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RESIDENT EVIL™

CITY OF THE DEAD



S.D. PERRY

PROLOGUE

Raccoon Times, August 26, 1998

MAYOR ANNOUNCES 'KEEP CITY SAFE' PLAN

RACCOON CITY—On the front steps of City Hall, Mayor Harris announced in a press conference yesterday afternoon that the City Council will be hiring at least ten new police officers to join the Raccoon police, in response to the continued suspension of the Special Tactics and Rescue Squad (S.T.A.R.S.), in effect since the brutal murders that plagued Raccoon earlier this summer. Joined by Police Chief Brian Irons and all of Raccoon's Council members, Harris assured the gathered citizens and reporters that Raccoon City will once again be a safe community in which to live and work, and that the investigation into the eleven "cannibal" murders and three fatal wild-animal attacks is far from closed. "Just because no one else has been attacked in the last month doesn't mean that the elected officials of this city can relax," Harris stated. "The good people of Raccoon deserve to have confidence in their police force and to be secure in the knowledge that their political representatives are doing everything possible to ensure each citizen's safety. As many of you know, the S.T.A.R.S.'s suspension is likely to become permanent. That unit's gross mishandling of the murder investigations and its subsequent disappearance from Raccoon City suggests that they don't care about this community—but I want to assure you that we care, that myself, Chief Irons, and the men and women you see here today want nothing more than to make Raccoon a place in which our children can grow up without fear."

Harris went on to detail a three-point plan designed to bolster public confidence and keep Raccoon citizens from falling victim to violence. Besides hiring between ten and twelve new police officers, the citywide curfew will remain in place through at least September, and Chief Irons will personally head a task force of several officers and detectives to continue searching for the killers who took the lives of eleven people between May and July of this year-----

Cityside, September 4, 1998

RENOVATION OF UMBRELLA COMPLEX PLANNED

RACCOON CITY— The Umbrella chemical plant just south of downtown Raccoon is due for major construction efforts, slated to begin next Monday. This will be the third such structural renovation in the last year for the thriving pharmaceutical company. According to Umbrella spokesperson Amanda Whitney, two of the laboratories inside the main plant will be fitted with several million dollars' worth of new equipment designed for vaccine synthesis, and the building itself will receive a state-of-the-art security system. In addition, all of the connected office buildings will be upgrading computers over the next several weeks. But will this be a problem for downtown traffic? Said Whitney, "With the Raccoon police building just finishing up yet another one of their renovations, we know that local commuters are getting pretty tired of blocked streets. We're going to do our best not to get in the way of downtown traffic; most of the construction is internal, and the rest we'll be doing after business hours." The courtyard in front of the RPD building, our readers may remember, was recently repaved and landscaped after several mysterious cracks appeared in the cement and topsoil; traffic had to be diverted around two blocks of Oak Street for six days. When asked why so many "overhauls" as of late, Whitney replied, "Umbrella has stayed ahead of the competition for as long as it has by keeping up with current technology. It's going to be a busy couple of months, but I think it will be well worth the effort when we're finally through. . . ."

.Raccoon Weekly Editorial, September 17, 1998 IRONS TO RUN?

RACCOON CITY— Mayor Harris may be in for a rough race next spring. Weekly sources inside the RPD are saying that Brian Irons, chief of police for the last four-and-a-half years, may be running for the city's top office in the next election, facing off against the popular and as yet unopposed Devlin Harris, already in office for three consecutive terms. Although Irons would not confirm his possible entry into the political arena, the onetime S.T.A.R.S. member also refused to deny the rumor.

With his approval rating at an all-time high ever since the cessation of this summer's savage murders (as yet unsolved) and the planned expansion of the RPD, Chief Irons may indeed be the man to knock Harris out of City Hall; the question is, will voters be able to forget Irons's alleged involvement in the 1994 Cider District land scam? Or his rather expensive tastes in art and interior design, which have turned parts of the RPD building into something more like a museum than a working office? Assuming he means to throw his hat into the ring, this reporter—for one—will be looking forward to examining Irons's financial records. . . .

Baocoan Times, September 22, 1998

TEENAGER ATTACKED IN CITY PARK

RACCOON CITY—At, approximately 6:30 P.M. last night, fourteen-year-old Shanna Williamson was accosted by a mysterious stranger in downtown's Birch Street Park on the way home from softball practice. The man came out from behind a row of hedges at the south end of the park and knocked Ms. Williamson off of her bicycle before attempting to grab her. The teen managed to get away with only a few scratches, running to the nearby residence of Tom and Clara Atkins; Mrs. Atkins alerted the authorities, who conducted a thorough search of the park but found no sign of the attacker. According to the girl (through a police statement issued earlier this morning), the man appeared to be a transient; his clothes and hair were dirty, and she described a bad odor coming from him, a "smell like rotten fruit." She also said that he seemed drunk, staggering and falling after her as she ran. With the plague of cannibalistic murders from May to July still unsolved, the RPD is taking Ms. Williamson's encounter very seriously; the assailant bears a striking resemblance to eyewitness reports of the "gang" members spotted in Victory Park last June. Mayor Harris has called a press conference for later today, and Mice Chief Brian Irons has stated already that with the first of the newly hired police officers expected next week, regular patrols will extend their routes to include the downtown park blocks. . . .

ORE

SEPTEMBER 26, 1998

WITH THE GUYS WAITING OUTSIDE IN BAR-

ry's truck, Jill did her best to hurry. It wasn't easy; the house had been tossed since the last time she'd been there, the floors were strewn with books and papers, and it was too dark to navigate around the debris easily. That her small home had been violated was upsetting, though not much of a surprise. She figured she should just be thankful that she wasn't really the sentimental type—and that the intruders hadn't managed to find her passport.

She grabbed random handfuls of clean socks and underwear in the cramped darkness of the bedroom and stuffed them deep into her weathered backpack, wishing she could turn on the lights. Packing a bag in the dark was harder than it sounded, would be even if one's house hadn't been trashed; but she knew they couldn't afford to take any chances. It was unlikely that Umbrella still had all of their houses staked out, but if there was anyone watching, a light in the window could draw fire.

At least you're getting out. No more hiding. There was that much. They were headed for foreign soil, to storm enemy headquarters and very likely get killed in the process, but at least she wouldn't have to hang out in Raccoon anymore. And from what she'd read in the papers lately, maybe that was for the best. Two attacks in the last week ... Chris and Barry were skeptical about the danger, even knowing what the T-Virus did to people—Barry thought it was some kind of a PR stunt, that Umbrella would “rescue” Raccoon before anyone got hurt. Chris agreed, insisting that Umbrella wouldn't crap in their own back yard, so to speak, what with the Spencer estate disaster so recent. But Jill wasn't prepared to assume anything; Umbrella had already proven that they couldn't contain their research. And with what Rebecca and David Trapp's team had faced in Maine ...

Now wasn't the time to think about that—they had a plane to catch. Jill scooped the flashlight off the dresser and was about to head for the living room when she remembered that she only had one bra with her. Scowling, she turned back to the open drawers and started to dig. She had enough clothing already, chosen from what Brad had left behind when he'd fled Raccoon; she and the guys had been holed up in his vacant house for several weeks, ever since Umbrella had hit Barry's house, and although none of Brad's stuff fit Chris's tall frame or Barry's massive one, she'd been able to make do. Lingerie, however, wasn't something the S.T.A.R.S. pilot had stocked up on. She didn't particularly want to hop off the plane in Austria and have to go bra shopping.

“Vanity, thy name is underwire,” she muttered softly, pawing through the rumpled heap. She found the elusive article only after she'd gone through the drawer twice, and crammed it into the bag as she jogged toward the small front room of the rented house. It was only the second time she'd been there since they'd gone into hiding; she had the feeling she might not be coming back for a while. There was a picture of her father on one of the bookshelves that she wanted to take.

Stepping nimbly through the dark clutter, she hooded the flashlight with one hand and trained the narrow beam at the corner where the shelf had been. The Umbrella team had knocked the whole thing over but apparently hadn't bothered to go through the books themselves. God only knew what they'd been looking for in the first place. Clues as to where the renegade S.T.A.R.S. were hiding, probably; after the attack at Barry's house and the disastrous mission at Caliban Cove, she no longer had any illusions about Umbrella simply ignoring them.

Jill spotted the book she wanted, a rather lurid-looking paperback entitled *Prison Life*; her father would have laughed. She picked it up and rifled through the pages, stopping when the light fell across Dick Valentine's crooked grin. He'd sent the picture along with one of his more recent letters, and she'd tucked it into the book so that she wouldn't lose it. Hiding important things was a habit she'd gotten into young, one that had just paid off yet again. She let the book drop, the need to hurry suddenly forgotten as she gazed down at the photo. A faint smile played across her lips. He was probably the only man she knew of who looked good in the bright orange jumpsuit of a maximum security pen. For just a moment, she wondered what he'd think of her current predicament; in a roundabout way, he was responsible, at least for her getting involved with the S.T.A.R.S. in the first place. After he'd been sent up, he'd urged her to get out of the business, even saying that he'd been wrong to train her as a thief. . . . so I take a legit job, actually working for society instead of against it—and people in Raccoon start dying. The S.T.A.R.S. uncover a conspiracy to create bioweapons with a virus that turns living things into monsters. Obviously nobody believes us, the S. T.A.R.S. that can't be bought by Umbrella are either discredited or eliminated. So we go underground, try to dig up proof and come up empty-handed as Umbrella continues to screw around with their dangerous research and more good people are killed. Now we're off on what will probably be a suicide mission to Europe to see if we can infiltrate the headquarters of a multibillion-dollar corporation and stop them from destroying the goddamn planet. What would you think, I wonder? Assuming you'd even believe such a fantastic tale, what would you think?

“You’d be proud of me, Dick,” she whispered, scarcely aware that she’d spoken aloud—and not at all sure if it was the truth. Her father wanted to see her in a less perilous line of work, and compared to what she and the other ex-S.T.A.R.S. were currently up against, burglary was about as dangerous as ac-counting.

After a long moment, she carefully placed the photo into a pocket of the backpack and looked around at the broken remnants of her small home, still thinking about her father and what he’d say about the strange path her life had taken; if things went well, maybe she’d be able to ask him in person. Rebecca Chambers and the other survivors of the Maine mission were still in hiding, quietly networking through the S.T.A.R.S. organization for support and waiting to hear what she and Chris and Barry could tell them about Umbrella’s headquarters. The official HQ was in Austria, although they all suspected that the minds behind the T-Virus had their own secret complex elsewhere—

· which you won’t find out if you don’t get your ass in gear; the guys are gonna think you stopped to take a nap.

Jill shouldered the bag and took a final look around the room before moving toward the back door, through the kitchen. There was a lingering scent of rotten fruit in the dark air, coming from a bowl of apples and pears on top of the refrigerator that had long since disintegrated into mush. Even though she knew better, the smell caused a chill to run up her spine; she hurried for the closed door, trying to block out the sudden vivid flashes of memory of what they’d found at the Spencer estate . . .

... rotting as they walked, reaching out with wet and withered fingers, faces melting with pus and de-cay—

“Jill?”

She barely contained a cry of surprise at the sound of Chris’s soft voice just outside. The door opened, Chris silhouetted against the darkness by a distant streetlight.

“Yeah, right here,” she said, stepping forward. “Sorry it took me so long. Umbrella’s been through here with a bulldozer.”

Even in the bare light she could see the half grin on his boyish face. “We were starting to think the zom-bies got ya,” he said, and although his tone was light, she could hear real concern beneath it.

Jill knew that he was trying to ease the tension but couldn’t find it in herself to smile back. Too many people had died because of what Umbrella had un-leashed in the woods outside of town; if the spill had happened closer to Raccoon ...

“Not funny,” she said softly.

Chris’s grin faded. “I know. You ready?”

Jill nodded, although she didn’t feel particularly ready for what lay ahead. Then again, she hadn’t felt ready for what they were leaving behind, either. In a matter of weeks, her concept of reality had undergone a massive shift, turning nightmares into the common-place.

Evil corporations, mad scientists, killer viruses. And the walking dead. . .

“Yeah,” she said finally. “I’m ready.”

Together, they stepped outside. As Jill closed the door behind them, she was suddenly struck by a strange and ominous certainty—that she would never set foot in the house again, that the three of them wouldn’t be coming back to Raccoon City at all... .. but not because anything happens to us. Some-thing will happen, but not to us.

Frowning, hand on the doorknob, she hesitated for a moment and tried to make sense of the bizarre thought. If they survived the recon, if they were successful in their fight against Umbrella, why wouldn’t they come back to their homes? She didn’t know, but the feeling was uncomfortably strong. Something bad was going to happen, something—

“Hey, you okay?”

Jill looked up at Chris, saw the same concern on his youthful face that she’d noticed earlier. They’d gotten pretty close in the last few weeks, although she suspected that Chris might like to get a bit closer. Oh, and you don’t?

The sense of impending unpleasantness was already fading, other confusions and uncertainties stepping in to take its place. Jill shook herself mentally and nodded at Chris, letting the feelings go. The flight to New York wasn’t going to wait for her to indulge in self-analysis—or to worry about things that she couldn’t control, imagined or otherwise.

Still, that feeling . . .

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” she said, and meant it.

They moved out into the night, leaving the house dark behind them, as lonely and silent as a tomb.

Two

OcfoBER.3, 1998

TWILIGHT HAD SETTLED ACROSS THE MOUN-

tains, painting the jagged horizon in shades of purple dusk. The winding blacktop snaked through the gathering darkness, surrounded by shadowed hills that towered into the cloudless sky, stretching toward the first faint glimmerings of starlight.

Leon might have appreciated the majestic view a bit more if he wasn’t so goddamn late. He’d make it to his shift on time, sure, but he’d been hoping to get settled into the new apartment first, take a shower, get something to eat; as it was, he might have time to hit a drive-through on his way to the station. Changing into his uniform back at the last rest stop had saved him a couple of minutes, but basically he was screwed. Way to go, Officer Kennedy. First day on the job and you’ll be picking cheeseburger out of your teeth during roll call. Very professional.

His shift started at nine and it was already just after eight; Leon let his boot ride a little heavier on the gas, even as his Jeep whipped past a sign that told him he was half an hour away from Raccoon City. At least the road was clear; except for a couple of semis, he hadn’t seen anyone for what felt like hours. A nice change, considering the traffic tie-up just outside of New York that had cost him most of the afternoon. He’d actu-ally tried to call the night before to leave a message with the desk sergeant that he

might be late, but there'd been something wrong with the connection. Nothing but a busy signal.

What little furniture he had was already moved into a studio apartment in the working-class but basically decent Trask district of Raccoon City, there was a nice park not two blocks away, and it was only a five-minute drive to the station. No more gridlock, no more overcrowded slums or random acts of brutality. Assuming he could survive the embarrassment of showing up to his first shift as a full-blown officer of the law without having unpacked his bags, he was looking forward to living in the peaceful community. Raccoon is about as far removed from the Big Apple as you can get, thank you very much—well, except for the last few months. Those murders . . .

In spite of himself, he felt a tiny thrill at the thought. What had happened in Raccoon was horrible, of course, sickening—but the perps had never been caught and the investigation was really just getting started. And if Irons liked him, liked him as much as the heads of the academy had liked him, maybe Leon would get a chance to work on the case. Word had it that Chief Irons was kind of a prick, but Leon knew his training had been top-notch—even a prick would have to be a little impressed. He'd graduated in the top tenth, after all. And it wasn't like he was a stranger to Raccoon City, since he'd spent most of his summers there as a kid, when his grand-parents were still alive. Back then, the RPD building had been a library and Umbrella was still several years away from turning the town into an actual city, but in most ways it was still the same quiet place he remembered from his childhood. Once the cannibal killers were finally put away, Raccoon would be ideal again—beautiful, clean, a white-collar community nestled in the mountains like a secret paradise. So I get settled in and a week or two passes, and Irons notices how well written my reports are, or sees how good I am on the target range. He asks me to take a look at the case files, just to familiarize myself with the details so I can do some footwork—and I see something that no one else has seen. A pattern, maybe, or a motive on more than one of the victims ... maybe I run across a witness report that reads wrong. No one else has caught it because they've lived with it for too long, and this rookie cop just comes along and cracks the case, not a month out of the academy and I—

Something ran in front of the Jeep.

“Jesus!”

Leon hit the brake and swerved, shocked out of his daydream as he struggled for control of the vehicle. The brakes locked and there was a screech of rubber that sounded like a scream. The Jeep half-turned to face the darkening trees that lined the road—and came to a stop on the shoulder, dying after a final lurching jolt.

Heart pounding and stomach in knots, Leon opened the window and craned his neck, scanning the shadows for the animal that had darted across the highway. He hadn't hit it, but it had been close. Some kind of a dog, he didn't get a clear look—a big one, anyway, a shepherd or maybe an oversized Doberman, but it had looked wrong somehow. He'd only seen it for a split-second, a flash of glowing red eyes and lean, wolfish body. And there was something else, it had seemed kind of..

... slimy? No, trick of the light, or you were just so shit-scared that you saw it wrong. You're okay and you didn't hit it, that's the important thing. “Jesus,” he said again, softer this time, feeling both relieved and suddenly quite angry as the adrenaline leaked out of his system. People who let their dogs run loose were idiots—claiming they wanted their pets to be free and then acting surprised when Fido got squashed by a car.

The Jeep had come to a stop just a few feet away from a road sign that read RACCOON CITY 10; he could just make out the lettering in the growing shadows. Leon glanced at his watch; he still had almost

half an hour to get to the station, plenty of time—but for some reason, he simply sat for a moment, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. Cool pine-scented air breezed across his face; the deserted stretch of road seeming almost unnaturally quiet—as if the landscape was holding its breath, waiting. Now that his heart had resumed a more normal pace, he was surprised to find that he still felt unsettled, even anxious.

The murders in Raccoon. Weren't a few of those people killed by animal attack? Wild dogs, or some-thing? Maybe that wasn't someone's pet dog at all. A disturbing thought—and even more disturbing was the sudden feeling he had that the dog was still close by, maybe watching him from the darkness in the trees.

Welcome to Raccoon City, Officer Kennedy. Watch out for things that may be watching you. . . .
“Don't be an asshole,” Leon mumbled to himself, and felt a little better at the sound of his no-nonsense adult tone of voice. He often wondered if he would ever outgrow his imagination.

Daydreaming like a kid about catching bad guys, then inventing killer dog-monsters lurking in the woods—let's try to act our age, eh, Leon? You're a cop, for God's sake, a grownup....

He started the engine and backed onto the road, ignoring the strange sense of unease that had some-how managed to take hold of him in spite of his mind's chiding voice. He had a new job and a nice apartment in a nice little up-and-coming city; he was competent, bright, and decent-looking; as long as he kept his creativity glands in check, everything would be fine.

“And I'm on my way,” he said to himself, forcing a grin that felt out of place but suddenly necessary to his peace of mind. He was on his way to Raccoon City, to a promising new life—there was nothing to be uneasy about, nothing at all. . .

Claire was exhausted, both physically and emotion-ally, and the fact that her butt had been aching for the last couple of hours wasn't helping matters much. The thrum of the Harley's engine seemed to have settled deep into her bones, a physical counterpoint to the butterflies in her stomach—and of course, the worst of it seemed to emanate from her extremely sore and overheated ass. Plus, it was getting dark and like an idiot she wasn't wearing her leathers; Chris would be totally pissed.

He's going to yell his head off, and I won't even care. God, Chris, please be there to scream at me for being such an idiot. . . .

The Harley buzzed along the dark road, the sound of the engine echoing back at her from the sloping hills and shadow-laden trees. She took the corners carefully, very aware of how deserted the winding highway was; if she took a spill, it could be a long time before anyone happened by.

Like it would matter. Take a spill without your gear on, they'll be scraping pieces of you off the asphalt with a squeegee.

It was stupid, she knew it was stupid to have left in such a godawful hurry that she couldn't be bothered to suit up—but something had happened to Chris. Hell, something may have happened to the entire city. Over the past couple of weeks, the growing suspicion that her brother was in trouble had become a certainty—and the calls she'd made that morning had cinched it for her.

Nobody home. Nobody home anywhere. Like Raccoon moved and forgot to leave a forwarding address. It was definitely creepy, although she could give a shit about Raccoon. What mattered was that Chris was there, and if something bad had happened to him—

She couldn't, wouldn't think that way. Chris was all she had left. Their father had been killed on his construction job when they were both still kids, and when their mother had died in a car crash three years ago, Chris had done his best to take on a parental role. Even though he was only a few years older, he'd helped her pick a college, find a decent therapist—he even sent her a little money each month beyond what the insurance policies paid out, what he called “walk-ing around cash.” And on top of all that, he called her every couple of weeks like clockwork.

Except he hadn't called at all in the last month and a half, and hadn't returned any of her calls. She'd tried to convince herself that she was silly to worry—maybe he'd finally met a girl, or something had turned up on the S.T.A.R.S. suspension thing, whatever that was all about. But after three unanswered letters and days of waiting for the phone to ring, she'd finally put in a call to the RPD that very afternoon, hoping against hope that someone there might know what was going on. She'd gotten a busy signal. Sitting in her dorm room, listening to that soulless mechanical bleat, she'd started to worry for real. Even a small city like Raccoon had a voice-mail answering system set up to field calls. The rational part of her mind told her not to panic, that a downed line was nothing to get freaky about—but already, her emo-tional self was screaming foul. She'd gone through her address book with trembling hands, dialing the few numbers she had for friends of his, people or places he'd told her to call if there was ever an emergency and he wasn't at home—Barry Burton, Emmy's Din-er, some cop she'd never met named David Ford. She even tried Billy Rabbitson's number, although Chris had told her that he'd disappeared a few months earlier. And with the exception of an overloaded answering machine at David Ford's house, she'd gotten nothing but busy signals.

By the time she'd hung up, the worry had trans-formed into something close to panic. The trip to Raccoon City was only about six-and-a-half hours from the university. Claire's roommate had borrowed her riding gear to go out with her new biker boyfriend, but Claire had an extra helmet—and with that feeling that was not quite panic spinning through her fright-ened thoughts, she had simply grabbed the helmet and gone.

Stupid, maybe. Impulsive, definitely. And if Chris is okay, we can laugh about how ridiculously paranoid I am 'til the cows come home. But until I find out what's going on, I won't know a moment's peace.

The last of the day's light was draining from the strip of cloudless sky above, although a waxing, nearly full moon and the Softail's headlight gave her enough light to see by—more than enough to see the small sign ahead on her left: RACCOON CITY 10.

Telling herself that Chris was fine, that if anything weird had happened in Raccoon, somebody would have checked it out by now, Claire forced her concen-tration back to handling the heavy bike. It would be full dark soon, but she'd be in Raccoon before it was too dark to ride safely.

Whether or not Raccoon City would be safe, she'd find out soon enough.

THREE

LEON REACHED THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN with twenty minutes to spare, but decided that a hot dinner was going to have to wait. From his previous visits to the station, he knew that there were a couple of vending machines he could hit up for something to tide him over. The thought of stale candy and peanuts didn't sit well on his growling stomach, but it was his own damned fault for not taking New York traffic into account.

The drive into the city proper did a lot to soothe his still rattled nerves; he passed the few small farms

that lay east of town, the fairgrounds and storage sheds, and finally the truck stop that marked the separation of rural Raccoon from urban. Something about know-ing that he was going to be patrolling those back roads before long, keeping them safe, gave him a surprising sense of well-being and not a little pride. The early autumn air from the open window was pleasantly brisk, and the rising moon bathed everything he saw in a silvery glow. He wasn't going to be late after all; within the hour, he'd officially become one of Rac-coon's finest.

As Leon turned the Jeep down Bybee, heading for one of the main north-south streets that would take him to the RPD building, he got his first hint that something was very wrong. In the first few blocks, he was mildly surprised; by the fifth, he found himself slipping toward a state of shock. It wasn't just strange, it was ... well, it was impossible.

Bybee was the first real city street, coming from the east, where buildings outnumbered empty lots. There were several espresso bars and cheap diners, as well as a bargain movie theater that never seemed to run anything but horror movies and sexy comedies—and was therefore the most popular hangout for the youth of Raccoon. There were even a few generically hip taverns that served microbrew and hot rum drinks for the winter college-student ski crowd. At quarter to nine on a Saturday night, Bybee should have been teeming with life.

But of the mostly single or two-story brick shops and restaurants that lined the street, Leon saw that almost all were dark—and in the few that still boasted some light, it didn't look like there was anyone inside. There were plenty of cars parked along the narrow street, and yet not one person that he could see; Bybee, the hangout for cruising teens and college students, was totally deserted.

Where the hell is everybody?

His mind grasped for answers as he crept down the silent street, searching desperately for a reason—and for some way to alleviate the sweaty anxiety that had once again settled over him. Maybe there was some kind of an event going on, a church function, like a spaghetti feed. Or perhaps Raccoon had decided to take up Oktoberfest and tonight was the big kickoff. Yeah, but everybody at the same time? It'd have to be one hell of a party.

It was then that Leon realized he also hadn't seen a single car on the road since he'd had the scare with the dog ten miles out of town. Not one. And with that thoroughly unsettling realization came the next—less dramatic, but distinctly more immediate.

Something smelled bad. In fact, something smelled like shit.

Jeez, dead skunk. And apparently it threw up on itself before dying.

He'd already slowed the Jeep to a crawl and had planned to take a left on Powell, just a block ahead—but that horrible smell and the total absence of life were giving him a serious case of the creeps. Maybe he should stop and check things out, look around for some sign of—

“Oh, hey___”

Leon grinned, relief flooding through his confusion. There were a couple of people standing at the corner, practically right in front of him; the streetlight was out on their side, but he could see them in silhouette clear enough—a couple, a woman in a skirt and a big man wearing work boots. As he got closer he could see by the way they moved, heading south on Powell, that they had to be monumentally drunk. Both of them staggered into the shadows cast by an office supply store and out of sight; but he

was going in that direction anyway—no harm in stopping to ask what was going on, was there?

Must've come out of O'Kelly's. A pint or two too many, but as long as they're not driving anywhere, fine by me. Am I going to feel stupid when they tell me that tonight's the big free concert or the all-you-can-eat town barbecue. . . .

Almost giddy with relief, Leon turned the corner and squinted into the heavy shadows, looking for the pair. He didn't see them, but there was an alley tucked between the supply store and a jewelry shop. Maybe his two drunk friends had ducked in for a bathroom break or something even less legal—

“Shit!”

Leon slammed on the brake as a half-dozen dark shapes fluttered up from the street, caught in the Jeep's headlights like giant whirling leaves. Startled, it took him a second to realize he was seeing birds; they didn't cry out, although he was close enough to hear the brushing of dry wings as they took to the air. Crows, enjoying a late night feast of roadkill, what looked like—

Oh, my God.

There was a human body in the middle of the road, twenty feet in front of the Jeep. Face down, but it looked like a woman—and judging from the liquid red stains that covered most of the once-white blouse, it wasn't some beer-happy college student who'd decided to take a nap in the wrong place. Hit-and-run. Some bastard hit her and then drove away, Jesus what a mess—

Leon killed the engine and was half out the door before his racing thoughts caught him up. He hesitated, one foot on the asphalt, the stench of death heavy in the cool still air. His mind had latched on to an idea that he didn't want to consider, but knew he had better; this wasn't some training exercise, this was his life.

What if it's not a hit-and-run? What if there's no one around because some psycho gunman decided on a little target practice? Everyone could be inside, laying low—maybe the RPD's on the way, and maybe those drunks weren't drunk, they could've been shot and were trying to get help. . . .

He leaned back into the Jeep and fumbled under the passenger seat for his graduation gift, a Desert Eagle .50AE Magnum with a custom ten-inch barrel, Israeli export. His father and uncle—both cops—had gone in together on it. Not standard issue for the RPD, in fact much more powerful; as Leon grabbed a clip from the glovebox and slapped it in, feeling the solid weight of the weapon in his slightly unsteady hands, he decided it was the best present he'd ever received. He stuffed two more clips into a belt pouch on general principle; each only held six rounds. Pointing the loaded Magnum at the ground, he stepped out of the Jeep and took a quick look at his surroundings. He wasn't all that familiar with Rac-coon at night, but he knew that it shouldn't be as dark as it was. Several of the streetlights farther along Powell were either shot out or simply not on, and the shadows past the blood-soaked body were thick; if not for the Jeep's headlights, he wouldn't have even been able to see that.

He edged forward, feeling horribly exposed as he left the relative cover of the Jeep, but aware that she could still be alive; it didn't seem likely, but he had to at least check.

A few steps closer, and he could see that it was definitely a young woman. Lank red hair obscured the face, but the clothes were right, denim pedal-pushers and flats. The wounds were mostly hidden by the bloody shirt, but there seemed to be dozens—ragged holes in the wet cloth exposed torn, glistening flesh and the crimson of muscle beneath.

Swallowing heavily, Leon quickly switched the gun to his left hand and crouched down next to her. The cool, clammy skin yielded easily beneath his finger-tips as he touched her throat, pressing his first two fingers against the carotid. A few seconds passed, seconds that made him feel horribly young and afraid as he tried to remember the procedure for CPR and prayed, at the same time, that he would feel a pulse. Five compressions, two short breaths, keep my el-bows locked and come on please don't be dead—

He couldn't find it, and didn't want to wait one more second. He tucked the Magnum into his belt and grabbed her shoulders to turn her over, to check for breathing—but as he started to lift, he saw some-thing that made him lay her down again, his heart a twisting knot in his chest.

The victim's shirt had pulled out of her pants enough for him to see that her spine and part of her ribcage were exposed, the still-fleshy knobs of verte-brae shining and red, the narrow, curving ribs disappearing into masses of shredded tissue. It was like she'd been knocked down and . . . chewed on. Information that Leon had disregarded as unimportant suddenly registered, and even as the few facts he had clicked into place, he felt the first inky tendrils of real fear slither into his mind.

The crows couldn't have done this, would've taken them hours, and who the hell ever heard of crows flocking after dark to eat? And that shit-smell, it's not coming from her, she died recently, and—

Cannibal. Murders.

No. No way. For that to happen, for a person to have been killed and then partially—devoured on a city street with no one to stop it—

· and with enough time to pass for scavengers to come—for that to happen, the killers would have had to slaughter most if not all of the population. Doesn't seem likely? Fine. Then what's that smell? And where is everyone?

Behind Leon, there was a low, soft groan. A shuf-pling footstep, and another sound. A wet sound. It took him barely a second to stand and turn, hand instinctively snatching for the Magnum. It was the couple, the drunks, staggering toward him, and they'd been joined by a third, a beefy-looking guy with—

· with blood all over his shirt. And his hands. And dripping out of his mouth, a rubbery red mouth set into his pasty, rotting face like an open sore. The other man, the big man with the work boots and suspenders, looked much the same—and the vee of the blond woman's pink blouse revealed cleavage that was spotted with darkness, with what appeared to be mold.

The trio stumbled toward him, past his Jeep, rais-ing pale hands as they emitted moaning, hungry wails. Some dark fluid gurgled out of the beefy man's nose and ran across his moving lips, and Leon was over-whelmed by the understanding that the terrible, shitty smell was decayed flesh, and it was coming from them—

· and there was another one, stepping out from a door stoop across the street, a young woman in a stained T-shirt, hair tied back from a slack and mindless face.

A groan from behind him. Leon shot a look over his shoulder and saw a youth with dark hair and rotting arms shamble out from the sidewalk darkness of an awning's shadow.

Leon raised the Magnum and aimed at the closest, the man with suspenders, while his instincts screamed at him to run. He was terrified, but his trained logic continued to insist that there was an explanation for

what he was seeing, that he was not looking at the walking dead.

Control, procedure, you're a cop—

“All right! That's far enough! Don't move!” His voice was strong, commanding and authoritative, and he was wearing his uniform, and God, why wouldn't they stop? The man in suspenders moaned again, blind to the weapon pointed at his chest and still flanked by the others, now less than ten feet away. “Don't move!” Leon said again, and the sound of his own panic made him back up a step, darting his gaze left and right, seeing that there were still more of the wailing, lurching people coming out of the shadows.

Something grabbed his ankle.

“No!” he shouted, whipped the gun around—

· and saw that the corpse of the hit-and-run victim was scrabbling at his boot with one blood-crusting hand, working to drag her crippled body closer. Her gasping cry of frantic hunger rose to join those of the others as she tried to bite into his foot, bloody smears of saliva drooling off her abraded chin, dripping onto the leather.

Leon fired into her upper back, the sharp, explosive crack of the massive weapon loosening her grip—and at such close range, probably obliterating her heart. Spasming, she dropped back to the pavement—

· and he turned and saw that the others were less than five feet away, and he fired twice more, the rounds splattering red flowers into the chest of the closest. The entry wounds spouted scarlet. The man in suspenders was hardly fazed by the twin gaping holes in his torso, his stagger faltering for only a second. He opened his bloody mouth and gasped out a hissing mewl of hunger, hands raised again as if to direct him to the source of relief. Must be on something, firepower like that could drop an elephant—

Backing away, Leon fired again. And again. And again. And then the empty clattered to the pavement, another was slammed in, more rounds fired. And still they kept coming, oblivious to the shots that ripped at their stinking flesh. It was a bad dream, a bad movie, it wasn't real—and Leon knew that if he didn't start believing, he was going to die. Eaten alive by these—

Go ahead, Kennedy, say it. These zombies. Blocked from his Jeep, Leon stumbled away, still firing.

SO MUCH FOR THE NIGHTLIFE; THIS PLACE IS

deadsville.

Claire had seen a couple of people wandering around as she'd pulled into Raccoon, though not nearly as many as there should have been. In fact, the place seemed spectacularly deserted; the helmet blocked out a lot of visual evidence, but there was definitely a lack of business going on at the east end of town. A lack of traffic, as well. It struck her as weird, but considering the disasters she'd been imagining all afternoon, not all that ominous. Raccoon still existed, at least, and as she headed for the twenty-four-hour diner off Powell, she saw a fairly large group of partyers walking down the middle of a side street. Drunken frat boys, if she remembered her last visit clearly. Obnoxious, but hardly the horsemen of the apocalypse.

FOVP^

No bombed-out ruins, no dying fires, no air-raid sirens; so far, so good.

She'd planned to head straight for Chris's apartment before she realized that she'd be passing Emmy's on the way. Chris couldn't cook worth a damn; consequently, he lived on cereal, cold sandwiches, and dinner at Emmy's about six nights a week; even if he wasn't there, it might be worth it to stop in and ask one of the waitresses if they'd seen him lately. As Claire pulled the Softail to a gentle stop in front of Emmy's, she noticed a couple of rats scurrying for cover from atop a garbage can on the sidewalk. She put down the stand and unstraddled the bike, taking off her helmet and setting it on the warm seat. Shaking out her ponytail, she wrinkled her nose in disgust; from the smell of things, the trash had been sitting out for quite a while. Whatever they were throwing away gave off a seriously toxic stink. Before going in, she chafed her bare legs and arms lightly, as much to warm them as to wipe off the top layer of road grime. Shorts and a vest were no match for the October night, and it reminded her once again of how dumb she'd been to ride bare. Chris would give her one hell of a lecture ...

... but not here.

The building's glass front gave her a clear look at the well-lit, homey restaurant, from the bolted red stools at the lunch counter to the padded booths lining the walls—and there wasn't a soul in sight. Claire frowned, her initial disappointment giving way to confusion. Having visited Chris pretty regularly over the last few years, she'd been to the diner at all hours of the day and night; they were both night owls, often deciding to go out for cheeseburgers at three in the morning—which meant Emmy's every time. And there was always someone at Emmy's, chatting with one of the pink polyester-clad waitresses or hunched over a cup of coffee with a newspaper, no matter what time it was.

So where are they? It's not even nine o'clock. . . . The sign said Open, and she wasn't going to find out standing in the street. With a last glance at her bike, she opened the door and stepped inside. Taking a deep breath, she called out hopefully.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

Her voice seemed somehow flat in the muted silence of the empty restaurant; except for the soft hum of the ceiling fans overhead, there wasn't a sound. There was the familiar smell of stale grease in the air, but something else, too—a scent that was bitter and yet soft, like rotting flowers. The restaurant was L-shaped, booths stretching off in front of her and to the left. Walking slowly, Claire headed straight; at the end of the lunch counter was the wait station, and past that the kitchen; if Emmy's was open, the staff would probably be hanging out there, maybe as surprised as she was that there were no customers—

· except that wouldn't explain the mess, would it?

It wasn't a mess, exactly; the disorder was subtle enough that she hadn't even noticed it from outside. A few menus on the floor, an overturned water glass on the counter, and a couple of randomly strewn pieces of silverware were the only signs of something amiss—but they were enough.

To hell with checking out the kitchen, this is too weird, something is seriously fucked up in this city—or maybe they got robbed, or maybe they're setting up for a surprise party. Who cares? Time for you to be elsewhere.

From the hidden space at the end of the counter, she heard a gentle sound of movement, a sliding whisper of cloth followed by a muffled grunt. Some-body was there, ducked down.

Heart thumping loudly, Claire called out again.

“Hello?”

For a beat, there was nothing—and then another grunt, a muted moan that raised the hair on the back of her neck.

In spite of her misgivings, Claire hurried toward the back, suddenly feeling childish for her desire to leave; maybe there had been a robbery, maybe the customers had been tied up and gagged—or even worse, so badly injured that they couldn’t cry out. Like it or not, she was involved.

Claire reached the end of the counter, pivoted left—

· and froze, eyes wide, feeling as though she’d been physically slapped. Next to a cart loaded with trays was a balding man dressed in cook’s whites, his back to her. He was crouched over the body of a waitress; but there was something very wrong about her, so wrong that Claire’s mind couldn’t quite accept it at first. Her shocked gaze took in the pink uniform, the walking shoes, even the plastic name tag still pinned to the woman’s chest, what looked like “Julie” or “Julia.” . . .

... her head. Her head is missing.

Once Claire realized what was wrong, she couldn’t force herself to un-realize it, as much as she wanted to. There was only a pool of drying blood where the waitress’s head should have been, a sticky puddle surrounded by fragments of skull and dark mashed hair and chunks of miscellaneous gore. The cook had his hands over his face, and as Claire stared in horror at the headless corpse, he let out a low, pitiful wail. Claire opened her mouth, not sure what would come out. To scream, to ask him why, how, to offer to call for help—she honestly didn’t know, and as the man turned to look up at her, hands dropping away, she was stunned to hear that nothing came out at all. He was eating the waitress. His thick fingers were clotted with dark bits of tissue; the strange and alien face he raised into view was smeared with blood. Zombie.

A child of late-night creature features and campfire stories, her mind accepted it in the split-second it took for her to think it; she wasn’t an idiot. He was deathly pale and ripe with that sickly-sweet scent of decay she’d noticed earlier, his eyes cataracted and gleaming white.

Zombies, in Raccoon. I never expected that. With that calm, logical realization came a sudden rush of absolute terror. Claire stumbled backwards, feverish panic turning her guts into liquid as the cook continued to turn, rising from his crouch. He was huge, easily a foot over her 5’3”, and broad as a barn—

· and dead! He’s dead and he was EATING her, don’t let him get any closer!

The cook took a step toward her, his stained hands clenching into fists. Claire backed up faster, almost slipping on a menu. A fork clattered away from beneath one boot.

GET OUT NOW.

“I’ll be on my way now,” she babbled. “Really, don’t bother to show me out—“ The cook staggered forward, his blind eyes glowing with dumb hunger. Another step back and Claire reached behind her, felt air, felt nothing—

· and then the cool metal of the door's handle. A shot of adrenaline triumph bolted through her as she spun, snatched at the handle—

· and screamed, a short, sharp cry of horror. There were two, three more of them outside, their disintegrated flesh pressed to the glass front of the diner. One of them had only one eye, a suppurating hole where the other should have been; another had no upper lip, a ragged, permanent grin scrawled across its lower jaw. They clawed mindlessly at the windows, their ashy, ravaged faces awash with blood—and from the shadows across the street, dark shapes shambled out into the open.

Can't get out, trapped—

· Jesus, the back door!

From the edge of her vision, the glowing green exit sign shone like a beacon. Claire spun again and barely saw the cook reaching out to her from a few feet away, her full attention fixating on the only hope of escape. She ran, the booths whipping by in a flash of unseen color, her arms pumping for speed. The door opened out into the alley, she was going to hit it running and if it was locked, she was screwed.

Claire slammed into the door and it flew open, crashing into the brick wall of the alley—

· and there was a gun pointed at her face, the only thing that could possibly have stopped her at that second, a man with a gun—

She froze, raising her arms instinctively as if to ward off a blow.

“Wait! Don't shoot!”

The gunman didn't move, the deadly-looking weapon still aimed at her head—

· gonna kill me—

“Get down!” the gunman shouted, and Claire dropped, her knees buckling as much from the command as from the cold fingertips suddenly groping at her shoulder—

Boom! Boom!

The gunman fired and Claire snapped her head around, saw the dead cook falling backwards from directly behind her, at least one massive hole now in its forehead. Sluggish spurts of blood jetted from the wound, the white eyes filming over with red. The fallen corpse twitched, once, twice—and stopped moving.

Claire turned back to the man who'd saved her life, and his uniform registered for the first time. Cop. He was young, tall—and almost as terrified-looking as she felt, his upper lip beaded with sweat, his blue eyes wide and unblinking. His voice, at least, was strong and sure as he reached down to help her up. “We can't stay out here. Come with me, we'll be a lot safer at the police station.”

As he spoke, she could hear a closing chorus of gasping moans from the street, the wails of hunger growing louder. Claire let herself be pulled up, grip-ping his hand tightly, taking small comfort in the fact that his fingers were as feverish and shaky as hers. They ran, dodging dumpsters and heaps of flat-topped boxes, chased by echoing, haunted cries as the zombies found the dark alley and started after them.

FIVE

LEON RAN ALONGSIDE THE GIRL, DESPER-ately racking his memory for the city's downtown layout. The alley should let out on Ash, not far from Oak, the RPD's street—but the station was at least another fifteen blocks west; unless they could find transportation, they weren't going to make it. He was on his last clip, four rounds left, and from the sounds reverberating through the alley, there were dozens, maybe hundreds of the creatures at either end. As they reached the mouth of the alley, Leon held up his hand and slowed to a jog, scanning the dimly lit street. He couldn't see much, but from where they stood to the next streetlight, there were eleven or twelve of the creatures to the right, staggering and reeling their way through the stinking darkness. There were only three of them to the left, not far from—

· hallelujah!

“There!”

Leon pointed at the squad car parked across the street, feeling a flush of wild hope. There were no officers in sight, that was too much to ask for—but the front doors were standing open, and the three moaning things that roamed nearby wouldn't reach it before he and the girl could. Even if there were no keys, there was a radio and the windshield was bulletproof. They could probably hold out against the walking corpses until help came—

· and it's the only chance you've got. Go!

He hesitated just long enough to see the girl nod, her brown ponytail bobbing, and then they were sprinting for the black-and-white, the pavement a blur beneath their feet. Leon kept the handgun half-pointed toward the creatures closest to them, fifty feet away; he wanted to shoot, to keep them from getting one step closer, but he couldn't afford to waste the ammo.

God, let there be keys—

They reached the car at the same time and split, the girl running around to the passenger's side, and Leon realized with a new kind of horror that she probably thought the car was his. He waited for her to slam the door before jumping behind the wheel, a small, deeply frightened part of him screaming that this was his first day as he yanked his own door shut. A prayer answered; the keys were in the ignition. Leon dropped the Magnum into his lap and grabbed them, feeling that wild hope once again, like there were options besides dying.

“Buckle up,” he said, barely hearing her assent as he turned the keys and the flashers came on. Ash Street and the creatures that stalked it were bathed in blue and red swirls of pallid color, shadows changing form and thickness. It was a vision of hell and he hit the gas, desperate to get away from it as fast as he could.

The car spun away from the curb with a squeal. Leon pulled the wheel right and then left, narrowly missing a lurching woman whose scalp had been torn half off. Even through the closed windows, he could hear her frustrated howl as they sped away, joined by the cries of many more.

Backup, call for backup—

Leon fumbled for the radio, not taking his gaze off of the road. The creatures were scattered but persis-tent, dark and shambling monsters that staggered out into the street as if drawn to the sound of the speeding car. As the black-and-white rocketed across Powell and continued on, he had to dodge several

more of them.

The girl was talking, staring out at the desolate landscape as Leon hit the com button on the radio, his sense of helplessness rising. No static, no nothing. “What the hell’s going on, I arrive in Raccoon and the whole place is insane—“ “Great, the radio’s out,” Leon interrupted, drop-ping the radio and focusing on the road. The entire city seemed like an alien world, the streets strangely shadowed. There was a dreamlike quality to it, but the smell kept him from believing that he was asleep. The stench of diseased flesh had permeated even the interior of the squad car, making it hard to concen-trate on driving. At least there was no traffic and no people. No real people . . .

,.. except me and the girl. I’ve got to do my job here, keep her from getting hurt. Poor kid, she can’t be older than nineteen or twenty, she’s probably terrified;

I’ve got to keep it together and shield her from further danger here, get to the station and—

“You’re a cop, right?”

The girl’s lilting but somehow sarcastic tone snapped him out of his panicked musings. He shot a look in her direction, noting that while she looked pale, she didn’t seem to be quivering on the edge of a break-down. There was even a trace of humor in her clear gray eyes, and Leon got a sudden strong impression that she wasn’t the breakdown type. A very good thing, considering the circumstances.

“Yeah. First day on the job; great, huh? I’m Leon Kennedy.”

“Claire,” she said. “Claire Redfield. I came to find my brother, Chris... .”

She trailed off, staring back out at the passing street. Two of the creatures were staggering into the path of the car from either side, but Leon hit the gas and managed to drive between them. The steel mesh screen separating the back compartment was down, giving him a clear look from the rearview mirror, the two shuffling ghouls were now plodding mindlessly after them.

Hungry. Just like in the movies.

For a moment, neither spoke, the obvious question remaining unspoken. Whatever had happened to turn Raccoon into a horror show didn’t matter as much as how they were going to survive it. They’d be at the station in a couple of minutes, assuming the roads stayed clear. There was an underground parking lot, he’d try that first—but if the gates were closed, they’d have to cover a short distance on foot. There was a small courtyard in front of the building, a park area—

Four rounds left—and maybe a city full of those things. We need another weapon. . . .

“Hey, open the glovebox,” he said. If it was locked, there was a key on the ring that should open it. Claire tapped the button and reached inside, reveal-ing the back of her pink sleeveless vest; the legend “Made in Heaven” was applied above a voluptuous posing angel holding a bomb. The outfit suited her. “There’s a gun inside,” she said, and pulled out a sleek semiautomatic. She raised it carefully and checked to see if it was loaded before digging out a couple of clips. It was one of the RPD’s old issues, a nine-millimeter Browning HP. Since the slew of re-cent murders, the Raccoon force had been carrying H & K VP70s, another nine-millimeter—the difference was that the Browning could only hold thirteen, while the newer issues held eighteen rounds, nineteen if you kept one chambered. From the way she handled it, Leon could tell that she knew what she was doing. “Better take it with you,” he said. The RPD kept a decent arsenal; assuming that there were still cops around, he could pick up his assigned

weapon and—

- and why are you assuming anything?

As Leon took the corner of Ash and Third a little too quickly, the realization finally hit him that the station itself might be crawling with corpses. Every-thing was happening so fast, he just hadn't considered the possibility. He straightened out the car and let up on the gas, trying to come up with an alternate plan as calmly and rationally as he could. Maybe there was an organized defense at the station—but it wasn't easy to feel hopeful with the stink of decay so heavy in the air.

We have three-quarters of a tank, more than enough to make it over the mountains; we could be in Latham in less than an hour.

They could drive by the station and if it looked—unfriendly, just get the hell out of town; sounded good to him. He started to tell Claire, see what she thought—

- when the horrible smell of slaughter washed over him and something lunged out of the back seat. Claire screamed and the monster that had been in the squad car all along grasped Leon's shoulder with icy hands, its flyblown breath gusting into his face. It snatched at his right arm, pulling it toward its drool-slick teeth with inhuman strength.

"No!" Leon shouted as the car veered wildly to the right, jumping the curb and sliding toward a brick building. The creature was unbalanced, losing some of its grip; Leon jerked the wheel but too late to avoid the wall completely. Metal shrieked and a brilliant flash of sparks illuminated the groping hands and leering, ghoulish grin of their passenger as the speed-ing car shot back out into the street.

The dead thing swung its eager arms at Claire, and without thinking, Leon slammed on the gas and pulled a hard right. The car fishtailed, the back end crunching against a parked pickup truck in another burst of fiery sparks. The drooling corpse fell back into the padded seat but immediately pulled itself forward again, gnashing its teeth and clawing for the girl-The squad car sped down Third, Leon trying to control the wheel as he grabbed his weapon and half-turned, holding the Magnum by the barrel. He didn't think to take his foot off the gas, couldn't think of anything except that the zombie was about to sink its teeth into Claire's struggling shoulder. He brought the heavy weapon down and across its face, the butt sliding across flesh that peeled away in a thick flap. Blood gushed from the wound as the grips crushed into its nose, cartilage separating from bone with a wet crunch. Gurgling, the creature clutched at its bleeding head and Leon just had time to feel a second's triumph—

- when Claire screamed, "Look out!"
- and Leon looked up to see that they were about to crash.

Leon hit the zombie with his gun and Claire in-stinctively flinched from the splatter of blood, her horrified gaze finding that the street they were on was about to end.

"Look out!"

She caught just a glimpse of his white knuckles on the wheel, his clenched jaw—

- and the car was spinning, screeching, buildings and streetlights flashing by so fast that all she saw was a blur, and then—

BAM!

There was an explosion of sound, of glass shattering and metal compressing as the cop car slammed into something solid, throwing Claire against her safety belt. The impact hurled the zombie forward at the same time, and Claire reflexively threw her arms up as the dead thing crashed through the windshield—

· and then everything was still. There was only the ticking of hot metal and the sound of her own heart thundering in her ears. Claire brought her arms down and saw that Leon had already recovered, was already staring at the bloody, broken mess sprawled across the hood, its head hanging mercifully out of sight. It wasn't moving.

“You okay?”

Claire turned and looked at Leon, suddenly having to fight off a semi-hysterical laughing fit. Raccoon had been taken over by the living dead and they'd just been in a serious car wreck because a corpse had been trying to eat them. All things considered, “okay” was not the first word to come to mind.

At the sight of Leon's sincere and stricken expression, the urge to freak out passed. He looked on the edge of a fit himself; allowing her devastated nerves free reign wouldn't help anything.

“Still in one piece,” she managed, and the young cop nodded, seeming relieved.

Claire took a deep breath, feeling like it was the first she'd taken in hours, and looked around at where they'd ended up. Leon had managed a complete 180 at the very end of the street where it T-ed, the obviously totaled squad car facing back the way they'd come. There were no zombies in the immediate vicinity, but Claire had the feeling that they wouldn't have long to find cover; from what she'd seen so far, most if not all of Raccoon had been affected by—by whatever it was that had happened. She held the handgun tightly, trying to get her tangled emotions under control.

“We—“ Leon started to say something and then stopped, his eyes widening as he stared at the rear-view mirror. Claire looked behind her—and for a second, could only think that at some point since she'd left the university, she'd been cursed. Cursed. Somebody wants me dead, that's all there is to it.

A semi was barreling down the street, still several blocks away but close enough for them to see that it was out of control. The truck veered back and forth, smashing against a blue pickup parked on one side of the street and then plowing under a mailbox on the other. Claire realized with numb horror that it was a tanker—and from the way the haul was sliding dangerously at each frantic swerve, the driver had a full load. In the split-second that it took to digest that information, to pray that it wasn't gas or oil, the tanker had halved the distance between them. She could actually see the flames painted across the dark green cab, but even then it wasn't real until Leon broke their stunned silence.

“—maniac's gonna ram us,” he breathed, and then they were both stabbing at the seat-belt releases, Claire praying that the crash hadn't locked them somehow—

The sound of the belts letting go were inaudible beneath the rising monolithic growl of the oncoming tanker and the echoing crunch of cars being side-swiped left and right. It would be on them in a heartbeat.

“Run!” Leon shouted, and then she was pushing her way out of the squad car, cool air against her sweaty skin and the scream of the truck's engine blocking out everything else.

She took three giant running leaps and then felt as much as heard the impact, the asphalt shaking beneath her feet even as the crash of rending metal thundered behind her.

One more flying step, and—

KABOOM!

· she was being pushed, shoved roughly off her feet by an incredible pressure wave of heat and sound. She managed to kick off against the ground as the tanker's explosion turned night to day in one brilliant instant. An awkward shoulder roll, grit biting into her heat-blasted skin, and she landed behind a parked car in a gasping heap.

There was a brief, clattering rain of smoking debris, and Claire was on her feet, stumbling back into the street to search the towering flames for some sign of Leon. Her heart sank. The tanker, squad car, and what had once been a hardware store were all enveloped in an inferno of chemical fire, the street completely blocked by the mass of twisted, burning destruction.

“Claire—“

Leon's voice, muffled but audible through the wall of curling flame.

“Leon?”

“I'm okay!” he shouted. “Head to the station, I'll meet you there!”

Claire hesitated for a second, staring down at the handgun she still held tightly in one shaky hand. She was afraid, scared of being alone in a city that had turned into a living graveyard—but it wasn't like there was much of a choice. Wishing that circumstances were different was a waste of time. “Okay!”

She turned, trying to get her bearings by the smoking, flickering light of the wreck. The station was close, a couple of blocks away—

· and there were creatures lurching out of the shadows, from behind cars and inside darkened buildings. With single-minded purpose, they sham-bled into the strange light of the blazing accident, making small sounds of hunger as they came—two, three, four of them. She saw tattered skin and rotting limbs, gaping blackness where eyes should be—and still they came, moving slowly toward her as if homing in on living flesh.

Beyond the fiery wreck, she heard gunfire—two shots from perhaps a block away, then nothing—nothing but the crackle of consuming flame and the soft, helpless cries of the shuffling dead. Leon's on his own now MOVE!

Claire took a deep breath, spotted an opening within the lethal crowd closing in on her, and ran.

Six

ADA WONG FIT THE SHIMMERING DISC OF

metal into the slot on the statue, patting it into the opening until it was flush with the marble. As soon as it was in place, she heard the shift of hidden levers and stepped back to see what would happen. Her footfalls echoed through the massive lobby of the RPD building, the sounds reverberating back to her

from three stories of open room.

Another key? One of the subbasement medals? Or perhaps the sample itself, hidden in plain sight. . . wouldn't that be a happy surprise.

If wishes were horses. The water-bearing nymph made of stone slid forward at a slight angle, the pitcher at her shoulder dropping a slender piece of metal atop the lip of the defunct fountain. The spade key.

She sighed, picking it up. She already had the keys; in fact, she had everything she needed to search the station, and most of what she needed to get into the lab. If it wasn't for someone at Umbrella dropping the bomb, the job would have been a walk. Easy money. Instead, I get a three-day vacation sans comfort, I get night of the living standoff, I get to play Put the Bullet in the Brain and Let's Find the Reporter at the same time. The samples could be anywhere by now, depending on who survived. Assuming I make it out of here with the goods, I'm asking for a big goddamn bonus; no one should have to work in these conditions. Ada slipped the key into her hip pack, then gazed unseeing at the upper balustrade of the impressive hall, mentally checking off the rooms she'd been through and the ones she'd searched more thoroughly. Bertolucci didn't seem to be anywhere on the east side of the building, upstairs or down; she'd spent what felt like hours staring into dead faces, searching the reeking piles of corpses for his square jaw and anachronistic ponytail. Of course, he could be moving—but from the information she had on him, it was improbable; the reporter was very much a rabbit, a hider in the face of danger.

Speaking of danger...

Ada shook herself and got moving, heading back to the door that led into the lower east wing. The lobby was safe enough from the virus carriers, they didn't seem to understand the concept of doorknobs—but there were threats besides the infected. God only knew what Umbrella might send in to clean up ... or what had been freed from the laboratory when the leak occurred. Less frightening but just as bothersome were the live cops that might still be trooping around, looking for someone to save. She'd heard gunfire, some distant, some not, every hour or three since she'd gone to ground; there were still at least a few uninfected left in the expansive old building. Trying to convince a panicky he-man with a gun that she was alive and didn't want an escort made facing the undead seem almost appealing.

Walking on the balls of her feet to avoid additional noise, Ada slipped through the door and then leaned against it at the end of a long hall, safe to decide on her next move; although she hadn't checked out the basement yet and there were still several carriers wandering around in the detectives' room, the hall's doors were all closed; if someone or something wanted to get at her, she'd be able to see it coming and get out in time.

Ah, the exciting life of the freelance agent. Travel the world! Earn money by stealing important things! Fight off the living dead when you haven't showered or eaten a decent meal in three days—impress your friends! She reminded herself again to insist on that bonus. When she'd arrived in Raccoon less than a week before, she thought she'd been prepared; the maps had been studied, the reporter's files memorized, her cover story set—a young woman looking for her boyfriend, an Umbrella scientist. That part was almost true; in fact, it had been her brief relationship with John Howe ten months before that had landed her the job. More of a one-night stand, actually, and not a very good one at that—but John had thought otherwise, and his connection to Umbrella, though it had probably killed him, had turned out to be a lucky break for her.

So, she'd been ready. But within twenty-four hours of her self-assured check-in at Raccoon City's nicest hotel, her luck had changed; while eating dinner in the vinyl-encased and mostly empty lounge of

the Arklay Inn, she'd heard the first screams outside. The first, but by no means the last.

In some ways, the disaster was an asset; there'd be no guards posted around the lab, no endless covert trial runs. The prep work she'd done on the T-Virus had assured her that the airborne was short-lived and dissipated quickly; the only chance of catching it at this point would be through contact with a carrier, so that wasn't a problem—and once she and a couple dozen others had made it to the police station, she'd seen that Bertolucci was among them. Even with the undead factor, it initially looked like things were going in her favor.

Mission objectives: question the hack, find out how much he knows and kill him or ignore him, depending; retrieve a sample of the new virus, Dr. Birkin's latest wonder. No problem, right?

Three days before, with the knowledge of how the Umbrella lab connected into the sewer system and Bertolucci standing right in front of her, the job had looked pretty wrapped. And of course, that's when things had started to go wrong.

The rearranged station, with the rooms shifted around after the S.T.A.R.S. fiasco, making half my preparations obsolete. People disappearing. The barri-cades that kept coming down. Police Chief Irons, throwing off commands like some cut-rate dictator, still trying to impress Mayor Harris and his whiny daughter even as the dead piled up....

She'd watched Bertolucci closely enough to see that he was going to duck and run, but had missed the exit; she hadn't even had time to make contact before he had disappeared somewhere into the maze of the station, losing himself in the commotion of the first wave of attacks. Ada had decided to fly solo herself when three-fourths of the civilians were wiped out in a single mass assault not an hour later, all because no one had bothered to lower the garage gates. She wasn't willing to die to keep up her cover as a frightened tourist looking for her boyfriend.

And so came the wait. Almost fifty hours of waiting for things to settle, tucked in the clock tower on the third floor, slipping downstairs to find food or to use a bathroom in the lengthening stretches of time be-tween gunplay. Between the echoing clatter of shots and the screams . . .

Terrific. So now you're out and what do you do? Stand around and reflect. Get on with it; the sooner you finish, the sooner you can collect your wages and retire to some nice island somewhere.

Still, for a moment Ada didn't move, tapping the muzzle of her Beretta absently against one long, stockinged leg. There were three bodies sprawled in the hallway; she couldn't stop staring at one of them, crumpled beneath a window counter halfway down the corridor. A woman in cutoff shorts and a halter, her legs crudely splayed, one arm cocked above her blood-soaked head. The other two were cops, no one she recognized—but the woman had been one of the people she'd talked to when she'd first made it to the station. Her name had been Stacy something-or-other, a nervous but strong-willed girl just out of her teens.

Stacy Kelso, that was it. She'd run into town to pick up some ice cream and had ended up caught in the takeover—yet in spite of her own predicament, she was more concerned about her parents and little brother, still at home. A conscientious girl. A good girl. Why was she thinking about it? Stacy was dead, a ragged hole at her left temple, and Ada hadn't capped her; it wasn't like she had anything to feel personally responsible about. She'd come in on a job, and it wasn't her fault that Raccoon had gone nova. . . . Maybe it's not guilt, some part of her whispered. Maybe you're just sorry she didn't make it. She was a person, after all, and now she's as dead as her parents and kid brother probably are. . . .

“Snap out of it,” she said, softly but with an edge of irritation. She tore her gaze from the woman’s pathetic form, fixing it instead on a broken ashtray at the end of the hall. Feeling bad about things she couldn’t control wasn’t her style, it wasn’t how she’d gotten to the top of her trade—and considering how much Mr. Trent was putting up to retain her services, now wasn’t the best time to be analyzing her empathy skills. People died, it was the way of the world, and if she’d learned anything in the course of her life it was that agonizing over that particular truth was point-less.

Mission objectives: talk to Bertolucci and get the G-Virus sample. That was all she needed to worry about. There was a mechanism that Ada still had to check a few twisted passages away from where she stood, in the press conference room. Trent’s notes on the architect’s latest additions to the station had been sketchy, but she knew it had to do with the ornate, sculpted gas lamps and an oil painting. Whoever had commissioned all of the work had one serious secret life going on; there were actual hidden passages upstairs, behind the wall of what had once been a storage room. She hadn’t gone through them yet, although a quick glance had told her that the room itself had been remodeled as an office. Judging from the overstuffed and neurotically macho decor, it was probably Irons’s. Even from the short time she’d been in his company, she’d ascertained that he wasn’t the most stable man who had ever walked; there was no question that he was on Umbrella’s payroll, but there was also something about him that just screamed dysfunctional. Ada started down the hall, her dress flats clicking loudly on the scuffed blue tiles; she was already dreading yet another time-consuming mechanical puzzle. Not that there was any help for it; she had assumed from the beginning that the virus was still in the lab, but she couldn’t afford to take any chances on passing up an earlier retrieval. The files indicated that there were between eight and twelve one-ounce vials of the stuff, information from a two-week-old video feed—and Birkin’s lab was far from impenetrable. With the underground lab connected to the station through the sewer mains, she had to entertain the possibility that the samples had been moved. Besides, Bertolucci could be tucked away in the research library or in the S.T.A.R.S. office on the west side, maybe the darkroom; dead or not, he had to be found. And it would also give her a chance to collect a few more nine-millimeter clips from the fallen RPD. She followed the passage as it led her past a small waiting area, complete with vending machines that had already been pried open and ransacked. As with the rest of the station, the corridor was cold and badly in need of air freshener; she’d grown used to the smell, but the chill was murder. For the hundredth time since abandoning her table at the Arklay, Ada wished that she’d dressed more casually for dinner. The sleeveless tight red tunic dress and clattery shoes were fine for cover, as mission gear, however, the outfit was somewhat less than practical.

She reached the end of the hall and carefully opened the door to her left, weapon half-raised. As before, the corridor was clear, yet another testament to the faded elegance of the building—dusky sand-colored walls and symmetrically patterned tiles in this one. The station must have been magnificent once, but years of serving as an institutional facility had leached away its grandeur; the tattered grand movie-house look and the cold, hopeless atmosphere created a distinctly sinister feel—as if at any moment a cold hand could fall across your shoulder, a soft gust of diseased breath whisper across the back of your neck....

Ada frowned again; after this job, she was going to take a very long vacation. Either that, or it was time to find a new career. Her concentration—her ability to focus—wasn’t what it used to be. And in her business a slip at the wrong time could literally mean death. Big bonus. Trent smells like money. I’ll ask seven digits, high six minimum.

In her attempts to let her thoughts go, to let animal awareness take over, she found that she couldn’t keep out the persistent image that crept into her mind. A memory of young Stacy Kelso, anxiously pushing her hair behind her ears as she talked about her baby brother. . . .

After what felt like a very long time, Ada shook the troublesome vision and continued down the hall, promising herself that there would be no more lapses of concentration—and wondering why she couldn’t

make herself believe it.

SEVER

LEON'S BOOTS SCUFFED SHARDS OF BROKEN glass across the floor of the Kendo gun shop as he snapped open drawers, ash-stained sweat trickling down his face. If he couldn't find .50s pretty quick, he was screwed; the few weapons still remaining in the ravaged shop were inaccessible, strung with steel cable, and the front picture window was completely smashed. It wouldn't take long for the creatures to find him, he was down to his last round, and he still had a couple of blocks to go.

Come on, fifty cal action express, somebody in Raccoon must've ordered 'em—

“Yes!”

Fourth drawer, under the deer-rifle case; a half-dozen empty clips and as many boxes of ammo. Leon grabbed a box and turned, slapping it on the counter as he glanced hurriedly at the front of the small shop. Still clear, if you didn't include the dead guy on the floor. He wasn't moving, but from the freshness of the wounds that oozed from his considerable gut, staining his strappy white T, Leon wouldn't have long to linger; he didn't know how long it took for the freshly dead to stand up—and didn't really want to find out. Gotta do it fast anyway, it's like I'm a beacon for those things and this place is easy access.... Gaze darting between the crashed front wall and his skittering hands, Leon started to load up. He'd lucked across the gun dealer's, having forgot-ten entirely about it in the dizzying, nightmarish run from the wreck. When the fastest route to the station had turned out to be blocked by a pile-up, the best detour was through Kendo's. It was a coincidence that had undoubtedly saved his life. Even killing two of the ex-living on his way, he'd nearly been over-whelmed by the sheer number of them.

“Uuunh___”

A ghastly, skeletal form staggered out of the street's shadows, drunkenly aimed at the front of the shop. “Hell,” Leon muttered, his fingers somehow man-aging to go faster. One clip down, one more and he could take the rest. If he bolted now, he'd be dead before he could make it to the station.

Another leprous figure was suddenly standing at the mostly empty frame of the shop's glass entrance, the decay so bad on its legs that Leon could see maggots squirming through the fibrous muscle.

· four... five... done!

He snatched up the Magnum and ejected the clip, reloading even as the mostly-empty hit the floor. The maggoty creature was shouldering its way through the jagged corners of glass still attached to the frame, something liquid in its throat gurgling softly. Bag, he needed a bag. Leon's fevered gaze swept the space behind the counter, stopping on a grease-stained gym bag propped against a stool in the back corner. Two running steps and he had it, dumping the contents as he ran back to the pile of clips and loose bullets on the counter. Cleaning equipment rattled across the linoleum as Leon swept the clips into the bag, ignoring the scattered rounds in favor of the ammo drawer.

The decayed monster was shuffling toward him, stumbling on the body of the pot-bellied dead man, and Leon could smell how rotten it was. He jerked the Magnum up and leveled it at the creature's face. The head, just like the two outside—

With a tremendous, thundering kick, the gurgling, pulpy skull blew apart, thick fluids splattering the shop's walls and display cases in a wet slap. Before the decapitated mess could crumple, Leon spun and

dropped into a crouch by the ammo drawer. He shoveled the heavy boxes into the nylon sack, his stomach knotted and shaking from the fear that, even now, the back alley could be filling up with more of them, cutting him off from where he needed to go. Five clips per box, jive boxes, get out already—

Pushing off from his crouch, Leon shouldered the bag and ran for the back door. From the corner of his vision, he saw that another creature had made it inside Kendo's; from the crunch of powdering glass, there were more of them filing in just behind it. He opened the exit door and slid through, glancing left and right as the door settled closed, the automatic lock catching with a soft metallic snick. Nothing but garbage cans and recycling bins, overflowing with mildewed waste. From where he stood, the alley stretched off to his left and then hooked left again; if his internal compass was still working, the narrow, cluttered passage would take him straight to Oak, letting out less than a block away from the station. So far, he'd been lucky; all he could do was hope that his fortune would hold out, would let him get to the RPD building alive and in one piece—and, God willing, find a heavily armed contingent of people who knew what the hell was going on.

And Claire. Be safe, Claire Redfield, and if you get there before me, don't lock the door.

Leon repositioned the leaden weight of the ammo across his back and started down the dimly lit alley, ready to blow apart anything that got in his way. Claire almost made it without having to shoot; the zombies that trickled out into the streets of Raccoon were relentless but slow, and the adrenaline pumping through her system made it easy enough to dodge them. She figured that they were drawn out by the sound of the wreck, then just followed their noses, or what was left of them; of the ten or so that had made it close enough for her to get a good look, at least half were in an advanced stage of decay, flesh falling from the bone.

She was so busy watching the street and trying to sort through all that had happened, she almost ran right past the police station. She'd been to the RPD building twice before to visit Chris, but had never entered from the back—or in the cold and stinking dark, pursued by malignant cannibals. A crashed cop car and a handful of zombified officers had clued her in, sending her through a small parking lot and some kind of an equipment shed that opened into a tiny paved courtyard—a courtyard where she and Chris had eaten lunch once, sitting on the steps that led up to the station's second-floor helipad. As simply as that, she'd made it.

Weaving past the two stumbling, uniformed corpses that wandered aimlessly across the L-shaped yard was easy, and it was such a relief to be somewhere she recognized, to know she was about to be safe, that she didn't see the woman until it was almost too late. A wailing dead woman with one limply hanging arm and a gore-streaked, shredded tank top, who reached out from the shadows at the base of the stairs and brushed at Claire's arm with cold and scabby fingers. Claire let out a strangled yelp of surprise, stumbling back from the creature's outstretched hand—and nearly fell into the arms of another one, a tall, broad-shouldered rotting man who had emerged from beneath the metal stairs, graceless yet silent. She dodged sideways and pointed the nine-millimeter at the man, backed up a step—

and felt her calf hit the unyielding railing of the back steps to the roof. The woman was five feet to her right, the torn, bloody shirt exposing one gouged breast, the hand of her working arm grasping toward Claire. The man was one step from reaching distance, and she couldn't back up any further.

Claire pulled the trigger and there was a mammoth boom, the gun jerking almost out of her hand. The right half of the tall man's slack and withered face disappeared in a burst of dark, liquid streams gushing from his shattered skull.

She whipped the gun around, tightening her grip as she aimed for the woman's pallid, moaning face.

Another blast of deafening sound and the rising moan was cut off, the waxen forehead imploding in a spray of blood and bone chips. The woman went over backwards, crashing to the pavement like—

· like a corpse, which she already was. They won't be walking away from this one.

It was as if everything finally caught up to her at once, the reality of her situation driven home when she'd pulled the trigger. For a moment, Claire couldn't move. She stared down at the two crumpled sacks of ruined flesh, at the two people she'd just shot, and felt like she was only an inch or two from losing it. She'd grown up around guns, been to shooting ranges dozens of times—but with a .22 target pistol, firing at pieces of paper. Targets that didn't bleed, or spew brain matter like the two human beings she'd just—

No, a cool voice inside of her interrupted. Not human, not anymore. Don't kid yourself and don't waste time on remorse. Leon could be inside by now, looking for you. And if the S.T.A.R.S. got called in, Chris could be here, too.

If that weren't motivation enough, the two zombie cops that Claire had passed when she first hit the courtyard were on their way, boots shuffling and dragging across the flagstones. It was time to go. She jogged up the stairs, barely able to hear the clang of her steps over the high-pitched ringing in her ears. The nine-millimeter blasts had done a tempo-rary number on her hearing—which explained why she didn't know about the helicopter until she was almost to the roof.

Claire hit the second-to-top riser and stopped dead, a whipping wind pounding rhythmically at her bare shoulders as the giant black vehicle hovered into view, half lost in shadow. It was near the ancient water tower that bordered the helipad at the south-west corner, though she couldn't tell if it had just taken off or was coming in to land.

Couldn't tell and didn't care. "Hey!" she shouted, raising her left hand into the air. "Hey, over here!" Her words were lost in the blowing dust that swirled across the rooftop, drowned out by the steady chop of the 'copter's blades. Claire waved wildly, feeling like she'd just hit the lottery.

Somebody came! Thank God, thank you!

A blaring searchlight snapped on from the midsec-tion of the hovering bird, scrawled across the roof—and was going in the wrong direction, away from her. Claire waved more frantically, drawing in breath to call out again—

· and saw what the spotlight saw, even as she heard the desperate, mostly unintelligible shout beneath the 'copter's roar. A man, a cop, standing at the helipad's corner opposite the stairs, backed against an elevated section of the roof. He held what looked like a machine gun and appeared to be very much alive.

“—get over here—“

The officer shouted at the helicopter, his voice tinged with panic; Claire saw why and felt her relief evaporate. There were two zombies lurching through the darkness of the helipad, headed for the well-lit target that was the shouting cop. She raised the nine-millimeter and then lowered it helplessly, afraid of hitting the cornered man.

The spotlight didn't waver, illuminating the horror with brilliant clarity. The cop didn't seem to realize how close the zombies were until they were grabbing for him, their stringy arms extending into the beam

of fixed white light.

“Stay back! Don’t come any closer!” he cried, and with the pure terror in his voice, Claire heard him perfectly. Just like she heard his howling scream as the two decaying figures obscured her view, reaching him at the same time.

The sound of his automatic weapon ripped across the helipad, and even over the helicopter’s clamor Claire could hear the whining ting of bullets flying wild. She dropped, knees cracking against the top step as the weapon’s clattering fire went on and on—

· and there was a change in the sound of the ‘copter, a strange hum that rose quickly into a me-mechanical scream. Claire looked up and saw the giant craft dip down, the back end swinging around in an erratic, jerking arc.

Jesus, he hit them!

The ‘copter’s spotlight was going all directions at once, flashing across metal pipes and concrete and the dying struggles of the cop, somehow still firing as the two monsters tore at him—

· and then the helicopter was coming down, tee-tering sideways, its blades slamming into the brick of the elevated roof with a tremendous crash. Before Claire could blink, the nose of the craft hit—plowing across the helipad in a curtain of screeching sparks and flying glass.

The explosion happened just as the mammoth machine slid to a stop against the southwest corner—directly on top of the fallen cop and his killers. The rattle of the machine gun was finally cut off in the whoosh of flame that sprang up after the initial sputtering boom, lighting the rooftop in a burning red glow. At the same instant, something in the roof gave with a rending crunch, as the nose of the ‘copter plunged through a brick wall and out of sight. Claire stood up on legs she barely felt, staring in disbelief at the leaping fire that dominated almost half of the helipad. It had all happened too fast for her to feel like it had happened at all, and the smoking, burning evidence in front of her only made the sense of unreality greater. An acrid, sickly-sweet odor of burning meat wafted over her on a wave of heated air, and in the sudden silence, she could hear the soft groans of the zombies down in the courtyard. She shot a look down the stairs and saw that both of the dead cops were at the foot, blindly and uselessly falling against the bottom step. At least they couldn’t climb ...

... can’t. Climb. Stairs.

Claire turned her frightened glance toward the door that led into the RPD building, maybe thirty feet from the curling, popping flames that were slowly eating the body of the ‘copter. Except for the stairs, it was the only way onto the roof. And if zombies couldn’t climb—

· then I’m in some deep shit. The station isn’t safe.

She stared thoughtfully at the burning wreck, weighing her options. The nine-millimeter held a lot of ammo and she still had two full clips; she could head back into the street, look for a car with keys in it and go for help.

Except what about Leon? And that cop was still alive—what if there are more people inside, planning an escape?

She thought she’d held up pretty well on her own so far, but she also knew she’d feel safer if somebody

else were in charge—a riot squad would be okay, though she'd settle for some battle-scarred veteran cop with a shitload of guns. Or Chris; Claire didn't know if she'd find him at the station, but she firmly believed that he was still alive. If anyone was equipped to handle himself in a crisis like this one, it was her brother. Whether or not she found anybody, she shouldn't take off without telling Leon; if she didn't, blowing town instead, and he got killed looking for her. . . . Decision made. Claire walked for the entrance, carefully skirting the blaze and scanning the flickering shadows for movement. When she reached the door, she closed her eyes for a second, one sweating hand on the latch.

"I can do this," she said quietly, and although she didn't sound as confident as she would've liked, at least her voice didn't tremble or break. She opened her eyes, then the door; when nothing jumped out at her from the softly lit hall, she slipped inside.

EIGHT

CHIEF OF POLICE BRIAN IRONS WAS STAND-

ing in one of his private corridors, trying to catch his breath, when he felt the shuddering impact rumble through the building. He heard it, too—heard some-thing. A distant splintering sound, heavy and abrupt. The roof, he thought distantly, something on the roof. . . .

He didn't bother following the thought to any kind of conclusion. Whatever had happened, it couldn't make things any worse.

Irons pushed away from the stone wall with one well-padded hip, hefting Beverly as gently as he could. They'd be at the elevator in a moment, then there was just the short walk to his office; he could rest there, and then—

"And then," he mumbled, "that's the question, isn't it? And then what?"

Beverly didn't answer. Her perfect features re-mained still and silent, her eyes closed—but she seemed to nestle closer to him, her long, slender body curling against his chest. It was his imagination, surely.

Beverly Harris, the mayor's daughter. Youthful, stunning Beverly, who had so often haunted his guilty dreams with her blond beauty. Irons hugged her closer and continued toward the elevator, trying not to let his exhaustion show in case she woke up. By the time he reached the lift, his back and arms were aching. He probably should have left her in his private hobby room, the room he'd always thought of as the Sanctuary—it was quiet there, and probably one of the safest areas in the station. But when he'd decided to go to the office, to collect his journal and a few personal items, he found that he simply couldn't stand to leave her behind. She'd looked so vulnerable, so innocent; he'd promised Harris that he would watch out for her, and what if she was attacked in his absence? What if he came back from the office and she was just—gone? Gone like everything else . . . A decade of work. Networking, making the connections, careful positioning... all of it, just like that. Irons lowered her to the cold floor and opened the elevator gate, trying desperately not to think about all that he'd lost. Beverly was the important thing now. "Going to keep you safe," he murmured, and did one corner of that perfect mouth rise slightly? Did she know she was safe, that Uncle Brian was taking care of her? When she was a child, when he used to frequent the Harrises' for dinner, she'd called him that. "Uncle Brian."

She knows. Of course she knows.

He half-dragged her into the lift and leaned her in the corner, gazing tenderly at her angelic face. He was suddenly overwhelmed by a rush of almost paternal love for her, and wasn't surprised to feel tears well

up in his eyes, tears of pride and affection. For days now he'd been subject to such emotional outbursts—rage, terror, even joy. He'd never been a particularly emotional man, but had grown to accept the powerful feelings, even to enjoy them after a fashion; at least they weren't confusing. He'd also had moments when he'd been overcome by a kind of strange, creeping haze, a formless anxiety that left him feeling deeply unsettled . . . and as bewildered as a lost child. No more of those. There's nothing else that can go wrong now; Beverly's with me, and once I collect my things, we can hide away in the Sanctuary and get some rest. She'll need time to recover, and I can, can sort things through. Yes, that's it; things need to be sorted through.

He blinked the already forgotten tears away as the metal cage started to rise, unholstering his sidearm and ejecting the clip to count how many rounds were left. His private rooms were safe, but the office was another story; he wanted to be prepared.

The elevator came to a stop and Irons propped open the gate with one leg before lifting the girl, grunting with the exertion. He carried her as he would have carried a sleeping child, her cool, smooth body limp in his arms, her head rolled back and wobbling as he walked. He'd picked her up awkwardly, and her white gown had hiked up, exposing the tight, creamy skin of her thighs; Irons forced his gaze away, concentrating on the panel controls that opened the wall into his office. Whatever harmless fantasies he'd had before, she was his responsibility now, he was her protector, her white knight...

He was able to hit the protruding button with one knee. The wall slid open, revealing his plushly decorated and thankfully empty office; only the blank, glassy stares of his animal trophies greeted them. The massive walnut desk that he'd had imported from Italy was right in front of him and his stamina was going fast; Beverly was a petite woman, but he wasn't in shape the way he used to be. He quickly laid her on the desk, pushing a cup of pencils to the floor with his elbow.

"There!" he exhaled deeply, smiling down at her. She didn't smile back, but he sensed that she would be awake soon, like before. He reached under the desk and tapped the wall controls; the panel slid closed behind them.

He'd been concerned when he'd first found her, asleep next to Officer Scott in the back hall; George Scott was dead, covered with wounds, and when Irons had seen the red splash on Beverly's stomach, he'd been afraid that she was dead, too. But when he'd taken her to the Sanctuary, to his safe place, she'd whispered to him—that she didn't feel well, that she was hurt, that she wanted to go home ...

... did she? Did she really?

Irons frowned, snapped out of the uncertain memory by something, something he'd felt when he'd laid her on his hobby table and straightened her blood-stained gown, something he couldn't quite recall. It hadn't seemed important at the time, but now, away from the hidden comforts of the Sanctuary, it was nagging at him. Reminding him that he had suffered one of those confused moments when he'd, when he'd—

- felt the cold, rubbery jelly of intestine beneath my fingers—
- touched her.

"Beverly?" he whispered, sitting down behind his desk when his legs went suddenly weak. Beverly kept her silence—and a turbulent flood of emotions hit Irons like a tidal wave, crashing over him, crowding his mind with images and memories and truths that he didn't want to accept. Cutting the outside lines after the first attacks. Umbrella and Birkin and the walking dead. The slaughter in the garage, when the bright

coppery scent of blood had filled the air and Mayor Harris had been eaten alive, screaming until the very end. The dwindling numbers of the living through the first long and terrible night—and the cold, brutal realization that had hit him again and again, that the city—his city—was no more. After that, the confusion. The strange and hysterical joy that had come when he'd understood that there would be no consequences for his actions. Irons remembered the game he'd played on the second night, after some of Birkin's pets had found their way to the station and taken out all but a few of the remaining cops. He'd found Neil Carson cowering in the library and had . . . tracked him, hunting the sergeant down like an animal.

What did it matter? What matters, now that my life in Raccoon is over?

All that was left, the only thing that he had to hold on to, was the Sanctuary—and the part of him that had created it, the dark and glorious heart inside of his own that he'd always had to keep hidden away. That part was free now....

Irons looked at the corpse of Beverly Harris, laid out across his desk like some delicate and fragile dream, and felt that he might be torn apart by the feelings of fear and doubt that warred inside of him. Had he killed her? He couldn't remember.

Uncle Brian. Ten years ago, I was her Uncle Brian.

What have I become?

It was too much. Without taking his gaze from her lifeless face, he pulled the loaded VP70 from its holster and began to rub the barrel with numb fingers, gentle strokes that reassured him somehow as the weapon turned toward him. When the bore was pressed firmly against his soft belly, he felt that some kind of peace might be within reach. His finger settled across the trigger, and it was then that Beverly whispered to him again, her lips still, her sweet, musical voice coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. ... don't leave me, Uncle Brian. You said you'd keep me safe, that you'd take care of me. Think of what you could do now that everyone is gone and there's nothing to stop you. . . .

"You're dead," he whispered, but she kept talking, soft and insistent.

. . . nothing to stop you from being fulfilled, truly fulfilled for the first time in your life . . . Tortured and aching, Irons slowly, slowly pulled the nine-millimeter away from his stomach. After a moment, he rested his forehead against Beverly's shoulder and closed his tired eyes.

She was right, he couldn't leave her. He'd promised—and there was something to what she'd said, about all of the things he could do. His hobby table was big enough to accommodate all kinds of animals . . .

Irons sighed, not sure what to do next—and wondering why he was in such a hurry to decide, anyway. They would rest for a while, perhaps even take a nap together. And when they awoke, things would be clear again.

Yes, that was it. They would rest, and then he could sort things through, take care of business; he was the chief of police, after all.

Feeling in control of himself again, Brian Irons slipped into a light and uneasy doze, Beverly's cool flesh like a balm against his feverish brow.

IlinE

THANKS TO A VAN PARKED IN THE ALLEY

behind Kendo's, Leon's straight shot to the station had taken a few detours—through an infested basket-ball court, another alley, and a parked bus that had reeked from the sprawled corpses inside. It was a nightmare, punctuated with whispering howls, the stink of decay, and once, a distant explosion that made his limbs feel weak. And though he had to shoot three more of the walking dead and was wired to the teeth with adrenaline and horror, he somehow managed to hold on to his hope that the RPD building would be a safe haven, that there would be some kind of crisis center set up, manned by police and paramedics—people in authority making decisions and marshaling forces. It wasn't just a hope, it was a need; the possibility that there might be no one left in Raccoon to take charge was unthinkable.

When he finally stumbled out into the street in front of the station and saw the burning squad cars, he felt like he'd been hit in the gut. But it was the sight of the decaying, moaning police officers staggering around the dancing flames that truly wiped out his hope. There were only about fifty or sixty cops on the RPD force, and a full third of them were lurching through the wreckage or dead and bloody on the pavement not a hundred feet from the front door of the station.

Leon forced the despair away, fixing his sight on the gate that led to the RPD building's courtyard. Wheth-er or not anyone had survived, he had to stick with his plan, put out a call for help—and there was Claire to think about. Concentrating on his fears would only make it harder to do whatever needed to be done. He ran for the gate, nimbly dodging a horribly burned uniformed cop with blackened bones for fingers. As he clutched the cold metal handle and pushed, he realized that some part of him was grow-ing numb to the tragedy, to the understanding that these things had once been the citizens of Raccoon. The creatures that roamed the streets were no less horrible, but the shock of it all just couldn't be sustained; there were too many of them.

Not too many here, thank God...

Leon slammed the gate shut behind him and pushed his sweaty hair off his brow, taking a deep breath of the almost fresh air as he scanned the courtyard. The small, grassy park to his right was well lit enough for him to see there were only a few of the once human creatures, and none close enough to be a threat. He could see the two flags that adorned the front of the station house, hanging limp in the still shadows, and the sight resparked the hope that he thought he'd lost; whatever else happened, he'd at least made it to someplace he knew. And it had to be safer than the streets.

He hurried past a blindly reeling trio of the dead, easily avoiding them—two men and a woman; all three could have passed for normal if not for their mournful, hungry cries and uncoordinated staggers. They must have died recently—

· but they're not dead, dead people don't gush blood when you shoot them. Not to mention the walking-around-and-trying-to-eat-people thing. . . . Dead people didn't walk . . . and living people tended to fall down after they'd been shot a few times with .50 caliber slugs, and didn't put up with their flesh rotting on their bones. Questions he hadn't yet had time to ask himself flooded through his mind as he jogged up the front steps to the station, questions he didn't have the answers for—but he would soon, he was sure of it.

The door wasn't locked, but Leon didn't allow himself to feel surprise; with all he'd been through since he hit town, he figured that it would be best to keep his expectations to a minimum. He pushed it open and stepped inside, Magnum raised and his finger on the trigger.

Empty. There was no sign of life in the grand old lobby of the RPD building—and no sign of the disaster that had overtaken Raccoon. Leon gave up on not feeling surprised, closing the door behind him and stepping down into the sunken lobby.

“Hello?” Leon kept his voice low, but it carried, echoing back to him in a whisper. Everything looked just as he remembered it; three floors of classically styled architecture in oak and marble. There was a stone statue of a woman carrying a water pitcher in the lower part of the large room, a ramp on either side leading up to the receptionist’s station. The RPD seal set into the floor in front of the statue gleamed softly in the diffuse light from the wall lamps, as if it had just been polished.

No bodies, no blood... not even a shell casing. If there was an attack here, where the hell’s the evidence? Uneasy at the profound silence of the huge chamber, Leon walked up the ramp to his left, stopping at the counter of the reception desk and leaning over it; except for the fact that it was unmanned, nothing seemed to be out of place. There was a phone on the desk below the counter. Leon picked up the receiver and cradled it between his head and shoulder, tapping at the buttons with fingers that felt cold and distant. Not even a dial tone; all he heard was the sound of his own heavily thumping heart.

He put the phone down and turned to face the empty room, trying to decide on where to go first. As much as he wanted to find Claire, he also desperately wanted to hook up with some other cops. He’d received a copy of an RPD memo just a couple of weeks before, stating that several of the departments were going to be relocated, but that didn’t really matter; if there were cops hiding in the building, they probably weren’t concerned with sticking close to their desks.

There were three doors leading away from the lobby to different parts of the sprawling station, two on the west side and the other on the east. Of the two on the west, one led through a series of halls toward the back of the building, past a couple of filing offices and a briefing room; the second opened into the uniformed-officer squad room and lockers, which then connected into one of the corridors near the stairs to the second floor. The east door, in fact the whole east side of the first floor, was primarily for the detectives—offices, interrogation, and a press room; there was also access to the basement and another set of stairs on the outside of the building.

Claire probably came in through the garage ... or through the back lot to the roof.. .

Or, she could’ve circled around and come through the same door he had—assuming she even made it to the station; she could be anywhere. And considering that the building took up almost an entire city block, that was a lot of ground to cover.

Finally deciding that he had to start somewhere, he walked toward the squad room for the beat cops, where his own locker would be. A random choice, but he’d spent more time there than anywhere else in the station, interviewing and working through scheduling. Besides, it was closest, and the tomb-like silence of the oversized lobby was giving him the creeps. The door wasn’t locked, and Leon pushed it open slowly, holding his breath and hoping that the room would be as undisturbed and orderly as the lobby. What he saw instead was the confirmation of his earlier fears: the creatures had been there—with a vengeance.

The long room had been trashed, tables and chairs splintered and overturned everywhere he looked. Smears of dried blood decorated the walls, splashes of it in tacky, trailing puddles on the floor, leading toward—

“Oh, man—“

The cop was sitting against the lockers to his left, his legs splayed, half-hidden by a smashed table. At the sound of Leon’s voice, he weakly raised one shaking arm, pointed a weapon vaguely in Leon’s direction—then lowered it again, seemingly ex-hausted by the effort. His midsection was awash with oozing blood, his dark features contorted with pain. Leon was crouching at his side in two steps, gently touching his shoulder. He couldn’t see the wound, but there was so much blood that he knew it was bad—

“Who are you?” the cop whispered.

The soft, almost dreamy tone of his voice scared Leon as much as the still oozing wound and the glassy look in his dark eyes; the man was slipping, fast. They’d never formally met, but Leon had seen him before. The young African-American beat cop had been pointed out to him as sharp, on the fast track to detective, Marvin, Marvin Branagh. ...

“I’m Kennedy. What happened here?” Leon asked, his hand still on Branagh’s shoulder. A sickly heat radiated through the officer’s ragged shirt. “About two months ago,” Branagh rasped, “the cannibal murders . . . the S.T.A.R.S. found zombies out at this mansion in the woods. . . .”

He coughed weakly, and Leon saw a small bubble of blood form at the corner of his mouth. Leon started to tell him to be still, to rest, but Branagh’s faraway gaze had fixed on his own; the cop seemed determined to tell the story, whatever it was costing him. “Chris and the others discovered that Umbrella was behind the whole thing . . . risked their lives, and no one believed them . . . then this.”

Chris . . . Chris Redfield, Claire’s brother. Leon hadn’t made the connection before, although he’d known something about the trouble with the S.T.A.R.S. He’d only heard bits and pieces of the story—the suspension of the Special Tactics and Rescue Squad after their alleged mishandling of the murder cases had been the reason the RPD’d been hiring new cops. He’d even read the names of the infamous S.T.A.R.S. members in some local paper, listed along with some fairly impressive career records—

· and Umbrella runs this town. Some kind of a chemical leak, something that they tried to cover up by getting rid of the S.T.A.R.S.—

All of this went through his mind in a split-second; then Branagh coughed again, the sound even weaker than before.

“Hang in there,” Leon said, and quickly looked around them for something to use to stop the bleed-ing, inwardly kicking himself for not having done it already. A locker next to Branagh was partly open; a crumpled T-shirt lay at the bottom. Leon scooped it up and folded it haphazardly, pressing it against Branagh’s stomach. The cop placed his own bloody hand over the makeshift bandage, closing his eyes as he spoke again in a wheezing gasp.

“Don’t . . . worry about me. There are ... you have to try and rescue the survivors... ..” The resignation in Branagh’s voice was horribly plain. Leon shook his head, wanting to deny the truth, wanting to do something to ease Branagh’s pain—but the wounded cop was dying, and there was no one to call for help.

Not fair, it’s not fair—

“Go,” Branagh breathed, his eyes still closed. Branagh was right, there was nothing else Leon could do—but he didn’t, couldn’t move for a moment—until Branagh raised his weapon again, pointing it at him with a sudden burst of energy that strengthened his voice to a rough shout.

“Just go!” Branagh commanded, and Leon stood up, wondering if he would be as selfless in the same situation, working to convince himself that Branagh would make it somehow.

“I’ll be back,” Leon said firmly, but Branagh’s arm was already drooping, his head settling against his heaving chest.

Rescue the survivors.

Leon backed toward the door, swallowing heavily and struggling to accept the change in plan that could very well kill him—but that he couldn’t walk away from. Official or no, he was a cop. If there were other survivors, it was his moral and civic duty to try and help them.

There was a weapons store in the basement, near the parking garage. Leon opened the door and stepped back into the lobby, praying that the lockers would be well stocked—and that there would be somebody left for him to help.

TEII

FROM THE BURNING ROOFTOP, CLAIRE moved through a snaking hallway littered with broken glass—and past a very dead cop, a bloody testament to her fears about the station’s safety. She quickly stepped over the body and moved on, her nervous tension growing. A cool breeze ruffled through the shattered windows that lined the hall, making the darkness alive; there were shiny black feathers stuck in the streaks of blood that painted the floorboards, and their soft, wavering dance had her jerking the semiautomatic toward every shadow. She passed a door that she thought led back outside to a set of external stairs, but she kept going, taking a right toward the center of the building. The way the helicopter had buried itself in the rooftop was gnawing at her, inspiring visions of the old station going up in flames.

From the look of things, maybe that’s not such a bad idea....

Dead bodies and bloody handprints on the walls;

Claire wasn’t happy about the idea of touring the station. Still, death by fire didn’t carry much appeal either, she needed to see how bad it was before she went looking for Leon.

The corridor dead-ended at a door that felt cool to the touch. Mentally crossing her fingers, Claire opened it—and stumbled back as a wave of acrid smoke washed over her, the smell of burnt metal and wood thick in the heated air. She dropped to a crouch and edged forward again, peering down the hall that stretched off to her right. The hall turned right again maybe thirty feet down, and although she couldn’t see the fire proper, bright, fiery light was reflected off the gray paneled walls at the corner. The popping crackle of the unseen flames was magnified in the tight corridor, the sound as mindlessly hungry as the moans of the zombies down in the courtyard. Well, shit. What now?

There was another door diagonally across from where she crouched, only a few steps away; Claire took a deep breath and moved, walking low to stay beneath the thickening blanket of smoke, hoping she could find a fire extinguisher—and that a fire extinguisher would be enough to put out whatever blaze the crashed ‘copter had created.

The door opened into an empty waiting room—a couple of green vinyl couches and a rounded counter-desk, with another door across from the one she'd entered by. The small room seemed untouched, as sterile and quietly unassuming as she might have expected—and unlike just about everywhere else she'd been tonight, there was no lurking disaster in the mild shadows thrown by the overhead fluorescents, no stench of rot or shuffling zombie. And no fire extinguisher. . . .

Not in plain sight, anyway. She closed the door on the smoky corridor and stepped toward the desk, lifting the entrance flap with the barrel of the gun. There was an old manual typewriter on the counter—and next to that, a telephone. Claire grabbed for it, hoping against hope, but heard only dead air through the receiver. Sighing, she dropped it and ducked down to check out the shelves beneath the counter. A phone book, a few stacks of papers—and then, half-hidden by a woman's purse on the bottom shelf, was the familiar red shape she'd been hoping to find, coated with a thin layer of dust.

“There you are,” she murmured, and paused just long enough to stick the nine-millimeter into her vest before hefting the heavy cylinder. She'd never used one before, but it looked simple enough—a metal handle with a locking pin, a black rubber nozzle hooked to the side. It was only a couple of feet long, but it weighed a good forty or fifty pounds; she figured that meant it was full.

Armed with the extinguisher, Claire stepped back to the door and started to take short, sharp breaths, filling her lungs. It made her feel light-headed, but the hyperventilation would allow her to hold her breath longer. She didn't want to keel over from smoke inhalation before she'd had a chance to put it out. A final deep breath and she opened the door, crouching her way back into the now noticeably hotter corridor. The haze of smoke had gotten thicker too, extending down from the ceiling in a dark and choking fog at least four feet deep.

Keep low, breathe shallow and watch your step—

She turned the corner and felt a bizarre mix of relief and sorrow at the sight of the burning wreckage right in front of her. She bobbed her head and took a small breath through the fabric of her vest, feeling her skin flush and tighten from the heat. The fire wasn't as bad as she'd feared, more smoke than substance and not much taller or bigger than she was; the flames that licked up the wall in orange-yellow fingers seemed to be having trouble catching, stopped by the heavy wood of a half-smashed door. It was the nose of the helicopter that drew her attention, the blackened shell of the smoldering cockpit—and the blackened husk of the pilot still strapped to the seat, the melted mouth frozen in a yawning, silent scream. There was no way to tell if it had been a man or a woman; the features had been obliterated, running together like dark tallow.

Claire jerked the metal pin loose from the handle and aimed the hose at the burning floorboards, where the flame danced in white and blue. She squeezed the lever down and a hissing plume of snowy spray whooshed out, blasting over the debris in a powdery cloud. Barely able to see through the billowing white-ness, she directed the hose over everything, dousing the wreckage liberally with the oxygen killer. Within a minute, the fire appeared to be out, but she kept up with the extinguisher until it ran dry.

At the last spluttering cough of spray, Claire let go of the handle and took a few more shallow breaths, inspecting the smoking wreck for any spots she'd missed. Not a flicker, but the wooden door alongside the helicopter's flocked cockpit was still leaking ten-drills of black smoke. She leaned closer and saw a tinge of glowing orange under the charred surface. The area surrounding the burning wood had already been torched, but she didn't want to take any chances; she stepped back and gave the door a solid kick, aiming for the glowing embers.

Her boot connected squarely with the hot spot, and the door flew open with a splintering crack, the

scorched wood giving way in a sparking shower of cinders. A few landed on her bare calf, but she drew her weapon before stopping to brush them off, more afraid of what might be waiting behind the ruined door than a few blisters.

A short, empty hallway, littered with jagged pieces of splintered wood and hazy with smoke, then a door at the end on the left; Claire moved toward it, as much to get to some fresh air as to see where it led. With the immediate threat of the fire over with, she had to start looking for Leon—and thinking about what they'd need to survive. If she could check out a few of the rooms along the way, maybe she'd be able to find stuff they could use.

A phone that works, car keys . . . hell, a couple of machine guns or aflame-thrower would be nice, but I'll take what I can get.

The plain door at the end of the hall was unlocked. Claire pushed it open, ready to fire at anything that moved—

· and stopped, feeling mildly shocked by the bi-zarre atmosphere of the lavish room. It was like some parody of a men's club from the fifties, a large office decorated with an extravagance that bordered on the ridiculous. The walls were lined with heavy mahogany bookshelves and matching tables, surrounding a kind of sitting area made up of padded leather chairs and a low marble table, all set atop an obviously expensive oriental rug. An elaborate chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a rich, mellow light over it all. Framed pictures and delicate vases were situated through-out—but their classic designs were overwhelmed by the stuffed animal heads and poised, lifeless birds that dominated the room, most gathered around a massive desk at the far side—

· oh, Jesus—

Laid out across the desk, like some character from a gothic horror story, was a beautiful young woman in a flowing white gown, her guts ripped to bloody shreds. The corpse was like a centerpiece; the dried and dusty animals stared down at her with dead glass eyes—there was a falcon and what looked like an eagle, their ratty wings spread in simulated flight, as well as a couple of mounted deer heads and that of a nappy furred moose. The effect was so creepy and surreal that for a moment, Claire couldn't breathe—

· and when the high-backed chair behind the desk swiveled around suddenly, she barely held back a shriek of superstitious terror, half expecting to see some vision of dark and grinning death. It was only a man—but a man with a gun, pointed at her. Twice in one night, what are the odds—

For a second, neither of them moved—and then the man lowered his weapon, a sickly half-smile playing across his pudgy face.

“I'm terribly sorry,” he said, his voice as oily and false as a bad politician's. “I thought you were another one of those zombies.”

He smoothed his bristly mustache with one thick finger as he spoke, and although Claire had never met him before, she suddenly knew who he was; Chris had bitched about him often enough.

Fat, mustachioed, and as slick as a snake-oil sales-man—it's the police chief. Irons.

He didn't look good, his cheeks flushed with high color and his porcine eyes rimmed with puffed white flesh. The way his gaze darted around the room was unsettling, as if he was in the grip of some kind of heavy paranoia. In fact, he looked unbalanced, like he wasn't all that connected to reality.

“Are you Chief Irons?” she asked, trying to sound pleasantly respectful as she stepped closer to the desk. “Yes, that’s me,” he said smoothly, “and just who are you?”

Before she could speak, Irons went on, confirming Claire’s suspicions with what he said next—and with the bitter, petulant tone in which he said it. “No, don’t bother telling me. It makes no difference. You’ll end up like all the others. ...”

He trailed off, staring down at the dead woman in front of him with some emotion that Claire couldn’t place. She felt bad for him, in spite of all that Chris had told her about his rotten personality and professional incompetence; God only knew what horrors he’d witnessed, or what he’d had to do to survive. Is it any wonder that he’s having trouble with reality? Leon and I wandered into this horror show in the last reel; Irons was here for the previews, which probably included watching his friends die.

She looked down at the young woman on the desk and Irons spoke again, his voice somehow sad and pompous at the same time.

“That’s the mayor’s daughter. I was supposed to look out for her, but I failed miserably. ...” Claire searched for some words of comfort, wanting to tell him that he was lucky to have lived, that it wasn’t his fault—but as he continued his lament, the words died in her throat, along with her pity. “Just look at her. She was a true beauty, her skin nothing short of perfection. But it will soon putre-fy... and within the hour, she’ll become one of those things. Just like all the others.”

Claire didn’t want to jump to any conclusions, but the wistful longing in his tone and in his shining, hungry stare made her skin crawl. The way he was looking at the dead girl—

· you’re imagining things. He’s the chief of police, not some perverted lunatic. And he’s the first person you’ve met who might be able to give you some kind of information. Don’t waste the opportunity. “There must be some way to stop it. . . .” Claire said gently.

“In a manner of speaking. A bullet in the brain—or decapitation.”

He finally looked away from the body, but not at Claire. He turned to gaze at the stuffed creatures perched on the edge of his desk, his voice taking on a resigned but somehow mirthful quality.

“And to think—taxidermy used to be my hobby.

No longer. . . .”

Claire’s internal alarms were doing some serious jangling. Taxidermy? What the hell did that have to do with the dead human being on his desk? Irons was finally looking at her, and Claire didn’t like it one bit. His dark and beady gaze was directed at her face, but he didn’t seem to actually see her at all. For the first time, it occurred to her that he hadn’t asked her one question about how she’d come to be there or commented on the smoke that had leaked into his office. And the way he’d talked about the mayor’s daughter ... no real sorrow at her passing, only self-pity and some kind of twisted admiration. Oh, boy. Oh boy oh boy, he’s not just out of touch here, he’s on a different goddamn planet—

“Please,” Irons said softly. “I’d like to be alone now.”

He sagged down into his chair, closing his eyes, his head falling back against the padded back as if in exhaustion. As simply as that, she’d been dismissed. And although she had a million questions—many of

which she thought he could provide answers for—she did think that maybe it was for the best if she just got the hell away from him, at least for now—

A soft creaking sound, behind her and to the left, so quiet that she wasn't even sure she'd heard it at all. Claire turned, frowning, and saw that there was a second door to the office. She hadn't noticed it before—and that soft, stealthy sound had come from behind it.

Another zombie? Or maybe somebody hiding. . . ? She looked back at Irons, and saw that he hadn't moved. Apparently he hadn't heard anything, and she'd ceased to exist for him, at least for the moment. He'd gone back to whatever private world he'd been in before she stumbled into his office.

So—back the way I came, or do I see what's behind door number two?

Leon—she needed to find Leon, and she had a pretty strong feeling that Irons was a creep, whether he was crazy or not; no great loss that he wasn't up for joining forces. But if there were other people hiding in the building, people that she and Leon could help or who might be able to help them. . . .

It would only take a moment to check. With a last glance at Irons, sagging next to the corpse of the mayor's daughter and surrounded by his lifeless ani-mals, Claire walked to the second door, hoping she wasn't making a mistake.

ELEVER

SHERRY HAD BEEN HIDING FOR A LONG TIME in the police station, for what must have been three or four days, and hadn't seen her mother yet. Not once, not even when there had still been a lot of people left. She'd found Mrs. Addison right after she'd gotten there—one of the teachers from school—but Mrs. Addison had died. A zombie had eaten her. And not long after that, Sherry had found a ventilation shaft that ran over most of the whole building, and had decided that hiding was safer than staying with the grownups—because the adults kept dying, and because there was a monster in the station even worse than the zombies or the inside-out men, and she was pretty sure that the monster was looking for her. That was proba-bly stupid, she didn't think that monsters picked out just one person to go for—but then again, she'd never thought that monsters were real, either.

So Sherry had stayed hidden, mostly in the knight room; there weren't any dead people there, and the only way to get in—besides the ventilation shaft behind the suits of armor—was to go down a long hall guarded by a giant tiger. The tiger was stuffed, but it was still scary—and Sherry thought that maybe the tiger would scare away the monster. Part of her knew that that was dumb, but it made her feel better anyway.

Since the zombies had taken over everything in the police station, she'd spent a lot of time sleeping. When she was asleep, she didn't have to think about what might have happened to her parents or worry about what was going to happen to her. The air shaft was pretty warm, and she had plenty to eat from the candy machine downstairs—but she was scared, and even worse than being scared was being lonely, so mostly she'd just slept.

She'd been asleep, warm and curled up behind the knights, when she'd been awakened by a tremendous crash somewhere outside. She was sure it was the monster; she'd only caught a glimpse of it once before, of the giant's broad and terrible back, through a steel grate—but she'd heard it screaming and howling through the building many times since then. She knew that it was terrible, terrible and violent and hungry. Sometimes it disappeared for hours at a time, letting her hope that it had given up—but it always came back, and no matter where Sherry was, it always seemed to appear somewhere close by.

The loud noise that had ripped her from her dreamless sleep was like the sound a monster would make tearing the walls down, and she'd huddled in her hiding place, ready to dart back into the shaft if the sound came any closer. It didn't. For a long time she didn't move, waiting with her eyes squeezed shut, holding on to her good luck charm—a beautiful gold pendant that her mother had given her only last week, so big that it filled up her whole hand. As it had before, the charm worked; the loud, terrible noise hadn't been repeated. Or maybe the big tiger had kept the monster from finding her. Either way, when she'd heard gentle thumping sounds in the office, she'd felt safe enough to creep out of the case and go out into the hall to listen. The zombies and inside-out men couldn't use doors, and if it was the monster, it would have come for her already, clawing down doors and screaming for blood.

It has to be a person. Maybe Mom ...

Halfway down the hall, where it turned right, she'd heard people talking in the office and felt a burst of hope and loneliness mixed together. She couldn't tell what they were saying, but it was the first time she'd heard anybody who wasn't yelling for maybe two days. And if there were people talking, maybe it was because help had finally come to Raccoon. The army or the government or the Marines, maybe all of them . . .

Excited, she hurried down the hall and was next to the big snarling tiger, right by the door, when her excitement faltered. The voices had stopped. Sherry stood very still, suddenly anxious. If people had come to Raccoon to help, wouldn't she have heard the planes and trucks? Wouldn't there be shooting and bombs and men with loudspeakers telling everybody to come out?

Maybe those voices aren't army people at all; maybe those voices are Bad People. Crazy, like that one man...

Not long after Sherry had gone into hiding, she'd seen a terrible thing through a grating that led into a locker room. A tall man with red hair had been in the room, talking to himself and rocking back and forth in a chair. At first, Sherry had thought about asking him for help, to find her parents—but something about the way he was talking and giggling and gently swaying back and forth made her wary, so she'd watched him for a while from the safe darkness of the air shaft. He'd been holding a big knife. And after a long time, still laughing and mumbling and rocking, he'd stabbed himself in the stomach. Sherry had been more scared by that man than by the zombies, because it didn't make sense. He'd been crazy, and he'd killed himself and she'd crawled away, crying because it just didn't make any sense.

She didn't want to meet anyone else like that. And even if the people in the office were okay, they might take her away from her safe place and try to protect her—and that would mean her death, because the monster surely wasn't afraid of adults.

It felt awful to turn away, but there was no other choice. Sherry started back for the armor room—

Creak!

· and froze as the floor shifted underfoot. The sound of the creaking board seemed incredibly loud and she held her breath, clutching her pendant and praying that the door wouldn't come flying open behind her, that some crazy wouldn't charge in and—and get her.

She didn't hear anything, but felt sure that the pounding of her heart would give her away, it was so loud. After a full ten seconds, she carefully started back down the hall, stepping as lightly as she could, feeling like she was creeping out of a cave filled with sleeping snakes. The hall back to the armor room seemed

like it was a mile long, and she had to use all of her willpower not to run once she reached the turn—but if there was one thing she'd learned from the movies and TV, it was that running from danger always meant a horrible death.

When she finally reached the entrance back to the armor room, she felt like she might just collapse from relief. She was safe again, she could snuggle back into the old blanket that Mrs. Addison had found for her and just—

The door from the office opened, opened and closed. And a second later, there were footsteps. Coming for her.

Sherry flew into the armor room, no longer thinking about anything at all in the bright and trembling crush of panic that swept through her. She sprinted past the three knights, forgetting her safe place because all she knew was that she had to get away, get as far away as possible. There was a dark, tiny chamber past the glass case in the middle of the room and darkness was what she needed, a shadow to disappear into—

· and she could hear the running footsteps somewhere behind her, pounding over wood as she hurtled into the dark room and into the farthest corner. Sherry crouched down between the dusty brick of the room's fireplace and the padded chair beside it and tried to make herself as small as possible, hugging her knees and hiding her face.

Please please please don't come in, don't see me, I'm not here—

The running footsteps had come into the armor room and were slow now, hesitant, moving around the big glass case in the middle. Sherry thought of her safe place, the mouth of the ventilation shaft that could have taken her away, and struggled to hold back hot tears of self-condemnation. The fireplace room had no escape; she was trapped.

Each hollow, thumping step brought the stranger closer to the dark room in which Sherry hid. She scrunched herself tighter, making promises that she would do anything, anything at all if only the stranger would go away—

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Suddenly, the room flashed into blinding brightness, the soft click of the light switch lost beneath Sherry's terrified cry. She pushed away from her corner and ran, screaming and unseeing, hoping to get past the stranger and back to the air shaft—

· and a warm hand grabbed her arm, tight, keeping her from going one more step. She screamed again, jerking as hard as she could, but the stranger was strong—

“Wait!” It was a lady, the voice almost as frantic as Sherry's hammering heart.

“Let me go,” Sherry wailed, but the lady was still holding on, even pulling her closer.

“Easy, easy—I'm not a zombie, take it easy, it's okay—“ The woman's voice had turned soothing, the words crooned gently, the hand on Sherry's wrist warm and strong. The sweet, musical voice repeated the gentle words again and again.

“—easy, it's okay, I'm not going to hurt you, you're safe now.”

Sherry finally looked at the lady, and saw how pretty she was, how her eyes were soft with concern and sympathy. And just like that, Sherry stopped trying to get away and felt the hot tears trickle down her face, tears that she'd been holding back ever since she'd seen the red-haired man commit suicide. She instinctively hugged the young, pretty stranger—and the lady hugged her back, her slender arms tight across Sherry's trembling shoulders.

Sherry cried for a couple of minutes, letting the woman stroke her hair and whisper soothing words to her—and at last, she felt like the worst was over. As much as she wanted to crawl into the lady's arms and forget all of her fears, to believe that she was safe, she knew better. And besides, she wasn't a baby anymore; she'd turned twelve last month.

With an effort, Sherry stepped away from the woman and wiped her eyes, looking up into her pretty face. The woman wasn't that old, maybe only twenty or so, and was dressed really cool—boots and cutoff pink denim shorts and a matching vest with no sleeves. She wore her shiny brown hair in a ponytail, and when she smiled, she looked like a movie star. The woman crouched down right in front of her, still smiling gently. “My name's Claire. What's yours?”

Sherry felt shy suddenly, embarrassed for running and then trying to get away from such a nice lady. Her parents had often told her that she acted like an emotional baby, that she was “too imaginative” for her own good, and here was proof; Claire wasn't going to hurt her, she could tell.

“Sherry Birkin,” she said, and smiled at Claire, hoping that Claire wasn't mad at her; she didn't look mad. In fact, she looked pleased with Sherry's answer. “Do you know where your parents are?” Claire asked, in the same sweet tone.

“They work at the Umbrella chemical plant, just outside of town,” Sherry said.

“Chemical plant... then what are you doing here?”

“My mom called, and told me to go to the police station. She said it was too dangerous to stay at home.”

Claire nodded. “From the look of things, she was probably right. But it's dangerous here, as well. . . .” Claire frowned thoughtfully, then smiled again.

“You'd better come with me.”

Sherry felt a cold knot tighten in her stomach, and shook her head, wondering how to explain to Claire that it wasn't a good idea, that it was a very bad idea. She wanted more than anything not to be alone anymore, but it just wasn't safe.

If I go with her and the monster finds us. . . . Claire would be killed. And although Claire was thin, Sherry was pretty sure that she wouldn't be able to fit in the ventilation shaft.

“There's something out there,” she said finally. “I saw it, it's bigger than the zombies. And it's coming after me.”

Claire shook her head, opening her mouth to say something, probably to try and talk her into changing her mind, when a terrible, furious sound filled the room, echoing in violent waves from somewhere in the building. Somewhere close.

“Rrrraahh—“

Sherry felt her blood turn to ice. Claire’s eyes went wide, her skin paling.

“What was that?”

Sherry backed away, breathless, in her mind already running for the safe place behind the three suits of armor.

“That’s what I was telling you,” she gasped out, and before Claire could stop her, she turned and ran. “Sherry!”

Sherry ignored the shouted plea, sprinting past the glass exhibit case for the safety of the air shaft. She leapt nimbly over the knight’s pedestal and dropped to her hands and knees, ducking her head and scrambling into the ancient stone hole set into the base of the wall.

Her only chance, Claire’s only chance, was for Sherry to get as far away from her as possible. Maybe they would find each other again when the monster had gone.

As Sherry crawled quickly through the tight and winding darkness, she hoped it wasn’t already too late.

TWELVE

ADA SAT ON THE EDGE OF THE CLUTTERED desk in the office of the Chief of Detectives, resting her aching feet and staring blankly at the empty steel safe in the corner. Her patience was wearing thin. Not only was the G-Virus sample nowhere to be found, she was starting to think that Bertolucci had flown the coop. She’d gone through the break room, the S.T.A.R.S. office, the library—in fact, she was pretty sure she’d covered just about everywhere the reporter would have had easy access to, and had used two full clips to do it. It wasn’t that she was low on ammo, it was the waste of time that the bullets represented—twenty-six rounds and no results, except that there were a dozen more virus-riddled corpses lying around. And two of Umbrella’s freak hybrids. . . . Ada shuddered, remembering the warped red flesh and trumpeting shrieks of the bizarre creatures that she’d capped in the press room. She’d never been particularly bothered by greed, corporate or other-wise, but Umbrella had been up to some seriously immoral experimentation. Trent had warned her about the Tyrant retrievers—which, thankfully, hadn’t put in an appearance yet—but the long-tongued, clawed, bloody humanoids were an affront to even her sensibilities. Not to mention a lot harder to kill than the virus carriers. If they were T-Virus products, she’d have to keep her fingers crossed that Birkin hadn’t done anything with his newest creation. According to Trent, the G series hadn’t been put to use yet, but it was supposed to be twice as potent. . . . Ada let her gaze wander, taking in the plain, functional office. It wasn’t the most inspiring environment to take a break in, but at least it was reasonably gore-free; with the door closed, she could hardly smell the officers in the main part of the room. They’d been pretty far gone when she’d put them down, that bonelessly wet stage that apparently preceded total collapse.

Not that it matters if I can smell them, my hair and clothes have absorbed the goddamn smell; when they start to go bad, it seems to happen with a bang... She wished she’d bothered to learn more on the science end; she knew what the T-Virus was used for, but hadn’t thought it necessary to research the physio-chemical effects. Why bother, when she had no reason to think that Umbrella had been planning to spill a shitload of it in their hometown? She was getting plenty of firsthand information about how well it worked, but it would have been nice to know exactly what happened in the infected party’s body and mind, what turned them from a person into a mindless flesh-eater. Instead, she could only file away her

observa-tions and make guesses at the truth.

From what she'd seen, it took less than an hour for someone infected to turn zombie. Sometimes the victim went into a kind of fever-coma first, which presumably burnt out parts of the brain—and only added to the impression that they were waking from the dead when they stood up and started looking for fresh meat. The symptoms of the virus were the same for everyone, but not the progression rate; she'd seen at least three cases where the victim had turned bloodthirsty within a couple of moments of being infected, the stage she'd started to think of as “going cataract.” One of the few constants was that their eyes clouded with a thin film of eggy white mucous when they turned—and although the physical deterioration always started immediately, some fell to pieces much faster than others ...

... and why are you thinking about it? Your job doesn't include finding a cure, does it?

She sighed, bending over to rub her toes. True enough. Still, it was something to think about. Focus-ing on staying alive was tiring and all-encompassing work; she didn't have a chance to consider the subtle-ties of the circumstances while clearing out corridors. She was on break, and she needed to let her brain run around a bit, ponder a few of the job's more puzzling aspects.

And there are about a thousand to mull over... Trent, what Bertolucci should or shouldn't know... and the S.T.A.R.S.—what the hell had happened to that merry crew?

From the articles that Trent had included in the info packet, she knew about the S.T.A.R.S.'s suspen-sion—and considering what they'd been investigat-ing, it didn't take a genius to figure out that they'd been railroaded by Umbrella for uncovering part if not all of the bioweapon operations. Umbrella had probably offed them by now, if they hadn't gone into hiding—and she had to wonder if Trent had played any part in the S.T.A.R.S.'s little misadventure, or if he'd tried to contact them before or after. Not that he would've told her; Trent was an enigma, to be sure. She'd only had one actual meeting with him, although he'd contacted her several times prior to her leaving for Raccoon, mostly by phone—and although she'd always prided herself on her ability to read people, she knew absolutely nothing about where his interests lay, why he wanted the G-Virus or what his gripe with Umbrella was about. It was obvious that he had some inside connection, he knew too much about the company's workings—but if that was the case, why not just pick up his own goddamn sample and then quit? Hiring an outside agent was the act of someone trying to avoid implication—but implication of what?

Ours is not to question why. . . .

A good principle to live by; she also wasn't getting paid to figure out Trent. She doubted she'd be able to even if she was getting paid for it; she'd never met such a supremely self-controlled man as Mr. Trent. In every interaction they'd had, she'd gotten the feeling that he had been smiling inside, as if he knew some intensely pleasurable secret that no one else was privy to—and yet somehow, he hadn't come across as arrogant or overblown. He was a cool one, his genial-ity so natural that she'd been vaguely intimidated; she might not have been able to pick up on his motives, but she'd seen that calm humor before—it was the real face of true power, of a man with a plan and the means to implement it.

So has the spill upset his plans, whatever they are? Or was he prepared for this contingency... ?He may not have planned it, but I can't imagine that “caught unawares” is anywhere in Trent's vocabulary.... Ada leaned back, rolling her head tiredly before pushing herself off the desk and stepping back into her uncomfortable shoes. Enough down time, she couldn't spare her aches and pains more than a few minutes and didn't expect to figure out much of anything until she was well away from Raccoon. She still had a couple of areas to check for Bertolucci before heading into the sewers, and she'd noticed that some of the first-floor window barricades weren't as solid as she might have hoped; she didn't want to

end up blocked out of a path by a new group of carriers from outside.

There were the “secret” passages on the east side, and the holding cells downstairs past the parking garage. If she couldn’t find him in either of those places, she’d have to assume he’d left the station and concentrate her efforts on obtaining the sample. She decided to try the basement first; it seemed unlikely that he’d stumbled across the hidden corn-dors. From what she’d read of his work, he wasn’t a good enough reporter to find his own ass. And if he was hiding in or near the holding cells, she wouldn’t have to spend any more time roaming the station, facing the inevitable invasion; the entrance into the subbasement was downstairs, so barring any complications, she could head straight for the lab. Ada walked out of the office, wrinkling her nose at the fresh burst of rotting smell pushed at her by the lazily spinning ceiling fans. There had to be seven or eight bodies in the desk-filled room, all of them cops, and at least the three that she’d shot had been fairly rank...

. . . and didn’t I leave five carriers still walking around in here when I came through before? Ada paused just outside the large and open room, looking back in from the narrow connecting corridor that led to the back stairs. Had there been five? She knew she’d capped a couple on her first visit; the rest had been too slow to hassle with, and she thought there’d been five of them. And yet she’d only had to knock off three when she had returned for her im-promptu break.

There were five. I may not be at peak, but I can still count.

She wasn’t in the habit of doubting her ability to keep track of such things, and the fact that she’d only just noticed was a sign of how tired she was; two days ago, she would have made the observation immediately. There was no way to tell if the additional corpses had been shot or had simply disintegrated on their own without exposing herself to contact—they were too messed up; but it would be wisest to assume that there were still a few survivors wandering around.

Not for long, one way or another....

Whether or not the zombies managed to break through, Umbrella would act soon, if they hadn’t already. What had happened in Raccoon was a share-holder’s worst nightmare, and Umbrella certainly wasn’t going to ignore the problem; they’d probably already worked up a fail-safe disaster and prepared their own spin to feed to the press. And it was a foregone conclusion that they’d try to salvage Birkin’s synthesis before putting their fail-safe into effect, which meant that she’d have to be very careful. Birkin had apparently been somewhat secretive about his work, and Trent had relayed that Umbrella would eventually send in a retrieval team ... with Raccoon in ashes, that eventuality had probably been moved forward a few notches.

A team of human beings, hopefully. I can handle that. A Tyrant, though ... 7 don’t need that kind of pain.

Ada turned away from the room, walking toward the closed door that would lead her to the basement steps. Tyrant was the code name for a particular series in Umbrella’s organic weapons research, a series that embodied the most destructive applications of the T-Virus. According to Trent, the White Umbrella scientists—the ones working in the secret labs—had just started tests on a kind of humanoid bloodhound, designed to hunt down any assigned scent or substance it had been encoded for with relentless and inhuman capabilities. A Tyrant retriever, a nearly indestructible construct of infected flesh and surgically implanted wiring—just the kind of thing that they might send in to find, say, a sample of the G-Virus....

Once she collected Trent’s sample, she was history, paid and drinking margaritas on a beach somewhere. And anything she might or might not feel about it, about how many innocents had died or

what Trent wanted the G-Virus for—it was just one more thing to put on her list of things the job didn't call for. Her defenses safely in place, Ada started for the basement to see if she could find the troublesome reporter.

Leon stood in the ransacked basement weapons locker, adjusting the holster straps and thinking about where Claire might be. From what little he'd seen so far, the station wasn't too bad. Cold and dim and stinking of the bodies heaped in the hallways, but not as actively dangerous as the streets. It wasn't much to be grateful for, but he'd take what he could get. He'd killed two of his fellow officers and a woman in the tatters of a traffic patrol uniform on his way to the basement—the cops upstairs and the woman just outside the morgue, a few yards from the small room that housed the RPD armament. Only three zombies since he'd reached the station, not including the few he'd been able to avoid in the detectives' room—but he'd passed over a dozen corpses on the short journey and had been able to make out the bullet holes on about half of them, through the eyes or directly to the temple. Between the cleanly “dispatched” creatures and the number of weapons missing from the lockers, he dared to hope that Branagh had been right about there being survivors.

Marvin Branagh ... probably dead by now. Does that mean he'll turn into a zombie? If Umbrella's really behind all this, it has to be some kind of a plague or disease, they're a pharmaceutical company—so how do you catch it? Is it a contact thing, or can you get it from taking a deep breath—

Leon dropped that train of thought, fast; as cool and humid as the basement was, the thought that he could be infected by the zombie sickness made him break out in a sudden feverish sweat. What if all of Raccoon was still hot, and he'd caught it just driving into town? The cluttered shelves of the storage room seemed to close in just a bit, in an anxiety flash of epic proportions.

But before real panic set in, he heard his mind's voice remind him of the reality—and the acceptance of the reality came with it, allowing him to let go of the fear.

If you're sick, you're sick. You can eat a bullet before it gets bad. If you're not sick, maybe you can survive to tell your grandkids about all this. Either way, there's probably nothing you can do about it now—except try to be a cop.

Leon nodded to himself, sighing. A better plan than worrying about it, and he now had the equipment to boost his chances. The electronic lock for the weapons store had been shot through, saving him from having to go searching for a key card or shooting it himself; the door had obviously been pried open, the external locks and handle practically shredded. On his first dig through the room, he'd been disappointed, and not a little freaked. There had been no handguns at all and very little ammo left in the dented green lockers—but he had found a box of shotgun shells, and after a second, more desperately thorough search, he'd un-covered a twelve-gauge hidden behind a high stack of boxes. There were a couple of shoulder harnesses for the Remington model still hanging on a wall hook, as well as a bigger utility belt than the one he already wore; it even had a sidepack deep enough to hold all of the loaded Magnum clips.

With a final cinch on the harness, he decided that it would be best to start searching the most obvious places first, every connecting corridor from every possible entrance. He'd head back to the lobby first, find something to leave a note on—

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Shots fired, close, and the echoing tone said it was the garage just down the hall. Leon yanked the Magnum out and ran for the door, precious seconds wasted as he fumbled at the mangled handle. The

hall was clear, except for the dead traffic cop on the floor to his right. Straight ahead was the entrance to the parking garage, and Leon hurried toward it, reminding himself that he wanted to go in easy, that he didn't want to get shot by a panicked gunman. Take it slow, get a good look before you move, identify yourself clearly—

The door, set into the wall to his right, was standing open—and as Leon darted a look into wide and open space, his body shielded by the concrete-block wall, he saw something that startled him into forgetting about the shooter.

The dog. It's the same goddamn dog.

Impossible—but the sprawled, lifeless animal in the middle of the car-lined chamber looked the same. Even with the barest glimpse he'd had before, the slimy wet demon in canine form that had nearly scared him into a crash ten miles outside the city could have come from the same litter. Beneath the sputtering fluorescent strips that lit the cold, oil-stained garage, Leon could see how truly abnormal it was.

There didn't seem to be anything moving, and no sound except for the buzz of lights. Still holding the Magnum ready, Leon stepped into the garage, determined to get a closer look at the creature—and saw a second one next to a parked squad car, apparently just as dead as the first. Both lay in sticky red pools of their own blood, their long, skinned-looking limbs splayed brokenly.

Umbrella. The wild animal attacks, the disease—how long has this shit been going on? And how did they manage to keep it quiet after all those murders? What was even more confusing was why Raccoon wasn't crawling with support services already; Umbrella may have been able to keep their involvement with the “cannibal” murders silent, but how could they keep Raccoon's citizens from calling for help from outside the city?

And these dogs, like carbon copies . . . something else that Umbrella made up in their labs? He took another step toward the fallen dog-things, frowning, not liking the dark conspiracy theories that were forming in his thoughts but unable to ignore them. What he liked even less was the look of the oil stains on the concrete floor; they were rust-colored—and there were too many of the dried splotches for him to count. He bent down to get a closer look, so intent on putting to rest a sudden terrible suspicion that he didn't register the shot until he heard the high, singing whine when it blew past his head. Bam!

Leon spun left, bringing the Magnum up and shouting at the same time—

“Hold your fire!”

and saw the shooter lowering her weapon, a woman in a short red dress and black leggings standing by a van against the far wall. She started walking toward him, her slender hips rolling smoothly, her head high and shoulders back. As if they were at a cocktail party.

Leon felt a rush of anger, that she could seem so calm after very nearly killing him—but as she got closer, he found himself wanting to forgive her. She was beautiful, and wore an expression of genuine pleasure at seeing him; a welcome sight after so much death.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “When I saw the uniform, I thought you were another zombie.” She was Asian-American, fine-boned but tall, her short hair a thick and glossy black. Her deep, satiny voice was almost a purr, a strange contrast to the way she looked at him. The slight smile she wore didn't seem to touch her almond-shaped eyes, which were scrutinizing him carefully.

“Who are you?” Leon asked.

“Ada Wong.” That throaty purr again. She tilted her head, still smiling.

“I’m Leon Kennedy,” he said reflexively, not sure what to ask or where to start. “I—what are you doing down here?”

Ada nodded toward the van behind her, an RPD transport wagon that was blocking the holding cell area. “I came to Raccoon looking for a man, a reporter named Bertolucci; I have reason to think that he’s in one of the cells, and I think he might be able to help me find my boyfriend. . . .”

Her smile faded, her sharp, almost electric gaze meeting his. . . . “And I think he knows all about what happened here. Would you help me move the van?”

If there was a reporter locked up on the other side of the garage wall who could tell them anything at all, Leon was eager to meet him. He wasn’t sure what to make of Ada’s story, but couldn’t imagine why she would lie about anything. The station wasn’t safe, and she was looking for survivors, just as he was. “Yeah, okay,” he said, feeling caught off guard by her smoothly direct manner. It felt like she had taken control of their meeting, some subtle but deliberate manipulation that had put her in charge—and from the casual way she turned and walked back to the van, as if there was no question that he would follow, he thought she knew it.

Don’t be paranoid; strong women do exist. And the more people we can find, the more help I can get to look for Claire.

Maybe it was time to stop making plans, and just try to keep up. Leon bolstered the Magnum and went after her, hoping that the reporter was where Ada thought he was—and that things would start making sense, sooner rather than later.

SHERRY BIRKIN WAS GONE, AND CLAIRE

couldn’t fit herself into the ventilation duct to go after her. Whatever or whoever had screamed and scared the little girl so badly hadn’t put in an appearance, but Sherry was history, maybe still crawling frantically through some dark and dusty tunnel. She had apparently been hiding by the duct for a while; there were empty candy-bar wrappers and a musty old blanket stuffed in the opening, the pathetic little hideaway tucked behind three standing suits of armor.

Once she’d realized that Sherry wasn’t coming back, Claire had hurried back to Irons’s office, hoping that he might be able to tell her where the duct let out, but Irons was gone—along with the body of the mayor’s daughter.

Claire stood in the office, watched over by the TnLRjEEn dumb glass eyes of the morbid decor, and felt really uncertain for the first time since she’d hit town. She’d started out to find Chris, a goal that had expanded to include worries about zombie dodging, hooking up with Leon, and avoiding creepy Chief Irons, pretty much in that order. But in the few moments between meeting the little girl and that strange, howling scream, her priorities had shifted dramatically. A child was caught up in this nightmare, a sweet, little kid who believed that there was a monster stalking her.

Maybe there is. If I can accept that Raccoon’s got zombies, why not monsters? Hell, why not vampires or killer robots?

She wanted to find Sherry, and she didn't know how to start. She wanted her big brother, but was just as clueless as to where he might be—and she had begun to wonder if he knew anything about what had happened to Raccoon.

The last time she'd talked to him, he'd avoided her questions about why the S.T.A.R.S. had been suspended, insisting that it wasn't anything to worry about—that he and the team had run into some political trouble at the office and it was all going to be sorted out. She was used to his protectiveness, but thinking back, hadn't he seemed overly evasive? And the S.T.A.R.S. had been investigating the cannibal murders, it wasn't much of a stretch to connect the past flesh-eating activity with the current...

. . . which means what? That Chris uncovered some

evil plot and was hiding it?

She didn't know. All that she knew was that she j

didn't believe he was dead, and that for now finding Chris or Leon would have to take a back seat to finding Sherry. As bad as things were, Claire had defenses—she had a gun, she had at least a little emotional maturity, and after nearly two years of daily five-mile runs, she was in excellent shape. But Sherry Birkin couldn't be older than eleven or twelve, and seemed frail in every sense of the word, from the dirt in her pixie blond hair to the desperate anxiety in her wide blue eyes—she had inspired all of Claire's protective instincts—

Thump!

A heavy, hollow vibration rattled through the ceiling, making the intricate chandelier in Irons's office tremble. Claire reflexively looked up, gripping her handgun. There was nothing to see but wood and plaster, and the sound didn't repeat itself. Something on the roof. . . but what could have made a noise like that? An elephant being air-dropped? Maybe it was Sherry's monster. The vicious scream they'd heard back in the private exhibit room had come through a duct or the fireplace, the origin of the cry impossible to pin down—but it could have been the roof. Claire wasn't particularly keen on meeting up with whatever had screamed, but Sherry had seemed certain that the creature was following her. . .

. . . so find the screamer, find the girl? Not my idea of the perfect plan, but I don't have much else to go on at this point; it might be the only way to find her. Or maybe it was Irons up there—and although her meeting with him had left a slimy taste in her mouth, she regretted not having tried to get more information out of him. Crazy or not, he hadn't struck her as stupid; it might not be a bad idea to find him again, at least to ask some questions about the ventilation system.

She wouldn't know anything until she checked it out. Claire turned and went to the office door that opened into the outer corridor, where she'd put out the helicopter fire. The smoke had thinned in the adjoining hall, and although the air was still warm, it wasn't the heat of a fresh blaze. In that, at least, she'd been successful. . . .

Claire stepped back into the main hall, averting her eyes from what was left of the pilot—

· and craa-ack!

· She froze, and heard a massive splintering of wood followed by the thick, ponderous steps of some-one who must be huge moving through the corridor past the turn, the sounds deliberate and thundering. Guy must weigh a ton, and oh Jesus tell me that wasn't a door being torn apart—

Claire shot a look back down the small hallway to Irons's office, her instincts telling her to run, her brain reminding her that it was a dead end, her body paralyzed between the two—

· and the biggest man she'd ever seen stepped into view, shadowed by the thin haze of smoke drifting through the hall. He was dressed in a long army-green overcoat that only accented his size, and was as tall as an NBA star—taller, but with proportionate bulk. A thick utility belt was wrapped around his waist, and though she didn't see any weapons, she could feel the violence radiating off him in invisible waves. She could just make out his sickly white blur of a face, the hairless, sloping skull—and quite suddenly, Claire was certain that he was a monster, a killer with black gloved fists, each as big as a human head—

Shoot! Shoot it!

Claire aimed but hesitated, terrified of making a horrible mistake—until it took one massive step toward her on tree-trunk legs, and she heard the crunch of denting wood beneath its booted Franken-stein feet, and saw the black eyes, black and rimmed with red. Like lava-filled pits in a misshapen white boulder, blank but not at all blind, his gaze found hers—and he raised one meaty clenched fist, the threat unmistakable.

· shootshootshoot—

She squeezed the trigger, one, two times, and saw the impact—a flap of its lapel blew into shreds just below his collarbone, the second shot slicing cleanly through one side of the neck—

· and he took another step, not a flicker of expression passing over his rough-hewn features, the fist still raised, seeking a target, seeking to crush—

The black, smoking hole in its throat wasn't bleeding.

Oh SHIT!

In a rush of adrenaline-boosted dread, Claire pointed the handgun at the creature's heart and pulled the trigger repeatedly, the giant taking another step, striding into the stream of explosive fire without flinching—

· and she lost track of the shots, unable to believe that it could still be coming, less than ten feet away as the rounds hammered its mammoth chest—

· and the gun clicked empty, even as the monster stopped in its thundering tracks, swaying from side to side like a tall building in a high wind. Without taking her shocked gaze from the reeling giant, Claire grabbed another clip from her vest and fumbled through reloading, her brain crazily trying to name this walking abortion.

Terminator, Frankenstein's monster, Dr. Evil, Mr.

X—

Whatever it was supposed to be, the seven-plus semi-jacketed rounds to the chest had finally taken effect. Silently, the towering creature slumped to his right, falling heavily against one smoke-blackened wall and sagging there—not crumpling, but not moving, either.

Weird angle, that's all, he's dead, just propped up by his own weight—

Claire didn't move any closer, keeping the handgun leveled at the motionless giant. Was this the screamer? For as powerful and inhuman as it looked, she didn't think so; this was no primal, furious demon, howling for blood. Mr. X was more like some soulless ma-chine, bloodless flesh that could ignore pain ... or embrace it.

“Dead now, doesn't matter,” Claire whispered, as much to reassure herself as to cut off the relentless stream of useless thought. She had to think, to figure out what this meant—this wasn't some freak zombie mutation, so what the hell was it? Why didn't it fall down? She'd emptied a mostly full clip—would somebody hear the shots, would Sherry or Irons or Leon or whoever else might be lurking around the station come find her? Should she stay where she was? The creature that she'd already started to think of as Mr. X wasn't breathing, its muscular body perfectly still, its face as closed as death. Claire bit her lower lip, staring at the still impossibly standing, leaning creature, trying to think through her confused fear—

· and saw his eyes open, his shiny black and red eyes. Without so much as a wince of pain or effort, Mr. X swayed back to a stand, blocking the hall, his giant hands raising again—

· and with a mighty swing, he crashed his fists through the air, his long arms whipping just in front of her as she stumbled back. The momentum was enough for both of his huge hands to plunge into the wall across from where he'd leaned. The impact buried his fists, his arms stuck in the wood and plaster halfway to his elbows.

Me, could've been ME—

Back through Irons's office and she'd be trapped. Without giving the matter any further thought, Claire moved, sprinting toward Mr. X. She flew past him, her right arm actually brushing against his heavy coat, her heart skipping a beat as the material wisped across her skin.

She ran, hung a left and dashed down the hazy hall, trying to remember what was past the waiting room, trying not to hear the unmistakable sounds of movement behind her as Mr. X jerked his hands free. Jesus, what is that THING—

Back through the waiting room, slamming the door behind her as she ran, Claire decided that she would decide later. She ran, not letting herself think any-thing at all but how to run faster.

Ben Bertolucci was in the last cell in the room farthest from the garage, crashed out on a metal cot and snoring lightly. Keeping her expression carefully neutral, Ada decided to let Leon wake him up. She didn't want to seem overly eager, and if there was one thing she knew about men, it was that they were easier to handle when they thought they were in control. Ada looked up at Leon with a patience she didn't feel and waited.

They'd checked out an empty kennel and a winding concrete hall before finding him, and though the cold, dank air reeked of blood and virus decay, they hadn't come across any bodies—which was strange, considering the slaughter that Ada knew had occurred in the dank garage. She thought about asking Leon if he knew what had happened, but decided that the less they spoke, the better; there was no point in letting him get used to having her around. She'd seen the manhole in the kennel, rusting and set into a dark corner, and been gratified to see a crowbar on an open shelf nearby. With Bertolucci snoozing in front of them, Ada felt like things were finally starting to pick up—

“Let me guess,” Leon said loudly, and reached out to thump on the metal bars with the butt of his gun. “You must be Bertolucci, right? Get up, now.” Bertolucci groaned and sat up slowly, rubbing at his stubbled jaw. Ada wanted to smile, watching him frown wearily in their direction; he looked like shit—his clothes rumpled, his lank ponytail frazzled. Still wearing his tie, though. The poor slob probably thinks it makes him look more like a real reporter. . . . “What do you want? I’m trying to sleep here.” He sounded grouchy, and again Ada had to suppress a smile. It served him right for being so difficult to find. Leon glanced at Ada, looking a trifle uncertain. “Is this the guy?”

She nodded, realizing that Leon probably thought Bertolucci was a prisoner. Their conversation would dispel that particular notion pretty fast, but she didn’t want Leon to know more than he had to; she’d have to choose her words carefully.

“Ben,” she said, letting her voice carry a hint of desperation. “You told the city officials that you knew something about what’s been going on, didn’t you? What did you tell them?”

Bertolucci stood up and glared at her, his lips curling. “And who the hell are you?”

Pretending that she hadn’t heard, Ada upped the desperation, but just a hair; she didn’t want to over-play the helpless female bit, it kind of clashed with the fact that she’d survived this long.

“I’m trying to find a—friend of mine, John Howe. He was working for a branch office of Umbrella based in Chicago, but he disappeared several months ago—and I heard a rumor that he’s here, in this city . . .” She trailed off, watching Bertolucci’s expression. He knew something, no question—but she didn’t think he was going to give it up.

“I don’t know anything,” he said gruffly. “And even if I did, why would I want to tell you?”

Original. If the cop wasn’t here, I’d probably just shoot him. Actually, she probably wouldn’t; Ada wasn’t into killing for the fun of it, and thought that she could probably get it out of him using one of her more persuasive methods—if her feminine charms didn’t work, there was always a shot to the kneecap. Unfortunately, she couldn’t do anything with Officer Leon hanging around. She hadn’t planned on their encounter, but for the moment, she was stuck with him.

The cop obviously wasn’t happy with the reporter’s responses. “Okay, I say we leave him in there,” he growled, talking to Ada but staring at Bertolucci with undisguised irritation.

Bertolucci half-smiled, reaching into one pocket and pulling out a set of silver cell keys on a thick ring. Ada wasn’t surprised, but Leon looked even more pissed off.

“Fine by me,” Bertolucci said smugly. “I’m not about to leave this cell, anyway. It’s the safest place in the building. There are more than just zombies run-ning around here, believe you me.”

From the way he said it, Ada thought she’d proba-bly have to kill him after all. Trent’s instructions had been clear—if Bertolucci knew anything about Bir-kin’s work on the G-Virus, he was to be disposed of; why, exactly, she wasn’t sure, but that was the job. If she could just get a few moments alone with him, she’d be able to ascertain how much he actually knew. The question was, how? She didn’t want to shoot Leon; as a rule, she didn’t kill innocents—and be-sides, she liked cops. Not necessarily the brightest lot, but anyone who took a job that required putting his or her life on the line had her respect. And he had great taste in weaponry—the Desert Eagle was top of the line . . .

. . . so why rationalize? I ditch him first and then circle back, doesn't mean I'm going soft—

“Ggrrraaaa!”

A violent, inhuman shriek pierced the tense silence. Ada snapped her Beretta around, aiming at the open gate that led back through the empty cell-block area. Whatever it was, it was somewhere in the basement—

“What was that?” Leon breathed from behind her, and Ada wished she knew the answer. The still resonating echo of that furious scream was like nothing she'd heard before—and nothing she expected to hear, even knowing about Umbrella's research. “Like I said, I'm not leaving this cell,” Bertolucci said, his voice breaking slightly. “Now get out of here before you lead it right to me!”

Sniveling coward—

“Look, I may be the only cop left alive in this building,” Leon said, and something about the combination of fear and strength in his tone made Ada shoot a look back at him. The officer's gaze was fixed on Bertolucci, his blue eyes sharp and unyielding. “. . . so if you want to live, you're gonna have to come with us.”

“Forget it,” Bertolucci snapped. “I'm staying here 'til the cavalry shows up—and if you're smart, you'll do the same thing.”

Leon shook his head. “It could be days before anyone comes, our best chance is to find a way out of Raccoon—and you heard that scream. Do you really want to get a visit from whatever made it?” She was impressed; some Umbrella freak could be lurching its way toward them even now, and Leon was actually trying to save the reporter's worthless hide.

“I'll take the risk,” said Bertolucci. “And good luck getting out, you're gonna need it. . . .” The rumpled reporter stepped up to the bars, looking back and forth between them, running a hand over his greasy hair.

“Look,” he said, his voice softening. “There's a kennel in the back of the building, with a manhole in it. You can get to the sewers from there, it's probably the fastest way out of the city.”

Ada sighed inwardly. Terrific; so much for her hidden route to the lab. If she dumped Leon now, it would take him about five minutes to find her. You can always kill him, if it comes to that, Or... you can get him lost in the sewers and come back for Bertolucci while he's clearing the path for you. Unlike Bertolucci, she didn't want to run into whatever had screamed—and now that she knew he was staying put, luring the cop away was the next logical step.

The things I do to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. . . . “Alright, I'm going to check it out,” she said, and without waiting for Leon's response, she turned and sprinted for the gate.

“Ada! Ada, wait!”

She ignored him, hurrying past the empty cells and back into the chilled hall, relieved that the passage was still clear—and feeling a little unnerved by her sudden reluctance to simplify the situation. Things would be a lot easier if she just got rid of them both, a decision she wouldn't have hesitated to make under different circumstances. But she was sick of death, sick and tired and disgusted with Umbrella for what they'd done; she wasn't going to take the cop out unless she had to.

And if she did have to, if it came down to some innocent's life or completing the job?

That she could ask herself that question at all told her more about her state of mind than she wanted to admit. She'd reached the door to the kennel; Ada took a deep breath, forcing every twinge of nagging emotion from her thoughts, and stepped inside to wait for Leon Kennedy. fOVRjEEn SO BEAUTIFUL . . . EVEN IN DEATH, BEVERLY Harris was radiant, but Irons couldn't risk having her wake up while he wasn't watching; he carefully folded her into the stone cabinet beneath the sink and latched it, promising himself that he would take her out when he had more time. She would become the most exquisite animal he'd ever transformed, posed and forever perfect once he'd prepared her the proper way ... a dream come true.

If I have time. If there's any time left. He knew he was feeling sorry for himself again, but there was no one else to commiserate with, no one to marvel at the sheer magnitude of all that he'd suffered. He felt terrible—sad and angry and alone—but he also felt that things had finally become clear. He knew now, knew why he was being persecuted, and that awareness had given him a focus—as depressing as the truth was, at least he was no longer lost.

Umbrella. An Umbrella conspiracy to destroy me, all along. . .

Irons sat on the scarred, stained table in the Sanctuary, his special, private place, and wondered how long it would be before the young woman came for him. The one with the athletic body, the one who'd refused to tell him her name. In a way, she was responsible for his newfound clarity, an irony that he couldn't help but appreciate; it had been her sudden appearance that had provided him with the truth.

She would find him, of course; she was an Umbrella spy, and Umbrella had obviously been watching him for quite some time. They probably had lists of everything he owned, volumes of psychological profiling reports, even copies of his financial records. It all made sense, now that he'd had some time to think; he was the most powerful man in Raccoon, and Umbrella had designed his downfall, tailored each vicious backstab to cause him the most acute agony possible. Irons stared at his treasures, the tools and trophies that sat on the shelves in front of him, but felt none of the pride they usually inspired. The polished bones were simply something to look at as his mind worked, absorbed with Umbrella's treachery.

Years before, when he'd started taking money to turn a blind eye to the company's doings, things had been different; then it had been a matter of politics, of finding himself a niche in the power structure that really controlled Raccoon. And things had worked smoothly for a long time—his career had progressed on schedule, he'd earned the respect of officials and citizens alike, and for the most part, his investments had paid off. Life had been good.

And then there was Birkin. William Birkin and his neurotic wife and their brat daughter.

After the Spencer estate spill, he'd almost convinced himself that the S.T.A.R.S. and goddamn Captain Wesker had been responsible for all the trouble, but he could see now that it was the arrival of Birkin and his family, nearly a year before, that had started the ball rolling; the destruction of the Spencer lab had only hurried things along. Umbrella had probably started monitoring him the day he'd had the misfortune to meet Birkin—at first, just watching, planting bugs, and installing cameras. The spies would have come later . . .

The Birkins had come to Raccoon so that William could concentrate on developing a superior synthesis of the T-Virus, based on the research being done at the Spencer lab. As quirky and unpleasant as

William could sometimes be, Irons had liked him, right from the start. The male Birkin had been Umbrella's boy genius, but like Irons, he wasn't the type to brag about his position; William was a humble man, only inter-ested in fulfilling his own potential. They'd both been too busy to have much of a friendship, but there had been a mutual respect between them; Irons had often felt that William looked up to him . . .

. . . and my mistake was to allow it. To allow my regard for him to cloud my instincts, to keep me from noticing that I was being watched, all along. The loss of the Spencer lab sent some big ripples through Umbrella's hierarchy, and only days after the explosion, Irons had been approached by Annette Birkin with a message from her husband—a message and a request for a favor. Birkin had been worried that Umbrella was going to demand the new synthe-sis, the G-Virus, before it was ready; apparently, he'd been most dissatisfied with the application of his previous work, something about how Umbrella hadn't let him perfect the replication process, Irons couldn't remember exactly—and with Umbrella looking to recover from the financial blow of the Spencer loss, Birkin had been concerned that they might compromise the integrity of the untested virus. Through Annette, Birkin had asked for assistance—and offered him a little extra incentive to keep things fair. For a hundred grand, all Irons had to do was help keep the G-Virus under wraps—in short, watch out for Umbrella spies and keep an eye on the surviving S.T.A.R.S., making sure they didn't do any more “discovering” of Umbrella's research.

That was it. A hundred thousand dollars, and I was already watching my city, and keeping tabs on that rebellious little pack of troublemakers. Easy, easy money, and more to be made if everything went as planned. Except it was a trap, an Umbrella trap. . . . Irons had walked right into it, and that was when Umbrella had started plotting against him, using the information they'd gathered to seal his fate. How else could things have gone wrong so quickly? The S.T.A.R.S. had disappeared, then Birkin—and before he'd even had a chance to assess the situation, the attacks had started up again. He'd barely had time to seal Raccoon off before everything had fallen to shit. And all because I was helping a friend—for the greater good of the company, no less. Tragic. Irons stood up and walked slowly around the cut-ting table, idly tracing the dents and scars in the wood with his fingertips. Behind every mark was a story, a memory of accomplishment—but again, he could take no comfort. The cool, quiet atmosphere of the Sanctuary had always soothed him before, it was where he practiced his hobbies, where he was truly able to be himself—but it wasn't his anymore. Noth-ing was. Umbrella had taken it from him, just as they'd taken his city. Was it so far-fetched to deduce that they'd unleashed their virus to get at him, to rob him of his power—and then sent that scantily clad brown-haired girl to rub his nose in it? Why else was she so attractive? They knew his weaknesses and were exploiting them, trying to keep him from retaining even a shred of dignity . . .

. . . and soon she'll come for me, maybe still playing dumb, still trying to seduce me with her helplessness. An Umbrella assassin, a spy and an exploiter, that's all she is, probably laughing at me behind that pretty face. . . .

Maybe the spill had been an accident; the last time they'd met, William Birkin had seemed unsteady, paranoid, and exhausted, and accidents happened even under the best of circumstances. But the rest was fact, there was no other explanation for how com-pletely Irons had been ruined. That girl was coming to get him, she was from Umbrella and she'd been sent to murder him. And she wouldn't stop there, oh, no; she'd find Beverly and . . . and defile her somehow, just to make certain that nothing he cared about was left.

Irons looked around the small, softly lit room that had once been his, gazing wistfully at the well-used tools and furniture, the sweet, familiar smells of disinfectant and formaldehyde emanating from the rugged stone walls.

My Sanctuary. Mine.

He picked up the handgun that lay on his special cutting table, the VP70 that was still his, and felt a bitter smile curl his lips. His life was over, he knew that now. This whole affair had started with Birkin, and would end here, by his own hand. But not yet. The girl would come for him, and he would kill her before he said his final good-byes to Beverly, before he admitted his defeat by taking a bullet. But he would see to it that she understood his suffering first. For every torture he'd endured, the girl would pay, the bill settled through flesh and bone and as much pain as he could inflict.

He was going to die, but not alone. And not without hearing the girl scream in agony, creating a voice for the death of his dreams—a voice so clear and true that the echoes would reach even the black hearts of the company executives who had betrayed him. The S.T.A.R.S. office was empty, cluttered and cold and layered with dust, but Claire was reluctant to leave. After her stumbling, frightened flight through the body-strewn halls of the second floor, finding the place where her brother had spent his working days had left her feeling weak with relief. Mr. X hadn't followed her, and although she was still anxious to help Sherry and find Leon, she found herself linger-ing, afraid to step back into the lifeless halls—and hesitant to leave the one place that felt like Chris. Where are you, big brother? And what am I going to do? Zombies, fire, death, your weird Chief Irons and that lost little girl—and just when I thought things couldn't get any more insane, I get to face off with The Thing That Would Not Die, the freak to end all freaks. How am I going to get through this?

She sat at Chris's desk, gazing at the small strip of black-and-white pictures that she'd found tucked in the bottom drawer; the four shots were of the two of them, grinning and making faces, a photo-booth memento of the week they'd spent in New York last Christmas. Finding the strip had made her want to cry at first, all of the fear and confusion she'd been holding back finally surging to the front at the sight of his well-loved smile—but the longer she'd looked at him, at the two of them laughing and having a good time, the better she'd started to feel. Not happy or even okay, and no less afraid of what was to come—just better. Calmer. Stronger. She loved him, and knew that wherever he was he loved her back—and that if the two of them had been able to survive the loss of both of their parents, to build lives for them-selves and share a silly Christmas vacation in spite of having no real home to go to, then they could cope with anything. She could cope.

Can and will. I'm going to find Sherry and Leon and, God willing, my brother—and we're going to make it out of Raccoon.

The truth was, she didn't really have any choice—but she needed to go through the process of accepting her lack of options before she could act. She'd heard before that real bravery wasn't an absence of fear, it was accepting the fear and doing what was necessary anyway—and once she'd sat for a moment, thinking about Chris, she thought that she could do just that. Claire took a deep breath, slipped the photos into her vest, and pushed away from the desk. She didn't know where Mr. X had been headed, but he hadn't seemed like the waiting-around type; she would head back to Irons's office and see if Sherry had come back—or Irons, for that matter. If X was still there, she could always run.

Besides, I should have searched his office, tried to find something about the S.T.A.R.S. There's nothing here that can tell me anything. . . .

Standing, she took a last look around, wishing that the S.T.A.R.S. office had offered a little more in the way of supplies or information. All she'd found of any use was a discarded fanny pack in the desk behind Chris's; according to the expired library card in one of the pouches, it had belonged to Jill Valentine. Claire had never met her, but Chris had mentioned her a couple of times, said she was good with a gun.. . . Too bad she didn't leave one behind.

The team had obviously cleared out all of the important stuff after their suspension, although there were still a surprising number of personal items left around, framed pictures and coffee mugs and the like; she'd spotted Barry's desk right away from the partly finished plastic gun model on top. Barry Burton was one of Chris's closest friends, a huge, friendly bear of a man and a serious gun nut. Claire hoped that wherever Chris was, Barry was with him, watching his back. With a rocket launcher.

And speaking of . . .

On top of everything else, she needed to find another weapon, or more ammo for the nine-millimeter; she had thirteen bullets left, one full clip, and when those were gone, she was SOL. Maybe she should stop and check some of the corpses on the way back to the east wing; even in her panicked run, she'd noticed that some of them were cops, and the hand-gun was an RPD issue. Claire didn't like the idea of touching any of the dead bodies, but running out of firepower was distinctly less desirable—particularly with Mr. X running around.

Claire walked toward the door and pushed it open, trying to get her thoughts organized as she stepped back into the dim hall. Leaving the office put a damper on her resolve; she had to suppress a shudder at the still vivid image of Mr. X as she closed the door behind her, suddenly feeling vulnerable again. She turned right and started back toward the library, deciding that she wouldn't think about the giant unless she had to, wouldn't dwell on the memory of those blank, inhuman eyes or the way he'd raised his terrible fist, as if driven to destroy anything in his way ...

. . . so knock it off already. Think about Sherry, think about getting some goddamn ammo or how to handle Irons, if you can find him. Think about trying to stay alive.

Just ahead, the dark wooden hall turned right again and Claire tried to steel herself against the task ahead; if memory served, there was a dead cop around the corner—

· like I can't tell by the smell—

· and she'd have to search him. He hadn't been too disgusting, at least, not that she'd noticed—

Claire turned the corner and froze, staring. Her stomach knotted, telling her she was in danger before her senses could. The body that she'd jumped over on the way to the S.T.A.R.S. office was now only a bloody, tangled mass, flesh and broken limbs and shredded uniform. The head was gone, although there was no way to tell if it had been taken away or just smashed into an unrecognizable pulp. It looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer or an axe to the corpse in the few moments since she'd passed it, beating it into a clotted smear.

But when, how, I didn't hear anything—

Something moved. A shadow, soft and darting over the mashed remains some twenty feet in front of her, and at the same time, Claire heard a strange rasping sound, breathing—

· and she looked up, still not sure what she was seeing or hearing—that ragged breathing and the tick of talons on wood, the talons themselves, thick and curved, the claws of a creature that couldn't exist. Big, the size of a full-grown man, but the resemblance ended there—and it was so impossible that she could only see it in pieces, her mind struggling to put them together. The inflamed, purplish flesh of the naked, long-limbed creature that clung to the ceiling. The puffed gray-white tissue of the partially exposed brain. The scar-rimmed holes where the eyes should have been.

· not seeing this—

The creature's rounded head dropped back, the wide jaw opening, a rosy stream of dark drool pour-ing out and splattering over what was left of the cop. It extended its tongue, eely and pink, the rough surface shimmering wetly as it slithered out. And out. And out, the snaking tongue uncoiling and whipping from side to side, so long that it actually trailed through the ripped flesh of the corpse.

Still frozen, Claire watched in horrified disbelief as the incredible tongue snapped back up, flicking drop-lets of blood through the shadowy air. The entire process had taken only a second, but time had slowed to a crawl, Claire's heart beating so fast that every-thing else was in slow motion—even the creature's drop to the wooden floor, its body flipping in midair so that it landed in a crouch atop the mutilated cop.

The creature opened its mouth again and

screamed—

· and Claire was finally able to move as the bizarre, hollow shriek erupted from the monster, able to point her weapon and fire. The thunder of nine-millimeter rounds drowned out the howl that echoed through the tight hallway, bam-bam-bam—

· and still screaming that chilling, trumpeting cry, the creature was thrown back, its claw-tipped arms flailing. Its spasming legs kicked up bloody chunks of the eviscerated body; Claire saw a ragged flap of scalp, one ear still attached, fly across the hall and smack into the wall with a wet slapping sound, sliding down—

· and the creature got its legs beneath it somehow and flopped forward in a boneless lunge. It spidered toward her, lightning fast, gripping the wood floor with its terrible claws and howling.

Claire fired again, unaware that she was also screaming as three more rounds hit the scuttling thing, ripping through the gray matter that protruded from its open skull. She was going to die, it would be on her in less than a second and its massive talons were only inches from her legs—

· and as suddenly as the attack had come, it was over. Every part of the sinewy body quivered and shook as liquid gray dribbled from its burbling head, the thick claws tapping wildly against the wood floor in a frantic tattoo. With a final whispering whine, the creature died. There was no mistaking it this time. She'd blasted through its brain, it wasn't going to get up again.

She stared down at the monster, her shocked mind digging for something to relate it to, some animal or even a rumor of an animal that came close—but she gave it up after a few seconds, recognizing it as a lost cause. This was no natural creature, and as close as it was, she could finally smell it—the odor was not as pungent as the zombies', it was a bitter, oily smell, somehow more chemical than animal. . . . and it could smell like chocolate-chip cookies, who gives a shit? Raccoon City's got monsters, it's time to stop being so goddamn surprised when you see one of them.

The chiding tone of her mind's voice wasn't partic-ularly convincing. As much as she wanted to feel brave and determined, to step over the monstrous creature and get on with things, she just stood for a moment—and for that moment, she thought very seriously about going back to the S.T.A.R.S. office, going inside, and locking the door behind her. She could hide, hide and wait for help, she could be safe—

Decide, then. Do something, one way or another, stop this wavering and whining, because it's not just you anymore. Will Sherry be safe? Do you want to survive at the cost of her life?

The moment passed. Claire took a careful step over the raw red flesh of the creature and crouched down next to the cop's remains, using the muzzle of the handgun to push a torn piece of bloody uniform aside. She swallowed down bile as she poked through the rotten flesh and bone, working not to think about who the cop had been or how he had died.

Nothing, and she now had only seven bullets left—but she refused to panic, letting the disappointment fuel her determination instead. If she could search one bloody mess, she could search another. With a last look at the dead animal-thing, Claire stood and walked quickly toward the end of the corridor, her decision made: no hiding and no more running from the fear. At the very least, she could take a few of the monsters with her, raising Sherry's chances of escape.

It would be better to die trying than not to try at all.

She wouldn't waver again.

FIFTEEN

LEON FOUND ADA IN THE KENNEL, STRAIN-

ing to lever up the rusted manhole cover that the reporter had told them about. She'd turned up a crowbar from somewhere and had it wedged beneath the thick iron plate, her well-defined biceps lightly sheened with sweat as she worked the bar. She'd managed to raise the cover about an inch, but let it drop back into place as he walked in, the metallic clang loud in the cold, empty room.

Before he could say anything, she lay the crowbar on the cement floor and looked up at him with a strained half-smile, brushing at her rust-dirty hands. "I'm glad you're here. I don't think I'm strong enough to do this by myself. . . ."

He hadn't been sure before, but the helpless look she gave him cinched it; she was playing him, or trying to. He'd known Ada for all of twenty minutes, but he doubted seriously that she'd ever been helpless about anything.

"Looks like you're doing just fine," he said, holstering the Magnum but not making any move toward the manhole. He crossed his arms, frowning slightly. He wasn't angry, just curious.

"Besides, what's the hurry? I thought you wanted to talk to the reporter. About John, your Umbrella friend ____" The woman-in-distress look melted away and her delicate features turned cool and hard, but not in a bad way; it was as though she was letting her real self show, the strong and self-assured Ada he'd first met. Leon could tell that he'd surprised her by not rushing to her aid and was glad to see it; he had enough to worry about without being manipulated by a mysterious stranger. She'd been very careful to avoid his questions, but it was time for Ms. Wong to explain a few things.

Ada stood up, meeting his gaze evenly. "You heard him—he wasn't going to tell us anything. And with this place as dangerous as it is, I don't really want to stand around waiting for him to develop a conscience . . ."

She dropped her gaze, her voice softening. ". . . and I don't even know if John's in Raccoon. But I do

know that he's not here—and I want to leave before the station's completely overrun.”

It sounded good, but for some reason, he had the feeling that she was holding something back. For a few seconds, he struggled to think of a polite way to get her to open up—then decided to hell with it; under the circumstances, social graces would have to be suspended.

“What’s going on, Ada? Do you know something that you’re not telling me?”

She looked at him again, and again, he had the feeling that he’d surprised her—but her cool, dark gaze was as unreadable as ever.

“I just want to get out of here,” she said, and the sincerity of her tone was impossible to deny. If he didn’t believe anything else she’d said, he had to believe that much.

And I wish it was that easy—but there’s Claire, and even Ben, our asshole friend, and God knows how many others. . . .

Leon shook his head. “I can’t leave. Like I said, I may be the only cop left around here. If there are still people in the building, I have to at least try to help them. And I think it’d be best if you came with me.” Ada gave him another one of her half-smiles. “I appreciate your concern, Leon, but I can take care of myself.”

He didn’t doubt it—but he also didn’t want to see her abilities tested. Granted, he was pretty untested himself, but he’d been trained to deal with crisis situations, it was his job.

And be honest with yourself—you lost Claire, you couldn’t help Branagh, and Ben Bertolucci could give a rat’s ass for your protection skills; you don’t want to fail with Ada on top of all that. And you don’t want to be alone.

Ada seemed to know what he was thinking. Before he could come up with a convincing argument, she stepped forward and put one slender hand on his arm, the humor fading from her bright eyes.

“I know you want to do your job here, but you said it yourself—we have to find a way out of Raccoon, try and get outside help. And the sewers are probably the best chance we’ve got. . . .”

The light, gentle touch surprised him—and sent an electric flutter through his belly, an unexpected flush of warmth that left him feeling confused and uncertain. He managed to keep his reaction from showing, but just barely.

Ada continued, frowning thoughtfully. “How about this—help me with the manhole cover, and let’s see what’s down there. If it looks dangerous, I’ll come with you ... but if it’s not bad—well, we can talk about what to do next.”

He wanted to protest, but the truth was, he couldn’t make her do anything she didn’t want to do—and he wanted very much for her to know that he wasn’t some overbearing macho type, that he was receptive to compromise . . .

. . . and does the name “John” ring a bell? This isn’t a date for Chrissake, stop thinking with your hormones.

Feeling awkward even thinking about it with her hand still on his arm, Leon stepped away, nodding

briskly. Together, they crouched down next to the manhole. Leon picked up the crowbar and jammed one end beneath the lid; as he pulled back, Ada pushed on the bar, and with a heavy grating sound the thick metal plate came up. Leon put his back into it and heaved the lid to one side, clearing the opening—

· and both of them recoiled back from the smell that bellowed out of the dark hole, a choking, dark stench of blood and piss and vomit.

“Gah, what is that?” Leon coughed.

Ada sat back on her heels, one hand pressed to her mouth. “The bodies from the garage, they must have dumped them down here—“ Before he could ask what she was talking about, a scream of pure terror echoed through the basement halls, filtering through the closed door. The cry went on and on, a man’s voice, the panicked scream suddenly changing to a gurgling shriek of pain. The reporter.

Leon locked gazes with Ada, saw the same startled realization flash across her face—and then they were both up and running, pulling out their weapons and sprinting through the door before the echoes died. I left him, I shouldn’t have left him—

They ran down the corridor for the cell block, guilt driving Leon to run faster than he thought he could. Someone or something had gotten to Bertolucci—and had passed right behind his back to do it. Sherry stood in Mr. Irons’s office, rubbing at her good luck pendant and wishing that Claire would come back. She had crawled through a dozen dusty tunnels to get away from the monster and to lead it away from Claire, and was pretty sure it had worked—she hadn’t heard it again, and had come back to find that Claire had left; if the monster had found her, she would have been dead and ripped apart.

But she’s not here. Nobody is. . . .

Sherry sat on the edge of a low table in the middle of the room, wondering what she should do. She’d gotten used to being alone, and hadn’t even realized how lonely she’d been—but meeting Claire had changed that. Sherry wanted to see her again, she wanted to be with other people, she wanted her parents so bad that it made her ache. Even Mr. Irons would be okay, although Sherry didn’t like him; she’d only met him a couple of times but he was weird, showy and fake—and his office was creepy besides. Still, she’d gladly put up with him if it meant she didn’t have to be alone anymore. . . .

Footsteps. In the hall outside of the office. Sherry stood up and ran to the open door that led back to the armor room, hoping it was Claire and ready to sprint for cover if it wasn’t. She ducked around the door frame and held her breath, staring at the stuffed tiger in the hall and silently praying. The outer door opened and closed. Muffled steps on the carpet, moving slowly, and she tensed to run, at the same time trying to muster up enough courage to sneak a look—

“Sherry?”

Claire!

“I’m here!”

She ran back into the office and there was Claire, her whole face lit up with a beaming smile. Sherry flew into her open arms, so happy to see her that she wanted to cry.

“I was looking for you,” Claire said, holding her tightly. “Don’t run off like that again, okay?” Claire knelt

in front of her, still smiling—but Sherry could see the worry behind the smile and in her cool gray eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Sherry said. “I had to, or the monster would have come.”

“What does it look like?” Claire asked, her smile fading. “Does it look—kind of red, with claws?” Sherry swallowed heavily. “The inside-out men!

You saw one, didn’t you?”

Incredibly, Claire grinned, shaking her head. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I saw, an inside-out man . . . good description.”

She looked at Sherry more seriously, frowning.

“ ‘Men’? There are more of them?”

Sherry nodded. “Yes, but they aren’t anything like the monster. I only saw him once, from behind, but he’s a man, a giant man—“ Claire seemed excited. “Bald? Wearing a long coat?”

“No, he had hair, brown hair. And one of his arms was all screwed up, a lot longer than the other one.” Claire sighed. “Terrific. Raccoon’s got something for everyone, sounds like . . .”

She reached out and took Sherry’s hand, squeezing it. “. . . and that’s all the more reason that you should stay with me. You’ve done a really good job of taking care of yourself, and you’ve been very brave—but until we find your parents, I feel like it’s my job for now, to watch out for you. And if the monster comes, j’H__ril kick its ass, okay?”

Sherry laughed, surprised into it. She liked that Claire didn’t talk down to her. She nodded, and Claire squeezed her hand again.

“Good. So we’ve got zombies, inside-out men, and a monster. And a big bald guy . . . Sherry, do you know what happened to Raccoon? How this all got started? Anything you can tell me, anything at all—it could be important.”

Sherry frowned, thinking. “Well, there were a bunch of murders last May, or June I think—like ten people got killed. And then they stopped, but then maybe a week ago, somebody got attacked.” Claire nodded encouragingly. “Okay. Did more people start getting attacked, or . . . what did the police do?”

Sherry shook her head, wishing she could be more helpful. “I don’t know. Right before that girl got attacked, my mother called from work really upset, and told me that I couldn’t leave the house. Mrs. Willis—that’s our next-door neighbor—she came over and cooked dinner for me, and that’s how I heard about that girl. Mom called again the next day, and told me that she and Dad were stuck at the plant and wouldn’t be home for a while—and then like three days ago, she called again and told me to come here. I went to see if Mrs. Willis would come with me, but her house was dark and empty. I guess things had already gotten pretty bad by then.”

Claire was staring at her intently. “You were alone all that time? Even before you got to the station?” Sherry nodded. “Well yeah, but I stay alone a lot. My parents are both scientists; their work is impor-tant, and sometimes they can’t stop in the middle of what they’re doing. And my mother always says that I’m very self-sufficient, when I want to be.” “Do you know what kind of work your parents do?”

At Umbrella?" Claire was still watching her closely. "They develop cures for things, for diseases," Sher-ry said proudly. "And make medicines, like serums that hospitals use. ..."

She trailed off, noticing that Claire seemed dis-tracted suddenly, her gaze far away. It was a look she had seen plenty of times before, on both of her parents' faces—and it meant that they weren't really listening anymore. But as soon as she stopped talking, Claire refocused on her, reaching out to pat her on the shoulder—and for some stupid reason, that made Sherry want to cry again.

Because she's listening to me. Because she wants to watch out for me now.

"Your mother's right," Claire said gently, "you're very self-sufficient, and that you've made it this far means that you're also very strong. That's good, because we're both going to have to be strong, to make it out of here."

Sherry felt her eyes go wide. "What do you mean? Leave the station? But there are zombies all over the place, and I don't know where my parents are, what if they need help or they're looking for me—" "Sweetie, I'm sure your folks are just fine," Claire said quickly. "They're probably still at the plant, hiding and safe, just like you were—waiting for people to come from outside of the city, to, to make everything better—" "You mean kill everything," Sherry said. "I'm twelve, you know, I'm not a baby."

Claire smiled. "Sorry. Yeah, to kill everything. But until the good guys come, we're on our own. And the best thing we can do, the smartest thing, is to get out of their way—to get as far out of their way as possible. You're right, the streets aren't safe, but maybe we can get a car. . . ."

It was Claire's turn to trail off. She stood up and walked toward the big desk at the far end of the office, looking around as she went.

"Maybe Chief Irons left his car keys here, or another weapon, something we can use—" Claire saw something on the floor behind the desk. She crouched down and Sherry hurried after her, as much to stay close as to see what she'd found. She already knew that she didn't want to lose her again, no matter what else happened.

"There's blood here," Claire said softly, so softly that Sherry thought she hadn't meant to say it out loud.

"So?"

Claire looked up at the plain tan wall, frowning, then back down at the big drying splotch of red on the floor. "It's still wet, for one thing. And see the way it's just kind of cut off? There should be some on the wall here ___" She rapped on the dark wood trim that lined the wall, then on the wall itself. There was an obvious difference; a dull thump from the trim, but the wall sounded hollow.

"Is there a room back there?" Sherry asked. "I don't know, it sounds like it. And it would explain where he took . . . where he took off to earli- j er. Chief Irons."

She glanced up at Sherry as she started to feel along the baseboards, running her hands up the wall and pushing at it. "Sherry, look around the desk, see if you can find like a switch or a lever. My guess is it would be hidden somewhere, maybe in one of the drawers. . . ."

Sherry started to move behind the desk—and tripped, her foot sliding on a handful of pencils that she hadn't seen. She grabbed at the desktop, trying to catch her balance, but still came down pretty hard on her bare knees.

“Ow!”

Claire was next to her right away, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just—hey! Look!”

Her bruised knees forgotten, Sherry pointed at the switch under the top drawer of the desk, set into a small metal plate. It looked like a light switch, but it had to be for the secret door, she just knew it.

;

I found it!

Claire reached out and flipped the switch—and behind them, a section of the wall a few feet across slid smoothly upwards, disappearing into the ceiling and exposing a dimly lit room lined with oversized j bricks. Cool, damp air breezed into the office; it was a secret passage, just like in the movies.

Together, they stood and stepped toward the open-ing, Claire holding Sherry back with one arm until she’d looked first. The small room was totally empty—three brick walls and a stained wood floor, and only about half the size of the office. The fourth wall was dominated by a big old-fashioned elevator gate, the kind that pushed to one side.

“Are we going to take it?” Sherry asked. She was excited but nervous, too.

Claire had taken her gun out. She crouched down next to Sherry and smiled—but it wasn’t a happy smile, and Sherry knew what was coming before Claire said a word.

“Sweetie, I think it would be safest if I went and looked around first, and you stayed here—“ “But you said we should stay together! You said we could find a car and leave! What if the monster comes back and you’re not here, or you get killed?” Claire hugged her, but Sherry felt almost sick with helpless anger. She was going to tell her not to worry, that the monster wouldn’t come, that nothing bad would happen—and then she was going to leave anyway.

Stupid grownup lies—

Claire leaned back, smoothing Sherry’s hair away from her face. “I don’t blame you for being scared. I’m scared, too. This is a bad situation—and hon-estly, I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I want to do the right thing by you, and that means that I’m not going to take you into a situation where you could get hurt, not if I can help it.”

Sherry swallowed back tears, trying again. “But I want to come with you . . . what if you don’t come back?”

“I’m going to come back,” Claire said firmly, “I promise. And if—if I don’t, I want you to hide again, like before. Somebody will come, help is going to come soon, and they’ll find you.”

At least she was being honest; Sherry didn’t like it, not at all, but at least there was that—and from the look on her face, Sherry could see that there was nothing she could say to change her mind. She could be a baby about it, or she could accept it. “Be careful,” she whispered, and Claire hugged her again before standing and moving toward the eleva-tor. She pushed a button next to the gate and there was a low, soft hum; after a few seconds an elevator car rose into view, coming to a gentle stop. Claire pulled

the gate open and stepped inside, turning for a last look at Sherry.

“Stay here, sweetie,” she said. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Sherry forced herself to nod—and Claire let the gate close. She touched something inside the elevator and the car went down, her smiling, strong face descending out of sight, leaving Sherry by herself in the cold, dark passage.

Sherry sat down on the dusty floor and hugged her knees close to her body, rocking herself slowly. Claire was brave and smart, she’d be back soon, she had to come back soon. . . .

“I want my mommy,” Sherry whispered, but there was nobody to hear. She was alone again, the thing she wanted least of all.

But I’m strong. I’m strong, and I can wait. She rested her chin on one knee, touching the necklace her mother had given her for good luck, and started to wait for Claire to come back.

SixfEEen

ANNETTE BIRKIN SAT IN THE LABORATORY

monitor room, exhausted, staring up at the wall of video screens centered over the surveillance console. She’d been there for what felt like years, waiting for William to appear, and was starting to think that he never would. She’d give it a little longer—but if she didn’t see him soon, she’d have to do another search. Goddamn technology . . .

It was a brand-new system, less than a month old—twenty-five screens with a channel control that should have allowed her to see any and every part of the facility. A brilliant security advance—except only eleven of the screens still worked at all, and over half of those would only show static, an endless dance of electric snow. Of the five she could still get a clear picture from, all she could see—all there was to see—were dead, rotting bodies and the occasional Re3, either feasting or sleeping. . . .

“Lickers. You called them lickers, because of their tongues. . . .”

She thought she’d been past the worst of the pain, but the lonely sound of her own voice in the cold, cavernous chamber and the realization that there would be no answer—that there would never be an answer again—brought on a fresh, knifing wave of grief. William was gone, he was gone and she was talking to no one at all.

Annette lowered her head to the console, closing her weary eyes. At least there were no more tears; she’d wept an ocean of them in the days since Um-brella had come for the G-Virus, but was simply too spent to cry anymore. Now there was only pain, interspersed with fits of violent, helpless fury over what Umbrella had done.

Another month, maybe two, and we would have given it to them. We would have turned it over without a fight, and William would have made the executive board and we would have been happy. Everyone would have been happy—

There was a faint squealing from one of the muted security screens. Annette looked up, hoping and dreading at once—but it was just a licker, one floor up in the surgical bay. It had dropped from its ceiling roost to snack on one of the techs, howling stupidly to itself as it ripped into the corpse’s guts. The dead

man looked like Don Weller, one of the chemical plant go-betweens, but she couldn't tell for certain; he was almost as mutilated and inhuman looking as the Re3 that was eating him.

She watched the lick feed, watched the small screen but didn't really see; her mind wandered, running over what was left for her to do. She'd already wiped all of the computers and locked in the countdown codes; the lab was ready, and her escape route was secured. But she couldn't finish things until she saw him again, saw that he was back in the Umbrella facility. Destroying the lab wouldn't solve anything if he wasn't in the blast zone; they would find him, and extract the virus from his blood and Umbrella won't have it. I'll die before I let them have it, so help me God.

Her only consolation in all of this mad, horrible affair was that Umbrella hadn't managed to get their greedy hands on William's synthesis. They hadn't and they never would. Everything that had gone into the creation of the G-Virus would be buried under a thousand burning tons of stone and wood, along with William and all of the monsters they had created for the company. She would go into hiding for a while, take some time to heal, to consider her options—and then she would sell the G-Virus to the competition. Umbrella was the biggest, but they weren't the only conglomerate working on bioweapons research—and when she was through with them, they wouldn't be the biggest anymore. It wasn't much of a revenge, but it was all she had left.

“Except for Sherry,” Annette whispered, and the thought of their young daughter made her heart ache, a different pain but pain nonetheless. Since the day Sherry had been born, Annette had meant to spend more time with her, to focus on the child instead of on her part in William's brilliant work. And yet some-how the years had slipped by, William's promotions had kept coming up, the work had grown ever more interesting and valuable—and although both she and William had made promises to themselves and each other that they would make more of an effort to develop their family life, they had continued to put it off.

And now it's too late. We'll never be a family, we'll never be parents together. All that time wasted, slaving for a company that sold us out in the end. . . . It was too late; there was no point in mourning what could have been. All she could do now was make sure that Umbrella wouldn't get anything else from the Birkin family. William was gone, but there was still Sherry; that part of him would go on, and Annette meant to finally become the mother she should have been all along. Of course she'd have to wait until things cooled down before she could collect Sherry, at least a few months, but the girl would be safe; the cops would send her to live with William's sister, it was in both of their wills unless Irons is still alive. That fat, greedy bas-tard could find a way to screw even that up if given half a chance.

She hoped he was dead; even if he wasn't directly responsible for Umbrella's awareness of the G-Virus, Brian Irons was a disgusting, arrogant man with the morals of a sea slug. After years of loyalty to the company, he'd been bought out for a measly hundred thousand dollars. Even William had been surprised, and he'd had an even lower opinion of the police chief than she had....

On the screen, the Re3 had finished its meal. All that was left of the dead man was an empty shell, arched, bloody ribs, and a faceless cup of skull, the surely vibrant colors lost to the video's flat shades of gray. The lick scabbled out of view, trailing sticky fluids in its wake. Thanks to the T-Virus, all of the reptile series were efficient killers, although the 3s had design flaws—the protruding cerebrum was the most obvious, but they also had a ridiculously high meta-bolic rate; keeping them fed had been a constant hassle.

Not a problem anymore. Plenty of canton to go around—and lucky them, they'll get a chance for a hot dinner soon enough. . . .

Annette felt drained of energy, and didn't want to go back out into the facility—but she couldn't just keep hoping that William would happen by one of the working cameras. She'd heard him up on level three, perhaps two days before, but hadn't seen him in almost twice as long; she couldn't keep waiting. Umbrella's people were probably already working on a way in—even with the mainframe wiped, there were other ways to get past the doors—

· and William may have found a way out. I can't keep denying it, no matter how much I want to. There was an abandoned factory west of the lab, a shipping company that had been bought up by Um-brella to ensure that the underground levels would stay secret; it was how Umbrella had managed to build the complex in the first place without arousing suspicion, hiding equipment and materials in the factory's warehouses and using the heavy machinery lift to transport them. Although the entrances from the factory had still been sealed off the last time she'd checked, there was a slim chance that William had gotten through—and if he could get to the factory, he could get into the sewers.

Annette forced herself to stand up, ignoring the cramps in her legs and back as she picked up the handgun on the console. She didn't know much about guns, although she'd figured out how to use one quickly enough, after—

· after they came for the G-Virus, the men in the gas masks, shooting and running—and William, poor William dying in a puddle of blood and I didn't see the syringe until it was too late—

She took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to push that terrible memory aside, trying to forget about the incident that had taken William from her and turned Raccoon into a city of the dead. It didn't matter anymore. The journey ahead wouldn't be a pleasant one, and she had to concentrate. Escaped Re3s, first-and second-stage infected humans, the botany experi-ments, the arachnid series—she could run into any of the T-Virus carriers, not to mention whomever Um-brella had managed to send.

And William. My husband, my beloved—the first human G-Virus carrier, who isn't really human any-more.

She'd been wrong to think that she had no more tears inside. Annette stood in the middle of the vast, sterile room five floors beneath the surface of Rac-coon and wept lost, racking sobs that didn't even begin to touch the pain of her loneliness. Umbrella would be sorry. Once she could be sure that William was beyond their reach, she was going to destroy their precious facility, she was going to take the G-Virus and run, she was going to make sure that they understood how badly they'd screwed up—and God help anyone who tried to stop her.

SEVENfEEn

ADA RAN INTO THE CELL BLOCK ONLY A STEP

behind Leon, just in time to see the reporter stumble out of his cage and fall to the floor. "Help him!" Leon shouted, and ran past Bertolucci to check out the cell. Ada stopped in front of the gasping reporter but ignored the command, waiting to see if whatever had gotten to him was going to spring out of the open cell—

· he was behind bars, how did this happen—

She waited, weapon pointed after Leon as he leapt in front of the open cell, her heart pounding—and saw the bewilderment on his youthful face, the open surprise. The way his gaze searched the cell told her that it was empty. Unless the attacker was invis-ible . . .

Not a chance. Don't even start thinking like that, don't let it get to you.

Ada knelt next to the reporter, taking in immediately that he was in a bad way—dying bad. He'd crumpled into a half-sitting position, his head against the bars of the cell adjacent to his. He was still breathing, but it wouldn't be long before he stopped. Ada had seen the look before, the far-seeing gaze and the trembling, the pallor—but what she didn't see was how, and that scared her. There were no wounds. It had to be a heart attack, maybe a stroke—

· but that scream.

“Ben? Ben, what happened?”

His flickering gaze fixed on her face, and she saw that the corners of his mouth were cracked and bleeding. He opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a rasping, unintelligible croak. Leon crouched down next to them, looking as confused as she felt. He shook his head at her, an unspoken answer to her unasked question; there was apparently no sign of what had happened.

Ada looked down at Bertolucci and tried again.

“What was it, Ben? Can you tell us what happened?” The reporter's shaking hands crawled up his body, resting across his chest. With a visible effort, he managed to whisper a single word.

“... window. . . .”

Ada wasn't reassured. The cell's “window” was hardly a foot across, maybe six inches wide, and set eight feet off the floor—nothing more than a ventilation hole that opened into the parking garage. Nothing could have gotten through—at least nothing that she'd heard of or read about, and that meant that there were dangers she wasn't prepared against. Bertolucci was still trying to speak. Both Ada and Leon leaned closer, straining to catch his painful whispers.

“... chest. Burns, it... burns. . . .”

Ada relaxed just a bit. He'd seen or heard something outside of the cell, something that had kicked off a massive coronary; that, she could accept. A pisser for the journalist, but it would save her the trouble of killing him herself. . . .

He reached out suddenly and grasped her forearm, staring up at her with an intensity that surprised her. His grip was weak, but there was desperation in his wet eyes—desperation and some frustrated sorrow that inspired not a little guilt for what she'd been thinking.

“I never told . . . about Irons,” he breathed, obviously struggling to hang on to life, to get it all out. “He's—working for Umbrella ... all this time. The zombies—are Umbrella, research . . . and he covered up the murders but I couldn't—prove it all, yet... was going to be my—exclusive.”

Bertolucci closed his braised-looking eyelids, breathing shallowly as his fingers fell away from her arm, and she felt a surge of pity for him in spite of herself. The poor dumb jerk; his big secret was that Umbrella was into bioweapons and that Irons was on the take. It would have been a big scoop, too, but apparently he hadn't even been able to get any hard evidence. He doesn't know dick about the G-Virus, he never did—and he's going to die regardless. Talk about a shit deal.

“Jesus,” Leon said softly. “Chief Irons _____” Ada had all but forgotten how clueless the young cop was. He was obviously new, but a couple of times he’d seemed so perceptive that she’d been taken aback; the kid wasn’t just a testosterone case, there was definitely something going on upstairs—

· knock it off already, he’s not much younger than you. The reporter’s about to kick and you need to be on your way, not worrying about Officer Friendly—

Bertolucci spasmed suddenly, his hands clutching at his chest as he moaned, a sharp, tortured cry of agony. His back arched, his fingers hooked into claws—

· and the moan went liquid as blood started to stream from his mouth in a burbling gout. Choking and shaking, Bertolucci’s limbs convulsed violently, droplets of crimson spraying out with each racking cough—

· and Ada saw red blossom across his rumpled white shirt beneath his scrabbling hands and heard the thick, wet crack of breaking bone. She leapt back as Leon grabbed for the reporter’s hands, not sure what was happening but absolutely positive that it was not a heart attack—

· holy Christ what IS this?

All at once, Bertolucci went limp, his eyes rolled back and fixed, sightless. Blood still oozed from his cracked lips and there was a sound, a horrible sound of meat being torn, and under the stained fabric of his shirt, something moved.

“Get back!” Ada shouted, pointing her Beretta at the dead reporter, and in the split-second it took her to aim, a thing erupted from Bertolucci’s bloody chest. A thing the size of a big man’s fist, a gore-drenched thing that opened a tiny black hole of a mouth and squealed shrilly, revealing nubs of sharp red teeth. It wriggled out of the corpse with a whip-ping manta’s tail, splashing the cold cement with shreds of wet tissue and gut.

Lashing against the cooling flesh of the reporter, it poured from the body in a gush of blood and onto the floor—and took off like a shot for the open gate back into the hall, propelling itself with its snaking tail and legs that Ada couldn’t see, smearing a red path behind it.

It was out the door before she even remembered that she was holding a gun; for the first time since she’d come to Raccoon, since ever, she had been so completely shocked that she hadn’t thought to react. A chest-bursting parasitic creature, straight out of a sci-fi movie. . . .

“Was that—did you see—“ Leon fumbled breath-lessly.

“I saw it,” Ada said softly, cutting him off. She turned and looked down at Bertolucci, at his face, frozen in a bloody contortion of anguish, and at the gaping wet cavity just below his sternum. His mouth, cracked at the corners. . . .

He’d been implanted with the creature—by what, she didn’t know, and she didn’t want to know. What she wanted was to get the mission wrapped, as quickly as possible, and then get as far away from Raccoon City as she could. In fact, she thought that she’d never wanted anything quite so badly. When she’d first realized that there had been a T-Virus incident, she’d expected to have to deal with some unpleasant organ-isms. But the thought of having one of them forced or forcing its way down her throat, nestling inside of her body like some slick, aberrant fetus before eating its way out. . . if that wasn’t the most horrible thing she could think of, it ran a close second.

She looked at Leon, giving up any pretense of trying to be reasonable. She was going to the lab, and it wasn't open to discussion.

"I'm getting out of here," she said, and without waiting for a response, she turned and walked briskly toward the gate, careful not to step on the glistening trail of blood that the tiny monster had created.

"Wait! Look, I think—Ada? Hey ___"

She stepped into the corridor, weapon raised, but the creature was gone. The blood trail petered out less than halfway down the hall—but she saw that they'd left the door to the kennel open—

· and the manhole cover's off. Terrific.

Leon caught up to her before she'd gone more than a few steps. He stood in front of her, blocking her path, and for just a moment, Ada thought he was going to try to physically stop her.

Don't do it. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to.

"Ada, please don't go," Leon said, not a command but a plea. "I—when I got to Raccoon, I met this girl, and I think she's in the station somewhere. If you could help me find her, the three of us could leave together. We'd stand a much better chance—" "Sorry, Leon, but it's a free goddamn country. You do what you have to, and good luck—but I'm not staying. I've had enough. If—when I get out, I'll send help."

She started to push past him, hoping it wouldn't come to violence and wishing that she could tell him not to get in her way—how dangerous it would be for him to try—when Leon surprised her yet again. "Then I'm coming with you," he said. He met her gaze evenly, his own unflinching and resolute—and scared. "I'm not going to let you do it alone. I don't want anyone else—I don't want you to get hurt." Ada stared at him, not sure what to say. Now that Bertolucci was dead, she didn't want to have to ditch Leon in the sewers; it wouldn't be hard, considering how extensive the system was . . . but he was just so goddamn nice, so determined to be helpful, that she was starting to—to not want to have to do anything bad to him. Things would be a lot easier if he was just some asshole on a machismo kick. . . .

Okay, so blow your cover. Tell him you're a private agent working to steal the G-Virus, and you don't want company; tell him about the relief you felt when you realized the reporter was about to die, or how you don't have a problem with killing, if it's for a good cause—like getting paid. See how nice and helpful he is after that.

Not an option; neither was trying to talk him out of coming along, it wouldn't make sense. And there was some part of her, some part that she didn't want to admit to, that wanted very much not to be alone. Seeing that thing that had popped out of Bertolucci had shaken her, it had left her feeling that she wasn't as invulnerable as she liked to think.

So let him come, get to the lab and find a safe place to leave him there. No harm, no foul.

Leon was watching her closely, studying her—wait-ing for her approval.

"Let's go," she said, and the grin he gave her, though winning, made her feel even more uncomfortable.

Without another word, they walked toward the kennel, Ada wondering what the hell she was

doing—and whether or not she was still capable of doing whatever it took to get the job done.

Claire stood in front of a medieval door at the very end of the dark, dungeon-like hallway that the elevator had taken her to. The station had been chilly, but the icy damp of this stone hall made the station seem like summer; it was like she'd descended into some ancient, haunted castle straight out of the Middle Ages.

She took a deep breath, trying to decide how to go in; she was pretty sure that Irons wouldn't appreciate a surprise visit, but the idea of knocking seemed ludicrous—not to mention dangerous. There were torches burning in sconces on either side of the heavy wood door, the door itself belted with strips of rusting metal—and if she'd had any doubt before that Irons was crazy, the sight of the twin sputtering torches and the feel of cold, quiet dread that suffused the corridor itself had wiped her uncertainty out.

A secret tunnel, a hidden room complete with mood-lighting . . . what sane person would want to hang out down here? It wasn't the disaster that did it—Irons must have been nuts way before the Umbrella accident . . .

Another certainty, although she didn't have any proof—but when Sherry had told her about what her parents did for a living, and what had happened just prior to her coming to the station, something had clicked. Umbrella worked with diseases, and the population of Raccoon had definitely come down with a bad case of something. There must have been some kind of an accident, a spill that had released the strange zombie plague. . . .

Quit stalling.

Claire bit at her lip, not sure what she should do. She didn't doubt that Irons was down here somewhere, and she did not want to run into him again; maybe she should go back up, get Sherry, and try to find another way out. Just because the area was secret didn't mean that it was some kind of an escape route. Still stalling, and Sherry is up there by herself. And you've got a gun, remember?

A gun with very little ammo. If this was Irons's hidden lair, maybe he kept weapons inside . . . or maybe it was just another corridor, one that led even deeper into the bowels of the station. Either way, wondering about it was telling her exactly jack shit. Claire put her hand on the latch, took another deep breath, and pushed it open, the heavy door swinging in slowly on well-oiled hinges. She stepped back, pointing the handgun—

Jesus.

An empty room, as dank and unwelcoming as the corridor—but with furnishings and a decor that made her skin crawl. A single naked bulb hung down from the ceiling, illuminating the creepiest chamber she'd ever seen. There was a table in the middle of the room, stained and battered, a hacksaw and other cutting utensils scattered on top; a dented metal bucket and a mop, slopped against one water-stained wall, next to a portable basin with dried red patches inside; shelves, laden with dusty bottles—and what looked like human bones, polished and pale, set out like macabre trophies. That, and the smell—a thick chemical reek, sharp and acidic, that only just covered a darker smell. A smell like insanity. Even looking into the room made her want to be sick; “nuts” was maybe the understatement of the year for the police chief—but there was nobody home, and that meant that there could be another secret passage somewhere inside. At the very least, she had to check for weapons.

Swallowing, Claire stepped into the room, glad that she hadn't brought Sherry with her; looking at the private little torture chamber was going to give her nightmares, it was nothing to expose a child to—

“Freeze, little girl, or I’ll shoot you where you stand.”

Claire froze. Every muscle in her body froze as Irons started to laugh from behind her, from behind the door where she hadn’t thought to look. Oh my God, oh, God, oh, Sherry I’m so sorry—

Irons’s deep chuckle rose into the hearty, gleeful laughter of a madman, and Claire understood that she was going to die.

EIGHTEEN

TRYING NOT TO BREATHE TOO DEEPLY, LEON

reached the bottom of the metal ladder and turned around quickly, aiming the Magnum into the thick gloom. Murky water sloshed over his boots, and as his eyes adjusted to the low light, he saw the source of the terrible smell.

Parts of it, anyway. . . .

The subbasement tunnel stretching out in front of him was littered with body parts, human corpses that had been torn into pieces. Limbs and heads and torsos were strewn randomly through the stone passageway, lapped at gently by the few inches of dark water that covered the floor.

“Leon? How is it?” Ada’s voice floated down from the circle of light above the ladder, echoing hollowly around him. Leon didn’t answer, his shocked gaze fixed on the terrible scene, his brain trying to add up the shredded parts and come up with a number. How many? How many people?

Too many to count. He saw a faceless head, the long hair streaming around it in a cloud. A heavy woman’s decapitated trunk, one breast bobbing above the rippling darkness. An arm encased in the tatters of a cop’s dress shirt. A bare leg, still wearing a sneaker. A curled hand, the fingers slick and white. A dozen? Twenty?

“Leon?” Ada’s tone had sharpened.

“It’s—it looks okay,” he called, struggling to keep his voice from cracking. “Nothing moving.” “I’m coming down.”

He stepped away from the ladder to give her room, remembering something she’d said before, something about bodies being dumped. . . .

Ada stepped off the bottom rung, splashing into the dark tunnel. His eyes had adjusted well enough to see a look of disgust cross her delicate features—disgust and something like sadness.

“There was an attack in the garage,” she said softly.

“Fourteen or fifteen people died. . . .”

She trailed off, frowning, and took a step past him to get a closer look at the severed and mutilated remains. When she spoke again, she sounded worried. “I didn’t see the attack, but I don’t think they were torn up like this.”

She looked up, scanning the roof of the tunnel, gripping her nine-millimeter tightly. Leon followed her gaze, but only saw algae-thick stone. Ada shook her head, looking back down at the gently rippling sea of broken flesh.

“The—zombies didn’t do this. Something got to these people after they were killed.”

Leon felt a chill go up his spine. That was about the last thing he wanted to hear, standing in the humid, stinking dark and surrounded by savaged bodies. “So it’s not safe down here. We should head back up and—“ Ada started forward, stepping through the tangled limbs, the sound of her careful, sloshing movements seeming very loud in the otherwise silent tunnel. Damn, does she ignore everybody, or is it just me? Watching his step, Leon followed, reaching out with his free hand to touch her shoulder. “At least let me go first, okay?”

“Fine,” she said, sounding almost but not quite exasperated. “Lead the way.”

He stepped in front of her, and they started forward again, Leon trying to divide his attention between the darkness ahead and the sodden pieces of flesh and bone underfoot. Just ahead, the tunnel turned to the right, and there was some light reflected off the oily surface of the water; the passage was clearer, too, with not as many bodies.

Leon paused just long enough to unshoulder the Remington, checking to make sure he’d chambered a round. Whatever had gotten to the corpses didn’t seem to be around, but he didn’t want to be unpre-pared if it came back.

Ada waited without speaking, though he could feel her impatience—not for the first time, he wondered if there was more to her story than she’d told him. He was scared, and he was also cold and tired and afraid for Claire, who might still be wandering the station—he didn’t even know if Claire was still alive; but he hadn’t felt right about letting Ada walk into a bad situation on her own.

Ada, on the other hand . . . she was as calm and controlled as a veteran soldier, expressing nothing but a kind of irritable eagerness to get on with things—and if she appreciated his presence at all, she was taking great pains not to show it. It wasn’t that he needed or wanted her gratitude—

· but wouldn’t most people be happy to have a cop along? Even a rookie?

Maybe not, and it wasn’t the time or place to start asking questions. Leon shut down his thinking and started moving again, stepping gingerly over a chewed-up chunk of flesh that he couldn’t identify. “Stop,” Ada whispered sharply. “Listen.”

Leon tensed, Remington in one hand, Magnum in the other. He tilted his head, straining to hear, but there was only a distant, hollow drip of water—

· and a soft thumping. A rapid but random sound, like padded hammers on a padded surface. Whatever it was, it was getting closer, coming toward them from where the tunnel turned up ahead.

Why isn’t it splashing, why don’t we hear water—? Leon backed up a step, raising both weapons slightly, remembering how Ada had looked at the ceiling before—

· and saw it, saw it and felt his heart stop in midbeat. A spider the size of a big dog, skittering over the wet stones halfway up the inner wall, its bristling, hairy legs tapping—

· not possible—

· and then there was a series of deafening explosions next to his right ear, bam-bam-bam-bam, the muzzle flash from Ada's Beretta strobing the hellish tunnel as she fired. The booming echoes pounded through the dark as the giant, impossible arachnid dropped from the wall, splashing into the inky water. It crawled toward them, wounded, dragging two of its multiple legs through the murk behind it, dark fluids spilling out from its grotesquely rounded body. It humped itself over a human head, the mutilated skull rolling out from beneath its swollen, pulsing abdomen, and Leon could see its shining black eyes, each the size of a ping-pong ball—

· and he squeezed the trigger on the Remington, not even feeling the kick of the thundering blast, his entire focus on the inconceivable arachnid. The round hit it squarely, blowing its alien face into a thousand wet pieces. The spider flipped over backwards with a skidding splash, its thick legs quivering, curling in over its furred body.

His ears ringing, his heart pounding, Leon chambered another round, his mind telling him that he had not just blown away a spider that big, the physics was wrong, it couldn't happen because it would collapse under its own weight—

· Ada pushed past him, running ahead, shouting back to him. "Come on, there could be more coming!"

Leon took off after her, forced by Ada's reckless behavior to put his shock on hold. He sprinted through the dark, jumping over the disturbed and gently rocking hunks of flesh, past the closed dead spider that would never have existed in the reality he'd known before Raccoon.

"Drop your weapon," Irons commanded, and the girl did so, hesitating for only a second. The Browning clattered to the floor, and Irons had to resist the urge to laugh again, scarcely able to credit how stupidly she'd acted. The Umbrella assassin had obviously grown arrogant, walking into his Sanctuary as if she owned the place—and her smug, inflated conceit had cost her the game.

"Turn around, slow—and keep your hands where I can see them," he said, still grinning. Oh, what a gloriously easy conquest! Umbrella had underestimated him for the last time.

Again, the girl did as he asked, pivoting slowly, her hands empty and open. The look on her face was priceless, her aquiline features fixed in a mask of fear and shock; she hadn't expected this, she thought it would be a simple task to take out Brian Irons. After all, he was a broken man, a shadow of his former self, his city, his life taken away—

"Mistaken, weren't you?" he said, feeling the humor leak out of the situation, feeling the anger stir again. He kept the VP70 trained on her ridiculously young face; insulting, that they'd sent a child in to do their dirty work. Even such a pretty one. . . . "Calm down, Chief Irons," she said, and even angry, he was pleased to hear the strain in her sultry voice, the edge of fear beneath her useless plea. He was going to enjoy this, even more than he'd imagined. . . .

. . . but first, some answers.

"Who sent you? Was it Coleman, from headquarters? Or did your orders come from higher up ... someone on the board, perhaps? There's no point in lying, not anymore."

The girl stared at him, her eyes wide with feigned confusion. "I—I don't know what you're talking

about. Please, there's been some kind of a mistake—" "Oh, there's been a mistake, all right," Irons spat, "and you made it. How long has Umbrella been watching me? What were your orders, exactly—were you supposed to kill me outright, or did Umbrella want to see me suffer a little more first?" The girl didn't answer for a moment, obviously trying to decide how much to tell him. She was good, her expression still carefully arranged to show only a bewildered fear, but he saw right through it. She's been caught, she must know that I won't let her live and she's going to try and conceal the truth, even now. Young, but well-trained.

"I came to Raccoon looking for my brother," she said slowly, her wide gray eyes fixed on the gun. "He was with the S.T.A.R.S., and I just—" "S.T.A.R.S.? Is that the best you can do?" Irons laughed bitterly, shaking his head. The Raccoon S.T.A.R.S. had fled well before things had fallen to shit—and last he'd heard, Umbrella had already "converted" the organization to their purposes, and was working to eliminate those who wouldn't cross over. As a cover story, it didn't play.

But there is something. . . .

He narrowed his eyes, studying her pale, anxious face. "And just who is your brother?"

"Chris Redfield, you know him—I'm Claire, his sister, and I don't know anything about whatever Umbrella did, and I wasn't sent here to kill you." She spoke quickly, all but stumbling over herself to get her story out.

She did look like Redfield, through the eyes at least. . . although why she thought that connection would help her somehow was beyond him. Chris Redfield was a pompous, disrespectful upstart who had openly defied him many times; in fact—

"Redfield was working for Umbrella, wasn't he?" Even saying it aloud, Irons could see that it was the truth—and his anger swelled up like a red tide, an acid heat that flushed through his veins and made him feel sick.

Even my employees, all along. Treasonous Umbrella puppets.

"The Spencer estate, the accusations against Um-brella . . . it was all a setup, they had him stirring up trouble to—to distract me so they could steal Birkin's new virus. . . ."

Irons took a step toward the girl, barely able to keep himself from pulling the trigger in spite of his plans. The girl, Claire, took a step back, holding up her hands, palms out, as if to ward off his righteous fury.

"That's how the S.T.A.R.S. knew to get out of town," he snarled, "they were warned to get out of town before the T-Virus leak!"

He took another step forward, but Claire had stopped, her eyes going even wider. "You mean Chris isn't here?"

Her small, hopeful whisper only fed the red, burn-ing heat that pounded through him—and the feelings were so powerful that they transcended rage, focusing his intentions into something brutal and precise. It wasn't enough that he'd been betrayed by Umbrella and the S.T.A.R.S., it wasn't enough that he'd been manipulated, tormented, hunted—

No. No, I have to be lied to by this little girl, a spy and an assassin from a family of traitors, A lifetime devoted to service, a lifetime of hard-won experience and self-sacrifice, and this is my reward. "A slap in

the face,” he said, his voice as cold as this new savagery that filled him up, transforming him into the hunter. “Treating me like an idiot. You don’t even have enough respect to lie well.” He extended the nine-millimeter and walked to-ward her, each step measured and deliberate—and her fear was real this time, he could see it in the way she stumbled back, her lips trembling, her young chest heaving in a most delicious way. She was terrified, trying to look for a weapon and watch him and get away all at the same time, succeeding at none of them as he marched forward.

“/ have the power,” he said, “this is my Sanctuary, this is my domain. You are the intruder. You are the liar, you are the evil—and I’m going to skin you alive. I’m going to make you scream, you bitch, I’m going to make you wish you were never born. Whatever they paid you, it wasn’t enough.”

She backed against one of the shelves, tripping over the leg of the worktable, almost falling on top of the covered trap door in the corner. Irons followed, feeling that beautiful, exciting power course through him, feeling excited by her helplessness. “Please, you don’t want to do this, I’m not who you think I am!”

Her pathetic entreaties made him stop and laugh, wanting to add to her terror, wanting for her to know that his control was absolute. She was wedged be-tween a trophy shelf and the covered pit, and Irons stayed a safe distance away, enjoying the look in her glistening, overbright eyes—the panic of a trapped animal, a soft, warm, powerless animal of tender, pliable flesh. . . .

Irons licked his lips, his hungry gaze traveling over her limber, smooth, cowering form. Another trophy, another body to transform . . . and it was time to get down to business, to—

“Graaagh!”

What the—

The board that covered the subbasement entrance flew into the air, splitting with a tremendous crack, one jagged piece hitting Irons’s hip. He staggered, not understanding—he was in control and yet something had gone horribly, horribly wrong—

Something wrapped around his ankle, something

that squeezed so tight he heard the bone being

crushed, felt incredible, spiking pain travel up his

leg-

· and he locked gazes with the girl, her eyes bright with a new terror, and in that instant of contact, of clarity, he wanted to teil her so much, wanted to tell her that he was a good man, a man who’d never deserved any of what had happened to him—

· and the vise-like grip jerked, and Irons was falling, dropping the gun, pulled into the pit by the screaming and the pain and the beast that waited for him below.

IlinEfEEEn

ONE MINUTE, IRONS WAS STANDING IN FRONT

of her, staring into her eyes with a terrible, wrenching sorrow—

· and in the next, he was gone. Yanked into a hole in the floor by an arm that she only caught a glimpse of, a muscular, dripping arm with foot-long claws. It whipped out of sight, taking Irons with it into the darkness below.

There was another scream from the creature, a powerful, lusty howl that was matched and then surpassed by the intensity of Irons's terrified shriek. Frozen by the piercing screams, Claire could only listen, shock and relief and fear for herself battling through her as the horrible cries swept up through the open hole, pounding her ears in the cold, dismal dungeon that Irons had created—

· until his cries burred to a stop, only a second or two later—and the slurping, meaty, wet noises began. Claire moved. She scooped up the handgun that Irons had dropped and ran around the table in the middle of the room, not wanting to be grabbed and pulled under like he had.

It killed him, it killed him and he was going to kill me—

The reality of what had just happened, what would have happened, hit her all at once, turning her limbs into rubber. Claire forced herself a few more steps away from the open pit and collapsed against one sweating stone wall, taking in great, whooping breaths of the bitterly scented air.

He had been planning to kill her, but not right away. She'd seen the way his mad gaze had crawled over her body, heard the eager anticipation in his crazy laugh—

There was a low, grunting sound from the corner, a bestial sound, the growl of a well-fed lion. Claire turned, raising the heavy gun, astounded that she could feel any more horror—

· and something burst up from the hole, some-thing with flailing arms, and Claire fired, the shot going wide. A glass bottle on a shelf exploded as the thing hit the floor—

· and it was Irons, but only half of him. He had been neatly bisected, cut in two by the thing that had snatched him; everything below the fleshy waist was gone, trails of torn skin and muscle hanging down over the oozing pool of blood that had replaced his legs.

Claire backed toward the door, the weapon still trained on the opening—and heard the creature, the monster scream again, an echoing howl that faded away, falling away into some distance that she couldn't imagine. A second later, she couldn't hear it at all; it was gone.

Sherry's monster. That was Sherry's monster. She edged slowly toward the mangled corpse of Chief Irons, toward the empty, yawning blackness of the hole—but it wasn't all blackness. She could see light filtering up from somewhere, enough to see that there was another floor below, what looked like the metal grid pattern of a catwalk—and a ladder leading to it.

A subbasement. . . a way out?

She stepped back from the opening, her thoughts racing and disorganized, trying to absorb the information along with what Irons had told her. Chris wasn't in Raccoon, the S.T.A.R.S. were gone—a wonderful, terrible relief, because it meant he was safe, but also that he wasn't about to come running in to save the day. There had been a spill at Umbrella, which explained the zombies, at least—but what he'd said about Birkin, about Birkin's virus . . . was that Sherry's father?

And—maybe the zombies are the result of some laboratory accident, but what about all the other things,

Mr. X and the inside-out men?

The way Irons had ranted about Umbrella suggested that while the accident was unexpected, the pharmaceutical company wasn't some innocent victim. What had he called it?

"T-Virus," she said softly, and shivered. "There was Birkin's new virus, and there was the T-Virus ____" The zombie disease had a name. And you didn't name something unless you knew something about it, which meant—

· which meant she didn't know what it meant. All she knew was that she and Sherry needed to get out of Raccoon, and the subbasement might be a way. It wasn't a dead end, the monster that had killed Irons had gone somewhere . . .

. . . and do you really want to follow it, with Sherry? It could come back—and if it actually is looking for her. . .

Not a happy thought—but then, neither was hitting the streets, and the station was already crawling with God knew what other creatures. Claire checked the clip of the weapon Irons had held on her, counting seventeen bullets. Not enough to face off with the things in the station—but maybe enough to keep a monster at bay. . . .

It was a chance, but she was willing to take it. Claire took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly, collecting herself. She needed to keep it together, for Sherry's sake if not for her own.

She turned, looking down at the mangled remains of the police chief. It was a terrible way to have died, but she couldn't find it in herself to feel sorry. He had been ready to rape and torture her, he had laughed when she'd pleaded for her life, and now he was dead; she wasn't happy about it, but she wasn't going to shed any tears, either. Her only feeling about it was that she should cover him up before she brought Sherry down with her; the girl had seen enough violence for one lifetime.

You and me both, kiddo, Claire thought tiredly, and started to look around for something to drape over the dead Chief Irons.

Leon caught up to her in the cold industrial hallway that led to the sewer entrance, a few steps up from the flooded subbasement. She'd run ahead to plant the keys that would get them into the sewers, not wanting to have to explain how she'd come by them; she'd just managed to toss them into the boiler room before his footsteps sounded on the metal steps behind her. At least I don't have to fake being out of breath. . . . Ada could see by the look on his face that she needed to smooth things over; she started talking the second he stepped into the shadowy corridor. "I'm sorry I ran," she said, offering him a nervous smile. "I hate spiders."

Leon frowned, studying her—and looking into his searching blue gaze, Ada realized she was going to have to do better than that. She took a step closer to him, not close enough to be invasive but enough so that he could feel the heat of her body. Maintaining eye contact, she tilted her head back to emphasize the height difference between them; it was a little thing, but in her experience, men generally responded well to the little things.

"I guess I'm just in a hurry to get out of here," she said quietly, losing the smile. "I hope I didn't worry you."

He dropped his gaze, but not before she saw a flicker of interest—confused and self-conscious, but

definitely interest. Which made it all the more surprising when he stepped away.

“Well, you did. Don’t do it again, okay? I may not be much of a cop, but I’m trying—and God only knows what we’re going to run into down here.” He met her gaze again, speaking softly. “I came with you because I want to help, I want to do my job—and I can’t do that if you go charging ahead. Besides,” he added, smiling a little, “if you run off, who’s going to help me?”

It was Ada’s turn to look away. Leon was playing it straight with her, openly admitting to his fears—and his response to her not-so-subtle flirtation had been to step back and tell her that he wanted to be a good cop. Interested, but not a fool for his tool. . . and man enough to tell me that he’s unsure of his abilities. She was forced to smile back, but it was a shaky affair. “I’ll do my best,” she said.

Leon nodded and turned to inspect the hallway, letting the conversation drop—much to Ada’s relief. She wasn’t sure what she thought of him, but was uncomfortably aware that her respect for him was growing; not a good thing, considering the circumstances.

There wasn’t much to see in the damp, poorly lit hall; two doorways and a dead end. The boiler room, where she’d tossed the keys—or plugs, rather—was directly in front of them, the sewer disposal entrance in a back corner; according to the sign on the wall, the other door opened into a storage closet.

Ada followed as Leon walked to the closest of the two doors, the storage room, hanging back as he pushed it open with his Magnum and stepped inside. Boxes, a table, a trunk; nothing important, but at least no creepy-crawlies. After a quick search, he stepped back into the hall and they moved toward the boiler room.

“How’d you learn to shoot like that, anyway?” Leon asked as they stopped in front of the door. His tone was casual, but she thought she detected more than casual curiosity. “You’re pretty good. Were you in the military or something . . . ?”

Nice try, Officer.

Ada smiled, falling into her carefully rehearsed character. “Paintball, believe it or not. I mean, I went target-shooting some when I was a teenager, with my uncle, but never got into it much. And then a few years ago, a friend at work—we’re both buyers at an art gallery in New York—dragged me to one of those weekend survival retreats, and we had a blast. You know, hiking, rock-climbing, stuff like that—and paintball. It’s great, we go up every couple of months . . . although I never thought I’d have to use it for real.”

She could actually see him buy it, see that he wanted to buy it. It probably answered a few questions that he’d been hesitant to ask.

“Well, you’re better than a lot of the guys I graduated the academy with. Really. So, you ready to get on with this?”

Ada nodded. Leon pushed the door to the boiler room open, scanning the ancient, rusting machinery in the wide empty space before ushering her inside. She made a point of not looking down, wanting Leon to find the small wrapped package that she’d tossed in a few moments earlier.

She hadn’t gotten a good look before. The room, shaped like a sideways “H,” was fitted with corroded railings and two massive old boilers, one on either side. Fluorescent lights sputtered overhead, the few that still worked casting strange shadows across the metal pipes that ran down the water-marked walls.

The door that led into the sewer system was in the far left corner, a heavy-looking hatch next to an inset panel.

“Hey—“ Leon crouched down, picking up the bundle of plugs that would open the hatch. “Looks like somebody dropped something. . . .”

Before Ada could go through the charade of asking him what he’d found, she heard a noise. A soft, slithery noise, coming from the area in the right back corner, neatly blocked from view by one of the boilers.

Leon heard it, too. He stood up quickly, dropping the bundle and raising the shotgun. Ada pointed her Beretta toward the sound, remembering how the door had been slightly ajar when she’d come up from the subbasement.

Oh, hell. The implant.

She knew it even before it crawled into sight—and was shocked anyway. The little bugger had grown, and it had grown fast, easily twenty times its former size in half as many minutes—and it was still growing, apparently at an exponential rate. In the few seconds it took for the creature to move into the middle of the room, it went from the size of a small dog to the size—and bulk—of a ten-year-old child.

The shape had changed, was changing, too. It was no longer the alien tadpole that had chewed its way out of Bertolucci. The tail was gone, and the creature that inched its way across the rusting floor had developed limbs, stretching arms folding out of its rubbery flesh. Claws popped out of the tan and swimming skin that swirled over its body, accompanied by a sound like gristle being punctured. Muscular legs unfurled, liquid that snapped into sinewy shape as its stuttering crawl became smoother, almost feline—

The shotgun and Beretta sounded at the same time, a string of massive blasts peppered with the higher whine of the nine-millimeter. The creature was still shifting, standing, mutating into a humanoid shape—and its response to the booming shots that smacked into its twisting flesh was to open its mouth and vomit, a grunting projectile scream of rotten green bile—

· that hit the floor and started moving. The stream that gushed from its wide, flat face was alive—and the dozen or so crab-like creatures that tumbled out of the monster’s gaping mouth like liquid seemed to know exactly where the threat was to their fetid, mutant womb. The skittering, multi-legged animals swarmed toward Ada and Leon in a silent wave as the implant monster took one massive step forward, pulsing cords standing out on its impossibly long, thick neck. Leon had the heavier firepower. “Got ‘em!” Ada shouted, already targeting and shooting at the closest of the tiny, bilious green crabs. They were fast, but she was faster; she pointed and squeezed, pointed and squeezed, and the baby monsters exploded into small fountains of dark, ichorous fluid, dying as silently as they’d come.

Leon blasted again and again with the shotgun, but Ada couldn’t spare a glance to see how he was faring with the mother beast. Five of the crawling babies left, three more rounds and she’d be dry—

· and she heard the shotgun clatter to the floor, heard the deeper but less powerful fire of the .50 AE rounds resounding through the metal room as she picked off” two more of the spidering creatures, and her weapon clicked empty.

Without stopping to think, Ada let go of the Beretta and dropped to the floor. She grabbed the shotgun by the barrel, rolling up into a crouch beneath Leon’s line of fire, and swung the weapon down, hard.

Two of the mutant animals were smashed into goo by the heavy stock—but the third, the last of them, sprang forward in an unexpected burst of speed—

· and landed on her thigh, catching hold with needle-sharp claws. Ada dropped the shotgun, crying out as the animal scuttled up her leg, the warm, damp weight of it making her frantic with disgust. Off get it OFF—

She fell backwards, slapping at the creature that had already reached her shoulder and was skittering toward her face, toward her mouth—

· and then Leon was grabbing her, roughly pulling her up with one hand as he snatched at the animal with the other. Ada stumbled against him, clutching at his waist to keep from falling. The bug clung tenaciously to the tight fabric of her dress, but Leon had a good grip. He tore it away, shouting as he flung the flailing thing across the room.

“The Magnum!”

The weapon was stuck in Leon’s belt. Ada jerked it free, saw the creature land near the giant, motionless heap that had birthed it, blasted to death by Leon—

· and fired, managing to get a clean shot despite how off-balance she was, how deeply unnerved she was by how close she’d come to being implanted. The heavy round clanged against the floor, rust chips spattering up—and the creature was blown into an ugly stain against the back wall. Obliterated. Nothing moved, and the two of them just stood for a moment, leaning against each other like survivors of some sudden, terrible accident—which, in a way, they were. The entire firefight had taken place in less than a minute, and they had come out unscathed—but Ada wasn’t going to kid herself about how close it had been, or what they had just managed to destroy. G-Virus.

She was sure of it; the T-Virus couldn’t have created such a complicated creature, not without a team of surgeons—and they’d seen it growing; how big, how powerful would the creature have become if they hadn’t walked in when they had? The beast might have been some early G-strain experiment, but what if it had been the result of a leak? What if there were more of them?

The sewers, the factory, the underground levels—dark, shadowy places, secret places, where anything could be growing. . . .

Whatever the situation, the trip to the labs wasn’t looking like a walk anymore—and Ada was suddenly very glad that Leon had decided to come along. Since he was so goddamn insistent on going first, if some-thing attacked, she’d have a better chance of surviv-ing—

“Are you okay? Did it hurt you?”

Leon, one arm still supporting her, looking into her eyes with a heartfelt concern. Ada realized that she could smell him, a clean, soapy smell, and pushed herself away. She handed the Magnum back to him and straightened her dress, studiously inspecting it for rips to avoid looking at him.

“Thanks, I’m fine. Don’t sweat it.”

It came out harsher than she meant it to, but she was rattled, and not just by the implant’s vicious attack. She glanced at him, and wasn’t sure how to feel when she saw that her response had caught him off guard. He blinked slowly, and a kind of coolness settled into his gaze, indicating a strength of character

that she hadn't bothered to give him credit for. "Paintball, huh?" he said mildly, and without another word, he turned to pick up the package she'd planted.

Ada stared after him, telling herself how absolutely ridiculous it was to care what he thought of her. They were about to embark on a journey in which she might have to desert him, or watch him sacrifice his life in order to save her own . . .

. . . or kill him myself. Let's not forget that, friends and neighbors. So who gives a shit if he thinks I'm an ungrateful bitch?

Straight up. She should thank him, for reminding her.

Ada stooped down to retrieve the shotgun, feeling like she needed to do a better job of keeping her priorities straight—and feeling an emptiness inside that she hadn't noticed in a long, long time.

TwEnfY

MR. IRONS HAD BEEN A VERY BAD MAN. A

sick man. Sherry supposed she'd known it all along on some level, but seeing his secret torture chamber, like some mad doctor's workshop, made it a lot more real. The room was just gross, bones and bottles and a smell even worse than the zombies. Perhaps that was why seeing the shape on the floor, the incomplete body shape beneath the bloodstained tarp, didn't bother her half as much as Claire seemed to think it would. Sherry stared at it, wondering what had hap-pened exactly.

"Come on, sweetie, let's get going," Claire said, and the forced note of brightness in her voice told Sherry that Mr. Irons had been severely messed up. All Claire had told her was that Mr. Irons had attacked her, and then something had attacked him, and that there was a chance they could get somewhere safe if they went down into the basement. Sherry had been so relieved to see Claire at all that she hadn't bothered to ask questions.

Not big enough to be a whole person under there . . . did he get eaten? Or chopped into pieces?
"Sherry? Let's go, okay?"

Claire laid a hand on her shoulder, gently pulling her away from what was left of the police chief. Sherry let herself be led toward the dark hole in the corner, deciding that it was best to keep her questions to herself. She thought about saying that she didn't care that Mr. Irons was dead, but she didn't want to appear rude or disrespectful. Besides which, Claire was trying to take care of her, and Sherry didn't mind that at all.

Claire went down the ladder first, and after a second, called up to her that it was safe to come down. Sherry stepped carefully on the metal rungs, feeling really happy for the first time in days. They were doing something, they were getting out of the RPD station and headed for escape; whatever else hap-pened, it was a good way to feel.

Claire helped her down the last couple of rungs, lifting her and setting her on the metal floor. Sherry turned and looked around, her eyes widening. "Wow," she said, and the word whispered away into the dim shadows and came whispering back, reflected off" the strange walls.

"Yeah," Claire said. "Come on."

Claire started walking, her boots clanking out ech-oes, and Sherry followed closely, still looking around in amazement. It was like a bad guy's lair in a spy movie, some factory passage inside of a mountain or something. They were on a catwalk surrounded by rails, a murky green light coming up through the grate floor from somewhere far below—and although there was rough brick to their right, to the left was an actual cave wall. She could see giant, dripping pillars of stone that stretched off into the dark, natural formations of rock that were stained green by the weak and ghostly light.

Sherry wrinkled her nose. As interesting as it was, it smelled pretty rotten. And she didn't like the way that sound carried in the chill air, making everything seem hollow.

"What do you think this place is?" she asked softly. Claire shook her head. "I'm not sure. Between the smell and the location, I'd say we're in part of a sewage treatment plant."

Sherry nodded, glad to know—and even more glad to see the way out just ahead of them. The walkway wasn't very long; it turned left, and there was another ladder at the end, one that went up. When they got to it, Claire hesitated, peering up at the opening over-head and then back around at the dark and empty cave.

"I should go up first . . . how 'bout you climb up right behind, but stay on the ladder until I say it's clear?"

Sherry nodded, relieved. For a second, she'd been afraid that Claire was going to tell her to stay down here and wait, like before.

No way. It's dark, stinky, and lonely. If I were a monster, this is where I'd be. . . .

Claire went up, boosting herself easily through the hole, and Sherry clambered up just behind, holding the cool metal of the rungs tightly. After a few seconds, Claire's long, slender arms reached down to help her out.

They were back on solid ground, a short cement hallway that seemed incredibly bright after the cave. Sherry figured they were still in the sewage plant; the smell wasn't as bad, but the hall was bordered on the left by a motionless river of sludge water, maybe a foot deep and five or six feet across; the muddy water ran off in either direction, one end through a low, rounded tunnel, the other stopped by a big metal door. It was all overlooked by a kind of balcony, but Sherry didn't see any stairs.

Which means . . . oh, yuck.

"Do we have to?" she asked.

Claire sighed. "Fraid so. But look at the bright side—no sane monster would follow us through that."

Sherry smiled. It wasn't particularly funny, but she appreciated what Claire was trying to do—it was the same as covering up Mr. Irons's body, or telling her that her parents were probably safe.

She's trying to shield me from how bad things really are. . . .

Sherry liked that, so much so that she was already dreading the moment when Claire would leave her for good. Eventually, she would; Claire had a whole life somewhere else, her own friends and family, and once they got out of Raccoon, she would go back to wherever she came from and Sherry would be alone again. Even if her parents were okay, she would be alone . . . and though she wanted very much for

them to be safe and well, she wasn't looking forward to the end of her time with Claire.

She was only twelve, but she'd known for a couple of years that her family was different from most. The other kids at school had parents who spent time with them, had birthday parties and went on camping trips, and had brothers and sisters and pets. She'd never had any of those things. She knew that her parents meant well, and that they loved her—but sometimes, she felt like no matter how quiet and good and self-sufficient she was, she was still in their way—

“You ready for this?”

Claire's soft, pretty voice brought her back to the situation, reminding her that she needed to be more alert. Sherry nodded, and Claire stepped down into the dark, dirty water, reaching back to help her. The water was cold and greasy, and came up to Sherry's knees; it was gross, but not puking bad. Claire motioned toward the big metal door to their left with her new gun, looking as disgusted as Sherry felt.

“Looks like we're going to—“

A loud noise from the balcony cut her off, and they both looked up, Sherry instinctively moving closer to Claire as the noise came again. It sounded like foot-steps, but too slow and too loud to be normal—

· and Sherry saw a man in a long, dark coat walk into view, and felt her mouth go dry with fear. He was a giant, maybe as tall as ten feet, and his bald skull gleamed as white as a dead fish belly. She couldn't see him clearly because of the angle, but she could see enough—and she could feel that he was bad, that there was something very wrong and bad about him. It radiated off of him like sickness.

“Claire?” she squeaked, her voice breaking as the giant man stalked across the balcony, as he started to turn toward them—slowly, so slowly, and Sherry didn't want to see his face, didn't want to see the face of a man that could frighten her so deeply by just walking onto a balcony—

“Run!”

Claire grabbed her hand and the two of them ran, splashing through the thick water toward the sealed door. Sherry concentrated on not falling, on praying that the door would open—

· don't be locked, don't be locked!

· and on not looking back, not wanting to see what the giant, bad man was doing. The door was close but it seemed to take forever, each second stretched out as they fought against the weight of the cold and oily water.

They stumbled to the hatch and Claire found its control, slamming at the button in a kind of panic that made Sherry even more afraid. The door split in the middle, one half sliding up into the ceiling and the other slipping beneath the rippling waves. Sherry didn't look back, but Claire did. Whatever she saw made her leap through the door, pulling Sherry off her feet and hurtling into the long, dark tunnel that lay behind the hatch. As soon as they were through, Claire fumbled at the wall and the door slid closed behind them, sealing them into the dripping darkness.

“Don't move and be quiet,” Claire whispered, and in the very dim light that came from somewhere up ahead, Sherry could see that she was holding the gun out in front of her, trying to search the heavy shadows for any new threats. Sherry obeyed, her heart pound-ing, wondering who, what that man had been—it was the man Claire had asked her about before, that much was obvious, but what was he?

People didn't get that big, and Claire had been scared, too—

Clink.

A metal noise, soft and muffled from the wall behind her—and Sherry felt the water around her feet start to move suddenly, a swift rush of current that pulled on her legs, pulled her off balance—

· and she stumbled, tripped, plunging face-first into the cold and nasty water as the current got stronger, sucking her backwards. Sherry reached out, trying to find something, anything, to hold on to, and felt slimy stone whip beneath her clutching fingers as the waters rushed her away, away from Claire.

· can't breathe—

Sherry kicked wildly, twisting her body, her eyes stinging from the bad water—and managed to take a breath as her head broke the surface, as she realized that she was in a tunnel, a pitch black shaft no bigger than the vents from the station. The swift waters carried her along, Sherry taking deep gasps of the foul air overhead, forcing herself not to struggle against the relentless power of the hissing liquid. The tunnel had to end somewhere—and wherever it came out, she had to be ready to run.

Claire, please find me, please don't give up on me. ...

She was lost, blind and deaf, sliding down through the dark—and farther and farther away from the only person who could protect her from the nightmare creatures that had taken over Raccoon.

Annette no longer doubted that her husband had escaped the laboratory levels. Not only were half of the facility entrances unsealed, the fences that surrounded the factory had been breached—and the sewer tunnels, the tunnels that should have been mostly empty, were crawling with human carriers that had to have come from outside. Even as advanced as they'd been in terms of cellular deterioration, she'd had to shoot down five of them just to clear a path from the tram to the sewage operations room. After what seemed an eternity of trudging through the semi-treated, inky waters of the labyrinthian system, she came to the platform she'd been looking for. Annette stepped up into the concrete tunnel, gazing warily at the closed door a few meters in front of her. Closed and undamaged, a good sign—but what if he'd gone through before he'd lost all trace of human intelligence, before he'd grown into an un-thinking, violent animal? Even now, he might still retain something resembling memory; the truth was, she didn't know. The G-Virus hadn't been tested on humans yet. . .

. . . and if he did go through? If he made it to the police station?

No. She couldn't, wouldn't entertain the possibility. Considering what she did know about the progressive chemophysiologic changes—what he would be capable of doing if the virus worked the way it was supposed to—the thought of him getting to an uninfected population . . . well, it was unthinkable. The station is safe, she thought firmly. Irons may be an incompetent ass, but his cops aren't. Wherever William is, he couldn't have gotten past them. She couldn't afford to believe anything else; Sherry was there, if she'd done what she was supposed to do—and besides being her own flesh and blood (which, she reminded herself, was reason enough), Sherry played a very important role in her future plans.

Annette leaned against one cold and sweating wall, aware that time was running out but simply unable to go on without resting for a moment. She'd been counting on the encoded territorial instinct to keep him close to the lab, and had been so sure that she would find him, that her live, human scent would lure him to her . . . but she was almost at the end of the contained area, and all she'd found were a dozen ways in

which he could have escaped.

And Umbrella will be here soon. I have to get back, I have to activate the fail-safe before they can stop me. William deserved to be at peace—but beyond that, destroying the creature that had once been her husband would eradicate all of her doubts about the success of her objective. What if she blew the lab and escaped, only to find that Umbrella had captured him? All of her struggles, all of his work, for nothing. . . .

Annette closed her eyes, wishing that there was an easy way to make the decision that had to be made. The fact was, William's death simply wasn't as crucial as getting rid of the lab. And there was a good chance that they wouldn't find him, that they weren't even aware of his transformation—

· and it's not as though I have a choice. He's not here, he's not anywhere.

She pushed away from the wall, walking slowly toward the door. She would check the last few tunnels, perhaps see if the conference rooms showed any sign of damage—and then she would go back. Go back and finish what Umbrella had started. Annette pushed the door open—

· and heard footsteps, echoing through the lonely corridor from somewhere up ahead; the hall was shaped like a "T," the sounds melting into themselves, making it impossible to tell from which direction they were coming—but they were the strong, sure steps of an uninfected human, perhaps more than one, and that could only mean one thing. Umbrella. They've finally come.

Rage boiled up through her, making her hands shake, her lips curl back from gritted teeth. It had to be them, it had to be one of their murdering spies; besides Irons and a few of the city officials, only Umbrella knew that these tunnels were still in use—and that they led to the underground facility. The possibility that it was some innocent survivor of the spill didn't cross her mind, and neither did running; she raised the handgun and waited for the heartless, murdering bastard to appear.

A figure stepped into sight, a woman in red, and Annette fired—

· bam, but she was trembling, screaming inside, and the shot went high. It ricocheted off the cement wall with a whining, zipping sound, and the woman was raising a weapon of her own—

· and Annette fired again, barn-zip, but suddenly there was another one, a blurred, flying shape that leapt in front of the woman, knocking her out of the way, all of it happening at once—

· and Annette heard the cry of pain, a man's cry, and felt a burst of roaring triumph. Got him, I got him—

But there could be more, she hadn't hit the woman—and they were trained killers.

Annette turned and ran, her dirty lab coat flying, her wet shoes slapping against the cement. She had to get back to the lab, fast.

Time had run out.

TwEnfY-OnE

LEON STOPPED TO ADJUST HIS SHOULDER

harness, so Ada walked on ahead, musing over how surprisingly clear the first few tunnels had been. If memory served, this corridor let out right next to sewage treatment ops; past that was the tram to the factory, and then the machine lift to the underground. Conditions would probably get worse the closer they got to the labs, but with the trek as trouble-free as it had been so far, she was feeling optimistic. Leon had been uncomfortably quiet since they'd opened the path into the sewers, only talking when it was necessary—watch your step, hold up a minute, which way do you think we should go ... she didn't think he was even aware of the defenses he'd put up, but she was getting better at reading him. Officer Kennedy was brave, he was at least above-average in the brains department, he was a crack shot—and he didn't know dick about women. When she'd blown off his attempt to comfort her, she'd confused and hurt him—and now he didn't know how to interact with her. He'd chosen to withdraw rather than risk another rejection.

Really, it's for the best. No point in leading him on when it's not necessary, and it saves me the trouble of ego-stroking. . . .

She stepped into the intersection of the empty hall, thinking about the easiest place to part company from her escort—

· and saw the woman, just as she fired.

Bam!

Ada felt chips of concrete spray across her bare shoulders as she brought the Beretta up, a blur of emotions and realizations flashing through her in the instant it took to react. She wouldn't be able to return fire in time, the woman's next shot would kill her, anger at herself for being so stupid—and recognition. Birkin—

She heard the second shot—and then she was hit, shoved out of the way and falling to the cold floor as Leon cried out in pain and surprise, his warm bulk landing on top of her.

Ada took a deep breath, shocked and amazed as she understood what had happened, as Leon rolled off of her and clutched at his arm. She heard running footsteps and Leon's harsh panting, and sat up. Oh, my God. No shit—

He'd taken a bullet. For her.

Ada stumbled to her feet, bending over him.

“Leon!”

He looked up at her, jaw clenched against the pain. Blood seeped through the fingers of his hand, pressed to his left armpit.

“I'm—okay,” he gasped, and although his face was pale, his eyes clouded with suffering, she thought he was probably right. It undoubtedly hurt like a son of a bitch, but it wouldn't—shouldn't—kill him. It would have killed me, Leon saved my life—

And on the tail of that thought, —Annette Birkin.

Still alive.

“That woman,” she blurted, the guilt hitting her even as she turned to run. “I have to talk to her.” Ada took off, sprinting around the corner and down the hall, the door at the end standing open. Leon would live, he would be fine, and if she could catch up to Annette, this whole goddamn nightmare would be over. She’d studied the file photos, she knew it was Birkin’s wife—and if, by chance, the woman wasn’t carrying a sample, she’d sure as hell know where one was.

She ran through the door and stopped short of jumping into yet another water-filled tunnel, pausing just long enough to listen, to scan the surface of the rippling murk. No splashing sounds, and there were still lapping waves to the left—

- and a ladder bolted to the wall, leading up to a fan shaft.
- goes to operations.

Ada plunged into the water and made for the ladder. There was a hallway farther along, but it was a dead end; Annette would surely have opted for es-cape.

She quickly scaled the metal rungs, refusing to let herself think about Leon (because he was fine) as she peered through the shaft and saw that it was clear. Mrs. Doctor was probably still running, but Ada wasn’t going to walk into another bullet. Through the shaft, a quick peek past the dead, massive blades of the vent fan at the far end, and back down another ladder. The giant two-story chamber that housed the sewage-treatment machines was emp-ty of life, as cold and industrial and strewn with equipment as she’d expected. There was a hydraulic bridge that spanned the room, raised to the level she’d exited on—which meant that Annette must have gone down via the west ladder, the only other way out. Ada flipped through her mental maps as she started across the bridge, remembering that it went down into one of the treatment center’s dumping grounds—

“Drop it, you bitch!”

Behind her. Ada halted, feeling a pain inside—the pain of a hearty slap to the ego. The second time she’d screwed up, badly, in as many minutes—but there was no way she was going to obey Annette’s hysterical command. The woman’s aim was for shit and Ada tensed, preparing to drop, to spin and fire—

Barn-ping!

The shot hit the floor next to Ada’s right foot, glancing off the rusting bridge. Annette had her. Ada dropped the Beretta, raising her hands slowly, turning to face the scientist.

Jesus, I deserve to die for this. . . .

Annette Birkin walked toward her, a Browning nine-millimeter trembling wildly in one outstretched hand. Ada winced inwardly at the sight of that shaking gun—but saw a possible opportunity as An-nette moved closer, finally coming to a stop less than ten feet in front of her.

Too close. Too close, and she’s right on the edge of a total collapse, isn’t she?

“Who are you? What’s your name?!”

Ada swallowed heavily, putting a stutter into her voice. “Ada, Ada Wong. Please don’t shoot, please, I haven’t done anything—” Annette frowned, backing up a step. “Ada... Wong. I know that name—Ada,

that was John's girlfriend's name....”

Ada's mouth dropped open. “Yes, John Howe!

But—how did you know? Do you know where he is?” The disheveled scientist glared at her. “I know because John worked with my husband, William. You've heard of him, of course—William Birkin, the man responsible for the creation of the T-Virus.” Annette fairly glowed with a mix of pride and despair as she spoke, giving Ada hope; it was a weakness that she could use. Ada had read the files on William Birkin—read about his steady climb through Umbrella's hierarchy, the advances in virology and genetic sequencing... and about the scientific ambition that had made him a veritable sociopath. It looked as though his wife was operating on a similar plane—which meant that the Mrs. would have no problem pulling the trigger.

Play it dumb, and don't give her a reason to doubt it. “T-Virus? What's—“ Ada blinked, then widened her eyes. “Doctor—Birkin? Wait, the Doctor Birkin, the biochemist?”

She saw a flash of pleasure cross Annette's face—but then it was gone, and there was only despair. Despair and the flickering of bitter madness, deep in her bloodshot eyes.

“John Howe is dead,” she said coldly, “he died three months ago at the Spencer estate. My condolences—but then, you're about to join him, aren't you? You're not going to take the G-Virus away from me, you can't have it!”

Ada started to shake all over. “G-Virus? Please, I don't know what you're talking about!”

“You know,” Annette snarled. “Umbrella sent you to steal it, you can't lie to me! William's dead to me now, Umbrella took him from me, they forced him to use it! They forced him. ...”

She trailed off, her gaze suddenly far away. Ada tensed—but then Annette was back, her eyes welling up with tears, the weapon pointed at Ada's face. “A week ago, they came,” she whispered. “They came to take it, and they shot my William when he wouldn't give them the samples. They took the case, they took all of the finals, both series—except for the one that he managed to keep, the G-Virus ...” Annette's voice raised into a shout suddenly, a pathetic and somehow pleading shout. “He was dying, don't you see? He didn't have any choice!” Ada understood. She understood all of it. “He injected himself, didn't he?”

The scientist nodded, her limp blond hair falling across her eyes, her voice a whisper again. “It revitalizes cellular function. It—it changed him. I didn't see—what he did, but I saw the bodies of the men who tried to kill him, afterwards ... and I heard the screams.”

Ada took a step closer, reaching out as if to comfort her, her own features set into a mask of sympathy—but Annette thrust the gun at her again. Even in her sorrow, she wasn't going to let Ada get any closer. But it's almost close enough....

“I'm so sorry,” Ada said, lowering her arms. “So the G-Virus, it leaked, it changed all of Raccoon—“ Annette shook her head. “No. When the Umbrella assassins were—stopped, the case was broken. The T-Virus leaked—the lab workers hit by the airborne were contained, but there were rats, you see. Rats in the sewers....”

She paused, her lips trembling. “... unless William, my sweet William has started to reproduce. Implanting embryos, replicating ... it shouldn't be time for that yet, but I—“ She broke off, her eyes

narrowing, the madness sweeping over her again as visibly as a crashing wave. High color flared in her pale cheeks, her red-rimmed eyes glossy with paranoia.

Get ready—

“You can’t have it!” Annette screamed, spittle flying from her cracked lips. “He gave his life to keep it from you, you’re a spy and you can’t have it—“ Ada ducked and leapt, pistoning both of her arms beneath Annette’s, shoving the gun up and away from both of them. The Browning discharged, sending a round clanging off the ceiling as they fought for control of the weapon. Annette was physically weaker, but she was driven by demons of hatred and loss, the edge of insanity lending her strength—

· but no sense—

Ada let go of the gun suddenly and Annette stum-bled, not prepared for the unexpected move. She crashed against the railing of the bridge and Ada charged, driving her elbow into Annette’s lower belly, hitting her beneath her center of balance—

· and Annette half-turned, her mouth an open darkness of surprise, her arms pinwheeling for bal-ance—and she plummeted over the railing, silently, not a sound until the dull thump as her body hit the floor some twenty feet below.

“Shit, “Ada hissed, stepping to the rail and looking down. She lay there, facedown and motionless, the gun still clenched in one thin white hand. That’s just great. Walk into an ambush, not once but twice for hell’s sake, then kill the one crazy bitch who can tell you where the samples are—

A low moan floated up from Annette Birkin’s body—and she moved, hunching her back, trying to roll onto her side.

Shit shit shit!

Ada turned and ran across the bridge, scooping up the Beretta as she hurried for what looked like a control panel next to the fan shaft ladder. She’d have to lower the bridge, get to Annette before she could crawl away—

· except the panel was for the fan, and as another painful moan—a slightly louder moan—echoed up through the chamber, Ada knew she didn’t have much time.

The dump, I can go through the dump, circle back around through one of the tunnels—

Even as she thought it, she was jogging for the west ladder, hoping that the pitiful scientist was injured enough to stay down for a minute or two. There was a small balcony at the end of the bridge that looked over the dump, and the metal ladder hung down from an opening at the far right. Ada lowered herself down as quickly as she could, dropping the last several feet onto a cement landing.

The dumping area was a large boxy room, the walls heaped with industrial debris—smashed crates, rust-ing pipes, wire-encrusted panels, and rotting card-board. She stepped off the landing and into almost three feet of black sludge, the cold, goeey muck rising up to her thighs. She didn’t care, she only wanted to get to the lady Birkin, to bring an end to her time in Raccoon—

· except something moved. Beneath the opaque and stinking liquid, something big moved. Ada saw what might have been a reptilian spine slice through the murk in front of her, saw and heard a stack of

boards topple into the water some ten feet away in the same instant.

You gotta be kidding me. . . .

Whatever it was, it was big enough to change her mind about the hurry she was in to get to Annette. Ada backed to the platform and boosted herself up, never taking her gaze from the indeterminate shape as it curled back through the lapping sludge—

· and rose up in a sudden, violent spray of dark-ness, coming straight at her. Ada raised the Beretta and started to fire.

There was a tiny elevator platform in one corner of the empty conference room, a square of metal that apparently went down. Claire hurried toward it, fetid water dripping from her clothes, feeling horribly lost and anxious to keep moving, to find Sherry. Please be alive, baby, please....

She'd found the drainage hole, but no Sherry—and after agonizingly long moments of screaming into the rushing water, of trying to squeeze into the tiny hole, she'd forced herself to abandon the effort. Sherry was gone, maybe drowned, maybe not—but unless the flow of water suddenly decided to reverse itself, she wasn't coming back.

Claire found the controls for the one-man lift and punched a button. A hidden motor whirred and the lift descended, inching down through the floor, proba-bly taking her to some other empty hall, some other blank and unknown room—or worse, directly into the path of yet another unnatural creature. She clenched her damp hands in frustration as the lift slid slowly down, wishing that it was faster, that there was some way to speed up her search. She felt like she was running blind, taking whatever path was in front of her; from the tunnel where Sherry had been lost, she'd found a dimly lit corridor and then the unadorned and somehow sterile conference room. It was like an endless funhouse—sans fun—and she was feeling pretty shitty for bringing Sherry into it; if the girl was dead, it would be her fault—

She shut down the futile thinking before it got any farther, making herself focus. Self-recrimination was a killer, and she couldn't afford it. The elevator was lowering into a hall, and she crouched down, pointing Irons's heavy gun in front of her as her new surround-ings rose into view.

The concrete corridor had another lift at the other end, and was intersected by a second hall, maybe forty feet away—and next to the junction there was a body propped against one cement wall, what looked like a cop—

She felt a mix of shock and distress, her eyes widening as she took in the cop's slack features, the hair color, the build . . .

. . . that's—Leon?

Before the lift hit the floor, Claire jumped off and ran toward the crumpled figure. It was Leon, and he wasn't moving, either unconscious or dead—but no, he was breathing, and as she crouched in front of him, his eyes flickered open. His hand was high on his left arm, his fingers wet with blood.

“Claire?” His blue eyes seemed clear, tired but aware.

“Leon! What happened, are you okay?”

“I got shot, must've blacked out for a minute. . . .” He carefully took his hand away, exposing a small

ragged hole just above his armpit, oozing red. It looked painful, but at least it wasn't gushing. Wincing, Leon pulled the shredded fabric of his uniform over the hole and put his hand back over it. "Hurts like all hell, but I think I'll survive—Ada, where's Ada?"

The last was delivered almost frantically, Leon struggling to push himself away from the wall. With a soft groan, he fell back, obviously in no shape to move.

"Lie still, just rest for a minute," Claire said.

"Who's Ada?"

"I met her at the station," he said. "I couldn't find you, and we heard that you can get out of Raccoon—through the sewers. The city's not safe, there was some kind of a leak at the Umbrella lab, and Ada wanted to leave right away. Somebody shot at us, and I got hit—Ada went after the shooter, down that hall, she said it was a woman..."

He shook his head as if to clear it, then frowned up at her. "I have to find her. I don't know how long I was out, but not more than a couple of minutes, she can't have gone far—" He started to sit forward again and Claire stopped him, pushing him back gently. "I'll go. I—I was with this little girl, and she's lost somewhere in the sewers. Maybe I can find both of them."

Leon hesitated—then nodded, resigning himself to his injury. "How's your ammo?"

"Uh—seven in this one—" She patted the weapon that she'd taken from the squad car, tucked in her belt. It suddenly seemed like a million years ago, that wild ride. "—and seventeen in this one."

She held up Irons's gun, and Leon nodded again, his head rolling back tiredly. "Okay, that's good. I should be able to follow in a few minutes... be careful, alright? And good luck."

Claire stood up, wishing that they had more time. She wanted to tell him about Chris, about Irons and Mr. X and the T-Virus, she wanted to find out what he knew about Umbrella, or if he knew the way out of the sewers—

· but this Ada might be facing down a sniper right now, and Sherry could be anywhere. Anywhere at all. Leon had closed his eyes. Claire turned and started down the intersecting hall, wondering if any of them had a chance to make it out of this madness alive.

TwEntY-Two

ANNETTE HURT ALL OVER. SHE SAT UP SLOW-

ly, feeling sick from the seeming hundreds of aches and pains that yammered for her attention. Her neck and stomach hurt, she'd jammed her right wrist, both knees felt like they were swelling—but it was the sharp pain in her right side that was the worst, because she thought she might have cracked or even broken a rib.

You horrible, horrible woman—

Annette leaned back, supporting her strained neck with her uninjured hand, but saw only metal and shadow; Ada Wong, the bitch from Umbrella, had apparently run away. She'd pretended not to know anything, but Annette wasn't stupid; Ada was probably already on her way to the lab—or coming after

her, anxious to finish her off.

Umbrella, Umbrella did this. . . .

Annette crawled to her feet, using the rage to overcome the pain. She had to get out, to get to the laboratory before the spies did—but oh, she hurt so very much! The stabbing sensation in her gut was terrible, a knife sawing at her insides, and the lab seemed a million miles away . . .

. . . can't let them steal his work. . . . She staggered toward the door to the cavernous room, one arm wrapped around her burning chest—and stopped, tilting her head to one side, listening. Shots. Echoing through the chill air, coming from the adjacent dumping grounds—and a second later, she heard a thundering hiss, more shots, splashing—

Annette grinned, a tight, humorless grin. Perhaps she'd get to the lab first, after all.

The bridge, lower the bridge, don't let her es-cape. . . .

Tired and aching, Annette stumbled to the hydraulic's controls and activated the span's descent. The powerful hum of the bridge's motors drowned out the noises of whatever battle was being waged, the platform rotating down and locking into place with a heavy clang.

Annette pushed herself away from the wall, falling against the console by the door. She found the switches for the ventilation fan and flicked them up, still smiling grimly as the whining start-up high overhead grew into a dull roar. Ada had run into trouble in the dump, and Annette wasn't going to let her just climb back out of it; with the bridge lowered and the shaft blocked, Ms. Wong would have to fight her way through.

Hope it's a pack of tickers, you bitch, I hope they're tearing you to pieces in there. . . .

Annette turned away from the console—and fell, the pain and dizziness too much, her bruised and swelling knees hitting the floor and sending fresh needles of agony through her legs—

and the door in front of her opened. Annette raised the gun but wasn't able to aim, expending what was left of her strength just to keep from screaming in suffering and frustration.

William, it hurts so bad, I'm sorry but I can't—

A young woman crouched in front of her, a look of wary concern on her smudged face. She was dressed in cutoffs and a vest, dripping with sewer water—and held a sleek and heavy handgun, not pointing it directly at Annette—but not pointing it away, either. Another spy.

“Are you Ada?” the girl asked tentatively, reaching out to touch her—and it was more than Annette could stand, to be touched in pity by some heartless, scheming corporate pawn.

“Get away from me,” Annette snarled, slapping at the girl's outstretched hand weakly. “I'm not your 'contact,' and I don't have it on me. You can kill me, but you won't find it.”

The girl moved back, a look of confusion on her dirty face. “Find what? Who are you?”

The questions again, and the fury passed, leaving her numb. Annette was tired of playing games; it hurt too much, and she just wasn't strong enough to fight anymore. “Annette Birkin,” she said wearily. “As if

you didn't know. . . .”

She'll kill me now. It's over, it's all over. Annette couldn't help it. Tears trickled down cheeks, tears as futile as her plans. She'd failed William, she'd failed as a wife and a mother and even as a scientist. At least it would end now, at least there would finally be an end to the anguish—

“Are you Sherry's mother?”

The girl's words stunned her, snapping her out of her exhausted collapse as sharply as a slap to the face. “What?! Who—how do you know about Sherry?” “She's lost in the sewers,” the girl said, speaking quickly, her voice tinged with desperation as she shoved her handgun into her belt. “Please, you have to help me find her! She was sucked into one of the drainage shafts and I don't know where to look—“ “But I told her to go to the station,” Annette wailed, the physical pain all but forgotten, her heart pounding out waves of horrified disbelief. “Why is she here? It's dangerous, she'll be killed! And the G-Virus—Umbrella will find her, they'll take it, why is she here?”

The girl reached for her again, helping her up, and Annette didn't fight, too weak and terrified to fight. If Sherry was in the sewers, if Umbrella found her—

The girl stared at her intently, looking somehow guilty and afraid and hopeful all at once. “The station was overrun—where do the drains go? Please, Annette, you have to tell me!”

The truth dawned into her exhaustion and fear like a ray of bitter light.

The drains let out into the filter pool—which happens to be right next to the factory tram. The fastest route to the labs.

It was a trick. The girl was using Sherry's name to get to the facility, to get information about the G-Virus. Sherry was still at the station, safe and well, and this was all an elaborate ruse—

· but Umbrella knows the way, why would she ask if she knows already? It doesn't make sense!

Annette raised the gun, her aching wrist trembling, and backed away from the girl. Her confusion was too big, the questions too many—and because she couldn't be sure of anything, she couldn't pull the trigger.

“Don't you move. Don't you follow me,” she snarled, ignoring the pain, reaching back to push the door open. “I'll shoot if you try to follow me.” “Annette—I don't understand, I just want to—“ “Shut up! Shut up and leave me alone, can't you all just leave me alone?!”

She backed through the door, pushing it closed on the surprised and frightened girl, squeezing her arm against her bruised or broken ribs as soon as the hatch was shut.

Sherry. . . .

It was a lie, it had to be a lie—but it didn't change anything, either way. She could still make it, she had to make it back to the facility, to finish what she had started.

Turning, limping and gasping, Annette stumbled into the cold darkness of the connecting tunnel, letting each terrible, aching step be a reminder of what Umbrella had done.

* * *

A cold, silent cavern, the walls sheened with ice, and I am lost. I am lost and exhausted, running and afraid for a very long time, so I sit down to rest. So quiet, so cold—but my arm hurts, I'm sitting against a wall that has grown spines, and one of them is digging into my flesh, piercing me. It hurts so badly, and I have to get up, I have to find someone, I have to—

· wake up.

Leon opened his eyes, aware at once that he'd hazed out again. The realization made him catch his breath, the sudden fear jolting him fully awake.

Ada, Claire—Jesus, how long?

He gently pulled his hand away from his arm, the blood gummy and thick between his fingers. It hurt, but not as sharply as before—and the bleeding had stopped, at least at the entrance; the shreds of his torn uniform had clotted to the wound, forming a stiff seal. He leaned forward, reaching around to touch where the bullet had come out; again, a hardening, tacky patch of fabric beneath the pulsing ache of the wound. He couldn't be positive, but he thought that the bullet had gone straight through the flesh, missing the bone completely—which meant he was extremely god-damn lucky.

Even if it blew my arm off, Ada's still out there—and I sent Claire after her. I have to go after them. He thought it was the shock of the trauma that had made him black out, rather than the pain or blood loss—and he couldn't afford any more time to re-cover. Clenching his teeth, Leon pushed himself up with his good arm, his muscles cold and stiff from the damp chill of the concrete.

His left shoulder brushed against the wall, and he gasped as the pain intensified briefly, stabbing and hot—but it ebbed, receding to the duller throbbing sensation after a few seconds. Leon waited it out, breathing deeply, reminding himself that it could have been a hell of a lot worse.

When he was finally on his feet, he decided that he could take it; he wasn't light-headed or dizzy, and although there was blood on the floor and wall, there wasn't nearly as much as he'd thought there would be. Careful not to jostle his wound, Leon turned and walked down the corridor to the closed door at the end, moving as quickly as he could.

Through the door, he was faced with another water-filled tunnel stretching off in either direction; there was a ladder on the wall to his left, but he didn't even want to guess at how to climb it without ripping open the wound—besides which, there was a loudly spinning fan at the top. He struck off to the right, stepping down into the dark water and sloshing forward, hoping that he'd see some sign as to where Ada or Claire had gone.

Chasing after the sniper . . . how could she do that, how could she just leave me there?

After their confrontation with the vomiting monster-thing, he'd sworn to himself that he wouldn't assume anything else about Ada Wong; she was alter-nately flirtatious and standoffish, and if she'd learned how to shoot by playing paintball, he was a bank executive. But in spite of her confusing behavior and probable duplicity, he liked her; she was smart and confident, she was beautiful—and he had assumed there was a good, decent person beneath that contra-dictory facade ...

... and yet she left you to chase after the shooter, left you rolling on the floor with a bullet in your arm. Yeah, she's great; you should propose.

He'd reached a split in the tunnel, and blocked out his wandering attempts to figure out Ada's actions, reminding himself that he could ask her when he found her—//he found her. There was a locked gate to the right, so Leon turned left, peering uneasily into the thickening shadows as he trudged onward. He shouldn't have let Claire go after Ada alone, he should have pulled himself together and gone with her—

He stopped, hearing something. Shots, distant and hollow, coming from somewhere up ahead, distorted by the winding maze of tunnels that made up the sewer system.

Still holding the Magnum tightly, Leon pressed his wrist against the bullet wound and started to run, the pain going sharp again, making him queasy. He couldn't manage much better than a shagging jog, the water slowing him down almost as much as the nasty bite of the wound—but as the last echo of the shots faded away, he somehow found the motivation to go faster.

There was a dimly lit offshoot to the tunnel ahead and to the left, pale yellow light streaming out across the softly slopping water. Even before he reached it, he saw that he would have to make a choice. Straight in front of him was a platform of sorts, a heavy door set into the ragged bricks of the tunnel's end, water dripping down from the ceiling in slender rivulets. An obvious choice, except—

Leon stopped in the elongated patch of murky light, looking down into the offshoot. Another door, and he didn't have time to decide, the shots could have come from anywhere—

Barn-bam!

To the left. Leon jumped up from the tunnel, feeling new pain, feeling hot wetness against his wrist as the wound started to seep. He ignored it, hurrying to the door and pulling it open, hearing more rounds fired as he started down a wide and empty hall.

The corridor he'd entered was as shadowy and cold as the sewage tunnels, but much bigger, wider, pre-sumably some kind of transport hall for heavy equip-ment. It twisted left and then left again, boxes and a rack of steel canisters against the second corner, just past some kind of a loading door.

. . . acetylene, maybe oxy, good GOD what takes that many bullets and doesn't die?

He heard another string of shots, splashing water—and a different sound, a deep and guttural hissing that chilled him to his core. Strangely familiar, but too loud to be possible.

A million snakes, a thousand giant cats, some pri-mordial, terrible dinosaur—

He ran, finally giving up trying to hold the bullet hole closed, needing his arm free to pump for more speed. The end of the tunnel was close, he saw a panel of blinking lights and an opening to the left, another huge loading door—

· and he stopped just short of running into the line of fire as another rapid succession of shots sounded, as a thundering crash of water sprayed out, water raining down on the floor in a thick sheet. “Stop, I'm coming in!” He shouted—

· and heard Ada's voice, and felt a sweeping relief

in spite of whatever horror was ahead.

“Leon!”

She’s alive!

Magnum raised, his wound bleeding freely now, he stepped in front of the open door—and saw Ada across a lake of churning muck, boxes and broken boards swimming through the turbulent liquid. She was standing on a small ledge of concrete beneath a ladder, her Beretta pointed into the thrashing pool.

“Ada, what—“

Splash!

A giant burst out of the lake and slammed him off of his feet, knocking him back into the corridor. It happened so fast that he didn’t actually see it before he was flying through the air, his mind feeding him the picture as he hit the ground. He fell on his injured arm and cried out, as much from the shock of what he’d seen as from the stinging blast of pain.

· crocodile—

Leon was on his feet and stumbling away before he even knew he could get up—and the giant lizard, the croc that was thirty feet long if it was an inch, stepped into the corridor behind him with a mighty, bellowing roar. The cement trembled as the mammoth reptile crawled up from the waters of its home, gallons of black water streaming from its toothy, grinning jaws.

· jaws as big as me, bigger—

Leon ran, there was no pain, his heart hammering in a primal panic. It would eat him, it would shred him into a hundred screaming, bloody chunks—

· and the beast roared again, an impossibly low bellow that rattled his bones, that urged sweat to burst from every quaking pore—

· and Leon shot a look back, and saw that he was much, much faster than the grinning lizard. It was still climbing through the loading door, its tree-trunk legs short and squat, its incredible bulk too huge to maneuver so easily.

Leon swapped weapons in a daze of terror, his wound shrieking as he chambered a round into the Remington. He sidled backwards in an uneven gait, reaching a turn in the hall—

· and unloaded all five shells as quickly as he could pump them, the heavy rounds blasting the monster crocodile’s hideous snout.

It roared, swinging its head from side to side, blood erupting from its grinning face in buckets—but still it came, lumbering forward, dragging its armored tail from the pool of slime behind it.

Not enough, not enough power—

Leon turned and ran again, horrified at having to retreat, afraid of what would happen to Ada when he left the crocodile behind, but knowing that it would take another fifty rounds to stop it—that or a nuclear blast, and why was he still thinking, he needed to get away and then worry about what to do.

Hang on, Ada—

The booming steps of the giant filled his ears as he ran past the boxes, past the row of steel cylinders—

· and stopped running. His instincts cried out for sanity, but he had an idea—and as the terrible lizard took another twisting, thundering step, Leon turned and went back.

Let this work, it works in the movies, please God be listening—

The row of five gleaming canisters was inset on a thick shelf cut into the wall, held into place by a steel cable. There was a release button for the cable on the side of the shelf. Leon slapped it, and the heavy wire drooped, one looped end falling to the floor. Dropping the shotgun, he grabbed the closest of the cylinders, his muscles straining, blood pouring from his injured arm. He could feel thin, trickling trails of it sliding down his sweat-slick chest but didn't stop, rocking back on his heels to free the can of com-pressed gas.

· there!

Leon jumped back as the silver can fell off the shelf, hitting the ground and rolling a few inches. He looked up and saw that the croc had covered another fifty feet—close enough for him to see the dull, dirty pits in its six-inch teeth as it roared again, close enough for him to smell the rotting-meat stench of its hot breath only a second later.

Leon raised one boot to the canister and shoved with all he had, the can lazily rolling back toward the gaining lizard. By some incredible stroke of fortune, the corridor floor had some slant to it; the two-hundred-plus pounds of cylinder seemed to pick up speed, spinning in the croc's direction in a loose semicircle.

Backing away, he yanked the Magnum from his belt and pointed it at the shining can, forcing his fingers not to pull the trigger. The crocodile plodded forward, its tail slapping the walls so hard that stone dust rained down with each violent whip. Leon was in a state of total awe, in the grip of an instinctual terror so deep that it was all he could do not to turn and flee. Come on, you bastard—

Less than a hundred feet away, the crocodile and the canister met—and Leon pulled the trigger. The first shot pinged off the floor in front of the rocking can—and the grinning jaws opened, the massive beast lowering its head to catch at the obstacle, to push it aside.

· steady—

Leon fired again, and—

KA-BOOM!

· was thrown to the ground as the canister ex-ploded. In a blast of curled steel and igniting gases, the creature's head was obliterated, disappearing like a popped balloon. Almost simultaneously, a wave of steaming gore hit Leon, bits of tooth and bone and shredded, smoking flesh clapping over him like a thick wet blanket.

Gagging, his ears ringing and arm bleeding, Leon sat up as the headless carcass settled to the floor, the legs crumpling beneath the brainless weight of the reptilian monster. He pressed his blood-covered hand against the wound, exhausted, sick, in pain—and as deeply satisfied as he'd felt in quite some time.

“Gotcha, you dumb shit,” he said, and smiled. When Ada came jogging up the corridor a moment later, that’s how she found him—staring at his handi-work in dazed and dizzy triumph, bloody and bleed-ing and grinning like a little kid.

TwEnfY-TnREE

LEON WAS WEARING A WHITE UNDERSHIRT

beneath his uniform; Ada tore it into strips and bandaged his arm with it, fashioning a kind of sling for him to wear once she’d slipped his ruined shirt back on. He’d lost enough blood to be dazed, almost helpless, and Ada used his mild shock to explain herself as she tended to him, feeling mildly shocked herself by the complex emotions that warred inside of her.

“... and I thought she looked familiar. I thought I’d met her through John, and I almost caught up to her—but she must have slipped past me. I got lost in the tunnels, trying to find my way back....” Nothing of truth, but Leon didn’t seem to notice—just as he didn’t seem to notice the gentle, careful way she touched him, or the very slight tremor in her voice as she apologized for a third time, for leaving him behind.

He saved my life. Again. And all I have to give him in return are lies, calculated deceit in exchange for his selflessness....

Something had changed for her when he’d taken the bullet in her stead, and she didn’t know how to change it back. Even worse, she didn’t know that she wanted to change it back. It was like the birth of a new feeling, some emotion that she couldn’t name but that seemed to fill her up; it was unsettling, uncomfortable—and yet somehow, not altogether unpleasant. His clever solution to the problem of the nearly invincible crocodile—the creature that she’d only just been able to hold at bay, in spite of her best efforts—had made the unnamed feeling even stronger. The hole in his arm was only a flesh wound, but from the streaks of fresh blood across his smooth chest and stomach, she knew that it had been hurting bad—draining him, killing him as he’d worked to save her ass.

Get rid of him now, her mind hissed, leave him, don’t let this affect the job—the job, Ada, the mission. Your life.

She knew it was what she had to do, that it was the only thing to do—but when he was fixed up as best as she could manage, and her pathetic cover story had been told, she conveniently forgot to listen to herself. Ada helped him to his feet and led him away from the gut-splattered scene of the monster reptile’s demise, spouting off some nonsense about having found what looked like an exit when she’d been lost. Annette Birkin was gone; as soon as Leon had led the crocodile out of the dump, she’d scaled the ladder and checked—and seen that Annette had retained enough sense to start up the fans and lower the bridge before running, effectively blowing Ada’s other options for escape. The woman was possibly psychotic, but not a moron—and although she’d been wrong about Ada’s source of purpose, she’d been dead on as to the purpose itself. To wrap the mission, Ada would have to get to the lab as quickly as she could, before Annette could do anything ... final—and Leon, silent and stumbling Leon, would add to her time by half.

Drop him! Lose the weight, you’re not a nursemaid, for Chrissake, this isn’t you, Ada—

“I’m thirsty,” Leon whispered, his breath warm across her neck. She looked up into his gore-stained, blinking face and found that the voice inside was easier to ignore this time. She’d have to leave him, of course, in the end there would have to be a parting of the ways—

· but not yet.

“Then we’ll have to find you some water,” she said, and steered him gently in the direction she needed to go.

Sherry woke up in the dark, a terrible, bitter taste in her mouth, a river of cold gunk tugging at her clothes. There was a rumbling sound all around her, a sound like the sky was falling, and for a second, she couldn’t remember what had happened or where she was—and when she realized that she couldn’t move, she panicked. The thundering sound was fading, fading and then gone—but she was stuck in some awful stinking river, pressed against cold, wet hardness, and she was alone.

She opened her mouth to scream—and then re-remembered the screaming monster, the monster and then the giant bald man, and then Claire. Remember-ing Claire stopped her from screaming; somehow, the image of her was like a soothing touch, easing through the blind terror and allowing her to think. Got sucked into a drain hole, and now I’m—some-where else, and screaming won’t help.

It was a brave thought, a strong thought, and it made her feel better to think it. She pushed herself away from the hardness at her back, treading the dark water, and discovered that she wasn’t stuck at all; she had been up against a row of bars or openings in the rock, and the force of the current had held her there—held her, and probably saved her from drowning. The disgusting goop was flowing around her, tinkling and burbling like a regular old stream, not nearly as strong as before—and the bad taste in her mouth meant that she must have swallowed some of it. ...

Thinking that opened up the rest of her memory. She’d been floating along and then had gotten twisted somehow, and had gulped some of the horrible, chemical-tasting liquid and freaked out—passed out, she thought.

At least the noise had stopped, whatever that had been, a sound like a moving train, maybe, or a giant truck, roaring away . . . and now that she was more awake, she realized that she could see. Not very much, but enough to know that she was in a big room filled with water, and there was a tiny, feeble shaft of light coming down from high above.

There has to be a way out. Somebody built this place, they had to have a way out. . . .

Sherry swam a little farther into the big room, and kicking, she felt the toes of her shoes glance off against something hard. Something hard and flat. Feeling stupid for not thinking of it already, she took a deep breath, lowered her legs—and stood up. The water was all the way up to her shoulders, but she could stand.

The last traces of panic slipped away as she stood in the middle of the room, turning slowly, her eyes finally getting the most from the weak light—and saw the ladder shape against the far wall. She was still scared, no question, but the sight of the shadowy rungs meant she’d found the way out. Sherry lifted her feet and paddled toward the ladder, proud of how she was handling herself.

No screaming, no crying. Just like Claire said.

Strong.

She reached the ladder and pulled her knees up to the bottom rung, a few inches above the surface. She got her feet beneath her and started to climb, grimac-ing at the thick, slimy feel of the metal bars beneath

her pruned fingers. The ladder seemed to go on forever, and when she risked a look down to see how high she'd gone, she could only see a tiny, shimmering patch of the water's lapping top where the light hit it directly. She could see the source of the light, too—a narrow slit in the ceiling, not much higher than where she was.

Almost to the top. And if I fall, I won't get hurt.

There's nothing to be scared of.

Sherry swallowed heavily, willing the thought to be true, and looked up again.

A few more rungs, and when she reached up for the next, her hand touched a bumpy metal ceiling. She felt a burst of accomplishment, pushing at it with one hand—

· and it didn't move. Not at all.

“Shit,” she whispered, but it didn't sound annoyed, the way she'd hoped; the word sounded small and lonely, almost like a plea.

Sherry hooked an elbow through the rung she was holding, touched her pendant for luck, and tried again, really pushing this time. Straining with all of her might, she thought she felt it give, just a little—but not anywhere near enough. She lowered her hand, cursing silently this time; she was trapped. For several minutes she didn't move, not wanting to go back down into the water, not wanting to believe that she really was stuck—but her arms were getting tired, and she didn't want to jump, either. Finally, she started down, much more slowly than she'd come up. Each step lower was like admitting defeat. She was perhaps a third of the way back to the water when she heard the footsteps overhead—a light thumping at first, more of a vibration than anything, but then quickly redefined into separate steps, getting louder. Then closer—and getting louder still, ap-proaching the top of the pit where she'd awakened. Sherry gave about a second's thought to ignoring the footsteps and then scrambled up the ladder, deciding that it was worth the risk; it might not be Claire, or even anyone who meant her well—but it could be her only chance at escape.

She started shouting before she got back to the top.

“Hello! Help, can you hear me? Hello, hello!” The footsteps seemed to pause, and as she reached the ceiling again, still calling out, she hit the metal several times with her fist.

“Hello, hello, hello!”

Another smack with her decidedly sore hand—and suddenly she was hitting air, and a blinding light was in her face.

“Sherry! Oh, my God, sweetie, I'm so glad you're okay!”

Claire, it was Claire, and Sherry couldn't see her but was nearly overwhelmed with delight at the sound of her voice. Strong, warm hands helped her up, warm, damp arms were hugging her tightly. Sherry blinked and squinted, and started to be able to make out the features of a vast room through the brilliant white haze.

“How did you know it was me?” Claire asked, still holding her.

“Didn’t. But I couldn’t get out by myself, and I heard walking. . . .”

Sherry looked around at the big room that Claire had pulled her into, feeling stunned amazement that Claire had heard her at all. The room was huge, spanned by a series of thin metal catwalks laid out in diagonals—and the section of floor that she’d come out of was at the farthest corner of the darkest part of the room, the panel that Claire had lifted only a couple of feet across.

Man. If I hadn’t knocked, or if she’d been going any faster....

“I’m very glad it’s you,” Sherry said firmly, and Claire grinned, looking just as happy and amazed as Sherry felt.

Claire knelt in front of her, her smile fading a little. “Sherry—I saw your mom. She’s okay, she’s alive—“ “Where? Where is she?” Sherry blurted, excited by the news—but feeling a kind of nervous uncertainty tensing her muscles suddenly, making it hard to breathe.

She looked into Claire’s worried gray eyes, and saw that she was thinking about lying again—that she was trying to figure out the best way to tell her something unpleasant. Even a few hours ago, Sherry might have let her do it, too—

· but not anymore. Strong and brave we have to be.... “Tell me, Claire. Tell me the truth.”

Claire sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t know where she went. She was—scared of me, Sherry. I think she thought I was someone else, someone bad or crazy. She ran away from me—but I’m pretty sure she came this way, and I was trying to find her again when I heard you calling.”

Sherry nodded slowly, struggling to accept the idea that her mother had been acting weird—weird enough for Claire to try and sugar-coat it. “And you think she came in here?” Sherry asked finally.

“I can’t be positive. I also ran into this cop, Leon, before I saw your mother; I met him when I first got to the city, and he was in one of the tunnels I went through after you disappeared. He was hurt, he couldn’t come with me to look for you—so after your mom took off, I went back to get him, but he was gone.”

“Dead?”

Claire shook her head. “Nope. Just gone—so I backtracked, and as far as I can tell, this is the only way your mom could have gone. But like I said, I’m not sure. . . .”

She hesitated, frowning, gazing at Sherry thought-fully. “Did your mom ever tell you about something called the G-Virus?”

“G-Virus? I don’t think so.”

“Did she ever give you anything to hold onto, like a little glass container, something like that?” Sherry frowned back at her. “No, nothing. Why?” Claire stood up, putting her hand on Sherry’s shoulder and shrugging at the same time. “It’s not really important.”

Sherry narrowed her eyes, and Claire smiled again. “Really. Come on, let’s see if we can figure out where your mom went. I bet she’s looking for you.” Sherry let Claire lead the way, wondering why she was suddenly sure—almost certain, in fact—that Claire didn’t believe what she was saying. . . and

wondering why she couldn't find it in herself to ask any more questions about it.

The factory machine lift, like the tram, was exactly where Annette had left it. The margin had surely tightened, but she was still ahead of the spies, of Ada Wong and her ragged little friend . . .

... lies, telling me lies like they all tell lies, as if losing William, suffering such pain and loss isn't enough to shame them...

She fumbled the control key out of her torn lab coat pocket, leaning heavily against the mounted controls as she inserted the key and turned it. Her shaking fingers touched the activation switch and a trail of lights appeared on the console, too bright even in the moon-filled darkness. Cool autumn air brushed over her aching body, a friendly, secret wind that smelled like fire and disease ...

... like Halloween, like bonfires in the dark when they brought out their dead, burning the pestilent flesh of the plague-riddled bodies...

Four squealing, blaring honks sounded into the night sky, the massive elevator room telling her that it was time to go. Annette staggered up the gray and yellow steps, unable to remember what she'd been thinking about before. It was time to go, and she was so, so tired. How long had it been since she'd slept? She couldn't remember that, either.

Hit my head, yes? Or just sleepy, may haps. . . . She'd been exhausted before, but the relentless pain of her injuries had sent her to some delirious place that she'd never imagined could exist. Her thoughts came in spiraling, uneasy bursts of feeling that she couldn't seem to sort through, at least not to her satisfaction; she knew what had to be done—the triggering system, the subway gate opening, the hiding in the shadows and waiting to heal—but the rest had become some strange, disjointed grouping of free association, as if she'd taken some drug that had overloaded her senses, and would only let her think a bit at a time.

It was almost over. That was something she could hold on to, one of the only constants in her muddled mind. A positive and somehow magical phrase that she could still see, no matter how blind she became. On her way through the factory, she'd coughed and coughed and then vomited from the pain a thin and acidic string of bile that had made dark bubbles burst in front of her eyes, the darkness staying for so long that she thought she might actually lose her sight—

· it's almost over.

Clutching the thought like a lost love, she found the latch to the metal room and went inside. The controls, pushed. The movement and sound of movement engulfing her as she lay across one soft metal bench and closed her eyes. A few moments of rest, and it was almost over.. . .

Annette sank into the dark, the humming motors lulling her into a deep and instant sleep. She was going down, her muscles relaxing, her aches and miseries loosening their hold—and for some endless reach of time, she found a silence—

· until a howling, terrible scream knifed into her darkness, a shriek of such fury and pain that it spoke for her heart, and she jerked back to life, panting and afraid—

· and then realized what had snapped her out of her dreamless sleep, and her thoughts came together, giving her one more clear and constant thing to hold on to.

It was William. William had come home, he had followed her—and Umbrella would have nothing, because the thing that had been her husband had come back into the blast radius.

The scream sounded again, this time echoing away into one of the lab's many secret places as the lift went down and down.

Annette closed her eyes again, the new thought joining her lost love from before, the two of them together making her happy at last.

William has come home. It's almost over.

The third followed naturally, added as she slipped back into the silence, knowing that she had to get up too soon, to begin the final journey. When the lift stopped, she'd wake up and be ready.

Umbrella will suffer for what they've done—and everybody dies at the very end.

She smiled, and fell asleep, dreaming of William.

LEON FINALLY STARTED TO FEEL LIKE HIM-

self again, sitting in the control room where Ada had left him. She'd found a medkit in one of the dust-covered cabinets, along with a bottle of water; she'd only been gone for about ten minutes, but the aspirin was starting to kick in, and the water had worked wonders.

He sat in front of a switch-covered console, trying to piece together what had happened after the explosion in the sewers; the last thing he really remembered clearly was seeing the headless crocodile collapse, and then being overwhelmed by a light-headed weakness. Ada had bandaged him up and then led him through tunnels—

· and a subway, we were on a subway for a minute or two—

· and finally to this room, where she'd told him to rest while she went to check on something. Leon had protested, reminding her that it wasn't safe, but had still been too fuzzy to do much more than sit where she'd put him. He'd never felt so helpless, or so totally dependent on another person. Once he'd gulped about half of the gallon jug of water, though, he'd started to snap out of it. Apparently, blood loss tended to dehydrate ...

... so she gave me the water and then went to check on what, exactly? And how did she know to come this way?

He'd barely been able to walk, let alone ask any questions—but even in his delirium, he'd noticed how certain she was, how she'd chosen their path with unwavering precision. How could she know? She was an art buyer from New York, how could she know anything about the sewer system of Raccoon City? And where is she? Why hasn't she come back? She'd helped him, she'd most probably saved his life—but he just couldn't keep believing that she was who she said she was. He wanted to know what she was doing, and he wanted to know now, and not just because she'd been keeping secrets; Claire was still somewhere in the sewers, and if Ada knew the way out of the city, Leon owed it to her to try and find out. Leon stood up slowly, holding onto the back of the chair, and took a deep breath. Still weak, but no dizziness, and his arm didn't hurt as badly, either—the aspirin, perhaps. He drew his Magnum and walked to the door of the small, dusty room, promising himself that he wasn't going to accept any more vague answers or smiling brush-offs.

He opened the door and stepped out into an open-ended warehouse almost big enough to be an aircraft hangar, it was empty, decrepit, and heavily shadowed, but the brisk night air that breezed through made it almost pleasant—

· and there was Ada, stepping onto a raised plat-form just outside of the hangar, disappearing behind what looked like a section of a train. It was an industrial transport lift—and from the well-oiled look of the rails that ran through the warehouse, it was one part of the abandoned factory that hadn't been completely abandoned.

“Ada!”

Keeping his wounded arm tightly pressed to his body, Leon ran toward the lift—and felt dull anger as he heard the rising thrum of the transport's engines, the heavy mechanical sound spilling out into the clear night sky. Ada was leaving, she hadn't gone to “check” on anything—

· but she's not going anywhere until she tells me why.

Leon ran out into the moonlit open, hearing the door to the transport slam shut as he skirted a control console and stepped up to the vibrating metal plat-form, nearly tripping on the brightly painted steps. Before he could catch his balance, the transport started its descent; three-foot-high panels of corrugated metal rose all the way around the train, containing the large platform as it slid smoothly down into the ground.

Leon grabbed for the door handle as the darkness swept up around the humming transport, the sky dwindling into a smaller and smaller starry patch overhead. The cool, pale light of the moon and stars was quickly replaced by the electric orange of the transport's mercury lamps.

He stumbled inside, and saw the startled look on Ada's face as she stood up from a bench bolted to one side, as she half-raised her Beretta and then lowered it again—and a flash of guilt, there and gone in the time it took for him to close the door.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, staring at each other as the room continued its smooth descent. Leon could almost see her working to come up with an explanation—and as tired as he was, he decided that he just wasn't in the mood.

“Where are we going?” he asked, making no effort to keep the anger out of his voice.

Ada sighed—and sat down again, her shoulders sagging. “I think it's the way out,” she said quietly. She looked up at him, her dark gaze searching his. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to leave without you, but I was afraid. . . .”

He could hear real sorrow in her voice, see it in her eyes, and felt his anger give a little. “Afraid of what?” “That you wouldn't make it. That 7 wouldn't make it, trying to keep both of us safe.”

“Ada, what are you talking about?” Leon moved to the bench, sitting down beside her. She looked down at her hands, speaking softly.

“When I was looking for you, back in the sewers, I found a map,” she said. “It showed what looked like some kind of an underground laboratory or factory—and if the map was right, there's a tunnel that runs from there to somewhere outside of the city.” She met his gaze again, honestly distressed. “Leon, I didn't

think you were in any condition to make a trip like that, like this—and I was scared that if I brought you with me, if it was a dead end or some-thing attacked us. . . .”

Leon nodded slowly. She’d been trying to protect herself—and him.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “I should have told you, I shouldn’t have just left you there like that. After all you’ve done for me, I—I at least owed you the truth.” The guilt and shame in her eyes wasn’t something that could be faked. Leon reached for her hand, ready to tell her that he understood and that he didn’t blame her—

· when there was a resounding thump outside. The entire transport shook, just a slight tremble, but enough to make both of them tense.

“Probably a rough spot in the track...” Leon said, and Ada nodded, gazing at him with an intensity that made him pleasantly uncomfortable, a warmth spreading through his entire body—

BAM!

· and Ada flew off the bench, thrown to the floor as a massive, curled thing slammed through the wall, crashing through the sheet metal of the vehicle’s side as though it were made of paper. It was a fist, a fist with bone claws, each of them nearly a foot long, the claws dripping with—

“Ada!”

The giant hand withdrew, its bloody talons ripping new holes in the metal wall as Leon dropped to the floor, grabbing Ada’s limp body, pulling her into the center of the transport. A terrible shriek pealed through the moving darkness outside—and it was the same furious cry that they’d heard in the station but louder, more violent—and even less human than before.

Leon held on to Ada with his one good arm, feeling the warm trickle of blood seeping out from her right side, feeling her dead weight against his heaving chest. “Ada, wake up! Ada!”

Nothing. He lowered her gently to the floor, then pulled at the bloody hole in her dress, just above her hip. Blood was welling up from two deep punctures; there was no way to tell how bad, and he ripped at the fabric, tearing off the bottom few inches of her short dress and pressing the wadded material against the wound—

· and again the monster screamed, and the rage in its throaty howl was nothing to what Leon was feeling, staring down at Ada’s still and closed face. He stretched her tight dress over the makeshift bandage, fixing it in place as best he could, then stood up and unstrapped the Remington.

Ada had taken care of him, had protected him when he couldn’t protect himself. Leon loaded the shotgun grimly, feeling no pain at all as he prepared to return the favor.

When they reached what looked like the end of the line, it was Sherry who figured out where her mother must have gone. They’d walked into yet another open, shadowy room, but it only had the one door; there seemed to be no other way out of the cavernous chamber, unless Annette had jumped off the raised floor and trekked off through the unlit emptiness that surrounded them.

They stood at the edge of the darkness, trying to see down into the shadows and having no luck. The room was set up almost like a loading dock: a railed platform ran from the door along the back wall, then

ended abruptly, giving way to a seemingly endless void. Either Annette had climbed down and navigated some secret path through the dark, or Claire had been mistaken about which way she'd gone. So what now? Go back, or try to follow?

She didn't want to do either one—although going back pretty much beat the crap out of the idea of walking into a pitch-black abyss. And Leon was probably still back there somewhere . . . “Could it be a train? Is this like a train station?” Sherry asked, and as soon as she said “train,” Claire gave herself a solid mental kick in the ass. Platform, railings, about a thousand overhead “pipes.”...

Claire grinned at Sherry, shaking her head at her own stupidity; she was getting flaky, no doubt about it.

“Yeah, I think it is,” she said, “though you guessed it, not me. My brain must be on strike. . . .” The small computer console on one side of the platform, the one she'd dismissed as unimportant, was probably the control board. Claire headed for it, Sherry following along and clutching absently at her gold locket as she described the noises she'd heard, down in the drainage well.

“... and it was moving away, like a train would. It scared me pretty bad, too. It was loud.”

Sure enough, just beneath the small monitor screen on the standing console was a recall command code and a ten-key. Claire tapped in the code and hit “enter”—and the chamber was filled with the smooth hum of working machinery: the sound of a train. “You're one smart cookie, you know that?” Claire said, and Sherry practically beamed, her entire face crinkling with her sweet smile. Claire wrapped an arm around her shoulders and they walked back to the edge of the platform to wait.

The tram's light appeared after a few seconds, the tiny circle of brightness getting bigger as they watched. After the trials they'd been through, Claire decided to be as fantastically optimistic about this new development as she could—primarily to keep from worrying about what horrible thing would probably happen next. The train would lead out of the city, of course, and it would be well-stocked with food and water; it'd have showers and fresh, warm clothes—

· nah, scratch that. A hot tub, and a couple of those thick terry robes, for after. And slippers. Nice, but she'd settle for anything that didn't include monsters or crazy people. She glanced at Sherry, and noticed that she was still rubbing her locket. “So what's in there?” she asked, wanting to make Sherry smile again. “You got a picture of your boy-friend, or what?”

“Inside? Oh, it's not a locket,” Sherry said, and Claire was pleased to see a faint blush rise in her cheeks. “My mom gave it to me, it's a good-luck charm—and I don't have a boyfriend. Boys my age are totally immature.”

Claire grinned. “Get used to it, sweetie. As far as I can tell, some of them never grow out of it.” The train was close enough now for them to see its shape, a single car about twenty or twenty-five feet long riding smoothly along its overhead track. “Where do you think it goes?” Sherry asked, and before Claire could answer, the door to the platform exploded.

The hatch blew inward, torn off its hinges in a squeal of metal and clanging to the floor—

· and Claire grabbed Sherry, pulling her close as the towering Mr. X stepped into the room, bending low and sideways to squeeze through the opening, his soulless gaze turning toward them at once. “Get behind me!” Claire shouted, pulling Irons's handgun, risking a glance back at the approaching train. Ten seconds, they needed ten seconds—

· but X took a giant step toward them, and she knew they didn't have them. His bland, terrible face, expressionless, his giant hands already rising, still twenty feet away but only four steps in his massive stride—

“Get on the train when it stops!” Claire screamed, and pulled the trigger.

Four, five, six shots, beating into his chest. The seventh hit one dead-white cheek, but Mr. X didn't blink, didn't bleed—and didn't stop. Another mighty step, the black, smoking pit in his face a testament to his inhumanity. Claire lowered her aim, legs, knees—

Bam-bam-bam!

· and he paused as the rounds smashed into him, at least one a direct hit to his left knee, the black eyes fixed on her, marking her—

“—here, come on!”

Sherry was pulling at her vest, screaming, and Claire backed away, squeezing the trigger again. Two more rounds hit him in the gut—

· and then she was on the train, and Sherry had found the control for the door. It whooshed shut, Mr. X framed in the tiny window, not coming forward anymore but still not falling. Not dying. “Follow me!” Claire shouted, spotting the board of blinking lights to her right, knowing that the door wouldn't hold for a second if the giant, terrible creature started walking again.

She ran for the control board with Sherry at her side, thanking God that the designer had been user-friendly as the red “go” button snapped down beneath her shaking hand—

· and the train was moving, sliding away from the platform, away from the indestructible un-man and into the black.

Annette sat in the staff bunk room on level four, waiting for the mainframe to respond to the power-up and debating whether or not to initiate the P-Epsilon sequence. Once the fail-safe system was triggered, all of the connecting corridor doors would unlock, and those doors that were electronically powered would open. The creatures that had been trapped these last days would be free to roam, and most of them would be hungry ...

... hungry and hot, bleeding pure virus from their clotted flesh ...

She didn't want to run into any—unpleasantness upon her departure, but as the first lines of code spilled across the screen, she decided against running the sequence. The P-Epsilon gas was an experiment anyway, something a couple of the microbiologist techs had worked up to appease the Umbrella damage-control staff. If it worked, it would knock out the Re3s and all of the human carriers that had been infected by the initial airborne—the first wave—ensuring her a safer trip to the escape transport tunnel; but the spies were coming, and Annette didn't want to make things easy for them. She'd heard the lift being recalled as she'd stumbled her way to the synthesis lab—which was fine, great, they'd be just in time for the finale, and she wanted them fighting for their lives as she sped away from the facility, away from the brilliant explosion that would consume the multibillion-dollar facility...

... and it'll burn, it'll all burn and I'll be free of this nightmare. Endgame and I win. Umbrella loses, once and for all, the sneaking, murdering animal bas-tards—

She felt good, awake and aware and in very little pain; she'd meant to go straight to the nearest computer outlet upon her return to activate the fail-safe even before collecting the sample, but she'd barely been able to see straight as she'd stumbled off the lift; she'd been afraid of forgetting something—or worse, of falling and being unable to get up again. A trip to the meds locker in the synthesis lab had fixed all that; already, the terrible pain was a distant memory, along with the bizarre, deluded thought processes that had made it so hard to concentrate. When her little cocktail shot wore off, she'd pay for the temporary reprieve, but for the next couple of hours, at least, she was as good—she was better—than new.

Epinephrine, endorphin, amphetamine, oh my! Annette knew she was high, that she shouldn't overestimate her abilities, but why shouldn't she feel happy? She grinned at the small computer in front of her and started to tap in the codes, her fingers flying over the keys, feeling like her teeth would crack as the synthetic adrenaline pounded through her dilated veins. She'd made it back to the lab, William had come back, and the sample, the very last viable G-Virus sample in the facility, was tucked into her pocket. She'd hidden it in one of the fuse cases before she'd gone looking for William, and picked it up on the way to the staff room—

· 76E, 43L, 17A, fail-safe time... 20, vocal warning/power cut, 10, personal authorization, OOOlBirkin—

· and that was it. Annette couldn't stop grinning, didn't want to stop as she lightly stroked the “enter” key, the triumph a hot and liquid joy spinning through her numb and tattered flesh. One touch, and there was nothing on earth that could stop it. In ten minutes, the taped warnings would start to run, and the transport lift would shut down, cutting the facility off from the surface; in fifteen, the audio would begin the countdown—five minutes to reach the minimum safe distance by train, another five and—

Boom. Twenty minutes before the explosion. More than enough time to get to the tunnel and power up the train, no matter what is loosed; enough time to speed away from the ticking dock, beneath the city streets, through the isolated foothills at the outskirts of Rac-coon. Enough time to get to the end of the track, walk out into the private plot of land, turn around—and see Umbrella lose it all.

As the clock ticked to zero, the plastique fail-safe charges in the laboratory's central power core would be activated. Even if all but one of the twelve explosive packets failed, that one blast would be enough to set off the secondary charges that were built into the walls themselves; Umbrella's fail-safe system had been designed to take it all down. The lab would become an inferno, blasting up into the dead city, visible for miles—and she'd be there to see it, to know that she'd done what she could to make things right.

This is for you, William. . . .

The thought was bittersweet... for some time, they hadn't—enjoyed their relationship as husband and wife. William was so brilliant, so devoted to the work, that the pleasures of synthesis and development had taken the place of the perks of married life. She had come to recognize his genius, to learn the joy of supporting him without the nuisance of relationship struggles—but now, her finger resting on the end of it all, she found herself suddenly wishing very much that there had been more between them in the last few years, more than her adoration for his incredible gifts, his appreciation of her assistance....

This is our last kiss, my love. This is my contribution to the work, my final loving act for what we shared. Yes, that was right, that was the feeling. Annette pressed the key, her heart singing, and saw the locked code flash across the monitor in glowing green. “I respectfully tender my resignation,” she said softly, and started to laugh.

TwEntY-FIVE

THE DARK SLID PAST THE MOVING PLAT-

form, metal darkness bathed in murky orange light, and whatever had punched through the wall of the transport was gone. Leon had edged his way around the enclosed room twice, and seen nothing at all, heard nothing but the smooth hum of the working motors.

When the creature finally howled from the shadows atop the roof, and Leon snapped the shotgun up, what he saw actually made him freeze. In the second it took him to really see it, his vengeful fury blew away like so much dust, replaced by an absolute bone-chilling awe. Holy shit—

The thing was still shrieking, its head thrown back, the brutal, gurgling scream like the voice of hell in the moving dark. It had been a man, once—arms and legs, shreds of clothing still hanging from its hulking body—but everything human about it had changed, was still changing as it bellowed its rage into the cold black, and Leon could only stare.

Its body was swollen and rippling with strange muscles, the bare chest puffed and bloated with its endless scream. Its right arm was six inches longer than the left, the stained bone claws jutting from the pulsing hand. And the bulbous moving tumor in its right bicep looked like nothing so much as an eyeball the size of a dinner plate, jerking wetly from side to side as if searching—

· and the scream was changing, too, getting deep-er, rougher, the shaggy face falling forward—and melting into its chest. Like hot wax, like a movie effect, the creature's head flowed into its upper body, disappearing smoothly into the inflamed and greedy skin—

· and at the same time, another face was forming, growing, rising up from the back of its neck with a horrible snapping sound, like fingers being broken. Slitted eyes cracked open, a bony red hole of a mouth forming, taking up the furious cry with a new voice—

· and Leon squeezed the trigger in denial, a denial of the monster's unholy existence. Boom!

The shot hit its chest, and a thick, purplish blood sprayed out, cutting off the creature's scream—but that was all it did. The monster's new face angled toward Leon, the domed head tilting—

· and it hopped down onto the platform, landing in a half-crouch on legs as big around as Leon's chest. It took one jumping, crooked step forward and was close enough for Leon to smell the strange, chemical musk that poured from its glistening skin—and see that the wound on its chest had stopped bleeding, that the strange flesh was eating the tiny holes. The creature raised its mighty claw and Leon stumbled backwards, pumping another round and firing as the talons came down—

· shhink!

· and sparks flew up from the metal rail as the shot blasted into the creature's stomach, more purplish fluid spattering from its body. The almost point-blank range of the heavy round barely fazed the towering monster. It took another step, and Leon backed away, pumping another round—

· and he tripped on the steps that led up to the transport room, tripped and fell on his ass, the round going high over the creature's bullet-shaped head. One more step and it would be on him—

· dead I'm—

· except it didn't take the step. Instead, it turned toward the railing, its bizarre head tilting, the pits of its rudimentary nostrils flaring—

· and silently, almost gracefully, it leapt over the edge of the platform, out into the passing darkness. For a moment, Leon didn't move. He couldn't, he was too busy trying to understand that the monster hadn't killed him. It had smelled or sensed some-thing, it had broken off the attack that it most certainly would have won—and had jumped off the moving transport.

I'm not dead. It's gone, and I'm not dead.

Why, he didn't know, and couldn't begin to guess. Accepting that he was alive was enough—and a short time later, maybe no more than a few seconds, his knotted thoughts and senses told him that the transport was slowing down, that the shaft was getting lighter, the blackness washing to gray.

Leon crawled to his feet and went to check on Ada.

!

Sherry had heard the monster from far away, from somewhere deep in the giant hole, and felt even more scared than she had when the giant—Mr. X, Claire called him—had come into the train station. Claire had said it probably wasn't even the monster, that it was most likely some machine problem, but Sherry wasn't convinced. The sound was so distant and strange that it could have been something else but what if it isn't? What if Claire's wrong? They stood outside a warehouse in the chill of the dark, stood over the big hole in the ground and waited for the mechanical noises to stop. The almost-full moon was low in the sky, and Sherry could tell by the deep blue light of the horizon that it was very early in the morning; she didn't feel tired, though. She felt scared and anxious, and even with Claire holding her hand she didn't want to go down into the black hole where the monster could be.

After what seemed like a long time, the humming noise of the machinery stopped, and Claire stepped back from the hole—the transport shaft, she said—and turned back toward the warehouse.

“Let's go see if we can recall the—Sherry?” Sherry hadn't moved to follow her. She stared down into the hole, holding her charm and wishing that she was brave like Claire—but she wasn't, she knew she wasn't, and she didn't want to go down into the dark.

I can't, I can't go down there, I'm NOT like Claire and I don't care if that's where my mom went, I don't care at all—

Sherry felt warmth across her back and looked up, startled, to see that Claire had taken off her vest and was slipping it over her shoulders.

“I want you to have this,” Claire said, and in spite of her fear, Sherry felt a sudden rush of confused happiness.

“But—why? It's yours, and you'll get cold.. ..” Claire ignored her for a minute, helping her put it on. It was too big for her and it had some dirt on it, but it was the coolest thing Sherry thought she'd ever worn.

For me. She wants me to have it.

Claire knelt in front of her, now wearing only a thin black T-shirt and shorts. She looked at her very seriously, pulling the vest closed over Sherry's chest. "I want you to have it because I can tell that you're scared," she said firmly, "and I've had it for a long time, and when I wear it, I feel like I can kick ass. Like nothing can stop me. My brother has a leather jacket with the same design on the back, and he kicks ass—but he got the idea from me."

She smiled suddenly, a tired, warm smile that made Sherry forget about the monster, just for a minute. "So now it's yours, and every time you wear it, I want you to remember that I think you are the best twelve-year-old who ever walked."

Sherry smiled back, hugging the faded pink denim to her body. "And it's a bribe, huh?"

Claire nodded without hesitation. "Yes. And it's a bribe. So what do you say?"

Sighing, Sherry reached for her hand, and they walked back into the warehouse to find the controls for the elevator.

Ada woke up as Leon set her gently on a creaking cot, woke up with a pounding headache and a pain in her side. Her first thought was that she'd been shot—but as she opened her eyes, and Leon's worried, pale face swam into focus, she remembered.

He was going to kiss me, I think—and then . . .

"What happened?"

Leon reached down and brushed her hair off of her forehead, smiling a little. "A monster happened. The same one that got Bertolucci, I think. It put its hand through the wall of the transport and knocked you over. You hit your head, after it—clawed you." Virus!

Ada struggled to sit up, to look at the wound, but the headache knocked her back. She reached up and carefully touched the throbbing spot just over her left temple, wincing at the feel of the sticky lump. "Hey, just stay put," Leon said. "The wound isn't too bad, but you took a pretty serious knock. . . ." Ada closed her eyes, trying to collect herself. If she'd been infected, there wasn't anything she could do about it now—and really, what an irony that would be—if it was Birkin who'd stabbed her and he was still hot, she'd end up collecting a G-Virus sample in an extremely personal way.

Deep breath, keep it together. You're not in the transport anymore, what does that tell you? "Where are we?" she asked, opening her eyes. Leon shook his head. "I'm not sure. Like you said, it's an underground lab or factory of some kind. The transport is just outside. I brought you to the closest room."

Ada turned her aching head enough to see the small windows, over a cluttered counter, looking out into the transport bay.

Gotta be fourth level, where the lift stops. . . .

The main synthesis lab was on the fifth level. Leon was staring down at her so sincerely, his bright blue gaze so achingly tender, that for just a few seconds, Ada thought about aborting the mission. They could go down to the escape tunnel together, they could hop on the train and get out of the city. They could run away, run far, far away—

· and then what? Call Trent and tell him that you'll offer a refund? Sure. Then maybe you can meet Leon's parents, get a ring, buy a little white house with a picket fence, have a couple of kids ... you could take up crochet, and rub his feet when he comes home from a hard day busting drunks and making traffic stops. Happily ever after....

Ada closed her eyes again, unable to look at him as she spoke.

"My head hurts pretty bad, Leon, and the tunnel I saw, on that map—I don't know where it is, ex-actly___" "I'll find it," he said softly. "I'll find it, and then I'll come back for you. Don't worry about anything, okay?"

"Be careful," she whispered, and then felt his soft lips graze her forehead, heard him stand up and move toward the door.

"Just stay here, I'll be back soon," he said, and the door opened and closed, and she was alone. He'll be okay. He'll get lost trying to find the tunnel, he'll come back, he'll see that I'm gone and take the lift back to the surface... I can find the sample and escape, and it will be over.

Ada counted a minute and then sat up slowly, grimacing at the pounding in her skull. A bad knock indeed, but not a debilitating one; she could function. There was a noise outside, and Ada stood up, walking to one of the small windows. She knew the sound even before she looked, and felt her heart sink a little; the transport was heading up, probably recalled to the factory by an Umbrella team ...

. . . which means I don't have a lot of time. And if they find him—

No, Leon would be okay. He was a fighter, he had the sense to run from danger, he was strong and decent—and he didn't need to have someone like her in his life. She'd been crazy to consider it, even for a moment. It was time to wrap things up, to do what she'd come to do, to remember who she was—a freelance agent, a woman with no qualms about stealing or killing to complete a job, a cool and efficient thief who could take pride in a career with no misses. Ada Wong always walked away with the goods, and it would take more than a few hours with one blue-eyed cop to make her forget it.

Ada pulled the key cards and master from her pouch and opened the door, telling herself that she was doing the right thing—and hopeful that in time she'd come to believe it.

TwEnfY-Slx

ANNETTE HAD RUN INTO SOME TROUBLE.

The trip down to the cargo room hadn't been bad;

she'd only run across one carrier, one of the first-

stagers, and had blown a hole into its ashy, withered

skull with the first shot. She'd passed under a sleeping

Re3, but it hadn't stirred from its ceiling bed, and it

seemed that the other creatures still lurking in the facility shadows hadn't yet figured out that they were

free. Either that, or more of them had disintegrated into mush than she'd imagined ... in any case, she'd be gone before she had to worry about it either way. In all, she made it to the cargo room hall in under three minutes, and had punched in the key code with a sense of grand accomplishment; the high from the shot was wearing off, but she was still feeling good—

- until the hatch to the cargo room refused to open. Annette had tapped the simple code in a second time, more carefully—and nothing. It was one of the only doors in all the facility that didn't open automatically on fail-safe triggering, but it shouldn't have been a problem—there was a verification disk in the slot beneath the controls, the disk that was always there in spite of Umbrella's insistence that only the section heads were supposed to have access—

- and of course, upon checking, she'd seen that it wasn't there, that it wasn't where it was supposed to be. Someone had taken it.

Annette stood in front of the locked hatch in the empty hall and felt the first bright tendrils of panic reach into her mind, a hysteria that she couldn't allow to take hold.

The lab's going to blow up, and I've wasted four, almost five minutes now and where's the goddamn disk?

“Easy, take it easy, you're okay, it's okay. ...” A gentle echo, a whisper of reason in the shining hall. She'd simply have to take the elevator from a different level; she had the master key, she had a weapon, she had time. Not as much, but enough. Breathing deeply, Annette started back toward the hall that led to the stairs, reminding herself that all was well and that it didn't really matter, that Umbrella was going to pay whether or not she made it out alive. She didn't want to die, she wasn't going to die, but the gleaming, blood-splattered corridors and once-sterile labs were going to burn either way, so there was no need to panic—

- and as she turned right and moved quickly down the connecting hall, her footsteps loud and hollow in the silence, a ceiling panel crashed down in front of her—

- and an Re3, a licker, dropped to the floor and screamed for her blood. No!

Annette fired, but only hit its scrabbling shoulder as it darted forward, reaching out with one deformed claw to swipe at her. She felt a sharp red pain in her forearm, and fired again, shocked and disbelieving—

- and the second one caught it in the throat, and it screamed, blood spraying from its torn neck, its trumpeting shriek a garbled and spitting cry as it lunged at her again.

The third shot blew into the gray jelly of its brain, and it flopped to a spasming stop just inches from her trembling legs.

Gasping as she realized how close she'd been, Annette looked down at her bleeding arm, at the thick scratches that had torn through her lab coat—

- and something gave. Something in her mind.

Her racing mind, her pounding heart, the blood and the licker, William's licker, dead on the floor in front of her—all these things whirled and danced, spinning into a circle that came together and focused into a single, stunningly simple thought. A thought that made sense of it all.

It isn't theirs.

It was so clear, so crystal clear. She couldn't run from pain, because pain would find her wherever she ran; she had proof, dripping down her arm. William had understood, but had lost himself before he could explain, before he could tell her what she really needed to do. She had to confront her attackers, and make sure they understood—that the G-Virus wasn't theirs—because it didn't belong to them.

But will they understand? Can they?

Maybe, maybe not. But she was so overwhelmed by the profound simplicity of the truth, she knew that she had to try, to make them see. The work was William's. It was his legacy, and now it was hers; she'd known that before, but now she knew it, a ray of light in her mind that made everything else trivial. Not theirs. Mine.

She'd have to find them, tell them, and once they accepted the truth of it, they would have to leave her alone—and then, if there was still time, she could go her own way.

But first, she needed another shot. Smiling, her eyes wide and starry, Annette stepped over the lick and started for the stairs.

Leon thought he heard shots.

He was in some kind of a surgical bay, the first room at the end of the first passage that he'd taken after leaving Ada, and he looked up from the pile of crumpled papers he'd found, listening—but the distant cracks didn't repeat, so he went back to his search. He rifled quickly through the pages, desperate to find anything besides the endless lists of numbers and letters beneath the Umbrella letterhead. Come on, there must be something useful in all this....

He wanted out, he wanted to get Ada and get the hell out. The disemboweled corpse slumped in the corner was reason enough, but it was more than that—the very air of the room, of the hall outside the room, and, he was willing to bet, of every room in the facility, was just wrong. It stank like death, but worse, there was an atmosphere of something darker, something amoral. Evil.

They performed experiments here, they ran tests and God knows what else here—and they'd created a zombie plague, they'd created the monstrous demon that attacked Ada, they'd murdered an entire city. Whatever they meant to do, they were practicing evil.

· Evil on a grand scale; the transport had taken them into a secret Umbrella facility, and it was a big one. From the numbers on the walls, he knew he was on the fourth floor, whatever that meant—and the catwalk he'd taken to get to the strange operating room, only one of three choices, had stretched over what had to be sixty or seventy feet of open space, the bottom to it lost in shadow. He didn't know how deep he and Ada had come, and he didn't really care; what he wanted was a map like the one she'd found in the sewers, a clear and simple diagram with an arrow pointing to out.

And it ain't here....

Frustrated, Leon pushed the useless papers aside—and saw there was a computer disk lying on the steel table that had been hidden beneath the stack of chemical readouts. He picked it up, frowning—"For Cargo Room Verification" was printed on the label in smudged block letters.

Sighing, Leon slipped it into his pocket and rubbed at his aching eyes with his right hand, his left arm basically useless again after carrying Ada from the lift. He didn't want to look for a computer to see what was on the disk, he didn't want to go wandering from room to room looking for the exit, seeing what atrocities Umbrella had played with before they'd shut themselves down. He was tired and in pain and worried about Ada . . . and he decided, as he walked back to the door, that he should go back and talk to her. He'd wanted to ease her mind, saying that he would find the way out, but the place was just too goddamn huge; if she even knew the direction, or could remember the floor number....

Leon opened the door, stepped into the hall—

· and a woman with a gun was standing in front of him, a nine-millimeter pointed at his chest. She was bleeding, thin streams of crimson pouring from one arm and dripping down her dirty white lab coat—and the look on her face, the strange, wide-eyed glassy look that played across her features, told him that making any sudden moves would be a very bad idea. Oh, Jesus, what is this?

“You murdered my husband,” she said, “you and your partner and the girl, too—all of you, you wanted to dance on his grave but / have news for you!” She was high on something, he could hear it in her high, trembling voice and see it by the way her skin twitched and ticked. He kept his hands at his sides, kept his voice low and calm.

“Ma'am, I'm a police officer, and I'm here to help, okay? I don't want to hurt you, I just—“ The woman dipped her bloody hand into her pocket and held up something, a glass tube full of some purple fluid. She grinned wildly, raising it over her head, the gun still trained on his chest. “Here it is! It's what you want, isn't it? Listen to me, do you hear me? It isn't yours! Do you understand what I'm saying? William made it, and I helped him, and it doesn't belong to you!”

Leon nodded, speaking slowly. “It doesn't belong to me, you're right. It's yours, absolutely—“ The woman wasn't even listening. “You think you can take it, but I'll stop you, I'll keep you from taking it—there's plenty of time, time for me to kill you and Ada and anyone else who tries to take it!” Ada—

“What do you know about Ada?” Leon barked, taking a half-step toward the madwoman, no longer feeling so calm. “Did you hurt her? Tell me!” The woman laughed, a humorless, insane cackle. “Umbrella sent her, you stupid shit! Ada Wong, Miss Love-em-and-leave-em herself! She seduced John to get the G-Virus but it's not hers, either! It's not, it's NOT YOURS IT'S MINE—“ A massive shock rocked the floor, pitching Leon to the ground, a rumbling vibration that shook the walls—

· and crash, pipes and plaster rained from the ceiling, a thick beam striking the woman down with a dull thump. Leon covered his head as bits of concrete and white chunks of drywall slapped at him—

· and it was over. Leon sat up, staring at the woman in shock, not sure what had happened. She wasn't moving. The metal beam that had struck her still hanging from the ceiling, one of her arms pinned beneath it—

· and a cool, clear voice suddenly blared from hidden speakers somewhere in the walls—female, calm, and punctuated by the rhythmic bleat of a honking alarm.

“The self-destruct sequence has been activated. This auto-destruct sequence cannot be aborted. All personnel should evacuate immediately. The self-destruct sequence has been activated. This program cannot be aborted. All personnel should evacuate immediately—“ Leon scrambled to his feet, took one running step toward the fallen woman—then reached down and plucked the glass cylinder from her outstretched hand, shoving it into his utility pack. He didn't know who she was, but she was too crazy to

be holding anything in a test tube.

Ada—he had to get to Ada and they had to get out. The throbbing, screeching alarms blasted through the echoing halls, chasing him through the door to the catwalk along with the indifferent-sounding female’s repeating message of imminent destruction. The recorded voice didn’t say how long they had, but Leon felt quite certain he didn’t want to be around when the clock ran out.

TWEETY-SEVER

THE COOL, DARK RIDE DOWN THROUGH THE elevator shaft ended in a squeal of hydraulic brakes—and then silence, as the engines shut down and trapped them somewhere in the seemingly endless tunnel.

“Claire? What—“

Claire held a finger to her lips, hushing Sherry—and heard what sounded like an alarm from some-where outside, a repeating, muffled bleat of honking noise. There seemed to be talking, too, but Claire could only make out the faintest mumble.

“Come on, sweetie, I think the ride’s over. Let’s see where we ended up, okay? And stay close.” They moved out of the transport room and onto the platform, the distant sounds not so distant any-more—and there was light, coming from somewhere behind the lift. Claire took Sherry’s hand as they walked quickly around, not wanting to worry the girl but feeling pretty sure that it was an alarm they were hearing. There was definitely someone speaking over the rhythmic squeals, too, and Claire wanted to know what they were saying.

The lift had stopped only a few feet down from some kind of a service tunnel, the light she’d seen coming from a caged bulb that hung down from the tunnel’s ceiling. There wasn’t a door, but there was a decent-sized crawl space at the end of the short passage; it would have to do.

It’s either that or climb back to the surface, probably only a mile or so up. . . .

Not a chance. Claire boosted Sherry up and then climbed after her, moving to the front and then crouch-walking to the dark hole. The bleating sound got louder the closer she got to the crawl space, the mumble transforming into a woman’s voice. She strained to hear the words, hoping that she’d catch “elevator malfunction” and “temporary”—but she still couldn’t make it out. They’d have to abandon the lift and hope that they were leaving it for something better.

Claire swiveled around, sighing. “Looks like crawl time for me and thee, kiddo. I’ll go first, and then—“
SLAM!

Sherry shrieked as something landed on the roof of the transport behind them, crashing through the top in a thundering clap of rending metal. Claire grabbed her, pulling her close, her breath caught in her throat—

- and a hand, two hands appeared through the hole in the roof. Two thick arms, clad in shadow—
- and the gleaming white of Mr. X’s enormous skull rose up from the destroyed lift, like a dead moon on a starless night.

Claire turned and pushed Sherry toward the dark-ness of the crawl space, her heart hammering, her

body suddenly slick with sweat.

“Go! Go, I’m right behind you!”

Sherry disappeared into the curving black, darting out of sight like a frightened mouse, and Claire didn’t look back, was too scared shitless to look back as she followed Sherry into the hole, their relentless stalker surely climbing through the shattered elevator to continue his determined and unfathomable hunt. Ada had heard pieces of Annette’s screaming rant from the shadows of the catwalk hub, where the three metal spans joined. She’d forced herself not to rush to Leon’s aid, promising herself that if she heard shots, she’d reconsider—

· but then the laboratory facility had been vio-lently shaken, and the bland voice of the recording started its loop.

Shit!

Ada staggered to her feet, furious at the woman scientist, a part of her aching for Leon, knowing what this meant. Annette had triggered the fail-safe, which meant they probably had less than ten minutes to get the hell out of Dodge—

· and Leon doesn’t know the way.

No, not important. If she was going to collect the sample, which Annette surely had on her, she needed to do it now. Leon wasn’t her problem, he’d never been her problem, and she couldn’t quit now, not after the hell she’d been through to get Trent’s pre-cious virus.

Ada took a single step away from the main fuse panel that connected the three catwalks—and heard the pounding footsteps coming toward her, footsteps too heavy to be Annette’s. She slid back into the shadows and around to the span that led west, press-ing herself against the hub’s frame.

A second later, Leon went running past, probably back to where he thought she’d be waiting for him. Ada took a deep breath, blowing it out as she swept Leon from her mind, and hurried across the southern bridge to find Annette.

Ada was gone.

“—has been activated. This auto-destruct

sequence—“

“Shut up, shut up—“ Leon hissed, standing help-lessly in the middle of the room, his stomach knotted, his hands balled into fists.

When she’d heard the alarm, she must have pan-icked and run. She was probably stumbling through the giant facility, lost and dazed, maybe looking for him as that infernally calm voice repeated, as the sirens blared and rang.

The transport lift!

Leon turned and ran back through the door—and saw that it was gone, a large empty hole a few feet deep where it had been. He’d been too intent on getting to Ada, he hadn’t even noticed that it wasn’t

there anymore—

· we have to find that tunnel, we have to! Without the lift, we're trapped here!

With a silent howl of frustration, Leon turned and ran back toward the catwalks, praying that he would find her before it was too late.

The crawl space ended abruptly, stopping over at least a seven-foot drop to an empty tunnel. Her ears ringing, her mouth dry as dust, Sherry grabbed the edges of the square hole, closed her eyes, and jumped. She swung out over the hall and let go as soon as she was straight up and down, landing crooked and falling as her right leg crumpled. It hurt, but she hardly felt it, scrambling on hands and knees to get out of the way, staring up at the hole—

· and there was Claire, her head coming out, her wide, worried eyes taking in that she was okay, that the hall was empty and safe . . . except that there were bells ringing and a woman on an intercom was talking, and Mr. X was coming.

Claire stretched her arm down as far as she could with the gun. “Sherry, I need you to hold this, I can't turn around.”

Sherry stood and reached up, grabbing the barrel, amazed at how heavy the gun was as Claire let go. “Don't point it at anything,” Claire breathed, and then she actually dove out of the hole, curling her body and landing on her shoulder, her head tucked in tight. She did a half-somersault and then her legs banged into the concrete wall.

Before Sherry could even ask if she was all right, Claire was on her feet, taking the gun and pointing to the door at the end of the hall.

“Run!” she said, and started to run herself, one hand pushing on Sherry's back as they sprinted for the door, as the intercom voice told them to get out, told them that a self-destruct sequence had been activated—

· and behind them, a sound of crashing metal tore through the blaring noise of the sirens, and Sherry ran faster, terrified.

TwEnfY-EiGHT

ANNETTE BIRKIN CRAWLED OUT FROM BE-

neath the crushing weight of the cold metal, still holding the gun, the G-Virus gone. As she opened her mouth to scream her fury, to rail to the Gods at the injustice of her terrible plight, blood dribbled out across her lips in a thick streamer of clotted drool.

· mine mine mine—

Somehow, she made it to her feet.

Ada told herself that she didn't deserve Leon Kennedy's good opinion anyway. She'd never deserved it. Forgive me . . .

As he ran back across the catwalk from the trans-port bay area and swung west, running blind with fear

for her, she stepped out of the hub's shadows and pointed the Beretta at his back.

“Leon!”

He spun around, and Ada felt her throat lock at the relief that spread across his face—and struggled not to feel anything more as the joy turned sour, his grin fading.

Oh, Jesus, forgive me!

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said, and felt no pride at how smooth and steady her voice sounded. How very cold.

The alarms blared, the mechanical voice almost as icy as hers, telling them that the fail-safe couldn’t be shut down. She didn’t have time to let him get used to the idea, that she was as much a monster as the Birkin-thing or one of the soulless zombies. “The G-Virus,” she said. “Give it to me.” Leon didn’t move. “She was telling the truth,” he said, no anger but more pain than Ada wanted to hear. “You work for Umbrella.”

Ada shook her head. “No. Who I work for is no concern of yours. I—I—“ For the first time in years, since she’d been a very young girl, Ada felt the sting of tears—and suddenly she hated him for that, for making her hate herself. “I tried!” she wailed, her composure blown by the fierce torrent of anger that coursed through her. “I tried to leave you, back in the factory! And you had to take it from Birkin, didn’t you, you couldn’t just leave it alone!”

She saw pity on his face, and felt the fury pass, swept away on a wave of sorrow—for what she’d lost, with him; for the part of herself she’d lost a long, long time ago.

She wanted to tell him about Trent. About the missions in Europe and Japan, about how she’d become what she was, about every event in her miserable, successful life that had brought her to this place—holding a weapon on a man who’d saved her. A man she might have cared about, in a different time and place.

The clock was ticking.

“Hand it over,” she said. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Leon stared into her eyes, and said, simply, “No.”

A second gone, then another.

Ada lowered the Beretta.

Leon steeled himself for the shot, for the bullet from Ada’s gun that would kill him—

· and she slowly lowered the weapon, her shoulders sagging, a tear running down one porcelain cheek.

Leon blew out his held breath, feeling too many things, a jumble of sadness and betrayal—and pity, for the tortured struggle in her beautiful dark gaze—

· and a shot rang out from the shadows behind her. Ada’s eyes went wide, her mouth falling open as

she pitched forward, the gun hitting the floor, her body hitting the rail and flipping over.

“Ada, no!”

He ran and dove, and somehow she caught the rail as he grabbed her wrist, her body dangling over the bottomless dark, blood spouting from her hanging, shattered shoulder.

“Ada, hold on!”

* * *

“Mine,” Annette whispered.

She raised the handgun again, intending to shoot the other, to take back what was hers, to make them all pay—

· and the gun was too heavy, it was falling, and she was falling with it. Together, they fell to the dark metal, the dark, the dark spinning up into her mind and finally taking her pain away.

William-

It was her very last thought before she went to sleep. The door opened into a room filled with screaming machines, the howls and hisses of the humming, rattling giants drowning out the shrill call of the alarm warning.

Claire ran, pulling and pushing Sherry along, looking desperately for a way out, knowing that the monster was close.

What does he want, why us?

There, a platform in the corner some six feet off the floor, a stack of crates pushed to one side just beneath it.

“This way!” Claire screamed, and they ran, past the rows of shuddering metal consoles, heat pouring from the machines as Claire pushed Sherry up and then climbed after her.

Crash!

She turned, saw that the massive creature was ripping through the door across the room, striding into the screaming heat and searching, searching—

At the end of the platform, a double metal hatch. They dashed for it, Claire not thinking of anything but how to get away, how to destroy a thing that had survived all that it had—

· the door was unlocked, and they ran onto another platform; the heat in the shadowy chamber was searing, terrible—

· and a dead end. Claire saw that before they’d taken a half-dozen running strides into the massive room. They were on the overseer’s platform in a foundry, the boiling heat rising up from the heavy smelting vats below.

She had twelve bullets, split between two guns. Claire stumbled to the edge of the platform, Sherry next to her, the electric orange of the molten metal bathing them in its fevered glow. Hot enough to burn anything. . . .

How? How do I make him jump?

“Sherry, go over there!”

She pointed to the farthest corner of the platform, and Sherry shook her head, her small face trembling with fear.

“Do it! Now!” Claire shouted, and with a cry of terror, Sherry ran, her locket banging against the open flaps of the denim vest—

- not a locket—
- and Sherry screamed, and Claire turned, and Mr. X was coming.

He walked into the chamber, as stiff and huge and impossible as when she’d first seen him, the eerie orange light turning him into even more of a night-mare. Claire stood her ground, jamming Irons’s gun into her shorts, the half-formed plan running through her frightened mind. It probably wouldn’t work but she had to try—

- he reaches for me, I jump over the railing, I grab on, he falls—

Mr. X turned his blank gaze toward her as he took his floor-shaking, measured steps, the black bullet holes in his face and throat just pockets of shadow in the smooth, terrible pumpkin light—

- and he turned toward Sherry, and raised his fists, and started for her.

“Hey! Hey, I’m here!” Claire screamed, and he didn’t hear her, didn’t see her, his entire monstrous being focused on the cowering, sobbing girl huddled against the far wall, clutching her locket—

· and Claire knew what he wanted. The half remembered phrases from both Sherry and Annette came together in a flash of awareness, forming the answer.

G-Virus, rip her apart, good luck charm—

Not a locket.

“Sherry, he wants the necklace! Throw it to me!” If she was wrong, they were both dead. Mr. X closed in on the girl, blocking her from Claire’s view—

· and the pendant, the G-Virus pendant that An-nette Birkin had inflicted on her young daughter came flying through the heated dark, hitting the floor in front of Claire’s feet.

Mr. X reeled around, following the path of the thrown pendant with his black eyes, forgetting Sherry the second the necklace left her grasp. It was true. Good girl!

Claire scooped it up, waving it at the monster, feeling a rush of incredible anger and malicious glee as the bloated giant started toward her with unwaver-ing intent, fists raising again, his lifeless features fixed on

the glittering pendant.

“You want this?” Claire taunted, the words spilling out of the fury, for the wasted bullets, for the fear that she and Sherry had suffered. “Yeah? Then come and get it, you miserable, mindless freak!”

The monster was less than five feet away when Claire turned and threw it into the bubbling, burning hot pool, the necklace disappearing into the melted iron—

· and the superman creature that had terrorized them throughout the endless night walked straight into the rail, the metal bars snapping in his all-powerful wake—

· and plunged silently into the giant vat, a great wave of sizzling metal sloshing over the blackened sides, spontaneous eruptions of flame dancing up from the dark shape of his body as he disappeared beneath the surface of the molten lake.

Triumph, sweet and wonderful—and then the cool voice of the recording changed suddenly, wiping away the joy of seeing Mr. X take a lava bath. Over the shrill blasts of the mechanical sirens—

“There are five minutes to reach minimum safe distance. All remaining personnel should evacuate immediately. Please report to the bottom platform. Repeat, please report to the bottom platform. Re-peat ___” Sherry was at her side, and Claire grabbed her hand, and they ran.

The pain was incredible, and Ada closed her eyes, wondering if she would die from it.

“Ada, hang on! Just hang on, I’ll pull you up!” Through the throbbing, pounding sirens that assaulted her ears, Ada heard the countdown for the fail-safe start to run. Five minutes.

He tries to save me, we both die.

Leon’s grip was strong, the determination in his panicked, pleading voice almost as strong as her own will. Almost, but not quite.

Ada turned her face up to his, saw that in spite of it all, he still wanted her to survive, he wanted to help her up and carry her away to the safety of escape. Not this time. Not for me. . . .

Her life had been about selfishness, about ego and greed. She’d seen a lot of good people die, and somewhere along the way, she’d lost the ability to care—telling herself that even the effort was a waste of time and a sign of weakness.

And I was wrong, I was selfish and wrong and now it’s too late.

Not too late. Whatever waited beneath her, the decision was made.

“Leon—go down, west, and find the cargo room, past the—row of plastic chairs. You’ll need the disk, it’s in my—pouch—“ “Ada, I have it! Cargo disk, right, I have it, I found it—don’t talk, just hold on, let me help you!” He fumbled at the rail, trying to maintain his grip. Talking was a horrible effort, but she had to finish, had to tell him before time ran out.

“The code is 345. Get to the elevator, Leon. Take it down. The subway—tunnel leads out. Have to—run full throttle . . . and watch out for Birkin, the G-carrier, he—he’s changing by now. Got it?” Leon nodded, his blazing blue eyes filling her up. “Live,” she said, and it was a good word, a word to go

out on. She was tired, and the mission was wrapped, and Leon would live.

She let go of the railing, and Leon screamed her name, and the sound of it followed her down into the dark like a bittersweet good-bye.

TwEnfY-ninE

SHERRY WAS SCARED, BUT MR. X WAS DEAD

and he must have been the monster all along, not the one at the station but the real monster, the one that had wanted to rip her apart all along—

· but she didn't have time to think about it as Claire sprinted, jerking her along back the way they'd come, through the machine room, through the hall with the crawl space and around a corner—

· and Sherry screamed as a zombie reeled toward them, a dead white creature made of dusty bone, and Claire raised her gun and shot—

· bang, and the dry white head caved in, the moaning dead creature crumpled to the floor, and then Claire was dragging her over the body and running for the door at the end of the hall. It was an elevator, and Sherry collapsed against one wall after Claire pulled her inside, trying to catch her breath as Claire punched the controls. After the speed of their run from Mr. X, the elevator's descent was a crawl, a softly humming crawl.

“We're gonna make it,” Claire gasped, “just a little longer.”

Sherry nodded, her heart pounding even harder as the intercom voice told them that they had four minutes left to be safe.

Leon felt like he didn't know how to stand up and walk away. The image of her composed, beautiful face in the second before she'd let go ... she's gone. Ada's dead.

He reached for the Beretta, fresh grief washing over him as he picked it up, the weapon still warm from her touch—and it was too light, too light by half because it wasn't loaded. There wasn't even a clip. She'd never meant to hurt him; she'd lied, she'd lied all along, but she'd never meant to hurt him at all.

“... are four minutes to reach minimum safe distance. All remaining personnel should evacuate immediately. Please report to the bottom platform . . .” Four minutes. He had four minutes to get far enough away to fulfill Ada's last request. He stood up and turned for the door—and stopped, reaching into his pocket, pulling out the tiny glass tube full of purple fluid. He knew he didn't have time to spare, but it only took a second to pull his arm back and throw the sample as hard as he could, wanting it as far away from him as possible.

If the laboratory responsible for so much death was going to burn, let the G-Virus burn with it. “Yes!”

The elevator door opened—and there was a train, a secret subway train in shining silver. It was silent and dark, not the powered-up, thrumming machine that Claire had hoped to see, but it was still the most beautiful escape vehicle that she'd ever laid eyes on, hands down.

Sherry holding on to her arm, they ran to the door at the front of the three-car subway, the bleating alarms still sounding, echoing through the concrete tunnel. The woman's bland voice, the voice that Claire

had started to hate long moments ago, in-formed them that they had three minutes to get to the minimum safe distance.

They hurried aboard, Claire noticing and not caring that there weren't any seats, just a wide, empty space for the passengers to stand in. The control booth was to the left.

“Let's get this show on the road,” Claire said, and the bright and radiant look of hope on Sherry's dirty, tired face made Claire's heart break, just a little. Oh, baby ...

Claire looked quickly away, hopping up the steps to the control room, making a silent promise to herself that if the train didn't work, she'd carry Sherry through the tunnel herself. Whatever it took to see that the fragile hope in her eyes wasn't broken.

* * *

The code and the verification disk he'd found in the operating room opened the door just as Ada had said, the broad hatch opening into a short hall. With three minutes left, Leon dashed down the cold corridor, through another override door, a biohazard symbol emblazoned across the front, and found himself in the cargo room.

He didn't have time to stop and get a good look, his focus on getting to the elevator before the recording told him he couldn't possibly get out of the facility alive. Leon ran to the back of the wide, strangely red-tinted room, found the controls for the large warehouse-type elevator, and slapped the button for down, ready to jump in and go—

· and nothing happened, except that a row of tiny lights—perhaps twenty tiny lights over the elevator door—started to flash in descending order. Slowly. Leon reached forward and slapped the button again, feeling something like numb disbelief as the elevator crept down, pausing for what seemed like minutes between floors, as the alarms blared and the countdown to the lab's destruction ticked closer and closer to the end.

“Jesus!” He turned around, feeling like he'd scream if he had to wait much longer—

· and for the first time, got a clear look at the room he was in. The two tall, wide shelves that ran the length of the chamber held a very specific kind of “cargo”—and although the half-dozen giant glass containers that lined each shelf held nothing but clear red fluid, Leon felt a chill just looking at them. Each cylinder was large enough to hold a full-grown man, and it made him wonder what they'd been built for. Doesn't matter, they're gonna be blown to shit in a matter of minutes, and so am I if this goddamn thing doesn't hurry UP—

He turned back to the elevator, almost glad to be angry, frustrated, to have something to feel besides loss—

· and the ceiling over the elevator started to shake and rattle ... Leon backed away, pointing his Mag-num at the solid metal ceiling panel as it crashed down and out—

· and the monster from the transport lift landed in front of him, the same demonic creature that had hurt Ada, that should have killed him—

Birkin—?

· and from the way it threw back its strange head and howled, the vicious, feral sound drowning out the buzz of the alarms, he could tell it had come to finish the job.

The subway was ready, it was powered up and ready to go—except it seemed that the tunnel gate release had malfunctioned; a console full of green lights, and a single red dot that insisted the gate needed to be opened manually.

Two minutes to safe minimum distance.

Won't make it, we'll never make it—

“Stay here,” Claire said, and went outside to find the release, praying that it was nothing.

* * *

Leon turned and ran as the monster started walking toward him, each powerful stride thundering through the chamber, the echoes of its terrible shriek still spinning through the room.

Think!

The powerful shotgun hadn't been enough, he had to hit it someplace vulnerable, the eyes, use the Magnum—

Leon was back at the door. He spun and fired, aiming the Magnum at the creature's face—

· except that the face was changing again, the jaw dropping, falling away as it screamed. Great jagged spikes of tooth or claw slid out from what was left of the mouth, from out of the top of its pulsating chest—and as another scream burst out of its mutating throat Leon saw two new arms unfurl from its sides. The limbs snapped into place, elbows locking, thick worms of taloned fingers growing from the tips. Bam-bam-bam!

The shots grouped tight, blowing into the thin-stretched skin over its slitted left eye. The monster roared, this time in pain, and Leon saw shards of bone and pus-purple fluid splatter out, a small stream of dark blood obscuring the yellow ball of its eye. It shook its head back and forth, flinging more liquid, squatting down on its haunches like a mutant frog—

· and leapt into the air, springing up and right, landing on one of the seven-foot-high shelves with an animal grunt.

Oh shit, how'd it do that—

He couldn't see its eyes, couldn't see anything but its back as it slumped down—but it was changing again, he could hear the wet snapping sounds and see the knobs of spine rising up through the purpled flesh of its back.

He didn't want to see what it was becoming, but the elevator hadn't landed yet, and he had two goddamn minutes.

Leon grabbed another clip and slapped it home, then fired at what he could see—a shape with six legs, a shape that no longer looked like anything human. The shot hit one of its muscular shoulders, and the creature jumped. Like some wild, spidering beast it leapt back to the floor, landing a few feet in front of

him. Its chest had become a wall of strange teeth, of spikes that opened and closed as it panted—and when it screamed again, the sound was a demon cry, like nothing he'd ever heard, like the dying screams of a thousand damned souls.

Leon got two shots off into the cluster of moving teeth and stumbled away, and beneath the constant blare of the sirens, he heard the bright and cheery ping of the elevator's arrival.

Claire ran to the front of the train, looking at the series of levers and switches set into the tunnel wall, frowning, finding the red and white handle in less than ten seconds and slamming it down. She heard the grating of metal somewhere in front of the train and turned to run back to the door—

· when she heard metal again—the ripping, tear-ing sounds of steel being bent and hammered out of shape, coming from somewhere behind the subway, from somewhere in the back of the tunnel—

No, no way.

She stared toward the back of the train, past the metal bars of a closed gate that led back into shadows—and heard a sound like bone on concrete, a grinding heavy noise that repeated, and again. Footsteps.

Claire ran for the door, knowing that it couldn't be X, absolutely could not—he was melted, gone, and they didn't have the G-Virus anymore—

· and she caught a glimpse of movement past the bars of shadow some thirty feet away. A glimpse of something tall, wisps of smoke curling through the darkness—and the bitter, choking stench of something burned. It stepped out of shadow, stepped toward the back of the train car, raising charred, massive fists—

BAM!

· and the car actually rocked, as Claire realized that it was Mr. X, or what was left of him—and that he was surely a demon straight from hell. She'd combined the clips on their elevator ride; eleven rounds left; there was no way it would be enough, but it was all they had.

Claire raised Irons's gun, wondering if this was the end.

Leon ran, around the shelf to his right, heading back for the elevator, and there were galloping, thundering footsteps right behind, he couldn't stop. Another turn, back through the middle of the room—

· and he was hit in the back, propelled forward and down as the beast rammed him, hot, rubbery flesh slamming him into the floor.

Leon rolled and it was on top of him, its dripping teeth poised to drive through his skull, its thick legs pinning him down. The tumor like an eye was still there, opening out of the shoulder, looking at him—

· and he jammed the barrel of the weapon against its drooling chin and pulled the trigger, screaming, emptying the heavy rounds into its thrashing head. The beast shrieked, flailing, falling sideways off Leon. In a flash, he was up and running, straight for the open elevator. The enormous, freakish animal was still howling as Leon sprinted into the lift and turned, hitting the control marked down—

· and saw the beast shuddering, changing, scream-ing, and spitting chunks of bone and flesh and blood as it also turned and started for the elevator. It picked up speed with each staggering step, the door closing slowly, the terrible creature almost flying now—

· and Leon had the shotgun in his hands, pumped a shot and squeezed. The blast hit its barrel chest, knocking it back—

· and the door closed, Leon was going down, and there was only one minute left.

THIRJY BAM!

Sherry felt the train rock violently all around her.

Claire!

She ran to the door, remembering that Claire said not to leave and not caring; she didn't know what it was or what she could do to help, but she couldn't just stand there—

BAM!

· and the car shifted again, another loud, banging crash blasting through the stale air, the floor trem-bling beneath her feet. Sherry reached the door and hit the open switch, her heart hammering, sweat dribbling through the dirt on her face.

The door slid open—and there was Claire, pointing her gun at something Sherry couldn't see, something at the back of the car.

Claire's gaze flickered to her, and her shouted words quaked with fear and panic.

“Don't come out! Shut the door!”

Sherry reached for the controls and hesitated, terri-fied for Claire, wanting to see what it was—

· quick look—

· and she darted her head out, just for a second, searching for the source of Claire's fear, for whatever was slamming into the train car. A smell like chemi-cals and burnt meat had filled the dimly lit platform, coming from—

Sherry screamed when she saw it, when she saw the tattered, charred monster that was rocking the sub-way, just past a wall of metal bars. She saw its giant fist pound the steel wall of the train, but it was the monster's face that she couldn't look away from. Mr.X.

The skin was burnt away from his face, from his whole body. Smoke drifted up from the blackened, melted lump of his skull, but the eyes were still alive—red and black and steaming with acrid smoke, but still very much alive.

“Sherry! Do it, now!” Claire screamed, not taking her gaze from the smoking monster, from its terrible, giant body coated with red, metallic muscle, as red and burnt as its awful eyes.

Sherry hit the controls, the door closing as Claire started to fire.

The elevator did go down, though not as Leon had expected, and not nearly as fast as he needed it to go. The wide platform slipped down an angled tunnel, like a slide, neon gridwork on black walls humming past. Slowly.

“ .. now forty seconds to reach minimum safe distance.”

“Go go go—“ Leon breathed, every ache and pain in his body forgotten in the rising dread that beat at his brain. The voice had stopped telling him to report to the bottom platform, now only making announce-ments in ten-second increments. As much as he loathed the repeated instructions, it was much worse not hearing them; the silences between the statements were telling him not to bother trying.

To make it this far and then die because of a slow elevator. ... He couldn't accept that. He'd been through too much. The car crash, Claire, the running and the monsters and Ada and Birkin—he had to make it, or it was all for nothing.

There didn't seem to be a real floor beneath the descending platform, or he would've tried it on foot—but the lift seemed to be lowering by grooves cut into either side of the darkness, by some mecha-nism that he couldn't begin to guess at.

“ .. twenty seconds to reach .. .”

Leon started to shake, the tension running through his muscles, tightening them, making it hard to breathe. What was safe distance? When that cool, inhuman voice reached zero, how long before the explosion?

Full throttle, she said full throttle—

The train would have to be fast. And he had ten seconds left to get to it, as the strange elevator continued its smooth, unhurried trek down into the dark.

The door slid shut and Sherry was safe. For the moment. Claire's thoughts had kicked into overdrive, spinning through her limited options in a flash. Can't let him knock it off the tracks—

She knew she couldn't hope to injure the creature, but she might be able to distract it long enough for them to get away. She wished she'd bothered to show Sherry the simple controls for the train, wished that the train was already moving, taking Sherry to safety—

· but I didn't and we have to go NOW.

The recorded message was counting down the final ten seconds to reach a safe distance. As the smoking remains of Mr. X dealt another hammering blow to the dented subway wall, Claire aimed for its mutant head and fired.

Five shots, four of them smacking into the bizarre material that made up its flesh, about where a hu-man's ear would be. The fifth went wide, and as the explosive thunder echoed through the shadows of the chill platform, the thing that she'd dubbed Mr. X turned slowly toward her.

Now what?

The recorded female voice distracted her for a split-second, as Mr. X took a single step toward her, a

lumbering, monstrous step that pulled it out of the shadows.

“... three. Two. One. Safe distance minimum now required. Self-destruct will occur in five minutes. There are now five minutes until detonation.” The alarms still blared, but at least the voice had shut up. She wouldn't have noticed in any case, her wide-eyed gaze fixed on the creature. It was hideous, all the more so for its still humanoid shape, like a mockery of reality, of sanity. In spite of the charred, smoking patches that covered most of its body, its unnatural flesh hadn't lost its elasticity; the reddish matter beneath the burns flexed and contracted like real muscle. It looked like a skinned giant that had crawled from beneath a burning building—and if it had suffered from its molten metal bath, she couldn't see it. Another mighty step, and the arms rose, the barred gate was ripped down, the iron bars were crashing to the concrete.

Slow at least, at least there's still that—

It was the only thing she had going for her. Claire sprinted for the subway door, still afraid, but the smoking monster was slow, powerful but unable to really move—

· and suddenly, Mr. X wasn't just walking any-more. The creature bent at the waist, bent its knees—

· and pushed off the ground in a dynamic lunge that tore gouges in the concrete, its deformed feet propelling it toward her at a full run.

Claire didn't think. She dodged right and took off past the hunched, loping monster, running as fast as she could. It almost got her anyway, its reflexes faster than fast—as if losing its facade of skin had freed it somehow, the liquid metal oaring it down to its core strength. As she leapt over the broken gate and into the shadows, she heard the screech of not-flesh fingers raking across the cement, saw that Mr. X had brought one mighty arm up, slashing through the air where she'd been only a second before. It meant to disembowel her—

· but why, no G-Virus, no reason—

Claire ran deeper into the echoing darkness as the intercom system calmly informed her that they had four minutes left.

“There are now four minutes until detonation. . . .”

Shit shit shit!

Just when he thought he might have a stroke from the frustration, the elevator had finally stopped. Leon jerked at the handle to a thick metal door, tensing himself to run—

· and the door opened into one wall of a passage, a sterile concrete corridor lit by flickering overhead bars. And there were no signs telling him which way to go.

Left or right?

The few seconds that he hesitated could cost him his life—//he still had any chance at all. He'd heard once that when faced with a choice, most people instinctively turned in the direction of their dominant hand. With the crappy luck he'd had throughout his long, long night in Raccoon, he decided to go the other way.

Left. Leon ran, his boots pounding the floor, wondering if he should even bother.

* * *

Not far past the broken gate, Claire saw a walkway that crossed over the train, the stairs hidden by deep shadow—

· and she heard the pounding of Mr. X behind as it started after her, each running step a violent slap of mutant flesh against cement. The terror drove her on, her feet hardly touching the ground, not caring if she ran head-on into a wall in the deepening dark. Maybe that would be best, it was tremendously powerful, it was fast, it was impossible to kill—she didn't stand a chance if it caught her—

· and the steps were getting louder, faster, she heard the ripping scrape of its clawed fingers plowing up concrete. She had maybe a second before that hand tore into her—

· and she dodged right again, throwing herself into a well of darkness just past the stairs. Mr. X flew past, a mammoth, hulking blur, and she actually felt the wind from his moving hand whisper against her leg as she hit the cold floor.

Sharp pain shot up her arm, her elbow cracking hard against the cement. She ignored it, jumping to her feet, searching for the monster in the dark. Can it see, does it see me?

Her hand found an angled wall to the right, cement against her back and on the left. She was in the space beneath the stairs, and she had no idea where the impossibly silent X was; the shadows wouldn't help her if it could see in the dark.

She ran her hands over the walls, found a switch and punched it. The texture of shadow changed as dim light filtered down from somewhere above—and she saw the monster less than fifty feet away just as it turned, its thick red gaze scanning evenly across the deserted platform—

· and finding her. Marking her. The only sound was a soft crackling coming from its still-smoking flesh—until it took a step for the stairwell, and cement crunched beneath one purpled leg.

Six or seven shots left, get the eyes—

Claire stepped quickly out of the shadows and raised Irons's gun, squeezing the trigger, backing toward the stairs.

Bam-bam-bam—

· and X was positioning itself for another attack, the bullets smashing into its melted face, two of them ricocheting from the matter of its skull as it aligned to her position.

· bam-bam—

She was at the stairs, sidling up a step, the rounds useless, Mr. X starting its lurching run. It would be on her before she could turn, before she could get up the steps.

· I'll die—

· but at least I'll hurt it first-

Mr. X took one—two powerful strides, halving the distance between them as Claire aimed, determined to make the last shots count. She would die, and her only regret was for Sherry, her only wish that she would be able to incapacitate the nightmare X before it killed her.

She fired, and the monster's left eye exploded, a burst of inky fluid splattering its wretched, inhuman face.

Yes!

Mr. X veered to its right, not stopping but not coming straight at her anymore—it would still hit the base of the stairs—too close!—she had to try for the other eye and she had about two seconds left—

Claire aimed, found her mark, and—

· click!

· there were no bullets left, and the monster was slamming into the base of the steps, the smell of roasted meat washing over her as it raised its giant hand up, and its giant, terrible body was all she could see.

Claire rolled down the concrete stairs, hunching herself into a ball—

· and screamed as Mr. X's ragged clawed fingers raked across her left thigh, and a distant voice told her that they had three minutes left.

IHIRtY-OriE

HE'D GONE THE WRONG WAY. TWISTS AND

turns in the cold and empty hall had led him to a storage room—a dead end.

“There are now three minutes until detonation.” Leon turned back the way he'd come, and with what felt like the very last of his strength, forced himself into a stumbling run. He was too exhausted to feel disappointed, to worry about his impending death, to wish that things were different; it took all of his energy just to keep moving.

He'd make it or he wouldn't; either way, he didn't think he'd be surprised.

Claire hit the floor at the base of the stairs and leapt to her feet, blood running down her leg in a hot pulse of stinging pain. She staggered away, nothing broken—

· but she knew her clawed leg was just the begin-ning of what it would do to her, a prelude to the real pain.

Mr. X was still bent over the railing of the steps, but as she stumbled away, back toward the broken gate of the platform, the monster pushed itself off. It turned its immense body in her direction, the open blackness of its empty eye socket drooling out some dark and ichorous liquid. It would compensate for its altered senses, she was sure—it would compensate, realign, run at her again—and would slaughter her like the merciless machine it was, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

At least I'll die in the explosion—

Claire tripped on the metal bars of the gate, barely catching herself, blood pattering to the ground as she staggered another step, please let it be quick—

“Here! Use this!”

Claire spun, saw that Mr. X was positioning itself for its killing strike—and saw the silhouette high above, on the walkway over the train. A woman's voice, a woman's shape, the shadowed figure throwing something—

· who—

· that clattered across the concrete, landing between her and Mr. X. It was metal, it was silver—she'd seen them in movies, it was a machine gun—and Claire ran for it. Another final hope, another chance, however slim, that she and Sherry would survive.

She reached the weapon, dropped, saw X pushing itself toward her, the thunder of its steps shaking the ground—

· and she scooped up the heavy gun, kicking against the floor and rolling onto her back, her shaking hand finding the trigger, her body moving to accommodate the weapon. Stock on the ground, arms twisted around the cold metal, aiming—

· please please—

The monster was only a step away when the spray of bullets crashed out of the gun, a clattering, rattling string of tiny explosions that shook Claire's entire body—and whammed into the gut of the beast, the sheer force of so many rounds stopping it in mid-stride—and pushing it back.

· tattatattatatta—

She felt the vibrating metal trying to shake itself free of her grip, so she held it tighter, the butt of the weapon tapping against the floor at a manic pace. The bullets were still pounding into the creature's abdomen, so fast and so many that she couldn't hear her own gasping cries of fury and pain and exaltation—

· and Mr. X was trying to move forward, but a strange thing was happening, a strange and beautiful thing. Its gut was being shredded by the endless stream of rounds, its midsection gaining depth and texture, black fluids coursing down its lower half from the ragged, growing wound. X's mouth was open, an empty hole like its eye socket—and like the socket, thick liquid was pouring out, obscuring its pitiless face.

· tattatattatat—

Claire held on, directing the hail, watching the creature try to stand against the pulsing, crashing spray. Watching it bleed. Watching as it seemed to—condense, its massive body crumpling, its torso sinking down.

The bullets still flying, Mr. X raised its arms—

· and split in two.

Claire took her finger off the trigger as X's upper body toppled to the cement, a wet slap of heavy meat, and its legs collapsed, falling to one side, more strange blood gushing from both halves. Pools of shiny black grew around the massive pieces of its broken body, forming stinking puddles. The creature was dead—and even if it wasn't, it didn't matter anymore. Unless it could pull itself across the floor as fast as she could run, her battle with the terrible mystery that had been Mr. X was finally through—

· hell with all that, no time, MOVE!

Claire was on her feet in a second, ignoring the squelch of blood in her boot and the pain that had caused it, her gaze searching the upper platform for her unknown savior. No one was there, and she didn't know if another minute had ticked by, the warning lost in the gunfire.

“Hey!” Claire shouted, backing toward the subway car. “We have to go, now!”

No answer, no sound but the ringing in her ears and the echo of her trembling words. If she wanted to save Sherry . . .

Claire turned and ran.

* * *

“—two minutes until—“

Leon pushed himself to go faster, the twining tunnel a blur of gray that spun past his aching, breathless perception. He'd lost all track of the turns and twists of the corridor and was rapidly losing hope, a voice in the back of his mind telling him that maybe it would be best to stop, to sit and rest—

· and then he heard it, and that tiny, despairing whisper was obliterated by the sound.

The sound of heavy machinery stirring to life, somewhere up ahead. Not far ahead.

Train!

Faster, legs distant, rubbery, lungs working, heart pounding—one way or another, it was almost over.

TelRjY-Two

CLAIRE BURST INTO THE TRAIN, HOLDING A

giant rifle and with one leg covered in blood, barely pausing to hit the controls to the door before running for the engineer's booth. Sherry knew that they were in trouble, that it was going to be close, so she didn't waste time asking questions; she followed, relieved beyond measure that Claire was okay but keeping it to herself.

Okay, she's okay and we're going now....

A small, tinny version of the intercom voice and alarms blared out of the tiny room's control board. “There are two minutes until detonation.” Claire had dropped the oddly shaped rifle and was hitting

buttons, throwing switches, her attention fixed on the console. A giant mechanical hum suddenly enveloped them, a growing, whining rumble that made Claire grit her teeth; Sherry couldn't tell if it was a smile, but she smiled as she felt the train lurch—

· and start to move, taking them away from the platform.

Claire turned, saw Sherry standing behind her, and tried to smile. Claire rested one hand on Sherry's shoulder, but didn't say anything—so Sherry didn't either, waiting to see what would happen. The train started to go faster, sliding past dimly lit halls and platforms, the tunnel in front of them dark and empty. Sherry let the warmth of Claire's hand remind her that they were friends, that whatever happened, Claire was her friend—

· and she saw a man, a policeman, stumble into view ahead on the left, and then the train was gliding past him, his eyes wide and searching and desperate in his dirty face.

“Claire!”

“I see him—“

Claire turned and ran out of the booth, her foot-steps clattering through the metal train car, sprinting to the door. She hit the control and the door slid open, the booming, grinding sounds of the subway billowing into the closed space.

“Leon!” she screamed. “Hurry!”

She jerked back suddenly, a wall sliding by, and spun around looking as desperate as the man—

Leon—had. After another second she turned back and closed the door.

“Did he make it?” Sherry asked, realizing that Claire couldn't possibly know, even as the words came out of her mouth.

Claire came to her and put an arm around her, as the train kept going faster and her face knotted with worry—

· and the voice in the intercom told them they had one minute left—

· and the door in the back of the car opened. In stumbled Leon, his arm wrapped with a shredded, stained bandage, his hair matted with dark, dried goo, his eyes bright and blue in the mask of dirt. “Full throttle!” he shouted; Claire nodded, and Leon blew out a heavy breath. He staggered toward them, the train shifting back and forth, speeding now, rocketing through the tunnel. He put his arm around Claire, and Claire hugged him tightly.

“Ada?” Claire whispered. “Ann—the scientist?” Leon shook his head, and Sherry saw that he might cry. “No. I didn't—no.”

“... thirty seconds until detonation. Twenty-nine . . . twenty-eight. . .”

The woman's voice kept counting down, the numbers seeming to come twice as fast as they should, and Sherry buried her face in Claire's warm side, thinking about her mom. Mom and Dad. She hoped that they'd gotten out, that they were safe somewhere—

· but they're probably not. They're probably dead.

Sherry could hear Claire's heart pounding, and she hugged her friend tighter, thinking that she would think about it later.

“... five. Four. Three. Two. One. Sequence complete. Detonation.”

For a second, there was no sound at all. The alarms had finally stopped, and the clattering movement of the racing train was all there was to hear—

· and then there was an explosion, a muffled sound, a shoomp sound that kept going, growing, becoming huge.

Sherry closed her eyes and the train rocked suddenly, horribly, and they were all thrown to the metal floor as bright, burning light flickered through the window, as the sounds of a car crash blasted all around them, heavy thumps raining over the roof—

· and the train kept going. It kept going, and the light went away, and they weren't dead.

The blinding flash dissipated, faded, and Leon felt the tension leaking out of his body. He rolled onto his side, and saw Claire sitting up, reaching for the hand of the young girl next to her.

“Okay?” Claire asked the girl, and the child nodded. Both of them turned to him, their faces expressing what he felt—shock, exhaustion, disbelief, hope. “Leon Kennedy, this is Sherry Birkin,” Claire said, saying the words carefully, the slightest accent on “Birkin.” He got the message even without the intensity of her gaze, nodding his understanding before smiling at the girl.

“Sherry, this is Leon,” Claire continued. “I met him when I had just gotten to Raccoon.”

Sherry returned his smile, a weary, too-adult smile that seemed out of place; she was too young to smile like that.

One more rotten deed to lay at Umbrella's door, innocence stolen from a child. . . .

For a few seconds, they just sat there on the floor, staring at one another, smiles fading all around. Leon hardly dared to hope that it was really over, that they were leaving the terror behind. Again, he saw his feelings mirrored in front of him, in Sherry's worried brow and Claire's tired gray eyes—

· and when they heard the distant squeal of metal coming from somewhere at the back of the train, he didn't see any surprise. A rending, tearing screech—followed by a heavy, somehow stealthy thump—and then nothing.

Should've known it isn't over—

“Zombie?” Sherry whispered, the word almost lost in the gently clattering sound of the speeding train. “I don't know, sweetie,” Claire said softly, and for the first time, Leon noticed that her left leg was ripped to shit, blood oozing from several ragged scratches; he'd been too amazed at his, at their narrow escape to see it before.

“How about I go take a look?” Leon said, taking his cue from Claire, keeping his voice mild and even;

no point in scaring Sherry any worse. He stood up, nodding toward Claire's leg.

"Sherry, why don't you stay here with Claire, keep an eye on that leg? I'll see if I can find some bandages while I'm checking things out; don't let her move, okay?"

Sherry nodded, her small face intent with purpose that again was too old for her years. "Got it." "I'll be back in a minute," he said, and turned toward the back of the swaying train, praying that it was nothing at all and knowing better, as he reached for the Remington and went to see.

Leon opened the door, the sounds of the rolling train amplified for a second before it closed behind him. Claire couldn't see him enter the next car from her position on the floor, and wished she'd been in shape to go with him; if there was something else on the train, Sherry wasn't safe, none of them were—

- don't think like that, it's nothing. It's over—
- like it was over with Mr. X?

"What should I do?" Sherry asked, pulling Claire away from the disheartening thoughts. "Direct pres-sure, right?"

Claire nodded. "Yeah, except we're both pretty grimy, and I think it's starting to clot. Let's see if Leon comes back with something clean ..."

She trailed off, her thoughts going back to Mr. X. There was something nagging at her but she was a little dizzy from the blood she'd lost—

- G-Virus. It wanted the G-Virus before.

Why had Mr. X come to the subway platform? Why had it been trying to get inside the train, unless—

Claire struggled to get up, fighting her swimming head and the throbbing pain in her leg.

"Hey, don't move," Sherry said, a look of deep distress in her eyes. "Leon said to stay still!" She might have been able to overcome her physical problems, but seeing Sherry on the edge of panic was too much; if there was some G-Virus creature on board, if that was why Mr. X had come, Leon would have to face it alone. She couldn't leave Sherry. If Leon didn't come back, she'd have to figure out how to detach their train car, or stop the train so they could get off before the creature could get to them—

Claire shut the thoughts off, forcing a smile for Sherry. "Yes ma'am. I just wanted to make sure he got through the second car. . ."

She could see the relief sweep across Sherry's face. "Oh. Well, forget it, I'm taking care of you now, and I say you stay still."

Claire nodded absently, hoping that she was wrong, hoping that Leon would be back any second—

- Sam! Bam! Bam!

The thunder of the Remington was loud and clear. Sherry grabbed her hand as two more shots blasted the hope from Claire's fuzzy mind, as the train sped through the dark.

The second car was clear, the same wide-open space that Leon had entered the train by, all dusty steel and not much else. Whoever had designed the escape vehicle had obviously figured the Umbrella employ-ees would have to be packed in like sardines. Just us three, though—and our stowaway. . . . There was nothing to see, but Leon moved slowly nonetheless, carefully scanning the shadowy corners and steeling himself for whatever was in the last car. Whatever it was, it couldn't be as bad as the thing that had jumped him in the cargo room, the Birkin-thing, if that was what it was. The thought that the creature had anything at all to do with Claire's young friend was deeply unsettling, even obscene. A monster and a madwoman, both destroyed, both parents of the little girl. . . .

He reached the back of the dim and rocking train car and peered through the door, pushing all other thoughts aside as he tried to make out anything at all in the last car. Darkness, and nothing else. Hell.

Maybe there wasn't anything to see, but he had to look. He felt his heart start to pound fresh adrenaline through his body, felt his weariness fall away. Noth-ing, it was surely nothing, but it felt bad. Wrong. Last thing, very last thing. . . .

He took a deep breath and opened the door, step-ping into the loud, whipping breeze of the outside, holding on to the rail. The rattle of the train drowned out the thumping of his heart as he moved to the last car, opened the door, and stepped into darkness. Immediately, he raised the shotgun, all of his senses telling him to run as the door slid shut behind him. He reached back, slapping for a light switch. Dark-ness, but there was a powerful smell like bleach or chlorine, and there was the soft sound of wetness, of movement—

A single bare bulb flickered on in the middle of the car as he found a button, and he thought for just a second that he'd lost his mind.

A thing. A creature that wasn't even vaguely hu-manoid, except for a strange, pulsing tumor protrud-ing from one side, a slick orb that looked very much like an eye.

Birkin.

The creature was a giant, stretching blob of dark, slimy matter, spanning the width of the car; Leon couldn't tell how tall it was. The Birkin-thing had thick streamers extended out, tentacles of wet and elastic goo attached to every part of the space in front of it—the ceiling, walls, and floor. And as Leon watched, the alien beast pulled itself forward, the dark limbs contracting, bringing the mass of the body a few feet ahead of where it had been.

Not crazy. He was seeing it, seeing the brackish, moving colors of black and green and purple in its tentacles as it stretched out again, the viscous materi-al latching to the metal of the car somehow, dragging the blob a few more feet ahead. The body itself was nothing so much as a gaping maw, a wet cave that still had teeth—

· and that would reach him pretty soon if he didn't snap out of his disgusted stupor.

Leon aimed into the giant hole of its mouth and pulled the trigger, pumping in another round, firing, pumping, firing—

· and then the shotgun was empty, and the giant semi-liquid thing was still moving steadily forward. He didn't know how to kill it, didn't know if the rounds had even damaged it. His mind raced for an answer, for a solution that would end the terrible life of the G-Virus monster. He could detach the last car, fire through the pins and chains that held it together, //he could find the locking mechanism—

· and it would still be alive. Still living and chang-ing in the blackness of the tunnel, becoming something new—

The stretching elastic of its nebulous form inched forward, and Leon reached back for the door control. He'd have to try unhooking the cars, there was no other choice—

· unless—

He hesitated, then unholstered his Magnum and pointed it at the impossible mass. At the strange tumor that peered out of a slit in its rubber flesh, the eye that had been in every form that Birkin had taken. Careful aim, and—

· BAM!

The effect was immediate and total, the heavy round piercing the rheumy sphere—and a hissing, screaming whine or whistle pouring out of the toothed maw, like nothing on Earth, like the howl of some-thing mechanical and insane. The tendrils of un-formed matter shrank inward, turning black, shriv-eling—

· and the thing imploded, pulling in on itself, withering into a steaming black mass less than a quarter its original size. Like a deflated beachball, the gelid blob wrinkled and shrank, collapsing into a flattening thickness, drooling itself into a wide puddle of bubbling slime.

“Suck on that,” Leon said softly, the last bubbles popping, the pool a dead and inanimate thing. He watched it for a few moments, thinking about nothing at all—and finally turned to join the others, to tell them it was over.

First day on the job, he thought.

“I want a raise,” Leon said, to no one at all, and couldn't help the grin that broke across his face, a tired, sunny grin that faded quickly ... but for the few seconds he wore it, Leon felt better than he had in a very long time.

Leon was back, and had found a jumpsuit that he tore into pieces and used to bind up Claire's leg. All he'd said was that they were safe now, although Sherry had seen him and Claire exchange a look—one of those “we-shouldn't-talk-about-it-right-now” looks. Sherry was too tired to take offense. She snuggled into Claire's arms, Claire stroking her hair, the three of them not talking. There was nothing to say, or at least not for a little while. They were alive, on a train thundering through the dark—and from somewhere not far ahead, a soft light came filtering in, coming through the window in the control booth, and Sherry thought it looked very much like morning.

EPILOGUE

THEY SAW THE AFTERMATH OF THE EXPLO-sion from ten miles outside the city, a black and billowing cloud that rose up into the early morning light and hung over Raccoon like a terrible storm—

· or a bad dream, Rebecca thought, a recurring one. Umbrella.

She didn't say it aloud, because it wasn't necessary. John and David hadn't gone through the Spencer estate nightmare, but they'd been at the Cove facility, witnesses to what Umbrella was capable of; they

knew.

Nobody spoke as David stepped up the speed, his knuckles white on the wheel. For once, John didn't crack any jokes about what might have happened. They all knew that it was bad; before Jill, Chris, and Barry had left for Europe, Jill had wired them with her suspicions about another accident, and asked them to keep tabs. When the phone lines had gone down, they'd loaded up the SUV and left Maine to see what could be done. The only question was how many people had died this time.

Maybe this is the end, finally. A blast like that... Umbrella can't cover this up so easily, not if it's as bad as it looks.

John finally broke the silence, his deep, mellow voice uncharacteristically subdued. "Fail-safe?" David sighed. "Probably. And if there was a spill, we're not going in; we'll circle the city and then call for help from Latham. Umbrella is surely sending in its cleanup staff already."

Rebecca nodded along with John. They weren't technically part of the S.T.A.R.S. anymore, but David had been a captain before, and with good reason. They fell back into a tense silence, the dawn-touched trees spinning past the utility vehicle, Rebecca wondering what they would find—

· when she saw the people, staggering up into the road, waving their arms.

"Hey—" she started, but David was already hitting the brakes, slowing down as they neared the three-some of ragged strangers. A cop with a bandaged arm and a young woman in shorts, both of them holding weapons, and a little girl in a pink vest that was much too big for her. They weren't infected, or at least not showing signs that Rebecca could see—but they looked like hell nonetheless. With their ripped clothes and their faces pale and shocked beneath masks of dirt, they certainly could have passed for walking death.

"I'll talk," David said, his crisp British accent mild but firm, and then they were pulling up beside the Raccoon survivors.

David opened his window and killed the engine, the young cop stepping forward as the woman slipped one grimy arm around the little girl's shoulders. "There's been an accident, in Raccoon," he said, and although they were obviously tired and wounded and badly in need of help, there was a wariness in the cop's tone, a guarded, careful note that suggested just how bad things had been. "A terrible accident. You don't want to go there, it's not safe."

David frowned. "What sort of accident, Officer?" The young woman spoke up, her mouth a set and bitter line. "An Umbrella accident," she said, and the cop nodded, and the little blond girl buried her face against the woman's hip.

John and Rebecca exchanged a look, and David hit the switch to unlock the doors.

"Really? Those tend to be the worst kind," he said gently. "We'd be happy to help you, if you'd like, or we could call for help. . . ."

It was a question. The cop glanced back at the woman, then met David's gaze for several long beats. He must have seen something in David's face that he felt he could trust; he nodded slowly, then motioned for the woman and girl to come forward.

"Thanks," he said, the exhaustion finally coming through. "If you could give us a ride, that'd be great."

David smiled. “Please, get in. John, Rebecca—would you assist. . .?”

John grabbed a couple of blankets out of the back as Rebecca reached for her medical kit, careful not to uncover the rifles tucked next to the wheel well. An Umbrella accident. . .

Rebecca wondered if they knew how lucky they were to have survived it—but another look into those three exhausted, shell-shocked faces told her that they probably did.

They started talking even before David turned the vehicle around—and in a very short time, they discovered that they had a lot in common, as the child fell asleep and they drove back the way they’d come, leaving the burning city behind.