



SIX FEET FROM HELL:
UNITY

JOSEPH A. COLEY

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BY

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CHAPTER 1

April 17, 2022 – 1434 hours – Tazewell, Virginia

Joe finally had the target in sight. He had tracked it nearly all day, waiting for the moment when he could pull off a shot. He was tired, hungry and sweating profusely, even in the cool spring air. As he eased forward, a briar patch snagged his pants leg, slowing his pursuit. He hastily untangled the patch from his legs and looked back up. The target was gone, but he could still faintly hear it. The lush green surroundings had made it difficult for him to keep track of the objective. The underbrush was much easier to track in when it was dead and dry, the crunching of dead leaves and twigs gave away even the most elusive of prey.

Joe stepped forward slowly. The upside of the wet ground was that he made little noise as he crept. Slowly, heel to toe, one foot after another, he moved towards a clearing, praying that his intended mark was still there. The canopy above him rustled ever so slightly in the spring breeze, carrying the sweet smell of honeysuckle across his nose. The fragrant scent had a calming effect on him. It reminded him of better times. It prompted memories of springs and summers past. He'd spent most of his life outdoors in both good weather and, but the fragrant aromas that popped back up in the spring always made him feel like those years that passed had never left him.

Joe eased forward and made it to the end of the tree line. The lush, green rolling hills in front of him were overgrown from years of neglect. Nature had a beautiful way of reclaiming what once was. The area looked like farmland for growing and baling hay, but it was obvious that task had not been done for some time. Joe stepped out from the woods and into the open. As he gingerly dropped to one knee, he raised his shotgun – borrowed from Cornbread and loaded with a special shell he'd designed – and aimed. The head of his target bobbed ever so slightly as it moved slowly across the field.

wasn't much taller than the grass that surrounded it, but Joe could make out the slight movement nonetheless. He brought the shotgun tight against his shoulder and slowly eased his right index finger on the trigger. He squinted against the sunshine as it peeked through the clouds ahead of him. The target's head popped up once more, just above the grass, about fifteen feet away. It stopped and perked up.

Joe squeezed the trigger.

The shotgun boomed in the spacious valley. The turkey fell, its head gone from the top of its long slender neck. Whatever Cornbread had loaded in the shell, it worked. The large bird fell where it had stood a few moments before, minus a head, and very much deceased.

"Bout damn time!" Joe said exasperatedly. He lowered the Mossberg and stood up.

Joe racked the next round, just in case, and threw the shotgun over his shoulder. Footsteps bounded behind him as they mashed down brush. Joe turned slowly to see Rick fast approaching. Joe had told him to hold position behind him until he could secure his target. Rick slowed his approach as he noticed Joe's relaxed bearing. He carried Joe's suppressed M4 at low ready, scanning back and forth in case of something a little more sinister than turkeys heard the shot. He stepped out of the trees and into the clearing. As he saw Joe, he slung the rifle over his shoulder.

"Haha! There's gonna be some good eatin' tonight! Good shot, dad!"

Joe grinned and walked over to where the dead turkey lay. He'd managed to take off the top several inches of the bird's neck as well as obliterating its head. There was no mistaking the power of whatever Cornbread had loaded into the twelve-gauge shells. One of the ingredients of the shells glinted as Joe picked up the bird by the feet. Joe dragged the bird away from its original spot and handed it to Rick. Rick grabbed the bird by the feet as Joe's attention was pulled towards the shiny, metallic flicker.

"What is it, dad?" Rick asked as he tried to look over his father's shoulder.

Joe picked up the metallic sliver and showed it to Rick. "Dimes," Joe laughed. "Probably about

buck fifty or so, I'd guess."

"Well it sure as hell did the trick," Rick laughed as he motioned Joe back to the woods. "C'mon Curtis just hollered on the radio. He said Captain White is more unruly than usual. He's bitching about being hungry again."

Joe let out a deep sigh. Annoyed, he stomped back towards Rick. "Well, I told that one-legged fucker whenever he decided to talk we'd give him a little more to eat. It's his own damn fault. Radio Curtis back and tell him we'll be back in a little while. Tell him we got dinner, too."

Rick grabbed the small radio from off his Load Bearing Vest and keyed it up. "Rick to Curtis, do you copy?"

"Yeah go ahead, Rick," Curtis' voice came over the tinny speaker.

"We're on our way back with dinner. Dad says the usual. As soon as Captain White starts talking we will give him whatever he wants."

"Well he's still not saying anything worth a shit. He said its inhumane how we're treating him and some very unpleasant things about my mother. What did you guys bag for dinner tonight?"

"Turkey. And dad says Captain White can shove the Geneva Convention up his ass," Rick said winking to his father.

Curtis laughed over the radio. "I'll relay the message. Y'all hurry back with dinner. Curtis out."

Joe let out a healthy laugh as he grabbed the turkey from Rick and tossed it over his shoulder. "Couldn't have said it better myself, bud. C'mon, let's get this to somebody that knows how to clean and cook it. I'm starving."

"We'd get back a lot faster if you would just ride one of the damn horses, dad. We got a half dozen of 'em and you never seem up for riding one," Rick said. He was trying to elicit an answer why his father didn't care for equine transportation. The stable of horses was always available for whoever wanted to take one out. Joe just wasn't that anxious to ride something that unstable. The

horses weren't skittish around zombies, but you never knew when it would start to affect them.

“They’re just too loud for hunting. If we get a chance to go somewhere close by, I promise I will take one of ‘em out for a ride, but until then, I prefer to stay on foot or in a Dodge.”

“Sounds good, dad. Not to be the pessimistic one, but when do you think Captain White is gonna talk? It’s been, what, four months now? I figure if he ain't talked by now, he's not gonna.” Rick quickly changed the subject, catching his father off guard.

As Joe thought it over, he realized Rick was right. It had been a little over four months since they had captured Captain Marcus White a.k.a. “The Captain” and they were still no closer to finding out what Lieutenant Wyatt’s intentions or whereabouts were. There was an entirely likely chance that Captain White honestly didn't know where he was, but they had kept him prisoner since Christmas nevertheless. Joe had steadily decreased White’s food rations in an attempt to make him more pliable but it was just pissing him off. Even though Captain White had been a Marine, it was only a matter of time before he cracked. Joe took the easier route of trying to get information out of him slowly instead of forcing it out all at once. Neither method had been successful so far, but he remained optimistic.

“I think that he *will* talk, eventually. He doesn’t have any other choice. His boys are obviously not coming for him and he has very little to bargain with other than information. Remember what happened when we he woke up after I’d shot him? I don’t think he’s as tough as he makes out to be. I think he’s just too goddamned hardheaded for his own good.”

Joe thought back to what had happened when they brought Captain White back to Tazewell. Shortly after Joe shot him, White had passed out from the pain. They brought him back into town and stitched him up and make sure that he would be a viable asset. In the heat of the moment, Joe didn't realize that shooting him probably wasn't such a great idea, or the best way to get information out of him. They had set up a sentry to watch him as he healed. It took nearly two days for White to wake up from his coma, and when he had, the first thing he'd done was bawl his eyes out. The pain was too intense for him to bear, he'd complained. Joe had ordered that no pain medications given to him, and

that had sent the Captain into another crybaby session. Never mind they didn't have any pain medication other than moonshine, it had broken him nonetheless. His pain had turned to anger after a few days and he'd clamped up tight since then. The only time he spoke was to hurl insults at whoever drew the short straw of guarding him.

“You're probably right, but now that it's gotten a little warmer out I think we should increase our security some more. I think that it's time that we made the OP's in Bluefield and Richlands. Even if his boys aren't coming back for him, we need to prepare for 'em anyway. It never hurt having at least a listening post on either end of the county,” Rick said as they trudged back through the woods. They were only about an hour away from the wall, but lugging the turkey around now made it seem like twice that distance.

Joe looked across to his son curiously. “And who is gonna take people out there? You?”

Rick walked in front of his father, turned and backpedaled as he continued. “I could if you'd let me. I just think that we'd be a lot better off if we had a little bit of a heads up, you know, in case the Peacemakers figure out where we are.”

“I'd rather someone else do it, honestly.”

Rick stopped abruptly in front of his father. “Why? You don't think I can do it, do you?”

Joe let out another deep sigh and looked his son directly in the eye. “It's not that I don't think you can do it. I'm almost positive that you can, but I spent too long away from you and I'm not going to send you out without me, no matter what. I had to sit and worry about what was happening to you on that damned oilrig for nine years, son. I'm not letting you out of my sight for a good while.” Joe started walking again, past his son, and back towards Tazewell. “C'mon, Rick, people are waiting for dinner.”

Rick spun around. “Look, I understand that you don't want me out of your sight, but I'm not a kid anymore. I don't remember being one at all, to put it bluntly. I never liked the oilrig, and I don't blame you for what Mom did. The difference between me and her is that I can handle the stress a he

of a lot easier than she can.”

Joe thought back to his estranged wife. She had left him in a crisis at a very inopportune time. It wasn't her fault; she was simply looking out for herself. Joe couldn't blame her for wanting to shield herself from the fear and apprehension out of her life. Looking back, he would have done the same, given the opportunity. Instead, he had trudged on, doing what he did best – helping others. It had served him well thus far in his life, and he wasn't about to stop now. Being the one to call when the shit hit the fan was his specialty. That being said, he still hadn't heard from his ex-wife for over a year now. The last time they spoke, it had been uneventful and seemed a little abrupt to him. Perhaps she had found her center, maybe she had found someone else with a different take on what life should be like. Far be it for him to stand in the way of happiness, he hoped that whatever decision she had made, that she was happy with it.

“I know you think I'm being overprotective, but I'm just trying to spend what time I've got left with my family. I want to make the best of a bad situation. I'm slowly coming to terms with the fact that I'm not getting any younger, so I'm gonna make the best of what I've got.”

“Does that blonde that you've been talking to figure into that, too?” Rick nudged his father as they walked alongside.

Joe's face went flush as he smiled. “I didn't think anybody had noticed that yet.”

Rick threw his head back and laughed. “Ha! Really? In a town that's walled in and only populated by a little over a hundred people, you thought you could keep a secret?”

Joe feigned aggravation and waved a dismissive hand. “I know, I know. I didn't think it was such a hot topic for discussion.”

Rick patted his father on the back. “Don't worry about it. Everyone deserves to be happy. And who am I to stand in the way of that?”

Joe glanced at his son and raised an eyebrow. “So you're okay with it?”

“Yeah. Why not? Don’t think that just because you don’t have divorce papers from Mom that you
can’t be with somebody else. I’m sure she would agree with me. Besides, she’s in Georgia and I don’t
think she’s looking to come back anytime soon,” Rick replied. “Life’s too short – especially nowadays
– to not be happy.”

Joe hugged his son with his free arm. “Thanks buddy. I appreciate that.”

CHAPTER 2

April 17, 2022 – 1439 Hours

Joe and Rick approached the southeast side of town. As they neared the hospital, they could see the wall. The hill the former hospital stood on made for a good vantage point, but it hadn't been secured, so it sat derelict. It was a creepy sight after so many years of nonuse. The once bright white of the exterior walls were replaced with a film of dingy green slime. The overgrown grass and trees complemented the off-colored hospital, showing the world that it no longer needed man's help. The hospital sat only a hundred yards away from the edge of the wall, but it might as well been a hundred miles. The workforce that it would take to move the wall around the building was just not feasible now. Between security for the workers, clearing the building, and physically moving the wall itself, it would be a massive undertaking.

As they walked by, Joe studied the hospital carefully. It would be a nice addition to the walled-off area of the town, if he could find a use for it. The motel was large enough to accommodate the residents, but it was getting a little crowded inside. Two and three people to a room were starting to grate on people's nerves. The citizens were used to not having any privacy, but it still unnerved them. It wouldn't be long before there would be a few more additions to the populace, with three of the town's women pregnant. One was due in less than a month; the other two had just begun to show a small pooch, probably close to four months along.

There had been talk of stretching the boundaries of Tazewell's wall since shortly after Joe and his team had arrived. The consensus was to leave it alone, but since the weather had begun to warm, the people were restless. There were only so many hunting parties, scavenging crews, and guard duties to keep residents busy. It was better to keep them occupied with a long-term goal than some immediate

need.

The undead were less of a presence in the last few months. There had been few incidences with zombies at the wall and even fewer narrow escapes with them. No one had been bitten in the last few months, thankfully. The residents of Tazewell were not immunized. For reasons unknown to Joe and his team, the residents had not been vaccinated. Shortly after imprisoning Captain White, everyone received a checkup, with none having the “V” on their right arm. It was unsettling for Joe, but the rest of town seemed not to notice. It had been long enough since they became aware of what being bit and dying meant; they took all necessary precautions. Bodies were buried outside the wall, more than a mile away. As soon as a resident passed away, they received a railroad spike to the skull, and the spike was taken away to the improvised cemetery. Graves were marked with whatever was available; usually two-by-fours nailed together did the trick.

Joe came to the threshold of the wall and looked for the sentry on duty. There was not one to be found. Annoyed, he banged on the wall with his makeshift door code. After banging out *J-A-C* Morse code on an aluminum trailer side, the guard appeared. He was a kid, maybe twenty, named Boyd. Boyd had a penchant for being a little overzealous when it came to his guard duty, so whatever had taken his attention away from the wall must have been interesting.

Boyd bounded up to the catwalk and darted his head left and right before seeing Joe and Rick standing about five feet away from the wall, about twenty feet away from him. Dressed in digital ACU camouflage from head to toe, including a patrol cap. Nearly every person in town had the same getup. Camouflage was the fashion of choice in the post-apocalyptic world. You could dress it up how you wanted, but it still didn't sway from the fact that most everyone had the same outfit. Boyd slung his rifle, a weathered Marlin model 336, over his shoulder. The lever-action 30-30 was a little worse for wear, but was deadly accurate nonetheless.

“Sorry, guys! Didn't hear y'all coming! I'll go get the ladder!” Boyd bounced back down the catwalk and yelled for someone on the other side to hand him the aluminum stepladder. Boyd grabbed it and slid the business end of it towards Joe and Rick.

~~Rick stepped up the ladder first, clanging metal the whole way up. He shoved the turkey over the top of the wall towards Boyd, who admired the day's catch.~~

“Woo! We are gonna have a good dinner tonight, fellas! How'd ya'll bag such a big sumbitch! This fucker must be thirty pounds!” Boyd noted.

“Because I had to track the damn thing for almost four hours before I finally got a shot on it,” Joe said as he reached the top of the ladder. Rick extended a helping hand out to his father and helped pull him up. “I'll take that now, Boyd.”

Boyd handed the turkey back to Joe quickly. “Oh yeah, yeah. Sorry Joe.”

“Don't mention it. Just want to get this cleaned and cooking in time for dinner. Have a good one, Boyd. I'll see you at supper.” Joe tossed the turkey over his shoulder and started away from the wall.

Boyd fidgeted with his rifle for a moment before hollering out. “Hey Joe! I got a quick question for you!”

Joe stopped and turned to face the young man. “What is it, Boyd?”

“Well, I've been talking to Larry about helping out a little more here and I just wondered if you could put a good word in for me with him. I'd love to get outside the wall some, and I'm a hell of a shot.” Boyd quickly spoke and eagerly waited for Joe's response.

“I'll see what I can do, Boyd. No promises, though.”

“Thanks man! If you ever need one of your knives sharpened, just holler at me! I'll do yours for free!” Boyd's voice carried louder as Joe walked away. Joe threw a thumb up back at the kid as he continued towards the other side of town.

Once they were outside earshot, Rick leaned in towards his father. “You aren't gonna let him go outside the wall, are you?”

Joe chuckled. “Why not? He's older than you are and you get to go out all the time.”

“I don’t know, he just seems a little...off,” Rick replied.

“In a world where the dead come back to life, the term ‘a little off’ needs a little more clarification. Boyd pulls more guard duty than most of us do. I think we should reward hard work like that. Don’t you?”

Rick shrugged his shoulders as they turned left towards their “chow hall.” The chow hall was the only building within the walled town where food was brought and prepared. It was also the only building in town that had a working gas grill to cook. There was an ample stash of propane tanks and natural gas to cook with stored behind it. In the pre-apocalypse days, it had been a grocery store with a full deli and plenty of food-filled shelves. Now it sat full of tables, chairs, picnic tables, and other places to sit and eat. It was located about a mile from the motel, so working up an appetite going to breakfast was not a difficult task.

“I guess if you trust him, then I should too, right?”

“I never said that I trusted him – he hasn’t had a chance yet – so I say we at least give him a chance to prove himself. We don’t have too many people begging to go out and the ones that do get out are starting to resent when they have to. I think it may be time for a changing of the guard, so to speak. It’s stressful enough around here without having to hate your job on top of it,” Joe pointed out.

“So does that mean I can change jobs if I want to?”

Joe playfully smacked Rick on the back of the head. “You’re stuck with me, boy.”

Rick playfully nudged Joe back and grinned. “Whatever, gramps. I was just gonna ask when I can take over your job, you old fart.”

Joe let out an amused whine. “Son, *nobody* wants my job.”

“What are you talking about? I’d love to have your job. You get to make the decisions; you get to figure out how things are run around here. You and Larry pretty much run this place by yourselves.”

“No, the people run this place. Larry and I just make sure that they have what they need to c

what we ask of them. It's the way government is supposed to work, not the way that it *used* to work."

Rick waved dismissively. "Yeah, but you don't have to worry about being elected. The people pretty much just choose whether or not they want you to keep running this place."

"Yeah, and God forbid they should change their minds. I don't think they'd bother with impeachment; they'd probably just shoot me and be done with it. That's why we keep as many people as happy as we can. We compromise when it's necessary and we hammer our point hard when it's not. People might think that I have the final say in everything, but they don't realize that it's *them* that have the last word."

"Well you'd better hope that Reggie doesn't have the last word when it comes to that."

Joe frowned. Reggie had been a particular thorn in his side since coming back with Captain White. As soon as the team had come back with one more than they left with, he had started complaining. A hardcore liberal, Reggie had declared that we had no right to hold Captain White against his will, despite the atrocities that Joe told about. Joe told of the conscripting, the raids, and the murderous plot against his ZBRA team, among others. Joe had no basis for the argument as both the perpetrators had been killed before they could carry out the mission. Mike reconsidered and managed to keep Curtis alive, his last full measure of devotion was what kept Curtis among the living. Wagner had taken it upon himself to work for "The Captain" not knowing that he was walking into a trap of his own. From what little information Joe had gathered from Captain White, he'd intended to kill Wagner once the job had been completed.

Reggie represented everything that was wrong with the world before the end. He was in favor of trying to strike a deal with Captain White and the Peacemakers, obviously not caring that they would do to him what they had planned to do to Wagner. Reggie had a few sympathizers, but was by far not the majority. Joe thought that it irked Reggie badly. In the days before, Reggie seemed like he would be the person to take up a cause for the simple reason of pissing someone else off. He would have been for gun control when everyone around him was against it. He would be the lone dissenter when the

was an easy decision to be made. He would be the one to complain that killing the wildlife around Tazewell was not only cruel, but against God's will. If the Good Lord wanted the human race to be taken out by the Romero Virus, then who were they to argue.

Reggie did not eat with the rest of the town; instead, he grew his own. He rarely traded with anyone in town apart from taking a few seeds to keep his stash of food and marijuana plentiful. Reggie had grown pot for several years, according to Larry. In another life, Reggie had been an attorney prosecuting the people for the very plant that he now possessed. When it happened that he needed meat, he would fish from the small section of the Clinch River that was within the confines of town. He never left the safety of the walls. He did not have a gun, a conscientious objector to the bitter end.

“Reggie is just happy being Reggie. I don't give a shit if he wants to take up a donation for PETA, he's still just gonna be the lone dissenter when it comes to anything I do. I've tried talking to him, really have, but he won't listen. Besides, he doesn't have anything that we want and we sure as shit don't have anything that he wants. As long as he keeps his bullshit to himself, it'll be live and let live.”

“See, that's why you are one of the people in charge around here. If it was me, I would've kicked his ass out by now,” Rick said half-joking.

“Well we can't just kick people out because we don't agree with what they say. That was one of the big problems *before* the world went to shit. You can't just stuff your beliefs down someone else's throat and then bitch and moan when it doesn't work. This country was founded on the principles that 'all men are created equal' and I think it's high time that we start getting back to that.”

“Amen to that, dad. I'm all for equality and shit, but just don't expect me to respect that kind of behavior from him. He doesn't do shit around here and probably never will. That laziness just doesn't sit right with me. I work my ass off to bring people food and whatever else they need; I just expect a little respect in return. As long as he don't ask for stuff from the rest of us, God bless him. Let him grow good and stoned one night and drown in the river for all I care.”

Joe laughed. "What's got you riled up today?"

"I got guard duty after dinner. And trust me, nothing would suit me better than to just put a bullet in Captain White and be done with him, too."

"Well, I can't be picking favorites around here or people might get the wrong idea," Joe replied. They were less than a quarter-mile from the chow hall now, the giant tan-colored building in sight. Before the zombies, it had been a Food Lion. "I tell you what, Curtis and I will come by and play cards with you some tonight and pass the time. Sound good?"

Rick smiled. "I suppose it's better than sitting there with Jamie and cleaning guns all night long."

"Hey, he keeps all our guns in tip-top shape. Be grateful that he does. Everybody had a specialty around here; his is guns, ammo, and explosives." Joe winked at his son. "Just remember that the next time we have to go out on a mission."

Rick chuckled. "So what is my specialty then?"

"Long-range targets."

"Yeah, but that's only useful for zombies."

"Not necessarily. You've bagged a couple nice deer from long range. Those deer feed the people here. You keep the people happy which makes my job a hell of a lot easier. I appreciate that more than anything, son," Joe said, clapping Rick on the back.

"Thanks, dad." Rick and Joe were now in the parking lot of the old Food Lion. One of the largest buildings inside the wall, the Food Lion served as their chow hall, meeting place, and general social gathering spot. It, like most buildings in town, was a little worse for wear, but served its purpose well. The shelves were taken out and all the interior contents removed except for the kitchen utensils and cooking area. There was ample room in the old store for their "town hall" style meetings, held usually once a week.

Rick and Joe strode into the big building. The early afternoon smell of potatoes and other

vegetables was a daily affair. The kitchen prepared two meals a day most days. It was difficult enough to take care of just those two meals. Most days it was eggs and ham for breakfast, with the occasional addition of potatoes followed by deer or turkey for dinner. There was a garden maintained just outside the limits of the wall, guarded at all times. Corn, potatoes, green beans, and onions were grown near year-round. Any extras were canned and stored on-site. There were a few cases of MRE's left. The were saved for the crews that would have to go out for extended periods. A single MRE had over 2,000 calories and could maintain a person's energy for several days if necessary.

Joe and Rick walked towards the smell of cooking vegetables. Even though it was only three the afternoon, the cooking started early to make sure dinner was ready by six o'clock.

"Hello? Anybody home? Angel, you back there?" Joe hollered as he approached the counter. The glass front of the deli had been taken out, as well as the coolers, leaving just a counter about chi high. The food was served and handed over the counter – the soup kitchen of the apocalypse.

Joe peered over the counter. "Guys?"

An excited little girl ran out from behind the counter, her brown, waist length hair bouncing behind her. She spotted Joe and Rick. Joe recognized her as Victoria, one of the children that Angel took care of during the day. Angel wasn't in charge of the kitchen, but instead took care of the children in town. It wasn't exactly daycare, but the kids were taken care of nonetheless. The parents could drop their children off with Angel and Heather – Heather was the one in charge of the kitchen and go about their day doing whatever needed to be done. The town was a microcosm of its former self, with everyone helping one another.

"Hey Joe! Hey Rick!" Victoria greeted. Her southern accent was so deeply ingrained in her that "Rick" sounded more like "Wick" most of the time. She was only a little over four years old. Her vocabulary and grammar weren't the best, but formal education took a back seat to survival education.

"Hey, Victoria. Where's Angel and Heather? We got us a big 'ol bird for them to cook for dinner. You like turkey?"

“Yes I do! It’s yummy!”

Joe knelt down and ruffled the little girl’s hair. She playfully batted his hand away and laughed. “So where is the babysitter?”

“She’s right here. Sorry fellas, just trying to corral some of the little ones,” Angel said, appearing from back in the kitchen. She smiled and motioned towards Joe and Rick. “I see you brought dinner.”

Joe returned the smile, making eye contact with the blonde-haired woman. She was a full eight years younger than he was, but she had an intelligence that was well beyond her years. Joe had met her a few days after arriving in town. After taking out Captain White, Larry had taken the next few days to introduce Joe and his team to the rest of the town. While some were indifferent to their presence, most welcomed them in with open arms. Angel was one of the ones who had taken to Joe immediately. She was an unmarried, attractive, woman whose fiancé had died in the early days of the apocalypse.

She had narrowly avoided becoming a victim herself when the outbreak started, as she was trapped in her house alone for nearly three days before venturing out. The minute she had walked out she was nearly shot by a tall, skinny kid who was raiding the neighbor’s houses near her. The kid was a horrible shot – mainly due to excessive hours of *Call of Duty* – and his shots sailed wide left. She darted back inside and waited until someone came knocking. Several days later, someone finally did. It was Larry and several others that took her from her residence and escorted her to the motel for safekeeping. In that time, Angel had become fast friends with Larry’s wife, Paige, and some of the other families. She had spent the last near-decade becoming a hardened zombie killer with a soft side and a fondness for babysitting. It was her idea to start the makeshift daycare and give the parents in town a break if need be. The parents always had a secondary person lined up to take care of the children if they did not return. The children were always taken care of.

“I would say to take a picture ‘cause it’ll last longer, but I haven’t seen a camera in years,” Angel said, winking at Joe.

Joe hadn’t realized that he was staring at her until she spoke. He wasn’t sure if he was in love, b

there were stirrings in his heart that he hadn't felt for a long time. It was a wonderful feeling, and one that he hoped would continue. He blushed and looked away coyly. "Sorry, just daydreaming."

"Daydreaming while staring at me, huh." Angel again winked at Joe. "Must've been one hell of a dream."

More blushing. "Yes ma'am. I was wondering if you..."

"Curtis to Joe." The tinny speaker attached to the radio crackled. Joe growled inaudibly and keyed up the radio, not taking his eyes off Angel as she waited.

"Yeah, Curtis. What is it?"

"Need you over at the jail, buddy. Larry is on his way. We got something we need to talk to you about."

Joe frowned at the radio. "What does Captain White want now?"

"He says he's ready to talk, but he'll only speak to you."

"Roger that. It's about fuckin' time. Send Larry over with the Dodge to pick Rick and I up. We're over at the chow hall droppin' off dinner."

"Copy. He's on the way."

Joe clipped the radio back on his LBV and looked back up to Angel. "Duty calls. You and Heather take care of dinner. I'm gonna expect good things out of you if you keep up that sunny disposition much longer."

Angel smiled. "You can expect a lot more than that if you'd like."

Joe couldn't help but blush just one more time.

CHAPTER 3

April 17, 2022 – 1513 Hours

“I don’t know why he’s all the sudden changed his mind, but I don’t like it. It doesn’t make any sense. I’d take whatever he has to say with a *big* grain of salt,” Larry said as he drove on through the center of town to the other end of the wall.

Larry wheeled the truck alongside the building and threw it in park.

“Let’s go see what he wants,” Larry said as he exited the truck.

The Tazewell County Jail was a four-story steel and concrete structure. It sat on Main Street in town and represented the far edge of the wall. The building was only accessible from one side, the other being the exit for the wall. To the left and right of the exit were phone poles driven into the ground and pavement. Railroad ties and old four-by-four wood planks made up the wall itself. The wall was considerably higher, measuring at least twelve feet tall as far as Joe could tell. The jail itself made up a large chunk of it. To get in from the outside required someone to be at the sally port of the jail. Once inside, the myriad of locked doors ensured that if you were inside, then you were meant to be there. Six locked doors stood between the sally port and the inside of town. Plus, having somewhere to keep prisoners was never a bad thing

Two guards were posted outside Captain White’s room. The first man was about fifty years old but had a face that told the story of a rough life. He was one of the few men in town Joe had seen that did not sport a full beard, opting for a five-o’clock shadow look instead. He carried one of the M4 that Joe had brought from Camp Dawson slung over his shoulder, the barrel pointed down.

Joe extended a hand to the man. Being one of the few that he hadn’t met yet, he wanted to make

good impression. “Good afternoon, I’m Joe. I see you’ve got one of my M4’s there, partner. An
judging by the way you’ve got it in chow sling, I’d say that you are prior military.”

The old man cracked a dry smile and reached his hand out to meet Joe’s. A hearty handshake followed. “Jim Crowley. Retired Staff Sergeant, U.S. Army. Did a tour in the first Gulf War and Panama.”

“Nice to have you on board, Jim. Mr. Crowley, you said?”

“Yeah, and I’ve heard all the Ozzy Osbourne jokes a thousand times over. Just Jim will do.”

“Fair enough, Jim. Now, what’s our prisoner talking about? He’s finally ready to talk?”

“Yeah, said that he’s tired of not getting’ shit for food. I guess he’s used to the good life from stealin’ from other people so long. Sorry sack o’shit took more from people than death and taxes did. Curtis interrupted. He stood with Jim Crowley as the other guard for Captain White.

“Well, let’s see what he has to say, then. I’m interested to see what he’s willing to give up,” Joe shifted the Mossberg on his back and drew his .45. He wasn’t going to take any chances with Captain White. He’d had plenty of time to heal up from the last incident that he’d had with Joe, and he did not want a repeat. “Open it up.”

Curtis stepped forward with the large chain of keys and pulled the one for Captain White’s cell. He slid the large, odd shaped key into the lock and turned. There was a soft metallic clink as the lock released. He swung the door open and immediately covered his face.

“Goddamnit White! What the fuck?” Curtis exclaimed.

Captain White sat on a small aluminum bed on the right side of the cell, his hands clasped together and elbows resting on his knees. He seemed unaffected by the horrible smell emanating from the room. He turned his head slowly towards Curtis and let out an evil grin. “I told you I was tired asking permission to take a shit, so I used the facilities.”

Curtis stepped into the room and roughly grabbed White by the elbow, pulling him out of the cell.

offhandedly. Jim closed the door behind him as Joe pointed his .45 at Captain White. “What do you want to talk about, Captain?”

White made a mocking pout face. “Aww. Ain’t it nice that you still call me Captain?”

Joe narrowed his eyes. “Well, calling you ‘shithead’ was just getting old.”

Curtis pulled a set of handcuffs from his belt and cuffed Captain White’s hands behind him. He shoved White down on his knees and told him to cross his legs. The fake leg that he wore just below his right knee turned at an odd angle and pinged against the hard, concrete floor. If he decided to make a move, then that would be the end of him, as Joe kept the .45 pointed dead center in his chest. A one-legged man wasn’t a prime candidate for escaping, but they weren’t taking any chances.

“You said you wanted to talk, so start talking.” Joe stood in front of him, not blinking.

“No. You give me what I want first. I want some goddamned food and better living conditions. You give me that and I will tell you what I know.”

“You tell me what I want to know or I’ll just shove you out the door and let the dead have their way with you instead. I’m tired of fucking around with you, White. You’ve been nothing but a pain in the ass since we brought you here. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve overstayed your welcome. So either tell me something useful or join the ranks of the undead.”

White clamped his jaw. “At least give me some food,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What promise do I have from you that you’ll tell me anything if I do?”

“General Wyatt is the one you want. I can tell you how to get hold of him.”

“Yeah, the sat-phone. Trust me; we’ve tried to get hold of whoever will answer. No dice, cowboy. Tell me something worthwhile.”

“The number isn’t in the phone. I have it in my head. General Wyatt told us to maintain OPSEC on the numbers to reach him. I’ll give it to you, with some conditions, of course.”

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