

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

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Chapter 1

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

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

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

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miles sighed and gave up on the air-con.

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

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

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

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

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

The three collected their equipment and stepped off the minibus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let it go, Elliott."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah," was all Miles said in response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You know what I mean.”

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

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

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

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

“Our tax dollars at work, eh?”

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

Miles’ eyebrows shot up. “I’m sorry?”

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

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

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

across their faces.

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"W'sup?" she said.

"Fun night?"

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

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

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

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

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

“Squealer?”

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

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

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

“They use them to practice on.”

“What do you mean practice on?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

shirt that he never, ever changed.

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

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

“Where’s Clea?” Miles asked.

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

“So why are you still here?”

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

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

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

“Don’t you have a home to go to?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He put his headphones on and turned the music up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clea spent that much on coffee.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

switch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The popularity of panic rooms had soared ever since the outbreak, but they were nothing more than an illusion of safety. There was evidence to suggest that they actually did more harm than good. Families were known to barricade themselves inside one, only to discover that one of them had suffered a bite. The others then found themselves trapped in a confined space with a ravenous zombie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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