

So, It Begins...

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Unlikely companions wander through a post-apocalyptic wasteland seeking refuge.



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So, It Begins... : Chapter 1

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Chapter 1

December

1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 I flipped through the last few indecipherable pages of my so-called journal. The cover was sordid but recognizable. Snow had melted some of the pages together, and some of the writing was too smudged to read. But, my memory was vivid enough to piece together a few illegible words. 1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 It had been three months since I've been away from home. And, the cold isn't much better. Every day seems to get worse and worse. There are moments, though, that seem more bearable than the rest... 1/2

* 1/2 * 1/2 *

1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 "We can't build a fire? Why not?" Aaron inquired, yelling at James at the top of his lungs.

1/2 1/2 1/2 "We'll risk being found--"

1/2 1/2 1/2 "But, I'm cold, damnit!"

1/2 1/2 1/2 He tried to snatch the matches from James' cold hands. Failing, the half-opened box fell in the snow.

1/2 1/2 1/2 "Now they're damp and need to dry out... Are you happy now?" James said, wincing.

1/2 1/2 1/2 "I just wanted---"

1/2 1/2 1/2 "We know what you wanted," a girl interrupted. Her name was Jessica or Jesse... Jess--?

Something like that; I never cared to listen closely to the last few syllables of her name. 1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 "You're just so selfish," she continued. "What would you do if those things find out where we were?"

1/2 1/2 1/2 "I'd just--"

1/2 1/2 1/2 "Run. That's what you'd do. Stop making things so difficult for the rest of us."

1/2 1/2 1/2 I agreed with everything that she had said, but wasn't James talking first? 1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 She quieted down and backed behind James' shoulder. I guess it was her way of telling him that it was his turn to speak again. 1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 "Don't put everyone else in danger with your stupidity. If you wanna pull stunts like that, run off on your own and do it. Don't pull us down with you."

1/2 1/2 1/2 With that, he was done. And, the conversation was over. He clasped his gaunt fingers around his thin, black jacket and backed off into a corner. His faithful dog followed.

1/2 1/2 1/2 All of our eyes followed him into the darkness until we could no longer make out the outline of his willowy body. Subconsciously, though, I think we all understood that the black, bulging figure in the corner that never moved was James. And, we aren't to bother him when he is upset.

1/2 1/2 1/2 We averted our eyes and left James to himself. He was so very irritable nowadays, and I couldn't blame him. We were dirty, hungry, and scared. To top it all off, it's freezing cold and, there are no real level-headed people in our group--well, none as level-headed and as quick on their toes as James. 1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 I admit that I am only good for school books and exams, and when it comes to survival, I'm about as useful as a wet blanket in a snowstorm. And, I think James knows that. But, I try to do as much as I can to make up for it and James sympathizes. The others aren't as forgiving, even though they are about as useless as I am.

1/2

1/2 1/2 1/2 We moved around over a dozen times since the first month. Now, we're staying in a library, I believe... Or, it could just be a bookstore. Either way, it's deserted and we're here alone, left to fend for ourselves.

1/2 1/2 1/2 This is good enough for me, I guess... I like to read often, but my stomach doesn't like brainwork when it's hungry. I wandered around, straddling the complex mixture of shadow and light, which limited my

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search for food.

I stared off into the distance for a short while, and then felt a faint pang of hope flutter around in my stomach. There was a vending machine sitting afar off in the distance; I could tell. It was as perfect and still as if no one or anything had even discovered its existence yet. I had to have some food from that box.

I looked around, hoping to find a friendly face in the dimness. I fixed my eyes upon Aaron, but he seemed unapproachable... His expression was one of contempt and ire. So, I quickly diverted my attention to Jess; she looked up at me.

"Don't even ask," she said abruptly, whipping her short and curly, dark tresses back over her shoulder.

I frowned. I didn't want to go into the darkness by myself, but I also didn't want to starve. How could the two of them be so selfish at a time like this? Weren't they hungry too? Were they actually too upset to be starving? Were they all really upset over a pack of damn matches?

I winced and knelt down. The hunger was growing and becoming unbearable. I held my stomach and peered around again.

The shadow in the corner was misshapen. It bulged once--twice---. Then a body slowly took form, aglow with the crepuscular light that poured inside through the upstairs windows. The thinning shadow then took shape, and a long, slender arm reached out to touch my shoulder.

"Tomorrow," James said. "When there's more light, we can look for food."

Though reluctant, I nodded and tried to mentally prepare for the night of starvation that lay ahead of me. Well, I'd rather die starving than to die being ripped apart and eaten.

"Why do we always have to listen to you?" Aaron interjected, twirling a jade, varsity football ring upon his finger.

"Because, he knows what he's doing... unlike you," Jess said snippily.

"I'm serious... Pretty soon, he's gonna be telling us where to piss!"

"I'd like to know whether the area's safe before I pull down my pants..." I sarcastically mumbled under my breath.

"Okay, cut out the smartass remarks. This has nothing to do with either of you. This is between me and him."

James didn't say anything. He towered behind me silently and glanced sideways at Aaron in the dim light.

"Are you deaf?"

"Keep your voice down," James said coolly.

"Or what?" Aaron boomed rudely.

"Or you'll get us discovered," James whispered in a stern voice.

Aaron sighed and walked behind us. He stopped at the distinct line of light that crossed over into darkness and looked back over his shoulder.

"Coming?" he called out, hoping someone would accept his hazardous invitation.

"I can wait..." I murmured, quickly stepping behind James' long, skeletal arm.

"Humph, figures," Aaron snorted. "What about you, Jess?"

Jessica looked a bit uneasy. "I'm not all that hungry, honestly," she said. Then, she quickly looked away and started playing with a few invisible strands of her chocolate-brown hair.

"Fine," Aaron answered. "But don't look at me like a sad puppy when I have food and you don't."

After that, he took one giant stride out into the darkness. He hopped over what seemed to be a desk covered in books and magazines. Then he was alight again but only slightly. His face and torso was painted with pale-blue moonlight.

Oh God, no... What is he doing? I thought. Aaron rolled up the sleeve of his jacket and clenched his fist over and over again. The jade stone glimmered dully in the moonlight.

"James..." I whispered, "He's not gonna--he's not gonna actually break it with his bare hand, is he?"

James placed a narrow hand on my shoulder. "Come on," he said, turning me away.

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"What? But, what about--"

"If he's so smart, he can figure it out himself."

I looked up to catch a glimpse of his face. His eyes were still and fixed straight ahead. Jessica, confused, didn't know whether to follow or to stay behind and wait.

"What's goin on?" she asked nervously.

"Either you come or you stay," James said, stalking past her with both hands now on my shoulders. "It's up to you."

He stopped for a moment and looked back at her. I took the opportunity to look back also. There was a loud crash, and she jumped to her feet. I glanced over in the corner where Aaron was standing, and his hands were slick with something... and dripping. Could it be blood?

His face looked pained as he drew the wet hand up to his face and examined it carefully. His fair hair was glowing, illuminated with soft, blue light.

I glanced quickly to the left of him; something else had caught my eye. A figure appeared, hobbling out of the darkness from across the street.

"Oh, my God," I said in a gasp, and covered my mouth.

"Keep moving," James said, putting his hands on my shoulders again.

Jessica had jumped to her feet by now, but before she could follow us, we had turned a corner. And she, along with Aaron, was lost in the darkness behind us.

Just after we had turned the corner, I heard a dull thud.

"What was that?" I managed to shriek out in a raspy whisper.

"Shh."

I quieted down as I was told. We reached a dead end. There was a door at the far end of the long, secluded hallway, but it was locked. And, James didn't want to risk making noise trying to pry it open.

"Be quiet," he whispered, placing a thin finger to my chafed lips.

I held my tongue and nodded my head. There it was again, that nauseating, dull-sounding thud, except it sounded farther away this time. I made up my mind. I knew what the sound was now, and why I had to keep quiet. It was the sick thumping of dead bodies being flung at thick glass.

I touched the skin of my arm. It was spiked like raised dots. I was terrified... And, we were all gonna die--all because Aaron didn't like to be told what to do. Why did I have to mention being hungry!

Before long, I grew deaf. I couldn't hear anything any longer. My heart, my pulse, my everything beat hard into my ears. And, I felt myself shrinking--shrinking back into the corner behind me.

I grabbed for a wall in vain and fell blindly through the air. My backside hit the cold, tile floor, but I didn't scream. I scooted back into the corner, and pulled my knees up to my chin.

"What was that?" I gasped.

James backed into the corner and hovered over me for just a second.

"Is that the dog?"

James quietly knelt down beside me and put his long hand over my taut mouth.

There was a sound--a faint sound--of something skulking down the hallway. It was too faint, too stealthy to be one of those creatures. But, what if they could creep around like--like us?

"Hello?" a shaky voice whispered from around the corner.

We didn't answer back. Instead, we crouched together in the darkness, breathing deeply into each others' chests. The voice said "hello" again, and still, we didn't answer.

James tried to pull away, but I wasn't having it. I couldn't allow anything to happen to him. He was my only chance, my only hope for survival.

I clung to the sides of his shirt and tried keeping him still. He reached for my hand, then turned around and nodded to me that it was okay. So, reluctantly, I let him go.

He crept alongside the wall and spied beyond the corner that we had darted around. After a moment, he sighed and reached out into the darkness. To my dismay, that arm came back with something--someone attached to it. Jessica.

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sky after it rains.

Earlier, when the place was filled with shadows, I felt more restricted, but now that everything was illuminated with more light, the room seemed vacant and wide--much wider than it had seemed in the darkness.

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Chapter 2: Dawn Comes

Chapter 2

Dawn Comes

When we stepped out into the space, I looked towards the vending machine where Aaron had once stood. I saw the large window from which the sick-sounding thud had reverberated.

The glass was smeared now, with blood and dirt and--sweat, probably. There were some indistinguishable remnants of filth that I couldn't quite make out.

Dribbles of blood were sprinkled across the carpet, the tile, and the wall. And, blood was smeared across the exit door in the distance--Aaron's blood, surely. And now, he was gone--out there somewhereâ

"See?" Jessica said in a faint whisper. "That's where he wentâ"

"Oh wow, how obvious! As if we didn't already see that," I said snidely.

I rolled my eyes and caught sight of James. His facial expression was one of disapproval. And once again, I felt ashamed. Okay. I could be betterâ I don't have to sink to her level. So, here goes. ***Mission Impossible: Don't respond to Jessica's cynicism.***

* * *

James pulled me over the first two sets of steps, and I almost fell. The steps were higher than average. And, he was tall enough to take two steps in one stride if he felt like doing so. Jessica was tall enough to do it tooâ

Soon, I was stuck in the back, trailing the two of them.

I grimaced, and prepared to climb the second set of stairs, which rose up beside a set of large windows that overlooked the city. Minutely, I acknowledged the windows then quickly looked back down at my feet to make sure I didn't trip whilst being dragged.

At the top of the staircase, there was an aisle--accompanied by railing--that continued in both directions. To the left, the aisle continued for a short distance and ended in front of a set of large windows.

Opposite of it, an aisle continued to the right towards a set of doors and branched off into two directions. I tightly held onto James' hand and veered right.

There was a widely open door a short distance away. Inside, the lights flickered ominously and shelves upon shelves of books towered over the debris of knocked over tables, broken chairs, and torn up pieces of paper. The dog ran right past us. I was wondering where he had been all this timeâ He strolled up between me and James and eyed me curiously. I cringed again; I couldn't hold it much longer. I would kill to be a dog right now. At least then I could "go" anywhere I wanted to.

I pulled away from James and staggered down the aisle and over to a door. I opened it, and to my dismay, it wasn't a bathroom. It was just another room with more magazines and books.

I left the door open and tried my luck with the room next to it, but it wasn't a bathroom either.

There was room sitting at the far end of the aisle, but it was still covered in shadow. I refused to go that far, but I had to do something quick.

I staggered back over to the first room and shut the door. And when I was done, I pulled up my pants whilst staring blankly at the dark spot in the carpet that I had just created. I forced myself to turn away. What an embarrassmentâ I had been reduced to pissing on carpets and dabbing with--not tissue, but magazine paper. After that sickening dose of reality, I came out of the room and pulled the door shut. I looked around for Jessica and James, and I found them.

They were standing next to each other now; their backs were turned to me. They were looking out of the window at the sun slowly creeping over the dismal, distorted skyline. Her curly hair just barely touched her broad shoulders.

The sun peeked over the buildings in the distance, and the first-few, dull rays of morning eclipsed their bodies; their figures turned into shadows; her hair was now a bed of unmoving snakes. And James was a statue shrouded in obscurity--he was stone.

"Ahem."

"Oh, Cayleigh, you're done?" Jessica said, whipping her curls around.

James looked too.

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"Noâ I just decided to come over and take a piss right here in the middle of the floor," I replied derisively.

Mission Impossible: Failed.

James' eyes were upon me now; I could feel them. And, I just knew that he was frowningâ But by now, I was satisfied. And instead of pleading my case, I averted my eyes and said nothing.

* * *

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Chapter 3: A Grim Encounter

Chapter 3

A Grim Encounter

The dog yawned, and so did I. We sat on the sidewalk and watched as James--and Jessica, by the looks of it--worked on a car.

The sun was warm upon my face, but the rest of me was cold. The sidewalk felt like ice, and the coolness of it made my bottom feel numb. So, I tried to wiggle a bit to get warm. Just as I began to feel progress, James got the car to crank. I jumped up and beamed brightly. Finally, a car!

It was fairly new, and it was bright green with lots of room in the back for me and Nero--that was the dog's name. What a stately name for a dog! Come to think of it, he and his owner did sorta act like royalty from time to time.

I continued to express my contentedness at the thought of a car, but my attitude quickly took a downward turn when I noticed a ghastly scar, grim and grey and stained with rust-colored blood, etched across the door. Once again, life had become sickeningly surreal.

After wrapping my head around the concept of death and destruction, and after stomaching the consequences we may have to face as survivors, I decided that I still wanted to live. And, I also decided that I wanted to drive. But, of course, they wouldn't let me.

My uncle let me drive the tractor quite a few times in the past, but that was about it. I had no further driving experience than that. Uncle Benny promised that he would let me drive his burgundy pick-up truck someday, but who knew that day would never come?

After protesting to the two that I had enough skill to test drive the car, they laughed and graciously advised me to stay away from the wheel.

I mumbled something unsavory, and cuddled up next to Nero in the backseat. His forehead was rather large and ears were sharply alert. He didn't seem to mind me much. And for once, I didn't mind him, though I was slightly put off when he began to sniff me.

James got behind the wheel and drove us out of the city. And even though I was content with Nero, I still wanted to protest because Jessica got to sit up front; not me.

At first, I tried to sit in the middle of the two. But then, Jessica complained about how hot it was with all of us sitting there together; so, I had to sit in the back... What was she talking about? It was nearly thirty-five damn degrees outside.

Soon, though, I understood what she was doing. James asked whether she would like for him to crack a window; she politely declined and unzipped the top half of her jacket.

I felt a faint twinge of pain, and for a moment, my face reflected that discomfort. I looked down at my chest and realized that there was nothing to compete with there. Her breasts were far bigger than mine.

Okay, maybe her breasts were a cup-size bigger, but the way she pushed them together made them look huge! C-cups are so damn overrated. My B's are just fine. I think!

* * *

James' face was unreadable, but by the time we reached the city outskirts, I had had a good idea of what he might have been thinking about.

He actually wanted to take a motorcycle at first. For the first time, Jessica and I had actually agreed, and we had not ruled in James' favor. He promised that if he had gotten the motorcycle, he would have ridden alongside us, but I didn't want to spend anymore time alone with Jessica than I had to. We'd probably end up killing each other.

I begged him to get a car and to forget about the motorcycle. And, Jessica scolded him for even thinking he could break away from our tiny group. Reluctantly, James agreed. Somewhere inside, though, I wished that he could've gotten his way.

Since Jessica had proclaimed herself to be "hot," James eventually talked her into allowing him let down the windows. Her short hair whipped back and forth furiously while my long, black locks churned slowly in the

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wind. Outside of the window, the world didn't seem to notice that life as we knew it had come to an end. Mist rose from the dewy grass; sparse amounts of bright light struck the miniscule water droplets, illuminating them, making them appear to be thousands of crystal feathers billowing in the slight, icy wind.

Minutely, I recognized where we were. There was a bridge up ahead that would lead us out of the town completely. Low fog slinked overhead, thick in its depths and full enough in height to make the morning sun and the leaves that loomed directly above invisible.

"In a few seconds," I began, "this'll be the first time I've gone out of town since-" I hesitated and choked on a memory.

"Since when, Cay?" James asked.

I inhaled.

"My uncleâ He was the last person I had gone out of town with-months ago. Days before all of these things began to happenâ!"

I looked down at my hands. I hadn't noticed that I was wringing them. And by the looks of it, they had turned red.

"I'm sorry, Cay," James said.

Jessica shot me a sympathetic glance, and I accepted it. That would probably be the most sincerity that I'd ever get from her.

To stop my nervous fidgeting, I slid my hands underneath my leg. The cool fabric of the seat soothed my tingling skin.

"Ready to crossover, ladies?"

"Hell yes," Jessica said, almost too enthusiastically. "I've been waiting to get out of this town my whole life."

"What about you, Cay?"

I looked up at James' eyes in the rearview mirror, and mustered up enough nerve to nod.

"Well then," he said, "let's do it."

He instructed us to sit tight as he rolled up the window. Then, as if he had gotten his wish and was driving a sleek, cool motorcycle, James leaned forward in his seat and floored it. We headed-impossibly fast-straight toward the fogged over bridge in the distance.

"Maybe you shouldn't speed," I yelled.

"Why not?" he responded zealously.

"Because, you probably shouldn't be speeding toward something you can't see too well," I croaked.

"I'd be speeding if it were a bike!"

"Yea, but it's not a bike," Jessica said; I noticed a slight trace of the same nervous tremble in her voice as I had.

"Calm down," James said brashly. "I can see where the bridge begins. Stop being so uptight and live a little!"

I sat back and dug into the seat with one hand and clawed at the walls with the other. Jessica pretended to be badass, but she was just as horrified as I was. Nero, however, could care less. He had been asleep for the past half-hour.

Within seconds, we were zipping across the sturdy, old bridge. Because of the fog, I could hardly see outside of the car. But the closer I looked, I could see splints of light highlighting the bridge's concrete structure. We were only a few inches away from the railing.

"James, we're too closeâ! Maybe you should slow down," I said again, now nervously clawing at the armrest.

"I've got it; don't worry-"

"But, James-"

"If he says he's got it, the man's got it! Calm down!" Jessica yelled over her shoulder, and whipped back around.

"We're almost over the bridge-!"

"James, watch out!"

"Shhhhhh----!!!!!! Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!!!"

* * *

James had hit something, and he swerved sharply, managing to hit something else in the process. He didn't dare to stop right away. The experience had shaken us all, even though we managed to cross the bridge in one

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piece. Once we cleared the bridge completely, the fog began to disperse.

"I should probably stop and see what that was."

"Don't be stupid," Jessica said quickly.

Silence danced around us for at least another half-mile.

"No! I should really stop--to at least see if the car's okay."

"Are you sure that's smart, though?" Jessica said, eyes as big and round as saucers.

"Smart? Oh! Smart like when you encouraged him to speed across a god damn foggy bridge?"

Jessica pressed her lips together tightly and faced James.

"Fine, just do whatever the hell you want," She said sternly. Then she whipped her head around and looked out of the window.

I smiled a little inside. I had won this round.

As soon as the fog disappeared completely, James stopped in the middle of the road. He looked carefully at his side of the car. Then, he walked around to the front. His face gradually changed as he traveled further around and viewed the opposite side.

He squatted down to look underneath the car. He groaned something awful, and then I knew! It was a person--or maybe two people--that had encountered the murderous grill of our vehicle.

James stood silently, still looking with an intent gaze underneath the side of the car. His reactive expression terrified us. It disturbed Jessica so badly that she rolled down the window and tried talking to him, but James wouldn't answer.

"James?" I called. But, there was still no answer.

"If he didn't answer me, what makes you think he'll answer when you call him?" Jessica spat out derisively. I grimaced.

"That's it," she proclaimed, "I'm getting out to see what this is all about."

Jessica tugged on the door handle and James stepped back to let her out.

"Oh shit!" she said in a gasp.

"What? What is it--?" I asked.

"That's not all," James said. "Step back and look underneath."

Jessica's face went white. She was so horrified that even the green veins trickling through her body were now visible in her chest and arms.

"What is it?"

No one would answer me. No one would tell me anything.

"Fine. I'll just have a look for myself."

"Cayleigh, you should probably stay inside," James quickly said.

"Then tell me! What is it?"

"You'd be better off not knowing," he said, pushing the door shut again.

"Stop treating me like a child, and let me see for myself!"

James let go of the door and stepped back. Jessica stood, still staring in the direction underneath the car. I stepped out, and as soon as the car door closed, I peered around to see what everyone was gawking at.

Thick, dark blood streaked across the bright-green car door. There was a gaping dent splattered with blood and what appeared to be flesh.

"Let's go," James said quickly.

"Wait," I said, "What's underneath the car? What--what were you and Jessica staring at?"

"Nothing," he said, grabbing Jessica's wan arm and pushing me toward the car.

"Stop it! If she can look, why can't I?"

James sighed. "Fine," he said, withdrawing his hand, still holding on to Jessica. "Be hardheaded."

I hesitated a bit, but soon found that my legs had a will of their own. I took three, wide steps back, and I immediately saw what James and Jessica had been staring at so intently.

He was still alive--or she--I couldn't tell! It was split in half but was somehow clinging onto the bottom of the car. Parts of its face were worn away; its lips were withered; its arms were torn open but still in tact.

At the waist, the rest of him was gone, but not completely. A ragged, badly cracked spinal cord jutted from his body and coagulated blood fell in clumps, staining the asphalt beneath him.

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I shuddered. Waves of horror and sickness shot through me. I opened my mouth in an attempt to speak, but nothing came out. My bottom lip quivered, and my skin prickled.

"Are you alright?" James asked, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I trembled at his touch. It was surprisingly warm, despite the cold weather.

"I'mâmhm," I said, nodding robotically.

"Let's get back inside."

I obeyed James this timeâ I slinked down in the seat and leaned my head against the window. Nero crawled over and decided to rest his massive head in my lap. I didn't protest. He was warm, and I was shivering.

Jessica got into the car right after me. She didn't speak. She just stared ahead into the distance.

James disappeared for a second and emerged at the side of the car with a fairly large tree branch. After a moment of jabbing and grunting and sighing, he dropped the stick, wiped his pallid brow with his arm, and kicked the branch out of the road.

With grim realization, I knew what he had done. He got back in the car and said not a word.

As we drove off, I could see his worried eyes glancing back and forth in the rearview mirror. He left it there, the half dead--half alive thing, lying in the street and clawing at the ground.

Chapter 4: A Camp Up Ahead

Chapter 4

A Camp Up Ahead

The rest of that morning was pretty quiet. No more snide remarks from Jessica, no rebellious responses from me, James didn't say much--as usual--and Nero just seemed to sleep a lot. Maybe car rides make him sleepy. I found that car rides make me sleepy too; I had fallen asleep, and when I woke up again, James had retired the wheel to Jessica.

He was tired, and I could tell. He reclined in the passenger's seat and leaned the chair back, far enough that I could see the top of his head. He closed his eyes, and his head slowly drooped over to one side.

His hair was jet black, and it sprouted wildly from his head in thick, dark wisps. I touched my own black hair, and grimaced. His looked softâ and I wanted to see if--

I looked over at Jessica; she wasn't as shaken up as she had been earlier, but there were still signs of trauma written across her face. If I even looked like I'd attempt to bother James, I knew she'd start some kind of scene. So, I sat back and once again slinked down in my seat.

Eventually, Jessica slowed down and almost immediately, James sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Why'd you stop?" he asked, squinting.

I peered around him, looking over his shoulder.

"There'sâ a person," Jessica said, stunned.

We all looked toward the street and sure enough, there was a person standing out in the middle of the street.

"Is itâ really a living person? Orâ is it one of those things?" I asked, clinging to the back of James' seat.

"I can't really tell," James said. "Drive a little closerâ Try to drive around it."

Jessica put the car in drive and attempted to go around.

"No, stop!" the thing said, waving his arms.

"Ha!" I yelled. "It's a man!"

He ran to the front of the car with his hands held out and tapped the hood.

"Stay here."

James got out of the car, and had words with the man. They seemed to get along quite well, too. So well, in fact, that I pushed Nero's head out of my lap, got out of the car, and waltzed up to the man.

"Hi, I'm Cayleigh," I said, beaming brightly. Then I extended a narrow hand in the hopes that he would take it. He stared stupidly for a moment, and I thought briefly about taking my hand back. But before I could execute the action, he took my hand and shook it.

"Arthur," he said, then retracted his hand quickly.

His palm was hot; when he withdrew, my hand felt even more sensitive to the frigid, morning air. I quickly shoved my hand inside of my pocket and stood behind James.

Jessica got out of the car as well, and she too began to listen to the two talk. She even joined the conversation every now and then, but I stayed silent. Arthur's eyes kept swimming across James' face, to Jessica's breasts--as if he could miss them--and then to me.

His glances were no ordinary glances. When he looked at me, he examined me--from head to foot. I noticed that he did the same to Jessica as well. Second by sluggish second, I found myself slowly shrinking behind James' slender body. ---

Apparently, there was a small camp--clear of any attacks--and Arthur was a part of it. He led us through the drooping, ivy vines and the hanging tree leaves to a nook far away from the road.

There was someone else--a girl; she had light-brown hair and too much enthusiasm. But decidedly, I liked her straight away. She greeted us eagerly and welcomed us to sit down.

"So, what's your name?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter," she said. "You shouldn't get too attached when either of us could die any second."

"Well, she's right," James agreed, and sat down beside her.

However grim it sounded, she really was quite right. How could a girl with so much enthusiasm be so morbid?

So, It Begins...

I grimaced and wandered over to the fallen trunk where James sat with Arthur's travelling companion; and, I sat on the ground by James' foot. I leaned against his knee and for a second, I felt his body tense up. Then just as quickly, he relaxed again. Jessica sat across from us on another log with Arthur.

"Yea, we've been out here in the wilderness together for nearly two months, and I still don't know her name," Arthur proclaimed. "I just call her Bootsie."

"Why is that?" I asked.

Arthur pointed over to her feet, and it was then I saw that she wore big, black combat boots.

"Oh, I see," I said sleepily. "Bootsieâ!"

I don't remember much after that. I fell asleep--I think--but not for long. Bootsie had fallen asleep herself, leaning her head against the sitting log.

It seemed to be long beyond noon when my eyes fluttered open, and I felt James gently caressing my hair. I wanted to pretend that I was still asleep--just to feel his hands stroking my tresses. And for a moment, I decided that I wouldâ until Arthur came bursting through the bushes.

James quickly jerked his hand away, and I pretended to be roused out of my false slumber by their noisy entrance. Damn itâ!

Arthur, along with Jessica, came over to the three of us, carrying an arm full of food. Jess eyed me conspicuously, and I turned my head away.

"You slept all this time?" she asked, noticeably prodding.

"Well, yeaâ!" I said, rubbing my eyes.

"Yea, she's been asleep for a while now," James interrupted, "and just woke up when you two came trampling through the bushes."

"It makes no sense for her to sleep that long anyhowâ!" Jessica complained peevishly.

"Well, neither of us got much sleep the other night; I needn't point out what happened with Aaron," James mentioned coolly.

Jessica rolled her eyes and came to sit on the log.

"I guess so," she said, running her hands through her short, tawny hair. "I could use some sleep too."

She leaned her head against James' shoulder and nuzzled the side of her face into his arm. I wanted to protest, but instead, I rolled my eyes and stood up from the cool ground.

"Something wrong? Are you alright?" Jessica asked, brushing her chest against James' arm and back.

His face was slowly turning red. He tucked his bottom lip under his top one and said, "Are you?"

He obviously loved big breastsâ!

"Yea, I'm fine."

I walked by a still slumbering Bootsie and down into the shallow grove of trees from whence Jessica and Arthur had come.

I sat alone for what seemed like an hour. And pretty soon, I began to feel soâ tired, all over again.

I reclined back into the frozen, crumpled leaves and pulled my jacket tightly around me. The tension in my arms, my legs, my entire body justâ diminished. I was calm. I was at easeâ! And pretty soon my mind also drifted.

* * *

I dozed off a little, but it wasn't for very long. I parted my eyes a bit, and I could see the scarce light of the sun filtering down through the leaves. I rolled over and hugged myself, rubbing my arms and neck. It was getting colder, and no one had come after me yet.

Maybe they had realized that I needed space? Or, maybe they had come looking for me and let me be when they saw that I was asleep?

I rolled over onto my back and gazed up through the trees.

"Arthur?!" I gasped, grabbing at my jacket collar and hugging my arms. "Wha--where did you--?"

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said sincerely.

"But--why--how--? How long have you been sitting there?"

Arthur looked embarrassed. He stood up from the broken trunk that he had been leaning against, walked over to me, and extended an arm.

"Are you gonna take it?" he asked, holding out a steady hand.

So, It Begins...

I reached out and grabbed it. He pulled me up swiftly--so swiftly that when I got to my feet, I stumbled forward and fell into his chest.

"Sorry," I quickly responded.

"It's fine," he said, still holding my hand.

I pulled away. "You never answered my question."

"Oh, I was making sure that--that nothing happened. It was stupid of you to run off into the woods alone. So, I went after you."

"Oh," I replied, thinking to myself that he still hadn't answered the one question I had asked. "M-maybe we should get back to the others."

Arthur nodded, and I quickly walked past him and headed toward the camp.

* * *

Things with Arthur only continued to get more awkward. That night, we had to camp outside, but not quite. There were two tents, and Bootsie offered to share her tent with Jessica and me. To James, Arthur wasn't as generous. He'd never volunteer his tent to anyone if of his same gender.

His eyes were squinty; he stood as tall as James, but he was significantly more robust. He was sturdier than James. And because of his reddish-blond hair, I speculated that he had a very short fuse. Creepy bastard. He and Bootsie were noticeably older than the rest of us--by maybe three or four years.

You see, Arthur was a man's man. And, he didn't seem to do more than he thought a "man" should be expected to do. He only offered to share his bed and rations with women, and he never volunteered a helpful hand to another man.

James brushed it off. He seemed to take 'not having a place to rest pretty well. If there was enough room in our tent, we would have been more than happy to let him inside.

"You know, Arthur, you're just full of shit."

Everyone stood silently and looked over at Bootsie. I really liked her now. She was very outspoken even though she kept mostly to herself.

"An honest piece of shit," Arthur said in his own defense.

Bootsie rolled her eyes and stamped towards Arthur's tent.

"You can just have my spot in the tent. I'll brave one night with this smartass."

"No, it's fine," James insisted. "I can sleep outside. I've fallen asleep in worse places."

"Worse places than this?" I thought aloud.

"I'm not asking, I'm telling you. Take my place."

After that, Bootsie retired to the tent with a smiling Arthur only seconds behind her.

"We could always switch," Arthur said to James, peeking his head out.

"Heh," James mouthed softly, noticeably un-amused.

I crawled inside of the other tent; Jessica and James followed. It was awkward getting our positions right, but it didn't take long. It was decided that James would sleep in the middle.

Jessica fought to lay behind him. So, I was left to lie in front by the opening. Damn, more cold air.

Before lying down, I could see the dim tinge of red slowly creeping across James' cheeks. Hmm, I peered across to Jessica. Her chest was loosely pressed against his back. It's gonna be a long night.

I separated myself from them, and I could feel the cold air creeping through the tent and slowly slithering inside of my jacket. I curled into a ball, as best I could, and hugged my arms. Slowly, but surely, I fell into a shallow slumber.

In the middle of the night, I woke up surprisingly warm. To my realization, James had moved closer. His pelvis was near to my back, and his chin rested just above my head.

I blushed, and forced myself to think rationally for a second. A cold body would move toward another if it needed warmth, right? Satisfied with the excuse I concocted, I curled back into a ball. And James, in a quick act of impulsivity, slipped his leg between mine. I panicked.

"James?" I whispered. But, I received no answer. "James?"

I settled down again and decidedly enjoyed the warmth that that was being created between us.

* * *

So, It Begins...

The next morning was warmer than the previous day, but it was still fairly cold. I rolled over and got a full glimpse of Jessica's cleavage. She was curled into a half moon and clasping the floor of the tent between her fingers. I sat up and sleepily looked around the tent. James was nowhere to be found.

I crawled out of the tent and saw Nero. He was curled up at the base of a tree. Arthur and Bootsie's tent still seemed to be closed.

I walked through the shrubs and hanging branches, down the path where Arthur had first led us. At the end of the trail, I saw a confused James, pacing up and down the ground and staring at the side of the car.

"What's wrong?"

"Cay--?" James said turning around, noticeably startled by me.

"What are you doing?"

James scratched his head and backed away from the car.

"Listen," he said, walking towards me with both hands now in his pockets, "about last nightâ"

"What about it?" I replied with a nervous smile, attempting to spare us both the embarrassment of his explanation.

James let out a nervous bit of breath, which sounded mixed between a laugh and a sigh; and then, he proceeded to explain himself.

"I, umâ You see," he began, "I have this thingâ Whereâ I sleep wildly sometimes. And, I just--You see, with my last girlfriend, she--we--" he seemed at a loss for words. "I just do things in my sleep sometimesâ I'm sorry if you were uncomfortable, but--I just tend to huddle closely to things in my bed."

Who does he think he's fooling? I thought to myself a moment. Alright. He huddles closely to whatever's laying beside him. But, Jessica was closer than I had been, and he decided to reach for me--not her. Maybe he likes me after allâ

James' cheeks went bright red, and up close, I found it to be adorable on such a pale face. Not that it wasn't cute before when Jessica had made him blush. --It's just--this time, his emotion had depth. And, we both shared the same feeling. Embarrassment.

"That's okay," I said, my face more rubicund than his, "I was cold anyway."

James turned back around and moved toward the car. The blush slowly trickled down from his face and emptied into his throat; soon, it was no longer visible, and he was pale once again.

"What are you looking for?"

"We should've gotten another car after hitting that thingâ" he said, a twinge of remorse clouding his sympathetic eyes.

"Why? What's wrong? It won't start?"

"I wish that was the problemâ"

I bit my bottom lip. "Then, what is it?"

"When we--when we leave later on today, we have to leave Nero here."

"But, why?"

James' eyes went cold, and his lips began to tremble.

"He must've gotten curiousâ I should've fed him as soon as we got here," he said, tensing up his jaw.

"What are you talking aboutâ?"

"I caught him, this morning, licking blood and pieces of flesh off the underside of the car."

I gasped and clasped both hands around my mouth.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes--"

"I mean, he could've just been--"

"Damn it, Cay, I said I was sure!" an enraged James snapped. "I wiped the damn blood from his mouth myself."

"Jamesâ!--"

"They say you shouldn't give dogs blood... It makes em wild... But, zombie blood..?" James winced. "I thought twice aboutâ just acting like it never happened--and just letting him tag along until--just to see ifâ"

His voice trailed off, and his eyes lowered.

So, It Begins...

"I'm so sorryâ!"

The corner of his eye glistened. "Well, anyway," he said almost too loudly, and wiped the corner of his eye with his sleeve, "it'd be too much of a risk."

"I--promise not to tellâ! if you decide to bring Nero along, I mean."

"You--you would do that?"

"I meanâ! yea. I know how much he means to you."

"Yea," James said sleepily, staring blankly into space. His eyes were filling with nostalgia. "We've been through a lot together."

I nodded.

"Even before, with my family--"

"Why the hell did you two leave me behind like that?!"

Jessica burst out of the bushes with leaves and dew littering her dark hair; she was furious.

"We--"

"We were just checking out the damage," James said quickly.

"Never leave me behind with that creepy guy, ever again!"

"Arthur? Creepy? Noâ!" I replied with cynical disbelief. James eyed me conspicuously. "She started itâ!" I mumbled.

"I'll deal with you later," James replied, then turned his attention back to Jessica. "What happened?"

"That creep!" she wailed, eyes filling with water. "He was staring at me! Just staring! And when I caught him, he just grinned and said, 'g'morning girls'."

"Nothing's so bad about that," James tittered.

I rolled my eyes. "So what! He mentioned your breasts in a sentenceâ! And now, you're upset that he was talking to your boobs instead of your face? You should be used to people doing that by now."

"Cay," James scolded, signaling me to be quiet by putting a finger to his lips. "Is that all, Jess?"

Jessica sucked up her tears and began again, "I wasn't all that upset at first, noâ! not until--until I looked down and saw that--"

"Saw what?"

"My breasts were out!" Jessica bawled.

I was flushed, and James was speechless. He gained a noticeable tinge of red in his cheeks.

"Did he--?"

"I don't know!" She wailed again, "They were just out!"

Damn, I was enjoying this. "They were bound to slip out," I said smiling. "Just look at how big they are!"

"Cayleigh!" James said, glaring at me. His eyes were cold. And soon, I knew that I had gone too far. "Maybe you should wait with Nero at the camp."

"But, James--"

"Go wait with Nero at the camp," he said, pronouncing each word more stern than the last.

I frowned, but obeyed. And slowly, I walked back through the bushes and trees towards the camp.

I thought minutely about the way I had been acting back there, and I was a tad disgusted with myself for going so far. Not because I was wrong, but because Jessica deserved this kind of treatment and nobody saw that as clearly as me.

Okay, maybe I did kick her a bit too hard while she was downâ! and maybe that wasn't such a great thing to do, but she kicks me all the time!

I bit my bottom lip and stamped through the bushes, swatting away branches and sidestepping thick tufts of grass. I was getting angry--no, not angry. I was pissed! And, no one understood my reason for anything.

Well, I really was pissed, until I tore through the brush and saw Arthur--creepy Arthur--sitting on the log, petting Nero.

"You and ol' Jim done playing nice?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Arthur said, smiling. "So, what were you two doing?"

"Um, the carâ!" I said, stammering through the sentence, trying to remember what James had told Jessica.

"There was damage. So, we were checking it out."

So, It Begins...

"Oh, so the three of you are leaving soon?"

"Yea, pretty soon, I think."

For what it's worth, I actually wished, I prayed, I hoped that we would be back on the road soon and that we would be leaving Arthur's weird ass behind. I wanted as many miles between us as possible. Bootsie, though--she could come. I didn't mind her at all.

"You hear that, Boots? They're leaving us," Arthur shouted into the bushes.

The bushes adjacent to Arthur began rustling, but there was no answer.

"Boots, got damn it, stop playin' around and answer me! We know you're back there! We can hear you moving in the bushes, for goodness' sake."

"Bootsie?" I called.

Arthur walked towards the bushes, and stretched out his hands to part the wilting vegetation.

As soon as he attempted stepping through, something came bursting out. It knocked Arthur down, and he hit his head on the log.

I stared in disbelief. How could it--? Where did it--?

It was wailing something awful. The sound was so grave that my ears threatened to bleed from the noise.

It managed to trample over an unresponsive Arthur; then, it somehow tumbled over the log and landed right on top of me.

"Arthur! Get it off! AAAAAAAAArthur!"

I screamed at the height of my lungs. It reached and clawed for my neck--for anything it could touch; I swatted and pushed it away with all the strength I could gather.

Growing increasingly tired, I clasped my fingers tightly around its arms and continued to scream.

"Nero! Help meee!! Somebody!"

I looked around, and Nero was gone. Some loyal dog he was after all! And, what exactly was Arthur playing at? Was he unconscious? Or, was he pretending to be out of it--to keep from attracting attention?

"Please, James! Bootsie! Someone!"

My arms were giving way, and I couldn't hold him off anymore. So, in one last act of desperation, I pulled my feet up and kicked as hard as I could and my legs went through! Its ribs were all mush and spongy flesh.

"Oh, please! Someone, help me!"

"Cay!"

I couldn't look around properly, but I could tell whose voice it was.

"Bootsie? Bootsie!"

The butt of her boot came into sight, and the white of her leg followed. She raised her heel and stomped down onto its face.

It toppled over, still clawing and wailing as horrifically as it could--like it could've been in pain. But, I knew it wasn't hurting--it couldn't have been.

I scooted backward, and I watched as Bootsie reached down into one of her black boots and pulled out a knife--maybe some sort of machete--and aimed for his forehead.

She jabbed it in as hard as she could, with as much strength as she could muster, and then she stepped back.

In vain, it struggled to get up on its knees. Then, it toppled over into the dead leaves and stopped moving completely.

"Are you alright?" she said, stepping backward and now towering overhead.

"Yea, I think so---"

"Did it bite you or scratch you anywhere?"

"N-no.." I said, briefly thinking of what happens to those who are injured--those who would become liabilities--those like Nero.

Bootsie walked toward the thing and examined it once over. It was immobile, but still alive, more or less. Still flinching. The large knife jutted out of its forehead at an awkward angle.

"Oh, shit! Where did that thing come from?" James asked.

He and Jessica had finally managed to find their way back to the camp. If I had to rely on them for help, I'd've probably been mauled and mutilated by now.

"The bushes, I'm guessing," Bootsie answered.

So, It Begins...

"Is it dead?" Jessica asked.

Bootsie picked up her foot and--almost angrily--thrust her heel down upon the hilt. Then she retrieved her bloodied knife from the gaping hole in its forehead.

"It is now."

Chapter 5: A Plan for Survival

Chapter 5

A Plan for Survival

After a moment of debating what to do and what not to do with Arthur's unconscious body, Bootsie, James, and Jessica moved him away from the dead creature.

"What do we do with the zombie?" Bootsie asked.

I shuddered. I hated that word. It sent continuous ripples of horror and fright through me. I couldn't fathom something dead coming back to life with a purpose to eat and kill and eat some more.

"I dunno," James said, letting go of Arthur's arms. "We could just leave it and find some other place to go. How hard could that be?"

He walked towards the tree where I was sitting. Then, he knelt behind me and placed his hand atop my head.

"I thought he said that this camp was free of zombie attacks!" Jessica screamed while pointing at Arthur.

I shuddered again. That wordâ

"It is! Well... it *was* until the three of you showed up. To be honest, I thought they'd attack us a long time ago--I mean, we're practically asking for it--being out here in the open and all."

"I wonder why they'd want to attack us all of a suddenâ" James inquired.

"I know why," Bootsie said. "It's because he's a hungry bastard, and we're just a coupl'a walking meat sticks." She snickered.

I think I'm gonna be sickâ

"What I'm most concerned about, though," Bootsie continued, "is how it knew exactly where to find us."

"Hmâ well, it was only you and Arthur out here in the wilderness for a little whileâ either we've all overstayed our welcome, or it's all of our smells combined that's drawing them here all of a sudden."

"Maybe so," Bootsie agreed. "A camp of maybe two or three people is small enough to go unnoticed, but five people--all huddled together--is kinda pushing the envelope."

"Right," James agreed.

"And this bastard can't even handle one on his own," Bootsie said, shaking her head.

She knelt down over Arthur and put a finger in front of his face. He was seriously out of it. She plucked his nose and pulled on his eyelids, but he made no noticeable reaction to any of her taunts.

"I knew that bastard was hiding a bitch on the inside," Bootsie tittered. With that, she nudged him with her foot.

Arthur stirred and grabbed her ankle with one hand.

"Hey," he managed to cough out, "I'm one-hundred percent man."

"Hey! He's back!" Bootsie wriggled out of his grasp and plopped down to her knees. "Did he get you anywhere?"

"No. I don't think soâ Unless the piece 'o shit chewed on my skull," he said, rubbing his head. "--Hurts like hell."

I stared over at the corpse lying on the ground. It--he looked vaguely familiar. His hair, the parts that weren't littered with blood, was very fairâ

I sat upon my knees and slowly--hesitantly--crawled towards the body. Upon his finger was a jade-green, football ring.

* * *

I can't remember much of what happened next, but I woke up in the backseat. My head was resting in Bootsie's lap.

"Are you alright now?"

I looked at her dumbfounded and sat upright.

"What happened?"

"Shhh, hun', you clocked out back there," Bootsie said.

"But the man--"

"Shhh, do what she says. You don't want to faint again trying to remember what happened."

So, It Begins...

Wait--Arthur? He was awake and beingâ caring? --the hell kind of dream is this?

"We think the zombie attack was too much for you to handle," Bootsie said, stroking my hair.

I trembled at the mention of the word. "Stop saying that," I muttered.

"Yea, you can't handle zombies well--"

"Stop saying that word!" I shouted.

There was stillness. Silence. I had made a scene. I held a hand to my head and softly massaged my temple.

"Cay?"

The voice came from up front. It was James, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, just--just tell me what happened."

Jessica intervened, "There was a *zombie* atta--"

"Shutup, you! Just shutup! You hadn't liked me from the beginning, and now you're pulling this bullshit!"

"Cay, calm down--"

"No! You always take up for her, even when she's dead wrong! I'm sick and tired of it! Why don't you ever stand up for me?"

"Cay--"

I looked at James inquisitively. There wasn't much that he could say anyway. It was true. So once again, things grew silent.

Arthur coughed. "Damn, girl. You're that upset over one word?"

"Well, it's kind of a frightful word to be throwing around, you insensitive dumb ass," Bootsie chimed in.

"But, I just don't see why--"

"Zombiesâ They're the living dead--or whatever--right?"

"Right," Arthur echoed.

"I just don't believe they're deadâ diseased, maybe, but not deadâ !"

"They're mindless eaters," Arthur said.

"But something has to keep them going. Maybe they're not what we think they are."

"Hun'â the one you kicked--his entire chest cavity caved in. His insides were rotten, through and through," Bootsie said.

"No, I don't believe it--" I said in a whisper.

"Yea, how can it be alive if it's dead inside?" Arthur said.

I covered my ears and shut my eyes tightly. "I don't believe it!"

"Shh--shh, Cay, quiet down," James said, slowing the car to a halt. He looked around desperately. "Anyone else up for driving? You, Arthur?"

"Well, since you volunteered me," Arthur said, sounding more cynical than he probably intended, "I guess I might as well."

James pulled over and both he and Arthur proceeded to get out of the car.

"Oh, you're serious?" Bootsie said, sounding alarmed.

"Yea, I don't mind driving for a bit," Arthur replied.

"Oh, *hell* no," she shouted, stepping out the other side. "I'll drive."

"But, I'm already out of the damn car!"

"And that's supposed to matter to me, why?"

Arthur gritted his teeth. "Well, I'm not getting back in the backseat."

"And you sure as hell aren't driving either," Bootsie snapped back.

"Well, you can sit up front with her, if you want," James said, motioning for Jessica to get in the back.

Jessica looked out of the window at Arthur and rolled her eyes. Then, she got out, walked around the car and sat in the back behind Bootsie. James scooted on over to the middle, and I sat behind Arthur.

For the first time, I realized how tired Jessica actually looked. The skin underneath her eyes was noticeably darker than the rest of her tan face.

She closed her pale-green eyes, leaned over, and rested her head against the window.

"James," I said, placing a hand to my thoughtful brow, "that was a man back there--"

"Shh, don't try to remember," he replied.

So, It Begins...

But, I couldn't help myself. I had already remembered. I had already pictured a man--a dead man--lying amongst the decrepit leaves. Blood littered his fair, downy hair. And, a jade ring was nestled around one of his swollen, discolored fingers.

"That was Aaron back there," I said, with grim realization.

"Cayleigh, don't--"

"You knew, didn't you?"

James sighed. "It wasn't until after you passed out that--that we really noticed."

"We? You mean, Jessica noticed too? So, I'm not crazyâ That *was* Aaron back thereâ!"

"Yea," James said in almost a whisper.

"Do you think--" I stammered. The panic rose into my throat. "Do you think the same thing'll happen to us--if--?"

"Well--"

"Because you can't drive worth a shit!" Bootsie interjected.

She was now yelling at Arthur. The two had been bickering since we had pulled off.

"C'mon, don't be that way."

"Don't be what way? Truthful? Every time I let you drive, you crash into some shit!"

"That was only one time--"

"Only one time, my ass! The first time was with the truck--there was that second time with the tractor--and, I was damn near eaten alive that last time I let you drive!"

"What time was that?!"

"The red jeep! Remember? You took off, and I only had one leg in the god damn car, you bastard!"

Arthur chuckled. "Yea, that was a crazy dayâ!"

Bootsie rolled her eyes. "I'll be damned if I ever let you drive again if I have a say in it."

"Fine," Arthur said snickering. "I see where you're coming from. But, you don't have to be so bitchy about it."

"Oh, yes the hell I do. And while I'm at it," Bootsie said, slamming on the brakes, "Just where in the hell are we going?"

Her tone was noticeably louder. So, it was obvious that she was now talking to either me, James, or us both. I paused for a moment to think. Just where were we going?

I looked at James and shrugged, but he didn't acknowledge my stare. He looked straight ahead, then slowly turned to catch Bootsie's gaze.

"We're just--running awayâ! Wherever the road takes us, that's where we're going."

There was silence. Then, Bootsie spoke again.

"That's the silliest shit I've ever heard."

James smiled wryly. He knew that she was right about his plan being inane and not making any sense, but that was pretty much the only "plan" that he ever had.

Arthur couldn't even conjure up any smart remarks. He looked just as puzzled as the rest of us. I kind of knew this from the beginning, but never fully reckoned with the fact that we were wanderers. We didn't have a set destination, but we all had one common goal. Survival.

"Well," I said, speaking up for the first time in a while, "we should probably stay away from the cities."

"Yea, true," Bootsie echoed.

"But, we're gonna need food, water, and other supplies," Arthur interjected. "And, staying in the damn country ain't gonna work if we plan on eating properly."

"That's also true--to an extent," Bootsie agreed. "Well, looks like James' plan'll have to work for now."

"So, we're gonna wander around this infested countryside--?"

"For now," Bootsie said, cutting Arthur off. "Let's see where this road takes us."

Chapter 6: A Somber Confession

Chapter 6

A Somber Confession

After Bootsie took off again, I realized that I had neither heard nor seen Nero since he ran off during the last attack. I asked James about Nero's whereabouts, and he pointed behind me. Nero was curled up in the trunk, asleep.

He looked deadâ But, I learned that he was actually under heavy sedation. I wanted to ask more questions, but James really didn't want to talk within earshot of the others. So, he urged me to save my inquiries until later.

Eventually, James fell asleep leaning his head against the seat. Arthur was still quietly bickering with Bootsie about their past experiences together, and I was stuck between being half awake and half asleep--and leaning more towards neither.

Soon, the car came to a halt. I lifted my sleepy head and looked up front. Arthur was smirking, and Bootsie mirrored an identical grin.

"I told ya I'd think of a good place," Bootsie said, hopping out of the car.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"We're home!" Bootsie answered while looking back over her shoulder. Arthur followed after her, jumping out of the car and slamming the door.

"Home?" I said to myself, turning to look out of the window.

Bootsie had stopped in what looked like a parking lot. We were about 100ft away from the building in the distance. Was it--a rodeo arena?

"James? James, wake up."

I grabbed James' arm and shook him a little. He didn't stir at first; so, I grabbed a fist full of his hair and tugged as hard as I could.

James, roused from his slumber, swung a heavy forearm in my direction. I leaned away to dodge his arm and, instead, caught an elbow in my chest.

"Whaaaaat?" he whined.

"Ouch! Damn it, James!"

"What, what, what, what, what?" he said, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"You elbowed me in the boob, you sleepy bastard!"

James tittered. "Well, you did yank my hair. How was I supposed to know exactly what was going on in my sleep?"

"Hmph!" I grabbed the tender breast with one hand and pushed open the door with the other.

I stepped out and walked around to the front of the car. It was a rodeo arena, alright. I could see the bull-pens from the parking lot. The place looked like it might've been abandoned even before the current plague had taken over the country.

The grass--dry, brown, and jagged--boldly jutted up through the cracked concrete. The far reaches of the lot were littered with fragments of black gravel and vast deposits of soot and ash blotted out the faded, white lines of what once seemed to be parking spaces.

From where I was standing, the outside of the arena looked heavily reinforced with bars. And on top of that, there was a thick-metal roof that sat atop the holding pens and extended over to the stands.

There was a building adjacent to the arena, presumably connected to it. Even it resembled a prison. Its cage-like exterior made it appear ominous and brooding; but, there was no doubt in my mind that the building would serve for great protection against the harsh elements and the impending danger of future attacks.

James walked up beside me and rested his sharp elbow on my shoulder. Jessica, still slightly sleepy, lagged just behind him.

"Looks like those two are enjoying themselves," James said, pointing straight ahead.

Bootsie and Arthur were running, quite enthusiastically, towards the building. And once they had reached the arena entrance, both had stopped.

So, It Begins...

"What are they doing?" I asked softly.

"I don't knowâ!" James answered.

"Maybe they're arguing again," Jessica sleepily added.

"Perhaps soâ!"

James stopped talking and was now focused on the two up ahead. Arthur was now making wild hand gestures at Bootsie, who appeared rather nonchalant. And soon, she too exploded and began hopping up and down and waving her hands in Arthur's face.

"Maybe we should go--see what that's all aboutâ!" I suggested in a hushed voice.

James nodded and took the first few steps in Bootsie's and Arthur's direction. I followed immediately, and Jessica--after a moment's hesitation--decided to come along too.

At the halfway point, Bootsie put an abrupt end to the argument. She shoved an opened palm in front of Arthur's face and pushed as hard as she could--which turned out to be harder than any of us expected.

Arthur, startled and caught off guard, went tumbling backwards and landed on the ground. Bootsie, noticeably pleased, walked into the building without so much as flinching.

"Damn gypsy," Arthur grumbled as we walked closer towards him.

"Looks like you got your ass handed to you," James teased. But, Arthur was not amused in the least.

"I'd like to see you stay on your feet after someone catches you off guard and mashes you in the face--"

Arthur grunted.

"I'm sorryâ! mushed?" I said curiously.

"Mushing is a mix between mashing and pushing," James said grinning.

"Anyway, you said she caught you off guard?" Jessica crudely interjected. "You were staring right at her hand when she did it, and you *still* fell on your ass."

The three of us shared a second of wild laughter at Arthur's expense.

"Hellâ! She hits like a manâ!" he mumbled, getting up off of the ground and dusting himself off.

"What was that even about?" I inquired.

Arthur stood silently and gaped--for only a moment--but it was long enough for me to feel uncomfortable.

"What do you think it was about?" he answered condescendingly, flirtatiously running his hand along the side of my face.

"Okay, that's enough fun for one day," James intervened. "I need you to come with me back to the car for a bit."

"Well, what about me?" Jessica asked, noticeably anxious.

"Stay here with Arthur or go in after Bootsie and help her check the place out--we have to move some things out of the car," James said.

Jessica bit her bottom lip. She was glad to avoid work, but she wasn't particularly satisfied with being left behind.

"Alright--fine," she answered tersely and went into the building. After a moment's time, Arthur followed behind her.

James put his arm around my shoulder, and we turned our backs to the building and headed towards the car.

"So, what do we need to get out first?"

"The camping tents," James said.

When we reached the car, James opened the door and pulled the two tents out of the backseat. I quickly grabbed up one, and headed for the building again.

"No, wait a minute," James said.

"What? I can carry one by myself, and you can get the other one. Simple."

"No. It's not so simple," he insisted.

"Why not?"

James tittered nervously, and then that laugh quickly subsided and became a sigh. He walked around to the back of the little, green car and opened the trunk.

"We need to get Nero inside."

"How are we gonna do that with these two, big circus tents?" I jested.

"Well, I kind of already figured that out," he said.

So, It Begins...

"Well?"

"We need to wrap Nero up in either one or both of these tents and carry him inside."

"Why are we hiding him?"

"You'll seeâ!" James answered.

"But, don't the others already know that he's back here?"

"Yes, and they know he's gonna be around here somewhere. They just won't know where. As far as they know, he's wandering around the property as I speak. I mean, he's a dogâ!"

"But if they know he's here, then why--"

"Shh--you said you would help me," James interrupted. "Remember?"

I grew silent and then nodded my head. "Right. What is it that you need me to do?"

* * *

I opened one of the tents and spread it at James' feet. James then put his arms around the sickly dog and pulled him out of the trunk. For a few seconds, he held Nero like a child then almost regrettably put him down.

We covered Nero in the folds of the tent and wrapped the second tent around him for extra security.

"Okay. You take this end right here," James said, grabbing my hand. "Don't let this piece slip. It's holding the two tents together."

I nodded solemnly and took hold of it. James went around to the other side. And on the count of three, we picked up the two tents and walked towards the building.

Well, James walked. I wobbled. He was so tall and Nero was so heavyâ! I lagged behind, holding on to the tents and tried my best to keep up.

We walked around the arena and found an alternate ingress shadily located on the side of the building. The entrance was crude and resembled two flaps or barn doors poorly carved into the side of the building. The door was half latched; whomever was last at the arena had left in such a hurry that they did not--or could not--lock the doors properly.

James sat down his half of the tent and opened both doors, catapulting specks of dust and dander into the dry air. Broken rays of sunlight cut through the haze and dimly lit the entrance. Had it not been for small cracks in the rickety, wooden walls, the inside would have been pitch black.

"Okay, let's go," he said, retrieving his end of the tent.

"Wai-wait-wait," I managed to squeak out. "We're going in there?"

"Do you see any other entrance?"

"Uh, yea, the one on the front seemed to be working just fine," I responded snippily.

"Come on, Cay," James began, "don't do that cute shit now. I already explained why we can't go in that way."

"I know, it's just--" I hesitated a bit and looked around James' shoulder. "Are you sure about this way?"

"No, but it looks like no one has been around here in a long time."

I sighed and nodded in James' direction. "Alright, I'm right behind you."

James began to walk backward into the unrefined space, and I followed. After pulling Nero inside completely, James faced forward and led the way through the darkness.

The further we skulked through the dark tunnel, the more and more uneasy I became. I could feel my pupils expanding, attempting to latch onto whatever bit of light that was left in the small space. Before long, even the dimmest speck of light had petered out, and we were forced to go forward into complete darkness.

Soon, we reached a dead end and a decision had to be made. Left or rightâ! James, after a moment's hesitation, decided to turn left.

Just before reaching the end of the tunnel, James slowed his walking pace. He stopped completely and motioned for me to release my portion of the tent. He sat his end down as well.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Shhh! Not too loud," he responded in a hushed voice. "I'm gonna go check things out first. Stay here."

"But, what if--"

"--Stay here," he said in a rasp whisper.

James sauntered listlessly up to the exit point; a dim spot of sunlight feebly lighted his face. Then, after deciding that he was pleased with where we were, he waved me over. Reluctantly, I left Nero there in the tunnel and hurried towards James.

So, It Begins...

It was amazing. It looked as though we were standing in the middle of a giant ring. We were surrounded by what seemed to be hundreds of bleachers and one white fence, encircling the small patch of dirt that we were standing on.

The ceiling was filled with holes. Tiny particles of unsettled dust swirled around in the nonexistent wind--alight with yellowish rays of cool light trickling down through the tattered ceiling. By the looks of it, it was high-noon. And, we needed to hide Nero quickly--before the others began to wonder where we had gotten off to.

James pulled Nero out into the open space and surveyed the outer edges of the ring for a place to put him. "There," he said, pointing to the far, right end of the arena.

In the dim light, there seemed to be an indentation in the bleachers which was filled with bars and extra fencing.

I picked up my end of the tent and helped James carry Nero towards the hollowed out space, which James later identified as a holding pen.

Once we put the tent inside of the pen, James carefully uncovered Nero and examined him. Noticeably aghast, I stood behind James and stared at the dog.

His mouth was widely agape, and his dry tongue lolled out onto the tent. Though his eyes were half opened and filled with pus, I could detect an enlarged pupil sluggishly shifting back and forth, hiding behind his thick eyelashes.

"Is he going to die?" I asked, placing a hand over my mouth and nose.

"I don't know," James answered solemnly.

He reached inside of the tent folds and pulled out a leather leash. After placing the leash on Nero, James tied the free half to the fence.

"Are you sure he needs that? He doesn't look like he can move at all."

"I'm sure."

"That's it?" I asked, waiting for his reasoning. "You're not gonna explain to me why?"

James stood up and walked out of the holding pen. I followed behind him, anxiously awaiting an answer. He locked the gate and continued walking--not towards the clearly visible exit that would undoubtedly lead us into the building where the others were--towards the pit in the wall from which we had just emerged.

Once again, I felt my pupils expanding and searching the small space for fragments of murky light to compensate for my lack of sight. I stopped in the door of the tunnel and stared intently into the darkness, trying find James' willowy body scurrying through the obscure shadows.

"You coming?" James said, sticking his hand out of the tunnel.

My heart leapt into my throat and my nerves were shot, but outside, I succeeded at keeping my calm composure.

"So, you want to know how I know?"

I squinted my eyes and peered into the blackness.

"Yes," I said in a whisper, slowly reaching for James' gaunt hand.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the tunnel after him. He dragged me through the passageway--stumbling over my own two feet-- and quickly began rambling on about his father getting infected.

"At first, I thought that it was just a stomach bug," he began. "But, I was wrong."

When his father became unbearably ill, James ran a series of home experiments--he had always been fascinated with potions and animals and the human body--and came to one grim conclusion. His father had to die.

"Oh, my God. I can't imagine how that feels--to have seen your father dying right in front of you."

James nodded. It was clear that he didn't want to continue with the conversation, but I tried to empathize anyhow.

"When I was twelve, my parents--they. I grimaced. It was hard to include them and "death" in the same sentence. In some way, I never really accepted that they were gone. "My parents--perished in a freak accident."

"Freak accident?"

So, It Begins...

"Yea, and it was sorta my fault."

"How?" James inquired, noticeably perking up.

I guessed that I was finally getting through to him--finally making him see that I understood the pain of losing someone.

"Well, my parents were sleeping and I was hungryâ So, I went to the kitchen to find something to eat. But, I didn't find anything. I tried to wake them; I thought that they'd make me something to eat but--"

I looked over at James and his stare was an intense one. He had stopped in his tracks and was now staring blankly at the side of my face. I hesitated and choked on a memory. I could see the exit point just up ahead, and in an act of compassion, I touched his shoulder and encouraged him to keep walking.

Then, I skipped through my morbid story right down to the gruesome end.

"To make a long story short, there was a fire. Started by me. They didn't make it."

"So--you killed them?"

"Wellâ yes."

"On purpose?"

I was taken aback.

"No, I--um, not on purposeâ it was mainly smoke inhalation."

James sighed. "Stopâ!"

"--you see, my father had just shown me how to use the stove that dayâ So, I thought it'd be okay if--"

"--Just stop it."

I bit my bottom lip and crossed my arms. We had reached the exit point, and it seemed like the wind had picked up since we had gone inside. James had quickened his cadence, and I was now--at least--four whole steps behind him. He was upset with me, and I didn't understand why.

"Are you mad at me?"

Silence danced between us. Foreign traces of slight moans in the wind answered me while James remained quiet.

"I don't understand why you're madâ All I tried to do was empathize, but--"

"But you couldn't," he said harshly. I could hear the backlash of bitter spite clinging onto his sharp tongue.

I couldn't see his face, and for onceâ I was glad that I couldn't. I imagined his brow frowning upon me and his lips twisted, bent to form curses.

We reached the dusty, green car. And James, with a burst of solemn enthusiasm, slammed the trunk down. It was clear that he was furious, but--against my better judgment, I prepared to ask why.

"But I don't understand--"

"Listen, Cay. I appreciate what you were trying to do--"

James' face was angrily contorted and his mouth was a tad askew, but after a few moments of looking down at me, his anger quickly subsided. His intense glower morphed into a blank stare. A trace of melancholic nostalgia flickered in his dark eyes.

"It's obvious that you understand what it's like to lose someone you loveâ!" James began, "but our stories have no similaritiesâ!"

"What do you mean?"

"I killed my father. That was no mistake."

"--only because you had to kill him. I'm sure you loved your father just as I loved mine--"

"--No. I wanted to kill him," James said somberly. "And, I enjoyed it."

* * *

So, It Begins...

Chapter 7: Reign of Lead

Chapter 7

Reign of Lead

James grinned at me from behind the concession stand. Jessica caught sight of our secret elation, and expressed her distaste with a brief scowl in my direction. But, I didn't care. I finally felt--safe. I didn't feel the loom of certain death as I had the months before.

We finally had an actual--for a lack of better words--home. Sure we'll have to change hideouts sooner or later, but for now, this place is ours.

"Hey! Look at this shit!" Arthur yelled with excitement, running towards us.

He stopped in the middle of the hallway and waved us over. Then with the same amount of excitement, he ran back down the hall.

The three of us--James, Jessica, and me--stared at each other confusedly. Then strangely enough, a wide grin crept across my frozen face. Somehow, Arthur's otherworldly enthusiasm excited me. I clenched my fists together and eagerly trotted towards the end of the hall.

I stopped in the doorway, gawking inside at Arthur and Bootsie.

"Guns?" I inquired aloud.

"Guns!" James shouted fervently, standing behind me in the doorway.

"Yea!" Bootsie yelled. "Now we can go on that food hunt in the city!"

"Let's go," Jessica said, finally catching up to us.

I shrank out of the doorway and leaned against a wall in the hallway. I didn't want to goâ Sure, I felt better than before, but I wasn't ready for another encounter.

First, Arthur burst out of the room with a rather large machine gun.

"Best damn AK I've ever laid my eyes on," he boasted, making a beeline for the exit.

"Damn idiot," Bootsie said, coming out behind him.

She sat on the floor with three clips in her lap, loading two guns- one that looked terribly identical to Arthur's and another with a scope and a long snout.

Jessica came out with a small hand-gun, and James came out with--presumably--an AK as well. I was the only one who was empty handed. And if I could, I was gonna keep it that way.

"You're not gonna stock up, hun?" Bootsie asked as only she could.

"No--"

"Why not?"

"I'm not really a--gun-person," I responded coolly.

"Arthur's not either," Bootsie said, getting on her feet. "Can't ya tell?"

"Umâ!"

I looked outside and watched Arthur aim and pretend to shoot at random specks of nothing wafting down through the air.

"Because he's eager to waste his first rounds on absolutely nothing?" I said after a moment of thought.

"I didn't think about that one!" Bootsie snickered. "And it's very likely that he will, but I could tell by his stance."

She pointed down at his feet and then traced an invisible line back up to his arms and neck.

"If he were to shoot into a horde standing like that, he would stagger back and lose his balance." She took my arms and placed the funny looking gun with the scope and long snout into my hands. "You look like a rifle person to me," she said with a confident smile.

"But, I never even--"

"But-nothing. You will use this because you hafta' protect yourself. Besides, it's the perfect gun for you."

"Bootsie--"

"Ahem! Now," she said, holding my arms level, "you have to keep your body and the gun's weight vertical and directly over your feet--which should be further apart," she said, tugging on each leg. "And, your hips should beâ!"

So, It Begins...

Bootsie's voice sort of trailed off as she repositioned my body into--what she called--"the perfect shooting stance." When she was done, she stepped off to the side and examined me.

"I don't think I can do this--"

"Well, you're gonna have to, kiddo. And if it's any consolation, you do look ready to me. And, you look a damn-sight more capable than that excited id'git out there."

I smiled weakly and slowly lowered the nose of the gun. Bootsie grabbed a hold of my forearm and pushed the door open, dragging me outside behind her.

"Who's driving?" James asked, quietly walking behind us.

"Hell, I'll do it!" Arthur answered eagerly.

"-like hell you will," Bootsie retorted. "We need someone with actual common sense--someone who knows when to wait and when to pull off. And, you just don't fit that description."

"I will," Jessica volunteered. "I don't have much to carry; plus, I've got about seven years of driving skills under my belt."

"Well, I'm sold!" Bootsie said, hopping in the backseat.

Arthur, the poor defeated soul, followed directly behind her grumbling the entire way.

"I guess I'll be sitting with them," I said, turning to face James.

He shook his head and pointed up front. "You'll be sitting with her."

"Butâ we don't even get along," I argued. "Why does it make any difference where I sit anyway?"

"It makes a difference because the three of us in the back will be getting out and going inside of buildings.

The two of you will fall behind us and wait somewhere near the car."

"Why do I have a gun if I'm just gonna be by the car anyway?" I responded, noticeably frustrated. "I'm not even getting close enough to hit anything!"

"That's not a close range firing gun," he responded, a slight smile creeping across his pallid face. "Why would Bootsie teach you all that shit about standing and aiming if you were gonna be standing close to one of those things? You wouldn't have time to do any of that if they swarmed you--"

"-yea, but--"

"Plus, you tend to freak out a lot more than the rest of us. And weren't you just telling Bootsie that you didn't even want to go with us--let alone use a gun?"

I bit my bottom lip. I felt like a fool. James was making a lot of sense, and I was arguing with him for no good reason at all.

"You're right," I said, gripping the rifle and readying to walk around to the passenger's side.

James, bat in one hand and a gun in the other, got into the backseat and closed the door.

* * *

We pulled up near a stop sign at an intersection. Directly to the right of us was a Super Mart; ahead of us and behind us were dilapidated, retail-chain stores.

I, surprisingly more curious than I thought I actually was, opened my car door and stepped out.

"Cayleigh--"

I was almost sure that it was Bootsie calling meâ or maybe it was James. But, I was compelled to walk towards that Super Mart which was now directly in front of me. I needed to see--

"What do you think you're doing?" James yelled, taking me by the arm.

"I was justâ looking at the windows."

"You don't have to walk towards the building to do that," he retorted whilst pulling me back towards the little, green vehicle.

"You can do it from the car."

Seeing so much destruction up close hurled me into a state of disarray. Yes, the town that I had known was destroyedâ but just how far had this plague stretched? Were we actually the only survivors of this blight?

"Look," James began, taking me by the shoulders and sitting me down, "snap out of it or you're gonna get yourself killed."

I shook my head substantially, as if to rouse from my stupor.

"I'm sorry, I just--dunno what came over me."

"It's alright, just straighten up and fly right," he responded.

So, It Begins...

Arthur got out and Bootsie circled around to where he and James were standing.

"Is she gonna be able to keep her shit together?" Arthur snapped.

"Don't ask him about me when I'm sitting right in front of you. You should ask me. I'm right here for shit's sake--" I retorted.

"And, yes. I'm gonna be fine."

"Well, you heard that," Bootsie snickered. "Now, let's get this over with."

This was the plan: James, Bootsie, and Arthur would go left of the Super Mart, then they'd double around to the other side of the intersection and hit the Super Mart on their way back.

When they got their tactics down, the three of them went off into the same direction, soon disappearing behind the twisted, spiny, outstretched arms of a naked oak tree.

* * *

"Shouldn't they have come back by now?" Jessica asked, squatting over the road, dragging the barrel of her gun about surface of the chilled asphalt.

I sat in the sun on the cool hood of the car hoping to keep warm whilst staring out into the distance at the Super Mart's glowering, blank windows.

"Well?" Jessica began again. "Think we should go looking for them?"

"Don't be stupidâ!"

"So, you're seriously not worried about James--or any of them?"

"As far as I'm concerned, they're smart and strong enough to take care of themselves out there alone. And if either of them get separated from the other, they can survive and find their way back."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, maybe because we're sitting here and they're not? Take a look around, legsâ! We're the weakest link. We're the ones who were left behind."

Jessica pursed her lips together.

"That was a bit harsh."

"But trueâ!"

"Like hell," she retorted, rising from the ground squeezing the handle of her gun. "You're the weak, whiney bitch in this equation."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard meâ! I called you a weak, whiney bitch," Jessica replied. "You freak out about the littlest things--like words. Oopsâ! I mean one, measly, got-damn word."

"You don't understand--"

"And, you hang around James, hoping he'll keep you safe whenever things get a little hectic."

"That's not true--"

"If either of has to be the weakest link around here, it's definitely you."

Jessica, noticeably pissed off, inched towards me, and I raised the nose of my rifle in her direction.

"Whatâ! you're gonna shoot me now for speaking my mind?"

"To be honest, Jessica," I said, lowering my head to look through the scope, "I didn't think you had one."

She held her arms out beside her head. The gun she carried dangled precariously from her index finger.

"Al-Alright, I take back everything I said--I didn't mean it--"

"That's a shame--" I responded, sliding down off of the hood. "I actually liked you better when you put what you thought of me out in the open."

"Can you put the gun down now?" she said, hesitating to move.

"Get the hell out of my way," I mumbled, pushing her aside with the nose of my gun.

They were comingâ! the infected. I spotted two coming creeping towards us from the left wing of the Super Mart. They must've heard Jessica's shoutingâ!

I tried to remember what Bootsie had taught me. I closed my eyes and balanced my weight with the gun; and once I felt that my stance was right, I squinted through the scope and fired.

"Hot damn, I hit oneâ!"

"Yeaâ!"

So, It Begins...

Jessica was a bit rattled. I don't know whether it was because she had previously thought I was going to shoot her or because we were in such close proximity to the infected.

"Let me give it a shot," Jessica said, stepping out in front of me and spreading her feet apart to balance.

"Have you ever shot a gun?"

"What in the hell does that matter," she retorted. "If you can fire that thing and hit your target, I'm sure it'll be a breeze for me."

She clasped her hands around the handle of the gun and put both fingers on the trigger. Then, she slowly stretched her arms far out in front of her and fired. She missed.

"It's okay. I'll shoot it--"

"Back off," she hissed. "I've got it."

She readied herself to shoot again and that's when I noticed another one of those things emerge from the left wing of the Super Mart.

"Jessâ maybe we should--"

"Shhh! Not while I'm aiming!"

I raised my gun and aimed at the figure slowly creeping towards us. She fired for the second time, and she hit her target, square in the forehead.

"I hit it!"

"Alright! Good--" I said, still locked on my target. "I think we should go now--"

"We can take these bastards!" she exclaimed. "Don't chicken out on me now!"

I prepared to shoot the figure in the distance; and just as I fired, another one of those things emerged from the brush downside the massive oak tree that James, Bootsie, and Arthur disappeared behind nearly an hour ago.

"This is becoming a hot-zone, Jessica," I yelled, turning to aim at yet another hazy figure coming around the left wing of the Super Mart. "If the others stuck to the plan, then they're probably at the far right wing of the intersection by now and moving towards the Super Mart."

"Yea, so?" Jessica called back, firing at the thing in the brush.

"So, that means we should get the hell outta here and go get them," I rebutted, noticeably aggravated.

"Come on," she whined. "We've got this!"

I shrugged and walked towards the middle of the intersection, aiming steadily at the left flank of the Super Mart.

Another gunshot rang out; and the thud of another lifeless body resounded against the asphalt. There were more comingâ And I began to think that maybe--just maybe, they were attracted to the sound of our gunfire. A fairly dense cluster of figures emerged from the left flank of the store; the horde moved slowly but intently towards the two of us--and just when I readied myself to fire again, something unexpected happenedâ One of them started to run.

It burst through the slow-moving horde with intense determination; and although it was moving fairly slow itself, it was fast enough to pose a threat. That was it; I wasn't gonna play Jessica's game anymore.

"I'm getting in the car!"

I turned around to run and saw that Jessica had already made it to the car--I hurried to the door and pulled on the handle, but it was locked. I banged on the window and stared desperately in her direction; she shook her head solemnly; then after muttering something unintelligible, she started the car and began to pull off.

"Jessica, stop playing around!" I yelled, banging on the side of the car. "Wait!"

Chapter 8: Left Behind.

Chapter 8 Left Behind

Cayleigh tore through the woods savagely; she could hear the runner in hot pursuit and to be honest, she wasn't moving very fast. She was quickly losing breath and her cadence was significantly slower than what it had been when she had first taken off.

She was tired; she needed to rest. Each dry breath of chilled air that she inhaled set the thin walls of her expanding lungs ablaze; and, she could scarcely grasp each breath before it all came spilling back out in raucous sputtering.

* * *

Jessica sped down the street; except for a stray plastic bag billowing in the silent wind, a few vacant cars, and bits of paper littered about the street, the town was pretty much void.

When she reached the end of the street, Jessica turned the car around and crept back up the road.

After a short while, she caught sight of someone running across the street--. It was Bootsieâ

Bootsie ran across the sidewalk and onto someone's lawn; she leapt through the tall grass that spilled messily over into the street and ran up to a window.

After recognizing her, Jessica sped towards the house--startling Bootsie--and pulled into the driveway.

"We've got to go!" Jessica yelled out the window, madly flailing her hands in the air.

Bootsie put two fingers to her lips and whistled for the others. Then she ran up to the car and hopped in the backseat.

"What happened?"

"They're coming--"

"What happened? You're supposed to be at the intersection waiting for us," James yelled, running towards the car with Arthur only steps behind him.

"I just told her," she said in heavy gasps. "They're coming for us--"

"Ain't gotta tell me that shit twice," Arthur said, jumping in the backseat.

James opened the door and hopped in beside Bootsie.

"Just what happened back there?" Arthur asked.

Jessica tucked her bottom lip in and swiftly backed out of the decrepit driveway.

"Well?" James asked impatiently.

"There were just too many of them--" she began. "We fired at as many of them as we could, but they were coming too close--. They just attacked us out of nowhere--"

James, stricken with sudden fear, leapt forward and looked into the front seat.

"Where's Cayleigh?" he asked.

"She--she--"

"She what?!" he yelled.

"She didn't make it!"

James was taken aback. He slowly leaned back into his seat and stared blankly into Jessica's dark, chocolate curls.

"Go backâ"

"What?"

"Go back!"

"But, I told you--"

"What did you see? What makes you think she didn't make it?" Bootsie asked, squinting her hazel eyes.

Jessica bit her bottom lip and thought for a short while.

"She just--she took off into the woods."

"And you just happened to be in the car?"

"She wasn't thinking straight!" Jessica yelled defensively. "I made it to the car and she didn't!"

James cocked his gun and leaned forward.

So, It Begins...

"Go back."

Chapter 9: Infected.

Chapter 9

Infected

I couldn't catch my breath no matter how deeply I inhaled. But as soon as I saw opportunity, I clawed viciously at it.

I ran upon a low hanging tree and jumped at the sturdiest branch that I could reach. And once I took hold of it, I scrambled madly up into the tree.

After getting to safety, I spotted the runner a few yards away; it was no longer running. It was walking, hobbling even, towards the tree that I was sitting in. And, it looked tired.

How could it be tired? I thought aloud, staring down at its discolored face.

"I should probably put it out of its misery!"

I removed the rifle from my back and aimed slowly at its head.

"Please--"

Wait! Did he just speak to me?

"What did you say?" I asked, slowly lowering the rifle.

"Please--" he said again, "don't shoot."

"But you're--you're a zombie--" I said, choking on that hideous word.

"No--not true--"

"Then, what's wrong with you?"

"Please, help me--"

He held his arms out and knelt on the ground. Remorseful, I hesitated, but soon found that I was slowly climbing out of the tree.

I backed away, sure to keep a good distance between the two of us in case he tried to attack me.

"Help you with what?"

"It's inside of me--" he spat out. "My neck--!"

He was getting more and more tired; and, he couldn't seem to catch his breath.

"Okay, your neck--"

"Get it out of me!" he yelled, jumping off of the ground.

Alarmed, I raised my rifle again.

"Stay back!"

"It's too late!" he yelled, walking slowly towards me.

I continued to back away.

"Too late? Why? Why is it too late?"

He inhaled and grabbed his throat, struggling violently with the breath of air caught in his chest.

"C'mon," I said nervously. "I can still help you--just tell me what to do--"

He went still. After a few moments of unease, I waved my hands in the air. And, he just stood there blankly staring at me.

"Hello? You okay?"

There once was someone in there! But, he was gone now. The man who I had been speaking with just seconds before was dead. But his body--his body lived.

It seemed even too heavy for him to carry anymore. He sluggishly dragged each foot through the dirt and dry leaves; he opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. There was only a deep, rugged hiss followed by a few unintelligible grunts.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered somberly, raising the barrel of the rifle.

Then, I aimed at his neck and fired.

* * *

"Is this where you last saw her?" James asked, jumping out of the car.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure of it--"

"Which way did she run?"

So, It Begins...

"Through there," Jessica said, pointing through the low brush and wilted trees.

James, without hesitation, jumped down into the ditch and followed what he thought to be Cayleigh's shoe prints.

No more than five minutes into his desperate search, he heard her rifle sound off.

* * *

He fell to the ground. His dark blood spilled over the dead leaves and gushed out in a trickling stream of carmine.

I immediately felt lightheadedâ I had never seen so much blood before. I slowly walked over to his body and knelt down beside him.

I really thought that I could save himâ Whatever was wrong with his neck, it sure didn't make any difference to shoot at it. Maybe he was delirious, I thought.

"Poor bastardâ !" I said softly, turning him over.

I studied his face. He really looked quite normal after a momentâ His mouth was parted slightly and his face was stained with black soil.

His foreheadâ It bulged slightly. Taken aback, I tapped the incongruous portion of his skull and it moved again.

"Shit--"

I scrambled up from the ground and desperately reloaded my gun. I could see whatever it was bulging wildly in his head--. Then it quickly moved from his forehead to his neck--

Then it wriggled out of the gulf in his neck and squirmed across the ground to me.

I cocked the gun, fired, and missed. It was moving much too fast to shoot at such a close range.

I aimed one final time and right when I shot, it leapt from the ground and bit through my jeans and into my leg.

Anxious to get it off of me, I dropped the rifle and writhed around frantically, madly swatting at my legs with both hands. But it had a strong hold.

I stopped flailing around and tried to calm myself down. Then, after a second's consideration, I decided to reach down and pull it off of me.

It wasn't hanging from my jeans like I expected it to be--. I rolled up my pants leg and to my horror, it was burrowing into my skin.

I panicked. And in one desperate act to save myself from further infiltration, I opened my jacket and ripped the entire bottom half of my shirt. I took the remnants of the shirt and wrapped it tightly around my leg.

"Cayleigh!"

I looked up frantically, hoping that my ears hadn't begun to play tricks on me. Seeing nothing, I glanced back down and firmly tied the cloth into a secure knot.

"I'm going crazy," I said in a gasp. "I'm infectedâ and now I'm going crazy!"

"Cay!"

"James?!"

I wasn't going crazy after all.

"Why didn't you answer me?"

"I can't believe it's really you! I thought I was going crazy!"

"Why would you be going crazy--?"

He looked down at the body across from me and went still.

"Is it dead?" he asked, pulling me up and backing away from it.

"Yes--"

"Did it bite you--scratch you anywhere?"

"No, James--"

"Good--"

"No, not good--" I said, pulling up my pants leg and pointing at the bloodied cloth.

"I thought you said--"

"It wasn't him," I said somberly. "Something crawled out of him and nested in my leg.."

"Oh, shitâ That means--"

So, It Begins...

I nodded.

"Those people weren't zombies," I replied. "They were hosts."

James took me into his arms and carried me back to the intersection where the others were. Jessica looked at me, horrified that I had told James that she had actually deserted me. But, I hadn't. And, I didn't plan to.

James climbed into the backseat, still holding me, and Arthur took my seat up front.

"You okay, hun?" Bootsie asked sincerely.

"Yes," I began. "I think I'm fine--"

"She's just a little exhausted from all the running," James included. "I saw the runner she took down in the woods."

"Did it attack her?"

"She shot it before it could."

"Good."

James was better at keeping his cool than I was. They were gonna find out sooner or later that I was infected. But if James could help it, he'd find a way to stop the progression of it first. I leaned my head against his chest and closed my tired eyes.

* * *

Chapter 10: Respite.

Chapter 10

Respite

It was coldâ why was I so cold? I rolled over onto my side and curled into a ball.

"Cayleighâ!"

"What?" I mumbled in a sleepy stupor.

"Let me see your leg--"

"My leg? What? My leg is fine--"

"Cay," the voice said once again, "wake up. You're out of it."

I rolled over onto my back. Then after wiping my face, I opened my eyes and focused on the vague figure in front of me.

"James?"

I tried to sit up and get a better look at him, but he placed a firm hand on my shoulder and gently pushed me back down.

"Lie still," he said, rolling up my pants leg.

"What--what are you doing?"

"I need to see what happened to your leg," he said.

I reclined and allowed my body to relax on the cold, dusty ground. And after a short while, that's when I noticed that I was back at the rodeo arena.

The tiny rips speckled across the ceiling were filled with dying rays of the setting sun. And Nero, poor Nero, was lying deathly still in the pen next to me.

"Is he gonna live?"

"That dependsâ!"

"On what?"

James sighed deeply.

"On whether your leg can tell me what this infection really isâ!"

James unwrapped my leg and sat on his knees, staring.

"Is it bad?" I asked, nervously fidgeting at his cold touch.

"Does this hurt?" he asked, pressing his hand down onto the unmoving parasite.

"Noâ! It just feels weird," I said. "It's dead, I think."

"Okay."

With that, James reached into his jacket pocket and took out a flask. After taking a sip, he pulled a knife out of his back pocket and poured some of the alcohol on the blade.

"I asked Bootsie if I could borrow it," he said, holding it up in the air.

"What are you gonna do with that?"

"I'm cutting that bastard out."

He placed the blade to my skin, and as soon as he pierced a fairly small portion of my skin, I felt the thing move.

I became faintâ! And, it was getting warm--no. It was hot, and I was burning up. Then, I felt it move again.

"Shit--where'd it go?"

"It's moving up my leg--" I mumbled. Then, slowly coming out of my dizzy stupor, I began to yell. "Get it outâ! Get it out!"

"I'm trying!" he shouted. "Hold still!"

He tried to unbuckle my pants, but before he could get the zipper down, it moved again.

"My stomach!" I yelled, "Get it out!"

"Press down on it!"

I pressed both hands down upon my abdomen and in a frantic rage, James pressed the knife down and began to cut.

* * *

So, It Begins...

I opened my eyes. The morning sun poured through the tattered ceiling in thin, golden rivulets of brilliant light.

I rolled over onto my side and looked into the pen beside me. Nero was gone.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. After looking around the room, I stood up and walked towards the locked gate. Before I could reach it, something snagged at my leg; I tripped and fell into the dust. My leg was chained to the railing.

"Damn it!" I hissed, grabbing at my stomach.

I sat upright and opened my jacket. A portion of my stomach was covered in gauze and cloth.

"James! what did you do?" I whispered to myself.

"I cut it out," he said, opening the gate.

"Where'd you even come from?"

"Doesn't matter. You were right," he said, sitting on the ground next to me. "They aren't zombies!"

I was becoming more tolerable of the word. But, I still couldn't help but wince at the mentioning of it.

"It works like this," he said. "It's a parasite. It burrows into the skin and it travels to the brain; once it gets there, it takes over each of your actions--little by little. And after a certain point, depending on how fast the parasite progresses, it renders the brain completely inoperative."

"So! that means they lose their motor skills?"

"Motor-skills, speaking ability, ability to make coherent decisions--"

"But, that *is* a zombie--"

"Yes, but it's a different understanding of the word. Once the body's dead, it's dead. It doesn't reanimate. If you kill the body before the parasite makes it to the brain, then it can't control it."

"And if the parasite has made it to the brain," I began, "then you have to--"

"Yes! You have to damage the brain."

"I see! So, what really happened with Aaron?"

"Well--once the parasite made it to his brain, he couldn't speak or think rationally. It fed off of him until his body wore away--until he couldn't support the parasite anymore. See, it kills the body's senses one by one."

"So, what happens when it has taken all that it could from the host?"

"The host! dies," he said, looking over at Nero's empty pen.

"Oh!"

"Did Nero--?"

"No! I put him down."

"But, why?"

"It had already made it to his brain."

"I'm so sorry--"

"Don't be!," he replied. "That wasn't Nero for a few days now."

I lowered my head then looked up at James.

"Am I! gonna be okay?"

"Yea, of course you are."

"Then, one question," I said with a smile. "Why am I chained to the railing?"

James covered his face minutely then leaned across me to unfasten the chain.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I did it last night and just forgot that it was there."

"It's okay," I tittered, looking up at the side of his face.

He continued to hover over me; and for just a moment, we stared into each other's eyes. Then, slowly, James leaned towards me.

"What are you doing," I said softly, sitting perfectly still.

"I'm! trying to kiss you," he said, a wry smile creeping across his pallid face.

"Okay--Just making sure," I responded, returning a nervous smile.

"What are you doing?" Jessica said, walking up to the pen.

"Shit! I was--I dropped something," James said, leaning back into his seat.

I pulled down my jacket to cover my bandages, but it was too late. She had already seen them. Jessica angrily squinted her eyes.

So, It Begins...

"We're about to try getting food again," she said, opening the gate. "Come on. We need you."

"I'm gonna stay here with Cay--"

"She looks like she can take care of herself," Jessica retorted.

"I'll be fine, James," I said. "You go on--"

"No, I'm not leaving you behind. Who knows what could happen while we're out."

I glanced over at him. He was thinking pensively of what to do.

"She's coming with us."

"But--"

"But nothing," he interjected. "I said she's coming."

* * *

Jessica wasn't pleased. She went into the gun closet and pulled out her pistol. She reloaded it and walked angrily to the car.

"Do I have to get a gun this time?" I teased, grabbing at my stomach.

"No--no, you don't have to," he said, brushing a fallen strand of hair out of my eye.

"Do you want me to wait for you?"

"Just sit in the car," he said. "I'm coming after I get Bootsie out of the back."

I left the gun closet and walked out of the arena. The car sat afar off in the distance. Arthur, unbeknownst to Booksie, was behind the wheel. And Jessica was leaning against the car.

"Stop it right there," she shouted.

I slowed to a halt and answered.

"What?"

"I know what you are--" she began. "I know what's happened to you."

"It's not what you think," I said, walking towards her.

"Don't you move," she shouted. "If you take one more step, I'm shooting your damn brains out."

I raised a nervous hand, "Jessica, wait--"

"The hell are you doing?" Arthur asked, hanging out of the window.

"She was bitten!" Jessica yelled. "Ask her to open her jacket!"

"I wasn't--"

"Jessica!" James yelled, bursting out of the building.

It startled her, and she fired. I fell to my knees.

"You missed--" I mouthed stupidly and pointed at my head. "My brains are up here."

James ran over and grabbed the gun out of Jessica's hand. Then he knelt down slowly and pulled me into his lap. He held me close and rocked back and forth.

I could feel the warm life spilling from my body and dripping down my stomach and side.

Then slowly, gently, I let go. ---

"What did you do?!" James screamed, cradling Cayleigh in his arms.

"I didn't--She was--"

Bootsie and Arthur stared at Jessica, poignant looks of disappointment branded on their solemn faces.

James laid Cayleigh down on the cold asphalt and stood up slowly.

"She was--she was--bitten--"

"Like hell, she was--" James spat out angrily. Then he pointed the gun at Jessica's face.

"But I saw--" Jessica stammered, backing up slowly. "She had bandages on her stomach--and I heard you say--"

"You heard me say what? That she was bitten?"

"Noâ you said she was infected--"

"There was nothing wrong with her!" James yelled, eyes tearing up. "I saved her!"

Bootsie shook her head somberly.

"It's true," she said. "He told me last night--"

"But--but I don't understand--"

"Then ask questions! That's what people do when they don't understand, damnit! They don't go shooting like idiots!"

So, It Begins...

James' squeezed the butt of the gun tightly; and, his hand shook violently.

"I'm sorry," she said repeatedly. "I didn't know--I'm sorry."

Slowly, James lowered his gun and stormed off.

* * *

James, irrevocably enraged, wandered off into the night. He moved towards the city line, alone now. And now that he knew what he was really up against, he moved confidently through the darkness.

He knew, too, that he'd obtain that sleek motorcycle one day. He'd name it Cay and live the hardest, most fearsome life he'd ever known before society was fully restored again.

He turned his back to the sunset which engulfed the massive rodeo arena in the foreground, and to a bright, green car leering at the bloodstained asphalt in the distance.

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Chapter 11: The Reckoning.

The Reckoning.

Chapter 1: Awake (Teaser)

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So... cold.

I hugged my legs tightly and my eyes gently fluttered open. It was dark--well, dim. I could see no further than the scarce stretch of light that shone above me.

This bed was freezing... I looked down--not a bed. A table, And--I was naked--I quickly covered my body with open palms and nervous arms. Where were my clothes??

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--Read the rest of the teaser here "The Reckoning":

http://www.booksie.com/fantasy/book/jennifer_brighton/so-it-begins:-the-reckoning

--Followed by "Awake":

[http://www.booksie.com/fantasy/book/jennifer_brighton/awake-\(so-it-begins:-the-reckoning\)](http://www.booksie.com/fantasy/book/jennifer_brighton/awake-(so-it-begins:-the-reckoning))

--Followed by "Of Scars, Blood, and Shallow Graves":

[http://www.booksie.com/fantasy/book/jennifer_brighton/of-scars-blood-and-shallow-graves-\(so-it-begins:-the-reckoning\)](http://www.booksie.com/fantasy/book/jennifer_brighton/of-scars-blood-and-shallow-graves-(so-it-begins:-the-reckoning))

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(1) Foreward and Journal Entries for "So, it begins...":

http://www.booksie.com/fantasy/novel/jennifer_brighton/so-it-begins:-foreward-and-journal-entries/chapter/1

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Thank you, and I truly hope you enjoyed reading.

So, It Begins...

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