



AFFECTED

RANDI LEE



*Eight years ago, there was no World Government. There were no agents, no carts. The fear of a nosebleed did not exist. Then came The Affection-an incurable disease that ran rampant across the planet, killing off roughly 60% of the human population. Two years later-with order in shambles and governments all over the world in ruins-the World Government formed. That's when the real trouble began. The WG made it its mission to segregate the sick (known as "Affected") from the rest of the population in an attempt to keep the disease from spreading. Agents were put into place to corral the ill and the God-forsaken carts were introduced. For the past six years, Ethan has lived a quiet life. He has done his best to remain out of the public eye and, more importantly, off of the agents' radars. However, when his ex-girlfriend, daughter of the famous scientist who first discovered the*

*disease, is captured by agents and taken to World Government headquarters to be experimented upon, Ethan can no longer pretend the world around him doesn't exist. On his way to save her, Ethan is thrust into a place of turmoil, espionage and conspiracies. Will he be able to handle the pressures of reality? Will he be able to save her in time?*

# Affected

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First Edition

For Tim



*It begins with a nosebleed.* That's what the official press release said. *There's no need to be alarmed until you sneeze red.* When the Leader of the Free World announced that first symptom, people everywhere believed him without argument. After all, what reason did he have to lie?

Agent Matthew Cameron didn't trust him, however. A smart man, Cameron was, a thinker. He didn't believe The Leader's words. Cameron knew it began far sooner than that—he knew a conspiracy was upon them.

Cameron would prove it one day, his theory, but not quite yet. There was work to be done and no one better suited to do it than he. A newfound filth now covered the world. Looting. Riots. Murder abound. In order to restore civility a cleansing was needed. That cleansing superseded the truth.

*Someday I'll get him,* Cameron thought. *Just not tonight.*

A loose section of rusted chain link fence captured Cameron's suit jacket and tugged as he leapt over it, tearing the arm clean off. Cameron cursed, hit the ground and reached for his gun. He wanted to ignore what the Chief said about shooting to kill—the jacket was an Armani, Goddamn it—but he was on his third strike and couldn't afford an unpaid suspension. He'd give a warning this time, but not much of one.

Cameron ran up a dirt trail flanked on either side by static tree trunks and windswept branches. A rotting log disintegrated under the pressure of his foot, causing him to stumble. Shrubs full of thorns caught him and ripped nasty little lines into his palms. He reached for the low hanging bough of a river birch and pulled himself out of the bristled mess with one hand. The other hand held firmly onto his standard issue Grandpower K100 Slovak with itchy fingers.

Cameron landed on the other side of the bushes and fired a warning shot into an upcoming clearing. Tawny deer, an array

of birds and a pair of black bears scattered in every direction like an explosion making its way outward—however, no human cries were heard. The forest quieted. He stopped and looked round, his keen brown eyes searching the lines of oaks for any hint of a clue.

Their goldenrod leaves provided no assistance.

*Think, Cameron. What would you do?*

He always asked himself this question when chasing a target. Connecting with their fear and motivation gave him clarity, a view into their world. Where would he go if the tables were turned? Into the browning field ahead? No, he wouldn't be stupid enough to expose himself out there. So if not then—

—The Horse Caves: a series of interconnecting boulders southwest of The Notch. That's where Cameron would hide. If this target of his was smart enough—and he had to be given how long he'd avoided Cameron—that's where he'd go, too. Cameron turned left and headed uphill.

Not longer after, he hit the Robert Frost Trail. It led him through a series of muddy springs and up a flight of stairs made of tree roots before popping him out on the mountain's main trail. Running up that trail for five minutes brought him to The Horse Caves—several massive rocks carrying one another with crevices hanging between them.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Mr. Johnson." Cameron pointed his gun at the center of the row of boulders. "However, I should warn you: I don't mind the hard way."

The gunfire resounded unexpectedly, as did the bullet that grazed Cameron's right arm. He dropped his gun, slid down against a nearby boulder and clutched the wound. Forcefully cussing Johnson's name, he did the best he could to right



himself while keeping his arms and legs tucked behind the safety of the massive round slab.

*The hard way it is.*

Another bullet fired past, this time just above Cameron's head. He dove to the ground, grabbed his gun with his good arm and wildly shot at The Caves. This strategy didn't result in Cameron hitting his target, but it stopped the shooting on the other end long enough for him to stand up and hide behind a tree, a little closer to the boulders—and Johnson.

"Just leave me alone!" Johnson's chattering voice hit the resounding walls of the caves and multiplied. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"You know that isn't the truth, Mr. Johnson." Cameron's ears perked and searched for the origin of his target's voice. He had to keep him talking in order to discern his exact location. If he could get one clear shot... "You "You know what you've done. You know whom it is you have killed! Your family, your friends. Your—"

"—It isn't true. It isn't true!"

"Give it up, Mr. Johnson. We can still end this peacefully."

"We both know that there's no way this'll end peacefully!"

*Keep talking, Johnson.* "I assure you, there is a comfortable way out of this, Mr. Johnson. If you turn yourself in peacefully I will forgive you for my shoulder, and my jacket."

"You're lying!" Johnson shouted clearly.

*Yes. The echo in his voice is gone; he's out in the open.*

"Why would you tell me the truth?" Johnson continued. "You're ly—"

The bullet pierced Johnson's heart with a surgeon's precision. When he fell it was unceremonious. There was no

small inkling of life left in him, no meaningful final words. He simply fell—as they all did.

Clutching his shoulder, Cameron walked to his target's body. He used his Allen Edmonds capped-toe shoe to roll Johnson over.

Spit hit the dead man's face. "That was my favorite jacket." Cameron pulled out his newly released, sixty-four gig iPhone Twelve, called headquarters and prepared to explain why he'd killed another one. Hopefully the Chief wouldn't be too pissed. He *did* have a legitimate reason this time.

My day begins at the end of a rusted knife. *Give me all you got!* the man says with his scarecrow voice. It's his first time doing this, he's not a pro. The hands of pros don't shake the way his do. The faces of pros don't cower behind tightly knit ski masks that cover them right up to their fresh, quivering eyes.

"I don't want any trouble out of you," he tells me, erratically waving the knife the way the new ones do. "Just give me what you've got and I'll be on my way."

I can't be asked to get stabbed today—the emergency room is far more expensive than the twenty dollars in my wallet and the roll of Charmin Ultra in my left hand—so I hand over the goods. Dropping the blade, he wipes the blood from his nose and runs. It's their motto, all of them: Leave the knife. Take the Charmin Ultra.

The door's unlocked when I get home because Gary's too lazy to lock it. Doesn't surprise me. He does little more than drink beer and play his games. Occasionally he'll get his dishes to the sink, but that's as far as he goes. Asking him to clean his own plate is like asking a pig not to wallow in slop: it isn't happening.

There's a little too much sun when I walk in the kitchen, leading me to close the Roman blinds over the sink full of empty beer bottles and soggy, half-eaten sandwiches. I nearly knock the small fern next to the faucet over. It's browning in places and probably deserves more attention than it gets, but I'm a forgetful man and no one's going to miss a little fern if it dies.

Gary shouts for a beer before I make it to the basement stairs. It's a little too early to be drinking, but I see his point:

it's never too early to drink these days. I grab a pair of Sam Adams Summers from the fridge and head downstairs.

"You forgot the toilet paper," he says.

Careful to avoid the rogue spring in its center, I take a seat on the calico couch. "Go get it yourself."

"I haven't a membership."

"Then get one," I reply.

He isn't listening.

Gary has the television set to WWLP, a station that alternates between re-runs of late '10s reality shows and dolled up anchors reporting the local news. Gary only watches the news for the tight little blond field reporter, Jeannie Grant. He promises it's because he wants to stay up-to-date on current events.

I hand Gary his beer. He grunts his thanks, his eyes fixated on Grant and some report she's giving.

*"—Here in the Mount Holyoke Range, it's safe to say that this Affected hit a little too close to home."*

"The whole lot of it is rubbish," Gary says. He grabs the clicker and flips the television's setting to *Video 2*. Using a brightly buttoned controller, he turns the X-box Seven-Twenty on. The jet-engine whirl of it comes to life, adding a humming tone to the basement's otherwise silence. "Just another way for them to stick it to us."

"Yeah," I concede, though I don't agree. He's too stubborn to debate. "Totally agree with you, man."

"Of course you do." The blues and yellows of the television bounce off of his sun-deprived face. "Because I'm right." He pauses to stuff his mouth full of cracked pepper chips. "There was another sighting. Not too far from here. I think the news said it was the next town over. Shame she didn't stop by. It's about time you two hooked up."

Searching for something I can change the subject to, my eyes scan the basement. Video games and empty soda bottles are strewn about as lazily as the mismatched couches I found at a bargain outlet. There's a dresser to the left of me with three broken drawers, a pile of dirty laundry plopped in front of the twenty-year-old washer-dryer set and a purple yoga ball my ex-left that I'm too lazy to throw away. All of this is painted rainbow by the Christmas lights we've stapled to the beams.

There are signs of water damage on one of those beams. Bingo: an out. "I think we have a leak."

"I think I caught a glimpse of her at the shops—" *He just can't let anything go!* "—I would have confronted her, but there was an agent nearby and I didn't want to bring her any attention."

*Of course you didn't*, I want to say. "That was good of you."

Every day I swim in Gary's sea of pathological lies. I'm surrounded by his smell—the odor of one who rarely leaves the house and never showers—and his stories: the ones where he fought a gang or had a one-night stand with a model. The ones where he's the hero, the villain, anyone who faces adversity and flies over it with wings of pure gold. I am forced to swim in all of it because he is the only Unaffected left on Limes Road and I've never been good at being alone. If I want company, settling for him is my only option. That, and I need someone to help pay the rent.

I grab several chips from what's left of the bag. "There was another raid last night. It was on the news. They took twelve this time, a whole family. Grandparents and everything."

"Surprised the World Government still allows them to report that stuff," Gary replies. Good. He's going with it.

“Since everywhere else is shushed. How many Unaffecteds do you think the bastards took this time?”

“They said all twelve were Affected. I say cut that in half and you have the real number.”

“Bastards,” he repeats. “Just because one family member has it doesn’t mean they all do. This one time I saw them take eighteen in one go, babies included. Would’ve fought them off if there weren’t so many.”

“Even the babies? How terrible.”

“I’m gonna get those bastards.” He finishes off the last of the chips. “I’m gonna take so many of them out they’re gonna have to raise the dead to be an army again, they are.”

“That’s brave of you,” I reply as I stand. After putting down my copy of *On Writing*, by Stephen King, I stretch my arms toward the cobwebbed eaves. “I have to get to work. I’ll see you later, man.”

“See you. Oh, and mate?” he asks.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t sneeze.”

I nod my head. Gary nods his. His attention turns to a half-filled bottle of Sam Adams and some fighting game or another. I grab coffee change from a bowl on the dresser and make my way up the stairs.

It’s Autumn-crisp out—light jacket season. I love this time of year. The leaves provide a certain orange and gold beauty this world so benefits from. Careful to follow the road’s faded yellow line, I walk in the center of Limes Road. I do this so I’m not seen too close to any of the Affecteds’ houses. Walking too close to them might leave me exposed; walking too close to them might get me picked up. The only safety is to maintain my distance, something I’ve become quite good at.

Streetlights still flicker even though it’s mid-day. No one bothers to turn them off. Brick and mortar townhouses flank

either side of me. Each one has a number tacked on it in red spray paint above the door. The numbers are indicative of how many people in the houses died or were picked up. Four. Seven. In one case, Eighteen. I walk far away from all of them and wonder how eighteen people could fit in such a small home.

Jane Alden's convenience store is dead save for the clerk, the meticulously dressed man at the coffee station and myself. The meticulous man's short, neatly combed haircut contrasts with my bedhead spikes. The designer dress shirt he wears is easily thrice the cost of my thrift-store hoodie. And his shoes—I know what brand they are: the expensive brand. I normally don't notice the details of other men. However, this one's so finely attired that I can't help myself. We're a rough khaki sort of town, not Armani slick.

"Need to get in?" he asks, stepping away from the coffee pot.

"Thanks," I say meekly. Shuffling in next to him I straighten my back. Our elbows bump when he reaches for the sugar and I grab the coffee pot. Coffee splashes and hits both of our arms—not enough to scald, but just enough to stain.

"I'm so sorry!" I say. *Idiot*, Ethan. That shirt must cost half a week's salary! "I'll buy you another one."

The Armani man grabs a napkin and blots his sleeve, carefully favoring his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I've been looking for a reason to get a new one."

"Are you sure? I'm willing to pay." I'm not.

"Yeah. It's fine." His nonchalance leads me to second guess his sincerity. "But if this was my favorite shirt, *then* you'd be in trouble."

We share a laugh, then he walks to the counter to pay. I remain at the coffee station, fiddling with the pot, until he

leaves the store—just in case he changes his mind and demands that I pull out my checkbook.

“Strange one,” Jerry the clerk says when I pay for my coffee. He’s scruffy, like Gary. There are mustard stains on his shirt, like Gary’s. “Don’t see many like him around here.”

I count out eighty-five cents and slide it across the counter, careful not to touch Jerry’s hand. *Don’t touch anyone*, she said to me once. *And never keep more than twenty dollars in your pocket*. Glad I listened to her advice today.

“Yeah, curious,” I reply. “Wonder if he belongs to that new agency they just opened up on South Longyard.”

Jerry says something else and I pretend to pay attention. After a quick good-bye I leave him and make my way back to the center of Limes Road.

Only a few blocks away, work—a sawmill—greet me quickly. Having arrived too early, I circle the building once before I go in. I reached my workplace at eleven twenty-two on purpose. I always do. The walk is therapeutic. It clears my mind and I need to get her out of my head before I trifle with table-saws and drill presses. Sometimes the walk does wonders. Thanks to Gary it isn’t working so well today.

I make it to the end of the building. A gaggle of geese by the small, algae-green duck pond honk at my feet. Over confident, the mother goose nips at my ankle. I kick—not enough to connect, but with enough force to shoo her away. The others recoil. Voicing their displeasure, the geese split. I’m permitted to finish my round unabashed.

Behind me, the geese honk, snap at each other and wade into the pea-colored murk. Ahead of me lies another day.

\* \* \*

“You all hear about the raid?” Jaffey asks. He takes a moment to swig from a small flask he probably shouldn’t be



swigging from while using power tools. "Twelve this time. Betcha you can cut that in half and you'll have the number of real Affecteds."

Sounds familiar. I nod.

"Did they have an excuse?" Bill asks. The melody of routers, power drills and air compressors nearly drowns out his smoky-choked voice. "Or was it just another random raid?"

Jaffey wipes the blend of sweat and sawdust from his fine-webbed forehead. "Nosebleed. The mother. Real shame."

"Got her on the first symptom, huh? That's too bad." Bill says. "Pretty soon us saw boys'll be the only ones left in town."

"At least we have each other," Jaffey replies with a hoarse laugh. "Hey, Ethan, you comin' to the game with us this weekend or what?"

"You ask me that every week and every week I say the same thing."

"Pass?"

"Pass."

"Come on, kid," he argues. "All you do is come to this shit hole and go home to that other shit hole. Get out and live every once in a while."

"Pass."

"We'll get him to come one of these days," Bill interrupts. "And when we do we'll get him a beer. Nothin' like beer and a ball game."

"Aye," Jaffey says. He growls when the piece of hickory he's jointing snaps down the center. "Goddamn it!"

Throwing the piece to the ground, Jaffey rants on about the quality of wood these days and how tools just ain't what they used to be. Several saw boys stop their work to hoot and holler, fueling Jaffey's tirade.

“Mother fuckin’ rich assholes can build their own mother fuckin’ cabinets!”

“Jaffey!” the foreman shouts from the lobby. “Get your cussin’ ass over here!”

“Son of a...” Jaffey kicks the splintered wood across the mill floor with his twenty-year-old Timberlands and storms off.

“You still seein’ that girl of yours?” Bill asks as he returns to work. “Tracy, was it?”

“Gracie,” I say with a short breath. The radial arm saw comes at me a little too quickly. I slow my pacing down for the next cut. “And you know I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Shame.” He’s always so damn nosy. “If I remember correctly, she’s a real looker, her.”

“Shame,” I reply. I don’t hide my animosity. In fact, I embellish it.

He throws his hands up in the way people do when they know they’ve overstretched their boundaries. “Didn’t mean to get your goat there, Kid. Just makin’ small talk, is all.”

Why don’t we talk about your dead wife, then? “It’s fine. No harm done. I just... I don’t want to remember her.”

“Fair enough, Kid. I s’pose I wouldn’t want to remember a looker that got away, either. But, hey—Don’t get too worked up. A catch like you’ll snatch a girl up in no time.”

I don’t want another girl.

Bill goes back to sanding the rough edge of a one-by-two piece of hickory. “What do you think this’ll become?”

“Probably the face frame for some aristocrat’s china cabinet,” I say.

“I hate the still wealthy,” he replies. “Sons of bitches are out of reach no matter how many of them show symptoms. I’d break the damn thing in half and throw it in the chipper if I didn’t need this job.”

We, the people of the mill, are simple men. Some of us cram together in small apartments and work two-and-a-half jobs to make ends meet. Most of us don't have cars anymore. Sawdust creeps into everything—our clothes, our hair, our noses, our lives. Fishermen could reel us in from the shore and spend days cleaning us. They still wouldn't wash it all away. I can't smell it anymore, can't see it either, really. There's an itch, though. The itch reminds all of us that it's there and it isn't going anywhere. I'm about to comment on how bad the itch is today when the explosion rocks the mill.

I would have assumed it was an earthquake if the blast hadn't blown out the windows and sent such a blaze through that the mill floor's beams threatened to catch fire.

Shards of broken glass fly about in the heated air like pinwheels dropping from autumn trees. Power tools are ripped from our hands by the shock, thrust back toward the far end of the millwork floor.

We drop our remaining tools and dive to the ground, shouting at each other to get under tables and stay away from any active blades. I fall to my knees, barely missing the tipped over radial arm saw blade whirring its way into the floor.

Bill bends over, grabs my arm and drags me toward the far wall. "Stay down, Kid!" he says as he forces my head down with his hand. I holler when my jaw connects with the rough wood planking—a rogue nail nearly pierces my nose—but Bill won't ease up. That lion protecting his young shields as much of my body as he can with his own.

"Let me up!" He's damn strong for an old man. "I'm fine, Bill. Let me up!"

"Shut your trap! It ain't over!"

"What do you mean—"

Another blast sends another blaze slicing through the shattered glass windows, doing its best to lick our heads as it shoots across the space. My ears are singed and my dry face cracks but I take no greater damage thanks to Bill's cover—as for how he's doing...

"Bill! Are you okay?"

"Fine!" he bellows. "Now stay down!"

"Liar!" I shout back, fighting against his grip.

"I'm fine! Now shut the damn up!"

We're on the floor for several more seconds before the blaze eases up and gritty smoke rides in on its coattails. I cough under Bill's hand and rub my stinging eyes. There's something sticking into my thumb. I can't tell if it's a nail or if my thumb's actually been cut in half, but that's the least of my worries. What's going on out there? Is it over? Shouldn't we be running? But Bill isn't letting up...

Someone shouts in the distance, Cliff, I think? I like Cliff. He's the one with three kids and no wife—the one who always tries to slip spare cash into my jacket when he thinks I'm not looking. The Cliff who's always willing to help one of his brothers. That Cliff.

"Cliff?" I shout. "Cliff is that you?"

"Get me out!" the voice calls with a thick Boston accent—it's definitely Cliff. "Get me the hell outta here!"

There's a rise in his voice; it's higher than I've ever heard it before. Something's preventing him from getting out. He's going to die without help and he knows it. But no one's calling to him. No one's shouting, "I'll be right there!" It's a shock, the lack of response—we saw boys always stick together. Maybe they don't think they can get to him. Maybe they're knocked unconscious. Maybe they're dead. As morbid as it sounds I want to think it's the second two. I don't want to believe that a saw boy wouldn't help one of his own.

I hear Cliff's calls. I think of him trapped. Something turns on inside of me and winds my stomach to the brink of snapping: Cliff's a single father of three. His wife was picked up ages ago. He's all they have. His eldest is barely old enough to watch the others, let alone fend for them. Who am I? A loner in a townhouse? Yes, Cliff's a single father of three with a mortgage to pay. I'm a bachelor with a Welsh roommate who can't wash a fucking dish. Damn it! I don't

want to risk my life for a second time today, but Cliff's kids—now how do I get rid of Bill?

*Grab the pinky and the ring finger and twist outward*, Bill once said during a drunken speech about bar fighting. *They'll be weepin' before you know it*. I doubt he ever thought I'd use his method against him. It worked, though, just as he'd said it would. His hand is off my head in a flash and I am on the run just as quick.

"Kid, no!" he shouts.

He isn't the only one shouting. Others call to me as I sprint:

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Wrong way, Ethan!"

"Run to the door, not the back of the room!"

Everyone's heading for the lobby now. Bodies slam into me and call my name as I dash in the opposite direction. Someone reaches for me as I run past but I slip out of his grasp and keep going. I have to get to Cliff. I have to. Damn it! I don't want to die. But those kids, those kids!

I find him at the far end of the mill, in the corner where we keep all of the sanding supplies. A cabinet's fallen on him and trapped him up to his chest. He's covering his face with one hand and feverishly pushing against the cabinet with the other. Not far from his left arm a rogue hand saw still runs, jutting about wildly as it comes dangerously close to slashing his arm off. With the way it's bucking it's near impossible to clasp the handle. I freeze: How do I get that thing away from him without losing a hand?

Smoke fills the area, making it even more difficult to pinpoint a safe place to grab the saw. It hops in my direction. I try to jump back, but my legs catch in its cord and send me teetering to the floor. My face misses the blade by about a

foot. It winds and grinds its way toward me. I close my eyes, waiting for the whirling saw to hack its way through my face.

It stops before it reaches me. The blade grinds to a halt and drops to the floor, unmoved. What the? I look around. Ahead of me the cord's risen by several feet. On the far end of it stands Bill with a knife in one hand and part of the cord in the other.

"You've a hell of a set of ears, Kid!" Bill pulls me to my feet. "I didn't hear Cliff at all!"

"Yeah!" Craig Smith adds—wait, where'd he come from? "When I seen you going the wrong way I just thought you'd gone crazy or something."

Three more saw boys emerge from the smoke. I knew it. I knew they wouldn't leave a fellow saw boy behind! How could I have doubted my brothers? Together they grab the cabinet and lift. Once its high enough, Bill and I grab Cliff and drag him out. The others drop the cabinet and help Cliff to his feet. He screams in pain—something about his leg—and falls over nearly instantly. Craig and I catch him before he hits the floor and sling his arms over our shoulders.

Bill motions toward the lobby entrance. "Let's go!"

Covering our faces with the rims of our shirts, we carry Cliff to the door as quickly as we can. When we reach the exit a pair of firemen relieve us of Cliff's weight and out come the hoses. Built of brick several inches thick, the building doesn't take long to douse. In that time Bill, the others and I catch our breath on the lawn across the street and take turns asking each other what the hell just happened.

Jaffey runs up to Bill and I. The red of being winded splatches itself all over his wrinkled smoker's face. "Saw the whole thing from the lobby!" Jaffey points across the street. "Someone bombed the agency. It's completely gone!"

I follow the line of Jaffey's arm toward the building across the street—the one that isn't there anymore. All that's left of it are a pile of flames and several flipped over cars that burn from the bottom up. Trees are gone. Foundations of buildings on either side of the agency are covered in torched rubble and what must be the remains of anyone unfortunate enough to be in them at the time. There's a blackened skeleton in the middle of the road. I hope it isn't a saw boy.

It isn't. After a head check we're all accounted for. Some of us sit in the backs of ambulances with burn wounds on our faces and arms. Others stand on the grass and speculate. Others, still, wander over to what's left of the agency and examine its remains. We all do something—save for going home, that is. We aren't allowed to leave, not while we're all suspects to this crime. I rub my forehead with my dirty hand and wait for the inevitable interrogation that is to come.

\* \* \*

The smell of this place—burnt buildings peppered by charred bodies—is too much to take. The vile comes and when it does so does the shaking and the headache. My lungs fight against the remnants of smoke that riddle me with coughs. My mind does its best to wrap itself around this insane predicament.

*Is it real?*

*Did this just happen?*

*Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?*

Another round of vomits incites an astounding *Yes!* to all of these questions.

"Let it all out, Kid." Bill pats my back a little too hard. "Better to get it out now and be done with it. Otherwise, you'll be horking all over your house later."



Ever the boy, Jaffey takes a stick and draws swirls in the vomit blending in with the grass. “I remember my first bombing. Threw up all over Bill’s car, I did. To this day he still makes *me* drive to Fenway.”

Bill slaps me on the back as if here were hitting Jaffey. “Well, if the jackass didn’t cost me a hundred bucks in detailing—*or* if he’d paid me back for it—I wouldn’t be so damned leery about him riding in my damn Cougar!”

“That car’s a piece of shit anyway,” Jaffey replies. “The fuck drives a Cougar, anymore? Those bullshit cars are ancient!” He grabs my arm and pulls me upright. “So, Ethan, you done puking or do I need to go grab some sawdust to cover up all this shit?”

I wobble as I stand, take a moment to right myself, then wipe my mouth on my soot-ridden shirt. My hands are blistered from the palm plant I took when Bill threw me to the ground. The splinter resting between my thumb and its nail hurts worse than the part of my face that he’d smashed against the old wooden planks with rogue nails sticking out. Still pissed that he slammed me down like that, I have a hard time looking at Bill as I ask, “How did you know about the second blast?”

“They always strike twice,” he replied. There was something in the way he stood that said, *You ain’t getting any more out of me, Kid.*

I purse my lips. The questions retreat.

Jaffey kneels down. There’s a star shape in the vomit now. He crosses through it and works on making a figure eight. “Agents are gonna have a field day with this.”

I look around. There are more agents in the road than there are potholes, which speaks volumes as we call our home *Pothole City*. Those hyenas flank ambulances and scavenge the road, searching for clues with their keen hawk eyes.

Interrogations begin. The agents cherry pick us one at a time and slingshot questions to which we have no answers.

“Do you think the bomber’s still around somewhere?” I ask. “He couldn’t have gotten that far.”

“Oh, he’s still here, all right,” Bill replies heavily. “All five hundred pieces of him are still here.”

What’s he on about? “What are you on about?”

“He means it was a suicide bomber,” Jaffey answers.

I touch the sore spot on my face with my splintered thumb and wince at the pain of my already forming black eye. There’s something they aren’t telling me. “What are you guys keeping from me? How frequent are these bombings?”

Jaffey and Bill look at each other Masonically, like they don’t want to let me into their little secret society. Determined to know the truth, I grill them. Unable to leave, they’re stuck with me. It’s only a matter of time and a certain level of annoyance before they tell me why they don’t want to tell me why.

Finally, Bill caves. His eyes look away from Jaffey and fall upon mine. They’re tired, his eyes, they’re ready to give in, to sleep. He defies them though, that lion. He won’t allow them to close just yet.

“Jaff and I were part of a resistance a while back,” he says. “Thought we were doing something good. We hid the Affecteds away and lied to the agents whenever they came around looking for them. Gave them peaceful ends. It was good. We were doing something good.”

Bill pauses, open his mouth to say something, then slams it closed. Whatever information he wants to reveal is fighting underneath the weight of his tongue, and losing. He swallows. He looks down. He says no more.

“Things took a turn for the worst, though,” Jaffey continues for him. “The group became hostile. They started

attacking. At first it was just an assault on an agent here or there. Then came the first bombing. Suicide bomber. Took out an agency and three other buildings. One of the buildings was a daycare center. That's when I lost my shit. We quit after that and never looked back."

A bout of head spinning catches me and escorts my face back to the crabgrass and small rocks. Jaffey sits to my left. Bill stares at the empty space where a building should be. We're all quiet—for a while.

"Say, Ethan," Jaffey says, picking at the grass beneath his bent knees. For a fifty-year-old he plays the role of five-year-old nicely. "That was a good thing you did back there. Getting us to save Cliff and all. What made you go back?"

Stupid question, Jaff. What do you think made me go back? That I was looking to save my favorite Dewalt?

"It was the right thing to do," I say.

He beams and compliments me, but he shouldn't. He doesn't know how much of a coward I am—how much I didn't want to do it—how much I wanted to ignore Cliff's voice. I shamefully pick at the splinter in my thumb only to jamb it in further.

"And his kids," I add. "He's all they've got. I couldn't leave those kids all alone to fend for themselves. Now that his wife's gone he's all they have."

"What do you mean?" Jaff asks. "Cliffie sent his kids to live with their aunt weeks ago. Said it was better than hangin' around with the likes of him."

I spit remnants of vile onto Jaffey's little figure-eight design. "Son of a bitch!"

"Why are you pissed, then?" he asks. "You did a good thing. You could have left him to die. If you didn't run back we'd never have known that one of us was still in there. You saved him. You're a hero."

“Yeah, sure.” Is it my turn to be questioned about the bombing yet? The agents are sure as hell taking their time interviewing everyone. Hurry up, damn it! I want to get the hell out of here already. I have Gary’s dirty dishes to tend to and a book to read.

Jaffey goes on to say how proud he is, what a great guy I am. Eventually, Bill breaks away from his trance and does the same. But they can’t see it: they can’t see how upset I am that I risked my life for this man. I won’t let it show. They don’t know that just a moment ago I vowed to never help anyone ever again. I will not tell them that. All they know is that ‘Ethan the Saw Boy’ is a hero. I can’t be bothered to take that away from them.

When it was finally my turn to testify, the agents were curiously lenient in their questioning. I expected bullying, hostility...but they were kind to the point of being gentle. They asked only the basic of questions before allowing me to slink away from the crowd and return to my dirty dishes and stained calico couch. After they told me to go I fled the scene as quickly as I could. No point in sticking around when agents are involved. Unless you want to get picked up, that is.

Every day I know it's 4:07 because the old grandfather clock in the corner tells me it is. Its antique chime only rings once per day—the useless thing—but I can't be asked to have it fixed.

Today its baroque sound is accompanied by a curiously gentle knock at the door. I purse my lips as my eyes follow the wood slab of an entrance. The knock is too soft to be an agent and it can't be Gary. He lives here. Why would he knock? Unless the idiot forgot his keys again...

The *tap, tap, tap* repeats itself. A female voice says my surname in the form of a question. She says she only needs a minute of my time. Ah, yes—I know that line, and that voice, quite well. I put my book down, walk into the foyer and open the door.

“Good afternoon, Sir—” her crinkled blond hair pulled messily into an attractive ponytail confirms my suspicions. “—I'm Jeannie Grant from channel—”

“—I know who you are.”

“Oh, splendid.” She looks caught off guard, as if she doesn't think anyone watches the news anymore. “Anyway, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind answering a few questions for me.”

I lean against the dirty-white doorjamb. “I don't know where she is.”

Her head darts back. “How did you know...”

“That's what all of you ask,” I interrupt. “And before you ask again, I haven't seen her in years. Good day.”

I turn around and allow the door to swing to a close behind me. The young blond with eyes too large for her face thrusts her arm into the crack of the door before it has a chance to fully close. “She's been sighted in the area, you know. It's

only time before I'm not the only one pounding down your door for answers."

I look back.

"Please," she says. "Agents will be here at some point or another. I'm looking for evidence that she *hasn't* contacted you, that she's probably already moved on. I can't report on that unless I understand her habits a bit more. It may not seem like it, but I'm trying to help you. Both of you."

Her stubborn face is unyielding, like Gracie's. There's tenacity in her amber eyes, like Gracie's.

"What are you waiting for?" I ask impatiently. "Come in already."

With a satisfied smirk she follows me in. The door creaks to a close.

"Something to drink?" I ask as she wanders around the living room, staring at this and that. She stops at the chipped end table and picks up the bronze statue of a huskie I've had since I was a kid. My little sister painted the eyes with blue glitter nail polish years ago. That and that damned rarely chiming clock are a pair in a set of the only remnants I have left of our childhood.

"Two options," I say curtly. "Mr. Sam Adams or Dr. Pepper."

Grant places the statue back on the table. "A Sam would be great, Sir."

"Ethan is fine," I say.

"Ethan it is," she replies, her voice supply laced with satisfaction.

By the time I return from the kitchen she's already nestled herself into the old armchair I found on the side of the road. The leather's worn out here and there, exposing the under-fabric. It chafes in places but I still like it and, with most things, I can't be bothered to replace it.

I pass her the bottle of Sam, take a seat on the couch and tell her in my unsubtly sarcastic way to make herself at home.

"I'll get straight to the point." She pulls out a small black recorder. Grant clicks a little red button and holds its front up to my face. "What do you know about Grace Abbey?"

"As much as she'll tell me." I push the recorder away. "Which isn't much."

"But you're childhood friends, aren't you? And I have a report that you've been in a relationship with her. Is that true?"

We've been in several relationships. "It's true. We were together for a while, but that doesn't mean I know anything about her. She's pretty tight-lipped. I'm surprised I even know her name."

Grant puts the recorder down and produces a small blue notebook from her messenger bag. She scratches something down, her pen like a fingernail scraping at the chipped surface of a coffee table. "I see. And what do you know about her father, Doctor Kevin Abbey?"

I dip my head back and take a generous swig of beer. It's bitter and grainy—and satisfying. "I know that he died trying to find a cure."

"We all know that, but what was he like while you were growing up?"

"About as tight-lipped as Gracie."

"So about as tight-lipped as you."

"Tch."

Grant exhales, her breath a quick, audible pulse. "Ethan, in case you didn't know, agents don't screw around. If you give them cause to believe you're lying they won't hesitate to pick you up."

My living room is as hodge-podge as my basement, minus the musty odor and Christmas lights. The failing couch dips in

the middle, leaving each side slanting. Beside the old recliner on which Grant sits is a cane rack filled with all of the umbrellas I buy because I keep forgetting mine at home. My television is from my nineteenth year and the stand it rests on is supported on one side by several old copies of *Reader's Digest* books dating back to 1998. Every so often I pull one out and reread its yellowed pages. There's an engaging novel called, *Toxin* by Robin Cook if you're ever in the mood for a good thriller.

"Ethan," Grant says. "I asked you a question."

I shake the elements of the room out of my head. "What, now?"

"I asked you what the intervals are between visits from Grace Abbey. How often do you see her?"

Between the time I pulled my beer from the fridge until now it's warmed up and is much less appealing. I set it down. "Depends, really."

"On what?"

"Who knows? She never tells me where she goes. She just, sort of, leaves. I go to sleep and she's in my bed. I wake up and she's out of my life."

"Do you think she runs because they're guilty?"

Damn, this chick has balls.

"Do you think she runs because her family is responsible for the Abbey Virus?"

There's a twitch in my knee. My muscles tighten and force me to stand. "Just what does that have to do with 'keeping *us* safe?' You have some nerve coming here and accusing my girl's family of doing something so heinous and unforgivable."

Grant's overly wide eyes grow wider. She gets up and moves a hand toward me. "Ethan, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"



“—To what?” I slap her hand away. “To pin this pandemic on the man who died trying to rid the world of it? I knew you were up to no good. I knew you weren’t here to ‘help us.’ None of you are.”

“Okay, maybe I’m not,” she admits, recoiling. “But you know finding her might mean the cure, don’t you? Doctor Abbey was the first recorded case, after all. If scientists could get a hold of just one vial of her blood, they could test it to try and identify the origin of the strain and—”

I grab my beer and throw it across the room. It smashes against the far wall, staining it watery-brown. “And *you* know they won’t stop at one vial. They won’t stop until there’s nothing left of her but hair and hollowed out bones. They probably wouldn’t even stop then.”

She straightens up. Her face is steeled by her obvious convictions. “Wouldn’t one life be worth it, though? Wouldn’t one life be worth stopping a world of pain? Of the agents and their damned carts?”

“Out,” I say.

“Ethan...”

“I said get out!”

I’ve never been much of a bully, but I’ve never had much need to be. This time is different. Grabbing her arm, I nearly drag her to the front door. She continues to argue with me as I force her to walk, she’s even witchy enough to pin the recent bombing on Gracie. This woman is just enough of a bitch to say that *my* girl was behind the explosion. Fuck this chick. I stop listening. Whatever else she says is drowned out by the throbbing of my motoring chest.

When we reach the door I shove her out and slam it. I do my best to control the shake in my arms, the churning in my stomach. She pounds on the door for a while, shouting about

something—apologies, I think. Eventually she leaves. About damned time.

I grab the broom and dustpan and clean up the glass shards lying next to the rarely chiming clock. After that I wash the beer from the wall and allow the ratty red dishrag to soak up the remnants on the floor.

The walk to the basement couldn't be slower. Every creak of the steps is as pronounced as my outbreath. However, by the time my bare foot hits the final tread my skin no longer feels as if it's trying to detach itself from the rest of me. My fingers stop tingling. My muscles stop constricting. I remind myself that there's no use in being angry, that she wouldn't want me to be this upset.

At the bottom of the dresser in the basement, underneath the three missing drawers, is my target: an oversized plastic comb-bound book with a coffee stain on the cover. I retrieve it delicately, careful not to disturb its loose contents. The book and I find our way to the couch. I wipe Gary's cracked pepper chip crumbs away and sit.

This book is gentle. It touches down on my lap with great care. Gingerly I open the cover and look upon page one. There's an article adhered to it with scotch tape: "*Phenomenon Finally Named: Government Races to Find a Cure for Devastating 'Abbey Virus.'*" I've read this article countless times. My eyes follow the Times New Roman lines of it anyway:

*"The United States Government has officially named the illness plaguing both the country and the world as the 'Abbey Virus,' after acclaimed Scientist Dr. Kevin Abbey. Dr. Abbey was the first to announce that the symptoms people have been exhibiting are being caused by a quickly manifesting infection that corrupts the blood.*

*“When asked, Dr. Abbey indicated that scientists from around the world have agreed to collaborate in trying to find a cure. These scientists will follow Dr. Abbey’s direction in this time sensitive endeavor.*

*“Dr. Abbey also described the symptoms of the virus, which he stresses individuals should be on the lookout for: “It begins as a nosebleed,” he said. “The nosebleed is the key.”*

*“Other symptoms include...”*

There’s no point in reading the rest of the article. I’m well aware of the symptoms. Page two hosts an article about the spreading threat that is the Affection. Page three contains two small blurbs about how scientists aren’t doing their jobs and that there should be a cure by now. Next comes page four...

I hate page four.

It’s a full-page article on the cover of the New York Times. The headline reads, *“Family Mourns as Acclaimed Scientist Dies of Affection.”*

An image of the family at Doctor Abbey’s funeral accompanies the article describing the details of his death—from the first nosebleed to the complete failure of his system. Doctor Abbey’s wife, Lina, is hunched over, clutching the casket, screaming for her dead husband to return to her. Their eighteen-year-old son tries to pull his mother away, but she won’t let go.

Then there’s Gracie. She’s standing there in her Sunday best, her long brown hair kernalled in perfectly messy spirals, her arms crossed against her chest, her hardened clay face set intently upon one spot: the camera. I hate this picture...yet, I love it; with her eyes straightforward like that it’s almost as if she’s staring at me and we are in each other’s lives again.

I scan a few more pages: the one with the article about her first disappearance; two or three with pictures of sightings; another of the two of us, a candid shot Gary took as I sat with

my arm around her on this very couch. My fingers trace the lines of her hair, the hint of her nose, the depth of her smile.

“Oi, mate!” Gary shouts, traipsing down the stairs. “You’ll never guess who I just ran into!”

Placing the book on the side table I press my elbow against it and rest my head in my hand. “Let me guess, that reporter you’re always after?”

Gary hops over the couch and lands by my side. He grabs the X-Box controller and turns the gaming device on. “Mate, how’d you know?”

“Lucky guess,” I say, leaning further over the table. Gary stares at me. I wonder if he’s going to ask what’s that I’m leaning on.

“Yeah, well, whatever.” His attention is drawn to the screen. “She’s even hotter in person.”

“They all are,” I say with a nod, lucky that he’s so one-minded.

“Cheers to that.”

We hang out in the basement for some time, he lost in his virtual world while I forget the day and lose myself in my book, *On Writing*. The afternoon blends into the evening and twilight soon coats everything in a purple hue. My drooping eyes fail me far sooner than Gary’s do. Shallow yawns cling to my throat like molasses. Saying my goodnights, I stand up. I place my book on top of some other book I’ve left out, stretch to the cobwebbed eaves, and make my way to bed.

\* \* \*

Cleaning up the mill’s much more fun than I expected, primarily because Jaffey’s such a prime source of entertainment. He bitches about everything under the sun, sure, but he does it in such a way that one can’t help but be mesmerized by his comically corrupted view of the world.

“I don’t give a shit what anyone says.” He grabs another burnt two-by-four and tosses it into the dumpster that’s been placed in the middle of the mill floor. It thunks against the other remnants of what could have been custom furniture for the still wealthy. “Babies are fuckin’ ugly!”

“Jaff, where the hell’d that one come from?” Bill adds his own armful of charred wood to the heap. “What’d babies ever do to you?”

Jaffey’s upper lip raises until it barely reach his nose. “One pissed on me on a plane, for starters.”

I nearly drop what’s left of a teak bar stool. “Say what?”

“How the hell’d that happen?” Bill asks with his old man chuckle.

“I’m a good guy,” Jaffey says—that’s what he always says—“That’s how the hell it happened.”

Jaffey rants on about the detriment that is infants and Bill and I laugh. We go on this way for some time, enjoying our motley sawdust brotherhood. I toss in the occasional random comment but Bill and Jaffey lead the show. It’s good, being around these two. It’s cleansing.

Aside from some broken windows, a few tipped over saws and the loss of a week’s worth of wood, the mill is in surprisingly good shape. The fire was never allowed to reach the rafters, leaving the roof uncompromised. None of the brick walls suffered serious damage and the old barn-style planks of flooring look black, but act as defiantly sturdy as always.

There was one good side to all of this mess: the owners agreed to pay us double to work weekends. They needed their bread and butter back on the plate as quickly as possible. The weight of money in my pocket is one I’m always willing to bare.

“Agents are gonna be all over the place,” Jaffey says after he’s worn himself out of raving. “They’re gonna have their big brother eyes on us for a while.”

“No getting away from them now,” Bill agrees. Something shifts in his salt-and-peppered scruffy cheeks. “Wonder if they were around before it happened. Wonder if they’d been tipped off or something, seeing how quickly so many of them swarmed to the crime scene.”

I tip my head as the answer to a riddle suddenly becomes clear. “I think I saw one the other day. I spilled coffee on him.”

Jaffey pauses. He turns to me with his shoulders hunched and glares. “And he didn’t pick you up?”

That’s a little ridiculous. I know the old man hates agents, and I know his hatred is valid, but taking me in for a coffee stain? “Why would he pick me up for that?”

“‘Cuz they’re bastards,” he replies. His shoulders rise. Ferocity coats his eyes in a fevered gloss. “All of them! Look for any reason to pick somebody up. You know that, Ethan.”

My eyebrows rise and fall. Casually, I pick up another wasted piece of furniture and throw it into the dumpster. “Maybe all of them aren’t that bad, then.”

Shit. I don’t need to look at him to know I’ve just said the worst thing I could say. It’s evident in the still of the stale air, in the way Bill just took a step back, back away from Jaffey’s viper eyes—eyes set so intently on me its as if the venom has already stung.

“The fuck you been livin’, Ethan?” Jaffey throws the remains of a desk drawer at me too quickly for me to dodge. “You think those suited assholes pickin’ up innocent people, tossin’ ‘em in carts and taking them to God-knows-where is good? Give me one good thing about them, then.”

“Jaff.” I clutch the place on my chest where the sharp edge of the drawer hit. “I’m sorry.”

“Go on,” he repeats.

“I’m really sorry, Jaff. I forgot about—”

“—Go the mother-fuck on!”

“Jaffey!” the foreman shouts from the lobby. “Get your cussin’ ass in here!”

“Goddamn it!” Jaffey turns around and charges off, pushing Clint Stevens into a workbench in the process. I wait until he’s rounded the corner, until I know he’s out of earshot, then, the lost doe that I am, I turn to Bill in a pitiful search for compassion.

“I forgot about Agnes...” I say hesitantly.

“It happens,” Bill replies in his fatherly way. “So you comin’ to the game this weekend or what?”

Are you kidding, Bill? After what just happened you’re already on about some stupid baseball game? Whatever, I suppose. This is how he copes. Can’t blame him.

“Sorry, man,” I say. I just got robbed. I can’t afford a tick—

—Jaffey’s shouting.

It’s loud, quick, powerful: powerful enough to stop the saws, the drills and all of us saw boys; powerful enough to incite a shared quiver in our eyes; powerful enough to shake our skin and our hands. He’s shouting about the thing we fear most.

He’s shouting about agents.

The waft that brought in that fraction of a sentence makes our elbows and our backs stiffen. As a unit, we saw boys drop our burnt wood and broken chairs and dare to inch closer to the entrance to the lobby where Jaffey, the foreman and two agents are caught in a heated debate.

Whispers erupt among the laborers like too many wasps trying to sting a single spot.

*Is one of us Affected?*

*Are they here to search the mill?*

*Who is it this time? Who're they after this time?*

*Will they take us all away?*

Bill braves the corridor between the mill floor and the lobby. He's the first to see those suited devils' target. "Damn it, Jaff..."

I look over Bill's shoulder, at Jaffey's typically tepid face. His wrinkles jut out at odd angles like surging rivers branching out in every direction. Gloss tints the whites of his eyes pale yellow. His cheeks are a rouge blaze, enflamed like an animal caught in the back of a cage.

"Don't come any closer!" Jaffey, that bucking stallion, shouts. He darts about the lobby, his voice as wild as his flailing arms. The two agents flank him with their pitchfork guns. They do what they can to peacefully subdue his act of defiance. But they can't catch him—and they won't. He's far too astute to run into their reach.

"Mr. Friedson, we will not say this again," Agent One says. "You will come with us now or the consequences will be dire."

"The consequences will be dire if I go with you," Jaffey replies. "So why the hell would I do that?"



“You are in direct violation of the Unaffected Protection Act of 2020,” Agent Two responds. “By remaining here you are putting everyone in this building at risk. Think about your co-workers, Mr. Friedson. Do you wish them Affected, as well?”

Jaffey points a finger at Agent Two. “I ain’t Affectin’ shit!”

I want to scream at him. “Idiot!” “Fool!” “What are you doing?” By their clamped jaws and clenched fists I can tell the other saw boys want to, too. But we’re smart enough to not make a scene in front of two agents. They are paid by the head to put people on carts—to take people to whatever God-forsaken place they take them. We don’t want them fabricating reasons to pick us up. We should be loyal to Jaffey. We should rise up and stand by his side. But the fear of the unknown constricts our voices too well. We do not want to go to that God-forsaken place. We do not want to know what that place is.

Agent Two points his Slovak at Jaffey. Agent One follows suit. Jaffey grows even more wild, more erratic with his flailing arms and bull-stamping feet. His eyes dart about. They land on a nail gun several feet away. He charges toward it.

Jaffey, what the fuck are you thinking?

Before any of us can beg our voices to tell him not to, Jaffey reaches the nail gun. His finger slams against the trigger in rapid succession. This does nothing—the nails go nowhere—nail guns need direct pressure applied to their tips in order to do any damage—but he keeps clicking it the way a child would shoot a closet-monster with a toy gun, shouting things like, *“It’s not my time! I don’t deserve this! It’s not my time to go!”*

The Agents wait him out for a while, but he doesn’t stop. When Jaffey charges at Agent One with the nail gun raised

high, Agent One shoots Jaffey in the head for ‘insubordination.’ *Insubordination*. That’s what’ll go on record. That’s how they’ll justify his death. He failed to comply and, ‘being in the late stages of the Affection,’ was a threat to society.

We all know the truth: why he defied the grimmest of all reapers. There was no reason to pick up Jaffey Friedson’s body and put him onto one of those carts. His nose had never bled. He’d never sneezed red, not once. But his wife had once, so they took him anyway. Just in case.

Later, we gather around the small Magnavox in the lobby. Bill tunes it in to Channel Four. Jeannie Grant’s standing outside this very mill with her pearl white teeth and heartless black microphone. She says what we all knew she’d say, that Jaffey was in violation of The Act and posed a threat to society. We all know how wrong she is.

We’ll never say as much.

\* \* \*

Being poked at and prodded by a beautiful woman is never a bad thing, unless that woman is checking for symptoms. With her tight little white uniform and contrasting black hair she’s sexy, all right. I’m in no mood to care. I don’t want to be here. *I don’t want to be here.*

I don’t want to be here.

Nurse whatever-her-name-is pulls an oversized Q-tip out of my nostril and examines it. “Well, the good new is that your nose is clear.”

“That’s a relief,” I say, though I knew she wouldn’t find anything. No one ever does. Still, because of the incident with Jaffey the check up’s mandatory, so I deal with her prodding fingers and stupid little tests. Besides, she’s nice enough. We small talk as she runs through the checklist. Turns out she’s a

thirty-three year old mother of two who never actually went to nursing school. They just, sort of, threw the job at her when the demand for medical jobs sky rose.

Interesting way to get into the business.

“You’ve no fever and your blood pressure is normal,” she concludes. “And you don’t have any joint pain, so that’s good. I just need to check your blood sample and you’re a free man.”

She rolls up my sleeve, taps my vein and inserts a small needle under my skin. It pinches a bit—she isn’t as good at this as the usual lady (where is she, by the way?) The syringe slowly fills with the thing I hate most: blood.

“I don’t like this part,” I say. “The waiting kills me.”

The needle gives a final pinch as the nurse pulls it out. “It kills everyone.”

The nurse drops the syringe in an orange *Hazardous Materials* bin and turns her attention to the vial of blood. She produces another syringe—one with peat-green liquid in it—and pokes the vial’s rubber cap. The grassy fluid finds its way into the tube and tints the contents an odd shade of brownish-purple. She swivels the vial around and after several rotations my blood turns red once more.

“No corruption.” She drops the tube and the syringe into the same orange bin and removes her grape-scented purple latex gloves. “You’re a free man.”

I wasn’t too worried—I never am—but her words did ease the slight palpitation in my chest. “Great. Thanks.”

“Hey, Ethan,” she says casually as she closes a brown case of medical materials. She looks up at me, curiosity running through the lines around her eyes. “Is she as spunky as they say she is?”

I try to quell the smile before it emerges. It comes out anyway. “Spunkier.”

She smiles, too. Nodding at the door to the medic room, she says, "You're healthy. No need to stay here any longer."

I'm about to leave when a slick-suited man with neatly cut hair wanders into the room and blocks the door. "Before you go, Ethan, I have a few questions for you, if you don't mind."

Are you kidding me? Do you think I want to answer your big brother questions? Of course I mind! "Of course not," I say, a casual deceit rolling off my tongue.

"Thank you," he says over-politely. "Please, have a seat."

The nurse leaves. I sit down. He does, too. There's a misshapen uncertainty in the air that leaves a tightness in my chest and shortens my breath. Is he here to pick me up? To make some bullshit excuse as to why he was validated in carting me off?

"I hear you saved a co-worker from the fire at the mill," he says. "He would've died if you hadn't helped him. You're a real home town hero."

I run my thumb along the inside of my middle finger. What does that have to do with anything? "Was just helping a friend. It's no big deal."

"Still." He picks at his thumbnail as if he doesn't want to be here. I'm a waste of his time; we both know it. "It's commendable."

"I suppose."

He talks a bit more about the hero that is me before shifting his attention to what I know he really came here for: "Do you have reason to believe any of your co-workers were involved in the bombing?" he asks.

I think of Bill. "No."

"Do you have any reason to believe any of your friends were involved in the bombing?" he asks.

I think of Gary. "No."

He leans forward and clasps his hands together. "Any loved ones?"

I think of...

"Ethan?"

There's a swish in my chest.

"Ethan?"

My eyes hurt.

*"Ethan?"*

"Huh?"

The agent taps his fingers against one another. "Do you have any reason to believe one of your loved ones was involved in the bombing?"

"...No."

There's no lie in my words, because I believe them. The satisfied look on his face tells me that he does, too. Good.

"All right, then." He stands. "That's all I have for you. Thank you for being honest. It's a shame how many people feel the need to lie to the officials these days."

"Yeah," I say. "Shame..."

"Well, that's it. Unless you have any questions for me?"

"Just one..." I'm afraid to ask. I don't want to know the answer. But it's very rare for an agent to freely offer information. There's no use in wasting the opportunity. "Why do you use the carts?"

Agent Whomever turns his back to me and clicks his nails once more. "Haven't the slightest. Good-bye, Ethan."

"Thanks," I say. "Mister..."

"Friedson," he says. A hint of sorrow lines his otherwise business-precise tone. "John Friedson."

Oh, man.

John turns around and looks at me as if he wished he were looking in a mirror. "Dad talked about you a lot, you know."

I don't want to say, *Funny, he never mentioned he had a son*. So I don't. I let him leave without another word, another look, another thought.

The nurse is waiting for me with cultured eyes when I walk into the medic building's lobby.

"If... If you ever see her again," she says tentatively. "Tell her Tracy Miller says, *'Way to go.'*"

"I will," I say. I won't. Encouraging Gracie is the last thing I want to do. It's not like I'm going to see her again, anyway. She's a myth. A unicorn. There's no catching her.

We say our good-byes and I exit the building. Behind me lies a dirt castle in which I'd rather not soil myself again. To the left and right of me are vacant buildings with numbers tacked over the doors in red spray paint. Above me is the sun, a disenchanted guardian angel that sits on its laurels and does nothing to protect the world below it. Below me is a road that leads nowhere, and everywhere at the same time. Ahead of me lies another day.

Everyone stands for the national anthem. It's sung by a middle-aged gangly woman—the kind you'd expect to see walking extra slow down the frozen food aisle at the grocery store, just to prolong the trip before she returns to her studio apartment and only friends: three cats named Blanche, Betty and Bertha. She's sharp on the *'free'* in *'land of the free.'* A few of us cringe. I pinch my eyes shut and wait for the note to pass.

The Boston Red Sox have sold out every game since May of 2003. Today's the same. Each seat is filled with another rambunctious fan, their 'A-s' replaced by hard 'Ah-s,' screaming in disdain at the opposing team, the Baltimore Orioles. Nine of the candy-striped men file out of the dugout and take their positions on the field.

"Now *this* is life," Bill says. He takes a swig of the thirteen-dollar watered down beer he purchased at one of the rip-off concession stands. "Beer, ball game—all a man needs in life."

I stare at my own untouched cup. "I can't believe you actually like this crap."

"Lesson number one, Kid," he replies. "Nothing tastes better than a beer by the Green Monster."

"Yeah, well, opinions vary." I place the beer beside my feet.

Bill's laughter melds in with the animated cheers and jeers of the fans. He grabs my beer and thrusts it into my hands. "C'mon, Kid. Just one drink—for Jaffey."

I bite the inside of my cheek. Manipulative asshole. There's no way I can say no to that. We tap cups. I drink as much as I can before what almost passes for beer burns my throat.

“Speaking of Jaffey,” I say, staring into my cup. “Are you sure it’s okay for me to take his ticket? I mean, it’s only been two days. They haven’t even buried him yet. I’m not sure I feel right about this.”

“Balderdash!” Bill says. He takes a moment to shout something derogatory about the Orioles. “Wasting a Sox ticket? He’d rather lose a leg! Relax, Kid. Jaffey’d want it this way.”

“If you say so...”

Bill slams his hand against the back of my neck. “You worry too much, Kid. Don’t you know that worrying too much can make you sick?”

I’m about to tell him that I’m not worried—that I rarely worry—when I catch the eye of someone who’s staring at me from the eighth row.

“Damn it.”

“What’s up, Kid?”

I wait until the crowd’s finished booing at a line drive before I say, “She followed me.”

“Who?” Bill asks casually, finishing off the last of his diluted wheat-water.

My eyelids close. I clench my teeth. My lips purse. “Grant.”

Bill’s more alert now. He turns to me with aged eyes full of interest. “You mean that reporter? Why not go down and talk with her? She’s a real looker, her.”

“Is that all you think about?”

“Sort of,” Bill replies. “Anyway, I’m going to grab another beer. Need a top off?”

Thinking of the burning sensation the previous drink induced, I shake my head. “I’m gonna go tell her off.”

A rise from the crowd: one of the hitters just sent a ball screaming over the Green Monster. Bill and those around me



fall into a dance of rowdy rejoicing. Ignoring them all I make my way to the overly blond reporter.

We meet in a corridor between the concession stands and the seats, far enough away for some privacy but still close enough to be overrun by the crowd's persistent rants.

I lean a shoulder against the cold cement wall and fold my arms. "This is three days in a row now, Grant."

"What can I say?" she pulls out her stupid little notebook. "I'm persistent."

"And I'm sick of you."

Grant reels back. "Now, that isn't very nice."

"Never said I was," I reply, tightening my intertwined arms.

She puts the notebook back in the messenger bag slung over her shoulder. "Touché."

"Why are you so interested in finding her?" I ask. I can't be bothered to waste time with small talk. "And don't give me that whole '*vial of blood*' spiel again. The way you go on about her there has to be another reason."

A piece of blond hair falls in front of one of her amber eyes, splitting it in two. She tucks it neatly behind her ear with her French-manicured fingers. "Rumor has it she knows the cure."

Is this chick serious? "Rumors are typically wrong."

There's a gleam in her eye—an unconvinced one. "Why are you so opposed to healing the human race? If this Abbey girl's the key—"

"—Do you think for one second that if she had the cure she'd keep it to herself? Are you that daft? Why would anyone be so selfish?"

"You tell me," she says. "You're the one who knows her."

Another roar from the crowd—the Sox must be up by two now. Several fans run between us with their hotdogs and beer,

desperate to get back to the action unfolding on the field. Grant's short. She has to crook her neck to look up at me. The look she gives me is unyielding, like Gracie's looks.

"We're done here," I say.

I walk back toward the seating area. Grant grabs my arm and pulls. I pivot and swing on one foot. Her Gracie eyes are so vivid, so real. I search for anything to stare at instead of them.

"Ethan, please..."

Something interrupts the shouting of the crowd. Slowly, they quiet. Soon they emit no sound at all. Grant and I watch each other for a silent, knowing moment. Fear steals the tenacity from her eyes and widens them. She slides her hand down my arm and places it in mine. Grant squeezes. Wrapping my fingers around hers and squeezing back feels appropriate for the moment, so I do. Together we head for the seating area, our steps short and slow like shallow, ragged breaths.

Agents are on the field—several of them. As if they're reciting the pledge of allegiance, both teams are lined up, the Sox to the left, Baltimore to the right. The players have taken their hats and gloves off. The catcher is without gear. They're completely exposed, but that doesn't matter. No equipment will protect them from the ball that's about to strike.

The crowd is frozen in the ice of their own fear. They're waiting to find out who the agents are after. They whisper amongst each other, *I hope it isn't so-and-so. It'd be better if it's this guy or that guy. Are they picking up a whole team? If so, it had better be the Orioles.*

They say Ramon Alvarez is the best pitcher the Sox have had since Daniel Bard. They say he's the pitcher of the generation, in fact. He's the pride of the Sox and a role model to millions of aspiring children. He's a spiritual leader, a devout family man—and he's Affected.

Everyone stills as the agents form a circle around him. The group walks off the field together, Alvarez helpless to escape their suited cage. He doesn't attack them. He doesn't cause a scene like Jaffey did. Alvarez points his chin to the sky and goes with them, too proud to react negatively in front of millions of fans. I'm sure he wants to be remembered as the legend he is, not the chicken they could have turned him into.

Both team managers are on the field, their boys huddled around them respectively. They part from their teams and meet on the pitcher's mound. Heads are nodded. Hands are shaken. The coach of the Sox shouts something at a young man with brick-red hair. It sounds like, "*You're up!*"

As the Sox take their positions and an Oriole goes up to bat, the crowd explodes in a round of cheers. They resume their overly rowdy language, their lewd conduct. They eat their hot dogs as if nothing has ever tasted better. Everything goes back to the way it was, as if their pitcher had not just been carted. The game is played as if never interrupted, and Grant and I hold hands.



*Eight years ago, there was no World Government. There were no agents, no carts. The fear of a nosebleed did not exist. Then came The Affection-an incurable disease that ran rampant across the planet, killing off roughly 60% of the human population. Two years later-with order in shambles and governments all over the world in ruins-the World Government formed. That's when the real trouble began. The WG made it its mission to segregate the sick (known as "Affected") from the rest of the population in an attempt to keep the disease from spreading. Agents were put into place to corral the ill and the God-forsaken carts were introduced. For the past six years, Ethan has lived a quiet life. He has done his best to remain out of the public eye and, more importantly, off of the agents' radars. However, when his ex-girlfriend, daughter of the famous scientist who first discovered the*

*disease, is captured by agents and taken to World Government headquarters to be experimented upon, Ethan can no longer pretend the world around him doesn't exist. On his way to save her, Ethan is thrust into a place of turmoil, espionage and conspiracies. Will he be able to handle the pressures of reality? Will he be able to save her in time?*

# Affected

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