

PROJECT RD

I never thought something like going to the movies would destroy my life, much less turn me into a monster.

I went alone that night, which was strongly advised against. Everyone always traveled in numbers for safety reasons. It wasn't a bad idea, considering what we were up against. Traveling in packs made sense when it came to muggers or sexual predators, so it made just as much sense with *these* kinds of predators. My sense of security—and many others here in the town of Ground Zero—was a gun. My dad had given me a Glock 19 last year for my twentieth birthday. Mom was upset that he hadn't given me one sooner.

Having it didn't really do much for a cocky little piss-ant like me who strolled too leisurely through the shadows between streetlamps. It provided the opportunity for an Infected to jump out and bite me on the arm. But I hadn't been worried until that horrible moment. I mean, the last outbreak had been in 1989, when an infected drifter had visited town. My parents had been in the middle of it, and had always lived with the paranoia of another pandemic.

Despite the attack, I remembered my gun and brought it out of my holster. Just like in strict Arizona, we were allowed to pack heat like twenty-first century cowboys. I remembered what my parents taught me—aim for the head—so I pressed the gun against the Infected and blew half his face open.

I'd killed the thing completely, but the damage had already been done.

Shortly afterwards came the painful transformation. Every nerve felt hot and my stomach crumpled like paper. I couldn't even hold my gun and dropped it in the cold pool of blood where the Infected lay.

Before anyone saw me, I stumbled off and ducked into the theater alley. Tears stung my eyes; my skin tingled and itched like a wool sweater. I knew what was happening and I was powerless to stop it. I'd been infected with The Disease. It spread throughout my system, shoving me into the far corner of my mind. It took the helm of my body and became captain, demoting me to a mere passenger.

When the pain ended, my stomach ballooned. Foreign hunger pangs grumbled inside me, but what I craved wasn't a cheeseburger.

My first kill was a homeless man. He slept while I snuck up on him, although he snapped awake the minute I bit into his head. He tried fighting back. His dirty, ragged nails sliced my face. His breath reeked of cheap liquor and popcorn; he must've been eating the excess kernels out of the theater's trash bins. After struggling with him, I finally took a brick and smashed his head in. I was soaked in blood. My clothes stuck to me, but his juicy brain was mine at last. It sat in my mouth like jell-O, tasting exotic.

After I'd scraped the last brain chunk from his broken skull, an immediate desire for more exploded inside me. I stumbled out of the alley and into the street, catching people's attention as they exited the theater. They screamed. Seeing me gave them the terrifying and certain awareness that the Living Dead had returned to Ground Zero.

Their disturbance attracted many other Infected. I recognized a couple of them as they emerged from the dark, like my best friend, Tony Wiker.

I wondered if he recognized me. He'd been missing and presumed dead, or possibly infected, since last week. He looked bad. His face was sunken in and his eyes were like murky white marbles.

We feasted on whoever we could grab. Once we had someone on the ground, we'd smash their heads open and eat their brains. We couldn't stop consuming. Nor would we have stopped until everyone's skulls had been licked clean—or unless the army trucks hadn't arrived.

Soldiers poured out of the back doors and began shooting. I wanted to run, but the Disease wanted to feed: *Still!*

Against my will, I charged a theater customer. He saw me coming and socked me dead in the face, sending me to meet Mr. Pavement. Inside my mind, I shouted at myself to stay down. Since I didn't get back up, I figured it worked. I mean, I was still there, inside myself. The Disease hadn't driven me completely out. I had some say in all this, dammit!

People scattered as soldiers picked us off. Spotting the variations between the Infected and Uninfected wasn't difficult. My old high school principal, Mr. Chambers, took a bullet in the chest just before a soldier wielding a machete ran up behind him and lopped off his head. This gruesome display made me attempt to reason with myself. I suggested it was better to run and hunt another day rather than stay and get killed tonight. In truth, I was technically dead anyway. They don't call us the living dead because it's catchy.

Even so, I didn't feel dead, perhaps since I'd just been bitten. Whatever the case, I wanted to live, but the Disease had taken over my body the instant that asshole bit me.

White CDC vans screeched to a halt nearby. Soldiers in black uniforms burst out and yelled for the others to stop firing. Few Infected were left at this point: only me, Tony, two women I didn't know, and our paper boy, Scott. One of the women was the last to get shot by an actual bullet before the other soldiers used their weapons on us.

Tony got hit first, forcing him to perform some kind of labyrinthine boogie dance. Blood-red foam oozed from his mouth. A flickering wire connected his chest to the weapon the gunman held. They were only packing stun guns. Their intention wasn't to kill, but capture us.

Two soldiers leapt into action when Tony dropped, first securing his mouth with a muzzle and then cuffing his hands behind him. I could've sworn I heard a bone crack. They hoisted him off the ground and threw him inside one of the vans. The same thing happened to Scott and the remaining woman.

Watching all this distracted me from the control I had over myself. Before I knew it, I stood up and ran. A soldier shouted as I charged her, and I received my own electrical charge, muzzle, cuffs, and free ride to the unknown.

I lied on the floor of the van, my body still fatigued from the Taser. The other Infected had been taken in separate vehicles. Soldiers were with me, holding me down with their boot heels. One man stared at me sympathically.

The muzzle bounded tightly around my head, as were the cuffs on my wrists. I felt the Disease in me going mad. It wanted to feed, not escape. I couldn't believe I still craved brains. I was stuffed.

Lying there, I realized what sat in my gut; a full belly of raw human brains. The blood in my mouth stained my taste buds. Whenever my tongue ran over my teeth, I felt meat wedged in between them. I nearly got sick.

I tried distracting myself from this realization before I puked into the muzzle. I listened to the steady sound of asphalt passing beneath the van's undercarriage. The soothing rhythm almost worked until I thrashed to life, gaining me another Taser hit.

When the van stopped, I was hauled into a rectangular, windowless gray building that could've been mistaken for a giant cinderblock. It sat on a hill just outside the town's limits. As kids, we'd never known what it was and our parents didn't talk about it. We made up stories of a secret FBI storage facility where space aliens were kept, or a maximum security prison that held the world's most dangerous criminals. It had been protected by a high voltage fence and guards armed with big guns. Trying to go near the place was stupid, if not impossible. Out of all my friends, I was the least curious about it. Ironic that I was going inside now.

The guards took me, Tony, the woman, and Scott down a long stairwell, inside a midnight blue tiled room, where we were stripped naked. They shackled us against the wall like BDSM dolls and sprayed us with hoses by people in white scrubs—orderlies, I later found out.

The floor melted into watery red ink as blood and chunks of flesh from our victims washed away. The frigid water snapped our bodies to life like an electric charge and we lunged futilely. All that did was give the guards another excuse to Taser us again.

A woman in a lab coat appeared. She didn't say much, only injected us with something and told the orderlies to put us "in the rooms." They took us soaking and butt naked into individual rooms, where I was locked into my own.

Only a dim yellow light smoldered above me. The room had an iron door and padded walls. When my body regained feeling, I stood up, screaming and howling. Others did the same from inside their cells. I was thankful for the padded walls when I kept slamming against them. Someone slid open a peephole to observe and I charged the door. My head struck iron, whistling goodbye to consciousness.

Time blurred together after that. Honestly, I couldn't say what happened when or in what sequence. I think the injections had something to do with the confusion. I received three hot meals daily, which I rejected because it wasn't brains. Once a day, I was bound to a chair in a little black room—with a restricting mask on—and forced to watch a slide show. The first images were beautiful scenery and landscapes. My reaction was mild to say the least. The next set was of old black and white photos of destruction, mass murder, and piles of bodies from the Holocaust. Again, it had little affected on me. The third set was of living people doing ordinary

things, sports fans sitting on bleachers, children at a playground, and a couple kissing. I went wild and tried breaking free. I wanted brains. All those images of heads containing fat juicy brains made me crazy.

After the slide show, my chair automatically swung one hundred and eighty degrees. The same woman in the lab coat stood inside a separate room, behind a glass shield.

“What’s your name?” she asked into a microphone.

When my answer only consisted of more thrashing, she said, “I’m sure you’ve noticed the injections you’ve received. It’s nanotechnology in medicine. Do you know what that is? What it can do for you?”

I didn’t answer.

“It’ll target the Disease in your blood cells and eventually kill it. What do you think about that?”

Again silence.

She told the orderlies to take me back to my room.

The routine was carried out each day; injections, slide show, and the woman inquiring about my name.

Then, one day during the slide show, I had an urge to travel to those beautiful locations. I felt saddened and sympathetic toward the Holocaust victims, and my body didn’t jolt so much when I saw living people. I was becoming me again.

On the second to the last day of this routine, the woman asked me for my name. In my head, I screamed it, but all that came out was mumbles and moans. She seemed to understand that I was trying to answer and told me that if I wanted to get through this, I had to fight the Disease on my own.

I did. I lay there on the floor inside my padded room and thought back to when I’d kept myself on the ground during the shooting in front of the theater. I didn’t know how I’d had that kind of control but I had to reclaim it.

I worked to bring myself from the corner of my mind, where I’d been cringing, and to push my way to the front again. I didn’t know how long I’d been doing it, but when I was able to move my arm when I wanted to, it appeared there was hope for success. I was overpowering the Disease.

I didn’t stop there. When my daily lunch arrived, I ate it, regardless of my protest. I hadn’t eaten in so long, the food had no taste.

After the slide show the following day, the woman again asked my name, and I answered, “Alex.” Her smile stretched from ear to ear, showing long crow’s feet around her eyes.

“Breakthrough,” she proclaimed.

When I returned to my room, I slept. I hadn’t slept for a while.

I don’t know how long I was in a dream world before I finally came around. My eyelids stuck together and I had to pry them apart. Once they opened, my eyes stung in the silvery light. Voices were all about me, distant, yet the faces were close enough to show the creases in the medical masks they wore. I saw three people—two men and the woman.

She shifted her dark eyes down to me. “What’s your name?”

“Alex,” I answered weakly. My lips smacked.

“Hello, Alex. I’m Doctor Jennifer Blackwood, founder of Project RD.” She pointed to one of the masked men. “This is Phil Bristow, one of the Collectors who brought you here. He wanted to check in on you.”

I remembered Phil. He’d been in the van that night, the one with the sorrowful face.

“And this is General Mike Shelton.”

“What do you remember?” Shelton barked abruptly.

I didn’t answer him. Instead, I simply croaked, “Water.”

“He’s thirsty,” Blackwood said.

“It can drink after it talks,” Shelton argued. He turned his electric green eyes on me. “We need to know what it remembers. How many people it ate?”

I didn’t like General Shelton.

“Stop it, General,” Blackwood snapped. “Your position in security does not extend to interrogation.”

Stored away inside his glowing eyes, I saw a history that might explain his razor-thin tolerance towards me.

“Besides, he’s not one of them anymore. He . . .”

“I know what it is,” he interrupted, his voice rumbling like low thunder.

“Water,” I requested again.

Blackwood heard me. She turned her attention to me. Those long crow’s feet appeared around her eyes again. I suppose she was smiling.

“Of course,” she said gently. “Phil, get him a bottle of water, please.”

Shelton leaned his face near mine. He had crusty balls of junk in the corners of his eyes and his eyebrows were unkempt his bushy. His oily skin and pitch-black pores were also less than desirable. Thank God he wore a mask. I could imagine how his breath smelled, though I had no reason to talk.

“Do you realize what you’ve done, freak?” he whispered hotly.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I justified.

“You do remember, eh?”

Blackwood turned back to us. Her eyes narrowed and her eyebrows formed a little wrinkle between them. “General Shelton, if you don’t stop interrogating the patient, I must ask you to leave the room.”

Patient?

“This thing can tell us what went through its head when it killed and breakfasted on people’s brains. It must be interrogated.”

“And *he* will be questioned in due time,” she promised as Phil entered the room, water bottle in hand. “It’s part of our program. Again, it’s not your job to make inquiries. You’re only here to protect us in case something goes wrong. That’s it.”

I liked her.

Shelton grunted. She was unaffected by him, as if she had to constantly deal with his cruel attitude.

Phil cracked the bottle cap. I instinctively reached for the bottle but my hands were strapped down, along with my ankles. I'd been fastened to the bed like a monster.

"It's for our protection," Blackwood explained, taking the bottle from Phil. "As well as your own."

I shuddered when the cold water touched my desert dry lips. It might have been the first taste of water I'd had since *that night*. I hadn't even showered since then, either. What I really wanted, though, was to brush my teeth with all the antibacterial toothpastes available.

"You're doing very well," she said, taking the bottle away. "Your vitals are stable and the pigment in your eyes has returned to normal. You're lucky we got to you before the decay."

"What's Project RD?" I asked. My words sounded more lubricated.

"Rescued from Damnation," she explained, twisting the cap back on the bottle. "You have just made it through Step One—detox."

"Detox?"

"Yes. For the past month, you've been in solitary confinement."

I blinked rapidly. Surely, I look confused.

"Everything you've gone through, the padded room, the slide show, it was a part of detox."

"Oh."

"Mr. Wiesel, you're not out of the woods just yet. The Disease is still inside you. However, with our help, you can become whole again."

It surprised me that she knew my last name. Then I thought, *duh*, of course she would; my wallet had been with me on the night I'd been bitten.

"How?"

"You'll stay here for a year, during which time, you'll go through a twelve-step program to help wean you away from your hunger for human brains. For example, you'll go to group therapy with others like you to discuss your feelings."

Shelton snorted. "Why call it Project RD? Should be called Zombie Rehab."

"General, please," Blackwood begged.

She'd grown as tired of him as I had. It'd be worth losing the ground I'd gained just to mutilate him and eat his brain. I kept that to myself, of course.

She returned her focus to me. "Here you can be helped, but you have to want it."

Was she kidding? Did she think I wanted to stay a flesh-eating freak until my body fell apart? I wasn't going to say all that, but I thought it all the same.

"Okay," I mumbled.

She lowered her mask. I supposed she wasn't concerned with whatever contagion she guarded against. "I'm happy to hear that. Now, let's get you cleaned up. It's time you began Step Two."

—Step Two—

Before I was released from my bed, they strapped the restricting mask on me first.

“Try taking it off and I’ll destroy you,” Shelton warned vehemently.

This time, Blackwood said nothing in return. This was where his job started.

He and Phil the Collector brought me to the showers not far from my recovery room. Phil unstrapped my mask, but not without another stern warning from Shelton to behave. I didn’t budge or say anything. I wanted clean warm water so much I hardly noticed them watching me when I finally stood beneath the spigot. My body felt stiff, even though I could move just fine. I raised the water temperature, thinking my muscles were strained from the experience.

I soaked for a while before noticing the needle holes in my arms. There were so many, I couldn’t even count them. It didn’t look as though any had healed since the first injection. Neither had the bite mark on my arm from that infected prick when he’d sunk his teeth into me.

I pressed on the wound to check for any pain, but there was none. I remembered my other wounds; namely, the scratches on my face from the homeless man in the alley. I slid my hand down my cheek and felt where the skin had been sliced. They also felt fairly fresh.

“Hurry and wash up,” Shelton ordered.

I grabbed the bar of soap and sniffed. I’d always liked the smell of soap, but while breathing in the frothy bar, I smelled nothing. I suspected it was unscented.

They gave me clean clothes—gray scrubs—and took me into an assembly room where three other Infected were seated in front of a small stage with a screen behind a podium. One was a husky man, the other, Scott. I was restrained by my wrists and ankles to a chair next to a familiar young woman. She looked at me over her restraining mask.

“I hope this isn’t going to be another slide show,” she groaned tiredly.

“Me, too. What’s your name?”

“Sahila. Yours?”

“Alex.” I studied her a moment. “Have we met before?”

She considered me for a long time, until a painful reflection flickered in her eyes. In those eyes, I saw the nightmare.

“Yes,” she said with a lump in her throat, one she swallowed. “We were both in front of the movie theater when the Collectors came.” Her chest started heaving. “Oh god, it was the worst night of my life.”

If my wrists hadn’t been bound to the chair, I would’ve held her hand. I didn’t say it but I totally agreed. It had been a bad night.

We got no further in our conversation before Blackwood came on stage, positioning herself behind the podium. “Hello everyone.”

It was the first time I had a conscious opportunity to look at her. She was model tall, with sharp facial features, and her hair pinned back tightly. General Shelton stood beside her, unmasked and staring indignantly at everyone.

“Welcome to Project RD. First off, I’d like to congratulate you for making it through Step One. I know it was very difficult, but because of your achievements, there is hope. I’d also like to apologize for the restraints and masks we’ve forced upon you. Unfortunately, although you’ve made it quite far into recovery, you’re still unstable.”

The lights went dim and a slide projector came on behind us. The screen showed a graph with three dimensional bars and a percentage above each. Blackwood used a laser pointer to rest on the second tallest bar.

“You’re in the orange, in the forty-seventh percentile,” she explained. “Meaning that even though you’re mostly in control, you’re still very tempted to Relapse.”

Relapse? Shelton was right, it ought to be called *Zombie Rehab*.

“Your goal,” Blackwood went on, moving the pointer past the yellow bar, over the blue, and stopped on green, “is to reach here; Sobriety.” She turned to us and said, “As I mentioned in your recovery rooms, you’ll go through a twelve-step program to control your addiction to human brains. You’ll have a support team twenty-four/seven and will be treated like people, not zombies.” Her face turned grim. “That is, unless you cross a line. Here to instruct you on the rules of Project RD is General Shelton.”

She quickly stepped aside as if afraid of the general and allowed him to take her spot behind the podium. I didn’t like the man, and didn’t want to hear what he had to say, but under the circumstances, I didn’t have a choice.

“All right, this is how it’s gonna be,” he said, jumping right into the meat of it. “There are no second chances with us. If any of you brain-eating bastards try cracking a skull, we’ll crack yours back before taking you down to the execution room for beheading.”

I expected Blackwood to step in and say something about the way he talked to us, but she remained in the shadows. She must’ve had good reason for doing so.

“We begin with the ‘No Second Chance’ Rule ’cause whoever you bite or kill will suffer along with their loved ones, and we won’t risk repeating relapses from any of you. Got it?”

Scott whimpered. It was cruel to talk that way in front of a child, even a murderous one.

“You might think me a hard ass, and I am. But that’s because I’ve been dealing with your kind since I was kid and the Worldwide Outbreak of 1957 took out my entire family.”

I was right about the history.

“My men will be monitoring your every waking minute and will not hesitate to take you down at the smallest sign of trouble. Everyone, even the orderlies and doctors, will be armed with stun guns that have the power to paralyze a goddamn t-Rex, so keep that in mind whenever you get a grumble in your bellies.” His expression then turned real dark. “And FYI, this whole place is sitting on a bomb. If there’s ever a riot, I’ll blow this freakin’ building from the tower.”

Blackwood stepped out in a hurry and came back into the light of the projector.

“Thank you, General.” She took his place as he stepped down. “To my chagrin, he is correct. If you relapse even once, you will be put to death without delay.” She then got off the bomb subject quickly. “The workers here are risking their lives every single day and it isn’t fair to sacrifice several for the chance that one may be cured. But we’re not here to discuss failure; we’re here to prepare for your future. Within the last four decades, I and my team of scientist have worked to not only end the zombie disease, but to reverse it. After all this time, I’m proud to say that our monumental hard work has paid off.”

Shelton rolled his eyes. Clearly he thought differently, which made me question why he was even here if he didn’t believe in the mission of Project RD.

“Some of you may not be fully aware about zombie history, but for those who do, you can view this as a recap.”

She took a remote off the podium and aimed it at the projector. The bar graph was replaced with a hieroglyphic of a man eating another man.

“This is the first known record of the outbreak, which occurred in Ancient Egypt in 3000 BCE . . .”

She gave us the rundown on zombie history, starting with outbreaks in ancient civilizations. The Black Plague of 1665, which I’d thought was caused by diseased rats, had actually been caused by the Infected. There’d been outbreaks off and on throughout history all over the world. The worst though, was the Worldwide Outbreak Shelton had mentioned, and it had started in our small town, now renamed Ground Zero. It had been the first outbreak in America and the government hadn’t been prepared to handle it, even though Europe had tried to warn them in advance. America had been brimming with confidence from the victory of WWII and believed the country could handle anything. Weeks after the American outbreak, the Disease had spread into a global pandemic. It wasn’t until the mid-sixties that the problem had been controlled, but then it cropped up again in ’89, at Ground Zero. The problem had been contained quickly before it could spread any farther.

When the history lesson ended, Blackwood shut off the projector and the lights came on.

“I wanted to show you that to not only give you information about what you’ve become, but an understanding about why this program exists. Imagine if we can stamp out this menace to society by curing the Disease, rather than just executing the carriers.” She peered over her shoulder at Shelton, as if to say, *my way is better than yours, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah!*

“If Project RD is a success, then the human race can carry on without the burden of worrying about another outbreak. Yes, there will be skepticism, and, yes, there will be negative comments from the public; but when you’re cured and leave this facility as healthy and well-adjusted individuals, we’ll have shown the world that anything is possible, and it started with you; the First Group!”

I’ll admit, I felt inspired.

That evening we were placed in rooms that could only be described as prison cells. I felt emotionally drained. Blackwood had announced that we could talk to our loved ones before lights out. For those of us wanting to do so, we’d been taken into private rooms with a laptop and

a webcam. I wasn't allowed to have my restraints removed, but the orderlies had taken off the mask.

Man, my nose had itched. I'd been stretching at it when my parents came on screen. I quickly lowered my hands to hide the cuffs.

Our conversation had started off light. We'd talked about the weather and who had won the Super Bowl. I went into what Project RD was all about and its agenda. Mom had said I looked terrible and Dad got emotional. I'd told them I loved them both and left.

The orderlies relieved me of my restraints and mask while soldiers stood by. They put me in my cell with a tray of food. I ate slowly, tasting nothing. I hardly noticed the lack of flavor as I thought about Blackwood's pep talk. I was proud to be the first of something so important. To be a part of Project RD's first success group, who had the chance to actually be cured—this could really change the world.

The next day was the group's first session. We sat around in a circle without masks but still strapped to chairs bolted to the floor. Without the mask, I saw everyone's faces. Despite her pallid skin and yellow fingernails, Sahila was pretty. I gave her a genuine smile when our eyes met, and she returned the gesture. Sitting next to her was the husky man with a black beard. He looked uncomfortable and stiff.

It was just the three of us. I didn't know where Scott was. I'd hoped to see Tony, but he wasn't there. Between me and Sahila was a vacant chair, which was soon taken by a young woman.

"Hi, everyone, I'm Gia Thomson, your sponsor."

"Hi, Gia," we all replied.

"Today we're going to introduce ourselves and discuss what happened to bring you here."

She was perky, like a cheerleader on an adrenaline kick. She had an incredibly wide smile and eyes that . . .

I couldn't look at them. All I thought about was the brains behind them. Being so close to an Uninfected ignited my temptation.

No, don't start slipping now, I told myself. Her tits, yes! That'll be my focal point.

To help cool my yearning, I reminded myself about Shelton's 'No Second Chance' rule. Staring at boobs certainly helped control myself,—at least from on kind of hunger anyway.

"Who wants to go first?" Gia asked.

I did, just to keep my mind off my appetite for her brain. I stated my full name, age, and rehashed the night I'd been bitten. When I got to the part where I'd killed the homeless guy, my stomach started to ache with those strange hunger pangs. I skimmed over it before I got into describing every juicy detail.

Gia's face turned melancholy. "It's painful to talk about your kills. I understand."

No, she didn't; and no, it wasn't painful. Not in the sense she referred to.

Next went the husky guy, Jeff Byrne. He'd been a mechanic when a zombie had bitten him inside his shop. He hadn't had a chance to kill before the Collectors found him on the floor suffering rigor mortis. He'd been unable to move around even after his muscle function had returned. He was going through physical therapy now.

Sahila Taylor had been a high school senior who'd worked as a waitress at the Ground Zero diner. She'd left work when an Infected attacked and bitten her on the same night as me.

Her experience haunted her. She whimpered and closed her eyes at times. I thought she was going to cry but no tears fell.

Her mood shifted when she got into relating her first kill. Unlike me, she described the savory flavor of fresh brain and how it had squished ever so sweetly in her mouth, like a fat, ripe grape. Jeff and I started panting. You'd think she was describing the best sex she'd ever had.

"That sounds so good," Jeff moaned.

"Okay," Gia said, slicing into Sahila's words, stopping her from going into any more detail. "Let's stop here and continue tomorrow, 'kay?"

Next, we went to the medical ward for checkups. I got another injection of nanotech and a batch of vitamin supplements, which I had to slip individually through the tiny bars over my mouth. I asked about my wounds that weren't healing. The doctor said my cells and tissues were half dead and would take twice as long to heal. I asked if that meant I was half dead.

In a flat tone, he answered, "Yes, your body is at a standstill, in the gray area between life and death. I'm here to build your body up and tip it back over to the living side. Everyone else is dealing with your mental health."

Good, because I'd relapse in a heartbeat if *that* dispassionate bastard was my sponsor.

"Will it work?" I asked eagerly. "Can you guys make me well again?"

The doctor sniffed and shined a light into my eyes. "Only time will tell."

After that uplifting physical, I was taken back to my room.

—Step Five—

At this stage in the program, I attempted to reach out to the family members of my victims and ask for forgiveness. I wrote letters to make amends. Granted, I only killed four people, and the homeless guy probably had no family, but the responses were brutal. I got a vicious death threat from a widow whose husband I'd killed. In her letter, she stated how she wanted to peel my skin off and bury me in salt. The second letter was written on the back of a picture of a seventeen year-old theater employee I'd devoured. It read: *You shouldn't get a chance to live since you didn't give my boy one.* The third person to respond, Mr. Adams, whose brother I'd killed, sent me a Get Well card with nothing written inside.

That was one of my worst months.

—Step Eight—

Eight months later and things were looking up. During my physicals, I was observed through a CT scanner where doctors determined how my mind reacted to the subject of consuming brains. After months of injections, checkups, and heart-to-heart group therapy, my zombie mindset wore away, and I was relieved of my restraints and masks. I'd reached the blue level and was declared *Low Risk*. Others who just passed Step One were beginning their own Step Two stage. I saw them bond and wearing masks; I gave them encouragement to keep up the struggle toward sobriety. I also spent time outside my room with others and ate together in the cafeteria.

"It's nice to finally be able to hold a fork again," Jeff said, staring at his hand gripping the handle.

Jeff was much happier now that he could move about with ease. When I'd first met him, he'd been partially paralyzed. Now, after months of physical therapy and injections, he was a totally new person. We all were, since our appetite for brains had faded to a sickening memory.

The program was working. In fact, we told Oprah, CNN, and John Stewart on the Daily Show so. Sahila, Jeff, and I even made the cover of Rolling Stone magazine. Since the First Group was recovering so well, Blackwood thought it was time to publicize the success of Project RD and shut all those critics up. For our safety, we weren't allowed to leave the facility. Too many people wanted us dead. Our interviews were broadcasted live from Project RD and the photographers from Rolling Stone came to us. Blackwood had turned the Infected into romantic figures. Vampires move over; zombies were the in thing now.

Everything was going to be all right.

—Step Twelve—

“My name is Alex,” I said to my group.

“Hi, Alex,” everyone replied.

“It’s been 352 days since I’ve eaten human brains.”

They clapped.

“How do you feel about that?” Gia asked.

“I feel great about it,” I answered truthfully. “I’ve only two weeks left in this program, and I can honestly say, I have no urge to eat brains.”

“What is your major accomplishment since being in Project RD?” Gia asked.

“That I’ve beaten the Disease.”

“What are you most thankful for?”

“Being alive. And also for the support I’ve received while being here. In this place, I haven’t been judged for what I did as an Infected.”

“What’s your goal once you get out?”

“I’d like to start college this fall and live a normal life again.”

“What’s your worst fear once you’re out?”

I was almost too afraid to speak it out loud. “Relapsing.”

“When you’re out on your own, you’ll be constantly tested. Do you think you’ll relapse?”

“No,” I said confidently. “I may have to carry this disease with me for the rest of my life, but it doesn’t control me.”

Everyone clapped again. Gia looked pleased.

“Thank you for sharing, Alex.”

I had made it. I was almost at the finish line. I finally came to terms with living with my unholy actions. Not a day had gone by that I hadn’t thought about the people I’d killed. Before, when I used to think about what I did, I’d reminisce on how sweet their brains tasted. Now my grief was a source of comfort.

Once we’d reached Step Seven, we were allowed to go outside, to a secured yard where we could run, walk, or chat with others. Nearby was a playground where the Infected children played. I’d spotted Scott many times. He seemed well. Seeing those children always gave me hope.

“Not running today?” Sahila said, sitting beside me.

“Nah, my body has gotten stiff and achy.”

My five senses had bailed on me in recent months. I could probably stand in the arctic cold and not get one goose bump; even hearing sound was a challenge.

“Me too,” she said, taking off her square-frame glasses. “I’ve been feeling like an old woman lately and my eyesight is getting worse. I asked the doctors about it, and they just prescribed these ugly-ass glasses to wear.”

They were ugly, just like mine. The lenses were as thick as the glass of a fishbowl. I kept mine in my pocket because I felt embarrassed and pathetic when I wore them, like a dog with a cone around his head.

“They keep telling me to give my body time,” I said. “Jeez, it’s been almost a year already.” I craned my neck towards Jeff sitting on my other side. “What about you? How are you functioning?”

He’d spaced out again, staring off into nothing. He’d been doing that a lot recently, like his brain wasn’t registering anymore. I’d once caught him eyeing an orderly and licking his lips. I wondered if I ought to report it.

“I feel fine,” he answered softly but crystal clear.

The sunlight really brought out the truth of our exterior. Like the rest of us, Jeff looked dreadful. Razor-thin veins had risen, creating navy blue roadways on his yellowish skin. There was a potent smell about us that was a cross between sour milk and unattended pool water. It wasn’t appealing and didn’t go away, even after showering.

I looked over at the tower. I’d seen it every time I’d been to the yard. It was the only tower in the place. It sat at the building’s back corner in a section I’d never been to. To the best of my knowledge, none of us had.

“Do you think this place is rigged with explosives like Shelton said?” Sahila asked.

“Believe it or not, I hope so,” I replied. “If a zombie riot ever happens, it’d be for the best if this place did blow up and took everyone out before any of us escaped and started killing again.”

Jeff breathed heavily. My attention switched to him just as he lunged. He got me to the ground and snapped his jaws like Cujo. I held him up just enough to keep him from biting my face, which became drenched in saliva. His eyes were hungry and red. I thought he was going to tear into me when Sahila managed to push him off. His weak condition made him as easy to tip over as a sickly cow.

“Run!” she shouted, taking her own advice and heading back inside.

I got to my feet with every bone cracking, and dashed across the yard. I would’ve followed her but Jeff had gotten up and blocked my escape. He chased after me with surprising agility. Apparently, his physical therapy had worked really well. My stiff body couldn’t outrun him and his breath was soon on the back of my neck.

A gunshot took care of that. I stopped and saw Jeff on the ground, his head bleeding. A sharpshooter had gotten him right in the temple.

Blackwood came to my room that evening. After the attack, I’d wanted solitude, but it was nice to see her.

“Are you alright?” she asked, sitting on a chair across from my bed.

“Am I going to end up like Jeff?”

“Mr. Byrne had great potential for full recovery, he really did. However, his overpowering addiction drove him into relapse.”

“But he’d never eaten a brain.”

“That’s precisely my point. He’d never experienced such gruesome pleasures and it ultimately consumed him.”

“Like teenage virgins?” I put in, speaking from experience. “Most are always wanting sex even though they have no idea what it feels like.”

She considered my analysis. “More like a child who’s born an addict but has never touched a drug. He didn’t kill, but the addiction was there all the same. His body told him he needed brains and eventually his mind believed it. You and Sahila are different because you’ve tasted the forbidden fruit. The pain of your sins has kept you on the road to recovery.”

“But why did he come after *me*?”

“That’s the good news.”

“The good news?”

She didn’t explain anything more until we arrived at a ward four stories below our floor, where none of the Infected was ever allowed to go. We were met by plenty of Shelton’s guards and security doors along the way. No one challenged Blackwood’s presence.

We came into a dark hallway with shiny black walls and glass cells. Inside those cells were more Infected. *Real* Infected. I talking, moaning, screeching, jaw-snapping, took-a-wrong-turn-into Dead-Endsville-and-put-it-in-park Infected!

“We call them the Incurable,” Blackwood explained. “The ones who have no hope of returning to the life they once knew.”

“Why are they here?” I swallowed the dry lump in my throat. “Why haven’t they been beheaded?”

“We need to study them to find an antidote strong enough to cure even those who’ve been infected a long time.”

We walked through the shiny, yet gloomy hallway. It stretched for what seemed like miles. Guards stood on either side of each cell. I looked at the Incurables as we passed. They all came from Ground Zero; at least, the ones I recognized who hadn’t decomposed beyond repair. I really didn’t want to see this.

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked weakly.

She stopped and turned to face me. “You asked me why Mr. Byrne went after you.”

“Yeah?” I said, standing for the long-awaited answer.

“If Mr. Byrne had been near one of these Incurables, he wouldn’t have attacked them because the Disease has completely taken them over. Understand?”

“Not really.”

“He came after you because the Disease is leaving your body. You’re actually reversing what has been done to you.”

It was like she’d told me I won the lottery. “Really?”

“Yes, you and Miss Taylor are the most promising patients at Project RD.” She placed her hands on both sides of my face. It was the first time I had hands that weren’t in latex gloves touch me. “The both of you are pure successes. You needn’t worry about relapsing. You’re more human than you think.”

I grinned like a madman. Then my eyes snagged on an Incurable in a cell behind her.

I stepped over to the glass wall. To see the patient more clearly, I had to wear my glasses, which was even more embarrassing because they’d broken after the altercation with Jeff. They now had tape wrapped around the bridge. Steve Urkel, the Zombie.

Inside was my best friend, Tony. He was in a wheelchair, his head lolling on his shoulder while a stream of drool hung from his bottom lip. He looked half rotten, a little worse than he did that night at the theater. In the cell with him were an orderly and a doctor. The orderly wiped Tony’s mouth and gave him water he sucked through a straw. The doctor prepared to give him an injection.

“Tony Wiker,” Blackwood said, coming up to stand beside me. “Even though he’s been infected for so long and his body is badly decomposed, we’re still trying to save him. He’s receiving daily nanotech injections and we’re giving him stem cells to rebuild his dead tissue, but his brain is too far gone. I’m afraid he’ll spend the rest of his life confined to a wheelchair.”

It hurt to see Tony like this, especially when I remembered all the good times we’d shared.

He shifted his milky eyes to me after I tapped lightly on the glass to get his attention. I waved and gave a fake smile. He seemed to recognize me and his moans breezed through the air holes above me.

“Calm yourself,” the doctor ordered. He had his back turned to Tony while he loaded the syringe.

Unexpectedly, Tony stood and grabbed the orderly. Faster than anyone could cry for help, he bit through the man’s neck and tore out a fist-sized chunk of flesh.

The doctor reached for his Taser, caught off-guard by the sudden animation of his brain-dead patient. He fumbled for it, but Tony was on top of him and pushed him to the floor. A guard swiped a keycard to get inside, but before the light turned green, Tony had smashed the doctor’s head open and had begun hollowing out his skull. The look on his putrid face as he shoveled brain into his mouth screamed of ecstasy.

In the midst of my shock, an envious feeling squeezed in.

Blackwood yelled for the guards to get inside. When they did, Tony received more volts than a lightning strike. He went down while the guards pounced with cuffs and a restricting mask.

Blackwood’s eyes turned on me. She looked surprised, as if she’d forgotten I was still standing there. “Get him out!” she ordered a guard.

He took my arm and led me out of the ward, back to my room.

I knew Tony's fate was sealed. It just surprised me when Blackwood said he'd requested to speak with me before his execution.

"I thought he was brain dead."

"He's been deliberately unresponsive to make us believe he was brain dead, waiting to strike when it was convenient."

"What should I say to him?"

"These are his final moments, Mr. Wiesel. Just tell him goodbye."

Blackwood was upset about Tony. Not saddened, but pissed, like she'd gotten a D on a test she studied hard for.

The execution room was a long elevator ride down. Two armed guards silently accompanied me. When the ride was over, we walked through a dark concrete hall, into a room where Tony was strapped face down on a board, under a guillotine. I didn't expect to see the execution method, and when I did, I wished I hadn't come. My only comfort was that I wouldn't actually witness seeing his head get chopped off.

As I approached, the guards stayed back to give me privacy. Tony remained motionless, as though in acceptance of what was going to happen. He didn't even move when I knelt beside him.

"Tony," I whispered. "It's me, Alex."

In a voice as raspy as a sixty-year-old chain smoker, he said "Hey, dude." He rotated his head sideways toward me. "I knew you'd come. When I saw you earlier, I had to talk to you. That's why I attacked those guys."

That took me aback. "You murdered them to get yourself put down here just to chat?"

"Well, that and to finally get them to kill me. I can't hack it here anymore."

My heart leapt into my throat. "Why? You were improving."

He gurgled a laugh. "I was better when I first got here. Now I'm a little worse. This place isn't what it seems. Project RD can't cure us."

"What do you mean? *I'm* cured. Blackwood told me the Disease is reversing itself. I'm going home for Christ's sake."

"And you'll relapse and bite someone, and then start the shit all over again, just like the last group in '89."

"Last group? I'm in the first success group."

"You're the third, after the second in the 80's and the first in the '50's. Project RD was called Project Study then. They collected zombies from Europe to do experiments on. But they got careless and the zombies started killing the staff. Eventually, they got loose and went straight for Ground Zero, where the Worldwide Outbreak began."

I didn't know what to say.

"Project Study was renamed in the 70's when Blackwood took over. She picked up where the first team left off, with the intention to find a cure. There weren't many zombies around by then and those left were dying off, so she deliberately let them loose to infect others. But it didn't

spread like last time, because she made sure the whole thing was capped before it got out of control.”

“No. Some drifter brought the Disease that time.”

“Lies,” he whispered. It sounded like he was about to fall asleep. “That was a cover. It was Blackwood who was responsible for the 80’s outbreak just so she could have zombies to study. And now she did it to us. You’re dying, just like me. Blackwood is obsessed with finding a cure, but what she doesn’t realize is that once bitten we *are* the Disease and there’s no cure from us. The injections are only slowing our decay. I’m telling you, dude, we’re the living dead, and we can’t go against our nature.” He blinked slowly. “Ask yourself, d’you feel any better? D’you *physically* feel at all?”

In truth, I didn’t feel anything, not even someone grabbing my arm and hoisted me to my feet.

“I’m glad you’re here, freak,” General Shelton said. “I want you to see this.”

He delivered me into the hands of the guards who had escorted me into the room.

“Stop! What are you doing?” I cried, as guards held me by each arm.

“I love this part of my job,” Shelton said, sliding Tony toward the guillotine. His head went through the round opening. He looked at me.

Shelton pulled the latch, and the slanted blade sliced through Tony’s neck with flawless ease. His head dropped into a waiting basket. To my relief it was bloodless. To compensate for that, Shelton snatched Tony’s head out by the hair and shoved it in my face.

“This is what needs to be done with all you brain-eating bastards!”

Tony’s eyelids flickered, his mouth moving. I would’ve vomited if I could.

On our way back up, I told Shelton about what Tony had said and asked if it was true.

“Is that what you ghouls were talkin’ bout? Yeah, it’s true. That’s why I signed up with Project RD, to make sure there ain’t no more Worldwide Outbreaks.”

“But you’re part of it? Even after what happened to your family, you’re still going along with the whole thing?”

“Remember the tower?” he asked deviously. “Don’t think I don’t have the balls to go through with it.”

The entire experience had traumatized me. That night, I took a walk through the wide corridors and headed for Sahila’s room. I needed to talk to someone. Witnessing Tony’s death had disturbed me, but not as much as what he’d said—or how I felt when he ate the doctor’s brain. Actually seeing it in all its juicy glory had made me feel something I hadn’t felt in a while: *Hungry!*

“I was just on my way to see you,” Gia said. “I heard what happened. Blackwood gave Shelton an earful for what he did. Are you okay?”

I looked into her eyes and knew what was behind them.

Her head cracked open easily enough when I slammed it against the wall. I eagerly reached inside and pulled out her brain like pumpkin innards. I could taste again; in fact, all my senses charged up.

Sahila stepped out of her room and asked what that sound was. I didn't answer. I was too busy enjoying myself. Thundering footsteps from an orderly, pounded towards me. He yelled into a radio and held a Taser in his other hand. Sahila leapt on him as he passed and slammed him against the wall. She tore into him.

Other patients came out of their rooms. I stood licking my fingers while Sahila kept feasting. Soldiers came but the sight of us eating had driven the rest into a feeding frenzy. They attacked the guards and chaos erupted.

Bomb, I thought.

There was an evil here and it wasn't the Infected; it was Project RD. I had to stop Blackwood from unleashing anymore Infected and continuing her experiments. To do so, I needed to destroy the facility.

My brain lust returned but I didn't let it overwhelm me. I had to reach the tower.

I jumped on a soldier and tasered him with his own gun. It was all I could do to keep from biting into him as I stripped him of his uniform. I didn't want blood on the clothes. While everyone else fought, I disguised myself, took his pistol, and left him there to be eaten.

The alarm began blaring and gunshots exploded in the night. I left the ward as fast as I could, pulling away from the madness I'd created. I jumped into an elevator and headed for the third floor, where I could reach the tower. I got to the fourth when the elevator stopped and the doors reopened. I put on my, I'm-not-a-zombie-dressed-like-a-soldier, persona.

"General, everything will be under control soon," Blackwood said into a radio, stepping inside. "No need to take drastic measures."

"It better be," he shouted. "I'm at the tower right now, ready to push the Doomsday button if—"

"It'll be handled!" she fired back.

The second she took her finger off the TALK button, I shoved her against the wall. It took her a moment to recognize me.

"Mr. Wiesel?" She noticed the blood on my face. "Oh God!"

"You did this to us," I said, shaking her. "You let the Infected into Ground Zero so you could have more lab rats to work with."

"Tony told you? My staff talked too freely around him when we thought he was a useless lump of meat."

She didn't need to say anymore. I would've eaten her brain if I could have done it without becoming lost in the enjoyment of doing so; it would've compromised my mission. With great restraint, I avoided cracking her head open and merely slammed it against the wall. She let out a small cry before her body went limp.

The doors slid apart, opening a way to the third floor.

I'd never been here but it looked like any other ward. Abandoned, dust on every surface, it appeared as if it hadn't been occupied in years.

I ran around for a while before I found a locked door. Fortunate that I'd bumped into Blackwood; I could use her keycard to get into any of the rooms.

The door led to another elevator that took me straight up to the tower. When I stepped out, Shelton was yelling. Good thing, too, because his volume covered the wound of my footsteps as I crept from the dark hall into the room where he was. He had his back to me as he shouted orders into a radio. As I snuck up on him, I noticed his hand on a key inserted in a lock on a control panel with dozens of switches and buttons.

He never saw it coming. I raised my pistol and blew him away at point-blank range. His head exploded all over the place. I picked off a brain chunk and threw it into my mouth like popcorn shrimp. It melted on my tongue and left my backbone tingling.

Beside the key was a green button. The control panel hummed. I guessed everything was in play for the big bang. All I needed to do was turn and press, or the other way around, I really didn't know.

I prepared myself for my final moment. I didn't mind going down with the ship; after all, what else did an Infected like me have to offer? It was all for the best.

I spit out a piece of skull fragment and turned the key. All the lights came on. It was go time.

Every nerve in my body got fried just before I found myself on the ground beside the late General Shelton. Blackwood stared down at me with a face burning with fury. She held a Taser and shocked the holy hell out of me again, either out of caution or spite. I bet on spite.

"I've worked too hard to have you destroy this on a whim," she said through gritted teeth. She pressed her shoe onto my chest, holding me down. "You were so close, Mr. Wiesel. I had such faith in your success, *my* success! Now I see there's more work to be done." She removed her foot and stood over me like a fearless warrior. "You may be another one of my failures, but I'll keep you around to stand testament to my achievements."

And just like that, it started all over again.

(END)

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