

# END DAYZ

A Hitchhiker Strain Collection

(11,000 words)

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End Dayz

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# CHAPTER ONE

**Pierce**

October 29th

Dearest Beth,

I arrived in Connecticut last night and I miss you already. There's no sense in mailing these letters as by the time they make it across the Atlantic, I will be home again. I'll give them to you as soon as I get back so that you know not a day went by without my thinking of you. Two weeks to go, love.

Dad wanted to come with me, as he has some rather strong opinions about where I should be attending University, but he wasn't able to get himself inoculated in time to be approved to enter America. It was only by, let's be honest, bribing some self-important official that he managed to get me bumped to the top of the list.

I don't know what the rush is, I have another year before I'll even be applying to schools. Still, he believes it's imperative that I start tailoring my application for whichever Ivy League school I (aka- Dad) decide to attend.

My dad told me again and again how much better things were going to be over here. Entire states clear of infection, none of the mandatory curfews we're dealing with at home, rainbows and sunshine. The whole lot. But, as we drove away from the airport, I was able to get a sense of how the infection has altered America. It's not quite what we expected. People here are still constantly in fear for their lives, and every other billboard is advertising some new gadget that is guaranteed to keep you safe from infection.

Still, everyone is going about life as usual, it's not as though the streets are deserted. The atmosphere is just so tense, like this delicate peace could disappear any day. Even Aunt Mildred is acting strange. I suspect she may have had a close call recently, which is terrifying to think about. She's acting a bit paranoid and is extremely jumpy.

Despite her mood swings, Mildred is being quite hospitable, and her flat is clearly one of the most posh in the entire state. But like Dad she already seems to know exactly which school will be the best fit for me. As far as she's concerned, Harvard is the only acceptable option for a boy of my "breeding"—yes, she actually said that. We'll be touring Yale first as it's the closest, but I swear she actually seems pained to do it. She's about ready to toss any and all non-Harvard pamphlets into the bin.

I hope you know that if I had any choice, I would stay with you in Birmingham, graduate with our friends and then go to whichever school would keep me close to you.

Yours Always,

Pierce

October 30th

Dearest Beth,

I desperately hope things at home are all still the same as when I left, and that you're well. Things here are far more troubling than we'd been lead to believe. I don't know if the situation simply unraveled quickly or if the American government had been trying to hide that things here were on the brink of collapse. Either way, I fear that my dad may have shoved me into a very dangerous situation. I'll know more in the morning.

We were assured when we booked this trip that in the month since the initial infection, the situation in the U.S. had stabilized. Of course the infection was still building in the South, but every major city had precautions in place to keep us safe. Well, there has definitely been some kind of miscommunication. I can only pray that what I saw tonight is an isolated incident. I needed to write you and explain exactly what happened. Then I should probably try and get some sleep.

After about five hours, I woke to the sound of screaming coming from the condo above Mildred's. Pained, terrified screaming. I had taken a sleeping pill to try and speed up my transition to the new time zone but the sound of this woman's yelling brought back too many memories of the first attacks and I woke up right away.

My first thought was that if someone had been infected and managed to get into the city, the authorities must be told. It was only when I made it downstairs to the parlor that I began to suspect things may be much more serious. I picked up Mildred's phone and attempted to call the emergency number but couldn't get through. Never a good sign.

The screams from upstairs finally stopped, but I wasn't daft enough to think that was a good thing either.

I went to find Mildred, whose room was on the other end of the flat and see if there was any emergency plan I wasn't aware of. She wasn't in her bed. She wasn't anywhere. I couldn't ignore how bizarre it was that someone of her age was out of bed at two o'clock in the morning. Strange enough that I couldn't convince myself that it was a good idea to stay put and wait for her to come back for me. I'd have to leave and see if I could find someone who might know what was going on, and preferably had a large arsenal of guns.

Do you remember just after the first wave, when firearm use became a mandatory class at every school across England? We were both so against the idea of learning how to fire a gun. Now I can't help but be thankful that I know how to handle a shotgun. That won't do me much good until I can actually find one, so for now that's goal number one. Assuming the authorities don't swoop in by morning and right everything, that is.

Anyways, I found an old knapsack in the front closet, where I also discovered that the door to the apartment had been left wide open, so I loaded it up with some of my stuff. If the quarantine stories from the U.S. are to be believed, it's entirely possible that this city will be locked up in a matter of days.

I made sure to grab the picture of you that we took before I left. Maybe carrying around a framed picture isn't the brightest move, but I wasn't about to leave without it.

I was so busy thinking about guns that I almost forgot I would need a weapon in the meantime. Aunt Mildred didn't own any firearms, so I settled on a kitchen knife because it was the best I could find.

More than anything I wanted to call you and tell you what was going on, but I knew wasting time wouldn't get me anywhere and I didn't want to worry you. I'm sure you would have had some perfect advice that I will be kicking myself for not thinking of sooner.

I left the condo, and at first the hall seemed dead quiet. I guess that isn't a term we can use anymore. If the dead were quiet, this would all be so much worse. I tripped over my feet trying to take a step back when I saw a bloody hand print trailing along the wall leading to the elevator. The noise was enough to alert one of the infected who was trapped

in the flat across the hall. It sounded as though someone was throwing their bodyweight against the door, and I could hear a low groaning. The infection was both on this floor and the one above, another less than encouraging sign. Things had gotten bad very quickly: I was expecting the worst once I got to street level and briefly considered returning to the flat and waiting for rescue. Unfortunately, in times like these that isn't how things work so I knew I'd have to keep going if I wanted to find help.

I reached the main floor of the building without any trouble. I moved slowly to avoid the sound of footsteps on the metal stairs. I'm sure someone was alive on the third floor. I heard two people talking, but I wasn't about to stop and check. Situations like these don't always bring out the best of humanity.

I stepped out into the lobby and was instantly greeted by the smell of decay that I really hadn't missed from the first time we did this. There were two of the infected, both too busy devouring a corpse to notice me, their hands greedily digging into its gut. They didn't have any idea I'd come into the room so I stupidly just stood there looking at them for a minute. One had the ashen color of someone who had been dead at least a couple of days, the other wore Mildred's ruby red bathrobe.

All of the air left my lungs at once. I must have made some noise because just then, both zombies looked up from their meal and turned towards me.

If I hadn't seen what she was doing to that body, I never would have guessed that my aunt had been turned. Her eyes seemed as alert as ever, and she moved so much faster than I expected. There was no question she was hungry, and she reached me before her companion had even moved, a strip of flesh hanging indelicately from his mouth.

My dear old aunt latched onto my throat with one hand, the other attempting to push me onto the ground. Before I knew what I was doing my knife was jammed into the side of her throat.

I know, I know, you have to go for the brain or nothing will happen. Not surprisingly she barely reacted and continued trying to crush my windpipe but she did bleed, more than I thought was possible. I yanked my knife out with little trouble, this time sending it right through her temple, letting out a sob as she collapsed to the floor. Maybe that's not the most macho thing to admit, but you know how much nearly this exact situation has terrified me throughout the month since the first outbreak. She was my aunt.

The other zombie acted more like what we were told to expect, and had gone back to ignoring me while it finished off its current victim who had started to twitch as the woman began to reanimate. I managed to kill both of them without incident, but not without feeling increasingly sick to my stomach.

I know you still have nightmares about what everyone went through last time, but already that seems like nothing by comparison.

I apologize if this was too graphic, but I couldn't just lay here without writing down some form of what happened. All I could do then was hike the knapsack up onto my shoulder and move on, but as I lay here now imagining that I'm talking to you, my mind keeps going back there. How can I possibly explain to Dad what happened to his sister?

I'm currently holed up in a diner that was about two blocks from Mildred's building. Despite the early hour, the door was wide open but there's no sign of the staff. There's a blaring siren coming from a few blocks away, which I think has probably drawn any other infected to its source, while warning the living to stay at home where they're safe. Or maybe it's the get out of here while you still can siren. That's tomorrow's problem.

I've locked myself into the staff room and I'm confident I will be safe for the night. All I can hope is that you are as well and that I will be able to make it home and spend the rest of my life fighting to keep you safe.

Love,  
Pierce

November 6th

Dearest Beth,

It's been a few days since I've written, and I feel as though I am constantly on the move. When I woke up that morning, the city was as silent as a tomb; even the siren had stopped blaring. I tried calling you, but there was no answer on your mobile or at your house. I'm trying not to think about what that could mean.

What we experienced during the initial outbreak in Britain is nothing compared to the devastation here. Power is beginning to fail and there is no way to tell how many people are still alive, but there is no question that a great deal of them have been turned. The inoculation had yet to be distributed to the masses in this part of the country, and it's clear now that it was too little, too late. Even those who have that small form of protection can only survive for so long.

I met a man yesterday, Adrian, who has convinced me we need to move west, past New York and away from the major population centers. I wanted to find a boat going across the Atlantic, to get home to all of you, but none are going. The one port I managed to drive to had already gone up in flames. Adrian has also confirmed my greatest fear, that the UK is also experiencing this resurgence. We'd been having large outbreaks in the north for days before I even left home and somehow the government was able to hide it from us. As far as we can tell, the infection is almost worldwide so there is nowhere we can escape to. All we can do now is stay alive.

I know now that these letters will likely never reach you but it makes me feel better to write them out and pretend you're here with me. Or even better, that I'm back home with you. I will think about you all the time and hope you are somewhere safe, thinking of me.

Love,

Pierce

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Belle**

November 12th

Dear Diary,

I'm pretty sure that yesterday was actually the worst day of my life. I know I say that all the time, but it was just totally horrible and scary, and I can't stop thinking about what happened. It actually makes me feel sick. Seriously, even when things seemed to be the absolute worst, creepy strangers start showing up in town and ruining everything.

Grace, Dad and I walked to the grocery store. Not the FoodPort by our house since there isn't anything left there but rotting meat and vegetable mush, but the big one in the middle of town. It was insanely cold out, but we were walking anyways because "exercise is good for us," and we "have to conserve fuel for the generators," or whatever. Either way, we couldn't wait any longer. We had to find more food. We've been rationing everything lately. On Monday I only had a can of corn and some cereal. I tried to convince Dad that we should start checking the empty houses on our street for supplies, but that's disrespectful or something.

After today, he might start to see things my way.

Even the walk there was miserable. I hate the cold, and I tripped over my third grade teacher on the way to the store. How ridiculous does that sound? She was frozen solid and buried under about a foot of snow. Mrs. Treacle had obviously been zombified, there was a pretty big chunk missing from her shoulder and she had that hungry expression frozen on her face.

I used my knife to make sure she wouldn't thaw out and go back to eating people once spring came. Dad says we won't have to worry about them for a few more months but I didn't want to risk ever having to face her again. Seeing people I knew before always gives me nightmares.

When we got to the grocery store I was in a bad mood, even though Dad tells me to look at these trips like shopping sprees. Fun in theory, but it was still just the three of us and a grocery store.

The door wasn't locked when we got there, and it was obvious that my dad was worried we'd come all this way for nothing. That man misses food more than anyone. At least we know that there are probably more people alive nearby.

We got inside and saw the store hadn't been picked clean yet, so that cheered me up a bit. Since I'm the pickiest about what we eat I volunteered to load up a cart with cans and other food while they looked for practical stuff. If we're calling this a shopping spree, I'll take pasta over batteries and bleach any day.

We had checked the whole store for any of the infected before we'd split up, so while I was checking boxes of cookies for their expiry dates I wasn't even thinking about... well, anything but cookies.

I spun around when a glass bottle fell off the shelf and shattered on the floor, but he was already next to me by then. This homeless-looking guy was standing right beside me, just staring. I tried to scream but he grabbed me and covered my mouth with his crusty looking hand.

I tried to kick him, scratch him—anything. But he was so much stronger than me, and it was hard to steady myself while he was pulling me toward the back of the store. He obviously hadn't had a bath since the infection started spreading and smelled like moldy socks, maybe even moldy socks on a dead guy.

I did manage to knock over a canned-pasta display, but the cans all landed on top of each other and didn't make as much noise as I was hoping for. My dad and Grace were on the other side of the store, but it wasn't that big of a building. If I could just get their attention then my dad would be able to help. He was always so paranoid about my leaving his sight, and this wasn't a good time to start letting me do my own thing.

We went through a set of swinging doors into the back room and the guy pushed me up against a wall. He stood there and looked at me again “My, aren’t you pretty? he said before I tried to run back toward the door. He was too fast and grabbed me around the waist.

“Now, sweet thing. Don’t go runnin’ off. Me n’ you, we’re gun’ be so happy together.” Almost delicately, he pushed me back up against the wall. He was so close to me that I could feel his breath against my face. It smelled even worse than he did and I thought I was going to throw up all over him. I wish I had. The hand on my waist began to trail down my body until he slipped under my thick, winter coat.

He was holding a long blade in his other hand, one of those ones you see people using to chop down tall grass. It was when I felt his grimy hands touch the bare skin on my stomach that I remembered to scream. It must have scared him, and he took a step back before backhanding across the face.

I shut up fast. He stepped toward me again, and bit his lip as he eyed me hungrily. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Before he could touch me, my dad barreled into the room. But he didn’t look like my dad. His expression showed nothing but rage.

All my dad had on him was a baseball bat, but that was all he needed. He shouted, loud, and in one swing he had the creep sprawled on the floor. I thought it was over when the knife went flying out of the guy’s hand, but my dad just kept wailing on him. Hitting him in the head, again and again.

I slumped onto the floor, but I couldn’t make myself stop watching. The guy had to be dead, but my dad wouldn’t stop. Eventually Grace led me out of the room, and I guess I’d been crying but I felt like I was watching the whole scene from outside of my body. It all happened so fast.

Ugh. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.

November 15th

Dear Diary,

I've been sitting at home for almost all of the last three days eating canned ravioli (pretty much the closest thing to comfort food we have left) and refusing to talk to anyone. It wasn't just what happened in town, it was more when we got back. My dad freakin' lost it! I had stopped crying halfway home, but my dad still didn't say anything. His face was all red, and I could see him frowning through his mustache, but he didn't say anything.

As soon as we got in the house, he was like a whole different person. He was throwing things around and screaming. He didn't even stop after he'd literally Mom's ceramic horse into the wall and cut his hand. That's when I started hiding in my room.

Every time I close my eyes, all I can see is the look in that man's eyes and imagine what—

Yeah, never mind.

Grace has finally agreed to stay with us, at least for now. I think we're both scaring her. She and Dad haven't been together that long, so it's kind of weird, but whatever.

When my dad finally stopped yelling she came upstairs to check on me. I was too embarrassed that she had caught me crying to even care that she came into my room without knocking. She didn't even say anything; she just sat down on my bed and started reading her book. The weird thing was, I was really glad she was there.

Dear Diary,

Me again! I fell asleep at some point but woke up wanting to go see how Dad was. I left my room to see him still sitting in his chair by the front window and I don't know what to think. He just isn't the same guy who protected me since the second outbreak. I don't know what to do.

"Daddy, I'm okay, really," I said, putting my hand on his arm. I know I'm a mess, and not even a little bit okay, but that's pretty much apocalypse-chic now and I just had to say something. "It wasn't a big deal".

"Not a big deal? You have no idea what that man wanted you for, what could have happened to you." I started to respond but was quickly cut off. I couldn't tell him I knew *exactly* what that man wanted me for.

I thought he was going to get all worked up again but he seemed so calm. "We've been so worried about the infection, about the dead, that we haven't been thinking about the big picture. I'm not going to be able to protect you forever. We need a better plan". Then he slumped back in his chair, and went silent, but I'm going to think of this as progress anyway.

November 19th

Dear Diary,

The three of us have been brainstorming for days, and I'm starting to feel normal again. Dad figures there have to be a decent amount of people still kicking around town and we should track them down and make some kind of plan. We need to at least start talking to each other, coordinating supply runs, and trading for what we need.

Tomorrow we start knocking on doors to find out who is still alive, and we'll go from there.

November 24th,

Dear Diary,

It was hard at first, but we're starting to make progress. Even with a lot of the zombies frozen solid, not a lot of people are looking to wave a flag around announcing that they still live here and are available for eating. Dad still won't let me check houses by myself, even if I promise not to go in. I won't admit it to him, but I feel better going with him anyway.

We found a good group so far, and for the most part they've agreed we need to start working together. We're going to do patrol shifts, and start checking the empty buildings. People are paranoid about supplies and don't want to admit what they have, but Dad figures they'll come around. We aren't savages and all that.

We're having a town meeting in about a week to discuss how to divvy up the supplies that don't belong to anyone anymore, but there are so few of us that I can't imagine it will be a problem.

December 25th,

Dear Diary,

Merry Christmas, I guess. Dad's determined to make it special. He gave me Mom's lucky necklace, the one she's wearing in this picture of her holding me the day I was born. I had forgotten all about it, but it's nice to have. Sometimes I wonder what she'd think of what Dad and I are doing now. She probably wouldn't believe it. My shy, easy-going Dad seems like a totally different person.

We're up to thirty people in our neighborhood that we know of. Kind of scary considering there used to be like two thousand of us, just in this neighborhood. There are still a lot of places we haven't checked, but we're leaving signs around town so people will come to us.

Dad's starting to act more like himself, but he's still so serious all the time. We've had a few people pass through trying to find somewhere safe, but no one has wanted to stay. Probably because my dad insists on interrogating them.

Anyways, Christmas! Some lady we didn't even know two weeks ago gave us a live chicken as a Christmas present. Dad wanted to eat her for dinner tonight, as a special treat. No way I was going for it though. She's probably the closest thing I'll ever have to a pet. Our first Christmas after the end of the world and I'm hanging out with a chicken.

I dunno, I'm actually kind of happy.

January 8th

Dear Diary,

There was an attack, and everyone is all kinds of freaked out. Not an attack like what happened to me, but a zombie attack. Savannah Cooper was found at her house, totally out of it. She was wearing nothing but a nightshirt and shorts, covered in blood. She wasn't crying, wasn't talking, wasn't doing anything, just sitting there. Staring off into the distance like something was watching her. Big Jim found her and brought her to my Dad.

I got the honor of checking her for bites. She was clean, but her family hadn't been so lucky.

Mr. and Mrs. Coopers had gone out to check on their neighbor, Mrs. Nairobi when four zombies came out of nowhere. Savannah was still in the house, but she heard them screaming. We don't really know what happened. I feel so bad for her.

By the time Jim found them there wasn't much left of either of the Coopers. What's scaring everyone was that we thought it was still too cold for zombies, they should be frozen, but these didn't seem bothered at all. They also weren't people from town. We think they actually wandered in from the interstate. They bled way more than any zombie I'd ever seen, almost like they were alive. So are they changing or something? Are zombies just getting used to the cold? I don't even want to think about it.

January 10th

Dear Diary,

Dad hasn't slept in two days. He wouldn't stop talking about what happened to the Cooper family and is obsessed with resources and answers. I think he's planning something again, but he won't talk to me. I guess it's okay though. Our list of survivors just passed one hundred, so someone is always swinging by the house looking for company or supplies. I actually like being busy again.

January 20th

Dear Diary,

People started showing up around two, and we even managed to put some food out for them. Not much, but even stale crackers seem like a luxury now. As usual, not everyone showed up, but our living room and kitchen were already full with the forty or so people who did.

Once everyone was settled in, my dad stood up by the fireplace and cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. He usually hates talking in front of groups but once he sets his mind on a project he won't even let himself get in the way of it.

"Thank you all for coming." He started quietly, but let his voice build as everyone else fell silent, "I know things have been hard and it's damned cold outside but I felt we couldn't put this off any longer. We need to band together. Patrols and sharing supplies just isn't enough.

"I know none of us want to leave our homes, and what's left of those we've lost, but it's becoming more and more dangerous for us to remain scattered. There are so few of us. We thought we would never have to face this again, but we're here now and we're going to do everything we can to stay alive and protect those we love." As he spoke, I could see everyone starting to slowly nod their heads in agreement, their faces becoming more serious than afraid. Grace was pretty much beaming, she looked so freakin' proud of him.

"What I propose is that we begin to retake our town, one building at a time, and that we start with the high school. It's big enough that we can all live there comfortably, without stepping on each other's toes, and it has everything we need. Showers and a kitchen, a big fenced in yard we can protect. I don't know about all of you, but that's starting to sound pretty damn close to heaven for me." He was beginning to get a little flushed as everyone started to murmur their agreement and a few of the men shouted out their support. "We won't rush this, we'll take time to get organized, but I know this is the right route for all of us. I'd ask that anyone who knows the school come back here tomorrow to help us with a plan of attack. We'll also need a few volunteers who are comfortable with weapons to go in when the time comes. We'll work in teams, and make sure we have each other's backs."

Through all this, I couldn't stop myself from looking at Savannah. I don't even know who she's been staying with since her parents died but she doesn't look good. She spent the whole meeting wrapped up in a blanket, just shivering and not saying anything. She used to hangout with me when my parents were out on their date nights. We haven't talked in a while. While some of the grownups argued about stupid stuff, I went and sat beside her. Just so she'd know she wasn't alone.

"Is it really worth risking our lives, just so we can all go live in some school that's badly in need of some renovations?" Mrs. Palmer was about sixty years old, and lives in the biggest house in town. Her face looked like it was pinched in the middle as she peered disapprovingly at my dad with her beady little eyes. I was about to jump in and tell her to shove it, but Grace beat me to it and managed to tell her off a bit more diplomatically.

"No one will be forced to help retake the school, and no one will be forced to move in with the group once we do, but we can't live like this forever, we need to start creating a new future for ourselves. We're only going to do that if we work together".

My dad grinned over at Grace as he nodded his agreement. Maybe I'm starting to see what he likes about her. Maybe. "Ravencrest as we knew it is gone; the world as we knew it will never come back," he said. "We need to face that reality and begin to start over. This will be a new town, with new rules and a harder way of living, but I believe one hundred percent that we can and will be safe again." My dad stopped speaking for a moment and looked around the

room at each of the people who were hanging on his every word. “Today we begin anew. Today we start to build New Ravenscrest.”

I had no idea Dad could be so convincing. Or maybe it was just that everyone else needed a change as much as we do.

After that there wasn't much else to be said and things wrapped up pretty quickly. People were talking excitedly amongst themselves as they left. My dad is great, but the idea of seeing other people every day is just too good to pass up. Plus, I know it's stupid, but I spend a lot of time thinking about how I was so close to high school but would probably never get to go. It won't be exactly what I had imagined, but now I'm actually going to be living there.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Alex*

November 14th

Dad,

I don't know if you'll find this, or if you're even still alive, but I hope you will. Mom and I have decided that we have to get out of Florida. Mom didn't want to leave until you made it home, but it's been two weeks now and if you could have made it back, you'd be here. Or maybe not. It's not like you can just catch a flight from Austin anymore.

Just in case, I'm leaving you this note so you'll know where to find us. I bet even you are already missing the age of cellular technology.

It's too dangerous here and food is scarce. Bandits are a bigger problem than the zombies, more often than not. This thing is making people crazy, and crazy people with guns are never a good thing.

I don't like the idea of leaving home, especially when we can't know if the situation is actually any better elsewhere, but it's only going to get worse here. We have to try.

We're taking Nina's friend Marybeth with us. You know, the blonde whose parents let her do whatever she wants and who Nina is always saying she'd rather be living with. Well, Marybeth's parents were turned a week ago, so we've kind of adopted her. I'm missing the peace and quiet that the Park family is known for, but she keeps things interesting.

Anyways, the plan is to head up the coast to South Carolina to see if we can find Aunt Tess and the kids. If you're reading this, then that's where we'll be.

We all talk about you every day, and come up with these ridiculous stories about what you're doing. We imagine feats of zombie killing heroics that a five-foot-six businessman probably isn't all that capable of, but I think it helps us all to sleep at night.

More than anything, we hope you're okay and that we will see you again soon.

Alexander (and Mom, Nina, and Marybeth)

November 20th

Dad,

It took us almost a week just to drive across two states but we made it, although I'm kind of wishing we had aimed for somewhere else. Tess and both of the kids have been infected, probably a while ago by the looks of them. No sign of Jimmy.

Marybeth and I went back to the house and ended their suffering. At least that's what Marybeth keeps telling me; I feel awful even just thinking about it. I don't know how many child zombies you've seen, but I'm sure you'd agree they are the worst. It's hard not to think about the vaccine and how this could have been avoided if the government had just gotten their act together sooner.

The trip here wasn't too bad, even if it did take longer than we'd hoped. In Georgia we were forced off the road to escape a group of six or seven of the dead, and the van wasn't exactly meant for off-roading. We lost them but ended up just outside some small town in the middle of the night with no gas. We slept in the van and then spent two days trying to break into cars, then we tried to get gas from a pump without electricity, and then searched for supplies. Criminal masterminds we are not. We did all of this while avoiding the zombies still roaming the town and Marybeth cracking ninja jokes at every opportunity.

We eventually figured it out, but not before Nina had a major scare at the convenience store. We'd thought it was empty but the clerk had been turned, and was probably the most gruesome looking zombie I've seen yet, at least of those still able to stand. Nina's fine, but I think it really shook her. Ever since the second outbreak, Mom has kept her inside almost constantly, so she's managed to avoid seeing a lot of what's out there. She's tough though. She'll be all right.

Mom thinks we should keep heading up the eastern seaboard, that the military probably has a base somewhere near New York and that they can keep us safe. I don't know about that, but I can't see any reason not to go. So we're going to keep heading north. Our next stop is Richmond, Virginia. I'll try to leave something for you at the Ball's Bluff Battlefield Cemetery so you know where we're headed next. Just in case.

Alex

December 6th

Hi Dad,

I hope you found this okay and took some time to check out the civil war stuff. I figured leaving it at the front gate would probably be a bit on the obvious side and it might get picked up by someone else passing through, but I couldn't risk you missing it.

We picked up a hitchhiker a few nights ago. I can practically feel the heart attack you're having from here. It's fine, he's a cool guy (yes, he's a he). He's done a lot to get us into better shape. We've got a van again, even bigger than our old one and it can carry more supplies. It even has a DVD player. It was such a surreal feeling to put a movie on, it felt kind of wrong. That didn't stop us though. Thanks to Adam we have no problem getting gas or food anymore. You probably don't want to know the details, but we're happy and feeling safer than we have in a long time.

Funny thing, the whole way here (when we weren't watching movies) I've been thinking about this cemetery and your obsession with the Civil War. In a way, isn't this the new civil war? Brother against brother and all that, just in a different way. Maybe not, since I guess it's not just happening here but you can definitely compare the two. I wish you were here to bounce this off of. I know you'd smirk at me for saying this, but I miss talking to you. I tried bringing the idea of zombie apocalypse as millennial civil war up with everyone else, but it's obvious no one is interested. Marybeth tried to take an interest but I could tell she just wanted to put on *Notting Hill*.

Have I mentioned that Marybeth is growing on me? She's actually a pretty funny girl and she does a lot to draw Nina out of her shell. You probably think Nina is better off firmly in her shell, but it's been good for her to have someone who isn't family to talk to. For me too.

We've decided to head west for a bit. The closer we get to New York, the more zombies we're running into. I know Orlando is a big city, but that's pretty much why we always stayed away from it; I kind of forget how many people live in cities. Now it's obvious how many people died in cities. Mom still wants to go north.

We ran into some people back in Georgia who had heard rumors that the zombies freeze if the weather is cold enough, and while it's already colder here than what we're used to, it's not that bad yet. For now though, we go east. We're aiming for Lao Lao's place, even though Mom is sure we won't find her alive. I'm hoping we don't find her at all. I think a zombie grandmother would be too much to take. We're only going there because Mom likes to think about the idea of you following us to wherever we end up.

Anyways, maybe we'll see you there.

Alex

December 9th

I'm not going to leave this note as we haven't made it to Indiana yet, but for me these letters have become as much about chronicling the Park family journey as it is you finding us. Maybe more, since I'm not really sure if I really still believe you're somewhere behind us, or if I ever did. I write out two copies of each letter though, just in case.

Adam was bitten today. He went out this morning to see if he could find some coffee as a treat. Mom's been talking about how much she misses it. He was bitten by a damn (sorry) barista, if you can believe it. It's hard to imagine anything got the jump on that man; he's pretty much a brick wall. He was bitten on the hand before he managed to stab the thing in the eye with a cake knife. When we met him he said he'd been inoculated, but now he seems to think he should leave us anyways, just in case. There's precaution and then there's suicide. He's pretty upset, and not making much sense but we're not going to leave him unless we have to.

I won't risk the girls for this guy we met a week ago, but he's done a lot for us and you could even argue we owe him our lives, so we'll do what we can.

Until Indiana,

Alex

December 18<sup>th</sup>

Dad,

Well, we've made it to Lao Lao's and you're not here, obviously. Neither is anyone else. I think Mom was relieved, sometimes it's just better not to know what happened to the people you love. I like to think you found some comfort in the fact that you weren't home when the second wave hit, that you didn't know for sure what happened to us. Until you found my witty and informative letters that is.

We lost Adam somewhere around the Kentucky border. I don't mean he died, I mean we literally lost him. He didn't have a fever, and wasn't showing any other signs that he'd been infected but he was so worried for us, more than himself.

One morning he just woke up and announced he was feeling much better. We were all so relieved that we didn't even question the sudden change. He decided to go into the next town and find supplies for us and just never came back. We figured out pretty quickly what he was doing but waited through the night, sleeping in the van on the side of the road just in case he had gotten in some trouble.

He never came back, but when we woke up the next morning there was a box of cans sitting right in front of the van.

Should I have gone back for him? I really don't know. It was probably the right thing to do, but Adam was a pretty smart guy, maybe not by your standards—he'd been a trucker before everything happened. Still, he was smart, and if he thought he needed to get away from us then I have to think he'd know better than I would. It's hard to just let it go.

Before we got here we'd talked about staying in Indiana, but now that we're here it's pretty obvious we can't. This town is full of these really intense zombies that don't act like anything we've seen. I want to know where these super zombies came from, but they're too dangerous to get close to. Way faster than what we had to deal with the first time.

Mom has "decided" that we're heading to Canada, but I think we're just going to take it one leg at a time. I do understand that colder could very well be better, and you can't get much colder than Canada. But I'd like to think that if any government is going to get it together and find a solution it will be us.

We've been here for three days now, eating raspberry preserve and all kinds of healthy food that seems like a snack now. It turns out Lao Lao had a generator, which you probably knew but we weren't expecting. Finding the freezer in the basement was the closest thing to a holiday that we'll probably have for a long time. We haven't turned on the lights, since it looks like a lot of the houses in this area have been ransacked, but we've used the stove for almost every meal. Obviously a lot of it had gone off, but there was still enough to warrant a feast. It's not like we can take it with us.

I was hoping we might get some news while we're here, but there's still no TV signal. I'm not sure what that means for the rest of the country, but it doesn't change anything for us.

As we head north we might start looking for other houses with generators out in the country where they would be more common. So, where is the next leg of the race taking us? It was hard to pick something, since I don't really know any landmarks. We're going to make a brief pit stop in Bedford, which is south of Bloomington to leave you directions once we have more of a plan. We're taking route 50, and will leave a note on the "Welcome to Bedford" sign. Hopefully there is one. If not, we will have to figure something out.

Alex

December 21st

Made it to Bedford but we can't stay here long. We had to kill four zombies just to reach this sign and I'm actually getting pretty good at it. No one would look at me and think 'scrawny Asian kid', not anymore. It looks like the rumors are true, and they're definitely slowing down but it just hasn't gotten cold enough yet. Of course this would be the first mild winter in years, but that just means that eventually we'll need to head farther north.

Unfortunately, not yet. The road heading north is a disaster, and there's no way we'll be able to drive through it, so we're going east again. Mom's worried going farther west will make it too hard to find supplies, but I think east is just going to mean more of the infected. Of course I won't argue with her, we'll just have to be more careful.

I've been spending more time with Marybeth, and it turns out she's a lot smarter than I thought. She'd kill me if she knew I said that, but I mean it. She comes off as this carefree, well... ditz. But she's really not. Maybe all of this has changed her. Or maybe I just didn't see it before. I'm really glad she's here.

I hope you get a chance to get to know her better.

East to Seymour it is. I'm learning way more about Indiana than I ever wanted to know, but I think I like this better than sitting still. I'm hoping someone somewhere has managed to make a secure area for themselves, and that they might be willing to take in three quiet Asians and a chatty blond girl.

The map says there is a KFC just as you come into Seymour. Look for a sign of us there.

Alex

December 24th

Dad,

I don't even know how to write this, but it would be wrong not to tell you. Maybe selfishly, I just can't face the idea of you traveling across the country to find your family just to reach us and learn the news. Nina is dead, as of less than twelve hours ago.

I will spare you the details, but it was a close call for all of us. They grabbed her while we were refilling the car. I don't know how we didn't hear them coming, or even smell them. Before I knew what was happening she was screaming. There were three of them, and they were already—

I couldn't think, couldn't move, but Marybeth took care of her. I hope you find comfort in knowing she won't be roaming endlessly, hurting others. I'm not sure I do.

After that, Marybeth was hysterical, and I had to pull her into the car before they decided to come for us. Mom was in the back seat sorting through supplies when it happened, but as we pulled away she was screaming louder than Nina had been. It was as I pulled the van out of the gas station that I threw up. Looking back, some parts of it are a blur, and some of it is too vivid to erase from my mind.

This was just outside of Seymour, so I decided to keep going according to the plan. Just in case. We found a house on the outskirts where we're going to stay for now. I just don't want to keep going without Nina, not yet. Maybe she'd want us to, but I can't even start to think like that.

For now, we're at 437 Seever Court. I left a map of the town for you just under the counter.

Love,

Alexander

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

**Zack**

Mission Report: Ravenscrest Senior Highschool – February 1st

Overview: Two weeks after the formation of New Ravenscrest by Mayor Paulson, two teams were assigned to clear out the local high school so all known survivors can move in to one central location in order to increase security and better divide resources.

Team Members: Zack Goss, Derrick Herald, Nico Moscovitz, Lila ???, Margo Night

Report: I've been told to write down the details of the mission in in the school yesterday, so that there's no confusion about what happened to our people. I'm not sure why it matters—it's not like there is going to be some kind of official inquiry or anything. Pretending like this is some sort of government operation won't change the fact that this "report" is being written by a guy who should probably be in science class right now. But, whatever... this is how it went down.

We geared up at The Hunting Depot with the other team. I could see my breath it was so cold, and Derrick was yapping about what a waste of time this was and how it would all lead to government control all over again. I tried to ignore him and spent the whole half hour wishing I hadn't volunteered.

It not that I don't think we should have gone into the school. My mom and I live so far out on the edge of town that I'm looking forward to being around people again. I just wasn't convinced I wouldn't go and get these four people killed.

Despite the cold, I could feel beads of sweat sliding down my spine as I got my weapons together. Now that we're all pooling our resources there were finally some decent zombie killing options. I had knives in the pockets of my cargo pants, a crossbow on my back and some kind of gun in my waist band. I'm pretty sure I'd been the only guy in my class who didn't pay attention when we got that firearm lecture. Life or death, I knew how to use it, I just really didn't want to. Still don't. The rest of my team has pretty much the same set of stuff, minus the crossbow.

Not a lot of people in town were willing to put their necks out to get this 'new home' idea of Paulson's up and running. Out of a hundred or so, only nine were willing to try to take back the school, and one of 'em was that guy who had just gotten here a few days ago with his family. Miles something. Damn, I don't even know the guys last name. He wasn't even from here and he was more willing to fight back than most of the people who lived here their entire lives.

The nine of us split up into two groups, with Paulson leading three and me leading four, since our group was less experienced. It hasn't been that long and already there are different levels of zombie killing expertise. Weird. I should probably get double credit for spending years killing zombies on *XBOX* before any of this crap even happened. Still, I'm not even sure how I ended up leading Group B. I guess I know the school better than most, and probably put down about ten of my turned classmates back in September, but I don't really enjoy the fight. Not like some of these guys do.

Anyways, we got everything together, went over the plan again, then took off for the high school. Two minutes before go time, and both teams were just standing in the Ravenscrest High parking lot looking less than excited. Paulson's daughter was there too. She would be staying just outside the school with a first-aid kit. Not that it would do any of us much good if it came down to it, but it's all we had.

We weren't sure how many people would have holed up in the school after they got bit, but I could already see three of the dead pounding their fists against the lobby door, trying to get to us. They looked fully dead though, so at least there was no way these could be like the hardcore zoms that killed the Coopers. They would be harder to kill, but at least they were too dumb to charge at you in a group, or figure out how to open the sliding door and get to us before we got to them. I even recognized one of them from my second period English class.

We approached the school, and Belle stood back as Paulson used a crowbar to pry open the doors. The rest of us formed a protective cluster around him.

There was only had a second to gag at the smell before all three zombies practically tripped over each other to get out into the open. The kid I recognized, James Cho was missing half of his face but that didn't stop him. He lunged at me with a low groan while Miles took down the decaying janitor that followed him out.

I grabbed the knife from my right pocket, standard kitchen blade variety, and lunged back, wincing as the two of us collided. I had my knife through his eye before he had a chance to counter and quickly ripped it right back out again. Too early in the game to lose a weapon.

It was Derrick that ordered everyone to move forward, but I let it go. Without saying anything else, we branched off and went our separate ways, each group moving in the predetermined formation down either the east or west hallway.

Our group headed west toward the staff offices and gym, while the other group took on the underclassmen classrooms. Derrick and I took point, Lila and Margie followed a few feet behind, and Nico brought up the rear.

It was weird seeing the school like this, dusty and abandoned. Obviously the power had gone out a long time ago, and there were blood stains everywhere. It's hard to think of it as the same place that I dreaded going to every day for three years. Back then, I didn't even really know what dread was.

Things went smoothly at first, but I had to keep reminding Lila to stop talking. I'm sure we all wanted to say something just to break the silence, but it would only draw unwanted attention.

As we passed the nurse's station, we heard shots coming from the other side of the school, followed by this awful scream and I couldn't help but imagine the very worst happening to the other team. I wanted to help, but the plan was clear. The sooner we got this done, the sooner we would stop losing people to the dead.

We worked our way toward the gym, clearing each room as we passed. There were a few bodies that were too far gone to identify. I can't even tell you how many times I had to stop myself from looking at the bottom of my shoe after stepping on something with that sickening, squishy feeling to it.

We only had to take out three zombies that were locked into various classrooms before we made it to the gym about thirty minutes after going inside. We'd been moving so slowly, making sure we didn't miss anything but the farther we got the more it felt like something or someone could jump out at you at any second.

The thick metal doors to the gym were closed so we had no way to know how many zombies we'd find in there. There are still so many people from town unaccounted for that we've started a pool to guess where we'll end up finding most of our neighbors. The school ranked pretty high.

I practically jumped when, without warning, Derrick started banging on the doors with his fist. A big part of me wanted to punch the guy but we all just stood there for half a minute, not saying anything. Waiting.

Eventually his knock was answered and whoever/whatever was inside started pushing themselves up against the door, which thankfully wouldn't budge. To hear that breathy moaning noise, and know what's waiting on the other side—definitely not my favorite feeling.

I motioned for the others to take their positions in an arc around the door as I got ready to turn the handle. It didn't sound like there were too many in there, but we needed to control the flow, not let too many out at once. I opened the door.

Seven. There had been seven people who died in the gym before reanimating. They all came at us as soon as I opened the door. It was chaos for a few minutes. I killed one, and managed to pull another off Margie, but my heart was

pounding and it was all instinct. I couldn't give you a play by play if my life depended on it.

We all managed to take out at least one, I think. I know Lila and Nico had both been looking forward to going into the school, even just for the chance to fight back for a change, and it showed.

As soon as all seven of them were down there were four different happy dances going on in that hallway. Not dying is a pretty epic feeling. I hip bumped with Lila and noticed that Derrick wasn't enjoying the same high the rest of us were. At first I thought he was just being, well... Derrick. Then I saw the blood on his leg. Somewhere in the course of the fight, he'd been bitten.

Eventually the others noticed, and we all just kind of stood there. I had no idea what to say, and I knew he'd want me to keep my mouth shut but we had protocol to follow now.

Derrick hadn't been inoculated so he probably had two days before he died and another few hours after that until he reanimated. Anyone who is infected gets twenty-four hours to do what they need to before they either off themselves or someone does it for them. Not a nice choice to have to make.

Miles and his family had come from out west and were the only people I knew who had gotten their vaccinations before the second wave. Not that it would save us from infection like we'd been promised, but they'd heard stories that it did give you more time. Of course, once you did turn you'd end up as one of the super zombies that killed the Coopers, so it still wasn't a best case scenario.

"Man, I'm sorry," Nico said, but Derrick didn't respond. He just stared at the wound in his leg which was steadily seeping blood. He looked shocked. I'm sure he never thought it would happen to him.

"You can backtrack the way we came, we'll finish this up," I said jerking my head towards the hall. The other team only had four people so we could probably still finish the job. I assumed the gym was the worst of it anyways. It would suck to lose someone on our team who knew how to handle a weapon, but we could manage. Hopefully.

"No. You pansies need me and you know it. Just give me something to wrap this with, and we keep going." Derrick's expression became hard and unreadable. "It's not like I have any affairs to get in order, no one will be reading over my will hoping they get my car or my record collection. We do this, and then I end it."

In that moment I felt pretty damn sick. I had considered what it would be like to be the hero, clearing the school without losing anyone. Keeping everyone safe. I hated the bastard, but I feel like I let him down.

I didn't know what to say, but thankfully I didn't have to worry about it since Derrick stalked down the hallway after wrapping his leg as if none of this bothered him at all.

We made it to the second floor, no problem. There had been two zombies in the stairwell, but one had been too far gone to even get off the floor and Derrick killed the other in about ten seconds.

It looked like the other team had gone about the same pace as we had. I saw Sharon Simpson wiping blood off of her hands onto her pants, while George braced himself on his knees, huffing to catch his breath. Paulson offered a weak wave from the other end of the hallway before the three of them disappeared into another classroom. There was no sign of Miles. I still don't know what happened to him.

The next six classrooms were empty. I guess if you're going to hide out from the apocalypse in the school, you don't do it in a science lab. We had our final surprise as we reached the very last classroom on our side of the hallway. Going into the room, and there was a collective sigh of relief. All we needed to deal with was one dead guy on the floor at the back of the classroom.

Most of us had put down our weapons already when Margie took her knife to go make sure the poor sucker on the floor wouldn't be coming back when he jumped up and grabbed her. He didn't look like he'd been dead long and

definitely moved faster than anything we'd been expecting. He had a hand around her throat before any of us could even blink.

Margie flailed, and tried to get her knife into his head but the zombie just kept snarling, snapping his teeth and trying to pin her down. Margie is a pretty tough lady for someone who used to work at a bakery. She's a pretty tough lady, period. But she'd been caught off guard and the sudden fight had startled all of us. Well, all of us except Derrick.

He tackled the Z, putting all his weight into getting him off of Margie, who quickly scrambled to her feet and picked up her weapon. Too late though as the zombie managed to tear off a chunk of Derrick's arm with his teeth. To his credit Derrick took it better than I would have, only letting out this gurgled groan. It was horrible to look at, I don't even want to think about what it felt like.

I knew what I had to do then, even though I really didn't want to. I pulled my crossbow, loaded a bolt and took out the zombie who fell to the floor in a blood covered heap. Then with a nod from Derrick I took a second shot and put him out of his misery. Lila started crying then, and for all I know I was too. I won't be using that crossbow again.

I know he was going to turn anyways, but it still feels so much worse. Even worse than taking out people I actually liked after they'd turned. At least then it was a kill or be killed kind of thing.

We all met up in the middle of the hall with the other team once the school was officially declared clear by Paulson, but there was no celebrating. In that moment I was glad it was over, but more than anything I was just so, so tired. We walked out of the school without saying a word.

The Ravencrest survivors won something big today, or at least that's what everyone keeps telling me. It's definitely not a day that I'm ever going to forget.

There will be another few days of moving supplies around before we all start to move in, which is good. I just want my own bed and to sleep for a week.

I guess you didn't need to know all of that. But I thought someone should.

## The Hitchhiker Strain

To find out what happens to Pierce, Belle, Alex and Zack, check out Mortality: Book One of The Hitchhiker Strain. *After surviving a deadly plague outbreak, sixteen-year-old Savannah thought she had lived through the very worst of human history. There was no way to know that the miracle vaccine would put everyone at risk for a fate worse than un-death. Now, two very different kinds of infected walk the Earth, intent on nothing but feeding and destroying what little remains of civilization. When the inoculated are bitten, infection means watching on in silent horror as self-control disappears and the idea of feasting on loved ones becomes increasingly hard to ignore. Starving and forced to live inside of the abandoned high school, all Savannah wants is the chance to fight back. When a strange boy arrives with a plan to set everything right, she gets her chance. Meeting Cole changes everything. Mere survival will never be enough.*

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## About the Author

After taking a gap-year to live in Ireland, Kellie has now settled into a life focused on the publishing world. Between working for three small publishing houses, reviewing for her book blog, and writing, it's all books, all the time. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

Kellie currently lives near Toronto, Ontario with her family, including a pair of Glen of Imaal Terriers.

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