



SOMETIMES WE RAN 2: COMMUNITY

STEPHEN DRIVICK

Sometimes We Ran 2

Community

Stephen Drivick

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To my sister, one of my earliest fans.

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Chapter 1

One Year and One Month After the Zombie Apocalypse

There are times during the zombie apocalypse when you must run.

This was one of those times. Me and my road companion, Claire, were now running for our lives from three very hungry Red-Eye zombies. We had been scrounging for supplies in an old store when we came upon a nest of about half a dozen of the dead bastards resting in the back room.

I pulled my gun and dispatched two. Claire took out one with her weapon of choice, an aluminum baseball bat. One good swing, and she caved its head in. Then, three more got caught in the door like some kind of vaudeville comedy team. Not wanting to be overrun, we took off, with the three monsters right behind us.

Now we were running at full speed down a dusty road with hell bearing down behind us. I shot a quick glance over my shoulder. The three zombies were just keeping up with us, neither falling behind or trying to catch up. Their plan was simple. They would wait for us to get exhausted, then they would pounce on us.

Then they would feed.

The road ahead had no cover. There weren't even any abandoned cars or buildings to duck into. The store we had been

checking for supplies was the only structure around, and it was full of undead. There was simply no place to hide. Claire and I were surrounded by deep, foreboding forest. We would have to use the woods to escape. It was the only way out. I just hoped nothing else horrible lurked in the trees. I looked at Claire. She was running at full speed with her head down, her small legs churning. As if she could read my mind, she looked up for some guidance on what to do next. I pointed toward the dark forest, and possible salvation. We turned in unison at the first gap, and headed into the trees.

Almost immediately, the sunlight dimmed and the temperature cooled. Warmer weather had returned a few weeks before and the afternoon temperatures were starting to climb a bit. The coolness of the forest was almost refreshing. I could smell the decaying leaves beneath our feet. I wished we could stop to enjoy it. I shot a fleeting glance backward to check on our pursers. They had followed us into the woods and were hell-bent on making us a meal.

I could feel myself getting tired. The chase was taking a toll on my middle-aged body. A slight numbing pain began to radiate from my legs and lower back. I sensed that Claire was beginning to fade as well. Even though she was half my age, a lack of food had left us a little weak from poor nutrition. I was tempted to tell her to run on and I'd catch up later. I knew full well that the Red-Eyes would surround me like a wounded deer and then eat me. Claire knew that too; she would never leave me behind.

It was time to fight.

I put on a burst of speed and cut off Claire. I grabbed her hand, and pulled her into a hiding place behind a large group of trees. We leaned back and made ourselves as small as possible.

“What are we doing?” Claire said, between huge gulps of air.

“We’re not going to get away. We can’t outrun them, and they won’t get tired,” I said, trying to control my breathing. I drew my handgun and peeked around the tree. A light breeze tickled the trees above me, causing the branches to sway and the leaves to make noise. The birds chirped happily, unaware of the drama unfolding below.

The three Red-Eyes stopped a few feet away. They seemed to be confused. They lifted their heads and sniffed the air in unison, trying to find us. Claire and I have found that the Red-Eyes had developed an excellent sense of smell and hearing. If Claire and I were quiet, we might have a chance to take them out. Couldn’t do much about masking our smell. Neither of us had a bath in a while.

I watched from our hiding place as the undead looked around. They slowly got closer to the tree. One of the trio caught a scent and ran off in another direction, disappearing into the woods and leaving the other two behind. The trio was now a pair. The odds were at least a little more in our favor.

One of the two remaining Red-Eyes began to approach the tree. The other one stood a few yards away, beating the bushes. I tensed and waited for my chance.

I turned to Claire. “Get ready to run,” I whispered. She nodded, and got her bat ready.

The nearest Red-Eye continued to sniff the air, and approach our hiding place. It was a young one, a teen-age girl who had been about fifteen or sixteen years old. She was tracking us, but hadn’t seen us yet. She got close to the tree and began to walk around it looking down at the ground. It was time to counter-attack.

She looked up, and I put a bullet in her face. She screeched and fell down at my feet, dead. Her dying screams had alerted her companion, a young male in a tattered hospital gown. He hissed in my general direction and came at me. I got off another shot, but it hit him on the shoulder. It's very hard to shoot when you are running.

Claire had taken off at the first shot. She slowed a little so I could catch up to her, and we started to run again at full speed. The little break at the tree had done us good. Although not fully refreshed, we had both caught a second wind. My shot had slowed the last Red-Eye down. We might have a chance. Claire ducked into the weeds and onto a gravel path in the woods and I followed. We ran a few yards into a power-line easement. The trees and brush had been clear-cut for huge metal towers to carry main transmission lines from some far away power plant. There was no cover.

“Dammit!... Sorry. Now what do we do?” Claire said.

I could hear our undead friend thrashing through the woods coming down the path. Soon it would be face-to-face with us. “Go wide. Stand over on that side. If he goes for you, kneecap him with the bat.” Claire often incapacitated our adversaries by slamming her bat into their knees.

“What about you?” she said, as she put some distance between us.

“I’ll put a bullet in his head,” I said, getting ready for battle.

The Red-Eye broke into the clearing and stopped a few feet from our position. He stared at us both and sized up the situation. After a few seconds, he made a decision.

He started going after Claire: my one-hundred-and ten pound, five-foot-nothing, zombie-wrecking machine.

She didn't flinch, but stood her ground with her bat ready. The Red-Eye approached with foam dripping from the sides of his mouth, growling like some kind of mad dog. When he got close enough, he lunged. Claire was too small and too fast. She avoided his attack, and side stepped away from his reaching, greedy hands and flashing jaws. In one fluid motion, she swung down with the bat and made contact with his knees.

The zombie yelped and tumbled to the ground. The blow to the knees had done something to the joint, and he tried to crawl away from his ultimate fate. Now it was my turn.

I walked up, with gun in hand, preparing to put him out of his misery. I aimed at the center of his head and started to pull the trigger. The undead monster flipped over on his back and raised his arms in self-defense. I paused at this strange behavior. The Red-Eye was on the ground with its hands in front of its face. I had never seen one behave like this. It knew it was going to die.

It almost acted alive.

"What are you waiting for, John? Kill it!" Claire yelled from behind me.

I pulled the trigger and put a bullet in its head. It slumped down to the gravel with a large hole in its forehead. Dark blood, black as night, began to leak onto the groomed gravel path.

"Why'd you hesitate?" Claire asked, brushing herself off.

I was still a little shocked by the zombie's behavior. It took a few seconds for me to answer. "Don't know." I managed to say. "It put its hands up like it was begging for its life."

Claire poked the corpse with her bat. “Yeah... I saw that too. Creepy.”

I looked down at the dead Red-Eye. They managed to look less fearsome when they were dead. Maybe it was their eyes turning pink in death that did it. “Must have been a reflex. Something it remembered when it was living.”

“Yeah,” Claire said, not convincingly. “Just a reflex.”

We turned and walked quickly away from the corpse. It was best to get through the cleared area as fast as possible. There was still one more Red-Eye in the forest somewhere, looking for us. If it caught us out in the open, we might be out of luck.

Claire and I crossed the easement without incident, only pausing at the huge metal towers to take a water break. I grimly noted to myself that we only had two bottles of water left to quench our thirst. Without water, this was going to be a short apocalypse.

Claire winced as she tried to flex her hip. She held onto a small fence and tried to stretch her leg to alleviate whatever pain or cramp she was feeling. Her hip had been injured in a scooter crash a few months back, and it didn’t heal properly. Not too many doctors around in a world full of zombies.

I watched her stretch for a second. It was obvious she was in a little pain. “You okay? Does your hip hurt?”

She looked up, and brushed her pink-highlighted auburn hair out of her hair. It was a little greasy from weeks on the road running from monsters. “I’m okay. Only hurts when I run.”

We started to walk toward the other side of the clearing. The lack of a hum from the overhead power lines was a little unsettling. The civilized world might never get back to

normal. “I’m just a little worried about your mobility,” I said. “I’m a little too old to carry you.”

Claire giggled a little. I always loved to hear her laugh. “I can still outrun you, old man.” As to prove her point, she took off like a scared rabbit toward the other side of the easement.

“Claire! Wait!” I took off after her, but couldn’t catch up. Even with an injured hip, she was still pretty quick. I watched her dive into the tree line and disappear. I ran in after her. She knew we needed to stay together. I ran through the forest, and came upon an access road. A large building loomed across the road from me. It looked like a store or a mall. Might make some good cover. “Claire! Where are you?” I called out.

“Over here.” Claire was already approaching the building, looking for a way in. “I think it’s a mall. Can we check it out?”

“Just wait a minute. I’ll be right there.” I jogged across the road and joined her. “You know better than that. We need to stay together. What if something was in the woods?” I scolded Claire like she was a schoolgirl, but she knew the rules.

“Sorry. Now can we go inside?”

As our weeks on the road dragged on, Claire and I had become experts on entering and checking out abandoned buildings. We approached them like a two-man army unit, making sure everything was clear and that we had an escape route in case we had to flee. In a few buildings, we had encountered nests of undead. They grouped together, waiting to go out and hunt. Disturbing a nest was not a good idea. It was almost like poking a nest full of fire ants. It was a good way to get overrun and dead in a hurry. Some of the buildings also contained zombie-dogs as well. The dogs were the worst. If we saw any

evidence of dogs, we usually moved on.

Claire and I walked around the building looking for a way in. During our tour of the back wall of the stores, we found an open loading-dock door. There was a decomposed body lying on the dock. A single Yellow-Eye zombie cruised the lot in front of the dock door. Yellow-Eyes were a little dumber and slower than the Reds. If he was alone, it might not be too bad.

I holstered my gun and drew my modern tomahawk. The chrome-plated steel glinted in the afternoon sun. I decided to go hand-to-hand to save a little ammunition, another essential commodity lately in short supply. “Ready?” I said to Claire.

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

We put some distance between us and started towards the open door. The Yellow-Eye saw us and began to shamble in our direction. It was badly decomposed, and didn’t look like much of a threat, but it was in our way. I got close and swung the pointed end of the tomahawk at its rotting head. The point went right through its forehead into its brain, snuffing whatever spark made these things move around. The zombie fell to the ground dead, without a struggle. I pulled my tomahawk out and moved on to the dock.

Claire and I took positions at the door. I took out my flashlight and shined the weak light into the dark space beyond. It was nearly out of juice: I guess we can add batteries to the list of consumables. I moved the light around and saw nothing moving. I lifted my head and took a long sniff. Sometimes you could smell the Red-Eyes coming before you saw them. The sniff revealed only a dank, wet odor coming from the store.

I nodded Claire inside. She readied her bat and stepped into the dark room. I followed, with tomahawk drawn. We took a

few steps, and bumped into a tall human-like figure standing in the doorway. Claire attacked it with her bat. The sound of ringing aluminum echoed off the walls.

After the attack, Claire stepped back to catch her breath. “What the hell was that?”

I shined my weak flashlight at our adversary. The weak brown light revealed a smiling plastic face and a smooth forehead with a gaping baseball bat-sized wound. Claire had killed a mannequin.

“You killed a dummy from the store, kiddo. I guess we’re safe now.” In spite of the tension, I laughed a little.

“Very funny. Scared the hell out of me.”

We made our way out of the stockroom into the store, and then stepped into the mall. Claire and I stood in wonder at what we found. I turned off my flashlight, as we were not going to need it.

The upper floor and roof of the mall had partially collapsed. It had destroyed most of the mall, leaving a gaping hole where stores had been. Only the small store Claire and I walked through and a few more in the corner behind us remained. The rest was a big pile of twisted metal, glass, and other miscellaneous debris. Sunlight streamed in from the open hole in the roof.

“Oh my God,” Claire said under her breath.

“The mall is gone. Just gone...” My voice trailed off into a whisper. It was hard to take in all the destruction.

“What the hell happened?” Claire said, as she turned around to view the damage. “Looks like a bomb went off”

“Don’t know. Maybe water or weather caused it to fall.” I looked down at the ground and noticed a few puddles of dirty water. “Maybe a blocked drain or two. Water builds up, and there goes the roof.”

Claire and I began a search for any usable supplies. With most of the second floor and roof pancaked on the first floor, everything that might have been useful was buried. After a pass of the area, we started the task of searching the dead scattered around.

The mall had a few decomposing bodies lying on the damp floor. There had been a battle among the living, probably over supplies or shelter. Empty shotgun shells and rusty edged weapons lay among the bodies. Many of them were no more than clothes full of bones at this point. It was unpleasant and a little unsettling, but in desperate times like these, we couldn’t pass up any source for supplies.

Claire went off into some of the remaining stores to look around, while I handled the bodies in the mall area. I went about the job like an undertaker. Just turn the body over carefully and search any pockets or bags. Finish with one body and go to the next like an assembly line. Don’t look at the face or any personal items. Don’t get involved with their lives.

I looked at about eight bodies, but didn’t find much. In the pocket of one man, I found a few shotgun shells for my weapon. Some of the bodies were crushed beneath the debris, so they were skipped. I also skipped the kids and the strollers.

Just couldn’t bring myself to rifle through a dead kid’s pocket.

“Claire! Where are you?” I called out. My voice echoed through the piles of mall lying around.

“Over here, Tiger.” Claire emerged from one of the dark holes that had once been a store selling trendy clothing and handbags.

“Find anything?”

“Not much. Lots of moldy clothing and shoes.” She nodded to the store behind her. “Couple of bodies all lying in a circle back in there. Looks like some sort of mass suicide. Found a pistol on the floor.” Claire handed me a small, dirty revolver. The gun was complete, but was too dirty to use. All the chambers were empty.

I handed it back to Claire. “You can keep it, but it needs a lot of cleaning. Looks a little rusty. Needs bullets, too.”

“Nah. I’ll stick with my bat.” Claire threw the gun away, and added it to the debris of the dead mall.

We made our way to a safe and body-free store in the undamaged part of the mall. It was another outlet for shoes and handbags. Most of the stock was full of water and covered in green, fuzzy mold. Amazing how nature took over so fast. Claire and I walked inside, and I pulled down the anti-theft door to prevent any Red-Eyed mall occupants from surprising us in the night.

“I’m a little hungry. Let’s eat something,” I said.

“Okay.” Claire took off her backpack and walked over to the walls of handbags. She began to try some of them out. I guess you can take the girl out of the mall, but you can’t take the mall out of the girl. “Find anything you like?” I unpacked our meager supplies: two cans of beef stew, one can of soup, and a package of unsalted crackers. We were running on empty.

“This one is kind of nice.” Claire held up a brown handbag with a trendy name. At the same time, she looked kind of

sad. "God. Sometimes I really miss shopping." She tossed the three hundred dollar leather bag into the nearest corner and sat down with a sigh.

I opened the crackers and handed her a few. I sat down beside her, and we ate in silence for a while. We'll eat a few crackers tonight, and save the canned food for another time. Crackers and water. I guess it was better than nothing.

Claire broke the silence. "Not much food left, huh?"

"We'll be okay. We just have to find some more. Until then, we'll ration." I tried to sound hopeful.

"We've been rationing for a few weeks, and haven't found anything." Claire turned to face me. "Running out of water, too. We have to face facts, John. We are getting weaker, and we are not finding any food. We're going to starve to death, aren't we?"

I was surprised by Claire's frankness. Usually she was in a better mood. Maybe she was tired of it all. "Listen. We'll be okay. We've gotten lucky before. Maybe there's a store, or a truck around with some food and water," I said, still trying to sound hopeful. Claire was right though. Food and water were getting harder to find, and we were getting weaker. I thought it was just my imagination, but I'd noticed recently that I was getting tired and run-down. Claire, who was a lot smaller than me, must be running on empty by now. If the zombies didn't get us, starvation or thirst would take us right out.

Claire lay down on the floor, using her backpack as a pillow. It might have been the awful yellow light in the broken mall, but she looked pale, wasted, and very thin. "I think we need to go our separate ways," she said weakly.

I could not believe what I heard. "No way. We'll stay together."

Claire bounced up to a sitting position. "It makes sense. I'm thinner than you. I'm fading faster. Soon, I'll be slowing you down. It would be easier to find food for just one person anyway."

My stomach roiled with rage. I grabbed her shoulders. "How can you even think I could abandon you? Just walk away? After all the crap we've been through, you want to go it alone?"

Claire looked at me, her ice-blue eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry. It's just that I think this is it. I don't see us going on much longer." She broke down and started to cry. Both of us had been crying more often these days.

I put my arms around her. I silently cursed the virus, parasite, fungus, or terrorist that caused this nightmare. Claire was young. She should be graduating from college, meeting a nice boy, and getting some cool job to pay for her student loans.

She should be shopping in a mall for handbags.

Claire composed herself. "I'm sorry. I guess it's the starvation talking. I don't want to be alone."

"Me neither." I moved some slightly greasy auburn hair out of her eyes. The tears had made tracks on her dirty face. We both needed a good bath. "I know where there might be some food," I said.

"Where?"

I looked at the ground, and said softly, "Up on the interstate. There still might be a truck or two left."

"Wait a minute, Tiger." Claire looked me in the eyes. "You said the interstate was a bad idea. Too many zombies."

“Yeah, well...desperate times. I think it’s time I took a look. Tomorrow, I’ll find the nearest on-ramp and raid a few trucks. You stay here and hold down the fort.”

Claire was going to argue. “The hell with that. You out risking your life while I stay in this blasted-out creepy mall? No freaking way. I’m going.”

I let out a long sigh. “I knew you were going to say that. Okay. We’ll go together.”

I pulled out a map of the area, and Claire and I started planning tomorrow’s mission to find food. As we discussed our options, the sun went down. The ruined mall grew darker and scarier. Claire was right. The place was damn creepy.

Chapter 2

Rescue or Kidnapping

“Looks pretty clear, Tiger.” Claire handed me the binoculars so that I could take a look at the highway overpass.

Claire and I had hiked a few miles out of town, away from the doomed mall that had been our stop for the night. Now we were crouched in a gas station looking over our objective: a highway overpass. We needed to get to the ramp, get on the overpass, find any supplies, and then get the heck off the highway before anything tried to kill us. The highways were nasty. The undead liked to hang out on the overpasses and hunt down any unfortunate survivors looking for supplies. It was usually a good idea to stay off the interstates, but Claire and I were desperate. We had to find water, at least.

I scanned our objective from one side to another. There had been a bad wreck, and cars and trucks were scattered haphazardly on the road. It was hard to see if anything was moving, but Claire might be right. It looked clear.

“Interstate 20,” I said, reading the signs. “We must be near the Alabama border.” Claire and I switched from our usual westerly direction to traveling south to try and find some warmer temperatures for the winter. “Let’s give it a try. Looks like we found a couple of trucks.” I carefully packed away my binoculars, and we started our walk to the on-ramp. Claire and I went from car to car, trying to stay under cover in case

anything was watching from above. Soon we were standing at the beginning of the on-ramp that went up to the highway.

It was the usual apocalypse parking lot. I could see a wreck at the top of the ramp that paralyzed traffic and caused everybody to abandon their cars. There were a few bodies scattered on the ramp. During the worst part of the zombie swarms, highways became feeding grounds.

I looked down at Claire and drew my shotgun. I needed a little more muscle than my handgun for the on-ramp. There could be a swarm of Red-Eyes on the highway. “Ready, kiddo?”

“Yeah.” Claire gripped her bat tightly.

We started up the ramp, with Claire slightly in the lead. The silent, dusty cars were the only witnesses to our passing. We didn’t stop to look. Just quick glances to make sure nothing was waiting inside to reach out and grab us. The cars were time capsules, frozen at the time of the outbreak. Many of the vehicles were packed to the gills with personal items that people grabbed when they tried to escape the undead hordes. Your whole life, packed into a minivan.

As we got closer to the end of the ramp, the accident scene came into view. The pattern of the cars on the ramp began to break up and become more chaotic. I caught a quick scent of death, and my head went on a swivel. Zombies could be near.

Claire stopped. I almost ran over her.

“Oh God,” she whispered under her breath.

We had come upon a feeding ground. In a small clearing surrounded by a circle of wrecked and burned cars, were piles of half-eaten bodies, dried blood, and dead zombies. There were even a few dogs scattered around on the ground. The

blood had splattered on the cars and ground had turned a rusty brown with time. The survivors had put up a fight; improvised weapons and a few guns were scattered among the piles of bones and decaying corpses. I felt what little food that was in my stomach jump up and prepare to leave.

Claire turned a little green. "I think I'm going to throw up." She dropped her bat and turned away. I stood in horror, unable to turn away. The worst was the children's bodies in the car. They had locked themselves in while the parents fought for the lives of their families.

They fought and died while their children watched.

I finally found Claire behind me, leaning over a little patch of grass. I picked up her bat, walked over, and put a hopefully reassuring hand on her back. "You okay?" I asked. The question seemed so inadequate sometimes.

Claire stood up, and took her bat. She didn't throw up, but was still a little pale. "Yeah...just hate finding this kind of crap." She pointed at the terrible scene with her bat. "You would think we'd be used to stuff like this by now."

I silently disagreed. I would never get used to all the horror of the road. "We'll call it off and try another ramp."

Claire wiped her mouth with her sleeve. "No...no, we need to go on. I'm okay. Let's go."

We quickly made our way past the gore and ran onto the highway. Carefully, and as quietly as possible, we made for the nearest truck that looked like it might have something inside. Our steps quickened as we approached the end of the truck. I prayed something inside might keep us alive.

The first truck was empty. Nothing but broken pallets and bubble wrap littered the floor of the trailer.

“Dammit,” Claire said under her breath.

“Let’s try that one.” I said, pointing at the next truck down the road. It had been in an accident, nearly jackknifing on the overpass. The trailer was twisted slightly at an odd angle. We ran at a slight jog to the door. It was closed, which was a good sign. I opened it up and looked inside the dark trailer. The smell of dead body wafted out lightly and enveloped us. Claire and I looked at each other. Something horrible could be curled up inside, waiting for us.

“I’ll check it out,” Claire said. Before I could argue, she hoisted herself up into the trailer and headed inside. She disappeared into the darkness, with bat ready.

After what seemed like an eternity, I called into the blackness of the truck. “What’s going on in there? Did you find anything?”

After a short pause, which caused me to break out into a cold sweat, she finally answered. “I’m all right. The smell was the driver, I guess. His body is at the front. Come on in...I found something.”

I climbed into the trailer and was greeted by a wonderful sight. One pallet of multicolored bottles of thirst-quencher-type drinks, still wrapped in plastic, and a half a pallet of bottled water. Another pallet of canned food had been broken up and mostly raided, but a few spare cans were spilled on the floor of the trailer. Claire stood at the water pallet, smiling from ear to ear. “You were right, Tiger.”

I already had my knife out and was cutting the plastic wrap on the bottled drinks. I grabbed two lemon-lime colored beauties, pulled them out, and tossed one to Claire. We cracked them open and managed to set an all-time record for the least time

required to down a twenty-ounce bottle of liquid. Without even a slight pause, we opened two more. Orange, this time. They went down just as fast. I don't think we realized how dehydrated we were.

After our thirst was satisfied, we sank down to the floor. Claire wiped her mouth, and let out a little belch. "Excuse me, but damn, that's good."

"You said it." I could actually feel my body re-hydrating as it soaked up the liquid. A little energy began to return. "These are pretty powerful drinks."

"Yeah." Claire looked a lot better. "I'm probably going to pee for a week, though." She giggled a little bit. She gathered up a few of the spilled cans of food, and read a few of the labels. "Hmm...mostly fruit cocktail and pears. Wish it was better."

"That's okay. Pears and fruit will keep us going for a while." I crammed a few cans of pears in my backpack. Claire did the same. There was life-giving fluid in the fruit too.

We sat back and relaxed for a minute. I caught sight of two boots jutting out from behind some packing material. "I guess that's the driver," I said.

Claire looked at poor devil in the corner. "Yeah. I guess so. Wonder what happened?"

I rubbed my tired eyes. "Probably locked himself in here to escape from the undead. Maybe he killed himself."

"Tough way to go." Claire took another swig of her drink. "Should we check out a few more trucks?"

"Let's do it. I would like to find some more substantial food than just canned fruit. We'll check out a few cars, too." My confidence was slowly returning.

“Sounds good,” Claire said, grabbing her bat.

We took a few more bottles of water and food in our backpacks, and made our way to the door. I made a mental note of the truck’s location if we needed it later. Claire reached the door first, then froze in place. “We’re in trouble.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

I heard a commotion outside the truck. When I joined Claire in the doorway, I knew we had a problem. What I saw made my heart sink to my feet. There were about a dozen Red-Eyes picking their way through the wrecked cars and trucks. They were headed our way from the direction of the on-ramp that we had just used to get into this mess.

We had to run. Claire and I hit the ground at full speed. We were going up the highway away from the zombies, headed west I think. As we ran, another problem cropped up. More Red-Eyes, coming the other way, blocked our escape. We stopped in our tracks. Claire and I were surrounded by undead on two sides, with a long drop off the overpass as an alternative.

“Now what?” Claire yelled over the moaning corpses.

I looked around in a state of panic. We had nowhere to go. Soon the zombies would get through the wreckage and overrun us. Claire and I were trapped on the overpass. All of a sudden, it was a bad situation.

I drew my handgun. “We’ll have to fight our way through,” I said. “We’ll take out the ones ahead of us on the highway, make a hole, and run like hell, okay?” It was a lot of Red-Eyes to fight while running, but we had done it before. Success wasn’t guaranteed, but we had a chance.

She took my hand. “Okay.” A faint smile crossed her lips.

We turned west, toward the zombies that were now making their way through the wreckage. They stepped over each other to get to us. The dozen or so behind us were also getting close to getting through. They looked hungry. Claire and I may have been the first prey on the highway in weeks.

“Ready?” Claire nodded. We took a few steps with our weapons - my gun and Claire’s trusty bat raised. The battle for our survival had begun yet again.

Then the world exploded.

The ground shook as someone or something started shooting a very large and loud weapon. Claire and I hit the ground and tried to make ourselves as small as possible. My ears rang from all the noise. Claire was yelling directly at me, but her voice was muffled. We both dove for cover behind a nearby silver sedan.

From our hiding place, I took in the destruction. Most of the first group of Red-Eyes coming from behind us was splattered all over the interstate. The remainder had their legs and arms blown off and were now crawling around trying to escape the rain of hot lead. As I began to wonder what happened, the mystery weapon spoke again in its loud voice.

This attack was directed at the other group of Red-Eyes which had been approaching from the other direction - the ones we were all set to run through to freedom. It had been a more complete attack. The Red-Eyes that had been coming through the wreckage were disintegrated. Nothing remained. The zombie threat had been eliminated. My ears began to clear up so Claire’s voice became clearer.

“What the hell happened?” she said, looking around. Small bits of insulation and debris, stirred up in all the gunfire, were

settling in her hair like fine gray snow.

Before I could answer, I heard a strange noise behind us on the highway. It was a noise I hadn't heard in a great while. It sounded like a big diesel engine with turbos winding up. Gears changed, and the sound rose and fell as the vehicle approached. It was a large, rectangular, off-white truck with six big wheels. It had a metal plow-like device attached to the front. Painted on the side was "UN" in big black letters, crossed out in spray paint. As it approached, a mount on the roof, loaded with a very sinister-looking large caliber machine gun, folded itself down and disappeared. The zombie-killer had done a good job.

Instead of stopping at the vehicular carnage on the overpass, it crashed right through. The plow in front cut through cars like they were children's toys. Claire and I cringed as several Red-Eyes were run over without remorse. The odd-looking vehicle rolled onto the overpass and stopped, air brakes screeching in protest.

Nothing happened at first. "These guys sure know how to make an entrance," Claire said.

"Yeah. It's marked for the United Nations," I said. "Didn't know they had trucks like these. I wasn't aware that peace-keepers needed zombie-destroying, roof-mounted guns."

We stood there for a few more seconds. Our saviors just sat there, diesel engine burbling at idle. Something was about to happen. I could feel it. For a moment, I thought maybe Claire and I should run away.

A door opened from the side, and several uniformed troops poured out. They were in city camo, with American flags, helmets, and gas masks. All carried serious looking rifles. It

was an army straight out of the end of the world. They went from car to car, taking positions and eliminating remaining zombies. One of the soldiers had a small radio, and seemed to be talking to headquarters.

Claire and I walked to a clear spot on the overpass to meet the soldiers. One approached me. He looked like the squad leader. His gun was down, but ready. I extended my hand in friendship.

“Thanks, guys. You came -,” I started to say.

“Hands up!” The soldier raised his gun.

We stood dumbfounded at the command. “Hands up! Now!” the soldier said, with a little more anger in his voice. Claire and I obeyed.

“Have you been bitten?” he barked at us. We shook our heads no in unison. He turned and waved two more soldiers in our direction. “Search them. Make it snappy. We’ve got to get outta here.”

The two soldiers started to search us. They took our weapons and went about searching our pockets and bodies for more. After that, they lifted our shirts and checked our stomachs and backs for zombie bites. They also checked our arms and legs. We didn’t resist. I think we were in shock. “All clear, sir!” one of the soldiers said to his superior.

“Get them in the truck.” He turned to his squad. “We are moving out. Let’s go!”

The squad started back to the truck. One of the soldiers nodded his head towards us and said, “Let’s go.”

Claire and I obeyed. At least we weren’t in handcuffs. Claire looked at me and started to say something, but I put my finger

to my lips to tell her to stay quiet. No sense volunteering any information about us. Besides, they had a lot of weapons, including a nasty one attached to the roof of their vehicle.

They herded us into the armored truck, and we sat down on one of the seats. If the outside of the former United Nations wonder truck was weird, the inside was even weirder. It looked like a mobile command center, all state-of-the-art electronics and wall-to-wall buttons and switches. The troops all came inside and silently sat down around us. The door closed, causing a brace of little white lights to come on overhead. I heard the powerful diesel engine come off idle, and we were off.

Claire was sitting across from me, looking worried. I gave her an everything-will-be-all-right look. After all, the uniforms were American, the vehicle was from the UN, and we were not being restrained or anything. They took our weapons, but that was probably just a precaution.

Still, I had to wonder as we picked up speed and drove away from the overpass: Was this a rescue or a kidnapping?

Chapter 3

Wallace and Odegard

We rode in silence for a few hours.

With no windows in the armored truck, I couldn't see where we were going. It was west, I think. A couple of times, I was tempted to ask the stoic, silent soldiers what our final destination was, but I think they were under orders not to talk to us. The only voices I heard were the vehicle operators giving status reports to some base. Occasionally, I would feel the truck turn. We must be off the highway and on the secondary roads. I felt helpless. I didn't know where we were or where we were going.

I didn't like not knowing where I was. This was beginning to feel like a kidnapping.

Claire was sitting across from me looking nervous. When we first hit the road, she was grabbing the seat so hard her knuckles turned white. I told her through facial expressions to be calm down. Eventually, she relaxed a little. After so many weeks on the road together, we could practically read each other's minds.

The truck made another turn, ran for a bit at full speed, then stopped with a whoosh of brakes. The side door opened, and another uniformed soldier stepped into the vehicle. He had a medical insignia stitched on to his shoulder, along with the flag of the United States. He stepped in front of Claire

and kneeled down. The medic-soldier fumbled around in his pocket and produced a small penlight. He turned it on, gently grasped Claire's chin, and shined the bright light into her baby blues. He checked both eyes, then waved at the two soldiers seated on her right and left.

"She's okay. Bring her in," he said. The soldiers stood up, and they escorted her off the vehicle.

The medic turned and repeated the process with me. The soldier was a young fellow, only about twenty years old or so. I noticed he wore sneakers instead of boots. Really weird footwear for a soldier, I thought. He stepped in close. A light shadow of beard was on his face, and he was chewing some kind of gum. He looked closely at my eyes.

"He's good. Kind of bloodshot, but okay." He nodded to the soldiers seated near me. They stood up, and I was escorted off the truck.

I exited the truck into some kind of garage or quarantine building. Tables and chairs were set up along one wall, along with some small showers. The extra soldiers from the truck marched off into a hallway to another section of the building. A guard closed a chain-link fence behind them.

Claire was seated at one of the tables. Two men, one older with snow-white hair and in uniform, and one in a dress shirt and tan pants, were asking her questions. She looked a little stressed. I was directed to another table and told to sit down.

"What's going on? Who are you guys?" I asked. Maybe I was overtired or something, but I was starting to get a little concerned.

The soldier took one of his hands off his gun, and pointed one of the fingers at the ground. "Just sit down." I sat. What else

could I do? Really didn't fell like being shot. I glanced over at Claire. The questioning was over, and they were taking blood. "Wait a minute. What are they doing to her?"

"She is being processed. You're next. Just stay seated."

Processed? Sounds like they were going to cut us up and eat us for dinner.

White-Hair Soldier Boy and Tan Pants finished with Claire, and started to walk over. They left her under the watchful eye of a guard, a cotton ball on her arm where they took blood. She looked at me and shrugged.

The white-haired soldier walked up and extended his hand. "Hello. John, is it?"

"Yeah." I took off my glove and grasped his hand. He had a strong handshake. It was the handshake of a career tough guy. His face broke out into a grin. The lines in his face made him seem older than when I first saw him.

"Great. I'm General Ray E. Wallace. Your little lady over there told us your name." He gestured over his shoulder. "This smart-looking fellow with the glasses is named Keith Odegard. He's my computer and process guy." He shook my hand with great enthusiasm. "Always glad to meet another survivor." His voice was smooth and tinged with a Kentucky or maybe a Virginia accent. There were some small stars on his shirt. At least he looked like a general.

"What the hell is going on? Where are we?" I asked.

"In due time, John, in due time. First, ole Odegard here wants to ask you some questions, and we need a blood sample. Okay?"

I calmed down a little. "Okay. Ask away."

Without saying a word, Odegard sat down and put a laptop on the table beside me. He opened it and tapped a few keys. It was an actual working computer. It had been nearly a year and a half since I had seen one.

“Do you have an Internet connection? I’d like to see how my stocks are doing,” I joked. Wallace let out a little laugh. Odegard looked up, and adjusted his glasses.

“Actually, no, we don’t. The facility has a built-in information network. We salvaged a few databases and transferred them to this facility: tax and property records, college transcripts, DMV, credit reports.”

Wallace shook his head. “He was kidding, Odegard.”

Odegard glanced at his boss. “Oh.” He turned back to look at me. “Very funny. I need to ask you a few questions. Okay?”

“Shoot.” I leaned in.

Odegard tapped a few keys. “First, your name. John M. Linder. correct?”

“Yes.” I hoped they didn’t have my DMV records. I had a few outstanding citations.

Odegard tapped a few more keys. “The M is for?”

“Michael. My father’s name.”

A few more tapped keys. “Telecom engineer, freelance. Age forty, born nineteen seventy five in Atlanta, Georgia to Michael and Beth Linder. One sister... Angela Linder, age thirty-five.”

“I’m forty-one. My birthday was a few weeks ago. The family info is correct.” I thought about my mother and sister. Angela was working in Hong Kong when the outbreak started. Mom was living north of Atlanta. I hope they weren’t part of the

army of the undead. Dad was gone. He died a few years ago. I hadn't thought of my family in a while. It made me a little melancholy.

Odegard tapped some more keys on his computer. "Forty-one...Okay. Wife: Gia Marie Linder, age thirty-eight. What happened to her?"

I didn't answer at first. A picture of my lost wife flashed in my mind. It was Sunday, and she was reading the paper. Gia always liked to pretend she read the editorials and the main section first, but I knew she always grabbed the funnies to read first thing. I could see her curled up on the chair in our rental house living room, her long legs and bare feet curled up under her. I could almost smell her. Like flowers, only stronger.

"Don't know," I managed to croak out. "I never found her."

Odegard stopped typing. "It's okay. I'll put her down as 'missing.'"

The questions were killing me, and I felt worn out, old, and a little depressed. I guess some tears showed up in my eyes. Odegard looked a little concerned. "Are you okay? I have a few more questions."

"I'm fine. Just a little tired," I answered.

Wallace interrupted the questioning. "We can ask them later, Keith." He looked at my eyes, and called over a medic. "Lets just get a blood sample and get this man to bed."

Odegard stood up. "He might be suffering from post-traumatic stress. He might not be as fit as you think he is, General." He straightened his glasses and looked in my eyes.

"That's enough, Keith." Wallace gave Odegard a look that cut

him off. The medic arrived with a needle and a length of elastic to expose one of my veins. It was the same medic that had checked me out in the truck, now changed into medical wear. He tied the band on my arm and prepared the sample jar for my blood.

I strained to catch a glimpse of Claire at the next table through all the people. Two guards were leading her away to the hallway out of the garage. They were taking her away. She glanced back and said in a loud voice, “John... help! I don’t know where they’re taking me!” She began to struggle. One of the guards grabbed her by the arm and was pulling her away.

They were separating us. I didn’t like that.

Even though the medic was taking blood, I tried to stand up. I looked at Wallace, who was quietly talking to Odegard, and said, “Where are they taking her? Who the hell are you guys?” My voice echoed in the vast space of the garage.

“Take it easy, John,” Wallace said in a calm, syrupy voice. “She’s going to quarantine for a few days. You’ll see her soon.”

Quarantine? I chose not to believe him. “I don’t want us to be separated. Let me go!” I tried to stand, but the medic and two guards held me down. My rage began to build, and I started to fight. The guards grabbed me and held me down. The battle had begun. “Where is she going?” I yelled, as the guards restrained me.

Wallace nodded to the medic, and I felt a needle go into my arm. A warm fluid gushed into my veins, and I started to feel lightheaded and a little dizzy. I tried to fight it, but blackness began to overwhelm me. I fell to the floor.

The bastards had drugged me. Soon, the blackness drew over

me like a sheet on a dead body. Very soon, I found that I didn't really care about Claire any more. In fact, I didn't care much about anything.