

**DEAD  
FALL**  
A ZOMBIE NOVEL  
**JOSEPH  
XAND**



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# Chapter 1

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**T**HE SECOND BODY FELL from the sky minutes after the first. The first had jostled him from his dream. The second roused him completely. Dr. Thaddeus Palmer sat upright in his bed and rubbed his face. The wind-up clock on his nightstand told him it was just after 3 a.m. He pulled back the curtain on the window next to his bed and peered outside. Even in full moonlight, he couldn't see much detail beyond the front porch.

Thad stretched back out on his bed and soon dreamed again. Whatever was out there could wait a little longer. Too dark to chance going out now.

Nearly three hours later, Thad awakened to another dull crash, this one closer and coupled with snapping branches. He swung his legs over the side of his bed and snagged his jeans off the locker next to his nightstand. He pulled them on, then stammered two doors down to his daughter's room.

Peeking in, he found her sound asleep and slowly pulled the door closed behind him.

He sat in the chair next to the front door and pulled on his boots. They were, in fact, his father's boots and fit Thad a little too loosely. Loose enough that on long days working in the yard they rubbed blisters on his heels. He'd grown used to wearing Band-aids before he needed them in hopes of avoiding blisters. He wore no

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Band-aids now, but did have two pairs of socks on for the cold and reasoned that they may provide enough cushion against the rubbing, especially for a quick trip outside.

He'd never owned boots himself. As a well-respected and well-paid professional in his field, he could afford Allen Edmonds and did so by the dozens. But his father, also a well-respected physician in his own right, was always most comfortable lounging in a pair of cowboy boots. Of course, his father was well-respected in the small-town-private-practice, he-knows-everyone-and-everyone-knows-him sense of the word. Thad had been respected in the highly pretentious, you-know-me-but-I-don't-need-to-know-you sense. His father had earned respect. Thad had required it of any employment contract, along with a hefty, sign-on bonus.

As quietly as possibly, Thad released the quadruple bolts securing the door and opened it slowly. The squeaking hinges, normally imperceptible, were now like fingernails on a chalkboard. Outside the sun was just beginning to crest above the far, distant mountains. Before heading out, Thad grabbed from the umbrella stand what was quickly becoming his most useful tool. His daughter referred to it as his "stab stick." He honestly did not know what to call it.

It was nothing more than a six-foot piece of rebar nailed to a thick, wooden broom handle with long barbed-wire fencing tacks wrapped and padded with duct tape. The bottom end of the rebar stuck below the broom handle about a foot and was sharpened roughly to a point. Spear? Javelin? Harpoon? Stab stick seemed as good a name as any.

Thad stepped gingerly onto the wrap-around porch and surveyed his small world beyond it. His home (his father's home) was nestled on the south end of a one-

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and-a-half acre outcropping that jutted from the cliff side of Bear Pass Mountain, a medium-sized peak within the lower Catskill range of Upstate New York. Behind the house, on its west side, a wall of rock rose vertically for over 100 feet to the mountain's summit. In front of the house, trees and brush sparsely dotted the landscape before, roughly fifty yards out, the slight knoll ended abruptly, giving way to a sheer 300-foot drop to Bear Pass's nadir. Standing at the side of the cliff offered a semi-panoramic view of the Lower Hudson Valley beyond.

Thad walked slowly down the few steps leading onto the front lawn, his senses focused, noting every sight and sound around him. Birds flitted about among the trees and sang their morning serenade. Squirrels chased one another up and down tree trunks, and somewhere, possibly echoing from the zenith, a woodpecker tapped to its own rhythm.

He walked north, casing, towards where he believed the earliest morning thuds had come from. Two-thirds of the way to the partially-disassembled barn, he discovered two fresh depressions. One of the depressions was empty, as was often the case. In the other, though, a body lay crumpled and broken, the head split and crushed. That happened sometimes, too.

Behind him, chickens clucked in their makeshift coop inside the dilapidated barn. At first, he wasn't going to buy chickens, fearing they'd die during the first harsh winter. But last winter had been somewhat mild and the chickens thrived as a result, providing him and his daughter with plenty of eggs and even the occasional chicken dinner.

Thad craned his neck upward toward the top of the towering cliff. He wondered how anything could survive such a drop, but realized that "survive" is a strong word. He scanned the yard for the former

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occupant of the empty hole. All around him the ground was littered with small craters, nearly a dozen in this area of the yard alone.

*Just where did you get off to,* Thad thought.

Creased grass led from the crater and he followed it with his eyes. The trail went beyond the small, rusting tractor and towards the edge of the cliff. This one had likely walked off the cliff above and then dragged itself off the next cliff. The bodies usually continued in whatever directions they were facing after impact. Thad started moving that direction when a deep gurgle turned his attention to the back of the house.

He half jogged around the corner to find one of the creatures at the base of the rock wall. It pulled itself along the edge of the wall slowly, inch-by-inch, only able to utilize its left arm. Its back was broken at a disturbing angle, its useless legs jutting right nearly 90 degrees. Its right arm slithered along, hugging the contours of the rocks and crevices it encountered, the bones probably completely crushed. Behind Thad, about ten paces from the corpse, Thad noted two small, broken branches. They had snapped off a tree growing awkwardly halfway up the side of the cliff wall.

*So that one was you,* he thought.

Thad straddled the thing quietly. He raised the stab stick and brought its iron point down through the center of the creature's skull. He didn't put much weight or effort behind it. He'd learned he didn't need to. The stab stick was heavy enough that gravity did most of the work. The thing stopped moving immediately.

"Daddy?"

Thad whirled around. Karen, his daughter, stood at the top of the back porch steps in her pajamas clutching and petting Bun-bun, her stuffed rabbit. Thad waved her inside. "Don't come out here right now, Sweetie."

"Is everything okay?"

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Thad looked down at the corpse between his feet. The killing tool stood stiffly in front of him. She must have seen him quiet it. The thought made him uneasy. But it wasn't the first time she'd seen him kill one of those things. Not by a mile. She'd dubbed it the stab stick, after all.

Someday she'd do more than watch him quiet a corpse. Someday he'd have to teach her how to do it herself. A whole new world. To think he used to worry himself to death with future discussions about drugs and condoms.

"Are there a lot of 'em?" she asked.

*More than usual*, he thought. He looked down the rough gravel driveway, infested with potholes and weedy growth, to where it disappeared behind the high rock wall.

"Hey, why don't you go inside and mix us up some pancakes. I'll be in a few minutes to help you cook 'em up."

"Okay," she replied drowsily. He smiled at her as she padded back inside in her Cookie Monster slippers.

Once the screen door slapped closed, he pulled up the stab stick and started down the driveway. He was still a good distance from the edge of the rock wall when he heard the chain link fence rattling around the corner. Before he rounded it, the smell of the thing nearly knocked him over.

The corpse stood in the middle of the eight-foot fence, pressing tightly against it. One of its arms was thrusts through one of the diamond-shaped holes in the fence. Skin and flesh were ripped free of the bone to accommodate the arm fitting into such a small space. The thing was stuck, but it didn't seem to know it. It pushed into the fence and dug its feet into the ground, trying to walk forward, or maybe thinking that it was doing so. When Thad came around the corner, the

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corpse stepped faster and dug into each step deeper. The fence groaned under its weight even as the creature moaned at Thad.

Thad looked to the top of the fence where it met the rock wall. The L-shaped bracket that was supposed to keep the fence securely mounted to the rock was coming loose of its moorings. He had no idea how to fix it. The fence leaned and bounced as the thing pushed against it. Thad thought the fence might hold two, maybe three of those things pushing against it. But much more than that and he was sure it would give.

Thad hefted the stab stick and sliding it through the fence, carefully rested it squarely on the corpse's forehead. The thing seemed to wait patiently as Thad leaned into it and quickly jabbed the rebar into its skull. He nearly lost his grip on the tool as the corpse, finally quieted, slid down the fence. Thad yanked it free and the corpse collapsed only as far as its trapped arm allowed.

Thad shook his head. He'd have to chop off that arm to remove the corpse and clean up the mess. Thad walked the length of the fence, all of fifteen feet, which included a six-foot wide gate, to where it ended over the edge of a steep drop-off. The drop-off wasn't as steep or as sure as the cliff in front of the house, but it was still treacherous, especially for the non-living. The side of the fence continued strangely about three foot beyond the edge. The dead weren't smart enough to figure out how to climb around the side of the fence. At least none had managed the trick yet. Thad looked over the edge, hanging onto the fence for safety. Some distance below, three sets of eyes stared up at him and clawed at the side of the rise in a fruitless attempt to climb.

*That's one more corpse than yesterday,* he thought.

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Every once in a while, the corpses, attempting to circle the end of the fence, would fall over the edge. Sometimes they'd get stuck on the ledge below rather than falling all the way, such as these three. The oldest two had worn their hands to nubs trying to climb back up, clawing at the hard rock. The newest addition likely wouldn't learn from their failures.

*Five of them in one night, Thad thought. Something's drawing them in.*

On average, no more than two of the things wandered off the cliffs above in any given week. Five of them in a matter of hours wasn't a record. But it was close.

Shouldering the stab stick, he walked along the south side of the fence and back to the front yard. There was a time when he couldn't come this way without stopping at the graves, those of his father and his ex-wife, and paying his respects. Now he barely noticed them at all. Karen, on the other hand, still came out here nearly every day. She'd sit on the grass next to her mother's gravestone (which was really just a big, round rock Thad had found behind the barn; Thad had promised Karen a proper gravestone someday), petting Bun-bun and whispering quietly to the grave. In the spring, he'd see fresh flowers in a cheap, plastic kitchen cup sitting between the two mounds of dirt.

He moved quickly towards the edge of the cliff. But halfway there, he stopped, considered a second, and changed direction to the front door of the house. Mounting the porch, he leaned into the house and whisked his binoculars off their hook next to the door. Strapping them around his neck, Thad leaped off the porch and jogged to the end of the yard, being careful not to get too close to the edge of the cliff. Looking down at the prison in the valley immediately below, he didn't need the binoculars to see there were more of the

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dead today than ever before. Yesterday about six dozen of the dead surrounded the prison's perimeter, most of them pounding the tall, chain-link fence, others wandering the cast fields that encased the prison on all sides. Today easily twice that many crowded the fence lines.

Punching the stab stick into the ground and bringing up the binoculars, Thad surveyed the fenced interior of the prison. Nothing seemed out of place. It had been a couple of months since he'd seen any live humans within the prison fences. Even then he'd never counted more than four separate individuals, all of them wearing prison jumpsuits or grays. They always surfaced on the roof of a particular building, probably the cafeteria. None of them ever ventured onto the prison grounds below and chanced an altercation with the fifty or so corpses sauntering within the perimeter.

Thad often wondered how many prisoners survived the outbreak, only to die slowly, locked and starving in their cells. How many of them, now dead, pounding on the cell bars in vain, serving a sentence beyond life? How long could the lucky survivors, those not locked in a cell, survive on the prison food stored in the cafeteria pantries? Would they let the others out or just let them starve?

Thad thought he knew the answer. The food would last with fewer people eating it. Even so, before the world ended, Thad knew the prison received food deliveries twice a week. Obviously, the food supply wasn't endless, regardless of how many people were eating from it. He also wondered what desperate measures they would take once the food ran out.

Thad heard a flapping sound and looked right to see the creation he'd sown together several months back had come loose. He'd need to tie it back down before the whole thing spilled over the side.

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*Hell, he thought, I need to take it up and toss it in the barn.*

But he knew his daughter wouldn't let him. They'd talked about it before. She nearly cried.

"But Daddy, what if people need us?" she'd begged through tears, and he relented to leaving it tied down to the edge of the cliff.

In retrospect he wondered why he'd even wasted the time and energy making it, sewing it together, slopping on paint. Was it empathy? Guilt? Redemption? An attempt to hold onto some last shred of humanity? Did it even matter anymore?

Raising the binoculars again and moving his gaze along the fence line, Thad noticed something that hadn't been there the day before. Tracks. Someone had recently driven through the tall grass around the prison, probably doing reconnaissance, looking for the prison's vulnerabilities. He followed the tracks around the perimeter and to where they disappeared into the tree line to the east. He looked towards the highway and inspected it as far as he could see. Nothing.

Bringing his eyes back to the tree line, he swept the binoculars right to left slowly. Finally, he saw them. Two men stood just inside the trees, passing their own pair of binoculars between them, visually scrutinizing the prison fences, pointing, discussing what they were seeing. One of them sat on the hood of a silver Hummer. The other stood in front of it.

Thad continued inspecting the tree line in front of them. The two men appeared to be alone. No one else that he could see. But odds were, they were part of a larger contingent sent ahead to scout the prison.

Bringing the binoculars back around to the men, Thad was shocked to see their binoculars trained directly on him. Thad dropped his binoculars and

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stammered backward, slumping out of their line of sight.

Then his daughter screamed.

Unconsciously, Thad snapped up the stab stick and bolted towards the house. The binoculars bounced painfully on his chest. He ripped them off and tossed them in a bush as he ran.

He was halfway to the house when she screamed again. He stopped in his tracks and looked around. That hadn't come from the house. A chicken darted across the yard to his right. The barn.

He scrambled towards the barn and nearly fell when he lost his footing in a crater. Finally, he bursted into the barn. His daughter was pinned in a corner. A corpse edged towards her. It stood impossibly on a pair of legs that were obviously broken in several places.

"Karen!" Thad screamed. In a single motion, he rushed the creature, spearing the stick through its ribcage and pinning it to the barn's wall. At the same time, with his right hand, he grabbed Karen by the arm and slung her out of the corner and onto the pile of dirt behind him. He looked to make sure she was okay. Tears streamed down her face and she looked like she may be on the verge of screaming again.

"Stay down!" Thad demanded but realized she was likely too scared to move anyway.

Thad turned his attention to the creature to see it sliding, little by little, along the length of the stab stick's handle, trying to free itself, moving towards him. Its only good eye focused squarely on Thad. The other eye dangled from its socket, and in the back of his mind, Thad wondered if it had happened on impact from the fall from the cliff top. Somehow neither arm was broken. Both extended towards him, thin bones reaching and wiggling where fingers should have been.

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Thad noticed feathers on the thing's hands and face glued on by wet, sticky blood. The corpse had been feeding on chickens when Karen came in. The door of the chicken coop was off its hinges, and in one corner of the coop lay several bloody lumps of feathers and blood.

Thad scanned the barn around him for a weapon of some kind. Nothing. He'd always been obsessive about putting away tools. Even the typical farming utensils found in most barns—pitchforks, rakes, hoes, shovels—were carefully stowed away in the basement to keep them from rusting. When they'd first arrived, Thad had left them hanging on the nails on the barn wall. But after he'd had to disassemble nearly half the barn, he'd moved them to keep them out of the elements.

*The barn!* Thad thought. He looked to the other side of the barn, or what was left of it. Several pieces of wood hung loosely from a wall fragment on the far side. Thad took off that way just as the creature slid off the end of the stab stick with a wet, sickening slurp. Suddenly loose, the thing nearly collapsed on its weak legs, but soon gained its footing.

"Daddy?"

Thad looked back. The creature had refocused its attention on Karen. She was trying to squirm backward to the top of the dirt pile. The corpse jerked towards her, its legs shaking.

Reaching the far wall, Thad grasped a wall stud that he'd knocked loose from the top plate the summer before and yanked it free of the bottom plate. The stud was 9-foot long and awkward to handle, but it would have to do. It wasn't the kind of light-weight studs lumber manufacturers made in recent history (when people were still building homes, or garages, or anything for that matter). This was solid, milled back when a 2x4 was truly two inches by four inches.

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Half carrying, half dragging the thick piece of lumber, he reached the creature just as its toes touched the bottom of the dirt mound and it was about to fall forward onto Karen. He swung the stud as best he could manage, which was only high enough to strike the creature in the upper thigh. But it was enough. Its broken and battered legs crumpled on impact. Half its body, the lower half, fell back away from Karen. The top half fell straight down, facing forward. The reverberation from the collision caused Thad to lose his grip on the stud, and it tumbled out of his hands and clunked on the ground.

As if nothing had changed, the dead man dragged himself towards the blubbering child. Karen had reached the extent of her retreat, crammed into a corner at the highest point of the dirt pile as the thing's grotesque phalanges touched the toes of her soiled slippers.

Thad kicked it hard enough in the side to hear ribs crack. The thing slumped onto its side, but never lost focus on Karen. It caught her slipper between two grimy fingers and slipped it off her foot. Thad kicked it again, harder this time. It toppled onto its back and seemed momentarily dazed, its eyes searching, looking for a target. Its arms flailed aimlessly.

Thad reached down and hoisted the 2x4 again. He straddled the creature as he had done the one before. Seeing him, it reached up. Feathers almost comically protruded from between the bony fingers.

Thad dragged the stud till it was standing straight beside him. He raised it up with both hands, centered and leveled it above the thing's face, then brought it down, allowing gravity again to take its course. The dangling eyeball splattered against its upper cheek, and the jaw bone beneath cracked and gave ground.

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Thad lifted his battering ram again and let it fall, aiming higher this time. The forehead collapsed an inch under the weight. The creature's hands pawed the air, searching for him.

Raising the stud one more time, he drove it down again, putting some force behind it this time and aiming for the same spot as before. The thing's head split and flattened with a wet thud. Its arms fell limp on either side.

Panting, exhausted, Thad released the stud and let it topple to the ground, half of it landing outside the barn door. He dropped to his knees and scuttled over to his daughter, grasping her roughly, turning her over and scanning her for any sign of injury.

"Did it touch you? Are you hurt?" he tossed her around, feeling her back, arms, and legs for spots of blood.

"No," she said faintly, submitting to the frisking.

"Have you been bitten?" He was about to flip her completely over and search again.

"No!" She pulled away from him and sunk deeper into the corner. She dug her face into her shoulder and sobbed.

Thad stared at her for a moment and reached for her hair, but stopped. Instead, he fell back onto the dirt and laid face up, trying to steady his breathing.

Eventually, Karen crawled over to him and laid her head on his chest. Out of habit, he raised a hand to her head and petted her softly.

*How could I have been so careless?*

Thaddeus Palmer had always been a man who savored the limelight, who craved attention. He believed a man's clothes and women and how many houses he owned said something about the man, and he'd always had a lot to say.

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His marriage had been nothing more than a business proposition, binding him contractually to a woman whose father carried a lot of weight in the world of medical research grants. And in times when that fell through, at the very least his marriage was a nice, welcome tax deduction.

Then Karen was born, and for the first time in his life he'd fallen completely and utterly in love. He was enamored, and he sold off cars and homes and canceled speaking tours and other high-paying engagements so he could be home more. He traded Italian silk ties and diamond cuff links for diapers and spit rags. He held her and cooed and played, and when Karen was in the room he felt small and insignificant, and for the first time in his life, he didn't mind.

"I'm sorry," he said a long time later. He was sure she'd fallen asleep.

"I know," she replied eventually.

"Why did you come out here? I told you to stay in the house."

"Eggs," she whispered nonchalantly.

"Eggs?"

"For the pancakes," she explained.

"Oh," he said. He looked over at the ruined chicken coop and the several carcasses within. Two or three still pecked around within it, but most of the flock were scattered outside the barn. It would take him half the day to patch up the coop and round up the chickens. Plus he still had bodies to gather and toss over the edge of the cliff.

*The cliff*, he thought. Suddenly he remembered what he'd seen before Karen screamed. The men watching the prison. Watching him.

Thad rose up and faced his daughter. "How about we eat the leftover biscuits from yesterday, okay? With some peanut butter and jelly?"

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"Okay," she agreed lazily.

"You go inside, okay, and get it all ready. I've got to check on something, and then I'll be right behind you."

He helped his daughter to her feet and crouched next to her. She was a dusty, dirty mess. He grabbed her discarded slipper and put it on her, then started dusting her off, patting her down quickly. He brushed dirt and leaves out of her hair with his fingers and tried to use his shirt to wipe her face before he realized it was pretty useless.

"How about you clean up a little bit before you get started on breakfast."

Karen nodded her assent, and he walked with her through the barn door. He stopped there and she walked on without him. He watched as she padded towards the front porch.

Thad left the barn and made his way to the newest craters in the ground. One of them still had the body in it, of course. From the empty depression, his eyes once again followed the trail of crushed grass that led beyond the tractor and seemingly towards the cliff edge in the distance. He walked along the grassy trail to the other side of the tractor. Sure enough, the trail changed direction; there was a line of crushed grass leading directly to the barn. The creature must have dragged itself this far before noise or movement from the chickens changed its course. At some point, probably inside the barn, it had managed to stand up.

He shook his head. He knew better than to move onto something else before he'd accounted for every corpse fallen from above, to the best of his abilities. He'd gotten lax and it nearly got his daughter killed, which would have dealt a killing blow to him as well.

Thad walked on to the cliff's edge, retrieving his binoculars along the way. They had been hanging by their strap from a small limb in the bushes, fortunately

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undamaged. He secured the binoculars to his neck again and stood at the precipice, this time hiding, at least partially, behind some low-hanging tree limbs.

He turned the binoculars immediately to where the men had been earlier. They were gone. He scoured the tree line and highway beyond for movement. Nothing there either, save for the occasionally straggling corpse.

Thad lowered the binoculars and breathed deep. Out on the horizon, where the sun should have emerged, dark, ominous clouds crowded, lopping off the tops of the mountains far beyond.

Silently, lightning streaked between the clouds, striking unseen among the lush, green peaks.

Apparently, a storm was coming.

# About the Author

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Joseph Xand has been (in no particular order) a carpenter, pizza deliverer and cook, psychology clerk, dishwasher, resident assistant, security guard, community organizer, CAD designer, cabinet maker, line feeder, forklift driver, warehouse worker, hall director, political organizer, writing instructor, screenplay analyst, reach truck driver, editor, non-fiction author, granite fabricator, secretary, janitor, Union organizer, website and graphics designer, convenience-store clerk (for one day), cashier, record-store clerk, screenplay club founder, and computer tech.

Now he can add novelist to the list.

He lives in Texas with his wife, three kids, three dogs, and three cats.

For information on the rest of the book, please visit [JosephXand.com](http://JosephXand.com)