

DEAD END: BOOK 1 A VERY GOOD MAN



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Dead End: A Very Good Man

By

P.S. Power

Chapter One

Jake's stomach hurt again.

Not exactly a big mystery as to why. It wasn't real pain, just fear. Terror really. He knew that feeling pretty well now, that tightening low in the belly that turned to cramps about the time he had to go into a house. Every freaking time. Any house now too, even when he wasn't out with his crew hunting, like they were now.

So at least this time it was probably warranted.

Some people tried to claim that the fear was part of the zombie thing, a side effect whatever took someone from alive to dead and turned them into an animated human shark, eating the living without end, looking for food if they weren't eating.

Those people were lying to themselves.

No, the fear was natural and part of anyone still sane enough to realize what was going on, and a few people that weren't. Jake knew that now. Admitted it fully. Lying to yourself just got you killed anymore, didn't it? He was afraid, and it had settled deep into his bones, making him want to run away from what lay past the door in front of him. That couldn't stop him though. Not if they were all going to survive.

Someone had to make the zombies go away, and if they didn't do it, who would?

Holding the spear he'd fashioned from an old rake handle, sharpened to a point, but not one too sharp – that made them fragile and the point could shatter – Jake stood in the open from the doorway of the little white colored house. Waiting. In front of him he heard her screaming at the top of her lungs. That didn't help the fear at all, Molly doing her job the way she did. In fact, it freaked him out.

A lot.

Zombies came to human voices like lazy moths to flame and they positively ran toward screaming. Probably trying to get in on the free meal before the others ate it all. So when the cleaners hunted, they used a screamer. Someone, usually a woman since they screamed better than men, made some noise and got the undead going, headed toward their position, waiting for

them in relative safety and comfort. Today they were starting on the front porch, but Molly had insisted on going inside. Alone.

Again.

Then, the girl was suicidal, so who could blame her?

Most people just stuck a gun in their mouths if they wanted out, but her people had been Catholic when it all started, so she didn't believe in just killing herself like a normal person. No, she just courted death instead, hoping that Jesus would call her home or whatever it was they believed.

Brilliant plan, except that she'd probably end up a zombie, which would mean he'd have to cut her freaking head off himself. Jake really hated having to behead people he knew like that. It was much harder than just shooting them in the first place.

Taking a head always felt so personal, so final. Even from zombies. Plus that feeling, the pull of the knife on his hand while he cut, or the gristly feeling of a machete on soft wet bone staying with you. Like it lived in your hands and arms, all the time.

Well, at least they weren't sleeping together. Jake had asked if she wanted to, figuring that someone that slept around as much as the chubby brunette did might give him a shot.

She did.

Shot right down.

Claimed that he wasn't her type of all things. That had been interesting, because until that moment Jake hadn't known she had a type, or even standards. It was the reason he'd asked.

Well, that was no big. He'd started out a bit thin and rangy looking and six months in the land of the dead hadn't helped much at all there. At the end of the world you kind of expected to get laid though. Wasn't that in all the stories? It seemed to be working for almost everyone else. Even the ugly people were getting action, based mainly on the fact that they were still alive. The beauty didn't seem as high anymore. Not for most people. Just him, Jake guessed, a little sourly.

A form rushed him fast and hard. Out of the black interior of the single story ranch style house moving straight for him without stopping. Jake pulled the spear out of the way, since it was Molly, not something more dead yet. His job being sticker for this hunt, a position he'd invented but that all the groups used now, wasn't that hard. Not really, so he'd move from there to shooting too, if they needed the backup. They being the forty-something Tipper, who swore she was lesbian and the thirteen year old slightly chubby boy next to her, Dave.

Tipper looked the part she tried to sell him, but went off with a lot of guys too. Not Jake's business, except that she was clearly lying about it to him. That... hurt a bit. He might not be the best looking guy in the world, but he wasn't deformed either. Plus, he'd never given her reason to be untruthful to him about something like that, had he? Yeah, they were friends and yes he'd asked her if she wanted to have sex, mainly because he didn't want to die a twenty-four year old virgin, which didn't seem that unreasonable to him. It had been a while ago, when Jake had asked her. She still maintained she only liked women. Even after they'd saved each other's lives, like fifteen times.

She'd started out looking like a businesswoman, butchering her hair off in the second week and dressing like a fighter after the third. More like a lumberjack than most of them did, red flannel long sleeves, two or three shirts under that and heavy jeans. Way too hot for August. All of them were dressed about the same.

Dave was in blue, jeans and oversized shirts tucked in and tied down so that nothing would catch if he had to run or fight. In the three months the boy had been on the team he'd gone from

real fatty to merely a bit hefty. Honestly, if he'd looked like this before he probably would have been recruited for school sports teams. The guy handled himself well and built muscle pretty easily, even as they all half-starved most of the time. Inside three more months the kid would probably be stripped down to lean.

Back Before they'd both been first person shooter fans, gaming all the time. A lot of the best hunters now had been. Dave was certainly that. One of the best. Kid or not.

He was also probably a psychopath.

A real one.

He loved killing. Zombies, animals for dinner, people that didn't do what he wanted. Pretty much anything that he didn't think would kill him first. Brave though. Dave said he didn't feel fear at all and after everything, Jake kind of believed it. Watching him work was like looking at ice in a freezer. Cold and with no sign of melting any time soon.

That must be nice. Jake was always afraid now. For instance, at that very moment he felt a deep and abiding fear that Molly was going to run straight up the spear. Moron.

"Behind me!" The large girl bleated loudly, a panicked squeal that easily would have been enough to get any black blooded zombie going after her in search of lunch.

It took a second to get the spear down and he nearly missed the window, since the girl threw herself to the right again, instead of the left like they'd practiced. He'd have called her a retard but that would be insulting the good mentally challenged people of the world. If there were any of them left. So instead of an instant reaction, up and to his left, then down into the runner behind her, Jake had to jump back and stab desperately into the thing's middle like a spaz.

This zombie had worn a suit to work. That or the guy, knowing he was about to die from a bite, had dressed up in his finest clothes, so that he'd make a good impression later. Rather than take his own head off like he should have. Either way it was a pain in the ass now, because the heavy jacket, once a nice gray coat, now covered with layers of dried blood and filth, caught the spear point, which would have hit in the center if things had gone like they should. He wanted the relatively soft middle, got ribs and fabric instead. Falling back as the man, who'd been old when he died, looking to be in his mid-fifties or so, ran at him full speed. Jake floundered a bit before managing a kick to the middle, a stomp really, with his left foot, which gave him enough distance to re-center and stab again. It was risky, trying to kick a zombie like that, but this time it worked, without any scratching or grabbing.

The spear rode up, the man impaling himself on it almost without notice, there was groaning but that happened all the time, it wasn't a sign of pain. Or at least not pain that Jake was causing. Once it was about a foot through, just outside of the thing's arms reach, Jake pushed up, hard. Using the wooden handle as a lever. The ichor dripping out slowly, and the stench of death suddenly magnified enough to make him gag a little. The blood of the zombie was black and thick as the guy finally overbalanced and fell back, thankfully into the front room of the house. As planned. New ones still had red blood, so this one had been around for a while, even though he looked to be in good shape. Probably trapped inside here then.

"Jesus fuck Molly," Dave said quietly, menace pouring off his body strongly enough that Jake could feel it ten feet away. "If you want to kill Jake that badly, just grow a pair and shoot him. For now, just get the hell out of the way and stay down, we'll deal with this later."

Tipper growled, a low sound that wouldn't attract any zombies that might be out and about. That was rare, but it could happen, they'd all lived it at least once. Back when everything first started every second person you saw was already gone. Now, in Westwood at least, it was still

true, but there were a lot fewer people, so it was harder to notice.

—“Darn straight girl. It's one thing to get yourself killed...” The butch looking woman moved alongside Dave, who made the first kill with the shotgun in his hand, a single shot to the thing's head.

Then Dave shot again, another one in the room then. Dave rarely missed on something already down. Jumping to his left, he moved back, reloading as he did, smoothly and with an eerie dead-eyed calm. Tipper took her turn and two blasts later moved back too, doing the same thing, just like they practiced. Everyone moving their body was supposed to go to the left each time, their own left. It wasn't hard or confusing. They kept going like that, shoot and move back, letting their partner catch the next one as it came. Trusting each other. Like actual friends or something.

Something set his nerves on edge suddenly. Jake didn't know why, he didn't see anything yet and only felt as scared as usual, but... the situation wasn't right. He just knew something was very wrong. Without hesitation he pulled the nine millimeter from the holster on his belt and took aim at the door, waiting. Everyone was outside, which should be safe, roughly speaking. It just didn't work for him here. The situation had gotten creepy. Dangerous. More deadly somehow, which shouldn't have really been possible.

Tipper and Dave handled the four that came at them from the house easily enough, so he turned around just in time to see the other two, both runners, headed straight for them.

Ah, that would be it then. Jake nodded to himself a bit. Now it made sense.

Molly, genius that she was, screamed. The runners headed straight for her. Well, it was her job, but a handgun wouldn't have been his first choice for trying to take these things out on the move and they hardly used rifles at all anymore, so he hadn't thought to bring one. These guys both were men and had been young before they passed on, probably some of the first hunters from their heavy, torn and blood stained clothing, had been fit and strong when they went, which meant fast now.

Lovely.

Jake took aim and got the first one about fifteen feet away from Molly's throat.

The two at the porch were still dealing with the threat from inside, and Molly still had one closing on her position fast. Like a freaking linebacker. It would have helped if she shut up maybe, but that wouldn't happen. The girl wanted to die and apparently didn't mind taking her team along for the ride. Sweet of her really, always willing to share the treat. Except that she wasn't, not with Jake, was she? He nearly shot her first, to stop the noise, but managed to load three slugs into the charger's brain pan instead, stopping it no more than a foot outside its arm's reach from its target. Molly kept screaming.

Stupid cunt.

Jake didn't like to use foul language as a rule, but the girl was going to get them all killed. Possibly today if she didn't shut it fast. Before he could shoot her Tipper cast him a worried look and spoke low, nearly the growl that Jake used most of the time himself.

“Can it Molly. Stop now or we'll have to kill you.” She kept looking at Jake while she spoke.

For some reason, ever since the beginning, whenever people had to be killed for the good of the group, everyone always looked at him. Probably because in the original group of eight, he had been the only one willing to take out Gary when he'd freaked. It had been the eighth night when that happened. Zombies came toward organic noises, especially human voices, but they ignored gunfire. What Molly didn't ignore was the clatter of Dave's shotgun chambering a round. The kill wouldn't kill the girl, or at least Jake didn't think so, not yet. He really wanted to though. So did

Jake at the moment.

~~That feeling stopped when the girl did, voice going dead instantly.~~

“Good. Let's pull back and see what comes out now.” This again got muttered low and deep. Jake may not have had more than a mid-tone tenor for singing, but it went low for zombie. Nearly a croak. They liked high pitched voices better and higher tones carried better to zombie ears.

They moved quietly then, weapons out, except for Molly, who glared at him when she thought he wasn't looking. Why him? Who knew. Jake would have killed her if she hadn't shut-up, sure, so would the others. They even all liked her well enough when she didn't freak out like that. He wondered what her problem with him could be? It had been her screwing up as far as he could tell. Even with that, when she moved wrong, he'd covered her and got the dump in time. It was annoying, but not something to carry around with them really.

That, dumping a single zombie over, made a huge difference. The first hunters didn't know about it and ended up in vast open fights with undead climbing all over them. About half of them died each time they fought, because zombies don't stop unless you destroy a big chunk of the brain, which movies aside, was harder to do than it sounded. Or... if you provided food. Yeah, they could throw a living person to them too, that worked pretty well, overall. A bit hard on morale though. Dumping a zombie got the others to stop for about half a minute while they tried taking a bite of the downed form, just in case it was lunch. They didn't like the taste, but it could take them three or four bites to make sure.

All of them stopped, most of the time, to check an already downed potential snack. Hence the guy at the door with a spear. Machetes and baseball bats had been tried too, and they kind of worked, but had drawbacks. Machetes let the creatures get too close and bats didn't get them off the ground fast enough. It could take a half dozen swings to down one and that just took too long most of the time.

Shooting worked, but zombies rarely went down from anything less than a headshot and shooting them holding still and bent over a body trying to munch was much easier than doing the same thing as they were charging full blast. They didn't move all that fast as they aged, but the fresh ones were nearly as quick as live people. Anyone could take out slow shamblers. That was where the old movies had it wrong though, thinking that the old ones were all you'd have to ever face, and that they'd all look like they'd come out of the grave. They got that way after a while but the fresh ones could sometimes pass as human. In looks at least.

Except most people didn't try to eat you.

They moved back a ways, quietly, waiting to see if anything else came out to play. Nothing did, thank god. Not that Jake believed anymore, if he ever really had. Not now. If there was a god he'd abandoned them all six months back and hadn't even sent a note to explain why. No backup or anything.

Kind of a douche move, if it was really the case.

Molly sat on the ground crying and glaring at him between sobs. At least she was muffling the noise now. Really, Jake felt like just getting a new screamer, or just doing it himself. He really couldn't though, his voice always stayed too soft now.

The chubby girl would end up getting him killed and the way she'd been doing things, he'd come back as a zombie. That would suck.

For one thing he really didn't think human flesh would be all that tasty, since zombies didn't even cook it first. Plus everyone was thin and stringy now. The other thing was the whole loc

they got going, pasty and torn up. The rotting didn't help either. Yeah, he was white, but finally had a little color to his face from all the hunting the team had done that summer, along with the farm work he'd put in. He'd hate to lose that now. It was the best tan he'd ever had.

Nothing happened at all, not for hours. Finally, just about the time he was getting ready to call a halt to the day, a single form walked out of a house near the one they'd been working in. The form didn't shamle or run, just walked carefully, looking around. It could be one of the rare smart ones, or it could be a regular person. Not their problem if the later, the former was though. The intelligent zombies were the worst. No easy way to tell if it was a dead person for sure from there, or, well there was one, but it was kind of dangerous. After watching it for several minutes still not able to tell, except that it seemed like a girl, or a woman... or a young man wearing a dress. Jake decided on the easy thing. First he signaled to Dave and Tipper, a single wave from him to the target, cupping his hands in front of his face to explain the plan. They both nodded back, ready to move if need be.

"Hello!" Jake yelled, his voice still hoarse from all the whispering he'd been doing over the last months. Then he waited.

The form didn't run toward them, instead it turned and ran away. Human then. Good. They could go. If the person had wanted to talk they would have either yelled back, or if they were sane, waved and waited to see what happened. Of course their hunting group were cleaners, the people that moved in and cleared neighborhoods of the undead, which meant, if not a safe group at least one that probably wouldn't rape or rob you. Everyone knew that by now. Most groups were a little spottier than that.

Really that wasn't exactly correct.

Most groups were made of decent people that would as soon leave you alone as not, truth be told. Those groups hid and kept their heads down when they could. But some of the worst were out looking for victims a lot. There had been a biker gang that terrorized the area for the first two months for instance. That group had been a pretty rough and tumble lot.

They didn't make it.

What worked to intimidate good regular people Back Before didn't work very well on zombies at all, and people that hunted the already dead didn't just give up anymore because you looked a little scary or waved a gun. It was an attitude thing.

The biggest problem they still had in Westwood was the police. The remaining piece of the police force that was. The fire department had held together for nearly three weeks scrambling to fight fires and protect people, even if they weren't armed for it at all and the EMTs held nearly as long after the announcement from the Center for Disease Control came over everyone's radio and television sets.

The police had started breaking inside four days. They didn't just run, which could have been forgiven, Jake guessed. After all, they weren't trained for Armageddon any more than the next group of people. What they did though was use the taxpayer provided weapons and their badges to loot the town, then took over Castor's farm, which, thanks to crazy Mr. Castor's paranoia had a fence around the whole place topped with barbed wire. They made occasional raids still and had been taken to stealing women for some reason, or so it was rumored. The reasons why varied depending on who you asked. Jake didn't know himself. He just kind of hoped it wasn't for food.

All he knew for certain was that they didn't send out small groups like his. Any group over ten people had to be watched, just in case it turned out to be them. Luckily, the police were trained to be cowardly. They constantly feared everything, meaning they didn't go out too often. The

worked for the rest of them at the moment, since it meant they could just walk back home before dark. It was only about five miles, which meant two hours, since they had Molly along. She couldn't keep up with even a slow jog and whined about a fast walk.

If she did that today though, Jake was going to have to shoot her.

It wasn't a rule that you had to go quickly or even that you couldn't whine, he'd just had enough of her for the day. Hopefully the others would back his story about how she'd turned into a zombie without warning and he'd had to "help her along" or they could claim she'd tripped and gotten lost... Or that gypsies had stolen her.

No one would buy it, but that would be halfway funny at least.

The journey went even slower than normal and Molly did, of course, start complaining about halfway there. Not loudly, but it still rankled. Mainly because she'd decided everything that had happened was his fault and harped on the idea without pause.

"We agreed on left, that's what we practiced and then you moved right. How am I supposed to do anything about that? Those things nearly got me!" She said, her tone rather sincerely bitchy.

Jake, thankfully didn't have to answer her, since Dave did.

"You stupid cunt, you ran the wrong way. It's always your own left. You went to the right. Not doing that is how you're supposed to stop it. Yeah, Jake took the spear to the other side scrambling not to stab your chunky ass. It nearly got him killed and you're trying to blame him for it? God. Look I know you're not exactly Mensa material, but you could at least learn to notice when you mess up that badly, can't you?"

The girl, no make-up on a round face that actually looked better now than it had early on having thinned a good bit due to reduced rations, looked to Tipper for some girl solidarity. Her big brown cow eyes were kind of imploring actually. Jake nearly felt bad for her but she wasn't trying for good will from him. Just Tipper.

She didn't find it.

One thing about Tip, she was all work in the field. Hardcore like a soldier or even special forces guy. Most of the rest of the time too. Freaking tough really. It meant she called things like she saw them, no matter who it might offend. Including him if he was the one screwing up, but this time that wasn't her reaction at all.

"No shit Mol. Jake went by the plan and the only thing that saved you was how quick his reflexes are. Twice. If you think Dave or I could have saved you back there think again, we were in the wrong place totally and would have taken half your face off if we'd tried to hit those hostiles with shotguns at that range. What was with the screaming off plan crap anyway? They should have bought you a bullet to the brain you know. I'm really kind of shocked that it didn't. She fired a strange look at Jake then, one that spoke of fear she hadn't shown when everything had happened at all.

Worry about Jake having not killed the girl? Maybe he was being too soft?

The dark haired girl looked at the other woman with venom in her eyes, but didn't say anything. Tipper may have given them a funny name to call her, but that was the only joke she'd told. If it was one. Dave just walked, bored with the conversation already. Jake could see that. There would be more of it to come, obviously, from the way Molly stared at him, but hey, that was part and parcel to being around other humans, wasn't it? People generally whined and complained always about useless shit. Before, back when he lived in his parent's basement and played video games sixteen hours a day that's how he'd been. A whining and annoying little waste of space. Now he was going to be honest, Molly now was a better person than he'd been back then. At least she

tried to help people by screaming.

He'd mainly just mopped and felt like the world had wronged him.

They kept walking and the complaints became less frequent as they sped up. It really wasn't that Jake wanted to silence Molly, just get back in time for dinner, since it was potato night. The night before they'd had venison, a treat, which Carl had taken down on his way back from a clear up with his crew. That was rare though. No one hunted regularly and the deer avoided town. There was still some left, which would probably be a stew or something for dinner, but they'd had mashed turnips the day before. Not exactly a culinary delight as far as Jake was concerned.

Then again he'd complain about that out loud about the same time he could run into town and pick up a big bag of something else for dinner. It was food and that's what they had, so he ate it.

A few people still went on about things like that, or dreamed of foods they didn't have. It didn't help. It just made you hungry for things you couldn't get, which left you unsatisfied. Better to just forget about food as anything more than what you had at the moment, and tonight was potatoes. Early ones they'd managed to grow on the farm that their group had taken over. It had been backbreaking labor, but they'd gotten nearly two hundred acres planted back in May. The big harvest was coming, and then they had to can, dry and all that other stuff he'd never done before and had barely heard of. Thank god they had Lois and Mary to run that for them. If it wasn't for the two women, one an old hippie that used to live on a commune and the other a survivalist, they'd have been going hungry the next winter for sure.

The farm was in the middle of a field of green, low things planted around the house, corn off to the ways, so that no one could sneak up on them too easily. They had herbs near the back, which improved the food a lot and beets as well, maybe carrots too. Jake didn't really know for certain, but he'd tried, when he could, because it made sense. If everyone pitched in their odds of survival went a way up. If they carried dead weight... Well, winter was going to be hard that way.

He didn't mind the kids that much, because really they weren't dead weight, just young. The two that were left did their chores without complaint and even did a decent job of it, better than a lot of people to tell the truth. The old people... well no one really old was alive, were they? The oldest people they had were Burt and Lois and both of them stayed in and around the house, but they went into town to loot only with a heavy guard. Burt knew stuff, how to make water pumps and wind turbines from scratch, stuff like that. He didn't just carry his own weight, but part of everyone else's as well. All Jake could do really was manual labor. He tried to learn at least what he could and work as best he was able.

But they had dead weight.

The moron crew. They weren't hunters or even useful at anything, they weren't even good for guard duty for the most part, since they were too lazy to trust. It was a team of four or five, led by the oh-so popular Derrick Holsom.

He'd been on the police force before, but they hadn't taken him in when they raided the town. Holsom had claimed it was because he was a "good" cop and that the criminals on the force just hadn't liked that he'd wanted to try and protect the civilians. Jake was pretty sure he understood what they'd really been thinking now though. At very best Derrick would have been a pain in the rear. Even here he tried to undermine Nate, their leader, at every turn.

Normally that wouldn't have been such a huge deal, but Holsom had three things wrong with him for this situation. He was popular with the women and had slept with most of them already. He was a former authority figure, which meant the others, especially the younger women, still

looked to him for guidance. The worst thing though, was that he was stupid. If the man had ever come up with a good idea Jake had been gone at the time and no one had bothered to inform him of the red letter day.

To him the situation fairly screamed what was going on most of the time. Holsom thought he was the best one to lead, but if he ever did, they'd all be screwed. The man couldn't even be bothered to do his share of the work and relied on bullying others to get by.

He had his people too, all men, all large and all at least as stupid and lazy as he was. Jake hadn't even bothered to learn their names. As soon as he had a reason he planned to kill them and if they didn't shape up. Before winter set in at the latest. They were a burden right now, when the cold hit and food got scarce, having them could mean death. He'd need a real reason, of course, but the women would lynch him though, for taking away their favorite boy toy.

Shallow bitches.

Oh, it wasn't fair of him to think that about them, he knew and tried to get himself to stop. Still, plenty of other reasons to dislike Holsom, not just him getting all the girls.

The house had white siding on it, so it gleamed in the bright sun, the green in the field stark and wonderful to see. It had a rust red trim, also done in vinyl siding, kind of pretty really. The people that had lived here before had really invested in the future. Unfortunately they didn't know what that meant at the time and wasted their money on home improvements that didn't mean much now. Siding and a nice electric range in the kitchen, a really nice matching washer and dryer combo and a deep freezer off in the barn, a huge thing for storing meat. None of them worked of course, except the vinyl. They should have put in another cellar, that would have actually helped.

In the back of the house Burt, gray haired and wearing a bright blue Hawaiian shirt and some tan colored shorts that looked to fall off if he wasn't careful, worked to prop up the edge of the windmill blade, trying to set it in place. Jake jogged over, and helped get it upright, then held it as the older man tamped the base down and set brace supports for it.

“We really should have a concrete base, but the store was out last I checked. I don't think they've gotten a new order in yet. We should go look again soon. Check construction sites around people garages? Not that I'd want to be the one doing it.” The tone sounded relaxed, happy even. Burt always did. Almost. When he didn't, there was a real problem.

Jake looked at the windmill, trying to make sense of how it transferred power. It had a belt of heavy cloth, nylon webbing, instead of gears. Behind the blades, large wooden paddles, there was a circle, a wheel that the heavy strap wrapped half way around, then it rested snugly over a similar, but much smaller circle on the bottom. It was all wood. It had to be, until they got enough power going to run an arc welder. Burt said he knew how to use one and even had a few sitting in the shed he used as a workshop about fifty feet away toward the fields.

The old man started laughing as Jake checked the whole thing out, “I know, far from ideal, but it's a start. With this we can pump water from the well to fill a cistern, a big water tank on a platform. That will get us water for the house year round. If we manage a wood fired water heater or two and some wood stoves, then we may not even freeze to death in four months. I'll just put you in charge of that. We need something like twenty cord of wood and six wood stoves. Really, we could do it with three stoves, except we'll need to replace the little one in the kitchen with something bigger, it's not a proper stove right now and more a fire hazard waiting for someone to get lazy. That basically means welding, which means electricity, so a generator first and a better wind tower. We need the wood regardless though, so you can do that first.”

The man didn't laugh at him, but the tone was playful, almost happy. It was clear to anyone listening that Burt didn't really expect Jake to see to it at all. Why not though? It had to be done and while he wasn't the person that he'd have picked either, no one would care who did it, as long as it got finished in time.

Jake thought about it for a second and realized that wood shouldn't be too hard to get. They had a wood lot not a half mile away, and could use the human powered wagon Burt had built for that. They could grab dead fall and even new logs if they had to, and bring them back for splitting and all that stuff. He'd never done anything like it before, but pioneers used to do it. They weren't wimps, those people from way back, but a lot of them came from the city, and had less to worry with than they did now. If they could figure it out, chances were that modern people could too. Just with more bitching and complaints.

The modern American totally owned that.

Jake nodded at the man, noticing the bright and cheery blue shirt again. Nothing Jake owned had color. Most of it was kind of a drab off gray.

"I guess I can try to put a team together for it. Um... what's a cord of wood?" Jake felt stupid asking, but Burt didn't make fun of him over it, he just answered. The man was good that way.

"It means a stack of split wood four foot high, four foot wide and eight foot long. The real answer here is that we're going to need a lot more of it than we think. Maybe more than we can get. We should have been doing this already, but no one wants to risk going into the woods." The man shrugged and looked down at his own feet.

Burt didn't leave the grounds of the house at all now. Not if he could help it. A lot of people didn't, so he wasn't alone. The cleaners all had to, so that was twelve people right there, but they slept in shifts, since they also did most of the guard duty. That left about thirty people that might be willing to risk it to be warm in the winter. Well, more if he could get some of the others to break through their personal terror. Or at least face it. He nodded at the older fellow.

"OK. I'll get on that. Um, do we have any saws or anything like that? I guess axes would work and we could blow some of the wood into chunks with small explosives but..."

Burt laughed and patted him on the arm firmly.

"A man after my own heart, if you don't have a chainsaw, find a different way to do it. Explosives... That could work, but I have axes and even some brand new chainsaws set aside. Even a few old manual rip saws, the two person kind," He blinked at the blank look Jake gave him.

"Ah... right, that means nothing to you, does it? Here, I'll show you."

That got them both headed to the shed out back. The others all went in the house, Molly first without even paying attention to the fact that he'd stopped to talk to the older man. Tippi listened for a few minutes and walked off too. Dave had just disappeared, probably to go kill something.

In the little metal shed, a white colored aluminum thing with a metal roof in shining silver, Burt showed him the saws, starting with the funny looking two handled ones he'd stolen from the historical reenactment in town at the Fort Jessup monument.

"I also stole all their blacksmithing gear. If we can work that out, smithing, we'll have a lot of things faster. We can work on that in the winter though. Right now we need even more basic stuff." He pointed to the saws and described the pit set up they'd want for making planks and even parting out firewood rounds.

The chainsaws all worked, and Burt showed him how to start and use one, then had him do

getting that Jake learned best by doing things himself. It had taken a long time for that to sink in that he learned by doing, but Burt had picked up on it in weeks.

The action of pulling the cord felt a lot easier than he thought it would. Too easy almost. The roar of the yellow and green saw made him feel uneasy at first, but that wouldn't stop him from using it. The days of balking because you weren't perfectly comfortable with something had left a long time ago. It felt like forever. A lifetime at least.

The old man didn't make mention of it, but fuel would be the big issue. Hence the human powered saws being needed. No one would like the additional effort, both not wanting the extra work even at the best of times and because everything was harder on short rations like they had been. Jake was already dreading the idea and they hadn't even gotten the first log in.

They did have axes, nearly a dozen in different sizes, wood awls, which Jake thought looked a bit like giant Hershey's kisses, all silver and pointed on one end and a lot of sledge hammers they hit them with. With all this and the big metal cart, they should be able to do something.

“OK, I'll start working up people tonight. We'll try for the first load tomorrow, unless we get word that someplace needs to be cleaned out. My team's up for all that this week.” Not that anything would come in. After the initial rush and the freakishly scary first two months, things had died back a lot. The weak had already been turned and the people they had left knew how to avoid zombies. If there was anything suspected the other groups tended to send word over to the nearest place, but really, no one had even come by for nearly three weeks. Everyone protected themselves with traps and set watches, but theirs was the main group that actively took out threats in town. They had to be careful because of the burners. If they left any zombies for too long, the wacky end times Christians would set the houses around them on fire. Regardless of there being living people in them or not.

The older man sighed and gave Jake a funny look, “You know Jake I should have mentioned this to you a month ago. I keep bringing it up with Nate, and he keeps putting me off. I think it's the fear. Well, I can't fault him there, I don't want to go and do it either, but we have to. Either we do it now or in December after the kids and small women have died from the cold.”

Thinking about it for a second Jake just shrugged.

No one really asked the cleaners to do anything but guard and kill. That was considered the main job after all. An important one too. Still, he didn't feel like freezing or eating uncooked food all the time. Warmth meant life. So did water and even an old video game freak like him knew that being clean did too. That meant warm water, if not hot. Right now it was all he could do to make himself wash in the cold ground water each morning and it was toasty out still, being August. The warmest part of the year. Some of the people kind of smelled already, skipping out on being clean for comfort's sake. That or laziness. So stoves and water heaters. Along with rules requiring them to be used. He asked Burt for a list of materials. Jake went into town pretty often, so it wouldn't hurt to scout things out.

“I can do better than that, I have a book inside that has plans. You should read it as soon as possible. That way we can work out all that will be needed.”

On their way back they carried a heavy metal pole, once a flagpole from the local middle school, but now it was going to serve as the base for their new wind tower. Strong, but a bitch to move. It must have weighted close to two hundred pounds. That was what they were doing when Carley started laying into him.

She ran at him, which made him want to kill her by reflex, but luckily his hands were full. She didn't deserve to die yet. Not for running.

Zombies didn't care if you ran at all, so in principle, Jake didn't either. It was her raised voice

that really concerned him. True, they were probably safe here, this area was pretty clean, but what were you going to do if you had to take chances? The words she used weren't that rough, but sounded angry and would carry. For the moment Jake managed to ignore her and work with Burt to carefully take the metal pole off the shoulders. It dropped to the ground with a soft clang, landing on the dirt. The noise got Carley's attention though, and she stopped talking for a few seconds as Jake turned to her.

He held up his left hand, the right instantly finding the weapon on his hip and drawing it. That, more than the pole dropping, helped silence the good looking woman. She had shoulder-length hair, blond and a little curly, even without perms and all that, and devastating light blue eyes. Of the nearly forty odd women at the house she was easily the best looking. The kind that would have easily made the college cheerleading squad, if it hadn't been for the military feminism keeping her out of such things. Her good looks were one of the only things that had kept her alive so far. More than once he'd thought of killing her himself. Maybe today if she pushed things? It wasn't like he had a real use for the woman. She made a point of telling him he'd better not ask her for sex months before, so it wouldn't cost him anything personally to get rid of her.

Probably not though.

Having a bad attitude didn't get you killed. Not by Jake. Raising your voice while you did would and Carley had seen him do just that three times in the last few months. It was a rule. Her rule, but everyone else followed it or he shot them. In the head.

"Carley, I don't care if you feel like you need to take me to task for something, but would you be willing to not scream while you do it? If you make too much noise, I'll have to kill you." His voice went lower than it had to, because loud people sometimes shut up once you pointed it out and worked harder if you whispered. Carley wasn't insane yet, just annoying.

"I can't believe you nearly let Molly be killed just because she won't sleep with you, you pig!" Carley whispered at least, so Jake put the handgun away. For now.

"Um, Sorry? I don't see how my saving her life today counts as nearly letting her be killed. She lost it and started screaming at the wrong time. Not my fault. Even if it was, why would her not sleeping with me be the problem? None of the women here sleep with me. That hasn't stopped me from trying to protect them all." Jake felt baffled, more than a little. Molly was telling people that he nearly got her killed? And that it had anything to do with sex? That was hardly fair of her. What was it?

What the fudge?

That thought distracted him, but he made it stop. Fudge wouldn't be found for a long time, never again. He didn't even like it that much. Oh, sure, Jake would have killed a person for a square of it at the moment, but that wasn't the point.

Carley wasn't convinced of his good will for some reason and kept after him. And after him. Finally, after about five minutes of griping at him, Jake had to move to help Burt put the windmill on the pole, which turned out to be simple, just sliding it all into place through some metal brackets that would let it swivel a bit. Then they had to try and stand it up, that would be harder.

"Carley," Jake said, trying to get her attention with a hoarse whisper.

"Don't you interrupt me!" She yelled at him, her voice going just high enough to make him glare at her and roll his eyes.

She fell silent then at least. She may hate the "patriarchal machine" and him for being part of it, meaning he had a penis, but she respected the fact that there were rules, once reminded. Jake

pointed to the metal in front of them.

~~“Sorry, not trying to ruin your misplaced rant, but could you help us set this up? It's kind of important.”~~

Trying to do all the jobs, except cleaning out nests of undead, was something Carley actually did. She didn't want anyone to think women couldn't do their part. Jake didn't care, as long as they got help. Feminism was a stupid idea now though. Moronic. Not because women weren't equals or anything like that, but because they were, obviously.

It was a simple fact in this world. Complaining about not having the same rights as anyone else was close to insanity right now. He let it go, because it got the woman to work and she rarely complained about manual labor. That might look weak after all.

If that was the way she really thought. Jake felt himself slide, as far as his opinion of her went again. Not because of her looks, it was just that he couldn't really know her heart, could he? She acted like a feminist and seemed to be acting tough, but that didn't mean it was what she was really thinking, did it?

They had to kind of wedge themselves into place and found that they didn't have enough strength to do it, not with just the three of them. After a minute Jake just jogged to the house and stuck his head in the door.

“Hey, everyone, come quick and help set up the new wind turbine!” He said, urgent but soft. He never yelled anymore. Not unless he was ready to shoot someone. Even then it was rare. Just killing them tended to work well enough. Most of them got that they'd displeased him somehow then.

At first no one came, but then Lois did and she brought two kids with her, Sammi, a fairly cute eleven year old girl and her “brother” Ken, who wasn't related to her at all. He had dark skin and hair, compared to her lily white complexion and slightly Asian looking features. One of the new families that had sprung up in the days following... things.

Ken didn't talk at all.

Jake liked him.

A few minutes later others started coming out, Jose, the Mexican guy that ran the farm operations first. He didn't speak much English, and only a few people here could talk to him at all, Nate mainly. Jose got things done by grabbing people, putting them where he wanted and pointing a lot. It worked. He didn't seem to get what they were going to do at first, but the second they started working on it, he ran away. It made the people on the porch watching laugh.

Holsom and his group.

All men, all big enough to be helping lend some muscle and all nearly worthless, at least when the ex-cop was around. Jake didn't know for certain, but the men may all have been ex-cops of one kind or another. Jail guards or something. They'd all had short hair to start with, and seemed to have that narcissistic attitude that all police and prison guards project as a rule. Well, the ones on television had. Real ones might be different. It wasn't fair to compare them all to Holsom, or even the Westwood force.

“Trust a wet back to avoid honest work.” Holsom said, getting a laugh from his buddies, none of them seeing the irony of it at all.

Freaking morons.

Less than a minute later Jose came back carrying a length of rope, which he tied quickly to the pole, wrapping it around once Jake saw, not tied at all. So that it could be released easily by letting go of one side. Smart. He pointed at the men on the porch and pantomimed pulling on the

rope. Holsom looked ready to shoot him for it, hand going to his side, where he wore a gun.

“Fuck...” The words came clearly, and loudly, from the ex-cop. Too loud.

Yay.

Jake didn't say anything, he just drew down and started to pull the trigger. Being too loud was a good enough reason to take the man out. If he went for a weapon that would work too. Jake had a good line on the man's head already, which got the larger man to freeze.

Darn.

Other people saw him go quiet too. Maybe if he asked the man to be loud again that would work? Jake tried to think of something fast, but Holsom just didn't do anything.

Just then Nate walked out the back door of the house, the screen making a soft scritch sound that riveted everyone's attention pretty quickly. His brown eyes sized up the situation and stared at Derrick Holsom with a soft smile. He spoke so softly that Jake, only fifty feet away, could barely make out the words.

“Got a little loud there Derrick? Now, let's see about helping get this windmill in place before dark, shall we?” The tenor of the words was calm. Relaxed even. Gentle.

That quality made Nate seem weak to some people, but it meant that their house didn't have to get into a fight with everyone on the planet for each scrap of bread either. They managed to get along with most of the other groups, even the ones that feared and hated each other. Nate did something that Holsom just couldn't manage, he listened to people. Then, if he heard a good idea, he took action. Normally at least.

The firewood thing was a bit odd, but Burt probably had that situation right. Nate really feared the zombies. He always had. That didn't make him a coward though. He walked past the group of armed men and walked toward the rope that Jose held in his leather work glove.

Finally, one by one the men on the porch started to move. Jake didn't put his weapon away until Holsom started walking. Even then he watched the man, ready to draw if he had to. His decision to kill the man wasn't personal, but who would blame him for trying to take Jake out first? Probably no one at all. Jake just wasn't as popular with the ladies. Or the other men. The guy who'd shoot you for speaking too loud generally wasn't going to be your best bud. It was kind of a shame really.

Once they had help it took less than three minutes to get the whole thing into place. Then they all held it while Burt ran around putting the braces up. The operation was finished about ten minutes later and everyone wondered off again. Everyone but Sammi, Lois and Ken.

Sammi stood next to the nervous looking kitchen lady, who eyed Jake like he might molest the kids or something if she blinked too long. Or shoot them. Lois really didn't care for him for some reason. Maybe he needed to do more work in the kitchen? It could be that she thought he was freeloading like Holsom, since she did most of her work there, meaning she wouldn't see what he did at all. Food was important, so he nodded to himself. That was doable.

The girl tilted her head at him just slightly, “would you have really killed him just for cursing?”

Jake shook his head and spoke softly back to her, a small smile on his face.

“It wasn't the bad language, use all the bad words you want. I don't even care if you want to use them to make fun of me. It was the sound level. If he wanted to complain about having to do work like everyone else, but in a whisper, I wouldn't care at all. Especially if he did it while actually helping. Yelling right now puts everyone in danger still. It's just hard for people to control sometimes. Though no one should be complaining about work right now, there's way to

much to do to waste time on things like whining.”

Sammi grinned at him and patted his arm gently.

“Right, so you can help Ken and I do the dishes after dinner? We really should have more people doing it, it takes hours, and we don't really get much light. More hands means we can get done without burning candles. We'll want those in the dark months.” The nod she gave him was terse, but her face looked only half serious. “So after dinner? We can put you in as low man since you don't have experience yet. It will give Ken some experience being in charge of someone. We can give you a cute nickname like “hey you” or some such.”

Lois, gray short hair and stained bland shirt over her well-worn work pants, a tan color that had probably once been nearly brown, blanched and tried to hush the girl, actually saying “hush”

“I'm sorry Jake, she didn't mean anything by it...” The woman said as if the suggestion would make him angry. Why that would be he didn't know at all. He never got mad over being asked to help out. Not since... Not since that day. The second day after the announcement.

“Sure she did, she meant I should get off my lazy butt and help with the dishes. Fair enough. I'll be there. Ken's my boss. Got it.” Jake gave the girl a nod.

Lois gave him a funny look, slightly baffled now instead of scared. That was an improvement. Had the woman always been scared of him? Jake wondered about that. Why? She never raised her voice and worked all the time, nearly from dawn to when she went to bed. Having a problem with her would be stupid. Maybe he really needed to be nicer to people? Work harder to pull his weight, like Burt and Lois did. Jose too. That man always worked.

He sure as heck wanted to be more like them than Holsom. Except the getting laid all the time part. That he could deal with. That would be a really nice change in fact. Of course he hadn't gotten any before the man had come either, so just getting rid of him probably wouldn't fix that. On the good side it wouldn't make things worse that way either. Not even if all the women hated him for doing it.

Dinner was good, fresh potatoes slow baked, and as he'd figured a deer meat stew. That had potatoes too. The servings weren't huge, but they were real enough, a full bowl of stew and two decent sized potatoes each and a slice of oat bread. During the end of the last winter they'd gotten by on less than that per day. The ones that survived at least. Of course that had mainly been scavenged food. This year it would all be about planning and farming. Everyone was doing it, and the other groups had some kind of farm going, except the police in their closed encampment. Morons.

They probably thought that they'd just let the little people do the work then come and raid them. It would probably have worked before, but now everyone would fight to the death if they came. That made a much bigger difference than the likes of the cops were ready for, Jake being Back before they'd always had greater numbers to fall back on, or the people they faced were simply unarmed. If that didn't work, they could call in back-up and often did even if it hadn't been needed.

The rules had changed.

No one said much while they ate, just focusing on the food they had, enjoying it. The room was dark, except for a single candle. Everything was now at night, not that it was really that late, still dusk out. Even the candles were a luxury. The zombies didn't go toward the light or anything, but they'd need them for the winter, when it got dark at five each night. People could only sleep so much and they didn't functionally have entertainment.

When the meal ended Holsom and his crew all glared at Jake, a few spending time looking

hard at Nate too. Jake got it. They felt like he and Nate had shown them up or some macho bullshit like that. They had of course, but not in the way the men imagined.

It wasn't some ego trip, or even that Jake was a better fighter than they were, which they should have gotten already. It just came down to the fact that they weren't nearly as important to everyone as they thought they should be and he'd pointed that out. Really, the only power they had as a group were their guns. Jake wondered if they should have them at all. The only other people that did were the cleaners.

Ah. That was actually a good point. One he could use. If they wanted to be armed, they should earn the right. No one would argue that, would they?

“So, Holsom,” Jake said firmly, but in a whisper, making it sound a little menacing.

“I'm setting up a firewood collection detail that's going to run from now until we can't get any more wood for the winter. I'd like you and your friends to come along, we need all the able bodied people we can get that aren't afraid of the zombies. Since you all carry weapons all the time, I assume that means a few dead people won't bother any of you overly? Really, we probably won't have any problems that way, but it's important regardless.” Jake smiled. It wasn't a nice thing.

“Fuck that. I'm not a lumberjack.” The man said, surly and as stupid as always.

Like anyone would confuse him with someone that cut down trees for a living? Or worked for the police? Jake had some negative thoughts about the Westwood police force in general, but he really couldn't fault them for not taking Holsom along with them.

His buddies chimed in, all fingering weapons, but not drawing them. Jake got ready to kill them all, wondering if he'd survive it. Probably not, there were five of them and one of him. They didn't have to be good, just put out enough bullets.

Oh well. Jake faced death several times a week, it would find him sometime, today might be the day. People shifted in the room but no one yelled or said anything.

Quietly from the corner Nate cleared his throat, a soft and calm sound, “None of us are Derrick, but the simple fact is that without wood we won't make it through this next winter. Half the people that died so far did so from the cold six months ago and that was in the spring nearly.

Holsom laughed and thumbed the clip on his holster open, a menacing move that meant the man didn't get the situation at all. Tipper stood behind him with her shotgun pointed right at his head, tilted upward politely so that his brain would decorate the ceiling rather than take a chance of hitting someone on the floor. She always had perfect control of her weapon. And a cute butt. Jake tried not to think about that though, not just then.

Chuckling lightly, standing almost invisibly behind one of Holsom's large friends, a man known only as Stan, Dave spoke. His voice was menacing, as if hoping they could kill all the lazy freeloaders right then and there. It was creepy really, half little kid, the rest grown up killer. Raspy and rough.

“Look around cocksuckers.”

Jake glanced himself, hoping that didn't mean he was a secret cocksucker, and saw that each of the men had at least two weapons pointed at them. The other cleaners had apparently decided that they'd had enough too.

Yay.

It was about freaking time.

“Let's do this civilly gentlemen, by you putting your weapons, all of them, on the ground please.” Nate said.

It took time for them to get the idea that their options were limited. One of them tried to draw and shoot Jake, and got shot three times for his trouble. Jake's hit just below the throat, a miss the man had been a zombie. Lethal on a human. Vickie, the head of the other good cleaning team removed the top of his head with her sawed off shotgun and much to Jake's surprise Nate boy had a pistol out and had used it. A shot to the chest, off centered, but it hit. Since the man was a pacifist by nature and upbringing, that was a huge shock to everyone. The barrel didn't smolder visibly in the candle light, but just having fired it had an impact on the room.

Everyone but Jake and a few of the cleaners looked like statues. Nate shook his head slowly.

"No. We can't have people here plotting against us Derrick. You and your friends have been trying to take us down for too long. I'd hoped that you'd all see the error of your ways and learn to help out, but..." He didn't finish, because of the three women that ran into the room, throwing themselves in front of the man. Brave of them, but foolish.

"No! You can't kill him... I love him." Deborah said, her forty year old mouth saying what her equally old brain should have realized was a stupid thing to say given everything.

Erin said something similar, but she could be forgiven, Jake guessed. Still a bit overweight and pug nosed, along with not being overly bright and maybe seventeen. She'd probably felt lucky that Holsom had bothered to pay attention to her at all. She was probably right. As she spoke Sara, an older woman, the third in their little triumvirate of the yaya sisterhood or whatever started screaming at Nate. Jake trained his handgun on her and spoke softly.

"Quietly. Please."

She didn't seem to hear him. Jake sighed and shot her in the head. This time it wasn't a miss. He did manage to angle the shot at least, so no one else got hit. The room went silent as she fell. Everyone knew better than to scream now. That just got you killed. Jake half expected Molly to raise a fuss, just to make him kill her. She didn't though. She just stood back, her little twenty two pointed at one of Holsom's buddies. The bearded one. Jake always thought of him as "Smelly" but that probably wouldn't turn out to be what his parents had named him. That was just the name he'd earned.

Washing paid off.

Turning back to Derrick as if nothing had happened, Jake grunted.

"Weapons please. All of them. If you don't comply we kill you all in... Thirteen seconds. Starting... now." No one moved. It would be the thirteen second thing, throwing them all off. That was why he'd said it after all, to try and get Holsom to hesitate long enough.

"Ten." He said, beginning to pull the trigger, nine millimeter pointed at Derrick's head. If he got to seven the man would die. Element of surprise and all that.

"Eight." He said two seconds later.

Just as he was about to start killing people, Holsom pulled his gun with two fingers and started removing the other weapons he had hidden. He only had three, if the large knife gun included, an oversized bowie that would only be good for intimidating people, not taking on zombies, at least not more than one. People had tried that in the beginning, using swords and machetes to take on the undead, because it had worked in video games or, as some had said, "swords don't run out of bullets" which was a good point on paper. It turned out to be a lot harder to behead a person than it seemed. Most of them were dead or had at least moved to firearms. Mainly the first one.

Dave collected up the weapons quickly, without being asked and removed those to the side. Two bodies were on the floor and six people stood in the middle of the room that they just

couldn't trust anymore. At least Jake couldn't trust them. Derrick started talking then, his voice low and urgent.

“Whoa, this is getting way out of hand here. I just meant that, you understand, I think my time would be better spent leading instead of doing grunt work. We have people for that here, plenty of them. I...”

Jake nearly capped the man right there, but Nate shook his head.

“No, we all have to pull our weight now. If we don't we die. I'm going to go get wood in the morning and so is everyone else not on guard duty that can be spared. No one is too important for this.”

Jake nearly shut his eyes. They were not going to let Holsom stay, were they? That would be so... suicidal. Thankfully Tipper mentioned it, which got a nod from Nate.

“Agreed, these men haven't been holding up their end yet at all. More they looked to be about ready for violence when called on it. If they stay they can't be armed again. That's about the only thing that's been keeping me from mentioning their behavior so far. We can't have that. We'll put it to a vote, majority rules. Do they stay or not?”

What the fuck was the point of having a leader, if Nate was just going to do crap like this? Jake wondered. No sane person would want people like this to stay would they?

“Um, I think they should be allowed to stay.” One of the remaining female traitors said softly, looking at Jake as she did. Deborah, the older one.

Proving Jake's point. No one who wasn't crazy...

The debate started then.

Quietly.

After ten minutes Jake put his weapon away and started dragging the bodies out. He'd made a mess and dried blood stained. Then he washed up and followed Ken and Sammi into the kitchen to help with the dishes. They were already working, the light wouldn't wait after all. Those would be needed in the morning after all and people died all the time, it wasn't a good reason to skip out on the task.

Just before they were done getting the dishes all onto the wooden drying racks, they used some of them, large things that Burt had made early on, another shot came from the living room. Jake motioned them to the floor as he turned to run in, crouched low. Trying not to get shot, he poked his nine millimeter, a dull black, held in his left hand, into the room and peeked in, only his brown left eye around the frame. He knelt close to the ground. One of Holsom's crew, Smell, laid on the floor, wet glistening in the dull light from where the top of his head had been. He had a gun in his hand, and it seemed that Dave had taken exception to it. Good. Now he wouldn't even have to bother learning the man's real name.

That should have illustrated the point well enough, but most of the people wanted to give them another chance anyway. Throwing someone out into the night was... Harsh, and no one wanted it to happen to them later, so they argued against it as a precedence. In the end the three remaining men were allowed to stay. Jake would have fumed, but didn't bother. He'd probably still have to kill them all. The vote had been... instructive though. Not because of who voted for letting them stay, that was nearly everyone. No, it was the dozen people that had voted against that caught his attention.

Nearly half the cleaners did, right off the top. No hesitation even. Tipper and Dave led the way, and both the other team leaders, Vickie and Carl. Vickie's screamer, a fifteen year old boy named George did too and the old guy from Carl's team, Barry. At least thought that might be h

name. The man was ancient, pushing fifty at least maybe older. He was good though. The re
voted with everyone else.

The others that could see the problem for what it was made less sense.

Lois, the older kitchen lady and Burt voted against letting the men stay. So did Carley, b
since she hated all men, that kind of made sense. The other two... Sammi and Ken. They went la
too, even knowing that the vote would be going against them and that doing it would mal
enemies. It was clear they were making a point. Jake got it at least. Sammi spoke for them both.

“They're dangerous and lazy. If we let them stay it's going to come back and bite us later. W
should take them out back and shoot them right now. If we don't, we're going to regret it. I'll do
myself if someone will lend me a firearm?” It was too dark to make out her facial expression an
she whispered, but the tone didn't sound teasing.

Jake didn't speak his mind, but that about summed it up. Maybe he could sneak the girl
shotgun later? No one would blame a little kid for executing the men, right?

He, personally, would sleep easier if they were dead. It felt nice to know that at least a fe
other people could see that too. It worried him that more didn't.

It worried him a lot.

Chapter Two

The screaming woke Jake up with a start, a flash of cold poured over him and he consider
freezing even while his body moved, grabbing the sidearm under the mattress he slept on. It w
trapped under the right edge, the handle of the forty-five sticking out. That meant the whole thin
came clear of the holster easily. He rolled to the right so that his back would be to the wall. He
done this often enough that the move was almost smooth now. Not really fluid, but pretty goo
for having been asleep. He brought the weapon up and automatically thumbed the safety, cradlin
the thing in both hands. Like on an old cop show.

He whispered into the room, “I'm covering the door. Anyone know where that came from?”

For a moment no one spoke, then finally a soft voice answered, female, though not someon
he could recognize in the dark like this. So it could be any of nearly forty odd women then.

“It was... uh, me. Nightmare. Sorry.” The woman sounded scared still. Jake exhaled slowl
not having realized he'd been holding his breath at all.

That happened, everyone got scared sometimes and that meant yelling or screaming in the
sleep. Carl's team had the night watch this week, and really, one or two screams shouldn't attra
anything. Not unless it was already close. If that was the case they'd hear fighting from belo
soon. That or more screams. If that happened he'd go, but otherwise it would just take too lon
and invite being shot by the watchers on the ground floor. On night watch they didn't use candle
so anyone going down the stairs needed to be careful. You couldn't call out, but zombies didn
either sometimes. If you stubbed a toe and grunted you were probably going to die.

“Alright. Happens to everyone. Can you go back to sleep? Do you have someone with you?”

The voice said “no” so softly that Jake nearly winced, that also happened, a lot. The next b
that the speaker clearly knew was coming. You woke up screaming and then just had to lie in th
dark, waiting for morning, hoping you didn't die before the light came back. He'd done it mo
times than he cared to remember himself. Less now, but at first it had happened almost ever
night.

“Move over here then. I'll sit up so you can sleep.” It wouldn't guarantee anything, but sometimes if you acted like this was all normal it helped.

There came a sound of movement, a rustling, then a subdued “hey” as someone else got stepped on or jostled. Finally nearly a minute later his mattress, a twin sized thing he'd dragged from town himself, moved as the weight of someone settled onto it. He still sat by the wall. He could just sit and doze if need be. He'd learned how. Jake kept the gun out, ready just in case.

Not everyone did it, but sometimes dreams were prescient. At first he hadn't wanted to believe it himself, since it wasn't all that scientific, but over time he had to admit that some people could feel things like that. His own life had been saved more than once that way, so he'd pay attention to this too. Ignoring it would be stupid.

That meant that he dozed off for a while, he thought, waking with the slight hint of change that came in the pre-dawn hours, about four something in the morning, maybe five. Jake didn't have a watch anymore. His had broken in the third week after things started and there'd been no reason to find another one yet. The door slowly opened which got his attention and the two crouching figures came in, a hint of silver in the fist of the first one, a knife. Jake waited for a second, the large weapon in his hand pointed at the man.

The waiting was just to make sure he wasn't still asleep. He didn't want to kill someone just coming back from the bathroom, and he really did just wake up with a gun in his hand sometimes. Crouching didn't help their case, but if he dreamed it, that could all be him.

Then, if it were a dream, he wouldn't have a gun and they'd be moaning zombies trying to eat the people on the floor, wouldn't they? That or a group of women refusing to ever have sex with him. That probably wouldn't be in a bedroom though, being too close to actually getting some from his own mind to handle. The man finally looked over at Jake and froze.

“Fuck!” The man yelled as the gun went off.

He should have whispered Jake thought. If he'd whispered Jake might have paused for a moment. Yelling was a reason to shoot, dream or not.

The bang caused a tumult, people couldn't help screaming being woken like that. The second man had a knife as well, so he got shot too. Now Jake could just hope he hadn't gotten anyone that he actually liked. That always made killing people harder.

People started to stand in the room, including, by voice and the size of the silhouette, Nate, who the two men had been standing over, or at least near. He always took the position by the door, since it would be the one in the most danger if an attack came. Jake always pulled the fire wall for the same reason. Or maybe not exactly the same. Really Nate did it because the other people were afraid, Jake did it because he was.

So not at all alike. It had worked out for Nate though, this time.

Moving carefully past the form on the bed with him, just standing and walking on the mattress he flowed across the room toward the men on the floor by the door. Nate held his hands out and identified himself clearly. It was dark after all.

“I'm Nate Green.” He said.

“Jake.” The answer was automatic. It was also pretty close to the first thing they'd said to each other, on the second day, when they'd met on the street.

The shadowed form nodded and Jake pointed at the people on the floor as everyone else started to gather around slowly.

“Who...” This came from behind him, the woman from his bed. Nate knelt and examined the first one, checking the pulse at the neck.

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