

POLLUTED

By Jaymie Jaymz

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The wails, moans, and screams never stopped around this dismal place. It didn't matter how long she had been working here at the Dallas Institution for The Cure, goose bumps still rode up Dr. Shay Baker's arms, and tears still welled in her eyes.

The worst thing was: there was little she, one of the few doctors left in the world, could do about their pain.

She clutched her purse tight as she passed the corridor leading to the exit. Inside the dark cells, men, women, and children writhed on the cold ground in pain. She placed a finger under her nose to block out the poignant stench of a neglected landfill. With guilty eyes, she glanced into Cell Five.

A thin arm shot out from between the bars, covered in viscous black liquid that drip-dropped to the cement floor. "Help me," a voice croaked.

Shay stumbled back from the cell a few steps. "Your next dose isn't for another hour. Daniel will bring it to you then."

The man's face pressed against the steel bars, his eyes and skin a dark yellow, "No, please. Give me the execution."

"You know we can't do that, yet."

"You don't understand the pain. Please." The man cried tears of blood.

"I'm sorry." She moved on, picking up speed until she reached the women's locker room. Inside, she put her military-issue protective clothing on and fastened a pollution mask to her face.

Shay pulled an M-16 rifle out of her locker. She threw the strap over her shoulder and slung the rifle onto her back.

She opened the exit door and stepped outside. The city of Dallas sat underneath a thick swath of smog and clouds, ones that never moved on to allow full sunlight into the city.

The doctor hustled to her Ford Explorer, eyes alert, constantly scanning the parking lot. She jumped into the vehicle, slammed the door and locked it. She closed her eyes a moment to calm herself.

Shay drove with caution through downtown Dallas, once so beautiful and full of life, but now riddled with businesses and homes that have wasted away, left unattended because their owners had either

been executed or had turned Rogue, fully succumbing to the infection and having escaped the necessary execution due them. These were beyond anyone's help. They were unpredictable; dangerous.

The doctor pulled into the parking lot of Dillon's Grocery and parked near the front door. She grabbed the rifle and got out of the vehicle, her movements slow and quiet.

Inside the store, with a flashlight in hand, she moved down the dark aisles, most of them already empty. Shay grabbed the last three packs of batteries, and then moved down the candy aisle. She sifted through box after empty box until a candy bar on the bottom shelf caught her eye. She knelt down and grabbed it, hunched farther down and looked for more.

A gust of heavy wind rattled the store windows up front. Shay turned her head and stared at the windows. She squeezed the candy bar so hard, it broke into two pieces.

The window glass shattered, and the wind rushed in. The doctor closed her eyes as glass and debris whipped around her. Then, the wind died just as fast as it had appeared and the store settled.

"This is the part where you run," she said. But for some reason, her muscles weren't getting the message from her brain.

A Rogue, in the form of a dust devil composed mostly of old newspaper and aluminum cans, swirled past her vehicle and entered through the doorway. Shay jumped to her feet, readied her rifle, and backed up a few steps. The Rogue slowed its rotational speed and took its time approaching her, like the predatory creature it was.

"Come on and form, you son of a bitch." She aimed at the mass and continued backing up until her shoulders slammed into the glass door of a cooler.

The Rogue made dry hacking noises so loud, she cringed. Then, it "spat" a soda can at her. It flew like a bullet at her face. Shay jumped to the side, and the can slammed into the cooler door. Fireworks of glass exploded around her.

She looked from the Rogue to the front exit. She'd have to take her chances. Waiting another minute would definitely mean death. Shay bolted down the chip aisle. The Rogue jumped over the top of the

shelves and swirled right behind her. Dust particles, spinning at high velocities, scratched at her exposed neck, broke the skin, and drew blood.

Shay clenched her teeth from the pain and dived through an empty part of the shelf. She dropped into the next aisle, got to her feet and raced for the door. The Rogue rose up over the shelf and continued after her.

The doctor burst into the parking lot and lunged into her vehicle, slammed her fist down on the locking mechanism and reached into her coat pocket for the keys.

The Rogue threw itself at her Explorer. The vehicle rocked violently and her body jerked to the right, her hand losing its grip on the keys. She righted herself and dug into her pocket once again. Shay jammed the keys into the ignition and gave it a turn.

Her eyes shot back to the driver's window. The Rogue stared at her with two black eyes, the sclera no longer white, but dark yellow, its tall, solid body formed of newspaper and dust. It grinned at her with teeth no longer made of bone, but of sharp pieces of aluminum.

Shay screamed and grabbed her rifle. The Rogue yanked the door off with one hand, tossed it aside, and lurched at her. She aimed at his head and pulled the trigger. Its entire body exploded, covering her in dust, newspaper, and jagged scraps of aluminum.

She dusted herself off and started the engine.

At home, in her bathroom, Shay scrubbed her naked body with baby wipes. She wiped her neck down and started to toss the wipe into the trash can, until the blood streaks caught her attention.

Shay dropped the wipe and examined the back of her neck in the mirror. "Oh, Jesus, no." she turned away from the mirror with tears in her eyes. "Glass was everywhere. That's all it was." She wiped her eyes and calmed herself. "We're okay. I'm okay." She put her nightgown on and headed for the kitchen.

Shay lit the candles on the table and sat. She opened up an old military MRE, frowned at the dehydrated meatloaf and sighed. "It's still better than Grandma's meatloaf." She glanced at a large red frame sitting across from her at the table and laughed. The face of a ten-year-

old girl with raven black hair and big green eyes smiled back at her.

“Mommy might be joining you soon, Amanda.” She winked at the little girl. The motion squeezed a tear from her eye.

#

Shay dragged herself into the bathroom to get ready for another long, tortuous day at the institution. She brushed her hair, avoiding the mirror. She couldn't stand to look at herself these days, the failure she had become to her fellow Americans who counted on her to save their lives, to her daughter who had depended on her for protection.

With her back to the mirror, Shay brushed her teeth. The skin on her forearm darkened and bubbled. The toothbrush fell from her mouth and slammed to the floor. She clutched her arm, nails digging deep into flesh.

“Oh, lord, no.” Black oil popped out of her pores like beads of sweat. She turned the water on, shoved her arm underneath the flow and scrubbed at the oil. It only made a bigger mess, the water doing nothing to remove the stubborn liquid.

Shay yanked the medicine cabinet open, grabbed baby powder and sprinkled it over her forearm. The powder soaked up the oil, and then she scraped the whole mess into the trash can. She pulled out some gauze and sports tape, threw some more powder over her arm, and then wrapped the entire wound with the gauze.

At the bedroom closet, Shay chose a long sleeved white coat to go over her scrubs to hide the infection, if her associates saw it...

The doctor sat on her bed and wept. She had always been careful when treating her patients all these years, had avoided getting the infection, but then that nasty Rogue had to come along.

“Damn you.” Anger coursed through her.

She jumped as the phone rang on the end table beside her. She picked it up, pressed it to her ear. “Hello?”

She listened for a minute, eyes closed. Bad news.

“Give me ten minutes. I'll meet you there.” She hung the phone up and slid into her protective clothing.

Minutes later, Shay pulled into a driveway, avoiding the ruts and deep cracks. The house looked little better than the others in the city,

but life here was evident in the festive porch decorations: paper skeletons and ghosts, and even a rotted pumpkin, a sad attempt to bring back life as they once knew it.

She got out of the car as two attendants from the institution, Mark and Daniel, approached her, both dressed in protective suits and wearing masks. Daniel hugged her.

Mark, stern-faced, crossed his overdeveloped arms over an equally overdeveloped chest. "We'll have to drag him out, Doc. We tried the nice way."

Shay nodded. "Is he the only one?"

"Far as we know," Daniel retrieved a pair of handcuffs from their van and headed for the front porch. She and Mark followed him. Shay tried to avoid looking at the decorations. Amanda had loved Halloween, but this was no time for painful memories.

With a grunt, Mark kicked down the door and all three crept inside.

"Be careful." Shay pulled a syringe from her coat pocket and prepared for a possible struggle.

The house was dark and stank of cigarette smoke and ripe garbage. From somewhere, water dripped into a sink.

Mark stepped into the kitchen. Daniel and the doctor took the long hallway that led to the bedrooms in back. The syringe shook in Shay's hands and her breathing grew heavier. Daniel wasn't doing much better, his shoulders pressed to the wall, eyes darting about.

"Maybe he left," she said.

"I can hope."

She and Daniel peeked into the master bedroom. They stepped carefully over the clothes and other junk scattered on the floor.

"Hello?" Shay squinted at the bed. The blanket covered a large...something. She wasn't sure what kind of horrors might be hiding underneath. Daniel followed her gaze and swallowed hard.

The doctor readied her syringe and moved forward. "We're here to help. Please don't be afraid."

The mass under the covers shifted positions, scooted closer to the left edge of the bed.

She and Daniel moved in. His handcuffs were open and ready to

detain the infected. Shay reached out with her free hand and gently tugged at the blanket.

“Oh, Father God, be with us.” Sweat ran from Daniel’s forehead, and he blinked it out of his eyes. “Be careful, okay?”

She tugged some more. A few strands of blonde hair poked out from beneath the covers.

A hulking figure sprinted from the shadows of the room and tackled Daniel to the floor. “You stay away from her!” it shouted.

Shay screamed.

A little girl threw aside the blanket and crawled off the bed. Shay held the girl’s frightened eyes with her own, and then the girl sprinted into the closet and scurried up a ladder inside it.

Beside her, the figure, a man, pummeled Daniel, who was no match for his attacker’s amazing strength. “You’re not taking us to that place to die,” the infected said.

Shay jabbed the needle into his arm. After a few seconds, he fell back on his butt, dazed. Mark ran into the room and lit it up with a large industrial flashlight. He had a gun in his other hand.

“You guys okay?” Mark flashed the light on Daniel, whose eyes stared up at the ceiling, his head bloodied and bruised.

“Oh, Danny,” Shay fell to her knees and pulled his head against her chest.

Eyes flashing with anger, Mark turned the flashlight on the infected man. Black oil poured from his nose, ears, and mouth. The flesh of his entire left arm had been replaced with jagged, sharp pieces of glass, no doubt the cause of Daniel’s death. He stared at them, his sclera a dark yellow, a well-known sign of life-threatening levels of toxicity within the infected body.

Mark grabbed the handcuffs and put them on the man’s thick wrists, and then he slammed his work boot against the guy’s jaw.

“That’s enough,” Shay said. “Let’s just go.”

“It’ll never be enough for these monsters.” Mark kicked the guy in the abdomen. The infected moaned and curled into a fetal position.

She screamed as Mark’s gun went off. The infected man lay on his back with a gaping hole in his forehead. Oil oozed out from the wound.

“Are you kidding me, Mark?”

“Was he alone?”

“We have rules.” The doctor sprang to her feet.

“Was he alone!” Mark shook, still seething with anger. Suddenly she didn’t feel any safer with him than she had with the infected man.

“Yes.”

Mark nodded and made his way back into the hallway.

Shay stepped into the closet and looked into the open attic above the ladder. The little girl stared back at her with terrified eyes that bled black tears. Then she coughed, sending a spray of slimy green liquid to the floor below.

Shay jumped back just in time. Mark’s footsteps pounded down the hallway; he was coming back. She glanced up at the girl again. “Run, sweetheart. Get out of this town and hide.”

She left the closet and headed for the door. Mark entered the room and gave her a strange look.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Trying to figure out what we’ll tell the others.” She pushed past him and moved down the hallway. He caught up with her.

“We tell them nothing. The guy was gone by the time we got here.” Mark grabbed her arm and forced her to look at him. “Right, Dr. Baker?”

She looked away from his smoldering stare. “Right.” Satisfied, he let her go.

“It’s easier this way. I say we make a few new rules of our own.”

#

At the institution, Shay stared at the computer monitor in her lab. Several complicated mathematical equations filled the screen. *Come on, think. What are we missing?*

Steel tables loaded with blood collection kits, glass jars containing green and red liquids, and syringes filled the rest of the lab room.

She flinched as a woman screamed somewhere nearby. Shay moved towards the door and listened to the commotion.

"It's not time," the woman said. "Do you not hear me? Those who turn can't talk, you moron."

"We got new rules, lady," a man answered.

The doctor yanked the door open and rushed into the corridor. Mark and another attendant, Nick, both dressed in protective clothing, dragged the woman towards an elevator.

"Mark! What are you doing?" Shay rushed to catch up with them.

Mark jabbed the elevator button. "It's getting crowded in here, Doc." He jabbed the push button with impatience and avoided eye contact with her.

Nick shrugged. "New rules. If you had been in the meeting earlier, you'd have known."

Mark gave a tight-lipped smile then, though his eyes remained locked on the push button.

"You can't make new rules without my vote, too." She balled her fists. The poor infected woman looked at her with hopeful eyes.

"Please don't let them do this," the woman said.

The elevator door opened and the men rushed the tearful lady inside. Shay tried to follow, but Nick held her back. "Please," he said. "You shouldn't even be this close to her. You're not protected."

Nick yanked his hand back as the elevator doors began to close. The infected woman's eyes held on Shay until the doors closed completely.

Tears welled in the doctor's eyes as she pounded on the elevator door. She sucked in a breath and clutched her arm as hot searing pain gripped the flesh. Black oil seeped through the sleeve of her lab coat. "Oh, Shit. Not now."

She ripped the coat off, dabbed at her arm with it.

"Doctor Baker?"

Shay turned and looked down the corridor. Mr. Rierdan, the man who had funded the institute, waited by her lab door, dressed in a dark blue suit as always, eyes magnified by a pair of military-issue bifocals.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

She nodded and situated her lab coat over her arm to hide the wound.

The two stepped into her lab. Shay took a seat at her desk and slipped her arm underneath it. “Why wasn’t I called into the meeting?”

Mr. Rierdan sat on a table across from her. “Your time is better spent here than in a stuffy board room.” He smiled. “It was really was no big deal, Doctor.”

“A woman being executed before fully turning is ‘no big deal?’”

“I’m talking about the decision to change the rules.” He knelt before her and put a fatherly hand on her thigh. She hid her arm even farther under the desktop. “We’re overcrowded as it is. More come in everyday, and we have no cure to offer, yet.

“Those who’ve showed signs of entering Phase II of the infection are to be executed. That also eliminates the danger of keeping those in Phase III around. We don’t need to add to the Rogue population, do we?”

She shook her head. “These Phases are not exact. They were only meant as rough guidelines, something to—”

“On the contrary, you did excellent defining the Phases. Any whose limbs change completely, whether it be aluminum or newspaper or any other form of pollution, is close to hitting Phase III and turning.”

A stream of sweat trickled down Shay’s forehead. Mr. Rierdan was too close to her. He might start smelling the infection if he didn’t back away soon.

“Okay, yes, you’re right. I overreacted.” She forced a smile. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get back to work and perhaps save some lives.”

He stood, studied the floor around her desk, a strange expression on his face, and then left the room.

Once he shut the door, Shay breathed a big sigh of relief. She checked her arm. The oil flowed from the wound heavier than ever. It had soaked through her lab coat and formed a thick pile on the floor beneath her desk. Had Mr. Rierdan seen it? He couldn’t have. He would’ve said something, would’ve locked her up in a cell with the other infected.

She pulled baby powder and more gauze from her purse and treated the wound, and then she pulled a fresh white coat from a locker in the lab bathroom.

Back at her computer monitor, she reworked some of the equations, and then got up and went to the table closest to her desk. She poured and mixed two chemicals into a glass beaker and filled a syringe with the liquid concoction.

Shay punched in a security code next to an airtight steel door and waited for it to open. She stepped inside and wrinkled her nose at the putrid stench.

She stepped to the left and entered an examination room, where an infected man lay strapped to a table, his frame large and tall. Water tinged green oozed from every open orifice on his face, staining his long blonde hair. He coughed violently and black oil sprayed out onto his gown. The man stared at her with dark yellow eyes.

“Where’s your suit?” he asked. “Are we getting careless, Doc?”

“Just one injection today, Sam. Let’s hope we get good results.”

“It doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?” He looked at her with knowing eyes.

She ignored him and jabbed the needle into his forearm. Sam winced as the chemicals entered his bloodstream. “We’re fighting a losing battle. You know it. They know it.”

Shay grabbed a white towel and wiped the polluted water from his face. “Don’t go losing hope now.”

Sam scoffed. The doctor’s eyes welled up with tears for the second time this morning.

“The third floor’s awfully busy these days,” he said. “The powers that be are panicking, yes?”

She tried to control herself, but the tears refused to stop their assault. She shook her head, but then nodded.

Sam tried to reach his hand out to her, but the restraints wouldn’t allow it. “How long until they take you up there? They think they’re fixing the problem, but they’re only putting a band-aid on it, avoiding the real issue.”

“And what is the real issue? Because honestly, Sam, I don’t and never have understood what’s going on.”

“It’s obvious, my angel in white. Nature tried to gently warn us throughout the years, but we didn’t listen. Now we are what we’ve

created.”

Shay sat on the edge of his bed. It didn't matter anymore. She was one of them, so there was no reason to place a brick wall between her and those she had feared for so long.

“Let's get out of here,” he said, “before they decide to blow the place up and do away with everyone in one easy shot.”

A look of horror crossed her face. She shook her head a moment in disagreement, but then she knew, yes, they would and could do that if the fear ate at them enough.

Shay reached for his arm restraint and slipped the leather out of its buckle. Then she hunched over and gagged so hard that her whole body shook. Sam stared at her with concern and pulled his one arm from the restraint. He quickly undid the others and jumped free of the bed.

Shay's face turned a light blue and her eyes searched his in fear. Sam helped her to her knees and vigorously rubbed her back.

“Don't try to hold it in,” he said. “It'll kill you if you don't let it up.”

She gagged once again and then heaved. A plastic crunch came from her mouth as an impacted water bottle emerged from it. She yanked at it and pulled it free. Sam smoothed her hair back from her forehead.

“You're lucky,” he said. “Those are much easier to pass than aluminum or glass.”

She stared at the bottle in wonder, and then threw it to the floor in disgust.

“It's time to go, Shay,” a voice said from behind them.

She and Sam spun around and got to their feet. Mr. Rierdan stood in the doorway with Mark and Nick. Mark lunged at her. “How long have you known?” he asked, rage obvious in his eyes. “Did you give it to me, bitch?”

Mr. Rierdan pulled Mark back. “That's enough. Take them both downstairs and lock them up.”

Mark and Nick grabbed Sam and the doctor.

“This isn't the answer.” She struggled to get out of Mark's grip.

He only dug his fingers in deeper.

“We’ve got an answer for you all,” Mark said with an evil glint in his eyes.

Nick remained quiet and refused to look at her.

On the third floor, Nick and Mark threw them into a large holding cell with a dozen other infected individuals. The heavy iron doors slammed shut.

“I’m sorry, Shay,” Mr. Rierdan said. “But I’d expect the same treatment were I infected, too.” He turned from the cell and disappeared down the dark corridor.

“Sorry,” Nick mumbled before stumbling after Mr. Rierdan.

Mark remained rooted in front of the cell, leering in at Shay. He took in the others with cold eyes and then flashed them all a wicked smile. “We’ve got a big surprise for you guys tomorrow.” Mark winked and walked away.

Shay took a seat on a bench. Sam plopped down next to her.

“You’re right,” she said. “What are we going to do?”

The other infected people gathered around them. A bald woman stepped out from the crowd. Small clouds of smog poured from her mouth as she breathed.

“It’s your fault.” Smog Lady pointed a blackened finger in Shay’s face. “We die here everyday while you tinker around with your medications.”

A thin man moved to her side, his entire body a dull silver color. “You knew they didn’t do anything but make us even sicker.” He got right up in the doctor’s face. “You didn’t care.”

Sam jumped up and put space between them. “All right, now, calm down. This is everyone’s fault. If you live here on the planet, then you’re a contributing member to this infection.”

Silver Man and Smog Lady backed up and joined the group once again, intimidated by Sam’s size, but their eyes still pierced Shay’s in anger.

“I was up there in that lab,” Sam said. “This woman worked endlessly up there to find a cure.” He eyed each person in the crowd. “So I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense. Understand?”

The people separated and moved back to their original positions.

#

Sam leaned close to Shay's ear and whispered, "We have to get out of here. Tonight."

"Any ideas? I mean we're dealing with steel bars and individuals weak with infection."

"We can't work as individuals. We have to work as a group. There's strength in numbers, Angel." He smiled at her.

Her heart fluttered and she chided herself for it. What was wrong with her? This was no time for these kinds of emotions. How utterly ridiculous she was being.

A whistling pierced the silence, and Mark waltzed down the corridor with some kind of contraption in his hand. He attached it to the wall across from the holding cell and then flicked a switch. A digital timer came to life and started counting down: six hours and fifty-nine minutes.

Mark turned to everyone in the cell, madness in his eyes. "Great news. I found a cure." He glanced at the contraption. "Don't worry. You won't feel much pain."

Nick, Mr. Rierdan, and twelve other institute attendants joined Mark. None of them could look at Shay or anyone else left to die in the cell. Together, they moved for the exit and disappeared from view.

Shay listened as the exit door slammed shut and locked. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "How did you know?" she asked Sam.

"I told you I could hear all kinds of things on the third floor."

The infected women in the cell wept and the men paced with anxiety. Her heart broke for them. If only she had been smart enough to find a cure. As if aware of her thoughts, Sam wrapped an arm around her shoulder and held her tight.

The digital timer continued its count down.

#

Shay jumped up from the bench. "Everyone, come here."

The crowd gathered around her and Sam with curiosity.

"Okay, all we need is a key, right?"

The people nodded and some mumbled a "yes."

"Has anyone passed any aluminum today?"

Silver Man moved towards the back of the cell, reached under a bench, and retrieved two aluminum cans. He returned to Shay and handed them over. "Won't work," he said.

"One won't, but if we put several together and form them just right, we can use it as a key." She looked at Sam.

He shrugged. "Better than just sitting here waiting."

They all glanced at the timer. Four hours left.

Shay twisted the aluminum and tried to form it into the shape of a key. The material cut her hands as she worked. Sam took it from her and continued the work himself.

Shay asked the others if they had anything else to use.

"That's it," Silver Man said. "They keep the cells clean of the garbage."

"We kept those two around for weapons," Smog Lady said. "Just in case."

"Good thinking." The doctor smiled at the two. They managed a smile back.

Sam held up the "key" for all to see. "Let's try this one now. It won't hurt."

They all moved to the steel door of the cell. Sam slipped his hand between the bars and guided the aluminum key into the lock. Before he could fiddle with it, the contraption on the wall beeped. Everyone watched as the digital numbers jumped from three hours and fifty minutes to one hour and fifty minutes.

"That's not fair!" Silver Man said.

"That's it. We're toast. Burnt toast." Smog Lady set her face against the bars and wept.

"Hurry," Shay said to Sam, as he twisted and turned their makeshift key in the lock.

The doctor searched the large holding cell for anything useful.

The others followed her lead, but not Silver Man. He hid in the corner and yanked his shirt sleeve up to find his flesh giving way to scraps of metal. He clenched his teeth in pain and pulled the sleeve back down to hide his new iron arm.

The entire building shook as an explosion went off somewhere in the west wing. Shay fell down onto a bench. Chunks of cement came loose from the walls and rained down on them.

Everyone ducked down and protected their necks. Sam made his way over to Shay. "Sadistic snakes. They want us to feel as much fear as possible before it happens."

Silver Man crept over to them. "There were kids in the west wing." He pounded the bench next to them so hard that it broke in half. "If the infection doesn't get those pricks, I will."

Shay chose a bench across the room and laid down, eyes focused on the ceiling. Her mouth dropped open, and then she bolted up, jumped on the bench and pointed at a small, square access door.

"The attic's right above us," she said.

Smog Lady smirked. "Do you think we're that stupid, hon? It's nailed or sealed down real good. We already tried it."

"We're going to try it again." Sam stepped up on the bench and motioned for the big man with red hair to climb onto his shoulders. Sam lifted Red up high and he wrestled with the door. It didn't budge an inch.

Shay paced in frustration. "Think, people."

Silver Man stood back quietly, fearful eyes moving from the access door to Shay and Sam. He could help, but if he did, they would all know he was close to turning Rogue. Would they kill him or have mercy?

Smog Lady screamed then as the digital timer beeped. "Fifty minutes left."

Red pressed and pushed at the door even harder, the people staring up at him in fear.

Unable to hold back any longer, Silver Man approached Shay and showed her his arm. She smiled and squeezed his shoulder in support. "Sam," she said. "Our true angel's right here."

Everyone turned around and took in Silver Man's new iron arm.

He and Red switched places. Silver Man took a deep breath and threw a mighty punch to the access door.

Sheetrock crumbled like cake and fell to the ground. The attic was dark and stank of rotted wood and mildew. Sam and Silver Man helped the others into the attic and then made their way up with the help of the other men.

They used the crossbeams to move through the attic.

“Keep heading east,” Shay told them. “There should be a window at the end. It faces the parking lot.”

After twenty minutes, the group made it to the window.

“You’re kidding me,” Sam said. Steel bars covered the window from the inside of the attic.

Another explosion rocked the building, this time coming from the north. The attic shook, and then settled.

Sam grabbed a hold of the bars and yanked. Silver Man reached out with his iron arm and pulled the steel bars off. “I could get used to this.” Next, he broke the window glass.

Shay stuck her head out the window. “Where’s the fire escape ladder?”

“Oh perfect,” Smog Lady said. “Extra crispy, blackened toast.”

Sam pulled Shay back from the window. “We have to go north.”

“Are you crazy?” Silver Man asked. “We don’t have time to go back.”

“We stay here, we die,” Shay said, and then she caught up to Sam. Red trailed after them.

Smog Lady thought for a moment. “They blew it up. We can get out that way.”

The others caught on and followed Shay and Sam. They picked up the pace, running over the crossbeams, arms out for balance.

Smog Lady lost her balance and fell through the weak floorboards of the attic. Her screams stopped abruptly as her body crashed to the cement floor below.

Shay and Sam moved towards the hole she had fallen through and peered down.

The lady’s body laid twisted, right leg in the shape of an “L.” The

woman did not move.

“We can’t help her,” Sam said. “We need to keep moving. We’re running out of time.”

The group hustled to the north end of the building.

Each skidded to a stop. The attic floor had fallen onto the first floor, creating a steep incline like a big slide. The group crawled down on hands and knees.

Sam kept a protective hand on Shay until they reached the floor below. Pockets of light shone through the crumbled cement walls of the building.

The group looked around for a way outside, but everywhere they turned, chunks of cement and debris blocked their exit.

The west wing exploded. This one shook more violently than the others had. All were knocked off of their feet.

“We’re gonna die,” Silver Man said, sending the others into panic mode.

“No we’re not.” Shay got to her feet and raced to a steel exit door near the end of what used to be the northern corridor.

At the door, she pushed down on the steel bar.

“Come on,” she said, as the stubborn thing refused to open.

Sam motioned Silver Man over. He pushed and pulled at the door. It moved a few inches and heavy smog poured in through the crack. And then the door stopped opening as it hit metal on the other side of it. Sam peered out to view the obstruction.

“Well?” Red asked.

“A damn Mac truck.”

Silver Man threw his hands up. “I have my limitations.”

The entire group threw their bodies against the heavy door. They bled oil and polluted water as they injured themselves in the effort. Finally, Sam stepped back and cursed. Shay tried to comfort him.

They all froze as an engine started. The Mac truck rumbled and Shay and Sam watched as it rolled forward, away from the door. Sam threw it open and then coughed as clouds of smog assaulted his senses.

Shay rushed outside and stared at the truck. Who was in the cab? She held her breath at the sounds of violent coughing, and then her

eyes opened wide. "Oh my god."

A young girl stumbled from the cab, blonde hair limp around her face.

The other infected ran out into the open. Some fell to their knees in relief. Others whooped and hollered in joy. Silver Man noticed the little girl and cried. "There's your angel, doc."

Shay ran to the little girl and hugged her close. The girl smiled.

"We need to move," Sam said, breaking the joyful mood that had washed over the others. They stared at him, irritated. "If they come back and see us..."

That's all it took. The people raced off in different directions and disappeared.

Sam and Shay moved across the parking lot with the girl.

"What's your name, sweetie?" the doctor asked.

"Haley." She put her little hand in Shay's.

Sam moved to an old Ford truck near the back of the lot. "Get in."

Shay sat up front and put Haley on her lap.

Sam removed covers and panels from the steering wheel column and yanked the ignition wires out, then stripped and twisted them together. Shay scanned the parking lot. "Please hurry."

Sam pulled out the starter wires next and repeated the process.

She spotted a blue SUV driving towards them. "Sam!" His head popped up, and he followed her stare. The SUV picked up speed and headed straight for them.

Sam touched the starter wires to the ignition wires. Nothing. "Come on, don't do this to us." He tried them again.

The little girl sunk deeper into the doctor's lap as the SUV got closer, revealing its driver. Mark had a rifle up front with him, an insane smile on his face.

"That crazy son of a bitch," Sam said when he caught sight of him.

Mark picked up the rifle and took aim at them. Shay and Haley ducked down. The bullet ripped through the windshield and glass exploded everywhere.

Sam touched the wires together once again and the engine roared to life. He slammed his foot on the gas pedal and spun the wheel to the left, away from Mark's SUV.

Shay got a good look at Mark as they swung past his vehicle. Black oil poured from his nose and from the corner of his eyes. Mark yanked his SUV around and charged after them. He fired his rifle once again. It slammed through and destroyed the back windshield this time.

"Hang on." Sam whipped around and did a U-turn, tires screeching. He headed for the back exit that led directly to Interstate 612.

Shay looked out the open back. Mark turned his vehicle around and followed once again.

The old truck busted through the chain link gate and swung onto the interstate. Sam pushed the vehicle as fast as it could go, but it was no match for Mark's newer model SUV. He caught up to them and drove up beside Shay's window.

"Look what you did to me." Mark glared at her, eyes wild, mad. The man was out of his mind. He aimed the rifle at her.

Sam yanked the wheel to the right and rammed into Mark's SUV. He dropped the rifle to put both hands on the wheel. Sam's truck gained some distance as Mark fought to control his vehicle.

But a minute later, he pulled right up alongside them again, rifle ready.

Sam pressed the accelerator all the way to the floor and headed for the Tanner Bridge up ahead.

"Get down," Shay shouted. Mark fired his rifle and gave a wild laugh. Sam yelled as the bullet pierced through his arm. Out of instinct, he clutched it, losing control of the wheel.

Shay set Haley on the floor and crawled over Sam to get into the driver's seat. Sam made his way to the passenger side.

Pissed, she gave Mark a look to kill. She was tired of playing games. It was time to free Mark of the infection. She kept driving straight, the bridge only a few feet away now.

Mark kept up with them. He laughed and laughed, and she wanted to put her hands around his throat and strangle him just to shut him up.

At the bridge, with Mark still on her right side, she yanked the wheel hard and smashed into his SUV. His eyes opened wide and he yelled as the vehicle plummeted over the bridge.

Shay slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the truck. She raced to the edge of the bridge and looked over. Mark's SUV lay in a mangled heap of metal on the unforgiving rocks below.

Sam joined her, with Haley in his good arm. He put his other arm around Shay, who couldn't take her eyes off the crash site.

#

Teams of infected men and women, many from the Dallas Institute for the Cure, worked tirelessly on the new suburban neighborhood they had claimed as their own.

Silver Man and Red piled large stacks of debris into the back of a Mac truck. Shay and Sam pulled garbage from the manmade lake, both in knee deep and working with raw determination.

"Haley," Sam said, "how many times do we have to tell you not to do that?"

Little Haley swirled across the lake like a dust devil, throwing debris into the air and disrupting the still water.

Shay gave him a playful punch. "We'll have to find a whole new way to discipline, huh?" She wiped her nose with a handkerchief to soak up the small trickle of oil, her arm no longer flesh, but a thin sheet of plastic, the kind used in water bottles.

Sam, skin silver and hands covered with smooth glass, shook his head as the little dust devil spun away into the trees and disappeared. "Won't be much longer before we can do that."

Shay kissed his cheek. "Not if our plan works." She pulled pieces of tire rubber from the water and hauled it to the beach, the oil from her nose dripping less and less until it stopped altogether.