

# FALLEN IS BABYLON

The poster features a dark, ominous scene. In the foreground, a woman with long, dark hair has a bloody, smeared face and a menacing, open-mouthed expression. Behind her, a prison with a chain-link fence and a large, multi-story building is visible. Two figures in black robes, one holding a scythe, stand near the fence. The sky is filled with thick, red, smoke-like clouds, and a large, pale moon is partially obscured by them. The title 'FALLEN IS BABYLON' is written in a large, stylized, orange-gold font at the top.

MICHAEL WENTELA

*FALLEN IS  
BABYLON*

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grey gecko press

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**To my wife, Stephanie: you have been,  
and still are, my rock and my inspiration.**

**Without you,  
this would not have been possible.**



*Lo! I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye—at the last trumpet.*

**1 Corinthians 15:50**

*And he cried with a mighty voice, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, and is become a habitation of demons . . .”*

**Book of Revelation 18:2**

*The only thing more astounding than the heights mankind will ascend is the depths to which he will descend.*

**Alexander William Victor**



# PART ONE

WHEN DARKNESS CLOAKED THE LAND





## ONE

The stench of death no longer permeated and fouled the air, but the city was still dead.

At one time—during a different era, before *The Collapse*—it had been a shining and vibrant, semi-urban jewel, a flourishing center of commerce and government, with parks and amenities and cultural offerings enjoyed by a diverse and largely affluent population. It had been a trendy university town and a historic state capital that consistently ranked as one of America's best places to live by the magazines that rated such things. It was a city that had bustled and pulsed with effervescent life, an unexpected home to both the conservative and eclectic lifestyles. The city had been a radiant beacon of contemporary American life, an example of the lifestyle that many people aspired to live.

The city was now little more than a rotted corpse.

Vann Arnett stood on the widow's walk of the once-elegant four-story Victorian mansion and surveyed the perimeter defenses from this perch nearly fifty feet above the ground. From his high vantage point, it appeared as if the triple ring of fences was undisturbed and none of the booby traps had been tripped.

He wasn't surprised. It had been more than a week since *they* had stood beyond the outer fence, taunting and tormenting him with their provocative catcalls like perverted and demented Midway hawkers. The males, with their insults and challenges to his manhood, were bad enough, but the females . . . they were worse. Much, much worse.

With the sultry temptations of an ancient siren song, they called out to him with promises to fulfill every one of his erotic fantasies and dirty desires. They danced and stripped and more, in an attempt to entice him out from behind the defenses of his fortress.

Oh sure, their provocative and unrestrained behavior had an acute but expected physiological effect on him as he stared through night-vision goggles or binoculars at the young women as they performed their unscripted pornographic routines—he was a red-blooded male, after all—but he wasn't lonely enough or horny enough to climb down from the ramparts of his citadel and surrender himself to them. He craved physical intimacy like a junkie ached for the next needle spike, but he wasn't *that* desperate. Not yet, anyway.

In a previous life, the century-old mansion had been known as Wolveshaven. It had regally sat secluded on a large, tree-shrouded lot. The eccentric multistory structure had dominated the block in a residential neighborhood a half mile northeast of the downtown square and state capitol building. Nestled in the narrow isthmus that sliced between the city's two largest lakes, it was a block and a half from the larger and northernmost body of water, which was visible from the sniper's nest in the widow's walk that rose fifteen feet above the fourth story.

The mansion, primarily charcoal gray in color, with rust, black, and white trim and accents, still retained its stately appearance, despite the defensive embellishments created by Vann, Sylvie, and Hal. A series of photovoltaic panels on the eastern and southern rooflines captured solar energy, which was then converted into electricity that was used daily, while an industrial-sized gasoline-run generator in the basement offered another source of electricity, should it be necessary.

Chimneys from four different fireplaces sprouted up from the asphalt-shingled roof, but only the fireplace on the third floor—the living quarters—was actually used for heat during the winter months. The top floor of the building was primarily the arsenal, while the first and second floors were used for storage. At one time, the basement had been furnished as a high-end living area with all

the latest accessories and necessities of contemporary life, but now it served as additional storage space.

An armored, armed, and fully stocked panic room—a fallout shelter in a different era—had been constructed in one of the interior basement rooms for a last stand. The double main doors were centered in a long, wraparound porch, and the railings had been reinforced with sandbags behind them. Mimicking the architecture of the house, a three-vehicle garage was discreetly tucked away from the residence.

Wolveshaven, the onetime grand mansion with its lupine-inspired Victorian adornments and ornamentation, now possessed an apocalyptic Mad Max–fortress feel.

Arnett stared out at the blasted and desolate landscape that surrounded the mansion. It was a barren no-man’s-land, void of all trees and other greenery or any signs of life at all. It was a vision of perdition. He sighed and frowned. As he often did, he fought a losing battle to stifle the ever-present urge to feel sorry for himself.

*So this is what my life has become, he thought. A day-to-day struggle to not only stay alive but to prevent myself from going insane. Some life, huh? I survived the greatest calamity to befall mankind, only to live like this, if you can call it living. I’m no secluded desert father or contemplative hermit-monk, so why me? What did I do to deserve this fate? Who did I piss off?*

He absently glanced down, and when a tiny flash of sunlight forced him to make an unexpected double take, his mouth dropped open. Vann stared at the delicately detailed gold band on the third finger of his left hand. The intricate Celtic design captured those colorless rays and glinted them back in soft amber-white flashes. He wriggled his fingers and made the light dance playfully along the surface of precious metal.

A smile creased his face, but the feeling lasted only a fleeting moment before those unexpected and unwanted memories came flooding back. They crashed down over him like murky floodwaters, threatening to suck him under the roiling torrent of emotional debris and mental flotsam, drowning him in the wreckage of his

life and all of humanity. He was helpless as the memories poured into the gaping wound that was his soul.

They had been demoralized by despair and immobilized by grief. It had been two and a half weeks—eighteen days, actually—since they had buried their twelve-year-old daughter, Shelane, but it seemed like an eternity. It had consumed them and left them with nothing. They had suffered the heartbreak that no amount of time would heal and no parent should have to endure: they had outlived a child, their only child. In response, both of them had withdrawn into their own inner sanctums to confront the demons that taunted them and the ghosts that haunted them.

Arnett had been so caught up and isolated in his despondent world of anguish, just trying to somehow get through the day if only to face the burden of the next one, that he hadn't even realized that Susannah had come down with some kind of bug. The once-vibrant and trim red-haired woman appeared fatigued and gaunt as she reclined in their bed, her freckle-dusted pale skin with an unhealthy gray pallor to it.

"I'm just tired," she said, trying to smile but failing miserably. "I haven't slept well in days, since . . ."

Susannah didn't finish the sentence—*couldn't* finish it—but she didn't have to.

He, too, had not slept through the night since Shelane's condition had taken a turn for the worse and they had rushed her to the emergency room of the university's world-class medical facilities. The medical staff assured them that everything would be all right. Little did they know they would never again take their girl home.

A few days after that conversation, he realized that Susannah had the same early symptoms that their daughter had exhibited: perpetually running nose, coughing deep from the lungs, puffy joints that were stiff and sore, and no appetite to speak of. Vann feared that his wife had come down with the same virus that had taken his daughter. He dreaded it. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her, too.

He tried to get Susannah to go to the clinic to see a physician, but despite her weakened condition, she adamantly refused to even consider it. With the thought that it had done Shelane absolutely no good lingering in his mind like a fresh wound, he couldn't argue with his wife. Instead, Vann concealed his worry and fear from her. He kept it locked inside and suffered in silence.

Over the next week, Susannah's condition worsened. Her nose had turned into a spigot for stringy mucus that no amount of blowing could completely clear. Each cough seemed as though a piece of the lining of her lungs would painfully rip free. Her joints had become so swollen that the skin around them had pulled grotesquely taut. She had been able to keep some water down but nothing else: even the soup broth he fed her had induced violent vomiting.

She had slept restlessly, tossing and turning under the bedcovers while perspiring profusely, and during those moments when she was awake and lucid, Susannah whispered of bizarre nightmares with no elaboration.

Arnett had kept a constant vigil at her bedside, giving her water, trying to get her to eat something, and changing the sweat-soaked T-shirt and panties that she wore. While Susannah slept, he had halfheartedly worked on his own projects—proofing the galleys from his second novel, whose deadline was rapidly approaching, or going over a pair of manuscripts that his agent believed would be his third and fourth novels—but he found he had no energy or inspiration for it.

He slept in either the contemporary leather chair in one corner of their bedroom or on the floor beside their king-sized, four-poster bed. He had called the English Department at the university to let them know he would be taking more sick leave, and he was surprised to find out that the university had shut down. Preoccupied with his own issues, he had not watched the local news or CNN, much less read the local newspaper, in almost three weeks.

And then—as if from nowhere—Susannah's condition began to improve.

Vann thought it was a miracle. The prayers of a non-practicing Catholic had been answered. It was the only explanation he could

come up with, and the only one that made any sense to him. It was a miracle, and he repeatedly thanked God for it.

Sure, she was pale and tired and weak, her appetite had not returned, and her eyes were still hypersensitive to light, but her nose had stopped running, the cough had pretty much dissipated, and the swelling in her joints had diminished to mere puffiness.

Despite the lingering grief over the death of his daughter, Vann was silently elated. He felt as though he and Susannah had dodged death this time. They had looked the Grim Reaper in the eye, smiled, and flipped him the bird. Each day she improved a bit more and got a little stronger. Arnett was confident that it was just a matter of time before Susannah was healthy again.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Days later, Arnett took a break from his writing and tiptoed into their bedroom to check on her. He opened the door and softly called out, "Susannah."

Because her eyes were still light-sensitive, the blinds and room-darkening shades were drawn tight. Even though it was mid-afternoon, the room was shrouded in charcoal shadows, and Vann, whose eyes had not adjusted to the dimness, couldn't see very well as he stepped over the threshold.

"Susa . . ."

He never finished her name.

Small but strong hands roughly clutched his shoulders and hurled him into the room, propelling him off balance into the darkness.

"What the . . ." Arnett muttered loudly. Carrying sixty pounds too many on his six-foot frame, he stumbled into the room and tripped over the footboard of the bed. As he fell, he attempted to grasp one of the posts but missed. He tumbled onto the bed and hoped he wouldn't land too hard on top of his wife. When he sprawled onto the firm mattress, he was more than a little surprised to find that Susannah wasn't in the bed. "Fuck."

Confusion poured into his brain, filling the vacant spaces created by the fleeing of rational thought. Fear had not entered the picture—yet.

With hands moving in spastic jerks, he felt around the surface of the bed in search of his wife. He sought the familiar shape of her legs, her thighs, her hips, her arms, her shoulders—any part of her body. Nothing here. Nothing there. Again, nothing. One more time, nothing. Vann’s fingers found only the textured surface of the fluffy and thick comforter for his efforts. It gave him no comfort. His heart thundered in his chest, thumping behind his ribs like a bird trying to escape its cage.

“Susannah?” he said softly in the quiet of the bedroom, uncertain of what the response would be.

Arnett’s solitary word was met with a snarl, throaty and deep with the hard edge of malevolence.

“Susannah?”

“O-o-over here, Vann, my sweet.”

The voice did—*but didn’t*—sound like Susannah, but she had never, ever called him “my sweet” during the decade and a half of their marriage. Fear seeped into his mind and forced its way to the forefront of his thoughts as he struggled to see in the darkened room. “W . . . where’s Susannah? What have you done with her?”

“I’m right here, my sweet.”

*She said it again!*

Keeping his attention focused on the area of the bedroom where the voice had come from, Vann searched out the small lamp on the nightstand beside the bed. His fingers groped and probed the stale air for the distinctive shape of the lamp. Like an unexpected piece of shrapnel from a distant explosion landing nearby, he remembered his surprised response when his Susannah had told him that she had spent more than three hundred and fifty dollars for the matching pair of designer lights. He shook his head to clear the rogue thought.

In the dark umbra, Arnett just barely made out the indistinct shape slipping away from the doorway and gliding farther into the room. He wondered where his wife was. She couldn’t be the figure creeping in the darkness. *She couldn’t be*. He smiled when his fingers found the lamp and, an instant later, its switch. Fearing what he might actually see, Vann held his breath and turned on the light.



The room was flooded with unexpectedly bright light from an energy-saver sixty-watt bulb. Caught off guard, the person who had been Susannah Arnett hissed and covered her eyes with her forearm.

“What the . . .” Vann was not certain *what* he was looking at. The . . . the creature looked like his wife—thin with red hair—and it wore the same oversized, white T-shirt and white cotton pants as earlier in the day, but there was no way this was Susannah. No way. She was a ghostly white apparition, more nightmare than wet dream.

“Turn it off!” she shrieked as if in pain. “Turn it off!”

For one brief moment—an indeterminately long, agonizing instant—his fingers flexed on the plastic switch. Just another couple ounces of pressure would have done the trick, would have snapped off the light and plunged the bedroom back into darkness, but Vann hesitated.

“Turn it *off!*”

He stared openmouthed at what his wife had become. Transfixed by horror, he couldn’t take his eyes off her and what she had become. Vann couldn’t help but notice that her breasts were visible as one of the straps of the undershirt slipped off her shoulder. He involuntarily glanced down to points south of the border before returning to her head.

“*Turn it off!*” It was more snarl than three-word sentence.

Arnett snapped out of his daze and managed to ungracefully roll off the bed.

Susannah, with one arm locked tight across her eyes, blindly grasped out with the other. Her fingers clutched open and closed like claws as she attempted to catch something—anything—in them. She shuffled her bare feet toward the bed, moving closer and closer with each mini-step.

Was it panic? For whatever reason, Vann dashed around the foot of the bed and toward the door just as Susannah lunged onto the mattress with a growl. As he pulled open the door, Arnett glanced back at the bed, and what he saw chilled his soul like a tombstone in winter.

Susannah, with pure animal fury and litheness, scrambled to her hands and knees atop the bed. She slowly turned to face him, tilting her head in an animalistic manner. A snarling hiss revealed razor-sharp fangs in her mouth, but he only distantly noticed them. Vann could only stare at her eyes, which glared back at him with a smoldering rage and hunger. Those twinkling deep-blue Irish eyes—the ones that had helped him fall in love with Susannah Mullins on their first date many years earlier—were almost entirely devoid of color, as if they had been washed away. It gave them an eerie and almost translucent appearance.

The woman he had loved and who had loved him was nowhere to be found in those strange, savage eyes. A sharp fragment of sadness penetrated his heart. A beat later, the urge for self-preservation kicked into high gear.

“I’m sorry, Susannah,” Vann whispered.

He stepped over the threshold and pulled the door shut behind him. The clicking of the catch was followed by a pissed-off snarl from deep in the bedroom. Arnett fled down the hallway toward the afternoon sunlight that flooded into the living room through huge picture windows.

A body thudded loudly into the other side of the bedroom door, and it was violently flung open. As he ran into the living room, Vann heard another animal yelp of pain, and he stifled the urge to run back and comfort his wife. *She’s no longer my wife*, he thought as he sprinted out the main door of their home and into the chaos the world had become.

Without even realizing it, Vann had removed his wedding ring while absently lost in his memories, and he idly spun it on his pinky. He silently battled against a wave of sadness that swept over him and wrapped up his heart in something other than a lover’s embrace.

He was lonely and depressed, but there was little he could actually do about it. All the shrinks had other activities penciled in on their calendars or PDAs, iPhones, or BlackBerrys.

Arnett clenched his wedding ring tightly in the palm of his hand, closed his eyes, and sobbed once. He sniffed back his tears

and opened his hand, staring at the gold band. He had squeezed it so tightly that the metal had left indentations in his flesh. He knew he had to stay strong and vigilant, but some days it was difficult—so goddamn difficult.

With a ragged sigh, Vann slipped the ring—a love token from a past but forever-gone life—back onto the third finger of his left hand as he surveyed the horizon of a battered landscape.

*Toughen up and ride this thing out*, his father, the well-respected but bitter trial lawyer, would have said to him.

He frowned at how much his life had changed during the past nineteen months—*eighteen months and twenty-two days, but who's counting?*—and definitely not for the better. His daughter, one of the shining lights of his life, had died a grotesque and horrible death. His wife, the other illuminating beacon in his existence, had suffered a fate worse than death. She had changed and become . . . one of *them*.

Civilization had death-spiraled into anarchy before completely grinding to a collapse. The world was now populated by nocturnal, somewhat human creatures that hunted down the last remaining survivors of mankind for sustenance. And he was now almost totally alone—save for the ever-present Irish setter, Rusty—and he had been for the past seven months.

Sylvie and Hal had disappeared without a trace one early spring morning in late March. The two of them had left to do chores at the farm where the trio grew an assortment of fruits and vegetables west of the city, and they had never returned. They had planned to spend the day preparing manageable tracts of farmland for planting, so Vann knew they would be out of range of the two-way Motorola radios each of them carried like a talisman clipped to their belts, but he also knew Sylvie and Hal were well-armed and ready for any and all kinds of trouble.

In these desperate days, trouble came in many shapes and sizes, not just the night-wandering ghouls. He thought nothing of it when he hadn't heard from them all day, and he became only

slightly concerned that they had not contacted him when the sun began its inexorable descent toward the western horizon.

Fear and worry, however, simultaneously entered Vann's consciousness after sunset, when darkness cloaked the land and *they* came out of hiding. It was dangerous—practically suicidal—to be outside after sunset.

Shortly after sunrise the next morning, Vann and Rusty searched for them, traveling to the farm ten miles from the western fringes of the city. Sylvie and Hal had obviously been there, for the evidence of their day's labor was plain to see. Several acres of farmland had been tilled in preparation of the planting that would take place in a couple of weeks. The turned topsoil, rich and black, looked like a fresh wound on the gray earth, and its heavy, loamy odor hung in the air like fecund musk. The self-armored Ford Explorer was nowhere on the farm.

Vann traded his prized Mossberg 930 autoloader 12-gauge shotgun for a smaller and more lethal M4 submachine gun, and he and the muscular male Irish setter scoured the nearby town for a sign—any kind of sign—that the two of them had taken shelter there and spent the night holed up in one of its more secure deserted buildings.

During the first few hours, it was a methodical and thorough search, Vann proceeding logically through vacant stores and empty homes with the dog never venturing too far from his side, but frustration and anxiety eventually led to haphazard and quick scans. He dismissed many of the buildings with little more than perfunctory glances because neither the thick dust that covered almost all surfaces, nor the clinging cobwebs suspended like string at the finish line of a footrace, had been disturbed.

It didn't matter how or where they searched, the results had been the same. Arnett concluded that Sylvie and Hal had not ventured into the desolate village to seek shelter or refuge or anything else. They had not been there, but that didn't answer the questions of where they had gone or what had happened to them.

Vann and Rusty spent every hour of daylight over the next week and a half searching for them. They returned to the village

one more time. The man and the dog went to the safe houses that had been set up at locations throughout the city. They randomly searched buildings, and the two of them prowled streets and alleys in hopes of catching a glimpse of the Explorer.

For all their tireless efforts and risks to life and limb, they found absolutely nothing, not so much as a trace. It was as if Sylvie and Hal had simply disappeared from the face of the earth, almost as if they had never existed. Arnett didn't think they had just run off without him, not wanting a third side to a love triangle or to live out the scenes of the film classic *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*.

If the two of them had just slipped away, they wouldn't have spent the day working at the farm, and they certainly wouldn't have left the treasures and trinkets of their past lives behind at the citadel. He had initially feared that the Explorer had broken down on their return trip to the fortress, but he uncovered no evidence of that scenario. Arnett simply refused to contemplate the other circumstance. He convinced himself they had just vanished.

Vann abandoned the search after nine gut-wrenching days. It wasn't that he and Rusty had exhausted all the possible locations for exploration—literally thousands of them remained—but instead it was that his obsessive search had nearly cost them their lives in an unexpected dusk encounter that had left three Kindred sprawled dead at the curb and him trembling from an adrenaline spike and embarrassed rage in the Tahoe.

Before that memory could flicker to life like an old 8mm home movie and tug him down a troubled Yellow Brick Road, he shook the unwanted thoughts from his head. They were reminders of his foolish carelessness, his single-minded pursuit of futility. Dumb luck and blind fortune had intervened to save him and the dog from a disastrous end that day. It was a harsh lesson—one taught in the School of Hard Knocks, his father would have lectured him—but it was one he had learned and learned well.

"C'mon, Rusty, we've got work to do today," he said to the setter.

Arnett slowly wheeled the SUV down the residential street in a neighborhood a mile or so southwest of the citadel. It had been a

quiet and law-abiding neighborhood, but it was now as still and peaceful as an ancient crypt.

In that past life, it had been an ordinary upper-middle-class street lined with a mishmash of houses that were between and fifty and seventy years old, but now it appeared the same as any other street in the city: dead and gone.

Grass grew in thick clumps and spiky tufts where the freezing and thawing had cracked open the pavement of surface streets and sidewalks. Spindly weeds and prickly thistles dominated once-manicured lawns that, untended, had withered and turned brown, while shrubs and bushes grew wildly out of control with the threat to take over some yards, and vines entirely encased several homes.

Homeowners, who had once paid off their mortgages and had taken pride in the upkeep of their dwellings—brick ranches, 1970s-era split levels, nondistinctive two-stories, and the odd-out Cape Cod bungalow or contemporary Victorian—would be mortified and saddened by their current state: Paint had chipped or peeled off. Aluminum siding had faded to chalky paint residue under the unrelenting summer sun and frigid temperatures of winter. Shutters hung askew or had fallen off entirely. Broken windows had exposed the interiors to all the elements, from monsoon-like rains to white-out blizzards. Birds nested under the eaves and in sagging soffits and bats roosted in brick chimneys and attics, while other wildlife made itself at home throughout the rest of the house.

The disrepair was such that collapsed porches had fallen into the yards, complete sections of roofs had been ripped away by tornado-like winds, houses here and there had burned down to the foundations while adjacent dwellings had been partially burned or merely scorched, with vinyl siding hanging like something from a Dali painting, and a number of homes had suffered the indignity of having the large tree—a once-stately ash or majestic oak that had been the centerpiece of the front yard—crash down upon the house, punching holes in the roofs in most cases but spectacularly snapping the spine of the roof joists and ripping open a chasm three-fourths of the way to the foundation in one instance.

Time and the elements had conspired together to remove most of the detritus of throwaway trash and other disposable goods and newspapers and missing-person posters that had been left behind by man, scattering them about by circumstance and chance. It had been replaced by carpets of soggy leaves, fallen branches of all shapes and sizes, and downed trees.

Chunks of pink fiberglass insulation, sections shattered two-by-fours, pieces of asphalt shingles, shards of glass and other debris had been violently ripped out of damaged homes and other structures. The occasional dead power line drooped above the roadway like an inverted arch or lay snake-like across the pavement.

All automobiles, from sleek sports car to cumbersome minivan to monstrous SUV, rested on tires that ranged from just a little soft to pancake-flat. Some were parked in driveways and others at the curb, while a few were left askew in the street, having ended their last journeys with an accident. Those vehicles unfortunate enough to have had their final parking spot under trees were now painted with mottled spots of white and gray from excessive bird droppings. Not very many—maybe one in fifty—still contained their long dead and desiccated final occupants.

No children or adolescents had played on this street—or any other in the city, for that matter—in well over a year. There had been no impromptu games of street soccer or street hockey. No bikers or skateboarders had sluiced down the pavement or concrete sidewalks. No toddlers and attentive parents had fun in the front yard in tiny wading pools to beat the heat or made snow angels in fresh powder.

There were no children's toys forgotten in the front yard, no mountain bikes awaiting their riders' return, no music thumping loudly from a teenager's pimped ride while he waited at the curb for a friend, no riding lawn mower operated by an obsessive-compulsive amateur landscaper buzzing in the distance. The neighborhood was just empty, with no energy pulsing through it or vigor driving it forward.

It was devoid of life.

Vann, as he drove down the street, scanned the houses and consulted the makeshift map spread across his lap and the center console. He was looking for a sign—literally.

Arnett had broken the city's various neighborhoods down into sections and proceeded to do a house-by-house search for anything useful. He identified those dwellings that had already been explored by spray painting a black X on the front door, while a red X indicated that he had discovered creatures in the house, summarily dispatching them to their final judgment.

He also duly noted his findings on the map with a similar, albeit, smaller symbol. As if that were not enough, in a spiral-bound notebook, Vann logged all that he recovered during his pillaging expeditions. It was a curse of his gold-colored personality and habit of his scholarly training. The likelihood that his life depended on it was merely an afterthought.

He stopped the Tahoe in the middle of the street—travel lanes were irrelevant since he seemed to be driving the only moving vehicle on the road these days—checked the map and then the houses along the street. Arnett found the last dwelling that he had searched, a black X prominent on the door, and dropped the gearshift into PARK.

“This is it, Rusty,” he said to the dog, “the end of the known world.”

The Irish setter, who sat upright in the passenger seat and had spent most of the drive with his black nose stuffed in the three-inch crack of the open window, turned to him as if to ask, why have we stopped? For all the indifference the animal showed him, Rusty was still a dog that loved to go for a ride, especially if he could stick his face into the breeze.

“I know it's fun, but we've got work to do.”

If a dog could contort its facial expression into a frown, Rusty did so.

“Don't give me that shit. You knew this was a work trip, not a joyride.”

The setter turned away and stuffed its muzzle in the open space at the top of the window. His actions succinctly said, *if I ignore you*



*and pretend that you are not here, I will not have to do what you want. So there.*

“Yeah, I love you, too, flea bag.”

Vann took one last glance at the map and mentally noted there were only three red Xs in the neighborhood—the nearest one several blocks away—and no red Ks, his notation indicating where he had found and exterminated members of the Kindred.

He didn't know much about them or how they managed to exist from day to day, preferring to eliminate rather than interrogate. Arnett knew they had some rudimentary hierarchy, but he believed it was similar to that of a wolf pack led by an alpha male. He suspected they were more organized than they appeared, knowing that they had warriors who were always armed among their ranks, but he didn't want to give them too much credit.

The few he had bothered to interrogate spoke of a charismatic leader called the Prophet who preached an apocalyptic message, quoting from the Book of Revelation, but Vann was skeptical of their life-fearing delusional ramblings. The Kindred shunned contemporary conveniences and weapons, preferring low-tech and minimally mechanical devices that functioned without electricity, along with armaments such as bows and arrows, crossbows, swords, and knives.

They spray painted their symbol—a cross that extended down into a sword blade with the hilt encircled by a serpent—in bright red or orange on structures all over the city to mark their territory, and the Kindred tattooed or branded or scarred themselves with that same ornamentation as a means to identify one another.

He also knew the Kindred were wickedly dangerous and would kill him without hesitation or regret if the opportunity ever presented itself. He had seen the phrase *THEIR DEAD BODIES LIE IN THE STREETS OF THE CITY* spray painted throughout the capital. If the unthinkable happened, he suspected that his head would end up on a spike and displayed somewhere in the city. He had come across a few of them during his travels and couldn't help but wonder what happened to the rest of the body.

Arnett folded the map and stowed it in the center console. He hopped out of the SUV, and the dog followed him out the door.

It was a beautiful fall day—the temperature had warmed up and the air smelled pure, as if untainted by the presence of man and his machines—but Vann felt little pleasure or enthusiasm as he geared up for the task ahead. It was a necessary evil, a chore that he had to perform.

Oftentimes, he felt like a grave robber as he stood in the dusty solitude of someone else's home, sorting through their private and personal possessions in search of something that he—and he alone—deemed useful. Many people had desperately hoarded canned goods, boxed meals, bottled water, liquor, and all sorts of other items as *The Collapse* played out its apocalyptic drama, meaning some houses were veritable treasure troves awaiting his discovery.

Decked out in full battle rattle—he rarely left the citadel in anything but his battle dress uniform—Vann headed toward a ranch with a combination of brick and wood siding that was still in remarkably good shape, suffering only minor humiliations from its perpetual state of neglect.

With the M4 slung over his right shoulder and a mesh bag similar to what divers used to haul up treasure over the other, he held the Stingray in his right hand and two high-intensity Surefire U2 Ultra Lights in his left. He strolled up the walk to the front door, which was unlocked. He twisted the knob and stepped over the threshold into another world.

Arnett entered a living room that had not seen human activity in probably a year and a half, the dog slipping past him but not venturing farther into the house. He removed his wraparound Oakley sunglasses, slid them above the bill of his black Chicago White Sox baseball cap, and surveyed the room. He snapped on the Stingray and got a better view.

The style was a mixture of contemporary and traditional furnishings. It was as though the residing family had been in the ongoing process of replacing serviceable hand-me-downs from their parents and other relatives with pieces of their own choosing. It

was pretty much the same thing that he and Susannah had done during the first decade of their marriage.

A slow sweep of the flashlight revealed a large sofa and matching chair, a coffee table with magazines casually strewn across the top in front of the sofa, a non-matching recliner, end tables with matching lamps between the sofa and chair as well as next to the recliner, and an antique-appearing sitting chair with a long-stemmed reading lamp adjacent to it.

A flat-screen plasma TV was affixed to the primary wall while an entertainment center with all the latest technological accessories and toys was near it, and surround-sound components had been mounted in strategic locations throughout the room. The other walls were adorned with knickknack-covered small shelves, pieces of undistinguished artwork, small mirrors, and such. A layer of dust covered everything in the room, and delicate cobwebs had softened the harsher features.

The beam of light swept past and then returned to a pair of framed eight-by-ten photos on the wall opposite the sofa. They were school photos of the two children—a girl and a boy—who had lived here. The girl was around twelve years old with long, blond hair, blue eyes, and a shy smile, while the dark-haired boy was probably two years her junior with dark eyes and a sly smile. They were cute kids.

“Oh shit.” The last thing Vann wanted to do was think about what had happened to the two children, because that would lead to thoughts about what had happened to his own daughter, inevitably taking him to a place in the dark recesses of his mind that he did not want to visit. He took a deep breath from the stale air and exhaled loudly. He repeated the process a couple more times, as if it would actually chase the thought-demons that had infiltrated his mind.

“Screw it, Rusty. Let’s get this over with.”

When he and the Irish setter finally walked out of the house about four hours later, it had proven to be a valuable search, a more than worthwhile afternoon of work where he had gained useful provisions.

Arnett had discovered a couple dozen cans of Campbell's soup, Chef Boyardee SpaghettiOs and ravioli, Bush's Best Baked Beans, StarKist tuna fish, and an assortment of Green Giant vegetables, along with several packets of Maruchan ramen noodles, a half dozen boxes each of Kraft macaroni and cheese, Uncle Ben's wild rice, and three different varieties of Creamette pasta in one of the kitchen cupboards.

Unfortunately, insects had found and plundered the bags of flour and sugar, rendering them useless. There were three unopened gallon jugs of bottled water and partially opened twelve packs of Coke, Diet Coke, and Mountain Dew on the floor near the refrigerator. He had snagged a half-dozen plush body towels—you could never have too many towels, Susannah had said many years earlier—from the linen closet adjacent to the main bathroom, where he had nabbed the five remaining unused bars of Dove bath soap, along with unopened boxes of Q-tips, Crest toothpaste, and EasySlide dental floss from underneath the sink. Arnett was obsessive about his dental hygiene because he knew there was no dentist down the street with whom to schedule a checkup.

Too much for the bag, he had loaded the booty in a cardboard box retrieved from the Tahoe and hauled it back out to the SUV.

In the rear of the house, the children's fashionable bedrooms and the simply adorned guest room had yielded no treasures or useful plunder. The master bedroom, tastefully and stylishly decorated, had offered an interesting search but ultimately yielded no necessities or luxuries. Despite the haul, he wasn't sure how to feel because he was always on the lookout for a cache of a more adult nature.

Disappointed, he frowned and scratched the whiskers on his chin. "C'mon, *dawg*, let's go home." Vann then pocketed his small black Stingray flashlight, gathered up the two high-powered Sure-fire flashlights that he had placed on the end tables, and left the bedroom, Rusty padding silently at his heels.

That night, after he had eaten supper, fed the dog, and decided the Kindred were going to ignore once him again, Arnett wandered

into the high-tech entertainment room of the citadel. It had been state-of-the-art for the past year and a half. He studied the huge collection of DVDs, organized by genre and alphabetized by title, for a couple of minutes before he plucked an old favorite.

Vann slid the disc into the player, grabbed the remote, and sat down in his high-back Lane recliner. The fifty-five-inch Vizio LCD flat-screen TV flickered to life as he fingered the buttons on the remote, waiting for the familiar opening scene of a film he had watched countless times to begin.

He spent the next couple of hours laughing and shooting lines in perfect timing with Chris Knight, Mitch Taylor, and the other characters of *Real Genius*.