

THEY DESTROYED BEFORE.
NOW WE LIVE ...

IN THE AFTER

DEMITRIA LUNETTA

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Part Two

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

About the Author

Back Ad

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher

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CHAPTER ONE

I only go out at night.

I walk along the empty street and pause, my muscles tense and ready. The breeze rustles the overgrown grass and I tilt my head slightly. I'm listening for Them.

All the warnings I remember from horror movies are wrong. Monsters do not rule the night, waiting patiently to spring from the shadows. They hunt during the day, when the light is good and their vision is at its best. At night, if you don't make a noise, they can shuffle past you within an inch of your nose and never know you are there.

It's so very quiet, but that doesn't mean that They are not near. I walk again, slowly at first, but then I pick up my pace. My bare feet pad noiselessly on the cracked sidewalk. Home is only a few blocks away. Not far if I remain silent, but it may as well be miles if They spot me.

I've learned to live in a soundless world. I haven't spoken in three years. Not to comment on the weather, not to shout a warning, not even to whisper my own name: Amy. I know it's been three years because I've counted the seasons since it happened. In the summer before the After when I'd just turned fourteen.

A branch snaps in the distance and I stop immediately, my body tense. I shift my bag slowly, carefully adjusting the weight so the cans inside don't clank together. Every little noise screams at me that something is wrong, but it could be nothing.

Clouds shift and moonlight suddenly brightens the street. I glance around, searching, studying an abandoned, rusted car for any signs of the creatures. When I don't spot Them, I almost continue on, but at the last second I decide to play it safe. Stepping into an abandoned yard, I disappear into the shrubbery. I'll wait until a cloud passes in front of the moon and darkness reclaims the night.

I can't take any chances, not with Baby waiting for me. My bag holds the food we need to survive. We only have each other. I found Baby shortly after the world failed, when I still believed things would return to normal. I no longer hold that hope. Nothing this broken can ever be fixed.

CHAPTER TWO

This is how I think of time: the past is Before, and the present is the After. Before was reality; the After, a nightmare.

Before I was happy. I had friends and sleepovers. I wanted to learn how to drive, to get a jump start on my learner's permit. The worst thing in my life was math homework and not being allowed to date. I thought my parents were so clueless; my dad with all his "green" concerns (I told my friends he was an eco-douche), and my mom, who was never home except for Sunday-night family dinner. I was kinder to my mom, though, and only called her a workaholic. Her job was with the government, her work very hush-hush.

I always thought of myself as smart, and I was definitely a smart-ass to my parents. I loved seeing them squirm, letting them know that I didn't buy into their "because I said so" crap. I was good at school. I could always guess the endings of movies and books. Now there is no school, there are no more movies, no new books, no more friends.

The creatures arrived on a Saturday. I know it was a Saturday because if it were a weekday I would have been at school and I would be dead. Sundays I went with my father to visit his parents at Sunnyside Pine, and if They had come on a Sunday I would also be dead.

I remember that the electricity flickered and I was annoyed because I was watching TV. I had wondered if my father was on the roof screwing around with the solar panels. They didn't require much maintenance, but he liked to hose them off twice a year, which always messed with all our electronics. I checked the garage. His electric car was gone. He was at the farmers' market, probably overpaying for organic carrots.

I microwaved some pizza bagels (the ones my mom hid from my dad at the back of the freezer) and sat back in front of the TV, flipping through the channels mindlessly. I'd wished my parents would listen to me and upgrade to the premium cable package. I thought life was so unfair. My mother had bought my father a brand-new electric car for more money than I would probably need for college, but she wouldn't spend fifty bucks extra a month to get some decent television.

I checked my cell phone but there were no calls from Sabrina or Tim. I was supposed to go to a movie with them later. Tim had been madly in love with Sabrina forever but her parents would only let her go out with him if I tagged along. I joked with Sabrina about being the old spinster in a nineteenth-century novel. "No secret love child for you two," I'd tell her with a wink. "Not while Matron Amy is on duty."

I didn't really mind being their chaperone; they never made me feel awkward or like a third wheel. Sabrina hadn't even decided if she was all that into Tim. I'd been friends with her since fifth grade when I was the weirdo who skipped a grade and she was the nice girl who didn't treat me like I had the plague. Pretty soon we were friends and stayed besties through middle school and into high school.

I tossed my phone on the coffee table and kicked up my feet, giving my full attention to the TV screen for the first time. But I noticed that even when I changed the channel, the picture stayed the same. I paused, curious. The president was making a speech. Boring. I ate my snack, only half listening.

"It has come to our attention," the president droned, "that we are not isolated in this attack."

I sat up, my bite half chewed. Attack? I was too young to remember the string of terrorist attacks at the beginning of the century, but my mother worked for the government and was constantly talking

about our “lack of counterterrorist mechanisms.”

I turned up the volume. The president looked exhausted, bags under his eyes, makeup caked on from the cameras. “The structure landed in Central Park early this morning,” he said into twenty microphones. “As of now, the fate of anyone residing in New York City and the surrounding suburbs is unknown. We are working to find the cause of this interruption in communication as soon as—” His speech was cut short. The breaking news logo flashed across the screen.

I took a swig of soda. It was strange that the network had interrupted the president. I didn't understand what they were talking about, didn't know what it all meant yet. I glanced at the screen and what I saw nearly made me choke on my soda. They had footage of the “structure” in the park. Something emerged, turned toward the camera, stared. Still coughing, I pressed PAUSE on the DVD remote and stood.

That was the first time I saw an alien.

CHAPTER THREE

After They came, I did not leave my house for three weeks. The broadcasts stopped after the first few days, but they were not helpful anyway. They kept repeating the same things. Aliens had landed, they were not friendly, half of the planet was dead.

They were horrifyingly fast, traveling across the globe at an alarming pace. They didn't destroy buildings or attack our resources, like in so many crappy Hollywood movies. They wanted us. They hungered for us.

That first day, I was slow to understand what was happening.

My hands shook as I desperately tried to call my friends and family. My father didn't carry a cell phone. He didn't believe in them, said they gave people brain cancer. My mom had one of those fancy touch-screen phones that her job paid for, but she never answered, and her office line went straight to voice mail. Sabrina's phone just rang and rang. So did Tim's. I tried my cousin in Virginia and my mom's parents in Miami. No one answered. I went through the phone book on my cell, furiously calling one number after another. Eventually I could no longer dial out. I kept getting a recorded message. "All circuits are busy. Please hang up and try your call again at a later time." Soon I couldn't even get service. I stared at the screen for a minute, then, frustrated, threw the phone against the wall.

I curled into a ball on the couch and tried not to cry, but I couldn't hold back the tears for long. When my father didn't come back after a few hours, I had to admit to myself that he was dead. He had camping skills, but I could not imagine him holding his own against an alien attack. My mother might be okay, her government offices were high security, surrounded by soldiers. But I had no idea how to reach her, and could soldiers really protect her from those repulsive creatures? I had to face the reality that my parents could both be gone.

I stayed on the sofa and cried until I had no tears left and not enough energy to sob. I eventually crawled to the fridge and grabbed my dad's Ben and Jerry's from the freezer. It was the one junk food he allowed himself. He said life wasn't worth living without Cherry Garcia. I gorged myself on ice cream and ended up vomiting purple-pink onto the floor. I fell asleep there, exhausted and miserable.

When I woke several hours later, I couldn't figure out why I was on the kitchen floor. I opened my eyes and saw the mess I had made, instantly remembering everything. I wanted to stay there, but the smell finally got to me. I sat up and rubbed my deadened arms. Sobbing hysterically wouldn't help my dad or my friends. It wouldn't help me. Something inside me shifted or maybe just broke. I had to take care of myself.

I stood carefully, my legs still shaky, and went to retrieve the cleaning supplies from under the sink. When I was done cleaning the mess, I numbly grabbed a book from the shelf and hid in my room, unable to face my own thoughts. I needed to escape, if just for a short while, into a story from long ago.

My first night alone, I still assumed things would settle down. I stayed glued to the TV, watching the news report the same thing over and over. People were dying, and I was sick with grief, but I knew that we would overcome the invaders or whatever they were. We were the strongest nation on earth.

The second day passed and the TV was out, but there were still people on the radio. I was comforted by their voices, even though they spoke of mass chaos. People tried to run away, but They were everywhere. People tried to hide, but They found them.

Then on the third day, the radio went silent. I stayed in my room and obsessively read one book after another, to keep my mind on anything other than what was happening. I'd always escaped in books, but now reading had become something more. It allowed me to be somewhere else, to feel something else, not just the numbness that overtook my body and made me wonder if I was still alive.

My father loved Shakespeare; he would read passages with me and discuss all the intricacies. I reread *Romeo and Juliet* and cried my eyes out over their loss. Before I'd always argued with my father that the star-crossed lovers were idiots who should have coordinated their plans better, but that time they got to me. I completely broke down and crawled into my parents' bed. Draping their covers over my body, I sobbed myself to sleep. I was like that back then; my mood would swing between an almost hysterical sense of loss and having no feelings at all.

On the fourth day, I made myself eat and then tidied the house, trying to do the normal things that people do. I put out all the pictures I had of my friends and parents, gluing a collage to my bedroom door. I ransacked every photo album, placing each picture with great care, keeping my mind occupied. It was so much easier than facing reality. Sometimes I found it hard to concentrate, what with the world ending and all. I wanted so badly to leave the house, to see if anyone else was around, but I was scared of Them.

I finally decided to go out on our rooftop deck, and watch Them chase people down the street. They were faster than I'd thought possible, a blur of green, the color of pea soup. Glowing yellow eyes sometimes caught the light and flashed gold. The creatures pounced, not bothering to kill their prey before feeding. They ripped skin and flesh from their victims, who screeched in agony. The cries always brought more of Them, eager for their next meal. Those first few days were full of screams. It was terrible, but the real terror came when there were no more shrieks, when the world went quiet. I thought I was the only one left on the planet. There was only me and Them.

The fourth night, I turned on all the lights in the house. My block was dark, except for our home, my home. No one else had electricity, but I still did. I silently thanked my father who wanted to live footprint-free by installing solar panels and insisting we always put more into the grid than what we took out. We were as close to self-sustaining as current technology allowed.

I didn't know then that They were drawn to the lights, like moths to a flame. I didn't know that they couldn't see very well. They were attracted to anything bright, especially once they realized that where there was light in the darkness, there were humans, which for Them meant food.

The electric fence saved me, and that was my mother's doing. Even though we lived in an excellent, safe neighborhood in Chicago, she needed to protect the work she brought home. She had the fence installed behind our beautiful iron gate, the one They ripped up and destroyed in just a few minutes. She needed to make our house a "secure area." My mother and father were so different. I wondered sometimes how they managed to stand each other at all. Still, they were so in love. Their public displays of affection were always embarrassing and I used to make gagging noises to try and get them to stop. Now I regret the way I acted toward them. I regret a lot of things that happened Before.

CHAPTER FOUR

After those first few days, I quickly learned to keep the noise to a minimum and the lights off when it was dark outside. They hid at night, but were still attracted by light and sound. Even small noises would bring Them to the fence, their green skin sparking as They tried to tear through the electrified chain links.

I spied on Them through my dad's nature binoculars, carefully watching, mesmerized by the grotesqueness, their snarls and sharp teeth. They had two arms and two legs, but that is where the similarities to humans ended. They were hairless; all the same shade of yellow-green, like sunburnt grass. Most were naked, though some wore torn shirts or pants they must have scavenged from the dead. One sported a dirty Cubs hat, at which I couldn't help but laugh. My sense of humor was very different in the After.

I spotted them at the fence sometimes. They heard me if I was too loud, or occasionally They wandered over aimlessly. They didn't seem to be very curious in general, not concerned with anything but the pursuit of food. I tried to ignore Them when They rattled the fence, braving the electric shocks in search of meals. I'd go and hide in my room, but eventually I developed a sick fascination with Them. I decided to study one up close, determined to know what they really looked like. One day I gathered my courage, took a deep breath, and walked into the backyard. Humming softly, I waited.

Within a few seconds, one made it to the fence. It grabbed the metal with both hands and was jolted back by a painful shock. Shaking its bald, dull-green head, it quickly got up and tried again to attack, never taking its eyes off me. Again and again it came after me; either it couldn't learn from the earlier shocks or it just didn't care. It gnashed its teeth, pulling back its thin lips to reveal yellow fangs. It had practically no nose, only two holes where a nose should be. Puke-green flesh hung loosely from its body like baggy clothes. I could smell its burning flesh as its hands became blackened from the electric current. As long as I was within sight, it would pursue me single-mindedly.

I was frozen in place, terrified yet fascinated. I called out, "How have *you* destroyed *us*?" The sound of my voice only made the alien struggle harder against the wire of the fence trying desperately to attack me.

Finally I left it, snarling and slobbering, relieved and confident that the fence would hold. I went back inside and watched from the window, my shaking hands wiping the nervous sweat from my forehead with a kitchen towel. It would forget in a moment why it was there, what it was that drew it to that place. It would wander off in search of food again, live meat. I went to the basement, huddled in the corner, and read, pretending it was still Before, when little green men were just a joke and couldn't eat you.

CHAPTER FIVE

After twenty days I ran out of food. My father had a small rooftop garden, but none of the vegetables were ready, and I couldn't live on carrots and tomatoes for the rest of my life anyhow. I went a whole day without eating before admitting to myself what I needed to do.

I walked to my parents' room, into their closet. I took down the box that my mother thought I didn't know about. I'd put it off, hoping I wouldn't need to leave the safety of the house, that all the carnage would stop and that I would be saved. My hunger made me realize that I would have to face the world as it was; life-threateningly full of Them. For that, I needed protection.

"Most households that keep a firearm end up hurting a family member or someone they know," I heard the echo of my father's concerned voice as I took the gun from its case.

"I would like to see those statistics," my mother had replied. "What studies are you citing exactly?" she'd asked with a wink. He tried not to smile, but his eyes betrayed him. He'd always pretended to be stern but would give in so easily. He put his hand on the back of her neck and pulled her forward for a kiss. I remember being amazed. Even when they were arguing, they still made out. They didn't notice me in the doorway. Even then I was good at being quiet.

They kept the gun, thanks to my mother's stubbornness. My father surrendered, as long as I learned how to use it properly and knew it wasn't a plaything. I was ten. My father came up with some lame excuse about wanting me to gain a better understanding of the world, but I knew it was because he feared I would find the gun hidden in the closet and think it was a toy.

I never thought about the gun, not after my lessons at the shooting range were finished. That day, however, when I needed to leave the house for the first time since They arrived, all I could think about was how grateful I was that my mother was super paranoid, that her work demanded it.

I loaded the clip into the gun and smiled, putting the holster on, slipping my arms through the straps. I packed my backpack with a flashlight, a knife, and my wallet, unsure of what I would find outside. Looking back, it just goes to show how clueless I was.

I waited until sunset, when there would be less of Them. It took me twenty minutes to work up the nerve to open the front door. The lock clicked open, painfully loud. I checked to make sure They weren't waiting for me at the fence. We lived in a nice neighborhood: big expensive houses with well-manicured lawns. Ours was the only one with a fenced-in front yard. I unlocked the electric gate, checking for the hundredth time that the key was safely tucked into my pocket for when I returned. To lock myself out now would most certainly mean death. I felt sad remembering when I'd done it a couple of times Before, when the penalty was only heading over to Sabrina's house to mooch junk food until one of my parents got home.

I took a deep breath and steadied my shaking hands, willing myself into calmness, pushing my terror away as I stepped past the rubble of what used to be our outer gate.

I had decided I would start out simple; venture to the corner store a block away, have a quick look around, grab some canned ravioli, and haul my butt back to my house. I was careful to walk quietly.

"Slow and steady wins the race," my father had always said. *He is such a dork*, I thought automatically. It made me want to cry. My father wasn't anything anymore. No one was anything.

I walked slowly, carefully placing each foot on the sidewalk to avoid making noise. The night was windy, which made me jumpy. Any movement of a bush or tree and I froze. After constant stalling, I had to force myself to calm down again. I didn't want the sound of me hyperventilating to bring

Them. *The shadows are just shadows*, I told myself. *They are all sleeping now*, I reasoned. But wasn't very convincing.

As I walked, I noticed a few of the houses had broken windows or open doors. Cars had been abandoned in the street, some with blood on the windshield. I tried not to look at these things too closely, not to let them psych me out. I had survived an alien invasion, I wasn't going to starve to death because I couldn't overcome my fear.

I made it to the store without spotting any of Them. Cautiously I pressed at the door, expecting it to be locked, but it gave way with little trouble. The smell hit me first, musty and rotten. I stood for a moment with the door open, breathing shallowly until I became used to the stink. When I stepped inside, my shoes squeaked on the linoleum floor, making me cringe. I slipped them off and left them by the door.

This is the market that Sabrina and I would sneak off to, to buy junk food when she stayed at my house. There used to always be customers here, buying munchies or lottery tickets, sipping on sodas from supersize cups. The outside world was empty now, but being in that vacant store was somehow worse.

I made myself focus into the darkness and went straight to the canned food aisle, frantically filling my backpack with corn, soup, tuna fish, anything I could get my hands on. The cans clanged loudly when I hoisted the bag to my shoulders and I froze. There was no way I could make such a racket and get home alive. Quickly I repacked the bag, placing candy bars and bags of marshmallows between the cans.

But now not all the cans fit. I don't know why I didn't leave them on the floor, but it didn't seem right. Your mind does funny things when you spend so much time alone. I stocked them back on the shelf, one by one. Anxiety was flooding my body, and my hands were shaking with fear and hunger. I dropped a can on the shelf and it fell into the other ones and onto the floor. My eyes followed it as it rolled toward the front of the store. I stepped forward and instantly froze. There was one of Them at the store entrance.

I took a step back as quietly as I could. The creature's head pushed through the door, its body jammed in the opening, unsure of where to go. Finally it made its way inside; its head rocked clumsily from side to side, trying to see in the dark. They shuffled around when there were no people in sight, wandered aimlessly. They weren't fast until They had reason to be, when They detected their prey.

The creature's foot touched my shoes where I'd left them by the door. In a flash it dropped to the floor and sniffed at my sneakers. I continued to back away, my socks soundless on the cold tile. It moved forward, crawling on its hands and knees. Something settled in my bag with a thud. Its head snapped up in my direction and in a flash, it ran toward me. Without thinking I grabbed a jar of tomato sauce and hurled it at the creature.

I aimed for its head, but the jar sailed over it and smashed against the floor. That made it stop. I looked back and forth, unable to decide if it should investigate the new, louder noise.

I stood as still as I could. *Please don't see me. Please don't see me. Please don't see me.*

The gun was at my side in its holster. I could reach it and shoot before the thing reached me, but that would draw every one of Them within earshot.

It moved closer, searching wildly. The smell of rotten meat filled my nostrils, almost making me gag. It looked right at me but could not see me with its milky-yellow eyes. I held my breath, afraid to even blink. The creature moved frantically, its black-blue tongue licking its fangs. Its closeness made my skin crawl.

It was becoming more difficult to hold my breath. I could push the creature and try to run, but They were so fast it would catch me before I could reach the door. Its teeth were unbelievably pointed.

too big for its mouth. Hot, putrid breath blew onto my face.

~~It edged closer and I took a small step back, sickened. I clenched my teeth, willing myself not to give in to my terror and run. My foot hit a can, hard. It rolled down the aisle, away from me. The creature rushed toward the noise, almost brushing against me as it went by. I made myself as small as possible, knowing if we touched, if the creature discovered me, it would be the end.~~

Luckily it knocked over more cans on its way, creating a clatter, confusing itself. I used the diversion to run toward the exit. My socks made no noise on the hard floor.

I silently jerked open the door and power-walked home, looking over my shoulder every few seconds. My heart in my throat, I was convinced the thudding in my chest would be loud enough to bring Them all running.

I finally reached my house and fumbled with my key. I panicked when I couldn't get the gate open immediately, but taking a deep breath I managed to find the keyhole. I unlocked the gate and slammed it behind me, no longer caring how much noise I made. I was barely able to turn the interior bolt before the creatures smashed into it.

I ran for the door and once inside, a sick curiosity made me look out the window. There were three of Them at the gate, milling around, unsure in the darkness. They hadn't known I was there until they'd heard the slamming iron. They were so fast. I would have easily been caught if it were day.

I rummaged through my pack, gorging myself on candy bars and canned ravioli. My father would have had a fit. I'd always been annoyed when we shopped at the natural food store, just wanting to eat "normal food." It wouldn't be long until I pined for an endless selection of fresh vegetables.

Much later, I realized that I should have dropped my pack the minute one of Them appeared. But I desperately needed the food in my bag. My shoes were gone, left at the store, but I decided soon after that shoes were dangerous. They made too much noise. I started wearing just socks, but my feet would grow calloused and rough before long, making footwear unnecessary altogether.

Looking back on that first trip, knowing what I do now, it was a miracle I survived at all.

CHAPTER SIX

I was incredibly lonely that first month, before I found Baby. I stopped keeping track of the day. Whether it was Monday or Wednesday seemed meaningless in the After.

There were whole days when all I did was read. Sometimes at night I'd listen to my TuneZ play turned down low, headphones in my ears. I listened to my dad's playlist, full of bluegrass and oldies. I told myself that it was a good way to honor his memory, even though I could barely think of him without breaking down.

I went about my routine, venturing farther and farther away from home. There was a large supermarket only five blocks away. As far as I knew, there weren't any other survivors, so I had my pick of overprocessed food, filled with the toxic preservatives that my father always ranted against. Now they were keeping me alive.

It was so creepy, to walk through the empty aisles, to "shop." I avoided the produce section, quickly turning to compost. Even so, the supermarket smelled awful, but I began to get used to the stink. I'd never realized how sanitized my life had been, how clean and contained. I thought about how dirty the After would be, how the world would change without constant maintenance.

I visited the supermarket often, wanting my cabinets to be full of nonperishable food. It became a routine. One night, though, I had the greatest shock since the After began. I discovered Baby in the produce section, her chubby fingers shoveling rotten, month-old grapes into her mouth, hands and face stained with purple juice. She could not have been more than three or four. Her dirty, blond hair was matted into pigtails, pink hair ties still in place. She had been injured; her skirt was stained the rusty brown of old blood.

I took a step toward her and immediately her large, brown eyes were on me. She didn't cry out or even flinch. As quiet as I was, she'd heard me approach. After studying me for a few seconds, she padded silently in my direction, her arms outstretched. How was this tiny being still alive?

I almost left her there. I was already hardened from what I'd witnessed. Instead I picked the girl up and carried her home. I decided that if she cried on the way, I would leave her. If she squirmed, I would just drop her. If she so much as whimpered, I would have tossed her aside for Them to finish. How much I had changed in just a few short weeks of living in the After.

But the girl had not made a noise. I've witnessed Baby cry many times since that day. Her lips tremble like any other child, her nose wrinkles, and tears run down her cheeks, all in silence. I watch her sometimes while she sleeps, guilty at what I almost did all those years ago. I don't want to think about what my life would be if I had given in to my heartless thoughts. I don't know what I would do without Baby, left alone with only my memories of Before.

When Baby came, it was like starting over in the After. I was no longer alone. I still wonder how she survived for so long, since she was so young. It helped that she was quiet and had good instincts. She knew not to make a sound. She didn't whine when I cleaned her wound, pouring hydrogen peroxide to kill the germs. A chunk of flesh was missing from the fatty part of her thigh, but it seemed to have healed over enough to prevent infection. After I'd cleaned and wrapped her leg, I checked her for other wounds, but the only other abnormality was a strange diamond-shaped scar at the nape of her neck, just near her hairline.

Even though she looked in good shape, I still walked to the pharmacy and scavenged antibiotics to give her as a precaution. I figured she could take the same pills I was given for my skin infection the

year before. I also scavenged some new clothes for her, and when I returned, she was waiting silent at the door.

I gave her the antibiotics, guessing at the dosage. I also gave her a bath and washed and combed her hair. After that, Baby became my shadow, following me silently around the house. Sometimes she'd stop and stare at a window or wall and I assumed she was damaged from the After, unable to focus. Once she stopped mid-step, suddenly turning and running to hide behind the couch, and a few seconds later I heard the fence spark. I realized that she knew They were outside and was frightened. She could hear them, often when I couldn't.

I tried to comfort her, but I knew I needed some way to communicate with her. Vocalization was out of the question, voices always drew Them, and I did not want Them constantly testing the fence. It seemed easier just not to talk, and Baby was smart enough to understand this. Or maybe what she had witnessed had shocked her into silence permanently.

I dug out my dad's book on sign language and began to teach her and myself. Through the years we've modified our language to fit our purpose. We sign into each other's hands when we're near. Now, we can have an entire silent conversation moving only our fingers, but when we started I used only a few simple words. *Food. Quiet. Bad. Good. Baby.*

Calling her Baby seemed to fit; for all I knew she was the last toddler on earth. She took to the signs remarkably well, mimicking my every action. She became my constant companion. She wanted to be everywhere I was and do everything I did. If it had been Before, I would have been annoyed, but I was starved for human interaction. Baby didn't just become my family, she became my entire world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Amy. Baby wakes me by signing onto my face. Three years have passed, so she's a child now, not a baby, but my label has become her name.

What? I ask crankily. *I'm sleeping.*

I saw it again, she tells me, her fingers move with a desperate swiftness. *The ship.*

I sit up and look into her eyes, large and shining. She should be afraid, but instead she is excited. Her lips curve slightly, almost forming a smile.

Show me, I demand.

She grabs my hand and we hurry to the roof. I don't bother to get dressed. Years ago, Before, I would never have gone out on the roof deck in my underwear. Years ago, I would have been careful of the neighbors. But now, in the After, there are no neighbors.

See? There! Baby hands me the binoculars. I look out over the houses. Sure enough, there is another black object, hovering in the distance. When we first spotted them, I told Baby they were ships, for lack of a better word. The sign in the book is actually "boat," but Baby doesn't know that. The signs are what I make them, a visual representation. I didn't know how to explain "spaceship."

The ship looks more like a helicopter, anyway, except without the tail end. No windows either. I can't hear the engine from where we are and I wonder at the single blade, keeping it airborne. What differences in technology do They possess? The ship's material looks odd: it's not metal; it can't be. It doesn't throw the light back. Even in the early morning predawn glow, it should still reflect something. I'm impressed Baby noticed it at all. She must have been on the lookout. We've only recently started seeing the ships and any break from the norm is a cause for excitement. I scan the ground to see if any creatures are on the prowl yet, but there are none.

I look back to the ship, which hovers in the distance, unmoving. If it is a spacecraft, why would They wait three years to reveal their mode of transportation? If it isn't a spaceship . . . But I don't even entertain the idea. I've never seen anything like them before. The ships had to have been brought by Them.

The craft lowers itself slowly in the distance. A few blocks away, maybe more. I map it in my head: Oz Park. It landed in the park.

I'm going to go have a look, I tell Baby. *You stay here.*

She shakes her head no and points at the sky.

It's not quite daybreak, but if I leave now I will be pushing it. I can get out to the park before sunup, but I doubt I'll be able to make it back home again. I will have to be very careful.

I run downstairs and put on my camouflage pants and hooded sweatshirt. They are from years ago and the pants no longer fit me properly, my ankles stick out the bottom. *Floods*, my dad would have joked. I bought them when army greens were in style and haven't been able to scavenge any that are better. Designers probably didn't take into account an imminent postapocalyptic scenario; they had no idea how useful these would be. With the creatures' poor eyesight, the camouflage pattern helps me blend into grass or shrubbery. But I've never tried it in daylight before.

I grab my pack, with the gun tucked inside. In three years I've never shot it, but I like having it close. I sometimes think about taking a few of Them out, lessening their population, but there are so many, it wouldn't do much good.

Before I run out the front door, I kiss Baby on the forehead. *Stay here,* I say with a look. The la

thing I need is to worry about her following me.

I jog barefoot to the park. I've been practicing running at home on the treadmill in the basement and have developed a way to breathe silently. My mouth gapes open strangely, but who is around to judge? I run through the streets, staying close to bushes and trees. Everything is overgrown now which provides plenty of places to hide from Them. The sidewalks are already beginning to crack with tree roots pushing upward toward the light of day, and the roads are filled with leaves and debris. I can feel the unevenness under my feet. It doesn't make much difference to me since my feet are so calloused at this point I can walk through the rubble of the After unfazed.

Oz Park used to be beautifully maintained. My parents, more often just my father, would take me here when I was little. I loved the swing set, which is now overturned and rusting away. Most of the grass has died, leaving pitiful weeds and sandy soil. I make my way through the park, careful to stick to covered areas, pausing under trees and along fences to survey the area.

When I reach the southwest corner, I sprint up the hill and flop down on my stomach. I crawl the last few feet through the uneven sand and try to get a better look.

The ship has already landed. It sits in the middle of an old baseball field, its blade continuing to swing around and around. There are no windows, no door. I scan the area, keeping my head low. None of Them in sight. But why? I listen carefully, my ears strain for even the smallest noise, but I hear nothing. The ship is soundless.

An opening suddenly appears in the side of the craft, more like a hole than a door. Three of Them stumble out, snarling. The gap closes and the ship takes flight, straight up into the air, silently, before vanishing.

I start to crawl back, but quickly realize that They are headed toward me. I pull my hood over my head and lie perfectly still, my hands tucked under my body. It's still dark out, but first light is coming fast.

Crap, I think as I hear them approach. They crest the hill and shuffle by me. I wait silently until they are out of sight and consider my options. Unfortunately I don't have many. I scramble to some nearby trees and climb one easily. Settling in, I guess I will be there for a while.

The sun is rising, but it looks like clouds are rolling in from the lake. I pray for a storm. They hate storms, especially loud ones with thunder and lightning. I can make it home easily in the rain. I remember being in the park on a similar day long ago. My mother had a rare moment for us and had asked me what I wanted to do. I insisted on a picnic, even though the weather was dreary. We wore our rain gear, yellow boots and plastic coats, and ate egg salad sandwiches in the rain. It's one of my favorite memories of my mother. I couldn't have been older than four or five.

I wait for the downpour and consider the ship. Clearly it's theirs, but I can't imagine one of Them flying it. Maybe there are different kinds of Them? It's possible that the ones I've seen are the mindless drones, sent to rid the planet of us pesky humans. Maybe there are smarter ones, ones that can build things like that ship. Ones who have plans. Perhaps the ones I've seen are only the first wave, sent ahead to destroy us.

The rain starts, but only a drizzle. The newly lit morning sky is starting to darken and I let my mind wander to my other experiences with Them, one in particular that made me truly understand that there was no going back to Before.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was before Baby, but not long before. Now, three years ago seems like a lifetime. Only a month into the After, I'd started searching houses, looking for signs of life. Most were simply empty, although some had a few bloody pieces of clothing in a bedroom or broken belongings scattered in a hallway. *This is where They had gotten the occupants*, I often thought.

It was well after dark, so though I was cautious, I was also confident. I used the sidewalk, instead of keeping to the shadows. I chose houses at random, tried the doors. Most were unlocked. A few were missing altogether, torn apart by Them. People left all kinds of useful things behind, food being the most important. I also liked looking through their books. As much as people loved e-books, there were always paper books around. You can tell a lot about people by the kind of books they owned.

I'd taken to pilfering to alleviate my boredom and keep sadness at bay. You could see just how far a family had gotten, how prepared they were. There were a lot of half-eaten lunches, a few packed suitcases. There were never any bodies, which I was glad for, but there were plenty of questionable stains, and a few odors that I'd rather not have walked nose-first into. At first I was afraid I'd run into Them, but you would never find Them in an empty house. They preferred to be in the open during the day, hunting, and at night . . . well, I didn't know where they went at night. There just weren't very many around when it was dark . . . unless you made a lot of noise.

I never pilfered houses directly around where I lived: somehow that would have been wrong. I knew those people. They weren't the faceless masses. They were neighbors, my parent's friends, and with associations would have come memories, which I didn't want. In those early days, before I hardened, my only chance for survival relied on maintaining tight control over my emotional life. Breakdown would have meant death, but sometimes a memory would open the gate a crack.

I found a promising house a few blocks from home, with no broken windows but an open door. I had hope that maybe the family that lived there made it out of the city before They showed up. Whoever stayed there had clearly tried to hurry, probably left at the first sign of trouble. I stepped inside, quickly helping myself to their canned goods. I searched the bedrooms for winter clothes, unsure if I would be able to use the heat in the winter. I'd been stockpiling blankets and coats.

One bedroom was painted all lavender and I assumed it belonged to a teenage girl. I went to the closet, hoping the clothes would be my size. On the floor next to the closet was a yearbook from my high school. I sat on the floor and thumbed through it. It was from the previous year, so my picture was in the freshman section. I paused over Sabrina's photo, feeling my throat catch at the sight of her smile. I remembered being so jealous that her picture came out better than mine. One of my tears hit the page and I quickly flipped to the front section, which had scrawled notes to *have a great summer and good luck in college*.

Trembling, I quietly closed the yearbook and set it back on the floor. Whoever owned it would not be in college now, and they certainly did not have a great summer. I wiped the tears from my face and composed myself, my stomach aching from the unexpected glimpse of what was.

I left there with my bag of cans and walked toward my house, exhausted and ready to call it quits for the night. That's when I saw a house with a light on in the basement. *A light? Someone's home?* I stopped, stunned. Someone else had a generator or solar panels. Someone else was alive.

I crept toward the window cautiously, painfully aware that light attracted Them. I looked around me; something was very odd. For some reason, I glanced up. Over the basement window, above

eight feet up, hung a refrigerator suspended from a cable. It was a trap. I smiled. A trap for Them.

~~I backed away slowly, not wanting to trip over whatever mechanism would spring the trap.~~ I searched my pack for a pen and ripped out a blank page from one of the books I'd taken.

My hands shook as I scribbled, *I'm alive too. I'll be back here at midnight tomorrow.* I looked at the paper and added, *Please.*

Elated, I placed the note under a rock just in reach of the light from the window. Whoever rigged the trap would see it when they came to check if they were successful. I figured I could return for a couple of nights.

When I came back the next night the trap was sprung, but the note was still there. Whoever set the trap had not yet returned. I placed my note closer to the fallen refrigerator, glad that the creature underneath was almost entirely covered. Its feet stuck out awkwardly and I thought of the Wicked Witch's sister from *The Wizard of Oz*. We're sure as hell not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

I had to suppress a laugh, but then the creature's leg twitched and I realized that its slaughter was recent. I backed away, cautious that others could be close by. I walked home, slightly disappointed but also hopeful, knowing I could return the next night.

For two days I waited, with no one in sight. I wondered if they kept track of time or owned a watch. I still wore my dad's old-school digital. More for the memory of him than anything else. I wanted to wear my mom's Cartier, but the ticking was too loud in the absolute quiet. Each night I began to doubt my plan. I wondered briefly what the person or people were like; what if they were avoiding me on purpose? What if they were unfriendly? The thought of being able to interact with another human being made me desperate.

On the third night, there was someone waiting, crouching in the bushes. I was used to watching for Them, so I spotted him at once.

"I can see you," I told him in the loudest whisper I dared. "Hello? Please come out."

He stood and looked me over. I couldn't see him well in the dark, but he was tall and his shaggy hair framed a face I couldn't quite make out. Backing away, he waved for me to follow. I almost couldn't believe that there was another human alive. I wanted to yell or hoot, but I swallowed my enthusiasm and tried to calm myself. Even so, I was shaking slightly as I trailed behind him to an apartment building a few blocks away. He unlocked the entrance door and motioned me inside.

We went up several flights. Some of the stairs creaked, making me uncomfortable. It wasn't long ago that I would never have dreamed of following a man to his apartment.

At the top floor, the man unlocked the door and went inside. I looked up and down the hall, hesitating for just a moment before going in after him. He shut and locked the door with a *click*. Then he flipped on a switch and I was startled by the sudden brightness. I looked to the windows but they were blacked out, keeping Them from spotting the glow. A gentle hum sounded from another room.

"You can talk. They won't hear us," he told me.

I looked at him clearly in the light. He wasn't young, but he wasn't old either, probably about my father's age. Fortyish. I wrinkled my nose. In his enclosed condo, I could smell him for the first time. It was likely he hadn't showered since Before. His shaggy, blond hair almost covered his eyes and a unkempt beard framed his face. I guessed he hadn't shaved since Before either.

"Who are you?" I asked. "I mean, what's your name?"

"Jake." He held out his hand and I shook it. His hand was firm, his skin rough. It was strange to touch another person.

"I'm Amy," I said, my voice unsure. He still hadn't released my hand, so I pulled it away awkwardly.

“Sorry.” He grinned. “I’m just surprised to see another live human around. It’s a shock.”

“How . . . You set that trap by yourself?” I asked.

“Construction worker by day.” He grinned again. “Drummer by night. Well, I was a drummer. There’s no band anymore.”

“There’s not anything anymore,” I said quietly.

“Whoa, negative Nancy.” He ran his fingers through his greasy hair. “We’re still here.”

I bit my lip, ashamed. I didn’t want to alienate my first human contact. “So, you were in a band. That’s fan.”

“Fan?” he asked.

“Fantastic . . . It’s what my friends and I used to say,” I explained. Sabrina and I started it as a joke, to make fun of the people at our school who insisted on talking in text-speak. Sabrina and I had whole conversations where we pretended to be bubbleheads and only used the first syllables of words. The rest of our friends got annoyed with us real fast, but subbing *fan* for *fantastic* stuck.

“Fan.” Jake tilted his head and stared at me. “I like that.”

“What kind of music did you play?” I asked, mostly because I didn’t know what else to say to him. I read in *Cosmo* once that you can put people at ease by asking them questions on topics that interest them. The problem was Jake seemed completely comfortable, I was the one who needed to chill. I had wanted to see someone for so long, but now it all felt so strange and unreal.

“Death metal,” he told me with a grin. “We used to make a ton of noise in here.” He motioned toward the walls. “That’s why we can talk; I had the place soundproofed. The neighbors were always bitching about the noise.”

I looked around, uncertain of what to say. Jake’s condo was nice. He had fancy furniture and paintings on the walls. One in particular caught my eye.

I gawked. “Is that . . .?”

“A Picasso,” Jake shrugged. “I know what you’re thinking, but it would have just sat abandoned at the Art Institute. Besides, we have to enjoy the finer things in life, otherwise what’s the point of surviving?”

“I suppose.” I was uneasy about it but wasn’t sure why it bothered me. Why not take priceless art . . . It was hardly stealing. There was no one else around to enjoy it.

“What about you, Amy?” he asked. “How did you survive? You look like you’re about twelve.”

“I’m fourteen,” I corrected him. I wanted to add that I read at a college level and was very mature for my age, but I didn’t. It would have sounded stupid, and what did that matter now?

“How have they not gotten you? They’ve gotten everyone else.”

“My parents,” I explained. “One was a hippie and one was paranoid.”

Jake frowned, not understanding.

“My mother put in an electric fence; my father made sure we had solar panels, a vegetable garden, and a rainwater basin. . . .”

“You have running water?” he interrupted me.

“Mostly . . . when it rains anyway. The filters work because of the solar panels.”

He stared at me. “Where do you live?” I felt my body tense. There was something in his tone that I didn’t like.

I looked at him, unsure of what to say. “Lakeview,” I answered vaguely. “But you have electricity too,” I quickly pointed out.

“A generator. It runs on gas . . . plenty of cars lying around to siphon fuel from. I also hooked up a couple in empty houses to attract those things.”

“Why?” I asked, truly curious. There were so many of Them, what would killing a few stray on do?—

“It makes me happy.” He scowled, looking anything but happy. “I feel like I’m actually doing something. Every night I go on my rounds, up to the lake and downtown and back. I check on the traps every third night.”

He stepped toward me and I backed away. I smiled awkwardly. Something about him had me on alert.

“I’m just heading to the fridge,” he told me, his hands up in the air. He opened the door and grabbed a couple of bottles. “Do you want a beer?”

“Uh . . .” Out of habit, I hesitated. “I don’t know. . . .”

“In case you haven’t noticed, society is in shambles. Our government has collapsed and we’ve been overrun by creatures from another planet. I don’t think the drinking age applies anymore,” he told me with a smirk.

He was right. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t drink. “Sure, I’ll have one,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed.

Jake returned from the kitchen and held out the bottle to me. I reached for the beer uneasily. As I stretched out my fingers the bottle slipped. The glass crashed to the floor and shattered, the noise startling me. I stared at the broken bottle, the beer fizzing in a puddle. It was unsettling not to be silent. Everything felt all wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I told him lamely. “Do you have a towel or something?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He took a swig of his beer and went to get me another one. Suddenly I was struck by an overwhelming urge to leave. “Actually, I should get back,” I said. “I wanted to do some more scavenging before dawn.”

“Oh. Okay.” His face fell. He looked at the floor, clearly disappointed. “But maybe I can see you again tomorrow,” he said, perking up slightly. “I mean, we have to stick together. There aren’t many of us left.”

“Have you seen others?” I asked excitedly. Somehow I just didn’t like the prospect of being stuck with Jake as my only human companion for the next fifty or so years.

“A few. There are even rumors that a whole town survived, though no one seems to know where it is.” He sipped his beer, unwilling to say more. Then he gave me a look that made my skin crawl. “You can stay here if you want. Or I can come to your place. I’d love to take a hot shower.” He beamed. “A hot shower would be fan.”

“Yeah, fan,” I agreed. Jake’s use of my friends’ slang sounded like when my dad tried to buddy up to me and said things like *cool* and *hip*.

“So, we can hang out at your place for a bit?” He was suddenly standing very close to me.

“Maybe.” I was careful not to commit to anything. “We can talk about it tomorrow.” I backed away toward the door.

“All right,” he said, though clearly it was anything but. “Should we meet up tomorrow at our spot at Midnight?” he asked. A shiver ran down my spine. His use of “our spot” freaked me out.

“Sure, sounds good,” I agreed, just wanting to leave. I reached for the door and struggled with the handle. Jake stood over me, making the muscles in my neck and jaw tense. He reached past me and undid the lock.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, and hurried down the stairs, out the door, and into the night.

My hands shook slightly and I felt queasy. I had such high hopes for our meeting. I thought he’d be younger, less creepy. I wanted us to click and become friends. But up there, in his apartment, all

wanted was to escape. I guess it takes a certain kind of person to survive an alien invasion; I was just lucky my parents were a little wacky. I had no guarantees with strangers.

A noise behind me snapped me out of my thoughts and I stood still. I quickly stepped into the bushes and hid. I expected one of Them to shuffle by, as they often did at night, unaware of things that were not directly in front of Them. Instead there was nothing.

It took me a few moments to realize it wasn't one of Them. It was Jake. He'd followed me. He wanted to know where I lived. He wanted to see my setup and decide if it was better than his. My heart thudded in my chest. And what if he did think mine was better? My house was secure. It had running water and electricity. What would he do when he saw all that? My mind was racing. He would try to take it.

I waited in the bushes for him to make a move. His progression was not loud, but I'd learned to listen for even the slightest sound. As he made his way closer, I froze, uncertain of what I should do: run or stay hidden. I didn't have long to decide.

Too late, I chose to bolt. I was still in the bushes when a hand grabbed my arm tightly. Jake pulled me roughly from my hiding spot. He took my backpack and slung it over his shoulder, holding my arm in a death grip. He hugged me to his chest.

"If you scream," he whispered, his hot breath in my ear, "the creatures will come and kill you." He shoved his arm under my shirt and squeezed. The pain made me exhale loudly.

"If you like that, just wait." He pulled my hair, yanking my head back with a jerk. Forcing his face to mine, he kissed me roughly. His teeth rammed into my lips, cutting painfully at the soft tissue. He pulled away slightly and I tasted blood, sharp and metallic against my tongue.

I reached my arm around and pulled the gun from its holster. I was grateful my clothes were baggy and Jake hadn't noticed I was carrying it earlier. I shoved the barrel in his stomach and unhooked the safety with a click.

"Back off," I said, careful to keep my voice low. I could hear the panic in my tone, and my hands were shaking. Jake took several steps back and stared.

"If you shoot that gun, every one of those things within four miles will be on you." He started to come toward me again. I quickly reached in my pocket and screwed the attachment onto the end. I'd practiced at home for speed.

"Silencer," I hissed, forcing a smug grin. I really just wanted to puke.

"You know, silencers aren't all that quiet. . . ." he whispered, though he didn't sound very convinced. He backed away, looking me up and down. He still held my backpack. "I'll see you around, honey." He winked at me before he turned and began to jog away.

Then I remembered the object in my pocket. Since that day with the creature in the store, I'd come up with a getaway plan. A way to distract Them if They had me cornered, something more complex than a can of corn. I pulled out the remote and stepped back into the bushes. I paused for only a second before hitting the button.

About half a block away, the siren sounded. I heard a few run by, not the mindless shuffle but the full gallop They developed when They thought humans were near. And then I heard Jake scream. There must have been a few closer. He would have been shocked at the noise. It would have taken him too long to realize it was coming from the bag. Even if he had tossed it in time, he could not have outrun Them. He wouldn't have had enough time to hide.

The screams continued and I put my hands over my ears. He'd be dead in less than a minute. I just wanted the noise to stop. The alarm was still going, but I figured They would tear that apart soon enough as well. I didn't want to do it, but I already had to worry about Them. I couldn't live

wondering if a psycho survivor was out to get me as well. I cried silently, hoping Jake was not the only other person alive on the planet. Did he lie about seeing other people? About the town survivors?

The creatures shuffled around for a while, satisfied with their meal. Exhausted, I waited for what seemed like hours, cold and miserable until the area cleared and I could walk back to my house. The first thing I did when I got home was rig another bag from the car alarms I'd scavenged.

I didn't know then that the awful exchange with Jake would be the last real conversation I would have for a very, very long time.

A clap of thunder brings me back to reality, away from the past. I scan again for any new ships, but the sky is empty except for dark gray clouds. The heavier rain will come soon. I'll be able to climb down the tree and return home before long.

I try not to think about Jake and what happened that night. But I had learned a few very important things about survival. I also learned where They go at night.

While I hid in the bushes all those years ago, I watched Them shuffle back from their kill. One by one, They lay on the ground and slinked down a rain gutter. I would not have thought it possible, but they are small and bend in incredible ways. Even their bones seem flexible. That's where They will be now, while the sky is darkening and the heavy downpour threatening to burst through the clouds. They will head underground to the sewers.

As soon as the drizzle turns into a torrent, I slide down the tree and jog home. Baby is happy to see me. She greets me with a towel and a change of clothes.

Did you see it? she signs, her quivering hands betraying her concern. *The ship?*

I nod.

Is it Them? she asks.

Yes.

Where did it come from?

I don't know, I say, no longer sure that I want to find out.

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