

Chapter 1

The end of the world will not come without a war

Standing at the checkpoint behind concertina wire and sandbags, sweating in his body armor and holding an M4 carbine, PFC Jon Mooney closes his eyes and instantly falls asleep on his feet, nodding under the weight of his Kevlar helmet. Then his eyes flutter open and he believes, just for an instant, that he's still in Iraq manning a roadblock in Baghdad's Adamiyah District, with Apaches throbbing overhead and Iraqi kids hawking cold sodas and sniper rifles popping in the windows.

His heart racing, his eyes flicker, assessing threats, and settle on the giant billboard across the intersection for what seems like the hundredth time. The big ad, packed with models frolicking in a frothy pink bubble bath, is mounted over a Burger King nestled between a nameless electronics store and a discount clothing shop. He doesn't understand the ad, doesn't even know what it is supposed to be selling. It calls to him, promises some sort of escape he desperately wants right now, but cannot name.

This is not Iraq. This is New York City.

The Burger King and all of the stores are closed on this part of First Avenue due to the epidemic, their fronts screened by black metal grates as if the street were a giant prison. Abandoned cars and litter choke the streets and sidewalks radiating out from the checkpoint up to the concrete roadblocks placed a block away.

This is supposed to be home.

Midtown Manhattan looms over this grimy street scene, skyscraper windows winking in the sun. Mooney squints into the light until he finds the gleaming crown of the Chrysler Building. Everything looks quiet,

almost serene up there. A man could stop and rest for a while in the breeze.

Forty-six hours ago, he was sitting on a runway halfway around the world with the rest of Charlie Company's Second Platoon, waiting for his ride home. Of course, they weren't calling it a retreat. The Brass called it the Emergency Redeployment, the officers on the ground called it the Extraction, and the enlisted called it Suckfest and the Mother of all Clusterfucks and "a great way to get killed." Whatever you wanted to call it, the military began pulling out tens of thousands of soldiers all at once while the Iraqi government folded up into the Green Zone and the tribesmen returned to settling old scores when they had time between fanatical attacks on the retreating Americans.

The soldiers, returning home on anything that could fly or float, were redeployed throughout the United States. The logistics of the withdrawal of forces from bases around the world back to the homeland boggled the mind. Mooney's light infantry rifle platoon, still burned by the Middle Eastern sun and digging sand out of their pockets, got assigned this stretch of First Avenue in Manhattan.

The mission: Provide security for Trinity Hospital.

Not exactly the homecoming that Mooney had been looking forward for the past year, but at least nobody was shooting at him anymore.

Near the checkpoint, the old man has returned and is again hounding people trying to get through the soldiers and into the hospital. "I wouldn't go in there if I was you," he warns. He's clean shaven, with long, scraggly gray hair. He wears a T-shirt that announces: THE SMARTEST DUDE IN THE ROOM.

"But I'm hungry," a man says. "The stores are low on food and I've got nothing."

Corporal Eckhardt, Mooney's team leader, waves through a young woman obviously infected with Hong Kong Lyssa, supported by a man who could have been her husband or boyfriend. The woman is lit up with fever and twitching.

"Sorry," Eckhardt is saying to those next in line. "We are not doing food distribution at this post. Here's a list of sites you can try. The list is from the City Government."

"People go in there," the old man says, nodding at everybody within eyeshot. "But they don't come out."

The old bastard is practically gloating over this news.

Mooney sighs as he watches people streaming through the abandoned cars, seeking care among Trinity's rapidly dwindling beds. The infected never seem to stop coming. He's tired of military service. But soon it will all be over for Jon Mooney. Twenty-seven days and a wakeup, his discharge comes through and he's out of the Army, and Alpha Mike Foxtrot—*adios*, motherfucker—to Iraq, New York and the rest of it.

The days are crawling by. He and most of the other guys in the platoon are kids, nineteen or twenty years old, but they wear patches on both shoulders, indicating that they have combat experience, that they are veterans. They are infantry: lean and fit and hungry. Mooney is tired and he has already seen too much that he'd like to forget. He just wants to go home and return to collecting vintage records and staying up until two in the morning watching bad TV. He'd like to see if he can get things going with Laura again. Maybe get his own place, some secret refuge where he can be alone for a while.

"Next!" barks Eckhardt. "Come on, let's go, people."

"Everybody goes in there, but nobody ever comes out!" the old man crows.

"Mister, I believe it's time for you to shut your dicktrap," says Specialist Martin from Weapons Squad, leaning over his tripod-mounted .30-caliber M240 perched on a pile of sandbags and aimed up First Avenue. Sitting on the ground next to him, the assistant gunner, the guy everybody calls Boomer, laughs.

"So is this how you treat—?" the old man starts, then begins jogging away as Martin swivels his machine gun just enough to communicate threat. "You boys are in the right business, all right," he calls over his shoulder as he weaves through the abandoned cars. "Because the end of the world will not come without a war!"

"Alpha Mike Foxtrot!" Martin calls after him with a grin and a friendly wave, making the assistant gunner cackle again.

"A war of fratricide!" the man calls back.

Mooney is only vaguely aware of what that word means, but it makes him shudder for some reason.

"Only in New York," says Boomer, shaking his head.

This place is starting to sound like Baghdad

At the south checkpoint, a small crowd is arguing with Second

Platoon's CO about whether the Army is hoarding a secret government vaccine in the hospital.

Second Lieutenant Todd Bowman of Fredericksburg, Texas has pale blue eyes and the blond, all-American good looks of a choir boy. Bowman studied history in college before joining the Army to see firsthand how it is made. Tall and lanky, he has been a competent leader but has not yet shaken his habit of glancing at Sergeant First Class Mike Kemper, a thirty-year-old veteran from Louisiana, for confirmation of his boldest orders and deepest fears. Kemper, small but with large hands and a wiry, lethal build, usually winks back. With his short-cropped hair and intense stare, his normal expression is menacing until he smiles, which dramatically changes his appearance. To the boys, the platoon sergeant is a rock. They call him Pops.

On the other side of the double line of coiled concertina wire pulled across First Avenue and weighted down by sandbags, a large woman is pleading with the LT to share whatever vaccine his troops are guarding inside the hospital.

"Ma'am," says the LT, "if we had a vaccine, why would we be wearing these masks? Do you know how uncomfortable it is to wear these masks all day and night?"

The woman stares at him uncertainly. "Well, it could be just for show."

"That makes no sense to me whatsoever, Ma'am."

"I told myself I was going to come down here and I'm not budging an inch until I get some vaccine for my babies. Do you understand me?"

Another man says: "Look here, officer."

"How old are you, anyway?" the woman says. "Twelve?"

The man continues: "Look at me, officer. Thank you. The President of the United States said you have a vaccine. Why would the President say that if it weren't true?"

Bowman answers matter-of-factly, "Sir, the Commander-in-Chief passed along no such information to his chain of command, who surely would have told me about it."

"Hey, I asked you if you understand me," the woman says.

Another man jumps in: "My wife's got it and I asked her sister to come over and help but now she's got it and I can't control both of them. They're back in my apartment doing God knows what, ripping the place apart. I need help. What should I do?"

"The best you can," Bowman answers. "You can bring them here for

care or try to get a neighbor to help or maybe call the police, if they have the resources. But I can't spare a single man to leave this post to help you. I'm sorry. I really am."

A long series of single gunshots erupts to the north, popping against the steady background roar of New York, the sound of eight million people trying to stay alive. Bowman stiffens for a moment and turns towards the gunfire's distant echo, his instincts aroused by a vague sense of threat. Moments later, the sound is drowned out as a Blackhawk helicopter zooms overhead, skimming the rooftops.

Corporal Alvarez has meanwhile hustled up, and reports to the LT that the Trinity people want to talk to him. It's urgent, he adds.

The man is still talking: "You're not listening to me—"

Bowman nods vaguely, unable to shake his feeling of unease, and tells the crowd: "We're done here."

Dr. Linton, the hospital chief, and Winslow, one of several heavily armed city cops providing security inside the building, stand outside the city transit bus parked in front of the hospital emergency room doors, wearing N95 masks and looking worried. Behind them, the line of victims of the Hong Kong Lyssavirus and their families wait their turn to go into the bus, coughing and blowing their noses. Inside, nurses perform military-style triage to separate those infected with HK Lyssavirus from those with other infections or nothing wrong with them at all other than panic and imagination.

Those who have Lyssa are separated into priority groups using colored tags. If you get green, the nurses send you back home for home care. If you get red, you are considered a high priority for the ICU if one is available. If you get yellow, you might do well in the ICU and you might not, so you are hospitalized but have to wait.

If you get black, they make you as comfortable as possible until you die.

The HK Lyssavirus' mortality rate is high, somewhere between three and five percent of clinically ill cases, as much as twice as during the Spanish Flu of 1918-19. Hundreds of thousands of Americans are already dead and another two to three million are expected to die later. So many are dying, in fact, that corpses are being stacked in refrigerated trucks continually idling on the other side of the hospital, which, when full, drive their loads out to mass graves being dug in New Jersey.

The problem is not the number of dead, however, even though the num-

ber is horrifying.

HK Lyssa is a new airborne flulike virus—likely to have originated in Indian fruit bats, according to the CDC—that evolved to become easily transmissible between humans. It knocks you off your feet like severe flu, with additional symptoms such as twitching, rapid blinking and a powerful sour-milk body odor. Most people recover in about two weeks, but if infection is severe and the virus enters the brain, it causes dementia: The victim foams at the mouth, refuses water, becomes paranoid and prone to sudden violent movements, and eventually cannot speak except to make an unnerving growling sound like an idling motorcycle. Somebody on cable news called them Mad Dogs, and the label caught on. It fits. They are dangerous, and the soldiers know to be careful of them. Mad Dogs have hurt and killed people, even their own family members. They always get the black tag. They always die, usually within three to five days.

But the small numbers of Mad Dogs complicating an already horrifying epidemic is not even the real problem.

The biggest challenge facing the United States is simply the staggering number of people who are sick, unable to do anything except lie there and require constant help.

Because the human immune system has never encountered this virus before, it has no natural defense and almost everybody is susceptible to catching it. As a result, tens of millions of people are sick around the country, including many of the people who treat them, maintain public order, produce and distribute food and pharmaceuticals, make the water flow, and keep the lights and air conditioning and refrigerators and elevators and gas stoves working. America is already starting to come apart at the seams.

There is a proverb that says the USA is always just three days from a revolution. Stop delivering food to the supermarkets and see what a country of three hundred million citizens, with a strong sense of entitlement and more than two hundred fifty million guns, has to say about it. This is why the government declared a national emergency and recalled its military forces from overseas—to protect America from itself.

“Stay close, Mike,” Bowman tells the Platoon Sergeant. “I have a feeling I know what they’re going to want this time.”

Kemper takes off his patrol cap and runs his hand over his closely cropped skull. “It was inevitable, sir,” he says. “We knew this would happen.”

“But we couldn’t really plan for it. We’re not equipped.”

“We trained with non-lethals, but now that we have to actually use them, there’s none to be had,” says Kemper, refitting his cap. “All that training, down the drain.”

Linton foregoes the usual token effort to make some sort of friendly contact with the military men protecting his hospital, and gets right to the point.

“Lieutenant, we have no more room for new patients. No beds, no staff, nothing. We’re running out of gloves and gowns and masks. We’re shutting down and will be focusing on our current caseload for the near future.”

“I understand,” Bowman says.

The hospital chief extends a clipboard with one gloved hand. “I’ve had the addresses of several local alternative care sites written down. Last I heard, they are still in business. Hospices, too, for the Mad Dogs.” The doctor clears his throat politely at his use of the common but politically incorrect term. “I’m asking if you can tell people who come here wanting care that they should go to one of these other sites.”

Kemper takes the clipboard while Bowman says, “We’ll take care of it.”

Linton opens his mouth, closes it, then says simply, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Watching the men return to the hospital, Bowman shakes his head and Kemper nods in agreement.

“It’s a bag of dicks, sir, that’s for sure,” he says dryly.

Bowman sighs loudly. “I’ve got to report this up to Captain West. Mike, find me my RTO.”

A sudden crash of automatic weapons fire to the west, deep inside the city. The soldiers turn towards the sound, their faces wearing expressions of puzzlement. They exchange a quick glance. Every day, it seems, there is a little more gunfire. They’re thinking: This place is starting to sound like Baghdad.

And the epidemic is only a few weeks old.

If you shot a dog, you couldn’t eat it

Eight days earlier, Charlie Company sat around for thirty hours surrounded by their gear on the runway in Logistical Support Area King

Cobra in Iraq, alternately sweltering by day and freezing by night while waiting for a ride home. King Cobra was a virtual city of sandbagged tents and concrete bunkers sprawling for miles in all directions and surrounded by concertina wire and guard towers. The Army's ongoing exodus from the country was a marvel in its overall speed and orderliness, but LSA King Cobra nonetheless steadily unraveled in the confusion, constant attacks by insurgents, and the massive ongoing labor of trying to provide shelter and medical care for the infected. An estimated twenty percent of the forces in Iraq caught Lyssa and were suffering in quarantine tents.

At the time, the boys thought they were being redeployed to Florida, which started a debate about the relative merits of Miami girls versus girls from every other state represented in the Company. They shouted to make themselves heard, as some POGs—people other than grunts, support troops—in a nearby motor pool company had started a musical duel, one side picking gangster rap, the other heavy metal anthems.

The second night, the boys began to worry. Nobody in charge seemed to know they were there, and they were out of food and hungry. Some snuck out to beg or steal some MREs and barely made it back alive. One couldn't walk to the latrine without being attacked by wild dogs or shot at by nervous replacements. Dogs caught Lyssa too and you needed to bring a shotgun to the can so you didn't get bit, and for the same reason, if you shot a dog, as a sniper from Third Platoon did, you couldn't eat it.

A Humvee parked near the edge of the runway took a hit from an RPG and was burning, its ammo cooking off and popping. Marine Cobras roared overhead in the darkness, setting up strafing runs. In the middle of a densely populated camp with fires all around, thermal and night vision optics were useless, so the boys sent up flares and took potshots at the shadows. The swacked Humvee exploded, shooting flaming shards of metal fifty feet into the air, making the boys whoop. A SAW gunner in Second Platoon showed up laughing with a bottle of cheap Iraqi gin he'd bought from some kids at the perimeter, and the boys passed it around, savoring the slow burn on their parched throats.

A firefight broke out in the distance, then another, red tracer flashes bursting along the wire. A single mortar round whistled and burst in the center of the camp, sending pieces of tent flying. A squad of heavily armed MPs jogged by, telling everybody to keep their heads down. Buses packed with soldiers drove onto the runway as if nothing was happening,

their headlights playing on the tents and Stryker vehicles lined up in neat rows while a C130 cargo plane touched down dangerously close. The headlights briefly illuminated two soldiers locked in a fist fight, then swerved away, returning them to darkness. Somebody in the quarantine tents was screaming. Shots rang out.

The boys lay on the ground shivering in their armor, using their helmets to rest their heads, dreaming of forbidden pleasures—hot showers, plates piled high with French fries and, of course, sex. Some were so exhausted they dreamed of sleep, or not at all. In the middle of the night they woke up, Iraqi dust caked in their ears and mouths and nostrils, to the sound of gunfire close by. The air stank of oily smoke and hot diesel fumes.

At least it's not like this at home, they thought, and sighed. Soon, it will all be over.

Green tracer rounds from Russian guns streamed into the cold night sky over Baghdad. The city appeared to be tearing itself apart. Word went around that the militias were shooting Lyssa victims down in the street. People went Mad Dog and roamed the city along with animals who'd also caught it, spreading infection.

It was a disaster beyond the soldiers' comprehension.

"We tried," PFC Richard Boyd said, watching the distant fireworks, his voice quivering with rage. "We really did. Now they can die for all I care."

At dawn, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer Armstrong, silver-haired and looking fierce with his arm in a bloody sling, mustered the battalion and gave everybody a rousing speech just before they boarded chartered United and Air France planes and started the long journey home.

Operation Iraqi Freedom has been scrubbed, he told them.

We're going back to the World.

The mission has changed. Our new mission is more important. In fact, it is possibly the most important thing the Army has done since the founding of the Republic.

We've got to see America through the Pandemic, he said.

The boys glanced at each other in formation, exchanging quick, discrete grins. It was actually happening. They were finally going home.

As Charlie Company boarded the planes, First Platoon found that Private Tyrone Botus, the kid everybody called Rook, had gone Elvis. He had ventured out near the quarantine tents to refill his squad's canteens the night before. They couldn't find him anywhere.

We have bayonets. That should make an impression

Jake Sherman, the platoon's radio/telephone operator, hands Lieutenant Bowman the handset attached to the SINCGAR radio pack on his back. "War Dogs Six on the net, LT," he says, his mouth full of gum.

War Dogs is Charlie Company's call sign and War Dogs Six is the commander of Charlie Company, Captain West.

"This is War Dogs Two actual," Bowman says into the phone. "I send 'Metallica,' over."

This is War Dogs actual. I copy "Metallica." Wait one, over. Um, roger that, over.

"Request riot control gear, over."

Wait one, over. That's a, uh, no go, over.

"Request to be relieved by riot control units. How copy? Over."

That's another no go, War Dogs Two. I've got nothing to send you. You'll have to make do, over.

The LT grinds his teeth and says, "Roger that, sir."

Hearts and minds, son. Good luck. Out.

Bowman turns to face his squad leaders. His rifle platoon is divided into three rifle squads of nine men plus what's left of Weapons Squad, decimated by Lyssa infection back in Iraq, leaving a single gun team. Each of the rifle squads, in turn, is led by a staff sergeant easy to pick out because, like Bowman, they are the only ones wearing patrol caps instead of Kevlar helmets. The men lean into the conference.

To the east, across the river somewhere in Brooklyn, a splash of small arms fire.

"Gentlemen, our position here is changing," says the LT.

The platoon occupied the block in front of the hospital, where the City parked a bus in front of the emergency room doors. Double strands of concertina wire were laid across both ends of the block, weighted down by sandbags, with nests for the platoon's thirty-caliber machine gun. In the intersections beyond, concrete barriers blocked off the adjoining streets, but people simply drove around them using the sidewalks and abandoned their cars in the intersections. Beyond the roadblocks, the streets are jammed with cars in slowly moving traffic, drivers yelling at each other and leaning on their horns. Looking at the bumper-to-bumper traffic only a block away, you could almost believe things are still normal

here. At least normal for New York.

“Until now, our mission has been to protect the hospital and ensure the orderly flow of cases through the triage process,” Bowman adds. “Now the hospital is full up, as I’ve just informed Captain West using the mission code. This means the orderly flow of cases is about to hit a dam. We’re shutting off both entrances in thirty minutes.”

“The good citizens of New York are not going to like that one bit,” Sergeant Ruiz points out. “Could get ugly fast.”

“Any word on the non-lethals, sir?” asks Sergeant McGraw in his heavy South Carolina drawl.

“The Captain says that’s a November Golf, Pete.”

In other words, a “no go.”

McGraw rubs his nose. With his barrel chest, handlebar mustache bristling on his upper lip, and heavily tattooed forearms, he has an intimidating appearance. When not soldiering, he is usually riding a Harley across the Bible Belt with his young biker girlfriend, hammering down on the big slab. “Kind of hard to do crowd control with what we got, LT,” he says. “We’re armed to the teeth and can’t use any of it. You know that.”

“We have bayonets. That should make an impression. Hopefully, it will be enough.”

“And if it ain’t, sir?”

Bowman looks into his non-coms’ eyes. He knows what they are thinking. Back in Iraq, they’re thinking, the streets are still littered with American good intentions, blood and bodies and undetonated munitions. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died there, many as a result of stray American ordinance. You simply can’t use the kind of firepower that American infantry carries around and not expect civilians to get killed, especially in built-up areas. Accidents happen and they cannot afford accidents now that the civilians are their fellow citizens. To do this mission properly, the soldiers need batons, shields, riot control dispensers, snipers on the roof and birds in the air. But they have none of these. There are Army units all over the country needing the same equipment and there is simply not enough to go around. Due to the usual logistical foul-up, they do not even have CS gas grenades commonly issued to infantry in urban deployments.

Instead, they are packing heavy firepower and plenty of bullets.

“We stick with the ROE,” Bowman answers. “Remember that we’re in somebody’s house here.” The rules of engagement for this mission in

urban terrain: Return fire only if you are fired upon directly by a hostile force that is clearly visible. Which should be almost never.

He adds: “And we keep our force concentrated. Between Lyssa and everything else, we’re down to seventy-five percent strength. I don’t want to see any part of this platoon peeled off and overrun by a mob of pissed-off civilians looking for medicine.”

They know they are basically in a no-win situation, a “bag of dicks” in Army lingo. Ruiz whistles through his nose. Lewis mutters, “Man, this is jacked up.” Kemper smiles and says: “Embrace the suck, gentlemen.”

Bowman raises his eyebrows. “OK. If the crowd gets out of hand, we’ll put on respirators, fire some smoke grenades and maybe the civs will think it’s tear gas and run for it. It’s a long shot, I know—”

McGraw is grinning. “Satisfactory, sir. It’s worth a try, sir.”

“All right, then. Get your men ready to muster in thirty minutes.”

The best way to take down a police helicopter with an RPG while playing *Grand Theft Auto*

The boys of Third Squad are the night shift, and this being day, they are enjoying some rack time, sprawled on their bunks in a large room in the cool basement of the hospital, where Second Platoon has been billeted. Three of the boys are sleeping soundly after a debate on the best way to take down a police helicopter with an RPG while playing *Grand Theft Auto*. Corporal Hicks, sweating bullets, does push-ups on the floor. Grunting, he switches to sit-ups. Boyd smokes quietly and reads a letter from home, idly running one hand over his bristling skull and mouthing the words *oh, man* repeatedly, while McLeod, the platoon ne’er-do-well, leafs through a copy of *Playboy*, calling out, for anybody caring to listen, names, hobbies, measurements and, assuming unlimited funds, how much he would pay to have sex with them. The Newb sews a rip in his uniform, cursing steadily at having to perform yet another goddamn mind-numbing Army chore when he could be dreaming, while Williams cleans and oils his M203A1 carbine and grenade launcher and at that moment is pretty sure he’d shoot somebody in the face for a hot fajita burrito with sour cream and extra corn salsa. A good soldier can break down a rifle in fewer than thirty seconds and reassemble it in less, and Williams knows his business. He grew up in Oakland hustling and gang banging, and he is a long way from that world, even though he feels right at home

with the big, dumb, earnest kids of his platoon, this melting pot Army. He shakes his head, smiling and remembering. He has some stories to tell when he gets back. He is still alive to tell them. A boom box stolen from an upstairs nurse's station plays a loud, steady stream of music. Today it is hip hop, yesterday it was rock and roll, tomorrow who knows. As long as it's loud.

"Man oh man, at least a million dollars," says McLeod, checking out the centerfold. "At least. I mean, Jeezus. Hey guys, what'll you give me for a quick look at these hooters? Do I hear a buck? I swear they're real. Any takers?"

Williams shakes his head. It's all they ever talk about—that special Suzie Rottencrotch back home, their mythical sexual prowess, the hot nurses upstairs and what they are going to do to the world's women when they get out of the Army. He looks up as Sergeant Ruiz enters the room and says, "Hey, Sergeant. What's the word?"

"The word is you morons aren't sleeping when you're supposed to be getting your Zs," Ruiz barks back at him, glaring with his intense eyes. "And not wearing your masks when you're supposed to, either."

"We didn't wear the masks in Iraq, Sarge," McLeod says. "How come we have to wear them here?"

"Because in Iraq, we weren't living in a hospital filled with people dying from the Black Death, shit-for-brains."

McLeod grins, racking his wit for a good retort, but Ruiz has already moved on. "Get out of your fartsacks and get your shit on, ladies. LT has some work for us and we're on the move in ten minutes."

Boyd looks up, his eyes gleaming. "My sister's got Lyssa. I got this letter from home."

The boys stop and stare at him.

"My mom says they're burning bodies outside town. She even told me how they do it. They dig a trench to make an air vent, right, and then they build the pyre with wood. They put the bodies on top and burn them up. The town council got totally freaked and started doing this. This is all the way on the other side of the country. The letter took over a week to get to me."

"Sorry about your sister, Boyd," Ruiz offers.

"This was over a week ago," Boyd says, staring at the letter in disbelief. "She could be dead by now."

"Did somebody say they were burning up bodies?" says Ross, whom

everybody calls Hawkeye because of his uncanny accuracy with an M4 carbine. He has just woken up and is still bleary from sleep. “Man, that is extreme.”

“It’s got to be bullshit,” says McLeod. “Some cities are digging mass graves to store the bodies temporarily, but they’re not burning them up, for Chrissakes.”

“If they were paranoid enough, they might,” Williams says.

“What I’m saying is: What am I doing here in New York?” Boyd wonders. “Why aren’t we guarding a hospital in Idaho, like in Boise? I should be there. I should be home with them. I could at least be in the same lousy state. I have to call my mom.”

“I’ll bet we got guys in Boise and the towns around it just like we’re here in New York,” Ruiz tells him. “Some of them are probably New Yorkers and wishing they were here. And they’re watching over your family just like we’re watching over theirs. The same way that everybody in this platoon has each other’s backs. All right?”

“Hooah, Sergeant,” says Boyd, without enthusiasm.

The boys quietly begin to pull their gear on: battle dress uniform, boots, kneepads, body armor, harness, watch, ammo, knife, gloves, primary weapons and Kevlar.

“Okay, so we’ve reached the point where we’re setting people on fire, but if you look at this whole global plague of death in a glass-half-full kind of way, there are some things we could actually be pretty happy about,” McLeod says to break the ice after a few moments. “For example, we’re getting three squares a day, eight hours of rack time a night, and we even got running water. Plus we don’t have to go out on patrol in neighborhoods that all look like Tijuana after it’s been cluster-bombed, getting our balls blown off by elevated IEDs and crazy Hajjis.”

“Shut up, McLeod,” growls Ruiz.

“I’m just trying to cheer everybody up by pointing out it may be true that two hundred million people are going to die and the world is probably ending, but at least we got out of that Arab Hell with our butts and balls intact and we don’t have to shit in an oven covered in flies, so mission accomplished, am I right or am I right?”

Most of the boys are laughing, but Ruiz is now standing in front of McLeod, who snaps to attention, staring straight ahead into the void, his mouth carefully zipped and primly holding back a smile. Ruiz takes a step forward until their eyes are inches away, Ruiz’s probing, searching for an

excuse, McLeod's respectfully vacant. Finally, the sergeant shakes his head in exaggerated disgust and walks away. "*Vamos, ladies!*"

Williams slaps McLeod on the back after Ruiz leaves the room. Their friendship goes back to basic training, where they were battle buddies and McLeod often got them both smoked with pushups and barracks maintenance—usually scrubbing toilets—by falling asleep in class and otherwise pissing off the drill instructors.

"You go on being a buster and Magilla is gonna chunk your ass good, dawg," Williams warns. He means it: Ruiz is an articulate and thoughtful NCO but has a short temper and, thanks to constant exercise, a thickly muscled body, making him resemble a bulldog. The boys call him Magilla behind his back, short for Magilla Gorilla.

McLeod replies with a cartoonish shrug.

Corporal Hicks, watching Boyd slowly pull on his gear while muttering to himself, says, "Get yourself squared away, Rick. Almost everybody in this platoon has somebody on the outside who's got the bug."

"I should be there with them," Boyd says. "They're all I've got in this world."

"If we stay focused, we'll all get through this and I mean everybody. If we start falling apart, with everybody going off his own way, well, then God help us all because we are surely jacked. Because this thing is going to get a hell of a lot worse before it gets better. Until then, make the pain your friend and it will make you stronger."

McLeod grins and says, "Wouldn't it be cool if the Sergeant got Lyssa in his brain and turned into a Mad Dog? 'Get out of your fartsacks and get your shit on, ladies!' Snarl, snarl!"

The boys burst into laughter.

I'm going to kill you dead

Sergeant McGraw roars, "Squad as skirmishers, move!" and watches his squad deploy in a line, weapons held at safe port so the friendly citizens of New York can clearly observe their bayonets. Beyond the concertina wire and the sandbags, people keep on streaming through the cars. They break into a run after seeing the soldiers begin to close the checkpoint, and when they finally reach the wire and confirm their dashed hopes, they try to shout or beg their way in.

Help me, they say. I think my kids have it and I don't know what to do.

Their faces are turning blue.

Corporal Eckhardt hands them the yellow sheets, but the people do not want to leave. Many of them brought a sick loved one with them, and the prospect of walking ten blocks to a Lyssa clinic set up in some school or bowling alley does not seem promising. They scream, they shout, they beg. They fall to the ground and sit, numbly clutching their yellow pieces of paper. The air fills with that sickly sour smell people give off when they've got Lyssa—the stench that keeps on giving.

A woman is crying, I can't do it by myself, I can't, I just can't.

"Couldn't we let in just a few more people?" Mooney hisses.

"Shut up," says Finnegan, standing next to him. "You know the answer to that."

"This is horrible."

Sergeant McGraw says into his handheld, "We're good at this end, sir."

Gunfire rattles just a few blocks away to the west, loud and echoing among the buildings. The seemingly constant wail of police and ambulance sirens appears to multiply in volume.

McGraw pauses, looking west, and says, "I've got—"

A deafening boom sends a brief tremor through the ground and shatters windows in nearby buildings. The soldiers break formation to look as a fireball mushrooms into the air on a plume of black smoke, rising up over the buildings across the avenue to the west. A shrill wail goes up from the civilians.

"Holy crap!" says Wyatt. "I felt the concussion."

"Back in formation!" McGraw roars, his face red. "Right now!"

"Whoa, what was that?" says Rollins. "It practically blew out my eardrums."

"Dude, this is seriously jacked," Mooney whispers.

"We got to trust the Sergeant," Finnegan hisses at them. "He'll get us through this. If he don't, Pops will. Now just shut up and do what you're told. It's all going to be okay."

"No talking in the ranks, you hear?" McGraw says, then finishes his report to the LT on his handheld.

Mooney is not listening. He is watching two men jogging towards the crowd at the wire. There is something not right about them. The way they move as they weave purposefully through the cars. A strange, loping gait with their hands splayed into claws pressed against their chests. Like they aren't people, but some kind of animal. The thought chills him.

“Sergeant?” he says.

“Next man who talks is going to get my boot,” McGraw growls, fed up.

Mooney has lost sight of the two men. One of them had no shirt on and what looked like blue pajama bottoms. The other wore a baseball cap, denim shirt and blue jeans and had a black stain on his face, around his mouth.

The civilians are screaming. Mooney cranes his neck, trying to see past McGraw’s broad shoulders.

Then the sergeant moves, running fast, and Mooney can see the check-point. The two men are there, one of them pulling the long dark hair out of a woman’s head by the handful while the other systematically bites her stomach, drawing blood and leaving a smear of drool. The other civilians are screaming and trying to get out of the area fast. The men wrestle the woman to the ground. She lets out a horrible high-pitched whine and suddenly seems to give up, her body starting to go slack, her eyes glassy and pleading.

McGraw is shouting, stop, stop or I will shoot.

Corporal Eckhardt takes a step forward. “Sergeant—”

The sergeant sees what they’ve done and screams, “I’m going to kill you dead—”

But remembers his training, fires his Beretta into the air. Warning shots. The men’s heads jerk up with a spray of blood and spittle, looking like birds startled while feasting on carrion. The one wearing pajama bottoms leaps to his feet and takes a run straight at McGraw but immediately becomes entangled in the concertina wire, thrashing and making sounds like a dog being strangled.

Concertina wire is lined with two-inch-long razors set four inches apart. The man shreds himself until he falls to the ground, his legs soaked with blood and bleeding out from a severed femoral artery in his thigh.

The other man jumps to his feet, runs, leaps over the wire—

Several carbines *crack* and *pop* at once and the man twitches in mid air, lands on the ground in a heap. Instantly, a widening pool of blood begins to form under him.

“Cease fire! Cease fire!”

Mooney lowers his carbine. The sharp tang of cordite hangs in the air.

“Did you see that?” McGraw says to nobody in particular. “What was that?”

Bowman is shouting, running towards them from the other checkpoint,

demanding to know why weapons are being fired.

The woman is still alive, lying on the ground and in the throes of some sort of convulsions. The two assailants lie still in their own blood, obviously dead.

“Ma’am, it’s all right now,” McGraw says, holding the Beretta behind his back and extending his other hand across the wire. “Come to me. We’ll take care of you.”

The woman stares at him in terror, panting as she pulls herself unsteadily onto her feet.

He lowers his mask. “Look at me. Miss. You’re going to be okay.”

She begins twitching and blinking rapidly.

“No, don’t—”

But she has already turned and started running. By the time the squad can make an opening in the wire enough for McGraw to give chase, she is gone.