

Cheating, Death

A Zombie Novel by
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Modern Evil Press
Phoenix

First Edition

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Published by Modern Evil Press, Phoenix, AZ

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-934516-05-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009910817

*For everyone who wanted
"a zombie novel"*

Contents

Chapter One	1
Trouble In Traffic	
Chapter Two	9
Breaking News	
Chapter Three	17
On the Road	
Chapter Four	25
Go With the Flow	
Chapter Five	37
Hysterics and Histrionics	
Chapter Six	47
Leaving Safety	
Chapter Seven	55
Taking, Chances	

Chapter Eight	67
Indecision, Separation	
Chapter Nine	75
Finding, Failure	
Chapter Ten	85
Turning Around	
Chapter Eleven	93
Together Again	
Chapter Twelve	101
Rejection, Revelation	
Chapter Thirteen	109
Death and Salvation	
Appendix Z	117
About the Zombies	

Chapter One

Trouble In Traffic

The sun slowly approached the horizon as the outskirts of Denver rose up over it to greet them and the truckload of zombies they had hauled halfway across the country already.

“The turnoff for the 470 should be coming up in a few miles,” said Russell from the passenger seat.

“Come on, man, we’re almost there,” insisted Carl. “If we go straight through Denver we save half an hour. Rush hour is over by now. We’ll be in and out in no time and off the roads that much faster.”

“If you’re getting tired, just say so. I can drive the last leg for you.”

Carl took another swallow from the energy drinks they’d both been drinking all day. “I’m not about to fall asleep, Russell, I just don’t see why we have to make things so difficult.” Even sticking to the posted speed limit, the truck was rapidly approaching an old Winnebago that puttered casually along in the right-hand lane. Carl checked his mirrors, signaled, and cautiously moved the truck into the left lane to pass. “I’m not suggesting we drive recklessly or do anything that could get us pulled over, just that we spend a little less time on the road.”

“Are you questioning the Sergeant’s orders?”

Cheating, Death

“This isn’t about orders, it’s about common sense.”

“Exactly. I have enough common sense to know that taking hundreds of zombies through the center of a densely populated area isn’t a good idea. Which is why the Sergeant ordered us to drive around them.”

“We didn’t drive around Omaha.” Carl watched a little red sports car come up fast behind him, and wondered whether the Winnebago had sped up to keep him from getting by. It felt like they were barely inching by the old, lumbering RV.

“Omaha’s not big enough to have an expressway built around it.”

“Don’t know why they call it an express when it takes longer.”

“When there’s traffic in the city it’s faster to go around. I thought you had experience driving trucks.”

The little red car had caught up with them and was stuck behind them, angrily weaving back and forth between the two lanes as though doing so would get them to pass faster. Carl tried to ignore it, stuck to the speed limit, and continued to gradually pass the Winnebago. “I’m driving the truck, aren’t I?”

Russell sighed. The Winnebago trundled off the highway at exit 21. Before Carl could begin to move the truck over, the sports car that had been buzzing around behind him shot past him on his right, only to get stuck almost immediately behind another pair of cars. The sports car began again to weave back and forth between lanes behind the cars that were keeping it from treating the highway like a raceway. “It wouldn’t get us finished any sooner, anyway. If we get to the camp ahead of schedule we’ll still have to wait our turn to be unloaded. You’ll be sitting in that seat the half-hour you think you’d be saving.”

“At least I wouldn’t be driving.” Carl swallowed the last of his energy drink, taking his eyes off the road for only a second or two to tip his head back for those final drops.

When his eyes returned to the road ahead of him he lost another second in disbelief before reacting. He was hurtling toward something terrible.

At least four cars Carl could make out were being smashed, turned around, turned over and worse, all on their own strange trajectories. The little red sports car was doing barrel rolls as it soared over the rest of the carnage, flipped like a tiddlywink into the air. His right hand still clutching the empty can, Carl pulled the wheel hard with his left, swerving the truck away from the unfolding pile-up while tossing the can Russell's direction. With both hands he tried to maintain control of the vehicle as it dropped off the road and into the median. The forty-five-thousand pounds of dead flesh in the container trailing behind them was reluctant to make such an immediate course correction.

As narrowly as the rear corner of the trailer missed the out-of-control sedan spinning after it into the median, Carl's ability to avoid oncoming traffic on the other side was very nearly enough. Nearly, but not quite, enough. The force of the impact with a speeding pickup was all that was needed to get his trailer to tip over. To tip over and to break open, spilling his cargo all over the road and the median in a spectacle that no one would survive to describe.



Melvin Spall looked anxiously at the setting sun in his rear view mirror, then back at the traffic in front of him. He was only a couple of miles from his exit, only minutes away from Barr Lake under normal traffic conditions. Mel could almost feel his blood pressure rising as the possibility of giving Stacy this one final sunset at the lake was taken away from him. They had never run into traffic on their way out to the lake before, not stand-still traffic.

There were no cars moving on his side of the road, and no cars at all on the other. In the distance he saw what

might have been smoke. They inched forward a few feet. He looked at the sun again, fat and orange behind them. "Looks like we're going to miss our sunset."

"Do you think there's been an accident?" Stacy was leaning back and forth in her seat, craning her neck, trying to see around the cars blocking their way.

"Have to be a pretty bad one to stop traffic in both directions," replied Mel. He wasn't thinking about the accident. He wasn't thinking about people who might be hurt or trapped in wrecked cars. He wasn't thinking about how beautiful Stacy was and how improbable that someone half his age would have chosen him to be with. He wasn't thinking about his wife and his children and yet another family dinner he was missing out on.

As Mel sat in traffic, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and giving the sun a dirty look, he was second-guessing himself. He was thinking that maybe he shouldn't stop seeing Stacy, after all. He was thinking that maybe the traffic keeping him from returning to the site of their first date to break it off with her was a sign. He was thinking that maybe he should leave his wife after all.

"I think I see people getting out of their cars." Stacy was leaning forward and up, straining against her safety belt, trying to get a look at what was going on. "Maybe we should turn around."

The sun was touching Denver in the rear view, and Mel's heart was learning just how easy it was to change allegiances, back and forth and back again. He leaned somewhat to the left and saw what she was talking about. There were definitely people out of their vehicles up ahead, and almost certainly a bad accident. Mel fingered the switch to lower his window, then leaned out for a better view.

The smell of smoke hit his nose as the vision of an injured victim became clear before his eyes, and Mel was sure it had been a serious crash. As he stared at the bloody, torn

clothes of the man shambling along in the distance, he tried to remember why he'd planned on leaving Stacy. Then he saw another victim, and another, stumbling along the median or in the road, all in bad shape. He didn't know why the injured were walking around; they should have remained where they were until paramedics arrived, but they seemed intent to wander aimlessly about. He couldn't think of a solid reason for ending the affair, nothing urgent, nothing immediate. One of them appeared to be limping along on a broken leg; Mel could clearly see a raggedly shattered bone jutting further from the flesh of its thigh with each awkward step. Bile rose in his throat.

Mel saw a few drivers, those nearer to these wandering traumas, leave the safety and privacy of their cars to try to offer assistance. He heard shouting, but couldn't make out what they were saying. He'd been seeing Stacy with an almost monotonous regularity for over a year. He could tell that the tone of the shouting had changed once the injured had been reached by their would-be saviors, and not for the better. He couldn't decide whether the regularity and ease with which he'd been having the affair made it feel comforting or boring. From where Mel sat, it appeared that the people who had been injured in whatever accident was up ahead had begun to attack those who had approached them to offer help, swinging at them, grabbing at them, even biting them.

Mel didn't know whether he wanted to stay with Stacy or to leave her, but he did know that she wouldn't want to see this. He'd learned early on not to take her to horror movies, and whatever it was that was going on in the traffic jam ahead of them was more disturbing than any special effects he'd seen on film. "It looks pretty bad up there, hon. Some people got pretty hurt in the accident. I'm going to turn around, but I don't want you to look, okay?" Stacy nodded, even as she sat down into her seat and put her head down

into her hands, covering her face. Sometimes she reminded him of his eight year old daughter, the way she hid herself from the things she didn't want to face.

As he pulled his SUV carefully out onto the median, thankful that after sixteen months of deliberation he'd decided on a model with true four-wheel drive, Mel couldn't decide whether he found it endearing or disheartening that he was dating someone who reminded him of his own child. Glancing over at her as he crossed onto the empty lanes that would take them back toward Denver, Mel was sure he must be imagining the scene playing out in the distance beyond her still-covered face. It didn't make sense to him that anyone, even people who were in shock after a horrific accident, would so violently attack those who tried to assist them.

The last glimpse he had of the carnage as it disappeared from his view reminded him only of a National Geographic special showing predatory animals hunched over and feasting on their bloody prey. He tried to convince himself he must have seen it wrong, that it was a group of heroes leaning over someone injured in the crash to help, but something in his mind wouldn't let go of the idea of predators eating prey. As he made his way back into town, apologizing to Stacy for their failed lakeside rendezvous, the enigma of what he'd seen totally distracted Mel from making any decision about his wife and his mistress at all.

After dropping Stacy off at home, the rest of the drive to his own driveway flashed by in an instant, as too-familiar drives so often do. The less-than-warm welcome Melvin received from his family made him question yet again why he'd been considering leaving Stacy and staying with Frances.

"You're early," his wife said without looking up from clearing the table after dinner. "I didn't make you any dinner. You should have let me know you were on your way."

"Sorry, dear." Melvin tried to help clear the table, but she batted his hands away and did the work herself. He gave up, walking toward the kitchen empty-handed, saying, "I

guess there was some sort of accident out by the airport that shut down the freeways. The client we were supposed to be meeting with over dinner is probably still stuck out at DIA, waiting for the roads to clear up, from what they told me.” Melvin knew the accident he’d seen wouldn’t have stopped traffic headed to or from the airport, but he was also pretty sure Frances wouldn’t look up the particulars. He opened the refrigerator and stared indecisively at its contents. “I’m sure I can find something to eat, dear.” As she noisily loaded the dishwasher without saying another word, Melvin had the impression Frances wasn’t really even listening to his excuse. He grabbed a random, unmarked container from the fridge, shoved it in the microwave, and hoped random chance would work out better than half an hour deliberating over leftovers.

The rest of the evening was simply a falling into step with their regular routine, and Melvin and Frances barely spoke two words to one another as they put their children to bed and later put themselves to bed. If Melvin had needed to make a decision about what he’d seen on the road that evening, it would have plagued him for days or weeks or more, going back and forth and over and over every detail and option he had to consider. Instead, free from having to choose, the entire horrible and disturbing scene had been wiped completely from his mind long before his head hit the pillow, and he dreamt pleasant dreams that night.

Chapter Two

Breaking News

“Is this footage real?” Sunny wanted to look away from the shaky footage being played for her, but couldn’t. “This can’t be real.”

“The police commissioner and the mayor won’t confirm or deny anything but what they gave us in the official statement, but videos like this one have been popping up all over the net.” Ted clicked over to the next video, and the next, as he spoke. “We’ve had over a dozen people try to sell us their videos, and dozens more just emailing their videos straight to us. Our servers are on the verge of crashing. If this is a hoax, there are hundreds, maybe thousands of people in on it, and all of them here in Denver.”

Sunny tried to keep from gagging as she watched someone get torn limb from limb on the grainy, low-light footage spooling out on the monitor. “How do we report this? Do we stick to the official statement? People won’t know what they’re facing out there.”

“We have to report the truth. We have to play the videos. Show them.”

“I don’t care how bad it is out there, you can’t broadcast that footage the way it is. We’ll lose our license.” Sunny was looking Ted hard in the eye, mostly to give herself a break from the carnage on the screen. “And we can’t say it’s zom-

bies. I mean, obviously it's zombies, but we can't say that. No one would believe us."

"But it's the truth. Look at that!" Ted pointed to a close-up shot of a being that could be nothing other than the walking dead trying to gnaw its way through someone's face. "Zombies. Roaming the streets, eating people. Eating people, Sunny!" Ted looked at the city's official statement as though it had somehow brought the dead to life on its own, and read from it incredulously. "This isn't just the 'risk of contamination from an unknown biological threat.' It's zombies. Simply telling people in the suburbs to evacuate isn't going to prepare them for what they're going to be encountering out there, and getting everyone else to head to the stadium is just going to get everyone killed faster."

"You don't seem to be handling this very professionally, Ted." Sunny placed a hand gently on his shoulder, to try to reassure him. "We have a duty, as journalists, to remain calm. If we look like we're panicked, then the public will panic, and a lot more people are going to die. We have to put on a brave face, Ted. We have to set an example."

Ted recoiled from her touch, turned, and walked away, still raving, "Oh, I'll set an example. You'll see. I'll show everyone what they ought to do," and he disappeared into his office and closed his door decisively.

Sunny shook her head and turned back to the monitor. She began sifting through all the footage they'd received, looking for a few seconds here and there that would show their audience what to expect without showing too much. She knew the footage was going to be airing throughout the morning, and that her cut of it and her performance would probably be rebroadcast over and over again, to audiences across the nation - perhaps across the globe. Sunny wasn't about to let Ted's panic attack ruin the future of her career in broadcasting.

When she heard a single gunshot ring out from Ted's office a few minutes later, Sunny stopped worrying about

how to barricade him in and keep him off the air. Instead she focused on crafting the perfect message and delivery for maximizing survival of Denver's citizens along with her own chances of getting an offer from national.



Eyes closed, clutching desperately at holding on to a few more minutes of sleep, Melvin reached out and hit the snooze button on his alarm clock. The phone continued to ring, even as he pressed the snooze button again and again, until Frances reached over past him to answer it.

"Hello?" Her voice belied both her grumpiness at being woken and her frustration at Melvin's failure to answer the phone himself, all in that single, short word. "What are you talking about, Marge? There's no news on at 3:30 in the morning." Melvin tried to pretend he was sleeping, but the phone's cord was stretched right across his face. "Alright, alright, I'm turning it on." Frances hung up the phone without saying goodbye, and grabbed the remote from the bedside table.

The television sprang to life, bathing them in its blueish glow. Frances clicked around until she found the news report Marge had called her so frantically about, and turned up the volume to hear what all the fuss was about.

"...not to panic. They recommend that citizens avoid contact with anyone who appears to be infected or injured. As you can see in this shocking footage, attempting to assist those who have been effected by this unknown biological threat only puts you -and your family- at risk. Let the police and the paramedics do their jobs while you focus on getting your loved ones to safety."

"Are you sure you have the right channel, dear? This is probably just some late-night horror flick." Even as he tried to dismiss it, Melvin sat up straighter and carefully watched

the snippets of footage rolling by in sharp contrast to the bright and peppy morning news anchor beside it on the TV.

“Of course it’s the right channel. That’s Sunny Preston. We watch her and Ted Seaver report the news every morning on Good Morning Denver. Now shush.”

“...evacuation plan. As you can see on the map, I-76 is still shut down, and while traffic is slowly making its way Eastbound on I-70, citizens with residences East of downtown are encouraged to head to Mile High Stadium to be screened and quarantined. Checkpoints have been set up on I-25 both North and South of Denver, and on I-70 both East and West of E-470. Traffic is moving slowly, but please remain in your vehicles with the windows up and the doors locked until you reach the checkpoints. Abandoning your vehicle on the road only puts other citizens at risk. Before you leave your homes, know your evacuation route and stick to it...”

Melvin and Frances watched on with bleary eyes as Sunny continued to dole out information about the government’s ill-conceived evacuation plans and the ‘unknown biological threat’ that she knew -but refused to say- was zombies. They continued to stare at the screen as Sunny’s message began to repeat, starting from the beginning “for those of you just joining us.” Melvin tried to convince himself that what he’d seen in traffic the previous evening was unrelated, that he hadn’t come within a few car lengths of being exposed to this ‘unknown biological threat’. He wanted to say something, to relate what he’d seen to Frances, but because of the circumstances that had put him so close to harm’s way, he kept his mouth shut. He wondered if anyone had called Stacy.

Several minutes later, after they’d watched Sunny go over the evacuation map a second time, Frances was about to turn off the set and get ready to evacuate, but Melvin put his hand up and said “Wait.”

“What, now? We’ve seen all this. We need to get on the road and—” Frances’ jaw dropped and only a dry croaking sound escaped her throat to finish her sentence. She dropped the remote.

On the screen, Sunny was being attacked by what she had referred to as the ‘contaminated’. She appeared to have been so focused on her performance, on keeping her eyes bright, shining, and fixed on the camera, that she hadn’t seen the monster coming for her. It was on top of her, gnawing on her, before she even began to scream. In a scene more brutal, violent, and explicit than anything her edited footage of the attacks had shown the viewing public, Sunny began to be consumed greedily by her own cameraman. In their struggle, the pair were thrown to the ground, their struggle continuing out of sight, the empty set and sounds of violence being broadcast without interruption. Melvin and Frances continued to watch in horror until Sunny’s kicking, flailing, and screaming from just out of frame was replaced by only the relentless sound of a zombie noisily eating its prey. Evacuation instructions continued to scroll by along the bottom of the screen. Anyone who tuned in too late might not know what the sounds being broadcast over the image of the empty studio represented, but Melvin and Frances knew. Frances was still frozen, jaw agape. Melvin reached out to the remote that had fallen from her hand and switched off the television, then watched her closely to see how she would react.

“We’ve got to wake the children,” she said finally. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Suddenly Frances was out of bed and frantic. She was pulling down luggage from the top shelf of the closet, digging through the dresser drawers, trying to operate somewhere between packing thoughtfully for a vacation and trying to grab the bare essentials on the way out of a burning building. Melvin was more calm, though not because he had any more

surety about what they would need or where they would go; he was simply used to operating indecisively, and calmly got dressed as though for any other day while his wife rushed back and forth and all around him, trying to make decisions that might effect them for hours, days or even weeks. She spoke quietly to herself as she did, mumbling, “if we end up stuck at the stadium, we’ll be freezing, but if we can get out of town we can drive to mother’s place in Albuquerque and we’ll need warm-weather clothes. What about shoes? Do you think we’ll need running shoes to get away from those things, or...”

Melvin went out to the kitchen and began making sandwiches. He didn’t know whether they’d be able to get through one of the checkpoints and away, or get quarantined and stuck at the stadium, but he figured that within a few hours it would be breakfast time and they’d all be hungry, wherever they were. Melvin couldn’t remember whether his daughter preferred ham or turkey, or what kind of cheese his son was always refusing to eat, so he just made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for everyone. He packed them into a cooler with some apples and a couple of juice boxes, then went to wake up the children.

When he got to their bedroom, both Mike and Maddy were sitting up in bed, rubbing their eyes, awakened by their mother’s frantic packing of their cute, technicolor bags.

“What’s going on?” asked Madeline.

“Are we going somewhere?” asked Michael.

“You’ve got it, kid,” replied Melvin, “We’re going on a trip. It looks like Mom is packing your bags, so you two just have to get dressed, and we can go.”

“Where are we going?” asked Michael as he climbed out of bed and stumbled over to his open, half-empty dresser.

“What about school?” asked Madeline, still sitting in bed, her head following Frances’ frantic footsteps back and forth across the floor of the room.

“No school today, Maddy. Now come on, get up.” Melvin lifted Madeline up out of bed and carried her over to her dresser. “What do you want to wear, today? It’s going to be pretty cold outside, so we’ve all got to bundle up.”

“I’m tired,” complained Madeline, “Why do we have to go so early?”

“It’s like a race. Everyone in town is trying to go, and if we wait too long, we won’t be able to.” Melvin set her down out of the path of Frances’ still-frenzied and mumbling form. “So hurry up and get ready, okay?”

Madeline nodded, and started digging through what was left in her drawers, looking for something nice to wear in case they won the race. She knew winners were always on TV after a race, and Madeline didn’t want her friends at school to make fun of her for wearing the wrong outfit on TV. Michael was already dressed, and didn’t seem to mind that no two pieces of his multi-layered outfit matched in the slightest. “Good job, Mike. That sure looks like a warm outfit, to me.”

“And fast, huh dad?”

“And fast. Now don’t forget your shoes.”

Michael looked down at his feet, then back up to meet Melvin’s eyes, then smacked his palm comically against his forehead, shook his head, and began searching the room for his always-hastily-kicked-off shoes. Melvin didn’t know where his son got his sense of humor from, but couldn’t help but find it endearing. He got down on his hands and knees and looked under the bed and all over for the tiny, missing footwear.

Chapter Three

On the Road

“**Y**ou can go.” Officer Smalls waved the car through, and by this point in the night he wasn’t surprised at all by their squealing tires and rapid getaway. These people didn’t have anything to hide, they were simply running for their lives, trying to get away from the massacre while they still could. He clenched and re-clenched his fist and grimaced in pain. His arm hadn’t felt right since that first contaminated citizen had bitten him. With a stiff movement, he waved the next car in his line forward.

“May I see your license, ma’am?” The driver of the car, who had been warned by bullhorn-weilding peace officers for the last half-mile about what to expect, handed her license out to him in an instant. Officer Smalls liked it when things went smoothly. He gave her license a passing glance as he asked her, “How many people are traveling with you this morning, Ms. Levesque?” He could see a teenage boy in the seat beside her and a toddler in the car-seat in the back. He shined his flashlight directly into the boy’s eyes.

“Just my two sons, officer.”

The woman sounded nervous, but so had everyone else who had come through the checkpoint since the Mayor had issued evacuation orders. “Have any of you come in contact with the contaminated, ma’am?”

Cheating, Death

“You mean the zombies?” The boy wasn’t nervous. He sounded excited at the prospect of encountering the walking dead.

Ms. Levesque’s head snapped briefly, angrily, at her son. “No, officer. We haven’t seen anything but what they showed on the news.”

Risking his mother’s wrath, the teenager couldn’t help but ask, “Have you seen them? This is so cool! Zombies. In my town!”

Officer Smalls handed the license back and waved them on without going through the rest of the questions he was supposed to ask. “You can go,” was all he said as he struggled to stay upright. Suddenly he was feeling extremely light-headed, and there was a pain in his gut. A pain like intense hunger, but beyond that in a way that made him nauseous. The next car in line pulled up next to him, a hand already extended out the driver’s side window, offering a license. This driver was in a hurry.

Officer Smalls put one arm out and steadied himself by leaning on the top edge of the car. He was looking straight down at the impatient arm holding an out-of-state driver’s license. An offering to him. For a moment it was as though he wasn’t sure what was happening, or what he ought to do. His vision became unfocused. If he hadn’t been leaning on the car, the officer would probably have stumbled, perhaps even fallen. Then he remembered what he was supposed to do, and reached out to take the driver’s offering.

Another officer had begun approaching when he’d noticed Officer Smalls leaning over a car for longer than he usually took with anyone, thinking there must be something suspicious about the vehicle. Before the second officer realized what was going on, it was too late. With a firm grip on the driver’s arm, Officer Smalls sank his teeth deep into its flesh and tore back with all the strength he had. Screams and blood erupted like a fountain, but Officer Smalls didn’t mind. As fast as he could swallow the first mouthful of flesh,

another arm was being stretched out toward him as though in offering and he gladly bit down on it. The second officer had been reaching out to stop him, but had only given him something else to chew on.

More and more people began to see what was happening, and to react. People waiting near the front of the lines tried either to make a break for it or to turn around to escape the zombie cops. Police officers were shooting haphazardly; at unchecked cars trying to flee, at Officer Smalls, and a few out of total panic, without any clear targets. Cars crashing into one another, fires erupting, people abandoning their cars to flee on foot, people dying and contaminated people returning to life turned the freeway checkpoint from a bastion of order to a maelstrom of chaos in a matter of seconds. Anyone more than a few car lengths away couldn't really see what was going on, but all who stayed there went from waiting for a chance to be saved to waiting in line to be consumed by a new and violent epicenter of the outbreak.



“You two finish your breakfast while I put the luggage in the car, okay?” Frances had insisted that they all eat breakfast before leaving home, and after seeing that the look in her eye hadn't altered a whit since they'd switched off the news, Melvin didn't argue with her. It hadn't slowed them down too much, since Mike and Maddy were racing each other every step of the way, now. Melvin liked it that they got along so well, even though the two of them couldn't be any more different.

He peeked outside before opening the door, and didn't see anything unusual. It looked just like his front yard at four in the morning on any other day. Still, Melvin was cautious. He opened the door quickly, lifted the two big bags outside, and shut the door again as fast as he could. From his front step he hit the remote keyless entry button on his key-

chain, then picked up the luggage with both hands and ran to the back of the SUV. As though he were actually in the race his children played at being in, Melvin sped through the motions of opening the back, securing the bags, and locking the car again.

From the driveway, Melvin saw his neighbor apparently buckling his son, little Stevie, into his car seat. He waved quickly, shouted, "Morning, Steve!" and turned to run back inside without waiting for response. Melvin assumed Steve would be just as stressed out as he and Frances were, and wouldn't want to stop and chat. When he was inside again with the door shut firmly behind him, Melvin saw that breakfast had been finished and everyone was ready to go.

"Everyone ready?" They nodded. "Good. Frances, I didn't see anything... amiss outside, but let's not take any chances. You get Mike and Maddy buckled in as fast as you can, while I get the rest of the bags in the car. Okay?" Everyone nodded again. Melvin got down on one knee in front of his children. "Mike, Maddy, this is part of the race, too, so I need you both to get in the car and get ready to go as fast as you can, okay?" With the cutest little looks of absolute seriousness on their faces, Melvin's children nodded to him again. He couldn't resist ruffling Mike's hair as he stood, receiving a "Daaaad" of consternation in response.

Melvin peeked out front again, said "Here we go," and opened the door. He hit the remote again as the others ran to the car, locked the door behind them, and grabbed the last of the bags. Madeline was in her seat, buckled up, and had her door closed before Melvin even reached the back of the SUV. As he loaded the cooler and the kids' bags into the back, he noticed that Steve was still leaning into his own car. He shut his rear gate and asked, "Still having trouble with the straps on that car seat, Steve?"

Which was when Steve came running out his own front door with a pistol in hand. Whoever was leaning over little Stevie in the back seat of Steve's car, it wasn't Steve.

“Frances, we have to go, now,” Melvin said forcefully, running around to the driver’s side door. Steve started shooting at the figure leaning into his car, which was the first time it seemed to notice anything but little Stevie. Melvin could see that it was one of the undead, he could see the blood drenching its face, its neck, its whole front like a great, red bib, and he could see what was left of little Stevie, strapped into the back of Steve’s car. Melvin raised his voice even louder, to be sure he was heard over the poorly aimed gunshots ringing out only a few feet away, “NOW, FRANCES, NOW!”

Melvin leapt into the driver’s seat. He slammed the door shut behind him with one hand and slammed the key into the ignition with the other. He heard another car door close and his wife screaming “Go, go, go!” and Melvin sped out of his driveway without looking away from the road in front of him to see whether everyone was in the car. He was reacting faster than he could ever have thought things through, or decided what to do. It wasn’t until the sound of gunshots abruptly ceased behind them that Melvin looked in the rear view and saw Steve being overcome by the monster that he’d mistaken for the man.

After turning a corner and putting that carnage out of sight, Melvin’s pulse began to slow down a little until he noticed that his wife wasn’t sitting next to him. Her seat was empty. He looked over his shoulder and was relieved to see Frances, looking shell-shocked, in the back seat with the kids. He realized she must have leapt in and shut the door when she’d heard the gunshots, more worried about getting away from danger than her own comfort. “Do you want to move up front, dear?” he offered.

“Don’t stop the car,” was all she said. Her eyes were unfixed, staring into the middle distance, and rarely blinked. Melvin kept driving.

It wasn’t until he’d been driving for several minutes that Melvin realized he didn’t know where he was supposed to be driving. He and Frances hadn’t had a chance to discuss

it before they'd left. From everything he'd seen, he doubted it would be safe anywhere near downtown Denver, but the nearest road out of town was the I-76. The blockage of which, he realized, was probably where all this madness had begun. Melvin couldn't make up his mind. He couldn't decide what to do, where to go, or how to protect his family. He felt assured by the scene in his neighbor's yard that they'd done the right thing by fleeing, but beyond that was a fog.

By allowing his hands and feet to steer the SUV without a real destination, Melvin soon saw that he'd brought his family to the street where Stacy lived. It had been automatic. As he passed by Stacy's home, Mel couldn't help but stare at her darkened windows and wonder whether she'd already left or she hadn't been alerted to the danger. In the rush to get his family ready to go and out the door he hadn't been able to call her, himself. For most of a second, Mel considered stopping to save her and his foot let up on the gas. As they came up next to Stacy's unlit house though, Melvin's head turned far enough that he saw Frances in the back seat. Their eyes locked. His foot pressed down hard on the gas. His hands took the next turn.

When he turned his head back to face the road, the first sign he saw was for the Eastbound I-70. He pretended, even to himself, that this was where he'd been heading all along and soon they merged into the apparently endless line of vehicles that all shared the idea. Melvin got in line, got in a lane, and idled slowly forward with his fellow evacuees. Long before the sun began to lighten the horizon ahead of them, Michael and Madeline had fallen back to sleep.

After Melvin saw he'd burned a quarter-tank of gas to travel less than a mile and still wasn't to the freeway's on-ramp, he thought he might have made the wrong decision. He began second-guessing himself. He tried to calculate how long it would take to get out of town at their current rate of travel. He tried to remember how many people the stadium

could hold. He planned out various routes that might be clear to get to the stadium from where they were stuck in a seemingly frozen line of traffic. He thought he saw people out of their cars up ahead. He thought he saw something that reminded him of—

Melvin pulled the SUV out of traffic, driving up over a curb and across a sidewalk to do so. He crossed an empty parking lot, turned down an alley, and found an empty street to take him away from the line of cars he'd realized were merely waiting for death. The sudden activity seemed to rouse Frances' attention, and before she could ask he said, "I've changed my mind. We'll head to Mile High Stadium. It'll be safer, there."

In the growing daylight, Melvin could see that Denver already looked half-dead itself. There were cars abandoned on nearly every road, some wrecked, but most left with a door open and an idling engine as though their owners had expected to return to them after only a moment. More shocking than the cars left on the roads were all the cars that weren't there - Denver's normal morning traffic was missing; the only roads that were clogged were the ones leading out of town. Most shocking of all was the pedestrian traffic that grew denser and denser the nearer Melvin drove to the center of town, and he stayed as far from them as he safely could.

The sidewalks, the roads, even people's yards and city parks, were populated by the walking dead. Perhaps one in three were feasting on the recently deceased. Not even a single person he saw appeared to have survived the night. Melvin hoped they'd reach the stadium without incident, and without his children waking up to see the horrors taking place all around them. He hoped there were survivors there, someone to protect them. He hoped he'd made the right decision.

Chapter Four

Go With the Flow

Sarah heard someone at the window, and fumbled frantically to get her sweater back on over her head, whispering “Gotta go,” as she clicked the webcam off just before being discovered.

“What are you doing in my bedroom?” asked Johnnie in the most accusatory whisper he could muster.

“What are you doing sneaking out in the middle of the night?” Sarah replied with appropriate snark. They continued to argue in a loud whisper.

“I’m not sneaking out, I’m sneaking in.” He shut the window behind him.

“You know what I mean.”

“At least I’m not doing a striptease on the internet. Your sweater is on backwards, by the way.” Johnnie pulled his own sweater off over his head.

Sarah quickly reversed her sweater. “It wasn’t a striptease! Bert and I were just... chatting.”

“Sarah, you were half-dressed when I got here. That’s the strip. And you’re doing it over the internet; that’s the tease. Strip, tease.” Johnnie shook his head, adjusting his

desk lamp to examine a large, fresh set of tooth imprints on his upper arm. The wound was rapidly bruising.

“Hey, at least I don’t have to worry about Bert leaving marks on me this way. You and Francis are getting pretty kinky.”

“He prefers to be called Frankie, and no, Frankie didn’t do this.”

“Frankie? As in ‘Frankie and Johnnie’? You do know Frankie kills Johnnie in the song, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m not cheating on him, am I?”

“Until you meet someone new. How many boys have you been through this semester?” Johnnie shot his sister a look so cold that only the most emo of his friends could have matched it. She couldn’t help but flinch away. “So if it wasn’t Frankie, who bit you?”

Johnnie poked and prodded at the wound, making faces of exaggerated pain. “Some crazy homeless guy. I was on my way back home, taking the shortcut behind the bowling alley, y’know?” Sarah nodded. “And this bum jumps out from behind a dumpster and just attacks me. He must have been totally out of it; he didn’t say anything or try to grab my wallet, he just kept growling and snapping his teeth at me. I thought he was gonna take a chunk out of my arm.”

“How did you get away?”

“I’m skinny, and I spend half my free time ‘wrestling’ with twinks and jocks. I’ve out-wrestled half the varsity wrestling team.”

“Eww! I don’t need details.”

“Suffice it to say, I know how to come out on top, and this guy was no wrestling star. As soon as I was out of his grip I started running, and when I looked back he wasn’t following me. For all I know he’s still there, waiting for someone else to walk by so he can take a bite out of them, too.”

“Gross.”

“Do you think he had rabies?” Johnnie was still poking at his bruised arm.

“You’d better hope not. You’re supposed to be in your bed sleeping, not hanging out behind a bowling alley getting chewed on by bums.”

“And you’re supposed to be in your bed sleeping, not sneaking into your brother’s room to expose yourself on camera for all the world to see.”

“It’s not all the world, it’s just Bert, and I wouldn’t have to sneak around if Mom and Dad would give me my own computer!”

“You think Cuthbert isn’t recording all your little webcam sessions?” Johnnie made sure he pronounced her boyfriend’s name with special emphasis. “You think he isn’t showing you off to all his buddies from down at the country club?” He rolled his eyes. “Like coming from a good family makes him any less of a guy?”

“He prefers to be called Bert, and he’s not like that!”

“All guys are like that. Was doing this stuff over the internet his idea, or yours—” Johnnie’s head snapped toward the door, his voice lowered to a much gentler whisper. “Wait, did you hear that?”

“What time is it?”

“A little after two.”

“Shoot. I’d meant to be back in my own room by now. Dad’s been getting up every night at two and puttering around, lately.”

“Puttering around?”

“Eating, watching TV, sometimes just wandering around the house. I assume he has insomnia or something.”

“Is your window unlocked? Maybe you can sneak around.”

“I only leave it unlocked when I sneak out that way.”

Then they both heard a noise on the other side of the bedroom door. The sound of laughter. Applause. He’d turned on the television. Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. “Good luck,” Johnnie whispered as his sister snuck out into the hallway.

“You too. You’d better hope that doesn’t get infected.” Sarah shut Johnnie’s door silently behind her and tip-toed back to her own room. Both teens were asleep within minutes, and they each got about an hour’s rest before being woken by hard, harried knocking at their bedroom doors.

“John! Sarah! Wake up! Get dressed! We’re leaving in ten minutes, with or without you,” their father shouted to them through their doors. Johnnie could tell by the tone of his father’s voice that he was serious, and was out of bed and dressed in seconds. If the house were on fire they wouldn’t have had ten minutes, but the tone of his voice was certainly as serious as a fire.

Johnnie grabbed his messenger bag, made sure everything was in it, and ran out to see what was going on. His sister and his mother were already standing, slack-jawed, before the big flat-screen in the living room and Johnnie was soon doing the same. As he watched Sunny Preston giving her report as though this were any other news day, Johnnie absentmindedly put his hand on his arm where he’d been bitten.

“What are you all standing around for? We’ve gotta get out of here. Are you ready?” Johnnie’s father burst in through the front door as though he’d been expecting them outside already.

“Where are we going?”

“The National Guard are set up at the stadium. I trust them more than I trust our chances out on the open road.” He switched the TV off and headed back to the door. “Now. We’ve got to go now. The stadium holds less than a hundred thousand people. We don’t want to be turned away.” He didn’t wait to see whether they were following; he just ran out to the already-idling car and jumped in.

A few minutes later, Johnnie’s father was telling the guard at the entrance to the stadium that none of them had encountered the contaminated, and Johnnie tried not to touch the throbbing wound on his arm as the guard shined

his flashlight at him in the backseat. Sarah had been trying to get him to say something about it since she'd seen the news, but he kept giving her that look that turned the blood in her veins to ice. Johnnie's intense stare kept Sarah quiet as they were waved through into the stadium's parking lot and their father declared "Nothing to worry about, now. The National Guard will protect us, here."

Johnnie was neither the first, nor by far the last, to hide their zombie-related injuries in order to get into the stadium. He was simply the first of them to turn, not long after the sun had come up.



The sun had fully risen over the horizon by the time Melvin reached the trafficades keeping him from getting within a couple of blocks of Mile High Stadium. Again Melvin found himself glad he'd invested in a capable SUV as he drove up onto the sidewalk to get around the barrier. As soon as he did so, two humvees and a dozen uniformed gentlemen carrying firearms seemed to appear out of nowhere to stop him. Being the first living people he'd seen since leaving the traffic jam trying to get out of town, Melvin was happy to be stopped at gunpoint by them.

He rolled down his window and addressed them, "My family and I are looking for someplace safe to go. The I-70 is totally—"

One of the men cut him off, "Don't you have a radio in that thing?" Melvin nodded, though he hadn't turned it on all morning. "We've been at capacity since 4AM, sir. No room. You're supposed to stay in your home. I'm going to need you to turn around."

"They've already got to my neighborhood. They ate my neighbors. It's just my wife and I and our two small children," and Melvin hit the switch to roll down the rear window so the soldiers could get a good look at his fam-

ily. He didn't want to have to try to come up with a new plan, to make a new decision about what to do. "Surely you have room for us. We brought our own food. Can't we work something out?"

The soldier's face remained unsympathetic, and the others he'd arrived with were keeping a diligent watch on the street behind them, refusing to make eye contact with yet another family being turned away from the promise of their protection. Shaking his head, the young soldier was about to turn them away a little more forcefully when his radio squawked and spoke his name. Melvin looked back over his shoulder at his wife, still near-catatonic, while the soldier spoke indecipherable jargon into his radio. The brief conversation seemed to take minutes, as he awaited a judgment against him.

"If you're willing to turn over your vehicle to us, we'll let you in."

"You want ... my SUV?" After spending a year and a half in search of the perfect vehicle, Melvin was wary of letting it go. "Don't you have humvees and ... I don't know, tanks?"

"We're lining up civilian vehicles to create a secure perimeter, and we need vehicles that fit a certain profile. Trucks, vans, SUVs, and other large vehicles." He leaned toward Melvin and lowered his voice a little. "Honestly, sir, if your neighborhood has already been taken over by those things this is your best chance. We haven't heard a word from any of the outbound checkpoints in over half an hour, so there's no getting out. As far as civilians are concerned, this is the last safe place in Denver."

"You aren't giving me much of a choice."

"You want to save your kids' lives?"

"Fine, fine, you can have it. Where do we need to go?"

The soldier gave a hand signal as he spoke, "Get your family out of the vehicle and Private Torres will escort the four of you to the stadium and be sure you aren't stopped by any other patrols."

“Wait, you’re going to make us walk?” Private Torres tried to open the back door next to Madeline, but found it locked. “It’s got to be half a mile to the stadium from here.”

The soldier Melvin had been speaking to raised his weapon slightly; not enough to be aiming it at them, but enough to remind them it was there. “Unlock your doors, please, sir. No need to make this difficult.”

“You can trust us, sir. We’re the National Guard.” Private Torres spoke without a hint of threat or irony in his voice. Melvin reluctantly unlocked the doors.

“We’ve got some stuff in the back—”

Another soldier was already pulling Melvin out of the driver’s seat, preparing to drive it away. “Only what you can carry, sir.” Melvin ran around to the back of the SUV and pulled his kids’ bags and the cooler out just in the nick of time. His SUV, the humvees, and all but one soldier were gone as quickly as they’d first appeared. Melvin tried to keep his wits about him, tried to put on a brave face for Mike and Maddy.

He handed Michael’s bag to Frances, and knelt down to strap Madeline’s bag onto her back, almost glad his inability to decide between luggage and backpacks for his children had led him to luggage that could be worn as backpacks. “Are you ready for the next part of the race, Maddy? We’ve got to get to the stadium. Everyone’s waiting for us.” She nodded, still half asleep.

He looked over to see that Frances was just standing there, holding Michael’s bag, staring at the space their car had filled moments ago. Without missing a beat he shifted over to where Michael was standing and, taking the bag from his wife’s ineffectual hand, strapped it on his son’s back. “How about you, Mike? Are you up for a foot race? This nice soldier is gonna make sure we keep pace. Do you think you can keep up?” Michael nodded excitedly, even as he yawned.

Melvin stood, turned to his wife, and took her by the hand. “Frances?” She turned her head in his direction, but without seeing him at all. “Frances, we’ve got to walk the rest of the way.” He couldn’t tell if her head was nodding acknowledgement or just bobbing, part of her trance. Holding her hand in one of his and grabbing the cooler with the other, Melvin nodded to the soldier and they all started walking down the middle of the empty street. Frances stumbled along, her eyes glazed over and her face expressionless. If not for her lack of appetite for the flesh of her family, she might easily have been mistaken for one of the zombies they were trying to escape.

As they moved along from checkpoint to checkpoint under the watchful eye of the National Guard and what remained of the Denver Police, Melvin got again to thinking. Seeing how his wife was coping with being safely escorted to and then through the safest part of the city, Melvin wondered where Stacy was, and how she was coping with the situation. He wondered whether she was still alive at all. He wondered if he’d made the right decision when he’d driven past Stacy’s place without stopping. Twelve hours earlier, Melvin had changed his mind about ending his affair with her, and now he was considering whether he should have endangered his marriage to try to save her. Then they reached the stadium, and he saw that they really were at capacity.

Invesco Field at Mile High could comfortably seat about seventy-six thousand fans during a football game. Melvin had attended a game or two since its opening and knew what that many people looked like. As he entered the stadium and Private Torres left their side, Melvin estimated that there must be two or three times as many people crammed into the place that morning. The stadium seats were full, the field was full, and all the stairs, the wide corridors, and every horizontal surface a person could get to seemed to be occupied by terrified refugees from the zombie outbreak. It took

Melvin's family nearly forty-five minutes to find a place to sit down, out on the edge of the grass. When they did, Frances was still in a daze, but Michael and Madeline had been having fun leading her around, each holding one of her hands.

When they'd finally settled into their few square feet of grass, Melvin told them, "Now you two be good and watch Mommy while I go to the bathroom. Don't let her wander off, okay?" They smiled and nodded, never letting go of their mother's hands. He looked Frances right in the eye and thought there was a spark of understanding there, that he was leaving her to watch the kids for a few minutes, and he didn't wait around for her to give a coherent response. Melvin trusted that Michael and Madeline would be safe as long as they stayed with their mother.

As soon as he was out of sight and out of hearing range of his family, Mel took out his phone and tried to call Stacy. The first ring was a relief that the phone networks were still functional. The second ring was a relief that Stacy's phone was on; it hadn't gone straight to voicemail. The third ring was okay. The fourth ring was a little worry. The fifth ring was a sinking feeling in his chest. After the fifth ring Mel heard a click, but no greeting.

"Hello?"

Mel thought he heard the sound of an engine roaring to life.

"Hello?"

There was a distant, hard thump. A crunch. The sound of squealing brakes.

"Stacy? Are you there?"

A loud, close sound, as though the phone had been dropped, and then Mel's phone beeped to let him know the call had been disconnected. He hit the green 'Send' button twice to redial, and it didn't even ring; it went straight to voicemail. He hung up and tried again. It went straight to voicemail again. Mel tried a third time, and heard the

Cheating, Death

annoying tones and nasal voice of a pre-recorded operator telling him all lines were busy and he should try his call again later. He hit 'End'.

Mel stared at his phone with anger, fear, and contempt, willing it to work, willing Stacy to call him back, to be all right, to be alive and more aware of her surroundings than his wife. Mel was seriously beginning to second-guess his decision to save Frances without regard for Stacy's well-being. In the long moment Mel stood there staring at the phone in his hand, he felt ready to rush out into the streets of Denver, to find his young lover, and to do whatever it took to save and to protect her from this and all other threats to her safety in the world. Then his phone rang.

"Hello? Stacy? Are you okay?"

"Mel? Where are you?"

"I'm at the stadium with my—" Mel cut himself off, quickly repeated himself, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Mel. I'm fine. I was trying to get to my mother's place, but..." Mel thought he heard the sound of an engine roaring to life again, and another distant crunching thump in the space where Stacy couldn't find the words to speak. "...I was too late."

"I'm sorry, Stacy." Mel didn't know what to say. He hadn't really known Stacy's mother; she'd thought bringing the married man she was having an affair with around to meet her mother was less than wise. Now it was too late. Mel was straining to hear whether Stacy was speaking softly, or crying, or both, and covered his ears with his hands, pressing his phone against his head. "You're still okay, though, right? You're going to get through this thing, Stacy."

"I know, Mel, it's just... It's my mom." Now she was definitely crying. With his ears covered, straining to hear Stacy, Mel was aware that the noise level in the stadium was rising, but didn't look up to see why. "I'm not ready to lose her, Mel. I'm too young."

Mel could barely make out Stacy's voice, and people

were bumping into him with a lot more force than if it were merely due to the crowdedness of the stadium. They were running. They were all running. They were all running in the same direction. Mel was caught in a stampede. “Stacy, I’ve got to go! Something’s happen-” Mel’s phone was knocked from his hand mid-word and lost immediately underfoot. Three times as many people as should have been allowed entrance to the stadium were trying to get out of it at once. The few of them who could shape their terrified screams into coherent sounds announced that there were zombies in the stadium, eating people. Melvin remembered that Mike and Maddy were inside and he began fighting against the torrential flow of people trying to escape.

Melvin was pushed and pulled, battered and bruised and cursed as he fought against the crowd, searching for Frances’ face among them, hoping his family was still safe. When he finally caught sight of his wife’s face, she seemed to be standing right where he’d left her, with the same look of shock on her face she’d had since she’d seen Sunny Preston devoured on live TV. Melvin continued to force his way to her side, struggling for inches of progress in the bottleneck of the opening to the field, and then breaking free and rushing to Frances.

“Frances, we have to go.” He grabbed her and shook her, trying to get her attention. “Frances, somehow zombies got into the stadium. Where are Mike and Maddy? We have to get them out of here.” She didn’t speak, but she moved one arm, raised it, pointed. Melvin’s gaze followed it.

The trampled, crushed, mangled and bloodied body of his only son was being worked slowly into the soft earth by thousands of fear-crazed feet, fleeing. Madeline was nowhere to be seen. Melvin took his wife’s outstretched arm and, hoping his daughter had been safely pulled along with the crowd, dragged Frances into the outward flow of bodies. Melvin tried to avoid stepping on Michael’s remains as they passed by, but he didn’t look back once they had.

Chapter Five

Hysterics and Histrionics

From his seat high up in the nosebleed section, the sudden movement of the people on the field looked remarkably more like a stirred-up ant hill than Alvin had really expected. As those around him were reacting in fear and confusion, he couldn't help but laugh out loud at the sight of it. Then he was swept up in the flow of people who were sure that if those down on the field were so desperate to escape, it must be time to go. They weren't content to politely step by the occasional person without their instant conviction to leave; all were forced into motion or were trampled underfoot.

Narrow walkways and steep stairs that had been designed with a calm and orderly procession of usually-inebriated sports fans in mind became death traps when mixed with a panicked mob. Anyone who didn't move fast enough was knocked down, pushed down, even thrown aside. Bodies tumbling downward collided catastrophically with those in lower rows, creating a snowball effect of lost footing, flailing limbs, and further falling.

Serious injury, near death and death all seemed to speed the transformation of the hundreds of people in the crowd who had been hiding their contamination by the undead. In the madness of the mob, few noticed that some of the fallen who stood back up and re-joined them were biting and claw-

ing indiscriminately at everyone within their reach. In the crush of bodies, everyone was being battered, bruised, and worse; they barely noticed being bitten. Soon hundreds of contaminated became hundreds of zombies and those hundreds contaminated thousands more.

Alvin was still laughing as he was pulled along with the crowd. When he saw that some of those around him, fleeing without even knowing why, were the very monsters the mob thought it was escaping, he laughed even louder. When he felt teeth sink into his skin, Alvin's incredulous laughter turned hysterical.



Like a fluid under pressure, the force of the crowd's momentum reduced immediately as the threshold was crossed to the wide open space of the stadium's parking lot. Eventually the dispersing mob reached an equilibrium, trying to keep its distance both from the zombies beyond the military-secured perimeter and the zombies they believed were in the stadium. Among hundreds of thousands of confused and upset people, dozens of zombies and those they'd already attacked, and hundreds of over-worked military and police officials trying to maintain order, Melvin had to try to find his missing daughter.

"Madeline!" He shouted at the top of his lungs, true desperation coming through loud and clear as he repeated her name, "Madeline!"

Melvin had watched the ground carefully on their way out. There had been plenty of adults injured or killed by the stampeding crowds, but none of them were his little girl. He'd seen what was left of his phone scattered by uncaring feet, broken into useless shards of glass and hunks of plastic. He'd hoped to find even so little as a glimpse of something she'd dropped, to tell him he was heading in the correct

direction, but there was nothing. When he got out to the parking lot and looked out over the undulating sea of people, each twice his daughter's height, he screamed out in despair, "Madeline!"

Face turned up to the heavens, eyes clenched closed, screaming out more in a desperate plea to the universe than in any expectation that she would hear him, Melvin called her name out, over and over and over again until his throat turned hoarse and his lungs burned and he couldn't help but double over in pain, coughing hard and wiping tears from his eyes. Something about the situation or in Melvin's display of rough, raw emotion seemed to get through to Frances; when his coughing fit slowed down and he began to return to standing, her hand was on his shoulder. He looked up, looked into her eyes, and saw that she was actually looking back this time. Melvin smiled.

"Where are Mike and Maddy?" she asked, innocently.

Melvin stood straight up, looked his wife straight in the eye, and didn't know how to give her a straight answer. "Michael is..." He tried to put it delicately, "Michael is gone, and Madeline is missing. She's probably somewhere out in the crowd, looking for us."

"You lost them?" Frances was beginning to become upset.

"When I left them with you, everything was okay."

The tone of her voice had become the belligerent one Melvin was accustomed to, "You left them? You left my children alone in the middle of..." She faltered, "...zombies could have..."

Melvin tried to raise his voice, to match her tone, but it came out rough, hoarse. "I left them with you, Frances. They were with you. For the first five minutes in over five hours, they were out of my sight, and you couldn't even hold their hands. You."

"Don't you dare try to put this on me, Melvin. You know I was in no state of mind to protect them. You should

have known better than to leave them behind. What was so urgent that it couldn't wait until your own children were safe?"

"They were safe, Frances. I spent all morning trying to get them someplace safe. I traded away the SUV to get them past the National Guard who tried to turn us away. I watched over all three of you, kept you all safe, even found you a nice spot on the grass to rest your legs in the middle of the only safe place left in the entire city. When I left them in your hands, Frances, they were safe."

"And now where are they? Michael is 'gone'?" Frances made finger quote-marks in the air to mock him. "What do you mean he's 'gone'?"

"You want to know? You really want to know what I mean?" Melvin grabbed Frances roughly by the arm and began dragging her back toward the stadium. "I'll show you."

"What are you doing, Melvin?" Frances fought back against him, tried to dig in her heels. The crowd mingling around, which had been watching their argument unfold, did nothing to stop them. "Where are you taking me?"

"I'm taking you to see what happened to Michael when I left him with you. I'm going to show you what a good mother you've been to him."

"Look, Melvin, we don't have to go in there. I mean," she was looking around, trying to make eye contact with any of the strangers watching her get dragged back into the stadium, but they avoided her gaze. It was clear to her that no one wanted to get too near to the stadium, and she could guess why, "if there are zombies in there, I mean, you don't have to..."

"I do have to do this, Frances. I want you to see what I mean by 'gone'. I want you to know what you're accusing me of." Soon, Melvin had dragged Frances out of sight of even those closest to the entrance, and everyone went back to minding their own business. They didn't even flinch when they heard Frances' screams echoing off the huge concrete

walls of the stadium.

“That. That is what ‘gone’ means, Frances. Someone in the crowd shouted ‘zombie’ and everyone started running at once and from the looks of it, you couldn’t even get Michael to standing before they trampled him to death. Don’t look away, Frances. Look at him. See what ‘gone’ means. See what happened when I left you alone with your own children for five minutes. Look!”

She was trying to look away, trying to turn away, to close her eyes, to do anything but see the mangled mess that was left of her son. Frances didn’t have anything solid to heave up, but she retched at the sight of him. She didn’t see the zombies still wandering around, here and there, snacking on the freshly dead bodies of those who hadn’t fared any better than her son. Melvin saw them. He had enough compassion to get her away from there before they found Michael’s bloodied body. He was still dragging her along, but this time she wasn’t fighting. A small cluster of soldiers rushed into the stadium as Melvin dragged Frances stumbling out, and they were paid only enough attention by the soldiers to confirm that neither was undead as they rushed in to see what all the fuss was about.

“I don’t know where Madeline is. I didn’t see her, back there, and she didn’t come when I called.” Melvin stopped, grabbed Frances by both her arms, and stood inches from her face. “Now, are you going to help me find her? Can I trust you, now, or are you going to get her killed, too?”

Frances shook her head, asking, “How are we going to find her?”

“I don’t know, but we have to start somewhere. She must have been pulled along with the crowd, so she’s out here somewhere. No way the National Guard would have let an eight year old girl wander outside their secure perimeter, so that narrows it down some.”

“Isn’t there someone in charge? Someplace people would turn in a lost child? Anything?”

“You obviously don’t remember getting here.” Melvin shook his head dismissively at his wife as he climbed up and stood on top of one of the parked cars nearby. “The police and military were divided up between the four traffic checkpoints and the stadium. No one has heard from the checkpoints in hours, and those that are left here are stretched pretty thin, trying to surround the place.” Melvin was trying to find Madeline by scanning the crowds from the car’s roof, but soon realized it was no use; there were too many people in the crowd and his daughter was too small to be seen among them. “That’s why there wasn’t anyone at the stadium working crowd control; they’re busy keeping the zombies out.” He climbed back down and stood next to her. She seemed to be somewhat recovered from seeing Michael.

“So we just ... wander around, shouting her name?”

“That’s the best plan I’ve got. Can you think of something better?”

She shook her head. He headed out into the crowd. They alternated shouting out variations of their daughter’s name, “Madeline,” “Maddy,” and even “Madeline Evangeline Spall” as they worked their way out among the restless refugees. After they’d been looking, shouting, searching, and questioning strangers for over an hour, Frances began questioning Melvin again.

“Why did you leave them with me?”

“Do we need to get into this again?”

“Yes. We do.” She was calling out her daughter’s name in between their conversation. “You had to know I was in shock. Did I seem alright to you?”

“No. You had the same glazed-over look on your face from the moment you saw that news anchor get attacked until you finally came-to out here in the parking lot.”

“So why did you leave them with me, if you knew I couldn’t keep them safe?”

“I...”

“I saw what was left of your phone in the corridor, Melvin. You left to go call her, didn’t you?” Frances had a way of pronouncing the word ‘her’ that made it sound worse than the foulest curse from a sailor’s lips.

“What are you talking about?” Melvin began shouting out his daughter’s name with renewed vigor.

“Don’t pretend I don’t know, Melvin. Not now.”

“Don’t know what, dear?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s the end of the world, one of our children is dead, the other is missing, and you’re going to stand there and pretend you haven’t been having an affair?” Frances stopped short, her hands on her hips. Melvin stopped, turned, and tried to measure the level of sincerity on her face.

She was deadly serious. Still, he tried to deflect; he hadn’t decided whether he wanted to be with Stacy, or Frances, or to try to keep it on with both. “What makes you think this is the end of the world?”

“Zombies have decimated Denver. The roads out are shut down, the entire city is taken over, the only survivors are trapped between a rock,” she indicated the stadium, “and a hard place,” and she waved her arm at the zombie-infested city beyond the barricades. “If you think this is a local phenomenon, how long do you think it’ll stay that way? How long do you think it’ll take zombies to stumble to Fort Collins? How long until Colorado Springs is like this? A day? Two?”

A nearby stranger spoke up, “She’s right, dude. It’s the end of the world.”

“I don’t know about you two,” and Melvin shot the stranger a dirty look before turning back to his wife, “but I’m still alive, and I intend to stay that way.”

“You may be alive, but what about your little harlot? What about your son? Was calling that little whore worth your son’s life?”

Melvin turned away, began searching the crowd again

Cheating, Death

for his daughter, calling out her name. Frances ran after him.

“Didn’t she answer?” Frances laughed, coldly. “Did you sacrifice your own children for a dead whore?”

Melvin didn’t turn around, but he seethed. “Stacy’s not half the whore you were when I married you.”

Frances laughed even louder, “So you admit she’s a whore.”

“That’s not what I—” Melvin spun around to face her, hands clutched tight, nails digging, bringing blood. “What do you want from me?”

Frances smiled wickedly, her heart twisted by the pain and strain it had already suffered that morning, trying to cope with more. “Nothing. You’ve already admitted you’ve been cheating on me with some cheap whore who isn’t half the woman I am. What more could I want?” This time Frances walked away from Melvin, continuing the search, calling out for Madeline.

Melvin didn’t know whether to follow her or not. He watched her move farther and farther away through the crowd. He began to feel his hands relax, began to feel the pain in them. Then he heard a familiar voice calling out from behind him.

“Mr. and Mrs. Spall! Wait! I’ve got your daughter!”

Melvin was sure he’d misheard. Frances didn’t seem to be stopping. Melvin turned around and saw Private Torres making his way through the crowd, Madeline perched on his shoulders, having the time of her life.

“Daddy,” she called out when she saw him. She reached her arms out and down and Melvin happily took her from Private Torres’ shoulders and into a warm embrace. Frances, as though out of nowhere, was suddenly hugging them both, and her crying had turned from tears of anger to those of joy.

“I saw her alone with another man, out by the edge of the lot. I recognized her from helping y’all get in, this morn-

ing, so I knew something was up,” Private Torres explained. “I liberated her and we’ve been looking for you two for the better part of an hour. If you two hadn’t been making such a scene...” He looked a little sheepish, “well, it might have taken longer to find you. Are you three gonna be alright? Do you need help finding your son?”

Melvin shook his head and Private Torres understood the look of loss in his eyes without any explanation. “I think we’ll be alright. We’re together again.”

“They’re about to give the all-clear to start moving people back into the stadium.” Torres leaned in and spoke softly, “but don’t go in with them. The supply trucks never made it through, so there’s not enough food for everyone. It’s only a matter of time before something worse than panic sets in.”

“What are we supposed to do?”

“Look, if you really want to survive, you’re better off on your own. Large groups of people seem to attract them.” Melvin looked around with unease; he had never been in a group of people larger than the one he was now in the midst of. “Go gather some supplies, find someplace safe to hole up, and barricade yourself in until help comes.”

“Is help coming?”

Before Private Torres could respond, his radio called his name. “I’ve got to go. Just get out of here. Keep her safe, okay?” Then the Private was walking away, talking into his radio, and he didn’t look back. Melvin and Frances nodded after him, anyway.

Chapter Six

Leaving Safety

Shirley woke up in the third-row seat at the back of the van, her head pounding. She squinted at the daylight streaming in through the windows, wondering how much longer it would be until they got home. Then she noticed that the engine wasn't running. It wasn't the first time Shirley had been forgotten, passed out in the back of the van after an all-nighter. "At least they didn't leave me at the club again," she muttered to herself.

Shirley sat up slowly, one hand on the seat in front of her to keep the van from spinning, the other on her head to keep it from exploding. She was nauseous, but she knew she was also dehydrated, and had sense enough to hold back the bile and keep from losing any more fluids. "Good thing I have Fridays off," she croaked, "otherwise I'd have missed one Hell of a party."

Her eyes scanned the seats, the floor, looking for anything to drink. There were empty water bottles discarded into every nook and cranny of the back of the van, and after several minutes of checking each one, Shirley found a couple of ounces of fluid. Then she started looking for her purse among the random detritus on the floor. She was about to give up and go inside when she spotted it on the seat she'd awakened on; she'd apparently used her purse as a pillow.

Cheating, Death

Digging through the purse was much more familiar territory than digging through the junk on the floor, and Shirley quickly found the pharmacological savior she'd been seeking.

She swallowed her last two ibuprofen with the last swallow of water, then lay back down in the back seat, propping her head up on her pillow/purse. Shirley closed her eyes and began waiting patiently for the thumping and throbbing in her head to back off. She wasn't going to bother trying to face the full-on daylight outside the van before her hangover had a chance to subside.

Shirley had been partying and recovering long enough to be intimately familiar with every pain and pleasure of the procedure. She could actually count down the minutes and seconds until the analgesic in her veins overcame the previous night's poisons, and she grinned as she felt her headache receding, right on schedule. A moment later, Shirley's grin fell from her face when she noticed that the thumping she'd been hearing wasn't just in her head. Someone was outside the van. Someone was outside the van, trying to drive her crazy. She would have none of that.

She burst into motion, wondering which one of the guys she would find outside it, banging incessantly against the van, knowing full and well she was inside. Shirley practically flew to the side-door of the van, flinging it open and shouting at the figure on the other side of the door. At first her shout was in triumph, almost an "Aha!" but it was only a split second before it shifted mid-shout to a scream of terror. She fumbled with the door, missing the handle twice. When she finally pulled the door back across to close it, some of the trash that she'd been wading in had half-tumbled out of the van, and the door bounced back instead of catching closed.

Shirley screamed again, batted at the garbage blocking the door, and managed to get the side-door closed again. The zombie simply returned to thumping ineffectually against

the side of the van, wanting to get in and get at her, but unable to work the handle. Shirley finally took a moment to look out the windows of the van, to see beyond its familiar interior. She realized the van wasn't parked in the driveway, but stuck out in traffic, somewhere. Three lanes of stopped cars in each direction and zombies all over, seemingly checking the vehicles for anyone who'd been left behind. Shirley, forgotten and abandoned by her friends, left to fend for herself on what appeared to be the Zombie Freeway, sat down in the middle of the van and cried, her headache quickly returning.



Before any announcements were made and before the crowds began flowing back toward the stadium, Melvin, Madeline and Frances were moving the opposite direction. Melvin hadn't let his daughter out of his grip since she'd been returned to it, though she didn't seem to know anything had been amiss. Madeline thought it was all part of the game they'd been playing since they'd been awakened so abruptly in the middle of the night. With a smile on her face, hugging her daddy, all she had to say was "I'm hungry," as though everything else were right with the world. Melvin didn't want to contradict that thought.

"Me, too, Maddy. We're gonna go get some food, right now. What do you want for lunch?"

"Lunchables!"

"I'm pretty sure that can be arranged." Melvin was less worried about indulging his daughter's desire for fat and salt and preservatives than he was about trying to protect her from zombies without military assistance, or what he was going to say to his wife about Stacy. He didn't know whether he'd be able to survive either one.

As they finally reached the edge of the small part of the city that was still relatively zombie-free, Melvin saw some-

thing that caused his heart to drop. It was his SUV. As promised, it had been used to help create a barricade. So far, the barricade was only about a dozen vehicles in length. Each one appeared to have been driven into the vehicle in front of it at three or four miles per hour, fast enough to wedge the vehicles together and slow enough that they all stayed in a straight line. Melvin's SUV was literally crushed between an E-series van and a school bus, and several pairs of vehicles would have to have been pried apart to free it. He refrained from weeping at the sight of it, but barely.

It wasn't that he cared more about his car than his son, but that the weight of all the horrible events of the day was getting to be too much for him. Every little thing was now pushing him closer and closer to the edge of losing it, so that even little things, like seeing his so-capable SUV turned into little more than an oversized brick, brought the threat of tears to his eyes. As they walked around the barricade, not stopped by the National Guard who cared only about keeping anything from getting in, Melvin wasn't sure he'd be able to take it if Frances attacked him verbally, again. It was all too much for him.

"Do you know where you're going?" Frances sounded genuinely curious, though Melvin didn't trust her to remain civil for long. He couldn't help but get defensive.

Melvin pointed, "That's Colfax, right? So, there's a King Soopers at Speer, just off Colfax. Unless you have a better idea?" Frances shook her head. "Alright, then."

"How are we supposed to defend ourselves? Have you thought of that?" Her faux fear and contemptuous concern became less convincing the more Frances spoke.

"Run."

"That's it? That's your plan? We run?"

"While you were apparently catatonic, this morning, I was busy driving us back and forth across a zombie-infested city. I got a pretty good look at those things in action, and they aren't fast. Unless we get trapped somewhere and there

are a lot of them, we should be able to get away simply because we can move faster.”

“So, what about them?” Frances pointed down Colfax as they rounded the corner from Eliot, indicating the dozen or more figures shambling among the abandoned cars lined up and down both sides of the road.

“You can see them from here, right?”

“Yeah, but doesn’t that mean they can see us, too?”

“Sure, but we’re faster. If the classic movies are to be believed, we’re smarter, too. I’ll carry Maddy, you stay out of their reach, and we’ll be okay. Look at them, they haven’t even noticed us, and some of them are within fifty or sixty feet. Just pay attention, and we should be fine.”

They began by walking along the sidewalk, Melvin in front, still carrying Madeline, and Frances behind. They tried to remain as silent as possible. After a few hundred yards, they were forced to begin walking amongst the stopped cars in the road, carefully picking their paths to stay as far away from the walking dead as possible.

“It’s like a video game,” commented Madeline after a few minutes of their weaving around parked cars and hiding from zombies.

“That’s right, Maddy, and we have to be quiet if we want to win this level.” She lifted a single finger to her lips to pantomime “Shhh...” and Melvin hoped she would be able to keep from screaming if something bad happened. They continued their slow progress.

It wasn’t long before they came within reach of one of those who had died in their cars, reaching out its open window suddenly as they passed by. Melvin leapt forward, slapping a hand up over Madeline’s mouth to stifle her scream, and Frances was trapped on the other side of the reaching, gnawed-on arms and the teeth-chomping head craning out the driver’s side window of the car. There wasn’t room to get by between the next car over and the hungry undead monster, so Frances had to backtrack and find another path. To

avoid all the other zombies in the area, she ended up on the other side of the concrete median from Melvin and Madeline, but continued along parallel to them as she looked for a safe way to cross back.

“Frances!” Melvin whispered to her as loud as he could, waving his free arm to try to get her attention. “Frances!”

She stopped her forward motion and turned toward her wildly gesticulating husband. His eyes bugged out, and he seemed to be trying to tell her something, but she had no idea what it was. “What?” Frances didn’t bother keeping her voice low, but Melvin refused to match her brazenness. He continued whispering things she couldn’t hear and making hand signals she couldn’t understand. Soon, Madeline was waving her arms in the same ridiculous, useless way that made Frances want to start screaming at her husband again. Before she had a chance to start screaming at him, though, she screamed at something moving right behind her.

From mere inches away from the back of her head, Frances heard what sounded to her terror-addled mind like a strange rumbling growl. She screamed the sort of scream that sells tickets to horror movies as she spun around to face the source of the sound. The young woman Frances was screaming into the face of, who had just thrown the side-door of the van open, screamed right back at her. Then, realizing their screams had attracted the attention of every zombie in a quarter-mile radius, Shirley began to run East on Colfax. Frances dove into the vacated van, pulled the door shut behind her, and watched a steady stream of undead stumble and moan after the fleeing girl.

Melvin had reacted quickly, leaping into the back of a pickup truck, then up onto the top of its cab, then up again onto the the cab of a container truck next to it, never losing his grip on Madeline or sight of the nearest zombies. From their high perch, Melvin and Madeline had an excellent view of what Frances failed to see; Shirley did not go slowly or

quietly through traffic. She did not even bother to stay on the ground, leaping onto and running over the tops of cars like the stars of action movies, screaming all the while. Shirley was in a blind panic, and though she was soon out of sight and he didn't know what would become of her, Melvin was glad for her inexpert escape; every roaming zombie on Colfax was after her, or following the herd-like motion of the other zombies, and within a few minutes there was not a single one in sight.

He carefully descended from one truck to another and down to the street as Frances exited the van and met them halfway. "She's not very good at this game," commented Madeline.

Melvin agreed, "Nope, but now we can all walk down the sidewalk instead of down the middle of the road." They moved back to the sidewalk and continued on their way, aware of -but out of the reach of- any undead that were trapped in their cars among the bumper-to-bumper traffic. All the way to Speer, where they turned, they didn't see any other walking dead, and Melvin knew Shirley must have gotten at least that far safely. All the way to Speer, Frances was seething, wanting to curse her husband for nearly getting her eaten, wanting to take their daughter from him and leave him for cheating, knowing she probably wouldn't make it on her own. She clenched her teeth and kept quiet.

As the King Soopers came into sight, Madeline asked quietly and with only a hint of whining, "Are we there yet? I'm really hungry."

"Almost there, Maddy." Melvin knew they'd made good time, considering, but he could feel his own stomach rumbling away as the sun got higher and higher in the sky overhead. He moved Madeline to his other arm and turned her so she could see it, saying, "See? That's where we're going."

Frances spoke up again, "Do you think we'll be able to

get in? What if they're locked up? Wouldn't everything have been closed when this all started?"

Melvin pointed, "Read the sign. They're twenty-four hours. They were open when the news broke this morning."

"Come on, what makes you think a grocery store clerk is going to stay at work with zombies roaming the streets?"

"I didn't say I thought they'd be staffed. I think they'll be open. What grocery store clerk is going to bother locking up when they hear there are zombies roaming the streets?"

As they got closer to the store, seeing what they were about to walk into, Frances had new reservations. "Wait, is this place underground? You don't expect me to go into an underground store in the dark, do you?"

"It's not underground. It's part of the same structure as a multi-level parking garage for that building," and he pointed to one of several brick buildings that matched the construction of the garage and the grocer. "It's a whole complex. Designed for convenience. And look, the power's still on, so it won't be dark."

Frances could see that the lights were shining in the ceiling of the garage, and could see that light was shining out from the front of the store, as well. Still, as Melvin and Madeline continued right on into the dimness of the parking structure's shade without slowing down at all, Frances paused, reluctant. There was something about the place that didn't feel right to her, and she didn't want to go in. She stood there, at the edge of the garage, half in sunlight, and watched her husband carry her daughter in through the automatic doors. Then she heard a noise, and whether it was one of the walking dead moaning or her own stomach rumbling, she ran after Melvin and into the store.

Chapter Seven

Taking, Chances

“Where you at?” Theo was sure the voice coming over the line was far too happy to be awake this early in the morning.

“I’m sleeping. Where do you think I’m at? I’m in bed.”

“Well wake up! This is our lucky day.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s almost ten.”

“I’m going back to sleep.” Theo hung up and rolled back over, trying to return to the pleasant dreams he’d been roused from. His phone rang again. He tried to ignore it. It rang again, and again, and again. Theo gave up, answered, “this better be good, Stink.”

“I told you, it’s our lucky day. Now get dressed, I’m on my way over.”

Theo reluctantly rolled out of bed and scrounged around in the heaps of rumpled clothes on his floor for an outfit. He’d long-ago mastered the art of balancing any attempts at matching against the relative strength of each garment’s odor in order to craft a look that was as inoffensive to the eye and to the nose as his domestic laziness would allow. He knew Stink didn’t care what he smelled like, but Theo didn’t want to add anything to what his best friend brought to the table, in terms of raw funk.

There was an urgent knock at his front door faster than Theo had expected; Stink must have already been on his way when he'd first called. Theo took his time making his way to the door, and Stink seemed uncharacteristically impatient, knocking harder and faster the longer it took. When Theo finally unlocked the door, Stink opened it and burst clumsily in, slamming it behind him.

"What took you so long?" Stink was breathing hard and fast, freaked out about something.

"What are you in such a hurry for?" There was another noise at the door, less a knock than a dull thump. "Who's with you?" Theo reached out to open the door again, but Stink turned the deadbolt closed before he had a chance.

"See for yourself," replied Stink, pointing to the peephole. Theo put his face up against the door, eye to the hole, then jumped back as though it were about to bite him.

"What is that thing?"

"Duh... It's a zombie. That's what I was telling you about."

"You said it was my lucky day, and you brought me a zombie... What is wrong with you, dude?"

"I didn't bring you a zombie, it just followed me to the door." The zombie thumped up against the door again. "Look, those things are everywhere. The city's been evacuated, and anyone who couldn't get out of town is hiding out at the stadium."

"You should've let me sleep. I was having this great dream—"

"So the police are all guarding the stadium, and no one is minding the stores. Weren't you saying last night how much better the Xbox would look on one of these big plasma TVs?" Theo nodded, putting the pieces together -slowly- in his mind. "So let's go get one!"

"What about the zombies?"

Stink pulled a huge revolver out from the waistband of his pants, offering it to Theo. "Dude, you beat all the Resi-

dent Evil games, and you kick my ass every night in Halo. Just aim for the brains.”

“Where’d you get a gun, Stink?”

“My old man keeps it in the same drawer as his good Scotch. Just take it. I heard heavy military reinforcements were supposed to be showing up this afternoon, so we have to hurry.”

Theo reluctantly took the gun. He’d never held a real gun, and seeing the bullets in the chambers of the cylinder reminded him of what made the early Resident Evil games so difficult. “Do you have any more ammo?”

“Just aim for the head, dude. One shot, one kill, right?”

“Right.” Theo wasn’t sure they were thinking this through, but didn’t have any better ideas of his own. Then the zombie found the front window, shattering its way in and getting tangled in the curtains.

“Time to go,” shouted Stink, unlocking the door and running toward the van he’d parked haphazardly across Theo’s lawn. Theo stared at the fumbling zombie in his window for a while, but was brought back to attention by the revving of the van’s engine and the cloud of black smoke it choked into his living room. He ran out and got in the passenger-side door, barely restraining himself from shouting ‘shotgun’ as he carefully kept the revolver pointed away from the driver while climbing aboard. “And we’re off!” Theo thought Stink was having too much fun before Noon, not to mention in the midst of a zombie apocalypse, but stayed silent as they drove away.



When Frances passed through the automatic sliding doors and looked around, there was no one to be seen. No one at the Customer Service counter to her right, no one manning the long row of registers to her left, and no one in

the one aisle she could see down. In the distance, she heard the familiar sound of her daughter's laughter, and took a few cautious steps further into the store.

"Wheeeeeee!" shouted Madeline. "Again, daddy, again!"

Melvin complied with his daughter's wishes once they'd reached the last aisle and he'd had a good look down it; he turned the shopping cart she was perched in around, and began running back along the entire length of the front of the store toward Frances, and then past her. All the while, Melvin was carefully looking down the depth of each and every aisle in the store, swooping around the produce section and heading back to see that the back aisle was as clear as all the others. Making a whooshing noise that seemed to delight his daughter to no end, Melvin turned again and pushed the cart back to the front of the store and stopped next to Frances.

"All clear," he said, confident. "No people, living or dead, to be seen."

"It's ... safe?" Frances still had that creeping feeling that they shouldn't be there, though she didn't see anything threatening about the place.

"Well, the front door opens for anything that approaches, I didn't check the bathrooms or the back room, but I'd say it's safer than being out on the street, right now. You should have plenty of time to get away from any kind of threat, in here. We're going to find the Lunchables, why don't you see what other well-preserved food you can find for us to hole up with for a couple of days?" Melvin began walking away down the nearest aisle before Frances could respond, saying, "Just shout if you need anything," and leaving her to fend for herself.

"Ooh, peaches!" Madeline reached out for the canned fruit as they passed, and Melvin helped her pull the number ten can of yellow cling peaches safely off the shelf and into her lap with the cutest little "Oof" as she felt its full weight.

They continued down the aisle as Melvin explained, “Three quarts of peaches is probably too much for a girl your size to eat, Maddy. I think it’s too much for a girl my size to eat, and she’d have to be an awfully big girl to be my size.”

“We can share. You and me and mommy is three, so that’s one quart each.”

“I think even one quart would be too much for you, squirt.” Melvin pulled a six-pack of four-ounce plastic cups of diced peaches from the shelf as they neared the end of the aisle, and placed it in the cart next to Madeline. “I think these are more your size.” Madeline nodded in agreement, but held the huge can of peaches in her lap, hugging it. “Now, where do you suppose they’ve hidden the Lunchables in this place?”

They were looking at the refrigerator case that seemed to stretch the entire length of the back of the store when Melvin heard the first, distant, gunshot. Then he heard another shot fired, and another. Then the sound of squealing tires ending in the sound of a collision Melvin was sure he could feel, and they were plunged into darkness. Somewhere far away, but definitely still in the store, Frances screamed. Melvin didn’t bother trying to run toward her in the dark; it had been a single scream, not the sustained outburst she would make if she were being eaten alive. A few emergency lights had popped on around the perimeter of the store, but they barely did more to illuminate than the indirect lighting coming in through the front door.

“It’s gonna be harder to get our shopping done in the dark, isn’t it kiddo?” Madeline was silent, and in the near-total darkness, he thought he could see her nodding. “Well, let’s see if we can find a flashlight.”

From his quick run back and forth across the store, Melvin thought he remembered seeing batteries up front near the pharmacy and guessed that he’d find flashlights near the batteries. Staying in the dim luminance of the emergency lighting along the store’s periphery, Melvin moved hastily

toward his destination. The creeping dread he hadn't known his wife had been feeling from before she'd come in was now working its way up Melvin's spine and overloading his senses. He tried not to let it get to Madeline, tried to keep his face calm and even as his pace continued to quicken.

Melvin reached the front of the store and the batteries without glimpsing Frances along the way, and briefly wondered if she'd fled out into the daylight. His hands found a flashlight, and he began prying ineffectively at the plastic packaging that kept it and its batteries prettily on display. He grew more tense, more angry, and more afraid with every passing moment in the dark. Melvin was about to toss a couple of the sealed flashlights into the cart and push them outside to try to get into them in the light of day when he heard Frances scream again. This time, it sounded like she was being eaten, and close. Melvin dropped the impossible-to-open flashlight and ran toward the sound of his wife's voice. He wasn't sure he preferred her over Stacy, but he didn't hate her and he didn't want her to be killed by zombies.

She was two aisles over and halfway down, cowering on the floor as a zombie shambled slowly toward her from the back of the store. Melvin was pumping with adrenaline and running at speed. He ran right past Frances and tackled the approaching zombie with all his momentum and pent-up rage. The two of them flew through the air for a few feet, then came down hard with the weight of both of them coming down full force onto the head and neck of the recently deceased stock boy. The wet crunching sound of its skull and vertebrae giving way was sickening, and as Melvin was lifting himself off the now-truly-lifeless corpse underneath him, Frances was dry heaving a few feet away.

"Are you alright?" Melvin asked, offering her a hand up after barely regaining his own feet. Frances refused his help, pulling herself up by the shelves of canned goods she had no opener to get into. He shook his head dismissively and

started walking away from her, trying to think of something witty to say. Then he heard another brief scream and Melvin was running again, this time back to his daughter.

Even in the dark, he could see it was too late. In the low light, the scene was like something out of an old black and white movie, Madeline's blood dark like chocolate syrup or motor oil as it gushed from her neck. Whether she hadn't heard it approaching or had been too afraid to get out of the cart and run, Madeline had still been sitting there hugging the number ten can of peaches to her chest when the undead monster had torn her throat out with its teeth. As the zombie languorously munched away at Madeline's soft flesh, her blood gushed out in an unbelievable torrent of darkness that consumed her clothes, the peaches, and which seemed to be opening a dark portal in the floor under the cart.

Melvin took in all this in an instant, and in another instant he was shoving the zombie one way and pulling the cart another. Without a thought, Melvin discovered that he was perched over the laid-out body of the monster, repeatedly bringing the heavy can of cling peaches in heavy syrup down onto the remains of its long-since ruptured skull, smashing it again and again into smaller and smaller chunks. Frances didn't stop him, she simply stood by the blood-soaked body of her last living child, too shocked to shed tears and too grief-stricken not to weep. After what seemed like a long time, Melvin's arms stopped moving, and Frances caught her breath. Then Madeline's mutilated form began moving, and Frances' breath caught in her throat.

"You know what has to happen." Melvin spoke as though the truth of the statement would cover the crime he was about to commit. Frances couldn't stand to watch, and finally did run out into the light of day, shoving the immobile doors outward and open without slowing down. Melvin apologized, as he approached what was left of his daughter with the battered can still clutched in his hands. "I'm so

sorry, Maddy. I should never have left you.” Melvin closed his eyes, but as he brought the heavy can down, his aim was true.

It only took a few more hard blows before she stopped moving entirely.

Melvin joined his wife outside, not even considering re-entering the store, his appetite completely gone. She was standing out in the street outside the parking garage, staring at something. Melvin didn't see what it was until he was almost by her side.



“I told you it was too big.” Theo was exhausted after working for over an hour trying to wedge the giant box into the back of Stink's van, and was sure they would be caught at any moment.

“It's a seventy-six inch set, and I measured the back of the van, it's seventy-seven inches with the doors shut. It should fit.” Stink was still shoving at the ridiculous box.

“The screen measures seventy-six inches diagonally, Stink, that's not how long the box is. We're never going to get the door closed.”

“Just a couple more inches.”

“It's not gonna happen, man. Give it up.”

“Well then we have to take it out of the box.”

“No way I'm picking that thing up three more times. Get someone else to help with your crazy schemes, next time.”

“If you aren't going to help me get it out of the box, then you have to sit in the back and keep it from flying out.”

“Why do I have to sit in the back?”

“Because it's my van. You can't drive stick, anyway.”

“Fine, but we're taking it to my place.”

“Of course! You think I want to carry that thing up three flights of stairs?”

With that, they stopped trying to cram the eighty-one inch box into a seventy-seven inch space, Theo climbed into the back, and began contemplating how he might stop a smooth-sided box from slipping away. It weighed more than he did, and both the doors at the back of the van were swinging free as Stink slowly pulled away from the loading area behind the Best Buy. “Just go slow, and be careful,” he shouted up to Stink in the front, and for a while it seemed like they might actually make it.

Then Stink stopped the van in the middle of the road, for some reason. Theo sat impatiently, staring out the open back of the van, wondering why they’d stopped. After what seemed to Theo to be several minutes, he called out, “What are we waiting for?”

“It’s a red light, man. Chill out.”

Theo turned around to face the back of Stink’s head. “When was the last time you saw another car on the road? Moving, I mean?”

“It’s zombies, man, everyone’s either out of town or hiding somewhere.”

“So what are you waiting for? You don’t have to wait for the light. You don’t even have to drive on the right side of the road. Just get us out of here. I’m starting to get freaked out.”

“Oh, yeah! Why didn’t I think of that? I’m totally driving on the wrong side of the road.” Stink put the van in gear and slowly pulled out into the intersection, crossing over and driving the wrong way up Speer. “This is so cool,” he said, swerving haphazardly around the abandoned cars on the narrow street with childlike glee, paying not a whit of attention to Theo, struggling in the back.

Theo wasn’t only struggling because Stink’s thoughtless driving was shifting the giant, heavy box around in the

little space left in the back; he was literally struggling with a zombie. It had managed to climb into the back of the van while they'd been stopped at the light, and then proceeded to try eating Theo. He grappled with the monster, tried to push it off him, tried to push it out the back of the van, but the thing was too hungry, and too strong. Stink was suddenly having too much fun driving the wrong way and crossing intersections without stopping to notice the noise of his friend's fight for survival.

They made it nearly a mile down the road before Theo managed to get his hand on the revolver he'd had shoved in his pants. Too close and too scared to aim well, Theo just began squeezing the trigger over and over. He was firing into the body of the creature and into the big-screen TV and out through the roof of the van, and none of his shots would save him. Upon hearing the shots being fired, Stink's head spun around to see what was going on and his hands followed the motion, swerving the van even farther away from the clear center of the road. Seeing Theo in the grip of a zombie, Stink slammed his feet on the brakes, but too late.

The braking threw Theo and the zombie tumbling out the back of the van, and the force of hitting the road managed to toss them apart, freeing him from its deadly grip. Unfortunately, it also threw the huge, heavy box containing the television out after them, and it pinned Theo to the ground under its overwhelming size and weight. Stink's reckless steering, combined with his too-late braking, put the van on a collision course with a utility pole. Stink, who hadn't been using his safety belt, was thrown through the windshield, and his brains were splattered across the ground upon impact. The utility pole snapped, breaking the power lines and blowing a nearby transformer as the crossed lines overloaded it. The power went out for half a mile around, including inside the King Soopers that Stink had almost -but not quite- managed to drive past without incident.

As the zombie crawled over and began to eat him alive, Theo thought he heard a woman screaming, somewhere nearby.

Chapter Eight

Indecision, Separation

The sun stood directly overhead. Melvin and Frances stood in the middle of the street, facing each other from just out of arm's reach. They tried to ignore the sounds of the zombie greedily feasting on the still-moaning, pinned-down Theo as they stared each other down. Both of them were wearing Madeline's blood, though Melvin was also decorated with the sticky, chunky remains of the other two zombies. Melvin had known Frances long enough to know what was coming, but couldn't decide how he wanted to handle her. He couldn't decide whether he still wanted to go on alongside her, saving her, perhaps for the rest of his life in the deadly place the world had recently become.

At first, though not for long, her voice was low. Not soft, but deep. "You left them."

"I saved you."

"You left them, and now both my little babies are dead."

"You were screaming."

"You left them, but you never left me. Why didn't you leave me?"

"What do you mean? I... I left you with them, at the stadium."

Cheating, Death

“If you’d left me, my babies might still be alive. Why didn’t you leave me, Melvin?”

“What are you...?”

“I’m obviously not good enough for you. Not a good enough wife? Not a good enough mother? Not young enough, not beautiful enough, not new enough for you. So why did you stay?”

“I thought you’d want me to stay. What should I have done? Just left you with nothing? Two kids to feed and a mortgage? You haven’t worked since you had Maddy.”

“Haven’t worked? I haven’t worked? Why do men always assume raising children and running a household isn’t work? Why can’t you appreciate all the work I’ve been doing for you, to raise your kids, to keep your house clean, all these years?”

“You know that’s not what I meant, Frances! I just meant...” Melvin stammered, “...in this job market...”

“In what job market? Look around. The only one hiring right now is the army of undead. No experience necessary. Start immediately. They even take eight year old girls.”

“Yesterday. Before... I mean, I didn’t want to put the kids through all that. Fighting and separation and splitting their time between two homes and everything I had to go through when I was that age. I didn’t want you to have to be a single mother.”

“If you cared so much about me, why would you do this to me? To us? Why would you tear our family apart from the inside and let it rot slowly away? If you really cared, you would never have cheated. If you really cared, Michael and Madeline would still be alive right now.”

“You can’t put this all on me, Frances. I did everything for them. It isn’t my fault the city is overrun with the walking dead, or that you couldn’t watch them on your own for five minutes. I may have cheated, but I didn’t kill my own children.”

“Tell that to Madeline.”

“That isn’t the same thing!”

“And yet if you’d left me for that little whore of yours, she might still be alive. Or if you’d cared enough not to cheat on me, you wouldn’t have needed to sneak off to call that slut in the first place, and Michael might be alive, too. Hell, if not for your inability to stand by your vows, we’d probably never have left the protection of the National Guard.”

“You heard what that soldier said. Do you want to go back?”

“It’s too late now, Melvin. There’s no going back on what just happened. No changing your mind on this one. No returns, no refunds, no exchanges. I know you love changing your mind, but this isn’t something you can turn around and start over. Dead is dead, Melvin.”

“I know that.”

“And I know you’ve been forced to make decision after decision, all day long, without being able to weigh the variables and compare the options and take each one out for a test drive. I know how long it normally takes you to make any decision, and I know how many times you tend to change your mind before settling into anything permanent. It took you two years to decide what car to buy. Two years! Normal people don’t even drive the same car for two years, and you spent two years thinking about it before you made your first payment.”

“I only spent sixteen months picking out an SUV, Frances. There’s no need to exaggerate.”

“I agree. There really is no need to exaggerate. You spent sixteen months picking out an SUV. You also spent the eight months before those sixteen on deciding to shop for an SUV rather than for a sedan, a pickup, a compact car, or a clown car for that matter. I’m not even including in the two years the ten months you spent talking about whether or not you should start thinking about what sort of new car to buy. I’m not going to guess how many test-drives you went on over the course of those three years, or how much money

Cheating, Death

you spent renting SUVs so you could spend even more time trying to make up your mind.”

“Buying a vehicle is a big investment, Frances. You know it is.”

“Sure, yeah, I know, but I’m making an example. Normal people, they spend a couple days making up their minds about a new car, maybe a couple of weeks. Not you. You spent two years making one decision. Two years!”

“You keep saying that. I know, I spent a long time making sure we got the right vehicle for us, with the features and capabilities we need. We haven’t had it long enough, but it would have proven to be—”

“Shut up about the car, already. This isn’t about the car, it’s about you! Even when I think you’ve made up your mind about something, I’ve always got to be ready for you to change your mind. I’ve always got to have the receipts, and know the return policies, even when you’ve done your research. It’s insane, Melvin! It isn’t normal.”

“You didn’t marry me because I was normal, Frances.”

“No, I married you because I’d thought that after all the pain and suffering, all the waffling about our relationship, the on-again off-again way you’d treated me, that you’d finally made up your mind and settled on the answer you’d stick with. I married you because I thought I was your right choice, Melvin. I guess you couldn’t even stand by that one decision without second guessing it, could you? You had to go and test-drive another model, check out her features and capabilities, and see if maybe you could have done better. You couldn’t make up your mind and keep it made, could you?”

Melvin realized the irony of finding himself unable to decide what to say in that moment, but irony didn’t make answering her accusations any easier. He wanted to poke holes in her metaphor. He wanted to describe how it hadn’t been like wanting to test-drive a newer model and it hadn’t been like doing research before buying a new car. He wanted

to tell her that it had been fast and easy and unexpected, and that the second-guessing and the trouble making up his mind hadn't come until later. Hadn't come until he was seeing them both every day and couldn't help but do a point-by-point comparison. Melvin wanted to tell her everything, but didn't know how to start. Couldn't decide how to express what he'd felt. And as he stood there in his indecision, his head began shaking from side to side. Frances saw his resigned frustration and being unable to even begin as an answer to her query and an admission of his guilt.

"I knew it. And how long has this tire-kicking been going on behind my back? Not the two years you'll have to spend before you ever drive again, now that your precious SUV has been turned into a roadblock. Then you'd have been stuck facing two big decisions at once, and you'd surely have blown a fuse somewhere in that overworked little head of yours."

"It's been a little over a year. She started working in my department on Valentine's Day, last year. I'm not sure you want the details," he said, and when Melvin used those words it wasn't because he was having reservations about sharing the details, but because he literally hadn't been able to conclude whether the details would be wanted or not, "but at first we were just taking our lunches together. The first time we went out together away from work, the first time I lied to you about working late, was a year ago yesterday. Last night I was trying to take her back to the place we'd had our first date so I could end things with her, but the road was blocked because of the zombies. We couldn't get out to the lake, and ... yes, I started second-guessing myself and didn't say anything to her. I just took her home. But I swear, I was about to break it off before the whole world started falling apart."

"Even if that's true, why should I care? You admitted you've been sneaking around with another woman behind my back for over a year. You told me you've been breaking your vows to me every day when you went to work. You

even admit that you couldn't stand by your decision to leave her. Do you even know what you'd do if she called you right now?"

"Frances, I..."

Melvin took too long to answer. "Yes you, Melvin. You don't know what you want, and I don't want to put up with it any more. How can I trust that you'll stay with me, that you'll look out for my best interests, that I'm not better off alone with the dead than with my own indecisive, cheating husband? I can't. I can't trust you, Melvin. I just wish you'd let me know sooner." She turned away from him. After a brief pause, she began walking away from him.

"So that's it? In the midst of all this, after what we've just been through together, after all the years we've been together, you're just going to walk away?"

"At least I've made my mind up about it," she said, not turning around, not slowing down, "at least I'm not like you, Melvin."

The zombie that was still working its way through Theo's guts looked up at Frances as she passed by, then put its head back down into the meal before it, ignoring her. Her pace was steady, though unhurried; the only direction she was headed was away from Melvin. Melvin watched her walk away, and wasn't sure how he felt about it. He wasn't sure whether it was a good thing that she'd decided to leave him, or a bad thing that they would each now be on their own to face the terrors all around them. He wasn't sure whether Stacy were still alive, or how he could find her if she were. He stood there, staring at Frances' backside as it shrank away into the distance, trying to make up his mind how he should feel about it.



When Frances felt she was far enough away from her husband that he wouldn't see her falter, she began to shake and to quake and to cry out through clenched teeth. She cried out in anger and in grief and in loss and in betrayal. It felt huge, it felt loud, it felt like a furious flame burning within her, but it came out deep and low, more a growl and a gurgle than a weeping, wailing scream. The pain was too big to fit through the outlets available to it, and only the overflow escaped. Her legs continued pumping, carrying her along, as she struggled with the last few hours of her life wiping away all that had come before.

When her throat had stopped choking so hard on its own cries and her teeth had stopped clenching so tight, Frances began muttering. To herself, to the universe at large, to whatever God or gods were listening, perhaps to no one at all.

“...how could he? How could he do this? To me! To all of us...”

She walked without direction, turning away from any undead she saw without looking to see whether she was making progress or walking in circles.

“...our own children. With his own hands! So many years, so long, and now...”

The mid-day sun beat down on her, and she didn't notice it. She didn't notice her sweating, her stinking, or the soreness of her feet. She walked for hours without slowing.

“...never again. If I see his bloody face one more time, I'll kill him. Just like he killed them...”

Frances was outside her own mind, so far from the world around her that she didn't even seem to notice when zombies blindsided her, knocking her to the ground.

“...should have known. Known better. I should have noticed sooner...”

The undead didn't have a chance. Though her leg broke in the fall, Frances' fury had only found an outlet in its defense of her. With a strength that would have shocked

Cheating, Death

her, had she been aware of using it, Frances beat back two of them at once, pushing them off her fallen form before they could take even a single bite from her flesh. She crushed one's skull against the street until it ruptured and its struggling ceased.

"...my poor Madeline. I'm so sorry. I should never have trusted him..."

The other uncoordinated, undead fiend hadn't had enough time to rise again to its feet before she pounced, and though her muttering never ceased and her eyes still seemed glazed-over, she made short work of the other attacker.

"...left alone to die. Should never have left you, Michael. Left you behind..."

Dragging herself to her feet, covered in the near-black blood of the monsters she'd conquered, eyes blank and bone sticking out through her broken leg, Frances could easily have passed for one of the contaminated creatures around her. She was in shock again, shambling along as well as she could on a broken leg, mumbling almost silently to herself as the sun lowered in the sky and she silently began to bleed out.

"...kill him. I'll kill that bastard for what he's done. I'll kill him..."

Chapter Nine

Finding, Failure

Inevitably, Theo turned. Almost at once, the zombie stopped eating him and he started moving again, struggling to tear himself free from the big-screen-TV box he was pinned under without a trace of fear that he was literally ripping himself in two. The sound of this, along with the motion of the two zombies in his peripheral vision, broke Melvin's gaze away from the spot on the horizon where Frances had disappeared from view. He turned and began running away.

When Melvin had been standing still, staring into the distance at nothing, the only zombie in town had seemed to be the one near the wreck of the van. No others had stumbled by or approached to try to eat him. Now that he was moving, Melvin wondered how that could have been; there seemed to be walking dead everywhere he turned. The more he tried to move away from congregations of them, the more of them there seemed to be. He didn't need to move faster than a brisk walking pace most of the time; as long as he didn't end up in the thick of them, it was easy to avoid them or at least to escape them. The problem Melvin was finding was that as the day wore on, Denver became thicker and thicker with the undead.

As he fled, without real direction, Melvin was still trying to come to terms with everything that had happened.

Cheating, Death

His heart and mind felt as lost as his feet were making his body. The pain of Frances' leaving was mixed up with the relief that he wouldn't have to decide between two women any more. The grief and shock of losing both his children in a matter of hours was confused by the knowledge that he'd crushed his daughter's skull for her own good. The excitement and anticipation of being able to be with Stacy without reservations or outside obligations was hindered by his inability to contact her or even verify she was still alive.

Melvin had tried going inside a few places to find a working phone. Most places were locked. A few were left standing open, and each one Melvin looked into or approached had already been occupied by zombies. Melvin was not eager to get trapped, unarmed, in a small space with an unknown number of monsters trying to eat him. He did find a couple of places whose doors were closed and unlocked, as he'd wandered.

The first was a bakery. The doorknob had apparently been sufficient to keep any zombies from wandering in off the street, and when Melvin called out for any survivors who might have been in the back he got no reply. The display case was full of fresh baked goods, though, and Melvin quickly went around behind the counter and began eating. After he'd had his fill of pastries and bread, Melvin filled a bag with as many loaves of fresh French bread as he could, to take away with him. Then he looked for a phone. Behind the counter, beside the register, was the base station for a cordless phone, but no handset. After looking high and low for it, Melvin finally decided to brave the back room. He cautiously headed through the big swinging double doors that lead to the back, hoping he wouldn't find anyone there.

The baker was there, still in his short, white hat and clean, white apron as he stumbled mindlessly around the back of the bakery. Melvin counted himself lucky that the zombie baker hadn't found the swinging doors yet, as it had afforded him his first meal in the nearly ten hours

since breakfast. Across the room from him, Melvin saw the cordless phone resting on a countertop. Between him and the phone stood the zombie, still facing away and apparently unaware of Melvin's presence. Melvin set down the bag of bread as quietly as he could. He slowly approached the zombie from behind.

Then, with a sugar-fueled burst of speed and stupidity, Melvin tried to dash around the zombie and grab the phone. The undead baker lunged at him, easily grabbing hold of Melvin's sleeve and pulling the captured arm toward its mouth. Melvin's other arm, stretched out to the limit before being yanked back the other way, managed to grab the phone. Unfortunately, in his reflexive reaction to being grabbed by another zombie, Melvin swung back at it with the only thing he had available. The long, stiff antenna of the cordless phone plunged into the zombie's eye socket and lodged deep in its brain. It died, fell, and as its weight pulled down and its grip on Melvin's sleeve went slack, he foolishly tried pulling himself up by the phone. He only ended up snapping its antenna off in the creature's skull and tumbling with the zombie into a heap on the floor.

When he had recovered enough to see what had happened, Melvin tried using the phone in his hand but, without its antenna, it couldn't even get a dial tone. He tossed it aside, grabbed the bag of bread, and headed back out into the city.

Eventually, Melvin's random wandering away from concentrated groups of the dead led him to another closed-but-unlocked door. This time, rather than an undead baker and related carbohydrate theft, Melvin was shot at almost as soon as he'd peeked his head in the door. He squealed in fear and fell backward, landing hard on his tailbone. A bolt of lightning-like pain shot up Melvin's spine from where it had struck the concrete stoop to the base of his skull.

Melvin was still sitting on the ground, rubbing his lower back, when the door was thrust open from inside and

a rifle was pressed suddenly into his face. Melvin couldn't decide how to react, so ended up just sitting there, staring at the gun in his face.

"I thought you was one of them things." The man lowered his rifle and offered Melvin a hand up. "Get inside, before any more of 'em show up." Melvin followed the man inside, closing the door behind them.

"I don't think they can work a doorknob. I've only seen them in places with the doors standing open or... well, with the doors smashed in."

"Y'never know," grunted the man with the gun. "I ain't takin' no chances." He walked across the room and sat against the wall in a big chair that faced the door, his rifle guarding them from intruders even as he rested it across his lap.

"That's understandable." Melvin looked around, didn't see anywhere else to sit, so just stood there with the big bag of bread still clutched in one hand. "Has there been any news? I've been on foot since dawn, and haven't seen another living person for hours."

"Nothing new been broadcast since the National Guard lost control at the stadium a couple hours ago." The man indicated a stack of radio equipment by his side that Melvin somehow hadn't noticed. "Nothing official, anyway. Some civilian chatter, but that's mostly calls for help. 'Course, ain't nobody answerin' back."

Melvin nodded. "I guess I left the stadium just in time."

"Shouldn't'a' been there in the first place," he growled. "Stupidest thing I ever heard. Ya' don't get people comin' together durin' an outbreak, ya' keep 'em apart."

"The roads out of town are all blocked. There were zombies eating people right in their cars on I-70, this mornin'."

"O'course there—" A loud noise of something crashing to the floor somewhere else in the building interrupted their

conversation. “You know how to shoot?” The man handed Melvin a gun, even as he asked. Melvin shook his head from side to side and looked at the gun in his hand as though it might bite him. “It’s easy. Just point at them things’ heads and squeeze the trigger.” The man was quickly moving to flank the doorway that led to the back.

“O-okay,” Melvin stuttered, following.

“And don’t go shootin’ me, neither.” Then he disappeared into the darkness beyond the threshold. Melvin cautiously followed.

He couldn’t see anything more than a few feet into the room. He couldn’t even tell how big the room might be. He whispered, feeling that the low light required a low voice, “Why are the lights off?”

“Shhhh...”

Melvin stepped out of the light of the doorway, keeping his back to the wall, not wanting his silhouette to be the only visible thing in the room. He listened for movement, either of the man whose name he’d forgotten to ask or of whatever had caused the noise that had drawn them both into the dark, and heard nothing. Melvin couldn’t decide what to do. He waited, trembling, gun clutched awkwardly, in the dark.

Farther away than seemed reasonable from what Melvin was able to make out about the room they were in, there came another crashing noise across the darkness. Then Melvin heard footsteps running toward the sound. Being more unsure than he was afraid, Melvin walked quickly in the direction he thought the noise had come from. Several times he bumped into what he thought must be tall rows of shelves full of merchandise, imagining himself in the back room of some sort of store and wishing he’d paid more attention to what sort of building he had walked into. The sounds of a struggle began to come from somewhere off to his left, then Melvin thought he heard a gunshot coming from his right. He froze where he was standing. He couldn’t figure out what might be going on.

Cheating, Death

Melvin felt a hand gripping at his shoulder from behind, heard another gunshot, and before he realized it, Melvin was running straight ahead as fast as he could. A softly-glowing exit sign appeared from behind something, on a wall ahead of him he couldn't otherwise see, and Melvin headed for it as a different-sounding gun went off again and again behind him. He thrust his weight against the door, throwing it open and throwing the light of day into the room behind him. An emergency-door alarm began calling out to all the undead in and around the building.

Melvin spun around, unsure whether to leave the man to fend for himself or to try to go back and help him, and he saw that there were at least three zombies in the large room he'd just left, all of them headed his way. One of them appeared to be the man who had shot at him a few minutes earlier, his throat torn out and his rifle still clutched uselessly in one of his hands. Melvin lifted the gun in his hand, thinking of the last words he'd heard the man say, and squeezed the trigger.

The noise was deafening, but the zombies were still coming. Melvin squeezed again, heard and felt the gun go off, but didn't see any of the zombies even superficially hit. He set down the bag of bread, put both hands on the gun, and tried lining up the shot more carefully. When he was sure he had it pointed at one of the zombies' slowly advancing heads, he squeezed the trigger again. Again, he missed, though this time he thought he saw a spark in the distance and wondered what he'd hit.

Melvin tried aiming the gun at the larger target of the lead zombie's torso, and shot the thing in the arm. He fired again and again, trying to do any sort of damage to their heads that he could, and only managed two superficial hits before the gun was empty. Melvin hurled the useless hunk of metal at the zombies, and even that missed them completely. He looked down at the bag of bread and considered throwing loaves of bread at them. The three monsters continued

their relentless approach. Melvin picked up the bread, took a step backward, then shut the door, locking them inside. The alarm stopped sounding.

Again, Melvin felt a hand gripping his shoulder from behind. He spun around, facing another zombie, and reacted quickly, if somewhat ineffectually. The zombie still had a grip on Melvin's shoulder, but couldn't bite him; Melvin had shoved one of the loaves of bread into its gaping maw as it had lunged face first toward him. He dropped the bread bag again. With some lucky struggling, Melvin managed to force the animated corpse to the ground and to slowly wriggle away from its clutching hands and biting mouth before it had gnawed its way free of the loaf of bread. As Melvin's hands had searched for something to attack the creature with, they'd found a mobile phone still clipped to its belt.

This time, Melvin had the presence of mind not to use the phone as a weapon. He pulled it free of its holster, pulled himself to standing, and stepped quickly away from the creature's reach. Melvin carefully slid the mobile phone into his pocket. He looked around the alley behind the building until he came upon a lone cinder block, then hefted it over to where the creature had just managed to return to standing and was beginning to approach him. Melvin shoved the zombie hard to the ground, then raised the cinder block over his own head before bringing it down on the monster's head in a single hard blow that knocked the life out of it.

Breathing hard from running around in the building, from wrestling with this zombie, and from carrying the heavy block down the alley, Mel pulled out the mobile phone he'd found and dialed Stacy's number.



“I should never have listened to you, Max. Coming to the mall was a terrible idea.” Stacy looked out through the

store's still-lowered lift gate at the zombie hordes gathering on the other side.

"It worked in the movies. Haven't you seen Dawn of the Dead? Classic Romero."

"I told you, I don't watch horror movies." Stacy didn't like watching the reality of zombies any more than the fiction of them that appeared on film, and turned away. "Did it occur to you that all these other people might have had the same idea?"

Max shook his head, sheepish. "Must've been as bad as the stadium. If people were crowding in here and a fight broke out or people stampeded, anyone who had been infected would've turned within minutes. Then it's just a matter of time until..."

"Until the mall is completely overrun with the walking dead, and getting anywhere near it is a terrible idea. So what's next, Max? Any other bright ideas?"

"We could try heading for the airport."

"You know how to fly?" Stacy sounded almost hopeful for the first time since she'd heard Melvin's voice on the phone that morning.

"Me? No." Max shook his head, and Stacy's face returned to the grim expression it was quickly becoming used to forming. "But if there are any other survivors, maybe one of them does."

"So... we head to the airport, we hope it isn't as overrun with the undead as this place, we hope that someone who knows how to fly has also survived, that they also head to the airport, and that they don't get there and fly away before we do? Great. When do we leave?"

"There's also the chance that rescue will come from outside Denver. If they come by air, there's a good chance they'll land at the airport."

"I guess so. If we can get there, at least we'll be out of the worst of it. The airport is what... ten or twelve hours' shambling from here?"

“They won’t follow us. They aren’t that smart.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, but I—” Stacy’s phone began to ring. “Who is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s unlisted. Someone alive, though. Maybe they have a better plan than going to the mall.” Stacy hit the ‘Send’ button and lifted her phone to her ear, saying, “Hello? This is Stacy.”

Chapter Ten

Turning Around

“Cherry Creek Shopping Center? Why would you go to a mall?”

“It was Max’s idea. It didn’t occur to him that anyone else in town had ever watched a zombie movie, apparently. Where are you?”

Mel was already walking around to the front of the building with the bag of bread again in his hand, trying to get his bearings. “I don’t know, the middle of nowhere? Some sort of industrial area, I think. I’m trying to find a street sign.”

“How do you not know where you are? How did you get there, Mel?”

“I was just ... wandering. The National Guard took my SUV at the stadium, so I’ve been on foot since things went bad there this morning. I’ve just been, ooh, hang on.” Mel saw a street sign at the corner and began running toward it, the sounds of heavy breathing and gravel crunching underfoot filling Stacy’s ear. “Okay, I’m at Brighton and Race. I’ve just been walking away from zombies all day. Whichever direction the most zombies were in, I went the other way.”

“Hang on,” said Stacy, turning away from the phone to talk to someone else. Max just stood there at the corner, waiting for her voice, hoping for a plan. “Okay, Max

says Brighton turns into Broadway. Just head..." she paused, "head Southwest on Brighton and we'll meet you as soon as we can. How many people do you have with you? The truck we've been using doesn't have a lot of room up front, but we can try to find something else."

"It's just me, now."

"What happened to—"

Mel didn't let Stacy finish her question. "It's just me."

"Okay. Be safe. It might be a while, since we've got to fight our way out of the mall, but we'll be together again soon. I'm glad you're alright, Mel."

"You too, Stacy."

After the call disconnected, Mel slid the phone into his pants' pocket and considered the road. Having been in a daze for what must have been hours, Mel realized he had no clue where Race Street was, or how far he'd been walking. He could tell by the sun's position in the sky that it was already mid-afternoon, and he turned down Brighton and walked toward it, squinting to keep his eyes on his surroundings. Mel pulled a loaf of bread from the bag he'd been carrying around like an anchor or trophy all afternoon, and snacked as he walked.

Made more aware of the passage of time with something to look forward to, Mel began to notice how much his feet hurt, and how thirsty he felt. He began to wonder how many miles he'd already walked, and how many more he'd have to walk before he reached Stacy. He wondered what Stacy would think about his not having come after her, about the way his children had died, about all the terrible things he'd had to do just to survive the day so far.

Mel remembered that twenty-four hours earlier, everything had been normal. Everything had been sane. He'd been planning on taking Stacy to the lake, at sunset, one last time. He'd been planning to end their relationship they way it had begun. He'd been planning on staying with Frances. Mel followed Brighton as it curved South around a Post Of-

fice and realized he'd probably never see his wife again. That he'd certainly never see Michael or Madeline again. That Stacy was the only person left for him. Mel wished he'd known just a day earlier all that was about to change for him, and thought about staying with Stacy forever.

When Mel followed Brighton under I-70, he was relieved and worried by what he saw. The freeway was filled with bumper to bumper traffic, and with zombies. From his perspective, it seemed that all the vehicles had either been abandoned, or their inhabitants were dead or undead, just as they had been on Colfax. Mel was glad to see that the walking dead that seemed so densely to mingle up on the overpass hadn't managed to find the freeway exits. He was able to cross underneath dozens of zombies that would have surrounded and possibly overwhelmed him had he to pass by amongst them. Seeing the freeway so totally blocked, even in the heart of the city, reminded Mel that even after he was reunited with Stacy they wouldn't find it easy to escape this nightmare. Still, he followed Brighton as it curved around on the other side of the freeway, putting the sun directly ahead of him once more.

As Mel's body continued to carry him forward, only occasionally deviating course to avoid a zombie on one side of the road or the other, his mind went over and over all that had happened. Mel tried to put together words to describe his experience, knowing that Stacy would expect some sort of explanation for what happened to his family. At work, for his job, Mel never had any trouble stringing words together. Choosing exactly the right phrasing to push through a proposal or to support his point in a meeting came naturally. It was everything outside of work that Mel had trouble with. It was expressing his feelings in words, making decisions that would effect the people he cared about, and fitting everything together to create a life worth living that gave Mel a hard time. Even as Brighton curved back to the South and became Broadway under his sore feet, Mel still hadn't

figured out an appropriate way to say he'd crushed his daughter's skull in with a can of peaches.

Luckily for Mel, it was only another quarter hour or so before he saw a truck approaching at high speed, weaving between abandoned cars and intentionally running down the undead in the roads and on the sidewalks as it came. He knew he must look terrible, so he waved his free arm in the air to them, signaling that he wasn't just another shambling corpse to be destroyed. The truck sped past him, rammed into a zombie Mel hadn't realized was following him, throwing the creature into the air and down the block a ways before it made a quick u-turn and approached Mel's side at a more reasonable pace. Mel could see that a young man he didn't recognize was driving the big pickup truck, and before it had come entirely to a stop, Stacy burst out the passenger-side door. She ran up and gave Mel a huge bear hug, wrapping her arms completely around him and squeezing tight.

"Oh, Mel, I'm so glad to see you!" She began planting tiny kisses all over his face, ignoring the blood and grime and who-knows-what-else splattered across it, just as he tried to do the same for her. "I can hardly believe I got through a day like today without seeing you."

"You, too," Mel said, still unsure of his words, "I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner."

"After you called this morning from the stadium, I tried calling back and couldn't get through. I thought you'd died, Mel. Especially when we got word about what happened there."

Max leaned out the open window of the truck, "You two think you can have your little reunion in the safety of the truck instead of standing in the middle of the road? They're starting to notice us." He was right. Dozens of zombies were slowly approaching them from every direction, converging on their noise, activity, and the promise of something living to eat.

"Mel, this is Max. Max, Mel."

“Pleased to meet you,” said Mel as he and Stacy climbed into the cab of the pickup.

“I met Max this morning. He saved me when my car broke down.”

“When your car broke down?” asked Max jokingly, before picking a zombie to aim the truck at as they got started down the road. He saw a particularly ugly one ambling off to the right, and turned them down Champa Street to hit it.

“Okay, when I ran over one zombie too many and cracked my radiator.”

“That little rice burner of yours wasn’t designed for the zombie apocalypse, Stacy. You really ought to buy American.” Max patted his truck’s dashboard proudly as it crushed yet another zombie under its huge tires.

Mel didn’t want to start thinking about his lost SUV again, which he was sure would have been just as capable of running down the undead, and held up a loaf of bread. “Bread, anyone? I killed a zombie baker for this.”

Stacy greedily accepted the offered loaf, tearing into it immediately and saying “thank you” through a mouthful of bread.

“We tried to get to the Food Court at the mall and get some supplies,” explained Max, gladly taking a loaf for himself, “but there were just too many of them. That’s why we took so long to get to you; we were trying to come up with some sort of plan.”

Stacy laughed, tiny flecks of French bread flying from her lips. “Some plan, Max. What would they have had at the food court that we could have eaten, anyway? We should find a grocery store.”

“Hey, I worked fast food for years,” exclaimed Max, “I could have made you any kind of burger they had in their freezers.”

As they passed by the convention center, Mel saw where they were driving and, before he realized what he was saying, he spoke. “If you turn left at Speer, there’s a King

Soopers a couple of blocks down.”

“Awesome.”

Mel’s mind started to catch up with him. “The uhh...” Memories of what they would find when they got where he was leading them flooded his thoughts. “There was an accident, and there’s no power. It’s pitch black inside.”

“No problem, Mel.” Stacy turned to look to the back of the pickup, and Mel’s eyes followed hers. “Lights, guns, gas, tools, we’ve got.” The back of the truck was loaded with all the supplies Mel knew he wouldn’t have thought of.

“I’ve got everything but food and water, back there. Heck,” said Max as they turned left, “I’ve even got the can openers.”



Somehow, leaving a trail of blood in her wake and without again being accosted by the zombies all around her, Frances found that her feet had delivered her back to where she’d started. As the sun touched down on the horizon, Frances’ awkward walk led her into the artificial cavern of the parking garage without any of the hesitation she’d felt the first time she’d entered it. This time, there were no lights on in the parking lot and no lights on in the store and Frances’ slow shambling delivered her into a deep darkness. The sound of something moving in the darkness came to her ears, but Frances was so far away inside her own head that it arrived at her consciousness without meaning. She proceeded into the store through the doors she had left shoved open earlier with no fear of what else might have done the same thing in the intervening hours.

As her limping gait led Frances slowly across the front of the store, she paid no attention to the several zombies approaching her from the garage and the aisles of groceries rendered useless to their rotting bodies. If she’d thought much about them, or really been mentally present enough

to notice them, Frances would probably have been frightened of the slowly swelling mob of monsters around her. She wouldn't have known she had nothing to fear. Whatever mechanism drew these zombies toward the living, whatever it was that made eating human flesh an inescapable addiction, whatever it was that allowed the undead to recognize one of their own, they didn't know Frances was still a living, breathing person. Instead it was their proclivity to behave as a flock that caused them to follow her; the living dead tended to move as a group when they were gathered together, and having accepted Frances as one of them, her direction of motion became their direction of motion.

Then Frances reached her destination, or what was left of it, and the dozens of zombies around her lost their direction as she lost her momentum. Within moments, most of them had returned to their small, slow, often circular wandering around. Frances leaned down, the sensation of bone sliding further out of her flesh going unnoticed, and pulled Madeline's remains up into her arms. She clutched what was left of her daughter, picked over by scavenging zombies, to her chest. Her breath was too shallow to really vocalize properly, but her lips moved and her heart beat the same painful beat again and again, saying "Madeline, Madeline, Madeline, Madeline, Madeline..."

Chapter Eleven

Together Again

Max switched on the all the pickup's lights as they drove the final blocks to the store and the sun lowered over the horizon; high beams in front and a bank of flood lights across the top of the cab shining on everything in their path, brighter than day. There were dozens of zombies on every block, there in the city center. Mel wondered how safe they would be, going into a dark, enclosed space, at night, with so many more zombies around than there had been earlier in the day. He wondered what Stacy would think if she saw and recognized Madeline's body there.

"That's weird," said Max, slowing the truck as they drew up to the entrance to the parking garage and the King Soopers, stopping just outside.

"That's the accident I was talking about that took out power to the place," said Mel, referring to the wrecked van with the big-screen TV behind it, pinning half a body to the street.

"Not that, Mel," said Stacy in hushed tones, "the zombies."

Mel looked around, even turned around to look behind them, before replying, "What zombies?"

“Exactly.” Mel couldn’t tell whether Max looked white as a bone, or if it was just the rapidly diminishing light of dusk that changed his complexion. Max slowly turned the truck to point its lights into the cave-like parking garage entrance. “No zombies. A quarter mile from here, there were more zombies than I could have run over. A mile and a half from here there are hundreds of thousands of zombies still milling around at Invesco Field. Why aren’t there zombies here?”

“Do you think someone’s set themselves up here already? Killed the zombies and secured a perimeter in there?” Stacy’s ease at dealing the requirements of this new world of zombies and lone survivors was a bit of a shock to Mel, and he stayed quiet.

“There would be bodies all over,” said Max, pulling a little forward, into the garage, “especially around the doors.” They could easily see that the doors were standing wide open, and no dead bodies lying around. “This is weird.”

“Were there a lot of zombies around when you came through here earlier, Mel?”

“I uhh...” Mel had been running through the events that had transpired there in his head, picturing Madeline being eaten, bleeding out, and the fierceness on her face as she’d lunged for him. “There were ...uhh...” Mel cringed, “there were two zombies. That we saw. I uhh...” Mel didn’t want to try to explain that Madeline had become a third, just then. He didn’t really want to even think about it, just then. “I killed them both.”

“Hmm...” Max scanned back and forth and didn’t see any monsters lurking in the dark corners of the nearly-empty parking lot. He drove in, made a big circle with the pickup, and pulled right up to the big double doors that led into the store, shining the full intensity of the truck’s lights in through the open doorway. In the slice of store they could see, there was no one. No survivors standing ready to defend their turf, no zombies lurching around. “I don’t understand

it, but I'll take it." Max opened his door and climbed out. Mel quickly followed suit, with Stacy right behind him.

Stacy pulled back a tarp on her side of the truck, revealing a couple of crates of guns and ammunition. She pulled out a handgun, offering it to Mel. "You know how to shoot, Mel?"

Mel thought about his experience trying to shoot at zombies earlier and thought it was best not to mention it. "Just... aim for the head and squeeze the trigger, right?" He took the gun. He tried to feign confidence.

"That's the general idea. Try not to shoot me, okay?" Stacy was strapping on a holster, gathering ammo, and otherwise behaving as though she was an experienced soldier, despite having never held a firearm prior to waking up that day. Mel just tried not to drop the gun in his hand. She noticed his discomfort, and placed a hand on the inside of his arm. "Maybe there won't be any zombies in there, Mel, and you won't have to shoot at anyone. We'll be in and out in no time, right?"

Mel just nodded. They could all feel that something wasn't right about the situation. That they were arming themselves against an unknown, unseen threat, and that their lights and their weapons and their hope would still leave them unprepared for what they'd find inside. They all feigned confidence.

"You two take a shopping cart each and load it up with all the bottled water they'll carry. I'll get canned food. If we have time, we'll go back for salt and flour. Don't dawdle. We want to have the truck loaded and get out of here as fast as we can. Alright?" They nodded. "Alright." Max ran into the store ahead of them. He looked right. He looked left. He stopped. "Fuck."

Stacy ran in after him, and Mel wasn't far behind. Mel's hands became clammy at the sight of close to a hundred zombies milling about in a group at the other end of the front of the store. Stacy repeated Max's exclamation, "Fuck."

Cheating, Death

Max spoke in a low voice, "As soon as we start shooting, we'll have their attention. Are you two ready for this? They won't stop until they're all dead."

"You don't think we can get supplies someplace safer?" Mel knew that a hundred zombies gathering around the spot he'd left Madeline's broken body couldn't be a coincidence. "Shouldn't we at least get more bullets?"

"Stacy and I have enough ammunition for a group this size. Just stay out of the way and try not to shoot us in the back, okay?" Max had clearly understood that Mel wasn't much good with a firearm. Mel nodded, stepped backward, and Max turned back to face the knot of zombies. "I figure we have a few minutes before they reach us. Take out as many as you can before that, and if it gets too hairy, retreat to the door." Max began firing. Zombies began falling. Stacy's rate of fire was slower, but her aim was nearly as true. Mel stayed back, staring at the strange woman he hardly recognized as Stacy. This was not the same Stacy he'd thought he'd known, not the same person she'd been just one sunset before.

Like an unsteady heartbeat, their shots rang out with a deadly steadiness. The monsters approaching were slowed as they stumbled over the bodies of those who had already fallen, but their progress was relentless. Each time Max or Stacy had to change clips, the monsters would make a little more progress. The creatures began to be uncomfortably close around the same time the crowd finally began to thin. Mel could see the possibility of success within their reach, even though he'd done nothing to contribute to it, and felt momentarily relieved.

Then, from across the store, from beyond the wall of the walking dead, her attention brought to bear by the noise of the gunshots and the motion of the crowd away from around her, Frances looked up from the tiny, bloody body in her arms. She looked up, her eyes opening and adjusting slowly to the bright light streaming in to the dark store,

and as the number of living dead in the way diminished and thinned, she saw them. She saw Max and Stacy mowing down the zombies as relentlessly and methodically as the zombies had gone after the residents of Denver. Then, beyond them, bathed in bright white light, Frances saw Melvin.

Their eyes met across the hazy air of the zombie slaughter between them. Frances' mind was far away from reality, but something in her reacted. Something in her knew what she needed to do. Frances' hands released Madeline's remains, and her body turned to face Melvin and her lungs pulled in a deep breath.

At the same time, Melvin's face changed; his jaw dropped and all the blood went out of it. "Frances?" His voice was only a breath. His breath, incredulous. He started toward her, oblivious to Max and Stacy's progress, flanking around them and the very-near-to-them remaining zombies to run toward his wife unhindered.

Frances moved as close to running as she was able with her broken leg toward Melvin. Her throat raw from sobbing and dry from dehydration, when she called out, long and loud and hard and accusing, "you," it could have been mistaken for a growl or a guttural, animalistic sound. Her eyes were still glazed over, and there was glistening, darkening blood all around her mouth where she'd been kissing Madeline's cold corpse.

As he got within a few feet of her, Melvin's mind began to see her not as his grieving wife, returned to the place where she'd lost her daughter, but as one of the monsters. She wasn't running to embrace her estranged husband and apologize for their argument, she was shambling toward her next meal, reaching out to him to sate her appetite. Melvin didn't stop in time, didn't react fast enough, and Frances was on top of him.

She clawed at his face. She jumped at him, knocking him to the ground. Melvin tried to put up his arm to protect himself, and Frances bit down on it in anger. Growling,

she whipped her head back and forth until a chunk of Melvin's arm tore free. Frances spit it out onto the ground, then went back for another mouthful, even as she scratched at him with her blood-encrusted hands.

Melvin was terrified. When Frances tore a piece of skin from his arm with her teeth, he froze momentarily. When her head descended again to take another bite, the fingers of his other hand finally did their job. They squeezed.

The muzzle of the gun was pressed up against her chest. The bullet pierced her heart, killing her. Frances' body went limp. Melvin shoved her off him and, thinking fast, shot her a second time, in the head. Within arm's reach of his target, Melvin had been able to finally make an accurate head shot.



The Sergeant watched the team he'd kept with him since arriving in Denver that morning clearing the area of zombies and making preparations for the arrival of survivors. "Where is everybody? I told everyone to report to the Civic Center Park by sundown."

Lorraine clung to the Sergeant's side lovingly and said, "there are a lot of zombies out there, Sarge. It took us longer than we expected to get across town and back, too."

"The fire wall should already be burning by now, and we've barely begun to arrange the pyres. Half the teams tasked with gathering firewood haven't even reported in, yet. How are we supposed to protect survivors without some way to keep the zombies out?"

"Anyone who's survived this long can probably take care of themselves, Sarge. We got here too late to have to deal with the truly helpless."

"If I'd known they were going to do something as stupid as telling people to congregate or evacuate, we'd have flown out sooner. They'd have been better off if they hadn't

said anything at all, or if they'd followed proper quarantine procedures and advised people to stay in their homes. Getting a million people running around scared just makes things worse."

"It's all the bad movies, Sarge. Just like you were telling me. They create an inconsistent and inaccurate perception of zombies." Lorraine hadn't paid much attention to zombie movies, herself, but she trusted the Sergeant's judgement; he was the de-facto top zombie expert, worldwide. His zombie survival training camp had given hands-on experience to hundreds of people, dozens of whom were with him in Denver to assist with the outbreak. "They didn't know better."

"Which is why I wanted to start a new camp out here in the first place. We could have trained people from all up and down the Rockies to survive something like this. If just a handful of people in law enforcement had the proper training, this might have gone very differently. We'd be planning an organized evacuation with proper protocols, rather than putting together a makeshift refugee camp in the heart of an infested city."

Someone came up from behind the Sergeant saying, "Maybe you should have sent a full security team with each truck, instead of trusting a pair of drivers to be able to keep things under control."

The Sergeant recognized Carl's voice immediately. "Maybe if my drivers had been paying more attention to driving, they wouldn't have spilled a truckload of zombies across a freeway in a major metropolitan area."

"You should have seen the other guy."

"I did see the other guy, Carl. The 'other guy' was a six car pileup that you could have avoided if you'd maintained appropriate distance from traffic ahead of you."

"Oh, I assure you, Sergeant, I tried. Drivers see that open space in front of another vehicle, and they can't resist trying to fill it. The car that caused the crash had literally just pulled in front of us."

Cheating, Death

“If they’d literally just pulled in front of you, there would have been three hundred feet between them and the car in front of them, Carl. How did they manage to hit it?”

“Uhh...”

“You don’t have to keep giving him a hard time about it, Sarge,” said Lorraine, jabbing him lightly in the ribs, “what’s done is done.”

“And Denver is done.” The Sergeant shook his head disdainfully. “Well, Carl? What are you standing around here for?”

“Sir? We were told to report to this location at sundown.”

“And you’ve done that, Carl. Now make yourself useful and go find some firewood.”

“Sir.” Carl turned and walked away, glad the Sergeant had found a woman to temper his usual temper, and tried to find whoever was in charge of preparing the fire wall.

The Sergeant looked around again, saying, “Where is everybody?”

Chapter Twelve

Rejection, Revelation

The silence after the gunfire was filled with the ringing it left in their ears. Melvin was sitting beside the fallen form of Frances, his lungs burning with rough, heaving breaths. Stacy and Max were still tense, looking for any other undead that might be slower-coming from deeper within the store, standing at the edge of a sea of bodies their actions had stilled. When it became clear that the three of them were alone for the moment, Stacy lowered her weapon and approached Mel's side.

"What did you do, Mel?"

"She attacked me."

"I saw. But you shot her."

"She was one of them. I had to."

"She recognized you, Mel. She went right for you. They don't do that."

"She was trying to eat me," he said, showing Stacy his wounded arm. "People don't try to eat other people. Zombies do. Look at her!"

Stacy bent over and picked up the chunk of Mel's arm Frances had spit out. "Zombies swallow, Mel. She wasn't trying to eat you. She was angry, not hungry. What did you do to her, Mel?"

"I..." Mel knew he'd cheated on her, he'd broken his vows and admitted it. Mel knew she'd blamed him for the

deaths of Michael and Madeline. Mel could see that whether she was alive or undead when they'd arrived, she'd come back to Madeline's body, so he had a clue about what had been on her mind. Mel looked up at Stacy, and didn't know how to explain it all.

"Let's get our supplies and get out of here," interrupted Max, pushing a cart around the heaps of bodies they'd created. "Whatever attracted these zombies here will probably bring more, and we don't want to still be here when they arrive." He turned away from them down an aisle.

Stacy didn't offer Mel a hand to help him up from the floor. She turned and walked back toward where the shopping carts were corralled. Mel got to his feet without slipping in the blood pooling around Frances' cooling corpse and caught up with Stacy as quickly as he could.

"There's a difference between defending yourself from monsters and murdering your wife, Mel. If you give up your respect for human life, you're no better than the zombies." Stacy angrily shoved the legs of one of the zombies out of the way with the front wheels of her cart.

Melvin steered around them. "I swear, she was one of them! Or... I thought she was one of them. She was surrounded by zombies. If she were alive, wouldn't they have been trying to eat her? Did you see her? There was blood dripping from her mouth before she ever bit me, and she moved like one of them. She had to be one of them."

"She didn't move like a zombie, Mel. Zombies are slow. They're awkward because they're dead; they don't remember how to move right. She moved like she had a broken leg. She ran at you like she didn't care she had a broken leg. Like the pain of whatever you did to her was more than the pain of the broken bone sticking out of her leg. What did you do to her, Mel?"

"I don't know, Stacy. It could have been any number of things. It's been a long, hard day."

“Well what was the last thing you said to her? Why did you separate? What was she doing here? There’s got to be something.” Somehow they’d found the aisle of the store lined floor to ceiling and end to end with bottled water while they argued, and they each began loading their carts.

“We were arguing about you, Stacy. I don’t remember, exactly, what the last thing I said to her was, but after we lost Maddy she just lost it.”

“You lost your daughter?” Stacy paused her hefting and stood staring at Mel with a look of disbelief.

“She’s dead, Stacy. If you must know, she died right here, in this store. I left her side for a few seconds, and a zombie tore her throat out, alright? Is that what you want me to say? It’s my fault. I didn’t protect her, and she died. Okay?”

Stacy’s eyes went wide. “You left her alone? Isn’t she... eight?”

“Yes. She was eight. But I heard Frances screaming, and I came running. I can show you the zombie I killed protecting her, if you want. It’s just a few aisles over.” Mel hadn’t stopped loading his cart, and when it was full he didn’t wait for Stacy. He turned it around and headed out toward the truck.

Stacy threw another couple cases of bottled water on her cart and hurried after him. “You’re not telling me the whole story, Mel. She attacked you as though you’d been the one to kill Madeline. And what about Michael?”

Mel didn’t turn around to answer her. He steered his heavy-laden shopping cart around the bodies and out the door, saying, “I did kill her, the second time, alright? I crushed her little skull in with a number ten can of peaches. The zombie tore her throat out, she died, and when she came back as one of them, I killed her. It was me.” Mel gave the garage only a cursory glance before turning his back to it to load the water into the back of the truck. “If that weren’t

Cheating, Death

enough, she blamed both of us for Michael's death, because I was on the phone with you when he died."

Stacy gasped. "Is that what...?" She couldn't finish her question.

"Yes. We were at the stadium, I thought we were safe, and I stepped away for a minute to call you. Somehow some zombies got in, people panicked, and there was a stampede. Knocked the phone right out of my hands, knocked Michael to the ground, and a hundred thousand feet walked over his body, trying to save themselves."

"I'm so sorry, Mel." Stacy was so caught up in listening to Mel's story that she wasn't unloading her own cart. Mel unloaded it for her, into the back of Max's truck.

"I guess she'd suspected I was having an affair, and after Michael... It all started to come out. You wanted to know why we separated? Take your pick. I was cheating on her, with you, for a year. She blames me for Michael's death because I was on the phone with you instead of protecting him. She blames me twice as much for Madeline's death, because I wasn't protecting her the first time and because I killed her with my own hands the second time. She lost it, after that. She practically blamed me for the zombie outbreak before she stormed off. But she didn't look like one of them, the last time I saw her. She was fine. Angry, but... uninjured. Alive." Max pushed a cart full of canned food out of the store on the other side of the truck, and began unloading it.

"And she was still alive when she attacked you," insisted Stacy. "She obviously didn't fare very well on her own, but she was still alive. I saw you shoot her, Mel. You shot her in the chest. If she'd been one of them, she wouldn't have stopped trying to eat you. She wouldn't even have flinched."

"I shot her in the head, too."

"Which I appreciate," interjected Max. "If she wasn't one of them yet, shooting her in the heart would have done it. Come on, Stacy. You think she was standing in the middle of a hundred zombies without getting bitten once? As far as

I'm concerned, she was either one of them, or was about to be. The head shot kept her from getting up."

"I don't know whether she was infected or not. All I'm saying is I don't think she was dead, yet." Stacy grabbed Mel, stopped him from pushing the carts back into the store, made him face her. "Even if she was wrong, or crazy, or whatever you want to think about her state of mind, Frances was alive, Mel. You murdered your wife." Mel shook his head. In contradiction as well as in disbelief. "It's not okay, Mel."

"She was one of them. You saw her, right, Max? She was a zombie."

"It's a catch-22, man. If she was a zombie, then you're gonna be one pretty soon, on account of the chunk she bit out of your arm. If she wasn't a zombie, then you're a murderer. Either way, it would be a terrible idea to take you with us. It's a classic horror movie mistake, and not one I plan to make." Max was carefully stacking cans of food into crates that lined the back of his pickup, so Mel couldn't catch his eye to see if he was being facetious. "Not to mention that, faced with a hundred zombies, the only thing you shot at might not have been one of them. You froze up in a fire-fight, which makes you a liability for the rest of us."

"What are you saying?" Mel still couldn't seem to catch Max's gaze.

"He's saying you can't come with us, Mel."

"I'll let you two say goodbye," said Max, putting the last of the cans into the truck. "I'll go get the salt, and then we're leaving. Get his gun." Max pushed his cart back inside.

"So that's it, you're just leaving me behind?"

"Look, Mel. It isn't just this. You aren't the only one that's had a hard day. It's given me a lot to think about. You didn't pick me, for one. Given the choice, faced with certain doom, you picked your family over me, Mel. You didn't even call. Not to warn me, not to say goodbye, not until you

thought your family was safe. I wasn't your first choice, Mel, and I finally think I understand that."

"It wasn't like that. I couldn't get a minute alone, Stacy. It was—"

"It's okay," she interrupted. "You don't have to explain yourself any more than your actions already have. I know you aren't good at making up your mind, Mel. So you didn't make a decision about who to be with, and when the news broke, you were with her. So you behaved as though you'd intended to be with her, and you protected her. And when we got here, you were with me. So you behaved as though you'd intended to be with me, and when you saw her, you shot her."

"That's not how it happened."

"But you cheated on her, Mel, and when push came to shove you killed her. I guess I finally figured out that if you'd cheat on her then someday you'll cheat on me. Would you kill me, too? Or just leave me to die, unarmed and surrounded by monsters?"

"You know I'd never do that to you, Stacy."

"I'm sorry Mel. I just don't."

"She was one of them. It wasn't her, it was..." Mel began to see she'd already made up her mind. He handed her Max's borrowed gun and flashlight, resignedly.

"Like Max said, if she really was a zombie, then you're going to turn into one of them, yourself. It's only a matter of time. I'd rather not have to be the one to kill you, Mel."

Mel had run out of excuses, explanations, and arguments. He nodded, then reached out to pull her into his embrace. Stacy accepted the hug, and returned it warmly. They stood in each other's arms until Max had come back out, finished loading the pickup, and started the engine to leave. There was no goodbye kiss, there was only "goodbye," and Mel was standing alone in the dark of the empty garage.



“So what’s the plan now, Max?” Stacy was trying not to think of Mel as they pulled away from the King Soopers’ parking garage. “Not the airport, again?”

“No. I had an idea when he called, earlier. The main roads out of town are all blocked, but maybe the old roads are still clear. We can take Broadway up and Brighton across, then take Brighton all the way out to the town of Brighton, and ride the 85 out of Colorado. Avoid all the Interstates.” He turned right at 14th, heading back toward Broadway.

“And if the 85 is as impassable as the Interstates?”

“We’ll know before we get too far, and at least we’ll be headed roughly toward the airport. Plan A, if the roads are clear, is take the 85. Plan B is to try to get to the airport. How’s that sound?”

“I assume you have a Plan C coming together, for when we get to the airport and it’s worse than Invesco Field, right?”

“I’m working on it, Stacy. One thing at a time.” Almost as soon as they were away from the grocery store, they began to see zombies in the streets again, and Max ran a few of them down. He didn’t go as far out of his way to crush them as he had earlier, and didn’t cheer with each crunch and thump under his wheels. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Driving to Brighton? Sure.”

“No, I mean... With leaving your friend behind.”

“You were right, Max. He’s a liability. Maybe he’ll turn into a zombie in the next few hours, or maybe he’ll freeze up again when we need his help, but...” Stacy drew in a quick breath through her nose. Max couldn’t tell if it was a sniffle or just a breath, and didn’t want to take his eyes off the road to see if there were tears on her face. “It’s for the best. I’m sure he’ll be fine. He’s made it this far, hasn’t he?”

Cheating, Death

“Sure.” As the Denver Mint came up on their left, Max saw something strange happen directly ahead of them, at the Civic Center Park. “Did the park just catch fire?”

Stacy had been staring at her lap, and looked up, wiping the tears from her eyes to see clearly. “Uhh... yeah. Can zombies start fires, Max?”

“I guess we’re about to find out.”

Chapter Thirteen

Death and Salvation

The truck's taillights disappeared from Mel's view within seconds, and he was left standing alone and unarmed in the dark of the parking garage. He looked out the rectangular opening of the garage to the moonlit street beyond, then down to his empty hands. Melvin Spall had nothing. No one. No hope, and no plan. He saw the blood oozing from his arm and realized he probably didn't have a lot of time, either.

Melvin Spall's stomach rumbled in hunger, reminding him of the bag of bread he'd left in the cab of Max's pickup truck. He turned his head back to the black entrance to the store, and almost retched at the thought of going back in. A smell, real or imagined, came to him from that portal to death, and he imagined the dead bodies littering the floor, the food without refrigeration in the heat of the day, the remains of his wife and his daughter, all working to turn his hunger into nausea. Melvin Spall didn't even attempt a final foray into the store for water, though he hadn't had anything to drink all day.

Melvin Spall stalked out into the open air of the street and began to wander again, glad that the moon was already high overhead. He walked slowly, and he thought.

Cheating, Death

His wife was dead. After all their years together, the good times and the bad, raising their children and having an affair and all the rest, Melvin Spall had grown used to having Frances in his life. In his bed, every night. Taking care of him, taking care of his family, consistently. She was gone. Not just left behind, in a divorce or after a fight, but gone for good. Melvin Spall's anchor had been ripped away by his own foolishness, and he found himself adrift.

As long as he stayed far enough away from the zombies, they didn't seem to notice him. His path was a strange one, crossing back and forth across the street and behind cars and around buildings just to avoid being seen. It was easy for Melvin Spall to wander this way, though, because it was how he'd wandered through his life. As long as he stayed far enough away from any big decisions, he didn't have to make them himself.

His children were dead. Madeline had been so bright. Michael had showed such potential. Their futures had promised so much, and now it was all for naught. All the dirty diapers, all the doctor visits and the corresponding ear infections, all the clothes bought and grown out of in a blink, even the few years they'd already spent in school; it was all a waste. Melvin Spall wished he'd spent more time with them. More time at home. More family vacations. More time reading to them instead of telling Frances he was too tired and having her put them to bed. He wished he could get the image of Michael, worked to a pulp into the soil, broken and bloody and so small, out of his head. He wished he could forget the feeling of Madeline's skull giving way under the force of his hands, or to stop hearing her brief, blood-chilling scream over and over again, as though from just around the next corner.

Melvin Spall was tired and hungry and thirsty and sore. He'd been up and moving since long before dawn, with only a few hours' sleep. He was on his last legs, not quite the shambling, mumbling creature his wife had become, but well

on his way down that road. He'd stopped checking doors, stopped looking for shelter, and at some point not very far North of the grocery store where he'd been abandoned, Melvin Spall found a dark alcove that hid him from the streetlights and the moon light, and he collapsed to the ground. Ignoring the cold, ignoring the danger of one of the walking dead stumbling randomly upon him, he curled himself into a tight ball, closed his eyes, and tried to sleep.

His lover had left him. Stacy, who had fallen for Melvin Spall on her first day at work, had abandoned him. After the aggressive way she'd worked herself into his life and into his heart, after the lunch dates, the dinner dates, the sunsets at the lake, and after all their more intimate rendezvous in their year together, she had rejected him. She had driven off with a stranger. She had left him to die, with the contradictory excuse that she didn't want to be the one to kill him. Melvin Spall had not revealed his own plans to leave her; Stacy had independently made up her mind that they should separate. With his arms curled around himself, he couldn't help but wish Stacy's arms were still there, still holding on to him.

Eventually Melvin Spall drifted off to sleep. His dreaming mind returned again and again to the traumas he had suffered. He continued going over and over each moment of decision, second guessing himself even though unconscious. His home town had become a death trap, drawing him back again and again to its core, and to the personal reminders of pain it had given him there. He felt as abandoned by the world at large as he did by the few living people he'd encountered that day. The National Guard had told him he'd be better off leaving their protection. His wife and his mistress had each turned away from him, leaving him standing alone and defenseless in the street. The world beyond Denver had sent no forces to his aid, either to rid the city of its plague of death or to carry survivors to safety. In his restless, shivering sleep, Melvin Spall dreamed that they had all died. The National Guard, his family, his lover and her companion,

Cheating, Death

even the rest of the world, all consumed by the spread of the zombies. He dreamt that he was the last living person in a world of the dead.

Then the sound of footsteps approaching fell on Melvin Spall's ears, and he rolled over, still dreaming. He dreamt that death had finally come for him, the last living man on Earth, to finish the work it had begun. In his dream, death came in the form of a little girl, a little boy, a lover, a wife, and a crowd of friends. Their faces were happy and expectant, like at a surprise party where they're all facing the door, waiting for the guest of honor. In Melvin Spall's dream, they were waiting for him to enter through death's door, and he could hear them speaking, quietly.

"He wasn't the one who trained us," said one of the dead in his dream, "Hang on, I think I saw something moving in that alcove."

"Shhh...!" hushed another.

"I'm breathing... as quietly... as I can," said a third dead face in the crowd, and Melvin Spall began to wonder what was going on. The dead faces in his dream didn't make any sense, saying, "Look, there's no reason to go poking around in dark corners, trying to get attacked. Remember your training. Use language." Melvin Spall began to rouse from his deep slumber, and the figure standing in the light of the streetlamp across the way raised his voice, bringing him fully awake. "Hey, you, are you alive? It's important that you answer, because zombies don't use language, and we're going to kill you if you don't answer."

Melvin Spall leapt to his feet, bursting out of the darkness of the alcove, waving his arms at the two well-armed men he saw standing there. The bite wound on his left arm was clearly visible to them, an obvious sign of infection. He ran toward them, shouting "Don't shoot! Don't kill me! I'm alive. One of those things bit me, but I'm—"

Before he could finish his sentence, one of the two men raised his weapon and fired. With an explosive bullet

entering his skull right between his eyes and destroying his brain, Melvin Spall died instantly. The momentum he'd had running toward them had carried his body another couple of steps before he became a crumpled, lifeless heap of cold, battered, abandoned human remains.



Stacy watched a dozen people appear, at the Sergeant's order, and unload the supplies from the back of Max's pickup in seconds. "You seem pretty organized. Do you have an escape plan?" Another person appeared with gas cans, topped off Max's tank, and put the empties in the back to be filled.

"Today we were just doing basic recon and gathering survivors who had broadcast their locations," replied Lorraine, "we'll do a full sweep of the city for survivors over the next few days. Sarge says that after three days or so, anyone who hasn't been found won't be."

"Then, what?" Max and two of the men got in the cab of his truck and they drove off, leading several other vehicles to the King Soopers to gather additional supplies. Stacy secretly hoped Mel would still be nearby, but hadn't said anything about him when she'd heard their plan.

"I don't know. We blew up the fuel dump at the airport and blocked all the runways, so we won't be flying back out. Sarge said that was to keep any infected from flying out and any new victims from flying in. I guess Sarge is planning on coming up with a plan later on." Lorraine looked the Sergeant's direction with unabashed lust and trust. "I mean, we don't even know how many people we'll be moving. There are only about a hundred and fifty now, but if we find a couple hundred more, or thousands, the logistics change significantly."

Cheating, Death

“What about the walking dead? Won’t they just walk to the next town over? What are you doing to stop them from taking over the world?”

“The zombies? Nah. They mostly walk in circles or stay in a small area. I didn’t get the full training, but according to one of Sarge’s lectures, out of a million zombies, maybe a dozen will find their way more than a mile from where they died.”

“That’s still a risk, isn’t it? If a zombie walks a mile North and attacks someone who walks a mile North and attacks someone then eventually Fort Collins is overrun with undead. Not to mention that if you survive an attack but get bitten, you could drive almost anywhere in the country before you succumbed. You said it could take up to thirty-six hours to turn, right?” Stacy couldn’t stop thinking about Mel, worrying about him, wondering if his wife had actually been a zombie or not.

“It’s usually much faster. Sarge says he’s seen it happen in a matter of minutes. A few hours is average. Get bitten at lunch, have brains for dinner, that sort of thing. And the infected get sick. Really sick, really fast. Any kind of injury speeds it up. They wouldn’t be driving for long.”

“But they could get to Fort Collins, or Colorado Springs.”

“Maybe. If someone got bit and drove out, and if they got that far before they died and if no one killed them before they spread it further, then yes. But beyond Colorado, they won’t get far. Cheyenne on the outside, and then it stops spreading. Remember, once they die, they don’t go far. Sarge ran the numbers before we left, showed us all the maps. The world will be fine.”

Stacy kept looking back in the direction they’d come from, thinking about Mel, wishing she’d given him more time. She was second-guessing herself. She was wondering why she hadn’t been as devoted to Mel as Lorraine appeared to be to the Sergeant. “How long have you and the Sarge

been together? You two seem so happy.” Stacy imagined it had been years. Lorraine trusted the Sergeant so completely.

“About a week,” answered Lorraine, with a big smile and a wink, “most of it in bed.”

Stacy remembered when Mel had been able to bring that kind of a smile to her face, just days earlier. She thought about going after him. She thought about forgiving him. She tried to excuse his behavior, to her heart, and she tried to pretend she hadn’t watched him murder his own wife. She couldn’t forget him. She couldn’t forgive him. She wouldn’t have found him if she’d looked. She never learned how he’d died.

Then, after a few hours, because of something well beyond her control, Stacy forgot forever all about Melvin Spall.

Appendix Z

About the Zombies

Some helpful information about the zombies in this book:

Zombies are slow.

Zombies are stupid.

Zombies do not use tools.

Zombies do not use language.

Zombies do not experience romance.

Zombies are not just old, hungry vampires.

Zombies do not want to exact revenge on the living.

Zombies do not have any magical abilities or super-powers.

Zombies can only be killed by damaging or destroying their brain.

Zombies eat the living, and are attracted to the motion and commotion they make.

Zombies like eating brains, but are not possessed of super-human strength, so how are they supposed to bite through your skull?

Zombies who did manage to eat the brains of their victims wouldn't be much of a threat, since they'd prevent the spread of zombie-ism by doing so.

Zombies are created when a human has had fluid contact with a zombie; primarily via saliva transmitted into a bite wound.

Note: Hell is not full, zombies are not a sudden and global phenomenon bringing all unburied dead to life, the dead are not clawing their way out of graves, and this book's cover is intentionally misleading.

Zombies spread quickly because the living are stupid, too.

About the Author

Teel is an independent author, artist, creative visionary, blogger, publisher, podcaster, and sometimes filmmaker.

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to everyone who bought in via Smashwords.com and read this book as I was writing it; I appreciate your support and hope I can keep entertaining you with new words. Thanks also to my sister, Angela, who has literally helped me proofread every book I've ever written, even the ones she didn't like.

About the Universe

Cheating, Death is the fourth glimpse of the storybook universe first seen in *Lost and Not Found*, and gives a detailed look at the zombie outbreak that put the events of *Forget What You Can't Remember* in motion. The short story collection, *More Lost Memories*, gives further depth to the characters and settings of *Forget What You Can't Remember* and *Cheating, Death*, including a few more zombies. Read them in any order; they each have their own stories to tell.

Books by Teel McClanahan III

The *Lost and Not Found* universe:

Lost and Not Found
Forget What You Can't Remember
More Lost Memories
Cheating, Death
A Zombie Novel

Untrue Tales From Beyond Fiction
Recollections of an Alternate Past, a series:

Book One:
An Introduction To Dodgeball, or
Conception and Induction, or
How To Begin An Apocalypse

Book Two:
The Twofold Invasion, or
Penetration and Destruction, or
How To Make Love With Twins

Book Three:
Escape From Exile, or
Confusion and Contraction, or
How To Get Out Of Hell

Other works:

Dragons' Truth
The Vintage Collection
Worth 1k --- Volume 1
A collection of poetry instead of pictures
Worth 1k --- Volume 2
Working, eating, pain and longing