

Chapter One: Group Therapy

“Hello, my name is Billy, and I am alive,” I say, repeating the preamble required by each of these stupid-ass weekly meetings.

“Hi, Billy,” responds the soft, sad greeting of the 11 other ‘formerly infected’ on stage with me. Their voices echo through the mostly empty auditorium of the old high school. When the defeated speak in unison, the sound has no power to uplift. In fact, it’s like a moan from my past. I shiver as the soft breeze of a lost memory drifts just out of reach.

Dr. Yvonne, sitting among us on the poorly lit stage, has no firsthand knowledge of what we’ve been through, are going through, or will go through. She only knows what she’s read and studied. She’s not one of us, so she’s meaningless. But Old Joe, fiddling with his eye patch to my left, Nancy, sniveling to my right, and the nine other pallid faces in our ‘Circle of Belonging’ are here and that’s worth something. I’m not sure why and I’m not sure what, but as long as we’re stuck on the compound and talking about our struggles with the infection I’ll participate, if only because I know it’s what Gerald would have wanted.

Before he left six months ago without so much as a goodbye—two years before his release date by the way—Gerald told me these meetings, as mundane and ineffectual as they seem, serve a purpose. They force us together. They may be miserable experiences proctored by bubbly doctors who care more about their discoveries and newfound fame than us. They may be three-hour long lies. They may be one more way to show us how fucked up humanity is, now especially. But we *formers need* to be forced together, even if we’re not listening. Being together is helpful. It does something to our brains, fixes our memories, makes us feel more *human*. Though again I’m not sure why I care. I’m not sure any of us deserves help anymore. I’m also not sure any of us want to remember.

And if I’m being honest, Gerald was slipping away toward the end anyway—disappearing on private meetings with Dr. Yvonne and going to Fort Knox for this or that sanctioned political bullshit he was part of. But, for some reason, I keep up the façade, even as Cryin’ Ryan whines that there’s no hope, even as the girls, Mindy and Liv, hug each other in silent acceptance. I won’t pause as Michael and Gabe sit with their arms crossed, eyeing me with misdirected anger. Or even when Rex huffs indignation at every word I say or Darlene and Alexis go out of their way to blatantly ignore me. When I catch the tapping sound of Steven’s plastic arm nervously hitting his chair, I ignore it and continue.

"I was never dead," I recite, wondering if any of the others are listening, wondering why I care. "I am glad to be alive. I understand the infection controlled my body and my mind. The infection is gone now. I am well. I am whole." My voice bounces off the walls and the vacant seats of the auditorium that once overflowed with hundreds of teenagers, eager to live ... to spread their proverbial wings and fly into life like missiles of *being*. I try to ignore these subtle reminders of death; ignore that I've been doing this for three years; ignore that I still feel the same way I did the day I was 'cured.' I fail.

Yes, Profine Pharmaceuticals has done a great job turning this abandoned high school and adjoining neighborhood into a walled and gated safe haven for those of us 'lucky' enough to have been 'cured.' The Profine Omaha Compound, the POC, is a 'transitional place where we are cared for by compassionate and understanding doctors, nurses, and specialists' and sequestered from the masses that can't stop hating us. It's supposed to make us feel safe as we search for our humanity. According to the pamphlets, it's a five-year-long search. During that time we are kept penned up in this compound, occasionally offered a brief foray into the city where the remaining normal-folk live. They don't call it a prison and in truth it's not. But it has enough similarities to seem like one.

In actuality, what a little over 15 years ago was a thriving midwestern symbol of middle-class America in the first decade of the 21st century is now one of the largest secured ghettos in the world. Dr. Yvonne hates it when I call this place a ghetto. After all, it's nice, not "slummy." She always uses finger quotes when she says this. I always reply with, "So when the gas chambers are added, I guess you'll line them with marble and call this place a spa, huh?" or something like that. It usually shuts her up.

Anyway, it holds more *formers* than any other Profine compound. We aren't allowed out unescorted and the only way to get in is to work here, be a *former*, be related to one, or to know the right people. It doesn't matter though, because the eerie, quiet, and (most disturbing) clean POC is just another sign that, in one way or another, too many lives ended in the Infection War.

I shiver again, not sure I want to search for my humanity. I mean, no one else in the world is ... there's a certain irony to that.

"Billy," Dr. Yvonne prompts, "are you all right?"

There is a trace of fear beneath her sympathetic tone. This worries me since Dr. Yvonne should be confident that I am, in fact, all right. After all, she is one of the mad genius creators of Tetdat—the single shot cure that wiped the infection from my blood and brain, awakening me to this perpetually cold life.

The folding chair's rigid surface sends chills through me. I suppress them, nodding and sitting straight-

er. I try hard not to look at Dr. Yvonne's bulbous body and poofy red hair as she leans forward, concern evident across her jowly face. She's soft. That's one of the things I don't like about her. In order to have survived the Infection War and actually lived it, there are a lot of things you could be, *soft* is not one of them. Which means she survived by avoidance. A luxury none of us here could afford, a luxury my wife couldn't afford.

"I'm just cold," I explain as I wrap my arms around my chest, rubbing my shoulders to emphasize the fact that my blood doesn't flow as it should anymore—one of the side effects of the infection or the cure ... I'm not sure which. I don't think anybody is. "You know how it is for us—this place is ... drafty."

Dr. Yvonne chews on the tip of her pen; her fat lips wrap around it while her eyes study me. A small part of my brain—a dark part, a part I want to hide away from because despite its size, I feel it might be strong—wants to know what it's like to chew on her. Watching her watch me while I hide from my thoughts, I thank God I'm not that pen ... which is the most I've thanked God for since well before I came out of my infection fugue, emaciated, pale, and nearly dead, to stare at Dr. Yvonne's plump cheeks that a part of me still wondered about tasting.

After what seems like an interminably long silence, broken only by Nancy's soft whimpers, Dr. Yvonne removes the pen from her mouth and her slobber shimmers in the low light.

"I apologize," she says, "about the location of our meeting this week. You know how it is though. With the Profine crews finally expanding our Safe Zones locally, POC is filling up fast. Our normal meeting place is simply not available."

I can see in the way her eyes dart while her porcine head bobs back and forth that she is hoping for some reaction to this news. The group gives none.

"That doesn't interest you?" she inquires, sounding hurt. "POC is Profine's center for the cure! Don't you have questions about our new patients or new safety measures? What about the recent worldwide outlawing of public executions of your kind? Your suicide rate is the lowest it's ever been! The equality laws are expanding internationally! There are now nearly a hundred Safe Zones communicating with each other across the globe! The Internet is fully functioning again! Isn't that great? We're getting reports that Australia is 100% clean! And all of this is because of Profine!" She leans back, huffing in deliberate exasperation. "No one's curious to know more about all the good we're doing?"

"These meetings aren't for discussing the daily functions of Profine, Doctor, or how well reduction is going. We know *our kind* is 'safe.' We see the rent-a-cops in the watchtowers every time we leave our damn houses. What we don't know is *why*. Why are you keeping us safe when the rest of the world wants us dead?"

Why isn't the rest of the world blowing down our doors?" I reply, trying hard to suppress the rage gurgling in the back of my throat the way it must have when I was infected and hungry. "No. You know what? That doesn't even matter. We're not Profine. We don't need these fucking reports. All we need is help!"

She balks for a moment, lost for words.

"Look," I offer a smile, "I'm sorry." I've been trying to keep this strange peace since Gerald left. I do as I'm told. I get angry. I apologize. I dance like a trained monkey.

I run a hand over my face and sigh. "Can we talk about us *formers*?"

"Though I don't like the f-word, Billy, you're right," the good doctor concedes. "I just get so excited about all this." She waves her arms around and, since the cold doesn't bother her like it does the rest of us, I am gifted with a front row ticket to the greatest underarm fat show on earth. I shudder again at the sight of her flab swinging and flopping as she gestures. I don't want to eat her. I don't. I'm not one of the first batch of fuck ups Profine created. Still, she's so big, the me I was three years ago would have probably delighted in a taste ... if I delighted in anything when I was infected, which I doubt. I'm certain, in fact, that when I was infected I was numb. Numb and hungry.

Noticing me shudder, Dr. Yvonne stops and asks, "Are you sure everything is all right though?"

What she doesn't understand is that these shivers make me feel more alive than any of the meetings, group sessions, exercises, or drugs they offer us every week. Having the ability to feel a sensation—*any* sensation other than hunger—trickling up my spine, sending small waves of shock to my appendages ... *this* is what it feels like to be alive. This is what I want to feel—the opposite of numb. This is what I want to share with Old Joe, Nancy, and everyone: the importance to *feel* and let go of the numbness that infected us.

But I'm a hypocrite. I can't let go.

Before I can say anything though, Dr. Yvonne grins and claps her meaty hands together. An echo re-sounds throughout the empty auditorium. She speaks, focusing on lists of daily affirmation activities and memory exercises. Everyone else eats it up. They smile, cry, share, even laugh, proving Gerald was right. This is what they need. None of them even care about my questions. They don't care why they're alive. They're just happy they are. Why can't I be like that?

I tune it out. I find it far more interesting to watch Dr. Yvonne's fat jiggle as she moves. I'm astounded she somehow made it through the war untouched and I didn't. How could she have moved quickly enough to get away from the infected, especially the fast ones?

Oh wait. I know.

It's because of who she is. I've seen the plaques in her office, the photos. She looks like a wealthy, self-important bitch. I know how easy it was for people like her to sit back in their nearly impenetrable castles, kick up their feet, and drink their \$1,000 bottles of wine while the rest of us were trying to survive. When I close my eyes, I see my wife, hopeless, weak, done. The anger is coming back and I try to turn away from Dr. Yvonne, but she looks like a blimp and I hate her for it. I wish she'd put her labcoat back on. I need to calm down, try to laugh. I think of how she kind of looks like Katy Perry, only morbidly obese. I remember listening to "Teenage Dream" with my wife the day I first witnessed the infection in all its glory It had blared out of our cheap wedding present alarm clock at 8:00am that morning. I liked that song, in an ironic sort of way, until I met Dr. Yvonne.

Jesus, I hate rich people.

As I ignore her words, she shifts the conversation back toward her agenda. I don't know if this is intentional or if she is so self-obsessed that everything comes back to whatever the hell it is she wants to discuss. She rambles for another 15 minutes about the new patients being treated at POC, the growing Safe Zones, and the 'magnificent strides' the doctors are making in medication for our side-effects, what she calls 'hopeful breakthroughs.'

"... and there's a new supplement we're developing; it's actually been in the works since ... well, for a long time," she prattles with distant, gleaming eyes that undoubtedly envision another research grant she can fritter away on bad clothes. "It temporarily takes the blood out of the eyes, or at least lessens it, and—"

"What about our skin?" Nancy interrupts with a variation on one of two questions she asks every week. Her voice has a slight tremor. She stares at the hardwood stage, her large, dark eyes watering up. The dim lighting brings the sharp edges of her features into focus and she looks almost beautiful for a moment. "My husband won't even sleep in the same room with me anymore. He keeps Delilah away. He says I'm ... he says I'm ... a monster."

She's melodramatic and she's lying. He says worse. Their home is next to mine, and our little smart-houses aren't exactly known for their thick walls and privacy. Last night as I was trying to watch a rentfeed of my dead wife's favorite movie, *Gone With the Wind*—because Dr. Yvonne told me it would be good for my 'emotional recovery' and 'memory therapy'—all I could hear were their yells and their daughter's cries. It had started out with a conversation about her inability to have babies. That's what Nancy's other question is always about at these meetings: "Why are we all barren and sterile?"

I've never much cared. I'm only thankful—it's the one positive side-effect to the infection. The last

thing I want to do is bring a child into this shit-fuck of a world. When I study Nancy, I wonder if it would be possible even if she wasn't barren. I'm relatively sure she never bounced back to a normal weight when she was cured.

"Now Nancy," Dr. Yvonne chastises, catching my attention with her sharp words. Then she takes on her best grandmotherly tone as she stands and crosses the stage toward the disconsolate woman. Her enormous high heels click and clack against the floor's hard surface. When she reaches Nancy, I watch as her pudgy hands engulf Nancy's slender ones. "Nancy," she repeats, shaking her head.

Nancy whimpers.

It's almost sensual. Or it would be, if Nancy weren't shaking. Or if pink, salty trails weren't streaking through heavily caked makeup on her sharp cheeks, or if her whimpers weren't growing louder and louder ... or if we didn't all know where this was going.

"You know you will be the first people to know about any new meds we develop to get the *natural* color back to your skin and—before you ask—to help your ability to reproduce," Dr. Yvonne says. "Also, while we're on the subject, your *natural* memories."

The way the word 'natural' comes out of her mouth makes me want to kill her. I also recognize once more that there may still be a part of me that wants to eat her, despite the Tetdat shot. As I said, given the doctor's corpulence, she would make an ample meal for someone suffering from the infection I once had. Though, it isn't so much her possible delicious taste that makes me think she'd be better off dead, because, let's be honest, I don't *really* want to eat her. Tetdat works. It's the fact that she doesn't deserve to be alive.

But again, maybe none of us do.

Can somebody please tell me why I'm here?

The way Dr. Yvonne talks must not bother Nancy though, because she nods solemnly. I watch as more tears fall to the stage, leaving small, pink puddles ... and I'm angry. Doesn't Dr. Yvonne realize she doesn't *have* to say anything else? It would be better to scoot her ample frame in closer to Nancy and *hold* the poor woman, who reminds me of a China Doll in her fragile beauty. Unfortunately and to her perpetual discredit, Dr. Yvonne doesn't like to focus on any single group member's problems when we meet as a whole.

When she speaks, she speaks to everyone. "However, there are several cosmetic surgeons who've had some luck treating the formerly infected's skin," she goes on. "And as I was saying, as we speak, our doctors are working on the supplement to remove blood from the eyes." She pauses here, looking around the room at the silent group. "You all remember Gerald, right?"

I lean forward, for the first time tonight I'm interested in what she has to say. The rest of the group collectively murmurs that they do, in fact, remember Gerald. Why wouldn't we? He left before his five years were up and POC didn't seem to care. This does not happen.

"Well, I was going to save this for later," she begins, shifting her attention away from Nancy and her growing sobs. "But this has already been a rough meeting, so I'll share it early." When she dips one of her fat hands into the pocket on her purple pants I am amazed she doesn't get it wedged there.

Before I have time to contemplate what she could be digging for in that tight, tight pocket, she produces her phone. Smiling, she looks up at the soundbox in the back of the theatre. "Lower the screen," she says loud enough for someone up there to hear her. I'm taken aback as the thought that there is someone up there silently watching us crosses my mind. A moment later though a large white screen hums down behind us and takes my attention. Dr. Yvonne presses a few buttons on her phone and looks up again. "Is it synced?"

The house lights flash on and off in reply.

She stands, pressing the screen on her little phone in the middle of our circle of uncomfortable chairs—I'm sorry, 'Circle of Belonging.' I am now looking directly at her heaving, gigantic cleavage as she looks up at the screen. When she looks down and her eyes, twinkling with pleasure, like two pieces of fool's gold lodged in cookie dough, meet mine, I know she thinks I looked on purpose and I am afraid. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is actually a good thing.

Fear means I am alive. Whether I deserve to be or not doesn't matter when I'm feeling it.

"We're good," she says and turns away as the white screen goes dark and calypso music sounds from speakers hidden from us. There is a tone in her voice that bothers me. It's almost like she's too happy right now. Private moment happy.

I watch with revulsion as she trundles back to her seat. The problem is I don't know if I'm revolted by the fact that I'm thinking of her as food or simply by her. Once comfortably adjusted on that poor chair's face, she sighs, saying, "You're all going to love this."

Then the dark screen goes bright again, only this time we see a happy beach with smiling people, and most importantly, Gerald.

He grins and waves, his shaved head reflecting the sunlight wherever this was filmed. His eyes are still horribly bloodshot, pinkish/redish orbs, like all of ours—except Dr. Yvonne's of course—but there is a brilliance to his skin that makes me want to cry. It's dark. Dark like it was in those photographs he used to bring to meetings, showing what he looked like before he was infected. He looks happy and for a moment I

forget my bitterness at the people who were locked away for the duration of the Infection War. The scientists, businessmen, and their families who maintained a modern quality of life while my wife and I—while the rest of the fucking world—struggled to survive.

“Hi guys!” Gerald says. His voice sounds suspiciously like that of an old sitcom actor’s and my hope is dashed. “I’m *me* again,” he claims with such eager jubilation I have trouble believing him. “The skin’s only temporary for now, but they claim” I swear I hear a laugh track.

This isn’t the Gerald I know.

The Gerald I know is a brooding, grey-skinned, lonely, angry man. He was once arrested for beating up a gang of 12 members of The Cure—the name adopted by those assholes who once hated homosexuals, but now hate us. Except that’s not fair to them, I’m pretty sure they still hate homosexuals too.

But I digress. The Gerald I know is one of us. He has anger in his heart. He prefers darkness to light because at night it’s far more difficult to tell his skin is about five shades too pale. He got drunk with me more times than I can count, reminiscing about days we all understood and wondering about what this world had become. He didn’t lounge in that bitterness like me though. He was a man of action who visited what remains of the United States government at Fort Knox regularly—with an escort of course—lobbying for us with a violent passion that was enviable.

Whatever has happened to him is not. I don’t care how it seems.

I listen to this stranger who resembles my friend explain to us how Dr. Yvonne secretly sent him to see some cosmetic surgeon at a Profine lab in “The Walled City Paradise” of *Corpus Christi*, Texas of all places. He goes on, telling us what we already know like he is reading out of some stupid fucking *Corpus Christi* brochure:

“It’s just a few hundred miles south of the American border and the only place in the world where *formers* are treated like humans. It’s also an impenetrable fortress you can only enter if you’re invited. It’s the one place in the world that hasn’t had an ‘infected incident’ in years. Also, the city is rich, thanks to its ingenious adaptations like”

Everyone is rapt, leaning toward the screen and the fake Gerald as he recites lines about Profine and *Corpus Christi*.

“... Furthermore, Safe Zones from all over the world ship and receive goods off its coast. It is paradise.”

My lips move, unable to cage my angry thoughts, “This is a lie.”

There is a collective gasp from the group, even Nancy, who usually releases gasps only in relation to

her sobs. Dr. Yvonne taps the screen, freezing the image of Gerald, looking unnaturally happy and healthy, as if to mock us.

“I’m sorry Billy, do you have something to say?”

My hands shake as I stand, and it takes every ounce of effort I can muster to maintain self-control in the screen’s blistering bright light. “I need a cigarette.” Before anyone can object, I have my coat on, its heavy leather warming me while I make my way across the stage, down the stairs, and toward the exit. Before I disappear through the door though, I say my piece. “And I can’t take this bullshit anymore.”

I know Gerald—the old one—wouldn’t be happy with this type of outburst, and honestly I’m not either. As much as he hated Dr. Yvonne, he could always maintain control. It might be the first time one of us has stomped out of a meeting. At least that’s better than what Gerald apparently did: run away to the safest place in the world to be experimented on by these people. Who’s to say I can even believe Dr. Yvonne and her movie? Shit, Gerald might be dead for all I know. This could all be some fucked up plan to get the rest of us to follow her like she’s some twisted pied piper.

Maybe seeing me leave like this will be good for everyone else. Maybe they will see you don’t have to be afraid, or be a lapdog for Profine. Just because these people cured us, doesn’t mean they own us.

I light a cigarette and curse, relishing the feel of the harsh smoke coursing through my lungs. It’s a cool autumn night and this building is on a hill so I’m grateful for anything that makes me feel warm. The POC’s sterility certainly doesn’t. Surrounding the school are small cookie cutter homes with plain but meticulously manicured lawns interlaced with narrow, garbage-free streets. There aren’t any cars. *Formers* aren’t allowed to drive, kind of like severe epileptics from before. I realize, studying the neighborhood, that this place is a lot like the mask Gerald is wearing in that movie. It’s all fake. Outside of POC’s walls, even in the Omaha Safe Zone, the world is shit.

The lonely chapel standing on the edge of the neighborhood is the only thing that splits the monotony. Its towering cross casts a shadow of failure on everything but the hill I’m standing on. Just like in the real world, in POC, religion is dead. But I guess it belongs here, since it is also fake.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I lean against the brown brick school and stare down at the houses. The safety lights shine every 15 feet. Now that the infected have walked the earth we’re far more careful at night, even in here, surrounded by an electrified, double-steel wall and manned gates, which, a few miles away, is also surrounded by an electrified double-steel wall and manned gates. We’re in a cage in a cage and I’m getting out of one.

Throwing my cigarette to the ground, I make my way down the main drag toward Gate One. The people in the watchtowers are looking the other way and *formers* are rarely out at night here since it's cold and dark and we're basically all afraid of everything, so I reach the guardhouse without incident. Sam, Sam, the Company Man is there in uniform. His feet are up on his desk next to a small television blaring some old sitcom that would have been better off forgotten. His doughy belly lolls with laughter. When he sees me, the show flips off and he stumbles to his feet. "Billy!" he smiles, the lie of the lapdog.

"Sam," I nod but keep moving.

An amazed, ignorant expression flashes across his pinkish cheeks and before he can move to stop me, I pull the passcard from the lanyard on his neck and swipe my way through the reinforced steel gate. I would use my own, but it can't get me out without an escort. I'm not what you'd call 'well-behaved.' Few of us are.

There are always protesters, and gangs of The Cure roaming out here, all vying for a chance to attack one of us. And with sound dampeners running all along POC's perimeter, there could be more going on than I can hear, so I have to be quick. Though the sun is pretty much down, the weather is particularly cold this fall, and the streets outside POC look vacant. Anything is possible. So with my breath leading the way, I run from the out-of-shape Sam, who doesn't have the balls to follow me past the wall anyway. The men manning the watchtowers wouldn't dare fire at me without a direct order from Dr. Yvonne. It's almost too easy. I lose myself in the neighborhood that doesn't look nearly as nice as the one in POC. When I feel I'm far enough away, I lean on a dilapidated privacy fence facing a dark, garbage strewn alley and bring another cigarette to my lips.

I was never a big fan of Omaha before the war. Yes, I enjoyed being close enough to the "big city" that I didn't feel trapped in an endless ocean of corn and beans whenever I was at home in my small town some 50 miles away. But living here? Never. Never. Never. It was all so strange. It was like a city where everyone tried to hide the fact that it was basically Chicago's bitchy little brother, or worse, cousin. Now I long for those days when Omaha hid all its ugly spots—all its racists, bigots, and gangs and their shitty neighborhoods—where no one could see them. I long for the days when the suburbs were masks held firmly into place and not burnt out husks where you'd eventually find a brutalized body or a rabid dog if you looked long enough. The air smells bad here too, like beyond the big wall surrounding the Omaha Safe Zone, there is nothing but death and it's seeping in on the autumnal wind. In truth, there probably is nothing but death out there, until you get to the next Safe Zone ... some small town in Colorado I think ... "Always on the Grow" according to the newsfeeds I assume that one is a lot like this one though: sad in every possible way. Sad

look, sad smell, sad sound, sad feel, sad taste. Even the buildings look like they're waning, falling under the heavy weight of what we've all been through, like mankind's day is at an end, therefore, so is everything it built.

Maybe it is.

Maybe it should be.

It's not that I don't appreciate what the doctors have done for me, for all of us. I'm grateful I'm not shambling along in a death-like state, a mindless cannibal controlled by a parasitic infection searching for live meat to consume. I'm grateful my body didn't die while I was infected, because it could have. I'm grateful the drug was administered soon enough after I was infected that my body could survive the infection's death. If I'm being honest, I'm ultimately grateful for the fact that Tetdat worked—not like Profine's first experiments. I'm glad I'm here and I'm a thinking human being who can fully understand how fucked up we all are. It's good to be perfectly aware that if this is the end, we deserve it to be.

I'm grateful for so many things, but I'm also pissed. Everywhere I look nowadays, all I see is the worst of mankind thriving in the insanity that started with the Infection War and continues with this New World Order of half-rebuilt pockets of government eating out of Profine's hands. Sometimes I wish I was more like my wife who had the guts to eat a bullet the day she was infected.

I am lost in my thoughts, searching for misplaced memories because that's my default mode these days. Since I came out of the infection fugue my memories are all jumbled and as much as I hate to say it, Dr. Yvonne's right. It is therapeutic to sort them out.

At some point I begin wandering aimlessly through the debris-filled alleys, knowing someone is going to find me soon and I'm going to get into lots of trouble. When I finally hear running footsteps behind me, I turn, ready for a fight and scared it might be The Cure after me. For the third time tonight, I feel alive.

It's Nancy. She stops. Her tears have made a mess of her face, her makeup. Even though she won't look directly at me and we're between the safety lights, because of the moon, I can see the grey tones of her skin clearly, encrusted with splotches of pink and brown caked powder. It makes her look more inhuman than if she wore nothing to conceal her abnormal skin. It tells me she's a liar like everyone else, like Gerald. Like me.

I know what she's going to say before she opens her mouth, so I try to stop her.

"You shouldn't have followed me."

"I know seeing Gerald must have been—"

“Don’t say anything. I don’t want to talk. Go back; it’s dangerous for you out here.” I toss my cigarette.

“Sam is going to call the other guards if I don’t get you. The cops are going to be after you soon too, the real cops. They’ll shoot you and burn your body. You know you’re not supposed to leave at night, especially without an escort.”

“Neither are you.”

Nancy sniffs and looks around at the nondescript alley. A few trash cans stand sentry, a lone broken beer bottle sits on the ground next to a stack of bricks, damp leaves scuttle across the ground in the light wind. There is something going on in the house to our right. Across its garbage strewn yard I can see people milling around. I can even hear some awful music playing.

“Sam let me out with his keys. I knew you took his lanyard so I told him I could get you to come back and he wouldn’t get in trouble.”

“I’m not going back tonight.”

“It’s dangerous for you too, you know,” she protests, her arms crossed at her chest. “Why’d you come all the way out here? Why not just go back to your house?”

I shrug, distracted by the activity in the house.

She takes a furtive step toward me, continuing, “I wasn’t entirely truthful in there.”

“I know,” I reply. “I can hear you every night.”

“He’s gone, Billy. Profine let him leave,” she sobs now, again, the tears exploding down her face, “and he took my daughter.”

I light a new cigarette and watch until she cries it all out. I try to come up with the right words of comfort, but I don’t think there are any. Even if there were, the movement in the house would make it hard for my mind to find them. I think there are more people walking back and forth than there were a moment ago. There are glasses jingling and that horrible music is forcing its way out. It’s some pop country from before the Infection War I can’t name. Hopefully, they’re too focused on their shitty music to see us, but we should probably get out of here.

I turn my attention back to Nancy. “I thought it was bad with him,” I say. “I mean, I heard you guys fighting all the time but ... I’m sorry.” The music has stopped.

She takes another step forward, her eyes on me, saying, “Thank you.” Centered in two pools of blood I see a pair of deep dark eyes that I know, once upon a time, must have mesmerized more than one man. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a lon—”

“Hey!” an angry, high-pitched voice pierces our bubble, silencing Nancy. “Who’re you?” A screen door slams.

I turn to see a skinny little man amble toward us from the house with the grace of a drunk on a five-day bender. His arms bat back and forth as he tries to maintain his balance. I take a step back, feeling Nancy’s hands wrap around my arms.

He’s wearing black overalls and a glare that screams hate. “You’re *infected*, ain’t you?”

Nancy stutters a reply that means nothing and I move to shield her from this stranger. Silence comes from the house as the people who were, apparently, having a good time a moment ago are now focused on us, the *formers* in their alley.

“No,” I say. “We’re not.”

Undaunted, the man charges from his yard and invades our personal space with an urgency that makes me step backwards again. He’s looking directly into my eyes before I can turn away.

“But you were, weren’t you?” he growls a foul, liquor-stained assault on my nose.

I nod. There’s no use lying; he’s seen my eyes up close, even if he can’t see how pale my skin is in this dimly lit section of the alley.

His eyes dart from Nancy to me and back again. There is a hot rage, seething from him, begging for release. I’m almost jealous of his heavy breaths and beastly heat.

“You two’re from the Profine place?” he demands, pointing a crooked finger in the general direction of POC and spitting.

I nod again and raise my arms to show my palms, complacent, like we’re taught to do whenever something like this happens. He’s not wearing a mask, so he might not be with The Cure. Still, he’s definitely angry. Nancy’s hands grip my shoulders so tight it hurts. If she weren’t here, I would attack him—probably bite him too, just for fun. Then I’d be put in one of those early wards with all those people who never quite lost the appetite despite the expulsion of the infection. It’s been a long time since Profine let something like that happen I wonder how the world would react to a former backsliding now, almost four years after the initial experiments with pre-Tetdat cures proved ... less than successful, basically giving birth to assholes like these and their ignorant fear ... while simultaneously giving birth to a cure Why can’t anything ever be simple?

The man snarls through gritted, jagged teeth. “It’s because of infected like you that I don’t have a family. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.” Sure, science says it’s impossible for us to backslide anymore

and in fact no one who has been bitten by a *former* has turned. But the court of public opinion made its decision a long time ago.

He whistles. Grumbling voices and shuffling feet follow it. Then the house gives birth to several other men, each covering his face with a military surplus gas mask painted black. There is a crude red 'C' hand drawn on the center of every mask and a breathing tube hangs down from each one limply, like a dead elephant's trunk.

They're all terrifying.

They encircle us like a pack of starved mad wolves. Their huge blank round eyes pierce and their masked faces say nothing. The breathing tubes swing like nooses waiting for us.

"We're doing what Profine won't let the government do anymore," the one man without a mask snarls, then attacks with his fists. He's older, filled with more rage and alcohol than discipline, so avoiding his blows and smacking him down quickly should be easy, even for a middle-aged *former* like me. But as he lashes out I realize the reason I crossed over into their world: I don't want to stop him. I want to feel this pain.

It means I am alive.

As black dots sprinkle my sight and my brain grows woozy, the irony makes me laugh. Though it probably sounds more like crying.

Maybe I am crying.

The others shout muffled encouragement from behind their masks while the old man pummels me. It doesn't take long before I'm on my knees, my consciousness swimming in blood. I'm barely aware of Nancy's screams, or the sound of the other men cheering on this assault. I start to fade, knowing I'm going to die if this keeps up, but feeling more alive than I've felt since before the infection.

Through his fists, I catch a slight shuffling sound behind me, a scraping, then Nancy's words force through the blubbery nonsense. "No! Stop!"

More laughter.

A gasp.

The sick sound of a brick crunching the old man's skull.

The crowd falls silent.

The brick hits the ground.

Bedlam ensues.

I'm struggling to my feet but finding balance a new and dangerous activity. My knees shake and my

arms can't seem to push up. When I'm about to fall down and let whatever happen, happen, Nancy is at my side, pulling at me with some strength reserve I wouldn't have thought possible.

"Come on," she hisses in my ear as her arms wrap under mine. "Get up!" She hefts and shoves and forces me to stumble along on legs that feel broken. Instinctually, I reach for my face to feel the cuts and bruises, but she bats my hand away. "Move!" she yells and I do because I know what the alternative would mean. I may want to die, but my instincts don't.

One of Nancy's arms encircles my shoulders and the other grabs my waist as we pick up our pace. She babbles about murder, pity, sorrow, forgiveness, and so many things I don't want to hear, as we flee through the neighborhood and away from the confused gang.

When we finally stop to catch our breath, well away from the bigoted shouts in the broken neighborhood, I can't help but ask, "What the hell was that?"

"The Cure," Nancy says. Her voice is cold, removed.

"I know," I reply. "What you did"

"Shut up," Nancy speaks with uncharacteristic authority. She wraps her arms around me and leans in closer than I ever expected her to be. She whispers, "I'll take you to my house and fix up your face." Before I can respond, she's kissing me and I taste tongue and passion and sex, far more intensely than the throbbing pain from my lacerations and bruises. When she pulls away, I stare, dumbstruck by feelings I haven't had in years.

"I am alive," I mumble while she wipes my blood from her lips.

"We have to go." Nancy takes the lead and we snake through the neighborhood toward POC. When we finally get to the gate, and Nancy slides Sam's card and throws it at his shocked face, I can feel my erection growing.

When we're safely inside POC, Nancy feels it too.

I can't keep my hands off her as she tends to my injuries. When she's done, the sex is incredible.

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A few hours later, I awaken to the sound of Nancy crying beside me. From the safety light through the window I can see her sitting naked on the edge of the bed. Her arms are wrapped around her legs; the safety light's blue glow is wrapped around her body.

"What's the matter?" I ask, reaching out to her.

She jerks away. "This was a mistake, Billy. I want you to leave."

I don't argue—what's the point? Whoever bashed in that man's head, led me to safety, cared for me, then ravished me wasn't Nancy. *This* is Nancy.

Like everything else, this is wrong.

I quietly retrieve my clothes and leave. As I cross her yard toward my house I can't help but recall one of my wife's favorite quotes. It is Scarlet O'Hara's mantra: 'After all, tomorrow is another day.'

And I laugh because, after all, I don't know if it is.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER

We hope you enjoyed reading Chapter One of A.E. Stueve's new novel *Former*.

The novel will be published in January 2016.