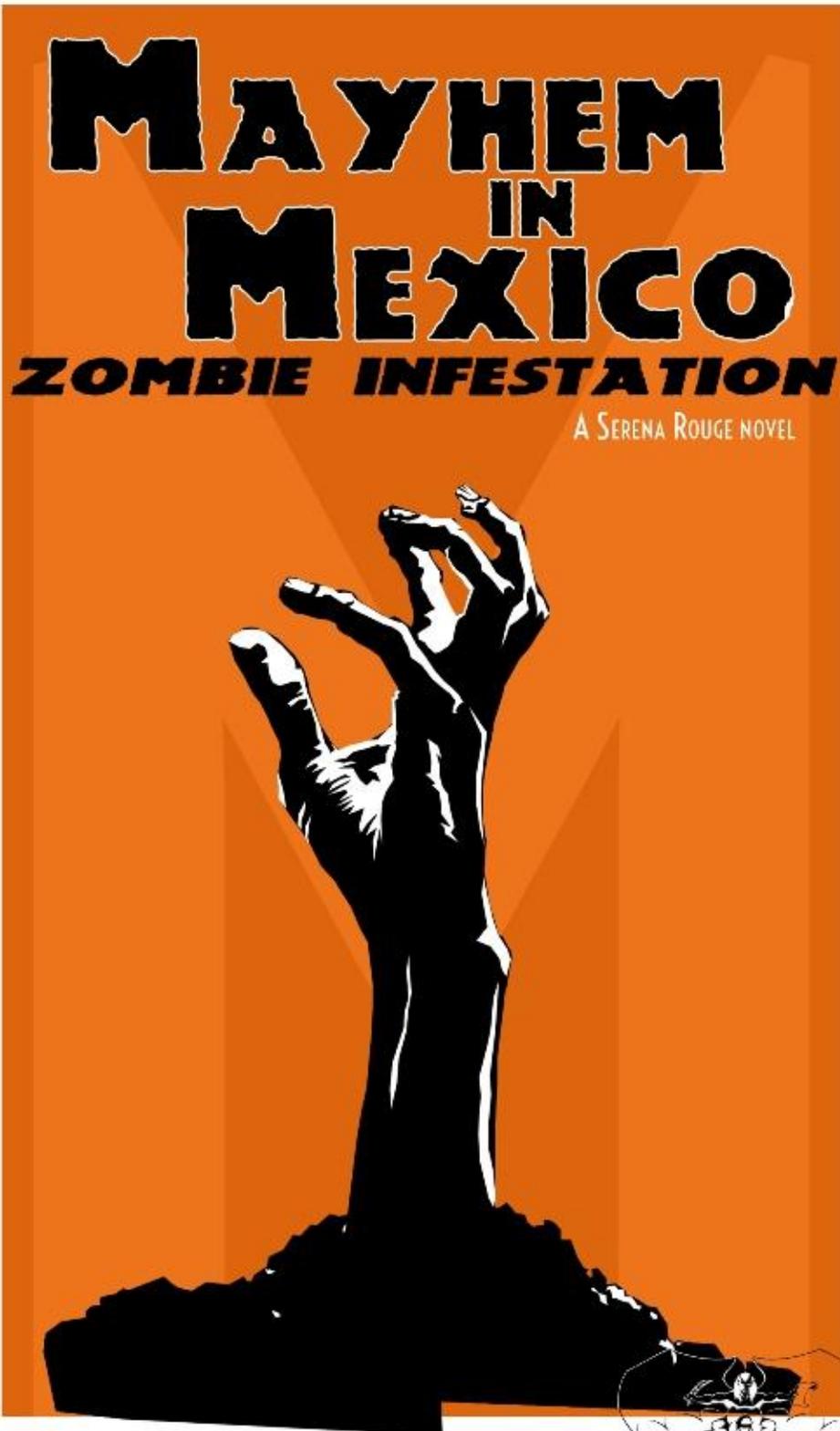
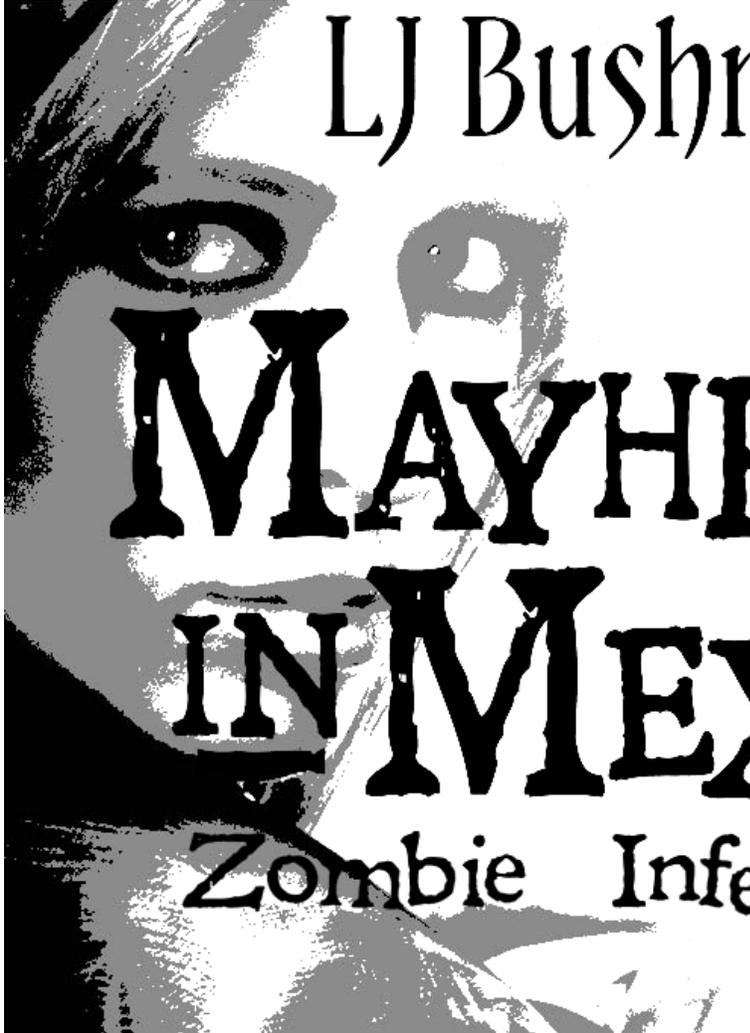


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A JUST INK PRESS NOVEL



LJ Bushman

**MAYHEM
IN MEXICO**

Zombie Infestation

Just Ink Press, LLC



A Just Ink Press novel

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Mayhem in Mexico: Zombie Infestation

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MAYHEM
IN MEXICO
Zombie Infestation

One

Being an Immune had its advantages, but sometimes an Infected stuck it to me. Like last night. I'd been too slow, hesitated to make the kill. Now I'd pay for it; if only for a short time. The first kid stomping down the stairs warned me to hurry. I covered the nasty gash on the wrist I'd been tending with half a plan to redo the bandages later. I didn't need my kids asking questions.

Kyle sauntered in—I'd figured it was him abusing the stairs—tapping his fingers against his thigh to a tune only he could hear. He snagged a glass of orange juice and a piece of toast I had ready for him on the counter and alternately chugged his drink and took massive bites of the bread he'd folded in half.

"Good morning, Kyle. Here's your lunch."

"Thanks, Mom," he said with a full mouth as he rushed toward the front door.

"You're not going to give your mom a kiss? What's your rush?"

"Mom," he said with an eye roll. "I'm too old."

"You're never too old to give your mom a kiss." I laughed inwardly as he threw a quick peck on my cheek before flying out the door, banging the outer screen shut. He'd come home after cross-country in the same manner. He never did anything quietly.

I pattered around the kitchen and started the list of mundane tasks I had to do today. With my secret life becoming more intense of late, I'd taken to listing the everyday chores. Today's list: grocery shopping, pick up Seth for his AAU basketball practice, and fitting in some writing time at the local book and coffee shop.

I'd almost finished my coffee with today's list ready to go when my younger son came loping into the kitchen, face crestfallen as if someone had eaten all his Halloween candy. He always moped around after being woke up. The tell-tale sign being his blanket still hung over his arm, like he planned to lie down and sleep wherever he landed.

"Good morning, Seth." I smiled at him.

"Morning," he mumbled begrudgingly. "What's for breakfast?"

Since his father left with nary a backward glance, breakfast became a ritual I maintained for him, even though he was ten and old enough to get his own. A plate of waffles with syrup waited for him on the counter. He trudged over, grabbed his plate and a glass of milk, then came back to sit at the table.

He dug into his breakfast, eyes half-opened, his hands slow. The blanket trailed to the ground, forgotten. When nearly finished, his eyes brightened as he became more coherent. "Today's basketball practice!" His moping vanished, as if it had never been there in the first place.

As I grinned at him, I replied, "Don't forget to ride the bus home, or you'll miss practice. You're riding with Jimmy today. I'll pick you up after basketball, though."

He nodded vigorously and became antsy. "Maybe I'll make all my free throws today. Last time I missed two, but they hit the rim before falling out."

Smiling at his eagerness, I made the noncommittal noises moms everywhere had perfected when their children waxed poetic on their latest fads. Before basketball, it was "Halo Reach". Or one of those video games. I couldn't keep them straight. At least with basketball, I had a clue what he talked about.

He finished his breakfast, downed the last of his milk in one big gulp, and snagged his backpack. "Three minutes 'til the bus comes. I'm leaving now. 'Kay, Mom?" He gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Thank God he hadn't started that nonsense about being too old yet.

When he left, I slipped my shoes on and headed out in my minivan. I looked longingly at the Harley sitting next to it – my other persona. But today was Mom day.

On the way to the Safeway about fifteen minutes from my house, I mentally went over my grocery list. Seth had begged me to buy microwave popcorn. Personally, I didn't like the excess salt in them, but it was better than some of his choices.

As I grabbed a cart on my way in, I saw a car remarkable in that it was so unremarkable. It was a nice car and sparkling clean, devoid of the bling people in our area put on their vehicles.

The rims were mid-line. The car didn't have any painting detail. No cutesy air freshener hanging from the window. No "My Kid's an Honor Student" bumper sticker. My senses tingled. None of those things were warning signs by themselves, but my intuition said something wasn't right. On the other hand, it was probably none of my business.

Moving into the store, I forgot about the car and pulled the stuff on my list off the shelves, lamenting at the recent price hikes – a result of gas being sky high.

In the produce aisle, I felt someone staring at me. There. The man in a blue suit. Strange things always happened the produce aisle. Why? I think it had something to do with being able to see so far over the food surrounding you. People acted as if they were invisible because they'd picked up a tomato. As my senses tingled, I decided I didn't need salad for dinner. That would make dinner hit the table quicker before I

needed to get ready for my night of killing the Infected – otherwise known as zombies. I headed to check out.

The man in the blue suit didn't follow me. Must have been my nerves. When living a dangerous second life, it paid to be overly cautious. A small sigh of relief escaped as I left the store and rapidly pushed my cart to the van. I'd started loading the groceries when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye.

Frowning, I held the cantaloupe in my hands as if weighing it. A tall man in a black suit came my way. I was pretty sure the guy in the store wore blue. Didn't he? How many suits and ties went shopping in the late morning anyway? Were they working together? The guy in the black suit walked up to me and grabbed my arm. Holding back my initial instinct to beat the crap out of him – starting with a melon to his head – I glared at him instead. Screaming was out; it might bring innocent bystanders into harm's way.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded

His eyebrows went up, surprised at the question. "You're coming with us. Now."

Us? What us? Then it hit me – good thing it wasn't my melon for how dense I'd been for a moment – the blue-suited man. Yanking my arm out of his grip, I pivoted and came face-to-face with Blue Suit. He had a syringe. I wasn't too worried about what was in there. It took more than a little Valium to knock me out. I crushed the melon over the top of Blue Suit's head. He lunged at me with the syringe and I punched him in the eye and sideswiped his legs from under him. I still didn't want to be stuck with whatever he had in the needle.

Black Suit grabbed me from behind, his arm circling my waist. I threw my head back into his face, then turned and punched him in the nose. There was a satisfying crunch a moment before I felt the prick of a needle. I turned to tell him it was no good hitting me with common knock out drugs, but my vision blurred. The last I remembered from the parking lot was Black Suit's ugly mug and the bruise spreading under his eye.

When I woke, my head spun. I ignored it in favor of accepting the pack of cigarettes they gave me when I asked, and stalled for time. The room was larger than most interrogation rooms – don't ask me how I know – but still narrow. The concrete walls made it feel claustrophobic. The tattered desk looked straight out of a noir story, complete with a single light overhead. With a quick brush of my hands across my derriere, I moved off the floor where they'd dumped me to the chair they'd indicated off on one side of the desk. What the hell was going on?

My hair stuck to the side of my face, the drying sweat made me itch. I wanted to scratch the top layer of my skin off. Already pissed off because I had no idea what time it was and didn't know what had happened with Kyle and Seth, I tried to contain my

rage. But the questions went round and round, not helping the spinning in my head. Was it after school yet? Was Seth waiting around for a mom who wasn't going to show up? Pissed and uncomfortable weren't good bedfellows. Not that these assholes cared.

Whatever they'd done to me – presumably a ride in the trunk of their car – I'd been sweating like a runner in a marathon and now I needed a shower. Not to mention hungry as hell. Maybe they'd be kind and throw in a nice, rare steak with the shower when I got out of this shithole and back to my kids. *If I made it out.* It didn't seem like a situation where they planned on killing me, but none of what happened felt right. I was afraid to ask the time. Afraid they'd figure out why I wanted to know and use my kids as leverage.

At least the kidnapers let me have the smokes. It helped keep my anger at bay, although I couldn't fathom why they'd kidnap me, then let me light up.

The two of them stood on the other side of the table. Black Suit gazed down at me, his distaste palpable. I wore what I called my 'day clothes', and surely it wasn't helping them come to terms with me. They had to wonder, how the hell does a writer fight like I did? It was only fair; I had trouble coming to terms with the fact they'd knocked me out cold. Believe me, it wasn't easy. I looked down at my clothes to remember what I'd put on. Oh yeah. Acid-wash jeans, old t-shirt and Nikes made up my public persona. My mom face. But I didn't think a mother of two was the person they were looking for.

No. They likely wanted the woman in the file they held. I leaned back on the old wooden chair and put my feet up on the matching desk. Unease slithered through my gut as I wondered if the brown stain was coffee or blood.

Blue Suit, the slightly shorter and dourer of the partners, held my file. I recognized it from the unique symbol on the label and speculated how much of it had been sanitized – a remnant from my stint in the military hospital after a freak biological substance leaked in my neighborhood. I'd seen the file many times, both the "public" and "private" ones, back when I was still married, and before I found out my husband cheated on me. I put an abrupt stop to that train. It left the station a long time ago.

I stubbed out my cigarette in the small old-fashioned glass ashtray on the desk. They obviously didn't have an updated dossier on me or they never would've left me with such a handy weapon, much less matches. Wonder whose mistake that was.

My hand hovered over the ashtray in a seemingly idle gesture.

Blue Suit read from the file, "Name, Serena L. Rouge, formally Hartson at the time of hospitalization. Age, thirty. Occupation, writer."

I resisted the urge to blow the hair out of my eyes or make any other movement they might misconstrue as nervousness and listened to his voice drone out the basics. My

smile grew wider at his incredulous tone. I'd bet money he wondered to how some peon of a writer gave him a black eye and broke his partner's nose.

Black Suit, the one with the broken nose and truly atrocious attitude, glared at me with puffy eyes. He spoke like he had a bad cold; due in part to my resistance in the parking lot. But really, was it my fault they didn't do their homework before kidnapping me?

"Hey, this is serious," Blue Suit said, noting my smile.

My smile widened at his cranky tone. Needling assholes never got old. "Since you haven't bothered to explain why you've kidnapped a citizen with no outstanding warrants or other reason to be arrested, I'm not sure why you think I should take you seriously."

My anger was barely suppressed. I thought again of my boys at school. Or home. Or lost for all I knew. I could control the urge to hurt these fuckheads again, but I *really* didn't want to. Only my extreme need to keep my secret life, well, secret from yahoos like these guys, kept me sitting in a pseudo-relaxed position. As long as it seemed they didn't have the latest information, I didn't want to give them a reason to go digging.

"If you're so innocent, then why'd you fight us?"

I stared. Was he completely stupid? Where did the government—I assumed since they had a military file, they were affiliated somehow—find these guys? No wonder the zombies were winning. "Duh? Every woman is told to fight to prevent being kidnapped. You were abducting me—in public no less—for fuck's sake. What'd you expect?"

I lit another cigarette I didn't want so I had a weapon ready. Also, I'd noticed Black Suit didn't like the smoke. Definite plus in my book.

They couldn't possibly want my writer persona, yet they seemed unaware I possessed other skills. Skills my anger continued to push me to put to use. What did they want? Anyway I looked at it, it smarted being kidnapped by these bumbling idiots. But they'd managed to knock me out cold. I needed to know what the hell they used in the syringe. It was hard to bring me down—ever since the accident.

"We missed you at home and it couldn't wait."

What the fuck ever. "Why am I here?" I sucked in the cigarette smoke, then let it out in perfect rings. I'd worked hard to perfect the skill. It amazed me how uncaring I appeared while doing it—I'd practiced in front of a mirror. I took note of the door and how far away it was, listening to his answer.

"You're here as follow-up to your biological hazard accident a few years ago. We're checking in on everybody," Black Suit said, managing to sound condescending despite his nasal impairment.

I sat my chair down hard on all four legs and stood. “Wrong answer, boys. I’m not stupid. If this were truly about the accident, we’d be sitting in a hospital or military lab. Not an interrogation room.” They looked shocked. “Yes, I know what kind of facility I’m in.

“They’ve already done about a hundred follow-ups with me. No, this is something else. My only questions are: where am I and why am I here? What have I done? Make that three questions.” I pulled in a long drag and blew it out at Black Suit, which pissed him off more, I noted with vicious pleasure. “Well?”

Blue Suit waved his partner down when he took an angry step toward me. I nearly smiled. He had a cantaloupe seed stuck in his hair. He’d cleaned up, but somehow missed it. “We need your help. We suspect others have become infected with the same virus from your accident. Since you’ve been exposed already and shown remarkable resistance to it, we’ve decided to enlist your aid.”

Shit. This created a problem. Now what? At night, I secretly hunted down zombies, or as I called them when not feeling prosaic, the Infected. I didn’t mean those with the AIDS virus Blue Suit alluded to who were more fortunate than their counterparts. Until the final stages of the worst cases, the Infected appeared like everyone else. I was immune to it, but no one could prove it—except me. I resisted the urge to check my ankle holster to see if my gun was still there. My security blanket. I never left home without it and a knife.

“A remarkable resistance?” It was hard to believe they were standing there, having kidnapped me, and tried to play games with me. “The government fucks up; I’m exposed to AIDS through some freak accident. I lose my husband. Nearly lost custody of my kids, and that’s all you can say? I show remarkable resistance? Jesus fucking Christ, you guys are some major assholes.” I leaned forward, letting some of my righteous anger show to hide a spurt of fear. What if they discovered my double life as a zombie killer?

They took a step back. Good.

I’d lost my husband ostensibly because of my exposure to AIDS. He’d wanted out. The government denied the seriousness of the illness, said it was harmless. Hell, even AIDS was a cover up for their fucked up experiment. The governments involved had a lot to answer for.

All those people with HIV and AIDS? Their nightmarish situation defied all current medical knowledge. They were in various stages of being a zombie. They just didn’t get the super powers that came along with it or the *neato* resurrection side effect.

Those who tested positive for AIDS were the unlucky ones. Their bodies simply deteriorated and the disease was recognizable by the medical community. Although in

my book, they could count themselves lucky their bodies went before their brains turned them into mindless killing machines. Most didn't feel that way. Hard to be grateful for something the government insisted didn't exist.

"Well?" I demanded.

"We need you to go in as a ghost writer. The people we're dealing with, a relatively unknown terrorist group, specifically don't want a regular journalist," Blue Suit said. Apparently, he'd been voted the mouthpiece of the pair.

I couldn't work out if they thought I was stupid or if they were simply spouting party line. "Who wouldn't want a news journalist over a mystery writer?"

"This group wants someone more malleable to what they want written than a journalist."

Really? Fortunately for them, I thought they were spouting bullshit.

"We need you to get information for us," he continued before I could ask any more questions.

Now they'd really lost me. "What's going on? What terrorists," I asked when he hesitated.

"A group of people have threatened to release the virus on the general public. We suspect these terrorists have their hands on the serum that causes the Ultimate form of the disease you were exposed to," he replied.

"Ultimate form?" Best to play it like I'd no idea what they're talking about.

"They've taken the virus you were exposed to and made it stronger. The terrorists are threatening to unleash the Ultimate form of AIDS if we don't give them what they want."

"The Ultimate form of AIDS? What if I'm not as able to fight off the new stage?" I could fight it off. No point in telling them. Or explaining how I found out. Besides, who knew if a stronger strain lurked out there? "What is it they want?" None of this made any sense whatsoever. If I had spidey senses, they'd be tingling. Wait, I do. I call it my bullshit meter.

Did they know not everyone exposed to the virus contracted the deteriorating disease the government and medical professionals classified as AIDS? Probably not. These two didn't seem to understand AIDS was a mutated, failed, version of the experimental virus that started this whole mess. One our government had secretly helped develop.

I didn't know what they were originally looking for, but they found a way to make super soldiers. When exposed, some people became smarter, faster, put out higher levels of pheromones, which gave them control over other humans. They spread the disease quicker than you could say, STD.

“I don’t know about your ability to fight off the new stage of virus. I’m here to recruit you. The terrorists want a writer to tell their story, but want to share the credit. They claim they have the cure to all illnesses, except AIDS, and the government is covering it up,” Blue Suit said.

He eyed me speculatively. No doubt weighing his preconceived ideas of a writer’s ability to do anything not sedentary against the way I’d fought back earlier. A lot of people thought the same. I couldn’t help but wonder why they wanted a fiction writer instead of a news journalist. More importantly, did they think I was immune? They couldn’t possibly know about my mutated genes, or could they?

I noticed the agents exchanging glances. Maybe they were afraid I’d attack again. I narrowed my eyes. “Exactly what government agency do you work for?” A question I should’ve asked a while ago, but was too caught up in things like being kidnapped, kids, and the zombie virus.

Blue suit pulled out his ID. “We’re FBI,” he said with large amounts of self-importance. Great. I’d met his kind before. Regardless of why they’d started in their chosen field, their position of authority went straight to their heads. “Part of a special task force put together to fight this particular terrorist group,” he finished, confirming my suspicion. He held his ID wallet up to my scrutiny. I looked closely, memorizing the numbers so I could do a deeper check later.

“Fucking Bad Information is involved with this? Tell me, stud. What did you hit me with back in the parking lot?” I put out my cigarette, sat back down, and crossing my feet, plopped them up on the table.

“Nothing,” Blue Suit – I’d continue to think of him that way – said. “We just hit you on the head.” His left hand twitched and he stared at me full in the eyes.

Have I mentioned I hated being lied to?

“This interview is over. Take me home. If you can’t tell me the truth regarding the drugs you’re pumping in me, I’m not buying the rest of your bullshit.” Not that I bought it anyway. I stood and was halfway to the door before Black Suit grabbed my arm.

I looked him up and down scathingly. “Get. Your. Hand. Off. Touch me again without my permission, and I’ll kill you.” Okay, so I had a temper. But these guys were seriously pushing my buttons. Attacking me and leaving my kids vulnerable were not the best ways to get on my good side.

The agent looked stunned and took a step back. Blue Suit stepped between me and the door. He held out a hand in an attempt to placate me. “Sorry,” he said. “We need her to cooperate,” he spoke over Black Suit’s protest. He turned back to me. “We gave you a special concoction for those who’ve been exposed.”

"I need to know what it is," I told him through clenched teeth.

"We don't know." Desperation laced his voice.

"Who does?" I believed him about his ignorance, but it didn't make me happy. On the other hand, if I could get ahold of the drug, it would make my job easier.

They exchanged another look. It infuriated me.

"Look, guys. You want my willing cooperation? Then tell me what I need to know." God help me if they didn't care if I was willing or not.

"The army developed it. The same scientists responsible for creating the virus has been looking for an antiviral. They created this to help put the infected under anesthesia for testing. Before this, it was nearly impossible to catch or test them."

I looked at Black Suit and wondered if he understood he'd just told me they'd been abducting other people the way they'd grabbed me. Ironic. The FBI in the kidnapping business.

I walked back to the desk and settled in again, this time picking up the ashtray and playing with it while they talked. It was tempting to use it. Maybe a quick toss smashing Black Suit's nose completely? Or hitting them in the back of the head while I burned the eye out of the other with my cigarette? However, I didn't want the agency to know I was capable of more than a few self-defense moves. It might be all that kept me out of the aforementioned labs. Plus, these guys weren't zombies. Until I figured out whether or not they were involved with spreading the virus, I couldn't hurt them again.

"What was the virus originally intended to do?" I thought I knew, but how much information did the FBI have on it? Or at least, how much did these two know?

"The virus was invented to boost the immune system. Something backfired. We don't know the details."

Hello, Captain Obvious. I knew more than they did. These two were left ignorant and therefore disposable in case something went wrong. Which meant, more than likely, I was as well. I'd have to tread carefully so the people arranging the mission didn't grow suspicious of me. I wished I knew who pulled the strings behind this.

I nodded, as if accepting their explanation. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"You travel a lot." Blue Suit paused, apparently waiting for my confirmation. I nodded. "We want you to go on a trip to Mexico. A research trip, or whatever. You're going in as a writer. We'll give you the details of who to meet, code words, everything you need to get in and accepted by the group."

"If you have all that, what do you need me for?" My spine tingled. No, this wasn't right. My intuition screamed, *Run. Fast and far.* Another gift from the accident. My life was partitioned into two parts – before and after the accident.

I'd become something else after the accident. Something more than human, but not zombie. I hadn't believed the government when they'd said nothing changed after the exposure, but their doctors wouldn't order the lab tests for me. A fact I'd since become grateful for.

After finding a genetic scientist who lived in my area, I had set up my own lab in the basement like Frankenstein, a mad scientist. Successful as a writer, I could afford it. My scientist worked on demand and doubled as a babysitter for cover. I had blood and saliva samples from everyone I'd come in blood contact with and the few Infected I'd killed in the course of my work as my alter ego. So far, none showed the same "T" shaped addition to the antibodies like mine did. My mind kept going back to my kids despite these two yahoos. I really needed to get out of here.

Blue Suit set my file down on the desk. My fingers itched to grab it and check if it had been updated since I last saw it. "We need you to get in and confirm they have the virus. Also, if they've succeeded in creating an antivirus. A lot of agents died to obtain the information we have so far. Somehow, the terrorists know when we send in an agent and no one gets past the door. We don't know what gives us away."

Perhaps because you guys are from the same cookie cutter? I bit my tongue on my nasty retort, and said, "Okay, I get that you need someone who doesn't stink of cop." I ignored Black Suit's low scowl. "But why me? Why a writer and not an investigative reporter?"

"The terrorists asked for a specific type writer. One who will tell their story. But not a journalist. They said a journalist would be too biased. They want an objective account of what they're doing." For the first time, his stance changed as he slouched, making himself a smaller target.

"Terrorists want an objective account?" Uh-huh. And I was the fucking Easter Bunny. Their excuse was so flimsy, a child could see through it. From his pacing, it looked like he'd started to realize how lame it all sounded. Good. A little fear would help keep him safe.

"What aren't you telling me?" *And when can I get the hell out of here?* I fought the fear every mom had when they're unsure of where their kids are, even while I tried to concentrate on the issue at hand.

"These particular terrorists include army personnel. Ex-army."

I whistled low. "You do have a problem. That explains their knowledge of tactics, but doesn't explain how they got their hands on the virus in the first place." I was a writer, not a dumbass.

"That's one of the things the task force hopes to find out. If you make it in, you're our best chance at saving the world from terrorist damage capable of harming every man,

woman and child if it gets out," he said, impassioned as only those who truly believe could.

I pursed my lips grimly. He'd no idea just how right he was about the dangers to the rest of the world if the terrorists unleashed the virus. It already spread its insidious poison through love and sex and hate. If the terrorists had found an antivirus, I wanted a chance to get a sample. AIDS was the least of our problems.

"I'll do my best. What do I need to know? How're you going to get me in?"

For the next hour, they went over the details of the plan. It wasn't a bad plan, but with every step, I grew colder, sure someone higher ranking than the two suits knew about my double life. Were they setting me up to be a scapegoat in the same way the agents were being set up, or was someone using my talents without revealing themselves for a more honorable reason?

I, for one, hoped for the latter.

Two

The unexpected trip with the FBI had nearly cost me a night's worth of work, but had put me behind schedule. Damn them and their stunts. Despite working as fast as I could to push the Suits, I was late, making everything from dinner to picking up the boys from their sports practices late, which upset them. Fury didn't begin to cover what I felt.

Per the conversation with the FBI, I was due to leave in two weeks. By car. That's the only part I'd dug my heels in about and wouldn't budge. Fuck going by plane and not being allowed to bring any of my specialty weapons.

The bar was busy for a weekday. I already found my target for the night. Some nights, I could go all night without finding one. But not tonight. I smiled, knowing how the deep red lipstick emphasized my lips, and licked them for good measure. The guy sitting next to me adjusted his jeans and gave me a once over. My leather biker pants and leather jacket looked good on me and I flaunted it. His eyes drifted from my perfectly painted face framed by my wild mane of auburn hair, to the bountiful cleavage showing above the V of my silk shirt.

Gotcha, I thought as his breathing changed, speeding up.

I went to the Back Street Bistro almost every night. It was a popular hunting ground for the zombies who still appeared and acted human. At least that had been my initial reason. The warm ambience and rich interior – leather, brick, high-end coasters – appealed to a wealthy clientele even if it was downtown. Men and women trolling for a sugar daddy were ripe for the taking by those infected. Unfortunately for the Infected, their brain waves gave them away. My psychic talents had gone from extremely intuitive to knowing within seconds if someone else carried the virus when they used any of their extra talents. After physical contact, I could also tell what level of sickness they'd contracted. Of course, the intuition, my gut instinct, remained.

And I always had my trusty bartender back up, Gabe Dance, whom I'd saved from a zombie early in my career. We'd been lucky that day. Now he watched my back and helped cover for me. Sometimes, he tipped me off if he noticed particularly strange or overt changes in his customers. With a subtle wink at Gabe, I turned my attention back to the man near me.

“Hi,” he said, using a low voice designed to be intimate. Even with my natural defenses, his voice danced along my skin. I’d bet my last dollar, this man-turned-zombie’s voice made other women weak in the knees and light-headed.

I pulled a new cigarette pack out of the inner pocket of my jacket, tossed my hair over my shoulder with a short flick of my head, and started packing the cigs against my palm. “Hi, stranger,” I purred with my own brand of magic. Zombies in particular seemed to fall in love with my voice. In a long practiced move, I ripped the plastic off my cigarettes, flipped it open with my thumb, and tore the foil off the top.

I sat on a bar stool, one high-heeled leather boot on the floor, the other hooked on the lower ring. The position emphasized the muscles of my legs through the tight fitting leather. The zombie’s eyes glowed with lust.

“What’re you having, doll,” he asked.

“Nothing if you keep calling me doll,” I replied archly.

He looked taken aback. I could see the wheels in his head working on a retort. My best guess, he was a businessman by day. Short, well combed hair, Dockers, casual dress shoes, and a long-sleeved collared shirt. His only concession to the night scene was the lack of tie and he’d unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. I’d met his type before. They wanted people to know they were successful. Figured it drew in more moths. I shrugged. They were right. Women liked a man with money and this place dripped with it.

“I’m sorry, Miss—” he paused and looked at me expectantly.

Shit, really? That’s the best he knew for pick-up lines? I had to play it through, or find a new mark for the night. This guy caused my instincts to buzz. I couldn’t risk letting him loose. “I’m Rogue.” I took a deep drag of my cigarette, letting the smoke out slowly.

“Well, Rogue, I’m Roger. Roger Vincent. And I’ve just put you at the top of my to-do list,” he said as if he were a luscious dinner and I a starving Survivor contestant. Like I’d jump at the chance to bed him.

I rolled my eyes. Funny he should use that particular line. He was at the top of my to-do list. I doubted we meant the same thing. “Honey, I get lines from boys like you all the time. I want a man. Call me when you grow up.” I turned my body so I faced the bartender, effectively dismissing Roger.

If I fell too easy, he’d lose interest. I needed him alone so I could put a knife through the base of his skull, or shoot him between the eyes—only sure way to kill a zombie.

I wished I knew what the government hoped to accomplish when they originally got their hands on this particular virus. It had mutated in so many ways, I suspected they no longer had control of it—as if they ever did. I’m sure they had their illusions of

control, but they certainly didn't know the extent of the virus' spread. With so many asymptomatic people, it must be impossible for them to track.

Roger leaned over the bar next to me, rubbing his arm against mine and signaled for the bartender to bring me a drink. The bartender, a big burly black man with the visage of Attila-the-Hun but the heart of Mother Theresa, winked at me and brought me the usual.

I winked back and grabbed my Long Island Iced Tea – with half the alcohol. I had a deal worked out with Gabe, the bartender. He made me two drinks out of one drink's worth of alcohol. One early in the evening, one later when my work was done.

I'd saved his ass from a female zombie – my first actual kill – on a virus-induced high. He and I had a special understanding. He took care of me, I took care of him and his customers. Worked out well.

I continued smoking and drank my Long Island without thanking Roger, knowing it would irk him into speaking.

“Consider that a gift from the best night of your life.” Arrogance tinged with anger dripped from every syllable.

I turned back to him and give him a hard look. I started at his crotch and worked my way up. “You think you have it in you to give me a ride that good? I have power between my legs everywhere I go. Can you live up to my Harley?”

I purposefully took a long drag off my cigarette, pursing my lips in an exaggerated ‘O’. His eyes never left my mouth.

“Oh yeah, baby,” he said, dangerously close to drooling down his chest. “I can give you whatever you desire.”

I laughed deep in my throat and with a quick motion, tossed my hair behind my head, and put my cigarette out while he leaned in close.

“With lips like yours, you can keep me going for hours. I never stop until I wish it.”

This guy's arrogance jumped off the charts. It had been so long since I'd been out on a real date, I'd forgotten what regular men were like. It made me cynical.

“As if. I'm not submissive. Your dick can't handle this.” I thought he was going to fall to his knees with want. I'd issued a direct challenge. Lust lit his eyes and his mouth quirked in an evil grin as he likely imagined breaking me to his will. *Side effect of the virus?* Maybe. But I figured he'd been evil before the taint of zombie sickness took over.

“I know exactly how to handle a woman like you.” His voice shook.

Good. I had him now. Too arrogant to think a woman might have the same powers he did. “Why don't you follow me outside, honey? We can do some” – I stopped, leaned closer to his ear and whispered – “talking.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the front exit. I pulled him back in such a way, he whipped back to me eye-to-eye. He nearly panted from lust.

“Not that way, honey. Out back.” I tugged his hand and stepped away. When he didn’t follow, I turned back. “I’ve something special to show you.” Like a Saturday Night Special. Okay, so it was a .357 Magnum. Why quibble? For him, I may only use my knife. More personal that way. This guy was a jackass with or without the zombie virus. Putting him out of his misery before I gave the zombie’s brain the killing blow seemed too humane.

He leered at me and followed like, well—I laughed to myself—like the lamb to the slaughter. Only in his case, it was more like putting down a rabid dog.

I swayed my hips as I walked and kept a low hum going. Hearing my voice would keep him in a semi-hypnotic state and easy to coerce. I’d one last test—one I detested—to perform. Kissing him. Damn the accident. I was given psychic powers. Knew a certain amount without ever touching anyone.

But to probe deeper into someone’s brain? I inwardly cringed. I couldn’t kill him until I was one-hundred percent sure he was a zombie, and not simply immune like myself. Even if he was a grade-A asshole. That meant kissing. My working theory ran that marks let their guard down the smallest amount during that moment, but it was enough for me to get in and access their mind. See if they were hurting people, eating them.

I dropped off the step leading to the back alleyway. Turning, I slowly backed up toward the dumpster. His eyes glittered and reflected a hardness he’d hidden from me earlier. Oh yeah, I’d enjoy killing this one. How many others had he hurt or, more likely, killed? Now, for the final test.

I held out both of my hands knowing he’d respond automatically. When he stepped in, I turned him so his back hit the brick wall, near the dumpster. With any luck, the dumpster would hide my actions from any casual onlookers.

I put my arms up around his neck. I needed easy access to his head and the back of mine where I kept the knife in a specially made choker necklace. The beadwork hanging from the clasp had been designed to hold a knife. My Magnum was in a shoulder holster, but I wanted to do this one up close and personal. Plus, I hoped to have this over with before he asked what the bulge was.

I put one hand at the base of his neck in a deceptively soft move, and my other hand on the top of his head, my arm draped up his chest and extending up the side of his head. I let out a low grunt as his hands grabbed my ass and jerked me into his hard-on. Well, I didn’t need to worry about him finding my gun yet. Not bad on size where it

matters. *What the hell?* Why would I notice that now? I had a job to do. I'd deal with my libido later.

I put my lips on his, slanted my eyes so they appear closed, and reached into his mind with mine. I shuddered. He thought it was from lust, but I nearly threw up in his mouth. Definitely a zombie. Infected with a capital "I." He had killed three women in the last week – a normal escalation leading to the final zombie stage that occurred before they actually died. It was much uglier after death.

The pictures in his mind, which showed him going down on a woman then literally eating her out while one hand held her down by the neck, were fresh, so recent the vividness made me want to gag. He strangled the woman's screams along with her breath, each whimper exciting him.

I slowly moved my hand from the top of his head to the back of mine, leaning hard against him like I wanted more. He kneaded my ass, grinding me into his cock. I grabbed my weapon and, still kissing him, brought it swiftly around and up into the back of his skull. I held him tightly with my other hand.

He jerked at the last second, causing me to nick my hand, but I persevered. I held onto the knife handle with the now cut hand and upper-cut him with my other hand, pushing his skull deeper onto the blade. I grabbed his neck and squeezed. He didn't want to die and fought it longer than others had.

The zombie virus kept him alive long after a human would've died – the cells seeking to repair themselves and turn him into the mindless killing beast. The kind of monster I felt the scientist who created it sought to make in the first place before helping a faction of the army take control of the virus. What else they'd intended with the contraction of the disease, I couldn't be sure. But this one, Roger, wouldn't be hurting anymore women after tonight.

Finally, he stopped fighting and slumped against the wall. My left hand was slick from my blood and his. I grimaced. I hated all the damn lab tests and with every new exposure, it started a new round. It was one of my top rules. I would kill myself before becoming one of these beautiful, deceptive monsters. I had kids to protect.

Now was the dangerous time. The few minutes when I was vulnerable to getting caught. I took a rag and an aerosol can from my jacket and sprayed the bleach mixture on him. It took care of my blood and saliva on his skin. After I took a blood sample from him, I wiped the rest off his neck and tore away his shirt. I hadn't bled much, but didn't want to leave a trace of my blood on him. Anything else could be explained away by our contact in the bar. I applied the spray to his lips and washed those as well.

Meticulously, I went over his body and clothes, as fast as I dared. When I finished the cleanup process, I picked up his body in a fireman's carry, careful not to bleed on him

again, and threw him into the dumpster. I took out the plastic bag I'd brought specifically to carry any bloody evidence home. The rag, shirt, knife, and spray can went into the bag.

I tucked everything into my inside pockets, trying to distribute the bulk, and went back into the bar. I sat at my stool. Not bothering to finish my original drink, I started on my second. Exhilaration filled me, making me light-headed and giddy. It always hit me like this. The initial fear of killing the zombies remained, never letting up until the moment I knew he or she wouldn't get away.

Fear of killing, everyone felt it. However, the thrill I felt afterward frightened me. I exuded sexuality like a cat in heat, and was glad. This time, I wanted something for myself. Roger's kiss lingered on my lips. A rag landed on my hand, startling me. I looked up to see Gabe staring at me seriously.

"Here," he said. "Looks like you cut yourself on that glass you broke. Take the towel. Go clean up."

I stared down in surprise at my hand. I'd forgotten to clean myself up. A rookie mistake. I blushed and mumbled thanks. I dug in my leathers for a bill, threw it at the bar, and rushed outside. What if Gabe and I weren't working together and someone else saw my injuries first? Fear and frustration coursed through me as strongly as the earlier exhilaration. I reached the bike and jammed the dark helmet on my head, strapping it down fast out of habit.

I sat on my Black Harley Nightster and started the engine in a swift, fluid motion. I took off, angry with myself for missing such a simple step. I drove the few miles to my home and parked the bike in the garage.

I leaned it on the kickstand and ran into the house, stripping my coat and tossing it on the couch on my way through the living room. I cursed and ducked to the bathroom to clean up. The kiss had affected me strangely. The second before the vision of Roger's victim clarified, my body had responded to his.

"Great. Now I've got the hots for zombies. What's next? Vampire porn?" I pulled the leather pants off my legs and carefully hung them over the towel bar. I loved my leathers, but wasn't as careful with my lace-lined silk shirt. It could go in the wash.

I pushed up the heat in the shower, straight hot until the burn was too much and forced me to cool it down a bit. I scrubbed with my antibacterial soap and let the hot water flow over me. First getting kidnapped, then responding to the kiss of an Infected? Maybe I'd become too complacent with the super strength and mental powers I'd had since the accident. I knew one of the tools the Infected used was sexual pull. What made me think I would be immune to it? Whatever made me react to the zombie gave me the creeps.

I kneaded my scalp hard, trying to scrub away the dirty feeling. Finally, I turned off the spray and reached for a towel. With my hair wrapped in one towel, my body wrapped in another, I looked in the mirror. The rush of the evening glittered in my eyes. I shrugged. It would go away eventually. It always did.

Careful about the water dripping off me, I grabbed my leathers and padded out of the bathroom and through the empty living room. I snagged my jacket, looking around. Books and games littered the living room and I shook my head. My kids were good, but there were some things they couldn't seem to do no matter how many times I nagged.

I headed to the basement door just off the living room and went down. Off to the side was another door with a magnetic electric lock. I entered my security code and pressed my palm on the pad. After the built-in delay, the door opened with a whoosh.

I waited until the door closed behind me before moving past the line marked in the floor. I moved to the next door in the short hallway and input a second code. The door opened with another low whoosh. Cold air washed over my nearly naked body, causing a slight chill and raising goose bumps on my flesh. The closed-in, stale air freshened by a small car air freshener Lori hung near her workspace. I hated having to do the tests, but at least I could leave the majority of the work to my scientist friend.

The whole basement area had been arranged per instructions from Lori, the geneticist/scientist I had found through a friend who worked in the University of Washington's Medical program. She also made a good babysitter. She kept all of her things in an orderly fashion. Nothing mad scientist about her. How fortunate I'd been to find someone like her, someone loyal, good with my kids, and smart as hell. Just the way I liked my friends.

Collecting vials, needles, and other assorted equipment, I sat in the chair specifically installed for drawing blood and tied my arm with the latex tourniquet the way Lori had shown me. I did a few hand pumps to push out my veins, took a few deep breaths before inserting the needle. The blood started flowing and I kept breathing until I'd collected the thirty cc for the prelim tests necessary to check for further infection.

Taking the larger tube I'd filled, I separated it into the standard three vials, leaving the rest for Lori to decide what, if any, other tests to run. I put the whole lot in the cold storage, made sure the date was readable. As always, I grabbed a small bottle of OJ to replenish the blood I'd lost. My increased metabolism, a side effect of the virus, caused me to need more than the average person. I locked up the blood storage unit. I always kept everything double secured or better. Lori would have my hide if I didn't. The scientist I'd been supremely lucky to find was not only young and smart, genetics were her specialty. She was also a stickler for security and would tell me off if I became lax.

I trudged back through the security doors and up the stairs. God, what a night. And it would be time to get up and get the kids off to school in four hours. Kyle could do without me, but Seth still liked to see my face before school. Some days it was hard to keep my other life from the kids. Hell, Kyle would try to join me.

My head pounded. I hated the headaches. For a moment, I stood and rubbed my temples. They'd started after the incident, and I couldn't help but wonder what they meant. Was it my body's way of dealing with the adrenalin? Or a sign my body was going to crash and burn?

I'd no way of knowing and the damn government wasn't exactly forthcoming about the situation. I needed to keep searching and tracking all the information I could. Just in case.

Despite the late hour, I crept in to my boys' rooms to check on them after putting on my night clothes. Seth slept on his side, curled up on top of his blankets. I smiled. Ever since he was a baby, I'd had trouble keeping him covered. I pulled the blanket up over his Marvel character pajamas and touched a hand to his cheek.

The last few years had been roughest on him, I think. His dad's defection to another family, complete with his own "other" kids, hit all of us hard, but Seth hurt the most. He didn't show it often. My heart ached whenever I saw the faraway look in his eyes. I bent over, kissed him on the forehead, and whispered, "Love you."

He groaned, opened his eyes, and smiled at me.

"Hi, Mom," he said sleepily.

"Hi, son. Go back to sleep. Just checking on you guys. Goodnight."

"Night, Mom. Can I have five bucks?"

I'd started to leave already and had to turn around to look at him. His dark hair contrasted starkly against his fair skin in the streetlight shining through his window. His big eyes looked at me imploringly.

"What do you want with five dollars?"

"They're selling popcorn at school." He was barely able to stay awake. He must really want that popcorn.

"And it's five dollars for popcorn?" I was a little skeptical, but with all the fundraisers, who knew.

"No. It's a quarter."

Okay, he had me stumped. "A quarter. So you want five dollars for popcorn that's a quarter?"

"Yes. My friends want some too. I want to share with them."

My smile was his answer.

"Thanks, Mom." Happy, he snuggled under the blankets.

I shook my head at the easy-to-please boy.

After a quick check on Kyle, I shut his door and moved down the hall to my room. I sat on the queen-sized bed situated under the bay window, took out my phone, and tiredly plugged it in. As I laid there contemplating the stars – my favorite bedtime ritual – my cell vibrated incessantly. I groaned. *Who the hell could that be?*

I let it go to voicemail. If important, they'd leave a message. When the voicemail alert beeped, I muttered and hit play. It was Mutt and Jeff – my Suited kidnappers.

Shit. They wanted me to leave tomorrow. Somebody's timetable had changed. I cursed loudly and jumped out of bed to pack. What the hell happened to change the plan so radically? They'd better have a good explanation. Babysitter favors were expensive enough. Changes in the timetable could lead to downright extortion and nobody was better at it than Lori.

I broke one of my personal rules. I grabbed a cigarette and lit up in the house. I didn't believe in coincidences. Yet it had to be coincidental they'd upped the timetable the same night I'd a physical response to a zombie. Right? Or maybe the Suits had figured out my true identity. Either way, it was troubling in a situation with one too many questions. What the hell was happening?

Thank you for viewing a sample of Mayhem in Mexico