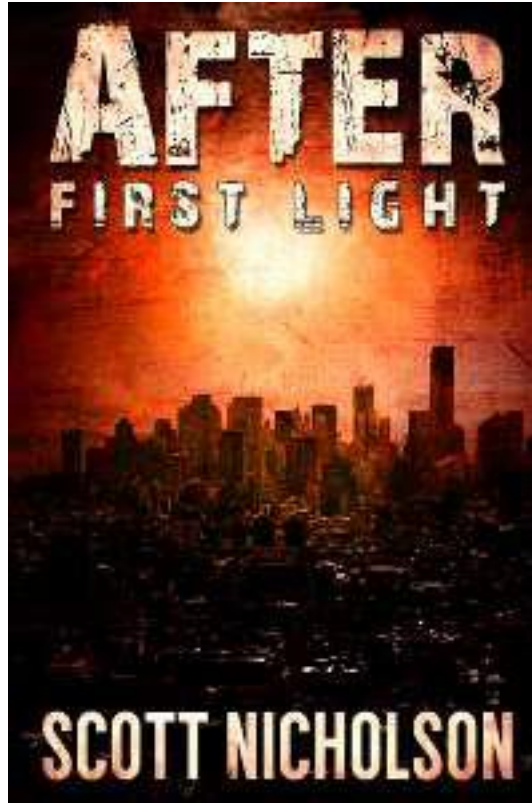


AFTER FIRST LIGHT



SCOTT NICHOLSON

A massive solar storm wipes out the technological infrastructure, and as the few survivors struggle to adapt, they discover some among them have...changed.



AFTER: FIRST LIGHT

By Scott Nicholson

Prequel to the AFTER series

Look for After: The Shock, After: The Echo, and After: Milepost 291.

After #4: Whiteout, coming soon.

Copyright ©2013 Scott Nicholson

[Haunted Computer Books](http://www.hauntedcomputerbooks.com)

Scott's newsletter for giveaways and free books: <http://eepurl.com/tOE89>

CHAPTER ONE

The sun looked like a cheese pizza that had been broiled in hell's hottest oven.

Dr. Daniel Chien frowned at the monitor, concerned less with the rippling cheese than the rising bubbles of red sauce. Each bubble erupted with a force equaling 100 billion megatons of TNT, spewing electromagnetic radiation across the solar system. Chien was intellectually aware that the pizza was really a massive star around which Earth and other planets revolved, but technology had reduced it to little more than a commercial-free reality-TV show.

Sir Isaac Newton nearly blinded himself staring at the sun, and I can do it from the comfort of my air-conditioned cubicle.

The images recorded by the Solar Dynamics Observatory were a marvel of modern technology. Not only was the space-based observatory performing a continuous, real-time monitoring of solar activity, it used an array of solar panels as its energy source. In turn, the data allowed Chien and other researchers to study the sun's electromagnetic fluctuations, solar wind, sunspot activity, and particle radiation.

The sublime beauty of the system had lured Chien from a faculty position at Johns Hopkins. Even as a boy in Vietnam, he'd been fascinated by the sun as the giver of life. The Earth's precarious position at just the right orbital distance counted as something miraculous, although Chien was careful to avoid debates over science and faith. To him, wonder was wonder and did not require further complications. Let the glory hounds like Newton clog the pages of scientific history while Chien and his fellow grunt workers added to the pool of knowledge bit by bit.

But his role as a researcher didn't diminish his appreciation of solar myth. After all, there was hardly a more apt metaphor for human hubris than Icarus flying too close to the sun and having his wings melt.

The sun, as Chien liked to tell his friends, was cool.

He still took childlike delight in the real-time images of the sun captured in a variety of spectra, available to the public via the NASA website. The array of sophisticated instruments measured multiple wavelengths and offered two dozen ways to observe and measure solar phenomena. The main image was the one now commanding his attention, and although he was fully aware of the sun's petulant temperament, he didn't like the erratic pulsations appearing on its surface.

Somebody's burning the pizza.

“Katherine?” he said, calling to the other on-duty researcher at the SDO’s offices in the Goddard Space Flight Center. Dr. Katherine Swain was several years his senior, a 20-year veteran of NASA, and a woman who held no romantic notions of the sun at all.

“Yes?” she said, in an annoyed tone, looking up from her laptop. She’d confided to Daniel that she was having “family problems,” and Daniel had projected a polite pretense of concern without pressing for details. Which meant avoiding her unless something important was happening.

“It looks like some irregular plasma activity.”

“We’re in an irregular phase,” she said, not clicking away from whatever she was working on. “The moon’s having its period.”

Much like a woman, or the moon, or any other natural object, the sun went through nearly predictable cycles of behavior. Solar cycles lasted about 11 years, and the study of radionuclides in Arctic ice had allowed researchers to map an accurate history of the sun across geological epochs. Although the cycles followed identifiable patterns, the general agreement was that the current cycle was among the most active on record.

“It’s not just *regularly* irregular,” he said. “It’s crazy.”

“Ah, here comes the big one?” Katherine teased. “Guess they should have listened to you, huh?”

As a member of a commission asked to assess the nation’s vulnerability to electromagnetic pulse attack, Chien had testified before an Armed Services subcommittee. He’d warned of the impact of massive solar flares, but his cataclysmic scenarios were pushed aside for what were considered the more-relevant dangers of low-flying nuclear missiles. The military couldn’t fight the sun, and neither could it procure billions of tax dollars by provoking the administration’s fear of the sun. Besides, terrorist threats were far sexier than probability modeling.

Last year, Chien had co-authored a report that painted a grim picture of infrastructure failure on the heels of a massive solar storm, calling it “the greatest environmental disaster in human history.” Since then, Katherine and the other SDO researchers had wryly called Chien “Dr. Doom.”

Chien had stood firm in his quiet way. Besides, it really wasn’t a matter of “if.” It was a matter of “when.”

But even Chien didn’t really expect “when” to be *now*.

“Look at AR1654,” Chien said.

Katherine’s keys clacked as she brought up an image on her laptop screen. “It’s only an M-1,” she said. “At worst, we could get a few radio blackouts in the polar regions. No biggie.”

“But AR1654 is aligning with the Earth. That means we will be right in the path of the plasma stream if a flare erupts.”

“And it will pass right over us. That’s why we have an atmosphere, so we’re not exposed to constant radiation. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be around to have this conversation.”

Katherine, apparently satisfied with her prognosis, resumed typing. Chien watched the image on the screen for another minute, as sauce leaked from the edge of the pizza’s crust and bulged out into space in huge, curling ribbons.

Maybe I’m no different than Newton, a sensationalistic glory hound. But he died a virgin, so I’ve got him beat there.

Chien went through the rote recording of data that occupied much of his duties, but his mind wandered to Summer Hanratty, the woman he’d been dating for the last six months. He couldn’t escape the irony of her first name, and its connotation with sunny weather had fueled their initial conversation at a colleague’s party. Maybe they were getting serious.

Heating up, huh? Well, even Dr. Doom needs a little comfort in the night.

Katherine’s clipped voice interrupted his reverie. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Chien had flipped away from the satellite imagery to tables of temperature, X-rays, and magnetic energy.

“Check the Magnetogram,” she said, referring to the telescopic image that mapped the magnetic energy along the sun’s surface.

Chien summoned the proper screen, which now showed the solar pizza as a mossy tennis ball pocked with violent orange and cobalt-blue acne. The area near AR1654 showed a brilliant plume erupting from the surface.

“It will loop,” Chien said, referring to the sun’s habit of bending much of its escaped energy back into the thermonuclear maw. As turbulent as the imagery made the sun appear, most of the activity took place deep inside, where hydrogen and helium burned away at astonishing temperatures. It took light 200,000 years to emerge from the center of the sun to the surface, and from there a mere eight minutes to reach the Earth.

Chien thought he would share that little factoid with Summer when he dropped by her apartment tonight. It was the kind of romantic *bon mot* that would wash down well with a glass of Chablis.

“Even with a loop, it will likely shoot some electrons our way,” Katherine said.

“Should we log a report?”

One of the center’s responsibilities was to warn of potential interference with satellites and telecommunications equipment, which helped justify the \$18 billion NASA budget. A caricature of a notoriously penurious

Republican senator was pinned to the bulletin board near the restrooms, bearing a handwritten admonition: “A phone call a day keeps the hatchets away.” Providing a practical public benefit was essential to the long-term survival of the center.

“The usual,” Katherine said. “Possible disruption of regular signal transmission but no need for extraordinary measures.”

“A little static on the cell phone,” Chien said. “A little snow for the TV viewers with a dish. No Doomsday on the radar.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.”

“I’m thrilled. An apocalypse would be terribly inconvenient. I’ve got a hot date tonight.”

Katherine managed a rueful smile. “Wish I could say the same. Take my advice and never get married.”

Chien didn’t want to tiptoe through those conversational landmines, so he shifted back to business. The bulging projectile of the solar flare clung to the sun’s surface like a drop of water on the lip of a leaky faucet. Usually, the flare would collapse again, the charged particles of helium and hydrogen reeled back by the intense gravity. But this one kept swelling, a ragged dragon’s breath of plasma leaping into space.

Chien flipped through the suite of instruments, observing the flare at different wavelengths. “Are you seeing this, Katherine?”

“Let me get this bulletin out first.”

“I’d hold off on it for a moment. We might be upgrading.”

“We can’t upgrade. This is M-1 already.”

Chien’s mouth went dry and his heart hammered. The solar flare’s footprint grew both on the surface and in its bulge in the heliosphere. “Looking like an X.”

“Daniel, that’s serious. It means rerouting high-altitude aircraft and damage to satellites. If we send out a red alert, we’d better be right.”

“The sun doesn’t care who’s right or wrong,” he said, watching the ragged hole on the sun’s surface widen further and the plume take an immense leap.

X-class solar flares dispensed radiation that could threaten airline passengers with exposure if they were not adequately shielded by the Earth’s atmosphere. Such flares were rarely recorded, but Chien was well aware that human measurement of such phenomena was but the blink of an eye against the ancient history of the sun. No doubt thousands—perhaps millions—of massive flares had swept across the Earth in ages past, scouring the planet with radiation and scrambling its geomagnetic fields. Chien was alternately excited and frightened that he might be witness to one of them.

But Katherine was right. Issuing an X-class bulletin would set a whole range of actions in motion, affecting the telecommunications industry, defense, and air transportation. Rerouting flights alone would cost millions of dollars, not to mention throwing off flight schedules that could disrupt international travel for weeks. Any shutdown of telecommunications and satellite service could quickly run costs into the billions as well. This was a panic button that, once pressed, could not be easily dismissed.

"You know what happens if we cry wolf," Katherine said.

As project director, Katherine would be the scapegoat for any political fallout, but Chien would likely be drummed out as well. Sure, he could always return to university life, where notoriety was little more than a mildly eccentric selling point on the tenure track. But he'd likely be done in the field of government-funded research, and there wasn't a whole lot of private-industry opportunity.

But facts were facts, and the numbers were screaming X all the way. "We can't close our eyes to this," he said.

"Okay, I will give a warning of 'possible disruption, monitoring closely,'" Katherine said. "That should keep us covered until we can crunch all the corn flakes."

She issued the alert to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Communications Commission, and the departments of Defense and Homeland Security. Katherine rated the threat a G3, a strong geomagnetic storm as measured on a scale of one to five. She logged the data and noted the time, saying to Chien, "Your shift is up. You better go play Romeo."

"No way," he said. "The solar cycle doesn't peak again for 11 years, and I'm not getting any younger."

"Your call. But take my word for it. When you get to be my age, you wish you'd had more dates with people and fewer dates with computers."

The solar plume on the screen had grown to epic proportions, so much so that Chien had to zoom out on the imagery just to fit it on the screen. Even for a trained scientist, it was difficult to equate what looked like a bit of Hollywood illusion with billions of tons of solar material hurtling toward the Earth at two million miles an hour. Even if the plume proved truly dangerous, the solar wind and its charged particles wouldn't reach Earth for at least a day, maybe two.

"Something's got me worried," Chien said. "The SDO has only been operating for four years, and in that time we've had no major solar storms."

"So?" Katherine had apparently already swallowed her own downplaying of the threat and accepted mild space disturbance as *fait accompli*.

“The SDO is itself a satellite. With a vicious enough solar wind, we’d lose uplinks and downlinks, as well as orientation. Worst-case scenario, we won’t be able to track the effect.”

“Well, let’s just pray it’s not a worst case, then,” Katherine said, with a wry smile. Religious references were rare in the space center.

Chien, a Taoist, was not amused, nor was he comforted.

CHAPTER TWO

“It’s a bird,” the girl, Madison, said.

“I see that,” Rachel Wheeler said. “It’s pretty. Why don’t we put it in the sky?”

Madison had snipped the misshapen bird from a sheet of black construction paper. It was part of a collage, a series of different shapes held in place with paste. The bottom was a strip of green paper and the sky was a strip of blue paper. There was a square for the house, and a block with wheels that represented Daddy’s truck. The forked brown tree was topped with a clump of green for leaves, and three scallop-edged dots of white were drifting clouds. The biggest object in the collage was a wobbly orange oval, a sun that projected brightness and cheer.

But Rachel’s main interest was the hidden interior of the house.

“Right here?” Madison said, setting the bird in the tree.

Tree. Perhaps she sees security there, maybe a nest.

“Wherever you want,” Rachel said.

“There,” Madison insisted.

“Okay, let’s put the paste on the back so it will stick.” Paste had not changed much from Rachel’s own grade-school days, and she helped Madison dab it on with big, greasy strokes using a wooden Popsicle stick.

Madison stamped the bird into place and frowned. “Maybe it should fly away.”

“How come?”

“So it won’t hear what’s happening in the house.”

“Would the bird be afraid?” Rachel kept her voice level, suppressing any eagerness. She was painfully aware of Do-Gooder Syndrome and those who wanted to help no matter the cost.

Madison shook her head, swishing fine blonde hair across her thin shoulders. “No, because the bird can fly away.”

“Do you sometimes wish you could fly?”

“Yeah, because Daddy won’t let me ride the school bus and then I could come to school.”

Madison had repeated the second grade because she’d missed twenty-seven days in the last school year. Despite the intervention of the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, Madison’s father didn’t feel compelled to follow the law. Her mother was serving three years in prison for the manufacture, sale, and delivery of methamphetamine. Because the county had little funding for child services, Madison would remain in her father’s custody unless he committed some unforgiveable atrocity on the order of molestation or murder. The “welfare state” was just one of the many oxymoronic catch phrases Rachel had encountered as a school counselor.

“What if we put a window on the house?” Rachel said, edging a little more deeply into her inquisition.

“Daddy says windows are for nosy people. Says you better keep the curtains closed.”

“But then you can’t see the sunshine. It’s dark all the time.”

Madison shrugged. “Not if you turn on the TV.”

Hard to argue with that one. Rachel glanced at the clock. It was almost two, and Madison was her last client of the day. She hated that word “client,” but “student” wasn’t exactly accurate, either, since she didn’t really teach. Rachel had finished her two-year Masters program and was currently conducting an internship at Greenwood Academy. The charter school was in a renovated warehouse on Charlotte’s rundown east side, a politically popular nod to school choice that had the ulterior motive of moving education costs from the tax coffers to parents.

Mrs. Federov, the dour and scrawny principal, had approved Rachel’s internship with the condition that no parents would be involved. Rachel was free to meet with students individually, but she wasn’t allowed to probe into anything besides school and peer subjects—as if home life had no role in academic performance and character education.

Rachel was under no illusions that she was here to save the world. She was here to save herself. Most notably from guilt over Chelsea, her little sister.

Madison wasn’t the only one who knew about loss.

“We don’t have TV at school,” Rachel said.

“We have a ’puter,” Madison said.

“Yes, we do have computers.” Rachel didn’t have an office, instead meeting with her clients in a supply room. That was handy for paper cut-outs, but not for technology. The media center had a bank of computers, but

the one in Mrs. Federov's office was the best in the school. Of course, it was Mrs. Federov's personal property.

Which made using it even more fun, because it was off limits.

Rachel checked the hall, closed the supply-room door, and opened the side door that led to Mrs. Federov's office. Mrs. Federov had a polished walnut desk that must have cost the nonprofit school association a thousand dollars. On it sat a MacBook, gleaming white like a futuristic relic. Madison pressed behind her, eager to enter.

"On one condition," Rachel said.

"Not to tell?"

The kid is sharp. But then, aren't they all, until grown-ups grind off all their edges? "I wouldn't want you to lie. If a grownup asks, always tell the truth."

Madison nodded, her brown eyes solemn. "What condition, then?"

"Can you tell me what's inside the house?"

Madison's brow furrowed as if she had already forgotten the collage. "House?"

"The one without a window."

"Oh. Is this one of those times when I have to tell the truth?"

"I won't tell anyone else. There's a difference between a lie and a secret. And this would be our secret. Just like the computer."

Madison looked longingly past Rachel to the computer. "Okay then. Daddy's asleep on the couch. Drinking beer. He has a gun."

A lovely combination. She could picture him, his shirt unbuttoned and hairy belly bulging, a platoon of empty bottles on the floor around the couch. The gun was a disturbing addition to the scene.

Great. Now I don't just have to worry about him showing up in the principal's office, I have to worry about him gunning down fifty innocent kids.

"Does he say anything about the gun?" she asked.

Madison shook her head. "Just said the gum...the gub...the *govement*...is not taking his."

Her father actually didn't sound all that much different than many other Charlotte residents. The South was a conservative stronghold, despite the liberal university communities in North Carolina. The Mecklenburg school board was having a serious debate over whether to allow teachers to carry concealed weapons. Rachel wondered how long it would be before bulletproof vests were a classroom requirement.

"Okay," Rachel said. "Let's play some Dora the Explorer."

When Rachel booted up the MacBook, it was already set to Mrs. Federov's Yahoo! page. Rachel had no interest in the woman's private habits, but she did notice an orange ball of fire in the news thumbnails. The accompanying teaser said, "Killer Solar Flare Heading for Earth?"

Rachel was well aware of Yahoo! and other news outlets using provocative headlines as click bait. She'd survived Y2K, collision-course asteroids, and the Mayan prophecies, accepting them all as hysteria. But she couldn't resist, not after her grandfather had drilled doomsday paranoia into her skull from an early age. She clicked on the article.

"What's that?" Madison said, pointing at the photograph that was credited to NASA.

Never lie to kids. "Scientists say the sun is giving off an awesome amount of energy that will reach the Earth by tomorrow."

"Will I get a sunburn?"

August was humid enough already, so that was a legitimate concern. "No, it's more like a type of invisible wave. Some people are worried that it will disrupt their phones, computers, and television."

"Does that mean we won't be able to play Dora the Explorer?"

"I'm sure it will be okay. People write these stories just to get our attention. If trouble was really on the way, don't you think they'd be trying to do something about it?"

That logic sounded silly even to Rachel's own ears. Pollution, global warming, gun violence, disease, and starvation were real and constant threats to human survival, yet no one seemed to be doing anything about *them*. Yet a bizarre menace straight out of a science-fiction movie drew eyeballs. She quickly scanned the rest of the article, slowing near the end to absorb a particularly sensational paragraph:

While unlikely, in extreme cases electromagnetic radiation from solar flares can damage electrical transformers, essentially shutting down the nation's power grid. An intense enough solar storm could also destroy circuitry in modern technological devices, including the electronic ignitions and other systems in motor vehicles and machinery. Most scientists agree that the Earth's atmosphere would shield the planet's surface from much of the electromagnetic effects. However, Dr. Daniel Chien of the Goddard Space Flight Center said, "We don't know the possible effects of a massive solar storm on our modern infrastructure simply because we haven't had one." Chien paused before adding, "Yet."

The article concluded with an aide to the president downplaying the threat but assuring the public that the situation would be closely monitored.

“Is the sun going to blow up?” Madison asked, as if it were just another video game.

“No, honey, it will come up tomorrow just like always.”

She booted up Dora the Explorer and let Madison start her usual fifteen minutes with the game. Then she went to the office door to keep an eye out for Mrs. Federov.

If the school board passed the concealed-carry requirement, Rachel was sure the leathery old bat would be the first in line to get a permit.

CHAPTER THREE

Franklin Wheeler stood on a small wooden platform he’d built in the crotch of a massive oak tree.

He’d built the platform two years before, one of the first additions to the compound he’d constructed on national park land in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In those days, he slept in a tent that was tucked under a rock ledge, surviving out of a backpack that contained a collapsible fishing rod, ready-to-eat military surplus meals, a few basic hand tools, a Coleman liquid fuel lantern, a first aid kit, and a water-purifying system. His Snow Leopard sleeping bag was rated to forty below zero, but the summer nights had been warm enough for him to sleep under open stars. That initial expedition led him to choose the isolated ridge as the perfect site for his compound.

From the platform twenty feet above the ridge line, he could see miles in the distance, the great Appalachian ridges rolling away like blue-green waves into the distance before leveling off across Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina. Although the haze of Ohio coal-burning plants often veiled the sky, on clear, cool nights the fuzzy lights of Charlotte were visible 150 miles to the southeast. Now, though, all he saw was the late-summer foliage, pocked here and there with great windows of speckled granite, and the tiny rooftops of distant homes burrowed in the slopes. A mile beneath him wound a ribbon of asphalt known on the maps as the Blue Ridge Parkway, a national scenic route, but which Franklin considered the tyrant’s racetrack for overland invasion.

Franklin scanned the road with his binoculars. The usual intermittent stream of tourist traffic passed below, Floridians and New Yorkers making their own type of invasion. But they were harmless next to the slumbering

beasts in D.C., Beijing, and Moscow. But all dragons appeared to be sleeping in the day's heat. The platform didn't quite afford a full panoramic view, but between his makeshift crow's nest and other lookout points on the ridge, Franklin figured his compound was secure for another day.

He climbed down the series of wooden slats nailed into the oak's trunk and checked the gate. After selecting this ridge for his compound, he'd spent a year hauling materials via the old logging roads that crisscrossed the mountain. In his younger days, he'd protested the U.S. Forest Service's granting of timber rights to private corporations, but now he was grateful for the limited access their abandoned roads provided. The transport had been a laborious process, often using an all-terrain vehicle, but he'd dragged enough chain-link fence and concrete mix up the mountain to enclose a two-thousand-square-foot perimeter among the trees.

The fence wouldn't deter a serious military assault, and a drone could sail right over it and blast him to hell and gone, but the government had lost interest in him since he'd dismantled the Freewheeler Movement. He'd gone through a few fringe groups over the decades, and his first underground newspaper had been typewritten manifestos mixed with pen-and-ink cartoons, Xeroxed for three cents a sheet and sold for a nickel.

The Internet had granted him a cheaper and broader platform, and he'd blogged prolifically as Freewheelin' Franklin, a nod to the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. But while the Freaks were all about sex, drugs, rock'n'roll and Down With the Establishment, Franklin Wheeler saw the darker strains of threats and conspiracies. Politics was a wrestling match where the audience—the voters—cheered while the goons in the ring—the middle management bureaucrats—beat each other with chairs while the real thugs—the wealthy elite—picked everyone's pocket from the skybox.

The 9/11 attacks had made every libertarian and patriot a target as D.C. seized the opportunity to roll the CIA, FBI, NCS, and the military into one big standing army called Homeland Security. As righteously offended as Franklin had been at the naked power grab and the militaristic streak that extended all the way down to school janitors and ambulance drivers, he was also wise enough to heed the shifting climate. The Freewheeler Movement was never a red-alert threat, since Franklin thought populist armed resistance was idiotic. What was the point of fighting for the right to bear semi-automatics when the government owned drones, tanks, and nuclear warheads? Franklin's interests had shifted from domestic problems to the larger reality that the world probably wouldn't last long enough for the Rise of Imaginary Hitler.

The dangerous and heavily armed cranks moved to Montana, Texas, and the Pacific Northwest, drawing all the attention with their recruiting pitches in *Soldier of Fortune*. Franklin's blog, on the other hand, became a Web destination for the discontent, bored, and deranged—an amalgam of losers that could never be forged into a real social force, much less a militia. The government soon tossed his *dossier* in the bottom cabinet with UFO enthusiasts and Bigfoot fanatics. As Franklin's visibility faded, he embraced it not as a failure but as an opportunity.

The opportunity was this mountain compound he called Wheelerville.

Population: one, with the mayor also serving as street sweeper, minstrel, and shoe-shine boy.

Franklin checked the vegetables in the garden, picking some turnips to feed the goats in the adjacent pen. He often let the goats browse in the wild, but today he didn't feel like hoofing it across the slopes to retrieve them at nightfall. Despite the ongoing crush of civilization and species extinction, the Blue Ridge was still home to predators like coyotes and bobcats.

And predators like the U.S. Army.

Franklin had heard the rumors of a secret installation for years. But even if it existed, Franklin took it as a good sign for his own security. The army was corrupt, but it wasn't dumb. The army was smart enough to pick a safe zone for any secret bases.

As the oldest mountain range in the world, the Appalachian terrain was stable and unlikely to suffer earthquakes. Likewise, a megatsunami caused by the Canary Island volcano shelf plopping into the sea would never reach this far inland. Hurricanes and tornados were broken up by the foothills, and the climate was relatively temperate for a deciduous rain forest. Indeed, the biggest threat was a prolonged blizzard, but Franklin had enough firewood and stored food to hold out for months if necessary.

His one-room cabin was built with an adjoining storage shed that featured a series of solar panels on top, oriented toward the southeast. He opened the shed and checked the battery banks that stored the converted energy. The batteries were also connected to a micro turbine that Franklin operated on the windiest days, and he also had a backup generator with a paddle wheel that exploited rushing creek water to generate power. Seeing that the bank of batteries was fully charged, Franklin disconnected the solar panels and closed the shed, which was lined with thin sheets of copper and aluminum. The metal shielding acted as a Faraday cage, protecting the batteries and equipment from electromagnetic radiation caused by a thermonuclear explosion. If Al-Qaeda detonated a dirty bomb in the atmosphere over D.C., the pulse would wipe out half the country's

infrastructure but Franklin could still work his radios and computer, which were also stored in Faraday cages when not in use.

Franklin entered his cabin, opening the windows to catch the afternoon breeze. He sat at his table and connected his shortwave radio, scanning the channels. After a burst of screeching static, he zeroed in on a familiar voice.

"Charlie One-Niner, come in," Franklin said into his desktop microphone. "It's your buddy, the Unknown Soldier."

"Soldier?" said the cracked and dusty-sounding male voice on the speaker. "What in the hell's going on down in the land of cotton?"

Franklin had adopted the radio handle to throw any federal snoopers off his scent, and on the air he pretended he was based in Alabama, where even his most paranoid ramblings would not seem out of place. Shortwave radio signals were virtually impossible to track, so Franklin used it to network with like-minded people around the world. It was also his sole social outlet if you didn't count the goats and chickens, and he tried not to count them too often.

"Probably about the same as up there in Canada," he replied. "Only with worse health care and no moose to shoot."

"We're in a record heat wave," Charlie said. "Bet it's breaking a hundred and ten down there."

Franklin glanced at the thermometer on his tiny weather station. Seventy-nine, with barometric pressure rising. Pretty seasonal for August in the mountains, although the humidity was thick enough to cut with a rusty knife. "Close," he lied. "But I'll live."

"And some of those idiots *still* say global warming is just a goddamned theory."

"If you backtrack on those assholes, you usually find a pipeline between their bank accounts and the oil and coal industries," Franklin said. One thing he liked about his faceless friends is that they dispensed with small talk like the weather and immediately started solving the world's problems.

If only we had an audience as big as Rush Limbaugh's and Howard Stern's, we'd save the human race whether they wanted it or not.

"Once you get your Alaskan pipeline built, maybe the U.S. will quit bombing the hell out of the Middle East."

"Yeah, but then we'd have to invade *you*, good buddy. Got to feed those defense contractors."

"Fine with me. Just don't make me drink that watered-down American beer. Budweiser. Christ, I'd rather drink moose piss."

"I'll put in a good word for you," Franklin said. "So what's happening with the ice caps? Still melting?"

“I’m pretty high up here in Ottawa, but I’ll bet Alabama goes underwater in five years,” Charlie said. “Maybe you’ll have some nice beachfront property.”

“It’s a liberal plot to do away with the Red States,” Franklin said. “Take away the Deep South and the Democrats will hold the White House for the next century.”

“You never did tell me what party you support.”

“Lemonade Party. I think you ought to run the government like a lemonade stand. Serve it up on the sidewalk, cold and sweet for a nickel a glass.”

“That’s just the heat getting to you.”

“Could be. Don’t take much to bring me to a boil these days.”

“Speaking of heat, did you hear about the big solar storm?”

Franklin had adopted a policy of “Ignorance is bliss,” focusing mostly on daily survival and maintaining a sustainable compound. While he owned a tablet computer with an ethernet card that allowed him to connect to the Web via satellite, he rarely prowled the Internet for news anymore, simply because he no longer trusted any sources. Even Charlie.

“No,” he said into his microphone. “I’ve been too busy picking cotton and stuffing it in my ears.”

“Scientists say it’s going to be one of the biggest on record. Supposed to shut down radio communications and TV and shit like that. Government’s putting out official warnings.”

“Does that mean I won’t be able to hear your angelic voice for a while?”

“Careful, Soldier, or I’m going to sing you a lullaby and it might start the cats to howling.”

“Well, from what I know of solar storms, they can blow the hell out of the electrical grid. Can’t imagine what they’d do in New York if the lights went out for a week.”

“Come on, Soldier. You know how fragile the whole system is. You blow out all those transformers and you can’t replace them all for years. Plus, you need power to manufacture the new ones. Sort of a Catch-22.”

“Don’t sound so excited about it, Charlie. I might start thinking you’re one of those Doomsday nut jobs.”

“Well, that’s worst-case scenario. But if it happens...”

A pause filled Franklin’s cabin, a high band of white noise coming from the speaker. Franklin eventually completed the thought. “Total shutdown. No gasoline pumps, no grocery stores, no air conditioning or heat, economic collapse.”

“Now you’re the one getting all excited. I swear, you’re starting to breathe heavy, like a teenage boy with his first *Penthouse*.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault everybody got dependent on a government run by foreign bankers. But I’ll be ready when it hits, whether it’s an asteroid, a pole shift, World War III, or a Martian invasion.”

“Assuming you live long enough.”

“I’ll be around as long as I need to be.” Franklin thought of his family. His wife Bitsy had died of breast cancer, and their daughter Laurel had disowned him after his political views attracted too much notoriety. She wanted to protect her two daughters from him and his twisted views, she said.

Well, Chelsea had been taken from them all, leaving only Rachel. And Rachel was his hope. They’d maintained an uneasy correspondence hidden from Laurel, but Franklin felt a desperate need to leave some sort of legacy. Rachel wasn’t exactly a convert, but at least she was kind enough to humor his occasional emails.

“Well, you better research the solar storm,” Charlie said. “Even though you can only trust half of what the mainstream media tells you.”

“They feed you just enough of the truth to keep you stupid.” Franklin was suddenly anxious to get off the radio. “but I’m on it.”

The evening seemed to have grown warmer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Maj. Arnold Alexander slid the NASA report into a manila folder. He was a fastidious man with a neatly clipped moustache, narrow-set eyes, and a heavy chin that gave him the aspect of a perpetual scowl. Which made it easier for him to disguise the scowl he was currently biting back.

“Worst-case scenario,” Henry Gutierrez was saying. The major thought the curly-haired man was far too fond of the word “scenario.” Gutierrez had used it at least five times since the meeting had begun.

“Doesn’t look like much of a scenario to me,” Alexander said. He secretly chafed at the power wielded by this little pencil-pusher. As chief of Homeland Security’s Office of Infrastructure Protection, Gutierrez had risen through the ranks on departmental politics, not experience or merit. But in the terrorism era, army officers like Alexander had to defer to bureaucrats like Gutierrez. The abstract goals and elusive enemies of the last decade of

U.S. warfare paled in comparison to the invisible threat the Department of Homeland Security was created to stop.

Alexander's people fought a war of flesh and blood, but Gutierrez fought a war of emotion. And that emotion was fear, the side that always won in the end.

Maj. Alexander was not only outranked, he was outnumbered in the compact Homeland Security boardroom. The third person at the conference table, Ellen Schlagal, was from the Office of Cyber Security and Communications. She had scarcely spoken after accepting a cup of black coffee, and she turned the cup before her in small circles, mostly staring into the drink's surface. When she did look up, her intense blue eyes swept both of the men's faces like an emergency beacon.

"We can educate the public about the problems, but of course that opens the door to opportunists," Gutierrez said.

"It's either that, or when somebody's cell phone goes out, they start blaming terrorists, and then we have a full-on panic," Alexander said.

"If we announce in advance that blackouts are coming, we might have a panic anyway. A stock market crash, ammunition stockpiling, food hoarding."

Alexander rubbed his moustache in annoyance. "Let's say that a terrorist group has a planned mission, more or less ready to roll. And they find out major cities might lose their electricity and communications. That would be the perfect time to swoop in and pull off an attack. Not only would they benefit from the chaos, the odds of getting caught—assuming they weren't packing suicide belts—go way down."

"That's still just a theoretical risk," Gutierrez said.

"But that's what your whole department is built on," Alexander said. "Something that might happen. *Might*."

Schlagal finally spoke. "I agree that NASA's data isn't convincing enough. Solar flares can knock out some satellite reception, but the worst we've ever experienced is short-term disruptions, usually measured in minutes and hours, not days."

"But the electrical grid is a little more fragile than the satcomm systems," Gutierrez said. "It's an interlinked system of more than 200,000 miles of transmission lines. It's like a spider web. If you knock part of it out, it's hard to sew back the missing threads."

"But you can just plug in parts and keep rolling," Alexander said. "Fill in the gaps later."

"Not so simple," Gutierrez said. "The grid likes to be balanced. Electricity isn't really stored. It is distributed and consumed as it's created."

Big outages can lead to cascading failures as power re-routes to other parts of the system, including back to the power plants. A series of surges blowing out everything along the way.”

Alexander wondered why he was the unlucky officer to field this problem, driving over from the Pentagon to battle the Capitol’s weekday traffic. He couldn’t even see this as a defense issue. Homeland Security had claimed its turf and had both the psychological and political pull with Congress. Any event on American soil short of a foreign invasion was not going to involve the armed services.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s say you do have some blackouts. Even a *lot* of them. I still don’t see the imminent threat.”

Schlagal cut in again. “The problem is there really isn’t a repository of transformers. Parts are made as needed. We’d be at least two years behind—”

The power went out.

Alexander waited for five seconds. Gutierrez was wearing a watch with an illuminated dial. Otherwise, the room was pitch black.

“Back-up generators will kick in any second now,” Alexander said. “But I have to admit, that was a pretty nice marketing ploy.”

The room remained dark. Now he could smell Schlagal’s perfume. Gutierrez breathed like a smoker. His watch dial flickered and moved across the table, rustling papers.

“Your HQ does have back-ups, right?” Alexander said, brushing his moustache again.

“Yes,” Gutierrez said. “But back-up generators are always hard-wired into a building’s electrical system. Any surge from an electromagnetic pulse is going to short out the generators as well.”

The lights blinked once and went dark for two full seconds, then came back on. “See?” Alexander said. “These solar flares aren’t going to be anything more than a temporary inconvenience.”

“These are the first waves,” Schlagal said. “NASA said the effects are unpredictable and of unknown duration. We could have a few weeks of brownouts or we could go down in one big zap.”

Alexander wasn’t an old-school officer. He’d come up with women in the ranks and had served in the Iraqi War with female officers. And Washington was changing, as well, with women seeking—and often gaining—top positions and Congressional seats. He didn’t figure Schlagal for a political gold digger, despite her inclination to blow this minor threat out of proportion.

"I don't have to tell you what even three days of a widespread power outage would do," Gutierrez said, rubbing his temples as if he had a headache. "Just picture your own routine. The food in your fridge would spoil. You might get lucky at the grocery store, but there's more likely to be a panic. Besides, the store's fridges would be out, too."

"A surge would affect vehicles, too," Schlagal said. Now they were coming at him like two tag-team wrestlers who had trapped an opponent out of reach of a tag. "Electronic ignitions and computers in cars. So you'd be walking to the store. Which, of course, means no delivery trucks would be showing up with veggies and milk."

"Christ," Alexander said. "Don't tell me the TSA is going to be involved, too. Those bastards don't need any more encouragement."

He wanted to be home, watching sports highlights and drinking a beer. His daughter Junie was in twelfth grade, and he'd been helping her with her physics. The subject had gotten much more complicated since he'd been in school. Maybe he could get some of the NASA folks over to give her some tutoring.

"I don't think you're taking this very seriously," Schlagal said, eyes narrowing so that the mascara on her lashes nearly merged into two black lines.

"Okay," Alexander said. "I could see a panic if people weren't prepared. And your average person won't be prepared even if you give them advance warning. Remember Hurricane Sandy? We might need some troops on standby if the National Guard and local police can't handle it."

"Not just grocery stores. Hospitals, police stations, and fire departments will lose not only their power but their ability to communicate. Not to mention all those planes. Do you know how many thousands of flights are in the air at any given time? And almost all those planes run on computers or have electronic components. One big pulse could knock them all out of the sky."

"You're making the problem so big that it's almost pointless to plan for it," Alexander said. "Like nuclear war. If it hits, you're doomed anyway."

"Sticking our heads in the sand won't help."

Gutierrez fell silent and pressed his palms against each side of his head. He squeezed his skull so hard that his fingers were white. His lip trembled.

"You okay, Mr. Gutierrez?" Alexander wondered why the administration let civilians make decisions about national security. They clearly couldn't handle pressure under fire.

"As you can understand, Major, we've been hopping all over Capitol Hill on this," Schlagal said. "It's a hot potato that no one wants to catch."

"I'm sure the Commander-in-Chief doesn't want it anywhere near his desk," Alexander said.

Gutierrez's face clenched, his cheeks crinkling around his grimace. "Don't...make this...about *politics*."

The major held up his hands, palms showing. "Hey, we all know who gets the credit on those rare occasions when things go right. And we're here when they need a fall guy. Like if this solar event becomes a real problem."

"It's not just a single event," Schlagal said. "It's a phase and a cycle. NASA says the worst is yet to come."

"Well, in one way, if it gets worse, things get simple. We impose martial law in the name of national security. The fringe militia and the liberals will grumble, but everyone else will welcome it if it makes them feel safer."

"I'm not so sure we can open the door for the administration to gain more power," Schlagal said. Gutierrez appeared to be having troubled breathing. Alexander wondered if the man suffered from asthma.

"Abraham Lincoln used executive powers to the extreme," Alexander said. "Nationalizing the banks, suspending the Fourth Amendment, and lying as a matter of policy. History remembers him as a compromiser, but he actually was a benevolent dictator. Of course, half the country would have argued about the 'benevolent' part."

"Half the country might be in the dark next week," Schlagal said.

As if to punctuate her statement, the lights flickered again. Alexander frowned and glanced at his laptop computer. Even though it had a battery back-up, the screen went blank. "Okay, then. I'll kick it up the chain of command."

Gutierrez stood, shoving his chair backward so hard that it tipped over. He clenched his fists and pounded them on the tabletop in time with each word he uttered. "There...is...no...*chain*."

The major didn't like the way the guy's dark eyes glittered, as if the wiring behind them had shorted. Maybe he had snapped from the stress. Not all that surprising for a civilian, but worrisome because other lives might depend upon his actions and decisions. Alexander needed to take control of the situation immediately.

"We need an update from NASA—"

Gutierrez interrupted by diving across the table, reaching for Alexander. Schlagal yipped in surprise. The major, instincts well honed by combat training, rose into a defensive stance. Gutierrez crawled across the slick maple surface, the knees of his nylon trousers struggling for traction.

"Henry?" Schlagal said.

"*Scenario!*" Gutierrez bleated.

Alexander didn't like the look in the man's eyes. At Fort Benning, Ga., he'd once been jumped by a private who'd screamed "Remember Pork Chop Hill!" over and over. It had taken three M.P.'s to drag the attacker away, but not before Alexander had thrown five or six hard punches to the man's head. The man didn't even seem to feel the blows. Later the private was booted from the Army for possession of narcotics before he could be court-martialed for assault on an officer.

Gutierrez now appeared to have that same mindless rage boiling inside him. He slapped Alexander's laptop to the floor and jumped off the table. Alexander was a good four inches taller, but Gutierrez still charged him, hands open like the claws of a crab, going for the major's throat.

Despite the sudden ferocity of the attack, Alexander kept his calm, ducking under the assault and slapping Gutierrez off-balance with a judo-inspired elbow. Helen Schlagal broke from her own shock and raced for the door. Gutierrez snarled like a rabid dog and jumped at Alexander again, this time actually snapping his teeth together with an audible *clack*.

The lights went out again and in the darkness, the major heard the door click open and Schlagal calling down the hall for help.

Where are those back-up generators?

Alexander didn't have time for the next thought, because Gutierrez slammed into him with the full force of his 180 pounds. Luckily most of it was stomach, the flab of a career civil servant. Alexander spun away from the blow and drove a fist toward where he guessed the man's nose was but struck him in the temple instead. Gutierrez grunted and collapsed in a heap.

When the lights flickered back on a minute later, Helen Schlagal returned to the room with two guards to find Alexander bent over Gutierrez's limp form, checking his jugular for a pulse. Alexander shook his head. They tried CPR until a medic arrived, but it was too late.

No one knew it at the time, but Gutierrez was Victim One in the tsunami of solar radiation rolling across the globe.

CHAPTER FIVE

The drive home had been nerve-wracking. The six-lanes seemed packed with road ragers, even by Charlotte standards. Rachel had found herself squinting through the windshield up at the bright sky above, but the sun seemed its usual angry late-summer self.

Finally home, Rachel made a cup of chamomile tea. She punched up some Death Cab for Cutie on her iPod and lodged an ear bud in one ear, then flopped on the couch with a paperback copy of a Stephen King thriller. The walls of her efficiency apartment were paper thin, and she could hear Fox News blasting from her neighbor's television set.

Rachel was about to plug in the second ear bud in an attempt to block out the bombast, but she heard the words "solar flare" and shut down her iPod. Moving to the wall, she cocked her head, feeling a little like a snoop but rationalizing her actions as scientific curiosity.

"Solar activity has been associated not only with localized power outages, but also a rise in aggressive behavior. Republican leaders in Washington have been calling on the president to address the situation, but so far the White House is mum. Let's go to Landry Wallace at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta for a special report on the behavioral changes. Landry?"

Wallace delivered a staccato rant that made little sense. Rachel had difficulty following it. She was too poor to afford cable, and she would never have voluntarily watched the news even if she were plugged into what her grandfather Franklin called "the Idiot Grid." However, at one point during Wallace's interview with a CDC official, she heard him refer to "Zapheads," the nickname given to those affected by the heightened solar activity.

Rachel decided to browse the Internet for more developments, but a knock interrupted her. Only one person would drop by without phoning first.

"Mira," Rachel said, welcoming her friend into the apartment.

"I smell chamomile." Mira was a tall, dark-haired Filipino whom Rachel had met in the complex's laundry room. They borrowed sweaters, earrings, and belts from one another to expand their wardrobes on the cheap, although Mira sported fashion far more elegantly than Rachel did.

"Want a cup? Only cost you a buck."

Mira pretended to dig in the pocket of her jeans and came up with an empty palm. "Put it on my tab."

Going to the little counter that comprised the kitchen, Rachel said, "Did you hear this crazy stuff about the solar storm?"

"Yeah. Sounds like some people are getting heat stroke or something. I saw the cops take down a skateboarder on the street outside. He was punching away while five of them wrestled him to the ground."

"What did he do wrong?"

"Some lady downstairs said he busted a plate glass window and attacked a mannequin."

“That’s weird. They don’t even have real mannequins anymore, except those real creepy ones in Old Navy. Most of them don’t even have heads.”

“Zapheads,” Mira said. “That’s what they are calling them. It’s like some kind of psychological condition. A stress thing.”

“Cool. If it keeps up, maybe the state will boost funding for counselors.”

“Nah. Cops are cheaper.”

They settled onto the couch with their tea. Rachel glanced at her iPod. The screen was blank.

Weird. I left the music running.

She picked it up and tapped the glass screen. Nothing happened.

“What, you got a text?” Mira asked. “A hot date?”

“Like there could be any other kind of date in this weather.”

“When you get a job, you can move into a place with air conditioning.”

Mira motioned at the box fan perched in the room’s lone window, above Rachel’s bed. “Or marry a guy from Alaska.”

Rachel frowned at the iPod and put it back down on the coffee table. She hoped it wasn’t broken. Her mother had given it to her as a graduation present. “I’m not really marriage material.”

“You’ve just got to find the right man. Or right *woman*.”

“You know I only believe in Biblical marriage.”

“Which one is that? King David’s first, where you trade the foreskins of 200 Philistines for a bride, or his other seventeen marriages?”

“Don’t get literal on me.”

Mira shrugged. “I’m not the one worried about my eternal soul.”

Mira’s father had been a steward for a cruise line, diligently saving money so his family could afford to live in the United States. Having been an American for most of her twenty-four years, she had eagerly adopted the country’s lax morality, although Rachel had educated her in the more conservative ways of the Bible Belt. The playful tension over their respective spiritual beliefs had proven to be a centerpiece of their relationship.

“Well, Judgment Day may come sooner than you think,” Rachel said, although she had never gleaned much sensible prophecy from the Book of Revelation. In some chapters, the sun went black, and in others, it fell into the sea. Her grandfather believed most of the Bible’s prophecies were written by schizophrenics. “In a complex problem, the simplest answer is usually the right one,” he’d once said to her.

“You know what they say about doomsayers,” Mira fired back. “Even if they turn out to be right, they’re still assholes.”

“You’re starting to sound like my grandfather.”

“Who must be a truly fascinating wacko, from what you’ve told me.”

“You’re only insane until the majority comes to see your point of view,” Rachel said. “Maybe we can go visit him in the mountains. If we can find him.”

“Bet it’s nice and cool up there right now while we’re baking away here in the city.”

All Rachel knew of his location was his cryptic references to “Milepost 291” on the Blue Ridge Parkway. In typical Franklin Wheeler fashion, he’d made her promise to commit the name to memory and never tell another soul. Given the persecution and harassment he’d faced for his loudly libertarian beliefs, she understood his paranoia and his desire to slip off the grid and away from the spotlight.

Mira pulled her cell from her blouse pocket. “Dang.”

“What is it?”

“Stevie was supposed to call.”

“Getting stood up again?”

“We’re just hanging out, not dating.”

“What does that mean? Sex without having to say you’re sorry?”

Mira ignored the jab. “No bars,” she said, tapping her phone.

“That’s weird. There are towers all over the place. You have to drive half a day to find a dead spot.”

“Maybe it’s that solar thing. I’ve still got power, just no signal.”

“I read that communications might be interrupted,” Rachel said. “Also supposed to have some static on the radio and TV.”

“Well, ain’t nobody got time for that.”

“The worst is supposed to be over by tomorrow. Something about the sun rotating away from the earth so the solar flares spew out to the far side of the solar system.”

Mira finished her tea and carried the cup to the tiny sink. “Well, you just enjoy the sunset alone. I’m going to track down Stevie.”

CHAPTER SIX

Officer Harlan McLeod had only been on the force for nine weeks.

As a rookie, he got the crap shift, midnight to six. That wasn’t so bad, since Taylorsville was a sleepy town in the foothills of North Carolina and the worst crimes he’d handled were a cemetery vandalism and a few domestic disputes. In all cases, alcohol was involved.

The big excitement of the evening was that two of the department's cruisers wouldn't start, so both he and Stefano in Unit Seven had to switch from their usual cars. The city's maintenance staff couldn't figure out the cause, although it appeared electronic in nature. He'd hit the street thirty minutes late, but it had taken only an hour for boredom to set in.

Now, as he cruised the four-block Main Street and the courthouse square, he wondered how long he'd be able to take this gig before he applied for a big-city post. He wasn't all that romantic about police work, taking his two-year basic law-enforcement training because he didn't want to go to college or enter the military. Sure, this was the era of "Unsung heroes," where everyone with a uniform commanded respect whether that respect was earned or not. But Harlan was more interested in a job than a career, and he figured as long as he veered well away from politics and registered as an independent, he'd log plenty of paychecks.

The moon was faint and fuzzy, and beyond the pale streetlights, a strange greenish glow licked at the clouds like a series of veins. The department had received a bulletin warning of possible radio interference. Something to do with the sun, Maurice from Communications had said. Harlan didn't know what to make of that. Why should the sun be causing trouble in the middle of the night?

Harlan decided to test out the radio. He said into the handset, "Unit Twelve here, I'm ten-twenty on Main Street. Routine patrol."

A little static cut in before the response. "Ten-four."

Routine.

Harlan debated pulling into the service dock behind the courthouse and catching some shut-eye. He'd squeezed off a few catnaps on previous shifts and had mastered the art of sleeping lightly. He'd even learned how to prop his laptop on his steering wheel so that it would look like he was working. But he was too bored to sleep.

His luck was in. A hunched-over figure scurried down a side street. Nothing good ever came from being out at 3 a.m., and Harlan couldn't resist tailing the guy for a block or so. If the guy fled upon realizing he was being followed by a cop car, well, that counted as probable cause.

The cruiser's lights swept over the figure, pinning his silhouette against the whitewashed brick of a furniture store. Harlan wondered if he should call in the pursuit, realizing he'd mentally elevated the person to a "suspect." But he didn't want to be ribbed if the suspect was just some guy whose car broke down after his wife booted him out of the house. The chief wasn't a ball-breaker, but he definitely believed in rank and pecking order. Harlan hadn't been around long enough to be making his own interpretations of the law.

He gunned his engine a little, causing the headlights to brighten. The figure neither accelerated nor turned, just lurched on ahead with an unsteady gait.

Looks like public drunkenness at a minimum. Might be carrying, too. A drug bust would get me in good with the chief.

Of course, the suspect could be packing a concealed weapon as well. This was America, after all.

Harlan punched the accelerator and closed the fifty yards in seconds, the engine's roar reverberating off the concrete, glass, and asphalt of the downtown. That got no rise out of the lurching man, and Harlan screeched to a halt and threw the gear lever into PARK. He got out, leaving the car running.

The man maintained his unsteady pace. He wore a red hoodie, the sleeves cut unevenly just below the biceps. His jeans were halfway off his ass, showing gray underwear with a black waistband. Something flashed at the man's side, and Harlan realized it was a watch. Suspect was white. Like they all were in Taylorsville.

"Police," Harlan called, in the firm, commanding tone they'd taught him in Basic.

The suspect might have cocked an ear—maybe—but kept on down the block. Soon he'd be in the shadows at the back of the furniture store. Harlan debated hopping back in the cruiser for pursuit, but now it was getting personal.

"Halt!" Harlan said, his voice cracking just a little. Very unprofessional. This guy was getting to him in a big way.

Damn it, I'm the authority here. I'm in control of the situation.

He unbuttoned the strap on his hip holster, although he didn't touch the butt of his .38 Smith & Wesson. In Basic, he'd had one rule hammered into his crewcut skull: *Don't pull it unless you mean it.*

He wasn't sure if he meant it yet. He was annoyed, nervous, and frustrated. Not a good position for making snap decisions.

He should call it in now. Stefano, a good old Jersey Italian, was manning Unit Seven somewhere in the industrial park. The chief encouraged back-up on all but the most routine duties. "Cover your ass, or the gravedigger will cover it for you," the chief liked to say.

One of the suspect's legs buckled and he nearly fell. Definitely four sheets to the wind. Fortified wine, if Harlan had to guess—Mad Dog or Thunderbird. Harlan used the stumble to close on the suspect, feeling braver with the headlights making a big, bright stage of the street. He was close

enough to smell the man—old sweat, piss, and a strange, metallic stench like ozone during a thunderstorm.

“Stop where you are,” Harlan ordered.

The man finally turned. He was Caucasian, all right, sporting a '70's porn-star moustache with a toothpick jammed between his teeth. The toothpick wiggled, and Harlan realized the wooden sliver wasn't *between* the man's lips; it was protruding from the lower one, a greasy smear of blood marking the point of penetration.

“Keep your hands where I can see them,” Harlan ordered, although the man didn't seem to hear. The suspect stuck one pinkie beneath the hoodie to dig at his ear, and stuck the other in his jeans pocket. No way he had a gun in there, Harlan could tell that much, but he didn't like being ignored.

He drew his Smith & Wesson. “Freeze.”

Saying “Freeze” was awkward, the first time he'd ever felt like a cop on a television show. *I'll be eating donuts if this keeps up.*

But Hoodie didn't seem to care whether Harlan was playing tough. He glared at the officer—and something about his eyes was wrong. They had the wetness of a drunk's, and that puffiness around the lids, but instead of red spangles splotching the whites, familiar greenish veins streaked through them.

Like the sky. His eyes are like that weird stuff in the sky.

That sounded too much like hallucinogenic hippie hullabaloo. Harlan needed to nail down this situation fast, before it got any weirder. Or worse, before some helpful do-gooder citizen came along and witnessed whatever might happen next.

What happened next was the last thing that ever happened for Officer Harlan McLeod.

Hoodie clucked his tongue, making a chuckling, popping noise, and then charged Harlan. The assault was so sudden that Harlan instantly went for his holster. He'd forgotten he already had his revolver in his hand, and the confusion cost him a precious split-second. Before he could raise the weapon again, Hoodie was on him, clawing and snarling, his teeth clacking together near Harlan's face.

So much for all that training. The chief is going to be pissed.

Harlan stepped back but lost his balance, and that abetted Hoodie's momentum. They slapped against the asphalt, with the policeman bearing most of the weight. Something crunched in his lower back and his legs went numb. Harlan tried to raise the Smith & Wesson, but it suddenly seemed to weigh thirty pounds. Then Hoodie's teeth found his cheek and cleaved a wet strip of meat from his skull.

Harlan bleated an unprofessional squeal as Hoodie hammered and scratched at his body. The pain was bad, but the worst part was those eyes—like rarified lightning, glittering with profane fire.

On his back, he rolled his gaze up toward his forehead, looking at the twin headlights of his cruiser. Ghostly rims of haze circled the orbs, droplets of late-summer mist. Somehow it cast a calming presence over the horrible tableau. Like this was only a show.

Then something went for his throat—the impact simultaneously blunt and piercing—and the light washed over Harlan and vacuumed him into its endless blank brilliance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shits and Giggles.

Those were the nicknames Franklin had given to the idiots on the AM radio talk show. They were what the blabber set called “rising stars,” loudmouths who sought to become even more provocative than Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Alex Jones and his circus-like Infowars network.

Shits was a hawkish Republican from the Midwest who fought for small government, the Holy Bible, and his personal interpretation of the Constitution upon which America was stolen from the natives and bequeathed to rich white men. Giggles was a small-L libertarian who thought John Locke was a liberal and that any public service, including federal disaster aid and orphanages, amounted to totalitarianism disguised as socialism.

In general, Franklin could relate to any debate which started on the fringe right of the spectrum and went off the cliff from there. But he was particularly intrigued today—and neglecting his garden—because Shits and Giggles were talking about the solar flares and their potential impacts. It was difficult to tell whether they were wildly misinformed or just issuing whatever propaganda the Establishment had pushed their way. For all the brazen defiance of the Establishment, talking heads always understood that advertisers were still their corporate overlords.

“It won’t hurt anything,” Shits was saying. “All this speculation is designed to stir fear on Wall Street and send stocks into a tailspin.”

“And that’s a good thing for the wealthy elite who own this country,” Giggles replied, right on the end of the statement as if their *schtick* had been

rehearsed. “Because they already cashed out during the last government-subsidized bubble and are waiting for another crash to buy low.”

Franklin sneered at people who simplified the shell game to a matter of dollars and cents. Just like political noise, the financial markets were diversionary tactics to hide the true consolidation of power. The New World Order was just waiting for the right opportunity, and a worldwide natural disaster would fit the bill nicely.

“Let’s look at infrastructure,” Shits said. “The U.S. has conducted tests that say satellite communications are the weakest link and most vulnerable to solar radiation.”

“Who cares if you lose your cell signal for an hour? The real problem will be when people can’t start their cars.”

Shits was on that one, jumping from subject to subject with an unrestrained glee. The topic didn’t matter—he was an expert on them all. “Only the most recent cars will be affected. Government tests—”

“Did you look at that test? They borrowed cars and had to bring them back undamaged, so they limited the electromagnetic pulse exposure. Talk about foregone conclusions. Now, the Russians back in 1962 had vehicles totally shut down during their tests, and that was before the advent of all this technology.”

“Count on the Rooskies to go balls to the wall. They probably had human guinea pigs sitting behind the wheel, too.”

“Some folks say the older vehicles will still work, but what happens when you run out of gas? What happens if the pumps don’t work and the refineries shut down? Not to mention the gridlock on the highways.”

Franklin had read all sorts of research on the pulse effect, and some scientists suggested a car in a concrete garage would be unaffected. But unless the entire vehicle was in a huge Faraday cage, isolated from any conductivity, then it was a goner. He suspected only the military would plan for such extremes.

But try telling that to a scientist. They looked at facts instead of the truth.

Giggles was on a roll now. “These media reports we’re getting—people going crazy and attacking other people in some sort of mindless rage—I think it’s all part of the program. First they scare you, and then you willingly give up a bunch of rights. Then when you’ve given up enough rights, it’s easy to take away the rest.”

“We lost a police officer in North Carolina, two sailors on leave in Norfolk, a pediatric nurse in Texas, and there are rumors of other unconfirmed deaths. God bless their souls.”

“Mindless rage. Antisocial behavior. Total chaos. Are we talking about Zapheads or are we talking about Congress?” Giggles snickered at his weak joke.

“The Administration is invisible on this issue. That’s what happens when you vote liberals into office. Right now we need some strong leadership—”

“Right now we need folks to take care of themselves and not sit around waiting for government to solve their problems,” Giggles interrupted.

Sounds good to me. Franklin reached for his battery-powered radio but the signal went dead before he touched the dial. He thought the batteries might have drained, but the steady hiss of unfilled bandwidth poured from the speaker.

Maybe the Prophecy According to Shits and Giggles was correct and the End Times were finally here. Franklin rose from his chair, crossed the little cabin’s dark interior, and gazed out the doorway onto his little compound. The sunset was a purple scar along the crown of the mountains, and Franklin wondered if the sun was busy dealing its silent destruction as a new part of the world turned to face the heat.

“Rachel, if you’re out there, remember what I told you,” he whispered to the forest. “You’re the only one with sense enough to listen.”

He descended the rough wooden steps into his compound and headed to the chicken coop. Predators were always afoot here in the wilderness, and Franklin maintained a defensive mindset.

We can make it through the night, but what happens when the new day arrives?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Daniel Chien arrived early for work.

So early that it might as well have been considered working late.

He’d been tempted to just sleep on the couch in the Space Center lobby, since he’d only left the observatory three hours earlier and had barely slept a wink. Summer Hanratty had found him much too obsessed for human company, especially the kind of company she wanted, so she told him to give her a call when he returned to Planet Earth.

Once problems began popping up, the Administration had asked for on-the-hour reports, and Katherine Swain had ridden the console whenever Chien took a brief reprieve. Katherine had become just as hollow-eyed as

Chien, because they both knew this level of solar activity had never been recorded.

Or even theorized.

Things were heating up. The magnetic field lines from the solar flares had behaved in unexpected ways, splitting and reconnecting in random patterns while the intensity of the coronal mass ejections increased. The center had lost contact with the SDO, as Chien had predicted, and they were essentially working in the dark, relying on ground-level measurements of the solar activity instead of direct readings from outer space. Despite linking an emergency network of radiotelescopes around the world, the data had become spotty. Not only was communication on the blink, but some countries were already experiencing widespread power outages.

The popular press had begun digging into the story, gaining gleeful interest when the concept of “Zapheads” arose. Chien wasn’t sure if solar radiation and gamma rays could affect the electromagnetic impulses of the human brain, but the storm had long entered uncharted territory. If the wiring melted or the signals got crossed, no scientist on earth could predict the effects. Prophets had just as much legitimacy in such realms.

Katherine had reluctantly raised the threat level to Class X. The Administration was sending some FEMA and Homeland Security officials down later today, and Chien had a feeling science would quickly fall slave to politics, just as it had done throughout the course of human history.

As Chien punched his access code into the security keypad, he glanced around the dark parking lot. Half a dozen vehicles were in the lot at 5 a.m., twice the usual number. And yet the August surroundings looked much the same, the maples a brilliant green under the security lights, frogs and crickets wailing around the decorative pond in the landscaped entryway. But Chien could feel something in the air, a charging of the atmosphere, subtle like the coming of a storm.

Dr. Doom was right, huh, Katherine?

He entered the lobby, which was much dimmer than usual, and Chien realized the emergency lighting was on. Not a good sign.

An even worse sign was slumped over the reception desk. Even in the poor light, Chien recognized Tamberlyn, the night security guard. His cap had fallen to the floor and one hand hung limply over the edge of the desk. Chien called his name, getting no response, and hurried across the tiles, his footfalls sounding much too loud in the glass-enclosed lobby. Tamberlyn’s face was pressed into a magazine, the pages splotted with his drool. Chien touched the man’s wrist to feel for a pulse, but the skin was already cool.

Chien picked up the desk phone, but it was dead. He glanced over Tamberlyn's body, seeing no sign of a struggle. It was unlikely that someone would rob the SDO lab, because the equipment was of such a specialized nature that it would be difficult to pawn, and astronomy wasn't exactly a cash business. Even the data had little commercial value, because most of it was publicly available.

Katherine!

Chien hurried down the hallway, bypassing the elevators. He hit the stairwell, which was pitch dark except for the ambient glow of a few emergency lights. He stumbled going up, cursing as his kneecap knocked against concrete. Then he was on the second floor and approaching the SDO lab.

The door was open. The lab was usually brightly lit, with lots of monitors, blinking lights, various digital meters, and personal computers. But only a few specks of light were visible, like fireflies against a midnight forest.

"Katherine?" he whispered.

Something moved to his left, followed by the squeak of chair rollers. He turned, and a sudden blur hit him in the chest, knocking the wind from his lungs and his glasses from his nose. He smelled Katherine's perfume—a sensible discount brand with a French name he couldn't recall—and beneath it an electric sweaty odor, like a June bug caught in a zapper.

He shouted her name, then called her "Dr. Swain," hoping to induce some glimmer of professional memory. He pushed at her, and then began punching, as her talon-like hands raked over his face. Her nails cut a searing line of agony across his forehead.

She's going for my eyes!

He landed a fist against the side of her body, incongruously aware of the bulge of her breasts against him as she forced him to the floor. Katherine Swain wasn't a large woman, but somehow she seemed to have embodied all the power of gravity. A suppressed chortle vibrated behind her ribs like some kind of wind-up toy. She reared up, giving him a chance to buck her off, but her face froze him into immobility.

The firefly glints he had seen were not the remnants of the mechanical world he so loved. They were organic, an obscene inflection in her eyes. He could only stare and exhale as she clasped both her hands together into one fat fist and drove the flesh hammer down onto his throat.

He spat out an *urk* as his larynx was crushed.

Sucking for breath, he glanced wildly about the room, looking for a way out. But this time, science wouldn't be his salvation.

Dr. Doom was right.

CHAPTER NINE

Campbell Grimes thumbed the controls to reload his shotgun, descending a stalled escalator onto the subway platform.

A zombie jumped from behind a pillar, decked out in gray coveralls like a maintenance worker. Campbell barely had time to blow the monster's head off before two more jumped from the shadows.

He fired—*ka-blam blam*—eliciting two explosive gouts of animated blood, followed by a scream and an inhuman cry deep in the subterranean cavern beneath the city. Left 4 Dead was one of the most popular video games ever, and despite playing it religiously for the last three years, Campbell was nowhere close to being tired of it. He liked his cooperative protagonists in the game better than most of his friends in the real world—at least he could always count on them to have his back. Campbell had little doubt he would be sitting in an old folks' home one day and fighting through the same zombie hoards that magically never seemed to age or diminish.

But old age wasn't on the radar yet. At 25, he was still far from growing up, much less old.

"Come on, come on," he shouted at the screen. He flipped the controls to send his character onto the subway train, running between the empty benches with his shotgun leveled before him. Sensing a lull in the attack, he *clacked* another shell into his gun.

A demonic howl arose from the car ahead. He raised the barrel and braced for more slaughter—and the screen went black.

"The hell?" He clicked the game buttons for another ten seconds before realizing the system had lost power as well as the monitor.

Looking around the cluttered living room of his Chapel Hill apartment, he wondered if Roy had forgotten to pay the power bill again. Roy was the kind of roommate who always had twenty bucks for a couple of twelve-packs, but never seemed to have a hundred bucks for any purpose. The idea of skipping the beer for a few days in order to pay the power bill would never cross Roy's mind.

Campbell wasn't exactly Mr. Responsible himself, but he had a little pride. He worked as a delivery boy at Papa John's Pizza to make ends meet,

fooling himself that one day he would get a real career. But what was the point of honesty? Where had that ever gotten anyone?

It wasn't just the television and Xbox that had lost power. The little orange lights on the kitchen appliances were dead, too. Enough morning sunlight leaked between the curtains to glint off the crushed beer cans on the coffee table.

"Roy?" he yelled.

They each had private bedrooms in the old house that had been carved into apartments by an aspiring slumlord. It was twenty blocks from the University of North Carolina campus, which moved it from the rent zone of "rear entry with an ungreased jackhammer" to the slightly more palatable "full frontal assault." Which was good, since Campbell had graduated two years ago and didn't need proximity. Roy, on the other hand, was in the seventh year of his B.S. in Communications program. The problem was that Roy's communication skills were even worse than Campbell's, who talked more to virtual friends than the real people in his life.

He called Roy's name once more, then stood, banging his shin against the coffee table. He inched across the carpet, sliding on his socks so he wouldn't bump into any other obstacles. The static electricity caused little blue sparks to dance around his toes. If Roy had been sitting there stoned, he would have offered a "Cool, dude," his catch-all observation for anything that wasn't "Lame, dude." That communications degree was really going to take him places.

"Roy, you got anybody in there?" he called through the door. Sometimes he slept with Marta, the Mexican girl whose age might have put Roy on the wrong side of statutory rape charges, but she dropped by only once a week. Campbell kept his nose out of such things unless Marta happened to have a "friend" who "was down for partying." Which was every three months if Campbell was lucky. Not that he cared that much. Women were complicated; Left 4 Dead made linear sense.

"Roy! Did you pay the power bill?"

After pounding hard three times and getting no answer, Campbell tried the door. If Roy was gone from the apartment, he locked the door because he was dealing nickel bags of weed on the side. Not that Roy didn't trust Campbell. Paranoia just came with the territory.

The handle turned, which meant Roy was snoozing through a hangover. Pete pushed the door open, bulldozing a pile of dirty clothes. The room smelled of old socks, cheap aftershave, the rusting metal of Roy's weightlifting set, and a permanent booze/pot smell that blended into one tarry and potent smog.

Campbell felt along the wall—widescreen TV, lift bench, dresser piled with bottles—until he reached the window. He wracked the curtains wide so that the sun streamed onto Roy's bed.

There, asshole, I hope that drives fishhooks into the backs of your eyeballs and yanks them out.

Roy didn't move. His face was turned toward Campbell, mouth hanging open, the tongue lolling in there like a fat, pink grub. Campbell kicked the bed. "Wakey wakey."

Roy quivered but didn't awaken. This time Campbell wedged one bare foot on his roommate's thigh and shoved. Roy rolled partway over, not even muttering his annoyance. Campbell leaned in and studied Roy's pale face.

Don't look so hot. Like he's been shooting heroin or something.

Campbell leaned closer. A new kind of foul stench came from Roy's mouth. But it wasn't bad breath, because Roy wasn't breathing.

Damn damn damn.

He pressed a finger to Roy's neck like they did in the movies. He wasn't sure what a pulse would feel like, but it didn't matter, because he felt nothing.

Shit shit shit. He's dead.

Campbell retreated to the living room, eyes now adjusted to the gloom. He fished his cell from his pocket. But should he call an ambulance? What about the drugs? Would Campbell get in trouble? Sure, he could blame everything on Roy, but a police search of the place would be a big hassle.

In the end, he decided to make the call. Except his phone didn't power up. It had been fully charged an hour ago, when his manager called to remind Campbell about his shift.

No power, no phone. What the hell is going down?

Campbell opened the apartment door. A man was sprawled on the sidewalk outside, huddled like a lump of clothes. A red Jeep wheeled wildly through the parking lot of the complex, shearing the bumpers of three vehicles before plowing into a Ford truck. The Jeep's driver crashed headfirst through the windshield, hanging there like a trophy deer mounted on a red plate. Screams rang out from the surrounding streets.

All hell was breaking loose, and Campbell did the only thing he could think of under the circumstances.

He stepped back, slammed the apartment door, and locked it.

And wondered how long it would take for the power to come back on, and how long before Roy started to stink for real.

CHAPTER TEN

Rachel heard the screams as she clawed her way out of sleep.

As usual, she'd been underwater in her restless dreams, probing the murky depths for something she could never find.

Something banged against her apartment wall, and she thought the neighbors might be having one of their cozy little spats. But the screams were muffled and distant, coming from somewhere outside the apartment complex.

And there were several, a chorus line of wailing, shrieking, and bellowing. A grinding metallic crash, punctuated with broken glass, brought her fully awake. Somewhere down the street, a car horn blared incessantly and then gave way to an abrupt silence that was much too deep for a weekday dawn in Charlotte.

Rachel rolled into a robe and rose to the window, assuming an auto accident. She had to remove the box fan to get a good look. The street was a mess. Cars were jumbled in a chaotic array, with traffic completely stalled. A city transit bus had slewed to a stop in the intersection. Two service vans had collided, one of them spilling bundles of blue towels from its cargo bay. Steam rose from beneath the hood of a Toyota sedan, and the driver's arm dangled from the window. The hand was deathly still.

That's when Rachel realized the only movement on the street was a woman in business suit running awkwardly between the stranded vehicles, one high-heel missing, hair trailing out behind her in tangles.

No, there were others.

Chasing the woman.

The nearest was a man in a khaki uniform shirt with a cloth insignia on the shoulder, like some sort of delivery driver. He slapped against the side of the bus as if not seeing it and staggered for a moment before continuing after the screeching woman. As if drawn by her cries, a man in a scuffed leather jacket dodged between vehicles toward her. His pursuit was blocked by two cars that had collided bumper to bumper, and he scrambled over the hood of an Audi sedan, sending bits of broken glass winking to the street. They were both gaining on the woman, who was too frantic to remove her lone high heel. She hobble-clopped toward the storefront of an electronics repair shop, where an old woman was collapsed against the door.

Then Rachel noticed the other bodies...at least four that she could see at a glance. She recognized a pink cardigan sweater she'd loaned to Mira, and then recognized the long dark hair splayed out around her head where Mira lay prone on the sidewalk near a bus stop.

Call 9-1-1.

Rachel reached for her cell phone on the nightstand, although surely the police already knew about an incident this big. But the phone was dead.

Her grandfather had tried to teach her about firearms, but she had resisted, refusing to buy into the violence of the world. Now she wished she had a weapon. But she didn't know whom to shoot. Or why.

Rachel shoved the screen out of the window and yelled at the panicked woman, hoping to draw the attention of her attackers. But while the woman turned and looked up, the two men plunged ahead, closing the distance. They were on her in an instant and began tearing at her clothes and hair.

A rape, in broad daylight?

But that didn't square with the carnage below, or the dead bodies. This was big. Way big.

And she remembered the stories about solar flares. She squinted at the rim of flaming orange that burned like a promise across the city skyline.

Rachel didn't yet realize it, but she was witnessing the glimmer of a new dawn, a world where death claimed its throne and the few survivors could hardly count themselves as lucky. Because the survivors would be alive and nothing more, while others among them—those who'd been sparked into a cataclysmic upheaval of evolution—would be *more* than alive.

This was the first light of After.

Someone pounded on the door.

Scott Nicholson is the international bestselling author of more than 20 thrillers, including *The Home*, *Disintegration*, *Liquid Fear*, and *Speed Dating with the Dead*. His books have appeared in the Kindle Top 100 more than a dozen times in five different countries. Visit his website at AuthorScottNicholson.com. Sign up for the Tao of Boo newsletter for contests, giveaways, and book news: <http://eepurl.com/tOE89>.

Look for the other books in the After post-apocalyptic series: After #1: The Shock, After #2: The Echo, After #3: Milepost 291, and After #4, Whiteout. If you enjoy them, please write a review so other readers can find the books.

AFTER: THE SHOCK
Book 1 in the post-apocalyptic series
By Scott Nicholson

A massive solar storm wipes out the earth's technological infrastructure and kills billions. As the survivors struggle to adapt, they discover some among them have...change. The first book in the After series.

Learn more about it at [Haunted Computer](#).

CHAPTER ONE

There were three of them.

She'd stopped naming them a week ago. It had been an amusing distraction for a while—and the Good Lord only knew, she needed distractions—but then they'd all started blending together, the Black-Eyed Susans, the Raisinheads and the Meat Throats.

Now, though, Rachel Wheeler couldn't resist looking through the grimy drugstore window as she waited, crouched in the litter of baby powder and cellophane.

Stumpy.

The one on the right, sitting on the sidewalk bench surrounded by a mountain of bulging plastic bags, was missing his left arm just below the elbow. The wound was swathed in a filthy towel strapped in place with duct tape, stained dark brown at its blunt end.

Stumpy was waiting for a bus that would never come. Rachel couldn't tell if he was a Zaphead. He might just be another of the schizophrenic homeless, one of the underclass that hadn't even noticed that the world had ended. Although gaunt, he didn't appear particularly motivated to kill, obsessed instead with swatting away the flies that swirled around his stump.

He was fifty feet away, and she could outrun him easy. All she had to do was run as if her life depended on it. It wouldn't be much of a challenge because her life had depended on it for days.

A hundred yards down the street, The Beard, the guy staggering back and forth, was almost certainly a Zaphead. His expression was hidden by the unkempt hair, but he was hunched and his fists were clenched, rage curling around whatever strange energy burned inside of him.

Okay, Beard, you've solved my little dilemma of whether I should head south or head north.

The mountains were her destination, and they lay to the northwest, but she wasn't willing to risk The Beard.

The word "destination" sounded odd in her thoughts, because of the root "destiny." Such abstractions were laughable now, but laughter was the only weapon against the fear that sapped the strength from her legs. And she needed her legs.

Oh, yes, Lord, give me stumps for hands, but please don't mess with my legs.

In this scary new world, in this After, you had to run, dragging your guilt and fear and all the dark weight of Before.

Even if she'd wanted to head south, where not even hope was an option, Chain Guy had other ideas. He was moving through the smoky haze between a Volvo sedan catty-cornered in the intersection and an abandoned police car, its doors flung open like the wings of a spastic, grounded bird as it perched with two wheels on the curb.

Chain Guy was dressed in a torn leather jacket, despite the late-August heat—and in Charlotte, the August heat grabbed your throat and scrubbed you with salt water—and he carried a knapsack. Clearly, he was one of the higher-functioning lunatics. The chain in his right hand trailed out on the asphalt behind him, its faint *clink* the sole soundtrack to a scene that had once featured rush-hour traffic.

She ducked lower in the drugstore window, clutching her backpack more closely. The pack was bulging, and she'd needed the dried foods she'd collected, but now, the comfort items felt more like indulgences that would slow her down and maybe get her killed.

Really, toilet paper and tampons, Ray-Ray? Why not grab some hemorrhoid cream and Viagra while you're at it? You can't beat these prices, so you might as well stock up.

She wondered if she should wait it out, to see whether The Beard and Chain Guy squared off. Maybe while they were busy, she could slip out and head down a perpendicular street. It was likely that one or two Zapheads would be on the prowl, but she didn't want to stay there until dark. The store's front door was smashed in, and other scavengers might show up for this unbeatable, once-in-a-lifetime, going-out-of-business sale.

The sun was still high, but barely visible through the smoke that curled from the downtown high rises. She suspected a bonfire was raging in the football stadium, too—the wind carried the stench of charred meat.

Chain Guy wrapped loops of his weapon around his forearm until he had a four-foot length. He swung it back and forth, gradually picking up momentum until he was whipping the chain in a circle over his head. He was still about forty yards from The Beard, who still paced back and forth, apparently oblivious to the coming storm.

As the chain *whirred* like a slow helicopter blade, a dog bounded out from behind the police cruiser, snarling and yapping. He was a German shepherd—lean, dark and hungry. The dog made a beeline for Chain Guy, evidently smelling something he didn't like. But the dog must have sensed the reach of the chain, because he halted and lowered himself onto his forelegs, haunches reared as if poised to attack.

Get 'em, boy, Rachel silently cheered, thinking the distraction would give her an opening. She squeezed the straps of her pack, testing the weight and calculating how much it would hinder her speed.

The dog's lips peeled back as he growled. Chain Guy's expression didn't change. He spun the chain faster, almost daring the dog as he headed for The Beard. The shepherd danced forward a few feet and snapped, but Chain Guy kept walking, not breaking stride. The dog apparently didn't like being challenged, so he made a run for Chain Guy's ankles.

The chain lashed out of its orbit and descended with stunning speed, the blow so sudden that Rachel wasn't even sure she'd seen it. Then came the *thwack* as metal hit meat, the chain flaying the dog's rib cage. It emitted one garbled yelp of pain and collapsed. Chain Guy still wore that blank, businesslike expression as he brought the chain around for another blow. This one took out a leg and the shepherd crawled away like a broken spider.

The sickening attack reminded Rachel they weren't playing "Ring Around the Rosie" here. It was dog eat dog. And, they definitely weren't playing. If it came down to it, she'd rather Chain Guy eat the dog than eat her.

If Chain Guy looked to his left, he might have glimpsed her hiding behind the shards of glass in the storefront. Her curiosity was slightly more compelling than her fear, and every bit of information might mean the difference between survival and its opposite. She wasn't sure what the "opposite" was, but it was worse than death.

Chain Guy maintained his pace, but he let the chain slow again above his head. Stumpy hadn't moved from his bench, and The Beard still seemed intent on whatever crack in the asphalt had consumed his entire attention for the past minute.

Or Jesus. Jesus in the oil stain, the rainbow warrior, the light of wisdom.

Rachel bit her lip to keep from giggling. *Don't lose it. Only crazy people lose it, and you know what happens to crazy people.*

Something tumbled from the shelves behind her, near the prescription counter.

She hadn't checked the aisles after seeing the corpse of a child, although the place had seemed dead. But "dead" had a new meaning now.

She tensed, but didn't bolt, because the real threat of Chain Guy outweighed the imaginary threat spawned by a jar falling to the carpet. The Zapheads weren't known for subtlety, so there was zero chance of one of them creeping up on her. No, a Zaphead would roll forward like a Cadillac out of hell, fueled by the frenzy zapping and hissing in its brain.

Chain Guy was busy bearing down on The Beard, so she crawled to the left a few feet and peered around a display of Hallmark cards. A hand stretched out on the floor beside the prescription counter, the fingers twitching.

Could be a Zapper in the last throes of internal combustion.

The hand curled once, twice, and then she recognized it as a beckoning motion. A Zaphead wouldn't beckon. It would go for what it wanted, not lure you closer.

Somebody—a human—was down. And here came the litmus test of After: Did the old codes still apply? Did she still have to love her neighbor? Did she have to treat everyone as a child of God?

Maybe God wouldn't notice just this once. Maybe she could just sit right here near the door and then make a run for it, gasping prayers.

Better to ask for forgiveness than for permission, right?

However, forgiveness probably wasn't a question one wanted to ask of God. Not now, in the After. Rachel tried to look away, she really did, but the hand made another beckoning motion. It looked frail, the fingers knotty and thin. It was not the kind of hand that would wrap around your throat and drag you screaming into the darkness.

Outside, the chain clanked against the asphalt, as if Chain Guy was working out the kinks and getting ready for business.

The hand gave one final gesture, this time just the index finger, motioning *Closer, closer, closer* with an intensity that only silence could fully project.

Still, she resisted the impulse to help, the love-thy-neighbor credo that had been drummed into her from childhood, sitting bedside with her cancer-stricken mother, volunteering at the Humane Society, joining the Wellspring Fellowship's Happy Helpers, and taking counseling classes at UNC-

Charlotte. Little Ray-Ray had been on track for a golden-rule life of selfless service. In the Before.

However, she'd been sidetracked.

She wasn't even sure there was a track anymore, because the train had jumped off into a dark, directionless territory.

Rachel looked away from the hand and eyed the door. She could probably get twenty yards down the sidewalk before Chain Guy broke his fixation and noticed her, and maybe that would buy her enough of a jump on him. Her legs were young and limber and strong, built by a cycling addiction. She could outrun him.

Probably.

"Huhhh..."

The wheeze came from behind the prescription counter. She jerked around her neck, and the hand now balled into a fist, as if tapping some last reserve of energy. The whisper came again, weak and broken.

"Huhhh...help..."

Goddamn you, God.

She checked on Chain Guy, still closing in on The Beard, who swayed in obsessed circles. Stumpy sat on the bench as if waiting to feed pigeons. It was just another busy weekday in downtown Charlotte.

Just another day in After.

"Help." The voice of the hand's owner gained volume, and she hissed a "Shhh" in response as she crawled down the aisle. The last thing she needed was for Zapheads to show up, pissed off that they hadn't been invited to the party.

She'd long ago—well, *days* ago, but it had seemed like years—decided that it was selfish to pray for survival and deliverance, but it was righteous to pray for the strength to help others. She'd also promised to live for Chelsea, to spend all the years that had been taken from her little sister—taken by Rachel.

But she couldn't think of that now, or she would become paralyzed, accepting her fate. *Deserving* death. Deserving it because each breath was a selfish act in a world where she had destroyed something beautiful.

As Rachel drew closer, a rank, sour odor assailed her. She'd smelled her share of corpses, with their heavy, sweet fecundity—decay had become so pervasive in After that only a truly sharp odor had a chance of piercing it. Whatever lay behind the counter had achieved that rare status.

The arm pulled itself into the gap and she crawled faster, chafing her knees even through the blue jeans she wore. Her backpack was off-balance, banging against her right hip, and she had to navigate an obstacle course of

stuffed animals, jars of nutritional supplements, soft drinks, and other artifacts of a lost culture.

It was darker back here, removed from the sunlight, but not so dark that she had to dig out her flashlight. She wasn't sure she wanted a clear look, anyway, because the sour odor suggested something had turned inside-out.

"Help," the man's voice said again, and she answered, "Okay."

God, I'm trusting you here, and if you're leading me to a horrible, painful death, I swear I'll never speak to you again.

Then she reached the counter and felt concealed enough to rise into a crouch and duck-walk the final ten feet around the counter. The man was curled on his side in a fetal position, wearing a white coat that suggested he'd been the pharmacist on duty at some point, back when duty mattered and pulled a weekly paycheck. Resembling a lighter-skinned Gandhi, he was bald and old and wore rounded glasses with wire frames. A pool of vomit explained the stink, and the flies had already migrated from the child's corpse to check out this new taste sensation.

"You're...one of us," he said.

"Yeah," she said, wishing she could summon that caregiver confidence expounded upon in her counseling textbooks. "Are you hurt?"

He gave a pained smile, and a wet fleck of vomit appeared in the corner of his mouth. "I hurt just fine, thanks."

"Let me help you."

She reached to check the pulse in his neck, but he shook his head. "No, don't save me. For the sake of...all that is holy...let me die."

Great. So he wants me to play Dr. Kevorkian here. Too bad.

She touched his neck, and he didn't resist. His carotid pulse was a weak flutter. It was a wonder that he even had enough strength left to speak.

"Don't save me." His face curdled with an emotion somewhere between anger and defiance.

"Why did you ask for help, then?"

He rolled his eyes down to his other hand, the one that was curled into a fist around something. "I wasn't *asking* for help. I was *offering* it."

His reply startled her. He didn't look like he was in a position to help anything but the maggots. His breathing grew shallower.

"How many are outside?" he asked.

"Two or three," she said. "I'm not sure about one of them."

He opened his hand, which held an orange prescription vial. "Nembutal," he said. "The easy way out."

So, *he* was the one playing Dr. Kevorkian. She'd seen Nembutal in the animal shelter, where it was used to end the suffering of sick pets. He let the

vial roll from his hand and he gave it a weak nudge along the floor, toward her.

“Antiemetics, too,” he said.

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Don’t want to vomit it out before it has a chance to work.” His words were slurring now. “I should take the old sawbones advice...of ‘Heal thyself’ ...to heart, huh?”

She wondered how many of them he’d swallowed. Probably far more than enough, if he knew his trade, and he had the look of experience. In a matter of such importance, he’d be dead certain about the dosage levels.

“I’m not ready to die,” she said.

“None of us were,” he wheezed. His eyelids fluttered.

She checked his pulse again, and she could barely detect the blood making its last sluggish rounds through his circulatory system. At any second, he’d fall unconscious, and then his brain would begin the slow process of turning off the lights until the party was over.

“Do you...want me to pray with you?” she said. She didn’t want to ask if he was saved, because that seemed too judgmental for this most personal of moments.

“I’m...good,” he said. He nudged the vial toward her. “Here. My final request.”

His hand bore a wedding ring, and she wondered about his wife. Had he “helped” her escape from After? Had he guided her into the next great uncertainty? Maybe he’d even tricked her, grinding the pills into powder and spiking her sweet iced tea.

Take it. May as well let him die feeling helpful.

“Thank you.” She collected the vial and he grinned and closed his eyes. She slipped the vial into a side pouch of her backpack. A moist whistle came from his throat, and then he grew quiet.

Outside, in the street, Chain Guy bellowed in that inhuman manner that meant he was about to indulge in his Number One Priority, following his purpose, as did all beings under God’s high heaven. Even Zapheads.

She sat with the suicidal pharmacist for another minute until his pulse stopped, and then crawled back to the front of the store.

Learn more about After: The Shock at [Haunted Computer](#), order a personally signed paper copy, or buy it at your favorite online bookstore.

AFTER: THE ECHO
Book 2 in the post-apocalyptic series
By Scott Nicholson

Six weeks after a massive solar storm wipes out billions, a small group of survivors must face a future that may have no room for them. A group of mutants called “Zapheads” are evolving to replace humans at the top of the food chain.

CHAPTER ONE

The September sun burned the treetops in a kaleidoscope of gold, scarlet, and a purple so Doomsday deep that the forest appeared bruised in spots.

The air was clean, with much of the haze confined to the eastern horizon behind them, where Charlotte and Winston-Salem had burned to nothing. No one had informed the birds that the world had ended, so their songs and chirrups rang from the high branches. All in all, Rachel Wheeler considered it just another ordinary day in After.

If you don't think about the dead and the changed. And the next solar storm that could fry us all to madness.

Her legs were sore, but they'd grown stronger with the miles. DeVontay Jones, the dark-skinned man with the glass eye walking behind her, couldn't even keep pace. Or perhaps he was dawdling so that Stephen could explore like an ordinary boy, dashing to grab a flower here or poke a stick in a mud puddle there. Stephen kicked at the first of autumn's fallen leaves, taking joy in the loud scuffing sounds.

“How much further?” DeVontay asked Rachel.

“You're the one with the map.”

“I don't care about no numbers,” he said in his Philly accent, although its hard edge had softened in the six weeks since the solar flares had erased all borders. “I'm talking how much more of our lives we got to spend walking in the woods.”

“The rest of our lives,” Rachel said. With Stephen out of earshot, she could add, “Which may not be much longer.”

“Miss Optimistic,” DeVontay said with sarcasm. “Where's the little pep talk, the prayers, the faith?”

Rachel didn't want to confront faith. Somewhere along the way, the bodies and the carnage and the relentless horror had chewed a ragged hole

through the walls of her heart. Any light left inside had leaked out with all the sad inevitability of a ruptured balloon. Where faith had abandoned her, stubbornness had taken up the cross and pushed her toward the mountains.

Where hope had died, anger had stepped into battle formation.

"I still believe," she said and felt no shame at the lie. She simply believed in something different now.

Survival.

"Well, I believe we ought to sit down a minute," DeVontay said. "You might know where we are, but I wouldn't mind getting a look at the map."

"Don't you dare make a joke about women drivers," Rachel said.

"Wouldn't dream of it." He tried to wink, but the lid dropped only halfway down his glass eye, making the expression more of a creepy leer.

"Stephen!" Rachel called.

The boy had pranced off into the woods, breaking their rule that they should always stay in sight of one another. Not that Rachel was worried. Since leaving the farmhouse five days ago, they'd stuck to the forest roads, only occasionally intersecting a highway or coming across a house. They hadn't seen a Zaphead since then, although once in a while strange chuckling sounds had ridden the breeze from a distance.

"That boy doesn't listen too good," DeVontay said.

Rachel could tell he was uneasy, because he shrugged the shoulder strap of his rifle down his arm and into position for action. "We're safe out here," she said. "Nothing for Zapheads to hunt."

She shut out the memory of the Zapheads she'd encountered in Charlotte and how they had swarmed over any survivors, driven to destroy any breathing creature that crossed their paths. But the Zapheads—so named by clever bloggers in the early stages of the solar storms and then picked up by the mainstream media—had largely stuck to populated areas, which Rachel believed was due to their suppressed intelligence. Lacking any reason to migrate, they stayed where their brains had fried.

DeVontay, though, had a different theory: the meat was easier.

"Stephen!" Rachel called again. The highway ran a good hundred yards to their right, littered with cars and gas-bloated corpses. Stephen knew enough not to head in that direction.

"Guys!" Stephen called, somewhere past a wall of autumnal maples and sycamores. "I found something."

Rachel's ribs squeezed around her heart. She'd settled into the numb routine of foot travel, weary enough of discovery. She'd discovered the sun could unleash invisible hell upon the world, killing billions and changing others into mindless killers. She'd discovered she was among the few

survivors plunged into a world where the technological infrastructure built over decades had been erased. She'd discovered God wasn't nearly as benevolent and constant as she'd always believed.

And now she discovered that she didn't want to take another step. No more surprises, no more challenges to overcome. But she took the step anyway, and then the next.

And then she was running.

After finding the rifle back at the farmhouse, DeVontay had given her the pistol, and they had practiced with both weapons until she felt confident with them. She'd fought Zapheads at close range, and—in another unwanted discovery—found their blood was red, too, that for all their savagery, they were not much different than the human survivors.

Still, if anyone threatened her or Stephen, she was willing to spill their blood again and again and again.

The thought no longer horrified her. Anger was her last remaining source of motivation, the fire in her belly and the burning in her soul.

DeVontay's long strides moved him past Rachel, and he entered the clearing a good ten seconds before Rachel. When she saw him slow and lower his rifle, she knew there was no danger.

"Plane," Stephen said, and Rachel found herself involuntarily scanning the sky, but all she saw was an uneven layer of late-afternoon clouds.

The tops of the trees had been sheared off in a great line, branches twisted and skinned naked, white wood exposed to the sun. Fifty yards ahead, an airplane fuselage had gouged into the ground, a long furrow of reddish-brown soil marking the path of its crash landing. One wing was crumpled against the trunk of a massive oak, and the other was nowhere in sight, perhaps cartwheeled into the far pines.

The plane had a shattered propeller, so Rachel knew it wasn't a jet. It was a commuter plane that held thirty or forty people, what business travelers called "puddle jumpers." It had probably been airborne when the solar storms hit, knocking out power and radio contact. The pilot had wrestled the manual controls just skillfully enough to prevent a nose dive, but it was highly unlikely anyone could have survived the crash.

"Damn," DeVontay said.

"Maybe they were the lucky ones," Rachel said. Stephen hadn't registered any shock, more like a boyish wonder. Considering he'd nearly lost his mind after his mother died, Rachel took it as a good sign that he was almost normal.

As normal as anyone could be in After.

“Too bad we can’t fly it,” Stephen said. “Then we’d *really* get to Mi’ssippi.”

Rachel and DeVontay had nurtured the illusion that they’d eventually get Stephen to his father, who was almost certainly dead or worse. Rachel no longer felt the slightest guilt at the deception. Guilt was a luxury for the civilized.

“Wonder how many people were in planes when the Big Zap happened?” DeVontay said.

“The electromagnetic pulse would have knocked them out of the sky like a giant flyswatter,” she said. “Like they were talking about on the newscasts, back when all this was just a theory.”

“No parachutes,” DeVontay said. “But I guess if you think it’s going to crash, you don’t get on in the first place.”

“What a horrible way to die.”

Rachel had never had a fear of flying, but she’d never set foot on a gangway without thinking about the possibility of a crash. And she’d decided it wasn’t death she’d feared, it was the possibility of knowing you were going down and getting several minutes to appreciate the coming impact.

But isn’t that what is happening anyway, to all of us, all the time? We’re all headed for it. We just maintain plausible deniability. We know we’re dying, but just not today. We all want to go to heaven, but not right now. Rinse and repeat as needed.

Stephen continued toward the plane, transfixed as if it was the first time he’d seen one up close, or maybe just enjoying a boyish fascination with destruction. Rachel tugged at his shirt sleeve, but he shook free and moved closer. A small circle of scorched grass surrounded the rear of the plane, but the hull was relatively intact. Luggage lay scattered around the wreckage, one bag torn open to reveal a vivid red dress, another with the heads of golf clubs poking from one end.

Rachel saw no movement behind the rounded rectangular windows, and she didn’t want Stephen exposed to the stench of several dozen decomposing bodies. Even in the shade, the plane’s interior had probably topped a hundred degrees, roasting the bodies trapped inside.

“Wanna see,” Stephen said.

“Let DeVontay check it out first,” Rachel said.

DeVontay lowered his eyebrows, his glass eye glinting drily in the sunlight. “Gee, thanks.”

“Hey, you’re the man of the family,” she said.

They hadn't discussed their odd relationship, but they'd become a family in perhaps the truest sense of the word. Nothing the bible would recognize, certainly, but they'd faced tribulations together that even the Old Testament plagues couldn't rival. They were bound by mutual survival.

DeVontay headed toward the wreckage, rifle at the ready. Stephen started after him, but Rachel reached out and snagged his shirt, this time keeping a grip. "Not so fast, fearless scout."

DeVontay peered through one of the rounded port windows, then walked around to the front where the nose of the plane had torn loose from the body. Rachel knelt over a green suitcase that had busted open in the crash. A tag around the handle revealed the baggage had been through Atlanta. Rachel briefly considered the privacy of the suitcase's owner. Did she have the right to prowl in someone's personal history?

She glanced over at the plane. Beyond it, in the weeds, a sodden stretch of cloth ended in a twisted nub. At the end of the nub, a leather shoe pointed up at the treetops.

If that were me, I'd want someone to use whatever I could offer.

As she opened the case, Stephen joined her and dug into the clothes, books, and a little zippered bag of makeup. Stephen pulled out a pair of panties and his face curdled in disgust before he flung them away. "Yuck."

His reaction was so much that of an ordinary boy—a boy from Before—that Rachel almost smiled. But smiling seemed like sacrilege at this scene of such slaughter.

She found a long-sleeved blouse in a shade of subdued rose. She held it up over the grimy flannel shirt she'd been wearing since they'd left the farmhouse. It looked close to her size. "What do you think?" she asked Stephen.

He shrugged. "I guess it's pretty, if you like that kind of thing."

She wadded it up and tossed it back in the suitcase. "You're right. No use looking pretty these days."

Stephen picked up the blouse and held it out to her. His big brown eyes were wide and hopeful—like maybe it wouldn't be so bad to pretend things hadn't changed so much. "It's pretty. Like something my mom would wear."

This time she did smile. "Okay," she said, lifting one arm and giving an exaggerated sniff of her armpit. "Guess this one is getting a little stinky."

DeVontay emerged from the devastated fuselage, his rifle slung casually over his shoulder. "All clear," he said. "I think we got us a roof for the night."

A jolt of horror shot through Rachel. He didn't expect them to sleep among all those bodies, did he?

DeVontay pointed to the plane's nose, which was cracked like an egg and sheared upward. "Empty," he said.

Rachel started to repack the suitcase, and then realized how ridiculous her instinct was. She tucked the blouse under her arm. "Five-star accommodations?"

DeVontay glanced up at the sinking sun. "I don't like stars. Especially that one."

Stephen, apparently taking the adult cue that it was okay to prowl through the luggage, ran over to a satchel and unzipped it, throwing clothes and papers into the air. He fell silent and still, staring down into the mess.

Rachel and DeVontay shared a glance, and DeVontay frowned and shook his head. "Go on. Do your counselor thing."

"Aye-yay, Captain."

Rachel went over to Stephen and saw the baby doll nestled in the satchel's contents. Stephen had outgrown his attachment to his baby doll Miss Molly, leaving it with the corpse of a girl to comfort her on her journey to the beyond. But now the loss of his mother showed on his face, a mute, hollow kind of pain.

"Come on," she said, taking him by the shoulder and guiding him to the nose of the plane where they would camp for the night. She'd soon be gathering clothes to bundle into makeshift beds, and then starting a campfire to heat a few cans of Campbell's soup with crackers. DeVontay was busy clearing wreckage from the tilted nose of the plane.

They'd sleep surrounded by the dead.

Just another ordinary day in After.

As Rachel comforted Stephen, she didn't notice the movement in the surrounding forest, or the eyes that watched them settle in for the night.

Learn more about the After series at AuthorScottNicholson.com, order a personally signed paper copy, or buy it at your favorite online bookstore.

Bonus excerpt!

ZAPHEADS: THE BURNING SKY **(An After Novel)**

By Joshua Simcox & Scott Nicholson

Mackie swallowed a pair of Vicodin with a mouthful of warm Diet Coke and patted his waist for the comforting heft of his Glock, tucked in his jeans and hidden beneath his windbreaker.

He hadn't needed it since gunning down the last Zaphead about three miles back.

The Vicodin, however, Mackie always seemed to need. Even if he was wasn't feeding addiction by chemically soothing his anxieties, prescription pain meds were in high demand in After, and thus served as useful currency.

One didn't want to spend much time on the highways these days without both weapons and items for bartering.

Just ahead, he could see the campus begin to emerge from the rows of shops, assorted small businesses, and modest houses that lined both sides of the highway running through this particular stretch of western North Carolina mountains. Mackie hadn't been here in some time, but even in After, he could see that the campus had lost none of its intoxicating bucolic flavor.

With its quaint mountain charms and stone's-throw proximity to a few ski resorts and a number of popular hiking destinations, Evans-Lawson was a school more popular with outdoorsy slackers than the more studious-minded. Mackie had belonged to neither group—and neither did Ally, really—but he missed it here just the same.

Those days reminded him of things long forgotten in After: possibilities, youthfully naïve optimism.

What came later was something very different.

Something much uglier.

And that was even before the solar storms that scorched the sky and turned the world below into a wasteland worthy of a Bad Religion record.

The storms had shut down the world's power grid and rendered any device or service dependent on it useless.

Cell phones, cable, internet. Cars, even.

All of it gone. Functionless.

Mackie tossed his bike—a Wal-Mart cheapie he found in someone's back yard a few miles across the county line—aside, dropped his Diet Coke can, adjusted his backpack, pulled his Glock, and loaded a round into the firing chamber. A pair of decomposed bodies, bloated with rot and saturated in congealed blood the consistency of pancake batter, lay facedown in the gas station parking lot just ahead. Another sat in a dark blue Mazda parked near the front entrance, his head leaning against the driver's side window, smears

of blood and liquefied skin staining the glass. There were no Zapheads nearby as far as Mackie could tell. The campus would likely be a different story.

Mackie jogged across the highway and entered the campus from a northwestern angle, his Glock held in a two-handed grip and pointed downward. The summer session Ally was attending was obviously sparsely populated—otherwise the number of corpses lying on the campus grounds would have numbered in the dozens rather than the sporadic few Mackie encountered as he moved further toward Linvale Residence Hall.

He couldn't be sure he would find Ally there, assuming she had survived the storm and remained unchanged (a thin prayer at best), but she had made Linvale her home for the previous four semesters, so it made sense to try there first.

Far more likely, though, that he would find her body lying somewhere here on the campus lawns among the other corpses.

That was the second-best outcome Mackie could hope for.

In addition to laying ruin to the world's technological infrastructure, the solar storm also dropped most of humanity's population dead where they stood and sat. A few scattered pockets survived, and some had come through relatively unharmed.

The others became something different.

Colloquially, these survivors were known as "Zapheads," a reference given to the rabid, homicidal rages that possessed them after the solar storm boiled their brains and stripped away all traces of their humanity.

Mackie had first heard the term used several days earlier by a stocky, middle-aged man Mackie had found trapped by beneath a pickup truck by a frenzied group comprised of varied ages. They were gripped by a rage that Mackie knew had no basis in natural human behavior. His mind first went to chemical or bacterial agents. But no, the solar storms obviously had something to do with this, and those were most certainly not the work of terrorists.

Mackie had saved the man by emptying a magazine into the crowd of Zapheads, but eventually had to send a few rounds into his fellow survivor's chest later that evening when he attempted to overpower Mackie and steal the supplies in his backpack.

It was ammo Mackie regretted having to use, considering that his supply was quickly dwindling and there were assuredly a number of Zapheads left between him and Ally.

Mackie felt conflicting measures of both nostalgia and revulsion. The deep, rich green of the campus lawns, the flowering dogwoods, and beautiful

stone architecture of the various residence halls and academic buildings stoked the fires of pleasant memories from his days as a student here. But the sight of scattered corpses and the stench that accompanied them quickly turned those memories to vapor.

He could feel the Vicodin begin to take hold in his bloodstream; that euphoric flush of warmth and the pleasurable numbness that soon followed. That was probably why the shuffle of staggered footsteps behind him didn't register immediately, never quite coalesced in his mind as a viable threat until he felt a weight crash into him from behind and an arm snake around his neck, clawing for purchase.

He felt the warmth of frenzied breaths on his neck before teeth sank into the space between his neck and right shoulder. The backpack he was wearing proved an ineffective barrier between him and the Zaphead attacking from behind. Mackie juttied his pelvis forward and then rammed his ass piston-like into the Zaphead's gut with the force of a solid punch. Mackie then gripped the Zaphead's forearm and quickly bent forward, driving his right shoulder at his left foot. The momentum carried the Zaphead over Mackie's shoulder and she landed at his feet with a sharp exhalation of breath.

He was an average martial artist at best, more efficient with a Glock or k-bar knife than his fists or feet, but a few of the techniques he picked up from Krider's men in Tampa had thankfully stuck.

The Zaphead was a girl, early 20's. A brunette with a pixie haircut and a dingy grey tank top, a Misfits insignia tattooed on her throat beneath her right jaw. A punk chick, the type Mackie would've been drawn too back in his horny-hound days. Her eyes were a dry, stoner red and her lips were torn and mangled, most of her teeth ground down to stumps and exposed nerves.

She had obviously tried chewing through something her teeth weren't strong enough to pierce, tearing her mouth to raw hamburger in the process. Not uncommon behavior in the Zapheads Mackie had come across.

The bite near Mackie's shoulder burned and stung, but it didn't concern him. Zapheads, as far as anyone could tell, weren't infectious, unlike the zombies of popular cinema.

The girl thrashed and shrieked, and Mackie held his foot down on her stomach to keep her planted. His Glock fired with a sharp crack and a hole opened in the Zaphead's forehead. Instant silence.

With its lack of external safeties and its point-and-shoot ease of use, Glocks were ideal weapons in the After, though Mackie had also found them useful in his previous profession. The problem was keeping a steady supply of ammunition, and Mackie had little of that to spare.

That's why, when Mackie spotted three other Zapheads ambling about near the rear of a lecture hall building to his left, a short distance ahead, Mackie thought it more prudent to evade them rather than shoot. The sound of the pistol shot had captured their attention, but with their vision of the area Mackie currently occupied partially obscured by the building, their eyes had yet to locate the source.

Time to move.

Unlike other, more sprawling mountain universities located nearby, such as Appalachian State, Evans-Lawson had a relatively small, compact campus. Traversing it from end to end was the work of 10 minutes at most, and that aspect of the college was either part of its charm or a major detriment depending on which student you asked. For Mackie, it was a considerable blessing, and as he took off at a jog, he knew he would reach Linvale quickly.

What he might find when he got there wasn't something he was ready to contemplate just yet.

He darted forward, moving carefully around fallen corpses; most of them seemed to be students, given their youthful appearance and collegiate-appropriate attire.

Well, *youthful appearance* was stretching it, considering the decomposition taking place. But these were obviously kids, only a few years younger than Mackie himself, cut down inside the comforting bubble of academia before the realities of post-college life would have an opportunity to do the same. A few of the bodies seemed older—30's, maybe even early 40's at a guess. Whether these were non-traditional students or faculty members, Mackie wasn't sure.

The constant stench of putrescence was something he hadn't quite adapted to yet and he preferred to keep a wide berth between himself and the decaying bodies scattered on the grass. Even so, he looked at each one closely to be sure none was Ally.

He no longer had a line of sight on the other three Zapheads he left behind; hopefully the noise from Mackie's Glock had drifted vapor-like across what little remained of their ability to process stimuli and their attentions were now focused elsewhere. At any rate, now that Mackie was some distance ahead of them, they seemed to pose no threat.

He could see Linvale just ahead, to the left of the student union and tucked behind another residence hall. At six stories in height, Linvale was the largest residence hall on campus and one of the few at Evans-Lawson that wasn't co-ed. Like most other buildings on campus, it was an intricate, neoclassical style stone construction.

Mackie covered the remaining distance quickly, his back bent in a slight crouch and his eyes scanning rapidly left and right.

It was almost laughable, this notion that he actually had some idea what he was doing. Since graduation, he had learned to use a gun and handle himself reasonably well in a fight and he had killed a few people—normal people, not just Zapheads—but he was from an expert at this sort of thing.

He paid particular attention to each door he passed. The doors to most buildings at Evans-Lawson were opened on the inside by push bars; while even the highest functioning Zaphead would have some difficulty negotiating a doorknob, it would be simple enough for one to lean his weight against a push bar and stumble outside if he happened to see Mackie through the door's glass inset.

Situational awareness was a crucial element of self-defense, and though some Zapheads—like the three he spotted just minutes before—moved at a more languid pace and seemed less observant than their more rabid brethren, Mackie wanted to spot them in advance rather than be caught unaware again. The Vicodin wasn't helping; Mackie's arms felt weightless and the fog of an early-stage narcotic high settled over his head.

Not the most ideal circumstances for an armed man waist-deep in potential threats on an extraction mission, but he wasn't sure he could handle what lay ahead without a good buzz to soften the edges.

There was another scattering of corpses on Linvale's front lawn—most female, but none of them Ally. A momentary surge of hope cut through the Vicodin swimming in Mackie's bloodstream. But he realized there was no percentage in getting too excited just yet. Assuming she was even inside the building and not elsewhere on campus, the most likely fate for Ally was either that she was dead or another member of the Zaphead population.

Or she could be nowhere near campus. It was the slimmest of possibilities, but Ally may have left the campus, either alone or with other survivors, to look for help elsewhere. Though her car was surely as dead as every other at the moment, she may have even tried finding her way back to her parent's home, in a county several hours east.

The thought put shards of ice in Mackie's gut. He knew Ally wouldn't likely last long on the highway, even with traveling companions.

He wished he could call her, but even if cell phones were functioning, she had changed her number and blocked his several months ago.

All residence hall doors required a keycard that doubled as student ID for entry. The glass panes in the front pair of doors and first floor windows remained surprisingly unbroken, but the glass in the doors was reinforced by wire mesh. No point in trying to shatter it to enter the building. The first

floor dorm room windows were an option, but the blinds were drawn and Mackie wasn't about to enter a room he had no view of from outside. The sound of breaking glass might also draw other Zapheads.

The other option—and not one he particularly favored—was to search the pockets and purses of the corpses lying outside for a keycard.

But...wait. The solar storm shut down all power. Anything powered by electricity is now useless...

That should mean that the door would open without the need for a keycard, although he might have to force it.

Mackie gripped the handle, pressed down on the latch with his thumb—
—and felt his heart speed up as he pulled the door open smoothly and without even the squeaking of a hinge.

The lobby was deserted; no corpses on the floor or on either of the couches that formed a right angle across from a television mounted on the wall.

Ally's dorm was on the fourth floor, or at least it used to be. He hadn't spoken to her in so long that he had no idea if she had changed rooms. He wouldn't have even known that she was attending this summer session if it hadn't been for a Facebook posting from a friend of a friend, one of the few people in Ally's life that hadn't severed all ties Mackie.

If she's here, she could be anywhere in the building. The prospect of searching six floors of dorm rooms was daunting. Mackie felt tired just thinking about it.

Shit.

I guess I'll start there first and go from there.

Ally had always seemed to love that particular room and wouldn't likely have given it up. It was far from a sure bet, but it was a logical place to start.

Mackie moved carefully up the stairs, his finger perpendicular to the Glock's trigger, and his eyes adjusting slowly to the gloom. Even though the sun wouldn't set for another couple of hours, without the overhead fluorescent lights, visibility would be low in the stairwell and hallways.

Mackie hated the idea of entering an area where he had roughly the visual acuity of a fruit bat. You didn't need to be a film scholar to know that that sort of thing rarely ended well in the movies.

The stairwell was clear, but the stink of rot told him that there were bodies lying behind the door to the second floor hallway. He knew he should check to make sure Ally wasn't among them...but no, her dorm room first.

He jogged further up the stairwell, bypassing the entrance to the third floor hall, no longer cautious about the noise his footfalls made.

The heat inside Linvale was stifling. Although summers in the mountains of western North Carolina were considerably cooler than in Florida, where Mackie had spent most of the last two years, the improvement wasn't as significant as he expected. It was much too hot for even the thin windbreaker he was wearing, but he liked the extra protection of long sleeves and a second layer of fabric.

Though they weren't contagious, a bite from a Zaphead—as Punk Chick had so aptly demonstrated—was no less painful for it.

Mackie quickly covered the remaining stairs beneath the fourth-floor entrance and threw open the door, dashing headlong into the hallway, his eyes trained to the left where Ally's room would be, near the end of the hall.

And plowed face first into a Zaphead that came charging out of the gloom to the right.

Shit! Stupid, careless...

Shitshitshitshitshitshit...

Mackie tumbled backward into the stairwell with the Zaphead clinging to his shirt, spittle spraying in his face. They fell onto the staircase, the supplies in Mackie's backpack jabbing painfully into his spine. The Zaphead's weight pressed down on Mackie, choking off his breath with a force that felt like tons rather than pounds.

This Zaphead wasn't as dainty as Punk Chick. This was a linebacker-sized male that obviously put in his time at the gym before the Big Zap. Here to engage in some extracurricular activities with one of the girls on this hall before the storms hit, no doubt.

Mackie wedged his right forearm under the Zaphead's chin. He wanted to get the bastard's snapping jaws as far from his own face as possible. It also didn't help that Mackie was holding his Glock in his right hand and had no chance of getting off an effective shot in his current position. His left hand was pinned beneath the Zaphead's weight, so switching the Glock to his other hand was also out of the question.

A second Zaphead tumbled out of the hall's entrance before the door closed shut, and she staggered into the stairwell. A blonde, slim, her skin a shade too pale.

Not Ally.

But not what Mackie needed right now, either.

Mackie sucked in as much breath as the Zaphead's weight would allow and tried lifting his knees for leverage. Not much luck, but he did manage to raise just enough of the Zaphead's weight to wriggle his left hand free. Mackie slammed his left palm against the Zaphead's forehead, forcing his

head back just far enough so that Mackie could remove his forearm from the Zaphead's throat and press the Glock's barrel against it.

The female Zaphead stumbled down the stairs. If she fell on top of them, Mackie knew he'd have a hell of time excavating himself from beneath the combined weight of two Zapheads.

Mackie squeezed the trigger, and felt a spray of blood on his neck and chest. The Zaphead on top of him gurgled and sputtered, fighting to suck air through his shredded trachea. Ropes of blood fell from his mouth onto Mackie's face.

The other Zaphead lost her footing on the stairs and fell foreword, aiming straight for Mackie and the dying bastard on top of him.

Mackie squeezed off a second shot but missed, the bullet striking the convergence point of the walls and ceiling as the girl continued to fall.

He braced himself as she fell on top of the Zaphead pinning him to the stairs. The added weight squeezed out what little breath Mackie could hold in his lungs, and he felt certain his backpack would push his spine out through his chest.

He was also pretty sure he could taste his spleen.

The girl thrashed and snapped, but couldn't find purchase with the dying Zaphead between her and Mackie. Mackie reached out with his left hand, grabbed a fistful of hair behind her head, and with his other hand pressed the Glock against her temple.

The bullet drilled through her skull and sent shards of bone and chunks of brain tissue flying in a splattery burst, like a messy meal heated in a microwave too long.

It took Mackie several tries and far more time than he felt he had to spare, but he eventually managed to work himself from beneath the two Zapheads. If there were other Zapheads inside the building, the sounds of struggle and gunfire hadn't alerted them yet.

Mackie leaned against the stairwell wall and pulled in as much breath as his starving lungs allowed. His back felt like some kids had used it as a Piñata. When his breathing had found its rhythm again, he pulled himself and opened the hallway door again. He stepped inside, slower this time, sweeping his Glock left and right.

No Zapheads. One female corpse that wasn't Ally lying inside the entrance to the communal bathroom.

Ally's room — or at least the room she had stayed in since the beginning of her freshmen year — was on the left, second to last. If she was in there, alive and unaffected by the storm, she surely would've heard the noise in the stairwell.

Mackie tapped on the door with the Glock's barrel and called her name.

Please, God...

No response. But Mackie thought he could hear something stirring inside the room. Possibly the sound of soft footsteps, but maybe that was just what he wanted to hear.

The door flew open suddenly, and on the other side was a blonde girl, a foot or so shorter than Mackie, her hair not much longer than Punk Chick's pixie cut. She was wearing a pale green T-shirt and those tight, stretchy pants Mackie often seen women jog in. The kind that accentuated curves so well.

She was gripping a pair of scissors in her left hand, and her wide, wet eyes reflected surprise and uncertainty.

"Who are—?" she began before Mackie pushed her inside the room. He stepped inside and closed and locked the door behind him.

This wasn't Ally, and it wasn't anyone Mackie recognized. She was still holding the scissors—as a weapon, Mackie was sure—but she made no effort to use them in her defense.

"I'm looking for Ally. Ally Williams. This used to be her room."

The girl had no time to respond before Mackie's eyes fell on a huddled, writhing form buried beneath a blanket in the closet space to the left.

Oh, God...

Mackie quickly walked over, ripped away the blanket, and felt his heart nearly punch through the walls of his chest.

It was Ally, her wrists and ankles bound with duct tape. A pair of panties were stuffed in her mouth and bound in place by more duct tape. Her chestnut hair was disheveled and slicked with sweat, and her eyes had the distinctive redness and uncontrolled frenzy of a Zaphead.

She seemed groggy and sluggish, but that was quickly wearing off, and she began struggling against her binds with more fervor, her mouth working furiously at the panties stuffed inside.

Mackie's insides felt as if they were about to drop through the floor.

The girl behind him spoke. "Are you...are you Macklin?"

Her turned and stared at her, but not really *at* her; it seemed more like he was staring through her and into the wall behind.

And then he was on her, one hand clutching the back of her head, the other jabbing the Glock beneath her chin.

"What...the *hell*..." he spat. The girl was still holding the scissors, but seemed to have forgotten them.

"She...she kept trying to attack me. Had to...to restrain her..."

Mackie held her place for a moment, and then let go of her head and lowered the Glock. He looked back at Ally still huddled in the closet space, her face a mask of demonic contortions.

“Who are you?” he asked. He seemed deflated.

The girl tried keeping her distance, but that wasn’t easy in such a small room.

“Linzie. Linzie McAllister.”

“Lindsey? Are you her roommate?”

“Linzie. Z-I-E. No, we’re friends, but not roommates.” And then she added, unnecessarily, “I’m here for the summer session, too.”

Mackie said nothing, just kept his eyes on Ally.

“After I taped her up, I started giving her Benadryl I found in one of her drawers, like, to calm her down. Help her sleep.”

Ally’s seasonal allergies were brutal. Of course she would have Benadryl lying around.

And apparently, the drug’s sedating quality worked on even Zapheads.

The notion that a Zaphead could even *be* sedated hadn’t yet occurred to Mackie. Maybe there was a cure? But that was too big a problem to think about right now.

“I’ve seen what some of these things can do,” Mackie said. “How the hell did you get her restrained to begin with?”

Linzie’s eyes fell. “I had to hit her a few times. I’m sorry, but I had to. She went crazy kept trying to hurt me.”

Mackie said nothing. He moved closer to Ally again and took a more careful look at her face. Beneath strands of damp, lank hair he could see bruises on her forehead.

Linzie answered his unasked question. “I grabbed a stapler from her desk and hit her with that a few times. I’m sorry, I just—”

“How did you get the Benadryl in her?”

“Just, y’know, forced the capsules down her throat. Flushed them down with some water. She bit me when I did that.” Linzie held up a hand, and Mackie could see where Ally’s teeth had scraped off some flesh on a few of the fingers.

“Do you have any more?”

“Don’t think so, no.”

Mackie felt a wave of exhaustion consume him. He stumbled over to the bunk beds near the opposite wall and plunked down on the lower bunk.

“You *are* Macklin, right?” Linzie asked.

“Mackie. But yeah.”

“How did you get here? Are you alone?”

Mackie placed the Glock beside him on the bed's comforter and rubbed his eyes. "I'm alone. I was in the next county over on business when all this shit started. I knew Ally was here for the summer session, so I wanted to find her, see if she was okay. My car stopped working when the storm hit, so I walked for a while, and then found a bike."

Mackie didn't mention that his business in the next county involved paying a visit to a reporter named Julia Stone and warning her away from an investigation she was conducting into the western North Carolina branch of Lucas Krider's operations.

Part of that warning was to involve rape and a savage beating, but Mackie had no intention of doing either, and he gambled that Krider would never know the difference.

Mackie had been eager for the job and Krider had no problem giving it to him. An assignment near his old stomping grounds meant that Mackie might have an opportunity to see Ally again, and despite his earlier promise to keep a respectful distance, Mackie planned to make that opportunity a reality.

And thanks to that fortuitous Facebook posting, Mackie knew that Ally would be spending a big chunk of her summer at Evans-Lawson.

He never got the chance to find Julia Stone before the storms came, but that didn't matter now. The sun had a longer reach than even Krider's.

Linzie still kept her distance but seemed more relaxed now. "How did you make it all the way here on a bike? Aren't there more of those things out there?"

"Some. But it seems people are mostly just dead now." Mackie reached into his pocket and pulled out two more Vicodin. Chewed and swallowed.

"Are you hurt?" Linzie eyed the gore painted on Mackie's face and clothes.

"Ran into a few of those things out there. But I'm fine."

"How did you know Ally would be here?"

Mackie didn't answer, though he saw no reason not to. A little Facebook stalking was hardly his greatest sin. "You were both here together when the storms came?" he asked.

Linzie nodded. "I tried to leave a couple of times, but some of those things were roaming in the hall. Thought it made more sense to wait here for help."

Mackie's eyes hardened. "You were just gonna leave her here?"

"I wanted to find help. I wanted to see what the hell was going on. The power goes out, our phones stopped working. I see all these dead bodies out the window on the lawn, and then Ally—"

Mackie held up his hand. "I get it. I'm sorry."

"It's those storms that did this, right?"

"I think so, yeah. I think that's how it started."

"Is it like this everywhere?"

"Everywhere that I've seen."

They both looked over at Ally. The Benadryl fog was continuing to lift, and she struggled frantically against the tape binding her hands and feet. An odd, guttural moan rumbled from her throat, but was choked off by the panties stuffed and taped inside her mouth.

Mackie opened his backpack, rooted through crushed packages of potato chips and Lance crackers—the contents made soggy by a can of Diet Coke that ruptured while he was struggling with the Zapheads in the stairwell—and pulled out a syringe filled with clear liquid.

"What's that?" Linzie asked.

"Morphine. After the storms, me and a few others raided a hospital nearby. I thought if I found Ally, but she wasn't, y'know, *herself*, I could use this to keep her calm while we escaped."

"So, you were, what, just planning to carry her out of here on your back?"

An epically shitty plan, Mackie agreed.

He uncapped the syringe and moved toward Ally. "Well, the good news is I won't have to do it alone. There's two of us now."

After tapping the syringe and gently depressing the plunger to remove air bubbles, Mackie jabbed the needle dart-like into Ally's arm.

Her eyes gradually lost focus, and her motions became less spastic as the Morphine took effect.

"Is that safe?" Linzie asked.

"No idea. It's a safe dose of morphine, but I have no idea if it will interact with the Benadryl you gave her. Can't exactly Google that now. But if we wanna carry her out of here, I don't think we have much choice."

"So what now? We try to leave?"

Mackie sat beside Ally again. He drew his knees to his chest and let his head fall forward.

"In a second. I just...I just need to rest for a little bit."

Linzie sat on the lower bunk, where Mackie had been just a few moments before. "Did you get anything else while you were at the hospital?" she asked.

"Some basic first-aid shit. Raided a vending machine, too."

“We have some food here,” Linzie said. “Some soups and chips. Ramen noodles, Chef Boyardee. I’ve tried feeding Ally a little bit, but I can’t get much in her. And, y’know, I don’t want her to choke.”

Mackie hadn’t even thought to ask about when the last time Ally had eaten was. He felt a sudden rush of gratitude toward Linzie.

“She talked about you some.”

Mackie raised his head. “I can’t imagine she would’ve had much good to say.”

“I could tell she cared about you. She was worried, I think. About the pills, the people you worked for.”

Mackie nodded. “I met Ally my last year here, when she was still a freshman. I had moved here from Florida for college because I didn’t really have the grades for a state university, but I didn’t want to go the community college route. A private college like this was my only option.

I saw some brochures, and liked the vibe of this place, the atmosphere. Thought I might enjoy living in the mountains. It was expensive, but my parents made it work.”

“Was she your first girlfriend here?”

“I had slept around a little before, but yeah, pretty much. I was a couple of months away from graduation, and all I could think about was how I didn’t really wanna go home. I’d lie in my room every night and all I could think about was the uncertainty...where do I go from here? What kind of job will I get? How do I be...*significant*. All the hell I really wanted to do was just stick around campus.

And then I met Ally, and she gave me a reason to.”

Ally’s restless motions had all but stopped now, the morphine working its soothing magic. She still appeared conscious, but Mackie hoped she’d fall asleep soon. He stood up, picked up the blanket from where it had landed when he threw it off Ally earlier, and draped it over again.

“Ally told me you went back to Florida,” Linzie said.

“I did, after a couple of years. Jobs here aren’t exactly plentiful, and my degree was pretty much useless. I tried to make it work for awhile, found little scraps of part time employment here and there. But it was all putting a strain on my relationship with Ally, and I was barely making enough to survive up here. I went home and starting working construction with an old friend of my dad’s.”

“What about the pain meds? Ally made it sound like—”

“Like I had a problem? Yeah, I think she was right.”

“But you don’t seem like, y’know, a...junkie.”

Mackie smiled. "It's not like anyone ever found me lying passed out in puddles of my own piss and vomit, if that's you mean. Doesn't make the problem any less of a problem."

"So how did it happen?"

Mackie took his seat beside Ally again. He let his hand dangle over her shin. Linzie recognized affection in the gesture.

"How did I get hooked? Accident on the job. Relatively minor, but my doctor wrote a prescription for some low grade Vicodin. The problem was I kept taking it even after I stopped hurting."

"Doctors won't prescribe that shit indefinitely. How did you get more after you ran out?"

Mackie smiled again. "You know those people I worked for that Ally was so worried about? She wasn't talking about my construction job."

"So, what, you started working for a drug dealer?"

Mackie closed his eyes, leaned his head back. "I started working for a man named Lucas Krider. He *was* involved with drugs, meth and pills mostly, but not just that. Prostitution, too. Typical Dixie Mafia stuff."

Linzie's eyes widened. "Dixie Mafia? That's an actual thing?"

"It's a little different than what you see on TV, but yeah, it is."

"And that's who you were getting the pills from?"

Mackie sighed. He didn't want to discuss this any further, but was too exhausted to argue. He knew they needed to leave soon, but all he wanted to do was sit next to Ally and sleep.

"I was getting the pills from a co-worker, a guy that ripped off a stash from some asshole in Krider's crew. I wasn't aware of any of that. But when Krider tracked us down, his plan was to kill us both *and* as many of our family members as his men could find. My shithead friend had stolen from him, and I was just as guilty because I was paying him for the pills he'd ripped off."

Mackie bit his lower lip hard, wished the Vicodin in his system could quench his memories of what had gone down in Tampa as easily as it could physical pain.

"But then he decided to extend a little generosity. Krider was always looking to recruit young new talent, so he decided to give us one of us an opportunity to come work for him and make reparations. The other would die, along with his family."

The whole world had gone to shit outside, but if Linzie was aware of anything other than Mackie's story, she gave no indication.

“So he made us fight for that one open slot in his crew. He wanted to see who could *earn* it, who had the *conviction*. That’s the kind of shit he said. I was always a decent fighter, nothing special, but I could handle myself.

But this other guy, he was a drunk and an addict and been for so many years at that point, he was pretty much useless. Could barely hold down his job with the construction crew. He was scared, and I just started whaling on him and I didn’t stop. All I could think about was my parents and my sister and Ally. Krider may not have gone after her, may never have even found out about her, but I just couldn’t—”

He stopped, closed his eyes again. “I gave that guy a beating that impressed Krider, and then Krider had one of his men shoot him.”

“Oh, God,” Linzie said.

And from that moment on, Macklin Dailey found himself gainfully employed, performing the types of services that men of Lucas Krider’s stature rarely did with their own hands.

“You’ve killed people,” Linzie said. Mackie couldn’t tell if she had phrased it as a statement or a question.

“A few. But mostly it was beatings. Warnings. My job was to help Krider protect his territory.”

As recompense for purchasing pain meds stolen from Krider, Mackie spent his first year performing these services for free, though Krider covered his living expenses. After the first year, Mackie was given a salary. Far more money than he had ever earned in his life.

But the real salary was safety for his family. For Ally.

A job with Krider wasn’t a job you could walk away from without expecting some serious blowback.

“And you can live with that,” Linzie said. “With killing people.”

Mackie remembered the night he spent puking his guts out after the first time, and the solid hour he spent in his car holding a pistol to his temple.

He had come damn close to *not* living with it.

“I can live with keeping the people I love safe. I’ve never enjoyed any of it. But if I refuse, I’m not the only one that ends up in a drainage ditch somewhere. This is self-defense and protection for my family. That’s how I have to look at it.”

“Did Ally know?”

“I didn’t tell her much. Part of that was to keep her safe, part of it was because I didn’t want her to know what I’d become. But she knew things weren’t right with me. She did some digging and eventually found out that I was involved with some bad people. The relationship didn’t last much longer after that.”

In spite of the room's humidity, Linzie wrapped her arms around herself as if huddling against the cold. "How come you never tried to kill Krider? You were probably close enough to him to do it."

"At the time, that wouldn't have been an option. He always had people near him, and even if I could've made it past them, there were plenty more out there like Krider in the same network. There's no place I could've hid from them all.

But now, with all that's happened, if I make it out of here, I'll go back to Florida, and if he's still alive, I'll put a bullet in him. If he's a Zaphead now, I'll chain him in a basement somewhere and torture him until he dies of old age."

Linzie looked confused. "A Zaphead?"

"That's what I've heard them called. People that survived the storm but became like...her." He nodded at Ally. The morphine had taken her someplace else, and now she looked more peaceful than Mackie had felt in years. He wasn't sure how much longer it would last, but he had more of the drug if he needed it.

Mackie pulled Ally close, felt the dampness of her hair soak into his neck.

"We can go soon," he said. "Not sure how many more Zapheads are close by, but I killed two from this floor on my way here. If we move fast, I think we can get out safely. I don't much ammo left, but hopefully it'll be enough."

Neither of them acknowledged just how difficult it would be to leave while carrying a body between them. And even if either of them could think of a safe place to travel nearby, getting there wasn't likely—not without a working car and with only one magazine of ammo left for Mackie's Glock.

Maybe Ally's dorm was the safest place they could be right now.

Mackie's lids closed over his burning, aching eyes. Was he really this tired?

A moment later, all was dark.

###

When Mackie awoke, the sun had set, and his mouth had the texture of sandpaper and tasted like a dirt-caked sock. For one panicked moment, he forgot where he was, and though he vaguely recognized the girl leaning over him, her name escaped him.

She was holding his Glock.

He tried to sit up, but the girl pushed him back to the position he had fallen asleep in.

"It's cool, Mackie. Just stay there for now."

Linzie. Z-I-E.

Mackie turned his head to the left and saw Ally beside him, her wrists and feet still bound, the panties still bunched inside her mouth. But where Mackie last remembered her as relaxed and docile, the rage now seemed to have returned. She looked as if she wanted to strip off every shred of her own skin with her teeth.

The morphine wore off. How long was I asleep?

And why is Linzie—

"I wanted to kill her, y'know. That's what I was here for actually."

Mackie wasn't sure he had heard her right. He tried standing again, but Linzie pointed directly at his face. Mackie also noticed that she was wearing his backpack.

She's robbing me, the bitch...

Did she even know how to use the Glock? Not that it was that difficult to figure out, with no safety and all. Untrained shooter or not, at this range, she could do some damage.

"Linzie, what the hell are—"

"Craig Everson."

Something about the name was familiar. But why would she blurt it out with a gun pointed at his face?

"Stay with me, Mackie. Cut through your drug fog. Do you remember Craig Everson? I need to know you recognize that name."

He didn't.

And then he did.

Suddenly, all the shit happening in the Post-Apocalyptic Solar Storm world outside made a lot more sense than what was happening in this room.

Craig Everson. Small time lowlife. A meth head that made the mistake of getting pinched at a routine traffic stop with Krider's product in the trunk of his car.

One of the few kills Mackie that hadn't left much of an impression on Mackie.

"I know this doesn't get easier, Macklin. You've done this a few times before and you'll do it again, but it never gets easier. Still, I need you to take care of this. You can leave his family out of it, but I want this guy gone before he opens his mouth and says something we'll all regret..."

And Mackie had taken care of it.

Followed him home one night after he made bail and put a round in his forehead while his old lady screamed on the front porch.

Krider wasn't a big fan of witnesses, but Mackie had been sloppy that night, all the Vicodin in his system softening the edges of good judgment.

"He was an epic screw-up, don't get me wrong," Linzie said. "But he did a lot of good for me and my mom. And when you took him away, she completely fell apart. All the shitty men in her life, and here was one that had a problem, sure, but he didn't hit us, did his best to keep the bills paid. Didn't try to stick it where it didn't belong. When you killed him, she just couldn't handle it.

I came home one afternoon and found her in the basement. She'd blown out her liver on booze and pills."

"You can leave the family out of it."

Sure.

"You...you were his stepdaughter?"

"And I suppose I don't need to tell you that I'm not a student here, either. I came here for Ally. I wanted to take her away from you the same way you took Craig from mom and me. That was my plan, to be a new girl in the area looking to hang out with some cool college kids. Then I'd just happen to be where Ally was one night and strike up a conversation. I wanted us to be friends, and then I wanted to kill her and make damn sure you knew that it was all your fault."

Mackie's head spun. Beside him, Ally thrashed and moaned.

"But how did—"

"How did I know it was you? I knew the kind of circles Craig ran in. So I started asking questions. Apparently, that got back to Lucas Krider and he came to see me one evening. He admitted to selling Craig the meth, but he gave me your name and told me you and Craig were running a little something on the side. There was a disagreement, so you shot him."

Krider. The bastard.

"But you know what I think, Mackie? I think that was just his way of getting back at you for being so sloppy during that hit, for leaving my mom behind as a witness."

If Linzie didn't kill him, he was going to find Lucas Krider. If the piece of shit was already dead, he was going to kill him over and over again.

"Anyway, Krider and I sort of got friendly, and I told him how I wanted to take someone special from you because of how you destroyed my family when you killed Craig. He loved that idea. He wanted to help. So he told me all about your parents and your sister. And all about Ally."

That's why Krider had been so eager to give me the Julia Stone assignment. He knew I'd try to see Ally, and I'd find out what Linzie had done to her.

"He gives me some money, so I could rent a place up here. And he tells that he'll make sure you're close by on a job. He knew you'd come look for her. And I think he was hoping that after I killed Ally, one of us would kill the other just to make things a little easier for him. Either way, I don't think he intended to let us both live."

Of that, Mackie was certain.

"But what he didn't count on was a change of heart on my part. As I got to know Ally, I realized that I couldn't punish her for your sins. I wanted somebody to pay, but I couldn't be like the monster that took Craig away and ruined my life."

"And then..." Linzie spread her arms in a sweeping gesture indicating the world outside the dorm room. "All this happens. The power goes out, people are either dropping dead or turning into raving maniacs. And now I'm actually taking care of the girl I came here to kill. Waiting to die. Waiting for help to show up. Or maybe just trying to run out that door again and let those things have at me."

Linzie chuckled. "And then, of course, you show up. And I hear your side of things. That was important to me, hearing it from you. And you know what? I see another stupid junkie that made some bad decisions. Not much different than Craig, I guess. He didn't have to die, but then again, he didn't have to use a psychotic piece of shit like Lucas Krider to feed his meth habit, either."

Mackie said nothing.

"I don't quite forgive you. But I'm not all that interested in hurting you anymore, either."

Linzie stepped over to Ally's writing and picked up a few items she had removed from Mackie's backpack. Two morphine syringes and a bottle of Vicodin. She tossed them to Mackie.

"I'm leaving," she said. "I doubt I'll make it back to Florida, but I want to try. And I want to find Krider and do what you should've done in the first place. If you want to join me, you can." She nodded at Ally. "But her...you may want to accept the possibility that she'll never be what she was before. Killing her might be the kindest thing you can do for her. But that's up to you."

Linzie put her hand on the doorknob and looked over her shoulder at Mackie again. He felt like he should say something, offer an apology if nothing else, but no words formed in his parched mouth.

And then Linzie opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, quickly closing the door behind her.

Mackie pulled Ally close to him and did his best to hold her as her body thrashed and shook.

He looked at the vials of morphine in his hands.

Stay or go?

If he left, Mackie knew he couldn't take Ally with him, knew deep down that there was no cure for what the solar storms had done to her.

He could end her pain right here.

End his own, as well.

They had both been happy here once. Now they could die here together. Why not? What was left out there to hold onto?

Mackie pulled Ally against him as tightly as he could, pressed his nose against her damp hair.

He wanted to die.

He wanted to be with Ally.

And he wanted to see Lucas Krider dead.

But now, all he wanted to do was sleep.

THE END

Joshua Simcox is a journalist and writer living in western North Carolina.

A sample from the Zombie Patrol series by J.R. Rain

On the day that changed his life forever, Lieutenant Commander Joseph Carter fought anxiety as he veered his government vehicle off the freeway.

He headed toward the naval base in Seal Beach, pondering who and what awaited him. He knew he wasn't supposed to smoke in the car. He lit a cigarette anyway. He told himself that he hadn't done anything wrong. Nothing to worry about. But still...

Why had he been summoned?

"You know why," he told himself, but he didn't want to think about it now. He inhaled deeply, turned up the radio and opened the car's windows to clear out the tobacco smoke.

The base was less than ten minutes from the freeway. That meant, the Lieutenant Commander told himself, that he had ten minutes to gather his thoughts. Not that he hadn't been doing so since earlier today when he was first ordered to report to Seal Beach. He wasn't feeling well, and his sunglasses did little to shield the blinding rays that made his head ache even worse. He had little appetite. No surprise there. This morning, he'd consumed about a half-gallon of water, which he'd later upchucked.

"Must be the flu," he muttered, remembering that his buddy, Mike, had displayed the same symptoms. Thinking of Mike, he glanced in his rearview mirror. "Hey, wake up!" He'd almost forgotten about Mike, and that was strange. Jesus, his thoughts were scattered.

Mike didn't move, so Joe tossed an empty water bottle back to wake his comrade. Mike finally sat up, clearly bewildered.

"We're almost there," Joe said. "Get your shit together."

Mike didn't look so hot but did his best to comply.

"Can't afford to get sick," Joe muttered, whether to himself or Mike, he wasn't sure. But Joe decided to squeeze in a clinic visit and ask for some antibiotics while he was on base. That would take care of whatever was ailing them. It was probably just the flu.

He almost missed the entrance, swerving into the left-turn lane at the last moment. He knew this exit like the back of his hand. How could he have almost missed it?

I'm just distracted and not feeling well, he thought.

It's just the flu, he told himself again as he flashed his ID to the guards and was waved through the gate. He veered the car toward base headquarters.

* * *

"Let's go over it again," said the Agent in Black.

Lieutenant Commander Joseph Carter wanted to bury his head in his hands, but he knew better. This agent had now been questioning him for three hours. Joe knew the drill. It could go on for several more if this asshole didn't get the answers he wanted.

Don't lose your temper, he thought. *Show respect. No matter how crappy you feel.*

And Joe was feeling increasingly crappy. He was flat-out sick. He pushed thoughts of the sickness aside and focused on his surroundings, though he did note the location of the nearest wastebasket. Just in case.

The office was small and it would have been cozy if he had been there under more pleasant circumstances. The guards outside were the only hint of threat. The problem was that Joe Carter was having a very hard time remembering what had happened two nights ago. His thoughts felt scattered, incoherent, almost as if he was drunk. Or high. Or both.

The small room and guards outside were also making him feel claustrophobic. God, his head ached, too. He wanted to put on his sunglasses, even though the blinds were closed. The glass of water on the desk sat untouched. Joe was thirsty, yes, but he didn't want to barf all over the office. Then again, maybe it would speed up this whole process.

Joe sighed. "Where do you want me to begin?"

The Agent in Black was seated on the corner of the desk—a position that allowed him to look down on the Lieutenant Commander. Joe knew all these tactics, but had never had them applied to him. His pristine record in the military spoke for itself. He'd never been in trouble and he didn't think his actions the other night were unwarranted.

"You and your friend were returning to your quarters from the bar, when...?"

"I saw what I thought was a meteor," said Joe.

"But it wasn't a meteor."

"No."

"And?"

"It landed in the middle of a field."

"Inside the base?"

"Yes."

"What did it look like, falling to the ground?"

"I just told you." Joe tried to hide his frustration. "At first, it looked like a meteor. A falling star. It had a trail. But as it came closer, we realized it was very small, and it was going to hit the ground."

"How small was it?" asked the Agent in Black for the hundredth time.

"About the size of a basketball," Joe answered tiredly.

"And you two just ran over to it?"

"Yes."

"You didn't think to report an unidentified object landing on military ground?"

"No, I...we...weren't thinking, I guess. We'd had a few beers...we were off-duty."

"Lieutenant commanders are never completely off-duty."

Joe Carter remembered that he was supposed to be on leave. "I know. It was a mistake."

“So, what did it look like?”

Joe looked longingly at the water. He lit a cigarette instead. He raised his bloodshot eyes to the Agent in Black. “It looked like a sphere, I told you. About the size of a football...” Joe trailed off. No, that wasn’t right.

“A football?” The Agent in Black was right on it.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Joe Carter’s brain felt like jelly. He felt truly ill. He frowned. He concentrated. “A basketball. I meant it was the size of a basketball.”

“You just said football. Which was it?”

“A basketball. It was round. I got my words mixed up. I’m sorry.”

The Agent in Black regarded his detainee, for a detainee was exactly what Lieutenant Commander Joseph Carter was. For the moment, anyhow. The Agent in Black studied the man below him, and figured the man was either withholding information, or was coming down with something. Or hung-over, which the agent doubted. After all, Carter had been under surveillance for the last forty-three hours, ever since “The Incident.”

In fact, both Lieutenant Commanders Joseph Carter and Mike Mendoza had been watched closely—followed, even, from San Diego to Seal Beach. The Agent in Black was slightly surprised that they hadn’t been aware of it. At least, they hadn’t given any indication of knowing that they were being tailed, other than nearly missing their freeway exit.

The agent sipped his coffee, and glanced at Carter’s untouched water. “You thirsty?” he asked.

“No.”

Silence.

“What did you do when you reached the fallen object?”

Carter sighed. “Like I said, we got to it and...we looked around to see where it came from. It just fell out of the sky. We didn’t see any aircraft, and no, the wind wasn’t blowing, and no, the thing wasn’t hot, and yes, it looked like a round rock. Gray in color, but that impression might have been due to the moonlight.”

While the agent watched him closely, the lieutenant commander stood and crossed over to the room’s only window. The guards watched him closely, too. Carter tried to close the blinds just a little more, but couldn’t seem to make the damn things work. Blast it! The light was just too damn bright.

“What happened next?” the agent calmly asked.

Frustrated, Carter gave up and faced the Agent in Black. “I...I don’t remember. Wait. Yes, I bent down to touch it. I know, I know, I know I

wasn't supposed to. I was just so curious, you know? So, I touched it. I'm sorry. I touched it and a piece broke off in my hand. I showed it to Mike."

"Lieutenant Commander Mendoza?"

"Yes."

"And he touched it, too?"

"Yes."

"And that's when you decided it might be time to report the incident?"

"Yes. I called my commanding officer from my cell phone." *But you dicks showed up first*, Joe thought to himself. Aloud, he said, "You know the drill from there."

The Agent in Black knew. His CREW had tracked several such "Incidents." Over the past two days, small objects had landed on various military sites worldwide. The CREW was on the spot in most locations before anyone else. Lieutenant Commanders Carter and Mendoza were two of the six in the world who'd seen the landings firsthand. As well as these two LCs, three witnesses in Mexico City and one in Istanbul were being interrogated.

There was a knock on the door.

"Excuse me." The Agent in Black left Carter with his own thoughts.

Carter and Mendoza got a glimpse of the goon in the hallway and exchanged glances before the door closed.

In the hall, the agent met with what could have been his clone. "You get anything?" he asked.

"Not much. Same story."

The Agent in Black nodded. These two unfortunate LCs knew next to nothing. Neither had top-secret clearance. Even if they had, they wouldn't have had any access to The CREW's intelligence information. "What should we do with them?"

The clone spoke. "They don't know anything."

"They've seen the crash."

The clone nodded. "True, but they aren't aware of anything else."

The Agent in Black's first priority was to contain this information. No matter what.

The clone read his mind. "Any additional attention to this could be catastrophic."

The Agent in Black nodded and considered the whole picture. These two had spotless records. Obviously, they were potential "lifers" for the Navy. Containment of these events also meant silence. The Agent in Black had the authority to lock them up. Hell, he had the authority to make them disappear, too. Few knew the agent's real name, and he liked it that way. He was

known simply as the Agent in Black, a name that struck fear in those he crossed paths with. Fear was a good thing in his line of business. He and his CREW were above Top Secret; that is, they didn't officially exist. Indeed, few knew of the CREW's existence, including the president. A cabal of intelligence leaders had created the CREW, along with other shadow agencies, to clean up messes just like this one.

And it's a helluva mess, thought the Agent in Black.

But their disappearance would attract attention. Families didn't need to know, but military colleagues would wonder, even in private. Besides, both men looked ill. Additionally, both men were supposed to be on leave.

He sighed and made his first mistake. His biggest mistake. "Have them sign a confidentiality agreement. Then they can go."

The clone hid his disagreement. He would never contradict his superior. Or so he thought at the time. "I'll draw up the papers."

Learn more about the Zombie Patrol series at www.jrrain.com.

Other books by Scott Nicholson

AFTER: THE SHOCK (Book 1)

By Scott Nicholson

A massive solar storm wipes out the earth's technological infrastructure and kills billions. As the survivors struggle to adapt, they discover some among them have...change. The first book in the After series.

Learn more about it at [Haunted Computer](#)

AFTER: THE ECHO (Book 2)

By Scott Nicholson

Six weeks after a massive solar storm wipes out billions, a small group of survivors must face a future that may have no room for them. A group of mutants called "Zapheads" are evolving to replace humans at the top of the food chain.

Learn more at AuthorScottNicholson.com

AFTER: MILEPOST 291 (Book 3)

By Scott Nicholson

Two months after a cataclysmic solar storm, Rachel Wheeler and her companions make the dangerous journey to Milepost 291, the site of her grandfather's survival compound. Learn more at AuthorScottNicholson.com.

SOLOM #1: THE SCARECROW

By Scott Nicholson

When Katy Logan moves to a remote Appalachian Mountain town with her troubled teen daughter, she discovers supernatural legends are coming to life.

Learn more at AuthorScottNicholson.com.

SOLOM #2: THE NARROW GATE

By Scott Nicholson

As Katy and Jett overcome tragedy and settle into the community of Solom, they are caught between the town and a mysterious horseback preacher. Learn more at AuthorScottNicholson.com.

THE HOME

By Scott Nicholson

A Top 50 Kindle bestseller.

Experiments at a group home for troubled children lead to paranormal activity—and the ghosts are from the home's past as an insane asylum. In development as a feature film.

Learn more about *The Home*

MEAT CAMP

By Scott Nicholson & J.T. Warren

In a desperate attempt to save their land from tax foreclosure, Delphus Fraley and his daughter open a camp for at-risk kids, with the goal of building character through experience in the Appalachian Mountain outdoors.

But a strange infection contaminating the camp's mess hall soon triggers a violent rampage. As the isolated camp turns into a bloodbath, camp counselor Jenny Usher first fights to save the children, and then finds she must fight to save herself.

Because this infection doesn't just kill, it brings the dead back to life...

Adapted from Scott Nicholson's original horror screenplay.

See it at [Haunted Computer](http://HauntedComputer).

McFALL

By Scott Nicholson

Too good to be true.

That's what the residents of Barkersville say when Larkin McFall moves to their small Appalachian Mountain community. The lawyer and developer quickly gains respect as a community leader who improves the economy, supports charitable causes, and takes an interest in local government.

But not everyone is so welcoming. The McFall family has been linked to supernatural legends and odd disappearances for generations. But Larkin laughs

off the stories as superstition and promises a bright new future for the town. When those who oppose McFall begin dying in mysterious and violent ways, Sheriff Frank Littlefield investigates the newcomer and discovers a man with no past and no fingerprints—and with no way to be defeated.

CREATIVE SPIRIT

By Scott Nicholson

After parapsychologist Anna Galloway is diagnosed with metastatic cancer, she has a recurring dream in which she sees her own ghost. The setting of her dream is the historic Korban Manor, which is now an artist's retreat in the remote Appalachian Mountains.

Sculptor Mason Jackson has come to Korban Manor to make a final, all-or-nothing attempt at success before giving up his dreams. When he becomes obsessed with carving Ephram Korban's form out of wood, he questions his motivation but is swept up in a creative frenzy unlike any he has ever known.

The manor itself has secrets, with fires that blaze constantly in the hearths, portraits of Korban in every room, and deceptive mirrors on the walls. With an October blue moon looming, both the living and the dead learn the true power of their dreams.

Learn more about the paranormal thriller *Creative Spirit*

DISINTEGRATION

By Scott Nicholson

A Top 30 Kindle bestseller.

When a mysterious fire destroys his home and kills his young daughter, Jacob Wells is pulled into a downward spiral that draws him ever closer to the past he thought was dead and buried.

Now his twin brother Joshua is back in town, seeking to settle old scores and claim his half of the Wells birthright. As Jacob and Joshua return to the twisted roles they adopted at the hands of cruel, demanding parents, they wage a war of pride, wealth, and passion.

But the lines of identity are blurred, because Joshua and Jacob share much more than blood. And the childhood games have become deadly serious.

Learn more about the psychological thriller *Disintegration*

THE RED CHURCH

Book I in the Sheriff Littlefield Series

By Scott Nicholson

For 13-year-old Ronnie Day, life is full of problems: Mom and Dad have separated, his brother Tim is a constant pest, Melanie Ward either loves him or hates him, and Jesus Christ won't stay in his heart. Plus he has to walk past the red church every day, where the Bell Monster hides with its wings and claws and

livers for eyes. But the biggest problem is that Archer McFall is the new preacher at the church, and Mom wants Ronnie to attend midnight services with her.

Sheriff Frank Littlefield hates the red church for a different reason. His little brother died in a freak accident at the church twenty years ago, and now Frank is starting to see his brother's ghost.

The Days, the Littlefields, and the McFalls are descendants of the original families that settled the rural Appalachian community. Those old families share a secret of betrayal and guilt, and McFall wants his congregation to prove its faith. Because he believes he is the Second Son of God, and that the cleansing of sin must be done in blood.

"Sacrifice is the currency of God," McFall preaches, and unless Frank and Ronnie stop him, everybody pays.

Learn more about the [real haunted church](#)

DRUMMER BOY

Book II in the Sheriff Littlefield Series

By Scott Nicholson

On an Appalachian Mountain ridge, three boys hear the rattling of a snare drum deep inside a cave known as "The Jangling Hole," and the wind carries a whispered name.

It's the eve of a Civil War re-enactment, and the town of Titusville is preparing to host a staged battle. The weekend warriors aren't aware they will soon be fighting an elusive army. A troop of Civil War deserters, trapped in the Hole by a long-ago avalanche, is rising from a long slumber, and the war is far from over.

And one misfit kid is all that stands between the town and a sinister evil force...

Learn more about [*Drummer Boy*](#) and the Appalachian legend that inspired the novel.

THE SKULL RING

By Scott Nicholson

Julia Stone will remember, even if it kills her.

With the help of a therapist, Julia is piecing together childhood memories of the night her father vanished. When Julia finds a silver ring that bears the name "Judas Stone," the past comes creeping back. Someone is leaving strange messages inside her house, even though the door is locked. The local handyman offers help, but he has his own shadowy past. And the cop who investigated her father's disappearance has followed her to the small mountain town of Elkwood.

Now Julia has a head full of memories, but she doesn't know which are real. Julia's therapist is playing games. The handyman is trying to save her, in more ways than one. And a sinister cult is closing in, claiming ownership of Julia's body and soul

Learn more about [*The Skull Ring*](#) and False Recovered Memory Syndrome

SPEED DATING WITH THE DEAD

By Scott Nicholson

A paranormal conference at the most haunted hotel in the Southern Appalachian mountains...a man's promise to his late wife that he'd summon her spirit...a daughter whose imagination goes to dark places...and demonic evil lurking in the remote hotel's basement, just waiting to be awoken.

Learn more about *[Speed Dating with the Dead](#)* and the 2008 paranormal conference and inn that inspired the novel

KISS ME OR DIE

By Scott Nicholson

Richard Coldiron's first and last novel follows his metafictional journey through a troubled childhood, where he meets his invisible friend, his other invisible friend...and then some who aren't so friendly.

Richard keeps his cool despite the voices in his head, but he's about to get a new tenant: the Insider, a malevolent soul-hopping spirit that may or may not be born from Richard's nightmares and demands a co-writing credit and a little bit of foot-kissing dark worship.

Now Richard doesn't know which voice to trust. The book's been rejected 117 times. The people he loves keep turning up dead. And here comes the woman of his dreams.

Learn more about *[Kiss Me or Die](#)*

LIQUID FEAR

By Scott Nicholson

A Top 20 Kindle bestseller.

When Roland Doyle wakes up with a dead woman in his motel room, the only clue is a mysterious vial of pills bearing the label "Take one every 4 hrs or else."

Ten years before, six people were involved in a secret pharmaceutical trial that left one of them murdered and five unable to remember what happened. Now the experiment is continuing, as Dr. Sebastian Briggs wants to finish his research into fear response and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Only by taking the mysterious pills can the survivors stave off the creeping phobias and madness that threaten to consume them. But the pills have an unexpected side effect—the survivors start remembering the terrible acts they perpetrated a decade ago. They are lured back to the Monkey House, the remote facility where the original trials took place, and Briggs has prepared it for their arrival.

Now they are trapped, they each have only one pill left, and cracks are forming in their civilized veneer. After the pills are gone, there's only one option. "Or else."

Read about it at *[Haunted Computer](#)*

CHRONIC FEAR

By Scott Nicholson

A Top 20 Kindle bestseller.

Chronic Fear is the second installment of the chilling Fear series, which began with the harrowing *Liquid Fear*. The story picks up one year after the notorious Monkey House trials, from which the tiny handful of survivors have scattered in the wind. For while the unwitting human guinea pigs are still alive, the experimental drugs to which they were subjected continue to wreak havoc on their emotional stability. World-renowned neurobiologist Dr. Alexis Morgan knows first-hand the horrors of the sadistic experiment: her husband, Mark, was one its victims. As a result, he is plagued by unpredictable bouts of rage and paranoia. Dr. Morgan's research into the drug leads her to suspect presidential candidate and U. S. Senator Daniel Burchfield of plotting to gain control of the drug for his own purposes, a power play that is sure to result in countless casualties unless she and three Monkey House survivors can outwit the shadowy figures behind the conspiracy—if they don't lose their own sanity first.

Read the first chapter at [Haunted Computer](#)

OCTOBER GIRLS

By Scott Nicholson

Crystal doesn't want to be a trailer-trash witch like Momma. Her best friend Bone is only too happy to escape the afterlife and help Crystal break the rules.

Then a young movie maker comes to Parson's Ford, and he has a very special project in mind: a horror movie starring a real ghost. The movie is rolling, the creatures are stirring, and the brainwashed teenagers are ready to welcome a new star from the other side of the grave.

Learn more about the paranormal fantasy [October Girls](#)

CURSED

By J.R. Rain and Scott Nicholson

Albert Shipway is an ordinary guy, an insurance negotiator who likes booze and women and never having to say he's sorry.

And he thinks this is just another day, another lunch, another order of kung pao chicken. Little does he know that he's about to meet a little old lady who knows his greatest fear. A little old lady who knows what's hiding in his heart.

In just a matter of minutes, Albert's life turns upside down and he enters a world where magic and evil lurk beneath the fabric of Southern California. And all his choices have brewed a perfect storm of broken hearts, broken promises, shattered families, and a couple of tiny problems. Namely, killer mice and a baby.

Albert Shipway is finally getting a chance to right some wrongs. That is, if it's not too late.

Learn more about the urban fantasy [Cursed](#)

GHOST COLLEGE

By Scott Nicholson & J.R. Rain

First in a new series featuring paranormal investigators Ellen and Monty Drew. Ellen claims to possess a sixth sense but Monty, a former P.I., only believes what he can see. She views their work as a sacred mission while Monty just wants a happy wife and a paycheck.

Then the Drews are summoned to a Southern California bible college after workers report hearing mysterious voices at night. When they encounter the unhappy ghost of a young girl, Monty's skepticism is shaken, but he resolves to help his wife free the trapped spirit. Their search uncovers the Latin phrase "Non omnis moriar"—*not all of me shall die*—and they learn more about the site's history as a Catholic school destroyed by an earthquake. But a mysterious presence has plans of its own for the young ghost, and Monty and Ellen must go head to head with a Dark Master that's had more than a century of practice in demonic deeds.

Learn more about Ghost College at [Haunted Computer](#).

THE VAMPIRE CLUB

By J.R. Rain & Scott Nicholson

A group of college students pursue their passion for vampires, but when they discover the real thing, one of them must make the ultimate sacrifice in order to preserve the undead kind. A new vampire series by the author of the Samantha Moon series and the Liquid Fear series.

BAD BLOOD

By J.R. Rain, Scott Nicholson, and H.T. Night

People call him Spider. And people come to him when they have a problem. So when teenager Parker Cole approaches Spider at night school, he figures she's just another problem waiting to happen. But then she tells him about her father, who runs a cult called Cloudland based at the foot of mystical Mount Shasta, California. And then she tells Spider about her best friend, who is now dead, her body completely drained of blood. Spider wonders if the death is the work of a fellow vampire...or if he's now the target of a sinister game designed to lure him to Cloudland, where darker mysteries await.

THE HARVEST

By Scott Nicholson

It falls from the heavens and crashes to earth in the remote southern Appalachian Mountains.

The alien roots creep into the forest, drawn by the intoxicating cellular activity of the humus and loam. The creature feeds on the surrounding organisms, exploring, assimilating, and altering the life forms it encounters. Plants wilt from

the contact, trees wither, animals become deformed monstrosities, and people become something both more and less than human.

A telepathic psychology professor, a moonshine-swilling dirt farmer, a wealthy developer, and a bitter recluse team up to take on the otherworldly force that is infecting their town. The author's preferred edition of the 2003 paperback release *The Harvest*.

Learn more about the science fiction thriller [The Harvest](#)

THE DEAD LOVE LONGER

By Scott Nicholson

Private investigator Richard Steele must solve his most difficult case ever—his own murder—while caught between women on both sides of the grave. In a race against time as his spirit slips away, Richard confronts his many, many failings and trusts in a power beyond his understanding—love. His only weapon is faith, and he's running out of bullets. It's going to be a hell of a showdown.

Learn more about [Transparent Lovers](#)

CRIME BEAT

A novella by Scott Nicholson

Crime doesn't pay...but neither does journalism. When John Moretz takes a job as a reporter in the Appalachian town of Sycamore Shade, a crime spree erupts and circulation increases. Then the first murder victim is found, and soon a serial killer is grabbing headlines. Moretz comes under suspicion, but he stays one step ahead of the police, his fellow reporters, and seemingly even the killer.

Learn about [Crime Beat](#)

BURIAL TO FOLLOW

A Novella by Scott Nicholson

When Jacob Ridgehorn dies, it's up to Roby Snow to make sure his soul goes on to the eternal reward. The only way Roby can do that is convince the Ridgehorn family to eat a special pie, but a mysterious figure named Johnny Divine is guarding the crossroads. When peculiar Appalachian Mountain funeral customs get stirred into the mix, Roby has to perform miracles...or else. Novella originally published in the Cemetery Dance anthology "Brimstone Turnpike."

Learn more about [Burial to Follow](#)

FANGS IN VAIN

By Scott Nicholson

Sabrina Vickers is on a mission from God. Unfortunately, she's not quite sure what it is.

All she knows is that her lover Luke is a soulless vampire that she's supposed to save, the forces of evil could be approaching, and her spiritual adviser is a fallen

woman who has been falling for the past few hundred years. And, of course, Sabrina has yet to master the set of angel wings God granted her.

A romantic getaway turns into a showdown that could trigger the start of Armageddon, if Sabrina can't handle her on-the-job training. The first installment of the Sabrina Vickers series features paranormal action, humor, and romantic fun. Learn more at AuthorScottNicholson.com.

FLOWERS

By Scott Nicholson

Features the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Award grand-prize winner "The Vampire Shortstop" and other tales of fantasy, such as "When You Wear These Shoes" and "In the Heart of November." Includes the Makers series where children control the elements, as well as more tales of magic, romance, and the paranormal.

Learn more about *Flowers* and the award-winning "The Vampire Shortstop"

ASHES

By Scott Nicholson

A collection of supernatural and paranormal stories by award-winning author Scott Nicholson, including "Homecoming," "The Night is an Ally" and "Last Writes." From the author of THE RED CHURCH, THE SKULL RING, and the story collections FLOWERS and THE FIRST, these stories visit haunted islands, disturbed families, and a lighthouse occupied by Edgar Allan Poe. Exclusive introduction by Jonathan Maberry, author of THE DRAGON FACTORY and GHOST ROAD BLUES, as well as an afterword.

Learn more about the supernatural stories *in Ashes*

THE FIRST

By Scott Nicholson

A collection of dark fantasy and futuristic stories from award-winning author Scott Nicholson. Dystopia, cyberpunk, and science fiction imbue these stories that visit undiscovered countries and distant times. Includes two bonus essays and Nicholson's first-ever published story, in addition to the four-story Aeropagan cycle.

Learn more about the fantasy and science fiction stories *in The First*

ZOMBIE BITS

By Scott Nicholson

A collection of zombie stories, from the zombie point-of-view to the shoot-'em-up survival brand of apocalyptic horror. Proof that even zombies have a heart...Based on the comic book currently in development by Scott Nicholson and Derlis Santacruz. With a bonus story by Jack Kilborn, a comic script, and Jonathan Maberry's "Zombie Apocalypse Survival Scorecard."

Learn more about [Zombie Bits](#)

CURTAINS

By Scott Nicholson

A collection of crime and mystery tales from the vaults of Scott Nicholson. Includes "How to Build Your Own Coffin" and Year's Best Fantasy & Horror selection "Dog Person," as well as the psychological thrillers "Letters and Lies," "Sewing Circle," and more stories that appeared in magazines such as *Crimewave*, *Cemetery Dance*, and *Blue Murder*. Includes an afterword and a bonus story from bestselling authors J.A. Konrath and Simon Wood.

Learn more about [Curtains: Mystery Stories](#)

GATEWAY DRUG

By Scott Nicholson

After the first hit, there's no turning back. Ten tales of horror and suspense from a bestselling author. A man learns fast cars and fast women don't mix, even when they're dead. A young boy discovers the terrible power of love. A rock musician will do anything for stardom. Bonus contributions from Tim Lebbon and Shane Jiraiya Cummings, as well as the afterword "One Sick Puppy."

Learn about [Gateway Drug](#)

HEAD CASES

By Scott Nicholson

Nine stories of psychological suspense and paranoid horror, featuring the first-ever appearance of "Fear Goggles." Collected from the pages of *Crimewave*, *The Psycho Ward*, *Cemetery Dance*, and more, find out what happens when a writer thinks Stephen King is stealing his ideas. Bonus stories by William Meikle and John Everson.

Learn more about [Head Cases](#)

MISSING PIECES

By Scott Nicholson

Ten stories of suspense, fantasy, and the supernatural, including "The Beulahville Gospel; Jubilee," "Floating Cathedral Song," and "Constitution," as well as three stories making their original appearance.

THESE THINGS HAPPENED

By Scott Nicholson

It's been a strange life. It's been my life. Features stories, poems, and essays on relationships, romance, writing, and taking oneself far too seriously. Plus some humor. You may laugh, you may cry, you may decide you want to be a writer, too. You may hate me after if it's over. That's okay. You wouldn't be the first. Learn about [These Things Happened](#).

IF I WERE YOUR MONSTER

Children's book by Scott Nicholson, art by Lee Davis

Creatures of the night teach a lesson of bravery in this full-color, illustrated bedtime story for all ages. Let vampires, ghosts, scarecrows, and mummies protect your little one from the bullies and mean people of the world. 24 screens or pages. View it at [Haunted Computer](#)

TOO MANY WITCHES

Children's book by Scott Nicholson, art by Lee Davis

When Moanica Moonsweep plans a Halloween party, she needs the perfect potion of stinky stew. But when she asks her friends for advice, she ends up with one big mess and lots of hurt feelings. 28 full-color screens or pages. See it at [Haunted Computer](#)

DUNCAN THE PUNKIN

Children's book by Scott Nicholson, art by Sergio Castro

A momma pumpkin must teach her young pumpkin all about the dangers of Halloween, while a mysterious creature known as Skeerdy-Cat-Crow watches over the pumpkin patch. 30 full-color pages or screens. See it at [Haunted Computer](#)

IDA CLAIRE

By Scott Nicholson, art by Lee Davis

Little Ida is a handful of feisty fun for her harried dad, bursting with imagination and play while Dad tries to keep up. Features 32 full-color screens.

THE GORGE (UK)

By Scott Nicholson

An experimental rafting expedition, an FBI manhunt for a delusional killer, and the worst storm in decades collide in the remote mountain wilderness...and then *THEY* come out.

Learn more about [The Gorge](#)

OMNIBUS EDITIONS

You can also save with the omnibus editions

Ethereal Messenger (contains *The Red Church*, *Drummer Boy*, and *Speed Dating With The Dead*)

Mystery Dance (contains *Disintegration*, *Crime Beat*, and *The Skull Ring*, and bonus stories and essays)

Horror Movies: Three Screenplays (*The Gorge*, *Creative Spirit*, and *The Skull Ring* screenplays)

Ghost Box: Six Supernatural Thrillers (contains *The Red Church*, *Drummer Boy*, *The Dead Love Longer*, *Burial to Follow*, *Creative Spirit*, and *Speed Dating With The Dead*)

Mad Stacks: Short Stories Box Set (Contains *Gateway Drug*, *Head Cases*, and *Missing Pieces*)

Bad Stacks: Short Stories Box Set (Contains *Ashes*, *American Horror*, and *Curtains*)

Odd Stacks: Short Stories Box Set (Contains *The First*, *Flowers*, and *Zombie Bits*)

Table of Contents

After: First Light

After: The Shock (Excerpt)

After: The Echo (Excerpt)

Ally, Beneath the Sky That Burned (Excerpt)

Zombie Patrol excerpt (By J.R. Rain)

About Scott Nicholson

Other Scott Nicholson Books



This free edition was downloaded from
www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.