

## The Dead Days Journal

### Chapter One

Jack swept a chunk of unruly black hair into a worn Yankees cap and headed back into the woods. Normally we talked or kidded around on our salvage trips, but today he hadn't said a word.

Now I'd have to search the house alone.

*Note to self: find out why Jack's sulking.*

The dilapidated structure ahead of me barely resembled the home it used to be. Though there'd been no rain for days, the half-sunken roof still appeared damp. Massive vines hugged the collapsing front porch and had begun to tentacle their way inside through a broken window. I took my time studying the exterior and decided the vacant prefabricated three-bedroom, one-bath Cape Cod contained no basement. This along with a scent of human decay made the house perfect.

*Rumor has it "they" don't care for the smell of rotting flesh... There would be no surprises.*

I pulled a sack and two light sticks from my army pack before stashing it behind an overgrown honeysuckle bush. A waft of sweet nectar gave me an idea. With a flip of my favorite skinning knife, I removed a handful of flowers and then smashed the stems into the folds of the bandana around my neck. I secured the fragrant cloth over my nose.

The buds would either lessen the nauseating odor or make the stink of death completely unbearable.

Climbing across the porch, I followed the vines to the broken window. As I crouched down on the sill, I closed my eyes to listen to the dim buzz of insects and a soft, rustling breeze. I took a deep breath of sweet rot and opened my eyes just before ducking inside.

The first body, slumped in a recliner, was swollen and yellow. At her feet lay a maggot-infested lump of fur. The lack of mature flies told me these were recent deaths. Poking my head

around the next corner, I found two more bodies: a man and a child. Both sat with their heads face-down on the kitchen table, and between them was a spilled box of rat poison. They'd taken themselves out instead of fighting for their lives.

*Cowards.*

Poor lighting and a warped set of stairs proved to be a bit treacherous, but I got to the top without a mishap. The right side of the stairwell, blocked by debris from the collapsing roof, looked dangerous. Thick branches and the years of grime that covered the windows in the bedrooms to my left made it difficult to see. Down the hallway there were only tiny pinpricks of light reflecting off metal door handles and glass picture frames that hung along the wall.

A sudden pang in my gut caught me off-guard. I bent over for a minute to ease some of the cramping, using the banister for support. The pain had nothing to do with hunger and was the last thing I needed. If I bled and anyone found out, I'd be locked up for days. My over-cautious father was a stickler for safety.

Shaking the light stick, I stepped into the hall. Under the new green glow, a hint of smooth tile gleamed. I went to the cracked door directly in front of me in hopes of finding a stocked medicine cabinet. The door squealed as I pushed it aside. A small, musty bathroom littered with old moldy towels meant more water damage, either from the roof or a leaky pipe.

The closed cabinets were a good sign the place hadn't been emptied yet. With one hand firmly gripping the door knob, I tested the floor with my right boot. There was nothing worse than falling through rotten floorboards.

*Solid.*

As I stepped in front of the filthy mirror, I noticed my burglar-like image. With the lower half of my face hidden behind a yellow bandana, the only visible features were round green eyes and honey-colored hair. The rest I'd concealed in nondescript leather gloves, a gray T-shirt, and tan cargo pants. I almost passed for a man in this getup. Sliding my knife into the sheath on my belt, I placed the open sack in the empty porcelain sink.

One unopened bottle of aspirin, a half-box of assorted bandages, liquid Benadryl, hand lotion, tweezers, clippers, and a tube of antiseptic ointment were the only useful items left. Of course, the medicine had all expired, but some was always better than none. Duncan, the medic in our group, would find a use for whatever I hauled back.

I had no luck in the linen closet; its contents were currently scattered in piles around my feet. From under the sink, I rescued a can of Lysol, some glass cleaner, and two freezer-sized zip-top bags full of toilet paper, cotton swabs, panty liners, and five tampons, which I immediately stashed in the deeper pouches of my pants.

The closest bedroom, with its flowered wallpaper and pink furnishings, belonged to the little dead girl downstairs. Several minutes of rummaging and I'd almost filled the rest of my sack: wool socks, a sixteen-pack of crayons, a purple stuffed bear, two blankets, a knit cap, two scarves, three sweaters, and a pair of gloves. The cold of winter was still a couple months off, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to stock up on warm gear for the children.

*Lincoln will love it when I make him wear this pink unicorn hat.*

The room grew dark by degrees as the artificial light became a dying glow and then went out completely. There wasn't a need to waste the other, as I didn't have an endless supply of anything anymore. A quick peek in the next bedroom revealed a small office. I added a note pad and a couple of pens to my bounty.

Back downstairs, I quickly skimmed the empty cupboards and then took off.

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An hour later, the cramping hit me again. I huffed off my pack to remove a precious tampon from the leg pocket of my pants and stepped behind a thick oak tree. Not that there was anyone out here, but I'm still my father's daughter.

The crunch of leaves to the north had me scurrying quietly to pull up my pants. I stuffed the messy cardboard applicator and the wrapper in a snake hole at the base of the tree, pulled my knife, and waited.

When the tall, dark figure passed me by, I smiled. With a cinched brow and careful strides, he was doing his best to be silent, but heavy muscles and large feet made it impossible. His intense focus also made him blind. Ben Alexander had many treasured attributes, but grace was not one of them. Sheathing my blade, I snuck around the tree to get behind him. Once I'd reached the proper distance, I snapped a twig under my boot-heel.

The second he jumped, I sprang onto his back and wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms about his neck. I smashed my face against his scruffy cheek. "Boo."

Ben grabbed my wrists hard, but as soon as he realized who attacked him, the pressure eased. "Damn it, Leo, you scared the shit out of me."

“I don’t smell anything,” I said, hopping off.

Ben spun around angrily, but then his temper cooled with a hefty sigh. The big brute did nothing lightly.

I went to retrieve my pack. “Did my father send you?”

The dry woods crunched under Ben’s weight as he followed close behind. “No.”

“So, what are you doing?”

When I reached for my gear, Ben bullied me aside and slung my heavy pack over his shoulder the same way he would a bag full of pillows. “I wanted to see you.”

His pursuit was as inevitable as it was practical. Ben owed me his life.

The year my family fled Washington, D.C. for higher ground, we’d ducked into a train yard to escape a band of looters and encountered Ben, his neck sliced ear to collar bone. My father took one glance and decided to let him die because, wild-eyed and cloaked in black, he looked like a twenty-something badass who’d gotten exactly what he deserved.

While my parents scouted ahead, I hid between two battered trains waiting for the mob to clear. My father ordered me to make sure the creep stayed quiet. I watched Ben suffer for close to fifteen minutes. He never made a sound.

In that slow, agonizing passage of time, I saw more than a bloody degenerate laying there. Ben’s long, brown hair shined from previous care, and he had warmth in his doe eyes that didn’t go with the rough and tough exterior. Neither did the character he held in his square, quivering jaw. When my father returned to collect me, I refused to leave without Ben. My father had demanded an explanation, but all I could tell him was that it was something about his eyes. My father didn’t believe me, didn’t believe that was my only reason, but he couldn’t waste precious time arguing. We got Ben to his feet and took him with us.

As soon as he was capable, Ben served as extra muscle—he had plenty of it—and farmer. He tried to be my loyal protector, but I’d made that job most difficult. I’d laughed when my mother warned me to stop giving chase or Ben would fall in love with me. I wasn’t laughing now.

The sound of Ben clearing his throat brought me back to the present. He’d moved closer. “Where’d you go?”

I shifted my weight and kicked at a rock on the ground. “A little detour down memory lane.”

Absently, Ben rubbed the jagged scar on his neck, an unconscious habit he did more often in my presence. It bothered me that I reminded him of the worst night of his life. The night his brother lost his mind and murdered his entire family. “It’s been four years and you still haven’t told me why you fought to save me.”

“I was eighteen then and at the mercy of my hormones.” Truth was, I’d seen right through Ben’s eyes and straight into his soul and knew I’d never have reason to doubt him.

The corners of Ben’s mouth twitched. “Really?”

“The possibility of never seeing another man, other than my father and little brother, will make a girl do crazy things.”

Ben’s frown deepened. “You know how I feel. I wish you wouldn’t make fun.”

My lips opened to say something, but I couldn’t figure out the words fast enough. I moved my feet instead.

Dropping the pack, Ben took hold of my forearms before I had a chance to get away.

*Damn, he knows me too well.*

“Don’t run, Leo. We’re *both* adults now. Don’t worry. If you reject me, I can handle it. I won’t be thrilled, but I’ll handle it.”

A strange heat simmered between us. I would have found him attractive even if he wasn’t one of the last men on Earth. The unwanted feelings I’d kept buried sizzled under Ben’s warm gaze. The second I tried to yank free, his grip tightened. He wouldn’t let me get away without an answer, not this time.

“I don’t know what to say. I care for you, but... I mean, who knows? All of us could be dead in a week.”

His grasp eased. “That’s my point.”

For an uncomfortable minute we looked at each other. When he dipped down to kiss me, I immediately turned my head. Ben groaned into my ear, released my arms, and then started to walk away. I didn’t know why, but I couldn’t let him leave. I threw myself against him. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held on tight. Ben didn’t return my embrace, but I’d already decided not to let go until he did. We were both stubborn that way. Ben had to know I wasn’t trying to hurt him intentionally.

“Leo, are you forcing yourself on Ben?”

I should have known Jack would come along at the worst possible moment. We were due to meet at the river, as we did after every haul. I turned my head to see a shirtless Jack flaunting his perfect, hairless pecs. With his lips pressed into a hard line and his hazel eyes narrowing, Jack looked like he had something to hide. “If he’s not a willing partner, I’m right here.”

Jack had proclaimed himself the stud of our camp, and I knew he’d slept with a few of the girls already. Some were much older than his twenty-five years, and one I thought was far too young. But times were different now. Life was different. *Our next day isn’t guaranteed.*

The little goading Jack provided was all Ben needed. His strong arms slid around my waist, and then Ben straightened, lifting me off the ground and pinning me tightly to his chest. “Get lost.”

I tried to conceal my smile by burying my face against Ben’s neck when Jack strolled by whistling.

Ben growled. “You think that’s funny, don’t you?”

I laughed, but when Ben craned his head back and I looked into his eyes, I couldn’t resist. I kissed him hard.

## **Dead Day # 1,430**

The beginning of the end happened close to five years ago. Friday, August 13, 2021 was day-one of the worldwide drought. The entire planet hadn't seen a raindrop in more than twenty-four hours and continued to fry for months. Riots, looting, and other savagery ensued. News reports estimated the world population had decreased by roughly one billion souls in those six months.

On February 10, 2022, when the rains finally came, the world cheered. Except the rain never stopped and the thirsty lands ran over. Four months later, on the last day of international communications, the reported death toll had increased by another two billion. Through sketchy national media reports that there had been no contact with anyone on the other side of the planet in months, and speculative rumor, it was believed that the entire eastern hemisphere had drowned.

In 2023 a tsunami took out all of the east coast. The same year the long-anticipated "Big One" dropped what remained of California into the surging Pacific Ocean. Lingering national and local communications eventually failed. No internet, cell phones, or electricity. In the years that followed, disease and famine greeted those who were strong enough to survive.

I, Vincent Marrok, am one of the last survivors in America. I prepared for years, and for the past five years, I have lived only to fight, run, or hide—all for the survival of my family and those I've taken in along the way. A journal, a rare gift found by my beautiful daughter Leo, will serve, for my own peace of mind, as a record of our existence because, as far as I know, we may be the only ones capable of surviving The Dead Days.

Population: 23

Rations: 187 days