

## *Favoritism of the Damned*

*Collie James*

Tommy Whitehead woke up on the morning of March 15th, 2015, around noon. He untangled himself from the mess of his cheap cotton floral comforter and rolled out of bed. Rubbing his face, he used his foot to hook his jeans from the floor. Yawning, he slid into them. Grabbing his red sweatshirt from the bedpost, he staggered into the small bathroom, pulling it on as he went.

Running his hand through his coarse, dark hair, he peered at himself through the film of the medicine cabinet mirror. His ice blue eyes were bloodshot, and there were dark circles around his high cheekbones. He looked skeletal, grayish, a result of the drinks the night before. He ran his tongue over his teeth; they felt gritty and his mouth tasted like ash. Twisting on the faucet, he gobbled toothpaste on his toothbrush and vigorously brushed. He spat into the dingy yellow basin, then clicked his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

Minty fresh.

Surprisingly, there was no headache, but it would have been okay if there had been. It wasn't as though he had to go to work. He hadn't worked in over a year. Not since his mom had had a massive stroke and he'd been fired for taking time off to be with her. He had hated collecting those darn student loans anyway, and that was corporate America for you. They didn't care about people, just the almighty dollar. It was just as well though; he wouldn't have been able to go back for a while either way. When his mother died, it had taken him a long time to recover. Truth of it was that he still hadn't gotten over it completely and probably never would.

Collie James

At least he had his unemployment. Otherwise, he would be homeless by now. And besides, he deserved it. He had been paying in since he was not much more than a kid, and it wasn't his fault that the stupid economy had crashed.

Tommy's stomach churned and growled. Even though he was six-foot-three and only a hundred and fifty-five pounds, he ate almost continuously. He knew there was nothing in the fridge to eat. He sighed. *Gonna have to go to the store*, he thought.

Wetting his hair brush, he ran it through his matted hair, making it look somewhat human. Turning off the water, he pulled a towel from a nail embedded into the dull white wall and dabbed his face. Replacing it, he went into the bedroom and donned his tennis shoes. He left the bedroom and turned left down a narrow hallway to the small, sparsely furnished living room. Grabbing his black leather jacket from the ratty futon, he exited the house.

Just before sinking into his white 2008 Nissan, he ran his hands over his pockets and looked back at his house, making sure he had his wallet. The house wasn't much; just an old, faded white cottage style home with bleached red shutters. Feeling the lump of his wallet, he sank into the driver's seat.

Leaving the driveway, he turned left, heading west onto Adair Drive. Passing the low income, dull brick apartments on his right, he thought they looked out of place here as he did every time he saw them. The neighborhood was an old but nice one, even if some of the houses were a tad rundown. Sure it was pretty close to the inner-city of Knoxville, Tennessee, but there was a lot of lush grass and soon-to-be vibrant green trees. Right now, they were stark and grey, but they would be full of blooms soon.

As he passed Lynnhurst Cemetery, he noticed that there might be a funeral in session. Even for a Sunday, it was busy. People were scattered everywhere, weaving through the old and new grey headstones of all shapes and sizes alike. He was so absorbed in watching them and the way they seemed to amble in the staggering throws of grief that he almost missed his turn. Slamming on the brakes, he swung left into the Food City parking lot. Luckily, there hadn't been another car coming, or he would have had something else to make his life worse. He didn't

## Favoritism of the Damned

have insurance and could barely afford rent, so a crash would have been disastrous.

He swung into a parking space close to the store, got out, locked his door (an impulsive habit), and went inside. Just beyond the automatic sliding-glass double doors, he snagged a black shopping basket. Perusing the aisles, he wondered what on earth would be fast and easy to cook, then it hit him. He swung by the bread aisle and picked up some whole wheat, then he swung through and snapped up some mayonnaise. After that, he headed to the dairy section and selected some American cheese and a gallon of milk. Along the way to the meat department he grabbed some eggs and a can of biscuits. *Dang, should have snatched a buggy*, he thought as the basket grew heavier.

As he shopped, the store became crowded with customers. Oddly, some seemed to be grabbing things up in a state of frenzy.

He got the biggest pack of bacon that the store carried. In the produce section, he licked his lips as he selected a tomato and head of lettuce. The BLT sandwich was going to be awesome. He could already smell the bacon frying and taste the greasy sandwich on his tongue.

At the self-checkout aisle, as the dings of registers, the beep of scanners, and the rustle of plastic bags assaulted his senses, he peered self-consciously over his shoulder before taking out his food-stamp card. He shook his head. *Worked basically all of my life and now reduced to this*. Just before sliding his card, a loud crash drew his attention. Behind him, halfway down the peanut butter aisle, two people were scuffling. *A fight*, he thought. *All right, been a long time since I saw a good brawl*. Groceries forgotten, he moved toward the commotion.

Among broken bottles of grape, strawberry, and peach jams and jellies and unbroken plastic containers of peanut butter rolling on the floor, a silver-headed man wearing a tattered black suit and stained white shirt grappled with a dark-haired man who looked about thirty and who wore jeans and a blue-stripped button-down. Despite the obvious age difference, the older man seemed to be overpowering his younger opponent. *This is gonna*

Collie James

*be better than I thought*, Tommy's inner voice said as he moved closer to get a better look.

The old man grunted loudly with an unnerving hunger in his voice. He had the dark-haired man by the shoulders and appeared to be trying to pull him closer, but the younger man was stopping him by holding him under the armpit. The old man groaned again, his mouth gaping and seeming to strain toward the younger man, revealing a mouth full of sickly yellow teeth. His neck muscles strained forward like a turtle reaching for a high piece of vegetation. From this distance, Tommy could see that the older man looked ill. His complexion was a mottled grey, and his eyes were a nauseating mustard color. Tommy wondered how he could put up such a fight.

By this time, other shoppers drawn by the commotion had crowded in behind Tommy, clogging the walkway, and just as many had gathered on the other side of the thrashing men.

"What the hell is wrong with you, old man? Get the hell off me!" the younger man screamed.

"UUUGGGHH!" the old man groaned in answer, lunging forward with such force that it drove the younger man back, crashing into the shelves, knocking more condiments to the floor. The younger man's heel struck on a jar of peanut butter. His left foot shot forward, sending him crashing to the polluted tile floor. He howled in pain and lost his grip as a shard of broken glass imbedded into his hamstring. The old man fell upon him. For an instant, his head shook like that of a dog playing with its favorite tug toy. The younger man's howl became a high, keening wale of pain. Like a dog baying at the moon, the old man's head lifted, his chin pointing towards the ceiling. His mouth worked, chewing on the entire cheek he had torn from the other man's face. Blood coursed down his neck and, like a fountain drink, streamed down, covering the man beneath him.

"Oh god! Oh god! Oh god! What did you do?" the man on the floor cried, clasping the side of his face.

A woman behind Tommy belted a chain of machinegun screams.

## Favoritism of the Damned

In answer to the man on the floor's pleas, the old man dipped forward for another bite.

His hunger to see a good fight diminished, Tommy turned to leave. He forced his way through the crowd, passing the yowling woman, having to struggle to get by her massive expanse. She looked like a hippo draped in a seventies-style floral curtain. He didn't bother to finish checking out; he no longer had an appetite of any kind now. He passed through the murmuring crowd, through the space between the rows of self-checkout machines to the entrance.

Tommy's blood went cold, and defying the efforts of his hammering heart, drained to his feet. He froze, his feet glued in place. Jammed into the entrance hall separating the two entrance doorways of the store was a horde of groaning, teeth-snapping, hand-reaching bodies so tightly packed that there was no room between them. They wore tattered, filthy clothing of every color and size. Their faces were masks of green, bloated hunger. It took a moment for him to process what he was seeing, but then the word whispered into his brain. *Zombies!*

Dry, wrinkled, dirty-finger-nailed, clawed hands stretched out of the passage, reaching for him. Just as a body fell forward to the ground from the encumbered doorway, his mind kicked into gear. *Run, you idiot! Get the hell out of here!*

He spun on his heels and ran. More people had gathered near where the first attack had originated, but now there were many more people screaming, but they were so tightly jammed together that they had created their own barrier. "It's zombies! Run, you freaking chowder heads!" he yelled, jumping over a mass of people on the floor.

He veered left where there were fewer people. At the dead end, he cut right by the dairy aisle screaming, "Run, you fools! Get out of here!" as he went. He didn't slow when he hit the beige, rubberized door leading to the stockroom. It banged open, slamming against the wall with the sound of a gunshot. He found himself in a stark, grey room filled with overstock of candy, laundry detergent, and all kinds of other stuff. He bolted toward the only door he saw, slamming against it. It wouldn't budge. In

Collie James

his panic, he twisted the knob violently back and forth with no effect. He looked down. “Damnit!” he barked. The door was padlocked.

Frantically, he surveyed his surroundings, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The only possible way of escape he saw was a square, green hatch mounted into the grey cinderblock wall beside the door. He stepped to it and jerked on the banana-shaped handle. It opened with a screech. He peered into a gaping, square, black hole. It led straight into an economy-sized trash compactor. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

He was about to turn and look for another way out when he noticed bright white light spilling in from the side of the opening. He leaned forward and inspected it. He was a very slim man. He just might be able to squeeze through the gap between the compactor and the wall. Grabbing the corner off the hatch, he hoisted himself up, placing one foot on the jamb. Carefully but quickly, he stuck his head through the lighted breach. It fit. Next, he stuck an arm through, twisting so his shoulder would pass. Next came his other arm. The pressure on his chest was terrible. Nonetheless, bracing his elbows and forearms on the top of the huge green compactor, he heaved himself up and through the constricted space. He was out. He let himself drop the five feet to the ground with a thud of rubber soles on asphalt.

A cacophony of moans and groans filled the chilly March afternoon like the drone of mutant locusts swarming a cornfield. Fear and dread raising every hair on his body, Tommy turned around. Unfortunately, the store he’d chosen to patronize on this day of all days was backed up to the Lynnhurst Cemetery. What he saw was a horrific scene directly out of the film *Night of the Living Dead*. Shambling towards him between the silvered, granite stones jutting up from lush, well-manicured grass their embedded glass gleaming in the sunlight, were uncountable zombies. Their sickly green faces, dead-fish eyes, and arthritically clawed hands aimed towards him. They lumbered along slowly, hampered by the dirty rags of rotting clothing and flapping soles of decaying shoes.

## Favoritism of the Damned

There were only about thirty feet between him and the half wall that dropped from the cemetery to the service road behind the store. In a horrified, stunned state, Tommy ran left around the compactor and along the tan back wall of the store. He didn't stop until he had skidded through another left and was at the door of his white Altima. Luckily, he didn't need his keys to open the door. His hands were shaking too badly to even operate a key fob. The car was totally electronic. He thumbed a small black button on the handle, and the door made a clicking sound as it unlocked.

He swung the door open and dropped into the driver's seat, banging his head on the doorframe in the process. There was too much adrenaline coursing through his system, however, for him to feel the white-hot burst of pain. He looked around. The closest zombies were still trying to get into the store, blocking any exit. The others were now far away, some falling into the freshly opened graves. He knew where he was going, the question was which location.

Being a single man, he had no wife or girlfriend to worry about. When you're broke, you can't afford to date. But like anyone in a situation like this, his mind went to the only living relative he had. He fumbled his cell from the passenger seat, swiped the screen, and scrolled through the contacts. He hadn't talked to his brother in a long time. They had never been very close, so it took a second to find it. When he did, he tapped the call icon. The phone only rang once before a voice said, "Hello."

"Ronnie! Listen, man, I know this is gonna sound crazy as hell, but you have to just take my word. The freaking zombie apocalypse is happening, and we have to get somewhere safe where we can hold up for a long time. Meet me at the Wal-Mart on Millertown Pike. Don't worry about getting anything. It will have all we need. Just get there ASAP!"

Tommy expected his brother to scoff and tell him as he always had that he was full of it and that there were no such things as ghost, demons, or zombies. So he drew a breath, ready to argue to convince him. But no rebuff came. Ronnie simply said, "Okay, I'm on my way. Be careful, Tommy."

Collie James

Tommy automatically opened his mouth to protest, stunned speechless, but he just sat with his mouth hanging open for a long moment. “Uh ... uh, okay. See you there,” he finally said. He started to hang up but paused, then said into the phone, “Uh, Ronnie-”

“Yeah.”

“I love you, bro.”

Ronnie mumbled something unintelligible back and then hung up.

Tommy tossed the phone back into the seat, punched the automatic start button, and the car hummed to life. He tore out of the parking lot, slid left, and headed northeast on Adair Drive. Without hardly a pause at the traffic light, he swung a right, heading east on Broadway. A short distance down the road, he hit the I-640 East ramp.

On the interstate, the engine growled with speed. Tommy’s mind churned as fast as the spinning wheels. There had been a Wal-Mart closer to his brother’s house, but the one he chose was better for a long-term residence. Once the almost endless supplies had been used up, there were other places close by to be raided: a Food City, a gas station, a Gamestop to ease the boredom, and a gun shop in the proximity.

Being someone who had always been fascinated by the paranormal, and a lover of horror fiction who had watched every zombie movie and show available, he had thought and talked about what he would do if there were ever a real zombie outbreak. The choice was obvious, he’d always declared: go to a Wal-Mart and fortify it. It would have everything you needed. Food, weapons, furniture, DVD’S and players to ease the long hours of restlessness, backup generators for power, and a gas station right outside the door. He already figured he knew what had caused this. He’d read an article about it a while back. Those damned, crazy scientists had rigged it: a souped up version of the rabies virus, combined with Ebola and Nanotechnologies. The result— a parasite that would infect its host and force it, living or dead, to do its will (which was eat).



## Favoritism of the Damned

A midnight-blue Chevrolet Cavalier to his right drew him from his thoughts. Inside, the passenger was attacking the driver. The car swerved, slamming into him and driving him into the divider wall. Metal screeched, sparks flew. Tommy jumped, screamed, fought the wheel, punched the accelerator, and freed himself from the carnage. Behind him, the car flipped end over end, the sound nerve-racking. He crossed all three lanes and sped through the Mall Road exit. Not slowing as he dodged traffic, he skidded sideways, going left, northeast on Millertown Pike. Weaving between cars, tires squealing, he veered right, between two restaurants, and into the Wal-Mart parking lot. He parked near the entrance to the lot beside a flatbed semi loaded with a yellow bulldozer.

He surveyed his surroundings. It didn't appear that there was any commotion yet. That was good. It would be easier to take it over. Still, he hopped out and grabbed a long screwdriver from the trunk, and then perched on the hood.

His brother pulled up in an old, white service van. Tommy stood until he was parked, then walked around to the driver's door. Ronnie climbed down from the van. He was three inches shorter than Tommy's six-three, but he was of a much denser build. He looked like a lumberjack in the thick, blue sweatshirt he wore. Although he was fifty, ten years older than Tommy, his hair was so thick that it looked like a coon hat on his head the way it fell down and covered his ears. It hadn't thinned at all.

"Hey, Bro. I'm surprised you showed up, especially with me talking about zombies," he said as patted Ronnie's shoulder.

Ronnie shrugged. It didn't really surprise Tommy. Ronnie had always been a person of very few words, but he didn't look so well. His face was pallid, with a sheen of greasy-looking sweat dotting his cheeks and forehead. His deep brown eyes looked cloudy and his lips chalky.

"You all right, Ron? You don't look so well."

Not meeting his eyes, Ronnie said, "What do you expect? There's damn zombies running around."

Collie James

Tommy nodded. That was a pretty good answer, he supposed. His brother had always been tough, but this was way out of his realm.

“Well, what I figure we’ll do,” Tommy began, “is go in and let people know what’s going on, then start barricading those big glass doors.”

Ronnie raised an eyebrow and slumped back on the van. “It doesn’t look like anything has happened there. Do you really think that people will believe you and just help you start defacing public property?”

Tommy kicked his heel with the toe of his other sneaker. “You got a point.” He looked up. “So what do you think we should do?”

For a very long moment, Ronnie stared off into space, his eyes glassy and his typically defined jaw line now slack. He seemed to look even paler than he had just a few moments ago. Finally he spoke. “To tell you the truth, I don’t really know.” His voice sounded weak, raspy.

“Are you sure you’re okay, man?” Tommy asked again.

Ronnie nodded weakly.

Trying to figure out their next move, Tommy stared down at the screwdriver in his hand in concentration. “I got it!” he exclaimed. “We will go in and try to let the people know what’s going on. If they don’t listen, we will take the screwdriver to sporting goods, use it to force the cashier out of the way, get some guns, and *make* the people listen. We will give them the choice to leave or help,” he grinned to himself in triumph.

Ronnie made a low gurgling sound. Tommy looked up at him. His mouth was slack. A long line of thick yellow saliva hung from Ronnie’s chin. His eyes were now ringed in blood red. They fixed on Tommy, and his slack jaw turned up in a ravenous grimace. He lunged forward, locking his steel grip onto Tommy’s arm. Tommy cried out, jerking backward just as his brother’s jaws snapped with a loud click where his face had been a moment before.

“Ronnie, man, stop!” he yelled, trying to pull free. Ronnie didn’t answer, only tried to pull him closer, his mouth chomping.

## Favoritism of the Damned

There was no use. This wasn't his brother now. His heart beating a mile a minute, breaking with sadness at the same time, he tried to pull free, but his brother was too strong. He lunged again. Tommy yanked back once more. A moment of clarity broke through his terror. He drove the screwdriver into his brother's arm. It lodged in and his brother let go. Tommy stumbled backward to the back of the van, but it didn't take his brother long to resume his attack.

In an effort to escape, Tommy climbed to the top of the vehicle, almost falling as he stepped on the handle of the door, which caused it to turn downward and release the door. On top of the van he thought he was safe for the moment, but he was wrong. His brother scaled the open door and was on top of the van with him. *That's not right! Zombies can't climb, and they're supposed to be slow.*

Taking his only option, he leapt back to the ground, crumpling on impact. When he had regained his feet, Tommy saw why his brother had not questioned him when he had called, and why he was now a member of the undead. Standing before him, arms spread wide, dirty, silver-streaked-black hair matted to her head, stood his mother. She had bitten his brother. But that was impossible! She had died of a stroke two years ago. Tears sprang to his eyes at the sight of her; but before he could absorb the full impact of anguish, Ronnie landed behind him with a loud *thunk*. He was trapped between them.

With a speed that shouldn't have been possible, his mom flew toward him. There was no way she should be able to do that, for she had been paralyzed by the stroke and couldn't even walk or talk when she was alive. Taking the only option he had for escape, he catapulted himself up onto the back of the flatbed truck. To his amazement, his mother came right behind him. He rounded the bulldozer, skimming the side of the truck. Again, he was astonished when his mother followed. With a last-ditch effort at survival, he climbed into the glass cab of the dozer and pressed himself to the door on the other side. When she clambered in, he hopped out of the door and slammed it shut. As fast as possible,

Collie James

he scrambled over the dozer and slammed the other side. It worked. *Zombies weren't smart enough to open doors.*

Before the thought had time to process, something grabbed his ankle; the next thing he knew, he was on the pavement with his brother on top of him, jaws snapping. Above, he saw his mother behind the glass door staring down. His mind went black. He had no idea how he had done it, but somehow he ended up on top of his brother. His brother's vice-like hands clamped on his shoulders, pulling him toward his awaiting teeth. Letting out a tormented scream, Tommy pulled the screwdriver from his brother's arm and plunged it into his eyeball. It sank deep with a disgusting liquid sound. Blood and ocular matter sprayed his face. There were no words to describe the pain he felt for what he had done to his only brother.

"Noooo! My boy!" Tommy looked up from where the sound had come from. Glaring down at him from the glass enclosure, in a dry rusty voice, his mother shrieked again, "You killed my boy!"

Tommy's resolve broke. Great wrenching sobs tore from his chest. As he watched through tear-clouded vision, his mother opened the door of the cab and stepped out. This wasn't possible. Zombies couldn't talk and they couldn't open doors. They couldn't feel pain or know people. He had watched every zombie movie ever made, and in none of them did a zombie talk or open doors. But this wasn't a movie; it was real life.

"Momma, I'm sorry, Momma. I didn't mean to, but he was gonna kill me! I don't want to die!"

She drew closer to the edge of the flatbed. He could hear the creak of her dried skin as it stretched. "You killed my boy. You, the one who was always too good for us, always out looking for a better job. You could never be happy just living on the property with us."

Her words cut like a knife, made worse by the rasp of long-dead vocal cords. Ronnie had always been her favorite, the one she'd doted on and coddled. "No, Momma. I love you, and I love Ronnie, but he was gonna kill me," Tommy insisted, his voice thick with the saliva of tears and emotion.

## Favoritism of the Damned

His mother's dry, cracked lips drew back in a horrific grin, revealing blackened gums receding from yellowed, pitted teeth. With unbelievable speed, she leapt down, landing on the pavement on all fours. Like a spider, she scuttled toward him.

"Oh, god!" The screwdriver still in his hand, he darted backward, crab-walking on his heels and elbows.

He wasn't fast enough, though. She was on top of him in a split second, glaring down at him with a ravenous gaze. "I just wanted us to be a family again! But no, as always, you only thought of yourself," she accused, puffs of rusty grave dust pluming out of her mouth with each word.

"No, Momma, don't hurt me! I don't want to be dead or like that!" he pleaded, trying not to breathe in the acrid stench of her. He turned his head, trying to get away from the flap of tattered black fabric hanging from the sleeve of her dress. It had once been a beautiful, shimmering fabric. He knew because it was the dress he had chosen to bury her in.

"I wasn't going to eat you. I just wanted us to be a family. But you had to go and kill your brother like the selfish brat you always were. And I'm so hungry." She grinned down at him, that menacing expression the only thing on her decaying face. A maggot worked in the corner of her bulbous, white right eye, making his stomach churn. "Give Momma a kiss." She lunged down toward his face.

"Ahhh!" he bellowed. Adrenaline spiking through his system, he bucked and twisted his hips simultaneously. She rolled off him, one of her arms hitting the ground tearing away a long strip of flesh. He jumped on top of her, putting his knees on her shoulders. "Momma, please stop! I love you! I don't want to hurt you!"

She cackled, twisted her head, and chomped at his leg. Her teeth snapping like the fire of a cap gun. "I'm hungry!" she hissed.

"Grrraahhh!" Tommy screamed. He came down on her head with the screwdriver. It hit in the center of her forehead but didn't penetrate her skull. It skidded up, tearing her scalp. Her dirty, silver-black hair came loose in a flap like a bad hair piece. Even

Collie James

now her neck strained to try and eat his flesh, her head twisting side to side as she lunged for purchase, squirming under him.

A tear fell from his eye and landed on her lips. Her tongue shot out, rolling around, tasting it savagely. "I'm so sorry, Momma. I love you, and god do I miss you," he sobbed. "But this isn't you. I will see you one day again, but not like this. Please forgive me." He pulled the screwdriver free, raised it high, and brought it down hard. It struck home in her maggot-filled eye, but she still wiggled. With a groan of torment, he put his weight on it and slid it deeper. She went still underneath him. He sat there straddling her, his head bowed and his body jerking as blubbers from the pain of this day overtook him. He stayed a long time, his soul emptying out, leaving nothing but an empty shell.

Eventually, he rose. Wal-Mart forgotten, he climbed into his car and drove. His mind and heart were now an empty void.