

THE HUNGER (v.2)

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EXCLUSIVE TO BOOKSIE.COM! I originally published THE HUNGER through Authorhouse on 1/4/07. Unfortunately, the version that got published, had not been properly edited and as a result, a great story went out, looking horrible. I have decided to republish it through another publisher, but first, Edit, Rewrite, and add to the story and publish it here! Enjoy! Feedback much appreciated!



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THE HUNGER (v.2) : Chapter 1

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living, dead, or undead is entirely coincidental. The United States Government had no part in the research for, or writing of, this book.

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PROLOGUE

Abdullah Al-Yasin said his final prayer to Allah and closed his holy book, the Koran, sighing as he kissed the cover. He would never again see his five children, but found solace in knowing that what he did now would greatly affect their future. Their father would die a hero, bringing many infidels to death with him. His name would live on in legend for spreading the message of the great leader Bin Laden. The Americans were cocky and foolish! If they would only bow to the Almighty Allah and cast away their Christian and Jewish ways,

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none of this would need to be done! But this was a Holy War. They brought this on themselves by denying the truth, and now it was Abdullah's time. Fate had brought them to this point. Believing that their heartland was safe from attack was all too ignorant. Abdullah would see to it that they never felt safe again. Allah would welcome him with open arms and pride in his eyes after today's actions. Months, if not years of planning and preparation had brought him to this point.

Al-Yasin looked around the small motel room that he had called home since enrolling in the university. The mirror on the wall held pictures of his loved ones. He removed them, one by one taking a moment to savor each one before placing them in his pockets. He wished they were close but quickly pushed the thought away knowing his longing to be with them would only lead to weakness. He knelt to one knee and lifted the sheet from the small bed, looking underneath, where he found the package. It was a small black case that was about the size of the deck of cards that the Americans had printed the faces of his leaders on before killing them. He enjoyed the thoughts of the chaos that was to come. He knew that within that small case was the key to the afterlife that he would so richly earn. He needed to refocus. Not let his mind wander so much. He began his mental check list, starting with his teeth. He looked in the mirror and admired his filed teeth. It had been painful but he had managed to file each of his teeth to a sharp point. He checked his nails one last time to make sure they were sharp and reminded himself that his actions would change history forever. He slipped the package into his tan jacket's right front pocket and set the bomb. It would not kill as many as he would like, but it would serve its purpose as a distraction for what he would do on campus. He then left the motel room, locking the door as he exited.

He had been given specific instructions. Thursday afternoon. The bomb would detonate at exactly Two forty-five p.m. Meanwhile, at Campus Square: The events rally. Under the cover of being a student, Al-Yasin arrived at the events rally acting as if he would sign up for any number of activities and social clubs. He couldn't wait to destroy them all. They all disgusted him. He hated the Jew Americans and all that they stood for.

He found the longest line at the rally and cut in front of the largest student he could find. The student was wearing a college letter jacket and had a shaved head. The line was for tryouts for the football team. Al-Yasin was sure to shoot a look of hatred at the jock as he stepped into his spot in the line. The jock responded by shoving Al-Yasin out of the way, and he fell to the ground. He laughed as he reached into his pocket and removed the small plastic package. The case held a syringe, which contained the weapon.

"Allah Achbar!!" Al-Yasin screamed as he injected himself with the needle, shoving it deep into the veins in his arm. The rush was instant. He could feel it racing through his blood and everything around him slowly started to spin and go black.

Al-Yasin knew that it was the time to attack. He jumped up from his spot on the ground and bit the man who had shoved him, tearing out a chunk of the student's neck as blood spewed from the wound. Feeling someone grab him, Al-Yasin spun around and slashed the face of teacher who had a hold of his arm with the nails he had been growing for months. From another direction, someone tackled him to the ground. He bit the boy in a football jersey and scratched his face. He fought with all he had, until everything went black and he could fight no more. By his mental count, he had infected twelve.

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ONE

Michael had spent the entire afternoon the day before packing. His little apartment wasn't much, but it was home. The smell of the candles his mother used to burn when she visited weekly was one of the things he would surly miss most, as much as he hated to admit it. Michael's mother was one of his best friends. She believed in him unselfishly no matter what he decided to tackle. Ever since he had moved out, she visited every Sunday just to say hi and let him know what was going on in her life. He always felt like he could talk to his mother, no matter what was going on around him. She was not happy about the fact that Michael would be going to college in another town, but was excited that he was going to college. His mother was the one woman in his life that was always there for Michael. Though he clung to the security of his past, he was ready for the future, and welcomed it.

Looking around his apartment, Michael saw the history of it. The hole in the wall where he had tripped and landed his forehead in plaster while he was, ironically, plastered. That had been the first time he had gotten drunk in his own place. At the time he was underage, so he had to have a friend buy the alcohol, but at least he didn't have to steal it, or hide it from his father. His thin tall body often could not handle booze the way his heavier set best friend's could. Michael didn't party often, but when he did, he was usually the first to pass out and get wonderfully embarrassing pictures taken of him. The apartment was not pretty. A true bachelor's pad. The walls were covered in scuff marks from furniture moved, and stains adorned the floors from God only knows what. There was a large stain on the ceiling that had not been there when he moved in, and Michael had no idea how it got there or what it was, but was sure he'd rather not know. Strangely, his apartment was not really a reflection of Michael. He was actually a clean-freak who had given up on trying to clean up after his friends. Michael was pretty sure that he could kiss his deposit goodbye, but he wasn't too worried about it. He would have spent the money on gas any way and his mother had already filled his gas tank for him. She worried about everything. She not only filled the gas tank, but also had the breaks inspected, the oil changed and all the liquids in the engine topped off. Michael was grateful for all of it, but his mother said to think nothing of it as it was a going away gift. As he said his good-byes to his one bedroom apartment, he wondered if he was really ready for dorm life. He wondered if he was really ready for a space, probably shared, that was not really his own.

A new school meant not only new surroundings, but also new people. It was always awkward for Michael to deal with new people. The friends that he had partied with were really friends of friends. As a child he was a prodigy. "Wise beyond his years" his mother used to say. Being smart made him a teachers dream, but a kid's nightmare. It was not easy to make friends because other children tended to look at his intelligence as a threat, thus they would label him by the things that kids so often throw around. Geek. Nerd. Loser. Michael had heard them all. He grew to detest other kids; that is until he met Brian. Brian West was a new kid in fourth grade. He had moved to town from Spring Valley. Brian was a heavyset kid and never grew out of it. His large size was due both to being chunky and also to muscle. Michael had always thought that the fat only hid the brawn. Brian was not a quiet kid, but Michael had not noticed him until that day. By the time Brian came to school, all the cliques had formed, and Michael belonged to none of them.

One cold autumn day, Michael was at recess receiving his usual taunts and low blows. Eric Sampson, a school bully who was much larger than any other fourth grader Michael had ever seen, was being extremely cruel. His taunts became physical with spit in Michael's face. When Michael did not react, Eric had shoved him. Again Michael turned the other cheek and did nothing. He knew that a reaction would only excite the bully. This drove Eric to want a reaction even more so he began pounding on Michael. Michael took every blow at first, hoping the kicks and spits, laughs, and cheers would all eventually stop, but everyone snaps. Michael couldn't take it any more and started to fight back. This just enraged Eric more, and Michael was rewarded for

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his efforts with a kick in the groin. Michael dropped to his knees, eyes filled with tears as they shut tightly. Suddenly the bully's punches stopped. Michael opened his eyes to find that the new kid was not only defending him but also beating the hell out of Eric Sampson! This was the start of a beautiful friendship. After that day, no one had ever messed with Michael again.

Michael was just glad that Brian would be there to help him through the new experience of going to college as he had been helped through the traumatic experience of the fourth grade. Brian was the one person who always had his back. As they grew older, Brian learned to make friends with his quick wise cracks, and witty comebacks, but Michael never mastered the science of human interaction, opting to only open up to his mother and Brian. Near the end of his high school career, Michael finally began to show his personality to other people and made a few friends, but for the most part Brian was the only person he truly trusted.

Though Michael knew he would still see his family and the few other friends he had collected over the years on some weekends, he was not entirely sure that he was ready to leave small town life for the life of a city college student. Oh well, he figured, there's no turning back now. His bags had been packed, his mother had come, said her tear filled goodbyes and gone, and now it was time to leave to pick up Brian. He slammed the trunk of his yellow '87 Toyota Corolla, checked the tires one last time, then hopped in the drivers seat and turned on the engine. With that he was off.

Michael was free. He and Brian were on the road trip of a lifetime to the college of their dreams and nothing could hold them back. Only the open road and limitless possibilities lie ahead of them. With their windows rolled down they sped down the empty highway as the cool summer breeze flowed through the packed car and into their lungs. It was a nice change from the smog of the city. The view was pure eye candy, breath taking. Miles and miles of colorful hills of fields lay sprawled out like a breathtaking scene from a serene Grant Wood painting. The cornfields flew by in an endless blur like a green and golden dream. Usually driving on the highways made Michael feel tense but with the lack of traffic he truly felt at peace.

They had been on the road for about four hours, three pit stops for munchies, two bathroom breaks, and one soda stop. Michael and Brian had talked about everything, and nothing, and now were out of things to talk about. Brian was looking over a brochure he had read a million times before as Michael turned his thoughts to the future and to the new life that lie only a few short miles ahead of them. His feelings of worry about missing the past were gone by the time they had hit the inter-state. The key to all of his dreams, his entire future was at that college, and nothing short of death it's self could stop him from getting there. Even the school's name made him feel free. Spring Valley University (SVU as Brian called it).

Although the small Iowan town of Spring Valley was not well known, it was home to a college that was. The college had many great programs, such as nursing and drama, but most importantly one of the best government funded computer technology and science programs in the world. Some of the top minds in those fields came from SVU, including Brian's father. Brian's father had been educated at SVU then stayed on after receiving his Doctorate to be a professor with the school until he retired. He still made trips to the school once a week to help out or hold seminars.

Michael smiled at the thought of his future as a big time computer-programming millionaire. Michael Cross: the next Bill Gates. He noticed that Brian had been smiling too. While he had been watching the road and day dreaming about his bright future, Brian had been reading the same old wrinkled brochure about the school of their destiny. Even though he had read it cover to cover, Brian kept reading over it. Michael thought it was to convince himself that he had some form of choice in the school.

"What are you so smiley about?" Michael asked Brian, fully knowing that the only thing that Brian could be smiling about was the same thing he always smiled about. Brian was, what some people called, a pervert.

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"Girls," Brian answered. "Do you realize that this school has a much higher ratio of girls than guys? And by the looks of this brochure, they're pretty hot too! Maybe this college won't be so bad after all."

Michael realized that this had been the first time he had seen Brian excited about anything about the school since they left. He knew all too well the depressing reason Brian planned to attend the school, and how unhappy he had been about it. Lack of options.

For as long as he had known Brian, Dr. West, Brian's controlling father, had been drilling SVU into his son. To the outside world, Dr. West was a fun, energetic, exciting professor who was also a dedicated family man and consult to the school. In reality he was those things, but also a control freak, who treated Michael better than Brian from the first day they had met. Brian was not the most intelligent guy, but where he failed in grades, he made up for in athletics, participating actively in wrestling, football, soccer and baseball. His father never seemed to notice, and even said that his son's participation in sports was barbaric. On a visit to Brian's house after school sophomore year the subject of college came up. Brian mocked his father as he quoted him. "If you want me to pay for college, then you'll go to the school I say, and that school is Spring Valley University, understand?" Brian's father had not been a mean man, just a strict one. Michael was sure that the good doctor had Brian's best interest at heart, though he understood that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Apparently Brian's grandfather had had been one of two men who had founded the school's acclaimed, and government funded, science department and as a result, his father went to that college and now it was Brian's turn. Brian was destined to be a scientist, weather he liked it or not. Michael knew that Brian would rather pick up a baseball, football, or even a pencil and draw than touch a beaker or burner any day. That was part of the reasons Michael had agreed to go to this school. So his best friend wouldn't be alone. Lack of options is a terrible thing when it comes to college. Michael was left-brained and Brian was right. Michael always thought that was the reason they clicked so well.

"The place might as well be a girl's school! Dude, I so have dibs on that chick!" Brian said as he held up and pointed to a picture from the pamphlet of a beautiful girl. Michael took his eyes off the road for only a moment to glance at the pretty girl in a nurse's uniform. She had straight brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and a beautiful smile.

"Yeah," he said, "But with our luck, that's the only hot one and all the rest look like the living dead! She's probably a model paid for the picture." Michael saw Brian smile back then turn his attention to the road and a look of pure panic crossed his face.

Michael looked up from the pamphlet and turned his attention back to the road to see the source of Brian's wide-eyed fear. though he saw it, his mind almost did not process it. A man was standing in their path, not moving as the car sped toward him. Let it be a scarecrow. A horrible prank. Weather it was a scarecrow or a man, it was less than fifteen seconds ahead of its impending doom. Michael felt the world spin around him and go into slow motion as he slammed the break. He was fully aware that it was too late. Knowing that nothing could be done to stop what was about to happen, Michael and Brian both braced for impact. Michael threw the wheel as far to the right as it would go and slammed his break, in a last minute effort to stop the inevitable. The car began to skid out of control as the smell of burnt rubber filled the air. The tires screeched as if they screamed for help. Michael tried to correct the skid by throwing the wheel to the left but it was too late. Ohmygodohmygodohmygod... Before he could blink, one of the tires blew out and the car was in a full forced free spin on the highway. The car became a wrecking ball of force as it slammed into the man who stood motionless, fearless, in the middle of the road. The loud THUD could be heard as clear as a bell over the screeching tires. The massive impact of the car threw the man into a ditch and Brian into a panic. The car began to roll as another tire blew out and the car came to the gravel on the side of the road. The vehicle rolled for what seemed like forever and Michael foolishly hoped it would land on the wheels. The small yellow mangled metal vehicle came to a stop upside-down in a muddy ditch, inches from a barb wire fence.

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When the car had finally stopped rolling, and their hearts stopped racing, Michael and his shaken friend took a moment to make sure each other were all right, then climbed out of the car, knowing that they were lucky to be alive.

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Brian was hysterical. He had never been in a crash before and was quickly realizing how much control he had lost. Brian was the kind of person who took control of any situation with force, if he didn't already have control, and the fact that he almost lost his life hit him hard. The thought of the victim brought him back to reality.

As if thinking the same thing, both young men looked over at where the man had been thrown. They knew they had to find him. An unseen crow let out an eerie caw as they slowly walked across the barren highway toward the area the man had landed.

Brian was shaken to the core. The man was not large, probably weighing less than 200 pounds, and the car hit him hard, but the simple fact of the matter was that he was simply not there. Michael and Brian searched everywhere. Brian couldn't figure it out. There was a small period of time after the wreck where he had been in a state of panic then shock, but this was beyond words. As they walked to the side of the road, Brian and Michael agreed that the spot they were standing in was where the man had probably landed. The only thing that was lying in the spot now was a large crimson mess of dark blood and flesh-like matter that trailed off into the cornfield as it faded away.

"He must be in shock." Michael said, "I've read that when you're in shock, your body can do some amazing stuff..."

"Like crawling away? Right." Brian knew that that wasn't the case. There was no way in hell that a man hit by a car going seventy-five could simply crawl away from the scene. It just wasn't possible. He'd seen deer torn apart from less force than that. "If he's alive, we gotta find him." Brian said, his eyes following the trail into the field. Brian remembered the first aid kit that Michael's mother had made them pack. Now he was glad she had. "He's gonna need help. Run back to the car and see if you can find the first-aid kit in the trunk." Michael nodded and headed for the car. Brian decided to see if he could find their missing victim.

Pushing some corn stalks aside, Brian could see that the blood trail faded after only a few short feet. He also became vaguely aware of the smell of what had to be some form of road kill. He stepped into the field listening carefully for moaning or the sounds of a man with several broken bones and in a lot of pain, but heard nothing. The entire field seemed quiet. Too quiet. He knew the man had to be dead. Maybe he had been thrown farther than we thought...

"Mike, I can't find him..." Brian said as he took a deep breath to the smell of rot filling his lungs. He turned back to face the road, not wanting to get lost in the field. As Brian turned he was greeted by something he never expected to see...

...There he was.

The man that the car had hit was standing less than five feet away... and limping toward Brian. The short man was heavy set, balding, pale, wearing farmer's overalls, flannel, probably in his late forties and looked like death warmed over twice. The man had a vacant stare in his glazed eyes and his out stretched hands with broken fingers were reaching for Brian.

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"Mike! I found him! Sir, you're going to be okay. Sorry about hitting you, man, are you okay?" Brian rambled on and on as the man simply groaned and took a step closer dragging a broken foot behind him.

"Look man, maybe you should just sit down for a second. You've lost a lot of blood and my friend is getting the first aid kit right now." Again, the man groaned and took a limping step closer as his cold eyes widened. Just then Brian got his first real look at the man's wounds. The man's leg had clearly been shattered, with several compound fractures, but by the looks of it, that wasn't all. He guessed by the way the man was leaning to one side that a few ribs were probably broken also. Listening closely he could hear some bones crunching as they scraped together with each step the man took. He smelled horrible and his left ear had what looked like maggots crawling in it.

"Oh man... Dude, you gotta sit down..." The man's eye's widened even more as he opened his bloody drool filled mouth and suddenly lunged at Brian with out any warning. Brian tried to step out of the way but the man was too fast and before he knew it, Brian was on the ground fighting off the injured man, maggots falling on his face.

"Dude! I know you're pissed, I said sorry! What the hell's your problem?" He pleaded as he struggled to hold off the man who was now drooling blood while trying to bite him. His broken fingers made him weaker as he could not grab or scratch his prey, but his weight defiantly gave him the advantage.

"MICHAEL!" Brian screamed for help, "Get this freak offa' me!" He continued he struggled as he kned the man in the groin but with no effect.

The as suddenly as he had attacked, the man collapsed. His weight crushed Brian as it lie motionless on him. Officially creeped out, Brian pushed him off and saw Michael standing over him with a bloody crowbar in hand.

"You okay man?" Michael asked.

"What the hell do you think? Do I look okay to you?" Brian said sarcastically as he tried desperately to get the maggots off of him. "Did you kill him?" Brian asked his body shaking from the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He reached out an unsteady hand for his friend to grab.

"I don't know, I hit him in the neck and he just dropped. I tried pulling him off but..." Michael said, helping his friend to his feet.

Brian quickly gave thanks to his friend with a nod and stepped away from the psycho farmer. Brian nudged him with his foot but the farmer did not move. Angry at what had happened he gave the farmer a good kick in the ribs to release some tension.

The boys started to walk toward the road when they heard a sound from behind them. They both turned to see the groaning and gurgling farmer lying on the ground, eyes darting left and right as he spit blood bubbles.

"He must be paralyzed, neck down." Michael said stating the obvious.

" I don't give a damn if he is Mike, the dude tried to kill me!" Brian said. "I say we leave the son-of-a-bitch to rot. Fuck him." Brian was now quite passed shocked and was now pissed off. He was more than willing to leave the farmer to the crows to die in the field.

"No way man! He just isn't thinking right!" Michael protested. "If we leave him and he dies, it's a hit and run! We've gotta find some kind of help... look, the guy isn't going anywhere and we're only a few miles from

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town." Michael was always logical and organized in extreme situations and was almost always right, and Brian knew it.

"Okay, so the guy needs help now, but I seriously doubt that a first-aid kit is gonna do the trick. By the time we get to Spring Valley he'll probably be dead anyway." Brian said as he tried to figure out a better plan. "My cell phone..." started to say but then remembered that the cell's battery, much like the car was dead. "Never mind. Okay, here's the plan: we head to the car and collect what we need then head to Spring Valley and hopefully we'll see someone on the way." Brian looked back at the man who was still moaning and drooling. "If we find someone we'll bring back help."

The man was looking paler by the second as the blood oozed from his wounds. His lack of blood in his system didn't seem to slow the endless movement of his head as his body lie motionless. Brian looked back to Michael. "That dude really creeps me out."

Brian took one final look at this crippled attacker and watched a large black bird sweep down and land on his brow. The man didn't seem to notice as the bird began pecking at his eye. The man kept moving his head back and forth as the bird flapped its massive wings. It dug its midnight black claws into the man's head as it pecked away at him as if he were road kill. Brian shuddered as he looked away.

At the car they found only their empty soda bottles and the bags, which held books and random articles of clothing. "Well," Michael said, "the more we take, the more we'll be slowed down so I say we only take the first-aid kit just in case. We can come back for the rest in the morning." Brian nodded as he heard the bird let out a caw from the field as if to bid them farewell. Brian tied his shoe and grabbed the first-aid kit and they began their walk down the highway that lead to the city of their dreams... or nightmares.

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T W O

Mayor Bloom was in hell. He had no doubts about it. Nor did he doubt the fact that he would probably be dead before the next sunrise.

Bloom knew exactly how this happened to his city. He knew that none of this was his fault and there was nothing he could have done differently to stop it. If only they had acted sooner.

He had watched from the relative safety of his home as the first few people began eating each other after they had returned from the dead. He knew how this had happened and, as much as he wished he could deny it, he knew why. He knew that his whole city was now infected. The city that had made him the success he had become, lie in ruins. He knew no one could stop it, that this city was the first, but not the last. He knew that it would spread. He knew that the city he loved, the city he had worked so hard to make successful and to keep beautiful, would never be the same as it once was. There was no turning back from the wasteland of flesh that it had become. He was fully aware that the entire city had become less inhabitable than Chernobyl.

After he saw his wife die, he fought his way to his office where he thought it would be safe. He fought his way through the city of the damned only to hide in fear, fear and shame. He hid in his office offering his town no comfort, or explanation, as the Army came in and blocked off its streets. He had hid in his office as the sounds of bullets and gunfire filled the once empty night skies. He hid in his office as the screams of children dying in the streets filled his ears like an endless nightmare of sound he couldn't wake from. He had watched in horror from his hiding place in his office, as an Army of evil devoured the Army of man. An Army of the dead. He hid in his office as he realized that his fate had been sealed watching the same Army of men return to life and join the dark force that had destroyed them. He hid. He hid and wept. He, a grown man, and the mayor of a powerful city, had wept like a small child left alone in the dark cold night. He cried like a little girl on acid-laced Cheerios. He hid feeling utterly alone knowing his people were dying and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. Nothing he could do to stop it. So, with no other options, he had hid in his office and watched as the hunger consumed his city.

Bloom hugged his shotgun knowing that he had only one cartridge left. All of his spare ammo was across town in his wonderful home. A home he felt he would never see again. No. He couldn't think of home. The pain of knowing he would never again see the happiness that once represented his life was too much to handle. Bloom knew that remembering the past life he used to have was too much. He needed to focus on now. He needed to stay focused on what he was going to do with what was left of the mess of his life. His only shot at survival had been more ammo but his only ammo was at home. He would never make it across town alone so his only choice was to hide. He had been hiding in fear knowing that the only thing protecting him from his demise was a cheap lock on an unsteady door that was older than he was.

The mayor had no doubts in his mind that he would soon die and that no one was coming to save him. He felt he had nothing to live for. Mayor Bloom was in hell. He felt a tear stream down his face as he placed the barrel of his shotgun in his mouth. A thousand images of the past flooded his mind, taking him back to a time and place that he could no longer stand to be apart from. The end was not near. The end was now.

~

Michael was tired. Brian had been babbling on for the last few miles, as he always did, about how pissed off his father would be when he found out about their situation and how he would probably somehow be blamed for the whole mess. Michael had let him ramble on and occasionally threw in a "Yeah," or "Uh huh." to make

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Brian think he was actually listening and cared about what his friend had to say. Michael just wanted to get to town. He was just about ready to say something to stop Brian's constant whining when he actually said something that made sense.

"You know, it's kinda weird that there's been no cars or traffic out here... aren't we like half a mile from town?" Brian said, "Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen any cars at all since the interstate."

Michael gave the sideways comment some thought and quickly realized that Brian was right. Where was everyone? It was the middle of the day just outside a busy city and there wasn't a soul in sight and there hadn't been all day.

"Dude, your right, that's just weird." Michael said.

As they continued down the highway trying not to even think about the mess behind them and the strange lack of traffic flow, Michael noticed some flashing lights up the road. He pointed out the lights to Brian, as they got closer. Michael knew that it wasn't his eyes playing tricks on him. As they got closer they began to make out some kind of military barricade. Blue, orange and red flashes of light painted the sea of endless cornfields that met the edge of Spring Valley. Michael strained his eyes as he started to make out some military hummers, fire trucks and squad cars blocking the road into, or out of, town.

"You don't think they're waiting for us do you?" Brian said uneasily.

"Nah, why would they have that many cops, S.W.A.T. and the National Guard for two college guys? Why not just send State Patrol? Overkill don't ya think?" Michael said trying to put Brian's already shot nerves to ease.

"Yeah," Brian said, "I guess you're right... Well look at it this way, we don't have to look very far for help!"

"Thank God too," Michael said with a smile, "my feet are killin' me!" Brian smiled back and they both began to jog toward the blockade, and were almost knocked off their feet by what they found.

When the long jog to the roadblock was completed, Brian was beyond confused. He had expected to find some cops and military types at the barricade, but instead found no one. Not one police officer was available to explain the reason behind the roadblock. The entrance to the city had been just as empty as the field had been. The sound of radio static came from one of the cars and crackle filled the air, which also held the strong smell of burning oil. Brian and Michael had taken a moment to examine the assorted hummers and city vehicles but, despite their efforts, found no reason for their vacancy.

"Maybe they went to lunch." Brian said half joking, knowing this was no joking matter.

"Holy... Brian, you ain't seen nothing yet, come check this out..." Michael said from the other side of the row of cars. Brian walked over to where Michael was standing and felt a knot build up in his stomach. The sides of the vehicles looked worse than any movie crime scene. Bullet holes riddled the sides of the blood stained and dented doors. Stray bullets had flattened the tires and the windows had been shattered on the passenger sides. Blood soaked everything in a layer of crimson.

"What the hell happened here?" Michael said matching Brian's thoughts.

"I dunno, but this ain't right." They both turned around slowly to the streets of the once booming college town, which now stood barren, not a single soul in site. Cars had been turned on their sides or were upside down. Phone pole had been knocked down by stray traffic and fire was busting out of most buildings. The town looked like a war zone, with no bodies.

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"Looks like it's gonna be harder to find help than we thought..." Brian said to Michael who was reading the stained wooden town sign.

" 'Spring Valley Welcomes you.' my ass! Maybe we would have been safer at the wreck." Brian said.

"We should go to the police station first. If anyone can help us, it's the cops. I bet that's where everyone's at." Michael said as Brian began following his lead. Brian looked around the town and felt it's eerie silence the sound of fire burning was all that filled his ears.

"Dude," Brian said, "I've been here hundreds of times with my dad when a I was a kid, and I've never, ever, seen it this empty." Brian's mind began to fill with memories of his many childhood visits to the town, that his father had said, was destined to make him a success.

"I don't think I've seen any town this barren." Michael said as they continued to walk its empty streets.

Brian began to take notice to his surroundings. No dogs barking, no birds, no sound or movement of any kind other than the sound of his own heart beating and their footsteps. The smell of smoke filled his lungs. Smoke and something else. Something he had smelled once before. It smelled like road kill but worse. Papers littered the streets and the cars that lie vacant with doors wide open and shattered wind shields. A large fire truck was tipped on it's side and plumes of smoke rolled out of its burning cab. Windows of buildings were broken or boarded up. Blood stained the streets and, though it had dried, once ran into the sewers. Brian's mind could hardly process what he saw. The uneasy feeling that had been riding with Brian since the crash was surly turning to fear. What the hell happened here?

Brian kept his thoughts to himself as he and Michael finally found a sign that indicated that an old building was the town's city hall. The sign also said that the town treasury and Mayor's Office were also in the building. The Police office was across the street.

The Police station was as boarded up and barricaded as other buildings, if not more so. Large double doors were at the buildings entrance, with the number 1902 at their top. The doors seemed sturdy enough. This was refreshing to both Brian and Michael. It meant that this was a perfect place to keep people safe.

"I wonder if anyone's here." Brian said.

"God I hope so." Michael said with a slightly worried tone in his voice. As they ended their ascent up the stairs and began to slowly open the heavy wooden door to the Police station, they were greeted by a scent that made them both gag and a scene straight from a 'B' grade horror movie.

~

The Mayor's Office in the town hall was a dark place for Spring Valley Mayor David Bloom. He removed the barrel of the shotgun from his mouth, his hands trembling. The decorations of his office that had once brought the mayor feelings of pride and comfort, now made him feel very paranoid. The cold glazed glass stare of the stuffed duck in mid-flight on the mantle seemed to stare directly into his soul as if to pass judgment on him. He got the same feeling from the mounted moose head, which hung on the wall and was once his pride and joy, a reminder of a hunting trip with the president of the school board in Canada. Bloom felt lost in their judging eyes, almost as if his soul had been jaded. The glass eyes of his prized trophies seemed to burn a hole into his core. His constant unchanging fear was that much like the rest of the dead in Spring Valley, the once quite dead moose and duck would return to life in search for human flesh to quench an eternal hunger. Death meant nothing in this town. It was merely the end of consciousness as the living had come to know it.

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"My sanity's starting to slip..." Bloom said to himself. "Gotta keep it together..." Just then, he thought he heard a voice. At first he thought it was one of the dead animals through out his office. Bloom was convinced it was all in his mind. His mind had to be playing tricks on him... until he heard another voice. These voices were not like the whispers that had mocked him through out his stay in his office. They were more human. He could have sworn he heard the words 'Police Station'. God no.

He slowly began to breathe heavier as he rose from his crouched position on the floor to get to the window. Then he remembered what happened to the last people who wandered the streets in an effort to find survivors.

The visions flashed in his head, as the paranoia started to take over, and he began to remember the twisted scene. They had been walking down the street. A man and his wife, no older than thirty. Bloom had yelled down to them to get help and that he was stranded there. He remembered feeling relief. He remembered feeling hope that this nightmare had ended. They had yelled back. The voices had fallen on dead ears. As if they were a swarm of ants to a piece of candy on the sidewalk, the carriers began to surround the couple. At first it was just one, then many began to come out of the alleys and climb out of the windows of other buildings like a pack of ravenous wolves. The couple had been eaten alive after being torn limb from limb by a sea of the living dead. Bloom had seen death in Vietnam, but nothing like what he had seen in his quiet town of Spring Valley. It was at that point, that the mayor had lost hope in saving others or being saved himself. It was then that he began to wait, in self-pity, to die.

Bloom began to think about the creatures and all that he knew about them. Perhaps it would all fit together somehow in his mind and help him come up with some kind of plan to survive. What he actually knew about the bloodthirsty bastards was much more than he wanted to, and more than most in his town. He never wanted it to go this far. He had done everything in his power to stop it, what little power he actually had. He knew they preferred night to daylight, were infested with the smell of rotting flesh (which made for a good warning sign), and would attack anything that moved or made a sound. He knew that in order to survive he had to rely on more than just his sense of sight. His guess was that after they were taken over by the parasite; they were driven by a primal urge to feed or spread the plague. He also knew that if bitten or scratched, you became one of them. Bloom would rather blow the back of his own head out, than become one of them. For this reason, he saved a shotgun shell in his wallet. He called it destiny.

By the time he had convinced himself to look outside, the men behind the voices were gone. The door to the station was closing so Bloom knew they had gone in, and probably would not come out. Why did I wait to look out? Why didn't I warn them? I can't let them die. Something has to be done.

Bloom reluctantly opened the window and the stench of death filled his lungs. He knew that one of them was near but had no idea where. His heart raced as he quickly grabbed the sharpened letter opener from his desk. It would be one more weapon to use in the upcoming undeniable confrontation with the dead things. Come on you bastard. Where are you?

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T H R E E

Michael had pissed his pants. The scene of ghoulish slaughter that lay in front of him had caused Michael to piss his pants, and Brian to vomit. He hadn't realized that he needed to urinate, but his bladder knew better. The scent as they entered the station was enough to make a coroner gag, but the sight was beyond words. It reminded Michael of an image from the Jonestown suicides or an old holocaust photo he had seen in high school history class. Hitler would be proud.

Men and women of all ages, all in uniform. Police officers, Firemen, and military types were piled like stacks of rotting wood in a pool of blood. Oh my god. Michael had to turn away from the repulsive sight. Corpses had been thrown like cheap discarded rag dolls in to a pile of flesh in the middle of the room. The room looked like something out of Jeffery Dahmer's dreams. Limbs lie scattered around the office like left over lunch from a cannibal cult. Blood splattered the walls and ceiling. Bones stripped from the flesh littered the room as left by savage dogs. Messages begging for help adorned the walls, scrawled in blood.

Though his gut told him to get out, Michael watched as Brian began to wander around the open office as if in search of a reason for the carnage. Michael's stomach churned as Brian studied the blood spatters on the walls. Michael suddenly felt claustrophobic. He needed to get out. His body was against him and he could fight it no more. Michael's mouth filled with saliva and he convulsed into vomit mode.

"We gotta get the hell out of here, Brian." Michael still said feeling sick to his stomach as he watched his friend move around the room.

"Good idea." Brian said, turning toward his friend.

Suddenly, a body fell from the top of the pile, falling on the opposite side from Brian. Michael saw it, but Brian didn't. Too shocked to say anything, Michael simply pointed at the rising corpse behind Brian. Michael frantically looked around the room for something to throw his friend. He noticed a gun on the floor in the palm of a pale severed hand. Michael pried the dead fingers off of the gun and threw it to Brian, yelling for him to look out. Brian spun around just in time to see the man in a torn Army uniform. He ducked low ramming his shoulder into the creature's gut, which let out a wet sloshing sound. The monster stumbled back tripping over another corpse. Brian backed up, not looking away from the Army man, until he was by Michael's side at the station's doors. Michael was still gagging from having to grab a severed hand as Brian turned off the safety on the gun at took aim at the corpse that had gotten up and was now stumbling toward him. It reached out its bloody hands and moaned as its pace increased. It's eyes were a pale grey in their sunken sockets, but this did not stop it from "seeing" it's prey as it limped forward.

"That's close enough, asshole!" Brian said as he got a closer look at his would-be attacker while trying to take aim.

Michael couldn't help but stare at the man dressed in a tattered Army uniform. His upper lip had been ripped or torn off; Michael couldn't tell and really didn't care. The man was covered in scratches and bite marks from head to toe. Some parts of his arms, legs and face had entire chunks of flesh missing. He had a dislocated shoulder and appeared to have a broken right foot, but none of this affected him. The former soldier had one mission now, and Michael didn't want to find out what it was. He was closing in on Brian, and fast.

"Screw it man, this guy's already dead!" Brian screamed as he opened fire. The bullets hit the man squarely in the chest and arms but the man kept coming. The bullets jerked him back as they ripped apart his clothes but

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did not stop him.

"What the fu...." Michael started as he watched more and more bullets from Brian's gun tear into his attacker's chest. Just when Michael thought things couldn't get worse, that nothing would stop the mad attacker, it was confirmed that he was in hell. The pile of corpses, that had been still, began to move. Another of the lifeless. The second creature climbed out from under a woman in a dress and rose from behind his predecessor. The two creatures were less than five feet from the terrified friends and closing in.

Suddenly, Michael felt something grab his leg. He looked down to see the upper half of a woman who had been blown apart by a shotgun blast and was now clawing her way toward him with one hand on his ankle. She was weak, but persistent. Michael quickly stomped on her wrist, forcing her to let go. Michael stepped back as Brian unloaded a shell into the woman's forehead, which let out an explosive splatter on the floor. Her grip loosened and she let go. Then Michael felt something grab his arm. He lifted a fist as he turned to see Brian pulling him back to the door. They swung open the massive door and found themselves staring down the double barrel of a sawed off shotgun.

"Duck!" the man on the other side of the gun demanded. Michael and Brian did as they were told and heard a blast from above their heads. The sound was deafening and led to a constant ringing in both boy's ears. The man was taller than Brian but shorter than Michael. He was heavyset and in his fifties. His five-o'clock shadow hid most of his facial features, but his dark eyes were intense with purpose.

Michael turned his head just in time to see the Army man's head blown off of his shoulders as he fell to his knees. The shotgun wielding man swung the gun over his shoulder and grabbed them both by the arms.

"We gotta get to my house." The man said as he slammed the door shut behind them. "If we don't make it to shelter before night fall we won't see tomorrow."

~

Mayor Bloom had found his second wind. He had faced his fears and saved the two men he heard earlier, partly because he knew that the opportunity to have some one to go with him to his home might not come again. He had run out of his office after hearing gunshots coming from the station and was greeted by one of the walking dead. He had to fight it off with his bare hands and finally killed the bastard, who put up a hell of a fight, with his bare hands until he finally killed it with a quick stab in the skull with the letter opener. He had run across the street to save the two men from becoming lunch meat for the undead. By the looks of it, his timing couldn't be better.

Bloom remembered the nightmare that had become of the Police Station. When it all began, he had gone on television to tell his residents of the safety of the Police Station. At the time they had made it a safe haven for the uninfected. What he hadn't counted on was the speed at which the disease would multiply, or the fact that his Chief of Police, Charles Franklin, had contracted it. Due to Charles' condition, the plague of the undead spread through the back offices and into the main corridor infecting all who came across its path. The once "safest place" in Spring Valley soon became a literal station of the damned.

"The roads are blocked off every couple of blocks at all of the major intersections so we'll have to go by foot, but we gotta move fast if we want to live. Don't make anymore sound than you have to," Bloom told the young men after snapping himself back to reality. His pulse was racing and he could tell that they were still adjusting to the shock of what they had just seen.

Bloom glanced over at the men and realized that they were both quite younger than he had initially guessed. Great. Kids to baby-sit. Hope they can work a gun. Bloom figured that they were probably college students

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and defiantly not locals. There was no way that any local who had been in town the last few days would have ever even considered going into the Police Station after what had happened. Even during daylight it was a bad idea.

One of the boys was younger looking and shorter than the other. He had been the one with the gun, which lead Bloom to believe; based on the number of random shots he heard earlier, that he had a temper. The short one kept asking stupid questions. He hadn't shut up since they left the station. The guy seemed to have the attention span of a gnat. The older and taller of the two simply did as he was told. He seemed agreeable and took orders well, which would probably keep him alive longer. Bloom liked people who could follow orders with out asking questions. In Spring Valley, asking the wrong questions at the wrong times would get them killed. He hoped neither of them would have to find that out the hard way.

"Okay," the annoying one said. "I've been trying to talk to you since we left that hell hole and I'm sick of not getting any answers! I'm not going any further until you tell us what the hell happened here and where the fuck you're taking us."

Bloom really didn't have the time to play twenty questions from the dumb ass. "Look kid, we don't have time for this. Every second we waste gets us closer to sundown." He explained. "We gotta keep moving. I don't give a shit what you do, but I'm going to the gas station about two blocks from here to get some food. Come with me if you want. I'll explain everything that you could possibly wanna know once we get there."

Bloom saw the two young men look at each other and nod. Looking down at the gun wrapped in his white knuckles Bloom asked, "How much ammo you got?" He watched as the child fumbled clumsily with the stolen gun that he didn't deserve to have until the clip finally ejected showing only three .9mm bullets.

"Okay," Bloom said, after seeing the disappointment in Brian's eyes, "I've got more ammo at home, and that's where we're going. See this shotgun? I'm out of ammo. Blew my last round saving your asses so that makes your gun the only one we got. I got military training. Give me the gun." Bloom hoped the kid would learn, quickly, how to follow directions and to see the value in having a war vet carry the only weapon.

Brian wasn't buying it. "What?" He said with the same look of desperation that Bloom had seen too many times before. "Hell no! You're telling me that you're empty and all I got is three shots? And you think I'm gonna give up my gun?? Fuck you! What if you're one of them? What if you just haven't turned yet?"

"Look," The man said, "I have military experience. If you don't wanna get killed tonight, you'll learn to trust me. Here's the deal, kid, you screwed up here, not me. Your clip holds fifteen rounds and was probably full when you got a hold of it, which means you blew twelve rounds in that walking-void before I even showed up! Now listen closely. Here's some ground rules if you want to live through the night. Number one: Don't argue with me. I've been around longer than you and I won't hesitate to kill you myself if you become a burden. Rule number two: any questions, see rule number one. As for the flesh eaters, they hate daylight cause it causes them to die sooner. Dries the skin, or something. So don't be stupid and go out at night unless you really have no other option. Don't let them get close enough to bite or scratch you. That's how it spreads. You get bit or scratched. Kill yourself, cause if I'm with you, I will. Don't make too much noise day or night. They kill any thing they hear. They usually travel in packs so if you see one, look for more. Don't waste ammo. If you have to shoot them, aim for the head. That is the only sure shot. These things aren't human anymore so don't think twice about killing them. You two just walked into a war zone. It's kill or be eaten alive, literally. Understand? Anymore stupid ass questions? Or can we keep moving?"

"Oh shit." The older one said. This was one of the first things Bloom had heard him say. He pointed at gas station, which was now in sight. Bloom looked to see what Michael was pointing out only to see three of the carriers knelt by the front door of the gas station. They were eating, what appeared to be a large dog, or maybe

a deer.

"Remember," Bloom said. "Aim for the heads."

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FOUR

Michael knew that Brian wasn't ready. He had seen the frantic shots at the police station and knew that Brian wasn't a good enough shot to make the heads. Not from the distance they were, and not in one shot. There was no way. Michael had seen his friend become unsteady and clammy and his face lose its color at the sight of the three infected monsters eating the lifeless and twitching dog. Michael made the decision to do what had to be done and made a grab for the gun. He easily pulled it out of Brian's sweaty hands.

"What the fuck?!" Brian protested.

"Back off Brian!" Michael said with a dead-serious look on his face. "I'll take the shots. Trust me on this one. I got it." Before Brian could contest any further, Michael began to take aim.

The mindless ones, less than ten feet away, heard the brief argument, and arose from their cold meal at a chance for some fresh warm meat. They reminded Michael of vultures with carrion, or a murder of crows pecking at road kill. They were each disfigured in their own unique and grotesque way and looked as if they were murder victims who had been left to rot in the sun for a few months. They had a cold and vacant stare in their eyes and their mouths hung open as they came closer, guided by the hunger. The monsters drooled and slobbered as they pushed past one another, each wanting the first chance at human flesh. The groaning sounds they made were like that of a caveman seeing fire for the first time. Behind them, the dog was still twitching, and Michael couldn't help but feel sorry for it. He had been relatively calm up to this point, but now his heart was pounding so hard, he thought he would soon feel it come out of his chest. Sweat beads rolled down his brow. Though becoming more anxious, his hands remained steady as a trained sniper.

Michael turned his gaze to the man who had saved their lives, wondering what he would do next. He obviously had a survival instinct. The man pulled a small knife-like object from his shirt pocket.

"If you can take out two of them, I got the other." The man said. "But if I get bit, take me out."

With that, Michael and Brian watched, awestruck, as the man ran towards the evil in front of them. He seemed fearless as he lunged the makeshift knife into the first one's temple and turned to the next, and slashed it's throat. The first creature collapsed, but the second kept coming, his moans becoming muffled gurgles. The man locked arms with the creature and held it back as he struggled to keep it from biting him. It's mouth wide and groaning, the undead pulled at the man's clothes, tearing feverishly. Michael aimed at the demon. The man was trying to hold its head still with his hand on its chin. When Michael finally got it in his cross-hairs, he took his shot. The bullet hit it's target blowing the attacking one's skull apart in a fountain of blood and bone. A sudden rush of adrenaline came over Michael's body as he realized what he had just done. As if in slow motion, he watched his undead victim fall lifelessly to the ground.

Only one carrier remained, but not for long. It had been closing in on Bloom's struggle with it's undead brethren. Michael watched as Bloom turned his rage to the last one. He swung the shotgun from over his shoulder and rammed the butt of the gun into the creatures gut then head, knocking it to the ground. Then, as if driven by the possession of the devil himself, Bloom stomped on the head of the flesh-eater with the heel of his army boot with a loud crunch. Again and again he stomped screaming "Die you rotting bastard, die!!" Then he used the butt of his gun to smash what was left of its skull into a mushy pulp. As a puddle of coagulated blood formed around the mess that used to be it's head, the man dropped to his knees, his breaths heavy.

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Wow. Michael thought. He had no idea that a single man could possibly harvest such raw, rage driven, power, and was thankful that such power was on his side. I gotta stick with this guy. Note to self: Don't piss him off.

"Now that's how you 'don't waste ammo!'" Brian said looking over at Michael. Michael was not amused and slightly offended by Brian's lack of respect for the man who had risked his life to save theirs. Michael knew how much anger, pain, and pure hatred it must have taken for a man to do something like that. It was almost like the man had a personal vendetta against the creatures. Michael was sure the man had probably seen them kill all the people that he knew and wanted vengeance.

"Are you alright?" Michael said as he walked cautiously to the knelt man's side. The man looked up Michael with blood spattered on his clothing and a lost look in his eyes. He paused for a moment then his gaze turned cold again.

"I'm... fine. Let's just get inside." Bloom said, looking away from Michael.

The gas station seemed to be a relatively secure location with bars on the windows and door, and, in an interesting twist of much needed luck, the door's deadbolt lock was open. The building was small and showed no signs of fire or other major damage; the windows were cracked but not broken and tinted so they could not see inside. The trio moved into the building like a S.W.A.T. team, sweeping it in case something should try to catch them by surprise. After a clean sweep of the store, they found that it had been ransacked but still had a few supplies left. Racks had been knocked over, and containers were spilled everywhere. There was some food and random supplies scattered around that could still be used. The building had no power and, as the sun began to set, the only light in the building came from an unbroken emergency flood light, in the north corner of the main room. The men began looking around the small shop for anything they could use. Michael had many questions for the man, but was afraid to irritate him for fear of what he might do if annoyed. He knew he would get the answers he wanted when the time was right. After the quick second, more thorough, sweep of the shop, the men were relieved to find that none of the undead had figured out how to get inside. Michael had hoped to find a survivor or two, but was not surprised not to. He would be surprised if anyone survived this mess.

After noticing a metal door by the entrance of the store, Michael decided to check out the broken cooler and grab a beverage. He opened the magnetic cooler door and took a swig of the luke warm bottle of water before pouring it over his sweaty head. The summer evening was hot and the smell of rot was heavy in the air, but Michael had gotten as used to it as he could. The soothing feeling of the water as it rolled off his head and down to his tense shoulders. Michael had a feeling that this would be the last 'shower' he would get for a while and he almost forgot the bizarre situation he was in. He looked at Brian who was eating a half-melted candy bar and it made him think of the candy that Brian had stolen from the dime store down the block from where they grew up. His father had beaten his ass black and blue for stealing that candy, but man those bars were good! A smirk crossed his face as his daydream was interrupted by the man's voice. Not a word had been spoken since they got inside the store.

"You wanted answers? Listen up 'cause here they come." The man started. " My name is David Bloom and this is my town. I am... I was the mayor. I was across the street in city hall for three days before you came along. I hate to admit it, but I'm glad you did. I've seen hell unfold on earth during those short three days. My life will never be the same. Friends, neighbors, family, all dead. I was ready to quit but 'Nam wouldn't let me. I survived that so I knew I could live through anything. So there I sat. Trying to figure out how the hell to get back to my house. I got an ammo cache there. I used to collect that stuff. Who would'a known it would save my life. So while I tried to figure it out, I heard you two walking around outside my office window and that's when I came and got you out of that jam you were in. Like I was saying, I have more than enough ammo at my place and if we want to live, we'll need it. I got more guns too but the kicker is not that their there, but that we gotta get there first. I knew there was no way I'd be able to make it without someone backing me up. Now

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there is three of us and if we work together, I know we can make it."

Michael was suddenly very glad to have Brian with him. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to be alone in a hellhole like this, especially for thee days. The mind games alone would drive you mad.

"I'm Michael, " He said. "And that's Brian." Michael pointed at Brian who was wolfing down an old pack of Twinkies. "We came here for the college but accidentally hit someone outside of town so we went looking for help and..."

"Enough with this bullshit polite crap." Brian interrupted with a mouth full of Twinkie, "how the hell did all of this happen and what are we gonna do now?"

Bloom looked like he had been caught off guard by Brian's straightforward manner. "Don't beat around the bush much do you, kid? I figure we can stay here tonight, seems safe enough, and head out first thing in the morning. The bars should hold through the night as long as we don't attract any extra attention. As for how this all happened, I wish I could tell you. All I can say is that SVU's Science department was involved. The government had something to do with it..." He finished as he looked away. His lack of eye contact led Michael to believe that there was more to say, but Bloom wasn't willing to share.

Michael had begun to walk the store in search of anything useful. After stuffing his pockets with chips and candy, he walked to the counter. He had just stepped behind it when a small sound caught his ear. He strained to hear the sound as it got slightly louder. A low growl and scratching coming from outside the door. "What the hell..." Michael began to whisper when the mayor interrupted him.

"Shh..." Bloom said. "It's the dog. It's turned. I thought we'd have more time."

Brian looked confused. "What dog? The one from outside? You're tellin' me that these things come in dog too?!" Suddenly he looked more paranoid than a crack fiend in a drugstore.

Michael could see in his eyes that although he was acting as tough as he could, Brian was terrified. His hands were shaking and his breathes becoming heavy.

"Yeah." Bloom answered. "Dogs, cats, birds, rats, you name it. Anything living that these things bite or scratch eventually turns. Now shut up. As long as it thinks no one is in here, it will go away and look for food somewhere else."

Then Michael remembered every hokey action and horror movie he had ever seen. The owner of the shop always kept a gun or two under the counter. He slowly looked down under the counter, and his face quickly lit up like a Christmas tree on a bonfire.

~

A dumb look crossed Michael's face and Brian had never seen him so happy. They had just gotten the bad news about undead wildlife from beyond the grave and Michael was grinning like a Cheshire cat on catnip. "What could you possibly have to smile about, Mike??" Michael responded with an even bigger smile. "What'd you find a gun or something?"

Michael shook his head. "Better."

What could ever be better than another gun? Brian's mental question was answered when he watched his friend lift three small boxes from behind the counter. "What's that?" he asked. Michael lifted the lid of one of

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the boxes as Brian and Bloom walked over to the counter to see what he had discovered. Brian got his first glimpse of what the mystery boxes had to hide when he read the top of the lid that Michael was removing. 'Spring Valley Pawn and Gun ~ 30 .9mm bullets' said two of the boxes and it couldn't make Brian happier. The other box was an old cigar box.

"And behind door number two?" Michael said opening the third box. Something plastic and shiny caught Brian's eye. Ten 12-gauge shotgun shells. He looked over at the sawed off 12-gauge hanging on Bloom's back.

"Looks to me like our odds just got a little better, Mr. Mayor!" Brian whispered to Bloom who sullen face finally showed a look of hope.

"Oh, but that's not all folks, what do we have just for playing today kids?" Michael said in a cheesy game show host voice. He pulled a fourth item out from behind the counter with a cloth covering it. A rush of excitement swept through out Brian's body as Michael revealed the fourth item. Another .9mm handgun. Michael handed the gun to Brian who eagerly checked the clip, only to find it empty.

"How sweet is this shit?!" Brian said as he filled the clip and slid the cigar box to Bloom. "Fill 'er up bud!"

For the first time, Brian saw Mayor Bloom smile as he loaded his shotgun. Brian had filled his clip and watched Michael do the same.

"Let's see," Michael thought out loud, "Thirty bullets per box, two boxes, thirteen in my clip and another fifteen in yours, Brian, leaves us with thirty-two bullets, if the boxes were full, plus some shot gun ammo.

"I stand corrected," Brian said. "Looks like our odds of survival just got a hell of a lot better!" Now all three men were armed and their morale was high.

The dog continued to growl outside, whimpering once in a while.

~

Mayor Bloom decided that the time had come to fill his new allies in on a little about the cause of the chaos in his city, if for no other reason then to put an end to their questions. Bloom lived by the philosophy that knowledge is power so he decided to give them just enough to shut them up. "Well boys, we're gonna have a rough day tomorrow so I think there are some things about this mess that I should let you know right now. I might not be alive to tell you in the morning."

Brian went over to the broken cooler and collected two beers, one for himself and one for Michael. The beers were warm, but Bloom was sure that Brian wanted to get buzzed and didn't care about the taste. He offered a beer to Bloom, but Bloom shook his head. Brian and Michael cracked open the bottles and came to sit near Bloom so he would not have to speak loudly.

"I used to be quite proud of this town." Bloom started. "I'm sure you know that there is not a college on the planet quite like ours. People used to say that this town was the only one in the world guaranteed to make dreams a reality. Now all it is guaranteed to make is nightmares. SVU had one of the most advanced computer and science courses around. The science department played a big part in this mess. The government funded it to do research and development on vaccines for some of the world's worst diseases. If you ask me that's where the Army got involved. I was sworn to secrecy, but I guess that don't matter now. My brother worked in the basement labs. You had to have special clearance to get in the labs, and even I didn't have clearance. My grandfather was one of the founders of the department. Guess that shows you how far bloodlines really go. I got my hands on some memos and asked my brother about them. He never told me much, always told me he

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couldn't and that it was all classified information. The memo said something about 'MBEP'. I guess it's a parasite that makes these things do what they do. This one time, I got my brother really drunk and he just started spouting off about his work and how he was involved in trying to stop biological terrorism in the Heartland. What ever that meant. I think that the government is behind this. They must have used SVU to make this undead making parasite, if not find a way to kill it. If there is a way to kill the parasite, it would be at the college, and with all the power down, all we'd have to do is pry the doors open with a crowbar and we could get into the labs. I got a feeling that we don't have more than a week to get it done though. The government will probably try to erase Spring Valley before it leaks what happened here, or worse, spreads to a bigger town. If the parasite did this to our little town, imagine what it would do to a city like New York or Washington. Here's the plan: tomorrow, after we go to my house, we gotta try to make it to the school. Most of my family is already dead. If my brother is alive, he'll be there. Right now I don't care about saving the town. It's too late for that. All I care about is getting the hell out of town alive." The mayor suddenly got very silent and turned away from the boys. He knew that he had said way too much. That's what happens when you think out loud.

~

Michael was sure that the mayor's eyes were getting misty. Poor guy was probably getting upset about the loss of most of his family. He looked to Brian to see if he could read his expression and get a feel for what he thought about the information they had just learned. Brian, as he so often did, looked dumbfounded. He must have been trying to process all that they had just heard. Michael still had questions for Bloom, especially about MBEP and the memo, but he knew that since the mayor was their only dependable source of information, it was best not to push him. Just as he had done before, Michael was sure that Bloom would share when he was ready. The tension was thick in the air. Michael decided to say something to break the silence. "We should probably to get some sleep..." He knew no one would be able to sleep, but somehow felt better suggesting it.

"I know there's no way I'm sleeping tonight." Brian said as if reading Michael's mind. "I wanna know what to expect from those things out there."

Bloom let out a half laugh. "What to expect? You want me to tell you what to expect? Expect nothing. Expect everything. Hell expect anything. Lemme put it this way: I've seen people I've known my whole life, people I love and people I grew up with try to kill me. The first one of those fucking things I ever had to shoot was my wife of thirty-two years. I watched a mob of those bastards come into my house, eat her, and then come after me. She changed and later I had to shoot her. The hardest thing I ever did..." He paused for a moment. Brian opened his mouth to speak but Bloom continued before he could say anything. "I watched the birds. They had their bones exposed and they'd peck at corpses. Then I'd watch the dead bodies get up too. Hell, if that dog is still out there, it'll probably kill us tomorrow before we even make it out the door. What do you think we should expect?"

Michael's stomach had finally stopped churning until a dormant chill ran down his spine and the fear crept over him again. "Gee, that makes me feel so much better." He said.

"Why lie? Here's the deal boys," Bloom said, his voice gruff. "The dead humans are the slowest, but pretty strong. The dogs are fast, but the birds are faster. Avoid 'em all. If you get scratched and they don't kill ya and you don't kill yourself, I will."

"Gee Mayor, you're just chock full of good news and hope ain't ya! Good to see who our true allies are." Brian said almost mockingly to Bloom. "Well," He said planting a kiss on his gun. "No offense Mike, but I got a new best friend, and at least now we stand half a chance, all of us being armed and all. With all this ammo, we should be good to go!"

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Michael saw Bloom roll his eyes. "I hate to break it to ya Brian, but all this ammo will probably be gone by noon... If we don't waste any shots."

Michael saw Brian's ear-to-ear grin begin to fade as he walked close to the entrance to the gas station. He was beginning to hate how honest Bloom was. Michael was and always would be appreciative of what Bloom had done for them, but he didn't really like his style. He was glad that he and Brian knew someone who seemed to know as much as Bloom did about their unique situation, even if he didn't tell them everything. Michael trusted Bloom with his life, even though he hadn't known him for long. He was sure that there was a reason for Bloom's discretion.

Michael's thoughts were cut short as terror struck his core. Michael saw something moving through the door's dust covered window. The silhouette of one of the carriers outside. The windows were too dirty to see into or out of, but Michael could feel in his bones that the carrier knew that there was food inside. Michael hated being considered food. He prayed that the carrier was alone. Suddenly claustrophobia overcame him as Michael realized that there were no other exits to the building but the one they came in, and that was not an option. He and his friends had cornered themselves. The gas station might become their tomb.

"It had to have heard us..." Bloom whispered, "Don't say a word, don't even breath hard. If it doesn't see or hear anything it will think no one is here and leave."

Michael flinched as he saw Brian begin to back slowly away from the door and slightly jump as he backed into something.

The sound of glass shattering echoed throughout Michael's ear as if louder than any sound he had ever heard. Brian had accidentally bumped into a shelf, knocking off the empty beer bottle he had placed there earlier. The sound echoed through out the station and Brain jumped from the sound. They had no escape, and the carrier knew it.

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FIVE

The man-eater pounded relentlessly on the glass door, which began to crack as the monster begged for a meal of fresh meat.

"Right now there is only one of them and it looks like the dog's gone. The bars on the door should be strong enough to keep it out for now, but there's gonna be a lot more real soon. We gotta find a way outta here now!" Bloom knew that the army of death that would be coming for them would make it through the door and windows in no time. He knew that if they didn't get out soon, they would die. He saw the door crack even more.

Brian drew his weapon, aiming for the silhouette's undead head. "NO!" Bloom yelled as he darted across the room to knock Brian's hand down. "Brian! What the hell are you doing? The sound of the shot will draw them in quicker! What'd I say about wasting ammo?"

Suddenly the beast outside let out a shrill scream as the glass door shattered under the thunderous slam of its pounding fist. The only thing keeping the flesh hungry creature from getting its meal was the firm set of steel security bars. The bars, which had been seen as a form of protection, now made Bloom feel caged in. Now that the slobbering creature could see its prey it became much more motivated as it shook the bars fiercely and reached through them in a vain effort to reach the men inside.

"Please let me cap him!" Brian screamed.

"No! You trying to get us killed?" Bloom replied.

The disgusting creature was in the further stages of decay and had little skin on its face and arms. The bars rubbed off rotting flesh and muscle mass as the monster swung at the men. He looked like something out of a biology book, or the guy from that puzzle box movie Bloom had seen a while back. The smell was worse than most, like burnt meat. Bloom had trained his nose to ignore the scent, but this was fighting that training.

"Think, boys! How can we get out of here?" Bloom shouted taking aim at the hunger infested, but not wanting to waste the ammo or make the sound. Then he saw a look of discovery sweep over Brian's face as his eyes widened. Bloom resisted the unconscious urge to roll his eyes.

"The cooler!" Brian said.

"This is no time for a Beer!" Michael said in a smartassed tone.

"No Mike, I used to work in one of these stores in high school and there is always a roof access ladder in the cooler!" Brian finished with a squinted eye look at his friend.

It was in that moment that Bloom decided that maybe the short, young cocky one could be of some use after all. The door to the cooler was next to the door that the undead was trying to get through, so it would be tricky to get inside without getting scratched, but it could be done. Bloom would make sure to make one of them go first so he could learn from their potential mistakes.

The banging on the door began to get louder as another of the infected joined the first in a duel effort at getting the fast food. Bloom could see more carriers coming over their shoulders. They had been attracted by

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all the noise. A chilling low groan could be heard in the distance from the choir of the dead.

One by one the men began to squeeze by the swinging arms of the dead and into the cooler. Bloom suggested that Michael go first, since he was the thinnest. So, first was Michael who moved so quickly that the creatures seemed not to even notice him. Bloom was slightly impressed, but only slightly. Next was Brian. Brian froze. Michael yelled for him to hurry and encouraged him to just move quickly and they wouldn't touch him. He turned and fired at one's hand, a move that Bloom thought was idiotic, as he wiggled his way through the cooler door. For a brief moment one grabbed Brian's arm sleeve. Panic swept his face as he jerked away, tearing his shirt and moving into the cooler. The mindless seemed not even to notice his meal had escaped its grasp as it kept swinging its decaying arms. Bloom was last. He pondered his move for a brief moment before making it. He decided that one swift movement would be best, with his back to the creatures. He was almost into the cooler when suddenly he was jerked back by one of the monsters grabbing his shirt. "Urgh!" he said as he tried to escape the undead grasp that held him back. Shit! Don't let it scratch you! He quickly spun around and punched the attacking creature in the forehead with a wet crack. He pulled his hand back before they could grab it, but the creature's friend also grabbed on and the shirt began to rip. Bloom pulled and twisted as the shirt ripped, freeing him from his attacker's grasp. Just when Bloom thought he was free of the threat, the undead prick grabbed the shotgun that had been hanging over Bloom's shoulder. Michael and Brian pulled at the mayor's arms to no avail as the second and now third of the infested grabbed at the gun and its straps joining in the game of human tug-o-war. Think David, Think! The strap! "Cut the strap!" Bloom yelled.

"But we'll lose the gun! Brian protested.

"Fuck the gun! Lose the gun or lose me!" he said as he looked down at the sharpened letter opener in his shirt pocket that had saved his life once before. "Cut it now!"

Brian did as he was told and pulled the makeshift knife from Bloom's pocket. He sawed away at the strap and, after what seemed like a lifetime, it snapped freeing Bloom from the weapon that almost killed him, and ironically, spared his life. The three man-eaters now had the gun and looked at it, puzzled at what it was or how to use it. They threw it to the ground and resumed the clawing actions they knew best, reaching for thin air. A fourth one joined them, picking up the gun and shooting it's self in the foot. Bloom hated them. Stupid bastards. I hope they nuke this hellhole and fry you all.

The tired trio made it in to the cooler and stacked some boxes against the door in an effort to keep out the fiends that would surely soon try to get in. Bloom's muscles were sore from the struggle, but he packed the boxes in front of the door as if his life depended on it, because it did.

Then they heard it. A loud crash and the sound of metal bending and hitting the floor. Time was almost up.

~

Brian's heart raced as he realized that he was going to die. The creatures pounded on the door and slapped on the glass trying to get in, but they were too stupid to pull the glass doors open. All that separated Brian's doom from an ever growing black parade of death was a few metal shelves full of spoiled food and glass doors. Brian, his best friend, and the mayor of Hell were all trapped inside a locked walk-in beer cooler and he had been wrong. At the store he had worked in a few summers back there had been a ladder that led to the roof, only accessible from the cooler. It was the same type of gas station and looked the same cosmetically as the store he was familiar with, but there was no roof escape anywhere. In his mind's eye, Brian could see where the ladder should be but it was not there, and it tortured him.

"We're fucked." Brian said as he and the others frantically looked for another exit from the cooler. They all knew there probably was none. The undead were in the gas station and beating at the cooler door, growing in

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numbers with each passing minute. The trio was down one gun and a whole lot of options. Brian could hear the moans and groans of the hunger even through the thick insulated walls and glass doors. What the hell was I thinking? God please save us. We're trapped. Are the walls closing in? Oh my God! Those things are pushing in the walls. "There has to be another way out of here! We can't be stuck." Brian said as he began to become unglued. He tried desperately not to lose it, but was spinning into panic mode.

"Remind me to kick your ass if we get out of here." Michael said trying to be comical despite their situation. The comment only made Brian feel more stupid than he already did.

Though his back was to it, Brian heard a click and knew that the door to the freezer began to move. He turned to see it slowly open and several sets of bloody and broken fingers began to reach through the small opening in the door way. The crates holding the door shut were not heavy enough and began to fall as the power of many undead pushing on it, made the door open a little more. Brian ran across the small room and slammed the door closed, helping Bloom slam it closed again.

"Hey! I found it!!" Michael said from the other side of the room. Brian could barely hear him over the sound of hands slamming on the glass doors, which began to break one by one. Brian and Bloom were fighting like hell to hold the cooler door closed as Brian looked over and saw what Michael had found. Under some boxes, Michael had found a large cement hatch that would probably need two people to open it. The hatch was about three foot by three foot and lie in the corner of the metal room. "Looks like this place has a basement!" Michael said as he pulled at the unmoving floor panel. Brian and Bloom continued to hold the cooler door closed. Brian knew that if he left Bloom's side, the mayor would probably be overwhelmed and the cooler would be flooded with flesh eaters.

Bloom spoke up, revealing that he had been thinking the same as Brian. "Okay, I can hold this door myself while you help him get that hatch open, but make it quick, and be ready to shoot if any of them get in. It's our only option. Go!" Brian knew that Bloom was right so he nodded and counted down from three to one. He darted across the cooler almost slipping on some blood that had come in from under the door. As he got to Michael's side, he was afraid to look back. His actions were driven by adrenaline. He and Michael moved the hatch with minimal effort only to find a hungry carnivore waiting in the basement. He wore a gas station attendant uniform and the name 'Chris' was engraved on his shirt pocket. Brian quickly pulled out his pistol and put a bullet in Chris's brain, almost reacting rather than thinking. Looking over at Bloom, Brian quickly realized that the mayor was in some serious trouble. He was barley holding the door shut as his legs shook.

"Mike, Brian, when I let go of the door, these things are gonna pour in, so be ready to cover me and close the hatch." Both men nodded as Bloom revealed his plan. "Ready? One... two... three!" Bloom sprinted across the room and dove into the small hole in the corner. Brian looked up just in time to see a mob of the infested close behind. He and Michael shot off a few rounds, pulled the hatch closed, and locked it.

Way too close. Brian's breaths were fast and matched his throbbing heart, which he thought could pound out of his chest. He looked down and saw that the door had cut off the fingers of one of the carriers. He almost fell down the wooden stairs as he tried to back away. Turning, he saw that Bloom had fallen down the stairs and was lying motionless on the dirt floor. He called his name, only to hear Bloom let out a groan. He got scratched. He's one of them. Brian raised his gun and took aim at Bloom's head.

"What do you think you're doing?" Michael asked Brian as he slapped his gun down.

"I ain't one of them yet." Bloom said as he turned over and sat up. "Just sprained my ankle. That's all. I'll be fine. Not a scratch or bite on me, but thanks for being ready to do it."

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Michael had let out a sigh of relief as the door slammed behind Bloom. After the slight tension between Bloom and Brian, Michael used his foot to push the lifeless undead Chris off of the steps and out of the way. Bloom had fallen over the corpse and lie for a moment on the ground. Brian was right to react the way he did, but if Michael hadn't stopped him, Bloom would be dead for no reason and they would be alone. Brian and Michael were still standing on the stairs looking down into a basement that they couldn't see. No light filled the room, but what did fill the room was the stench of Chris. The awful smell was strong but Michael had grown used to it, and had no gag reflex. "Anyone have a lighter?" He said squinting to see the dark room. A faint glow slowly filled the room as Bloom struck a match on the floor. Michael immediately saw a small camping lantern on the shelf against the wall. He moved swiftly to get it, but the breeze he caused blew out the match. "Oops." He said as he heard Bloom sigh, striking another match.

"I do have a limited amount of these you know." Bloom said as he used the second match to light the lantern. It was then that Michael got his first look at the room as they turned up the lantern's light.

The basement was not as large as the store, about a fourth of its size. There was a damp feeling in the air and it reeked of rot. There were a few shelves against the wall, which had canned goods and cheap wine bottles. Four fragile wooden crates were stacked in one corner of the room and another held empty beer kegs. Of all the useless things that the room contained, the walls were the worst. There were no doors. Great. Trapped again. The lack of a door, frustrated Michael. First came the PD, then the gas station, next the cooler, now a stinky and useless basement. "Well shit." Michael said. "At least in the cooler we had some kind of view. Here we might as well be in solitary confinement in prison, and who knows how much fuel the light has."

Michael continued to look around the room, this time looking a little closer. Then Michael saw something that looked off. There was something about the shelves where they had found the lantern. Something that he couldn't quite place. The room was undecorated with newer cement walls. Three of the walls made entirely of cement and rock. The other wall was made mostly of dirt with some rock for support, but the shelf seemed to be framed in cement. The others didn't seem to notice. "Guys, come help me move the shelf, I think I just found something!" Both the mayor and Brian helped Michael with the old oak shelf and the three men found something they never expected. There, behind the shelf, was an old wooden door.

"Where do you think it goes?" Michael thought out loud.

"Probably into another storage room" Brian said pessimistically.

"There's only one way to find out." Bloom said as he tried to lock the door. Hope ran through Michael as Bloom tried to open the door. The hope was shattered. The door was locked. Michael had almost given up hope, but Bloom hadn't. "Damn... Hey Brian. You still got that knife?" Bloom asked knowing the answer. "Give it here."

Brian did as he was told and Bloom used the letter opener to jimmy the lock open. Michael felt his pulse increase as he and Brian raised their guns. Bloom stepped back, telling them to open the door. The boys had no idea what to expect from what ever lie beyond the door. In this place, it could be anything.

Chapter 7: The Hunger (v.2) Chapter 6

SIX

Bloom knew what lie beyond the old thin wooden door. The only thing that could be on the other side was a tunnel. He had almost forgotten that the downtown area was full of them. Back in the 1920's, the tunnels were used for moving and trading items and products from one store to another, not to mention 'late night deliveries'. They were also used to maintain the city's sewer system, which ran parallel to the tunnels. This little fact worried him. Bloom and his friends had been lucky enough to find an entrance to the tunnels, however the only problem was that he had no idea if anything had gotten into the tunnels and didn't know his way around in them. If they were to get lost in the labyrinth under the city, they would be as good as dead.

Before they had been attacked in the gas station Bloom had dropped some pretty heavy information on the boys. He didn't want to risk them losing it over the situation in the sewers. The little wimps would probably give up and kill themselves. That's all I need. Just when I start to find a use for these two, they would freak out and that would be it. I gotta figure out how to get a gun from one of them. Probably Michael. At the beginning of the city's battle against the undead, the people of Spring Valley dropped the bodies of their fallen into the sewers, having nowhere else to put them. They did not realize that most were infected and were sure to come back from the dead. By now the sewers had to be crawling with carriers. There was one place that Bloom had no intention of going. Nothing on earth could force him to knowingly go there. The tunnels had several doors that opened to the sewers and opening the wrong door could mean an early end for Bloom.

After opening the door, Bloom knew he should say something, but not too much. "I think this is some kind of trade tunnel. I remember seeing a blue print for one of them in the Spring Valley Museum."

"Yeah, I remember reading that older towns are full of them. Used in like the 20's and 30's for moving alcohol during the prohibition..." Michael said. Bloom began to realize that the quiet taller one was a lot smarter than he first thought, and that it might be harder to keep things from him. Maybe I should go for Brian's gun. Bloom decided that it couldn't hurt to fill them in about the tunnels and they're history, since Michael seemed to know about it anyway. He was sure to leave out the part about the sewers and the fun times that were probably crawling in them, in an effort to keep them calm. Bloom wasn't in the mood to deal with paranoia. He was a master manipulator, which is why he easily had excelled in politics. He cautioned them to stay close and not open any doors with out all three of them there. He gripped his letter opener tight as he tried to get his bearings. The mayor figured that since his house was less than a mile north of the store that they could probably keep going on a straight path north and be okay. Bloom couldn't have known what kind of trouble may lie in their path and preferred not to think about it, especially since he had no gun. He was good with hand-to-hand combat, but was lucky not to have gotten scratched yet. Bloom had no intention of pushing his luck. Bloom hated losing control and was very uneasy with the fact that his life was potentially in the hands of two kids he had just met a few hours before. Kids he barely knew, let alone trusted with his life. They were unfit for combat with no real instincts or training. In fact, Bloom didn't trust either one of them at all. He began to think that eventually, after of course getting guns and ammo from his house, he would need to ditch them, or kill them. Bloom knew that they would inevitably slow him down in the end, and in this situation, that was not something that Bloom was willing to risk. He didn't have time to be slow. He didn't dislike the boys. It was nothing personal. By killing them, he would probably be doing them a favor. Bloom just wanted to survive.

Brian didn't trust Bloom. He had no reason to. Sure he had saved their lives, but it almost seemed as if he was more annoyed by them than glad to have them fighting by his side. Brian was usually a decent judge of character. He would never have voted for Bloom. Besides being bossy, Bloom had a look in his eyes that really didn't sit well with Brian. The eyes are the windows to the soul, and Bloom's eyes were dark, more so

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than would be caused by lack of sleep. Brian knew that at his first chance alone with Michael he would have to find out how he felt about Bloom. He just hoped he would have the chance to talk alone with Michael much sooner than later. Bloom seemed to hold a lot back when talking to them. He almost acted like he thought they were stupid and wouldn't figure it out. Like it was a mind game or something. It was like Bloom not only knew more than he was sharing, but he was only telling them what he wanted them to know, which was just enough to shut them up. Brian had a history of not trusting any politician, and wasn't about to start with Bloom. Politicians lie.

The three men had been walking a straight line down the cold dark tunnel for about half an hour and seemed to be getting nowhere fast. The walls were grey and slimy from mold and moss and they seemed, to Brian, to be moving. He knew they weren't and that it was just his mind playing tricks but that mixed with the fact that he was sick of walking was getting to be too much. He was about to complain but decided not to after looking over at the lantern that Michael was carrying. The lantern's oil looked low, almost empty. Brian knew that once the lamp was out, so was their light, and the tunnels were freaky enough with light. He didn't want to see them without.

Bloom had mentioned that he didn't know the tunnels very well, which was probably a lie, but that his house was less than a mile away. Brian was tired. Not only physically but mentally as well. He began to think that he was hearing things. Perhaps the moans of the living dead haunted his mind but Brian could have sworn he heard the dull and chilling sound of moaning coming from the walls of the tunnels. Perhaps the city was haunted as well. If the dead could return to walk the earth, what would stop the spirits from coming back too?

Brian was sure heard a moan. It was not in his head. He knew it, so He decided to bring up his concerns with Mike and the Mayor. Bloom quickly dismissed the sounds as Brian's over worked and overactive imagination.

"You know as well as I do that we're a hell of a lot safer down here than we would be up there. If you wanna go back up, be my guest. I'm sure the gas station is clear by now if you wanna go back, but the lamp stays here." Bloom insisted as his pace hastened. Despite his words it was becoming clear that something was bothering Bloom. He was practically jogging.

As Brian looked up, he began to see manholes and ladders. They had passed many of them but Brian knew that by now it was nighttime and spooking his head out of the wrong manhole would be suicide. He began studying the walls for signs of location markings, which was becoming harder as the lantern dimmed. He was worried that something would happen and he might get separated from his friend and their tour guide from terror town. Then something caught his eye. "Hey Mikey, wait up. Check this out!"

Brian heard Bloom whisper some profanities under his breath. "Brian, we don't have time. The lamps almost out and we're almost there. Do you really want to be down here in the dark, 'cause I don't." He said.

"Wait a minute. I think he might be right." Michael said turning his attention to the mold-covered piece of paper on the wall. It was faded but could still be read.

Bloom rolled his eyes and walked over to where the boys were standing. "Well what have we here?" he said as he carefully began peeling the paper off the wall.

~

Michael held the lantern closer to get a better look, squinting to see. Michael could tell right away that it was a map or blueprint of some kind. Being the controlling person that he was, Bloom had snatched it up pretty quickly, but Michael had excellent vision and knew the distinctive qualities of the paper that identified it as a map. Although he figured that the map probably was not only of the tunnels, but also made references to the

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streets above, he trusted it with Bloom. After all, Bloom hadn't leaded them astray yet. In fact, if it weren't for the great mayor, he and Brian probably would never have made it this far. They'd probably be in the pile at the police station. Now they should have some idea where they were, and more importantly where they were going... until the dead end.

According to the map, they missed a right turn about three doors back, so after back tracking, Bloom convinced Michael and Brian that he knew where he was going. Michael thought that maybe they should cut through the sewers, thinking it would be better lighted, but Bloom kept persisting that it was not a good idea, and that he was in control.

Chapter 8: The Hunger (v.2) Chapter 7

Rebecca was terrified. She knew that she was stronger than most her age, but was still not sure how she had survived this long. The city had become hell on earth but she remembered when it was not so bad yet. She remembered when this all started and the C.D.C had quarantined the city. They thought it was a flu pandemic. They were wrong. Even Rebecca knew that the flu didn't cause you to eat people. The C.D.C. tried to get people to believe that so there was no panic. It didn't work. People panicked, people rioted, and looted and tore the city to shreds until the military came in. The sick were hard to tell apart from the well but the military seemed to do okay at it... until they were over run. It took them too long to figure out that head shots were the only way. The monsters took out entire platoons, and the military never even had a chance to call for backup. Now she was alone... and terrified.

~

Brian had proven himself slightly useful and worthy of the life that Bloom allowed him to continue to have. Bloom tried to hate him, knowing that he was naive and hot tempered, but the little asshole kept making it harder. Maybe once he got home he would just shoot them both in the head. It was not the death that he had planned for them, but a quick and painless death would be the least he could do after all the help they had been. Don't forget, they're both more of a burden than they're worth.

The item on the wall that Brian had found was indeed a map. "Okay, according to this, we only have three more manholes to go before we get to the one we need. Keep your eyes open and move fast. We're gonna lose the light before we find it." Bloom loved to be in control. It was like a drug to him. Made him feel powerful, like a meth addict in a Home Depot. That is why he had been the town's perfect mayor. He could keep people under control. Even the press. No story got out without his say so. He even got memos from the Government about progress on the project. Bloom was power, and as far as these kids went, so far, so good.

The travel down the tunnel had, so far, been uneventful despite hearing some groans from the undead. The sounds were coming from the sewers, but Bloom had managed to make Brian and Michael believe that the sounds were from the streets above. Just as the ladder they would need to take came in to view, a sound sent a chill down Bloom's spine. A sound that was all too familiar. A sound that he thought he would never hear again. It filled him with hope and dread at the same time. It was a sound that was obvious and that Bloom could not 'shake off' or deny as easily as he had with the others. He also couldn't hide his wide-eyed reaction. Michael and Brian had heard it too.

As the all too familiar sound of a girl screaming for help filled the tunnel, flashes of his wife screaming for help as the carriers closed in on her suddenly overwhelmed Bloom. Images of women and children screaming and dying in the streets danced across his vision. The screams of unfair, and undeserving victims of an unnatural unending war.

The screams couldn't be ignored then, and they couldn't be ignored now. Bloom snatched away Brian's gun from the palm of his sweaty hand and headed toward the near by door that the screams had come from. Bloom was not about to let the blood of more innocent women be spilled on his watch. He was ready for war, but Michael beat him to it.

Standing at the door ready to kick it open, Michael yelled "Get the manhole open, I'll get the girl!"

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Rebecca had ducked back in to the tunnels under her Grandfather's shop in an effort to escape the mob of monsters outside. The tunnels that her grandfather used to play hide-and-seek with her in, used to make her feel safe and she thought that they would probably be the safest place in the city. She was wrong.

Becca may have only been fourteen years old but was extremely mature for her age and generally had good instincts. How many other girls my age would have lasted this long? She had thought entering the little passage at the back of the old antiques store.

She had been hiding in her room, like her parents had told her, but when she heard the screams of her family, she had to try to help. Her mother didn't make it and although he tried to fight them off, her father was disappeared shortly after leading the dead people out of her house so she could escape. Both her parents gave their lives to save hers, so she waited until the sun came up and went to her family's shop across town. She thought that maybe the city had set up some kind of survivors post after hearing something about the Police Station on the radio, but had to go to the shop instead when she realized she wouldn't make it. So, she decided to go where she knew for sure that she would be safe. Underground. Becca had gone to the gas station with the tunnel and was happy to see that the man who worked there was still alive. He had given her a bite to eat and a few bottles of water before he helped her in to the storage room. Once they were down there, he gave her a flashlight and that he couldn't go with her because he had been bitten. His name was Chris and she would never forget his kindness. He said he would lock the tunnel door behind her so she could escape. She knew that it would probably be his last good deed.

Becca knew the tunnels like the back of her hand. She had used them often as a child and showed them off to her friends. One of the storage rooms had, at one time, served as a clubhouse for girls. Her memories of the tunnels were warm, even if the walls were cold. Becca remembered playing with some of her oldest friends, Kelsey, Mikie, Kourtney, and Maria. They would take turns weekly being the leader of the "Spring Valley Young Ladies Club." Those days were long gone now, and the only thing left of her friends was their distant memories.

Rebecca couldn't forget her way through the tunnels if she tried. Her grandfather had insisted that she know them. She had used the tunnel from the gas station to get to her grandfather's shop, hoping he was still alive, but knowing in her heart that he wasn't. When she entered the door to the storage room that lead into the shop, she knew she was wrong to hope. She had seen the gun in his hand before seeing any other part of him so, when she couldn't hold it back, she cried at his side. His hand had bite marks, and so he had decided that it would be better to take his own life then to become one of the monsters. She sat there at his side until time slipped away, and it was nightfall. Though he was dead, his corpse made her feel safe. When night came, so did the walking dead people. Becca knew that her only chance for survival was to go back into the tunnels, so she did. She had checked out the clubhouse room and found nothing so she decided to go into the sewers. It may not smell that great but she had figured that it would be a faster way to get back to her house. She also thought that it would be harder to get in to than the tunnels, so she knew there would probably be less monsters there. She was wrong.

The sewer had been much scarier than the tunnels, and now she knew why her grandfather told her to stay out of them. Besides the rats, they stank worse then she thought they would, were wet and slippery, and seemed to be a lot darker than the tunnels. She kept telling herself that she had seen worse and been in scarier places, although she couldn't think of any.

Just when she started to get used to her new situation, they began to rise. They had been lying in the mucky green water, so she did not see them, but they had been there the whole time, and when they heard her slipping and cussing, the began to rise from the water. She had some idea where she was, but not positive, so she just ran. The faster she ran, the louder her feet clanged on the metal grating floor beneath her feet. The more noise she made, the more creatures woke up, until she reached a dead end. Suddenly she wished she had

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grabbed the gun from her grandfather's hand. Becca looked around frantically for some form of sanctuary, and a small wooden door was all that the sewer had to offer at its dead end path. A small locked door. Becca screamed for help as panic took over her every breath and the undead closed in.

"Help me! Someone please! I'm trapped!" Becca screamed as about a dozen dead people closed in on her. She kept screaming, hoping that God would spare her. With every scream they moved in closer, she kept backing up until her back hit the wall beside the locked door. She kept looking for another way out, but saw none.

Suddenly, pounding came from the other side of the door. Oh no, it's more of them. Now I know they're gonna get me. The pounding continued. Our father who art in heaven...the pounds became slams on the door. Hallowed be thy name... The dead people were less than seventy-five feet away. Thy kingdom come...

With no warning, the door broke open and the hands grabbed her. On earth as it is in heaven. Warm hands. Not cold and clammy like a dead person's. Becca stopped praying. She turned to see two kind-looking young men, about twenty-two or twenty-three years old. They continued to pull her arm and she ran with them to a ladder a few feet away. Looking up, she saw that the manhole above had been pried open. A hand was above ground reaching down, ready to pull her up, hopefully to safety.

Becca climbed up the ladder and turned to see the shorter of the two climbing up behind her. "Keep going!" he said. The taller one followed behind him shooting at the dead people who were now staggering through the broken door below.

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Michael had saved the girl just in time, but was beginning to wonder who would save him! Brian had led the girl up the ladder to Bloom, who had already cleared a path above, but Michael was still in the tunnel fighting off a legion of the dead alone.

Michael's eyes widened as fear took over his body. Something was working its way through the crowd. A giant flesh eating man who looked more like something from a Hollywood movie than a man.

The massive mound of a man pushed his way past the other monsters in the crowded tunnel as if wading through water. It threw other creatures to the side, slamming them into walls like rag dolls. Michael took aim and pulled a trigger putting a bullet right between the big bastard's eyes. It took a few steps back, and then kept coming. "What the hell....?" Michael was stunned. Again he shot it in the head, tearing its scalp apart. Again it kept coming. Michael suddenly knew how it would be to feel like a rat in a maze with no cheese, put there to be tested, toyed with, then die. Like a deer in the headlights of a Mack Truck, he fell back. Gunfire saved him, but not his own. The bullets rained down from above like God's lightning punishing the sinners. Brian had begun to fire at it to hold it off.

Michael heard the voice of his friend between the gunshots. "Get your ass up here! Bloom says they're too stupid to climb! I'll hold them back!"

Michael took a chance to make an exit and began climbing the ladder. His feet slipped with each step he took, but he managed to make it up the ladder quickly. He was almost to the top when he felt a grip around his ankle. The hand was huge and almost crushed his foot under its massive grip. It was stronger than he could have ever imagined, and as it pulled at his leg, the extreme pain made Michael think that the demon's grip could pull the skin from his leg. Brian grabbed his wrist as he turned to face it and fired a shot in to its right eye. The monster let go and grabbed at its face letting out a shrill scream that sounded more like anger than pain. It fell back; knocking down some of the other undead that had come around it and then fell to the ground. Michael looked up to see Bloom's hand helping Brian to pull him up. As he reached the city streets, a

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breath of fresh air filled his lungs. Bloom quickly closed the cover and did one more sweep of the street.

After catching his breath, Michael surveyed his surroundings to see five of the undead lying motionless around the manhole. He looked up at Bloom who was covered in blood spatter.

"I had to clear the street." Bloom said, wiping blood from his forearms.

"I guess so." Michael said as he turned his attention to the girl. "Are you okay?" he asked her now getting his first good look at her. She looked familiar some how but he knew that he had never met her. She resembled someone.

"Yeah, I'm fine now." She said shyly

Poor kid's probably in shock. I would be, we're more than likely the first living people she's seen in a long time. Michael glanced over to Brian's direction to see him lift the manhole cover and pushing the corpses that littered the street down into the sewer below. Michael could tell that Brian was trying to spare the girl from the morbid sight of macabre that she had probably already seen.

"My name is Michael, what's yours?" Michael asked as he put his arm around her shoulder trying to turn her away from the sight.

The girl pulled away. "The name's Becca, and I can take care of myself. You don't need to baby me."

That sure could have gone a lot better. "Becca, you know we're not gonna hurt you, and you know I never meant to belittle you. That guy is Brian and that's the Mayor."

Becca's face began to get pale as her eyes gradually opened wide. "The Mayor?" Becca said as tears filled her eyes. "Daddy?!" she whispered running over to Bloom. Bloom's head perked up as he turned to see the girl and a look of amazement crossed his face. His jaw dropped. Until this point he had not been paying attention to the girl.

"Rebecca?" Bloom said as they ran to each other.

"I thought you were dead! You never came back and I thought they killed you!" she said as tears ran down her face. "I saw you outside! Why didn't you come back for me?"

Michael saw his first glimpse of true emotion from Bloom as he fumbled through an explanation. "I wanted to honey, really I did. I thought they got you..."

"Give me some credit Dad." She said lightly.

"... sorry. Baby I'm just glad your alive! I led them away from you and got stranded in my office."

"Mom always said you spent too much time at the office." She giggled.

"Anyway, I was stuck there, until these two came along." Bloom said.

Brian suddenly looked as if he remembered something and interrupted the touching reunion. "Look, this is sweet and all, but shouldn't we get inside until daylight? We're running out of ammo and I don't know about you guys but I could really go for some more. Where is your house?"

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Bloom looked at Brian with the look of the devil in his eyes. "Until now I didn't give a damn about you, Mike or myself. I thought my only child had died with my wife. You have no idea how that feels. Excuse me if I want a few minutes to talk to her. My house is two blocks north of here. Cut through the yards if you wanna go ahead, but it's not secure enough. We'll stop in the study to get the guns and ammo then we have to get up to the attic. Safest place in the house."

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EIGHT

Somehow finding out that Bloom was a father didn't help Brian trust him any more. Bloom never let his kid out of his sight and held her hand the whole way to the house. He obviously loved her but didn't seem to care that Brian and Michael were even there, after all the help they had been! Once in "protection mode" he wiped out the undead with his bare hands, no ammo wasted! By his count, Brian had witnessed Bloom kill at least ten of those things before getting to his house.

After arriving at the Mayor's Mansion, they took their time getting through the house, as they were unsure what lie around each corner. Most of the house had been empty, save from some corpses of a prior battle Bloom had leaving the house. Once they made it to what Bloom called his cache, they had not been surprised to find that his collection of weapons had been ransacked and all that was left was a small amount of ammo. The ammo that was left that didn't match their guns, but they did find a magnum with about twelve rounds. Should give us some stopping power. Brian grabbed the magnum before Bloom could notice that it had not been stolen. After clearing out the cache, Bloom took his daughter up to his home office with Michael, but Brian stayed behind to 'look for more weapons'.

Once alone, Brian began searching the office more efficiently. He tried to be quiet as he pried open the locked file cabinets, pulled out all of the drawers, and looked over every inch that his eyes could see, until he came to the closet. In the closet he noticed a squeaky floorboard. Brian moved aside some empty shoe boxes and noticed a small brass knob built into the floor. Brian turned the knob slowly, expecting to find hidden weapons, but instead found some things that the mayor would not have wanted him to see. One of which was a file marked 'The Attack'. He quickly thumbed through the file until he came across the memo about the M.B.E.P. that Bloom had mentioned at the gas station. What the hell is this? No more secrets now Bloom. Brian's mind raced as he thought about how to break it to Michael that he had found what Bloom was hiding. Brian turned his attention to the memo the Bloom had referenced.

"CONFIDENTIAL MEMORANDUM

ATTN: DAVID BLOOM

PRIORITY: HIGH

RE: Microscopic Biologically Engineered Parasite (M.B.E.P.)

Mayor Bloom:

Here is full report regarding the MBEP per your request. Please review and reply to the department as to what direction you would like to go next. This memo is "Eyes Only" and should be destroyed after reading.

Explanation:

As the name implies, this is not a creature of nature. After contamination of Spring Valley, this report was issued to explain all that we have learned about the process of the MBEP.

The MBEP is the first of its kind in that it starts as a parasite then later mutates into a viral form. The parasite will use its eggs to attach to the skin cells of its host, causing symptoms of itching, burning, and sometimes swelling of the skin.

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After hatching, the new parasite begins attacking the skin cells causing them to deteriorate. With each cell it attacks, more eggs are laid, causing slow reproduction as the eggs take about two hours to hatch.

The parasite has a preprogrammed instinct to lay multiple eggs under the host's fingernails and on its teeth. These special eggs are called drone eggs, as they lie dormant feeding on plaque on the teeth and dirt under the nails, until after the host's death. The drone eggs are used to spread M.B.E.P to other hosts.

After skin cells are broken down, the parasite moves through each layer of the skin, and begins attacking the muscle cells in an effort to break down the host's activity. This causes uncontrollable muscle spasms, cramping and a general discomfort. Eventually the host becomes paralyzed. The parasite then attacks the most important muscle, the host's heart. Through the host's heart, the parasite attacks the blood stream, and mutates. Upon the entering of the blood stream, the parasite's mutation completes into its virus form. This allows it to attack blood cells at a much more rapid pace, eventually causing death.

After the majority of the blood cells have been transformed, the host reanimates, becoming what appears to be the "walking dead".

It was originally believed that the walking dead attacked the uninfected to feed a hunger or a primal instinct, but it is now known that the sole purpose for bites and scratches is to spread the drone eggs.

If the parasite is introduced directly into the blood stream, the mutation to virus form is instant and death and reanimation occur at a much more rapid pace."

Purpose / Use:

"The M.B.E.P. is a biological weapon designed to decimate troops and entire cities in 48 hours or less. It was designed as a suicide weapon and is not suitable for American troops."

NOTE:

"Neither the United States of America nor any branch of its government have had any part in MBEP development or creation.

MBEP is containable. SVU has created an antibody that counteracts the effects and can lead to a complete reversal of the effects. The antibody must be injected into the blood stream of the subject within eight hours of contamination by scratch or four hours of contamination by bite to be effective."

Brian was in awe. This was a weapon. Someone did this on purpose. The government is denying any involvement, but Bloom says they directly fund the research at SVU. Brian's mind was swimming with what the memo meant until it hit him. Antibody! Knowing that the effects could be reversed made it much more important to get to the University and explained why Bloom was set on going there. Brian knew he had to talk to Michael about what he had learned. Mike will know what to do, he always does.

Brian decided it would be best to hide the file so he stuffed it down the back of his pants and pulled his shirt over it. He then decided to join the rest of the group in the attic where they planned to come up with a plan and spend the night.

Once in the attic, Brian couldn't help but glare at Bloom. How could he keep this from us? Then he realized that he couldn't lead on that anything had changed, or Bloom might ditch them. Changing his original plan, Brian to ignore Bloom and his kid. All they did was ramble on about how much they had missed each other. Brian knew that the only two people that Bloom cared about were himself and Becca. How self-centered are

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they? What about me... and Michael? If it wasn't for Mikey, his kid would be dead, and I ain't heard one 'thank you' yet. He decided not to let it bother him. There was too much else to think about. He began to think about how he could get Michael alone so he could show him what he found. Bloom would probably try to get the files before Michael or Brian found them, and hopefully he would think that someone else stole them when the house got ransacked. Brian had to tell Michael before Bloom got the chance to look.

"I gotta piss..." Brian said in Bloom's general direction. "...And I'm taking Mike with me to stand guard. You guys just keep on catching up. I'm sure you won't even notice we're gone." He said, grabbing Michael's arm.

As Brian slowly opened the door to the attic, he checked for unwanted visitors, and having seen none, hurried Michael down the stairs. He continued to scan the area for movement and saw only a rat scurry across the floor and down the stairs to the basement. Brian waited for a moment and after seeing no other movement he pushed open the door to the hall and heard a loud THUNK.

"What was that?" Bloom called down after them.

"I dunno. We're gonna go check it out." Brian answered, making no effort to hide his smart ass tone.

The sound was the door slamming into the head of a zombie that had been crawling through the house. The force of the door had broken its neck, so Brian kicked his would-be attacker in the face with a wet smack. This did the trick.

"All clear Bloom" Brian yelled up ensuring that he and Michael had a few moments of uninterrupted privacy.

They had no trouble finding the bathroom in the huge house, and were glad to find that it had no windows.

"Come in with me." Brian said to Michael.

"Damn dude. You really are freaked aren't you? I'm not gonna hold it for ya. You're on your own there." Michael said jokingly.

"Duh. Just get in here." Brian said as he entered the bathroom and pulled Michael in after him. Michael seemed taken back by Brian's actions.

"What's going on Bri?" Michael said with worry in his voice.

Brian filled in Michael on his discovery about Bloom and what he had been hiding. After showing him the file that he had found, Michael sat for a moment in shock, just as Brian had done. "... and now that he's got his kid, he's really got no real reason to keep us alive." Brian finished.

"On the contrary, Bloom has every reason not to kill us. How's it gonna look to daddy's little girl if he kills the two boys that helped save her from the big bad monsters in the sewer?" Michael said, being logical as always. He was still in a state of denial, and Brian had expected that.

"Come on Michael, wake up man! All he's gotta do is tell her that we were infected. Look, just be careful around him. Don't trust him. That's all I ask. You'll see what I'm talking about." Brian said, putting the closing arguments on his case against the mayor. "Plus, he's a Republican. Look at this house." Brian tried to end the tense conversation on a note that he new Michael would laugh at.

"Very funny, I'm a Republican. Ass. I still think he would have told us more about the memo when he was ready, why else would he have even brought it up?" Michael countered. After a moment of silence he added,

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"Fine. I'll keep on my ties, if it'll make you more comfortable."

"That's all I'm asking man. I really don't think we're safe with him for much longer, we really should consider flying solo." Brian ended the conversation with a sigh, unsure of what he and Michael's future held.

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NINE

Becca was happy to have her father back. She was still in denial that he was even real. Part of her thought that he was a figment of her imagination that had become reality to her to help her cope with the unreal situation. Another part of her thought she was dead and that this was the afterlife. She really didn't care as long as she got to stay with her father. It was as if the monsters in the sewer had gotten her and she was stuck in a dream world, but his warm hug proved that he was real. He made her feel safe, even in this environment. The two boys had gone to the bathroom a while ago and Becca and her father had some time to talk about their options. They had to consider what they would do if things didn't go as planned. If something should happen, like if the guys ever got infected, her or her dad may have to kill them to save themselves. They had gone over all the possible problems, and her father even told her that she might be forced to kill him, if he became infected. Becca was okay with possibly having to do the boys the favor of saving them from being one of the walking dead, but her dad, that would be the hard one. She couldn't imagine being apart from her father, now that they had finally found each other again. They both had thought the other was dead! The only thing she knew was that she had her daddy now, and didn't care who may have to die to keep him alive. Becca would do what ever it took to make sure they never parted again, and she knew that her dad felt the same way.

Bloom had come up with a plan to go to the basement labs of the college to see if they could find any survivors, or maybe a town evacuation plan that had never come through. Becca liked the idea. She thought it was solid, and told her father that they should fill in the guys when they got back. If they came back. It had been quite some time since they left, but Becca didn't want to mention it to her father because she didn't want him to go looking for them and not come back. Becca was used to meeting new people then watching them die. In the few short days since this had happened, she had met many survivors who thought they could help her, only to die, and try to kill her later. She promised herself that she would trust no one, but her father. Anyone could become infected, and there was no telling when he or she would change. She kind of got the feeling that her father didn't trust them either. The boys had saved her life, but either one or both could have gotten infected when Michael was stuck below. If they had been infected, Becca knew that they would change at any time.

Becca was brought out of her thoughts by the touch of cold steel to her wrist. She looked down to see her father's prize magnum. He had two of them. One was meant for shooting, and the other was platinum plated and just for show. The gun was completely covered in the precious metal with a black leather grip. The gun was finely polished and "Bloom" was engraved on the side in fancy letters. The weapon had been a gift from one of her father's friends from the war. Apparently, it had saved his life, and after he got back from Vietnam, his friend had made a lot of money in Stocks and had it customized and sent to him as a gift. It was his most prized possession. She had never seen the gun fired, and as far as she knew, after the war, it had never been.

"I trust you with it before anyone else. You're gonna need a gun eventually and as hard as it may be to think about, the fact is that I might not be around forever..." He said holding the platinum gun out. Becca took the gun and looked at her father with fear and tears in her eyes. She opened the chamber to see that it was empty but would hold nine rounds.

"Dad." Becca said fighting back tears. "Don't say you might not be around. You'll jinx us."

"Come on sweetie, you've never been superstitious. You used to make fun of your mother for that kind of stuff." Bloom said, trying to make her smile. "Here. You'll need these." He added as he handed her a handful of bullets. "Put the extra in your pocket and don't forget they're there. You'll probably need them."

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David hesitated for a moment and Becca already knew in her soul what he was about to say. "Rebecca, honey..." He took a deep breath. "If I ever do get bitten... if something happens where I get scratched..."

"I know Dad... I... know." Becca said, not wanting to hear him say it.

"That gun saved me once. It may have to save me again, that's all I'm saying." He finished.

Becca put the bullets in her pocket as she was told. She wiped a tear from her eye and hugged her father tight. She knew that it was hard for her father to talk about this too, but it had to be done. She also knew that he trusted her. He had to. Who else would give a kid her age a gun and the ammo to go with it? Then he handed her platinum tipped bullet. "Destiny," he said, and she knew what he meant. It was meant for her or for him, if need be. Grandfather did it. There is no shame if it has to be done. Though she put on a tough face, deep down Becca just wanted to cry.

Becca tried to think of better times. Her mind drifted to how it felt to visit her grandfather's shop in the summer or go to his farm and play in the fields. She even remembered the smell of the fresh country air and the feel of the cool breeze blowing through her hair, as she would swing on his tire swing in the large oak tree in front of his house. This felt like a cold hell compared to that warm distant memory. It had been warm memories like that one that had helped her get this far. Becca wanted to die in her father's arms. She had seen kids her age become one of them and didn't want her fate to be the same. Becca sighed.

Just then, something caught Becca's ear. Her heart began to race and she could feel her forehead break out in sweat as the door to the attic slowly began to open. Her father stood up, gun drawn, and ready to open fire. Becca did the same, despite the fact that her gun held no ammo yet. She found herself holding the heavy gun with both shaking hands. Even if it had been loaded, Becca knew she could never shoot anything with any accuracy with her nerves working against her the way they were. She took a deep breath, feeling like her end was near. At least I'll die with daddy. She listened closely for any sign of the dead. Becca heard no moaning, but the dead in this town didn't always warn you before they were going to eat you.

~

Michael couldn't shake the feeling that if he stuck his head up into the attic it might get blown off. He wasn't completely sure that he was convinced that Bloom was the enemy by what Brian had said earlier, but it did make him think. Michael had learned by now that in Spring Valley, nothing was black and white. He decided to have Brian go up first on the ruse that he would cover him in case they had any unexpected visitors. As much as he had no intention of sacrificing his friend, he had no intention of dying either!

At least Brian was smart about it. Michael guessed that he had been thinking along the same lines as he watched his friend slowly push open the door and raise his gun. "Hello?" he said as he waived his gun around to show their friends up stairs that he was in fact quite alive and still human. Michael held his breath for what seemed like hours as a few tense seconds passed. Brian continued moving upstairs. Michael was half expecting his friend to come flying back at him after being shot in the chest, but was very pleased when that didn't happen. Well, if Bloom wanted us dead, that would have been the perfect time. Maybe this is a good sign...

Once up stairs, Michael, Brian, Bloom and his daughter nailed a few boards over the entrance to the attic. Bloom had the idea that if they received any uninvited guests in the night, that they would hear them and trying to get in and it would give the four a fighting chance to survive. Michael had to admit that Bloom was a good leader, even if his only concern was for the safety of himself and his kid. Michael decided that it was much better to be with Bloom than against him.

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"So, what's next?" Michael asked the room hoping someone would answer. "I personally would like to find a way out of town, my plan is to do that. How I don't really know yet so... any ideas?"

"Actually, my dad came up with a great plan." Becca said as her father messed up her already ratted hair.

"Of course getting out of town is a priority," Bloom interrupted, "however, we need to get to the college first." Michael was caught off guard by the idea. He thought the Bloom's would be in full support of getting out of Spring Valley. Unless he wanted the antibody so he could sell it to the highest bidder once they got out of this mess. Apparently the shock of the idea showed on his face. "Hear me out. Here's the deal. Like I said, we should go to the college. I have a feeling that there we will find more than a few answers. Maybe even an evacuation plan, or perhaps some kind of special weapons that could help us fight off those things. Are you with me?"

"Wouldn't it be faster just to leave town?" Michael said.

"Sure it would be, but don't you want to know how to stop this thing from spreading? You said before that you hit one of them outside of town, which means that it has already left Spring Valley. Do you really want it to spread? Are you with us or not?" Bloom countered, almost defensively.

Brian made no effort to hide the rolling of his eyes. "Are there really any other options?"

Bloom raised an eyebrow than changed his look to a glare. "Actually, as I see it, you have three options: one, Come with us and possibly find a way out of here and live happily ever after. Two, try to find your own way out of town, and probably find an early grave instead. Three, you could always stay here and die. I guess the choice is really yours. I can't make you come with us if you don't want to."

Michael tried in vein to think of a logical fourth option but really didn't like the idea of wandering the streets alone with Brian. "No matter what we do, I think we all need to stick together. We obviously stand a better chance that way." Michael said it more for Brian's sake than for the other two, who had defiantly made up their minds already. As much as he wanted to, Michael couldn't come up with a better plan of action. Bloom had been a good leader so far, hopefully he would continue to come through for them. Maybe he would have told us about the memo if we gave him more time...

~

The Mayor was once again very happy with how easy it was to sway Michael. Brian was certainly a pain, and Bloom would take great pleasure in watching him die, or at least, scream in anguish. The plan was sheer brilliance. If they got separated before he got a chance to get rid of Brian and Michael, they would surely try to make it to the college. They had no way of knowing it, but the college would be suicide for anyone who didn't know the underground science department facility, but Bloom knew it. He knew it well. He also knew that if his first explosive plan didn't work, than they would certainly not make it through the underground maze of doors and hallways. They would be eaten alive by some of the test subjects that 'accidentally' got released. Bloom tried to fight back a smile at the thought of one of the test creatures tearing Brian in to thinly sliced ribbons of flesh. He had developed a deep hatred for Brian and was beginning to realize why. Brian reminded him of someone he used to work with. A fellow politician and cocky doctor who tried to take full credit for much of Bloom's work. Bloom couldn't wait to release one of the beasts and then watch it tear Brian limb from limb. Then again, why wait. Why not kill him tonight. Sure it'd be less fun, but what use do I have for him now?

"I say our best bet is to try to get some rest." Bloom said, trying to seem as caring and friendly as possible.

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"Yeah, but I'd sleep with one eye open." Brian said with a cold look to Bloom.

"Okay, Brian. Good night. Sleep well, my friend." Bloom said mockingly. Gritting his teeth, Bloom wished that his mind's visions would become Brian's nightmares.

Bloom waited patiently until the two men and his child had fallen asleep to make his move. He quietly used the claw hammer to pry up the boards and slowly open the attic door. He swiftly moved down the stairs, not making a sound and turned the corner with out hesitation. He snatched a flashlight from the drawer of one of the guest bedrooms and found his way through the dark house being careful not to make a sound. He felt like he was in the jungles of Nam again. Hunting. As he made his way to the office, he hoped that the memos and folders were still there. He opened his closet to find that the hidden compartment in the floor had already been ransacked. Brian. Little Bastard! Bloom knew Brian had taken the folder and now curiosity was going to kill that cat. He crossed the room to the darkened gun shelf. The centerpiece used to be his prize gun, but now was empty. He reached to the shelf that once held the gun and pushed it down with a click. The shelf slid inward and stopped. He pushed it the rest of the way and waited.

As he pushed in the shelf, he waited and held his breath, hoping that the opening hidden drawer wouldn't make any noise. CLICK. CLICK. BEEP. Bloom listened as the secret drawer unlocked its self and slid open revealing what Bloom had hidden there. Two small black metallic boxes. One larger than the other with three LED lights, one yellow, the second orange, and the third red. The second smaller box simply had a small red button on it. As Bloom picked up the two items, he felt more in control of Brian's fate then ever before. It was a shame that Michael had to die, but in Bloom's mind it was either he and his daughter, or them. Casualties of war.

Bloom pushed back the drawer and picked up the flashlight that he had set down. The flashlight dimmed as the battery died, so he discarded it. Bloom tiptoed through the house to the kitchen. He opened the back door listening for any sign of the living dead. After he was sure that it was safe, he ran across his back yard to the shed, and after unlocking it, he grabbed the cans of gasoline and kerosene. He set down the container of kerosene and brought the gas back into the house with him. The plan was going beautifully. He headed to the basement for the next step. As he made it across the kitchen to the door of the basement, Bloom realized that any number of the carriers could be down there. They may have crawled in through the basement windows and were just waiting for a warm meal. He turned the doorknob, took a deep breath with gun in hand, ready for anything. Once on the steep steps to the basement, Bloom tried to use his finely tuned senses to his advantage. He heard no shuffling feet, and the potent smell of decay was not strong as it would be if there were many masses or even one near by. He lit a match and threw it in to the basement in an effort to flush out any thing that may be hiding in the shadows. A rat let out a squeak as it ran across the floor into a large crack in the wall. Bloom moved to a support beam in the middle of the basement, and placed the charge. He peeled off the backing and stuck the charge on the support beam, flipping the switch on the side. He watched as the yellow light turned on, signaling that the charge was awaiting its next command. He poured the gasoline around the basement and up the stairs. A rush of sheer joy overtook him at the thought of what he was doing. He couldn't wait to burn Brian alive. His screams would be heard for miles!

~

Brian was in the middle of a nice, warm dream. As always, he was dreaming of women on the beaches of a tropical island, serving him in the nude. Brian loved this dream. Then the dream changed. Magically, tragically, the dream turned dark. The women of his dream began to mutate into something sick. Something evil. The dream was just becoming a nightmare when he was awakened by a loud sound. A gunshot coming from the back of the house. He quickly jumped to his feet and scanned the attic. He noticed that the door was wide open, and there were figures asleep on the floor. One was the size of Michael and the other the size of Becca. Where the hell is Bloom? Damn it! I knew I shouldn't have gone to sleep. The question barely had

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time to hit his mind before he heard a second sound. An two more gunshots then an explosion, small but powerful. The sounds were all coming from the back of the house. The undead can't use guns. It's gotta be Bloom. The shots had awakened Michael and Becca who began looking around the attic for Bloom.

Brian moved to the back of the attic and looked out the window to see the source of the explosion. He watched the flames shoot up the side of a shed in the Bloom's back yard. A few burning dead walkers stumbled forward, headed toward the house.

~

Becca woke to the sound of gunshots from the back yard. She woke up Michael who looked around the room. Where's Daddy? I can't lose him again! She saw Brian at the window and joined him to see fire spreading through the back yard. The monsters were coming. They were on fire, and didn't even seem to notice. Black smoke rolled off of them as their skin melted off the bones. By this time, Michael had joined them at the window and started to ask Brian what happened. They talked back and forth in a low tone and Becca ignored them, backing up slowly, not wanting to see any more. She breathed heavy, trying not to panic. She was worried that one of the undead fire walkers could have been her father. As she backed up step by step, she had no idea that she was backing toward the open door to the attic. She just wanted to get away.

Two arms reached around her. One around her waste and the other over her mouth. Becca could tell by the warm touch that who ever had her was human. She didn't scream, instead letting herself get carried down the steps. At the bottom of the steps she looked up to see her father slamming the door behind them, then lock the latch. He looked tired and sweaty.

Becca could hear Michael and Brian scream at her father. They screamed for him to let them out and unlock the door. "Why..." she began.

"I looked them over last night while they were sleeping. Brian has been bitten and Michael was scratched. You know what happens when someone gets infected." Her father said. Becca nodded. Even as they screamed profanities down at her father, Becca knew that they were doomed. Her father grabbed Becca's hand and pulled her to the back door.

"Daddy, no! The monsters..." She started to say, but then stopped when she saw that they lie unmoving at the door.

"We have to get to the college."

~

Bloom had just finished placing the charge and pouring the gas when he felt it. The small rodent that he had written off earlier had come out from its hiding place in the wall and bit his ankle. In a moment of rage, Bloom stomped on it, killing it instantly, only to find that something was not right about the color of it's blood. He knelt down to get a closer look, and found that its blood was coagulated. The rat was dead before Bloom stomped on it, which meant that it was one of the infected... that meant the Bloom was infected. His head began to feel light as his heartbeat began to pound in his chest. His knees began to shake as his legs became weak. He knew that it didn't happen that fast. That this was all in his head. He still had time. He couldn't think about it. He had to get Becca to safety. He knew he had to get up the stairs to the attic where he could get Becca and leave the others for fire feed. As he made it up from the basement he saw some carriers by the shed. He had come too far to let his plan be ruined by the night-walkers, so he shot one in the head, only to find that it was not alone. There were three more. This could be the perfect distraction! Bloom noticed the blessing in disguise as he shot the kerosene can. He missed the first shot but hit the second dead on,

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causing it to explode. This would slow the infected and give him a reason to get Becca out of the attic. He turned to the hall and could swear that he felt the infection fighting its way through his veins, toward his heart. Taking him over. It's only my imagination, it doesn't move that fast. Gotta focus. Bloom only had a small idea how long he had, but he did know that if he didn't get to his daughter soon, she too would die. Time seemed to crawl as he ran across the house. He had just come to the hall with the attic door when he heard the sound of foot steps in the attic. Bloom climbed the stairs with every energy he had and was pleased to see the door still open. Bloom scanned the attic and saw that it was empty. Panic began to set in as he realized that his child was not where he had left her, asleep on the floor. He frantically searched the attic with his eyes and was relieved to see her at the window, with the other two. She was backing up from it, probably shocked from the flaming creatures outside. On the path she was going, she would be in his arms in no time.

Bloom tried to fight back a smile as he listened to the two men scream to be let out. He kept a straight face for Becca's sake than brought her out to the side of the house, where he had a four wheeler parked. It let out a dull roar as Bloom fired it up and his daughter held on to his sides tight. He took Becca to a safe distance from the house to watch the show. They turned to face the house and Bloom reached in to his pocket and circled the button. He smiled as he pushed it.

In the basement, on a wooden support beam, on a small box, an orange light lit up, then a red one. Seconds later the basement erupted in fire. The house shook as the explosive went off igniting the basement and kitchen in flames. Bloom chuckled under his breath as he thought of Brian burning alive. As he roared the engine, Bloom was overcome with cold sweat. He and his daughter sped into the night toward the college. He knew he had to get there before it was too late. He only had about four hours left, if that.

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T E N

"Now do you believe that he is a bastard?" Brain had said when it was obvious that Bloom and Becca were no longer by the door. Brian was angry beyond words.

"What? He's just gonna leave us to die?" Michael said naively.

"Looks like that's the plan. He's probably headed to get the antibody from the college. Bet he knows just where to find it too." Brian said. Just then, Brian heard a sound. The sound of a small engine turning over. He went to the other window to see Bloom and Becca getting on and leaving. "Great. There they go. Told you we were fucked."

Michael went to Brian's side just in time to see the lights of the ATV stop several hundred feet away. Brian knew that it was no change of heart and that Bloom was probably laughing. Son-of-a...

BOOM! The sound made Brian's ears ring with pain as the explosion rocked the foundation of the house. Did something hit the house? Sounded like a jet liner. No, Bloom blew up his own house! How psycho is this guy? Brian was unsure how long they had until the attic was engulfed, but knew that they couldn't stay where they were. The attic windows were three stories up, with no roof access. The door to the main floor was still firmly locked. We gotta break the windows...

"Michael, you get that window and I'll get this one! We'll need the fresh air!" Brian said, picking up a piece of wood.

Michael had been knocked down by the blast, but was soon on his feet again, trying to stop Brian. "No! If we break the windows, the air will feed the flames. Help me go through the boxes. We need to find something we can use to filter our breathing. We are gonna have to go down stairs."

Brian realized the error in his initial idea, and did as he was told. He soon found a box of old sheets, which he and Michael tore into long strips and they used them as small masks. They wrapped the shredded sheets around their heads. Gotta stay low. Most people die because of the smoke. Hot air rises. Gotta get down stairs. Brian's mind flooded with information that he had ignored in school safety programs. As if reading his mind, Michael went to the door and began kicking it to break the lock. After several kicks, he fell back, exhausted. Brian grabbed the wood that he had found earlier and he and Michael began ramming the door. The door was cool to the touch, so the flames had not totally engulfed the house, yet.

As Brian and Michael rammed the door with the makeshift battering ram, the wood began to split. The door cracked and eventually broke in two as blooms of black smoke bellowed in over them, expanding like an evil dark flower searching for sunlight. The heat from the smoke caused Brian's eyes to water as he dropped to the floor, dragging Michael down with him. The master bedroom was to the right, and Brian had an idea. He motioned for Michael to follow him.

Once in the bedroom he shut the door and looked to the window. They were still two stories up, so jumping was not an option. Then a better idea hit him. Brian grabbed the sheets and went in to the bathroom, he knew that in a huge house like Bloom's that there had to be a bathroom accessible from the main bedroom. Brian had Michael turn on the water in the shower and drench the king size sheet. The sheet should be just large enough to cover both men, so after it was soaked, Brian got in the shower. If they were wet, it would be harder for them to catch fire. Once he was soaked enough, Michael did the same, then they wrapped themselves in

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the sheet, and headed back for the hall way.

Crawling through the hall way was hard enough without the ability to see through the smoke and darkness, but things were about to become more difficult then they could imagine.

As Michael and Brian crawled down the stairs to the foyer, a black pair of legs stopped them. They looked up to see that the legs were nothing more than rubber rain boots. False alarm. Suddenly the cover of the wet blanket was torn away, and the unmistakable sound of an undead moan came through the crackling fire, then another, and another. The room was filled with burning monsters, and Michael and Brian were surrounded.

Brian rolled onto his back and kicked out the legs of the monster that had tried to grab them. Michael also rolled over, firing round's into the heads of the monsters that he could see. Brian coughed as the smoke filled his lungs, but he continued to fight as he unloaded a round into the head of the ever hungry that he had knocked over. As the creatures came in from other rooms, the floor began to crack and Michael and Brian scurried back to the stairs.

"Shoot the floor!" Brian yelled to his friend who opened fire on the floor, not knowing why. Hope this works. The floor began to give way and soon broke into a giant hole in the middle of the room with a loud crash. It fell through the first floor and into the basement. Brian kicked out the feet of the closest night stalker and it fell down the hole to join many of its already falling friends.

Michael crawled around the large hole before Brian said to go. What is he doing? He's gonna get killed. Brian tried to call after him to stop him, but as he opened his mouth, it filled with smoke and he began to choke. Just when Michael was almost out of site, Brian saw him slip into the hole in the basement. "No!" He yelled after his fallen friend. Gunshots filled his ears as more and more smoke filled Brian's lungs.

~

Michael's foot was sprained, as well as his wrist, but neither were broken from the fall. He stood up, scared out of his mind and ready to fight to the death. In the attic, Michael had reloaded his gun before going to sleep, and was glad that he did. The floor was so hot that it quickly melted the rubber in his shoes causing him to fall all over again and when he went to get up, it burned the palm of his hand. He saw the windows that the smoke had been pouring out of and realized that he had found his escape. "Brian, I got a way out. Find a way out for yourself and I'll meet you outside." He yelled up to his friend who surely had troubles of his own.

Though his vision was blurry, Michael was still a pretty good shot. He landed each shot fired exactly where he intended for it to hit. Not one bullet was wasted as he cleared the basement of undead. The only thing worse than the smell of rotting flesh was burning rotting flesh. He gagged and coughed as he made his way to the largest window in the room. Not being able to reach it, Michael dragged a workbench over to the window by the leg that was not on fire. The table is probably gonna break. I've got one shot at this so I better make it. Michael backed up to take a running leap at the table. Stopping for a moment to take a deep breath, Michael suddenly felt the warmth on his feet. The shoes soles were almost completely melted through. The smell of rotting, burning flesh and melted rubber was thick in the air, almost palpable. Michael tried to run, but fell flat on his chest as his shoes were so melted to the floor that he felt like a fly on flypaper. His hands burned even more as they touched the floor, and Michael screamed in pain as he pushed himself up, slipped out of his shoes and ran at the table, burning his feet the whole way. In one giant leap, he made it up the table and halfway through the window. Then the table broke. The shattered glass that littered the grass outside cut Michael's already painfully burnt hands as he tried to pull himself out. Suddenly a hand grabbed his ankle. Though he could not feel much through the pain of his feet and hands, he knew it as one of the carriers. Using all of his might he kicked it in the head and forced it to let go. His body weight fighting against him, Michael gave it his all and finally crawled out of Bloom's inferno hell. He fell forward with his every effort to crawl

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away from the house.

Once far enough away that Michael felt safe, he removed the bed sheet-mask that he had used to breath through and tore it in half, wrapping his hands and feet with as much as he could. Michael fell back and screamed in pain as he sobbed from the hell he had been through.

~

Brian was still inside. He had heard all sorts of awful sounds from the basement, and could only pray that his friend made it. Michael had said that he was going to get out, but now Brian was alone and afraid. Stay calm. Don't panic. He kept telling himself over and over that he would make it, but was unsure how. Part of the third floor had fallen in but missed Brian. This was actually a good thing, because it killed a few of the undead that were still hungry and had Brian cornered. The front door had been locked, and the lock was too hot to touch so his only chance would be to make it to a side door or out a window on the main floor. As the house continued to come down around him, Brian crawled to the back of the building. Some portions of the floor had fallen through, and the entire floor was unstable, so he had to be even more careful where he went. The floor was getting hot with every crawling move he made so Brian had to move quickly.

When he made it to the Bloom family den, Brian noticed a large picture window that would be easy to make it through. He shot the window a few times, to make it easier to break and closed the door to the den behind him. The smoke was clearing from the room through the bullet holes in the glass, easing the breathing situation. Then, without warning, the floor began to crack. Oh hell no. Brian took a run at the den window and leaped, before he looked. He had forgotten that he was still on the second story and the only thing outside the window was air and a tree. His body smashed through the glass, cutting his face and forearms and slammed into the tree's branches. The fall threw his body around like a dog with a chew toy as he hit branch after branch. He fell for what seemed like an eternity to finally land on the grass outside the Bloom home. Brian was unconscious. The dream of beaches and beauties returned to him as Brian finally got the rest he needed.

~

Becca held on tight to her father's side as a tear escaped her eye for their fallen friends. Her father could not explain the explosion back at the house, but she was sure she'd rather not know what he probably did. She rested her head on his back as they flew through the night on the ATV. His breathing was getting heavier, but she pretended not to notice. They were going through people's yards because the roads were blocked and headed strait for the college. Becca couldn't stop thinking about those poor boys that had saved her. Did they really have to die? She knew the answer. When you became infected, you needed to die. It was a cold fact that she had gotten all too used to.

They began to slow down. When she asked her father why they were stopping the ATV answered for her as it cut out, little by little. The ATV had run out of gas. Becca had seen her father put the gas can by the ATV, and thought he had filled it. She was wrong. Her father was cussing and saying that he 'didn't have time for this crap' as the ATV slowed to a stop. The gas can had been left beside the house. "At least the school is only a few blocks away, Dad." Becca said, trying to make her father smile again.

"We might not have a few blocks. Damn it! We better start walking." Her father responded. She had seen him mad before but this side of her father scared Becca.

The creatures started to come out from their hiding places, following the sound of the ATV. Becca and Bloom started running, but she wasn't fast enough. Bloom picked her up and carried her with a strength that she didn't realize that he had. She was firing at the passing undead carriers and missing each shot, but was still trying to help.

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"Damn it, Rebecca! Quit wasting ammo. You shoot when I tell you to! Got it?" The mayor snapped. Becca was hurt, but hid it well. He knew that her father was just stressed by the situation. She looked into his eyes and realized that his face was paler. His eyes dark, worse than lack of sleep.

"Are you feeling okay?" She asked in a meek voice.

"I'm fine. If I put you down, can you run?" He answered in a short tone.

"Yeah, Dad." She said, ready to run.

He set her down, and they ran as fast as they could until the University Campus was in sight. Becca knew the campus better than she knew the sewers, and hoped that her father knew the basement labs.

~

Bloom knew his time was running out. The first layer of skin on his arms had begun to peel off as if the result of a sunburn. The itching was nonstop. He and Becca had made it to the campus, but still needed to reload the generator to give the labs power. Some moron who wanted to conserve power had shut off the emergency generator, making it even more time consuming and difficult for Bloom. He just hoped that he would make it to the antibody before he changed, or worse, hurt his daughter. The trip to the generator was uneventful. They had taken the stairs to all of the public access areas, then Bloom had to use an over sized screwdriver to pry open security doors to get to the generator. He almost electrocuted himself trying to start it up, but once it was going, the doors became unlocked, and Bloom felt released.

The trouble came after he got the doors unlocked. The beasts were released. Bloom saw the first when he entered secure sector three. The four-legged creature was half wasted away and looked like a nightmare come to life. Its fur had fallen out and the skin was eaten to the bone in many places by other dogs and the parasite. Becca started crying the moment she saw it, even when Bloom told her to stay strong. She fired her weapon when he told him to, and he was never more proud than when she landed the bullet that stopped the hungry mutt.

The second one came when they entered sector 3.5. It snuck up jumped on top of Becca. Bloom kicked in its skull after grabbing it by the neck and slamming it into a wall. She seemed okay, but it was too close for Bloom's comfort. They needed the antibody, and they needed it now.

Bloom's security card allowed them to enter an elevator that would bring them to the labs in the fourth basement of the school. The elevator was disguised as a broom closet to keep out students that didn't belong there. For the most part it worked, though the school did, on occasion, find the average couple making out between classes. Little did they know, the closet was monitored via closed circuit camera. They were usually busted before they could get too cozy.

As the elevator brought the Blooms closer to what they were seeking, it suddenly stopped, and the sound of paws on the roof of the elevator made the mayor's blood run cold. He knew that there was more than one mutt above and they would find a way in. He searched frantically for another way out of the box that could spell their death as he held Becca tightly to his side.

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E L E V E N

Michael had heard the glass shatter and knew that it had to be Brian. He pulled himself off the ground and limped as quickly as possible to the side of the house that the sound had come from. There he found his friend lying lifeless at the bottom of a tree covered in his own blood. Though Michael was no doctor, it was obvious that his friend had extensive injuries. Brian looked like he had a dislocated shoulder and a few broken bones with bumps and bruises all over. He looked like a truck had hit him. At first glimpse, Michael was sure Brian was dead. Michael didn't want to check Brian's pulse, not sure he could handle it if he was now alone for good. After a few tense moments, Michael finally checked Brian's pulse and found that it was faint, but present. With the house engulfed in flames, it was not a good idea for the duo to stay where they were. If Bloom had planted any more explosive surprises, the house could go at any moment. Michael assessed his options. There were not many. His feet felt like they were still on fire, but he knew he was Brian's only real chance for hope. He used all his strength to pick up his friend and carry him a safe distance from the house. As Michael turned and looked at the house, he saw a red gas can near where Brian had been laying. He ran to it, knowing that at some point it would be useful. By the time he made it to the can and looked back at Brian, he realized that there were many shadows around him. At first he was unsure, thinking his eyes were playing tricks on him, but it soon became quite clear, they were more than shadows. They were moving shadows. Michael drew his trusty gun and fired at the shadows, which fell to the ground but kept moving. As he got closer, he quickly figured out that the shadows were what was left of carriers. Brian had been attacked by the lifeless, but Michael's itchy trigger finger saved him. Michael's shots had rendered them all grounded, but still hungry. They moved as best they could, trying to get a piece of his friend. Michael finally made it to his friend's side, just in time to stop him from being eaten by a large carrier in overalls and a flannel shirt. He looked like a truck driver. One clean shot between the eyes was enough to stop it cold before it could take the first bite. One of the creatures had been torn in half, as if hit by a car, but continued to move. Michael ended its pathetic excuse for a life then turned his attention to his wounded friend.

As he tried to revive Brian, Michael found that his breathing had stopped. After all that he and Brian had been through, not just in Spring Valley, but through out his life, Michael could not, Would not lose Brian now. He tried to remember CPR and did his best to bring Brian back. After a few seconds that felt like days, Brian let out a smoke filled cough and was breathing again, but still unconscious.

Michael knew that he had to find a way to get to the College, and that Brian was not going to be much help. From where he was standing, Michael could clearly see Bloom's neighbor's houses and saw a metal shed behind one of them. He dragged Brian over to the shed and broke out the weak metal door. Inside he found a lawn mower, another gas can, some pruning sheers, some cardboard, a beach towel and rope. These supplies were exactly what he was looking for. Though his feet were weak, Michael ignored the pain as he got to work.

Michael couldn't help but feel like MacGyver as he used the sheers to cut two pieces of rope and the towel. He wrapped the towel shreds around his feet. Then Michael tore the cardboard into pieces that would fit under his sore injured feet. He used the rope pieces to tie the rags in place, making weak shoes, but ones that would help his feet from getting infected.

Michael still had to figure out a way to move Brian so he tied what was left of the rope to the metal door's handle and pulled Brian's heavy body onto it. He had used the items at his disposal to make shoes and a sled that he could use to pull his friend. I'll be damned if I'm going to leave your fat ass behind! MacGyver would be proud. He wrapped the rope around his waste and began dragging Brian to the other gas can. After mixing the two cans, to make a full tank, he placed it beside Brian on the sled and headed in the direction that Bloom's ATV had gone.

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Brian was one heavy son-of-a-bitch. Michael had overestimated his strength and after about a quarter of a mile, he was exhausted. He was about to give up when, in the distance, he saw what looked like an abandoned ATV. Upon closer inspection he realized that it was not just any ATV, but the one that Bloom and his daughter had escaped on. If the ATV is here, where's Bloom and Becca? Michael searched the area for signs of struggle or blood, and found none. He reached to the vehicle's ignition, and tried to fire it up, with no results. The gas gauge read empty, so he filled the tank with the gas that he had borrowed from Bloom's neighbor.

Once the tank was full, Michael tied the sled to the back of the ATV and tied the excess to Brian's waste, to make sure he didn't fall off. He was about to hit the road when he noticed a headline on a newspaper that had caught under the right front tire.

"INSANE DIABETIC SCRATCHES AND BITES STUDENTS" The article told of how, during a student events rally at the school's Campus Square, a man attacked students who were trying to help him through a diabetic attack. Apparently, shortly after injecting himself with insulin, a man scratched and bit those who tried to help him. It said that he had been brought to the hospital, admitted and treated for not only his diabetic attack, but also for Influenza. The man was unconscious during his treatment, but after coming to, he had violently attacked many of the staff there and was forced into a strait jacket and placed in a room for observation in the hospital's psych ward.

Michael was sure that this was no diabetic attack, but instead probably one of MBEPs earliest victims. This man made disease was so tragic. The poor guy probably thought it was a blood-sugar problem. How could he have known? All those people tried to help him... how could any of them know? Michael dropped the paper and climbed on to the ATV. He knew he had to stay focused and get to the college. Try to kill us? Time for some answers Bloom. You better hope that they kill you before we get to you.

~

Becca screamed in fear as Bloom told her to fire at the roof. The monsters above them were growling hungrily as they barked out unholy sounds. Thinking on his feet, Bloom quickly realized that the only way to get the elevator moving again was to shoot the safety cables. Hopefully if the elevator dropped suddenly, it would knock the beasts off their feet and give He and Rebecca a chance to hit them. Becca shot at where she thought the monsters were and Bloom shot for the cable. The shots rang through the ears of the elevator's passengers and tore the roof to shreds. Soon the dogs stopped moving, and blood began to seep through the roof. Becca saw it coming as she screamed but could not react in time. I was too late... the first drop of infected beast blood fell directly into her screaming mouth.

"No! Spit it out honey! Spit it out!" Bloom screamed in terror to his daughter. As Becca frantically tried to get rid of the blood in her mouth, Bloom began to panic. He could handle being infected even as his sanity continued to slip, but not his little girl. He knew that it was too late. Becca had already ingested some of the infected blood. Bloom only knew of one sample of the antibody. He continued tapping his daughter on the back, trying to force her to cough it up. "Throw it up Becca. Gag yourself if you have to." He said as tears filled his worried and tired eyes.

Becca didn't need to gag herself because she was already dry heaving. It had been a long time since she had eaten anything and Bloom worried that she might never get another meal that wasn't a human.

Feeling more claustrophobic than ever, Bloom pried the doors open, only to find that they were between floors and the door that they needed was below them. Becca was small enough to fit through but not Bloom.

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"Rebecca, you're gonna have to go without me. Take my security card." He said as he dug through his pocket to find the credit card sized key. Once he found it, he handed the card key to her.

"No. Dad I won't leave you." Becca protested.

"You have to. You are our only chance. Go down the hall and turn right. You'll see a card reader so you'll need to use my card there. My pass code is R May Bloom." The mayor said trying to fill her with the important information before he changed.

"My middle name?" Becca said, distracted for only a moment. "No. Dad, there has to be another way down. I'm not going without you."

"Damn it Rebecca! There is no other way. Go now!" He said. "You can come back for me once you get the antibody."

"Antibody?" Rebecca said. "What antibody?"

Bloom had forgotten that he had not mentioned the cure to his daughter before. She would surely be upset at the slip of the mind, but he didn't have time to argue or explain. "There is an antibody. You have to go through the door I told you about and use the code on the locker with my name on it. There were enough antibodies made for the important people in town before it could be mass-produced. Most of them are probably gone, but mine should still be there. Get the antibody Rebecca."

Bloom saw the hope light up in her eyes, even if it was false hope. She had a chance, but Bloom was beyond the point where the antibody would save him. She had to know that he was infected by now. All the signs were there. She was probably in denial. Becca thought for a moment then nodded. He pried open the second set of doors leaving just enough room for her to crawl through. "Be careful." He told her as she tried to wiggle through the small opening.

Becca was half way through the tiny opening in the elevator doors when the elevator suddenly shook violently. Just for a moment, but enough to frighten Bloom. The safety cable was snapping, one wire at a time. One of his bullets must of hit his mark. The plan to drop the car was fine, when it was to save their lives, but now that Rebecca's life was on the line, it was a different story. If the safety cable broke completely, the elevator would slam down on the bottom half of Becca, tearing her in half. He pushed at her feet, trying not to move the dangling elevator too much. She wiggled and squirmed, trying to get through, but making little progress. The elevator jumped again as a second wire from the cable snapped. Bloom pushed frantically as she began to panic also. He told her to put her legs out strait and that he would push her through. She held her legs out as strait as she could and he backed up to get a running start at her feet. As he got to the back of the elevator, another wire broke, jumping the elevator yet again. Time was running out. It always seemed to be the one thing constantly working against Bloom. He said a quick prayer and slammed his shoulder in to her feet.

The final wire snapped and elevator fell. Time moved in slow motion as Rebecca pulled her feet out of the doorway, with the help of her father's shoulder, and into the relative safety of the hallway just in time to miss the elevator.

Bloom was relieved, but alone once again. Suddenly his itchy skin started to act up. He didn't realize it before, but as he scratched his arm, a piece of skin came off under his nail. Bloom was dying. At least Rebecca will live. I gave her a fighting chance. Blooms only wish now, besides her safety was that he had given her more bullets.

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Becca was alone and scared in the cold darkened hall. The hall was quiet and lit only by emergency lights. Her father was a floor below her, stuck in an elevator, with no way out. Becca had to get the antibody and get back to him so he could show her how to take it. She was alone, scared and felt lost in the cold dark halls, comforted only by the absence of moans. Half tempted to use the bullet her father had called destiny, she decided against it after realizing that it was not what her father would want. She had to cure herself then find a way for them to get out of town safely. Her father was counting on her. Good thing we're not both infected. Wonder if there is more than one sample left. Becca stopped her thoughts from wandering too far and climbed to her feet to begin walking down the hall. She followed her father's instructions to the letter, not knowing what to expect in the dark halls and wanting to avoid any surprises. She just hoped not to run into any more dogs. She took the time to reload her empty weapon and saw the bloody smudges on the once shiny platinum gun. Seeing her own bloody reflection sent chills through her body. Becca had not showered in days, and looked like it. She spit on her shirt and used it to clean the gun off. It wasn't very lady like, but she didn't care. She was going to take care of the heirloom just as she would her father.

When Becca found the security card reader, she slid the card through the slot only to stop half way to the sound of dragging feet. They're here too. She pulled back the hammer of her gun and took aim up the hall that turned left just ten feet in front of her. Sure enough a man in a lab coat dragged his dislocated foot behind him. He was wasted away just as much as the monsters she had seen in the sewer but was missing his lower jaw which gave him a wet and sticky look. She raised the gun and shot out his knee. Becca wasn't sure she could hit the head, so she figured she'd try to slow it down enough for her to get through the door. She couldn't have known that she was doing the flesh eater a favor. As it dropped to its stomach, it began dragging its legs and crawling at an inhuman speed toward Becca. It clawed like a dog but moved like a scurrying spider, almost appearing to move the floor its self at the creature's will. She shot at its head and missed. Fired again, and missed. It was crawling faster toward her, closing in with her every breath. Becca was too scared to look so she closed her eyes and fired one last time.

Becca felt no pain. No sudden jolt of being forced to the floor. She opened her eyes to find brain matter splattered all over her clothes and the hall around her feet. The perfect head shot.

Another cold chill ran through her body as she wiped the mess off of her clothing. Disgusted, but relieved, Becca quickly checked for more of the undead pests and, after finding none, she unlocked the door. As the card reader's light turned green, it asked for a pass code. Becca only remembered the word May. She struggled to remember the rest as a timer counted down to lock down. She had ten seconds to enter the correct code before the doors locked for good. Rebecca May, no. Becca May, no. May Bloom, no. R May Bloom! That's it! The code came back to her with five seconds left. She had no time for spelling errors so she carefully entered the code. The solid green light blinked for a moment, turned red, then green again with a beeping sound. The electronically locked door began to slide open and the sound that Becca dreaded filled her ears once more. Moans. Lots of moans.

~

Brian's dreams were faded nightmares of death, dismemberment and cannibalism. Not exactly the pornographic dreams he was used to. He knew they were dreams but couldn't awaken from the hellish sleep he had fallen in to. The good news was that being asleep meant that the creatures in his dreams couldn't hurt him. Brian's eyes drifted open and closed as if being held down by cement bricks. He tried to open them and focus, but couldn't. He felt like he was a prisoner in his own dreams. Abruptly, he was brought out of the deep sleep by the feel of excruciating pain in his leg. He sat up screaming and looked down to see one of the undead clawing and biting at his leg. The lower half of the creature was torn off and the ground was speeding past him. He kicked the demon in the head with a wet thud and it let go, but it was too late. Brian had been

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bitten. The monster had gotten a chunk of his skin. The cut from its teeth was not deep, but enough to hurt like hell and enough to infect.

Michael had heard Brian's scream of pain and slowed the ATV to a stop just in time to see the corpse fall to the ground a few yards behind them. "Brian! Are you all right? Did he get you?" Michael said with a worried tone in his voice after seeing blood on his makeshift sled.

"Yeah, I'm fine. And no. I got rid of him before he could get me. That's his blood not mine." Brian lied. He may have been groggy but Brian knew that if there was an antibody, that it would be at the college and they had just gotten to the campus. He still had a chance to live. He knew that Michael would never shoot him, even if he asked to be shot, but it wasn't a chance that Brian was eager to take. He would tell Michael only if he had to.

"Good to see you awake man, you gave me quite a scare." Michael said.

"God, I hurt like hell. I feel like a bus hit me." Brian said with agony in his voice.

"Yup. You're complaining. You'll be fine." Michael laughed. "You must have taken quite the fall. I had to relocate your shoulder and I think you might have some broken bones."

"Wanna swing by the hospital?" Brian said, knowing he was requesting the impossible.

"Would if we could, bud. What do you say we go pay Bloom a visit instead? He and his brat are probably somewhere inside." Michael said trying to motivate Brian.

"Yeah. Sounds good. I'd love to kick that asshole's face in." Brian said trying to come across tougher than he felt.

The two men were on a mission as they broke in a window to the school. It had been boarded up, so they tied the rope around the boards and to the back of the ATV, then used it to break in to the school.

Inside, Brian became aware of the fact that Michael was limping more than he was, and figured that he had messed up his feet in the fire. He grabbed some of the wood from the window that they had broken into and tore off a sleeve of his shirt. He wrapped the fabric around the broken end of the wood and handed the homemade crutch to his friend, who gladly accepted it. They both were in a world of hurt and prayed for some kind of evacuation plan somewhere in the school. As they made their way through the empty school, they found many first aid kits, which they used to bandage their smaller cuts and splint Brian's broken bone. This was the first time that Brian saw Michael's feet. Michael carefully spread some burn cream on them and sighed with relief. Brian had a new respect for his best friend. The man had taken care of Brian during his little nap with injuries that would have made Brian give up. His feet were covered in second, maybe third degree burns and his hands were not much better. Somehow, despite his injuries, he had found the strength to fix up Brian, make a shed-door-sled, and get to an ATV. Brian was impressed.

After they finished cleaning up in one of the classrooms, Brian had removed the brochure from his pocket. In it he found a picture of the gymnasium with a sign that clearly said Basement. They decided that their best option was to try the gym.

Cutting through the gymnasium seemed like a good idea at the time that Brian pitched it to Michael, but proved to be foolish in practice.

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The massive roundhouse style gym was the pride of the University's athletic department. It could easily seat over three thousand people on a packed night and was fully equipped with a sound system and lights to rock the house on any given night. At the back of the gym was a stairwell marked basement. There was only one small problem. The gym was full of undead students and jocks in basketball uniforms. It was like an undead pep rally. A sea of the living dead stood between Brian, Michael and their destination. The undead filled the basketball court and the bleachers. Brian and Michael tried to sneak by the mass of freshly dead by going behind and under the massive bleachers, but had no luck. As if they could smell live flesh, the whole group turned to the humans and began reaching down through the stairs at them. Some of the flesh hungry climbed through the stairs while others simply went around until Brian and Michael were backed into a corner.

"Time to fight or die I guess." Brian said, again trying to sound tough, even though he was scared out of his skull.

"Dude, I never studied karate." Michael said as he raised his gun. "Guess this will have to do."

The living dead mob closed in on the would-be college students and Brian ran up to the first with a punch in the face. He figured that since he was already infected, he might as well go down with a bang. As if starring in his own action film, Brian fought off a row of the undead, punching, kicking and even head butting, without once drawing his gun. The adrenaline fueled rage was so intense that he didn't even feel the pain from the wound in his leg. Michael, on the other hand preferred the safety of his pistol as he fired away, making head shot after head shot. The undead fell before his gun, not standing a chance. Michael was a much better marksman than he would have guessed. Brian was taking out one reanimated freak after another, barely breaking a sweat. Not bad for a guy with some broken bones. Why is the pain so dull? Brian's thoughts wandered as he fought, snapping necks and smashing skulls with the greatest of ease.

Within five minutes, the mass of undead that threatened the duo, was dead for good. Brian only drew his gun twice, and Michael never put it down. Now that the Gym was clear, they would be able to make it down the stairs, if they came across no other surprises.

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T W E L V E

Darkness was beginning to take over Bloom along with a hunger unlike anything he had ever felt. The itching and burning had gone away, and now all that was left was a dull lightheaded buzz. His ears rang and his mouth was dry but he could taste blood. He had bitten his tongue, hard enough to draw blood and he didn't even realize it. There was something different about his blood... he couldn't really place it. Then it struck him. He found the taste of his own blood strangely enjoyable. He knew he was changing fast. Soon it would be over. To take his mind off it, Bloom had tried to pry the doors open again, but they had gotten bent closed in the fall. After a few minutes of trying, he decided that it was probably better this way. I'd rather be trapped in this box. No way of hurting Rebecca if she comes back. How could I be so stupid? How did I let myself get infected? It Can't be over yet... Never get to walk Rebecca down the isle...Can't think straight... so hungry. Tears streamed down his face as Bloom began to lose the world along with his vision and everything slowly went black and he fell to the ground.

~

The smell and sound hit Becca at the same time. Before she saw the first one, she knew they outnumbered her by at least three. The doors slid open and out flooded several undead men, as if dogs bound by leashes, finally freed. Becca was quickly dropped to her knees and shot the first few with great ease. Her first reaction was to go for the legs again, but then she remembered her mistake, and decided to go for the sure shot. Headshots. Becca was in survival mode, reacting more than aiming. Her reactions were good as they dropped at her feet. Suddenly, a monster grabbed her hand. With no hesitation, Becca turned and bit its hand. The monster stumbled back. She was sure it felt no pain, but having a human bite it, must have been a new experience. Its brief expression of shock soon changed to rage so she closed one eye and took aim at the head.

Good night Mother Fucker. Click. What the hell?

Becca knew she could be out of ammo, but prayed that she missed a chamber when reloading. She pulled the hammer back and pulled the trigger again. Click. Shit!! She didn't have time to try again so she just moved... Becca rammed her shoulder into the monster before it could grab her again. She grabbed his wrist and threw him into the hall diving into the room and making it past him. She slammed the red button to close the doors and they slid shut on its reaching hand, cutting it off at the wrist. The hand flopped around for a moment, then stopped.

Becca reached into her pocket and felt only four bullets left. She quickly fumbled to reload her gun, and knew that she couldn't waste any more shots.

Becca had made a foolish mistake. A childish mistake. She hadn't even considered the idea that she could be locking herself in the room with more of them... or worse.

Her eyes widened, as Becca smelled wet dog, and heard nails on metal to go with the scent. Don't waste ammo, don't waste ammo, don't waste ammo. She closed her eyes tightly and listened to the growl. Becca's back was to the beast. It had the upper hand. She was not sure why it had not pounced on her yet, but didn't really care. She turned around slowly and found herself face to face with one of the wolf-creatures. It let out a gruff howl as it finally pounced at her. Becca quickly dropped and rolled out of its way, just missing its hungry drool covered jaws. The beast slid for only a moment, slamming its head on the metal door that had saved Becca from the prior attack. A broomstick was leaned up against the corner of the room so Becca crawled under the table moving the chairs behind her to slow the beast. It ran through the chairs breaking

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them in two with its brute force. Fortunately for Becca, the beast had a hard time running on the slippery metal floor, slowing it down. She continued to crawl as fast as she could, not wanting to look back but knowing that she had to. Becca turned over to face her undead pet and greeted it with a kick in the nose. The monster stopped briefly and shook its head, giving Becca just enough time to grab the broomstick and hold it up. The beast jumped at her mouth open as the broomstick impaled its head., its undead body landing on her and pinning her down. She struggled to get out from under the monster and found herself in a corner. Didn't waste ammo.

Becca crawled out from the corner and got her first real look at the small metal room. A row of green lockers lined the right wall opposite of the door she had come in. Each locker had a name and department above it. She scanned the lockers searching desperately for her father's name. Dr. Kameron Sawtel, Weapons and Survival Specialist; Dr. Clifford J. Heathcote, Special Services; Dr. Brian West Sr., Antibody Development; Dr. David Bloom, City Mayor and Department Founder. BINGO! Each locker had an alphanumeric keypad on it. Becca reached for the small alphanumeric keypad on her father's locker and punched in the code that had worked on the door earlier. Sure enough, it opened the locker also. As the electronic lock released, the door opened its self. Inside she found a picture of her and her mother, a green serum in a syringe and directions. She briefly skimmed the instructions and found that the serum was missing a key ingredient. According to the small sheet of paper, the green liquid must be mixed with the DNA of the Antibody Developer. She had no idea who the Antibody Developer was and hoped her father would know.

After checking the room for other useful items and finding none, Becca went for the door but stopped when she realized that she was going to have trouble getting back to her father. The door was holding out a few of the monsters, and with as few bullets as she had, opening it would be suicide. How do I get out of here? She couldn't wait for rescue; she knew they would never come. She had to figure something else out.

Becca could hear the monsters pounding at the door as if begging to be let in. She frantically looked around the room trying to find any way out. The door she had come in was the only one in the room. The room had no windows or even a broom closet. Becca slumped against the door and leaned her head back, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She opened her eyes and looked at the top of the door. She saw something she had not seen before. A vent. Directly above the door was a vent that would be just big enough for her to fit into. She hoped it would hold her weight but knew she really didn't have any other choice. She dragged the table over to the door and climbed on top of it, but still wasn't tall enough to get in. She climbed down and looked around the room for something else she could use for a boost. One chair was left unbroken from her battle with the beast. The metal folding chair was the only one of its kind, which was probably why it survived the beast's force. Becca moved it on top of the table. As she climbed onto the chair it slightly slid on the metal table. Reaching into her pocket, Becca found her father's card, which she used as a screwdriver to loosen the screws. As she climbed on the back of the chair, it began to slide again, so not taking any chances she jumped up. The chair slid out from under her leaving her with her top half in the vent, her legs dangling. The chair flew off of the table and hit the door open button, allowing the monsters to get into the room they had been locked out of. Becca pulled her legs up into the vent, but not after being hit by a bloody nub. Becca was glad that the creature had no hand attached to the wrist that had hit her.

The vent gave Becca three choices: right, left or strait. She decided to turn left, knowing that was the way she had come down the hall. The vent shook with every crawling move she made, but Becca was sure the vent would hold, but was careful just incase.

The path she had chosen was the correct one. Becca found herself in the elevator shaft, about ten feet above the stopped elevator. She turned around and kicked out the cover, which fell with a loud clang onto the roof of the elevator. Looking down she saw the two dead hounds that had infested her. She flipped them off. It really didn't matter, but made her feel a little better. It was quite a drop, but Becca was confident that she could jump, and not get hurt. She slid to the edge of the vent and dropped. The way she landed didn't hurt, but

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landing next to one of the dead hounds freaked her out.

Through the bullet holes she could not see her father moving around. "Dad, I'm back! I got the medicine!" He lie motionless in the fetal position as if ill. Without warning, a panel in the elevator's ceiling gave way, and one of the hounds dropped into the enclosed space. He father did not react to the huge hound's corpse that had fallen just beside him.

"Daddy, are you okay?" Becca yelled down, now getting worried about her father. There was no response. Maybe when the elevator fell, he bumped his head. He's probably knocked out. Becca dropped down into the small dented room and knelt next to her fallen father. In the back of her mind she knew. She had just trapped herself. She didn't care. Even undead, Becca knew that her father would never hurt her. Never. "Dad?" She again tried to get a response with no result. She reached out her hand and tapped his shoulder. Still no reaction. Becca rolled him over and saw his pale skin. No. He wasn't breathing. Becca lightly slapped his face, which was cold to the touch. "Daddy? Come on Dad. Don't do this... I can't survive without you!" Becca held on to hope...

Then Bloom opened his eyes. "Thank God!" Becca was overcome with relief. His head slowly turned to her, and his eyes widened as they came into focus. There was something wrong with his eyes. They were shallow. Colorless. Soulless. Darkness surrounded them. No. God, no. Becca's relief turned to terror. "Daddy, not you too!" Becca cried in a weak voice as tears rolled down her cheeks. Becca could feel her heart breaking inside her chest. She was alone and had nothing. No one. "Daddy."

As her father slowly sat up, Becca backed away from him. His head cocked slowly, as if he knew who she was. "Daddy, Please don't make me do this..." Becca opened the chamber of her father's prize gun. She removed the bullet that her father had called Destiny from her pocket. The platinum tipped bullet cast an eerie reflection as the light from the dull security lamps in the elevator shaft hit it. Becca took a final look at it before sliding it in the top slot. She finished loading the gun and closed the chamber. Her breaths became heavy as she lined up the sites to aim for her father's head, barely able to see it through her streaming tears. She then turned the gun to her own temple. Part of her would rather kill herself then have to shoot her father. I'm so sorry Daddy. God forgive me.

Shaking her head she pointed the gun back to her father because Becca knew that weather she liked it or not, her father wanted it this way, and it had become her responsibility to set him free.

~

Michael followed Brian's lead. Since he had come to, Brian had been acting different. Almost like another person. Decisive, quiet, and direct; these were not qualities of the guy that Michael had grown up with, but they described Brian to the letter right now. Brian seemed angry and rude. More rude than usual. Michael didn't know the cause of the change, and didn't care, as long as his friend was okay. What did worry him was the fact that Brian didn't seem to be any pain from his injuries. Every step Michael took was agonizing and everything in him wanted to scream in pain. Brian had broken bones and wasn't whining in the least, so Michael kept his mouth closed about it.

The basement corridors were a labyrinth of classrooms and closets. Brian seemed to know exactly where he was going, as he walked with a purpose down the long twisting halls. Michael followed his every step as if he was headed for a buried treasure and Brian had the map. Brian moved swiftly, painlessly, his fear replaced by purpose and intent.

"How do you know where to go?" Michael finally asked his friend. "Your like a bloodhound on a fresh scent!" He added jokingly.

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"Brian stopped and faced his friend. His expression was dead serious. "I've been here before. My father brought me here." Michael expected Brian to continue talking, but he only paused for a moment, and then continued walking.

Unexpectedly, Brian stopped. "Can you hear that?" he asked.

Michael strained his ears but heard nothing. "No... why?"

"Shut up and listen!" Brian said in a demanding tone. He obviously heard something that Michael couldn't.

"What are we listening for?" Michael asked in a weak whisper.

"Paws." Brian answered.

Paws? Michael wasn't sure he had heard correctly. Then he heard them. Brian was right. Some kind of dog was headed their way. The sound of nails on the cement floor, were moving in on them at a running pace. Michael looked to the right of him through the windows into the classroom and then to the left but saw nothing. The path ahead was clear so there was only one direction that the creature could be coming from.

Pushed out of the way by Brian, Michael fell to the ground as a giant four-legged creature tackled his friend. Drawing his gun, Michael was afraid to fire at the massive monster for fear of hitting Brian on accident. Every time that Michael thought he had a clear shot, the beast would shift his weight and Brian would be in the crosshairs. Brian rolled over pinning down the beast, and then reached for the gun that he had tucked in his pants behind his back. The gun was gone. Michael saw Brian's gun lying a few feet away, having been knocked loose in the struggle. As he reached for it, the mutt turned its attention to Michael, snapping at him viscously. Brian used his forearm to pin the beast down by its neck, and Michael grabbed the weapon, tossing it to his friend. Brian spun it around and pistol whipped the beast's face several times before he cocked the gun and fired a round into the beast's thick skull. A crimson pool of blood quickly filled the hall around them.

Michael helped Brian to his feet with one word: "Thanks." Michael couldn't help but be reminded of the undead farmer at the begining of their nightmare. He wished they had turned around then and left Spring Valley to it's own fate.

Brian nodded and shifted his gaze back to the path that they had been on, as if nothing had happened. Michael didn't know how he felt about the new and improved killing machine that Brian had become.

~

Brian was unsure of what was happening to him, but he liked it. He felt faster, stronger, and more powerful than ever before. His senses were keen. He could hear and see things in ways he was not used to. He felt indestructible. Brian had kicked undead ass without breaking a sweat. Killed a hellhound without even blinking. Too bad Michael was so weak. Brian knew why he was changing both physically and mentally. The infection. What was strange to him though, was that he didn't feel like he was dying. The infection didn't even feel like it was spreading. If anything, Brian felt like he was living, possibly for the first time in his life. Michael was slowing him down. Wasting his time. Brian couldn't wait to get to Bloom. He would tear him limb from limb without thinking twice, in front of that little bitch he called a daughter. Little whore. Brian was sick of the Blooms. He was sick of them breathing his air. It would only be a matter of time before he found them and gave them what they deserved. A painful and degrading death. He couldn't tell Michael what he had planned. Michael was too good. To pure.

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A scent grabbed Brian by the nose. It pulled him to Bloom. It called to him. Bloom's cheap aftershave gave the coward's hiding place away.

After taking a stairwell to a lower level, the scent got stronger. It lead him to an elevator. Michael was asking pesky questions like how Brian knew where he was going and if he was okay. Brian gave him short answers like that he remembered it all and that he was fine, but it took all his resistance not to slap his old chum against the wall just to shut him up.

The elevator doors were shut but this was not going to be enough stop Brian. He pried the doors open and looked down the dimly lit shaft. The stench that drove him was stronger now. He knew Bloom was near. Brian jumped out the door, freefalling the floor and a half to roof of the elevator. He heard a familiar scream as he landed on the roof. Becca. Michael called after him and Brian looked up to see the pipsqueak climbing carefully down a ladder on the side of the shaft. Brian returned his attention to Bloom, where it rightfully belonged. He dropped down into the hole in the elevator only to land on one of the hounds. Its weak skin gave way and Brian found his foot lodged in the creatures wet entrails. A hand grabbed his shoulder as he tried to pull his leg from the undead quick sand of intestines. He hand pulled him back and Brian was spun full circle to come face-to-face with a fully zombified Mayor. Now I have an excuse to tear you apart you ugly bastard. Brian grinned ear-to-ear as he removed Bloom's hand with a twist of the wrist. He felt bigger and badder than a character from the Tekken video game he used to play, King, on cocaine as he used his free hand to slam Bloom against the wall of the elevator with a strike of his hand to Bloom's chest. Bloom Grunted as he pulled his hand free of Brian's grip and grabbed Brian by the side of the head smashing it into the other wall. Brian ears rang as he heard Becca screaming in the background. There was no pain. Brian liked that.

"Shut up Bitch!" Brian yelled as he kicked in Bloom's knee, forcing his weight to shift and his grip on Brian' head to loosen.

"Brian!" Michael screamed at from above as he helped Becca escape from the small war zone.

Brian didn't care if the girl escaped. He saw red as he focused all of his energy on bloom. "I'll kill you, bastard!" He yelled, as he swung his arm around Bloom's, breaking it at the elbow. Bloom's response was a gurgling moan as he tried to bite Brian. "Too late!" Brian laughed as he punched Bloom in the mouth, knocking out a few teeth.

Bloom aggressively forced his body weight on Brian, causing him to stumble back over the fallen dog and the elevator to shake. Brian rolled over onto bloom and pummeled his face with the rage of the Devil himself. The elevator shook more. Bloom clawed and scratched at Brian as he laughed and continued punching Bloom. The elevator shook a final time and came loose from the ledge it had been caught on.

The elevator free fell until it hit the bottom of the shaft with an explosive crash.

~

Becca watched in horror as her father dropped to his end, taking Brian with him.

Chapter 14: The Hunger (v.2) Chapter 13

THIRTEEN

Becca's sobs could be heard through out the halls of the underground labs. They would break hearts, if they had not fallen on dead ears. Instead, they only gave the ever hungry a reason to keep looking for fresh food. She had watched that bastard Brian fight her dad. Michael had kept her from going back into the elevator, but even knowing that he was undead, she still wanted to be by her father's side. She would have shot Brian and ended his life if Michael wouldn't have stopped her. Michael had tried to assure her that freshly reanimated corpses were no longer family or friends and that Brian did what she was going to have to do anyway. Becca didn't care. She just wanted her daddy back, something that no one, not even Michael would ever be able to give her.

They climbed the ladder back up the shaft and into the hall that held the lab she had come from. She found no comfort at Michael's side and was sure she'd rather be dead or alone than with him. She was beyond tempted to throw him down the shaft so he could share the same fate as his traitor friend. She knew should never make it alone. Not yet, and not with as little ammo as she had. Once she calmed herself, Becca told Michael of how she was infected, but had the antibody. She showed the instructions to Michael, hoping he could make some sense of it. He insisted on being taken back to where she had found the antibody. She tried to tell him about the monsters in the hall, and that it was a bad idea, but like most men she knew, he was stubborn, and didn't care. Eventually, against her better judgment, Becca took Michael back to the room with the corpses and dead hound. The handless infected one still waited to greet her at the vent, but Michael had shot it from the far end of the hall. She couldn't help but be impressed by how good of a shot Michael was. She almost wished that he would plant a bullet in her head to end the pain she felt, or at least to stop the itching. Becca wiped the sweat from her brow and looked down at her brown sweater sleeve to find loose skin. Her skin was peeling. She didn't know the relevance of this, but she knew it couldn't be good.

On the short walk to the locker room, Becca couldn't help but notice that Michael was limping. She asked him what happened, (not really caring, but wanting to strike up conversation any way) and he started to angrily say something, but ended up saying that he hurt his feet. She realized that they were covered in black garbage bags. She wanted to laugh, but resisted the temptation.

Once inside the room, Becca showed Michael the row of lockers. His jaw fell open as he stared at one name and title. "Dr. Brian West Sr." Other than sharing the first name with the asshole that killed her father, Becca didn't see the relevance. Michael explained that not only was the man that the locker belonged to his friend's father but his DNA was what they needed to make the antibody work. He punched in several codes, trying to get the locker open, but with no luck. Michael was obviously about to give up when Becca suggested "junior" in honor of his son. The pass code must have worked, because the locker opened. Inside, they found some of the doctor's notes on the antibody that he had developed in a journal that he had kept.

~

Michael was amazed at the level of Brian's father's involvement in the antibody project. According to his journals, he was the antibody's primary developer and knew about everything there was to know about the M.B.E.P. and how it got to Spring Valley. The Journal told of how the FBI and an agent of Homeland Security had come to his home a few days ago. They asked him to return to the University to work on a project of National Security. They explained that the town that he loved had been attacked by a member of a Terrorist sleeper cell in Iowa, and that the attack had been covered up by local media, at the urging of the government, to prevent wide spread panic. They had quarantined the town with the help of the local police and the CDC. The attack had been biological, and the government believed that the problem could be

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contained, if an antibody was made and distributed before it got a chance to spread. Michael was taken back by the brilliance of Brian's father. He had been concerned that once he finished developing the antibody, the government would try to cover the whole attack, and kill him, and possibly his family to keep them quiet, so he came up with a plan. He would use his own DNA as an "X Factor" in the antibody, which must be included with the rest of the serum to make it work, this way, if he had been killed, his son and family would still have a chance to be saved. The only problem was that, in his tests on himself, he found that the MBEP caused him not to deteriorate, but instead lose his mind and believe that he was indestructible. Fortunately, Dr. Heathcote, one of the other scientists working on the project, injected him with the antibody before the virus could drive him beyond the point of no return. This is how he discovered that his DNA could be used as the primary factor.

Michael found the journal fascinating. It not only explained Brian's actions, but gave him hope that if Brian was still alive, he could be saved, and so could Becca.

Becca wanted to leave the school. She was afraid to see what was left of her father and believed that it was hopeless to even try to reach Brian. Michael told her that without his DNA she would die, and the antibody she held so dearly, might as well be water. She finally understood. Michael hated having to baby her along, knowing that time was running out. After the short trip back to the elevator, Michael gave his gun to Becca.

"Becca," Michael said to the little girl, trying not to talk down to her and have the most respect he could in his voice, "You stay up here and keep guard of the door. I'm giving you my gun, since yours is low on ammo... but I want it back when I get back, okay?" He hoped he was not talking to himself. He knew that there was a good chance that when he returned, she may be one of the undead. Becca nodded. The good news was that the undead didn't use guns, so it might be easy to get it back if he had to... do what he may have to do.

"Only give him some of it. Leave some for me." Becca said as she handed the serum to Michael and took his gun. It was a show of mutual trust.

He carefully climbed down the ladder and came to the bottom of the shaft, which was filled with smoke. "Brian?" he called fighting back coughs. No Answer. "Are you okay...?" Michael called again. The roof of the elevator was nonexistent. He climbed down into the hole, and found Brian shaking alone in the corner of the elevator, mumbling to himself. Bloom's body was on the opposite side, barely recognizable and not moving. Michael was glad Becca had stayed in the hall. No girl should have to see her father like that.

"Get the hell away from me, you undead freak!" Brian mumbled in a shaky voice.

"Brian, it's me, Mike. I'm here to help you..." Michael approached his friend slowly, unsure of how dangerous he was.

"You can't talk. Get out of my head. Out of my head! Get 'em out!" he yelled.

"Calm down buddy, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm not one of them..." Michael said in a very calm tone. He felt like a negotiator with a gun to his temple.

"I said shut up!" Brian yelled as he lunged at Michael, throwing him against the wall. Michael fought back, but Brian had always been the stronger of the two.

Michael reached into his pocket with his free hand and grabbed the needle. He removed the cap and tried to jab it in Brian's neck. Brian blocked the move. "What the fuck is that? You're not my friend! Not my friend!!" He yelled. Michael struggled, both hands pinned against the wall. Brian's grip was intense. Michael tried to use the needle to inject his friend's hand but his grip was too low.

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"I'm so sorry Brian." Michael said as he resorted to his plan B. He head butted Brian, but his gaze only became more intense as he headbutted Michael back. Michael's nose was probably broken. His mind flashed to childhood and the beatings he used to get in school. Snapping himself out of it, he moved on to plan C, A plan that no man should ever have to carry out on another man. He kned Brian in the groin. Brian's face contorted in pain and he dropped his hands to grip his aching groin. Michael seized the opportunity and injected half the serum into Brian's neck. Brian fell to the ground. Oh God. I killed him. Michael was worried that he had given Brian too much or too little of the serum. He turned his friend over and began CPR. Sure enough, his heart had stopped from the dose.

Michael's forehead dripped with sweat as he rolled up his sleeves and tried with all he had to revive his friend. One and two and three... he counted in his mind. A growl came from above. Michael continued to count in his mind. He didn't have time to turn around. When he hit fifteen, he tipped his friend's head back and gave a solid breath. Brian began coughing. For the second time, Michael had saved his friend. The growling became intense barks followed by a scream and five gunshots. He yelled up at Becca to see if she was okay, and she replied with a yes. The town he had come to for higher learning, had, so far only taught him survival and reminded him of the CPR skills he learned as a lifeguard at the pool growing up.

~

Brian felt like he had been hit in the head with a pick axe, and his body hurt all over. This was like the worst hang over ever multiplied by a thousand, not to mention the pain of what he could only imagine was several broken bones. He looked over to the bloody mess that was Bloom. Blood spatter was everywhere. The elevator walls were black from smoke, but the blood could still be seen all around the small-darkened room. The last thing he remembered was entering the school through a window and using first aid to bandage up his wounds from the fire. He had no idea where he was, how he got there, or what the hell happened to Bloom. Michael was rambling on and on about how glad he was that Brian was okay, and how they had to get up to Becca, before it was too late.

As they climbed the ladder, Michael told Brian of how strange he had become. Brian knew that he had been infected, and the liquid that his friend had injected him with had to be the antibody. When they finally got to the top, Brian was greeted with a gun to his forehead. At the other end of the gun was Rebecca Bloom.

"You killed my Dad. The mayor was a good man." Becca said with her hands shaking.

"Becca, Brian's normal now. Let us up." Michael called from behind him, still on the ladder.

"Shut up! This is between me and him." Becca yelled back.

Brian carefully finished climbing the ladder with his hands in the air. Once he was fully in the hall with her he said slowly "Give... me... one..." and grabbed the gun from her, before she knew what he was doing. "...Good reason not to kill you!" Brian finished as he aimed the gun back at Becca whose facial expression Brian found humorous.

"Because your dad wouldn't do it." Michael said, joining them in the hall.

"How dare you bring him into this, and how the hell would you know?" Brian said, offended that Michael would even try to bring his dad in to the equation. Michael knew how Brian felt about his dad. Hell, if it weren't for his father, Brian and Michael never would have found themselves in the mess they were in.

"Because it says so right here. Becca and I found his journal." Michael said, handing the black leather bound notebook to Brian. Brian looked at it, and slowly lowered his gun. In the confusion of the last twenty-four

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hours, Brian had completely forgotten that his father was supposed to be in Spring Valley for a conference. How could I have forgotten about it? He took the book from Michael and Becca ran past them both.

"Screw you both, you're on your own." Becca said as she grabbed the serum from Michael's hand and ran down the hall away from both of them.

Brian didn't care. He was too busy reading his father's words. The notebook explained what had happened and had detailed information about how to prepare the serum. It even mentioned that his locker password was junior, which is what he called Brian when he was little. His eyes filled with tears as the honor of his father filled him with pride. He had always been annoyed to be Dr. West's son until now. Now he just hoped he would get out alive to tell his father how much he meant to him.

Michael was talking about the next challenge, which would be getting out of town. Brian realized that he had to shift his focus to survival, and who knew if the government was going to destroy Spring Valley, and if so, how much time they had.

They made their way back up the school's stairwells until Brian stopped cold in his tracks. He had been reading the journal since it was given to him, and he finally found a clue that would give them a chance to survive.

~

Becca ran. She knew she couldn't trust Brian or Michael anymore. She headed down the hall and up the stairs, trying to make it out of the school. She thought that if she made it outside, she could figure out a way out of town. I gotta take this one step at a time. She was glad to be away from Brian and Michael, but hated to be alone again. For awhile she had thought Michael might be okay, but when he went back and got Brian, she knew that the two of them would only get her killed. She couldn't work with the guy that not only killed her father, but also would have shot her, if Michael hadn't stopped him. Brian was an evil man, and Becca had learned only to trust herself.

Becca had lasted this long with very little help; she would make it the rest of the way. How to get out of town was a real challenge. Becca had grabbed the serum and when she thought she was safe, she took the cap off of it. Since it had already been used on Brian, it had his DNA in his blood half way up the needle. She knew she would have to stick the needle in herself deeply to make sure to get enough. She wished that she had waited until Michael convinced Brian to let him use some of his blood, but she was fully prepared to make due with what she had. She rolled up her sleeve and looked for a vein. She could faintly see a blue line in her arm, and decided that it must be the right spot. She looked closely as she got the needle as close to the vein as she could, and stuck it in. It hurt like hell, but she forced the needle in until she couldn't see anymore of Brian's blood. God I hope there is enough of his DNA. She fully saw the irony in the fact that the man who killed her father would be her savior. Her father had given her life, and then Brian took his away, now he was giving her a second chance at life. She couldn't help but think that it wasn't fair that she had been infected in the first place. She had been so careful. She had not been bitten or even scratched, even with all the close calls she had. A simple drop of blood had fallen into her mouth all because she was scared and screaming. There still was a chance that the serum might not work. The directions did say that more DNA, the better the chances were. Becca could only hope.

Becca was forced to stop. She had come to a dead-end in the stairwell she was climbing. A pile of body bags and burning wood blocked her path, and she could see no way around. She descended the half floor she had climbed to the door she had just passed. She foolishly opened it quickly, not expecting more of the infected to be on the other side.

Chapter 15: The Hunger (v.2) Chapter 14 (The CONCLUSION)

FOURTEEN

Michael was glad to have his friend back. He was determined to insure that since he had entered Spring Valley with Brian, that he would leave with him as well. Judging from the look on his face, Brian had just discovered how to make that happen. He smiled and pointed at his father's legacy. Michael was amazed to read what Brian was smiling about. The book had an evacuation plan for VIP personnel. It was the last thing that either of them expected to find in the notebook, but it made sense. Bloom had mentioned something about it at one point, and they both dismissed it as a way to fulfill his twisted plans, but he must have known about it. Michael's guess was that Bloom hoped to find a sample of Dr. West's DNA and the evacuation plan then escape, the sole survivors of a grisly attack, and then sell the sample to the highest bidder in the government... possibly not this government. That selfish prick piece of shit. Michael finally knew how Brian had felt about Bloom the whole time. He didn't know how he could possibly be so naive. He couldn't help but be mad at himself for his foolishness. Just because Bloom had saved him, Michael had followed him like a lost puppy. He would never again doubt his friend.

The plan told about a special phone in a locked office and the code word "Junior West". They would find the office, use the phone and follow the instructions to get out, hopefully before dawn. It was a solid plan, and the only thing that stood between them and it were a few floors of concrete, and possibly hundreds of the infected.

The phone was on the fourth floor, seven floors, and countless undead above them. The elevator was destroyed and not an option, so the only choice was to take the same way that they had come, so they did. All they had to do was follow the blood trail that Brian's wound had left. Since the path was mostly clear on the way down so they hoped that it would still be a safe choice.

As they climbed each floor, the undead seemed to become more and more relentless. The infected grew in numbers making it harder and harder for Michael and Brian to get to their destination. Fortunately, they didn't remember how to open doors, and were slow, so this gave Brian and Michael the advantage. It became a game of outwit the undead as they outran each horde, dodging their swipes and swings then ducking behind closed doors, only firing their weapons when they had to.

As Michael came to the final hall, Brian told him to stop and grabbed his arm.

"Spell that?" Brian asked. Michael inhaled deeply as the smell of wet dog and rotting flesh filled his lungs. Then Michael heard a deep, almost demonic growl. One last undead dog stood in the path of the stairwell that lead up to the gym. This dog was different. Bigger. Meaner. The others had been wolves, this looked like a mixed breed. It looked like Cujo on steroids after mating with a rottweiler. It drooled a mixture of saliva and coagulated blood and growled as if it came straight from hell. This was the truest meaning of the words brute fiend. As it stood at the end of the hall, the creature cut the distance between them in half in a single bound. One more pounce and it would be on top of them. Michael went from relatively calm to heart-pounding-panic in an instant. Michael grabbed for his gun. It was gone. The one time he needed it most, and his firearm was missing. He had forgotten that he gave it to Becca and that the little brat ran off with it. Brian was one step ahead of him, firing the last of his ammo at will. The creature took every shot, without slowing down. It pounced at Brian, as he fired bullet after bullet into the creature's skull. It continued in the air, until it landed at Brian's feet, it reached up with its massive jaw and tore a chunk out of Brian's already wounded leg. He may have been immune to the parasite that the mutt carried, but not to blood loss. The force of the bite made Brian drop the gun, and Michael grabbed it firing a final round into its temple at point blank

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range, blowing its brain matter against the wall. The beast let out a final mammoth breath, then fell lifelessly to the ground. The beast was slain.

Brian's face was getting paler by the minute. Michael had torn off a shirt sleeve and used it to tie off Brian's leg, but was sure that he was prolonging the inevitable. Brian was going to bleed out and die in Spring Valley.

~

Becca opened the door and was greeted by a horde of the undead carriers. The leader of the pack grabbed her arm with an intense grip. Becca fired Michael's weapon at it but missed. The monster lunged toward her pushing her back as its friends all fought each other for a piece of her.

For the first time, Becca looked at its face, and recognized the monster that had her in his clutches. The creature used to be Tom Romero, one of her best friend's big brothers. In life, he had been the object of her first major crush. Tom used to drive Becca and her friends to the mall when all the parents were busy. He had been the captain of the Spring Valley High Football Team and was always with his best friend, George Savani. He was the all American kid next-door, unselfish and kind as he was good looking. As in life, the undead George followed closely behind Tom and was trying to push him out of the way. Becca pried her arm free of the creature's grip and stumbled backward down the stairs. As the flock of living dead lemmings followed Tom down the stairs after Becca, the stairwell above her started to crack. Becca tried to grab the doorknob, but the door was jammed. She pushed at it for a few minutes, until finally it gave way, but not enough for her to get through. By this time, the pack of ravenous undead monsters had made it to her.

Becca knew that her end had come, and that she would soon be with her father. She tried in vain to get the monsters off of her, fighting through the agonizing and paralyzing fear, but soon another carrier joined the first. Becca screamed in fear until she could scream no more. She closed her eyes and fired at the masses, hoping that God would save her.

~

Brian's pain was beyond human. He had slipped into the seventh circle of hell. Brian was sure he would be going to heaven when he died. There was no hell, there was no way it could get any worse than this. It had to be all up from here.

Brian was growing more and more light headed from his quick blood loss. Michael had tried to carry most of his weight, but he was sure they would never make it out of the city together.

"You have to leave me Mikey. You've saved me enough. Save yourself. I'm just slowing you down." Brian asked the impossible of his friend, and he knew it. If the table was turned, he wasn't sure he would be able to leave Michael. The selfish part of him wanted for Michael to say no, but he knew that he would need to try to save his unselfish friend.

"No way man. You're getting out of here with me, alive." Michael said, obviously trying to sound like he was in charge, but fighting back tears.

"Once we find that phone, you gotta leave me in that room. Take the journal. The world's gonna need it if this shit spreads." Brian said, trying to sound brave.

Michael nodded, but Brian was sure that he would try to talk him out of it. He could see it in his friend's eyes. He had only agreed to appease Brian and try to shut him up. It worked.

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When they made it to the secure room, they were pleased to find that the door had been broken open. This would surely save them some time. The phone was locked in a small, black metal box. For being as important as it was, Brian was surprised at how easy it had been to break the lock that guarded the phone. It was a satellite phone, and they instantly got an auto-dial as they turned it on. The automated voice asked for the pass code for clearance and evacuation and Michael said the name in the book. The voice rejected it. A recorded error message told Michael that he was not authorized to clear an evacuation. Brian wanted to try. He had thought that maybe since his father worked at the school, that he would have clearance. Brian spoke the pass code, and the feminine voice gave clearance. She then told them that within a half an hour, an evacuation helicopter would pick them up on the roof of the school's entrance. Now Michael and Brian had a destination, and for the first time, real hope.

Brian's leg was weak. He had tied it off with a torn piece of cloth, just above the wound. The first aid seemed to help and slow the blood flow, but Brian's fear was not death, but that the undead would smell his fresh blood trail and kill both him and Michael. He didn't want to be alone, but he had a sinking feeling that he and Michael would be overcome by the hungry carriers and run out of ammo. He knew that his being around his friend put him in danger. He had a suspicion that the carriers could smell blood like sharks in the water. Brian still felt weak from his close encounter with insanity, and his mind danced with random words and phrases that made no sense. He could barely hold his head together, but things were getting clearer by the minute. He vaguely remembered beating the hell out of Bloom, and hearing a crunching sound as the elevator fell. The pressure from Brian's foot on Bloom's neck had broken it. He knew that he had seen Becca at one point but was unsure where she was now.

"Mike," Brian said, still trying to keep his bearings, "I changed my mind. If we get medical help, I think I could make it... Lets get to the chopper."

"Now you're making some sense." Michael said with a smile.

Michael wrapped his arm around Brian's waste, as Brian leaned on his shoulder. They had made it to the top floor, now it was just a problem of finding roof access. Brian suggested that they take a student access elevator to the top floor and both were excited to find that it worked. Like most of the city, the elevator's walls were covered in bloody hand prints, which gave an uneasy feeling to the pit of Brian's stomach.

The top floor was home to the computer sciences and programming labs, the journalism department, and the creative writing department. The halls would normally look like any other halls, but here they looked like someone had thrown a grenade when they were full of students between classes. Dried blood, bone and flesh chunks lie around the hall like a cannibal college. The lockers were riddled with bullet holes and dents as if a war had broken out. Chills ran down the back of Brian's neck as he looked around the hall from Hades. Most of the doors to the classrooms were closed and undead teachers and students pounded on the windows and doors as they passed. Brian could hear the windows beginning to crack under the constant pounding of the undead palms. Brian was glad that they were too stupid to turn the handles to the doors, but he still was nervous at the sound of the cracking glass. His mind flashed back to the gas station and the all too close call there. He would hate to find himself in a similar situation. Brian knew that they had to hurry because there was no telling when the windows to the classrooms would give way. As Brian's gaze turned to Michael, he noticed the look of lost hope on his buddy's face as they passed the classrooms. This was probably where Michael would have spent most of his time and he was undoubtedly wondering where his future would be now that SVU was gone. Brian knew that Michael could easily get into any school he wanted, but that wasn't the point. Michael had begun to invest some of his self and his future into the very idea of the school. Now that was all gone. He shook away the thoughts after realizing he had no comforting words and looked to what was ahead in the hallway.

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At the end of the hall was a door with a sign reading "Faculty Only". Brian knew that this was it. Access to the roof had to be behind that door.

~

Elsewhere in the school's darkened halls, a pack creatures hungrily followed a scent of their next meal. They were on the hunt. They could smell fresh blood, and followed the scent like a pack of bloodhounds seeking a fugitive. Behind the lead monster was a trail of undead as if following their newly crowned leader. The moans of the dead filled the school, as the masses of carriers grew larger with every floor. Their undead groans sent a clear message to the living that they were not safe for long... A loud message that could not be ignored.

~

Michael was worried about his friend, but had a new found faith that they would make it. They found the door that promised to lead them to their freedom... locked. Michael leaned Brian against the wall and grabbed a fire extinguisher from its red box on the wall. He used the heavy object to pummel the doorknob until it loosened. The sound of metal on metal excited the living dead, who were locked in classrooms banging harder and harder on the glass. Right as Michael hit the doorknob the final time, breaking and sending it to the floor, the sound of hundreds, if not thousands of the dead filled the hall. He looked up the hall to the elevator and stairwell and saw the shadows of the oncoming mob of monsters decorating the hall. As they rounded the corner and entered the hall Michael saw something he had prayed never to see again leading an Army of the dead. Seeing this scared the hell out of Michael but gave the classroom carriers the extra motivation they needed to finally pound through the glass and crawl out into the hall, joining the oncoming legion of the dead. The leader of the undead pack was another juggernaut infected. This one was larger than the one in the tunnels, a five hundred pound beast of a man. The man looked like the sheer force of his step could shatter cement like glass. Puss filled wounds covered its already hideous body, from bullet holes to scratches to bite marks as if the other living dead had been feeding off of it.

"Run." The only word Michael could think of. The juggernaut's massive footsteps shaking the ground beneath him. It was slow, but obviously powerful.

Michael fought to stop panic from gripping him, but it was not easy as he looked at the closest creature to crawl and claw it's way toward him. The pitiful undead had one eye that looked like it had been clawed out as the other dangled from it's socket. Michael shivered at the way the being looked and began kicking at the door. He had broken the knob off of the door, but now he had to get it open. Michael kicked at the door, and after the third kick, it flew open revealing nothing more than a broom closet.

~

Becca's gunshots may have missed the mob of undead, but hit the cracking stair well above her. The bullets riddled the stairs until they crashed down on top of the crowd and gave her an escape route past them. She climbed the rubble and made it into the hall. She suddenly found herself missing Michael. He was better with a gun and she could sure use that skill right about now. She only hoped she could make it back to him before he died.

~

"No, no, no!" Michael was starting to lose it as the mass of monsters continued closed in on them.

"Calm down!" Brian said. "We ain't dead yet!"

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Brian was right, they had to figure out something else. Michael began to search the small broom closet. Metal shelves lined the left wall and dirty mop buckets were scattered around the room. He pulled the door closed behind them as his mind ran through a few futile escape scenarios. Michael stepped further into the small five-foot by seven-foot room and was glad to find that there was more to the room than he had originally thought. On the far side of the shelf was a fire escape ladder that went to the roof. Michael pulled Brian into the room and made him go up the ladder first. While Brian tried to climb the ladder, Michael moved the metal shelf against the door, hoping to hold out the advancing crowd, but knowing that nothing would stop the juggernaut. Due to his injured leg, Brian was having a hard time making it up the ladder, so Michael went up first, intending to pull his friend up.

As Michael climbed the ladder, a loud crash came from behind him. "Grab my foot!" Michael yelled to Brian. Brian grabbed his leg, and Michael continued to pull his body up the ladder, using only his arms and one spare leg. Forcing the roof hatch open with one hand while gripping the ladder with his other proved to be harder than Michael thought it would be. His body shook as he tried to hold the weight of himself and his friend with one arm and an unsteady leg.

With more strength than he thought he had, Michael finally made it to the roof. He turned to grab Brian's hand and help him up only to find that the creatures had made it into the closet. Holding onto Brian's leg was Becca, still alive and scared out of her mind. Little Becca Bloom had survived alone for a short time, but eventually escaped the mass of monsters. She was trying drastically to pull Brian down the ladder, and climb up past him. He screamed in pain as she clawed at his wounded leg wound. Becca would put her fingers into his wound in a moment of panic.

~

Brian knew he had to do something. Something unlike him. Something heroic. "Get up the ladder, I'll distract them! Have them bring the chopper to the side of the building. I'll find you!" Brian screamed as he lifted Becca past him to Michael's waiting hand. He didn't give Michael time to argue. Michael pulled her to the roof and Becca slammed the door closed.

Alone in the hall with the Juggernaut, Brian thought for sure that he found his last moments. The Juggernaut could rip Brian apart without flexing a muscle if it wanted to and Brian knew it. It stopped as if sizing Brian up. The horde followed suit. Brian checked his gun. Out of ammo. He looked up at what he was sure would be his demise. It had gapping wounds from prior battles all across its gut and face. In one spot the wound was so massive that some of its intestines were spilling to the floor dragging behind him, something it seemed not to notice. Suddenly, the ugly bastard began to run, its thunderous steps crushing the floor beneath its feet and almost knocking Brian to the ground. It grabbed Brian before he could react and slammed him against the wall. Brian slowly got back up and before he could catch his breath or reach his feet, the Juggernaut grabbed him again and threw him into the crowd of the dead like a bowling ball towards pins. Brian took what little time he had to look around him, searching for any weapon. Then, as if a gift from god, he spotted it. A soldier that had succumbed to the undead onslaught held a grenade in his hand. Brian began to crawl toward it only to be grabbed and thrown through a wall and into a classroom. His body hurt from head to toe, but Brian knew he had to kill the Juggernaut, if for no other reason than to save his friends above. He stood up, took a deep painful breathe, ran toward the Juggernaut, and at the last moment slid between its legs. The Juggernaut pounded the ground in frustration, and turned around only to find a grenade shoved deep into its stomach. Brian dived into the class room and covered his head.

~

The sound of helicopter blades filled the distant air, as Michael tried to help Becca to her feet. "Look Becca! There's the chopper, we're gonna make it!" Michael said trying to reassure a hysterical Becca. She finally

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came to her feet and Michael let her go, running to the edge to waive down the chopper. Becca reached out to the sky, trying to keep her balance while waiving at the chopper. She stumbled toward Michael as a shot rang out. Michael looked up to see that a sniper in the helicopter was firing at Becca. "No!" Michael yelled at the flying machine. "She's alive!" The sniper must have heard his pleas, because he immediately raised his gun, ceasing fire.

A voice thundered down from the helicopter. "You are safe now, grab the ladder." The chopper dropped a rope ladder to the side of the school. Michael grabbed it to hold it sturdy, then had Becca climb first, her safety a major concern. She climbed the rope ladder as if she had done it a million times before. Before Michael could look back at the roof of the school, the ladder was raising with the helicopter. His feet shook as something below him exploded.

~

The massive explosion cleared the hall and sent a deafening ringing into Brian's ears. The fact that he could hear it meant he was still alive. He took a moment to compose himself and wait for the ringing to stop. Once he could hear again he heard no moans in the halls meaning he was truly alone from the undead infected. Brian sighed in relief... until he heard the first footstep. Brian didn't think there was anyway the Juggernaut could have survived. He peered into the hall only to see the disgusting mess that was left of the FIRST Juggernaut. Behind it, entering the hall, was a second. "Holy shit. I'm fucked."

~

Becca climbed the ladder with ease and was inside before Michael could make it half way up. Thinking quickly with revenge on the brain, Becca said something to the pilot and the sniper. They both reacted immediately. The pilot began descending to the side of the building and the sniper prepared to fire.

~

Becca must have told the pilot about Brian, because the helicopter immediately began to descend to the side of the building. When the side of the building came into view, Michael could faintly make out Brian running for the window. "Bring it down more!" He yelled up at the chopper as he held on to the ladder for dear life. One of the rescue soldiers pulled the ladder up, as the chopper continued to get lower and closer to the window.

~

Brian ran for the window and prepared his body to dive through it. "He's infected!" The sniper yelled out as his finger tightened on the trigger of his rifle, his aim fixed on Brian's head.

"No!" Michael yelled, his voice drowned out by the sound of a single shot. As he watched in horror, Michael saw Brian dive through the window; his arms outstretched for the helicopter, and was met with a bullet in the middle of his forehead. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Brian's arms went limp and he fell to the ground three stories below.

Michael turned his rage to the man who had killed his friend. He tackled the sniper to the floor of the helicopter, holding his head over the edge. "What the hell is wrong with you?! That was Brian West! He wasn't infected, he was fine!"

The sniper's expression changed to a look of shock as the name rang in his ears. "But..." words failed him.

THE HUNGER (v.2)

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Becca had watched silently, as her town slowly got farther and farther away. She didn't know where they were going, and didn't care. She was just glad to escape the hell that had once been her home. She was glad that the man who killed her father was now dead too and felt no guilt about telling the sniper that her 'Friend' was infected and they had agreed to kill him before he could change. Becca began to feel light headed from the flight. For the first time in a week, she took a deep breath, sat back, and relaxed as she scratched her arm, picking at the peeling skin.

THE END...?

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