***From the Journal of Maya Weiss***

***October 26, 2013***

*Between the traffic jams and avoiding the zombies, it’s been really slow going. Cars were backed up on the highway between Kansas City and Denver, and the side roads weren’t much better. We made it into Nebraska today, which means we probably averaged less than ten miles per hour after we left Fort Riley. I’m not in a big hurry to get to Wyoming as long as Dave and Amy are behind me.*

*Porsche’s been spending a lot of time with Mike, the Marine corporal who was flirting with her back in Nevada. She tried to sneak back into the truck last night, but I was still up. She tried to apologize, and when I asked her why, she stuttered and then clammed up, just like a teenage girl trying to be tactful about walking in on you and your boyfriend making out. But when I asked her to tell me about Mike, she started talking again. I guess after things get settled again, he’s going to be a truck driver. He has it in his head that traveling between groups of survivors is going to be something that will be at a premium for a long time. I guess he has a point.*

*After she crawled into her bunk, I stayed up and listened to the shortwave for a while. It’s a mixed bag out there.*

*Radio Concho, out of San Angelo: A mix of music in both Spanish and English, and a daily kill report. Evidently, there is a competition between three hunter teams for most zombies killed. One team is a historical reenactment group called the Buffalo Soldiers, the second is the Rams, from the athletics department from the local college and the third is the One Three Knights, a local gang that became part of the Fort Concho group. So far the Buffalo Soldiers are in the lead but the One Three Knights are catching up.*

*Radio Free America, out of St Louis: “The People’s Choice for News and Music” “President” Shaw is a regular here. Lots of slick, patriotic music; deep baritone voice-over; nothing positive reported. They do a lot of blaming everyone else for “the problems this country is facing” and claim President Shaw is the man to get things done. Tonight, they talked about the “freedom strike” in Kansas City again, and the heroic efforts of Daniel, a Christian leader who has saved countless lives and evidently killed a million zombies with his bare hands or something. According to them, Dave is a socialist trying to live on Daniel’s hard work but refusing to contribute to it himself. I’ll have to ask Dave about the whole socialist thing when I see him again. To hear them tell it, Dave abducted all the women in the new Eden complex, then ran off and joined some sort of socialist commune that stole the bread right out of the mouths of the hundred tiny babies Daniel was himself nursing back to health…when he wasn’t killing zombies, raising the dead and single-handedly saving the world. What bullshit. What’s troubling is that they suspect Dave was killed by the strike, but they’re saying that it isn’t confirmed. Which means they might still be looking for him.*

*Radio Z: This one is hard to pin down. Some nights he’s on, some nights he’s not. I think he’s mobile, because a lot of times, he just says “Transmitting to you from the heart of the wasteland” before he starts talking. He calls himself Johnny Apocalypse. Tonight, he said he was on top of a water tower, and that he could see for miles. Then, he stopped in the middle and said “Do you hear that?” In the silence that followed, I could hear a train blowing its horn in the distance. “That, ladies and gentlemen, is the sound of hope calling out to us from the dark of the night after the end of the world, calling us to follow it toward the dawn.” He has a poet’s soul. He played “City of New Orleans”, then some Bob Dylan and ended with Three Doors Down’s ‘Citizen Soldier’. Before he signed off, he said he was heading north. “There’s a town I heard about that’s having some troubles so I’m gonna go walk the ground around it and listen to the wind. Who knows…maybe there’s a hero or two left out there.”*

*The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind…*

**Chapter 1**

**Road Trip**

*~ “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware” ~*

*Martin Buber*

Highway 40 out of Kansas City was packed with dead cars and dead people, some more dead than others. If a divided four lane was this bad, I wasn’t even going to try to imagine what Interstate 70 was like. With the rain still coming down in thick drops, the more active corpses couldn’t seem to make sense of things unless we got within a few yards of them. The first time one stumbled across out path, I smeared him across the front bumper of the truck. At least, I think it was a him. The second time, we were navigating around the wreck of a semi that had turned on its side when we found ourselves a few feet away from a group of deadheads munching on the bloated remains of the cattle that had been the truck’s cargo. Amy yelled out a warning, and I hit the gas. On rain slick roads in a five mile long traffic jam, that wasn’t the smartest thing I’d done all day. We ended up turned sideways, and the truck stalled. Immediately, I tried to restart it. After a few seconds, I stopped though. I wasn’t getting anywhere, and I figured the infected would be close to the truck by then. But when I looked out the window, I saw them wandering around only a few feet closer to us.

“What are they doing?” Amy asked. She was a pretty sharp kid, so I looked closer. After a few seconds of watching, I noticed it too. Most of the time, the zombie walk was a slow shuffle with the hands at the side. If there was food nearby, the arms came up and the fingers curled like claws to grab anything with a pulse and drag it toward the mouth. This group had their arms up, but they didn’t have the forward reach going on. Instead, they were moving their arms back and forth in front of them. As I stared, the sky lit up for the umpteenth time that morning, and thunder hit like a fist, rattling the truck’s windows. The zombies started and then began moving in a different direction.

“They’re blind,” I said softly. “The rain, the thunder and the lightning…the higher functions that help us sort that kind of thing out must not work in the infected. At least not in the dead ones.”

“No bets on it working on the ghouls, huh?” Amy asked.

“I wouldn’t bet my life on it,” I said. The truck started on the second try, and I pulled back onto the shoulder of the road. The shoulder wasn’t much better since every few yards we found where someone else had the same idea but with more fatal results.

“We’ve got to get off the highway,” Amy said when we passed a turnoff.

“I’m looking for a roadblock,” I told her asI pulled around a gutted minivan. “I still need a new gun.” The wheels slipped in the grass on the side of the road and I let off on the gas to let the truck coast a little ways before I pulled back onto the loose asphalt.

“I thought you loved the Ruger.” She pointed to the little 10/22 Takedown that was stowed behind me.

“I do, and if I had to take just one gun, that’s the one I’d choose. But I like having something a little bigger around, too.” I pulled around the wreck of a little red compact car and drove along the shoulder for another half mile before we came to an overpass. On the far side, a stretch of clear road beckoned beyond the on ramp. I inched my way between two parked cars and crossed the grass median that separated the ramp from the access road, and we were on rough asphalt.

The access road followed the highway for a few hundred yards, far enough for us to get past the concrete barricades that had been set across the road two deep. Disappointed, I crossed the grass to get back on the highway, and a couple of miles later, we drove out from under the rain right before the road turned south. After a week and a half under the smoke that blanketed Kansas City, sunlight was a welcome sight, but I almost missed the rain and the added cover it lent. Still, sunshine was sunshine, even during October. We rolled the windows down and let the sun warm us up. Even in dry clothes, I still felt a little damp after swimming across the Kansas River, and I caught sight of Amy’s hands shaking a few times. She’d snagged a pair of gray camo pants and a hoody at one of the stores in Wyandotte Plaza, but the hoodie and the t-shirt weren’t enough to dispel the chill. I couldn’t blame the icy sensation that still ran down my back entirely on the weather, though. Swimming across the Kansas River had been more like swimming the River Styx to escape Hell. We’d left a lot of demons behind in KC, and very few of them were the strictly metaphorical kind. A little sunshine was welcome in more ways than one.

I saw what I was looking for as we passed a line of trees and found ourselves looking out across an open field. Parked on an overpass south of us were a Humvee and what looked like a Bradley Fighting Vehicle. The road going east from there was clear. I couldn’t see the other side, but I was pretty sure it was crammed with cars all the way back into Lawrence. Ahead, I could see the sign for Kansas Highway 9 as it crossed 40, and I took the left turn. Almost immediately, I could see the overpass and the Bradley’s turret pointed west. We passed a couple of quiet little farms, and I did my best to keep my eyes on the road. I didn’t want to see what might be looking out of the windows of those houses. The bigger question in my head was which I was more frightened of seeing, the living or the dead. The first I’d want to stop and try to help, and the second would just haunt me as my writer’s imagination conjured up what might have happened behind the doors of those houses.

Nothing or no one rushed out toward us as we got closer to the overpass, and I slowed down and pulled to the left side of the road. Amy looked at me with one eyebrow raised as I put the truck in park looked toward Lawrence. Vehicles were backed up as far as I could see, but nothing moved. Two weeks of surviving the zombie apocalypse had taught me a lot about the undead, and one was that the mostly dead ones, stage two infected if you wanted a clinical name for them, tended to stay close to where they died until they had a good reason to move on. In some cities they followed the survivors who got out. Springfield’s city limits had been pretty porous, but Kansas City had been bordered by a river on the west side, so a lot of them had backed up against the few bridges that military hadn’t bombed to rubble. Lines of cars meant oceans of dead people who hadn’t got the message. Lawrence struck me as being pretty damn open. It was in freaking *Kansas*, after all. No road? No problem. Just drive over the flattest fields in the U.S. This whole area should have been crawling with infected. But we hadn’t seen a walker for a few miles.

“Let me guess,” Amy snarked from beside me. “You’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“The Farce is strong in you, padawan,” I said as I undid my seatbelt. “Do you?” She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then opened them and shook her head. It was a reminder of one of the things I hadn’t quite gotten used to, an ability to sense the undead that we shared. Amy was a lot better at it than I was, but she was more comfortable with it, too.

“I don’t *feel* anything,” she said after a moment. “Not for a while. Is that what’s got you spooked?” I nodded and opened the truck door. She got out as I did and held up her Ruger. “I’ve got your six,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“Aim for the neural strip, the T in the face if you have a forward facing zombie. Eyes, nose, mouth,” I gestured at my own face as an example. “If they’re looking to one side…well, you already know the best targets there.”

“I do?” she asked. Her eyebrows went up a little, giving the grin on her face a sort of surprised look.

“Same place you shot the Necromancer,” I said as I pulled receiver and barrel for the Ruger Takedown from its pack. “Temple and ears. Keep your eyes off your scope until you have a target. And don’t try to shout at me or get my attention. Shoot first, let the shot warn me. I’ll get the message.” The slide went back under my thumb and I pressed the locking tab to hold it in place. Inserting the barrel into the receiver was only a few seconds’ worth of work, and it clicked into place with a twist. Unlike my standard model 10/22, I’d grabbed four Ruger BX-25 magazines for the Takedown. Without a scope on it, I wasn’t expecting to be doing a whole lot of precision shooting. Not that I was a bad shot with iron sights, but I was a whole lot better with a scope. Hence the need for less time reloading between missed shots. With the Takedown assembled, I put the pack back on and loaded a magazine, then released the slide and flipped the rear sights up.

Under Amy’s sights, I headed to my left and made for the eastern side of the overpass. Once I got to the road, I could see that the Bradley was blocking the right lane on the bridge, with a Humvee taking up the left lane. Between the two, they effectively owned the entire road. The back ramp of the Bradley was down, which made me stop for a second. At a roadblock, I would have figured standing orders were to be buttoned up tight. The Humvee’s doors looked like they were all closed, but as I got within a few feet, the rear door on the driver’s side opened a few inches as a breeze picked up and ruffled my hair. The Ruger came up by reflex, and I waited to see if anything else happened. After a few seconds, I lowered the rifle and crept a little closer. More details started to stand out to me with every step. There was no gun in the pintle mount on the Humvee, and the Bradley’s top hatches were standing open, letting light stream down into the vehicle. The underside of the Humvee was visible as I came further up the incline, showing nothing but daylight between the road and the chassis. I wished hard for a scope on the Ruger, but nothing came of it, just like always.

Brass littered the ground between the two vehicles, and I could see bullet holes and burn damage on the cars closest to the roadblock. As I drew close the Bradley, I could see why it wasn’t buttoned up. The interior was blackened from fire damage, and I could see the melted shapes of electronics in the turret. That usually meant the vehicle’s position had been overrun, and they’d popped thermite to keep it from being captured intact. Fighting every instinct I had, I scurried up between the two vehicles and poked my head up to look in the Humvee. The inside was blackened as well, evidence of another thermite charge. My shoulder blades tried to pull together as I climbed the side of the Bradley and crouched behind the turret. To the west, I could see the line of cars stretching back toward Lawrence. A lake took up most of the left side of the road, stretching an easy six or seven hundred yards to the west. I stayed on the side opposite the lake. If I was going to hang out anywhere right now, a place with a supply of water nearby seemed like the perfect place. Then it hit me, what had been bothering me about this whole place.

No bodies. Since zompoc Monday, I’d seen hard core Special Forces soldiers leave comrades where they’d fallen if they were bitten. I’d watched Marines burn their dead on the roof of a hospital to make sure they didn’t get up and follow us. No one took chances with bodies any more. If any of the troops in the Bradly or the Humvee had fallen, either to zombies or to angry villagers with torches and hunting rifles, I should have seen bodies. Thermite burned hot, but I knew it didn’t burn long enough to completely reduce a body to ash. It was one of the less savory things running around in my head and I was pretty sure the NSA had tagged it in my search history. For that matter, I didn’t see any bodies on the road. No suitcases or storage containers on top of cars. No zombies. Thousands of bullet holes peppered every car in my line of sight, and lots of blood covered the ground in dark patches, but the kill zone in front of me was devoid of bodies.

A shudder ran through me at the thought of what might have happened to the dead, followed closely by a colder dose of fear as I asked myself another question. *Who has the soldiers’ weapons?* The thought had barely registered before my feet hit asphalt again, and I was running toward the guard rail. My left hand propelled me over the metal rail and my feet hit the uneven ground hard enough to sink into the soft turf and keep me from tumbling down the hill. Amy kept her eyes on the road behind me until I opened the door and jumped behind the wheel. As soon as the engine turned over, she was in the passenger seat and hitting the safety on her rifle. She had barely buckled herself in when I put the truck in reverse and hit the gas. I didn’t try to turn around on the little one lane road. Instead I just kept going for the three hundred yards between our butts and the nearest driveway. My rear bumper took out part of the split rail fence as I cut sharp into the gravel drive and hit the brakes, then shifted into gear. Rocks sprayed the lawn behind me as I hit the gas again, and I took out the mailbox before I hit the road again.

“Dave, what is it?” Amy asked as she looked back behind us. “What did you find?”

“Nothing,” I said as I blew through the four way intersection. “Way too much nothing. No bodies, no stuff.”

“They’d been looted already?” she asked. I shook my head.

“No, they’d been taken. All of them. I didn’t see a pyre, and I can only think of one reason to take bodies right now if you’re not gonna burn ‘em.” My voice sounded a lot calmer than I felt. In my peripheral vision, I could see Amy’s face go slack as she followed my train of logic, then she grimaced.

“You can’t be serious,” she said. I sped past a school and kept my natural reflexes in check for all of six seconds before I replied.

“I’m very serious,” I said. “And don’t call me Shirley.” She rolled her eyes at the lame movie quote, but her head turned to look behind us again. The road curved ahead of us, and I followed it left, opting to go west as far as I could. It kept edging west, and I kept the gas pedal as close to the floor as I dared. Up ahead I could see where the road doglegged, and I cut the edge as close as I dared, relieved to see a sign for Kansas 59 a mile ahead. As soon as we hit 59, I floored it again, heedless of how much fuel I might be burning. It wasn’t like I needed to worry about the price of gas.

“We need to pass north of Topeka,” I told Amy as I pulled a Kansas map from the glove compartment. “And if we can find another town, maybe we’ll find a roadblock we can check.”

“Where the hell are we?” she asked as she tried to unfold the map.

“North of Lawrence on 59. We just passed an airfield back there.” Her finger hovered over the map for a moment, then dropped to the paper.

“Got it. Stay on this when it goes north and then back west…there’s a little town called Perry not far ahead.”

“Yeah,” I said drily. “About four miles, according to the sign.”

“Smartass,” she said. I didn’t bother to tell her to mind her language. Post ZA, being a good father figure to a teen seemed to be more about teaching her survival skills and less about manners or social niceties. So far, I thought I was doing a pretty good job. We were both still alive, and after getting out of KC in one piece, that was saying something. I still wanted my damn “World’s Deadliest Dad” coffee mug.

The road was pretty clear, with only the occasional car wreck to break up the scenery. Most of those were off the road, with the cars either wrapped pretty solidly around trees or telephone poles. We passed one field where a truck had gone off-roading into a thousand acres of freshly turned dirt. The tracks arced gently toward the only thing for a dozen square miles: a bright green combine. The truck’s front end was lost under the combine’s thresher blades, its rear wheels off the ground. A mile further on, we had to slow down and swerve around a head on collision between a dark blue minivan and a silver BMW. I tried not to look, but I saw movement in both vehicles from the corner of my eye. I wondered how many ghouls and zombies were trapped forever in dead vehicles by the simple barrier of a fastened seatbelt. When the road turned back west, we found ourselves on what looked like the border between Kansas and the rest of the US. On our right, the northern side of the road was dominated by low hills and trees, while the southern side was all open fields and flat as Kansas was known to be.

Less than ten minutes later, I saw what I had been hoping for. Up ahead was a white sheriff’s patrol car. Unfortunately, it was surrounded by infected. I slowed and pulled to the left about a hundred yards away. I made the count about twenty, maybe a few more. Beside me, Amy was bouncing in her seat.

“Can I take care of them?” she asked, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

“Remember, aim for the face, not the forehead,” I said as I opened the door. From my side of the truck, I watched as she steadied her rifle against the door and took careful aim. A crack split the air, and one of the infected fell. I heard her exhale and then she fired again. None of the zombies dropped, and she cursed, then pulled the trigger again. This time one fell. Slowly, the infected turned toward us, and she put another one down. After she dropped three more of them, they started our way. One broke from the shambling walk of the dead into a trot, then a sprint.

“I’ll get the runner,” I said as I pressed the safety and leveled the Takedown at it. “You keep busting heads.” I put the bead in the middle of its blue button up shirt and pulled the trigger. A dark splotch appeared just to the left of the button line, but the ghoul kept coming. I pulled the trigger five more times, and all I did was mess up its wardrobe. The .22 rounds weren’t killing it fast enough, so I tossed the Ruger on the seat and drew the SOCOM from the tactical holster on my right leg, cursing my still wet vest in the back of the cab as I worked the slide. Left handed, I was a decent shot with a pistol. Right handed, my only saving grace was the SOCOM’s Laser Aiming Module. The green dot bounced around on the ghoul’s torso, and I stroked the trigger. The shot went wide, and I aimed to the left, knowing my tendency was to twitch to my gun hand side when I pulled the trigger. The second round caught the ghoul high and on the right, sending it spinning to that side before it hit the ground. I took the brief moment to change hands, and when it scrambled to its feet, I put the green LAM dot on its chest and fired two more times. Both shots hit it just to the right of the breastbone, and it fell on its butt. For a moment, it just looked at me, it chest heaving as blood coated its body. Then its head wobbled and it fell back to the road.

Beside me, the steady crack of Amy’s Ruger paused as she slid a fresh magazine home. There was a click as she released the bolt and a heartbeat later, she pulled the trigger again. As she fired, I holstered the SOCOM and grabbed the Takedown from the seat. By now, almost half of the infected were down. I leveled the bead on the Ruger’s barrel on the nose of one of the infected and pulled the trigger. To my surprise, it dropped like a puppet with the strings cut. Not a bad shot at fifty or sixty yards.

“Hey!” Amy protested.

“Keep shooting,” I told her. “It’s not a contest.” Still, I only dropped three more in the time it took her to take care of another nine. “Good shooting,” I told her as I slid behind the wheel again. My heart grew a couple of sizes when she smiled at the compliment and seemed to mean it when she said “Thanks.”

“I see why you want a bigger gun,” she added as we drove up on the cruiser. I stopped about ten yards away and did a careful U-turn using the little side road to the left of the road so that the truck’s tailgate was facing the sheriff’s car, then backed the rest of the way, rolling over a couple of bodies along the way. The stench hit as the wind shifted, and I got out of the truck wishing for more rain or a little bit stronger wind, say something on the order of an F1 tornado. I heard Amy gag on the smell as we walked toward the cruiser. Once I cleared the rear of the truck, I squatted down to check under the patrol car and saw nothing but daylight. Amy brought her rifle up and scanned the double line of cars that stretched back toward Perry. She lowered it and gave me a thumbs up a few moments later.

The driver’s side door was open, and the deputy’s bloated body was in the seat with the seatbelt buckled. An AR-15 was on the ground beside him, the magazine well empty. His pistol was on the floorboard, and I could see several bloody bite marks on his hands and arms. More telling was the gaping hole in the top of his head, and the smaller hole under his chin. I swallowed down the taste of bile in my mouth and started the business of stripping what I could from him. His service belt used Velcro instead of a buckle, and I thanked any deity that would listen for that. Once I had the belt and his pistol, I grabbed the keys from the ignition and stepped back, fighting hard just to keep yesterday’s dinner down. The radio was useless, so I pulled it from the belt and tossed it into the car before I walked around to the other side. The passenger seat yielded a duty bag that held a change of uniform, a second pistol and two boxes of ammo for it and a few other bits of gear. I grabbed it and went to the trunk.

On most patrol cars, the trunk was a mobile supply depot, and this one was no different. A Mossberg 500 Law Enforcement model was locked into the rack at the back of the trunk, and several plastic tackle and tool boxes filled the rest of the space. I did a quick visual check of them, finding crime scene gear, a digital camera, binoculars and crime scene tape in one box, and a first aid kit, emergency blankets and a fire extinguisher in another. I grabbed both boxes and put them in the truck bed, then came back and grabbed the guns and ammo. A duffel bag had water, a couple of MREs and some energy bars inside, which I grabbed along with the regular tool box. Lastly, I grabbed the defibrillator and jump box. On my last trip to close the trunk, I picked up the mesh bag with a trio of stuffed animals in it. The only things left were the traffic vest, a set of spike strips and a box of blank forms by the time I closed the trunk.

“Dave,” Amy said as I closed the tailgate and shell top. Her eyes were on the road behind us. Sunlight glinted off the windshield of a vehicle, and I could see the headlight from a motorcycle. Whether it was my potential cannibal horde or another group of people, I had no idea. What I was sure of was that I didn’t want them following us. I ran back to the patrol car.

“Get in the truck!” I yelled to Amy as I popped the trunk open and grabbed the spike strips. My feet couldn’t seem to move me fast enough as I sprinted for the door of the truck. Once again, I spun the tires when I put the truck in gear. The rear end fishtailed as I made a hard right turn and went cross country until I hit the side road that ran west, straight toward Perry. I stopped about thirty yards down the road and got out to spread the spike strip across the cracked asphalt, spending seconds I didn’t really feel like I had. Once I was back behind the wheel, I breathed a little easier.

“Are they…?” Amy almost asked.

“Cannibals? Don’t know. After us? Maybe. We’ll know if they try to follow us. Right now, I need you to crawl in the back and grab the pistol and as many magazines as you can for me, then I need you to load the shotgun.” I risked a glance in the rearview mirror, but the other vehicles still hadn’t made it to the turn off.

“On it,” Amy said as she crawled over the seat and through the opening in the rear window into the truck bed. A few seconds later, she leaned across the back of the seat with the pistol in hand. “There were only a couple of shots left in the magazine in it, so I loaded the last one in it. There’s a round in the chamber.” I took the gun with a nod and she pushed herself back into the camper shell. With nothing but straight road ahead of me for half a mile, I took the chance to see what I was shooting. The boxy design was characteristic of a Glock, and sure enough, when I turned it to look at the left side, I saw the trademark Glock brand and the number 22 engraved on the slide, with .40 to the right of that. I hadn’t had much experience with the .40 Smith and Wesson, but Nate had spoken highly of it. I set the Glock down and drew the SOCOM, remembering that I’d fired four rounds from it. Keeping one eye on the road, I dropped the mag out of it and pulled a fresh one from the tactical holster. With a full mag and a round in the chamber on both pistols, I had twenty nine rounds to hand without having to reload. I hoped it would be more than enough. While I was hoping, I went for broke and hoped I didn’t have to use either gun.

My optimism died a quick death as I saw movement in the rearview mirror. The bike swerved and kept coming, but two cars behind it didn’t look so lucky. The first one swerved left but the second one just kept going straight across the strip. A third car went the opposite way, and I wasn’t sure if it managed to clear the spikes or not. Either way, I was pretty sure at least one of them wasn’t going to catch up to us. We were coming up on an intersection, and I looked along the road crossing it by habit. Both sides were clear, but a railroad crossing on my left caught my attention. It factored into my plans as I thought that over. Railroads didn’t just stop in small towns. They usually went straight through them, which meant there was probably at least one road on this side of town that ended up running right alongside it. If I could find it, I had a route all the way through Perry.

The blue roof of the car wash that stood on one corner of the intersection was a blur on my left as I sped through the stop sign, and I heard the buzz of a street bike behind me. Trees lined the left side of the road on the far side of a shallow drainage ditch as we sped past the intersection and into the edge of town. The bike’s buzz became a muted roar as it sped up and came around on my side. I caught my first glimpse of the rider, all black leather with a helmet that only left his eyes visible. For a moment, it settled in my side mirror as the rider drew a sawed off shotgun from a holster on his hip. My right hand fell on the Glock and I brought it up to my chest. The rider twisted the throttle and drew up beside me, lifting the shotgun as he came.

It was a tactic that had probably worked several times before, drawing up beside some unsuspecting driver and just unloading both barrels before they could react. It relied on surprise and reluctance in other people to shoot first. Neither was the case now, and the look on the rider’s face when I pulled the trigger was probably the same expression he was used to seeing on the other side of the gun. I fired several times and watched his body jerk twice as I got really lucky. He veered off to the left, then disappeared from view when he hit a parked car.

“Dave, we’ve got one behind us!” Amy called out from the rear of the truck. No sooner had the words left her mouth than the truck jerked from impact. Behind me, I could hear Amy cursing, then I heard the camper shell’s rear window opening. The Mossberg boomed, and the car behind us, a late model red Mustang, swung into view in my side mirror. Its front windshield was starred and white around a hole the size of a dinner plate almost dead center in the glass.

“Aim for the front grill next!” I yelled over my shoulder. She didn’t respond, but I heard the shotgun boom three more times in rapid succession, and the next time I saw the Mustang, it was stopped in the middle of the road with steam billowing from the hood. Then the first figures ran out from the houses on the left, and I looked to the road ahead. I couldn’t honestly say I felt bad about leaving them to their fate, but it wasn’t one I felt like watching. It also wasn’t one I felt like making Amy watch.

“Good shooting,” I called out to her. “Close up the window and come back up front. I need your help getting out of town.” The road merged ahead and I followed it west across an old truss bridge over the Delaware River as she slid into the rear part of the cab.

“Looks like that whole getting out of town thing pretty much just happened,” she said.

“We need to head north, and get away from the railroad tracks,” I told her as I handed her the map. “We have places to be…and to not be.”

“Where to be or not to be, that is the question,” she said.