

## (Frail: Excerpt)

### Chapter One

When I was fourteen there was a security breach near the intersection of Seventy-Third and Klein and my mother killed her first intruder, and her last. She was on the six-to-three shift and I had guitar lessons a four-toll drive away in Leyton and she was supposed to pick me up straight from school, so we could hit U.S. 30 before the evening checkpoints started. But she didn't show, wasn't answering her cell, so I just sat there in the cafeteria, waiting, inhaling traces of stale crinkle-fry grease and watching the sky fade from drab blue to deep gray. Dave, one of the janitors, was mopping the floor like he wanted to slap its imaginary face and Ms. Acosta slipped and skidded in the wet and almost fell, I was glad to see it after all her clucking to my mother about slacking off and bad attitudes and "twoooo-antsy" (that's how she pronounced it, all bird-whistle fluttery like a comedienne in some old movie). She saw my lips twitching and glared at me, got what my mother called a cough-syrup smile right back, and I was reaching for my phone again when the warning siren kicked to life.

Louder and louder, that singular cadence distinguishing it from tornado and fire alarms: *aieeeow-oooo*, *woooo-owwww*, low and moaning like an animal in pain. A very particular animal, creature, inhuman thing, that one-note wail all it had left for a voice. Onomatopoeia, we'd just learned that in English: natural sound encapsulated into speech, like a captured insect buzzing in a new-made bottle. *Onomatopoeia*, *onomatopoeia*, the word kept winding and tongue-twisting through my head. Remain in your seats. This is only a test.

"Damn," Ms. Acosta said, going pale under her orangey streaks of foundation.

"They're just testing it!" Dave shouted over the noise, supremely bored, nails raking at an angry pink

splotch on the side of his neck. “The sun hasn’t even set, those things are barely awake—”

The intercom snapped on. “*Code Orange alert,*” said a woman’s voice, prerecorded, urgent but serene. “*Code Orange, located at—Klein—and—Seventy-Third—*”

“Halfway across town,” Dave shrugged, and kept squeezing out his mop.

*“Please lock all doors and windows and seek basement shelter until the all-clear sounds. If you are outside please seek the nearest safe house or other accessible building. It is a federal crime to deny shelter to any person seeking refuge from an environmental disturbance. Code Orange. Code Orange . . .”*

“Just what I need. Haul it, Amy.” Ms. Acosta swept my backpack off the table, grabbed it like it’d burden me too much to run from the crippled hordes. “Dave? Move it! Let’s go!”

“They’re halfway across town,” I said, and folded my arms. No wonder I couldn’t reach my mom, there hadn’t been a Code Orange in years and never with her on shift. If I could somehow get over there I could watch her toast their asses, maybe flick one with my own lighter if it tried to run away—

“Amy, I swear to God I’m not in the mood—Dave? Dave! Put that mop down and let’s go!”

Dave just snorted. “Jesus Christ, Alicia, calm down. They move about two miles an hour and they ain’t gonna roller-skate over here—”

“Fine!” She flapped her bony bangled arms at an imaginary audience, the only one that’d applaud her dramatics. “Fine! I’m not your mother, you get a leg torn off like Cris Antczyk did don’t bother hopping over to me for sympathy—Amy!” The siren kept sounding, Dave nonchalantly fussing with his dirty yellow plastic bucket and CUIDADO: PISO MOJADO sign. “Get up. Follow me. *Now.*”

I got up. Shoved my hands in my pockets, feeling with fingertips for my school ID, town ID, curfew card, access gate e-pass. Followed her a few steps, sizing up her scuffed beige pumps with the one loose wobbly heel, my black flats. Then I ran, sailing over the damp linoleum, Ms. Acosta stumbling and screaming, “Amy, *goddammit!*” and Dave shaking his head laughing but I was already down the hall, out the steel double doors, the approaching sunset tinting Sycamore Street in a lurid orange wash and the sirens making the air tremble and throb.

My chest was a hot hollow husk but I was laughing as I ran, nobody can catch me, everyone else was basement-bound but I was going to see an honest-to-God living dead body get exactly what it deserved. I'd never seen one in the flesh, not even by the roadside, and even on the news all you ever saw was "dramatic re-creations" and shitty movie CGI—I was gunning for the real thing and to see my mother do the deed. She'd get a raise, a promotion, if she faced it down. She could do it without puking or fainting, not like so many of the men. All their big talk. I was proud of her, still one of the only women on the security squads, and this wasn't just to gawk and rubberneck. It wasn't just for me. After everything that happened you have to understand, I'm not lying, this wasn't all just about—

I'm getting ahead of myself. Sorry. You start to ramble, blither, when there's nothing left to talk to but the air. Ms. Acosta, she'd tell you all about that, if she were still alive.

The little white stucco house on the corner of Sycamore and Cypress had gone creamy pink, quivering like a slab as the sunlight went rich and deep; I tunneled through their lilacs and kept on going. Seventy-Third's halfway across town, Dave was right, but Lepingville wasn't that big a town. As I veered off Maplewood I could already see the police cars and fire engines and Lepingville Civic Security vans blocking the streets, great grapelike clusters of red, blue, bottle-green flashing lights. I picked through backyards and easements looking for the best vantage point and completely by accident I saw her, framed perfectly by the gnarled, curving tree branches around me: my mother, an ambulatory burnt marshmallow in thick padded charcoal-gray fatigues, coppery hair twisted up at the back of her head, waddling down Seventy-Third calm as you please as she fitted another cartridge to her flamethrower.

Everybody in town joked about intruders but they were still scared shitless. My mother, though, she'd grown up over in Gary with no alarms, no fencing unless you put it up yourself, nothing but a half-defunct PA system, your basement and you. Anything could happen, any time, and you had to keep cool or you'd go crazy. I wanted to be cool, *sanguine*, just like her. I wanted her to get that piece of walking ant bait, the raise, the promotion, she got so much shit from the men she worked with and she deserved this chance, it *wasn't* just all about me—

There it was. All alone, standing there in front of the torn shrubbery and rusted, broken fence point

it'd ripped down, arms dangling and limp, perfectly quiet but with its long pearl-gray teeth bared and grimacing. A bloated, brackish, muddy mess, a first-grader's art project shaped with careless palm-slaps into a too-angular skull, a smeared nubbin of a nose and horribly thin fingers; something about those fingers, the way each one was a perfect sticky twig of tacky clay not yet softened to full rot, made a horrible shiver rush up my back, my chest going hot and tight in disgust.

It was a man, had been a man, its penis swung limp and useless from its gaping trouser holes but more indecent than the sight of that ever could be was the smell. You can't imagine the smell, so strong and sharp and porridge-thick that I gagged, gasped as it rolled over me, my lungs squeezing shut under the assault: an overpowering gaseous stink that wasn't even a proper smell of death but of *life*. Nasty, fetid, wriggly life, bursting in horrible exuberance from that thing once a man, fields of mold blooming on fabric and skin, grubs and bluebottles breeding, hatching, crawling from the crevices around eyes, nose, crotch, armpit, elbow crooks, eating and being eaten from the inside out—the police and firemen heaved and retched but not my mother, she didn't even flinch, just pulled on her breath-mask and stood her ground. Kill it, Mom, for God's sake kill that *smell*. All the rest of them just watching. Like me.

They stood aside, the other security guys, they left her to it all alone: The bitch thinks she can handle it? Yeah, we'll just see about that. Cowards. She walked right up to it, there in the middle of the street. The cops raised their guns. Bullets wouldn't kill an intruder, but wounding it might buy some time. My mother took her time. Why shouldn't she? It couldn't run, it could barely walk. Its kind relied on ambush and paralyzing panic.

I stuck a jacket fold to my nose and crept nearer, keeping to the trees. I never even considered how trees, bushes, dark shadowy overgrowths where they could lie in wait were their friends, how I'd never smell others coming over this one's reek. *Sanguine*. That word sounds a lot better than *reckless*.

It made a sound, looking at my mother, and the noise it made sent a strange, prickly disquiet through me because it wasn't like in the movies, it wasn't the right sound. It was a low, full moan that bore an edge of surprise, a living human's dismay and uncertainty turned to stretched-out toffee in that undead mouth. It kept staring at my mother, wide gaping eyes from the collapsed ruin of a face and make it stop,

Mom, tell it to knock that off; it's not hungry, I can tell it's not. It's like it thinks it knows you, somehow, from somewhere.

The stench was so awful my throat closed up; I was making little *huhh, huhhh* heaving sounds I couldn't stifle, warm acidic puddles pooling in my mouth. Kill it, Mom. Make it stop.

She took off her mask. The cops, the security squadron muttered in confusion but nobody tried to stop her, they weren't taking a single step closer than they had to. The thing moaned again, an oh-shit, what-now, what-do-I-do noise and some of the squadron snickered. My mother wasn't laughing. Her eyes looked like that thing's voice sounded.

"Get out," she said, her voice shaking. If the smell was getting to her, you'd never guess it. "Go back through that fence and get out."

Why was she talking to it? They didn't understand us. They were beyond speech. She took a step forward, tugging her boot from the soft thick dirt. The thing didn't move.

"You're trespassing on human territory!" she shouted, a strange, strident agitation buoying her voice up over the squadron vans, into the trees, as she rattled off the black-book gobbledygook it couldn't possibly understand. "As a civic security official I am authorized to use all necessary levels of force to address Class A environmental disturbances by Indiana Code Section 17, paragraph 8(d)—"

It made another sound. *Oooooo*, it went. Still looking my mother up and down, like it knew something about her and had no idea what to do with what it knew, and then *ooooooooossss*. Airy, hollow whistling, trying to make sounds a rotten tongue, lips, palate wouldn't allow anymore. *Oooooossssss*. And it took a step forward.

My mother didn't move. The squadron snapped to attention; you could see it on their faces, fear, and some smirking, because they thought she'd frozen up. It wasn't that, I knew it wasn't, but something was very wrong and even over the horrible stink of living death you could smell, feel, hear the wrongness all concentrated in her voice as she raised the flamethrower and screamed, "Get out! *Get out!*"

It opened its mouth again, making softer, cow-lowing cries like it wanted to wheedle her into something. Coax her. It stumbled forward, slow as they all do, holding out its arms.

I don't know what I was expecting to happen when it caught the flame. Maybe that it'd drop to the pavement and lie there like a proper corpse, a genteelly singed peaceful stinking dead body, or give a little *pop* like marshmallow char in a bonfire and collapse, instantly, into a sighing pile of shitty muddy ash. But instead it stood there with its puppet arms waving, each filthy rag of clothing a tattered fiery flag, and then its mouth opened and jaw came unhinged around a long, hard, sustained scream of agony. Not like the alarm siren, not like in the movies: It sounded human, the sound of those screams was a human being just like me or my mother or Ms. Acosta or anyone else in such awful, unimaginable pain they'd do, give, promise anything to make it stop but there was nowhere to go, no way out. It couldn't run, not like a panicked human on fire. Instead it rotated in a slow tottering circle. It sank to its knees, groaning and sobbing. And it rolled on the ground. And it bubbled, and cooked, and slowly died.

The firefighters moved in to keep the grass from igniting; didn't matter if they doused the flame, the heat would still keep working its way in, sloughing off rotten skin and bone. It was covered in sprayed-on extinguisher frost now, a grotesque Christmas window mannequin with arms curled into useless, foreshortened boxer's fists, and the screaming wouldn't stop.

The smell, as it burned. Kept burning, even without any fire. Mom. I need you to make it stop, now.

She sat down hard on the grass, watching it writhe and sob and burn, and someone grabbed her and dragged her to the vans. It was crying now, full-throated sobs of pain as its bones disintegrated, skin falling off in thick charred pieces like slivers of briquettes from a barbecue. The same sort of dirty gray ash. They'd surrounded my mother now going Good job, Lucy, you *did* it, you fucking toasted it, just listen to it wail, and I ran from my hiding place because I couldn't stand it anymore. It *had* to stop crying, she had to make all this stop happening and go away, tell me it wasn't really a person and everything would be—and that's when she saw me, and shoved them all aside to get to me.

“What are you doing here!” she shouted, pulling me out of the path, away from the sobbing howling skeleton lying in its own ash. “You're at school, you're in the *shelter!* Why aren't you—goddammit, can't you stay out of trouble longer than five minutes at a time, why are you here! What the hell are you doing here!”

I didn't have any answer and my mother grabbed my arms in a pincer grip and shook me, yelling things I couldn't hear, and Ms. Acosta was suddenly right there puffing and panting in white sneakers like nurse's shoes, and my mother screamed at her to mind her own goddamned business for once in her life, and I wrenched free and ran fast as I could from the smell, the shouting, the cries of pain that just kept growing louder. It all got lower and fainter, faded out entirely around Hollister, and I sat there on the sidewalk like my mother had on the grass, letting my nose and ears fill up with the clean airy quiet. A good hour, maybe more. The color faded and retreated from the sky, everything bathed in the soft formless dark.

I went home and threw up and then sat in the basement, on the cots we had set up in case of tornadoes or what had just happened, and that's where my mother found me. Staggering tired, she looked drained dry, a dried streak of something like blood except sticky and ashen smearing her cheek. She didn't yell at me, we had the leftover baked beans for dinner and went straight to sleep. The next morning and all afternoon she just lay there, quiet, staring at the wall next to her bed. And the day after that. And the day after that.

My aunt Kate said later my mother hadn't been right in the head since my father died, that even before that she'd been strange. Off. A lot of people said that, about my mother. But I knew her, and they didn't, and all I'll say is that after that evening something inside her seemed to bend and twist like that thing's rotten twiggy fingers, tearing in two without making a sound. She never cried. She wasn't the type. She never talked to anyone. She could take care of herself. She went to work. She came home. She asked me about school, how anyone smart as I was (ha) could be barely passing history, asked me about my music, cooked the pancake dinner we ate every Friday she was off-shift. No more lying around in bed. There was no time, and she liked to keep busy.

And then one winter morning a year later, when I was fifteen, I woke up and she was gone. No note.

She used to go out sometimes at night, long after dark, when she thought I was asleep; all she'd ever say was she was taking a walk. Walking for hours, sometimes not coming home until dawn. That was so reckless I got scared, even knowing I couldn't stop her, that her job meant she knew "stranger"-danger

better than I ever would, that like everyone else she never went anywhere without her lighter. I'd lie there half-awake, drifting, as the sky lit from iron to pearl, and sometimes I'd fall back into thick heavy sleep and when I woke she'd be lying beside me on the bed, fully dressed, snoring. We never talked about it. Always, no matter what, she came back.

They found her LCS jacket, folded neatly at the edge of a forest preserve a half-mile outside the town gates, her badge and ID in one pocket. The jacket's too big, but it's warm. I like to imagine it's what got me through this past winter.

If you're going to get anywhere in life—this is how I see it—it's important to always show the truth of things, even when it doesn't make you look good. Even when it makes you angry. You have to be honest, no matter what, or it all just goes to shit. So the truth is that she's not forgiven, my mother, for what she did. I have the power of forgiveness in me and it's the only power I have left; I wave it inside my head like a July sparkler, letting the little line of fiery floating light it traces in the dark mark out the saved, the damned, those forever left behind. She's not forgiven. My father isn't forgiven, for disappearing while coming home from the mill when I was five. Ms. Acosta isn't forgiven, for . . . I'd thought we finally understood each other, when there was nothing else left. But we didn't. That dead thing isn't forgiven, ever, for spreading its filthy contagion of crying, pain, despair—

No, I change my mind. I forgive it because it hurt so much. Only for that. Just like I have to forgive my uncle and aunt, for getting so sick. The way everyone got so sick, the way everyone died—human, zombie, everyone. Everywhere. Except me. I'm one of the only ones left.

Last spring, a year after my mother disappeared, it started. A plague. A famine. Everyone around me got sick, a disease nobody had heard of, no doctor could diagnose. It made people hungry—no. It made them ravenous, insane with hunger and the more they ate, the more the disease ate at them, turning them to great gobbling mouths crammed with meat, drink, garbage, soap, grass, paper, tree bark, dirt, insects, vermin, antifreeze, glue, face cream, Styrofoam, gammon, spinach, anything, anything they could chew or swallow. They attacked and killed their pets, children, each other. For food. Everything they'd ever feared the intruders, the real flesh-eaters, might do to us—

But the undead too. Even them. They got sick too.

But not me. I don't know why. I hid and kept hiding until the sickness burned itself out, hit a peak and a slope and finally the living, the undead, every eating thing couldn't eat anymore, didn't want to. After all that, they starved to death. The disease binged on them, gorged itself sick, and then it purged. And they all died.

No. Not *everyone*.

Some who got this sickness—living, undead, didn't seem to matter—they survived the ceaseless hunger, the self-starvation afterwards, and became something else. They look human, some of them used to be, but they're not. Not anymore. As strong as zombies ever were, even stronger, but they don't rot, they don't decay and no matter if you stab, shoot, starve, freeze them, drown them, smother them, torch them with fire, they can't die. They heal right before your eyes, and it's the last thing you see before they kill you. Fast-moving, fast-talking, fast-thinking as humans. Strong as zombies. And no matter what, they can never, ever die. The intruders are dead, but they've left a new generation behind. So many of them. So few of us.

There were only four of us in Lepingville who stayed human, who never got sick, and I'm the only one who got through last winter. And it was a mild winter, this year.

I don't know what I'm going to do. I've got no idea what I'm supposed to do now, and there's nobody to tell me. One foot in front of the other, my mother always said. Step forward, keep going even as your feet sink into the soft lawn mire all around you, the *shuuuck* of your shoe yanked from a pocket of mud making you flinch like a starter pistol just went off by your ear. Keep going. Somewhere. You'll figure it out. You've got no choice.

I think somehow, from all her years working cheek by jowl with death, my mother sensed this was coming, the way animals sniff out impending earthquakes and flee. She was going to take me with her, but it was too dangerous and she knew someone would take me in, they have to because it's a felony otherwise, and once the sickness ceased she'd find me and we'd figure out, together, what to do next. I couldn't die, we had to find each other. I didn't kill myself. I didn't starve. I didn't freeze or get sick or

butchered for my flesh, I didn't ever mean to do what I—I *stayed here*. I have a right to be proud of that. I stayed.

That's what they tell you, when you're little. Right? If you're lost, stay right where you are. Somebody will find you. It's inevitable. Someone. Somewhere.

I'm still waiting.

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