

## BOOK TWO EXCERPT

“What do we do?” Ann asked, raw fear evident in her voice.

“We run like hell,” Paige answered. “And I mean now.”

Paige remembered the size of the beast they had seen shortly after they left the Bunker, if indeed this was the same creature, and she shuddered with revulsion. Also, she remembered the blur of fur and claws that streaked out of the darkness in Emmitsburg to drag off the poor man who was ripped apart and eaten alive. These memories sparked a visceral urge inside her to flee mindlessly into the darkness of the hospital interior, as far away from the alpha predator as possible.

*Get a grip!* she told herself.

“We split up,” Jake whispered. “Paige, you and Ann take the stairs up and find a place to hide. I’ll take Remi with me.”

Paige opened her mouth to concur, but the front doors burst inward from their hinges and a huge shape blocked the outside sunlight from streaming in. A fetid stench rolled over Paige that was so foul she had to clench her stomach muscles to tamp down the impulse to throw up.

“Go!” Jake shouted.

Needing no further coaxing, Paige yelled at Ann, “The stairs. Now!”

Armed with her tiny penlight, Paige made for the stairs to the left of the reception desk that led to the second floor. She and Ann no sooner placed their feet on the first steps when an explosion of flapping fur came from the ceiling. The sudden chaos woke the bats

sleeping there, sending the giant fuzz monkeys into a panicked flight. Paige felt wings and bristly hair brush against her arms, her face, and her hair. A mindless hysteria tried to take over her mind and send her fleeing into the black depths of the hospital, but she fought it off.

Ann screamed.

“Hurry!” Paige hollered back over her shoulder, as her legs pumped up and down, taking the stairs two steps at a time.

When she reached the top, darkness to her right swallowed the illumination from her penlight. A hallway? Without pausing to think about it, Paige charged into the dark hoping her course wasn't going to turn into a dead end. She thought Ann was right behind her, but it was impossible to tell. Also, she didn't know whether the cat was charging after her and Ann or after Jake and Remi. The noise from the frightened bats drowned out everything else. The rationale side of her said that keeping Remi alive was paramount; he and he alone could prepare the serum. But the irrational part of her wanted the cat to chase somebody else, anybody else but her.

A deafening roar shook the floor she ran on, like a bomb going off directly behind her. The angry shriek hit her ears with such force that it nearly knocked her off her feet.

Ann screamed again, this time even louder than before.

One question was answered. The monster was charging after her and Ann, leaving Jake and Remi to escape however they could.

The dim beam of light shining in front of her caught the reflective letters of a sign to her left that said 'Exit.' Without hesitating, Paige bashed her shoulder into the metal door

below the sign, while simultaneously shoving down the door handle. She had no doubt that in moments the cat would smash the door open like it had the front doors in the lobby below. Still, she kicked back with one foot to make sure the door slammed shut. Now she confronted a choice. Take the stairs back down or take the stairs leading up?

“Up,” she said out loud, hoping somehow Ann might hear.

There was no logic to up over down. Maybe running from a predator triggered something imprinted in her DNA from her primordial ancestors on the African savannah. When a beast wants to eat you, climb a tree and get the hell off the ground. So, she scrambled to get her ass up the stairs, but in her panic her foot slipped, causing her shin to bang on the metal edge of one of the steps.

“Shit that hurt,” she growled through clenched teeth.

Paige regained her balance and continued up the stairs, sprinting up one floor, then another, then another. At some point in her pell-mell flight, she realized that Ann was not with her. Before she could think about what this meant, the exit door she came through moments ago exploded open with the sound of an artillery shell going off. The monster was coming after her.

The thing was at least three, maybe four floors below her, but it's presence filled her senses. She heard its guttural breathing, the raking scrape of its claws on enamel painted concrete, and she smelled its stench. Pointing her wimpy penlight back down the stairs, she also saw huge, luminous eyes bouncing toward her. The creature was leaping from landing to landing, not even bothering with the tiny stairs built for pathetic human legs.

“Come on, you bastard!” she yelled down at it.

What mattered was that the giant ball of fur and teeth follow her, what mattered was that Jake and Remi got away. Those were good things, but they did little to make the prospect of dying suck any less.

Paige fought to maintain control of her fear. If she gave into the horror, game over. So, when the stairs ended in front of a door on the top floor, she calmly twisted the knob.

Locked.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

*Stay calm, girl.*

She smashed her shoulder against the door as hard as she could. It squeaked and possibly budged a fraction of inch. Paige shot a quick glance behind her, which confirmed what the grunting sounds told her. The cat was ten yards back, tensing for a final jump that would end with her in its mouth.

Choices. Turn and fight? Take another shot at shoulder slamming the door? She had two seconds to do one or the other before the beast landed right on the spot where she currently stood. She needed only nanosecond to cross turn-and-fight off the list. Fight? With what? Fists and a penlight?

Paige leaned back and plunged forward intent on ramming the door again with her shoulder, but her trailing foot slid outward, causing her fall flat on her side in front of the door. In the end, the only part of her body to make contact with the door was the top of her head.

As she slid to the concrete surface, a huge mass flew over her fallen body and crashed into the door with a force far beyond what she could have done with her puny shoulder.

The door burst outward with a bang, and the blur of a giant shape flew through the doorway. A claw scraped along her back as it jetted by.

Paige's fortuitous slip just as the cat lunged for where her torso should have been saved her life. Instead of tearing her in half, the beast passed right over her and slammed into the door it was not intending to hit.

"Ahh!" Paige shrieked, as the pain from the slash registered.

Wincing from the gash, Paige's mind instantly registered three things.

One, the goddammed locked door was gone. In its place was empty air and the blinding afternoon sun.

Two, on the other side of where the door used to be was a surface of silver tarpaper. The roof. She lay on the threshold of the exit to the roof.

Three, an animal with a brown-black, short-haired pelt lay on its side fifteen feet away, its legs twitching. She guessed its body to be at least ten feet long. The thing knocked itself out, apparently expecting to crash into flesh, not steel.

*This is my chance.*

Paige stood, biting her lip from the wound on her back, and vaulted out of the doorway and onto the roof. She could have gone back down the stairs into the darkness, but her penlight was gone. Once the creature revived, running from it in the black interior would be a claustrophobic nightmare. No, the roof had to have some sort of fire escape. That was her ticket to safety. No matter how much this animal had evolved, she doubted its new abilities included climbing down ladders.

She jogged toward the nearest low parapet, her eyes roving up and down it for a sign of a way down. Nothing. Worse, the unmistakable sound of the monster scrambling to its feet, its claws raking the shingles for purchase, hit her like a tsunami.

*Shit oh dear!*

Paige shifted out of jog mode and down into her run-like-the-bejesus gear. But she had no clear goal, other than stay in front of the cat. From the noises behind her, she didn't have to glance back to know that terminator behemoth was back in the game and chasing her again. Realizing that she had only milliseconds before her friendly neighborhood predator took her down like a lion tackling a gazelle, she angled toward the edge of the roof and covered the three-foot distance in a heartbeat.

*This is going to hurt!*

Paige swan-dived over the edge and out into the void . . .