

THE SCOOP
by Brett A. Contreras

How the hell did I end up with this job? Bill asked himself.

He did not like cops. His experiences with members of the law enforcement community for the last ten years had been negative ones, most of them humiliating and expensive. Beer tickets in his teens, speeding tickets once he was driving, even getting busted in the back seat of his VW Jetta with Barbara Ann Romano...each experience had added to his dislike of the Boys in Blue.

And now, he was riding in the back of a Special Weapons and Tactics truck with eight uber-cops, with two more in the cab up front. Bill had been introduced to the team back at the precinct, and had already entered their names into his laptop.

Bill Sullivan was 26-years old, with sandy brown hair and sharp grey eyes. He was of average height, slender but quick. He had played three years of basketball in high school, but had not had the height to play in college. He had majored in Journalism, with a minor in Rhetoric, then spent two and a half years after graduation working as a barback in various eateries and bars around Springfield.

Last summer, he had finally landed an internship at The Beacon, Springfield's top Tier-Two newspaper, but progress since then had been negligible. He had been growing more and more bitter, stuck in an entry level position and performing all the pointless and degrading jobs that went with it. He had petitioned many times for greater responsibilities, something more in line with journalism than brewing coffee and helping tidy up the mailroom. He had even written some unasked-for pieces and submitted them to Ron Rogers, his boss and general pain-in-the-ass.

His tenacity had finally paid dividends this week, so he thought, when Ron had called him into his office. The Nemesis Comet had missed Earth by plenty, once again proving the doomsayers wrong, but had stirred up plenty of opportunities for special interest articles. Since the near-miss, strange things had continued happening, including some evidence of a new virus, something that caused psychotic behavior in sick or wounded individuals. Each of Bill's unsolicited submissions had been ignored, forgotten or outright rejected. Then, on Tuesday, Ron finally called him to a meeting.

"You're up, Kid," Ron had said. "You're going into the field for us."

Bill had been beside himself. "No kidding? What's the job?"

"You'll be tagging along with a city SWAT team...recording a mission of theirs or something."

Bill had felt his heart sink. "What? A SWAT team? I get to report on cops shooting looters?"

"SWAT has been almost exclusively assigned to dealing with these growing instances of infected dead rising and causing trouble," Ron had told him matter-of-factly. "I'm pretty sure you'll be along on one of those."

"What? Did you say...the infected *dead*? I thought the psychosis was occurring in the injured and sick..."

Ron had looked at him for the first time in the whole meeting. “Did I stutter, Sullivan? If you don’t want the damn assignment, I can give it to another intern.”

“No, I’ll take it! I just...forget it. Thank you, Ron.”

It was now Thursday. Bill had spent the past thirty-six hours digging up everything he could on the new virus, as well as recent SWAT operations in and around Springfield. Ron had been right; it seemed that there had been some instances of reanimation of the recently deceased. This was not general news yet; Bill had had to dig fairly deeply to discover it. Those infected by the virus were aggressive, very resilient to physical damage and highly contagious. The medical reporters had even developed a common term for them: *zombies*.

As far as SWAT, they were more active than they had been in decades, and were logging the highest casualties-inflicted in the history of the city. Whether there was an infection or not, this smacked of Kent State, Watts...Rodney King.

Bill had not found anything yet to latch onto, but he held out hope. He glanced around at the team, all veterans of the Springfield police force, and tried to recall their names without consulting his notes. Nearest to him was Nicholls, the tall blond fellow with the foul mouth. Next was Harvey, a huge, red-faced Irishman. Bayonne was the shortest man on the squad, standing about an inch taller than Bill, and had a cutting sense of humor that the young reporter did not favor. Last on this side of the truck was “Doc” Weller, obviously the team medic, judging from his creative nickname.

Across from Weller were the squad snipers, Lawton and Maru. Both men paid more attention to their long-barreled, customized weapons than to their squadmates. Next was Navidov, a quiet hulk of a man that Bill had to assume was from Eastern Europe. Across from Bill sat the squad leader, Lieutenant Geoffrey Rollins, a serious-looking fellow nearing forty years of age who sported a conservative, almost corporate-looking haircut and the prerequisite cop moustache.

In the cab of the truck rode Sergeant McGee, Rollins’ second in command, and another officer named Goodman. Goodman was actually younger than Bill and had been outgoing and friendly when introduced. Bill found Goodman the only one of the team that he liked...

“Lieutenant, the demographics of your team are surprising to me,” Bill said. “I figured there would be more minorities.”

“Navidov’s Russian,” offered Harvey helpfully.

“And a woman,” added Bayonne. This brought harsh laughter from several of the troopers, and a mute scowl from Navidov.

“That’s Hollywood, Mr. Sullivan,” the lieutenant told him. “Our chief has consistently maintained that he does not support quotas and numbers. If you can do the job, you get hired, and the teams are built based on who works best with whom. We don’t discriminate...or *reverse* discriminate.”

Bill raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips tartly. He tapped away at the keys of his laptop.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Rollins added, “two of the three captains in our precinct are African-American.”

“So, is that why we have you with us, Sullivan?” asked Nicholls. “You’re collecting demographics research on the city force? That’s pretty fuckin’ dull stuff.”

“No, Mr. Sullivan is riding with us today because The Beacon wants its readers to know just exactly how we perform our duty out on the mean streets,” said Lieutenant Rollins. “And, I am sure, they are hoping he is able to come back with some juicy nuggets of questionable conduct.”

“It’s like having the damn Political Officer along,” groused Navidov, seeming to notice Bill for the first time. He accentuated his distaste by hammering down on the charging rod of his M16.

Bill tried to return the grizzled Russian’s baleful stare, but found himself immediately overwhelmed. He dropped his eyes to the ghostly glow of his computer, and busied himself with some unimportant formatting function.

The vehicle came to a halt and Lawton and Weller threw the doors open. The officers sprang to their feet and pounded out of the truck, deploying on the street outside. Bill was the last to get out, and Lieutenant Rollins even offered him a hand down.

“I’m okay,” Bill said, with some resentment, hopping to the pavement below. Rollins shrugged and walked away.

Bill looked around and saw that the street they were on had been cordoned off by local law enforcement. The crowd was held back by barriers and tape, as well as one mean-tempered officer with a bullhorn and a 12-gauge Winchester shotgun.

To Bill’s left, on the south side of the street, there was a large open area between two strip malls. The parking area, once servicing the malls, had been combined with two rejuvenated lots on the other side of the city block and converted into a flea market of sorts. The people of Springfield tended to be sturdy folk, and the market remained open for around nine months out of the year.

The strip malls had been evacuated and the flea market blocked off with Jersey barricades. A handful of armed officers stood near the half-walls, glancing apprehensively into the fairgrounds, where a large group of...people...could be seen milling about.

Rollins had walked over to a female officer wearing sergeant’s stripes; Bill quickly followed.

“Good afternoon, Lieutenant,” she said. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Billy, this is Sergeant Amanda Regan. Regan, this is Billy Sullivan, a budding young reporter from The Beacon.”

“It’s *Bill*, actually,” he said, shaking her hand.

“Hello,” she said blandly, releasing his hand quickly and turning back to Rollins.

“Thanks for keeping them contained, Regan,” Rollins said. “What’s the situation?”

“Group of meatbags hit the flea market,” she told him, gesturing past the barricades. “According to a couple of the surviving merchants we talked to, they did have security in place. But it sounds like there was a pretty significant group of them that attacked...probably twenty or thirty at least.”

“Thirty zombies?!” Bill interrupted, wrestling with the laptop and trying to enter his notes. The computer was a Dell machine, several years old, and terribly bulky. Bill

imagined that he was getting better definition in his shoulders and upper arms just from lugging the piece of shit back and forth to work.

Regan scowled at Bill, then continued. “Thirty meatbags were more than a match for whatever couple of bat-toting ‘security’ personnel they were paying; and I understand that there were quite a number of casualties, among merchant *and* customers. Naturally, as the people they killed rose to join them, the numbers increased. We got the call and arrived in time; none of them has left the fairgrounds. Unfortunately, I think there are a lot more than thirty now.

“Any of them that got too close to the perimeter or came at us, my men took down. But we’ve been careful about not shooting at those feeding in the center. We didn’t want to get them stirred up; we don’t have the firepower to deal with all of them if they come in a rush.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. We’ll take care of it.”

Lieutenant Rollins spoke quickly and softly into his mike, and the SWAT troopers fanned out immediately, moving to their appointed tasks. Harvey and Weller broke to the left; Nicholls and Goodman to the right. Both pairs disappeared into the nearby storefronts.

Sergeant McGee set the remaining officers down at intervals along the Jersey-barricades at the fairground entrance, then joined them. They raised weapons, picking their targets. It was quiet for almost a minute, then,

“Harvey and Weller, on station.”

A moment later, *“Nicholls...Goodman, on station.”*

Rollins inhaled deeply, then nodded.

“Fire.”

The troopers at the wall began firing, single shots or three-round bursts. The zombies nearest to the officers went first, their heads erupting like overripe fruit, bits of bone and brain matter spraying into the air. Soon, Bill could hear the reports of Harvey and Nicholls’ M16s, firing from the flanks.

With the nearest threats dealt with, the troopers began taking down targets further away. Lawton and Maru did most of that work, the Remington 700 and Heckler and Koch PSG-1 better suited for the range.

As Sergeant Regan had predicted, once the gunfire started, the large group of zombies among the booths in the flea market became highly agitated. They broke away in twos and threes, lurching quickly towards the police officers.

Unfazed, the SWAT troopers continued their assault. The unrelenting hail of bullets shredded the zombies and, in less than five minutes, it was over. Rollins called for a report.

“All targets down,” said Weller.

“All targets down,” repeated Goodman.

“Start your sweep, Sergeant.”

Sergeant McGee rose to his feet and slung his rifle. Lawton, Bayonne and Navidov followed suit, then clambered over the wall. Maru remained behind to provide cover. The four officers drew sidearms and strode into the field in pairs. They moved from body to body, frequently firing a single round into the head of a still-twitching zombie.

Bill had moved up to the Jersey barricades and rested his laptop there. He tapped at his keys, experiencing a mixture of horror and unexpected disappointment.

It was a short time later; Bill had taken a break from writing. A van had just arrived which Nicholls had loudly announced was the “clean-up crew”. A few yards behind him, he listened to the SWAT troopers, riffing casually with one another.

“Bayonne, what the fuck, dude? Do you need to be on *auto* at all times? Doesn’t that gun have any other setting?”

“Yeah, you should be called *One CLIP, One Kill!*”

“You guys can lick me,” Bayonne replied.

“Yes, I’m sorry to have to tell you now,” said Rollins, his face straight. “But the Captain has told me that we’re going to have to start deducting from your paycheck when you use more than two clips on one of these missions...”

“Oh, man! He’s gonna go *broke!*” Nicholls crowed.

“He’ll have to start paying the department,” Weller put in.

“Did you guys see that one that looked like a bodybuilder? Biggest zombie I ever saw; I swear,” said Nicholls.

“I got *that* one!” Bayonne insisted.

“You unloaded half a clip into his fuckin’ knees, and he *fell* on a support post!” Nicholls countered. “*That’s* what killed him!”

“Still counts!”

Bill wanted to be angered by the officers’ joviality, their seeming indifference for the death they had just meted out, but he found his indignation somewhat hollow. First of all, if the information about this sickness was true, those people the SWAT troopers had shot were already dead. They were also aggressive carnivores and therefore dangerous to other citizens...including Bill.

He realized that, in large part, their humor was a coping mechanism. It was really the only way they could deal with the horror they were having to witness each time they were sent out to handle one of these situations. It was obvious from the way they treated one another that they had bonded under the stresses of a dangerous job and shared hardships. Bill had experienced that sort of camaraderie with his basketball teammates, but he knew that was a thin, shallow phantom of the bond these men shared.

Bill found himself slightly envious of the officers at that moment. He tried to shrug it off, watching the members of the clean-up crew move about the flea market. The officers looked like a HAZMAT team, dressed in full environmental suits. Many of them wore large tanks containing some sort of chemical agent. This they sprayed the corpses with before loading them into body bags. They then applied liberal doses to the ground where the zombies had fallen. It looked like grisly work.

“Lieutenant!” It was Goodman, leaning out of the SWAT truck’s cab. “Call for you from Captain Sherman.”

Rollins nodded and left the other officers to their fun. He took the offered handset from Goodman and greeted the captain. His face immediately fell.

Bill came away from the wall and made his way over to the lieutenant. At first, he could only hear Rollins, but he was soon close enough to hear Captain Sherman's voice through the headset, his voice sounding tinny and distant.

"Of course my men are ready, Sir, but I think this may be a bit... Yes, I understand, Sir. But what about the other teams?... All of them? How can they all be committed?... No, Sir. Of course not. My apologies."

"Gary Waters is the officer on site; he'll brief you."

"The officer?!" Rollins asked.

"As I said, Lieutenant, we are becoming hard-pressed and stretched very thin all of a sudden. Hopefully, this is just a bad day and not a sign of things to come. But there has been a rash of outbreaks of these things, and it falls to us to deal with it. I do not want to have to make that call to get the National Guard in here."

The exchange had attracted the other members of the team. They began gathering around, looks of concern replacing the ones of mirth that had been there only moments before.

"Captain, I'd like to point out that we were not equipped for an internal operation. Only two of my men are carrying MP5s. It's getting dark and we have no infrared. We do not have our urban assault gear. No battering rams or riot shields."

"You have Harvey and Navidov, don't you? They're your battering rams."

Lieutenant Rollins looked up at his two biggest officers. Navidov was the oldest and most seasoned of his team, standing just over six feet and weighing a solid two hundred and eighteen pounds. Harvey was even bigger, though a few of the pounds were admittedly more from a love of red meat than weight training.

Harvey nodded at him. "It's all right, Lieutenant. The Discover bill came yesterday and my wife's been at it again. I've got plenty of aggression to work out. You just tell me which doors and I'll get 'em open."

"Captain, we will of course comply," Rollins said into the headset. "But if any of the other teams becomes available, I strongly urge..."

"Don't urge, Geoff. The other teams are thoroughly embroiled right now. Team One may be off the board after this week. Just get this scene taken care of."

Rollins looked stricken, but recovered immediately. "Roger that, Sir. En route." He squelched the mike and handed the headset back to Goodman.

"All right, listen up," he called. The team gathered.

"We're still active; they're sending us to another trouble spot. The Captain wants us moving immediately, but take fifteen for bathroom, food, whatever. Re-check all equipment, then load up. I'll brief you on the way."

"Another mission already?" Bill asked. "Lieutenant, I have all I need. You can drop me back at The Beacon, right?"

The lieutenant scowled at him. "We're not a taxi service, Sullivan. The Beacon is not on the way to this site. But no, you don't have to come with us; we can part here. You won't get a cab down here right now, but the walk shouldn't take you more than a couple of hours."

Bill looked dubiously at his surroundings, his gaze wandering with trepidation to the bloody fairgrounds. The men in the environmental suits scurried about the area, continuing their clean-up. He then glanced upwards, noting the fading light in the sky.

“You could probably catch a ride back with the meat wagons, once they finish up,” offered Nicholls with a smirk.

“Yeah, but they usually ride pretty full,” added Bayonne. “You’ll probably have to ride in the back with the ‘cargo’.”

Bill shook his head and exhaled sharply. Without a word, he hopped back into the van and moved to find a seat.

The truck had been humming along at a good clip for about fifteen minutes now. The SWAT troopers were quiet, aside from the noise of them checking each other’s gear.

“The lieutenant mentioned infrared,” Bill said quietly to Lawton, whom he was now sitting near. “Does infrared actually work on these things?”

“They don’t give off as much heat as a live person, but they still generate some. It actually helps to tell them from live targets,” the sniper replied absently.

To be honest, Bill found *that* more disturbing than the idea that they radiated *no* heat. He covered his unease by tapping some notes into his laptop.

It was fully dark when the truck arrived at the site on Springfield’s west side. This was the old section of the city, the part that had been built up in the 1890’s and since abandoned to the lower income population. The street was a mess; a crowd of over two hundred was gathered, blocking traffic and jamming the sidewalks. There looked like there were injured, and many were in varying degrees of hysteria. People were running in and out of the building’s atrium, some of them carrying furniture or appliances.

The truck’s doors flew open and the team dispersed quickly.

“Where’s the crowd control?!” asked McGee incredulously. “This is almost a riot!” He doubled back to the truck’s cab and grabbed the keys.

A lone squad car sat nearby, rooftop lights flashing. Two officers remained near the cruiser, sidearms drawn, looking about at the crowd nervously.

Rollins strode forward, flanked by McGee and Navidov.

“Thank God you’re here!” shouted one of the officers, a stocky but rattled-looking fellow. “We’ve been radioing for backup for almost forty minutes now, but all the precincts are reporting full capacity. What the fuck is going on?!”

“Why don’t you tell us what’s going on *here* first,” answered Rollins. “Who are you?”

“Officer Gary Waters, Lieutenant,” he replied. “Sorry, Sir. Things are nuts here and we’re just feeling a little isolated.”

“Where the hell is our Site Command Unit?” McGee asked.

“We’re it,” said Waters, glancing about anxiously. “Like I said, we’ve been radioing for backup for almost three-quarters of an hour. Mason and I went into the building at first, but there is some serious meatbag presence here!”

“About how many?” Rollins asked.

Waters shrugged. “Hard to tell in there, Sir. But they’re in the apartments, Sir. They’re killing people!”

Rollins exhaled and shook his head. Bill was not sure, but he thought he heard him swear.

“Waters, you keep calling for backup, you understand?”

“Yes, Lieutenant!”

Rollins paused. “Waters, you have an extra shotgun you can spare?”

“We just have the one, Sir. If you need it...”

“No, you keep it. You may need it with this crowd. Be careful.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“All right, Team, get hot! Let’s get in there. Bill, you wait here with Waters and Mason.”

Bill regarded the ominous-looking apartment building and felt an odd sensation come over him. His father had once said that there were certain opportunities that came along once in a lifetime. You just needed to be ready to take them when they presented themselves for that very short time. “Lieutenant, if it’s all the same to you, I’ll join you.”

“Sullivan, I’m not taking responsibility for you in there. We’re going in because there are civilians inside. I’m not taking another one with me.”

“You can’t keep me out,” Bill countered petulantly. “I have a right to be on the scene and the people of Springfield have a right to have the news reported by someone who actually *knows* what’s happening!”

Nicholls laughed. “That’d be a fucking switch.”

“I’m *not* your responsibility, Lieutenant,” Bill insisted. “This is *my* decision!”

Rollins raised an eyebrow, then just shook his head. “Stay far enough back that you don’t get in our way, Billy. Let’s move, Boys.”

The SWAT troopers fanned out into an obviously well-rehearsed formation, then moved with all speed towards the front of the apartment building. It took a moment before Bill realized he was being left behind, then rushed to catch up. He had slung the Dell laptop into a canvas shoulder bag, but it still banged infuriatingly against his hip.

Bill swore, if he made the main edition, he would first request a better, *lighter*, laptop.

The crowd parted in front of the heavily-armed officers, and Bill suddenly spotted a large van, parked obnoxiously close to the front of the apartment building. Antennas and a satellite dish protruded from the van’s roof, and a small group of people was standing near the open side door. All save one were male and dressed casually; the last was a tall blonde carrying a microphone.

“They got a TV crew here?” asked Nicholls incredulously, his index finger straying to the trigger of his weapon.

“Officer! Officer!” cried the woman, obviously the scene reporter. She wore a conservative orange blazer and sported an unadventurous pageboy haircut. Her makeup was at once too modest and too profuse; Bill had never actually seen the like. She led with her microphone, a large, clumsy, retro piece of equipment that she wielded like a club when a member of the surging crowd did not make way for her. Following close behind came her cameraman, a large Latin fellow with thick arms and the customary backwards baseball cap. The shoulder-carried camera’s spotlight was already activated, and it shone brazenly in the faces of the officers that glanced its way.

“Hey...HEY!” shouted Bill angrily, even pushing his way into the SWAT troopers. “This is *my* story! This is *my* scoop!”

“Officer!” the woman persisted. “Charlene Jayne, News Eleven, Springfield! Can you tell us a little about the situation here?”

Lieutenant Rollins hesitated, then shrugged. “He’s right, Honey. The Beacon assigned him to our team for tonight. Listen, after he gets himself killed, I’ll give you whatever you need.”

The comment shocked both Bill and Charlene enough that Rollins was able to get his team moving again and beyond the reach of the news crew. Bill shot Charlene a dirty look (which she eagerly returned) then ran after the officers. He caught up to them on the wide stone stoop of the apartment building. Rollins was giving orders,

“Lawt, Maru, you guys stick out here and watch our back door. And keep anyone else from following us in. The rest of you, two-man teams and watch your spacing. Billy, you stick right by me and Bayonne. I should have my head examined for bringing you in here.”

“It’s my choice, Lieutenant,” Bill repeated. Then, after a moment, “Shouldn’t I have a gun?”

“No,” Rollins answered immediately. “Goodman, take us in.”

Bill felt his face flush and his ears buzz as the rush of adrenaline hit him. Goodman and Nicholls disappeared through the door, closely followed by Weller, Navidov, McGee, Harvey, Bayonne and Lieutenant Rollins.

Bill hesitated, feeling a tightness in his chest and throat...then he plunged in after them.

The interior of the apartment building stank; it was a mixture of sweat, stale urine and old garbage. The foyer was dim; the narrow hallways and stairwell beyond were even darker. A couple of what Bill had to assume were forty-watt bulbs burned in widely-spaced wall sconces.

“SPRINGFIELD P.D.!! GET YOUR FUCKIN’ HANDS UP!!”

“HANDS IN THE AIR!!”

“SHOW ME YOUR HANDS!”

Bill almost pissed himself as the troopers in front all began yelling at once. He craned his neck, but could see nothing over the larger men in front of him. He could hear some hysterical babbling from the hall ahead, which was quickly cut off by the policemen.

“GET OVER HERE!”

“THIS BUILDING’S UNDER QUARANTINE!”

“GET THE FUCK OUTSIDE!”

The troopers in front of Bill parted, and two frantic young men and an older woman were rushed past. Weller ran behind them, shepherding them through the atrium and out to Lawton and Maru.

“Check the apartment and secure the atrium!” Rollins ordered. McGee and Harvey climbed several steps and took up positions on the stairs. Goodman and Nicholls had already disappeared through the door that the men and woman had come out of. Inside, Bill could hear them calling out to one another,

“Clear!” “Clear!”

“Clear!” “Clear!”

Weller had returned and, along with Navidov, moved past the open apartment and down the narrow hallway. A few moments later, Goodman and Nicholls reemerged.

“Apartment is clear, Ell Tee. No one home.”

“Sergeant, you and Harvey keep the foyer secured. We’re moving back down the hallway.”

“Yes, Sir,” McGee answered.

Rollins and Bayonne joined the other four and the group moved quickly into the dark hall. Bill followed immediately.

“How far back does this hall go?” Bill asked, gazing warily past the advancing troopers.

“We didn’t get blueprints,” Rollins answered in a tone that could have either been sarcastic or genuinely worried about the fact. “We’ll need to improvise on the fly on this one.”

“This thing’s gotta be five stories,” Bill commented.

“One floor at a time,” Rollins answered. “Be quiet.”

The troopers had reached the second apartment and, when no one responded to their challenges to open the door, were forced to break it in. The apartment within was abandoned, though the garbage and empty beer bottles gave testament to recent occupancy of a sort, legal or no.

“This place is a shithole! How could people live here?!” Nicholls bitched, peering in.

“You ever been to Bayonne’s place?” Goodman asked with a laugh.

Rollins and Bayonne were up next, breaking down the door to the third apartment. The team came up short here; the main living area was trashed, and the carpet was thick and sticky with blood. There may or may not have been bullet holes in the walls; they were too damaged to tell.

A brief search turned up no one living or dead, and the team regrouped in the hall.

“Why don’t we just burn the whole fucking thing down?!” Bayonne grouched, somewhat shaken.

“Because people still live here,” Rollins answered. “Now shut up and let’s hit it.”

“What is it with you and always wanted to blow things up or burn ‘em down?”

Weller asked quietly.

“Demolitions guys always like to show off,” Goodman joked.

“Fuck you, Danny.”

Weller and Navidov went through the next door and found another empty apartment.

“No one dead in here, Lieutenant,” Navidov called.

“But I *do* smell weed,” Weller put in. “We may want to remember this place for future reference.”

Bill turned, as he heard a commotion from the front of the building. He could hear Lawton yelling, along with several others who were likely civilians.

“What the hell?” Rollins asked, stepping back and looking past Bill.

“More people from the street,” Bill answered, “trying to get in here. Probably looking for family or something. Don’t just assume they’re looters.”

“When did I say anything about looters?” Rollins asked, irritated.

“Just one door left, El Tee,” Goodman called. “We’re at the back of the building.”

“Looks like they piled a bunch of boxes and garbage back here too,” said Nicholls. “What the fuck? These people live like pigs.”

They could hear Sergeant McGee now, yelling from the foyer. It was obvious that there was a significant group trying to force their way in. McGee was warning them; Lawton and Maru were adding their voices as well.

Rollins turned back, “Goodman, Nicholls, hit that last door. Let’s clear this floor and get back to the front of the building.”

Goodman and Nicholls called out and, when there was no response, went through the door.

“Oh, *fucker!*” Goodman yelled.

Bill jumped halfway out of his skin as he heard the sustained fire from Goodman’s MP5. There was shouting, then Nicholls’ M16 sounded, firing several long bursts.

A half dozen voices shouted from the front hallway. Above them all, Sergeant McGee’s baritone thundered, trying to maintain order.

Navidov and Weller had immediately moved to back up the other two, and now crowded the final doorway, weapons raised. Bill became aware that Bayonne had grabbed him, and was holding his shirt in one fist, which trembled ever so slightly. Lieutenant Rollins stood between Bayonne and the officers in the doorway.

“Report.”

“Son of a bitch...,” managed Goodman, from inside the room.

Weller was looking away.

Navidov looked over at Rollins. “Three meatbags. They were eating a child. They are all dead. Including child.”

Bill leaned against the wall and felt like he had shit his pants. He might even have vomited; he could not tell.

“Clear the apartment, then get back out here,” Rollins said. When he turned back, he looked a shade whiter.

“*El Tee! Civilians coming your way!!*”

Bill turned around to see that several of the people from outside had forced their way past the officers in the building’s atrium. A large man in mechanic’s coveralls was charging towards him, a look of dire intent on his face.

“Sir! Stop where you are!” Bayonne yelled, shoving Bill away and stepping into the center of the hall.

“You get outta my way, you son of a bitch!” the man yelled, slowing, but not stopping. “My family is still in here!”

“Sir! I need you to leave these premises *immediately!*” Bayonne ordered. “We are in the middle of...”

A heavy-set woman appeared at the mechanic’s shoulder, wild-eyed and frantic. “What are they doing here?! They ain’t lettin’ you in! You gotta get your baby!”

Bill stepped past Bayonne, holding his hands up. He could see at least two more people in the hall behind the woman.

“People, *please,*” Bill said, in what he hoped was a soothing tone. “These officers will just need a few more minutes to make sure all the apartments are safe...”

The mechanic hauled off and belted Bill, sending him spinning into the hallway wall. Pain lanced through his head, both from the man’s large, knobby fist and from the hard wall.

“Dammit, get these people out of here!” Rollins roared. “Bayonne! Clear this hallway!”

Bayonne grabbed Bill and threw him back towards Rollins and the others, then stepped forward authoritatively. Even the large mechanic retreated, suddenly wary of the small SWAT trooper.

“Sir!” Bayonne began again. “We have a *dangerous* situation here and I *need* you to leave this building *now*! Once this building has been determined to be safe, we will do our best to reunite you with your family.”

The mechanic hesitated, unsure of how to continue. He gestured towards the final apartment, “I just need...”

“What the fuck is that noise?” Weller asked, looking at the floor.

“Apartment clear, Ell Tee!” Goodman called, stepping through the door.

As Bill shook the stars from his head, he saw the stack of boxes and garbage, which had merely looked like a refuse pile, lurch away from the wall. It had been a barricade, albeit a very shoddy one, and now suddenly gave way under the assault of no less than a dozen zombies, storming out of a heretofore unseen doorway to the basement!

“*MEATBAGS!!*”

“*HOLY SHIT!!*”

“*FUCKIN’ ZOMBIES!!*”

Boxes and debris flew everywhere, showering Weller, Goodman and Navidov. A large chunk of cardboard flipped onto Bill, blocking his view.

Gunfire sounded, too close by, and Bill dropped into a crouch, arms held protectively over his head. Thankfully, he was not hit, but...

The sudden wail of terrified agony caused Bill to lose control of whatever bodily functions he had retained to this point. He shoved the cardboard off and looked up to see, no less than six feet away, ‘Doc’ Weller being dragged backwards into the pile of debris by a trio of zombies. Their arms were wrapped around him, holding him fast. Their teeth sank into his neck, shoulder and arm, rending cloth, flesh and muscle. The team medic screamed, his eyes widening in unbelieving horror, and discharged his MP5, rapidly expelling thirty 9mm bullets into the thighs of a nearby zombie, and then into the wall beyond.

“Aw, fuck! OFFICER DOWN!!” Nicholls screamed, raising his M16 and firing. One of Weller’s zombie assailants rocked back and collapsed, but the other two dragged the screaming officer into the surging pile of undead.

Goodman also fired, letting his MP5 rake across the nearest zombies. Two went down, but the crowd came on, and Goodman and Nicholls were cut off. The MP5’s bolt smacked open, and Goodman fell back, ejecting his magazine and fishing for another.

“Enough playing around with them!” Rollins yelled. “Bayonne! Clear those civilians in *any* way you need to! Navidov, with me! Fire!”

Navidov was already shooting, leaning away from the cellar door so as to keep his fire from traveling right through the zombies and hitting Goodman or Nicholls. He fired short bursts, felling two, three, four zombies. He then dropped to one knee and ejected his spent magazine as Rollins stepped up.

The lieutenant was less conservative, unleashing a barrage of 5.56mm rounds on full-auto, throwing the remaining zombies to the ground in varying stages of defacement.

“More on the stairwell!” Goodman yelled, chambering a round from his fresh magazine. He maneuvered for a clear lane of fire and unleashed a hail of bullets through the open doorway.

Nicholls and Navidov had both reloaded and now stood and fired single shots into the heads of the zombies flailing about on the hall floor. The old wood was now running thick with blood and was littered with brass shell casings, bone shards and bits of flesh.

“Where the fuck is Weller?!” Lieutenant Rollins yelled, reloading his own weapon.

“There!” said Goodman.

“There!” said Nicholls. They were pointing to different spots.

“Time to move, Lieutenant,” said Navidov, gazing down the stairwell. “More meatbags coming.”

“Bayonne, take us out!” Rollins called.

Bill finally pried his eyes away from the carnage and looked back towards the front of the building, half-expecting to see Bayonne in some wrestling match with the big mechanic. But the civilians were already running, the last of them disappearing from sight at the far end of the hall.

Bayonne was on the move as well; it took a shove from Rollins to get Bill going.

Moments later, Bill followed Bayonne into the atrium. Sergeant McGee was entangled with a large black fellow who, despite the circumstances, was still insisting he needed to get back inside to find his sister. Lawton stood just inside the doorway, his rifle in one hand, the arm of a second black fellow in the other. The second man was smaller, and seemingly less zealous in his desire to enter the deeper recesses of the building. Maru stood beyond, in the atrium, facing the street, H&K PB1 held at the ready.

“Sir, I got you covered! Get out!” Harvey yelled from the stairs.

“HARVEY!” Lawton yelled. “BEHIND YOU!”

Maru whirled and shoved the smaller man away, joining Lawton at the inner doors. Lawton and Maru moved as one, raising the Remington and H&K simultaneously. As Harvey whirled, he saw two zombies that would have already had him rocking backwards with gaping holes blown through their foreheads.

Even so, the horrific mass of undead spilling onto the landing that led to the second floor was far too many. Harvey flipped his selector switch to full-auto even as he stumbled backwards. The M16 blazed, and the flesh of the nearest zombies was shredded and holed. But even as Harvey tried to *fall* backwards down the stairs, the surging wave of undead broke over him, and he disappeared in the hail of clawing arms and rending teeth. His scream quickly turned liquid, then cut off entirely.

The large man that Sergeant McGee had been tussling with shouted and ran, bowling over Lawton as he fled through the atrium. McGee whirled and brought up his M16, firing into the zombies as he retreated for the door.

Bayonne paused in his flight, trying to pick his shots, but Rollins just smacked him on the back. “He’s *dead!* SHOOT!”

Bayonne and Rollins opened up on the zombies, as did Navidov, Nicholls and Goodman as they emerged from the hallway. Maru continued to fire, even as he reached down and helped Lawton back to his feet. Lawton drew his .45 caliber sidearm and fired from his knees. Undead skulls erupted and their dead flesh tore and flew and fell like hail.

They tumbled from the stairs and landed in the foyer with wet splats; they became entangled in the railings and hung like macabre piñatas; they collected on the steps and oozed detritus.

“Move out! Move out! Move out!” Rollins yelled, motioning his men towards the door. There was a splintering sound as the nearer stair railing gave way; the bodies of the dead and the undead fell in a horrid wave, piling up on the atrium floor. Even so, more zombies issued from the second floor; Bill estimated there were already seventy or eighty and more were coming.

How could this be?

Lawton and Maru fell back, disappearing from sight. McGee and Bayonne moved to the atrium doors, firing.

“Billy! Get out of here!” yelled Rollins.

Navidov and Nicholls went dry simultaneously. Goodman saw what had happened and stepped forward, opening up with the MP5. The nearest zombies fell back in tatters, but there were so many...

Despite his seeming fervor, Goodman was actually very conservative with his rounds, blowing out knees and faces when he could, or just throwing a few rounds into torsos when he was about to be grabbed. But he too ran dry in short order, and a zombie was stumbling forward, reaching for Nicholls...

Bill reacted entirely on instinct. Having no other weapon handy, he brought up the Dell laptop. Lunging past Nicholls, he swung the computer with both hands, bringing the heavy piece of equipment down on the zombie's skull. There was a horrible crunch, of bone, laptop chassis, or both...and the zombie went down.

Navidov shouted an epithet in his native tongue, then slammed the bolt home on his weapon. He grabbed Bill by the collar and yanked him back, firing the M16 from his hip with one hand. Nicholls had also reloaded, and added his fire. The remaining zombies fell en masse. There were still more coming from the second floor, but their enthusiasm seemed to have waned temporarily, as they tried to figure out how to navigate the growing pile of bodies. Some even fell upon their fellows, tearing into the more accessible, albeit dead, flesh.

“Thank you for that,” Navidov said to Bill, gesturing. Bill looked down, noting with only mild concern that his laptop was now neatly caved in around its middle.

“El Tee, there's fuckin' more of them coming from the basement,” Goodman said, his voice shaking almost as much as his hands as he discarded another magazine and reloaded the MP5. Down the hall, towards the rear of the building, Bill could already see the hallway filling with zombies.

“And more coming from up top,” McGee added, watching the stairs. “I can't see 'em yet, but I hear 'em comin'.”

Bill could hear them too. Even if the creak of the floorboards and the stairs of the landing above could be argued to be caused by living feet, the lonely, dissonant moaning could never be.

“Keep moving, Boys,” Rollins ordered. “We're out.”

Outside, the crowd was still unruly, but no longer was anyone attempting to enter the building. Bill thought he could see the mechanic, the heavy woman, the large black fellow...they would be spreading the word of what was happening.

Spreading...the word seemed terribly significant all of a sudden.

Bill was vaguely aware that he was near the police car. He saw Maru, on one knee about twenty feet in front of the entrance to the building. The H&K rifle was in his hands, trained on the door. Navidov was near him, M16 at the ready.

Bill slowly became aware that Lieutenant Rollins was talking,

“How many other entrances to this building?”

“The main foyer, and there’s a back door,” Waters answered. “That’s small...just like a fire exit.”

“Then we contain them until we get backup,” said Rollins. “We’re burning this one down. Goodman, get me the Captain.”

“What about the people inside?”

“There are no people in there anymore.”

“Officer! Officer!”

It was Charlene Jayne. She and her Latin attendant were suddenly upon them, camera spotlight and retro mike thrust forward intrusively.

“What happened in there, Officer?” she asked. “What is the situation?”

“The situation is bad, Ma’am,” Rollins answered.

“What did you find in there, Officer?” she pressed.

Lieutenant Rollins looked at Charlene wearily. “It’s *his* scoop,” he said, jerking his head towards Bill. “Now get out of our way so we can work. *Please.*”

Bill looked back at the lieutenant. *It’s his scoop*. The words themselves were cliché, but Rollins had meant more by them than what he had said.

Bill probably would not have understood a few hours ago. He would have scampered away, story in his laptop, eager to please Ron Rogers. Now, he had more than he ever could have hoped for...and he now cared less about the article he would write than he could have imagined.

Things were changing in Springfield, maybe in the whole world. Things were changing with Bill Sullivan.

But it *was* his scoop. And Lieutenant Rollins had said so. And, at the moment, *that* meant everything.