

MEGAN

Breadcrumbs For The Nasties
Book One

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QUIET CORNER



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Mother died when I was ten. Father figured it was something she'd eaten—tainted meat from any one of the expired cans we'd been surviving on. Truthfully, I don't think he had any idea what took her from us. Looking back, I suppose it didn't matter. Even if he had known, it wouldn't have changed

anything. There was no way to help her. The sickness had its way with her. It ate her slowly. It was patient, took its time, enjoyed itself. Her fingernails dried and peeled away. Her skin turned to paper. When I touched her, she recoiled and winced. She was so sensitive. Breezes became uncomfortable, droplets of rain like tiny nails against her flesh. Her eyes glossed over, blurred into clouds, milky and white. Her hair fell away, handfuls left on the road as we traveled. Father made a point to stop and bury as much as he could.

Breadcrumbs for the nasties. That's why he said we couldn't just leave it out in the open: *breadcrumbs for the nasties.*

While I wasn't fully aware of the breadcrumb reference, I believe I understood the basics. *They* would smell the hair the same way they smelled everything. They would smell the hair, and it would lead them right to us.

By the third week of her sickness, mother's face had transformed into something wrinkly and crumply, whisper-thin and so very delicate. Her eyes sank into their sockets, the surrounding flesh like old leather. The color of her pupils was gone. It had dulled and washed out, a milky nothing. Her hands were an awful purple-blue, bruised and blotchy. Her lips cracked, but refused to bleed. She was so beautiful once, my mother, so very beautiful. I wanted to look

like her. I wanted to walk like her and smile like her. I wished I had her dimples.

I loved her dimples.

At night, lying beside her as she stroked my face, father standing watch, I would count the awful blue veins creeping up her arm like dried tree branches—more of them every day. Every night it took longer. When she looked down at me and tried to smile, I could tell she wanted to cry.

She never did.

At no point in my life can I recall seeing mother cry. There were opportunities of course, many of them. She could have cried. I wouldn't have thought any less of her. A part of me believes it was because of me. She didn't want me to see. Tears were a luxury, and luxury was a word that no longer held meaning. My mother was a strong woman, right to the end.

Thirty days after she originally fell ill, just before sunset, she died.

I remember the moment distinctly. I'll never forget it. I don't want to. She dropped to the dirt and began to shake. Her knees tucked in close to her chest and her skeleton arms wrapped around them, fingers bent and frozen. Her wrists twisted inward, broken nails clawing at the fabric of her jacket as if salvation were hidden among the folds. When she opened her

mouth, no sound emerged. Her face was a scream. Her breath was a whisper. Father lifted her in his arms and carried her to the trees. I wanted to follow. I wanted to help him carry her. I wanted to unfasten her jacket and tear it from her body to stop her from sweating. I wanted to mash the palm of her hand against my face and let her know I was there. I wanted to kiss her crinkled skin and sob into the crook of her neck. Instead, I did nothing. I couldn't move. From twenty feet away I watched, hands shoved in my pockets and tears in my eyes as father beat on her chest and screamed her name. He opened her mouth and huffed into her throat. Then he did it again. For a full ten full minutes, he repeated the process, until his arms were spent and his lungs hollow. He tried everything, everything he could possibly try. And then he tried it again. In the end, it didn't matter. When no options remained his head slumped forward, shoulders limp. Broken, he buried his face in the hollowed cavity of her chest, wrapped his arms around her body, and screamed.

I'm not sure what he said. It wasn't meant for me.

I remember the moment my mother died so clearly—too clearly. To this day, I can recall the look on father's face, eyes soaked, tears spread like lightning down his cheeks. I'd never seen my father cry, either. I'd never seen it before and would never

see it again.

Fifteen minutes later, he was done.

From the road, I watched my father bury his wife in the partially frozen soil beneath the dead and dying trees. He did it with his bare hands, digging until the skin on his fingers peeled away, leaving behind meaty, blood-soaked nubs. When he was done, he stared past the tops of the trees and into the clouds overhead. His sigh was audible, even from so far away. I felt it on my skin, in the hairs on my arms, on the back of my neck. Though he wanted to mourn, there was no time. There was never any time. Night was approaching, and we weren't safe in the open – not at night. The night belonged to the *nasties*. Nothing was safe at night.

Kneeling at my side, father wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. His face was sweaty. The prickly beard on his chin rubbed against my scalp as I sobbed into the folds of his crinkly, cold jacket. He patted me gently on the back and allowed me to remain in his grasp for well over a minute. It was a minute longer than I expected.

“We have to go.”

My legs had stopped working, so he lifted me. I couldn't stand. I couldn't do anything. When I tried to move, I fell. Father caught me. When my body

refused to do anything other than stare at the mound of dirt beneath which mother was buried, he snatched me by the wrist and pulled me forward.

“We have to go, Megan.”

They were the last words he'd speak for the remainder of the night and well into the morning.

We settled into an abandoned house just before nightfall. Father secured the doors as well as he could before coaxing me into a nearby closet, laying me down and covering me with his jacket. Gently, he slid the hair from my eyes, and for a while he just stared. I think he stopped breathing. For a fraction of a second, his mouth opened, dry lips parted to form a word. What emerged instead was a breathy nothingness that spoke volumes. There were no words, not any more. There never would be. After that, he was gone. The closet door closed and the darkness folded in. Father stood watch that night, the same as he had the night before and the one before that, as far back as I could recall.

My father was a good man. He wasn't a perfect man, but he was a good man. He loved me dearly, and he did his best to keep me safe. Despite the obstacles thrown his direction, he rarely faltered. Even when he faltered, he never gave up. He could have. It would have been easy. So many did.

I've met my fair share of men in the years since that specific night in that specific closet, listening to the *howlers* outside and shivering into the crumpled fabric of father's jacket. I've compared each and every one to him. His was the last generation born of a forgotten time. Once they were gone, there would be no one to remember the world as it once was—a time when the closet in which I hid served a different purpose entirely. Father was a relic of a place long since gone. He was a visitor in a world he could never truly understand, a passerby in the ugliness I called home.

In the morning, father made no mention of mother or what happened. He fastened the topmost button of my jacket, mussed my hair halfheartedly, and kissed me gently on the forehead.

He smeared the dirt from my cheek. "You're always so dirty."

He knew we had to keep moving. No matter what, we had to keep moving. Though my stomach was empty and the hunger pains stiff, I kept my discomfort to myself.

The journey was slow. The air was cold, colder than it had been in some time. A particularly harsh wind rattled the rusted exterior of the wagon we were dragging behind us, snaked between the trees and whistled an awful sound. Father pulled my hat down

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over my ears, lifted the hood of my jacket over my head, and tugged the strings tight.

“Are you okay?” His face was bright red, sweat frozen to his face. When the barely-there hints of sun hit it just right, it sparkled.

I remember liking that sparkle.

I wasn't sure how to respond. Every answer seemed silly. I recalled my mother, the veins on her arms, and the look on her face. In her head, she was screaming. My mother died screaming.

“I'm fine.”

It was a lie. It was a lie, and we both knew it.

It was the only answer I could give.

Midday, we came across a freshly mauled body in a ditch along the side of the road. Whoever it was, there wasn't much left – shredded bits of meat and shattered bone. Father shuffled across the street to investigate further. I planted my feet exactly where he instructed and didn't move. It was the *howlers*. It had to be the *howlers*. I didn't need to see the aftermath up close to recognize the work of the *howlers*. They rarely left anything behind. When they ate, they ate until they were full, until their bellies were so packed they could barely stand. What they couldn't finish they left

behind with barely a thought. They weren't thinkers or packrats, and they certainly didn't plan ahead. They weren't capable of it. The *biter*s and the *gimp*s were different animals entirely. The *biter*s were only after one thing, and the *gimp*s were sloppy. The aftermath of a *gimp* feeding was the worst. Mother never let me see those. She'd cover my face with her hand and point my body in the opposite direction. One time I peeked through the cracks in her fingers and instantly wished I hadn't.

When father returned, he looked worried. His hand fell to my shoulder, fingers pinching the flesh beneath my jacket. After scanning the dried out trees on either side of the road, he moved his hand to the center of my back and nudged me forward. "We have to keep moving."

The remainder of the day was uneventful. Again night approached, and again we took shelter. Like every night prior, I found myself alone in the darkened closet of a rotted, weather-worn relic. Closets had become my bedrooms. I had so many of them. The *bowler*s were quiet that night. I remember this specifically because it was rare. Maybe they were full from the night before. Maybe they simply didn't care.

Maybe we weren't worth it.

At the first hint of daylight, father fastened my

topmost button, pulled my hat over my ears, lifted the hood over my head, and tied it beneath my chin. When he noticed my shoelace was undone, he dropped to one knee and secured it with a double knot. I told him I could have done it myself. This made him smile.

“Think we’ll find it today?”

Father placed his hands behind his head, leaned back, and stretched the muscles in his back. “I don’t know, sweetie. Maybe. I think we’re close.” He was looking through a tiny opening in a boarded window at the opposite end of the room, scratching at his beard. “We have to be close.”

From his knapsack, he retrieved a single, unmarked can, set it on a nearby table and popped it open with his knife. “Found these last night. Little treat.”

The contents were yellowish-orange, slimy, cut into tiny wedged shapes, and browning on the edges. I didn’t know what it was, but it looked disgusting and old. It smelled even worse. Father dipped two fingers into the sticky glop and handed me a lump, which I immediately popped into my mouth. It was terrible. It was disgusting.

It tasted awful and delicious, and when I finished swallowing it, I extended my hand for another.

We were fairly early into the morning trek when we happened upon the compound. Father snatched me by my jacket, pulled me to the tree line, and told me to *get down*. At first I was confused. I couldn't understand what he was so worked up about. The compound didn't look too dissimilar from some of the buildings we'd come across over the years.

Father extended his finger through the browning bush we crouched behind, pointing to a grayish shed just inside the outer wall. "There. Look."

He was right. I didn't know how I'd missed it. Just beyond the rusted steel was a man in a dark jacket wearing a gasmask, a rifle tucked to his side. There was another man beside him and there seemed to be movement further back. These were the first *normals* we'd seen in months, and the first in years that didn't look destitute, or sick, or lost, or all of the above. Suddenly my heart was pounding. My fingers went to my mouth and my teeth to my nails.

"Is this it?"

Father didn't answer. He was scanning the compound, taking his time, trying to figure out exactly what he was seeing and what it meant. He stood for a moment, looking past the trees and further down the road, attempting to get a better feel for the layout of the structure. When I pulled at the fabric of his jacket, he pushed my hand away. When I

tried to stand, he palmed the top of my head and shoved me to the dirt. After a few minutes of quiet examination, he dropped to one knee, placed his hands on my shoulders and turned me in his direction.

His eyes narrowed. “I need you to do exactly as I say, Megan. Do you understand?”

His hand moved from my shoulder, fingers instead tapping lightly against the knife strapped to his thigh. “I need to make sure this is the place we were looking for.” His hand returned to my shoulders for an instant before sliding up my neck and gently cupping my cheek. “And I need you to stay here while I do it.”

My face scrunched. Suddenly my nose tickled, and the tickle shot into my eyes. My cheeks turned warm. My mouth opened, and my head shook. Father moved his other hand to my face and held it in place. “Don’t shake your head at me. This isn’t a request, young lady. You’re going to do exactly as I say. Do you understand me?”
When my eyes began to water, he smeared it away with his thumbs.

“No matter what happens, I need you to stay right here. If I’m not back before the sun begins to set, I want you to make your way back to those houses we ran across an hour ago. Do you remember

those houses?”

I didn't move.

“You go to the houses, you climb into a closet, and you stay there until I come get you. Do you understand?”

I couldn't answer. There was something in my throat, something massive, something so oversized it was keeping the words at bay. I didn't want him to leave. Why couldn't I go with him? The steel structure loomed over his shoulder, a great gray shadow of unknown possibilities. Why couldn't I go?

Father tightened his grip on my face, his thumbs constantly working to wipe the tears into my freezing cheeks. “You have to stop crying. I know it's hard, but you have to stop crying. You can't cry. Not in this place. Not ever. Crying is not allowed.”

Instead of swallowing, I held my breath and thought of my mother, focusing my gaze on the deep-set wrinkles on father's forehead when looking into his eyes became impossible. There was a single gray hair mixed into one of his eyebrows. I hadn't noticed it until that very moment.

“Look at me, Megan.”

I bit my quivering lip.

“If I'm not back by tomorrow night, you know

what to do. You've done it enough times. You've done it before, and you can do it again. You're smart, and you're strong. You're stronger than you think."

He looked to the dirt, struggling to find the words. When he turned back, his expression had changed. The corner of his lip curled upward ever so slightly. "You look just like your mother."

Father pulled me to him, pressed his lips against my forehead as he had so many times before and held them there. I closed my eyes. I remember closing my eyes. I remember that I never wanted to open them again.

I'll never forget that moment, the wonderful sting.

When Father was done, he stood, pulled the knife from his side and handed it to me. He removed his backpack and dropped it to the dirt. "If I don't come back, you take all of this with you and head in another direction. Don't come after me and don't ever come this way again."

I almost followed him. It took everything I had not to follow him. I should have followed him.

I never saw him again.