

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



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Chapter 2

COLONEL MOSS WAS frustrated. He'd been yanked out of a long retirement when everything started going to shit, promoted up the ranks, then assigned to command a ragtag regiment comprised of untrained enlistees, aging National and Coast Guard troops, civilian police officers (apparent weekend warriors) and only a smattering of actual, experienced military personnel and officers.

His orders from the brigadier general (the highest ranking military officer in existence, as far as Moss knew) were to make a route through what was being called the North Central Corridor, supplying a number of civilian outposts along the way with much-needed ammunition, medical supplies, and food rations. The Corridor was comprised of Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Northern Kentucky, Ohio, and parts of West Virginia.

To this point, the mission (Operation Outreach) was an utter-fucking disaster. The regiment left military headquarters (what used to be a used car dealership) in Monroe, Michigan nearly three weeks ago and headed South. Moss lost two officers before they even reached the state line.

Their first stop, the Mansfield Outpost in Northern Ohio, was no longer in existence. It had been completely overrun by the dead.

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Ditto for the next two outposts; they'd circled wide around Columbus only to find the First Baptist Outpost in Athens, Ohio deserted. Then in St. Albans, West Virginia, they found only the charred and smoldering skeleton of buildings where the outpost was supposed to be.

At that point, several of his men went AWOL, and others tried to steal a supply truck and head out on their own. Colonel Moss had to commandeer a police transport van to serve as a makeshift, mobile jail cell, a sort of brig-on-wheels, until they returned to Monroe. He'd chosen two former police officers, promoted them to second lieutenants, and put them in charge of the prisoners. Then, after turning the convoy west from St. Albans, he lost three other men in a friendly-fire incident during an encounter with a swarm of the dead.

Morale wasn't low.

Morale was beaten, gang-fucked up the ass, drawn and quartered, and tossed into a deep, cold grave to be food for worms.

Currently, the regiment was held up in a high school baseball stadium in Morehead, Kentucky, just east of the Licking River. Colonel Moss knew of only one bridge to cross the river, and it had been crudely sabotaged.

In a rickety tent that served as his command quarters, he stood over a map of Kentucky, lifted from a local convenience store. He was searching for an alternate river crossing, as well as trying to map a route to Salem, Indiana (where the next outpost was supposed to be located) that avoided the larger communities of Lexington and Louisville where large pockets of the dead were likely clustered.

"I've sent Cadagon and Fuller here," Colonel Moss pointed to an area of the map along the Licking River South of their current position, "to see if the bridge

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there is still functional. If it is, that's a good option. However, if this bridge were crossable," his forefinger landed on a part of the river far North of their location, "then, yeah, it's a long ways up river to make the cross, but this Northern route above Louisville," his finger traced a route he'd already highlighted in orange, "is nearly a straight shot to Salem. It might be faster in the long run. Plus we might be able to rendezvous with the 10th Armored Division out of Milwaukee if they've made it this far South. I'd like to send—"

Colonel Moss's words were cut short when a bullet passed through his brain and blasted a circle of red, chunky matter against the tent's canvas wall. Colonel Moss, caught up in strategizing, didn't notice his first lieutenant approach him from the side and place the muzzle of his sidearm just half an inch from the colonel's temple. Moss fell onto the map, then dragged it and the metal table to the ground with a crash.

"I'd like to suggest an alternate route, Colonel," said First Lieutenant Beechum as he replaced his 9MM in its holster.

Nunez chuckled nervously. Schuler looked down at his feet. They'd nearly jumped out of their boots when the shot rang out, even though they'd expected it and even watched Beechum as he approached Moss. Both men had been standing in front of the colonel as he laid out the possible routes. They'd have likely been the scouts Moss would have sent north to survey the bridge there.

Outside the tent, some yelling broke out, indecipherable, followed by gunshots, and then people clearly being ordered to their knees.

"Christ!" Beechum said. "What the hell kind of cannon are they shooting off out there? They'll have every fucking piece of stink-meat within two miles pounding at the gates."

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With his leg, he shoved the colonel onto his back and disarmed him, sticking Moss' Colt 45 into his pants. The army hadn't used Colts as standard issue for a long time. Recently they'd doled out 9MM Berettas to soldiers. But veterans like Moss weren't accustomed to change, and he kept his Colt 45 at his side, even though bullets for it were not issued and were scarce. Beechum had been eyeing the Colt for some time.

Private First Class Murphy shuffled in through the tent flaps and stood at attention, raising an arm in salute, but the gesture nearly faltered when his eyes fell upon the fallen colonel and what was left of the right side of his head.

"Knock it off," Beechum ordered. Murphy dropped his arm and stood more at ease, but unable to remove his gaze from Moss.

"Everything under control out there?" Beechum asked.

Murphy didn't hear him.

"Murphy!"

Murphy looked up at Beechum. "Yes...Yes, sir," Murphy responded. "Everything's good. Captain Rodriguez went for his gun, so Phillips had to put him down. But everything is cool...uh, good...under control, now...sir. We're awaiting your orders."

Beechum nodded and snatched a pack of cigarettes out of Moss' front shirt pocket. He tapped out a cigarette and popped it into his mouth.

Murphy looked back down at Moss. "Well...that's it, then. It's a mutiny," he said.

"I thought a mutiny happened on a boat, like in that movie, the one with Clark Gable," Nunez said.

"I didn't think it mattered," Murphy replied.

"Maybe it's a coup," suggested Schuler.

Nunez shook his head. "Isn't a coup when you overthrow a government?"

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"No, that's a coup d'état," Schuler responded.

"A coodit-what?" asked Murphy.

"Man, fuck that, this is a mutiny," Nunez shot back.

"A military rebellion," Schuler said.

"But isn't that a mutiny?" Murphy asked.

"Would the three of you shut the fuck up?" Beechum barked. The three men seemed to shrivel all at once. Beechum struck a match across his jeans and lit his cigarette.

He bent over and tried to pry the map out from under Moss. It ripped and left Beechum holding half a map covered in blood. He dropped it and tried to kick it as it fell, but missed. It slumped to the ground unceremoniously. "Fuck!" he yelled.

Murphy, Schuler, and Nunez looked at one another and then back to Beechum. Beechum unfolded a metal chair that had been leaning against a tent pole and plopped down into it, dragging hard on his stogie and blowing out a long column of smoke.

"Schuler, go to wherever you got that map and get me another one."

"Okay...sir. Um...a Kentucky map, sir?"

"No, goddammit!" Beechum yelled. "Why the fuck would I want a map of fucking Kentucky?"

Schuler opened his mouth, then snapped it shut.

"Get me one of those road map books, with all the streets and highways of every state in it."

"A road atlas?"

"Whatever. Just hurry it up."

"Yes, sir." With one more glance at his colleagues, Schuler slid through the tent flaps.

Beechum sat quietly and finished his cigarette, seemingly deep in thought. He flicked the butt into a clump of brown, dry grass in the corner. They'd had to trample down a square of grass in order to erect the tent deep in center field. Nunez had to stop himself from

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going over to the butt and stomping it out to prevent a fire.

"So what do we have out there?" Beechum finally asked, fixing his eyes on Murphy and tipping his head to the tent's entrance.

"Um...well, what we expected, I guess. Captain Rodriguez is dead because...well, I told you that already. Um...Barnes and Revis, those cops? We got them. Last I saw, Tucker and Caldwell were beating the shit out of them." Murphy laughed, quickly looking around to Nunez, who didn't seem amused but smiled anyway.

"They're out of the *brig*, then?" Beechum emphasized brig sarcastically, glancing down at Moss when he did.

"Huh? Oh yeah...brig. Yeah, we let 'em out."

"Meyers?"

"Meyers? Yeah, that's where we put her. In the, uh, brig. Police van-thing."

"And the faggot?"

"Travers? Yeah, him, too. Police van, brig-thing."

Beechum nodded.

As an afterthought, Murphy added, "What are we calling it now? Still the brig?"

"I don't give a shit what you call it," Beechum said, then offered, "You can call it the pussy-mobile for all I care." He laughed. "Cause that's what it is, right?" He bellowed louder, and Nunez and Schuler laughed with him as if they'd been given a direct order to do so.

"Or the fag-wagon," Murphy tossed out, and they all roared louder.

Finally, the laughter died. Beechum tapped out another cigarette and lit it to break the quiet tension. He sucked on it deep.

"What else?" he asked, again addressing Murphy, blowing out a stream of smoke.

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"Well, that old nigger, Keene. The Coast Guard dude who said he used to be a Navy Seal or some shit? Yeah, we got him, too. He's with Barnes and Revis, or what's left of them. Down in the dugout."

Beechum nodded and took another long drag off the cigarette, then flicked it, half-finished, in the direction of the first.

"Well," Beechum said suddenly and probably louder than he intended, "I guess I better go make an appearance." He slapped his hands to his knees and stood, creaking the chair as he did so.

Outside the tent, the sun did little to counter the crisp, early morning wind that swept in after the overnight thunderstorm, which turned out to be little more than a drizzle. It blew through the tall grass in waves, and Beechum briefly imagined having to wade through the chest-high grass to chase down a fly ball.

Once Beechum reached the infield, the tall grass subsided. Their first day here they'd found rusting grounds-keeping equipment in a maintenance shed, and Moss had ordered the grass in the infield, from the bases to the dugouts, cut down. They'd managed to start one of the riding mowers, but Moss wouldn't allow it because of the noise. They found two manual push mowers, but they still had to chop the grass low enough for the mowers to do their jobs. Around the pitcher's mound, they pulled up a 25-foot diameter circle of grass, leaving nothing but red dirt. In the middle of the circle, at the height of the mound, a fire smoldered, fueled by the bodies of the several walking dead they'd had to clear off the field upon arrival.

The convoy was parked in a semi-circle along the baselines, from home plate to second base. It consisted of two supply trucks, a deuce-and-a-half and a five ton, an M-548, and the police transport, newly acquired. The only vehicle missing was the Humvee, which

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Schuler had taken to go map shopping. Inside the baselines, next to the various vehicles, shelters had been erected, either free-standing canvas tents or makeshift lean-tos, also canvas, attached to the sides of the larger vehicles. From the base camp, Moss' quarters and command center rose awkwardly a few feet above the grass in the distance. Over the last few days, a thin trail had been worn in the grass leading to his tent. For some reason no one knew, no one would ever know, Colonel Moss had always preferred to set up his quarters away from the rest of the division.

Beechum, with Murphy and Moss in tow, turned left at second base towards the home-team dugout where Tucker, Caldwell, Cadagon, and Fuller were waiting; the latter two had never left to scout a southern route over the Licking River, as they had been ordered to do. Everyone wore baseball caps that said "Morehead River Otters." They found a box of the souvenirs in a maintenance closet behind the visiting-team dugout. They had apparently adopted the high school's mascot as their own.

Beechum glared towards third base. Phillips stood guard behind the police van. Phillips made eye contact and tipped his hat to Beechum, a general acknowledgment, if not a half-hearted salute to their new Commander-In-Chief. Beechum also noted the crumpled body of Captain Rodriguez lying between first base and the pitcher's mound. Phillips's handiwork. He was ruthless and trigger happy. He would have to be watched closely.

When Beechum reached the dugout, the four men there shuffled and gave a small salute, though they didn't come to attention. Beechum recognized them with a nod.

"Report," he commanded, looking at Cadagon.

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"No problembo, Boss. Everything went smooth as shit. We're just watching over the prisoners." Cadagon gestured towards the dugout with his head.

"Yeah, but Revis and Barnes took a tumble down the stairs walking down into the dugout," Tucker chimed in. "Whoops!" Most of the men laughed. Beechum didn't.

A voice arose from the shadows of the dugout behind Cadagon. "Yeah, real brave men you are. Beating up men with their hands cuffed behind their backs. They still managed to get in a shot or two on you pussies! How's your head, Caldwell?"

"Hey, fuck you, Pops! Why don't you shut the fuck up before I come down there and shut you the fuck up?" Caldwell screamed back. His hand rubbed a lump on his forehead where Revis had managed to head butt him.

"Just undo one of my arms and then come down here and try it, Caldwell. Or are you afraid of getting your ass kicked by an old man?"

Caldwell took two steps towards the dugout, but Beechum reached out and stopped him with a hand to the chest. Caldwell met Beechum's eyes, and Beechum shook his head.

Beechum moved past Cadagon and Fuller and peered into the dark of the dugout. He shielded his eyes with his hand to guard against the glare and even then had to squint and let his eyes adjust. He first noticed Barnes sitting on the bench and leaned against a post, his arms behind his back. He looked exhausted and possibly unconscious. His chest rose and fell heavily beneath a blood-stained uniform. His face, unrecognizable, was an explosion of bruises, cuts, and welts. Revis seemed even worse off. He lay on his side across the bench, his arms also pinned behind, and somewhat beneath, him. His face was a bloody pulp of

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meat and beneath his head, a puddle of blood had pooled. Beechum couldn't tell if he was breathing.

Finally, he saw Lieutenant Colonel Keene, who peered up at him angrily through slits of eyes. He was hunched over, his hands cuffed to a bench railing. His dark skin helped him blend into the darkness. But those eyes. Those eyes Beechum could see plainly. And in them burned all the fury of hell.

"Beechum, you son-of-a-bitch! This is mutiny!" Keene barked up.

"Told ya," Murphy replied quietly, leaning towards Nunez and smiling. Beechum glared back at him, and Murphy dropped the smirk as he lowered his eyes to the ground.

Beechum turned back to the dugout. "It didn't have to be this way, Keene. There were other options. I tried to convince you and Moss, but you wouldn't listen."

"Moss did listen, Beechum. He told you we'd look into it when we got back to Monroe. But, soldier, this is a military operation, and we have our orders—"

"Fuck the orders! Military operation? There is no military! Not anymore! Hell, there may not even be a Monroe. But with these supplies and the right shelter we could hold up for a long time."

"Beechum, those supplies are not ours to do with as we please. We have an obligation to the civilians we've sworn to protect."

"What civilians, lieutenant? Huh? Those burning in the fire out there? 'Cause that's all we've seen for three weeks now. Well, I'm done playing the hero, Keene. I don't look good in tights and a cape. It's time to survive. Anyway, it's too late for anything else. Something tells me if I cut you loose, we couldn't go on with the mission as if nothing ever happened." Beechum glared at Keene, searching. It took Keene a long time to answer.

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"No, Beechum, you're right," he finally responded. "It is too late. You are a traitor to your country, soldier. If you were to let me go, I'd have to kill you."

Beechum sighed and shook his head. He looked to the sky and found no reprieve there either. Biting the inside of his lower lip, Beechum took two steps back and nodded to Tucker.

Tucker raised his M-16, angled it into the dugout, and let out two quick bursts of shots, sweeping the gun from left to right and then back again.

Smoke blew directly into Beechum's face, and he blinked to regain his vision. When he finally did, he again looked down into the dugout. Keene's body slumped halfway to the floor, facing sideways, held up by the cuffs stretching his arms. Barnes lay draped partially on top of him. Revis was on the dugout floor, face down, his hands sticking up behind him.

Beechum spat into the dugout, a final statement against senseless duty and oppressive honor. Then he turned his attention to other affairs. He looked out at the camp on the other side of the diamond through the smoke drifting up from the pitcher's mound.

"Murphy, you're with me. The rest of you, let's close up shop and get ready to move out. I wanna leave as soon as Schuler returns."

Cadagon moved to speak, but Beechum was already walking away towards the caravan, Murphy trailing behind.

Beechum made a beeline for the police transport van, walking around Rodriguez's body.

Upon arrival, Phillips also started to speak, but Beechum cut him off. "Open it," he said bluntly.

Phillips shouldered his M-16, popped his cigarette into his mouth, and yanked a metal pin out of the slot where a lock should be. He twisted a steel arm 180 degrees until he heard a snap, then pulled open the

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right-side back door. Then he pulled down a handle until there was another pop, and opened the left side.

Travers' large, overweight frame sat on a wood bench affixed to the right-side wall. His arms hung above him, cuffed with a long chain to a rail. His legs were also cuffed, a thin chain connecting his ankles and run through a steel loop welded to the floor. He turned away from the sudden intrusion of light, but not before Beechum noticed a swollen cut underneath Travers' eye, making his large, round face fatter than it already was. Travers' thick, small-rimmed glasses laid on the floor of the van in front of him, one lens cracked. The bulky man seemed terrified.

The woman seated across from Travers and restrained similarly didn't look scared. Not at all. She didn't turn away from the brightness. She merely squinted and searched until her eyes fixed squarely on Beechum.

"You son-of-a-bitch," Meyers leveled calmly.

"You know, I keep gettin' that today," Beechum returned, smiling back to Murphy and Phillips. Behind them, he could see Tucker and Fuller rolling up a tent.

"What do you want with us, Beechum? Why didn't you kill us like the rest?"

Beechum rested his hands at the top of the entrance to the back of the van and leaned in. "Well, Meyers, I don't know if you've noticed, but dedication to the cause has been waning among the troops," Beechum poked a thumb towards Murphy and Phillips. "But what you got between your legs, private, is a one-hundred percent, bonafide morale booster. And I know you wanna do what you can for your fellow soldiers."

"Fuck you, Beechum!" she shot back.

Beechum chuckled. "In time, Meyers, in time. But I like your enthusiasm." He motioned for Phillips to close

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and secure the doors. Phillips snapped the left side shut when Travers spoke up.

"Wuh...what about me?" Travers managed feebly.

Beechum stopped Phillips by raising a hand and leaned into the right side of the van, nothing but a silhouette from Travers' perspective.

"What's that, Travers?"

"Wuh...what about me? Wuh...wuh...what do you want with me?"

"Wuh...wuh...well, faggot," Beechum chided, "we got plans for you, too. We're gonna have some fun, don't you worry."

Travers began to cry, a slobbery, blubbering mess.

Beechum moved from the doorway and both soldiers were quickly submerged in darkness again.

Stepping out from between the vehicles, Beechum noted that the soldiers, his soldiers, were nearly finished wrapping up camp. Looking in the direction of the far-side dugout again, his eyes were drawn to movement. Shaking his head, he hurriedly strode towards the body of Rodriguez, Murphy moving quickly to keep up. When he got to the dead man, Beechum pulled Moss's Colt 45 from the front of his pants. Rodriguez was just beginning to twitch back to life.

"Phillips!" Phillips, still standing guard behind the police van, turned to face Beechum. "Really?" Beechum asked regarding Rodriguez's rocking body.

Phillips shrugged.

Just as Rodriguez was pushing himself up, Beechum placed the gun to the back of his head and put him down, for good this time.

Beechum replaced the gun and stood tall. He took in everything around him. To his right, Schuler drove the Humvee back through the side gate. Out in far-left field, between the supply trucks, he could hear a small legion of the dead pounding on the fence. He couldn't

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see them through the tall grass, but they were there. In deep-center field, half the command center was engulfed in flames, the other half collapsing into the fire. The two cigarettes Beechum had tossed in the corner.

"Dammit," he said to himself, quietly enough so even Murphy, by his side, couldn't hear him.

Beechum took off his baseball cap, wiped sweat from his brow with his shoulder, and then replaced the hat. He turned towards the other men. All standing. All waiting. For him.

"River Otters! Let's move out!" he ordered. Immediately the men dispersed, climbing into the assorted vehicles.

Murphy took the opportunity to get in a word. "Hey, Boss. You know, I've been thinking. We could head south, you know. Like, to the Florida Keys. Maybe find an island somewhere that's uninhabited where the ZD can't reach us. Maybe—"

"We're not headed south, Murphy."

"No? But I was...uh. No? Okay. Uh...where to then, Boss?" Murphy asked timidly.

Schuler pulled up in front of them, rolling down the window and holding out a Rand McNally's. Beechum took it and started towards the passenger side. Looking over the hood of the Humvee, he shot Murphy a curt smile.

"Prison."

About the Author

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