

A person is walking away from the viewer on a long, cracked asphalt road that stretches into the distance. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a bright, low sun on the horizon creating a strong silhouette of the person and a long, shimmering reflection on the wet, cracked pavement. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, and the overall atmosphere is one of desolation and survival. The background shows a rugged, desert-like landscape with some rocky outcrops and sparse vegetation.

THE
**RETURN
MAN**

**CIVILISATION'S GONE.
HE'S STAYED TO
BURY THE DEAD.**

V. M. ZITO

THE RETURN MAN

by
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CHAPTER 1: THE ROARK CONTRACT

1.1

The corpse crouched in the shallow mud-water along the lake, shirtless and saggy chested, grabbing at minnows that darted between the green rocks. Marco studied it through his binoculars. Sometimes the dead surprised him – so quick with their hands, but so uncoordinated. Like toddlers. He watched the corpse strike and come up empty, then again, gawking at its palm while its reptilian brain groped to understand the failure. Failing at that, too, it splashed after the next silver flash of fish.

Marco squinted.

There. On the dead man's left hand.

A wedding ring.

He zoomed in on the ring. Jewellery was a godsend for making the ID. Skin fell off, hair fell out; fat men rotted

themselves thin, and thin men ballooned with gas and bacteria. But if you were lucky enough to find the corpse with original jewellery, some identifiable piece that hadn't been torn or bitten off, then you had your proof. Bring the jewellery back, and nobody disputed you'd done the job.

Down below, the corpse shoved its hand again beneath the water, stirring up the mud.

'Come on,' Marco muttered. 'Come on, show me.'

The corpse splayed its fingers out for inspection, as if it had heard.

Which, of course, it couldn't have. The tree blind where Marco had camped for three days now was a cautious two hundred yards up the mountain – tucked high into a young lodgepole pine, plenty of coverage, long green needles to disguise the canvas assembly. The platform was only five feet wide, five feet long; with all his gear there wasn't enough space to stretch his legs while sleeping, but cramped muscles in the morning were a fair trade for the safety of altitude. The perch was accessible only by the iron spikes he'd driven into the trunk at intervals – impossible for a corpse to climb.

He'd learned to build the blind from a hunting magazine scrounged out of a dark Barnes & Noble a few months back, with parts from a ransacked Sports Authority. His Cornell education was officially useless; hunting magazines and topographical maps were the new required reading. Back before civilisation tanked, he hadn't known an ounce of shit about outdoor survival. Now he went nowhere without a yellow, dog-eared copy of *Camping for Dummies* in his backpack.

A sharp, tiny pain speared his neck. He slapped a biting

gnat, crushed it into his skin.

Christ. He felt dirty and ripe. He'd been tracking this same corpse for almost a month. And the hike to the lake had been especially draining. He'd had to ditch the Jeep twenty miles south, where the mountain road had been blocked by the wreck of a thirty-foot Ryder truck. The trailer had wedged sideways between the trees – years ago, judging by the corrosion along the torn bed. Mildewed furniture, smashed electronics, scraps of orange-rusted metal strewn everywhere. In the cab sat the driver, skeletonised, arms eaten. Some idiot taking all his toys with him during the Evacuation. Flying hell's bells down the twisty road, losing what control he had left.

The wreckage was impossible to clear, and the forest too dense for off-roading. On the map, Marco had measured an alternate drive to the lake – three hours of circumnavigation that would burn a dangerous amount of gas, which was already in short supply. And so he'd decided to risk the remaining distance on foot, backpacking for a day with his gun drawn. Compared to that, the tree here was a safe haven. From a height he enjoyed a clear view down over the forest, to the water, to the shore – past the manmade beach, the docks, the rustic vacation cabins clustered at the western inlet of sparkling Lake Onahoe. All calm.

Still, he now felt a twitch of unease, as if something weren't right. He exhaled and studied the ring on the corpse.

Grimy, but the thick gold band was visible enough. Twelve millimetre or so. Square diamonds in a milled linear pattern, a fit for the description Joan Roark had given. Wives were good like that, he'd found. Men struggled for details – funny how they always remembered the price – but the

women? They'd draw a ring from memory if you gave them pen and paper.

With his thumb, Marco idly played with the platinum band on his own left hand. It wobbled on his underweight finger. Only a matter of time, he knew, before it slipped past his knuckle in the middle of some craziness and plunked to the ground, unnoticed, gone. He had to start eating more, stop wasting away. Until then he should just take the ring off, store it back at base when he was on a job – or maybe get a chain, wear it around his neck like a dog tag.

Perfect, right? A reminder why he fought this war.

Danielle—

He didn't allow the thought to finish. He tucked the binoculars into the mesh side pocket of his pack and refocused his mind.

The corpse.

Yes, there was a good chance Marco had found Andrew Roark.

He glanced at the printout tacked to the canvas beside him, a colour photo Joan had scanned and sent from her home in the East, in the Safe States. Roark when he was alive.

The photo was a headshot – *headshot*, Marco thought wryly, *always aim for the head, the only way to kill a corpse for good* – taken from the annual report of Roark's company, Tylex, some big Fortune 500 number. Andrew J. Roark, CFO, an executive in his fifties. Sharp suit, double chin, a chubby neck squeezed into a starched white collar.

Roark's cheeks were tinged red, his nose big with a round bridge that made him look like a large goofy bird. But friendly, Marco had decided, a guy who laughed a lot.

A good-sounding, unguarded laugh – a guy who didn't feel comfortable being boss, a guy who wore a baseball cap at the company picnic and wanted the lunchroom people to call him Andy. His eyes were a bright, insightful blue; his short hair glistened silver on the sides and dark across the top.

The corpse below Marco had blind white sacs for eyes, a few strands of hair on a rotten scalp. *But the rest is right*, Marco thought. If you used your imagination. If you ignored the toll of two postmortem years, the skin mottled like bad cheese now, the ears shrivelled, the tip of the nose missing where something had gnawed the cartilage. Ignore all that, and what do you see?

Marco nodded. He was almost certain the thing down there was Roark. And yet ...

He couldn't know for a fact.

Not until he saw that ring up close.

1.2

Moving slowly to minimise noise, Marco reached down next to himself in the blind and retrieved his rifle – a sleek Ruger 1-A he'd been lucky to find last year beside the mutilated body of a hunter in Utah. A good weapon. Long-barrelled but not too heavy, built for mountain killing, accurate at three hundred yards. Serious punch.

He trained the scope on the corpse. Miraculously, it had caught something. A frog hiding in the mud. One flipper, crooked and green, popped from the corpse's fist, kicking at the air. The dead man flattened its hand against its mouth, shoving mud and frog inside, and bit down with a vicious jerk

of the head. Brown sludge oozed from its teeth.

Marco shuddered. Bad luck for Kermit there. That was the problem with hiding places – down in the mud, up in a tree.

You think you're safe, until you're not.

The joints in Marco's neck cracked as he scanned the forest below him and to the sides, searching for irregular shadows between the straight charcoal trunks. He listened for the crackle of feet dragging through dead leaves. But everything sounded right, looked right. Even the air smelled like the drizzly rain that morning, like clean pine. No trace of the giveaway stink that permeated an area when corpses gathered together.

But it worried him that the dead were good hiders, too. Sometimes they seemed to come from nowhere. And from experience he knew that one rifle shot could draw a crowd. As remote as the forest seemed, the town of Wilson was just over the mountain, five miles down Route 78. Wilson, population five thousand – *former* population five thousand – an oasis in the Montana wild, catering to the summer lake vacationers that once flocked here.

The four-aisle grocery store, the lone movie theatre, the video store still packed with titles on VHS. Marco had resisted the temptation to pass through town for a supply boost on his hike. Instead he'd cut a wide path around. Places like Wilson were trouble. God forbid he stir up five thousand corpses. Christ, as far as he knew, they were out here already, enjoying a nice walk in the woods. Any careless sound could attract a pack, clamouring like dogs around the bottom of his tree, and he'd have to waste bullets – or worse, they might keep coming, outnumbering his ammo. He'd be stuck where

he was, while Wilson held a goddamn town meeting below him.

Damn it. He hated taking a shot unless he knew.

He concentrated his memory on the photo album Joan Roark had shown him. The trajectory of a man's life. Andrew Roark, younger, thinner – even his nose looked smaller – in a white tux on his wedding day, black hair combed tight to his scalp, cigarette tucked in his grin. Roark through the years, turning older, heavier, better dressed, in a better house. Birthdays, Christmases, trick-or-treating in a scarecrow costume with the kids. Roark again in his fifties, at a banquet table, beaming, arm around Joan, champagne flutes before them on a white tablecloth. His hand held up three fingers for the camera. 'Our thirtieth anniversary,' Joan had said.

And their last.

But it was the vacation snapshots Marco remembered most. Decades of them. Andrew and Joan at the lake. The first photos were just the two of them, newlyweds. In a canoe, on the beach, cuddling in a hammock on a cabin porch. Then joined by an infant, then another. The kids aged, and then it was grandkids on rafts, rolling on the lawn, fishing on the dock with Roark. In one of the last pictures, Joan and Andrew in the canoe again, waving back at the camera.

Lake Onahoe was their place. Every July for thirty summers. 'He loved it so much,' Joan had said. 'Couldn't wait to get through June, just to get up to the lake again.'

Which was the reason Marco had made the trip to Montana. He'd already wasted three weeks on two failed stakeouts. First Roark's home town, then his office in Seattle.

But this place seemed like the jackpot.

Roark's corpse had migrated three hundred miles, just

to rot here.

All the dead did it. Picked their own place to haunt. No thought behind the decision; the corpses couldn't think but were herded instead by an impulse they couldn't understand. Not that Marco understood, either. But as a neurologist – *ex-neurologist*, he reminded himself, *you're nothing now* – he could guess. Their brains had gone dark, whittled down to the stems. Functional operations took place in the primitive reptilian complex, ruled by rage, fear, survival, hunger. Yet up in the neural pathways, something else remained, the weakest electricity from the amygdala into the prefrontal cortex. A drip of emotional memory from the higher brain.

He doubted the dead drew comfort from it. They didn't seem to care. It simply acted like a gravitational pull, drawing their cold bodies to wherever the warmth of their lives still lingered.

For Roark, this lake is where it would end.

Marco swept his Ruger up and down the shore, checking one last time through the scope for signs of trouble before he took the shot. Through the crosshairs the lakefront seemed quiet. Nothing new, nothing he'd missed. No sign of any hidiers.

Focus, he thought. Caution was good – but too much and the corpse might wander back into the trees, and he'd lose the easy shot. And no damn way did Marco want to track the dead man through thick forest and mountainous terrain. Swinging the rifle back, he fitted his outside arm into the leather sling to stabilise the shot from his seated position.

He fixed his sights. Two hundred yards, into the black hole of the corpse's shrivelled ear. The walnut stock pressed

cold against Marco's cheek.

He could see the mandibular muscles on the side of Roark's head flexing, the jaws still working the chewy cartilage of the frog. The corpse gazed across the lake, emotionless.

Marco waited for its head to still.

There. The crosshairs met in the middle of its ear.

Lingered.

Marco fired.

1.3

The crack of the Ruger tore through the trees, the pine needles quaking a million ways around him. He glimpsed a fragment of skull explode from the corpse and spin sideways into the water, like a rock skipping, twice. The echoes of the shot rocketed back towards Marco from the mountains on the other side of the lake, and he watched, his head ringing, as the corpse flopped face-first into the shallow water, staining it with that obscene fluid the things bled – not blood, but black and liquid like diarrhoea. It lay there without a twitch.

Whatever remained of Andrew Roark in that reanimated flesh – gone now.

All parts equally dead.

Marco watched the corpse bob a few feet from shore. The lake and forest sat in utter silence, stunned by the rifle-shot. He imagined the insects, the birds, the animals holding their breath, hearts jackhammering in their chests.

He ejected the spent shell and set the rifle on the platform. Then he closed his eyes and listened, his head tilted back. He inhaled the scent of pine, let it tingle through his

body before breathing out through his mouth. He waited. Minutes passed. The quiet overwhelmed him.

Lately, after the kill, he'd felt this odd emotion – like a sadness that he'd lost someone he knew, someone important to him. It shouldn't feel personal, Marco knew. And yet it was personal. It had to be. For the past two months, Roark had been a companion of sorts, in all Marco's thoughts and incessant planning. Pathetic, but true. And now it was over.

Roark had been returned.

And so Marco sat, waiting for the sadness, the silence, to lift.

Gradually the hum of wildlife resumed. Squirrels chirped. Chickadees and dark-eyed juncos resettled in their trees and conversed shrilly. Cicadas started again like motors. Marco allowed another ten minutes to pass, just to be careful, sifting through the forest noise – no sound of trouble. He fetched his binoculars again and checked on the corpse.

Roark's splayed body bobbed a few feet beyond where Marco had dropped it, bumping against rocks in the shallows. The cloudy lake water rippled underneath the corpse, discreet waves caused by winds coming off the mountain and crossing the lake. *Shit*, thought Marco. The body was buoyant, bloated with gas and decay. If the rolling water nudged it from the rocks, just a bit to the right, the carcass could float out to the deep.

It wouldn't sink – but Marco was in no mood for a swim to retrieve it.

Enough meditation. Move your ass.

In confident motions he removed two handguns – a police-issue Glock .40 and a Kimber he'd found in an abandoned Phoenix SWAT truck – from the side compartment

of his backpack and holstered them to his chest. From another bag he pulled his hunting knife and slung the sheath from his belt, then slipped another three ammo clips into his vest. He grabbed a coil of nylon rope in case he had to lasso the corpse back to land, and then, moving to the rear of the blind, he turned himself around and stepped onto the first spike down...

... when he heard it.

That noise that always made his eyes water, his spine contract.

The cry. Strangled, wet, gurgling ... not a low moan, but a high, sickening squall that seemed to churn unnaturally in the throat, choked off forever from dark dead lungs.

Somewhere to the east. Still distant, thank Jesus, a long wail rising from the trees, and Marco saw nothing but forest. He swung back atop the platform, his breath quick. Moments later a second cry echoed the first. More than one corpse. Then a third cry, then a fourth. And then too many to count.

Marco shuddered. God, he hated that sound.

He hated it, because *this* was when they seemed their most human. The miserable noise was the touch-point between his existence and theirs, the awful joke played on them all. They suffered. He suffered. Listening to them now, he heard the pain. The frustration, the dread that beat in his own chest every night as he tried to sleep, suffocating in his room at base, wanting to scream but afraid to make a sound. Too careful to release his anguish out loud.

In that small way he envied them.

He scanned the eastern horizon. A small cluster of black specks bustled above the tree line, about two miles away, swooping in and out of each other. Turkey vultures. The birds

were a great early warning system, Marco had discovered, like canaries in a mine. The stench of death attracted them, and once they'd locked onto a corpse, they might follow for days, launching attacks on the walking carrion, swinging down to tear at a leg or a neck. Two or three birds could devour a corpse alive. It was justice of sorts, if justice still existed.

With larger crowds of the dead, the birds tended to keep high in the sky, on the lookout for stragglers. Their presence had tipped Marco off in the past, saved his ass more than once, and he'd come to think of them as allies. *Says a lot*, he thought sourly sometimes. *My only friends are vultures*. Back at base in the mornings, he had a habit of peering out through his bedroom window the moment he awoke, scanning the sky for vultures like people used to check for rain.

Seeing what kind of day it would be. A lot of vultures meant a bad day.

Now the ghastly wailing continued, louder. Marco judged it would take the horde – from the chorus he guessed there might be as many as fifty – maybe half an hour to cover the ground, figuring the terrain was uneven and choked with roots and rocks. And, besides, they might not even be heading in his direction. With luck, they'd wander away.

He frowned. There was no real reason for the shiver in his stomach. He himself had a short walk to the lake, a quick errand: check the body, get the ring, return to the blind. Fifteen minutes, tops. Up here with the canvas drawn tight, he'd never be detected. Not the perfect situation, but workable. Better than letting the corpse float to the middle of the lake.

Deliberating, he absently pinched his left earlobe between his thumb and index finger – a habit of his while

thinking, ever since childhood. His knuckle pressed into a small triangular notch in his lobe, a missing piece of cartilage the size of a tooth. Dog bite when he was seven. The injury had occurred on a summer morning, thirty-five years ago, as Marco crawled between the hedges in his yard to dislodge a rubber ball. Without warning, Frankie, the yellow-eyed mongrel next door, had crashed through the branches, teeth snapping. The utter terror of that one single moment remained vivid to Marco even now. The roar of animal anger, the black head exploding from the leaves, the hot, reeking weight of fur crushing him into the garden mulch.

I'm getting eaten, he'd thought, dazed, as claws tore his shirt, raked his back.

His first lesson that monsters weren't pretend. Things could get you in real life.

To this day, dogs scared the shit out of him.

'Oh hell,' he decided. 'Let's go already.'

Feeling the press of time, he lowered himself again onto the top spike, then dipped his right foot until he felt the spike below. In swift increments he descended the tree, keeping close to the trunk, listening to his holster knock a hurried rhythm against the evergreen wood.

At the bottom, he surveyed the immediate area. The tall ferns carpeting the forest floor were green, bright with life. Globules of dew glistened in spider webs between the fronds, and sunlight pierced the treetops like white javelins. The only sign of disturbance was a corridor of partly crushed stalks heading south – a trail he'd made himself yesterday on his hike to the lake. He drew the Glock, just to be prudent, and started off down the path.

Stretching his legs felt good, to uncramp and get moving again.

The air grew noticeably warmer a hundred feet lower and, when he looked back, he saw a light mist above him. He'd been sitting in a mountain cloud without realising it. The mist obscured the bent vegetation. *Could be an advantage*, he thought.

Or not. He doubted the corpses were smart enough to track him. Instead he realised he'd better pay attention to his surroundings, take note of landmarks. Like a giant grey flat-sided boulder, and a half-toppled tree growing sideways from a mound of intricate roots. Marco added them to his mental map. He couldn't afford to get lost on the way back to the blind.

Especially if monsters were after him.

Closer to the lake, as the trees thinned and the air began to smell like a damp basement, he came across a mash-up of footprints – some barefoot, others not – in the soft earth.

The area had recently been hot.

He wasn't too concerned. He'd seen these tracks already, inspected them a few days ago on his first morning at the lake. He'd ventured down to the cabins to check if he was alone out here. The row of eight identical houses had greeted him – impressive structures chiselled from ruddy brown logs, two storeys high, flanked by stone chimneys, windows ominously dark.

The doors were all locked, which he found reassuring. The former residents had likely left on their own, still alive and ahead of the violence, probably back when the evacuation orders first came down from the state. He doubted he'd find any squatters, but of course he had to check. In each front

door he shattered the glass pane, using his bedroll to muffle the sound, then crept through the shadowy hallways with his gun pointed ahead of him. His heart knocked heavily, his pulse flared every time a squirrel ran along the roof outside. Empty, all of them. Safe. Cleaned out, too, the pantries and closets bare. On the dinner table in Cabin Seven – next door to the Roarks’ – he’d found a handwritten note:

Jay, hope you didn't come here, but if you did, we had to go to Kim and Robert's in Connecticut. Please call. Sorry. We didn't know where you were, and the army won't let us stay longer. We're okay and went with the escort. Hope you are, too. Dad said to leave you the Remington in case you came. It's in the hall closet.

Marco had checked the closet. Nothing but a few wire coat hangers and sawdust on a plywood shelf. He'd slipped the note into his vest. A phone number was scribbled there, too, and he thought maybe he'd try ringing Connecticut when he returned to base. See if Jay had ever shown.

At any rate, these footprints were fainter now, the mud resculpted by the morning drizzle. Except in one spot – a fresh, sharp set of prints, pressed into the rust-coloured pine needles.

His hand tightened on the Glock. He eyed the new prints, following them with a studied gaze in both directions. To the north they moved out of sight, away from his own path, back into the woods; southward they angled through the last remaining trees and down into the sandy pit of the shoreline. Exactly where Marco himself was heading.

Roark, he thought, relaxing. This was where Marco

had first spotted the corpse, shambling out of the tree line towards the water.

Bolstered, Marco hiked along the tracks the last fifty yards to the beach. Emerging from the forest, the prints disappeared where the sand loosened. No problem. He cut straight to the water, then followed the lake shore towards the dock and cabins at the far end of the beach. Half a minute later he recognised the rocks, slimy with algae, where he'd dropped the corpse.

'Shit,' he declared.

The body wasn't there.

1.4

'Shit,' Marco said again, angrier this time.

He scanned the lake surface, out towards the deeper water. Floating there was the corpse, just as he'd worried, thirty feet into the lake – the sopping dark green of Roark's pants, limbs splayed, the blasted-out side of its head turned up, carrying water like a cup. Streamers of brain and broken skull trailed alongside the body as it drifted farther away by the second.

Immediately Marco knew the rope he'd brought wouldn't do any good. His little cowboy fantasy of lassoing the corpse seemed far-fetched now as he squinted at the diminishing target.

He rubbed his forehead. He supposed there were two options. Swim out there – which meant leaving the guns ashore and stripping down to avoid waterlogged clothes all night, since he couldn't risk a fire with so many corpses in the

area – or just turn around, return to the blind, and chalk this one up to a bad day. Joan Roark would have to take his word, no physical evidence to prove he'd done the job. Unfortunate, but permitted by the contract.

Neither option appealed to him.

He glanced hopefully towards the dock. In the sand next to a piling lay a faded red canoe, belly up. But even from here he could see a hole in the bottom where the wood had simply imploded from winters of neglect. Not seaworthy.

Aware that his indecision was costing him time, he glanced back over his shoulder. The mountain blocked the sky to the east, and he was unable to see how far the vultures had advanced, but the clock in his head told him that he'd better choose fast.

Cursing, he bent and unlaced his boots, kicked them off, then tugged down his pants.

He removed the pants along with his vest and ClimaCool long shirt, but the holster with the Kimber he shortened to a small loop and placed around his neck, unwilling to disarm completely. With some overdue luck, he might be able to wade the whole way out. He placed the Glock atop his folded clothing, then pulled his knife to take along, too.

The water was colder than he expected in September, even for Montana. Clenching his teeth, he splashed deeper as fast as possible, ignoring the shock in his balls as they went under. The lake bottom alternated between rocks and squishy mud. As a kid, he'd hated the sensation of mud squeezing through his toes; he'd been scared of blood-sucking leeches hiding in the ooze. Now he couldn't resist a smirk. He'd been a timid boy, afraid of everything.

And yet look at me now. If leeches are all that eat me today, I'll be happy.

Two dozen steps later, the water had climbed to the middle of his chest but then levelled, and he went twice as far without getting any wetter. From down here in the water, it was harder to see the corpse; he wasted some effort moving towards what he soon realised was a floating tree branch before noticing a greasy trail like an oil spill on the water surface.

Discharge from the head wound. Guided by it, Marco spotted Roark moments later, floating just a few yards ahead. He pushed his way over to the body. Roark's bare back rose like a hump from the water, the skin purple and white, marbled with countless bruises and lesions – almost beautiful, like the markings on butterfly wings. Marco reached his free hand towards the body, eager to grab hold before it drifted farther, then thought better. With his knife, he jabbed the corpse's back, springing a fresh rivulet of black fluid that trickled between two emaciated ribs and dripped into the lake. Marco watched.

The corpse didn't even twitch.

Satisfied, Marco grabbed hold of its shoulders and spun it. Roark's dead face goggled at the sun, mouth open, two rows of worn brown teeth exposed. God, the thing stank.

Marco studied the pale eyes, the jaw frozen wide. Seeing a kill up close was often an anticlimax. A letdown. He sometimes wished they'd look peaceful, or relieved, or maybe even grateful. He'd read a story by Poe once – *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* – where an old man had been kept alive unnaturally by hypnosis, only to crumble to dust as the trance broke. Now that would be satisfying. A puff of smoke, a hissing noise. A bright flash. Something significant. Instead,

this: a poor dead bastard who never knew what hit him.

Normally Marco snapped a picture or two, but he'd left his digital Nikon at base. Joan Roark had emphatically refused photos, which was fine with Marco; the prize souvenir was the ring, anyway. He pulled Roark's left arm from underwater, the skin tough like rawhide as Marco took a firm hold of the wrist. The ring glittered gold, polished by the lake.

Just then the hair follicles on Marco's neck shot up straight.

He'd had this feeling before. A subconscious awareness of background noise. Sometimes, joking, he called it his 'zombie sense'. He wheeled and faced the nearby shore.

And there they were. Twenty corpses, maybe more.

His veins chilled, as if the cold lake pumped through him.

They were a dishevelled group on the sand. Grey-skinned males and females, eyes vacant, decked in tattered, worm-eaten clothes like some grim portrait from the Great Depression. Hair thick and knotted, matted with blood and god knows what else.

They stood facing him, arms limp, bodies swaying in place – that eerie slow dance they did at times while waiting for another instinct to kick in. He stood frozen himself, afraid to trigger the attack, but he knew it was inevitable. They were hungry. Their dead eyes locked on him with emotionless interest, their necks craned forward. Evenly he drew the Kimber.

Nice and slow, he thought. And then the fun begins.

This couldn't be the pack he'd heard earlier, the one from the east – no way could they be so fast. His forehead burned, angry at himself; he'd been so damn obsessed with one threat, he'd ignored a dozen other dangers. Probably these

things had been waiting nearby, dormant in the woods behind the cabins, emerging as soon as they'd heard him splash into the lake.

Any second now, they'd charge. He ignored the voice in his head whispering, *You're fucked*. Roark's body bumped against his hip. He steadied himself and raised the Kimber towards a corpse at the water line, a narrow-bodied male with no shirt, only a bolero tie circling its torn-out neck. Marco aimed carefully. This shot was the only one he wouldn't need to rush.

So make it count.

The scene in front of him was silent; he heard a horsefly buzz past his ear.

The gun exploded.

And all hell broke loose.

1.5

The thin corpse's cranium slammed backwards as the bullet hammered it, dumping wet white brains down its spine; the dead man's eyes crossed and it sat down hard on its ass before toppling over. The other corpses roared – a furious, unified sound, like a cry to battle, and Marco's heart shrank as the dead pack charged, crashing and swarming into the lake.

Go. He took fast aim and fired off three more shots in a five-second blur, sweeping bullets from left to right across the front line of attackers. *You. You. And you.*

He scored just a single headshot, dropping a blubbery-breasted male corpse with a long wet beard, and saw one of his other shots blast through the bony shoulder of a wild-

eyed old female with no ears. His shot at a teenage girl in a pink Hello Kitty T-shirt disappeared into nowhere. Incensed, wailing, the things continued to splash in from shore, lurching towards him.

They weren't fast – the footing underwater was even more treacherous for them than it had been for Marco – but they were spread dangerously, so that he couldn't direct his gunshots in any single direction. Then again, he'd never intended to keep shooting. Knocking a few corpses out from a pack was smart, to thin their numbers and improve your odds of escape. But a full-out killing spree? That was just stupid asshole bravado. He'd seen too many soldiers go down, guns blazing during the Evacuation, realising too late that the enemy had advanced from unworkable angles. Men and their useless weapons swallowed beneath a ravenous mass of corpses.

Retreat. Always the best option. *Remember – you can't kill 'em all.*

The corpses crashed closer, arms wild and flailing.

Too many to dash between, especially in water. He'd be grabbed, tackled, torn apart.

Thinking furiously, he calculated his best route. Deeper into the lake? The dead couldn't swim ... but they didn't need to breathe, either. They'd pick their way along the bottom, out of sight, reach up, pull him under by the ankles. Shit, there could be corpses down there already, sloshing towards him; he'd seen men pulled from rowboats, ambushed by underwater attacks ...

Something else. They'd closed to within twenty feet.

He had to choose. *Now.*

The shore by the cabins – fifty yards to his left, away

from the onrush. Perfect. He'd race there, slip between the houses, lose them in the confusion. He blasted another round at the nearest corpse, a young male in army fatigues; the bullet punched through the soldier's drippy right eye. Satisfied, Marco splashed a full two steps towards the cabins before he remembered.

Roark. The ring.

Shit. He spun and splashed in reverse, back to the floating body, seconds ahead of the attack. Already he knew this was a mistake, turning around, but now the stubborn son-of-a-bitch in him had to see it through. His head buzzed, eyes pinned to the horde almost on him as he grabbed for Roark's hand, felt their fingers entwine. *Find it, fucking find it.*

There. Cold hard metal. He yanked in a panic, and with a pop and a squish the ring slid off, pulling Roark's ripe flesh with it, like meat from a greasy turkey bone. Marco jammed the ring onto his thumb – even dead, Roark had beefier fingers than his own – then stumbled backwards to avoid a pasty-white black male lunging at him from across Roark's body. Three more corpses charged from the left, snarling. Time was up.

Off balance, still backpedalling, Marco raised his gun.
And tripped.

His foot caught on something hidden, a chunk of rock or wood buried in the silt, and he yelled out as the lake closed over his head. Darkness cut him off. The silence underwater was terrifying. He kicked, trying to right himself, felt his leg make contact with another leg – *they're on top of me*, his mind screamed, expecting to feel cold hands clamp down all over his body – and then he pushed away and broke surface a few feet from where he'd gone down, desperate for air to breathe

and light to see.

The dead were everywhere now, the lake slick with black feculent blood lapping at his bare chest. The Resurrection couldn't be absorbed through the skin, thank god; he'd been doused in enough corpse slime over the years to be sure of that. Brazenly he broke towards the cabins, splitting between two corpses in quilted hunting vests, and as he ran he wiped a stinging gob of mud from his eye. It was then he realised with shock that his right hand was — *empty*.

The Kimber was gone.

Stupid fucking asshole. He'd dropped it underwater. Gone for good.

'Fuck!' he screamed, and it actually felt good to be as loud as he wanted for once. Discretion didn't matter much now.

He tightened his grip on his knife and pressed on towards the cabins. Picking up speed as the lake grew shallow and his knees cleared the water, he reached the shore with a good lead on the corpses still struggling in the deep. They'd been baited away from the beach, and now all he had to do was circle back to retrieve his clothes, the Glock and ...

... and there came the fuckers from the east.

Pouring out of the woods all along the lake, from the cabins to his escape route through the trees. More than the fifty he'd predicted. A hundred, maybe more. Maybe *way* the fuck more. Suddenly the attack had opened from another side, and as he stumbled to a stop, the army of corpses sensed him — swivelled to face him all at once, so perfectly synchronised that he wondered if the fucking things were able to communicate in a way he'd never detected.

We have you surrounded.

There was no way to reach the forest.

Give yourself up.

As a boy, he'd always been the kid who panicked during games of tag, who froze in the middle of pursuit and let himself be grabbed, simply because the resolution of being caught felt better than the terror of the chase. That same sensation returned to him now. His legs buckled, and for a moment he actually considered sitting down in the wet sand. Sitting there cross-legged like some kind of Buddhist monk, blissful and transcendent, merging his mind with the serene blue sky, the cool water and happy green trees on the opposite shore; taking one last look, closing his eyes and waiting, and the end wouldn't even hurt.

Except that he knew it would hurt.

Bad.

So instead he forced his legs straight, opened his eyes wider, looked for options. *Options, goddamn it*, he repeated, like an affirmation of life. To his left, the cabins had been sealed off behind a wall of corpses, collapsing on him fast; to the far right sat the old dock. Lopsided, falling apart, it led back out into the lake, a pointless dead end. But the beaten canoe next to it ...

For the second time that day he seized on the thought of the canoe.

And this time he had an idea.

Gasping, he dashed back across the beach, racing along the precarious seam between the two packs of undead, those staggering from the woods and those pursuing him from the water.

The opportunity would be gone in seconds – the

corpses were converging fast. He focused on the canoe ahead, but in his peripheral vision the dead faces were impossible to ignore. Dark and savage, teeth snapping at the air as he ran past.

He covered the final yards to the dock in a sprint, awestruck by the gamble he was taking.

His mind reeled.

Am I crazy? Will this work?

1.6

The canoe had long ago been flipped and laid lengthwise on the shore beside the dock, like a long wooden bowl turned upside down. It leaned slightly in the sand, inviting Marco beneath; at full speed, he launched himself towards it and belly-flopped hard to the shore. The impact knocked him airless; with a grunt he wriggled below the overturned boat, as if he were entering a tight and narrow cave, his elbows scraped raw by pebbles and his navel full of wet grit.

Here in this dusky, hollow shelter, the air was rank with mildew and an oily smell of fish, and invisible cobwebs stuck to his face and arms. Sunlight punched through the gaping hole in the canoe hull overhead. He felt like a small animal cowering in its den. He lowered his cheek to the sand and peered back out at the beach through the crevice he'd entered. Dozens of grotesque feet, naked and swollen purple, shuffled towards the canoe.

So far, so good.

Sweating, he jammed his knife into the wooden hull, inches from his face, all the way to the hilt so it wouldn't fall out. Now both hands were free. *Hurry*, he thought; if

the corpses outside piled their weight onto the boat, he was lunchmeat. He contorted himself into a crouch and shoved his shoulders up into the hull, ready to lift the canoe onto his back...

... except the goddamn boat didn't budge.

Bitch! The canoe was heavier than he'd guessed. It sat atop him, immovable as he strained, and the blood in his head felt primed to squirt from his eyes. But although Marco was thin, what he did have was muscle – a body whittled to its core by endless angry workouts in his basement gym, two or three hours on days he really hated the world. Now, enraged, he screamed ... and felt the canoe shift. It lifted off the ground, dripping sand, the yoke digging at his neck.

And away we go!

He stumbled to his feet, half bent, the upside-down canoe cupped over his spine like the shell of some ridiculous turtle. The bow pointed straight and long ahead of him, ready to launch, but he hadn't yet taken a step before a loud boom sounded on the exterior, next to his ear; the entire boat quaked, and aftershocks rumbled down into his vertebrae.

The canoe's weight shifted sharply as the first corpses dove against it, and he fought to keep it balanced overhead. The physics were simple: *If it tips, I'm dead.*

The pounding on the boat doubled, merged with the pounding pulse in his ears. His legs shook, and then more corpses arrived from the left, counterbalancing the attack from the right, so that he had an easier time keeping himself upright. He couldn't see in any direction but down to his bare white toes, and a bit to the left and right. Outside the canoe, a hundred corpses crowded the rims from both sides; he saw only their crooked legs and rotten feet.

Seconds later the corpses mobbed the hull, an all-out attack.

Blows rained onto the canoe, the crack of the wood terrifyingly loud, and he prayed the boat wouldn't simply fall apart around him. Angry cries joined the violence; the corpses were confused by his improvised defence, but the confusion wouldn't last.

Sure enough, the canoe began to pull upwards as they tried to tear it off him. Alarmed, he held it down with all his strength. *Time to go.* He drove hard with his legs, relieved as the boat slipped easily through their grasp – he heard them scrabbling for grip, but the wood was worn smooth – and stumbled forwards along the sand, wearing his canoe armour. The point of the bow parted the crowd, dealing hard punches to those in its path. He gained momentum, whooping aloud as if each hollow clunk, each speared skull off the metal bow-ball, were another block of coal thrown into his internal boiler.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

He surged ahead like a locomotive knocking cows from the rails, barely checked by the impacts. A white-eyed male corpse fell, rolled under the canoe. It hissed and grabbed at his ankles, but he high-stepped over it, resisting the urge to kick its forehead.

If only he'd had his boots on.

The canoe grew heavier by the moment, but Marco's legs kept churning despite the pain. He had no idea where he was going. Looking down, he followed the foamy dark sand along the shore, concentrating on the wet impressions of his feet, confident he was at least headed back to his starting point, where Roark's body had first hit the water.

As he cleared the initial mob, a jolt from the side nearly sent him sprawling. He recovered in time to see a pair of obese legs, enormous and pickled and veiny, below the left rim of the canoe. A fat corpse had broadsided him and now hung on, pressing against the boat with all its weight, driving Marco sideways a step into the lake, then two steps, three. The water rose to his shins.

Any deeper and he was fucked.

Desperate, he threw his shoulders up into the boat, freeing one hand to grab the knife still embedded in the hull; he retrieved it with a furious yank and in the same motion drove the blade into the bulbous rotted belly outside the canoe. He jerked hard ...

... disembowelling the dead man; the knife cut up into the ribcage and popped from Marco's grip, gone. The corpse bellowed as its guts cascaded onto the shore. Surprised, it released the boat and flopped forward, chasing its own entrails. Marco splashed back to the sand.

The sounds of awful wailing fell farther behind as he maintained a quick-footed trot, grimacing but afraid to slow down. A hundred yards later he was rewarded for his work. His folded stack of clothing and the Glock appeared at his feet.

'I'm back,' he announced, his voice raw.

Panting, he tilted his body and managed to dump the canoe without collapsing. The boat crashed into the shallows, startling the same minnows he'd watched Roark hunt an hour before.

He glanced around in haste. As he'd guessed, the corpses were a good distance back, still labouring towards him, but their slow, singular advance wasn't half the threat of being

surrounded. He'd survived. He would continue to survive. Trembling, he grabbed his Glock and clothes, jammed his sore feet into his boots, then turned and bolted north to the trees.

He found his earlier path without trouble. At the edge of the forest he paused and turned.

The beach crawled with dead men and women, arms and legs jerking like ugly puppet limbs as they staggered up the shore. *Men and women*, Marco repeated to himself. Easy to forget sometimes. He wondered how many had wives, kids, lovers in the Safe States, mourning for them, sick with grief and wondering where they were now.

Christ, how fucked up the world had turned. How it made the dead so alive and the living feel so dead. He doubted there was any fixing it, any way to turn it back.

But, shit, he could at least help make things better.

Grim-faced, he jogged up the mountain, past the tree that grew crooked and the flat-sided boulder, into the mist and the walkway of broken fern. Up in the blind, he shut the canvas curtain and sat undetected, unafraid, listening to the groans of the dead pass through the forest and fade as the mob lost his trail. And as he waited for them to leave, to wander off to wherever their tortured minds beckoned them, he held Roark's ring – yes, he was certain now, he *had* found Roark – and read again the words etched inside the band.

*Together we make a circle, one life without end.
Always, Joan.*

END OF CHAPTER ONE

THE RETURN MAN
BY V. M. ZITO

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