

NEW LIFE
INCORPORATED

New Life Inc.

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ISBN 978-1442180086

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Acknowledgements

This book never would have existed without the support of my parents, David and Charlene Shockley, the first two people to teach me the magic of words, and the last two people I think about every night. It definitely wouldn't have taken shape without my husband, Ellis Hooley, to help me find the novel lost inside all the extra words. There would be no reason to write without my three children, Britney, Zackary, and Taylor, and writing definitely wouldn't be nearly so much fun without my writing partner, Erica Lopshire.

Chapter One

He'd killed the kid.

A metal trash can slamming to the ground woke Joe Ramsey from the nightmare. He'd been having that same one about Miguel dying ever since it happened two years ago. He jerked upright and looked both ways down the dark alley. A huge orange cat crawled inside the overturned can as it rocked slightly from side to side. The animal mewed, and the sound echoed and blossomed in the midnight stillness.

Wind stirred paper and ashes from the mountains of debris around Joe, turning the slight yellow light closer to grey. Joe looked at the skeletal remains of the buildings in front of him. Uneven bricks formed half-walls. Charred metal twisted toward the sky, reaching for the moon.

"Damn dream," he muttered. His breathy words came out in a stream of gray mist before dissolving in the cold air. Joe shivered and pulled the filthy, torn blanket closer as the December air cut through him, especially his bum knee. Christ, it hurt. He straightened his left leg out and winced as the muscles and cartilage rippled from the movement, resisting as though they

would break before stretching.

Three more months, and the weather would be tolerable. That damned Texas wind would stop biting in March—not that he intended to hang around the good old city of Dal-Worth until then. Joe lifted his hand and rubbed the aching muscle in his neck, instantly regretting sleeping in such a half-cocked position. Just as soon as he could get a job and save enough to slip away, he would. *You can't keep wandering like this*, he thought. *It's time to put down roots. It's 2175, old man. You're 37, and the days keep adding up.*

And Dal-Worth, Texas, was too dangerous for anyone right now, what with the Lifers and Resisters drawing battle lines over the Lifespan Chips. From the corner of his eye, Joe took in the fragmented buildings—just another argument between the two factions which had gone from words to works.

A small buzzing sound hovered over Joe's head. He saw a zoom-scope flashing a beam in his general direction. The beam came from a small, black box which functioned as a broadcaster, uploading surveillance data to the Dal-Worth Federation Headquarters. *Yeah, I want to be hauled in because I'm out during lock-down. At least it would be warm.* Joe ducked under the covers, hoping he wouldn't be spotted by the Federation's patrol units. The beam touched his blanket for a moment before leaving.

"That was close," he muttered, tired of dodging the Federation, Resisters, and Lifers. Joe wiped the sleep from his eyes and shook his head. He didn't understand the controversy

over the Chips. True, they could increase longevity, but why was that so bad? Maybe if he ever found a job, he'd get one.

A lump formed in his throat, and he reached into his pocket. His fingers touched a cigarette lighter he hadn't used in months. Then he felt the blue teddy bear. His fingers had memorized the black, button eyes and red satin ribbon tied around its neck. They caressed the soft fur and pushed the bear deeper before he pulled out his hand.

He wouldn't get that Chip, even if he were a millionaire.

Joe looked down the alley at the filth and refuse piled up around him. He had made his bed deep in one corner of the pile, hidden from plain sight so both the Lifers and Resisters would leave him alone. So far, so good. Since the two factions had torched this place just last week while fighting, he figured he was safe enough. Besides, getting too close to most businesses wasn't a smart idea, not with the Impulse security systems now everywhere. Hell, last week, a drunk homeless guy had walked too close to an invisible trip-line near a jewelry store and been zapped unconscious. Joe had watched the Federation peace officers carry him away. He'd wondered how long that little sleep spell had lasted.

Joe suddenly felt a gentle humming sensation in his head. He bent and cradled it between his hands, trying to drive the feeling away. It wouldn't go. "Goddamn propagandist shit!" he seethed, knowing New Life, Incorporated was about to broadcast an advertised message directly into his thoughts. He couldn't stop or ignore it.

NEW LIFE INCORPORATED OFFERS THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME. LIVE TO SEE ABSOLOM'S COMET IN 3050. GIVE YOURSELF AN EXTRA FIFTY YEARS. DON'T YOU DESERVE IT? FOR A MODEST FINANCIAL COMMITMENT, WE CAN GIVE YOU NEW LIFE. NEW LIFE. NEW LIFE.

As the message faded, Joe said, "Shut up," to block the traces of humming left in his mind. He lowered his hands and clenched his fists, wishing he could strangle the men responsible for mental advertisement. They still couldn't cure cancer, but they could climb inside people's heads. No laws forbade it. The Federation had ruled that mental advertisements were only thoughts projected at a certain level. These "thoughts" didn't have influential power, and they couldn't change normal mental processes. They simply replaced the radio broadcasting of the 20th century.

"And what about annoying people?" Joe seethed, resting against his makeshift bed. A growling from his stomach answered him. It felt hollow, like the acid had already eaten through his gut. Joe reached into his pocket, searching for coins he knew he didn't have. His fingers touched the bear and lighter.

I need a job, he thought, clenching his fingers into a tight fist. Unfortunately, the only job Joe Ramsey knew exceptionally well was a job he didn't want--killing people for the Federation. Even though his fingers had clenched, he still felt the soft bear that reminded him of the little boy who had owned it. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he remembered the medal the

Federation had given him fifteen months ago to honor his bravery.

The cold wind ripped through Joe, numbing his hands. The throbbing in his knee worsened, as though someone had punched it. If he'd had any guts, he would have left without that medal. If he'd had any strength, he would have declined that "honor." If he'd wanted to absolve that sin, he would have blown his brains out. An eye for an eye. Instead, he'd thrown away his career and deserted his military retirement, leaving his medal at the bottom of Lake Erie.

His stomach rumbled more loudly, and Joe knew he had to eat something or he was going to be sick. With one last glance up and down the empty alleyway, Joe pulled the blanket back and stood, preparing to do something he'd never done before, scavenge food from a trash bin.

As if in reply to Joe's intentions, his stomach growled again, more resistant. Whether in protest or agreement, Joe hadn't a clue. He stood and walked toward the dumpster, trying to ignore the cold air stirring around him. Pain sliced through his knee, and it almost buckled. Two years, and the pain still wrapped its claws around him. How much longer before walking became easier?

Taking short steps, he managed to get to the silver, metal wall that came to his chest. As he stuck his head over, he smelled the mixed garbage and thought about moving away from its pungent odor, but he knew better. This was the Last Chance Cafe. No money, no meal—unless he wanted to bum something from the Resisters' shelter a few miles away. Nobody else ran any type of good-Samaritan sanctuaries these days, and Joe wasn't sure he

wanted to stick his face in one, had he known of any others.

He didn't deserve pity. He deserved to die.

His stomach rolled, and he knew he didn't have a chance to refuse food—even disgusting food. He had to eat. He forced himself to look inside the dumpster. All the garbage lay deep, at the bottom, which meant he would have to climb inside to find anything remotely edible. After checking to make sure no one had appeared in the alley, he pulled himself over the wall and jumped into knee-high refuse.

Pain snapped through him as he landed, and when his feet slid into the garbage, the smell worsened from his body's stirring it up. The stench of some rotting animal filled Joe's lungs. *Damn*, he thought, staring at other people's trash. Living on the streets had been a nightmare when he couldn't afford to buy food. What was he becoming?

Joe bent and dug. His numbed hands moved slowly, awkwardly. Joe couldn't feel the garbage he sifted through, and his fingers could barely pick up anything. Papers lined the surface. Joe saw advertisements from New Life Incorporated. He picked up one of the glossy sheets and saw the perfect, five-star pentagram which had come to symbolize the corporation—probably because that was the rough shape of the scar left on the foreheads of those who had had the Chip implantation. Free advertising.

Joe shoved aside the crinkled brochures and found a partially-burned sheet of white paper with typing on it. Curious, he brought it close to his face, trying to read the words in the dim

lamplight. The darkness pressed closer. Joe reached in his pocket and pulled out his lighter. Flipping it on, he held up the paper and looked at it. "dation bought out by Lifers." The first word of the sentence had been burned badly enough so Joe couldn't make out all of the letters. He read on. "Justice can be bought for a 'modest' financial commitment. Corruption can live and prosper far longer without the help of longevity chips."

Human screams broke the silence. Joe ducked more deeply into the trash bin as someone yelled, "Get him! Now!"

Joe's heart hammered. Had he been spotted? The small lighter flame consumed the paper. In his careless haste to hide, he had allowed the lighter and letter to get too close to each other. The flames lapped from the paper to his fingers, burning his skin. He dropped the paper and ground it deep into the trash.

Outside the container, Joe heard things crashing together. "Get away from me!" a man shouted. More scuffling sounds. "I know the truth about New Life!"

"Grab hold of his arms and hold his body down," that first voice ordered. "Kneel!"

Joe listened to feet moving against the concrete. Jesus, the Lifers and Resisters were at it again. How many were there? He closed the lid on his lighter and shoved it deep in his pocket.

"Let me go!" the man screamed again. "Get away from me!"

A cold rock pressed down the pit of Joe's stomach. His whole body ached from sitting still and listening too long. He forced himself to rise, carefully favoring his injured knee. He

peeked over the side of the bin toward the scuffle.

Three men surrounded one. Two of them held the victim's arms out to the sides like on a crucifix. The faint moonlight played on the victim's face. Joe scrutinized it and wanted to be sick. A damned teenager, if Joe weren't mistaken—a kid whose voice had changed only a couple of years ago—a kid who didn't have the good sense to stay off the streets during lock-down. Just another kid caught in the middle. Joe's fingers curled, and he felt anger work through every muscle—stiffening, tightening.

The kid's dark eyes shone in the moonlight, frightened by the flash of steel pointed at his jugular. Joe's stomach rumbled again, but not in hunger. Nausea replaced appetite as he looked at the teenager's trembling body. He swallowed the bile in his throat and looked at the men around the kid, focusing on the one holding the knife.

About 5'10" and stocky, the guy looked old enough to be Joe's father, but his father had never looked that massive and bulky, as though he might have trouble fitting through a doorway. Hard, unnatural lines around the man's mouth, eyes, and forehead defined an angry profile. In the moonlight, Joe could see the star-shaped scar on his forehead where the Lifespan Chip had been implanted.

Yeah, Joe thought savagely. This SOB is somebody I want walking around this earth another fifty years. He looked at the kid's forehead and found another blatantly differently mark—a triangle patch fused over the skin. The badge of a Resister that forever blocked the Chip's implantation. The kid had made a

lifetime choice, probably at the age of sixteen, when getting drunk, laid, or anything else which, at that moment, seemed smart and fashionably acceptable.

And the Lifers were going to kill the kid because of that badge. If they couldn't convert him, they had no use for him. Joe gritted his teeth to keep from muttering a string of obscenities. He shifted his weight and grimaced when pain ripped through his knee.

The older guy brought the knife close to the kid's neck. "Looks like we got us a guinea pig. Maybe we should crack his skull and see what replaced his brain." He pressed the knife deeper, cutting. The kid gasped. A smile lit the old man's face. "How dare you protest the gifts of New Life!" He pulled the dagger back a bit. The youth's shoulders sagged, and his head rolled forward as though he wanted to faint. "Christ," the kid whispered looking down at his pants. A growing wet spot appeared.

Joe looked back at the kid, at his tortured face. The older man moved the knife upward and flicked the point of it against the kid's left temple, drawing blood from a deep gash. The man leaned close and touched the kid's face with his fingers. "Hell, maybe I should just cut that badge from your head and take it back to Caleb as a souvenir. He collects `em, you know. Ain't like we could use you for anything else." He lifted the dagger and poised it at the top of the triangular mark.

You gonna stand and watch or fight the fight? he asked himself. His fingers slowly moved to the hilt of his dagger.

Three against one. Could be worse. He started over the wall, and pain skewered his knee with each movement. *Then again, it could be better*, he thought. Joe Ramsey didn't care about odds. He yanked out his knife and darted behind the old man. Before the guy could react, Joe held it across the man's neck.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," Joe ordered in a softly menacing voice. "I'll cut you up so you'll need a miracle to save you, even with that Chip." Joe saw a slight movement of hands and pressed the blade closer. "Tell them to back off and let the kid go."

Joe saw his opponent's shoulder and back muscles ball into rigidity. "Do you know who you're fucking with?" his adversary asked in an equally quiet voice that came out between clenched teeth.

"Doesn't matter," Joe said. "This knife doesn't care who the hell you are. It'll take your head off just the same."

"It'll matter the next time we meet." The man slowly lowered the blade.

Joe pulled him back. "And what makes you think there will be a next time? What makes you think I won't kill you this time?"

"Because you're stupid enough to save a Resister. That means you won't kill me."

Joe dipped the tip of the blade into his skin and cut. "Don't be too damned sure about that, Old Man."

Despite the cut, Joe's hostage stood perfectly still, as though he hadn't felt anything. "Ask anybody in this neighborhood about Malachette." The two men holding the youth grinned, revealing

sharp, white teeth. *The pretty boys of New Life*, Joe thought disgustedly.

"And if you don't shut up, you won't be breathing long enough to worry about being a tough guy," Joe snapped at them. He looked at the youth. Red splotches covered both his cheeks, and when he saw Joe's eyes, he looked away, embarrassed. In the second that they'd stared at each other, Joe saw something that didn't resemble youth—something broken. The kid was praying Joe would get him out of here, and Joe knew somebody else needed to be wearing the hero suit—somebody with two good legs. Somebody who hadn't been the person Joe once was.

Joe's head hummed. Not now, he thought. Then the message came. NEW LIFE INCORPORATED OFFERS THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME. LIVE TO SEE ABSOLOM'S COMET IN 3050. GIVE YOURSELF AN EXTRA FIFTY YEARS. DON'T YOU DESERVE IT? FOR A MODEST FINANCIAL COMMITMENT, WE CAN GIVE YOU NEW LIFE. NEW LIFE. NEW LIFE.

The guy on the right of the kid lunged. Joe started to cut Malachette's throat, but fingers grabbed his hand. A fist rammed across Joe's face, and the world turned rainbow-colored. *Jesus, I knew this wasn't a good idea.* Joe felt himself falling. He threw out his hands to soften the landing he couldn't see coming.

"Grab that kid," Malachette screamed. "He's getting away!"

Pain exploded in Joe's ribs as a foot slammed into them. "You piece of shit!" Malachette yelled. Another kick. Joe's arms moved in front of his chest and abdomen. "I had that punk. I

could have taught him why being a Resister doesn't pay. Why didn't you just stay out of it?" The irrational tone quickly died, and Malachette's voice softened into a normal pitch. "It doesn't matter."

Malachette bent over and grabbed a fist of Joe's hair. As his fingers knotted in it, Malachette yanked Joe's head from the ground. "You're a street rat—no home, no nothing. And you think saving a Resister is a noble deed." Venom-laced laughter filled the night.

Joe's head pounded. Pain trickled through his scalp from Malachette's death-grip in his hair. He kept blinking, trying to cleanse away the blackness. *At least the kid got away. At least I managed to do one thing right during my miserable life.* Joe's blindness melted in time to see Malachette kick his left leg. Joe whimpered. His fingers wrapped around the damaged knee.

Malachete stopped lashing out at him, and leaned close to absorb Joe's pain. He leaned so close Joe could see the map of scars on Malachette's pitted face—hard, angry lines made by a razor. Or a machete. A light snapped on in Joe's head. That's how he got his name.

Malachette flicked his knife at Joe's hand, leaving small, painful gouges in the flesh until Joe finally moved it. "Smart boy. At least you understand pain."

Joe lifted his leg and started to kick, but one of Malachette's thugs slammed his elbow down on Joe's groin. More pain. *What does this SOB want?*

"Do you know how much that one little Resister was worth?"

Ten thousand." Malachette said. "Be still, and I won't hurt you. Much." Malachette's large knife poised at Joe's left knee, as though waiting for Joe to panic. The blade would sink in if he laid still. Or if he panicked. Either way, Joe didn't stand a chance. He didn't see mercy as one of Malachette's qualities.

Malachette's scarred fingers flicked the blade, cutting a small hole in Joe's pants. Malachette pulled back the material and peered at Joe's knee. Then he sat back, satisfied. "Hell of a war wound, boy. Hurts, don't it?" He lifted the knife and skimmed the bruised surface, scratching the tender skin.

Pain ripped through him. Joe met Malachette's cold eyes and ignored the intense desire to look away. His fingers curled into fists. He'd rather die than talk about that war. "Fuck you."

Malachette grinned. "You ain't my type. I only like dead whores—or soon to be dead ones."

The blade sliced in up to the hilt. Joe felt like his body had been ripped in half. He screamed in a voice he had never used. Tears jumped into his eyes. He gripped his leg as the pain impaled him again. And again. He started to hyperventilate. *I'll never walk again.* But the frantic heart pounding against Joe's chest told him walking again wouldn't be his worst problem. Being able to breathe after Malachette had finished took top priority.

Malachette bent over him and yanked Joe's hair back while laughing. "Nothing like taking something small and making it--"

The air exploded around them. Bullets rained into them. One whizzed past Joe's ear, and all he could think was, *Here comes the war, and I might as well have a target painted on me.*