

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL

# PIGGY

THE CURE



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**O**n any normal day on the island city-state of Lucella, the sun would peek out from behind a cover of clouds, showering the island with golden rays. Dew-soaked blades of grass would sway lightly in the gentle breeze and the wind was so delicate that you couldn't tell where the air stopped and your skin began. On a normal day in Lucella, birds chirped merrily from the peaks of lush green treetops and the smell of the sea breeze wafted across the shore of the island. On a normal day, the laughter of Lucella's people echoed across the city, from the children outside a local schoolyard to the underground Metro station. On a normal day, there would be dozens of people milling around the city, going about their daily lives, just like anywhere else. Unfortunately, Lucella had not had a normal day in a very long time.

It had been months since the Infection had begun, the Infection that had caused perfectly normal people to begin acting . . . *strangely*. For reasons that were still unclear, several members of the population had been affected by something strange. Upstanding members of the community were suddenly growing bigger and



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more distorted, losing control of their bodies, becoming more aggressive, and sporting dull, glowing eyes. Those terrible eyes, they haunted Ben in his sleep, even now. That is, when he managed to get any sleep. Ben drew his jacket closer around his shoulders as he shuddered, trying to keep the thoughts of the things he had seen over the past few weeks at bay. Ben's friend Ollie shuddered as well, more worried about the future than the past.

Ben's whole journey had begun with Ollie; a weeks-long trek throughout the island to find him had led





them both here, to this very spot, outside a military base on the outskirts of town. The friends they had made along the way stood on the crest of the hill, watching over them, keeping alert for any sign of the encroaching Infected. Billy was an orange bull, much taller and larger than just about anyone that Ben had ever met. His dark gray horns, silver nose ring, and black spiked bracelet made him seem intimidating, but he was actually one of the sweetest people that Ben had ever met. Of course, it didn't hurt that he was as strong as an ox (even though he was a bull). Since they had met, Billy had carried around a large barbell. Whether it was an effort to keep fit, or simply a deterrent to the weaker Infected, Ben didn't know, and truthfully, he didn't care. Those weights and steel bar had already gotten them out of more than a few jams. Badgy, on the other hand, was . . . less personable. A white badger with a red tie, Badgy had spent most of their time together wisecracking, but Ben couldn't deny his usefulness in a fight. The glowing rod that he held close to him at all times had been proven to be just as effective a zombie deterrent as anything else they had come across,



and Badgy wielded it with astonishing precision.

“*Ben.*” Ollie prodded gently, rousing Ben from his thoughts. “Are we doing this or not?” Ben looked at the door of the base and nodded resolutely. Of course they were doing this; they had come too far not to. Over the past few weeks, during their adventures across Lucella, they had been in infrequent contact via a police officer’s walkie-talkie with a man who seemed to know more about this infection than he was letting on, and, if the helicopter parked outside this base was any indication, this was where that man had ended up. Ben took a deep breath to center himself, something he found himself doing more and more these days, then pulled the base door.

Nothing. The door didn’t budge. Ben tried again, to no avail. Pushing, pulling, a series of rhythmic knocks, nothing seemed to work. “Wait a minute . . .” Ollie trailed off, moving to the side of the door. “There’s a keypad here!” Ben moved to follow Ollie, grateful for a reason to take even a small break from trying to pry the door open. Ollie was right. On the side panel of the door, there was an old keypad, ten digits laid



out on top of corresponding buttons and four digital blanks blinking almost mockingly at the duo.

“A four-digit passcode? We could be here all day trying out all of those!” Ben lamented, kicking a patch of dirt in frustration.

“Sure, that’s one way to do it,” Ollie started. Ben had known his friend long enough to recognize when he had a plan. “Or we could just use these four numbers.” Ollie pointed at the keypad, and sure enough, four of the numbers had been worn down. “One, seven, four, and nine,” said Ollie. “Those four numbers have been used more than the rest. We put those in the proper order . . .”

“We’ve got ourselves the code to the base.” Ben finished his friend’s thought. It was smart, something that would have taken Ben himself a lot longer to figure out. Ben punched the numbers into the keypad in order, only to be greeted by a red flashing light and a series of angry beeps. *Okay, so not in numerical order*, Ben thought to himself. “Well? Keep going, right? There’s like . . . five thousand possible combinations of these numbers.”



Ben quirked a brow as he put in the numbers again, this time in a different order. “How do you even know that?” he queried, the lights flashing red once more.

“It’s . . . it’s pretty basic binomial coefficient, right?” Ollie must have seen the expression on his friend’s face. “You really didn’t pay attention in math class, huh?” Ollie jabbed.

“Well, the last time I was in school . . .” Ben’s words trailed off as he thought back to an earlier adventure, feeling a pang of guilt as he remembered Bunny and how she had most likely sacrificed her only chance at survival to help him get to the Metro station to save his friend. Bunny would be happy to know that her efforts were not in vain.

Ben was shaken from his reverie again as Ollie reached past him, inputting another series of numbers into the keypad. It seemed like hours, but truthfully, it was only a few minutes when Ollie entered the proper sequence into the keypad. With a rapidly blinking green light, the keypad chirped in approval, the heavy gray steel doors of the base parting slowly with a groan, a clear sign





of disrepair. Ben wondered when the last time someone had been here was. “Well, would you look at that? Open sesame!” Ollie quipped, justifiably pleased with himself. The doors slid all the way open, sunlight flooding the cavernous opening of the base and revealing a set of stairs leading to a lower level. Ben turned back to look at Badgy and Billy, giving them a thumbs-up. Billy returned the gesture as well as he could, considering that most bulls did not have opposable thumbs. Ben could tell from here that Badgy was rolling his eyes, but he, too, returned the thumbs-up. The two old friends resumed their guard as Ollie met Ben’s eyes.

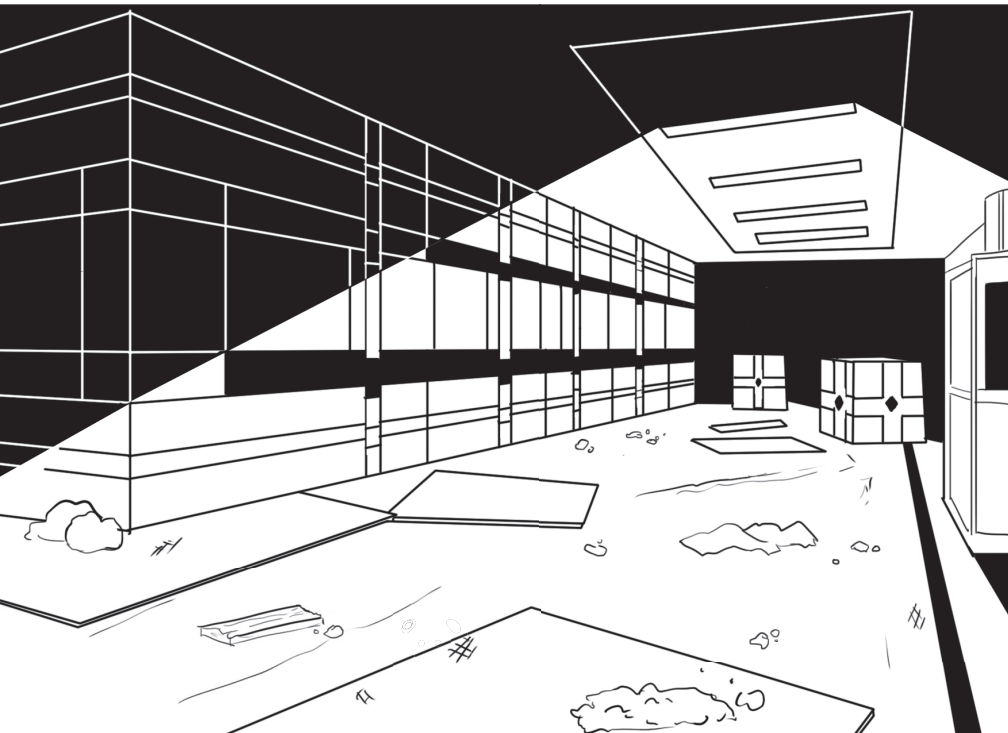
“Are you ready for this?” Could anyone ever be ready for something like this? Ben nodded, and together the two descended the stairs, the metal doors whisking shut behind them. The doors shutting threw their surroundings into stark relief. Where minutes ago, the harsh Lucellan sun had been beating down upon the two of them through the dense fog that had encircled the island since the beginning of the Infection, they now found themselves cut off from all-natural light. Instead of the sun, the two were illuminated



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only by the flickering lights coming from a series of fluorescent lights overhead, humming and popping ominously. Ollie flipped a lever near the bottom of the stairs, flooding the entire base with artificial light.

“Hellooo!” Ollie shouted through cupped hands, the sound of his voice echoing across the base. Ben put his hand out to silence him; if any of the Infected were loose in the base, then Ollie’s cry would surely bring them right to the two boys. If the man on the other end of the walkie-talkie was here, this was a rescue mission, too. Whoever that man was, he knew more about



the Infection than he had let on, and Ben had come too far now to not get to the bottom of all this.

“Check around downstairs.” Ben pointed toward the hallway, gray and lined with red chairs and shelves. “Meet me back here in five minutes if you don’t find anything. And be careful,” Ben chided gently. Ollie nodded, disappearing into the elevator and descending to the lower level.

Ben turned on his heel, following the overhead lights throughout the ground floor. The first room he came upon seemed to be some sort of office room, nine cubicles all separated with glass walls. Ben searched through the offices for anything they could use but came up mostly empty-handed. A few half-full staplers, a couple of long-disconnected phones covered in cobwebs. If the mysterious voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie *had* come from here, it was not recently. No one had been here in a very long time.

Ben moved on to the next room—this one much smaller, empty except for a few scattered papers and abandoned test tubes. He pulled a heavy-duty flashlight



out of Officer Doggy's bag, just one of several things he has saved from the veteran of the Lucella Police Department's stash when he had disappeared from the woods that night, all those weeks ago. Shining the beam from the flashlight across the papers on the table, Ben began to read, piecing together what he could from the complicated formulas and notes scrawled unevenly across the pages. He flipped through them, his eyes widening as he pieced everything together. Taking a deep breath, he suddenly became aware of how quiet it was. The hair on the back of Ben's neck stood on end as he became aware of the sound of footsteps behind him. Clutching Officer Doggy's flashlight in his grip, he whirled around to face the source of the echoing footsteps.

"Wah!" Ollie screamed when, confronted with Ben, who was poised to strike.

"Ollie, what are you doing? You can't sneak up on people like that, we are on *high alert!*"

Ollie took a moment to catch his breath. "You *just* told me to be quiet!" Ben clicked Officer Doggy's flashlight off and stowed it back in his backpack.





“What did you find downstairs?”

“Not much. Just some auxiliary power and a whole bunch of cobwebs. What do you think they were cooking up in this place?”

Ben motioned Ollie toward the notes he had found. On the front page of each was a mishmash of different handwriting, overlapping notes, and formulas. On the back of every page was a strange series of lines and circles. Ben didn’t understand, but he figured that they were important. “Ollie, I think we were wrong. I don’t think this is a military base, I think it’s a lab. A lab designed to manufacture a cure.”

Ollie’s eyes widened. “A cure? For the Infection? You really think so?”

“It would explain these notes. They mention something called *Substance-128*. It sounds like whatever that is, it was the reason for the original Infection. There are some parts that I don’t completely understand, something about limoncello—no, *Linaeomma*—”

“Ben, I hate to interrupt . . .” Ollie spoke up, but Ben



had sensed it, too. They weren't alone, and this time Ben was sure that the interloper was not a friend. The footsteps of the people infected by the virus were almost unmistakable. Though they seemed to glide when they walked, their footsteps were heavy and plodding. Glowing red eyes appeared in the doorway, on a creature taller than Ben and Ollie by a great deal, and they were getting closer by the moment. The hulkish frame of the Infected disappeared and reappeared beneath the lab's faulty lighting.

"Don't . . . move . . . a muscle," Ben whispered to Ollie through gritted teeth. The lumbering figure advanced another step, then another. Ollie took off, disappearing through the adjoining door.

Predictably, the monster took off after him, leaving Ben alone to rifle through Officer Doggy's old bag. The flashlight, some granola bars . . . Ben finally got his hands on what he had been looking for, Officer Doggy's old Taser. It was only powerful enough to stun one of the Infected for a couple of seconds, but sometimes that was all you needed. Ben shoved all the research notes into Officer Doggy's bag and



slung it over his shoulders before chasing Ollie and the Infected out the door.

It didn't take long to spot his friend, weaving through the mazelike corridors of the offices—the Infected not far behind. Ben moved through the offices as well, taking care not to get too close to his target. If there was a cure out there, Ben wanted to make sure he wasn't a zombie himself when they found it. Ollie continued to run, making a break for the laboratory doors. The creature advanced on Ollie as Ben zigzagged through the office, finally exiting on the other side.

Catching up to Ollie and his pursuer, Ben stood in front of the door to the lab. He raised the Taser to his eye level and aimed it at the bear creature, steadying his shaking hands. If Ben hadn't been so focused on rescuing Ollie, he may have noticed the sounds on the other side of the door. The subtle thudding on the door had been growing less subtle by the second, and finally the door to the secret laboratory groaned loudly as it caved inward, Billy and Badgy bursting through just in the nick of time. The force of the sudden intrusion knocked Ben over as Billy barreled through the



now-open door. Ben should have known that these two were not the type to figure out a four-digit pin code. Why open a door when you can make one?

Badgy ran directly into battle, forcing the Infected away from Ollie with a series of precise blows from his glowing rod. Billy stepped in and closed the door behind them, slotting his weighted barbell across the door to barricade it from any unwanted visitors. The Infected that they had stumbled across in the lab snored at Badgy's feet, seemingly unconscious. Badgy sheathed his glowing weapon on his hip, pointing to the unconscious bear.

"Tell me that wasn't the voice on the radio," Badgy said.

Ben shrugged and sighed. "That's going to have to take a back seat. Take a look at these." Ben bent over to pick up the notes from the lab, which had scattered on the ground when he had fallen over. "Wait a minute . . ." From this angle, Ben could suddenly see the markings on the back of the notes in the proper light. They weren't random sketches when they lined





up like this. “It’s a map!” Ben exclaimed. It was all starting to make sense. Whoever had been working at that base knew that the virus was spreading. Maybe they wouldn’t have time to complete the cure, but they could leave clues for people who could.

“Umm . . . a map to what?” Billy queried. “Buried treasure? The homes of the stars?”

“A cure, we think,” Ollie answered, helping Ben grab the papers. Billy and Badgy looked over the notes and handed them back to Ben, who stowed them again in Officer Doggy’s bag. “I was thinking, there’s nothing here but some old beam radiation machines . . . But there’s gotta be almost a half-dozen locations on this map. If we all split up, and each explore one—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa . . . back it up there.” Badgy halted Ben’s train of thought before he could take it to its logical conclusion. “There’s four of us, and a whole lot more of them out there. No one is splitting up anywhere. If this is a map to a cure, we find it together. And if it’s just a whole bunch of nonsense . . . Well, we do that together, too.”



“That was . . . surprisingly wholesome of you, Badgy,” Ollie commented.

“Relax, I just don’t want to have to whack any of you guys with this thing.” Badgy recoiled, patting the glowing rod that he kept at his hip.

“We should get going,” Ben said, moving toward the door.

“Uhh . . . not that way,” Billy cautioned. “We blocked it behind us for a reason.” Ben understood instantly. That explained why Billy and Badgy had been in such a hurry to get inside the lab.

“How many?” he queried. Fighting off the Infected had turned into a way of life for Ben over the last couple of months, but no matter how good you got at it, it was always preferable to avoid them when you could. The virus had made the Infected impossible to reason with, extremely aggressive, and incredibly contagious. A simple swipe from one of the Infected could have you joining their ranks before the day was done. That was why this cure was so important.



“More than are in here,” Badgy replied, gesturing to the sole Infected at his feet. The bear began to stir and groan as if in response, but a singular rap on the head from Badgy’s glowing weapon set it right again, the creature falling back into unconsciousness. “Is there a back way out of here?” Three pairs of eyes fell on Billy, who was retrieving his weighted barbell from the door, the sounds of infected groans echoing on the other side of the makeshift entrance. Billy paused.

“Why . . . Why is everyone looking at me?”



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