

An AB Discovery Book

Max, The Diapered and Werewolf Zombie Kisser



Barry Oliver

Max, The Diapered Zombie and Werewolf Killer

Max, The Diapered Zombie and Werewolf Killer

By Barry Oliver

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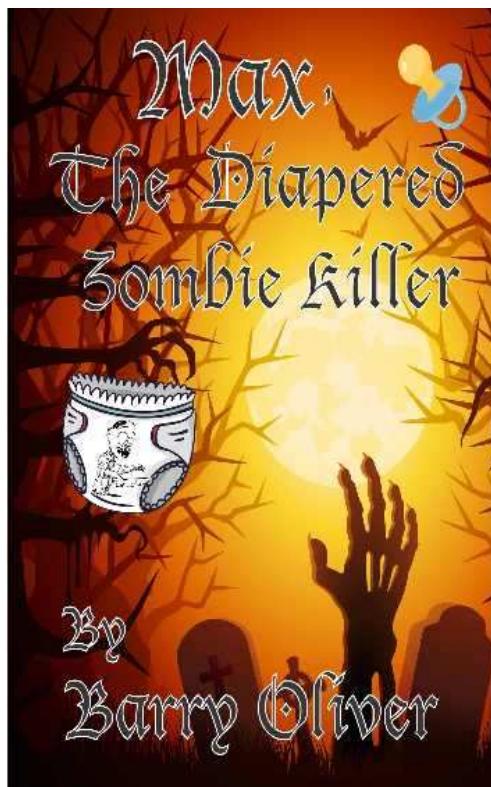
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Max, The Diapered Zombie and Werewolf Killer
The follow-up book to the scary diaper
novel,

Max, the Diapered Zombie Killer



Now read the terrifying, diaper-soaking second part to Barry Oliver's
trilogy

Max, The Diapered Zombie and Werewolf Killer

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Prologue: Refugees



People were calling it "*The Great Storm*", or more simply "*The Storm*", with the clear understanding that *The Storm* could mean only one thing. That thing was the unexplained weather phenomenon (not foreseen by a single weatherman) that had destroyed nearly every town and everybody in the State.

Survivors—and there weren't many—came straggling across the border into the next State (one which had inexplicably been spared by *The Storm*) seeking refuge and a place to start over.

Some of those few survivors—and not many of those—had actually seen the things responsible for the destruction of their homes—the walking dead.

Zombies.

But none of them talked about it, knowing they would not be believed, refusing to believe it themselves. Others had merely heard rumors of the creatures while still others—the majority—had no idea what had hit them. All of them, regardless of what they had seen, spoke simply of *The Storm*.

The survivors who made it across the border, depending on which highway they took, usually encountered Bill Robertson (or Big Bill as everyone called him) as they fueled up at his Sunoco station, pretty much literally in the middle of nowhere. He was called Big Bill for obvious reasons. The man stood six foot five and

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wore a giant rodeo belt buckle pinned to the front of his pants, pinned without a belt because they didn't make belts big enough to span Bill's waist. He could have worn a length of rope, but that would have been embarrassing. Big Bill honestly didn't give a shit about his size. He knew that people crossing the border needed gas, and he was more than willing to sell it to them.

Big Bill was also used to giving directions to the nearby towns that had set up refugee camps: towns with names like Red Hills, Black Springs, or White Rapids. There was even a town named Orange Grove in a State where orange trees had never grown. By some random coincidence, most of the refugee sites were located in towns with a color reference. If the name of a town began with a color, it most likely hosted a refugee camp.

At the moment Big Bill was frustrated by a neon "Open" sign on his front window. The damn thing kept shorting out. It would flicker a moment, then "Pop!" it would go out. The really annoying thing was that each time the sign shorted, it tripped the circuit breaker to all the lights in the store.

"Shit!" Bill cursed as the lights went out for the third time. He would then have to walk to the rear of the store in the dark where the circuit box was located. Since it was also night, he had to use a flashlight to locate the popped circuit then reset it.

Bill returned to the neon sign for the fourth time and gave it a good shake. After all, electronics seemed to respond to shaking when all else failed. To Bill's pleasant surprise, worked this time. The sign quit flickering and all the lights stayed on. Bill made a mental note to call the corporate office tomorrow morning and inquire about getting a new sign. In the meantime, another pickup truck had pulled into his station for gas.

Bill returned to the store to man the cashier station. Although it was possible to pay at the pump, travelers invariably came inside to buy chips, or a hot dog, or coffee. And these days

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they would be asking for directions to some town labeled by a color. Big Bill was always happy to give directions as he took their money. He wasn't afraid of running the station alone at night either, primarily because Big Bill was... well, big. And secondly, because of the shotgun he kept behind the counter for insurance. It would be a mistake to mess with Big Bill.

It wasn't long before the two men driving the pickup truck entered the Sunoco store. Judging by their almost emaciated appearance, Bill correctly guessed they were refugees in need of food.

"Hot dogs are along that wall," Bill pointed to his left. "Coffee is over there."

"Thank you, sir," the taller man replied politely. Both men turned for the hot dogs. Minutes later, the two men returned to the cashier counter to drop off a half dozen hot dogs, two bags of chips, and a six-pack of cola. The shorter man then turned to the coffee counter to fill his own large coffee mug.

Bill didn't mind when people brought their own mugs for coffee. He always charged them for a size large. Bill began to ring up the men's purchases.

The tall man at the counter pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. "Do you know how to find a place called White Rapids?"

Bill nodded understanding. *A refugee for sure.* "You keep driving on this highway another twenty miles or so." He pointed out the window as if that were necessary. "Take Exit 22, then follow the signs from there."

"I appreciate your help, sir." Again, the polite response.

Bill started to pack their food into a plastic bag. "That must have been one hell-of-a storm you folks went through. I hear all sorts of strange stories about it." He was fishing for information. The haggard customer nodded politely but didn't say anything.

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“Some people even say there were monsters about. But I’m sure that’s because it happened to be Halloween. Probably a bunch of kids in costumes.”

The man averted his eyes downward and nodded again. “That’s what some people say,” he said softly.

It was clear to Bill that the man wasn’t interested in giving details. “But whatever happened, people sure don’t want to talk about it.” He handed the plastic bag over to the man. “I always think it’s better to talk to people about your troubles. You know, take the burden off your shoulders.”

At that moment the store lights flickered off and the three of them were plunged into darkness.

“Damn it!” Bill cursed again. “I’ve had enough of that piece-of-shit sign.”

Bill was about to head toward the rear of the store with his flashlight when he stopped abruptly in his tracks. Standing in the place where his customer had been a moment ago, was something now much taller than Big Bill himself. The thing looked like an animal of some kind, perhaps a bear with dark fur and a long snout. What sent a chill down Bill’s neck were the creature’s eyes—it had none. Two cavernous sockets stared lifelessly down at the relatively shorter Big Bill behind the counter.

“What the fuck,” Bill gasped.

He decided it was time for the shotgun. When he reached for his weapon under the countertop, his hand encountered another object covered in fur. Bill looked down reflexively. Through the dark shadow behind the counter, he could make out the shape of a second animal looking up at him. He couldn’t tell if the thing had eyes or not, but a moment later he could see that the thing had teeth.

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“Shit!” Bill desperately searched for the shotgun with his other hand.



From the highway, a single shot could have been heard if someone had been there to hear it. The sound of that shot would have been followed by the sound of a short scream, then a gurgle. Those sounds would have then been followed by tearing and chewing sounds mixed with the occasional growl from some animal.

But no one was there to hear those sounds. With the store lights darkened, people assumed the station was closed. They simply kept driving past the Sunoco station in search of other gas stations, and in search of other towns with names like Red Hills, or Black Springs...

...or White Rapids.

Chapter 1: December

7th



It was no small irony that a boy named Maxwell Roosevelt had been born on the 7th of December - a date that he was forever reminded, "lived in infamy," or so some President named after him had once said. Of course, President Roosevelt had not been named *after* Max, but from Max's point of view, it felt that way. A war had started on this date before even his grandparents were born and for some reason, people felt they had to remind him of this fact, on his birthday, as if he—Maxwell Roosevelt, no relation to Franklin Roosevelt—had declared that war.

But Maxwell Roosevelt was now a war survivor himself. His war, needless to say, had been quite different than Franklin Roosevelt's war. Max's war had been between the living and the dead. And in his war, the dead had taken nearly everything. They had taken his parents and his home. They had taken every one of his friends. They had even taken his dogs. Max was now a homeless orphan, alone in the world but for one other survivor—Cindy Tyra.

Cindy had equally lost everything to the dead, including and most painfully her three closest childhood friends. Like Max, Cindy was a homeless orphan with no other possessions than her F-150

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truck and a rather impressive collection of weapons. Cindy's only family now was some 11-year-old kid she had picked up along the way and was now his legal guardian. That kid was a rather odd boy who insisted on wearing diapers whenever possible, and whose 12th birthday was today.

Max was ashamed to admit that, despite everything they had experienced and their incalculable loss, he was, at least at this moment, happier than he could remember. Happy, not because of their loss (he would give anything to play with his dogs again), but because of where his life was now. He was happy to be living in the Camelot Cove motel park—now converted refugee camp. He was happy to be attending a small public school—rather than his former exclusive private academy—in the nowhere town of White Rapids. He was happy to have found new friends. And he was happy that on this day, for the first time in memory, Max would not hear the word “infamy.”

Yet another reason for Max's happiness was the person seated at the table alongside Cindy Tyra. That person was Jase Stephens, Cindy's new boyfriend. Over the course of barely a month that they had known him, Jase had not only won over Cindy's skepticism but had befriended Max as well. With Cindy now Max's guardian, Max imagined Jase as a kind of father, though at age 19, more like a fun, older brother than father figure. The label didn't really matter to Max. He was happy to have Jase around.

“Are you ready to sing?” Jase asked as he finished lighting all twelve candles on Max's cake. The three of them were crowded around a small dining table that was crammed into one corner of a single space, double twin bed motel room, now converted into a one-room efficiency. There was honestly less space in this motel room than Max's former bedroom in his former house from his previous life in Casperville. Max didn't care about that either. He was actually happier with less space.

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“You bet!” Max chimed, leaning eagerly toward the cake. He wanted to get the singing over as quickly as possible, skip the cake and ice cream, and get straight to his presents. He had a good idea what was in the largest box since he had been begging Cindy for a week now, but the anticipation was still killing him.

Cindy and Jase could see how anxious Max was to get to the presents, so they sang the Happy Birthday song comically fast. Then all three of them blew out the candles together.

Max jumped away from the table.

“Let’s do this,” he shouted going straight for the large present that stood over half his height. He tore away the wrapping paper with abandon. He knew what it was after the first tear.

“A toddler bed!” Max announced pretending surprise. “Yes! I love it! Thank you, Cindy.”

Cindy smirked. She knew that Max knew what was in the box all along. “It’s the cartoon train bed that matches your Choo-Choo plushie. I hope you like it. I’ve got the crib mattress hidden under my bed.”

“Oh cool,” Jase commented. “Turn it around so I can get a good look at it.”

Here was yet another reason why Max liked Jase so much. Jase knew all about Max’s emotional need to feel like a little kid. He had understood Max from the moment Max had explained it to him. Jase knew about Max’s pacifier and recently purchased a cartoon train plushie that he slept with. He knew that Max was at this moment wearing a diaper, and usually wore one except when he was at school. Jase had zero problems with any of it.

“We do what we need to survive,” he had once told Max.

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In a rare moment of uncertainty, however, Jase wrinkled his brow as he examined the picture on the box. “But can you fit in it? Aren’t you too tall?”

“Oh yes,” Max nodded enthusiastically. “If I sleep like this.” He lay on the floor in a semi-fetal position. “Which I do when I snuggle my Choo-Choo plushie.”

In his former bedroom in Casperville, Max had slept on a king-sized mattress. It had felt like sleeping on a football field. Although it made him relatively small in comparison, it also felt like sleeping on an adult bed—which it was. Max looked forward to the more snug, confined space of a toddler bed. He had already practiced lying on a crib mattress in the department store, so he knew he could fit if he slept curled up like a baby—which he did.

“Cool,” Jase commented again. “I’ll help you put it together later, but first there’s my present.”

Max’s attention perked up. He hadn’t actually asked Jase for anything, so he had no idea what Jase’s present could be.

“Here you go,” Jase handed Max a box wrapped in Ninja-themed paper. “I hope you like it.”

In similar fashion to the first gift, Max tore away the paper wildly. His eyes immediately opened wide. “An Xbox!” he screamed. “Oh my God, thank you!” He lunged at Jase with a tackling hug.

Max had abandoned his previous Xbox in his previous life along with all his games since at the time they had no electric power and his very survival had been in question. If he had any regrets from his previous life, it was that decision. Max truly loved his games, but now he could start over. He suspected Jase would be happy to play the Xbox with him.

“I thought we could start with this one.” Jase handed Max an unwrapped game. “Ninja Nation. You know, it kind of goes with the wrapping paper theme.”

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Max pulled his hair with both hands. “I’ve never played that one, but I’ve heard about it. This is awesome!” He was now faced with the dilemma of what to do first: play a round of Ninja Nation or assemble his toddler bed.

Cindy waved her finger in a mild scolding manner. “Ninja Nation is fine with me, but no monster video games.”

Max had no problem with that rule. “Agreed,” he answered. He had experienced enough monsters in real life.

Jase narrowed his eyes. Here was another hint. He knew that Cindy and Max had been severely traumatized during The Great Storm, but they still withheld details from him. Jase refused to press them for those details for fear it would open old wounds. He trusted that, in time, they would let him know. For now, Jase remained on the lookout for hints such as this one.

“So, do you want to assemble your bed first, or set up the Xbox?” Jase asked while still contemplating the “no monster games” rule.

Max rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know. I can’t decide.” It was a good dilemma to have.

Cindy chimed in. “Before you decide, I have another present for you.” She stood up from the mini-table and walked over to her bed where she had hidden another present alongside Max’s crib mattress. She handed Max a box wrapped in plain silver paper. “Go ahead. Open it.”

Max pulled off the silver paper more cautiously this time. Cindy’s subdued tone implied that this gift was of a more serious nature. When he pulled away the last fold of paper, he could see that it was serious. A breath of air escaped his lungs.

“Oh,” he said softly. “A cellphone.” Max gave Cindy a worried look.

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“Two of them,” Cindy replied. “I found them at the flea market. Open the box and take a look.”

Max opened the lid to the box slowly, as if it contained poison. During The Storm, cellphones *had* been poison. The zombies had used people’s phones to communicate with and track their victims. Max’s friends had subsequently thrown their phones away.

Jase looked over Max’s shoulder into the box. “Wow, those are really old school, like First-Gen cellphones.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Max asked, wary to even touch the things.

Cindy tried to reassure him. “I think it is. These are plain phones. They aren’t smartphones. They don’t have GPS. You can’t even text with them. All you can do is call numbers.”

Max picked up one of the phones gingerly between his thumb and index finger. The device almost looked like a child’s toy phone with large, physical number keys and a narrow screen that would only display the number as you typed it.

“Uh... okay. If you say so.” Max wasn’t so sure.

Here was yet another hint. Jase could see some silent communication going back and forth between Max and Cindy. He already knew that neither of them carried a cellphone. When he had first met Cindy, there had been no exchange of numbers or email. He found it odd that, in this day and age, he could never call or text her. It was obvious that phones made them nervous for some reason, but why? Jase scrutinized their faces for more clues.

“Go ahead,” Cindy pressed. “Give it a try.”

Max searched the device for a power button—there was none. Instead, he found a simple, physical volume wheel and an on-off switch. He flipped the switch on both phones. On the backside of

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each, Cindy had taped a card with that phone's number. Max punched in the number to the other phone in slow motion. When the thing rang, he jumped as if it had exploded.

Cindy could see Max's fear. She reached into the box to retrieve the ringing phone, then pressed the answer button. "See. It's only a phone," she spoke into her receiver.

A split second later, "See. It's only a phone," came out of Max's speaker. Max hit the End button. "Okay, it works," he said breathlessly. "But why?"

Cindy nodded patiently. "Max, we need to have a way of reaching each other when we're apart. I think it's safe now. It's time we... you know, try to return to normal."

Max returned the phone to its box. He shook his head slowly. "I don't know if I can. I don't know if I'm ready."

Jase stood silently watching the exchange of words and looks between Max and Cindy. This was more than just a hint. It was a *big* hint. It was killing him not to ask, but Jase knew not to interfere. They would tell him in good time, but apparently, that time was not now. When he couldn't take the awkwardness any longer, Jase stood from the table and sat on the floor next to Max's big present.

"Okay, then. Let's put this bed together."

Max slowly walked over to Jase and sat with him. "Okay. We'll do the bed first," he said flatly. Gone was Max's bubbling excitement. In its place was doubt.

Uncertainty.

Fear.

Somehow, without the word being spoken, "infamy" had made its appearance at Max's birthday.

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Chapter 2: The Graveyards of White Rapids



“This is the one,” Max announced as Cindy inched her F-150 at 5 mph down a gravel road that was nearly a mile from the nearest paved county road. “This is where they will be.”

It was 2 AM when Cindy brought her truck to a stop outside a crumbling building that had once been a church over a century ago. Behind the broken walls and the remnant of half a chimney, was what had once been the town cemetery. Cindy’s headlights cast a feeble light over the ancient, moss-covered gravestones. She reached for her M-16.

“I seriously hope you’re wrong, Max.”

Max reached for his own 9mm Luger, making sure the safety switch was on. “Me too.”

The two of them stared silently into the cemetery for a full minute. Neither was anxious to go in.

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“Do you think we should look around?” Cindy asked timidly.

Max’s hands were suddenly ice cold. He now thought it was a terrible idea to come here at this particular time.

“Let’s watch for a few minutes. Then maybe.”

It was hard to tell if the broken church and the mossy gravestones had experienced the advanced aging process they had witnessed in Casperville, or instead of the natural, slow aging of a cemetery that had not been used in over a hundred years. Either way, Max did not want to get out of the truck.

Cindy and Max had already scouted the modern cemeteries currently used by the town of White Rapids—there were two of them. Each had been well lit with manicured lawns and polished headstones. Neither Max nor Cindy had felt the need to carry their weapons as they had walked between those headstones looking for telltale signs of zombies. Although technically, a zombie could come from any grave, neither of them felt that either of those cemeteries was the one. The hairs on the back of their necks had not “stood up,” so to speak.

The hairs on their necks were standing now. Cindy’s grip on her machine gun tightened.

“Maybe we should return in the morning.”

Max rested his free hand on the door handle. “The graves always went back to normal during the day. We have to look for them now... when they’re out.” He swallowed with a dry mouth. “I mean... if they’re out.”

Cindy rested her hand on her own door handle, uncertain of her next move. “You know, as your guardian, I am responsible for keeping you safe. I could get in trouble if you get hurt. I should say no to this whole thing.”

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Max rolled his eyes, then pulled the handle to his door. He didn't feel he needed a guardian telling him what to do. And besides, they were both in equal danger.

Cindy took a deep breath and opened her own door. "Okay, but stay in the beam of the headlights. Don't wander off into the dark." She switched the engine off but left the headlights on. Both of them stepped slowly around the truck, careful to stay in the light.

The story behind Max's guardianship had occurred shortly after their escape from Casperville and arrival in White Rapids. As refugees had flooded into the State, they were simply collected and housed in various motel parks and temporary tent camps. There weren't enough foster homes in the State to handle all the newly orphaned children. Naturally, none of those children brought their birth certificates or passports with them, and electronic records were a shambles after The Storm. Identification was often not possible. Children were simply placed with whoever would take them.

Cindy *did* have her driver's license with her, and she was 18 now, so she could legally become a guardian. That and some story about how this boy named Max was a long-lost cousin, was enough to get her assigned as Max's temporary guardian. It wasn't quite the same as an adoption, but it at least permitted her to take Max to a doctor and enroll Max in school.

Cindy had read over the guardianship paperwork the day they had stamped it officially and handed it to her. It gave her a weird feeling of advanced maturity. "Wow. Just like that, I've got a kid."

Max squinted at the paperwork as well. "That's so weird. Do I have to call you Mom now?" That had earned him a fake punch in the arm. "Ouch," he had pretended to be hurt. "Do they know that you beat me?"

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Cindy had made a sarcastic huff. "What a great idea. I'm glad you suggested it."

Now tonight, Cindy was placing that little person she was responsible for, into danger...not to mention herself. She stepped close to Max to make sure he stayed by her side.

I can't let anything happen to you.

The night was silent, literally as a graveyard. In the quiet, Max could hear the crinkling of his diaper as he stepped toward the gravestones. At any other time, wearing a diaper gave him a sense of being safe and secure. It had no such effect tonight. Instead, it was too loud. He began to shiver reflexively both from the cool December air, and his mounting fear.

This really was a bad idea, Max began to think.

The ground cover around the first grave sites appeared to be intact. There was no evidence of recent activity. Cindy kneeled by the first stone and rubbed the moss off the writing.

"Whoever this was, they died in 1896."

Max likewise rubbed the dirt off the stone nearest him. "This one says 1903."

Cindy stood and glanced over the stones illuminated by the truck's headlights. The dates that were visible were all late 19th and early 20th Century. "This is only a few of them," she said as her gaze moved past the truck's light into the grave beyond. "There are a lot more out there."

Max's shivering intensified. He took a few steps toward the truck. "Not tonight. I can't do it."

At that instant the truck's headlights went off, plunging both of them into midnight darkness. Max jumped as a small trickle of urine escaped into his diaper. Both of them swung their weapons around toward the F-150.

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“Are they here?” Max whispered. His 9mm trembled as he aimed it toward the shadowy outline of the truck.

Cindy squinted into the darkness. She could neither see nor hear anything. Then she breathed a sigh of relief.

“They go off automatically a few minutes after the engine stops. I forgot to set the light switch to the ‘on’ position.”

Max clung to Cindy’s arm as they both approached the darkened truck, weapons still drawn just in case they were wrong. Stepping around the door, they could see that no one or no *thing* had made its way into the truck. Cindy reached in to switch the headlights on, then hesitated. She wasn’t sure what they would see when the lights *did* come on. Remembering the unnatural speed of zombies, they could find themselves suddenly surrounded by the creatures.

“What are you waiting for,” Max said urgently. “Turn them on.”

Cindy turned the switch, then swung her M-16 around at the cemetery. The weapon safety was off. It was in full automatic fire mode. Likewise, Max switched the safety of his Luger off and aimed it toward the now illuminated gravestones.

The graveyard was as it had been. The silence was uninterrupted. There were no monsters to be seen. After a tense minute of waiting, they both lowered their weapons and clicked the safeties on.

Max broke the silence. “I think we should go.”

Cindy nodded in agreement. “I think you are right.”

Max stepped around the front of the truck moving toward the passenger side when he first heard the sound. He froze mid-step. Max wasn’t sure if the skin on his back had tightened first, or if

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he had first heard the sound of howling. Both seemed to happen simultaneously. Max aimed his 9mm wildly into the dark.

“What is that!” he shrieked.

Cindy aimed her weapon outward as well. The howling sound seemed to be coming from multiple directions. One seemed to answer another. Then there was a third. Cindy was prepared to fire a few rounds to give Max cover while he ran for the passenger door. Then she lowered her gun with another sigh of relief.

“Are they wolves?” Max said in a panic.

“No,” Cindy replied calmly. “They’re only coyotes. Listen closely. The pitch is too high. The animals making that sound are small.”

Max’s leg muscles could finally move. He ran for the passenger door and jumped into his seat. “How do you know they aren’t wolves?”

Cindy took a more leisurely seat behind the steering wheel, calmly setting her M-16 down, then closing the door. “I’m sure they are coyotes. They can’t hurt us.” She started the truck engine.

Max slammed his own door and clicked the lock. Another dark thought entered his mind as he looked through the window into the featureless night. “What if they are werewolves?”

Cindy frowned at that. “Of course, they aren’t werewolves. What gave you that idea?”

Max shook his head. “I don’t know. But they sounded like werewolves to me.”

Cindy put the truck in reverse and began to slowly pull away from the cemetery. “Werewolves, vampires, ghosts: those are movie monsters. I think we’ve got enough dealing with zombies.”

Max, The Diapered Zombie and Werewolf Killer

“And they don’t make movies about zombies?” Max added, still unconvinced.

Cindy turned the truck around and was prepared to drive forward, but paused to answer Max.

“Those other monsters aren’t real. Zombies are the only real monsters we’ve seen. Don’t let your imagination run away with you.”

“But how do you know the other monsters aren’t real?” Max pressed on. “If zombies are real, then they can be real, too.”

Cindy huffed in frustration. “I just know, okay. I’m older than you.”

“If you say so, Mom,” Max replied sarcastically. That earned him another punch in the arm, this one a bit firmer than the first time. “Ouch,” he whined.

“Don’t talk about it,” Cindy commanded impatiently. “I have to focus on driving.” She put the truck in ‘Drive’ and pulled forward along the gravel road.

The drive to the Camelot Cove motel would be in silence. Max rubbed his arm where Cindy had punched him. His feelings were hurt much more than his arm. He felt that he was once again being ignored because he was a kid.

Werewolves might be real. He turned his head away from Cindy. *Just because she’s older doesn’t mean she’s right.*

Max next contemplated the diaper he was wearing and the fact that he had peed accidentally.

I’m supposed to be Max the Diapered Zombie Killer Superhero Kid, he thought remembering the title he had given himself after surviving Casperville. *Now I’m only Max the Kid in a Wet Diaper.* Max leaned his head miserably against the truck’s window as Cindy

Max, The Diapered Zombie and Werewolf Killer drove into the night. Maybe I deserve to be ignored. I don't know what I'm supposed to be.



That night, as Max curled into his toddler bed to sleep the few hours remaining in the night, Cindy was struck by how young and fragile he really was. Max had fought side by side with her against an army of zombies in Casperville. He had stood his ground firing round after round at the undead masses from his 9mm Luger, while her other friends—Zoey, Grace, and even the powerful Charlie—had all fallen.

Yet here was that same boy now wearing a two-piece PJ outfit over his diaper, his PJs displaying a cartoon train that matched his toddler bed, cuddling a stuffed train plushie and sucking on a pacifier. Cindy suddenly felt a kind of parental guilt.

He's so vulnerable and small. I can't believe I risked taking him into a cemetery tonight.

Cindy kneeled by the toddler bed and rubbed Max's back in a motherly gesture. "Hey Max," she said by way of apology. "I'm sorry about tonight. I'm sorry you were scared and I'm sorry I hurt your feelings."

Max listened silently with his pacifier in place while squeezing his plushie tightly. He nodded a 'thank you'.

"I was also thinking that we don't need to do this anymore. We've checked out a few cemeteries. We haven't found evidence of zombies. It's not our responsibility to save the world. As you

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remember from last time, we would know if they returned. It's pretty obvious when they do."

Max continued to silently hug his plushie. He certainly wasn't disagreeing.

"Besides, you have your new school now, and your new friends. What are their names?"

Max spoke around his pacifier. "Corey and Bee."

"Corey and Bee," Cindy repeated. "And we both have Jase. You like him, don't you?"

Max's face lit up at the name. "Yes, I really like Jase."

"Me, too. Jase means a lot to me. And I'm a senior in high school. After I graduate, I'll get a good job and we can move out of Camelot Cove."

Max finally had something to disagree about. "I don't want to leave Camelot Cove. I like it here."

Cindy blinked her eyes patiently. "I understand. We can talk about that when the time comes. What I'm saying is that it's okay for us to live our lives again. We deserve to be happy. Zoey, Grace, and Charlie would want that for us." Cindy's voice cracked at the mention of her late friends.

"What about werewolves?" Max asked next. He wanted to be believed, even if it was a crazy idea.

Cindy patted Max's back reassuringly. "Maybe you're right, Max. Who knows? But whether or not werewolves exist, it's not our responsibility to figure it out. But it *is* my responsibility to protect you. I don't want to put you in harm's way ever again."

Max nodded in agreement. He was tired of always being afraid. He really did like his new life here at Camelot Cove. His heart

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wasn't into monster hunting anymore. Cindy leaned over and kissed Max's head.

Max then presented his train plushie in little kid fashion. "Kiss Choo-choo," he said.

Cindy grinned broadly. What an adorable thing to ask. She gave the plushie train a kiss, then ruffled Max's hair. "Get some sleep. The sun comes up in only a few hours."

"No monsters?" Max asked one more time.

"That's right, Max. No monsters. All the monsters are gone."

Of course, Cindy understood that she couldn't make any such guarantee. But isn't that what parents want their children to believe?

I'm not his parent, Cindy reminded herself. I'm just his guardian. Still, under the circumstances, the two felt remarkably similar.