

# Chapter 1

The sounds of chirping birds and children's laughter filled his ears. A soft breeze carried the smell of spring flowers. Rocco's parents' car sat a few blocks ahead of him in front of the park. He could see their heads through the rear window, as they waited for him. His stomach growled in anticipation. He cocked his head as a man strode towards the car, he had something in his hand. A salesman maybe? Rocco squinted to see that it was the barrel of the pistol flashed out at him. His chest tightened, and he stopped for only a moment before he took off running. He tried to yell, but a loud pop rang through the air, drowning out his warning.

Time slowed. His feet refused to push faster. "Dad," he yelled.

What did this man want? There was another loud bang followed by shattering glass. No! Why couldn't he move faster? Why couldn't he have left two minutes earlier? His brain struggled to make sense of the scene before him. The sound of his mother's screams.

The gunman darted to the other side of the car, he threw open the passenger door, and another shot rang through the air.

"No!" Rocco yelled, desperation tearing through his lungs. "Leave them alone! Please, leave them alone." His mother's body hit the pavement with a thud.

He'd almost reached them when the wailing from his little brother pierced his ears. Somewhere deep inside, he finally found the strength to push his feet even faster. He had to save Kyle. He had to get to his little brother. He was just a kid.

Almost as if in slow motion. The man turned and fired again. Kyle's terrifying cries became silent and his body was torn from the car, landing on the hot pavement. His dad's body was the final one to fall as the killer climbed into the drivers' seat and drove away.

Rocco finally reached the scene, skidding to a halt over his family. He sank to the ground at the sight of his little brother, pulling his limp body onto his lap and cradling it in his arms.

He didn't need to check for a pulse, he could see he was dead. The tears finally came, but they couldn't wash away the blood or reality of what had just happened.

The shouts of witnesses reached his ears. A crowd began to form around him, but he didn't look up. Somebody knelt by his mother, checking for signs of life, but nobody else approached. They wouldn't risk it. He knew it was hopeless. All he could think about was the monster that did this. He could sit there and feel sorry for himself or he could go after the monster.

The fear which once consumed him left, replaced by a fire in his belly. He narrowed his eyes and gently set Kyle's body on the ground. With one last look at his family for strength, he took off after the car.

Rocco knew he would never catch him on foot. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a man on a motorcycle at a stop sign. He didn't hesitate shoving the man from his bike, jumping onto it before the rider could retaliate. *Wait, was the man on the motorcycle a monster?* Rocco could have sworn half his face was missing. No, it couldn't be. There were no real monsters here. They were only on the news. He shook his head bringing himself back to reality. It didn't matter who's bike he was on he would never see that man again.

He had to do this to avenge his family's murder. No matter what, this man would pay for what he did, and he would pay with his life. Kyle was just a kid, and this monster had killed him, for what? It couldn't be for the little gas in the car, could it? The rage which filled his heart was uncontrollable, filling every pore of his being. There was no putting out this flame. Even if he could, he didn't want to.

It didn't take long for him to find his parent's car. He followed it for only a few miles before the gunman pulled into a driveway. Rocco parked the bike a few driveways down. He needed a weapon. Only a fool would go after a man unarmed. He crept to his family's car and looked in. Blood covered the seat where his father had once

sat. A glance at the blood-soaked seat on his mom's side was all he could handle before turning away. He couldn't think of his mom. He would never be able to hug her or say he loved her again.

Something inside him drew him to the back seat. Even though he didn't want to, his eyes raced there against his will.

There was no time for this, no time for sorrow or tears. He closed his eyes sweeping away the memories which were crashing down around him. He reached through the shattered window and touched the blood on the seat, his baby brother's blood. A pistol lay on the floor, it was the one the creature used to kill his family. It's justice he sought, and providence had provided him with the tool with which to carry it out. With a deep breath, Rocco grabbed the gun and pulled himself up from the ground.

"This is for you Kyle." He checked the chamber. Five bullets. "I hope this is enough." It would have to be. "I love you guys," he whispered as he silently shut the car door. He turned and walked to the front steps of the house.

He glanced at the house the monster entered. It looked the same on the outside as the one he parked the bike at. The neighborhood was one of the wealthier ones in town. How could someone from this place be a killer? Why did he target Rocco's family?

He turned his focus again to the gunman's house. What would he find on the inside? With trembling hands, he reached for the doorknob and slowly twisted it open. He crept through the door. With narrowed eyes, Rocco scanned the room in search of the man who had taken away his family. His heart pounded and sweat beaded on his hands and forehead. The burning filled his lungs and seeped into his bones. Everything within him needed this.

A rustling came from his left someone was coming. Rocco crouched hugging the wall waiting for the kill. Something leaped at him from around the corner. It wasn't human, but as it hit his chest his hand reacted. One-shot was all it took, and the dog sunk lifeless to the floor. Four bullets left.

"Black?" a shout came from upstairs.

Rocco smiled. Good, now he had taken something precious from the man who'd taken almost everyone he valued. He wanted him to suffer before he died.

A surge of energy shot through Rocco's body. He turned and crept upstairs toward the voice, stopping to listen at the landing. The man was here, but where. He stood motionless waiting and listening. He heard it, the man who was struggling to hold his breath, gasped for air. That gasp would cost him his life.

Rocco stepped toward the door where the sound came from. His body pressed flat against the wall so he could peer into the room. The killer was hunched over pacing back and forth in a small circle. His face told his story. He wasn't a man; he was a monster. His hair was thin and lay in patches on his scalp. Pus oozed from open sores covering his head. The flesh on his face was peeling away leaving the bone and muscles exposed. The skin he had left was pale and his red eyes sunk into his skull. He hadn't been holding his breath after all. His breathing was raspy like a dog's growl. This man was diseased. Rocco had never seen one; he didn't believe they were real until that very moment.

It looked Rocco in the eyes, starting to smile as he lifted his shotgun. But Rocco put a bullet in his skull before the thing even lay a finger on its trigger. The next bullet sank into the monster's neck. Two more times.

Bang. Bang.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. He had accomplished the task he had come there to do.

"I killed him," he said aloud. "I killed him for you, Mom, Dad, and Kyle. I got the justice you deserved."

Seeing this monster lifeless at his feet didn't calm the rage pulsing through his veins. It only added fuel to the fire. The black hole in his soul grew.

It was time to go back to his family. He kicked the corpse on his way out. It didn't help. He paused at the family car; the keys were in the ignition. It was his car, but no, he couldn't sit in it. This was the

place his family breathed their last breath. Taking the motorcycle, he returned to the park. He needed to get to his family's bodies before the clean-up started.

“No,” he yelled. “Why did you take them? I wasn’t gone long.” There was a small trace of blood left where his family had laid. He slumped to the ground and set his hand in the blood where his brother had been. “Kyle, I’m sorry I didn’t save you.”

He didn’t stop his tears this time, but instead, let them flow. With the increase in crime and bodies lately, it was common practice, for people to collect dead bodies and burn them. This was to prevent them from turning into monsters. There was no proof that a dead person would change but people were scared. Couldn't whoever had taken his family see they had been murdered and were not infected? Yes, it was cheaper than a funeral but a proper burial was what he wanted for his family. They deserved nothing less.

The next time he opened his eyes, it was dark. The surrounding shadows pressed against him, any number of creatures hiding inside. He pulled himself off the ground and started to run home. With every step, he thought he saw movement. Was it a monster, or just the wind? Was he being stalked, chased, or was he seeing things? Not wanting to be their next victim, he sprinted to his house and stumbled through the front door struggling to catch his breath.

Hearing the commotion, David was at the door in seconds.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. His eyes scanned Rocco from head to toe and back again, probably assessing him for injuries, taking in the blood and tears. “Rocco, what happened.”

Rocco stared at David, unsure of how to put anything into words. He pushed back his dark blood-stained auburn hair and rubbed at his face. Tears he could no longer feel dripped onto his bloody palms.

“What happened.” David shook him more urgently. His eyes wide and watery. “Rocco, you need to tell me what happened. You are starting to scare me.” Rocco could tell he was fearing the worst.

The images of his family replayed in his head over and over again. David had already lost his biological family how could he tell them their parents and brother were dead. How could he put it into words?

“He killed them.” Rocco blurted out, and pounded his hands against the wall. His chest grew heavier as he spoke. “He killed them all.”

“Who killed who?”

“First, the monsters come and now God leaves us.” Rocco threw his fist up in the air. “Why didn’t you save him? How could you let a kid die that way? So much for guardian angels. Where were they? They didn’t help Kyle. The monster killed him, no, he killed all of them. Where were you, God?” Rocco dropped to his knees. “Where were you?”

David grabbed Rocco’s hand and pulled his gaze to him. “Rocco, what happened?”

“Monsters are real. It is just like they said on the news. They are real and they are here. None of us are safe anymore.”

“They killed Kyle?”

“Mom and Dad too.”

“This can’t happen again,” David stumbled back and sank onto the couch. He buried his head in his hands. “Not again. I can’t lose another family. When my parents died in that wreck... No.” He lifted his head, his eyes met Rocco’s. “I don’t think I can go through this again. Why is this happening?”

“It was a picnic.” Rocco wanted to comfort David but didn’t know what he could say. “I don’t know why he killed them.” Rocco cursed as he sat on the couch next to David. “I didn’t even get to say I love you. Why didn’t I say I love you?” They sat on the couch the radio played softly in the background.

“Breaking news.” The radio announcer interrupted the music. “The terrorist organization is known as ‘The Aeyden Group’ has been sighted in the state capital this week.”

Rocco stood and listened.

“This has been the first sighting in the state. Approach strangers with caution. Attacks appear to be random and untargeted. Any suspicious behavior should be reported to your local police department immediately.” There was a rustling of papers then the announcer continued. “This disease causes decomposing skin, tearing it away from their bones. Be careful this group can think and feel, yet they are full of rage...”

Rocco could remember how the monster who killed his family looked and smelled of death, yet he was very much alive. Rage filled Rocco again as he ripped the radio plug out of the wall sending the radio tumbling to the ground.

“I watched them die. I was close enough to see it all, but I was too far to do anything about it. It will haunt me until the day I die.” He paused. “Three bullets took everything from us. I want them back. I want my little brother back. I want more time with them. I want to say I love you.” He walked over to the punching bag hanging in the doorway. “Kyle was a kid.” He punched the bag. “Who shoots a kid? He had his entire life ahead of him.” Rocco’s fists continued to fly. “Kyle was twelve. He had his whole life ahead of him. I would give anything to take his place.” He stopped, letting the bag swing in silence, and turned back to the sofa. “I took things into my own hands. I did it my way. I killed the monster, David.”

Today, he had killed his first creature and hadn’t felt any remorse. He turned back and continued to punch and kick the bag until he had no energy left. Dropping to the floor, he closed his eyes and tried not to let his visions take over, the smell of the monsters rotting flesh filled Rocco’s nose. He used to think terrible things were only happening in other places in the world, now they were happening in his town. He should have seen this coming as the price of gasoline and food had skyrocketed in the last year. People were being killed for a gallon of gas or a loaf of bread.

Vigilante had become the norm of law enforcement. The world was changing, and leaving two types of people in its wake, the diseased and the un-diseased. Rocco had become part of the vigilante. He had

done what he'd needed to do today. He served as judge, juror, and executioner, to his family's murderer.

The more he thought about it, the darker his heart turned. That final shot firing through his mind again and again. It was the shot that had killed his little brother, and also the one that had turned Rocco's soul to stone.

“I'll kill every monster I see until I rid the world of them all.”

“God said vengeance was his.” David's voice was soft.

“I didn't see God helping when the monster killed our family. You weren't there. You didn't see what I saw. There is only one way to stop them. I'll take it from here. I won't rest until they're dead, every last one of them.”



## Chapter 2

Lena tossed and turned most of the night. Something felt off, but she didn't know what. A thundering boom echoed through the house and her feet hit the floor before she had time to think. Smoke poured in underneath her bedroom door. She grabbed a scarf out of the closet, tied it around her mouth and nose, and crept into the hallway staying close to the ground.

“Lena,” her dad yelled. “Where are you?”

She found him at the top of the stairs. “I'm right here.”

“We need to get out.”

He grabbed Lena and her mom and shot down the stairs, aiming for the back door. As they approached the kitchen a group of diseased men stepped in front of them. Lena froze. She had heard horror stories about them. Nightmare tales about women's skin being used to cover the sores of the diseased.

“I'll fight them off. You two run.” Dad threw a punch at a monster. Lena watched in horror as a flap of skin dislodged from the monster's face as his fist made contact.

Lena felt her mom grabbing her arm and pushing her past the sink towards the back door. A monster grabbed her leg. He was too big for her to push off. She couldn't move. Kicking and punching did nothing to him. She was trapped. When she woke up, she thought she was going to die in a house fire, now she wished she would have. These monsters terrified her.

“I'm the one you want, come and get me.” Lena's mom pushed past the diseased and darted out the door.

“Dad, help her.” Lena fought back the lump in her throat. The monster threw her to the ground and gave chase. “Don't let them hurt mom.”

She stood at the door and watched as her dad killed one of the monsters with his bare hands. Fighting his way to his wife. She needed to help. There had to be something she could do. Lena started toward her mom.

“No Lena.” Her dad pushed her toward the shed. “I can’t help mom until I know you’re safe. Run to the cellar, climb in, and shut and lock the door. Don’t open it for anyone. I have the key I’ll unlock it when it’s safe”

“No, dad. I can’t.”

The sounds of her mom’s screams echoed in the night.

“Now.” He pushed her a little harder. “Run, Lena. Run to the cellar.”

The desperation in her dad’s eyes was all she needed to see. She sprinted to the cellar as fast as her feet would carry her. At the cellar door she stopped and looked back, she froze. Maybe she could help them.

Her mother’s screams filled her ears again and tears filled her eyes. Her father’s yell told her it was too late.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Lena dove in the cellar and locked the door. It was dark and the smell of rotten meat and mold filled the air. Is this what death smells like? “Please stop this. Help us.” The darkness was closing in around her. She hated it there. Nothing she did could drown out the fighting going on outside of the cellar. She attempted to swallow the lump in her throat, and listen for her parents.

Remember the good times, she told herself. Mom and dad love her more than their own lives and were giving up their lives for her to live.

She closed her eyes. All she could see was her mother’s face. What would those monsters do to her? The horror stories of the things they did to pretty women rushed to her mind.

“God,” she cried out. “Please save them.” She hushed her cries. What if the monsters heard her? She couldn’t let them know where she was. Her parents risked everything

*Help them, she said silently. Don't let the monsters hurt them.* Her tears covered her face. Don't think about what is going on outside. Think of happy times. It was no use. The fighting raged on. The cries of her neighbors joined her parents. "Please make it stop," she whispered.

The rain started. Heavy drops pounded on the cellar door. The lightning flashed and Lena jumped. The voice of her dad was getting closer. She would soon be safe. He would take care of her. She reached for the handle to open the door.

But the words of her father raced through her mind. She couldn't disobey him. Her hands dropped to her side. His screams filled her ears. What were they doing to him? He needed her help. She reached for the handle again but couldn't open it. He said not to unlock it for any reason. He had a key and would unlock the cellar when it was safe.

*Was he safe? Could she help him? Where was her mom?*

Silence filled the air. Lena counted to a thousand. No more thunder. She listened for any noise.

"I'll kill you," her dad growled. The fighting started again. It was closer to the hatch this time. Lena hoped her dad was winning, but in her heart, she knew he wasn't. A loud thump hit the top of the hatch. Lena jumped.

"I love you." This was the first time Lena heard him cry. His voice was soft. "I'm sorry I won't be here for you. I didn't want you to worry. I'll make sure you're safe."

"Don't talk like that. We will always be together." She pressed her face against the door to feel close to him, and so he could feel close to her. She needed to be strong but didn't know-how. She never had to be strong before. Her parents were always there to take care of her.

"Listen to me, Lena." Her dad's voice grew weaker and his breathing slowed and gurgling sounds came from his throat between every breath. "Do not leave the cellar until morning. Before you open this door, listen for any noise. Make sure you are alone and all of the monsters are gone."

"I won't leave." She struggled to hold back her tears.

“What do we do with this one?” A gruff voice grumbled.

Lena sat as still as she could barely breath. One of the monsters was right above her standing over her dad. She couldn't let them find her.

“Leave him. He will die before we can get him back to camp. He is of no use to us. Is the woman still breathing?”

“She is for now; it won't be long before Aeyden kills her. I can't wait to see what he does to her pretty face before then.”

Lena clasped her hands over her mouth to choke back a sob. The monster's laughter filled her ears. Her mom was alive, and there wasn't a thing she could do to help her.

She sat in silence. The monsters had gone, but her dad didn't say it was safe yet. A few drops like water dripped through the cracks in the hatch. Her eyes closed tight. She knew it wasn't water but her father's blood. “Daddy,” she whispered. “Daddy, stay with me. I'm scared.”

“Don't be afraid princess; I'll always be with you.” There was another long silence before he spoke again. “I want you to remember your mother and I, love you.”

“I love you both.” Lena listened to his breathing as it slowed and eventually stopped. She curled in a ball and wept. Her life had ended when his breathing stopped. She sat cold and alone. How was she going to make it without her parents? They were all she had. She was alone in a world filled with monsters.