

**Sample chapters from**  
***Hear Evil (Book Two in The Ro Delahanty Series)***  
**Chapter Twelve / Marauder's Den**

*Thursday, September 4, 2003, 1:15 a.m.*

“Uh,” Robin Frietag grunted as the familiar high-lifted and noisy diesel Dodge pickup pulled into the driveway of her convenience store, then rolled her eyes and muttered, “Here come the Lousekateers.”

The Lousekateers was a nickname a trio of boys had gained while attending the old Montgomery High School. In fact, they were part of the last graduating class from the building six years ago. While at the time not meant as a compliment, they had taken it as a badge of honor and were still living down to it.

As its manager, Frietag thought of the 24/7/365 convenience store on the south edge of Montgomery, alongside the intersection of Iowa Rt. 40, a major four-lane, and County Road T, a two-lane, north-south blacktop, as “hers.” It was called the Marauder's Den because it was across the street from the sprawling and still relatively new regional high school serving town and farm kids from the northwest corner of the county. The school's teams were the Marauders; their logo was a scowling pirate.

The Lousekateers showed up three, sometimes four nights a week in the early morning hours to buy a twelve-pack, cigarettes and jerky or other snacks. By their loud voices and almost clown-like swagger, she was pretty sure by the time they got to her they'd already been through at least one twelve-pack.

“Hey, Robin, you're sure lookin' fine tonight,” Seth Deters waved to her as he headed for the big cooler at the back. Deters, the more handsome of the three, was also the most obnoxious, always ready with some suggestive remark, “You know, Robin, if I was ten years *older*, or you were ten years *younger*...”

However, he never pushed it too far, in part because he knew the woman and his mother and father had all been contemporaries in high school twenty years ago, and in part because he knew – who in a town the size of Montgomery didn't? – her long-time boyfriend was one of the city's cops.

Jeremy Harris and Clint Sperry, his pals, usually loitered in the open area near her cash register by the door. Where their everyday look tended toward a bored frown, today they seemed excited, or anxious, she wasn't sure which.

And they were all decked out in full camo. While an occasional camo shirt or jacket on a customer wasn't uncommon, the only time all-camo outfits showed up was during deer season.

"What's with the get-ups, you guys? I thought hunting season didn't start for another couple months."

"If you're after deer," Harris answered, a little cryptically.

"And we ain't huntin' no squirrels neither," Sperry said with an I-know-something-you-don't-smirk.

It was Deters, who, when he approached the counter with his twelve-pack of the cheapest light beer they sold, couldn't contain himself, "We're goin' zombie huntin'!"

"Ohhh," Freitag said with a sidelong look, like, "Are you kidding me?"

"It's all over the Internet," Sperry told her, "the Zombie Apocalypse. It started in Canada and is movin' down into the U.S. of A. through Minnesota. They first invade small towns, like Montgomery, and after they've turned everyone in town into zombies" – he made a not especially good pantomime of a blank-faced, stiff-walking undead – "they spread out to the bigger cities."

"There're entire neighborhoods in Minneapolis overrun now," Harris said.

"There're pictures, eyewitness accounts and everything," Sperry added.

Shaking her head, Freitag said, "And you three morons are gonna saunter up to Minnesota to look for the zombies."

"We don't have to, they're already *here*." It was Deters. "We've heard there's a nest of 'em's hiding in the woods out south of town."

Handing Deters the change from the twenty he'd given her, along with his ID, she said, "Well, don't mistake any stray cows out there for zombies."

After they left, Freitag busied herself restocking the candy shelves, now convinced the Lousekateers had already been half-drunk when they came in and would go much further along that road as they downed the new twelve-pack; and equally as sure they would spend the next hour or two laughing and acting stupid, driving around some back roads out in the county, see nothing and head for home to sleep it off.

She found it beyond credence these fools actually thought there were zombies out there.

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It was almost two-thirty when Ro pulled into the convenience store's parking lot and radioed in, "Fort Armstrong, One-Nine 10-07" – *out of service* – "at the Marauder's Den."

"10-4 One-Nine."

There were five all-night convenience shops in her patrol area; she made it a habit to visit each several times a week to use the restroom, buy a cup of hot tea and a protein bar, and be 10-8 – *in service* – in ten minutes.

Entering the convenience store, Ro pointed toward the back corner where the washrooms were. Robin flashed a smile and waved her on, telling her the bathroom was unoccupied.

While Ro had never been good at small talk, she had made a conscious effort to learn something about the clerks in each of the convenience shops. Most of the time the conversation was little more than chit-chat; but there was always the possibility these night owls might share something important. While Robin Frietag's usual favorite topic was her new grandson, tonight it was about the upcoming fortunes of the Marauders football team. They had been conference champs last year based on the passing accuracy of a senior quarterback now playing for the Iowa State Cyclones.

Having had several customers between Ro and the Lousekateers, Frietag had pretty much put their drunken bullshit out of her mind, having heard it all, or something much like it, before. It never occurred to her to mention it to the deputy.

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Not quite ten minutes later Ro had taken only a couple of steps out of the convenience store's front door when there was the unmistakable popping sound of gunfire. But it was muffled, suggesting it was coming from some distance away. They were too close together, even overlapping, suggesting several shooters, three, maybe four. There were the distinctive rapid sharp pops of assault-style weapons being fired as fast as someone could pull the trigger, as well as more spaced-out thump-like reports, suggesting a heavier caliber weapon.

"Ah, shit!" Ro muttered, tossing her foam plastic cup of hot tea in the trash can next to the door and sprinting for the patrol car. Climbing in, she grabbed the mic and without the usual preliminaries called in, "Fort Armstrong One-Nine 10-8!"

"10-4," Gwen Teague, the regular third shift dispatcher, acknowledged, but then ordered, "One-Nine, you are 10-78" – *backup* – "for Two-Three investigating shots fired on County Road T about three miles south of Montgomery. 10-39" – *urgent, use lights and siren*.

"10-4," Ro acknowledged, then confirmed, "I can hear the gunfire from here. My ETA is five."

"Copy that."

Fort Armstrong Unit Two-Three was Corporal Mel Schreiber, who was already on the scene or closer to the site.

## Chapter Thirteen / Zombie Apocalypse (Part One)

Thursday, September 4, 2003, 2:38 a.m.

“Jee-sus Christ, investigate *shots fired!*” Corporal Mel Schreiber snarled to himself. “It’s a goddam war zone!” Frowning, he added, “And what the fuck are those idiots shooting at?”

An “investigate shots fired” call almost always turned out to be one round someone had discharged by accident, or several fruitless attempts to kill an unwelcome raccoon invading a backyard.

But what he saw after cresting a small rise on County Road T was insane! They had parked a big pickup across the road’s shoulder, its headlights on bright, illuminating a narrow strip of pasture, seventy yards wide, and a stand of timber beyond.

There were four of them blasting away at the wall of woods. Even from not quite a hundred yards away he could tell two of the shooters were firing stubby, AR-style weapons, the rapid muzzle flashes a dead giveaway. Another seemed to have a more conventional rifle, slower muzzle flashes. And one, the closest to him, was using a large-frame, semi-automatic handgun, like a .45.

*Shots fired earlier...* Schreiber reasoned to himself. *What I’m seeing now... Damn, these guys have gotta already put dozens of rounds into those woods.*

Closing the distance to the shooters, he glanced to his left at the woods several times, trying to spot any visible targets, or worse yet, returned fire – a scary thought! Nothing.

Reaching for his mic to report he was “on scene” and investigating, a flash off to his right caught his attention. Vaguely aware he’d been passing a farmhouse, he now saw two small lights too close together to be a car coming down a long drive toward him.

*Just what I need, some farmer on a four-wheeler coming to investigate,* but then he understood, *Uh, it’s probably this guy’s pasture they’re shooting up.*

Dousing his siren, he figured he was now close enough to the shooters they should have heard him, although they did not seem to have noticed; he made his call-in. He also asked about his back-up and was told One-Nine was en route, ETA two minutes.

*Delahanty, good!* he thought. Although he would never have admitted it out loud, he’d been among the deputies initially skeptical about female cops. However, after she’d taken down four perps single-handed and saved a fellow deputy’s life in a shootout a few weeks ago, he figured she must have “big brass ones,” again something he wouldn’t dare articulate because it wasn’t PC (politically correct). But deputy Delahanty had his unqualified respect as a cop.

Coming to a sliding stop ten yards from the shooters, they turned toward him, well illuminated by his headlights. He’d expected looks of surprise, maybe some fear about a cop descending on them, or worse yet, turning their guns on him, but what he saw on their faces was curiosity and even expectation.

A bit confused, he wondered, *What the hell, do these guys somehow think I’m here to help them? Do what?*

Turning his radio to external speaker mode, Schreiber commanded, “Deputy sheriff! Cease fire! Cease fire! Cease fire!”

As the four lowered their weapons toward the ground, Schreiber exited the patrol car and stepped around into the flood of light from his headlights, figuring if any of these guys might get it in his head to fire on him, looking into the bright headlights would throw off their aim and give him time to secure his own weapon and respond.

Keeping his right hand down close to his holstered Sig, he ordered, “Gentlemen, slowly place your weapons on the ground,” and used his left hand to emphasize the desired action. All four were in full camo outfits; there was a litter of empty beer cans, dozens of spent cartridge casings, and empty magazines scattered around their feet.

Schreiber’s order got a look of shock and confusion.

“Aren’t you gonna deputize us so we can go clean out the zombies?” one asked, glancing over his shoulder, as if he was expecting hordes of the undead to any second come pouring into the pasture from hiding places in the timber.

Schreiber was dumbstruck.

To buy time to think he said, “Uh, I can’t deputize you. Only the sheriff can....” He knew it was lame but didn’t know what else to say. *Zombies?*

He had, of course, heard One-Nine’s approaching siren and was relieved when her car come to a stop behind the pickup off to his right. Exiting the car, Delahanty took a position on the other side of the four, placing them in a crossfire if it ever came to it.

“Gentlemen,” he repeated, “I need for you to place your weapons on the ground in front of you, and then step back – *now!*” Perhaps it was the more authoritative edge in his voice, or the presence of a back-up deputy on the scene, or both, but the four complied, although with obvious reluctance.

It was then the four-wheeler growled to a stop next to Schreiber’s car. The farmer, carrying a pump shotgun, jumped off and charged toward the four shooters, shouting, “If one of you assholes killed any of my cattle...”

Schreiber stepped in front of the farmer and held up his hand. “Sir, please take it easy. They’re not shooting any more, your cattle are safe.”

The farmer’s face seemed to relax a little until one shooter protested, “We weren’t shooting your cattle, we were shooting the zombies.”

“Zombies!”

Still confronting the farmer, Schreiber tried to reassure him, “Sir, we’ve got the situation under control for now. Give us a chance to sort things out, okay?”

The farmer nodded.

Turning to the shooters, Schreiber said, “Alright, can one of you give me a legitimate reason you were shooting up this man’s woods?” He made little an effort to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

It was Deters who stepped forward and related he same story they’d given Robin Frietag earlier. While he’d addressed Schreiber, both the farmer and Ro heard as well.

The aggrieved farmer had had enough and exploded, “Zombies on the Internet! Are you fucking kidding me?”

Schreiber spun on the farmer, a stern, raised-eyebrow-look warning him his patience was running out.

“We saw ‘em moving in the trees,” another of the quartet offered as justification.

Schreiber knew he should maintain a professional objectivity, to treat everyone with respect, but it was hard not to agree with the farmer: *Do these numb nuts really believe there are zombies out there?* But then he raised his hand for silence; a distant look said he was listening to something on his earbud. After a moment he spoke into his shoulder mic, “10-4.”

Ro had heard the message as well; a second back-up deputy, Gil Stern, Armstrong Two-Eight, was a couple of minutes from the scene.

Turning to the farmer, Schreiber said, “Sir, I you need to go back and stand by your four-wheeler and keep out of the way; can you do that?” With a nod, the farmer moved toward his four-wheeler.

Addressing the four shooters, Schreiber said, “Gentlemen, I need for you to stay in place and to not touch those weapons. Understood?” They nodded.

He walked over to where Ro was standing. “Two-Eight and I can keep an eye on these guys. Can you to go check out those woods, see what these characters were shooting at?”

Ro gave him a quick nod of acknowledgement.

But then Schreiber couldn’t resist a bit of cop humor, “You do know how to make a Code Z call, right, Deputy?” Of course, there was no such thing as a Code Z call.

Ro pretended it had been a serious order, “Copy that, sir.”

Heading for her car to retrieve the big throw flashlight from her war bag, the mini-LED light in a pouch on her kit belt not designed for large open spaces, she thought, *Thanks for the compliment, Two-Three.*

As the first to arrive, protocol said Schreiber was in charge. It meant he needed to remain on the scene and assign back-up officers to whatever else might need to be done, like not hesitating to send them to checkout an unknown and perhaps dangerous situation. The compliment was he’d treated her like he would any other cop, as an equal.

## Chapter Fourteen / Zombie Apocalypse (Part Two)

Thursday, September 4, 2003, 2:49 a.m.

Making her way across the pasture, Ro slipped into warrior mode. It was not something done consciously but out of instinct. It meant not denying being afraid but channeling the fear and focusing it on her reaction to any danger. She'd been here before and rather liked the feeling; it was a rush.

Moving the flashlight back and forth in slow sweeps across the tree line, Ro looked for any shape not belonging, the silhouette of a human form up in a high hide perhaps hiding a sniper; listened for an out of place sound, the distinctive "clack" a semi-automatic's slide makes being pulled back; even tried to detect any anomalous odors, the distinctive, paint-like smell of a meth lab hidden back in the timber. The danger, though not probable, was still real.

About half-way across the pasture, she found a wet and muddy shallow swale running to her right, probably explaining why the field was used for cattle instead of crops.

"Crap," Ro muttered, as her tactical boots squished in the mud, then rolled her eyes at her own possibly unintended pun because perhaps it wasn't actually mud.

Swinging her light far to the right, Ro tensed. Vague dark shapes appeared to be moving. It took a second to figure out it was a dozen Black Angus cattle browsing at the lower end of the pasture, down near Perty Creek's south branch.

Could *be those goofballs* were *only shooting at cattle*, except there was no sense of relief at the thought.

Moving closer to the woods, Ro's eyes widened. Now, instead of undifferentiated tree shapes, she could make out the details of a dozen or more thin saplings laying over on their sides, sheared off by a bullet, and big, fist-sized chunks blasted out of the sides of larger trees.

But there was something odd, a dark, fan-like smear on the grass near the trees. Bending down, she touched it with a finger; it was wet and sticky, its scent coppery – blood.

*Oh shit, this is serious now; someone or something's been shot!*

While her right hand continued to hold the flashlight high above her shoulder, her left hand dropped to the holstered Sig at her waist.

In fact, the weapon almost came out when a face popped up from behind what looked like a thick deadfall tree trunk a few yards ahead, just inside the tree line, but then disappeared. She didn't draw because it was a small face, child-like, a girl's face.

A thin voice, a girl's voice, called from behind the deadfall, "Please don't shoot at us anymore."

*Us?*

"It's alright," Ro called, trying to be reassuring. "I'm a deputy sheriff. Nobody's going to shoot at you. Have any of you been shot?" The blood, it was her number one concern.

The girl, small and thin, not more than eleven or twelve, rose with her hands up, but was visibly shaking, “We didn’t mean to do anything wrong. We thought it was a joke. Are you going to arrest us?”

How do you answer a question like that? Ninety-five percent of the time the answer is no, but there’s always the exception.

“We’ll see,” Ro said.

Glancing down to her left, behind the log, the girl said, “Kyle’s hurt. Can you call an ambulance?”

*Oh Christ, they didn’t shoot a kid!*

Striving to keep her voice steady, Ro said, “Yes, I can. I’m coming over to take a look.”

“Okay,” the girl said.

Moving closer, Ro realized the deadfall wasn’t a “log” at all, but a big black Angus steer laying on its side, her flashlight revealing at least a dozen bloody wounds in its side.

Besides the girl, hunkered down behind the steer were three other kids, all boys, also pre-teens, all spattered with blood, their eyes staring up at her with fear. A fourth was lying on his back.

Passing around the steer, her flashlight briefly caught four banana bikes lying on their sides a little further into the trees.

Two of the boys scrambled to their feet; despite the blood, they looked okay. They were all wearing the remnants of sheets, had applied dark eyeliner around their eyes and were carrying flashlights.

Ro shook her head, the whole scenario suddenly falling into place: *A childhood prank gone horribly wrong. Those numbskulls up on the road thought they were shooting at zombies.*

But the third kid’s eyes were closed. Casting her light down, Ro could see a four or five-inch splinter of wood sticking out of his chest, below his left collarbone. Dropping to her knee, she took his wrist and checked for a pulse; he was alive.

*Looks too high to have hit a lung. He might be okay.* Then glancing around, said aloud, “Are any of you others hurt? Shot?”

They all shook their heads. When one boy noticed Ro looking at his bloody sheet, he said, “It’s from the cow. When the shooting started, we hid behind him.”

*The poor critter took a lot of hits for you; he saved your lives,* shuddering at the hideous damage even one of the dozens of high-powered rounds blasted into the trees might have done had it hit a kid instead of the thick steer.

“His name’s Kyle?” Ro asked. There were several nods “yes.” “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. First, I want you to take off those sheets, roll them up and help me put them under Kyle’s feet. I think he might be in shock. Then I want you all to wait here while I go out to the edge of the trees and call for help. Okay?”

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Deputies Schreiber, Delahanty and Stern would spend the rest of the night with all the routine cop stuff needed to mop-up after an incident like this, especially one involving gunfire.

Helping the EMTs trudge across the pasture and treat Kyle out in the woods, then carry him to the ambulance up on the road. Doctors at the hospital would remove the splinter which hadn't penetrated too far, stitch him up and release him to his parents later in the morning.

Administering on-the-spot breathalyzer tests to the shooters, which they all failed, including the twenty-year-old younger brother of Sperry, the fourth shooter. Taking their statements. Bagging and tagging as evidence the guns, empty magazines, shell casings and beer cans. Transporting them to the county jail and booking them for disturbing the peace, drunk and disorderly and serving alcohol to a minor. Typing their official reports into the computers in the deputy's ready room.

The next day the county attorney would throw the book at the four would-be zombie hunters, adding reckless endangerment, malicious mischief, aggravated trespass and vandalism to the charges; while it was fortunate no one was shot, the erstwhile zombie hunters were still in big trouble.

Coordinating with the social workers from the state's Child Protection Service who took custody of the pranksters before turning them over to their parents. They would all receive stern warnings out of the deal.