

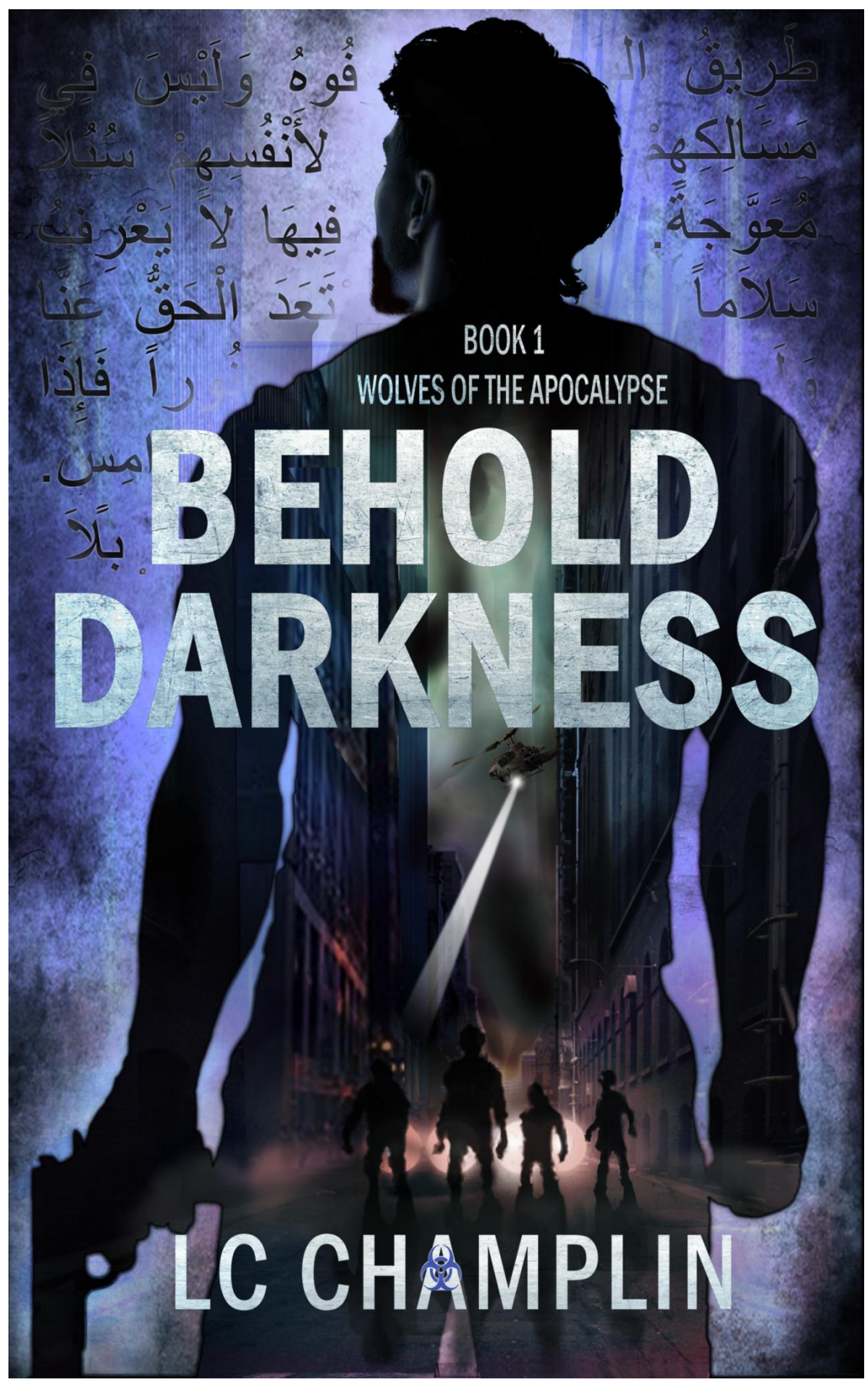
فُوهُ وَآيِسَ فِي
لَأَنْفُسِهِمْ سُبُلًا
فِيهَا لَا يَعْرِفُ
تَعَدَّ الْحَقُّ عَنَا
نُورًا فَإِذَا

طَرِيقُ الدَّ
مَسَالِكِهِمْ
مُعَوَّجَةٌ
سَلَامًا

BOOK 1
WOLVES OF THE APOCALYPSE

مِسْ
بَلَاءٌ
**BEHOLD
DARKNESS**

LC CHAMPLIN 



Wolves of the Apocalypse:

Behold Darkness

Deleted Scene:

Gang Warfare

By LC Champlin

Thanks for checking out the book!

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Wolves of the Apocalypse: Behold Darkness, by LC Champlin.

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Cover by me, since apparently if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself – even if you try to pay someone.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Special thanks to...

Dragon,

Scorpion,

Fish,

Bear,

and Slug

for helping make this series possible.

WARNING:

This book is intended for MATURE AUDIENCES due to –

Blood and gore

Strong language

Intense situations

Extreme violence

Mature humor

Sexual themes

Interested yet? Thought so.

Author's Note:

My editor wisely advised me to delete this scene because it doesn't advance the plot. That said, it was wicked fun to write, and if you enjoyed the completed, edited *Behold Darkness*, you'll enjoy this deleted scene.

(You'll also see how wordy I am without an editor to rein me in!)

Chapter 17

Drive

Believe – The Bravery

Chirp. Headlights flashed on the silver - *Arctica*, they called it - Flying Spur as Nathan drew the key fob. He yanked the driver's side open, whipped off the assault rifles and stowed them in the passenger foot well, then swung into the Fireglow leather cockpit. *Yes.* A thrill of adrenaline tingled as he turned the ignition. The 6.0-litre, twin turbo, 48-valve W12 purred to life. Damn, too bad chaos choked the streets and left no way to test the Flying Spur's two-hundred MPH boast.

He shot the stick with its laminated B into Drive and eased the vehicle into the lot. Albin slammed the vault closed, then tossed the VTAC in the back seat and slid into the passenger side.

"Sir," he started as they fastened seatbelts, "if the streets are congested, it may be faster to travel on foot at some point."

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. I want as much steel between myself and the insanity as possible for as long as possible."

"Understood." Albin braced himself, grabbing the slingshot handle and center armrest. When he and Nathan didn't use a limo, the attorney fought to occupy the driver's side. His rationales ranged from "You have papers to look over," to "Do it for appearance sake." Really the blond lacked appreciation of Nathan's driving style.

Nathan chuckled as he spun the wheel and gunned the engine. G forces shoved Albin against the door. "Find a news report. Let's see what's going on. Maybe they can tell us what those...things were."

"Let us hope they are an isolated incident." The adviser spared a hand to flip radio channels while Nathan waited for the barrier arm to raise thanks to battery backup. "An infection may be the cause. Ebola perhaps, or Marburg."

Nathan advanced the Bentley left onto Minna St., bi-Xenons turning power-outage night to day. The mass of twisted, burning wreckage in front of the St. Regis-proper blocked the short route, forced a round-the-block detour. "But why are they attacking us? That's not what the victims on the documentaries did."

“As I lack a degree in virology, I cannot say.”

Static, rap, static, country - news. Naim’s 1100 Watts of subwoofer power and bass extension brought the news woman’s voice across in crystal clarity.

Nathan swerved to avoid a car wrapped around a light pole. Damn narrow streets.

“-Emergency crews are working to extinguish fires on Battery St. in the Department of State building and Main St. at the Federal Reserve Bank-”

Bentley tires screeched as he slammed on the brakes to avoid ramming a fleeing, panicked pedestrian. “Idiot!” *One, two, three, four.*

“-Authorities are ordering people to make their way to safe zones at Union Square on Geary and Stockton-”

He slowed long enough to glance both ways before swinging left past the One Way sign. Down New Montgomery St., go around the block.

“One way, sir,” Albin warned, pushing himself back in his seat as if to avoid advancing with the vehicle.

Headlights blazed ahead, charging them like a grizzly. Glinting steel whipped past inches from the driver’s side mirror. Nathan grunted as the Flying Spur jumped the right curb. “I’m only going *one* way. I’m not taking more detours if I can help it.”

“All things considered, Mr. Serebus, it may be safer and more expedient to stop here and return on foot-”

Thwump! A crack of distant thunder.

Rain, just what they needed. Nathan leaned toward the wheel as he threaded the pass between a delivery truck and a wreck. Fires licked the metal, hellish ghosts of the dead streetlamps that stared down at the chaos.

“-There’s been another explosion, this time at the Immigration and Customs-”

Not thunder, then.

Left on Mission St. ahead. Fuck! A garbage truck hulked in the darkness, angled across the street. A car that had rammed its rear blocked what remained of Mission. Did the entire damn city want to defeat him?

“Bloody hell! We’re never going to get there at this rate,” he snarled under his breath, mashing the accelerator and launching through the canyon of high rises. Ahead continued the obstacle course of running pedestrians, earthquake rubble, and abandoned vehicles.

Another pair of headlights approached. Swerve, brake, accelerate. LEDs blazed across dark windows, then back across the road.

Nathan bared gritted teeth as his heart thundered in his ears. Then, another noise above the war drums: “-of us needs to find a route for the vehicle while the other returns to the St. Regis.” Albin’s you-may-be-the-boss-but-you-are-a-sodding-dolt tone.

“-Sweeping power and phone service outages are hampering-”

Jessie St., also alight with wrecks. Shit. Two figures staggered into the road, one in a red shirt and the other in a yellow jacket. Headlights sped toward the intersection, only to slam into the pedestrians. Ragdolls flew as the truck spun out and plowed into a parked car. Another street blocked. And every second took them farther and farther from the hotel.

“Split up?” Nathan snarled after a breath. His stomach lurched at the memory of the last two separations and the car-vs.-pedestrian contest. “No. No more needles in burning haystacks or solo slogs through Hell.”

“Even if it means your new friend burns? If we fail to arrive soon, our efforts will be wasted anyway.”

Concentration making Nathan one with the road ahead, he couldn’t spare Albin a glance, but the icy gaze pinned him. Damn it, why did the man always have to make so much sense? *Because that’s what I pay him to do.*

“-Gangs are reported to be active in the areas, and experts suspect-”

Jaw working, nails biting the heels of his hands, Nathan jerked the Bentley right, onto the sidewalk where a meter once resided. Seatbelts locked at the sudden stop. Right hand over the stick’s polished B motif, he shoved it into Park.

The seatbelt hissed aside. “You’re right at least ninety-eight percent of the time, I freely admit.” The CZ glinted in the light of a nearby fire as he deployed it. “This had better not be the two percent.”

“It’s the only option if you want to save her,” Albin responded, accepting the CZ while handing over the AK.

As if the emphasize his point, a siren’s bleat and scream on Market St. forty yards ahead joined the din. Red and white pulsed over the buildings, reminiscent of blood on upholstery. A second later an ambulance rumbled past.

“Consider that an improvised weapon.” Nathan nodded to the 9mm. He tossed the AK strap over his head while locking gazes with Albin. “Get back alive. That’s an order, Albin Conrad.” Then he threw the driver’s door open and ducked out.

Albin hoisted himself across the center console to take the wheel. “Of course, sir. This isn’t New York City, after all. Godspeed, Mr. Serebus.”

The Flying Spur's door slammed and Nathan took off back down New Montgomery.

Chapter 18

Ambulance Chaser

Get Lonely With Me – George Ezra

Albin took the wheel and guided the Bentley toward the intersection of Market St. and Montgomery St. The vehicle responded to the slightest touch, as if it sensed its master's thoughts. The comfort of driving oneself settled over Albin. Not that Mr. Serebus drove poorly – he possessed superb skills – he simply operated vehicles like he performed every other action: in the most intense way possible.

The rearview mirror showed Mr. Serebus as he dodged around a wreck and out of view. Separating rankled, but they had few other options.

Nathan Serebus felt most comfortable when he held the reins of power. Control came as naturally to him as breathing. People handed him authority on a silver platter because doing so felt so correct. Unquestionably, he wielded said power with the grace of a master samurai with a katana.

At the intersection, the Flying Spur slowed as Albin squinted in either direction. Crimson and white strobed the canyon walls a block north on Market St. The siren shrieked its ode to confusion as the ambulance sped onward. If he followed, perhaps he could gain their attention and convince them to at least halt and call for assistance, if not return to the St. Regis. An ambulance would spare them the trip to a safe zone that would no doubt devolve into disaster.

The news announcer's voice cut through his thoughts: “-go to the Union Square Red Cross safe zone for medical help-” Good to know.

As he toed the accelerator, a mid-sized sedan flashed through the bi-Xenons' glare, traveling north up Market St. He swung out after. Construction barriers, parked cars, wrecks, and debris from the quake clogged the artery, but wide pedestrian walks afforded passage in the Serebus school of driving.

Ever the field marshal, Mr. Serebus held the rare station of a man Albin respected and followed. The Alaskan daily proved himself worthy of loyalty via his ingenuity and intelligence.

From somewhere ahead a boom of thunder penetrated the Bentley's cabin. No, thunder sounded much different and originated from above, not ahead. A collision must've occurred. The complications in this quest kept mounting, but duty called.

Even the act of considering leadership's bothers gave Albin a migraine. Let him operate from the cool of the shadows. If the current leader slipped, however, he'd take charge in a heartbeat.

Mr. Serebus did not slip; he simply required the occasional reality check. Now he felt a...responsibility to get the hotel employee to safety – a very dangerous objective. Perhaps it stemmed from second thoughts about entering the Berserker rage of his Norse ancestors and pulverizing his former bodyguard's skull. Life for life, with his efforts to save the girl acting as hyssop to cleanse the bloody handprint from his soul. Why? Mr. Serebus asserted that he never felt guilt. Instead, he handled setbacks by striving to prevent their reoccurrence.

No need for guilt existed anyway. The guard fell asleep at his post. If the bodyguards had performed their duty, perhaps the terrorists wouldn't have captured him- No. Thoughts of his capture and hostage status rolled behind the mental vault door. The steel guarded memories that only functioned to invoke unfruitful states of mind and emotion. Yet even as the barrier closed, sunlight blazed around it and a desert wind blasted forth. Sweat slithered down the side of Albin's neck, along his carotids. Then the vault sealed, returning the temperature to normal. He swallowed past a sandy throat. Memories... Case in point.

Ahead, the emergency lights had halted. He advanced the Bentley with caution.

Perhaps only Mr. Serebus's drive for control prompted the rescue. Possible but doubtful, considering the severity of their situation.

Ambulance and sedan slid into view. Passenger side open, the car rested with its left front buried in the emergency vehicle's right rear corner. The ambulance's doors hung ajar. It had challenged a row of bollards on the northwest side of the road and lost, glancing off one only to ram another. Judging from the smoke wafting from the crumpled fore, the truck wouldn't help Mission: Unnecessary Complication – or rather, the rescue. What a waste.

Albin tapped a finger on the B-embossed stick, foot still on the brake. Every second he vacillated could mean the difference between life and death, both for Mr. Serebus and his sacrificial lamb. Albin had not unleashed Berserker rage on a subordinate, even one who probably deserved it. He did not need to redeem himself via a lost cause.

Figures moved at the front of the ambulance in the flashing lights and single functional headlamp.

A compromise, then: he could ascertain the status of the vehicle's occupants while, if the crash incapacitated the medics, he searched for useful items in the ambulance. He swung the Bentley onto the brick sidewalk on the opposite side of the street and stepped out, the 1911's weight at his side a talisman against the dark. His torch cut a swath through the murk as he circled to the front of the scene.

Chapter 19

Local Color

Pompeii - Bastille

Two blocks, then right on Mission. Nathan dodged wreckage, the rifle butt against his shoulder.

She's not worth it, called a voice in the back of his mind, a voice like his own but muffled as if in forest. Why risk everything for a random hotel employee? He just let his friend drive off into what fuck-all kind of chaos. *Why?*

Nathan Serebus didn't sacrifice, he invested. What ROI did he expect for this Good Samaritan stunt? By all estimates, she'd probably die even if he reached her. But he wouldn't forfeit his effort, not yet. *Sunk-costs fallacy*, the voice admonished. Resources already spent shouldn't affect his ability to make the right choice. Time remained to keep avoidable future costs from turning into prospective costs.

Ahead, three young people started to trot toward him, apparently mistaking him for a cop. Idiots. He raised the AK and yelled a warning, warding them off.

He might never see Albin again. Hot dread spread down his neck, coiled in his chest. All for what? What the hell type of life-valuation system did he use? *What the fuck are you doing, Nathan Serebus? What kind of man are you, losing control like this?* The dried blood on his face itched as he grimaced.

Two dark figures separated from the flickering shadows ahead, firelight rendering their faces a sick orange. One wore a red sweater and jeans, the other a yellow Lakers windbreaker over a Timberwolves tee. Wait, the two collision victims? No wonder they stumbled. Hold on a moment... Something felt off about how they moved, like they received small electric shocks with each step. Shell-shocked, their rust-colored eyes bulged. Rust?

One, two, three, four.

Nathan slowed a notch to analyze the threat level. The nearest threw back its head, opened its mouth in a *ssssaaaahhh*. Oil glistened as it dripped from the jaws. Oh shit, out here too?

If they could take out a group of terrorists and survive a head-on with a truck, it behooved him to play it safe. Two double-taps thundered through the streets to strike center of mass in a spray of gore. The abominations hit the ground under the 7.62mms' kick. That should slow them down.

He broke into a sprint. *Two percent, Albin.* Two goddamned percent incorrect!

Mission St., finally! He leapt onto the car smashed against the garbage truck. On the other side stretched a war zone: fires, wreckage, bodies, broken windows. To either side, skyscrapers rose like Titans.

No time to waste staring. He jogged toward the St. Regis. More bodies greeted him, these hanging from vehicle windows. What happened to them? The trauma from the car wrecks didn't appear fatal. Perhaps the terrorists released a chemical weapon. If he stopped to perform a forensics investigation, the lost time would cost Kate her life.

Ahead hunched the Hummer, where it blocked the St. Regis Ame Restaurant entrance. He trotted to a halt at the third window past the Humvee and its shredded driver. If he guessed correctly, this window would make a perfect emergency exit/entrance.

Lucky the Hummer mowed down a meter. After a quick assessment of the scene and its hazards, he grabbed the meter's base like a Hank Aaron slugger. Nikes screwed into the sidewalk, muscles tensed with adrenaline, he swung. The recoil went straight through his wrists in a blast of fire and needles. "Ah! Shit!" he hissed, the meter sliding from tingling hands.

He shook out his arms, then fumbled at the cord and dumbbells. If this didn't work, the ricochet would probably kill him. Fantastic.

Just forget it. Wait for Albin.

No. A damned piece of glass would not defeat Nathan Serebus.

Feet braced, spine straight, 10lb on the ground... *One, two, three, four.* The dumbbell lifted off to hum through the air. Release. Ten pounds of iron at a hundred miles an hour collided with plasticized glass. *Crack!* Close but not a shatter.

Rinse and repeat. This time the dumbbell blasted through. Enlarge the break and-

A group of figures, six in all, swaggered around the corner of 3rd St. from the direction of Market. Nathan paused, slid into a defensive stance. Baggy pants with crotches at the knees, hoodies and T-shirts two sizes too large, and an assortment of weapons marked them as gang members. Asian, likely Chinese, as even in the gloom they didn't look dark enough to hail from Cambodia.

One, two, three, four. Hold. One... Tense muscles loosened, prepared themselves for reflex-quick action. His grip slid up the cord, closer to the dumbbell.

Six armed thugs with mayhem on their minds. Excellent. About time he received reinforcements. A creative distraction never hurt either. Kate's life timer ticked away, but this time investment should only cost two minutes, maximum. The ROI would justify the choice.

Chapter 20

Rescue the Rescuers

I Am a Rock – Simon and Garfunkel

A paramedic crouched beside a prone body, the sedan's remaining headlamp silhouetting them. Another first responder checked the condition of the car's occupants on the passenger side. The authorities appeared to have the scene under control. Perhaps they could radio for another unit to detour to the St. Regis.

Despite the situation's urgency, Albin hesitated. This seemed like a puzzle where a piece fit almost but not exactly. The torch's beam scanned the surrounding buildings, cars, trees. There, three figures staggered along behind One Bush Plaza's wall.

The nape of his neck crawled with the sensation of surveillance. Spinning, he slashed the light over the wall on the opposite side of Market St. Three faces ducked behind the concrete blocks, human cockroaches averse to the light. Only looters or other filth would act so under these circumstances.

Never let the enemy flank your position. How many times had Grandfather repeated the maxim? He needed to complete his task before the situation worsened.

Then the earth rumbled, forcing him to his hands and knees lest he fall. Concrete fell from facades, windows cracked, and car alarms blared. Why did California claim all the abnormal occurrences? The ground didn't attempt to throw one off its back in England and New England.

After what felt like an eternity, the tremor ceased.

Keep your head. Yes, the looters and cannibals. The medics should know the danger nearby. "Watch out-" the words died as the first medic's patient reared, grabbed the man's neck, and heaved upward to sink teeth into the victim's throat. "Gaaaah!" The cry ended with a gurgle as the medic struggled.

Crimson flowed over white, blistered skin. The .45's sights hovered over scene now. Cannibals out here? Then the St. Regis alone did not contain the phenomenon. Images of the things tearing into the terrorists' throats and bringing them down like lions on gazelle flickered at

the edges of his mind. His grip on the Springfield tightened, the crosshatching rough on his skin, banishing the memories.

“Kevin!” The medic at the sedan leapt toward his comrade, only to stop short as the monster dropped its prey and turned rust eyes on him. Kevin spasmed on the ground.

Albin exhaled. The front sight snapped into focus, targeting the cannibal’s skull. As he squeezed the trigger, the killer lunged at its prey. The weapon’s thunder resounded through the street. The bullet caught its target in the thigh. A poor shot, it threw the attacker off balance and halted its advance.

For a moment the target remained prone. Then with a *sssssaaaaahhh* it struggled to right itself.

Sssssaaaaahhhhh. More hisses emanated from behind the ambulance, above the whir of the rig’s generators, to join the first cannibal’s. Lovely. More cannibals, just as he’d always hoped to encounter in the middle of a war-zone city at night, alone, with only a handgun and limited ammunition.

He advanced, knees bent, center of gravity low, weapon covering the scene. Another report issued from the .45. The cannibal dropped like a ragdoll as the lead punched through its skull to liquefy brain tissue. Ah, headshots worked like a charm. Brilliant.

“What the- What the fuck!” The remaining medic staggered backward toward the car, mouth open and eyes bulging.

This little adventure cost two rounds thus far. Payment begged services or goods be provided. Albin skirted the growing pool of blood, halting before the terrified medic. “It is a shame about your friend, but you can still be of use. Your radio.” He gestured to the young man’s harness-mounted radio and mic. The time came to take matters in hand.

“Wha- Why?” The poor fellow probably ranked as a rookie, one who’d seen only two or three real trauma runs as a full-fledged paramedic.

Sssssaaaaahhhh.

“Now.” Albin pinned him with a glacier-ice glare. “Remember your training. Control yourself.”

Enough waiting. Albin pulled the radio strap up over the medic’s head and unclipped it from his belt loop before the fellow could resist. An EMS transponder connected its operator to the dispatcher and emergency unit grid. With it the medic could receive updates on closed roads, danger points, and safe zones.

After ducking into the harness, Albin trotted around the sedan, whose driver sat shell-shocked or perhaps deceased. He needed to pass the ambulance rear to reach the Bentley. Speed and stealth should carry him past the cannibals.

The rig rocked under its occupants' machinations. Another step left brought the open door and interior into view. Ah, not good. Not good at all. Saliva turned to sand in his mouth, nearly choked him as he tried to swallow. Sweat on his palms forced him to adjust his grip on the 1911.

Two monsters rode a struggling medic, while another crouched atop a patient on the Stryker stretcher. A fourth gnawed the throat of a first responder. Blood sloshed on the floor, streamed out the back and onto the asphalt.

Four. Four monsters thrashed inside the ambulance while two .45 rounds remained in the Springfield. The 9mm and extra magazine occupied the Bentley's center console, the home of many a firearm in time of need.

Chapter 21

Backup

Invincible – Adelitas Way

The thugs saw Nathan. To make certain, he turned and swung the dumbbell into the glass again. The hole widened. He spared them a glance, then stepped back and readied for another attack.

But the ground had other ideas. A rumble made him drop to a crouch to keep his balance. After all he'd seen tonight, a worm thrashing out of the earth wouldn't surprise him. The asphalt calmed, though chunks of concrete crashed to the ground nearby.

The gangsters composed themselves. Back to business. The lead thug, a short punk who wore a bandana around his head, called, "Hey, what we got here? Some fucker cuttin' in on our shit?"

Nathan pivoted to face them, raised his chin and looked down at the gangbanger. So the dumbass wanted to play hardball. If he didn't watch his step, he'd lose his head under a Louisville Slugger. "Your shit? You can have your shit all you want. Today there's more than enough for everybody."

"You think so?" The punk grinned as he and his cronies sauntered closer. "See, I don't think you understand the concept of *territory* clearly."

A smile of reckless calm crawled across Nathan's face. "Oh, I think I'm pretty clear on it."

"Yeah?" Behind, the grunts readied their weapons: crowbars, sledges, pistols, even an MP5. They began to spread out to flank the lone vandal.

"There's more in this rich-fuck playhouse than you and your boys can carry," Nathan related as if speaking with friends at the local bar. "Liquor," eye contact with a crowbar wielder and an idiot with a face like a pancake. "Cash," addressing a sledgehammer user and a rat with a tweaker's twitch. "And the keys to rides you've only seen in your wet dreams." This took in Big Fuckler on the far right and Bandana Head. Greed flickered across their faces, put the weasel's slyness in their body language. "That is, if you get there before my boys grab all the best shit. First come, first serve." Up the urgency.

Loyalty played a significant role in gangs, but loyalty to *what* made the difference. They might follow a leader's orders, but only until they could take his place. Profit, power, and pleasure really called the shots in most street gangs.

Bandana Head sneered as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Your boys sound pretty hard. Why you out here and not gettin' the shit in there with 'em?"

Nathan jerked a thumb toward the hole. "Ever hear of a back door? Front door's already open."

"Maybe we should just take you along for security purposes." Bandana Head reached behind. Silver flashed in the firelight: a handgun.

"Maybe." The dumbbell swung gently from Nathan's grip. Time ticked away while these shitheads postured. "Or maybe not. Tell my guys Vlad says it's okay for you to 'help out,' and you're golden."

"How stupid you think we are?" The thugs shared a chuckle, with a smattering of "Fuck yeah," "Dumbass," and "Just cap him" for good measure.

Painfully stupid. Time to up the bravado. He could macho-man with the best of them, though he wanted a shower afterward. A man learned a lot from Dutch Harbor's Elbow Room Bar. "Pretty stupid if you don't get moving. If you're so scared, I'll go. But my guys are gonna get jealous if they see I've made new friends." He kept his tone light, his stance casual. "They'll be real pissed if they don't see me in about a minute." That should forestall Big Fucker, whose Magnum sight took a little too much interest in Nathan's center of mass.

"Yeah, sure, *Vlad*," the leader mocked as he looked about his crew for support. "I'm about to piss myself just thinkin' about 'em, Dracula."

Ten pounds of iron clinked to the pavement as Nathan held up a hand, but not in surrender. "I'll do you a solid." Thumb on the shoulder mic's PTT- "Red Team, come in. Got some of Vlad's *friends* out here. They're looking for a good time. They'll be at the front door; give 'em a warm welcome, will ya?" Hopefully they wouldn't notice the call sign omission.

"*Copy that.*" Red Chief's voice. "*We're always real happy to have company.*"

"*We're on our way,*" Red One joined in.

In the shadows, Nathan rolled the HT volume to nil. No distractions needed now.

Light from a nearby fire flickered over the asphalt to mingle with the icy moonlight. He took a casual step toward it. The illumination played over his armor, gear, and Red Hand.

The leader looked him up and down, an expression of mingled disgust and confusion forming. *Take a good look, punkass.* The others didn't bother to hide their reactions: "Crazy mofo," "Die-Hard," "Psycho ain't playin'."

"Now," Nathan bared his teeth in Hannibal-Lecter fashion as he took up slack in the electric cord, "if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." He turned toward the hole in the window, then glanced over his shoulder at the gang. "Remember, tell them Vlad says you're cool."

"You really got some balls on you, ya sick fuck!" Bandana Head laughed.

In reply, Nathan swung the weight into the reinforced glass.

Pancakeface muttered, "We're wasting time, K-Tong, they got easy shit in there!"

"Yeah," added Sledge, "We're supposed to get--"

"Who's on top here?" Bandana Head rounded on his underlings. "For that, you two can babysit Dracula here. If it ain't everything he's said, have fun with him."

Another swing punched out a chunk of glass from the left. Nathan converted wrecking ball to hammer by grabbing the dumbbell. Two more blows should widen the hole enough for him to carry Kate out without lacerating himself. His new bodyguards meant he could focus.

The two gang members left out of the ransacking fun frowned but did as their boss ordered. They flanked Nathan, casting annoyed looks at each other.

"Who you with?" Pancakeface grated, curiosity overcoming unease.

"With?" Nathan gave him a bemused look as he stepped back from the window. Glass littered the pavement, glittering like ice shards. "You don't recognize this?" He pointed to the Red Hand on his face.

Pops from inside the St. Regis announced the welcome party. The guards opened their mouths to question, but Nathan cut them off.

"What's that?" He nodded, up Mission St. Movement to two figures twitching and spasming as they advanced toward him and the idiots. Firelight writhed over gold and purple..and a red sweater. Black stained the holes that ventilated their clothing. The Timberwolf mascot drooled oil.

Chapter 22

Face Your Fear

Lights Out – Breaking Benjamin

What now? If Albin ran, the motion might attract the cannibals' attention. In the ambulance, two green cylinders sat in a rack against the driver's side. Oxygen tanks. Albin smiled, mirthless and determined. He backed up, opened range on the ambulance and its invaders. The .45's sight locked over the nearest cylinder. A steady trigger squeeze and the weapon kicked against his grip.

Of course he couldn't drop before the bullet impacted, but he made the attempt. As he ducked behind a parked car, magnesium-white sparks erupted in an explosion that triggered a second blast. Shrapnel sprayed through the ambulance and out the rear.

Fire licked the interior, then climbed up the ruined cannibals. Their prey wouldn't have survived even if the Springfield contained a full magazine. Carotid arteries and jugular veins made for quick deaths when jaws severed them.

Albin turned and sprinted toward the Bentley. Time constrained him to leave the scene in the hands of the rookie. The stripling would either earn his dinner or turn into dinner.

Ahead, the torch's light caught two figures crouched near his vehicle's driver's side. The looters from earlier wanted to make a night of it.

Dropping to a jog, he yelled, "Move or I fire!"

The two vandals looked up in shock, then fled like mice at the approach of a cat.

+++++

Sssssaaaaahhhh. Nathan's mouth went dry. No. No fucking way. Animal instinct cried for him to shoot, run, climb - anything to escape. His gut clenched as oil-mouths gaped and rust-eyes burned with hunger.

"What the fuck?" Sledge adjusted his grip on the hammer, disgust contorting his face.

“They’re crazy shitfaced.” Pancakeface pulled a .357 Python from under his hoodie. “Wish I could get some of whatever they got.”

Nathan stepped backward. Glass crunched under his Nikes. “They look pretty sick. They probably need some *help*, huh. Maybe need to be put to a merciful end?” The thugs wanted some entertainment, so let them get it.

Sledge chuckled, raising his hammer over his right shoulder. “Somebody better help ’em then.”

“Guess so.” Pancake’s revolver rose, then- *BOOM!*

The Lakers fan faceplanted as its right knee exploded. Its partner didn’t hesitate, but pressed on. Pancakeface laughed.

The report left Nathan’s ears ringing as he blinked muzzle-flare spots from his vision. Disable them. Good. He stepped through the hole and refastened the dumbbells around his waist while his bodyguards advanced on their prey.

More muffled thuds sounded inside the hotel.

Sssssaaaaahhh. The sweated cannibal’s attention locked on Sledge. The gangster swung his weapon, pulverizing this bastard’s knee, making the ghouls a matching set.

“How you feelin’?” he mocked.

A kick snapped the prone thing’s head back. Then its hand darted out like a striking viper and caught Sledge’s ankle. “Hey, get off!” He tried to shake loose, but the cannibal’s other hand shot out to shackle him. Slavering jaws sank into flesh. “Aaah! Sick fuck!” Then brain tissue and oil splattered under ten pounds of sledgehammer.

“What the fuck, what the fuck!” The bite victim dropped on his ass to hold his wound, while Pancakeface stared. “The hell? It’s on fucking fire!”

One, two, three, four. Hold. One- Nathan swallowed hard. The ghouls lay motionless, a chunk of dog meat.

Movement. The Lakers bastard got its intact leg under itself for a tripod crawl. Pain went unnoticed. *Ssssaaaaahhh*. Orange marble eyes bugged as it dragged toward Pancake, who gaped. A flicker of survival instinct made the Asian stumble back, only to trip on a crack and land on his ass too. The Python glinted in his slack grip.

Ssssaaahhh. Silent and cold, Nathan watched the scene unfold like the climax of a horror movie: The monster clawed its way up the gang member, who gasped and gabbled in panic. Its jaw hinged open like a snake’s. Its body twitched, heaved. Tar exploded from its maw to splatter the thug’s face. Pancakeface? Oilface now.

Ghoul puke apparently acted as a stimulant, because Pancakeface raised the Python. Another explosion of gunpowder and gray matter as the .357 punched through the skull, spraying the gangster with more gore.

Silence settled over the St. Regis. Shit. The terrorists would come to investigate the gunshots any second now.

Nathan turned from the terrorized gang members to find himself in an office. Desk, chairs, computer. Door.

He turned the HT volume back up. Channel set: 17. Distance and manmade canyons might interfere with the signal, but he needed to try. "Albin, do you copy?" He held his breath.

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The H-777 at Albin's belt hissed: "*Albin, do you copy?*"

Cannibals and looters owned the night, the 9mm served as his only weapon, and the ambulance had just exploded. Despite this, Nathan Serebus's voice triggered the response of focus and calm.

"Yes, sir. ETA four minutes at the latest."

"Good work. I met some local gang color outside, but they're a traumatized at the moment, so I doubt they'll be a problem"

"I would expect nothing less."

"I'm going to get Kate. I'll meet you outside. Be safe."

"You also, Mr. Serebus." *Do not get in over your head, even if you believe rescuing her is something you must do.*

Albin whipped the Bentley door open and slid inside. The engine fired to life. He backed into the street and aimed southward. Dark lampposts and deserted vehicles flashed past as he guided the vehicle toward his objective.

Mr. Serebus could talk himself into and out of almost any predicament. If the evening's events proved anything, they showed the Alaskan could also fight himself into and out of dangerous situations. Hopefully Mr. Serebus hadn't overestimated his abilities or underestimated his enemies'.

Chapter 23

Barefoot Into Hell

I Don't Want to Die – Hollywood Undead

Wheeling the volume to minimal, Nathan spared a last glance at the thugs outside. Sledge still whimpered over his ankle, while Pancake tried to rub the oil off his face with his hoodie. By the energy of his scrubbing, he'd take the first layer of skin off too.

Back to work. *One, two, three, four.* AK around and up, P2X blazing, he opened the door a crack. Clear. He left it ajar to facilitate escape.

He trotted down the hall, into the employee locker room. In the LED beam Kate lay still and pale under the towel and coat. *Just be alive!*

Nathan darted through the door, settled it closed. The terrorists didn't need any more encouragement to visit the back halls.

Across the room in three strides, he swung the rifle to his back and dropped to one knee beside the girl. Pulse, let there be a pulse. "Kate, can you hear me? Kate?" Nothing. Her neck's chill flesh made his heart miss a beat of its own as he checked for hers. Yes! Thready but present. She could still pull through.

An assessment of the bandages showed less wet blood than earlier. Signs didn't match wound severity. Then why...?

"What else happened, kid?" he muttered, lifting the coat. Ah. That explained her rapid deterioration. He should've checked earlier. Her life timer just dropped by half, if not more: A bullet entry hole on the right side of her abdomen glistened blue-black under the P2X. Possible lacerated intestines, if her luck held. If not, then a damaged liver and kidneys to match.

He eased her forward, checked her back for an exit wound. Bingo. Small caliber weapon, maybe a handgun. Arterial blood ran from the bullet's escape route, pooling on the concrete. He pulled a kitchen rag from a pocket and stuffed it into the hole. What he wouldn't give for another pack of QuickClot. Duct tape around her middle secured the pressure dressing. After trading the towel for more coats - the towel returning to his shoulders - he slid one arm under her knees and the other behind her back. He pushed to his feet.

“Albin, your estimate better be right.” He reached the door, but stopped. Voices outside, flashlight beams waving over the wall and window. From the sounds and the lights’ angle, their owners proceeded down the hall from the lobby side. Either the thugs recovered their balls, or the terrorists returned.

A door closed, down the hall. Room clearing.

One, two, three, four. Hold. One-

Another door closed. Getting closer.

His jaw clenched as he shifted his grip on Kate. That CZ would come in handy now. One-handed AK wielding while holding a hundred-plus pounds of victim didn’t work well. Sitting in the coat room and waiting for gunmen with automatic weapons didn’t appeal.

Stop the advance by whatever means necessary.

“There ain’t nothin’ back here,” came a male’s tobacco-tanned voice, one of the terrorists on sweep detail.

“Boss got what we came for,” replied a younger man. “We should get it to the airport while we can. Green’s about to hit Vitale, too.”

“But he’ll fuck us up if we don’t check our backs here.”

With no other choice open, Nathan eased Kate to the floor and swung the AK to the fore. One step forward, two leaps back. No, not backward; he now advanced in a different direction.

Wasting resources rankled, but desperate times called for desperate investments. Steel snicked through the duct tape to free the Bacardi. Whatever procurement personnel had ordered the liquor certainly didn’t expect its new role. Rag in bottle, lighter ready. WARNING: FLAMMABLE stood out in red on the bottom of the label. *Let’s test that, shall we?* He upended the bottle to soak the wick.

Hand on the door handle. *One, two, three, four.* Pull. “Hey!” he called.

Two gunmen with assault rifles burst from a room on the right, across from the exit office.

The instant the bottle left Nathan’s hand, its flame lighting the hall, he grabbed the AK and dropped to his belly, knee cocked to give his chest rig clearance.

Light and heat blossomed, a djinn free of the bottle and free to wreak havoc. Flames engulfed floor, walls, *pants*. Yells of surprise and pain and rage echoed.

Ready, aim, squeeze- What the fuck? The exit office’s door swung in; two figures lumbered into the line of fire. The thugs.

Electricity sparked down Nathan's spine, along his limbs, into his gut. Good? Bad? Wrong question. Right question? How to *make* it good for him and bad for them.

The gang members had their backs to the locker room, but they looked mauled from their ordeal. They staggered, stumbled against the wall as they plowed through the fire toward the gunmen.

"Who the fuck-"

Crack-crack-crack! Bullets peppered the gangbangers. Blood splattered, hissing in the flames. Sledge stumbled but kept coming. Tenacious bastard, or very, very high.

Nathan scooted back but kept an eye outside. The scene riveted him.

Another spray of gunfire thundered as Pancakeface toppled backward, chunks of meat exploding from his back with the lead. Copper, smoke, and spent gunpowder tinged the air. Trembling on the ground like a criminal in a live electric chair, he let out a hiss: *sssssaaaaahhh*. No. It just *sounded* like the cannibals'.

Flame-retardant carpet and walls quenched most of the fire. Now, extinguish the last of the flames on their clothing or kill their enemy? The gunmen tried to do both. Nathan wince-smiled. Not a good idea, boys.

Sledge spasmed, just in time turn a skull-crusher from a rifle butt into a glancing blow. Riding the momentum, right arm out as he spun, he clawed at the second terrorist. Fingers closed around the man's wrist. Like a viper, Sledge's head shot forward. Teeth latched onto neck.

"Yaaaah! Fuck!"

Wait. Teeth?

Pancakeface lurched up like a 1950's sci-fi robot righting itself. Black blood streaming, hoodie smoldering, he shuffled and twitched forward.

Meanwhile, the gunman went down screaming under Sledge's weight.

"The fuck! *Fuck!*" Rifle switched to club as the other bastard tried to rescue his comrade.

Too bad he missed Pancakeface's revival. He turned, weapon raised, just in time to see the thug piston toward him. Lead trailed up the wall, into the ceiling, as Pancake fell on him.

Chapter 24

Early Checkout

Point of No Return – Starset

Albin slowed at the intersection of Market St. and 3rd St. before swinging left, the wrong-way down 3rd. Few wrecks blocked the lanes here.

Mission St. opened on the left. He overshot by a car length, then reversed toward the Humvee and its deceased driver.

In the flickering light of gas fires two bodies sprawled fifteen yards from the pseudo-military vehicle. Beside one glinted chrome. Their shapes didn't look familiar, thankfully. Then again, as meaty masses served for heads, he could make out few details.

He parked beside the St. Regis's shattered window and traded the Springfield for the CZ. He slipped out of the vehicle to investigate the bodies. Vulnerability in this position grated on him like a sandstorm. His pulse filled his ears as he approached the gore-covered scene. Oil oozed from the corpses' wounds.

His heart skipped a beat in relief: neither body belonged to Mr. Serebus. He released a breath he hadn't realized he held.

Keep the mind moving forward toward the goal. Never let sentiment cause hesitation.

He retrieved the Colt Python that lay beside one of the carcasses and slipped it into the leg holster. At least he now possessed a replacement for the 1911.

Gunfire thudded within the St. Regis. The time had come to retrieve Mr. Serebus and escape this nightmare at last.

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Time to clean up; no time to figure out what just happened with the thugs' attack. AK ready, Nathan pushed to his feet and stepped into the hall. Here and there tongues of fire licked the last of the fuel. Better leave before they popped the sprinklers.

The gangsters seemed consumed with their prey. Or rather, *they* consumed their prey. Gore splattered across the wall in the LED's hellfire blue as Pancakeface took a chunk out the terrorist's carotid. He rode the convulsing victim like a bull.

What. The. Fuck? Acid burned in Nathan's throat. A minute ago these bastards bawled over an ankle bite and puke. Now...now they...

Now they turned as one to face him like monsters in a B horror movie.

Now they wanted to eat him.

One, two- AK up, sight arms surrounding Sledge's head. Squeeze-

BANG!

Blood, bone, and brain sprayed from the *left* side of Sledge's skull. Rust eyes dimmed as he swayed. Timber. He collapsed against the wall, skidded down in a trail of oil.

Who fired?

Pancakeface turned his white, blistered face toward the gunfire.

BANG!

His turn earned him a bullet between the eyes. Head snapping back, he dropped, twitching like a gaffed fish. The bullet remained in the skull.

Sight post and arms slid left while Nathan sidled right - just as Albin sliced the pie around the corner. Nathan lowered the AK and by extension the P2X to avoid blinding his adviser. The pistol's muzzle did likewise after Albin's light panned over him.

The blond snapped the weapon and beam back around to the thugs-turned-cannibal. Neither moved. Texas tea spread over the carpet.

"About time you got here." Nathan half-smiled. His stomach unclenched a fraction at the arrival of his friend - and transportation.

"Rush hour traffic, sir," Albin returned, glasses flashing in the E lights

Get to work. Nathan slid the AKM to his back and ducked into the locker room. He eased his arms under Kate and carried her into the hall. Outside, he picked his way through the fleshy debris while Albin covered the hall. One of the terrorists' rifles hung from the blond's shoulder. He must've overcome his disdain of scavenging.

Muffled shouts sounded from the lobby. Checkout time. Albin closed and locked the office door while Nathan trotted toward the Bentley. Engine idling, combat-ready parking. Excellent. The driver's side back door stood open, the dome light turning the Fireglow leather even redder.

He hunkered down and lowered Kate onto the seat, making sure the coats covered her. She felt light, limp, cold...like a dead bird. He clicked the center belt around her waist, then clipped her employee ID back to her shirt. EMS would need it.

A vitals check showed a thready pulse and shallow breathing. At least she didn't still lie on a locker-room floor. *Dying in a Bentley back seat is so much more desirable.* Nathan scowled at the voice of reason as he slid into the driver's seat and stowed the AK. He slammed the door, as if he could block reality's whisper.

Albin tucked the weapon, an AR-15, beside the AKM and P90 before he ducked in. Belting in, he glanced into the backseat.

"My turn," Nathan declared as he shifted to Drive and took a right on 3rd St. as Albin indicated. "You just wanted to drive a Bentley, didn't you?" he gave his adviser a sarcastic smile.

"Oh, yes, certainly, Mr. Serebus." The tone matched Nathan's. "It had nothing to do with life-and-death situations. In addition, I was lying about traffic. I simply wanted to take a spin around town."

"I thought so."

Nathan's shoulders flexed as he gripped the wheel. Yes, control again. Speed and maneuverability had a tendency to increase one's confidence. Steel and glass around him, all-wheel drive under him, and 600+ horsepower at his command beat the hell out of crawling through a terrorist-infested hotel, luxury or not.

Bi-Xenon brights washed the wreckage and chaos ahead in ice-water blue. Get through this, drop Kate at the nearest ambulance, and head for high ground.

Easier said than done.

I hope you had as much fun reading this as I did writing it. If you've read *Behold Darkness* but haven't left a review on Goodreads or [Amazon](#) yet, stop procrastinating and do it! That helps other people find the book and encourages me to write the next chapters. Thanks!

**Remember, the hunt continues with book 2, out 2018
on Amazon.**

To keep up to date on its progress, as well as get blog posts about villains, weird science, and more, **visit my site lcchamplin.com**