

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



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Chapter 3

LONG BEFORE BEECHUM SHOT Moss, or before Operation Outreach, or military/civilian outposts (although the First Baptist Church in Athens, Ohio was operating a crisis center), or the North Central Corridor, or Moss' return from retirement; long before Karen was attacked in the barn, or before she began holding daily vigils over her mother's grave, or before Dr. Thaddeus Palmer was warned against believing in safe havens, and just a little before he devised a weapon made out of a broom handle and rebar, and about the time the first dead body fell from the sky, a young girl and her even younger brother were trapped in the basement of their home in a small, suburban neighborhood in southeast Pennsylvania.

They'd been in the basement for seven weeks, although trapped only the last five and a half.

When word of a deadly outbreak of some strange sort first came out, the kids' parents weren't all that concerned. But when the first cases of the outbreak were discovered in Philadelphia, their father drove to the local grocery store and stocked up on can goods, bottled water, and batteries, among other essentials. Enough supplies to last them a month.

They considered calling the oldest sibling, away at college, and having him come home, but in the end decided he was safest on the west coast where he was.

Dead Fall

As the crisis worsened, the family moved into the basement. Every night when the kids fell asleep, the parents would sneak upstairs to watch news coverage in order to keep abreast of the latest information, the channel reception in the basement being too sketchy to bring the TV downstairs. And their father was certainly not concerned enough yet to redo the satellite wires.

Every morning when the kids woke up they'd find their parents sleeping next to them.

But one morning, 14-year-old Elizabeth Glasgow woke up to discover her mother absent. Her mother had apparently not come back to the makeshift bed, a lone mattress tossed on the basement floor. She looked over to the mattress on the other side of the room where her 11-year-old brother slept, and he was also alone, their father missing as well.

Lizzy stretched groggily, not too worried. The crisis was probably finally over and her parents had decided to sleep upstairs, but left the kids in the basement rather than having to wake them up.

For so young a child, Lizzy's brother snored with the best of them.

"Brandon," Lizzy called quietly. The boy didn't stir, nor did his snoring falter. "Brandon!" she called more loudly. Still nothing.

Lizzy gave up and decided to let the lazy little shrimp sleep. She stretched again before swinging her feet out from under the warmth of the heavy comforter and into the warmth of her soft slippers.

A single shaft of light stabbed across the room and spotlighted hundreds of fluttering, minuscule particles of dust and other material that would otherwise have gone undetected; tiny ghosts hurled into existence, if only for a moment. A two-inch, unshaped hole of light bore into the far wall about two feet to the left of a light switch that no longer worked.

Joseph Xand

8 a.m., Lizzy thought.

To alleviate boredom, three days ago Brandon watched a clock and followed the light, marking the wall and eventually the floor every half hour (starting at 7 a.m.) as the day progressed until the light disappeared altogether, just after 1:30 pm, when the sun rose above the house.

The light came through the basement's solitary window arranged high up the basement's east wall. Most of the window was painted over with a dark blue color, the Glasgow's having inherited the paint job when they bought the house. A previous owner had been an amateur photographer and had envisioned turning the basement into a darkroom, an endeavor that was never successful. But the paint remained, save for the small circle that chipped away over time, allowing a young boy to turn a basement into a giant clock—at least for six and a half hours a day.

Lizzy stood from her low perch and crossed the room to the staircase. She made her way up the creaky, wooden stairs and considered stomping on them as she climbed to see if it would wake her brother, but then decided against it. If her parents were making breakfast, she wanted first choice of the pancakes and bacon.

When she got to the top of the stairs, she found the door double-locked from the inside, with both the lower knob lock and the heftier deadbolt. Strange. How had her parents planned to get back in? Lizzy wondered. They had a key to the deadbolt, but the key to the lower lock was misplaced long ago by the house's previous owner, and Lizzy's father had never gotten around to replacing the lock.

Maybe the locked door explains why they never came back to bed, Lizzy thought. *They accidentally locked the door behind them when they left, couldn't get*

Dead Fall

in and decided to wait until morning to re-enter the basement rather than waking us up.

Seemed logical enough, but that meant the outbreak might not be contained, which meant more days down in the basement. Lizzy sighed disgustedly at the thought and unlocked and opened the door.

The first thing Lizzy noticed upon stepping into the hallway was that there was no one in the kitchen (the passageway leading into it was across from the basement door), and she didn't smell the wonderful aromas of breakfast—sizzling bacon, fresh-ground coffee, butter hissing in the skillet. Instead, her senses were attacked with the rancid stench of decaying flesh. Lizzy heaved, but covered her mouth and nose.

The second thing she noticed was the corridor's side table tipped over in front of the case opening leading into the living room, the antique lamp that had sat on it smashed to pieces.

Lizzy walked slowly down the long corridor towards the fallen table. "Mom? Dad?" she asked the stale air.

As she approached the entrance to the living room, although she couldn't see the TV, she could hear a female news reporter on it reporting the latest on the outbreak at a low volume. *Not ten minutes ago, the governor of Pennsylvania released a statement declaring the city of Philadelphia to be completely lost. This is incredible, and until recently, unfathomable...*

The curtain, normally motionless, whipped into view. As Lizzy stepped over the small, corner table laying across the entrance, she could see why. The large double window was completely shattered into the living room.

But Philadelphia is just the latest in a string of cities all along the East Coast to fall to the infection. And over this last week, other large cities have reported

Joseph Xand

outbreaks of infection. In just three days, large pockets of Los Angeles have been declared disaster zones...

It took a moment, but finally Lizzy saw the shoes in front of the couch, and then the body of the man still in them. He was lying face down on top of a crumpled coffee table. He was naked, save for the shoes, his gray skin hanging loose on his body. His torso was a series of deep tears and rips, revealing broken ribs and feeding hundreds of white, wiggling worms. What used to be his head was now a pile of mush, the skull nearly flattened to the floor. Lizzy fought to stifle a scream.

Federal reserve troops have already left the City of Brotherly Love, and the National Guard troops are set to retreat with them to the suburbs surrounding the city to set up a new front in hopes of containing the outbreak from there.

Across from the couch, another dead body (Mr. McGraff? From two houses down?) was slumped in the recliner. He wore a torn and bloodied Eagles jersey and a large chunk was missing from his left arm. His face was contorted into a sneer, and a broken leg from the coffee table was lodged in one of his eye sockets.

The governor is expected to speak within the hour from an undisclosed, safe location outside the capital. But he's already ordered the evacuation of Philadelphia, Pittsburg, and the surrounding suburbs.

Lizzy could hear a scratching sound from behind the couch in the corner of the living room. She moved closer to peer over the side of the couch. The TV was on the floor laying with the screen, which was cracked, face up. It still functioned and two people, if that's the right word, were on their knees on either side of it, clawing and biting at the image of the woman on the screen, her features and blonde hair streaked with gore.

This will be my last broadcast from inside our headquarters here in Philadelphia as my crew and I are

Dead Fall

scheduled to leave with the National Guard troops. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared. I overheard two soldiers saying that most of the proposed evacuation routes were already compromised, and our retreat into the outskirts of the city would be met with a great amount of resistance.

Lizzy thought she recognized the woman kneeling in front of the TV. "Mom?"

Lizzy's parents whipped their faces towards her. Her mother's left cheek was missing, exposing teeth and gums. Some of her cheek hung out of her father's mouth, stuck between his canines.

Lizzy screamed. Her parents jumped to their feet and bolted towards her full force. Lizzy, backing away, fell backward over the hall table laying across the passageway.

If you cannot leave, please stay tuned to this station for further emergency broadcasts. Be safe, Philadelphia. And as always, I hope to see you on the other side.

Lizzy crab-crawled backward and her parents, emitting a guttural growl of sorts, scrambled quickly towards her. Both of them tripped over the overturned table and landed hard and tangled, giving Lizzy a chance to get to her feet and run. But the reprieve was brief. They also leaped to their feet and sprinted towards her, quickly closing the distance.

Lizzy wanted to run back into the basement, but one look over her shoulder and she knew it was impossible. If she stopped to open the basement door, they'd be on her.

Instead, Lizzy ran past the basement door and the passage leading into the kitchen. She didn't change direction to head down the next corridor to her right where the bedrooms were located. She pushed on into the den at the end of the hall and had the presence of

mind to reach out for the doorknob and pull the door closed behind her.

It didn't matter.

Her parents were moving fast enough that their momentum carried them through it. Pieces of the door flew everywhere as it splintered, and Lizzy's parents burst into the room. They were momentarily confused, losing sight of Lizzy. A piece of the door stuck out of Mr. Glasgow's abdomen, but he seemed unconcerned. Then both parents caught sight of their daughter on the other side of the room and moved quickly to intercept her.

Lizzy ran through the door at the other end of the den, again pulling it closed as she went. This time her parents didn't have the running room to manage the speed they'd worked up to before. They slammed into the door, and it merely cracked under the pressure. The door rattled and shook as they pummeled on in incessantly. Lizzy backed away from the door slowly, her heart erupting in her chest, and managed to breathe deep and heavy until she was standing in the passage on the other side of the kitchen.

"Lizzy, what's going on?"

Lizzy looked across the kitchen. Brandon was standing outside the basement doorway in the hall she'd just escaped from.

Brandon made a motion to his right with his thumb. "What happened to the door? Where are Mom and Dad?"

Suddenly the pounding on the door in front of Lizzy stopped. It took her only a quarter of a second to realize why.

She turned to her brother and ran as fast as she could across the kitchen. "Brandon!" she screamed. She watched as her brother turned to his right. She recognized the look of stark horror as it spread across

Dead Fall

his face. She could hear her parents' snarl as they approached outside her view.

Lizzy dove towards her brother and tackled him just as he was beginning to crouch in a terrified, defensive posture. Her parent's outstretched hands grazed her back as both Lizzy and Brandon disappeared into the basement and slammed into the wall at the top of the stairs. Lizzy barely kept them from toppling down the steps.

Mr. and Mrs. Glasgow were once again disoriented briefly when their prey vanished from in front of them, giving Lizzy time to shut and lock the basement door. No sooner was the bolt in place than the door began to rock, pounded from the other side.

Brandon was crying and Lizzy might have been, too, were she not in a state of shock.

"Wuh...what's wrong with Mom and Dad?" Brandon stuttered between blubbering pants.

"I don't know." They both watched the door. "I don't know," she said again, shaking her head.

She put her arm softly around her brother's shoulder, and both of them backed slowly down the stairs. As they did so, finally, for Lizzy, the tears began to flow.

* * * * *

For the next few days, the tears continued to flow as the siblings came to grips with their situation. During that time they ate very little and slept even less, tortured emotionally by the constant beating at the top of the stairs, and unconsciously by visions of their parents anytime they managed to close their eyes.

On the fifth day, they began to ask questions. When will their parents ever quit banging on the door? Why don't they ever get tired? Or hungry? Or thirsty? But

Joseph Xand

mainly, why on Earth would their parents want to hurt them?

On the sixth day, Lizzy decided to ascend the basement stairs and try to talk some sense into her parents, although, by that point, she knew unconsciously the endeavor was pointless.

That's when she found the note. It was on the floor next to the door, half leaning against the wall. It read:

"DO NOT OPEN THE DOOR!

Lizzy and Brandon,

Your father was hurt and may have been infected by the bad bug going around. I have him in bed in our bedroom and am doing what I can for him. Don't leave the basement until I come for you. If for some reason you don't hear from me for awhile, and you must leave the basement, go through the door that goes to the backyard and head over to the Hoppers' place. Use the alleys. Don't go out into the street! It's dangerous out. No matter what, never forget that your father and I love you very much.

-Mom"

The note was stained with what might have been blood and spotted with what might have been tears. The top of the note had a strip of tape across it. Apparently, their mother had taped the note to the inside of the door before locking the lower lock, closing the door, then securing the deadbolt. The tape must have come loose before Lizzy woke up to discover her parents were gone.

Lizzy showed the note to her younger brother, and he cried some more. It was obvious Mom wouldn't be

Dead Fall

coming for them. At least not in the way they'd have hoped.

It was another four days before they decided to chance leaving the basement. They'd do exactly as their mother had suggested—leave through the basement door that opened into the backyard and head to the Hoppers'. In preparation for the trip, Brandon decided to utilize their father's tools to fashion a weapon. He found a short 2x4, about three-foot long, and drove nails into one end of it to create a nasty, lethal club. But the noise from its construction yielded unexpected, heart-wrenching results. Before the fifth nail was driven, there was a pounding on the backyard door to match the pounding at the top of the stairs.

Brandon climbed a table and peeked out the window through the chip in the paint. Two women, each with gaping open wounds and organs and guts hanging out from them, were laid out on top of the double doors, beating on them with their hands. They'd been drawn in by the pounding of the hammer.

Now Lizzy and her brother were truly trapped.

They spent the next four weeks in relative boredom. They talked very little, only when necessary.

Lizzy doled out their dull food, warming it on a hotplate. But a week in, the electricity went out, forcing them to eat their food cold and utilize sleeping bags in addition to their comforters on nights the temperature dropped.

To pass the time, Brandon pulled out the rest of the camping equipment and erected a tent, tying the ropes off to various pieces of furniture or pipes since he couldn't stake them to the ground (not that he was concerned the wind would knock over the tent). Lizzy, for her part, found a collection of sappy romance novels and surprised herself at how engrossed she could get into them.

Joseph Xand

Eventually, Brandon committed what would have been a cardinal sin were his father still alive. He cracked the lid on his father's prized comic book collection, grabbed a handful of the thin, plastic-sheathed books, and disappeared into the tent, where he spent most of his time. As the days passed, the box grew more and more empty until Brandon eventually moved the entire collection into the tent, save for a small stack of Archies, which he apparently didn't care for. He left them on his father's work bench. At one point, Lizzy peeked into the tent flaps to see early editions of Batman and Superman, horror and mystery comics, all sleeveless, scattered about the tent carelessly, Brandon cross-legged in a corner, reading by flashlight.

Throughout, the pounding on the doors never ceased. It slowed, perceptibly, from the initial barrage of fists, but it never stopped. And between the noise at the top of the stairs and the racket from those beating on the backyard basement door, it could be nerve-racking at times.

On the rare occasions Lizzy and Brandon spoke, it was usually to discuss plans of escape, but none of their ideas seemed all that plausible. Brandon favored fashioning another weapon and simply throwing open one of the exits and taking on whatever was out there. But neither of them could warm to the idea of having to face their parents again, much less fight them. The backyard door didn't seem like a good idea either. First, they probably couldn't lift the doors with those things on them. Second, the small window offered little in the way of reconnaissance. There could be a hundred more of those things wandering the backyard or the alley beyond and they'd never know it until it was too late. But one problem they couldn't get passed was the speed with which the creatures moved. Even if they could get

Dead Fall

out of the house, if they were ever spotted by one of those things, they'd never be able to outrun it.

They never seemed to tire or run out of breath.

Which was another topic of their scant discussions. Just what were those things? Why didn't they need to rest? Take a piss break? Again questions of food and water and how those things went without either would emerge from their conversations. And then, how were they still alive with such terrible wounds?

It was Brandon who first suggested they might not be alive at all.

It was Brandon who first used the "Z" word.

But no matter how many times they discussed the possibilities that they were dealing with zombies or simply extremely ill living human beings, or how many times they debated escape, they always ended doing nothing at all towards leaving the basement, believing, in the end, they'd undoubtedly be rescued, and all their questions then inevitably answered.

But eventually, Lizzy was forced into the realization that their escape was necessary, and soon.

Several concerns contributed to this conclusion. Not the least of them was the stench, which assailed their senses on three fronts. First, the stench of death from both the top of the stairs and the backyard doors. Second, the smell emanating from the small basement bathroom toilet. The water stopped working two days after the electricity and they hadn't been able to flush the toilet in weeks. Third, their own body odor. With the loss of water came the loss of the ability for sponge baths in the bathroom sink to keep themselves at least somewhat clean.

The loss of water also brought about another, more serious concern. Lizzy hadn't been rationing water as heavily as food because they'd been able to refill water

Joseph Xand

bottles in the sink. Now they were down to only nine bottles of water.

And even with as good a job as she'd done rationing food, the supply quickly dwindled. They were down to five cans of beans and eight pre-packaged containers of mixed fruit. At most she could make it last a week, but no more.

It was time for Lizzy and her brother to have another discussion on how to escape. A serious discussion.

The conversation revealed nothing new. Opening the door at the top of the stairs was really their only option. There was no way to move the two zombies from atop the basement's backyard door, and even if they could coax them off in some way, they had no idea what lay beyond the doors until they were opened. However, if they managed to get passed their parents, either by killing them or locking them in the basement, then they'd have time to look out the windows and plan their next move.

The speed with which their parents moved was still a problem, but Brandon reasoned that, if they were indeed dealing with zombies, then maybe rather than chasing them down the stairs, their parents would simply fall down them, giving him and his sister time to maneuver around them...if they fell all the way down the stairs. It seemed plausible and only required one person to open the door. The other could wait within the basement, hopefully out of harm's way.

There was some debate as to who should be the one to open the door, and it was then that Lizzy remembered something. She recalled how quickly her parents became disoriented when they couldn't lock on a target. What if they used that to their advantage? They could both open the door and try to squeeze themselves behind it. Then when their parents weren't looking, Lizzy and Brandon could push them down the stairs. It

Dead Fall

seemed the path of least resistance, even if it did leave both of them trapped between their parents and the wall.

Both agreed Lizzy's plan was their best option and set the next morning as their time of escape. Brandon got busy making another weapon for Lizzy while Lizzy inventoried their few supplies and tried to figure out how to carry them and still pull off hiding behind the door.

Lizzy decided against taking any of the romance novels. There would be better things to read upstairs. Brandon insisted on a handful of comics he hadn't had a chance to read yet, and eventually, Lizzy relented. She thought about what she'd bring if she could and decided she wanted to dig her diary out of her closet in her bedroom and bring it along.

Then it hit her. Her diary. Her closet.

She jumped to her feet.

Brandon saw her and stopped hammering. "What is it?"

Lizzy looked up and studied the basement's ceiling, made up of floor joists of the floor above them.

"Where do you think my room is?" she asked him in reply.

"Stupid question. Down the hall from the den, third door on the left."

"No dummy. From here. Where is my room above us?"

"Oh. I don't know. Let's see..." Brandon pondered.

He met Lizzy in the middle of the floor and together they walked under the staircase so that, upstairs they would have been just outside the basement door. From there the two of them walked the hallway in their minds and turned about where they agreed the corridor leading to the bedroom would be. Then, about thirty feet from the basement wall, Brandon stopped, imagining the ten

Joseph Xand

foot or so distance from Lizzy's bedroom door to their parent's door, then the depth of their parents' room to the outer wall, roughly twenty feet. Then Brandon took a left, walked a few feet, and turned back to face Lizzy.

"Your room would be around in this area, I think."

Lizzy nodded. "Yeah, that feels about right."

"Why?"

Lizzy didn't answer. Instead, she scanned the floor joists above her, particularly in the area she imagined her closet would be with respect to her bedroom door.

Finally, she saw it; a two-foot by one-foot plywood box built crudely between two joists. Lizzy grabbed a chair and pulled it beneath the box. She stood on the chair and felt for a way into the box. Her fingers circled the roofing tacks binding the plywood to the joists.

"Go get the hammer," she told her brother.

"What's this about?" he asked.

"You'll see. Just go get it."

Sighing loudly, Brandon retrieved the hammer and handed it up to her. Using the claw of the hammer, Lizzy quickly found a bite between the plywood and the joist and pried the hammer up, forcing the plywood down. The one-inch nails popped loose easily. She pulled down on the plywood with her hands and nearly lost her balance on the chair when her diary hit her in the chest and fell to the floor.

"All that for your stupid diary?"

"No dummy."

"Stop calling me that!"

Lizzy ignored him and pulled the plywood completely off, dropping it to the floor, and looked up into the box. She remembered when her older brother had shown her the secret hiding place in his closet in the room she'd inherit the next day after he moved away to go to college. She'd been perplexed at first when he pulled her into his closet, then got on his hands and

Dead Fall

knees, rummaging in a corner. He'd peeled back a corner of the carpet, then yanked up some boards set loosely between the joists. He told her how he'd build a box below his closet so he'd have a place to hide things. He'd never told her what he'd kept there, but she imagined weed and porno mags. And when she moved in, although her diary was no secret, she'd started hiding it in the secret place in her closet to keep it out of the hands of her nosey little brother.

Lizzy reached above her between the floor joists and easily pushed up the floor boards. She pulled them out and handed them down one by one to her little brother. She then stretched to fold the carpet up so that she was staring up at clothes hanging above her.

She looked down at her brother and smiled. He looked up at her with wide eyes, his mouth agape.

* * * * *

Finding the passage out of the basement and into Lizzy's room changed everything. Their plans had to be completely revised, more than once.

Their first revised plan was the easiest. They'd both climb up to Lizzy's room, then Lizzy would sneak down the hallway and shut the hallway door, cutting them off from their parents and giving Lizzy and Brandon free reign over the bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a couple of hall closets from which to gather supplies, and ample windows from which to monitor the outside world (on three sides of the house, at least) so they could plan their next move.

Of course, even the easiest plan wasn't without its problems. When Lizzy was last in the house, the giant window in the living room had been shattered, exposing their home completely to more of those creatures coming in undetected. For all they knew, there were

Joseph Xand

dozens of those things in the house. They didn't think so because they'd have likely heard them walking above them at some point, but not every part of the house had a part of the basement beneath it, so they couldn't be too sure.

Another problem was that the door leading from the corridor where the bedrooms were located to the hallway where their parents were beating on the basement door didn't have a lock on it as the one at the top of the basement stairs did. Brandon reasoned that the lack of a lock probably wouldn't matter. As far as they knew, so far their parents hadn't even tried the knob. They probably wouldn't think to turn the doorknob on the hallway door. Regardless they agreed it would probably be best to put a dresser from one of the bedrooms in front of the door to be sure.

Unfortunately, the plan never had a chance to play out. They dragged a table beneath Lizzy's closet and put the chair on it to make the climb into the house easier. But Lizzy quickly realized she couldn't fit through the small opening. Then Brandon tried, and he barely fit, scraping skin off his chest and shoulders in order to make it happen.

Back to the drawing board.

Obviously, Lizzy would need to leave through one of the doors. They had to come up with a plan that allowed Brandon to draw the dead away from one of the doors with as few risks as possible. The scheme they concocted was much more complicated than the ones before.

Brandon would squeeze into Lizzy's room and shut the door at the end of the hall as originally planned and gather supplies as originally discussed. Then in his room he would find his newest remote control vehicle, a monster-truck style police dune buggy complete with sirens and lights, and use it in the backyard to draw the

Dead Fall

creatures at the backdoor as far away as possible, and he'd try to do it from the safety of the window in his bedroom. Once the zombies were gone, he'd leave his room, knock lightly on the outside door for Lizzy to open it, then both would head back into the house via his bedroom window to plan their next move.

There were lots of foreseeable problems. What if the R/C vehicle no longer worked? He hadn't played with it in more than a year. How far can the vehicle get from the remote before it is out of range? What if it's not far enough? What if there are more of these creatures than expected and the siren on the vehicle simply draws them in? What if the creatures at the door don't even take the bait?

The plan was far-fetched and full of holes.

But it was all they had.

Plan B was for Brandon to leave Lizzy behind and bring back help if he could. Both hoped Plan B wouldn't be necessary. Neither of them wanted to be without the other.

At the agreed-upon time, the siblings said their goodbyes and, despite both fighting back tears, each assured the other that they'd be reunited within minutes. Brandon shimmied painfully up through the hole and with one last glance down into the basement, gave his sister a thumbs up.

At first, the colors of his sister's bedroom, the bright pinks and yellows, stabbed his senses, a complete reversal of the drab basement. He ignored the sensation and went straight to the window and peeked out the blinds. Sunlight attacked his eyes. It took a bit for his sight to adjust. When it did, his thoughts on what he saw outside were mixed. He was glad to see there weren't hundreds of zombies flooding the streets, but at least a half dozen staggered or stood about.

Joseph Xand

He left Lizzy's room and, before heading to the end of the hall to shut the door, he went quietly across to his room to check out the backyard. Most of the basement door, as well as the creatures on it, were beyond his view from his window, but he could hear them pounding on the door. So far no other creatures inhabited the backyard, at least the parts he could see. He looked at the driveway leading to the alley and wondered if he'd be able to drive the R/C buggy down it and around the corner from here. It seemed to be quite a distance. Plus if the creatures outside moved as fast as his mom and dad had, they'd probably overtake the slower-moving miniature dune buggy long before it reached the alley. The odds of pulling this off seemed stacked against him.

When he turned to leave, he found a package of cookies on his desk he'd forgotten to bring back to the kitchen. He stuffed five of them in his mouth greedily. They were long stale but tasted like heaven.

He left the room and started moving slowly to the end of the hall. As he went, the sound of his parents pounding grew louder and louder. He reached the door without incident and grasped the doorknob. But he didn't shut the door. He listened to his parents, the two people who'd loved him unconditionally his entire life. Despite the weeks of pounding and the moaning, he still loved them, too. And he knew he couldn't leave without seeing them one more time.

Silently he released the knob and edged his eyes around the corner. He didn't see his parents. He saw piles of grotesque, decaying flesh draped upon brittle skeletons.

Brandon's heart reacted, his pulse quickened, and he gasped ever-so-slightly.

And then what was once his parents turned to look at him.

Dead Fall

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Lizzy stood below the door leading into the backyard and waited. She wondered if she'd be able to hear the siren of the small R/C vehicle from here. More than once since they'd been in the basement (when her parents were still with them) they'd heard sirens of emergency vehicles rampaging down the street all the way in front of the house, but this was just a toy. If she could hear it, she should have heard it by now. Something must be wrong.

She listened to the pounding on the door above her and knew that if the plan worked then the pounding should stop abruptly. She waited and her own heartbeat seemed to match the rhythm.

And then the pounding stopped. But not from above her head. Her parents had stopped beating on the door at the top of the basement steps.

Lizzy's head whipped around and she looked up the steps across the room. She stopped breathing.

She walked cautiously to the bottom of the stairway. "Brandon?" she called up. There was no reply.

She stepped up onto the first step, but then turned and darted back to the table and chair beneath her closet. She climbed them and stuck her head into the closet. She couldn't see anything because Brandon had closed the closet door, which had actually been part of the plan. If something went wrong and Brandon had to leave Lizzy alone, the closet door being shut would offer at least some protection against something coming through the hole after her.

"Brandon!" she called loudly into the darkness. Again Brandon didn't answer her. "Brandon, please!" she pleaded into the stale air. Still nothing.

Joseph Xand

She started to cry as she scampered down to the floor. She crossed back to the stairway, grabbing the deadly club Brandon had made for her. She ascended the steps leading up to the house slowly, sobbing as she climbed. As she stepped onto the landing and turned to the door, thoughts raced through her mind. Thoughts like, *I should never have let him go up there by himself*, or *Now I'm all alone*, or *This is my fault!*, or *It should have been me*.

As imperceptibly as possible, she popped the doorknob lock and slid back the deadbolt.

With tears streaming down her face, and remorse and self-deprecation streaming everywhere else, Lizzy reached for the doorknob.

But it turned on its own. The door creaked open for the first time in many weeks.

About the same time a group of medium-level army officers, meeting at an abandoned car dealership in a small town in South Michigan, were voting on a motion to refer to a large portion of the upper United States as the North Central Corridor; and the same day Dr. Thaddeus Palmer was to begin deconstructing his barn (his father's barn) during which he'd find a heavy, five-foot piece of rusty rebar, Brandon Glasgow opened a door leading into the basement, flooding with sister with light and surprise.

He looked down into her stunned eyes, red and puffy from crying, a crude, nail-filled club raised clumsily above her.

"Sorry," Brandon apologized. "There was a change of plans."

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