JG Faherty

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December Soul

By JG Faherty

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"They talk to me."

Marnie's words came to from across the tiny living room of our apartment. I rolled my eyes, glad her back was to me so she couldn't see. I knew who she meant, just like I knew where the voices really came from. Her head.

The world's a different place since they showed up, but Marnie hadn't changed.

"They tell me dreams. Wondrous dreams. They know my name."

She was at the window, a fragile silhouette against the weak yellow of a December afternoon sky. Looking down at them.

The Lazari.

"Marnie, come with us. Be one with us." Her voice little more than a whisper. Speaking to herself, not me. She took a hit off her joint and shadow-smoke coiled around her. A sudden impulse hit me and I grabbed my phone. I needed to capture the moment. I rarely take pictures, I have no eye for detail. This time, though, when I tapped the review button, I saw that I'd framed her perfectly. A portrait of ethereal beauty, perched on the windowsill, one leg bent, the other hanging down, her baggy t-shirt transformed into a silken camisole, the outline of her uncombed hair creating the illusion of perfectly-styled curls. The shape of her hand up in the air, the joint

magically changed into a fancy cigarette poised between two fingers. Even the smoke curling up added a timeless air to the photo.

In that instant, nothing but her splendor existed in the world, and I felt a rush of pure love mixed with a kind of bittersweet joy because deep down I knew it couldn't last. Nothing does. Not love, not peace, not happiness.

And not life, despite what the religious kooks were saying.

Then I noticed the time. I had to leave soon for the hospital. My momentary bliss faded away, leaving just ordinary us and the fucked-up world we existed in.

"It's perfect there," she continued, oblivious to my movements as I went through my usual pre-work routine. Putting on my shoes, finding my wallet, grabbing a handful of oxys from the medicine cabinet. "No anger. No sadness. No hatred."

"That's great," I said, slipping into my coat. Upstairs, the thumping beat of salsa music cut off in mid-song. I hadn't even noticed the noise until it stopped. Manny Ocheo played his stereo all the time. No one ever complained. Our building is always noisy, the thin walls poor barriers to televisions, radios, or the sounds of families shouting or laughing. Most of the time it barely registered on me, I'd gotten so used to it.

Marnie simply didn't care.

I crossed the room and kissed her. She returned it in a distracted way, her attention more on the five people across the street. The ones looking up in our direction. Although they could have been gazing at any window in our building, it did seem like they had focused on us. Or perhaps just Marnie. Thinking about their gray, dead eyes staring at me sent a chill up my back. I knew they couldn't hurt us; all the Lazari did was walk and stare.

They were still damn creepy.

"You could hear them, too, if you tried."

I held back a snarky comment. Hearing is a sensitive subject with me. Unlike the mellow phantom conversations Marnie enjoys, the incessant buzzing and whining in my head is a living hell. Permanent damage, thanks to years of abusing pain killers. Someday it will go completely. I'd already started watching TV with the volume up, like my grandparents used to. In the not too distant future I'd likely need hearing aids.

But it was better than the alternative.

The crippling headaches afflicting me since childhood would have driven me to suicide by now without my medications—prescribed and illegal. Atypical migraines was the official diagnosis. I didn't experience any of the usual precursor symptoms. No auras. No tingling scalp, phantom smells, or loss of peripheral vision. Just sudden, blinding pain accompanied by blurred vision and nausea. Sometimes for an hour or two, more often for several. As a toddler, unable to handle or comprehend the sheer agony of them, I'd scream and cry and vomit. My parents finally took me to a specialist when I began smashing my head against things. Over the next several years they tried every doctor and medicine they could. Even had me scanned for tumors or aneurysms. The meds would work for a while – reducing the number of attacks per year, lessening the symptoms or duration—and then a new cycle would start, as if my body kept building up immunities to the prescriptions.

Finally, in my teens, I discovered the secret: drugs.

I took everything I could get my hands on. Pot, pain killers, downers. Even cough medicine and booze. Anything that depressed the nervous system and kept me semi-comatose. In combination with what the doctors gave me, I spent my high school years in a zombie state.

By then I was hooked. Bad. When the stuff in my parents' cabinets didn't do the trick, I

turned to schoolyard shit. Pot didn't do anything, but lace it with opium and I'd be good for an entire day. Then came Vicodin. And finally heroin.

My first OD happened at age seventeen. I ended up in the hospital twice more by nineteen. I didn't want to die, but I was willing to do anything to end the pain, even flirt with mortality. The next few years I spent in and out of rehab. In the process, I lost everything. My family gave up on me, my grades ensured I'd never go to a good college, and I had no friends. I'd probably have died before twenty-five if I'd stayed on that path.

Then I met Marnie.

I can't say she turned my life around—she had her own addiction issues at the time—but we fell in love and wanting to be with her gave me a reason to get a handle on my problems. I ditched the heroin and controlled my use of the other stuff, took just enough to function without going overboard. I wasn't clean and sober by any means, but I was a functioning member of society again. Like an alcoholic who needs a shot in the morning to get to work and another at lunch, and a couple in the evening. Not drunk, but always with a little something in the system to keep the withdrawal demons at bay.

A perfect solution? Hell, no. But better than ending up in a coffin.

So I suffered the side effects—the tinnitus, the bouts of constipation, the nascent ulcer, never mind what was probably happening in my liver—in order to keep living a semblance of a normal life. A vicious circle: I needed the pain killers to keep the headaches at bay, but they caused the increasingly debilitating noises in my ears, which in turn created depression and stress, which triggered the migraines, which meant taking more pain pills. At this point I couldn't stop if I wanted; I'd tried it once. Managed to make it two days before the hell of detox got too bad.

I hadn't known real silence in years, probably never would again. And it shamed me to admit that Marnie's imaginary conversations sometimes pissed me off. She had the opportunity to experience total quiet whenever she wanted, yet she chose to fill it with ghostly voices, while I would kill to get rid of the never-ending static and bugs even just for a few hours.

When you got right down to it, neither of us had any control over our situations.

"I'll see you in the morning." I added another kiss on the top of her head. Her hair smelled of pot, sweat, and hints of the sandalwood candles she burned constantly in the bedroom. Essence de Marnie. If I'd had more time, I'd have led her back to the bedroom.

Instead, I took two of the oxys, washed them down with the last dregs from a can of soda on the coffee table. Ever since the Lazari appeared, I'd been experiencing an upswing in the frequency of my migraines. Stress is a major trigger, and between the anxiety of losing Marnie's paycheck and living in a world where the dead walked the streets, I had more than my share.

"Always together," she said.

"Always and forever," I repeated. Our private joke. We'd been saying it since we got out of the rehab we'd met in. Two people alone in the world, with only each other to rely on.

Marnie waited until I was almost at the door before speaking again.

"We should go."

I paused. As so often happened with Marnie, her comment could be taken two ways. Leave Brooklyn, escape to somewhere out in the country where the Lazari couldn't find us? Or take our lives and become part of the undead? You could never be sure which way her cryptic thoughts were running.

The sound of gunfire down on the street made me jump. Marnie twitched and dropped her joint. A half-dozen quick, snappy reports. Probably a pistol. Police or private citizens, no

way to tell. But either way, I wouldn't need to worry about the Lazari when I left the building.

Despite the government's constant reminders that the zombies posed no threat, police in most cities had created retermination squads that went around putting down any Lazari that got reported. Only they couldn't keep up; the numbers of the walking dead kept rising. So more and more people had taken the matter into their own hands, despite it being illegal.

Three months after the first reports of the dead coming back to life, things were really starting to fray at the edges.

You saw it everywhere you turned. The news, the conversations in the bodegas and at work. The faces of the people passing you on the sidewalk. Haunted, angry, frightened, confused. Eyes darting around, assessing the other pedestrians. It used to be normal for strangers to ignore you, walk past you. The city's a busy, non-stop place. Now it wasn't uncommon to get a nod as someone approached. Or a nervous wave.

A not-so-subtle request for confirmation of life.

People were afraid, and this time it wasn't of being attacked or bitten. If the most recent rumors were true—and so far, they'd been right each time—mankind was done for. Leaving the city would just delay the inevitable.

Of course, the government was denying it. *"The Lazarus disease is not spread by proximity. They cannot kill you by touching you. Or breathing on you. They cannot kill you with their thoughts."*

I believed that last one. Every test done on captured Lazari showed zero brain function. But the other possibilities? Truth was, no one knew how why the numbers of Lazari were increasing every week. The original theory had been a virus or bacteria. Then something called prions, like Mad Cow disease. Now the CDC kept talking about an unknown fungus, like the one

that infected ants and made them do all sorts of crazy shit.

These days, no one trusted the government anymore. Every step of the way they'd been weeks behind what the general population already seemed to know. You could chalk it up to how slowly the wheels of government move, or cover ups, or just head-in-the-sand denial, but lately rumors were more trusted than official reports. Especially after the vice president died during a visit to China and then returned to life three days later—on Air Force One—at the same time the President was on TV assuring the world the whole Lazari epidemic was being overblown by the media.

"They're gone." Sadness filled Marnie's voice. She let out a long sigh and lit another joint.

I didn't say anything. I'd long ago gotten used to her being more connected to the phantoms in her head than to real people. She believed getting stoned kept her grounded, helped her hear the voices that have whispered to her since she was a child. Like an herbal radio tuner for her brain. More importantly, the pot prevented her panic attacks and night terrors, allowing her to sleep and function in a somewhat normal manner.

Which reminded me. I had to leave. Zombie apocalypse or not, the hospital wasn't about to close. And with Marnie out of work—again—we couldn't afford for me to miss any time.

"They'll be back," I said. And they would. Marnie's voices always returned. Her only friends, other than me. She needed them, got seriously depressed when they weren't whispering to her.

"Yes." Marnie took another hit. "They will. But we should still go."

"We'll talk about it in the morning." Procrastination. One of my many bad habits, according to my mother. She's not wrong. An uptight, cold-hearted, type-A know-it-all who

couldn't stick by her son when shit got bad and his addictions got out of control, but not wrong.

Marnie shrugged and gave a half-hearted wave. She was staring out the window again. At the dead-again Lazari? Or waiting for new ones to take their place? It didn't matter, she was off in Marnie-land again. Fine with me. We'd eventually get around to making a decision about leaving. Not today. Maybe not this week. In our own time. Something Mother wouldn't have allowed. Everything had to be according to her schedule. "Do it now or get the fuck out of the way and let me do it" was her motto. That and "You chose that path, Jeremy. Now you have suffer for your actions."

Hey, Mother. How's the apocalypse treating you? I wondered as turned my back on "Marnie, a study in melancholy." We hadn't spoken in almost three years, way before the Lazari appeared. She'd been convinced I was going to die and go to hell because of my drug use.

"You're committing suicide with those. That's sin."

"Jesus committed suicide," I shot back, turning her religion against her. Anger and the early stages of withdrawal had me eager to lash out. "He knew what would happen when the soldier came for him."

"Don't confuse sacrifice with suicide."

The day I'd gotten out of what would turn out to be my last stint in rehab, she'd told me I wasn't welcome in her house anymore and all my stuff had been placed in storage. I had one month to get it or it would be sold.

A month later I moved in with Marnie and we'd been our own little island ever since. Going on three years. The best ones of my life, despite living paycheck to paycheck and being hooked on a drug that was slowly killing me.

I pictured Mother in church crying and wailing while the pastor sermonized about the

second coming or Armageddon. A devout Christian, something like the dead rising would throw a real monkey wrench into Bethany Franklin's perfectly designed life plans. Maybe even more so than having a son addicted to heroin because of chronic pain. Except she wouldn't be able to pretend the Lazari didn't exist. Not when all of humanity was in an uproar over it.

Once the news leaked that the blank-faced, silent people wandering the streets weren't just high on some new drug or victims of a disease, religious organizations around the world had experienced a major upheaval. Hordes of people abandoned their faiths while just as many others suddenly became fervent believers. Televangelists enjoyed a resurgence and now they dominated the airwaves.

Would she stick around and deal with the crazy or escape the city the same way she used to escape me? Instead of shopping with her friends, just get into the car and head out to some remote vacation spot, ride the shit storm out in seclusion. She had the money to do it. Even after the big market crash that followed the first announcements, there'd be plenty of cash in the bank.

And it wasn't like the world had come to an end. At least not yet. Businesses still ran, people went to work and out to dinner, movies got made, television got watched.

I closed the door behind me, cutting off the sounds of Marnie chatting with her spirit friends. *"No more music. Now it's time—"*

The hallway was oddly silent as I headed for the stairs but then I remembered the gunfire. Everyone had probably stopped what they were doing and run to the windows. When I hit the street, the familiar sounds of the city enveloped me. Horns honking, the growl of a diesel engine as a bus roared by, the background thrum of traffic. The crisp air with its hints of the coming holiday season. The smoky tang of roasting chestnuts, the savory greasy scents of grilled meats and boiled hotdogs emanating from street carts.

The sheer normalcy of it calmed me after the stories in the news. The world wasn't rolling down hill toward Armageddon; this was simply a bump in the road of humanity, like cancer or AIDS or avian flu. Disastrous at first, but eventually science would get it under control.

Bang! Another shot, someplace near the park. The opposite direction I needed to go. I pictured a Lazari toppling over. One thing the movies got right. There's no coming back from a bullet to the head, zombie or not.

I kept an eye out as I walked. Not for Lazari. For shooters. I didn't feel like catching a stray bullet from some drunken asshole. Marnie and I had talked about getting a gun back when the recent dead had started returning. Everyone wanted one for protection. But then things calmed down and we decided we didn't need one. It helped that the Lazari weren't rotting, shambling, brain-eating zombies like on TV. For some reason, the only people who reanimated were those dead two weeks or less, with their brains intact and not embalmed. The first wave had been mostly those who tended to die alone. Drug addicts, random heart attacks, the elderly, bed-ridden patients with terminal illnesses. They'd pass away and three days later be walking down the street again. It took a while for anyone to even realize it, because if no one knew you died, no one knew you came back.

When proof of reanimation became public knowledge, the world went kind of crazy for a few weeks. But once people realized the Lazari didn't eat brains or flesh—in fact, they didn't seem to eat anything—the terror subsided, became more of a general unease that quickly turned into complacent aggravation. The Lazari became a new kind of homeless problem. An annoyance, an eyesore, but not a real threat. In fact, a lot of people preferred them to the homeless, because even though they spent most of their time wandering the streets or standing in front of buildings, they didn't beg or piss on the sidewalks.

It was some televangelist who first called them Lazari, and referred to the condition as the Lazarus effect. The name stuck, more so than the other terms people used. Dead-heads, zombies, walking dead. It had exactly the effect the government wanted, though, which gave rise to the idea that TV preacher had been a White House shill. Once the reanimated had an innocuous name, it made a frightening situation more palatable, calming what could have been a full-scale, nation-wide riot.

Of course, it wasn't a complete return to normality. You couldn't escape fat, sweaty men on TV sermonizing about the end of the world or open a newspaper without seeing letters to the editor describing the terrible things the Lazari were doing. Chasing people into traffic, stalking them in alleys, causing car accidents. Grieving families and money-hungry revivalist preachers blamed every death from natural causes on the Lazari. Stories about government conspiracies, men in black, aliens, and the wrath of the gods filled the airwaves.

Not long after Halloween, the first retermination units popped up. The vigilantes joined in almost immediately. People started talking about the Lazari having super-powers. Mind control. Distance killing.

"What are they, the dead who stare at goats or something?" I'd said during a lunch break conversation about the Lazari one day. No one got the joke. But several of them said they'd bought guns. Around the same time, I began being more careful during my walks to and from the bus stop.

A pack of four Lazari approaching me broke my reverie. Even from a distance I could tell what they were. The slow, steady walk, all of them stepping in perfect rhythm. The emotionless, staring faces. I crossed the street well before they reached me, more concerned about contagion than violence. They stopped and looked in my direction.

As much as I didn't believe they could communicate telepathically, it was hard not to get creeped out when they moved in unison like that. For a moment I thought they might chase me but they continued on their way. I'd never been chased by any, but I'd seen it on the news, heard people talking about it happening to them. If you believed the lunatic fringe, they did it to give people heart attacks or make them run into traffic. Undead recruitment tactics.

It made as much sense as any of the theories coming from the CDC, like vestigial memories, primitive hunting tactics encoded in the genes.

I got to the corner just as my bus arrived. It was only half-full, typical of a Sunday. I kept hearing about all the people supposedly leaving the city, but the sidewalks seemed just as crowded as ever. The ER certainly was when I got there. The usual controlled bedlam. Ambulance crews wheeled patients in. Overworked nurses darted from one exam cube to another. Messages blared constantly from the loudspeaker. In the packed waiting room, a man in a blood-stained coat shouted at Leeza Benson, the receptionist on duty.

"Don't let my boy die! I don't want him to end up like those things!" He gestured at the windows. I didn't have to look. I'd seen them on the way in. More than a dozen Lazari standing in the lawn, staring at the gray walls of Brooklyn General. At some point security would chase them away—or the cops would shoot them—but in the meantime they had to be freaking out a lot of people. By tomorrow every death in the hospital would be blamed on supernatural brain rays.

I hurried to the locker room to change into my scrubs. On the shelf of my locker was an unlabeled prescription bottle containing one hundred twenty pills. My monthly oxy delivery, courtesy of Anatoly in Pharmacy. How he managed it, I couldn't even begin to guess. But he had a great business going with me and a few others. Anything you wanted.

Or in my case, desperately needed.

I tucked a few pills in my pocket, stashed the jar in my coat, and dashed to the ER. With the place being a madhouse, my priority would be cleaning and sterilizing the exam rooms between patients. That, and dumping the perpetually overflowing medical waste bins.

"Code Blue, Pod Five! Code Blue, Pod Five!"

A team of harried-faced nurses raced past me. A high-pitched alarm pinged, way louder than the ever-present *nnnnnnnggg* in my head. Some machine registering another crisis. More running and shouting. I stayed out of the way, putting fresh sheets on a bed in the one empty room. The exam cubes, a series of fifteen curtained-off squares termed pods by the hospital, lined one side of the triage area while desks and monitoring stations occupied the other side, with a wide walkway between. The curtains did nothing to hide the unwelcome sound of someone yelling "Clear!" followed by the *zap-thump* of a defibrillator. An old woman passed me, her face ghost-white and a rosary in her hands. I felt bad for her. Not easy listening to the sounds of medical failure while you waited to learn the outcome of your own loved ones.

A few minutes later I saw the code response team trudge by, the fate of their patient evident in their slow gait and the angry way they tossed their gloves into the bins. You can usually tell how long a person's been working the ER by their reaction to a death. The new ones' faces sag with grief; the lifers' are etched with cold resignation. Rarely did you see confusion, but this time it was apparent in their furrowed brows and backed up by bits of conversation I caught.

"—just don't get it. No internal—"

"—a broken hip? He was stable when—"

Another code alarm went off and they hurried away. I rolled my cart to the pod they'd

come from and came to a halt when I saw the body still on the bed.

Middle-aged, his dark complexion ashen from lack of blood and oxygen. No visible wounds. The crash cart sat nearby. Square welts on his chest showed where they'd used the paddles on him. I leaned out, searching for an orderly.

"Hey, we need a transport—" My next words turned to a groan as sudden pain erupted in my skull. An electric buzz accompanied it, like static from a TV when the cable goes out, but with the volume all the way up. I pressed my hands against my temples. Jesus, not now! The pills I'd taken earlier should have dulled my nerves to the point where nothing could trigger a headache. I turned, groping for the visitor's chair next to the bed.

The dead man was sitting up and staring at me.

The buzzing grew worse, drowning out the sounds of the ER. I tried to call for help but shock paralyzed my vocal cords. Then common sense took hold of me. He wasn't dead. His heart had started up again on its own. Rare, but not impossible. He couldn't be a Lazari. Hell, it hadn't been five minutes yet, let alone three days days.

With rational thought came the ability to speak.

"Hey! Hey, somebody! This guy's alive!" Each word stabbed an ice pick into my already shattered skull, but I had to let someone know.

The man slid off the table and stood, his body leaning hard to the left, favoring one leg. I remembered the nurses saying something about a hip injury. "Hey, buddy, you shouldn't be..."

He stepped forward, his eyes never leaving mine.

His dead eyes.

No mistaking it. The dull, empty gaze of a corpse. I'd seen it too many times not to recognize it.

Another wave of static blasted my skull. Colored spots filled my vision and my legs went weak. I collapsed into the chair, fighting to breathe. With a shaking hand I dug a pill from my pocket and dry-swallowed it. Darkness closed in around me. Distant voices called my name, the rest of their words lost in the deafening static. I tried to answer. Help, I needed help. I could feel my consciousness fading, like the time I'd passed out on the beach from heat exhaustion. A similar lassitude filled me, a sense of giving in to the inevitable, my fear receding to a distant thing. The only difference was the non-stop agonizing whine inside my skull, a ghostly drill boring through flesh and bone.

Then the oxy kicked in and the mental torture stopped. The invisible bands around my chest disappeared and I sucked in a huge lungful of disinfectant-tainted air. My vision cleared, leaving just a few opaque floaters whirling around. My ears still rang, but nowhere near as piercing as before.

Someone screamed and I realized the ringing wasn't just inside my head, it was all around me. Dozens of alarms and buzzers going off at once. The patient with the broken hip was gone. I staggered out of the cube and into chaos. Nurses and doctors ran in all directions. Even the techs at the monitoring stations had abandoned their posts. Men and women in civilian clothes shouted for help or joined the mass exodus.

A stocky nurse with dreadlocks barreled past me, shouldering me out of the way like I weighed nothing. Before I regained my balance, a boy in a bloody t-shirt ran after her.

One of his hands was missing.

Other patients marched behind him, all of them with the slack, empty expressions of death. Some wore exam gowns; others still had on their street clothes, many of them stained with blood.

I turned to run and found myself facing another group of newly risen Lazari, led by the man with the broken hip. With nowhere to go, I did the only thing I could think of.

I leaped over a desk and ducked underneath it.

The alarms and terrified shouting, combined with the static in my brain, prevented me from hearing anything approaching me. Crammed into the tiny space, I covered my head with my arms, closed my eyes, and did something I hadn't done since childhood.

I prayed.

My breath came in rapid gasps and I pressed my mouth against my clenched knees to muffle it. When nothing happened in the first few moments, my terror intensified instead of lessening. It had to be a trick. I pictured them all standing around the desk, waiting for me to foolishly emerge. Time grew impossibly slow, each violent beat of my heart taking minutes instead of seconds.

"Jeremy. Jeremy. Jeremy..."

They were calling my name! The rumors were true, they could speak inside my head. That was how they killed people and I'd be the next to—

"Jeremy!"

Something grabbed my shoulder. I screamed and jerked away, banging my head against a wood panel. My eyes flew open.

Francine Zoumpoulias, my supervisor, peered in at me. Jesus, they'd killed her, too! I tried to kick her away but my feet got tangled.

"Jeremy. It's okay. They're gone. Are you all right?" She held out a hand.

The sound of her voice made me pause. The Lazari don't speak. And the alarms had stopped. I could hear clearly; even the background noise in my head had receded to a normal—

for me—level.

"What... what happened?" I let her help me out of the cubbyhole. The ER was in shambles, papers scattered everywhere, IV poles and other equipment on the floor. Splattered blood stood out bright against the pale walls and floors, as if someone had started to create a three-dimensional Jackson Pollock painting and then gave up. Mamoudou Dallo, one of my shift mates, stood a few feet from us, staring at the disaster that was the ER. His face looked the way I imagined mine did, numb with shock and disbelief.

"They all died. Every patient. And then came back. As..." She shook her head, unable to go on. Her lips pressed together, fear and anger tightening her face into hard angles. I stood up, surprised my legs didn't collapse under me. After all, I'd been wedged into that tiny space for... I looked at the clock over the nearest exit.

Ten minutes?

It had felt like hours. How could—

The *pop-pop-pop!* of automatic gunfire outside made the three of us jump. A few more shots and then it stopped. We looked at each other, unsure of what to do next.

The entrance hissed open and three men in dark SWAT uniforms stormed in, rifles aimed at us. My heart thudded back into overdrive. In that instant, I knew I was going to die, victim of a mistaken identity. Mamoudou cried out and fell to his knees.

I closed my eyes and waited for death.

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"It doesn't make sense," I said to Francine. We were sitting on a bench, waiting for the

bus. “Three days. It’s supposed to take three days for them to rise.”

She ran a hand through her gray hair. Her tone of voice was sardonic, her words far from comforting. “Kid, haven’t you learned anything yet? The government don’t know shit. They’ve been wrong about this since day one. Virus, fungus, whatever it is, it’s changing. Mutating. They can say all they want, I believe my eyes. Those patients weren’t critical. They shouldn’t have died like that. And they damn well shouldn’t have risen.”

Before I could say anything, her bus pulled up and she stood. “See you in a couple of days, Jeremy. Enjoy the time off. I have a feeling things are gonna get worse before they get better.”

She boarded the bus and then I was alone. Mine wouldn’t arrive for another ten minutes. That left me nothing to do but think about what had happened. As if I’d be able to do anything else anyhow.

After confirming our living status, the police had corralled everyone who’d witnessed the events in the ER down to the cafeteria, where we’d given our statements, first to a nervous looking patrol officer and then to a detective who seemed pissed about being assigned to a Lazari detail. Once they finished, the hospital administrator, a gray-haired man carrying at least two hundred pounds of extra weight, told us we had the rest of the day off and the next day as well, because the ER needed to be repaired and decontaminated. That surprised me; there’d been no damage to the structure of the room and it shouldn’t take more than a few hours to disinfect the place. Francine said it was their way of giving us some mental health time, for which I was grateful. Lord knew I’d be having some nightmares about what happened.

I tried calling Marnie again. Still no answer. “Marnie, where the hell are you?” My fourth message, plus a couple of texts. I was beginning to freak.

She's just sleeping, I told myself. Or zoning out by the window. She had a habit of not hearing the phone, or forgetting to bring it with her when she went out. Usually I didn't worry but her recent talk about leaving and the beauty of the other side had me wondering if she might do something stupid. She'd never been what you'd call suicidal, but she was damn stubborn. If she really believed the Lazari existed in some kind of paradise, she might very well decide to see for herself.

I wanted to get home, assure myself she was okay, and then we could figure out our next steps. The incident in the ER had me questioning everything I'd believed about the Lazari and the future of the world.

"Things are gonna get worse before they get better." Francine's words kept coming back to me. Were the rumors true? Did the Lazari really possess some kind of supernatural ability to stop a person's heart through sheer force of will?

Rational, scientific thought said no. But those same experts still hadn't figured out how or why the dead returned to life in the first place. Or maybe they had, and they were keeping it a secret. Would it be such a surprise if the government was covering something up? Hell, for all we knew the whole thing was some kind of black ops experiment gone bad, like the conspiracy theorists kept saying. Maybe they'd been trying to create an ultimate weapon or super soldier, one that couldn't be killed.

My bus arrived in squeal of brakes and a cloud of diesel stink. I boarded, my mind still awhirl with lunatic fringe speculations. I couldn't escape them, especially when I saw clusters of Lazari on almost every block, loitering in front of buildings, staring at doorways or windows. Waiting for people to emerge? Sending telepathic instructions through the airwaves? Ideas that seemed laughably crazy a day ago now caused my stomach to churn with anxiety.

As we pulled up to my stop, I saw a familiar bouquet of color down the street. A woman in a red, white, and blue knit hat and a pink coat.

Marnie!

Relief poured through me and I hurried down the bus steps. She was chatting with a couple in front of a bodega, a grocery bag in her arms. I couldn't see who was with her because their backs were to me, but they could have been anyone. Marnie never had a problem talking to strangers. Anytime, anywhere. Real or imaginary.

Caught up in her conversation, she didn't notice me approaching. Again, not unusual, until I waved and she still didn't acknowledge me.

"Marnie?" I eased by her companions and tapped her shoulder. The musky smell of weed surrounded her like cloying perfume.

"It sounds wonderful," she said, her words obviously not for me. "So wonderful."

I turned to see who had snared her interest so deeply. Marnie's powers of concentration would never be called intense, except when fixed on her own cosmic musings.

Lazari!

I'd never been so close to one, not even in the hospital. Their eyes were a grotesque shade of red on the bottom and gray on top. Their hair hung in limp strands. A faint odor of shit emanated from them, like when you get a little dog crap on your shoe without knowing it and can't figure out where the smell keeps coming from. Tiny wrinkles covered their sagging, gray skin, as if they'd been left in the water too long.

"Yes, this is him," Marnie whispered. That, more than anything about the situation, exceeded my creep factor threshold for the day. I grabbed her and pulled her away.

"Let's go." I looked over my shoulder at the two corpses. "Stay the fuck away from us."

For some reason, it didn't feel stupid to be talking to a pair of corpses.

"Hi, Jeremy." Marnie smiled as if nothing unusual had happened. "How was your day?"

"Not now." I kept a grip on her arm and guided her down the street to our building. She didn't object, keeping pace the entire time, that same dreamy look on her face that she got whenever her thoughts were somewhere else. I didn't want to know where; the idea that she'd actually been speaking with *them* terrified me.

Impossible, I kept telling myself. Even if the Lazari did have some kind of paranormal abilities, telepathy wasn't one of them. They had no brain function. Except for the bizarre claims of a few psychics no one had reported any kind of communication with the newly risen. And Marnie was no psychic, just a stoner with a history of mild psychosis.

We got inside and I dumped the groceries on the table. When I turned around, Marnie had moved to her usual spot on the windowsill, looking down at the neighborhood. Her version of reality TV. A joint smoldered between her fingers.

"Marnie, listen to me. You need to stay away from the Lazari. They're dangerous. Something happened at the hospital today. I think they caused it."

"It can't last forever." I couldn't tell who she was talking to. Me, the voices in her head, the Lazari down on the street. The fucking window for all I knew. She'd drifted away into la-la land. Rational conversation would be useless until she returned. Emotions warred inside me—fear, confusion, anger—and I took my frustrations out on the groceries, slamming jars and cans into cabinets and practically throwing a piece of frozen meat into the sink.

Marnie never even glanced my way. Just kept up her monolog with her invisible friends. I caught bits and pieces of it, words like "paradise" and "peace" and "stubborn." Captured by the setting sun, she glowed as if surrounded by fiery aura. Forced to wait my turn, I clicked on the

television. As I expected, Mercy General was the headline story on every station. Most of them focused on the sensational aspects, the Lazari being put down by the cops, the chaotic aftermath left behind in the ER. But on Channel Six, a long-haired, bearded man in dirty clothes several sizes too large for him sent chills down my back with his comments.

"It's mind control, man," he said. "They did it. The Lazari. There was a bunch of them outside, just starin' at the place. I saw it when I came in. Just starin'. I heard them, too. Right before all the alarms went off. Callin' my name. Freddy, Freddy. Then the place started goin' crazy and I ran outside with everyone else."

The camera cut back to the news anchor, a petite blonde who gave an exaggerated eyebrow lift at the camera. "Thank you for that report, Missy. Deputy Commissioner Ed Holmdel of the CDC could not be reached for comment but his office issued a statement reiterating their assurance that the Lazari do not possess telepathic abilities and cannot bring about human death through mental coercion. In other news..."

The picture went fuzzy and static drowned out the anchor's words. I reached for the remote but the table and my hand were just as blurred. A sharp pain ran up my neck and into my head. I cursed and headed for the bathroom in a drunken stagger. Too much stress; I needed to take something before the migraine hit full force. I located my Maxalt pills through pure instinct and stuck one under my tongue, the rapid dissolving formula instantly filling my mouth with a bitter flavor. The next thirty seconds stretched on forever while I waited until the pill disappeared before I could take another two oxys with water. Even in that short time, my symptoms evolved. My vision returned but the static grew louder. A thousand voices coming through a distant signal on a broken radio, the noise sandpaper grinding my brain raw.

Back into the living room. Moaning like tortured ghost, I fell onto the couch. Pulled a

pillow over my head to block the light and sound. Stupid, I should have gone into the bedroom. The TV attacked my already abraded nerves. I couldn't even lift my head to find the remote. Instead, I pressed the pillow tighter. The noise in my head reached deafening proportions, the entire world talking at once, all the televisions in an electronics store tuned to no signal and the volume at max. I wanted to scream; instead, I retreated into a black tunnel, sinking down, down, down, light and sound receding until my physical world disappeared, leaving me floating in blessed darkness and silence.

And then nothing at all.

###

A sensation of youthful nostalgia filled me as I drifted through that hazy place between sleep and full wakefulness. I was in my bed at my grandmother's house, the windows open to let in the sounds and smells of summer. Insects whirred and chirped, the songs of the warm night lulling me into dreamland. Even the pungent scent of a passing skunk out in the yard didn't upset me. I'd grown used to the smells and sounds of the country from all my vacations upstate. I closed my eyes and prepared to let sleep claim me again. In the morning there'd be pancakes and—

The raucous *whoop-whoop-whoop!* of a car alarm down on the street shattered my comforting illusion. I sprang up and found Marnie sitting on the coffee table, staring at me.

"What the hell?" My heart pounded triple-time and I clenched the sofa cushion with both hands, struggling to focus on the here and now. The sounds of summer morphed into the unending background noise in my ears. The aroma of Marnie's last joint revealed itself as the

source of the skunky odor.

"You disappeared." She reached out and touched my arm, her skin as soft as her voice. "Where do you go?"

I rubbed my eyes. Nothing like waking up to existential questions. "Dreamland," I said, knowing she'd keep asking until I answered.

"You're making things so hard." She sighed and stood up. When she moved, I caught a glimpse of the cable box next to the TV. Almost ten; I'd been out for hours. The sleep and pills had helped, though. My migraine had receded to a dull ache behind my eyes, accompanied by a sort of vague disorientation, like the morning after after a few too many glasses of wine. Had it actually been morning, I'd cure it with a cup of coffee. But not this late. Instead, I wobbled into the kitchen and poured a glass of orange juice.

"I made you something," Marnie said. She'd returned to her window perch. I looked around the kitchen and saw a plate on the tiny stove. Peanut butter and jelly on whole wheat bread. My favorite nighttime snack. A rumbling in my stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I wolfed the sandwich, washing it down with the juice, then joined her at the window.

A group of Lazari gazed up at us. More than a group. A pack. At least twenty of them. I saw more scattered up and down the street, contemplating the buildings.

Where the hell had they come from?

"Everywhere," Marnie whispered. For a moment I almost believed she'd read my thoughts. "We are everywhere and we are one. They say it's beautiful on the other side."

Nope, just another Marnie conversation with her imaginary friends.

The cold seeping through the cheap glass brought new life to the ache in my head. I moved away, glad I could no longer see the Lazari.

"Let's go for a walk." Her hand brushed mine.

"No way. The only place I'm going is bed." I grabbed a blanket off the couch and tossed it around her shoulders. "You coming?"

"Eventually. Soon I'll have no choice. It's hard to wait."

I kissed her cheek. "Goodnight."

"I love you," she said, her gaze still on the window.

"Always," I replied.

"Forever." Her customary response.

Except this time I wondered who her words were meant for.

###

Morning found me in front of the TV again, eating cold cereal and watching the seven o'clock news. I'd slept poorly despite my exhaustion and the drugs. Marnie had come to bed sometime after midnight and we'd made love. After that, I tossed and turned most of the night, plagued by dreams where crowds of faceless, naked people whispered my name and told me everyone was welcome in the new world. When I finally gave up on sleep I couldn't shake a feeling of having lost out on something important. I took two oxys to drive away my malaise and shut the bedroom door so the TV wouldn't wake Marnie.

The news did nothing to help my melancholy. Stories of unexplained mass deaths around the world filled the news. Hospitals, schools, office buildings, concert halls. Houses of worship weren't spared, either. And in every instance, the events were followed by all the victims rising up as Lazari within minutes. Top government officials had moved into their emergency

operations centers while hordes of terrified, angry people rioted in every major city.

I went from channel to channel, trying to find something that wasn't rumor or outright fantasy.

"—from the CDC said the matter is under investigation and a statement will be forthcoming as soon as—"

"—the President has been speaking with Prime Minister—"

"—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. This is the Word of the Lord, for he has—"

"—urging citizens to stay inside and avoid—"

"—the White House press conference is scheduled for two o'clock—"

"—the Vatican has remained unusually silent, refusing to speak to the press while the Pope and his council of advisors remain sequestered in—"

"—Cruise and several thousand of his followers have barricaded themselves in their compound in Texas, where they say they will await the coming of the—"

"—National Guard providing assistance to retermination units in—"

As if on cue, the sound of distant gunfire reached me. Nowhere near our neighborhood. I waited to hear if it drew closer. I'd purposely not looked out the window when I got up. Too many similarities between the walking dead outside and the faceless entities in my dreams.

When the shots didn't repeat, I turned my attention back to the TV.

"—the Biaviians will appear with their mothership, this I, uh, promise. Their prestigious intellects will unleash a magnitude of righteousness, but, uh, there is hope. The symbols I am, uh, selling will protect anyone who wears one by marking them as, uh, chosen—"

"—taken to the NIH, where studies on brain function will—"

"—if communication with the astral plane is possible, as ancient alien theorists believe, then we can only—"

The toilet flushed. A moment later Marnie shuffled into the living room, wearing one of my old t-shirts and rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"'Morning," I said, expecting her to go to the window. Instead, she snuggled in next to me and laid her head on my shoulder.

"Everything's changing. So fast." Her breath tickled the hairs on my neck. I nodded. For once, I knew what she meant. Her fingers caressed my chest and then worked their way down to my thigh. Despite the early hour and my thoughts moving in slow motion, I responded instantly. My hands slid up under her shirt and found her breasts. She slid my shorts down and moved onto my lap. I slid inside her easily and she moaned into my shoulder.

Instead of cooling my ardor, the apocalyptic news playing behind Marnie fueled me. If the world really was coming to an end, this was how I wanted to go. Marnie's body responded, and we built to a crescendo that ended too soon with both of us gripping each other while our bodies locked together.

Afterward, I poured us both more cereal and we ate in front of the TV, purposely keeping to stations that only played movies. We passed the day in that fashion, eating junk food and watching old films we'd seen a million times. We also made love twice more, something we hadn't done in since the late summer, when the Lazari first appeared. Marnie only went to the window once, to smoke a joint while I made grilled cheese for lunch. I heard her mumble something about wanting to make the most of the time we had left.

As the day progressed, the sounds of sirens and gunshots grew more frequent. I was

tempted to turn on the news and see the latest developments but Marnie grabbed the remote and cranked up the volume, a rare thing for her. Usually she complains that having the TV so loud interferes with her other conversations.

The one stain on the whole day was not being able to shake the lingering effects of my migraine. The pressure in my head kept threatening to return, forcing me to take more pills than usual to keep it at bay and leaving me as zoned out as Marnie.

Sometime after dark, Marnie went into the kitchen and fixed us cheese omelets and breakfast sausages. We watched another movie and then went to bed and made love again. I joked about running on empty and I'd be lucky to walk right at work tomorrow.

Marnie spooned in behind me, her breasts pressed softly against my back. "Goodnight," I said, sleep already pulling my eyes closed.

I barely heard her whispered response.

"Marnie?"

Her heaving breathing told me she'd fallen asleep.

I let myself drift off, mentally chiding my poor hearing.

It had sounded like she said "Goodbye."

"Transcendence."

"What?" I glanced at Marnie. She sat on the bed, dressed in baggy pink sweatpants and one of my old sweaters. Morning had dawned gray and cold, with a threat of snow in the air. Her eyes were on the little TV on our dresser; her distant expression gave me no clue if she was watching it or communing with beings on the astral plane.

I returned my attention to getting dressed, a slow process because I kept getting distracted by the news. I'd turned it on out of habit and now I couldn't stop watching. The situation had gone from bad to totally fucked overnight. Retermination units disappearing in droves. Police and national guard, too. Nothing but abandoned vehicles on the streets. Reports of entire city blocks silent and empty.

And Lazari everywhere. On the streets, in lawns, in parking lots. No more twos and threes, or even tens and twenties. They moved in large groups of hundreds. In some areas they appeared to be swarming like bees. Huge masses congregating in one area and then smaller units breaking off and heading in different directions. Someone had coined the term herds and it stuck.

One of the largest herds occupied the Ellipse across the street from the White House. Reports estimated close to a thousand Lazari there. An even larger herd filled Arlington National Cemetery.

As one veteran newscaster said, staring solemnly into the camera, "It is an ominous sign that there have been no communications with either the White House or the Pentagon since midnight."

Closer to home, a state of emergency had been declared for New York and New Jersey, with tolls suspended on all the bridges and highways. A mass exodus was taking place, people leaving the cities in droves. Highways were backed up for miles and mass transit was useless. I didn't need the TV to know that; the honking of thousands of horns reached us even through the closed windows, as if all the angry geese in the world had decided to migrate at once.

We planned on following them that afternoon.

"I wish we could go together," Marnie said. This time her eyes were on me. Sadness filled them, and I bent down and kissed her. Rarely did she show that kind of emotion.

"Me, too," I said. "But I have to go in today. It's payday. I don't get paid if I don't show, and we'll need that money. I'll duck out during my first break and be home by lunch and we'll get the hell out of the city." A small lie. It wasn't just the money; I needed more pills. My headache had returned sometime around five in the morning, booming thunder and lightning in my skull until I'd eased it with a mix of Excedrine and oxy. I'd been hitting the pain killers hard the last few days and at that rate I'd be out way too soon, with no way of knowing when or how I'd get more if we left town. I'd texted Anatoly, told him I needed as much as he could wrangle. I'd pay double if I had to, which he said was likely. My plan was to withdraw as much as I could from the ATM, get my stash, and then sneak out. Hopefully the cash would last us until we got somewhere and could close out the account from a branch.

"—Reverend Latimer Holmes of the National Church of Jesus on High gave a sermon to more than ten thousand people in Atlanta where he told them to be prepared for the rapture that—"

"—the Speaker of the House reiterated that Republicans were not obstructing—"

I clicked the TV off and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth and pop another oxy. I shook a few more out, hid them in the pill pocket of my jeans. I never took the whole stash with me; god forbid I lost it, or got arrested for something and they searched me.

When I came out, Marnie had moved to the couch, her gaze fixed somewhere between wall and ceiling.

"It's almost time," she said.

"Yeah. But I'll be home soon." I kissed her again, and she returned it with a passion that almost had me rethinking my decision to leave.

"I love you," she whispered against my lips. "I want us to be together forever."

"I love you, too. And we will be. Always." I grabbed my coat and hat and headed for the door. As it swung shut behind me, I heard her say it was up to me.

Then there was just the silence of the hall and the buzzing in my head.

###

The moment I left the apartment building I had the sinking sensation I'd made the wrong decision. The cold air ignited my headache, driving icy spikes through my brain. I gritted my teeth and dodged a pack of Lazari standing near the entrance. A squirming ball of eels churned in my stomach. I didn't want to end up like the thousands of people dropping dead around the country. But I had to get my pills and money. Besides, if the Lazari really could kill with their thoughts, I wouldn't be any safe anywhere until we got well away from all of them.

Another cluster surrounded the bus stop kiosk. The knot in my stomach grew larger when I saw four or five police uniforms in the mix. I had a suspicion I knew the fate of all the retermination teams and cops who'd been working the previous night.

I kept walking. No way I was waiting for a bus near all those dead-heads. Two blocks later I realized it didn't matter. The Lazari were everywhere and I hadn't seen a single bus. Most of the businesses I passed were closed as well, except for one Starbucks. I peered inside. All the tables were empty and one barista stood by the counter, his attention on a TV that was currently showing a cartoon.

The further I went, the more it seemed like I'd stepped into some alternate world, one where every human except me had turned into a glassy-eyed reanimated corpse. A couple of cars and delivery trucks passed me, weaving their way around the Lazari in the streets. None of them

slowed or asked if I needed a ride. Except for the occasional siren and the incessant honking of horns in the distance, the usual noises of the city were had disappeared along with the living inhabitants.

When it became obvious I'd have to walk the entire way, I decided to take the shortcut through the Bannerman Street Park which would lead me to Sutton Street and then the hospital. I didn't relish the idea of being in the secluded park but it was better than walking an extra six blocks in the freezing cold.

As I approached the fountain at the center of the park, I caught sight of a small crowd. I slowed, thinking the Lazari had found this place, too. But then I heard an amplified voice.

"...and the Lord cast his wrath down on the masses! For mankind has been judged, and found wanting. Only the righteous shall—"

I skirted around the edge of the impromptu congregation that listened in rapt silence while a man in a black outfit and white collar called on them to follow him to the river, where they would offer their spirits to God in a holy baptism.

The absence of any dead-heads gave me a break from my anxiety. Once the muscles in my back and neck relaxed, my headache dimmed as well.

My respite didn't last long.

I exited the park and walked to the corner of Sutton and Hudson streets, where I came to an abrupt stop, unable to comprehend the scene in front of me. Across the four-lane road stood the largest group of Lazari I'd seen yet. Hundreds of them lined the sidewalk from one end of the block to the other. All of them facing Brooklyn General. From the back you couldn't tell they were dead; it gave the impression of people waiting for some kind of special event, like a rocket launch or fireworks display.

I'd have to get past them to get inside.

From what I could tell, the undead mob went around the block on both sides. Circling the hospital wouldn't be an option. Neither would creating a distraction; this wasn't a zombie movie, where making a loud noise would draw the creatures away.

The wind picked up and the first snowflakes of the impending storm peppered my face. I drew my collar up and pulled my knit hat lower, wishing I'd worn something heavier underneath. I was about to make a wide circle of the hospital, in the hopes of finding a break in the herd, when movement on Hudson Street caught my eye.

A car!

Heading in my direction. As it drew closer I recognized it as a police SUV, white with the blue NYPD on the doors and light bar on top.

It came to a stop at the corner and four cops jumped out, dressed in full riot gear, including vests and gas masks. All of them held automatic rifles and they wasted no time opening fire. Blood and bone exploded and several of the Lazari toppled. The rest of them turned in unison, focusing their attention on the officers. The sharp crack of the guns echoed off the buildings and reignited my headache. A group of Lazari split from the crowd and approached the still-firing cops in steady, unhurried steps.

Their departure left a large gap in the cluster.

I stepped off the curb, a crazy plan forming in my head. The timing would have to be perfect. Run too soon, I risked getting shot. Wait too long and the other Lazari might shift and close ranks.

The rhythmic *crack-ack-ack-ack!* of the guns faltered, became disjointed as the Lazari converged on the police. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought the four men were reloading.

Unfortunately, I was betting on a different outcome.

As it turned out, I was right.

Two of the officers had gone still, guns held at their sides. The other two were shaking their heads and struggling to keep their guns aimed forward. Their movements slowed. Stopped.

The pounding in my head grew worse, the echoes of gunfire still reverberating in my skull. *Run! This is your chance!* my brain shouted at me, but my feet refused to move. One of the cops sank to his knees.

Then all four of them fell over.

Something popped inside my head and my paralysis broke. I raced across the street, terrified they'd make me their next victim. The Lazari near the dead officers turned and headed back to the line. I tried to run faster.

I dodged around a couple that attempted to block my way and then I was past them, sprinting down the sidewalk to the entrance. As I swiped my keycard, I glanced back.

The four officers were rising to their feet.

A soft *click* as the lock disengaged and the door opened. I stumbled inside and ran down the hall to the first bathroom I found. My hands shook so badly that I almost dropped my pills into the sink before getting two into my mouth. I washed them down with a handful of water and pressed my fists against my eyes until purple spots filled my vision. At this rate, I'd need to hit up Anatoly for some IV morphine to get me through the day. I had a fleeting thought that maybe these were side effects of long-term pain killer abuse, a prequel to going deaf or suffering a brain hemorrhage. Common sense told me it was just stress and all the adrenaline coursing through me and I needed to calm down

When you're in pain and surrounded by deadly zombies, common sense doesn't mean

fuck.

Deep breaths, I told myself. Get your shit together. I only had to do three things. Get money, punch my time card, and get my pills. Then I'd be free to leave the city.

My detour through the park had caused me to miss the bank I'd wanted to stop at, but there was an ATM outside the cafeteria. Either my headache was losing its power or I'd grown used to the pain, because I was able to step out into the brightly lit hall without groaning. It took a moment for me to get my bearings; I'd entered through a side door I rarely used. Once I saw the sign for Billing, I knew which direction to take. Three turns and two sets of doors and I'd be at the main cafeteria, first floor, right by the elevators.

I'd only made it halfway when the wrongness of the place penetrated the fog surrounding my thoughts.

The building was empty.

No one in the halls. No one in the offices I passed. Moving carefully, I peered through a set of doors at the elevator cubby. Usually there'd be at least a dozen people—staff, visitors, patients—waiting for one the six lifts.

Nothing.

The lights over the doors displayed different numbers—nine, six, twelve, eleven, fourteen, one—indicating they still functioned. But none of them were changing.

I passed through the first set of double doors and the familiar aromas of the cafeteria hit me, drowning out the bitter scents of antiseptic and the stale odor of recycled air that permeated the rest of the hospital. Greasy fries, toasted bread, pizza, soup, burgers, hot dogs, steamed vegetables, stews and pastas. The mouth-watering mix filled the corridor, thick and heavy as steam in a sauna. From six a.m. to ten p.m., this part of the hospital was a United Nations of

food. Not to mention coffee, with six different flavors constantly brewing.

My hopes came alive; maybe someone was here! Perhaps everyone had congregated in the cafeteria, afraid to leave the hospital, waiting for help to come. My pace quickened and I pushed through the next set of doors into the dining area.

Not a soul occupied it.

My pulse thumped a heavy beat against my temples as I tried to think of a time when I'd seen the room vacant. Even after hours there'd usually be a few workers there, eating their home-made lunches or talking on their phones.

I stopped in the center of the long room. The entrance to the food service area was open and the lights on, but even from my distant vantage point I could see no one manned the cooking stations. While I wondered what to do next, the true nature of the food aura gradually seeped through the layers of fear and pain surrounding my brain. No eggs, no bacon, no sweet-syrup smells of pancakes or cinnamon-laden oatmeal.

Just dinners.

That gave me a timeline of disaster. Whatever happened here had occurred last night, before the kitchen closed. Based on what I'd seen on the news, and outside, I felt pretty sure where the crowds outside the hospital had come from. I wondered if the whole place was devoid of life or if the Lazari were disposing of the living floor by floor. There had to be a reason they still surrounded the building. That reason might be survivors.

I prayed Anatoly was one of them.

The ATM worked its magic, spitting out five hundred dollars in twenties. My footsteps echoed in the hallway as I made my way to the ER, causing me to glance behind me more than once. I tried not to think about the hundreds of patients and staff overhead, but stress and a heavy

oxy buzz did a good job of fucking up my thought process so that my imagination kept delivering unwanted images, complete with sound effects. The thud of bodies falling to the floor. The pop of tendons as dead muscles twitched and stretched. Opaque eyes opening. The squeak of rubber-soled shoes on tile floors.

It finally got to be too much and I broke into a clumsy run that didn't stop until I reached the ER, gasping like I'd just finished a marathon. As I expected, the waiting room was deserted. So was the triage area, which had been cleaned and put back in shape since the last time I'd seen it. And apparently used as well, because some of the beds had rumpled sheets on them and the computer monitors were all on.

Seeing the place like a ghost town freaked me out even more and I went right to the locker room. Several locker doors hung open and one of the showers still ran. Steam billowed over the curtain.

"Hello? Anyone in here?" My voice bounced off the tiles and I twitched. If someone had answered I think I'd have jumped right out of my skin. I went to my locker and opened it.

Empty.

No. I'd come all this way and Anatoly hadn't held up his end.

He'd been turned.

I pictured the tall pharmacist, my pills nestled in his pocket, out there among the herd. He might as well have been a thousand miles away. Now what would I do? I couldn't leave the city with what remained in my stash at home. I wouldn't make it three days before my headaches or withdrawal symptoms incapacitated me.

The pharmacy.

Up on the fifth floor. Either there'd still be people there—maybe even Anatoly—or it

would be as empty as the ER. I could get the pills myself. Considering it looked like the end of the world might be happening, I doubted anyone would give a shit about me stealing some drugs.

The prospect of that long walk, which meant spending more time in the hospital than I wanted, added another ton of dread to the load already crushing me. But what choice did I have? I stepped into the hall, where two equally awful options confronted me. Climb five flights of stairs or take the elevators. In the stairwell, I'd be trapped if any Lazari came down. In elevators, the same fate, plus the danger of a power failure. Stairs slow, elevator fast.

More than anything, I wanted to get the hell out of there and go home.

Which meant the elevator.

I hugged the wall as I returned the way I'd come, more for emotional comfort than any real protection. The Up button lit when I pressed it and instantly a bell dinged behind me. I gasped and spun around, having completely forgotten one of the lifts was already on the first floor. The doors opened and my heart raced. I fully expected that gaping maw to disgorge a pack of Lazari, all intent on turning my brains to slush. I stared at the empty space for so long I ended up having to jump for the doors to get in before they closed. I pressed Five and felt the standard vibration as the car rose. Easy listening music played from the hidden speaker and for a second I could almost believe it was a normal day and I'd simply lucked out and gotten an empty elevator, a sort of urban legend in the hospital. You heard of it happening, but never to you.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. I stepped out, an ingrained response that my legs carried out before I had time to think about it. Then my brain caught up and I darted to the side, glancing in all directions for any signs of movement.

Nothing. Just the *shush* of the doors closing and the crickets in my head.

I headed for the Pharmacy area, which had been moved to the fifth floor almost ten years

earlier, during a renovation period where they redid the entire layout of the hospital based on some efficiency expert's report. The department had its own key-coded delivery elevator and a massive storeroom. Five also housed outpatient surgery and a step-down wing for general and elective surgeries.

No one occupied any of the rooms.

In a few, sheets lay on the floor and half-eaten meals sat on trays. I circled the deserted nurses' station and went to the Pharmacy. As I expected, the door was locked. I pounded on the glass and shouted. "Hello! Anyone there?"

No response. I peered through the window. My heart sank at the sight of two neat rows of med carts. Despite being a small hospital, Brooklyn General used the latest security technologies for dispensing medications. Nurses entered specific codes to unlock the carts and the meds were electronically inventoried before and after each round. When not in use, the carts remained in the Pharmacy. For emergencies, each floor had a small drug closet with the bare essentials: Tylenol, glucose and saline drip bags, ibuprofen. Atropine, epinephrine, and a few other items in the crash carts. If an emergency team needed anything special, such as narcotics, they had to call the Pharmacy.

A stupid metal door and reinforced window, and it might as well have been Fort Knox. No way I'd ever get the door open, not without...

A key.

The people were gone, but maybe one of them left a lab coat behind. A lab coat with a swipe key attached.

Desperation and hope overwhelmed fear and I ran from room to room, then to the nurses' station. When none of those placed yielded anything, I tried the store closets. The break room.

The bathrooms. Coming up empty handed again sent me back to the nurses' station where I used a pair of scissors to cut the plastic tag lock on one of the crash carts. I pulled open the doors and yanked out the drawers, spilling vials and needles onto the floor. A quick search revealed no narcotics. I repeated the process on the two other carts, with the same result.

At that point I kind of lost it. I turned over one of the carts, the clatter of metal on tile loud as thunder in the empty space. I screamed and ran down the hall, back to the Pharmacy. Kicked and punched the impenetrable door. Cursed at the top of my lungs until I ran out of breath and collapsed onto the cold floor, my back against the door, my whole body shaking. I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself. Eventually it worked, at least physically. Mentally, I was still a wreck, a ball of mixed emotions all trying to gain the upper hand.

What to do next? The question kept fluttering around in circles in my head. Each revolution brought the same answers. Go floor to floor and try to find another stash. Maybe the Pain Control ward, or back down in the ER. Both places had security just as severe as the Pharmacy, but there was always the chance someone had been in the act of opening a door when tragedy struck.

The only other option was leaving the hospital and breaking into a commercial pharmacy on the way home. That plan held its own potential issues. There could still be people working. People who might call the cops. It would by my luck to get arrested by the last police in New York and end up trapped in jail while the whole world disappeared around me, like that guy in *The Stand* that had to eat rats to stay alive. Hell, it was Brooklyn. The pharmacist might have a gun and just shoot me on the spot.

You're here, try the other floors. Then, if you have to, go to a pharmacy.

Another deep breath and I stood up, my body still buzzing with anxiety-driven adrenaline

but at least my shakes were mostly gone. Back to the elevator, where I pressed the button for Twelve.

The familiar hum of an approaching car reached me and I stepped back to see which one. There, the numbers counting down. Eleven, ten, nine...

What happened to the car you rode up in?

The question popped into my head, accompanied by a jagged bolt of pain, at the same time the number changed to seven. The car I used should have opened immediately. If I was the only one in the hospital, it wouldn't have moved from Five. Couldn't have, unless—

Someone called it.

I backed away from the doors until I hit the opposite wall, my head pulsing in excruciating waves that went all the way to my stomach. I fought the urge to vomit and forced myself to use common sense. The Lazari didn't use elevators, which meant someone else was alive in the hospital. A smile came to me. In that moment I wanted—needed!—to see another living person more than anything. I stepped away from the wall as the bell dinged.

"Thank god," I said as the doors swooshed open and the lift disgorged a group of people. Tears of pain blurred my vision but I made out several white coats among them. I wiped my eyes and my sight cleared.

Dead faces gazed back at me.

Easily a dozen of them, staring with a singular intensity so powerful it was like a physical attack. The atmosphere changed, became heavier, the way it does right before a storm, and a sudden pressure constricted my chest, forcing the air from my lungs. The agony in my skull grew worse and I cried out but I couldn't hear myself over the ringing in my ears. Gravity doubled and my legs collapsed. I closed my eyes and grabbed my head, cursing my decision to leave the

apartment. I should have stayed with Marnie, like she wanted. We'd be well on our way out of town by now. Instead, I was going to die alone, my heart blown to bits inside my chest by supernatural zombies.

Her face appeared in the darkness, a tear running down her cheek. A vast sadness filled me. I didn't want to go this way. I refused to. If the world had to end, and us with it, we should die together, in each others' arms.

I'm coming, Marnie.

"Hurry." I could almost hear her say it. Her image disappeared, and with it my surrender, replaced by a new sense of urgency. I had to get back before something bad happened to her.

Determination lent new strength to my limbs. Together forever, that was us. I rose to my knees, pushing up despite the weight of a thousand pounds on my shoulders. Groped for the wall, used it to balance myself as I stood. Forced my lungs to work. They resisted but I drew in enough air to remain conscious when the corridor wavered around me.

The Lazari came to a stop, frozen in place less than five feet from me. I staggered away, leaning on the wall for support as I rounded the corner and headed for the stairwell. It took me two tries to push the heavy steel door open and then I almost stumbled right over the railing. The door slammed closed behind me and immediately the pressure and deafening white noise in my head disappeared, and with it a good amount of pain.

I didn't take time to savor my relief. I had to get home to Marnie. Nothing else mattered. Fuck money, fuck drugs, we'd leave with just the clothes on our backs but we were getting out the city right away. I lurched down the stairs like a drunk after a three-day bender, clutching the railing for support. When I reached the first floor I exited through a different door than the one I'd entered, which dumped me out by the ambulance bay. If anything, the Lazari herd was larger

than before, but I didn't care. I wasn't planning on walking through them this time.

Not when I had my choice of vehicles.

Three ambulances were parked by the patient delivery doors. I climbed into the first one. As I'd hoped, the keys were still in the ignition. For once the Lazari uprising had worked in my favor. Usually the driver stays with the vehicle while his or her partner helps bring the patient into the ER. Which meant that when the Lazari struck, the keys remained behind.

The engine started right away and I slammed my foot on the gas. It accelerated faster than I expected and the tires squealed when I took the first bend. Then it was a straight run right past the visitor's parking lot. I was doing almost thirty when I reached the line of Lazari blocking the exit.

I didn't slow.

The ambulance slammed into the corpses with a thud like someone hit the car with a sledgehammer. The front end slewed sideways and a white-coated body rolled across the hood. Then a series of heavy bumps almost threw me out of the seat. I fought the wheel as the back end went up and came down hard.

Then I was through, racing down the street. I glanced into the rearview mirror and saw several bodies lying in the road. A couple of them wore the blue gowns of patients. Impassive faces turned my way as I drove by but none of the dead heads left the sidewalk. Two more blocks and I lost sight of them. I called Marnie while I drove. Got no answer. Tried again. Same thing. I left a message saying I was on the way home, to be ready to leave.

Something's happened to her. Once I thought it, I couldn't shake the terrible feeling that I was too late. I pressed harder on the gas. Snow splattered the windshield and it took me several harrowing seconds to find the wipers. Five minutes later I skidded to a stop on the slick road in

front of our building. I took the keys with me and ran inside. Fuck the law. We were taking the ambulance out of town.

The unusual silence of the place created an ominous atmosphere that filled me with dread. No music blasting, no voices arguing or children shouting, no televisions blaring.

Please be there. Please.

I climbed the staircase two steps at a time, my breath coming in gasps by the time I reached our floor. It took me several fumbling tries to get my key in the lock. The hushed corridor loomed around me, compounding the sensation of wrongness.

"Marnie?" I threw the door open. "Marnie!"

No answer. My fear doubled. I instinctively looked across the apartment at the windowsill, half-expecting to see her perched in her aerie and half afraid she'd be gone.

The empty sill hit me like a gut punch.

"No. She wouldn't leave me." Except I feared she would. Not because she wanted to, but because she'd be such an easy target for the Lazari. To someone as eccentric as Marnie, the voices in her head and the deadly messages of the Lazari would be indistinguishable.

I wanted to scream. To fall to my knees and cry. To get a gun—or better yet, a tank—and blow away every dead motherfucker in the city. The world. But first I had to be sure. A quick check of the bedroom and bathroom showed them unchanged since I'd left.

The kitchen. My eyes went right to the refrigerator and my heart leaped into my throat when I saw the white square stuck on the door. A note! Marnie always left one if she went out. Hope surged up and I sprinted across the room. She hadn't succumbed to the Lazari, she'd gone for food or snacks or to buy more pot. I snatched the note and opened it.

Jeremy,

I couldn't wait any longer. You're too strong, too stubborn. I had to choose for both of us. It's going to be beautiful. I can't wait for you to be One with us for eternity.

Love forever, Marnie

The world came to a crashing halt. She'd done it. She'd given in because of some deluded belief that the Lazari existed in an extradimensional paradise.

"Goddamn you!" I crumpled the note and threw it at the wall. Now what would I do? She'd left me. The only person I had in the whole world, and she'd fucking left me.

To become a god-fucking-damn zombie!

A bolt of pain zig-zagged up my neck and into my head. I needed to think clearly and I wouldn't be able to do that with bombs going off inside my skull. I dug into my pocket, pulled out two of the four oxys still in there. Took them and then went to the couch.

You're all alone now.

I tried not to think about how it had happened, but my thoughts kept going there. Marnie at the window. Talking, nodding.

Dying.

Slumped against the window or maybe her body fell to the floor. Motionless. Unbreathing.

And then she'd stood up and walked out the door.

Wait.

The door. It had been shut and locked when I got home. The Lazari didn't close up after themselves.

Maybe she wasn't dead yet!

I jumped to my feet. Marnie had to know I would try and stop her. She'd said it—I was

too strong, too stubborn. So she'd had to do it while I was gone. But she'd also said she'd waited as long as she could, which meant she hadn't done it right away. Without knowing when I'd be home, she wouldn't have taken the chance of giving up her life in the apartment when I could walk in at any moment.

She'd committed her supernatural suicide somewhere else. And if she only left a short while ago...there might still be time to stop her.

But where to look?

I tried to think of places Marnie visited on a regular basis. Stores, but she wouldn't go there to die. Not the park, it wasn't close enough to be convenient.

The roof.

It made sense. In the nice weather we'd often take a couple of folding chairs up there and watch the sunset. I'd have a beer while she smoked a joint. Sometimes we'd stay there, just sitting together under the stars and moon, me pretending my damaged hearing was the sound of summer insects buzzing in nearby fields, Marnie carrying on one-sided conversations with her invisible friends. Even in the winter we'd occasionally go up there and just stare out at the city, marveling at how beautiful it looked covered in snow.

Like today.

I ran to the stairwell. Two flights up and sure enough the metal access door was open an inch or two. The gray skies provided a backdrop for the giant air conditioning units, two rusting cubes that topped me by a couple of feet at least. I circled them, then checked the other side of the exit way, where I spotted a pink rectangle on the snow-covered gravel.

Marnie's phone.

"No..." The word escaped me, stealing the last of my hope with it.

I swiped the screen. The message light blinked, meaning she hadn't checked her voice mail. Had she already been gone by then? Or just hadn't answered, afraid I might talk her out of it?

I pocketed her phone. In the end, it didn't matter. She was gone. I'd been too late. Maybe if I'd done things differently, if we'd packed and left that morning, like Marnie said we should...

Tears ran down my cheeks, turned to icy streams in the freezing air. I didn't bother to wipe them away. Cold ate at me from inside and out and I relished it. I wanted to be numb, to escape my feelings. I sat down with my back against the door. Snowflakes floated down around me, larger now, harbingers of the whiteout to come.

Now what?

Only a week until Christmas. We should have been inside, drinking flavored coffees and watching *National Lampoon's Christmas* or *Home Alone*. Or going shopping to buy each other cute little gifts. Nothing expensive, but something to have under the little Charlie Brown tree next to the TV. Maybe even splurge and go to a real movie at the Cineplex.

Instead, I was alone on a frigid rooftop while the world died around me.

Time passed while I reflected on the unfairness of it all. I'd lost the only thing that mattered to me. I didn't know what I was going to do. Life had no meaning without Marnie. Someone else might have just stepped off the building. The end of the world coming, no lover, no friends, no family. But I didn't want to die. I'd fought too hard to survive all these years, and unlike Marnie I didn't believe in the afterlife. Death was just death. The existence of the Lazari didn't change that. They didn't think, didn't love, didn't do anything humans did. They were like a virus, infecting the world, their only purpose to create more of themselves.

Too strong, too stubborn. That's what Marnie had said about me. I didn't feel strong. But

I'd always been stubborn. My mother always told me that from the time I was a kid. And despite my relapses with addiction, I'd proven it. I'd never given in to the headaches, never OD'd or committed suicide or gone crazy. And I wasn't going to give in now.

Stick to the plan, no matter how much it hurt to be leaving the city without Marnie. Pack some clothes, get the fuck out, and try to survive the apocalypse. Maybe there was no place safe, or maybe I'd find some secluded hideaway, a cabin in the woods surrounded by miles of nothing. Wait it out, see what happens. After all, there had to be other survivors. People like me who were mentally strong enough to fend off their psychic attacks.

I could do it. I had to. If I stayed, eventually the Lazari would get to me, just by sheer power of numbers. They hadn't been powerful enough at the hospital but I wouldn't be that lucky forever. I'd felt the force of their assault as they tried to crush my heart.

Get out while I had the chance. The only choice left.

Despite my decision, it took a lot of effort to stand. My muscles had stiffened from the cold and a part of me still had no desire to ever move again. I didn't want to die but facing the new future terrified me. Descending the stairs was the hardest thing I'd ever done, because it meant confronting the empty apartment, knowing Marnie would never return. My personal green mile, only the terrible fate waiting for me at the end of that walk was the rest of my life instead of the end of it.

Two steps in and the apartment already gave off an abandoned vibe. No longer home. Just a place, devoid of life or memories. I stood in the living room and looked around, my brain still moving in slow motion. Pictures and souvenirs that no longer seemed important. What use would they be in the cold, deadly new world? Maybe someday I'd return and they'd be waiting for me. Until then, they might as well be artifacts of an ancient age.

I had my cell phone and my wallet, which held some cash and a single picture of Marnie and me. What else should I bring? What would I need?

The basics. Some clothes, food that wouldn't spoil. My drugs.

That last one was the most important. With my mind floundering in shock, I couldn't take the chance of forgetting them. I went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet. My hand was already reaching for them when I realized they weren't there. Just an empty shelf.

No, not empty. A piece of paper occupied the spot where my oxycodone and the rest of my meds had held permanent positions the last three years.

Jeremy, I'm sorry but it was necessary. You'll hate me at first but then you'll thank me when we're together. Always.

Marnie's handwriting.

"No. Fucking no!" I read the note again. She couldn't have! Wouldn't have. She knew how badly I depended on them. I checked every other bottle in the cabinet, even though it was obvious they weren't my drugs. Then I grabbed the waste can from under the sink. The familiar orange of prescription jars made my heart jump. I dumped the can onto the floor and heard the gut-wrenching hollow rattle of empty plastic on tile.

Empty. All of them. Oxy, Excedrin, Advil, Tylenol. Even the Maxalt. She'd gotten rid of everything, probably flushed it all down the toilet. At one level I knew that; yet I still ran into the kitchen and dumped that garbage out as well. Yogurt cups and cheese wrappers tumbled across the peeling linoleum. She'd even emptied the bottle of vodka we kept in the cabinet and the six pack of beer from the 'fridge.

All I had left were the two pills in my pocket. My emergency stash had become the only thing standing between me and insanity.

Why? Why would she do it? She knew how awful the pain got, how I couldn't function when the headaches hit. Without my medicine, I'd be a raving lunatic in a day or two, especially when the withdrawal symptoms set in. I'd be lucky if I didn't kill—

That was it.

She wanted me to commit suicide. Either that or weaken my resistance to the point where the Lazari could kill me and co-opt me into their undead cult. This was Marnie's screwed up plan for keeping us together forever.

I can't wait for you to be One with us.

She really believed she'd be waiting for me on the other side. So much so that she'd committed the ultimate sin and then condemned me to death.

Suicide and murder. If there was a Hell, she'd earned a ticket there for sure. I'd never been a religious person, but the concept of karma ran strong in me. If there really was an afterlife, there had to be consequences to pay there for what you did in this world. For all anyone knew, the Lazari were trapped in some kind of eternal suffering, Hell rather than Heaven.

Well, it wasn't going to happen to me.

I loved Marnie. Nothing she'd done was going to change that. But I had no intention of joining the ranks of the dead-heads. I'd die in my own good time and take my chances with the afterlife. According to my mother and the Church, Marnie's soul should be waiting for me. Along with my childhood dog, Peaches, my father, my grandparents, and anyone else who'd died before me.

"Together always," I whispered to the empty room. "But not today."

The loss of my pills was a major problem, but not an insurmountable one. All I had to do was drive to the nearest CVS, break in, and take whatever I wanted.

I took a deep breath and went into the living room. Turned on the TV.

"—no news out of Washington regarding the disappearance of—"

"—reports of several dozen people emerging from the East River, led by a man dressed as a priest—"

"—Jesus weeps for those who cannot pass through the gates of—"

"—exits from the city are impassable due to thousands of empty vehicles blocking the roads. Herds of Lazari are growing in size near all the bridge and tunnels leading into and out of Manhattan. Hector Gomez is in Chopper One. Hector?"

I stopped on the local news station. I'd need to know which roads had the least amount of Lazari on them. There'd be no driving across any of the bridges. I'd have to get as close as I could with the ambulance and then walk until I came to an opening in the logjam where I could take another car. Based on the aerial view they were showing, it'd be a helluva long walk. The lines of abandoned cars stretched for miles on both sides of every bridge and tunnel.

"It's a real disaster down there, Tonya. I've never seen anything like it. Tens of thousands of Lazari, the people who once occupied all the cars you see, have formed barricades on the highways. The moment anyone tries to approach them... well, there's no gentle way to put it. They die. And then get right back up again as one of those things. Wait, there's someone now, he's moving toward the Lazari. We're going lower for a closer look. For you people watching at home, this video is going to get very graphic in a moment, you might want to send any children out of the—"

The picture tilted sideways as the reporter's voice cut off. There was a quick glimpse of the cockpit, the pilot's mouth open wide below his goggles, and then a dizzying view of the sky and earth exchanging places over and over. The anchorwoman's voice shouted in the

background. *"Hector? Hector? Can you hear us? Oh, my god!"*

I didn't want to watch but I couldn't look away. The images sped by. Gray clouds. Traffic jam. Clouds. Lazari looking up. The helicopter banking away in a steep dive. The Lazari, much closer. A man in a business suit, jacket flapping, arms spread, face emotionless.

Black.

The image changed. The newswoman's face now, her eyes wide with horror, her face almost as pale as her white blouse. She opened her mouth but no words emerged. Without a sound, she fell sideways out of her chair.

I turned the TV off. I didn't want to see what came next. In my head, I saw not her but Marnie standing up, eyes blank as a fish's.

The world was spiraling into chaos faster now. I had to get out of the city before total anarchy set in. Forget packing, I'd steal what I needed on the way. I grabbed my phone and Marnie's, a charger, and a bottle of water. Stuffed some granola bars in my pocket. Then I left, not even bothering to shut the door. Maybe the place that had been our home could shelter some other survivor.

The pounding in my head was back, and the tightness around my chest. Ordinarily I'd have attributed it to stress but after the events at the hospital and what I'd seen on the news I had a suspicion my discomfort stemmed from another source. I couldn't help picturing the hundreds of thousands—maybe millions by now—of Lazari occupying the streets, focusing their mystical powers on the few remaining living people in the city. A dome of dark energy descending onto the buildings, tendrils of black death weaving between buildings and seeping under doors. I automatically reached for my pills and then stopped as I remembered—again—that they had to last until I found more.

But that will never happen if you die before you get to any.

Indecision gripped me. If the pain of resisting the Lazari incapacitated me, I'd never get to the medicine I needed. But if I took the pills and they wore off before I got to a pharmacy, I'd be as good as dead.

"Fuck!" My shout bounced down the hallway and back again. The walls lost their focus, shimmered, and then returned to normal, except for a few colored spots orbiting at the periphery of my vision.

Take them. I'd have four, maybe six hours of protection against the pain. More than enough time to find a store and break in.

I swallowed the pills and prayed I'd made the right decision.

After a few deep breaths, I headed down the stairs. For the first time in months, I noticed the peeling paint, the dust and dirt piled in the corners, the faint odors of old urine and cigarettes. We'd grown complacent in our cheap apartment. Maybe things would've been different if we'd had a little more money. If my mother had helped us instead of cutting me off.

Bitter resentment lent strength to my arms as I shoved the front door open. My momentum carried me halfway down the steps before I saw the people on the sidewalk.

No, not people. Lazari.

An entire herd. Standing between me and the ambulance. More of them filled the road and blocked the sidewalk on either side of my building, preventing me from going left or right. I understood the source of the pressure crushing my ribs and skull. They were using superior numbers to pick the last survivors off one by one.

The herd stood at least twenty deep; no way I could push through and drive away. Thousands of dead, gray eyes bored into me. The static in my head grew worse and my brain

twisted the sounds around until it felt like I'd fallen asleep next to a radio stuck between two distant stations where only random bits of words came through.

Shhhhhzzzzzhmmmm—eremy—zzzzznnnnng—jere—zznnngggssssss—usss—nngzzzz—here—nnnng

My stomach did a flip-flop and my vision blurred and then returned, blurred and returned. The faces, slack and gray. Some of them seemed familiar. Neighbors? I tried to focus on them. A man in a UPS uniform. A woman wearing a waitress's apron. A couple of teenagers with too many tattoos who I was sure I'd seen loitering around the neighborhood before. An older woman with a narrow face and an expensive coat stood at the front of the horde, her silver hair the same as my—

Mother's?

Oh, Jesus.

It was her. Standing right at the bottom of the stairs, her severe blue gaze transformed into an equally cold and unreadable opaque stare aimed right at me.

I turned and ran.

There was no thought, no internal debate. I simply reacted. Up the stairs, into the building, and through the first floor corridor to the back exit, which opened into a long alley occupied by two dumpsters and a thriving colony of rats. I hit the latch bar with my hip and the door with my shoulder, never pausing in my blind flight. The metal door flew open and I stumbled into the alley.

Which was filled with Lazari.

A flash of pink in the first row.

Marnie.

Her cheap ski jacket stood out like a beacon. The red, white, and blue hat hid her blonde hair but her face...oh, Jesus, her face. It was awful.

Because there was nothing wrong with it.

She looked very much the same as the last time I'd seen her. A hint of a vacant smile turning up the corners of her lips. Eyes staring off into the distance. The pallor of her cheeks could easily be from the cold rather than an absence of circulation.

As I stared, snowflakes landed on her nose and lips.

They didn't melt.

"Oh, Marnie." Something in me broke when I saw that. My heart, my soul. My determination to escape. This was no random herd of Lazari. They'd come specifically for me, led by the only two people in the world who knew how to get inside me, understood my weaknesses, my needs.

I backed into the building. No point in running this time. They had me trapped. Only two exits from the building. I returned to my apartment and shut the door. Not because I thought the Lazari would come inside. That wasn't their way. No, I did it because that's what you do when you enter your home. You shut the door. It's habit. Just like hanging up your coat, getting a soda from the refrigerator, and sitting on the coach. All of which I did.

There was no thinking involved. I operated on instinct, moving robotically, unable to comprehend everything that had just happened. My brain was numb, the buzzing white noise my only sensation.

I turned on the TV. Static. *Click.* Static again. I pressed the channel button again. And again, my thumb on automatic. Static. Static. Static. The sounds from the TV indistinguishable from those in my head. *Click. Click*. Lucy and Ricky in black and white. *"Rickeeeee!"*

Click.

Static. *Click. Click. Click.*

"—you know how to take the reservation, you just don't know how to 'hold' the reservation—

Click.

"—this is the end of times! The Lord God Almighty has delivered unto us the his judgement and the Four Horseman have risen to—"

Click.

Static. I tossed the remote away. White noise for the ears and the eyes. The black and white pixels held my eyes, much the same way as a camp fire will when you're tired or stoned. Patterns appear, complex movements among the random flickerings. In the sounds as well. Beneath the uniform *sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh*. Whispers. Bits and pieces of words. Not necessarily English, or even any earthly language. You know it's not real but you can almost believe it is. Digital speak between pieces of equipment. AIs communicating with each other. Signals from other planets.

Or perhaps just the beginning of insanity.

I forced myself to get up. Took three steps and then stopped. Where to go? I glanced around the apartment.

The window.

I knew what I'd see before I even looked down. A pink coat at the front of the herd. She'd come to the front of the building. Her pale face staring directly at me. She'd lost her hat and snow had turned her blonde hair silver in the glow of the streetlights. It made her look old and young at the same time. The way I imagined she would have if we'd gotten to spend another

forty years together. My vision grew distorted as tears filled my eyes.

Marnie was dead, and soon I would be, too. Just like she'd planned.

A familiar figure moved up next to her. My mother. The two of them, who'd never spoken a single word while alive—had never even met each other—now stood shoulder to shoulder like mother and daughter-in-law with a shared goal: to kill the one thing they had in common.

It was almost enough to make me believe Marnie had been right, life after death did exist. Vestigial memories, the rational part of my brain reminded me. The Lazari knew how to walk, to turn corners, to use stairs. It made more sense that they'd retain some muscle memory, force of habit guiding them to familiar surroundings.

I couldn't bear to think that Marnie was still alive inside a walking corpse and actively trying to turn me into one as well.

Watching them watching me brought me to tears again and I had to turn away. I didn't want to go back to the couch. Or the bedroom. Time slowed. I breathed in the stale remnants of Marnie's pot and stared at the apartment, my lethargy back in full force. I had no desire to think or move or make any kind of decision.

The kitchen. As good a destination as any. I moved across the room like an old man, shuffling my feet because I lacked the strength to lift them.

I collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs. Stared at the table for awhile. Looked at my hands. Pale. Like Marnie's. I missed her. My eyes went to the window. Something missing. Her. I took my phone out. Opened the picture I'd taken. So beautiful. A moment of perfection captured in time. Had it really been just a few days ago? I studied it. Tried to remember what I'd been thinking at that moment. A distant memory, already fading.

Glass rattled against wood. I stood up, my heart racing, positive I'd see Marnie outside, tapping on the window. But no, only the wind. The storm growing stronger. I felt the weight of the Lazari's attention on me, a physical presence that grew heavier each minute. If I stood there long enough, would I simply collapse from it? Fall down and expire like all the others I'd seen? Did it happen the same for everyone?

At some point, I decided I didn't want to die on the floor. Better someplace comfortable. The bedroom was too far away so I went back to the couch. The television still showed nothing but static. Snow inside, snow outside. December in my soul.

The static captured me again. Dancing patterns, back and forth, around and around.

Around and around.

Tsssssschhhuuuusshhhccccck

So pretty. So relaxing. I closed my eyes. Nothing but static. Peace. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the apartment was dark, the only illumination the bluish-white glow of the TV that continued to play its digital blizzard. The sounds of the electric storm inside blended with the shushing winds of the gale outside. The red numbers on the cable box showed I'd slept the afternoon and half the night away; it was after midnight.

I had no idea what had woken me, although I had a vague recollection of dreaming about Marnie and my mother having lunch and talking about me. What I did know was that I felt like shit. My head ached something fierce and my stomach felt queasy. Plus, I had to pee. I stood up and the room tilted. I sat down again as a surge of dizziness overwhelmed me. Sweat poured down the back of my neck and a feverish heat filled me. My temples throbbed in time with my heart. Fast, much too fast.

The Lazari are attacking me again. Can't let them win.

I tried standing again and this time kept my feet. The roiling in my guts grew worse. Water. I needed water. I moved to the sink, poured a glass. Brought it to my lips, my hands trembling, spilling some. Drank.

Dropped the glass as my stomach erupted.

I vomited into the sink, clear, yellowish liquid. No food since the morning, nothing left in me. Cramps attacked my belly and I doubled over. This time nothing came out except a mouthful of stomach juices that burned my throat. I spat acidic phlegm and clutched the counter to keep from falling. Waves of hot and cold rolled through me, causing me to shiver. A kind of groaning whimper escaped me as I recognized what was happening.

Not the Lazari this time.

Withdrawal.

It'd been more than ten hours since my last pill. The first time in years since I'd gone that long without filling my system with chemicals.

You can do this. You've done it before.

Yes, but never alone, trapped in an apartment, without medical help. In the rehab centers they give you methadone, supplements, vitamin drinks. Pills for the nausea and the runs. Migraine meds.

It'll just be harder.

Right. Comparing cold turkey to a gradual detox is like comparing climbing Everest to a Sunday hike in the woods. Not even twelve hours in, the worst was still yet to come. I splashed water on my face and clenched my teeth against another round of cramps.

Damn you, Marnie. The next forty-eight hours were going to be a living hell.

Right on cue, my stomach clenched again, only this time the pressure was lower. I

staggered across the apartment, balancing myself on pieces of furniture. Halfway to the bathroom I knew I wasn't going to make it but I kept trying, squeezing my ass cheeks tight and lurching the last few yards.

My bowels gave way just as I reached the door and hit the light, hot liquid squirting into my pants and running down my legs. I fell to the floor, my head narrowly missing a fatal collision with the toilet. The smell of shit filled the small room and I dry heaved again.

I pulled myself across the tiles to the tub. Gripped the edge. Another dizzy spell hit and I hung there, one arm over the lip, the other pinned beneath me. The noises in my head rose in volume, became deafening. A million televisions now, filling my skull with static and random stations. Garbled words, sentences mixed together.

I put my head down against the tub. The cold felt good. I closed my eyes. The volume grew unbearable.

Everything disappeared.

I came to in the middle of a blizzard, lost in an endless expanse of white. White noise, white landscape. Everywhere. Inside and out.

sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh

The end of man in surround sound.

A terrible sense of failure came over me. The Lazari had won, I was dead, and this was the so-called paradise Marnie had promised. What a joke. No heaven, just—

Sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh Jeremy we sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh want to sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh with us chsssssss

"What?" I had no body, but my mind spoke the word.

Ssschhhcchh Jeremy. We are here. I am here. Ssschhhcchh Waiting. For you. Join us. We are One. There is more, so much more.

"Marnie?"

Yessschhhcchh.

And me.

"Mother?"

We can be together. Everyone. Ssschhhcchh All of us. The world. Everything. One. Join us.

Join them. A flicker of hope ignited in my soul. I wasn't dead! Not yet, anyhow. Still a chance...

I opened my eyes to bright light and bitter cold. I still lay sideways on the bathroom floor. When I tried to sit up, every muscle bellowed in protest. A debilitating weariness filled me. I'd been dreaming again. About Marnie. My mother.

No dream, Jeremy. We are here. Waiting.

"Marnie?" I sat up, adrenaline forcing away some of my listlessness. "Is it really you?"

Yes. I'm here. We're all here. Waiting for you. You are the last, Jeremy. Join us.

The chill inside me expanded, waves of cold coursing through my body. Not a dream. Marnie still existed in some supernatural way. She'd been right all along. Speaking to the dead the entire time. Trying to tell me...

Yes. You can hear us now. The barriers are broken, your mind is free.

Barriers...? The only thing that felt broken was my skull. Every nerve afire, as if something had exploded in my head, sending shards of bone into the crevices of my brain. But

the nausea was gone, and the fever, meaning my body was flushing the last vestiges of the drugs from my system, leaving me...

The drugs.

It all made sense now.

The headaches. Marnie's comments. To me. To them. She'd held off joining the Lazari because she refused to leave me behind. She wanted us to cross the bridge together.

Yes. Together. All I wanted.

All this time, the drugs had protected me. Had prevented me from hearing them, prevented the Lazari from getting into my head. They'd saved me.

So she'd thrown them out.

Jeremy. There isn't much time. We are becoming One. I want you with me.

I dragged myself to my feet. Every fiber of my being cried out as I moved. Not just withdrawal. Pressure on me, from every direction. The Lazari, still imposing their will on me. They hadn't broken through, though. Holding back? Because of Marnie? Or were the remnants of the drugs in my system still keeping them at bay? I crossed the room, my jeans stiff with dried shit, bouncing from couch to table to windowsill like a wino.

Marnie still waited on the sidewalk, one of a million dark shapes against the deep snow that covered everything.

Hurry, Jeremy. We are One. We are everything. Our world is beautiful.

Something stabbed at my heart. Invisible daggers jabbed my back, my head, my limbs. My barriers were broken, my walls coming down. I wouldn't last much longer. My body weak, my mind defenseless. Marnie had been right. What did that mean for the teachings of organized religion? Did her soul still exist? My mother's presence certainly seemed to indicate the

Catholics had gotten it wrong. Or did it? Had she simply been weak? Judged and found wanting? Maybe there was more than one afterlife. If one existed, why not all of them? The only question was, how would I meet mine?

On my own terms, I decided. And that meant taking care of some things before I took that big step, crossed the divide.

I refused to die covered in my own shit.

"A little more time," I whispered to myself, but Marnie answered.

"Hurry. We cannot wait much longer."

The pressure eased, like rising to the surface from a deep dive. I was still weak as a newborn but I managed to return to the bathroom, strip off my soiled clothes. Into the shower. The water freezing but I hardly noticed. Just a rinse, and then I wiped myself clean as best I could with a towel. Marnie's towel, surrounding me in apple blossoms.

Back to the bedroom. Clothes. Jeans, sweatshirt, socks. Cold outside. Did the dead feel cold? Did they feel anything? No answer from Marnie. Shoes. My coat. What else?

My phone. I would need that.

I stuffed it into my coat pocket and went to the door. This time I didn't look back. There'd be no returning. Not to the apartment, not to the world I knew. When I reached the stairs, I went up rather than down. I'd made my decision. Marnie had given up her life on the roof because it was our place. I would do the same, for the same reason.

Wind and snow struck me as I pushed open the door. Freezing rivers ran down my neck and filled my shoes. The drifts were halfway to my knees and I wished I'd worn boots. Then I laughed. In a few minutes it wouldn't matter. I reached the edge above our apartment and knelt, bitter cold leaching the last of my strength away. I peered over and as I expected, Marnie was

there, her pink coat a beacon. My mother stood next to her, both of them staring up at me.

"Come to us, Jeremy. Be with us. Be One."

I took out my phone. Opened the picture I'd taken of her. Marnie, a study in melancholy. She looked beautiful. My love, not as she was now, as she'd been.

"Always together," I whispered, and kissed the screen. Then I placed the phone back in my pocket and stood.

"Yes, together. Always," she replied, her voice overlaid by a million others. She was almost gone, almost One.

I stepped onto the edge.

"Jeremy? What are you—?"

Something exploded inside me just as I jumped. My head, my heart, the full force of the Lazari hitting me as Marnie and the others realized my intention. What she should have known all along. I could never be one of them. Not even for her. Maybe what I planned was technically suicide, but I preferred to think of it as doing the right thing and avoiding the temptation of eternal sin.

Mother, I hope your definition of sacrifice was right.

Reality slowed to a crawl. The cold disappeared. I felt nothing, heard nothing. My smile grew wider. Silence! Finally, after all these years. The faces below me grew larger in flickers, like progressive images taken by a camera. Marnie's face, expressionless, although I sensed her surprise.

The herd drawing closer.

Coming together.

Raising their arms.

No! I saw their plan the same time Marnie's thoughts reached me.

"Together, always."