

Saving the Dead

Chapter One Communication Barriers

“Leo, you have a student today.”

Ramirez dropped his head and groaned.

His partner, Samuel Drifts’s, response wasn’t so quiet. “Aww, John! What the fuck, man? This is our fifth student in a row. Can’t we just go out and do our jobs without having to babysit a bunch of wide-eyed idiots? I mean, every one of them was worse than useless, well except that blonde girl, what’s-her-name. She had her (heh) qualities.”

Ramirez looked up at his partner and said, “Sam, you know you’re no longer allowed to my house when my oldest daughter, Maria, turns eighteen next year, right?”

Drifts smiled at him. “You only tell me that once a shift.”

Operations Chief John Sutter, their supervisor, watched the exchange indifferently. He had seen their act before. “Well, this isn’t another impressionable girl. Sorry, Sam. His name is Justin Colbert. This is his first ride along. Sorry, Leo.” This time both Drifts and Ramirez groaned. Sutter continued, “He’s waiting by your rig. Enjoy your Preceptor duty.”

Ramirez sighed, shaking his head of graying hair. He gathered his insulated cup of coffee and crossword puzzle. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.” He turned for the door while

his partner young enough to be his son watched him go in open disbelief. He shouldered his backpack over his muscular tattooed arm and reluctantly followed.

Outside Sutter's office was the ambulance bay. A few of the other night shift crews were checking their rigs out as a few of the day shift crews brought theirs in.

"You're just going to take this?" Drifts complained. "We could have tried to argue our way out of being saddled with another student."

"It's John, you're not going to change his mind," said Ramirez. Drifts shut his mouth as he conceded the point.

Together they went into the supply office. Ramirez as the paramedic on their crew checked out their narcotics and anti-venom. Drifts as the EMT who could not take responsibility for the drugs, took it upon himself to check out the radios and spare batteries for their equipment.

Drifts inspected his titanium handled flashlight. The tube was slightly dented, but the light worked. "Do you need any batteries for your flashlight?"

Ramirez took out his similar flashlight from his own belt loop and tested the light. His was also had several dents from its secondary use. "I'm good." He slid it back into his loop.

"What rig do we have today?" Drifts asked.

"Triple-Three," said Ramirez.

"Okay."

Drifts asked. "Are you going to give him the speech?"

“Yep.”

As they reached where ambulance Triple-Three was parked, they were approached by a lanky kid with shaggy hair. “Hi,” the kid said enthusiastically. “I’m Justin Colbert. You’re Mr. Ramirez and Mr. Drifts, aren’t you? Mr. Sutter told me I’ll be riding with you today. I’m really excited to be here.”

Drifts groaned then looked at Ramirez. “You deal with him, Leo. I’m going to set up the truck.”

He pointedly walked around Justin to the driver side of the cab. Justin watched him go with an anxious expression.

“How old are you, Justin?” asked Ramirez.

“I’m nineteen, sir,” responded Justin.

“You don’t need to call me sir, Justin. We’re pretty informal here. Call me Leo, my partner’s name is Sam.”

“I don’t know,” Drifts called back from the cab of the rig, “you can call me sir if you want. Mr. Drifts also has a nice ring to it.”

“He’s kidding,” said Ramirez.

“Am not!”

Ramirez ignored him. “The thing is, Justin, if you want to ride with us, there are six rules you need to abide by. If you can’t follow our rules, then you can’t come out with us I don’t care what ‘Mister’ Sutter says.”

Justin looked at him apprehensively. “Umm. . . okay.”

“All right, then. Rule number one: We don’t do anything to get ourselves killed.”

Justin’s eyes bulged.

Ramirez went on, “Rule number two: We treat everything as if we’ve already seen it three times that day, whether it’s a drunk on the street or a pediatric code.” Justin nodded.

“Rule number three: If you see anything that does disturb you, let us know. We’ll talk about it. Every one of us has seen things on this job that have stayed with us forever. It happens. If you need to, we’ll be done for the day.

“Rule number four: Just because we arrive on a scene doesn’t mean that you get to get out of the rig.”

“Really?” asked Justin with a mix of skepticism and disappointment.

“Rule number five,” Ramirez continued without acknowledging the remark, “if you do get out of the rig, you will stay with me or Sam at all times. And rule number six: If we say fight; you drop your stuff and fight, if we say run, you drop your stuff and run. Got it?”

Justin nodded. “Yes sir. . . I mean Leo.”

“Good,” said Ramirez. “Go ahead and set yourself up in the back of the ambulance or box as we call it. Most students sit in the captain’s chair. It swivels around so you position yourself right behind Sam and me in the cab.”

After Justin loaded up his backpack, Ramirez gave him a quick rundown on where the equipment was stored. He didn’t expect him to remember. Students never did. He finished with

the final piece of equipment saying simply, “This is the hot-drill.” It looked like a normal power drill except that it had a box like device by the drill bit.

Justin looked at the hot-drill with nothing short of awe. “Do you. . . I mean. . . have you used it often?”

“A time or two,” Ramirez said dryly.

“Do you deal with. . . them. . . the zombies often?”

“Not if we can help it,” Drifts said from the driver’s seat.

“We do deal with the walking dead more often than the general public, but we try not to interact with them without police presence. Still, miscommunication happens, and when it comes down to it, we walk into the same situations that police do, except we don’t carry guns.”

“I still think we should,” said Drifts.

“No thanks,” said Ramirez. “I carried one for a while after the outbreak. I don’t want ever to do that again.”

“Whoa! You worked during the outbreak?” asked Justin.

“Yep.”

“What was it like?”

“Difficult,” Ramirez said shortly.

Both Ramirez’s and Drifts’s pagers suddenly went off as the radio called, “Unit Three-Three-Three.”

Ramirez sat down in the passenger seat and opened the map book.

Drifts sneered. “Dammit! I hate getting a call fresh out of the chute! Tonight is going to fucking suck, I know it!” He picked up the mic and in a somewhat calmer voice said, “Triple-Three.”

The dispatcher replied, “Start for Matheson and Twelfth on a sick.”

“Motherfuck!” shouted Drifts. “Why the fuck are they wasting our time?” His voice became pleasant again. “Responding Matheson and Twelfth.”

The dispatcher gave the specific address, and Ramirez gave Drifts the best route he saw in his map book. Still muttering, Drifts put the ambulance in drive and hit the lights and sirens as they drove out of the massive garage. The company was located at the top of a hill that overlooked the city beyond. Darkness, like a shroud of misery, loomed over the metropolis attempting to strangle its light. The strobes of their lights washed over the world around them.

Justin sat forward in his seat, watching Drifts weave the ambulance in and out of traffic with nothing short of awe.

“Wow,” he whispered.

“Listen kid, I know you’re about to blow your wad in all of the excitement,” griped Drifts, “but could you please contain your enthusiasm?”

Justin deflated a little. “Oh okay.” After a few minutes Justin broke his silence. “Excuse me?”

Ramirez pointed. "Sam, take a right on Manes. It should be the street after Mankiewicz."
He looked back. "What is it, Justin?"

"What kind of call are we going to?" Justin asked.

"I'll tell you what kind of call we're going to," growled Drifts. "We're going to see someone who's 'sick!' That means that this person is either too lazy or too stupid to contact their personal physician. Or better yet, they don't have any other doctor except the emergency room physicians. So guess what! They use us as their personal taxi to get them to the hospital! Fuckers! We waste so much time on people like this that we can't help those who truly need us, like gunshot victims and people having heart attacks!"

Justin, thinking the grouchy EMT was pulling his leg, looked to Ramirez. "Is that true?"

Ramirez nodded. "I wouldn't put it with as much passion, but what Sam says is more or less true."

"Whoa."

After a few moments, Justin asked, "Aren't you guys ever afraid?"

Ramirez looked back at him. "What do you mean?"

"Aren't you afraid of the zombies?" asked Justin.

Ramirez shook his head. "I respect the threat that they pose, so I'm careful around them, but I'm not particularly afraid of them."

"The dead walking towards you doesn't creep you out?"

“Well sure it does, but after all the hordes I saw during the outbreak, I’m a little more desensitized to it. Yes, a group of zombies can tear you to pieces in less than a minute if you get surrounded. After they turn, their bites and body fluids are instantly infectious. So we wear personal protective equipment and try not to get bitten.”

“And if a patient dies you have to be sure to drill the fuckers in the head,” Drifts chimed in. “Regardless of whether you’re bitten or not, once you kick the bucket you’re going to reanimate into a mindless carnivore.”

“The trick with zombies,” Ramirez continued, “is that you have to keep your wits about you at all times, and in this line of work that just comes with the territory. Besides, a zombie’s presence is not hard to spot. They’re stupid and except after they initially turn, pretty slow. They’re not quiet and they stink to high heaven. So as long as you’re paying attention, they shouldn’t be able to catch you off guard.”

“But when they first turn, you have to watch out,” added Drifts, “They can run at a full sprint for miles because they don’t get tired. That’s when things can get dicey. You remember that gang shooting two years ago, Leo?”

“Yep.”

Justin enthralled. “What happened?” he asked.

“There was a shootout between two gangs at a house. Must have been a drive-by because one side definitely got the worst of it. Anyways, none of the gangbangers were shot in the head, but plenty were killed. Well, it was chaos. We had, like, seven dead teenagers come barreling out of that house at us like track stars. We came so close to a miniature outbreak right then and

there. Ramirez here saved me from becoming a dead man's happy meal. After everything was cleaned up, they found three more almost completely-consumed bodies in the house."

"Why wouldn't the other gang shoot them in the head?" asked Justin mystified.

"Body shots are a common gangbanger tactic. Shoot to kill, not a headshot, so that a dead gangbanger will attack members of his own gang. The gangbangers are forced to take down their own colors. It really fucks with their heads."

"Wow. That's intense."

"No kidding." Drifts put the ambulance in park. "We're here."

The neighborhood they stopped in was dirty and menacing. People out on the street gazed at them with curious, mistrustful eyes. At the corner, a fat hooker in a bra and sweatpants loitered under a streetlamp. Twenty feet away, a drug dealer sat on the stairs of an apartment building and handed something to a fidgety-looking man.

Drifts picked up the mic. "Triple-Three on scene."

They had parked in front of a decrepit four-story apartment building. Justin stepped out of the ambulance looking around nervously. Neither Drifts nor Ramirez appeared to be concerned as they pulled out their stretcher and medical bags.

"Hey kid," called Drifts. "You better stay in the rig for this one."

Justin stared between the two of them. "Seriously?" Ramirez shrugged.

"Nahhh!" Drifts grinned. "I'm just fucking with you. Man! That never gets old!"

Ramirez chuckled and Justin looked relieved.

“Is that man selling drugs?” Justin asked, indicating a man sitting on the steps of the apartment next to the one that they were entering.

“Looks like it,” said Ramirez.

“Shouldn’t we like . . . call the police?” asked Justin.

“Why?” said Drifts. “He’s not bothering us.” Justin’s eyes bulged.

They entered the building. The hallway that they stepped into was dimly lit and stank of cigarettes and urine. The elevator was at the end of a tunnel-like hallway. Its door ground open and Drifts growled, “There is no way we’re going to get our stretcher in there.”

“Leave the stretcher,” said Ramirez. “We’ll take the bags up and see what we’ve got. Who knows, maybe we can get them to sign a Refusal.”

“Refusal?” asked Justin.

Ramirez answered. “Form people sign when they decide not to go to the hospital.”

“They do that?”

“As often as we can get them to,” said Drifts.

They grabbed their equipment and stepped into the elevator car. It made an audible groan under their combined weight. The partners exchanged concerned looks around nervously as the door whined closed. Drifts pressed the fourth floor button and the car lurched upwards.

Minutes later the doors opened as noisily as before and they stepped out looking thoroughly relieved. “That took forever!” Drifts complained. “What a piece of . . .”

Before them sat a Hispanic woman holding her knees as she crouched outside the door to an apartment.

Drifts approached her. “Ma’am, are you okay? Did you call 911?”

She looked up at him blankly. “No English,” she said, enunciating each syllable carefully.

Drifts looked up exasperated. “Of course you don’t. Leo.” He waved the paramedic forward.

Ramirez spoke in rapid Spanish, conversing with the woman.

Drifts and Justin watched their exchange blankly. “What did she say, Leo?” Drifts asked when they had finished.

“Her mother is sick inside here.”

He reached for the door knob. It turned easily but opened grudgingly when he pushed, revealing pitch darkness. He tried the light switch. It remained dark. Drifts and Ramirez looked at each other and slipped out their flashlights, shining them into the room. Immediately, they could see why he’d had a hard time opening the door. The entire apartment was filled with wall to wall clutter that reached waist height. Piles of trash and clothes, several old TVs, and lamps, toppling stacks of books. He even saw a turned over stroller at the top of a pile in the center of the room.

“How can people live this way?” asked Justin.

“You’d be surprised at how many people do,” Ramirez said.

There was a precarious, twelve-inch path through the center clutter. They started down it with Justin followed by the two partners. The woman did not move to follow.

Drifts shouted, "Shit!"

"What is it?" demanded Ramirez.

"A fucking rat ran across my boot!" Drifts said. "The damn thing was bigger than a cat!"

They could hear more scurrying within the dark, cluttered room.

They reached the room at the far end of the apartment and pushed the door open. A pungent odor struck them. Ramirez flipped the light switch on and the room was bathed in a sickly yellow light. Ramirez's eyes narrowed.

"Oh my God!" cried Justin.

"Whoa. . ." Drifts said, pausing in the doorway.

Lying there on the bare mattress was a large, elderly, Hispanic woman, naked except for an over-flowing adult diaper. Urine and feces spilled out onto the mattress staining it. Tattered gray hair lay in curtains around her head caked with dried vomit. Two rats scurried off of the mattress as they flicked on the light. She was covered in rat bites, some old and infected, some recent. Strips of her flesh were chewed off of her thigh and fatty underarm and two of her toes were missing. Her wrist and ankles bore angry red scars indented into the flesh of her extremities. She was taking slow, ragged breaths.

Drifts silently pointed at the head and footboards of the bed.

Ramirez nodded. "I see it." At each corner of the bed dangled pieces of rough rope, all of which were stained red.

"Hey, kid!" said Drifts. "Justin!"

Justin who was swallowing convulsively looked from the lady to Drifts.

"Go get this lady's daughter. We need to talk to her."

"But. . ." Justin gulped audibly, "But. . . I. . . I don't speak Spanish."

"Fuck!"

"Easy, Sam!" Ramirez said, "It's his first call."

Drifts took a deep breath and modified his tone. "Sorry. Just go give her a 'come' here gesture. That should work."

"Okay."

Drifts looked around in disgust. "Man, I hate putting our stuff down in places like this. That's how roaches get into the rig."

Ramirez grunted as he started an IV. He had already set his bag down on the filthy bed beside her. Drifts followed suit then put an oxygen mask on her face and hooked her up to the cardiac monitor.

A moment later Justin arrived with the daughter behind him. Without looking at her Ramirez asked, "Cuanto tiempo tiene de estar asi?"

She looked at her mother and shook her head. He repeated himself shouting this time.

She stammered as she finally answered. Ramirez's eyes bulged. He opened his mouth to respond, but shook his head and looked down at his patient.

"Man, I'm having a hell of a time getting a blood pressure here," said Drifts. He noticed his partner's expression. "What?"

"She said she's been like this for three days."

"Oh . . . no fucking way. . ."

"We need to check her for bites," said Ramirez.

"Seriously?" said Justin. "You think that she might have been bit by a . . ."

"We don't know," said Ramirez.

He and Drifts rolled the old woman from side to side in quick rough movements. They stripped off her diaper and Justin gasped at the sight. Both of her butt cheeks had large, deep red gouges. Pus mixed with blood and feces made the smell unbearable. The two partners laid her again on her back.

"Was that . . . a bite?" asked Justin.

"No," Ramirez said shortly. "Those were bedsores."

Drifts growled. "She sure as hell wasn't lying there for just three days."

"So she wasn't . . . bitten?"

"No," said Ramirez, "but she's very sick."

The old woman gasped loudly and did not breathe again. “Ah shit,” said Drifts.

The three of them glanced at the monitor. It showed a cardiac rhythm that wasn't conducive to life. Ramirez pressed the timer button on his watch. The two younger men glanced back at him. Both of their eyes fixed on his watch.

“Justin, start CPR. Sam, get on the horn. We need help here now,” Ramirez said in an urgent, yet calm tone.

“I never done CPR on anything but a dummy before.”

“Ride-alongs are to break you in, kid,” responded Drifts.

“What if she turns?” he asked in a small voice.

“She won't for at least five and a half minutes,” said Ramirez, “and most of the time they turn closer to seven. So we have about six minutes to try and bring her back to life before we have to take measures to prevent the alternative. I need you to start CPR now.”

Justin lurched forward. He jerkily placed his hands on her chest and began to push up and down. Suddenly a high-pitched wail erupted behind them. They twisted around to see the daughter's horrified face.

"Keep doing CPR," Ramirez told Justin as he faced the daughter, explaining to her what was going on.

She looked from her mother to Ramirez. Her expression became a sneer, "Usted hizo esto! La mato! Va mato a mi mamma!"

Ramirez shook his head as he tried to talk to her, but he broke off as she charged at him, screaming. He raised his hands to defend himself, but Drifts was already there. He grabbed her around the waist pinning her arms to her side and hauled her back.

“What the hell did you say to her, Leo?”

"Nothing! She thinks we killed her!" said Ramirez.

Drifts said, “Oh that’s fucking rich!”

“Just get her out of here! Justin and I will handle things in here!”

Drifts looked as if he doubted that Justin would be very much help. "I'll radio for help out in the hall."

"You do that," said Ramirez.

“Give me a shout if you need anything."

“Will do.”

Drifts carried the thrashing woman out of the room.

Ramirez glanced at his watch and then pushed a syringe of epinephrine into the IV. He placed defibrillator patches on her chest and motioned for Justin to stop compression as he checked the monitor. "Step back," he said calmly. "I'm going to shock her."

Justin leapt back as if she had suddenly become scalding hot. The monitor released a low whine as it charged. Ramirez pressed the button and her body jerked as she was shocked. "No change. Continue CPR."

Justin retook his place at her chest and began to pump. "Man, this is hard work," he panted. "I never . . . oh my God!" he shouted as he leapt back.

"What's up?" demanded Ramirez, deftly grabbing his flashlight.

"I think I just broke a couple of her ribs!"

Ramirez slipped his flashlight back into his belt loop. "That happens. It's nothing to worry about. Please keep going."

Ramirez intubated her and began to bag oxygen into the tube in her throat.

He looked at his watch with mounting tension. Justin was sweating profusely and his arms trembled from exertion.

Drifts came back into the room. "How much longer?"

"Not much," said Ramirez. "How's she doing?"

"The daughter's freaked but has control of herself, for now."

"Where is she?"

"On the floor in the hallway, crying."

Ramirez grunted. "Did you call dispatch?"

"Yeah. Fat lot of good that did. That's what I came back to tell you. There was a huge shooting a few miles away that has pulled most of our resources. They've dispatched us a fire engine and a couple of police officers, but they might as well be coming from Timbuktu for all the good they will do for us. Right now we're alone."

Ramirez glanced at his watch and sighed. "Sam, you better go back out and cover her. We're going to have to use the hot-drill."

Drifts nodded and left. Justin stammered, "We are?"

Ramirez nodded as he pulled the hot-drill out of the medical bag. He pressed a button on the handle and the drill bit glowed white hot. He slipped a pair of goggles on and handed a pair to Justin.

"Are you going to drill into her head?" asked Justin.

"No," Ramirez looked at him intently. "You are."

"What!"

Ramirez nodded. "You might not get another opportunity like this. Here, I can stand over your shoulder and help you. This way the first time you do it isn't when you're alone in the field."

"Shouldn't we try a little longer to save her?"

Ramirez held his gaze. "Back when we first started to work in EMS after the initial outbreak was suppressed, I was so sick of death. When someone died and hadn't reanimated yet, I would delay calling a code as long as I could. I didn't want them to turn, and I didn't want to use this." He held up the drill. "What I did, regardless of my intentions, was very dangerous and nearly got some good people killed. No. I won't wait any longer, and neither should you. Like it or not, she's dead. It's our job to protect the living."

Justin nervously took the drill as Ramirez handed it to him. "All right, stand over by her head. First, disconnect her from the Ambu bag and turn off the oxygen. Otherwise you're likely to light everything on fire when you turn on the cauterizer."

Justin did as he was told with shaking hands.

"Good," Ramirez continued. "Now place the bit of the drill directly in the middle of her forehead at a ninety-degree angle. Good. Now that red button by your thumb is the cauterizer. Press it and give it a few seconds to heat. Once it does, it will melt through the skin of the forehead and give you a steadier purchase." Justin followed the steps and the acrid smoke wafted up. It smelled like cigarettes, barbeque, and sweat. He started to gag.

"Slow, steady breaths," Ramirez reassured him. "Now. When you're ready, Justin, slowly pull the trigger and steadily increase the speed and pressure on the drill. The cauterizer will reduce the amount of blood and spread of biohazard material.

Justin stared intently at the glowing metal. In his hand he held one of the most effective weapons against the apocalypse. It was his duty as a living, breathing member of society to destroy the dead before they could spread their scourge. As he mustered up his courage, the seconds ticked on. Ramirez glanced at the countdown on his watch. With barely a minute and half on the timer, the kid looked up, his face pale and sweaty, "I can't."

Ramirez held out his hand to take back the drill. "I understand, kid. This is not an easy thing to do. I'll take care of it. You don't have to watch if you don't want to."

Before Justin could respond, there was a loud ruckus coming from outside the apartment. "Hey!" shouted Drifts shouted. He grunted in pain and a moment later his winded voice said, "Leo!"

There was the sound of running feet, and a moment later, the daughter appeared in the doorway holding a long carving knife. She released a cat-like howl and charged.

Ramirez threw the hot-drill at her. It glanced off her shoulder but the enraged woman hardly noticed. Ramirez snatched up his medical bag and swung it at her like a flail. The open bag's contents spewed out as it connected with her arm, knocking her off balance. She stumbled into the bed, her knife slicing into her dead mother's calf.

Putting himself between her and Justin, Ramirez grabbed his student by the arm and shoved him for the door. "Go!" he shouted and fled through the door behind him.

She screamed as she ran after them. Ahead of them, Drifts's silhouette appeared in the apartment doorway. He was holding his flashlight like a baton as he rushed forward. Justin's foot caught a hidden iron cord and he fell onto the three-foot wall of stuff. Moving too fast to stop, Ramirez tripped and landed right on top of him.

Tangled in a web of clothes, broken appliances, and molded food left on dishes, they thrashed to free themselves as the daughter pounced like a spider.

Ramirez's floundering legs caught her as he twisted around. She fell towards him, her bloody knife glinting in the dark. He reached out defensively and caught the wrist of her knife hand. She tried to claw at him with her free hand. He drove his elbow into her, but his arm was tangled in laundry diminishing the power in his strike, but still enough to stun her.

"Fuck! We've got a runner now!" shouted Drifts.

Ramirez heard another pair of feet running from the bedroom and the cold reality occurred to him: he hadn't neutralized the mother.

He saw the old woman's fleshy carcass running into view with a speed her body had not known in years. The zombie's yellow teeth were working to chomp through the intubation tube, and the blackened circle on her forehead from the hot-drill resembled a charred third eye. She was almost on top of them.

Drifts lunged over all of them, catching the zombie in a diving tackle. The two of them hurtled out of Ramirez's range of vision, crashing down on the floor beyond. The impact of them striking the floor woke the daughter from her temporary stunned state. She turned to the sounds of his partner's struggle with the zombie and threw herself at Drifts's back, tearing free of Ramirez's already precarious grip.

Ramirez sprung after her desperately. Ramirez crashed down on the daughter's back as he grabbed her knife arm with both of his hands, stopping her short of sinking it into Drifts's back. She released an angry scream as she writhed beneath him. He slammed her knife hand to the ground again and again. Her battered knuckles opened. Ramirez awkwardly grasped the knife's handle and threw it. It clattered as it disappeared in the cluttered darkness.

Justin, no longer pinned by their combined weight clambered to his feet.

"Someone, help me with this bitch!" shouted Drifts.

Drifts's arms were shaking as he wrestled her. Her bloody teeth had bitten through the tube and were inches from his exposed neck. His grip was slipping on her naked flesh, and her savagery overwhelmed him. He was getting tired, but the dead did not tire.

The daughter disarmed, Ramirez reached Drifts at the same time as Justin did. The two of them pried the dead woman's clawing fingers off of Drifts and helped him to his feet. He stumbled several steps and toppled backwards over the wall of junk with a muffled, "Fuck!"

The naked zombie, still on the floor lurched for Justin's leg. "Whoa!" the student screamed as he jumped back kicking. His boot caught her in the teeth, snapping them and knocking her head backwards. He brought his foot down and tripped on more debris causing him to stagger back a few feet. As he regained his footing he saw a metal handle gleam on a shorter knocked over heap. He snatched it up and a light flooded the room as he discovered Drift's flashlight. Justin raised the flashlight over his head like a hammer.

Ramirez backed towards Drifts, keeping his eyes fixed on the dead woman as he hauled his partner back to his feet.

"No!" screeched the daughter. She stood up between the EMS crew and her mother eyeing them warily as she held her arms out to ward them off. Behind her the zombie rose.

Ramirez shouted for her to move, and he and Drifts rushed her in unison, but the zombie reached her first. Dead fingers latched on her neck and hair yanking her backwards.

"Momma?" The daughter half-turned as the dead thing sunk its teeth into her shoulder.
"Ay!"

It tore off a chunk of flesh as they reached her. They broke the mother's hands as they freed her daughter. She collapsed bleeding and sobbing into Drifts, who pulled her backwards. It lurched towards them. Ramirez brought his flashlight up, but Justin was already there swinging Drifts's flashlight. He brought it crashing down on the zombie's head. The metal tube glanced off its head and struck its collarbone, snapping it with a loud crack."

The student raised his flashlight for another blow, but the dead thing crashed into him. They collapsed to the floor with the obese zombie on top. Justin cried out as he tried to push her off of him. Despite his adrenalized strength, she was too heavy and continued pulling herself towards him hungrily.

"Hang on!"

Ramirez ran up and grabbed a handful of gray hair yanking back. The zombie's neck arched and its teeth chomped at the air in hungry expectation. Ramirez's other hand pulled a field knife open with a click.

He jammed the tip of the blade into the space below the base of her skull. He twisted the handle until there was an audible crunch. The zombie convulsed once and went still.

Justin lay below it panting. "Okay she's dead-dead now," Ramirez said. "Push her to your right on the count of three. Ready? One-two-three."

Together they rolled the zombie off of him and let it thump to the trash-covered floor. Ramirez reached out and helped haul Justin up. The older medic lifted the dead woman's head then pulled his knife free the mother's skull. He rummaged around the piles and pulled a stained shirt and wiped the blood off his blade.

Ramirez placed a hand on Justin's shoulder, and the student flinched. "Come on. Let's get out of here." Justin nodded. Drifts, still holding the sobbing daughter, nodded to him from a few feet away. Together the three of them exited the room.

Outside, Drifts looked at Justin. "Well if that didn't grow some hair on your balls, I don't know what will."

Justin looked at the EMT with open shock. Then a moment later he snorted.

Ramirez took him through the finer points of field wound care as they bandaged the daughter's bite out in the hall. While they tended to her, Drifts went back inside to gather up some of their equipment and wash off his flashlight in the bathroom sink. He came back out a few minutes later with the monitor, oxygen tank, and a considerably lighter medical bag.

"I have the narcs, anti-venom, and the hot-drill. Fuck the rest!"

"I thought that you were going to clean your flashlight?" said Ramirez as he noted the dented flashlight in the biohazard bag.

Drifts shook his head. "Not here. The bathroom is worse than the rest of the place."

They silently carried the daughter down the stairs and placed her onto the stretcher. Sirens screamed as they loaded her into the back of the ambulance and two police cruisers arrived. The hooker and the drug dealer had conveniently found other places to be.

"Better late than never," muttered Drifts.

The first officer stepped out of his patrol car, his eyes bulging as he noted their bloody appearance. "What the hell happened to you?"

“We had a code on apartment 4B that reanimated, and then her daughter attacked us,” Ramirez said matter-of-factly. “We put it down, but not before she was bitten.”

The officers took a step backwards, their hands drifting towards their sidearms. “She attacked you before she was bit? Was she the only one?”

“Yep,” said Ramirez.

“Do you need us to arrest her? Is she safe? Do we need to put her down?”

“You don’t have to kill her. She wasn’t bitten anywhere vital. I think she can be saved. We’re taking her to the hospital now. We’ll press charges there.”

Drifts hit the lights and sirens and drove. Ramirez washed and cleaned his patient’s wounds. He started an IV and gave her a sedative and zombie anti-venom.

Justin sat silently at the head of the stretcher and watched Ramirez work. He did not try to help and only broke his silence once when Ramirez administered the zombie anti-venom.

“Will that help?”

“It might,” said Ramirez. “Coupled with surgical removal of all infected tissue, it has a forty percent chance of success. The problem is, it’s highly caustic to the kidneys, and she might have to be on dialysis for the rest of her life. Still, that’s a better outcome than putting a bullet in her head.”

Justin grunted and said no more.

They arrived at the hospital and a hazmat team met them in the ambulance bay, where they and their patient were stripped, washed, and examined under armed guard. Ramirez asked

for privacy during his exam. Seeing that he wasn't going to budge on the matter, the hospital staff relented.

“What that all about?” Justin asked.

Drifts shrugged. “Leo has modesty issues unlike me.” He stepped forward in naked glory, “All right folks, I've been a dirty boy. Let's clean me up! He jumped with a shriek. “Hey! This water's fucking freezing!”

Later, the hospital staff took the sedated daughter to a special ward. The three of them were given paper scrubs to wear as they waited for results.

Drifts said solemnly. “I'm sorry how things went back there. That bitch caught me off guard and kicked me in the nuts, and then she head-butted me. I came as quick as I could, but she had already grabbed that knife from God-knows-where and was almost on you guys. Scared the shit out of me!”

Ramirez waved off the apology. “Could have happened to any of us. You did stop the zombie.”

Drifts shrugged. Ramirez sat down by Justin. “Are you okay?”

Justin shook his head. “I don't know.”

“That was the first zombie you've ever seen, wasn't it?” asked Drifts. Justin nodded.

“They're a pretty brutal sight,” Drifts acknowledged.

“That wasn’t the worst part. I keep thinking about how she lived before she died. How she was treated by her own daughter.” He shook his head. “Daughters aren’t supposed to treat their mothers like that.”

“I know,” said Ramirez.

“Then we try to save her, and her daughter tries to kill us. Her mother becomes one of those things and tries to eat her. We should have let her. It’s what she deserved, but we saved her. We gave her medicine took her to the hospital. For what? So that she can spend the rest of her life in jail.”

“Have to agree with the kid on that one, Leo,” said Drifts. “Who wants to live that way? All those meds you have to take. Going to dialysis every week. Then everyone looking at you like you have the plague, because well you fucking pretty much do.” Drifts looked at his partner. “If a zombie took a big chomp out of my ass, do me a favor. Put a bullet in my head, and put me out of my fucking misery. In the end I think it might be kinder.”

Ramirez shrugged. “It very well might be. But your solution is pretty permanent. I would like to give the bitten a choice in the matter. Who knows maybe they’ll live a life of purpose.”

Drifts gave his partner a look that said, ‘I doubt it.’, but he otherwise held his tongue.

Justin said, “I don’t know. This situation was pretty messed up. I can’t really find the good in this moment.”

“I can’t really say I can see it either.” Ramirez admitted.

Justin looked at him. “What’s the point? Why even bother?”

“That’s an interesting question,” said Ramirez. “You know there’s an old EMS proverb that says that we all get into this profession to save the world, but in less than a year, we don’t believe that the world is worth saving.

“What we do is not easy. The world that we work in is dark and terrifying, and that’s without factoring in the walking dead. We operate on humanity’s frontline. We come in contact with people in their darkest hours and those who’ve succumbed to their darker natures. I learned a long time ago to never underestimate mankind’s capacity for ignorance and cruelty. We witness what depths people will go when they are in the throes of fear, rage, ignorance, and pain. There’s a price for looking at the animal that lurks beneath humanity’s civilized face. Once you see it you’re often changed in superficial and fundamental ways.

“Our purpose is in the struggle. We remind people of order in the chaos, of hope in the fear. We help those who deserve it as well as those who do not. We bring light to a world of darkness simply because it’s needed.”

Ramirez looked at Justin. “You’re a good man, Justin. You’ve kept your head where others would have failed, maybe even died. You have potential, that much I can see, but you don’t have to do this. Rule number three. You can be done, no harm, no foul, no judgment.”

“I don’t know if I can handle this. How can I tell?” asked Justin.

Ramirez shrugged. “There’s no way of knowing. None of us knows what the next call will bring.”

