

PROLOGUE

I WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND peoples' fascination with the apocalypse. Why would you waste so much time and energy worrying about something you can't change? Besides, most of the time, it never comes to fruition, anyway. Remember Y2K? I don't. I was too young, but I've heard stories. What a hullabaloo that was. People were so afraid of computers failing and throwing society back into the Dark Ages, they stockpiled supplies and moved into the wilderness so they could get away from technology. Why would they move to the wilderness? If technology was going to fail, wouldn't they be just as safe in a city? I guess they were afraid when it did, everyone would go crazy and start killing each other. Either way, it didn't happen. I wonder how those people felt afterward.

Then there was the whole 2012 scare. This one was supposedly based on an ancient prediction, so you know it was reliable. Are you kidding? Even the Mayans didn't believe their own ancestors' "vision." What happened was there had been a tablet that had the Mayan calendar carved into it. The end was broken and faded, so no one knew what it said. Our culture, being the pessimistic lot we are, automatically assumed it was an end-of-the-world warning, but, again, nothing happened on December 21, 2012. Christmas came

and went, and I think everyone everywhere, even the skeptics, had a little something more to be thankful for. Life went on as usual, and all those doomsayers faded into obscurity.

The day the world *did* end was pretty nondescript. By that I mean there was no nuclear explosion or asteroid or monumental natural disaster. There weren't even any horsemen or plagues to announce the end was coming. The world ended fairly quietly. I couldn't even give you a date because it happened at different times depending on where you were. It was never predicted, and I'm sure a scenario no one even considered. Who really thinks the dead are going to rise from the grave and destroy the majority of the population? No one but Hollywood, and we all know those are just movies, but that's exactly what happened. Those of us who survived were left wide-eyed, mouth agape, trying to figure out what to do next.

There were a few who were able to pull their heads out and organize those left behind. They made sure the populace had food, shelter, and protection. They were saviors, the United States' heroes. Life wouldn't have gone on without them, and it was pretty difficult those first few years after the zompocalypse.

Sometimes it's difficult for me to remember what life was like before the rise of the undead. I was a teenager, though I hesitate to say normal. I wasn't deformed or anything, but my classmates thought I was strange. I had a fascination with the dark, the macabre, although I wasn't a Goth or Emo. I read books and magazines about serial killers. I didn't idolize them or want to be like them—hell no—I was fascinated with how evil and black a human's soul could get.

I wanted to be a psychologist and work with the criminally insane, maybe figure out why they did what they did. Apparently, when you're fifteen, your friends think you're weird if you have desires to help someone other than yourself. While they were worried about becoming popular and getting the right boyfriend, I tried to figure out how to make society better.

Of course, those dreams will never come true. Society doesn't exist. Everything I once held dear is gone. I lost my parents to the horde, like a lot of kids. Unlike some of the others, mine weren't

taken by surprise or in some freak accident. They were taken because of their own stupidity. Some days I miss them a lot, but others I believe they got what they deserved. I might sound callous and uncaring, but what about them? Why would they abandon their fifteen-year-old daughter? It used to keep me up at night, trying to find the answer to that question, but I've given up asking it. No reason wasting time on things that could've or should've been.

As I stare out the passenger side window of the semi, I'm reminded how bleak the future has become. The truck rolls down a once heavily traveled highway that has been reduced to a cracked trail. Gas stations and towns dotting the landscape have been abandoned and are crumpling into the weeds that are taking them over. There are a few areas that still resemble pre-zombie destruction, and these are the military outposts set up along the road, used for protection and refueling. I use the term "military" loosely because there is no formal military anymore. It's a rag-tag group of men and women who were lucky enough to get guns. I chuckle to myself. It's been two years since I was last out in the world, and a lot has changed since then. I still remember the day the zombies attacked. It's as clear as if it'd happened yesterday.

CHAPTER 1

I SAT ON THE BENCH, my head bobbing and feet tapping to Korn's *Freak on a Leash* as it pulsed through my eardrums. I mouthed the words until movement caught my eye, then turned. Carmen and her friends walked toward the school bus stop where I sat. Carmen walked by, and for a moment, our gazes met, then she flipped her long, blonde hair and huffed, averting her gaze to the sky. I smiled and turned up my iPod.

Carmen and I used to be friends back in grade school. She used to be shy and awkward, like me, but when we got to Junior High, she broke out of her shell. She started making new friends, ones who apparently weren't as weird as I am. She quit talking to me. I guess I embarrassed her. I called her friends the Baa-Baa Twins because they followed Carmen mindlessly and did everything she told them to do without question—like sheep.

I stared at my feet, which once again tapped to the beat. Someone bumped me. The other students headed to the curb. Some of them believed they had to have the “right” seat on the bus, so they wanted to be first through the door. I remained seated. The bus was a little way down the block when it stopped. I slid to the edge of the bench to look, turning down my music.

Carmen stepped off the curb and waved. "Helllooo," she called, "we're down here." She placed her hand on her hip. "What are they doing?"

I got up from the bench and stepped into the street. The sun reflected off the bus' windshield so I couldn't see inside. I paused my music. The only sound was the idling of the engine. Suddenly, the bus rocked. A thud, as if something hit the ceiling, echoed through the streets. All of us froze. The doors slid open and the bus driver stumbled out, rolling onto his back after he missed the last step. He struggled to his feet and ran toward us. Two of the students, I recognized them as seventh graders, got off the bus. They almost fell down the stairs, and I wondered if they'd hurt their knees because they didn't seem to want to bend them. As they stepped into the sunlight, they flinched and seemed slightly confused. They turned to their right, then to their left, and when they noticed me and the other students, they moved forward. As they drew closer, I noticed their eyes were bloodshot with dark circles underneath. They both walked slowly, and one of them dragged his foot.

I was convinced they'd injured themselves. They were on the JV basketball team, so they could have fallen on the court, but I couldn't figure out why they were getting off the bus. It must have something to do with the sound I'd heard. The one who wasn't dragging his foot opened his mouth and let out a low moan. A shiver ran down my spine. The bus driver ran into the center of our group and grabbed Carmen by the shoulders.

"Run!" he yelled.

Carmen pushed him away, mumbling, "Eww, don't touch me."

Baa-Baa One stepped to her side and whispered something I couldn't hear. A look of disgust covered both their faces.

He turned to another boy. "You've got to get out of here."

All the kids stared at him. Was this some kind of joke? A few of them grabbed their backpacks and headed away from the bus. Carmen watched the man, her hand still on her hip.

"We've got to get to school, you know!" she said.