

*We begin with a long awaited origin story from Jonathan Maberry's bestselling Rot and Ruin series, wherein two sisters face the kind of impossible choices that those living in a zombie infested world must face as they fight to survive.*

## **SISTERS**

**(A Story of The Rot and Ruin)**

**By Jonathan Maberry**

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It rained the day the world ended.

That's how she remembered it.

The rain fell cold and hard. That day and every time the world ended. For Lilah there wasn't just one apocalypse. They kept happening to her.

And each time it was raining.

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The first time was when she was little. Too little to really understand what was happening. She was just learning to speak, barely able to walk, hardly able to form the kind of memories

that could be taken out later and looked at. She remembered a woman's face. Her mothers, but Lilah didn't really understand what that meant. George had to explain it to her later.

Lilah remembered her mother holding her, and running. And other people holding her. And running.

And the monsters chasing.

Grabbing. Tearing. Taking. Biting. Eating.

Always.

One of them had bitten Mom. Lilah had seen it happen but did not know what the bright colors and loud shrieks meant. Not then. Not until later.

She remembered the house where her mother and the other grownups had hidden. She remembered her mother screaming. Mommy, with her big, swollen belly. Screaming.

That's when Annie was born.

Lilah did not understand birth, either.

Or the death that followed.

Or what happened when Mom woke up.

She saw what the others did, though. She understood it on some level that ran so deep age didn't matter. She screamed louder than the newborn Annie. She screamed louder than the people who swung clubs and pipes as Mom tried to bite them.

She screamed so loud it made her spit red.

After that Lilah didn't have much of a voice. A whisper. The first words she learned to speak were said in that whisper, and every word since then. Every single word.

It had been raining that night, the drops thudding on the roof and tapping on the windows and knocking on the door. The rain hissed in the trees outside. Lilah recorded it without having labels for any of those tings. Despite the rain, those memories were burned into her. She was too young for any of it, but the world ended anyway.

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It rained the day George went away.

George.

Lilah never knew his last name. Last names didn't seem to matter much. People in books had last names, and people in the stories George told. And maybe he even told her his last name, but she forgot because there was no need to remember it.

George was the last of the grownups. The one who didn't die.

The others did. They went out of the house, one by one, over the weeks. Looking for help. Looking for answers. Finding nothing, it seemed, except the end of their own stories.

George stayed with Lilah and the baby. He named her Annie. After that it was Lilah, and Annie, and George for years.

And years.

Sometimes George did go out, but never too far and never for too long. He waited for times when the biters weren't so thick around the house and then he'd slip away, quiet as a mouse and vanish in the tall grass. Those were bad times. At first. Lilah would try hard not to cry because it scared Annie when she cried. So Lilah forced her raspy voice to be still, blinked her tears away, held the screams in, and waited.

George always came back. He was the only one who ever did. Pushing a wheelbarrow full of cans from someone else's kitchen. Bringing clothes and toilet paper and toys and books. Always books.

Bringing weapons, too.

Never bringing other people. There were none. They were all sure of that. No one but George, Lilah, and little Annie.

Childhood was learning to be quiet, learning to hide, learning to trick the dead. George taught them to fight as soon as they could hold tools. They spent long nights together turning wood and duct tape and kitchen knives into weapons. Quiet weapons. George wasn't a fighter. He told the girls that he used to sell shoes. He wasn't a hero like the princes and champions in the books he taught them to read. He wasn't big and full of muscle. He wasn't as handsome as Prince Charming or Aladdin or Captain America. He never took karate or anything like that. Everything he taught them was what he could make up, and some stuff he learned from books he found that weren't Disney books or comics. They all read as much as they could. They read everything. It was how George taught them about the world that was. A world Lilah and Annie would never know. Could never know because the dead rose and ate it all up.

Eight years. Just the three of them.

When Lilah was ten and Annie was eight George met a man in the woods. Not another biter. A living man. He was dressed like a hunter from pictures they'd seen. Camouflage clothes. But he smelled like one of the biters because he smeared something

on his clothes that made the monsters think he was like them, and they didn't eat each other.

George almost killed the man because at first he couldn't believe that he was alive. He *couldn't* be alive because the world had ended and everyone died. Every single person except the three of them.

But the man was alive. Really and truly alive.

When George realized that, he went running from cover and grabbed the man and embraced him, weeping, kissing his face and hands, sobbing out loud.

The hunter was happy to see him, too, but unlike George he hadn't believed the world was destroyed. Not completely.

"There's a lot of us left," he said. "We're taking the world back from these zoms."

Zoms. He called them zoms. Short for zombies. A strange word that Lilah had read in books and which didn't seem to fit. Zombies were dead people brought back to life to be slaves. These dead people ate the living. George usually called them biters or ghouls. Zoms was a new word.

George was so happy that he brought the hunter back to the house to meet the girls.

Lilah remembered that. She was absolutely terrified of the big man with all the guns and knives who smelled like a biter. And he was strange-looking. The man had the palest skin, almost as white as a corpse, and he had one blue eye and the other was as red as blood. He had lots of scars and he smiled all the time.

Lilah hated him and tried to stab him with a spear. Annie threw stones at him. It took George a long time to convince them it was safe.

Safe.

Funny word.

For Lilah 'safe' meant the three of them inside the house with the doors and windows shut. That was safe. It was the only safety she'd ever known.

After a long, long time of talk and promises and even some yelling on George's part—something he almost never did—Lilah stopped fighting. It took Annie a little longer to settle down. Unlike her big sister, Annie had never seen any adults other than George. They'd all died when she was a baby.

They all sat in the living room, and the big hunter with the red eye sat on the floor. He'd taken off all of his weapons and

given them to George to hold, just to prove that he wasn't going to hurt them. Lilah and Annie crouched like dogs on either side of George, ready to run, ready to bite.

"It didn't all fall down," said the big man. "We lost a lot of land, sure, but we're taking it back. This is one of the last areas that hadn't been cleared out yet, but my guys are out here doing just that."

"Your guys ...?" asked George, and as she squatted next to him, Lilah could feel him tremble with excitement.

The hunter took a couple of candy bars from his pocket and reached over to offer them to the girls, but Lilah recoiled. Annie hissed at him. The man's smile flickered and he placed the candy on the floor and shifted back away from them.

"They haven't had much candy," said George. "And I trained them to be careful."

"Stranger-danger," laughed the big man. "I get it. It's cool, and that's smart. Big ol' dangerous world and you can never be too careful."

The candy bars lay there, untouched.

"You said you have people out here?"

"Sure. Part rescue team and part hunters. We're quieting the last of the zoms as we go."

George repeated the word, "'Quieting'."

"Yeah, it's what we call it when we put the zoms down. Bullet in the motor cortex or a blade through the brain stem. Only way to get 'er done."

"Quieting," murmured Lilah, and then Annie repeated it.

"Look," said the big hunter, "these woods are still pretty thick with zoms. Not safe for you to be here. My camp's a few hours walk, but we have food, a stockade, horses, and a hell of—oops, I mean a heck of a lot of guns. We could go there and get oriented, then I can have a team take you and the kids to the closest town."

"Town ..." said George and he swayed as if he was going to faint.

"Yeah. Towns all over. Closest is Mountainside, which they set up just after the problems started. Built around a reservoir and backed up against a mountain. And it's up high because the zoms won't walk uphill unless they're chasing something. Big fence and a lot of people. That's one of the places I hang out, but there are other towns. Like I said, we're taking it all back."