

The Last Vampire

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

*(Originally this book was a paperback from Zebra Publishing;
this is the 2015 revised version)*

*This book is dedicated to my granddaughter Caitlyn Olvitt,
who loves vampire books as much as I do.*

*And for my sweet brother Jim Meyer, who passed away May 27, 2015...he was the best
singer/songwriter/musician I've ever known and a loving brother. I will miss him forever.*

You can listen to his music here: <http://tinyurl.com/pytftzc>

Reviews for **The Last Vampire**

"This isn't your ordinary vampire novel. Four Stars...." A Splash of Scarlet

"This is without a doubt the best end of world novel I have ever read, and I don't honestly feel anyone could write a better one." ~Blaze McRob's Tales of Horror Review

"I for one will never forget the incredible story of devastation and the last gasping breath of humanity." ~Coffee Time Romance

"Ms. Griffith is gifted at description, meaning she can accurately describe a setting without bogging down the reader with endless, needless details." ~Dina Rae's Write Stuff

"I truly enjoyed this story and give it an A! I would definitely recommend Ms. Griffith's books to anyone who likes horror with a little romance." ~Emeraldfire's Bookmark

"I was so drawn into this story, I found myself oddly disoriented once the tale was over. A great story, 5 Angels!" ~Fallen Angel Reviews

"Let's call it 4.5 / 5 for being ballsy, well written, and having that feel of authenticity we're all looking for in our books." ~Jennifer James Blog

"Kathryn Meyer Griffith gives us a wonderful look at vampires and how they would react to the end of the world. The world seems to be coming to an end...." ~Night Owl Reviews Zollyanna

"Too often, vampires are either the horrific beasts of old or the new romantic heart throbs. I prefer the nasty buggers. This novel certainly has those." ~Robert C. Nelson

"This epic tale of horror, fantasy, paranormal and should be on everyone's top 10 list to read. You will not be disappointed." Sweeping Me Blog Tour Review by Mary

"This book comes highly recommended for Dystopian and vampire genre fans. I would love to read more of Kathryn's work in the future!" ~Amazon customer Janiera

"The Last Vampire is a super stay-up-till-dawn story, the mysticism in Matthew's dream visions bringing me to the question...will there be a sequel?" ~Two Lips Reviews by Merrylee

"The Last Vampire by Kathryn Meyer Griffith is set in an apocalyptic background, reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's The Road. This is very original and would not dismiss it as another 'vampire/werewolf' story. I tremendously enjoyed reading it and give it 5 stars. I'm an instant fan of Ms. Meyer and will look forward to reading more of her work." ~5 stars Amazon Customer

Prologue

The end of the world had come, but it was like nothing anyone had ever imagined. Virulent earthquakes had rippled under the skin of the globe, tearing open the fragile earth; spreading destruction as they devoured towns and cities like monstrous hungry beasts; exploding lethal missiles in their silos; creating chaos and fear that eventually released the doomsday cries of every religious fanatic on the planet...but worst of all, it unleashed a vicious plague that could not be stopped. A plague that would finish what the earthquakes and wars could not.

Soon there were few places left to run to—to escape from the devastation and the dying.

Not even in America.

And so the world ended...

Chapter One

St. Louis, Missouri

“I can’t believe I’ll never see this place again, Larry,” Emma said.

“Me too,” Larry replied. He was too busy packing to look up, so she couldn’t see the expression on his face.

Emma sighed as she moved away from the windows on the ninth floor, her packing done. As far as she could see through the dirty glass, the sick and the homeless camps stretched, crawling along the fringes of the roads and across the dead grass and concrete of St. Louis, like a huge undulating blanket of ants; even through the windows she could sometimes hear muffled wisps of their squabbles, their sobbing, their misery, as if from faraway. It was chilly for April, it was always chilly lately, and tiny campfires sparkled among the drab tents.

There were people everywhere. They’d stripped the city of everything edible or useful, like an ocean of voracious locusts.

The city, once beautiful and strong, was dying, and she felt sorry for it. But it was the humanity suffering below her that tore her soul apart.

She wanted to weep for them, but she had no tears left.

The people had nowhere to go; no way to live since their homes and cities had been destroyed by the continuing earthquakes. Their lives had been shattered by homelessness, hunger, and...plague.

Plague, the evil the scientists believed had been released with that first mammoth earthquake six months ago, as it had ripped a new fault across Nevada and Arizona. It’d been a nine point three on the Richter scale. It’d been the worst one in human history—until the next one in California. That one had been a nine point nine. It had leveled every large city in two states; killed nearly two million people; reactivated a chain of long dead volcanoes that spewed forth miles and miles of molten lava and atmospheric debris; and then sent shock waves across five other states for months. It had sent temperatures plunging nationwide, while clouds from the erupting volcanoes and the flash fires darkened the whole nation and turned the days into long twilight. Cell phone towers collapsed everywhere and in most places a person could no longer use their beloved cell phones. They could no longer use the Internet. Communications disintegrated.

But the worst thing the earthquakes had accomplished was the destruction of a secret underground military chemical and biological weapons laboratory somewhere in Nevada that, the government finally admitted, might have caused the mysterious plague that then swept across the country. A sickness that was a thousand times more lethal than the feared AIDS virus, because it could lie dormant for hours, weeks, or months, and then strike, its victims dying in agony in *days*...and it sickled through the people left after the earthquake, killing everyone everywhere, especially the children. Nothing could stop it. Like the earthquakes, the scientists had no solutions or cure for it and millions more died.

In six months’ time, it had spread like wildfire.

The scientists christened it the Red Plague, because it, as the AIDS virus, attacked the blood. It heralded the beginning of the end and so started the great migration east.

The people had begun to panic.

Emma and her two children had grown sick with it, but miraculously had recovered, while their friends and neighbors had died in droves. Her husband, Danny, escaped it completely. It was extremely rare that someone survived it once they'd caught it. Emma wondered why God had spared them. But she had no answers.

Welfare and the other social services collapsed, toppled over by the sheer weight of the number of unemployed, sick, and homeless. The survivors had to fend for themselves, and with every month humanity was becoming more savage. These days many people lived out in the open in patched tents, makeshift abodes, or in burned-out buildings, without electricity or running water, waiting for the next earthquake to strike; afraid to be indoors when it did. They survived however they could: stealing, begging, maiming, and killing.

A person was a fool if he walked the streets unarmed.

The problem had swiftly escalated into one of catastrophic proportions that the government hadn't been able to solve, even with new laws and police state.

Glancing back outside one last time, Emma knew it was only going to get worse.

The hordes had been flowing into St. Louis for months now. They were blank-eyed with shock or fear; hungry, sick, and angry. Misplaced soft city-dwellers who had long ago forgotten how to survive without their air-conditioned homes, well-stocked grocery stores, cell phones, Internet, and microwaves.

They must have believed that things would be better here. They wouldn't be, Emma mused sadly. They'd all eventually die in one horrendous manner or another. If the plague didn't get them, or if some third-world religious fanatic leader who'd illegally obtained a nuclear weapon didn't drop another bomb on them, starvation or murder would. Despair. Many, in the end, every resource and avenue of hope exhausted, would opt for dying at their own hand.

There'd been mass suicides.

It was happening all over the world, they said.

And looking at the bewildered crowds terrified Emma. Soon, she feared, her husband and two children would be sharing their fate.

She gazed slowly around at the familiar room with the bright cubicles and the rows of shining new Macintosh computers. It had been her second home for so long. In the old days, she'd rarely have come into work on a Saturday morning, but she hadn't wanted to face the others while she packed up her belongings.

Larry, her coworker and friend, had had the same idea.

She turned to him and said, "There was a time I would have said I'm not all that sorry to be going...I haven't been happy here for a long time...but now..."

"I know," he answered. He met her worried eyes and shrugged. There'd been too much office politics involved since the new art director had been hired three years ago. Emma had never been one of his favored people. Years of snubs and tons of uncreative busywork, for a longtime

graphic designer of her status, had taken their toll and left scars.

Emma's face still reddened, remembering. It'd been a bitter pill to swallow. After all those years of being one of the top artists, she'd been humiliated to find herself teamed with a much younger woman who suddenly had the right to tell Emma *how* to do her job *and* make the final decisions on everything Emma did. Emma had been threatening to quit for years, but with the world situation steadily worsening, she'd held on, and was glad she had.

But now Corporate Graphics, the ad company she'd worked for over twelve years, had finally folded.

Her eyes were haunted. "I really needed this job since Danny lost his. I don't know what we're going to do now." She was biting her upper lip and her eyes misted over but she refused to cry.

Until three months ago, Danny had been a manager at one of the city's top restaurants. But expensive restaurants were one of the first luxuries to go. People could hardly afford to keep a roof over their heads and feed their families these days, much less spend a hundred dollars for a fancy supper out.

Now she was out of a job, too.

Larry didn't respond to her remark about needing the job. He had needed his, too. Millions of people did these days. Being unemployed had become commonplace, as the nation's economy had plummeted.

Three months ago, a 747 loaded with nuclear weapons had come from one of the Middle Eastern countries, some of which had been in open warfare with the United States for years, and had dived into the heart of New York. It had wiped half of the city's population off the map. There was speculation that the stock market wouldn't reopen. Ever.

"Well, think of it this way, Emma." Her fellow artist was giving her a halfhearted grin. "You won't have to get up early anymore...and you won't have to be humiliated anymore, either."

"Yeah," Emma muttered, thinking that her humiliations would probably come in some other form from now on. "You know our new art director told me last year in my yearly review—before things got so bad, I mean," she gestured symbolically at the world outside, "that when he first came on board, he'd wanted to fire all the older artists. But the big boss wouldn't let him. He said that he didn't think too much of any of us. He insinuated that I was dead wood, because I'd been here so long. That I should have moved on a long time ago, and that, no matter what I did, I'd never be a senior artist again under him. Never."

It seemed like a lifetime ago, but Emma still winced at the old hurt. Though her job had never been her whole life, like some people she knew, she'd wanted to be an artist since she'd been nine years old and in pigtails, and his words had been a cruel shock. Until then she'd been proud of her time at the company and her abilities.

She'd always worked so hard; loved her job. According to him, though, all that meant nothing.

"The man had a lot of gall. If someone had said that to me, I would have punched him out."

"That's you, Larry. I was so flabbergasted at the words coming out of his mouth, with a smile

on his face, mind you, that I clammed up and just nodded like a dummy instead of fighting back. I thought that if I worked even harder, proved myself to him, if I was as nice as I could be, I'd win him over in time. I was naive. He never did accept me."

"Yep, you sure were. Naive, that is." Larry nodded as he scooped up more of his belongings and stuffed them into brown paper bags. He'd heard this all before, but like the good friend he was, he let her go on talking.

He knew how hard leaving was for her. It was harder than for him. She'd been there longer.

"The worst thing was," she confessed, glancing nervously out the window again, conscious of the sudden rise in noise, "I feared for my job after that. And I was consumed with hate at the way he was treating me. I used to lie awake at night, planning revenge. It was horrible."

He snorted, "I still can't believe that he *told* you all that to your face. That wasn't very diplomatic for someone who was supposed to inspire confidence in his workers. I never did think much of the man," he admitted, but his voice was strangely subdued.

"He didn't want me to feel confident. He just wanted me to give up and quit. But I showed him, didn't I?"

"Yes, you sure did."

Larry had been hired by the new art director. But he'd turned out to be a little too headstrong, and, like Emma, had never enjoyed the privileges of the inner circle, though everyone had liked him, including Emma. They'd become friends.

He stood up, his arms full of books and fat file folders. "Don't know if I'll ever need these again, but I'd better take them home." He was a tall man, heavysset with a chubby, bearded face and compassionate eyes; because of his size he reminded Emma of a gentle grizzly bear.

Emma found herself back at the window, her thoughts darkening. Below, the people were scurrying around pointing and shouting soundlessly. Some of the tents pitched in the park near the fountain had fallen.

She paused, the commotion out in the streets forgotten for a moment. She tilted her head and said softly, "And now, what difference does any of it make?" Her feud with the art director, her hurt pride, all of it seemed so trivial.

He'd died of the plague two months ago.

"None," she answered her own question, as if Larry weren't even there, and then fell silent.

Larry must have misunderstood her silence. "You never should have doubted yourself so much, Emma. You're a damn good artist. He just never gave you a chance. You should have fought for your place."

"No," she replied tersely, a frown on her face as she glanced back over her shoulder at him. "I'm just not like that. I'm not the kind of person to jump through hoops, just to get a pat on the back. If my work doesn't speak for me, then there's nothing to say."

She took a deep breath and let it out painfully, looking around. "Let's face it, there's not going to be much of a future anymore for artists. Scientists, doctors, soldiers, and survivalists, yes. Not artists. Not right now. Maybe, someday..."

She returned to scrutinizing the crowds.

Larry cleared his throat self-consciously, ready to go. He walked up to her and gave her a quick hug, embarrassed, then stepped back to look at her. "Well, it's been great working with you, Emma. I wish things were different." Fear tinged his voice and Emma caught it.

"Don't we all?" she answered sarcastically.

"Someday...." he echoed her own words, his eyes ignoring the crowds below and instead scanning the honeycomb of artists' cubicles, computers, and shelves that held the printer refills and the extra copy paper. He reached over and gingerly touched one of the Macintoshes. "We'll say that these were our golden days. The best."

Emma walked over to her desk, her eyes evading his, filling with tears, even after she'd promised herself she wouldn't cry.

I'm going to miss all this. Bagels and coffee in the morning. Standing around laughing with my colleagues. Doing the work. "I'm going to miss you, Larry," she told him, letting her fingers play idly over the keyboard of her own Macintosh, her mind mulling over the memory of how she had once fought learning it and how she'd ended up loving it. In the last eight years, she'd done nearly all her designing on it. When would she ever use another one?

Their eyes met over the rim of her cubicle. She was tall for a woman: five-eight in her stocking feet. Her hair was shoulder-length and pale blonde, her eyes so dark a blue, they were almost black; her face long and narrow, and right at that moment very weary-looking.

"You were the best damn graphic designer I've ever known, Emma," he said sincerely as they headed toward the elevators, as if it could make up for all the rest. "No matter what the art director said."

"Thanks. You weren't so bad yourself," she laughed back, but her eyes remained unhappy.

"Maybe I'll see you at the next place?"

"Sure," she responded tiredly. *Not in this awful new world. If things get any worse, I might never work again.*

It'll never be the same.

Emma had reflected on the state of things on her drive in that morning. All those people everywhere; crammed in together like dying blades of grass under a shadowed sun; cooking heaven-knows-what over little cook fires and trying to stay warm. The police had long ago stopped chasing them off. There were just too damn many dying of hunger and plague right there on the streets, huddled in the doorways and living in the alleys. The hospitals could no longer handle the overload. The plague trucks rang through the city all hours of the day and night.

Emma saw their lost, pinched faces again, watching her as she maneuvered past them carefully in her car. She could imagine what they were thinking: *She still has a car, a home to go to, and decent food to eat.* Unlike them.

But for how long?

"I finished that underground shelter," Larry informed her proudly.

"You mean the one you were building along the Missouri bluffs outside the city?"

"Yeah. It wasn't easy. You know how hard getting certain materials and supplies have become. But I did it. Now we're ready. It's even stocked with food and bottled water. Enough

for the both of us for a whole year. Medical supplies, too. Joanie pilfered them from work. All I have to do now is transfer my guns from the house to the shelter.”

“Smart you,” Emma commented, genuinely happy for him. Larry was one of those survivalists who believed in being prepared for the worst. He’d been saying for years that when the big one came—bomb or earthquake—he wanted a safe place to go to. Now he had it.

Her husband, Danny, wasn’t a survivalist, he was a pacifist. He’d say, *If it comes, it comes, baby, and if we live, we live*. He didn’t believe in being prepared, though he had taught her a little about how to live out in the woods. He’d been a boy scout and an eagle scout.

“Joanie still working for the hospital then, huh?”

“Sure she is. It depresses the hell out of her sometimes, but she won’t leave. Says it makes her feel like she’s doing something worthwhile, you know?”

“Yes, I know.” Emma flashed him a smile. “She’s got more guts than me. I can’t stand the sight of blood. I faint dead away. I can’t stand to see people suffer.

“Your Joanie’s a special woman. Do you know how lucky you are to have her?” she teased him.

“Oh, I know.” And there was love in his deep voice. “How are Danny and the kids doing?”

“Under the circumstances, they’re holding up pretty well. Danny’s busy with the garden. We’ve gotten a lot of food from it already, but it’s about played out now that the weather’s become so unpredictable.”

“Fresh vegetables are worth their weight in gold these days.”

“Tell me. We had to surround it with fences to keep out the poachers. Danny joked that he’d electrify it, if the electricity weren’t already rationed. He has to keep a constant watch over the garden, or thieves would devour every leaf.”

“Times have changed, all right. When we have to guard our food like it was gold?”

Emma couldn’t have agreed with him more. But saying so wouldn’t change a damn thing. Nothing would change what the world was evolving into. She could only hold on tight for the wild ride, and pray.

The first tremors came when they were almost at the door, arms loaded down with their belongings. Earthquake.

Now she knew why Midnight, her cat, had acted so weird that morning when Emma was doing her load of blue jeans. She’d found him crouched, shivering, behind the dryer, and when she’d tried to pick him up, he’d scratched her and ran off. He’d never acted like that.

They said that animals sensed earthquakes long before they happened.

“Larry, did you feel that?” Emma whispered. She lowered the stuff in her arms slowly to the floor; then the next jolt came.

“My God!” she moaned, shoving herself away from the wall she’d fallen against, pulling herself up on her feet, and then running back toward the windows.

“Emma, get away from the glass. It’s dangerous!”

Her wide eyes frantically looked over the city. Union Station was still there. Untouched. The Arch was still standing. Nothing looked wrong, and yet...there was a shimmering, a shifting of

things. She shook her head. She wasn't wrong. The world outside was *moving*. People were running around on Market Street like frenzied sheep. The roar grew swiftly into a screeching chorus, as people began to realize what was happening and panicked.

As she looked on in horror, unable to tear her gaze away, a pencil-thin line zigzagged down the middle of Market Street, and began to yawn open like a hungry black mouth. People, cars...buildings...slid into the chasm and disappeared.

"Get away from those windows!" Larry was suddenly behind her, grabbing and drawing her away as the building began to sway. "We've got to get the hell out of here," he hissed. "Half the place is glass, and I don't know if it's even built to code—"

Another jolt hit, almost knocking them down. Hairline cracks shot down the solid wall to their right with violent whip like sounds.

Emma screamed. Frozen.

Just in time, Larry grabbed and spun her around, and started dragging her toward the hallway. The wall of windows behind them shattered and rained glass. In shock, Emma gazed down at her arms as tiny rivulets of crimson appeared. There was no pain, but she had to fight from passing out at the sight of her own blood.

Her thoughts were with her family across the river in Cahokia.

Danny is probably working in the garden, salvaging the last of the harvest. Peter and Jenny are watching cartoons in the living room, trying to stay warm. They hadn't been allowed to turn their furnace on for months. The gas and electricity rationing.

Oh, God.

Then the first explosion came, and there wasn't time to think of anything but escaping.

"The stairs," Larry yelled.

Larry herded her through the door to the steps, but not before she'd caught a glimpse of the mushroom cloud billowing across the river, framed in the Arch about where Cahokia and East St. Louis were. The ugly blood-red smoke permeated the sky.

Emma cried out, yanking Larry to a complete stop. The land across the river in Illinois was a wall of fire leaping toward them.

Cahokia. Home.

The whole east side was an inferno. No one could live through that.

"Oh, God, some bastard's dropped a nuclear bomb on us!" Larry wailed disbelievingly, his face ashen. The hand on her arm tightened until she gasped out in pain.

"Don't look at it, Emma. Oh, God in heaven," he muttered, "we've got to get to the shelter now."

Larry hauled her along behind him, slamming open the large door that let out onto the corridor just as the rest of the glass windows imploded. A roiling wave of heated air and wreckage hurtled them through the opening. The next thing she knew they were sprawled on the floor, the door lying on top of them.

Emma must have lost consciousness for a moment, and when she came to, she could hear fire crackling hungrily somewhere close. Very close. The city shrieked as the ground rocked beneath her. Faraway there were more blasts. The air had turned heavy, hard to breathe.

Groaning and shaken, she crawled out from under the edge of the door. Her eyes were burning, her vision blurry. She brought her hand up to her numb face and trembling fingers came away sticky with blood.

“Larry?” she whimpered, her fingers reaching out for him. He wasn’t there. “Where are you?”

She spied him, propped in the corner, grinning up at her through a dirty, pain-grimaced face; his legs were trapped under the door and other rubble.

“You all right, Emma?”

It touched her that he thought about her first, especially since he was the one obviously hurt. “I think so. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“I’ll be okay, but we’ve got to get out of the building, Emma. Out of the city.” A bewildered look settled on his bruised face. Emma noticed that his eyes were fever-bright, but vacant.

“Larry?”

“I can’t get my legs out.”

It took her precious minutes to get the door and the chunks of concrete off him, slicing her hands up in the process. She didn’t care. Her face wasn’t the only part of her body that was numb. When she looked at his shredded legs, she tried not to let the fear show on her face, tried to keep her stomach from emptying right there.

His wounds were bad.

How in the world was he going to get out of the building, much less the city, if he couldn’t walk?

“It hurts terribly, doesn’t it?” It sounded lame the minute it slipped out.

“I’ll make it somehow, Emma, I swear I will. And if I can’t... I won’t hold you back.” But the plea in his eyes was clear enough: *Don’t leave me.*

She reached down and helped him to his feet. He moaned in pain, teeth gritted tightly, as the weight resettled. Even with her support, he could barely stand, and he was a heavy, big man. Blood was everywhere,

Swallowing hard, she fought to keep standing as another explosion rattled the building.

“Gas lines going sky high,” he told her, his eyes studying her face. “There’ll be more. Flooding from the river. Real soon. If it was a nuclear bomb, radiation cloud should be coming across the water about now. There’ll be a massive wave of looting, killing. If it hasn’t started already. The city will be a trap.”

Frustrated, he shoved her away and toppled back to the littered floor. “Get out of here, Emma. Get away while you can. I’m not going anywhere.” He slapped his hands angrily against his useless legs. There were tears trickling down his filthy face. “I’d only hold you back. Get you killed.”

“No.”

“GO!”

Emma stared down at him with steely eyes, canted her head stubbornly, and held her hands out to him again. “I’m not leaving here without you. You’re the only friend I’ve got left. You’re *all* I’ve got left.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” she said sternly.

His eyes shone, glittering with gratitude. “Oh, Emma.”

Between them they made it down nine flights of stairs and into the lower garage where he had parked his Land Rover; only stumbling once when the steps behind them crumpled away. They were safer taking his new Land Rover than her old beat-up Buick Skyhawk.

The Rover was meant for rough terrain.

“What we’re heading into might be pretty rough. The shelter’s on the Missouri side, thank God, hidden up in the bluffs. Not too far from here if we can get there.

“But you’ll have to drive,” he confessed, leaning against the side of the big black vehicle for a moment to catch his breath. He fumbled the keys from one of his pockets. “Don’t think I can.”

“We have to get you some help—” she started to protest, seeing the blood dripping into puddles where he was standing.

“There’s *no time*, Emma.” His eyes were desperate. “I have an extensive first-aid kit in the shelter and medical books, too. I’ll deal with my wounds when we’re there safe.”

Emma collected the keys from his battered hands, and nodded.

She knew that since the first shock wave only a few minutes had elapsed, but it felt like an eternity. She was drained already.

The garage was crumbling around them. “Let’s go,” he announced anxiously, after she’d helped him into the front seat on the passenger’s side. She revved up the engine and screeched out of the garage, just as the section they’d been parked under collapsed with a shuddering crash.

As she floored the accelerator pedal, Larry tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and tied a tourniquet tightly around his left leg, the one that was still bleeding.

“You gonna make it?” she asked, peering over at his pain-filled face.

“I have to. You’ll need me and I’m the only one who knows where the shelter is.”

Then, “Hurry, Emma.”

The streets were a nightmare. The smoke so thick, she couldn’t see two feet in front of her. Market Street had been ripped into a ragged scar, full of smashed cars and dead or wounded people, so she drove onto one of the smaller side streets. But bricks, glass, and dirt soon forced them to a rolling crawl, while crippled or stalled cars and trucks blocked most of the roads. Water was rushing down the streets from somewhere, getting higher every second.

“The river’s flooding the city. If we don’t get out soon, we’ll be floating.”

Larry didn’t have to tell her to get off the street, she sharply spun the wheel and the Rover jumped the curb and headed for land that was clear enough to drive through. Parking lots. Grass. Sidewalks.

But there were people running everywhere, or lying injured, and as hard as Emma tried, she couldn’t miss all of them all the time. Some of them; when they saw the Rover was still moving, ran alongside screaming and begging for a ride out of the city, or for help. Emma wanted to stop.

“Keep going.” Larry glared out the window with a cold gleam in his eyes, as his hands fumbled under the seat and came out clutching a gun. “It’s a Beretta M-10. I got it off an old Army friend of mine. He swore it could drop an elephant.”

"I don't see any elephants," she commented feebly, but he didn't laugh.

"I mean it, we're not going to stop for *anything* or *anyone*," he warned her heartlessly. "There's no more room at the shelter. No more supplies. There's just enough for two people. I'm sorry." Guilt changed his face's expression, and he covered it in shame, still clutching the Beretta, with his trembling hands.

The crowd turned violent, ugly, when Emma refused to stop. They pounded out their rage against the side of the car with their fists or pieces of metal, as they splashed through the swiftly rising water. They cursed them; threw bricks at them.

Larry leveled the gun's long barrel against the window and threateningly pointed it at a woman's outraged, fire-scarred face.

Get back. *Get back.*

All of them did, except one man. He was in a tattered pin-striped suit, his hair still smoking. Emma glanced at him and thought: *Maybe I drove by you this morning on my way to work, you in your expensive suit and leather briefcase. Maybe you even worked in one of the other offices in my building.*

He spat at Larry through the window; shook his fist. The whole left side of his face seemed to be gone. But he fell back, and Emma watched his slumped figure dwindle into a smudge on the side of the road as they drove away, the water knee-deep already.

Emma accepted it without a word, hardening her heart, though it sickened her.

There was just too many of them.

"You're learning. From now on, Emma, all that matters is survival. Nothing else." His voice didn't even sound like the Larry she'd known.

He gave her directions to where they were going.

They raced across Bell Telephone's smoldering lawn, cut through the outskirts of a large parking lot, and up onto a sidewalk with benches. At times, they were driving through swirling water mid-tire high, and Emma wasn't sure what she was driving over. She winced every time something crunched beneath the Rover's tires. Building rubble or bodies. Maybe a child...like Jenny...like Peter.

"Oh, Lord. *My family's all dead*," she whispered, narrowly missing a screaming dark-skinned man who had suddenly jumped out in front of them, a human torch.

The tears rolled down her cheeks and she drove faster, as if she could escape all the pain.

"Yes, they are," he whispered back, desperately trying to keep from passing out. "Joanie, too." One of his hands found hers on the wheel and gently squeezed. When she glanced over at him, he was crying silently.

"I...wish...we'd moved to the Missouri side sooner. Joanie and me." He took his hand away, gripped the safety strap above him, and leaned his head back against the seat, holding on tightly, as they bumped across sections of a shattered building. The car's tires splashed through swirling water. "I was going to have us move as soon as the shelter was done. I was gonna build a tiny house next to it..."

Larry's home had been across the Poplar Bridge, too; in Dupo, Illinois. Now it was hell.

“...but time ran out,” his voice was anguished. Tears slid through the gore of his face. He’d loved Joanie more than himself. He’d loved her as much as Emma had loved her husband and children.

I have to get home! Something broke inside of her. Maybe they escaped, maybe they’re still *alive*. And here she was running away with another man to a hole in the hills.

“I should go home, Larry,” she exclaimed, as if it had just dawned on her. “They could still be alive. They might need me. I’ve got to find them.” Emma was suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to turn around right there and then and drive toward the east side.

She put on the brakes with all her might and brought the Rover to a breathtaking stop; muddy water gushed over the front. The engine stalled and died.

Larry seemed to pull himself together. He recognized delayed trauma when he saw it. They didn’t have much time, a crowd had already spotted them and was closing in.

“No, Emma. How can I make you understand? No one made it through that. Whatever it was, nuclear bomb or earthquake, they’re all *dead*. The east side is gone. The bridges are gone. Believe me. I’ll show you. I know it’s hard to take...for me, too.”

Her eyes as she turned to him were like a dying animal’s. Glazed and suffering.

“You know it’s true.” His voice was gentle, as if he were talking to a distraught child. “I’m so sorry, Emma.” His hand laid warmly over hers again.

Her heart finally cracked into a thousand pieces. She knew he was right. She sat rigid at the wheel, her mind trying to destroy itself. How could she be so damn selfish, so many people had died; who was she to think that only her people mattered? That she mattered? She laid her head on the wheel as the world spun. The water was lapping at the bottom of the door.

“Start the car up now, Emma. Or we haven’t got a chance.” She looked up. The rabble was just feet away.

Larry, his face scalded and slashed with slivers of glass, looked frightened and sick.

“We’ve got to get to the shelter while there’s still time. Please!”

“Yes,” a mouse’s voice. Then self-preservation kicked in with a vengeance. She turned the engine on, and the wheels spun furiously, then caught.

The foundation of the building towering behind them rumbled like an angry beast as they drove away. The ground started to shake again; things began to fall on the car. The front window smashed in around them.

Emma brushed off what she could, and kept driving.

As they raced through the city, buildings rocked and tumbled to the streets, landsliding over cars and screaming people, and narrowly missing the Rover at times.

She didn’t stop.

But she didn’t give a damn if she made it or not. It was Larry she was fighting for.

All she wanted was to die; be with her husband, her two children, her parents, and her two brothers and their families.

Everyone she loved was dead, except perhaps for one older sister who had moved up to Maine years ago. Emma prayed she, at least, was alive.

They made it out of St. Louis and headed for the woods, paralleling the river. Larry had been right. Illinois was just a glut of flames. The Jefferson Barracks Bridge was burning. She could see it down the horizon. The Mississippi River had split into two separate channels, flooding its old banks, and water was everywhere. Half the highways were already under water.

The Martin Luther King Bridge was gone.

The Poplar Bridge was gone.

Both had slid into the river with all their human travelers. The current was stained red with blood, and tips of colored metal bobbed along wildly in the filthy water.

Even though she tried to block it out, Emma could still hear the shouts and cries down below her.

She'd hear those cries forever.

Her last glimpse of St. Louis was seeing the Arch topple into the surging river. The towering Metropolitan Life Building went down next, and the Adam's Mark Hotel, Union Station followed like crazy dominoes, as the earth continued to quiver violently. A pulsating fireball was skimming across the water and gulping up everything they'd left behind just seconds before. If the city and land around it wasn't drowning, it was burning.

She couldn't bear to look again.

They were driving the last leg of their journey down a winding narrow dirt road, and had left the rushing water behind them, when she brought the Rover to a dead stop. "We can't go any further, Larry. The road's got fallen trees across it." And the fire was roaring close behind them.

"Yeah, I see," he muttered. "Looks like we haven't got any choice but to get out and hoof it. It's not that far now."

"Can you make it?" she asked. He was obviously in great pain. He'd already passed out once or twice since they'd left the city.

"I have to." He shoved open the door and waited for her to get over to him. "We have about five minutes' jump on that fire, and we'll be crispy critters."

Then they were on foot stumbling through the woods, fleeing before the voracious flames, rapidly opening fissures; dodging flying limbs and other debris.

They were knocked to the ground every time it shook.

"Don't know what the hell's happening, Emma," Larry sighed once. "But whatever it is, it's bad. Maybe it's the end of the world finally."

Emma had nothing to say to that, except that maybe he was right, and that maybe she didn't care.

But Larry urged her on, when she wanted to sink to the ground, sick and exhausted, and give up he wouldn't let her.

Later, she'd barely recall the rest of their flight, except Larry pleading that they were almost there and *keep going!*

A tree came falling out of nowhere. Larry had just enough time to scream and throw her out of the way before it crashed, pinning him to the ground. He went into convulsions, blood welling from his mouth, nose, and his eyes.

Sobbing aloud and wiping the sweat and tears from her face with the back of her grimy hand, she tried, but she couldn't budge the tree.

Emma knew he was dying.

So she cradled what she could of him in her arms as the rest of his life slipped away and with his last ounce of strength he took a key from his pocket, whispering hoarsely, "Go straight...Emma, only a mile or so further down the dirt path. Three huge rocks mark it...a cave...door recessed...you can make it.

"Get inside and stay...for at...least...six months...if nuclear strike...*have* to stay below *six months*. Emma. Don't come out for *nothing*." His mouth grimaced, and more blood spilt down his chin.

When she was sure he was dead, she hauled herself up on weak legs and started trudging in the direction he had pointed.

She found the large rocks and the cave, the door, just as Larry had said; just as another blast singed the whole of her right side and back. Her clothes caught fire, and she was slapped to the ground like a weightless rag doll. In spite of the pain, she tore her burning blouse off, crawled the last few feet, poked in the key with unsteady hands, and somehow yanked the door open—then slammed it behind her.

It was the last cognizant thing she'd remember doing, because she rolled across the dirt floor and passed out. The next few days were spent in fever and delirium, as the world outside destroyed itself.
