



CORPSE FAUNA
VOLUME ONE

THE DEAD BEAR WITNESS



JAMES
CHAMBERS

OSTRANDER™

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THE DEAD BEAR WITNESS

CORNELL:

1

Last thing Warden Lane Grove told me before he slammed shut the cell door was, “You think you’re someone special, son? Someone different and unique? You’re nobody special. You’re only clay like the rest of us. Sooner you accept that, better off you’ll be, because if you think my punishment is harsh, you’ll find an even ruder surprise waiting for you in the next world if you don’t change your ways.”

This and six weeks in solitary was my punishment for breaking the collarbone of some Aryan Brotherhood asshole who wanted to “protect” me. Show no weakness to those white supremacist fucks – they *will* make you their dog or kill you trying. Warden Grove knew it as well as I did, but I was fresh blood and a media darling, and he wanted to teach me a lesson about getting cocky.

Worst thing for me about solitary was that there was nothing to occupy my mind but thinking about how horribly I had screwed up when I was on top of the world. They wouldn’t allow me my books or even a Walkman – nothing but the searing brightness of the cell’s single bare bulb lit twenty-four, seven. That and all the time I needed to pick over the carcass of my memories, like the last time I saw Evelyn or the look on the bank manager’s face when three slugs from my Beretta M9 bored through his gut. Sometimes I got to wondering how it might have gone if I’d been just a few seconds faster.

That’s when I came to understand what Evelyn meant when she used to say the world is a smiling jackal eager for its chance to tear out your throat and lap up your blood. Most people don’t see it coming for the clutter in their lives, like politics or religion or trying to make a decent living with the deck stacked against them. Evelyn and I never had much use for all those things, telling people the “right” way to live. Better to take what we needed and be long gone when the man came around to collect his due.

I believe Evelyn held to that right up to the moment I dropped my guard and got her and our baby growing inside her killed.

2

Almost four weeks later Officer Paulson and Officer Gamewood yanked me out of the hole and told me that everywhere in the world the dead had risen to hunt and feed on the living. The world was ending. Warden Grove's day of reckoning was at hand.

I said, "Bullshit."

They dragged me down the hall to the infirmary, while I chased dime-sized ghost glares burned onto my retinas by the bulb in my cell. Wasted from hunger and not having slept more than an hour at a time since they tossed me down there, I wasn't so far gone I didn't notice Paulson's sickly tremors or the glistening film of sweat coating his pale face.

"Whole world's over. End of everything," he said.

He mumbled it to the empty air, not talking to me or anyone else, really. I guessed maybe the whole thing was a sick joke, more of my continuing education according to Lane Grove. Or maybe Paulson liked to get a little high on the job. Had second thoughts about all that after the horror show at the infirmary.

I was laying on a gurney with an IV of saline solution plugged into my arm to treat me for dehydration when a couple of hacks brought in Sammy Costa. Sammy was bleeding like a New York City fire hydrant in July; his face was ashen. He was a snub-nosed car-thief on a ten-year chip for his third strike, and he was a stupid man with a smart mouth. So, it was no surprise someone had decided to slice him open and make good work of it. The guards hefted him onto the gurney beside mine, but a two-foot-wide puddle of blood that spilled from Sammy's wounds and onto the floor made it obvious there was no saving him. Doctor Foley took one look, shook his head, and called the time of death. Then he set to work with the nurse and guards ripping Sammy apart like the Devil's pit crew.

They used bright scalpels and whirring bone saws. Blood splattered and flesh tore. Muscle snapped like strands of aged chewing gum. Translucent flaps of skin peeled back from bone and sinew. Joints cracked, and foul patches of gas belched from the recesses of Costa's body. His left arm came loose and a guard dropped it into a thick vinyl bag, sealed the bag shut, and tossed it into a waiting laundry cart. Next went Sammy's legs, each one amputated below the knee, wrapped in separate containers then tossed on the pile. Every few seconds the nurse called out the time, counting it down. Sweat dripped from Doctor Foley's face. It mixed with Costa's blood and ran in milky rivulets along the doctor's silver tools.

Costa's right arm vanished into a plastic sack.

Guards yanked on his thighs and spread them until his hip joints surrendered with a loud snap.

"One minute," the nurse said.

Thirty seconds later they finished. Foley hunched over Costa's face, sliced a scalpel through what was left of his neck and spine, and then wrenched the car thief's head free from his body. Two guards slipped a body bag over his torso; another held one open for the head. All that was enough to make me think I'd died in the hole and woken up in some insane Hell version of reality, but then as Sammy's lifeless, gray face vanished into black plastic, his smartass eyes flicked open and stared right at me. They gleamed like polished ivory in the last beam of light that touched them. They were cool as December, like all was right in Sammy's world. Soon as that bagged head crowned the pile of body parts, the aluminum cart shimmied and rattled. Slow at first, like when a truck rolls by a house and shakes the pictures on the walls, but then each black bundle wriggled, shifted around, twisted and turned like a caged rat. The canvas liner bulged as the severed limbs squirmed around each other.

The nurse screamed "Incinerator, now!" and sent the guards rushing the cart from the room.

The infirmary air swelled with the foul odor of raw flesh and the pungent stink of sleepless terror. I'm well acquainted with the scent of fear. It's a mixture of clean, dried sweat and the kind of body odor that comes from an adrenaline rush. Except for being so depleted by my hitch in solitary, I would've caught it wafting off my escort. I would've gagged on it rising from the medical staff when I entered the room. But it took the icy dread I felt seeing Sammy Costa ripped apart to make me realize fear's choking perfume tainted the entire prison. Now that I'd scented it, I couldn't ditch it.

I grabbed the nurse by the arm. Her name tag read Oberon. My voice came out like a rasp scratching across oak. "What in holy hell was that all about?"

"Shit," the nurse said. "You been living in a cave for the last month?"

3

Later, with a clean bill of health—aside from dehydration, sleep deprivation, malnourishment, and the general stress that comes from existing in a windowless three-by-five cell for nearly a month—they sent me back into general population.

It was afternoon recreation period, so I went to the television room. It was empty. That time of day, the place should have been full of soap opera fans, but there was nothing but snow on every channel. I stretched out on the couch and relished its coarse comfort. I rested my eyes in the cool stillness of the room. Flashing through my mind came visions of Sammy Costa, and Nurse Oberon's weary eyes, and the sickly look on Paulson's face, and I tried to pinpoint the exact moment when sanity had deserted the world. I couldn't do it.

Footsteps scuffed the tile floor. I shot upright and opened my eyes. A long-timer called Old Corntooth waved me back down and then shuffled to the table by the sofa. He sat on its corner and gave me the once over. I'd seen him around a few times, one of those guys who's been inside so long, he's like a ghost. He smiled, showing me how he'd earned his name.

"Been in solitary, ain't you?" he said. "You're out of touch, I suppose. Don't know the score anymore. Bad way to be in here. Uninformed, I mean. Lot's changed in a little time. You ought to watch this."

He handed me an unlabeled DVD in a clear plastic case.

"Television signals died two weeks back. All we's got left is a DVD-DVR machine in here. Got a couple of old football games up on the shelf, a couple of musicals, one of them Adam Sandler movies, but this here's the only one you want. It's the only one that means much. When you're done, stick it in the crack between the wall and the cabinet. I'll fetch it later. We ain't supposed to have it, y'know? Warden don't like this to circulate."

Old Corntooth left the room without looking back. I stared at the square of shining plastic in my hand, the silver circle inside it. Wasn't unusual for contraband skin flicks or movies the warden deemed objectionable to circulate in secret, but no one was likely to waste their time singling me out for something like that. Couldn't think of a good reason anyone might single me out at all. It's best in prison when no one pays any attention to you whatsoever. I wondered who'd sent it, knowing by the broken-down look in Old Corntooth's eyes that he'd never have bothered with me on his own.

I slid the disc into the player and sat back.

What followed: Two hours of raw, fucking chaos.

One-hundred and twenty minutes of madness.

Seventy-two-hundred seconds of death, blood, and blind panic.

That's what this movie was about.

The plot was shit, but the rest of it was convincing as all get-out. Someone had recorded it all while channel surfing and news channel or

not, every damn broadcast was the same: the corpses of the dead now walked the world and hunted the living with a savageness of insane dimension. It was worst in the cities where mobs of the dead swarmed the streets, but inside a few of days it had spread everywhere. The corpses moved with desperate purpose, heedless of their own safety, ignorant of any injury, and their growing numbers replaced the lost two to one. Nothing killed them but fire or cutting them to pieces. The hunger painted in their blank eyes drove them to consume the thing they'd once been: the living.

The reporters all asked the same question, "Why?"

Sure enough there were theories: radiation, disease, voodoo, parasites, the Apocalypse, Wi-Fi, genetically modified tomatoes, RFID chips, iPad mind control apps, and on, and on. No one had figured it out by whatever day the broadcasts had been recorded. Not that it mattered. The people on television worried about stopping it before it was too late, but it seemed like that point had come and gone and caught everyone with their pants down.

Except for me.

I got to watch the whole thing as if it was taking place right then. I pictured people outside fighting for survival against the mobs of walking dead. I thought of cities crowded with panicked mobs, hospitals overrun with corpses that wouldn't stay down, and roads choked by cars, trucks, and useless ambulances. My imagination ran away a touch, I admit, but I've always been that way. Thing was, what all the other men had experienced over the past weeks, locked up helpless inside while the rest of the world died, I put myself through in two hours, catching up fast. And I understood that all that was in the past, that with the dead spreading as fast the reporters said, any frantic battles for life were all over and decided by now. What had been a month in the hole for me must have seemed like years to the people outside. And that bastard Grove had let me stay there to rot as if the end of it all was no concern of mine, as if I were the ultimate outsider. Maybe he was right.

The DVD ended with a blank blue screen that matched the empty patch in my memory from my time in the hole. Damn video did wonders for my doubts about my sanity.

We'd been safely locked up, a thing for which not a man among us would have been grateful five weeks ago. And I wondered how many felt differently now. What was there to look forward to after we did our time: families, homes, girlfriends, money? Shit, some of us had lost all of that long before resurrection fever began firing up the dead. They say there's nothing more dangerous than a man with nothing left to