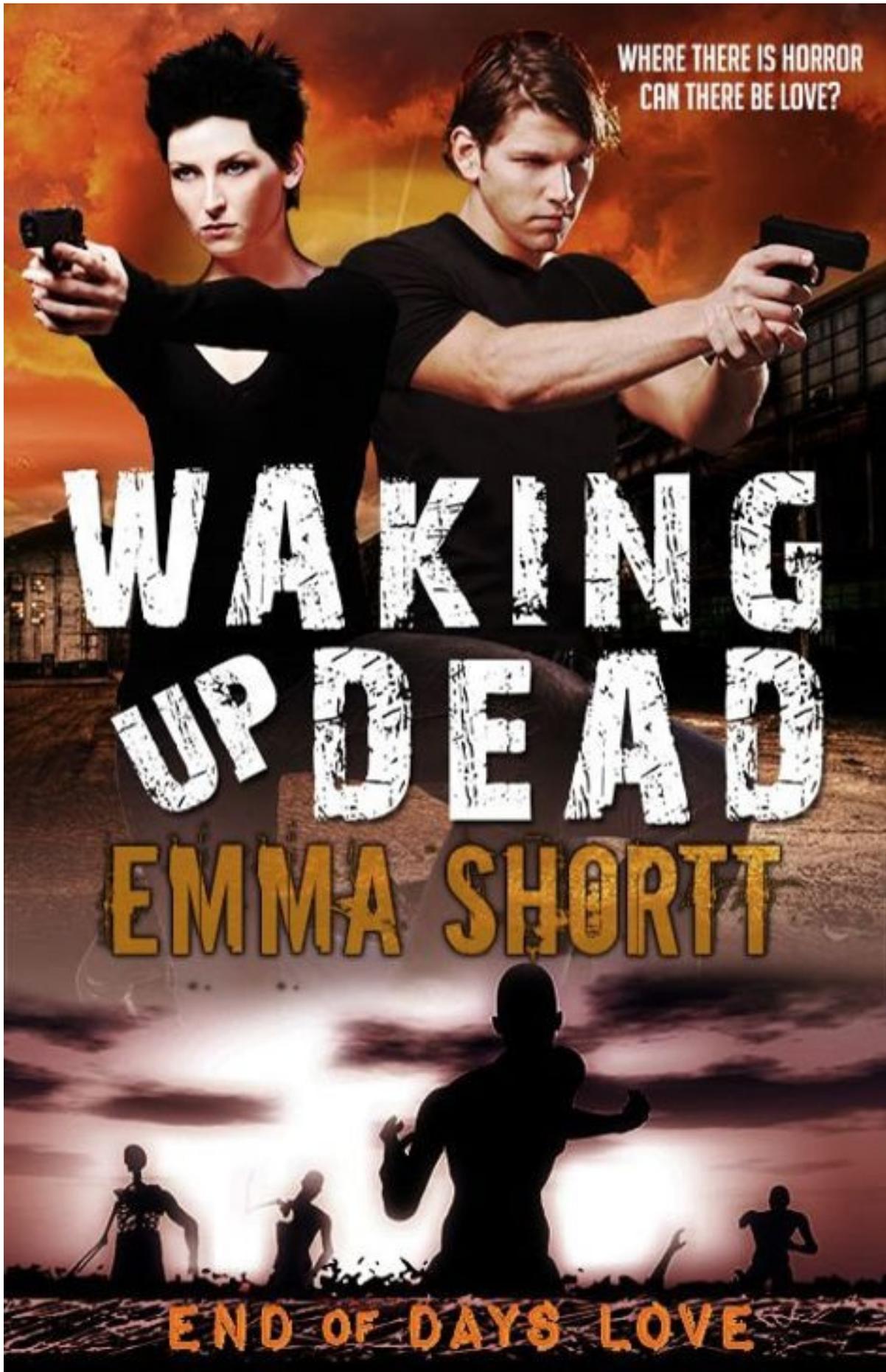


WHERE THERE IS HORROR
CAN THERE BE LOVE?

WAKKING UP DEAD

EMMA SHORTT

END OF DAYS LOVE



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Waking Up Dead

Emma Shortt

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*To Freckles and to Bear.
More than all the numbers, in all the universes.
More than forever.*

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PART ONE

*“ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IF YOU’VE GOT THE NERVE...BUT
SOMETIMES A MACHETE HELPS TOO.”*

JACKSON HART

Chapter One

CHICAGO

Without a doubt the house with the pretty green shutters had food inside of it. Pasta, canned vegetables, tinned meats, hell, it could have a five course, good-to-go, gourmet meal in there for all Jackson Hart knew. Crouched down behind an overturned SUV she could practically hear it all screaming from inside the pantry, and she narrowed her eyes as she assessed the best way to get at it.

Not through the front door. It was probably barred tight with planks of wood, or barricaded with piled-up furniture. Maybe through the back? But the skinny, shadowed alleyway that ran between the house and its fence screamed, *horror movie showdown*, and for all Jackson knew she’d be risking it only to find a blocked-up back door too. The shutters then. How thick were they? Was the glass behind them intact? Jackson hefted Mandy-the-machete and considered the possibilities.

“You’re looking thoughtful there. For the record it doesn’t suit you.”

Those words came from Tyrone, her friend, her only friend, if you wanted to get right down to it. He joined her behind the SUV, swinging his ax as he did so, and making absolutely no attempt to stay hidden.

“I was being stealthy,” Jackson said with a sigh. “You totally just ruined it.”

“Stealthy for who?” he asked. “The rats? There’s only them and us. We checked the street. It’s all quiet.”

Jackson frowned as she looked away from the house and down said street. A backpack, probably a child’s by the size of it, caught her attention, and she frowned as she noticed what looked like a rusty toy truck sticking out of the zipper. The things people had thought to take when they tried to run...it still baffled her.

“Quiet or not, they’re here somewhere,” she said softly. “It’s been almost a day since we saw any of them.”

“Let’s hope for another day and then maybe another.” He paused. “Better yet, let’s hope for a week.”

Jackson almost laughed. “Might as well wish for a working car.”

“I do, sweetheart. Daily. We’re surrounded by wheels and not one of them worth a

damn.”

“Two years and then some pretty much kills everything.”

“Everything but us,” Tye said.

Jackson nodded slowly at the truth of those words, tore her gaze away from the truck, and pointed her machete at the shuttered house. “Enough with the reminiscing. Take a look at that.”

Tye’s gaze followed the line of the blade. A frown spread across his face as he assessed the building from top to bottom. “It looks...”

“Like it probably did two years ago?”

“Yeah.”

“Weird isn’t it?” Jackson said. “I don’t know about your end, but down there,” she tilted her head to the south of the street, “the rest of these million-dollar houses are rocking the post-apocalyptic-makeover vibe. Broken glass, doors hanging off their frames, trash all over the place.”

“And this one stands alone,” Tye said, his frown deepening. “Could be Obama’s. I heard he has a house around here.”

“Had, *had* a house,” Jackson said. “And I’m pretty sure the dead do not make dining distinctions based on fame, or,” she added when Tye opened his mouth to speak, “government office.”

“Unless he went rogue in the beginning. He could still be hanging around.” Tye paused and shook his head. “That’s a weird thought.”

“Weird but not outside the realms of possibility,” Jackson said. “Hence the stealth you just ruined. Something is off, and we can’t ignore it. If there’s food anywhere, it’s hidden in that house. The rest have been picked clean, and this one looks like it’s been protected.”

Tye shot her an incredulous look. “You’re seriously not suggesting there are actual people inside?”

She snorted. “Yep, I’m betting there’s a whole family just waiting to open their arms to us. They’ll have a meal all laid out, hot baths running—”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Jack.”

Jackson shook her head. “You goad me into it. Seriously though, I’m thinking there *were* people still living in there. Not for a while and not now,” she added, holding up her free hand to halt whatever words Tye had been about to say, “but maybe they lasted out longer than the rest of the street. It’d explain why things look different. Better yet, it might mean food.”

Tye stomach gave a grumble. It was far louder than it should have been and Jackson caught his eye.

“Keep it down. That was loud enough for a pack to hear.”

“Can’t help it,” he said. “You keep talking about food. When was the last time we ate, for fuck’s sake? I still can’t believe the university campus was picked clean.”

“It’s crazy,” Jackson agreed, thinking of all those dorm rooms they’d crept through. Each had been viler than the last, full of blood and pus and a million other unidentifiable fluids. Worse, they’d stunk of teen sweat, though how that could be two and more years after those rooms had last been occupied, Jackson didn’t know. “Took a brave person indeed to wander those rooms and clean them out,” she added. “End of the day though, it doesn’t leave us much choice but to hit up Creepyville here. We need some calories in our system as soon as possible, and I’d rather not chow down on rat again.”

“There’s nothing wrong with rat.”

“There’s so much wrong with it I can’t even begin.” She swung Mandy in the direction of the biggest window, forcing Tye to lean back to avoid the super-sharp blade. “I’m thinking we go through the shutters there. We’ll chop through them and then the glass too if there’s any left.”

“That’ll make a bit of noise.”

“Less noise than trying to go through the front door. You know it’ll probably be barricaded up, and besides, didn’t you just say we were okay?”

“I said we are okay for the moment. Let’s not push our luck any more than we have to.”

“So we’ll be quick.”

He hefted his ax, giving it a swing of what Jackson assumed was agreement. “I’m always quick, sweetheart.”

“I bet.”

“You’re not funny.”

They made their way out from behind the SUV, around a Prius that seemed to have collided headfirst with a Dumpster, and across to the sidewalk. It was slippery and Jackson swerved to avoid what looked like a splatter of vomit. It was probably just decomposing vegetation but she shot it a nasty look as she passed.

“Waist-high grass and weeds,” Tye said with a scowl. “Does any look trampled to you?”

She shook her head. “You’re thinking zombie hide-and-seek? They’d have been on us already.”

“That they would. Bastards have no subtlety.”

“Amen for that.”

It took just a few moments to wade through the scraggy vegetation and approach the biggest window. Up close Jackson could see that the house did not look as pristine as it had from the street. The white of the stone was discolored in places by mold, and the wooden slats of the shutters were showing signs of wear and tear. She gave them maybe another year or so before bugs ate their way completely through.

“They’re starting to rot,” she muttered. “Should be easy enough to get through.”

“Along the vertical?” Tye asked.

“Yeah. You take the top hinge. I’ll take the bottom. One swing each should do it.”

The left side shutter came off easily enough, with minimal noise, and they lowered it to the ground, propping it up against the side of the house. Once it was safely out the way they stepped forward and peered through the window frame into the house.

“No glass,” Tye said softly. “And no pieces or shards of it either. At least none that I can see.”

“It’s like someone just carried them away...or cleaned up the mess.” Their eyes met and Jackson frowned. “This is creepy.”

“Creepier inside. There’s no fucking light.”

Jackson tightened her grip around Mandy as she looked into what would once have been a living room. Tye was right; although strips of light came in from the shutters, it was nowhere near enough to illuminate everything. She could make out a couch, a table, and what might be a TV stand, but nothing apart from that. “I wish I still had my flashlight,” she whispered. “I’d sell you for it right now.”

“Who are you selling me to?” Tye asked as he ran his hands along the ledge, probably making sure there were no slithers of glass they’d missed. “If we’re talking a curvy Latina I’ll go happily.”

“Curvy? On the post-apocalyptic diet?”

“Good point. Now stand back and I’ll go in first.”

“You sure?”

“It’s probably my turn. Wait for the signal.”

Jackson nodded as she turned to keep a watch on the street. That damn backpack was still in her line of vision and she scowled at it, unsure why it bothered her so much. It certainly wasn’t the only evidence of abandoned belongings. There were other bags scattered around, most empty, but some full of moldy clothes and useless electrical items. One thing was for sure, none of them had food or bottled water inside. Stuff *that* precious was hidden away. It took creeping around, braving places no sane person ever wanted to visit, to find the good stuff.

Places like this. Jackson let out a slow exhale before turning slightly so that the empty window was in her peripheral vision. She could hear Tye tiptoeing through the eerie room and tightened her grip on her blade, waiting for the damn signal. He’d insisted when they met—almost a month or so ago, though it was hard to keep track of dates any more—that they have one, and they’d debated for hours over what it should be. Not because it was so important, but because it gave them something to talk about beyond the depressing nothing. In the end she’d agreed to Tye’s suggestion of a whistle, one note for all is well and two for start fucking running. More often than not she got the two, and was surprised, was *always* surprised, when just one came.

Jackson took a deep breath, gave the street one last look, then dropped Mandy-the-machete into the room. She felt naked without her weapon and hurried to lift herself on to the ledge and pull herself up, dropping a moment or so later onto the carpeted

floor.

The squelchy, stinking, carpeted floor.

What was that stench? A combination of mold and ammonia? It was strong, almost overwhelming, and Jackson clamped her lips shut as she looked around the room. Shadows played across every surface, tiny dust motes swirled in the horizontal shafts of light, and almost immediately a feeling Jackson did not like hit, and hit hard. Over the last two years she'd learned to listen to those feelings. They'd kept her alive when so many other people—hell, practically everyone—was dead, and she picked Mandy up quickly, the feel of her smooth wooden hilt immediately comforting.

"Looks all clear," Tye said, his voice hushed. "On this floor at least."

"Something's not right here," Jackson whispered, unable to put her finger on what exactly was bothering her. "It feels...off."

"Then let's hurry."

They crept into the darkened hallway—Tye leading the way—and followed it the length of the house. It opened up into a kitchen, a large one, and the light was a little better, the gaps in the shutters wider from where the rot was making better progress. Still, the weird feeling remained, enough that Jackson tightened her grip on Mandy.

"That's gotta be the pantry, and the door is closed," Tye said, his voice hushed. "Check it out, and I'll keep watch."

Jackson approached the door slowly, her heart beating a steady tattoo in her chest. She gripped her weapon in her right hand as she turned the doorknob, holding her breath without even meaning to. The relief that hit when nothing jumped out seemed oddly out of place, and Jackson lowered the blade only slightly, her gaze taking everything in, because whoever had lived in the house had clearly planned for a rainy day. The metal shelves were practically overflowing with food, and for a moment she just paused to look at it all, her heart racing at the sight. Beans, vegetables, even tinned potatoes. How long had it been since she'd eaten a potato? Not since that farm in Indiana and most of them had been rotten.

"Jesus Christ, take a look at this," she whispered. "There's enough food here for weeks."

Tye leaned back slightly so he could peer in. Even in the dim light Jackson saw his eyes widen, but a moment later he shook his head. "We can only take what we can carry, you know that. Unless you wanna eat here and then take more with us?"

"I want to stuff my face immediately, but," she looked around the darkened room, across the shadowed work surfaces, the sink and the oven—something like a chill slithering down her spine as she did so, "this place give me the heebies, not to mention the smell. I don't like it. It feels wrong. Let's take what we can carry and find somewhere else to eat and rest."

"Back in the direction of the campus?"

"Might as well. We need to go back that way to pick up the interstate."

“Get a move on then, sugar pie. I’ll go after you.”

Jackson pulled her small pack off her back and unzipped it. The sound was unnaturally loud in the quiet of the room, more so than their hushed voices. She shook her head as she caught Tye’s eye. “I know. I know.”

There was enough space in the pack for maybe a half-a-dozen cans. Any more than that would slow her down, and despite the spooky vibe of the house Jackson narrowed her eyes as she read the labels, wanting to make sure she picked right. After a moment or so she took two cans of beans, a tin of potatoes, and a packet of pasta. Then carefully, so as not to disturb the shelving unit, she lifted herself on her tiptoes and reached out for a tin of ham. The moment her fingertips found the first of them she paused. Tye froze too, his ax head glinting off one of the vertical shafts of light.

“Did you hear that?”

She nodded. A sound, a sort of creaking. Jackson lowered herself slowly, her feet hitting the floor with the smallest of noises, her pack held tight to her body.

Tye took a step back, so that he was closer to her, and looked upward. Jackson followed his gaze, swallowing against the sudden lump in her throat as she realized what he meant.

He gestured toward the hallway they’d snuck through, but Jackson shook her head. The stairs were there and whatever was now making its way across the roof, or maybe even inside the attic, would cut off their escape. She touched Tye’s shoulder and pointed toward the French windows instead. Or rather what used to be the windows, they were just closed shutters now, but they closed from the inside, meaning they would be able to unlatch them, and slip out.

Cautiously they stepped across the floor. Like the carpet, it didn’t feel right, not squelchy this time though, but sticky. Jackson shuddered inwardly as she imagined exactly what might be coating the hardwood.

“We need to be quick,” Tye whispered, his mouth next to her ear. “I’ll kick it through and we’ll head for the alleyway on the right. It’ll follow the noise and come down thinking to trap us. Don’t lose that food.”

Jackson nodded and slowly, carefully, put her backpack on.

Another noise from upstairs, this one sounding suspiciously like something was walking. Jackson’s heart raced as she imagined one of *them* already inside the building. And where there was one there were three or four more. They traveled in packs, never alone. Food or not, it simply wasn’t worth the risk to hang around.

“Now,” she hissed.

Tye kicked the shutters through, and maybe it was the rot, or perhaps just the force of his muscles, but they exploded outward, shards of wood going everywhere, light filling the gloomy kitchen. A rattling groan sounded from upstairs, and where before the zombie had been stalking—trying to find a way inside, maybe not even sure there was a meal close by—now it bashed against something, the ceiling, one of the doors?

Jackson and Tye did not wait to find out. They burst into the garden—as overgrown as the front lawn—and veered right, toward the alleyway that ran the length of the house.

Horror movie waiting to happen...

The words echoed in Jackson’s mind as her feet pounded the ground, and she gripped Mandy so tight the bones in her hand should have ached. Should have, but didn’t. Adrenaline was flooding her system, her heart was racing in her chest, and everything came into sharp focus...including the four zombies that were heading straight for them.

Chapter Two

Luke Granger could hear them pounding on the ceiling of his underground bunker. The noise was constant and unrelenting, edging its way into his consciousness, pulling him from a nap that had been far too brief.

He lifted his head from his arms, glanced around the empty room, then reached for his—now cold—mug of coffee, downing the remains in one long swallow. The taste was vile, but then instant beans with powdered milk was never gonna win any medals, was it?

He scowled into the empty mug, remembering the hot lava java he used to drink, before shouting, “Give it a fucking rest.”

They pounded again.

Jesus Christ. What the hell was wrong with them? You’d think that after weeks and weeks of trying to get through the thick metal they’d realize they couldn’t. But no, they had to interrupt what little sleep he could get. He looked up and sent the ceiling the foulest glare he could muster. “I’m going to kill every last fucking one of you when I come out there.”

They pounded some more.

“Every single one,” he hissed, straightening in his chair and giving himself a shake. A sharp pain shot through his shoulder from the movement and he rotated the muscles, cursing himself as he did so for falling asleep at his desk again. The papers he’d been trying to read through before he’d nodded off were now scrunched up, and his headphones were dangling from the desk.

Luke picked them up, pushed back his chair, and stood. The ceiling was maybe three feet above him, and he walked across the room until he was directly underneath the spot they were busy bashing away at. He visualized the building above in his mind and suspected they were in the basement gym. Abruptly a meme he’d once seen filled his mind and Luke frowned. The picture had been of a house, and surrounding it were a few dozen treadmills. Zombies ran on the treadmills, arms outstretched, while a triumphant group of people looked on from inside the house. The caption had said, *zombie defense mechanism.*

If only it were that easy.

Luke sighed and stomped back over to his desk. The coffee mug was balancing precariously on the papers, and he righted it before sitting back down. The headphone

cord was tangled from where it had fallen, and the jack was half out of the socket. Luke plugged it back in, then gave the cord a sharp tug. Damn thing constantly curled in on itself.

The zombies increased their pounding.

How many were up there, Luke wondered? Five. Ten. Twenty? He had no way of knowing and really, in the end, it made no difference. For all his threats, Luke had no intention of opening the trapdoor and entering the house. That many against just him? He'd probably get eaten and then he'd be...well dead, and wouldn't that be a kick in the shitter?

Ignoring that depressing thought, he closed his eyes, lifted his headphones, and put them on. The heavy padding muffled the noise of the zombie party slightly, and he sighed in satisfaction.

It would be so easy to fall back asleep...to try and go eight hours straight without thinking about them. He could indulge in one of his little fantasies, the one that featured the battered old villa his family owned in Barra de Potosi, down in Mexico. He could almost see it in his mind. The red-tiled roof, the faded brown shutters, the scrubby brush. The sun would be beating down on it, making everything bake.

"You'd hate that wouldn't you?" he said, trying his best to ignore the pangs that remembering the old house made him feel. "The heat. Slows you fuckers down. Easy pickings."

The zombies pounded harder, hard enough for him to hear even through the headphones, almost as if they were answering him. But then it wasn't like anyone else was going to respond to his ramblings. There *wasn't* anyone else but him. Hadn't been for quite some time.

Luke sighed and leaned forward to switch the radio equipment on. A shiver of pain shot through him and, almost automatically, he reached under his shirt to rub the still-red wound by his rib cage. It itched constantly, which he guessed was a good thing. Surely it meant it was healing. And healing was essential in his lonely world. He couldn't afford to be slow, because those fuckers could run! Damn, could they run, as evidenced by the finally closed hole in his stomach where some dead bastard had dug its finger in and poked around. Not to mention the bite marks down his arms, and the particularly attractive one on his ass. His chest gave a nasty sort of ache as he remembered the kid clamping on his left butt cheek and sinking her teeth in. It ached a little more as he remembered slicing the point of his ax through her head...

The headphones crackled once the equipment was on, and Luke settled himself in the chair. He picked up a sheaf of the crumpled papers, his hand nudging his laptop as he did so. Laptop. Tablet. Phone. He wasn't even sure why he kept them—wasn't like they were much good to him now. Still...he frowned...no point thinking about that.

He turned the radio dial to find the first of the frequencies on his long, long list, his heart fluttering as a hissing sound came through over the airwaves.

He almost laughed.

How many nights had he sat in this exact same position fiddling with the radio, hoping against hope? Too many. But he had to try. What else was there?

The pounding grew dimmer as the minutes ticked by, as if they were putting less effort in, and Luke sighed with relief. Despite the fact that the zombies could not get into the basement bunker, he hated knowing they were close by. Hated the thought of them grunting and slathering on the other side of the metal.

Hated them full stop.

He flipped to the next frequency, letting his mind drift a little, imagining a lazy day on the bay, doing a little bit of fishing, drinking whiskey, eating a few olives. The last mouthful of olives he'd eaten had been out of a jar he'd found in a condo by Evergreen Park. He was sure they'd been bad. Certainly he'd suffered for a few days after eating them. Yes, a day on the beach, without a zombie in sight. He wouldn't even need to take his ax, never mind a gun. He imagined the sun shining down on him, basking in the silence...*the silence*... He bolted upright and cursed.

The pounding had stopped completely. He couldn't even hear muffled footsteps now. Sure, he wanted them to shut up, but wanting it was not enough to make it reality. They could still smell him in the sprawling mansion above, even though it had been a good month since he'd been up there, and they wouldn't stop until they gave him the steak-and-sauce treatment. No, only one thing would drag them away.

A burst of energy hit his system, jolting him awake in a way the caffeine had not. Luke stood up quickly and dropped the headphones—the wires of which immediately tangled back up, knocking the coffee mug aside in the process.

Only one thing...

Another meal close by...and that might mean...another person.

Luke's heart raced as he considered that amazing prospect. It had been so long since he'd seen or talked to someone. So fucking long...and yet... He looked upward, eyeing the ceiling again. It was possible the zombies had simply heard a dog or a fox—they didn't give much of a shit what they ate, would follow the noise regardless. He could be going out for no reason. But if it really *was* a someone, rather than a something, close by, he had to go help. Didn't matter how tired he was. How much he ached. How dangerous it might be. Even the faint possibility of someone else being out there was enough.

He righted the coffee mug, surveying his living area, or as some would call it, the heart of his bunker, as he did so. He'd been beyond lucky to find this place and he knew it, was thankful for it every single day. From what he could tell, it had been a giant panic room for the very rich guy who owned the mansion above. It was well stocked and had two exits—neither of which the waking dead had found—and walls thicker than Mary Lou's thighs. Ah, Mary Lou, his first ever girlfriend. She was dead now, of course. Lots of people were.

“Time to get moving,” he said, pushing the thought of all those people to the back of his mind. “Time to go actually, finally, find another person.”

Another person. The thought was almost unbelievable, and as Luke picked up his army-grade sweater from the back of his chair, anticipation curled in his gut. The hole in his stomach protested, but Luke had no time for that shit. He pulled open the desk drawer and grabbed a half-full Johnny Walker bottle, lifted his tee, and splashed some over the wound. It stung like a bitch, but the alcohol removed any possible infection, and that shit counted. Luke had no intention of getting sick, or worse, turning into one of them, though as far as he could tell it wasn’t as simple as just a bite or a finger in the stomach—he was proof of that. Whiskey seemed to be the key. He’d splashed all and any wounds with the stuff and he was still breathing.

He shrugged the sweater on before bending back down to lace up his boots. A film of red goo layered the front of one and he splashed some whiskey over it. Jesus, he’d be drunk soon from the fumes, and with his current sleep level he’d probably pass out.

He snorted at the image.

Luke shucked on his leather jacket—nothing said fashion like bite marks—and locked his Glock to his waistband. A few grenades in his pocket and his ax in hand and he was ready to go. The question was—which exit to use? It’d be a lie to say he wasn’t tempted to try the trapdoor that led into the basement area. Both because he was curious and because he would have liked to kill any of the zombies still hanging around—bastards deserved it, waking him up constantly. Only that’d be stupid, and Luke had not survived for so long by being stupid. He nodded to himself, mind made up, and headed across his living area to the tunnel that ran the length of the property. He picked up a bottle of Old Spice en route and splashed a liberal amount over himself. Combined with the whiskey, the Old Spice made him feel light-headed for a moment. Still it was necessary. For some reason the stench covered his tracks. Maybe they disliked the manly smell. Go figure.

Time to go save someone, anyone, he thought, and for a moment he hoped it’d be a female someone—preferably of the noncanine or nonfeline persuasion. Maybe even a luscious blonde with a dazzling smile, looking for someplace safe to stay.

He snorted again. Yeah, and why not ask for a rocket launcher, a new supply of grenades, and some way of getting down to Mexico while he was at it? The image of the villa came to him once more and he sighed. He doubted he’d ever see the place again. He’d suspected as much two years ago and nothing that had happened since had suggested otherwise.

Two years...the day nightmares came true and everything went to shit. The day the waking dead came calling.

Chapter Three

In a perfect example of timing actually working in their favor, Jackson and Tye burst out of the alleyway just as the zombies reached them. Tye was in front and he immediately lifted his ax, swinging it at the nearest one. It was a female and she was naked, dripping pus from various wounds that had yet to heal, growling in that horrible way they all did.

Tye's swing missed as the zombie swerved at exactly the right moment. He kicked out at it instead, hitting it on the hip bone, and it stumbled, falling into the entrance to the alleyway right in front of Jackson. She didn't even think about it. Jackson simply lifted her Doc Marten boot and kicked the zombie in the face—her forward momentum giving her more power than she would normally have had. Something crunched and she heard a snap. Its neck maybe? There was no way to tell and it didn't matter anyway.

Jackson skidded to a halt, lifted her booted foot again, and stamped down hard on its face. Fluids oozed rather than spurted as she made contact, and Jackson gritted her teeth as the stench of zombie filled her nostrils. Rotting garbage, urine, and a million other smells that were just as bad, all vied for prominence, making her gag. Another stomp, this one squashing the eyes and turning its nose into nothing more than a bloody pulp, then another, opening up the muscle and fatty tissues to the skull beneath.

"Balls to the walls!" Tye shouted and Jackson gave one more stomp before lifting Mandy.

A male zombie was heading straight for her. He was dressed in what looked like pajamas which were old now and had been slowly rotting. Jackson could see the mottled skin beneath them, more of those pus-filled wounds dripping. It held its arms out, those weirdly elongated limbs desperate to get to her, and Jackson swallowed down the hatred as she looked at its face.

Predatory. Feral. The bastard.

A moment later, it reached her. Jackson lifted Mandy and swung hard. The blade arced through the air with a speed that was shocking. It caught the zombie in the spot between the shoulder and the neck on the left side. About an inch of the blade went in, opening up the artery, creating a shower of blood. Jackson moved to the side to avoid the spray, pulled Mandy free, and swung again. But the zombie hit out wildly as she rotated, smacking her on the shoulder, and Jackson overbalanced, falling to her knees.

She felt the impact rather than the pain, and immediately righted herself, rolling and standing in one smooth move. Her second swing worked, the blade went in to the face this time, right along the cheekbone. The force of it made her arm spasm at the shock of the contact.

The zombie shrieked. Blood was spouting from its neck, half of its face was hanging off, and still it tried to get her. Jackson kicked it in the stomach, a perfect front kick. It hit the floor and she followed it, bringing her blade down on its head, cracking the skull bone and biting into brain. Once again the contact made her arms spasm, and Jackson had to grit her teeth as she pulled the blade back out.

Her arms shook as she spun around, looking for the rest of them. One, a teenage girl, was headless, Tye's ax having cleaved right through her neck. The other, Tye was busy stamping on, and Jackson clenched her fists as she watched bits of skin and muscle splatter upward from his heavy boot.

A flash of something that looked suspiciously like an eyeball shot past her and Jackson clamped her lips shut, the disgusting thought of a bit of zombie flesh finding its way into her mouth making her mentally gag.

"Where's the other one?" she asked the moment the flesh stopped flying. "The one that was on the roof?"

Tye wiped his boot against the grass—the zombie now still—and turned to face her. "It wasn't one of these?"

She shook her head as she looked around the area. "It couldn't have got down that fast."

A *bang* sounded from the alleyway. Jackson stepped back quickly so that she and Tye were right next to each other. Another *bang*, coming from the other direction, and a nasty chill slithered down Jackson's spine. The quiet of the street just a half hour earlier reminding her that the noise could only mean one thing.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yeah."

"There's only ever five at most in a pack," she whispered.

"Four here and one on the roof."

Jackson tightened her hold on her weapon and took several, quick breaths. "No. There's more. Listen."

"Where—"

A zombie, the one that had found them, jumped from the garage, falling into a roll, before standing up so quickly that Jackson almost skittered back. Almost but didn't. That would be unacceptable. The zombie would smell her fear and would come straight for her. Like animals, Jackson had long since suspected that they could sense the weakest person, and that person would never be her. *Never*.

"Hello, Mr. Fucking Crash the Party," Tye growled.

If things had not been so tense, Jackson would have rolled her eyes. "Really?"