

CHRISSY PEEBLES

The Zombie Chronicles

Apocalypse Infection Unleashed

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Apocalypse Infection Unleashed Series

by

Chrissy Peebles

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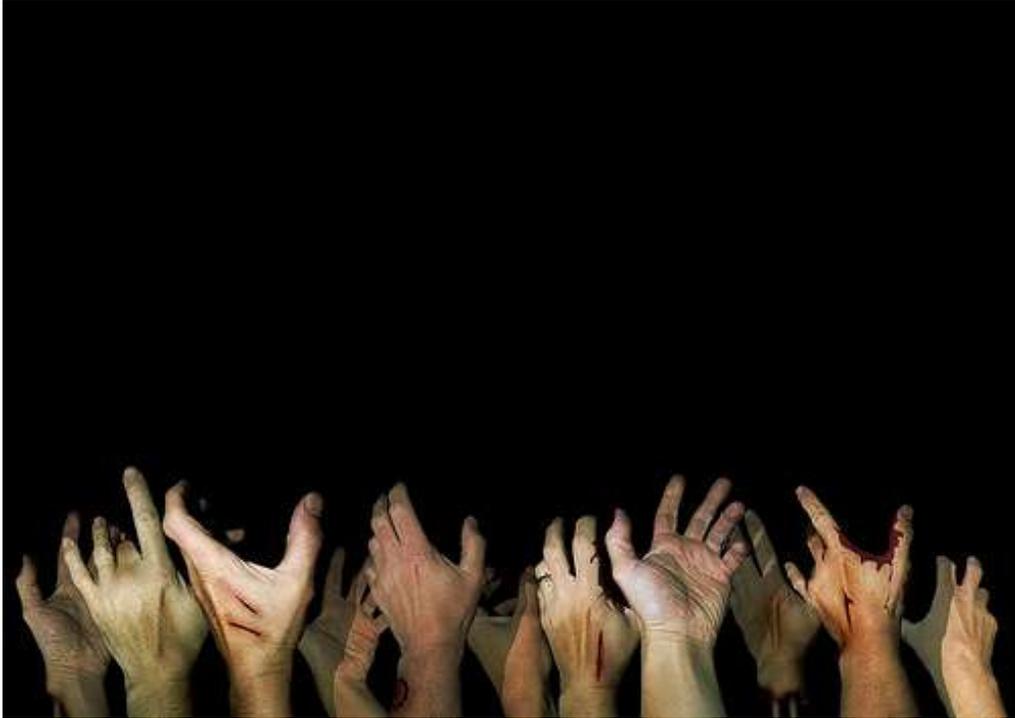
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Chapter 1



One year earlier...

It had been a long day in July, with heat waves rampaging throughout South Carolina. Even though nighttime had long fallen and the temperatures had cooled down noticeably, my shirt still stuck to my back. I wondered what good that shower had done that I'd taken before meeting Sherry.

A rush of wind blew through my hair as we rode to the top of the Ferris wheel and then stopped, hovering in midair. I breathed in, relaxed, and listened to the distant screams, music, and laughter echo below us. Sherry set down the stuffed pink pig I'd won for her in the ring toss and folded her hands in her lap, enjoying the silence. I dared a quick look at the stuffed animal, fighting with myself whether to be proud or sink into the ground. The guys back at school surely would've suggested the latter, but I didn't care. Granted, it wasn't the giant teddy bear I'd spent twenty bucks trying to win, but Sherry seemed happy with her little plush pink prize nonetheless. She squeezed my hand, and I smiled.

I rocked the cart back and forth with my legs.

"Hey! Stop it," Sherry said, twining her fingers through my hair.

“But you told me you loved it when somebody shook the cart at the very top. And I do too. Love that adrenaline rush.”

She smiled and batted her lashes at me. Her whole demeanor screamed flirty, so I inched closer and wrapped my arm around her to pull her closer. “Do you want to play games or make out?” she whispered suggestively.

Her eyes sparkled like big onyxes as I gazed into them. We had liked each other for months, and we’d been shamelessly stealing glances at each other until I finally plucked up the courage to ask her out. It was our first big date, and I’d been dying to kiss her all night. “What do you think?” I asked with a smile.

She inclined her head as though in thought.

That same moment, a piercing scream echoed from below us. Forgetting our first intimate moment, I peered below into the darkness to the gathering mass.

“What’s going on down there?” Sherry asked.

“I dunno.” I squinted to get a better view, but the steel rods of the Ferris wheel blocked most of my view from where we were dangling. All I could make out were red and blue lights flashing in the distance, blinking in rhythm to the sound of blaring sirens. I leaned out until I could count five police cars speeding toward the midway.

“What’s happening?” Sherry asked again, this time more quietly, as though she was talking to herself.

I paid her no attention as I continued to scan the commotion below. A man tumbled to the ground. The same moment, a group of people pounced on him. From up above, they looked like they were attacking him with their bare arms and legs.

Sherry grabbed my shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze to get my attention. “Oh my gosh, Dean! I think a gang of thugs are attacking the people in line.”

I shook my head. *It can't be.* We lived in a family tourist town, its biggest crimes consisting of kids stealing sweets from the local supermarket and old ladies complaining about Friday night litter on their porches; the crime rate was so low that misdemeanors made the front page. I couldn’t even remember the last time there’d been a public beating or any kind of vicious attack. “Maybe it’s nothing,” I said, my brain trying to justify the picture before my eyes.

“It sure doesn’t look like nothing,” Sherry said. “You think they’re on drugs?”

I shrugged, hesitating. I wasn't naïve enough to think there were no drugs where I lived, but to see their effects creeped me out big time.

Bang! Bang!

Before I could answer, shots echoed from the nearing cars. I wrapped my arm around Sherry and forced her head down the way I had seen on television and in all those action movies. "It looks like the police are firing into the crowd!" I yelled.

"No! They can't be." She clutched her chest. "My sister's down there. I hope she's okay."

The ride jerked forward. As we started to descend, Sherry leaned over me to peer at the blinking lights on the bar that rotated inside the wheel.

I gripped her hand. "We'll find your sister. I promise."

"Thanks, Dean."

A scream tore through the air, followed by growls and hisses.

"What's that noise?" Sherry asked, frantically glancing below us.

Peering past the yellow bulbs twinkling all around me, I tried to see what was happening below. My senses were on full alert because of the danger we were in. I knew a stray bullet could hit us, or one of the drug-crazed people might decide to attack us. We had to get out of there, fast, before something happened. A cold chill rushed through me as the cart stopped at the wooden platform.

I scanned the area for the best possible escape route. Crazed weirdoes were biting and tearing into the flesh of screaming, innocent bystanders, their blood staining their clothes and the asphalt beneath their feet. My stomach protested, ready to hurl up all the greasy hotdogs, funnel cakes, and cotton candy I'd eaten. My mind screamed, *This can't be true! People just don't go around biting each other like cannibals! It has to be a joke.* But I knew from the grotesque salty-metallic smell wafting through the air that the blood was all too real. It wasn't a joke...but the grossest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

"Dean, what's happening?" Sherry asked, shaking my shoulder frantically.

"I have no idea, but we've gotta get out of here."

The possessed people shuffled toward us. My pulse pounding in my ears, I spun quickly in hopes of getting out the other way, but the entrance was blocked with more people flooding in. The silver line dividers dropped to the ground with a loud *clang*.

"We're trapped!" Sherry said, grabbing my arm tight.

“No!” I shook my head vehemently. “Don’t even think that. We’ll climb up the Ferris wheel.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

I hesitated, considering my words. “Then we fight,” I said, suppressing a gag at the rotten smell.

Guttural sounds—strange growls—emanated from the group as they stared us down like they wanted to rip through our flesh. They had greenish-looking, cracked skin, torn clothes, and white eyes. *Contacts? A wicked case of cataracts? Liquid latex? Special effects?* I had no idea, but I was ready to take them on.

A girl with long blonde hair inched closer. She looked dead, her head unnaturally askew. Sudden recognition hit me with a jolt: *Sherry’s sister!*

“Jenny!” Sherry shouted; her voice overwhelmed with emotion. “Oh my gosh! What happened to you? You’re creeping me out.”

Jenny suddenly lunged at me, snapping her jaws like a rabid dog. She came within only inches from sinking her teeth into my carotid when a policeman fired shots. Jenny—or whatever she was—crashed down to the ground.

Shocked beyond all belief, Sherry leaned over the cart door, letting loose of her stuffed animal. It fell to the ground, right next to the thing that looked remotely like Jenny. Her gaze darted to the policeman holding the gun. “You shot my sister!”

“I’m sorry, miss, but that’s not your sister anymore!” he shouted back. “She would have killed and eaten the both of you!”

More of the possessed group shuffled toward us. My heart raced. I clenched my fists, ready to take down anything in my path. I slid my leg over the bar, preparing to jump out of the cart and fight when one of the policemen fumbled with the controls. We took off with a jerk. I fell back into Sherry’s arms, and we shot up about five feet in the air.

The beings lunged after us, shaking the bottom of the cart so violently we nearly fell out. Sherry clung onto me with a death grip. The group continued with their guttural chanting, and I swore I was trapped in some kind of lucid nightmare.

“What are they?” Sherry screamed in my ear. “What’s going on? What happened to Jenny? Why was she...like that?”

I steadied myself by holding onto the steel bar with one hand and wrapped the other around her as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Below us, the group of possessed people seemed to have multiplied, holding up their arms as if they wanted a ride too. I dared another peek over the edge and regretted it instantly. The whole gathering looked like something out of a horror flick, blood covering their clothes and caking their skin.

Some started to stumble toward the officer, who shot anyone—or anything—who got too close. “Hang on, kids!” the officer said. With another yank, we sped up into the sky, stopping at the very top. This time, shaking the cart for thrills or making out was the last thing on my mind.

“That policeman...he...that cop shot my sister!” Sherry said between gasps. She buried her face into my chest and wept. I pulled her close, not sure what words of comfort to give her. More shots were fired, followed by ear-piercing screams and then...nothing. Panic ensued from other riders still stuck on the wheel at various positions. *Better to be up here than down there*, I figured. We had to be at least 150 feet up in the air, and that made me feel safe from whatever was happening below.

My cell phone rang jolting me out of my stupor. I fumbled in my pocket and answered the call.

“Dean?”

“Dad!” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, son, thank God you’re alive. There’s no time for explanations. Where are you?” he asked, his voice betraying an edge.

“I’m on a date with Sherry. We’re stuck on top of the Ferris wheel at the beach. It isn’t moving. Dad, I think everybody’s dead down there! I-I don’t know. It’s all just so...it’s crazy, Dad, like some kind of horrible movie!”

“We’re coming to pick you up, and then we’re getting the heck out of town.”

“It’s too dangerous,” I said. “I know this is going to sound absolutely crazy, but you gotta believe me. People are turning into some kind of cannibals...and they’re attacking people.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ll be armed. I’ll get you out of there, I promise. Got it, son?”

“Where are we going?”

“Your brother’s flying us to the island with Grams where we’ll be safe. These things are attacking everybody in Myrtle Beach. We’ve gotta get far away from here as fast as we can.”

On the other end of the phone, glass shattered with a *crash*, followed by my mom's piercing scream. I gasped as the line went dead. "Dad!" I shouted. "Dad?"

Chapter 2

One year ago, a deadly virus decimated the world leaving swarms of brain-eating zombies in its wake. Survivors rushed to the makeshift fortresses, walled-in cities protected by towering concrete walls and a military force to be reckoned with. I managed to make it to one of these safe havens with my brother and parents, and that afforded me the chance to spend the last year sheltered from the gloom that rocked the land. My brother, on the other hand, decided to leave the safe confines and continue fighting with the U.S. Army to fight the onslaught of the undead. He became a top-notch zombie-hunter, but my parents and I didn't see much of him after that. My mother feared he might not come back alive, if at all.

Initially, the virus immediately turned anybody into zombies who had type O+ or A+ blood. The rest of us seemed safe as long as we didn't get exposed through broken skin. We never knew what really caused the outbreak. And when scientists thought they had it figured out, the rules would change slightly. The virus mutated, and now if somebody was bitten or scratched, it could take up to five days before they turned... unless they died which meant the change came immediately.

I tried to make the best of the situation. It wasn't that bad. Our house had electricity and water, and I led a fairly normal teenage life—right up until I had to leave and jeopardize my safety (and consequently my future) for the sake of a girl I'd only just met. But I really had no option. She was scheduled for a lethal injection, and I could not stand by and watch that happen. I planned on stopping the execution, even though I knew the stakes were high. After all, if I'd have been caught by the authorities, they would have promptly booted me out into *Zombie Land*. It was a fate I did not want to subject myself or my parents to, but after pondering it and considering my options—and the girl's, which were none—I realized it was a chance worth taking. I had to save her, no matter what, and I could only hope my parents would understand.

My plan was bold, daring, and sneaky, as a proper rescue mission should always be. I knew that getting her out of the clinic fast, before anyone noticed, was the key to success. I smoothed

my hands down my crisp white scrubs, smirking beneath my “borrowed” surgical mask as I adjusted it. I knew I would need a good disguise in order to get past the soldiers, and I was proud of myself for so easily snatching the medical uniform from the linen room.

Lucas, a friend of mine, laughed at the sight of me in the baggy cotton get-up. “I thought this was some kind of James Bond mission, not a pajama party.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” I muffled out from beneath the mask.

He eyed me up and down. “Well, you look ridiculous, but you definitely fit the part.”

“Well, secret agents have to hide their identity somehow, right?” I punched him in the arm, and he grinned. Lucky for me, Lucas had the security clearance to sneak me into the isolation area of the clinic, and he’d owed me a favor for a while. *It’s about time he paid up*, I thought, and I knew I could always count on Lucas. He was a fitness buff with huge arms, and he was the one who fit the part: He made for a perfect soldier with his camouflage uniform, Army boots, and buzzed head.

“This is a huge risk you’re taking, but I completely understand.” Lucas swiped a card over a control panel, and the door opened with a loud *click*. “Be careful, though, and whatever you do, don’t underestimate her. That virus is flooding through her veins. They have good reasons for putting her in quarantine.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan on joining Bite Club any time soon, I promise.” With a last glance back, I walked in through the heavy steel door. As soon as the door closed behind me, it hit me: *There is no turning back now*. I took a sharp breath and focused my gaze ahead.

The room looked just like any other sickbed, complete with sterile-looking white walls and the strong, bleach-like aroma of a plethora of medicines. On the far right was a huge lamp that cast an unnatural glow on the tiled floor. On the far left, a narrow bed with white sheets that were arranged around a frail woman told me I had the right room. I took a hesitant step forward, then stopped, suddenly unsure of whether or not I really was doing the right thing. What if she’s already turned? What if it’s too late to help her and I’m risking my safety for nothing? Fighting with myself, I took a step back.

Suddenly, Val rose to her feet. Her fists were clenched, and her eyes were wide with terror.

I pulled down my mask before she got the chance to pound me. “Hey! It’s me.”

“Dean!” she said. “You know I’ve been...bitten. But why are you...? Look, you shouldn’t be in here. You know being anywhere near me is a death sentence.”

I slowly unwrapped the bandages from her arm and cringed. The zombie bite looked worse—far, far worse—than I had anticipated. Green pus drained from the open wound on her lower arm, and it reeked of dead, rotting flesh.

“That bad, huh?” Val asked when she saw my ghastly expression, her voice echoing off the white walls in the confined isolation room. She brushed back her disheveled, long brown hair. “It’s funny how fate works. I spent so long trying to find you...” Her voice quivered as tears welled up in her blue eyes. “And now that I have, we won’t even get to spend one day together.”

I let out a long breath. “Don’t talk like that. We’ll have plenty of time together—so much time that you’ll probably get sick of me.”

“How do you figure that? And for the record, I don’t think I’d ever...I would never get sick of you.”

“Because I have a possible cure?”

She cocked a brow. “You mean the experimental serum?”

“Yeah, I snatched a bag of vials from the lab.”

She gasped. “Do you know what woulda happened if you’d been caught?”

“I don’t care. I’ll do anything to save you.” I wasn’t lying. I’d barely known the girl a few hours, but there was something about her, something worth saving, even at the risk of imprisonment or death. The funny thing was; I never thought I had that kind of sacrificial savior in me—especially for a girl I wasn’t even in love with. But after hearing her story, I knew there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her. She needed me, and I was going to be there.

“I can’t believe you’d go through all this for me, basically a stranger. It’s impressive. Thank you.” She softly touched my arm. “But those vials haven’t been tested, so there’s no guarantee.”

“Doc was sure this batch would work. He told me they’re on the verge of a major breakthrough, so it’s worth a shot—no pun intended.”

She smiled at my accidental joke. “Okay, if you say so. Give me the medicine. I’d rather be a guinea pig than one of those brain-munching things out there.”

“I can’t, Val. It’s too early. The virus has to be in your system for...well, for a set amount of time before the medicine has a chance to work.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the medicine couldn’t be given to her until *after* she turned into a zombie, a process that usually took about five days with the mutation of the virus now. *Yeah, she has a right to know, but just not now.*

“A set amount of time? How long before you can give it to me?” she asked, sounding a bit more panicked and demanding.

“Just a little while more.”

“You know I don’t have that kind of time.” She threw the bandage back on and pressed firmly on the tape. “Be realistic, Dean. You know the rules. I’ve been compromised. They’ll be in any minute to kill me, humanely of course.”

Her words pierced my heart, especially since I knew they rang of truth; if I didn’t intervene, she was doomed. “That isn’t happening! I’m here to break you out.” My plan was to sneak Val out, take her to the next sheltered city, and then give her a secret potion that the doc had been working on for months—the supposed cure to the nasty Necrotina virus that had spread across the U.S. and the globe, turning men, women, and children into zombie-like beings with the burning desire to feed on human flesh.

“Really?” She grabbed my arm as if I was kidding.

“Really.”

“Well, in that case, what’re we waiting for?”

“We can’t go until Lucas comes back and gives us the go-ahead. If we run into the general, our plan is screwed. It’ll just be a minute.”

She nodded and then placed her hands on her hips, her gaze imploring. “Is your brother going to help us?”

“I haven’t told Nick anything about you. He’d just flip out, and right now, we need him focused if we want our little plan to work.”

“I want to meet him. I *need* to meet him.”

“You will. I begged him to take us to the next city, told him we have to deliver some antibiotics for the doc.”

“Great. Think your smokin’ hot plan will work?”

“Trust me, nobody will suspect a thing.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“For starters, we’re flying.” Making it up to the roof was the only way to get past the heavy security. Nevertheless, even though flying was the safest option, in those days, nothing was a safe bet any more.

“Wait...did you say we’re flying?”

“Yeah. Didn’t I mention that Nick’s a pilot?” What I hadn’t told my brother was that I’d be hiding a secret stowaway in the back of the helicopter. *Oh well. I’ll worry about that later.* I was sure Nick would understand once I told him the entire story.

The door burst open, and Lucas peered in. “You guys ready? There isn’t much time.”

I motioned her out of the cell and pointed to a gurney. “Hop on!” I helped Val onto the gurney, then threw a sheet over her body up to her neck, mimicking medical protocol for handling the diseased on their way to the morgue.

“You’ve got to play dead,” Lucas said. “So no blinking.”

Val blotted the sweat from her brow.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I asked her, ignoring the sudden dread in the pit of my own stomach.

Her jaw clenched. “Don’t worry. I’ll bring home the Oscar. My life depends on it.”

As I wheeled her down the long corridor past a group of soldiers, I was hit with a rush of adrenalin like I’d never felt before. Danger aside, I was having the time of my life. I’d never wanted my parents’ version of the “normal teenage life”. I had been thrust into the middle of a real live—or dead, if you think about it—zombie apocalypse, the kind people had been joking about and making videogames and movies about for years. Like my brother, who had chosen the military for his own adventure, I lived for that stuff, always seeking a thrill. I craved being where the action was, and finally I was there, immersed in a risky rescue.

When we approached the guards, a chill ran across my spine. We all knew that if we didn’t get past that squad, it was all over before we even really got started.

“We’re putting her on ice,” Lucas said without so much as a nervous quiver in his voice.

The sergeant shook his head. “It just never ends, does it?”

“Nope.” Lucas looked at me. “You got this from here?”

I nodded and moved down the corridor fast, my heart thudding against my chest. Once we were around the corner, I bolted. Metal wheels screeched against the tile floor in protest of the speed I was pushing, and I hoped Val didn’t fly off the thing as we took the corners. The hall turned right, then a sharp left, and then a right again. “Okay, it’s safe,” I said, stopping. I started to strip off my white pants. Having Nick see me in scrubs would blow the entire plan, especially if he knew I was up to no good.

She sat up abruptly. “Please tell me you have clothes on under there.”

“Of course. Now c’mon!” I helped her down and pointed. “The helicopter pad’s this way.”

We raced through the corridor and up the stairs and finally reached the helipad, where a healthy gust of wind rushed through my hair. Val jumped into the back of the military helicopter and lay down, and I threw a U.S. Army-issued olive green wool blanket over her.

“I have a little confession to make,” I whispered between breaths, just in case Nick made a sudden appearance and caught me off guard.

“You secretly wear women’s clothing?”

“Geez, no!” I couldn’t stifle a tiny chuckle; the girl was funny, even in the most stressful of situations, and I appreciated that.

Her gaze narrowed. “Well, that’s good to know. So what is it?”

“I didn’t tell Nick about any of this. He has no idea you’re coming whatsoever.”

She let out a huff. “Ah. So when you said nobody will suspect a thing, you *really* meant *nobody*. Geez. I don’t believe this. I thought he knew a girl was coming, but he hadn’t been informed about my identity.”

“Nope. Please just keep quiet until we get to the city, okay?”

“Fine,” she mumbled, “but you should’ve told him.”

A minute later, Nick jumped into the helicopter and put on his headset. “Ready, bro?”

I jumped into the copilot seat and buckled up. “Yep.”

“You got the list of antibiotics we need for the doc?”

“Sure thing.” My big brother always played by the rules. That made him perfect for the military, of course, but it was exactly why I didn’t tell him about Val. He would’ve never agreed to sneaking her out of the city; he did nothing against the rules—ever. He lived by the moral code 100 percent. I don’t know where he inherited that from, though, because I didn’t mind bending the rules when it was appropriate.

He turned over the helicopter engine, and a few minutes later we lifted off and climbed slowly into the sky over Kelleys Island. The island wasn’t far from Sandusky, Ohio. That’s where Cedar Point was located. I had triumphantly ridden all seventeen roller coasters in that amusement park. Well, before everything happened, but I’ll never forget the adrenaline rush I felt.

Kelleys Island was the perfect place to go for refuge because we were completely surrounded by water. Zombies couldn’t swim, and as a backup, there were towering walls to

keep the undead from penetrating the safe haven. That helped us all sleep easier at night. We had a nice cottage that was owned by my grandma. She lived next door in a spacious bed and breakfast that she ran before the zombie outbreak.

All the Lake Erie islands had become refuges for a multitude of people, and citizens were making lives there, living almost normally, with the exception of knowing that outside those walls, the hungry dead were walking. In order for everyone to maintain such a lifestyle, the city had very strict rules in place. One of those rules stated that if a person was bitten, execution was mandatory—without exception, whether the victim was the mayor’s son or the housekeeper’s daughter. The safety of the many could not be compromised for the life of one.

“We should be back before supper,” Nick called out.

“Yep!” I yelled over the noise of the helicopter.

Halfway there, I heard a loud *pop*, something like a car backfiring. The floor and walls began to shake and vibrate. My head jerked back and then snapped forward as the helicopter plunged, cutting through the white clouds like a knife. Looking out the window, I noticed a plume of dark smoke swirling outside the copter.

“Wh-what’s happening?”

Nick fumbled frantically with the controls. “Malfunction. We’re going down!”

“Mal-what?” I asked with a gasp.

Chapter 3

The helicopter dropped in altitude at a pace that felt like light speed. A sudden loud banging, like hundreds of baseball bats smacking against us, echoed beneath my feet. Gripping the arm rests tightly; I looked out the window, though I shouldn’t have. The copter skidded on its belly and skipped across the treetops. The vibrations shook the floor like an earthquake. I braced for impact, knowing that even if we somehow miraculously survived the crash, we’d still have to live through the flames and/or toxic fumes that were sure to envelop us. I shook away the thought of blackened, tangled, twisting metal burning in the charred trees. My head jerked forward as Nick clipped a row of towering trees on a thirty-foot ridge. The helicopter jerked, forcing the side of my head into the metal wall. In an instant, everything was dark.

I don't know how long I lingered in that quiet darkness, surrounded by nothing but tranquility and carelessness that had become a sure death sentence in the real world. As I hovered in that dark place, unconscious of my body, the softest whiff of fumes assaulted my nostrils, slowly but steadily jolting me back to the grim reality: *We crashed...in Zombie Land.*

With a groan, I opened my eyes and took a deep breath, but the fumes from scorching metal burned my lungs. Nick's big head was staring down at me, and I pushed him away and vomited into the grass. Glancing around, I noticed Nick must have gotten me out and dragged me away from the wreckage. Vines, flowers, and towering trees surrounded us. We must've crashed into a forest.

My brother squatted beside me. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice wavering.

The blazing sun beat down on my skin. Spots danced in my vision, and my head ached, especially when I rubbed the bump that had formed on the side of it where I'd clunked against the dashboard. I'd never felt so crappy in my entire life, yet I knew we had to get moving. I slowly sat up and rubbed my pounding head. "I'm fine...I think."

"Fine is perfect, especially when we're lucky to be alive." He patted my back. "I tried the radio, but it's dead."

As my mind cleared, I suddenly remembered Val. *Wait...only both of us?* My jaw set as I peered around, frantically searching for her. "Where's Val?" I blurted before I realized what I was saying.

Nick regarded me from under drawn brows. "Val? You must have hit your head pretty hard. We crashed in the middle of freaking nowhere. Don't you remember anything?"

His words barely registered with me. *Of course he couldn't check on Val or pull her from the wreckage. My idiot self didn't even tell him she was onboard.* Ignoring my brother's questioning look, I jumped to my feet and dashed for the pile of burning metal. I twisted my body through a jagged opening and climbed inside, ignoring the shark-like metal teeth tearing at my skin and clothes, then dove through the fire and smoke, searching desperately for Val. My hands dived right in, ignoring the searing pain that ran up my arms from when I'd tried to shield myself against the dashboard during the crash.

"Dean! What are you doing?" my brother yelled after me. "I told you the radio's not working. It's fried, man, just like your brain."

Ignoring him, I kept looking. The black bag of vials rested upside down on the floor; I was relieved they were plastic and not glass, so they hadn't shattered, and there was still hope for Val. Coughing and choking, I continued to stumble through the wreckage.

"I'm not gonna be the one to tell Mom and Dad that your foolish crap got you killed!" Nick shouted again. "Get out now!"

Smoke poured from everywhere, and the crackle of fire unnerved me. Even though I couldn't see a thing, instinct commanded my hands to push through the debris. About halfway through, I thought I felt something warm under my touch. *Val! Crap, she's not moving. Is she even breathing?* "Val! Val!" I choked out. I could hardly breathe myself from the pain and smoke, so I dragged her toward me. I scooped up her seemingly lifeless body and shuffled out as fast as I could. "Oh, Val, I promise everything's going to be okay. Don't you go dying on me."

As I felt for a pulse on her neck, Nick ran up to us. "Who is that, and how'd she get aboard my bird?"

"Oh, thank God," I said.

"What?"

"She has a strong pulse."

Nick's brows drew together, darkening his features. "Dean, what's going on? Who is *she*?"

Shaking my head to signal him that it wasn't the appropriate time for a million questions, I laid her down far from the wreckage, just in case it exploded like crashes always do in the movies. "I'll explain later."

Nick grabbed my shoulder. "No! You'll explain now. Who the heck *is* this girl, and why's she with us?"

I swung around and shot him a venomous look. "Chill out! Her name is Val, and she needs our help."

We held each other's gaze for what seemed like forever.

Then, as if something suddenly clicked, his shoulders finally dropped. "Val, huh? Well, is she okay?" He ran a hand across her forehead. "She's burning up." Then his gaze drifted to the bandage on her arm, and he peeked under it, gasping. "She's been bitten." Nick stared at me in disbelief. "What were you thinking? Sneaking a bitten chick out of the city? This is against protocol, Dean... not to mention you're gonna get us all killed with your knight in shining armor crap!"

“Let me explain...” I hesitated, gathering my words, but he cut me off.

“I don’t want to hear it, and I want no part of this. You’re helping a zombie victim. What’s wrong with you? You know there’s no hope for her.” He punched the tree as sudden realization hit. “Wait a minute. You lied to me, didn’t you? You aren’t taking antibiotics to the doc. You were just using me to help you drag *her* out of there! Do you ever use your effing head?”

I looked away. I felt so guilty for landing us all in such a dire situation, such a mess. “No,” I whispered.

“No what? No you weren’t delivering antibiotics, or no you never use your thick head?”

“Both, I guess.”

“I don’t believe it This was nothing more than an elaborate hoax.” He ran a hand through his dense hair, his eyes throwing daggers. “Tell me one thing. How long have you even known this girl?” he asked, sounding as if he dared me to tell him an answer he already knew and was disgusted by.

“Less than a day.”

His lips pressed into a grim line; he was definitely losing his cool. “I put my neck on the line for you,” he shouted. “I got us the special clearance to go, and for what? So you could pull a stunt like this, putting all our lives in danger for someone you don’t even know?”

“Yeah, but would you have helped me if I’d told you about Val?”

He said nothing and just continued to stare at me with rage and disbelief storming behind his eyes.

“Well, would you have helped me or not?”

He waved his hands wildly. “No! Never! Not like this. Not in a million years! But still, I have connections. I woulda tried to talk to the general and help you guys out. There is a way to go about things and we have to follow orders. You just—”

“Wait, did you say you would have talked to the general?” I snorted, my gaze fixing on the bare trees in the distance as I conjured the guy’s image. He was about as helpful as a sleeping pill and just as dampening on one’s hopes and dreams. “If that’s the only kind of help you can think of, I’m glad I kept her hidden. We’d be burying her as we speak.”

“Better than the fate you just handed to her—and likely to us by association. I don’t know her, but I bet she wouldn’t want to wake up as a flesh-eating monster.”

“And she won’t.”

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