

The War On Horror: Tales From A Post-Zombie Society

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Smashwords Edition

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## Chapter 1

Elliott was sorting through his phone messages when he learned of his unexpected windfall. “You’re not going to believe this,” he said. “I’ve just inherited seventeen million dollars!”

Miles sat opposite and fiddled with the vents above him. He was trying to get the minibus’s air conditioning to work, but many years had passed since those vents had blown anything other than warm air. “No kidding,” he said without looking away. “I guess this means you can pay me back the twenty dollars I loaned you last week.”

“It says here,” Elliott continued, “that a distant relative of mine, a guy names Johannes Maxwell Elliott, died recently in a tragic zombie attack.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It turns out he’s a member of the Swiss royal family, and that I’m his closest living relative. Which is weird, because I’ve never even heard of the guy.”

“It’s also a bit strange that his last name is the same as your first name, rather than having the same surname. Or that Switzerland has no royal family.”

“Let me guess,” Adam said from the driver’s seat. “They can transfer the money into your account just as soon as you pay a small administration fee?”

Elliott skimmed through the rest of the message. “It doesn’t mention anything about fees. But even so, who cares? Seventeen million!”

“Maybe you should ask them to waive any fees in exchange for a percentage of the inheritance,” Miles deadpanned.

“Hey, that’s a good idea.” Elliott sat up in his seat and began composing a reply.

“Come on Elliott, I was joking. You really shouldn’t engage with people like that.”

“Relax, baby,” Elliott grinned. “I’ll just have a bit of fun with it.”

“I doubt they’ll see the funny side if you start jerking them around. Those people are known to get pretty nasty.”

Elliott let out a dismissive snort. “What can they do from the other side of the world?”

Miles sighed and gave up on the air-con.

The minibus struggled to pick up speed as it travelled up a steep incline.

A minute later the GPS instructed Adam to take a left into Shriver Court, and they quickly spotted the creature they had been called out to collect. The jovial mood inside the bus subsided. Elliott put his phone away. Miles’ pulse quickened a little.

“This could get a bit tense,” Adam warned as he pulled over to the side of the road and switched off the ignition. “A situation like this, we’re going to have to be extra careful.”

Their target this Friday evening was a young man in his early twenties. Or at least he was a day or two ago. Now he was a zombie. He wore a blood-drenched Fugazi t-shirt and ripped black jeans.

But he wasn’t what Adam was referring to when he said they would have to exercise caution. He was talking about the burgeoning crowd that had gathered nearby.

The three collected their equipment and stepped off the minibus.

The zombie staggered around in the middle of the road, while concerned residents watched on from their houses. They stood guard on their lawns, brandishing brooms and rakes, or whatever else they could find to protect themselves. A few hurled insults and abuse at the neighbourhood interloper. Others hurled rocks and bottles.

Adam and Miles knew from experience that this was where the real potential for conflict lay. The zombie didn’t pose any significant threat to their safety. They had collected hundreds, maybe even thousands like it over the past three years. Zombies were easy to handle because they were predictable. A restless crowd was anything but predictable.

Adam could sense trouble brewing, so he quickly moved in.

“Everybody listen up,” he announced to the crowd. His voice dropped down to a lower register in an attempt to convey a more masculine and authoritative tone. His years spent at drama school came in handy in times like this, where he could turn into Bruce Willis when the situation demanded it. “I’m sure you’re all familiar with the NEVADA law, which states that any act of violence or aggression towards an undead being is a criminal offence.”

This proclamation was met with a chorus of boos from the crowd. Further missiles sailed through the air. Adam pressed on.

“You may not agree with it, but it’s the law. So if you could all please return to your homes and we’ll have this under control as soon as possible. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Why are you protecting a killer?” came an angry voice from somewhere in the crowd. Several others expressed their agreement.

Adam ignored the vitriol fired in his direction. He was experienced enough to know it was pointless trying to reason with a volatile mob, and the best way for him to defuse the situation would be to get the job done as quickly as possible.

He and Elliott moved in on the zombie, while Miles stood back and kept an eye open for signs of trouble.

Miles positioned himself in such a way that the zombie and the crowd were both within his field of vision. While his role tonight was to keep watch on the crowd, he still couldn’t let his guard down with an unsecured zombie on the loose. He trusted that Adam and Elliott could apprehend it without too much difficulty, but it was always best to keep in mind the possibility of a surprise attack.

He scanned the crowd, trying to get a sense of who these people were. They were generally just everyday folk whose only concern was their family’s safety, regular homeowners with jobs and mortgages and flags flying proudly on their front lawns. They may have been afraid, but that was mostly due to their own ignorance rather than any real threat to their wellbeing. There was a small minority who were more vocal and seemed eager to stir up trouble, but they were all talk and no action, shooting their mouths off from the safety of the crowd. If they were going to do anything about it, if they had planned on following through with their threats and take the law into their own hands, they would have done so already.

But there was one guy in particular who caught Miles’ attention. He stood away from the main group, talking into his phone. He kept his voice low and shielded his mouth with his hand. He made brief eye contact with Miles, before quickly turning away.

This kind of behaviour was a red flag. There was every chance he was calling up friends or hired muscle to come down here and dispense their own form of justice.

“How we doing there, Adam?” Miles asked tentatively. He had kept his cool up until then, but now the nerves were slowly starting to kick in.

“We’re almost done, guy,” Adam replied.

Adam had recently started referring to everyone as “guy”, believing this was how young people spoke these days. This had begun a couple of days earlier, when he overheard Elliott saying it during a phone conversation. He was unaware that Elliott was talking with his older brother, and that his brother’s name was Guy.

“We’ll be out of here in about three minutes,” Adam added.

Miles looked around and tried to piece together the sequence of events in the hours leading up to this moment. It wasn’t all that difficult to figure out; the empty beer cans scattered nearby were a dead giveaway. In all likelihood, a group of liquored-up young men got a bit too close to our undead friend, and this was the result.

And then he saw the reason for all the hate directed towards the zombie. Sitting on the side of the road, clutching at his wrist with a tear-streaked face, was a young man by the name of Lucas. He was twenty-one years old and, thanks to the chunk of flesh missing from his forearm, wouldn’t live to see twenty-two.

How this all went down was fairly easy to figure out. Lucas and his friends probably came across this stray zombie on their way to a party and thought it would be hilarious to have their picture taken with it. This was the latest craze sweeping the internet; strike a crazy pose next to a zombie, take a photo, then post it online. Unfortunately for Lucas, he let his guard down for half a second and ended up paying the ultimate price. He wouldn't be the first to get too close to a zombie under these circumstances, and he was unlikely to be the last.

Situations like this were becoming all too frequent. Friday and Saturday nights was the most common time for zombie attacks, and the victims were predominantly young men. Alcohol was almost always a contributing factor, as was a low IQ. No matter how many times they were warned, they simply refused to take the risks seriously.

"Invincibility" remained the leading cause of death among young males.

Another bottle flew through the air and smashed at the zombie's feet, just as Elliott almost had it under control. It staggered back a few steps and unleashed a vicious growl.

"We better get moving," Adam said. He knew the situation wasn't about to get any easier for them. On jobs like this one, "concerned citizens" can escalate into "rabid lynch mob" with frightening speed. All it took was for one ringleader to do something idiotic and the rest would soon follow.

A fist-sized rock hit Elliott between his shoulder blades. He winced at the sharp sudden pain and spun around, ready for a confrontation.

"Hey!" he shouted in the direction from where the rock came. "Who threw that?"

This inquiry was met with further missiles and catcalls. Elliott took a step forward, the blood surging to his head. Miles threw an arm out to hold him back.

"Let it go, Elliott."

"We're just here to do our job! Don't they realise they're only making things worse?"

"Look at it from their point of view. Under the circumstances, we have to show a bit of sensitivity and understanding."

Out of nowhere, a car pulled up with its tyres screeching. The doors flew open and a bunch of gorilla-sized dudes with neck tattoos and baseball bats emerged.

"Uh-oh," Miles said when he saw the roid-ragers approaching.

"You think they'll show any sensitivity and understanding?" Elliott said.

Adam grabbed a hold of the zombie, who was now fully shackled. His hands were bound together with cable ties, and a protective muzzle was clamped around his face to prevent him from biting anyone.

"Okay," Adam said. "We better get him out of here."

They bundled the zombie into the minibus and closed the door behind them. A feeling of slight panic was beginning to creep in. They were parked in a street with only one way out. If another vehicle blocked them in from behind they could find themselves in a world of trouble.

Adam jammed the key into the ignition and prayed the bus wouldn't stall, as it had a tendency to do. His prayers were answered when it started on the second attempt.

Another bottle slammed into the side of the bus as it sped away from the scene. It didn't smash, but it did leave a sizable indentation.

Adam cringed. He'd been arguing for months with Steve, his partner in both business and life, about the need for Dead Rite to replace the creaky old minibus. But every time the bus returned from a job with further damage it just strengthened Steve's resolve to not bother getting a new one. He didn't want to shell out money for a new vehicle if it was only going to get trashed.

"That got a bit hairy," Adam said once they were finally in the clear.

"Yeah," was all Miles said in response.

"Was is always this bad?" Elliott said, running his hand over the lump forming on his back where the rock hit him.

“It’s hard to say,” Adam replied, his speaking voice reverting back to its normal camp pitch. “I think it’s been getting worse in the last year or so.”

“It’s *definitely* been getting worse,” Miles said. “The first year, we saw something like that maybe three or four times. And that was only in the rougher areas of town. Now we’re getting it three or four times a *month*, and in the suburbs too.”

The three of them had dropped into a nearby Aqua Bar, a popular health food franchise, for a quick bite to eat. The place was mostly empty, save for a few late-night revellers who thought that having a sushi roll instead of a kebab would cancel out all those calories they consumed earlier in the evening. They’d left the zombie in the minibus for the time being, which was a slight breach of protocol – they were supposed to take him directly to a processing centre – but none of them had eaten yet, so they stopped by for a sandwich. Besides, it was a fairly quiet night (the events of the last twenty minutes notwithstanding) and they figured they may as well hang around the area a little while longer and wait for Lucas to turn. Make it a two-for-one kind of deal.

“Did you see those kids throwing rocks?” Elliott said, shaking his head. “How old do you think they were? Ten, eleven maybe?”

“And the stuff coming out of their mouths,” Adam added. “‘Kill it! Smash its head open!’ Where do they learn all that?”

Hostility towards the undead had risen dramatically in recent times. It had always been there, simmering beneath the surface, but lately it had exploded. A recent poll showed that seventy-seven percent of the population now believed that all zombies should be exterminated rather than quarantined. A further sixty-three percent said the government were not doing enough to protect the public from zombies, despite attacks on civilians dropping by almost eighty percent in the past two years.

Elliott sucked down the remainder of his juice and looked at his watch. “So how long we got until Lucas turns?”

“Not too much longer,” Miles replied. “Maybe another half an hour.”

Elliott shook his head sadly. “Poor guy. I can’t imagine what that must be like. Not knowing how much longer you have left to live.”

“None of us know how much longer we have left to live,” Miles said.

“You know what I mean.”

“Don’t feel too bad for him, guy,” Adam said. “I don’t mean to sound callous, but he has no one to blame but himself. If those kids had done what they were supposed to do, which is report the zombie and have us come and collect it, then he’d still be alive. Instead, they saw the zombie as a source of amusement rather than something tragic. Something that not too long ago was human. It might even be considered poetic justice.”

“It might also be considered improving the gene pool,” Miles quietly added.

“Still,” Elliott said, fiddling with his straw. “It seems like a harsh price to pay for one moment of stupidity.”

While Adam and Miles had been in the undead management and control business for some time now, Elliott was still relatively green. He had joined Dead Rite just two weeks ago – he and Miles had been friends since childhood, and Miles had helped him get the job – and he didn’t yet have the hardened outlook on life the others had.

“Our tax dollars at work, eh?”

They looked up and saw a spotty young guy, a raver wearing a tight pink t-shirt, passing by their table.

Miles’ eyebrows shot up. “I’m sorry?”

“How’s about you get a real job?” the raver sneered as he walked to the door.

“How’s about you mind your own business?” Miles called out after him.

He shook his head in annoyance, before noticing that Adam and Elliott both had smirks spread

across their faces.

“What?” he fumed. “Just because we’re taxpayer-funded means we’re not entitled to a meal break?”

“Ignore it,” Adam said, more amused than offended. “It’s not worth losing any sleep over.”

## Chapter 2

It was after 2:00 a.m. by the time Miles finally made it home. He didn't mind working the late shift. Most of the other staff did whatever they could to avoid being rostered on at that time, but he was the only one that actually volunteered for it. It meant he could sleep in as long as he liked, and he avoided the hottest part of the day during the summer months. It also meant occasionally having to deal with belligerent drunks and other assorted headaches who only emerged once the sun had gone down, but overall it wasn't too bad.

He opened the front door and was instantly hit in the face with a blast of icy air. While this feeling was initially quite pleasant, it was soon offset by the realisation that his housemate Clea and her hippie friends were in, and they'd probably had the air conditioner running for fifteen hours straight. For a bunch of committed environmentalists and global warming crusaders, they didn't hesitate sucking up megawatts of power if it meant improving their comfort level.

He heard their voices as he passed the door to the lounge room. Several were engaged in a lively discussion regarding the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche – or, more accurately, they were regurgitating the views of their Philosophy 101 lecturer and passing them off as their own.

This kind of rambling, meandering, pretentious conversation could only mean one thing: they were all baked. Actually, the stench of burning cannabis wafting throughout the house was probably a bigger giveaway that they were all baked. Miles didn't care too much if they wanted to blaze up all day every day, but he'd asked Clea a hundred times not to smoke inside the house.

He'd also asked her a hundred times to keep the back door closed, especially when the air conditioning was running, but she could sometimes get a little absent-minded during a marathon smoke-session.

Miles went to close the door, and he heard a rustling sound. He stuck his head outside to investigate. He couldn't see anything. But there was definitely something moving out there, like an animal of some description.

He found a flashlight and took a few cautious steps into the backyard. The beam of light swept across the yard, scouring for movement. Nothing. It was probably just a neighbour's cat, or maybe a possum.

He heard a grunt and swung the light towards the noise, down and to his left.

For a split second, Miles' heart stopped beating. He dropped the torch and hightailed it back inside the house.

It took him a moment to calm down after receiving the fright of his life. Although what he saw was probably harmless, when you're not expecting something like that it can be quite terrifying.

He opened the door to the lounge room. It smelled like a rapper's tour bus.

Clea sat cross-legged on the floor in the centre of the room, and was midway through a prolonged soliloquy about whether animals were aware of their own mortality.

"Clea," Miles said. "Could I have a word, please?"

Clea slowly climbed to her feet and stepped into the hallway, glassy-eyed from the all-day smokefest.

"W'sup?" she said.

"Fun night?"

"Oh, y'know, just another meeting."

Clea was part of an activist group who called themselves the Tribe of Zeroes. Meetings were frequently held in Miles' lounge room, although they had a tendency to get sidetracked once the ganja came out.

"We're having another protest down at the courthouse tomorrow," she continued. "You should come down and check it out."

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do that,” Miles said, knowing full well that he had no intention of doing anything of the sort. “So ... is there any reason why we have a massive pig in our backyard?”

“Oh, that’s Squealer,” Clea replied, as if that sufficiently answered his question.

“Squealer?”

“Amoeba and some of his RAAT friends rescued him from a tattoo parlour.”

When she was stoned, Clea would speak in the vaguest of terms and provide as little information as possible. Miles knew that Amoeba was one of Clea’s hippie friends, a performance artist and professional weirdo, and RAAT was Revolutionaries Against Animal Torture, a radical animal rights group he was a member of. But he was still having trouble figuring out where a pig the size of a miniature pony fitted into all of this.

“What was a tattoo parlour doing with a pig?” he said.

“They use them to practice on.”

“What do you mean practice on?”

“They use the pig’s skin to practice their tattooing. It’s totally barbaric. So the RAAT guys broke in last night and liberated him. I said it’d be okay if Squealer stayed here until, y’know, the heat died down.”

Miles couldn’t help but be amused by Clea’s choice of words, as if the police were scouring the area on the lookout for a heavily-tattooed fugitive pig.

He was also amused that Amoeba and RATT had lowered their ambitions somewhat. A few months back, Amoeba was telling anyone who would listen about his plans to break into a medical research facility that tested their products on animals. He soon discovered that these labs had fortress-like levels of security and were more or less impenetrable. RATT were forced to seek out something more in line with their capabilities – hence the tattoo parlour.

“It’s not a problem, is it?” Clea said.

“I guess not,” Miles sighed. “As long as he doesn’t make too much mess.”

“He won’t. Pigs are actually pretty clean animals. Cleaner than some humans.”

Miles pictured what his lounge room would look and smell like tomorrow morning once the Tribe of Zeroes have had their way with it. He had no trouble believing that a pig would create less mess than twelve greasy potheads.

Miles awoke the next morning and found his house in the precise state in which he expected it to be in. Clea and her friends had moved on, but their scent lingered. It was a stale potpourri of mung beans, incense and bong water, and it was so thick you could almost taste it. It was on days like today that Miles had to remember to leave home immediately after showering, otherwise the smell would latch on to him and follow him around for the rest of the day.

He made sure his younger sister Shae left for school on time, then set about cleaning the place up. He took the beer cans out of the freezer, which had exploded and spilled over all the food, and the ice cream out of the refrigerator, which had melted and leaked everywhere. He disposed of the remnants of a peanut butter, bacon and M&Ms sandwich, possibly dreamed up by someone who had smoked so much weed that the spirit of Elvis stopped by to inhabit their body. He tossed all the empty bottles and cans into a big black garbage bag, emptied the overflowing ashtrays, then opened the curtains and windows to let in some sunlight and fresh air.

It was then he heard a tortured groan, coming from somewhere behind the couch.

“Hey, man ...” the voice said. “Would you mind closing that?”

Miles looked across and saw that the pile of dirty clothes and towels in the corner of the room was actually a sleeping hippie by the name of Fabian.

In the harsh morning light, Fabian looked even rattier than usual. He was skinnier than a heroin-addicted cancer patient and whiter than an albino’s corpse. His ginger dreadlocks were splayed across the floor like a giant squashed orange spider. He wore his hippie uniform of tattered jeans and a hemp

shirt that he never, ever changed.

“Sorry,” Miles said. “I didn’t realise anyone was still here.”

Miles wasn’t sure why he was apologising to Fabian, since this was his home and Fabian didn’t live there. Not officially, anyway. But in recent months he had become something of a semi-permanent resident, and he now spent more time at the house than Miles did. Fabian was used to living in squats, so the concept of overstaying one’s welcome was foreign to him.

“Where’s Clea?” Miles asked.

“She had to leave early to set up for the rally or something,” Fabian mumbled.

“So why are you still here?”

Fabian’s freckled brow furrowed, like he didn’t understand the question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean if Clea’s gone, then what reason do you have to be here?”

“Clea said I could sleep here a bit longer if I wanted to.”

“Don’t you have a home to go to?”

“What’s the big deal? I’ve crashed here before, yeah?”

“As a guest of Clea’s. If she’s not here then you’re just some dude occupying a stranger’s floor.”

Fabian sniffed and rubbed his eyes. “So what are you tryin’ to say?”

“I’m just saying this isn’t a hotel, Fabian I don’t mind you staying here occasionally, but every night for weeks on end is pushing it.”

“Geez, I’m sorry you have to deal with such pressing first world problems, man,” Fabian said, pulling a blanket over his head. “Send me an invoice if it’s that important to you.”

Miles shook his head and carried on with his cleaning duties. He opened up every curtain and window in the house and allowed the blinding sunlight to flood in. He made sure to make as much noise as possible while doing so.

Miles’ job as an undead management and control worker put him in direct opposition with the ethos of the Tribe of Zeroes. They believed that all former humans should be freed from the processing centres, and called for an end to worldwide zombie incarcerations. Despite this, Miles and Clea maintained something of an uneasy truce; she never hassled him about his job, and he allowed the group to host the occasional gathering at the house.

Some of the other Zeroes – Fabian in particular – weren’t interested in such niceties. Fabian was openly hostile towards Miles, and it never occurred to him that he should show at least a modicum of respect towards the owner of the house you’re currently living in rent-free.

Fabian and Clea met several years ago. They had a shared passion for social justice and organised complaining, although Fabian seemed more interested in Clea than in any particular cause. It was just a pity that Clea didn’t feel quite the same way about him. She regarded Fabian as something of a house pet, like a loyal puppy that trailed two steps behind her everywhere she went and did whatever was asked of him. Clea was well aware of Fabian’s feelings towards her, and she didn’t appear to be the least bit guilty about exploiting these feelings.

After the death of his parents, Miles moved back into the family home to look after his younger sister Shae. He decided to rent out the spare room to bring in some extra cash. The house was still a few years away from being paid off, and the mortgage repayments were surprisingly hefty. He discovered that his parents had somewhat overextended themselves by borrowing quite a bit more than they could afford.

Clea appeared to be the most normal and least threatening of all the candidates they interviewed. She had a pleasant demeanour, was reasonably polite and well-spoken, and when she offered to pay the first six months’ rent up-front it was obvious that money wouldn’t be a problem. Miles also thought it would be good for Shae, who was thirteen at the time, to have an older female presence in her life.

What he didn’t count on was the baggage that would come with letting such a “free spirit” into his house. Clea was something of a hippie – Miles probably should have figured that out for himself when

he learned she was twenty-seven and an arts student – and hippies are not solitary creatures. They congregate in packs, and if you let one into your house you invite them all in. Kind of like termites, and almost as difficult to get rid of.

In the two-and-a-half years since Clea moved in, Miles had encountered an endless cavalcade of colourful characters who were now regular visitors to the house. There was Tariq, the Iranian chemistry student who was also the son of a highly-regarded heart surgeon. Tariq had recently dropped out of college to pursue his vocation as a hardcore anarchist. He looked forward to the day when the masses would rise up and revolt, tearing down the corrupt system and allowing outright chaos to reign. He kept these views hidden from his parents, though; they had risked their lives fleeing Iran when Tariq was a child to escape the very real anarchy that was enveloping the country at the time.

There was also Mai, a recent addition to the Tribe of Zeroes, although no one really knew exactly what she contributed to the group. All Mai seemed to do was hang out at the house and smoke everyone's pot. She would occasionally hold up signs at protests and chant slogans for whatever cause Clea happened to be rallying behind, but her heavy weed consumption meant that her efforts were usually fairly lackluster. Some in the group believed the main reason for keeping her around was to fulfill a diversity quota. Clea insisted that the group have a Noah's Ark membership policy, which meant that every minority group had to be represented at least twice. Since Mai was both Asian and a lesbian, she ticked two of these boxes at once.

And then there was Fabian, the twenty-two-year-old freegan and self-proclaimed "spanner in the corporate machine". Fabian was an anti-capitalist warrior, committed to bringing down the inequitable system which was destroying humanity and making rich people even richer at the expense of the poor. His infatuation with Apple products and predilection for Nike footwear suggested that his ideals were somewhat flexible.

All these and more converged on the house for these rainbow gatherings, often leaving Miles to feel like an intruder inside his own home. He'd lost count of the number of times he had come home to find a bunch of unwashed dread-heads reading Kerouac aloud on his front porch, while a crew of crusty, rhythmically-challenged ferals bashed away on their bongos in the backyard. He once thought a "drum circle" was named due to the circular way in which the participants arranged themselves. He now knew it was called that because when you're listening to one, it seemingly had no end.

For the most part, these people were a bunch of dropouts on a narcissistic crusade of ineffectual rebellion. Perpetual adolescents avoiding the real world for as long as possible. None of them had jobs, and few had worked a day in their lives. Most, like Clea, were eternal students undertaking arts degrees of some description, the kind of which had no practical application in the real world. Clea was majoring in Sociology and Contemporary Gender Studies.

Here were a bunch of future waitresses and bartenders with doctorates in philosophy.

It's a known fact that one in six wait staff have college degrees, and the most common job for arts graduates is telemarketer.

For all their activism and socially-conscious rabble-rousing, what they were really protesting was their comfortable upbringings. Almost all of them were the product of stable upper-middle class families, a fact they now resented. In their eyes, growing up with no disadvantage was in itself a disadvantage. They had spent so much of their lives inside their safe, sheltered cocoons that they believed their personal growth had been stunted. This was their way of making up for it.

The reality was the whole thing was a self-indulgent exercise in class tourism. They could all dress in rags, let their unwashed hair grow long and pretend to be poor, safe in the knowledge that, unlike actual poor people, they could opt out at any moment. Once the perceived glamour of poverty wore off they could cut their hair, remove their piercings, put on a suit, and resume their position in bourgeois society with a collection of future dinner party anecdotes about their youthful adventures running with the underclass.



## Chapter 3

“Harbouring an undead being is a crime,” the stern voice over intoned to the train’s passengers. “If someone you know is undead, it is your duty to report it immediately. Anyone found to be hiding or protecting a former human risks fines of up to one hundred thousand dollars and two years imprisonment.”

Sitting uncomfortably on the train’s hard plastic seats, Miles did his best to block out another public service announcement. The rail operators were reaping in tens of millions of dollars per year ever since they decided it would be a good idea to bludgeon commuters with non-stop advertisements during their journey, but evidently none of that money went into improving passenger comfort. He was already nursing a slight hangover, and these incessant announcements weren’t making things any easier for him.

“And remember: Be vigilant. Be vocal. Help us win the war on horror.”

In the seat behind him, two obnoxious teenagers giggled over a clip they were viewing on their phones. It was another of those sadistic viral videos, the latest online fad that featured comic violence against the undead. Last year’s craze had homeless people fighting zombies for money. This year, it was all about movie parodies. Amateur filmmakers would post shot-by-shot recreations of scenes from cinematic classics, but with zombies playing the role of the victim.

So far there had been the ear-slicing scene from *Reservoir Dogs*, followed by the toll booth scene from *The Godfather* and the baseball bat scene from *The Untouchables*. Each video attempted to outdo what came before it in terms of violence and sheer depravity. The more extreme the footage, the more views it attracted.

The current record holder, with over two hundred million views to date, was the *Casino* head-in-a-vice clip.

Judging by the disturbing sounds coming from the boys’ phones behind him, Miles assumed this the latest one paid homage to the woodchipper scene from *Fargo*.

He put his headphones on and turned the music up.

Miles watched the needle as it penetrated his skin and entered the vein. He had a phobia of needles when he was younger, but seemed to have gotten over that now. Maybe it was because he’d seen plenty worse, and minor things like blood and skin lacerations no longer had any effect on him. It was a different world, and his idea of what was normal had been irreversibly altered.

When he was fifteen, he almost passed out when someone in his home economics class sliced their finger open and spilled blood everywhere. Now he had become much more desensitised. A few weeks back, when he was packing up after a particularly messy job, he noticed a severed foot lying in the gutter and thought nothing of it.

The research lab was busier than usual today, and he had to wait over an hour for his turn. About thirty people had lined up before him, eager to sell their blood.

He sometimes felt guilty about selling blood for money when he could instead be donating it to save lives. He felt slightly better about it when he learned that he wouldn’t have been eligible to donate anyway, since anyone who worked with the undead was prohibited. The odds of him having infected blood were miniscule, but they still insisted on the extra precautions. If a healthy person was mistakenly contaminated with infected blood, the results are catastrophic. The recipient becomes a ticking time bomb who can turn into a zombie at any moment.

A local hospital had recently settled two lawsuits from plaintiffs claiming that family members had been turned into former humans after receiving transfusions with tainted blood.

They weren’t quite as fussy here at the research lab. Human blood had become a highly sought-after commodity in a post-zombie world, and the race was on between the biotech firms to deliver a

vaccine or a cure for the infection. Their research required megalitres of blood which they used to study exactly how the infection reacted, why it behaved the way it did, and how they could stop it from spreading. Donors were paid \$200 per pint. This was considered to be a rather generous amount, but since a successful vaccine was literally a trillion-dollar idea the companies involved didn't hesitate in paying that much.

The search for a cure had been underway for almost three years now, but it was yet to produce any meaningful results.

Dr. Martin Bishop, one of the world's leading authorities on the spread of the infection, believed that an effective vaccine could be developed within the next twelve months if only the biotech firms made their findings open to the public. He called on governments to force these firms to disclose the results of their trials, saying it was ridiculous to have the world's greatest scientific minds competing against one another instead of collaborating and building on each others' work. But his pleas fell on deaf ears, and at present none of them were any closer to finding a cure than when they began.

Last year Vidar Skredsvig, an infamous Norwegian hacker and activist, was arrested after posting tens of thousands of documents online that had been stolen from the databases of Amylin Pharmaceuticals. He is currently facing a two hundred year prison sentence for the heinous crime of endangering the future earnings of a billion-dollar corporation.

"Since this government took office, there have been over seven thousand undead attacks in this state alone," the ominous voice declared over a dramatic soundtrack. "This is a figure that rises daily."

Miles glanced up at the TV in the corner of the room while he waited for the blood bag to fill. It was another election ad insulting his intelligence. Networks had bombarded viewers with these ads over the past few months.

The onscreen counter ticked over, displaying the tally so far: 7413.

"How many more innocent victims have to die before they admit they've lost control of the situation? On March 1, vote for Bernard Marlowe. It's time to take our country back from the grip of horror."

This ad was played at least four or five times every hour, with an updated death counter to keep the public up to speed on just how many lives had been lost. Miles already had a fairly low opinion of politicians, but exploiting an ongoing tragedy for political mileage seemed to be hitting a new low.

He turned away from the TV and looked at the blood draining out of his arm. This was a sight he found to be slightly less nauseating.

The bag filled and the needle was removed, and the nurse covered the entry point with a band aid. Miles was running a bit behind schedule and tried to leave straight away, but the nurse advised him to rest a little while longer. He waited a few minutes, then jumped up out of his seat shortly after she left the room.

He moved a bit too fast. His vision went grey and fuzzy, like TV reception in a thunderstorm. He held onto the chair for balance and took a few slow, calming breaths until it passed and he regained his focus.

The woman at the reception handed Miles his cheque and let him have a lollipop from the jar on the counter. He took a second one when she wasn't looking.

He deposited the cheque at a nearby ATM. This brought his bank balance to \$15,579.29. That may have seemed like a significant amount of money, but Miles couldn't help but feel a little deflated every time he looked at that figure. This was all he had to show for two-and-a-half years of working at Dead Rite. After scrimping and saving every dollar, renting out a room in his house, buying generic brand everything, walking and using public transport instead of buying a car, and selling his blood every two months, it only amounted to \$15,579.29. That equated to about six grand a year, or five hundred dollars a month. After all that effort, he'd managed to put away seventeen dollars a day.

Clea spent that much on coffee.

The bus slowed to a crawl after a short distance before it finally came to a complete stop.

“Sorry folks,” the driver announced to the passengers. “Looks like we could be in for some delays. Some sort of protest rally up ahead.”

The way the driver uttered the words “protest rally”, and the groans that followed from the passengers, said it all. This was the latest public display of dissent from the Tribe of Zeroes, the one they had been planning the night before.

Organising protests was now Clea’s number one priority, her studies relegated a distant second. Her first one was about a year ago, after a far-right Finnish politician said that only those with “loose morals” were susceptible to the zombie infection. Miles wasn’t sure if Clea was genuinely outraged by these ignorant comments from a man she’d never heard of in a country she couldn’t locate on a map, or if she just wanted to put on a street party for herself and her like-minded friends. He suspected it was the latter.

Protesting and civil disobedience had become Clea’s main interest, even if at the end of the day nothing was ever achieved. Her protests were usually about as effective as her online petitions, and these weren’t worth the kilobytes of disc space they occupied. She often boasted that her petition calling for all former humans to be freed from processing centres had attracted over 200,000 signatures. She was unaware that three times as many people had signed an online petition demanding that Eddie Murphy make a sequel to *Norbit*.

Today’s rally was in response to the outcome of a court case earlier in the week. Four men were convicted of killing a zombie and sentenced to five years in prison. It was a case that had divided the nation. Supporters of the men said that they were upstanding citizens who provided a valuable service to their community, and were now being imprisoned to appease vocal minority groups. Opponents decried them as callous murderers who killed for the sheer thrill of it, and deserved much harsher sentences.

It was difficult to disagree with the latter assessment. The four men had spotted the zombie stumbling around a nearby park one Saturday night, but instead of reporting it to the authorities they stalked it for over twenty minutes before bashing it over the head with an axe handle, chaining its feet to the tow bar of their truck, then driving around town until the zombie’s parts were spread across a two mile radius. They probably would have gotten away with it, too – the police generally don’t have the time, resources or inclination to investigate every reported case of zombicide – except for the fact that one of the men filmed the whole thing and posted it online. He was smart enough to blur out the faces of all the men involved; unfortunately, he forgot to blur the truck’s licence plate as well.

Up until that point authorities had been willing to turn a blind eye to instances of violence against the undead, despite the recent introduction of the NEVADA law which prohibited this kind of premeditated zombie thrill kill. But this incident was so horrific, and the uproar so resounding, they had no choice but to press charges. The four men were convicted of using excessive force on an undead being and were handed the longest custodial sentences to date for an act of violence against a former human.

But the Tribe of Zeroes still weren’t satisfied. They were out in force today and had traffic banked up in every direction. They were furious, and they wanted the world to know it.

Ten minutes passed, and Miles decided he had waited long enough. He got off the bus, figuring it would be quicker for him to walk the rest of the way.

He looked at his watch as he hurried along the street. His shift was due to start in twelve minutes. He had no chance of making it to work on time today.

## Chapter 4

Miles came into work forty-five minutes past his designated starting time. He was about to go to Steve's office to explain his tardiness when it occurred to him that no one had even noticed. They hadn't had any calls yet, and everyone else was busy with their own affairs. And while Steve was usually a fairly understanding and flexible kind of boss, he had been in something of a touchy mood over the past few days, so Miles decided not to risk it.

It was after 5:00 p.m. when the first job for the day finally came in.

Miles, Elliott, and another coworker, Felix, were dispatched to investigate at the outer suburban home. A concerned resident had reported some suspicious behaviour at their neighbouring property, and it didn't take long for Miles to conclude that those suspicions were wholly justified. The lawns were overgrown, the garden had withered and died, and several weeks' worth of junk mail spilled out from the letterbox. Either the people living here were zombies, or they had all been struck down with a case of spontaneous agoraphobia.

Miles conducted a quick preliminary investigation of the house to determine what exactly they were dealing with.

"Looks like we have four obits," he told Elliott and Felix, peering in through the windows. "A father, a mother, and two daughters, aged about twelve and sixteen."

"Obit" was an industry term, short for obituary, and referred to the number of undead beings at a given location.

The three cautiously entered the house and met the zombie family. Just by looking at them, Miles could tell they had been in here for some time. Their skin had a yellowish pigment and sagged like a deflated balloon. All were badly malnourished, their bones visibly jutting out from beneath their rotting flesh. The smell of death lingered in the air. By his estimation, they'd turned more than three weeks ago.

The industry term for this type of zombie was "rotter". Due to the mess they could create, rotters had to be handled with care.

They went for the father first. Miles moved slowly towards the zombie, careful not to startle him with any sudden moves. He maneuvered his snare pole up towards the zombie's neck.

A snare pole was a long, thin, tubular piece of aluminum, like something a dog catcher would use, with a two-pronged claw at one end. A lever at the other end controlled the claw, clamping it shut around the zombie's neck.

Miles held the zombie firmly in place, and Elliott came in from behind and slid the grill around its head. The grill clicked shut and effectively muzzled the zombie. When this was in place the zombie was incapable of biting anyone, and so it no longer posed a threat.

The hard part was over. Elliott then held the zombie's wrists together, Felix slipped on the cable ties, and they escorted him out of the house and into the back of the minibus.

The whole job took just over an hour. When they were done they packed their gear away and ensured the four zombies were strapped tightly in their seats.

Miles returned to the house for one final check to make sure they hadn't missed anything.

The house appeared empty, but it was company policy to check inside each room and behind every door before leaving to be absolutely certain that every last zombie had been accounted for.

He found a door leading down to a basement. He opened it and slowly descended the stairs.

He stopped momentarily when he was overcome with sudden feelings of vertigo, and the fear that he might lose his balance and tumble down into the black abyss below. He leaned against the wall for a moment until the sensation passed, and reminded himself that he was probably still a little light-headed after giving blood a few hours ago.

He took the stairs one at a time, slowly moving his hand along the wall until he came across a light

switch.

The lights flickered on. He blinked a few times, and a small grin appeared on his face.

“Hey, guys,” he called out. “You have to come see this.”

Elliott and Felix came down the stairs a minute later. They found Miles standing in front of a shiny steel door.

“Look at this.” Miles tapped the red button next to the door. “These people had a panic room.”

The door slid open, revealing a compact enclosure equipped with food, bottled water and medical supplies.

“Didn’t do much for them now, did it?” Elliott said.

“They seldom do,” Felix said, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

The popularity of panic rooms had soared ever since the outbreak, but they were nothing more than an illusion of safety. There was evidence to suggest that they actually did more harm than good.

Families were known to barricade themselves inside one, only to discover that one of them had suffered a bite. The others then found themselves trapped in a confined space with a ravenous zombie.

There had been numerous instances of emergency service workers cutting into the doors of panic rooms and discovering entire families of zombies inside.

But this didn’t stop gullible people from falling prey to persuasive and manipulative salesmen who were able to guilt them into having panic rooms installed, telling them they couldn’t put a price on their family’s safety. Some people didn’t even need to hear any sales pitch, since they had already fallen hook, line and sinker for the rampant media hype. Sensationalist reporting reminded them on a daily basis that zombies were hiding behind every tree and lurking inside every bush waiting to pounce, and it was only a matter of time before they invaded your house in the middle of the night and devoured your children’s brains.

The sad truth was that the majority of people bitten by zombies were attacked by members of their own family, or someone else known to them.

Despite more than three years passing since the initial zombie outbreak, there were still conflicting reports as to how these events occurred. At first, some believed it was a side-effect of genetically-modified food. Another of the more popular conspiracy theories at the time centred around a pharmaceutical company deliberately unleashing the infection, which was to be followed by the release of a vaccine a short time later. This scenario now seemed unlikely, since the most profitable time for a vaccine to be released would have been during the height of the panic.

Religious extremists like Ayman al-Zawahiri and Kirk Cameron predictably blamed the outbreak on the absence of faith and the acceptance of immorality in modern society. Meanwhile, numerous cult leaders and other assorted lunatics happily embraced the hysteria, and claimed the rising dead was a sure sign that the end of days was near and the second coming of Christ was imminent.

Some of the more credible scientific investigations traced the source of the outbreak to Dr. Hermann Volk, an unlicensed German surgeon. Dr. Volk was said to have been conducting experimental research on behalf of the national Olympic team by transplanting vital organs from racehorses, such as the heart and lungs, into human beings. It was believed that Dr. Volk’s goal was to provide athletes with an insurmountable competitive edge, enabling greater blood flow and superior lung capacity while evading detection for performance enhancing drugs. And while some of the test subjects were believed to have reacted well to their new organs, others did not. These subjects exhibited unexpected and unpredictable side-effects.

Once the infection was out, it spread faster than a celebrity sex tape. The first reports of a degenerative blood-borne virus sweeping through mainland Europe emerged on a Tuesday. By Thursday, it had travelled across to Asia. Before the weekend was over it had spread to almost every corner of the globe.

People the world over remained glued to their television sets (at one point, it was estimated that

over ninety percent of the world's population had watched at least one hour of television during a twenty-four hour period, much to the delight of the networks and their sponsors) where viewers were bombarded with statistic upon terrifying statistic. Up to five hundred million people were believed to be infected, a figure that could climb to an unimaginable *three billion* by year's end, and the mantra that was repeated over and over: "We may be witnessing the end of humanity as we know it".

Only one thing spread faster than the infection, and that was panic. Grocery stores were stripped of food, looting was endemic, and sales of firearms soared to record levels. Amidst all the chaos, the government implored the public to remain calm, but few took any notice. Nobody believed them when they assured everyone the situation was all under control.

And then, less than three weeks after the first reported zombie attack, the situation was brought largely under control.

Thanks to swift and decisive action by the UN and the WHO, not to mention unprecedented cooperation between the world's leaders, the majority of the undead were quickly rounded up and isolated from the healthy population. The revised number of infected humans worldwide was now estimated to be between twenty and thirty million – not an insignificant number by any means, but nowhere near the five hundred million initially reported. Several media organisations were forced to issue apologies for overstating the threat level and causing distress to their viewers.

In the end, the zombie apocalypse turned out to be more of a zombie aberration. While millions were affected, more people died in that calendar year from heart disease. A hamburger was statistically more dangerous than a zombie.

The occasional outbreak still occurred from time to time, usually in the more impoverished and overpopulated areas of the world, but these were now handled by the Paramilitary Undead Management Authority (PUMAs) and quickly contained. The PUMAs were a team of highly skilled operatives who could be dropped into an infected zone to contain any minor epidemics before they spread any further.

It later emerged that this was not the first time the recently deceased had risen. There had been numerous reported incidents over the past century, although these were typically on a much smaller scale and often covered up by governments of the day. However, all developed nations were acutely aware that a mass-scale zombie outbreak was not only a possibility, but something of an inevitability. Precautions and contingency plans had been in place for some time in preparation for such an event.

It was said that the many zombie films and television programs produced in recent times was a subtle way of educating the public about what to do in the event of a zombie outbreak and, more importantly, what *not* to do.

In fact, it didn't take long for the general public to figure out that zombies posed no real threat to their personal safety. They could be held off using just a broomstick or an umbrella, they were easily repelled with a few squirts of water from a pressurised hose, and could be outrun by something as slow as an electric wheelchair. Most of the early victims were people who got too close when attempting to film the zombies on their phones instead of doing the logical thing and running away.

The fears everyone held of a society on the brink of collapse, of the world's population being wiped out, of humanity turning on itself as the undead took over, proved to be totally unfounded.

For the record, the German Olympic Committee have repeatedly denied any involvement in or knowledge of Dr. Hermann Volk's alleged activities, and maintain that he has never worked for them in any official capacity.

## Chapter 5

Miles navigated the minibus through the dense traffic, somehow managing to keep his cool when yet another driver swerved unexpectedly into his lane. Elliott and Felix were in the seats directly behind him, with the zombie family strapped safely in the back.

The journey was mostly silent, with the only discernible sound being the intermittent droplets of sweat leaking from Felix's forehead onto the floor. It was only a fairly mild day – it was cool enough that Elliott was wearing the ugly green sweater-vest his girlfriend Amy had given him for his last birthday – but Felix's face was dripping like a rusted faucet.

Felix was one of the more peculiar characters Miles had encountered during his time at Dead Rite – and that was saying something. Perhaps the strangest thing about Felix was that he chose to work there at all. Most of the other staff were high school dropouts, but Felix was in possession of a towering intellect and a brain that was constantly working overtime. He would probably have been more suited working at a place like NASA or Google rather than trapping zombies for a living. If he'd attended a better quality school, his intellectual gifts would likely have been recognised and he would have thrived in an accelerated learning program. Instead he was enrolled in an underfunded state school, where his teachers saw him as an undisciplined and ill-focused space cadet, and his fellow students thought he was a total weirdo.

Felix came to work at Dead Rite around the same time as Miles. While Miles was just looking for a steady income, Felix was eager to gain first-hand experience in the field of undead management and control. He was something of an amateur inventor – he was one of those people who could pull an engine apart, figure out how everything worked, then put it back together again and make it run more efficiently – and he recognised zombies as being the big growth industry for the coming decades. It was an industry he was keen to climb on board at the ground floor.

His work so far had yielded mixed results. One of his more promising inventions was his cable-gun, which allowed a worker to restrain a zombie from a distance of up to twenty metres. The device, which looked like a large metallic hair dryer, had a simple yet brilliant design. The worker would aim at the target zombie and press the fire button. Two thin cables would shoot out and wrap tightly around the zombie's ankles, preventing it from moving. The retract button then yanked the cables back in, and the zombie would be dragged in like a fisherman hauling a massive marlin.

The Dead Rite staff were all impressed with Felix's new contraption and eager to try it out in the field, but the authorities had other ideas. They ruled that the device had the potential to cause unnecessary trauma to the undead being, and swiftly moved to have it banned from use.

Felix's other notable innovation was his puncture-proof body armour. He had developed a kind of synthetic fibre-mesh bodysuit that could be worn underneath clothes to guard against zombie attacks. The material was strong enough to prevent zombie bites from penetrating the skin; unfortunately, it also prevented the skin from breathing. This caused the wearer to sweat profusely, even in relatively mild conditions. So while the authorities had no issues with the protective suit and declared it acceptable for use, few people other than Felix ever bothered to wear it. The fact that it was pretty much unheard of for zombies to attack undead management and control workers meant that there was little demand for the outfits.

The minibus turned off from the highway, and they saw the processing centre in the distance ahead. It was a massive compound, occupying an area equivalent to five football fields, seemingly dropped into a vacant paddock in the middle of nowhere. Most major cities had processing centres now. This was where the crews deposited their zombies once they had been removed from the streets.

The activity outside the centre seemed particularly hectic today. Miles could sense trouble brewing as soon as he turned off from the main road and headed towards the front entrance. The protesters were out in force. Maybe it was due to the good weather, or maybe they were just killing time before the

Devendra Banhart gig later on that night. Whatever the reason, it appeared more chaotic than usual.

The protesters held up their signs declaring “No Former Human Should Be Without Rights” and “Undead Rights Correct Human Wrongs”. They rocked one of the trucks back and forth as it tried to enter the compound. A few of the braver ones laid down in the truck’s path, before being dragged away by the centre’s security guards.

The guards would have loved nothing more than to crack a few heads open or unleash a canister or two of tear gas, but they were under strict instruction not to do anything that might inflame the situation. The operators of the processing centre had publicly declared that they supported their right to protest, and knew that antagonising them would only create further problems.

“This doesn’t look good,” Miles said as he watched the disorder unfolding from a distance. “Maybe we should come back later.”

The minibus had stalled twice already on the way here. The last thing Miles wanted was for it to stall again while they were trying to get inside and then find themselves surrounded by a mob of angry hippies.

They drove closer and could see just how big the crowd was. Somewhere between two and three hundred protesters in total, banging on drums and chanting through bullhorns. They usually only had to deal with about thirty or forty.

The media labelled these agitators with the pejorative term “dead-heads”, due to both their fondness for the undead, and for the way they would migrate en masse from one happening to the next, like the Grateful Dead’s army of dedicated followers.

The minibus passed the turnoff to the front entrance and remained unnoticed by the protesters. Elliott spotted a smaller entrance up ahead, one that was used mainly for staff and deliveries. “There!” he said, pointing to it.

Miles made a sharp right turn and pulled up in front of the boom gate. He flashed his Dead Rite accreditation to the guard, and they were let inside.

Miles, Elliott and Felix leapt out of the minibus, then turned the zombie family over to the centre’s handlers. The zombies were then led away to another area where they would be stripped, hosed down, examined, photographed and assigned a number, then have a drip attached to feed them artificial blood. The blood contained a type of sedative which made them docile and easier to control. They would be outfitted in orange boilersuits and taken to their cells, where they would wait to be shipped off to a holding facility at a later date. These holding facilities were giant, sprawling prisons, located somewhere in the middle of the desert, and it was where every zombie eventually ended up. As to what happened to them after that – well, the government wasn’t divulging too much about that. As far as anyone could tell they were being held indefinitely, left in limbo and with no clear future.

Felix completed the paperwork, and Dead Rite received their payment. This job netted them \$2000, or \$500 per head.

Across on the other side of the centre, one of the trucks finally made it past the dead-heads and inside the main entrance. Two workers jumped out and began unloading the zombies.

They were from Z-Pro, and they were Dead Rite’s main (and now only) rival in the undead management and control business. Instead of driving around in a clapped-out old minibus, Z-Pro had several huge trucks that were painted jet black with massive company logos airbrushed along the sides. This made the vehicles instantly recognisable; it also made Dead Rite fairly inconspicuous by comparison, and allowed them to slip in and out of the processing centre without drawing unwanted attention to themselves.

“Look who it is,” Miles said, nodding in the direction of the truck. One of the Z-Pro workers, a lanky guy with long hair and a Jesus beard, was helping to unload the reanimated cargo. “Our old friend, Dwayne Marks.”

Elliott looked across to the truck. “Who’s Dwayne Marks?”

“He used to work with us,” Felix replied. “You’re his replacement.”

Up until a month ago, Dwayne Marks was a member of the Dead Rite team. But then Z-Pro made him an offer, and Dwayne wasted no time in accepting it. His defection to the rival UMC crew meant that a vacancy had opened up, which Elliott now occupied.

Z-Pro had poached many of Dead Rite's staff over the past couple of years, and with a generous salary and job security they usually didn't need too much coercion to switch sides.

Dead Rite may have been struggling financially, but Z-Pro were going from strength to strength. This was evident by the amount of zombies being unloaded from their truck. There had to be at least thirty in total. It made Dead Rite's haul of four look paltry by comparison. The difference between the two companies was vast; Z-Pro was like a massive fishing trawler, and Dead Rite was a two-man dinghy with a couple of rods over the side.

Miles stood back and watched for a moment, experiencing just the slightest twinge of jealousy.

Dead Rite and Z-Pro were undead management and control (UMC) firms that had sprung up in the aftermath of the zombie uprising. The military were initially deployed to handle the bulk of the zombie hordes, but as skilled and as thorough as they were it was impossible to account for each and every last zombie loose in society. The government decided to outsource this task to private contractors; service providers who could be called in if a stray zombie found its way into your neighbourhood.

Dead Rite was initially a pest control business that Adam had inherited from his uncle. When he first met Steve, the business was in disarray. They were losing clients, haemorrhaging money, and it was sending Adam broke. Steve was working in the finance industry at the time, and he offered to help out to see if he could turn Dead Rite's fortunes around.

It was Steve's idea to branch out into the burgeoning field of undead management and control. He wasn't the only one – the bounty of \$500 per zombie brought a multitude of shonks and charlatans from out of the woodwork, eager to make a quick buck and have the taxpayer pick up the tab.

The early days were good. A typical day saw Dead Rite bringing in twenty to thirty zombies, or about as much revenue as they got from a month of killing rats and trapping possums. Steve quit his job and joined Dead Rite full time. They took on more staff, about thirty in total, and relocated to newer, bigger premises.

But the good times didn't last. The zombie population soon dwindled, attacks became less frequent, and most of the UMC startups went under. And if it wasn't the lack of zombies that sent businesses to the wall, it was Z-Pro's market dominance that was the final nail in the coffin.

Dead Rite was the only other UMC business to survive. It seemed fitting that they started off in pest control; Jack Houston, the owner of Z-Pro, thought they were like cockroaches that simply refused to die. They had only just managed to stay afloat, though. They had to lay off most of their staff, and the few that remained had to make do on a significantly reduced wage.

The only reason the business hadn't gone under yet was due to the tenacity of its two leaders. Steve and Adam were a formidable duo; Steve had the brains and financial nous, while Adam had the practical experience in the field. Personality-wise, they were complete opposites. Steve was serious and soft-spoken, and not obviously gay. Any time he ventured into a bar it wouldn't be long before middle-aged divorcées noticed his lack of a wedding ring and homed in on him.

Adam, on the other hand, was outgoing and flamboyant, a certified Kinsey six. If he was a fictional character on a TV sitcom, GLAAD would call for a boycott of the show for perpetrating outdated stereotypes of homosexual men.

Strangely enough, despite the two of them being in a relationship for years now, no one ever made any jokes about their names. They were always referred to as "Steve and Adam", never "Adam and Steve". Perhaps the "Adam and Steve" jokes were so obvious that everyone assumed they'd heard them a thousand times already.

Miles joined Dead Rite in those heady early days. He needed a steady source of income after his parents died. He and Shae had received a small compensation payout, but it was only enough to last

them a few months. So when he heard of how much money could be made as a UMC worker, he immediately applied for a position.

He earned some decent cash early on, but then the downturn happened. He could have quit, but instead remained a loyal employee. These days his typical pay packet was only slightly higher than the minimum wage, but he had fallen into a comfortable rut. He couldn't really be bothered searching for another job, and resigned himself to the fact that this was his life for the foreseeable future.

## Chapter 6

Dead Rite's headquarters was a small rented warehouse located in an industrial part of the city. In a curious twist of fate, the building was previously used by a coffin manufacturer. In a post-zombie world, the coffin business had gone much the same way as Kodak and Encyclopedia Britannica had in a post-digital world. That is, it was now largely redundant. After the events of the past three years, few people wanted to risk having their loved ones making an unexpected reappearance during their own funeral, and so ninety-five percent of people now opted for cremation over a traditional burial.

Steve was still kicking himself that he didn't see that one coming. Crematoriums were the growth industry they should have expanded into rather than undead management and control.

Miles, Elliott and Felix had returned from the processing centre and were now filling in time before their next call-out. Felix always made productive use of this downtime, tinkering away in the small workshop out back on whatever his next big invention was. Elliott was on the phone with his girlfriend Amy, while Miles ate his dinner in the break room. On the way back from the processing centre, he had stopped by an Aqua Bar outlet to pick up a chicken caesar wrap and organic orange juice.

He was midway through his dinner when he heard a familiar voice on the TV.

He spun his chair around and saw his housemate being interviewed by a reporter from the front lines of the rally. She was leading the protest against the court decision handed down to the four men convicted of killing a zombie.

"We're here to make a stand!" Clea declared, exercising her right to be righteous. "We're here to send a message to politicians, to the media, and to those who still think it's okay to use former humans as punching bags and target practice. We want to stop the violence. Stop the hatred. It's time we all moved forward as one to create a better society!"

Clea's idealistic words and calls for peace were juxtaposed with vision from the rally. Viewers were treated to scenes of protesters decapitating an effigy of Bernard Marlowe, the outspoken anti-zombie crusader and aspiring Prime Minister. Another protester squirted lighter fluid over the effigy as if he was urinating on it, then set it alight in front of a cheering crowd.

As far as Clea's rallies went, this was par for the course. They would usually start out with the best of intentions, but it wasn't long until the situation descended into shambles and mob rule took over. Different protest groups that had little or nothing to do with undead issues (and often had opposing agendas) would begin shouting over one another, and the whole thing quickly became farcical. The Anti-GM Foods group struggled to be heard over the Legalise Drugs group, while the Save the Oceans group jostled for airtime with the Cancel the Debt group.

Meanwhile, a feminist collective paraded topless to highlight the issue of gender inequality and sexual harassment in society. They certainly received plenty of attention from the media, but it was debatable as to whether their intended message got through or not.

Clea's protests often ended this way, having the opposite effect of what she had intended. A previous rally targeting large corporations and the undemocratic influence they exerted over government policy quickly became a riot, resulting in dozens of small independent businesses being trashed.

Before that, at a protest meant to highlight the alarming levels of environmental degradation in the modern world, a large bonfire was started which the protestors continued to fuel by tossing on garbage, old shoes, clothes, street signs, wooden benches and whatever else they could find. It was estimated that the carbon emissions created by the fire was the equivalent of what ten thousand cars produced in one year.

Worst of all were the peace marches. These almost always ended in violence.

It was all too easy for the mainstream media to mock and belittle these people, and for viewers to dismiss them as a bunch of loony activists with too much spare time on their hands. This particular

news report showed only a short three-second sound bite from a human rights lawyer, but it did allow a man in a bear costume riding a unicycle a full thirty seconds to air his somewhat unique view of the world.

Meanwhile, in another part of the country, Bernard Marlowe appeared at his carefully stage-managed press conference to denounce the appalling behaviour of the protesters. He maintained that while the undead needed to be protected, people came first and the laws shouldn't be used to turn honest, hardworking, upstanding citizens into criminals. He reiterated that the current legislation had gone too far in favour of the undead, and promised to repeal the laws should he win office at the forthcoming election.

He added that his thoughts and prayers were with the families of the four men sentenced to prison for the unprovoked killing of a zombie. He made no mention of the still-living family of that zombie, who witnessed their son getting torn to shreds by a pack of bored, bloodthirsty thugs.

Even though it was now illegal to commit an act of violence against an undead being, there were still those in society who refused to abide by the law and insisted on taking matters into their own hands. They viewed these creatures as a threat, and many still harboured a great deal of resentment towards zombies after what they had previously witnessed during the initial outbreak. They believed that "the only good zombie was a dead zombie", a slogan they proudly proclaimed on their bumper stickers (apparently unaware that zombies were already dead). Others simply wanted to try out the high-powered weaponry they had purchased during the outbreak but never got the chance to use.

At the other end of the spectrum, there was a small but vocal group of people who objected to this sort of mistreatment. The Former Human Defence League was established ("Former human" was the politically correct term for an undead being, since "zombie" was considered to be outdated and offensive), made up mostly of traumatised friends and relatives who had witnessed loved ones hacked to death by gangs of barbaric rednecks. Their aim was to stop the slaughter of what they considered to be a living creature.

After numerous legal challenges and appeals it was ruled that former humans, while not technically living creatures, were still regarded as sentient beings and therefore deserving of protection. The National Law to End Violence Against the Dead Act (NEVADA) was brought into effect, stating that an undead being could not be harmed or interfered with in any way except in instances of self-defence. Killing for sport or recreation was strictly prohibited.

This ruling proved to be highly contentious. Many considered it a violation of their rights, and felt they should be able to take preemptive action when protecting their family and property. Despite the laws being in place for over two years now, zombies were still being attacked and killed on a regular basis by a minority of people who refused to accept the ruling. The most extreme example of this was the vigilante gangs that were said to traverse the countryside, wiping out zombies before the UMC workers could get to them.

Clea became involved in various forms of activism in her teens, and continued to support her many causes as she entered college. But by the seventh year of her studies, a nagging feeling of disenchantment was beginning to creep up on her. She was starting to feel that, despite the numerous causes she'd put her name to, there was nothing she could do that others hadn't already done before her. Women's rights, anti-war, save the rainforests – those battles had been fought by her parents' generation. There was little she could do to make a name for herself.

So when the zombie outbreak happened, Clea discovered her new calling. This was her chance to make a difference and blaze her own trail. The fact that zombies were so unpopular among the general population made it all the more alluring. This was a cause worth fighting for. She would truly be raging against the machine, while her contemporaries wasted time worrying about polar ice caps or endangered parrots.

Along with other like-minded revolutionaries such as Fabian and Amoeba, she founded the Zombie Equality Resistance Organization (ZERO), although they later abandoned that name once it was established that “zombie” was a derogatory term. They now referred to themselves as Zeroes individually, or the Tribe of Zeroes as a collective. Their logo, which they graffitied on walls and billboards and scratched into the paintwork of any cars they found displaying anti-zombie bumper stickers, was a circle with a “Z” in the middle, like a sideways anarchy symbol.

The Tribe of Zeroes became a vocal and visible presence, holding regular protest rallies and racking up numerous media impressions. These trust fund anarchists may have ditched their material comforts, but their sense of entitlement and born-to-rule mentality was still going strong. They were more than happy to lecture the public on what was best for them and how the world should be run.

It was just a shame that their efforts never really amounted to much. If anything, they ended up turning the public against their cause rather than gathering support. People who saw them on TV or read about their antics in the newspaper would take one look at this bunch of work-shy layabouts and instantly take the opposing side to whatever it was they were supporting.

Clea refused to see it this way, of course, and deluded herself into believing that they were making a real difference. She claimed that the group had been so effective at changing public opinion that they were now under surveillance by the authorities, who were regularly sending undercover agents to try to infiltrate the group. She had warned the others that they needed to be extra vigilant now after reading about what happened to the ZLF, a militant French pro-zombie organisation. The ZLF were recently busted for running zombie safe houses; shelters designed to keep the undead out of the state-run processing centres. It was later revealed that various members of the group were in fact government informants, and the members were now facing ten-year prison sentences for harbouring undead beings.

## Chapter 7

A few weeks back, Miles and Shae were invited to a barbeque at their cousin Stacey's house. Miles didn't really feel like attending. He had little in common with Stacey, other than their shared grandparents. But Shae wanted to go, and Miles eventually agreed it would be good for them to remain in contact with what family they had left.

Stacey and her husband Alistair were about a decade older than Miles, but they seemed almost middle-aged to him. Spending a whole afternoon listening to a couple of yuppies and their similarly materialistic friends talk about kitchen renovations and how remarkably gifted their young children were wasn't exactly his idea of a fun day out, but he thought he would at least make an effort to be sociable.

It started off promisingly enough. He listened politely as Alistair droned on about his new work promotion, and to Stacey as she described the meal plans for her four- and six-year-old in meticulous detail. He could feign enthusiasm for this for a couple of hours, as long as he had one of Alistair's imported beers in hand at all times.

The trouble started when Miles met some of the other guests. It began with a fairly innocuous question from Lisa, one of Stacey's work colleagues, but quickly went downhill from there.

It went something like this:

Lisa: "So Miles, Stacey tells me you'll be starting your commerce degree soon?"

Miles: "Well, that's the plan. But right now I'm working for Dead Rite."

Lisa: "Dead Rite? They're the, um, pest control people, aren't they?"

Miles: "They used to be. I think technically they might still do some of that. But their main focus now is UMC."

Lisa: "UMC?"

Miles: "Undead management and control."

Lisa: "Oh ... you mean zombies?"

Miles: "Well, yeah. Although we're not supposed to call them 'zombies' anymore. 'Former human' or 'undead being' is the preferred term."

Lisa: "So they're one of those contractors who have thugs go around beating up the undead before sending them off to those giant prisons?"

Miles: "Uh, yeah ... well, no, we don't beat them up. We try not to anyway."

Lisa: "Zombies pose no real threat to humans. You know that, don't you?"

Miles: "Uh ..."

Lisa (climbing on her high horse): "If we just left them alone we wouldn't have all these problems, and we wouldn't be wasting all our money on them either."

Daniel (drunk party guest): "Oh, here we go. Another bleeding heart liberal complaining that we're not treating the vermin of society with enough [*finger quotes*] respect."

Lisa: "Yes, I'm a 'bleeding-heart liberal'. That's the term ignorant rednecks use whenever they try to justify their own selfishness and intolerance."

Daniel: "Huh?"

Lisa: "Do you have *any* idea what happens to them inside those processing centres? How they're treated? The brutal methods used to restrain them?"

Miles: "Actually, we're pretty careful not to cause any distress when we're restraining them ..."

Daniel: "Okay, so when you have zombies coming into *your* home in the middle of the night attacking *your* family, you can call the [*finger quotes*] touchy-feely politically correct guys who use [*finger quotes*] non-violence and [*finger quotes*] positive vibes to shoo it away, or you can call the guys who'll get the job done as quickly and as efficiently as possible. I know who I'll be calling."

Lisa: “So the ends always justifies the means? You’re willing to turn a blind eye to the inhumane atrocities taking place in our name if it means you can carry on undisturbed with your comfortable existence?”

Miles (trying to change the subject): “So Lisa, you and Stacey work together, right?”

Daniel: “How can it be *inhumane*? Those things are not even human anymore!”

Alistair (tipsy on imported beer and ill-informed opinions): “Why even bother with all that processing nonsense. It’s not like they’re ever going to find a cure. Just put a bullet in each one and be done with it.”

Stacey: “Alistair!”

Alistair: “What? I’m only saying what everyone here is thinking.”

Lisa: “No, you’re saying what you and your bigoted friends here are thinking. You don’t speak for the rest of us.”

Alistair: “Well it’s better we do that than waste taxpayer dollars on keeping them alive ... or whatever it is they are.”

Miles (trying to change the subject): “Speaking of wasting taxpayer dollars, has anyone seen that new piece of public artwork they’ve installed in the park opposite the town hall?”

Lisa: “In the end it always comes down to money with you people, doesn’t it?”

Alistair: “Do you know how much is being spent on zombies these days? All those processing centres and holding facilities they keep building, and all that artificial blood they pump into them to keep them going? Meanwhile, hospitals and schools are falling apart due to a lack of funding.”

Lisa: “What does one have to do with the other? Hospitals and schools were underfunded *years* before the zombies came along. You just can’t kill something because it costs you money.”

Daniel: “We need to be looking after our own kind first before worrying about zombies. Charity begins at home.”

Lisa: “That’s not even what the saying means, moron.”

Daniel: “Then why don’t you tell me what it *does* it mean, sweetheart?”

Lisa: “‘Charity begins at home’ means that learning to be a charitable person is something that is *taught* within the home. It doesn’t mean you should only show charity to your own kind.”

Daniel: “Tell that to the innocent victims who have had their lives ruined by those parasites.”

Lisa: “What does that even mean? What you just said has nothing to do with what we were talking about!”

The debate carried on like this for a further fifteen minutes. Voices became louder, the language harsher, both sides compared the other to Nazis, Daniel repeated the slogans he’d heard on TV and read in *The Daily Ink*, and the phrase “political correctness gone mad” was bandied around with abandon. Stacey and Alistair went off on a tangent and engaged in a full-blown domestic dispute – firstly about the amount he’d been drinking today when he promised he’d take it easy, and then about how much her credit card debt had ballooned in recent months.

The party finally came to an end when Lisa emptied her drink on Daniel’s head.

Miles figured this was a good time to leave, and made a mental note to invent a less controversial job title the next time someone asked what he did for a living. Parking inspector sounded good.

He sent Stacey an apologetic text the next day, and even though she told him it wasn’t his fault, he got the impression that he might not be invited to any more barbeques or dinner parties in the near future. He was perfectly okay with that.

Anti-zombie sentiment had intensified in the past year, and had only gotten worse as the forthcoming election drew nearer. Zombie-bashing was now an acceptable form of bigotry – unlike racism, xenophobia, homophobia and religious intolerance, which were all now considered to be inappropriate and unacceptable, people were free to air their undead prejudices in public without fear of castigation.

The reason for this dramatic surge in resentment could be summed up in two words.

Bernard Marlowe.

Marlowe was a former editor of *The Daily Ink*, the nation's most popular tabloid newspaper, and he was now running for Prime Minister. Editing a tabloid was excellent training for his current campaign, which consisted mostly of scapegoating minorities, stoking the public's illogical fears, and giving society's lowest common denominator reasons for being outraged on a daily basis. He knew that fear bred like rabbits and there was no myxomatosis to curb it.

The results of his scaremongering strategy were spectacular; if an election was to be held tomorrow, it was estimated that Marlowe would win over sixty-five percent of the popular vote.

His success was largely due to his ability to sell the public on two lies.

The first lie was that they were living in one of the toughest economic climates in recent memory. This assertion bore little resemblance to the truth; unemployment was low, wage growth was high, and inflation was down. Despite the potentially catastrophic zombie uprising of a few years prior, people were actually far wealthier now than at any point in history. But since most people weren't as rich as they thought they deserved to be, they swallowed that line fairly easily.

Marlowe's second lie was to blame this perceived disadvantage, and everything else that went wrong in the world, on zombies. He sensed a growing unease about the presence of the undead in society and he didn't hesitate to ride this wave of ignorance and resentment. Most other public officials maintained a respectful silence on the issue; they didn't want to appear to be capitalising on people's grief and misfortune, and so they allowed the various departments to do their jobs. But Marlowe had no such qualms about hijacking the tragedy to further his own political ambitions. He repeatedly claimed that the current government's policies protecting the undead had left regular law-abiding citizens vulnerable to attacks from these bloodthirsty creatures, and that too much money was being spent on undead-related matters. His policies were lifted straight from the handbooks of the militant anti-zombie groups and far-right religious nutcases, but he was able to present them in a way that assured the public that being protective of your family and your community made you a patriot rather than an angry and hateful bigot.

His campaign focused exclusively on the issue of zombies, which he referred to as a "national emergency", and treated everything else such as education, health, defence, employment and the environment as minor concerns that didn't really affect the average person. He cherry-picked data from studies if it suited his agenda, and ignored the majority of evidence that contradicted it. He appealed to people's worst instincts, so long as there was a vote in it.

This strategy worked almost immediately, and his approval rating skyrocketed. The lower classes praised his straight-talking, tell-it-like-it-is demeanour. They also liked being told that if your life wasn't going so great it was probably all the zombies' fault.

But it was support from the middle and upper classes that really solidified his popularity. Many were furious about the costs associated with processing and housing zombies, although what they were most upset about was that money was being spent on someone other than themselves.

Affluence is a drug. During election campaigns, politicians become drug dealers. The privileged masses are all hopeless junkies who will do anything, no matter how immoral or degrading, to keep their drug of choice coming in. The easiest way for a political party to win the popular vote is to scare these addicts into believing their supply might be cut off.

If you repeat a lie enough times, sooner or later everyone will start to believe it.

Marlowe had done more than just convince the majority of the country that their lives were in danger and only he could save them. He had induced millions of people to fall into a mass psychosis, and created an army of frightened, strung-out dope fiends scared of their own shadow.

Last year, a story appeared in *The Daily Ink* about a town in Denmark that had trialled a new method of dealing with and managing the undead. The Danish government had caved in to the demands of

interfering do-gooders and allowed zombies to remain in their homes instead of being incarcerated. Volunteers would check in on them on a regular basis to supply them with artificial blood and ensure everything was running smoothly. The aim of this program was to improve their quality of life by reducing the amount of trauma and suffering the undead often endured when locked up in confined areas.

Within days of the trial commencing, disaster struck. No one knew exactly how it started, but the infection took over the entire community almost overnight. It was the absolute worst-case scenario. The undead ran riot, and no one escaped the massacre. More than half the victims were children, some as young as two.

It was a case that shocked the nation. Fortunately, none of it was true.

The story turned out to be a hoax, a piece of creative fiction that had already done the rounds on the internet a few months earlier. If the journalist filing the story had bothered to do the bare minimum of research and fact-checking he would have discovered that no such trial had ever taken place, in Denmark or anywhere else, and no Danish town had ever been wiped out by rampaging zombies. But he took the story as gospel, and splashed it across the front page.

It took more than two months before *The Daily Ink* would admit its mistake. They eventually published a small correction, buried at the bottom of page thirty-three next to a piece about a golden retriever that had been elected mayor of a small town. Some conspiracy theorists have suggested that the story was a plant by Bernard Marlowe, who had kicked off his campaign for PM days earlier, and was designed to stoke the public's fears and build resentment towards the undead population. Marlowe denied that any such subterfuge had taken place, and that the timing of the piece was a mere coincidence.

## Chapter 8

“You’d better hurry up,” Miles told his sister as she rushed to get ready for school. “You’re running late.”

“I *know* I’m running late,” Shae replied with typical teenage petulance. “I can tell the time, can’t I?”

“I’m beginning to wonder, since you never seem to make it out the door on time.”

Shae rolled her eyes dramatically, an affectation that Miles believed she’d picked up from one of those teen TV shows she watched.

He was still having trouble adjusting to Shae’s recent shift in attitude. Up until about six months ago she was always so polite and friendly and easy to get along with. Now she alternated between sarcasm and sulkiness, and he was barely able to utter a single word without it leading to an argument. Even though he knew this was fairly normal teenage girl behaviour, it still irritated him.

He wondered if he was that bad when he was fifteen, constantly answering back and permanent chips on both shoulders. It was something he didn’t like to think about for too long, since he probably behaved worse.

“Can I have some money for lunch, then?” Shae held her hand out like a train conductor collecting tickets.

“Why don’t you pack your own lunch?”

“Why don’t you give me money to buy lunch?”

“Why don’t you pack your own lunch?”

“Why don’t you give me money to buy lunch?”

“We can keep this up for as long as you like Shae, but you won’t get a different answer.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s cheaper it’s healthier.”

“I’ll buy something from Aqua Bar.”

“The food from Aqua Bar is not cheap, and I don’t think it’s as healthy as they claim it is either.”

“Come on, Miles. You know I’m running late.”

“It’ll take you one minute to pack your lunch.”

“But there’s nothing in there for me to take.”

“I bought heaps of stuff from the supermarket the other day. Go and have a look in the fridge.”

Shae grumbled some more, then stomped over to the refrigerator.

“What?” she said, staring into the dimly-lit void. “There’s nothing in here.”

“There’s plenty in there for you to take.”

“Like what?”

“Like pizza scrolls, muffins, banana bread, and four tubs of that yoghurt you like.”

“Where? I don’t see any of that.”

“It’s right there in front of you. Try opening your eyes.”

“They’re. Not. In. Here.” Shae spoke as if she was attempting to communicate with a complete moron. “See for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

Miles went over and looked in the fridge. He found tofu, tempeh, wheat germ and quinoa, but the food he had bought days earlier had mysteriously vanished overnight.

“But ... it was in here yesterday,” he said.

“And now it’s today, I believe,” Shae said.

Miles was perplexed as to how so much food could simply disappear like that, but it didn’t take him long to develop a hypothesis. He lifted the lid of the rubbish bin, where he uncovered the evidence of last night’s banquet – Mars Bar wrappers, M&M packets, an empty cookie box, and what remained of the snacks he had purchased. Clea and her friends had struck again.

“So,” Shae said, a smug grin spread across her face. “Why don’t you give me some money so I can buy my lunch today?”

Miles fished a ten dollar note from his wallet, and Shae snatched it out of his hand.

“Remember, that’s for your lunch, not drugs,” he said.

“You’re hilarious.”

Shae tossed some books into her backpack and headed for the door.

“What time should I expect you home tonight?” Miles called out after her.

“Don’t know. I have a group meeting after school.”

For the past couple of years, Shae had been attending weekly support groups for people who had lost family members in undead attacks. Miles went along with her at first, but he soon decided they were a huge waste of time. The groups were mostly made up of people wallowing in their own self-pity, competing to see who could tell the most traumatic story. He thought even the name of the group was stupid; they had christened themselves the Victims of Tragedy Support Group. He wanted to tell them they’d never be able to move on with their lives if they insisted on labelling themselves as “victims”. “Survivors” would be much more empowering term. But these sad sacks didn’t seem to want to move on. They just wanted someone to feel sorry for them.

He stopped attending the meetings, but Shae thought they were helpful and so she kept on going. Miles supported her decision, although he dropped the occasional hint that maybe it was time to move on. He forgot that asking Shae to do something would almost guarantee that she’d do the opposite.

Unsurprisingly, Clea sided with Shae on the issue, and claimed that Miles’ aversion to any form of therapy was further proof that he was a closet Scientologist. Clea had been a fierce critic of the Church of Scientology ever since she read an explosive article about this “dangerous cult” in one of her celebrity magazines. Clea herself was a Buddhist, although the extent of her Buddhism only went so far as owning a Tibetan prayer flag and a thirty dollar red string bracelet, and occasionally beginning her sentences with, “As a Buddhist, I believe that ...”

“Call me or send a text so I know where you are, okay?” Miles said as Shae walked out the door.

Shae called out something in response, but Miles didn’t hear it over the sound of the door slamming shut.

The kitchen was still a mess from the previous night, so Miles emptied the garbage bin and scraped all the leftover food into a bowl. He used the largest mixing bowl he could find, and he only just managed to fit it all in. It was a lot of wasted food for a group of people who liked to complain about the level of rampant consumption in our throwaway consumerist society.

He also found a couple of McDonalds bags and Big Mac wrappers scattered behind the couch, which was surprising considering that most of the Zeroes were vegans or vegetarians. The only one who ate meat was Amoeba, and even he described himself as an “ethical carnivore”. An ethical carnivore was someone who only ate meat from animals that had died from natural causes. Miles had never heard of this before, and he was pretty certain it was something Amoeba had just made up.

He took the mountain of leftovers out to the backyard and fed it to the living, breathing waste disposal unit residing in his backyard.

Seeing Squealer the Pig in broad daylight was almost as confronting as encountering him in the dark. He was huge, almost coming up to Miles’ waist, and had more tattoos than a white rapper and a white supremacist combined. Nearly every square inch of his pigskin had been filled in with decorative ink, covering him from snout to hoof in religious iconography, angel wings, swastikas, dolphins, naked women and Chinese calligraphy.

“Good Lord, Clive.”

Miles turned and saw Mrs. Jensen, his eighty-four-year-old neighbour, peering over the fence.

Despite having known Miles since the age of six, Mrs. Jensen could never quite get his name right, and had recently started referring to him as “Clive”. Miles corrected her the first few times she said it, but he soon found it easier just to pretend to be Clive.

“I must say, that’s a strange-looking pig you have there. His skin has the most peculiar colours. Do you know what breed he is?”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Miles replied. “He’s a hungry one, though.”

Squealer had a voracious appetite, and would happily eat anything put before him. He had even devoured all the mouldy lemons that had fallen from the tree in the backyard and had been lying on the ground for weeks.

“It’s a good idea getting a pig, Clive. Not only do they eat all your scraps, but they’re good for guarding your house too. And you need to be careful in this neighbourhood. You know, I saw a strange coloured man in the house next to mine last night. But it’s alright now. The police came around to take care of it.”

This was the third time Mrs. Jensen had reported this man to the police. Each time, he went to great lengths to explain that he had lived in that house for the past four years and was on friendly terms with Mrs. Jensen. He had even mowed her front nature strip on a number of occasions. But in recent weeks, she seemed to have no memory of ever meeting him. Miles was thankful that all he had to put up with was getting called “Clive” every now and then.

He returned to the house and found that Clea was awake. Or she was out of bed; he was unable to verify that she was actually conscious and alert. Her eyes were having trouble staying open for more than a second at a time. She had both elbows on the table, which propped up her hands, which propped up her head, which was clouded in a thick fog of pot smoke.

The Zeroes had celebrated long and hard into the night following yesterday’s rally – although it was unclear what exactly they were celebrating, since nothing was really achieved.

“Big night?” Miles asked.

“Hmmpf,” Clea responded.

“I see you guys got a bit hungry there.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’ll replace it all next time I go shopping.”

“So how do you explain those McDonalds wrappers?”

Clea shrugged. “Well, we were still hungry.”

“I guess vegetarianism and anti-corporate beliefs aren’t all that important when the munchies strike.”

“So sue me. I had one Fillet O Fish.”

“I forgot, a fish is technically a vegetable, isn’t it?”

“It’s okay to eat fish occasionally. It’s not as bad as eating cows or sheep.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Well, the fish would have died eventually.”

“All animals die eventually, Clea.”

“In the wild, I mean. Fish get eaten by other, bigger fish. Like sharks, or ... pelicans. Sheep and chickens have no natural predators.”

“What about foxes? They eat chickens. And wolves attack sheep.”

“Be serious, Miles. That sort of thing only happens in fairytales.”

“Is that a joke, or are you still stoned?”

“Speaking of which, we have to do something about our creepy neighbour.”

Even in her semi-comatose stupor, Clea was still able to abruptly switch subjects when she felt she was losing an argument.

“What about our creepy neighbour?”

“I caught him looking through our windows last night.”

Miles sat up. “You mean he was on our property?”

“No. He was watching us from his place.”

“So he was inside his *own* house?”

“Yeah, but he could see right into my bedroom.”

“So keep your curtains closed.” Miles said this like it was the most obvious thing in the world, which it probably was.

“I shouldn’t have to live my life worried about perverts spying on me, Miles. Men need to be taught to respect a woman’s right to privacy.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

Clea must have woken up some more, because Miles could sense she was itching to climb up on her soap box and rail against some perceived injustice. He figured it was easier to agree with her rather than use logic.

He doubted there was any truth to her Peeping Tom claims, and it was probably just more weed-induced paranoia, like her repeated assertions that undercover agents were trying to infiltrate the Tribe of Zeroes and plant listening devices on them.

The house next door to theirs had remained vacant for almost two years after the previous occupants had an unfortunate encounter with an undead intruder. Once a property has been tainted with zombie blood it becomes a lot harder to rent or sell.

The current tenant appeared about eight months ago. Miles hardly ever saw him – he had once or twice glimpsed the overweight-bordering-on-obese man pottering around his backyard with his shirt off – but to this day, he would struggle to identify him in a police line-up.

Clea thought it was disturbing that they never saw or heard from him, but Miles said that was what made him the perfect neighbour. No pets, no loud music, no screaming kids. The house may as well be vacant. Clea said he could be a serial killer, since every time one was caught, neighbours described him as “a nice, quiet man who never caused any trouble and always paid his rent on time”. Miles said that if the guy was a serial killer they had nothing to worry about, since the neighbours always lived to tell the tale.

“By the way,” Clea said, pushing a beaded lock of hair off her face. “What are you doing hassling my friends when I’m not here?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Fabian said you basically kicked him out of the house the other day.”

“I did not kick him out of the house!” Miles protested. “I just asked why he was spending so much time here.”

He couldn’t believe that Fabian, the little puke, had complained to Clea about him like a whiny schoolkid running off to the teacher.

“Do you have a problem with me having friends around from time to time?”

“I wouldn’t mind if it was one or two nights a week, but it’s not, is it? Fabian’s basically been living here rent-free for the past two months.”

“That is such a first world problem.”

“We’re living in the first world, Clea. All of our problems are first world problems.”

“Fabian doesn’t have anywhere else to go. As a Buddhist, I thought the decent thing to do would be to let him stay here for a while. But if you feel that strongly about it, I can ask him to leave.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” Miles said, quietly cursing himself for capitulating so readily. “He can stay a bit longer until he finds someplace else. Just ... try not to eat all the food from now on.”

“I said I would replace it, didn’t I?”

Miles had heard that one before, but whenever food was replaced it usually disappeared again a short time later. That was something he just had to learn to live with after allowing a bunch of caring, sharing hippies into his home. Things like property ownership and personal boundaries were nebulous concepts to them, while communal sharing and cooperation were wholeheartedly embraced. It was just a shame that this only ever went one-way, with the intruders taking advantage of Miles’ hospitality while providing little in return.

## Chapter 9

The zombie shortage had been going on for well over a year now. Most people generally regarded this as a good thing, but there were two groups that were adversely affected. The first was the undead management and control industry, who relied on former humans as a source of revenue.

The other was the print media; they needed constant tales of death and destruction in order to boost their dwindling circulations. Good news was no news, as the saying went, and so every day their pages were filled with confected outrage and fabricated semi-fictional beat-ups that only occasionally bared any resemblance to the truth.

Occupying pages four through seven of today's edition of *The Daily Ink* was the sad tale of Lucas, the young man Dead Rite had encountered the previous Friday night. The headline screamed "Another Young Life Cut Short", and was accompanied by a photograph of Lucas as a cherubic, churchgoing sixteen-year-old. It was a deliberately manipulative image, one that was designed to elicit sympathy from the reader who was more likely to mourn the death of a naïve teenager than the scruffy, shaggy-haired booze hound he would later become.

Following on from the grief, anger and soul-searching of this latest zombie attack was coverage of Bernard Marlowe's relentless electioneering. Marlowe, a one-time editor of this "news" paper, was deep into his campaign for Prime Minister, and he was given a helping hand from his former colleagues at every available opportunity. Articles endorsing his anti-zombie jihad were conveniently located adjacent to tragic stories of zombie attacks, so that even the most simple-minded of readers (and this publication certainly had many of those) could draw a link between the two without too much prodding or coercion.

For those that still needed to have it spelled out for them, a separate editorial lambasted the current administration for allowing the undead situation to spiral out of control, while anointing Marlowe as the one best equipped to protect our children from this evil pandemic sweeping the globe. And whenever they were unable to come up with any genuine news, *The Daily Ink* would fill its the pages with countless media slags and professional opinion formers who had turned scapegoating the undead into an art form. Paying too much tax? Blame it on the undead. House repossessed? Blame it on the undead. Traffic chaos made you late for work? Somehow, via a six-degrees-of-separation kind of logic, these hateful hyperventilators found a way to convince their readers that every one of your problems could all be traced back to those wretched zombies.

The sad, boring truth was that zombie attacks were becoming less and less frequent, and cases like Lucas's were few and far between. But the trash media weren't about to let a small thing like facts get in the way of a good story and prevent them from hyping the threat to absurd proportions.

*The Daily Ink* even had its own colour-coded alert system on its front page, although how they measured the level of threat on any given day was never divulged. That day's edition, the one that Miles flicked through as he killed time waiting around at Dead Rite, warned of an orange threat level. This corresponded to a medium threat; green was safest, and red signified that sales had slumped and a swift pick-me-up was required.

Some in the media actually seemed to pine for the days of the outbreak three years earlier, when the initial hysteria saw newspaper circulations and consumer spending soar to astronomical levels. They were now hellbent on returning to that level of fear; it was almost as if they were trying to wish the apocalypse into existence.

People don't spend money when they're happy and content. It's no coincidence that the words "panic" and "buying" often appeared side-by-side.

Miles knew not to take any of what was within these pages seriously. He put *The Daily Ink* in the same category as professional wrestling; occasionally entertaining, and only the most dimwitted of people believed it was real. It was definitely a publication that made you feel stupider for having read

it.

“Hey, Miles?” He looked up to see a coworker, Erin, settling into a chair opposite. “I need a guy’s opinion on something?”

It was mid afternoon, and all the staff were sitting around and wasting time as they waited for something to happen. A year ago Dead Rite were responding to dozens of zombie sightings every day, but due to the work drying up, as well as Z-Pro’s market dominance, two or three days would sometimes sail by without a single job being called in. On days like this, the staff on duty whittled the hours away by reading the newspaper, watching TV or, in Erin’s case, texting on her phone.

“Sure,” Miles said, tossing the paper aside. “What’s up?”

Erin held up her phone for Miles to view. “Would you call that big?”

Miles quickly shielded his eyes from the screen. “Erin, you really should warn someone before you show them a photo of an erect penis.”

He also thought about explaining what was and what wasn’t an appropriate topic of conversation for the workplace, but he then remembered overhearing Steve and Adam discussing amyl nitrate and glory holes a few days earlier, so he figured there wasn’t too much in this place that was off-limits.

“This guy sent it to me?” Erin said. Like so many young women of her generation, Erin had the irksome habit of ending many of her sentences in an upward inflection, making her statements sound like questions. “He seems pretty pleased with it? I just want to know if I should be impressed?”

Miles squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. “I’d really rather not—”

“Come on, help me out here? Is that considered big?” Erin held the phone a few inches from Miles’ face, forcing him to look.

“Well it’s hard to tell just by looking at that,” he finally said. “How tall is he?”

“He says he’s six one, but we literally haven’t met in person yet?”

The surprise registered on Miles’ face upon hearing this. Some random guy was sending intimate pictures to a girl he’d never met? Miles lamented the sheltered life he must have led. Here was a whole world of courtship and dating that he was missing out on.

“I can’t say one way or the other,” he said. “It looks kinda big, but maybe he just zoomed in close. There needs to be some sort of reference point.”

Erin looked at Miles like he was trying to communicate with her in Klingon. “What do you mean?”

“You know, like in nature photography when they take a picture of a tiny tree frog. They place it next to a five cent piece to give you some idea of the scale.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea,” Erin said, tapping at her keypad to churn out a quick reply. “I’ll ask him for another one, but this time with five cent coins lined up next to it?”

Miles was about to explain that that wasn’t quite what he had in mind, but Erin seemed satisfied so he let it go.

He went to the kitchen to make himself a coffee.

Miles and Erin went back a few years. They had attended the same high school, and had many classes together. Erin was one of the pretty popular girls, and Miles was one of the boys that the pretty popular girls routinely made fun of.

He couldn’t stand her back then. He hated the way she and her friends would torment him, the way they mercilessly teased anyone with the slightest physical imperfection, and their over-inflated opinions of themselves. So when Erin came to work for Dead Rite last year, Miles expected there to be a certain degree of hostility between them. This quickly proved not to be the case when it became apparent that Erin had no memory of Miles whatsoever. As far as she was concerned, he was a complete stranger. Miles had occasionally thought about reminding her of their past association but ultimately, like the misspelled tattoo on Erin’s wrist, he decided it would be best not to draw any attention to it.

Since they’d been working together, Miles’ opinion of Erin had softened a little. All those years of trauma she inflicted on him was nothing personal. Someone in a position of power victimising a weaker person was simply human nature.

There was also the fact that Erin had grown a lot since he last saw her and become a completely different person – specifically, her body mass had increased by about fifty percent.

While some may consider Erin's significant weight gain to be poetic justice for all the fat kids she ridiculed as a teen, Miles couldn't help but feel just a tiny bit sorry for her. Erin was the opposite of an ugly duckling; instead of being a plain child who had blossomed into an attractive adult whilst remaining a kind and decent person, she was an extroverted, overconfident narcissist who hadn't yet caught on to the fact that she could no longer use her looks to manipulate people the way she used to.

Miles was filling his coffee cup when he became distracted by the TV in the adjoining room. The volume increased suddenly, and all office chatter immediately ceased.

He stuck his head in the door to see everyone crowded around the TV.

“What's going—”

He was immediately shushed by Marcus, normally one of Dead Rite's more rambunctious coworkers. Like the rest of the staff, Marcus had his eyes fixated on the screen.

It was a breaking news report. The headline read “Toronto Rave Massacre”.

Miles had come in halfway through, but the facts and figures flashing up on screen soon brought him up to speed.

*The single worst undead-related incident since the initial outbreak three years earlier.*

*Of the twelve thousand ravers in attendance, approximately eight thousand were believed to be undead.*

*The Canadian army deployed to bring the situation under control.*

*Authorities at a loss to explain how so many casualties could have occurred in such a short space of time.*

The accompanying footage resembled something out of an apocalyptic sci-fi film. Thousands upon thousands of day-glo attired zombies were crammed into a fenced off area, while hundreds of armed guards clad head-to-toe in black protective gear patrolled nearby. Helicopters winched survivors to safety, and distraught family members waited desperately to learn the fate of loved ones.

“Man,” Elliott said, shaking his head with disbelief. “So many zombies.”

The first thought that drifted into Miles' mind was how much money a job like that would net them. He felt a little guilty for thinking this during such a tragic event, but he was pretty sure he wasn't alone. Sooner or later, every UMC worker came to view zombies as bipedal beings with invisible dollar signs floating above their heads.

“What is this, like, the third zombie-rave tragedy in the past year?” Erin said.

“This is the fourth, actually,” Marcus replied. There had already been similar incidents at raves in Paris, Johannesburg and Dusseldorf, although they were all relatively minor compared to this latest one.

“I wonder what causes it,” Elliott said. “Why does this happen at raves and not at, I don't know, sporting events?”

“It's caused by the drugs,” Felix said. “They deplete the subject's survival instincts. Instead of running away from a zombie, the ravers feel a compulsion to hug it. The infection spreads incredibly rapidly. By the time anyone notices there's something wrong, it's too late.”

The latest update then flashed up on the screen.

*Superstar Belgian DJ and SlamCore pioneer KoreKayeShyn believed to be among the victims.*

It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room, as they learned that one of the world's biggest pop stars was no more. Other than the sound of a few shocked gasps, the room lapsed into a deathly silence.

Marcus took the news the hardest. He was visibly distraught, burying his head in his hands.

“Oh man, that's so messed up,” he said, his voice cracking. “I had tickets to see him next month.”

Miles gently patted Marcus on the shoulder. “His music will live on,” he said.

He wasn't sure if this was what Marcus wanted to hear right now, but it was better than the trite, "At least he died doing what he loved" cliché. That was the emptiest and most meaningless of all platitudes. Stuntmen frequently died doing what they loved. So did heroin addicts.

Marcus was another relative newcomer to Dead Rite. He was also something of a minor celebrity, having appeared in a popular soap opera during his early teens. Acting work had dried up in recent years, due largely to Marcus favouring nightclubs and illicit substances over learning his lines and turning up to auditions on time. His party-hearty lifestyle had superseded his interest in performing, and left him with a defective memory and a miniscule attention span. The Dead Rite job was the latest in a long line of menial, dead-end occupations he'd held over the past few years.

Adam then strode into the room with purpose and flicked the TV off, just as Bernard Marlowe appeared via satellite link-up to capitalise on the tragedy and inform the public there was nothing to prevent this kind of massacre from happening here.

"We've just had a call come in," Adam said. "And it looks like it's a big one. We're going to need every single one of you."

The staff quickly snapped out of their languor and sprung into action, collecting their equipment and piling into the minibus.

Adam jumped behind the wheel. He revved the engine and, after stalling a couple of times, screeched out of the parking lot.

Shortly before they were due to arrive at their destination, Erin's phone chimed with a text message. She flipped it open to read it.

"Hey Miles?" she said. "It's seven?"

Miles looked across to where Erin was seated. "Seven what?"

"You know, seven coins?" Erin looped a strand of stringy peroxide-blonde hair around her index finger as she spoke. "Um, thirty-five cents?"

It took Miles a few seconds to realise what Erin was getting at, and that her Prince Charming had come through with his reply. "That's a bit bigger than average, isn't it?" she said.

Miles lied and assured her that it was, although sooner or later Erin would discover she'd been short-changed.

## Chapter 10

Adam opened the door leading down to the basement and was instantly struck with a barrage of pounding music. He and the rest of the team instinctively clasped their hands over their ears. That was the moment Miles realised just how effective soundproof walls and doors actually were. There was near-silence when they entered these premises a moment ago. Now they were forced to scream at each other in order to be heard over the thumping racket.

“Can we get that music shut off?” Adam shouted into Miles’ ear.

Miles ran back upstairs and had the owner switch the music off. He hurried back to the basement, just as the lights flickered on.

Once everyone’s eyes adjusted to the light they could see just what sort of establishment this was. It looked something like a dungeon crossed with a grimy dive bar. It had a kind of futuristic-gothic décor, with chains hanging from the ceiling, medieval torture devices strategically placed throughout the room, and mirrored glass covering almost every surface. This was not the kind of nightclub any of the staff had ever frequented, with the possible exception of Adam.

But the real eye-opener was the bar’s clientele.

The room was filled with kinky freaks in spiked dog collars and chain mail vests, leather chaps and body piercings, PVC bodysuits and gimp masks. Every one of them was kitted out in extreme BDSM getup, and every one of them was now undead.

One young female zombie was chained to the wall, halfheartedly struggling to free herself. Another zombie, a middle-aged man, had his head and hands in stocks, the kind of punishment used in colonial times – although in those days, it’s unlikely he would have also had his nipples clamped.

Adam did a quick head count. There were maybe fifty zombies in total, although the hall-of-mirrors effect made it seem like there were thousands. He was almost giddy with excitement, but refrained from showing any emotion; it was unprofessional, not to mention in poor taste, to derive pleasure from such large-scale loss of life. But he couldn’t deny the sheer relief he felt upon laying eyes on so many zombies in the one location. Dead Rite desperately needed a job like this to help stay afloat.

The rest of the crew viewed the club from above, barely able to believe what they were seeing. Many had walked past this place hundreds of times before with absolutely no idea of what lurked underneath.

“What do you suppose could have happened here?” Felix said, sweating even more profusely than usual.

“Who knows, guy?” Adam replied. “Maybe someone was infected when they came down here, then it spread to the others and they weren’t able to get out in time. It would have been pretty dark, and there’s only one exit.”

“Could be a conversion party that got out of hand,” Marcus hypothesised.

“Oh, come on,” Miles said. “Those are just urban legends. Aren’t they?”

Conversion parties were unsubstantiated reports of people coming together to deliberately infect themselves to become zombies. There had been isolated reports of this happening involving suicidal people, the terminally ill and extreme body modification enthusiasts, but the existence of large-scale gatherings that Marcus was describing had never been proven, and all evidence regarding them was purely anecdotal. But that didn’t stop the rumours from spreading, helped in no small part by sensationalised reports in the tabloid media. Some claimed it was done as the ultimate act of rebellion and defiance towards straight society. Others were said to believe that becoming a zombie was a form of immortality; a way of cheating death.

The Dead Rite crew set to work, carefully and methodically subduing each zombie and taking them up to the minibus. They were all relatively easy to restrain – made easier due to the fact that many were already handcuffed or in shackles, and some even had ball gags stuffed in their mouths – but the job

still took over five hours to complete. They had to make four separate trips to the processing centre, but no one minded working the extra hours. This was the most lucrative job they'd had for some time.

For some of the more experienced workers it brought to mind another job they had undertaken a couple of years back, inside a sprawling mansion in the wealthiest part of town. That one netted them a staggering seventy-eight zombies. It was beyond belief – every room they entered uncovered more and more undead beings, many with little or no clothing. It was rumoured that the owners rented the place out as some sort of zombie whorehouse, although these allegations were just speculation.

“Oh. My. God.”

Erin's mouth was agape as she stared at the elderly zombie before her, clad only in leather hot pants and a blindfold. His hands were tied above his head, and fresh whip marks crisscrossed his back. “I know this guy!” she screamed. “He was literally my high school principal!”

Miles came in for a closer look and saw that it was in fact Mr. Gordon, the principal from his and Erin's high school days.

“Just when I thought this job couldn't get any weirder,” he said.

“Oh my God, you don't even know what this guy was like?” Erin squealed. “He was the squarest guy you could ever imagine? It was like he literally arrived in a time machine from the nineteenth century or something?”

The words were tumbling out of Erin now, unaware that Miles already knew all of this. He too was having trouble reconciling the fact that the nearly-naked undead pervert spreadeagled before him was the same man who frequently gave him detention for school uniform violations.

Miles recalled that Mr. Gordon often showed up to school sporting bruises and black eyes. He claimed these were sustained during squash games, but now he knew what was really going on. It seemed that quite often the more normal someone appeared on the outside, the more depraved they were on the inside.

A terribly inappropriate thought suddenly materialised inside Miles' head. He knew it was so very wrong, but he couldn't help himself.

*At least Mr. Gordon died doing what he loved.*

“You okay there, Miles?”

Miles looked up to find Elliott standing beside him. “Huh?”

“You're staring into space with a weird goofy grin on your face.”

“Oh, it's just ... nothing.”

The two of them untied Zombie Mr. Gordon and led him upstairs.

It was dark by the time they finally finished. Most of the staff were exhausted and just wanted to go home, but the job had put Miles in a buoyant mood. With the overtime rates and bonuses he was about to receive for today's work, he would have made over nine hundred dollars. Now he felt like celebrating.

It was just his luck that the first pub Miles wandered into was filled with Z-Pro workers. If he'd known that, he wouldn't have gone anywhere near the place. But he was here now and they had all seen him, and he didn't want to look like he was trying to hide from them. He knew a few of them, since many were former Dead Rite employees. Dwayne Marks was there, along with a couple of others whose names he'd quickly forgotten once they'd jumped ship. They offered a friendly wave, and he waved back, but neither gave any indication that they should catch up on old times. That suited Miles just fine.

He went to the bar and ordered a shot of whiskey.

The Z-Pro guys (and they were exclusively male) dominated the pub, chugging beers, talking at the top of their voices and hitting on anything in a skirt. All were former high school jocks yet to realise that their school days were over. Aggressive alpha-males oozing hyper-confidence, but with little to back it up. They all looked identical, too – every one of them had tattoos covering both arms and a triangular patch of facial hair on their lower lip, and they all wore brightly-coloured polo shirts with the

collar popped. To an observer this was a slightly unsettling image. It was as if scientists had taken the biggest douchebag they could find and cloned him fifteen times. Even Dwayne Marks now had a small cluster of tattoos on his forearm, displaying the early symptoms of the Z-Pro virus that would slowly but surely take over the rest of his body.

Z-Pro were the polar opposite of Dead Rite, who were a *mélange* of misfits, geeks, outcasts and losers; the ones always picked last. Z-Pro had successfully stripped Dead Rite of all their talent by poaching the best and leaving the rejects. Many of the defectors couldn't wait to get away from Dead Rite – not only was the money a lot better at Z-Pro, but they didn't have to live with the stigma of working for “a couple of homos”.

The pub was busier than usual this Thursday night. It had been a while since Miles had been in there. It used to be a complete dive, but that was what he liked about it. It had paint peeling from the walls, smashed windows that were boarded up instead of replaced, and a floor that was so sticky you risked becoming permanently affixed to the spot if you stood in the one place for too long. A tiny stage in the corner was usually occupied by some tuneless punk band who, even by punk-rock standards, could barely play their instruments.

But it was sold last year, and had recently reopened with an all-new gentrified makeover. Smooth polished oak replaced the chipped and splintered bar, twelve dollar imported beers replaced the cheap generic stuff, and a DJ booth replaced the stage. The place had been scrubbed clean of every speck of dirt and grime, along with all of its charm and character.

Miles knocked back another shot and placed the glass next to the others. He paused when he counted the empty shot glasses he'd lined up, side by side. One, two, three, four ... five? That couldn't be right. Five shots? Had he lost count already?

He reminded himself that it was probably a good idea to slow down. He had a rule about not drinking straight liquor. There was a line, and if you crossed it you went from being “a guy who liked to party” to “a guy with a drinking problem”. The same way drug users believed that snorting recreationally was okay, but needles were for junkies. Drinking the harder stuff straight could lead you down a dark path. One minute you're having a great time, the next you're on your hands and knees puking in a back alley.

He figured tonight he could make an exception. As long as he stayed at the bar, he could rely on the bartender to measure out exact quantities. He would know when Miles had had enough. Besides, it was too expensive to keep drinking shots all night at these prices.

He ordered a Diet Coke next, just to be on the safe side.

A familiar kickdrum beat then reverberated through the venue's speakers, and a throng of patrons flocked to the dance floor. The DJ had dropped a hit of “Acid Reflux” by SlamCore superstar Chemikal Ali, the song currently enjoying its eighth week at number one. A bunch of the Z-Pro bromosapiens made their way over, trying out their sleazy moves on the female contingent.

SlamCore – or “car alarm techno”, as some disparagingly referred to it as – started off as an underground concern, but the past year had seen it enjoy a meteoric rise in popularity. The scene was now well and truly overground, and previously obscure artists such as Chemikal Ali and KoreKayeShyn had become household names.

A hyper-aggressive form of electronic dance music, SlamCore appealed to many who had previously expressed no interest in techno whatsoever. Young suburban males who banged their heads to thrash metal or hardcore punk were now swarming to these giant mega-raves and pumping the music from their bedrooms. What was once cult was now ubiquitous. These days if you wanted to hear SlamCore you only had to stick your head out the window (it blasted out of almost every frat boy-owned SUV on the road) or switch on the TV (it featured on almost every SUV commercial). Mainstream pop stars eagerly climbed aboard this latest bandwagon, terrified of being left behind. The music that once soundtracked illicit raves and highbrow art installations was now synonymous with binge drinking, strip clubs and date rape.

The formula for a typical SlamCore track was as follows: open with a basic drum pattern, gradually build upon it over each subsequent eight bars, then hit the listener with the “slam” – pummel them with an apocalypse-announcing, heart attack-inducing barrage of pulverising drums, bowel-loosening bass lines, machine gun fire, mutant feedback, primal screaming, and anything else that could be used to drown out any discernible melody or tune. It was quite possibly the least subtle and most obnoxious form of music ever created, but it was The Sound of Now. It had been embraced by a generation surrounded by fear, death and uncertainty, and all they wanted to do was get wasted and lose their minds to it. It went without saying that anyone over the age of twenty-six didn’t get it.

Despite falling within this target demographic, Miles winced when the music came on. He was enjoying the chill house music playing when he first came in, or at least it was unobtrusive enough for him to ignore. But there was no chance of ignoring SlamCore. If all this booze wasn’t going to leave him with a raging headache tomorrow morning, this wretched music certainly would. It was like listening to an air raid siren mating with a food processor.

His thought process was interrupted when a sweaty, bearded man in a Hawaiian shirt entered his field of vision. He was about as wide as he was tall, and looked like he had enough body hair to survive in the wilderness without clothing. Every exposed area of skin seemed to be covered in dense fur – hairy chest, hairy arms, hairy knuckles. This guy must need the drains in his house unclogged on a daily basis.

Miles recognised him immediately. His name was Jack Houston.

“You’re Miles, aren’t you?” Houston said, propping himself up at the bar. The thick gold chain around his neck and chunky gold bracelet on his wrist made him look even more like a seventies porn producer.

“Uh, yeah, that’s me,” Miles said.

“I’m Jack Houston,” he said, offering Miles his hand. “I’m the owner of Z-Pro.”

“I know who you are.”

Miles tried not to show any discomfort when Houston attempted to crush his hand in the handshake. His palm was so clammy that Miles felt like his hand was caught in a dishwasher.

Houston gestured to the bar staff. “Two shots, please,” he said. Two shots were duly delivered.

“I’ve been impressed by what I’ve heard about you, Miles,” Houston continued. “I think you may have the potential to be Z-Pro material.”

Miles glanced over at the Z-Pro staff on the opposite side of the bar, heckling the DJ and simulating sex acts on each other. He didn’t know whether Houston meant it as a compliment or insult by referring to him as “Z-Pro material”.

“We’re always on the lookout for talented workers. I think you’d fit in with us quite nicely.”

“Are you offering me a job?” Miles said. The five shots of whiskey had taken effect, dulling his basic comprehension skills while removing any filter between his brain and his mouth.

“Yes,” Houston replied. “I’m offering you a job.”

Miles took a moment to think this over. “That’s very generous,” he said. “But I’m afraid I’m going to have to turn it down.”

Jack Houston forehead creased, like that wasn’t the answer he was expecting. “I gotta tell you Miles, I’m surprised you’re not more enthusiastic. Most people I approach with an offer like this accept before I can finish my sentence.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Miles shrugged. “I’m just happy where I am.”

He wasn’t entirely sure if this was true. Was he really happy working at Dead Rite? It’d probably be more accurate to say that even if he wasn’t completely happy with his life at that point in time, he doubted a move to Z-Pro would do anything to change that.

Houston shook his head. “How much longer do you expect Dead Rite to be around? Every rat deserts a sinking ship sooner or later.”

“Steve and Adam are doing okay,” Miles replied. “They’re not going anywhere.”

He didn't know why he felt the need to stick up for his employer like this, but something about Houston's demeanour had him on the defensive.

Houston leaned forward, his eyes darkening. "There's no need to insult my intelligence Miles," he said, his tone becoming slightly more sinister. He was close enough for Miles to feel his hot garlic-scented breath on his face. "What kind of idiot do you think I am?"

"Just the regular kind, I suppose," Miles replied.

Houston glared at Miles. There was a prolonged silence. A pregnant pause.

Elliott once told Miles that the term "pregnant pause" comes from when you see a woman who might have put on a bit of weight, but no one wants to risk asking if she's pregnant or not, so they wait for her to bring it up. He didn't know if this was true or not, since Elliott often told Miles fanciful stories purely for his own amusement. When they were kids, he managed to convince Miles that his great-grandfather invented the canned laughter that is used in television sitcoms. It was years before he found out this wasn't true.

Houston then let out an irascible laugh. He wasn't used to this kind of recalcitrance. Miles wasn't used to dishing it out, either. It was only with five shots of whiskey in his system that he had the courage to do so.

"Just give it some thought," Houston said before leaving. "An offer like this won't be on the table forever."

Houston waddled away, and Miles looked at the two shot glasses on the bar before him, the ones Houston had bought. Even though he'd told himself earlier that he'd probably had enough to drink for now, it didn't count if the drinks were free.

After debating what to do for all of two seconds, he tipped both shots into his Diet Coke and stirred it around with his finger.

## Chapter 11

Miles awoke mid-morning with a devastating hangover. He staggered out of his bedroom and went straight for the kitchen. With his bloodshot eyes, rancid breath and lumbering gait, he didn't look all that different from the creatures he caught for a living. He was in dire need of a shower, but food and caffeine remained his number one priority. He'd forgotten to eat last night, and his stomach was now on the verge of cannibalising itself. Drinking on an empty stomach would explain why he was feeling so awful this morning. Drinking two days after giving blood wasn't all that smart either, and he ended up paying for it. One minute he was knocking back shots and having a great time, the next he was on his hands and knees puking in a back alley.

The kitchen was again in a state of disarray. A mountain of dirty pots, pans, plates and cutlery were tossed haphazardly into the sink. The rubbish bin was overflowing. The stovetop was caked in brown gunk. It was the same scenario playing out over and over; Miles would wake up to find the house in a complete mess, then clean it all up, only to discover it in the exact same state the next morning. He often wondered what would happen if he just left it all and didn't do any cleaning, but he already knew the answer to that – it would keep piling up for weeks and weeks, until he finally caved in and did it all himself.

He once asked Clea if she wouldn't mind helping out with the washing up every now and then. That suggestion went down like a whore on the Titanic – Clea went ballistic, calling Miles a chauvinist and accusing him of having outdated sexist views regarding the gender roles of women and housework.

The only thing they did manage to clean out quite comprehensively was the refrigerator and the cupboards. True to her word, Clea had replaced all the food she and her friends had eaten the other night. And once again, it had vanished as soon as Miles wanted some. All that was left in the refrigerator was a small block of cheese, half a tomato, a can of whipped cream and a jar of pickles, while the cupboards contained only a jar of jam and an open packet of peanuts. He briefly considered concocting some experimental Frankenstein dish from these few ingredients – in his hungover state, it would probably taste as good as just about anything else – but he eventually decided that his churning stomach would require something a little more substantial to make it through the day.

He trudged out to the garage, where they kept their emergency supply of food. He was scraping the bottom of the culinary barrel by resorting to this.

Stacked on the shelves at the far end of the garage, behind the makeshift weapons they had once fashioned out of brooms and rakes to fight off the zombie onslaught (but only ended up using to scare off looting teenagers) were rows and rows of tinned corn, tinned spaghetti, tinned soup, tinned potatoes and tinned tuna. This was a constant reminder of the panic buying they all succumbed to in the early days of the outbreak, and the fact that they could fall for the exaggerated media hype as easily as anyone.

Miles and his family hoarded all the non-perishable food they could get their hands on and bunkered down for the long haul. Now, almost three years later, two thirds of the food remained uneaten. It wasn't that they didn't try to use it all up. It was just that there was only so much tuna and spaghetti you could eat before getting sick of it. It didn't take long for this to happen to Miles. Just looking at these tins of food made him feel queasy.

It was a normal Thursday morning about two-and-a-half years ago when Miles received a hysterical phone call from Shae. He couldn't decipher much of what she was saying over all the sobbing, but he soon came to understand that zombies were on their property, and the possibility existed that one or more family members had been bitten.

Miles told Shae to get to a safe place, then borrowed a friend's car and made the three hour journey back home in less than two. He prepared himself for the worst when he arrived – but he soon came to

realise he had no idea of just how bad the worst could be.

In the backyard he found not one, but four zombies. Or what was left of them.

It was his father, his mother, and their two neighbours, the Parkers. Their identity wasn't immediately obvious to Miles. They had all been bludgeoned to death, then doused in petrol and set alight. They were now nothing more than four piles of putrid, smoldering remains; two under the clothes line, one in the garden bed, and one in the garage. The words "DIE ZOMBIE SCUM" were smeared across the walls in blood.

The police never did track down those responsible, but it was unlikely they even bothered looking for the culprits. In those days, few charges were ever brought against anyone accused of zombicide, and successful convictions were even rarer.

The events of that one day in August played over and over in Miles' head ever since. For a long time he harboured a great deal of anger and resentment. It was such a stupid and careless way to go. They'd survived the worst of it during the initial outbreak, but they let their guard down just the one time and paid the ultimate price.

He resented the Parkers, who were probably bitten by a stray but didn't take the necessary precautions to protect anyone else when they inevitably turned. He resented his father for recklessly getting bitten after that – he was apparently trying to remove the two zombies from the property rather than call in the professionals – and his mother for not leaving with Shae when she had the chance.

Most of all, Miles' fuming anger was directed at the nameless cowards who tipped off the vigilantes. It had to have been somebody living in their street; it was quite likely that they lived within a couple of houses either side of him.

Ever since that day, Miles viewed all of his neighbours with suspicion. In all likelihood he would never find out who it was, but he probably saw them on a regular basis. They've probably said hello to him dozens of times since and acted as if nothing was wrong.

Miles stared at the big black burn mark in the centre of the garage, the location where his mother was beaten and cremated. He'd scrubbed at that spot over and over, but he had never been able to get rid of it completely. It served as something of a metaphor for his ever-present rage; no matter how much he wanted to move on and let go of all the resentment building up inside him, he could never quite do it. It was a stain on his life that he was unable to fully wash away. He worried what effect all this repressed anger was having on him, and feared that one day he might just erupt. A few weeks ago, at Stacey's barbecue, he felt the overwhelming urge to knock Alistair's teeth out when he made the comment about putting a bullet into every one of the zombies. And then last week, Miles was in a café when he heard a news item on the radio about vigilantes in South America caught massacring hundreds of zombies. Another customer loudly applauded this news and let everyone know that this was the best possible course of action. Miles quickly left the premises in case he did something he might later regret.

Miles gave up on the idea of food and went back to bed in the hope of getting a couple of hours more sleep before work. That didn't happen. Instead, he stared at the wall and counted all the blu-tack residue leftover from the posters he'd had up during his teenage years. It sometimes felt weird that, at twenty-three, he was still sleeping in the same bedroom he'd had since he was six. It made him feel like he still hadn't properly grown up. On the other hand, he had to grow up pretty damn fast when he was forced to take responsibility for Shae.

He moved back home after his parents were killed. Shae was thirteen and Miles was twenty-one (with their eight year age difference, Miles never hesitated to remind Shae that she was a mistake), and so he was old enough to be granted legal guardianship. The change in his lifestyle was immense; one minute he was extending his adolescence during his gap year (which had blown out to three years by that point), the next he had a whole world of adult responsibilities thrust upon him. Partying and travelling took a back seat to paying utility bills and keeping the house out of reach from the bank. He

initially wanted to sell the house and rent somewhere smaller, since the loan repayments were surprisingly hefty, but he ended up staying for Shae's sake. She had been through enough trauma already without having to deal with the upheaval associated with moving to a new place. Besides, this house was now the scene of a gruesome quadruple zombicide. Its value plummeted, and if they sold it now they wouldn't come close to covering the outstanding mortgage.

Like his Dead Rite job, Miles thought moving back home would be a temporary arrangement. He had planned on finally commencing his long-delayed commerce degree when the new semester began six months later. But six months turned into a year, which then became two years, and was now two-and-a-half and counting. In that time he had seen all of his friends graduate and start their careers while he was trapped in a dead-end, go-nowhere job, watching the plans he'd had for his own life grow more and more distant by the day.

He knew it was selfish to think this, and he sometimes hated himself for it, but he often felt resentful for the situation he found himself in. He was twenty-three. This was the time in his life that he should be enjoying the most. The time when you can take advantage of all the privileges that come with being an adult without being weighed down by any of the responsibilities.

Miles had almost drifted off to sleep again when he was awoken by the sound of pounding techno music coming from the lounge room. This could only mean that Amoeba, Clea's performance artist friend, had arrived.

Amoeba had been working on an audio/visual installation he called "The Majestic Purge of Elysian Cancer" for the past few months. It featured hidden camera footage of overweight people devouring fast food meals spliced into Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda films, all set to a thumping techno soundtrack. The performance piece also included the burning of real money, and would culminate with Amoeba painting a pile of roadkill in psychedelic colours. It wasn't immediately obvious what the point of all this was, but Amoeba insisted this was his way of protesting animal cruelty.

Amoeba's work was frequently hard to decipher. Miles once tossed a wine bottle filled with cigarette butts into the trash, unaware that it was a piece of abstract art meant to highlight environmental degradation and the billions of people living in poverty worldwide.

Amoeba was simply another in a long line of derelicts and weirdos that Clea had invited into the house and allowed them to do whatever they wanted with no consideration for anyone else. It was on days like today that Miles regretted selecting her to move in and not one of the other candidates they had interviewed.

Maybe he should have chosen that Vincent guy after all. Vincent was a thirty-nine-year-old tax specialist who dressed in a buttoned-down shirt and brown corduroy trousers. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and had the kind of sideburns not seen since 1976. He enjoyed entomology and classical music. Miles thought there was something a bit odd about Vincent that he couldn't quite put his finger on. But he couldn't have been that bad; after all, his previous landlord supplied a reference that described Vincent as "a nice quiet man who never caused any trouble and always paid his rent on time".

A sharp, high-pitched scream reverberated around the house.

Miles groaned and buried his head beneath the pillow, but the commotion coming from the lounge room grew louder and louder.

And then came Clea's desperate wail: "Miiiiiles!!"

Miles fell out of bed and hurried to the lounge. He was met with a scene of comical pandemonium.

An obese, half-naked zombie waddled around the room like a giant baby, while six stoned, shrieking hippies cowered in the corner. The stereo blasted obnoxious SlamCore techno, and a projector flashed images onto the wall of fried chicken being devoured and the Third Reich marching in perfect synchronicity.

It took Miles a second to realise that this wasn't all part of Amoeba's forthcoming installation, and that an actual zombie had wandered into their house.

It took him another few seconds to recognise the undead intruder. It was their reclusive neighbour, the creepy voyeur with the carbohydrate-rich diet who just might be a serial killer.

“Miles!” Clea screamed again. “Do something!”

“Alright, calm down,” Miles said. “It’s just a zombie.”

“Hurry up!” Fabian said, his voice rising to a high squeal. When Miles heard the scream a minute ago, he assumed it came from one of the women. Now he wasn’t so sure.

Miles pulled the plug on the stereo and projector in an attempt to restore some order. “Could everybody please stop shouting and moving around so much,” he said. “Just stay where you are until I get back.”

Miles stepped out of the lounge room. The six nervous Zeroes remained frozen in place, afraid of making any sudden movements.

“Miles!” Clea pleaded. “Where are you going?”

“I need to find something to control him with,” he called back. “Just do what I told you and stay where you are, and you’ll be fine.”

Everyone waited and held their breath. The zombie neighbour, who appeared so worked up and agitated a moment ago, was now completely still.

Miles returned a minute later with a plastic bucket. He could have run to the laundry and made it back in half that time, but he took a degree of perverse pleasure in the fact that they all now relied on him to help them out. It was fun watching them squirm.

Clea could barely believe what she was seeing. “A bucket, Miles? How is a bucket going to stop—”

Miles calmly walked up behind the zombie and slid the bucket over its head. It was a near-perfect fit. This dude’s head was big, and now he was completely harmless.

“Okay, you—” Miles pointed to Fabian. He knew Fabian’s name, but it felt more authoritarian to refer to him using the second person pronoun. “There’s a roll of duct tape in the third drawer. Go and get it.”

Fabian dutifully scurried off to the kitchen.

Miles was beginning to enjoy this power trip. The whole time Fabian had been hanging around the house and mooching off him, he had never once done anything that Miles had asked of him.

“I can’t find it,” Fabian said from the kitchen.

“Look in the third drawer.”

“I am looking in the third drawer. It’s not in here.”

Miles took a couple of steps back and peered into the kitchen. “That’s the *fourth* drawer, Fabian.”

“No it’s not! Look—” Fabian counted them off. “One, two, *three*, yeah?”

“Third from the *top*. Really, who counts from the bottom up?”

Fabian found the tape and tossed the roll to Miles. He stretched out a length and wrapped it around the zombie’s wrists.

“*Now* do you see why we need to keep the back door shut?” Miles said as he bound the zombie’s hands together.

“Oh, so this is all my fault is it?” Clea said defensively.

“That was the general point I was trying to make, yes.”

“That’s victim-blaming, Miles.”

“No, that’s simply pointing out that if the door had been kept shut then none of this would have happened.”

“If anyone’s at fault, it’s you for not fixing the fence when I told you to.”

“When did you tell me to fix the fence?”

“Uh, last Friday?”

“You told me the fence was broken. You didn’t ask me to fix it.”

“Why do you think I told you? Because I wanted you to fix it!”

“Why should I have to fix the fence? It was you and your friends that broke it.”

“It’s your responsibility to fix things around the house.”

“Clea, you appear to have outdated sexist views regarding the gender roles of men and manual tasks.”

“No, I mean it’s your responsibility because you’re the landlord.”

“I’m the landlord?”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“I own half of the house, but I’m not sure that makes me the landlord.”

“Yes it does!”

“Shae owns half of the house, too. Does that make her the landlady?”

The zombie was effectively restrained, and Miles guided him out the front door and towards Clea’s hatchback. He then faced the daunting task of wedging the zeppelin-sized former human into the back of this tiny vehicle. It was hard enough for a regular-sized and still-living human to crawl over the front seat and squeeze into the compact car. But trying to force a sweaty, obese, shirtless zombie with a bucket over its head to do the same was another challenge entirely.

The industry term for a massively overweight zombie like this was “orca”.

Clea agreed to let Miles borrow her car so he could deliver the zombie to the processing centre. He asked her if she wanted to drive, but she made it clear there was no way she was getting into a small car with that grotesque decaying creature lurking just a few inches behind her.

Miles climbed behind the wheel and reversed out of the driveway. He attracted plenty of odd looks and double-takes from fellow motorists and pedestrians on his journey to the processing centre.

A feeling of slight melancholy came over Miles as he neared the centre. Even though he didn’t know his neighbour at all – he didn’t even know his name – he was going to miss having him there. Miles thought of him as an almost perfect neighbour. He didn’t play loud music or host wild parties. The only noise he ever heard coming out of the house was his early-morning smoker’s cough, and his occasional late night, off-key drunken renditions of Neil Diamond songs. He had no pets, so he never had to worry about barking dogs or screeching cats waking him in the middle of the night.

Best of all, the neighbour appeared to dislike meaningless social interaction and inane chit-chat as much as Miles did. The two of them seemed to have an understanding regarding this. One of the rare occasions where they crossed paths was just a few days ago, when the neighbour was collecting the mail from his letterbox at the same time Miles was leaving for work. The neighbour pretended to be talking on his phone so that he and Miles wouldn’t be forced to acknowledge one another. Miles was grateful that he had put on this charade for their mutual benefit.

But given what he knew about his neighbour, the events of today didn’t really add up. He couldn’t work out why the neighbour had wandered into the house. Once people turned, they usually carried on doing whatever they would normally be doing if they were still living. They typically stuck to familiar habitats. It didn’t make sense that he would come inside his house, since he’d never set foot on their property before. Or had he? Maybe Clea was right; maybe he was a Peeping Tom.

Miles showed his ID to the guard at the processing centre and was waved on through. After unloading the zombie from Clea’s hatchback – which was even more of an ordeal than getting him in there, despite two centre staffers lending a hand – he completed the requisite paperwork and was handed his \$500 payment.

He felt a slight pang of guilt for doing a job off the books like this. There was a gentleman’s agreement among UMC workers that you would only take on work through your employer and not do any other jobs on the side. This was fair enough, too. Dead Rite had invested time and money into having Miles trained and obtaining his UMC accreditation. He justified it by telling himself this was a one-off. The job had basically fallen into his lap, so it didn’t count. It wasn’t like he was out there actively seeking extra work on the down-low. Some of the more unscrupulous Z-Pro staff were known to have friends and family contact them if they saw or heard of any zombies on the loose. This practise could be quite lucrative – it would allow the worker to keep the whole \$500, minus a small percentage

for the tip-off, rather than have to share it with Z-Pro.

Miles stopped off at a hardware store on his way back. He used a few hundred dollars from his payment to purchase materials to fix the broken fence. He then bought an ice cream and a can of Red Bull from a convenience store in an attempt to subdue his unrelenting hangover. He ate the ice cream as he drove home, holding the cold can against the side of his head and steering with his knees.

He returned Clea's car, then showered and headed off to work. He was feeling even worse now than when he woke up that morning.

The neighbour's real name was Phil Lewellyn. He was a forty-eight-year-old financial consultant and father of two, and had moved into the neighbouring property following his recent divorce.

In the upcoming federal election he had intended on voting for Bernard Marlowe. He had been won over by Marlowe's uncompromising stand on undead issues, and supported moves to have the NEVADA law repealed.

## Chapter 12

Elliott drove a nail into a piece of timber at a slightly crooked angle. "I'm close to getting some money out of that Nigerian guy," he said.

"Oh, come on Elliott," Miles said wearily. "You're not still communicating with that scammer, are you?"

"Relax, baby. You sound just like Amy. She doesn't think I can do it either."

"Well then maybe you should listen to us both. It's a really bad idea."

"I'm telling you, I'm almost there. I told him that I can get the twelve hundred dollars for the admin fees as soon as I sell my car. The only problem is my car's been impounded for unpaid parking fines, and I just need to borrow two hundred dollars to get it out."

Miles wanted to remind Elliott, yet again, that he had no hope of ever seeing any money from this supposed scheme of his, and that Nigerian cyber criminals were not the sort of people he should be jerking around. But Elliott refused to listen. He had been talking about this for weeks now, and he was convinced he was about to swindle a swindler. Once an idea had buried itself into Elliott's head, nothing could dislodge it.

Elliott had dropped by Miles' place this Wednesday morning to help fix his broken fence – the one that collapsed a couple of weeks back when Amoeba and seven others used it as a makeshift stage for one of his performances, and which later allowed his undead neighbour to walk onto his property unimpeded.

"So how did you get stuck with this job?" Elliott said. "Shouldn't it be Clea's responsibility to fix it, since it was her friends that broke it?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Miles replied, biting down on his tongue.

"Good morning, Clive." They both looked up to see Mrs. Jensen at the other fence, feeding her leftovers to Squealer the Tattooed Pig. "Hello, Elliott."

"Morning, Mrs. Jensen," they replied in unison.

"Lovely morning, isn't it?" Elliott added.

Miles was irked slightly that Mrs. Jensen could always remember Elliott's name and never his, despite only having met Elliott on a handful of occasions.

"Shocking news about your neighbour, wasn't it Clive?" she said.

"It was a shock," Miles replied. "That's why we always have to remain vigilant."

"He was a bit of a strange one though. He never really said a lot. Now we know why."

Miles didn't know quite what to make of Mrs. Jensen's last comment. Did she believe the neighbour was a zombie all along and had been hiding it from everybody? Perhaps she was still a bit confused about this whole zombie business. After all, she wasn't quite as sharp as she once was. She often called the police to report crimes she had witnessed on fictional television shows.

"It's a good thing you boys are fixing that fence. You have a wife to look after now, Clive. It's your responsibility to keep her safe."

Mrs. Jensen scraped her plate clean, and Squealer grunted his gratitude.

"What was that about your wife?" Elliott asked once Mrs. Jensen had returned inside.

"She thinks Clea and I are married," Miles replied. "It doesn't matter how many times I tell her we're not, it never sinks in."

"You can't blame her for thinking that though, can you?" Elliott smirked. "The two of you do bicker like an old married couple."

"Hey, if you had to put up with what I have to put up with, you'd lose it every now and then too."

"No arguments there. I don't think I've ever met a more objectionable woman than Clea."

"You've obviously never met Adam's ex-wife, then."

Elliott almost nailed his hand to the fence. "Wait, Adam was married?"

“Yep.”

“You mean to an actual *woman*?”

“That’s correct. They met in their theatre group. They were both in a performance of *Cabaret*.”

“And she *still* couldn’t figure it out?”

“Apparently not. She turns up every now and again to cause trouble, demanding alimony or threatening to sue for fraud and whatnot.”

Elliott struggled to arrange his thoughts and words into coherent sentences. “What ... how is that even possible?”

“I don’t know,” Miles shrugged. “It happens sometimes, doesn’t it?”

“But Adam’s gayer than a *Glee!* convention. She’d have to be Helen Keller or Liza Minnelli not to see that.”

Miles took a step back to evaluate the fence. It was a bit uneven, and obviously an amateurish patch-up job, but it would do for now.

“I guess sometimes people don’t see the blindingly obvious, even when it’s right under their nose,” he said.

Elliott laughed and shook his head in disbelief. He had no idea how anyone could miss something so blatant.

In less than an hour’s time, he would discover just how prescient Miles’ words were.

Miles knocked on the door to Steve’s office. “Come in,” he heard Steve say.

He found Steve behind his cluttered desk, typing away with a vexed expression on his face. “Hey Miles,” he said, without taking his eyes from the screen. Steve was either buried up to his ears in work, or he wanted to give Miles the impression that he was.

“I’m just checking to see if this week’s pay has gone through yet,” Miles said in a way that almost sounded like an apology. Steve could have this effect on people, like he was doing them a favour by paying them for the work they did.

“We’ve just had some sort of technical glitch,” Steve said. “Sorry about the hold up. It should be in your account by tomorrow.”

Miles nodded, even if he didn’t find Steve’s explanation all that convincing. These “technical glitches” had become more and more common as of late, coinciding with Dead Rite’s perpetual cash flow problems. They didn’t really have any excuse for not paying them this week though, since that huge job from a few days ago should have replenished their coffers quite significantly.

Any guilt Miles may have felt over not telling them about the zombie neighbour of his quickly evaporated. He wondered if the job offer from Z-Pro was still on the table. There was plenty wrong with Z-Pro, but at least their staff always got paid on time.

He didn’t know why he had to be so rude towards Jack Houston the other night. It was partly due to being drunk, and partly out of loyalty to Steve and Adam. But mostly it was because he didn’t want to be a UMC worker the rest of his life. This job was only meant to be a temporary thing while he sorted some stuff out before starting his degree. Accepting the Z-Pro job would have legitimised him; it would have given him a career, and that was the last thing he wanted.

“While you’re here,” Steve continued. “There’s an extra shift available tomorrow if you’re interested.”

“Sure, I can do it,” Miles replied. It was supposed to be his day off, but he could always do with the extra cash, and it wasn’t as if he ever had any other plans.

“We’re really understaffed at the moment. Campbell quit this morning.”

The shock must have registered on Miles’ face. “Campbell quit?”

Steve nodded. “He called up to inform us five minutes before the start of his shift. No notice or anything.”

Steve appeared to be a bit miffed by Campbell’s sudden departure, but deep down he was probably

grateful for the abrupt manner in which he resigned. Since Campbell hadn't given adequate notice, Dead Rite were under no obligation to give him his holiday pay or any other entitlements he had owing. This came as a massive relief for Steve, since that was money the company simply did not have.

Steve and Adam often felt guilty that, due to their busy lifestyles, they never did any charity work. With the current state of Dead Rite's finances, at least they could legitimately claim that they ran a non-profit organisation.

Campbell didn't give any reason for his sudden departure, but it wasn't long before word got around that he'd accepted a position at Z-Pro. He was just the latest in a long line of Dead Rite staffers to switch teams when presented with a better offer. For the past couple of years Jack Houston had been using Dead Rite for spare parts, systematically stripping the business like a stolen BMW in a chop shop. This allowed Z-Pro to poach all of Dead Rite's best workers without having to pay for their training or UMC licences.

Miles' ego suffered a slight blow when he heard the news. He assumed that when Jack Houston approached him in the bar a few nights back he was being headhunted due to his reputation as a committed and hard-working employee. Now he realised that Houston was indiscriminately offering jobs to anyone, and Miles was just the next in line. This had to be true, since Campbell was far from a model employee – or even a semi-intelligent human being. He was a mouth-breathing dunce who would walk around the office shadowboxing. He thought Neanderthals were people from the Netherlands and albinos came from Albania. He once claimed to have been molested, just to get out of jury duty.

After giving it some thought, Miles decided that Campbell would be a perfect fit for Z-Pro.

Adam slammed his foot on the brakes and executed a quick u-turn, which the minibus was only barely able to complete on this narrow road.

"Right," he said, putting the bus back into first gear. "Let's try this again."

He drove on at a slow speed, squinting to make out the numbers on the letterboxes as he searched for the address.

Miles and Elliott were in the seats behind, en route to another job. A concerned resident had called in to report some suspicious behaviour at her neighbour's house, and they were immediately dispatched to investigate.

"Who was that feral-looking dude I saw hanging around your place?" Elliott asked, absentmindedly tapping his knuckles against the window.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific," Miles replied. "You've just described half of Clea's friends."

"The skinny guy. The one with the ginger dreads."

"Oh, that's Fabian. Why?"

"He looks familiar. Is his last name Turner?"

"I think it is."

"Yeah, that's him then."

"You know him?"

"Not really, but he went out with Sophia once. You know, Amy's cousin. This was a few years ago."

"Wait a minute—" Miles paused to make sure he had heard correctly. "Fabian dated Sophia?"

"Uh-huh. He looked totally different then. That's probably why I didn't recognise him at first."

"Sophia, the model?"

"Yeah."

Miles was having trouble wrapping his brain around this newest piece of information. Nothing about what Elliott had just said made any sense. Fabian resembled a scrawny Rastafarian version of Ed Sheeran. A hardcore vegan, he was so pale and anaemic-looking that his skin was almost translucent.

Amy's cousin Sophia, on the other hand, was freakishly exquisite. She looked like a tall blonde cyborg developed by scientists attempting to create the most aesthetically-perfect human being imaginable.

"How the hell did that happen?" Miles said.

"Well like I said, it was a few years ago. He looked totally different back then to what he does now."

"But, still. What could she have possibly seen in him?"

Elliott smirked. "I don't know, Miles. Take a wild guess."

"What?"

"What's the one thing that would make someone like Sophia take the slightest interest in someone like Fabian?"

"Believe me, I'm racking my brain here and I'm drawing nothing but blanks."

Elliott sighed, disappointed that Miles couldn't solve what he thought was a fairly simple riddle. "He's loaded, that's why."

"Fabian's rich?"

"His family is."

"But ... don't his parents run an Aqua Bar or something?"

"No. His parents *own* Aqua Bar."

"You mean they own the *whole* company?"

"That's right."

"But there are dozens of Aqua Bar outlets all over the country."

"Hundreds, actually."

Aqua Bar was a health food franchise that had experienced a surge in popularity in recent years. Their food was a little on the pricey side, but their customers didn't mind paying extra for something that was both good for them and good for the earth – Aqua Bar were a proudly eco-friendly and carbon neutral company. Customers could congratulate themselves for saving the world while eating their lunch. However, recent studies have suggested their "health food" claims may have been somewhat exaggerated, and that their all-natural salads, sushis and juices contained more sugar than the average donut.

"So the Turners are, like, millionaires?" Miles said.

"They're *at least* millionaires," Elliott replied.

Miles shook his head in disbelief. Clea had made him feel guilty about his confrontation with Fabian a few days earlier, where she implied that he was basically homeless. Now he learned that Fabian was just another rich kid slumming it, self-flagellating to atone for his privileged upbringing. A freeloading parasite who was poor by choice, living a lifestyle he'll give up as soon as he grows bored of it. While he was aware that most of the Zeroes came from fairly well-to-do families, Fabian's was in a whole other tax bracket.

The minibus slowed down before coming to a complete stop outside a weather-beaten old grey brick house in one of the city's the less salubrious suburbs. Adam switched the engine off and let out a heavy sigh.

"Okay, we made it," he said, unclipping his seat belt. "Finally."

Elliott's froze when he saw where they had parked. His mouth fell open. "Oh no," he said quietly.

"What is it?" Miles said. He could tell right away that something was wrong. Elliott's face was a picture of despair.

"This is Trent's house," Elliott said quietly.

Trent was an old friend of Elliott's. They had known each other since high school, and had remained close ever since.

It was Trent's house that Elliott, Amy and a few others had barricaded themselves inside during those hectic first couple of weeks of the zombie outbreak. Trent's gaming room in the basement

became their fallout shelter, and it was the best place they could possibly be. Trent was a natural leader, and it was his clear thinking and decisive action that kept everyone safe during those early days of uncertainty. He took control of the situation and made sure no one panicked or did anything stupid. It just seemed wrong that he should end up this way.

Adam reached across and placed a comforting hand on Elliott's shoulder. "Are you alright to do this, guy?" he said. "We can call someone else in if you don't feel up to it."

Elliott took a moment to gather his thoughts. "No, I'll be fine," he said. "I should be the one to bring him in."

He took a few deep breaths, then hopped off the bus. Adam and Miles followed.

"And you never know," Elliott continued. "It might just be a false alarm."

Nobody said anything. Dead Rite were called out to the occasional false alarm, but they usually came in at night when someone had mistaken a drunk or a prowler for a zombie. They didn't get too many of those during the day. And walking up the driveway to Trent's house, Miles saw all the telltale signs that something was amiss: several days' worth of junk mail spilling from the letterbox; four newspapers on the front lawn still wrapped in plastic; the lights switched on inside the house despite it being the middle of the day. This didn't look promising.

Elliott rang the doorbell. This was correct protocol – they weren't allowed to just burst into someone's house unannounced. After about twenty seconds had elapsed, Adam decided that no one was answering and looked for an open window to climb through. They kept a small battering ram in the minibus, but that was only used as a last resort.

"Don't bother," Elliott told him. He reached for the top of the fuse box, feeling around until his hand landed on the spare key.

Once they were inside the house, Adam opened the curtains to let some sunlight in. The place was a mess, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. The TV was on, and empty take-out containers littered the floor.

Miles found himself silently passing judgment on Trent and his housekeeping habits, until he remembered that his own house wasn't much tidier when he left home earlier that day.

"Trent?" Elliott called out. "Hello? Anyone home?"

They proceeded through the house with caution, carefully checking every room. Nothing. The house was definitely empty.

But the back door was wide open.

Elliott was the first to lay eyes on Zombie Trent. He found him shuffling around the backyard over near the back fence, grunting and growling at nothing in particular. In one final indignity to befall the poor guy, he had the misfortune of turning whilst completely naked. Now his decomposing body was on display for all to see.

Adam shook his head when he saw this. "Now that's unfortunate," he said.

The three of them moved in to restrain Zombie Trent. Adam came at him with the snare pole, and Elliott stood by ready with the muzzle.

"We've got this," Elliott said to Miles. "You go find something to cover him up with."

Miles headed back towards the house, and then stopped.

There was a noise. Something moving near the side of the house, rustling in the overgrown bushes.

He backtracked a few steps. It was a shape, something human-sized, hiding in the foliage. He didn't need to see any more to know what it was.

"Adam!" he shouted "I think we have another one here!"

Miles quickly retrieved his snare pole, then crept forward with slow deliberate steps. He wanted to see just what it was they were dealing with. A minute ago they thought the place might be empty. Now they had two confirmed obits, and the possibility of even more.

While most zombies were fairly predictable with their movements, they encountered the occasional one who was just that little bit sneakier. They would hide in discrete locations, then launch a surprise

attack on any unsuspecting breather that happened to be walking past.

The industry term for this type of zombie was “lurker”.

Miles moved in as close as he could safely get, then pushed some of the shrubbery aside with his snare pole to get a better look.

He most certainly got that. His jaw hit the ground.

It was at that moment that Adam appeared behind him.

“Adam,” Miles said, as calmly as he could manage under the circumstances. “Get Elliott out of here.”

“What?”

“Trust me on this one. Don’t let him see this.”

Adam could tell that Miles wasn’t kidding around. He turned and saw Elliott coming towards him, following them over to see what the commotion was.

“What is it?” Elliott said.

Adam took Elliott by the arm and tried to lead him away. “I think we should let Miles handle this one, guy”

Elliott shrugged Adam off and pushed his way past. “What’s going on?”

He came up behind Miles, then stopped in his tracks when he saw the zombie.

He opened his mouth to speak, but it took several attempts before any actual words came out.

“Amy?” he finally managed to say.

It was Amy, his girlfriend of five years. Like Trent, she was a zombie. Also like Trent, she was completely naked.

It didn’t take long for Elliott to connect the dots.

## Chapter 13

The bus ride from Trent's house to the processing centre gave new meaning to the term "awkward". Elliott sulked up the back and refused to speak or look at anyone. His zombieified girlfriend and one of his most trusted friends were a few feet away, strapped into their seats.

Miles sat opposite, frequently readjusting the blankets covering the zombies whenever they fell down. He made sure he averted his eyes while doing this – even though Amy was now undead, he didn't want to give Elliott the impression that he was doing anything inappropriate or trying to sneak a peek. But it wouldn't have mattered, since Elliott spent the duration of the journey staring out the window with a permanent scowl affixed to his face.

While they were somewhat sympathetic to his situation, Adam and Miles were not particularly impressed with the manner in which Elliott had handled himself back at the house. Once Elliott realised what was going on he screamed abuse at Zombies Trent and Amy, who would have had no idea what was happening, before storming off and locking himself inside the bus. Adam was less than pleased about being left one short to do the job. He was even less impressed when Elliott sat inside the minibus and refused to unlock the doors for about twenty minutes.

Adam himself was prone to the occasional melodramatic outburst and juvenile temper tantrum, but even he thought this was all a bit over the top.

Miles and Adam finally managed to load the two zombies inside, and were now running the gauntlet of dead-heads as they tried to make it inside the processing centre. Some of the protesters had caught on to the fact that Dead Rite had been sneaking in through the alternative entrance, and this time they were ready for them. Two dozen hippies converged on the vehicle as it pulled up at the boom gate and gave the minibus's creaking suspension a rigorous workout.

After a hectic couple of minutes of being rocked violently back and forth, they eventually made it into the centre. Everyone was left a little shaken up. Miles was particularly troubled; not so much by the protesters almost tipping the minibus over, but by what he had seen out the window on the way in.

Over on the grassed area, tossing a frisbee around with some of the dreadlocked dead-heads, he saw a group of schoolgirls. One of them looked just like his sister.

But he didn't have time to worry about that right now.

He removed the straps holding Trent and Amy in place, and then he and Adam guided both zombies off the bus.

Elliott moved to follow, but Adam stopped him.

"I think it'd be best if you stayed here a while to cool off, guy," he said.

The door closed, and Elliott fell back into his seat.

His mind kept returning to Trent and Amy, reexamining recent events for clues as to how long this had been going on. It didn't take him long to realise the signs were there if he had bothered to look for them. All those times Amy said she was sick, or visiting friends out of town, or attending funerals for distant relatives, she was probably with Trent. He thought that her extended family had an unusually high mortality rate, but he didn't want to pry – in this day and age it was entirely plausible.

Just last week, when Amy told him she was going out of town, he called up Trent to see if he wanted to hang out. He received no answer, and Trent never responded to any of his messages, but Elliott thought nothing of it.

He tried to think back to when this all could have started, to when he first noticed Amy's behaviour changing. He wanted to have at least some idea of how long this had been going on behind his back. She had been acting strange for so long that it seemed almost normal. It must have been years.

Then it dawned on him. It was years. Three years, to be exact.

This all must have started during those two weeks they spent barricaded inside Trent's house, back when the initial zombie outbreak happened.

At the time he thought there was something odd going on with her. He'd wake up in the middle of the night and find her gone, or he'd walk into a room and Amy and Trent would suddenly fall silent. But it was a crazy time; the world was falling apart, no one knew how much longer they had left to live, and so he pushed those thoughts out of his mind. He was grateful that Trent offered them security and hospitality during such a distressing time, but it turned out he was offering Amy a whole lot more.

He looked up and saw Zombie Trent in front of him, through the bus's front windscreen. He was being shackled and fitted into an orange boilersuit. His pale dead eyes stared straight back at Elliott, as if he was looking directly at him.

Maybe he was imagining it, but Elliott thought he detected the slightest of grins forming on Zombie Trent's face.

If Elliott was in any way capable of rational thought, he would have understood that nothing remained of Trent. That person was long gone. Trent ceased to exist – he didn't recognise Elliott, or know who he was and what he'd done to him. All Elliott was to him was a living, breathing organism that he wouldn't mind sinking his teeth into given half the chance.

But in his highly emotional and agitated state, Elliott could almost feel Zombie Trent taunting him. This former human, and his former friend, had a look of smug self-satisfaction plastered across his rapidly decaying face.

That was all it took for Elliott to snap.

He jumped from the bus and stormed over to where Zombie Trent was standing. With little regard for his own safety, he punched him square in the face.

Zombie Trent went down like a slaughterhouse cow. It was as easy as knocking over a store mannequin.

Elliott continued to pummel him while he was on the ground, his hands and legs still shackled.

"You think this is funny?" Elliott shouted at him before unleashing a flurry of kicks to Zombie Trent's midsection. "You think this is funny? I know you can hear me!"

Adam and Miles couldn't get over there fast enough. Neither one could believe what they were seeing, or that Elliott would do something so reckless.

"You've been doing this to me for *three years*!?"

Miles grabbed hold of Elliott and tried to pull him away, but his blind fury seemed to give him superhuman strength.

Two more centre staff members rushed over to help. They were eventually able to drag Elliott away before he could do any further damage.

"Have you lost your mind?" Adam screamed at him.

But Elliott couldn't hear him. His focus was exclusively on Zombie Trent.

There was every chance that he had lost his mind.

Fabian was growing restless. There was a war going on, but all anyone was doing was standing around and waiting for something to happen. The Zeroes had been protesting outside the processing centre for months now, and still nothing had been achieved. He knew that change took time, but he never really had the kind of attention span that would see things through to the end. If he knew it was going to take this long he might have had second thoughts about getting involved in the first place.

Another Z-Pro truck approached the processing centre, turning off from the main road and coming towards the front entrance. The assembled dead-heads put down their acoustic guitars and halted their games of hacky-sack to retrieve their placards and go through the motions once again. They chanted slogans. They laid down in the truck's path. They pounded on the sides and rocked it back and forth, oblivious to the distress this caused the former humans inside. They did the same things they always did, and it produced the same result: the Z-Pro truck and the processing centre staff were inconvenienced for a few minutes, before the hired goons came in and restored order.

This wasn't rebellion. They weren't sticking it to the man. This was basically an officially-

sanctioned protest. Everyone obediently remained inside their designated protest areas. This allowed them to think they were maintaining the rage, but it was about as effective as protesting the use of third world sweatshops and child labour by going into a Nike store and filling out a complaint form.

Fabian was sick of waiting. This was a cause that needed action, not empty gestures.

While everyone else was distracted by the commotion at the front entrance, Fabian managed to slip away unnoticed from the main group. He found a blind spot on the perimeter fence, unseen by any of the guards and hidden from view from the lookout tower.

He reached into his rucksack and fished out a pair of wire cutters.

His hands moved fast. A series of rapid snips, and he had cut a hole in the wire mesh fence big enough for him to slip through. This wasn't all that difficult, since the processing centre was hardly Alcatraz. It had been erected in haste with temporary fencing, and its main function was to keep zombies in rather than humans out. It was surprising that it had taken this long for someone to actually try it.

He looked around to see if anyone had spotted him. No one had.

One fence was down, and there was one more to go. His pulse raced as he set to work on the second one. But this fence would prove to be a much greater challenge. It was made from galvanised wire, and it was significantly thicker and stronger. It quickly dawned on him that he hadn't really thought this part through.

He pushed down hard on the handle of the cutters. Nothing. The blade barely made an indentation. The wire on this fence was five times the thickness than that of the first. He may as well have been using plastic scissors, for all the good the cutters were doing. Being a vegan with the biceps of a ten-year-old girl didn't help either.

When it became blindingly obvious that he didn't have a hope in hell of cutting his way through, he assessed his other options. Above him, a tangled mess of razor wire loomed menacingly. He knew this was the riskiest of all his options, but by now he was running on pure adrenaline. He scaled to the top of the fence, then carefully snipped away at the razor wire.

One minute later, and a section of razor wire fell away. He climbed over the top and jumped to the ground. His clothes snagged on the way down, and the razor wire mauled in his \$400 designer jeans. Normally he would have been devastated, but on this occasion he didn't have time to dwell on it. He was inside.

For a moment he just stood there, not knowing what he should do next. He was like the proverbial dog that had caught the car. He was inside the processing centre. He had made it further in than any other protester. Now what?

A wave of anxiety hit him. For all Fabian's talk of civil disobedience he had never really broken the law before, aside from some minor vandalism. He wasn't sure what sort of punishment he'd be facing for breaking into a government facility, but he assumed it would be more than just a light slap on the wrist. And with ginger dreadlocks hanging halfway down his back and his "This Is What A Feminist Looks Like" t-shirt, he didn't exactly blend in with his surroundings.

But he knew he couldn't just stand there and do nothing. So Fabian, the anti-corporate warrior, took out his Apple iPhone and filmed his surroundings.

What he captured was far from earth-shattering. Just a whole bunch of zombies being unloaded from the Z-Pro truck and taken away for processing. Over on the other side of the compound, a chain gang of zombies in orange boilersuits were led away to the transportation area, en route to one of the massive desert facilities where they all eventually ended up.

It was nothing he hadn't seen on TV before, and there was none of the rumoured abuse and degradation that had been spoken about. Everything was proper and above board. No one was beating the zombies or breaching the NEVADA law. It was such an anti-climax.

He was about to give up hope of filming anything worthwhile when he caught some movement out of the corner of his eye. A UMC worker jumped from his vehicle and stormed over to where one of the

zombies was awaiting processing.

Fabian whipped his phone around to film it. Viewing the events as they unfolded through the iPhone's LCD screen, he couldn't quite believe what came next.

The UMC worker swung his fist at the zombie and knocked it to the ground. He then unloaded a barrage of vicious kicks, screaming profanities and abuse at the top of his lungs.

Fabian crept closer to the action. He zoomed in as tight as he could. It was then that he recognised the deranged assailant. This was Elliott, Miles' loser friend who he had seen hanging around Clea's place a couple of times before.

Fabian held onto the phone with both of his trembling hands. His right hand was cramping after cutting through all that wire, but he ignored the pain. He was both terrified and exhilarated, giddy with nervous anticipation. He wasn't sure what was happening or why, but he knew this was big. This could be the Zapruder film or Rodney King tape of his generation. This footage was going around the world.

"Hey!"

Fabian flinched when he heard a guard shouting at him from the other side of the compound.

"What do you think you're doing?" the guard demanded to know. "You shouldn't be in here!"

The guard saw what Fabian was doing, then what Elliott was doing, and quickly deduced the potential implications of what was about to happen. He sprinted towards Fabian, while the other UMC workers and centre staff pulled Elliott away from the battered zombie.

Fabian knew he had to move fast. He fiddled with his phone, standing completely still as the guard came charging towards him like a wounded bull. He didn't even try to get out of the way when the guard lunged and tackled him to the ground.

"How did you get in here?" the guard bellowed, shoving Fabian's face into the dirt and twisting his arms behind his back. "This is a restricted area!"

Two more guards rushed over to lend assistance. They pulled Fabian to his feet and dragged him out of the area in a choke hold.

Once Fabian was taken away, one of the guards noticed the iPhone lying in the dirt. He picked it up and looked at the screen.

It said: "Message sent".

## Chapter 14

“I know I’m asking a lot,” Miles said, “but *please* don’t release that footage.”

“The world needs to see this, Miles,” Clea replied. “They need to know what’s going on inside those facilities.”

“I’m begging you, as a friend, that you do me just this one favour. I’ll never ask you for anything ever again.”

If Miles looked up the word “futile” in the dictionary it would probably include some description of what he was doing now.

Fabian had sent the video he had recorded to Clea, and Miles was praying that a miracle might occur and Clea would agree to let Elliott off the hook. He even considered offering Clea free rent for a year in exchange for deleting the incriminating footage, before deciding he couldn’t quite go that far. Besides, money never seemed to be a problem for Clea, and she was rich enough to turn an offer like that down.

“This is an issue that’s bigger than both of us,” she said. “When this is released, the public can see for themselves what’s happening inside those processing centres. It could change the way former humans are treated in this world.”

“You know what else it could do? It could make things a lot worse for them.”

“How do you figure that?”

“If that footage gets out, then it could put Dead Rite out of business.”

“And I’m supposed to care about that why, exactly?”

“Because if Dead Rite gets shut down, that leaves Z-Pro as the only remaining UMC contractor in town. You and I both know that they’re a hell of a lot worse than us.”

“The lesser of two evils is still evil, Miles.”

“What happened with Elliott was an isolated incident. But that sort of thing goes on every day at Z-Pro. They’re always being accused of mistreatment towards the undead, or torturing them for their own amusement. The only difference is that the charges never stick.”

Despite the frequent allegations of rough conduct levelled against them, Z-Pro had so far managed to avoid any charges or penalties. They claimed this was due to their disciplined workforce and strict adherence to correct protocols, but it probably had more to do with Jack Houston’s political connections. Whenever a potential controversy arose, it only took a couple of phone calls to the right people to make it disappear.

“Don’t worry,” Clea said. “Z-Pro are next on our hit list. We’ll take them all down, one by one if we have to.”

“Can’t you find it in your heart to forgive Elliott?” Miles pleaded. “You know, *as a Buddhist?*”

“Ha,” Clea snorted. “Nice try.”

Miles could argue with Clea until he was blue in the face, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle.

By the end of the day, those twenty-seven explosive seconds of wobbly cell phone footage would travel around the world at warp speed, appearing on thousands of news broadcasts and video blogs, and lighting up every media platform known to mankind. Critics who had long suspected that zombies were being abused inside processing centres now had irrefutable proof.

The video would spark new waves of protests from supporters of undead rights, and renewed calls for tougher penalties for anyone found guilty of mistreating zombies.

Steve flicked through the TV channels with the remote. Every network was running the same story – the shocking footage of the UMC worker caught kicking the crap out of a defenceless, semi-naked zombie. Several news anchors and pundits added their own commentary to go along with the footage,

describing the “brutal” and “confronting” methods that UMC workers employed on former humans inside processing centres. Others simply let the vision speak for itself.

Elliott’s eyes remained firmly glued to the floor. The past twenty-four hours had been a never-ending sequence of miseries, and it didn’t look like things were about to get any better for him in the foreseeable future. It should have been a private matter; an act of betrayal by a friend, and the betrayed’s violent-yet-possibly-justifiable outburst. Instead, it had blown up and was now very public. If Trent had still been human, this sorry saga wouldn’t have been the least bit newsworthy. But he was now a former human, and so the story had exploded into the public consciousness. It seemed as though everyone had an opinion on the matter.

Steve switched the TV off once he decided his point had been made.

A charged silence filled the room. A pregnant pause.

Elliott wasn’t sure if Steve was waiting for him to explain himself, or if he just wanted Elliott to squirm a little while longer.

“Steve,” he began. “I know this looks bad, but—”

Steve held up his hand, and Elliott immediately fell silent.

“Let me give you some idea of the problems we are now facing,” Steve said.

He spoke in a voice that was outwardly calm, but a slight quiver suggested he was doing all he could to suppress an enormous reservoir of rage.

“We have been caught violating protocol in the worst possible way. There is no way we can talk or negotiate our way out of this one. So this is what’s going to happen. We’ll release a statement to the press taking full responsibility for the incident. We’ll plead guilty to any charges brought against us. And we’ll announce immediate measures to be put in place to ensure this sort of thing never happens again. Which will include terminating the employment of the UMC worker in the video.”

Elliott looked up. “You’re firing me?”

“I’m afraid you haven’t left us with much choice. If we do all that, we might escape with just a fine. But if they really want to make an example out of us, Dead Rite could have its contract torn up.”

Steve gulped down what remained of his glass of water. He took a series of slow, calming breaths. He could feel another migraine coming on.

“Although at the end of the day I doubt it will make much difference if they end our contract or not,” he continued, “since the fine is likely to be so astronomical that we won’t have a hope in hell of paying it.”

“So why don’t you keep me on and I can work off the fine?”

Steve almost laughed out loud at that proposal. “You’re not serious, are you?”

Once Elliott gave it a moment’s thought, he realised how preposterous his suggestion was. The fine coming their way was likely to be in the six-figure range. They would have to garnish Elliott’s wages for the next thirty years before it was even close to being paid off.

Steve shook his head sadly. He liked Elliott, and he understood the reasons behind his sudden brain snap, but he had no other option but to fire him. The cliché about being disappointed rather than angry rang true.

“I don’t think there’s anything more for us to discuss here, is there?” he said.

Elliott took that as his cue to leave. He stood up and left without saying another word.

## Chapter 15

Bernard Marlowe stepped up to the microphone, and a hushed silence swept across the auditorium packed with twenty thousand greying baby boomers. After enjoying decades of wealth, prosperity and stability these people, who were older than a Rolling Stones audience and whiter than a Ku Klux Klan rally, were thrilled to finally have something to be angry about. That was what Marlowe provided for them, and they had all given up their evenings of watching *The Mentalist* in their comfortable suburban homes for the chance to catch a glimpse of their idol.

“This is the most dangerous and incompetent government in our nation’s history!” Marlowe thundered. “The Prime Minister has blood on his hands!”

This, like everything that disgorged from Marlowe’s mouth, was met with raucous cheers.

Supporting Marlowe tonight was his loving family: wife Celine, proudly displaying her new surgically-enhanced shrink-wrapped face, and twin daughters Madison and Stephanie, both outfitted in the latest runway designs.

The girls had jumped at the chance to act as stage props in front of such a huge audience. The two of them had eagerly embraced the famous-for-being-famous lifestyle ever since they were thrust into the limelight, and wasted little time in taking advantage of their newfound celebrity-by-osmosis. Barely a day went by without their picture appearing in *The Daily Ink*’s social pages, whether they were modelling in fashion shows, attending glamorous A-list events, promoting their range of designer handbags, DJing in clubs, or whatever else people did when they had a high profile but possessed no discernible talent. Their enthusiastic partying had come at a cost, though – they were now the oldest-looking twenty-two-year-olds you were ever likely to see.

“When we are elected to government,” Marlowe continued, a statement that was met with a deafening roar. “When we are elected, we will repeal the NEVADA law and implement CADAVER. We pledge to reinstate the rights of ordinary citizens. We will not be held to ransom by enemies of democracy like the Former Human Defence League and the Tribe of Zeroes. Because I believe in democracy!”

Marlowe’s voice reached its crescendo as he built to a climax. “We will take back this country from the grip of horror! Because the undead don’t run this country – the *people* run this country!”

This brought the crowd to their arthritic feet.

Wearing a ten thousand dollar Desmond Merrion suit and two thousand dollar Tanino Crisci shoes, Bernard Marlowe, the son of a wealthy investment banker who lived in a seven million dollar mansion and had a personal fortune of over eighty million dollars, had somehow convinced these people that he was one of them.

He thrust his arms in the air triumphantly, and was joined by his family to soak up the sustained applause.

“I believe in democracy!” he declared once more.

It was said that anyone who wanted to run for public office was unsuitable and should therefore immediately be disqualified. The type of person who would want to run the country is the type of person you definitely did *not* want running the country. It wasn’t that a career in politics made you a bad person; it was that politics attracts only the most vile people.

Bernard Marlowe was a prime example of this. His quest for power was nothing short of sociopathic, and there was no level he wouldn’t stoop to in order to achieve his goal. He would do anything for political mileage, whether it be dragging grieving mothers before the media to underscore the human cost of the zombie scourge, to digging up dirt and spreading innuendo about political opponents and their families and passing it on to his former media chums, to ignoring all expert advice regarding how best to handle undead issues in favour of populist slogans and simplistic solutions.

No one enters politics to serve their community. They do it to feed their own rampant egos. Self-

interest remains the number one priority. A politician's sole objective is to win office, and everything else, including what's best for the country and its citizens, comes a distant second.

Marlowe's pledge to repeal the NEVADA law, which protected zombies from unprovoked and excessive violence, was his most brazen display of pandering to the overfed masses. The National Law to End Violence Against the Dead Act had received bipartisan support when it was first introduced, and every other developed country in the world had similar agreements protecting former humans from such atrocities. Ethicists and other leading authorities on the issue were unanimous in their belief that these laws were essential for a civilised society to function.

Now, Marlowe was promising to replace NEVADA with CADAVER (Citizens Against Death And Violence Entering our Residences). He claimed this would restore the rights of civilians to protect themselves against any undead interlopers. CADAVER stated that landowners could use as much force as they deemed necessary to handle a zombie, including lethal force, if one trespassed on or near their property. A citizen was also permitted to use "an appropriate level of force" in the event of "a perceived threat from an undead being". Put simply, anyone could kill a zombie just so long as they explained to the police afterwards that they felt they were in danger.

Many could not believe Marlowe's arrogance on this issue. If he did repeal NEVADA, it would be the first time a world leader had rescinded legislation protecting the undead. The proposed CADAVER laws violated numerous worldwide treaties and agreements, all to satisfy one egomaniac's insatiable lust for power. These new laws would drag the country down to the level of several war-torn African nations, where the undead were routinely beaten to death in the streets and used by the military for target practice and to clear areas of land mines. It would be open season on zombies the moment CADAVER was put in place, since the majority of the population were now irrationally fearful of the zombie threat; a threat that only really existed in their imaginations.

But the facts didn't matter to Marlowe's crowd of adoring fans gathered here tonight. They believed in something better than facts; they believed in democracy and simplistic catchphrases. They also had someone telling them exactly what they wanted to hear; that they were the oppressed, the forgotten people, a persecuted minority, and he was the one vowing to correct this inequality.

Politicians think the public are complete and utter fools. For the most part, they're right.

Fabian would never admit it, but he felt an electric charge shoot through his entire body when he heard Marlowe call out the Zeroes by name. This was undeniable proof of the impact they were making, and that they were now on Marlowe's radar. They had him worried. The Tribe of Zeroes had arrived.

He hit mute on the TV, cutting off the remainder of Marlowe's bluster and empty rhetoric.

He stood before the group of assembled Zeroes, crammed inside Miles' house and spilling out into the front yard. The group had grown exponentially in size over the past few weeks. The release of the footage from the processing centre had given them the attention they so desperately craved, and Fabian had assumed the mantle of leader. He pictured himself as a Che Guevara-type, a revolutionary leading his followers in a mass revolt.

He wasn't Clea's lap dog anymore.

"This is our time," Fabian intoned to his enraptured audience. "This is our moment in history. The time has come for us to step it up a notch and really make things happen."

Fabian was in his element, high on the attention and drunk on his own self-importance. His footage had gone viral, shining a massive spotlight onto the Zeroes and their cause. Now he could sense a change in the air. They were no longer a joke or a media punchline. They were a legitimate force to be reckoned with. And he was the public face for their cause. He had been granting interviews for weeks with news organisations across every timezone, and the increased visibility had made the Zeroes the hottest underground agitators for every socially-conscious hipster looking for a movement to support. Additional chapters of the group were sprouting up by the hour in all corners of the globe, and their "Z" logo was appearing everywhere, spray-painted on the sides of buses and trains, across corporate

billboards and public monuments, and even on the midriffs of supermodels as they strutted down the runway at a recent Paris fashion show. It was the ultimate symbol of resistance.

Fabian was experiencing gargantuan headrush. A month ago he was a feckless wannabe, a rich kid slumming it among the underclass. Now he was like the Pied Piper of Trustafarians. The incident at the processing centre had earned him some serious street cred, as well as a criminal record (even if all they could charge him with was damaging government property, for which he received a small fine). He was both loved and loathed by the public, and it was exhilarating.

“This is a diseased culture we’re living in, and it’s up to us to eradicate the virus.” He pointed at the silent image of Marlowe on the TV as he said this. “Because this is more than a battle. We’re fighting a war. We are at war with the government, with Marlowe and his cronies, and with the planet-raping, billion-dollar corporations they all crawl into bed with.”

Such was Fabian’s surging confidence that he could deliver a rant against corporations while wearing \$300 Nike sneakers. They were a particularly eye-catching pair, too – neon red with bright orange swooshes.

“Marlowe has fired the starting pistol for an ideological grudge match. It’s us versus them, and we have to be willing to take it further and do what the other side won’t. That’s where we’ve fallen short in the past. They don’t play by the rules, and we’ve just been willing to stand by and let it happen. Well, no more. I say it’s time we took this to the next level. It’s time we got our hands dirty, yeah?”

A chorus of “yeah’s” and “right on’s” from the group backed this up.

“This is our one chance, and we need to capitalise on it. If we blow it, we may never get another shot. But if we get it right, this may be our opportunity to change the course of history. Now who’s with me, yeah?”

The Zeroes let out a rousing battle cry that set off all the barking dogs in the street.

A wicked grin appeared on Fabian’s face. He had never felt more alive.

## Chapter 16

“I know what the rules are Steve,” Miles pleaded. “But can’t we just look the other way this one time?”

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, refusing to budge on the issue. “We’re going to have to report her.”

“Who’s going to know if we don’t?”

“That’s beside the point. The business is in enough trouble already.” Steve slid his letter opener into another envelope and sliced it open. Most of the mail so far had been bills, which wasn’t helping his sour mood. “If we were caught flouting the law a second time, that would be the end of us. There wouldn’t even be an investigation this time. They’d shut us down straight away.”

Earlier that morning, Miles and Adam had attended a job where an elderly Greek woman was found to have been keeping her zombie husband chained up in the basement. The laws regarding this were quite clear; Dead Rite were now obliged to report the woman for harbouring an undead being, and she would be fined, jailed or both.

The woman begged Miles and Adam not to take her husband of fifty-three years away. Like many people, she couldn’t bear the thought of a loved one being sent off to one of those giant zombie prisons, where she would probably never see him again.

“Look Miles, I don’t like the law any more than you do,” Steve continued, jabbing the letter opener in the air to emphasise his point. “But our personal beliefs on the issue are irrelevant. There are serious penalties if we don’t abide by the rules, and I’m not about to take a risk like that.”

“She was old, and she hardly spoke any English. I’m not even sure if she knew what she was doing was illegal.”

Steve gave Miles a skeptical look, then turned to Adam. “Is this true?”

“She knew what she was doing,” Adam said quietly. “She was just putting on that whole confused immigrant act. You saw how much artificial blood she had in there.”

As much as Miles wanted to believe the woman was innocent, deep down he knew that Adam probably was right. They had found bottles of artificial blood inside the house, which she had purchased over the internet and was pumping into her husband to stop him from wasting away.

There was an active online community dedicated to this practise, where thousands of people would share stories and advice on how to keep a zombie in your place of residence without getting caught. There had even been rumours of people continuing to live with their zombie spouses as husband and wife – and everything that entailed. No one seemed entirely sure how this was achieved, and most didn’t like to think about it too much.

These people were all breaking the law, but Miles didn’t believe they should be sent to prison for it. They were just doing what many others would do if they found themselves in a similar situation. While everyone was now aware of what the correct course of action was in the event of a loved one being bitten, no one really knew how they’d react until it actually happened to them. It seemed wrong to punish people just for caring.

Miles and Adam noticed that Steve had been silent for the past half-minute. He was reading the piece of mail he’d just opened.

“What is it?” Adam said.

“More fan mail,” Steve said, a mixture of anger and amusement in his voice.

He cleared his throat and read the letter aloud.

“Dear Pawns of Satan,” it began. “Enjoy what time you have left here on earth, because you are both destined to spend the rest of eternity wallowing in the fiery pits of hell. It’s bad enough that the plague of dead walking the earth was God’s divine retribution for the kind of sinful behaviour the two of you indulge in on a daily basis. But the fact that you are now profiting from it ensures that you and every other sodomite will feel the full force of God’s wrath when Judgement Day arrives.”

Steve and Adam didn’t appear to be all that upset by the contents of the letter, but Miles could feel

his blood heating up. He had received similar correspondence from these far-right religious crackpots who preyed on vulnerable people by informing them that their loved ones had died due to the immoral behaviour of others.

Miles now disposed of the letters as soon as they arrived, tossing them into the garbage without opening them. Unfortunately, there were plenty of others who believed everything they read and chose to join the God Squad in their crusade against depravity.

Steve screwed the letter up and let out a barbed laugh. "We should show them our financial records," he said as he lobbed the ball of paper into the wastepaper basket. "Then they'll see that we're not exactly *profiting* from the situation."

"Maybe we should let them know that it's been a while since we indulged in sinful behaviour on a daily basis," Adam said.

"Adam," Steve said quietly. "I don't think this is the time or place to be talking about this."

"Right, so we should just ignore the problems we've been having and hope they all go away?"

The temperature in the room seemed to rise slightly. Miles could sense that Steve and Adam were on the verge of another major argument, so he discretely slipped out of the room without either of them noticing.

A minute later he heard their raised voices echoing throughout the building, as another simple discussion descended into a pointless quarrel over nothing.

This kind of thing was happening more and more over the past few weeks. Tensions were running high around the office, nerves were frayed, and everyone was flying off the handle for the smallest of reasons.

Steve appeared to be under the most pressure. Elliott's performance at the processing centre a few weeks back had resulted in Dead Rite being slapped with a quarter of a million dollar fine. Not that this came as a surprise to Steve; the chief investigator presiding over the case was a long-time associate and close personal friend of Jack Houston. As soon as he heard that, he knew they wouldn't receive anything less than the maximum penalty.

Dead Rite now had ninety days to come up with the money. For Steve, this time frame was like an additional form of punishment. He wished they would just terminate their contract rather than dragging it out for another three months. He felt like a prisoner on death row, waiting to be put out of his misery.

Miles arrived home a little after ten. He avoided going anywhere near the lounge room after hearing Clea and her gaggle of friends camped out in there. He wasn't in the mood to put up with their antics tonight, so he went straight to his bedroom.

He sent Shae a text message asking where she was, then switched on the TV.

The news tonight was dominated by the latest scandal involving a female government minister and the earth-shattering revelation that she'd been romantically involved with one of her staffers shortly after her first marriage had ended. The report delved into all the lurid details; he was nineteen, she was his thirty-three-year-old boss, and the implication that this affair cast doubt on her integrity and her ability to perform her duties. The reporting was so sensationalised and over the top that many viewers may have been left with the impression that some wrongdoing had occurred, instead of a rather pedestrian story of two adults who entered into a consensual relationship that had ended sixteen years ago. The whole grubby saga belonged in the pages of some trashy gossip rag, not as the leading story of a supposedly respectable news and current affairs program. It was low-rent entertainment disguised as news, and it was indicative of the depths to which journalism had sunk in today's political climate.

It came as no surprise that *The Daily Ink*, Bernard Marlowe's favourite newspaper, was the one to break the story, splashing it across the front page of that morning's edition. It also came as no surprise that they chose to target a rival female minister, ignoring the many male politicians who spoke of "family values" and "upstanding morals" while embarking on extramarital affairs and visiting prostitutes. Marlowe himself has had to make several sexual harassment suits quietly disappear via

secret payments and non-disclosure settlements.

Miles sent Shae another text, then switched the TV off and headed to the kitchen for something to eat.

One of Clea's friends had beaten him to it and was helping himself to the contents of the refrigerator. Miles had never seen this guy before, but he hadn't taken long to make himself at home.

"You Miles?" the stranger asked without looking up.

"Uh, yeah, that's me," Miles replied, somewhat surprised to have his reputation precede him.

"I hear you work for Dead Rite." He spat out the words "Dead Rite" as if they were puppy-killing child molesters.

"Uh-huh."

The stranger closed the fridge and turned to face Miles. His hair was dyed jet black and styled into a trendy mohawk. He had a nose ring and a goatee, and his torn black t-shirt and jeans were held together with tape and safety pins, like the punks used to wear in the seventies. The difference here was that this guy probably bought his outfit from a boutique designer store rather than the charity shops favoured by punks. In all, he looked like what the wardrobe department of a TV cop show thought a typical punk-anarchist might look like, right down to the studded bracelets around each of his wrists.

He also looked about ten years older than what Miles had first thought. The majority of the Zeroes were directionless youths in their late teens or early twenties. This guy looked like he was on the wrong side of thirty.

Miles immediately grew suspicious of his motives for joining the Zeroes. It may have had less to do with fighting oppression and injustice, and more to do with gaining access to a bevy of idealistic and impressionable college-aged girls.

Despite his appearance and his somewhat advanced age, he was still an unusually handsome man. He had a face so angular that it appeared to be made entirely of polygons.

"Kneel," the stranger said.

"Excuse me?"

Miles was taken aback by this abrupt command. He worried this encounter was about to take a turn for the weird.

"That's my name," he said, pointing to himself. "I'm Neil."

"Oh," Miles said. "Hi Neil."

Neil returned to the lounge with an armful of food and beverages.

"Your friend's a bit weird," Miles overheard Neil saying from the lounge.

"Oh, that's Miles," Clea replied. "He's a Scientologist."

Miles would later learn that Neil had caught Clea's attention at one of her rallies. He made an impression by throwing a brick through a Starbucks window, then scaling a power pole and cutting the electricity to a nearby McDonalds store. The fact that this was an anti-censorship rally was irrelevant; Clea like his passion, and decided he'd be a valuable asset for their cause.

Miles went to the fridge and set about making a ham and cheese sandwich. He discovered that Neil had taken the last of the ham, so he was forced to use tofu as a substitute.

He heard a car pull up outside the house a few minutes later. He left his sandwich-in-progress on the bench and waited by the front door.

"Where have you been?" he demanded to know as soon as the door opened.

Shae let out an exaggerated groan. "Can I at least come inside the house before you interrogate me?" she said wearily.

"It's almost eleven o'clock."

"I'm well aware of the time, Miles. I was at a group meeting. I told you about it this morning."

"You said it finished at eight."

"It did finish at eight. Then a few of us went out for pizza."

"Would it have killed you to call ahead and let me know?"

Shae shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't think of it."

Miles' impatience was growing, and Shae's dismissive attitude wasn't helping. "I sent you about five text messages," he said.

"We have our phones turned off during meetings. I probably just forgot to turn it back on." Miles found this difficult to believe, since Shae could barely go two minutes without looking at her phone. "So if you're done," she said, walking away, "I'm going to bed."

"Not so fast." Miles put his arm out to stop Shae from passing. "I want to talk about you skipping school."

Shae gave Miles another dramatic eye roll. "Some other time, please?"

"No, we need to talk about this now."

"It's no big deal. I just missed a couple of P.E. classes. It's not like it was anything important."

"That's not the point. I don't want you getting into the habit of missing classes."

"This is such a first world problem."

"Oh God, don't you start with that."

"Are you telling me you never skipped any classes when you were at school?"

"You're right, I did. And look where it got me."

"Don't worry, Miles," Shae said, pushing her way past. "I'm sure I won't end up like you."

Shae slammed her bedroom door closed for added emphasis.

If Miles' experience of raising his younger sister for these past two-and-a-half years had taught him anything, it was that he was being punished for his own behaviour as a teenager. It seemed that all the stress and trauma he inflicted on his parents when he was her age was being revisited upon him tenfold. It was harder and harder keeping Shae on the straight and narrow now that she was going through her obligatory phase of teenage rebellion. Whenever he asked her to do something, she inevitably ended up doing the opposite. If he told her not to drink a glass of liquid nitrogen she'd probably do it just to spite him. He knew this was typical behaviour for her age, but that didn't make it any less frustrating.

But what disturbed him the most was the influence Clea seemed to be exerting over her. Skipping a couple of classes didn't really concern him all that much. As Shae had rightly pointed out, he used to do it all the time. But it was the reasons behind her cutting class that troubled him. It wouldn't have bothered him if she was skipping school to go to the mall with friends, but she was doing it to hang out with a bunch of brain dead hippie stoners. He was afraid they were polluting her mind and leading her down a dark path.

It was fine for people like Clea and Fabian to waste their lives like that, since they both came from wealthy families and could afford to drop out for a few years. Shae didn't have that luxury. The next few years of her life were vital, and if she messed up now she could irreversibly damage her future prospects.

He knew he was being overprotective, but he couldn't help worrying about the people she was hanging out with and the choices she was making. The closer Shae became to Clea, the harder it was for Miles to get through to her. He didn't know if Clea was doing it deliberately, but she was definitely turning Shae against him. The two of them were forever ganging up on him, and he always felt outnumbered.

More and more, Miles found himself disturbed by the way guys were looking at her now. It was a subtle thing, but it was definitely there. Their gaze would linger a second or two longer than it should. The endless parade of strange men that Clea allowed into the house, like that sleazy Neil guy he'd just encountered, did nothing to alleviate his concerns.

Miles returned to finish his sandwich. The doorbell rang a few minutes later.

He answered and found Elliott clutching the doorframe as if the whole house might collapse if he let go. If he wasn't drunk, he was doing a pretty convincing impersonation.

"Heyyy, Miles," he slurred.

"Where did you disappear to?" Miles said. "I've been trying to call you for the past two weeks."

A few days after Elliott lost his job, Miles received a phone call saying he'd been arrested. The police suspected him of being part of an elaborate money laundering scheme after he was caught trying to deposit a fraudulent \$200 cheque. Elliott didn't help matters by being evasive and refusing to answer any questions. It was left to Miles to explain to the police that Elliott was trying to scam some money out of a Nigerian con artist, but it didn't quite pan out the way he had envisioned.

"I've bin busy," Elliott said, mashing his words together in such a way that they seemed to form an entirely new dialect. "I needed some cassh."

"You have a new job?"

"Nope." Elliott produced a small pill bottle from his back pocket containing several blue oval capsules. "I make money with theese."

"Oh good, you're selling drugs. For a minute there I was worried you were doing something irresponsible."

"Relax baby, I'm not selling drugs. I'm *taking* them. It's medication, and I'm getting paid to do it."

"You mean like a clinical trial?"

"No, they given me these pills to take, and then monitor how m'body reacts to it."

"That's called a clinical trial."

"Oh. Right."

"Aren't they supposed to isolate the test subjects while they monitor them?"

"Not thish one. Anyway, thish way I cin do two at once."

Elliott fumbled around for a second pill bottle, this one containing round orange tablets.

"So they're testing two types of drugs on you?"

"No, thish one's for a diffrint trial altogether."

"You're taking part in *two* clinical trials?"

"Yup."

"At the same time?"

"I'm tellin' you, the money's real good." Elliott smiled a broad grin, like he was exceptionally proud of himself. "You should do it, too."

The frantic rush to develop a vaccine or a cure for the infection meant there was a smorgasbord of clinical trials available for anyone willing to risk their health and wellbeing for some fast cash. The pharmaceutical companies were sparing no expense in their quest, and some were conducting themselves less ethically than they might otherwise have done.

"But you don't know what the possible side effects are!" Miles said.

"*No one* knows what the possible side effects are, Miles." Elliott spoke slowly, as if he was explaining something complex to a young child. "That's why they hafta conduct theese tests."

Miles then noticed the small perforations and discolourations dotting Elliott's arms. He then knew it was this, and not alcohol, that was the cause of Elliott's odd behaviour.

"Have you been selling blood as well?" he said.

Elliott shook his head. "Yeaah."

"How many times have you done it?"

"I don't know," Elliott shrugged. "Three times, I think. Or maybe it was three. My memory hasn't bin so good lately, f'some reason."

"Christ Elliott, you can't keep doing that."

"Sure y'can. You just hafta give a diffrint name when y'go in. They don't check your ID or anything. Besides, I'm AB negative. They pay me more f'my blood because it's rare."

"Would you close the door please, Miles?" Clea shouted from the lounge room. "You're letting out all the cold air!"

Elliott stuck his head inside. "Hi, Clea!" he called out in his friendliest voice. "It's only me!"

"Oh God," Clea said with disgust. "What is *he* doing here?"

"Goodness, Clive," Elliott said. "Your wife seems to be in a bad mood tonight."

“Look, it’s probably best that you don’t hang around here too much longer.” Miles attempted to usher Elliott out of the house before his presence caused a further scene. “You’re kind of persona non grata at the moment.”

“Uh look, Miles, the reason I came here tonight ...” Elliott paused as he tried to rearrange his jumbled thoughts into a coherent sentence. “I need your help with something.”

“Sure,” Miles said, picking up on Elliott’s sudden downbeat turn. “What’s up?”

Elliott took a deep breath. “My grandparents are zombies.”

Miles laughed. This revelation spilled out of him so quickly and without warning that he assumed Elliott was making some sort of joke. But the look on his face told him he was serious. He stepped out onto the front porch and closed the door behind him.

“What are you talking about?”

Elliott explained how it had happened. Earlier in the day he decided to drop in on his grandparents in the hope of scoring a free meal, having worn out his welcome at his parents’ place. But when he arrived, he discovered that he was too late. Both of them were now undead, sitting on the couch watching *Judge Judy*.

“When did this happen?” Miles asked.

“I just found them today. I went out to visit them, and I—”

“Wait, you *drove* out there?”

“Well I obviously didn’t walk that far.”

“No, I’m just surprised that you managed to put the key in the ignition, let alone operate a motor vehicle.”

“So are you going to help me or what?”

“Help you?”

“Help me take them to a processing centre, and, y’know ...” Elliott’s voice trailed off before he could utter the words “collect the payment”, but Miles knew what he was getting at.

“Are you sure that’s something you want to do?”

“Not really, but if we don’t do it someone else will. I’d rather it be me and you than have some chucklehead from Z-Pro knocking them around and helping themselves to the family heirlooms.”

Miles sighed. “I don’t know about this, Elliott.”

“Please, Miles. I can’t do it without you.”

Miles felt conflicted. Elliott was his best friend, and he was stuck in a desperate situation. But he had already gone behind Steve and Adam’s back once to do a job, and he didn’t think it was right to do it again.

“I mean that literally,” Elliott continued. “I can’t do it without you. I need a valid UMC licence to take them to the processing centre. Mine’s been revoked.”

Despite his deep reservations, Miles eventually agreed to help Elliott out. This would be a one-time thing, he promised, and he made it clear he was only doing this due to the exceptional circumstances.

They made plans to leave first thing tomorrow morning.

## Chapter 17

Despite its grim-sounding name, Graves End was actually a pleasant, quiet kind of town. A decade earlier it had been a thriving semi-rural community, but that all changed with the construction of a freeway bypass that diverted all the passing traffic. This led to many local businesses closing down and property prices plummeting, as the residents deserted the town in droves.

The flip side was that the town then became very attractive to retirees. Not only could cashed-up seniors now afford a house twice as big as one in the city for half the price, they didn't have to put up with any riffraff passing through their town and disturbing the serenity. For those that wanted to be left alone to enjoy their twilight years in peace, it suited them just fine. Thanks to the bypass, Graves End was the kind of place someone could only ever go to on purpose. Nobody ever stumbled across it by accident.

You wouldn't need to consult census figures to know that the citizens of Graves End had an average age of sixty-one. You could guess this by the uniform neatness of every one of the houses. Each residence was a picture of homely perfection, with manicured lawns that looked like spongy green carpet and rows of flowers and plants that were so well maintained they almost looked artificial. This level of immaculateness was attainable only to those who were willing to devote entire days to the presentation and upkeep of their abode.

Elliott pulled into the driveway of his grandparents' home which, like all others in this Stepford community, was impeccably presented. Only a few stray leaves on the front lawn hinted that something may be amiss.

They discovered both zombie grandparents inside the house. They were doing exactly what they would normally be doing at this time of day, which was watching their favourite game shows. The TV was on when they turned, which made it easier for Elliott and Miles. They were both able to quietly slip inside without drawing any attention to themselves. From there, it wasn't too difficult to get them both off the couch and into the back of Elliott's car.

"It's kind of strange that no one reported it," Miles said as he fastened their seat belts in place.

"I don't know," Elliott shrugged, carefully removing the rings from his grandmother's fingers and stashing them in his pocket. "People tend to mind their own business out here."

A shrill meowing interrupted them. Elliott looked up and saw Smokey, his grandparents' twelve-year-old tabby, perched on their front doorstep.

Elliott groaned. He hadn't thought about what he was going to do with the cat. "Say, Miles," he said. "How would you like a new pet?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, Elliott," Miles replied.

It was bad enough having a bunch of unwashed hippies and a giant tattooed pig stinking up his place. Miles didn't really like the thought of adding cat urine to that mix.

"I guess he's coming home with me then," Elliott said with a sigh.

Elliott moved to pick the cat up, and it immediately bounded away. "Goddamn it," he said to himself, as the cat scurried under the fence and into the neighbouring property. He wondered if he could just leave it behind and let it become someone else's problem. But then he thought of how much his grandmother loved that stupid cat, and how she would have wanted her furry companion taken care of if she wasn't around to do it.

He climbed over the fence and slowly crept up behind the cat until he had it cornered. The cat tried to run away again, but Elliott quickly scooped him up.

"Gotcha, you little bastard," he said.

Elliott stood back up and found himself face-to-face with a white-haired zombie.

He let out a tiny high-pitched squeal that he'd be embarrassed about if he wasn't so petrified. The cat leapt from his arms and scampered up a nearby tree.

The zombie stared back at Elliott, looking deep into his eyes. Elliott froze for what felt like an eternity, but was probably only about half a second.

It wasn't until he realised that the two of them were separated by a thick pane of glass, and that the zombie was inside the neighbour's house, that his heart resumed beating and he was able to get his limbs moving again.

Once the shock wore off, Elliott realised what this meant. Here was another zombie for them to take back. Sort of a buy-two-get-one-free kind of deal, and more money in his pocket. So maybe things were starting to look up for him.

He hurried back towards the fence, eager to inform Miles of this latest development. He climbed halfway over, then stopped. From this elevated position he could see directly into the backyard of the house behind his grandparents'.

In there, an elderly zombie slowly pushed a dead lawnmower up and down the yard. His zombie wife was nearby at the flowerbed, listlessly poking at it with a garden hoe over and over.

He climbed further up, standing on the top railing of the fence. He kept his balance by holding onto a branch from the tree that the cat was now hiding up. From here he could see into all the surrounding houses, where the same incredible scenario played out over and over.

Every resident in every home was now a zombie.

Elliott jumped down and hurried back to the car. Miles there was waiting for him. He could tell something was up with Elliott just by looking at him.

"What is it?" Miles asked.

"Miles." It took Elliott a moment to catch his breath and figure out how to put what he had just seen into words. He swallowed hard.

"I think we've hit the mother lode," he said.

Elliott's car crawled slowly up and down the streets of Graves End. He and Miles kept their eyes peeled for survivors, but the further they drove the less likely this seemed. What they found instead was zombies in every direction they looked.

Elliott's grandparents were now safely buckled in the backseat. The seat belts holding them in place weren't quite as secure as the restraints they had in the minibus, but they were effective enough. A zombie possessed neither the motor skills nor the physical dexterity required to undo a seat belt, and the grill over their faces prevented them from biting anyone.

"Do you think there's anyone left?" Elliott said as he scanned the area for signs of life.

Miles shook his head. "Doesn't look like it," he said.

He'd heard of this sort of thing happening before, where an entire town succumbed to an infection, but he didn't think it was something he'd ever see with his own eyes.

The further on they drove, the less hope they had of finding anyone alive. All they saw was the undead. The citizens of Graves End, people Elliott had known for years, were gone, replaced with macabre shells of their former selves.

An eerie scene played out around them as the car travelled through the town at low speed. The residents carried on with their daily routines at one-third the pace of their pre-zombie existence.

An elderly zombie trudged up and down the pavement with the assistance of a Zimmer frame. Another two rode around aimlessly on mobility scooters, bumping into parked cars and each other. A never-ending game of lawn bowls was in progress at the bowling green, played at a glacial pace.

"How could this have happened?" Elliott said. He was still struggling to come to terms with all of this.

His watch beeped to remind him to take his pills. He shifted around him his seat to retrieve them from his back pocket.

"It's rare, but it's not unheard of," Miles said. "Especially in towns of this size. An infection gets brought in, the person responsible is reluctant to seek help, or their families don't want to turn them

over to the authorities, and so it spreads. The fact the Graves End has an older population would have been a contributing factor. They turn a lot faster because their bodies are weaker, and they're more susceptible to an attack since they can't move as fast. It doesn't take much for an entire town to be overwhelmed within two or three days."

"I was just here yesterday," Elliott said, swallowing an orange pill with a mouthful of water. "Everyone seemed fine. People were walking around like there was nothing wrong. I talked to Lyle yesterday!"

To their left was Zombie Lyle, the service station's eighty-year-old proprietor and throat cancer survivor. Zombie Lyle was doing what he'd normally be doing at this time of day, which was sitting out by the ice box, reading a newspaper and smoking a cigarette through the tracheotomy hole in his throat.

"Then it looks like you got out just in time," Miles said. "At some point in the last twenty-four hours it would have reached a critical mass. The point of no escape."

They drove for over two hours, until it became apparent that the only living souls remaining in Graves End were the ones inside the car.

"I guess we better call this in," Miles said, absentmindedly scratching the cat's head as it sat on his lap. The cat purred lightly, enjoying this a little too much for Miles' liking.

"Is that our only option?" Elliott said.

"According to the law it is."

Undead management and control firms were only permitted to work on jobs with one hundred obits or less. Any more and they were required to report it to the authorities. The Paramilitary Undead Management Authority would be sent in, and the area sealed off while the PUMAs evacuated the remaining inhabitants. The firm would receive a nominal finder's fee for reporting the incident. In the case of Graves End, a town of about five thousand residents, this would amount to around \$20,000.

Elliott had been silent for a moment, staring out the window. Miles knew him well enough to know that there was something formulating inside his head. He had that look on his face.

"What?" Miles said, slightly worried by the sudden glint appearing in Elliott's eye.

"Maybe there's another option," Elliott said.

Steve jumped up from behind his desk and quickly closed the door. Once Elliott had informed him of what was happening out at Graves End, he assumed that the rest of this conversation should go no further than the four walls of his office.

"How many people live in Graves End?" Steve asked, settling back into his seat.

"About five thousand," Elliott replied.

"And they're all infected?"

"Yes."

"Every last one?"

"As far as we can tell. We drove around for about two hours and we couldn't find any survivors."

Steve shifted his attention to Miles, sitting alongside Elliott. "You can confirm all this?"

Miles nodded. "It's a category five plague. The entire town has been wiped out."

Steve leaned back in his chair and looked to the ceiling. The cogs in his brain were working overtime.

Miles noticed some red abrasions around Steve's neck and found himself speculating as to how they might have gotten there, before chiding himself for thinking inappropriate homophobic thoughts. There may be perfectly innocent reasons why Steve would have what appeared to be belt marks at the base of his throat. He couldn't come up with any off the top of his head, but he was sure they existed.

After returning from Graves End, Miles and Elliott took the two grandparents to the processing centre and collected their payment. Elliott offered to split the money 50-50, but Miles insisted he keep the whole \$1000 for himself. He figured Elliott needed it more than he did, and considering the circumstances he would have felt weird accepting it.

They then concocted a cover story as to what they were doing at Graves End – they said they were there to help Elliott’s grandparents move some furniture when they stumbled upon the town full of zombies – before approaching Steve and Adam with a proposal that just might save their business.

But Steve’s response was not quite as enthusiastic as they had hoped.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, shaking his head. “We can’t do it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Elliott said, throwing his hands up in disbelief.

“We have to do the right thing and call it in.”

“This job is like a gift from God, Steve. It fell into our laps at the exact moment we needed it the most. If we turn our backs on this, it’s like we’re giving the universe the finger.”

“I’m sorry, but my mind is made up.”

“This could solve every one of your problems.”

“And it could create even bigger ones for us, too.”

“Oh come on, Steve. Give me one good reason why we shouldn’t do this.”

“I’ll give you two. One, because it’s *very* dangerous, and two, if we got caught attempting a job this size we would be facing a seven-figure fine *and* prison time for Adam and myself.”

“I understand it’s a huge risk, but don’t you agree that a risk like this just might be worth taking?”

“That’s easy for you to say, Elliott. We have a lot more at stake here than you do.”

“It’s not really that dangerous. We’re all trained professionals. This is nothing we haven’t done before, only on a slightly larger scale.”

“What’s all this ‘we’ talk?”

“What do you mean?”

“If we do decide to go ahead with this hypothetical job you’re pitching – and that’s a big ‘if’ – what makes you think we’d welcome you back with open arms?”

“Well ...” Elliott hesitated. “I just thought since I was the one that brought this to your attention then I’d be involved. And with a job this size, you’ll be needing as many workers as you can get.”

“But we’re not doing the job, so I don’t know why we’re still discussing it.”

“Has anyone ever been found guilty of doing a job that should have been called in? It’s, like, a technicality. No one ever gets convicted.”

“With the luck we’ve been having lately, we’d probably be the first. Seriously, can you imagine what would happen if we were caught, on top of everything else we’ve been through these past few weeks? We’d be publicly hung, drawn and quartered. They could shut us down just for having this conversation.”

“No one would ever know. Graves End is well off the beaten track. Ever since they built the freeway bypass they don’t get traffic passing through there anymore. The only people we’ll see are locals, and they’re all zombies.”

Steve closed his eyes and exhaled. Elliott seemed to have an answer for everything. He knew that it would be beyond stupid and irresponsible to agree to what was being suggested here, but he couldn’t deny that he wasn’t just a little bit tempted.

He looked across to Adam. “What do you think about all this?”

Adam had remained mute throughout the discussion, and hesitated to break his silence. “You know what our current financial situation is,” he finally said.

Steve didn’t need to be reminded of the catastrophic state of the business. They were already struggling to make ends meet, but the fine they had just been slugged with would almost certainly spell the end for Dead Rite, as well as personally bankrupting Steve and Adam.

“Do you think we can afford to risk it?”

“It’s your call,” Adam said, shifting awkwardly in his seat. While he appreciated that Steve was involving him in the decision-making process, he was slightly irritated that the responsibility for making a decision of this magnitude seemed to be shifted solely onto him. “But I’m not sure we can afford *not* to do it,” he added.

Steve sighed and looked out the window to the car park. He took everything in, weighing up the myriad pros and cons. He'd love to be able to sleep on it and make a decision without any of the pressure and emotion that was weighing down on him now, but that was a luxury he didn't have. This had to be dealt with immediately. The longer he took to make his mind up, the greater the chance of someone else coming along and discovering the town.

Adam, Elliott and Miles all sat in silence and waited for an answer.

"Steve," Elliott said, leaning forward. "If it had been Z-Pro and not us who'd made this discovery, do you really think they would hesitate for a second to do a job like this?"

That was all Steve needed to hear – Elliott invoking the name of Dead Rite's much-loathed competitor. He swung around to face the others, a look of steely determination sparkling in his eye, and rose from his seat.

"We're gonna need a bigger bus," he declared.

## Chapter 18

Later that day, Steve called all the staff in for an emergency meeting to inform them of the situation at Graves End. He then outlined Elliott's proposal – rather than report it to the authorities, which they were required by law to do, Dead Rite would attempt to undertake the job themselves. After a week or two out there, they would have collected enough zombies to pay off the fine and all of the business's debts, and each member of staff would take home the equivalent of eight months' salary. Steve stressed that what they were suggesting here was highly illegal and potentially quite dangerous, and he would understand if anyone declined to take part.

But there were no dissenting voices among the staff. They had made up their collective minds as soon as they'd heard of how much money there was to be made. Everyone was ready to leave immediately, and they seemed a little disappointed when they learned that they would have to wait until tomorrow morning to commence work on the job, since Steve wanted to spend the rest of the day preparing for it.

They did get a bigger bus. Marcus was able to obtain an old school bus, a fifty-seater, at short notice thanks to a friend of a friend who worked at the police auctions. Steve wasn't sure they had the money for it, but Marcus assured him he could get it for a bargain-basement price: "It's amazing how much more affordable a vehicle becomes once someone's been murdered in it," Marcus explained to him.

Elliott, Miles, Marcus and Felix were put to work modifying the interior of the new bus to accommodate their needs. The seats were ripped out to make room for more zombies, and a retractable folding gate installed to separate the driver from the undead cargo. When it was finished, the bus could hold about eighty zombies standing up.

Adam and Erin gave the exterior a makeover. They added a quick coat of shiny black paint, then airbrushed a logo on the side that was remarkably similar to Z-Pro's. It was Miles who pointed out the necessity of this; he said that if an unfamiliar bus kept turning up to the processing centre and dropping off busload after busload of zombies then it might raise a few questions. He figured that if it looked enough like a Z-Pro truck, the centre staff would assume it's one of theirs and wave them on through.

The other thing they needed was more employees. Steve made a few phone calls and was able to find a further half-dozen workers who could come in and help out at short notice. All were former UMC employees who had lost their jobs once the firms they worked for went broke.

It was fair to say that these recruits weren't exactly of the highest quality. Steve was forced to lower the bar considerably, and these people were more or less otherwise unemployable. He didn't bother with the usual processes like checking references or their criminal history, since he doubted any of them would have made the cut. The only thing he cared about was whether they could turn up every day, do as they were told and keep their mouths shut.

Miles was yet to make his mind up about the Graves End job. The prospect of all that money was certainly very alluring, but he still had this nagging feeling of apprehension gnawing away at him. It was an opportunity that seemed too good to be true, and so logic dictated that it probably was. There were hazards involved with every job, no matter how simple it may initially seem. Doing one this size was a massive risk – not to mention what would happen if they got caught.

He returned home that night to find Smokey waiting for him by the front gate. He wasn't quite sure how Elliott's grandparents' cat ended up at his house, despite repeatedly telling Elliott he didn't want him, but there he was. If there was one upside, it was that they were finally starting to get rid of all that tuna in the garage.

The cat wasn't alone. There were also about two dozen Zeroes congregating out the front of his house. They were spread across the lawn, lounging around on the decrepit disease-infested couches

they had dragged over and dumped in the front yard. A few more were hanging out up one of the trees, and another guy was lying on the roof, strumming an acoustic guitar while staring up at the sky.

The only person Miles recognised here was Amoeba, who was leaning against the garage door chatting up a girl with a shaved head, telling her about his plans to “live off the grid”. The rest, he had never seen before in his life.

It was official. His house was now a drop-in centre for drop outs.

He trudged slowly up the driveway. Any hope he may have had for a peaceful night’s rest before the big job tomorrow evaporated in an instant.

A delivery van pulled in behind him, and the driver jumped out carrying a large box.

“Sebastian Devereaux?” he said to Miles.

“I’m sorry?”

“I have a delivery here for Sebastian Devereaux.”

“I think you have the wrong address. There’s no one here called—”

Before Miles could finish, Amoeba rushed over. “That’s mine,” he said.

The driver looked Amoeba up and down. “You’re Sebastian Dev—”

“Uh-huh, that’s me,” he said, fumbling for his ID and signing the form.

Miles shook his head. Apparently Amoeba, or “Sebastian Devereaux” as he was also known, was having his mail delivered to the house now.

He walked up the steps to the front door, where Squealer the Tattooed Pig blocked the entrance. He was lying on his side and wheezing heavily.

“What have you done to the pig?” he asked one of the interlopers.

“Oh, nothing,” they replied. “He’s just had a bit too much space cake.”

“You fed the pig space cake?”

“Well, not directly. But Mai ate, like, a whole bunch of it, and she ended up blowing chunks all over the bathroom floor. We figured the easiest way to clean it up would be to get Squealer in there and, you know, let him do what pigs do naturally. Now he’s feeling a little worse for wear as a result. But don’t worry, he’ll be alright.”

Miles stepped around the munted pig and entered the house.

The whole place seemed to bulge with people, crammed inside every room. It felt like a living, breathing organism.

He decided it was time to have a serious talk with Clea about all of this. This was too much. He tolerated her having a few friends over, but this was testing the friendship. There had to be at least seventy or eighty people in and around his house, and almost all of them were complete strangers. He’d put up with it in the past since he relied on the income from the room she was renting. Hopefully, if everything went well with this Graves End job, money would no longer be an issue.

He pushed his way down the hallway and knocked on the door to Shae’s room. He received no answer. He called her name, then knocked again. Still no response.

He opened the door and found her lying face down on her bed. He walked over and nudged her shoulder. “Shae?”

Shae didn’t move. Miles thought she was sleeping at first, but she was completely unresponsive.

He gave her a light shake, and realised she was unconscious.

Panic hit him like a sledgehammer.

He grabbed hold of her with both hands and shook her. “Shae!” He lightly slapped her face a couple of times.

Shae groaned and opened her eyes sleepily. “Jesus, what’s your problem?” she said.

Miles expelled a lungful of air. “Thank God for that,” he said, quietly relieved.

Shae struggled to prop herself up. She looked around, her eyes still half-closed. “What are you doing in my room?”

“Look, I just came in here to—”

Miles stopped mid-sentence. Something wasn't right with Shae. Her eyes were glassy and a deep shade of red. She could barely keep her head up, and seemed to be on the verge of nodding off at any moment.

"What?" she said irritably when Miles let the silence hang a bit too long.

"Are you stoned?"

Shae shook her head. "No, I'm just, um ... no."

"You're stoned."

"No I'm not."

Miles stood up. "Alright, who gave this to you?"

Shae collapsed back down onto her bed and pulled a pillow over her face. "You're not going to make a big deal out of this, are you?"

Miles could feel the anger bubbling up inside of him. "Shae, take it from me, you don't want to get into this stuff at your age."

"I'm almost sixteen, Miles. I'm not a child anymore. It'd be nice if you stopped treating me like one."

"I understand that, but if you're looking for a way to screw up the rest of your life then becoming a high school stoner is a great way to do it."

"Would you rather I be like you and get drunk every night?"

This comment caught Miles off-guard. Her words stung, even if they were true.

"When you're my age and earning your own money, you can do whatever you like," he said. "But until then, you do what I tell you to. Okay?"

As soon as he said it, Miles realised he was quoting his father's words verbatim. Although everyone turns into their parents eventually, it was a bit disconcerting to discover it happening at the age of twenty-three.

"I don't know why you think you can hide it," Shae said. "I see the empty bottles in the recycling bin. I can smell it on you every morning."

Miles walked to the door. "You know what, I'm not even going to bother discussing this in the state you're in. We can talk about this in the morning."

"Miles, can you please just try and be cool about something for once in your life? It's not that big a deal."

"I'm sorry, but I don't have the luxury of being *cool* about stuff anymore," Miles said, his voice rising. "If our parents were still alive then they could be the ones to worry about you and I wouldn't have to. But since I'm responsible for your wellbeing that means I have to be the bad guy."

"God, what do you think is going to happen to me? Are you worried that I'll end up living under a bridge somewhere, getting mixed up in heroin and prostitution?"

"No, I'm worried you'll end up living in a share house as a twenty-nine-year-old professional student, getting mixed up in pointless activism and performance artists."

"Oh great, so now I'm getting career advice from a glorified dog-catcher."

"You think I enjoy working there, Shae?" Miles was shouting now, something he never did. "Or that I wanted to put my whole life on hold to work in a dead-end job just to look after you? I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't want this burden. But I'm stuck here now, and I'm trying to make the best of the situation."

Miles could have left it there, but the momentum carried him forward. There was still more to get off his chest.

He was so worked up he hadn't noticed that Shae had fallen silent. She had never seen him erupt like this. Her brother was almost robotic in the way he managed to keep his emotions in check, no matter how bad things got.

"If you have a problem with how I'm handling things, you're free to leave. You and Clea and all your hippie friends can go live in a commune somewhere for all I care. It's your life, do what you like."

Miles stormed out of the room. He slammed the door behind him, doing his own impersonation of a stropo teenager.

Miles went from room to room looking for Clea. It was time for that long-overdue discussion.

He heard Neil's voice as he passed the laundry.

"Democracy sounds like a nice idea," Neil said, "but it's something I've yet to experience. The puppet masters allow us to *think* we all have a voice and that we're all in control of our own lives. But the truth is, most people are simply marionettes controlled by a handful of obscenely wealthy white men. They trick everyone into believing that they can think for themselves, but it's just mass-scale mind control. The media and the advertisers manipulate people in a way that is truly terrifying. Only a select few are aware of this, and so the politicians and the corporations do whatever they can to silence people like you and me."

Miles looked inside and saw Clea sitting on top of the washing machine and hanging on Neil's every word. She was so enraptured that he almost hesitated to interrupt. The feeling quickly passed.

"Clea, a word please?"

"Hey Miles, have you met Neil?"

"*Now.*"

The forcefulness of Miles' voice caught Clea by surprise. They stepped out into the backyard, away from the rest of the party.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"What the hell were you thinking, giving Shae drugs?"

"Drugs, Miles?" Clea snort-laughed. "She just smoked a little weed, okay?"

"No, that's not okay!"

"Miles, relax. She wanted to try some, and so we let her have a couple of tokes. That was it."

"What the hell is wrong with you? She's a minor!"

"Calm down. You're turning this into a bigger thing than it needs to be. She had one or two puffs on a joint. It went straight to her head, so we didn't give her any more. I put her in her room so she could sleep it off."

"What made you think it was a good idea to give her some in the first place?"

"Look, I figured if she's going to try it then it's better if she does it in a safe place with people she can trust, rather than at some party where she doesn't know what she's doing."

"That is *not* your decision to make, Clea. Shae is my sister, she's the only family I have, and I'm the one responsible for her. Not you. She's not some mascot that you and your friends can keep around to make you all feel younger."

Clea took a breath. She had never seen Miles this upset. It occurred to her that she had never even heard him raise his voice. She made sure to speak in a calm, measured tone, in the hope that he would do likewise.

"I understand that you're angry," she said, "but I think you're overreacting."

"I come home to find my fifteen-year-old sister passed out in her room, in a house full of strange men. No, I don't think I'm overreacting."

Clea threw up her hands in defeat. "Okay, I don't like where this is going. If you want to talk about this once you've calmed down, we can do that. But I'm done here."

Clea turned to walk away. Miles grabbed her by the arm, an act of impulse that took them both by surprise.

"No, I'm not finished—"

"What the *hell* kind of people do you think we are, Miles?" Clea snapped. Now it was her turn for indignation. "If you think for a second that any of my friends would lay a finger on Shae, or that I'd allow anything like that happen, then you're more of a jerk than I ever gave you credit for."

Clea stormed back into the house. More doors were slammed.

It was dark by the time Elliott left the Dead Rite building and headed back to his car. It had been a long and eventful day, but he wasn't tired. He was brimming with enthusiasm and nervous energy, and he could barely wait to start on the job out at Graves Ends job tomorrow morning. He had a feeling of cautious optimism, and a firm belief that things were finally starting to look up for him.

The past couple of weeks had been tough. His life had become one giant rollercoaster of emotions. He had lost his job and his girlfriend on the same day, and then became a figure of hate for millions of people on the internet thanks to the footage of him beating up Zombie Trent. People were now shouting abuse at him on the street, and the Tribe of Zeroes had burnt an effigy of him at a recent protest rally. He'd lost count of the number of death threats he'd received.

He'd also received messages of support from numerous anti-zombie groups that had adopted him as their poster child and set up fan pages in his honour. To them he was a hero, and they rallied behind him to fight this terrible injustice that he had suffered. This actually disturbed him more than the death threats; these "supporters" were not the kind of people Elliott really wanted to be associated with.

Perhaps his biggest regret was that his actions had almost cost Steve and Adam their business. He had a lot to make up for, and was hoping this job would go some way towards doing that.

He crossed the street and fished around in his pocket for his car keys.

A scrawny youth emerged from out of the shadows. He was dressed in dark clothing, his face hidden beneath his hooded jacket. Elliott tensed up slightly, but he tried not to let it show. He was caught off-guard by the way he seemed to appear from out of nowhere, and the fact that he was wearing a jacket in the middle of summer, but the logical part of his brain assured him that he had nothing to be afraid of. It was probably just some bored kid with a couple of hours to waste.

He averted his gaze to avoid any unnecessary eye contact, and relaxed slightly when he passed without incident.

If he had made eye contact, he would have noticed that the youth had a red bandana covering the lower half of his face. And that may have prepared him for what came next.

He heard footsteps rapidly approaching as he reached his vehicle. He turned and saw another hooded youth, a taller heavysset guy, charging straight for him. Elliott didn't have time to react. He was shoved hard into the side of the car, then forced down onto the ground.

"Hey, hey ... easy, man," Elliott said, making it clear that he was offering no resistance. "If you want my money, just take it." He was carrying about seven dollars in change on him, and he wasn't about to risk his life over it.

"Don't say another word," the attacker said coldly.

Everything from that point on happened so fast that he barely had time to make sense of it all.

He remembered feeling a heavy weight on his back when his attacker pushed his knee in between his shoulder blades.

Then the skinny youth crouching down in front of him.

He remembered freezing when he felt something sharp pressed up against his neck. Something like the tip of a knife.

And the feeling of overwhelming dread and despair that washed over him upon realising what it actually was. It wasn't a knife. It was something smaller, like a bee sting.

Or a needle.

The Dead Rite staff had been warned about the possibility of attacks by members of the public. None of them had ever experienced it first-hand, but they'd all heard stories of UMC workers being spat on or assaulted.

The most disturbing reports came from overseas, where the French resistance group ZLF were said to inject UMC workers and prominent anti-zombie figures with infected blood. This caused the victim to slowly transform into an undead being, an agonising process that could take anywhere between a couple of hours to a week or more.

But that was something that only ever happened in other countries. It had never happened here. Until now.

When he realised what was happening, Elliott thrashed around like he was possessed by demons, fighting to free himself from their clutches. He managed to swat the needle away, and his two attackers struggled to hold him down to finish the job. Elliott wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Out of nowhere, a van tore around the corner and screeched to a halt in the middle of the road. The two attackers left Elliott and quickly jumped inside.

"Consider this your karma, fascist," the skinny one shouted at Elliott. "You won't be bashing any more zombies now, yeah?"

The door slammed shut, and the van disappeared into the night.

Elliott remained on the side of the road for some time. He just laid there, staring up at the full moon hovering in the night sky above him. He should have guessed that something like this would happen. As soon as his life looked like taking a turn for the better, this came along. It was another great big cosmic joke at his expense.

The syringe full of zombie blood was in the gutter, a few metres away. Elliott eventually climbed to his feet to dispose of it correctly, to prevent some other innocent person from accidentally infecting themselves.

He held the syringe up in front of the street light to see how much blood was left. It was nearly full; only a small amount had been expelled. But that didn't matter. All it took was for one drop of toxic blood to get into your system, and that was it. Elliott had been handed a death sentence. He was an undead man walking. He could almost feel the poisonous fluid as it contaminated his bloodstream and turned him into a ticking time bomb.

Later on that night, and in the days following, Elliott replayed the incident over and over in his mind. He could think of little else. He never quite understood why he had been so passive throughout the whole thing, and how he had just accepted it and let it happen. He put up virtually no resistance, and just let them do whatever they wanted to him.

There was this one recurring image that kept haunting him. He was lying face down on the concrete, with the fat guy's knee in his back and the skinny guy's shoes inches away from his nose. He didn't know why, and he didn't know what it meant, but he kept seeing that one particular item of footwear in his mind, over and over. Sneakers that almost glowed under the refraction of the streetlight.

They were a pair of neon red Nikes with bright orange swooshes.

The party continued until the early hours of the morning. Thanks to what had transpired earlier in the evening, Miles had zero chance of getting a decent night's sleep.

Had he overreacted? Or was he taking it all out on Clea for the way she had supplanted him as Shae's cool older sibling? That definitely wasn't his role anymore. Shae used to idolise Miles when she was younger. Now he was the authority figure for her to rebel against. Miles had to be her father, mother and older brother rolled into one.

He found himself growing more protective of Shae as she got older, at a time when she was craving more independence. She was just doing what all kids did at her age, which was to test her boundaries and see how much she could get away with. He knew that it wasn't the end of the world if she had a couple of sneaky puffs on a joint. It would be far worse if he let her grow up without any rules and allowed her to do whatever she wanted.

He remembered the time his parents went ballistic at him when he was sixteen and came home drunk from a party. At the time, he vowed that when Shae was his age he'd be the older brother that he wished he'd had, the type that would drive her and her friends around when they needed a lift, and buy the occasional six pack when she asked. But circumstances intervened, and he never got the chance to do any of that. Instead of being the one who would allow her the odd indulgence, he was the one who had to say no to everything. It was only now that he understood what he put his parents through at that

age. He wondered how they ever coped with him.

## Chapter 19

Miles stumbled into the kitchen early the next morning and fixed himself some coffee. He had woken up with a dry mouth and an aching head after only managing about three hours sleep. It wasn't the best preparation for the day ahead.

In the past couple of weeks, his old nemesis insomnia had come back to torment him. Insomnia was sometimes a temporary thing, but lately it had become more like Fabian: an unwelcome and annoying visitor that had long overstayed its welcome.

Once again, the house was a mess. The stench was overwhelming, a mixture of cigarettes, stale beer, patchouli incense and God only knows what else. Miles was convinced this incessant hippie odour was affecting the property value. It was probably more detrimental to the resale value of the house than the four zombies that had been killed there.

He gulped down his coffee and immediately made another one. He wondered if he would be better off mainlining the caffeine, cooking up some powder in a spoon and injecting it directly into his veins.

He retrieved his neighbour's newspaper from his front yard – it was still being delivered, despite the fact that the neighbour was now undead and languishing in a holding facility somewhere – then retreated to his bedroom.

Clea was awake too, which was unusual for this hour. He could hear her moving around, traipsing between her bedroom and the bathroom and back again. He wasn't really in the mood to speak to her, but he wasn't about to go out of his way to avoid her either. What was said last night may cause some awkwardness between them, but so be it. It was better than bottling it all up. Everything was out in the open now. If she wanted to apologise he might consider doing it too. But only if she went first. Clea had a lot more to apologise for than he did.

He flicked through *The Daily Ink*, finding only the usual end-of-days proclamations and news stories that resembled press releases from Bernard Marlowe's office.

Page three was filled with photos of Stephanie and Madison Marlowe partying with a touring rock band, conveniently stepping out onto the hotel balcony where they were in full view of the paparazzi.

Miles stopped briefly to look at a double page feature on Lawrence Devereaux, the politician who was Marlowe's right-hand man and number one attack dog. He glanced at it for a few seconds, before realising it was just another fawning puff piece that read more like an online dating profile than a piece of journalism.

He tossed the paper aside, and then froze.

He didn't know what made him think of it, but something he remembered hearing yesterday suddenly drilled back into his mind.

He retrieved the newspaper and returned to the last page he looked at. His eyes scanned through the article, searching for information that may confirm his suspicions.

And then, in amongst all the pompous guff about how Lawrence Devereaux's "strong Christian faith imbued him with the values of loving kindness, justice and righteousness", he found just what he was looking for:

*Mr. Devereaux has been married to Geraldine for thirty-one years. They have three children: Emily, Sebastian and Thomas.*

Miles was dumbstruck. He read those two sentences over and over again to make sure he wasn't imagining it. But there it was, in black and white.

Lawrence Devereaux had a son called Sebastian.

Amoeba's real name was Sebastian Devereaux.

Holy freakin' crap.

Lawrence Devereaux was Amoeba's father.

This revelation took some time to sink in completely. The six foot six cross-dressing professional

agitator and performance artist known as “Amoeba” was also the son of a high-profile and highly divisive anti-zombie politician.

While Bernard Marlowe was the public face of the anti-zombie movement, it was Lawrence Devereaux who was actually the driving force behind it all. It was his idea to exploit the undead situation for political gain, and he was the one pulling Marlowe’s strings and telling him exactly what to say. Sebastian had frequently attended rallies protesting his father’s policies, and had even publicly burned effigies of him.

In all likelihood, there was a direct link between Sebastian’s current lifestyle choices and Lawrence’s career. Sebastian seemed to be going through the whole Freudian rebel-against-your-father phase that most males go through during adolescence. Perhaps he was just a late bloomer.

Miles put the paper aside when his phone rang. It was Stacey, his cousin.

“You’re probably worried about Shae,” she said. “I’m just calling to let you know she’s here.”

“Oh,” Miles said. “That’s a relief.”

The truth was that Miles didn’t even notice Shae was missing.

“She turned up on our doorstep last night and asked to stay for a few days.”

Miles gulped down the rest of his coffee. “Is that okay with you?”

“Of course it is. The girls love having her around.”

Miles fell back onto his bed and exhaled. This was what Shae thought of him now. She would rather hang out with Stacey and Alistair, an old married couple who danced to John Mayer at their wedding reception and were obsessed with home renovation TV shows, than live under the same roof as him.

“Is everything alright over there?” Stacey asked.

Miles sighed. “Things have been better, to tell you the truth.”

“I figured something was going on, but I didn’t want to pry too much.”

“Yeah, well ... she pretty much hates me at the moment.”

“She’s a teenage girl, Miles. If she didn’t hate you from time to time, you’d be doing something wrong. I know what I was like at her age. I nearly sent my parents to an early grave.”

“It just feels like I’m constantly fighting a losing battle. Like everything I say or do is wrong.”

“You’re doing fine. Remember, you’re raising a teenager. That’s something most men don’t have to deal with until they’re twice your age. And they’re usually not doing it alone, either.”

“I understand all that, but I don’t feel like she appreciates anything I do for her.”

“She will. Once we grow up a little, we realise exactly what we put our parents through.”

That was something Miles could relate to. He cringed whenever he thought of how petulant and self-involved he was at Shae’s age. He wished he could travel back in time to smack some sense into his younger self. Everything he was suffering through now was probably his karma paying him a belated visit.

The call ended. Miles looked at his watch and saw that it was almost time to go.

He made and then quickly drank his third cup of coffee, then grabbed his wallet and keys. He hurried out of the kitchen and almost collided with Clea.

He exploded with laughter when he saw what she was wearing.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Clea said.

Clea was dressed in a powder blue pantsuit. Her hair had been washed and coloured, and was tied up in a neat bun. She had removed all her facial piercings and had even done a surprisingly competent job of applying makeup. If Miles passed her in the street he probably wouldn’t recognise her.

“So what time does the real estate seminar start?” he asked in between fits of giggles.

“It’s just something we’re working on, alright? I have to look the part.”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh or anything,” Miles lied, before laughing some more.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying this.”

“Oh don’t worry, I am.”

Clea managed a grin, and both were relieved that the ice had finally been broken. They were both too stubborn to ever properly apologise for what had happened the night before, but this was close enough.

Miles then quickly pulled his shoes on and hurried out the door with his laces still untied.

On his way out, he passed eight or nine Zeroes who had slept in the front yard overnight. A few were splayed out on the crusty old couches, and others laid around on blankets and in sleeping bags. Tariq the Anarchist slept on a gurney he had stolen from a hospital. Some were awake and enjoying their first cigarette for the morning.

Neil was there with a tray of coffees that he had thoughtfully purchased for everyone to share. They most definitely appreciated this kind and thoughtful gesture.

None of them seemed to mind that the coffee was from Starbucks.

Steve drove the minibus into the empty car park located adjacent to the Graves End church. He had decided they'd need a central set-up point to serve as their base of operations. The car park looked ideal for this purpose – it was located roughly in the centre of town, and there was plenty of room for the two vehicles and all their equipment.

One by one, the Dead Rite staff stepped off the bus and saw that Graves End was exactly as Elliott and Miles had described it. Zombies were everywhere, literally in every direction they looked. Roaming the streets, tending to gardens, congregating in parks. Some of the staff went a little weak at the knees, overcome with feelings of vertigo at the thought of all the money there was to be made. To them, every single undead being represented a new outfit they could buy, or a new pair of shoes, or a car payment. The streets of Graves End were paved with zombie gold.

“Okay, we all know what to do,” Steve said to his charges. “Two people to a residence, in sequential order, just like we discussed. If you find a house with four or more obits, do *not* attempt to do the job yourselves. Wait for another group to come along and help you. If we're smart about how we do this, we shouldn't encounter any trouble. Are there any questions?”

Only one hand rose, and it belonged to Adam.

“Are you sure this is an appropriate place for us to set up?” he said, pointing to the place of worship situated behind them.

“What's wrong with it?” Steve said.

“I just thought it might be kind of, I don't know ... sacrilegious?”

Steve bit his tongue and suppressed the urge to make a sarcastic comment, like he usually did whenever Adam brought up his Catholicism. Like so many gay men raised in the church, Adam was wracked with guilt from just about everything he did in his life.

“Adam, there's plenty wrong with this job already,” Steve explained. “Maybe we're all going to hell, but it won't be for conducting our business on sacred land.”

Steve then clapped his hands together to signal that the working day had commenced, and each pair of workers dispersed to their first designated house.

The first place Miles and Felix were assigned to was a small semi-detached abode occupied by an elderly zombie woman and her deadbeat unemployed forty-something zombie son. Miles knocked softly, mostly out of habit, then tried the door handle. It was unlocked.

The two of them crept quietly inside and found the zombie mother at the ironing board, carrying on with her domestic routine, dutifully pushing an iron back and forth over her son's white t-shirt. The shirt was now ruined, covered in dark brown marks. The smell of burning cotton wafted throughout the house. It was a minor miracle that it hadn't caught fire and burned the place down.

The zombie mother wasn't too much trouble. She was a little reluctant at first about leaving her chores unfinished, but after a couple of minutes Miles and Felix were able to coax her away from the ironing board and had her muzzled and bound. Felix escorted her out the door.

Her zombie son wasn't quite so obliging. He was in the adjoining room, doing what he'd spent most of his life doing – sitting on the couch, watching TV with his feet up on the coffee table. The wrestling was on, and the zombie's eyes were fixated on the screen. It seemed that the lack of a functioning brain in no way diminished his enjoyment of the sport. If anything, it was enhanced.

But this presented a problem for Miles; like his previous human incarnation, this zombie didn't appreciate being interrupted in the middle of his favourite pastime. Whenever Miles came too close with the snare pole, the zombie would let out an angry hiss and batter it away.

Miles could see that he wasn't going to get anywhere with the TV on, so he grabbed the remote and flicked it off. Big mistake – this immediately sent the zombie into a fit of rage. He sprang up off the couch at a speed Miles was unprepared for and lurched at him with his teeth bared. Miles wasn't expecting this sort of combative behaviour. It seemed that even in death, the worst thing you could do to a wrestling fan was switch the TV off in the middle of a match.

He stumbled back a few steps and lost his footing when he tripped over the ironing board. He threw an arm out in an attempt to steady himself, and his hand fell on the scalding hot iron. He screamed out in pain, then hit the ground.

The zombie son advanced on Miles with a look of pure murder in his eyes. Miles had misjudged the zombie's height when he first saw him. Standing up, he was well over six feet tall.

He scrambled back into the corner of the room and looked for a way out, but there was none. Miles was trapped.

The zombie then stopped suddenly.

It was as if he had run into an invisible force field. He tried moving forward, but found that he couldn't.

He looked down to his feet and saw two thin cables wrapped tightly around his ankles.

And then his feet were yanked violently out from underneath him. He landed on the floor, face first, with a solid thud.

Miles looked up and saw Felix standing behind the zombie. His cable-gun device was in his hands; the device he had invented, but had been disallowed by the UMC regulatory body.

“Are you okay there, Miles?” Felix asked. The cable slowly retracted back into the device, and the heavy zombie was dragged across the floor like a harpooned whale.

Miles scrambled to his feet, clutching at his scalded hand. “I thought you weren't supposed to be using that thing on the job,” he said.

Felix shrugged and wiped the perspiration from his face. “If we get caught out here, I think we'll be facing more serious indictments than the use of improper equipment.”

Miles couldn't fault that logic. He hurried across to help out Felix, and after a number of unsuccessful attempts they finally managed to slip the muzzle over the zombie's face. Felix fastened the cable ties around his wrists, and they both hauled him upright and led him outside.

That was the first house taken care of. They had spent more than thirty minutes there when it should only have taken ten. There were still another four hundred or so houses to go before they reached their target.

They were already running behind schedule.

Steve decided that no one would object if the business helped themselves to a couple of hundred litres of petrol from the local service station. Even though they hoped this job would be immensely profitable for them, it still made sense to make use of the free supply of fuel if it was just sitting there. Dead Rite could then add larceny to their rapidly-expanding list of misdemeanours, but compared to the myriad of other crimes they would be committing over the course of the next few days, this was a fairly minor one.

He had entrusted Marcus and Erin with the task of refilling the two buses. This may not have seemed like the smartest decision he'd ever made, as neither one was especially known for their

diligence. But both had volunteered, and it was a relatively straightforward task. Steve figured that even a couple of complete idiots could manage this without screwing it up.

It wasn't long after they arrived when Erin was hit with intense cravings for both nicotine and junk food. She lit up a cigarette (next to a sign explicitly warning her not to) then wandered into the shop in search of some free food.

Marcus stayed back at the bowser and filled the minibus's tank. Thanks to his infinitesimal attention span, about ten seconds had elapsed before he found this task to be tedious beyond all reason. He alleviated his intolerable boredom by reaching inside the bus's front window and switching the radio on. He scanned the dial until he came across Fusion FM, the only station that played SlamCore 24/7, and the only station Marcus ever listened to these days.

His mood instantly brightened upon hearing that familiar thumping beat. The song playing was "Acid Reflux" by Chemikal Ali, the phenomenon that had transported SlamCore from the underground to the top of the charts. Six months earlier, this kind of music was only ever heard at desert raves or on pirate radio. Now it featured in fast food commercials and Hollywood rom-coms.

Marcus found the volume knob and turned it up full.

When the "slam" hit, he felt the ground shake. The vibrations from every beat raced through his body. He loved the feeling this music gave him more than life itself. Listening to SlamCore was better than any drug he'd ever tried – although drugs would have further enhanced his listening pleasure.

He remembered back to when he first heard this song, at Chemikal Ali's 4:00 a.m. set at the Gutterrave Festival a few months ago. He knew then and there that it was an anthem for a generation. Here was the soundtrack to the apocalypse; music that could melt your face off.

Erin appeared in the reflection of the car window, returning from her trip to the shop.

"Hey Erin," he said. "Could you take over here for a minute and–"

But when he turned around he saw that it wasn't Erin. He was instead face-to-face an eighty-year-old zombie in grease-stained overalls with a head full of wild grey hair. This was Zombie Lyle, the service station proprietor who was such a committed smoker that he refused to let a minor thing like throat surgery stop him.

Zombie Lyle lurched at Marcus, his yellow teeth going straight for the jugular.

Marcus threw his hands up in defence and did all he could to hold him off. This proved to be much harder than he had anticipated. Lyle was strong for an old dead guy. This kind of aggression took Marcus by surprise. Zombies were usually fairly easy to handle, especially when they had a few miles on the clock. But holding off Zombie Lyle was like trying to fight off an amorous Rottweiler.

Marcus used all his strength to shove him away, but Zombie Lyle just wouldn't quit. He came back again, pouncing at him with frightening speed. Marcus grabbed the only thing he had at his disposal to defend himself with – the fuel pump.

He wasn't deliberately aiming to shove the pump's nozzle into Zombie Lyle's tracheotomy hole. But that was where it ended up.

Marcus held onto the fuel pump for dear life, desperately trying to keep Zombie Lyle at arm's length. The zombie's decomposing face was now inches away from his own. Even when he was alive, Lyle was frightening enough to look at (Elliott once described him as having a face like a Ralph Steadman illustration). But undead he was truly terrifying, which Marcus was now discovering in explicit detail, from his sagging pockmarked skin to the burst capillaries in his eyes. This was like the worst acid flashback ever, multiplied by one thousand.

Zombie Lyle let out a guttural snarl and waved his arms wildly, trying to claw at Marcus, not at all put off by the fact that he had a fuel pump jammed into the hole in his throat.

Marcus was holding onto the pump handle so tightly that he didn't realise he was squeezing the lever. He soon saw what he was doing when Zombie Lyle's stomach filled with petrol, then overflowed and spilled out his mouth and nose.

And throughout it all, the zombie just kept coming and coming at him with a singular

determination.

“Hey!”

The zombie’s head turned, just as a full can of Pepsi slammed into the side of his face. He let out an angry holler. Bile and combustible fuel spewed from his mouth.

Erin was standing nearby with three more unopened cans in her hand.

“Get ready to run!” she yelled at Marcus.

Erin threw a second can. This one hit him square in the face.

Marcus shoved Zombie Lyle back. He tried to make a run for it, but slipped on a patch of oil. He fell down on the concrete, face first.

Erin moved in closer and hurled her remaining two cans. They hit the zombie in the shoulder and chest.

“Marcus!” she shouted. “You literally need to get out of there, right now!”

Marcus’s only avenue of escape was underneath the minibus. He executed a quick barrel roll, just as Erin flicked her cigarette at the crazed zombie.

The cigarette landed at Zombie Lyle’s feet, and he was immediately engulfed in flames.

Marcus watched on with a mixture of amazement and disbelief from underneath the minibus as the zombie staggered around area fully ablaze. Skin and muscle tissue melted away and dripped onto the ground like a grilled sandwich with too much cheese. Marcus almost passed out from the ghastly stench.

Zombie Lyle came to a spectacular end a few seconds later in an explosion of char-grilled rotting flesh.

## Chapter 20

The stinging in Miles' burnt hand was getting worse. He left Felix to take care of the two zombies, then returned to the house and went straight for the bathroom.

He ran his hand under the cold water tap for a couple of minutes, then rifled through the medicine cabinet. He found a tube of balm that was labelled arthritis relief. He didn't know if it would do anything for burns, but by now he was willing to give anything a shot. He squeezed out a generous amount and rubbed it into his hand, then wrapped it with a bandage from the first aid kit. The balm proved to be mildly effective and made the pain slightly more bearable.

He carefully replaced the tube back in the medicine cabinet and noticed there were about two dozen pill bottles inside. The labels were old and yellowed, and had names like Exelon, Actonel, Claritin, Flomax, Voltaren, Zylprim, Protonix, and many more that were too faded to read. Miles had no idea what most of these were, but he assumed they were the kinds of pills the old lady needed to keep her body going; blood pressure tablets, vitamin supplements, antihistamines, anti-Alzheimer's medication. He couldn't see any painkillers, which was what he really wanted.

His snooping may have been an invasion of privacy, not to mention a breach of company policy, but he pushed those thoughts to one side and kept on searching.

He opened a drawer and found something even better than painkillers: a blister pack of Ambien with about ten pills remaining.

He had taken Ambien on just the one occasion, about four or five months back. He was having difficulty sleeping one night when he stumbled into the bathroom and discovered Amoeba's stash of pharmaceuticals next to the basin, left out in the open for anyone to help themselves to. Included among this were a couple of Ambien pills. He swallowed one and returned to his room, where he enjoyed almost nine blissful hours of uninterrupted slumber. He awoke the next morning feeling better than he ever had, like he'd been completely reborn. He later regretted not swiping more of the pills, since they were only available on prescription.

Miles did a quick check to make sure Felix wasn't lurking nearby, then shoved the pills into his pocket. The label indicated that they were almost two years out of date, but that was just a general guide. And even though he had technically stolen from the recently undead, he wasn't really hurting anyone. This was essentially a victimless crime, like jaywalking or interfering with a corpse. No real harm was done. It wasn't like what Z-Pro did; they were known to pilfer cash, credit cards, jewellery, digital devices – basically anything that would fit in their pockets. Those pills would have eventually been disposed of, so it wasn't even really stealing.

Steve eventually called everyone in at around 6:00 p.m. They could have kept going since it didn't get dark until around eight at this time of year, but there was little point in staying any longer. The day had been a huge disappointment, and everyone just wanted to go home.

They had severely miscalculated the degree of difficulty for this job. Yesterday, when Steve and Adam were evaluating whether or not to take the job on, they'd estimated that they could collect about three hundred zombies, or four busloads, per day. If they could manage that, it would take about six or seven days to reach their target. That now appeared to be wildly optimistic. By day's end, they had only managed one hundred and seventeen.

Nothing had gone the way they'd planned. They assumed that because they were dealing with zombies of an advanced age they would be easier to handle. They soon found this not to be the case. These zombies were actually harder to control. Maybe it was because they were so stuck in their ways that they refused to leave their habitat, or maybe it was because old people were just more stubborn and belligerent in general. Whatever the reason, coaxing an elderly zombie away from its home was like trying to drag a pit bull away from its food.

If that wasn't bad enough, there was the debacle at the service station where Erin and Marcus had somehow managed to set both a zombie and the minibus on fire. Those two were conclusive proof that if you built something idiot-proof, nature just builds bigger idiots. Despite sustaining some serious fire damage the minibus was still drivable, although it now looked like something salvaged from an Eastern European war zone.

But the minibus was the least of Steve's worries. If the authorities found out about them inadvertently cremating a zombie, God only knows what sort of charges they'd be facing – on top of every other rule and regulation that had been broken today.

All this and more was running through Steve's mind as he drove back into town. He was alone, behind the wheel of the school bus, transporting the remaining forty-odd zombies to the processing centre. This gave him time to think, and he had some big decisions to make. Should they come back tomorrow and keep going? Was it all worth the risk? If today was anything to go by, it would be weeks before they brought in enough zombies to pay off their debts. The longer they stayed out there, the greater their chances of getting caught. Then again, what choice did he have? It was either this or bankruptcy.

Steve let out a lungful of air. It would be an understatement to say that nothing had gone the way he thought it would. And while many laws may have been violated in Graves End today, it appeared that Murphy's Law was still being strictly enforced.

He consoled himself with the fact that his day from hell had finally come to an end, and nothing more could go wrong from here.

He was proven wrong a few minutes later when he learned that Adam and the staff had been pulled over in the minibus. They were given a ticket for speeding, followed by a second one for driving an unroadworthy vehicle.

Steve drove on and silently contemplated his next move, as his list of problems grew slightly longer.

Tariq the Anarchist may have abandoned his chemistry degree six months shy of graduation, but he was still able to put his knowledge and skills to good use. He and Amoeba had constructed a makeshift laboratory in Miles' kitchen out of nothing more than the utensils and equipment found in the cupboards. Pots filled with dark brown gloop bubbled away on the stove, while tumblers and coffee mugs were used to measure out what appeared to be hazardous chemicals. Tariq and Amoeba both wore surgical masks to stop from breathing in the toxic fumes.

An open box, labelled ammonium sulphide, sat on the kitchen table. Inside was a plastic tub of crystallised white powder. It was the box that Amoeba had delivered to the house the day before.

When Miles saw this, shortly after returning home from a tough day at work, he realised he probably wouldn't be cooking any dinner in here tonight.

"Careful, bro," Tariq said to him as he poured some of the hot liquid into an empty Coke bottle. "You don't wanna get none of this stuff on your skin."

Like so many young men of his generation, Tariq deliberately dumbed-down his language in an attempt to hide his private school education.

"What's going on?" Miles asked, instantly gagging on the stench emanating from the pots.

"It's just a little science experiment," Amoeba replied with a mischievous grin.

Miles pulled the collar of his t-shirt up over his mouth and nose. "Please tell me this isn't a meth lab," he said.

He didn't really know what a meth lab looked like, but he figured it must be something like what Tariq and Amoeba had assembled here.

"Relax, bro," Tariq said. "It ain't nothin' like that."

"So what is it?"

"Okay, so Marlowe's havin' this campaign rally tomorrow, and we really wanna send a message—"

“Hey!” Amoeba said, cutting him off. “What did Fabian say about keeping this quiet from anyone not directly involved?”

Amoeba made a zip-your-lip gesture, and Tariq immediately fell silent.

Miles snatched a pizza menu from the refrigerator and headed for the sanctuary of his bedroom. He figured that whatever Tariq and Amoeba had planned, it was probably in his best interests that he remained ignorant (for legal reasons).

Walking down the hallway, he noticed the back door was halfway open. He went to close it, and heard Fabian outside with a small gathering of his disciples.

“This is just the beginning,” Fabian said, speaking in hushed tones. “That footage from the processing centre was great for our cause, but now we have to take it further. We need to make a bold statement, one that’ll make everyone sit up and take notice of what’s going on in this world. Because if you’re not on our side, you’re with the enemy. Anyone who stands by and does nothing while all this abuse and torture is done in our name is as culpable as Marlowe and Devereaux, or those fascists working for Z-Pro and Dead Rite. It’s us verses them, and it’s time to pick a side, yeah? Because after tomorrow, there’s no turning back.”

Fabian stopped talking when he sensed Miles loitering nearby. One of his lackeys reached over and pulled the door closed.

Miles went to his room and collapsed onto his bed. At least there was still one place in his house where he could find some peace and quiet, even if this was only because he’d put locks on the door. He had them installed a few months after Clea moved in, after coming home one night and finding three unwashed Zeroes sleeping in his bed. That was the moment he decided clear boundaries needed to be established, and certain areas of the house declared off-limits.

It troubled him somewhat that his childhood home had now become headquarters for a group of activists in the process of planning what sounded very much like a terrorist attack and creating what looked very much like homemade explosives. Individually the Zeroes were probably all quite harmless, but as a collective who knew what they were capable of? Fabian was his biggest concern. A month ago he was just another ineffectual dread-head in search of a cause to rebel against. Now he actually seemed like he might be capable of attempting something extreme.

Miles put this down to two factors. The first was the celebrity and notoriety Fabian experienced after the incident at the processing centre. That stunt had thrust him into the limelight, and was far more successful than he could have possibly dreamed. But that also meant the pressure was on to follow it up with something even bigger. His desire for change and social justice had been surpassed by his desire for fame.

The second factor in Fabian’s recent metamorphosis was the arrival of Neil, who had quickly become one of the most popular Zeroes – especially among the women. Neil would regale everyone with stories of his life as a daredevilish eco-warrior, from chaining himself to Scottish nuclear reactors to sabotaging Japanese whaling vessels. He was confident, charismatic, handsome and a natural leader; in short, he was everything Fabian wasn’t.

Fabian didn’t even try to hide his intense dislike of Neil. He hated the way Neil had become something of a de facto leader of the Zeroes without having done anything to earn it, and he was jealous of the way the female Zeroes – Clea in particular – had fallen under his spell. Fabian’s reaction to Neil’s presence was to take things further than anyone else. His views had become more dogmatic, and he was hellbent on achieving further notoriety.

A kind of power struggle had emerged between and Neil and Fabian, which had created a minor rift within the Tribe of Zeroes. The group had basically split into two factions: the traditionalists, led by Clea and Neil, were made up of those that enjoyed and getting stoned and complaining about the world’s problems but doing little about it. Then there was Fabian’s splinter group, which contained all the hardcore anarchists and nihilists determined to do whatever it took to achieve their goals, consequences be damned.

Miles wondered if he should do something about all of this before it got out of hand. He could ask Clea to try talking some sense into Fabian, or perhaps tip off the police about what the group might have planned. That would be the sane, responsible thing to do.

But before any of that, he had more pressing issues to deal with. So he phoned up his local pizza joint and ordered a large pepperoni with extra cheese.

## Chapter 21

Team spirit hadn't improved the next morning during the bus ride back out to Graves End. The previous day's disappointments still lingered in everyone's mind and put them in a sour mood. Worst of all was Steve and Adam – they'd had a blazing row before they left home, and now their toxic vibes were infecting the rest of the staff.

It all began when Adam made what he thought was a fairly innocuous comment regarding a house available for rent. It was a small hundred-year-old stone cottage that they saw every time they travelled to and from Graves End. Whenever they drove past it, Adam couldn't help but fantasise about what it would be like to live there. It looked like something out of a story book, standing alone at the top of a luscious green hill with majestic views of the sweeping valleys below. It was completely isolated, with no neighbours for miles.

The previous night, Adam's curiosity got the better of him and he looked up the real estate listing online. He was surprised to discover how affordable the rent actually was. The house had been on the market for two years now, and the rent had more than halved in that time. The reason for this was pretty obvious – the previous tenants probably met with a zombie-related demise – but Adam wasn't at all superstitious, so that didn't bother him in the slightest.

But things took an ugly turn when he casually mentioned this to Steve over breakfast the next morning. Steve started off by mocking Adam's interest in the property, telling him that Adam had lived in the city his entire life and wouldn't last a week in a place like that without going stir-crazy, before angrily reminding him of the state of their finances and that moving house was out of the question. Adam tried to explain that he was just thinking out loud, and that he knew the house wasn't really a viable option for them, but this only ended up making things worse. It quickly devolved into a full-blown shouting match that woke up most of the neighbourhood.

Adam now sulked in the back of the minibus and stared out the window. Steve had been in some rotten moods as of late, but he had never been this bad. Adam was beginning to think that all this pressure might finally be getting too much for him. Steve was flying off the handle over the smallest of things. Most of the staff now went out of their way to avoid him, preferring to go to Adam with any problems they had, since they were afraid of how Steve might react.

Adam hoped Dead Rite didn't go under, but at least there was a silver lining if it did. It would be something of a mercy killing, and maybe it would be for the best. Steve wasn't happy there anymore, and when Steve wasn't happy he made everyone else miserable.

A career change might be good for all involved.

If the first day at Graves End hadn't exactly gone to plan, early indications were that the second wouldn't be any different. For their first job for the morning, Felix and Marcus spent nearly forty minutes attempting to restrain a crotchety old geezer and bundle him into the minibus. They would have completed the job in half that time if Marcus hadn't driven off without closing the door. The zombie immediately tumbled out – Marcus had also failed to strap him in properly – and it took a further fifteen minutes to get him back in.

Marcus's forgetfulness and absentmindedness was getting so bad that Felix thought he might be showing signs of dementia at the age of twenty-seven. His brain was so drug-fried that he was constantly forgetting where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. He would zone out and stare into space for minutes at a time.

He still appeared to be buzzing from the rave he attended the previous weekend, and whatever substances he'd ingested there must have been potent because he hadn't stopped yapping about it. Marcus's verbal tinnitus, along with that God-awful radio station he was playing incessantly, was driving Felix up the wall.

The minibus pulled into the driveway of the second house. Marcus jumped out, but Felix hung back.

“You go ahead,” Felix said. “I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

During the previous job Felix had noticed a large tear in his protective fibre-mesh bodysuit. Luckily, he always carried a couple of emergency spares on him.

“I don’t know why you even bother wearing those things,” Marcus told him. “It’s not like you’re ever going to need it.”

He reached through the front window and turned the radio up full volume, then headed off towards the house.

It wasn’t long before Marcus encountered the home’s owner. He was a middle-aged bald guy in sweatpants and a stained t-shirt. He was lumbering around on his front yard, unsteady on his feet and with a long string of drool hanging from his mouth.

The industry term for this type of zombie is “drunk uncle”.

The zombie spotted Marcus and came hobbling towards him.

Marcus was pleasantly surprised. After spending all of yesterday trying to coax a bunch of geriatric zombies out of their homes, here was one coming straight for him.

It wasn’t until the zombie had come to within about ten metres that Marcus noticed something wasn’t quite right. This wasn’t a typical undead being, staggering around the place like a sloth on barbiturates. This guy seemed more like a baboon on crack. He grunted and growled, and he moved at more than double the speed of what he was used to. The thing was almost running.

Marcus held onto his snare pole, psyching himself up in preparation to restrain the zombie.

Then his speed increased, yet again. It was something close to a sprint. He moved in a series of awkward and jerking motions, like a marionette controlled by a junkie suffering through acute withdrawals.

Marcus had no idea what to do. He hadn’t been trained to handle anything like this.

At the last moment, he lost his nerve and bolted out onto the street.

The bald zombie gave chase. Marcus tried to remain calm and thought about how ridiculous this must seem to an onlooker, like a *Benny Hill* skit. But something was seriously wrong here. He had never seen a zombie move in this way before. There was no industry term for this kind of behaviour.

He made it out to the street, where he was confronted with an even more startling sight.

Zombies were now everywhere. Pouring from the nearby houses, out onto the street, their dead eyes filled with murderous rage.

Marcus prayed that none of this was really happening, and that it was all just the side-effects of a particularly unpleasant comedown. But the fear he felt was far too intense to be anything other than real.

His lungs filled with air, then he screamed out at the top of his voice.

“FELIX!!”

Felix was still midway through wriggling into his back-up bodysuit and remained oblivious to the drama unfolding around him. He looked up and saw Marcus in the middle of the road with zombies closing in from all directions.

Felix quickly slid behind the wheel of the minibus, then started the engine and threw it into reverse.

But before he did any of that, he switched the radio off. That infernal music was doing his head in.

Felix tore out into the street as fast as the rickety old minibus could manage. He sped over to Marcus, who was moments away from becoming someone’s lunch. The street was now filled with at least thirty zombies.

Marcus dived head-first into the moving vehicle and yanked the door closed behind him. “Drive!” he shouted.

But Felix didn’t drive. He continued on at the slow pace he was travelling, studying the amassed zombie horde with a peculiar curiosity.

“Felix!” Marcus screamed. “Go! Now!!”

“Marcus,” Felix said calmly. “Look.”

“Felix!!” Marcus was close to losing it.

“Marcus, we’re not in any danger.” Felix slowed the minibus down until it came to a complete stop. “Take a look around you.”

Marcus worked up the nerve to take a peek out the window. The zombies were still there, but something about them had changed. All their anger and aggression had disappeared in an instant. They were no longer the ravenous beasts that almost devoured him a minute ago. They had returned to the docile and confused creatures he was used to.

“That was bizarre,” Felix said.

“What the hell just happened?” Marcus said, still struggling to catch his breath and make sense of what he had just seen.

“Don’t you see what’s going on here?”

Marcus shook his head. “Nothing about what I just saw is making a whole lot of sense.”

Felix realised he would have to spell it out for Marcus. “I think the zombies were attracted to the music.”

Shortly after 9:00 a.m. Steve called the staff in for a quick team meeting. Felix had informed him of his latest discovery, and Steve agreed to let him share it with the rest. By this stage, he was willing to give just about anything a shot.

Felix explained to the group how the zombies seemed to be drawn to certain types of music. The most effective type, the one that turned them from slothful to psychotic in the blink of an eye, was the popular genre of music known as SlamCore.

After the close call with Marcus, Felix conducted a bit of trial and error to determine exactly what types of music the zombies were most attracted to. They were mildly aroused by electroclash, aggressive hip hop and industrial rock, but it was nothing compared to what SlamCore did to them. Something about that particular combination of sounds, rhythms and frequencies tapped into their primal urges and drew them in like moths to a flame.

Country music seemed to repel them.

“So that explains what happened in Toronto,” Elliott said, referring to the shocking rave tragedy a month earlier. “It was the *music* that caused it?”

“That and every other rave massacre from the past few years, it seems,” Marcus added.

“So why has nobody figured this out until now?” Adam asked.

“Who knows?” Felix replied. “I assume it’s because they’ve allocated most of their time and resources towards searching for a cure rather than finding out what kind of music they prefer.”

Felix then outlined his strategy for how they could best exploit this knowledge. They would switch on every radio they could find within the town – all the car stereos, portable transistors and bedside alarm clocks – and tune them in to a specific frequency with the volume turned up full. Felix would then use his laptop, which came with an inbuilt radio transmitter, to broadcast a brief sixty second burst of SlamCore over that particular signal. The hope was that this would lure any nearby zombies from out of their homes and into their clutches with minimal effort.

Everyone then returned to their designated areas and set about looking for radios. Since the residents of Graves End were a fairly trusting lot, this wasn’t all that hard. The doors to their homes were usually unlocked, and most left their car keys in the ignition.

Ten minutes later, they had switched on and tuned in about eighty radios. The volumes were turned up as far as they would go, and the doors to all the houses were opened up to allow the zombies to wander straight out.

Right when the clock ticked over to 9:20 a.m. – the staff had all synchronised their watches – Graves End went from being a peaceful and pleasant semi-rural community to one giant open-air rave.

The brutal sounds of SlamCore blanketed the entire township. It was like what being caught in a battle zone whilst high on ecstasy might sound like.

The track Felix had selected was “Hang Tha Horse” by Mr. Needlemouse, which was quite possibly the dumbest and most obnoxious song ever recorded. He’d observed that the stupider the song, the more effective it was at drawing the zombies in.

His plan worked almost immediately. Within seconds of the music starting, the zombies began emerging from their homes. One by one they all shuffled out, some breaking into what could be termed an awkward, disjointed run.

The effect this music had on them was a little troubling to some. They had gone from sleepy and docile to agitated predators. Some of the staff took a backward step and gripped onto their snare poles. They had never seen zombies behave like this before.

“Why are they reacting this way?” Erin asked, the concern showing on her face.

No one had an answer for her, but the impact it was having on them was undeniable. The music was like some sort of zombie mating call – although nobody really wanted to stick around for the subsequent orgy.

Even Miles, who was initially quite skeptical of Felix’s claims, was surprised. If he hadn’t been here to witness it he probably wouldn’t have believed it. He also thought it was somewhat appropriate that they were so drawn to this genre of music, given that SlamCore appealed mostly to people with limited brain function who just blindly followed the herd.

He remembered back to the one and only time he had voluntarily exposed himself to this type of music for a prolonged period of time. It was about six months ago, when Elliott and Amy had dragged him out to a club to watch some Dutch teenager with half his head shaved get paid to push buttons on a raised platform wave his hands in the air. The drugged-up crowd went ape for it, but to Miles the music was a form of torture. It sounded like the soundtrack to a snuff film remixed by a hearing-impaired sociopath. In some strife-torn countries, it literally was a form of torture: sadistic warlords were known to lock captured enemy soldiers in confined spaces and pummel them with deafening SlamCore for days on end.

Felix paused the music when his watch ticked over to 9:21 a.m. The zombies stopped a couple of seconds after that. With the flick of a switch, they went back to being like dumb, drunken pandas. They stood in the one spot, caught in a state of suspended animation, clueless as to where they were or what had just happened.

The Dead Rite staff quickly moved in to apprehended each of the zombies, snapping on the cable ties and guiding them towards the bus. After all the difficulty they had experienced yesterday, this almost felt like it was too easy.

The day before it had taken them over six hours to capture enough zombies to fill the first bus. Today they had done it in less than twenty minutes. Marcus jumped behind the wheel, and he and Adam took the cargo back into town to deposit them at the processing centre.

From that point, there was nothing more for the team to do except break early for lunch and talk about how they would be spending all the money they were about to make.

Fabian was becoming more and more apprehensive the longer the day wore on. He had been trapped inside this stuffy auditorium for three hours now, sitting in these uncomfortable plastic seats and having to endure speeches from four indistinguishable politicians, two captains of industry, and a set of patriotic songs from a dreary country singer generously billed as the opening “entertainment”.

Finally, the moment they’d all been waiting for had arrived.

Bernard Marlowe took to the stage, flanked by his trophy wife Celine and fame-chasing daughters Stephanie and Madison. He now stood less than ten metres from where Fabian sat.

“This country will not be held to ransom by extremists and those on the lunatic fringe!” he declared, parroting the words verbatim from the teleprompter in front of him. Despite reading from the

same script every day since his campaign began, Marlowe still relied on his teleprompter like he relied on his daily application of hair-in-a-can. He was a bumbling inarticulate buffoon without it.

The audience applauded, and the rally travelled along on its predictable course: Marlowe's empty sloganeering, followed by the crowd's sycophantic fawning.

"On March 1, we will say *No!* to fear! We will say *No!* to incompetence! We will say *No!* to the worst government this country has ever seen!"

More cheering from the crowd. Marlowe regurgitated all the lines he'd spouted at every other public event from the last twelve months, rehashing them like an aging rock band trotting out its greatest hits for easy applause.

"The undead don't run this country – the *people* run this country!"

"Together, we will emerge victorious in the war on horror!"

"I believe in democracy!"

The easy-to-please crowd were on their feet now, eating up every word.

Marlowe stood back, drinking it all in. More than anything, this was what he craved – power, respect, adulation. This was the reason he entered politics.

The applause died down, and the audience took their seats.

But Fabian remained standing. He was dressed in a Hugo Boss suit and a woollen hat that couldn't quite contain his ginger dreadlocks. His face was now hidden behind a red bandana. His suit jacket was turned inside out, revealing a large red Tribe of Zeroes "Z" logo painted across the back.

He climbed up on his seat and raised his fist in the air.

"Fascism is capitalism in decay!" he shouted.

The bandana muffled his voice somewhat, so only those close to him could actually understand what he was saying.

There were a few groans and boos from the crowd. Someone shouted, "Get a job, dead-head!" Security quickly moved in to subdue this lone agitator.

But Fabian was not alone in his act of rebellion. He was joined by seven other well-dressed attendees, fellow Zeroes, who also had their faces obscured by bandanas. They climbed up on their seats and shouted in unison: "Fascism is capitalism in decay!"

Before Marlowe and his goons could respond to this interruption, the Zeroes launched their attack.

In a matter of seconds there were a dozen projectiles flying towards the stage. Marlowe's security team swarmed in to protect their leader, rushing in from all directions to form a human barricade.

One unlucky guard at the front took a hit for his boss when a balloon struck him directly on the chest. It burst open, and his shirt and jacket were drenched with the ghastly contents. He was immediately incapacitated and fell to the ground in agony.

Panic and confusion quickly took over, as the smell of rotting corpses wafted throughout the auditorium. It was the most revolting stench imaginable. A smell so strong it made it difficult to breathe.

The majority of the attendees made a frantic dash for the exit. Others couldn't control themselves and emptied their stomachs on the spot.

Once their stockpile of missiles had been depleted, the Zeroes used the growing chaos to their advantage and disappeared into the crowd.

Security swiftly ushered Marlowe and his family off the stage and outside the venue towards their waiting limousine. They maintained a tight wall around them, although several more guards had been hit with the stink bombs and succumbed to violent bouts of nausea and vomiting.

The limo's door opened. Marlowe disregarded the "women and children first" convention and dived in head first. His wife and daughters followed, but Madison Marlowe wasn't able to move quite fast enough. Her bodyguard fought a valiant battle to keep his lunch down, but in the end his efforts were all in vain.

He puked all over her brand new Givenchy dress, in full view of the waiting paparazzi.



## Chapter 22

There were moments in life when all the planning and preparation you may have done simply goes out the window and success comes down to dumb luck and being in the right place at the right time. The early bird may catch the worm, but it's the second mouse that gets the cheese. This was one such moment.

The Dead Rite crew would have hoisted Felix onto their shoulders and chaired him home if they had the energy to do it. His brilliant new zombie lure-and-trap strategy had worked wonders, and had made them all considerably richer in the process. Everyone was unanimous in their belief that he was both a genius and a hero.

The second day at Graves End finally wrapped up at around 8:30 p.m. Even though they were all exhausted, no one wanted to stop working, and Steve only called it a day once he'd decided it was getting too dark to continue.

In total, nine busloads were filled for the day. That equated to over seven hundred zombies, or \$350,000 in revenue. The job they initially thought might take seven to ten days to complete could now be over as early as tomorrow morning.

Needless to say, the mood on the bus ride home was a lot more buoyant than the previous day. The workers were all keeping mental tallies of how many zombies had been brought in, and how much money they'd be earning from this job. They were also thinking about what they'd be spending all that money on.

One by one, they discussed what they would be doing with their impending windfalls.

Marcus spoke of his plans to rave his way around the world. He was going to spend the next year travelling from festival to festival, partying with the superstar SlamCore DJs like some sort of techno Grateful Dead groupie.

Erin said she would pay off her credit card debts, then put a down payment on that Volkswagen Beetle convertible she'd literally had her eye on for the past year.

Felix had no definite plans about how he'd be spending his cash other than to say that he could triple it in one weekend at the casino thanks to a foolproof system he'd devised that could beat the house without drawing any attention to himself.

When it came to Miles, he said he hadn't really given any thought about what he'd be spending his money on. After some cajoling from his coworkers, he eventually came up with buying a new car so he would finally be able to give up public transport.

The truth was that he knew exactly how he would be spending his money, but it wouldn't be on anything flashy or ostentatious. He would use it to pay off a large chunk of the mortgage. This would give him some much-needed breathing space, and relieve some of the crushing pressure he felt financially. He could also finally start his commerce degree, and he would have enough in the bank to be able to study full-time and work part-time, rather than the other way around.

Then it was Adam's turn. He said that once Dead Rite had paid off the fine and all their debts, there would still be enough leftover to trade in the minibus and finally upgrade to a newer model. This news was met with a loud cheer of approval from the staff, who were all well and truly sick of travelling to and from jobs in an unreliable rusty old Winnebago.

A few minutes later, the minibus passed the stone cottage at the top of the hill that Adam had fallen in love with. He knew what he would really love to do with all that money, but for now that would have to remain a fantasy.

Elliott was the only one who didn't contribute to the discussion. He sat up the front of the bus and rested his head against the window. The others left him alone and assumed he was just exhausted after a long day's work. A few of them had noticed that he had been oddly quiet these past couple of days, but

they put this down to the high level of stress he had been under lately.

The events of the past twelve hours were still buzzing through Miles' head as he left Dead Rite's headquarters and caught the train home. He had so many thoughts and emotions swimming inside his mind it was overwhelming. After enduring endless setbacks and disappointments over the past couple of years, today felt like a turning point in his life.

He passed a liquor store on his way home from the train station. He wondered if he might need a couple of quiet drinks to help calm down after such an exhilarating day. It didn't take long to convince himself that this was an exceptionally wise idea. He usually abstained from alcohol when he had to work the next day, but he justified it this one time by saying that a drink or two would help him wind down and allow him to have a better night's sleep. This was just being sensible – it wasn't a celebration. Not yet, anyway.

He paid for his bottle of vodka and headed for the exit.

The automatic doors opened, and he found himself standing face to face with Campbell.

"Miles," Campbell said. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Oh, hey Campbell," Miles said, caught slightly off-guard.

Miles hadn't seen Campbell since he unexpectedly quit Dead Rite a month earlier. Now here he was, running into him as he purchased liquor at 10:00 p.m. on a weeknight. It probably wasn't a good look, but at that moment Miles didn't really care too much what Campbell thought of him.

"How's life at Z-Pro?" Miles said, struggling to make small talk.

"Oh, you know. Same circus, different clowns."

Miles noticed how drastically Campbell had altered his appearance in the short time he had been with Z-Pro. He wore a bright pink polo shirt with the collar popped. His hair was dripping with gel, and a triangular patch of facial hair had appeared on his lower lip. His left arm was covered entirely in tattoos, and he had the beginnings of a sleeve on his right. He was slowly turning into another clone. It was as if Z-Pro gave their staff douchebag pills upon commencement of employment.

"What about Dead Rite?" Campbell said. "We haven't seen you guys around much these past few days."

Miles hesitated. Did Campbell know something? There was something in the tone of his voice that made it sound like he already knew the answer.

"Just another one of our quiet periods, I suppose," Miles shrugged.

Campbell grinned and nodded in a way that Miles couldn't decide was sympathetic or patronising.

"You know, there's a rumour going around about some mysterious outfit bringing in truckload after truckload of zombies in a bus that looks exactly like one of ours."

"Really?" Miles did his best to feign surprise.

"You know anything about that?"

"This is the first I've heard of it."

Miles was certain something was up with Campbell. This friendly catch-up now felt more like an interrogation.

He excused himself at the first available opportunity and quickly left the store.

He crossed the road without looking back, but had the unsettling feeling that Campbell was still watching him. He walked up the street a bit further, then ducked into a nearby shopfront.

That was definitely a weird encounter. He couldn't shake the feeling that Campbell knew more than he was letting on. When Miles first ran into him as he was leaving the store, Campbell didn't look the least bit surprised to see him there. It was as if he was waiting for him. Did he follow him there? Campbell didn't live anywhere near this neighbourhood, so it didn't seem like a chance encounter.

Miles told himself to calm down, and that he was probably reading too much into the incident. Paranoia was just an inevitable side-effect from doing something illegal. It was completely normal, beneficial even, to be suspicious of everyone under these circumstances.

The liquor store's automatic doors opened again a minute later, and Campbell emerged empty-handed. He looked down the street, in the direction where Miles would usually be walking home. He couldn't see anyone. He slowly turned around, scoping out the whole area. He was definitely looking for someone.

Miles observed this from across the road, hidden in the shadows of this unlit shopfront. He felt a little better knowing that he hadn't imagined that whole strange episode, and his suspicions about Campbell were wholly justified.

Miles could sense the celebratory atmosphere permeating from within his house from two blocks away. The party was in full swing, with hundreds of Zeroes converging on the place. Under normal circumstances he would regard this as a complete nightmare, but after the incredible day he'd had it really didn't bother him that much – although he realised his chances of a pleasant night's sleep were now fairly slim.

He navigated his way through the assorted revelers and hangers-on milling about inside the house, then past the fire-twirlers and sitar players outside, eventually finding Amoeba holding court in the backyard.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Tonight," Amoeba declared triumphantly, "we celebrate the coming of age for the Tribe of Zeroes!"

A cheer went up among the assembled throng.

Tariq the Anarchist raised his beer in victory. "Today we showed Bernard Marlowe exactly who's in control," he said. "The ruling elite ain't runnin' the country – the *people* run the country!"

A louder cheer rang out.

"Go inside and turn on the TV," Amoeba told Miles. "It's all over the news."

"You should have seen it, man," one of the other Zeroes cackled. "Marlowe hightailed it out of there like a scared little bitch!"

"This is just the beginning!" Mai added, showing more life and energy than many thought she was capable of. "Remember this day, because today is Day One of the revolution!"

Tariq started a chant of "Ann-Arr-Key! Ann-Arr-Key!" Before long, the whole crowd had joined in.

Miles escaped to his bedroom and switched the TV on, happy to be away from that gathering of weirdos.

The report about the Zeroes disrupting Marlowe's speech came six minutes into the news bulletin – Amoeba may have been exaggerating slightly when he said it was "all over the news". It was preceded by a number of puff pieces regarding the day's election campaign. There was Marlowe reading to school children, Marlowe meeting small business owners, Marlowe shaking hands with pensioners in shopping centres, Marlowe touring a factory in a hard hat and high-visibility vest, and various other heavily stage managed public appearances.

The disruption at the party conference was covered only briefly, with the news anchor stating that Marlowe's speech had been gatecrashed by "the now-obligatory rent-a-crowd dead-heads" that had been stalking Marlowe since his campaign for Prime Minister began.

The accompanying vision showed a slight commotion taking place in the auditorium, with the Zeroes being chased out by security, and then Marlowe on stage seemingly carrying on with his speech.

"This country will not be held to ransom by extremists and those on the lunatic fringe!" Marlowe boldly declared. "Together, we will emerge victorious in the war on horror!"

This was followed by a standing ovation.

Miles chuckled to himself and shook his head with bemused wonder. It was obvious, to him at least, what was going on here. With the help of some creative editing and shifting around of the chronology of events, the tone of the piece was altered completely. Instead of showing Marlowe running from the auditorium and into the safety of his limousine, a cut-and-paste job had made him

appear strong and defiant in the face of a bunch of unruly troublemakers.

And so that, it appeared, was the Zeroes' big moment. The one that Fabian believed would change the course of history ended up being nothing more than an undergraduate prank. A damp squib of a statement that earned them ninety seconds of airtime and a paragraph or two in tomorrow's edition of *The Daily Ink*, but would be all but forgotten in a week's time.

Miles switched the TV off and reached for the bottle of vodka.

By 12:45 a.m., one-third of the bottle was gone but sleep still eluded him. The music continued to blare outside, and the Zeroes' party was showing no signs of winding down.

At 12:58 a.m. he climbed out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom. He opened a drawer under the sink and retrieved the Ambien he'd swiped from the house at Graves End the previous day. The label warned against combining the pills with alcohol, but he figured that only applied to the elderly. Besides, he hadn't really had all that much to drink.

He swallowed one pill with a mouthful of water. He swallowed a second pill when he remembered that he was about twice the size of the old lady, and would therefore require twice the dosage for the pills to have any real effect.

He heard a phone ringing. It was a buzzing sound, coming from the powder blue pantsuit Clea had left among a pile of clothes on the floor near the tub. He crouched down and fished it out of her jacket pocket.

He took the phone and stumbled around the house looking for Clea, but she was nowhere to be found. One of the Zeroes, a short guy with a moustache wearing a sarong and a cowboy hat, told him he thought he saw her out the back somewhere.

Miles spotted Clea in a dark corner of the backyard, talking with Neil underneath the lemon tree. He took a few steps closer and saw that they were doing a lot more than just talking. They were all over one another like a couple of hormonally-charged teenagers at a high school disco.

"Oops, sorry," he said, but it soon became apparent that Miles' presence hadn't even registered with them. It was dark, the music was pumping, and Clea and Neil were far too interested in each other to notice anyone else.

Miles quickly retreated to the house to give them some privacy, before backtracking. A sinister thought crept into his mind.

He flipped Clea's phone open, hit the record button, and filmed her and Neil in action.

It felt kind of sleazy to be doing this, like he was some sort of creepy voyeur, but by this stage of the night everyone was pretty much wasted. No one paid any attention to him, and in the context of what else was going on around him it didn't even seem that out of the ordinary.

He filmed Clea and Neil groping and devouring each other for about two minutes, then searched through Clea's contacts list. He found Fabian's phone number and sent him the video.

Miles couldn't wipe the devious grin from his face. He knew that Fabian was in love with Clea, and that he hated Neil. He also knew that what he had just done was pretty nasty and vindictive. But it was also too good an opportunity to pass up. Besides, after the footage that Fabian shot at the processing centre and all the trouble that had caused, they could now call it even.

Miles returned to his room and crawled back into bed, feeling oddly proud of himself. His clock radio now displayed 1:14 a.m. He closed his eyes.

He opened them again a few minutes later, or after what felt like a few minutes. Someone or something was thumping around outside his room. He heard muffled voices, and what sounded like an argument. The door handle jiggled, like they were trying to get in.

He glanced at his clock and saw it was now 6:01 a.m. He tried lifting his head up, but he could barely move. His left arm was numb after falling asleep on it and cutting off the circulation.

The next thing he knew, the door was kicked open and he was pounced on by two men clad in black.

The men held him face down, pressing on his neck and twisting his arms behind his back. He felt a

sharp pain around his wrists as they were bound together tightly with cable ties.

His first thought was that he was being robbed, until he began to decipher some of the unintelligible shouting coming from the men. He picked out the occasional word, like “police” and “remain silent”.

They pulled him to his feet and dragged him out the door. He was paralysed by both the fear and the Ambien, so he offered no resistance. They hauled his limp body outside and dumped him on the front lawn.

A million different scenarios raced through his mind. The first and most obvious one was that none of this was happening, and it was all a dream brought on by foolishly combining alcohol with medication that wasn't prescribed for him. This was all just a dream. A crazy, vivid, terrifying dream. That was the best-case scenario. Or the worst-case, considering the frightening possibility that he had given himself brain damage and might never fully emerge back into reality.

His next thought was that he was under arrest for the Graves End job. Campbell had found out about it and informed Jack Houston, who then reported it to the authorities. That had to be it. Miles was losing his job, Dead Rite would be shut down, and they would all probably end up in jail. He could see no other plausible explanation.

He laid there on his side on the cold damp grass, still trapped in a partial paralysis, the cable ties digging into his skin. He struggled to make sense of any of it. He also had the overwhelming urge to scratch his nose.

It took him a few minutes to unscramble his thoughts and think it through logically, but he was eventually able to recognise that it was the Zeroes, not him, the cops were focusing their attention on.

Each of the Zeroes was being dragged away from their sleeping quarters with their hands tied. Most were only half-dressed, and a few were wearing even less than that. Some, like Mai, went kicking and screaming, thrashing around like a wind-up toy. Others, like Tariq the Anarchist, went to pieces, terrified when confronted with a small dose of actual anarchy.

Only Neil seemed unfazed by any of this. He stood back and observed proceedings as they unfolded. Strangely, the police made no move to apprehend him.

In the midst of his confused and incapacitated state, Miles was struck by a sudden moment of clarity: it must have been Neil who ratted out the Zeroes. That had to be the case. After all, why wasn't he being arrested along with all the others?

He saw Neil whisper something into the ear of one of the cops and point in Miles' direction. The cop then came over and cut the cable ties from around his wrists.

As soon as his hands were free, his nose stopped itching.

“You're free to go,” the cop said. “We apologise for the inconvenience.”

Miles wanted to ask what the hell was going on, but his mouth had trouble expressing what his brain was thinking. By the time he was lucid enough to formulate a complete sentence, the cop was long gone.

He struggled to his feet and walked off, rubbing his wrists along the way.

He was still none the wiser as to what was happening here. Was Neil a snitch? It didn't really seem like the kind of thing he'd do. Neil was more hardcore than anyone else in the group. He was someone who had chained himself to bulldozers and stormed the headquarters of big oil companies to dump dead wildlife on the CEO's desk. Unlike many of the others who spent their days getting stoned and talking about what should be done, he actually backed his words up with actions. Maybe Neil had been caught doing something serious and, staring down the barrel of a lengthy prison sentence, rolled over on his collaborators.

It wasn't until much later, when Miles had the chance to give it some proper thought, that he was able to figure out what the real story was. Neil was far too relaxed and composed to be a snitch. He looked and behaved like a totally different person. The way he spoke, the way he acted, his posture and body language – it was completely at odds with the person they all knew.

And then it hit him. It was so obvious, Miles couldn't believe it had taken him this long to figure it

out.

Neil was an undercover cop. His entire persona was a fabrication.

Miles had laughed at Clea when she suggested that spies could be sent in to infiltrate groups like the Zeroes. He never believed it, and assumed it was just Clea living in her own paranoid fantasy world. It seemed that Clea didn't quite believe it either, otherwise she may have been a bit more selective about who she let into the group. He wasn't sure what the screening process was for joining the Zeroes, but in Neil's case it seemed that chiselled good looks and stories about all his crazy adventures were enough to gain admission.

Miles returned to bed and enjoyed another four wonderful hours of deep, uninterrupted sleep.

And then the minibus drove over a pothole, and Miles was jolted out of his nocturnal wonderland. It was a callous reminder that he wasn't actually in his warm and inviting bed; instead, he was drifting in and out of consciousness on the bus ride back out to Graves End. The sleeping pills maintained a firm grip on him and caused him to periodically zone out. He would close his eyes for a second or two, and then realise twenty minutes had gone by when he opened them again. His body may have been awake, but his brain kept telling him he should go back to sleep. He wished the trip was longer so he could have more time to rest. What he was experiencing now felt a hundred times worse than being hungover.

It occurred to him that taking those pills might not have been one of his brightest ideas. Combining them with alcohol was even more foolish. Miles cursed his idiocy. He knew he shouldn't have done it, but he did it anyway. For some reason he always insisted on finding these things out the hard way.

He rested his head against the window and took a deep breath.

Steve kept a close eye on Miles as he drove. When he first laid eyes on him that morning, he looked so pale and wrecked that he wondered if he was hiding a zombie bite.

He also kept a close watch on the rear view mirror. It may have just been his imagination, but he was positive that same silver Jeep had been following them for the last twenty minutes.

"Hey, Miles?"

Miles felt someone tugging at his arm. He groaned softly and turned away from whoever it was that was bugging him.

"Miles?" Erin said. "Wake up".

"I am awake."

"Miles!"

Miles opened his eyes – and discovered that he was no longer on the bus. He was outside. In front of a house. Leaning up against a tree.

"Were you asleep just then?" Erin said.

"What?" He blinked a few times, hoping he didn't look as bad as he felt. "Um, no."

"I just called your name three times?"

"I only closed my eyes for a second."

"You've been leaning against that tree for ten minutes now?"

"I ... what?"

"Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine," Miles said, although he wasn't terribly convincing as he said this.

"You've been acting kind of strange all morning?"

"I'm just a little tired, that's all." He nodded toward the house. "So are we going to make a start on this or what?"

"No," Erin replied. "We've already done this address. I'm trying to tell you that it's time to move on to the next one?"

“Oh, right,” Miles said. “I knew that.”

For the rest of that morning, Miles would search through every bathroom in every house, on the hunt for any pharmaceutical assistance to help wake up. Ritalin, Adderall, pseudoephedrine, caffeine pills, trucker speed – anything that might give him a boost.

He finally came across a bottle of cheap diet pills inside a woman’s purse. Judging by the mu-mu wearing zombie heffalump who the purse belonged to, they didn’t appear to be all that useful as a weight-loss supplement. But they would have to do, or at least until something better came along.

Even though he had earlier promised himself that stealing from homes was just a one-off thing, he considered these to be extraordinary circumstances.

He swallowed six pills and stashed the remainder of the bottle in his pocket.

## Chapter 23

It was shortly before lunch when the bus returned from its third trip to the processing centre for the day. Fifteen minutes later, it was filled with another eighty zombies. This was all too easy.

Devon, one of Dead Rite's latest ring-ins, volunteered to take over the driving duties for the next trip back into town. Steve agreed, and instructed Miles to accompany him. Steve was careful to regularly rotate the driving roster to make sure the same two employees didn't keep showing up over and over. He was probably being overly cautious, but he didn't want to risk raising the suspicions of the staff at the processing centre.

Adam tallied up the zombies once they were all bundled on. "That's another full load," he said. "Which brings the grand total for the past three days to over nine hundred."

"So where does that leave us?" Steve said.

A tiny smirk appeared on Adam's face. "That means we're now officially in the black."

The look on Steve's face said it all – a mixture of elation and gratitude, but mostly just sheer relief.

"So we're back to zero now?" he said.

"Pretty much," Adam replied. "We've taken in enough to pay off the fine and cover all our debts. We can go, now."

Steve waited a moment before speaking. He wanted to give the impression that he was putting some serious thought into his next move, but all he was really doing was trying to come up with the best way to phrase his response. It was the woolly mammoth-sized elephant in the room. All the workers, Steve included, wanted to stay out there and keep going. No one would come right out and say it, but it was on everyone's mind. They had stopped thinking about how much money they had made and were starting to think about how much money they were leaving behind.

"There are still at least three or four thousand zombies out here, right?" Steve said.

Adam nodded. "That's true."

"And we're already here, and it's not even midday. So maybe we should stay for another few hours."

Adam folded his arms. "We agreed that we would only stay until everything was paid off."

"I know, but ... come on, Adam. We've gone this long without any problems. It'd be stupid to walk away from this now."

"It'd also be stupid to get greedy and tempt fate."

With his religious upbringing, Adam was well aware that greed was the deadliest of all the sins. Even the most honourable and morally upstanding people could succumb to temptation when large amounts of money were involved. No one was immune from having their judgment clouded by greed.

Steve exhaled. "Perhaps we should put it to a vote."

Adam consented, but he knew voting was pointless. Of course everyone would vote to stay. They were basically asking the staff if they would like to earn an extra \$10,000 on top of the \$25,000 they'd already made. Going home now would be like breaking into a bank vault and leaving a sackful of gold bullion behind.

Steve called the workers in and informed them of the situation, then asked for a show of hands. Predictably, everyone voted to keep going.

"It's only another half a day," Steve said once the workers had returned to their designated areas.

"We may as well keep going while we're out here. I'm sure it'll all be alright."

"Hey," Adam said with a shrug of resignation. "I believe in democracy."

The bus ride back into town was quiet, save for the low groan coming from the eighty zombies crammed into the makeshift pen. Devon was behind the wheel, hurtling down the freeway as if the speed limit was just a polite suggestion.

Devon had been hastily employed a couple of days earlier to help out with the Graves End job, and he was indicative as to how far Steve had lowered his standards with regards to the quality of staff. He was a borderline derelict who Miles had seen smoking discarded cigarette butts the previous morning. His long ratty hair was tied into a ponytail so tight that it gave the impression of an extreme facelift, and his arms, hands and neck were covered in homemade tattoos.

Devon had also served a six month prison sentence for looting during the initial zombie outbreak. While some looters were given suspended sentences if they stole food or other necessities, Devon was convicted after being caught stealing sneakers, iPads and twelve cartons of cigarettes.

He was sent back to prison a year later when he punched a prostitute in the face.

Miles sat one seat back, and was still navigating his way through the hazy chemical fog brought on by his pharmaceutical misadventures. Combining uppers with downers had created a mini electrical storm inside his head, making him simultaneously hyper and drowsy. One minute he felt like he was slipping into a coma, the next he was wide awake and so alert he felt like he had gained telekinetic powers. Those diet pills turned out to be a lot stronger than he had anticipated. He probably should have read the label before tossing a handful down his throat.

The bus approached the city's outskirts, and Miles felt his pocket vibrate. He reached in and grabbed his phone. It was a number he didn't recognise.

"Miles, it's me," came the shaky voice at the end of the line.

"Jesus, Clea." Miles sat up in his seat. "What the hell was all that this morning? Where are you?"

"I'm at the police station. I need you to come and get me."

"I'm at work. I can't just leave."

Clea asked again. She sounded frightened and vulnerable, two adjectives rarely used to describe her. Miles thought about reminding Clea that he had asked her for a huge favour a while back when she was in possession of some damaging footage, and she didn't exactly go out of her way to accommodate him.

"Please, Miles," she said, her voice cracking. "I really need your help."

It took only the threat of tears for Miles to cave in. He hated people crying around him, and really hated it when women cried. But Clea crying would be too much for him to bear.

He put his phone down and turned to Devon. "Do you think it'd be okay if I slipped away for half an hour while you take this lot to the processing centre?" he asked.

Devon communicated his response with a stern glare.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't an emergency," Miles said. "A friend of mine is in trouble."

Perhaps Miles did have parapsychological powers after all, because Devon finally consented. "Half an hour," he grunted. "Not a second longer."

Miles returned to Clea. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to come to the station and bail me out."

"How much?"

There was a lengthy pause before Clea answered. "Twenty-five."

"Hundred?"

"Thousand."

Miles had to stop himself from laughing out loud. "Clea, you don't seriously think I have that sort of cash lying around, do you?"

"Don't worry about the money. I have it, just ... not on me right now. I can get it for you in a couple of days. I need to move a few things around first, but I have it. All you have to do is come in and sign some papers."

"Wait a minute – aren't your parents both lawyers? Why did you call me and not them?"

Clea exhaled before saying, "The situation with my parents is complicated."

Miles' head throbbed with a sudden spasm of sharp pain. He leaned forward and clutched at his temples. First Elliott, and now Clea. Apparently he was the go-to guy when you needed to be bailed out

of prison.

Devon dropped him off at the police station, where a series of documents were put before him. He signed them all after giving them the most cursory of glances. He knew the gist of it anyway – Clea would be released, and his house used as a collateral. He was painfully aware of what a gargantuan act of faith this was, and that he and Shae could find themselves without a roof over their heads should Clea decide to skip town. But he figured that if you can't trust your pot-smoking, work-avoiding, tree-hugging Buddhist housemate, who can you trust?

Clea's hands shook as she lit a cigarette outside the station.

Miles sat with her while he waited for Devon to return from the processing centre, and she gave him the full story on what had gone down. As he had suspected, "Neil" was an undercover cop, sent in to infiltrate the group after Fabian's shenanigans at the processing centre had attracted the authorities' attention. His Starbucks-trashing antics were specifically designed to get himself noticed by the Zeroes and gain their trust.

Once Neil was a part of their inner circle he collected information on each of the Zeroes, recording conversations and documenting evidence of what they had planned. There were now audio recordings of Tariq the Anarchist saying someone should "take Marlowe out", which amounted to conspiracy to commit murder. Fabian was openly heard discussing his plans to inject Stephanie and Madison Marlowe with zombie blood so that Bernard Marlowe would have two zombie daughters. Everyone assumed this was just tough-talking Fabian shooting his mouth off, but with him you never could tell.

The stink bomb attack, despite being the kind of juvenile prank that school kids might play, could actually be classified as chemical warfare.

In total, they were now facing over two hundred separate charges ranging from public disorder to possession of a controlled substance to illegally keeping a farmyard animal in a residential area.

Clea was beside herself with worry. The cops had got to her, telling her that she could potentially be facing a twenty-year prison term for her role in all of this. Miles tried to reassure her, explaining that they were just trying to scare her, and if they really did believe she was a dangerous bioterrorist they wouldn't have let her out on twenty-five thousand dollars bail.

If that was their aim, then mission accomplished. Clea had been deeply rattled by the whole experience.

"What am I going to do now?" Clea sniffed, her red eyes moistening again. "I'm almost thirty. I've wasted my whole life."

"Come on, now," Miles said. "You have not wasted your life."

"I just wanted to make a difference. But nothing's changed. Nothing ever changes."

"That's not true. You've done plenty of good."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

Miles took a moment to formulate his response. The Zeroes were good at making a lot of noise and drawing attention to themselves, but their actual achievements were harder to quantify.

"Hey, you must have been doing something right if they sent someone in to infiltrate the group, right?" he said.

"That doesn't mean anything," Clea said, nervously chewing on her lip ring as she spoke.

"Sure it does. For them to resort to those sorts of measures means they must have seen you as a threat."

Miles may have only been saying this to comfort Clea, but part of him actually believed it. He thought about it some more on the bus ride back out to Graves End. Even though he sometimes made fun of the Zeroes and their ham-fisted attempts at influencing societal change, he also had a begrudging amount of respect for them. Many people claim to be angry about injustice and inequality, but few ever bother to do anything about it. The Zeroes managed to hold onto their ideals long after most others gave theirs up.

People generally became less idealistic and more conservative as they got older, which many

believe is due to the wisdom and maturity that comes with age. But the truth is that affluence breeds conservatism; people are less willing to rock the boat once they've attained a degree of wealth. They create comfortable little cocoons for themselves, and react strongly against anyone or anything that might threaten that.

Marcus waited until his watch ticked over to 1:00 p.m., then hit play on Felix's laptop. The sound of his beloved music flooded through the entire town of Graves End. The feeling this brought was indescribable. Superlatives like "euphoric" and "spiritual" didn't come close to doing it justice. It was as if he was leaving his own body. This must be what superstar SlamCore DJs experienced when they performed onstage. A sensation that was almost superhuman or godlike.

That was the moment Marcus decided what he would do with the money he'd be receiving from this week's job. His initial plan was to travel the world and rave in every corner of the globe. But that wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wasn't content with being just another body in the field. His destiny was up there on the stage, delivering joy to the assembled masses. That was what he was put on this earth to do. It didn't really concern him that the music attracted the undead. Somehow, the danger aspect made it all the more appealing.

His thoughts drifted away, and he descended deeper into the rave cave in his mind. He began to map out just how he was going to achieve all this. He would quit his job after they had finished up here today, and he'd be in Ibiza by early next week. He'd spend the first few weeks making contacts and dropping off mix CDs to club owners and promoters. He'd start off small and work his way up, using his minor celebrity status as a springboard to greater things. By this time next year, his goal was to have DJ'd on every continent.

This was the beginning of his second act. He would no longer be some washed up former soap actor who used to be moderately famous. He would be a star, once again.

Marcus was so caught up in his daydreaming that he didn't notice the music had been playing for over three minutes now. He also didn't notice the one-armed zombie creeping up behind him, ready to sink his teeth into the back of his head.

While some people claimed that you should live every day as if it's your last, Marcus was one of the few who actually followed through with this philosophy. He pursued each and every one of his hedonistic impulses which included partying for days on end, consuming every mind-altering substance put before him and copulating with anything that had a pulse. He lived by the mantra that it's better to regret the things you did rather than the things you didn't do.

Yes, Marcus genuinely lived every day as if it was his last day on earth. Unbeknownst to him, that day had arrived.

Elliott and Felix struggled to keep it together. Here they were, stranded in a dead-end street, with angry zombies closing in on them from every direction.

"Why is the music still going?" Elliott shouted over the noise.

They rushed around trying to switch off all the radios, but it wasn't doing any good. Even if they did manage to shut these ones down, there were still dozens more blaring in all the surrounding streets.

"Something must have gone wrong!" Felix replied. "We have to go check it out!"

Elliott wasn't so sure this was a good idea. If the music was still playing after five minutes, there was a good chance something had happened to Marcus. And if that was the case, there was little they could do to fix it. If the unthinkable had happened, the smartest thing would be to get out of town as quickly as possible. There were a number of cars sitting idle in driveways, and most still had their keys in the ignition.

But before Elliott could do anything, Felix had split.

He saw him in the distance, running off in the direction of the church car park. He shouted at him to

come back, but Felix either ignored him or couldn't hear over the music.

Elliott cursed under his breath, then set off after him.

Steve and Adam were finally in the clear. They watched the carnage unfolding from their hiding spot, crouched down behind two filthy dumpsters. They were both at a complete loss as to how everything could have gone so horribly wrong.

Ten minutes earlier and it was all going swimmingly. Twenty more zombies were lined up and ready to load as soon as Miles and Devon brought the bus back from the processing centre. It was still only early afternoon, and so they had enough time to fill up another three or four busloads before the day was out. The pressure was off – they had already made enough to pay off their debts, and so every busload from this point on was pure profit.

But then, for reasons unknown, the music didn't stop when it was supposed to.

The twenty zombies they'd already captured reacted to the music, thrashing around in their restraints like vicious guard dogs trying to get at a piece of raw meat. It wasn't long before they found themselves surrounded by dozens more, drawn out from the nearby houses. They were like wild animals that had spotted their prey, and before Adam could figure out what was going on he found himself cornered.

Steve rushed to his aid. He grabbed the battering ram from the minibus and swung it around wildly. Three zombies were struck in the chest and face, and were sent sprawling to the ground.

He pulled Adam away, and they escaped to their hiding spot. Seconds later, a mass zombie crowd converged on the area.

"We can't stay here," Steve said. "If that music doesn't stop, this whole place will be swarming within minutes. We need to find a more secure place and figure out what to do from there."

Steve knew that time was of the essence. He had no idea what had happened with the music, but he could only assume the worst. If there was no one manning the controls, the music would keep playing until the battery inside Felix's laptop went dead. That could take hours.

He spotted the church across the road, and saw that it had a side entrance. The door appeared to be slightly ajar.

Here was their chance.

Steve conveyed his plan to Adam: he would create a distraction, which would allow Adam to run across the road and barricade himself inside.

"You're coming with me, aren't you?" Adam said.

Steve shook his head. "I can't."

He pulled up his sleeve, and Adam saw the laceration on Steve's right arm. It was only small, but it was unmistakably a zombie bite. He'd sustained it a few minutes earlier.

"I'm sorry," Steve said. "This is something you'll have to do alone."

Adam shook his head. "There's no way I'm leaving without you."

"Adam, be smart about this. If I go, you'll end up stuck in a confined space with a hyperactive zombie."

"I need you to come with me."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going anywhere."

"Well in that case, neither am I."

Steve did his best to keep his temper in check. "This is not the time for arguing."

"If you're not coming with me, then we can both just sit here and wait until you turn. And then you can bite my face off. I can think of worse ways to go."

Adam folded his arms, which Steve knew was his way of saying the matter was closed and no further discussion would be entered into. This infuriated Steve, but he knew Adam wasn't bluffing. He was the most stubborn person he had ever met, and Steve didn't doubt for a minute that Adam would allow himself to be bitten just to win the argument.

The set-up area was swarming with zombies by the time Felix arrived. He could see no sign of Marcus. He sucked a deep hit from his asthma inhaler, then psyched himself up to make a mad kamikaze sprint for the laptop.

But before he could do that, he was grabbed from behind.

“What are you doing?” Elliott shouted at him. He clutched onto Felix’s arm to prevent him from going any further.

“We have to stop this music!” Felix replied.

“Are you insane? It’s far too dangerous!”

“If we don’t do it now, *everyone* will be killed!”

Felix twisted around and somehow managed to slip free from Elliott’s grasp.

Elliott could only watch on in amazement as Felix ducked and weaved his way towards the laptop, coming within inches of the rapacious zombies. He wasn’t sure if what Felix was demonstrating could be described as extraordinary courage or incredible stupidity.

Felix made it to within a few feet of his target, and then stopped. Lying between himself and the laptop was an inert body, sprawled face down on the ground.

“Marcus?” Felix crouched down and put his hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “Are you al—”

Zombie Marcus sprung up and chomped down hard on Felix’s arm. Felix fell to the ground and let out an agonising wail.

Elliott could only watch on helplessly as Felix was set upon by Marcus and three more zombies.

## Chapter 24

It was apparent as soon as Miles and Devon drove past the “Welcome to Graves End” sign that something had gone terribly wrong. They felt the thumping SlamCore beat before they heard it, which then grew progressively louder and louder over the noise of the engine as they neared the township. The two of them exchanged worried looks, and hoped that what they feared the most had not actually happened.

A psychotic zombie then charged into the middle of the road from out of nowhere, straight into the path of the bus. Devon slammed his foot on the brakes, but he didn't have a chance of stopping in time. The bus ploughed straight into the schizoid zombie and squashed it like a bug on a windscreen.

“Holy crap!” Devon yelled. “What the hell's goin' on here?”

“Don't stop!” Miles told him. A few crazed zombies were already eyeing off the bus, and Miles was beginning to feel like a sitting duck. “Just keep driving.”

They tried getting as close as they could to the set-up area, but it soon became clear that this was out of the question. Hundreds of zombies had flooded into the streets, and the area had transformed into one huge zombie rave. It was like a riot and an uprising happening all at once, with deranged undead creatures attacking anything that moved and tearing the town apart.

They had no hope of getting the bus through there. That street was a dead end, in every sense of the world, and if they tried to drive down it they would find themselves swamped within seconds. Devon made a sharp turn and drove down the next side street.

Miles blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes, just to be sure that what he was seeing was actually happening. He had hoped for a moment that this was all just a waking nightmare brought on by a lack of sleep.

“This don't look good, man,” Devon said, his hands white-knuckling the steering wheel. “What should we do?”

“Just ... pull over up here.” Miles pointed to a quiet spot up ahead, and Devon pulled the bus over to the side of the road.

They sat in stunned silence for a moment, neither one knowing what to do next.

A couple of zombies hobbled by and pounded on the side of the bus, but kept on moving towards the music once they saw they had no way of getting inside.

Miles tried making sense of what was happening, but his brain refused to provide anything that resembled a logical explanation. This was like something out of a time-travel movie; it was as if Miles and Devon had been gone for ninety years rather than ninety minutes. The town they returned to was unrecognisable from the town they had left.

Miles was first to speak.

“We need to find out if anyone else is still alive,” he said.

“No, we need to get outta here, pronto!” Devon replied.

“Devon, we can't just abandon everyone. If we leave and they're still out there, we've just left them to die.”

“You don't seriously think anyone could survive all this, do you?”

“I don't know, but we're not leaving until we know for sure.”

“Hey, I'm only doin' this for the money! I'm not about to risk my life for a bunch of people I don't hardly know.”

“You can do what you like. But I have to go check it out.” Miles stood and moved to the door. He looked in both directions to make sure the coast was clear. “Open the door please.”

Devon's hand didn't move. “You don't have to do this, you know,” he said.

“If it was you or me out there, we'd want them to do the same.”

“Dude ... we can just leave. We can go back and then call for help.”

“There’s no time. Give me twenty minutes. If I find anyone, I’ll send them back here. If no one comes in that time, or if I don’t come back, you can leave. How does that sound?”

Devon didn’t like it, but he eventually agreed that it was reasonable. He flicked the switch, and the doors opened.

Devon closed the door again the instant Miles stepped out onto the footpath.

Miles crept cautiously in the direction of the set-up area. A few houses ahead he saw a couple of zombies, scurrying across the road like cockroaches.

He was almost tiptoeing as he went from one location to the next, compulsively looking in every direction for anything that might want to kill him. He now understood why you were urged to remain calm and not to panic in moments of crisis. Right now, panicking felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He passed a house with a garbage can knocked over and saw a bent golf club sticking out. He reached down to pick it up. It was a five iron.

For some reason he thought of a joke he remembered Elliott telling him when they were younger.

Two explorers were traipsing through the jungle when they saw a lion charging in their direction. The first explorer throws his supplies to the ground and runs away.

“What are you doing?” his partner shouted after him. “You can’t outrun a lion!”

“I don’t have to outrun a lion,” the explorer replied. “I only have to outrun you!”

It was at that moment that Miles heard the bus’s motor splutter to life, then slowly fade into the distance – seventeen minutes before the agreed-upon time. He may have had trouble holding onto his nerve, but Devon’s was long gone.

Devon may not have been the smartest person Miles had ever met, but at least he was smart enough to know that he couldn’t outrun a lion.

Miles continued on, creeping slowly down one of Graves End’s side streets. He did his best to remain as inconspicuous as possible, darting between bus shelters, phone booths and parked cars and anything else he could find to hide behind. He figured if he kept a low profile and didn’t draw attention to himself, he’d be alright. The occasional zombie shuffled by, and one or two came perilously close, but they took no notice of him. Their only interest was getting to the music.

He reached the intersection closest to the church car park. From here he could see where the laptop was set up, unmanned and broadcasting to all of Graves End. It was only a short distance away, no more than one hundred metres. But separating them was an ocean of reanimated bodies.

Miles knew straight away that he didn’t stand a chance of reaching it.

In the distance, a few blocks up the road, a herd of zombies was coming his way. This group numbered about fifty or sixty in total. Miles quietly slipped down an alley to avoid detection.

He moved carefully along the alley and attempted to formulate a plan in his mind while he waited for the herd to pass. His strategy up until that point was simply to make it up as he went along. That hadn’t got him very far. He now realised he probably should have taken a moment or two to think it all through before leaving the safety of the bus.

A garbage can toppled over behind him, sending a cold bolt of fear shooting down his spine.

He turned and saw that a zombie from the herd had followed him into the alley.

Miles wasted no time in making a run for it. The zombie gave chase, breaking into the equivalent of a light jog.

Despite attracting this undead pursuer, Miles didn’t feel like he was in any danger. Even in their deranged worked-up state, it wasn’t all that difficult for an able-bodied person to outrun a zombie.

And then he rounded a corner and found himself staring at a dead end.

Panic immediately set in.

The zombie pursuer moved in closer, stalking his warm-blooded prey. Miles tried every door,

desperately jiggling at the handles, but each one was locked.

The corrugated fence at the end of the alley was almost three metres high. There was no way he could climb over that.

The zombie came within striking distance.

Miles tried to remain calm and analyse the situation rationally. He assessed all his available options, only to find that they were rather limited.

He took a deep breath and gripped the slightly bent golf club he held in his hands.

The various scenarios played out in his mind. Maybe he could dodge and weave his way past. Run left, then spin away at the last moment and go right. Follow this up with a sharp blow to the back of the head with the five iron. That should work. He had a decent size advantage over his opponent, as well as a fully-functioning brain, so it shouldn't be all that difficult.

But this plan was rendered moot when he saw that a further twelve zombies had joined their friend by following him into the alley.

The zombie sprang forward. Miles forgot all about his escape strategy and crouched down into a ball.

His eyes were clamped shut, so he didn't see what happened next.

He didn't see the beer keg fall from the sky and land on the zombie's head, crushing him like an empty soda can.

Miles opened his eyes when he heard the sickening crunching noise and saw the splattered zombie a few feet in front of him. Its limbs were sticking out from underneath the heavy metallic barrel at unnatural angles.

He looked up to where the missile had fallen from, but saw nothing but clear blue sky. His lifelong agnosticism was now seriously under question.

But he wasn't in the clear just yet. That was one zombie taken care of. There were still a dozen more, and it might be too much to ask God to make it rain beer kegs.

With all this racing through his mind, a door opened up behind him. A pair of hands reached out and dragged him inside, just as the horde prepared to pounce.

It took every ounce of Steve and Adam's strength to lift the heavy oak pew and carry it the few metres to the church's entrance. Steve struggled the most, and paused for a moment to catch his breath.

The skin around his bite wound had already turned black, and his whole right arm was inflamed. The infection was spreading rapidly to the rest of his body. He tried to fight off the fever and delirium, but he knew it was pointless.

His life was slipping away with each passing minute.

Upon entering the church, Steve and Adam discovered that the front entrance for the church couldn't be locked. They figured that if they pushed one of the pews up against it that should be enough to hold off any zombies trying to get in.

"We're safe now," Adam said once the pew was in place.

"We might be safe from the zombies out there," Steve said, gasping for air. "But you're still not safe in here. You'll need to restrain me, before I turn."

Steve was surprisingly matter-of-fact about the whole situation. He seemed to have a what's-done-is-done philosophy, and his main priority now was to prepare for his inevitable transformation. Like every UMC worker, he knew in the back of his mind that something like this could happen at any moment. What was important now was that he keep it together for Adam's sake. He knew that if he fell apart, Adam would too.

He searched through his knapsack and found a roll of electrical tape.

"Here," he said, tossing the roll to Adam. "By my reckoning, we have less than one hour."

Steve took a seat, and Adam unravelled a length of tape. He crouched down in front of Steve and began taping his left ankle to the leg of the chair. This was only a short-term solution – if the music was

still playing when Steve eventually turned, Steve didn't want his zombie self to be affected by it. But beyond that, their plans for the days and weeks following today – neither of them had any idea what would happen. Would Adam take him to the processing centre, where he would probably never see him again? Or would he break the law and try to keep him hidden from the authorities? It wasn't something they had ever discussed.

There was a long silence as Adam wrapped the tape around Steve's leg.

"I'm sorry, Adam," Steve eventually said.

"You have nothing to apologise for," Adam said.

"I do. This is all my fault."

Adam shook his head. "We don't know what happened out there."

"I mean, from before. You were right. We ... " Steve's voice faltered, and he cleared his throat. "We should have left when we said we would."

"You can't put this all on yourself. We all voted to stay out here."

"It shouldn't have been put it to a vote in the first place. That was my decision to make, but I took the easy option because I wanted the money. I knew how everyone else was going to vote, but I didn't have the courage to make that decision myself."

Adam tore the tape off the roll. He stood up and looked Steve directly in the eye.

"We can't change what happened, and we can't dwell on the past," he said. "All we can do now is make the best of the situation at hand."

A hint of a smile appeared on Steve's face. He'd always worried about Adam, and how he might cope if he was no longer around. His greatest fear was that Adam might do something stupid, like deliberately allow himself to be bitten after he turned.

But at that moment, Steve knew that Adam was going to be alright.

Miles was pulled into darkness, and the door slammed shut behind him. A few seconds passed before his eyes adjusted to the low light, but it felt like hours.

When his vision finally came good he saw that he was inside the local tavern, and it was Erin who had rescued him from a certain death. She was strangely calm considering the circumstances, and her breath was a combustible mixture of vodka, gin and tequila. Miles was quite certain that these two factors were related.

Elliott came down the stairs a minute later. It was him who had saved Miles by lobbing a full keg of beer off the roof and onto the head of an unsuspecting zombie. For once in his life, alcohol had been the solution to one of Miles' problems rather than the cause.

The two survivors filled Miles in on what they knew so far – which wasn't much. All they could tell him was that everything had been running smoothly until, for some inexplicable reason, the music continued to play long after it should have stopped. Marcus was dead now, and so was Felix after he tried to shut the music off. The rest of the staff, including Steve and Adam, remained unaccounted for.

"We don't know how it happened," Erin told him. "Everything was fine. I was having a cigarette, Elliott was working with Felix, Marcus was in charge of the music, and literally the next thing we know—"

"Wait a second," Miles interrupted. "They put *Marcus* in charge of the music?"

Elliott nodded. "Why?"

"Marcus came to work today grinding his jaw and his pupils were the size of pin pricks. You don't think that has anything to do with what's happening now?"

Miles knew it was somewhat hypocritical to be heaping all the blame onto Marcus considering the toxins he had swimming in his system when he arrived for work that morning. In the back of his mind, he wondered if all this was just one big alcohol- and Ambien-fuelled hallucination, like a bad dream he couldn't wake up from. But it felt far too real for that.

"Okay, now that you mention it?" Erin said. "That does sound like a rational explanation?"

Miles paced up and down for a moment, as if this would somehow provide him with the mental clarity required to think his way out of this.

“Right, so that’s the situation we find ourselves in,” he said. “What do we do from here?” He was hoping the others had some idea of what to do, because he was drawing blanks in that department.

“Shouldn’t we try and find some way to switch the music off?” Elliott said.

“Easier said than done,” Miles said, well aware that he was stating the obvious.

“I was thinking something along the lines of locking the doors, getting drunk and waiting until this whole thing plays itself out,” Erin said.

Miles couldn’t deny that he was tempted by that suggestion. Erin was well on her way towards getting hammered, and Miles had an overwhelming desire to join her. But he only had to remind himself of some of his more recent alcoholic episodes to conclude that this might not be a particularly good idea.

“Do I have to be the one to suggest the obvious?” Elliott said with his hands on his hips.

“What do you mean?” Miles said.

“Don’t you think it’s about time we bite the bullet and call this one in?”

“What, you mean contact the authorities?” Erin said.

“Well, yeah.”

“And what do we tell them when they ask what a UMC crew was doing in an isolated town full of zombies without reporting it?” Miles said.

“We tell them we were working here illegally and now we’re very, very sorry!” Elliott said.

“We can’t do that,” Miles said, shaking his head. “We’ll all end up in prison.”

“We won’t be arrested, will we?” Elliott said. “Steve and Adam might, since they’re the ones in charge. But I’m sure they’d understand if it meant saving everyone’s lives.”

“No,” Miles said. “We’re all liable.”

“But Steve and Adam were the ones who—”

“We all knew this was illegal before we went into it. And after what happened at the processing centre last month, I’m sure they won’t hesitate to make an example out of all of us.”

“So those are literally our only two options?” Erin said. “We end up in jail, or we end up as zombies?”

“Either way,” Elliott said, “we’ll probably be spending a long period of time locked inside a small cage.”

The room lapsed into silence. They were all so used to relying on Steve’s leadership for guidance that they felt lost without him.

“Look, we can’t just stand here and do nothing,” Miles said. “The longer we wait, the worse it’s going to get.”

“Let me suggest, once again,” Erin said, reaching over the bar to top up her glass, “that we lock the doors, get drunk, and wait until this whole thing plays itself out.”

Miles decided to ignore everything Erin said from that point on.

“First things first,” he said. “We have to get that music switched off. Any ideas on how we can do that? Is there some way we can, I don’t know, jam the frequency or something?”

“Felix probably could,” Elliott said. “But I think that’s a little beyond our technical capabilities.”

“Maybe you’re over-thinking it?” Erin said, something few had ever accused her of doing. “I mean, what if we could find some way of luring all the zombies away from the set-up area?”

“And how exactly do we do that?” Elliott said.

“I don’t know? This bar has a sound system? What if we opened these doors up, turned the music up full, then lured them inside here? Then someone can sneak across and shut the music off?”

“Wait a minute.” Elliott fell silent, then walked over to the back window. He peered through the Venetian blinds to the zombie-filled streets outside.

His eyes lit up like a switch inside his head had been flicked on.

“What is it?” Miles said.

Elliott turned back to Miles and Erin. A wide grin had appeared on his face. “I think I have an even better idea,” he said.

## Chapter 25

Miles and Elliott had no trouble entering the Burtons' home, with the previous occupants now long gone. Once inside they were able to quickly locate two sets of car keys. One set of keys was for Keith and Joan Burton's Volvo station wagon. The other was for their son Seth's Range Rover.

Seth Burton was the local hooligan who provided the elderly residents of Graves End with a disrespectful youth to complain about. He was notorious for wasting his days driving around Graves End in the fratmobile his parents had bought him, tormenting the neighbours by spewing hardcore rap music from its obscenely loud sound system. He had installed the speakers himself; speakers that were so ridiculously huge that they actually weighed down the rear of the vehicle slightly. Whenever Elliott came to visit his grandparents he could always hear Seth's music somewhere in the distance, even if he was on the opposite side of the town.

When Erin said that they needed something to lure the zombies away, Seth's Range Rover was the first thing that popped into Elliott's mind. He and Miles then slipped out of the tavern, and were able to make it to the Burtons' house a few streets away without too much trouble.

Erin locked the doors after they left and climbed over the bar. She switched on the jukebox, then set about making good on her pledge to get drunk and wait for this whole thing to play itself out.

Miles climbed behind the wheel of the Range Rover. He put the key in the ignition, and the engine roared to life.

He reversed out of the driveway and drove slowly towards the set-up area. Elliott followed a short distance behind in the Volvo.

Their plan may have been simple, but it was the best chance they had of clearing the set-up area and reaching the source of the music. Miles would drive by in the Range Rover with SlamCore blasting from the speakers. The volume should easily overpower the other radios nearby, and he would lure the zombies away from the area. Elliott would wait until it was safe and then quickly swoop in and switch off the laptop.

The Range Rover reached the crossroads closest to the set-up point.

Miles turned the radio on, which he had tuned in to Fusion FM. A KoreKayeShyn song played as part of their week-long tribute to the late SlamCore pioneer. This one was called "Rape and Pillage".

He cranked up the volume.

"Apocalyptic" didn't even begin to describe this unholy racket. The booming bass-heavy cacophony blasting from the trunk surely registered somewhere on the Richter scale. Windows shook. Birds fell from the sky. The earth's axis altered momentarily. Any living creatures within a half-mile radius lost control of their bowels.

Most importantly, it woke the dead.

Miles put the car into first gear and continued along at a cruisy pace. He drove fast enough to keep a comfortable distance from the zombies, but slow enough to cajole them along. His only concern now was that if the car broke down he'd find himself in a world of trouble, but everything seemed to be running smoothly in that department.

The zombies came in their hundreds. In every direction, down every street he passed, more and more emerged, like ants following a pheromone trail.

It wasn't long before Miles was drenched in sweat. It took all the concentration and discipline he could muster to hold his nerve and steady his trembling hands. He reminded himself over and over how important it was to stick with the plan. Everything was working so far, and he couldn't chicken out now.

His phone chimed with a message. It was from Elliott, and it said that in about one minute's time he would make his move.

Miles took his eyes off the road for just a few seconds to read the text message. Even if he was

paying attention he wouldn't have been able to avoid the out of control silver Jeep hurtling through the intersection at high speed. But at least he would have seen it coming.

After Campbell left the liquor store the previous night he was certain something suspicious was going on. Miles was definitely hiding something from him, but he was too smart to give anything away.

"Too smart" were two words rarely used to describe Marcus. So Campbell sent him a friendly text message enquiring as to his general wellbeing. Marcus sent back a near-incomprehensible reply, but after reading and re-reading it several times he deduced that Marcus was at the Inferno nightclub, and Campbell was welcome to join him.

Campbell arrived and found Marcus dancing shirtless on a podium, high on life and three hits of MDMA. He managed to drag Marcus away to a spot where they could talk, and it didn't take much prodding for Marcus to spill the beans on what Dead Rite had been up to for the past two days. He knew Marcus wanted a Z-Pro job, so all Campbell had to do was imply that he'd put in a good word for him with Jack Houston. Marcus then told him everything he wanted to know: how to get to Graves End, how many zombies were still out there, and their method of using SlamCore to draw the zombies from their houses. He even told him the frequency Felix was using to broadcast the music.

Marcus then told Campbell that he loved him for the sixth time in ten minutes and complimented him on his beautiful aura. The ecstasy was basically acting as a truth serum. Once Marcus had started talking, Campbell couldn't get him to shut up.

Campbell called in sick for work the next morning and, along with his Z-Pro colleague Dwayne Marks, followed Dead Rite out to Graves End in his new silver Jeep. They set up on the opposite side of town to avoid detection, then sat back and marvelled at how easy it all was. They managed to squeeze eight zombies into the Jeep, and after half a day's work they had made three trips to the processing centre and back, netting them \$6,000 apiece.

And then, shortly after midday, it all went haywire.

Miles was dazed for a few seconds following the crash. When he came to, he saw that the silver Jeep had slammed into the front of the Range Rover. The airbags on both cars had deployed, and smoke spewed from their mangled engines.

He looked out the window. The driver of the Jeep had collapsed out of the car and was crawling along the road.

It was Campbell.

About twenty metres behind him, a twisted body lay motionless in the middle of the road. It took Miles a moment to recognise the body as that of Dwayne Marks, another of his former colleagues. Dwayne looked completely different from the last time he saw him; the long hair and Jesus beard was gone, and both arms were covered in tattoos. One of those tattooed arms was now lying in the gutter, five metres away from the rest of Dwayne's body.

The huge hole in the Jeep's windscreen suggested that while the Jeep may have come to a sudden halt, Dwayne kept on going.

Campbell stumbled over to the Range Rover and pounded on the window. "Miles!" he screamed. "Help me!"

Miles saw Campbell in horrifying close-up. Half his face was hanging off, like a grotesque Halloween mask coming apart at the seams. Two fingers were missing on his right hand, and his whole right arm was showing signs of rapid decay.

Campbell yanked at the door handle and tried to pull it open, but the crash had buckled the front door. He couldn't get it to budge, and Miles wasn't about to offer any assistance.

Campbell looked up and saw an army of zombies coming in his direction. He gave up on the door and limped away as fast as he could.

Miles tried climbing out of the car to make a run for it as well, but realised he was too late.

Zombies were swarming in from every direction.

The next thing he knew he was surrounded by walking corpses, hungry for flesh and brains. A huge crack bisected the windscreen, and it wouldn't take much force to smash the whole thing open.

It was a matter of seconds before the two cars were swallowed up by the horde.

Elliott knew he had to act immediately. He threw the Volvo into gear and planted his foot on the accelerator. The tyres screeched, and the car sped straight for the set-up area. Miles was now in a world of trouble, and so it was on to Plan B. The fact that they hadn't discussed a backup plan might prove to be something of an obstacle. Elliott would have to do a bit of improvising.

He didn't have a clear run at the laptop, so he just ploughed on straight ahead.

The Volvo clipped one zombie, and then another, toppling them both over like bowling pins. He hit a third one front-on, sending it flying over the top of the car. The Volvo's airbags deployed, and Elliott's vision was obscured. All he could do now was plant his foot to the floor and hope for the best.

He heard and felt a jarring crash when the Volvo rammed into the table. The legs collapsed, and the car drove over top of it. But the music didn't stop.

Elliott rolled the window down and stuck his head out. The laptop had been knocked to the ground, but it was still working.

Seconds later, the vehicle was besieged by zombies.

Elliott backed up a couple of metres, then lurched forward again, hoping to crush the laptop under the car's wheels. But he couldn't get close enough. A cement traffic barrier lay between him and the laptop, and this prevented him from getting any closer.

He spotted a steering lock in the back seat. This would have to be his final option, a Hail Mary. If this didn't work there wasn't much hope left.

He grabbed the steering lock and opened the sun roof. He pulled himself out onto the roof and stood on top of the Volvo.

He was now surrounded by at least twenty zombies. A few clambered up onto the bonnet and tried to grasp at him. He waited until they came within striking distance, then smashed the steering lock into the side of their head. They were duly sent flying back to the ground.

For a brief moment he saw that he had a clear path to the laptop. He quickly leapt off the bonnet and ran over towards the flattened table.

Using all the strength he still had within him, Elliott raised the steering lock above his head and brought it down upon Felix's laptop.

The thing wasn't easy to break. Some laptops stopped working after suffering only the slightest of knocks. Felix's was clearly much sturdier than that. It took a number of solid hits before Elliott had fully destroyed it, and the music finally came to a stop.

If Felix had opted for a cheaper brand, the music would have stopped the first time Elliott smashed the steering lock into it. But it took eleven solid hits before it was finally broken.

It was during the eighth attempt that Elliott lost a chunk of flesh from his right shoulder.

Miles was trapped. He tried restarting the engine, but to no avail. The car spluttered and groaned, but simply refused to turn over.

The Range Rover was swamped by zombies. He couldn't tell how many. Dozens, maybe hundreds. All he could see was reanimated corpses outside the car trying to get in, shaking it and clawing at the windows. The crack on the windscreen was growing bigger and bigger by the minute.

Then the windscreen gave way. A fist-sized hole opened up, and a decaying arm reached through. Miles scuttled into the back seat. The hole opened up further. The zombie attached to the decaying arm tried crawling through and became stuck halfway. Miles fought him off with several hard kicks to the face, but this did nothing to discourage him.

Another zombie pounded on a side window, and the glass cobwebbed. It was looking more and

more fragile by the second.

Then came the thumping noise from above. Zombies were on the roof. From an aerial view, the Range Rover looked like a fresh piece of meat tossed onto an ant's nest.

And while Miles never gave up fighting, deep down he accepted that this may be the end. He was trapped inside a car with an untold number of vicious zombies trying to get at him, and with no clear avenue of escape. It was safe to say the odds were not in his favour.

And then the music stopped. So did the zombies.

Somehow, Elliott had done it. He had reached the laptop.

A few seconds passed before Miles remembered to breathe.

He was still surrounded by scores of zombies, but their aggression and menace had vanished in an instant. They were like battery-operated toys that had just had the switches on their backs flicked off. They were now in power down mode.

But he wasn't in the clear yet. He still had to find a way to get out of the car. The zombies were in their comedown state, but they weren't going to stay that way forever. It was only a temporary reprieve. He didn't have much time.

He moved very slowly and deliberately, careful not to awaken them from their dazed stupor with any sudden movements.

And then a gunshot tore through the silence, and a zombie's head exploded like a piece of rotten fruit.

## Chapter 26

A barrage of deafening gunfire rang out, and Miles dived for cover on the floor of the car. Dozens of zombies were turned into fertilizer, with blood and viscera drenching the outside of the Range Rover. Bullets tore through the car and whizzed past Miles' head. A shower of shattered glass and rancid gore rained down upon him.

The shooting continued unabated for at least five minutes, and didn't cease until every single walking corpse had been disposed of.

This was followed by an eerie silence.

After enduring hours of repetitive SlamCore, then a prolonged burst of intense ear-splitting gunfire, the only noise Miles could hear now was the ringing in his ears.

He slowly pushed himself up and peeked out the window. There were two men in the distance, both toting automatic weapons.

One was Keenan, a tall guy with a shaved head and goatee.

The other was Grainger, short and stout with long hair and a full beard.

About six months ago Derek Keenan, a forty-one-year-old unemployed construction worker, and Richard Grainger, a thirty-eight-year-old unemployed bus driver, decided they'd had enough of this zombie scum taking over their country. Every day it was getting worse. Zombies now had more rights than humans, billions were being wasted on their welfare, and law-abiding taxpayers were left to foot the bill. The fact that Keenan and Grainger were not exactly law-abiders, nor did they pay any tax, was inconsequential.

The final straw came when they read about zombies running wild in a small Danish town and massacring thousands of innocent people, many of them children, after a bunch of liberal do-gooders implemented a policy whereby zombies were allowed to live side-by-side with humans. That was the moment they knew they could never truly be safe around these savages. The way things were going, with the spineless government kowtowing to bleeding-heart minority groups and allowing the zombie situation to spiral completely out of control, it was only a matter of time before something like that happened here.

Not on our watch, they declared.

Their solution to this problem would come as no surprise to anyone who knew these committed patriots. Grainger had a lifelong infatuation with firearms, and Keenan's history of violence was about as long as his heavily-tattooed arm. Both had substantial criminal records dating back to their early teens.

Acting mostly on tip-offs, they traversed the countryside administering their own form of vigilante justice. While they may have been terrible workers in their previous occupations, they excelled in dispensing with hordes of the undead. They took no shortage of pride in their work, and even derived a sick kind of sadistic pleasure from it. They often took their time when dismembering a zombie – blowing off a limb or two, then watching it hobble around on one leg rather than putting it out of its misery. When they were done, they would help themselves to any cash or possessions from the zombies' houses, which they saw as payment for the service they provided to the community.

They often spoke of their plans to form their own militia, with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the government should the need arise.

Miles quietly opened the back door and slipped out. He kept as low to the ground as he could, hiding from view from behind the Range Rover.

He heard the clop-clop-clop of Keenan's cowboy boots growing louder and louder, then the sudden roar of gunfire as he snuffed out one of the few remaining zombies with his Glock pistol.

He had to think fast. Should he come out waving a white flag? He wasn't sure that was such a good idea. He was covered head-to-toe in zombie blood and innards, and although he hadn't been bitten – at least, he didn't think he had – they could easily mistake him for one of the undead. These guys seemed to have a shoot-first-ask-questions-later policy. Even if he was able to convince them both that he was in perfect health, it was unlikely that they'd inspect him for skin abrasions before giving him the all-clear and sending him on his way. Miles had just witnessed them massacre an untold number of zombies, a crime that could see them jailed for decades. For all he knew, they might snuff him out just to tie up loose ends.

He stayed hidden behind the Range Rover and watched Keenan walk over towards Campbell, who was sprawled out on the road a short distance away. Campbell was still human, but he wouldn't stay that way for long. Miles estimated that he'd be a zombie in less than fifteen minutes.

Campbell saw Keenan coming his way. With great effort, he pushed himself up into a crouching position.

Keenan raised his Glock and aimed it at Campbell's head.

"Whoa, whoa, easy man, easy." Campbell raised both hands in a surrendering gesture. "Don't shoot, I'm not a zom—"

Campbell was silenced with a bullet to the head from point-blank range.

His skull was blown apart like a smashed egg. Keenan wiped him out like he was stepping on a bug.

Miles flinched in horror at Keenan's sheer callousness and complete absence of emotion, watching this all unfold from just a few metres away. Campbell was killed without even the slightest hesitation. For these guys, the distinction between "former human" and "current human" appeared to be mere semantics. He figured that he'd probably suffer a similar fate if they discovered him there.

So Miles did the only thing he could think of: he laid down on the road, in amongst all the zombie corpses and body parts, and played dead. He positioned himself in such a way that the top half of his body was underneath the Range Rover, with only his legs sticking out.

Keenan's footsteps slowly grew louder as he circled the area.

Miles used all his focus and concentration on remaining absolutely still. He tried to control the motion of his chest by taking small shallow breaths. He knew that any movement he made, however slight, would probably be his last.

He saw Keenan's boots in front of him as he stepped around the two crashed vehicles. His heart thumped like a Newton's cradle, pounding so hard and so fast that he feared Keenan might feel the vibrations travelling through the ground.

Then he heard a noise, and it wasn't Keenan. Something else. Something crawling nearby. Then a faint rasp. It came from his left.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw an undead corpse that still had a bit of life left in it. It was riddled with bullet holes, missing a left arm, and its head was twisted around at a forty-five degree angle. But it was still hanging in there.

It was Zombie Dwayne Marks.

Miles' eyes widened as Zombie Dwayne slithered around on the ground a few metres away, using his one remaining tattoo-filled arm to drag himself closer.

He did what he could to repel Zombie Dwayne, but considering the position he was in he couldn't do much more than offer a pleading facial gesture.

Zombie Dwayne kept on coming, teeth bared, pulling himself closer and closer.

Miles faced an unenviable choice; quick death by gunshot, or slow death by zombie. He squeezed his eyes closed and prayed for divine intervention.

Then a shot erupted, and Zombie Dwayne's head detached from his body.

Miles tried to control his body's involuntary shaking, but he wasn't very effective. He was certain he had given himself away. Keenan was standing right beside him, and if he was watching there was no

way he could fail to notice his quivering body.

But, by some miracle, he moved on.

Keenan stepped around Miles, and his footsteps slowly faded into the distance.

Miles remained in that same position, face down, hugging the road, for another ten minutes, until he was certain Keenan had left and returned to his truck.

He waited for the right moment, then jumped up and sprinted over to the set-up point outside the church. There he found Elliott, hunched over in a corner of the car park, sheltered behind the minibus.

“Elliott,” Miles said. “Get up. We have to get out of here.”

Miles helped him to his feet. Elliott clutched at his right shoulder, his face now devoid of colour. His shirt had a dark patch where the blood had seeped through.

There was a moment of silence between them, as Miles realised what this meant.

“This way,” Miles said quietly, and they hurried towards the nearest house.

Keenan sauntered back to his truck, invigorated by the wild target practice he and his sidekick had just enjoyed. He tossed his Glock into the glove compartment, then moved around to the back of the vehicle.

The cargo tray was loaded with an impressive cache of weapons, from AK-47s to M16 assault rifles, through to samurai swords and a homemade flamethrower. The two bumper stickers on the back articulated their shared worldviews. One asked, “What Would Jesus Do?”, next to an illustration of our lord and saviour wearing a wife beater and holding an Uzi. The other said, “Vote Marlowe: The Undead Don’t Run This Country, The People Run This Country”.

“This could be my favourite place yet,” Keenan said to his partner in crime. “Took about a hundred of ‘em out, and I reckon there’s still hundreds more where them ones came from.”

Grainger threw on a yellow raincoat and pulled a pair of plastic goggles down over his face. “I’m countin’ on it,” he said. He reached into the back of the truck and took out his next implement of torture. It was a chainsaw with a massive fifty-nine inch guide bar.

He yanked at the cord, and the chainsaw roared to life. “Ya’ comin’?” he said, a manic grin spread across his face.

Keenan was distracted by something ahead in the distance. He’d spotted two bodies sneaking away from the church car park and into one of the nearby houses. At first he thought it might have been a couple more zombies he’d somehow missed. But they moved too fast for that.

“You go ahead,” he replied, retrieving the 12 gauge and a handful of shells from the truck. “Looks like we got us some company. I might hafta go pay them a little visit first.”

It didn’t take long for Miles to realise that he hadn’t chosen the ideal location for Elliott and himself to hide out in. He had selected this dilapidated corner house because he knew it was unlocked – the front door was wide open. It wasn’t until they were inside the house that they discovered it *had* no front door. Or it did, but it wasn’t attached. It was leaning up against a wall on the opposite side of the room. The owners were apparently in the midst of some serious renovating before their untimely demise, with building equipment and power tools scattered throughout the place. The interior was completely gutted, walls had been knocked out, and all the doors and windows were missing.

Miles looked outside and could see Keenan casually strolling their way with a 12 gauge shotgun slung over his shoulder. He knew then that they had been spotted.

He began desperately searching for a way to secure the premises.

“Miles, don’t worry about it,” Elliott said as he slumped up against the wall. “I won’t be around for much longer.”

Miles ignored him. He picked the door up and carried it over to the front entrance.

“Did you hear what I said? Go save yourself. I might as well let him put me out of my misery.”

Miles put the door down and turned to face Elliott.

“Elliott, you can try and do the right and honourable thing all you want,” he said, calmly but firmly. “But there’s no way I’m going to let some trigger-happy psycho blow your head off.”

“Miles, listen—”

“The people that killed my parents were people just like this. I’m not going to let the same thing happen to you.”

As much as Elliott was ready to concede defeat, he could see it from Miles’ point of view. For him, this was personal. And he was right. He knew the end was drawing nearer with every passing minute, but he wasn’t about to just sit there and let it be at the hands of some inbred vigilante hick.

“Go out the back door,” Miles ordered. “Go through that fence and wait for me on the road that runs along the back of the property.”

Elliott struggled to his feet and brushed the sawdust off his clothes. “What are you going to do?”

“I’ll find us a car and meet you there.”

“No, I mean what are you going to do about our friend out there.”

“Oh, him. Don’t worry about him. I’ll think of something.”

“Come on, Miles. You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“You risked your life out there to save mine. I’m just doing what I can to return the favour.”

“I didn’t risk my life,” Elliott said sadly. “I was dead long before that.”

And then Elliott told Miles what had happened to him three nights ago; about how he’d been attacked by the two men and injected with the zombie blood, and that he’s basically been a ticking time bomb ever since.

“I could have turned at any time,” he said. “I’m surprised I’ve managed to last as long as I have.”

Miles could barely believe what he was hearing. “Why didn’t you say anything?” he said.

“I don’t know,” Elliott shrugged. “I just wanted to make it up to Steve and Adam. I didn’t want anyone worrying about me.”

Miles tried to respond, but failed to come up with anything that could even remotely articulate the avalanche of emotions he was experiencing at that moment. Hearing Elliott reveal this to him, on top of everything else he’d endured today – it was almost too much.

Elliott offered a weak smile, then turned and limped out towards the back door. “So I’ll see you in about ten minutes, then?” he said.

The back door closed, and Miles was alone in the house.

The only sound he could hear was a droning chainsaw, a few blocks away.

Through the front window he saw the Sasquatch-sized Keenan crossing the road with the 12 gauge at his side. He had to find a way to stop him. If he let him through he would kill Elliott for sure, and quite possibly him as well.

He scanned the room, looking for something to defend himself with.

Miles assumed a house full of power tools and building equipment would have an abundance of potential weapons, but now they all seemed about as useful as a paper umbrella. How would a power drill stop an angry 120 kilogram hillbilly? Or a nail gun, or a belt sander? No, he needed something else. Something more substantial.

Something like that sledgehammer, the one that had been used to demolish the wall between the kitchen and dining area, and was now propped up against the fireplace.

It took some effort to lift the sledgehammer and carry it across to the front door. Miles stood to the side and waited, gripping the handle tight.

Keenan’s heavy footsteps reverberated on the creaky wooden steps.

## Chapter 27

Grainger sliced and diced his way through the main street of Graves End, leaving a bloody trail of body parts and zombie entrails in his wake. The chainsaw was massive, and almost as big as he was. It was completely excessive and impractical, something that would ordinarily be used to fell huge hundred-year-old trees. You didn't need a degree in psychoanalysis to see that the portly five-foot three-inch Richard Grainger was overcompensating for his shortcomings.

His raincoat was dripping in gore, and he had to stop periodically to wipe the blood and viscera from his goggles.

Grainger couldn't deny the sheer thrill he derived from this unrestrained brutality. He never liked to just kill the zombie straight away. He wanted to watch it suffer. Cutting the head off was fun, but starting with an arm or a hand, watching it flail around for a while, then slicing it in half from the groin up was a much more gratifying experience. Grainger's unstable childhood, violent adolescence and repressed bisexuality all manifested itself in the form of this sadistic rampage.

He stopped for a breather. He looked back to where he'd been and admired the results of his handiwork. He had eviscerated an army of zombies, and there were still hundreds, maybe even thousands more to go. He felt like a kid on Christmas morning.

He looked to his left and found that he was standing outside the town church. Inside, he saw movement. A silhouette.

A smirk appeared on Grainger's crumpled face. The thought of carving up a zombie in a place of worship held an undeniable thrill. It actually seemed quite appropriate.

After all, he was doing God's work.

Keenan stumbled around the room like a drunken sailor caught in a violent storm. If this was a cartoon he'd have animated birds circling his head right about now.

Seconds earlier, Miles was waiting by the side of the door for Keenan to enter. As soon as Keenan set foot inside, he swung the sledgehammer with all his might. Keenan didn't see it coming until the last possible moment, when he jerked his head to one side. The sledgehammer still made contact with the back of his head, but it was more of a glancing blow than a direct hit.

Keenan staggered around with his equilibrium thrown off-balance. He dropped the shotgun and clutched at his head.

Miles moved in for another swing, this time aiming for his leg. He knew that another blow to the head might kill him, but a busted kneecap would allow himself and Elliott ample time to escape.

But Keenan anticipated this, and this time he got in first. He lunged at Miles during the backswing and twisted the sledgehammer out of his hands. It fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

Miles was now seriously terrified. He had hoped that the hit to the head would have knocked Keenan out, or at least slowed him down. But it did the opposite – it woke him up. He could almost see the smoke pouring from his ears.

If he wasn't sure what Keenan's intentions were before, all doubt had now been removed.

Keenan grabbed Miles by the shirt. He lifted him up off the ground and slammed his forehead into his face. The sharp stabbing pain this caused was like nothing he'd ever felt. His eyes filled with water, and a river of blood gushed from his nose. His knees went weak, and he fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. It occurred to Miles that he'd never really been punched in the face before. He decided this was something he would have been happy to have gone his whole life without experiencing.

He tried standing, but his legs refused to take orders from his brain. The floor rose up on one side of the room, until he realised it was actually him falling back down. His face stung and his vision blurred, and he felt the urge to vomit. He forced down the bile pushing at the back of his throat.

He crawled across the floor, desperately searching for a way out.

The next thing he heard was the ominous sound of shells being loaded into a shotgun.

He saw a work bench up ahead and edged towards it on his hands and knees, somehow convinced that this wooden table might offer him protection from a psychotic hillbilly. He made it halfway under when he felt Keenan's meaty hand wrap around his ankle and drag him back out.

Keenan held onto Miles' foot with one hand and aimed the shotgun at his head with the other. This wasn't easy; concussion was setting in, and Miles refused to keep still. Keenan was seeing two different versions of Miles, and he didn't know which one he should be aiming at. It was a constant struggle just to remain conscious.

Keenan tried steadying himself. He rested one hand on a sawhorse, then pressed the barrel of the gun against Miles' forehead.

Despite the dire situation he found himself in, Miles could appreciate the irony of having survived multiple zombie encounters today only to be killed by a much more violent and dangerous species.

"Ready to die?" Keenan growled.

Miles made one final, desperate lunge. He reached back and grabbed hold of the power tool lying next to the work bench. It was a nail gun. He pressed it up against the underside of the sawhorse.

"Not just yet," Miles replied.

Miles squeezed the trigger. A six-inch nail shot through the wooden saw horse and pierced Keenan's hand.

Keenan howled like a wounded animal caught in a trap. He fired the shotgun, more of a reflex action than anything else, blowing a hole in the wall and creating a shower of plaster dust.

Miles leapt to his feet and drove three more nails into the top of Keenan's hand.

The shotgun fell away. Keenan clutched at his hand, desperately trying to prise it free.

Miles kicked the weapon into the middle of the room, where it was well out of Keenan's reach. He ignored the barrage of violent abuse and threats that Keenan hurled in his direction and made a dash for the front door.

He was free.

He took a few wobbly steps outside, holding on to the railing to stop from tumbling down the front steps. He staggered out onto the street, and then froze.

It was at that moment that Miles was confronted with the enormity of the destruction that Keenan and Grainger had wreaked upon the town. It was nothing short of a genocide. The town was littered with carved up bodies, the streets literally running red with blood. It was a scene of absolute devastation. He'd witnessed a lot over the last three years and thought maybe he'd become desensitised to it all. But this was like nothing else he'd ever seen. He hadn't encountered anything this horrific since ...

He then recalled the last time he'd come upon an atrocity like this. It was almost three years ago. It was the day he came home to discover his parents and neighbours beaten to death and burnt to a crisp in his backyard. He remembered the overwhelming feelings of anger and disgust at whoever had done this, along with the impotent rage at being utterly powerless to do anything about it. He would probably never find out who was responsible. He would never truly have closure.

He looked at all the corpses, or what remained of them, and was struck by a minor epiphany. They may have been zombies, but they were all people once. They had lives. They had families. And then, through no fault of their own, they were human no longer. He'd always known this, of course, but he had to push those thoughts out of his mind so he could get on with doing his job. He wasn't the only one; everyone had been conditioned to think of the undead as monsters and killers – it was easier and more convenient that way – but they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He could have left Keenan where he was – but then what? He would free himself sooner or later, his hand would heal, and he'd carry on with his rampage.

Miles decided he couldn't live with himself if he let that happen. The families of these unfortunate zombies deserved better than that. Even if he would never get closure with regards to his own family, it

was the least he could do for them.

Keenan continued to yank violently at his bloodied hand. But no matter how hard he pulled, it barely moved a millimetre. That saw horse was attached to him like an extra appendage.

Miles calmly strolled back into the house. He picked up Keenan's shotgun from the centre of the room. Keenan's eyes darkened.

"Go on," he slurred. "Do it. Shoot me. Let's see if you've got the guts."

Miles ignored Keenan and placed the shotgun up against the wall on the opposite side of the room. He then found a small portable radio that the builders had left behind.

Keenan tried shouting further abuse at him, but his rapidly deteriorating condition meant that an unintelligible string of garbled vowels was all that spewed out.

Miles scanned the dial on the radio until he found what he was looking for: Fusion FM, the undead's favourite radio station. The song currently playing was the epic "Xenotransplantation" by Chemikal Ali.

He cranked the volume to eleven. The abrasive music filled the house and spilled out onto the streets.

"I just thought I'd give you something to listen to while you wait," he smiled at Keenan, before making a quick getaway.

## Chapter 28

Adam watched in horror as the chainsaw chewed through the church door like it was balsa wood. He searched for an escape, but he could see no way out. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He could quite easily have slipped out the back door. But that would have meant leaving Steve behind.

Steve had already departed this world about twenty minutes earlier, with Zombie Steve taking his place. The enormity of what had happened had yet to sink in. It was almost too much for Adam to comprehend. He had already lost the most important person in the world to him, and now he was about to see him die all over again.

Grainger kicked his way inside, stepping over the pile of sawdust and splintered wood that was once the church doors and pews. He revved his chainsaw, salivating in anticipation of what was to come.

He was slightly disappointed with what he found inside – only one zombie – but it would do. At least the zombie was bound to a chair, so that would make it more enjoyable. He could get creative with his eviscerating, and the zombie would just have to sit there and take it.

Adam stood defiantly between Grainger and Zombie Steve.

“Please,” he said, his trembling voice barely able to get the words out. “Just leave us alone.”

Grainger walked calmly down the aisle. He'd encountered situations similar to this before, where some misguided hero tried to stand in his way and prevent him from doing his job.

“You have two choices here,” Grainger said. “You can step aside and let me do what I came here to do. Or I can cut you up first. Your move.”

Grainger took another step closer, but Adam held his ground. This surprised Grainger. Relatives of the undead occasionally put up some token form of resistance, but they usually got out of the way the second a running chainsaw was in their face.

“I'm not bluffing here,” Grainger warned. “One way or another, that thing is getting sawn in half before I leave. Now do you wanna move outta my way, or do you wanna be first?”

Adam's whole body shook with fear, and he fought back tears. But his feet remained firmly planted to the spot. He wasn't going anywhere. He'd already been to hell and back today, and there was nothing this guy could do that could hurt him any more than what he'd suffered through.

“Have it your way,” Grainger said with a shrug. He revved the chainsaw and took a step forward. “Just don't say you weren't warned.”

Grainger came at Adam with his chainsaw screaming.

Adam squeezed his eyes closed. He'd made his decision. He only hoped that it would all be over quick.

The chainsaw came within inches of Adam's nose.

And then Grainger stopped involuntarily.

There was something holding him back. It wasn't his conscience – that had never been an issue. It was something else. Grainger *physically* couldn't move any further. He tried taking another step, but his legs wouldn't budge.

He looked down and saw two thin cables wrapped around his ankles, binding his legs together.

That would be one of the last things he would ever see. The next thing he knew, his feet were violently yanked out from underneath him, and he landed face down on the floor.

Right on top of his running chainsaw.

Grainger fell on the chainsaw diagonally. The rotating blade cut deep into his arms and chest. Arteries were severed. Rib bones were sliced in half. Internal organs were exposed. Blood gushed out of him like a burst water main.

The Japanese samurai code states that the more blood one spilled in death, the higher nirvana achieved in the afterlife. If this was true, Grainger had purchased a first-class ticket to Shangri-la.

Adam opened his eyes upon hearing Grainger's horrific howls of pain and anguish. He covered his mouth with his hand, unable to believe just what he was witnessing.

He also couldn't believe who it was that had come to his rescue.

Standing at the entrance of the church, brandishing his trusty cable-gun, was Felix.

Felix was battered and bruised, and his clothes were torn to shreds, but he appeared very much alive.

"Felix!" Adam thought for a moment that he might have been hallucinating. "Are you ... are you okay? You haven't been bitten, have you?"

Felix pushed a tattered sleeve up to show the fibre-mesh body armour he wore underneath his clothes. "Now do understand why everyone should wear this?" he said.

The euphoria of the moment quickly dissipated when they realised they would have to deal with more pressing matters; namely, what to do with Grainger. They could have left him there, bleeding to death with his intestines spilling out. That was probably more than he deserved. But it still seemed like a cold-blooded thing to do to another human being. They couldn't call for help either, since he wouldn't survive the time it took for an ambulance to arrive.

Felix and Adam stood over Grainger as his blood filled the church floor.

"What would Steve do in a situation like this?" Felix asked.

Felix and Adam then looked at each other and smiled. They'd both had the same thought at the same time, and it was undoubtedly a fitting end for Richard Grainger.

Keenan had somehow managed to drag the heavy saw horse more than halfway across the room with it still nailed to his hand. It was nothing short of a herculean effort. Every move sent sharp tremors of pain shooting up his arm, and his hand would surely be torn to shreds if he could ever figure out a way to free himself. But at that precise moment he had more pressing matters to deal with. Like reaching that elusive shotgun.

He could see the scores of zombies closing in from outside. He didn't know what it was, but something was drawing them towards the house. He and Grainger had massacred hundreds in the past couple of hours, and yet more and more still kept on coming.

He winced again as he pulled the saw horse another few inches along. This brought him agonisingly close to the shotgun. He stretched out for it, hoping to grasp it with the tips of his fingers, but it remained tantalisingly out of his reach.

The first zombie stumbled through the front door. He was massive, an orca, and he was missing half an ear and the lower part of his jaw. His eyes lit up when he spotted Keenan.

Keenan made one final desperate lunge for the shotgun. The sawhorse tipped over and fell to the floor with his hand still attached. The pain this caused was excruciating, but he didn't care. He had his weapon.

He aimed and fired at the zombie. He was hit in the face, and the remainder of his head was blown away.

Two more came through the door. Keenan fired and hit them both in the chest.

Keenan fished some more shotgun shells from his pocket and reloaded, which wasn't easy to do with only one hand free.

He took out the next three zombies in quick succession, but he soon came to realise just how much trouble he was in. Even though Keenan would struggle to complete a fourth-grade math test, he could still deduce that the number of zombies converging on the house far exceeded the number of shells in his possession. Sooner or later he would have to find another way out.

So he went with what he thought was his only remaining option. He ripped off a strip of his shirt and tied it tight around his wrist. He found a small piece of wood on the floor and put it between his teeth.

He pointed the shotgun at his left hand.

The radio in the corner of the room was now blasting KoreKayeShyn's "Cycle of Abuse" at full volume. If only Keenan had known it was this that was attracting the zombies to the house. He could have blown the radio to pieces and made an easy escape.

But he remained blissfully unaware, so he closed his eyes and bit down hard on the wood. He knew his hand would be turned into pet food, but as far as he could tell this was his only way out.

He squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

He tried again and again. Still nothing.

The shotgun had jammed.

Panic quickly set in. Keenan pulled at the trigger over and over, but this only resulted in a series of clicks.

The zombies closed in on him.

Keenan wasn't about to go down without a fight. He grabbed hold of the shotgun by the barrel and swung it wildly. He managed to fight the first few off, but there were simply too many. Dozens of zombies were now inside, and his efforts did nothing to repel their bloodlust. He was only delaying the inevitable.

It wasn't long before he was set upon by an ugly beast with his torso sliced open and his entrails dragging along the floor. There was a moment of brief recognition when Keenan saw who was about about to devour him.

His eyes widened. "Grainger?"

The last thing Derek Keenan would ever see was his partner in crime sinking his rotting teeth into his face.

It was dark by the time Miles and Elliott made it back. They pulled up outside Elliott's parents' house in the blue station wagon Miles had borrowed from a driveway in Graves End. This was where Elliott wanted to see out his final moments as a human. He was barely alive, much to his surprise. He should have turned by now, but he was still holding on. But with his pallid complexion and rapidly deteriorating motor skills, he knew his post-human transformation wouldn't be too far away.

Miles opened the passenger side door and helped Elliott out. Elliott's hands were bound with cable ties – something Elliott insisted on, in case he turned during the journey home. He offered Miles a quiet, "Thanks," then disappeared inside the house.

Miles returned to the car and drove for a few blocks.

He pulled over to the side of the road and switched the ignition off. He was feeling ... well, he didn't really know what he felt. Anger. Sorrow. Gratitude. Guilt. Or maybe none of these, because he never really felt anything anymore. He had become an emotional black hole that experienced neither highs nor lows. These days it was mostly just numbness. He couldn't remember the last time he cried. He didn't cry when his parents died, just like he didn't cry when he said goodbye to his best friend for the final time. He'd found it much easier to suppress any feelings he had, with the aid of copious amounts of alcohol, than to properly deal with them.

He tried to figure out where the closest liquor store was from here, until he remembered that he had no money on him.

He pushed the car seat back as far as it would go and closed his eyes.

A milk truck roared past, rattling the car. Miles opened his eyes and saw daylight.

His watch told him it was 7:15 a.m. He'd been asleep for over ten hours. It was the longest he had ever slept in his life, and it was on the side of the road in the front seat of a stolen station wagon.

He abandoned the car with the keys still in the ignition and walked the rest of the way home.

"Clive!"

He was trudging slowly up the driveway when he heard Mrs. Jensen's voice calling out to him. He turned and saw her in the garden, watering her daffodils.

"What was all that hoo-ha over at your place yesterday, Clive?" she said.

It took Miles a moment to catch on, and realise that she was referring to the previous morning's police raid. So much had happened in the intervening twenty-four hours that it felt as if a month had passed since then.

"Oh, that was nothing Mrs. Jensen," he replied sleepily.

"What were the police doing there?"

"It was just a misunderstanding. It's all sorted out now."

"You know who I think they were after, Clive? I bet they were looking for that Miles boy I keep hearing about."

Miles nodded. "You might be right."

"That lad sounds like trouble, Clive. You'd do well to keep away from people like that."

Miles wearily climbed the steps to his front door. It took him three attempts to get his key into the lock.

The moment the door opened he was confronted by his furious younger sister.

"Where have you been?" Shae demanded to know. "I was worried sick! I thought something might have happened to you! I didn't know what was going on! I get home and there's no one here, Clea's moved all her stuff out, you're not answering your phone. And apparently we have a cat now!"

Shae took a breath and was ready to continue her diatribe, but stopped when she saw the condition Miles was in. His face was caked in dried blood and his clothes soaked dark red. He had two black eyes. He looked like he'd aged ten years overnight, and had the faraway look of someone who'd returned from war.

"Oh my God," she said, suddenly concerned for his welfare. "What happened?"

"I think I need to sit down," he said.

Shae helped him to the couch, then rushed off to the kitchen to make him a cup of tea. She had many questions, but knew now was not the time to be asking them.

Miles sat on the couch and stared straight ahead. The TV was blaring, so he put it on mute.

It was only then that his brain began to process exactly what he'd been through.

He had almost lost his life. Multiple times.

A number of his colleagues weren't so lucky. Steve was a zombie. So was Marcus. By now, so was Elliott.

He'd witnessed the brutal slaughter of hundreds of zombies.

He was technically a murderer, even if what he did to Keenan was justified.

And now Clea was gone. She'd disappeared, along with the \$25,000 he'd used to bail her out. If he wanted to keep the house he'd have to use the money he'd made from the Graves End job.

There would be nothing to show from the last three days.

Shae brought him his tea. His hands trembled as he raised the cup to his lips. He took one sip and immediately knew that she had slipped some whiskey in it. It depressed him that she knew he needed this to function. It depressed him even more that she knew where his secret stash was.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" Shae asked after a few minutes of silence.

Miles went to speak, but became distracted by something on TV.

An on-screen graphic declared that Bernard Marlowe now had an unassailable lead in the polls, and was predicted to win next week's election in a landslide. His approval rating had climbed a further six points over the past few days.

Analysts attributed this sharp rise to his performance at the party conference two days earlier, when he was seen to be standing up to the gatecrashers who disrupted the event. Voters perceived him as being bold and statesmanlike in the face of adversity.

The news hit Miles hard. Things just kept getting worse and worse. He felt like the whole world was crashing down around him. After all he'd been through, this felt like the final insult.

For the first time in years, Miles dissolved into tears.



## Chapter 29

In the days and weeks following the police raid, the Tribe of Zeroes struggled to maintain any sense of unity. Group morale plummeted and infighting was rife. It was hard for anyone to know who they could trust anymore. The theory of “Neil’s Law” came into effect, which stated that “as an argument between two Zeroes grows longer and more heated, the probability of one accusing the other of being an informant for the government approaches 1”. The group soon sputtered out and eventually folded.

Fabian was the first to roll over on his former comrades. He was still stung by the video that had been sent to him showing Clea and Neil in a passionate embrace. He didn’t know who filmed it, but he assumed it was someone on Neil’s side trying to rub it in his face. Upon his arrest Fabian immediately ratted out the others and claimed that Clea was the mastermind behind the group’s activities.

Once Fabian cracked, the rest fell like dominoes. The police could barely hide their amusement as these committed freedom fighters caved under the slightest of duress, telling them everything they wanted to know (and more) in exchange for immunity or reduced charges. Those assigned to the case were used to dealing with hardened criminals and genuine terrorists, the kind of people willing to sacrifice their lives for what they believed in. But they barely had to break a sweat with these guys. The hardest part of their job was keeping a straight face throughout it all.

And then a few months after the raid, all charges were quietly dropped. Many believed that the authorities never had any real intention of pursuing them. They knew they were dealing with a bunch of privileged kids in revolutionary dress-up, and making an example out of them would be like using a sledgehammer to crack a walnut. At any rate, the evidence against them was so flimsy – not to mention the questionable methods they’d employed in the gathering of that evidence – that the charges would likely have been thrown out before they even made it to trial.

It seemed that their only real objective in all of this was to scare them straight. Imprisoning the Zeroes might end up radicalising them, and that was the last thing they wanted. Besides, there was never any real possibility that any of them would end up in prison. Rich people never went to prison, unless they stole from other rich people.

Clea moved back in with her parents. She put her activism and other extra-curricular activities to one side, at the insistence of her father, and focused her efforts on completing the remaining credits of her Sociology and Contemporary Gender Studies degree. She currently works alongside two recent philosophy graduates and an art history major, waiting tables part-time at a local restaurant.

Amoeba moved back in with his parents. He reverted to his birth name of Sebastian Devereaux and accepted a position working as a parliamentary assistant for his father, now the Minister for Undead Affairs in the new Marlowe government.

It was widely rumoured that Lawrence Devereaux was the driving force behind the infiltration and raid of the Zeroes, believing they were a cult who had brainwashed his son. He allowed Sebastian to languish in jail for several days following his arrest – long enough for him to be “deprogrammed” – before coming to his rescue by bailing him out and welcoming him back home.

Sebastian maintains a keen interest in performance art, although to date “The Majestic Purge of Elysian Cancer” remains unfinished.

Miles still occasionally receives mail addressed to him.

“Neil”, whose real name was Officer Timothy Hutchinson, received high praise from his superiors for his role in the infiltration and the gathering of intelligence on the Tribe of Zeroes. Thanks to his good work, the police now had detailed files on every one of the major players in the underground activism scene. Even Miles had his own file, which stated that he was a Scientologist who sometimes went by

the alias “Clive”.

Officer Hutchinson has since worked on further undercover operations, and lives with his wife and two young children just one suburb across from Clea and her family.

Shortly after the Tribe of Zeroes disbanded, Fabian attempted to start a splinter group with a few remaining dissidents. They called themselves The Empty Collective, but this venture turned out to be short-lived. Their first act of revolt was to bring down the website of the classic board game Monopoly, which they believed brainwashed children from a young age into embracing ruthless capitalism. They were quickly tracked down and arrested, and Fabian was now forbidden from contacting or going within five hundred metres of Hasbro Inc. or any of its employees, in accordance with the restraining order.

A short time later, Fabian moved back in with his parents. He cut his hair short, removed his piercings, and accepted a job as a trainee manager at a newly-opened Aqua Bar outlet.

Miles ran into him a few months later when he was working behind the register. He failed to recognise him at first, and when he did he made no mention of Fabian’s previous life, or showed any indication that they knew each other. Fabian was grateful for this.

“I bet you’re going to miss having Clea around,” Shae said one day out of the blue when they were having breakfast in front of the TV .

It had been a few weeks since they had last seen Clea, and everything had returned to something that resembled normality. Miles still hadn’t gotten used to how quiet the house was – or how clean it smelled. He actually felt a little guilty; the night before the raid, when he was struggling to get to sleep over all the noise, he prayed that everyone would simply vanish and allow him just one night of peace and quiet. He was a little freaked out when it actually happened.

“What makes you say that?” he said.

“You know, the way you two would always gang up on me.”

Miles gave Shae a sideways look. “When did we ever gang up on you?”

“Um, all the time?” Shae said through a mouthful of cereal. “Whenever I complained about you, like when you nagged me about staying out too late, or that one time I skipped school, she *always* took your side.”

“Yeah, right,” Miles scoffed. “I can guarantee you that *never* happened.”

“She used to do it to me *all the time*. ‘Shae, listen to your brother. Shae, he only wants what’s best for you’. I could never get away with anything with the two of you constantly on my back.”

A few days later, Miles woke up to find an envelope slipped under his front door. It had no name or address on it, and no indication as to who it was from.

Inside he found a bank cheque for \$25,000.

A few days after the Graves End incident, an anonymous tip was made about the zombie plague that had engulfed the town. The PUMAs were sent in, the town was sealed off, and the remaining zombie population evacuated and transported to the nearest processing centre.

An investigation found that what happened at Graves End was simply an infection that got out of control and was allowed to spread unimpeded throughout this isolated community. Outbreaks of this kind were becoming more and more frequent as of late due to members of the public taking more risks and becoming less vigilant overall.

The report made note of the numerous dead bodies found throughout the town, which they believed was the work of vigilantes. The PUMAs discovered a truck loaded with high-powered weapons, but found no sign of the truck’s owners. They could only conclude that the vigilantes responsible for the massacre were now somewhere among the former humans they had shipped off to the processing centre.

The report also highlighted a number of unusual occurrences: many houses were found with their doors wide open; numerous radios were switched on but not tuned into any station; hundreds of cars had keys in their ignition and dead batteries; and a former human discovered with its hand nailed to a saw horse.

Conspiracy theorists would spend untold hours poring over every detail of the report when it was released to the public, coming up with their own fanciful versions of what *really* happened at Graves End.

A few months later, a musicologist submitted an article to a scientific journal suggesting a link between certain types of electronic dance music and unpredictable and aggressive behaviour in former humans. The news sent shockwaves throughout the entertainment industry, and the Marlowe government moved quickly to outlaw these specific forms of music. They introduced the Noise Pollution and Anti-Social Behaviour Act, which made it illegal to play or perform music with “repetitive beats, distorted bass and aggressive or frenetic instrumentation” in public places.

Many DJs and artists have openly defied these new laws in protest, which has led to numerous violent confrontations between police and protesters.

Less than one month after being elected, the Marlowe government fulfilled its promise by rescinding the NEVADA law and implementing CADAVER, which they claimed would restore the rights of ordinary citizens to defend themselves against the undead and their ability to take preemptive action as they saw fit.

Soon afterwards, reports of civilians being attacked by zombies rose dramatically. Many attributed this sharp spike on the number of untrained people attempting to dispense of a zombie themselves rather than contact the professionals. Bernard Marlowe and Lawrence Devereaux both dismissed these claims as nonsense, and continued to place the blame squarely at the feet of the previous government’s soft policies.

Adam dissolved Dead Rite immediately after returning home from Graves End. He paid his staff the money they were owed, plus generous bonuses, and then vanished – along with the \$400,000 that was supposed to be used to pay off the fine and the business’s debts. Disgruntled creditors turned up to the Dead Rite offices to demand their money, but all they found was an empty warehouse.

Adam has not been seen or heard from since.

The remaining Dead Rite staff weren’t particularly upset about losing their jobs. Most of them had planned to quit anyway, and had no desire to go anywhere near a zombie ever again. Only Erin continued in the industry; she quickly found employment with Z-Pro a few weeks later. From all reports she loved her new working environment, relishing the attention she received by being literally the only female in a workplace full of macho alpha males.

Felix achieved success with two of his inventions. His cable-gun contraption was brought to the attention of police and security firms, who believed it could be used as an effective method of crowd control. Thousands of units were produced and distributed, and were now being used as a safe and efficient way of subduing non-violent criminals and rowdy protestors. The Marlowe government helped facilitate this by approving their use and declaring them a preferable alternative to tasers and pepper spray.

His biggest success story, however, was his fibre-mesh bodysuit. Demand for this form of protection soared when Miles suggested they market them to territories with subzero climates, such as Alaska, Russia and Scandinavian regions. UMC workers in these areas were impressed with the bodysuit’s ability to guard against both zombie bites and hypothermia. The suits were rushed into production, and they were now having trouble keeping up with demand.

Miles put about a third of what he made at Graves End into paying off the mortgage, and the rest he used to go into business with Felix. He decided that, ultimately, college wasn't for him. He'd had plenty of time to enroll in the past, but he kept making excuses and putting it off. He didn't feel like he was missing out on anything – the education he'd received over the past three years was something that could never be taught in the classroom.

He now took care of the behind-the-scenes duties within the business, which allowed Felix time to work on developing and fine-tuning his creations. Miles spent his days completing menial tasks such as answering phones, counting stock, filling orders and issuing invoices – and he couldn't be happier.

He also accepted that he may have some unresolved issues regarding the trauma he had endured over the past few years, and how it contributed to his burgeoning alcoholism. He agreed that therapy might not be such a bad idea after all.

One week after Graves End, a man entered the offices of a local real estate agent and expressed interest in one of their rental properties. The agent offered to set up a time for him to inspect the house, but the man said this was not necessary. He submitted his application on the spot and paid the first year's rent up front, in cash. The agent thought this sort of behaviour was a little unusual, but she didn't ask too many questions. The house, an isolated stone cottage situated at the top of a large hill on the outskirts of the city, had been vacant for over two years now, and she was just glad to have finally found a suitable tenant.

The agent found the new occupant to be slightly odd – he seemed in a hurry to move in, and became very cagey when she asked if anyone else would be living with him – but she wasn't all that concerned. The only thing that mattered was that he was a model tenant; a nice, quiet man who never caused any trouble and always paid his rent on time.

The worldwide zombie population currently stands at forty-seven million and growing. A new holding facility is built, on average, every one hundred and seventy days.

There is still no vaccine or cure.

## Chapter 30

Elliott opened his eyes and found that he was suspended in mid air. A bright white light hovered in the distance in front of him. He was enveloped in a complete nothingness. Just an empty white space, with that brilliant bright glow beckoning him ahead. Where am I, he thought. Is this death? Is this what you see when you turn into a zombie? Was he destined to spend the rest of eternity trapped inside this void?

His eyes came into focus a few minutes later, and it became apparent where he was. He wasn't in purgatory, and he wasn't trapped inside the body of an undead being. He was in a well-lit but rather ordinary hospital room. The feeling gradually returned to his limbs once his blood resumed circulation, and he could tell that he was lying in an uncomfortable bed. The bright light he had seen was nothing more than the sun reflecting off a window and shining directly into his eyes.

He tried sitting up, but soon discovered what a massive ordeal this was. Every ounce of his strength was gone. He had lost so much weight that he barely recognised his own body. His eyes struggled to remain open for more than a few seconds, as if his eyelids had heavy weights attached to them.

A passing nurse saw that he was awake. She quickly alerted her superiors, then came into the room. She helped him sit up in the bed and made him as comfortable as she could.

He tried speaking, but found even this to be exhausting. He could only manage a few words before running out of breath.

His brain was working overtime trying to figure out what was going on, rearranging his fragmented memories into some cohesive narrative. The job out at Graves End. Everything going wrong. Getting bitten. Feeling his life slowly slipping away in the car on the drive back with Miles. The crushing realisation that he was about to die.

But he wasn't dead. That much he was sure of. He knew he still had a pulse thanks to the sharp spasms of pain he felt in his head with every beat of his heart. He knew he was breathing by the way his ribs ached with every intake of breath.

Two more nurses entered the room, followed by a tall bearded man in his fifties. Elliott thought he recognised him, but he couldn't remember from where.

The bearded man told Elliott that it was good to see he was finally awake. Elliott tried to reciprocate the greeting, but could only manage a soft groan. The man could see that he would have to do most of the talking. He introduced himself as Dr. Martin Bishop, the director of operations at the International Biodefence Laboratory. Elliott now remembered seeing him on TV once or twice, usually in a heated debate with some pharmaceutical industry mouthpiece regarding what action needed to be taken to find a cure for the infection.

Dr. Bishop began with the good news. They had been running tests on him ever since he was brought in more than two months ago, and it looked like he was going to be okay.

Two months? How was that possible? It only felt like ... well, Elliott didn't know what it felt like. Graves End seemed like it had only just happened, although it also seemed like it had occurred in another lifetime. Elliott's brain was in danger of crashing due to information overload.

Dr. Bishop then provided him with a quick rundown of what had happened since. Elliott was brought into the hospital the day after he returned from Graves End. He had suffered a zombie bite to his right shoulder, a scenario the hospital staff had seen countless times before. There was nothing they could do except wait for him to turn.

But he never did turn.

Hours went by, and then days. He drifted in and out of consciousness, but remained fully human throughout. The doctors were baffled. They had never seen anything like it. Most people turned after an hour or two. Some might last a day, on very rare occasions. But they all turned eventually.

Elliott was a medical marvel. He should be dead, or undead, languishing in a processing centre somewhere. But he wasn't. He was the first known person to have been bitten and survived.

But then came the most staggering news. The doctors had analysed his blood while he was in his coma and found that not only was there no trace of the infection, but he was actually immune.

Elliott had no idea what to make of this. He didn't know how to process any of this information. It felt like one big practical joke, or some warped, delirious dream. A moment ago he thought he was dead. Now they were telling him that the key to a cure was coursing through his veins.

But, as Dr. Bishop went on to explain, they had no idea why. The doctors all had their theories as to how this could have occurred, but they were still yet to locate several vital pieces of the puzzle. They were having to reverse-engineer everything, which was a frustrating and time consuming process. Dr. Bishop was hoping that Elliott could fill in some of the blanks.

He quizzed Elliott of a series of topics regarding the lead-up to being bitten. He asked him about his health, his diet, his lifestyle, his family history, his blood type, and if he had been taking any medication. Elliott answered as best he could, usually with one- or two-word responses, or by shaking or nodding his head.

And then, midway through this interrogation, Elliott fell silent. It was as if all the jumbled pieces of information in his brain suddenly slotted into place.

Everything started to make sense.

He remembered back to the two types of experimental medication he was taking as part of the clinical trials.

And the massive quantity of blood he'd parted with to earn some extra cash.

And those few drops of zombie blood that had been injected into him.

Elliott's mouth fell open. It was preposterous, and yet it somehow made perfect sense.

That tiny jab of zombie blood, the thing that was meant to kill him. Could that, combined with the untested medication he was taking, have been what had saved him? Maybe it worked in the same way a flu shot – a small amount of the infection is used to fight off the disease. He would have laughed out loud if it wouldn't have caused him to be in excruciating pain.

Elliott stared up at the ceiling. How could he possibly explain everything he had been through? The seemingly random sequence of events – from discovering Amy and Trent's affair, to the attack at the processing centre, to the viral video, to the clinical trial, to the assault on the street, to the whole Graves End escapade – that brought him to where he was now?

He looked at Dr. Bishop and took a deep breath.