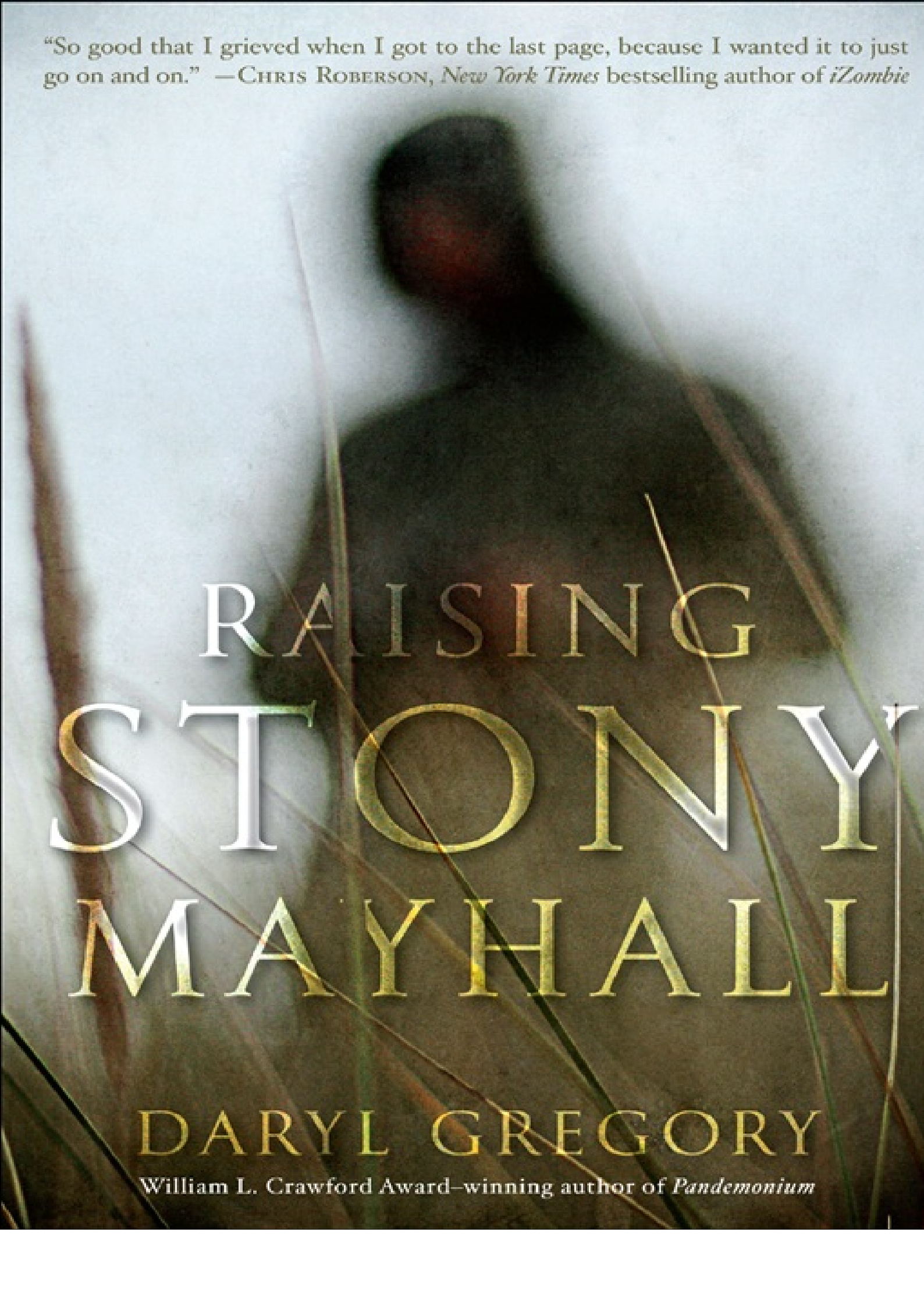


"So good that I grieved when I got to the last page, because I wanted it to just go on and on." —CHRIS ROBERSON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *iZombie*



RAISING
STONNY
MAYHALL

DARYL GREGORY

William L. Crawford Award-winning author of *Pandemonium*

Pandemonium

The Devil's Alphabet

Raising Story Mayhall



RAISING
STONY
MAYHALL

DARYL GREGORY

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For the sisters, Robin and Lisa

And the kids, Emma and Ian

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2011 Easterly Enclave

Excerpt from The Devil's Alphabet

*Are you sleeping,
Are you sleeping,
Brother John?*



It is traditional to end with the Last Girl, the sole survivor, a young woman in a blood-spattered tank top. She drops her chain saw, her sawed-off shotgun, her crowbar—the details differ—and stumbles out of the ramshackle house and into the light. Perhaps the house is burning. Dawn glows on the horizon, and the ghouls have been defeated (for now, for now—all happy endings being temporary). Perhaps she's found by her fellow survivors and taken to an enclave, a fortress teeming with heavily armed government troops, or at the very least gun-toting civilians, who will provide shelter until the sequel. Perhaps this enclave is located in Easterly, Iowa, about sixty miles northwest of the ruins of Des Moines. Perhaps the girl's name is Ruby.

That's her sitting in the high summer grass, head tilted like a painter. She is twenty-three and wears her dark hair short, which on these postapocalyptic mornings can be a real time saver. She's lived in the enclave for a little over a year, since the start of the second outbreak, and on most days, even through the icy winter, she's ridden her bike out here to the Mayhall farm, to watch for movement amid the blackened timbers where the house once stood. She is always disappointed. Out here, nothing moves but the wind.

Often she totes books with her. Sometimes she reads from a thick, five-ring binder jammed with typed pages, and at other times from the old-fashioned girl's diary she inherited, a thick book with a cloth cover of green and pink plaid, whose lock she opens with a safety pin. Mostly, though, she sits and thinks. She has a plan, this girl. And today is one of the red-letter days in that scheme.

A rider approaches, pedaling down the long gravel drive, a middle-aged woman with steel hair pulled into a fierce ponytail. Her aunt Alice. "Are they coming?" Ruby asks.

"Should be here within the hour," Alice says. "Thought you'd like to know."

"Ride out to the gate with me," Ruby says. Alice frowns; she is a woman with Things to Do. "Oh come on," Ruby says, and puts her arm around her. "You know you want to." Side by side, they could be taken for mother and daughter. Both are tall, with strong noses and high cheekbones. They are beautiful.

They ride down the drive to the highway, then head toward town. The enclave consists of twenty square miles of flat farmland, old housing divisions, and a few boarded-up stores and fast-food restaurants that used to make up Easterly. The clean zone is enclosed by two rings of fences topped with razor wire and spotlights. Good for keeping out the shambling hordes of last year, and good now for keeping out the federal government—the *illegitimate* federal government, people in the enclave say.

The road is flat and makes for easy riding. Ruby is anxious to reach their destination, but it is very hot and Alice, a doctor, will not be rushed into heatstroke. It's nearly an hour before they reach the southern guardhouse and its lobster trap of inner and outer gates. Sheriff Tim comes out to say hello, and he and a few of the guards stand around chatting with the women. Not for long; within minutes a man in the high tower calls down that a truck is approaching.

Ruby can't see anything on the road, and then she makes out a mercurial blob shimmering through the haze of heat. The truck gradually slows as it approaches the outer gates, where the federal troops are stationed. The helmeted and dark-visored guards briefly inspect the cab of the truck, as well as the yellow backhoe being towed on the trailer, then allow truck and trailer to pass into the no-man's-land before the inner gate. This movement signals a transfer in jurisdiction, and an entirely new bureaucracy springs into action. Civilian guards, without uniforms but with guns even larger than those carried by the federal officers outside, sweep forward and demand that the two men in the cab exit the vehicle.

The driver is a burly Korean man. He steps down slowly, then sees the women and walks toward the fence in a clumping gait. Both legs have been removed below the knee, and the prosthetics don't fit well. The guards yell at him to stop and be searched, but he laughs and waves them off.

"So you found one," Alice says.

"Did you doubt me? Did you doubt me?" the man says, laughing. "Found it at a place in Ankeny, with plenty of diesel, too. I claimed it as an unscheduled donation to the enclave. How you doing, Ruby? You girls didn't have to come out here and meet me."

"Not much going on today," Ruby says. "We really appreciate this, Kwang."

"Don't you worry, we'll find him," he says.

"Come on, Kwang," one of the guards says, making his name rhyme with *clang*. Even though Kwang's lived here almost his entire life, Iowans can't seem to get his name right. "Gotta do the bite check. 'Less you want us to do it out here in front of the ladies."

Kwang laughs. "I don't think they could take the excitement. You all want a ride back to the house?"

"We've got our bikes," Alice says.

"Awfully hot for pedaling," Kwang says. "Come on, you can throw 'em up on the trailer and ride in the cab. I've got air-conditioning."

Ruby touches Alice's arm. "It's only polite to keep him company," she says. It's been a year without many things, but at the moment, perhaps air-conditioning feels like the greatest luxury of all. There's generator power in the enclave, but it's strictly rationed.

"We shouldn't be wasting fuel on that," Alice says. But of course they shouldn't be wasting fuel on this project at all. It was Ruby who pushed this idea, who convinced Kwang to find them a backhoe for the excavation, who convinced her relatives to hold a funeral. Her determination to carry out this plan is a mystery to them, but they're indulging her.

Fifteen minutes later, after Kwang has passed the bite check, the women climb up into the cab with him; his co-driver has decided to hang out at the gate awhile and shoot the shit.

Traveling by vehicle, even a slow-moving semi, makes it obvious how tiny the enclave is. Someday, maybe soon, they'll have to expand, push back the fences as the population expands. There are pregnant women in Easterly.

Kwang nods to their right, at a patch of untended field. "That's where your mom found him, right, Alice?"

"About there," she says.

"Who?" Ruby asks.

Kwang says, "Stony and his mother."

"Wait, slow down!" Ruby says. She leans across her aunt, and presses the button to roll

down the window. “How come you’ve never pointed this out to me?” She’d traveled this road a hundred times with Alice.

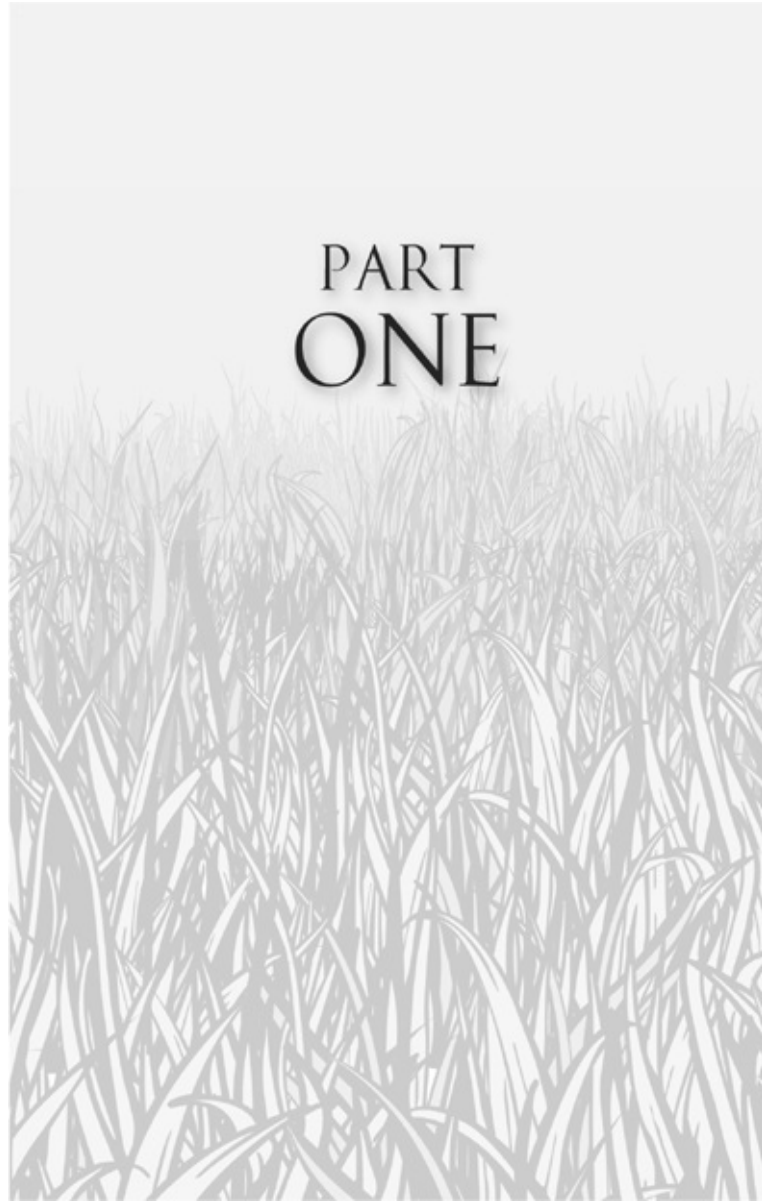
Kwang slows the truck to a crawl. There’s nothing to mark the exact location. Ruby says, “There ought to be a cross or something. A monument.”

“It was about there,” Alice says.

“There?” Ruby asks. It’s just a patch of grass.

“Your grandmother was driving us home through a snowstorm,” Alice says.

PART
ONE



CHAPTER ONE

1968

Easterly, Iowa

It was a wonder she saw the dead girl at all. The first winter storm of the season had rolled in well ahead of the forecast, and Wanda Mayhall drove hunched over the wheel, squinting through a shrinking ellipse of clear windshield at a road being erased by drift and singing in a high, strong voice. The wind buffeted the Ford Falcon station wagon and threw snow across her headlights, making a screen of white static. She sang “I Will Meet You in the Morning,” a belter of a hymn that would keep her three girls from worrying.

And there, at the edge of the road, a dark lump on the white snow.

She thought it was a downed cow, or maybe a dog. Then, a moment after her headlights had swept past, she thought she’d seen a glimmer of yellow. Something about that wink of color made her think, *Rubber rain boots*.

She pressed on the brake as hard as she dared. Still the car slewed, and the two girls in the backseat squawked excitedly. Alice, her oldest at thirteen, braced herself against the dash and yelled, “Mom!” Ever since her father died, Alice had bestowed upon herself all the privileges of an adult, including the permanent right to ride shotgun and criticize her mother’s driving.

Wanda put the car in reverse and slowly backed up, her eyes watching the rearview mirror for headlights barreling out of the snow, until she reached the spot where she thought she’d seen the dark blot. She left the car running and the lights on. “Don’t get out of the car,” she told the girls.

She walked around to the rear of the station wagon. The wind whipped at her skirt, and ice-cold snow bit her ankles through her nylons. Typical Iowa snowstorm, raking the empty fields at fifty miles per hour. A few feet from the taillights the dark closed in; she could barely distinguish gray field from pitch-black sky. She should have taken the flashlight from the glove compartment.

Then she saw the lump, perhaps ten feet from the road. She stepped off the shoulder and instantly plunged into snow up to her shins.

It was a girl, not more than seventeen or eighteen. She lay on her side, half buried in the snow, her arms curled in front of her. She wore an imitation rabbit fur coat, a dark skin, black tights, and yes, yellow rubber boots. Wanda pulled off one glove and crouched in the snow beside her. She pushed the girl’s long brown hair from her face and touched a hand to her neck. Her skin was the same temperature as the snow.

A light illuminated them. “Is she dead?” Alice said. She held the big silver flashlight. Of course she’d remembered it; Alice was as levelheaded as her father had been.

“I told you to stay in the car,” Wanda said.

“Chelsea’s watching Junie. Who is she?”

Wanda didn’t recognize her. Maybe she was a runaway, trying to make it to Des Moines. But how did she get way out here, sixty miles from the city? And what killed her—exposure? A hit-and-run driver?

The girl's arms were wrapped around her stomach. Wanda had a bad thought. She put her hand on the girl's shoulder and tried to push her onto her back, but only moved her a few inches; a drift had formed against her, holding her in place. Wanda pulled on the girl's arm—it felt heavy, but not stiff—and moved it down to her side. Then she tugged up the hem of the jacket.

The infant was wrapped in what looked like bath towels. Only its tiny gray face was visible, its eyes closed, its lips blue. Wanda made a low, sad sound. She worked her hands beneath the child, her hand cradling its neck, and brought it to her chest. It was cold, cold as its mother.

Alice moved closer to her, and Wanda put up a hand—the girl didn't need to see this. The dead girl's pale shirt and dark skirt were stiff with frozen blood. Her black tights, she realized, were crusted with it.

Alice stepped forward anyway, frowning. She didn't scream, didn't panic. She looked at the girl, then the baby in her mother's arms, and said, "We have to get them to the hospital."

"Oh, honey," Wanda said. She'd witnessed a few kinda-sorta miracles in her years as a RN, but there was no hospital on earth that could help this baby now. She held it to her arm and got to her feet. Then she carried it back to the station wagon. Alice said, "Shouldn't we bring the girl?"

"We'll come back for her," Wanda said. The mother she could leave, but she couldn't imagine abandoning an infant, even a dead one.

When they reached the car she made Alice get in first, then put the baby in her arms, as gently as if it were a living child. The younger girls leaned over the seat back, amazed. "You found a *baby*?" Chelsea said. She was seven years old, Junie only three and a half.

Alice said, "It's not—"

"Sit in your seats, all of you," Wanda said, cutting her off. The last thing she needed was three hysterical girls. She wouldn't allow herself to cry, either.

She eased the station wagon into the lane. In all the time they'd been pulled over not a car had passed them in either direction. The closest telephone was their own, a couple of miles away. She'd have to call the police, or maybe the fire department, and tell them where to find the girl.

Then Alice shouted and Wanda nearly slammed on the brakes. "Alice, you can't—"

"Mom!"

The baby's eyes were open.

After a moment Wanda said, "That happens sometimes." She used her nurse voice. Maybe Alice would believe her if she used the nurse voice.

"It's *moving*," Alice said.

One of the towels had come open, exposing a little gray hand. Wanda looked at the road back to the child. Its tiny fingers flexed.

Wanda felt a stab of panic. Suddenly she had a dying newborn to save. She couldn't floor it. The Falcon would never stay on the road. "Hold him up to the heater," she said. "Her. It."

The ten minutes to the farm seemed to take forever. The baby's arms shifted feebly under its wrap, and its lips moved silently. Alice talked to it the way she talked to Junie after a bad dream: Don't you worry, little one. Don't you cry.

Wanda drove up the lane and didn't bother to put the car in the garage. She killed the

engine and took the baby from Alice. "Help the girls out," she said.

"Chelsea, carry Junie in," Alice said, and followed her mother into the house. With one hand Wanda plugged the kitchen drain and turned on the warm water. The baby looked into her face. Its eyes were the color of clouds before a heavy rain.

"We have to treat it for hypothermia," Alice said.

Wanda had long ago ceased to be surprised by the things Alice knew. "That's right. Now get me some towels."

Wanda unwrapped the child. Ah, a boy then. He was blue-gray from top to bottom, with a black umbilical cord a couple of inches long, and a tiny gray penis. Dark hair with a bit of curl to it. She stirred the water in the sink, decided it would do, then lowered him into it.

Chelsea dragged over a kitchen chair so she could see. Junie climbed up with her arms wrapped her arms around her sister's waist. "We should name him," Chelsea said.

"He's not ours to name," Wanda said.

The boy seemed to like the water. He kicked his legs, waved his arms. He still hadn't made a sound. Then she realized that his chest wasn't moving. No: hadn't moved. The boy wasn't breathing. Junie reached out to touch him. "Get down, girls," Wanda said. "Down!"

She'd never been this scared caring for a patient. She decided she had to treat hypothermia and breathing at once, so she cradled him in the water with one hand and pinched shut his little nostrils with the other. Then she bent her lips to his. Gentle, she thought. New lungs were fragile.

She puffed a bit of air into his mouth. His chest rose a fraction, dropped—and stayed down. She breathed into him again, and again. After a minute she put her fingers to his neck. No pulse.

He gazed up at her with those cloud-colored eyes, perfectly calm. His hand came up and seemed to reach for her face. And in that moment she made her decision. If it was a decision. If she had any choice at all.

"Mom?" Alice said. "Is he okay? You want me to call the hospital?"

"No. No hospital." Alice started to argue, and Wanda said, "They're snowed in. Nobody could get here anyway. Please, put the girls to bed."

Alice managed to get the girls into their pajamas, but none of them would stay out of the kitchen. They watched as Wanda worked, and soon she was sweating like a long-distance runner. After a half hour the baby was no better and no worse for all the forced resuscitation. In fact he seemed to like it. The air she gave him he turned into gurgles and sighs and whines. His first sounds.

"We have to call the police," Alice said.

"We're not going to do that." Wanda lifted the boy out of the water and his arms waved if he wanted to get back in. "Not yet."

Alice lowered her voice. "You know what he is. One of those things from that night." Alice was old enough to read the paper, to watch the evening news.

"Those were all back east," Wanda said. "And they're all gone now." The president told them the creatures had all been killed—or whatever you called it when you destroyed their bodies. And if the police found out about this boy, they'd destroy him, too.

At some point Junie had climbed up on the chair again. She softly patted his head. "Lit-tle babeee," she sang to him. "Little old babeee."

Then the boy's chest rose, and he let out a long sigh.

"He's learning to talk," Chelsea said.

"He's just making noises," Wanda said. Though how did he learn *that*? His ribs moved again, and his mouth made a breathy whistle. Wanda put her ear to his chest. She heard nothing but her own pulse in her ears. Maybe he could learn to pump his heart, too.

And then she thought, Oh no, I can't do this. But of course she'd have to.

"Girls, I have something important to say," Wanda said. She lifted Junie onto her hip. "Alice, Chelsea, give me your hands." She made them place their palms atop one another's on the boy's head, *a laying on of hands*, just like the deacons did for someone who was terribly ill or troubled. Concentrated prayer.

Alice said, "What are you doing, Mom?"

"We have to make a solemn promise," Wanda said. "An oath." She took a breath. "We cannot tell anyone about this boy."

"Why not?" Chelsea asked.

"Nobody," Wanda said. "For a while at least. Can you promise that? Junie?"

"I promise," Junie said. And Chelsea said, "I won't tell a soul."

"This is a mistake," Alice said. "We should call the police." Chelsea yelped indignantly and Alice said, "Fine. I promise."

Wanda leaned down and kissed the boy's forehead. "Our secret," she said.

Her mind raced. She did need to call the police, to tell them about the dead girl. She'd said she thought she'd seen something out there, wasn't sure what. She wouldn't mention the child.

"We should name him Gray," Chelsea said.

"He's not a cat," Alice said. "We shouldn't name him anything."

"We'll call him John," Wanda said, surprising herself again.

"That's it?" Alice said. "*John*?"

"Brother John," Chelsea said.

The boy looked up at them. Then he blinked. He hadn't blinked before.

"A boy like this," Wanda said, "is going to need a normal name."

That first night, a Saturday, Wanda took the baby to bed with her, but he refused to sleep. He lay there, gurgling to himself, waving his arms and kicking his legs. Wanda eventually slept for what seemed only minutes. The boy never settled down, but neither did he cry. Next dawn she picked him up and carried him to the living room, where she rocked him until the girls awoke. Wanda called in sick to the hospital, and sat back, exhausted, as the girls took turns holding him. He stayed up the whole day, never napping, hardly ever shutting his eyes.

Feeding was also a problem. He often smacked his blue lips and worked his toothless mouth, but he turned his face away from water or milk. She was afraid of what he might be hungry for, but that day she taught him to swallow formula, and a few hours after each feeding he'd spit it back out. She doubted he was digesting any food at all.

After supper she hauled the crib from the basement—Junie had only stopped using it a year ago—and set it up next to her bed. The boy refused to sleep in it. She sang to him and rubbed his back, but after a half hour of leaning over the rail she gave up and brought him to bed with her again, where he cooed and squawked and fidgeted until morning.

On Monday she called in sick a second time, and again on Tuesday. She couldn't afford any more absences, but neither could she deposit the boy with the old woman who watched Junie. On Wednesday morning she told Alice, "You now have mono. You'll be out for two weeks. Chelsea will bring home your schoolwork."

"This isn't fair!"

"It's temporary."

Wanda learned to fall asleep to his noises and movement, and grew used to his cool body next to hers. He spent the night experimenting with new sounds. Eventually he discovered a kind of cry that would get their attention, a long, high-pitched wail that would cease the instant Wanda or one of the girls picked him up. No tears—there were never tears—and he never seemed too upset. He simply liked being in their arms.

The morning Alice was supposed to go back to school, Wanda dressed the boy in a special onesy she'd sewn from an old bathrobe. She threaded a leather belt through the back loop and fastened him to the inside of the crib. Alice was appalled. "He's not a *dog*." Wanda swallowed against the steely taste of guilt and said he'd be fine. She'd run home at lunch to check on him, then as soon as Alice got home from school the girls would let him out, got it?

John seemed unperturbed by the new arrangement. He didn't recoil from the onesy harness when she slipped it on him. Every morning he was happy to be tied down, and every afternoon he was happy to be let loose. They played with him, fed him, and he spit everything back up. He refused to die, and refused to grow.

If he'd shown the slightest sign of distress she would have been forced to take him to a doctor. She'd worked at the hospital for years, and she trusted several of the nurses and even a doctor or two, but she didn't think any of them could have, or would have, kept this secret. To them the boy would be a danger, a disease carrier. The government said that all the victims of the outbreak had been destroyed, but newspapers still reported sightings of the walking dead out in Pennsylvania and New York, and the grocery store tabloids ran stories every week about the hordes of unnatural creatures waiting out there, ready to attack. Alice brought a *National Enquirer* home one day, her eyes red from holding back tears, and slammed it down on the kitchen table. The cover showed a gray man with a bullet hole through his head.

"Those pictures are fakes," Wanda told her. "They do that all the time." She was holding John in her arms, and he seemed excited to see Alice.

"Does it matter?" the girl said. "This is what they'd do to him." Wanda hugged her daughter, and John squirmed between them. "What are we going to do, Mom?" Alice had made a complete turnaround since the night they found John. Once she decided that she was protecting the baby from the world instead of shielding her family from the devil child, she appointed herself chief concealment strategist.

But Wanda was the adult here. Ever since the cancer took Ervin, the *only* adult. "I'll think of something," she said.

Somehow they had to keep the boy's existence a secret. They'd been lucky so far. The body of his teenage mother had been recovered from the side of the highway, declared a Jane Doe and cremated (because every corpse was being cremated as quickly as possible that year) without any mention of a missing baby. And fortunately, Wanda's house was set back from the road, surrounded by corn and soy fields, so there were no neighbors to peek through the

windows. The rare visitor could be seen coming down the lane in plenty of time for them to take the baby into the back bedroom.

Alice, enforcer of secrecy, policed the younger girls. She quizzed Chelsea almost daily to see if she'd told anyone at school about John. And even Junie, who saw hardly anyone during the winter except when she went to the babysitter or they all went to church, understood that he'd be taken away from them if anyone found out. Alice read to the girls from *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which Wanda thought was inappropriate, but it did seem to get the point across. Junie asked her if they were going to put John up in the attic.

They were coping. They were keeping the secret. And then came the day in April that Junie snuck John out of the house and carried him across the road to see the calf that had been born that week.

Wanda was walking back from the barn when she saw the strange car in the driveway. A skinny, black-haired man leaned against the front bumper, smoking a cigarette. The front door of the house was open.

Wanda dropped the bag of cat food she'd been carrying and ran. When she was a few yards from the car she slowed to a fast walk and said, "Hello? Can I help you?"

The man was Oriental—Wanda couldn't tell if he was Japanese or Chinese or what. He said nothing, but waved toward the house, then took another drag on his cigarette.

Wanda went inside, then froze at the kitchen doorway. A woman, foreign like the man outside, sat at the table, cradling John in her arms. Beside her stood Junie and a boy who looked five or six years old. His hand was on John's chest, and the baby was gripping one of his fingers.

Junie saw her mother and screamed, "It was an accident!" Then she bolted for her bedroom.

The stranger woman watched her go, and then said something to her son in another language. The boy said, "This is my mom, Mrs. Cho. She says she's sorry for going in your house."

"That's all right," Wanda said automatically, though her heart was pounding. She came forward, holding out her arms for the baby. The woman nodded and transferred John to her.

The boy said, "That girl? She was walking by herself along the road. We almost hit her."

"I'm so sorry," Wanda said. "Junie knows she's not supposed to go in the road."

The woman nodded as if she understood. She was made up as if going to church: bright lipstick, curled hair, a blue polka-dot dress, high heels. Her son was dressed in shorts and a button-front shirt.

"We just bought a house," the boy said. His English was better than Junie's. "Down the road. There are mice inside, but my dad's going to kill them."

"I'm sure he will," Wanda said. They had to be talking about the Allen house. No one had lived there since the widow died last year. "I'm going to put the baby down for his nap. Can you tell your mother that? And say thank you for watching out for Junie."

The boy spoke to his mother in that other language—Korean, she guessed. They exchanged some words and then the boy said, "She apologizes again, but she has to ask something." He hesitated, then said, "She wants to know if your baby needs, uh, help?" He asked a question of his mother, and she spoke a few soft sentences. "Medicine help?"

Mrs. Cho looked at her, her expression calm. Wanda couldn't figure out if she knew what John was. Had she heard about the outbreak last fall?

Wanda said, "No, no help needed. But thank you. He has a skin disease. Poor circulation. Do you know that word? *Circulation?*"

Mrs. Cho stood and smoothed out her dress. Then she touched John's head. "Good baby," she said.

The boy reached up to John, and the baby grabbed his finger again. "I think he likes me," the boy said.

The next morning, John had grown, Wanda was sure of it. She retrieved the cloth tape from the kitchen drawer and measured him from crown to foot. She weighed herself on the bathroom scale, first with John in her arms, then without. Then, even though she knew the numbers by heart, she got out the paper tablet and checked the figures she'd written down the night she'd found him—numbers that had not changed in all the weekly measurements that followed.

He'd grown three inches. And he was nearly a pound heavier.

That afternoon she made a red velvet cake, told Alice to take charge of John and Juniper, then put Chelsea in the car and drove a quarter mile down the road. The Allen house was still as run-down as it had been when the widow had died, but the lawn had been mowed, and once Mrs. Cho had welcomed her inside, Wanda saw that they'd scrubbed the floors and walls and had already set up household. Wanda was disappointed that there were only a few Korean decorations in evidence: a floral print tablecloth with colors too bright for the Midwest, two exotic-looking candlesticks, and a book with pictograms on the cover that she thought—she hoped—was a Bible.

Mrs. Cho accepted the cake while her son translated. "Could you tell your mother that we'd love to have you come over and play?" Wanda said.

"You could help feed the cats," Chelsea said. "We've got a barnful."

The boy, whose name was Kwang, was obviously excited, but he watched his mother's face carefully as she considered the offer. Finally she spoke. Kwang said, "She wants to know about the stone baby. No, not stone. You know ..."

"The stone baby is doing just fine," Wanda said. "He is no danger to anyone."

It took the boy almost a minute of talking to pass this on. Wanda had no idea what all he was telling his mother. But eventually she nodded.

"Yes," Mrs. Cho said. "Thank you. Tomorrow."

Kwang showed up the next day, and the day after. With each visit, Stony grew. Within a few days he was walking. The next week he was talking. By the end of the summer the two boys were exactly the same height and weight, and they were hardly ever out of each other's sight.

CHAPTER TWO

1974

Easterly, Iowa

The day they created the Unstoppable, they decided to test him with an air rifle, a bow and arrow, and a knife. They started with the air rifle.

Like most of their experiments, they decided to conduct this one inside the bar away from the eyes of Stony's mom and sisters. Stony stood up against the wall wearing a red ski mask with a *U* drawn in Magic Marker on the forehead. Kwang took up position about ten feet away. He pumped the rifle five times, thought for a second and pumped it again.

"Don't go crazy," Stony said.

Kwang said, "Put your hands down."

"You're going to hit me in the face."

"I'm not going to hit you in the face. Besides, you're the Unstoppable."

"I hate that name. Unstoppable what? It's like calling the Hulk 'the Incredible.' "

"We talked about this! Just 'Unstoppable.' Like 'the Thing.' Now put 'em down."

"I can see right down the barrel. If you just—" A soft *pop* and the BB struck Stony just above the Adam's apple. "You jerk!"

"Shut up, you're fine. Did it hurt?"

"You hit me in the *neck*."

"But did it hurt?"

No, it didn't hurt, not really. Stung a little. Or maybe it was only the idea of it that stung. Pain was like that. It slipped away when he wasn't paying attention.

Stony pulled off the mask, then looked at the rafters while Kwang inspected his neck. Stony's skin was a brownish gray—the color of last night's pork chop, his sister Alice said—and dry as paper. "I can't tell where it hit," Kwang said. "Nope, no damage."

"Good," Stony said. His mom told him not to come home with any more scars. He carried a half-moon of stitches on his shoulder from where he'd fallen onto a metal sewer pipe last summer. (Kwang was chasing him.) And just last week the lawn mower had thrown a rock into his right thigh that left a dent the size of a half-dollar.

Kwang said, "Let's try the bow and arrow." Stony made a face and Kwang said, "What are you wimping out on me?"

"I don't think criminals use bows and arrows."

Kwang shook his head. "What, you want to go right to knives?" He picked up the bow and one of the steel-tipped arrows. "This? This is just a warm-up. It's nothing."

"Why don't we shoot a few at you, then?"

"Hey, you're the invulnerable one." *Invulnerable*. A comic book word. Kwang owned two cardboard boxes loaded with comics—*The Teen Titans*, *The Mighty Thor*, *Tales of Suspense*, and that was just the T's—which he allowed Stony to read or touch only according to a strict set of rules, rules that only Kwang understood or would share. He'd let Stony read, say, issues 5

through 62 of *The Invincible Iron Man*, but not 63 or anything after. “What are you going to do when he comes after you?” Kwang said. “You want to know you can take it, right? Besides, I’ll only shoot at your leg.”

“I know that if somebody comes after me with a bow, I’m running.”

Kwang paced off a dozen feet, turned. “You have a *superpower*,” Kwang said. He notched an arrow and pulled back the string. “And with great power—”

The barn door banged open, smacking Kwang, and Junie said, “There you are.”

Then Stony was on his butt and Junie was screaming. Stony looked down. The shaft was buried an inch deep in the left side of his chest, straight through the red C in his blue *Cul* shirt.

“That was great!” Kwang said.

Stony shook his head. “Mom’s going to kill me.”

But Wanda Mayhall had taught her girls early to keep secrets, not realizing how easily their skills could be used against her. The sisters had formed an inner circle around Stony, a fortress of Everything Is Fine, designed to keep their stressed-out mother from going off the rails, and to keep Stony out of sight of the world.

Junie was shorter than Stony by several inches, but she was technically older than him and took her big-sister status very seriously. She grabbed him by the wrist and hauled him toward the house, yelling for Chelsea. During the school year it was Mrs. Cho who watched him while his mother worked, but during the summers his sisters were in charge, and with Ali at work it was Chelsea who was the next-highest-ranking officer of the sorority.

They found her on the back porch in the rocking chair, bare feet up on the railing. She was thirteen, a teenager now, and had declared that she was not just stuck in the house *with* her siblings every day, she was in charge of them. She’d spent most of the summer screaming at Junie and Stony, reading Carlos Castaneda books, listening to KRNQ, and talking on the phone with her girlfriends. Mom checked on them whenever she could break through the busy signal, effectively pinning them all to the house. Stony thought this was only fair, since he was *never* allowed to leave the farm.

It was the number-one commandment in the list that had been in effect his entire life: Hide. Never leave the farm, never answer the phone, and never let a visitor see you. Only the Cho family was exempt. His mother had told him about the disease he was born with. She told him how some ignorant people would say he was dead, even though he obviously wasn’t, and think he was contagious, even though he definitely, definitely wasn’t, and that’s why he had to stay hidden.

When Junie, Stony, and Kwang walked out the back door, Chelsea quickly closed the magazine she was reading and placed it facedown on her lap. Then she noticed the arrow sticking out of her brother’s chest. “What did you *do*?”

“It was an accident,” Stony said. The old family joke.

Chelsea put the magazine away in her hemp purse, then made him sit down. Wincing, she put her fingers to the hole in his T-shirt.

“Don’t rip it,” Stony said. It was his number 14 Ernie Banks shirt.

“You are such a doofus,” she said. She lifted the shirt up over the shaft and pushed the cloth under his chin. There was no blood—he’d never bled in his life—but she still made

disgusted face. The shaft was buried in him like a reed in the mud.

“Should we pull it out?” Junie asked.

“No! That would make it worse.”

“Well, you can’t just leave it in there,” Kwang said. Wrong move. The girls turned on him, telling him it was his fault—which was mostly true—and finally drove him from the house. Then they started yelling at Stony.

Chelsea said, “Geez, Stony, he shot you in the *heart*. You could have *died*.” This caused Junie to burst into tears.

“It’s okay, Junie,” Stony said. “It doesn’t hurt.” Though that was weird, come to think of it. Shouldn’t something like that be a little painful? Mom said his disease made him different from everybody else, and he could do things other people couldn’t. But still, the heart was kind of important, wasn’t it?

“We need Alice,” Chelsea said. Alice was always the one who stitched and repaired his clothes. But she was working at the Tastee-Freeze in Easterly and wouldn’t be home until supper, the same time as Mom.

“Let’s just snip it off,” Stony said. “I’ll hide it until Alice can get it out.”

They retrieved their father’s big metal toolbox from the barn. Ervin Mayhall had enough tools to fix anything, except maybe cancer. From the pile of formidable instruments they chose a pair of pliers that looked like hedge clippers. Stony lay on the dirt floor holding on to the base of the shaft near his chest, while Chelsea clamped down and twisted the pliers. He could feel the arrow tip twisting inside him but didn’t want to tell her to stop. Eventually she managed to gnaw through the fiberglass shaft. The remaining stub still made a pup tent of his shirt.

“We can’t cut any more or we won’t be able to pull it out,” Chelsea said. She was dripping with sweat. The air in the barn was stifling.

“Maybe you could wear a coat to the dinner table,” Junie said.

“No, tell her I’m eating at Kwang’s,” Stony said. “I’ll hide out here until you can get Alice.”

That became their plan. At 4:30, a half hour before Mom’s usual arrival time, he went back to the barn, scattering the near-feral barn cats. Only a few minutes into his exile, Junie came out with a stack of Hardy Boys from his room. She was nine; he was five years old but looked and acted ten. She both mothered him and looked up to him. Though she wasn’t a reader herself, she approved of his appetite for books. Stony didn’t think there was much to admire there. He was a boy who didn’t sleep, in a house in which no TV was allowed. What else was he going to do with all that time?

“Anything else, Brother John?” she asked.

He thought about telling her that he’d read the Hardy Boys at least two times each, but he didn’t want her to feel bad. She was just trying to be nice. “I’m fine,” he said.

“Okay then.” She kissed him on the forehead, in the same way that their mother kissed all of them, and hurried out.

For a while he flipped through *The Secret of the Old Mill*, looking at the illustrations, and then he remembered the magazine that Chelsea was reading on the back porch—the one she had been so careful to hide from the little kids. That had to be more interesting than Frank and Joe tracking down counterfeiters. He snuck out of the barn, keeping low so he wouldn’t be seen from his mother’s bedroom window, and ran, crouched, for the back of the house.

Chelsea's multi-colored purse was still on the porch next to the rocking chair. If he stood up he'd be in direct view of the kitchen window. He dropped to elbows and knees and commando-crawled across the lawn: the Unstoppable, evading Agents of Hydra. When he reached the porch he slipped a hand through the slats and pulled her purse to him. The magazine was folded up inside. He took it out, a *Time* magazine with a gray photo of a battlefield on the front, and stuck it into his back pocket. Mission accomplished!

He started to crawl back, then decided to risk a peek inside the kitchen. He slowly rose, head tilted back, until his nose cleared the railing and he could look into the window. His mother and sisters were at the table, just starting to pass around the baked spaghetti. He hated to miss dinner. Not the meal, that was just food—no, *foodstuff*, a word he'd picked up from a box of Commander Calhoun FishStix. He could taste food, but he had no taste: he never knew what dishes were good or bad until his sisters or Kwang pronounced judgment. *Delicious, spicy, yummy* were colored toothpicks he stuck into whatever appeared on his plate and remembered for next time. Chocolate, according to Chelsea, was the best food ever invented. Mrs. Cho's kimchi was the worst ever, unless you ate with Mr. Cho and heard him grunt happily through a plateful. Stony didn't want to offend Mom or Mrs. Cho, so he decided early on that he should *really like* everything put in front of him, and the way you proved you really liked something was to chow down. He taught himself to chew chew chew, letting his gut fill up like a lawn mower bag, and then later he'd slip out to the bathroom and throw everything up. He'd long since stopped thinking of this process as weird—it couldn't possibly be weirder than pushing poop out your butt—but it was time-consuming. He kept up the pantomime because he loved sitting around the table with his sisters and hearing them talk about best friends and former best friends and the biology teacher with Jack Lord's hair, and he loved the way his mother smiled to herself when he told her he liked the burnt spaghetti noodles at the edge of the casserole dish.

Junie suddenly glanced out the window and saw him. He froze, and then Junie turned back to the table and announced at the top of her voice, "We forgot to say grace! Everybody close your eyes."

He ducked down, laughing silently, and then crept back to the barn with his prize.

Kwang somehow figured out that Stony was in the barn. A little after five, he sneaked through the big doors and climbed up the ladder to the loft.

"Hey, are you okay?" he said. "Did they get it out?"

Stony sat with his back against an ancient bag of seed, staring straight ahead at nothing, the *Time* magazine open on his lap.

"Look, I'm sorry I shot you, okay? I promise I won't do that again."

Stony seemed to focus on him for the first time. "I—I think I'm ..."

"What? Is it hurting?"

Stony handed him the magazine. On the cover was a black-and-white photo of a field full of bodies. In red letters it said, "The Fifth Anniversary." Then in black letters below that: "Can It Happen Again?"

"Look at the pictures."

Kwang flipped through some of the pages, and stopped at the two-page spread that showed a grassy field full of corpses. Men were tossing bodies into a huge bonfire. "Wow, there were

a lot of 'em.”

“*Zombies*,” Stony said. He’d never said the word aloud before, didn’t really know what meant. “A lot of zombies.”

He took the magazine from Kwang and flipped to another page. “There were thousands and thousands of them. They were all over New York and New Jersey and Pennsylvania and some other places. They killed tons of people. They didn’t tell you about how big this was at school?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. In social studies we haven’t even gotten to the Korean War yet,” Kwang said, nobody knew about Korea. All the kids at school thought he was from Vietnam. “So what’s the deal? There were a lot of dead people.”

“Kwang, they killed them all. Every one of them that had the disease.”

“I thought they sent them to a hospital or something.”

“That’s what I thought. That’s what Mom told me. But there never was a hospital. They just rounded them up and shot them and burned them.”

“Geez,” Kwang said. Together they looked through the pictures again. Then Kwang said, “Does your mom know?”

Stony stared at him. “Of course she does—they all do. My sisters, your family. Everyone’s been hiding this from me my whole life.”

“It’s not like you’re very old.”

“Shut up.” Stony got up from the floor and walked to the loft door, which was slightly ajar. He could see his mother’s station wagon in the lane, and the beater pickup that Alice drove. The Hardy Boys would call it a jalopy. “If the police found me, they’d kill me.”

“They can’t kill you,” Kwang said. “You’re the Unstoppable.” Stony made a disgusted noise, and Kwang said, “No, this is what you’re training for! When they come for you, you’ll be ready.”

“Stop it. This isn’t a joke.”

“Look, they only killed those other guys because they went crazy and ate people. You don’t want to eat people, do you?”

“Not you. You probably taste like spiced cabbage.”

“See, then nobody has to be careful around you.”

“Careful?” Stony said. “Who told you you had to be careful around me?”

“Nobody.”

“Who?”

“Nobody! My dad maybe.”

“What? When?”

“He used to say it all the time. Mother made him stop.”

Stony felt sick. “I thought your dad liked me. He lets me watch him work on the cars.”

“He doesn’t like anybody, why would he like you?”

“Okay, fine! Just—get out, okay?”

“Come on, Stony.”

“Get out!” Stony spun and shoved Kwang in the chest, knocking him backward onto the floorboards. The magazine flew out of his hands.

“Don’t you get it? They’re *hunting* me.” Stony picked up the copy of *Time*, then stepped to the edge of the loft. “And when they find me, they’ll kill me.”

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