock very close to her. She put his face to her ear so she could hear what he had to say.

The husband bellowed forth, "What's going on here? Who's that boy? Is he okay? I'll call a medic."

He went to pick up a phone, but stopped. His wife began screaming. She turned and writhed. She was missing an ear. The little boy was holding her severed ear in his mouth. The husband put down the receiver and came over to the door to have a better look at what was happening. When he did so, he saw that the boy had not only removed the woman's ear, but he was eating it. Furthermore, he was tearing the skin that connected the woman's ear to the side of her head. It formed a bloody flesh ribbon connecting the little boy's teeth to the side of the poor woman's head. She was screaming, bellowing and crying. The man came to remove the little boy from his wife. The boy kicked him in the groin when he approached. The skin of the woman was torn forward toward her forehead then upward so that parts of her hair were removed from her skull. The skin tore easily for the boy. He continued peeling around the face and put it directly in his mouth. Soon the skin above and around her eyes were gone. The facial muscles beneath her eyes were soon exposed. Her nose was removed. The ooze began to flow from Christopher's nose into her gaping, open wound. Chris continued to stuff the skin and hair from the woman's face and head into his mouth and devouring it hungrily. He ate ferociously, and, noisily, he smacked his lips.

Christopher finally released the woman. She was clearly still alive. She was moving around the floor. She screamed. The skin was still peeling down her face after Chris had left it. Soon her gums and teeth were exposed. She put her hands up to her face. Her left eyeball, now having virtually nothing but a nerve to hold it in its place, popped out of its socket into her hand. This caused her screaming to redouble.

The man, laying on the floor squirming in agony after the boy's swift kick to his genitalia, gripped the attention of the boy. Chris looked around the house. It was a very neatly-

kept house with very little in the way of weaponry. The room had a soft couch and an inviting unlit fireplace. There was a television stand in the far corner. On which was an old black-and-white television with some football game playing on it. The boy, even faster than his grandmother had been, ran over toward the television with the agility of his age. He picked up the television and tore it from the wires that connected it to the wall. The old man's eyes were huge with fear. A second later, the boy smashed the television set onto the man's face, causing both to explode.

Christopher was about to vomit. The cause of this was the fluid, still new to his system, had been generating at a very fast speed. He was fresher than even Dorothea had been. He wasn't even dead when the fluid took control of him. Furthermore, he was a strong male youth. His robustness had, in this aspect, been his downfall. The fluid's consciousness easily controlled his young mind and took full advantage of his developing muscles. He vomited this excess of almost-liquid gray paste onto the body of the woman that was still convulsing on the floor. He belched loudly. Remnants of his huge meal-- that is to say, the woman's face-- were easily recognizable in his stream of vomit.

After examining the house, he found no more food or subjects to convert. Similar scenes of destruction had invaded several other homes around the funeral home.

Rick was still nearly ten miles away with his shotgun but without a plan.

# Chapter Seven

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Lawrence Fowler, who had headed home after finding the pair of zombies in the vestibule of his funeral home, started calling people on his telephone as soon as he got in his house. His wife was horrified to see him covered in blood and smelling frightful.

"Are you okay, honey?"

"Yeah... I'll be okay. I have to make some phone calls."

"Did you call the police?"

"I did. They came."

"Well, what happened?"

"I'd much rather you didn't ask."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Well, yes."

"Did you commit a crime?"

"Hell no; I didn't commit a crime."

"Then what happened, dear? You're all bloody!"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You just know that I'm going to believe you."

"There were zombies at work today."

"You're right. I don't believe you."

"Yeah? Well, I'll prove it to you."

Lawrence Fowler then went into his bedroom and slammed the door. He took his shoes off and sat down upon his bed. He picked up a notebook and opened it. The notebook was really a log of the funeral events and information sent to him regarding each one. He would rather not leave this log at work because it could get damaged there and, furthermore, he wanted to know the people he would be addressing before he went to his work each day. So, with that, he pulled out a piece of paper that had a contact number in case he should have any problems with Agatha Lindsay's viewing. He assumed this card would be in the case of a fight between the development team and the family, or, perhaps some minor problems handling the body. He did not imagine that he would ever need this number, as his staff was very competent in dealing with situations involving bodies. Furthermore, he did not imagine ever having to tell anyone about a zombie infestation.

Nonetheless, he took a deep breath. After exhaling, he assured himself that, if there was anyone in the world who believed him, it would be the person whose name was on the

paper he held before him. He smiled. He was very happy that he hadn't thrown it away. He read the name: Clark Stewart. It seemed to Lawrence that the man had two last names, and common ones at that. He was hoping he wasn't the dupe of some larger hoax. He was sure of what he had seen, though. Furthermore, he was sure of what he had smelled. He had seen fire and blood. He had smelled charred flesh. Compounding with these hideous sensations was the sound of crunching bone and tearing flesh. He could not shrug at this.

He picked up the receiver and dialed the number on the paper.

It was ringing.

"Hello. This is Doctor Stewart's office."

"Is this Doctor Stewart speaking?" the bemused Lawrence asked.

"Yes it is. What's the nature of your call?" Clark asked politely. He was, in truth, a little flustered. Firstly, there were things on his mind; secondly, he absolutely hated being called in to work on a Saturday.

"Err... Zombies, sir," answered Lawrence. He stuttered. He knew he sounded foolish, but he took the opportunity before his will failed him.

"Zombies?" asked Clark.

"Zombies."

There was silence. There were thoughts scurrying around brains deep inside the ears of both men. For Clark, the reason he was called into work in the first place was the zombie-related phone calls. There were only two until Lawrence called. Clark did not know what to do to solve this. He wanted to know where the development team was and what they were developing. As for Lawrence, he knew that Clark had to believe him. He knew from the silence that he wasn't the first to call.

"That is a problem we're trying to fix."

"Well, that's good," he began. A wave of relief came over him when he fully realized that Clark, not only believed him, but already knew. Lawrence, who could have easily blamed Clark for this whole affair, didn't. He was just happy that Clark understood what he was saying-- even though he had only said a single word.

"We hope you don't blame our office for the zombies. Did they attack?"

"Yes. Very much."

"We were afraid of that." Clark was happy to use "we" to disperse his own personal blame to rest on his office,

the American Medical Association, and, especially, the team of developers from the various cosmetic corporations. He continued, "I, personally, am very happy that you were not seriously injured."

"Yeah. Me too. There are a couple dozen people back at where I work that weren't quite as lucky."

"That bad, eh?"

"Yes. The sights I've seen are horrible."

"May I have your name?"

"Oh! It's Lawrence Fowler."

"Right. Mister Fowler, could you tell me more about your situation?"

"Certainly. I'm the director of a funeral home. Your guys came to the viewing of an old woman who'd died. They were there last night and today. I thought that was odd. So, today, I stopped by the viewing room after I had heard some noises. There was a fire in the back of the room. There was a pile of bodies that prevented me from entering the room. A maniac grandmother had risen from the dead and was walking around eating people."

"And what funeral home is it that you direct?"

"Bentley, sir."

"Right. We've had a few other reports this morning. You're our third. Do you know what happened with the 'guys' we sent?"

"They're all dead."

"All of them? You saw them?"

"I don't recall seeing them specifically, but I'm pretty sure they're dead. There was no possible way that anyone could have made it out. Well, I know one person from the room made it out, but that was, I think, all."

"Who is this man?"

"Somebody Blackstock. He was the son-in-law of the deceased. I have it in my records here. Just a minute..." He then searched the little notebook he had on his lap. "Rick Blackstock. He's the one who paid for the viewing, ironically enough."

"Do you know how we could contact him?"

"I have his cell phone number here." He then gave Clark the cellular telephone number of Rick Blackstock.

At this same time, Rick Blackstock was still making his way back to the funeral home. He wanted to shoot his new gun and his new ammunition at some zombies. He thought that it might be something similar to the video games his sons played. Then, with this thought, he felt the terrible sadness of loss. His two sons would never play "Zombie

Assault" ever again. He would never get to see his children smile in accomplishment at cartoon violence. In retrospect, he thought that that might not have been the best way to raise them. He started to question whether he was a good father since he hadn't spent enough time with his children. He could have jumped up and rescued at least one. Little Angela was right by his side. She should have escaped. Somehow, the last time Rick saw her was in the funeral home where she was having her arm violently ripped from her delicate frame.

His cell phone rang, returning Rick from his profound reveries. He never used the phone because he hated it. He vowed that he would never drive and telephone someone at the same time. It rang again, so he pulled the car over onto the shoulder of the road and picked it up.

"Hello?"

Clark Stewart's voice-- unknown, of course, to Rick-- said, "Hello. I am Clark Stewart calling on behalf of--"

"Look. I'm very busy at the moment. I have some issues to deal with right now." He dare not speak of the issues with which he had to settle at the moment.

"Perhaps I could help you with those. As I was saying, I am with the American--"

He was interrupted again, "No. You really don't understand. Hopefully, you'll never have to understand."

"I understand already. That's why I am trying to contact you."

"What?"

"I wanted to say, we know about the zombies."

"Oh!" was all he could think to say. After coming to his senses, he added, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I understand this is a really trying time."

"You understand, do you?" Unlike Lawrence, Rick held this man-- whoever he was-- responsible for the five intruders at the viewing for which he had paid. He held Clark responsible for his mother-in-law turning into a zombie. Most importantly, and probably the most disturbing, he held Clark Stewart responsible for the death of his wife and three children.

"I'm trying."

Angrily, Rick said, "Well, let me help you!" He mustered himself.

"Please, there's no need--"

"Oh, there's a need. I am the husband of a woman who was killed today. I was co-worker to about eight people killed today. I saw my three children and wife-- I saw them die! My little girl was carried away by my mother-in-law. I could

have died in there. Thinking about it a few minutes ago, I wish I had died in there. I went to the police afterwards and nobody believed me. Still, I'm sure somebody else tried calling there."

"Please!" shouted Clark Stewart. He was trying to get a grip on the situation. He wanted to put his hands on what was happening and steer it like one steers an automobile. He wanted people to be safe from this massacre that he'd created. It was clear to him now that dozens of people were, in fact, dead.

"'Please' indeed! My daughter was six years old. My sons were twelve and seven. Do you know what that's like?"

"I--"

"No you damn-well don't."

"I know, bu--"

"You don't know. That's the thing. That's why I'm telling you. I've suffered so much today. Then I had to go and waste my own money on a gun and some ammunition so that I can rest assured my own mother-in-law doesn't come back from the dead and strangle me with somebody else's intestine."

"That's--"

"That's exactly what happened to a buddy with whom I used to talk football. He was my wife's sister's husband. Now that he's strangled, he's probably a zombie, too!"

"Please calm down! I have some good news."

"What's that?"

"You're not the only one who escaped alive. I talked with another man-- Lawrence Fowler. He was the funeral director. I figured that perhaps you two could join forces."

"What good does that do me?"

"Two people firing at zombies are more strong than going it alone."

"That's really nice of you-- really grand. You know, you guys offered me a load of money to sign up for this stupid new treatment, and all the money you sent me was transformed into ammo for the new shotgun that you bought me."

"At least you're being practical."

"Yeah. Great. Whatever. Give me the number of this Fowler guy."

He gave Rick the number of Lawrence Fowler.

Soon afterwards, all three were off the telephone. Clark resumed his planning. Lawrence resumed speaking to his wife. Rick resumed driving. Clark had told both of them to be very careful. There were well over fifty subjects across the nation of various ages and conditions who were all given this embalming agent. They were all in perfect

comprehension. No matter what happened, Lawrence Fowler and Rick Blackstock were in the same area. They could both do some damage. They might be able to do something about it.

Clark was sitting alone. He was quiet in his office. He would take no further calls. His head was reeling. He knew very well that everything being said this afternoon must be true. The five people in the world-- the only five people who knew how and why this fluid worked-- were dead. There was no possible salvation from that. The entire reason for his signing onto this project was that it might benefit humanity in the long run. Self-regenerating prosthetic limbs seemed an all-too-distant memory. He had very seldom cried in his life. He felt tears warming his eyes. He sighed. He looked around his office. He looked at his desk.

His teak desk had a long, narrow wooden block sitting on it. There was a gold-plated plaque on the front of it. It bore his name. Beside this, nothing. His desk was very bare. There were a few papers, a few jotted notes, but there were no pictures of his family. Virtually every other desk in the building had a picture of a wife or a child. Clark was, at home, a very lonely man. He had no wife. Subsequently, he had no children. He had no one. His parents were long dead. He was an only child. What few relatives he had remained distant from him. He was sad. At this point, he felt truly alone. It was Saturday. Most people who were usually occupying the building were at home. They were watching football or eating a late lunch. It was certain that very few men were more miserable than he at this moment. He looked at the clock on the wall. It ticked. It was made of a shining metal rim and a plain white face. The hands read forty-three minutes past two in the afternoon. He looked at his nameplate. He shined. He looked at his own hands. They quivered. He felt aware of a lot of things.

From his office in the most important city in America, he could feel the sorrows of so many men in several small localities across the country. His greater awareness was that there would only be more sorrow. But what could be done? He imagined phoning the national news and placing an emergency bulletin.

Then he realized this was the last thing he wanted to do. He would be the laughing-stock of an entire nation if these reports were true, and he had a terrible suspicion that they were true. He wanted to believe that a roomful of people in someone's basement was playing a big joke on him. The press would crucify him. Because he accepted a mundane

project that was unlikely to even work in the first place, he was now facing the most monumental consequences for his actions. The press would certainly make him the villain if he telephoned them. "After all," thought he, "it could be a hoax."

Then, he remembered. That very morning, in a far different locality, a zombie walked the streets. It had the recognizable ooze all over it. Someone, a retired old man who lived in the locality, ran into his house from gardening to retrieve a camera. He returned to the street to photograph this odd-looking individual when he witnessed the stranger-- for its sex could not be determined-- strangling his neighbor. The stranger was tall. It had some locks of hair left upon its head. The skin was mostly gone from its face. The body was horribly decomposed. There was no breast or stomach. There were jagged ribbons of flesh where its chest and abdomen had been. The neighbor had undoubtedly heard its wailing and come out to aid it. After stepping onto his porch, the neighbor, a man about forty years old, aggravated the zombie.

When the retired old gardener took the photos, he managed not to spook the zombie who was devouring the old man's neighbor. He electronically mailed the images to Clark's office where his boss saw it. He called Clark in to investigate it.

These electronic images were very graphic. There was a local row-home. There was a green porch and matching awning in front of the home. On the porch was a potted plant. This plant was probably a gift from the gardening photographer. Either way, the house had a contemporary style that seemed to be present throughout the neighborhood. On the porch could be seen the ooze-covered, fleshless stranger attacking the photographer's neighbor. The neighbor was laying on his back on the porch with his leg jutting upward. It was being held in this position by the zombie who had an attitude of pain. He was struggling to turn this neighbor's ankle. His own foot was on the neighbor's abdomen to force him to the porch. The next photo taken by the gardener showed the zombie's face, vacant of features, eating the foot he had just torn off of the man. The neighbor, missing one foot, was visibly screaming. There was blood. The next few photos conveyed the same thing. The old man provoked the zombie to get it away from his neighbor. He then ran into his house and bolted the door tightly behind him.

The series of photos that told this story were viewed by a disbelieving Clark Stewart early that Saturday morning. Later, he would hear similar stories. Now, his entire development team was dead. At first, all he had to

worry about was coming into work on a Saturday. The inconvenience of that had long-since been forgotten; they were overshadowed by these new horrors.

He looked, once again, around his office. He sighed again. He wiped the tears from his face. He could not, however, wipe the memory of those photos from his mind. They danced there. He saw the stranger and his vacant eyes. He saw blood. It was not a hoax. There was no refuting that. There was also no team of developers to answer his questions. The team had planned on having a quiet day viewing a pair of funerals. They planned no more. Clark rubbed his nearly-bald head. He was developing a headache, but he couldn't rub away the pain. He removed his glasses.

Clark felt agony rising up inside of him. He saw the zombies. He saw his own guilt and responsibility. He saw his entire frame shaking under the weight of all of this. A fever blossomed into his heavy head. Besides the press, he wondered what else he could do. He did not think that there might be some way of reversing these microbes. Without the development team, though, there would be no way of finding an anti-zombie. How could he warn the world?

He felt that, perhaps, he shouldn't. Under the stress, he imagined Rick Blackstock. He imagined Rick's horror to find that his wife was dead. Clark had wanted a wife very badly. Staying awake through long hours thinking, he imagined how happy he might be if he had a family. All this yearning was real. Rick Blackstock had a family. Clark might have envied him. Rick had three children and a wife, and Clark had killed them. He accepted the proposal that slaughtered an entire family and left two men to assemble an army and fight. After another minute of sitting in silence, he willed himself to make an admission.

"I have no solution," he told his desk.

He stood up. He was hot. He trembled. He looked around his office yet again. He had begun doing this compulsively. This time, he looked up to see the ceiling fixture. It was a rather pleasant, sturdy-looking hanging fixture. He wondered why he had never noticed it previously. He removed his jacket. He felt sweat covering his body. He removed his belt. Wearing a business suit today reminded him that every day he had worn a suit was a mistake. He looked at his belt pensively. He looked back up at the ceiling. A solution was coming. He moved the chair from behind his desk out to the center of the floor. He put a foot on it. Carefully, he shifted his weight onto this foot and raised himself to stand on top of the chair. He put the length of the belt through the buckle to form a loop. He

tied the very end of the belt to the fixture. While doing so, in the brass of the light fixture, he watched his reflection staring back. It was bald and wary. He put dangling loop of the belt around his neck. It was a tight fit. The ceiling was rather high and the light did not hang down very far. He was thankful for this, as it would be stronger that way. With his makeshift noose around his neck, he kicked off the chair. The rafters of the ceiling and the fittings of the light fixture groaned in complaint, but did not give way.

Clark no longer had to face his responsibility or worry about a solution. His part in the tragic disaster was completed.

## Chapter Eight

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About a quarter hour after the death of Clark Stewart, in the locality where Lawrence Fowler was waiting, there was a second funeral viewing about to take place. Across the town from the Bentley Funeral Home, there was a second funeral home with twenty long miles separating one from the other. Sadly, it occurred neither to Clark Stewart, Rick Blackstock, nor Lawrence Fowler that there were some fifty known test subjects. Five of which had risen from the dead in a very angry state. The same situation might occur again in this second funeral home. This thought hadn't come to any of these aforementioned people.

Three o'clock saw the official beginning of Dorothea Rayburn's funeral. Since most of the children of the local schools had visited Agatha Lindsay's viewing the previous night, they were present at this current viewing for their close friend. The funeral home was not as fashionable as that of Agatha Lindsay. Martin Rayburn, the single parent, was not as wealthy as Rick and Linda Blackstock. Rick was a full-time civil engineer, and the Blackstock family lived frugally.

Martin Rayburn was none of these things. Medical bills plagued his financial status. Furthermore, he found it difficult to find a job and even more difficult to maintain it. He worked as a construction worker in his youth. At the age of forty, he was married. His hair began to thin. The muscles he exercised in his line of work were worn soon thereafter. His days of being a laborer were finished with marriage. They soon had a child. Martin's wife and daughter were the best of his life, but they came at a price, though: his employment. From construction, he became a machinist. He paid for food, shelter, and all of the infinite minute needs of childhood. Then the machine shop closed. The family of three scarcely ate. They managed to pay for their house. His wife fell ill very shortly after Dorothea's birth. She was bed-ridden for most of the five years between Dorothea's birth and her own death. Her death was paired with the diagnosis of Dorothea's cancer. Angela Blackstock only found out about the cancer after Dorothea had had already been diagnosed for an entire year.

Dorothea's cancer of the colon was caused by a rare genetic mutation. Therefore, the cancer was probably developing since her birth. The end result was, as we have seen, her

death. Her father, in the interest of keeping what very little money he had, expediently arranged the viewing for the very next day. Martin Rayburn looked entirely morose. His head was lowered. His gait was slow and awkward. He sniffled and had a slight wheeze when he respired. His suit was more than merely old, it was also blue instead of the black that he had wanted to wear. He was sad that he was poor; however, he counted himself as very fortunate to have a viewing in the first place. He was very lonely.

There were very few family members due to such short notice. He felt mixed emotions on this point. On the first side, there were fewer people to remind him of his wife. There were few faces to remind him how sorry he felt, as he earnestly pitied himself. He wanted only those people who were currently close to Dorothea to pay their respects to her. On the other side, he would have liked the company of more familiar faces.

The chamber for Martin's daughter was much smaller than the chamber Agatha had for her viewing. The floor was carpeted with brown carpet. The walls were paneled with an imitation of oak. There were no flowers. The coffin was sitting on the far wall from the door. The room seemed to induce claustrophobia in Martin. It was not that the room was unsuitably small for his viewing, but, rather, there were many metal chairs. The chairs were made of hollow, silver, squared metal tubes welded together. The back legs and backrest were made of a single long U-shaped piece of metal with three tubes welded to form the platform for the seat and backrest. The backrest and seat were made of a foam rubber that was covered with vinyl. This vinyl was a pale yellow-brown color that was very slightly textured.

The yellowness of the chairs mingled with the brown of the floor and walls to give the air of uncleanness. Martin sighed. There was a portable kneeler in front of the coffin. Martin crossed the room, knelt, and said a long prayer.

Around five minutes after three, people started to pour into the room. The majority of visitors were from Dorothea's school. There was one agent appointed by Clark Stewart prior to his death to visit this funeral and check up on the development team. His name was Samuel Hayes. He was dressed in a sleek, black suit. Martin stood after his prayer and turned around to see the people behind him.

Martin saw Samuel Hayes over the sea of young children, their parents, and the few teachers interspersed. The school's principal even made a visit. Martin recognized him. He did not, however, recognize Samuel. He approached the stranger.

"Good afternoon!" said the stranger. He was tall. Some might have said he was handsome. He had a rather square face and pronounced features. Martin did not like him from this convivial beginning.

"I can't imagine why anyone should wish me a good afternoon. It's been a miserable day," he said weakly but defiantly.

"I'm Sam Hayes from the American Medical Association," he said disconnectedly.

"I'm Martin Rayburn, the father of the deceased."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Mister Hayes said without any emotion. He continued, "Has any other government official briefed you today?"

"No."

The inspector looked at the sea of people crowded in the room. They were talking amongst themselves noisily. He had looked at the register, which was sitting on a table next to the doorway. There was no mention there of his associates.

Martin looked at the man. "The viewing's only just begun. Our priest is not even here yet."

"Nonetheless, they were supposed to be here before the viewing started."

"Nonetheless, they are not here."

"I can see that now."

Martin turned from this tall, imposing governmental figure. Martin hated the government and everything to do with it. He begrudgingly accepted their money out of necessity. It was unnecessary for them to send one of their own to his daughter's funeral.

Martin went into the swarm. He infiltrated the congregation. He met up with the principal of the school. They shook hands. The principal looked more genuinely sad than the official had. The principal was an old man. He felt true sympathy for Martin, knowing his circumstances. The two men talked for some time. They shared a small bond that grew with their conversation.

Eventually the topic of conversation left Dorothea to something happier. Martin's burden was lifted slightly.

The time progressed. At half past three, the priest arrived. He was one that knew the family well. He had spoken at the viewing of Martin Rayburn's wife. He was another old man. He held his prayer-book in his hand and invited the congregation to pray with him. After prayer, a familiar method of inviting family and friends to speak took place. Martin spoke first, naturally. He felt obliged.

"My daughter was the best thing that'd ever happened to me. She was bright and happy, even in the face of death. Nothing will ever be the same. I loved her. She was like nothing else. No other child is the same." His trail of thought left him and returned. He continued, "I think Dorothea touched each and every one of us. She touched us first in life, and now, for the last time, with her death. There were many instances in life when she surprised me just by being herself. She was a wonderfully artistic, creative person. She might have just been six years old, but she was an artist. She was small and not fully developed, but she was strong. She was young, but she was full of that wisdom that youth possesses. It is beyond our comprehension why God could take such a person from my life. Perhaps he wanted to teach me humility. Perhaps, he wanted to show us a beautiful spark, like lightning, which vanishes instantly after dazzling us. Any which way his plan was designed, we have all gained very much by having known my daughter. I will always be proud of her. I still have everything she's ever created. They are my most prized possessions, but they are nothing compared to my memory of her. That is indelible. I will carry those memories she's given me until that day that I am fated to see her again. I think we all have memories like that. I remember her birth as though it were yesterday. I know I always will. She looked very much like her mother. I don't know how many of you had the honor and the privilege to know my wife, but, if you had, you would have seen Dorothea in her and she in little Dorothea. Anyway, I would just like to thank every one of you for coming to pay your respects."

He was quiet. He had gotten all this out of him. It was as though the burden was made lighter once again. Those mourners present, even the youngest of the children, felt the message in the father's oration. None of the adults there knew the pain of losing a child.

There was a complete, profound silence as the congregation of mourners considered Martin's words. Suddenly, the silence was abruptly concluded by screaming. A high-pitched wail came from the coffin. It was slightly muffled by the wood's density. Martin rushed to the coffin. He pried it open with his fingertips. He stood back aghast. The scream continued.

His daughter, so beautiful in life, was hideous. She had no hair. Her skin was enshrouded in a familiar pall of ooze-infested scratches. Her body had been bled dry before it was prepared with the new fluid. Therefore, the gashes, which were once again caused by the pressure of fluid against her

epidermis, were oozing with the plaster-like solution. She was screaming. This was her reaction to returning, once again, to life. She had been between the boundary of life and death all day, and, finally, the agents in the embalming fluid had taken hold. Her cognition had returned. It was met with violent pain and a voice in her head that was not her own. This voice was screaming at the same time Dorothea was. The two units, for the moment, were working in unison.

Her father watched her with a dazed expression. Joy mingled with grief. Tears fell down his face. The little girl's terrible pain was painted on her face. A slight gash was apparent next to her mouth on both sides due to stretching of her facial skin from screaming. Her mouth was wide. Her little teeth were visible. The father, as any human would do when their child was in such a state, attempted to console her. This intention proved fatal. The girl, only six years old, began obeying the fatal voice in her head as a way to end the torment. As her father's arm closed in around her, she lunged at him. Her teeth, shut around his laryngeal prominence ("Adam's apple"). He screamed out in pain. Blood drizzled down his neck to his chest.

The crowd did not understand. They appreciated the quieter screams of the father, as they were not as shrill as the girl's. The little girl did not relent in her mastication. The man's screams had stopped as Dorothea crunched her way through her father's larynx. She bit, chewed, and swallowed. Large pieces of flesh entered her insatiable stomach. She gnawed more, and she devoured plenty. Finally, her father had a neck no longer. His blood veiled her face. Her eyes were wide and livid. She looked at the people. Their horrified expression was adhered to their faces. The children, who had never been to a viewing before now, were in awe. They had understood death to be permanent. They were pleasantly surprised. They did not understand much about the biting, but, even their underdeveloped minds could comprehend terror when they saw Dorothea finish with her father. She had bit entirely through his neck. She was grabbing her father's head as she chewed. Upon completion, the man's head remained in her hands as the final tendons that held the head to the body were severed with a tearing noise. The body fell lifelessly to the floor with a dull thud. Dorothea looked blankly at her father's face before discarding the man's head next to the body.

It became frighteningly clear to Samuel Hayes what had become of his five associates. He stood. This was a signal to Dorothea that she had a new target. Moreover, it was a

signal to the rest of those mourners in the room to stand. Dorothea's eyes were still fixed on the tall man in the sleek, black suit. She leapt from her coffin into the middle of the standing throng. She seemed more nimble in doing this than Agatha. A quiet, noxious sense of curiosity filled the room. Soon, the little girl was lost among her classmates. She was of below the average height for a child of her age. This made her hiding easier. A few seconds later, Dorothea traversed half the room's breadth and, silently, attacked Samuel Hayes.

If her father had been able to see this, he would have been smiled. His eyes were pointed in the general direction of his daughter and the man from the government, but it is very doubtful that his brain was still functioning.

Nonetheless, the poor man's daughter grabbed the man's thigh with her bare hand. Her grip was vice-like. It brought the handsome man to fall back on his seat. He had never felt any pain like that pain. Soon, the sharp vice of the little girl's iron fingers tore through the skin, and Samuel felt a very warm sensation down his leg. He had closed his eyes from the pain, only to open them and find his leg drenched in blood. The very squeezing of his leg by this girl was enough to rupture the skin and inner muscular tissue around his thigh midway between his hip and his knee. Soon, it was more than just flesh that had ruptured. Her tightening hand had crushed the large muscle of his leg. The little girl had untold strength. This was because her body was very young and strong when it died. Her muscles, strong and well-rested, were now being put to the test. She twisted his leg at the area she had just marked by applying enormous pressure with her bare hand. His leg snapped as a dry twig might if it were scored with a knife and violently bent.

Samuel Hayes screamed out. Dorothea's little hand was rounded into a fist. The man thought to try and run from the girl. He stood and toppled. He only remained upright on his left knee, and, with his arm, he grabbed the back of the chair in front of him. His nub of a right leg remained suspended above the ground. He looked down to see in horror what happened when he moved it. It waved at the ground as one might wave their arm at a neighbor. In his amazement, the little girl punched his jaw. It was a tremendous blow from a such a tiny human being. With a loud crack, he reeled with pain. She punched him again, and then he fell to the floor. His nose had exploded. Blood ran onto the brown carpeting. Before he could begin to recover from his shock, she stomped on his face. She was dressed in dress shoes with sturdy heels, and she used this to her advantage. She grabbed at his bloody,

disfigured, broken face when she was finished. She put large bits of his facial flesh into her mouth. She tore more skin from his skull. People had, by this time, begun to run for the door.

A ribbon of skin containing the man's eyebrow still hung in her mouth as she bolted towards the door. She tackled the people closest to the door. It had been a mere long-jump from the center of the room to the doorway. She punched and slammed people against the walls beside the door. Most of these people were her classmates or their families. They were smashed brutally against the door frame by her strong arms. Loud crashing sounds thundered over the screams. With Samuel's facial skin finally swallowed, she started snapping her teeth and biting people who came near her. Her teeth were covered with the synthetic paste that was also covering her body. She tore off chunks of skin from peoples' forearms as they approached her too closely.

One woman, the mother of one of the children present, stood defiant. She was more determined to leave the chamber than the rest. She strode disgustedly up to Dorothea. The enraged voice inside Dorothea's twisted mind kept control of the situation. With the grace of a dancer and brutal swiftness of a wolf attacking its prey, Dorothea kicked the woman's knee. The very strong kick snapped the woman's leg, causing the lower leg to bend in the direction the knee was not designed to allow. Her knee had turned to jelly. She lifted her thigh. The lower leg dangled out of her control. Dorothea heard screaming and the dozens of pangs of disgust from the mourners. Dorothea quickly stepped forward and grabbed at the dangling leg. She twisted it, tearing the skin, ligaments and, finally, the tendons of the knee. The woman fell to the floor with another terrifying crash. When her action was complete, the little girl had the defiant mother's lower leg in her hands. She took a bite from it, quieting the voice in her head. Eventually, this bliss ended, and the voice became angry once again. When it did, she used the leg, the weapon she had at hand, as a flail and directed her crazed, crude swings at varied, terrorized the people in the room. She attacked the mother first, since she was the closest. She was repeatedly bludgeoned with her own foot and calf. The target seemed to be her face. Once the woman was on the ground, Dorothea stepped over her to find her next victim. As she did, she rained down the reproducing gray-white liquid onto the woman's dying form. As the little girl moved to her next target, her feet made a squishing sound on the carpet.

She threw aside the leg and took the nearest metal chair. With her astonishing strength, she tore apart the welds

holding it together. She used a staff created by unbending the U-shaped chair-back as her new favorite weapon. This was her spear. In much the same way Agatha let loose her fury, Dorothea did the same.

The five members of the development team might have been interested to see this.

A massacre took place very much in the same way it had three hours previously at the Bentley funeral home. The difference is that Dorothea's was the only viewing happening at this second funeral home. As such, there were no survivors.

One hour later, there was a bloody, moaning, crying, enraged squadron of dead children walking from this inexpensive funeral home toward a crowded restaurant.

## Chapter Nine

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Rick Blackstock, after having left the third gun store, decided upon going farther to yet another store. He knew he was losing time, but he wanted to have as much firepower as possible. By the time of Dorothea's funeral home massacre, Rick was just returning to town. He had amassed a powerful arsenal. In the three hours between the start of his shopping trip and his return to his locality, he had a second firearm and several hundred pounds of ammunition, knowing that a funeral home full of people could yield a lot of zombies. Furthermore, he became suddenly cognizant of Dorothea's massacre.

He recalled, while on the road, that Dorothea's father had opted into the same program he had. Rick was afraid that, perhaps, the same thing happened to Dorothea. His fears were confirmed when he tried calling the funeral home that Martin Rayburn attended. He had the number jotted down in case he might arrive late to Dorothea's funeral. Nonetheless, he was very fortunate to have it and his cellular phone with him while he was on the road.

On returning to town, though, he headed straight toward the funeral home where Martin Rayburn's daughter's viewing was held an hour previously. Approaching the road leading to this building was causing Rick apprehension. He, for the first time, wished he had not spent as much time gathering arms as he had. At last, his car pulled slowly up to the funeral home's gravel driveway. The steps leading inside where buckled; something heavy had trampled them. There was a doorway with the wood splintered entirely around it. The two doors had cracked glass; someone had smashed against them. Blood soaked this glass, the wood surrounding it, and the stone step separating the sidewalk from the door. There was an awning, and its supports were bent. The entire scene sent an uneasy feeling dancing in Rick's stomach.

Rick, feeling hesitant, overcame his senses and got out of his car with his new weapon in hand. It was a forty-five calibre revolver. He had it fully loaded and carefully tucked into his pocket. He figured he could fend off any zombies that might attack him. He cautiously approached the broken door. The plate glass was broken. The street behind him was completely devoid of life. He felt a certain serenity which was broken upon looking inside. He saw splattered before

him an unimaginable amount of carnage. Blood stained the lower halves of both walls of the hallway behind the door. The upper halves of these walls were slightly less splattered. The ceiling had still less, though there were even droplets of blood clinging onto the bare, white ceiling. The floor was nearly saturated with blood and various unrecognizable organs. Rick ventured into the silent place. As he did, he heard someone cry forth into the hallway. He pulled out his gun. He slowly slogged down the hallway. His footsteps, while Rick attempted to maintain stealth, were audible due to the copious amounts of blood soaking the once-brown carpet. Upon reaching the farthest chamber from the door, he peered through the vacant threshold. This was where the bloodbath occurred. Blood marred the walls, floor, casket, each and every chair, and even registry. He saw a few bodies left behind by the others.

These people were not zombies. Their brains were too badly destroyed by the little girl to become reanimated. As Rick peered inside, he saw the parent of one of Dorothea's friends who looked upward at the ceiling with vacant eyes. He was lying in a puddle of blood with his brains leaking out of a large fissure in his skull. More horrifying to Rick, who was on the verge of vomiting from the stench of death, was that the man was still moving.

"Kill me," the man moaned. It was visible from the wild contortions of his face that he was in terrible agony.

Rick Blackstock complied.

He removed the revolver from his pocket. Suddenly, it felt heavy. He pointed the weapon at the poor man's head, keeping his arm straight. The man, even in unimaginable agony, seemed still fearful of death. He trembled. He winced several times, expecting the report that would end his life. Finally, it came. The inside of this poor man's skull was emptied into the collective pool of carnage that made up the floor of this pitiful room. Rick was temporarily deafened by the shockingly loud blast that erupted from his firearm.

After the merciful execution, Rick was a changed man. He was hesitant. He did not want to kill people. This was, perhaps, the reason why it took him three hours to buy supplies. He must have meditated while he was purchasing his equipment. The whole ordeal was enough to drive a man mad. The knew that everything he had previously known about ethics and the treatment of people was different in cases of life and death. Here was a man asking for death, and Rick Blackstock who had, until that moment, killed nothing.

Rick executed this man and was fully feeling the profound consequences of his action.

He looked at the sad man. He was out of his pain. He looked around the room. There were very few bodies remaining. There were body parts-- a hand, the skin from a man's face, even the entire lower leg of a woman-- strewn all over the floor. The chamber wasn't large. He could see most of these effects from the vantage point over the fallen man's body. He walked farther into the room. The stench redoubled with every step. His soggy footsteps would have made the bravest man draw back from this chamber. Rick ventured onward. He did not know why. He was, no longer, looking for anything. There were clearly no more signs of life coming from this room. He saw, however, as he got closer to the coffin, a body without a head. It wore an old, dark blue suit. He made one farther step. He saw the poor man's head. It looked at him.

Rick Blackstock looked vacantly at this scene of horror. The unfortunate man could not return as a zombie like his daughter. This was oddly fortunate. The unimaginable pain of having one's head removed completely from one's neck was, however, something that put the fear of certain death into Rick. He had seen Martin Rayburn at school functions. He had met him several times previously through Angela. Rick fell to his knees. He put his weapon away in his jacket after applying the safety device. Rick lowered his head and cried. He stayed several moments thus with his knees slowly sinking into the bloody mire that was once carpet.

At this same time, Lawrence Fowler, after having doing some research on his own, returned to his own funeral home and did some exploration there. He met a similar scene of bloodshed: mucky carpet littered with entrails, blood stained walls, and a slew of body parts enough to make an entirely new composite being. There were also several liters of the gray-white paste. The difference between these scenes was this: Rick Blackstock was wise enough to be armed and Lawrence Fowler was not. This, however, was not a problem for Lawrence. He was unafraid. After the scenes he had witnessed, his senses seemed dulled. He was desensitized to this brutal mutilation. Though Rick had seen more carnage than he, their different minds operate in very separate ways.

Lawrence, upon arriving at his own funeral home, saw a wake of destruction. Several local homes had been vandalized. He, after having seen all that he had wanted to see of his funeral home, left to phone the authorities of the

vandalism. He would merely leave out that it was caused by zombies and, perhaps, the vandalism's extent.

Rick, after his solemnities, headed back to his vehicle. He made the decision to begin a patrol. He started his ignition and pulled his vehicle into the street. After a mere ten minutes of driving, he saw a child cross the street in front of his car. She was the last of a large group of children. They crossed in a single line and moved slightly slower than an average human might walk. They were in no hurry. They entered a fast-food restaurant geared toward children. They had a game room with inexpensive prizes for young children. To see children crossing the street in front of the building was nothing out of the ordinary. To see the last little girl, pale and fragile looking and trailing some artery from her leg along the ground was highly abnormal. A moment later screams could be heard from inside the restaurant.

For hours this ordeal had been rather private and contained. Rick had waited too long. Now, it became public. It spread beyond the realm of mourners to the families spending a late-afternoon eating dinner, playing games, and winning trinkets.

The restaurant was a large building. Brightness, color, and all the innocent blessings of childhood were present. The building's prominent color was gold. There seemed to be a bright glow emanating from the building. The name of the restaurant was in large, friendly, red letters above the double doors. Rick parallel-parked in the nearest parking space available. This was, unfortunately, nearly a quarter-mile from the restaurant. He paid the parking meter. The last thing he needed now was his arsenal to get towed.

He figured that the shotgun would come in handy after widespread panic ensued. For the moment, it was more discreet to use his handgun. He walked toward the building. He had his loaded forty-five in his pocketed hand and another pocketful of ammunition. He was ready. Inwardly, he wanted to slacken his pace. He did not want to kill anything ever again. He was aware, however, that this was impossible.

During these musings, when he was a mere five hundred feet from the entrance, the golden glow turned orange. There was an explosion from inside the restaurant. The zombie children were making their merriment. The establishment had caught fire. Rick stood still. He was transfixed. He had transfigured into a statue of salt for having looked back and not ran into the building when there was still a chance. His hesitation had cost him the lives of all the children who had gone out for some clean, wholesome, Saturday evening fun.

As he continued in his hesitation, which, up until now has caused countless deaths, he saw some of the zombie children exit. Their clothing and skin were still smoldering. They seemed not to feel the pain. Rick ran up to one and punched it. The children were seemingly without gender as their hair had all burned off of their scalps and their figures were without form. It was discernible, however, that they were angry. A dozen had gotten out of the burning building. Others were just inside guarding the entrance. As Rick punched the child, he saw over the child's shoulder. The scene inside the burning building was a nightmare. Little children, even babies still in their mothers' arms, were being attacked by the zombie horde with its back to the door. Families were trapped between zombie-children and a wildly-burning conflagration. Rick wanted to attack this horde within the building so that the humans could escape. However, before he could do this, he would have to mow down the protectors of this building.

"Simple enough," thought he, "I am armed." His thoughts turned easily-audible. His face contorted in disgust and anger. He spat as he shouted, "Fear me!"

He withdrew his weapon. The child he had just punched was shot. The screams echoing inside the building were met with those from the street. People were horrified by the fire, and startled by the gunshot. The zombie itself yelled out a pitiful cry. Its fortified vocal chords made the death-wail reverberate off all the nearby buildings in a dizzying echo.

Three more pops rang out in rapid succession. Three more zombie children lay slain. The children were not going to settle for this. Whatever voice controlled them urged them to move and take action. Suddenly, Rick's arm was being bit by a little child. His legs were in the arms of two other children. Furthermore, other passers-by were being attacked by this dead guard. Rick saw the zombie children inside doing the same attack to some other poor, unfortunate person. Rick fired his last two shots at the children at his legs. He kicked his feet and waved his arms. He, somehow, maintained his balance.

He withdrew to reload. Unfortunately, he could not withdraw fast enough to escape the children. He had barely managed to get a single bullet into his weapon. He was a very obvious threat to them. The children were much faster than he had anticipated. He had a handful of ammunition in one hand and the empty revolver in the other. He kicked at the three children circling him while he reloaded his gun. He was happy that there were only three. They seemed like less of a threat. A second later, he screamed forth in pain. His

scream was mingled with a gunshot. Another zombie was dead. His head was ringing from all these gunshots. His arm ached from the recoil of his weapon. His aim was terrible. His stance was poor. His ears were unprotected. He, obviously, did not have the time to properly master his weapon.

He still had two children near him. They circled him menacingly. They were hungry. The fluid was in liquid form dripping from their mouths, noses, and eyes. This pair of children could have been twins. Their clothing was no longer smoldering. They rushed him. Before Rick could fire his weapon, which was empty anyway, one child had bit his hand. He dropped the gun, and bullets fell from his pocket.

As for Rick, his hand was stinging in pain from the zombie child. Rick felt no remorse for hitting the little child in the face with his fist. He kicked. He punched. He fought like a madman to free himself. The moment could have very well been fatal. Suddenly, there was a loud bang and the zombies flew off of Rick. The passer-by had picked up the gun, loaded it with ammunition that had fallen from Rick's pocket, and fired. Apparently, he was a better shot than Rick.

The man gave Rick a knowing nod. More zombies-- this time they were adults and even different children-- had left the restaurant. Some did not venture far while others ran as swiftly as their new legs could carry them. Rick could see that this was beyond containment. He looked back at the stranger, but found that he had disappeared. The man looked like a laborer. He wasn't there anymore. The street behind Rick had eaten him. All that remained was the revolver laying on the ground. Rick picked it up distractedly.

Rick saw, to his horror, some more zombies headed toward him. He reloaded his gun as quickly as he could. His right hand ached from the zombie attack. He now regretted not having the shotgun. While it only held two shells at a time, it would have been much faster to reload than a revolver.

He held his gun with the strength of both of his arms. He fired and missed terribly. Here he made the decision that further gunshots would be very close range. He made a second decision that it might not be too late to get his shotgun.

He rushed as quickly as his battered legs could carry him. The zombie children were atop his thoughts. He dared not look over his shoulder. He was terribly out of breath by the time he reached his car. His ears were still ringing. He could hardly hear his own panting. The cold wind gave him a chill. He saw that, by running, he had provoked several of the zombies to run after him. They were a few yards behind him

as he hastily jammed his key into the car door. He turned to see them still approaching.

The zombies saw the chase and took it. Rick was an easy target. He looked as panicked and as frenzied as the rest of their victims. The group of six did not, however, understand that Rick had a purpose besides escape. As they closed in, there was a loud discharge. The lock of the gun triumphantly exploded ejecting lead shot in an array of brain-piercing fire. Three fell instantly.

"Multi-kill!" shouted Rick, in a halo of glory, mimicking a game his children played. He laughed maniacally.

He fired again. His next shot only took out one further zombie. The other two began to run away from him. Rick popped open the barrel of his gun. Two empty shells flew out onto the sidewalk with a sound reminiscent of dropping a pill-bottle with the exception that this pill-bottle had a metal cap. He slid in two more shells. He piled an entire box of ammunition into a pocket that could be closed by a zipper. He closed his barrel back up and chased the two demons that had escaped him. A double-explosion came from Rick's gun. He'd fired both barrels off in rapid succession. The two zombies fell and tumbled to a halt on the pavement. Two long crimson lines marred the sidewalk where they had fallen. Rick turned back into the direction of the restaurant. He was nearly out of breath when he finally made the pavement in front of his destination. By now, however, the guard had dispersed in many directions. There was little hope that Rick could kill the entire array. That was, he knew, also not the same group that had come from the viewing his wife had prepared. There was no longer a golden glow. The building was dark and silent.

Rick knew, however, that the silence was deceitful.

He opened the broken glass door, hoping to find a zombie guard on the other side. He saw a feast. Many of the zombies that stayed behind or just woke up were enjoying a meal of those who had burned to death. The burnt flesh of the fallen was torn off by those who had caused the fall. The scene was grotesque. Rick saw more carnage and more body parts than he had formerly only seen in textbooks.

Rick removed some cloth from the ground. It was probably someone's pant-leg. He tore it into two shreds and stuffed one in each ear. Rick raised his gun, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger once again. Zombies exploded. The bodies of those who had already died from the fire exploded. Rick reloaded and fired off more shells as fast as he was able. Reload. Explode. He turned slowly in a circle. Zombies

exploded in burning, orange masses. Gray ooze and blood splattered. Zombies looked up from their feasts only to transform instantly into a beige-gray mist. More discharges were fired. Rick's ammunition box became more empty as he swung his gun in a wide arc and leaving nothing moving. When he had completed his circle, the barrel of his shotgun glowed white.

He surveyed the dark restaurant for any signs of movement. He stepped through the carnage. He tripped on a body. Each step caused the crackle of burnt flesh beneath his feet. The stench was nearly unbearable. When he was at the back of the restaurant, he saw children lying dead in a pit of plastic balls. They were missing parts and were obviously used for food. Their heads looked intact and were, furthermore, covered with gray goo. It would be, therefore, only a matter of time before they rose again as zombies.

In fact, as Rick watched them, one began to move. It was crying. Rick would not be his dupe.

Rick saw no harm in taking a moment of hesitation. The children-- one boy and one girl-- looked relatively unharmed by the explosion and subsequent fire. This conflagration still smoldered in small patches that were scattered across the restaurant. It burned teddy bears and other innocent toy-victims. The two children, however, seemed as though they could be playing. For a moment, isolated in his own mind rather than in the back of a restaurant, Rick could see his own children. He saw Angela and Chris playing in a ball-pit devoid of blood or gray microbial material. He couldn't bring himself to kill his own children. These two, though they were clearly not his children, had, for a moment, the attitude of any child. In the dim light provided by the setting sun, Rick saw childhood bliss murdered by adulthood carelessness. He screamed and fired his weapon. Balls, innocent symbols that were brightly colored and illuminated from the detonation of Rick's firearm, flew into the air and rained back down on the two dead children.

Rick saw no more living people. He saw no more bodies he had to shoot. He left. He walked back to his car with his shotgun loosely held by his side. The safety was on. Rick sighed. He removed his makeshift ear protection. Still, he had a headache. A tear made its way down Rick's unshaven cheek. He heard police sirens entering the street behind him. He put his gun in his car quickly. He did not want police now. He wanted nothing to stop his own patrol. As two police officers went into the building, he saw a body rise from the pavement and follow the policeman. Rick started his car and drove

closer to see what was happening. The man who had saved Rick's life had fallen from his gunshot. Apparently a zombie had gotten to him, because he was clearly not in human form when he entered the restaurant behind the policemen. A shot rang outward from the building. Rick couldn't see what was happening in the building, but he did not care. There were two armed police officers fighting one unarmed zombie. Rick continued driving away from the burned-out shell of a restaurant.

A few minutes after Rick left, three zombies also left the ruins. Two were dressed in torn police uniforms. The third resembled a laborer.

# Chapter Ten

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Nightfall was approaching. It would be dark by five thirty--that is, in one hour from when Rick left the black remnants of a restaurant. Four thirty. Four and a half hours had passed from the beginning of Agatha's second viewing. Two funeral massacres have happened. Many gallons of innocent blood have been spilled. Sadly, approximately two hours had passed between the end of the first attack and the beginning of the second. Rick gathered his arms. Lawrence gathered his information. The zombies gathered recruits. From the Bentley Funeral Home, the zombies gained their numbers by mutilating the occupants of nearby houses. The zombies of Dorothea's funeral home took to local businesses. Both of these paths had fantastic and terrible results.

Rick Blackstock, driving from the restaurant, felt a certain easiness. It had been very easy to slaughter the zombies with his shotgun. They might have been able to create gruesome scenes of painful death, but Rick could do the same quite efficiently with his "boomstick."

As he drove down the vacant street, filled with the pride of having killed his first set of zombies, his cellular telephone began to ring once again. He pulled over to the curb and answered his phone.

"Hello," said he.

"Rick Blackstock?" said the voice in his ear.

"This is he," said Rick. His voice let out a little of his growing pride.

"I'm Lawrence Fowler. I am the funeral director at the establishment where you had your viewing this afternoon."

"Oh," said Rick Blackstock, having nothing else to say.

"I have, in these past hours, been doing some research about the zombies."

"I've got some guns, and, in the past few minutes, I've been shooting them."

"Good good. I was hoping we could join forces."

"How do you mean?"

"I have some information; you have some firepower. We could make a good team."

"Sounds good to me. Where are you?"

Lawrence answered.

"Alright. I'm on my way."

Rick turned his car around and navigated the streets. Soon, the restaurant and the surrounding businesses were far behind him. He was heading back toward a residential neighborhood. Rick turned into a street near to the one from which Lawrence called. He slammed on his brakes. The car stopped abruptly.

Rick looked around his car. Every house on the street had open doors. Some had broken windows. Some houses farther down the street from Rick had a fire burning. The street was eerily devoid of movement. There was the loud, echoing, high-pitched wail of zombie cries.

Rick put his foot back on the accelerator. He continued his drive. He crossed a small intersection. The next block of houses looked the same. Each with open doors and vacancy. Rick's eyes bulged. How could such a huge range of people have been attacked? The answer was simple: ignorance.

The zombies had, apparently, left the Bentley Funeral Home and took to the residences. Some walked while some ran. Some left the funeral home later than others. This caused the attacks to span out over a longer period of time and made their detection harder. Furthermore, when they got to the residences, they were crying or wailing. The people were sympathetic and opened their doors to these monsters. This mistake was repeated a hundred times. An entire family could fall to one of these savage mutants. Soon, these families would become a part of a larger whole. The zombies could smell each other and, therefore, join up. Neither Rick nor Lawrence knew where they were now, but Lawrence had plans of where to look.

Rick presumed that Lawrence's information might be crucial. He drove faster, hoping that the zombies of these past two blocks had not gotten as far as Lawrence's house.

Ashes and smoke filled parts of the street as the houses whirled past both sides of Rick's car. He was afraid. He did not even know Lawrence yet, but he felt that there was someone there who had experienced the horror that Rick had. As Rick drove, the houses seemed to be restored. These blocks of homes closer to where Lawrence lived seemed in a good condition. There were children playing by the side of the road. The little residential area looked pleasant. Rick could tell with a large degree of certainty that the neighborhood was safe. Rick drove onward more slowly. He was afraid that he might hit a child that was playing ahead of him. He checked his rear-view mirror. As he did, he saw a blue-gray mass run across the street and grab one of the

children playing ball. Rick stomped on his brake pedal. He grabbed his shotgun and ran out of the car.

He saw, for the first time, in the dying daylight, how a zombie really looked. The zombie stopped when he saw Rick. Rick would yield more meat than the children surrounding him. They stared at each other. The zombie was several hours old. The fluid that kept him alive had displaced every last drop of blood from its host. The aforementioned fluid was much thicker than blood, therefore the host's veins were more pronounced. They stuck out of his arms, hands and forehead. Since his skin was not receiving blood, it turned gray to match the substance running through the underlying veins and arteries. The blue came from the color of the walls of the veins. The zombie's eyes, with their large pupils, were leaking gray fluid as though they were tears. The zombie that Rick beheld was missing several fingers. His arm, still strong, held a child very closely. Suddenly, after a moment of gazing, he grabbed the child's head and turned it very swiftly through a full one hundred eighty degrees. The little boy's head faced the houses behind him. He remained upright only because the zombie held his arm. The zombie took a bite of flesh from the boy's arm leaving a large, bloody wound. The fluid entered and began pushing the blood rapidly outward. After the bloody bite, the zombie shoved the child's body away from him and ran after Rick. The little boy fell to the ground with a crash and blood began rapidly leaking out of the corpse.

Rick pulled the trigger of the shotgun. The zombie's head exploded. Gray goo splattered the street.

Rick jumped back into his still-running car. He drove toward Lawrence's house once again. Upon arriving in the correct block, he slowed his progression so that he could read the numbers from the houses. He stopped at 2805, cut the engine and got out of his car. Upon standing, he stepped in something that had the consistency of mud. He looked down. It was gray. He looked at the house; the door had been forced open. Fear whipped him like a punch to the gut. He grabbed for his shotgun.

He ran to the house. He pushed open the door. He saw two zombies. The sought man's wife was wrestling with one and the man himself with the other.

Rick aimed his gun at Mrs. Fowler. Lawrence cried out to stop Rick from pulling the trigger, "Don't shoot her!"

Rick stopped. He got closer to the man. He smashed the back of that zombie's head with the stock of his shotgun. Lawrence was no longer in danger. The second zombie

redoubled his attack on the wife. The first changed targets and attacked Rick. Rick very quickly picked it off with his shotgun's discharge. However, after doing this, Rick looked the woman's face to see two empty, bloody eye sockets. A crunching was audible as the zombie ate the poor woman's eyes. An optic nerve dangled from its pale lips. Rick shot this second zombie through the torso. Seeing Lawrence's wife fall to the floor, the pair of survivors decided to leave. They ran to Rick's car, and they sped away from this terrible scene.

During the ride, they spoke to each other after their deafness from the discharges ceased.

After the general niceties, Lawrence Fowler said, "Good thing you came when you did."

"I'm sorry about your wife."

"Not much you could have done, and we have humanity itself with which to concern ourselves."

"Very true. You said you have some knowledge you'd like to share?"

"You said you have firepower you wish to share."

"I have a revolver."

"Not much, but useful."

"It's a forty-five calibre. You and blow clean through them with it."

"Fair enough."

Impatiently, Rick demanded, "So, what do you have to tell me?"

"Much. It will require patience."

Rick took a deep breath. "Okay. Fair enough. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. There's a lot of stress."

"So, what do you know?"

"Firstly, zombies are not new. Secondly, they weren't invented by Hollywood," he began. They exchanged glances. Lawrence continued, "They used to be called 'ghouls.' That term has become more ambiguous now. Either way, ghouls had their start in folklore from those who practiced voodoo."

At this, Rick rolled his eyes incredulously.

"Hear me out. Hollywood makes zombies from other enigmas. Ghosts are not zombies. Demons are not zombies. Aliens are not zombies. I'm not saying that these other things exist, but we can be certain that zombies do." Lawrence wiped a tear from his eye. "Zombies come from Central and South America: more specifically, the Caribbean. Voodoo practitioners would take some part of a deceased person and make a 'voodoo doll' from them. You've heard stories like that before on television. The difference is that the person must be dead. The bokors-- that's what they called those who make

the voodoo dolls-- could control the zombies after giving them some sort of potion. The myth continues to say that the bokor would lose control if the zombie ate salt. Anyway, none of this is really applicable to our case."

"But what about the bit about a potion?"

"The potion isn't our embalming fluid. The stories say that, instead of making a voodoo doll, some bokors used blood and animal parts mixed with herbs to create a special drink. This would, supposedly, raise a person from the dead. That drink is the what's worth closer examination. Wade Davis, a Canadian botanist, said that these bokors actually used two powders injected into the bloodstream to raise their zombies."

"How did you find all this?"

"I used the Internet. Just searching for the 'origin of zombies' got me most of what I know."

Rick made an observation. "They seem to be acting like those zombies we see in the movies. They travel in packs. They moan. They walk funny. You know what I'm saying."

"Yes. Of course. They move in packs for the same reason why they attacked my house this evening instead of any other house on my block."

"Why's that?"

"They smell each other. The fluid might be odorless to us, but I believe that there is something about it that the zombies can smell."

There was a pause. Lawrence, the funeral director turned zombie expert, removed a piece of paper from his pocket and began to speak again. "I think scientists happened across some form of these Caribbean powders. The things found in modern cosmetics are astounding. Most contain sodium dodecyl sulfate. It's used to thicken things like toothpaste and make certain things lather, like shaving foam. SDS also causes skin irritation. It's essentially toxic in large quantities. Likewise, cosmetics often include parabens. They are preservatives. They also cause irritation, but only to those who are allergic to them. Furthermore, they also cause odd effects, acting like estrogen in some cases. Other ingredients in this paste that are or act as hormones include 4-methylbenzylidene camphor, nonylphenol, phenosulfothiazine, megestrol acetate, trenbolone, oestradiol, zeranol and diisobutyl phthalate. Also in the laundry-list of nearly-unpronounceable chemicals include arsenic, lead, aluminium, and iron oxide. All of these can be toxic. The hormones have been linked to cancer."

"Wait. How did you get the list of ingredients for the new procedure?"

"I have connections. The government is handing out their list to anyone who might have a solution."

"Tell me more about these hormones."

"Well, the oestradiol, as well as some of the others I mentioned, are carcinogens used in the beef industry. They speed up the life of a cow causing them to mature early and gain ludicrous amounts of weight. This is why consumption of beef is so unhealthy in the United States. Anyway, they cause cells to grow. They, mixed with some of the other chemicals-- some on this list are unavailable on the Internet-- cause the regeneration of dead body tissue. Some of the chemicals added are capable of simulating blood. In fact, human blood contains hormones. These hormones, while causing the body to produce fat cells, have been engineered to produce more of their own cells. I suppose they also contain some trace amounts of probiotic organisms."

"So, the Caribbean folks just happened to have had these rare chemicals to make their zombies?"

"Well, yes and no. Some of these hormones and things might have been present in the concoction that they made from dead animals. Furthermore, they had bokors to control their ghouls. These zombies have no controller."

"So, why do they want to eat people?" Rick asked.

"Zombies eating people is a Hollywood invention. In our case, the answer can only be scientific. The folks in the Caribbean can't resolve that. I presume there are nutrients in human skin that they crave. Remember that they have a remarkable sense of smell. They can smell their 'embalming fluid' from a mile away. So, perhaps they can smell some trace compound in human skin that they need to survive."

Lawrence stopped. It was, decidedly, his turn to ask some questions. "So, where are you driving us?"

"I'm driving a circuit around town. I want to know where they are so we can fight them."

"Okay. Might I suggest something?"

"Go for it."

"Why not assemble an army of sorts?"

"Not a bad idea."

"If we start near where some of the atrocities have occurred, we might be able to find people who believe us."

"True."

Rick directed his travel toward the blocks surrounding Lawrence's house. He found a group of injured people standing in a nearby street. It seemed they were in the attitude

of planning. Rick pulled his car to the side of the road. He and Lawrence got out of the car to join in the discussion.

As they approached, the dozen people turned to see them. "What do you want?" one of them shouted.

"We want to help you," began Rick.

"Do you know what we're facing?" another nameless face asked.

"My friend here does," Rick said, motioning to Lawrence.

"As for me, I have a gun to fight with and some ammunition to share."

"That's more than most of us have got," spoke their apparent leader.

"Any weapon will do, so long as you can smash their heads with it," spoke Lawrence. He seemed unaccustomed to speaking to large groups of people. "If you have got garden spades or crowbars, they will work. Likewise, if you have something blunt like a heavy pipe or a sledge hammer, you are equally useful."

"If you have a shotgun or revolver taking forty-five calibre ammunition, I can supply you."

Most of the people in that neighborhood, were woefully unarmed.

Suddenly, happily, they were a part of something larger than two people. Sadly, they needed more.

The group piled into their cars and followed the leader. Neither Rick nor Lawrence belonged to that neighborhood; therefore, they did not know the man leading them. The leader, however, led them to a large, vacant parking lot on the outskirts of the suburb. There, the entire army joined as a single unit and jumped into the back of two large trucks. Rick took along his gun and ammunition. Lawrence took his assigned gun, the ammunition Rick had given him, and his notes. The trucks were open and clean, though it was intended to move horses. They drove through neighborhoods near the funeral homes. Rick and Lawrence directed him. They looked for signs of human life among the carnage and destruction that lay in their path. Volunteer after volunteer joined the cause. Many, like Rick and Lawrence, had lost loved ones. They were angry, and, with the small army, they had found comfort and an outlet for revenge. Each brought with them some sort of weapon. There were metal shovels and glistening knives. The army was also furnished with a cricket bat, a steel post intended to hold a fence, and many other blunt and pointed instruments.

Block after block saw more and more people. Soon, people were crowded on Rick's truck shoulder to shoulder. Their

implements of war clanged together. Every one in the back of that truck felt the electric thrill of war. Some were scared, but all were friendly. They were a single military unit, now. That's all they needed now was a fortress and a means of bringing the zombies thither.

The driver, a blond man with short, bristly hair, felt that they needed more people. He turned his vehicle in the direction of the giant parking lot once more. When they got there, they unloaded half the army into the second truck. Both trucks then were sent out to scout for people. Since these trucks contained a very crucial part of the resistance to the zombie infestation, they remained close together, and one was never out of visual contact from the other.

Thus they drove. The sun was still holding onto the sky with its final half hour of daylight. The blond man's anxiety ran upward as the sun wound downward. His anxiety was mirrored in the thoughts of each person on the pair of trucks.

These trucks pulled into one locality where many houses were on fire. Since the zombies did not respond to vocal commands, the passengers of the army shouted into the street. They shouted welcomes and orders to join the army against zombies. Some were skeptical, but the neighborhood was beginning to look like ancient ruins. What was once a house on the corner resembled several posts and the burnt guts of a nondescript building.

Therefore, people joined. Residents of this neighborhood came from varying ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Each was welcomed aboard either of the trucks. After a mere quarter hour of patrolling this burning quadrant of the suburban area, the two trucks were full. The room was completely used. They were standing on each others' feet and jostling each others' elbows. The trucks pulled away from the wreckage of the neighborhood. Some residents who could not fit on the trucks followed in cars.

They had a sizeable army. There were nearly a hundred people. More still joined. They had a chain of cars going wherever the blond man was driving. Rick and Lawrence gave each other a significant look of hope. They had an army.

# Chapter Eleven

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The army's chain of cars wound its way through the empty streets toward their fortress. The farther and farther they drove, the fewer live people they saw. The neighborhoods were dying before their eyes. With a strong army of fighting citizens, the procession made its way toward their citadel.

Looming on the edge of town, an old factory stood silently awaiting the army. The procession of various vehicles, led by the two trucks full of warriors, wound its way into the venerable industrial park. They filled the parking lot with their train. After the cars were parked, people got out and began to raise some questions.

The blond driver of the first truck got out of his vehicle and beckoned the people to listen.

"Hello!" he shouted, "Can you all hear me?!" He paused. He cupped his hands to his mouth and took a deep breath. His army was more expansive than he had thought. More cars and appended themselves to his legion. "Now, can everyone hear me?"

There was a general agreement.

"Good! My name is David Wilkens. I would like to be your leader. We are at my place of work. This building behind us," at this point, he gestured to a giant building occupying the space one hundred yards over his shoulder, "is an old factory. It is still in operation. Its aged walls have held up through riots and picketers. There have been a number of events that have kicked at the foundation of this place. There was a hurricane here a few years back. Its lofty halls stood strong while some of the local houses were smashed to bits. This is where we should assemble our army. We can fire from the windows and doors. We can station people with guns on the roof. We will wait for them to charge us like an ocean charging the shoreline. We'll slaughter them and become heroes."

He stopped speaking and welcomed questions. The questions were very pertinent and David Wilkens did not seem to have the answers. David had a good idea. His fortress was a stronghold that the zombies could, hopefully, not penetrate. Nonetheless, most of the army was unarmed. Rick's shotgun with Rick's aim askew might not fire from the top of the fifty-foot tall structure with any accuracy. There was much to be decided.

David consulted with Rick Blackstock and Lawrence Fowler. That pair seemed to have all the answers.

"What do we do?" asked David.

"I thought you were going to be the leader," stated Rick flatly.

"Nonetheless, leaders have their confidants, and I choose you two."

"Don't begrudge the man some advice, Rick. We're all in a terrible mess," Lawrence advised.

"Nonetheless, he's going to get the glory and make none of the plans."

"Rick, you'll get glory, too. I assure you."

"So, can you guys help with a general plan, here?" David Wilkens asked bemusedly.

"Of course," began Rick, "What we need are scouts to get us provisions. We need guns, ammo and food."

"We'll get them with what, though?" asked David, "We don't have money to buy hundreds of boxes of ammunition, guns, and all that."

"We'll just have to take it. Someone can take the truck and load everything in the back. When we were coming up, toward the end of our trip, there were entire vacant neighborhoods."

Lawrence chimed into the conversation, "This means that there are a lot of zombies in waiting. There is, therefore, a huge zombie horde and a huge human army. I'm sure the news is out that there are zombies. If we get a group of people, we can convince shopkeepers to give us food and guns. We'll even agree to rent the weapons, if it comes to that."

"Okay. So, how do we get scouts?"

"Rick and I will lead two groups," said Lawrence.

"That sounds like a good plan."

"Thanks to Lawrence and I, it's our only plan," Rick reminded David.

"Right, Rick. Let's get going," said Lawrence, sounding frustrated.

Rick and Lawrence forced their way through the crowd with their trucks. They both acquired three people to help them. They began their circuit. Rick agreed to take care of guns and ammunition since he had made the circuit previously and knew the gun shops. Lawrence began with food and other personal needs. Lawrence was good with numbers and knew more about the ghouls than anyone. David, after the eight person scout-squad had left, realized that it was a huge blunder to set out the two people who knew anything about what they were about to battle.

David began to mingle with the army while the pair of heroes acquired the necessary provisions. David led them to the doors of the building. Once inside the large main room, everyone put down what little belongings they had brought and set personal boundaries amongst each other.

Mister Wilkens, alone, was at the helm of this factory. The huge main room, several hundred feet long by one hundred feet wide, was several stories tall and held very comfortably the army of almost two hundred men, women, and children. David set the men and women to bar the high windows. The factory had a separate wood-cutting shop where there were supplies to accomplish this task. A dozen workers among the two hundred also began preparing battlements on the roof. There was an access ladder to the roof, but the building was old and the roof was heavily sloped. They used timbering to make a makeshift railing sturdy enough to stop soldiers from falling off the edge. They also widened the access hole so that it would be easier for soldiers to get to the roof carrying supplies.

David stood still and watched these proceedings. He was muscular enough to be doing the work of three of these unskilled laborers. He also imagined himself a leader far beyond the realms of laboring. Furthermore, the zombies seemed unarmed. If he would have asked Lawrence or Rick, he would have known that the zombies were partially human and were quite capable of carrying a weapon and figuring out its use or, in the case of candlesticks and floral tripods, inventing them. The preparations were going well, and he was making the plans for his fortress to be truly infallible to a horde of strong but unarmed zombies. His fortress could be crushed by nothing while the zombies could be crushed by the army and the insurmountable redoubt of the building.

The building itself was a massive rectangle block with a few arms made of smaller buildings. These included a wood-shop, a few sheds, a secondary metalworking machine shop, and an infirmary for those who were injured while working. The main building was three stories tall. Ledges ran around the perimeter of the building on the inside to create the second and third floor. The roof was accessed from this third storey. The high, arched windows were two stories tall and had panels that could be opened from any level. These would make perfect turrets. Wooden boards were screwed into the woodwork around the fixed panes of glass to protect the legion from any thrown projectiles the zombies might have. Because the second and third stories were not complete floors, one from the concrete floor of the first level could

see the apex of the ceiling. This facilitated communication between the top tier and the main floor. Also, materials could be hoisted up on ropes to the top level or thrown down from the top level to the floor.

While the fortress was being secured, the two scouts and their six helpers were getting food, blankets, guns, ammunition, and anything else that could fit on their respective trucks. Many store owners were very willing to help with the cause.

Rick happened on a gun store that had closed for business just after he had left it the first time. They broke into the store, grabbed all the guns and most of the ammunition and filled most of the truck in one stop. They had acquired many large, metal ammunition boxes and several dozen weapons. As Rick prepared himself to drive to the next store, a police patrol car stopped his large, open truck filled with illegally obtained firearms and ammunition.

The officer asked what they thought they were doing.

"We are fighting zombies. Certainly you've heard," Rick answered.

"No, in fact. I haven't."

Police dispatch hadn't gotten in touch with this lone patrol car in an hour. The police officer called into his radio and discovered no response. Rick, losing time, drove into the street and pulled away from the police officer. A few seconds later, a police car was chasing him. Rick slammed the accelerator. The policeman, not having anyone to contact via radio, followed. Rick turned into a residential area. Here, much to his delight, he found zombies. He had pulled into a neighborhood where zombies were running rampant setting fire to houses and consuming the charred remains of those who were too far destroyed to become zombies. The scene was one of hell on Earth. The police officer pulled over and waved his arms at the truck full of guns and ammunition. Rick elected not to see this display which had cost him so much time. A few minutes later, the officer himself was a zombie.

As for Lawrence, the food shopping was far less adventurous. Rick phoned him and spread the news: There was no police dispatch. The entire town was under marshal law.

Lawrence and his crew plundered several grocery stores. Their entire truck was so full of canned food, can openers, blankets, and produce that the three people who went to accompany Lawrence had a very uncomfortable trip back to the factory-fort. Two men were standing on the back

bumper guarding the provisions, and one was in the cab with Lawrence with his hands full of food. There were cans of food wedged under the driver's and passenger's seats. There were cans of pork and beans atop the dashboard and cans of peas tucked by the passenger's feet. The back of the truck was completely loaded with boxes of food. The cans were so firmly packed that the blankets they acquired had to be used to keep things from falling off the side of the truck. They drove ahead slowly. They had also acquired many assorted sweets for the children, and five dozen can openers so that their huge feast of a thousand cans could be consumed. The passenger sat on a crate containing cans of various non-perishables.

Rick was not quite finished yet, though. There were, as we have said, nearly two hundred people in their army and Rick had only several dozen weapons. He made his way toward a second gun shop. There, he attained much more bounty than he had the first store. The back of his truck was completely filled with ammunition and the cab was completely filled with guns. There were several small arms that he and his compatriots held on their bodies. Since there was no room in the cab of the truck for passengers, two stood on the bumper of the back, and one lay atop the huge pile of ammunition clutching the slats on the side of the open truck so he did not fall.

Rick's crew was required, due to their enormous, combustible load, to drive slowly and carefully.

With these preparations, the two snails carried the provisions on their backs back to their home base.

The route might have only taken twenty minutes going thirty miles per hour, but each moment was tense. Tension strengthened every mind and body that was not in the fortress. The operations of both of these supply trucks must be undertaken very carefully, otherwise there could have been a loss of provisions for which the scouts were risking their lives.

The worst happened. The truck led by Lawrence Fowler containing the food hit a lone zombie who had run out in front of the truck. The truck stopped instantly. Thankfully, nothing was lost; however, as soon as the collision took place, a hundred zombies came from ransacking the nearby houses to investigate. The truck was soon surrounded by lifeless human forms.

Fear welled up inside the two passengers trapped on the rear bumper. Unlike Lawrence and the fourth member of

their crew in the cab, they were defenseless with nothing separating them from the certain destruction of the zombies.

Lawrence yelled, "Hold on tightly, back there!" and slammed on the accelerator.

The food shook and threatened to jump out of the truck onto the zombie-infested stretch of road. Lawrence ran into a few zombies. Others took their place. He was forced to stop a second time.

A passenger on the bumper shouted, "If you keep this up, our food is going to fall everywhere."

The man next to him on the bumper added, "And if you don't, we will be eaten alive!"

Lawrence, his men, and the provisions were lost either way.

Suddenly, an explosion sounded!

The report was quickly followed by others coming from somewhere to the truck's right. The zombies ahead of the truck began clearing. Lawrence and his astonished crew looked to their right and saw, to their great fortune, Rick and his supply truck. Rick had stopped his truck, and the adventurers got out and began shooting their new firearms. They cleared away the zombies who had begun to flee with amazing haste. Lawrence drove onward. Rick and his crew rejoined their truck. They did not bother to follow or exterminate any zombies that were not directly in their way. The provisions were far more important.

Moments later, the two huge, open trucks full of supplies reentered the industrial park's parking lot and pulled up to the factory. Suddenly, a hundred people poured forth to help unload everything. Every man was happy with receiving a gun and about fifty rounds of ammunition. Every family was happy to have some food. The groceries, after division, might not have made a proper meal, but it was certainly better than having to spend an indefinite period feeling hunger-pangs.

Those few who did not bring anything at all from their homes before rushing into the army received a blanket, since there were relatively few to go around. This group of people included the two principal leaders: Blackstock and Fowler.

These two had much to report.

After the trucks were parked out of harm's way and Rick and Lawrence gave a brief inspection of the factory, Rick and Lawrence made their report to David Wilkens.

"David, we've got plenty to tell you," began Rick.

"Okay! Let's hear it," said David.

Rick gestured toward Lawrence who spoke, "Firstly, these zombies are created by our government in a scheme to make

funerals more environmentally friendly. That was actually the cover story for some new biological agent they created that could reproduce itself. It can also, apparently, bring people back to life and control them to kill their loved ones. I'm sure most of this is common sense to you, but I would like to be sure that you are on the same page as Rick and me. The neighborhoods are deserted. We started our army too late. Everywhere else has already fallen. We came across a zombie army a few miles back from here. Rick managed to slaughter some of them, but there is an amazing horde that we're going to have to fight."

"How many?"

Rick answered, "At least a thousand. I saw a few groups of about one hundred on my way outward."

"How are we going to lure them here?"

Rick said, "Once again, Lawrence has a personal anecdote."

"Lawrence?"

"Well, when I was at my home, a pair of zombies came to my block and specifically attacked my house. My wife lay dead now." Lawrence gave way to emotion. Rick and David patiently waited for Lawrence to regain composure. Rick wished, suddenly, that he had told the story.

"I'm sorry," began Lawrence, "but, anyway, I presume that it's because I was at the first zombie attack."

David looked impressed.

Rick took over the conversation. "Lawrence did some research. His findings all sound feasible to me. He theorizes that, since we were there, we got some of this government substance on us. Even in trace amounts, the zombies can sense it. Lawrence says they smell it, and I believe him. Now, since Lawrence and I are covered with the stuff, we just have to wait for the zombies to get tired of looting other places and smell us."

"But, by now, the government chemical must be everywhere," argued Wilkens.

"Yes. But we're alive. The chemical is actively reacting with our skin. We're actively fighting off its contagion. It's in such a small dose that we won't be actively converted to zombies." This last sentence was stated hastily after David gave Lawrence a frightened gaze.

Rick mentioned, "Furthermore, we're not dead."

"At least, not yet," said Wilkens.

"And we're not going to die," added Rick who had an evident dislike for David Wilkens. Rick's legs and arms were

aching. He left to his small designated area to tend to his wounds.

The sun had completely fallen outside the citadel. There might be other strongholds of humanity in the nearby city, but the nearly two hundred felt very isolated as they were settling into their fortress home.

Electric lights illuminated the interior. Huge lamps hung from the rafters of the apex of the ceiling. A few people were placed on the roof to stand guard. One of Lawrence's scout crew was wise enough to grab a pair of binoculars on their shopping trip. While five men stood watch, the rest got comfortable on their blankets. They supped.

After a dinner of cold, canned foods, families settled down on the hard floor to sleep. The conditions were not comfortable. Small children could be heard crying and complaining. Overall, however, there was a general feeling of camaraderie. Families would, when the zombies attack, fight the foe side by side. There was a glory to it, and they were happy to be alive and experience it.

David Wilkens stayed awake that night, since he was the leader. Meanwhile, Rick Blackstock, Lawrence Fowler, and an army of about two hundred settled in for a long night's sleep under a lofty, safe ceiling.

Meanwhile, five forms shivered, chatted, and passed around a pair of binoculars. They were keeping an eye open to the surrounding darkness of the town where no one was stirring. This nearly complete blackness was only broken by a few fires still burning pell-mell around that sad, quietly ominous, deserted ghost-town.

## Chapter Twelve

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In the still of the night, Rick had a dream.

He was standing in the middle of a Gothic cathedral. There was a high, vaulted ceiling above him. He walked between the huge stone columns. The floor was marble and highly reflective. He saw the crucifix suspended high above the altar. Jesus was bleeding from his wrists and his feet where the nails impaled his flesh and from his forehead where the cross of thorns was applied. With the gargantuan arcades and endless rows of pews behind him, a life-sized crucified Jesus and an altar in front of him, and dizzying space on his left and right, Rick began to feel lighter. He rose from the floor until he was saw Jesus' face on the same level as his own. Jesus looked up from his reverie.

Jesus spoke. It was how anyone might imagine the son of God to speak: it was clear and thoughtful with a calming tone.

"My son, you've been under a great amount of stress today. You've been worried about glory in the upcoming battle. Do not fight for glory's sake. Glory is meaningless where we're headed. Fight with compassion for your fellow man. Be a hero for your brotherhood, and for all mankind. If you must end your plague by violence, then do so without pride. Remember that pride is a 'deadly' sin. Help your neighbors without want of reward. Good for goodness' sake is the only kind of good worthy of reward."

He paused. Looking exhausted, he continued, "My last three hours on Earth are nearly finished. I hope you may remember some of this advice I've told you."

"Is there anything else?" asked Rick, feebly.

"Go with God," said Jesus before he expired.

Throughout the remainder of Rick's dream, he searched for weapons throughout the cathedral. He found none. He found many bizarre things. In one room, he found his family. He said his good-byes to them.

He woke.

Sunlight had barely begun pouring through the windows that were not covered by planks. Rick squinted at his cellular telephone to catch a glimpse of the time. Much to his dismay, it was already seven o'clock. He rose.

The entire fortress, it seemed, was still asleep. He saw Lawrence eating pork and beans from a canister.

"Lawrence! You didn't wake me sooner."

"I realize this. You were rather badly injured yesterday and I figured you needed rest. Keep your voice down or you'll wake everyone, and they'll be rather angry."

"Sorry," he lowered his voice, "but I wanted to be awake in case anything should happen."

"Something has happened. Lord-and-Master Wilkens managed to send out scouts in the darkness against my judgement."

"Why?"

"To lead the zombies here when day breaks, I suppose. I haven't the slightest idea why he wants people risking their lives wandering around the streets in the darkness."

"The sun's beginning to rise."

"Only just. It wasn't even remotely light outside when David sent the scouts."

Rick yawned. "I certainly missed a lot when I was asleep."

"Me too," admitted Lawrence. "It would seem David was thinking about his plans when he was on the roof. He wants to gamble the precious few we have here. He wants a second line of defense in the parking lot."

"That's murder!" exclaimed Rick, quietly.

"I know."

"It's clear that he doesn't know what we're up against."

"It's his fort, I suppose. We're going to have to play by his rules," Lawrence advised.

"I don't think his army is going to stand for such reckless plans."

"Probably not. We'll see."

Suddenly, before the reckless plans could ever be forced into action, a large bang was heard. The zombie force had smashed the side of the building facing the parking lot. This was the most heavily secured side. Rick, who had his gun right next to the patch of floor where he slept, grabbed his gun and climbed toward the second storey platform. His limbs ached as he climbed the ladder. Finally reaching the second tier, he looked out of the window panel.

"There's a huge wave of zombies. It looks like there's a couple hundred of them. They have shovels, crowbars, a couple have hammers, others still have knives. They're attacking the walls!"

"Right!" shouted David Wilkens, "Everybody up! Everybody who had a gun assigned yesterday before bed, grab it and start shooting. This is not a drill!"

People did not need David's alarm. Most people had woken after the crashing noise and heard Rick's report.

The view from the top of this building where the lookout was situated was monochromatic. A sea of gray made the parking lot. It was dotted with various colors where the procession of the previous day had parked. Another gray line pierced the view beyond the parking lot in the form of a road. Beyond this road, the horizon was pierced by a second, reddish-gray line. This was a row of houses that ran parallel to the road. Here and there the line broke so that entry could be granted to the neighborhood. It was through these breaks in the housing that the gray army approached the citadel. Beyond this were other rows of houses. Far beyond these rows was an intricate backdrop formed by the city's skyline. It was presumable that the zombies had marched from the city, through the labyrinth of streets between the houses and into the parking lot before the factory.

It was as though the fort was a human body. It was asleep with its brain barely receiving the stimulus from the outside. An eye squinted open and told the brain what it had seen. Soon, the blood began pumping as people shot from their blankets. The heart was beating as people grabbed their guns. The body fought off the infection.

The roof, which is where Rick was assigned to fight, was soon crowded. Lines of men shot off their assigned weapons pell-mell. The zombies fought with redoubled efforts against the building itself. Some managed to crash through the bottoms of the tall windows, but did not succeed to break the wooden panels behind them. Rick, reloading for the third time, knew that he would soon be out of ammunition. His 'couple hundred' was, in fact, five hundred. They hid behind the cars still in the parking lot. Rick had a wonderful vantage point. The hidden zombies threw stones at the windows. If it weren't for the boards, the people beneath Rick would be pummeled with stones and anything else that the zombies could throw.

Some from the bottom of the windows recognized several of the zombies. They were from the army. David knew the recognizable group as the scouts he had sent out that very morning an hour before the trouble started.

Lawrence arrived on the roof.

"Gentlemen! Stop firing! You're wasting ammunition."

The furious banging stopped. Many ears were ringing and could not hear. After a few seconds, Lawrence spoke again.

"Fire in volleys. Do not keep firing at will like David asked. This is a waste of ammunition. Fire in waves. After each wave, wait a few seconds and fire again as a unit! This is ludicrous. I am telling the others this and then getting back to

my post. Rick, when you're ready to fire a volley, shout and we'll listen. I'm leaving you in charge of this tier."

Rick wondered where David had went. Suddenly, he didn't care. He was in charge of this tier. He was the master. He smiled.

"Alright, men. Those with automatic weapons, switch to burst mode. Those who have automatic weapons that do not have modal firing, just squeeze off short bursts when we fire."

While this was being said, the zombies were thrashing their arms through the gun-holes of the first tier. They were waiting for the discharge before they made theirs. They were all given similar instructions. Lawrence had told the others to use bursts instead of firing entire cartridges of ammunition. The reason, he specified, was that the longer one fired an automatic weapon, the farther off-target his shot would strike.

After a few last seconds where Rick reloaded his gun, he shouted, "Fire!"

The third tier made their report which was very closely followed by the second and first. It was one ground-quaking discharge. There were several small bursts of bullets within the barrage. Holes were being torn into flesh of the zombie army. A few seconds passed. Rick reloaded even though he still had one shot left in his barrel. "Fire!" he shouted a second time.

The second volley was much like the first. A huge radius of pavement now separated the live zombies from the building. They ran back in retreat. Two hundred were dead, probably slightly more. The rest withdrew across the huge parking lot and scampered back into the residential areas where they could hide and scrounge for more food.

There was general excitement. A loud "hurrah!" was heard in all places within a half mile radius, though those in the fortress could hardly hear it. Most were firing without ear protection. The two hundred guns had caused hearing loss in nearly every one of them.

The zombie defeat, however, had not been complete. In the time of the frantic firing, very little was accomplished in stopping the zombies from attacking the masonry. There was a gash in the building's exterior. It stretched from the ground to a foot above. The wall was dented inward. A breach had been made. This was not the maximum extent of their problem. Two people on the bottom level were grievously injured when zombies stuck their arms through the windows. Their faces had been compressed between the zombies' bare hands. The breach caused the slime of the fallen zombies to rush inward. The parking lot, it was suddenly apparent,

sloped toward the building. While there were drains around the perimeter to stop rainwater from eroding the building's foundation, the breach occurred directly between two drains. Now, the two bodies that were suffering terrible brain damage were lying in a pool of the embalming fluid. Everyone feared the consequences of this.

Minutes later, after the soldiers' ears stopped ringing, David appeared on the scene. The two people injured were brothers. They were part of an entire family that was present. David ordered that the brothers be taken outside and left there.

He further decreed that the building's breach should be sealed with some supplies he had found in a shed. There was cement and caulk enough to fill any hole. The stream of gray fluid, which contained large amounts of blue and gray various body parts, was to be cleaned up. David would take no part in the cleaning process. Through the cleaning process, Rick-- being a civil engineer-- helped abundantly.

Very few people were happy with David's leadership skills. Rick was glory-hungry, but a good warrior. Lawrence was very smart and a good leader. After David's orders were underway and it was clear that David Wilkens would not be handling a mop or a trowel, a large mass of people on the bottom floor asked that David resign his leadership to Lawrence Fowler. Lawrence was instantly flattered. He knew he could lead a funeral home, but he was not entirely sure about leading an army. He vowed to try his best.

It would not be that simple. David argued. "I am a good leader. This is my workplace. This is my fort to which I led you!"

Lawrence seemed too humble to speak for himself, so Rick spoke for him saying, "Lawrence knew how to defeat that wave of the zombie army. He's willing to pick up a mop." As he said this, Lawrence was actually holding a cleaning implement and cleaning the fluid, which was quickly congealing into paste as they argued.

"Nonetheless, this isn't a democracy," David said in complete earnest.

"More of a demo-crazy," a child added, completely out of turn to add contrast to David's solemnity.

There were some chuckles. Rick realized how foolish David's arguing sounded when a child provided his wisdom.

"Then it should become a democracy," Rick said. "That's all we're really interested in doing is saving ourselves from a zombie onslaught. Lawrence said that the zombies will

eventually eat beyond their means. It'll be a matter of time before they die of their own doing."

"So, you'll believe anything this man tells you?" asked Wilkens.

"Everything he's said to me so far has been true."

The crowd surrounding the pair of men seemed to concur.

David Wilkens' face reddened. His anger was palpable. It seemed that a wave of heat passed through the room.

"Maybe I won't give up my position that easily."

"Doesn't seem like you have a choice," said Rick.

"Why should I?"

"If you don't, the fine men here who have been fighting for the last half hour will force your hand in the matter."

Dejected and fuming, David left his throne. He walked from the group.

Soon, a scream was heard from behind the factory.

Some ran to see what was happening. Rick was the first to run to the back door of the very level on which he was standing. David was checking on the brothers that he had his subjects place outside. He wanted to see their status. There was an obvious fray. The brothers, evidently, had suffered little enough brain damage to become the very things that they had banded together to fight against. David's skin was broken around the chest. The skin of David's chest and neck had been ripped violently downward to expose his ribs. His heart and the aorta, which sprouted from it, now hung outside of his chest cavity. He was still standing upright with his back against the wall of a nearby shed. The brothers were busily eating at the torn flesh that was hanging from his ribs. They did not bother to tear it from the body before devouring it, but, rather, they knelt before the standing corpse and ate right from the exposed bones. They were getting their fluid in the body to a greater and greater extent with each bite. The smell was terrible. David's blood was smeared along the wall behind him and leaked onto the pavement on which he was standing and the brothers were kneeling. They were only fifteen feet away from the back door.

Rick grabbed the nearest gun he could find, which was the gun a man behind him was holding. Rick apologized very quickly for the rude manner in which he had grabbed the man's gun. He pointed the semi-automatic handgun at the first brother, and, shooting a number of rounds quickly, he shot the air several times, each brother several times, and the body of David Wilkens twice. It was unclear whether he had shot David because of bad aim, to ensure that he did not become a zombie, or because of personal hatred. One thing,

though, was certain: The three of them would not be coming back. Rick fired again until the clip was empty. Both of the brothers had bullets in their heads. This was, to Rick, good enough in ensuring that they would not return.

Soon, though, everything had returned to normal. A large amount of concrete was poured to fill the breach made in the wall. The paste had been scraped from the floor. Lawrence ordered bleach be applied to the paste to kill the microbes that made it lethal. Rick, Lawrence, and others, after the cleanup was complete and the concrete was settling, were discussing tactics. The sun had, by this time, trekked halfway into the sky. It was almost ten o'clock. The small group had very differing strategies. Lawrence had convinced, with his knowledge about the zombies' certain extinction, the people of the tactical meeting that isolation was the best policy. They had food. They had shelter. All they needed was to survive when the zombies attacked the building.

Lawrence doubled the lookout on the roof. He then ordered that the breach be surrounded on both sides by bricks. He, personally, moved bricks from some of the surrounding supply sheds. The drying cement, which was unstable and not properly filling the hole, now had a form. Lawrence and Rick piled mortar and bricks around the fissure. More cement was added, and then the bricks were piled further along the wall. With the army of volunteers, the work only lasted an hour. The building had a bandage.

Very shortly after the "bandage" had been put in place and the volunteers were back inside the building eating a late breakfast, a cry from the lookouts resounded throughout the room. "Zombie legion is approaching the same way as the first wave came: from the parking lot."

There was no telling how many zombies there were, so each rushed to his or her post. Rick grabbed his weapon which, after this point, he vowed never to leave again. He rushed to the roof with the other members of his squad close behind him. The lookouts had to wait for the legion to get on the roof before they could return to their own station. Much was learned in this consternation. The most important lesson was to assign lookouts on the roof who intended to fire from their lookout post.

After everyone arrived at their stations, the zombie army was much closer. It was evident that they had picked up members of other neighborhoods, even people from the city in the distance.

Rick shouted, "Fire!" and there was the first report. Rick reloaded. He heard clicking on both sides that said that the

rifles were reloaded. He shouted again to create the double volley of his level and the three below him.

This method that Lawrence had suggested had its usefulness. The zombies were slaughtered. Each volley knocked them down. Some, of course, rose again and continued their march toward the factory. As they got closer, though, they began to trip on those who had died at dawn. It wasn't long before they began tripping over the dead from this, the eleven o'clock attack.

"Fire!"

A third double-volley mingled with five-round bursts from the semi-automatic and automatic weapons. Death came to those outside of the formidable redoubt. It seemed that this time none of the zombies would reach their target. After this third volley issued by the fortress, the zombies lingered farther away. The cars in the parking lot would be their savior.

This was their thought, anyway. Lawrence suggested that the entire second tier-- the tier on which he was stationed-- aim at a single, small, red car far in the distance. This car was the safe zone for a dozen zombies. They hid under it, behind it, and even inside of it.

"Fire!"

The fourth double volley. Rick saw, after his own gun discharged, the red car's gasoline tank explode. A dozen zombies ran around their thinning group ablaze. They waved their arms. They thrashed as they ran around the section of the parking lot. Then, after their clothing and flesh had burned away, they fell into heaps and stopped their frantic movement.

The remainder of the zombies, still large in number but substantially less than the number in which they had started, began their hasty retreat.

Much to Rick's pleasant surprise, there was still a large quantity of ammunition remaining after this double attack by the zombies. It would seem that, after they had agreed on firing in waves, the ammunition was spared. Rick jumped from the roof down the ladder to the highest tier under the roof. From there, he jumped down the next set of stairs and continued his joyous run until he made the bottom floor. This was the safest place, since no zombies could reach it properly through the windows. The bottoms of the windows started about five feet above the pavement outside.

Rick and Lawrence were both applauding the army. Not one was lost. No zombies made it close to the building. To be sure of this, and to help heap the zombies against the side of the building, Rick led a small squad of volunteers outside.

Soldiers who were assigned to the roof for combat stood lookout. Every five minutes, the single pair of binoculars was passed back and forth between the dozen lookouts.

The work was completed quickly. The soldiers were careful to keep the ooze away from their bare skin. Soon, the bodies were piled along the front of the building almost to the height of the window. This would act as a bumper so zombies could not reach into the windows. They found something very disturbing on a few of the corpses: guns.

Rick, very quickly, passed this news onto Lawrence. He, in turn, ordered that people inside the fortress start nailing more wood against the windows. The wood would be dipped in cement to help stop stray bullets from entering. There was a wave of cold, icy fear among the inhabitants of that quiet outpost.

Soon, the banging of hammers and the grunts of men slinging zombie corpses resumed.

When the work was nearing completion, one of the volunteers who was slinging the zombie corpses into a heap by the windows kicked something. The volunteer was accustomed to sloshing among the reproducing ooze. He was given a jolt when he had kicked something dry and solid. He had kicked the pocket of a zombie near the bottom of the heap. Surprisingly, the pocket was dry. The man was curious. He stooped down, catching Rick's eye. Rick put down the corpse he was carrying to see what was happening. Others were interested in seeing what the volunteer had found. A small group began to gather around him as he rummaged through the zombie's shredded clothing.

The man finally found and reached into the zombie's pocket. He grabbed at a yellow, plastic rectangular prism. He pulled it out into the open. The entire crowd stood agape. Some applauded. The volunteer held in his hand a portable radio. The lonely outpost now had a one-way communication link to the rest of the human world.

Lawrence Fowler was very quickly notified. Everyone in the factory stood around the floor. The little bursts of sunlight mingled with the bright electric illumination. There was an electricity among the people standing on the floor as well. They were about to listen to the news of the outside world.

# Chapter Thirteen

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The crowd was, in a second, immersed with the static whir of the radio. Lawrence, while he and his squad was getting food and blankets, had also brought some spare batteries. This was lucky because moments after people experienced the hopefulness of hearing from the outside world, the radio went silent.

Lawrence replaced the batteries on the radio and clicked it on a second time. Once again there was more static. He turned the tuning dial. It seemed as though there were no stations left alive from the zombie attacks. The only other explanation could be a dead radio. The excitement began to wear off as Lawrence moved the tuning dial completely through all frequencies. Finally, after a few minutes of static-filled frustration, words came from the little, yellow, plastic box.

"...was playing on the top of the charts. Anyway, we've just lost phone contact with the rest of the world, so the news will just be repeats from here on out. Just a recap to my survivors over at the Trent Street shopping mall: there are zombies everywhere. I guess I didn't need to tell you that. The remarkable thing is that this isn't local. Zombies have taken over in all major United States cities. Radio contact has been established from Washington D.C. to some of our European friends across the pond. They'll be sending foreign aid. Let's hope it comes soon." There was a brief pause before he continued, "Other breaking news, there might be a third zombie outpost! Twice this morning loud explosions were heard in the direction of the ... area. Since we no longer have phone lines open, we can only speculate. If there are more armies out there listening, know that our prayers are going out to you. Coming up next..."

The station began playing music. The words came in very clear because the radio station was in the city that loomed over the suburbs and was visible from the roof of the factory. West of these residential areas was the factory fortress.

Eventually the news came back onto the radio. Mick McCann introduced himself. He had a clear, youthful voice that was particular to radio stations geared toward younger

people. He spoke of some of the atrocities that had occurred in the past twenty-four hours.

In the state of Washington, zombies had taken over the capital city of Olympia. Entire tall buildings had been ransacked by zombies in a six hour feast. Some people jumped from these skyscrapers to their death. They were made into zombies by the zombies waiting on the streets. Due to the crowded nature of city life, the inhuman were able to take over with frightening rapidity. The streets ran red with blood.

Miles away in Seattle, a similar scene of human destruction occurred. There, though, the zombies had set fire to buildings. They attacked one building out of spite. The building was a colossal edifice made of steel and glass. It was a black structure made in a unique shape-- as though a bell were set upon its side so that the clanger, hanging straight, would be parallel with the streets. Then, the bell-shape was intersected with a circle on the bottom. This approximation of a bell shape was enhanced and more detailed. Curves were added. The entire shape was extruded skyward to seventy six stories. Zombies attacked at the base with the clamor of pickaxes, a fury of shovels, and the frightful din of large sledgehammers. Their sheer strength put the powers of their tools to the test. The skyscraper full of people was known as the Columbia Center. Moments later, the nine hundred foot tall edifice fell to the ground with the thunderous roar of an earthquake. It fell as a felled tree might. The zombies who had attacked so furiously at the base were crushed, but so were the thousands of people trapped inside. The zombies surrounding the area enjoyed a hearty feast when they started to search the wreckage.

The radio told horrors of the city of New York, where two zombies had risen from a freshly covered grave. They were children. Their strong, little arms tore at the people on the nearby street. Also in New York City, a huge morgue became overflowed. It was apparent that the procedure had been applied to more than Doctor Stewart had decreed. He had called for fifty people nationwide. There were at least fifty people in the city of New York alone. They rattled and broke free from the morgue, killing each and every one of the people who were present. They ate at their flesh in the same way that they had at Agatha's and Dorothea's funerals. Then, these half-eaten corpses rose from their short slumber and joined the zombie horde into a nearby building. The Empire State Building fell in New York in the same way that the Columbia Center had in Seattle. The collapse of these

skyscrapers stood as a testament to zombie power. They were a strong, muscular force against which humanity could not stand.

The people stood on the floor of their fortress in terror. Reports followed from the very nearby city. From that city, millions of zombies were produced. Travelers and city residents alike were turned into angry, violent, flesh-eating ghouls that answered to no one but the painful voices in their heads. An eyewitness had said that the zombies were attacking at the base of the tallest building in that city as well.

People shivered. The thought of zombies toppling a skyscraper made them feel very insecure in the fortress they had chosen.

It was clear that the zombies had a similar motive. There was no communication link between the zombies of Olympia and Seattle with those of New York City or Chicago, yet the scenes of destruction in all of these places were similar. Somehow, the zombies were bent on destroying the most prideful creations of mankind and eradicating humanity with them. It is unknown why all zombies had the same voice coming through their heads, but it was clear that blood flowed through the streets of each city with disturbingly similar descriptions. These graphic vocal illustrations radiated terror from the radio.

The hall of humans also learned that a local shopping mall was barricaded against a zombie attack. A third outpost was at the radio station. They had heavily barricaded the solid walls. The station gave sound advice of how to barricade any structure. They assumed that there might be some humans left in houses. The soundest advice was this: Do not open any doors leading outside. The fortress of the factory had already broken this rule several times but only with careful precautions in place.

Furthermore, the factory was well-protected.

Before returning to music, the radio station gave a respectful call of recognition to the "army that made a powerful din at dawn."

At this, the entirety of factory army gave a cheer. While their situation was without hope, they were recognized for the dent they had made in the zombie army.

Faces turned a few feet from the little yellow box to the face of the austere Lawrence Fowler. He had listened to this radio broadcast with the utmost interest, and he was clearly rattled by what it had said. In his head, the zombies were local. They were a short-term problem that was plaguing only their city. Now, according to the radio broadcast, there

were only a few rural areas and smaller towns that did not have these manifestations of hatred. He sighed. He was in a state of visible anguish. The nation was filled with torn families. His enemies in Washington D.C. were shown that they were human in the same way that the innocent people of his own suburbs made this same frightful human realization: genocide.

The ladies and gentlemen of the radio station made it apparent that the factory's army was not the last in the town. It also made triumphantly clear that there were whole regions of the country unaffected. These places were too small to be caught in the tendrils of the government. Lawrence and Rick, the new leaders of this army, were astounded to hear of the huge mistake made by their benefactors. All in the army knew that after they had defeated the zombies, a new target would emerge: those responsible.

Huge events like this cause double-explosions. Brutus kills Caesar. Brutus then must face Antony. Strike follows strike. The populace of the nation must first strike the zombies-- that is, the immediate threat-- and then attack the government-- the underlying threat that served as the catalyst for the blood-thirsty ghouls.

This reverie struck in the hearts of Rick and Lawrence at the same time, for they were both wise men.

Rick's reverie went farther. Rick was just beginning to break free from his dissociative state. He realized that he was present in the situation. These waves of terror that plagued his army were real, and they affected him, too. Death was not only possible, it was becoming more likely.

As these thoughts ripped through Rick's soft human brain, a thunderous crash sounded outside the walls followed by the immediate sound calling from the lookouts.

"Zombies! A huge legion is approaching!"

"Get to your stations, everybody!" shouted Lawrence.

Rick helped people with their guns and ammo. They also covered their ears with cloth. Some tied towels or spare clothes around their head. As for the weapons, Rick had begun to memorize what person matched what gun and received which ammunition. He ran up to his post in a few light leaps.

The loud explosion was a zombie setting fire to a car and sending it in the direction of the factory. It was a visit from the eighteenth century, when navies would light a ship ablaze before sending it into an enemy port. Luckily, it exploded before it could ever make the trip. It was unclear to Rick why

the lookouts hadn't warned the fort before the car exploded. It was clear he would have to spend more time on the roof.

"Right! Everyone, take aim!" Here followed the sound of a hundred guns taking their positions resting against the wooden balustrade on the roof and the metal rims of the openings in the window panels below him. "Fire!"

A loud report. To their amazement, their report was answered by a second detonation. Some of the zombies were armed. Rick reloaded very rapidly. His haste was repeated in every set of arms around him and below him. "Fire!" he shouted a second time.

Every soldier aimed for the armed zombies. After their fall, other zombies picked up their weapons and began firing pell-mell. While the zombies were strong, their aim was terrible. It was clear that the original bearers of those bodies had never held a firearm previously. A lookout saw some zombies wielding shotguns with only one hand and holding the weapon in front of them with the stock butted firmly against nothing. This handful of zombies fired their shots into the ground or the zombies in front of them. Furthermore, each of their gun-wielding arms were snapped. They dropped their weapons. For some of them, this meant an additional, unintentional discharge injuring even more zombies.

Furthermore, it was apparent that some zombies holding weapons did not fire. They were unconscious of the fact their weapons contained no bullets.

A third report for the redoubt saw the zombie army's retreat.

After mowing down this armed army of half-witted zombies, they convened once again. Their three discharges caused nearly a hundred and fifty more zombies to be slain. This was satisfactory, considering the zombie legion was still at the far end of the parking lot during the attack. Since the parking lot was a quarter of a mile long, error was acceptable.

It was evident that their aim was, at least, better than that of the zombies. Rick told Lawrence of these numbers.

"In the future, to conserve what precious ammunition we have, we must wait for the zombies to have crossed the center of the parking lot before we fire our volleys. Their aim is terrible, so our danger of actually being struck is minimal. Furthermore, we do not know that every zombie we face from now onward will be armed. Conserve ammunition!"

This decree was met with many nods. It was directed, though, toward Rick. He was the one who announced when volleys would be fired. Lawrence trusted him.

Rick joined the clearing of people in which Lawrence was standing. He added to Lawrence's decree, "I noticed that the lookouts who were on the roof failed to notice the zombies approaching until a car was set on fire and sent in the direction of our outpost. This mistake could have meant fatalities and a huge breach in our walls. With Lawrence's permission, I would like to stand guard on the roof." Lawrence gave nod and a smile. "Secondly, I would like to point out that there are now some firearms out in the parking lot just waiting for other zombies to pick them up and fire them at us. We might not be so lucky the next time."

There was a second general consent. It would seem that Lawrence and Rick were the shepherds of the leftovers of mankind.

Then, the music stopped.

The same voice on the radio came back, "Mick McCann here! We've got some developments in the crazy craze that's sweeping the airwaves! There was just another battle from our friends at mystery outpost number three! A few explosions were just heard. We can't confirm that this is from humans, but we've got a hunch. It sounds like organized gunfire. Organization doesn't seem to be one of the zombies' strengths. So, outpost number three, keep on rocking! We send out this next song to those brave folks."

There was a shout of joy. Their strength was being recognized by the obviously-local radio station, and that gave the general morale a strong, much-needed boost. Lawrence, who had been grave, even permitted himself another smile.

One man had been injured by a stray bullet. He told Lawrence in private so that he didn't disturb the general joy. Lawrence found this admirable.

After dressing the man's bloody wound, Lawrence informed the rest of the army.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have a moment of your attention. This man was injured. His shoulder was hit by a stray bullet fired by our zombie foes. I want everyone to know that zombies with guns are a real threat. They might not have our aim, but a bullet still has a chance of killing one of us. We've already seen our own men die. There are precious few of us. It takes just minutes now for one of those ghouls to turn us into one of their own. We are vulnerable. I will lead a regiment to get the guns out of the parking lot. For all we know, these arms might help serve us."

With these words, Lawrence went out into the parking lot with five other men. Each of them was armed. They ran onto the hard, concrete surface. Rick stood on the roof with

binoculars. Three other men used the only three sniper rifles of the entire weapons cache. The three were ready to fire at any zombies. The five on the ground were ready to slaughter any zombie who should injure their leader. They split into two groups and began gathering up the weapons used by the zombies. There were eight guns in total: three shotguns and five handguns. Lawrence himself ventured the farthest from the fortress. He reached down to grab the last handgun. It had slid along the ground with a finger still on the trigger. It was nearly under a car. Lawrence bent down and felt the most terrible pain in his arm.

As he reached with his left arm, an arm that was not his grabbed him from beneath the car. Lawrence shouted to his compatriots. The zombie twisted his arm most brutally. It was twisted and twisted at its weakest point: his shoulder. The zombie pulled and tugged at it. Lawrence screamed out in pain. Blood drizzled down his shirt. It squirted from the gashes forming in his twisting arm. No matter how much he fought back with this appendage, it was completely in the zombie's control. As the zombie sank his teeth into the arm that was just barely attached to Lawrence's body by its core muscles, Lawrence heard a high-pitched voice cry out in his head. He, for a moment wanted to bite at his compatriots. He recoiled. He pulled away from the zombie. His skin stretched. His muscles broke. His tendons snapped. The pain was unbearable. Lawrence shouted and wailed as he saw his arm completely separated from his body. The voice of his head had stopped but the panic had already taken hold. He heard a gunshot. The fiend who was eating his arm beneath the parked car stopped in mid-bite.

Lawrence felt light-headed. He saw strands of blood vessels and stretched tendons jutting from his shoulder where his arm should have been. He wanted to move his arm, but felt nothing. The ball of his shoulder joint was laying somewhere under that nearby car. Lawrence was silent. He trembled in the winter wind.

His squad of men grabbed him and pulled him back toward the base. Others barricaded the door once again after the injured leader entered. They dressed his wound. Rick, who had offered to keep lookout, came down to see that his friend was still living. Thankfully, there was a physician present. He was dressing the man who had suffered the other arm injury while the squad was retrieving the firearms from the parking lot. Now, he was faced with a greater challenge. This would be the last time they ventured from their fortress. They had

gained eight firearms at the cost of one human arm. This was an unfair bargain.

Lawrence was silently happy that this fate had befallen him and not anyone else in their group.

Rick, upon seeing this spectacle, fell into introspection. He suddenly was blinded by the dream that haunted his sleep the previous evening.

Moments later, as Rick's eyes visually scrubbed the barren, suburban landscape for any signs of movement, he fell into thinking about this dream. Did God exist? If he did, was he trying to communicate with Rick Blackstock? Some words from the dream still rattled verbatim in his head. "Glory is meaningless where we're headed." This gave him a shiver.

This was a very open remark. Could the neurons of his sleep be conveying some supernatural, spiritual message? If yes, could it be a precursor of things to come? "We" could mean his army. "Where we're headed" could mean certain death. A second shiver rocked his spine. He bundled his coat closer.

He tried to remember humility. It seemed that he had not even given humility any effort this morning. He felt guilt. He should have been the one whose arm was ripped off by a zombie lying in wait under a car. Instead, he was in the safety of a lookout post. He wasn't even armed there. He sighed. From his lofty perch, he could not see under any cars.

He wondered what was going on in the rest of the world. Somewhere, in the southwest where the people were sparsely spread, some people skeptically looked at the news in disbelief and thought a major hoax was underway. Rick made a conscious decision that what was happening was real. After the gore he had seen at his mother-in-law's funeral, he was desensitized to such visually-horrifying violence. Now, he had seen his new best friend's arm ripped from its socket. He saw it all over again in his mind's eye. He felt nausea welling up into his chest. He spent a few quiet moments thinking about his family.

He saw, in the streets beyond the parking lot, a few zombies scattered pell-mell. They continued on their route without paying his outpost any mind. Rick felt a slight sense of relief. He hoped there would be no more bloodshed. He wished that his dream had promised him certain victory, even if his name was forgotten by everyone. He saw the embalming paste stuck to the pavement far below. He also saw a bird land near it and turn its little head away in revulsion.

Rick counted his blessings. Other species were apparently unaffected by this muck.

Down below, there were two injured men. The bald, little physician had patched both of them. Lawrence was no longer bleeding copiously. This was only a small relief to Rick, when a messenger had told him. Lawrence was asleep, and, therefore, Rick was the temporary leader while his friend convalesced. The previous day, he would have been happy to be the leader of this fine battalion, but now he quivered. Glory wasn't a valid cause anymore; the apparition had told him this. He was now only the servitor of death. Life came from nowhere. The little bit he guarded in his fortress was nothing compared to the endless masses of zombies that washed against the edifices of the nearby city. Woe to those who had fallen in such great numbers! Reports of the casualties were likely never to be solved. Between the dead and the missing, many families were suffering terrible losses. Rick was but one man on one outpost fighting the endless foe. "War is hell," thought he.

As far as blessings, he was luckier than the one-armed man below him. Rick flexed his arms, twisted his wrists, and clutched his binoculars tightly between his fingers. Lawrence, he thought, was missing a left arm. That was a terrible throw from balance and symmetry. He could only hope that Lawrence would be alive and well enough to lead tomorrow.

Grayish-brown-haired Lawrence had lain his thin frame on the cold ground. The sunlight and the electric lights shone down on him. He stared at the roof. He thought of Rick as the leader. Hopefully, his bravado had given way, by this time, to some wisdom of tactics. The group needed a strong leader, and Lawrence felt himself enfeebled by his new injury.

Meanwhile, several miles away, a radio station and a shopping mall stood as supporters of the human pier above the flowing, circling stream of sobbing zombies.

# Chapter Fourteen

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The fortress of Rick Blackstock and Lawrence Fowler was just one of several. The radio station to which the fortress was listening constantly reminded them of little, scattered outposts. The radio station had scouts sent forth on missions across the town's roofs and through alleys to find the news to broadcast. These news broadcasts were discouraging.

Around one o'clock in the afternoon, the news brought the story of three families barricaded in a residential area. A half-hour previous to this broadcast, the radio station's scouts watched a neighborhood from the summit of a water tower.

They were on a mission to find the army at the factory which they previously only heard. On their way, the squad leader suggested they climb the water tower to get a sweeping view of the region. The water tower, being one hundred and fifty feet tall, would serve as a secure vantage point, so they climbed to the top and searched.

After a few short seconds, one of the four men searching the area saw a barricaded house and pointed at it. His compatriots looked with interest. By the sheer, unexplainable force of coincidence, a zombie legion was headed into the block. The small group shuddered.

The zombies moved slowly, almost leisurely, into the street of the barricaded house. The zombies still carried some intelligence of their respective hosts. The human leftovers of their minds told them that a barricaded house would have occupants, and, if a house was barricaded, they needn't hurry. They had surprise on their side. Their zombie halves told them where the food was located and how to eat it.

The barricade on the brink of fate was in the middle of a block of houses. Each other house on the block had its door opened wide to the street. Brown leaves leftover from autumn had blown in the ones on the western side of the street. One house had a closed door. This was a standard brick house and the door was solid and wooden with a thin layer of white paint. Also in the door was a small diamond-shaped window. Just within, there were eight people standing on the brown rug behind the door. Some paced. There was silence within the house. There were indentations in the carpeting where tables, an armchair, and a sofa once were. These large, heavy

pieces of furniture now blocked the sunlight from entering the building. The dining room, which was visible at the back of the living room, contained no furnishings either. Since it faced the back of the house, the dining room table was standing on its side to block the window. In this dark room, there was a pile of non-perishable food on the floor.

Through this dining room was the dingy kitchen. There was a sink full of dishes, a stove topped with dirty pots and pans thrown pell-mell. There were doors to the right and left of the room. The one to the left, which faced the same exterior wall as the dining room window, led outside to a small, open, wooden porch. The door to the right led down to a basement. This dank, smelly basement flooded when the rain came. It served as their last resort should zombies invade their house.

Back in the main room, where the eight people stood pacing and watching a small television, the cabinet on which it usually stood was now barricading the exterior kitchen door. The television was flickering black and white static. Occasionally, it would flicker out as zombies attacked some distant satellite station. Other times, it would flicker on as a satellite station came back on-line from a zombie attack.

Of course, those on the water tower could not see the interior configuration of this structure, and those on the inside could not see the zombies on their warpath toward this house.

The people on the inside of the house had wide eyes. They looked angry and unpleasant. They were of mixed age groups and the elders present might have passed for zombies themselves. There were three of these creatures. They were gray, wrinkled, and feeble. Two of the three were women. Two of the five were in their thirties, apparently children of two of the elders. Lastly, three were children. All were sullen. Their expressions made it lucidly clear that they did not like being cloistered in this little house. From the condition of the house, with peeling wallpaper, untidiness, and uncleanness throughout, it was probable that the family did not occupy the house very often. The grandparents looked unfamiliar with the rooms. Their children were lean and appeared old for being in their thirties. Their children-- the grandchildren-- were between eight and twelve years of age. They were also lean and tired. Dark rings circled their eyes. The entire unit was awake and silent throughout the entire night. This morning saw no rest for this family, either.

Since this family did not speak, there was little use for names. It showed that the family was estranged even on days when zombies weren't plaguing their world.

The old man looked out the diamond window on the door over the coffee table that kept the enclosure secure. He saw rubbish and leaves cover the dead grass on the lawn. There was no fence to enclose their yard; there was no need. There was pure silence, and there was purity in their silence. The house seemed without sin except the sin of apathy. They had done their preparations out of necessity, and each did their preparations independently of their compatriots. Serenity, silence, deeper serenity: they were not strangers here.

Sadly and powerlessly, the foursome atop the water tower looked down at the ominous attackers. Quickly and without warning, the zombies began to run. The old man at the window saw nothing.

There was a herd of twenty zombies at the cul-de-sac at the end of the street. The leader of this zombie flock wore a torn suit with a silver name badge. Though the badge was visible to the men atop the tower, the name was illegible. If they could have seen it, they would have read "Arnold Hughes". The face that this badge represented was austere. He held in his hands an axe. His nineteen followers trailed wearing their mourning clothes. Their hair was ragged and unkempt, and their skin was lacerated. Ooze was secreted behind them. Each could smell their brethren and their foe.

As they sprinted through the street, the old man saw them approaching the yard. He feebly gave a signal to the rest of his family. He leaned against the coffee table in front of him. The family saw the panic written on his face and they each began to twitch and pace frantically.

Atop the tower, a quiet swear was heard among the helpless squad.

Down below, twenty zombies ran across the unfenced lawn and up to the wooden door. The leader, one of the austere faces that faced Doctor Clark Stewart and got his proposal approved, swung his axe. It entered the wooden heart of the door. He swung it again. This time, with an attempted yell. His mouth was open, but his neck was missing a large segment. From this area where his voice box once was, some ooze dribbled out.

The axe passed through the sturdy wood of the door. From the inside, the family saw it pass also through the coffee table and the old man's chest.

The house, previously silent, now erupted with screams. The sullen faces became wild as though an electric shock had jolted them. The axe was removed from the door, passing back through the old man's torso. It entered the door again, nearer the doorknob this time.

The family withdrew from the corpse. The horde kicked at the door while the leader mauled the door with the sharp edge of his axe. A few seconds later, the family witnessed other zombies plunge through the glass of their poorly-barricaded front window next to the door. The upturned couch that blocked the window was easily pushed into the center of the room. A double fright attacked the family as the zombies entered through the door and the window at the same time.

The television flicked back to a newscast. The family, who had been so distant all this time, huddled in a mass. This was probably the closest the family had ever been to each other. The old man was the only missing from the septet. After a split second of fear, the group finally got the idea to run from the zombie attackers. As the double horde merged into one mass bellowing forth from the living room toward the dining room, the family, once again, dispersed. The children pulled down the table and barreled out the window. Sadly for them, there was a concrete staircase leading down directly in front of the window. They fell into this stairwell, breaking bones as they tumbled down the stone stairs. One of the children broke their neck on the bottom of the staircase and died. The other two-- one with a broken arm and the other with a broken leg-- were covered with lacerations from the broken glass. They tried to run through the back yard toward the alley behind their house. The other four, that is the two old women and the parents of the injured children, were not so bold. They ran toward the basement.

The stream of zombies that had merged split again into two sections. A group of eight zombies ran out the back door, tearing away the poorly-built barricade. They ran after the injured children. One zombie ran into the stairwell and consumed the little boy with the broken neck. Another headed back toward the living room to consume the man who had been killed with the axe.

The remaining twelve headed for the basement after the adults. The feeble old ladies were pushed down by these monsters. They tumbled down the basement stairs, falling onto their children. The mass of people crashed into the tiled floor at the base of the stairs. The mother of the dead child tried to stop her fall with her arms, but they snapped feebly under the weight of her mother and husband on her back. She smashed her face against the ground with a dull thud. Blood came pouring out onto the floor. The force of the impact caused the blood to fleck on the brown imitation-wood paneling. The zombies attacked the family laying in a heap on the floor. Since the old ladies were on top, they were

the first target. Their soft, wrinkled flesh was easier for the zombie flock to consume. They tore the thin gray hair from their aged scalps. The man of the house, still healthy and alive in the middle of this heap, was the next target. He thrashed at the zombies, but there were twelve of them devouring the pile of flesh around him. He was but one person against a bloodthirsty multitude. His will was strong, but his body surrendered to Arnold Hughes' teeth and a stranger's strong hands at his throat.

Within three minutes, the entire barricaded house was entirely devoid of life, if we disqualify the zombies as having life.

Out back, the injured children's bodies were thrown pell-mell in the back yard. The little boy with the broken neck had very little remaining but several bones. There was gray ooze and vomit dripping down the staircase. The little boy was too much food for one zombie. The other children were not so badly torn. Removed from the bodies were an arm from one, and some of the flesh of the abdomen from the other. They had no head injury, so the zombies wanted to leave these humans relatively intact.

Those atop the water tower had witnessed the home invasion. They saw the zombies leaving with blood smeared across each of their faces, hands and clothes.

They knew this story had to be shared. They watched for a quarter of an hour until they saw six zombies leave the street on both sides of the house. Two were children; two were old ladies; one was an old man with a huge gash through his chest, probably caused by the axe; and a man in his thirties. Each were strewn with blood and missing various body parts. Their skin was not grayed yet; therefore, they were new zombies: the victims of the zombie assault.

The four men from the radio station returned to their fixed base of operations in a frenzied haste.

Those at the factory fort would hear of the "approximately six deaths" and the addition of their bodies to the zombie army.

The remnants of the family were now more a family than they had been in life. Their silence was replaced with intermittent sobbing. The reporters for the radio station had witnessed something horrible, and they had very mixed reactions. Most were already desensitized, though, and that aided in their ability to make reports. They reported, also, that they had still not found the fortress that was involved in three battles already that morning.

Another squadron from the radio station was sent forth into the dangerous streets. Their target was the other, large outpost: the mall.

Fans of horror movies of the time had learned that a shopping mall was a formidable stronghold against zombie invasion.

Thankfully for the reporters, this third stronghold was reasonably close to the radio station headquarters. The same could not be said for the factory. The disadvantage, however, was that the mall was pitifully armed. The barricades they had built, while formidable, were terribly complex since the mall was made mostly of glass and steel. The zombies, as the radio had informed them, had already toppled buildings in other cities, and these tall structures were made of similar materials to this shopping mall.

The mall, though, had hundreds of people crowded inside. They were the largest human assemblage in the city on the edge of which, many miles away, the factory stood.

Inside, people were well fed, but poorly armed. They had used clothing racks from the clothiers to forge spears similar to the ones the zombie invaders used. Therefore, this throng was primitively armed. Each had a spear and the distinct wish to impale a zombie's head on their weapon. This was unknown to those of the radio station. Their interest was spreading news and keeping record of this story. Therefore, their solution to send reporters a quarter of a mile away to the mall was an obvious one.

The radio station had around fifty people present to cover this crisis. Most of these people at the station had their homes destroyed and loved ones massacred. Each hour, one would tell a story of hope and survival. Some would tell of how they escaped their zombie foe while others gave advice on how to kill them. The station itself was fearless. If they survived, they figured they would be very wealthy with comprehensive coverage of how, exactly, the zombie invasion affected the cityscape.

A squad of six, with only one firearm, made their way intrepidly across the quarter mile. They walked past deserted office buildings. If it weren't Saturday when the invasion started, these buildings would now be teeming with zombies and flowing fearfully with death-reversing ooze. Saturday and Sunday, however, saw most of these huge monoliths of business rendered silent and vacant. These edifices of business and industry would have accelerated the zombies' death engine hundredfold.

Now, since it was the weekend, the zombies had to terrorize the residential district, picking each house of its owners and residents as a human might pick a crab of its meat.

The shoppers in the mall were informed of the zombie outbreak late on Saturday evening and elected to stay there through Saturday night into Sunday. They phoned their families. In most cases, flocks came to the mall to reunite with their loved ones. In other cases, people stayed in their homes too afraid to travel. In each and every case that this happened, the results were fatal. The third popular scenario happened when people at the mall phoned home to get no answer. In each of these cases, entire families were already terminated and, in most cases, had joined the zombie legions.

The reporters entered the mall through a small aperture in a barricade near a service entrance. This area was the only way into the mall. This mecca for money was tightly barricaded. Every store was gutted of everything. Unlike the house where eight people were slaughtered, these people came together as a community. This community lifted all the furnishings, racks, clothing, shelves, desks, large light fixtures, electronic equipment, and anything else that wasn't bolted down. They took all of this and threw it in giant piles in front of each of the main doors, the tall windows, the large service entrances for delivery trucks, the smaller service entries for the drivers of these trucks, the doors of every shop within the mall, the windows of these shops, and even the ventilation system. The overall effect of this action was darkness. The huge windows usually let in the golden Sunday sunlight. Now, they darkened and protected the inhabitants from the certain destruction that would have come if these precautions had been left undone.

The small service aperture of one of these barricades was in the remotest end of the enclosure so that, even in the unlikely event that a zombie should find it-- as it was well-hidden-- they would still remain out of harm's way. Also, the mall's exterior security alarm was activated. Anyone opening any doors or breaking any windows would alert the mall occupants to the impending legion.

The mall security staff verified via telephone that those knocking at the door were human. They entered the outward-swinging metal door and passed under the opening of the barricade intended for human entry and exit.

The radio personnel asked a flock of questions to a throng very interested in getting their personal stories published. Most of these people seemed honest. There would, of course,

be the occasional embellishment added to a statement, but this is the way history is still written.

Around half past two o'clock that Sunday afternoon, the radio crew continued their frightful journey back to the radio station's headquarters.

Once again, the factory fortress would hear the news they had to offer. The small, yellow, portable radio filled one hundred and eighty-eight ears with the same news. People in a mall a handful of miles away were settled and ready to battle. Their fortifications were supposedly strong. The radio announcer gave advice on barricade building gained from his reporter's visit of the mall. The reporters themselves gave their reactions.

The most prevalent problem that was striking the radio personnel was the location of the zombie army. By this time, more than twelve hours after the first victims fell, the zombies must have amassed a huge army of all the vacant houses. The radio crew witnessed hundreds of these ransacked domiciles on their trip to the outskirts of the town. They had also seen the empty skyscrapers that formed the city's skyline. All these people must have gone somewhere.

Their solution was that the zombies were still miles away in the suburbs recruiting. There was a report of a mall visitor whose family was crushed completely the previous night. His story was full of horrible visions of a zombie with a hammer smashing the chests of family members savagely in the dead of night. The man had run to the mall upon hearing that it was safe there. The fortifications had only just begun when he arrived. He slept the night in a department store that was barricaded before the rest of the mall had finished its fortifications.

These stories, while sad, gave those at the factory hope. They knew that their army was not the only army still standing. Their brothers and sisters at the shopping mall were less armed than they were. Those friends were brave within their improvised fortifications. Armed with hand-weapons, they had practically nothing in the way of ranged weapons and ammunition. Yet, these people in such a hopeless situation had formed a new family. There were stories of new friendship-- even romance-- within this huge shopping complex. This made their bonds of friendship at the factory stronger.

Deep within the duplex of human achievement and survival, there were stories being passed of bravery. There were boasts. People had made great strides. Most people were happy to be alive. By three o'clock in the afternoon,

Lawrence was awake. Rick informed him of the stories from the families home somewhere in the suburbs. Rick told Lawrence that the radio station knew of their existence and that they had sent scouts in their general direction. Their conversation occurred on the roof. Rick sat with his legs dangling over the edge. His one hand held his binoculars, through which he gazed frequently, and his other contained a cup of coffee procured by a lone scout who'd left the barricade without permission that very afternoon. Lawrence sat idly further from the edge of the sloped roof than Rick. His balance was still askew from the loss of his arm. His already-thinning hair appeared even more transparent in the cold, afternoon sunlight.

Eventually, Lawrence went back inside the building. He spoke of his arm to those who wanted to hear his story. He didn't seem proud of his injury, but he wanted to share his bravery with those who lacked it.

This left Rick alone. Other lookouts would be up soon, but, in the meantime, he thought of his family. He thought of what it meant to be brave. He wondered about the family of eight who were slain an hour previously and who had died in their fortified house. He sighed. He missed Angela, Chris, and Paul, and his heart especially ached for Linda.

Less than a week ago, they were making funeral arrangements. Now, so many other families would have bodies to bury. Added to this tragedy, they would have to kill the bodies again before they could be buried. Rick couldn't imagine how it would seem to kill someone who resembled someone you loved. He saw Angela's face swimming in his head. She was the last to fall to his mother-in-law. Furthermore, she was right behind him when she disappeared. Perhaps he should have done more to save her. If he did, however, he might not be at this outpost thinking the thoughts he was thinking. The blood pumping through his veins might have been congealing embalming fluid. Such horrors of human fatality blinded his mental focus.

He understood why it was hard for lookouts to see zombies on the parking lot many feet below him. Firstly, zombies were gray like the cement. Secondly, so many zombies shuffled through his head that it was hard to discern the real threat from the imagined one. He was tired. Suddenly, a gust of wind pushed him. He swayed and nearly fell.

He knew he was unsuitable for being a lookout presently. He called below for a replacement. As they came up from the warmth below and took over the watch from Rick, he went downstairs to his little patch on the cement and wanted to fall

asleep in the middle of the afternoon. As he lay down, some of the single ladies of the fort smiled at him. He wanted to weep for his wife. Rick hadn't shared her death with anyone. Lawrence, alone, knew of Linda because he was the only other survivor from his funeral home. Rick returned the smile to these women before the room turned dark, and he was fast asleep.

The radio station, however, was not asleep. It would seem that they had sent out other scouts to the mall. It was proven a safe route and the station director was greedy for information to pass onto the handful of listeners that still listened. They were committing the error of confidence within an exceedingly dangerous environment.

# Chapter Fifteen

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Due to the close proximity, so far as humanity is concerned, between the mall and the radio station, squadrons of reporters from the radio station could make visits to its sister outpost without threat. These visits, while morally uplifting to the soldiers at all three outposts, were a necessity to those who called the radio station's building their home. The radio station had very little food, and, as a result, those who reported to the shopping mall returned to their own fortification with a meal for all.

Meanwhile, far away in the suburbs, the zombie army was continually growing. Family after family was being shattered. Member after member of each of these families was being pulled into pieces both physically and mentally. Those who survived experienced a depression that was all-consuming. Their homes were not suitably barricaded against these formidable zombies. Those who did not survive, some might argue, consisted of the more fortunate half. These houses in which the doomed resided were all poorly barricaded. Evidently, the mass media of the day led the home-dwellers to believe that zombies were weak, enfeebled, half-witted imbeciles.

This was almost entirely false. The zombies, since they still had, for the most part, a human brain, were almost as intelligent as their bodies once were. The motor skills were slightly clumsier, but the muscles were much stronger. This enabled the mass carnage that has been seen in every major city in the United States. This has affected children more than adults due to the strength of youth and their bodies mental vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, the zombie legion was growing in the suburbs. They were made up of all of the residents who did not escape. The group was an assorted monstrosity of mangled people of all ages, all ethnicities, and every stage of deterioration.

The zombie host, the embalming fluid, kept the bodies from decaying beyond use; however, they stopped short of deteriorating so far as to be any less of a threat. Therefore, their primary deterioration was beauty. For these unfortunate human beings, the skin begins to dry and rupture in areas covering muscles. The eyes begin to dull. Since there is no more blood in their bodies and the blood vessels nearest the skin are too narrow for the fluid to pass effectively, color

leaves the skin, eyes, and hair. In most cases, the hair begins to fall out entirely. The skin of the scalp also ruptures. The sentient ooze creates these fissures of the skin to more easily reproduce.

The zombie's fluid seemed to have one consciousness duplicated in a million bodies. The legions had been wandering the streets under the direction of this fluid. Merciless human slaughter was proceeded by further merciless human slaughter. The most gruesome and terrifying were the parricides.

In one home far from where our story is unfolding, a peaceful family was sitting at a table serving dinner. There were three people of Asian decent. They patiently waited for their father, who was late returning from work. Patience eventually gave way to hunger, so they decided to start their meal without their father. The dining room was decorated in the fashion of the day. It was dazzling white. The chairs and table were made of wood painted white. There was a white tablecloth on which the white serving tray sat. Dazzling silverware sat carefully placed by every plate. The mother of the household was a most organized hostess, even for the meals with her children and husband. The family, so close to each other, was about to be decimated.

The husband, while at work, came in contact with the embalming fluid. He was a mortician at a local mortuary. He was accidentally stung with a needle containing the mystery fluid. Thinking nothing of this mistaken injection, he carried on with his work. Eventually, a voice started to control him through a terrible pain in his head. He took the remainder of the afternoon off of work. As he drove home, he was in a car accident. He ran from the scene of the wreck. He found himself light on his feet. He was already thin and athletic. Jogging was one of his hobbies. It came much easier to him, despite his head pain.

No one can tell of his whereabouts during the hours before he arrived at his home.

When he did arrive there, his family was happy to see him. He looked injured, and his family was concerned. He had trouble opening the door. He was uncoordinated. His face was twisted with pain. His skin was beginning to split and swell where the fluid was accumulating. The family gathered around their ailing father.

As they pulled him into their dining room, he lashed out and began swinging his arms. His clenched fist hit one of his two children. He kicked at his wife and bit at his other child. He thrashed and flailed. He grabbed a white chair from the

table and swung it through the air. There was a splintering sound as the chair made contact with his wife's neck. She screamed forth. Blood spurted from the side of her neck where the chair made its impact. It sprayed onto the white walls and carpeting. The man grabbed his youngest child, who was merely four years of age, and threw him onto the table before stabbing his chest repeatedly with a shiny, almost glowing, silver fork. The last of the children, who was also the last human occupant of the house, screamed out in pain when her father lunged at her. He grabbed her little arm and bit it. He tore at it. Soon, it was separated entirely from her body. She twitched and writhed in agony. Soon, she, too, began hearing the voice that was controlling her poor father.

On the floor, the mother who was dormant for a few moments while her husband murdered her youngest child, began to move as well. She twitched and flailed. Soon, she was coordinated enough to raise herself to her feet and shuffle awkwardly to her husband's side. The three left the house. Soon after, the man's second child who had been stabbed with the fork repeatedly, began to writhe in the same way his mother had. He ran out of the house looking for his parents.

The scene they had left behind was far from the pristine state in which it had begun. The immaculate silverware was covered in blood. The same was true for the tablecloth, the once-white walls, the carpeting, and even various parts of the ceiling which stood silently over the scene. These blood flecks were all of the family that would ever remain in that house. The family was off to terrorize their city and start the panic that was taking the nation by brutish force.

These scenes of the Asian family were repeated in nearly every house in the town that Rick Blackstock had once called home. It began in a house, and it repeated. One zombie attacking his own family became four or five zombies attacking their neighbors. Since the attack began on Saturday and continued into Sunday, most of the residents of the nation's suburbs were in their homes. The scene repeated itself thousands of times. Zombies went from one door to the next. In situations where two homes shared a wall, sometimes zombies would burst through the wall. This happened in rows of houses built only a half-dozen years before the invasion.

For these residents of the row-homes, a zombie bursting through the wood and plasterboard separating the two invaded houses caused an uproar. The residents of the second home were startled and upset. Those who had heard of the zombie invasion and took precautions to barricade their doors and windows found all their efforts were in vain. If

only they had purchased an older house! These zombies who passed through these very walls caused significant structural damage. Others set fires.

By Sunday afternoon, all of the homes surrounding the city had been gutted and all of the residents had been either destroyed or transfigured into gruesome flesh-eating monsters. There were absolutely no humans left in these residential areas surrounding the three outposts. This is to say that there were only five hundred humans still living within the thirty mile radius of the shopping mall in that city. Subsequently, the zombie army had surpassed hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children.

At noon on Sunday, the last of the city's residential areas fell.

At this point, the zombie legions had more than two and a half million members.

Their legion was slow-moving. They kept together, as there was strength in their huge numbers. They formed a procession that overflowed through the streets. It was on a collision course with the shopping mall in the center of the city. Around two o'clock in the afternoon, they were on the outskirts of the city that separated the suburbs from the industrial quarters.

To look at this unnamed city was to look at a bull's eye. From the sky, far above the skyscrapers, and even much farther from the streets, one could see concentric zones. On the west side, these zones were intersected by a body of water. On this body of water was the center of the bull's eye. This formed the center of the city designed to attract tourists. Surrounding this center were the industrial quarters, which took up the largest part of the city. The boundary on which the zombies marched was this inner line that separated the industry's segment from tourism's circle.

If those who were unfortunate enough to work on that Sunday had not run to the mall for shelter and remained on the higher stories of their skyscrapers, they would have felt the tremors of this legion marching through the city. Approaching the mall, the cloud gained speed.

At the same time, it will be remembered, a stream of young reporters from the radio station building were making the quarter-mile journey south across the town toward the shopping mall while the zombies were marching westward toward the same destination.

These reporters were not yet at the mall when they made visual contact with the legion. They saw the gray, fast-moving, disfigured, distorted mass rush headlong into the

mall structure. It was as one watches a burst of water splash against an immovable object. The ground shook with the zombies' footsteps. The sound was almost deafening. The collision sounded like a blast of thunder. The sea of zombies crashed into the wall. The bones of the zombies in the head of this rush were broken violently. Some exploded as gunpowder would have exploded from Rick's shotgun. Even miles away from the factory fortress this thunder could be heard. The radio station building heard it as well.

As the bones of these zombies exploded, the ground shook. The windows of the mall and of the surrounding buildings rattled in their frames. The steel structure groaned a loud complaint. Concrete walls cracked. The zombies' war-surge continued. Those who were behind the leaders of this charge continued where the leaders had been forcefully stopped. The northern face of the mall was marred with this zombie infestation.

Those inside the mall were awestruck. They could not see through their barricaded window. They might have thought that this onslaught was brought about by automobiles crashing into the face of the building. Very few realized that it was the zombies' very bones causing this uproar.

To make the atmosphere even more horrifying, the mall's alarm shrieked through the halls and empty stores of the makeshift fort. As the flow continued to rock the walls and the very foundation of the shopping mall, the northern face began to cave inward. The ceiling, no longer having this support, began to give way.

The huddled, terrified family of humans looked upward. They could see the blue sky beyond the greenish steel rafters that bent and swayed as the thousands of zombies mashed against the concrete, steel, and glass of the wall. Legion after legion of these monsters continued to plow into the structure. Finally, the occupants of the mall scattered on foot throughout the stores.

Moments later, the ceiling and wall of the main entrance to the mall crashed to the floor. The glossy tile floor was marred with large blocks of violently-torn concrete and steel. Their barricade fell from the inhuman war effort.

From the parking lot north of the mall, there was a now a ramp leading into the middle of this atrium. The base of this ramp was the pile of zombie corpses who had given their renewed life to batter the wall. The middle of this ramp was created by the rubble of the wall itself. The far end of the sloped pathway was created by the torn remnants of the barricade constructed to stop these demons.

Just more than two million zombies continued their rush. Their train was more than a mile long, stretching from the mall northward into the industrial sections of the city. They were all rushing in the same direction at the same dizzying pace. Each wanted fresh meat.

The members of the radio station watched from a nearby street. They saw the zombie legions rush the building. They heard the crash. They felt the very ground shake beneath their feet. They saw the zombie horde push parked cars from their path and hurl into this building. Their faith in barricades had failed them. They turned. They did not want to see the carnage that would soon take place at the mall. They ran at full flank toward their last vestige of hope: the radio station's meager building. The squad's rapid movement caused some zombies to notice them. None of the members of this quintet were particularly physically capable of making the quarter-mile run at such a speed, but, nonetheless, they ran.

Back at the shopping mall, the zombies ran over their bridge into the atrium. Still running full-speed, they split into the segments and followed the halls of the mall. They entered each store and filled into the shape of the mall as fluid takes the shape of the container into which it is poured.

None of the army survived this. In their frenzy, they had thrown aside their heavy lances. They wanted to run quickly, and their spears slowed them. They wanted to hide, but the spears were made of a shiny metal, and were too large to sufficiently hide. The result was fatal.

Members of this army had run into department stores and hid away under furniture, into tight spaces, high within supply closets, and anywhere else they could wedge themselves so as to be rendered unnoticeable by the zombie foe.

Each one was torn from his or her hiding space. The more physically fit were only bitten enough to ensure they would become zombies. The rest, that is to say those who were too old or too young, were torn limb from limb. In a department store, a black-haired teenage girl who often whiled away her time at the mall, was grabbed by her ankle, pulled from under a table into a clearing. The brown carpet turned into tile beneath her. The dizzying flashes of color that she saw turned black as ten zombies grabbed her hands, shoulders, ankles, thighs, neck and back. Each pulled in separate directions with their monstrous strength. The girl's body, thirteen but under-nourished, contorted under the unique stresses placed upon it. Her spine twisted. Her arms and legs bowed. A microsecond later, each snapped. Her spine was severed in

three places. Her neck twisted. Her head snapped from her neck. Her arms and legs left her twisted, bloody torso. This trunk of her body fell to the floor with a dull splat. Blood erupted from each of the holes where her appendages once were. The torso itself was picked up by several other zombies who feasted on her skin and innards. They did not bother to remove the clothing from their meal. The scantily-clad teenager's clothing was digested with the same ferocious bites as were her forehead, eyes, nose, ears, lips, cheeks, chin, neck, chest, arms, abdomen, thighs, knees, legs, hands, and feet. Her red blood splattered the brown carpet and the white tile, rendering it slippery. It mingled with the blood of her teenage friends who were killed in the same manner and the embalming paste which was reproducing in its gray, watery, liquid form.

It must be noted that the zombies attacked the females first. Each had the scent of cosmetics. This entranced the zombies. Since the chemical causing the voice in their head was partially composed of chemicals common in cosmetic products, they were naturally-- if we may use that word-- drawn toward it.

The men were mostly transformed by bites to the neck, face, arms, or legs. The zombies particularly enjoyed removing appendages. Men's feet could be seen in some of the zombies' mouths as they rushed through the stores causing their mayhem.

A wheelchair-bound octogenarian in a distant hallway could not move nearly as fast as the younger mall-dwellers. He moved perilously slower than those to his left and right. The zombies pushed his chair onto its side and forced the poor man's head repeatedly against the tiled floor. His last view of the world of the living was composed of the people running ahead of him being toppled, tortured, and ripped apart. His head popped as it smashed against the cold tile one last time. His brain burst out of the top of his skull. His old, wrinkled face had its flesh ripped from it. His arms were removed. The torn coils of skin that previously connected his arm with his body was torn off as well. All this happened by a sea of crimson hands, lips, and teeth. The moans of the zombies echoed throughout the halls. They mingled with the hundred screams of the dying soldiers.

Those who escaped through service holes in the barricade were followed by a dozen zombies each. The zombies were much better runners, so the humans did not run very far before being thrown to the ground and eaten.

As for those who were still running over the quarter mile that separated the falling castle and the radio station, they made it to a side door. They knocked frantically.

"What the hell's going on?" shouted a voice as the door opened for the quintet.

They scurried inside. "Hurry! Close the door!" shouted someone.

"Close it! Close it! Close it!" shouted another.

Just as the door was closed, the door jamb itself was separated from the surrounding wall.

Meanwhile, at the factory, miles away, they heard faint noises in the distance. They could see nothing over the tall buildings of the city. The parking lot in front of the factory had no movement except the occasional sea-bird that had made it inland.

Rick slept. Lawrence was listening attentively to the radio broadcast. Mick McCann was telling the people of the fortifications at the mall.

"We heard a loud crash a few minutes ago," said the clear, deep voice of the radio. "We can only assume that the shopping mall is under attack. They are well-fortified though. We even took some of their methods and shored-up our building here." There was a slight pause in the broadcast. The reception went sour for a few moments.

Every occupant inside the factory looked upward toward the radio in unison.

A voice on the radio shouted, "The mall's been breached! Everyone's dead! Thousands of zombies..."

A distinctly different third voice shouted, "They're here! Oh my God, they're in the bui..."

McCann himself could be heard swearing.

Those listening looked at each other in horror. They heard the shattering of glass followed by the miserable sobs of the zombies. Screams pierced this mournful wailing. Finally, all that was left was the zombies' miserable cries.

The sound was so terrible, so full of desperation and anguish, that many at the factory shed tears.

Back at the broadcasting room, the glass of the window to the booth was broken. The door was ripped from its hinges. Bodies were thrown through the aperture of the broken window. Mick McCann, whose dark-skinned face usually bore a smile and whose deep voice usually boomed into the radios of hundreds of thousands of listeners, lay dead on the window sill. He was lacerated by shards of glass and drizzled liberally with the gray liquid. It was clear that he would soon join his coworkers in the zombie army.

The zombie procession still continued. However, those who were about to enter the mall turned in a new direction, knowing instinctually that the feast there was finished. They were now running toward the last fortress remaining in that city. The leader of the frightful march of ghouls was wearing mourning clothes and was covered in reddish-brown dried blood.

Back at the fort, the gray-brown-haired, one-armed Lawrence Fowler began to look very grave.

He turned off the radio, which was still broadcasting the doleful zombie wailing mingled with static. He stood. Everyone watched.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our brothers have all died. We are alone. Barricades better than ours have fallen. David Wilkens and I have both paid in blood to keep this building from harm." This matter about David Wilkens wasn't entirely correct, but, rather made out of respect for the deceased man. After a beat, he continued, "It would seem that the entire human population has deserted us. I have no solution to this. I have tried to lead you. I think it is now time to console your families and face what is about to come. From this moment, no matter what we do, I strongly believe that no one will ever leave from this building with control over their senses."

Rick stood.

"Rick?" began Lawrence wearily. "You have a solution for us?"

The crowd shined with a flash of hope, but, like lightning, it was only for a second. Rick shook his head in the negative to this question.

"Go on then, anyway," said Lawrence before he sat down again.

"Guys, we've fought off waves of these zombies already. We know what they can do. We've beaten them before. There's still more than a hundred of us. Hopefully, they won't all attack us at once, and then we can tear down their offence piece by piece."

"They just attacked the mall, though. Didn't you hear?" shouted a voice. Rick recognized her as one of the women who had smiled at him earlier.

"Yes. But we aren't sure that everyone at the mall is dead."

"We could hear the crash from here. I don't know what the hell they did, but they made an awful din," said another voice from the sea of hopeless faces.

"We can't just give up, though. We've made it this far."

"We started with a full cache of weapons and ammunition. Now, we each have a weapon, but there's scarcely enough

ammunition to fend of a thousand zombies," said the same voice.

"That's another thing: we don't know how many zombies there are. There could still be humans barricaded in their houses. They could be there waiting because they were overlooked by these zombies."

Lawrence, knowing about a zombie's remarkable sense of smell, knew this to be entirely false. He, however, remained silent. He admired Rick's aim to regain morale. He feigned a hopeful look.

Rick continued, "We only have some frantic half-descriptions. We hear that the mall has been breached. How do we know that an empty building wasn't felled like we've heard about in the state of Washington? We don't know anything about what's happened on the outside. A radio station fell, probably because of carelessness. They wanted to be out and dangerous. They were in the thick of it. They traveled between wherever their headquarters is and the shopping mall. We don't know how many people were in that mall. We don't know how many people are still in the skyscrapers downtown. I think that, because we're isolated here, miles from downtown, we all assume the worst has happened. We all think that there are no people for miles! Why is that? We're still here! Each of us has lost family members, but we all know at least one person who is resilient. We need only look at ourselves! Each of us is strong. We are survivors. We have made it this far. We have guns. We have ammunition. We are well-rested. Each of us can fire a gun. This paltry zombie army, if they even bother to attack us, will fall the way the others have."

Lawrence, completely unconvinced, spoke up. "Rick's right. We think we're fighting a losing battle. We haven't even started fighting yet. For all we know, the din we heard could have been the legion of humans at the mall slaughtering the zombies. They could have something special there. In fact, they could have even destroyed the bulk of the zombie army with that explosion we heard."

The explosion was, of course, not an explosion. It was the northern walls and ceiling of the mall falling to the ground. It was the death of the rest of that city.

The people of this fort were torn. Some human spirits naturally yearn for hope. Others naturally produce it with great abundance. Now, there was mingled speculation throughout the factory as to their current status.

The answer to all of their questions was running along the streets toward the factory in the form of a zombie legion

of unimaginable proportions. It was a massive battalion that made the very Earth quake by its quick, steady footsteps.

Rick and Lawrence, both fearing the worst, sat gloomily amidst this speculation, trying to think of a solution. Two men were trying to save a hundred people against an endless sea of a million beings that were once ordinary people.

# Chapter Sixteen

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At the mall, the zombie army still flowed between the walls. Since more zombies poured into the building than the mall was originally intended to support, the building's structural integrity was compromised. With one large wall segment already missing and the massive roof beginning to fail, it was only a matter of time before the entire mall building would be transformed into ruins.

After discovering that there was no longer fresh food to be found at the mall, the zombies stormed the exits. This massive exodus from the structure came in the form of a flurry of feet. Once again the ground shook as the mall-zombies joined the street-zombies on their path toward the last human fortress.

This violent vibration imposed on the already-weakened structure mingled with the huge zombie mass pressing against the walls caused the glass and iron ceiling to buckle inward. Bellowing forth a thunderous roar, the ceiling crashed onto the tile floor. The outer walls crumbled outward at the extremities of this huge building. Thousands of zombies were trapped. Their screams were a cry of encouragement to their fellows. None of those on the outside turned or considered saving the lives of those trapped inside. The zombies were each in a blind rage. The voices, nearly all of which were hungry, fueled them into a blind torment. They knew nothing except where their instinct was taking them. They knew nothing about the victims or their compatriots. In this respect, to be a zombie is to be Narcissus. Each thought his or her own mortality was a moot point. Power was gained by consumption.

Seabirds flew overhead. If only they could comprehend the events taking their course hundreds of feet below them!

At the remaining barricade, there was restlessness.

Families huddled together. What little factory equipment was present was forced against the walls. They worked tirelessly to form buttresses. The walls must be supported. The radio was now silent, but, before it was such, they had heard of the demise of the radio station building. They knew carelessness was a cancer that would, with certainty, tear down the walls that protected them. No one dared leave the

building. They dimly heard the distant crash of the mall's roof and exterior walls. Fear added to their preparations.

The zombie legions were running in their direction from a distance of about three miles.

Within the legion, Father Sebastian, all of Rick's family, some of the members of the fluid's development team, and more than a million others transformed from an army on the march into a tempest on the run. If the zombie army were placed side to side so that they could face the human army, the zombie army would create a line more than nine and a half thousand times as long. If the zombies were more human, the reunion would have been a festivity not to be missed. The sad truth, though, was that the humans were rendered fearless and forgetful. They were no longer afraid of weapons or barricades. They no longer recognized their families. They were hungry and wanted to eat more food and add more numbers to their army. At this point, most of their army was unfed. The factory was full of food for them. Their numbers seemed to please them.

The zombies, here, suffered the same problems as their human counterparts. The self, that is to say the individual zombie, mattered more than the whole, that is the rest of the army. For the moment, in their stampede, the thought was of food. The warm blood and soft flesh would make a tasty meal for any of their legion to hastily consume. Adding to their legion was no longer necessary, as they could not feed the numbers they had amassed.

It was no longer an attack nor an organized war-stampede. Rather, it had transformed into a race. Those of the legion who could penetrate the factory walls and extract humans would be fed.

Back at the barricade, hammers sounded. Panic created a loud tumult of activity.

High above, only twenty minutes since the radio began its silence, a lookout shouted, "Zombies are coming! They're running!"

The hammers were thrown to the floor. Guns were picked up. The windows were full of people. The roof was crowded. Rick was in position. Lawrence's only arm held a revolver. The young ladies who winked and smiled at Rick had guns on the first level. Children were armed and placed on the third level, which was thought to be the safest since it was still enclosed yet far from the ground. Arms quivered. They all saw the zombie legion passing the rows of houses in the distance. They were entering the parking lot.

Previously, they could never see the back of the zombie waves because the houses obstructed the view. Eventually, as the battle muddled, they could see the far end and gain hope. This time, they waited for their foe to get to the middle of the parking lot before firing. They kept running endlessly toward them without pausing.

Those on the bottom levels heard a discharge and matched it. Those on the roof and, to a lesser extent, the third level, could hear Rick's loud call.

Like usual, the first few rows of the zombie legions fell back into the rows behind them. The delay in firing caused more damage. A hundred zombies fell in one volley.

A very short beat followed.

"Fire!" Rick commanded before firing his weapon at the leader of the zombie battalion.

Another huge blast mingled with bursts of fire. Smoke came from some of the weapons.

The gray ooze splashed from the front two rows of the zombie legion.

With horror, the lookout saw that some of the zombies were armed with axes, shovels, hammers, and even bricks. He shouted out to the human battalion, "Don't let them any closer! They're armed!"

The zombies heard this cry. Those that carried bricks flung their loads toward the windows. While their aim was impaired by their lack of coordination, most of the dozen bricks smashed against the barricade protecting the windows. Two fatal bricks smashed through the gun-mounts, knocking two human soldiers back. These bricks came through the second and third level. The two were knocked from their platforms. One regained his balance, the other fell from the third level to the factory floor, surprised that a brick could ever be thrown so high into the sky. He was just a child. His head hit the floor first, breaking his skull. His skin alone stopped his brain from spilling out. His blood poured from his nose and eyes. He stared vacantly at the ceiling. Many of the occupants heard only a scream and a dull thud. They could guess what had happened without seeing it.

The zombies continued their advance. With another shout from Rick, more zombies were blasted down. The ones who threw bricks were targeted.

Rick ordered the next volley be fired at what cars were in the parking lot. The next report from the factory saw many smaller detonations from the parking lot.

From the discharge, there were a half-dozen other discharges from the cars in the parking lot. Zombies took

catastrophic damage as their limbs and heads flew from their necks and torsos. Zombie bodies fell in heaps. Heads and necks trailed ooze over the zombie legions. Torsos and various fleshy chunks rained down their fill of organs. Those who witnessed this at the fortress could recognize that their foe was still very human on the inside of their skin.

No matter how many were killed in these horrific explosions, the gray, moaning, lacerated army kept coming. The end was still not in sight. Furthermore, the torrents had not slowed.

They continued their onslaught.

Once again, the zombie legions had crossed the midpoint of the parking lot. Another fiery report issued from the fortress. Another eighty zombies fell, and, yet, they still kept running. More found their way onto the parking lot. More passed through the small streets of the surrounding neighborhood.

The four levels of humanity with their weapons trained on the zombie legions shuddered. They were up against nothing they had ever expected to see. Hundreds of zombies lay slain. Their organs were exposed. The sludge that kept them alive poured out from the mass of twice-dead bodies onto the pavement by the bucketful, and yet more zombies were coming and running effortlessly over these piles of bodies.

Another discharge from the guns flattened another seventy-five zombies. It was clear a few of that army were running low on ammunition. The truck-full was not enough for the automatic and semi-automatic weapons. They wastefully created more than five or more discharges with each volley.

Those without ammunition ran back and grabbed other weapons. Some found the three shotguns that the zombies themselves had once wielded. They used any ammunition they could find. These people-- nearly a dozen in number-- missed firing in the volley. Another fifty zombies lay slain.

Unfortunately, volley after volley saw the ammunition run shorter. Soon, only a handful of people were left firing. Less and less zombies fell with each discharge. As a result, they encroached more and more on the boundaries of the building. The line of houses at the end of the parking lot showed, through its breaks, only more and more zombies. They had already slaughtered the inhuman foe by the thousands, and several hundred thousand more were visible. They ran pitilessly over the piles of their own dead brethren, wreaking havoc on the morale of the human army.

And so, while those who still had ammunition were still firing their last few rounds, Rick left the roof and came to the floor. The zombies were at the wall. The volleys now only killed a handful of the zombies at a time.

The gray army's hands reached through the gun-windows. Zombies with weapons hammered against the walls. If one were slain, another would pick up the shovel, the hammer, or the axe and continue where the others had stopped. Some humans picked up the primitive weapons they had brought with them-- axes, shovels, fence-posts-- and began a pitiful effort to fight back. Their bravery was admirable.

Thousands more poured into the parking lot with the strength of a million and a half more behind them. Those leading the charge were pressed against the battlements. Many struck the wall with their bare hands. This banging against the bricks grew more forceful with each strike. Hordes began smashing the windows with their hands.

The building was breached once previously. There were bricks that served as a form for the cement that plugged the breach. These bricks served as a step that the zombies could stand on to reach into the windows that had been left vulnerable so that weapons could be fired. Through these access holes, zombies tore away the wood covering the windows.

At the same time, the army abandoned their posts. Rick and his army ran toward the escape door. Upon pushing the door, it would not move. Rick himself pushed against the door with the weight of several of his compatriots added to his. On making the door open the slightest bit, he found a sea of gray flesh on the other side. He let the door slam shut. He locked it. The zombies were outside that exit, too. They were trapped.

The constant, unharmonious hammering finally produced another breach in the brickwork. The aperture soon continued to their hastily-built barrier of metal equipment and wooden boards lining the inner walls.

Lawrence and Rick were yelling at each other and trying to make a plan. They agreed that there was no escape. They saw the first zombies break through the new breach in the wall. The fissure was started directly beneath a window. The window, the wood behind the window, the bricks beneath the window, and the bits of machinery behind these bricks were cleared away by the shear strength of the gray, hammer-wielding legion.

The aperture grew each second. Zombies' fists had helped the hammers and cudgels. They were covered in blood. The sad, gray, zombie faces lit up on the sight of human flesh and

blood. The body that fell from the brick-wound was the first target.

Rick saw his army give way in front of him. Lawrence, enfeebled by having only a single arm, was an easy target. Rick saw Lawrence and several of the women surrounding him slaughtered by those who had broken through the wall. They were cut open by the implements that had cut open the brick. They were cleaved by axes, split by the zombies' bared teeth. In an instant, Rick's closest surviving friend was destroyed by the sheer will of the countless foes.

Rick led the retreat upstairs. On the second level, he looked down to see a zombie missing his lower jaw entirely attack a small child. He tore chunks of flesh off of the child and put these chunks directly down his throat. He had no mouth. Rick became dizzy. This stimulus was entirely too much. He ran with what energy he had remaining. There was no one in front of him. He no longer wanted glory. He was the leader, but he would rather follow. He vowed silently never to be proud evermore.

While he was having a personal revelation and running as fast as his legs could carry him, his army was being smashed by zombie fists, shredded into strips and devoured behind him. Brains soaked the platform, intestines were spilled on the cement of the first level. Blood covered the floor. It pooled in many places for zombies to trample underfoot.

Rick ran breathlessly to the top of the building, looking behind him after every few steps. He was pushed and shoved. He, nonetheless, thought he recognized members of the zombie army. His friends, his coworkers, and even, probably, his family members were down below smashing the remainder of humanity in this town into edible shards.

Rick screamed. He was on the roof, and he was alone. He saw people on the stairs punch and kick at the zombie foe. The zombies retaliated by scratching at the human skin and bit at the human faces. Humans fell mercilessly to zombie hunger and greed. None were spared to continue the zombie species that was already millions strong. The barbaric monsters gained access through the widened opening to the roof. Designed to make the movement of humans and guns more fluid, the opening to the third tier was now permitting zombies, even with their decreased dexterity, to easily gain access to the roof.

Rick backed slowly. He saw someone moving through the zombie horde faster than the rest: the black and gray figure of a child who still had remnants of blond hair on her head. She was missing an arm.

Only several paces separated Rick-- the only human left-- from the legion. They were moving slower now that many had been appeased. Rick Blackstock, at the edge of the roof, stopped still. He lost control of his emotions. He wept. His eyes were fixed at one point moving within the legion. This person was soon leading the zombies toward the last survivor.

The little girl was his own tiny, innocent daughter, Angela.

She slowed. The zombies followed her direction. She looked hesitant. The remnants of human cognition mingled with the frightening cry of the synthetic scream that was shattering her six-year-old brain. Her body trembled as she slowly walked toward her father.

He noticed that she was rendered hideous by the embalming fluid. He would have loved nothing more than to hug her once again. Her face still bore a strong resemblance to Linda's. Rick wept. Those few seconds seemed to linger in Rick's state of intense emotion.

The girl, closely followed by the zombie battalion, approached her father. She raised her only arm as though she were going to embrace her father.

Rick remembered his mother-in-law who made the same gesture before biting Linda. He stood motionless. His back was against the wooden railing that his friends had built when they prepared David Wilken's workplace for the battle. This railing moved slightly with the weight of Rick's body.

His sweet, precious daughter's face and hair shone in the cold sunlight. As she approached, her hand gently touched his abdomen. He could feel her cold hand trembling against his gut. Then, with tremendous force, he was pushed against the railing. It gave way easily under his weight combined with the little girl's mighty strength.

He fell with a terrible scream-- the final outcry produced by the last human for a hundred miles.

His body never hit the ground. The zombies below broke his fall. He was not dead until the zombies tore him apart as they had a million others. A moment after he fell, his entrails were no longer recognizable. Rick Blackstock and his army was no more.

The third outpost no longer hosted gunfire. It was no longer filled with the vivacious hustle of humanity. Rather, the only sound emanating from its lofty walls was the moans and sobs of those poor citizens infected with that fatal fluid endorsed by the American Medical Association.

For that pitiful city, humanity had fallen to zombie rage, greed and hunger.

# E p i l o g u e

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Scientific advancements, the astounding benefits that might have come from this invention, creation beyond humanity's means, the artificial recreation of non-organic materials, and the hopes of a future that would be so greatly changed by these advancements were all laid to rest as families were torn apart, homes fell to the ground, buildings were burned, regular men were tortured, and even children were brutally mutilated.

This city by the sea, medium in size and surrounded by suburbs, now contained no civilized life forms. Every human being had been removed from their homes, torn up from the streets, converted from public and private areas of the city. In twenty-four hours from noon on Saturday to noon on Sunday saw the destruction of ninety percent of the human population in that city. Now, as the sun was setting on Sunday, the only thing stirring was the zombie legion.

This same scene was repeated in every urban center.

In the state of Washington and in the cities along the pacific coastline, where buildings crumbled and the population lost lives in even more catastrophic ways, there were small pockets of humanity who were more successful in fending off the zombie foe. However, among the cities of Seattle, San Francisco, and Oakland, there were a combined total of only two hundred humans after the zombie massacre.

Humanity in the central plains states were largely unaffected by this monstrous scientific blunder.

On the east coast, Washington D.C. was largely unaffected by the zombie uprising, but only as far as the number of lives that were lost. Otherwise, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charlotte, and a dozen other cities along the eastern seaboard were completely decimated. There was no humanity left within these cities or their outlying residential areas. They were ghost towns.

Helicopters flew over these areas to find absolutely nothing human remaining.

In the end, after the zombies had finally relented and humans were through with killing themselves, only a quarter of the nation survived.

But why did the zombies fall? The answer is a singular phenomenon. Looking at the Earth from the moon with a telescope, we might be able to see these cities from a

high enough altitude to appreciate this arrangement. Urban areas were surrounded by suburbs. Suburbs were surrounded by more suburbs. Then, what was between these outlying suburbs and the next city's suburbs? Roads and very little else.

In the fatal cases, zombie legions could enter cities by these roads. Their army was in the tens of millions. They attacked violently. It was in cases like this that large buildings were toppled, civil disorder gave way to the zombie legion's disorder. Situations where humans fortified themselves from this battalion found people were extracted from their fortifications as those people in the factory and mall had been. Brave heroes died as Rick Blackstock and Lawrence Fowler had died.

In other cases, though, the cities that were connected by longer stretches of roadway could be saved.

After destroying and converting the entire city of Chicago and its residents, non-humans became divided. Some ran onward to the city of Gary in Indiana. There, they split up once again. Some sprinted onward to Indianapolis. Others flew to Fort Wayne. These cities were connected by suburbs, but, between these suburbs, there were long stretches of endless seas of farmlands. While flesh-eating ghouls gained their numbers exponentially in these huge populated areas, they lost their numbers in transit.

Here, in transit, was when the zombies would grow hungry. The voices of the zombie host screamed out into the heads of their subjects. Unfortunately for them, there was no humanity in these outlying areas separating these cities.

The only exception was the remnants of humanity making up the zombie horde.

Here, on these stretches of roadway connecting municipalities, terrible brawls would take place. A single zombie might stop in his place and lash out at one of his compatriots. This met firm retaliation. Soon, a battle happened within an army. The bile that was keeping them from death was splattered on the highways. Heads and arms flew. Already broken bodies were further smashed and torn in these demonstrations of desecration. Since the entire army was hungry for flesh, entire armies could fall to their own greed. The zombie revolution soon had no choice but to eat its own brothers.

In this way, the American southeast, mid-west, and southwestern areas were saved from the onslaught. They were saved because they were sparsely populated. New Orleans, in the south, had received no test cases of the new biological

agent. It was firstly saved by the same organization that had damned many other cities. It was secondly saved by its isolation from other huge pockets of human population.

New York City, the most densely populated state of that doomed union, saw the most destruction. Entire blocks full of buildings fell. Fires raged. Alarms wailed. The zombie throng was ten million strong within that city alone. They made it easily southward to the next major cities. Those that chose to head northward were doomed by their isolation and the rugged terrain.

Those that fled southward made it to Newark and Philadelphia. From there, their numbers grew even stronger. From there, they ravaged the entire state of Maryland. Washington, being sparsely populated late Saturday night, was overlooked. The huge zombie horde made it with swiftness and brutal rage to Richmond, Hampton, and Norfolk in Virginia. They continued southward and lost terrible numbers in the early hours of Sunday morning on their way to Raleigh, Winston-Salem and Charlotte in North Carolina. Those who continued on from these cities eventually died to their own numbers, but not before causing chaos in the tiny outlying neighborhoods that were scattered on the way out of these large cities. Once again, numbers gained in the large cities were lost in monstrous attacks against their own kind.

Agatha Lindsay was one of the first to receive the injection. It took her almost a week before she rose up and attacked her own daughter. She was old and weak. Many who received the same injection, as Dorothea Rayburn had, were young and full of life when they died. These were the unfortunate people who did not stay dead for very long.

Through the evolution of the biochemical mess that kept them alive, these zombies were able to convert newly dead people to their armies in a matter of minutes at the height of their brutality.

During their decline, they destroyed their own armies for food. They committed a second genocide. The first caused humanity's downfall. The second caused their own.

Weeks later, as people ventured farther and farther from their homes, the government saw itself rendered as a very viable target. Though even they had lost massive amounts of people-- as lawmakers and lobbyists are humans themselves-- there were enough who remained to hold the responsibility for the events plaguing the nation and the cowardice in not even trying to contain the threat.

Across the nation, there were suicides. Numerous religious groups spoke of the Antichrist. Anarchy and political turmoil ensued. The wrath of the populace against the governing body that allowed this genocide to take place was nearly as vicious as the attacks of the demoniac fury of the zombies. A war of words caused the double-bodies of the American legislature to be entirely replaced. It would seem that the army was never notified of the zombie assault. Police offices were shut down hours before zombies took hold of certain cities. The local and national government of that country had shown its cowardice to their mortally-transfigured constituents in the face of the disaster, so they had to face the constituents that remained afterward.

The effect was a mass-depression. This is where the aforementioned suicides took place in mass. Terror and anger mingled with the heavy grief of those who had lost their families and friends. Churches in areas unaffected by zombies were crowded. Psalms rose to the heavens. Many turned toward their faith to save them from their tireless grieving and agonizing fear of another zombie infestation.

After people overcame their fear of leaving their domiciles, they came across the fear of handling food that could contain the gray ooze that caused this mess in the beginning. There were reports that people were still being converted pell-mell from tainted food. These poor, infected souls were mercilessly executed. Hunger and fear turned to anger.

This anger caused the rulers of the land to hurry with their cleanup efforts.

There was corruption even in their efforts to remove the embalming fluid from the streets.

Eventually, after this double insult, there was a revolution.

Death begets death; every human being is mortal. What little of humanity was left in that sad country in that sad time banded together to create a new government. They rebuilt their cities. They stopped concerning themselves with the costs of destroying and rebuilding. The government that those who had survived this tragedy had built was more solid than the one it replaced. In their hearts, those who framed the new constitution knew it would last more than three hundred years.

Those who rebuilt the cities knew they would have to build for all time. A glorious new era had begun. Cities were brighter and stronger. So much had been learned. Clark Stewart, who had thought these simple injections of fluid into inanimate corpses might bring scientific enlightenment, was responsible for human enlightenment. Religion was

revisited. Humans explored their own resilience through spirituality. Other nations followed the example of America. Manufacturing and industry returned to the former land of indolence. This return of industry mingled with the spiritual reawakening. As a result, buildings were rebuilt as the cathedrals of the ancients were erected: indestructible, beautiful, a monument to the billions of humans lost.

Thus, through the devastating disaster, humanity was saved.