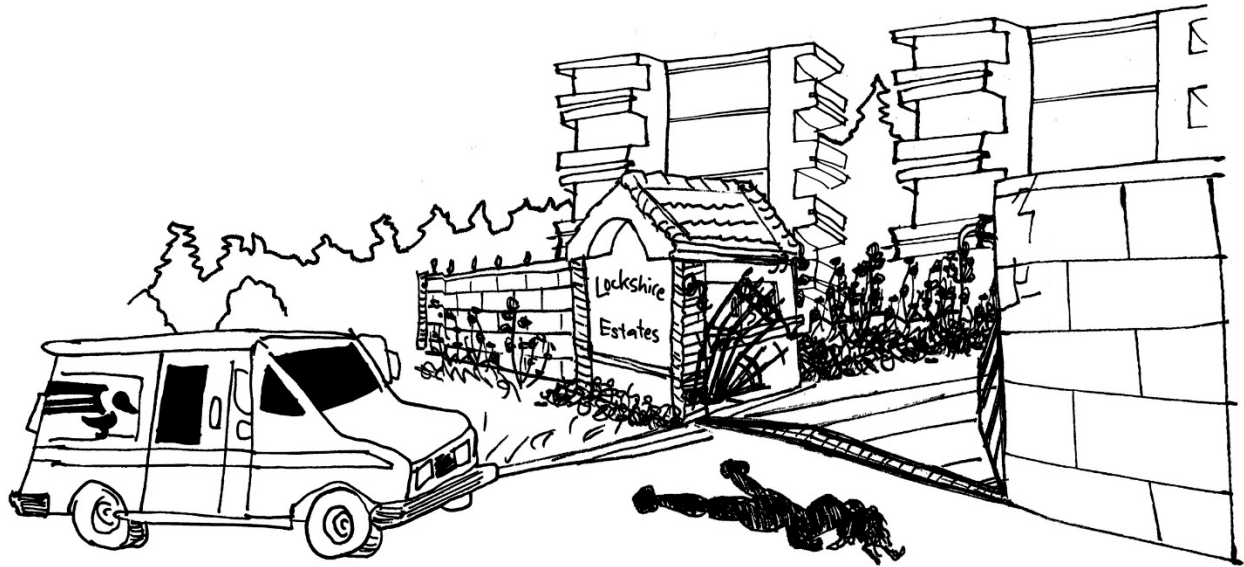


Preface: Parting Words



Dear Survivors,

This is Lochshire Estates, where I grew up. You probably think it looks pretty secure. Concrete walls provide quite a bit of protection from the infected, but before you move in, you should know what happened here. As far as I know, I'm the only Lochshire resident who survived. I escaped with my new friend, Ellie, from Boston, and my neighbor's cat, Stinky Ramero.

I'm Max Hartwell. My dad was Rich Hartwell, a scientist who was researching the Walking Hunger virus. If you're looking for him, you're too late; but before we lost power, I printed out his research. If I can find someone who gets it, maybe we can find a cure.

Don't be surprised if you can't find any weapons or ammo here. Guns were banned in the housing agreement, so we improvised. Don't go in the pool, and don't open the west tower's dumpster room. There are infected inside.

We took all the food and gear we could carry, but we left the rest in apartment 4D in the east tower. Be careful! There was a herd on the south side when we left. The safest entrance is probably the front door on the tower's west side. We cleared that out as best as we could.

We're headed to Thornton Middle School. I was a student there. Right after the outbreak, the local police turned it into a refugee center, but it was overrun weeks ago. It's probably not safe there, but we need medicine. Ellie has a nasty gash. It's not a bite, but we can't risk an infection.

If you stay here, the first thing to do is fix the front gate. We had to rip it out to escape. It's straight ahead, wedged against the entrance of the south tower. Be careful! There were about fifty creepers inside when we left. One of them was the Postman.

The Postman is different. It's smarter than the others, and they sense it. They follow it like a leader. A doctor on the radio said that some of the infected are smarter because they were aggressive people before. The disease keeps whatever it can use, and destroys the rest, so it keeps the aggressive parts of the brain.

We're not coming back here. Dad had a cabin on the southern side of Stinson Lake, ten miles southwest of here. The cabin is secluded, and safe. It should be well-supplied. We'll wait out the winter there. All peaceful survivors are free to join us. But if you're hostile, I'm warning you to stay away. We'll have weapons and will not hesitate to defend our property.

If you stay in Lochshire, I hope you can make more of this place than we could.

Don't get bit,

Survivor Max

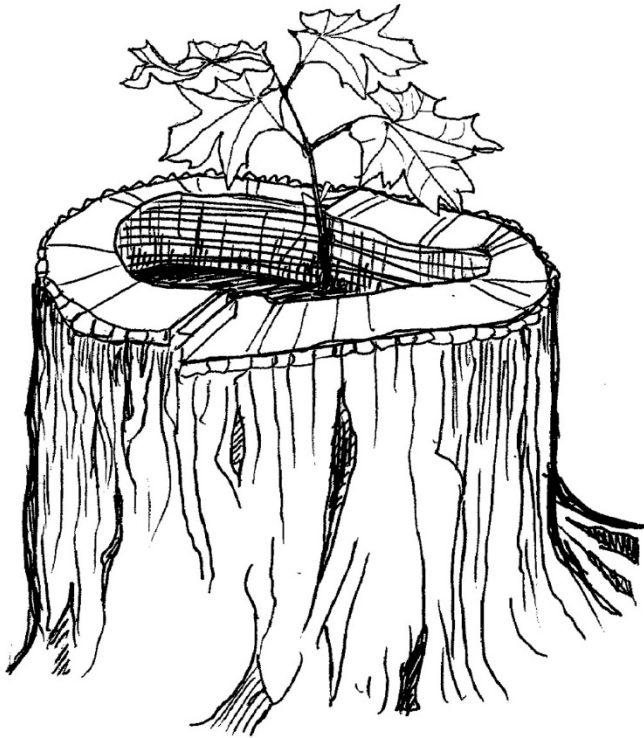
Chapter One: All Downhill from Here

The gray clouds were so thick I couldn't tell what time it was, only that we were losing daylight. It looked like a storm was taking shape. We were due for the first snow, and it certainly felt cold enough.

My poncho was reinforced with duct tape to protect against bites, so rather than digging through my gear bag for the roll, I just pulled a piece off my sleeve and taped the letter to the front gate ruins. I'd also fashioned myself a utility belt out of duct tape that held my multi-tool, a hammer, Ellie's hatchet, my dad's handheld two-way radio, and some other small gear. My helmet was made from a spaghetti strainer, with my LED headlamp attached to it. All my other supplies were stuffed in my bag.

Ellie had my other radio. I was eleven-years-old and she was maybe a year older than me at most. Her red hair was loose and untamed. She was sitting on the curb in a green hoodie, staring at the empty revolver on the pavement in front of her, still wiping tears from her eyes.

Ellie's mom was slumped on the ground between us. She'd been bitten, and turned. When it attacked me, Ellie had to shoot it. The .38 caliber slug entered its head just under the left eye, and was embedded in the hollow stump of a sugar maple tree across the street. It was our last bullet.



In the stump was a small, almost insignificant sapling. I'd always wanted to see a tree growing inside another tree, but in all the time I lived there, and all the seed pods I buried in that old stump, none had ever taken root. Strange that I'd finally get to see one grow there now. If it survived the harsh New Hampshire winter, and if I ever came back, maybe I'd get to see it. But I didn't have much hope for long-term plans.

The gunshot had drawn creepers out of the neighboring houses.

"We need to move," I said.

"You're right." She rummaged through her mom's rucksack for supplies, transferring a water bottle, a road map, and a handheld flashlight to her own book bag. "Let's get out of here." She holstered the revolver on her belt between her lock blade and a compact trifold shovel.

She winced with pain when she put weight on her injured ankle. I helped her to her feet.

Ellie was sweating. I checked her bandage. Her ankle was red and swollen. "It's infected," I told her. "I have some ibuprofen in my med kit for the pain and fever, but we need to get you some antibiotics and fast."

"Don't you think you're overreacting? I've had worse," she said.

"Maybe, but there's no hospital. A serious blood infection is bad, like amputation bad. Like death bad."

Stinky was a black and white tuxedo cat that I adopted after the collapse. In some ways, he had adopted me. His previous owner didn't fare so well, and even though he had been an indoor cat, he was going feral just as fast as we were. Vigilance was among his growing skills, and I'd learned to rely on his eyes and ears more than my own. He saw the first creeper headed our way before I did. The low groan he made when he saw a creeper was different than any other sound he ever made and I learned to recognize it. As soon as I heard him, I perked up.

I heard the creeper before I saw it, headed our way from a house down the hill. Its long wails would call others. It was a woman in a flannel shirt and denim overalls. The red stains on its face meant it had fed recently, and the gardening shears in its shoulder told me its meal had fought back. The uphill climb slowed it down, but we didn't have much time.



Ellie limped as the neighbor closed in. A small mail truck was parked in front of the compound. "That's our ticket out of here!" I whispered. It was unlocked, but there was only one seat, and no keys. I helped Ellie into the seat. "Stinky, up!" I slapped the side console and Stinky jumped up and meowed at me as if to say, *hurry!*

"Put it in neutral and steer," I told Ellie. "It's all downhill from here; I just need to get it rolling. We can coast the whole way, but we have to move fast."

She nodded. "Go! I got this." She put her hands on the wheel, looking determined as she scrunched her brow.

I ran to the back of the mail truck and pushed, but it wouldn't budge.

I heard a growl and Ellie screamed. It was a teenage creeper that must have come from the woods. It grabbed Ellie's hair through the window, and tried to pull her out. It turned as I came around, reaching for me with one hand and clutching Ellie with the other. Its lips were ripped off, its teeth dripping blood as it snarled. Flesh was missing from its fingertips, leaving the bones exposed. A perfect delivery system for infection.

I pulled the hatchet from my belt and swung, severing its jaw. The thing let go of Ellie as it collapsed, but it wasn't dead. I lifted the hatchet over my head and slammed it down into its skull.

I'd never killed one before, but it was no time to reflect. The gardening sheers creeper was getting closer.

I looked in the window. Ellie was shaken, but adrenaline brought her to full attention. "Pull the emergency brake!" I pointed. She nodded and cranked up the window.

When she released the lever, the mail truck began rolling downhill on its own.

More creepers stumbled toward us from houses up the road, and they were moving fast. I got behind the mail truck and pushed with all my strength, to build speed. We had to move faster to outrun them.



I got it to walking speed, but the next creeper was only yards away, and catching up. I got it to running speed when suddenly Ellie swerved hard to the left, throwing me off my step.

"Incoming!" she screamed and hit the gardening sheers creeper. The rotting body went under the tires, and I hopped as it came out from under the back of the mail truck. The creeper behind me tripped over it, but more were coming.

I ran to catch up to the mail truck and jumped onto the back bumper. The next two creepers were a few feet away, so I unlatched the back and opened the roll door. I jumped into a pile of undelivered mail.

A creeper grabbed the back bumper and held on, getting dragged behind the mail truck. I slammed the roll door down on its hands, but it still held on. On the third try I heard its hands crunch, and the door latched with the creature's fingers sticking out. I couldn't pull it open again. If the creeper was still attached, I'd deal with it later.

I poked my head in the cab. "I think we're clear. How are you doing up here?"

Ellie swerved to avoid more creepers. They chased us but we were too fast. "I'm good," she said.

"Want me to drive?"

"No, I got this. Give me those pain meds."

I grabbed a few pill packets from my first aid kit and offered her my water, but she swallowed them dry. "Now, where's this school of yours?"

"Down the hill, make a left at the bottom. Try not to hit any of them. We don't want to lose speed."

Stinkywatched the creepers go by.In the side mirror, I saw at least six of them chasing us.They were falling behind, but they weren't giving up.If we didn't keep moving, they'd catch up.