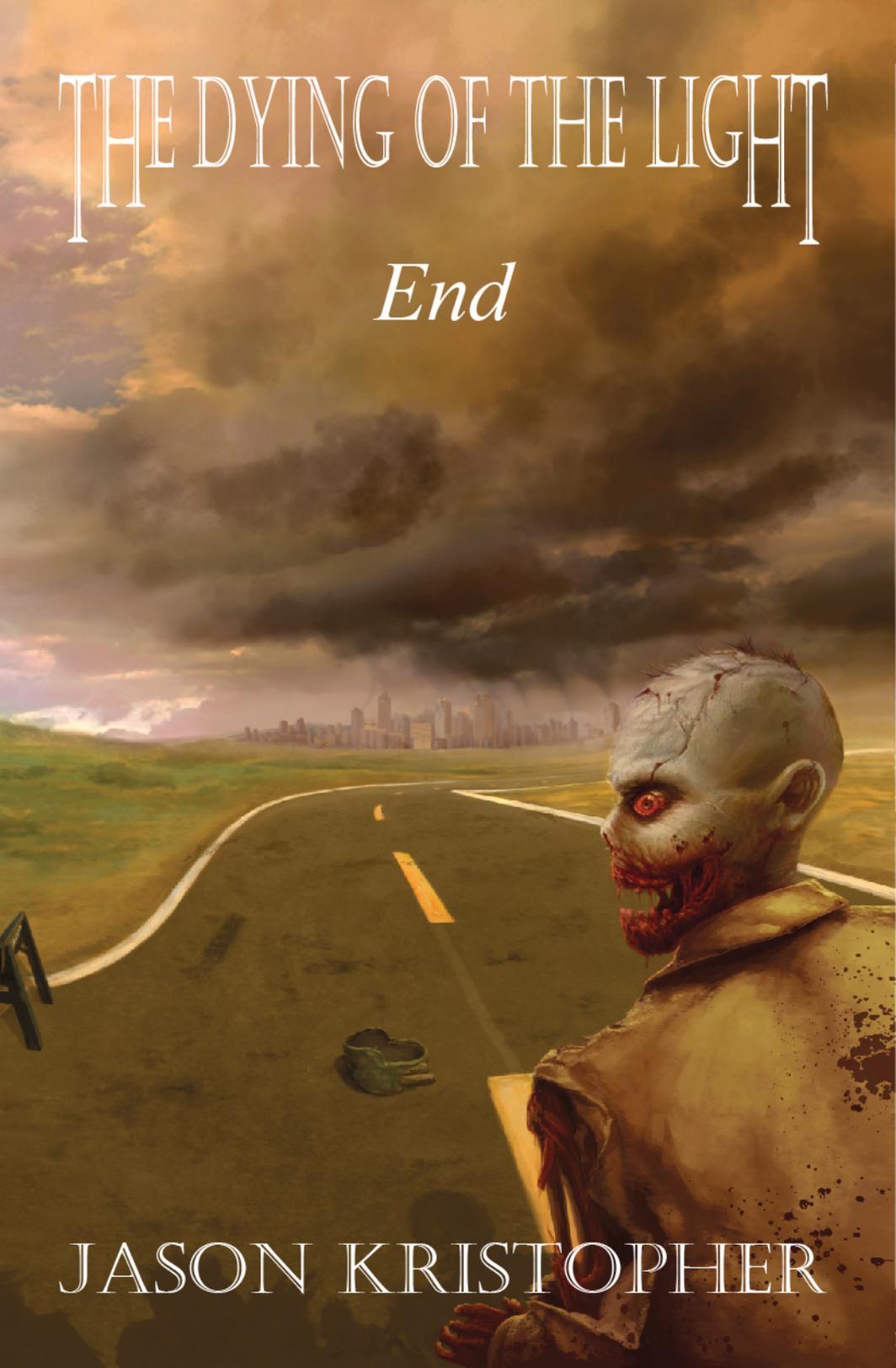


THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

End



JASON KRISTOPHER

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By Jason Kristopher

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First Edition

*To my family and friends
who always believed*

*And most especially to my grandmother
Margie Warhol
who was always my biggest fan*

prion (noun):

a protein particle that is believed to be the cause of brain diseases such as BSE [“Mad Cow” disease], scrapie, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Prions are not visible microscopically, contain no nucleic acid, and are highly resistant to destruction.

- Oxford English Dictionary⁽¹⁾

“...much more science is needed. There are many things we don’t understand, and the whole science of how prions propagate and cross species barriers is developing as we speak.”

- Dr. Neil Cashman, University of Toronto’s Center for Research in Neurodegenerative Diseases⁽²⁾

“We were amazed at how efficiently they spread.”

- Adriano Aguzzi, of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich⁽³⁾

“The bottom line is, if we don’t tightly control these diseases, we’re going to regret it big time.”

- Dr. Pierluigi Gambetti, director of the National Prion Disease Pathology Surveillance Center⁽²⁾

CHARACTERS OF NOTE

Military Personnel

Col George Maxwell, Army Ranger, AEGIS CO
Cmdr Frank Anderson, Navy SEAL, AEGIS XO

First Team

Alpha Squad

Maj Kimberly Barnes, Army Special Forces, CO
David Blake, XO
Gunnery Sgt Dalton Gaines, US Marine Corps MSOR
Cpt Tom Reynolds, US Air Force 1st Spec Ops Wing
Sgt Rachel Eaton, Special Forces
Cpt Angelo Martinez, Ranger

Bravo Squad

Lt Jake Powell, SEAL
Petty Off 2nd Class Edward Ames, SEAL
Sgt Desmond Jones, Ranger
Sgt Victor Roberts, USMC MSOR
Sgt Arkady Ivanovich, Special Forces

Second Team

Charlie Squad

Maj Shawn Carver, Special Forces, CO
Lt Manuel Ramos, USAF 1st Spec Ops Wing
Cpt Lawrence Greer, Special Forces, XO

Delta Squad

Cpt Janet Turner, USAF 1st Spec Ops Wing

Third Team

Echo Squad

Maj Terrance James, USMC MSOR, CO

Foxtrot Squad

Corpsman 1st Class Lucia Santos, USN, XO

Fourth Team

Golf Squad

Lt Malcolm Dagger, USMC MSOR, CO

Hotel Squad

Sgt Gordon Tremaine, Ranger, XO

Seventh Team

Mike Squad

Lt Adrian Masters, SEAL, CO

Non-Military Personnel

Dr. Mary Adamsdóttir, Head of Research, AEGIS

Rebecca Campbell, fiancée of David Blake

Eric Campbell, adopted son of David Blake

Morena Forrest, survivor of Laramie, WY

Michael Forrest, survivor of Laramie, WY

Henry Gardner, AEGIS Government Liaison

Harry Stafford, survivor, Washington Territory

ACRONYMS

AEGIS	Advanced Experimental Genetics Intelligence Service
ACU	Army Combat Uniform, standard Army uniform
CDC	Centers for Disease Control (and Prevention)
CO	Commanding officer of a unit or group
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
ICV	Infantry Combat Vehicle
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
OSS	Office of Strategic Services (precursor to CIA)
REAPR	Real-time Enemy Assessors and Physiology Readers
USAMRIID	United States Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases
XO	Executive officer, second in command of a unit or group

Prologue

Fall Creek, Colorado — 1 year ago

I didn't see Rebecca die the second time.

Or the first, for that matter.

I knew that I didn't want to be out on the street right now; not this close to nightfall. *Night is their time*, I thought, and realized I was whispering to myself. If I kept this up, I was going to go as bat-shit crazy as old man Feldon had been even before it all hit the fan.

He only ended up ranting and raving in the street, not eating people; he got off easy.

The waning Colorado sunlight fell across the street below me, and I could see more than a few of the bastards milling around, looking for a meal. I hid behind the roof sign for the small grocery store, my rifle across my back and my pistol in hand.

As I looked across the street, I could see my goal: Monty's Sports & Outdoors. Ten rounds in the pistol and a few in the rifle wasn't going to do it; I needed some more ammo if I was going to survive getting out of here. Unfortunately, there were about 30 walking death machines separating me from my next step on the road to Splitsville.

I sighed and checked my pistol's magazine once more, shifting the weight of the rifle. *Maybe if I move down the street I can find a quieter place to cross over.*

Suddenly, my eye caught on one of them wearing a sundress and standing apart from the others. Despite the rips and tears in the dress, I could see the pattern of flowers and pale yellow fabric. My vision tracked upwards, catching other details, like the silver watch and the simple necklace, framed by

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the long blonde hair, the bite and claw marks evident on her shoulder and upper arm. I knew what I would see as I raised my gaze to the thing's face, and as much as I hoped I was wrong in those few seconds, I wasn't.

It was Rebecca, my fiancée.

It had taken me most of two days. I'd grabbed the only guns I had in the house and went out looking. When she wasn't waiting at the house like I'd asked, I'd headed back there each night when my search yielded nothing. I couldn't leave without knowing — not guessing, but knowing for certain — that she was either dead or... something else.

A part of me hadn't wanted to find her, had hoped that she was still beautiful, still laughing, still so vibrantly alive somewhere... else. But now, that hope was gone. I'd found her.

Or rather, what was left of her. Though her face was slack-jawed and vacant, the beauty was still there and I had to look away. Dammit, why hadn't she listened? I hadn't found Eric anywhere, but now it was too much to hope that her young son had made it out of the house alive.

I'll admit I sort of lost it then; I fell back to the roof and cried. I don't know how long it was before I pulled myself together, but it was a while.

It's time, I thought. Shit or get off the pot, Dave. Fish or cut bait.

I looked back over the edge of the roof, and sure enough, all of them were still there. Glancing to the side, I measured the distance to the next roof, and knew that I could make it.

I holstered the pistol and drew the rifle off my shoulder, sighting on what used to be my fiancée and taking a deep breath. I offered up a silent prayer, and then, as I squeezed the trigger, I closed my eyes.

It was the only thing I could do for her now.

Chapter One

Washington Territory, 1872

It's late in the year, and the cold seeps into the very bones of the soldiers who have been sent to this backwater of the country, searching for a tribe of Indians said to be massacring — and sometimes *eating* — settlers, hunters and miners.

Newspapers back home call these reports about savage cannibals and murderous creatures "...nothing but the deranged ravings of madmen and fools." Unfortunately, the uproar causes President Grant to order the Army to investigate. The Army assigns Captain William Trace of Kentucky to 'find out just what the hell's going on up there,' in the words of the president himself.

Captain Trace uses local scouts and hunters to find the camps and mining outposts that have been attacked, but rather than evidence of Indians, he discovers only nightmares. Buildings burnt and collapsed, torn down from the outside. Broken and bloody remnants of the camps are strewn about like so much garbage, many of them with teeth marks in the skeletons. *Human* teeth marks, his medics tell him.

The detachment comes upon a site with some buildings still smoldering in the chill of the early morning. They find fresher bodies, only hours old, and several soldiers vomit, overwhelmed by the carnage. As a small squad investigates an out-building, they are attacked and wounded by "a creature from the depths of hell." The soldiers' combined fire manages to destroy the thing, but it's only after the smoke clears that they realize that it is, or at some point *was*, a human being.

The medic moves among the soldiers, treating the bites and other wounds. He assures them that they will heal and prescribes each a healthy dose of whiskey from his stores... for

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the shakes, of course. The rest of the detachment clears the town, burning what little remains and setting up camp while their captain and his advisers determine their next destination.

Several hours later, during a check on his men, Captain Trace realizes something more is going on and summons the company medic. The wounded men are violently ill, shaking, trembling, turning pale and lapsing into an unconsciousness from which he cannot awaken them.

Captain Trace immediately orders a wagon to transport the wounded soldiers to the closest Army base, Fort Vancouver. He provides the wounded soldiers and their drivers with water, rations and extra horses from the detachment's stores, knowing it will take three days to get there. He orders the drivers to take alternate shifts and to rotate out the tired horses as needed.

A week later, Captain Trace arrives at the final site, with Fort Vancouver a day's ride to the southwest. A scout on that trail rides back and informs the captain of an overturned and bloody wagon ahead. He sends his most trusted lieutenant to investigate, though he fears the worst. His fears are confirmed when Lieutenant Walker returns with the tale of a blood-coated wagon and snapped harnesses — and no men or horses.

After conferring with his medic, Trace realizes this is not the simple mission he thought. Something darker is at work here. He orders his men to search the surrounding areas in groups no smaller than five soldiers, and any wounded men are to be captured, if possible, or shot until dead if they pose a threat.

A day later, several squadleaders report sighting and destroying creatures similar to the one that attacked them the week before — but these are wearing the tattered remains of US Army uniforms. In order to maintain discipline, Captain Trace informs the men that the wounded soldiers are sick, and pose a serious health risk. As they have no advanced medical facilities nearby, he orders them to shoot any such soldiers on sight. Though rattled, his men follow him to the last attack site.

There, they find a small boy of no more than 12 years, frightened and filthy, hiding in the basement of the saloon.

Although unmarked with bites or other wounds, he acts crazy, as though his mind is gone. Trace and his men complete the destruction and burning of the town, and they take the boy back to Fort Vancouver with them. Once he calms down, Captain Trace finds a suitable home for the youngster with a local woman who has lost her family to Indians. Captain Trace knows that he will be in good hands, and thinks no more on it.

Rumors fly for months at what caused the Army to burn village after village, and those brave enough to venture out find only blackened remains, with no clues to the story.

Early the next year, President Grant orders the Department of the Army to create a special investigative detachment — called Unit 73 — to investigate incidents such as the Washington Territory attacks. Unit 73 responds to only nine outbreaks nationwide over the next 30 years, all involving minimal casualties.

Most of these incidents are in northern states, and Unit 73's scientists theorize that while some infections are neutralized completely, there are other specimens still out there, frozen in high mountain passes or even stuck in box canyons. The researchers inform their commanders that it is very likely more incursions will happen, but there's no way to tell when or where.

As expected, this does not fill their commanders or the president with joy.

Work continues as medical science improves, with the men and women of Unit 73 trying to discover the source of and cure for the contagion that causes people to turn on their fellows. Unfortunately, the lack of incidents leaves few samples to work with, so progress is slow and halting.

In some of those few outbreaks, survivors are found, but inevitably turn due to having been bitten, except in one unique case.

Washington Territory, 1931

Harry Stafford is a resident of a small hunting camp in northern Washington, and has been described by those who know him as a 'reclusive, ornery old goat' that would 'shoot you soon as look at you.' Though they don't much care for him, the others in the camp tolerate his rantings, as he is the best hunter and trapper among them.

Stafford often rambles about having been attacked by crazies and cannibals when young, only just escaping with his life when the Army rescued him. No one believes him, putting his ravings down to that of an old man suffering from senility. But when he comes stumbling into the town closest to the hunting camp, crazy-eyed and covered in blood that isn't his, gibbering about monsters... well, things start to change.

The townsfolk figure ol' Harry Stafford's finally lost it completely and done someone in. They lock him away, and the Sheriff and his two deputies head out to the camp to check on everyone else. There, they find that the main hunting lodge has burned nearly to the ground, and is still smoking, with the remnants of 13 charred bodies inside. Nearby, they find a bloody trenching tool. The Sherriff charges Stafford with the murders of the residents of the camp, and the bloody trenching tool is entered into evidence.

Before the trial of Stafford begins, the old man and all the evidence related to his alleged crime are taken into custody by men identified on paper only as federal agents Johnson and Smith. It turns out they work for Unit 73 and return with Harry, the trenching tool, and the remains of the dead to their base at Fort Lewis.

The agents question Harry Stafford and gradually piece together his story. A walker — named after the lieutenant who helped discover them — had come out of the dense forest and attacked and bitten one of the hunters from the camp while he was checking his traps.

During the fight with the walker, the hunter accidentally decapitated it and made his escape, but he was mortally

wounded. He barely made it back to the camp to tell Stafford what had happened.

Stafford tried to dispose of the hunter's body after he expired; after all, sixty years before, he'd hidden in a saloon's basement as the only people he had ever known were killed and eaten. He knew what was going to happen. But while he was trying to burn the body, he was caught and tied up by the other hunters, and then, by the time he'd managed to work himself free again, it was too late: the rest of the hunters had been infected.

He stalked them one by one, taking them down with his well-honed stealth and speed. When only two were left, he dragged the rest of the bodies into the main hunting lodge as bait. It worked; they followed him, then he ran around and chained the door shut with them still inside, setting fire to the building.

Throughout his interrogation, Stafford claims that he hasn't killed anyone but the monsters that would have killed him. Intensive analysis is conducted by Unit 73 personnel, who determine that there is evidence of human teeth marks on each of the thirteen bodies as well as other indicators of walker activity. This evidence lends support to Stafford's claim of mass walker infection. Years later, analysis of samples from the blood remaining on the trenching tool would test positive for the "zombie" prion, further exonerating the old man.

The agents eventually realize that the walker that had attacked the camp must have been some unfortunate soul who was either a remnant of the original Washington Territory attacks, or someone who was attacked by one of the wounded soldiers nearly 60 years before. It is later determined that the only way this could have happened would have been if the walker had been trapped in one of the blizzards and frozen, only to have thawed out and been just as deadly decades later.

The agents give Harry a nice, quiet place to live in the country, far from anyone else and with every conceivable need provided. They check up on him just over a month after his release and find that he has hanged himself. His suicide note is

short and to the point: “I can’t live with this anymore. I can still hear the screams.”

Belzec Extermination Camp, Poland, 1942

Unit 73 is made a part of the Office of Strategic Services when it is determined that walker attacks have been occurring not only on US soil, but also overseas, with reports coming in from posts and Army units throughout World War One and the early days of World War Two.

Agents from Unit 73 drop behind enemy lines in southeastern Poland to investigate rumors that Joseph Mengele has begun experimentation with walkers. The agents investigate a subsidiary camp near Belzec and discover the truth is even more horrifying than they were expecting.

Not only are the Nazis engaged in research on walkers, they are also *manufacturing* them, and at a rate that is staggering to behold. Unit 73 confirms that the SS Colonel General in command of the camp is attempting to create some sort of biological weapon to be dropped on targets from the air. During their infiltration, the agents count more than five thousand active walkers in pens at the smaller camp, and discover the source of the new ones: the Jewish, Romani and Polish prisoners from the main Belzec camp. Even worse, the prisoners know what is happening, and are powerless to stop their deaths and eventual rebirths.

As the agents acquire intelligence, it is delivered to the commander of Unit 73. In cooperation with soon-to-be Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force General Dwight Eisenhower, Unit 73 begins forming a plan to destroy both Belzec and its smaller and more dangerous sub-camp. Before the operation can be finalized and given a green light, operations end at Belzec, and the smaller camp is closed and dismantled, with many of the structures — and the walkers inside them — simply burned where they stand to prevent spread of the

contagion. Unit 73 operatives manage to collect some evidence of the mass infection of prisoners of war, but the war soon ends, and due to their nature, the incidents are quietly covered up and never brought to light.

In 1963, the newly-created Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) takes over funding of Unit 73, renaming it as the Advanced Experimental Genetics Intelligence Service (AEGIS). Soon, AEGIS' primary mission is codified and standardized. The two main purposes of the group become containment and investigation. First, to contain and eliminate any and all walker incursions through the United States and its territories, including the manufacture of cover stories to prevent worldwide chaos. This is done through the use of military personnel under strict security and need-to-know access — Special Operations groups who are simply told that the victims are dangerously sick and the illness is incurable. Second, to determine the source of the infection and a possible cure.

Arizona, 1986

She takes a quick break from her work and leans against a corner of the barn, sweating through her thin shirt as the bright Arizona summer sun pours down on her. Even for Arizona it's hot, and it isn't normally this bad so close to sundown. A sudden strong breeze brings her upright, and she lifts her chin into the wind, sending her long red hair streaming out behind her.

A child's laughter captures her attention, and she smiles as she looks over at her little brother, Johnny, playing in the front yard in the sprinkler. She wants to join him, but her father will tan her hide if she shirks her chores, so she turns back to the task of mucking out the horse's stalls. Even at thirteen, she has a strong work ethic and knows her responsibilities.

Her favorite, a mountain of a horse named Jack, whickers from the next stall and she smiles at him, extending a treat for him to munch on. She loves his chestnut brown coloring, and

rides him every chance she can, which isn't much these days, what with school and chores and homework.

As she finishes clearing the stall, she hears her mother call her and her brother inside for dinner, and puts back her tools, making sure the barn door is closed and secured. She can smell the delicious aromas of the food, and her stomach rumbles as she realizes just how hungry she is.

She turns off the hose as she passes the corner of the house, causing little Johnny to set up a wail that is probably heard miles away. She just rolls her eyes and pushes him inside to wash up. Her father comes in just behind her through the screen door and starts to head for the table, but is stopped short by his wife.

“Johnathan Michael Barnes, you know better than that. Get over here and wash your hands,” she says. “And take off those dirty boots!”

John Barnes laughs as he picks up his wife in a huge bear hug and swings her around. “Ellen, one of these days I'm going to eat with dirty hands, and I'll survive just to spite you.”

Kimberly looks at her parents laughing, the love they feel for each other clear in their eyes and smiles and little touches. Being a normal young teenage girl, she is concerned with such things, and sighs with hope that she will find that sort of love someday.

Her reverie is broken by the sharp pinch Johnny gives her as he sits down at the table, having run some water over his hands — his version of ‘washing up.’ She jumps and smacks him on the back of his head, causing a fight, which is quickly broken up by their mother.

Having washed his hands and taken off his dirty boots and gloves, her father sits down at the table and leads them in saying grace.

“Lord, we thank you for blessing our table with this bounty. In your name, we pray. Amen.” He smiles as he looks around at his family. “Now, let's eat!”

The evening air is warm and heavy, and her mother allows them to sleep on the screened-in front porch. She lies on her pallet, her long legs sticking out from the too-small blankets, and looks up at the stars through the screens. The night wind blows, taking much of the day's heat away and leaving her goose-bumped and shivering, but she doesn't mind one bit. She prefers to sleep outside when she can get away with it.

Sometime later, she starts awake. Something feels wrong, and she lies there for a few minutes trying to figure out just what it is that has awakened her, listening for even the smallest sound.

Suddenly, she knows: there is no noise at all. No crickets, no owls, none of the normal country night-noises that bother city-folk so. Not even any soft snorts or whickers from the horses in the stable. She glances over at Johnny, snoring in his rolled-up blankets, and decides to leave him be. No reason to wake him, yet. It's probably nothing, anyway.

She crawls out of her blankets, the cool midnight air pebbling her skin, and creeps to the edge of the porch, peering out at the night. Nothing is moving except for a few branches of the trees, and yet she still feels a sense of wrongness that chills her more than any breeze. Just as she is about to go inside to wake her father, she hears a horse cry out from the barn, followed by the oddest moaning sound she's ever heard.

That's Jack! What's wrong with him? The horse's screaming gets louder and she can hear him kicking against the walls of his stall, mad with fear.

Panic sets in. Kimberly finds herself running around the side of the house towards the barn, and is startled as the back porch light comes on and her parents run out of the house, stopping on the back steps. Her father holds his shotgun. Seeing her there, he points back to the house. "Get your butt back in there, Kim, and see to your brother, too," he yells. She is obeying before she realizes it, running back the way she came as her father heads

toward the barn. Kim grabs her brother from his sound sleep on the front porch and carries him into the house. As she comes into the front room, there is a loud boom and then another from the backyard as her daddy fires his shotgun. She can hear a loud crack from the barn. She stops in the middle of the room, staring out of the back door. Johnny wakes up and tries to pull away, and she holds him tightly.

Suddenly her mother screams from the back porch steps, and she hears that moan again as another shotgun blast goes off, closer than the others. She holds Johnny tightly to her chest as her father yells, and she sees *something* attacking him. He struggles with whatever it is, yelling to her mother, "Ellen, get the kids out of here! Go now before..." Whatever he is about to say is cut off as the struggle with the creature causes her father's finger to slip on the trigger. Another loud boom, and her mother falls backwards into the kitchen, her screams cut off and her chest a mass of blood, ruined skin and bone.

"God, no!" shouts her father, stunned into stillness by Ellen's death. "No, no, no..."

He doesn't see the rotting arms reaching for him once more, only coming back to the moment as the walker takes a large bite out of his forearm. He yells and curses, and with a mighty shove knocks the creature back, chambering and firing his last shell point blank into its face, blowing its head to pieces.

Kimberly sinks to the floor, her brother now screaming in her arms, his face hidden against her body. Her father, cursing and holding his arm, comes in through what is left of the back door and kneels next to his wife. He moans and cries as he cradles her in his good arm and begins to rock back and forth. In a daze, Kim sets her brother down. He clings to her legs as she walks to the kitchen's wall-mounted phone and dials 911.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Mom... mom's dead and my daddy's hurt. Come quick."

"What's your address? Hello? Hello?" Kimberly can't seem to put any more words together and drops the receiver. She goes back into the living room and sits down on the couch.

Johnny crawls up next to her and she wraps an arm around him, staring across the room at the wall.

She doesn't notice the flashing lights appearing outside, or the men knocking on the door. There are people who come to look at her daddy's arm, and she can just barely see them pull him away from her mother through the doorway. Men and women both come into the living room and try to talk to her, but she can't answer them, as if she doesn't remember how to talk, and Johnny is silent and still, his tears leaving stains on his cheeks. One woman sits down on her mother's rocking chair.

"I'll stay with you, dear," she says, reaching out and patting Kim's arm.

Eventually, Kim looks up when she hears a neighing horse outside. *At least Jack's ok*, she thinks. *I still have Jack, and Johnny, and Daddy.* The lady sitting nearby notices her perk up, and, desperate to reach the girl, decides to try one last gambit.

"I tell you what, I'll go find out what's going on with your horse, ok? I'll be right back. You'll be here when I come back, won't you?"

Kim looks at her for the first time and nods. Once the older woman is gone, though, she hears whispers from the kitchen, and creeps closer, trying to hear what is being said.

"They're coming, Adam."

Another man sighs. "I know, Bill, but you know what'll happen when they get here. Damn feds. And what about the girl and her brother? What happens to them?"

"They'll take them and make sure they're looked after. Come on, Adam, we can't fight them on this."

"I know, I know, dammit! I just hate to see this. John and Ellen are — were — good people; they don't deserve this."

Kimberly doesn't hear Bill's reply as she backs away from the door, motioning to her brother to be very quiet. He nods and follows her as she moves out to the front porch, away from the men inside, closing the door and moving around the side of the house. Suddenly she crouches down, pulling her brother down

with her as the beam of a flashlight plays over the side of the house, then away.

She sees the deputies checking the yard, house and barn, and waits until they finish. She sees the nice lady walking back to the house as the men move out to search the surrounding land, and realizes that now is her chance. Kimberly and her brother sneak into the barn and into Jack's stall. She whispers to the big horse as he greets her, his soft nose brushing her shoulder.

She knows that she can't let those people, whoever they are, take her and her brother anywhere. Working with quick and practiced ease, she saddles and bridles the big horse, hoisting her brother up to grab the saddle horn as she climbs up behind him. Making sure they aren't being watched is tougher, but she manages to ride Jack out of the barn and almost to the edge of one of the fields before she hears the shouting start.

They realized I'm gone. The nice lady wants us back, she thinks.

"Hyah!" she cries, digging in her heels, and sends the big horse flying through the night and into the field.

She doesn't know where she's going at first, but, as they gallop on, she realizes she's headed for her best friend Angela's farm nearby. *Maybe we can hide there awhile,* she thinks. *At least I know they won't turn us in.*

There's a loud whirring from behind her; some kind of chopping noise; she doesn't know what it is at first. As lights appear in the air behind her, she realizes it must be a helicopter, and judging from the way its searchlights are coming closer, they must be on her trail. Urging the big stallion to even greater speed, she and Johnny lay low against the horse's neck.

Suddenly the noise is right above her, then beyond her, and then the helicopter drops smoothly out of the air and lands just ahead of them, a large spotlight blinding her. Jack stops and rears at the sudden noise and light, throwing her and her brother from his back. They land hard; Johnny cries out as he comes

down hard on his arm, breaking it with a sharp crack. Kim's fall is just as painful, her head slamming back into the dirt.

She tries to get up and to calm the horse, but her vision swims and she falls back down, barely able to focus on the men running towards her from the helicopter. One of them kneels down beside her, reaching out a hand, but she screams and flinches back, afraid he is attacking her as the creature attacked her father. He nods at someone or something behind her and suddenly she feels a sharp sting at the back of her neck, and notices the man looking at her intently.

He seems so sad, she thinks as she passes out.

Panama, 1988

Petty Officer First Class Anderson looks through his binoculars at the drug camp in the jungle clearing, wondering just what the hell happened to this place. No drug camp is ever what anyone would call 'nice', but this one looks like it's been hit by an army. A different kind of army. The midges and mosquitoes are active in the late-morning heat, and the humidity is stifling, sweat pouring from all of the operators in streams. The cursing is fluent but very, very quiet.

Bullet holes riddle most of the buildings and he sees smears of blood across many of the walls. Several fires burn, further adding to the chaos and causing even more damage. At least one of the shacks is engulfed in flames, the harsh chemicals and shoddy construction materials feeding the fire that sends midnight-black smoke billowing into the sky.

Through the binoculars he sees a few survivors of whatever has happened, just standing around almost motionless. They're hurt, judging from the blood on their clothes and the few injuries that he can see, but why are they just standing around rather than evacuating? No shouts, no voices, no noise... not even any of the ever-present birds or insects.

Weird, he thinks. *Very weird, indeed.*

He touches his throat mike, whispering. “No sign of hostiles. Estimate seven to ten friendlies. Structural damage, blood... it’s nasty down there, sir.”

A voice in his ear. “Roger. Take position for overwatch. Alpha, east. Bravo, with me.”

The SEAL team breaks from cover at the base of the hill Anderson has scouted, moving to their assigned attack vectors. He slings his binos back into his pack and crawls forward to the next rise in the terrain, 500 yards from the clearing. He climbs a huge *corotu* tree and takes up a position on one of the massive branches, his long-barreled, camo-painted Mk11 sniper rifle resting ahead of him. He glances through the scope, but doesn’t see any movement or even the friendlies he thought he’d spotted earlier.

Where the hell did they go?

There is a burst of gunfire to the east of the camp, and a crackle of static over the headset, as well as a moan. “Alpha team engaged. Repeat, alpha engaged. Hostiles are unarmed,” the team leader says, breaking off amid another rattle of gunfire. “They’re attacking hand-to-hand. Holy fuck! One of them just *bit Sparks!*”

Anderson can hear the moans now without his headset; it’s a sound that runs a shiver of fear up his back. Like nothing he’s heard before, it’s full of menace and death. He fights down the urge to bolt and looks through the rifle’s scope again. “Overwatch, no shot on hostiles. Repeat, no shot on...” he says, pausing as he watches two of the six-man Alpha team back out of the jungle into the small clearing of the camp, firing as they retreat. One of them is obviously wounded and hangs on the other, one arm over his squadmate’s shoulder, firing a pistol again and again at whatever he sees under the dense canopy.

“I see you, Alpha,” Anderson says, focusing on one of the shapes moving towards his fellow operators in the clearing through the dark jungle. “L-T, they are headed west toward your position.” Suddenly, one of the shadows breaks out of the

darkness into the cloudy daylight. “Targets appear as friendlies! Engaging hostile targets.”

He aims and kills the first target with one well-placed shot to the temple. Alpha leader keeps firing into the jungle, and Anderson sees more appear, following the one he’s just killed, moving out of the jungle. More gunfire, this time from the west, and Bravo team emerges, the lieutenant falling back last as his men retreat, firing into the jungle. More shadowed figures move towards that squad as well, and Anderson can see they are going to get cut off and surrounded.

Through the high-powered scope of his rifle, he can make out more detail on the hostiles, now. Dressed in the rags and tatters of clothes, these people aren’t alive. *They can’t be. Not with those wounds.*

The next one he shoots has one arm missing, the flesh of the shoulder hanging in strips, the limb torn off. All of those he sees are covered in wounds and blood, and should not be standing, much less attacking.

Well, he thinks. I can fix that.

As he begins taking them out one by one, he hears the lieutenant on the radio. “Fall back to the central shack. We’ll take these bastards out there. MacMillan,” he says, and Anderson sees him gesture towards the tall, lanky second scout of the team. “Make your way around to Anderson and give us some support.” He can see MacMillan’s head turn his way, and flashes the scope of his rifle in a quick signal to the other man, who nods, crouches, and disappears.

Damn, that man makes me nervous, he thought. *No one should be able to disappear like that. Even I’m not that good.*

The others fall back into guard positions around the outside of the door to the central shack, firing quick bursts at the walkers. The lieutenant opens the shack door, looking for cover, only to be met by a crowd of grasping, tearing walkers. There is a short scream as he is torn apart in the doorway, and then the things pile out of the shack, falling on the other SEALs from behind.

Anderson freezes for a moment, and then, with regret, realizes what he has to do. He begins ending his former teammates' horror as they are attacked; one shot, one kill. As he sights in on the last of his men, the SEAL gives him a thumbs-up and drops a grenade from his hand. Anderson turns away as the explosion takes out the shack and the things attacking and feasting on his team.

Must've had something nasty in there, he thinks as the explosion catches another shack. The detonation from this one is even larger, showering the surrounding jungle with scraps of debris and more than a few of those things. As he turns back, he sees several other nightmares making their way toward his position, drawn by the sound of his gunfire. He laughs as he takes down his thirty-fifth kill, but he sees more of them still coming from other shacks and through the trees.

A sudden noise from the base of his tree makes him spin around on the branch and fire his pistol without even realizing that he's drawn it. The bullet caroms off some buried obstruction and zings out into the distance. A shaky voice issues from around the trunk. "Stop! It's me, boyo," says Hamish, poking his head around the tree, only coming out when he sees it is safe. Bloody and filthy and clutching a bandage to one forearm, the Scot looks wide-eyed at Anderson who swears profusely.

"Sorry, Hamish," he says. "They're headed our way. What's with the arm?"

"One of the fuckers bit me," he replies. "The others?"

Anderson shakes his head in reply, and MacMillan curses. "Good thing I've got the radio," he says, suiting actions to words and twisting a dial on his mike. "Papa Bear, this is Rabbit Four. We are di di mau with two SEALs to LZ X-Ray."

The reply is fast. "Roger, Rabbit Four. E-and-e to LZ X-Ray, pickup at 1330 Zulu."

"Roger, Papa Bear. Out here." MacMillan looks at Anderson, who climbs out of the tree and readies himself for travel. "Let's get out of here, Frank. It's gonna be a long walk."

“Damn straight.” They both stiffen as a moan drifts their way from somewhere close. They glance at each other and then hike up their packs and disappear into the foliage.

Over the next 20 years, AEGIS contains and eliminates twenty-seven separate incursions within the United States. Through secret dialogues with other countries, scientific advancement is shared, with the stated ultimate goal of finding a cure, somehow, somewhere.

A few of the finest minds on the planet are brought in to consult, and given a plausible cover story. Almost none question the necessity, believing that the Army is just being well prepared. Special operations units are called in when necessary, and only told the most basic need-to-know information.

The situation appears to be manageable, at least for the moment, and although attacks become slightly more frequent, there is nothing to indicate that a massive escalation of military force would be in order.

Chapter Two

Fall Creek, Colorado — 1 year ago

Monty's Sports & Outdoors was exactly what you would expect from a small-town outfitter. It wasn't huge, but Monty could get almost anything for his customers, even if he had to drive to Denver occasionally to pick it up. He carried mostly ammunition and some hunting rifles, tents and other camping gear, and the standard sports equipment. There was a musty scent to the air every time you walked in the store, and it was never clear if it was from the dust or merely the age of the shop.

Montgomery James Gordonsson, Junior was a huge bear of a man, standing head and shoulders above even the tallest of Fall Creek's citizens. Since he was so intimidating in size and appearance, most people found themselves hard-pressed to talk to Monty initially, but they soon discovered that he had a thoughtful and caring intelligence combined with an easy humor and wit.

At least, that was true before Fall Creek turned into Hell, I thought, looking across the street at the dark and still store. I hope he's still alive. I'd come down from the roof, but my new hiding place in the bushes seemed more exposed each moment. The problem was that this was the only scrap of cover in sight. I didn't see any movement inside the store, but that meant nothing, since I could barely see inside anyway. The movement I was more concerned with was that of the walkers on the street between me and my destination.

There were only five of them, and none of them were within more than fifty yards or so. I should be able to make it to the alley across the way if I was careful and quiet.

There's no point trying the front door. Monty would've made sure to lock up.

I took a deep breath and darted out of the bushes in a low crouch, one hand keeping my boots from falling off my shoulder and my sock feet making no noise on the pavement.

I made it. I couldn't believe my luck, but I didn't stop to revel in it. Once I was halfway down the alley and out of sight — and hopefully hearing — of the main street, I slipped my boots from around my neck and put them back on. I pulled the Springfield out of its holster and looked around the corner of the shopping center.

The service area behind the strip appeared to be deserted, but I'd already discovered in the last two days that looks could be deceiving. These things made almost no noise until they spotted some food, and then... well, they could be *loud*. I spotted a loose piece of concrete nearby and judged the distance carefully as I threw it down the alleyway. It made just enough noise on the concrete paving to suit me, and nothing responded, so I figured I was probably safe.

I found the rear door to Monty's easily enough, and tried the knob. To my surprise, it moved, and I wondered if Monty had simply left, not caring about the contents of the store. *Unlikely. He practically lives here. Something's not right.* I turned the knob once more, standing just behind the door as I pulled it open.

Suddenly the door was thrust open fully, and I ducked as a wooden baseball bat flew over my head to carom off the open door. It's funny the things that stand out when you're in a situation like that; I clearly remember the grain of the wood as it passed by my eyes with only inches to spare, and the dull *bong* sound as it hit the metal door. I also remember looking up into Monty's eyes as he recovered and started to swing again, only to pause for a moment as he recognized me, and I took advantage of that interruption to stand with my hands to one side in a peaceful gesture, the .40 caliber pistol in my hand notwithstanding.

"Son, you're liable to get blown away or killed doing some damn fool thing like that," he huffed. He looked both ways down the alley, and then pulled me inside with no more effort than shifting a heavy shopping bag between hands. He shut and

locked the door behind us, then turned to give me a once-over under the bright light of one of his camping lanterns. “Those things can hear like nothing I’ve ever seen. I was bringing in the last of the supplies I had stored out back when I heard you coming. I only realized I forgot to lock the door when you tried to open it.”

I grinned at the big man and was relieved to see an answering grin in return, albeit a pained one. “You okay, Monty? It’s a mess out there.”

“I’m okay, David. More or less.” He gestured to a bandage on his arm near the wrist and shook his head. “Some wackjob tried to bite me, of all things. I only told him I didn’t have any more ammo, and he just flew off the handle. I had to shove him out of the store. That’s when I locked up.” He jerked his head in the direction of the front of the store, and through the stockroom entrance I could see the rolling metal grate that he had locked in place.

Guess it’s a good thing I didn’t try the front door. “What about you?” he asked.

“I’m fine, but I’m getting outta this place, Monty. There’s nothing left for me here now. I was hoping to find some supplies here. You said you’re out of ammo?”

“No, not really. Just didn’t like the look of the guy, ya know? Told him all I had was already sold, but you’re welcome to whatever you need. I know you’re good for it once this crap is all over with. What about the missus and your boy?” He began rummaging around in a stack of boxes, finally pulling out a large black duffel bag and tossing it to me. When I just let it hit the floor, he glanced over. “What’s wrong?”

“She... I...” I couldn’t seem to speak; my tongue wouldn’t form the words, and he caught me looking toward the street. The pain I felt must’ve been evident, and Monty had always been an observant guy.

“Shit. That’s fucked up.”

I’d lived in Fall Creek nearly all my life and I’d never heard this affable man utter a single word even close to profanity.

Everything really is going to hell, then. I simply nodded, and Monty growled deep in his throat. “Well, if you’re getting out, then I’ll see to it you have what you need. Follow me.”

I followed him to his office, where he opened the huge safe that dominated one wall and took a small box from a stack inside. He motioned for me to hand him the pistol and I did so. The gun was dwarfed in his huge hands, but he fitted the suppressor from the box onto the end of the gun and handed it back.

“That’s a little something from me to you that don’t nobody need to know about, kid.” He looked me dead in the eye with a grim expression.

“Got it. Thanks, Monty. Listen, you want to come with me? I could use you in a fight.”

He chuckled and shook his head, the motion shaking his whole body. “Nah, I’m no good at that sort of thing, David. Besides, I’m kinda tired. Think I might lie down here when you’re done and get some rest. I figure I’m safe enough inside here for a couple more days, anyway.”

With all the camping supplies, ammo and MREs you could ever need, I thought. *He’ll be fine.* “I’ll just grab a few things and be on my way. And I’ll be back before you know it when I find help.”

He smiled and eased back into the enormous office chair that somehow managed to cradle his bulk, scratching absently at the bandaged wound on his arm. “Sure thing, David. Sure thing. Just gonna rest here awhile.”

The twenty-third zombie I killed was what had once been a little girl; she’d spotted me crossing a side-street. By this time, night was falling, and she came at me out of the little backyard of what I presumed was her house; no more than four or five years old, she was dressed in the dirty and stained tatters of a pink dress, her hair still in pigtails.

The moan she issued at me was anything but childlike, and she was light as a feather as she attacked me out of nowhere, biting and clawing. Her small teeth wouldn't be able to break through my pants or jacket, but that didn't mean I wanted her crawling on me; childlike or not, she was deadly.

She moved faster than any of the others I'd seen, and was on me almost before I could react. She clung to my leg, trying her best to make a meal of my thigh, and, as I tried to pry her off, I stumbled, falling back against the picket fence surrounding the small yard.

The fence had seen better days; it broke into splinters as I fell against it. I screamed as a huge piece of jagged wood pierced my arm. My balance gone, the girl swarmed over me as I landed hard on my back, and it took every ounce of will I had to fight through the pain from my arm and keep her from biting me as she snarled and spit, saliva and blood flying everywhere.

Suddenly, I saw my opening, and, grabbing her leg with my good arm, I swung her away from me into the stone wall of the house next door at full force. She hit with a sickening crunch and slid to the sidewalk, the creepy moans and gnashing of teeth silenced for good now. I groaned as the pain from my arm hit me again, and struggling to my feet, I gritted my teeth and swallowed hard as I gripped the spike of wood, took a deep breath, and pulled it out fast. I gasped as blood welled up from the wound, thick and black in the near-dark night.

Taking off my belt, I wrapped it around my bicep above the wound and cinched it tight, cutting off the blood flow. I'd have to do a more thorough job of cleaning and washing it later, when I had time, but for now all I could do was get moving again.

My scream had no doubt drawn the attention of every walker within a mile or more. As I retrieved my pack from where it had fallen, I tried to resist that bastard inner voice that told me I was a monster for killing a little girl, even though I would have been food if I'd given her even a ghost of a chance.

You're still a jackass, the voice reminded me. *You should've checked that yard before crossing the street, asshole.*

My inner voice was not nice. Not anymore. Not after two days in this place.

This time, I checked the yard carefully before entering my little house on Roland Avenue. Not seeing any horror-film nightmares, I moved quietly to the porch and knelt down, covering the darkened interior with the pistol held in my good hand. I knocked softly on the frame of what had once been the front door; shattered and twisted, it hung off of the hinges, glass covering the entryway floor. As it had for the last two days, only quiet stillness answered me.

No moans, no shuffling of dead feet. The house was empty. Even so, the events of the last two days had rapidly instilled new survival traits in my psyche, and I searched the shadows warily as I moved into the entrance hall.

I listened for long minutes at the base of the stairs, waiting to hear any noise at all. I realized after sitting there for fifteen minutes that I wasn't just listening anymore; I was avoiding going upstairs. Upstairs were the bedrooms. Upstairs I was certain, on some level, that I would find Eric. Or what was left of Eric. Even though I'd searched for him before, I had to do it again. To take one last chance of finding him alive.

Chance failed me, again. Upstairs, downstairs, the basement... all were empty. Eric was gone. There was no way for me to know if he was a zombie, had simply run off, or was hiding somewhere. I had been tempting fate running around looking for them; it was only pure luck that had so far kept me from getting killed, just like Rebecca. At the thought of what I'd done to her, I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. Just because something was necessary and right didn't make it easy.

There was a part of me — a large part — that wanted to go out there into the night, searching for the kid, regardless of my chances of making it out alive. It was the right thing to do, danger or no danger. But the odds were almost nil that he was still the boy I remembered. And I had to get out of this town somehow.

It was then that I made the hardest choice I've ever made, even though it was clear what I had to do: I abandoned him, knowing full well that it would mean his death, if he wasn't dead already.

He's probably still alive, asshole. Hiding somewhere, waiting for you to come rescue him, Dad.

Like I said, not a nice voice.

Mentally cataloguing the few possessions I wanted to take with me, I calmly and quickly began stuffing them into another duffel bag I grabbed out of the closet. Without thinking, I used my injured arm, and bit my lip to keep from crying out again.

First things first, dumbass.

I moved into the upstairs bathroom and grabbed the first-aid kit, closing both doors into the room as well as pulling the window shade before turning on the lights. I wasn't sure that zombies were attracted to light, but there wasn't any sense in taking unnecessary chances. I'd seen enough horror movies and killed enough of them in the last two nights to know that 'better safe than sorry' was always the way to go.

Fortunately the electricity's still on, I thought. And the water. I turned on the taps and unwrapped the belt, wincing at the fresh flow of blood from the wound, but thankful that the spike had gone all the way through. I was sure there would be splinters, but right now all I could do was stop the bleeding. Dropping the now-shredded t-shirt on the floor, I examined the hole in my arm and saw it wasn't as bad as I'd thought. The splinter wasn't that large in diameter, though the blood was still flowing freely.

Thanks, Dad, I thought as I opened the well-stocked first aid kit. As a Marine, he had always insisted on keeping an oversized kit somewhere in the house, and I was very glad I'd learned that particular lesson. I paged through the simple and well-illustrated field manual in the kit, and followed the directions.

I was amazed at the relative lack of pain as the coagulant powder stopped the bleeding, and I wrapped gauze around my arm after applying a bandage pad. I looked in the mirror when I'd finished.

Well, it ain't pretty, but it'll have to do. Hopefully I can make it to a hospital or something when I get to Lakewood.

Popping some painkillers, I repacked the kit, turned off the light and moved back into the bedroom. After putting on a warmer long-sleeve shirt, I picked up the bag once more, this time with my uninjured arm. Now that I'd at least bandaged the arm, the pain had started to fade a bit.

Extra shoes. Extra batteries. Extra clothes and a jacket. Water bottles. The bag was stuffed and bulging by the time I was through, but I didn't have to carry it very far.

I dropped it next to the bag Monty had given me, and I looked around at the kitchen just once as I paused by the back door, checking the path to the garage fifteen feet away. It was a cozy little house, but there was nothing left for me here now.

I made it to the garage and inside, the door shut and the light on, pistol at the ready. No movement, no noise. The camp stove under the workbench and the sleeping bag from the rafters overhead went into the back of my black 1988 Ford Bronco along with the duffels. I climbed behind the wheel and paused for a moment. This beast was going to draw every one of the monsters for three blocks or more when I started it up; no v8 engine I ever heard ran quiet. Nothing for it, though. Once I was moving, I could just run down any of the bastards between here and I-70. Few things could stop an old-school Bronco once it was at speed, and the over-sized winter tires would keep the big vehicle on the road. And it was a hell of a lot better than walking.

I was as ready as I would ever be.

The first roar of the engine overwhelmed the noise of the big garage door going up, and I rocketed out, the tall radio mast barely clearing the door, even tied back as it was. I didn't see the first zombie I hit, but bits and brains flew over the windshield as I smashed into it somewhere around the sidewalk and turned out into the street.

I tried to remember the clearest path from my house to the Interstate, given all the abandoned cars and other obstructions on the roads. I'd almost made it to the intersection of Roland and

Main, where I was tempted to turn, when I heard what could only be a helicopter overhead. *What the hell is a helicopter doing in Fall Creek?* I wondered as I slowed and checked for zombies, then stopped and stuck my head out the window.

The moonlight glinted off the side of a Blackhawk helicopter as it banked low over the ten or fifteen old buildings the visitor's bureau referred to as "Historic Downtown Fall Creek." Army insignia were visible on the side of the craft as it headed in the general direction of the town hall, and I assumed it would be landing in the main square.

That's my ticket out, I thought as I rolled the window back up and began moving that way. Just like that, all my plans had changed. *I just have to get there. Somehow. Through a hundred or more zombies that all want to have me for a late supper.*

I stopped about half a mile away from downtown, making sure the coast was clear before I parked next to an alley with a fire escape. I got out and grabbed the duffel with all my clothes, some food, and ammo. I wouldn't need the camp stove or sleeping bag. If it turned out these guys were no good, I could always come back here and head back for the interstate. The duffel went on my back, along with the rifle. Pistol in its holster, I climbed onto the roof of the Bronco and grabbed the fire escape ladder just as I saw the first zombie come around the corner, drawn by the rumble of the big V8. Timing was everything, I guess.

I moved across the roofs of the downtown shopping district quietly and quickly. Fortunately, there were only minor gaps between them, and I lucked out in finding a loose board from one of the signs that I could extend across the larger spaces. Taking it with me each time, I was able to make my way toward the main square.

I dropped and crawled to the edge of the building near the main square, then slowly peeked over the edge. It seemed like a standard Army camp, at least from what I'd seen in movies. There were a couple temporary helipads chalked onto the asphalt, and some tents set up, their sides rolled up to provide ventilation to the scientists working beneath them. I could see a

few random flashes of gunfire from the barricades they had set up; the zombies were being drawn by the noise of all the personnel, but were coming to the barricades in dribs and drabs, a few at a time.

I was done with Fall Creek now. I'd seen and done things in the last few hours that I had never thought possible, and I moved back, taking the first fire escape down to the nearest alley, crouching around the corner in the few shadows that were left as the sun began to rise. I hoped that these Army guys would be able to get me out of here.

Beyond the makeshift barricades — a few cars pushed together here and there, and a city bus blocking one street — there were at least two choppers, their blades turning as the Army personnel moved back and forth around their fortifications.

The problem was that I had no idea what sort of story they'd been told about what was going on here. Could've been anything, and they'd already seen several of their men go down. What was odd were the scientists they had with them. Obviously not military, they carried themselves differently, and flinched every time a gun went off.

At least there's none at this barricade for the moment, I thought. I could count about 30 or 40 lying on the ground in front of it, though. The night hadn't been completely kind to these guys.

And here came another patrol, within a couple hundred yards of me. I took a deep breath and checked for walkers. None spotted, I lowered my duffel to the ground, and holstered my pistol. Holding the rifle by one hand, I cupped the other and shouted around the corner.

"Don't shoot, I'm not infected," I began and jerked back as a fusillade of bullets struck chips off the edge of the building.

Genius, Blake. Pure fucking genius. Why don't you just fire your rifle in the air to calm them down, now?

From around the side of the building I heard a gruff voice. “God dammit Jenkins, cease fire! Who gave you an order to shoot, you dipshit?”

“Well, sir...”

“Shaddup, asshole, it was a rhetorical question.”

I chuckled. Definitely not an officer, that one.

“All you other assholes will hold fire until I give you a direct order, clear?”

A chorus of sheepish voices answered. “Clear, sir!”

“Good. You, behind the corner there. If you’re human, you’ll come out with your hands over your head, and slowly, or you will by-god die where you stand. You get me?”

I grinned again. *This guy’s been watching too much Full Metal Jacket.* “Yes, sir! Hands over my head and slowly, sir!”

I extended the rifle into view around the corner, keeping it pointed *away* from the squad, and lowered it to the ground. I held my hands up and inched around the corner, folding them atop my head as I walked forward, swallowing hard at the sight of no less than 10 M16’s pointed straight at my face.

I was about twenty yards away when the man spoke up again. “Alright, that’s far enough. Turn around.” I did so, barely moving. “You been bitten or otherwise wounded, son?”

“Yes, sir.” I closed my eyes as the rifles rose once more to the shoulders of the young soldiers in front of me, and I prayed that they wouldn’t fire as I yelled. “*Not bitten!* I got a piece of fence through my arm, sir, but I wasn’t bitten.”

“Take off your shirt. Slowly.”

Very carefully — and not just because my arm was throbbing by this point after holding it over my head for so long — I removed my jacket and shirt. “Went all the way through, sir.” I pointed out the entry and exit wounds, but he just looked at me.

“Well, if you’re lying, you’re dying, as they say. In any case, you’re a damn sight smarter than some of these jackasses I’ve got here,” he said, jerking a thumb in one grunt’s direction as he

rolled his eyes. From the anger I saw on his face, I guessed that was Jenkins.

“Alright, son, get over to the medic and get checked out,” he said. “They’ll let you...”

I interrupted him by fainting as I moved forward, the stress of the past two days — three now, as I noticed the sun coming up — finally catching up with the blood I’d lost. I noticed his name stitched on his uniform as I reached out for him, though.

It can be funny what goes through your mind as you’re passing out from stress and fear and blood loss; for me, it was a completely useless observation.

I’ve never met anyone named Maxwell before.

The massacre at Fall Creek changed everything.

With nearly 1,500 people dead, the cover-up was the most massive in AEGIS history. Along with all the civilians killed, the loss of the state troopers, national guard and soldiers in that action caused those in the know in the government to listen to what their military advisors had been telling them for years: that a corps of specially-trained and conditioned fighting men and women was needed specifically for these sorts of operations.

A classified Executive Order was issued establishing a secret Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, reporting only to the Secretary of Defense and the president. Containing elements of all four military branches, no expense was spared in the outfitting of these teams, their budgets so deeply buried by experts in red tape and secrecy that not even Congress could find them.

An experimental team was formed — a prototype for those that would come after — and began training in the new expanded AEGIS facilities at Fort Carson, Colorado.