

Teaser

Chapter 8

From Bad to Worse

The house trembles as Colonel Ward's Black Hawk helicopter descends over the front yard, its powerful spotlights illuminating the home. Inside, the soldiers, now with enough light, push their night-vision goggles up. The helicopter flattens the small bushes below, while loose debris is whipped into a frenzy, some of it flying through the windows into the house.

The moment the helicopter lands, the special forces unit leaps out, quickly fanning out around the house to secure the perimeter. Ward tosses his headset aside and steps out of the helicopter, accompanied with a tranquilizer gun in his hand.

Confidently, the colonel strides into the house through the blasted frame where the front door once hung, holding his gun nonchalantly at his side. With a quick glance, he assesses the situation and confirms that everything is under control. Ward looks in admiration at the creature lying on the ground before him. Stepping beside it, he moves much closer than the soldiers, who continue to keep Christopher at gunpoint.

"What are you, and what are you so afraid of?"

Christopher hears the colonel's voice. He opens his eyes and takes his claws off his ears.

Christopher sees Ward looking down at him and makes eye contact.

"I know you understand what I just said."

Due to the hard blow to the back of his head, Jonathan lies dazed on the floor, resting on the side of his face, his hands tied behind his back. Christopher slightly rises and looks at Jonathan, who is helplessly lying on the ground. Jonathan looks at him with defeat in his eyes, and no matter how much Christopher wants to help his best friend, he's powerless in his current state.

Jonathan looks at him with defeat in his eyes, and no matter how much Christopher wants to help his best friend, he's powerless in his current state. Held at gunpoint and with one of his legs nearly severed, there's little he can do. There is one way, but Christopher is resolute—it's

a line he refuses to cross.

"You can't save your little friend."

The colonel aims his tranquilizer gun downward and fires two darts into Christopher's chest. Christopher closes his eyes again, lets himself fall backward, and wants to get away from Jonathan as quickly as possible. He retreats into himself, shutting out the pain and resisting the mutation. Though the tranquilizer has no effect on him, he pretends otherwise. The virus coursing through him is so strong that it begins neutralizing the sedative almost instantly.

"Motherfucker!" Jonathan yells at the colonel, his frustration boiling over.

"These things work fast," Ward mutters, casting a surprised glance at the tranquilizer gun before turning his attention to Jonathan. The look in the colonel's eyes tells Jonathan that he's far from done with him.

Ward turns away from him, issuing commands to the leader of the special forces unit. "Get a tourniquet on his leg—it needs to stay alive. Secure him and get it airborne as soon as possible. Another chopper's on its way to collect the other asshole. But I've got some questions for him first. If the eyewitness accounts are accurate, there's something much larger and far more dangerous still out there."

The unit's medic, already inside, grabs his field medical kit and kneels next to Christopher's severely injured leg. With astonishment, he looks at the wound. "Colonel, I don't think it's necessary. The bleeding has already stopped."

The colonel glances at the wound and then at the medic. "Leave the thinking to me. Apply it and disappear."

The medic secures the tourniquet, his attention fixed in awe on Christopher's body. A large stretcher is unloaded from the helicopter and laid beside him. Several soldiers pull him onto the stretcher, strapping him down securely and with haste. Christopher's mutated size and weight demand extra hands as they struggle to lift the stretcher off the ground. With effort, the soldiers carry their captive outside, where the moonlight shines brightly on Christopher's exposed body.

The virus raging through his veins is strengthened by it. Christopher fights against his subconscious to prevent further mutations, but he feels himself losing the battle. He opens his eyes, the moonlight glaring as it reflects off the reflective layer behind his retina.

The soldiers, alarmed by the sight of his glowing eyes, hurriedly toss the stretcher into the helicopter. Four of them climb aboard, fastening several straps tightly across Christopher's body. They secure him in his stretcher against the floor and take positions at the front and

back of their captive as the sound of the engines grows louder. The rotors begin to spin faster, the advanced vehicle lifts off the ground, and quickly ascends vertically.

From the corner of his eye, Ward watches the helicopter rise past the window, plunging the house back into darkness. The lights are switched on, and Ward can't take his eyes off Jonathan. Dishes clatter off the counter, and furniture trembles across the floor as the helicopter, now high above the house, prepares to depart.

"Put him on the couch," Ward commands one of the soldiers.

Jonathan is yanked to his feet by two men and unceremoniously tossed onto the couch. He groans but remains unfazed by the overwhelming force surrounding him. Sitting awkwardly with his hands tied behind his back, he leans against them, the position pressing into his weight. "Easy there, ladies. Didn't know you liked it rough."

Ward grabs a chair from the dining table, positions it squarely in front of Jonathan, and takes a seat.

"Mr. Davis."

Jonathan meets the colonel's stare with a mocking expression, surprised by the confidence with which he knows his name. He remains silent, waiting to hear what the colonel has to say.

"Let me enlighten you about the situation you're in right now. As you may have noticed, we're not the local police. In fact, we're not even the regular military. What that means is simple: there are no rules I have to operate by. I can do whatever I want with you to uncover the truth about these exotic pets of yours."

Jonathan keeps his eyes locked on the colonel, his expression steady and his silence unbroken.

"Eyewitnesses reported seeing three of these things. We found the scraps of one. The second we just loaded up. Where's the third? Is it coming this way after its little stroll?"

Jonathan isn't one to act against his will, and his eyes remain fixed on the colonel, brimming with contempt.

The helicopter, carrying Christopher and the soldiers, soars over the forest with its sliding doors open on both sides. Christopher's head rests at the edge of the doorway, and he slowly opens his eyes. He turns his head to the side, watching as Jonathan's house shrinks into the distance before vanishing behind the trees. Slowly, he raises his head, his gaze settling on the soldiers. One of them meets his eyes, captivated by the bright reflection of the moonlight.

"It's awake!" the soldier shouts over the noise of the helicopter.

The other soldiers glance nervously at the glowing eyes staring back at them. The team leader grabs a tranquilizer gun and stands up. He stands over Christopher, gripping a handle above his head with one hand while aiming the gun at the prisoner with the other. The team leader

stares boldly and confidently into the glowing eyes before firing a tranquilizer dart into his body.

Bound to the floor of the helicopter, Christopher's transformed head remains locked onto the soldiers, not moving a muscle.

"Shoot another one!" a soldier yells.

The team leader fires another dart, but Christopher still doesn't flinch or react. The virus, further fueled by the moonlight shining directly on his face, breaks down the sedatives even faster than they can enter his system. Dark veins spread across his face and the rest of his body, turning his skin as black as the night.

Christopher turns his head to the side once more and sees nothing but trees and mountains illuminated by the moonlight. The gaping wound in his leg saps the strength from his body. Energy he needs to mentally focus on keeping his subconscious under control and remaining in his current state.

Christopher turns his head back, locking eyes with the team leader looming over him. The sadistic soldier, clearly annoyed, fires another dart from the tranquilizer gun into his captive's chest. Christopher opens his gaping maw, unleashing a series of hellish sounds directed at the soldier standing above him, who reacts instantly. Gripping the handle above his head for balance, he stomps his combat boot down hard onto Christopher's head. In return, he's met with a rising crescendo of terrifying sounds, each one louder than the last.

The soldier, eager to show off in front of his teammates, presses his boot down with all his strength on the demonic face beneath him, reveling in the power he holds over the bound captive. "Shut the fuck up, will you."

The injury and the relentless internal battle start to wear Christopher down, and his eyes slowly close with exhaustion.

"That's it, boy. Go to sleep," the team leader sneers, convinced the tranquilizers are doing their job.

"Land that chopper as quickly as you can. I don't trust that thing at all."

"How much further to the base?"

The soldiers' chatter becomes increasingly difficult for Christopher to track. Their voices blur as his subconscious steadily takes control. Deep within, he summons the strength to fight back but chooses not to. The fear of what will happen to him outweighs his resolve to avoid putting lives at risk. The distance between him and Jonathan brings a sense of peace.

As Christopher lets his guard down, the virus seizes its opportunity. The sharp crack of bones fills the air as his body starts to expand. Black manes sprout around his enlarging head,

framing the muzzle that pushes its way out. Meanwhile, his injured leg mends itself, the twisted bone snapping back into place. The straps restraining him strain under the growing pressure, pulling tight with a tearing sound. The steel anchors on the helicopter floor, where the hooks are secured, begin to warp.

"It's breaking free!"

"We have to take it out now that we still can!"

The soldiers descend into panic as Christopher's transformation accelerates. He grows so massive that his head and feet begin to stretch beyond either side of the helicopter.

The team leader stumbles, thrown off balance by the expanding creature, his shoe size now resembling that of a toddler compared to the enormous head beneath him. He lets go of his tranquilizer gun, clutching the handle above his head with both hands to keep from falling out of the helicopter. In a swift motion, he yanks his foot away from the widening jaws, afraid of losing it between the massive teeth.

A piercing ping rings out as an anchor breaks free, smashing against a steel panel. The strap snaps loose as Christopher opens his growing jaws and unleashes a deafening roar. The demonic sound reverberates through the confined space, so loud it disorients the soldiers and throws off their aim as they struggle to target the growing creature. The anchors of the remaining straps snap loose, crashing into the soldiers and ricocheting off the helicopter's sides.

Before the soldiers can respond, the towering Christopher surges upward, clamping the team leader in his jaws. The three remaining soldiers scream in panic and immediately unleash a hail of bullets.

The bullets sting, but they are too small to inflict any serious harm. With a single motion, the enraged Christopher gathers his legs beneath him and lashes out with a powerful claw. The first soldier caught by his strike is impaled on the long claws that tear deep into his body. He is flung into his comrade, who is then crushed against the open door. Christopher's blow carries such force that the door is ripped from its rails, hurling it and the lifeless bodies far into the night. A crimson streak arcs through the air, shimmering in the bright moonlight. The cramped interior of the helicopter leaves Christopher wedged between the roof and the floor. The violent jolt from the impact against the door tilts the helicopter, causing the last remaining soldier capable of resisting to lose his footing. Unable to steady himself, he can no longer take aim at Christopher.

Alarms blare from the cockpit, drowning out the screams of the soldier dangling from Christopher's jaws. As the pilots work desperately to stabilize the helicopter, Christopher

drives a claw into the steel side panel, his grip gouging deep grooves into the metal to anchor himself. With his other claw, he snatches at the soldier scrambling for balance, his long talons piercing the man's body like a hot knife through butter. The two soldiers flail wildly, battling for their lives, but the sheer power of Christopher's jaws and claws leaves them completely powerless.

Helpless, they dangle in the jaws and claw of the bipedal beast, screaming for help as blood streams from their mouths due to internal bleeding and the pressure exerted on their bodies. The pilots' headsets maintain a direct link to Colonel Ward.

Jonathan lies on his back on the dining table, a towel covering his face. He is pressed against the table as a bucket of water is poured over the towel. Gagging and choking, Jonathan tries to gasp for air.

Ward watches the scene unfold, the screaming coming through his headset. He swiftly clamps his hands over his ears, straining to make out what's happening. The racket from the waterboarding irritates the colonel. "Cut it out! I can't hear a damn thing!"

The soldiers halt the pouring, yank the towel off Jonathan's head, and watch as he coughs water from his lungs. He tries to sit up but is forcibly pushed back down.

The rotor blades tear through the treetops as the pilots wrestle the helicopter out of its sideways plunge, narrowly avoiding a crash. But there's no time to catch their breath. As the helicopter climbs again, one of the pilots glances back to see the two soldiers dangling helplessly from the fiend's claw and jaws.

Christopher, his other foreclaw still driven into the steel wall, meets the copilot's gaze with an unnervingly calm expression. He ignores the soldiers' flailing and feeds on the fear radiating from the pilots. The copilot's brain cannot process what he is witnessing. He keeps staring at his colleague, trapped between the jaws of the massive, wolf-like head.

"Nathan, turn around! Don't look at it and stay focused! We need to gain altitude now!" The pilot calls out, desperate to snap his copilot out of his daze, but he remains paralyzed, his eyes fixed on the scene behind them.

Christopher knows the danger has been eliminated and the pilots are powerless to fight back. All they can do is cling to hope and focus on keeping the helicopter in the air.

"What's happening? Report your status!" the colonel barks through the pilots' headset.

The copilot turns back around as he is pressed into his seat by the steep climb the helicopter begins to make, immediately assisting with the controls. Both men are stiff with terror, too terrified to respond.

Christopher's sublime hearing catches Ward's voice shouting through the pilots' headsets. Certain of his dominance, he hurls the soldier in his claw to the floor, pinning him under one of his powerful hind legs. Remarkably, the soldier's battered body still shows faint signs of movement.

As the helicopter ascends steeply, Christopher digs the claws of his other hind leg into the floor and braces his back against the roof. With a sharp pull, he wrenches his foreclaw free from the steel side panel, giving him full use of both. Now unrestrained, he grabs the blood-soaked soldier from his jaws, tearing away the man's bulletproof vest and clothing. Ravenous, Christopher lifts the naked soldier to his jaws, slicing the body in half with a single bite before swiftly consuming the remainder of the human carcass.

The helicopter has now gained significant altitude, and the pilots resort to their last option. They aim to use the open doors and perform another sideways dive, desperate to expel the fully mutated Christopher from their aircraft. As the helicopter hurtles downward, Christopher fights for balance, pressing himself firmly between the roof and the floor.

"Send backup immediately! Multiple casualties! I repeat: multiple casualties!" the pilot yells into his headset at Colonel Ward.

Hearing the frantic shouting, Ward storms over to Jonathan, still gasping for air on the dining table. He seizes him by the collar and hauls him upright. "What are you hiding from me?"

As Ward pulls Jonathan close, Jonathan hears the pilots' screaming through the colonel's headset, and a wide grin spreads across his face.

"Why are you so upset? It seems your men have found what you were looking for."

Blazing with rage, the colonel hurls Jonathan back with such force that the back of his head slams into the table.

Christopher's human mind, enhanced by his mutations, grants him complete clarity about the situation and how to respond. Time seems to slow, giving him plenty of space to weigh his options. He knows he can't stay in the helicopter, as reinforcements will arrive. Jumping out now isn't an option either, as the pilots could track him. His mutated body requires a lot of energy, and he's not about to give up an easy meal.

The faint remnants of life in the soldier beneath his hind leg are snuffed out as Christopher crushes the defenseless man underfoot. He lifts his paw slightly, allowing the lifeless body to

slide out of the helicopter with startling speed, before slamming his rear foot back into the steel floor for stability. Christopher thrusts his claws into the cockpit, sinking his talons into the pilots and yanking them, seatbelts and all, from their seats. Alarms blare and warning lights flash as the helicopter, now uncontrollable, plunges sideways above the treetops. Christopher lunges sideways, yanking the pilots from the cockpit and propelling himself off the steel floor with his hind claws. With the helicopter tilting dangerously, he leaps diagonally upward, far from the whirring rotor blades, the pilots clutched in his claws, as the full moonlight bathes him in its glow.

Leaves and branches are sent flying as the helicopter carves its way through the forest. The spinning rotors slice several trees in half before shattering against the ground. The steep sideways dive drives the helicopter faster into the forest floor, rupturing the fuel tank on impact. A massive explosion follows, sending a towering fireball rising above the treetops.

Moments later, the full moon continues to cast its light over Alaska's pristine wilderness, illuminating mountains, trees, and glistening lakes. Its reflection on the snow-covered ground reveals the dense moisture lingering in the air.

A dense mist blankets the bottom of a deep trench, obscuring it from view. The fully mutated Christopher approaches the edge, a lifeless pilot clutched in each claw. His keen sense of smell picks up a trail leading to the corpse of the soldier who slid out of the helicopter during the pilots' final desperate dive. Christopher hurls the bodies from his claws into the trench with contempt and complete indifference. He jumps in after them, finding they've come to rest beside the soldier's corpse.

His massive frame looms over the lifeless bodies as Christopher sadistically revels in the dominance he wields over his victims. Before consuming them, he pauses, drawing a deep breath through his nose. The stench of death floods his senses, stimulating the receptors within. A rush of dopamine floods his brain, amplifying the dark pleasure of the moment.

Jonathan kneels with his hands bound behind his back, guarded by special forces soldiers. As he waits, his belongings and even the house itself begin to tremble once more, signaling the descent of another Black Hawk helicopter into his front yard.

Ward walks out of the house toward the helicopter with one of the team leaders. They are followed by the rest of the unit, merging into formation behind them.

"A chopper is already en route to the crash site with a team looking for survivors. I doubt the target is among the debris. It's highly likely to look different than how it was loaded here. Find it."

"We'll find it, Colonel," the team leader says, giving a firm nod. He and his heavily armed team board the helicopter, and the moment the last man lifts his foot off the ground, the Black Hawk takes to the air.