



First Look Access

(Episode 9: J.M. Sullivan)

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

CHAPTER ONE

His head exploded. I'd never seen someone's head explode. I never thought I would. Maybe in the movies, but not in real life.

It's amazing what a 12-gauge can do at close range. The gun wasn't even ours, just an old rusty rifle we found on the side of the road. It only had one shell left. I don't even know why I picked it up. It was only supposed to be used as a safeguard, but it gave Dinah and me enough time to put some distance between ourselves and the monsters. I guess it did its job.

No one ever stops to think how one day life can be mind-numbingly ordinary and then the next, completely go to shit. Not that it matters whether you think about it or not. What matters is how you deal with it. Like Dinah says, "We can only play the cards we've been dealt. It doesn't do any good to wish about things you can't change."

Alice wiped her tired eyes and peered at the journal on her desk. She scrunched her nose as she looked at the crude sketch she had drawn next to her entry. While it was no artistic rendering, her pencil had captured the

raggedy, emaciated figure with its unhealthy soot-gray skin and vacant dead eyes quite accurately.

She studied the haunted creature glaring at her from the page. A shiver shot through her, ending in a violent twist of her stomach. The ghost of a scream echoed in her ears and she was ten years old again, hiding in a ransacked gas station with her mother. Her hands trembled as she remembered pleading in hushed tones for her mother to stay behind the cashier's desk with her while the creatures outside howled in rage.

We have to get out of here before they come inside. If not, we'll both be trapped. Her mother's forest green eyes filled with a sadness Alice had never seen in them before. It was wrong; her mother was never sad. She was joy—*life*.

Alice's lower lip quivered. She hated what came next. Begging. Tears. *I love you, Alice.* Running. Yelling. Terror. All followed by a flash of ripping, bloody claws.

Death.

A teardrop fell on the monster in the paper, blurring the graphite lines. Alice brushed it away quickly, smearing the picture further. She ran her hand back over it angrily, wishing she could wipe out the memory the same

way. When she pulled her hand away, only a gray blob remained, ruining the page.

That's appropriate.

Alice thought about the way the monsters had shown up and ruined everything. Her stomach turned as she remembered the first time she saw them. She had just crawled out of bed and walked into the living room where her mother was watching her favorite news station. Rounding the corner, she heard confused shouting and terrible screams above the reporter's voice.

"...I can't tell you exactly what happened in Washington District this morning, Trey, but it seems a mob of citizens turned violent and began attacking other pedestrians on the streets outside Borogove Industries..."

Her voice died out and Alice stared at the screen in stunned silence. It was a nightmare. The cameraman panned the shot to a large pack of men and women in business suits rampaging the streets. At least, they looked like men—except they were mauling people.

Suddenly, the screen blacked out.

"That's enough of *that*." Alice's mother set the clicker on the coffee table before compulsively starting to tidy the room the way she always did

when she was upset. She went to the kitchen and brought back a dust cloth and some varnish. “Here. Help me with this.” She handed the cleaning supplies to Alice. “I think it would be best if you stayed home today.”

Alice never made it back to school. By the time the evening news aired, all major channels were reporting unnatural attacks surging out of the Phoenix area. Momerath, CNN called them, a mixture of “moment” and “wrath,” since a person could turn into a raging killing machine with less than a moment’s notice. She supposed it stemmed from the media’s obsession with conjoined nicknames like “Bennifer” and “Brangelina.” She didn’t get it, but the name stuck.

Alice sighed and flipped lazily through her journal. Bits and pieces of the world after the Plague jumped out at her as she skimmed the pages.

... Momerath reported in all fifty states. . . military fighting back, but it’s not enough...people say it’s gone international. Flip.

...They can be killed! . . . have to destroy the nervous system. . . ask Dinah what the heck that means.... Flip.

...There’s more than momerath... there are Carriers too... people who have the virus, but don’t show it until it’s too late... Alice paused to look at another rough sketch she had drawn inline with her entry. It was a box that

she had split into two sections. The first showed a little stick girl lying in bed, coughing. The next box was the girl standing on the bed with her arms raised and long claws reaching out from her arms. The word “momerath” had been written above in scratchy red pen.

Alice remembered that entry. She drew it after she had snuck downstairs to watch the news with Dinah and her mother one night after she had been sent to bed. Terrifying images flitted across the television screen, and she had to strain her ears to hear the hushed volume to make sense of what she was seeing. A man was on the screen, pale and shaky as he spoke with the reporter. “...we just thought she was sick—the doctor said it was pneumonia...” He trailed off, his voice broken. The background switched to gruesome pictures of a mother and two boys lying on the floor, their bodies disjointed and mangled. Another picture flashed to a different angle, revealing the mother’s eyes, wide with fear. The rest of her face was missing. The final photograph showed a decapitated momerath, dressed in a frilly pink nightdress with golden plaits twisted around the stump of its bloody neck. Alice had to clap her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out so she didn’t get caught. She had nightmares for months after that.

She took in a deep breath and looked once more at the picture. Now that she was older, the image didn't torment her any longer, but it still made her stomach squirm. She flipped the page again, burying the memory.

...CDC says the Plague is a virus. It lives in the blood, makes it bad somehow... momerath kill because they need clean blood... Dinah won't tell me what it means. Mom won't let her. I wish Dad was here. He could explain it to me...

This time, a blaze of anger surged through her chest. How much time had she spent wishing he would come back? *Too much*, she thought bitterly. What a waste of her time. Angry Flip.

Alice sighed and shut the cover of her journal. "That's enough depressing thoughts for today," she grumbled, tapping her pencil against the desk. "Maybe tomorrow, you can relive the day Mr. Carroll left. That's *just* what you need." She snorted. "Yes. Then afterward, you can seek professional help for talking to yourself."

"It would probably be a good idea," a musical voice agreed, startling Alice from her monologue. "It's getting kind of creepy." Dinah stood in the doorway, brown eyes crinkling as she flashed a teasing grin.

Alice rolled her eyes but smiled at her older sister. Technically, her *adopted* older sister. Both girls had been taken in by the Carrolls when they were babies. First Dinah, then Alice a few years later. Standing beside each other, it was obvious they weren't related. Though both girls had pretty faces and petite frames made slender by strict food rationing, all similarities ended there. Dinah was gorgeous, with beautiful dark skin and rich mahogany eyes. She kept her curly ebony hair cut short and out of her face, which only emphasized her natural beauty.

Alice was the complete opposite. She was so fair Dinah often joked that she could glow in the dark. Her hair was the same: pale blonde that looked silver when the sun hit it right. It was one of her favorite features, which is why, even though it drove her crazy half the time, she never cut it. Paired with her high cheekbones and heart-shaped lips, it accentuated her dusky blue eyes and gave her a striking appearance. She wasn't a captivating beauty like Dinah, but she wasn't plain either.

Alice scoffed, used to her sister's teasing. "Whatever. I only talk to myself because I don't have anyone else to talk to. It's a coping mechanism."

Dinah slapped her hand across an imaginary wound on her chest. “You can talk to *me*. I’m always here for you, little sister.” She wrapped her arm around Alice’s shoulders and hugged her tight. “Because. I. Love You.” She squeezed Alice close with each word for emphasis, then finished by planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek. Alice shrieked and hurried to wipe her face on her shoulder. Dinah laughed and let her go.

Alice huffed and tried to glare at her sister, but only succeeded in letting out an unattractive snort. Like their appearances, the two girls had completely different personalities. Though Alice whined about not having anyone to talk to, it wasn’t a valid complaint. Even if people were around, her preference was to stay at home, reading or writing in her journal. If she did have to go out, she would rather watch the people in the Sector than have to interact with them. It was probably where her habit of talking to herself came from. Dinah always teased her about it. But then, Dinah didn’t have problems talking to anyone. One would think the apocalypse could put a damper on anybody’s spirit, but not Dinah’s. She had an easy smile and quick quip to offer to anyone in the Sector.

“You about ready to head out?” Dinah stretched lazily against the doorjamb. “We need to make sure we get back before dark.”

Alice groaned. Scavenging through abandoned homes and old belongings was depressing and made her feel guilty. It set her nerves on edge.

“Don’t give me the pout.” Dinah grimaced at Alice’s sulky expression.

“We have to eat.”

“I know,” Alice whined, “it’s just so *creepy*.” She shuddered for emphasis.

“That may be true, but it doesn’t make it any less necessary.”

Alice wrinkled her nose. Dinah was right—as always—but low stock in the pantry didn't make traipsing into momerath territory any more appealing. “Can we at least stop at the library on the way back?” She needed new reading material. She had gone through all her other books at least twice already. Her favorites were on their fourth or fifth read-through each.

“Sure,” Dinah promised. “But that means we need to get going. We don’t want to run out of daylight, and I have to stop at the Peterson’s before we leave the Sector. Mrs. Peterson says the baby has a fever and wants me to check her out.”

“Alright. Let me get my books and I’ll meet you out front.” Alice picked up her backpack and searched the room for the borrowed books scattered around her room.

“I don’t know why you bother returning them.” Dinah shook her head “It’s not like anyone is going to notice they’re gone.”

Alice shrugged. One of the things she hated most about scouting was taking things from people’s homes. It didn’t matter if the owners were long gone or dead, it still felt like stealing. Returning library books might have been completely irrelevant, but it gave her guilty conscience a reprieve.

She scanned her room, making sure not to forget anything. Her eyes landed on a picture of her family prior to the world falling apart. It was taken a few months before the Plague began, on a weekend trip to Huntington Beach. Alice could almost smell the salty sea air and feel the sand between her toes. She and Dinah leaned together with their mother holding melty ice cream cones on the pier next to Ruby’s Diner. Mr. Carroll had been long gone, but it didn’t stop them from having a blast. They spent the day playing sand volleyball, swimming, and hunting for seashells before ending with dinner and dessert on the pier. They asked a stranger to snap their picture and before he could, Mom smashed her cone in Dinah’s face,

covering her nose in vanilla ice cream. Alice smiled, remembering how she shrieked when Dinah snorted, spraying ice cream everywhere.

Curious how a memory can make you happy and sad all at the same time, she thought, looking wistfully at the picture. “Maybe those are the best memories of all,” she said, then realized she was talking to herself again. Sighing, she swung her backpack over her shoulder and hurried downstairs to meet her sister.

For more information on J.M. Sullivan, please visit
<https://jmsullivanauthor.wordpress.com>

And check out her books on

Amazon

https://www.amazon.com/Alice-Wonderland-Chronicles-J-M-Sullivan-ebook/dp/B06XP9QD6X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1490551850&sr=8-1&keywords=j.m.+sullivan

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