

Not a Good Day to Die

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Written for Gabriel Mallows.

With thanks to Luka for beta-reading.

Chapter 1

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“Are we going to check out Roywood?” I asked.

“Is there any point? It’s not in our jurisdiction and it’s supposed to be crawling with zombies, isn’t it? Or am I thinking of somewhere else?”

I grimaced at Gabriel Mallows’ back. We were scouting, or more accurately wandering around aimlessly. For once things were quiet in Dunell Hills which just made Squad Leader Mallows restless. Half an hour ago he’d burst into the squad room at Swinnerton PD and announced, “I’m going scouting. Who’s coming with me?” When no one answered he’d pointed at me. “You don’t look like you’re doing anything, Cat. You’re scouting with me.”

I hadn’t been doing anything, but frankly I valued my not doing anything time.

I didn’t have a clue what was in Roywood. At least not right now, although it had certainly had more than its fair share of zombies back in the early days. “You’re the squad leader Gabs, you tell me if there are zombies there.”

“Bloody indecisive wimmez,” he muttered. “Where are we now?”

“Tupton Lane, it’s still in Peddleston Village. Cross the road and we’re in Roywood.” I pointed at a road sign and then decided to wait patiently for his decision.

I’d switched in to Bravo squad a few months back, thinking I should maybe get some experience in the front line, as it were. Support was all very well, but in this town there are days when you have to pick up a shotgun and defend yourself. Gabriel Mallows had been promoted to squad leader not long after I’d joined up. He was half my age, with the organisational skills of a hyperactive hamster. If the department hadn’t been desperate... but then the department was desperate. This was a zombie apocalypse and we had no time to worry about whether 16-year-olds could handle responsibility. I coped with Gabby by skilled deployment

of passive-aggression. Waiting patiently for answers was, I had discovered, a particularly successful tactic.

“Fuck it!” he muttered. “Well we’re here now. Might as well check out some of the buildings. We’ve nothing better to do.”

“Protect Swinnerton PD? Man the ‘cades?”

“Rest of the squad have that covered. We’re scouting. Come on!” He headed across the road.

We turned into Owers Way. St. Dismas Hospital was on our left and Hem-burrow Library and Carslake Museum were on our right. They were both related to the hospital somehow; ancient, ornate and imposing buildings constructed to glorify their donors.

“Let’s give the library and museum a quick sweep, then we’ll check the hospital for medical supplies,” said Gabby.

I shrugged. Whatever.

We scrambled over the remains of a barricade. Heavy wooden doors had been dragged across the entrance and now lay splintered and rotting on the floor. Bookshelves lay in heaps nearby. Someone must have got them ready to plug the gaps. Piles of books lay in mounds against the far wall. The place smelled of damp paper, but not badly. The windows were set up high and hadn’t been smashed. The hall was large and the windows were small, not much rain had got in. The small high windows plunged the whole place into shadow, though.

Gabby looked around. “Doesn’t seem to have been much of a fight here. I wonder where the defenders went?”

I shrugged again. What was I? Fount of all knowledge?

Gabby scowled and skittered off into the depths of the hall, swinging his gun around imaginary corners. It was a silver-plated Smith & Wesson Model 500. Gabby described it as ‘big and manly’. It was certainly big. I had had no idea revolvers came in super-size. It did convey a certain Dirty Harry vibe on Gabby and its stopping power was impressive. It was a good quality handgun for Malton where we typically relied on what BD termed ‘pea-shooters’, dropped on us in supply crates. Gabby had called the gun Slasher. All the younger recruits seemed to worship BD and since his favourite gun had a name, so did theirs.

I picked up one of the books. It was a medical text, not surprising given this was a medical library. I frowned at the small writing and technical illustrations but I had no idea whether it was of any use to me or to us and no way of finding out. I tossed it to one side. It was probably useless. In this town, if you can’t fix the problem quickly, you wait for it to run its course and let our cheapened version of death do the fixing for you.

“Do you think there was an economics section?” Gabby’s voice echoed back. “There’s some books I’ve not been able to track down.”

It was easy to forget that Gabby read. He argued. He argued endlessly, mostly about the equitable distribution of resources and sometimes liberating the sources of production. Not that he could identify any sources of production in Malton. Some days he argued that, in the absence of an economy, communism and libertarianism were identical. That one always went down really well. Once or twice I’d joined in since I sometimes got weary of the DHPD’s right-wing rhetoric, but I never got much further than calling various officers fascist wankers, which doesn’t really rate highly as a debating tactic.

Gabby, on the other hand, knows his stuff. He read voraciously, mostly biography, politics and economics, when he could get his hands on the books. I’ve no idea where he picked up the habit. He can only have been 11 when the dead started walking the streets. He never talked about his family and no one ever asked. He’d staggered into Cotty Street Police Station when he was 14, half-starved and dragging a guitar that somehow looked bigger than he was. It was certainly more solid. We fed him and then taught him to shoot. Sometimes I’m not so sure we did him a favour.

There were several doorways leading off the large room, small offices maybe, or reading rooms or something. I checked my shotgun was loaded. It was. This was a routine drummed into us in the academy again and again; always keep your guns loaded and always double-check. I started looking through the side rooms one by one; office, cleaning cupboard, another office, a small hallway with a second door at the far end. There was a large biohazard sign stuck on it and then a long series of instructions for entry and exit procedures. I frowned.

“Gabby! Gabby!”

“What is it?”

“There’s something odd here.”

“Define odd.” His voice echoed, distorted by the large empty chamber at my back.

“Some kind of quarantine thing.”

I felt him arrive at my shoulder. “Wow! Well, don’t suppose it does anything now. Zombies will have been all over it.” He kicked the door. It fell from its hinges to the floor with a crash.

“Gabby!”

“What?”

“All those biohazard signs might have been there for a reason.”

“Zombies ransacked this place long ago. Someone just propped that door up. Whatever was in there has got out already.”

“You don’t know that.”

Gabby shrugged nonchalantly and walked into the room, sweeping his pistol about. Unlike the rest of library, this had smooth walls made from metal and a large hatch in the middle of the floor. Gabby stood in front of the hatch and stared at it thoughtfully.

“Best leave it shut.” I said hopefully.

Gabby shook his head. “Might be defensible down there. This room doesn’t look too badly mangled. We should check it out.”

I looked at the bare room and the metal walls. “There’s nothing here to mangle.”

Gabby just grinned and then pulled the hatch open. A metal tube led downwards. There were fixings in the sides where a ladder had once been. It looked like someone had torn it away.

“They must have taken the ladder away to prevent the zombies getting in,” suggested Gabby.

“Wouldn’t stop them for long. They’d just throw themselves down the hole and then stand up when they reached the bottom.”

Gabby looked thoughtful. “It worries me when you come up with shit like that. You’re right, though. Mind you, whoever was down there might not have thought of that. Fuck. Would zombies notice this hatch, if it was closed?”

I looked at the hatch thoughtfully. When shut it lay flush with the floor, a small handle set into it. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Gabby rolled his eyes. “Still worth checking down there. I’ve got climbing gear in my pack.”

I was still doubtful as Gabby began his descent. “There could be anything down there.”

“Only one way to find out.” Gabby fished a pair of sunglasses out of a breast pocket and put them on. “How do I look?”

“You can’t go down a big dark hole wearing sunglasses!”

“Who’s in charge here, bitch?”

I froze and glared at him. “Oi!”

“It’s a term of affection!” He grinned, waved, and began the descent. I stamped my foot.

“Halloo?” called a voice. “You coming down?”

I lay on my front to call down the hole. “Don’t you want me to keep guard up here?”

“Nah! Shut the door. Who’s going to come past?”

“Zombies? Death Cultists? Random maniacs? Take your pick. Anyway, you knocked the door off its hinges.”

“So I did. Fuck. Well, prop it back up. It’ll be fine.”

I growled in frustration, then heaved the door back into place.

It was dim down the bottom of the hole, with a faint musty smell in the air alongside the normal smell of rotting bodies that pervades Malton. Low power lighting cast a dull yellow glow over everything. That meant there was a generator down here somewhere which was probably worth salvaging.

I sniffed. “Zombies around. Must be.”

“It’s bloody dark. I can’t see a thing.”

I looked at Gabby. “Take the sunglasses off, maybe?”

“Point.” He took them off, grinned in an entirely unembarrassed fashion and then bounced on the balls of his feet. “Which way?”

I shrugged and then pointed right. Seemed like as good a direction as any. Our feet clattered on metal. We were in a long tunnel. I struggled to orient myself. We were probably heading out under the road towards the hospital. That figured, I supposed, what with the biohazard signs and everything.

“Something ahead,” said Gabby quietly.

“What kind of a something?”

“How should I know?”

I peered around him. There was a sort of lump in the middle of the floor. A dark mound in the yellowish light.

“Someone dropped something?” I hazarded.

“Pure genius.”

“I didn’t even want to be here.”

“So you keep saying. Fuck it! I’m checking it out.”

He walked forward. I saw him stiffen and then prod at the shape with his foot. It rolled over. The movement helped resolve the form. An arm flopped. It was the hunched shape of a human body. I hurried up, gun at the ready.

“Shit!” muttered Gabby. “Is there somewhere we can dump it?”

I looked around. “All the windows are at ground level. I suppose there might be a room we can lock it into.”

I knelt down for a closer look. It smelled terrible, but then zombies did. Although it was decomposing I could see the deep gashes in its torso. “Looks like a zombie kill to me. That means there are more of them down here.”

“That body’s been dead for a while, though,” pointed out Gabby. “Must have been zombified when it was put down. Why would zombies be tearing each other up?”

I shrugged again. “Maybe this one was looking for a revive or something.” Zombies weren’t terribly bright, but they did all work out eventually whether they wanted to be living or dead. Those that wanted to live stood around at revive points, muttering ‘Mrh?’ at passing humans, if they were alert enough. It was a strange sound, a kind of strangled groan, but everyone in the city knew it, and what it meant. Those who wished to remain dead often fought with the ‘mrh-cows’. They can be quite evangelical, in an odd sort of way, zombies.

Gabby pulled out a torch and switched it on, sweeping along the floor. “Lots of dust. No footprints.”

“So?”

“So there wasn’t a fight recently. I think that’s just a dead body.”

I snorted. “No such thing around here.”

We stood over the body bickering about whether to explore further or return to the surface and whether there was anything useful we could do about the body. In the end Gabby shot it through the head for good measure and announced we’d be back before it re-grew enough brains to cause trouble.

Then he put his sunglasses back on and headed deeper into the tunnels. After about a minute he tripped, cursed and took the sunglasses off.

“There’s only me here anyway.” I pointed out. “And I’m already unimpressed.”

“You never know. There might be a young and innocent wimmenz down here somewhere. I can rescue her.”

“And she’ll then fall at your feet?”

“Actually I’m more likely to fall at hers and beg in an entirely unmanly fashion, but I live in hope.” Gabby could be surprisingly self-effacing and self-aware at times, in amongst the brash confidence. I guess it’s called being 16.

The narrow tunnel opened out into a large cavernous space. There was a railing in front of us and we leaned over it to look down onto an empty floor.

“Cool place for a party,” remarked Gabby.

I laughed. “Maybe we should suggest it to Brass. When did we last celebrate anything?”

“Dunno, when did we last retake Caiger?”

“Must be someone’s birthday soon. When’s your 17th?”

There was a sharp silence. “Tomorrow.”

I blinked in surprise. “You never said.”

He shrugged. “Nothing much worth celebrating, not really.”

“Gabby, your 17th! That has to be worth marking.”

“Maybe, dunno, fuck it! I’d just rather not. This place is so fucked up I just can’t face it.”

“What was that?” I asked. I could hear something behind us, a dull metallic clatter.

“Sounds like someone running,” muttered Gabby.

We turned. The tunnel we had walked out of stretched away into the distance but it was possible to see the form of a man, silhouetted against the emergency lighting.

“Oi, mate!” called Gabby. “What’s happening.”

There was no answer. Some instinct made me start backing away but I bumped straight up against the railing. Seconds later I realised the run was slightly lopsided, like the man had a limp. Gabby fumbled about and produced his torch again. A powerful beam of light flooded the tunnel.

“Fucking hell!” he said.

I raised my shotgun and fired. The man’s skin was a palish green colour and blood was caked around his mouth and hands. I couldn’t account for the speed but I was pretty sure this was a zombie.

It staggered backwards and then came on. “How big is that thing?” muttered Gabby.

It was big, I realised. Gabby’s tall, well over six foot, but this creature was going to tower over him by several inches and it wasn’t skinny like he was. I fired

again. It was almost on top of us.

Gabby raised Slasher, all the time keeping the torch steadily fixed on the creature. He fired one shot, placing the bullet directly between the man's eyes. It fell over backwards. He glanced at me sideways and grinned. "Always go for the brains."

Then something dropped down from the ceiling. Gabby's gun clattered on the walkway, skidded and then dropped over the edge, clanging on the floor below. It was a second zombie, this one lean, wiry and elongated. Its limbs seemed uncannily long and jointed like a large spider had dropped down from the ceiling to pin Gabby to the floor. I raised my shotgun, hoping to get a clear shot at the thing's head but a stray arm lashed out, knocking the shotgun over the edge to join Slasher.

I fished in my pocket. I'd cooked up a syringe full of revivification serum earlier in the day and then Gabby had decided we didn't need it. So it had been slowly going to waste. The creature was busy biting and pounding on Gabby, so it was easy enough to slam the thing into the back of its neck.

On the whole, combat revivification is frowned upon. Those who have chosen the zombie lifestyle have a habit of standing right up, knocking you out, stealing your guns, shooting you and then committing suicide. It's very messy. Live humans do more damage than dead ones, who'd have thought? so we prefer to keep them dead. However, reviving him would buy us a few minutes, let Gabby find one of his spare guns and then we could just kill the zombie again and tip him over the edge of the gantry. With luck it would take the thing a while to get back up to our level.

I slid home the plunger. The zombie jerked upwards, its back ram-rod straight, and then turned a baleful glare upon me. To my surprise, it then stood up and sprang, spidery limbs outstretched. I found myself toppling backwards against the gantry rail and I scrabbled frantically at the zombie's front, realising I was grabbing the tattered remains of a lab coat. The gantry creaked and bent and I was leaning out over the drop. The zombie pressed forwards and my feet began to slide. I twisted frantically, grabbing at the railing behind me, hearing the sound of tearing metal. Then I was hanging over empty space. My hands were gripping thin metal struts that had twisted away from the gantry. The thin strip of metal hung down over the floor far below like a piece of orange peel and I dangled from the end.

"Cat!" It was Gabby shouting. There was a sudden flare of light and the zombie fell past me, burning like a comet.

"What?" I asked.

“Flare gun! I knew those things had to be useful for something.” Gabby lay down on his front, hands reaching down. “Can you get hold of me?”

I hauled myself upwards and then lunged with one hand. He grabbed hold and pulled. A foot found purchase on a metal strut somewhere and I risked transferring my second hand to his arm. Moments later I was back up on the walkway.

“Thanks,” I said, sitting up.

Gabby stood, his face looking surprisingly adult for a fleeting moment. “No problem.” Then he fidgeted and looked both ways. “What now? Go back and tip the other bodies over the edge as well?”

“Anti-virals first. That thing bit you. I don’t want you dying on me.”

Luckily Gabby wasn’t badly mauled. He’d sustained some scratches and a bite on his upper arm which appeared to have done more harm to his leather jacket than it had to him. I swabbed it clean and applied a dressing anyway, while Gabby whined that it was stinging and he was fine.

“You’ve got blood on your shirt too,” I muttered, examining the tear around the bite.

“It was blood-stained already from that break-in last week, a little more won’t hurt.”

“Really Gabby! Don’t you wash it?”

“Occasionally, often enough. Who made you my mother anyway?”

I tossed my head but didn’t say anything, because really it was none of my business and hot water was pretty hard to come by.

We tipped the big zombie Gabby had shot through the head, after its fellow and looked down at the burning remains below us, neither seemed to be moving. Even after spider zombie had burned out, it just lay there on the floor.

“I reckon it’s dead,” said Gabby.

“No such thing in this town.”

“So you keep saying but those zombies aren’t moving, nor is the fucker we found earlier.”

“Maybe one of those is the fucker we found earlier.”

Gabby shook his head. “He was black, so unless his skin magically changed colour when he stood up...” He shrugged.

“Point taken. I tried to revive that gangly one as well and it didn’t work. Mind you, the serum could have gone off.”

“Well, whatever the fuck’s going on, we need to find a way down. Slasher’s down there.”

“So is the big fuck-off zombie and the creepy ceiling spider zombie. Slasher’s not worth it. It only holds five shots in the cylinder anyway and the ammo isn’t

easy to find. Why not get a hand-gun with a magazine and ten shots?”

“You just don’t understand guns. Speaking of which...”

Gabby had a large shotgun strapped across his back. He unbuckled it and handed it over. I’m generally given shotguns. Precision aiming isn’t really my thing.

“What about you?”

“Spare pistol.” He pulled back his leather jacket to reveal a holster under one arm, counterbalancing the one at his hip where Slasher normally lived.

“Why did you shoot it with the flare then?”

“Flare was cooler.”

“What?”

“Fuck! Flare was to hand. I didn’t have time to think.”

I shook my head.

The gantry continued round the edge of the large room. Doorways opened off it at regular intervals. The first batch led into spaces that had clearly once been laboratories. The doors were all smashed and we wandered, largely uncomprehendingly, amid broken glass and twisted bits of equipment.

“What do you suppose they were doing here?” asked Gabby.

“Zombie stuff.”

“How do you figure that?”

I pointed at the nearest whiteboard. Notes were scrawled across it in marker pen. ‘Group meeting: Monday 10am’, ‘Remember to bug NT again about notes’, ‘Could infection become airborne?’ All the lab whiteboards had had similar scrawl. Enough to be sure these guys were studying the Necrotech virus.

“Do you think they developed the disease?”

“Doubt it.” I pointed at the note about bugging ‘NT’. “Looks like they were separate, trying to get the information from Necrotech.”

“Yeah but if they were separate *and* working on the virus... I mean how? No one knew about the virus until after the quarantine.”

“Maybe they came afterwards. I bet no end of people have been smuggled in here for one reason or another since the wall went up.”

“But the biohazard signs in the library?”

“These labs have probably been here a long time, connecting the hospital and the library, and maybe the museum. Maybe we’d have ended up at the museum if we’d turned left instead of right down the tunnel. Someone must have known about these labs and thought they could make them secure.”

“More fool them.”

We found the living quarters; five bedrooms and a small kitchen. Then we stumbled across the remains of what had probably been some kind of isolation room. The door had been smashed out from the inside. A large, reinforced, metal door, smashed out from the inside.

“That’s not good,” muttered Gabby, looking at it. “Zombies shouldn’t be that strong.”

“Shouldn’t have been as fast as that one we met earlier either.”

“What the fuck were these jokers doing?”

I looked at the twisted and buckled door again. “Are you serious about finding a way down to collect Slasher?”

I heard him sigh. “Not really. It would be kind of stupid, knowing that thing is down there somewhere. Not to mention the creepy spider one.”

I nodded and patted him on the arm. “There’ll be other guns.”

“It was just a gun. It was cool but, you know...” he shrugged and scratched his arm. “What do you say we quickly check the rest of the rooms on this level, see if there’s anything useful and then we bug out? Leave the big dangerous creepy spider zombies safely boxed up down here.”

“We *will be* in trouble if we both get zombified down here. No one knows where we are and zombies can’t climb up ropes.” I pointed out.

“Right and once we get back up top, we can let the right people know about the mega-zombs and they can bring the buildings down on top of them. That should stop ’em getting out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said relieved. “Mind you I think there must be a big generator down here that we should look for. Something’s kept the lights going, and for quite some time, I’d guess.”

“Won’t be portable then, will it? Nah, let’s just give the stuff here the once over quickly and then scarper.”

I smiled at him. “They could be stuck down below. Maybe it’s all safe now.”

He grinned back. “Five bedrooms and this isolation room; That’s six people. There must be three more somethings down here somewhere. I don’t much fancy meeting them. No, we’ll do this your way.” He made a mock serious expression. “I’m wearing my sensible hat today.”

“You’re not wearing a hat.”

“Well I don’t have a sensible hat. But, if I did, I’d be wearing it. Use your imagination, woman!”

I thumped him gently. “Sexist!”

“Always! Come on wimmenz! Let’s check this place out!”

Then we found the morgue. It looked like the basics of an infirmary but a large chest freezer had been dragged into the room and someone had taped the word “morgue” onto it. Inside were two bodies. A small blonde woman in pyjamas was laid out, looking like she was asleep. There wasn’t any obvious sign of injury but since she was frozen solid it was difficult to tell. There might have been a bandage on her arm, under the pyjamas. The other was obviously a zombie, although someone had put a bullet through its brain.

“Freezing doesn’t stop zombies, does it?” asked Gabby as I squinted at the bodies.

“Slows them up a little, but no. Never heard of freezing stopping them.”

“Then why aren’t these two up and about causing chaos?”

“Or that body in the tunnel for that matter, or even the zed you fried. This woman might not have been infected, but the other four sure are.” I closed down the lid of the freezer. “I wonder if they’ve got medical notes anywhere?”

“It’ll all be on the computers won’t it? Behind passwords and shit.”

“Bet there was a paper trail too. This room was some kind of hospital. I’m guessing that woman died of something or other and they had nowhere to store the body.”

“Why not just ship her out?”

“They had no easy way out of the quarantine? They had to jury rig up this ‘morgue’?”

“OK, makeshift morgue, find the paper trail.” Gabby glanced around the ransacked room and then wandered over to a filing cabinet. It was lying on the floor, the drawers trapped beneath it. Gabby heaved it over. Papers spilled out and ran across the floor.

The story we pieced together was pretty simple. The medical notes were full of phrases like ‘massive organ failure’ and ‘infection carried by saliva’ but the basics seemed to be that the woman, Dr Kent, had been bitten. They’d administered a ‘cure’ and she had died.

“Stupid fuckers,” muttered Gabby.

“They were working on a cure. They were trying to help.”

“Like fuck they were. What do you think the stronger, faster zombies are all about? If they were working on a cure it wasn’t the only fucking thing they were doing.”

At that moment we both heard the noise. A faint groan and the sound of running feet.

“It’s another one,” whispered Gabby.

“They don’t seem any brighter than the regular zeds, just faster, and stronger or creepy-crawler.”

“Just.” His tone was dead-pan.

“It’ll also stay down once shot. I’ll go and stand in the corridor. It’ll head for me and then you can shoot it from behind.”

“You trust me?”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. The question made me pause and look at him closely. Yes, he was 16 and hyperactive and irritating in all sorts of ways but I actually had no doubt that he would stay calm in a crisis and he was a good shot. He wouldn’t run or abandon me or panic. It wasn’t everyone who could face down a mega-zombie and remember to shoot it between the eyes. Most people wouldn’t think to turn a flare on one either and certainly few people would actually hit it. There was a reason Brass had put him in charge, after all. I’d just never really thought about it. “Yes, I trust you.”

“K. Let’s do this thing.”

Once I was standing out on the encircling walkway, it did occur to me that I had maybe been a little blithe in my confidence. The plan was sound, but that didn’t make acting as bait any easier... and why was I the one acting as bait anyway?

I clutched Gabby’s spare shotgun tight against my chest and banged a metal ladle from the kitchen against the railing, listening all the while for the sounds of running feet. Gabby had concealed himself behind the closed door of one of the offices.

It wasn’t long before the thing appeared some way off to my right, a moving shape in the dim lighting of the facility. I banged the ladle against the railing a couple more times, just to make sure I had its attention and then dropped the lump

of metal on the floor so I had both hands free for the gun. Gabby's hidey hole was between me and the zombie, which was good.

I held my ground until it was past Gabby's concealed room. I could see it now, a woman's form with grotesquely elongated arms and legs and a mouth that seemed unnaturally wide and gaping. I opened fire, emptying shot after shot into her and pumping the chamber maniacally. I walked backwards a step at a time as I did so, more through habit than anything else. The fighting retreat was ingrained into us all.

She pounded on. I'd been aiming for her chest because shotguns are useless as precision weapons but great for sheer stopping power. My intention was to slow her down, expecting Gabby to take the head shot, but Gabby hadn't appeared. I backed up further, fumbling new shells into the gun. I dropped the first onto the floor but the second slipped home. I didn't bother scrabbling for more but raised the gun and fired in the general direction of the thing's head, watching the shot pepper its way across her features, ripping flesh from bone to reveal the skull beneath. She was less than a stride away. I held the gun out in front of me like a bar as the flailing limbs reached forward. I fell backwards, staring into that wide gaping mouth, my shotgun rammed hard against her throat, keeping the teeth away from me.

I didn't think getting eaten would kill me, but it's never a pleasant experience. "Gabby!" I shouted, desperately.

I heard shots. The thing turned its head but I was pinned down by the weight on my chest and couldn't do much with the distraction. I closed my eyes and hoped Gabby's aim was good. More shots followed and then I felt the body slump. I pushed it to one side, no help from Gabby, and then struggled to my feet a sarcastic comment on my lips. Gabby stood in the centre of the corridor, a pistol held in one hand. He gazed at me a moment, mouth working silently and then swayed and crashed to the floor.

It didn't take long to work out what was wrong with him. His skin was hot to the touch and his arm, where the zombie had bitten him, was a livid red. With difficulty and a lot of cursing I managed to drag him to the infirmary and get him onto one of the beds. I found paracetamol among the pills littering the floor and gave them to him on the grounds that it might help bring the fever down. It had some effect. I'd have done efficient medical things with fluid drips if I'd had the

skills and been able to find any supplies. As it stood, I was reduced to dabbing at his forehead with a damp flannel.

After about ten minutes his eyes flickered open.

“Did I get the zombie?”

“Yeah, you got the zombie.” I reached down to squeeze his hand.

“That’s good. I feel like shit, though.”

“Infection.”

“That’s not good, is it.”

“I don’t think so, no. It means our normal anti-virals don’t work.”

“We’re going to have to use their cure, then.”

“Well for starters we don’t know if there is any and for seconds it killed the only person they tried it on.”

“I had actually remembered that much, but what alternative is there? I’m not getting all zombieish and killing you too.” He looked completely serious.

I wondered briefly if he really understood what he was saying but then realised he did. He wasn’t stupid by a long shot and he clearly knew he was proposing his own death in order to save me. “There are revives,” I hazarded.

“Not for this type of zombie-ism.”

He was right there. Nothing we had seen suggested that this infection carried the same immunity to permanent death. “We could wait and see. I can always try to revive you, and shoot you if it doesn’t work.” I stumbled a bit over the end of that sentence. I didn’t like the idea of shooting someone dead, properly dead that is, even if they were a zombie, least of all if they were someone I knew.

He shook his head. “I’m not prepared to take the risk. You could get infected too. Go find the cure.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Well I’m in charge of this squad and I am. Go find a cure, wimmenz.” He raised his head and then sank back with a groan. “I’ll rest here a bit.”

I sighed and started checking the litter of jars and vials on the floor. We had the medical name for the cure in Dr Kent’s notes. It was just a matter of matching the labels.

Gabby grimaced when I returned with the a small vial and a syringe. “Maybe that woman had some dodgy condition. The cure just reacted badly as a one-off.”

“Maybe. You still sure about this? I could go get Snow or Sy or someone. They might have some idea that we don’t.”

“If you thought you had time for that, you’d have gone already. Look on the bright side, either I survive, or you get rid of a lousy squad leader.”

“You’ve done all right.” I suddenly felt defensive on his behalf.

"I irritate you. You think I don't know what I'm doing."

"Only sometimes. You do OK in a tight spot." There was finding him a bit irritating and there was wanting him gone. I didn't like to think of him actually hurt.

"You didn't want to come down here. I should have listened."

"I get too cautious. If someone else had stumbled on this place the infection might have got out. It was a good call, checking down here."

"Now I know it's bad, with you complimenting me."

"Gabby... I..."

"Wimmenz! Just... fuck... get on with it please."

I sighed and sucked a dose into the syringe. The notes hadn't been that clear about amounts but the bottle was small, looked like a single dose to me. Like I knew anything about it. I didn't like the colour. It was just off clear with a sickly yellowish tinge.

"These probably weren't meant to be left around that long," I said doubtfully.

"They probably wouldn't have done me any good when they were fresh. Get on with it, Cat."

I tapped up a vein. Dr Snow had shown me how to do this. It was useful for some of the medical supplies they dropped on us. Then I injected the so-called cure.

"What now?" asked Gabby.

"I don't know. I guess you die or get better."

"Burn." He closed his eyes.

The symptoms more or less followed those laid out in the medical notes. Gabby's fever went down as the cure wiped out the virus. We chatted a bit about nothing much; music and politics and our friends back at the PD. He was a nice enough lad, really. I held his hand and he let me, but we never talked about what was actually happening. I didn't know what to say. I don't suppose he did either. Gradually his breathing became laboured.

"Do you think I'll make it to 17?" he whispered.

I glanced at my watch. "You've got half an hour."

"I'll make it to 17 then. I'd hate to die at 16. It's a shitty age." He coughed and there was blood on his fingers as he took his hand from his mouth.

"You'll make it to 17. You're going to pull through and we can have a big party. Anton quit smoking last week but he's been hoarding the ciggies. We can trade them for pigeon at Caiger, and Christmas lights and some big fuck-off boom box you can play Guns 'n Roses on. It'll be great, you'll see."

"You almost make it sound worth celebrating."

“It is. Oh Gabby, it is. We might give you a hard time but we all like you really.”

He coughed again. “Thanks Cat! I’ll look forward to it.”

Another fit of coughing took him, his body shaking. He was taking big gasping breaths. Dr. Kent’s medical notes said her lungs had failed first. I found a bag valve mask and started ventilating. He lay silent under the mask for a bit, his eyes flickering open occasionally. He continued to cough and I had to stop the ventilation and hold him up as his body was wracked and shaken and he brought up blood and goodness knows what onto the sheets. He clung to me after one such effort.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“No problem. You’ll be fine,” I whispered. “You just have to get through this and then you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah! Keep telling me that. Oh God, Cat! I feel fucking awful.”

I hugged him. Then he sank back onto the bed and I reached for the ventilator once more.

The scientists in this underground lab had kept their colleague alive for almost four weeks as her organs had failed one by one. It sounded unpleasant. I tried to tell myself that Gabby was lucky that I had neither the skills nor the equipment to do the same. I wasn’t convinced.

“Hang on in there,” I whispered.

He smiled wanly and then closed his eyes.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, surfacing a little occasionally to complain in a ragged whisper about music I hadn’t heard, or rant about the evils of The Man or money or Necrotech or all three at once. Occasionally he mumbled about a family I didn’t know and had never inquired after.

Then his eyes opened and fixed me with a penetrating gaze. “Mum!”

I grasped his hand instinctively, but he blinked and disappointment flashed across his face.

“Sorry Cat,” he whispered.

“Gabby! It’s OK.” I realised tears were starting to run down my cheeks.

“Don’t cry, Cat. It was a pretty shitty life anyway. Not got... much... to look forward to.”

“No, Gabby. There’s always hope. We’ll get out of Malton one day. Don’t give up!”

“I don’t think I’m going to make it. Sorry to let you down. I’m glad you were here.” His head fell back and his eyes closed. The fingers grasping my hand slowly fell away.

“No, Gabs! You’re doing fine, just a little longer.” I pressed fingers to his wrist, searching for a pulse. There was nothing to be found. “Please, just a little longer,” I begged, but he didn’t respond.

I tried a desperate improvised CPR, probably doing more harm than good. Slowly, his body became cold and stiff beneath my palms.

“Gabby, please, don’t die.” But there was nothing. He had already gone.

I lifted my hands away from his chest and looked at the still body. Only my sobs disturbed the silence.

It was 1.05am on the 17th May. Gabriel Mallows was just 17.

I smoothed the untidy brown hair away from his face and wondered whether to leave him where he was, put him in the freezer, or somehow try to drag the body back to the DHPD. It was such a stupid, stupid waste of life. But then all of Malton was a stupid, stupid waste.

Then his eyes flicked open and fixed me with a cold, dead stare. My hand stilled on the cool skin of his forehead. A low groan issued through his lips.

“Mrh?”

So I cooked up a needle and stuck it in him. Twenty minutes later he was revived, right as rain and I was incandescent with fury.

It wasn’t hard to work out what had happened. The ‘cure’ had cured only the mutated form of the zombie virus. The underlying original infection, which responded to the revivification serum, had continued chugging around his system. So when the cure finally killed him, the original infection simply kicked in and raised him as a zombie.

“This is all your fault,” I shouted over the balcony rail as he abseiled down a rope to the floor below in order to collect Slasher. “Coming down here was a stupid idea. Anything could have happened! We could both have died, or become super-zombies. What if one of us had gone back up the hole and carried the infection with us?”

“I just had a near-death experience. I could use a little fucking sympathy here,” he retorted. There was a clatter and a curse. I deduced he had reached the floor.

“You don’t deserve any sympathy. You are disorganised, reckless, puerile, adolescent and sexist.” I shouted down.

“And you’re obstructive, hyper-critical and scared of responsibility. Ah ha! Found it! If you don’t like the way I run the squad then you should have stepped up.”

“Bastard! Stupid, fucking, bastard!”

“I’m tying your shotgun onto the rope. Haul it up.”

I did so with bad grace, still seething quietly.

“Did you check the zombies?” I asked as he emerged back over the railing.

“Yes, I checked the zombies. Dead as fucking door nails. I told you.”

“You just made a lucky guess. I can’t believe how close we came to dying, really dying.”

“Oh shut up, Cat! I get it. I’m a joke. My life is a farce. Fuck, I died today and even that was a farcical stupid fucking mess. I’m stuck in this shitty town, with a bunch of people who tolerate me at best. I have no life, no future, I don’t even have a sodding girlfriend because, let me tell you, picking up women in a zombie fucking apocalypse isn’t easy. To top it all, it’s my sodding birthday so just, for once in your life, quit complaining about how much you hate working for me.”

He looked terribly vulnerable all of a sudden, like he had on the bed while he lay dying. I suddenly burst into tears.

“Oh God! Cat. Don’t cry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout at you.” He took a step towards me and then stopped waving his hands vaguely, almost, but not quite, daring to touch.

“I thought you were going to die!” I sobbed.

“Shit! Cat! It’s all right. I didn’t die. I thought I was going to die too.” He hugged me rather awkwardly as if I might explode any moment which, given how unreasonably I was behaving, was probably a fair assessment.

“I’m sorry,” I sniffed a bit. “I didn’t mean all those horrible things I said. You’re not a joke.”

“Well they were mostly right.” I felt him shrug. “I am puerile, adolescent, disorganised and.. what else did you say? I’ve forgotten.”

“Sexist.”

“Yeah, that too, silly wimmenz. Have you stopped crying yet? You’re getting my shirt wet. I wouldn’t want to take it off. You probably couldn’t control yourself.”

I laughed and thumped his chest. “In your dreams, sunshine. I’m old enough to be your mother.”

“But you’re not and anyway, maybe I like the sexy mum thing.”

“Waaay too much information Gabby.”

He grinned. “We good?” he asked.

“Yes, we’re good.”

“Cool! Because I don’t know about you but I want to get out of this shit hole and get you to organise me a birthday party.”