

DAYS LONG GONE

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PHOTON BOOKS

DAYS LONG GONE

The light from the full moon outlined the soulless shapes as they quietly shuffled down the empty street.

With moans of ravenous hunger and decaying flesh rotting off their bones, the emaciated, lifeless forms staggered forward.

Searching. Seeking. They neither ceased nor rested, day or night.

The creatures that had once been human were now something different. Something far less, and far worse. Neither alive nor dead, they were undead.

From what Mark Ranier could count in the dark, there were at least a dozen, and traveling in herds as they usually did.

He watched, sitting beside the window on the top level of the two-story building. Rubbing the smooth surface of a silver dollar he held, he waited.

He had seen many such ghouls before. Too many times, in fact. The thirty-one year old brushed his shoulder-length hair back, having let it grow long over the past year.

The old call letters still adorned the outside of the building. They served as a constant reminder to what it had once been - a radio station playing popular music from the nineteen eighties. Mark had been working there for just over a year when the world ended. When hell invaded earth.

Today was the twelfth of October, he knew. By that reckoning, the world ended twenty-six months, two weeks, four days and six hours ago. More or less.

The atomic clock on the wall had not yet ceased to function, telling him it was time for the nightly transmission. The duty gave his life structure and purpose. He never missed a night.

Sitting down inside the studio booth, Mark activated the necessary equipment, seeing the lights appear and letting him know the towers were still operating.

The solar panels on top of the building served him well, providing just enough energy to operate the barely-functioning radio station and allowing him to transmit. There had been plenty of such panels available, thanks to the number of individuals in the area who had been attempting to live off the grid, much to the disapproval of the government.

Mark was uncertain anyone out there could hear his daily transmissions, but it was a chance still worth taking. After all, why not?

Just before beginning the broadcast, he looked over at the small Christmas tree in the corner of the room. He had placed it there the previous

December to remember the way things used to be. Winter came and went, followed by Spring, then Summer and now Autumn and he lacked the nerve to take it down. It would remain up.

“It's just past nine o'clock on this Tuesday night. For those of you interested,” he began, speaking into the microphone as if thousands of listeners were hearing him. He hoped there were. “The dead are out tonight, just like last night, the night before and so on. But of course, you already know that.”

Mark continued on for a few minutes, reminding any listeners of his broadcasting times. He went into playing a series of songs, beginning with a track by a popular rock group from a few decades earlier. It was one of his favorites.

“If anyone's out there and can hear me, there's hope,” Mark said, following the series of music. “If you can still think, reason and feel, you're one of the survivors. This is Mark Rainer, broadcasting from Sparks, Nevada. Whatever happens, don't give up. Don't stop believing.”

He ended the broadcast.

You don't still believe that, do you?

He shook it off, stretching his arms. He had been broadcasting twice a day, once in the morning and again at night, ever since things fell apart.

Laying down on a cot in the corner of the room, Mark closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. Tomorrow would be another day.

It had been a Thursday when it all happened. What began several days before as rumors of some kind of viral outbreak quickly escalated. Over the

days following, the military attempted to impose martial law, although it did not last long.

Before anyone could understand what was happening, the grid went down and society collapsed. The human population quickly dwindled. Most people perished early, the living killed by the dead and the undead rising up to take their place. Pale eyes replacing those once full of life.

Just one bite, that's all it took. Only one and it is only a matter of time before you turned. Nothing can save you.

Those living in heavily-populated areas had it the worst. Highways and interstates were jammed, food or water became scarce, and there was no relief in sight. The military, in a last ditch effort to maintain control, firebombed many large cities. In the end, it had been a useless act that had failed to turn things around.

There were too many of them. Too many undead.

At first, the living were unaware they were already infected; that they already contained the sickness within them. But it was soon discovered that no matter how one died, they would come back, reanimated.

Mark had seen this for himself for the first time when his grandfather died just weeks after everything started. Although he had not been bitten, the old man reanimated half an hour later.

Rubbing the silver dollar his grandfather had given him as a child, Mark thought about his family. He had become the last one remaining. Until just months ago, his younger brother had been alive,

surviving with him for awhile, along with another friend.

Living out of the station, Mark's purpose was to make sure he broadcast daily and checked to make sure everything stayed intact. His brother helped him to secure the place, setting up the surrounding fence and the solar panels.

The place was not merely a refuge, it was now his home. There were just too many memories at the family house, and his old apartment had proven to be unsafe. Of course he could have chosen nearly any house in town to live in, but he preferred the station.

Immediately after the outbreak, two of the other station workers had stayed there for a short time before they, too, joined the undead.

The reality of this fate was undeniable. The longer Mark lived, the greater the probability became. Mark often asked himself the questions that he did not want the answers to.

How long will I make it? When will I die?

If he had a say in it, he would choose to die at the station, wanting the building to be his tomb, just as the pyramids had been to the pharaohs of old. The thought gave him a small measure of comfort.

Over the past two years, the station towers had received a number of fragmented transmissions from around the world. Originating from other stations, they bounced off communications satellites still functioning - at least partially.

Mark had learned over time that other countries around the world had also been affected by the outbreak. Governments had fallen and every

nation was in ruins, with very few people left alive. Armageddon had come to the world and none had escaped.

He had heard fear and hopelessness in the voices of strangers. The hopelessness that draws people into darkness, never to release them.

The many attempts made to communicate with other people or other stations had proven futile. Regardless, Mark hoped the satellites were boasting his transmissions, and people somewhere were listening. He wanted to believe that.

Mark's hometown of Sparks, located just outside Reno, had once been a thriving community. Right up until the outbreak, it had been growing and expanding.

Fortunately, the area had been the home to a large number of doomsday preppers and gun enthusiasts. They had banded together, forming a sizable network in the aftermath of the events. Up until just several months earlier, the group had resided nearby. However, nearly everyone left for Salt Lake City after learning of a larger community of survivors. In the face of overwhelming odds, Mark chose to remain behind, along with a few others.

Now, he had not seen another living soul in weeks and believed he might be the only one. The only living soul in Sparks, Nevada.

Hoping this were untrue, he opened a metal case and began sifting through it. He had recently searched through one of the storage rooms of the station, finding a box full of popular records from the nineteen eighties, many of which were still

sealed, as well as a turntable to play them on.

Mark liked to pretend he had just come from a record store, adding titles to his growing collection.

“Music for the end of days,” he mumbled to himself, pulling an unscratched vinyl platter out of its dust jacket and putting on his headphones.

With the building tightly secured, he fell asleep listening to the tunes and trying to remember when all was right with the world. Listening to men sing about Jessie's Girl, giving love a bad name, and how everybody wanted to rule the world.

The following morning, Mark awoke with the warmth of sunlight filtering down through the blinds, bathing him in it. This echoed the Saturday mornings of his childhood. Times gone forever, just like everyone he had ever known. The reality set in and he got up. It would do no good to think about it anymore than he already had.

Hungry, Mark ate the same oatmeal he had been eating for months. He was growing tired of it and over the past few days, realizing his food supply was getting low and he would need to get more. The grocery stores and convenient shops had been raided long ago. Mark occasionally hit up some of the houses in the newer subdivisions. He was usually successful, able to stockpile enough food and water to survive on for months at a time.

Preparing for a run into town, Mark took a few fire arms, started the ignition to his muscle car and let it warm up for a minute. The car, hidden behind the station, was now his after he found it in a garage of a suburban home - the keys in the nearby

kitchen.

Despite how much he liked the ride, it did not have the quietest of engines, and would draw the ghouls. For this reason, he had to be careful not to lead the undead back to the station.

Mark knew the corpses often moved in herds, even quite large ones, from some that he'd seen. They were the most deadly.

Driving into town, the only things he saw moving were old newspapers and debris tossed by the wind, and the occasional ghoul.

Sparks was now a ghost town, just like every city and town. Empty streets and intersections, desolate parks and houses, and the undead. The entire world was now full of ghosts. Mark did not believe in such things, but if he had, he knew there must be many restless spirits here.

Instead of returning to the same area he hit up the previous time, he opted to stay closer, turning into what had once been a nice neighborhood known for its high income residents.

Like all the other sections of town, there was trash littering the streets, overgrown lawns and unkempt house exteriors.

At the end of the street appeared to be the skeletal remains of what had been a person. Whether they had turned or not, he could not tell and had no desire to find out.

Slowly pulling into the driveway of a large house he had never been to, he quietly got out of the car, making sure he had everything he needed.

Mark had learned a lot from the survivalists he had met, carrying more than one gun. The two

problems with such devices were the loud noises they made, which drew the ghouls, and the ammunition they required. For this reason, his favorite weapon of choice was a hand-made, six-foot spear with a long blade at the end. Firmly grasping the deadly instrument, he entered the house through a side door next to the garage.

Daylight hours were the best time to go out on searches. Night was too risky for obvious reasons. It had been on such a maneuver that his brother was bitten, dying hours later. He never turned. Mark had made sure of that.

Survivors learned early on the only way to kill the undead was to stab them in the head, piercing the brain and shutting down the control center of the body. Likewise, the only way to assure a person would remain dead and not turn, was to do the same.

Mark looked around for any movement as he carefully made his way into the house. After checking each and every room of the one-level home, he returned to the kitchen and began filling up a bag with non-perishable food items and canned goods that had not gone bad.

Finding a box of snack cakes, Mark smiled. He knew the junk food items took forever to expire, and wasted no time opening one of the individual bags and eating it. The spongy cake with cream filling had been his favorite as a child and still was.

The bottom of a nearby closet revealed two cases full of bottled water. Always a good find.

Things were off to a good start.

Following this, Mark went to a few other

houses nearby, breaking into two of them. In one the smell was so bad that he nearly puked. Decaying bodies, no doubt. He had become too familiar with the putrid smell.

Once his back seat and trunk were filled with food and water, he started back. Just after turning onto another street, the car began to loose speed. Beginning to ride rough, he instantly knew what the problem was.

A flat tire.

Cursing aloud, he came to a stop, parked the car and got out to check. Walking around to the back of the vehicle, the back left tire had lost all the air.

Mark bent down to inspect it and discovered that a long nail had penetrated near the side.

Releasing a frustrated sigh, he popped the trunk, not remembering if the car had a spare tire or not.

As he did, he saw movement out of the corner of one eye. It was a ghoul.

The corpse was still a good distance away, so Mark turned back to the car. Searching the trunk after taking out most of the food he had just placed there, he saw the spare.

Wrestling to get it out, the movement continued out of his peripheral vision. Turning back to see again, there were now three more corpses slowly approaching, with one closer than the others.

Mark cursed.

After loosening the lug nuts, he quickly placed the jack on the street next to the flat tire, hurriedly using it to elevate the car. By the time he removed it, and went to put the spare on, the ghouls were within forty feet.

He reached into his vehicle to get his lance and that's when he saw another group approaching from the other direction. A dozen at least, perhaps two. It was hard to tell.

There was no time to finish changing the tire.

As the closest corpse arrived, Mark swiftly used his lance, the blade stabbing through the middle of the forehead. He felt the skull break. Blood sprayed out. The ghoul dropped instantly.

Before he had a chance to stab the next closest, three more were within ten feet. He took another out, but the blade had become lodged within the ghoul's head. As Mark struggled to get his weapon free, a few others lunged at him.

Backing away from them, he would need to flee. There were just too damn many. Forced to leave his favorite weapon behind as well as his car, Mark quickly ran towards the nearest house.

Half a dozen undead began to follow and at least ten more approached as he scaled the fence into the back yard, ran up onto the porch and came to the door, which was locked. Having mere seconds before the corpses would see him, he quickly rammed the door with one shoulder, forcing it open.

Once inside the house, he quickly shut the door back, then searched for something to secure it with. Finding a dining room table, he quickly moved the heavy piece of furniture over, adding a shelf and several other items.

By the time the ghouls arrived, Mark had hidden himself in the nearby living room, lying on the floor near a sofa. Taking a knife from his belt, he

listened and waited, hearing the rabid, grunting sounds from outside, banging on the door.

Thankfully, after several minutes, the sounds began to lessen until there was silence once again. He went to a window and looked out at the backyard, seeing the remaining ghouls leaving.

Going to another window which looked out at the street, over a dozen ghouls were staggering around the front yard. The car remained in the street, with the spare tire sitting beside it.

Idiot!

Mark would not stand a chance and had no choice but to wait it out. Over the next few hours, he explored the large house from top to bottom. The upstairs had four bedrooms, each decorated for kids of varying ages. The parents room was downstairs, and an entertainment area was on the bottom level.

Using a flashlight, he curiously looked around at the high volume of movies, game stations and toys. Entertainment that would likely never be enjoyed again.

Seeing a couple of movies he had been looking for, he slid them into a bag, and would add them to his collection back at the station. Although most of the energy from the solar panels went to broadcasting, he was still able to enjoy entertainment from time to time.

Mark wondered what happened to the family who had lived here, but already knew.

Glancing out one of the bedroom windows several minutes later, he could hardly believe his eyes. He saw a person running down the street. A young woman.

Mark stifled the temptation to open the window and get her attention, remaining quiet.

Several ghouls followed her as she avoided them and entered one of the houses across the street through the front door, but was unable to secure it from the horde of corpses, which soon entered as well.

Moments later, Mark was out of the house, running across the street and becoming a target for the undead once again.

Killing two of them with his knife before entering the other house, he looked around, hearing the grunting and moaning sounds nearby.

“Hey!” He yelled out. “Over here!”

Moments later, the first ghoul appeared in the hall, staggering towards him. Mark quickly dodged its attack, stabbing it in the head and rendering it motionless.

He whistled loudly. “I said, I’m over here!”

Another soon followed, and he quickly did the same. He stepped back, locking the door of the house behind him before proceeding.

Listening, he did not hear anyone stirring.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

“I’m here to help. Where are you?”

Again, only silence.

Mark slowly went deeper into the house, looking into different rooms, but seeing nothing. Suddenly, he heard the woman scream. Following the sounds to a den in the back of the house, a corpse was on top of the girl. Its jaw rapidly moving, the undead was only inches away from biting her face.

She screamed again, and within moments, Mark was there, quickly stabbing the corpse in the head. The body slumped forward, motionless. Just then, he heard more of the familiar groaning from the other side of the room. The young woman crawled out from beneath the body as Mark readied himself with his knife.

One of the ghouls was tall and bald, with a rotted mouth and visible, yellow teeth. The other, shorter, had a long gray beard and was barely clothed. As the decayed forms reached him, he slashed ahead, his blade firmly coming to rest in the base of their skulls and blood spurting out.

One after another, the ghouls dropped to the floor - their pale, lifeless eyes still open. Mark waited and listened for several moments, but all was quiet.

He turned to see the young woman sitting against the wall, breathing heavily. She was thin, pretty, and likely not yet twenty-one.

“Are you alright?” Mark asked.

She nodded affirmatively in silent response, as if traumatized.

“Were you bit or hurt?” He asked, going to her.

She said nothing, only staring blankly across the room. Mark knelt down beside her, checking for any wounds, but not seeing any fresh blood.

“I’m Mark. What’s your name?”

“Kayla,” she said moments later, her voice trembling.

“I saw you run into the house. I was across the street,” he explained. “Do you live here?”

“No,” she answered. “I was just trying to get away from the stalkers.”

“Is that what you call them?”

Kayla shrugged. “I guess.”

He smiled. “I like it. Are you traveling alone?”

“No,” she said before correcting herself. She looked him in the eyes for the first time. “Yes. I mean, I am now.”

Mark quietly nodded, listening, noticing a necklace she wore with a rectangular silver pendant and a cross in the center. “What happened?”

“My dad and I traveled east, from San Jose. That's where I'm from.”

“I see.”

“About a week ago, we ran into a group of the dead. I got away but he.....” She looked away, and Mark could see the tears in her eyes. The tears she did not want him to see.

“I'm sorry. I've lost people, too.”

The young woman forced a smile. The two of them explored the house together for a short time, returning to the back of the house, making sure all doors were secured. Looking through the living room window, Mark saw ghouls shuffling aimlessly in the street. The sun had set and it was dark.

“There are too many of them, we should stay here tonight,” He suggested. “My car is out there. Tomorrow, I'll fix the tire and we can leave.”

“And go where?” Kayla asked.

“To a safe place.”

“A bunker?” She asked. “We heard there were a lot of survivalists and NRA people here.”

“Not anymore,” Mark told her. “They all left for Salt Lake City months ago. I was one of the few who stayed behind.”

Over the next couple of hours, Mark and Kayla exchanged their stories, describing to one another how they had stayed alive since everything fell apart.

It had been awhile since Mark had met another person, much less enjoyed a conversation with anyone. Hearing the survival stories from people was something he loved. Every one alive had a different story, and none were ever boring.

“Thanks for helping me,” Kayla said later, seemingly out of the blue while drinking a warm coke.

Mark acknowledged with a non-verbal nod.

“Why didn't you leave?” She asked. “I mean, when everyone else left this town?”

“I don't know. I guess I wanted to stay at the station and keep transmitting,” Mark said, leaning back against the sofa and coming to an abrupt realization. “Damn it.”

“What?”

“I won't be able to transmit tonight. It's the first time I've missed.” He ran his hand through his hair, trying not to let it bother him. “I'll take you there tomorrow, if you want.”

Kayla took an old cellular phone out of her backpack. “I keep hoping one day, I'll need this again. I just can't bring myself to throw it away.”

“I think it's important to hold onto things like that – to have hope.”

“My hope isn't in this,” she told him,

looking at the phone. "It's in a better future."

Mark nodded, silently agreeing. "You have to believe whatever keeps you alive. Whatever gets you through each day and night."

"I believe that I'm going to see my dad again. My family" Kayla explained. "But not what they became. Those things out there with no souls."

Loosening his bootstraps, Mark took out a photograph. He handed it to Kayla. "That's my brother."

"What happened to him?" Kayla asked after studying it for several moments.

"He got cornered while getting supplies."

"I'm sorry."

"Well. I guess, it is what it is."

The two of them sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've had this reoccurring dream. In it, I'm in a place of pure light, warmth and love, with no suffering or evil," Mark explained. "I can never remember any more about it than that. I want to believe that's what awaits us after all this madness."

"Or maybe you're dreaming of the place you existed before you were born," Kayla suggested.

"How's that?"

"Some believe our spirits were with God in heaven before we were born down here on earth. That our perfect destiny is to find our way back there."

"Do you believe that?"

"My dad did," Kayla said before laying down, rolling over and closing her eyes.

“Good night,” Mark told her, thinking about her words.

“Night,” she whispered.

Unlike her, he had a hard time going to sleep. He did not like feeling trapped, and it still bothered him that circumstances had prevented him from making his nightly transmission. Silently convincing himself all would be well and he would return to his routine once he got back to the station, he was able to quiet his mind.

Mark awakened at the first light of day and waited quietly for the girl to awaken, amazed that she could sleep for an additional two hours before even stirring. Once they were both awake, he checked outside for any ghouls, but there were none. Finally able to get the spare tire onto the car, they get in and left the suburban neighborhood.

Kayla looked out the window for the majority of the ride back and Mark wondered what she was thinking of. Within a few minutes, they were back at the station.

“What happened to everyone else that worked here?” Kayla asked, shortly after entering the building.

“Three guesses, and the first two don't count,” Mark said.

She nodded, silently affirming what she should have figured out.

“The station is still functional, and I safeguarded the building against those things out there. It's my own place now. I call it M-A-R-K FM,” Mark said.

Kayla laughed. “You're a dork.”

He smiled at her, walking around to check the condition of things. “Let me show you the equipment. You saw the fence out there. This station is protected. None of those things are getting in here.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am, that's a good fence,” Mark responded. “This building functions on solar power, which means heat in the winter, cool air in the summer, and warm food.”

“It's nice.”

“But,” he said, sensing there was more she wanted to say.

“Well, if there really is a group of survivors in Salt Lake City, that might be a better place,” Kayla suggested.

“There's no way to know for sure,” Mark said. “But I'm glad you're here. We're here, cause we can survive together. If you like this place, you should stay here with me. We can keep this place operating, transmitting.”

“But you don't even know if anyone can hear you.”

“Maybe not,” Mark said. “But it's a good place. Just think about it.”

Kayla nodded, quietly familiarizing herself with the new surroundings.

Over the next few days, the two of them worked together at the station. Mark continued to transmit twice a day, broadcasting as far as the towers would allow and hoping the signal was being picked up and carried to distant places.

He had grown accustomed to being alone

and not having to watch out for anyone other than himself, but the more time he spent with Kayla, the more Mark hoped she would remain there with him. Despite the age gap between them, he could not deny his attraction to her. Not only was she beautiful and intelligent, but also possessed a hope that he did not.

Over their conversations, they formed a connection. A bond. Mark desired to reach out to her, to hold her, but was afraid to. What if she didn't feel the same?

Kayla made her room upstairs, in the one next to the studio, sleeping just beneath the window. Mark liked knowing she was so close and that if she needed anything, he could be there in mere seconds. As much as he tried to believe that a better world was possible, he was not ready to put stock in it yet. Perhaps it was just a pipe dream driven by an unrealistic fantasy centered around keeping the station functioning and wanting to feel significant.

Late one night, a few hours after she had gone to sleep, Kayla was awakened by a noise from downstairs. Listening for several seconds as silence followed, she got up, wondering if Mark could not sleep and might be working on something.

She stopped halfway down the stairs, listening for the noise again. All was quiet. Continuing on, she turned to look down the dark hall, but saw nothing.

“Mark?” She asked. “Are you down here?”

Getting no reply, Kayla took several steps down the corridor and began to hear the sound of wind.

“Mark?”

Still nothing.

She walked further, arriving at the front of the building and froze. The front door was wide open.

“Oh my God!”

Before she could take a single step to close it, something grabbed her from behind. A cold arm pulled her back and she screamed. Reacting as she had been taught by her dad, she kicked her legs out in front of her, dropping her body weight and falling to the floor. Quickly crawling away, Kayla turned around and saw the stalker.

Coming towards her, it was tall - well over six feet - and large. Fear rose up in the pit of her stomach and she fell backwards, screaming again.

She had never seen a ghoul this big, its face looking worse than any monster she had ever seen. With decomposing, gray skin and white eyes that almost seemed to glow, it came towards her, emitting a ravenous, inhuman growl.

Kayla quickly crawled behind a nearby desk, desperate to survive any way she could. Getting to her feet, she started towards the open door, leading out. It was her only escape.

Just before she made it, another stalker appeared in front of her, entering the station. She retreated, tripping over a chair in the process. She felt the pain shoot up her right leg, but remained unfazed. As the undead stumbled towards her, Kayla scanned the room for anything she could use as a weapon.

Picking up a metal stapler, she slammed it

against the side of the smaller stalker's head. Throwing it off guard, she bashed it several times, her hand covered in dark blood.

Another corpse entered the building moments later, and Kayla backed into a corner. The large stalker moved towards her all the while, revealing its teeth as if it were some kind of vampire.

Kayla pushed the desk in front of her, shoving it between her and them as a barrier. Their arms reached out to grab her – livid, pale and emaciated. She leaned as far back as she could to avoid their grasp.

As the three ghouls continued to get closer, she began to despair, not seeing a way of escape.

Maybe it's better this way, she silently confessed.

Just after thinking this, the large stalker froze in place, just feet away from her. Blood began running down its face, and it soon fell forward, nearly hitting Kayla before hitting the floor. As it did, she saw Mark holding his spear.

“Hey!” He said, getting the attention of the other two corpses that were still moving towards Kayla. “Over here.”

He pulled the blade from the head of the large stalker, then swiftly drove it into the heads of the other two in mere seconds. They dropped to the floor, motionless.

Mark leaped over them, locked the front door back and tossed the lance to the floor before going to Kayla. “Are you alright?”

Her back against the wall, the young woman

slid down to the floor, her heart still racing.

“I’m sorry it took so long, I heard you scream.”

She moved her head from side to side, still seeing her life flash before her eyes. “I thought you said this place was safe.”

Mark looked around. “I don’t know how they got in, but I’ll fix it.”

Kayla laughed. “Fix it?!”

“Shhhhhh,” Mark said, holding a finger in front of his mouth to quiet her. “There are more of those things out there.”

“I know, and this place isn’t safe.”

“I’m sorry, Kayla.”

“If we stay here, we’re dead.”

“No, we can-”

Before he could say another word, Kayla got up and left the room, returning upstairs. Mark looked out the window, seeing a few other ghouls approaching and part of the fence damaged.

He picked up his spear again, then went outside. Swinging his weapon, he decapitated two of them in rapid succession, feeling a rush of adrenaline. Fueled by anger, he was disappointed at himself for not reinforcing the fence and for letting Kayla down. He had promised to keep her safe and had failed.

Killing the approaching ghouls one by one, he counted fifteen bodies by the time it was over just seconds later, and he would need to clean himself up before returning upstairs.

Once the building had been secured once more, Mark found Kayla awake. “Nothing else is

getting in here.”

“Are you sure?” She asked, looking up at him.

“I’ll repair the fence and make it better this time.”

Kayla shook her head from side to side. “I know that there’s a better place than this. There are other people, where we stand a better chance of surviving, being a part of a community and having a future.”

“There’s a future right here,” Mark countered.

Looking away, Kayla looked at the stars in the night sky through the window. “Nobody can make it on their own. We’re not meant to.”

“Maybe not, but it’s not impossible,” Mark said.

“I’m going to Salt Lake City in the morning,” she told him after a brief period of silence, confessing to what she now felt certain was the right decision.

“You can’t be serious.” Mark couldn’t believe what he was hearing, and now wished he’d never told her there were survivors there. “That’s five hundred miles away.”

“You said the other car had a full tank of gas, and it’s a straight shot on I-80.”

“It won’t be enough, and you have no idea what you’re going to find.”

“I don’t care,” she said. “If there’s a community of survivors there, I have to try.”

Mark watched as she laid down on the bed he had made for her, rolled over and closed her eyes.

There was nothing he could say to change her mind and he was not going to try.

Attempting to go back to sleep, he could barely keep his eyes closed. The exact thing he did not want to happen, had happened. Thinking about everything Kayla said, he wondered if she might be right. He had no desire to leave the station. He was comfortable here and it was his home. Then again, he thought, maybe he had settled for something less than the best scenario.

Mark wondered if he was wrong for staying behind when the group left months ago. Had they made it to safety? Were they still in Salt Lake?

He did not know.

A few hours later, he watched the sun come up over the desert. Feeling the warmth on his face, he felt hope for the future. Against all odds, he believed that not only could life be better, but that it would.

Mark activated the equipment, seeing the lights on the console before him, then turned the microphone on.

“If you're hearing this, pray that you wake up. That this is all just a dream. That you wake up in the land of the living,” he began, thinking aloud. He looked over at Kayla, who sat across from him. “But for right now, I'm signing off. This is my last broadcast. If anyone's out there and can hear me, don't give up. If you can still think, reason and feel, then you ARE one of the survivors. Whatever happens, don't give up. Don't lose hope. Don't stop believing. This is Mark Rainer signing off.”

Turning the power of the station off minutes

later and locking it up, they packed the needed things and got into the car.

“Are you ready?” Mark asked, filled with a nervous excitement.

She nodded up and down. “Are you?”

He took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Mark winked at her, then turned the ignition key. While letting the car warm up, Kayla slowly reached for his hand. Touching it, their fingers melted together, intertwining. Mark looked at her, their eyes silently speaking the words not being spoken.

Slowly turning out onto the main road, the car began moving away from the station.

Kayla reached into her backpack and took out her old phone, then rolled down the window and threw it out.

Increasing their speed, Mark looked into the rearview mirror, taking one final glance at the building that had been his home over the past two years.

Setting his eyes on the road ahead, he turned the music up, playing from the disc he had burned. The sun was still rising, and they had a long drive ahead of them.

