

Ending
“The Run” V7



Everything went black. When Dennis’s eyes reopened, Mac was gripping the wheel and yelling his name. Like a grotesque puppetmaster, Anna’s leg wriggled into the cab, pulling the rest of her along with it.

With a final heave, Anna landed squarely on the seat next to Dennis, her eyes again glowing red. Head throbbing, he braced for a blow, but none came. “Anna, it’s okay,” said Jeremiah, his voice shaking. “We’re your friends. We want to help.” She didn’t respond but didn’t lash out, either. They sat in tense stillness while the bluegrass played insistently on, a reminder of the radio station they were headed to and the station DJ they hoped was somehow still alive and safe.

Then Anna’s right arm swung forward, whacking the radio console. She struck it again, but her clumsy movements only nudged the volume louder. “I guess zombies don’t like bluegrass?” Mac joked weakly.

Anna’s left arm shot out and grabbed the right. She wrenched it away from the radio and clutched it to her chest, shaking. Jeremiah peeked out from behind his hands. “Anna, can you hear us? Are you a zombie?” he asked tentatively. Miraculously, she seemed to be regaining control.

“I ... don’t know.” Her voice was low and raspy, as though unused for days. Mac reached to turn off the radio so they could hear her better, but she protested, “Leave it, please. Somehow the music helps.”

“You’re still Anna,” said Jeremiah decisively. “I can tell. Keep the music on. She likes it,” he told Mac firmly. Mac wasn’t sure, but he thought the red in her eyes was clearing.

Before they could ask any questions, Dennis yelped, “We’re here!” Giddy with relief, he swung the truck into the station’s large parking lot. It was strewn with debris, and he had to park at the very entrance.

The only other recognizable object around was an old truck even more beat up than theirs. Dennis hoped desperately that it was Petey’s.

“What if it’s a trap?” whispered Dennis.

“I’m not sure we have any alternatives,” Mac replied, eyeing Anna warily, “but let’s stay quiet.”

Dennis pulled the keys from the ignition, and the group clambered out. Mac saw Anna’s right limbs twitching. They moved as quickly and quietly as they could, peering nervously at the dark woods surrounding the lot. Suddenly, Anna’s rogue leg kicked out and sent an empty can clattering across the concrete, deafening in the silence. They froze. For a moment, nothing seemed to happen.

Then Mac noticed the debris around them stirring, as if blown by distant wind. “What the—” he started, but Dennis pointed wordlessly. Mac gasped. From every direction, figures were emerging from the woods. A sea of zombies was closing in, slowly but steadily. They had nowhere to run.

Mac picked up a long slat of wood, and Dennis grabbed a dented garbage can lid. Neither had much faith in their makeshift weapons.

Suddenly, Anna’s right arm again reached for Mac’s throat. Dennis dropped the lid and struggled to pull her arm away, desperate to save Mac. “Careful!” squeaked Jeremiah. “Don’t hurt her!”

“I’m trying,” Dennis protested, “but she’s gonna kill Mac!”

They remained at an impasse, Anna gripping Mac's neck and Dennis pulling at Anna's arm while Jeremiah stared into her crimson eyes. "Come back, Anna," he implored. "I know you're in there!" She held his gaze but didn't ease her grasp.

Just then, from the door of the radio station burst out a heavysset, wild-looking man lugging an enormous speaker. The speaker blared riproaring bluegrass, so loud that Dennis could feel his teeth vibrating. Jeremiah kept his focus, though, still speaking to Anna. The crowd of zombies had come to a standstill, almost as though they were observing the standoff. Anna's arm didn't budge.

Mac's eyes bulged, and his wood slat clattered to the ground. Twangy guitar and thumping drums rang out. Dennis's head spun with panic. "Anna, come back!" cried Jeremiah. Despite the music, the air felt frozen. "Come back to us!" He threw his arms around her waist—half restraint and half embrace.

Finally, just as Mac's knees started to give out, an especially loud twang rang from the speaker. Anna dropped her arm with a loud gasp. Mac stumbled backward. As quickly as it had gathered, the zombie horde began to disperse, loping back into the woods. Two zombies **lingered**, looking confused.

"I guess they really *don't* like bluegrass," Mac commented weakly, rubbing his neck.

"Depends which 'they' you mean," the man chuckled, lowering the volume slightly. "The zombies hate it. But the people inside love it. You okay?"

Mac nodded, and the man continued. "Yup, they're still human at the core. Looks like your friend there might be somewhere in between right now." Jeremiah put a protective hand on Anna's back. "Petey Coltrain, by the way," the man said.

The group made its introductions and watched in amazement as Petey clapped a hand on the shoulders of the two **lingering** zombies, spoke briefly, and ushered them into the station.

“How are you still alive?” blurted Mac. “I mean, with all these zombies around?”

“Pure dumb luck and stubbornness,” Petey said proudly. “At first I tried to stay quiet and hide like everyone else — but that didn’t work for most folks,” he grimaced. “Decided if I was gonna go, it’d be playing bluegrass. Turns out, that’s the secret weapon.”

“Bluegrass?” Dennis was incredulous.

“Well, music. I’ve tried classical, country, rap — it all worked, but I’m partial to bluegrass. It confuses them and eventually breaks through the infection. But it’s not enough just to blare music at ‘em. You need to **engage**, talk to them. The more you can make them realize you’re a person, the better they’ll remember that they are, too.”

“That’s exactly what you did, Jeremiah!” Dennis again felt a flash of pride at the boy’s brave **compassion**.

“That’s right. Well done, fella,” Petey gave Jeremiah a firm handshake. “Your help will be most welcome if you’re willing to stay and give it.”

“I am!” Jeremiah glowed. Then his face fell. “So ... things will never be like they were before?” he asked sadly.

“Afraid not,” replied Petey. “But hopefully we’ll all understand the world and one another a little better from now on. The zombies are here, and we can’t change that. And there’s no going back to how life was before the plague hit. But it’s literally going to be the *end* of the world if we don’t work through it now.”

Anna was looking abashed. “Can you ever forgive me?” she asked Mac, unable to meet his eyes.

“There’s no shame,” Petey declared, and Mac nodded vigorously. “You fought it, and you’re still here. Now that a few zombies have recovered, they’re helping me reach others. You can help, too.” Turning to the others, he said, “You’re all welcome to stay and join the effort. Not that you’ve got a ton of options.”

They laughed wryly, remembering the horde outside. “We’d love to,” said Dennis as the others added their agreement. He put his arms around

Mac's and Jeremiah's shoulders, and both extended theirs around Anna's. Slowly, her arms — left and right — lifted to join the embrace.

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The End.

Questions

"Mac's eyes bulged, and his wood slat clattered to the ground. Twangy guitar and thumping drums rang out. Dennis's head spun with panic. 'Anna, come back!' cried Jeremiah. Despite the music, the air felt frozen. 'Come back to us!'"

Why might the author have used so many short sentences in a row in this part of the story?

Explain Jeremiah's special importance to the story's resolution. Support your explanation with details and evidence from the text.