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Opening extract from
Dust and Decay

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BENNY IMURA WAS APPALLED TO LEARN THAT THE APOCALYPSE CAME with homework.

"Why do we have to study this stuff?" he demanded. "We already know what happened. People started turning into zoms, the zoms ate just about everyone, everyone who dies becomes a zom, so the moral of this tale is: Try not to die."

Across the kitchen table, his brother, Tom, stared at him with narrowed eyes. "Are you deliberately trying to be an idiot, or is it a natural gift?"

"I'm serious. We know what happened."

"Really? Then how come you spent most of last summer complaining that no one my age tells anyone your age the truth about the living dead?"

"Telling us is one thing. Essays and pop quizzes are a whole different thing."

"Because heaven forbid you should have to remember anything we told you."

Benny raised his eyebrows mysteriously and tapped his temple. "I have it all right here in the vast storehouse of knowledge that is me."

"Okay, boy genius, then what started the plague?"

"Easy one," Benny said. "Nobody knows."

"What are the leading theories?"

Benny jabbed his fork into a big piece of buttered yam, shoved it into his mouth, and chewed noisily as he spoke. It was a move calculated to annoy Tom in three separate ways. Tom hated when he spoke with his mouth full. He

hated it when Benny chewed with his mouth open. And it would muffle most of what he said, which meant that Tom had to pay even more attention to the yam-packed mouth from which the muffled words came.

"Radiation, virus, bioweapon, toxic waste, solar flares, act of God."

He rattled it off so there was no break between the words. Also annoying, and worth at least another point on Benny's personal Annoy-O-Meter.

Tom sipped his tea and said nothing, but he gave Benny the *look*.

Benny sighed and swallowed. "Okay," he said, "at first people thought it was radiation from a satellite."

"Space probe," corrected Tom.

"Whatever. But that doesn't make sense, because one satellite—"

"Space probe."

"—wouldn't carry enough radioactive material to spread over the entire world."

"We think."

"Sure," conceded Benny, "but in science class they told us even if one of the old nuclear power plants did a whatchamacallit, there—"

"Meltdown."

"—wouldn't be enough radiation to cover the entire planet even though it has more radioactive materials than a satellite."

Tom sighed. Benny smiled.

"What conclusion can you draw from that?"

"The world wasn't destroyed by radioactive alien space zombies."

"*Probably* wasn't destroyed by radioactive alien space zombies," Tom corrected. "How about a virus?"

Benny cut a piece of chicken and ate it. Tom was a great cook, and this was one of his better meals. Yams, broiled chicken with mushrooms and almonds, and rich green kale. A loaf of steaming bread made from the last of the winter wheat sat near where Benny could plunder it.

"Chong's dad says that a virus needs a living host, and zoms aren't alive. He said that maybe bacteria or a fungus was sustaining the virus."

"Do you know what a bacterium is?"

"Sure . . . it's a bug thingy that makes you sick."

"God, I love it when you display the depth of your knowledge. It makes me proud to be your brother."

"Kiss my—"

"Language."

They grinned at each other.

It had been nearly seven months since Benny's life-long hatred and distrust of Tom had transformed into affection and respect. That process had started last summer, shortly after Benny's fifteenth birthday. On some level Benny knew that he loved Tom, but since Tom was his brother and this was still the real world, the chances of Benny ever using that *L* word were somewhere between "no way" and "get out of my way I'm going to throw up."

Not that Benny was afraid of the *L* word when it came to someone better suited for it, namely the fiercely red-haired queen of freckles, Nix Riley. Benny would like very much to toss that word up for her to consider, but he had yet to do so. Shortly after the big fight at the bounty hunters' camp, when Benny had tentatively tried to bring up the subject, Nix had threatened bodily harm if he said that word. Benny had zipped his mouth shut, understanding completely why the moment had been so inappropriate. Charlie Pink-eye Matthias and the Motor City Hammer had murdered Nix's mother, and the insane events of the days that followed hadn't allowed Nix to properly react. Or grieve.

Those days had been the weirdest mix of absolute horror, black despair, and soaring happiness. The emotions he'd felt didn't seem to even belong in the same world, let alone the same person.

Benny gave Nix her time for grief, and he grieved too. Mrs. Riley had been a great lady. Sweet, funny, kind, and always a little sad. Like everyone else in Mountainside, Jessie Riley had suffered terrible losses during First Night. Her husband, her two sons.

"Everyone lost someone," Chong often reminded him. Even though they'd been toddlers, Benny and Chong were the only ones among their friends to remember that night. Chong said that it was all a blur of screams and shouts, but Benny remembered it with a peculiar clarity. His mother handing him through a first-floor window to Tom—who was a twenty-year-old cadet

at the police academy—and then the pale, shambling thing that had been Dad coming out of the shadows and pulling Mom away. Then Tom running away, his terrified heartbeat hammering like a drum inside the chest to which he held a squirming, screaming Benny.

Until last year Benny had remembered that First Night in a twisted way. All his life he had believed that Tom had simply run away. That he had not tried to help Mom. That he was a coward.

Now Benny knew different. Now he knew what kind of torment Tom had suffered to save him. He also knew that when Mom had handed him through the window to Tom, she had already been bitten. She was already lost. Tom had done the only thing he could have done. He ran, and in running had given value to Mom's sacrifice, and that had saved them both.

Now Benny was fifteen and a half, and First Night was a million years ago.

This world was no longer that world. On First Night the old world had died. As the dead rose, the living perished. Cities were incinerated by the military in a futile attempt to stop the growing armies of the dead. The electromagnetic pulses from the nukes fried all electronics. The machines went silent, and soon, so did the whole country. Now everything east of the small town of Mountainside was the great Rot and Ruin. A few other towns littered the foothills of the Sierra Nevada north and south of Benny's home, but the rest of the old world had been consumed.

Or . . . had it?

During that adventure in the mountains east of town, Benny and Nix had seen something that to them was as inexplicable and potentially world-changing as the zombie plague had been. Flying high, high above them had been a thing Benny had only ever read about in old books.

A jet.

A sleek jumbo jet that flew out of the east, banked in a slow circle around the mountains, and then headed back the way it had come. Now Benny and Nix were counting down the days until they left Mountainside to find where the jet had come from. The calendar pinned to the wall by the back door had black Xs over the first ten days of this month. There were seven unmarked days, and then a big red circle around the following Saturday. April 17, one week from today. The words ROAD TRIP were written in block letters below the date.

Tom thought that the jet was flying in the general direction of Yosemite National Park, which was due east of the town. Benny and Nix had begged Tom for this trip for months, but as the day approached, Benny wasn't so sure he still wanted to go. It was just that Nix was absolutely determined.

"Earth to Benny Imura."

Benny blinked and heard as an after-echo the sound of Tom snapping his fingers.

"Huh?"

"Jeez . . . what planet were you orbiting?"

"Oh . . . just kind of drifted there."

"Nix or the jet?"

"Little of both."

"Must have been more about the jet," Tom said.
"There was less drool."

"You are very nearly funny," said Benny. He looked down at his plate and was mildly surprised that it was empty.

"Yes," said Tom, "you were eating on autopilot. It was fascinating to watch."

There was a knock on the door. Benny shot to his feet and crossed the kitchen to the back door. He was smiling as he undid the locks.

"That's got to be Nix," he said as he pulled it open.
"Hey, sweetie . . ."

Morgie Mitchell and Lou Chong stood on the back porch.

"Um," said Chong, "hello to you, too, sugar lumps."